RAKHAING THUNGRAN IN COX’S BAZAR: CELEBRATING BUDDHIST NEW YEAR IN SOUTHERN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

Understanding cross-border ethnicity means looking at how the cultural characteristics of an ethnic group are linked to social and political conditions within the local community, within the ethnic group living across the national border, within each nation-state and between the nation-states with jurisdiction over each group. This thesis examines what it means to be Buddhist Rakhaing in southern Bangladesh, just over the border from the Rakhaing homeland in Burma. I do this principally through an examination of the celebration of the Rakhaing New Year festival or Thungran. Four inter-related points underpin the discussion on how Rakhaing experience this festival. First, a description of the various rituals and associated cultural characteristics of the festival experience does not adequately address how and why different Rakhaing individuals act differently during the festival. Second, instead of the Bangladesh state being an entity separate from Rakhaing ethnicity, it is deeply implicated in Rakhaing’s everyday life and hence the way Thunran is celebrated. Third, the social and political dynamics of Rakhaing everyday life are as important as the fluid cross-border cultural processes evident in their festival celebration. Fourth, the notion of having a distinct culture as Burmese people is central in how the Rakhaing understand and respond to the social and political challenges of living within Muslim Bengali dominated Bangladesh. Using Thunran as a starting point in the study of Rakhaing ethnicity, this thesis extends the analysis into how the Bangladesh Rakhaing are influenced by ethnic minority identity across two countries and how their ethnic identity influences their responses to specific socio-political contexts of Bangladesh.
This thesis is based on 17 month fieldwork study between 2006 and 2007 in Bangladesh and covered the celebration of two Thungran annual festivals. It presents an analysis of how a cultural festival is linked to social and political dynamics. I used the research methodology of situational analysis to study the two consecutive Thungran celebrations of Rakhaing in the town of Cox’s Bazar, located near Bangladesh’s south-eastern border with Burma. I present a detailed account of the ritual components of the festival celebrations and the way individuals participated in the two years’ celebrations. Despite some common features across the two years, there are differences in actual unfolding of these two celebrations. More importantly, despite these differences between the two years and indeed in many years before and after, Rakhaing understand their Thungran rituals as being consistent with their shared ethnic culture. I argue that these differences result from shifting social and political dynamics influencing the cultural behaviour of Rakhaing, and examine why these dynamics influence the way they see their ethnicity vis-à-vis the nation-state of Bangladesh.

A general look at Rakhaing’s religion, entertainment, dietary practices, clothing and physical appearances suggests a similarity to the Burmese cultural life, but especially and not surprisingly their co-ethnic people from Arakan/Rakhine State. Focusing only on the cultural aspects of ethnicity tends to represent Rakhaing as a homogenous group of people who are being pitted against the political entity of the Muslim-Bengali dominated Bangladeshi State. However, looking at the state, not as a singular entity, but rather as a dynamic political force implicated in the everyday lives of the people, reveals complex social and political relationships pertinent to Rakhaing’s lives in Bangladesh.
Rakhaing Thungran festival is a cultural event, but focusing only on cultural aspects does not allow one to understand how and why Rakhaing celebrate the festival. Knowing political and social dynamics is central in gaining insight into how people experience their ethnicity within a nation-state. The same can be said of the ways in which economy, class and gender prevail in how cultural differences are presented and represented by Rakhaing. To understand Rakhaing lives in Bangladesh, one has to look at how culture is linked to the social and political experience of the Rakhaing ethnic group living across the border, within the nation-state of Bangladesh and with neighbouring Burma. Being a Bangladesh Rakhaing is both about being a person of a particular ethnic identity existing across two countries in Burma and Bangladesh, and as being a member of the nation-state of Bangladesh with its own sense of belongings and challenges. These experiences shape each other.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am sincerely grateful to Rakhaing people of Bangladesh, since this thesis is fundamentally about them. I thank those appear in this thesis and others I have not been able to include here. Because of their time, friendship and trust, I was able to study their experiences, which I have documented in this thesis.

I especially thank my Rakhaing friends from Bangladesh who allowed me to join the friendship group. I would not be able to gain any insight into the social life of a Rakhaing without their acceptance into this friendship group. I am deeply grateful for the evenings we shared, good times we enjoyed and celebrations we participated together.

Other community members, who accepted us as their own and extended their hospitality, are very important for my fieldwork in Bangladesh. The happiness they allowed me to observe, sadness they let me joined to experience and anxiety I was able to share underline my understanding about Rakhaing community in Bangladesh. Only because they invited me into their lives everywhere I went in Bangladesh, I was able to document joys and tribulations of being a Bangladeshi Rakhaing. I owe a special acknowledgement to Ma Han for allowing me to use her photographs in my thesis.

My sincere appreciation extends to monks and village elders, other Rakhaing community leaders, either from big or small, formal or informal organisations. They gave generous time in answering my questions with great patience and kind permissions to observe their activities without any restriction. These accesses gave me invaluable ethnographic information. I thank U Bodhinyana especially for his kind help in transliterating Rakhaing terms, in addition to sharing his wisdom, experience and information about the Rakhaing people.

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wisdom has guided me to expand my academic knowledge throughout these years. In addition to academic guidance, his concern for the well-being of our family has been important support for us. His enthusiasm was reassurance during the time of frustration.

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I would also like to express my gratitude to Professor H K Arefen of the University of Dhaka, for his kind support and guidance during my fieldwork in Bangladesh. It was his gentleness that helped me through the hard days during my fieldwork.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Kyaw Than (1976-2013), who came to Cox’s Bazar a stranger, departed as a friend to many from there. Fun-loving generous Kyaw Than had friends in every work of life, every religious persuasion and every ethnic identification. His music entertained many friends, including myself. His words and experience shaped every chapter of my thesis, since he was my main informant. Most importantly, he was my best friend during my fieldwork.
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## GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

### Rakhaing Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahh</td>
<td>Power (social or physical)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah-khung</td>
<td>Uncle (mother’s brother)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah-ko</td>
<td>Elder brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah-koung</td>
<td>Good (as in a good person/ Lu Ah-koung)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah-Phaw</td>
<td>Close friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah-phoo-shay</td>
<td>Younger grandpa (Younger brother of either grandparents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah-saing-ah-sak</td>
<td>Generations of ancestors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah-sa-tak</td>
<td>The ritual on New Year’s day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah-wa-kwan Raazawon</td>
<td>The history of Ah-wa-kwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awgatha</td>
<td>A Burmese Buddhist prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ba-jee</td>
<td>The older brother of father or the husband of older sister of mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bama Ah-sow-ra</td>
<td>Burmese government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da-yow</td>
<td>Male’s Sarong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhanyawadee (or Danyawady)</td>
<td>Archaic name for the southern parts of Arakan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaing</td>
<td>Religious sect (either or monks or lay people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaing-sara</td>
<td>Leader/teacher of a lay Buddhist religious sect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goo Gree</td>
<td>Elder brother (Awagyan or southern Arakanese term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Htamees</td>
<td>Female’s sarong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katina</td>
<td>A Buddhist ceremony held within a month of the conclusion of the lent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krauk Paut</td>
<td>‘Six Holes’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kray</td>
<td>Look or look after</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kula</td>
<td>The derogatory term for Bengali Muslim by Bangladesh’s Rakhaing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kulapray</td>
<td>The country of Bengali Muslims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kung-thay-ma</td>
<td>Female cross-border traders (small-scale)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwan</td>
<td>Paan (Betel leaf with Areca nut and lime). Chewed with tobacco and spices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyoung-thaa</td>
<td>Student, normally referred to someone attending a formal class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone Htain (Burmese)</td>
<td>Burma’s riot police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mae Daw</td>
<td>Our Lady (the guardian spirit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrauk-U</td>
<td>The capital of the last independent Arakanese kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mendet (Ree-loung Mendet)</td>
<td>Water playing pavilion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mendet Wong</td>
<td>Participating in a Mendet (for female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mendet-theing</td>
<td>The guardians of Mendet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindat</td>
<td>A place in southern Arakan, near Kyauk Phyu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitta-ree-loung</td>
<td>Throwing love water (a ritual which allows the male participant to pour water and to talk to the female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongala</td>
<td>Goodness/ blessed (religious term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mranna</td>
<td>Rakhaing pronunciation of Myanmar (Burma)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mung Poung</td>
<td>Winter snack made of rice flour, palm sugar and coconut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myak-na-pyak</td>
<td>Face being destroyed/ losing face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naing-ngan-ray-tama</td>
<td>Politicians. Referring to the Burma’s Arakanese political dissidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nendee Hlaing</td>
<td>One of the earlier music bands from Cox’s Bazar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neng</td>
<td>Palace or the adobe of a spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net (Nat in Burmese)</td>
<td>The spirits (gods)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Koung Ma</td>
<td>Rakhaing spirit medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Takhrung</td>
<td>Songs for the spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngapee</td>
<td>Fish paste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyee</td>
<td>Unity, unit, united</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyee-shay</td>
<td>Younger brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyi-Naung (Burmese)</td>
<td>Brothers (Nyi: younger brother, Naung: older brother)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ouk-Thaa</td>
<td>Rakhaing’s term for Bama (Burman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraite (Payeik in Burmese)</td>
<td>Recitation of Buddhist Pali Verses (Paritta).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pariate Ree</td>
<td>Blessed water/ water presented at the recitation of Paritta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patalaik-Khaik</td>
<td>A suburb in Akyab/Saitway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phaloung Khaik</td>
<td>Rakhaing name for Cox’s Bazar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phara Ree Cho Pway</td>
<td>Buddha bathing ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rakhaing Sa</td>
<td>Written Rakhaing language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rakhaing Saka</td>
<td>Spoken Rakhaing language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rakhaing-tha</td>
<td>Male Rakhaing (The son of Rakhaing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ree Hlaing Phwat</td>
<td>Arakanese ‘rock’ band which produced the first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arakanese language ‘rock/ stereo’ album.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ree-Lounge Pway</td>
<td>Water Festival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roa</td>
<td>Village or ward/suburb within a Rakhaing Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roa-Shung-Ma</td>
<td>The guardian spirit of the village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roa-shung-tuk-pway</td>
<td>The fiesta for the village guardian spirit, involving the wedding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>between the spirit and the village headman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roa-Thaa</td>
<td>Villager/ the member of the local community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roa-zaa</td>
<td>Traditional village headman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roo-Raa</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swang-Daw-Gree</td>
<td>food offerings to the monks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanetkha</td>
<td>The fragrant liquid powder of the bark of a tree, Burmese females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>normally wear it on their cheeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tankhung</td>
<td>The first month in Rakhaing calendar (March-April)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tapoung</td>
<td>The last month in Rakhaing calendar (February-March)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taranagung</td>
<td>A Buddhist Prayer affirming one’s worship on the Buddha, his teachings and his disciples/monks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taunghama</td>
<td>She-from-the-mountain; Marma vegetable sellers from Chittagong Hill Tracts in Cox’s Bazar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thadangkywet</td>
<td>The seventh month of Rakhaing calendar (September-October). Its full-moon day signifies the end of Buddhist lent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thamapung</td>
<td>Picnic (get together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thamung Htoung</td>
<td>A traditional ritual of Warkyut, conducted by females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tha-ngae-chon</td>
<td>Friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thankhoung-sa-ying (Burmese)</td>
<td>Family member list (the list containing the family members and their particulars), an official documentation of a Burmese household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thing (Maha Thing Daw Gree)</td>
<td>Great Holy Ordination Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thout (Thok in Burmese)</td>
<td>Sutta or verses of Buddhist Pali Canon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thowdalle</td>
<td>Rakhaing term for Chowdhury (Landowner in Bangladesh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thungran Sa</td>
<td>astrological text which shows the exact time of Thungran and the rituals to be conducted on that time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thungran-ahsung</td>
<td>Uniform Thungran dresses of a group of close friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wa-kywet</td>
<td>The ceremony at the end of Buddhist Lent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waytali</td>
<td>Ancient Arakanese kingdom, between 6th and 10th centuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youkpha</td>
<td>Brother-in-law or male cross cousin (mother’s brother’s son/ Father’s sister’s son)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaret</td>
<td>The community building of a Rakhaing village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeeyo</td>
<td>Indian Jujube Jam</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zet</td>
<td>Burmese opera</td>
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### Bengali Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adivasi</td>
<td>Indigenous people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancholi Bhasa</td>
<td>Local dialect of Bengali language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamaya</td>
<td>Chittagonian term for those from Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangla</td>
<td>Bengali term for Bengali language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bari</td>
<td>Home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bideshi</td>
<td>Foreigner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chatgaya</td>
<td>Chittagonian dialect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desh</td>
<td>Country or Nation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatuas</td>
<td>Male’s shirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hartals</td>
<td>Strike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumma</td>
<td>The people of Chittagong Hill Tracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lungi</td>
<td>Male’s sarong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magh</td>
<td>Derogatory Bengali term for a Rakhaing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magistrate</td>
<td>Assistant Commissioner/ Senior Bureaucrat of the district under the Deputy Commissioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagorik</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pahela Baishakh</td>
<td>The first day of Bengali New Year (on the 14th of April in Bangladesh).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pann  Betel leaf with Areca nut and lime (Chewed with tobacco and spices)
Paurashava  Municipal council
Shadhu-Bhasha  The Bengali dialect used in official and educational institutions
Thana  Police Station
Union Parishad  The smallest unit of Bangladesh’s local government
Upazila Nirbhahi Officer  The most senior township administrator
Upazila Parishad  Township government body
Upazila  Township/ Subdistrict
Zemindar  Traditional landowner
Zila  District

Abbreviations

DC  Deputy Commissioner, the most senior administrative officer in a district.
MP  Member of Parliament
NGO  Non-Governmental Organisation
NCGUB  National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma
OC  Officer in Charge of a Police Station
PCJSS  Parbattya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (Chittagong Hill Tracts United People’s Party)
RBWA  Rakhaing Buddhist Welfare Association
RDF  Rakhaing Development Foundation
‘Ami Bangla Jami’ (I am the son-in-law of a Bengali), I explained with a foreign accent. This response came out almost involuntarily when the military officer stopped our taxi from taking the road across the military cantonment in the middle of Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital. My Bangladeshi companion explained to the officer that I was married to a Bangladeshi and what I said about being a son-in-law of a Bangladeshi citizen is true. The officer laughed at the explanation, amused at my Bangla and my claim to being the relative of his nation-state. He glanced at my passport, and let us take the road across the cantonment. This gesture saved us about an hour of sitting in the taxi in the sweltering heat of Dhaka’s jam-packed traffic. Thus we were able to use the road across the cantonment as the short-cut for our trip across the city.

Kin terms used to demonstrate association with the nation-state are not unique to my encounter with the Bangladeshi military officer. Such use of kin terms is almost normal in the nation-state discourses of any country. What is significant here is the officer’s unquestioning acceptance that my father-in-law, who is not a Bengali, but ethnic Rakhaing, was one of his county men, and hence by implication, I was one of his relatives. My companion, though Bangladeshi, was a Rakhaing person with different physical features to those of the officer and the majority of Bangladeshi. My appearance was like that of my companion but unlike him, I was born in Burma in the Rakhine/Arakan State.

This thesis explores whether this experience of acceptance by the state of Bangladesh and the majority Bengalis is shared by other Rakhaing people. Thus, how Rakhaing see and interact with other people of Bangladesh and the nation-state is at the centre of this thesis. The fundamental question I explore is what it means to be a Rakhaing in Bangladesh, or
how a Buddhist Rakhaing negotiates her nationality as a member of the Muslim majority Bangladesh, at the same time experiencing of the ethnicity she shares with a group of people in Burma, known there as the Rakhine/Arakanese.

Being of the same ethnic group, it is expected that Rakhaing in Bangladesh have the same cultural characteristics as the Rakhine in Burma. Both outsiders and the people themselves would assume that the two groups of people across the border have the same language, kinship relations, food practices, religious activities, and cultural celebrations. They see this as especially true for the significant cultural events like the annual Thungran or New Year celebration, sometimes also known as the Water Festival held every April during the first lunar month of the Rakhine calendar.

That was the perception I had when I participated in the 2005 Thungran celebration in Cox’s Bazar, the main town in Bangladesh’s south-eastern most district of the same name. Though a Rakhine myself, I grew up in other parts of Burma. My hazy memory of a Rakhaing Thungran celebration in Burma came from participating as a young child in my native Arakan/Rakhine State, a western province of Burma. I was able to renew this Thungran memory when I visited Cox’s Bazar Town to participate in the Thungran celebration in 2005.

I travelled to Cox’s Bazar to attend the water-plays of Thungran in 2005—the later rituals which involve people merrily throwing water at each other. When the 2005 Thungran festival started I was staying in my wife’s village near the Burma-Bangladesh border. I joined with other villagers to welcome the New Year through a number of religious rituals. The preparation for Thungran started on the day before the last day of the old year, a group of younger villagers from one section of the village were busily preparing
religious items and collecting money as contribution from the households. Younger villagers from another part of the village did not join this group, but visited pagodas and monasteries from four other neighbouring Rakhaing villages, located along the Burma-Bangladesh border. They cleaned these religious monuments. The group who were preparing religious items in the village celebrated their cleaning celebration at their village monastery. I was aware of the intense rivalry between these two groups, and understood the two groups did not mix in their celebrations. Despite this difference, it seemed to me on that day that these two groups were following the same ritual process. This same ritual process was the way I remembered how we had celebrated in Arakan/Rakhine State in Burma during my childhood.

On New Year’s day, the persons born on the same day of the week as the New Year’s day would conduct a special ritual to commemorate the arrival of the year. The person would get up early to bath and pray to the Buddha. The family cooked a sweet snack for the person to eat and share with the neighbours. Most elderly people from the village went to the monastery to spend the day there observing Buddhist rituals. Some families donated food and drinks to the monks and others observing religious rituals at the monastery. Only a few days after completion of these rituals, I travelled to Cox’s Bazar to participate in the 2005 water-plays.

Cox’s Bazar’s 2005 water-play celebration was different from previous years, since musical concerts were staged for the first time as part of the New Year celebration. Rakhaing from other parts of the country were coming to Cox’s Bazar to celebrate the three-day water-play events and to attend musical concerts. Two musical concerts sponsored by two rival community organisations were held in 2005. I went to Cox’s Bazar to participate in these concerts with acquaintances from the town and others from
Arakan/Rakhine State currently living as exiled political dissidents in Bangladesh.

When I arrived at one of the musical concerts where some of my acquaintances were performing, the opening ceremony was underway with a few people I knew to be the leaders of the sponsoring organisation and one or two well-dressed Bengali people making speeches in Bangla. I sat down at a vacant seat next to a Bengali person who gave me a stern look. When I introduced myself in English, his facial expression changed into a friendly gesture. He said he was a magistrate and he was invited to the opening ceremony. When the band started to play Rakhaing Rock-n-Roll songs after the opening ceremony, we continued to enjoy the concert together. I explained to him that those songs were from the first Rakhaing music album from the Bangladeshi Rakhaing community. He already knew about this album since it was he who officially launched the album just before I arrived at the ceremony. However, I quickly forgot about this encounter with a Bengali person attending a Rakhaing festival once the band started to play Rakhaing language songs and the dancing Rakhaing crowd grew large. I subsequently joined in the festival atmosphere for the remaining three days. We enjoyed Rakhaing vocalists from Bangladesh and Burma who entertained with Rakhaing language songs from Arakan as well as songs from the band’s first album. The crowd responded equally with shouts and cheers of the enthusiasm of the singers. In water-playing places located adjacent to the concert, a few people were playing in joyful water fights, but most people were interested in the musical concert.

In another musical concert, which was sponsored by the rival community organisation, the younger musicians aroused similar enthusiasm as in the first concert. However, unlike the first concert, most songs played were Hindi songs from popular Bollywood films. As in the first concert, most people here were also busy dancing, with only a few people
engaged in the water-plays. While watching these young Rakhaing musicians play Hindi songs, a Burmese Rakhine dissident who was living as an exile in Bangladesh commented that their parents would be feeling an “ache in their hearts” for their children’s disregard of the Rakhaing language. Without knowing exactly about the parents and the musicians themselves, I readily agreed with these comments on what some may see as the degraded culture of the present day Rakhaing youths in Bangladesh. However, my sad thoughts were quickly washed away among the wet dancing crowd of Cox’s Bazar.

The streets between the two concerts were busy with Rakhaing people. I did not know whether there were any other places for the water-plays and how many people were engaged in the water-plays. On these three days of water-festival, my focus was to enjoy Rakhaing songs from the concerts.

On the last day of the water-festival in 2005, after the concert, band members and their friends, including myself, got together for a party and a meal. While the food was being prepared, the band members recounted how much they enjoyed their songs. It was also revealed to me that one of the lead singers did not know how to read Rakhaing language. He memorised the songs from listening and writing their lyrics in Bengali script. The main entertainment was singing more Rakhaing songs, led by the musicians but joined in by all of us. The party seemed to create an exclusive cultural bubble in the neighbourhood mostly surrounded by Bengali people. The Rakhaing language songs, food and home-brew alcohol gave the impression to me that I was experiencing what it meant to be a Rakhaing and to experience Rakhaing culture. The culture and the way of life existed as fundamentally different to that of Bengali people. I felt I was rediscovering the authentic Rakhaing experience, the experience which I had missed out during my childhood in Burma. I felt I had re-engaged with it here in Bangladesh among a much smaller
community of Bangladesh’s Rakhaing people.

The outcome of this feeling of ‘rediscovering’ and ‘homecoming’ was the 15 month stay among the Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar, conducting the fieldwork study, which is the basis of this thesis. I experienced how Rakhaing lived in Bangladesh, I witnessed how they interacted with one another within the community and with other people from other communities, as well as the agents of the state. In particular, I documented the 2006 and 2007 Thungran celebrations. This in-depth and long-term fieldwork study shed a different light on the experience I had from my first three-day stay in Cox’s Bazar for the Thungran’s Water Festival in 2005. Instead of the neat and clear cultural experience of the 2005 Thungran, the more closely examined 2006 and 2007 celebrations showed that important social and political issues were as deeply implicated as the cultural experience of the Thungran rituals. Indeed, this combination of social, political and cultural issues were as much important during the festival times as in the everyday life of the Rakhaing people.
CHAPTER 1: THE FESTIVAL OF ETHNICITY: THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The ‘Tribal’ Rakhaings in Bangladesh

Than Tun: I will conduct a fieldwork study on the Rakhaing community in Cox’s Bazar.
Consular Officer: You are studying anthropology?
Than Tun: Yes, but how do you know?
Consular Officer: I studied sociology at [a University in Bangladesh]. I know anthropologists study tribal people.

In answering my enquiry about a visa for fieldwork research in Bangladesh, this helpful Consular Officer from the Bangladesh High Commission in Canberra presented two popular understandings: firstly, that an anthropological study involves ‘tribal’ people and secondly, that Rakhaings in Bangladesh are classified as a ‘tribal’ people. Contrary to these understandings, my research is an anthropological study on the state and its role in classifying people into social categories, with a special reference to the Rakhaing people in southern Bangladesh.

Several variations of the ethnonym exist for the people who are traditionally associated with western Burma and southern parts of Bangladesh (see Map 1). In Burma\(^1\), the name is spelled as ‘Rakhine’, while the term ‘Arakanese’ has also been used in English. In Bangladesh, there are a few variations: ‘Rakhaing,’ ‘Rakhain,’ ‘Rakhaine,’ or ‘Rakkhain’ (Khan 1984; Khan 1996; Khan 1999; Majid 2005; Biswas 2007; Hoque 2006). The term ‘Magh,’ sometimes spelled as Mugh or Mogh, has also been used as an ethnonym, but

\(^{1}\) In this thesis, I will refer to the nation-state where Burman and non-Burman live as “Burma”. This is despite the fact that this area has been renamed Myanmar by the junta. The choice of using Burma or Myanmar is politically rhetorical in nature, but Lang (2002, p. 8) uses “Burma” as ‘a more familiar form’. I will follow Lang’s lead in using the term Burma.
has been rejected by Rakhaing as being derogatory. In this thesis, I will use ‘Rakhaing’ to refer to the people who identify Bangladesh as their birth country, while using ‘Arakanese/Rakhine’ for those from Burma. In the Rakhaing language, it is the same spelling for those in Burma or Bangladesh.

The majority of Arakanese/Rakhine are traditionally associated with the western coastal region of Burma; most prominently within Arakan/Rakhine State. Lesser numbers are from the southern Chin State and northwestern region of the Irrawaddy Division. In Bangladesh, their traditional locations are the southeastern district of Cox’s Bazar and the southwestern districts of Patuakhali and Barguna. Cox’s Bazar is known as Phaloung Chait in the Rakhaing language, while Patuakhali and Barguna are collectively known as Ah-wa-kwan. In this dissertation, I will refer to the whole of Cox’s Bazar District as Cox’s Bazar, Cox’s Bazar Town as Phaloung Chait, and the combined districts of Patuakhali and Barguna as Ah-wa-kwan. While Cox’s Bazar and Ah-wa-kwan are considered to be the ‘traditional locations’ of the Rakhaing people in Bangladesh, many of them now live in other areas of Bangladesh as well as in Burma and other countries.

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2 Arakan/Rakhine State, for the geographic location, and Arakanese, the people, were accepted English terms until they were changed by the Burmese military government in 1989, into ‘Rakhine State’ and ‘Rakhine’. A comprehensive analysis on the junta’s justification and politics of legitimacy relating to the changes of place-names is provided by Houtman (1999).
There is no reliable statistical report on the number of Rakhaings in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics provides the ‘main source of official statistics’ in Bangladesh (Roy 2006). Although the reliability of these statistics has been questioned (Rahman, Shafiq 2006), some Bangladeshi authors on Rakhaing in Bangladesh use it as

Map 1: Rakhaing’s traditional locations
the main source of quantitative data on the Rakhaing population. *Banglapedia: the National Encyclopaedia of Bangladesh*, published online by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, estimates the Rakhaing population in Bangladesh at about 7,000 (Rafique 2006). Bangladesh’s English newspaper, *The Daily Star* (2008b), reports the same figure. These sources claim to have been based on the 1991 Census Report of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Moreover, Rafique, in *Bangladpedia*, estimates that eighty percent of Rakhaing live in Cox’s Bazar and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Conversely, the ‘Tribal Household and Population by Race’ in the Cox’s Bazar Zila or District Volume of *Bangladesh Population Census 1991*, the same Census Report said to have been used by *Bangladpedia* and the newspapers, details that the total Rakhaing population in the district is 13,477 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 1994, p. 51). Based on this figure, the total population would be at least 16,848$^3$, markedly higher than the figure of 7,000 quoted by Rafique and Rahman. Other sources also report very divergent population estimates. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* suggests 35,000 Rakhaings lived in Bangladesh in 2007 (Lewis 2009). A Rakhaing community organisation states 150,000 as the population estimate (Ushit Maung 2000, p. 58).

Whether 7,000 or 150,000, the population of Rakhaing is small compared to the total population of Bangladesh. The 1991 Census states Bangladesh’s population as being in excess of 110 million people (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2007, p. 5). The 1991 Census shows the ‘Tribal’ people, including Rakhaing, amounting to around 1.2 million: about one percent of the national population. The term ‘Tribal’ refers to people who are

$^3$ If the population of Cox’s Bazar were supposed to be 80% of the whole population, 13,477 would be at least the 80% of 16,848.
neither Bengali nor Muslim. It has a social connotation of marginalisation and exclusion that reflects the hegemonic cultural category of ‘Bengali-Muslim’ in Bangladesh.

In this introductory chapter, I will explore how the Rakhaing people of Bangladesh are viewed through this hegemonic notion and how they are placed into a cultural category of the ‘Tribals’ as a consequence. I will begin with a general outline of academic studies on Rakhaing people. I will use anthropological literature on ethnicity to critique these studies and to outline an alternative approach to ethnicity. This approach analyses the issues of ethnicity from a cultural perspective, but also relates these issues to social, political and economic aspects pertinent in the people’s lives. Such an approach views social practices, including ‘cultural festivals’, as both cultural and socio-political processes. The subsequent chapters detail how these cultural, social and political processes underline the lives of Rakhaings in Bangladesh.
Map 2: Cox’s Bazar District and Rakhaing villages.
The Hegemony of the Bengali Muslim Cultural Category: Rakhaing as the ‘Tribe’

The notion of ‘tribe’ in Bangladesh has a colonial legacy (van Schendel & Bal 2002, p. 126), and it entails the contrast between the ‘civilised Bengalis’ and ‘primitive tribals’ (van Schendel 1992, p. 103). The term ‘tribal people’ refers to the diverse groups of people – who are neither regarded (nor do they regard themselves) as ‘Bengali’ nor ‘Muslim.’ Ellen Bal (2000, p. 4) states that the term ‘tribal’ reflects a perception that these people are ‘primitive, isolated, simple, undeveloped, believers in local religions, or [have] specific tribal political and economic arrangements’. Contemporary accounts on these ‘tribal people’ generally portray them in terms of their ‘tribal’ characteristics. These accounts focus on listing such characteristics as features of phenotype, accounts of historical origins, types of food, styles of dress, the architectural character of residential or community buildings, the moral and social norms and the perceived ideals of the people (for examples see: Mian 1979; Maloney 1984; Islam et al. 1984; Ahsan 1993; Talukdar 1994; Sattar 1975). These scholarly accounts on ‘the tribal peoples’ reflect the popular understanding among the majority Bengali community of the superiority of Bengali Muslim cultural identity over the people who were identified as ‘the tribal.’ Through the prism of cultural superiority, the numerical majority of Bengali Muslim people is equated with the cultural identity of the Bangladeshi citizen, essentially making Bengaliness the only form of cultural characteristic of the Bangladeshi.

However, those identified as ‘tribal’ have rejected this term and replaced it with terms such as Indigenous and Adivasi (the original inhabitant). This rejection has often

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4 Ellen Bal (2000, p. 10) points out ‘...no one can say exactly how many different ethnic groups there are. Estimates range from 20 to 56,’ but she rejects the collective label ‘tribal.’
manifested in political activities, sometimes involving violence. Despite these attempts at different terms and associated categorisations, the notion that these people are backward and uncivilised has dominated the popular understanding amongst the majority Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh.

Most of the ‘tribal’ people in Bangladesh are generally associated with the Chittagong Hill Tracts, but there are also a number of non-Bengali peoples from the ‘plain region’, such as the Rakhaing people, that are also referred to as ‘tribal’. As one of the ‘tribal’ groups from the ‘plain region,’ some Bengali scholars, namely Khan (1999), Majid (2005) Hoque (2006) and Biswas (2007), have studied Rakhaing through the lens of the ‘tribal’ category. They focused on the uniqueness of Rakhaing’s cultural characteristics which deviate from the ‘norms’ of Bangladesh. Abdul Mabud Khan (1999), a Bengali historian, outlines the Rakhaing ethnic characteristics including the geographical area they occupy, their historical origins, life-styles, economic activities, social arrangements such as kinship, rituals such as weddings and ordinations, costumes, religious beliefs and festivals. However, Khan’s study does not solely focus on the ‘Rakhaine’ people of Cox’s Bazar and Ah-wa-kwan. Under the title, The Maghs, Khan also writes accounts of both the ‘Marmas’ of the hills and the ‘Rakhaines’ of the plains. While Khan shows that these two groups have a historical origin in Arakan, currently a province of Burma, he does not explain why these groups now have separate identifications. Even though they seem to have one ‘culture,’ the peoples who are identified by Khan as the Maghs in southern Bangladesh regard themselves as having two different identifications: Rakhaing and Marma.

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5 Despite such generalised characterisations within the wider Bengali society, no coherent or systematic policies have been developed by the government, as is the case in India which had a constitutional provision of ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (van Schendel & Bal 2002).
In accounting for the social, cultural and religious aspects of the people under these dual identifications, Khan (1999, pp. 42-43) dismisses the claim for a separate Marma identity. Instead, he argues that these Marma people are ‘to be regarded as the men [sic] of Arakanese stock and their arguments [for a separate Marma identity] are not only weak but also reflect their ignorance about the past.’ Moreover, Khan (1999, p. 59) regards the cultural differences between Marmas, the Maghs of the hills, and Rakhaings, the Maghs of the plains, as local variations. Khan’s study raises the question; if these two groups have the same cultural traits, why does an ethnic boundary still exist between them?

Notwithstanding many social and cultural changes, the identification of Rakhaing (and that of Marma separately) continues. This indicates that cultural practices do not necessarily equate to social identifications. Even though Khan (1999, pp. 177-186) acknowledges an introduction of modern means in cultural practices, as ‘most of the educated men now use wrist watches,’ and that ‘formal’ religious and social organisations have emerged among them, he downplays these changes as ‘developments’ out of the backward nature of their cultural traditions. He fails to provide an explanation as to how these changes impact on their ethnic identity. Despite Khan (1984) being critical of the Bangladesh government’s policy on the welfare of the Buddhist Rakhaing people in early work, in his 1999 publication, *The Maghs*, he pays no attention to the effect of the formation of the Bangladesh nation-state on their ethnicity. In short he does not consider Rakhaing beyond the ‘tribal’ category in Bangladesh.

Mustafa Majid (2005), in *The Rakhaines*, outlines a similar cultural inventory of the Rakhaing people, albeit avoiding the term ‘Magh’ in his description. Under a chapter entitled, ‘The anthropological identity of the Rakhaines’, Majid (2005) describes Rakhaing in terms of a number of characteristics. Thus he describes their phenotype as
belonging to: ‘the great Mongolian race [and, having]... straight, dry and black hair. The size of their head is generally round. The nose is flat...’ (p. 54). He further catalogues their festivities and customs (eg. ‘Rakhines are burnt after death’ (p. 57)); their geographical locations; their economic activities (eg. ‘every aged woman of a Rakhine family is expert in weaving’ (p. 70)); their domestic architecture (eg. ‘Like other Mongoloid races they also make a high platform and build their house on it’ (p. 71)); their dressing styles (eg. ‘They put their ‘lungi’ over their ‘fatuas’ unlike the Bengalee Muslims or Hindus who wear shirts over their ‘lungi’ (p. 72)); and their religion, Buddhism. This inventory of characteristics is followed by descriptions of Rakhaing language and the ceremonies of marriage and the New Year festival. The remainder of his book focuses on aspects of the government policies and bureaucrats’ behaviours, about which I will discuss later. However, Majid’s analysis of Rakhaing ethnicity describes Rakhaing purely in terms of cultural content and how he considers it as significantly different from that of the Bengali, but he does not explain how socio-cultural contexts shape Rakhaing cultural identity.

Abdul Awwal Biswas’s (2007) study focuses on the rituals and beliefs relating to the life-cycle of the Rakhaing people. He outlines their behaviours and attitudes on childbirth, child rearing, and menstruation, religious festivals, and funerals. Biswas’ focus on internal societal rituals fails to consider how Rakhaing interact with their neighbours. While some Rakhaing may live in their ‘traditional and isolated’ villages, many Rakhaing live in close proximity to their Bengali neighbours and many more live in urban areas; acquiring a modern education and livelihood. Biswas does not explain how these

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6 *Lungi* is a Bangla word for Sarong and *Fatuas* for Shirt.
7 All the villages that I had visited during my research were however not ‘isolated,’ but were full of vibrant interactions with their Bengali neighbours. However, these interactions were not always friendly.
changes affect the Rakhaing cultural behaviours and their conception of ethnicity. Focusing on cultural content supposedly different from the surrounding Bengali culture, he fails to explain how these cultural differences are important in their social life as citizens of Bangladesh, surrounded by the majority Bengali Muslims.

Hoque’s (2006) Masters thesis focuses on the role that radio plays in the life of Rakhaing. Instead of using the term ‘tribal,’ he uses the presently more accepted ‘Indigenous’ to identify the social status of Rakhaing within Bangladesh. However, Hoque’s understanding of the Rakhaing ethnicity follows that of Khan and Majid. He writes, ‘The Rakhaing of Patuakhali observe various ceremonies within their simple lifestyle,’ and then, he outlines the cultural contents of Rakhaing’s ethnicity (Hoque 2006, pp. 28-31). While he mentions that the identities ‘Burmese’ and ‘Magh’ have been used to refer to Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar, he does not explain the details of how such different identifications have come about nor, indeed, how they have been played down on certain occasions. While he acknowledges there are cultural similarities between Marma and Rakhaing, he does not explain why the Rakhaing and Marma identities persist.

Despite these Bengali scholars moving away from the popular idiom of ‘tribal’ in reference to Rakhaing, the fundamental idea of the people being defined in terms of their unique cultural characteristics different from the ‘normal’ Bengali has not changed. By providing a list of cultural characteristics, these studies do not change the conception of the culture of a Bangladeshi citizen as being a Bengali. Their portraits of Rakhaing as being the people having the list of characteristics different from that of the Bengali

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8 Even the term ‘indigenous’ referring to the minority peoples in Bangladesh is politically controversial, since the successive governments did not accord the constitutional recognition of these peoples’ separate histories and identities. (The Daily Star 2011)
present the cultural differences between the two groups, but do not challenge the cultural hegemony of the Bengali Muslim within Bangladesh, the assumption of being a Bangladeshi citizen means having the cultural characteristics of a Bengali Muslim.

These studies of Bengali scholars, however, are not different from, most Bengali academics and media accounts, which portray non-Bengali, non-Muslim people, as minority people with distinct cultural characteristics. Whether sympathetic to the plight of ‘minority’ peoples or not, such ethnocentric studies fail to account for these cultural differences as the results of social boundary maintenance or the politics of ethnicity carried out by, for, and against those who are being identified as different. Moreover, by focusing on the cultural characteristics, an ethnic group is perceived as a culturally bounded entity. This approach represents a group of people to have ‘a static, stable, homogenous, shared, authentic, pure, apolitical culture necessarily coupled to one ‘people’ defined by ‘racial’ or ‘ethnic descent’’ (Bader 2001, p. 251).

Ethnicity as Cultural Differentiation

An alternative approach to ethnicity was first presented by Fredrick Barth (1969). Barth emphasises the social boundary, rather than the cultural contents of groups, when studying ethnicity. He urges investigating ‘the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses’ (Barth 1969, p. 15, original emphasis). He further points out that, ‘... some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied.’ Thus, he advises against ‘[typologising] groups on the basis of lists of contents’ (Banks 1996, p. 13). Cultural similarities and differences do not always coincide
with different social identification. Rather than merely documenting cultural characteristics of a group, he says, analysis of ethnic identity should focus on how the social boundary that marks one’s ethnic identity is formed and maintained. A study of boundary maintenance allows an analysis of the dynamism of ethnicity, rather than assuming that the ‘culture’ of an ethnic group is static and neatly fits within an ethnic boundary (Eriksen 1992, p. 28).

The study of ethnic boundaries implies an understanding that ethnicity is a social relationship between two or more groups; hence, it does not exist as the property of a group. Eriksen (2002, p. 58; original emphasis) points out that ethnicity ‘exists between not within groups.’ Ethnicity does not derive from the group itself, but by virtue of its members being identified as an ethnic category in relation to people from another group. Handelman (1977, pp. 189-190) echoes Barth by stating:

Ethnicity is a category of membership; that is, an ascribed or self-ascribed device that socially locates an individual with reference to the social ascriptions of other persons. [...] Such membership provides persons with elements of ‘social identity’ which they use to orient themselves to other individuals, either as fellow members or as other kinds of persons.

One such social element used in orienting fellow members and outsiders is the notion of common ancestors or a common historical origin. In understanding the historical aspect of ethnicity, Barth (1969, p. 17; original emphasis) suggests looking at ‘what is needed to make ethnic distinctions emerge in an area’. In other words, an historical analysis regarding an ethnic group should be concerned with the historical process that gives rise to the ethnic boundary. The importance of the historical approach has been pointed out
by Brumfiel (2003, p. 207) as ‘to understand why people behave the way they do, we must know their past and their understanding of that past’. Understanding historical processes helps us see how cultural differences have come into existence and the dynamic of these differences in people’s lives (Eriksen 2002).

Khan’s (1996; 1999) works on the origins of Rakhaing have been important in understanding their historic link to the Arakan region of western Burma, as well as broader changes that have occurred in the history of the Rakhaing people. What Khan does not explain is what was happening to the ethnic identification of Rakhaing during the extremely turbulent history of eastern Bengal, later to become East Pakistan and then Bangladesh. He assumes that Rakhaing ethnic identity is constant throughout this politically and socially volatile period. Instead, a study on ethnicity should pay attention to the historical trajectories which give rise to a certain ethnic identification or the process of ethnogenesis.

While the study on an ethnic identity must be aware of the historical process of ethnogenesis, it is also important to be mindful that a certain version of history can be a part of contemporary identity politics. Eriksen (2002, pp. 71-72, original emphasis) cautions about the need to be critical on history, though he acknowledges the importance of understating historical processes themselves:

[Most] anthropologists would rather concentrate on showing the ways in which particular historical accounts are used as tools in the contemporary creation of identities and in politics. Anthropologists would stress that history is not a product of the past but a response to requirements of the present.
Moreover, Eriksen (1992, p. 30) also points out that ‘historically bounded studies of ethnicity and related phenomena usually failed to account for the reproduction of identity on the level of interaction.’

The focus on the ethnic boundary deals with the interaction that occurs at the inter-ethnic level. However, in order to fully understand the politics of ethnicity, Eriksen (1992) calls for attention to be paid to cultural manifestations of different ethnic groups from the inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic and inter-personal levels. One form of such manifestations would be the process where certain accounts of the past are used as a tool in signalling the members’ belonging to a particular ethnic identity. History can be important in differentiating the ‘others’ from ‘us,’ while this ‘historical commonality’ can also dictate ethnic solidarity (or allegiance). The question then is which ‘historical account’ becomes salient in present-day identity politics. Moreover, why individual members are attracted to certain aspects of history should also be pertinent in analysing inter-personal interaction.

The common historical origin is not the only instrument in provoking a sense of ethnic membership. Other cultural norms, such as dress, naming system, religion, and food can also be important in communicating ethnic distinctness. The critical approach to ethnicity should not focus on the notion of distinction based on these cultural norms, but on how the notion of cultural distinctness is socially produced and maintained. The focus in the Barthian approach to ethnicity is on ‘a type of social process in which notions of cultural difference are communicated...’ (Eriksen 1992, p. 29). This approach views ethnicity as a social process where individuals perceive other individuals as having cultural similarities as co-members, and differences from the ‘others’.
Barth’s approach to ethnicity is ‘strongly sociological in the sense that notions of the cultural are to be explained rather than used in explanation’ (Kapferer 2002, p. 14). This approach to studying ethnicity pays attention to the mechanisms of drawing, maintaining and redrawing ethnic social boundaries which delineate certain cultural characteristics as the markers of the group (Bader 2001). However, communicating a group’s ‘historical origin’ and other ‘ethnic’ characteristics also involves cultural communication. It is about promoting a certain version of ‘the facts’ to members and outsiders. While we pay attention to how these cultural features were made into an ‘essence’ of ethnicity, we have to consider what underlying processes make this communication possible. In other words, in understanding ethnicity, we need to look at both the social conditions which give rise of cultural differentiation, at the same time considering how these cultural differences are linked in the social and political dynamics of the people’s lives.

Kapferer (2002) criticises the strongly-sociologically focused approach to ethnicity, advocated by Barth (1969), since he believes it leaves the cultural out of the analysis. He argues these two are inseparable, as they are simultaneously involved in social production. Cohen (1999) contends that while anthropologists are moving away from equating a people with a list of cultural contents, ordinary people are increasingly appealing to these general cultural characteristics to explain and understand their identity. Similarly, Jenkins (1997, pp. 121-122) points out that ‘… [ethnic] boundaries, and interactions across them, are intimately and indissolubly bound up with the cultural contents of ethnicity.’ Ethnicity is not simply an empty vessel, to use Eriksen’s term (1991a), where the members ‘freely’ select the cultural contents. It is also the process of cultural formation which helps the people to understand their social conditions and dictates their social actions. While it is important to focus on the boundary maintenance
of cultural differences, the study of ethnicity has to pay attention to the cultural formation which helps the people to understand their social life and their cultural behaviours.

The social acts of communicating cultural differences—ethnic boundary formation and maintenance—are observable to the researcher. However, ‘the cultural differences referred to in these acts are themselves elusive’ (Eriksen 1992, p. 32). One of the reasons for this elusiveness of the cultural in most anthropological and sociological studies of ethnicity is the social sciences’ aversion to essentialism. In essentialist conceptions of ethnicity, cultural practices are generally regarded as the characteristics that mark an individual’s ethnic belonging. One’s ancestry, kinship, food, clothing, and other cultural factors are viewed as the innate indicators of one’s ethnicity. It is assumed that these cultural distinctions were in themselves the ‘essences’ of one’s ethnicity. Thus any social, political, and economic forces which are pertinent in a person’s life are seen as having a minimal impact on it. While it is important to point out the essentialist nature of ethnic cultural imaginations, it is also equally important to incorporate these essentialisms into the analysis of ethnicity. Herzfeld (1997, p. 26) argues that ‘distrust of essentialism in social theory should not blur our awareness of its equally pervasive presence in social life.’ In other words, a study of ethnic situations should consider why these ‘essentialist’ accounts of ethnicity are able to be used in signalling individuals’ ethnic belonging.

The study of ethnicity then needs to focus on social situations while paying a close attention to the cultural contexts where this sociality occurs. Even though we should not regard ethnicity as an inventory of cultural features, we need to be aware that how some cultural features have come to be viewed as ethnic markers, as much as which social practices are instrumental in the process of making these cultural contents important.
Such an approach would allow us to see the cultural forces of ethnicity embedded in wider social and political processes of social production (Kapferer 2002; Eriksen 1992).

State Effects, Ethnicity, National Identity and Borders

One such wider social and political process that has been important in the contemporary world is the politics of relating to the state. Barth’s (1969) earlier conception of ethnicity does not consider the role of the state. However, Barth (1994) later argues that the anthropology of ethnicity needs to incorporate the state in understanding the social process of ethnic boundaries. For Barth, the state provides ‘a vast field of public goods’ and regulates the lives and movements of people; hence, the state deals ‘directly with groups and categories’ (p. 19). He believes it is necessary to see the state as an actor influencing relations among individuals within or outside of their ethnic group.

Mustafa Majid (2005) outlines Rakhaing ethnicity as the collection of cultural contents of Rakhaing people and describes the political and bureaucratic issues that affect the lives of Rakhaing. Majid first provides an explanation of how Rakhaing, as a culturally distinct group, essentially differ from the neighbouring Bengali community. Then, he goes on to outline the cases of land conflicts between Rakhaing individuals and their Bengali neighbours. More importantly, his analysis involves the roles of Bengali political and bureaucratic leaders in these land disputes, which have adversely affected the properties of Rakhaing individuals. These detailed accounts document how social and political leaders have misused political power in rural areas against people who are perceived to be powerless. From a social justice perspective, Majid has compiled accounts of the abuses many Rakhaing have faced from despotic and corrupt state agents, as well as the
negative effects of culturally insensitive and inefficient state policies on the Rakhaing community. In an analytical sense, Majid paints the picture of the state of Bangladesh as an entity behaving against the Rakhaing ethnic group.

Majid conceptualises the state as ‘a group of functionaries’ (following Durkheim, quoted in Badie & Birnbaum 1983, p. 14). This conception of the state as a collective of ‘institutions with law-making and enforcing capabilities [which is being] staffed and controlled by a small number of specialists’ has dominated social sciences (Nagengast 1994, p. 116). In the studies of political dimensions of ethnicity, the state has been understood as an entity standing against the ethnic groups (for instance Geertz 1975; Horowitz 1985) or a tool of bureaucratic and military powers dominated by people belonging to one ethnic group against other ethnic groups (Brown 2002).

However, the state is not just simply a corpus of bureaucratic agencies and individuals. It also includes a collection of processes that legitimate domination over its citizens (Abrams 1988, p. 76). This domination manifests in the state’s capacity to regulate placement of its citizens, for example through permits, regulations, identity cards, passports and visas. At the same time, the state produces among the citizens a perception that it is the most important locus of power within its boundary (Trouillot 2001). This concept-building process takes place not only through the state’s control of how citizens are placed in society, but also through the construction of ‘feelings of awe and powerlessness’ among the people (Nuijten 2003, p. 9). In other words, the state is a collection of institutions that manifests a concentration of material forces; but it is also a process of cultural formation that creates an understanding that it is an entity that stands above the everyday lives of its people (Mitchell 1999).
The state ‘appearing as an apparatus that stands apart from the rest of the social world’ is an effect of the process of cultural formation (Mitchell 1991, p. 93). The failure to give attention to this process of cultural formation would lead us to misrecognise the state’s effect upon social categories. To those who study the state, Bourdieu (1999, p. 53) points out, that there is a possibility of misrecognising these effects not as what they are, that is ‘the [as] state categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state’. Ferguson (2006) advises analysts not to conceptualise the state as a separate entity from the society, but as the ‘bundles of social practices’ embedded in everyday lives. Such an approach regards the state not as an entity, but as a social construct that exists in relation to other social relationships. The study of the state then is concerned with the social processes that produce the conception amongst its people that the state is an independent entity with the supreme authority in its territory (Sharma & Gupta 2006).

Gupta (1995, p. 375) points out that since ‘the state has become implicated in the minute texture of everyday life,’ an ethnography of the state which gives greater recognition to the study of everyday politics will reveals the nature of the state in people’s lives. Recent anthropological studies of the state are moving toward focusing on the relationship between bureaucratic practices and everyday experiences of local people (Gupta 1995; Nuijten 2003). These studies conceptualise the state as a site of ‘symbolic and cultural production’ (Ferguson & Gupta 2002, p. 981) or an ideological project (Abrams 1988) which creates the cultural understanding of citizenship under the absolute control of the state. Such an approach looks at how the cultural imagination of the state and everyday practices of the ordinary people play out in state formation (Yang 2005; Ferguson & Gupta 2002).
State formation is not just the historical genesis of a particular state, but also looking at the political process in the formation of people’s social identities. Following Steinmetz (1999), the formation of the state refers to an ongoing process which involves both the features of the state structures and the mechanisms of policy making. These state features and mechanisms are not only concerned with how the state is being structured, for example in the constitutional frameworks and the systems of political parties, but also how the state has been realised in everyday life. This approach considers, as Navaro-Yashin (cited in Aretxaga 2003, p. 398) points out, the sphere of everyday life as ‘a central domain for the production and reproduction of the state.’ In this everyday sphere, cultural representations of citizenship are produced and reproduced; that is, their identities as citizens, aliens, tribal, and similar categories. According to Bourdieu, ‘the state moulds mental structures and imposes common principles of vision and division ... [which result in] ... the construction of national identity’ (Bourdieu 1999, p. 61, original emphasis).

‘National identity’ generally entails every citizen falling into a single social category. However, the construction of national identity is not generally a straightforward process as ‘the notion of the “other” is inextricably linked to the concept of national identity’ (Triandafyllidou 1998, p. 596). This process of national identity formation is as much about making people into members of the nation-state as simultaneously rejecting ‘others.’ In order to understand the political process that has come to be known as the state, attention must also be paid to the cultural formation of national identity. Moreover, instead of taking these categories of ‘other’ as a given, a study of the state should pay attention to cultural, social and political processes that give rise to these categories of ‘others’, in relation to national identity. In the formation of national identity, characteristics that are regarded as associated with the ‘other’ are rejected from the central
discourse of national culture. This process of national identity formation is the cultural process of meaning making, as well as the political process of citizenship where the state is deeply implicated (Eriksen 2002, Chapter 6). The state is concerned with both the structures of power distribution and the politics of meanings, which are central to the formation of national identity. Thus according to Gupta & Ferguson (1992, p. 12), ‘Discussions of nationalism make it clear that states play a crucial role in the popular politics of place making and in the creation of naturalised links between places and peoples’.

Majid’s (2005) *The Rakhaines* only deals with the politics of state structures, not the meaning-making process which is inseparable from everyday interactions among the peoples of Bangladesh, including Rakhain. Moreover, it does not question the notion of Bangladesh’s national identity being based only on Muslim and Bengali cultural characteristics.

The notion of a single ‘national identity’ assumes the boundedness of the national territory. It considers that within this national territory lives ‘a people’ with a homogenous culture and continuous history (Handler 1988). The concept of a homogenous national culture is not only a social construct (Anderson 1991), but it is also true that generally a nation-state is ‘multi-ethnic’ or ‘plural’ (Smith 1981, cited in Eriksen 1992, p. 53). Trouillot (2001, p. 130) argues that the assumption of a national state as the container of a single group of people has never been solid. The territorial encompassment of states is almost always challenged by the fact that ethnic identities of some citizens do not fall neatly within the state boundary (Wilson & Donnan 1998, p. 14). In these situations, Donnan (2005, p. 70) points out, people face ‘problems of negotiating ethnic and national
belonging where state borders are drawn with little regard to the putative ties of blood and culture that bind people on both of their sides.’

There have been numerous studies on the cross-border ethnicity of peoples who are a minority in different countries (for instance Donnan 2005; Heyman 2001; Leontidou, Donnan & Afouxenidis 2005; Escolar 2001; Gill 2003). Studies on cross-border ethnicity illustrate how ambiguity in identity and community membership is handled by people on the border (Gill 2003). These studies have focused on the fluidity of social identities that do not conform to the artificially drawn contemporary cartography of nation-states. However, critiquing such an approach, Donnan (2005, p. 74) cautions that the concept of borders as zones of ambiguity should not neglect the fact that people who live in the border areas may sometimes see themselves as having a stable and fixed identity. Moreover, most studies on cross-border identities assume that people ‘often are comfortable with the notion that they are tied culturally to many other people in neighbouring states (Wilson and Donnan 1998, p. 4).’ However, it is possible that the issues of identity and cultural belonging at the border areas are more complex than simply having a fluid identity or a fixed identity belonging to another nation. To understand the complexity of the lives of people with a cross-border ethnic identity, it is important to examine how they negotiate other cultural and national identities in their everyday lives. Such examination will have to go beyond looking simply from the national perspectives of the two neighbouring countries involved.

Bengali scholars who have done major work on Rakhaing see the link between those in Bangladesh and their fellow ethnic members in the Arakan/Rakhine State in Burma as unproblematic. The border areas where Rakhaing live have seen major historical changes,
especially during what is referred to as ‘the Partition’. The Partition, entailing the process of British decolonisation of British India, has attracted many studies, most of which have focused on the border areas between Bangladesh and India (van Schendel 2005, p. 36). However, the focus on the cross-border issues between Burma and Bangladesh has been limited to only a few academic works (Ahmed 2004; Islam 2007; Smith 1991; van Schendel 2006). These studies focus on the wider structural issues and pay little attention to Rakhaing. When they do discuss Rakhaing ethnicity, they regard it as being essentially the same in Bangladesh and Burma.

While there are common ethnic and religious ties to Burma, the Rakhaing people live in Bangladesh as citizens. Even though Rakhaing’s cultural characteristics do not fit in with the popular understanding of Bangladeshi national identity (which focuses on being Bengali and Muslim), Rakhaing are still legal citizens or Nagoriks of the Bangladesh nation-state. Desh is also an important term used to talk about the nation-state and the understanding ordinary people in imagining their common social identity in Bangladesh. Gardner (1993, p. 5) points out ‘desh is more than just a physical mass of land, trees and rivers; it is the locus of one’s social group, [but, it] can mean nation state, region, village or homestead.’ At the same time, the notion of ‘bari’9, denoting one’s original locality, is important to indicate one’s social identity in everyday life in Bangladesh. Even though the neighbours might not have the same ethnic identities, they still share their everyday life in their common locality, through either of these terms designating locality and belonging. In our attempt to understand the issue of national identity, we need to look at how the people’s perceptions of common locality feature in their understanding of national identity. While political, social and economic factors between indigenous

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9 Bari, meaning ‘home’, is the term used to indicate one’s native region, as in ‘Bari Ko Htai or where are you from?’ referring to ancestral origin of the individual, not their current location.
peoples and the Bengalis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are problematic, and sometimes violent, these factors may not have the same effect in other localised environments. Notwithstanding these differences, most studies on national identity in Bangladesh assume the centrality of Bengaliness within the bounded territory of the country (Desh) of Bengali speaking people (Bangla\textsuperscript{10}). By doing so, these studies fail to conceptualise how the notion of common local origins interacts with the notion of singular national culture, and how different relationships cross-cutting this dichotomy of Bengali versus not-Bengali are possible.

In addition to the assumption of boundedness of the nation-state, most academic studies have compartmentalised wider international geographies as regional studies through ‘academic regionalisation of the world’ (van Schendel 2002a, p. 647). This regionalisation generally delineates the world into well-bordered regions according to some sort of assumed cultural or social unity (McDonald 2004). The Burma-Bangladesh border regions have been at the boundary of what have been academically conceived as Southeast Asian and South Asian Studies. A study of the people of the Burma-Bangladesh border has to transcend both ‘nationalised’ and ‘regionalised’ perspectives. Moreover, the nationalised identifications in academic studies such as ‘Bangladeshi’ or ‘Burmese’ are also largely the products of nation-state formation (Shamsul A.B. 1999). Hence, the notions of ‘South Asian/Southeast Asian’ and ‘Bangladeshi/Burmese’ have to be critically considered in studying the ethnic categories that exist in all of these notions.

\textsuperscript{10} Bangla is both the name of the language, Bengali, and that of the land, as in \textit{Amar Shonar Bangla} (My Bengal of Gold) from the National Anthem of Bangladesh (Farooq 2006)
The study of these social identifications, including national, regional and ethnic categories, needs to take into account the standpoints of both the politics of identity and the processes of meaning-making that give rise to these identifications. A focus on the processes of meaning-making allows us to see how these social categories are essentialised products, resulting, in part, from state formation. However, as Bourdieu (1999, p. 53) cautions:

To endeavour to think the state is to take the risk of taking over (or being taken over by) a thought of the state, that is, of applying to the state categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state and hence to misrecognize its most profound truth.

To overcome the takeover of state thinking in our study of ethnicity and national identity, Trouillot (2001, p. 126) suggests a strategy focusing on the social practices ‘in which state processes and practices are recognizable through their effects.’ A study of the state needs to consider the multiplicity of political practices and structures existing in the name of the state. In other words, it needs to examine how state political practices relate to the myriad of other everyday social situations. However, as Steinmetz (1999) points out, it is important to note these situations are not static, but always in the process of formation. My study of the ethnic category of ‘Rakhaing’ will explore how the Rakhaing people have been part of the everyday process of Bangladesh and Burmese state formation, and how their cultural activities and characteristics are related to their social and political dynamics within Bangladesh.
Studying Ethnicity and the Politics of Festival Performance

One way to approach the complex social issues involving the politics of ethnic and national identities is through a close analysis of the community’s festivals. Festivals can be viewed as ‘entrees into a community’s symbolic, economic, social and political life’ (Farber 1983, p. 33), but it is also important that they not be reified as simple evidence of cultural continuity. When Khan (1999), Majid (2005) and Biswas (2007) discuss a Rakhaing festival, they present it as if it is suspended in time. In other words, they consider the festival as the time devoid of related social, political and economic processes. Their studies list what occur at the festivals and for what purposes these particular festivals are conducted. For instance, Khan (1999, pp. 169-170) describes, in detail, the festival of Chadaung11: when it occurs, what activities are conducted in a typical festival and how the activities in the festival could be understood from the orthodox Buddhist literature. However, he does not mention how this festival is celebrated during his time of research among Rakhaing. Similarly, in his discussion of the marriage ceremony, Majid (2005, p. 93) writes that ‘the marriage ceremony is held in the bride’s house because [Rakhaing] think that their girls are soft-hearted and that the bride’s mind is full of sorrow...’ However, Ravina Aggarwal (2004, p. 147) suggests, though in a different context to a Rakhaing wedding, that such a tearful event of the bride leaving her parents’ home is not always an indication of sorrowful and weak femininity, but can also be understood as a subversive act against the patriarchal dominance which put women in a marginalised position. Thus according to her, such behaviour in a wedding is not simply an expression of the bride’s sorrow, but a political act against the social suppression she

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11 Khan (1999, p. 169) is mistaken to label it as Chãdãung. Rather it is the Wa-kywet festival of Tadangkywet month (known in Burman as Thadinguyt). Firstly, Khan has ‘Bengalanised’ the pronunciation using the Bengali alphabet ‘Chā’ for the lack of Rakhaing consonant ‘Tha’. Secondly, he took the festival celebrated on the full moon day of the month of Thadin (the end of Thadin) as Thadin or Chãdãung (which has a very different meaning from the festival name). Even though he put a term Wachey next to Chãdãung, he only uses the latter term throughout his description.
faces in everyday life. Aggarwal points out that by closely observing the celebration of a ritual activity at the moment of occurrence, a researcher can gain insight into the different meanings that different participants attribute, even in relation to the same event.

The study of festivals as an attempt to understand cultural meanings has been the central focus in many anthropological studies. It is often assumed that through festival performances, and ritual activities in general, meanings of culture can be ‘more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived’ (Geertz 1975, p. 443). More importantly, Geertz argues that ritual activities can present how people understand their world. For him, a ritual or a festival is a special time when a researcher can observe cultural meanings which normally are well-obsured from view. Ancelet (2001, p. 144) finds in relation to the Mardi Gras performance in southern Louisiana that ‘[w]hat on the surface appears to be a purely ludic affair can have serious undercurrents that reflect community realities and concerns.’

However, Victor Turner (1982) points out that anthropologists should analyse not just the indigenous or people’s own meanings of the festival performances, but also their operational meanings. Operational meaning is the knowledge that comes from the observation by an anthropologist of what participants do rather than what they say they do (Turner 1970, p. 12). Festival time is not normal time; it is outside of the ordinary, or to use Turner’s words a stage of liminality, that is, a ‘condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life’ (Turner 1974, p. 47). It is a special time when ordinarily constrained social structures and cultural norms are ‘liberated’ (Turner 1982, p. 29). In this stage of liminality, festival performances of the people can become ‘a critique… an evaluation (with a possibility of rejection) of the way society handles history’ (Turner
Turner argues that even though a festival ritual occurs at a single temporality and locality, many meanings, derived from different sections of the community, are condensed into the festival. He refers to this condensation as a matter of ‘multivocal’ meanings, having more than one meaning at once (Turner 1982, p. 20). Unlike Biswas’s (2007) approach of unilaterally valuing and presenting his own point of view on the Rakhaing rituals, Tuner advocates looking at all of the different interpretations packed into a festival.

By closely looking at these varied interpretations, anthropologists can understand differences in social structures underlying these festival references (1982; Turner 1970). These structures are revealed through what Turner called *communitas*. *Communitas*, a conceptual tool that Turner uses to understand ritual performances, is ‘society experienced or seen as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated community, or even communion of equal individuals’ (Turner 1974, p. 49). *Communitas* is perceived as anti-structure or astructure by Turner (1974); it is a critique or a commentary upon social structures, such as class, caste, status and hierarchy. These structures are expressed in many other ways in normal times—for instance in differential tastes and aesthetics (Bourdieu 1984). However, during festivals, through *communitas*, the social structures of a society are revealed more clearly. The concept of *communitas* can give important insights into the broader social structures that underlie both the festival performances and everyday life. By using a structuralist approach, Turner comes to see that in festivals not only are meanings expressed, but social structures are also revealed, critiqued and commented upon. In the Bilmawn’s masquerade rite of the Berbers in Northern Africa, for example the performances parody Koranic teachings,
invert gender and generational roles of daily village life, and exclude normally dominant older male members (Hammoudi 1993).

Meanings and social structures that can be deduced from a festival are not static, but depend upon the social contexts in which the festival is celebrated. Houseman and Severi (1998, p. 167) point out that ritual performance should be viewed as a ‘form of relational field’ in which social actors engage in establishing the social contexts of the festival performance at the particular time. Festival participants could be engaging with each other through the same rituals, but each could derive a different meaning from them, depending upon how they are socially positioned in relation to other participants. Their engagements could be in the nature of contestation or cooperation with other participants and these engagements could reflect their struggle to maintain or change their social positions. In the analysis of a festival, we need to be aware of multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings that are manifested, because ‘[the] event cannot be reduced to being merely an expression or reflection of the larger social and political plane in which it has irrupted’ (Kapferer 2005, p. 103).

Studies of festivals by such scholars as Thorp (1986), Dirks (1991), Siu (1990), Holland and Skinner (1995), and Guss (2000, p. 11) show that festivals and rituals can be the sites of social contestation where new cultural meanings, social identities and social structures are redefined and created anew. Festivals sometimes can be understood as a political expression against gender inequality (Holland & Skinner 1995), or a reflection upon contested relationships between different generations and classes of people (Rapp 1986). Similarly, festival times are ‘fields of action in which both dominant and oppressed are able to dramatize competing claims or ‘duel with rituals’’ (Guss 2000, p. 10). At the same
time, a festival occasion is about more than one relation of contestation, but the site of multiple contestations (Dirks 1991). A festival could in fact reflect the contradictory meanings that manifested in the life of participants, as shown by Michael Pinches (1992) on the San Francisco Xavier fiesta in a Manila squatter settlement. This fiesta is a symbolic assertion of human dignity by the urban poor against bourgeois values while it was also a simultaneous affirmation of their class-subordination. By studying how a festival unfolds within its social context, we can understand the dynamic relationships among festival participants in terms of cultural, social, political, economic and other related aspects.

A festival that is said to be related to an ethnic group should not be regarded simply as an entry in the list of cultural contents. It must be considered as a cultural practice embedded within other forms and levels of social and political relationships, and hence loaded with multiple meanings related to these diverse relationships. Indeed, one of these meanings is the participants’ own imagination of the festival as an ethnic event. However, if we were to follow an anthropological approach on festival that I have just outlined above, it will show the dynamic relationships pertinent in the festival, and hence it will reveal how it is essentialised within the politics of ethnicity and nationality. Thus, a study of a festival associated with an ethnic group would reveal ‘strategic essentialism’ employed by the group in politicising and redefining membership (Henry 2000, p. 331). By locating festivals in their temporal, social and political contexts, we can understand how a festival is instrumental in the social process of ‘establishing differentiating characteristics’ for an ethnic group in relation to other ethnic groups, the wider society and the nation-state (Cadaval 1991, p. 206). Festival performances are not simply about a prescribed set of actions, which are performed by passive individuals. They are about how individual
participants respond to their life circumstances, and how they make the choice to perform
these ritual actions (Drewal, cited in Askew 2002, p. 21). Hence, the study of an ethnic
festival is not just to be regarded as a component of ethnic culture, but as a social practice
unfolded at a particular point in time while reflecting the cultural, social and political
dynamics that are pertinent in the participants’ everyday life.

An anthropological study of a Rakhaing festival is about more than simply listing how a
sequence of rituals is acted out by the Rakhaing individuals. It is as much about the
cultural activities as about the social, political, economic and other circumstances around
these activities. Such a study should analyse how different cultural meanings associated
with the rituals are situated within different social dimensions of the Rakhaing
community. Considered as a social activity, a festival has to be analysed in relation to the
social dynamics among the participants which involve as many contestations as
collaborations and accommodations among them and to other social, political and
economic challenges, at that particular point in time.

While others who have studied Rakhaing in Bangladesh (Khan 1999; Majid 2005; Biswas
2007) discuss many of the festivals celebrated in a year, in this thesis, I will focus on one
festival: Thungran or New Year. Thungran is also generally known as the Water Festival
based on the main ritual involving participants throwing water at each other. My intention
is not simply to give a single and simple cultural explanation of Thungran rituals such as
the participants throwing water at each other in mid-April, the summer month, because
the ‘body needs to be cooled by pouring water’ (Khan 1999, p. 172), or its possible
reflection as a symbolic purification of the past year’s misfortunes (Ko Thet 2001).
Similarly, I will not focus on how the Rakhaing Thungran ‘objectively’ differs from other
similar New Year celebrations involving water throwing, as in Burma’s Thingran (Htin Aung 1962), Thailand’s Songkran (Ashley 2005) or Laos’s Sangkhan Pai (Arcaimbault 1971). What I will discuss is how the particular Thungran celebrations in Phaloung Chait in southern Bangladesh in 2006 and 2007 came to be considered as the authentic and unique element of Rakhaing ethnicity. In other words, my study is about the politics of Thungran rituals relating to the participants’ ethnicity as Rakhaing and their nationality as Bangladeshi.

Owning Community, Studying ‘Others’

Many Rakhaing informants in my research project commented, ‘Your study would benefit us immensely’. This perception derives from the fact that, since I am a member of the Rakhaing ethnic group, my research agenda would be to promote the interest of the Rakhaing community in Bangladesh. Such perception indicates two assumptions: first, my status as a ‘native’ anthropologist and, second, my research agenda as the ‘correct’ documentation of the Rakhaing community in Bangladesh. While both assumptions are correct, the implications are not as straightforward as my informants have suggested. Though belonging to the same ethnic category, it is not possible to claim that I am the ‘same’ as the Rakhaing people in Bangladesh. Moreover, my research is equally concerned with academic exploration around the concept of ethnicity, nation-state and belonging to different social entities as much as it is about documenting the lives of Rakhaing in Bangladesh. My research is also concerned about how people understand their social belonging, and how these understandings are intrinsically linked to the way they view me, whether as a ‘native’—a fellow member, or an outsider.
In terms of social belonging, I was connected to the Rakhaing community of Bangladesh through our common ethnicity and through my family relations. Through marriage, I had had an instant notion of belonging as kin among some of my wife’s Rakhaing relatives. Apart from my ability to use the Rakhaing language and my ‘ethnic’ name\textsuperscript{12}, prior to starting my fieldwork in Cox’s Bazar, my everyday experiences as an Australian had little in common with those of most Rakhaing. However, even before I commenced my fieldwork, I had a social identity among these relatives. These kinship networks afforded me the entree to the community for my fieldwork; that is in getting to know people who are already socially linked. For those outside of the kin networks, I was an Arakanese/Rakhine married to a Bangladeshi Rakhaing, but living in Australia. These multiple identities were indeed invoked when I started to engage with Rakhaings in their everyday lives.

Despite these almost ready-made social identities within the community, my knowledge of everyday experience of being a Rakhaing in Bangladesh only gradually developed after a period of staying in Bangladesh. Through a distant relative of my wife, I gradually joined a friendship (Ah-Phaw) group of similarly aged males who participated in almost every social occasion together. In Cox’s Bazar, these Ah-Phaws became important informants for my research. My interactions with them form the bulk of my research and hence the data presented in this thesis, although I hardly name them for reasons of confidentiality. My Ah-Phaw group consisted of three goldsmiths, one tailor, one fish-paste trader, one cross-border trader, an NGO worker and a teacher. Their average age was in the mid-thirties. Even though this was not an exclusive group, and other people sometimes joined in, those listed above met most often and undertook other social or

\textsuperscript{12} The name ‘Than Tun’ is very common name in Burma (including Arakanese). Similarly, there were at least two Rakhaings with my name in Bangladesh.
religious activities together. Five out of this group knew how to read and write in the Rakhaing language. The NGO worker had a Master’s degree and was the highest educated within the Bangladeshi education system, but could not read or write Rakhaing. Six among the group were married, five had children (or a child) and one was married in 2007. Through my participation in the everyday life of these friends, I was able to develop a range of lived and shared experiences with my informants. This ultimately enabled me to make sense of the complex and dynamic lives of Rakhaings in Bangladesh.

Narayan (1993b) points out that being a native/insider to a community had traditionally been regarded in anthropology as allowing a special understanding of the people studied that would normally be difficult for ‘outside researchers’ to achieve. My social status as an insider, however, did not depend upon my ethnicity; it was contextual to the particular given social situation that I found myself in (Kusow 2003, p. 592). In the earlier part of my fieldwork in Cox’s Bazar, every introduction was followed by questions firstly about the Rakhine people in Australia and secondly about Australian society itself. Most of these queries were concerned about the different life styles between affluent Australia and poorer Bangladesh. During this period, I was given the nickname, ‘Australia’. By the end of 2006, my nickname ‘Australia’ was gone. They no longer asked about Australia and my participation in many of the social activities was no longer specially accommodated. During the fieldwork, my informants identified me with all these identities, while some were privileged at certain times.
These shifting identifications reflected both different social and cultural experiences I carried into my fieldwork research and perspectives the informants had on these experiences. Thus this thesis also considers how these social identities are constantly forming through complex social and political contexts, and how certain identities are given greater emphasis on particular occasions. While the local Rakhaing perspective on my identity had changed during my fieldwork, Bangladesh’s state recognition of my status as a foreign researcher did not change throughout my fieldwork. This official perspective manifested especially through the control of my visa and the requirement of a permit to enter into the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The focus on the social production of identities also sheds light on how they are being essentialised strategically in the many complex relationships of Rakhaing with state agencies as well as the wider Bangladeshi community. Focusing on these processes of identity formation reveals the politics of identity from individual, social, political and cultural perspectives. This allows documentation of how cultural identities are formed, sustained and changed in the everyday life of Rakhaing in Bangladesh.

While I was able to gain access into many aspects of the daily lives of Rakhaings, I also faced limitations during my fieldwork. As a Rakhine/Arakanese ethnic person, I was able to participate in most areas of daily life and in every community activity and festivity that was permissible to a male Rakhaing. However, though I was fluent in the Rakhaing language, my inability to understand the Bengali language (especially the local Chittagonian dialect), coupled with the restriction on me travelling to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, limited my full participation in the everyday experience of the Rakhaing people in Bangladesh. Notwithstanding these limitations, as I progressively acquired a limited
understanding of the local Bengali dialect, I was more able to experience the daily lives of Rakhaing in relation to different cultural, social, political and economic contexts.

Situational Analysis of Thungran; the Extended-case Method and a Rakhaing Festival

In my one and a half years of fieldwork study in Bangladesh, I participated in many private activities and community-wide rituals and festivals. Among the annual festivals, Thungran was the largest and longest celebration. I attended the festival celebrations of 2006 and 2007. My study on the Thungran festival follows the methodology of situational analysis, which is also known as the ‘extended-case method’ (Van Velsen 1967, p. 129). This methodology begins with a description of a social event and is extended out into a study of the wider social and political issues of a society. This methodology was first pioneered by Gluckman (1958 [1940]) in understanding a bridge opening ceremony in Zululand. By using the extended-case method, Clyde-Mitchell (1956) also studied the Kelala Dance to explore how different social categories are related to different social situations in Northern Rhodesia. Clyde-Mitchell (1956, p. 43) points out that ‘it is impossible to generalize about the operation of these principles without reference to the specific social situation in which the interactions take place.’ Similarly, van Velsen (1967, p. 136) states that as ‘norms are translated into practice; they are ultimately manipulated by individuals in particular situations to serve particular ends.’ In order to understand a social act in everyday life, it must be analysed as to how it is situated within the wider dynamic of society. Evens (2005) points out that to study socially situated practices means outlining social forces—either norms or structures—which limit or mediate the social practices, including the celebration of a particular festival.
The extended-case method situates a particular event within the wider social dynamic. It implies that ‘events [...] and situations, or situations as events, or events as situations are effectively moments of social life in the very process of formation’ (Kapferer 2005, p. 92). Hence, a study of an event is not simply about describing it without any contextual references, but to show it as:

the point of convergence of a series of processes, operating through time, which could have possibly taken other paths, but did not, and which brought a miscellany of customs and people to [that particular event] (Jayawardena cited in Handelman 2005, p. 65).

In order to understand how an event or a festival celebration occurs, we will have to pay attention not only to how it is generally celebrated, but also to the dynamic interplay of different forces mediating it as it unfolds at that particular time. Instead of automatically assuming that Thungran is the essential cultural element of Rakhaing ethnicity, I explore the dynamic interplay of social forces, which define Thungran as being a Rakhaing festival, in the particular contexts of 2006 and 2007.

I choose Thungran as a set of social actions for analysis in order to understand the larger socio-political context. I look closely into each ritual component to ascertain how different participants attribute different meanings to that ritual activity. I also explore what social, political and economic factors give rise to different meanings for the participants. However, despite such different participants relate the rituals of Thungran differently, every participant in these rituals and other people in Bangladesh come to understand these rituals as the events loaded with ethnic significance. By looking at Thungran festival, I explore what social, political and economic forces are pertinent in
defining Thungran as an ethnic event and in shaping participants’ understanding of
Thungran as an ethnic act.

The next chapter presents a historical review of the Rakhaing community in Bangladesh,
outlining how Rakhaings understand their past as well as how others view their history.
The aim of the chapter is to present historical contexts important in understanding the
debates on the social and cultural belongings of Rakhaing in present-day Bangladesh. It
explores how in popular historical accounts Rakhaing are declared to be the descendants
of Arakanese immigrants from Burma and thus to have a close cultural belonging to the
people of Burma. Despite there being different historical accounts regarding the origin of
Rakhaing, this one account has remained the most popular narrative, both among ‘others’
and the Rakhaing themselves. As a result, there is a strong cultural imagination that they
are essentially people of Burma who happen to be in Bangladesh territory. This cultural
imagination plays a central role in how they understand themselves in the nation-state of
Bangladesh, including their celebration of Thungran Festival.

Chapter 3 describes the Thungran celebrations in which I participated in Phaloung Chait,
Bangladesh. I will argue here that an understanding of how Rakhaings celebrate these
rituals cannot be phrased only in terms of Rakhaing culture. I explore how political, social
and cultural factors are intrinsically linked to the people’s understandings of the practices
of their ethnicity. Such analysis will shed light on why these rituals unfolded the way they
did. At the same time as Thungran is being celebrated as an ‘ethnic’ festival, it is also
linked to how the Rakhaing see themselves in the nation-state of Bangladesh, in terms of
religious, economic, cultural and political belongings. The subsequent chapters explore
the link between political, social and cultural factors.
In Chapter 4, I discuss how Rakhaing identification with the Burmese is related to their religiosity. I use the concept of ‘proxy citizenship,’ in reference to a minority religious people belonging to a neighbouring country where their co-religious adherents are a dominant majority (van Schendel 2002b). The chapter explores how Rakhaing ethnicity is understood in relation to Buddhist Burma and how it plays out in the identity imagination of Rakhaing in relation to Burma. This concept helps us to understand how Rakhaing relate to ‘Buddhist’ Burma and to ‘Muslim’ Bangladesh. Moreover, it also helps us to conceptualise how this perceived religious link plays out in the everyday lives of Rakhaing in Bangladesh.

The shared ethnicity with Arakanese/Rakhine in Burma has been important in the way Rakhaings have developed ‘ethnic’ performative activities, such as songs and dances in Bangladesh. Chapter 5 focuses on how ethnicity is being related in these performative activities. At the same time, I will outline how Bangladeshi Rakhaings, living with globalised/Bollywoodised everyday entertainment, relate to these ‘ethnic’ performative activities from Burma. These activities are being represented to national and international audiences as the ‘essence’ of Rakhaing ethnicity in displaying their ethnic distinctiveness from other people of Bangladesh. Such representations are promoted by Rakhaing community organisations in an attempt to legitimise their leadership role in the community to international and national audiences as well as to their own Rakhaing people.
Rakhaing ethnicity is popularly generalised in Bangladesh as having cultural characteristics similar to Burmese. This cultural association involves not only beliefs and behaviours, but also goods, which are regarded as being essentially ethnic in nature. This perception has been instrumental in the development of some economic activities for Rakhaing people. In Chapter 6, I will explore firstly, the economic activity of selling souvenirs from Burma to Bengali domestic tourists and secondly, of selling goods which are culturally associated with the ‘ethnic cousins’ of Rakhaing, the people who are widely perceived as having a similar culture to themselves. The chapter explores how these economic activities have been related to ethnicity in allowing the Rakhaing to benefit economically, while reproducing the claims of cultural distinction.

Whilst ethnicity is a claim to cultural distinction by a group of people, ‘ethnic’ individuals deal with ‘outsiders’ in their everyday lives in various economic, social and political spheres. These outsiders include the multitude of state agents. When faced with problems in dealing with local level agents of the Bangladesh state administration, Rakhaing have tried to access those in higher state structures to prevent incursions, or in other ways to promote their interests. In Chapter 7, I explore such political cases in order to study how social connections and community organisations based on ethnicity are able to negotiate between the ordinary Rakhaings and the agents of higher state structures. Accessing such structures through Rakhaings with higher social status has reinforced the political structures within the ethnic group and within the state.
Despite some Rakhaing possessing the means to address local problems, most view themselves as not really belonging in Bangladesh. This perception is principally a product of Bangladesh’s nationalism with its Bengali-Muslim focus which marginalising other religious and ethnic minorities. In Chapter 8, I will discuss how this perception of exclusion has emerged out of Rakhaing’s everyday experience as a minority population within the formation of the Bangladesh nation-state. I will also explore how this notion of marginalised minority status manifests itself in the everyday life of Rakhaing individuals.

Understanding a Rakhaing festival involves not just a description of the festival’s rituals and their apparent meanings, but how and why they unfold in a particular time. Such a study reveals the dynamic relationships among the Rakhaing participants in terms of cultural, social, political, economic and other factors. Focusing on how these factors play out in the festival sheds light on how they have featured in people’s everyday lives. An analysis of everyday lives allows us to understand how ethnicity and nationality have played out in these individuals’ imaginations of cultural distinctiveness. An analysis of Rakhaings’ everyday experiences, through the festival celebration of Thungran, will show how politics around Rakhaing ethnicity with its close association with Burma, is related to Rakhaing citizenship and sense of belonging in Bangladesh.
CHAPTER 2: BECOMING RAKHAING: HISTORICAL CONTINGENCIES OF AN IDENTITY

Introduction

Than Tun: Where do these Rakhaings in Phaloung Chait come from?
Khaing Mra: I don’t know; I don’t need to know [such information]. You better ask the likes of [individuals with formal education] about it. They would be able to tell you better.

In my attempt to understand the history of Bangladeshi Rakhaing, while I consulted modern formal sources, such as archival colonial documents and contemporary historians, I also used oral histories of Rakhaing people who did not have much of a formal education. Through these accounts, I tried to understand how they viewed themselves in terms of existing historical references. This chapter will focus on the historical backgrounds of Rakhaing from Cox’s Bazar District in southeastern Bangladesh and Ah-wa-kwan (Patuakhali and Barguna districts) in the southwestern part of the country. It will also explore the historical forces that have shaped the different identifications of the people, who are now known as Rakhaing.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I will review historical accounts of the origins of Rakhaing in Bangladesh. In the second section, I will present the historical forces and trajectories that have been involved in the ethnogenesis of the present day Bangladeshi Rakhaing identity. In the third section, I will explore a result of the ethnogenesis process, which is the Rakhaing indigenous/development movement within the context of the Bangladesh nation-state. In this chapter, I will also present the historical contingencies which have led to the identity formation of the present-day
Bangladeshi Rakhaing. This historical background is aimed at a better understanding of the Rakhaing social, political and cultural experience as a minority population in this nation-state.

Captain Cox’s Maghs

_Glimpses of Cox’s Bazar_, a tourism promotion book from the Cox’s Bazar district administration, summarises the genesis of Cox’s Bazar as follows: ‘Captain Hiram Cox, an officer of the East India Company, founded a bazar\(^1\) here in 1799 A. D. Cox’s Bazar derives its name from the bazar established by Capt. Hiram Cox’ (Ahmad 1995, p. 1). Cox’s Bazar Town is _Phalong Zee_ or _Phaloung Chait_ in Rakhaing. The Rakhaing name also refers to the same historical account of Hiram Cox building a market place: ‘We, Rakhaing, call English _Phalong_. Land or property owners are called _chateshun_. Thus, Rakhaing call this place, _Phaloung Chait\(^2\)_’ (Roema Lu 2006, p. 153). Both Bengali and Rakhaing accounts attribute the establishment of Cox’s Bazar in 1799 to an officer of the British East India Company.

When the British East India Company gained the control of the area of Cox’s Bazar in 1760, it was said to be ‘sparsely populated and cultivation also was not extensive (Ahmad 1995, p. 132). The situation of the region changed in 1786, when ‘...[the Collector of the British East India Company] suddenly found an invasion of the Maghs...[ who were eventually allowed to settle]...on the extensive tracts of waste land then untenanted’

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\(^1\) Bazar is a more common spelling of bazaar or ‘market place’ in Bangladesh.

\(^2\) Sometimes it is referred to as _Phalong Zee_: Zee means Market place, hence _Phalong Zee_ is closer to the meaning Cox’s Bazar. However, _Phaloung Chait_ is a more common name than _Phalong Zee_. Hence, it can be translated as either the marketplace or the town of a European.
The main reason for this ‘invasion’ of the Maghs was said to be the ‘insufferable tyranny and oppression of the Burmese government’ that they were facing (Malcolm 1970 [1826], p. 303). The Maghs were the residents of Arakan, which had formerly been an independent kingdom that was annexed by Burma in 1784. The incident of the Arakanese ‘invasion’ of 1786 was just the start of a series of exoduses of the refugees from Burmese Arakan into British territory:

By the year 1798, two-thirds of the inhabitants of Arakan were said to have deserted their native land. In one year, 1798, a body of not less than ten thousand entered Chittagong, followed soon after by many more; ... Cox settled about ten thousand in the large areas of waste land in Chittagong...

(Cox cited in Malcolm 1970 [1826], pp. 306-307)

Cox was said to have settled the Maghs in the southern parts of the present-day Cox’s Bazar district, which was in his words ‘almost entirely unoccupied, and nearly free of legal claims’ (Cox cited in Malcolm 1970 [1826], pp. 306-307). Giving the town the name of a historical person assumes that the history of the place starts with that individual, and hence the existence of the Maghs in the region is viewed only to have started with Hiram Cox settling the ‘alien’ Arakanese refugees. Therefore, it is assumed that the Maghs, and their descendants in Cox’s Bazar, are aliens to the land which is now called Bangladesh.

It is claimed that the Maghs were migrant people to the southern Chittagong region, which became Cox’s Bazar Subdivision and later Cox’s Bazar District.

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1 The ‘empty’ land where the Arakanese refugees were settled was ‘untenanted land. There was a legal dispute involving the local Zemindars over this land. The Company enquiry found that ‘none had any actual title’ (Ahmad 1995, p. 142). However, whether these areas were actually ‘empty’ without the local people due to long-standing political instability or there were actually people without the company’s recognition is unknown. However, as most historical accounts were based on the colonialists’ writings, the notion that the refugees were settled in the ‘empty’ land became the received fact.
In the Cox’s Bazar Subdivision there is a considerable true Magh population, descendants of those who fled to Chittagong at the close of the last century on the invasion and conquest of Arakan by the Burmese, and of those who sought our protection shortly before the first Burmese war in 1824. (Hunter 1973 [1876]-a, p. 143)

Similarly, the Bengali author of *Glimpses of Cox’s Bazar*, who is a native of the region, claims:

The Buddhist inhabitants of Cox’s Bazar, who are the descendants of the Arakanese, like to introduce themselves as Rakhaines [sic]. They are not indigenous to Cox’s Bazar; rather, they are immigrants (Ahmad 1995, p. 25, emphasis added).

These Arakanese from the southeastern shore of the Bay of Bengal were said not only to have fled to the southern Chittagong region, but they also reached to the southwestern shore of the Bay of Bengal, which is now Bangladesh’s Barisal Division.

The origin of the sizeable Mugh/Magh population of the Patuakhali district [of Barisal Division] may be traced to the beginning of the nineteenth century... After the annexation of Arakan by Burma in 1787 some 30,000 Mughs are said to have taken refuge in Chittagong and some of them later settled in Patuakhali-Sundarban region (Bangladesh District Gazetters: Patuakhali 1982, p. 19).

Khan (1999, pp. 48-50) writes about the history of the Arakanese settlement in Greater Patuakhali. He states that ‘in 1789 when the British administration was granting Magh families fertile lands in the Bakarganj Sunderbans, the southernmost Gangetic delta … was then uninhabited and swampy, but had rich forest.’ He also cites a petition of a settler, named Thungari Mug, to show that there was ‘the migration of some Rakhaines from Ramu to Greater Patuakhali.’ From Khan’s point of view (1999, p. 50), ‘the Arakanese residents of Greater Patuakhali are to be taken as a branch of the Arakanese refugees of
Cox’s Bazar and Ramu.’ What these British historical accounts and some contemporary Bengali understandings suggest is that the origin of Rakhaing, who are descendants of the people previously known as the Magh, is Arakan, currently a province of Burma.

Arakan: the Homeland of Rakhaing

Though Khan (1999, p. 51) mentions a Rakhaing language manuscript on the origin of Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaing, *Ah-wa-kwan Raazawon* (the History of Ah-wa-kwan)², he does not discuss their understandings of their origins, as mentioned in *Ah-wa-kwan Raazawon*. Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaings trace their origins directly to southern Arakan, not to Ramu or Chittagong. The origin was articulated, by mostly older males, with the phrase; Oukoh-reetouk Thee-neng-pyouk’; meaning ‘in the year 1146 [of Arakan era (1784-1785)], our throne was lost’)⁵. One of the Rakhaing informants recounts it in this way:

In a bitter cold night of 1784, 150 families of the Rakhaines [sic] sailed away with 50 boats with a view to freeing themselves from the tyranny of Burmese soldiers. They spent three days and three nights on the Bay of Bengal and reached the shore of the island of Rangabali in Patuakhali from Meghawati of Arakan. It was a desolate island full of forests and ferocious animals. They cleared the place by clearing the forest and sowed the seeds of paddy and fruits, which they brought with them from Arakan. (Tahan, cited in Majid 2005, p. 45)⁶

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² I saw only a few pages of it during my visit. However, its main argument was recounted by my informants.

⁵ This calculation is based on Arakanese/Burmese numerology. Days of the week are assigned with a number and a group of alphabets. For instance; Friday is associated with the number 6 and the 30th (Tha) and the 31st (Ha) alphabets (Maha Pine Nya Kyaw 1999). Hence, a citation of an alphabet refers to the day of the week as well as a number: the word *Thaut* to the alphabet “Tha” and hence to Friday and the number 6.

⁶ This exact account was also recounted by the informants in the Rakhaing language.
Another Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaing, U Tun Aung Zan (cited in Majid 2005, pp. 45-46), also writes in a Bengali language publication that the ancestors of Rakhaing from Patuakhali arrived there around 1784 from the south-west coast of Arakan in the form of a small group of families under the leadership of Arakanese courtiers. They cleared the wilderness for cultivation, and their land ownership was later recognised by the British.

The Rakhaing account of migration indicates both a different timing and place of origin from that of the British and Bengali accounts. While most British and Bengali sources regard the Patuakhali Rakhaing as a branch of Cox’s Bazar people, Majid (2005, p. 47) concludes differently from these accounts based on linguistic differences that had existed among the Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaing. He asserts:

One part of the Rakhaines is linked with those of Cox’s Bazar and Ramu and the other part has a close relation or similarity with the Rakhaines of Arakan... that ‘Rameryh’ [Ramrae] is the language used by the Rakhines of Rangoon⁷ or southern Burma whereas the Rakhaines of Cox’s Bazar use the language ‘Marrow’⁸...[hence] the Rakhaines of Patuakhali are of two streams.

Since most of Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing were said to have entered through the border areas, Majid (2005) accepts that Rakhaing had come to Patuakhali from the two ends of Arakan; from the south, across the bay of Bengal, and the north, via the Cox’s Bazar region. However, Majid does not pursue the significance of these ‘origins’ in relation to the later history of Rakhaing ethnic identity. He simply accepts their identity as a historical constant.

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⁷ Rangoon, formerly Dagon, was not known to be part of historical Arakan’s five provinces, one of which is south-eastern Bangladesh (Charney 1999, pp. 20-21). Majid (2005, p. 47) may have mistaken Rangoon for one of the southern provinces of historical Arakan, Rama-waddy or present day Ramree/Rambray.

⁸ ‘Marrow’: I have not been able to ascertain the exact location of this reference. The closest sounding name is Maruk-U, the former capital of Arakan. This could be the Bengalinised pronunciation with a strong influence of the Ramree/Rambray dialect.
Map 3: Trajectories of Rakhaing migration in 1784, according to Ah-wa-kwan Raazawon

Differing from Majid’s argument, Patuakhali Rakhaing identify four original locations (see Map 4) in Arakan, namely Ramree/Rambray, Cheduba/Man Aung, Lae Daung and Mindat (near Kyauk Phyu). All of these places, each with its own regional dialects, are located in the southern region of present-day Arakan State in Burma. Present-day Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaing, according to their own perception, speak only the Ramree/Rambray dialect, because other three dialects were said to have died out. However, none of these four historical dialects is considered to have a link to the Cox’s Bazar region. This difference in dialect between Ah-wa-kwan and Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing communities
might have been an important factor in the different ethnic identifications that existed for the older Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar and those of Ah-wa-kwan, which I will discuss later.

While Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaing see themselves as coming from the southern part of Arakan, some Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar have a different ‘history’. They see their origins in both the geographical Arakan/Rakhine State and the historical Arakan Kingdom; which encompassed territory within the Chittagong region. Maala Phung/Manikpur is a large Rakhaing village in the northern part of Cox’s Bazar district. Though the present day building was built recently, the village monastery was said to have been established first in 1442. Saegree, another Rakhaing village which had ceased to exist about fifty or sixty year ago, was also said to be a major Rakhaing village since the time of Arakanese Kings (Roema Lu 2006, p. 153). U Shang (1987, p. 18), a Rakhaing also argues that when the Mughals annexed Chittagong in 1666, they imposed a special tax targeting only the Buddhist ‘Magh’ population, implying that there was a substantial Arakanese population in southern Chittagong.

Some Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing believe that their ancestors had been living in the area, which is now called Phaloung Chait or Cox’s Bazar Town, long before Hiram Cox’s arrival. One account regards Ngalarung, a senior minister of King Thiri Thudama of Arakan (1622-1638), as the founder of a Rakhaing settlement at the town location after his departure from the Capital of Arakan:

...Nga Lut Roon [Ngalarung] became priest under the name of Aggamedhavi Saradaw, who later with his followers...settled down near the bank of river Bagcolly [Bagkhali] by establishing a small village... Then the village was named as ‘Aung Shan Tha.’ Lt. Cox himself managed to establish an image
of Lord Buddha... [which] had been given the name of ‘Kathet Ahshun’ and it has been regarded as [the] most sacred one (U Tun Sein 2000, p. 62).\(^9\)

In another account, Kathet Ahshun, one of the Buddha images in Cox’s Bazar’s main Rakhaing temple, Thing, ‘... was discovered in the jungle by the British Governor [sic] Capt Hiram Cox and he presented it to the Rakhaing people...’ (Tun Nyo 2000, p. 64). Tun Nyo implies that Rakhaing’s heritage (the Buddha Image) had existed well before Cox’s arrival. What these accounts indicate is that Rakhaing believed they had been long settled here in the present-day Cox’s Bazar region. In the mid-1600s, this region existed as an Arakanese territory with Ramu (located at about 13 kilometres away from Cox’s Bazar Town) as a major administrative city (Manrique 1967 (1653), pp. 94-95). Hence, relating to the Arakanese rule in the lower Chittagong, Majid (2005, p. 37) agrees with the account of the *Chittagong District Gazetteer*. It (1975, p. 115, original emphasis) says, ‘[T]he Rakhaing Maghs [...] are the descendants of the Arakanese, who lingered on after the Mughal conquest of Chittagong and of those who came to Chittagong as refugees [in the 18th and 19th centuries].’

While other British and Bengali accounts consider Rakhaing as alien migrants in Cox’s Bazar, some present-day Rakhaing in Bangladesh see themselves as having a historical link to the southeastern region of Bangladesh. A Rakhaing youth, Sunny, from Cox’s Bazar commented about the origin of Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing:

This place [Cox’s Bazar] used to be owned [ruled] by Rakhaing. Dhaka [the present day capital of Bangladesh] means the place which is defended with swords [as *Dha* is Sword and *Ka* to defend in Rakhaing language]. Hence, Rakhaing used to live as far as [Dhaka]. Many Rakhaing also lived in this area [present day Cox’s Bazar]. *Kula* [Bengali] historians say we were

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\(^9\) The author attributed the foundation of the village by Ngalarung to around 1782. However, the palace conflict, the murder of the King Thiri Thudama, for whom Ngalarung was a loyal senior minister, occurred around 140 year before, in 1638 (Collis 1923).
refugees fleeing Bandula\textsuperscript{10}, and that we arrived here as refugees only about 200 years ago. I think half of us are [the descendants] of these refugees, while the other half are original residents.

These Rakhaing accounts view Rakhaing as original residents of the place now called Cox’s Bazar. However, in their historical imagination, southern Bangladesh was the territory of the former Kingdom of Arakan, and it existed as one of its historical provinces, namely Vanga/Banga (also see Charney 1999, p. 20). They see themselves as the former rulers and original owners of the region.

Arakan is the homeland from both perspectives, whether Rakhaing see themselves as immigrants or as indigenous to Banga region of Ancient Arakan. In the former view geographical Arakan, which is the current Arakan/Rakhine State in Burma, is seen as their homeland, where their ancestors came from. In the latter view historical Arakan, of which current Cox’s Bazar was a part, was their former kingdom. However, most Rakhaing did not articulate this ‘original’ belonging to present-day Cox’s Bazar. They instead highlighted the story of refugee immigration in the 19th century.

In relation to their knowledge about their historical origin, Rakhaing university students in Dhaka said that they had learnt it from Bangla publications. Bangla publications generally rely upon colonial historical accounts to explain the history of Rakhaing in Bangladesh. As most oral accounts were factually unverifiable, the written colonial accounts became the only reliable source, even for Rakhaing authors from Bangladesh.

\textsuperscript{10} The Burmese general who commanded the Burmese Army in Arakan and fought against the British in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26) (Enriquez 1921). Hiram Cox established Cox’s Bazar around 1800, more than 25 years before Bandula’s time.
Moreover, in the late Pakistani and the early Bangladeshi periods, Rakhaing were not concerned with the notion of ‘originality’ or ‘indigeneity’ within Bangladesh. Their main concerns with the wider Bengali society related to them being called Magh, the derogatory ethnonym used by Bengali people.

Pre-Rakhaing identities: Magh/Burmese/Mranma

In the early 1900s, a group of businessmen from Cox’s Bazar donated a building in Shwedagone Pagoda, the most important Buddhist monument in Rangoon. They titled it Rakhaing Tazaung [the Rakhaing Pavilion] donated by Ah-nout Pri Yakhine Kung-tye-gree myaa ah-thin (in Burmese) [Rakhaing merchants from the western country].’ Though there was a qualifying phrase, Ah-nout Pri [western country], the autonym for their ethnic identity was Rakhaing (Yakhine in Burmese pronunciation). They did not use the term Magh (Mugh, Mug or Mog), as the contemporary colonialists had used in reference to them.

The term, Magh, is regarded as derogatory by present day Rakhaing in Bangladesh. They do not accept the meaning advocated by Khan that ‘it denotes a person of higher status having his Kshatriya and Magadha\textsuperscript{11} origin [a Hindu upper caste]’ (Khan 1999, p. 41, original emphasis). For Rakhaing, the term Magh reflects the notion of uncivilised people. Ghosh (1960, p. 4) argues that the term derives from a Bengali notion of ‘Magher Maluk’ (the country without law and order). Rakhaing understood that this ethnonym implied

\textsuperscript{11} The term ‘Magh’ (Maghi for male and Maghini for female) is a Bengali term with an unclear origin and unclear intrinsic meaning. As Khan suggests, it had been assumed that the term is associated with the supposed origin of the royal families in the Magadha Buddhist Dynasty in the south-eastern Indian subcontinent (Ghosh 1960, p. 18).
that they were descendants of slave raiders\textsuperscript{12} and hence were uncivilised people. While the term \textit{Magh} was used by colonial officers and Bengali neighbours, they themselves used \textit{Rakhaing} to refer to themselves amongst each other, as the above donation record shows.

However, in many places in Cox’s Bazar, namely Phaloung Chait, Pungwa/Ramu, and Mraina Roa/Chowdhury Para, primary schools, built and used by Rakhaing, are called ‘Burmese schools.’ ‘Burmese/Burmis Markets’, tourist souvenir shops on the main street of Cox’s Bazar, were historically associated with Rakhaing. These examples indicate that Rakhaing used ‘Burmese’ as their ethnonym in their interactions with those from outside of the community. An informant from Cox’s Bazar commented regarding the historical ethnonyms:

\begin{quote}
We used \textit{Magh} or \textit{Burmese} to refer to ourselves in talking to Bengali people. That is during the Pakistani colonial time, from my own experience. We didn’t know how to express our own ethnic name. We didn’t know our literature, our history. We didn’t know about ourselves.
\end{quote}

The informant was arguing that the lack of ethnic self-realisation was to be blamed for the adaptation of ‘Burmese’ as their autonym in their interactions with outsiders. Moreover, some colonial accounts identified them as ‘Burmese’. As an English officer’s account declares in regard to the town of Cox’s Bazar in the late 1800s:

\begin{quote}
In appearance it differs altogether from a Bengali town. ... The houses are built entirely of timber, raised on piles, after the \textit{Burmese fashion};... The
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12} This refers to the slave raids in Eastern Bengal of the Arakanese and Portuguese in the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries. These raids inflicted great terror among the local Bengali population. Hence, the Arakanese slave raiders have been associated with terror and lawlessness (Ghosh 1960).
happy, free and careless air of the people... presents a marked contrast to the appearance of the ordinary Bengali villages; ... (Hunter 1973 [1876]-a, p. 152, emphasis added).

As a result of such colonial accounts, Rakhaing would have referred to themselves as ‘Burmese’ when they identified themselves to the colonial officers (British and Pakistani). Another Cox’s Bazar informant also pointed out that it could be the result of the dominant of Burman in the anti-colonial movement in Burma,\textsuperscript{13} which prevailed among the Buddhist Arakanese during the British colonial time. With the Burmese religious, social and cultural influences, the Cox’s Bazar Rakhaings might have identified themselves as ‘Burmese’, the English term for the country of Burma as well as the majority Burman ethnic group. He also said:

As children we didn’t really understand these terms; whether Burmese or Rakhaing. Of course, we referred to each other as Rakhaing-thaa (the sons of Rakhaing).

Three ethnonyms had been involved in historical identities of the ancestors of present-day Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing; namely Rakhaing, Burmese and Magh. Rakhaing was used as the autonym within the community, Burmese as the autonym addressed to outsiders, and, Magh\textsuperscript{14} was/is the exonym used by outsiders, but rejected by Rakhaing themselves. However, this historical trajectory of identity formation was not the same for all of those who are presently called Rakhaing in Bangladesh or for all of those who are called Magh.

\textsuperscript{13} He used the term super-Burman nationalism (Mahabamawada) referring to the Burma’s majority ethnic group’s (Burman) hegemonic nature of anti-colonial ideology in relation to other non-Burman Buddhist identities such as Shan, Mon and Arakanese/Rakhine. He also saw the use of ‘Burmese’ as the ethnonym as the Rakhaing’s failure to realise their ‘true’ ethnicity.

\textsuperscript{14} The term is still used by the local Bengali in reference to the Rakhaing people. In one of my local travels between Rakhaing villages during my fieldwork, a few local Bengali children ran after the trishaw I was on, shouting ‘Maghi... Maghi.’ Even though I did not understand the real implication of these shouts, I could only imagine the feeling of resentment the term elicited among by the Rakhaing who had to face this in their everyday lives. However, the term was hardly used in the urban area of Cox’s Bazar Town.
The group of people who had been known as *Jumma Maghs* (or *Khyoungtha* or children of the river) from the Chittagong Hill Tracts region now identify themselves as Marma (pronounce: Ma-R-Ma)\(^{15}\) (Bernot 1960). The issues concerning Marma and Barua\(^{16}\) identities are beyond the scope of this thesis, since my research focuses on those whose identity is Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar and Greater Patuakhali/Barisal Division. However, the historical trajectories of Rakhaing identity in these two locations are not exactly the same.

While I stayed mostly in Cox’s Bazar District, I also travelled to Ah-wa-kwan (Patuakhali and Barguna districts in southwestern part of Bangladesh). Tatali village of Bawgyi Kyan/Barabagi Union in Barguna district was the first Rakhaing village on my Ah-wa-kwan trip. I travelled to Tatali from Dhaka through Amtali town, the local administrative centre of the Upazila\(^{17}\) of the same name. In this town, I first encountered Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaings’ own ethnonyms with a friend of a relative of my wife, his sixty-year-old mother, his wife and his toddler son. In the midst of our courtesy conversation, the mother suddenly asked ‘Do you understand my language?’ When I answered positively, she said ‘You are a Rakhaing-thaa, of course you understand Mramma language.’ However, his son referred to others from his community (including myself) as Rakhaing. These two ethnonyms were used sometimes interchangeably during my stay there, while the use of *Mrama* was more common among older people of Ah-wa-kwan. *Mrama* is Rakhaing pronunciation of ‘Myanmar’ (pronounced in Rakhaing as Mran-Ma), the reference in the Burmese language to the Burman people\(^{18}\).

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\(^{15}\) Magh is also said to refer to the Bengali Buddhists of Chittagong region, who are now currently called Barua in Bangladesh and Mramagyi in Arakan/Rakhine State in Burma.

\(^{16}\) Buddhist Bengali mostly from Chittagong.

\(^{17}\) Upazila is the level of administration exists between the local level Union and the Zila or District.

\(^{18}\) While ‘Myanmar’ in English refers to the country, ‘it was only in 1935 when a distinction [between Burma and Burman] arose. ‘Burman’ came to be the designation of the ethnic majority and ‘Burmese’
Though it might look like a confusion of identities among Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaing, they did not see themselves as Bama, or Burmans, who were referred to as Ouk-thaa. The sixty-year-old mother pointed out that she did not understand Bama language much, while another middle-aged woman from Tatali village also said that she knew her language was different from Bama language, and more importantly, for her, Mranma and Rakhaing languages were the same. In Prankhaung village, a female resident referred to me as a Mranma. However, another Rakhaing from Khasaree Bu Nya/Naiyaepara referred to himself and me as Rakhaingmathaa (the sons of Rakhaing women), indicating the common ethnic identity between myself, a person of northern Arakan origin (thus using a dialect similar to Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing) and one from Ah-wa-kwan, whose dialect was similar to that of southern Arakan.

Neither Khan (1999) nor Majid (2005) discuss the term Mranma. Instead, they treat the ethnonym, Rakhaing, as having been used constantly among the people. While these two Bengali scholars do not consider the use of Mranma as autonym among some Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaing, some informants also downplayed the term Mranma even though it was prevalent in their everyday lives. When I asked about the use of ethnonym Mranma, most middle-aged individuals generally evaded the question. Thein Hlaing, an Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaing who had been active in the Arakanese nationalist movement, said that even though they used to refer to themselves as Mranma, they had always known the fact that...

that of inhabitants of the country as a whole’ (Gutter 2001, p. 3). In both the Burmese and Rakhaing languages, “Myanmar/Bama” means the ethnic Burman. The country is generally referred to by the Rakhaing as ‘Bama Pray. A Rakhine from Burma can be referred to as someone from the country of Burma (Bama-pray Thaa), but not as a Burman. Rakhines in Burma generally use ‘Bama Pray’ in reference to the central Burma, while ‘Rakhine Pray’ for Arakan/Rakhine State in current nation-state of Burma.
they were from *Rakhaingpray* (the country of Rakhaings: Arakan). He implied that they had always been *Rakhaing* and the fact that self-reference of *Mranma* was an unimportant or mistaken fact. However, Maung Kyaw, in his late 20s from Pratharat Khaung/Amkolapara, commented:

> I am a *Rakhaing-thaa* [the son of Rakhaing]. We, *Ah-wa-kwanthaas* [the sons of Ah-wa-kwan, those from Ah-wa-kwan] used to call ourselves *Mranma*. But since I know that I am a Rakhaing, I don’t use [the term] *Mranma* anymore. *Mranma* and Rakhaing are different in terms of cultures. We speak Rakhaing language. We are *Rakhaing-thaa*. People used to study *Mranma* Language [Burman language]. Maybe that is why they used *Mranma* to identify themselves.

Similarly, Aye Thaung from Thaungsaung Roa/Angathakhu Para commented that the use of *Mranma* identity was the result of the influence of Burmese monks and entertainers among the Rakhaing community of Ah-wa-kwan in the early British colonial periods. From the ethno-nationalist standpoint, he argued that the religious and cultural pressures from the monks trained in central Burma had led Rakhaing to view themselves as Burmese. Even though most of the monks were ethnically Rakhaing individuals, their social and political activities were targeted against the British colonial rule in Burma. The central role of the Buddhist monk involvement in the political mobilisation against British rule in Burma (Smith 1965) had produced an important effect in the identity of the ancestors of present-day Bangladeshi Rakhaings in Ah-wa-kwan.

After British annexation of Arakan, Burman-defined Buddhist cultural norms became dominant religious practices among Arakanese, creating a strong religious tie between the *Sangha* or the Buddhist monastic order in Arakan and central Burma (Charney 1999). The Arakanese Sangha was concerned with forging the socio-religious identity of
Arakanese as members of a greater Buddhist community in Burma. An influential monk from Arakan argued that Arakanese belonged to the community which was ‘essentially Theravada Buddhist and Burman (that is the Buddhist Arakanese are Mranmas)’ (Charney 1999, pp. 289-290 original insertion). Some of these monks from Burma (either central Burma or Arakan) settled in Ah-wa-kwan as resident monks in Rakhaing villages. Thein Hlaing recounted that A Thin Saradaw (the head of A Thin Gaing/Sect) was a monk from a village in Mrauk U, a town in northern Arakan. Another important Buddhist monk, who was a Burman, had stayed in Assam in India, and hence his disciples belonged to the Assam Gaing. The descendants of these two Gaings—namely A Thin and Assam—are the monks of present-day Ah-wa-kwan, though their number is only eight individuals for all 46 Rakhaing villages of the region.

Even though ‘...in 1867 it is said that there was not a single Buddhist priest for the whole of the Magh colonies settled in the southern part of the District’ (Hunter 1973 [1876]-b, p. 189), the situation in Ah-wa-kwan had changed by the end of the nineteenth century. Ah-wa-kwan by then had a small number of monks coming from Arakan. Monks trained in Burmese traditions became the leading lights in providing educational and communal leadership among the Arakanese (Charney 1999). From these monks’ perspectives, their social focus was the development of a ‘Buddhist’ community, which was traced to Mandalay, the city where senior monks of Burma’s sects resided. As a testament to the influence from Mandalay, many Buddha Images presently found in Ah-wa-kwan are all said to have come from Mandalay. For examples, the Buddha images in Kansate/Kukata, Thaungsaung Roa/Angathakhu Para and Khadoat Khaung/Aungkuzan Para were cast in Mandalay and transported to Ah-wa-kwan via Calcutta, currently Kolkata. As monks

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19 Lieder (2008) deals with the resistance of the Arakanese against this religious integration with the Burmans in Arakan.
occupied the leading role in educating the majority of the community, they not only provided religious teaching, but also were pivotal in identity formation, as in colonial Arakan (Charney 1999). Hence, from the later colonial period, those who had been called Magh in Ah-wa-kwan, had identified themselves primarily as Mranma.

Unlike Khan (1999) and Majid (2005), who view an ethnic identity as historically constant, Ellen Bal (2007, p. 440) contends, in her study of the Garo people, that ethnic groups in Bangladesh ‘...have always been divided into clearly-distinct tribal or ethnic communities [which] is commonly (and uncritically) deemed a historical fact’. Following her contention, I consider how Rakhaing identity has gone through many transformations that have been affected by internal forces and external influences upon the Rakhaing community in Bangladesh. One important aspect of these identity articulations has been their link to Arakan. The Rakhaing people have understood that their ancestral land is Arakan. This perception of Arakan as ‘the homeland’ has played a central role in the ethnogenesis of the ‘Rakhaing’ as a common identity for those who presently called themselves Rakhaing in Bangladesh.

Ethnogenesis of Rakhaings

Ethnogenesis means the initial process of ethnic identity formation, involving a group of people who have previously perceived themselves to be different from each other, into a homogenous group united ‘by a deep cultural identity’ (Sharp 1996, p. 86). The process

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20 However, it is also important to note that Marma in Chittagong Hill Tracts trace their origin to the royal families of Bayin Naung (AD. 1551-1581), a Burman King, from central Burma who was exiled by the Arakanese king (Harvey 1961). In the Marma’s understanding, their link to Arakan had not been a positive experience.
of ethnogenesis is understood to involve a historical process in which certain shared social characteristics become unifying aspects of an ethnic group, such as religion, particular forms of cultural performance and language. However, ethnogenesis of one group may not be the same as that of another, since ‘there is no single, uniform process of ethnogenesis’ (Roosens 1989, p. 149). In the case of Rakhaing, it was the valuing of their common historical origins that played a major role in the ethnogenesis of present-day Rakhaing in Bangladesh, whether it is their shared connections to the physical location of the contemporary Arakan/Rakhine State in Burma or to the historical Arakan Kingdom.

One common theme in the ethnogenesis of some of these processes is the role of scholars in valorising ethnicity; one of the ‘predilections of the ethnographers’ (Davis 2001, p. 476) and of the educated class within particular groups (McKenna 1998). Scholars’ articulations on the ethnicity of a people are important in highlighting the commonalities of those people, accentuating the unity of the group, while dismissing the differences as diminutive regional variations. Among Rakhaing, the works of Bengali authors and educated Rakhaing and Arakanese nationalists have been important in the ethnogenesis of their present-day identification as ‘Rakhaing.’

Thein Hlaing, an Ah-qa-wa Rakhaing, who had a close association with the emerging Arakanese insurgency, recounted his involvement in the ethnogenesis (for him, it was revitalisation) of Rakhaing identity in Bangladesh in the mid-1970s, as a leader of a Buddhist Youth Association in Patuakhali District:

I gave a paper at a seminar in 1978, which was attended by the then President Zia Rahman [of Bangladesh]. My paper was called ‘Rakhaines: the Upojatis
of Bangladesh,’ which argues that we should be called Rakhaing instead of Maghs. [...] When I used the term Upozati\textsuperscript{21} to identify ourselves, Dr. Khin Maung [the former President of National United Party of Arakan, a nationalist insurgent organisation] objected to it by saying that we (Rakhaing) were not Upozatis, but a national people.\textsuperscript{22}

This account of Thein Hlaing’s involvement in the political process of identity formation in the late 1970s indicates the external forces affecting the ethnogenesis or ‘ethnic revitalisation’ process. Their attempt to reject the derogatory exonym, Magh, coincides with the Arakanese nationalist movement and the nationalists attempt to spread their visions among Rakhaing. Aye Thaung from Thaungsaung Roa/Angathakhu Para commented as follows on the influence of Arakanese nationalists in their realisation of their ‘true’ identity as Rakhaing:

Arakanese monks and other Naing-ngan-ray-tama [politicians] such as Dr. Khin Maung and other individuals mobilised the youths of Ah-\textit{wa}\textsuperscript{-}kwan... by explaining our history. Only after that, we the youths became interested in our historical roots. As a result, Goo-Gree [elder brother, Thein Hlaing] wrote the paper, saying we were Rakhaing [not Magh].

The ‘Rakhaing’ identity, which is currently prevalent in present-day Ah-\textit{wa}\textsuperscript{-}kwan, was considered to be the result of the influences of Arakanese nationalists, who were taking shelter in the border areas from the oppression of the Burmese government.

\textsuperscript{21} This is the Rakhaing pronunciation of the Bengali term Upojati, meaning ‘sub-nation.’ (Chowdhury 2008; van Schendel & Bal 2002).

\textsuperscript{22} The Arakanese nationalist, Khin Maung, was referring to both Bangladesh and Burmese contexts. In both contexts, the terms, \textit{upojati} and \textit{lumyoju}, respectively, have the connotation of being ‘uncivilised and backward.’ A Burmese academic (Sai Aung Tun 2000, p. 17) uses ‘primitive’ to refer to social, cultural, economic and religious characteristics, reflecting the modernist perspective of the Arakanese nationalist. The Arakanese nationalists contended that Arakan was an independent kingdom with great political, cultural and literary achievements, the markers of civilisation. They argue that Arakanese are the people of a civilisation, hence not merely sub-national people.
In Cox’s Bazar, Arakanese nationalists were also influential in the articulation of the ethnonym, *Rakhaing*, among the present-day Rakhaing people. One informant said:

It occurred after Bangladesh’s liberation. Arakanese from Burma introduced Arakanese histories to us. Those such as Dr. Khin Maung and Maung Kyaw Hlaing\(^{23}\) were involved in local community organisations. They shared their knowledge on Arakanese history. From that time on, our understanding of our identity was changed. [...] it was around 1974-75. I also published a book on Rakhaing in Bangla language.

Kyaw Shun Maung, from Cox’s Bazar, commented as follows, about the time when the ethnonym, *Rakhaing*, gained popularity among Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar;

...from 1980, [name of a Rakhaing from Cox’s Bazar] set up the Rakhaing Welfare Society and published a magazine called ‘Rakhaing.’ It was in three languages: Rakhaing, Bengali and English. From them on, our identity as Rakhaing was began to be known to outsiders. Of course, we always knew ourselves to be Rakhaing.

From the identity of Magh, three trajectories arose, generating two ethnic identities for the Rakhaing in Bangladesh. For the people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the exonym Magh had changed into Marma. For the people in Ah-wa-kwan and Cox’s Bazar, the former exonym Magh had changed into Rakhaing. In terms of autonyms, in Ah-wa-kwan, Mran-Ma had also changed into Rakhaing; while in Cox’s Bazar, Burmese similarly became Rakhaing. Some Rakhaings contended that they had always used Rakhaing as their autonym within the Cox’s Bazar community. The exonym which expressively identified with the nation-state of Burma dominated by the Burmans, were replaced with an identity in line with Arakanese nationalist ideologies, by the 1980s.

\(^{23}\) A leading member of an Arakanese nationalist organisation (Smith 1991, pp. 239-240) who later fled to Bangladesh.
Even though the Bengali scholar, Abdul Mabud Khan (1999, p. 43), argues that Rakhaing and Marma are of the same ethnic group, he acknowledges that their ethnonyms are different. According to him, ‘the Magh residents of Cox’s Bazar district and Greater Patuakhali are known as Rakhaine [sic].’ During the inception of the intra-ethnic identification of Ah-...
as the common descendants from the Arakan Kingdom. Assertions such as, ‘[t]he Rakhaine [sic] race is a mixture of Aryans and Mongolians’ (Majid 2005, p. 35) or ‘[the Maghs have] a sense of humour and they enjoy their hours of relaxation in gossip and light talks [sic]’ (Khan 1999, p. 119), may thus become the basis of acknowledged similarities that unify members of the ethnic group.

I have focused here on the historical processes around the ethnonyms of the Rakhaing people because a name is not simply a reference to an entity, but is also dependent on a social history (Rymes 1999, p. 163). The changes in the historical ethnonyms of Rakhaing people are also related to the changing relationships between themselves and Arakanese/Rakhine in Burma. However, the Arakanese nationalists were not the only external forces who had an impact on the identity formation of Rakhaing in Bangladesh. As Thein Hlaing recounted above, his significant articulation of Rakhaing ethnicity was related to a seminar attended by the President of Bangladesh. Similarly, Bal (2007, p. 453) points out the importance of the government policies in the Garo identity of Bangladesh as, ‘the very dominant state ideology which excluded the Garos from the ‘nation’ resulted in a firmer demarcation between Garos and others.’ In the following section, I will discuss how the Rakhaing identity has been made ‘firmer’ in social and political processes in relation to the policies and activities of the state.
Thowdalee in the West

Focusing on the process of ethnogenesis also reveals the importance of colonialism in the historical trajectories of ethnicity. While the colonial discourses were important in the Rakhaing’s autonym, and hence their understanding of their ethnicity, colonial policies impacted upon the social settings among Rakhaing. This setting has become important in present-day social dynamics, which are intrinsically linked to their current politics of ethnicity. A consequence of British colonialism in Bangladesh was the settlement of Magh refugees on the untenanted land in southern Bangladesh. The land settlement of the British for the Magh/Rakhaing in southern Bangladesh changed the internal social dynamics within the Rakhaing community.

The British land revenue collection was based on the Bengal’s Moghul zamindary system. This system involved collecting rent of the land from the cultivators through local intermediaries, who were then recognised as the landowners (Barkat 2001). When the British authority provided the land for the ‘Maghs’, it was granted through the leader of a particular community, to act as an intermediary between the English administration and the cultivators. This effectively made the leader the landowner of all the land provided for the community. As a result, a new class of landowners called Chowdhuries (Thowdalees in Rakhaing) emerged among Cox’s Bazar ‘Magh’ descendants as well as Talukdars and Matabars in Ah-wa-kwan. Hence, a saying emerged among Rakhaing in the Teknaf region: ‘in the east [of the Naff River, that is Arakan] there were Kyanoks24: in the west, Thowdalees.’ Such land ownership provided the Chowdhury families with the basics for an accumulation of wealth and status. These contacts with the British

24 Literally ‘the ruler of the island’, the local administrator, who served as a magistrate in rural Arakan during the early colonial times (Hall 1938).
authority confirmed the landed families as the leaders of the Magh communities. At the same time, their wealth allowed their sons to gain higher education in distant places such as Calcutta, Dhaka, or Saitway/Akyab, the capital of Arakan.

After the independence of Bangladesh, the Chowdhuries’ former roles as intermediaries between the government and the local community stopped. However, their wealth and leadership status continued. Most of these family members would not pursue any employment other than managing the family-owned land. One consequence has been that these highly educated individuals continued living within their community, with free time to engage in the community affairs. Khan (1999, p. 110) lists some of these educated individuals (not engaged in formal employment) as ‘social workers,’ indicating that they were deeply involved in community affairs. There were two spheres in terms of community affairs: issues within the village and those outside of their community. It had been in issues dealing with outside bodies—especially in dealing with government authorities and formal institutions such as developmental and social organisations—that the formally educated controlled community leadership.

One of the reasons these formally educated individuals became important in relationships with the outside world was their ability to communicate using the common (official) dialect of Bangla Language, which is popularly known in Cox’s Bazar as Shadhu-Bhasha25, as opposed to the local dialect, Ancholi Bhasha. This formal dialect is used in

25 While Shadhu-Bhasha (literary Language) derived from its comparison to Calit Bhasa (Colloquial language) (Thompson 2006, p. 730), the latter has been generally ‘used in both formal and informal writing’ (Huq 2006). However, in this instance, Shadhu-Bhasha is actually Calit Bhasa, similar to the dialect spoken in Kolkata (Thompson 2006, p. 730), and it has been the common language used in official and inter-dialectal communications. It is different from other dialects of Bangla, especially that of the Chittagong area.
formal education; hence, only those who have gained a formal education in Bangladesh were able to use it fluently. Most of the people of Chittagong (including those in Cox’s Bazar and the ‘Rohingya’ people in Burma) use their own regional dialect, Chittagonian (Chatgaya) (Lewis 2009). Moreover, since there was only a 35.3 percent adult national literacy rate in 1990 (SAARC 2005, Table 2.14), only a few educated individuals were able to effectively use the formal dialect in communications with those who represented state agencies. Even among the educated people, those with an education in either English or Burmese, schooled in Kolkata and Saitway/Akyab in Arakan State in Burma, were unable to effectively participate in dialogues with the state authorities. They were gradually excluded from effective leadership roles within the community associations.

The most important event for the Rakhaing community that showed the central role of educated individuals in their interactions with officials and state agencies was the visit of the then President Ershad of Bangladesh to Cox’s Bazar in 1990. He visited the town solely to meet with the Rakhaing people. Khaing Mra recounted her involvement in the Rakhaing delegation to Dhaka to meet with the President:

We were told to get a team of fifty Rakhaing men and women to meet with the President in Dhaka. We decided that we needed to have educated people who would be able to talk to the President. So we chose [the names of those who are currently professionals including a lawyer, judge, former bank-manager, doctor, and academic who were then younger than most community leaders] and others, representing each Rakhaing village...

At the Dhaka meeting, only a few educated individuals talked to the President (The Bangladesh Observer 1990). The President’s subsequent visit to Cox’s Bazar provided many benefits for the community, including the fund for monasteries and repossession of the Rakhaing cemetery that had been grabbed by a Bengali individual. More importantly,
the Rakhaing community received symbolic recognition from the President, since his visit to Cox’s Bazar was to meet exclusively with the Rakhaing community. Rakhaing informants understood that this recognition was an important factor in popularising the ethnonym, Rakhaing, in the official discourse. They saw it as an achievement, since they were no longer referred to with the derogatory term, Magh, by Bangladeshi officials.

A participant of the meetings with the President said:

We had told the local officials to address to us as ‘Rakhaing’, not ‘Magh’ many times before. However, they had been quite slow in taking up that term. When the head of the state started referring to us as Rakhaing, they had no choice but to call as such.

The meetings with the President not only resulted in some material benefits and a positive change in their exonym in official discourse, it also allowed the younger leaders educated in the Bengali education system to take the leadership of community activities. These younger educated elites, mostly descendants of the former Thowdalees or similar property-owning classes, started to participate in the community affairs and to mobilise themselves around the Rakhaing Buddhist Welfare Association (RBWA) from the early 1990s. This coincided with the dramatic changes in the political and social landscape of Bangladesh. The democratisation, which occurred with the ousting of President Ershad a few months after his visit to Cox’s Bazar, saw in Bangladesh increasingly important roles for developmental NGOs and the growing indigenous movement.
Indigenising Rakhaing or NGO-ising the community

The formation of the Rakhaing Buddhist Welfare Association (RBWA) owed much to the Arakanese nationalist activities in Bangladesh, especially a ceremony commemorating the anniversary of the death of an anti-colonial nationalist activist from Burma (Maung Than Hla 1995, p. 25). In fact, the Arakanese nationalists had been leading most of the community activities among Bangladesh Rakhaings. Regarding the involvement of Arakanese activists in the earlier period of the RBWA, Kyaw Shun Maung, who later became an important leader, commented:

[A Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing] was the president, but most of the leaders of the Rakhaing Association [RBWA] were Arakanese politicians. When we first joined the RBWA, they were the only people who would give speeches at the meetings of Rakhaing villages. There was no Bangladeshi [Rakhaing] leader to communicate with the villagers. Arakanese politicians’ speeches were not as relevant to our villages, so I started to give speeches. Now, many people love giving speeches at meetings.

Putting aside the sarcasm, his comment indicated a change in the community leadership. As many educated youths started to get involved more in Rakhaing community activities, they started to dominate community organisations, especially in the RBWA. The Executive Committee members of the RBWA by 1995 were mostly Bangladeshi Rakhaings who were fluent in the formal Bengali language. Their language ability was one of the advantages that allowed them to communicate the grievances of Rakhaings to the agents of the Bangladeshi state and to engage cooperatively with other non-Muslim Bangladeshi people in social movements. From the early 1990s, most of these community

26 I borrow the term from the work of Islah (2004) entitled The NGO-isation of Arab Women’s movements.
activists had gathered around the RBWA, making it the largest and the most important community organisation for Rakhaing in Bangladesh in that decade.

While the formation of the RBWA was largely influenced by Burma’s Arakanese nationalist movement, Bangladesh itself had a history of indigenous movements. As a consequence of the nation-building processes of post-colonial states in South Asia, the leadership of the minority ethnic groups mobilised ideological and political movements based on ethnic identity (Phadnis 1990). Against the Bangladesh state’s strong association with the notion of Bengaliness, the people of Chittagong Hill Tract responded with a political movement based around Jumma27 identity. It was fashioned in 1970 as the military organisation of Shanti Bahini (Peace Forces) and a political party named the Parbattya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) or Chittagong Hill Tracts United People’s Party (Mohsin 2002). The Jumma political movement had also been successful in the international indigenous movement arena. As an example, by 1984, the representatives of the Chittagong Hill Tracts People started to participate in the United Nations’ Working Group on Indigenous Populations (Muehlebach 2001, p. 420).

The main objective of the PCJSS and Shanti Bahini has been political autonomy for the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (PCJSS 2005). However, the Jumma movement as a whole is also concerned with the recognition of other rights of the Jumma peoples. Khairul Chowdhury (2008) contends that the Jumma movement is an indigenous movement as its focus is on ‘attempting to mobilize, produce and articulate the indigenous identity of the hill people,’ while he refers to the PCJSS and its armed wing.

27 Jumma means swidden cultivation in Chakma or Chittagonian Bengali dialect. Jumma as a political identity is discussed comprehensively by van Schendel (1992).
as an ethno-nationalist movement. In the politics of indigenous rights in Bangladesh, the Jumma people had gained the leading position. Hence, Bleie (2005, p. 66) points out that ‘of all the tribal communities in Bangladesh, only the Jumma peoples of Chittagong Hill Tracts were able to succeed in gaining access and to attract the attention of the world community to their plight under the successive governments.’ The focus of the indigenous movement, led by the Jumma leaders, has been to promote the rights of the minority communities in Bangladesh to maintain their indigenous ways of life without facing social and political marginalisation.

In the context of Bangladesh, the Rakhaing political aspirations did not amount to achieving any political autonomy, one of the demands of the PCJSS. While the Rakhaing had not been involved in an ethno-nationalist movement seeking a separatist autonomy, they had joined the indigenous movement’s involvement in ethnic politics in Bangladesh. Since the early 1990s, Rakhaing organisations have been involved in the indigenous movement along with the activists and organisations of other ethnic groups. One of the important aspects of Bangladesh’s indigenous movement has been the involvement of international and national non-governmental development organisations. These NGOs had been involved in Bangladesh since its inception in 1971, and they became important socio-political players as ‘the most effective agents of change in the 21st century’ (Karim 2001, p. 95). While most of the NGO activities in the country had been devoted to the socio-economic development of the whole of Bangladeshi society, some NGO’s paid specific attention to the plight of the Adivasi communities. This cooperation between the development and indigenous movements had provided the

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28 However, some Rakhaing individuals claimed to have provided material supports to the Arakanese insurgent activities against the Burmese government. Their relationship with Arakanese nationalists from Burma is explored in Chapter 7.
smaller indigenous organisations, such as the RBWA, with the means to participate in the wider national and sometimes international Indigenous and development activities.

The first method of engagement of the RBWA in these activities was participating in programs with other minority associations from Bangladesh and other parts of the world as part of the indigenous movements, such as national seminars on human rights and indigenous issues or becoming affiliated members within umbrella organisations (Kyaw Thein Aung 2000, pp. 37-38; Maung Than Hla 1995, pp. 26-27). The second method was the establishment of a development agency called the Rakhaing Development Foundation (RDF) in 1994. According to some informants involved in the formation of the RDF, it was to act as a wing of the RBWA to generate funds for development projects in the Rakhaing community (Maung Tha Lu 2000, p. 72; World Bank 2005).29 These two organisations had been the most important actors in the activities relating to both the development projects and political activities of the Rakhaing community in Bangladesh.

One of the achievements of the RBWA for the decade of 1990s—according to Maung Tha Lu (2000, p. 72)—"what Rakhaing people had never dreamt of"—was that a Rakhaing female Member of Parliament (MP) was appointed by the Awami League government. In the 1996 Parliament of Bangladesh, 30 women were selected by the winning party to fill the female reserved seats (Halder 2004, p. 53). For a Rakhaing, attaining the office of MP was a great symbolic achievement for an ethnic group in national politics. However, many Rakhaings considered that they did not receive any benefits—either as a community or as individuals. More importantly, this position of power was said to allow

29 Analogously to this two-prong approach for the development of a minority community, some Chittagong Hill Tracts people had set up NGOs to provide developmental assistance to the indigenous communities.
the MP’s family members to exercise undue influence in the community. Mahfuzul Chowdhury (2003, p. 272) points out that ‘during the AL [Awami League] government’s time in office (1996–2001), police arrested opposition activists ... while tolerating the unruly behaviour of AL supporters.’ The Rakhaing MP’s family members allegedly used her influence against the norms and interests of the Rakhaing community upsetting many Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar. Moreover, many within the community regarded that she did not achieve anything for the community as a parliamentarian. However, since her parliamentary position was ‘given’ to her by the party leadership, she might not have been able to achieve real changes in governmental policies. Halder (2004, p. 54) points out the lack of political significance of most Bangladeshi female parliamentarians in the reserved seats, served only as the ‘ornaments of the parliament.’

Despite these achievements, the RBWA split into two camps in 2001. The RDF members, ousted from the RBWA leadership, ceased to associate with the newly elected RBWA leadership. The present RBWA leaders made accusations that ‘a handful of dishonest ex-members of RBWA formed RDF and are collecting money from the government, NGOs, foreign embassies and donor agencies in the name of social and economic development of Rakhine people (sic)’ (The Daily Star 2004a). The RDF leaders responded that these new RBWA leaders were jealous of their successful community services. They also pointed out that the government’s NGO Affairs Bureau did not find any corruption in their investigations.30 While the tension between the two rival leadership groups has not subsided, most Rakhaing choose to stay independent of them ignoring the divide, while some align with one or other of them.

30 However, a current RBWA leader responded that the investigators might have been bribed by the RDF leaders.
Chowdhury (2008) points out that the indigenous movement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has strongly collaborated with the environmental NGOs, resulting in the converged agenda. He argues that the activities of the local NGOs, run by Indigenous people, focus on resources. Hence, the indigenous movement of the Chittagong Hill Tracts is strongly related to the concern with the indigenous people’s rights to land (Chakma 2009). However, for Rakhaing, situations were different from the experience of the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. While the Rakhaing community leaders participating at the national level were concerned with the social and cultural rights of indigenous people, most people within the Rakhaing community were concerned with development projects. While most Rakhaing informants would echo the demands of the Jumma people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, their main concern was the developmental help for them to escape their everyday socio-economic hardships.

Moreover, with the dominance of the historical narrative of migration from Burma as their point of origin, the politics of indigeneity within Bangladesh had less resonance with Rakhaing’s political imagination than that of the Jumma people. In most conversations regarding the politics of minority movements, most Rakhaing informants talked about how much opportunity Chakma people had enjoyed from development projects and socio-economic opportunities from government concessions. An informant commented about the Rakhaing MP:

She didn’t bring anything for the development of the Rakhaing people. She should have got help for more economic opportunities, such as establishing loan programs and finding jobs for unemployed Rakhaings.
Another informant criticised the current RBWA leadership; ‘[the former president] may take cuts from the projects, but we still got some help. Now, they [current leaders] are not able to get anything.’ This criticism is quite common among community members, but they did not acknowledge the symbolic importance of a Rakhaing being elected as an MP or other significant political recognitions these community leaders were able to attract at the national level. At the same time, many of the present-day leaders also expressed their desire to get development programs, especially from international organisations.

As a result of the leadership rivalry, the two organisations were no longer assigned a complementary division of labour, one focusing on development challenges and another on community activities. Both of these organisations were trying to be involved in community activities relating to Rakhaing identity, such as participating in the cultural performances and organising festival celebrations. At the same time, both organisations were separately trying to attract international and domestic support for community development programs. In most of the village branch meetings that I attended with the RBWA leaders, they talked about how they were trying to get funding from trans-national development organisations. As the development movement had penetrated into the Rakhaing community activities, the leadership, and other Rakhaing also, now understood that the central activities for the benefit of the community were mainly connected to development projects, akin to those of a development NGO. Hence, social and economic projects have become the benchmarks of successful community leadership. For most Rakhaing, present-day community activism is concerned mainly with how to best gain development assistance for the promotion and protection of material interests. The focus on community politics had thus changed from issues around identity to the needs for development.
Conclusion

For the Rakhaing in Bangladesh, historical processes were not simply about being the national ‘others’, but there were also about being ‘other nationals.’ The narrative of their history had been dominated by the refugee migration story after 1785. Trouillot (1995, p. 29) contends that ‘What happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete—buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries—that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative.’ Notwithstanding the concrete historical remains, such as monasteries and pagodas, and alternative oral accounts, the historical narrative surrounding the Rakhaing was dominated by a reliance on the colonialists’ written texts. This included most Rakhaing who relied more on the written texts reproduced by Bengali or Rakhaing authors. Hence, the Rakhaing historical narrative was dominated by the imagination of them as a people of Burma. This origin narrative, being combined with the developmentalist approach to the issue of indigenous movement and community development, resulted in Rakhaing organisations focusing more on economic and social development, rather than on the politics of identity or belonging within Bangladesh.

Catalysed by their indigenous movement, Rakhaings had been able to raise their ethnic profile as an indigenous/Adivasi population of Bangladesh. In the discourses of the government and media their ethnonym became Rakhaing, though sometimes it was spelled as ‘Rakhaine’ or ‘Rakhine’ associated with their ancestors in Burma. While the local people sometimes referred to them as Magh, Rakhaing had become a more popular term. Moreover, the communities in two distant locations, namely Cox’s Bazar and Ah-
wa-kwan, were now designated by the common ethnic identity Rakhaing. The community leadership, though divided, derived from its own community, with Arakanese/Rakhine from Burma no longer having control of the leadership. However, this did not mean that the Rakhaing people had rejected their historical connection to Arakan. The perception of their historical link to Arakan continued on and remained importance.

While they had rejected ethnonyms such as Magh, they understood they were members of the larger Rakhaing/Rakhine ethnic community whose majority lives in Burma. The historical trajectories of the Rakhaing ethnonyms were concerned with how they were being viewed in the contexts of the society that is now known as Bangladesh. Their rejection of the term Magh was not just about its negative connotation, but also about their historical links to Arakan or Burma, expressed historically through Mranma or Burmese. As the ethnonym Rakhaing gained popularity in official discourse, Rakhaing people were now more concerned about their ability to survive economically and socially within Bangladesh with its Muslim Bengali majority. These concerns were expressed politically within Bangladesh through their participation in the indigenous movements along with other minority peoples. At this historical juncture, I arrived in Cox’s Bazar to conduct my fieldwork research and to participate in the Rakhaing Thungran or New Year festival.

The process of identity formation involves, on the one hand, rejection of derogatory connotations and, on the other, realigning with Arakanese/Rakhine. Identity has not only concerned the symbolic notion of Rakhaing ethnicity, it has also played out in the arena of everyday lives. However, in the conversation that opens this chapter, Khaing Mra said this historical origin did not concern her much. Then, in terms of identity, while the
historical narratives were very important, they were just one of the forces in the lives of the Rakhaing. Other forces, notably religious, cultural, economic, and political factors, would have to be considered to understand how Rakhaing viewed their social belonging, as well as why and how Rakhaing of Bangladesh celebrate their New Year or Thungran festival.
CHAPTER 3: THUNGRAN: A PRACTICE OF ETHNIC DISTINCTION

Introduction

As the 2006 Thungran approached, many Rakhaing in Phaloung Chait were concerned that the celebration might not occur. Their concern derived from the prevailing political instability relating to the upcoming national election and the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. They were worried this political situation may not allow them to conduct the rituals associated with the Thungran. Sharing these concerns, I commented to a friend that my research might say that I was not able to study Thungran because it did not occur. I had understood, as did many Rakhaing, that Thungran was celebrated through participation in these rituals. However, one informant presented a very different perspective on Thungran. He said whether these public celebrations occurred or not, Thungran—the Rakhaing calendar change from the old year to the new one—would occur. I, along with other Rakhaing, had understood that Thungran only occurred with overt collective enactment of the associated rituals.

The Thungran festival is a collection of rituals conducted to mark the change in the Rakhaing calendar. For Rakhaing and those scholars who studied Rakhaing, Thungran is the most important festival. Almost every study on the Bangladesh Rakhaing has mentioned this festival. This chapter will outline chronologically how Rakhaing celebrated the Thungran festival in Cox’s Bazar in 2006 and 2007. I first discuss how each ritual component is described in written sources and by my informants. I then describe how these rituals unfolded in the Cox’s Bazar Thungran celebrations of Rakhaing years 1368 and 1369 (Gregorian calendar years 2006 and 2007). This chapter aims to clarify how relying solely on cultural aspects of the celebrations does not give a
sufficient understanding of why the actual unfolding of each instance of these celebrations is different from the other, such as how different individuals participated variably across these two years, despite the celebrations being regarded as culturally the same. This chapter points out that in order to understand how individuals participated in a social practice, such as the Thungran festival, as an ethnic act, my study has had to extend beyond the detailing of events and to look at how the festival is situated in wider social, historical, political and economic dynamics. This chapter also posits that a study of this festival needs to look at how the understanding of Thungran as an ethnic practice depends not only on the people’s ethnicity, but also relates other social factors.

Changing of the Rakhaing Calendar: The Time of Thungran

‘Thungran’ means passing from one year to another in the traditional Rakhaing calendar (Maung Tha Hla 2004, p. 152). The New Year occurs within the month of Tankhu², the first month in the Rakhaing calendar—mid-April in the Gregorian calendar. The exact day and time that the end of the year falls is based on the alignment of the stars in the sky. Traditionally, monks and lay people with astrological knowledge in the community were said to have calculated the actual time of Thungran (Tun Nyo 2005). Contemporarily, the Rakhaing base the time of Thungran on calendars imported from Burma (Majid 2005, p. 101).

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¹ ‘[Thungran] literally means ‘transit’--in Sanskrit sankranta, in Pali sankanta--the transit of the Sun to Aries from Pisces’ (Min Kyaw Min undated).
² The first day of the year is not the same as the first day of the first month in the Rakhaing calendar. The Rakhaing calendar uses the movement of the sun to count the year, but uses the moon phases to mark the months.
In his answer to my question of how he knows the date of Thungran, Theing Hlaing from Ah-wa-kwan replied:

We know the time of Thungran from Thungran Sa\(^3\) from the calendars from Burma—Arakanese calendars. From Thungran Sa we know who will have to do what during the Thungran time. But Thungran always falls on April 13th of the Christian calendar every year, it might be a different day in Rakhaing month, but it is the same in the Christian calendar. On the Thungran days, the elderly people will go to the monasteries for fasting. On the second day, there is a Phara Ree Cho Pway (Buddha Bathing Ceremony) and then a sermon by the monk. After Phara Ree Cho Pway, there will be water-festival. Last year, there was a Ree-Loung Pway [in our village]. We had a musical concert for the first time in Ah-wa-kwan, but it [the concert] usually occurs in Cox’s Bazar.

Another informant from a northern Cox’s Bazar village explained about the date of Thungran Festival in her village as follows:

Ma Gree: We know it from Thungran Sa [interrupted by her friend: ‘it normally falls on the April 13\(^{th}\) or 14\(^{th}\)’].
Than Tun: How do you know who will have to do Ah-sa-tak? [the ritual on New Year’s day].
Ma Gree: From Thungran Sa, too. It will be Monday born this year [2007]...
Than Tun: What will you do?
Ma Gree: I will do what is written in the Thungran Sa. I will have a shower and make offerings to Buddha. Then, I will have a sweet snack.
[...]
Ma Gree: You should come and celebrate Thungran (Thungran Khya) here [in her village about a two-hour trip from Phaloung Chait]. It is also fun here.
Than Tun: What happens in Thungran?
Ma Gree: We have Buddha-bathing ceremonies at the monasteries in the late morning. We also offer Shwang-Daw-Gree (food offerings to the monks) in the morning. We have water-play in the afternoon.

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\(^3\) Thungran Sa, which is an astrological text, shows the exact time of Thungran, general predictions for the new year and the recommendations to avert misfortunes, or to multiply good fortune.
Those living in the cities other than Phaloung Chait, however, had difficulty arranging the celebrations of Thungran. An informant from Dhaka said:

Living in Bangladesh, a Muslim country, our [public] holidays don’t match with Thungran. We can’t go back [to the native village] for Thungran or Wa-kywet [end of the Lent ceremony]... It is not possible to celebrate Thungran (Thungran Khya) in Dhaka. We could celebrate Thungran if there were a Rakhaing monastery. We could celebrate it [at the Rakhaing monastery]...

We normally celebrated it at the Chakma\textsuperscript{4} monastery on a Friday [Bangladesh’s weekly holiday]. It doesn’t happen every year, though. Not everyone [Rakhaing] in Dhaka can come, because of personal or job issues... We don’t throw water at each other, only bathe the Buddha image. We can’t care much about the formal rituals of Thungran. No way, we can’t throw water for three days, and there isn’t a place or enough water in Dhaka. We don’t throw water on people, but only on the Buddha Image. We bring snacks from home. We receive five precepts from the Chakma monks, but the way they pronounce [Buddhist chants] is different from us. [Then, his discussion returned to the need for a Rakhaing monastery and Rakhaing monks in Dhaka.]

Harabang and Cox’s Bazar are our towns. We can do whatever we want there [throw water on the streets, etc.]. But Dhaka is Kulapray (a Muslim country). We have to be mindful of our activities disturbing other people.

If Thungran is the changeover time between the old year and the new one, then, as the Cox’s Bazar informant commented, as a calendrical event it will always exist. The calendar year of the Rakhaing era will change over on its designated time within the month of Tankhu. Whether any rituals can be conducted; the calendar years will continue. The calendrical arrival of the festival time in Rakhaing language is ‘Kya’, meaning ‘to

\textsuperscript{4} One of the indigenous minority groups in Bangladesh, who are traditionally associated with the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
fall’. As the days and months pass on, the change of the year will occur, and Thungran will arrive or ‘fall’ or Kya. However, rituals commemorating this event, known as Thungran Khya, will be conducted and signify or reflect how people consider this particular time to be important in their lives. Hence my interest here is not about the ritual significance of the timing of New Year, but about how people celebrate to mark this significance and why this is significant for them.

Thungran is associated with a number of rituals, but only a few of them are celebrated communally in public. Other rituals are conducted personally or within the confines of one’s own home. These private rituals often do not feature in descriptions of the festival. Even though they have not been a part of the description of the festival, they are still conducted to mark the entrance into a new year in the Rakhaing calendar. They are conducted before what is regarded as the time of Thungran.

Before ‘the Fall of Thungran’

In early April 2006, while I was preoccupied about whether any public celebrations would occur for Thungran, my wife was busy completing a spring cleaning of our rented flat. This cleaning was to be conducted in addition to her daily household chores. This involved a thorough cleaning of the entire flat and its contents, including washing every corner of the house and every piece of clothing. My wife was concerned that this spring-cleaning might not finish before Thungran festival commenced or, as she put it, ‘the fall of Thungran’. As with our family, other Rakhaing in Phaloung Chait conducted this spring clean. As with most other domestic duties, Thungran cleanings were completed by the females of the house (or by the maids of richer families). The cleaning had to be
finished before Thungran, even though exactly when it should start was not clearly defined. Some households conducted this spring clean as early as two weeks before the day.

This spring-cleaning before the fall of Thungran was not only limited to households in Cox’s Bazar; monasteries were also thoroughly cleaned. On the eve of Thungran, the whole of the Thing and adjacent buildings were cleaned. The Thing in a Buddhist monastery is a building where the ordination of monks is conducted. However, in Cox’s Bazar, Thing or Maha Thing Daw Gree\(^5\) is the main Rakhaing Buddhist religious building surrounded by many monasteries and Buddhist monuments. It is located on the ground where many of the Rakhaing religious ceremonies are conducted. It serves as a religious-communal ground for Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing.

\(^5\) Though it was referred to as Thing in everyday usage, its formal name, Maha Thing Daw Gree, means the Great Holy Ordination Hall. Thing in Rakhaing is Sima in Pali, meaning consecrated ordination hall (Schober 2006).
Map 4: Rakhaing roas and monasteries in Cox’s Bazar Town

*Thing* spring-cleaning was conducted by a community group in 2007. Even though everyone was welcomed to join in the cleaning, this event was not publicly advertised. Hence, I did not know about the *Thing* cleaning in 2006, though I was able to observe the 2007 cleaning. I witnessed a small group of young males and females from Phaloung Chait conducting the cleaning. It was a small crowd compared to other major public events held there. This is not the same as the ritual cleansings conducted by monks or lay-shamans with special Buddhist chants and blessed water (*Pariate Ree*). This spring cleaning involved physically cleaning the building.
While household and monastery cleanings might be conducted regularly throughout the year, these special cleanings were conducted to mark the time of Thungran. Though they are an ‘actual’ cleaning in physical sense—as opposed to merely symbolic ritual cleansings—they were not mundane acts. Rather, these acts mark the temporal significance of Thungran, and both forms of cleaning are linked to Rakhaing traditional understandings of purity and mongala (blessings, luck or auspiciousness). Preparation for wedding ceremonies I witnessed during my fieldwork involved physical cleanings and ritual cleansings. Similar to pre-Thungran cleaning, the whole house was physically cleaned as part of the preparation for the wedding ceremony, more intensely and thoroughly than everyday cleaning. On the morning of the wedding, the bride or the bridegroom at their own house were mongala hmauk (raising auspiciousness: involving Pali chanting and associated rituals including sprinkling of water after the chant) by the monks. This ritual is said to purify the person and the location where the wedding would take place. The physical cleanings of the house and the religious buildings for significant events were linked to Rakhaing cultural and ritual understanding of purity, auspiciousness and cleansed locations.

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6 Both physical and ritual cleanings use water, while the physical cleaning involves the abundant use of water to remove dirt and stain; but it is only sprinkled in the ritual cleaning.
However, these spring cleanings as an activity at the commencement of Thungran were different from preparations for the rituals, occurring around the same time. Unlike the preparations for the festival rituals, spring cleanings were in themselves ritual components of the festival, marking the Thungran time. However, as noted, they were not publicly celebrated, and were not mentioned in most written or verbal accounts of Thungran. All interviewees declared that the celebration of Thungran started with the Buddha Bathing and ended with Ree-Loung Pway (the Water-Play). Only when specifically asked whether they or their family conducted Thungran spring cleanings, would they answer positively. Apart from Arakanese/Rakhine authors, Kyawt Hla (2001) and Maung Tha Hla (2004), writing on Rakhine Thungran in Arakan, most accounts of Thungran begin with the Buddha Bathing ceremony and Ree-Loung Pway. In regard to Phaloung Chait, the descriptions of Thungran generally started with a Buddha Bathing
ceremony and religious activities for three days\(^7\), followed by another three days of Ree-Loung Pway or the Water Festival (Saw Tun Oo 2005; Tun Nyo 2005; Majid 2005, p. 102). While many Rakhaing, such as my wife, placed extreme importance on the cleaning of the house before the fall of Thungran\(^8\), most Rakhaing did not even mention this activity when they recounted their participation in Thungran rituals. In fact, most Rakhaing from Cox’s Bazar in 2006-2007 did not participate in these house and monastery (including Thing) cleaning events.

Most members of my Ah-phaew or friendship group, including myself, did not get involved in the spring-cleaning of their homes, except two of our Ah-Phaws. They were generally active people in the community’s religious affairs, and they participated in Thing and monastery cleanings. During this period, others in the group were not concerned about completing the rituals for the passing of the year, but stocked up on alcohol for the joyous celebrations that occurred after these religious rituals. They were not concerned that they would need to ‘clean’ the house or other communal buildings for auspicious entrance into the forthcoming year.

While my wife and her female relatives were busy conducting Thungran spring cleanings, my Ah-Phaws were preoccupied with preparations for the occasions of what one Rakhaing author (Saw Tun Oo 2005, p. 63) calls ‘merrymaking’. Our first activity relating to 2006 Thungran was to stock up on alcohol, with a contribution of 500 taka from each member. Alcohol was bought from Taungtama (literally, lady-from-the-

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\(^7\) However, in most places in Arakan State, Thungran rituals consist of three days of Ree-Loung Pway (Water-play) after the day of Phara Ree Cho Pway (Buddha bathing).

\(^8\) My wife continued to maintain the same attitude to completing pre-Thungran house cleanings in Australia.
mountain; in reference to Marma women from the Chittagong Hill Tracts who came to Cox’s Bazar to sell alcohol and vegetables). Even though the political situation was tense in 2006 with the upcoming national election and the death of Bangla Bhai (the leader of a militant Islamic group) (*The Daily Star* 2006h), my friends continued on with their preparation for our Thungran merrymaking. In fact, whether the community-wide celebrations occurred or not, they intended to have a joyous time during the Thungran.

In 2007, by contrast to 2006, alcohol was hard to find. Bangladesh was under a caretaker government’s rule in 2007. This military-backed caretaker government strictly enforced the law banning alcohol consumption, leading to alcohol production and transportation being severely restricted and many retail sellers being arrested. However, somehow my friends still managed to find some alcohol for Thungran in 2007. Alcohol, in the form of homemade rice wine, was sold by Marma or unlicensed Rakhaing shops. Most males and females consumed alcohol during Ree-Loung Pway, but a majority of the latter would not drink it normally. Moreover, it is illegal for a Bangladeshi citizen to drink alcohol without a medical permit (Government of Bangladesh 1990), although there were no incidents of Rakhaing being arrested in Cox’s Bazar during Thungran in both years. My Ah-Phaws were all aware of the fact that houses and monasteries had to be cleaned to ensure the next year auspicious one, but some of us were not concerned about the cultural and ritual significance of the change in the Rakhaing calendar. However, for all of us, participating in Thungran rituals, especially those which were publically celebrated with great fanfare, was extremely importance as my friends put great energy and money into the preparation.
A week before the fall of Thungran in 2006, the Rakhaing Buddhist Welfare Association (RBWA) had a special meeting of its office bearers regarding Thungran celebration. The meeting agenda included discussions on informing the district authority about the celebration, collecting funds from the community, as well as allocating responsibilities in organising the celebrations. Similarly, in 2007, during the tense political time with the strict enforcement of the law by the military-led administration, the RBWA was said to have made an application to the Deputy Commissioner’s (DC) office, the district authority, informing it of the communal Thungran celebration and public alcohol use by the Rakhaing people. In short, these publically celebrated rituals were carefully planned affairs, requiring extensive preparation and organisation from the community leaders.

The ritual conducted on the first day of Thungran festival was Phara Ree Cho Pway or the Buddha Bathing Ceremony. In Phaloung Chait, in both 2006 and 2007, the ceremonies were conducted over two days. The first day was organised by ‘Kyoung-thaa’ or Rakhaing students. The second day was organised by ‘Roa-Thaa’ or the villagers. In 2004 and 2005, the student Buddha Bathing did not occur for the lack of student organisers. In 2006, a meeting was called by some older students, the most active being Saw Shwe, who had studied in Dhaka and associated with Arakanese dissidents living there. During the meeting, Saw Shwe gave a passionate speech stressing that the lack of a formal Rakhaing student association had hindered them in seeking opportunities to promote or protect the interests of Rakhaing youths—including conducting the Student Buddha Bathing ceremony in the previous two years. She called on her fellow younger students to set up a formal student organisation for the interest of Rakhaing students and the Rakhaing people in Bangladesh. During that meeting, Saw Shwe managed to gain

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9 I did not observe the 2007 Thungran planning meeting of the RBWA.
initial support from the Rakhaing students to conduct the 2006 Buddha Bathing ceremony and to organise a student conference after Thungran to discuss further the issue of a formal organisation. Saw Shwe led fund collections from the community and invited other Rakhaing students to participate in the ceremony. Preparations, such as making decorative articles, were the responsibility of older male students who worked on them on the eve of Thungran.

The older students, specifically Saw Shwe, did not get involved in the 2007 preparations for the Student Buddha bathing. Instead, another group of students took charge of the preparations. As with the student leaders of 2006, some of the new students were trying to set up another formal student body independently of the Saw Shwe-led organisation established after the 2006 Thungran. However, in both 2006 and 2007, on the eve of the Thungran festival, students were solely focused on successfully conducting the Kyungh-thaa Phara Ree Cho Pway as the first communal ceremony of the Thungran.

Buddha Bathing: Ethnic celebration as a religious ceremony

The Buddha Bathing ceremony was generally represented as the communal celebration of ritually cleansing the Buddha statues. Majid (2005, p. 102) writes:

On the first day of the festival, they organise religious processions [...] In the village or area from where arrangements are made to organise the procession, every people of all ages and sexes of that village or area do take active part in it with enthusiasms. [...] When the procession finally arrives to its destination at a ‘Kyang’ or Buddhist temple, the statue of Buddha and all other articles thereon are thoroughly cleaned and washed with scented water.
In Cox’s Bazar, the first day of Thungran was usually reserved for the Kyoung-thaa (Students) Buddha Bathing ceremony. Only on the second day, was the Roa-Thaa Bathing (by the villagers or ordinary people) conducted. ‘Village’ in this context refers to different wards in the town inhabited by Rakhaing in Phaloung Chait. There were nine ‘villages’ or wards in Phaloung Chait’s Rakhaing community. While most of these wards had Rakhaing names, their official names were in Bengali. Kyoung-naa-roa and Ngazee-tan were the only two Roas with a large and exclusive Rakhaing neighbourhood. In other Roas, Rakhaing lived scattered amongst their Bengali neighbours. As the numbers of Rakhaing households in some of these ‘villages’ were too small to organise their own ceremony, they combined with other villages.

Figure 2: The procession of Kyoung-thaa Phara Ree Cho Pway, Cox’s Bazar, 13 April 2007
The Buddha Bathing ceremonies of Thungran are visually and vocally noticeable on the streets of Phaloung Chait and surrounding villages. In Phaloung Chait, these ceremonies involved a procession of a loud speaker system playing Burmese monks’ sermons, followed by a few males and then females, all clothed in brightly coloured ‘Rakhaing’ dress, with a band of Hindu musicians playing upbeat tunes trailing at the end. While a few older males preceded the front of the procession carrying offering bowls, the majority of older males traversed on the side of the procession. Some of these males helped the police clear the way for the processions crossing the main road (normally heavily trafficked with trishaws). Only Rakhaing people usually participated in these processions.

The processions ended at the Thing ground. From the Thing, each ‘village’ group continued to their designated monasteries for a blessing ceremony by the monks. Each village procession would proceed to monasteries they normally supported. An image of Buddha was set up (especially for the occasion) in front of each monastery so that people could pour water on it. Unlike the more pragmatic act of spring-cleaning, the Bathing was seen as principally symbolic, though Bathing itself was not formally organised; everyone who felt like doing it could do so whenever she liked.

In explaining to me the nature of Rakhaing Thungran in Bangladesh, Kyaw Shun Maung said ‘we start our new year with a religious ceremony before merry-making (apyaw).’

The name, Phara Ree Cho Pway or the Buddha Bathing ceremony and the activities involved are consistent with Kyaw Shun Maung’s view of religiosity being the key meaning behind the ritual. The procession resonates with the Buddhist notion of

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10 Our Roa (Kyauk-tan) had the blessing ceremony at Sandamazu monastery located on the western side of Thing ground. Apart from these blessing ceremonies and a few other occasions, I did not have any association with the monastery. It could be my weak commitment to religious rituals. However, for the Phara-Ree Cho Pway, Sandamazu had become our ‘own’ monastery, as a member of the village where I was staying.
informing others of a religious or good deed being performed. Donation to the monks, hearing their sermons and bathing the Buddha image with water are also Buddhist activities aiming to accumulate good kama or luck. Pouring water on the image is symbolic in the sense that it is a ‘token bathing’ (Maung Tha Hla 2004, p. 153) in contrast to the physical cleaning conducted a few days before which involved literally removing dirt, stains and dust. However, the participants who bathed the image of Buddha in 2006 and 2007 saw their activity as equally significant to the physical cleaning. The cultural understanding of Phara Ree Cho Pway is that it is a religious activity to cleanse away the past year’s bad kama and accumulate good kama. This cultural understanding has prompted the Rakhaing participants to be involved in the activities of Phara Ree Cho Pway. However, cultural meanings and their importance alone were not sufficient reasons for the Student Buddha Bathing Ceremony to have occurred in 2006 and 2007.

Figure 3: A Rakhaing man helping his young daughter to bath the Buddha image during Phara Ree Cho Pway in front of the Thing in Cox’s Bazar, 14 April 2006
In both 2006 and 2007, a large contingent of Phaloung Chait Rakhaing who were studying at various educational institutions participated in the Student Buddha Bathing ceremonies, though no such ceremonies occurred in the previous two years\(^\text{11}\). At the end of the Blessing Ceremonies in 2006 and 2007, meetings were held to organise a more politically and socially active Rakhaing student association. Those who had facilitated the processions in 2006 and 2007 advocated, and later went on to form, a formal organisation based on the support of participating students. I was invited to participate in all the meetings and the ritual of Phara Ree Cho Pway. In 2006, I observed the formation of the Bangladesh Rakhaing Student Council (BRSC) with Saw Shwe as its leader. In 2007, the younger organisers also formed a new and rival organisation, the Bangladesh Rakhaing Student Association (BRSA), after their Phara Ree Cho Pway. The reasons for these 2006 and 2007 Phara Ree Cho Pway ceremonies, especially the involvement of those who organised these ceremonies, cannot be explained in simply cultural terms. While the cultural meanings allowed the ceremonies to be performed, the actual celebration and the participation involved social and political considerations surrounding the participants in these ceremonies.

None of my Ah-Phaws were students and consequently did not participate in the Student Buddha Bathing ceremonies of the two years. Instead, they participated in the ‘village’ Buddha Bathing ceremonies. Some of them even participated in the ceremonies of other Roas through their relatives or friends. For example, Weight Htun was from a ward that conducted the ceremony in the morning; he then (along with his sisters) came to join the

\(^{11}\) The older people who had been involved in the previous years before 2004 said the reason for the cessation in these two years was that there was no-one to organise them.
ceremony at our roa, Kyouk-tan, where his extended family lived. While Myak-mhan, another Ah-Phaw from our roa, joined the Buddha Bathing ceremony in 2006, he did not participate in 2007 due to a work commitment. The cultural meanings of Buddhist good kama and purity, and the related cultural practices of cleaning, cleansing and bathing the image which constituted Phara Ree Cho Pway, are all central for Rakhaing participation in the rituals of Thungran. However, these cultural meanings did not explain why the ceremonies occurred in Cox’s Bazar in 2006 and 2007, and why people participated (or not) in these particular celebrations.

On the evening of the 2006 ‘villager’ Buddha bathing and the next day, my Ah-Phaw gathered at a member’s house for a party. They had participated in the earlier Roa-Thaa Bathing Ceremonies, but the evening party where they got drunk and danced was almost exclusively conducted with close friends. They danced to mostly Rakhaing songs, some of which depicted Thungran celebrations, as well as a few Burmese and local dialect Bengali ones. Water was splashed among the group, but unlike the water-play to come two days later, it was thrown in small quantities, almost symbolically, in anticipation of the events to follow. The party, though it could be regarded as similar to others the group had throughout the year, was held in the name of Thungran. When one of the Ah-Phaws suggested we lower the noise so as not to disturb the Bengali neighbours, others refused to comply with his caution, saying they were celebrating Thungran. In normal gatherings for alcohol, our group was very much quieter. At the same time, the gatherings on the 14th and 15th of April 2006 were held earlier than the usual evening drinking parties. While it could be argued that these people were using Thungran as an excuse for partying, they genuinely regarded Thungran to be a special moment. Due to the stricter enforcement of the law by the military-backed administration, the 2007 parties were a lot
quieter compared with the festivities of 2006. My Ah-Phaws’ 2007 parties were as quiet as their normal gatherings, in contrast to the 2006 Thungran’s noisy events. Looking only at the traditional cultural meanings would ignore the significance of the different social events that unfolded in the name of Thungran, and we would thus fail to recognise how social and political dynamics influence how people live their lives.

These evening drinking parties over the Phara Ree Cho Pway days contradicted a previous explanation in terms of religion since drinking alcohol is against basic Buddhist principles. Even though the community wide celebrations during this period of the festival could be categorised as ‘religious’ rituals, my Ah-Phaws conducted celebrations which were not necessarily in-line with conventional ‘religious’ teaching, and those present were conscious of the fact that their activities are not conducive to the Buddhist teachings. However, these cultural contradictions were not the main concerns for my friends. Rather they were mainly interested in enjoying the occasion.

On the third day of the Thungran festival in both 2006 and 2007, on April 15th, there were spring cleanings of some Rakhaing goldsmith shops in Phaloung Chait. Those working in these shops conducted spring-cleaning simultaneously, while drinking and eating together throughout. Alcohol was shared among the goldsmiths and friends, creating the atmosphere of a street party. After the spring-cleaning, these workshops were closed until the end of the Thungran festival, only to be re-opened on the first ‘good’ or auspicious day of the New Year. Other Rakhaing businesses also waited for a ‘good’ day to re-open. These ‘good’ days were judged according to the Rakhaing or Burmese calendars. Conversely, employees of government or non-Rakhaing-owned firms continued to work on these days.
The first auspicious day in the New Year was important for only some of my Ah-Phaws—those who were engaged in gold-smith workshops or ‘Burmese Market’ souvenir shops. Other members of my Ah-Phaw, - those with a more modern education - did not regard this day to be especially important. Ko CD, the most formally educated amongst the group, continued to sell Arakanese music albums from his home-based shop without regard to this notion of the auspicious day as the day to restart his business.

On the last day of the Rakhaing Calendar year, on the 16th April, Ah-sa-tak day, persons who were born on certain days of the week, for instance Monday in 2007, dressed in new clothes and offered sweet snacks to the Buddha. The Rakhaing language *Thungran Sa* (Thungran Letter) from the Danyawady Calendar (published in Arakan/ Rakhine State in Burma) informed the attachment of duties to particular birthdays. In relation to the last day of a calendar year, Tun Nyo (2005, p. 19) writes:

> The ‘Thungran’ day is a very important in Rakhaing culture. Anybody whose birthday falls on this day must worship Lord Buddha and distribute sweets among the people.

Like the spring cleanings, the Ah-sa-tak rituals were conducted individually. These rituals were normally performed at home while sweets were distributed within the networks of close relatives and friends (but not necessarily to everyone in one’s Roa). Unlike the Buddha Bathing ceremonies, Ah-sa-tak and spring-cleaning rituals were not publicly celebrated. Some Rakhaing informants in Cox’s Bazar performed these rituals enthusiastically, while some paid little attention to them. In order to know what was written in Thungran Sa, a Rakhaing would have to know written Rakhaing language.
Those who were not competent in written Rakhaing would have to follow what other people recommended to them or simply would not bother to do them. These ritual requirements competed with educational or employment commitments for many Rakhaing. However, those who regarded these rituals as important still conducted them in order to mark the time of Thungran. Even though other commitments, such as employment or education, competed with these ‘private’ rituals, many Rakhaing would still try to fulfil them, as in the example of my wife conducting both Thungran spring-cleaning and Ah-sa-tak even in Australia, a country far away from her natal village in Cox’s Bazar. These Rakhaing’ activities were associated with cultural and religious meanings of good kama or, more specifically Rakhaing notions of auspiciousness and cleanliness.

Unlike private rituals requiring individuals’ involvement, public activities were contingent upon organised community participation and leadership, and favourable conditions for these events. In 2006, political instabilities had produced an anxiety that these celebrations might not even occur. This anxiety was eventually forgotten when the time of Thungran arrived. The fact that Thungran celebrations were held was dependent on social conditions rather than merely the Rakhaing cultural traditions of changing calendar years and the requirements of good kama, auspiciousness and cleansing to welcome the new year. As the Student’s Buddha Bathing ceremonies indicate, these rituals embodied cultural aspects of Rakhaing ethnicity but, at the same time, they were related strongly to the political and social contexts of Rakhaing’s everyday life. More importantly, while we can say that Kyoung-thaa Phara Ree-Cho Pway ceremonies occurred in both years almost in the same outward activities, the identities of participants and the way they came into actual activities were not the same. How these festivals
unfolded each year situated within the social and political contexts of the Rakhaing students of Cox’s Bazar, reflected for instance the changing of the student leadership. As Phara Ree Cho Pway and other religious activities concluded; the joyous celebration of Ree-Loung Pway commenced on the 17th April, the Rakhaing New Year day.

Mendet: the Pavilion for Water-play

In the meeting for the 2006 Thungran celebration, female members of the RBWA (Rakhaing Buddhist Welfare Association) agreed to organise Ree-loung Mendet (a water-playing pavilion) if male members of the RBWA would take charge of ‘restraining’ at the ceremony. Though the word ‘restraining’ was used, it did not refer to restraining outsiders. It referred to enforcing the rules of a Mendet. It is in the Mendet that the water-play between segregated young males and females occurs. Older female members have to enforce the segregation and orderly changeover between different male groups engaging in the water-play, but they demanded the older males to be involved in enforcing these rules.

Regarding the nature of a Mendet, Majid (2005, p. 103) writes:

... [Y]oung Rakhaine [sic] women, making up themselves most attractively and wearing similar colourful dresses, remain standing holding pots and mugs in their hands. On the other side, the crowd of Rakhaine [sic] youths, dressed gorgeously with colourful traditional dresses, enter the pavilion area dancing and singing, the youths sprinkle water on the young girls or women standing beside the water-jar on the pavilion. In response, the young girls or women also throw water on them, fetching water from the jars or boats. While doing so they also continue playing jokes and laughter, pulling one another’s leg, dancing, singing, playing music.
Cox’s Bazar Mendets in 2006 and 2007 were similar to the descriptions of those performed by Rakhine people. Maung Tha Hla (2004, pp. 154-155) describes a typical Arakanese/Rakhine Mendet as:

A level bar of wood\(^{12}\) is placed about three feet above ground and across the facade of the makeshift pavilion, which serves as the divider between the male outside and the female within, who are kept apart in a preventative measure at least at arm’s length from each other.

All 11 Mendets in Cox’s Bazar (each of various sizes) were set up similarly to Maung Tha Hla’s description. Females who participated in a Mendet stayed there for an extended period of the day. They engaged in the water-plays in groups. When their turn came, they would be sitting on the bench with their back to the front of the Mendet. Each visiting

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\(^{12}\) Bamboo poles were more commonly used in Bangladesh.
group of male participants would take their positions at the bamboo-rail and start throwing water at the females opposite them inside the pavilion (not ‘sprinkle’, as Majid suggests above). The female would respond by throwing water back at the male’s face. A water-fight would start, with the couple trying to throw water at each other’s faces. The one who wipes the face would lose the water fight. After a while, the male might ask his female antagonist to come closer for a Mitta-ree-loung (Throwing Love Water). The female participant would then stand closer to the rail, and the male would chat while gently pouring or sprinkling water on her. I was informed that at the Mitta-ree-loung, gift exchange could happen in a more intimate moment, although still under the supervision of the Mendet Theings (the guardians of Mendet). The water-play between these two groups would cease at a designated time. The male group would then make way for another group who were waiting their turn to have a water-play with the same female group or a new one.

Regarding the water-fight, Maung Tha Hla (2004, p. 156) writes ‘the mixed dual contest ensues, often enthusiastically, until one party is declared loser on his or her eyelashes being batted, or the face turned away or wiped off; ducking is not to be excused either... In lyric or prose the boy charms the girl with courteous remarks praising her beauty while the competition is in progress.’ Losing or winning at the water fight however did not have any consequences, apart from being embarrassing for the loser. Since winning itself does not provide any reward, the involvement in the water-fight and associated jesting against each other are valued most for enjoyment and fun between the different sexes.
Communicating through Mendet activities have an undertone of courtship. The water-play between a man and woman sometimes indicates mutual interest between them. While generally a male participant has little choice on who he would partner in the water-play, it is possible for him to request a particular girl as the partner. While the invitation sometimes indicates the man’s interest in the girl, her acceptance does not necessarily mean her reciprocating this interest. These cultural meanings of courtship played out in the 2006 and 2007 Thungran festivals. During our 2006 Ree-Long Pway visit, my Ah-Phaws made jokes that they were going to visit Mendet to throw water only to their most beloved Maree Chay (literally younger sister-in-law, but meaning a young girl or a sweetheart). However, the Maree Chay they were referring to was not an actual person but a figure of fantasy. Moreover, some of the married members of the group were also making similar jokes, indicating the cultural meaning of the water-play between males and females being about courtships. Mitta-ree-loung, especially, is an indication that a courtship activity, entailing close proximity between a male and female, is allowed as long as it is conducted under the supervision of an elderly person. However, not all water-plays could be reduced to the meaning of courtship.
Generally, people celebrated the Ree-Loung Pway days through their Ah-Phaw group. These friends would gather at a Rakhaing house (private place) from late morning to drink alcohol. These groups are segregated in terms of gender and age. Whilst gatherings are mostly based on Ah-Phaw group, sometimes other acquaintances might visit for a very short period. The core groups of friends contributed to cover most or all of the costs, but guests and visitors (those from other villages or those locals who lived in other such places as Dhaka, Chittagong or the Chittagong Hill Tracts) joined them for Ree-Loung Pway days. Hence, the drinking group on a Ree-Loung Pway day would be bigger than a normal gathering. This drinking group would constitute the group visiting the different Mendets later on in the day.
In 2006 and 2007 Cox’s Bazar, Mendets were visited around mid-day or in the early afternoon. When visiting, some groups have a band of Hindu musicians following them, while some had a loudspeaker system, mounted on a trishaw, playing upbeat tunes to which the group can dance. Others simply sang or joked, or quietly travelled along, if not too drunk or too shy to make any noise, from one Mendet to another. These Mendet visits were similar to those of Arakanese in Burma who would either have been followed by a ‘traditional band’ or cassette-player playing Rakhaing language or Burmese songs in Arakan’s cities. At a Mendet some groups engaged in the water-play as a whole, while in others only some members from the group would engage. In their trip to other Mendets, the group would carry water to throw at people or to drink with alcohol. Alcohol was shared not only amongst the groups, but also with friends and acquaintances they met on the streets. Throwing water at one’s acquaintances is an act of acknowledgement, and did not have the same meanings of courtship. A small amount of water is thrown at both male and female acquaintances the group meet on their journey.

In Majid’s (2005, p. 103) account of Ree-Loung Pway, he assigned the female participation only through Mendet. However, in 2006 and 2007, many female Ah-Phaw groups did not participate in a Mendet. Indeed, female participation is not limited only to the controlled and closely supervised Mendets. This assumption, which limits the female role to receiving the visit of male counter-parts under the controlled gaze of the elders does not consider the diverse gender relationships that Rakhaing people celebrate in Thungran. The traditional cultural meaning of Mendet implies the limited role of a Rakhaing woman as a receiver and protected member within the community and within the family. However, the actual unfolding of the 2006 and 2007 Ree-Loung Pway meant that focusing only on this traditionally assigned female role to inside Mendet had failed
to recognise other possibilities within the gendered relationship among the Rakhaing. While many females participated in Mendets in 2006 and 2007 in Cox’s Bazar, many others enjoyed their Thungran in other ways.

The female Ah-Phaw groups, normally uniformly dressed in *Thungran-ahsung* (Thungran Dress), travelled from one Mendet to another to watch other people participating in the water-plays. Similar to their male counterparts, the female groups gathered at a member’s house for Thamapung (literally means ‘eating rice together’) to drink alcohol. Their main activity in the Ree-Loung Pway was Mendet visits, rather than participating in the Mendet’s water-play. A female informant around 25 years old said, reflecting on her non-participation in Mendets:

I used to participate in Mendet when I was about 8th Standard. I hadn’t joined in since two or three years ago. I am getting too old for it. Nowadays, the [young] girls are more interested in Thamapung (eating meal together)... They don’t like to participate in Mendets anymore. Only children are involved in Mendets.

Like this informant, none of my female relatives of a similar age participated in the Mendets of 2006 and 2007 Thungran festivals. Instead, their friendship groups, clothed in the same style and colour of dresses, drank alcohol early in the day and later visited Mendets to watch the water-play. If there was a concert at the Mendet, they would join others dancing or simply watch from the side. They threw water at acquaintances they met on the street. They did not participate in a Mendet, as it would restrict them to one place for an extended period and compel them to conduct water-plays with any Rakhaing male who happened to be their partner there. The ‘traditional’ cultural significance of water-plays and the courtship alluded to in it, were not seen as particularly relevant to the
lives of the Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar, though it might have been many years before. However, the notion of joy underpinned by jokes, alcohol and music was still central to the ways Rakhaing celebrate Ree-Loung Pway, as reflected in Kyaw Shun Maung’s comment about it being a ‘pleasurable’ event.

However, Rakhaing women were able to enjoy public participation in the festivals, including mixing with other male friends, relatively more freely than within the wider restricted gender context of Muslim majority Bangladesh. This ability to access the festival and hence public space with relative freedom, should not necessarily be equated with a more equal gendered relationship. Whether easier access to public space entails a greater ability to participate in personal, community and public decision making requires closer consideration which is beyond the scope of the current study. Nevertheless, the perception that Rakhaing women enjoy relatively more personal freedom than Muslim Bengali women has been integral to the intra-ethnic relationships with other communities in Bangladesh. Such a perception of the Rakhaing as having distinct gendered ethnic identities is linked to the popular conception and understanding of other unique “Rakhaing” character traits.
Figure 6: Ma Han and her friends visiting Mendets on April 14, 2007, Cox’s Bazar

Few of my friends participated in the Phaloung Chait Mendets in 2006, despite the fact that they jokingly claimed that each of them would throw water at their beloved girl (Maree Chay) at her Mendet. On Ree-Loung Pway days, our group had actually expanded with friends from other cities. While most of these friends were Rakhaing, some were Marma from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Friends and relatives of similar ages joined in the drinking and Mendet visits. In 2006, a few Arakanese dissidents who lived in Dhaka also joined the group. A smaller number of these dissidents joined us in 2007. Due to a common language and equivalent kinship terminology, kin identities were favoured in their interactions in place of ethnic identities such as Rakhaing or Marma. Our Rakhaing friends living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts would come to participate in Phaloung Chait Ree-Loung Pway.
In 2006, three different members of our group hosted each day of Ree-Loung Pway. The get-together started around midday. As we all sat in a circle on the ground, a glass with alcohol was passed from one person to the next. Food was placed in the middle of the circle for nibbles. The circle would keep growing with other people joining in, and alcohol would be passed around until everyone was drunk.

After about three hours of drinking, our group would start visiting Mendets. As we had started the visit quite late, most Mendets had already finished or were in the process of finishing. Consequently, none of the group participated in water-plays at the Mendets. However, we did throw water on acquaintances we met in the street. This water throwing indicated friendship to that person. At the same time, the beauty of female strangers was also acknowledged in these interactions by my friends with a sprinkle of water on them, even though they were not our acquaintances. The notion of courtship and the act of sensuality towards a member of the opposite sex are still relevant in identifying to whom Rakhaing would throw water at during Thungran.

On the first day of 2006 Phaloung Chait’s Ree-Loung Pway, a heavy rain disrupted the celebration. While most others disappeared, our group continued on to Kyoung-naa-roa/Kyaung Para near the Thing. In Kyoung-naa-roa our group danced until late in the afternoon, soaking wet from the rain. The second and third days followed the same pattern of activities. The group visited different Mendets, but the members hardly engaged in the water-plays. In our visits at the Mendets, we watched other people playing with water. When we came to the Mendets with VCD players or a Rakhaing band on the stage, we
would join in with the crowd dancing to the music. In 2007, my Ah-Phaws did not celebrate all three days of Ree-Loung Pway in Phaloung Chait. In that year, they travelled to other villages where Rakhaing musical concerts were part of these villages’ Ree-Loung Pway celebrations.

Musical Concert of Thungran: Added Ritual or Invaded Culture?

While most writings on Rakhaing Thungran celebration focus on the water-play at the Mendet, there are many Rakhaing villages which do not participate in this festival. In many rural villages of Cox’s Bazar, and those of Ah-wa-kwan in 2007, water playing through a Mendet did not occur. However, being the most visible aspect of Thungran, newspaper reports mentioned this water-play as ‘the’ New Year celebration (The Daily Star 2006i; The Daily Star 2007a; Narinjara News 2007).

However, since 2005, musical concerts have been added as a new activity in the celebration of Ree-Loung Pway. In 2005, the RBWA and the Rakhaing Development Foundation (RDF), two leading and rival community organisations, both organised concerts for three days in Phaloung Chait. In 2006, only the RDF arranged a concert for the entire three days. In 2007, one-day concerts were set up in neighbouring villages, with some funds from the Arakanese political dissidents from overseas.
While musicians of the RBWA concert in 2005 were all from the local Rakhaing community, those in RDF were mixed between the locals and Arakanese dissidents. These older RDF musicians were regarded as senior in terms of musical learning; and they learned their musical skills (as well as reading and writing in Rakhaing language) in Arakan or from the Arakanese political dissidents. Moreover, these musicians associated with the RDF concerts enjoyed ‘Rakhaing’ songs in their everyday life. In 2005, two of the musicians produced the first Rakhaing language song album in Bangladesh, *Nhung Khruue Shoung*. Although their album was not a commercial success, their concerts were very popular among local Rakhaing at the festivals in 2005, 2006 and 2007.

The concerts held in 2005 and 2006 at the Thungran festivals were important not only for those who simply wanted to listen and dance to their songs; they also served as a forum for the host associations to entertain an invited member of the district administration. In 2005 the *Nhung Khruue Shoung* album, which had already been available for a few weeks, was launched (or rather, relaunched) at the RDF concert by a senior Bengali officer from the district administration. Also in 2006, district government officials were invited to the opening ceremony. Similarly, the RBWA invited the district administration to its Thungran celebrations, although since there was no concert to watch in 2006 and 2007, the guests watched the people playing water in the RBWA’s Mendet.

If a concert was held, during the opening ceremonies the central stage was used as the sitting area for the leaders of the association as well as one or two of the invited guests. These guests were generally district administration officers or local politicians. The main activity of such opening ceremonies was speeches from invited guests and Rakhaing leaders. A religious recitation would also be conducted at the start of proceedings.
Audiences at these opening ceremonies were generally sparse, with only the leading members of the association and some of their family members attending these activities. The 2007 RBWA opening ceremony, though it was held only on the second day of Ree-Loung Pway, was held inside the association office building, while the actual Mendet was erected across the street.

After the opening ceremony, the band played on the central stage. From this time, the invited guests and the leading members of the host organisation normally sat in the reserved areas to watch the initial ‘traditional’ dances from the younger Rakhaing girls, and later the band playing modern Rakhaing songs on the stage. This reserved space could be on the side stage, as in the 2006 RDF concert, or beside the dancing ground, which was directly in front of the band on the stage. The dancing crowd was segregated into male and female sections by a bamboo fence. A few members of the organisation were normally positioned at the fence to enforce the segregation rule. The Mendet for the water-play was set up, in both of the years that concerts (2005-2006) were held by both organisations (RBWA and RDF), on the sidelines of the centre stage.
A police contingent guarded the large Mendets. At the concerts, they also acted as the gatekeepers, only allowing Rakhaing (or Rakhaing-looking people) to enter the compound to dance. However, they did allow people with different phenotypes, such as Bengali people, if they were the guests of a Rakhaing person. While these guests could join in eating, drinking and dancing, they did not participate in the water-play at the Mendets. Marma and Burmese, who appeared to have the same phenotype as Rakhaing, could and did participate in activities. Those with Bengali ‘appearance’ could not participate (or were not allowed to participate) in the water-plays. During the Thungran events, the local Bengali people would crowd from the fence to watch the Rakhaing celebration. Bangladesh’s police maintained the boundary where the Rakhaing celebrated their festival, but the Rakhaing themselves decided who would participate in the
celebrations, how they would do so, and which particular activities they would involve themselves in.

Figure 8: The police officer and local Bengali people watching on the Rakhaing Ree-Loung Pway at Kyaung Nar Roa (Kyaung Para) Cox’s Bazar, April 18, 2007

The police not only provided physical security for Rakhaing participants but also imposed restrictions on the direct participation of the broader Bengali community in Rakhaing ritual activities, excepting invited Bengali guests, who were personal friends of the Rakhaing. Though the latter were able to participate in almost any of the joyful events, male Bengali friends were not permitted to join the water plays with Rakhaing females in a Mendet. Given the undertone of courtship between a man and a woman - the most sensual aspect of the celebration entailing the closed pouring of water - the water plays were considered as purely intra-ethnic affair, reserved for the Rakhaing only. Some other
ritual events, such as the musical concerts and Mendet visits, were likewise conducted in segregated ways, though under the full public gaze. Thus, despite public gender intermingle, the interactions were heavily regulated through accepted ritual rules. Moreover, these ritual rules were reinforced by the State, albeit in a nominal way, in the name of providing security for the community.

In 2006, my Ah-Phaws did not attend any of the opening ceremonies held by the community organisations. On the first Ree-Loung Pway day in 2006, the speeches from the RDF Mendet could be heard, but no one from the group paid attention to them and continued on with their drinking. On the second day of the 2006 Ree-Loung Pway when the group arrived at the RDF concert, they joined in with the dancing crowd. In the interval between songs, a RDF leader made a speech. The crowd noisily started to request more songs instead of the speech and someone threw a piece of mud onto the stage. The RDF leader then started to threaten to put the person under arrest, without naming or knowing the culprit, even though he did not have the judicial power to do so. Following this verbal threat, one of my Ah-Phaws urged our group to depart from the RDF concert, the most popular festival location of the day. We ended our day at another smaller Mendet where some members danced to Hindi popular songs on a VCD player.

My Ah-Phaw group did not enter the RDF concert the next day, but instead visited other surrounding Mendets. Our tour of Mendets eventually ended in the Zaret of Khaw-pazatan for a party that continued into the late evening. Every Rakhaing ward used to have a

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13 My friend was not the perpetrator, but he took great offence at the leader’s blanket threat to the audience. The real culprit reportedly apologised to the leader the next day, and the matter concluded without further problem.
Zaret, which was a common area to serve as the communal social, ritual and political space for the ward. By 2006, there was no such Zaret left in other wards in Phaloung Chait. Most of them had become private property. The Khaw-paza-tan Zaret status was unclear, as it had also been made into a private area. Although no new building had been erected a hut still existed on the land. On the last Ree-Loung Pway day of 2006, it became a party arena. Other participants were friends, family members or relatives of my Ah-Phaws, and the event became loud and noisy with a busy and drunk crowd dancing to Rakhaing songs from a CD player. However, such events did not occur in 2007.

In 2007, my Ah-Phaws did not spend their first two days of Ree-Loung Pway in Phaloung Chait. Instead, they travelled to surrounding areas where Rakhaing concerts were being held—the first day in Halbang/Harabang and the next day in Thawdeejya/Chowfaldandi. However, the first concert for the 2007 Thungran festival in Cox’s Bazar occurred two days before Phaloung Chait’s Ree-Loung Pway in Than Thee Roa (one of the Rakhaing villages in Mohaskhali) on the 15th of April. Only a few of my Ah-Phaw went to this concert, and they did not drink or dance and only went to watch the concert being performed. Other members of the Ah-Phaw group were busy with their business or employment commitments. Only on the first day of Phaloung Chait Ree-Loung Pway, on April 17th, in Halbang/Harabang, did most of the group travel to attend the Thungran concert. Friends living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other cities joined them there, and my Ah-Phaws drank alcohol and danced to the songs from the Rakhaing concert with these friends, as in the 2006 Phaloung Chait Thungran.
The following day, prior to travelling to the concert in Thawdeejya/Chowfaldandi, they attended the opening ceremony of the RBWA Ree-Loung Pway, where the Deputy Commissioner14 and other administrative officers gave speeches. My friends did not stay until the end of the speeches, but left for Thawdeejya in the middle of the opening ceremony. When I asked them in the evening, why they came to the opening ceremony, they said their transport had broken down near the RBWA building. They said they dropped by to see what was going on in the RBWA ceremony while they were waiting for their van to be fixed. While they were waiting the group, which was normally active and loud, sat quietly in the rows of seats when they were in the ceremony. They eventually left for Thawdeejya before the ceremony concluded, leaving me at the opening ceremony since I had declined to accompany them to the musical concert. In the evening after their return from Thawdeejya, we gathered at a friend’s place for a party. During that party, they recounted how much fun they had, and how much I had missed out for not accompanying them to the concert. The highlight of the day event for my friends was the fun they had at the concert, not at the ceremony of the community and bureaucratic leaders or the water-plays.

While my Ah-Phaws were away in Halbang on the first Ree-Loung Pway day of 2007, I joined another three Rakhaing and their two Bengali guests. The members of this group were much younger than my Ah-Phaws. They also gathered at a house to drink and eat until about 3 pm and did not visit all the Mendets. In most of the Mendets we did visit that day, they engaged in the water-play to a greater extent than my Ah-Phaws usually did in Phaloung Chait. I felt uneasy about continuing to participate. This uneasiness could have derived from the usual importance attached to the difference in aged groupings in

14 The highest ranking government official in the district administration.
interactions among the Rakhaing youth.\textsuperscript{15} This norm was partly transgressed by my prerogative as a ‘researcher’ or an outsider, but the uneasiness of the age-ranked relationship prevailed among us throughout the day. After about an hour and a half with this group, I left. Unlike my Ah-Phaws, who had strongly encouraged me to join with them in their festivities, this younger group was silent and gave no encouragement for me to stay or continue. I left them to join another Rakhaing of the same age who had just returned for Thungran from his place of work in another city. The two of us, non-drinkers for the day, visited a number of Mendets to watch other people, but did not participate and returned home without any sense of enjoyment of the day. While Ree-Long Pway rituals were joyous events, we did not enjoy ourselves, despite our understanding of the activities and our place in them as people of Rakhaing ethnicity. This indicates that fact that there is more to the Ree-Long Pway celebration than cultural meanings of cleansing and enjoyment linking one’s Rakhaing ethnicity to ritual participation, These rituals were clearly also structured by generational differences.

On the second day—the day my friends went to Thawdeejya and I attended the RBWA official opening ceremony— the younger group from the previous day had been joined by people visiting Phaloung Chait for the Ree-Loung Pway. Unlike my Ah-Phaws, they did not visit any nearby villages for the musical concerts. Even though two of them were musicians who had played in the RBWA concert in 2005, they may not have attended these concerts due to a not-so-friendly relationship with some of the musicians who were

\textsuperscript{15} These younger people would generally act differently from their normal behaviour if I was around. For instance, they would hide their cigarettes from me if I passed by them or they would ask my permission to smoke if I were happened to be in their gatherings. The uneasiness between us existed on other occasions as much as in the 2007 Thungran time.
playing. Moreover, they did not normally listen to Rakhaing language songs, even though they would sometimes participate in Rakhaing concerts.

On the last day of the water festival in 2007, my Ah-Phaws gathered at a friend’s place for a Thungran drink, as they had in 2006. They again visited different Mendets. When we arrived at the small concert that was already underway at the Khaw-paza-tan Zaret, they joined in the dancing inside the brick wall surrounding the Zaret. Some of my Ah-Phaws continued to dance at the concert, while a few of us went on to visit different Mendets to watch other people dancing and engaging in the water-play. The only water-pouring that took place in this group was conducted with acquaintances on the streets. When pouring water on elderly female acquaintances, my friends politely requested permission to do so before pouring the water. However, such pouring was not generally reciprocated by the elderly acquaintances. With other younger acquaintances, there was mutually spontaneous water pouring.

An elderly informant commented that the addition of musical concerts during Thungran was a bad cultural influence from the Arakan/Rakhine State of Burma. However, for both Arakanese and Rakhaing, Thungran, especially the Ree-Loung Pway, is a highly popular source of enjoyment and pleasure. The cultural meaning of Ree-Loung-Pway, is as a time to have enjoyment. For my Ah-Phaws and many other Rakhaing, these musical concerts were just another way of celebrating the Thungran festival started by their ethnic fellows from Arakan/Rakhine State in Burma. The musical concerts had become the most important feature of Ree-Loung Pway for some Rakhaing, as they provided the most enjoyment for them. These concerts, whether they were in Phaloung Chait or in other surrounding Rakhaing villages, drew the largest crowd of participants during the festival.
The importance of the musical concerts continued to increase in subsequent years following the end of my fieldwork in 2007. A musician friend commented that it now seemed the Thungran celebration would not be complete without the musical concerts. Even though these concerts had not been described in accounts of Thungran, they are now celebrated as an integral part of it and have been added as another component of the event and celebrated with great enthusiasm. Rakhaing celebrate Thungran Ree-Long Pway for enjoyment, and musical concerts were a current source of entertainment for many Rakhaing. Most Rakhaing would not criticise them for being added rituals, but saw them as mechanisms for younger people to join and have fun. The way musical concerts were organised and presented were not the same for every year, suggesting that entertainment and enjoyment were the principal reasons for these concerts.

Celebration without Ceremony: the End of Thungran Rituals

Most accounts of Thungran by Rakhaing (and Arakanese) or Bengali authors generally indicate its end with the conclusion of Ree-loung Mendet. The public celebration of Thungran being concluded with the close of Mendet or the musical concerts, Ah-Phaw groups continued celebratory activities within their private residences. In 2006, my Ah-Phaw group joined the Ah-Phaw group of a member’s sister. Though food and alcohol were not shared between these groups, we all danced together until late in the evening. Members of this female group were still uniformly dressed in their Thungran attire and danced separately from the males, mostly to Arakanese and Burmese songs. For my Ah-Phaw group, this party was a continuation of the day’s celebrations. However, for the female group, it was their Thamapung or ‘after-party’ (centred on a collective meal, made up of Thamung (rice) and Pung: (combined, as distinct from the earlier Thamapung in
the morning). Even after our Ah-Phaw party concluded, other after-party Thamapungs in our neighbourhood continued on. Alcohol fuelled conversations peppered with jokes could be heard from the Ree-Loung Pway ‘after party’ of the female Ah-Phaw group next door. Even though the formal part of the celebrations had concluded with the end of Mendet on day three, informal celebrations of the Thungran continued well into the early hours of the following morning.

In 2007, neither my Ah-Phaw group, nor the female group we joined the previous year held any ‘after parties’. While some of my friends got together after their dinner, they did not have a party following the formal celebrations on the third day. I did not ask why there was not such an after-party by the female group. It may have been that some members had to attend to their work in their souvenir shops, which were closed during the 2006 Thungran. The female group from our neighbourhood, who had a noisy Thamapung in 2006, held a quiet ‘after party’ at another house. They had planned a Thamapung at the same house as in 2006, but one of the members of their group had eloped with her long-time boyfriend at the end of the water play, leaving her family angry and her friends subdued.

With the conclusion of the Ree-Loung Pway in Phaloung Chait, many Rakhaing from other cities returned to their work or educational commitments. However, Thungran celebrations for some Rakhaing had not yet been completed in Cox’s Bazar. Some villages started their Ree-Loung Pway a day or two later than those in town. Other people from Phaloung Chait also visited these neighbouring villages to continue the celebration.

On the following day after Phaloung Chait Ree-Loung Pway (on the 20th April in both
2006 and 2007), my Ah-Phaws visited the nearby Rakhaing village of Kuraychouk
(Khurushkul), where they engaged in further water-play. My Ah-Phaws began their festivities in Kuraychouk/Khuruskul, as they had in Phaloung Chait. They began their day by drinking at a friend’s place, then later on visited different Mendets (three Mendets in the village in both years). Even though for my Ah-Phaws, the concerts were the most important activity during the Phaloung Chait Ree-Loung Pway, they did not totally disregard the water-play. Their participation in the village festivities differed, as they engaged much more in the water plays than they had in the town. They participated in throwing water and some even played Mitta-ree loung (Throwing love water), which they did not do in Phaloung Chait. Whether they decided to engage in the water plays because there was not a concert for them to participate in or because their female counterparts were not from the same town is unclear, but almost everyone from the Ah-Phaw group, including married persons, participated in the water plays.
Figure 9: My Ah-Phaws engaging in a water-play, Kuraychouk/ Khurskul, Cox’s Bazar, on 20 April 2007

The notions of courtship and flirtation permeated their activities on these days. While some of them were engaging in water-plays, others joked ‘Don’t trust him [for his love messages]. He is married [the person may or may not be married]’. Sometimes, Mendet Theings from the place they were trying to participate might tease them ‘How come a *Wargyi* is playing water here? [Wargyi literally means Old Man, but here implies a married person.]’ While these water-plays were unlikely to eventuate in romantic relationship, the notions of flirtation a courtship were strongly evident through the jokes, during the water-plays. This was apparent on one occasion when my friends eyed a good-looking girl outside of Mendets. They covered her with many buckets of water, showered over her head while some tried to strike a conversation. After she departed, the conversations, especially among these unmarried lingered on for a while regarding who
she was, where she was from and whether she was single. Such a close interaction with a female stranger was not necessarily possible for Rakhaing males in normal times. The notion of courtship in Thungran had allowed my Ah-Phaws to be more open in their approach to females.

In 2006, on the afternoon of the day after Phalong Chait Ree-Loung Pway, the day we visited the nearby village, the people of Ngazee-tan quarter held a procession to the Thing, where they donated light offerings. Some of those who were visiting nearby villages for Ree-Loung Pway came back to join in the procession. People from other wards did not participate in this procession, but came to the Thing to join in the religious activities. There was no such procession in 2007 as according to an informant from the ward, there was no one to organise the procession that year. Though this procession was said to have been ‘traditionally’ held on the next day of Ree-Loung Pway, it did not eventuate in 2007. However, many people from Phaloung Chait went to the Thing to conduct religious activities as in the previous years. With or without a communal activity, Rakhaing were able to fulfil their religious needs of visiting the Thing on that day. The religious needs to visit the Thing had garnered a large enough number of people in 2007 to have the feeling of organised activity, despite the fact that no one had organised the event. In this case, the cultural importance of visiting the Thing on that day was instrumental in the success of the Rakhaing gathering there.
Extending from Thungran: Analysing Rakhaing Ethnicity and Nationality

All Thungran rituals I participated in and observed with Bangladesh Rakhaing occurred because of the change in the Rakhaing calendar. Whether they were performed communally in public or otherwise, some Rakhaing conducted these rituals to mark the passing of the old year. For them, the performance of these rituals denotes that the Thungran has occurred. These rituals are regarded as a requirement for the commencement of an auspicious year. From this perspective, Thungran rituals are necessary elements in the life of a Rakhaing. Welcoming a new year with the rituals to bring about *mongala* or auspiciousness is of paramount importance for these Rakhaing. However, other Rakhaing would not consider such rituals to be the essential activities in their commemoration of Thungran, even though they may still consider them as important and may still participate occasionally. The notion of ethnicity does not equate with the cultural meanings of the rituals celebrated as if they are simple parts of this ethnicity.

The cultural meanings associated with each ritual that occurred in 2006 and 2007 do not in themselves adequately explain why and how they are being celebrated by Bangladesh’s Rakhaing in these years for two reasons. Firstly, not all Rakhaing participated in all rituals of Thungran. Secondly, not all Rakhaing shared the importance of these rituals and associated meanings equally. For some Rakhaing who could not or did not regard all of these rituals as essential parts of their everyday lives, they still regarded them as important. Even though some did not participate in every ritual, they still understood these rituals as integral parts of a Rakhaing Thungran celebration. Due to their educational and employment engagements, many were only able to participate in a selection of rituals.
Despite there being differences in the levels of participation of Rakhaing in these rituals, they understood them to be essential Rakhaing cultural practices.

As described by many Rakhaing and non-Rakhaing observers, Thungran rituals follow a prescribed ritual sequence. In general descriptions, Thungran celebrations started with Phara Ree Cho Pway, followed by Ree-Loung Pway. What activities they conducted, where they conducted them, and how they conducted them can be described as the cultural characteristics of the Thungran festival of the Rakhaing in Bangladesh. Phara Ree Cho Pway and associated cleansing and religious activities related to Rakhaing’s cultural understandings of good kama, ritual purity and auspiciousness. Ree-Loung Pway and related activities hinged upon the notion of enjoyment, courtship and friendship, expressed through the rituals of throwing water on each other. However, to answer the question of how these rituals unfolded, that is how each individual actually participated at any particular time and place, cannot merely be explained through a description of these sets of cultural phenomena. Moreover, there were many Rakhaing who did not participate in some of these activities. Hence, it would not be possible to essentialise the Rakhaing’s individual subjectivity in terms of these ethnic cultural characteristics associated with Thungran.

As Phara Ree Cho Pway is not simply about the religious needs, Ree-Loung Pway is not only about enjoyment Rakhaing gained from the act of water-play, courtships or flirtations and meeting friends. While Rakhaing notion of getting enjoyment out of these rituals had prompted participation of both males and females through the Mendet water-plays, they were not the only reason for most Mendets in Cox’s Bazar in 2006 and 2007. Even though Mendets exist as an integral part of the Ree-Loung Pway, other activities
such as the musical concerts and ‘official’ opening ceremonies are also performed as composite parts of this ritual. The ‘official’ ceremonies were attended by leaders of the Rakhaing community organisations, as well as by the non-Rakhaing administrative and political leaders from the wider Bengali community. These Bengalis participated not for the reasons of ritual purification in Rakhaing styles and enjoyments, since they were mostly Muslims or they were not able to participate in most rituals.

Describing Thungran rituals in themselves without social and political context also risks excluding the role of the state in the people’s lives. Even the detailed accounts that I have presented here only show the state in the background rather than as a dynamic force within the unfolding of the cultural events. In my descriptions of the Thungran rituals, the state either featured as an entity which gave permits to Rakhaing to stage the public celebrations or, through its officials, accommodated Rakhaing’s invitations to participate in these events as guests.

If we were to understand how Rakhaing view their lives within Bangladesh, we need to consider the effects the state had in giving permits, attending events and involvement in other political and social activities. Looking at the state means looking how the cultural event of Thungran connects to wider social and political arenas, and how it is constituted in the everyday lives of the Rakhaing people.
Explaining how these activities unfold as the rituals of Thungran from a cultural perspective reveals both the similarities and differences with the Thungran celebrations of other Rakhaing (or Arakanese/Rakhine) communities. However, it does not explain why these differences existed when the Rakhaing were said to have the ‘same culture.’ These differences could be dismissed as being regional variations, but how these differences were formed first has to be explained. More importantly, such differences did not diminish the claim by the participating people that these were ‘authentic ethnic rituals’ nor that these were accepted as of authentic by other fellow Rakhaing and non-Rakhaing people.

On the first day of Ree-Loung Pway in 2006, I asked Khaing Mra, a guardian or Mendet Theings from the RBWA, why she was preparing for the celebration of Ree-Loung Pway. She replied because it had been celebrated by many previous generations of her ancestors (Ah-saing-ah-sak). She did not mention the fierce discussion at the RBWA planning meeting that almost resulted in the Mendet for that year not going ahead. Rather, she described the ritual as a celebration of her ‘tradition,’ an element of ethnicity that she inherited from her ancestors and one that she shared with other Rakhaing. Cultural meanings which characterised these rituals might not have changed for many generations, and these rituals might still reflect these traditional values, such as the Rakhaing notion of purity and auspiciousness. Rakhaing themselves might believe that these rituals and associated cultural meanings were the essence of their ethnicity. However, we cannot explain differences between the 2006 and 2007 ceremonies by just looking at these cultural meanings. For a fuller explanation, we need to look at other aspects which are pertinent in allowing or impeding the way Rakhaing celebrate this festival in Cox’s Bazar, and those forces which lead them to view these practices as the essence of their ethnicity.
In order to study why and how these rituals unfold, we have to go beyond a study of considering people’s ritual participation as an element of their ethnicity. We also need to consider how their participation is situated within the dynamic complex of cultural, social, political, economic and religious aspects of Rakhaing lives in Bangladesh. This means exploring the dynamic interplays among cultural, historical, religious, performative, economic, and political aspects of the lives of the Buddhist Rakhaing in Bangladesh.
CHAPTER 4: PROXY CITIZENS AND CULTURAL BROTHERS\(^1\):
THE BURMESE NATION AND RAKHAING ETHNICITY.

Introduction

The first day of Thungran in Phaloung Chait involved the Kyaung-tha Phara Ree Cho Pway (the Student Buddha Bathing ceremony). In both 2006 and 2007, this Phara Ree Cho Pway was concluded with a sermon from the resident monk of Thing—Cox’s Bazar’s central Rakhaing religious monument. While the monk delivered his sermon in the Rakhaing language urging youths to conduct their lives in accordance with Buddhist morality, the preceding chants were conducted in ‘Burmese Pali’. Moreover, the sequence of what was being chanted was the same as the religious ceremonies that occurred in Burma. This chapter explores these similarities of religious practices between the Rakhaing and Burmese Buddhists, and the everyday social and political implications of these similarities in the lives of Rakhaing in Bangladesh.

The first part of the chapter outlines how Rakhaing came to see themselves as belonging to the Burmese Buddhist community, based on their religious commonalities with the latter. This notion of belonging to the religious community of Burma has a political implication, which is called ‘proxy citizenship’ by van Schendel (2002b). I explore in the second part how this concept helps us to understand the Rakhaing view on Burma and Burma’s representation of Rakhaing in Bangladesh as ‘the local Myanmar [Burmese] people’ in Cox’s Bazar (The New Light of Myanmar 2004). In the next part, I discuss the

\(^1\) I used the masculine term intentionally for two reasons: firstly it is inspired by Anthropological other or Burmese Brother? Studies in Cultural Analysis (Spiro 1992), and, secondly, in the Burmese official language, non-Burma indigenous people are generally referred to as Nyi-Naung, Younger Brothers-Older Brother, neglecting the female members of these ethnic groups.
implication of this Burmese ‘proxy citizenship’ and the Rakhaing interactions with the state of Burma. I focus on the Rakhaing common ethnicity with the Arakanese/Rakhine in Burma in order to explore the notion of citizenship and ethnicity. The final section investigates the political implications of the Rakhaing identification of themselves as being closer to ‘Buddhist Burma’ than to ‘Muslim Bangladesh.’ Rakhaing’s understanding of their religiosity was instrumental in their perception of the states in which they were connected, namely Burma and Bangladesh.

Monks, Spirits and Shamans

At the start of my fieldwork in Cox’s Bazar, I visited religious monuments around the town, including monasteries. At one monastery, I met the resident monk, who had recently assumed control of the monastery. At the time, he was also as much a stranger to the town as I was, since he had just recently arrived in Cox’s Bazar from Arakan/Rakhine State in Burma. The monk had spent some years at an Arakanese/Rakhine monastery in a suburb of Rangoon before arriving in Bangladesh. This Arakanese/Rakhine monk staying among Bangladesh’s Rakhaing was not an exception as many of the resident monks\(^2\) in Rakhaing monasteries were of Arakanese/Rakhine origin. Even the rest of the monks who were native Bangladeshi were ordained in Burmese monastic traditions, or trained at monasteries in Burma. According to some biographical pamphlets of senior monks in Cox’s Bazar district, they had

\(^2\) The lay committee of the monastery approach a particular monk to be the resident monk of their monastery. Generally, a preference is given to the monk who is originally from the village/community. There is no Sangha administrative system, which appoints resident monks for monasteries in the village level. Nikaya or Sects of Sangha provide guidance to the behaviours and education for individual monks; they are not administrative bodies for each local monastery.
conducted most of their training in Burma over an extended period; the monk U Pandita being an example (U Pandita 2006, pp. 8-9).

Rakhaing Buddhism is classified as Theravada, which is the prominent religious tradition in Sri Lanka, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Burma (Lester 1973). Despite this broader religious category, the Rakhaing religious identity could not be understood simply by looking at the how Buddhism is practiced in all of these countries. Of the Theravada Buddhist countries, Burma was the country in which all these Rakhaing monks were trained. Moreover, these monks were ordained in the traditions of ‘Gaings’ (sects) from Burma. Even though there was a total of no more than forty-five resident monks among Rakhaing in both Ah-wa-kwan and Cox’s Bazar, the religious rituals of these monks performed for the community resonated within everyday practices of many Rakhaing. These rituals were performed in the styles of Burmese Buddhist monks, including the language they used, the way they conducted the rituals and the robes they wore. While most Theravada Buddhist verses are written and recited in Pali, ‘there is much variation in pronunciation of Pali in different Buddhist societies’ (Houtman 1990, p. 9). The Burmese pronunciation of Pali texts is different from that of other countries, even though the meaning is generally the same for these texts. Bangladeshi Rakhaing regarded the Burmese way of pronouncing Pali as their traditional way.

A conversation with a Rakhaing regarding language tradition in Ah-wa-kwan reveals the importance of this particular way of reciting Pali texts in accordance with the Burmese tradition.

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3 These Gaings (sects) however did not dictate the monks’ everyday activities. For instance, the Most Supreme Leader of Shwegyin Nikaya in 1921 prohibited the sect members from engaging in politics but many senior members of the Nikaya still actively participated in political activism against the British colonial government (Mo Mo That 2002, pp. 38-41)

4 Monks of Burma wear robes of different styles and colours from Thailand and Sri Lanka (BuddhaNet 2008a)
Maung Khaing: For us [Rakhaing Buddhists], ordination is very important. In ordination, we need to recite *Taranagung* (taking refuge in the triple gems) in the correct way of pronunciation. If we couldn’t recite in the correct way, the ordination wouldn’t be successful.

Than Tun: Buddhists in Sri Lanka pronounce differently [form Rakhaing] in their ordination. Does it mean their ordination is not successful?

Maung Khaing: We also have Barua [Buddhists] in Bangladesh. They would pronounce *Taranagung* in their own way. We pronounce differently. They may assume that it is all right to pronounce in their own way. But we assume that our ordination would be only successful if we could pronounce correctly [correctly in Burmese Pali].

This point of ‘correct pronunciation’ of Pali verses in ordination was reaffirmed during the two ordination ceremonies that I observed. The presiding monks on both occasions demanded that the novices-to-be recite exactly as they pronounced the verses, following the style of what Houtman (1990) calls ‘Burmese Pali.’ Moreover, other recitations of the lay Rakhaing were conducted exactly as in Burma, both in language and style. Every Buddhist ceremony would follow, as in Burma, ‘the standard formulary [of a Burmese Buddhist ceremony]—*awgatha*, triple Jewel, one or two *thok*, and the taking of the five precepts’ (Nash 1966, p. 106). A wgatha, a Burmese language recitation, is only found in the tradition of Burmese Buddhism. Rakhaing in Bangladesh recited A wgatha in Burmese with a strong Rakhaing accent. When the monks from the Rakhaing community chanted Thouts (Pali verses, Suttas in internationally recognised Pali), they chanted in Burmese Pali. More importantly, these Burmese Buddhist rituals and chanting were not just confined to the monasteries, since some Thouts, especially those of Paraite (*Payeik*: in Burmese, and Paritta in Pali; the Book of Protection), were important in the everyday life of the lay people.

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5 For instance, instead of pronouncing ‘*namo tassa Bhagavato arahato samm_sambuddhassa,*’ (BuddhaNet 2008b), in Burmese Pali it is ‘*na-maw’ta tha ba-ga-wo’taw’ a-ra’ha’taw’ tha-ma-than-bok-da’tha*’ (Houtman 1990, p. 12).
Rakhaing generally believe that the chant of Paraite (Paritta), the Book of Protection, has the power to ward off evil and to bring Mongala (blessings or luck), as in other Buddhist societies (Tambiah 1968, p. 180). In shop-openings, weddings and house warming ceremonies, the monks chant verses from Paraite. Monks recite these chants to materials such as water, sand, rice and thread which are sprayed, scattered or worn as protection by the lay people. When my toddler son suffered from severe diarrhoea, an elderly relative urged us to get some Paraite water from the monk. While the use of Paraite was similar to other Theravada Buddhist communities in their everyday life, Rakhaing monks used ‘Burmese Pali’ in reciting it. More importantly, Rakhaing understood that other Buddhist communities pronounced the Pali verses differently from their monks, and that their own pronunciation was the same as the Buddhist Burmese.

When my son’s diarrhoea continued for four more days, the same relative organised a consultation with Zaw Khin, an Arakanese/Rakhine Net-koung-ma or spirit medium living in Bangladesh. Zaw Khin was said to be able to perform as a spirit medium of a Mae Daw (Our Lady). The spirit possession announced that a malevolent local spirit caused my son’s ailment. This event of spirit possession, as well as the accompanying belief of spirit involvement in people’s well-being, was just one of the many practices that most Rakhaing had in common with the Burmese, as explained in Burmese Supernaturalism by Spiro (1967, p. 145). Moreover, the prominent role of ‘animistic’ spirits in the everyday lives of ordinary people can also be found in other ‘traditional’ Theravada Buddhist countries (Obeyesekere 1963; Choulean 1988; Kapferer 1983;

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6 I was not able to ascertain the exact name of ‘Our Lady’ for whom he served as the medium, while other Mae Daw have a specific name such as Popa Maedaw (Our Lady of Mount Popa, located in central Burma).

7 A Rakhaing informant with a postgraduate level modern education however did not regard highly of this spirit possession, to the point of ridiculing the whole event.
Terwiel 1975; Tambiah 1970). What is important here is the way these possessions were conducted among Rakhaing in Bangladesh. In the spirit consultation for my son, Zaw Khin used the Burman language, with a strong Rakhaing accent. This use of language was to indicate that the spirit that possessed him was of Burman origin. However, it was only Zaw Khin, an Arakanese/Rakhine from Burma, who used the Burman language during the possession. Other local Net-koung-mas used Rakhaing language in their possessions.

Two other Net-koung-mas⁸ or spirit mediums that I met in Cox’s Bazar District were from Bangladesh. They not only conducted consultation sessions for the well-being of individuals, but also the village-wide festival for Roa-Shung-Ma, Our Lady of the Village. In every Rakhaing village including Phaloung Chait, a tree or a Neng (palace), which is a small shrine just outside of the village, was reserved as the abode of Roa-Shung-Ma. The Rakhaing village guardians are different from the Burmese, as the Rakhaing Roa-Shung-Mas are females, while the Burmese ‘village guardian nat is believed to be an old man’ (Spiro 1967, p. 85). At the same time, in every Rakhaing village, a male villager was selected, sometimes by hereditary criteria and sometimes through spirit possession, as the Roa Shun or the Lord of the village, being the ritual husband of the village guardian. He became the head of the village. In Burmese spiritualism, marriage with a spirit involved female or feminised individuals as the wife of a nat, becoming nat kadaw⁹, who would act as the spirit medium (Berglie 2005, p. 47). Moreover, Rakhaing’s traditional nets are different from Burmese nats (de Mersan 2009). Despite these differences, during

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⁸ Net-koung-ma, She-of-a-good-Spirit; only three Net-koung-mas in Cox’s Bazar district in 2006-7, but Zaw Khin did not performed other functions except personal consultations.
⁹ Kadaw in Burmese is the wife of an important person.
the spirit possessions in 2006 and 2007 in Cox’s Bazar, Rakhaing did not differentiate between their worship to both types of nets.

Figure 10: Roa-Shung-Ma’s Neng (the Abode or Palace of Our Lady of the village), Noa Rou Taung Village, Cox’s Bazar, April 2007

For the well-being of a Rakhaing individual in a southern Cox’s Bazar village, a Net-koung-ma was invited to conduct a private spirit consultation. While the primary focus of the consultation on the day was Roa-Shung-Ma of the village, other important nets were also invited. Some of these nets were associated with central Burma and Burmese traditions, such as Popa Maedaw (Rodrigue 1992, pp. 32-33), as well as historical figures
such as Anaw Rahta\textsuperscript{10} and Bandula\textsuperscript{11}. There was no distinction in the possession among the nets of these two traditions. This ‘syncretic’ practice of the two traditions was expressed without a concern for the distinctions between these two types of nets, both in private and public spirit worship.

\textit{Roa-shung-tuk-pway}, the wedding ceremony of the village ‘owner’ or headman to the village guardian, involved spirit possessions. At such a Roa-shung-tuk-pway in another Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing village, two Net-koung-mas danced at the village \textit{Net Neng}. The ceremony started with recitation of Rakhaing \textit{Net-takhrung} (Songs of the Nat) in the archaic Rakhaing language, followed by a dance. The dance was said to be conducted as a part of being possessed by the spirits. On that day, Net-koung-mas said they were dancing because they were being possessed by Ko Gyi Kyaw. Ko Gyi Kyaw, a spirit from central Burma, who was also known as U Min Kyaw or Min Kyaw Zwa, was ‘probably the most frequently impersonated nat in the ritual dancing’ (Spiro 1967, p. 119). However, during the dance, the mediums did not claim other Rakhaing nets possessed them, even though the ceremony was conducted to appease Roa-Shung-Ma, the Rakhaing village guardian spirit. While many ‘traditional’ Rakhaing elements were found in the spirit worship, numerous other elements which could be found in Burmese nat worship were also apparent. The popular elements such as Ko Gyi Kyaw or Popa Maedaw from Burma were especially prevalent in the spirit worship of Bangladesh Rakhaing during my research. These elements of ‘different’ traditions were, however, not differentiated by Rakhaing during the ritual performances. For Rakhaing in Bangladesh, the stories and the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{10} Anaw Rahta (Anuruddha in Sanskrit) was the Burmese hero-King who came to the throne of Pagan [central Burma] in 1044 (Pranke 1995).
\textsuperscript{11} Bandula refers to Maha Bandula, who was believed to be the general responsible for the atrocity that led to the exodus of Arakanese/Rakhine refugees into Bangladesh in the late 1790s (see page 71).
\end{footnotesize}
worship of the Burmese spirits resonated as the same as Rakhaing spirits in their ‘traditional’ spirit worship.

In a Rakhaing wedding reception, on the night before wedding ceremony, the families of the bride and groom entertain selected guests with a round of food and alcohol. However, in one wedding ceremony in a northern Cox’s Bazar village, a few people did not consume alcohol or beef dishes, even though they attended the pre-wedding celebration. The reason for their abstinence from alcohol and beef derived from their belonging to a gaing or sect of religious practitioners. These gaing members followed the teachings of Gaing-saras or teachers of shamanistic sects.

These Gaing-saras mainly come from Arakan, but these traditions of gaings were prevalent and had their origins in central Burma. The Gaing-saras performed protective acts against the evil deeds of others, including thefts and misfortunes, and for disciples facilitated many endeavours such as conducting rituals that would help to pass exams, to win love or to gain a visa to a foreign country. These included providing charms to carry and Buddhist verses to be recited. Gaing-saras also conducted exorcisms to combat ailments and misfortunes. These gaing hasaras were known in Burma as Ahetlan hsayas (upper path masters), who cure ‘illness caused by witches and evil spirits by invoking the assistance of beneficent spirits’ (Spiro 1967, p. 23). One became a Hsaya (master) by practising thamatha meditation, which involves recitation\(^\text{12}\) and visualization practices (Berglie 2005, p. 56). The Ahetlan Hsaya (or Gaing-sara in Rakhaing) used different

\(^{12}\) Berglie (2005) does not mention what one recites to become a hsaya. In contrast to ‘Weepathana’ meditation, Thamatha meditation in Burma involved focused repetition of a Pali verses with a rosary of 108 beads. The aim of the meditation is to gain ‘Thamadee’ or intense concentration so that the practitioner would be able to utilise his mental power in a supernatural way.
methods to be rid of evil spirits that caused illness, but ‘his most powerful weapon is the Buddha’ (Rodrique 1992, p. 14). Bangladeshi Rakhaing consulted these teachers for their own benefit, while some became members of the sect under these Gaing-saras. While there were the local shamanistic traditions in Bangladesh which employed Islamic and Hindu practices (Karim 1988), Rakhaing approached Gaing-saras that followed Burmese tradition.

Religious aspects of Buddhist communities are not just about the textually base doctrinal practices of the Pali Canon; they also incorporate the ways people believe and act in their everyday lives (Lester 1973, p. 5). Moreover, doctrinal Theravada Buddhism can be regarded as belonging to the Redfieldian ‘Great Tradition,’ while national/regional practices could be regarded as ‘Little Tradition’ (Obeyesekere 1963). Only aspects of this Little Tradition of Buddhism are locally executed and experienced in the everyday lives of ordinary people. As a consequence of various historical processes in Burma, Rakhaing regarded their doctrinal practices as the same as those of Burmese people. Other everyday aspects of their religious practices also had large commonalities with Burmese Buddhists. These common religious practices encouraged Rakhaing to view themselves as having the same religious identity as the Burmese Buddhist community.

Buddhist Burma, its Television, and the Rakhaing Religious Identity

The notion of membership in the Burmese Buddhist community is also reinforced by the ability of Rakhaing to engage with the religious activities of the Burmese in everyday life. Every morning, the Burmese government-controlled MRTV (Myanmar Radio and
Television) broadcasts the Payeik (Paritta) chanting of a renowned Burmese monk. Through satellite and terrestrial television networks, this chanting reaches into the living rooms of Rakhaing families in Cox’s Bazar every morning\(^ {13} \). On special Buddhist holidays and days of the full moon, the Payeik chant is followed by religious songs and other television programs on Buddhism. Thus Rakhaing experienced a particular form of Buddhism through Burma’s media.

Through the government-controlled Burmese media (television and Radios were exclusively run by a government department, while print publications were heavily censored, Allott 1993)—these religious programs not only transmitted a particular religiosity, but also conveyed the vision of citizenship that the Burmese government was trying to promote. Thus the media served to present the ruling junta as *Dhamaraja* (a just ruler), a government which ruled in accordance with Buddhist principles (Schober 1997). Through the patronage of Buddhist religious activities, the government tried to present itself as the guardian of Buddha Thar-Tha-Na (the doctrines of Buddha). By contrast, in the everyday experience of Bangladeshi Rakhaing, the state-controlled media in Bangladesh represented Bangladesh as an ‘Islamic state’, broadcasting calls to prayers five times a day, and while state agents regularly employed Islamic rituals during state functions. Conversely, but based on the same logic, the media from Burma presented Burma as a ‘Buddhist State.’

\(^{13}\) I observed the *Payiek* chanting being played in three households of my affinal relatives, while I assume to be common among most Rakhaing families in Cox’s Bazar.
This state patronage of religion was not only witnessed representationally through the media, it also manifested itself materially for Rakhaing in Bangladesh. The Burmese government’s Ministry of Religious Affairs (2005), for example, states that between 1997 and 2000 there were 10 programs involving 296 people who made pilgrimages from Bangladesh to Burma, where ‘they visited various parts of Myanmar [Burma] and paid homage to Buddha Images and Pagodas there.’ Bangladeshi Rakhaing participated in these pilgrimages, either by themselves or along with other Bangladeshi Buddhists. Significantly, these people were not just able to pay homage to many famous Buddhist monuments in many parts of Burma; they were also treated as state guests. The pilgrim visitors were transported and housed by military officials and they were able to meet with some high-ranking generals. One participant recounted the story of being treated as dignified guests by the Burmese government, and warmly greeted by the generals, including Khin Nyunt, the then third-highest-ranking officer in the junta. The pilgrims visiting famous pagodas and meeting with the high officials were also seen by their families in Bangladesh, through the medium of Burmese television.

Rakhaing had a chance to return the hospitality of the leading generals, including General Khin Nyunt in 2004, when he visited Bangladesh. During a state visit to Bangladesh in 1995, two Burmese ministers had an exclusive meeting with Rakhaing from Phaloung Chait at the Thing. When these Rakhaing expressed ‘their wish to visit Myanmar [Burma]’ (MacDougall 1995), the generals, according to one informant, replied that Rakhaing would not need a visa to visit Burma. The generals used kin terms (Nyi Ah-ko: brothers) to accentuate their unofficial policies toward Rakhaing. In various ways Rakhaing were given signals that they were regarded by the Burmese state as members of the same family, the Burmese nation-state.
In reporting the visit of General Khin Nyunt to Phaloung Chait, the Burmese government newspaper declared, ‘they [Khin Nyunt and his entourage] went to Aggameda Myanmar Monastery in Cox’s Bazar (Phalaungcheik) [sic] where they were welcomed by disciples and local Myanmar people.[...] the General cordially conversed with local Myanmar people’ (The New Light of Myanmar 2004, emphasis added). The so-called local Myanmar [Burmese] people were Rakhaing of Cox’s Bazar. In reference to this meeting in 2004, one Rakhaing informant said, ‘we had a chance to meet him as a tha-ngae-chon (friend).... but the ordinary people in Burma would not be able to deal with them [the generals] so closely.’ The visits of the generals still featured saliently in the conversations of Rakhaing regarding the Burmese government, though all of them had been purged from their powerful positions by 2006-7.
Figure 11: The RBWA’s meeting with Burmese Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, April 2004
NB: Reproduced from RBWA’s official publication The Rakhaing Review, 2005, p. 58.

In Theravada Buddhist countries, ‘government is a Buddhist institution’ (Lester 1973, p. 3). In Burma, the government presented itself as the guardian of Buddhism. Rakhaing regarded their religious practices as Burmese Buddhism, the Burmese Sangha as their teachers and the Buddhist community in Burma as their own community, with the Burmese military government as the Buddhist ruler. This sense of religious belonging gave them the status of ‘proxy citizenship’ (van Schendel 2002b) of Burma.
Rakhaing as Burmese Proxy Citizens

In the context of South Asia, van Schendel (2002b, p. 127) has argued that India and Bangladesh saw themselves ‘as being in charge of [...] a category of people living in the territory of the other state’; in the case of India, non-Muslims in Bangladesh. To be a proxy citizen of a country means one belongs to the dominant religious community of the neighbouring country, which is different from the dominant religious community of the state in which one resides (van Schendel 2002b, p. 131). Rakhaing regard themselves, and were regarded, as belonging to the Burmese Buddhist community. As claimed by Burmese government reports, they were the ‘local Myanmar people’ in Bangladesh. In order to understand the real implications of this rhetorical claim, we need to explore how Rakhaing experienced Burmese state personnel and policies.

The conventional notion of citizenship is ‘a legal matter’ (Kipnis 2004, p. 259), which implies ‘political rights and obligations with respect to a sovereign state’ (Lukose 2005, p. 509). The legal definition of Burmese citizenship would not define Rakhaing in Bangladesh as citizens, but their ethnic kin, the Arakanese/Rakhine are recognised as citizens (Government of Burma 1982). However, citizenship is arguably more than a matter of legality, as ‘it is also a matter of informally granted privileges (by state agents or others), identity and membership in a community’ (Kipnis 2004, p. 259). In fact, the state itself is not simply a legal entity, since ‘it has been difficult to think of the state outside the hyphenated dyad ‘nation-state’ (Aretxaga 2003, p. 396). Burma, as a nation-state, should be considered as involved in the political process of producing citizenship as a ‘set of practices (juridical, political, economic and cultural) that define a person as a component member of society’ (Turner 1993, cited in Nic Craith 2004, p. 289). This focus on the cultural aspect of citizenship resonates more with the concept of ‘proxy
citizenship’ as it concerns the religious identities of a people. Williem van Schendel’s (2002b) concept of proxy citizenship focuses on the membership of religious communities, since the identities of the people that he studied in the Bangladesh-Indian border area were manifested through the religious communities. Proxy citizenship, however, is not just about the perceptions of a people in regards to the neighbouring state and vice versa; it is also about how people interact with the neighbouring nation-state in their everyday lives.

Most participants in the state-sponsored pilgrimages to Burma had visited the country many times before, as indeed had most other Rakhaing. According to his autobiographical pamphlet, U Ottama (lay name: Nyo Maung) (2001) visited Burma at least six times in the period between 1958 and 2000. Apart from these pilgrimage visits, Nyo Maung had gone to Burma many times for business purposes, four times travelling to Rangoon in 1973-74 (U Ottama 2001, p. 11). Since he only applied to acquire a Bangladeshi passport in 1980 to travel to India, his trips to Burma were assumed to be conducted without any Bangladeshi official documentation. In fact, the late Nyo Maung was not the only one who had visited Burma without official documentation, for pilgrimage, business, or social purposes, or most of the time, for all three reasons. Many Rakhaing, from Cox’s Bazar or Ah-wa-kwan, had visited Burma, mostly without any official documents.14

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14 A type of travel document was available for the citizens of Bangladesh issued by the regional level authority to travel to the border town in Burma for a seven-day visit in 2005-2007. Only a few Rakhaing had used such documents to travel to Maung Daw, the border town.
Burma’s Cultural Brothers?

On these visits, Burmese proxy citizenship did not extend to any political and legal rights of a Burmese citizen, however limited these rights may have been. Jaw Maung, an informant from Phaloung Chait, had travelled a few times to Burma, mostly within Arakan State. On one particular occasion, he crossed the Naff River on a boat, which had set him down in a quiet spot on the riverbank, so that he would not have to pass through the formal document checkpoint at the jetty. He recounted:

A Lone Htain (Burma’s special police) saw me getting off from the boat and trying to pass through the marsh. When I got to the bank, he said in Burmese where I was going. I answered in Rakhaing I was going home to Akyab. Then he asked me, that time in Rakhaing, which part of Akyab I was from. I said I was from Patalaik-Khaik (a suburb in Akyab). He said he was also from that suburb, but he had never seen me there before. I said the name of my Youkpha (cousin), whom he apparently knew. I said I had been working in Cox’s Bazar, but I was going home. He addressed me Nyee-shay (younger-brother) and allowed me to go. On my return from Akyab, I bumped into him again. I said to him I couldn’t find any employment, so I am going back to Cox’s Bazar to find a job. He let me go again that time as well.

On this particular visit, Jaw Maung was able to traverse through Burma without being arrested by a Burmese state agent. This occurred not so much because he was a proxy citizen, in some generalised sense, but because he was able to speak Rakhaing language fluently, had a familial connection in Akyab, and his phenotype was similar to the local Arakanese/Rakhine. In other words, his ability to travel inside Burma was due to the shared ethnicity which was manifested in particular linguistic, social and ‘racial’ aspects of his life.

Another informant from Cox’s Bazar was less fortunate on his trip to Burma. His visit and stay inside Burma were rather smooth until he got to a border village where he was

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15 In Akyab, the norm was that individuals know almost all the people in their locale. Two individuals might not know each other personally but they would at least know each other’s families.
waiting to cross the Naff River back into Bangladesh. An Arakanese/Rakhine security agent happened to see him reading a Bengali newspaper from Bangladesh, and the agent attempted to arrest him. It was a scary moment for him, yet he managed to make his escape with the help of his host. However, he believed that, had he been arrested by the agent, he would not have been officially charged. Rather, he understood that after paying a bribe, he would be freed and allowed to travel back to Bangladesh.

Even though it is illegal to enter Burma without a proper visa, and an illegal entrant could be imprisoned for a five-year period (State Law And Order Restoration Council 1990), there have been no cases of a Bangladeshi Rakhaing being arrested under Burmese Immigration Law. Nonetheless, they enter into Burma with a great anxiety of being arrested by Burmese authorities. This anxiety is most acute when passing through the border areas. Beyond the border crossings, they are able to travel more easily in other parts of Burma. In recounting their visits to Burma, my main informants talked about how much they enjoyed visiting alcohol shops in Akyab or other parts of Burma, how cheap beer was for them, and how freely they could drink alcohol publically, which is not possible in Muslim majority Bangladesh. These younger male informants’ visits to Burma were concerned mainly with enjoyment opportunities not possible in Bangladesh.

While these informants travel to Burma for only short stays, many Bangladeshi Rakhaing have moved permanently, to settle in various parts of the country. For instance, in Bangladesh the Ah-ва-кван area, had a population of sixteen thousand Rakhaing in 1951, but by 1979, they only accounted for 3,713 as most had migrated to Burma (Mustafa & Khan 1984, p. 9). These migrations of Rakhaing from Bangladesh into Burma have been occurring since the end of World War 2. Once having migrated, these Rakhaing are able to merge into the local Arakanese/Rakhine communities, where they shared
characteristics like language, religion, dress, and phenotypes which were normally counted as significant markers of their ethnic Arakanese/Rakhine neighbours. These migrant families who settled in Burma served at least two purposes for their relatives in Bangladesh: as a social base in their travels to Burma, and ‘a choice’ that they could aspire to.

A Phyu, a native of East-Pakistan/Bangladesh, was able to settle in Burma through his extended families which were already established before Burma’s liberation. A Phyu and his elder brother from Mraina Rao/Chowdhury Para studied in Akyab staying at his Ah-phoo-shay”¹⁶ house. After his education, instead of returning to Bangladesh like his brother, A Phyu stayed on to work as a public servant in a government department and to establish a family of his own by marrying a local Arakanese/Rakhine woman in Maung Daw, the border town. He was one of the first-generation Bangladeshi Rakhaing to work in the Burmese government services. However, Rakhaing did not get their jobs as Bangladeshi Rakhaing, but by presenting themselves to the Burmese state as local Arakanese/Rakhine. In these cases, they were not proxy citizens of Burma, but rather simply citizens of Burma, with a repressed reference to their connection to Bangladesh/East Pakistan.

In the late 1980s, A Phyu had invited one of his brother’s daughters from Bangladesh to study in Burma. In order to be able to attend a government school in Burma¹⁷, one would need to be listed on the Thankhoung-sa-ying (Family Member List), issued by the Burmese Immigration Department. At the time of invitation, one of A Phyu’s uncles was working as the head of the Immigration office in Maung Daw, and the uncle would have been able to insert the girl’s name into the Thankhoung-sa-ying without much problem.

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¹⁶ Ah-phoo-shay: ‘younger grandpa’. In this case, it was his grandmother’s younger brother.
¹⁷ Public education only existed in the 1980s and 1990s when Burma was under the socialist government.
This document would serve as the primary document in the girl’s acquisition of a Nationality Card when she turned eighteen years of age. If A Phyu did not have such relatives in Immigration, he would have had to pay a bribe to an Immigration Officer. While this particular incident occurred during the 1980s, the practice of sending one’s children to relatives’ households to be educated in Burma continued throughout my stay in Bangladesh. Their ability to study at a government school, to acquire the national identity card, and to gain a government job did not, however, depend upon them having a proxy citizenship of the Burmese nation. Rather, it depended upon their capacity to represent (or misrepresent) themselves as local Arakanese/Rakhine to the Burmese state. While their familial connections made their ‘integration’ easier into the local social landscape, these connections were just one aspect of the factors determining their ‘integration’ into the local Arakanese/Rakhine community.

During a trip to Burma, one Cox’s Bazar informant was not stopped at a checkpoint to board the ferry, but his Arakanese/Rakhine friend from the border town was. The reason for the friend being stopped, according to the informant, was that his friend had a darker skin and a pointier nose—the phenotype of a Bengali or a local Muslim. Muslims from border areas, who asserted themselves to be ‘Rohingya’, and thus to be members of an indigenous people in Burma (Ahmed 2004)18, were not allowed to travel outside of their local area, being labelled as ‘invaders’ by the Burmese government (Amnesty International 2004). In Burmese official discourse, these Muslims belonged to the ‘Bengali Racial Group’ (cited in Ahmed 2004). One of the functions of the border checkpoints in Burma was to stop these Muslim people from travelling into other parts of Burma. These checkpoints use racial profiling based on phenotypes to screen those

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18 Rohingya indigeneity is a hotly contested issue in terms of national and local politics in Burma (Aye Chan 2005; U Khin Maung Saw 1994)
travelling out of these border areas. In contrast to the Rohingya, Rakhaing from Bangladesh were able to pass through these check points because of their similar phenotype to Arakanese/Rakhine. Even if they were using fake national identity cards, checks on them were not as stringent as they would be regarded as members of the Arakanese/Rakhine ethnic group, who enjoyed full citizenship with an original/indigenous status in Burma.

Although formal legal mechanisms exist, they are not actually enforced against Bangladeshi Rakhaing who belong to the same ethnic group as the officially recognised indigenous Arakanese/Rakhine of Burma. Cox’s Bazar informants retold the humorous anecdote of an encounter of a Rakhaing at the border checkpoint. The security agent asked for a *Hmat Pone Din* (literally, ‘Identification Card’; officially, ‘Nationality Card’). The Rakhaing person replied by saying ‘Why would you need my identification card, when you got the person in front of you?’ When he was told he did not have a visa to go to Burma, he replied ‘Would a Rakhaing need permission to come into his own country: *Rakhaing pry* (the country of Rakhine/Rakhaing)?’ The person was said to have then been allowed to proceed into Arakan. This example reiterates my earlier discussion in Chapter 2 on how Bangladesh Rakhaing understood Arakan as both their historical and ethnic homeland. Bangladesh’s Rakhaing often invoked this shared history which predated the existence of the current borders. However, despite the fact that this notion of belonging to a homeland was invoked to supersede the relatively recent phenomena of State and national borders, the reality of state violence embodied in the check-points and passport controls posed a real threat to personal safety for Bangladesh’s Rakhaing in Burma. In most cases, Bangladeshi Rakhaing try to avoid being identified as people from Bangladesh.
The common perception of them as members of the Buddhist community identified with the Burmese state does not give them the sense of security that a Burmese citizen has in moving around the country without breaking any laws. Though their shared ethnicity with the local indigenous people allowed them to ‘blend’ in and to present themselves as Burmese citizens, thus allowing them to travel inside Burma, without any official documentation, their legal identities as Bangladeshi Rakhaing still generated some uncertainty for them.

‘Proxy Citizens’ to Model Citizens.

During conversations about the cross-border travels to Burma, some informants made jokes to Aung Zaw, a Bangladeshi Rakhaing from Phaloung Chait, for not visiting his parents-in-law in Burma. On one occasion, an informant said jokingly that Aung Zaw would not dare go to Burma, because if he had gone there, the informant teased him, he would be put in the *Krauk Paut* (Six Holes)\(^\text{19}\) in Maung Daw. The joking informant was referring to the close associations that Aung Zaw had with the Burmese anti-government activists in the late 1990s, as was the case with many Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar.

In the mid-1990s, A Phyu’s younger brother, who lived in Bangladesh, made a short social visit to his uncle who was the senior immigration officer in Maung Daw.\(^\text{20}\) Many relatives from Bangladesh had visited the uncle’s house in their trips to the town before. Unlike these relatives, A Phyu’s brother had a close association with the then largest armed Arakanese nationalist group, which was working against the Burmese government.

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\(^{19}\) Six Holes is said to refer to the wooden cuffs that hold four limbs, neck and waist. The cuff is said to be used by the Burmese military in the Burma-Bangladesh border area against detained individuals.

\(^{20}\) All these individuals are now deceased—A Phyu’s brother in 2003, A Phyu and his uncle in 2004.
and based in Bangladesh. One brother-in-law was its senior member. After A Phyu’s brother’s visit, the uncle was questioned by secret agents about his nephew’s involvement and was later forced to retire. In 2002, A Phyu and some cousins from Burma visited Bangladesh to attend their relatives’ novice ordination ceremony. One of these relatives was the head of a well-known Arakanese activist group from Akyab, who had been living in exile for at least a decade. Upon their return from the ordination ceremony, A Phyu and the cousins were detained, questioned, and severely tortured by Burma’s Military Intelligence. They were released after their non-involvement in anti-government activities was proven. Other similar and even more violent incidents regarding those who had associated with the anti-government movement were widely-known, though there was not any way of verifying all the torture claims.

On the 2nd July 2004, a veteran Arakanese/ Rakhine nationalist leader was arrested by the Bangladeshi authority (Asian Tribune 2004). When the news reached Arakan, one Rakhaing, who was visiting Akyab, immediately hurried back to Cox’s Bazar. It was just because he shared the same name as that Arakanese leader. His son, who had accompanied him on the trip, reflected on the stay after the arrest news as the scariest moment in his life. It could be argued that his concern was a form of paranoia, given that the said Arakanese nationalist leader was in the custody of Bangladesh authorities. However, some argue that Burmese state control is itself based on paranoia, as ‘fear is the most common emotion constructed by the regime’ (Skidmore 2004, p. 39). Through the use of intense military surveillance and the threat of harsh imprisonment, the Burmese state is said to engender fear and terror perpetually among the population of Burma (Fink 2001). In their interactions with the state of Burma, Rakhaing shared the same emotion of fear with their ethnic fellow Arakanese/Rakhine in Burma.
While there is a fearful aspect of the Burmese State, for some Bangladeshi Rakhaing, there is a beneficent side. On the eastern bank of the Naff River, from the early 1990s, the Burmese government started to establish Na Ta La\textsuperscript{21} ‘model villages’ for Buddhist Burman and Arakanese/Rakhine settlers (NCGUB 2005). While the majority of these Na Ta La villagers were from other parts of Burma, some Bangladeshi Buddhists were invited to stay in these villages (Narinjara News 2006). The new settlers were given material assistance to start new lives (Narinjara News 2008). Bangladeshi Buddhists were also given nationality cards so they would not need to bribe officials to get Burmese documentation, as others needed to do in other contexts. Indeed, some Rakhaing had taken up this offer of a house, land and property, yet most of the people who took up these offers already had social or economic relationships in Burma, and they would have had travelled to Burma many times before.

One such Rakhaing man from a southern Cox’s Bazar village had crossed the Naff River almost every day, since he was engaged in cross border trade. In order to pass through the checkpoints in Burma, he said he had to furnish the Burmese security agents not only with a bribe, but also with information about Naing-ngan-ray-tama (anti-Burmese government activists) in Bangladesh and those associated with them. Another Rakhaing female cross-border trader was also questioned about a particular individual activist and his movements in her village in Bangladesh. How many people have been actively involved in providing information to Burmese security agents is not clear. How much these agents know about the anti-junta activists and Rakhaing’s association with them is also not known. However, there was a popular perception among Rakhaing in Bangladesh that among them was what Skidmore (2004, p. 72) calls ‘the vigilant ears of the regime.’

\textsuperscript{21} Na Ta La is an abbreviation of the Burmese name of The Ministry for the Development of Border Areas and National Races (Nae-zat-dae-tha hnint Tain-rin-tha Lu-myoo-myoo phwent-phyo-rae)
The effect of these mechanisms of surveillance was a belief that every Rakhaing in Bangladesh was potentially a Burmese government informant and that the regime had systematic knowledge of the lives of the Rakhaing. More importantly, those associated with Naing-ngan-ray-tama would be especially targeted when they ventured to Burma. There was a fear that those about whom adverse information had been given would not be able to go and settle in Na Ta La village, or in other parts of Burma, or even to visit Burma.

The invitation to settle in Na Ta La villages was an indication that Burma was the country to which Rakhaing could migrate. As many other Rakhaing had previously migrated—with incidents of mass migrations during the times of political instability in Bangladesh—those who remained in Bangladesh could look to Burma as potentially a country they too could turn to in a time of crisis, especially entailing community/religious conflict. As a Phaloung Chait resident, one of the richest Rakhaing in Bangladesh with a long-established social position in the town, said ‘We will eventually move to Burma.’ For such Rakhaing, their chances of migrating to Burma relied on avoiding the wrath of the Burmese junta. Like others wanting to visit or settle in Burma, they particularly had to avoid public association with the people generally called Naing-ngan-ray-tama – those Arakanese/ Rakhines who were involved in anti-junta activities – even on the streets of Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh.
The Bangladeshi Rakhaing community had been, in fact, a shelter for many Arakanese/Rakhine nationalists and pro-democracy activists\textsuperscript{22} from the 1970s. Many Rakhaing recounted how they had provided food, shelter, and other forms of help to the activists during the time they were trying to establish themselves in Bangladesh. Based on their common ethnicity and understanding of shared history, these activists were given support by the Rakhaing people in Bangladesh, notwithstanding that most of these Arakanese/Rakhine activists came to Bangladesh with diverse political and ideological agendas. From the Rakhaing perspective, Arakanese/Rakhine dissidents were in Bangladesh with an intention to revolt against the oppressive State of Burma, in which the Rakhaing’s Homeland is located. Although ideological and political differences among the exiled Arakanese/Rakhine led to different groupings with different approaches against Burma’s military regime, there was little or no distinction between these groups in Bangladesh. They were only seen as providing much needed assistance to the political causes of common ethno-nationalist interest, without distinguishing their approaches.

One informant claimed that his family had helped an Arakanese activist when she first arrived in Bangladesh. Later, in her attempt to get funding from a western aid organisation, she was said to have used his family photos as those of Burmese refugees, which were subsequently put on the internet by the donor agency. He objected that ‘she had made my sisters into refugees,’ which was a great offense in his opinion. Another Rakhaing commented bitterly about the Arakanese activists who had enjoyed his family’s hospitality but had forgotten him because they managed to get lucrative funding from the overseas donors. Another informant from a southern village complained that many Naing-ngan-ray-tamas had been helped by her, but when they surrendered to the junta,

\textsuperscript{22} Sometimes, these categories of ‘nationalist’ and ‘pro-democracy activist’ are not discrete, as some ethno-nationalists are also active in pro-democracy activities against the Burmese regime.
they reported her to the Burmese authority that had helped them in Bangladesh. In her opinion, such information could be used against the Bangladeshi Rakhaing and would affect their ability to go to Burma. While a few nationalists were highly regarded as patriotic and ‘great’ people, the stories of ‘bad’ Naing-ngan-ray-tama were highlighted among those Rakhaing with a friendly relationship to the Burmese junta. As a result, Naing-ngan-ray-tamas were generally treated without much regard. As a Mahazow/Mohiskhali Rakhaing said about an activist, ‘Isn’t he that Naing-ngan-ray-tama whom I chased away from my house.’

While some Bangladeshi Rakhaing reflected on their association with some Naing-ngan-ray-tamas as undesirable, the mechanisms of Burmese surveillance were also effective in preventing them from getting involved in supporting the activists. In talking about choosing a textbook for the Rakhaing Indigenous Language Schools in Ah-wa-kwan, one informant rejected what was claimed to be a ‘Rakhaing’ language textbook produced by an activist from Burma.²³ He said:

We don’t follow the political policy of [an activist]. We have brothers and sisters living in Burma. We can’t have them being disturbed [by the Burmese government]. We don’t want to destroy our ability to visit there.

The Burmese government’s ideal citizen was a Buddhist individual who would accept the junta’s ‘kingly role as chief donor and supporter of the sasana (dispensation of the teachings of the Buddha)’ (Jordt 2003, p. 69). In presenting this particular norm of citizenship, the Burmese government employed Buddhist rituals (Schober 1997) as well as other mechanisms such the use of state monuments and spectacles (Skidmore 2004). However, more importantly, the hegemonic power of military rule manifested through

²³ This conflict based on the choice of the text book for the Rakhaing language class is much more complex than I can present here. Here, I only present a simplified, singular perspective on the heated debate among the Rakhaing.
the threat of violence from constant surveillance (Fink 2001; Skidmore 2004). For various historical reasons, in part tied to their own politics of identity experiences in Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi Rakhaing saw themselves as belonging to this same Buddhist community. At the same time, the Burmese state promoted their sense of belonging to Burma. This sense of belonging in turn produced a strong desire among Rakhaing to identify Burma as their rightful place to live as Buddhists. This desire for ultimately residing in Burma encouraged compliance with the desire of the junta that individuals not contest its authority and its legitimacy. While the everyday experience of state domination through Buddhism in Burma involved complex strategies of resistance (Philp & Mercer 2002) and ‘forms of escape from fear’ (Skidmore 2004, p. 11), the everyday lives of Bangladeshi Rakhaing were as Bangladeshi citizens, relatively removed from the tyranny of the Burmese state. At the same time, Rakhaing in Bangladesh complied with the Burmese state’s project of control and surveillance, in the interests of promoting ‘model citizens’.

Rakhaing’s Buddhist Identity without Burmese Religious Practices

On 10 May 2006, a contingent of RDF members and supporters visited Dhaka to attend a ceremony organised by a Barua organisation. The ceremony commemorated Buddha Purnima or Vesakha day—the Buddhist annual celebration on the day of the full moon on the 2nd month of the Burmese calendar marking the Buddha’s birthday, his enlightenment and him passing away. Most participants were Buddhist Barua and Rakhaing, and most were members of the opposition Awai League Party including its leader Sheikh Hasina24. Two senior monks from Barua community, RDF leaders, and the

24 Hasina is the Prime Minister of Bangladesh between 1996-2001 and 2009-2014.
then Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina, sat on the stage. The ceremony started with a Buddhist recitation, but was not followed by a sermon or Pali Language chanting as in the Thungran’s Ree-long Pway ceremonies. Rather, the political leader and community members, including the monks, gave passionate political speeches.

Many of the official ceremonies of Rakhaing community organisations—including Thungran official opening ceremonies—followed in similar ways. Unlike a Rakhaing ‘traditional’ ceremony where only the monks sat at the front reserved areas or on the stage, in these official ceremonies the monks shared the stage with community and political/administrative leaders. The ceremonies started with a short Buddhist recitation, followed by ‘lay’ activities. While these ceremonies were commemorated in the name of the religion, they did not follow the ways of conventional Burmese Buddhist practices.25 Despite the fact that these ceremonies did not follow the widespread religious practices of Rakhaing—the ways of Burmese Buddhism—these ceremonies still highlighted their Buddhist religious identity in Bangladesh.

25 The Burmese junta’s officials, including the generals, would not sit on the same platform as the monks in any official/religious ceremonies, reported in the state-owned media.
Figure 12: 2005 Thungran opening ceremony of the RDF.
NB: The ceremony was attended by the Deputy Commissioner (on the furthest left). The monk sat between (and a little bit behind) the lay people. Monks normally occupied the most important place in normal Rakhaing religious occasions.

The reach of Burmese Buddhist practices occurred through the similarities in language and the feeling of familial or historical proximity to the Arakanese community in Burma. While there were similarities between Burmese and Rakhaing languages, there were enough differences for those who had not been exposed to Burmese not to understand it. The Pali Chants might be important rituals for most Buddhist Rakhaing, yet sermons which facilitated or had potential to facilitate their religious practices were delivered in Burmese, which was not always understood. Since written Rakhaing (Rakhaing Sa) and Burmese were similar26, those Rakhaing who could read Rakhaing Sa were able to read Burmese Buddhist literature and gained better understandings in the religious practices and sermons from the Burmese monks. These sermons in Burmese, which required more than casual understanding of the language, were not easy to follow for those Rakhaing who were not familiar with Burmese or written Rakhaing language. Hence, religious

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26 Rakhaing (Arakanese) speaking people are usually considered to use Burmese as the written language and Arakanese as a dialect of the latter (Spring 1963; Okell 1995), though Arakanese nationalists contend that Arakanese is a different language from Burmese (U Sakkeinda 1994).
practices that were closely identified with Burmese Buddhism were not significant for those Rakhaing who had little understanding of Burmese language, especially written forms.

Most Rakhaing who were exposed to post-Independent Bangladesh’s education system did not learn Rakhaing Sa. Some of them would live in the places in Bangladesh where Burmese Buddhist practices were not available, as in Cox’s Bazar. For them, the religious practices of Burmese Buddhists were not as significant as for other Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar. However, living within the country which was dominated by the discourses of Islam, as I will be discussing further in Chapter 8, Buddhist identity was important in their interactions with other people within Bangladesh. While their Buddhist identity had been socially important in their lives in Bangladesh, their religiosity did not resonate with Burmese Buddhist practices. Especially, as there were only Barua and Chakma monasteries in Dhaka and Chittagong cities, most Rakhaing in these cities would experience different religious practices which did not necessarily resemble the ways of Burmese Buddhists. For these people, their affinity to Burma through Buddhism is no more important than to other Theravada Buddhist countries. They did not consider Burma as their “home to go back to” or as the country they looked to resettle. They did not consider themselves as Burmese proxy citizens, but viewed Bangladesh as their own country which, despite the fact that it was dominated by Bengali Muslims, still recognised their Buddhist religious identity.
Conclusion

In general, The Rakhaing religious affiliation to Burmese Buddhism is an important factor in their perception of Burma as the country that they should really belong to as its citizens. Historical developments in Arakan resulted in similarities of religious practices between Rakhaing and the majority of people in Burma. This commonality of religion with the people of Burma has been a pivotal feature in Rakhaing’s acceptance of the Burmese state’s claim for political legitimacy through patronage over Burmese Buddhism and hegemonic control over the Burmese Buddhist community. Rakhaing sense of belonging to Buddhist Burma can be understood as the characteristic of ‘proxy citizenship’. However, this ‘proxy citizenship’ does not amount to any consequential importance when the Rakhaing interact with state authorities in Burma. In fact, it is their shared ethnicity with the Arakanese/Rakhine people in Burma which helps them in strengthening their sense of belonging to Burma as they can easily ‘integrate’ into these local communities. One of the main consequences of this ‘proxy citizenship’ is Rakhaing having to comply with the Burmese junta’s political agenda of control and surveillance.

When the Bamiyan Buddha Images were destroyed in Afghanistan in 2001 (British Broadcasting Cooperation 2001), Rakhaing in Bangladesh protested on the street of Cox’s Bazar (The Rakhaing Review 2005, p. 55). At that time, the Arakanese/Rakhine husband of A Phyú’s aunty in Akyab wrote an open letter calling upon the Burmese Buddhists to protest against the Taliban government. When the letter was distributed in Akyab, the uncle was imprisoned for two years by the Burmese junta. A Rakhaing informant from Cox’s Bazar puzzled over his imprisonment, saying:

Why did he get into trouble in a Buddhist country for protesting against the destroying of the Buddha statues by the Taliban? Even in this Muslim country, we could stage a street demonstration against a Muslim government [of Afghanistan].
Even though a degree of religious freedom exists for Rakhaing in Bangladesh, many still consider Burma as their ‘own’ religious community. The hegemonic practices of state agents and forces in Bangladeshi society favouring Muslim identity (to be discussed in Chapter 8), coupled with the dominant historical narrative of refugee migration (as discussed in Chapter 3) and the religious commonality with Burma, have been instrumental in shaping Rakhaing understanding of belonging more to Buddhist Burma than to Muslim Bangladesh. However, as some Rakhaing had less and less familiarity with these common religious practices with Burmese Buddhists, they no longer considered themselves to have a strong religious tie to Burma. Only when they participated in the community activities during their occasional visits to Cox’s Bazar or Ah-wa-kwan, did they came face to face with the Burmese Buddhist practices dominating the everyday lives of most Rakhaing.

Not only are most Rakhaing everyday religious practices considered to be the same as Burmese Buddhists, religious rituals in the Thungran celebration were almost an exact reproduction of those enacted by Burmese Buddhists. The Rakhaing common ethnicity with the people of Burma has had as much influence upon these Thungran rituals and their religious and cultural practices as the nature of the Bangladesh nation-station. However, these religious celebrations are just one aspect of the Thungran celebration. After the initial religious rituals, Thungran celebrations became mainly about having fun—dominated by colourful dances and the sweet tunes of song amid splashes of cool water on hot Bangladeshi summer days, and it is to the subject of harnessing such entertainment as singing and dancing that I now turn to in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5: SINGING INTO BEING, DANCING FOR THE NATION

Introduction

*Nhung Khruee Shoung*, the first Rakhaing language song album produced in Bangladesh (*Narinjara News* 2005b), was formally launched by a Bengali senior official of the Deputy Commissioner’s Office of Cox’s Bazar. The launch was part of the 2005 opening ceremony for the Rakhaing Development Foundation (RDF) Ree-Loung Pway ceremony of Thungran. The album launch was followed by a Roo-Raa (Traditional) dance, performed by a group of RDF members. Over the days of the festival, the Rakhaing musicians entertained enthusiastic Rakhaing audiences with (mostly) Rakhaing language songs. As their first album had just been released, the RDF musicians only had a limited number of ‘home-grown’ Rakhaing language songs. However, most of the Rakhaing language songs they sang during the festival were the songs of Arakanese/Rakhine origin. While the RDF’s band largely played Rakhaing language songs, the younger Rakhaing musicians at the rival Rakhaing Buddhist Welfare Association (RBWA) played a mixture of both Rakhaing and Hindi language songs to an equally enthusiastic Rakhaing audience. The audience in every concert showed great enjoyment to any songs that these bands presented.

In the previous chapter, I described how the ethnicity shared with the Arakanese/Rakhines is manifested in religious aspects of Rakhaing lives. In this chapter, I will explore how cultural performances such as songs and dances are related to ethnicity. Beginning with an analysis of the sociological background of the album, *Nhung Khruee Shoung*, I will outline how Rakhaing responded to changes in cultural performances in the Arakan/Rakhine State. I will then go on to discuss how the Bangladeshi educational system and Bollywood films from India were transforming daily entertainment amongst
Rakhaing. While the everyday entertainment of most Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar is dominated by popular performances from Bengali and Hindi entertainment industries, Rakhaing language songs and Rakhaing ‘traditional’ dances originating in the Arakan/Rakhine State in Burma are important on occasions of national and international ceremonies. My discussion will focus on how the discourses and activities of national and international agencies have shaped the cultural performances conducted by the Rakhaing in Bangladesh and in particular their community organisations on these important ceremonial occasions.

Singing into Being

The significance of *Nhung Khruee Shoung*—‘The Winter that makes snow fall’— was that it was the first Rakhaing language song album (and the only one so far) produced in Bangladesh (*Narinja News* 2005b). The album was produced by a Bangladeshi Rakhaing ‘stereo’ band, *Metal Cross*, from Cox’s Bazar. Two of the musicians in the band were leaders in the 2005 and 2006 RDF Thungran music concerts. One of the musicians, U Than, was one of my main informants during my fieldwork in Cox’s Bazar. The bandleader, Swe, was also an important informant during that time. I collected my fieldwork data by attending performances, including Thungran concerts, visiting their musical rehearsals and having private conversations. With the data collected, I have been able to gain an understanding of how their life experiences as Rakhaing have influenced their preferences for this particular musical genre and driven them to make this album. In detailing this understanding and U Than and Swe’s reasons for producing *Nhung Khruee Shoung*, I will explore their social backgrounds.
Metal Cross members did not expect to make a significant financial return from *Nhung Khruee Shoung*. Moreover, singing Rakhaing language songs was not their main profession. Swe was a successful graphic designer, and U Than was a goldsmith and a musician in a non-Rakhaing band. His band normally played Hindi and Bengali songs for non-Rakhaing audiences at private events, such as weddings and corporate functions in Cox’s Bazar. Swe gave the following reason for making *Nhung Khruee Shoung*: ‘I just want to show that we can also do it [producing a Rakhaing language song album] from Bangladesh.’ He also commented that they had become a part of ‘history’ because a Bengali language book on Rakhaing history in Cox’s Bazar mentions *Nhung Khruee Shoung*. Moreover, before it was released to the public, the album was sent to Burma with the third vocalist¹ to be assessed by established Arakanese ‘stereo’ musicians, who reportedly approved their album as ‘a good one.’

Swe attributed his first musical influences to Sai Khamoat, one of the Arakanese/Rakhine dissidents who stayed in Bangladesh in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Unlike the older Arakanese nationalists mentioned in Chapter 2, these younger dissidents had been involved in the failed people’s uprising of 1988 against the then Burmese socialist government. These exiled dissidents brought with them the musical preferences and skills which were common among the youths of Arakan at that time. As they socialised with other local Rakhaing youths, their musical tastes began to permeate through Cox’s Bazar. ‘Sai Khamoat’ is the *nom de guerre* of one such dissident who was nicknamed for his love of the songs of a popular Burmese singer called Sai Htee Saing, the leading light of the ‘stereo’ music genre in the 1980s in Burma (Jirattikorn 2007).

¹ The third vocalist is a Rakhaing currently living in Burma; hence, I do not discuss him.
The genre of ‘stereo’ music, the Burmese name for the category for pop/rock music, was developed during the cultural oppression of the socialist era in Burma (Lockard 1998, p. 28). From Sai Khamaot, Swe and other Rakhaing youths learned to play guitar and other musical instruments understood to be associated with ‘modern’ music. With his help, Cox’s Bazar’s Rakhaing youths had given public performances at Thing for Rakhaing religious festivals. Swe acquired more than musical skills from Sai Khamaot and other Arakanese dissidents. He also gained skills in Rakhaing Sa (written Rakhaing language). Commenting about his musical pedagogical days, Swe stated, ‘I learnt Rakhaing Sa from Sai Htee Saing songs ... I was the first one to play guitar and this genre of music in Cox’s Bazar, either of Rakhaing or Bengali community.’ Later, Swe became U Than’s music mentor. U Than, in turn, coached other younger Rakhaing (as well as non-Rakhaing) in, what they considered to be, ‘rock’ music.

Together with Sai Khamaot, Swe as well as other Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing youths formed an all-Rakhaing music band named *Nendee Hlaing* (The River Wave). Both youths who could play musical instruments and those who were interested in ‘stereo’ music became band members. One of the band members, who was interested in ‘stereo’ songs, showed me photos of the band performing at a religious festival at the *Thing* ground in Cox’s Bazar. Even though other members did not continue to pursue their musical careers, U Than and Swe continued to be involved in musical entertainment in Cox’s Bazar.

U Than was in his early teens when he arrived in Cox’s Bazar in 1988. Unlike Swe, a native of Phaloung Chait, U Than was born in Akayb, but his parents were natives of Arakan, in contrast to more nuance genres used by musical scholars.

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2 Musical genres such as ‘rock,’ ‘mono’ or ‘rora/traditional’ are general terms used by ordinary people in Arakan, in contrast to more nuance genres used by musical scholars.

3 The name of the most popular ‘stereo’ band in Arakan during that time was called *Ree Hlaing Phwat* (The Blue Wave). The two names not only had similar meanings, but they also sounded similar in the Rakhaing language.
Cox’s Bazar who had migrated to Burma around 1970. They re-migrated to Bangladesh in 1987-1988. In relation to his parents’ migration, U Than commented:

... [They] moved to Akyab to find employment. He worked in trading used clothing, imported from Bangladesh. When that industry disappeared and he couldn’t find another job in Akyab, he came back to Cox’s Bazar in 1987. I followed him later in 1988.

As U Than had studied up to the sixth standard in a Burmese government school in Akyab, he knew Rakhaing Sa quite well. He was also familiar with the Arakanese/Rakhine ‘stereo’ genre that had just developed in Arakan before he migrated to Bangladesh.

‘Stereo’ music in an Arakanese/Rakhine context also refers to the same Burmese genre of rock music. This genre of music involves guitars and drums with ‘explosive tunes’ (Am Tee Tee 1998, p. 112). This is in contrast to the slower and softer tunes of the ‘mono’ genre. In central Burma, the genre of ‘stereo’ music or Burmese rock had been established since around the 1960s (Lockard 1998, p. 28; Jirattikorn 2007). While there has not been any information on its reaching Arakan/Rakhine State, the popularity of ‘stereo’ music was well-established among the Arakanese by the mid 1980s. The first recorded ‘stereo’ album in Rakhaing language, Hlaing Lone Chay, was released in 1986. Through political dissident youths who had experienced ‘stereo’ music from Burma, Swe and his contemporary youths of Phaloung Chait acquired knowledge of, and a taste for, ‘stereo’ music. This style of music was different from other existing musical genres, such as ‘mono’ and ‘Roe Ra’⁴. They also acquired an interest and skills in the Rakhaing language.

In relation to dance performances, Farnell (1999, p. 343) points out that ‘[p]eople... frequently learn and practice additional specialized bodily techniques [such as dancing

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⁴ Songs of these genres are considered to have slower tunes and involved ‘less modern’ musical instruments such as mandolin (for mono genre) or ‘Arakanese drum’ (for Roe Ra). There has not been any systematic study on these musical genres in Arakan.
and playing music] according to their age, ethnicity, class, family tradition, gender, sexual orientation, talent, skill, circumstance, and choice.’ Similarly, Rakhaing youths’ appreciation for Rakhaing language ‘stereo’ music derived from their association with Arakanese/Rakhine youths with whom they shared a common ethnicity, while other factors such as their age and gender played a part in forging their closer friendships.

While the genre of Burmese rock/ ‘stereo’ music was being developed in Burma, in Bangladesh, Bangla rock or ‘band music’ was establishing it roots (Tanim 2004). Even though this genre was developing at around the same time, Rakhaing musicians did not identify their musical origins with this Bangladeshi ‘band music’, but instead attributed their musical heritage to ‘stereo music’ from Burma. One of Cox’s Bazar’s Rakhaing musicians stated that, ‘[A popular Bengali musician] couldn’t read written musical notes. I learnt them from Burmese music books’. With this he thus implied that he was a better musician than the Bengali musicians. He also argued that in terms of ‘popular music,’ Burmese ‘stereo’ musicians were more skilful than Bengali ‘band’ musicians. Swe recounted playing a video clip of a Burmese stereo song to a Bengali friend who was said to be amazed by the ‘beauty’ of the way the Burmese musician performed5. From Swe and some Rakhaing musicians’ points of view, this ‘stereo’ tradition, from which Arakanese popular music originated, was a superior one to Bengali ‘band music.’

Since the first ‘stereo’ album, fifteen further Rakhaing language albums in this genre had been produced in Arakan by 1999 (Mra Htun Aung 2001, pp. 250-252). Both Swe and U Than had a strong interest in the development of this Arakanese ‘stereo’ music, even though they had not been to Arakan since 1988. Nhung Khruee Shoung was the result of

5 That musician was a member of Iron Cross, probably the ‘hottest’ band in Burma (Gluckman 1995). The name ‘Metal Cross’ maybe inspired by the name of ‘Iron Cross’.
their talent in and taste for ‘stereo’ music, as well as their knowledge of Rakhaing Sa. For them, the album was a claim of their belonging to the community of Arakanese musicians. As Rakhaing, they saw their ability to combine their linguistic knowledge and skills as an expression of their stronger sense of ethnicity. Since a cultural performance could be understood as ‘an arena of creativity [...] and of distinct ethnic identification and pride’ (Gaudet 2001, p. 172), for these musicians, **Nhung Khruee Shoung** was not just an appreciation of, but also a commitment to creativity in ‘stereo’ music, which epitomised their social belonging to the same ethnicity and cultural expertise as Arakanese musicians. **Nhung Khruee Shoung** was as much an aesthetic product as an expression of ethnicity for Swe and U Than.

**Performances Across The Naff River**

The ‘stereo’ genre was not the only ‘cultural development’ that Bangladeshi Rakhaing received from the Arakan/Rakhine State. Performance genres that had developed in Burma had also been part of entertainment preferences of Bangladeshi Rakhaing. Many of these cultural performances amongst Bangladeshi Rakhaing were affected by historical changes in the genres of Burmese and Arakanese performances. An old female informant recounted her childhood as:

> [In Pungwa (Ramu) there were] many Zets (Burmese performance troupes). Those zets would come from Akyab such as **Hla Phaw Zet**, **La pa Zet**, **Nga Nat Kae Zet**, and **Kyaw Zan Rhee Zet**. These zets were patronised by rich Rakhaing from Pungwa. Many of the participants are, however, **Bama** [ethnic Burman]. I did not see these zets myself, I only heard of them from my mother. I saw Hla Phaw (the patron/leader of **Hla Phaw Zet**) in person, but he was really old then, and he had lost his mind [dementia].

The genre of performance known as zet or zet-**pway** is a live theatrical performance ‘that includes opera, drama, dancing, singing’ and is mainly based on Buddha stories
performed by actors accompanied by musicians (Myanmar Times 2003). Although some local people participated as members of these Zet troupes, generally members were travelling Arakanese or Burmese artists.

The popularity of zet changed in Bangladesh. One of the reasons, according to a Cox’s Bazar informant, was said to be the fact that they were performed in Burman language, while the Rakhaing/Rakhine language and the Rakhaing ‘traditional’ performances developed later in Arakan. He commented:

In 1975, when the ceremony to commemorate the renovation of the Thing [the central Buddhist structure of Cox’s Bazar] was organised, a team of dance instructors from Akyab arrived. They are Roo-Raa dance instructors. Only then did we realise that we had our own Rakhaing Roo-Raa (Tradition), and that pervious zet performances had been only Bama ones.

From the mid 1970s, Roo-Raa performances started to gain some following among local Rakhaing.

Roo-Raa, meaning ‘tradition,’ is a form of dance, based on stone sculptures of an ancient pagoda, that had been formulated by Arakanese ‘cultural experts’ working for the Arakan/Rakhine provincial authority in the late 1960s and the early 1970s (Mra Htun Aung 2001, p. 245). During that period, many Pakistani Rakhaing (later Bangladeshi Rakhaing) spent time as students in Burma, studying at Burmese schools or as temporary refugees during the Bangladesh liberation struggle. From a southern Cox’s Bazar village, Aphyu and his brother went to study for an extended period in Akyab, Arakan’s provincial capital from the late 1960s. Other Rakhaing, however, only went to Arakan for a short period during the political instability, as one of the Rakhaing recounted:

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6 I have not been able to ascertain the reason for the decline of zet troupes in Bangladesh, nor the changes in the popularity of zet in Arakan or Burma.
I was an election-monitoring officer for my town during the election which saw the East Bengal Awami League winning a majority of seats in the Pakistani Parliament. Though I was a neutral electoral observer, I was targeted by the people who opposed the Awami League. I fled to Burma and I stayed in [an eastern town in Burma] for about a year working as a tailor.

Another Rakhaing from Cox’s Bazar reminisced, ‘I was only a small boy. Our family fled during the liberation war. I attended school there during my stay in Akyab. But it was only a short time; I don’t think I learnt anything.’ Another Rakhaing informant in Ah-wa-kwan spoke about his trip to Burma thus: ‘I had lived in Burma, operating a grocery shop in Thingan Gyan [a suburb of Rangoon] when it was first built (in 1958). I stayed there for a few years. I also stayed in Akyab.’ Contrary to the claim by Khan (1999, p. 35) that Burma’s independence cut transnational relations between Burma and southern Bangladesh, many Rakhaing continued active cross-border travels, resulting sometimes in extended stays in Burma.

Their presence during the time of the ethno-cultural ‘revivalism’ in Arakan/Rakhine province had a significant impact on cultural performances of Rakhaing in southern Cox’s Bazar. These returned Bangladeshi Rakhaing set out to infuse their ethno-nationalist musical and performative tastes within the community, especially among their peers and members of the younger generation. Consequently, Bangladeshi Rakhaing performances (musical and dance activities) shifted with the ethno-nationalist cultural revivalist movement taking place in Arakan. These performances became a part of local religious and community events.
While new forms of Arakanese/Rakhaing ethno-performances were being developed in Burma in the 1960s and 1970s, in the relatively newly founded Bangladesh, the politics of minority peoples had started to play out in the cultural sphere. A Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing commented:

...[As] a token gesture from Ziaur Rahman [the then President of Bangladesh] to alleviate ethnic tension derived from his policy of populating Chittagong Hill Tracts with Bengali, a Tribal Cultural Institute was created in Bandarban. A branch of this Institute was opened in Cox’s Bazar.

This centre became a focal point where Rakhaing ethnic performative programs were organised.

Another important development in relation to cultural performances during that time was the creation of the Paharika (Indigenous Language Radio Program) on the government-owned Bangladesh Beter (Radio) in 1979 (Hoque 2006, p. 46). Some Rakhaing had been involved in this program along with other minority ethnic groups. A participant from Mraina Roa/ Chowdhury Para recounts his involvement in Roo-Raa performances and the Paharika program:

It started from around 1972 led by those who went to Rakhaing pray (Arakan: the Country of Rakhaing) to study from our village. They started with organising Roo-Raa performances in a local festival on the full-moon day of Tapoung. I didn’t study in Burma, but I learnt Rakhaing Sa [the written Rakhaing language] in our village, from Saradaw [the Abbot of the village monastery] and Sara Chay U San Maung. I was younger than those who organised Roo-Raa dances. ... I played sae [a rhythm instrument], and later I picked up singing. When Paharika [minority programming on Bangladesh Radio] started, the Rakhaing people participated as a part of the Marma program. I was the only Rakhaing there. Four Marma people were involved when the program started. Initially, I used songs from Rakhaing pray (Arakan), but later I wrote songs with local themes. I don’t sing anymore, but my songs are still being played on Paharika programs.
Other Rakhaing who had stayed for an extended period in Burma (or even some Arakanese/Rakhine living in Bangladesh at the time) contributed to the local production of cultural performances through state-sponsored media. Amongst a private collection of old television footage held by one Rakhaing informant, I found an archival recording of an indigenous program aired on Bangladesh Television featuring a Rakhaing song in the style of the Burmese ‘mono’ song genre. The song was written by a Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing who had spent most of his youth studying in Burma. The song is about the beauty of Phaloung Chait (Cox’s Bazar Town) in Rakhaing language.

These kinds of cross-border communications have not only occurred historically; both contemporary musical and dance genres of the Arakan/Rakhine ethno-cultural movement are also accessible in Bangladesh. One such example is the Bangladeshi Rakhaing’s following of contemporary ‘mono’ genre songs. In the 2007 Ree-Loung Pway at Kuraychouk/Khurushkul village, I witnessed two examples of musical performance that showed a deep appreciation of ‘mono’ genre songs from Arakan. During my visit to Maala Phung/ Manikpur village, an informant recounted her familiarity with Rakhaing language songs of the ‘mono’ genre, though she could not name either the song title or the singer. However, an important point she made was that these songs were mostly associated with her friend who had lived in Burma for a few years. In another instance, at a Metal Cross music rehearsal, an Arakanese/Rakhine musician started to play a popular ‘mono’ song, to which I contributed by singing the lyrics. A Bangladeshi Rakhaing sang along with a face of deep appreciation. He showed a musical taste for the ‘mono’ genre song which was different from the ‘stereo’ music.
Even from the colonial periods (British or Pakistani), Bangladeshi Rakhaing and Burmese Arakanese/Rakhine had shared similar tastes in performance. Such appreciation for particular entertainments, mostly developed in Burma with its much larger Rakhaing/Arakanese population, was transmitted through perpetual cross-border flows of people—the zet performers, returned migrants and Arakanese political dissidents. As different genres of performances developed in Arakan, they readily diffused amongst the Bangladeshi Rakhaing community. Cultural performances, appropriated through cross-border interactions, were re-appropriated in a local context, such as the lyrics connected to Rakhaing lives in Cox’s Bazar. *Nhung Khruee Shoung* was then just another landmark in the long history of cross-border intra-ethnic performative communications.

![Figure 13: Thungran concert in Than-thee Roa, Mahazow/Mohiskhali, 15 April 2007](image)

NB: The green banner at the back of the stage says ‘Don’t let the tradition disappear’ in the Rakhaing language.

Having been originally developed in Arakan, the homeland of Rakhaing/ Rakhine/Arakanese and the place where most of them live, these performances were regarded as inherently belonging to the ethnicity of Rakhaing. Kant (1978, p. 142) points out that
‘every tasteful reference to oneself or one’s own skills presupposes a social intention (to express oneself).’ Rakhaing’s taste for Arakanese performances is a social practice of identification which is ‘a matter of symbolic stratification which contributes to the definition of the social identities of both individuals and social groups’ (Coulangeon & Lemel 2007, p. 109). Particularly for those who had appropriated these performances, enacting them was an expression of their belonging to the Rakhaing ethnic group that existed beyond the present-day national boundaries. Wekesa (2004) argues that popular music subverts the notion of national boundaries as it is central in ethnic and national identity constructions. Just as ‘ethnic identification is a significant motivation of participants in staged Ukarianian dance in Canada,’ (Nahachewsky 2002, p. 177), the performances of Arakanese origin in Bangladesh were avenues of motivation for some Rakhaing to connect their ethnic identification with the Arakanese/Rakhine in Arakan. Performance genres that were popular in Arakan had crossed into the Bangladeshi Rakhaing community, where they played a central role in ethnic identity formation. As Nhungh Khruee Shoung was an expression of Swe’s and U Than’s identity, other genres of songs and dances of Arakanese/Rakhine origins that had been developed or performed in Bangladesh expressed the identity of the musicians and performers. They shared that identity with musicians and performers from Arakan.

Everyday Entertainment and Rakhaing Cultural Performances

Though Nhungh Khruee Shoung was a beacon signalling U Than and Swe’s ethnic identification, for most Bangladeshi Rakhaing youths who listened to pop music, it elicited a different response. Only two informants out of twenty-seven responded positively to the question, ‘Do you know Nhungh Khruee Shoung?’ Twenty of the remaining twenty-five informants only indicated they knew about it when they were
prompted with more information, such as ‘it is the album produced by Swe and U Than from Phaloung Chait’. At the same time, some of them responded with the answer that they would not normally listen to Rakhaing songs. One of the consistent responses from those who would not regularly listen to Rakhaing songs was that they did not understand them. Even though most of the informants under thirty-five years of age spoke Rakhaing Sakaa (spoken language) within the Rakhaing community, they did not know Rakhaing Sa (written language). One of the consequences of not knowing Rakhaing Sa was their inability to comprehend expressions of complex ideas in the Rakhaing language. These ideas were generally available from Arakanese magazines and books, most of them being written either in the Rakhaing or Burman languages.

In these interviews about *Nhung Khruee Shoung*, I asked informants to explain the meaning of phrases of a popular Rakhaing ‘mono’ song from Arakan. I focused on words that required a prior knowledge of Arakanese historical and geographical references. In the sentence ‘The dark green land, Pho Khaung Mountain of [Arakan] Range with sweet-vines,...’, many Bangladeshi Rakhaing youths only understood the phrase ‘the dark green land’. Asked about another sentence, ‘Rakhine/Rakhaing derived from the Aryan race, we built many civilisations, starting with Waytali, we had built Dhanyawadee...,’ an informant said, ‘I did not study any of these. I do not know anything about these words.’ The first sentence refers to a location in the Arakan mountain range, which divides historical Arakan and Burma proper, while the second sentence refers to an ethno-origin theory of some Rakhaing nationalists, and is an offshoot of the theory of the Aryan invasion into India. In order to understand these references, one would need to be able to read Rakhaing language literature produced from Arakan. Without being able to

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7 Since the two languages were very similar, once an individual could read one, they would be able to comprehend the other easily as well.

8 *Roe Taung Hta Ka Thanda Pan*. I used U Maung Thein’s version (1999) of the song.
understand these references, one would not be able to understand the meaning of such a nationalistic Rakhaing song.

In reference to the Rakhaing youth’s general inability to read and write Rakhaing Sa, an older Rakhaing commented:

When we were younger, before we went on to study English or Bengali, we had to study our own Sa. In Cox’s Bazar, at Burmese Primary School, there were three Rakhaing teachers. They taught us Rakhaing Sa. And, at the monasteries, monks taught us the religious texts in Rakhaing Sa. In the present day, people are preoccupied only with Bengali and English. Monasteries no longer teach Rakhaing Sa.

This informant also admitted that although he had learnt basic Rakhaing Sa in his childhood, he only became fluent in it through reading Arakanese books and magazines. Another informant reported that in the pre-Bangladesh period, the Pakistani authority allowed Rakhaing to study their own language at government schools. Although younger Rakhaing had learnt basic Rakhaing Sa they would generally reply, as did a mid-twenty-year-old male informant from a southern Cox’s Bazar village, ‘I cannot remember it now.’

As many songs in Nhung Khruee Shoung were written by Arakanese/Rakhine dissidents, they are written in a style that expresses nationalist feelings, full of historical and geographical references. One of the songs, entitled Lakran Panchee (Portrait of the Crescent Moon), refers to the cartographical shape of Arakan State in Burma (excluding Bangladesh or Cox’s Bazar region). In order to understand the meanings of these references, one had to be familiar with historical or geographical discourses of Arakanese ethno-nationalist movements. Since these discourses were only available through
magazines and books, present-day Bangladeshi Rakhaing youths do not comprehend most songs from either Arakan or the *Nhung Khruee Shoung* album.

In answer to a question requiring informants to rank the language in songs that they understood, the majority ranked them in the order of Bangla, Hindi, Rakhaing, Burmese, and English. The fact that Bangladeshi Rakhaing youths understood Bangla better than any other language is indicative that Bangla is the language used in their formal education. As English-language schools are too expensive for most people, the majority of Bangladeshi Rakhaing study at Bangla language schools. The influence of Bangla on the lives of Bangladeshi Rakhaing can be viewed in terms of national language homogenisation, which is ‘an integral aspect of most nation-building projects...’ (Eriksen 1991b), involving in this case the domination of Bangla over the languages of minority communities (Mohsin 2003). Through national education system, Bangla has established itself as the language of the nation-state among Bangladesh’s Adivasi (Indigenous) minorities such as the Rakhaing (Mohsin 2003, p. 92).

However, it was not only through the education system that Bangla had become a dominant language in the everyday lives of Bangladeshi Rakhaing. Another powerful mechanism of the nationalisation of Bangla is satellite television. Before privately run commercial television channels arrived, only government-run BTV (Bangladesh Television) was available (Ali 2006, p. 4). From the mid-1990s, with the development of commercial satellite television channels and increased television set ownership⁹, the Bangla language became integral to the daily activities of many Bangladeshi Rakhaing families in Cox’s Bazar. Satellite connections became readily and cheaply available

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⁹ By 2006, eight television channels has been established, and 41% of households owned a television set by then (Ali 2006, p. 5).
through ‘illegal’ re-distribution by the local reseller of the satellite connections to Cox’s Bazar Town households. In Cox’s Bazar in 2006-2007, a monthly price for a satellite connection, sub-connected through such local ‘distribution,’ was around 200 Takas, which was affordable for most Rakhaing families. Through satellite connections, the Bangla language thus became an important medium within the entertainment realm of Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing families.

The fact that informants’ answers identified the second most understood language as Hindi highlights that education is not the only medium involved in the development of youth language competence and musical tastes. In a wedding ceremony in Halbang/Harabang, a village north of Cox’s Bazar, while older males sang and danced to Bangla songs, the children danced to popular Hindi songs from a VCD player. Similarly, on many other private occasions, such as weddings and novice ordination ceremonies during my fieldwork, Bollywood songs dominate entertainment choices among Rakhaing youths.

This preference is not just prevalent in times of celebration or festival. Hindi entertainment has also become dominant in the everyday lives of Rakhaing youth. In a Phaloung Chait Rakhaing Roa, Rakhaing children played by acting out scenes from Hindi soap operas and by singing and dancing to popular Bollywood songs. As a result of such popularity, a ten-year-old Rakhaing girl from Cox’s Bazar was not able to say to her mother ‘when I was younger’ in either Bengali (Choto baelo kahi ni) or Rakhaing (A chay kha ga), but only in Hindi (Bja pan ka kaha ni). Among the teenage Rakhaing of Cox’s Bazar, their language of entertainment was not Bangla, but Hindi, which has become a crucial language for a good part of their daily activities of entertainment.
The influence of Hindi language entertainment is also a consequence of the development of satellite television. From its first entry in Bangladesh in the early 1990s, the satellite television industry has been dominated by Hindi language channels (Wahid 2007, p. 80). Wahid (2007, p. 87) points out, ‘[W]ith its massive entertainment programmes and the spectacular production, ... the Hindi channels of STV [Satellite Television] are now influencing the middle class viewers from the centre to periphery in Bangladesh...’ Among Cox’s Bazar urban Rakhaing, Hindi soap operas constituted the primary form of television entertainment, and many Rakhaing youths were more familiar with Hindi language and Hindi songs. Although Hindi films and television programs had been available to Bangladeshi through VCR from the 1980s (Wahid 2007, p. 76), the development of satellite television channels has amplified the ‘Hindi-ization’ of entertainment among Bangladeshi Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar urban areas.

Mraina Roa/Chowdhury Para is a Rakhaing village about 50 kilometres south of Cox’s Bazar, on the western bank of the Naff River, the boundary between Burma and Bangladesh. Although satellite television connections are not available in the village, entertainment media popular in Burma was widely available. In one of Mraina Roa’s families, two brothers preferred different musical genres in their everyday lives. The younger brother, who used to work as a goldsmith apprentice at another border village, had developed a friendship with many Arakanese/Rakhine cross-border traders. Every morning after breakfast, he would listen to the songs from a Burmese and Rakhaing language VCD collection. In contrast, the everyday entertainment of the older brother, who had spent most of his life studying in an urban area of Bangladesh, was Bangla popular ‘band music’ and Bollywood songs. Being more exposed to national (Bengali) and international (Hindi) cultural performances, the older brother has a greater
appreciation for the cultural products from non-Rakhaing sources other than those from Burma.

For most young Rakhaing, as with the older brother discussed above, *Nhung Khruee Shoung* was just another Rakhaing language album, to which they rarely paid attention. While *Nhung Khruee Shoung* is the beacon of ethnic identification for its producers/musicians, it does not reflect the everyday experience of these Rakhaing youths. Rather, their everyday entertainment preferences cantered around popular songs and dances from Bangladesh and Bollywood.

**Ethnicising Cultural Performances**

For these young Rakhaing, popular Rakhaing songs did not figure largely in ‘the immediate surfaces of everyday life’ (Chambers, cited in Negus 1996, p. 27). However, this does not necessarily mean they regard themselves as having nothing to do with performances in the Rakhaing language or those developed by Arakanese/Rakhine. Even though they do not engage in Rakhaing song or Rakhaing Roo-Raa dances in their everyday lives, these performances are valued as being an integral part of their ethnicity. Discussing the relationships between taste in music and identity, Frith (2002, p. 251) cautions against what he calls ‘sociological orthodoxy’, which assumes social determinism of ‘aesthetic listening’. Though the Rakhaing youths do not take aesthetic enjoyment from Rakhaing songs or dances, they still consider them as important to their ethnicity. More importantly, they still participate in performing these Rakhaing language songs and Roo-Raa dances.
In early March 2007, at the RDF building, a group of girls from Phaloung Chait were busy most evenings as they practised the routines of Roo-Raa dances developed by Arakanese/Rakhine in Burma. They were being coached in three dance routines by an Arakanese/Rakhine political dissident living in Cox’s Bazar. On the particular night I attended their rehearsal, they practised dancing both with and without music. They were told to repeat a segment of the routine of a dance if any mistake was made. They danced to the trainer’s instructions, and every wrong move received verbal reprimands from him. The dance practice went on for a few hours that afternoon, with continuous scolding and repetition of a particular movement. That night, one of the RDF leaders asked why they were dancing. When the girls answered ‘we want to go to Dhaka [where they would perform these dances],’ the leader corrected them with a statement asserting that these dances were part of Rakhaing ethnicity. They all smiled in agreement. Though they did not articulate their arduous endeavour to master these Roo-Raa dances, they accepted, at least outwardly, the interpretation of the leader that they were dancing their own authentic ethnic dances.

Despite Bollywood entertainment dominating their daily lives, these Bangladeshi Rakhaing youths still regarded ‘Rakhaing’ songs and dances as important for their ethnic identity. Their participation in performing them also indicates a more complex relationship between these cultural performances and their ethnic identity. Frith (1996, p. 108) argues that instead of the claim that a cultural performance is said to ‘reflect’ and ‘represent’ the people, the question is how a performance ‘comes to make its own claims.’ Duffy (2005, p. 689) also points out that ‘music is not a packaging and subsequent expression of [pre-existing] identity but is the process through which identity is constituted.’ One such process is the politics around cultural performances in which the
notion of indigeneity is played out. This politics of identity concerns interactions among Rakhaing community organisations, state agencies and international actors.

The dance group, which had been practising under the sponsorship of the RDF, performed Roo-Raa dances in Bangladesh’s Capital, Dhaka, as part of the Adivasi (Indigenous) Cultural Festival 2007. According to the press release of the sponsor organisation, the festival was ‘a celebration of life and cultural diversity’ of the indigenous and non-indigenous people of Bangladesh (SEHD 2007). This three-day event was an annual cultural festival involving speeches and discussions on issues relating to indigenous people by leaders of indigenous, non-indigenous and international communities. The highlights of the festival are the performances of different ethnic groups. Colourfully dressed ethnic dancers perform their various ethnic dance routines. The Rakhaing girls performed three dances on the last day of the festival in 2007. After the closing ceremony, they were each given ‘the certificate of participation,’ which acknowledged that they were members of the Rakhaing Development Foundation (RDF). Since 2006, the RDF has been participating in the annual Adivasi Cultural Festival organised by the SEHD, the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD 2008), ‘one of the leading environmental policy advocacy NGOs in Bangladesh’ (Chowdhury 2008, p. 72).

This Cultural Festival of Bangladesh’s Adivasi People is just one of the activities of the SEHD. The SEHD defines its role as follows:

It pays special attention to crucial and critical areas that are inadequately attended or not attended; highlights inequity; arouses debate around contemporary national interest issues; and provides information and ideas to the policy makers, development thinkers, activists and journalists. Exposé of human rights abuses against indigenous peoples and other disadvantaged or marginal communities and abuse against nature is a strategic activity of the organization. This strategy has proven effective in assisting people to think and speak out. (SEHD n.d)
The SEHD has been working to mobilise indigenous groups to form a collaborative movement in articulating indigenous identity and in promoting and protecting their social, cultural, political and economic rights (Chowdhury 2008). Many of its activities are concerned with engaging in political struggles of marginalised and minority peoples of Bangladesh. Their activities entail arranging collaborative forums for different community organisations, facilitating information seminars for community leaders, publishing on issues of human rights and natural resources (especially land) and, since 2004, organising the Adivasi Cultural Festival. Even though songs and dances of the Adivasi people were not the sole activities of the festival, the colourful photos of the Adivasi performers featured prominently in the promotional material for the festival.

Figure 14: The poster of the Adivasi Cultural Festival 2007, on March 18, 2007, Central Public Library, Dhaka.
Duffy (2005, p. 682) points out that analysing a cultural festival from its framework and associated paraphernalia such as promotional posters, programme notes and press releases reveals ‘certain ways of understanding the performances...’ of the organisers. From the sponsoring agencies perspective, the performances in the Festival showed ‘cultural diversity and richness of different ethnic communities’ (SEHD 2006). As observed elsewhere, the Adivasi Cultural Festival brochures reveal a perception of ‘ethnic’ cultural performances as ‘folklore’ and the performers as:

...the bearers of folklore [who] continue to be conceptualized as ‘them’—villagers or at least a lower social class—who will perform for metropolitan audiences. Such cultural productions are clearly marked by a vested interest in maintaining the exotic for cross-regional domestic as well as foreign consumption. Here then, ‘the folk’ is a restricted category for whom lived experience at the crossroads of regional and global cultural currents is denied. They are muffled and frozen in a pristine past that becomes increasingly commodified (Narayan 1993a, p. 190).

While it is important to acknowledge that the SEHD’s activities promote the social and political rights of marginalised communities in Bangladesh, its publicity materials, especially in relation to the Adivasi Cultural festival, were visually focused on the indigenous people’s cultural performances. Nonetheless, one of its brochures includes a statement concerning political issues:

Protection of cultures cannot be limited to mere efforts for the protection of dances, songs and drama. If a community's right to land, local resources, education and practice of traditions in their own language, and use of knowledge and local technologies are not secure, efforts for protection of culture become meaningless.

Even so, SHED’s and the national media’s central focus on colourful costumes and ‘exotic’ dances reduced the festival activities to the elements of folklore.
In early 2007, as a part of a project relating to children’s rights sponsored by an international foreign aid association, a group of Rakhaing girls performed three Roo-Raa dances in Phaloung Chait. The project aim, according to a leader of the Rakhaing organisation that partnered in the project, was to promote the rights of children in Cox’s Bazar. For the Rakhaing organisation, Roo-Raa dances were being promoted as an exercise of their ethnic rights. From the project organisers’ perspective, Roo-Raa dances were the embodiment of Rakhaing ethnicity, and these dances were presented to the international visitors as an achievement of the project. More importantly, from the perspectives of these international agencies, cultural performances were an arena where their help was waiting to be provided for an ‘oppressed’ minority of a poor country.

Non-governmental organisations are not the only agents involved in promoting performative aspects of ethnicity as an important area of ethnic politics. State agencies have also been a major sponsor of such performances. A Cox’s Bazar informant points out that even before the Tribal Cultural Institute was built in the 1970s, ‘we had been asked many times before by the local authority to provide performances for state visitors.’

The official webpage of the Bandarban Tribal Cultural Institute reads:

Some of the main functions of the Institute are collecting rare and valuable books and journals regarding tribal people and culture for the Library of the Institute, organizing cultural shows, drama etc on national days and in important social and public occasions and also at the time of VIP visits, organizing cultural exchange program in the country, recording and preservation of traditional tribal songs and ballads, collecting specimens of tribal arts and crafts, colorful dresses, traditional ornaments, musical instruments, coins, paintings and many more. (MOCA, emphasis added)

In line with these functions, the Rakhaing had performed Roo-Raa dances for the national occasions and VIP visits. These dances were also part of the entertainment for the then President Ershad’s visit to Cox’s Bazar to meet with the Rakhaing community in the early

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10 MOCA: the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the Government of Bangladesh.
1990’s. In the democratic period of post 1990, Rakhaing’s dance troupes had performed on state-sponsored occasions, such as Bangladesh Independence Day Celebrations and Victory Day Celebrations. State-sponsored performances rendered particular artistic forms as the representation of a category of people and hence these performances as the ‘emblem of [...] ethnic and regional identity’ (Diamond 1997, p. 93). As Acciaioli (1985) points out, the analogous process of state-formation in Indonesia has led to aestheticisation of ethnic cultural practices, making them into spectacles for the state. The process of state formation of Bangladesh, in some instances aided by international developmental agencies, has led to the transformation of Rakhaing cultural performances into spectacles, which are being used in presenting Bangladesh as a moderate Muslim country. That representation reflected Bangladesh as a country that not only protected, but promoted and even celebrated, ethno-religious differences. These minority cultural performances had been implicated in an endeavour to present Bangladesh as a liberal democratic state in the making. Through the presence of Rakhaing’s performances in major state events, Bangladesh would be viewed—as one retired Bengali senior bureaucrat advocated—as ‘a moderate Islamic country with [a] secular outlook’ (Zahur 2005).

Dancing for the Nation and the International Donor Community

While it is true that the state and other dominant structural forces impose their own discourse on the transformation of ethnic identification, this does not necessarily mean the dominated (Rakhaing in this case) passively accept these impositions. Adams (1998) points out that while the dominant discourse shapes the particular trajectories of representation of culture of a dominated group culture into spectacles, the process itself can open up other avenues of identity formation for the members of that group. One such
Avenue is the appropriation of cultural performances by community organisations in their relationship with the state and international agencies.

On 10\textsuperscript{th} May 2006 a Rakhaing Cultural Festival involving song and dance performances was held in Dhaka. While a few Rakhaing living in Dhaka attended this cultural event (sponsored by a Rakhaing organisation), special guests of the event were well-known Bengali businessmen, senior bureaucrats and a poet. A Metal Cross member and some other Rakhaing sang a few Rakhaing language songs. A group of Rakhaing dancers from Ah-wa-kwan performed Roo-Raa dances. Although the festival was organised by Rakhaing themselves, it followed the same framework and logic as the SEHD-sponsored Adivasi Cultural Festival. The tone of cultural performances in such festivals is ‘one of sanitization and desacralization, attempting to separate dance from ritual, and magic and superstition from \textit{more appropriate aspects of folklore}’ for the city-dwelling guests (Reed 1998, p. 512 emphasis added).

In another occasion in 2007, a four-member monitoring team for a developmental project promoting Rakhaing Sa (the written Rakhaing language), during its visit to the project sites in Ah-wa-kwan, was entertained with ‘Rakhaing dances.’ This pilot project was financed jointly by an international aid organisation and a European government agency. A local NGO also cooperated in the project, and some Rakhaing were employed as project officers. Though the cultural dances were not part of the pilot project, they were performed to showcase cultural developments amongst the villagers, especially the youths. An organiser of the project said to me after the dance, ‘It is not too bad for these young girls to be able to perform such a dance.’ He was trying to point out that as a positive result of Rakhaing language teaching, even under the pilot project, these girls
had gained a greater sense of ethnicity and hence they were able to perform their ‘ethnic’
dances, even though their dancing abilities might still be very limited.

The main target audience of these performances, in the Cultural festival in Dhaka and in
the project monitoring mission of the NGO, was not Rakhaing themselves. Rather they
were enacted to showcase Rakhaing’s ethnicity for national and international guests. The
focus of the dances was not the Rakhaing people, but the sponsoring community
organisation’s claim to be the representative of the Rakhaing community or in the local
NGO case as the protector and promoter of the interests of Rakhaing. This showcase was
about the sponsoring organisation’s (whether Rakhaing-led or not) ability to organise the
community to perform these ‘authentic ethnic’ acts. For example, a Rakhaing
organisation’s report of another development project stated that the ability of the
participants to perform ‘Rakhaing’ dances was a positive outcome of the project that had
been implemented. The funding objective of the project required to promote
empowerment of the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh.

At the 2003 RBWA’s annual conference in Pungwa/Ramu part of the entertainment,
featured a group of local girls performing Roo-Raa dances to Rakhaing language songs.
While most of the attendees were delegates of RBWA local branches, invited guests to
the conference included Moni Swapan Dewan, then a Deputy Minister, and other political
leaders from the Cox’s Bazar District. As all of the branch leaders were gathered, this
conference marked the pre-eminent event in the RBWA’s annual calendar of events.
Moreover, with all of these important guests assembled, it was the event to showcase
RBWA, as the organisation that represented the whole of the Bangladeshi Rakhaing
community. The gathering of these branch representatives, from almost every
geographical location with a substantial Rakhaing population participating, coupled with
the colourful performances of ‘ethnic’ dancers, made this an ‘authentic ethnic’ event, in the eyes of both participants and observers.

In the eyes of state agencies and international development agencies, the ability of an ethnic organisation to provide performances of ‘traditional’ dances is equated with its ability to mobilise the ethnic community. Ethnic community organisations oblige in this call to ‘perform’ ethnicity, to acquire recognition as representatives or defenders/promoters of ethnic interests. Performances then become a strategic practice for these community non-governmental organisations (whether community-based organisations or development-focused associations) in their claims to be the representative of their ethnic group. Such performances are enactments of the ethnicity of a minority with distinct cultural norms from the mainstream Bengali people. Arnell and Wolk (cited in Keali'inohomoku 2001, p. 39) argue, ‘Dance is always about cultural identity.’ However, as stated previously, these Rakhaing dances were not about the cultural identity of the Rakhaing performers, but were about the sponsoring association’s identity as the representative of Rakhaing community. Its identity as an important community organisation is recognised by the state and international agencies, which in turn were attempting to create/portray Bangladesh as a liberal democratic country.

Performing Ethnicity, Understanding Rakhaing’s Identity

These performers were dancing or singing for the benefit of associations trying to assert a claim as the community’s representative. They were, in fact, performing these dances for the associations to which they “belong”. In the Roo-Raa performances I observed most of the performers belonged to the families said to be aligned to the organising association. At the same time, each organisation had its own core group of performers
who generally would participate on its behalf. While some of the performers may have participated in the function out of their own volition, or family persuasion, others joined to forge a social relationship with the leaders of the association.

At one of the ethnic festivals in Dhaka, a participant commented that there was going to be a change of government in the upcoming general election of 2006. He stated that when the Awami League government came to power, the leaders of the association would become powerful individuals; referring to the widely publicised friendships between the leaders and Awami League politicians. The informant also stated he would be able to gain some material benefit from his association with the leaders of this organisation. For other performers, their participation in these functions was in all likelihood driven by different motivations, including their understanding of these performances as the manifestations of their ethnicity. However, for the sponsoring associations, national and international authorities would recognise them (and by implication their leading members) as the representatives of the community.

The making of Nhung Khruee Shoung had developed as part of the process of identity-formation of Rakhaing youths who were influenced by the Arakanese/Rakhine. Nhung Khruee Shoung was their expression of identity as individuals with a cultural expertise, being comparable to those Arakanese/Rakhine musicians from Burma. Within the context of the Bangladeshi nation-state, Nhung Khruee Shoung was appropriated by a Rakhaing association in its representation to the state. By providing the official launch in 2005, the state accorded recognition to both the album and the association. As the album had already been released within the community prior to Thungran, the re-launch at this festival can be seen as a performance conducted for the sake of the state agents attending
the ceremony. These types of promoted cultural performances are a form of culturalism, that is:

[The] conscious mobilisation of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics...[which is associated] almost always with struggles for stronger recognition from existing nation-states or from various transnational bodies (Appadurai 1996, p. 15).

After the end of the official opening ceremony, as the chairs were cleared away, the Rakhaing audience danced with great enthusiasm to both Rakhaing and Hindi songs being played. Some of these participants I later interviewed remarked that they did not normally listen to Rakhaing language songs. In making these statements their tone was apologetic for being unable to appreciate what they considered to be their ‘own ethnic’ performances. While they did not dance ‘Rakhaing’ dances as part of their private entertainment, these Rakhaing youth still considered these dances as constituent parts of their ethnic identity. More importantly, they still accorded meaning to these performances as reflecting their ‘ethnicity.’

At the concert for the Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing student conference in 2006, younger Rakhaing musicians performed for the Rakhaing students. Out of fourteen songs they performed, six were Rakhaing language songs. The other eight songs were Hindi. At the RBWA Thungran music concert in 2006, the same young musicians performed some Rakhaing songs, but the majority of songs played were Bollywood/Hindi songs. They could have chosen only to perform Hindi songs, but they still sang Rakhaing songs. At a private gathering on the 31st of December 2006, they sang Rakhaing and Bengali songs to entertain me11. Some of these Rakhaing songs performed on that night were not known to be popular even among the Arakanese/Rakhine in Burma. Since these musicians did not know Rakhaing Sa, they had to memorise the lyrics by listening to these songs.

11 One of the participants said, ‘Let’s entertain him [me] with Rakhaing songs,’
Nevertheless, they still knew many Rakhaing songs. Cartoon, a Rakhaing singer who was much younger than the Metal Cross musicians, stated: ‘I write them [the lyrics] down in the Bengali script. Sometime it is a bit hard to write exact pronunciations of the words.’ While Cartoon knows a few Rakhaing songs, Rocky, another vocalist and drummer, only knew one Rakhaing language song and sang it at every Rakhaing concert. Despite this, when U Than mentioned the idea of producing another Rakhaing language album, Rocky showed great interest in participating as a vocalist. Furthermore, they referred to these Rakhaing language songs as ‘Rakhaing songs,’ labelling these performances as intrinsically ‘Rakhaing.’ Though these younger Rakhaing musicians did not enjoy Rakhaing language songs in their everyday life as Metal Cross band members, they still considered these songs as essential elements of their ethnicity. More importantly, they would try to engage in performing or enjoying these songs, as they considered that these songs convey their ethnicity.

Similarly, even though Bollywood-inspired entertainment dominated the everyday enjoyment of Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing, they still regarded the Roo-Raa dances to be their ‘ethnic’ dances. Although I only witnessed a few Rakhaing youths actually participating in these Roo-Raa dances, many other Rakhaing said they had trained and performed these ‘traditional’ dances. Despite the fact that these dances did not form part of their everyday entertainment, they still regarded them as important to their ethnic identity. More importantly, as with the vocalists discussed above, these performers saw Roo-Raa dances as a reflection of their unique identity while they would still act them out to articulate this identity. Especially in their interactions with other Bangladeshi peoples and international actors, these performances and songs were powerful mechanisms to convey their ethnic identity.
Conclusion

Joy Hendry (2005, p. 4) criticises anthropologists for ‘the plethora of publications addressing the subject of ‘culture’ [that] often belittle its value to those who are establishing an identity for themselves by ‘reclaiming’ it...’ Roo-Raa dances could be understood as Rakhaing ‘reclaiming’ their ethnic identity, as much as the *Nhung Khruee Shoeng* album was about claiming Rakhaing-ness for my two friends. However, I do not believe that anthropologists dismiss these identity claims through cultural performances or artefacts. Rather they attempt to understand the process of what Susan Wright (1998) calls a ‘politicisation of culture’ which involves a group of people strategically using ‘culture’ as ‘part of a struggle not just for identity but also for physical, economic and political survival.’ Moreover, anthropological studies of the relationship between ‘culture’ and ethnicity are concerned with how the claim of ‘a culture’ by an ‘ethnic’ group is related to the political goals within the contexts of contemporary nation-states (Eriksen 1996). The Rakhaing community organisation’s claims to ‘Rakhaing culture’ in their relations with national and international forces formed part of how ordinary Rakhaing understood their ethnicity. While these performances might not have been parts of their everyday lives, Rakhaing still attributed cultural significant to these performances as their ethnic activities.

In most cases of state-sponsored or NGO-supported cultural activities, when the Rakhaing youths enacted their ‘ethnic’ performances, they were acting according to the discourse of culturalism through which the state attempts to legitimise itself and which international developmental agencies also try to impose. However, though acting in accordance with these dominant structural forces, Rakhaing were not just being ‘daubed’ into performing passively. Their participation was in fact a strategic act to gain access to
the higher political power structures, conducted through community organisations as representatives of their ethnic interests. State recognition, achieved in this way, allows them to gain easier access to higher state structures, and thus acquire a certain political influence. Even though these organisations are not formally part of these state structures, they are able to assert some influence over local level state agencies and personnel, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7.

Although Rakhaing language songs and dances might not have been part of their everyday entertainment, Rakhaing youths still understood that these cultural performances would or should be important in a Rakhaing’s life, including their sense of fun and relaxation. Hence in the 2005 and 2006 Thungran Ree-Loung Pways, many Rakhaing youths generally enjoyed the musical concerts. They came to enjoy popular songs, whether they were in Rakhaing or Hindi. In 2007, when the community organisations did not set up a Thungran music concert, younger Rakhaing, from various Rakhaing villages, organised to have a Rakhaing band from Phaloung Chait provide entertainment. While a song from the *Nhung Khruee Shoung* album was well received, other popular Rakhaing songs from Arakan/Rakhine State also got the Rakhaing crowd dancing enthusiastically. Even though many groups of Rakhaing participants used Hindi music for their entertainment in the Ree-Loung Pway celebration, the largest crowds enjoyed the Rakhaing band. This experience of enjoyment coincided with the political practices of the international and state agencies, which viewed such performances as defining the cultural characteristics of Rakhaing ethnicity. It is important to reiterate that these performances are different from the mainstream national and Bollywood dominated entertainment genre. Consequently, middle class Bengali people also shared the perception of Rakhaing as having a unique characteristic different from the Bengali majority. They saw these
cultural differences as exotic characteristics of a tribal people—a people who are culturally Burmese that happen to be living in Bangladesh.
CHAPTER 6: TRADING ON ETHNICITY: ECONOMIC PRACTICES OF RAKHAINGNESS

Introduction

On the second day of the 2006 Ree-Loung Pway (water-plays) in Phaloung Chait, the number in our Ah-Phaw group increased dramatically with the addition of many friends who had travelled from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Most of these friends were Rakhaing from Cox’s Bazar who had moved to the Chittagong Hill Tracts to sell imported Burmese goods or Ngapee (fishpaste), mainly to the Jumma people. They closed their businesses to come to join the celebration in Cox’s Bazar Town. Unlike these friends, those from Cox’s Bazar who worked in the retail business, called the Burmis Market, could choose to open their shops in the evening after the Ree-Loung Pway. These businesses would operate as long as the Bengali domestic tourists from other parts of Bangladesh stayed in Cox’s Bazar Town and remained interested in buying souvenirs from their shops.

This chapter will explore the links between ethnicity and economic activity. In exploring these links, it will primarily focus on non-economic aspects of the economy and will underscore the social relationships that influence, and in turn are influenced by, economic practices. I will begin with an exploration of the economic practices of Bangladeshi Rakhaing that took place in the form of Burmis Market retail enterprises. These shops sell imported Burmese goods and local Rakhaing products to Bangladesh’s domestic tourists. I then discuss how such souvenir industries are possible in Phaloung Chait and Kuakata. I focus my discussion on how these economic activities are related to the ethnicity of Rakhaing—a people understood as culturally distinct from the domestic tourists. I then explore a similar kind of economic activity involving Rakhaing and other
minority people of Chittagong Hill Tracts, which reflects different forms of ethnic relationships.

These economic activities are only a small part of Rakhaing economic life in Bangladesh. However, they provide an important reflection on how ethnicity is manifested in the everyday lives of Rakhaing. I explore how Rakhaing understand these economic opportunities within the context of Bangladesh society. These ethnic economies, even though small in terms of scale, are also important indicators in understanding Rakhaing’s role in relation to the political economy of Bangladesh.

Burmis Markets: Economy on Ethnicity

Cox’s Bazar is a tourist destination that the Bangladesh Parjantan Corporation or the National Tourism Organisation is trying to promote. While the beach—which is said to be the world’s longest, with 120 kilometres of unbroken sand—is the focus of the organisation’s official webpage on Cox’s Bazar, it also promotes the Rakhaing souvenir shops in the Town of Cox’s Bazar. It states, ‘The beauty of the setting-sun behind the waves of the sea is simply captivating. Locally made cigars and handloom products of the tribal Rakhyne [Rakhaing] families are good buys’ (Bangladesh Parjutan Corporation 2009).

These ‘tribal’ products are generally sold at the places called Burmis Markets. These shops are mostly located in a small section of Cox’s Bazar Town Main Road, near Rakhaing Roas and the ‘Burmese School’.

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12 The Primary School which has been historically associated with the Rakhaing community, but used to be called “Burmese school” as discussed in p 85.
as ‘Burmeese’, is the transliteration of the Bengali pronunciation of ‘Burmese,’ the
adjectival term for Burma. A Burmis Market is generally a small shop which sells
consumer items with a special focus on imported goods from Burma and local products
from the Rakhaing community. Consumer goods include shoes, slippers and toys
produced in Thailand and China, and Zeeyo (Indian Jujube Jam) packages, Burmese
traditional medicines, Burmese Tanetkha\textsuperscript{13} and wooden sculptures from Burma. Local
Rakhaing made shawls, bags and snacks are also popular products sold at a Burmis
Market.

Even though consumer products from Burma now dominate Burmis Markets, these shops
were initially souvenir shops selling the products of local Rakhaing cottage industries.

Khaing Mra, who started one of the Burmis Markets, said:

\begin{quote}
It started during the Pakistani period. Targeting domestic tourists, Soe Kyaw
started a shop on the main road selling textile items from our own weavings;
from our handlooms. Many Rakhaing on the main road followed to open
shops to sell textile items. Later, we also sold imported Burmese items such
as slippers, Htamees (Sarongs), cheroots, and gems. Even I, in the back lane,
could open a shop to sell what we weave and goods we bought from Kung-
thay-ma (female small-scale cross-border traders) from Burma. When the
Burmese items became popular items in our shops, they got the name Burmis
Markets.
\end{quote}

Khaing Mra argued that Burmis Markets were so named because of the goods imported
from Burma—hence ‘Burmese shops’—in order to promote the Burmese goods that they
were selling to the domestic tourists. However, they initially started as shops selling the
products from local communities to tourists. In earlier days, it was not Burmese products
which were the primary items for the market. Moreover, as Khaing Mra also mentioned,
these Burmese items were said to be hidden away to be sold only to those who asked

\textsuperscript{13} ‘Tanetkha, the fragrant liquid powder of the bark of Muraya Exotica, [whose fragrance] is induced by
rubbing it round and round with a little water on a circular flat stone, is a unique [Burmese] traditional
beautifier worn by [Burmese] ladies, young and old alike’ (Mya Mya Aye 2004).
specifically for them, as they were illegally imported. In the context of ethnic ‘Rakhaing’
goods being more visibly promoted in these shops during that time, the naming process
seems to have been a more complex matter than one simply based on the rational choice
of the entrepreneurs, who wanted to promote the imported goods by naming their shops
as ‘Burmese market’.

An educated Rakhaing from the town, who had been active in community organisations,
remarked that these shop-owners had mistaken their identity. He commented that
‘...during the Pakistani period, we used to identify ourselves in Bengali language as
‘Magh’ or Burmese... Then, we didn’t know our historical origin.’ The start of the Burmis
Markets was attributed to the Pakistani Period, which was before the ethnonym,
‘Rakhaing’, became a popular autonym of the people, as discussed in Chapter 2. The
acceptance of the ethnonym ‘Burmese’ was not simply about a mistaken identity; it was
in fact the Rakhaing’s rejection of the locally derogatory name, ‘Magh,’ and their
identification with the wider Burmese Buddhist community. Thus, the name ‘Burmis
Market’ itself was not simply about the Burmese products that were sold in the shops, it
was also an attempt of Rakhaing to associate themselves with the community of Buddhist
Burma, the country where a majority of Arakanese/Rakhine still live, and to dissociate
themselves from local stigma.

Historically, Rakhaing cottage industries that consisted mostly of weaving relied on
Burma for their raw materials and for their market. The creation of Pakistan after
decolonisation was said to have severed these economic ties between Bangladeshi
Rakhaing and Burma (van Schendel 2006). van Schendel (2006) points out, citing a
Rakhaing source from that period, that the destruction of these livelihoods had led to the
mass migration of many Pakistani Rakhaing into Burma. Such a mass migration seems
to have probably destroyed most of the local Rakhaing market for the Rakhaing products. However, it probably also created the opportunity for some Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing to start up a new industry based on the newly emerged national middle class, who now came as tourists to the seaside town of Cox’s Bazar.

These initial Burmis Market shops also had their origins in the architectural style of Rakhaing houses, which traditionally had been built on stilts. While the upper floor was used as the living space, the lower part was used as a space for cottage industries. These industries consisted of small-scale businesses, such as goldsmith workshops, yeast making, weaving, and small shops serving the neighbourhood. These are just to name a few that I observed while in Bangladesh. The cottage shops functioned as convenience stores selling mostly snacks, sweets, cigarettes, shampoo, and Kwan (paan or pan\textsuperscript{14}) for the needs of the neighbourhood. Such shops can still be found in most contemporary Rakhaing villages in Bangladesh. During the Pakistani period, one of these cottage shops on the main street of Phaloung Chait started to sell items to tourists coming from other parts of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). The Burmis Market started as one of Rakhaing’s traditional cottage industries from the ground floor of this Rakhaing house in Phaloung Chait. Present-day Burmis Markets are no-longer under Rakhaing houses—and most of the houses that Rakhaing resided in no longer follow these traditional architectural styles—but are set up in the more commercialised areas of the town, although still near their residential communities or Roas\textsuperscript{15}.

\textsuperscript{14} Pan is ‘a tropical creeper belonging to the pepper family of plants named \textit{Piper betle}. People chew it to sweeten the breath and colour (crimson) the lip and tongue and also to have some narcotic pleasure. Normally pan is chewed with shell-lime paste and areca nut or betel nut’ (Islam 2006).

\textsuperscript{15} Roa refers to a Rakhaing village in rural areas and to a quarter or suburb in urban areas.
Since their origin; the main clientele of Burmis Markets has been tourists. Khaing Mra commented in relation to clients in the Pakistan period:

We bought goods from Kung-thay-mas from Akyab [the capital of Rakhine/Arakan State], for instance a pair of slippers was six rupees\textsuperscript{16}. We, the local people, could not buy these good quality but expensive items. To tourists, a pair of slippers could be sold for even up to 20 rupees.

With such great margins of profits, these Burmis Markets targeted domestic tourists from other parts of Pakistan and later Bangladesh. As competition increased with many other shops opening, the profit margins receded. Still, Bangladesh’s domestic tourists were important patrons at these shops. During my visit to a Burmis Market, a group of Bengalis wearing sarongs—indicating that they were locals since visitors from other parts of the country only wear pants—asked about some items. The owner answered without much enthusiasm. After they left, the owner said these local people were not going to buy these items. Even if they did, they would haggle so much that he would only make a small profit, not worth all the trouble of selling these items to them.

Other locals they would not target included their fellow Rakhaing. This was for two reasons: Rakhaing would not buy items with inflated prices; and, as the shop owner would generally know their Rakhaing customers, it would not be possible for them to ask an inflated price. The seller would not be able to sell at such prices without being Myak-na-pyak (literally: the face being destroyed—losing face). When I asked one of my friends to help me buy a pair of slippers, I was taken to a Burmis Market shop owned by his relative. When the seller asking for ten taka more than the price at the wholesale shop (my friend had already told me the price), my friend smiled nervously to me to indicate his uneasiness about the asked price. My friend later negotiated to get a five-taka

\textsuperscript{16} This was the currency of Pakistan (including East Pakistan). In Independent Bangladesh, Taka is the name of the currency.
discount, which was still five taka more than the Bengali shop elsewhere. Although a profit of five taka is not significant, he was in a very difficult social situation, as his friend, a fellow Rakhaing, was being asked an inflated price at his relative’s Burmis Market shop. Tourists, however, generally not knowing the correct price, would pay without much haggling and more importantly, the seller would be able to transact on inflated prices without being Myak-na-pyak. Moreover, purchasing at a Burmese Market was not simply about obtaining consumer products. It was about buying products from Burma as well as interacting with the ‘Burmese’ people at the Bangladesh border town.

Present day’s Burmis Markets in Cox’s Bazar have changed significantly, in terms of the stock of goods that are carried. During the initial period, Rakhaing Kung-thay-mas (literally, the females who carry goods) transported the products sold in these shops from Burma. As Khaing Mra points out in the above description, they had been the main suppliers to the Burmis Markets. However, the nature of cross-border trading has changed. Since democratisation of Bangladeshi politics, a more organised port-to-port system of transport—from Rangoon to Chittagong in Bangladesh—has been used to supply Bangladesh with Burmese goods. These imported goods now occupy a larger proportion of the items in Burmis Markets. A small number of Bengali wholesalers from Cox’s Bazar Town now supply imported goods to the Burmis Markets as well.

Some items are also still being produced locally in homestead activities. While weaving on a traditional loom no longer exists in Phaloung Chait, some Htamees (female sarongs) and bags are woven ‘traditionally’ in rural areas such as Mahazow/Moheshkhali, Harabang or Ah-wa-kwan. While such ‘traditional’ weaving is no longer conducted in

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17 Though I did not ascertain the exact reason for the disappearance of these traditional weavings in Phaloung Chait, informants from other villages expressed their inability to compete with mechanically produced textiles, from Burma.
many places, a new type of weaving, which is less complicated, has been introduced amongst Rakhaing, to produce shawls. However, these shawls were not widely worn by Rakhaing. They were sold as local ‘tribal’ products of the Rakhaing community to the tourists from other parts of Bangladesh.

Figure 15: Ma Han at her Burmis Market shop, Cox’s Bazar, on 9 May 2007

In Burmis Markets, ‘imported’ does not always mean items have come from Burma. Some ‘imported’ items are the product of the local Rakhaing cottage industries, but are sold as if they were imported from Burma. Two such products are Zeeyo (Indian Jujube Jam) and egg-peanuts. Jujube jam is made and packed in small packages with a label written in Burmese and an incomplete Burmese address. These smaller packages are later repacked into larger bags that have been imported from Burma. The larger bags have
labels in Burmese and English. Only these bags, not the contents\textsuperscript{18}, are imported from Burma to be used as packaging for Zeeyo, even through the English label clearly states that they are sarong bags! Similarly, locally processed peanuts are packed with a Burmese language label, sometimes including a ‘Made in Myanmar’ English language sticker. These locally-produced ‘Burmese’ goods are sold to domestic tourists alongside genuine imports from Burma, China and Thailand. These tourists, consisting mostly of Bengali middle class from other parts of Bangladesh, throng to these Burmis Markets after the sunset at the Cox’s Bazar beach.

Experiencing Difference, Consuming the Other

The main reason for domestic tourists to visit Cox’s Bazar is to see ‘the world’s longest unbroken sandy beach of some 120 km’ (Hall & Page 2000, p. 218). However, there are also other attractions which tourists generally enjoy at this border town. One such attraction is the timber building of Aggamedha Kyoung on the Thing ground, one of the Rakhaing religious monuments in Phaloung Chait. Tourism industry promotional materials and many travel accounts on the internet describe these Buddhist monuments as ‘must-see’ places for tourists.

Tourists visit other places ‘in quest of the exotic’ (van den Berghe & Keyes 1984, p. 344) so that they can ‘see and experience something [they] cannot duplicate at home’ (Van Den Berghe 1980, p. 377). An integral part of a tourist’s visit is the acquisition of souvenirs, which are a way of capturing or freezing the extra-ordinary experience

\textsuperscript{18} Burmese sarongs were imported separately without these plastic covers. Importing these plastic covers became another important industry at the Burma-Bangladesh border.
Tourism involves not only beaches, buildings and scenery; it is also about relations between tourists and natives (van den Berghe 1980). Souvenirs, bought from Burmis Markets, are not only consumer items; they are also about the tourists’ encounter with ‘Burma’, albeit on the borders of Bangladesh. In other words, these ‘Burmese’ souvenirs are part of the tourist experience of a border town. The beach may be an important attraction, but this border town experience is also a compelling aspect of visiting Cox’s Bazar. Burmis Markets then are as much about acquiring consumer items as experiencing ‘Burma’ and interacting with the ‘Burmese’ people, who seem to have different cultural characteristics from a ‘normal’ Bangladeshi.

Even though Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing started the Burmis Market industry, they no longer numerically dominate the ownership of these shops. In total, there were 208 Burmis Market shops in Phaloung Chait in 2007. About sixty percent of the shops were owned and operated by Bengali people, leaving only forty percent of these Burmis Markets owned and operated by Rakhaing people. Their original location, near the Rakhaing Roas and their central Buddhist monuments, had fifteen mall-like buildings which housed rows of Burmis Market shops. While only four buildings (out of 15) were owned by Rakhaing, many Rakhaing rented small shops in Bengali-owned buildings. Since commercial interest was the driving force behind the operation of the Burmis Market, other non-Rakhaing people were able to open up similar shops alongside the Rakhaing owned shops.
Nevertheless, Rakhaing people were a necessary part of the Burmis Market industry in Phalour Chait. A few years prior to 2006, a new shop complex was built as part of a major hotel near the beach, at a distant location from the Rakhaing quarters where the current Burmis Markets were established. Even though a reduced rent was offered to Rakhaing to open Burmis Markets there, none took up the offer. This complex of shops was demolished in 2006 after a few years of unsuccessful ventures, indicating the important role of the Rakhaing presence in the industry.

Even though there have been fewer Rakhaing-owned Burmis Markets, they remain a significant aspect of the industry. Khaing Mra, commenting about the numerical dominance of Bengali-owned shops, stated that ‘many tourists asked, “Where are the Burmese?” at these Burmis Markets?’ The tourists were referring to the Rakhaing as

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19 An informant said this was because the new location was too far away from the female shopkeepers and assistants to return home late at night after the business.
Burmese people. Moreover, the Rakhaing believed that their shops would normally sell better than Bengali-owned shops since tourists wanted to buy more from their shops.

Most buildings in these Burmis Market malls are signified by large billboards featuring a female Burmese actor, wearing a ‘Burmese’ dress. This ‘Burmese’ dress is what Rakhaing female sales people in Burmis Markets would wear. In reflection of the style of Burmese women, they also wear Tanetkha on their cheeks. Female Rakhaing Burmis shopkeepers provide a marked contrast from the mostly male Bengali shopkeepers. The significance of Rakhaing females can only be understood in relation to the wider retail industry in Bangladesh. In a year and half of my fieldwork research in Cox’s Bazar, I was only able to document two Bengali Hindu females working as sale assistants in Burmis Markets, and no Bengali Muslims. In other types of retail shops in Cox’s Bazar, i.e., shops other than Burmis Markets, only males worked as sales people. While other retail industries in the whole of Bangladesh were almost exclusively a male domain, Burmis Markets in Phaloung Chait are an economic activity where Rakhaing females dominated.

These Burmis Market shops are primarily a commercial endeavour in which Rakhaing ethnicity features as an important resource, yet Rakhaing entrepreneurs had no subsidised benefits over other entrepreneurs in setting up shops. They still had to provide a large deposit for rent, as well as the capital for their goods. Indeed, anyone with enough capital could rent a shop in the Burmes Market Malls and could readily stock the shop with similar products from Burma. Consequently, many Bengali people had opened up shops alongside Rakhaing people. Nevertheless, the Burmis Market industry is based on the perception that Rakhaing are ‘different’ from Muslim Bengali and ‘similar’ to Burmese. The historical connection of Rakhaing with Burma is an important resource in their economic engagement with the dominant Bengali society.
Ethnicity as a social process of recognition involves identification of ‘us’ in relation, or in opposition, to ‘them’ (Wallman 1979, p. 6). Ethnicity is not simply about the symbolic meaning of cultural uniqueness, it is also involved in what Eriksen (2005, p. 353) calls ‘instrumental utility,’ which implies the availability of resources to individuals for belonging to a particular ethnic group. One form of instrumental utility concerns the economic benefit that ethnicity can bring. ‘Ethnic economy’ is used as a concept in understanding the link between economic activities and ethnicity and refers to an economic condition in which ‘any ethnic minority maintains a private economic sector in which it has a controlling ownership stake’ (Light & Karageorgis 1994, p. 648). Rakhaing ethnicity, being understood in this context as denoting connections to Burma, was an important aspect in selling to tourists important goods from Burma. Burmis Markets might have been an ethnic economy initially; however, as Rakhaing no longer had the numerical majority, it was no longer an economic sector exclusively controlled by them. However, it is still the economic activity in which Rakhaing ethnicity is implicated as the most important element.

While most tourists to Cox’s Bazar might be mainly concerned with its beach, Burmis Markets are an integral part of their overall experience of the visit. In the context of Burmis Markets, Rakhaing’s cultural distinctness has itself become a commodity. Amid the overall tourist experience, shopping at the Burmis Markets is a form of ethnic tourism as ‘the tourist interest is on the cultural practices which define a unique ethnicity’ (Wood 1984, p. 362). While the economic transactions of Burmis Markets occur inside Bangladesh, the experience of shopping at these markets has a strong reflection of what is considered to be experiencing the Burmese way of life. This experience of another nation comes to the tourists through their acquisition of ‘imported’ goods, even though some of them are essentially locally produced. It also derives from their interaction with
Rakhaing female shopkeepers, who are commonly understood to have the same cultural characteristics as the Burmese, the people of the next country. These economic activities not only reinforce the view of cultural difference between Rakhaing and majority Bengali, it also affirms a popular perception that exists amongst both of these groups, that Rakhaing are essentially ‘Burmese’ people.

The State-organised Ethnic Economic Activities for Rakhaing

While Cox’s Bazar Burmis Market industry was not under the control of Rakhaing, the souvenir shops that were run by Rakhaing in Ah-wa-kwan were mostly under their control. That control derives from the protection they receive from the local state authority. Similar but less popular than Cox’s Bazar, Kuakata is another beach location attracting domestic tourists (M. Hossain 2006). In addition to the beach, the Buddhist temples of Rakhaing people are a tourist attraction there (Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation 2009). The building near a Buddhist temple and Kansate²⁰, a Rakhaing village, houses shops which sell similar items to Burmis Markets in Cox’s Bazar. This building, called Rakhaing Mohila Market (Rakhaing Women’s Market), was built on Rakhaing communal land, with funding from the government. Though only half of the building had been completed in early 2007, shops had been operating in the complex since the early 2000s. A committee from the Kansate Rakhaing village administered and allocated individual shops to Rakhaing families. Shop owners did not have to pay rent, but they needed to be able to raise enough capital for the continuous operation of their shop. Although sixteen shops had been built and allocated, in February 2007, only seven shops were in operation. Some items in these shops were products of the local cottage

²⁰ Kansate is the Rakhaing name for Kuakata, and it referred to the Rakhaing village located near the central area of the Kuakata Beach.
industries, but a significant majority were consumer items sourced from Dhaka or Cox’s Bazar. Imported items from Burma such as balm, herbal medicines, and slippers came from Cox’s Bazar. These shops in the Rakhaing Mohila Market carried similar items to Burmis Markets in Cox’s Bazar. However, unlike the Cox’s Bazar markets, the Rakhaing Mohila Market was the product of government intervention aimed at developing the local Rakhaing community (*The Daily Star* 2004b). More importantly, it was under government protection against other non-Rakhaing interests.

![Rakhaing Mohila Market, Kuakata, Patuakhali. 16 February 2007](image)

In 2007, on the unmarked boundary of Kuakata Rakhaing Mohila Market, two sets of shops were opened. A Rakhaing family, having been unsuccessful in being allocated a shop, set up a makeshift shop in a corrugated iron hut. Since it was owned and operated by a Rakhaing family, no one from the Rakhaing village objected to it. However, on another side of the market, a row of shops owned and operated by Bengali Muslims was
set up. The Rakhaing shop owners were concerned about the new competition from these shops. They feared they would lose control over the souvenir industry near the Rakhaing Buddhist monuments and their village, but the Rakhaing shop committee was not able to take any action against these shops as they were built on a private land.

This concern was presented to the Deputy Commissioner of the district during his visit to the beach and the market. The Deputy Commissioner, the chief administrator of the district, ordered the Muslim owner of the adjacent land where Bengali shops were built to erect a boundary wall blocking access from the Rakhaing Mohila Market. Being located behind the wall, these shops would be away from the obvious view of tourists. Within a few days of the Deputy Commissioner’s visit, these Bengali owned shops had been moved away from the boundary line. Even without any legal power to stop the Bengali Muslim-owned shops from operating near the Rakhaing Market, the Deputy Commissioner, representing the state, made an effort to provide protection to the economic interests of Rakhaing.

Aside from the Rakhaing Mohila Market in Kuakata, there had been a few other development projects conceived exclusively for Rakhaing in Ah-wa-kwan. They had also received khas or government-owned land, distributed exclusively to Rakhaing. They were also said to have received small loans for economic development. In addition, the government funding had helped to build a Rakhaing Cultural Centre in Kuakata and fifty-eight individual houses for Rakhaing of Patuakhali District. The Rakhaing Mohila Market was a part of these government activities for the development of the Rakhaing community in Patuakhali District.
Unlike Cox’s Bazar Burmis Markets, which operated on a commercial basis, the Kuakata Rakhaing shops received a form of state subsidy and protection. In both locations, these shops were operated within a similar context of domestic tourism and were based on the ethnicity of local Rakhaing. While Rakhaing’s historical connection to Arakan was widely acknowledged in the media, the shops in Kuakata, were not advertised as having a direct relation to Burma or as shops which sold Burmese products. Rather, they were presented as cultural settings for the Rakhaing minority people of the Patuakhali District. By contrast in Cox’s Bazar, the Burmis Market items were presented as those from Burma and as items Rakhaing/Burmese from Cox’s Bazar would normally use in everyday life. In Kuakata, the Rakhaing souvenir shops were about the exotic encounters of tourists with the ‘other people’ of Bangladesh, not with ‘people of another country’, as in Cox’s Bazar.

Popular travel websites about Cox’s Bazar mentioned Rakhaing as the people of Burma, who just happened to be living in Bangladesh. Their belonging to Burma is important in Burmis Market, a domestic tourism industry. Adams (2004, p. 116) points out that the tourists’ imagination could serve as a mean for natives to reconceptualise their identity. As I discussed above, the clientele of these souvenir shops were domestic tourists. As tourism presupposes affluence (van den Berghe 1980, p. 375), those clients of Burmis Markets belonged to the affluent middle class of Bangladesh. The majority of the clients were Bengali people (and were assumed to be mostly Muslims, though it would not be possible to differentiate which religious identity they had), with a small number of occasional overseas tourists. The Rakhaing experience—through the Burmis Market—is of a country dominated by the Bengali Muslim middle class, who have more economic power than they do. Moreover, the perceived cultural association of the imported items
not only reinforced the minority status of Rakhaing in the Bangladesh nation-state, but also the Rakhaing’s own perception of their cultural proximity to the Burmese.

This inter-ethnic economic communication with the majority Bengali people is only one aspect of Rakhaing economic lives. More importantly, while these souvenir industries were most apparent in relation to Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar and Kuakata, they only featured as a small section in the overall economic spheres of most Rakhaing. In fact, many of those families that operated such shops would have other forms of economic activity as their main livelihoods. Most of these other economic activities could not be described as ‘ethnic economies,’ exclusive within the contour of the ethnic boundary with their ethnicity being at the forefront of such activities. The souvenir shops reflect the understanding that Rakhaing have distinct cultural characteristics and some goods are associated with these characteristics. As much as consumption of these goods are considered as being characteristically Rakhaing production and trading these goods have also been generally considered by Rakhaing and others as denoting the ethnic ways of the Rakhaing people. These Burmis Markets in Cox’s Bazar and Rakhaing shops in Kuakata sell items which were supposed to signify Rakhaing culture; however these transactions were not embedded within their everyday cultural lives.

Economy in Ethnicity: Ethnicising Consumption

Weaving shawls, bags and Htamees on a handloom was viewed in Bangladeshi popular understanding as a Rakhaing ethnic act and the products as ethnic goods—endowed with the cultural significance of Rakhaing. These products were sold at the shops for tourists, who would pay premiums for the exoticism of ‘tribal culture’. However, for local users
among Rakhaing, these handloom or cottage industries were replaced by mass-produced imports from Burma. *Da-yow* or sarong is a good example of an imported good that replaced the locally produced ones. An informant in Maala Phung/Manikpur complained, ‘It would cost more than 100 taka of material alone to produce a piece of *Da-yow*, while an imported *Da-yow* of higher quality can be bought for less than 100 taka. Who would buy these hand-woven *Da-yow* anymore?’ However, unlike the Burmese products, machine-woven sarongs from Bangladesh or India were regarded as having undesirable characteristics, such as the cloth being too thin or the styles or patterns too ugly for the Rakhaing taste. The most preferred *Da-yows* for everyday use were popular brands in Burma, while for ceremonial uses special ones were ordered from Mandalay in central Burma. Similarly, many other ‘ethnic’ items were imported from Burma.

While items such as *Da-yows* or some traditional medicines were available from Bengali wholesalers who imported bulk through port-to-port transport, other items were transported by *Kung-thay-ma* (small-scale women traders). These items were sold not at Burmis Markets, but at special Rakhaing shops. There were five such shops in 2007, while only one of them was located in one of the malls on the main road. The rest were on the back streets inside Rakhaing Roas. Unlike Burmis Market shops, these shops carried practical items to be used in religious or medicinal activities or even for everyday occasions of the Rakhaing people. Buddha statues, Buddha posters, calendars, religious books, ceremonial materials, Burmese traditional medicines, clothing materials, Burmese tea leave salad, Burmese noodles, fish crackers, and sometimes pork sausage21 were available at these shops. While Burmis Market shops could sell similar items, such as Burmese medicine and Burmese clothing, these Rakhaing shops had them in larger quantities.

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21 Pork was not widely available in Cox’s Bazar. It was only available occasionally within the Rakhaing community. Pork-sausage was in fact more scares than pork, since it was almost exclusively an imported item from Burma.
volumes and more variety. ‘Rakhaing Ethnicity’ itself was the resource in the souvenir shops that generated most interest for Dhaka-based domestic tourists. By contrast, in the Rakhaing community, items were sold in Rakhaing shops fulfil the cultural needs of the Rakhaing people. Based on the ethnicity of the Rakhaing community, these shops provide materials which are used mainly in intra-ethnic activities which are considered by Rakhaing themselves to be uniquely Rakhaing in character.

In addition to these consumer shops, a new form of Rakhaing cultural shop recently opened up in Cox’s Bazar. Two CD shops that sold entertainment or religious recordings imported from Burma opened in 2006/2007. These shops sold musical albums, music videos, movies, dance videos and Buddhist religious recordings in the form of monks’ sermons and praise songs. These CD shops were operated from home as a side business to the owners’ main jobs. They copied and distributed the Rakhaing recordings within the community and introduced popular Rakhaing songs and movies from Arakan State to Bangladesh. For the CD shop-owners, their activity was an economic one—selling CDs. However, their economic activity was only made possible by their ethnicity. Moreover, since these shops did not have a sign, their marketing was based on informal ethnic networks, with word of mouth as their medium of advertising. Moreover, through the Rakhaing musical albums they distributed, Rakhaing songs from Arakan/Rakhine State were popularised among many Rakhaing in Bangladesh. Some of these songs were performed at the Thungran festival activities.

In engaging in Thungran activities, most Rakhaing women dressed in Thungran-ahsung, Thungran dress uniformly worn by everyone within their Ah-Phaw group. The dresses are fashioned after styles largely developed in Burma and are made by Rakhaing tailors. These tailors generally operate their workshops from home; hence only through an
informal ethnic network would one be able to get a Rakhaing style dress. If the ‘Rakhaing dresses’ are made of good quality, expensive material, they are worn on special occasions such as at Thungran ceremonies, weddings, novice ordinations, or ceremonies of religiously significant days. Those of cheaper materials are worn every day at home, or within the community as well as by Burmis Market sales people in their shops. In 2006 and 2007, there were three female tailors in Phaloung Chait and at least one female tailor in every Rakhaing village who provided these services to their ethnic fellows. In most other circumstances, such as attending school or in the workplace, Rakhaing women normally wore Salwar Kameez, which is a three-piece ensemble of trousers, long tunic, and a shawl. This Salwar Kameez was also the normal attire of Bengali women. Consequently, ‘Rakhaing dresses’ are an important ethnic marker for Rakhaing, and the industry derived from this is also marked as an ethnic economic activity.

Victory Day (Bijoy Dibosh), commemorating the surrender of Pakistani forces in Dhaka in 1971, is celebrated with great festivity involving Bengali song and dance. The Victory Celebration, Bijoy Mela, was held at the Public Library ground near the government offices, on the other side of Rakhaing Roas. Most Rakhaing did not get involved in any of these activities, except for the obligatory hoisting of a Bangladeshi flag at their shops on the day. In 2007, one Rakhaing family was selling Mung-poung (Steam Snack: a Rakhaing winter snack) at the Mela, under the banner—written in Bengali—Rakhaing Bhapa Pitha (Rakhaing Steamed Rice Cake). When I approached the Mung-poung stand, we were told by the woman that it would cost us about three times the price she would charge us at her normal place and it would thus be better for us to come to her place within the community, as I had done many times before. Mung-poung was one of the many food items that had been regarded as Rakhaing ‘ethnic’ food and was also available within the
intra-ethnic networks. The perception of ethnic distinctiveness and its associated culinary
tastes has made these economic activities possible within the Rakhaing community.

Similarly, this perception of the cultural distinctiveness of Rakhaing, expressed in the
form of dress, food, and consumer items, gave rise to industries to produce these items
and a market to distribute them. Such economic activities not only fulfilled the material
needs of the culturally distinctive Rakhaing, but also enhanced their cultural proximity to
Burma. Most cultural items were either those imported or those fashioned in popular
styles from Burma. Even though the Rakhaing would not exclusively present themselves
in “things” Rakhaing in everyday life, as many Rakhaing would eat, dress and use items
not considered to be associated with their ethnicity, these goods and foods were regarded
as essentially linked to their ethnicity. These links are the essential elements of ethnic
economic activity, fulfilling the cultural needs of the Rakhaing people. Availability of
these cultural products through these economic activities is pivotal in enabling the
Rakhaing to perform cultural and religious activities that I outlined in earlier chapters.
Unlike tourism-related shops, which sell ‘cultural’ items, these shops and services
provide consumer items for Rakhaing to use in fulfilling their cultural requirements,
including religious, performative, culinary and everyday needs.

Economy with Ethnicity: Trading on Cultural Sameness

For most of the Rakhaing shops selling ethnic goods in Bangladesh, their clientele is not
just members of the Rakhaing community in Cox’s Bazar or Ah-wa-kwan. Their
customer base also includes the whole of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where the ‘ethnic
cousins’ of Rakhaing, such as Marma and Chakma, reside. Indeed, many Rakhaing
moved from Cox’s Bazar to the Chittagong Hill Tracts in order to open up shops that sold ‘ethnic items’.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts the nature of Rakhaing shops has changed, with the majority of the clients being those who identify themselves as Jumma people. These people, especially Marma, are viewed by Rakhaing and by themselves as having close cultural similarities to Rakhaing, and thus, being close in ethnicity. In fact, the Bangladeshi historian, Abdul Mabud Khan (1999; 2006), regards them to be of the same ethnic group, namely the Magh. Khan argues that many of the characteristics of Rakhaing and the Marma such as their language, religious practices, dress and food seem to be the same. Even though a social distinction exists between them as different ethnic groups, Rakhaing and Marma see their cultural characteristics to be similar, while fundamentally differently from those of Bengali people. Due to the phenotypical and religious similarities between Rakhaing and other Jumma groups, they regard themselves to be more culturally similar than with Bengali people.

This understanding of close cultural similarities can be understood in terms of inter-ethnic marriages. The marriage between a Marma and Rakhaing was considered largely unproblematic, even though sometimes not desirable according to some Rakhaing. In contrast, most Rakhaing informants consider a marriage with a Bengali highly undesirable. There were many stories of families moving to Burma to end the romantic affairs of their daughters with Bengalis, even though some Rakhaing had married Bengali Muslims. While there were fewer cases of Rakhaing males marrying Bengalis, there were

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22 The Jumma identity is a collective identification of the twelve separately named groups, Marma being one of them (van Schendel 1992, pp. 95, note 1).

23 As explained in Chapter 2, the term Magh, rejected by Rakhaing and Marma themselves, had been their exonym. While Marma are considered one of the Jumma people by the Jumma movement, Rakhaing are not.
more females married outside of their community. Those married to a Muslim were said to be required to convert to Islam and adopted the defining characteristics of a Bengali Muslim. Moreover, these women were said to get involved rarely in the community/religious activities or participated in the social lives of Rakhaing after their marriage to a Bengali Muslim. In contrast, a marriage to a person from the Chittagong Hill Tracts was viewed as having fewer problems, especially with the Marma people, as such a marriage did not change the cultural practices of a Rakhaing person because Rakhaing and Marma understood that they have almost identical cultural characteristics.

This similarity in cultural practices between Rakhaing and people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts has provided economic opportunities for some retailers from Cox’s Bazar. These shops have items similar to the Rakhaing commodity shops in Cox’s Bazar, but the customers are Hill Tracts people with different ethnic identity from the Rakhaing owners, but whose cultural characteristics are similar. Such owners have been able to operate businesses serving the material needs of these ‘similar ethnic’ practices. Some of their merchandise included clothing from Arakan State, Burmese traditional medicines and cosmetics, and calendars imported from Burma. Other items connected to the Buddhist monks, such as robes, begging bowls, hand-held fans, and slippers, were also sold in these shops. While Rakhine/Arakanese Kung-thay-ma or cross-border female traders originally transported these items from Burma, Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing traded them from Cox’s Bazar to Rakhaing shops in the Hill Tracts.

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24 Informants talked about the person having her nose pierced and having to don the Burka (headdress) as the defining characteristics that the women had adopted after marrying the Bengali Muslims.
In fact, it was not only in the Chittagong Hill Tracts that such trade was possible for Rakhaing, as such a shop also operated in Dhaka. Unlike the Burmis market shops, the Rakhaing shop in Dhaka sold items similar to those in Cox’s Bazar and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Even though the Rakhaing proprietor called his shop ‘Burmis Market,’ unlike the souvenir shops in Cox’s Bazar and Kuakata, its clients were not middle class Bengali from Dhaka. Most of them were Chakma or Marma garment factory workers living in the city, who were familiar with using ‘ethnic goods’ such as Tanetkha and similar cosmetics and traditional medicines from Burma. While the shop had other consumer items, sale of the ‘ethnic goods’ made up most of the transactions in the shop. Just as in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Chakma and Marma were the majority of the shop clientele, according to the Rakhaing salesperson.

As these ‘ethnic goods’ were used in Rakhaing everyday lives, they were also the items of daily use for the Jumma people. Unlike tourists’ consumption at the Burmis Market shops where ‘ethnic goods’ are transacted for their cultural association to the Rakhaing ‘otherness’, goods at the Rakhaing shops are bought by their clients for use in their daily lives. Based on their identification of cultural similarities between them and these Hill Tracts communities, Rakhaing were able to engage in a process of selling these items in the Hill Tracts. It was through their ethnicity— being identified as the users of these goods—that they were able to conduct an economic activity among the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts, who were also the users of these items.

While most of the ‘ethnic goods’ sold at the Rakhaing shops are imported from Burma, some products are locally produced. One such item is fish paste or Ngapee (literally, ‘pressed fish’). Ngapee is produced in villages near the salty waterways, the most important being Thawdeejya/Chowfaldandi—the biggest Rakhaing village in Cox’s
Bazar, with about 1,000 households. Ngapee involved small prawns, half dried in the sun and pounded finely, making it into paste. Most families in Thawdeejya were involved in producing or trading Ngapee. Most Ngapee produced in Thawdeejya was transported to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, targeting the Jumma communities. A number of families in Thawdeejya had their shops in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where some family members also lived permanently. Producing Ngapee has been exclusively a Rakhaing affair, and Ngapee is viewed as Rakhaing food—regarded as an essential cooking ingredient in a Rakhaing dish. The Jumma people, who are regarded by others, and view themselves as, having similar ethnicity to Rakhaing, also regarded Ngapee as an important ingredient in their ‘traditional’ dishes. This cultural similarity between Rakhaing and Jumma allows the former to engage in providing Ngapee. Though Ngapee is used by Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar and Ah-wa-kwan, small local productions provide enough to cover the local demand.

Rakhaing were not the only people originally from outside of the Chittagong Hill Tracts to become engaged in economic activities there. Unlike the Bengali migrants from other parts of the country, who are seen by many as dominating and destroying the way of life of the Jumma people, Rakhaing fulfil the cultural needs preferred by these people. Items such as Ngapee and imported goods are viewed as being different from those transacted by the Bengali people. More importantly, they are viewed as being ethnically significant in sustaining the cultural lives of Rakhaing and Jumma people. For example, a Bengali Muslim businessman had tried to enter the Ngapee business with a mechanised processing plant but was unsuccessful because the clients would not buy his product due to its inferior quality. Rakhaing commented on his endeavours in two ways. Firstly, he could not provide a quality Ngapee, as they were able to do, hence confirming their ‘ethnic connection’ to the product. Secondly, his endeavour demonstrated to the Rakhaing
and Jumma that a Bengali Muslim would do anything for economic benefits, even though Ngapee had not been traditionally consumed or produced, or even averted by the Bengali people due to its strong pungent smell. Moreover, this experience was considered to be a reflection of the threat to the economic and social conditions of the Rakhaing people in the Bengali Muslim-dominated country.

While trade in Ngapee occurred mainly between Rakhaing and Jumma, the alcohol trade is conducted with the wider society. Alcohol is a forbidden product of consumption in Muslim majority Bangladesh (Government of Bangladesh 1990). However, there have been reports of alcohol drinking becoming ‘quite common in Bangladesh’ (WHO 2004). In Phaloung Chait, alcohol can be purchased without a medical permit in two types of locations. One is at the legal ‘bars’ of luxurious hotels near the beach, while the other place to buy alcohol is in ‘illegal’ shops in the Rakhaing community. While these legal bars sell alcohol at inflated prices, the ‘illegal’ shops provide cheap homemade rice wine, produced in and transported from rural areas.

Though alcohol is apparently illegally available in almost every part of Bangladesh, in areas where the Rakhaing community existed, alcohol producing and trade seemed to be associated with Rakhaing ethnicity. In rural areas, Rakhaing are alcohol producers, but in Phaloung Chait, they are retail sellers. Even though only a very small proportion of the Rakhaing population engaged in the alcohol industry, trading and consume alcohol were considered an essential part of Rakhaing ethnicity. A senior law enforcement officer in Cox’s Bazar said that ‘these Buddhist people are granted a privilege to consume alcohol, in accordance with their culture.’ 25 Though alcohol is traded everywhere in Bangladesh,

25 He admitted that he did not know alcohol drinking is against Buddhist teaching, but just assumed that drinking was part of Rakhaing ‘culture.’
in places where Rakhaing communities are located, alcohol trade has been marked as an ethnic activity of Rakhaing. The cultural essentialism involved in associating certain items with Rakhaing has also allowed them to gain significant influence and sometimes dominance over the industries related to alcohol.

Rakhaing Economic Life in Bangladesh

The Rakhaing shops in Cox’s Bazar and Kuakata that sell souvenirs to tourists and those in the Chittagong Hill Tracts that trade in ‘ethnic goods’ are economic activities made possible through the ethnic distinction of Rakhaing from the Bengali majority and through their ethnic proximity to the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts. These industries have derived from the cultural characteristics of the Rakhaing people in relation to particular goods, which are considered by themselves and by others to reflect the essence of their ethnicity. However, these industries comprised only a small fraction of Rakhaing economic life.

Many Rakhaing are also employed in various private and public industries. Some of them hold very influential positions at their workplaces or are able to run their businesses with substantial success. In the pursuit of these economic activities, however, Rakhaing perceive they are being discriminated against or dominated by the majority Bengali people. Though many Rakhaing are working as senior public servants or as senior non-governmental development workers, Rakhaing generally believe that they would not be given leading or senior positions—that is positions with real decision-making ability. While a Rakhaing woman was a member of the national parliament between 2001 and 2006, some Rakhaing recounted that she had not been able to instigate any structural change for the economic development of Rakhaing, though she may have provided
minimal help for community development initiatives, such as government financial grants for the monasteries. Similarly, Rakhaing senior bureaucrats are said to be unable to actively help their communities because by doing so they would jeopardise their careers in the bureaucracy, which they believed only existed to further the interests of the majority Bengali community.

Even though there is a prevailing view amongst Rakhaing that they are being discriminated against as a minority population, they still believe they can gain some important bureaucratic positions, which are associated with having a significant social influence in Bangladesh. These positions are available to them because they are legal citizens of the country. While most Rakhaing view these senior government positions as hard for anyone in Bangladesh to get, they understand that these are even harder for them to gain than for Bengali Muslims. Even still, it was accepted amongst Rakhaing that a person with the right qualities—right educational credentials, right amount of money to bribe, and right social connections to influence the appointment—could still get a senior government job. More importantly, there had been instances of successful Rakhaing senior government officials in 2007, such as medical doctors, a District Judge, the Superintendent of the Police, Magistrates/Assistant Commissioners, District Land Surveyors, some senior officers in the armed forces, and a former Member of Parliament.

Those involved in private industries, such as general retail, gold smithing, or overseas import/export with Burma, regard their positions within these industries as subservient to the interests of the Bengali people. Moreover, the involvement of those ‘outsiders’ in the ‘ethnic economies’, such as Burmis Markets or Ngapee trade, reinforced the perception that Rakhaing are living with an increasing threat from majority domination. At the same time, these ethnic economies, such as the Rakhaing Mohila Market in Kuakata and the
Rakhaing shops in Chittagong Hill Tracts, are opportunities Rakhaing derive from exercising their ethnicity strategically in relation to the state and the people of other ethnic categories.

Ethnic economies that have so far been discussed involve economic activities that derive from the ethnicity of the Rakhaing people. However, one’s ethnic identification as Rakhaing does not guarantee a successful economic venture in these industries, as the economic life of Jaw Maung from Cox’s Bazar shows. By the end of 2007, Jaw Maung and his wife were running a Burmis Market shop on the main street of Cox’s Bazar near the Burmese School. Jaw Maung had tried other economic endeavours before. He had tried to find work in Burma and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, with some lengthy periods of unemployment in between. His life reflects the history of his attempt to engage in economic activities through his ethnicity.

Jaw Maung’s wife was a Rakhaing from Cox’s Bazar, but she grew up in Akyab, Arakan State, where most of her relatives still live. In the mid 1980s, her family returned to Cox’s Bazar, where she married Jaw Maung in the late 1980s. After the marriage, Jaw Maung worked in one of the two Burmis Market shops owned by his mother. However, in late 1990, his family lost all of their shops. After the ousting of Ershad from government in 1990, the democratisation of Bangladeshi national politics was followed by an open market economic policy that saw direct official trade between Burma and Bangladesh. With the opening of the border, the port-to-port trade of Burmese bulk goods supplied these shops with cheaper items compared with those obtained from cross-border Rakhaing Kung-thay-mas/female traders. In anticipation of the peak tourist season, Jaw Maung’s family had in stock a large quantity of the goods at the more expensive prices. With the flood of cheaper bulk imported goods, Jaw Maung’s family lost a substantial
amount. To compound their investment disaster, Bangladesh electoral politics interrupted normal life in the country, and the anticipated peak tourist season did not eventuate. *Hartals* (or strikes) and associated political violence stopped tourists from visiting Cox’s Bazar that year. Without these tourists, Burmis Markets were not able to sell their goods, leaving many families, not only Jaw Maung’s, out of business.

After these failures, Jaw Maung’s family engaged in selling alcohol, while Jaw Maung went to Burma to find a job. Without any trade skills, and almost illiterate in Arakanese/Burmese, his choice of work was very limited. Being unable to find a substantial business venture, he returned to Cox’s Bazar. When I first met him, he was unemployed, and his family mostly relied on his mother’s income from her alcohol shop. While he was not working, his wife sold alcohol at home, by holding a small quantity and selling strictly to those whom they knew well, meaning selling almost exclusively to Rakhaing. Jaw Maung said, ‘We don’t sell alcohol to Bengalis, only to friends, and we only stock a few bottles to cover our livelihood.’

Again, this small business venture was disrupted after a police raid. Jaw Maung escaped being arrested after paying a 4,000 Taka bribe (matching the monthly salary of a junior level public servant was also about 4,000 taka). Even though he had paid regular bribes to the local police, his shop was raided as part of the directive from the district level. After this trouble with the police, Jaw Maung went to one of the towns in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, to open an Ngapee shop.
In that town, Jaw Maung’s mother’s brother had an established Ngapee shop. The uncle helped him to set up an Ngapee retailed business at the market which opened one day a week. With his uncle’s help, opening the shop was quite easy, but he was not able to sustain the business. He said regarding this business failure that he had to compete with already established Rakhaing Ngapee shops, catering to a clientele with a great consumer loyalty. One of the reasons might be that he could not communicate with the people, who have different dialects from him, though they speak a similar language. Other long-established residents would not have had such a communication problem, as they would have been familiar with these dialects. Moreover, most of the established Ngapee businesses had much higher turnovers than Jaw Maung. Consequently, these businesses could buy directly from the producers—meaning a cheaper price and a bigger profit margin. After his six-month stint as Ngapee seller in the Hill Tracts, Jaw Maun returned to unemployment in Cox’s Bazar. Another reason for his return was the loneliness without his family and friends. Most other established Rakhaing traders had been living in Hill Tracts with their family for many years, and had forged friendships with either local people or other Rakhaing residing there. Since Ah-Phaws (friends) were very important in socialisation, most days for Jaw Maung were restricted to ‘doing nothing,’ waiting for the once a week market day. ‘On non-market days, I just stayed at home. I watch a lot of television [satellite TV; indicating his lonely social life without any friend].’ However, he insisted the reason for his return was simply an economic one, as he was unable to make a good business out of Ngapee selling, a successful ethnic economic pursuit for many Rakhaing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
During his unemployment, his wife made egg-peanuts, which were sold through Burmis Markets. He helped her by buying ingredients, but I never found out whether he helped her in the actual production process. Whenever I visited him, his wife would be cleaning peanuts, cooking the egg-peanuts or packaging the final products. He was generally doing nothing, until he opened a Burmis Market shop in late 2007 after I had completed my fieldwork. With a limited Bangladeshi education, Jaw Maung’s economic choices were limited to commercial employment. Without many trade skills and limited capital, he was not able to engage in the economic activities of the wider society. His economic potential was mostly confined to ethnic economies. Even then, he had difficulty in establishing a viable business. While ethnicity was an important element in his business ventures, it did not guarantee his success. These ethnic economies were exclusive spaces where Rakhaing were able to exercise their economic opportunities with better freedom and less competition within the political economy of Bangladesh. Hence, Jaw Maung who lacked individual business acumen to compete in the wider economy was able to find some opportunities in these Rakhaing ethnic economic activities, even if they ultimately failed him.

Conclusion

Ethnicity is a social category of a group of people considered by others and themselves to have a particular set of cultural characteristics, even though these characteristics are never absolutely defined. Physical objects, which are constituent parts of these cultural characteristics, are perceived by others and the members as a reflection of the people’s ethnicity. This association of consumer items with Rakhaing ethnicity has resulted in both the souvenir shops in Cox’s Bazar and Kuakata, and the Rakhaing shops in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, including the Burmis Market shop in Dhaka. However, these two industries
have two different ways of relating ethnicity and economic activities. In the tourist-based souvenir shops, goods are presented as artefacts to be collected by tourists in commemoration of their encounter with Rakhaing living in Cox’s Bazar and Kuakata. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Dhaka, the consumer goods are sold as goods to be consumed by the people who have a similar ethnicity to Rakhaing. Even though these two industries are related to Rakhaing ethnic identity, the ways they unfold in both economic situations are different. In the tourism industry, Rakhaing ethnicity is possible because of their social marginal status in relation to the dominant Bengali middle class, while transactions undertaken in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are part of the local economy in which people with similar ethnicities participate. Moreover, the souvenir markets are about the relationship between Rakhaing and the Bengali middle class who represented the mainstream society in Bangladesh.

The economic dynamic of ethnicity is not only about selling ethnic goods to ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (Eriksen 2005). It can also be about access to the economic opportunities available in everyday life. Even though there are some opportunities in both development NGOs and in the private sector in Bangladesh, Rakhaing understand that a Bengali Muslim has a better chance in realising these opportunities. They understand that the business, political and social institutions only serve the interests of the dominant majority population.

The Burmis Market is a tourist industry operating at a national border town. It also occurs at the ethnic frontier between the minority Rakhaing and the dominant majority Bengalis and the national border between Burma and Bangladesh. The economic exchange between these two groups of people does not change the established ethnic relationship between them. Rakhaing continue to regard themselves as the marginalised minority in
the nation-state dominated by ethnic others, while the Bengalis regard Rakhaing as the ‘others’ who really belong outside their nation-state. At the same time, the Rakhaing shops in Cox’s Bazar, the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Dhaka constitute economic activities occurring as part of the ethnic practices of those who share their cultural characteristics and their social status as a minority in the country of cultural others, namely Bengali Muslims. In the Bangladesh context, Rakhaing are considered to belong to a separate social category, in terms of their ethnicity: their historical origins, religious believes, and other cultural characteristics, such as dress, dance, language and food. In the contour of unequal ethnic relationships in Bangladesh, their ethnicity is a strategic resource in acquiring economic advantage for Rakhaing entrepreneurs. This marginalised position had become an economic opportunity for some Rakhaing, but at the same time has reaffirmed the popular imagination of Rakhaing’ ethnic belonging to Burma.

During the Ree-Loung Pway ceremonies of the 2007 Thungran, some Burmis Market shops re-opened during the afternoon, after the water-plays. That year’s tourist season had not been as lucrative because of the political violence relating to the postponed election and the 7 pm curfew on businesses by the caretaker government. In order to recover some of the losses from these political restrictions, some Rakhaing shops stayed open even during Thungran. The state’s policies had inadvertently restricted Rakhaing economic interests. This restriction reflected just one aspect of the relationship between Rakhaing and the state of Bangladesh. Bangladesh Rakhaing related to the state and the dominant majority in a more complex way than simply through the realm of a dominated minority at the margin of a nation. Even though this notion of a dominated and repressed minority is the most prevalent perception among Rakhaing, they still have to interact with state agents to protect or promote their interests while they live with the majority population as their neighbours.
CHAPTER 7: SHADOWING THE STATE

Introduction

On the second day of the 2007 Ree-Loung Pway, the Rakhaing Buddhist Welfare Association (RBWA) had its official opening ceremony of Thungran at its office building in Phaloung Chait. It was a significant ceremony for the RBWA, since the Deputy Commissioner, the highest administrative officer in the district, was one of the guests. Most members of the central committee and the leading members of the local and village branches were present at the ceremony. These Rakhaing members sat quietly to listen to the speeches delivered by the administrative officers and leaders of the RBWA. They witnessed how their ethnic leaders mingled with senior administrative bureaucrats during and after the ceremony. This orderly presence of the silent audience was seasoned occasionally by noises of Rakhaing people dancing, drinking and partying outside. Instead of joining them in the celebration of Thungran, these members sat silently in the hot, crowded room. Their attendance was to support their organisation’s leadership in the ceremony where the senior state officials were entertained.

In Chapter 5, I discussed how Rakhaing community organisations such as the RBWA achieved recognition as a representative of the community from national and international agencies. In this chapter, I will explore the implication of this recognition for the everyday lives of Rakhaing in Bangladesh. I begin with how the formal state structure exists at Bangladesh’s local level. In outlining the state structures, I not only describe the formal relationships between different sections of the state structures, but also how these relationships manifest in the everyday life of the people. In the following sections, I will present examples of cases of land grabbing faced by Rakhaing people in rural areas.
Through these cases studies, I explore how the social relationships between Rakhaing individuals and the senior level state agents have helped Rakhaing to assert political influence on their local-level state agents.

I will argue that these political influences against local state authorities did not derive primarily from the strength of the community organisations, as most conventional wisdom on civil society suggests, but from Rakhaing individuals’ strategic positions in their relations with state structures of Bangladesh. In explaining these political influences of the Rakhaing organisations and individuals over the local-level state authority, I will use the imagery of a religious practice of the reverence for a monk’s shadow in central Burma. In the 1980s, most lay people in central Burma would not walk over the shadow of a monk on the road. If there were no way of avoiding the monk’s shadow, the layperson would stand still letting the shadow to pass over her. This reverence however was not towards the shadow itself, but the monk, who caused the shadow. The shadow was regarded highly because it was linked to the monk. This imagery of the reverence for the monk’s shadow as his extension will be used to represent the influence that Rakhaing organisations and private individuals asserted on state agents and how this resulted from the latter’s apparent link to the Bangladesh state and the larger international areas in which the state seeks to situate itself favourably.

Encountering the State, Living in the Society

In explaining the nature of the Rakhaing Buddhist Welfare Association, a Rakhaing who had been working in a development organisation said that it was a ‘community-based organisation’ (CBO). His argument was that the RBWA as an organisation existed with
the support and the membership of the Rakhaing community. Generally, a CBO is one of the many forms of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Fisher 1997). However, in the broader Bangladeshi context, an NGO generally refers to an organisation autonomous from state control, but involved in development programs. Having a prominent role in the social, economic and political landscape of Bangladesh, these development NGOs are said to fill ‘the gap between society and state’ (Lam 2006, p. 101). Indeed, they NGOs are sometimes considered to be the ‘mantle’ of civil society (Rahman, Sabeel 2006). Similarly, membership-based grass-root organisations, such as the RBWA, are generally categorised as the components of civil society, which exists in opposition to the state.

In the usual conceptualisation of ‘state versus society’ relations, community organisations exist to represent the interests of people against the influence of the state. Being commonly considered as a failed state, Bangladesh’s ‘civil society’ organisations are viewed positively in representing the interests of the local community. In terms of development NGOs, Sarah White (1999), for example, points out that they maintained mostly a collaborative relationship with the state agencies so that they could provide necessary services for the local populations. However, these development NGOs have actively created the image of themselves as the true representatives of the people in the local community in its relation to the state (White 1999). This indicates that the role of an organisation not controlled by state mechanisms falls into a more complex relationship than a simple dichotomy of state versus society.

In order to understand how an organisation, including a development NGO, is involved in the politics of representation of the local community in relation to the state, Devine (2006) urges us to pay attention to its embedded and situational character in relation to other social and institutional processes. At the same time, the concept that the state is a
disembodied structure has been critiqued as an effect of state practices (Mitchell 1991) which are experienced in the everyday lives of the local people (Aretxaga 2003). Hence, it has been pointed out that the state should be understood as the ‘bundles of social practices every bit as ‘local’ in their social situatedness and materiality as any other’ (Ferguson 2006, p. 84). The relationship between the state and ‘civil society’ must be studied as to how they are locally situated in relation to one another and how they are constituted in terms of other forms of social relationship in the everyday life of the people. The state-society relationship, however, is not simply about the relationship between the state and civil society, but how different levels of the state relate to one another and how they interact with social actors who in themselves are also equally different from each other.

Responding to my question on a hypothetical robbery scenario, a Rakhaing informant said that she would approach the police as the first stage in addressing the situation. At the same time, she would inform the Chairman of the Union Parishad. The police and the Union Parishad were two of the locally constituted state institutions that most Rakhaing encountered on a daily basis. Bangladesh is a unitary governmental system—meaning that legislative, executive and judicial powers rest on a central government. However, the process of decentralisation of the government, in the rural context, has created a four-tier structure of government with Zila Parishads (District Councils), Upazila Parishads (Sub-District Councils), Union Parishads (Union Councils)\(^1\) and Gram Sarker (Village Councils). Of all these local government institutions, the Union Parishad is the only local government body elected directly by the people. The process of decentralisation has created 4484 Union Parishads (Rashid 2005, p. 787). Nine wards within a Union elect

\(^1\) In the urban context, beside the City Corporations of the six major cities, Paurashava or municipalities are the local government bodies which were set up under different legislation from the rural/regional bodies (Panday & Panday 2008).
one ‘chairman’ and twelve members (representing each of 9 wards, plus three female reserved seats). These Union Parishads are responsible for ‘various judicial functions, primarily maintenance of law and order, as well as economic, social and community development’ (Westergaard & Houssain 1999, p. 184). For most people in regional/rural Bangladesh, the Union Parishad is the only state institution that they will face in their everyday life.

The chairman of a Union Parishad is elected by the whole Union population, and all the administrative and executive powers of the Parishad are concentrated in him/her (Zafarullah 1997, p. 47). The Chairman is not only the supervisor of all activities of the Parishad, he is also the person who is the point of contact between the Parishad and other organs of the government. One example before 2008 was official identification of an individual, without national identification card. The national identification card was introduced for the 2008 General Election (The Daily Star 2008c). Before the national identification card system, during my fieldwork, the ‘Chairman Certificate,’ a document issued by the Chairman attesting to the personal details of an individual, was an essential document to identify a person for other government departments, such as the police station or district administration. The ‘Chairman Certificate’ was the most important identification document, especially for the purpose of state identification of individuals. It indicates the nationality of individuals, as well as showing other aspects of their identity, including ethnicity and religion. Other documentation, such as school certificates, could be used as identifications in some cases, but for most rural populations, the Chairman Certificate was probably the only form of state identification. Another important area where the Chairman can assert his influence is the judicial process. ‘The

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2 It was possible to have a female chairperson. However, the literatures, including legislation, on Bangladesh Union Parishad invariably used ‘Chairman’ to indicate chairperson.
Village Court Law 2006 entrusts the Union Parishad with the power to constitute Village Courts to resolve petty civil and criminal disputes...[It] consists of a chairman and four members’ (Danish Institute for Human Rights n.d). The Chairman gets involved in most aspects of state practices that affect the everyday lives of the people in the rural areas.

The process of gaining the positions of Chairman and Union Parishad members is by popular election. However, a Union Parishad election is a costly affair. In Westergaard and Houssain’s (1999) discussion of a Union Parishad election in 1997, they point out that chairman candidates spent from 300,000 taka to 650,000 taka3 on gifts and outright vote buying. Similarly, such cases are believed to be widespread in the Cox’s Bazar district. The amount of money that was needed in a Chairman campaign was said to be even higher in 20064. Elections of members also involve a large amount of money; though much less than a Chairman’s campaign. For instance, in a failed campaign for a position as a member of a Union Parishad in southern Cox’s Bazar in the late 1990s, a Rakhaing woman was believed to have spent at least 60,000 taka, which was a large amount of money for her. Money is not the only requirement for a successful campaign for a position in the Union Parishad. Westergaard and Houssian (1999, p. 201) find that Union Parishad members and the Chairman traditionally come from landed families; though the landed versus landless distinction has not been as significant recently in the daily lives of the villagers as it traditionally was. Most of the Union Parishad members and Chairmen would already be members of the influential classes (Zafarullah 1997, p. 47). A Chairman of a Union Parishad is a significantly influential person in the local context, as he is likely to be already socially important, and his office would allow him to assert political power. As these local elites control the mechanisms of the Union Parishad, ordinary people have

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3 60 takas were equal to one Australian dollar at the end of 2007.
4 The amount of election expenses for a chairman post was said to be at least one million Takas.
to rely on them for the goods and services provided through it. However, these local political leaders have only a limited scope in terms of state authority. Even though democratically elected by the people, the activities of the Union Parishad are supervised by the higher-level state structures.

In the official state structure, a Union Parishad exists under the Upazila Parishad. Unlike the Union Parishad, the Upazila Parishad is under the total domination of bureaucrats who are answerable to the central government (Zafarullah & Khan 2005, pp. 156-157). Among these bureaucrats, the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) is the principal functionary of the Upazila Parishad. He has overall control over other bureaucrats in the Parishad. UNOs are senior officers of the administrative cadre of the Bangladesh Civil Service (popularly known as the BCS). The most senior officer of the BCS administrative cadres in a district is the Deputy Commissioner (DC), who also has the responsibility of monitoring and evaluating the activities of local government institutions, as well as the functions of other government institutions at the local level (Government of Bangladesh 2006).

The office of the Deputy Commissioner is the principal organ of central government administration at the district level. It is responsible for most of the state’s activities at the district level, which also include judicial activities through magisterial functions (Government of Bangladesh 2006). The Deputy Commissioner is the chief of the district administration and he is supported by the BCS cadres, namely the Additional Deputy Commissioners and Assistant Commissioners/Magistrates who are appointed by the central government, as well as the junior officers, who are recruited locally. The BCS cadres hold superior bureaucratic power in conducting many functions of the state within the district. Some of the activities that I witnessed Assistant Commissioners (generally
referred to as Magistrates) conducting during my fieldwork included supervising high school exams, inspecting schools, organising security for religious festivals, coordinating emergency situations (such as during natural disasters) and inspecting compliance with building codes. While other offices of the central government ministries existed in the district, the DC office is responsible for coordination between them. Hence, it is associated with almost all state activities in the district. Through their involvement in these activities, administrative cadres, especially the Deputy Commissioner, become the embodiment of the state in a Bangladesh district.

The Central Government at the Local Level

While Bangladesh is a unitary political system with a strong central government, it is also an electoral-democratic country, with more or less regular elections, and a parliament functioning in a Westminster system of government. A member of national parliament is elected based on a constituency that consists of different rural Unions and urban areas. These parliamentary members are influential leaders of the local chapters of political parties. As senior members, the local parliamentarians have a high level of influence over the Union Parishad Chairmen of the same political party and more influence if they belong to the same faction within the party. Due to weak political party structures and factional differences, local parliamentarians or senior party leaders might not be very effective in some cases. That is because the party loyalty of members for most local leaders depends upon ‘lucrative returns for their support’ rather than their political orientation (Zafarullah 1997, p. 51). In one of the southern unions of Cox’s Bazar, a local Parliamentary member was said to change his party allegiance to the winner of every national election. However, in a nearby union, the Union Parishad Chairman was a strong
party man with an unchanging loyalty to one political party. That Chairman had helped
to fulfil a request from a district level leader, willingly ignored the official rules to provide
an identification certificate for a person who was not from his Union or even from
Bangladesh. Hence, the relationships between Union Parishad members and the members
of the national parliament from the district are based on their political or social
relationships, rather than on the state-provided structures. Even though members of
parliament are elected as representatives of local constituents, they do not necessarily
spend much time in their local areas. As Zafarullah (2007, p. 166) points out, ‘[village folks …for instance, can easily relate themselves to the more visible local council officers than their chosen parliamentary representatives who prefer to live away from their Constituencies’. Being able to access the services of their own local Parliamentarians is
not an easy task for an ordinary person who lacks any social, political and economic
means to access these politicians. However, if an individual is able to approach the local
Parliamentarian, it is possible for him to assert influence through the member upon the
Chairman and Union Parishad members.

While a parliamentarians’ influence fluctuates based on electoral fortunes, the district
bureaucrats are part of a stable structure. Especially those in administrative cadre of the
Bangladeshi bureaucracy have a more stable position of influence during their posting.
Their influence on local government structures derives from their being on the top of
district-level state structures. From the point of view of the local population in rural areas,
UNOs and DCs are where the real authority lies. They are the ones who make final
decisions, including reversing or changing decisions of Union Parishad Chairmen.

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5 In the 2001 election was Cox’s Bazar divided into four constituents, hence returned four members of parliament.
Moreover, these individuals, being embodiments of the state structures at the district level, can assert great influence upon the workings of other state institutions, especially local level offices such as land survey and police. Since these administrative cadres are ‘consistently placed in positions of authority at various levels and in a variety of organisations’ (Zafarullah 2007, p. 165), they are regarded as powerful individuals even by other government institutions outside of their jurisdiction. For instance, a Magistrate could contact a senior police officer (Officer in Charge, OC) from another district regarding the theft of her personal property. My observations were that a police officer would promptly oblige the request of a senior bureaucrat from another district.

Even though it is the duty of the police to deal with cases of theft, ordinary people without state power are not be able to approach the OC directly. To make a report to the police, an individual has to first meet with a police clerk, who will write up the complaint. This will then be submitted to a Sub Inspector (SI), who later passes it on to the OC. The OC would then instruct the SI to deal with the matter. The complainant would have to give some money to the SI for his ‘trouble’ to come and inspect the crime scene. By contrast, a senior bureaucrat, even from another district, would be able to directly approach the OC, who would promptly conduct the task, without the need for a bribe.

To get a form processed at the police station would not only take a long time, but depending on the case, would also cost a considerable amount of money. In a robbery case in early 2007 in Cox’s Bazar, the victim’s family did not go to the police. When I asked my informant, who was a family member, why they did not go to the Thana (the police station), he laughed and said: ‘Do you know how much it would cost? We might

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6 When I asked why the person reporting an incident did not write the complaint, I was told that the clerk could write in accordance with the regulations. The person gave the clerk a small amount of money afterward, as a ‘gift’.
as well buy a new necklace with the money to go to the police. It would cost that much to go to the *Thana.*’ Even after giving the bribe, there is no guarantee that it would be solved. According to my informations, this experience with the police and other state agencies was explained with the phrase: ‘this is Number Two [the second grade] country’.

On top of such inaccessibility of the police service for ordinary people, some Rakhaing are at the receiving end of corrupt police behaviour in relation to their livelihoods, such as dealing in alcohol or ‘illegal’ cross-border trading. It is illegal for Bangladesh citizens to consume alcohol and to trade it without a licence (Government of Bangladesh 1990). However, as noted earlier alcohol consumption has been associated with the Rakhaing ethnic imagination, and it has been used widely on Rakhaing social and cultural occasions. Along with the general acceptance of alcohol consumption, some Rakhaing are engaged in alcohol production in the villages and retail businesses in Phaloung Chait. Most of these industries are located well within the Rakhaing Roas. These alcohol shops are often raided by the police. Generally, most Rakhaing individuals pay a bribe not to be charged or not to be disturbed again. Most Rakhaing experience the police, an everyday organ of the state’s violence, as something with which they should not associate. Their experience with the local police has been that of ‘fear and weariness’ (Zafarullah & Siddiquee 2001, p. 470). Such a view of the police being ineffective and corrupt is not, however, unique to the Rakhaing community, since the negative reputation of the police is common throughout the country (Hasan 2002).

Beyond the police, accessing the higher bureaucratic structures is also very difficult for an ordinary person in Bangladesh. The formalised process involves bureaucratised layers of officialdom and prolonged decision-making by officers, who are ultimately responsible to the DC in a district. In addition to this bureaucratic formalism, the official
language of educated individuals, *Shadhu-Bhasha*, is different from the local Chittagonian dialect, the only dialect for the majority of illiterate people in Cox’s Bazar. For an ordinary person, accessing these state agencies beyond the locally situated Union Parishad is a difficult and costly affair.

Members of state structures in senior positions can influence the activities of lower-level state agents, even though they might not be structurally linked. These individuals are also able to protect (if not promote) their interests with ease, when it comes to state mechanisms through their bureaucratic colleagues. For those who are not agents of state structures, they have to rely on other resources, the most important one being money in the form of bribes (Khan 2003). Those who do not have money to approach higher-level state structures have to rely on formal processes. These formal processes take a long time and involve travelling long distances to administrative centres located away from villages. On top of this, results of these processes are unpredictable, as other parties involved might have more of an undue influence upon the state agents. Many of my informants advised they would try to avoid dealing with these state agencies through these formal processes. For many ordinary people, these higher-level state agents were almost inaccessible to provide their services, and most of these services were less relevant to everyday experience. It is the Union Parishad, the lowest level of the state structure, with which most ordinary people interact in their everyday lives. However, when they face problems from the activities of the Union Parishad itself, ordinary people have to seek the services of senior bureaucrats. In seeking these services, most Bangladeshi encounter great difficulties in their quest for redress through the formal processes, as in the land-grabbing case involving the villagers from Ree-Karing-Khoung.
Rakhaing Villagers and the Local Elite: A Case Study

Ree-Karing-Khoung is a Rakhaing village in Shunda Union⁷, in the north-eastern part of Cox’s Bazar District. Ree-Karing-Khoung is located on the district border between Cox’s Bazar and Bandarban. Travelling from Phaloung Chait to this village involves four stages. The first takes about an hour to a large town on a major highway. The second stage is from this town to Shunda Town, on a local dirt road; which takes about an hour in a run-down jeep. From Shunda, it is another twenty-minute trip on a brick tract in an auto-trishaw or a jeep. From the brick tract, one has to walk for about fifty minutes to get to Ree-Karing-Khoung. Since it is located less than ten kilometres away from Burma’s border, it is regarded as a ‘remote’ village in terms of accessibility from Phaloung Chait. It is not only remote, but Ree-Karing-Khoung is also a small village in size. Its thirty-five Rakhaing households collectively are not sufficiently significant as a vote bank even to elect a local ward member.

The chief of the Rakhaing village, Roa-zaa, used to have some administrative authority as the representative of the Bohmong Raja (the Marma Chief) of Bandarban Circle (now Bandarban District). In the modern political context, the village had been re-located within Cox’s Bazar district. The Rakhaing Roa-zaa no longer had political significance and his office was no longer recognised by the state administration. His role as the village headman was only recognised spiritually as ‘the husband’ of the village guardian spirit, Roa-Shung-Ma. While these village cultural leaders still played a central role in the rituals and community events, they had no formal political decision-making influence within the current state systems. Moreover, their influence within the context of wider Rakhaing

[⁷ The name of the Union and Rakhaing village has been changed.]
community had been limited mostly to respected positions, rather than as office holders with an ability to change public decision making processes.

Most villagers from Ree-Karing-Khoung worked as daily-waged workers in a rubber plantation owned by a Bengali movie actor from Dhaka. The villagers used to own rice paddy fields, but only three families now had a little land to farm. The rest of the villagers had mostly sold off their land to neighbouring Bengali people. The most formally educated person in the village was the son of the Roa-zaa who had studied at a university in Dhaka. However, he did not finish his study, and was living in the village without any employment at the time of my visit. Three households within the village made alcohol as their livelihood.

The Rakhaing village was politically insignificant for the Union Parishad Chairman election due to its small population. Moreover, the villagers also occupied socially and economically underprivileged positions and unable to access the higher state structures through their personal social networks. On top of it, the local Bengali Muslim leader that they had normally backed in the Union Parishad Chairman election did not win the position in 2006. Moreover, the new Chairman, who was the local member of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), did not have a good relationship with the villagers.

Ree-Karing-Khoung village was located on two adjacent small hills: the main village and the monastery with a smaller settlement nearby. The houses were built on the bigger hill, while the monastery was on a nearby smaller hill, to the north of the village. The monastery occupied only on a small area on one side of the hill, leaving the rest of the hill as khas (government-owned) land, as with most of the hills in the area. The monk in Ree-Karing-Khoung village was originally from Arakan State in Burma. He was an ethnic
Arakanese and had been involved in Arakanese nationalist movements. He fled Burma as a member of an Arakanese nationalist organisation, which was active in the area until in the early 1990s. He continued to reside in Ree-Karing-Khoung as the village monk. One of the activities that the monk had devoted himself to in the village was to claim other parts of the monastery hill by developing the land as a mango orchard. He also persuaded some Rakhaing families to settle next to the monastery. He (on behalf of the village committee) also applied for a legal grant of the land claimed for the Rakhaing village, but it had not been approved as of early 2007.

Map 5: Ree-Karing-Khoung village and surrounding areas
NB: Adopted from Google earth (2002). The older settlement occupied the whole of the largest hill.

*Khas* or state-owned land, is reserved for redistribution among landless people (Barkat 2001). Landless people without a homestead would be given priority in the redistribution of *khas* land so that they could build their homes. However, local elites generally have control over the mechanisms of land distribution, and it normally only benefits them.
Devine (2006, p. 85) says the only interest that ordinary people can hope for from *Khas* land distribution and other such schemes, is for the spoils to ‘trickle down’ from members of the elite who are their patrons. In the surrounding areas of Ree-Karing-Khoung, the *khas* land on the monastery hill had not been officially distributed and many landless Rakhaing villagers understood that the land in the close proximity of their village would be distributed mostly to them. However, Harun, a Bengali who lived in a nearby village, started to lay a claim to a portion of this *Khas* land to sell it off to a landless Bengali.

Harun was a cousin of a local Union Parishad member. He was from the family with the most land and the biggest kin group in the surrounding area. To get to their village from the main road, Rakhaing villagers had to walk through his family compound. Some of the Rakhaing villagers and Harun had previously had some conflicts. The villagers had accused Harun of harassing them during their travel to and from the main street. Harun was said to have demanded free alcohol and such food as chicken from the Rakhaing alcohol producers. He had cut down all the large trees on the monastery hill during the night without leaving anything for the villagers’ household use. Even though Harun had threatened their security and resources, the villagers were too afraid of him to complain.

The village doctor from Ree-Karing-Khoung said:

> Harun came at night to cut trees on the hill. I tried to stop him from encroaching into our land and cutting down all the trees in it. I was the only one who tried to stop him. Since I was alone in complaining against Harun, I started to be fearful for my own security and I stopped talking against him. .... The village is very over-crowded now. If we do not protect our rights to the land, where will we live? A Kula\(^9\) can live anywhere if he pays the money to the authority to build a house. We cannot do that, that is not in our belief system [a house has to be within the village boundary under the protection of the guardian spirit]. If the Bengali took the land next to our monastery, where will we go and live?

\(^8\) The villagers informed me that it was illegal to cut down trees in the government forestry areas for commercial purpose. However, it was allowed to harvest a small amount of forest products for personal use such as firewood for household use.

\(^9\) *Kula* refers to Bengali Muslims, generally with a derogatory meaning.
Harun first took a plot of land and sold it off to a Bengali Muslim. That plot was on the southernmost side of the hill, and the villagers only complained to the resident, who told them he bought the land from Harun. A few months later, another Bengali Muslim started to clear the land a bit closer to the Rakhaing new settlement. When the villagers could not stop either the person who was building or Harun, who was said to have sold off the land, they approached the local Union Parishad Chairman to intervene. The Chairman set a date to hear the land dispute case between Harun and the Rakhaing villagers. However, the villagers realised that Harun was close to the Chairman, and it was very likely that the Chairman would try to decide favourably for his follower. Though it might be an illegal decision, appealing against it would involve a long and costly process at higher levels of administrative and judicial hierarchies. Their local patron—the former Chairman—was not able to provide any protection against Harun. To protect their interests, they had to stop the current Chairman making a favourable decision for Harun. The village doctor and the monk asked the RBWA central committee to help them in the case.

Special Guests to the Village Court

The President, Vice President and four other RBWA members travelled to Ree-Karing-Khoung monastery on the day of the Village Court appointment. I accompanied the RBWA members on their trip to Ree-Karing-Khoung from Phaloung Chait. The RBWA team travelled to the village first to meet with the villagers. Then, they travelled together with the villagers to Shunda Union Parishad office. However, it just happened that the
President and Vice President of the RBWA arrived at the office before us: the monks\textsuperscript{10}, the villagers, other RBWA members and I. When we arrived at the Village Court, the two Rakhaing leaders were already sitting in the reserved areas next to the Chairman. The Village Court was separated into two areas by a low fence-like barrier. The smaller but higher area was where the Chairman sat looking over to the other side of the barrier, with a desk in the middle and four chairs against the wall; the Chairman’s seat was the biggest and most decorated. There were wooden chairs on each side of the area. While the Chairman sat on the middle chair, the members of the Union Parishad committee occupied other seats. There was an entrance on the left side of the area, where female witnesses or complainants presented themselves standing. The area on the other side of the barrier was larger and there were many plastic chairs. It was on this side where most people sat and male litigants presented themselves to the Chairman by standing near the barrier.

The RBWA President and Vice President sat on the smaller area, on the right side of the Chairman. One of the RBWA central committee members said later that when the presidents informed the Chairman of their intention to attend the land dispute hearing, he greeted them properly and gave them the seats near him. When the monks, other villagers and I arrived, the court was in the middle of hearing another case\textsuperscript{11}. All of us sat on the chairs in the larger area. Harun arrived at the court just before his case was heard. He presented himself dressed in a suit, from the entrance of the smaller area. He was given a seat on the left side of the Chairman in the smaller area, next to where two Union Parishad members were sitting (see Figure 18). While the Chairman treated the President and Vice President as special guests and accorded with seats in the ‘special are’, Harun also

\textsuperscript{10} Two monks from other parts of Cox’s Bazar came to Ree-Krine Chaung to support the local monk.
\textsuperscript{11} We witnessed this hearing on a domestic case involving a Muslim male from Burma and a local Bengali female.
occupied in the same area. This already indicates the differential status all of the people present at the village court; showing the degree of access each individual possesses to the Chairman.

Figure 18: Shunda Union Parishad’s Village Court plan.

The village monk presented his case standing on the other side of the barrier. He spoke in Rakhaing, which was translated by a RBWA member in formal Bengali language or Shadhu-bhasha. After the monk had spoken, Harun spoke in Shadhu-bhasha. During the hearing, many people interjected, including the President and Vice President of the
RBWA. While the local people used the local dialect, the two RBWA members used only *Shadhu-bhasha*. The RBWA leaders said to the Chairman that they were there as independent observers, and they would accept the Chairman’s decision only if it was in accordance with the law\(^\text{12}\). They were implying that they could easily access higher decision-making bodies, and they were willing to use their ability to access them if they were not satisfied with the Chairman’s decision. The Chairman did not decide the case on that day, but he referred it to a meeting on a later date at the site of the conflict. He also agreed that the RBWA delegation would be attending the site hearing on that day.\(^\text{13}\)

From the villagers’ perspective, this postponement was a victory as they originally believed that the Chairman was to decide the case on that day. Though the villagers did not believe that the Chairman would outright grant the whole hill area to Harun, they thought he would negotiate to allow Harun to have a smaller portion of the land. Though it was a compromise, Harun would still greatly benefit, since the villagers wanted the whole hill for themselves. One of the villagers commented, ‘The chairman was going to give five acres to Harun.’ Regarding the document, which was supposed to show the land ownership of Harun’s family, one of the village elders said, ‘Everyone in the area knows that this is Rakhaing land. Everyone knows that it is a Rakhaing hill.’ He implied that Harun had forged a document. One of the RBWA members also pointed out that if there had been a decision, it would be harder to change it, since it would involve getting to the higher level of state agencies, such as the district court. At the same time, the villagers

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12 A RBWA member attending the hearing with me translated this from Bengali into Rakhaing, since I do not understand Bengali.

13 On the next appointed date, on 12 January 2007, the Chairman did not arrive. The state of emergency was declared in the night of 11 January 2007, and the military-backed caretaker government of Fakhairudin Ahmed took over the power. The Chairman, as many other political leaders of the previous government, had gone into hiding. By the time of *Thungran* in April 2007, the hut in the disputed land, built by Harun, was destroyed by the police under the order of the *Upazila Nirbahi Officer* (UNO) of Ramu. Rakhaing informants from the village I met in Cox’s Bazar simply said ‘it was settled,’ but I have no further information about Harun or the Bengali person who bought land from him.
decided to approach the Deputy Commissioner’s office and the senior leaders from the political party of the Chairman. This postponement also gave time for the RBWA leaders to contact the senior administrative officers and the district-level leaders within the Chairman’s political party.

The victory at the Village Court on that day was attributed to the presence of the RBWA leaders. One villager commented:

People in the court were awed by the Shadhu-bhasha of the presidents. Since they could not understand what these presidents were saying, they could not interject. The Chairman was afraid of committing himself to Harun in front of the RBWA members.

The RBWA members intentionally used Shadhu-bhasha (the formal/literary dialect) to indicate that they were educated. They were dressed in good pants and quality garments. On our way to Phaloung Chait, a member who had worn a western suit that day said, ‘I wore this suit to make sure that they could see we were not ordinary people.’ Rather, they presented themselves as people having significant educational and social importance. This posturing of importance was to highlight their high social status in the view of the Chairman, Union Parishad members and other people at the village court. However, it was not only their social status, which allowed them to influence the Chairman. They were also the leaders of an organisation, which claimed to represent the Rakhaing community.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that they were members of a religious and ethnic based organisation, they did not present themselves in terms of religious significance. Nor did they present themselves as the leaders of an ethnic community. Rather they claimed, through their cultural practices, to be socially important Bangladeshis. More particularly, they claimed to be members of the national elite. This desire to associate primarily with the national elite, rather than the cultural norms of their own ethnicity, had not created
any conflict between the supposed traditional and modern concepts of leadership, in this instance between Monks and village heads, on the one hand and educated and more affluent, on the other.

Shadowing Power: Influencing the State Structures

The RBWA existed not only because Rakhaing participated in it, through their membership, their involvement in meetings, and the various positions they hold. It also existed because it was registered with the government, though this official registration was not the only contact it had with the state. A myriad of state agents had communicated through it to the Rakhaing community. For instance, the state delegated RBWA to act on its behalf in the distribution of government stipends for Rakhaing students (Narinja News 2005a). In another example, during the 2006 Ramadan festival, the Deputy Commissioner invited the RBWA members to represent the Rakhaing community in his Ifter or fast-breaking ceremony. At the same time, many senior state agents actively participated in the activities of the RBWA. Ministers of the Bangladesh government and senior bureaucrats appeared as the chief guests or special guests at its functions such as the general conference and cultural ceremonies. When these senior state agents attended its functions, many junior officials from the district administration accompanied them. Hence, these junior bureaucrats, such as the Magistrates and the UNOs (Upazila Nirbahi Officers), came to understand the RBWA as an important community organisation within their jurisdiction.
These associations with senior state agents were publicised in RBWA publications, namely the *Rakhaing Reviews*. Some of the stories featuring the RBWA were also reported widely in the local Bengali language newspapers. Such engagements between the RBWA and the state agencies are not simply about the symbolic recognition of the RBWA as a representative of the Rakhaing community. The RBWA’s involvement in many other land-grabbing cases was especially pertinent to the Ree-Karing-Khoung case. The most prominent case occurred at the time of the visit of then President Ershad to Cox’s Bazar in late 1990. President Ershad visited the Town only to meet with the Rakhaing community. The RBWA took the central role in the meeting with Ershad. One of the meeting participants, who had later become a leading member in the RBWA, said:

> During the meeting, Rakhaing requested him to help them with debt money that we owed to the government for our hand-looms and the Rakhaing cemetery from the Bengali’s land grab. Ershad ordered that the Rakhaing cemetery be cleared of Bengali land grabbers.

As a result of the meeting between the Rakhaing community and the President, Rakhaing regained an important cultural landmark. More recently, the RBWA was also involved in other land-grabbing cases, while some were successful, as in the repossessing of Wimattala monastery from a land-grabber (*Narinja News* 2005c).

Many local-level state agents in the district recognised the RBWA as having access to the higher state structures, at least to meet personally with the DC, the highest bureaucratic authority in the district. At the same time, through media representation, it had also presented itself to many Rakhaing people as having access to the higher structures of the state. This recognition from its own community and the local-level state agents that it had access to higher state structures had influenced the practices of these local level agents. In these practices, elite status is affirmed both in inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations, yet does not change the broader structural exclusion and marginalisation faced by the
Rakhaing community as a whole. Even though the RBWA might not always be able to assert its influence all the time, at least in the land-grabbing case in Ree-Karing-Khoung village, it was able to assert an influence upon the Union Parishad.

In Westergaard and Alam’s (1995) case study of a development NGO working to mobilise landless poor, the organisation itself put up its own candidates in Union Parishad elections. Unlike that NGO, the RBWA did not generally involve itself in directly controlling the official political positions in the Union Parishads. However, it was able to strategically approach the higher level of the state structures to redress the interests of Ree-Karing-Khoung villagers. Whilst it did not have a formal influence either structurally or politically over the decision of the Chairman, the RBWA members presented themselves to the audience in the village court as having a close social link to those who had greater structural and political influence than the Chairman. Though they did not have formal state power to influence the working of a state agent, in this case the Chairman of the Union Parishad, they were able to influence his decision or the potential outcome.

A condition of the RBWA being registered as a community organisation was that there were structures within the RBWA in which some members were recognised as office holders, such as the president and the secretary. These positions were not formally part of state structures, but they were recognised by state agents as being socially important. This recognition of importance helped these members to assert political influence over some state agents. Such influence was made possible because of the ways state structures linked to each other and the agents behaved with respect to each other. The influence that the RBWA leaders asserted in the land case did not come from its direct association with the Chairman himself. Rather it stemmed from its links to the agents in the higher structures of power, which had a direct influence upon the activities of the Union
Chairman. This influence, however, was not simply an extension of the existing power structure, as Hossian (2006) argues in the case of some local NGOs in rural Bangladesh being an extension of the local political elites. The RBWA’s influence had its origin in the appearance of its link to the higher structures.

As the shadow of the monk, to which the people in central Burma showed reverence as the extension of the monk himself, the RBWA’s influence is the shadow of the state, its extension of power, in the guise of the organisation’s political influence. The RBWA’s influence did not come from its own intrinsic formal power. However, its apparent link to the higher structures of the state gave it the political influence on the Chairman. In itself, the RBWA was not a structure of the state. It was recognised as having a strong social link with the higher structures of the state. Its political influence derived from it being able to shadow the power of the higher-level state agents.

Individual shadows of the state

My conceptualisation of an organisation being a shadow of the state derives from how state structures operate in relation to one another and how its agents relate to each other. The political influence of the RBWA, a community-based organisation, did not come from the empowerment of a civil society section that it claimed to represent. As a shadow of the state in Bangladesh, the RBWA was able to assert political influence due to its social and political link to the higher structures of the state. Hence, an individual with strong links to the state agents would also be able to assert political influence in a similar manner.
In a similar case of land grabbing in another Union Parishad of Cox’s Bazar, Chan-thaagree, Rakhaing villagers approached a prominent Rakhaing individual from Phaloung Chait in their dispute with a Bengali farmer. The farmer is said to have claimed a parcel of *khas* land for personal farming, though Rakhaing villagers had used it for *Pann* (betel leaf) cultivation. Betel leaf is cultivated on a swidden farming system, using one area for two or three years. After three years, the farm is left for one or two years without cultivating anything. During one of these fallow years, the Bengali farmer claimed the land for rice cultivation.

When the local Union Parishad Chairman refused to intervene, the villagers approached Kyaw Shun Maung. He was a director of a leading Rakhaing development NGO and an important member of the Cox’s Bazar Branch of an international organisation of business and professional leaders (Rotary International District 3280 Bangladesh 2007). His wife was an important member of a leading political party, and considered to have great political influence within Cox’s Bazar District branch of that party. Local newspapers carried photos of his wife and him meeting leading politicians and bureaucrats, including the Deputy Commissioner, the highest ranking bureaucrat in the district. Villagers said Kyaw Shun Maung ‘made a few phone calls’ and the land grabber backed down. Before going to Kyaw Shun Maung, the villagers tried to solve the dispute through the local forestry department, but the land grabber did not comply with its direction. A villager said;

[The land grabber] had a bigger *Ahh* [literally strength]. The Chairman didn’t do anything for us. Therefore, we went to [Kyaw Shun Maung].15 Only then, did the Kula back down. I think they got scared of him.

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14 This is not the real name of the village.
15 They used a nickname with Sara as a prefix to indicate his position as a teacher at a college, post-secondary school.
From the mid 1990s, Kyaw Shun Maung had involved himself in a leading Rakhaing community organisation, taking up many leading roles in it. The Rakhaing NGO in which he had been pursued various development projects (including a primary school) and an office building of the same NGO in Chan-thaa-gree. However, the villagers did not approach Kyaw Shun Maung through the NGO he was involved in, but they sought his involvement on a personal level.

Kyaw Shun Maung’s influence in the case was viewed by the villagers as an individual act, because Kyaw Shun Maung had *Ahh* (strength or power). From the villager perspective, his *Ahh* derived from his access to higher levels of political and administrative structure. He did not hold an official position within government or formal administrative structures. However, the villagers and other Bengali Muslims involved in the case understood that he had social links with those in senior positions of the political and bureaucratic structure. Kyaw Shun Maung’s political influence derived from a multitude of politically important social relationships in which he was implicated. His involvement in international organisations, along with many of his NGO’s projects funded from overseas, was regarded as signs of his international connections. At the national level, his wife had held an important political position in national politics, while he was the principal of a post-secondary educational institution. Moreover, the local newspapers also occasionally reported, sometimes on the front pages, the news of his wife and he meeting important social, political and bureaucratic leaders. Even though these social connections in themselves might not guarantee political influence of the state structure, they were recognised by the Rakhaing villagers and others involved as having a political influence upon those people who occupied senior state positions. Even though he was not a formal part of the state structure, Kyaw Shun Maung had a socio-political influence as a shadow of the state over the likes of the local level state agents.
An international shadow of the state

Unlike Kyaw Shun Maung or the RBWA, I did not have the locally acknowledged link to any of the individuals who were officers of the Bangladesh state. In Bangladesh, I was only a foreign researcher. However, I was ethnically a member of the Rakhaing community, albeit of Burmese origin and Australian citizenship. My ethnicity had allowed me to develop social relationships with many Rakhaing whom I had not met before. During my visit to Ah- wa-kwan in southwestern Bangladesh, I became friendly with a Rakhaing individual, Ba-jee Thein. Using fictive kin terms, I was able to approach him regarding my research issues. When I showed an interest in the land grabbing problems he was facing, he asked me to accompany him to the police station the next day. He said he wanted to report to the police that a Bengali individual backed by some local politicians had stolen his crops. Ba-jee Thein and that individual were already engaged in a legal dispute, which was still waiting at the time to be heard at a district court. Although the district court had ordered the Bengali not to touch the crops until the land dispute case was settled, he had forcefully taken the rice crops that Ba-jee Thein had cultivated. Previously Ba-jee Thein had informed the police, but they had not done anything since the Bengali had the backing of the local politicians.

At the police station, I introduced myself, in English, to the Officer in Charge (OC). I informed the officer of the reason for Ba-jee Thein’s visit, but I stressed the fact that I was there only to observe him in the process. The OC ordered another officer to take Ba-jee Thein’s case. Though I did not say anything, and understood nothing regarding their

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16 Ba-jee refers in real kin terms to older brothers of one’s father or husbands of older sisters of one’s mother. However, it was used in non-kin relationships to indicate a relationship to someone of greater age. Fictive kinship does not imply any obligatory relationship.
conversations, I stayed on waiting for Ba-je Thein to finish. He told me that police had promised him to look seriously into the issue. Later, he also told me that he was successful in protecting his crop from further thefts. He insisted that my presence at the police station helped him to get the real help from the police. I pointed out to him the reason for his success could be the fact that the military-backed caretaker government currently in power did not tolerate the abuses of power by the politicians. However, he said:

No. You are from the countries of power. He (OC) is aware of the fact that you could talk to your government. Your presence makes them to act promptly and effectively to help my case.

From his point of view, the police viewed me not as another member of the Rakhaing community, but as someone who belonged to the category of Bideshi (foreigners). Bideshi, in the above case, refers to me as a citizen of a western or developed country. Since Bangladesh received a large amount of foreign aid (1099 million US dollars in 2006-2007) (Bangladesh Bank 2007, p. 18), it was believed by some people in Bangladesh that their government was forever trying to appease western governments.

Moreover, as a PhD researcher from Australia, it was believed that I would be able to access the Australian government officials, if I wanted to17. Hence, in Ba-je Thein’s point of view, I was the one with great influence or with access to these influences simply by being a research candidate in a western country. This perceived influence however did not come from my individual attributes, such as my use of English language or my officious looking university visiting card. These attributes only confirmed my belonging to an educational institution in Australia. Rather, my perceived influence came from the images of unequal international power relationships. Such images arrived into the

17 However, in reality, I did not have such access to any governmental officials, either in Bangladesh or Australia.
people’s houses through satellite television and radio broadcasts\textsuperscript{18} (such as BBC non-
English services). International stories on the American Coalition’s invasions of
Afghanistan and Iraq reached the living rooms of many ordinary Bangladeshi through
national television, affirming the power of the West. More importantly in the national
context, the diplomats of developed countries and international organisations dominated
by these countries such as the IMF and UN, would make comments on the political
conditions of Bangladesh (\textit{The Daily Star} 2006a; \textit{The Daily Star} 2006c; \textit{The Daily Star}
2006d; \textit{The Daily Star} 2006e), using the rhetoric of democracy and human rights. These
images were viewed by Bangladeshi people as examples of western influence on the
international and national agenda of Bangladesh. Even winning of a Noble Peace Prize
by Muhammad Yunus in 2006, for his poverty reduction efforts through micro-credit
system, (\textit{The Daily Star} 2006j) was viewed as a political act of western nations that
wanted Yunus to be a future political leader of Bangladesh. When Yunus declared he was
forming a political party, \textit{Nagorik Shakti} or Citizen Power (\textit{The Daily Star} 2007b), a
Rakhaing informant who listened to both Bengali and Burmese BBC radio programs and
followed Bangladeshi satellite Television news commented:

\begin{quote}
Yunus will form a government. The military-backed caretaker government
will detain all other political leaders. After they all have been put away,
Yunus will be elected without any real opposition.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

In the people’s perception, political development in Bangladesh occurred under the
direction or in accordance with the wishes of the states of developed countries, especially
the United States.

\textsuperscript{18} The role of radio among Rakhaing in Bangladesh had been studied by Md. Abdul Hoque (2006).
\textsuperscript{19} The Bangladesh Constitution stipulates the installation of a non-party caretaker government for a short
time to conduct parliamentary elections. The second caretaker government supported by the military
came to power in January 2007, after dismissing the original caretaker government. The military-backed
government detained many political leaders, including two former prime ministers. For more information,
see Hagerty (2008).
Moreover, the state agencies sometimes provide security for western foreigners visiting the local areas in southern Cox’s Bazar. In 2007, a staff member of a foreign donor agency visited a Rakhaing village in Teknaf. A contingent of four or five police officers and a military intelligence agent accompanied her, providing security at the border area of Bangladesh. Although she was not the first or only foreigner to have visited the village, she as an individual associated with a western agency being accompanied by the agents of state only compounded local villagers’ perception of western governments’ influence over the Bangladesh state. From the villagers’ point of view, the most fearful state agencies, the police and the military intelligence, were at the disposal of a Bideshi, an official of a western institute or government. Villagers’ perception of the global dynamic of power relations in which Bangladesh was enmeshed as a dominated state was compounded by the presence of foreign aid projects in their daily lives. This perception of their country as a dominated state, had led to viewing a Bideshi, a citizen of a developed country, as having a political influence over Bangladesh’s internal policies.

In contrast to a Bideshi of a developed country, citizens of Burma—cross border traders and refugees—arriving in Bangladesh did not carry such an aura of importance. Most refugees were regarded by the Rakhaing as people to be avoided, as I discussed in Chapter 4. At the same time, the Bangladesh government regarded them as illegal and a potential security threat. One of my informants had some photos of an Arakanese political activist, but he destroyed them fearing that Bangladesh security agents might find them in his possession. Although I shared a similar ethnic background to these Arakanese refugees living in Bangladesh, my Australian citizenship and my affiliation to a western institution allowed me to be seen as having an influence over some of the state agents. I did not have any formal relationship with the state structures of Bangladesh (or Australia for that matter). However, my social connection to an institute in a developed country had become
a political influence for a Rakhaing villager in his approach to the police process. I too could be regarded as a shadow of the state.

Ethnicity and shadowing the state

Even though not formally connected to the state structures, the RBWA members, Kyaw Shun Maung and I were able to assert some political influence on the practices of state agents. These influences upon local level state agents were a result of apparent social connections to the higher level of state authority. In these cases, the official state agents were either against or not willing to protect the interests of the Rakhaing people who by themselves did not have sufficient political, social or material resources to exert any influence. However, the perceived involvements of the RBWA, Kyaw Shun Maung and myself had led to changes in the behaviour of these state agents. These changes were not the result of bribery, which could have had the same effect. At the same time, these influences did not derive from the mobilisation of the community or civil society against the state. Rather such political influences came from our apparent social links to higher levels of the state power. Our involvement could have the potential to become a problem for local-level state agents in their subordinate relationships to their seniors. These results did not derive from the forces of civil society working against the state, nor practically accessing the higher-level state agents. It came about primarily from what was perceived to be our links to higher levels of state officialdom.
Rakhaing villagers, without social, economic or political resources against local state agents, approached other Rakhaing who they believed to have influential social connections. In Ree-Karing-Khoung, during the visits of the RBWA central committee leaders, the village RBWA branch was re-formed, replacing the previously ineffective village committee. During the meeting for reformation, the villagers affirmed their commitments to be more active in organisational activities. From the early 1990s, the RBWA had been trying to claim a position as the representative of the whole Rakhaing community in Bangladesh. One way of achieving this goal was to have branches established in every location of the country which had a substantial Rakhaing population. Hence, RBWA leaders in the early 1990s travelled to almost every Rakhaing village which might not have had any previous direct relationships with urban-based Rakhaing elites. Through the RBWA activities in which those village leaders had participated, a social network based on ethnicity was established. Such social connections made possible the involvement of RBWA leaders. The organisational mechanisms of the RBWA had allowed the development of a social connection between the Rakhaing people. This social connection had been instrumental in Rakhaing villagers’ attempt to get political influence against those who occupied state positions in their local area.

In the Chan-thaa-gree case, the Rakhaing development NGO in which Kyaw Shun Maung was involved had some developmental projects in the local village. The Rakhaing NGO had been able to attract some funds from overseas sources to be used exclusively for the villagers. Through their involvements in these projects, many of the villagers had come to know Kyaw Shun Maung personally. The development projects organised in the name of the ethnic Rakhaing community had been important in establishing the social connections between him and Chan-thaa-gree villagers. Similarly, my relationship with Ba-jee Thein was not simply about researcher-informant interaction, but was also dictated
by the cultural norms of a Rakhaing host and a guest, an older Rakhaing man and younger one, as well as of an intra-ethnic relationship.

In each of these cases, political influence over the decision-making processes was drawn from each entity’s association, either real or perceived, with the State. More precisely, it reflected each party’s ability to show connections to these elites with decision-making power, yet the influence of these entities was unable to change the social and political structures in which the Rakhaing community as a whole was located at the margin. Traditional cultural leadership still enjoyed respect and support within the community, but its influence was unable to impact on the political dynamics of the modern State, on which the urban elite, by contrast, had some influence. This collaboration highlighted that we should not look at the components of community with the framework of “traditional” and “modern”. In fact, such dichotomy would fail to reveal how social powers were implicated in everyday politics. At some junctures of local conflict, cultural and religious leaders of the Rakhaing villages cooperated with the urban based social elites to carve out whatever influence they could assert over the decision-making processes.

Conclusion

In the cases presented in this chapter, ethnicity is seen to have had played a significant role in the social connections between the Rakhaing elites and the villagers who were without any social, political and economic connections to influence local state agents. When those state agents did not provide any protection for Rakhaing interests, the latter approached elites with whom they had social connections. These connections did not come from particular familial, collegial or other such relations, but from activities associated with their ethnicity. This ethnic connection had been highlighted through their
participation in activities conducted in the name of ethnicity itself, such as participation in ethnic community organisations or ethnically exclusive development projects. However, social communications within the Rakhaing ethnic group did not exist in opposition to the state. In fact, these social communications were strengthened because they could be used in better association with state agencies and officials, from the point of view of the villagers.

The relationship between the political structure that is known as the state and the group of people identified as Rakhaing was not simply about pitting each against other. Because of the hierarchical relationship between the people in local state positions, those with the higher authority could influence local level agents beyond their respective formal roles. Individual Rakhaing who had social relationships with those in higher state structures were thus able to assert influence over local level state agents. This influence had changed the activities of many local state agents who otherwise had not given help to the Rakhaing people, who otherwise would not normally be able to gain even informal access to their state agents at any level in order to protect their interests. This influence was not the result of patron-client relationships between ordinary Rakhaing and their elites. It derived from the implied links of their organisation and individual patrons to people within higher structures of the state, who were thus presumed to support local Rakhaing. While it is possible that other types of relationship between ordinary people and other patrons exist for the benefits of ordinary Rakhaing as I discuss in the next chapter, in some cases common ethnicity has been the link between the local Rakhaing and their elites which had helped to protect or promote their interest. These cases of shadowing the state highlighted the Rakhaing ethnicity of the villagers, while it also shaped local understandings of citizenship in the Bangladesh nation-state.
CHAPTER 8: BEING A MINORITY BANGLADESHI: THE POLITICS OF CITIZENSHIP IN THE NATIONAL MARGINS

Introduction

The musical concert on the last day of the 2007 Phaloung Chait Ree-Loung Pway celebration was held in the Zaret\(^1\) area of Khaw-paza-tan. The ground had a brick boundary and an iron gate. The band played mostly Rakhaing songs. In the area in front of the stage was the dancing crowd, made up almost exclusively of Rakhaing celebrating the last day of the Ree-Loung Pway (See Figure 19). A large crowd of Bengalis, massed on the street looking over the brick wall, witnessed the Buddhist Rakhaing drinking, singing, dancing and throwing water at each other. The police who were stationed at the entrance gate stopped those Bengalis who tried to enter the dancing ground, while allowing the Rakhaing to enter the compound. The Rakhaing were thus provided with an exclusive space by the Bangladeshi authorities to celebrate their cultural rituals. This chapter explores the relationship between the state and Rakhaing in their everyday lives and how the latter understand this relationship.

\(^1\) The village or quarter’s communal building and ground.
I first discuss the way national identity is conceptualised in Bangladesh, and how these conceptualisations have produced a sense of marginalisation for the people who were neither Bengali nor Muslim. I then discuss how Rakhaing experience the state in their everyday lives, and how this influences their understanding of the Bangladesh state. In the next section, I explore the relationships between material and discursive processes that inform Rakhaing’s understanding of their lives in Bangladesh. However, not all Rakhaing have the same everyday experiences in their interactions with different state agents and other people in Bangladesh. I will also discuss the experiences of Rakhaing from different social and economic stance points. In the last section, I explore how these differences among Rakhaing relate to the nation-state of Bangladesh. Notwithstanding these differences, a common sense of marginalisation prevails among the Rakhaing. While their sense of marginalisation could be seen as a product of identity formation at
the national level, it is also locally constituted. Hence, the issue of how they understand their role within the nation-state of Bangladesh has to be understood not only from the national perspective, but also from the localised, everyday experience embedded within other social and economic challenges facing individuals.

Bangladesh as a Bengali Muslim State.

It is generally argued that the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 was the assertion of a distinct cultural identity among Bengali people of the then East Pakistan (Uddin 2006; Alam 1993, p. 93; Osmany 1992; Ahmed 1994). According to Ishtiaq Ahmed (1996, p. 254), East Pakistan had changed into Bangladesh in a process which ‘seeks to synthesise the Bengali linguistic identity with an Islamic one’ by the people of eastern Bengal. The genesis of the cultural identity of “Bangladeshi” would imply the emergence of a Bengali identity which was different to that of India’s West Bengal and that of an Islamic identity which was separated from that of Pakistan. The historical emergence of Bengali cultural identity in East Pakistan/East Bengal was deeply intertwined with the history of other ethnic minorities in the present day Bangladesh, as demonstrated in the ethnonym of Burmis and Burmis markets which emerged in the pre-1970 era.

However, in the post-independence era, the central debate on Bangladeshi national identity has been focused on the role of Islam. Thus, Willem van Schendel (2001, p. 114) points out that the process of state formation in Bangladesh has been conceptualised in terms of religion, whether or not ‘Islam,’ as the focal point of national identity. The two main political parties, namely the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh National Party (BNP), are said to represent the two different ‘brands of nationalism’
The ‘secularist’ brand of nationalism, promoted by AL, focuses on the Bengaliness of 98% of the people of Bangladesh who identify themselves in this way, ‘that is, [as] speakers of the Bengali language and sharers in a culture which they identify as Bengali’ (van Schendel 2001, p. 112). In another form of nationalism, the religious identity of Islam is emphasised to recognise and celebrate Bangladesh ‘as a predominantly Muslim country’ (Uddin 2006, p. 138). This form of nationalism is attempts to differentiate Bangladesh with West Bengal, the neighbouring Indian state with a Bengali majority. These two brands of nationalism focus on the ethnic and religious identifications of Bengali people, while they exclude the role of other diverse groups under the category of ‘non-Bengali non-Muslim’ (Karim 1998, p. 303).

This exclusion of ‘non-Bengali non-Muslim’ people is reflected in the rituals that have been performed for the state (and state formation) such as Independence Day and Victory Day, as well as in the public rituals performed by state agents. For example, Ekushey February, 2 which commemorates the Bengali rejection of Pakistani Urdu Language domination, has become a celebration of the independence movement of Bangladesh (Uddin 2006). Ekushey February is portrayed as an episode of national liberation, and hence affirms the centrality of Bengali culture in the national imagination. Pertinent in the rituals performed by state agents are what Raiz (2005) called ‘Islamist politics.’ He refers to the facts of the political leadership employing Islamic symbols in political discourses. Yet the constitutional provision of Islam as the state religion, even though it might have been legally very important, does not feature so prominently in the everyday lives of ordinary people. A Rakhaing teacher of a higher educational institution in Cox’s Bazar said that he did not even know about it. Conversely, the public expressions of

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2 The 21st of February, the Language Movement Day in Bangladesh, has also been commemorated by the United Nations as the International Mother Language Day.
Islamic rituals among politicians and bureaucrats of in their state activities reach the everyday sphere of ordinary people through the media. Just as the Burmese government-controlled media overtly presented the Buddhist idioms and gestures in their broadcasts, Bangladesh’s state-run television, BTV, airs Islamic rituals prominently, such as the prayer calls five times a day. At the same time, the images of political leaders, publicly presenting themselves as the defenders of Islam or devout Muslims, reach the living rooms of Bangladeshis through the media. Even those political leaders who have claimed to adhere strongly to secularism present themselves publicly associating with the Islamic symbols (Riaz 2003). At the same time, the rise of Islamic politics has allowed ‘Islamic’ political parties such as Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami to gain electoral importance, as it became a junior partner in the BNP-led coalition government (2001-2006). As aspects of Bengaliness and Islam have been the central focus of the Bangladesh national imagination, the roles of Bangladesh’s ‘Others’ have been simultaneously marginalised through state discourses.

On the 9th of August 2006, the World’s Indigenous People Day, a student organisation of Cox’s Bazar, called the Bangladesh Rakhaing Students’ Council, organised a rally. The students’ demands at the rally were similar to the demands of other indigenous ceremonies in Dhaka and elsewhere (The Daily Star 2003b; The Daily Star 2004d; The Daily Star 2005b; The Daily Star 2006f; The Daily Star 2008a). These demands included constitutional recognition, education in the mother language, guarantee of community, religious and land security, and provision of ethnic minority rights. Though they are silenced within the main discourses of Bangladeshi nationalism, ‘other Peoples’ of Bangladesh have actively asserted their voice in the national imagination. This resistance occurs through a multitude of means, such as in the form of the ‘armed resistance’ of
Shanit Bahini and the PCJSS\(^3\) (van Schendel 1992, p. 125; Bal 2000, pp. 197-200; Ali 1993), electoral participation (Mohsin 2001, p. 20), and public protests such as demonstrations (SEHD 2007). In some of the activities of indigenous movements, the representatives of Rakhaing community organisations have been actively involved; such as participating in the Adivasi Cultural Festival 2007 (SEHD 2007) and in the different umbrella indigenous organisations, such as Bangladesh Adivasi Odhikar Anlodon (Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Movement) (*The Daily Star* 2006b). These activities of the Rakhaing could be regarded as contestations against the dominant discourse of Bengali nationalism, similar to the political and social activities of other ‘non-Bengali non-Muslim’ peoples.

The student rally of the 2006 World’s Indigenous Peoples Day marched on the main street of Cox’s Bazar from the Burmese School until it reached the Deputy Commissioner’s office. The march was stopped by the police near the DC’s office, so the Rakhaing students were unable to reach the central hub of administrative power in the district. However, they were allowed to gather on the platform or on the margin of the main road, where a member of the association gave a passionate speech (see figure 20).

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\(^3\) PCJSS stands for *Parbattya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti/ Chittagong Hill Tracts People’s Solidarity Association.*
He was surrounded by fellow Rakhaing students and local newspaper reporters, while the passing traffic gave a curious glance before moving on. While they had been able to march on the main street, they were removed to the footpath when they approached the district administrative headquarters. This physical moving aside of the indigenous rally reflected the symbolic and actual political scene at the national level. In a real political sense, the ‘other peoples,’ most of whom live literally in the cartographical peripheries of Bangladesh, are ‘pushed to the margins’ of the national imagination (Karim 1998). With the focus being on Islam and Bengali culture as the defining characteristic of a Bangladeshi; those with different ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds have been turned into ‘minorities’ (Mohsin 2001, p. 18) and their issues considered ‘a minor problem’ in the broader national political landscape (Uddin 2006, p. 145).

The minoritisation of ‘other peoples’ of Bangladesh has resulted in the Rakhaing perceiving Bangladesh as a country of Bengali Muslims. In their understanding of Bangladesh as the nation-state, they have excluded themselves from the national imagination. In early 2006, a Rakhaing with an accumulated wealth from his overseas
work migrated to Burma. He said his main reason to migrate to Burma was his perception of Bangladesh as ‘Kulapray’ (Bengali-Muslim country). Many other Rakhaing people also shared this notion of Bangladesh as Kulapray. In 2005, a Rakhaing youth was killed on his way from Dhaka to Cox’s Bazar. My Rakhaing informants believed that he was killed by Bengalis because they were jealous of his chance to gain an influential position within a lucrative foreign company. When I pressed that the murder might be just a criminal case, without much to do with his ethnicity, an informant commented that they would not kill him if he were not a Rakhaing. She maintained that the perpetrators believed there would not be any major investigation by the police, since he was a Rakhaing. As he was a member of a minority, she said, the investigators would not be subjected to any political or social pressure to pursue the murderers. And the case has not been solved, strengthening the informant’s argument of the police not helping the minority.

Similarly, in an interview with a Rakhaing university student, he recounted the story of an armed robbery at his home. The police were said to have told his family members to report it as ‘theft,’ a minor law and order problem, instead of robbery, a more serious crime. For him, the police’s unhelpfulness in this case was due to the fact that they were Rakhaing, a minority population. The student also commented ‘I don’t feel this is my country. I was born here [in Bangladesh], but I still don’t feel that this is my country.’ Another informant said even though they were citizens of Bangladesh, Bangladesh could not be called their country.

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4 He had not been out of Bangladesh, when I interviewed him.
Other Rakhaing informants shared a similar sentiment. A Bengali acquaintance of a Rakhaing from a southern Cox’s Bazar village engaged in a business deal with his distant relative from Burma. When his relatives from Burma failed to honour the deal, the Bengali asked the Rakhaing to compensate the loss. Even though he had not made any prior guarantee for his relative, he paid the demanded amount. When I commented that he should not have to give in to this bullying of an individual, the informant replied that he would not want to be in ‘opposition’ with a Kula (Bengali Muslim) in Kulapray. Instead of attributing his misfortune to the particular individual, he explained it in terms of their lives in Kulapray as minority people.

Even the positive relationships with individuals from the Bengali Muslim majority had were limited, according to informants. In a conversation with one woman from Cox’s Bazar about local security, she claimed:

> If there were a disturbance such as theft, these people (pointing to a Bengali household with a large extended family) would come to our help. When our fruits were being stolen a while ago, they came out to chase away the thief. They are good people, and we have a good relationship with them. But we have to maintain a friendly relationship with them, since we live in Kulapray.

Even when there were examples of positive experiences, Rakhaing saw themselves as being ‘lucky’ to have such experiences. These positive experiences were understood not as a result of them belonging to Bangladesh as full-fledged citizens, but because of the good will of some good individual Bengalis. Most Rakhaing considered the negative experiences as the unavoidable consequence of being a minority and hence a powerless people amid the Bengali Muslim majority. However, this cultural imagination of being an excluded people was not the only form of experience Rakhaing have in Bangladesh.
Living with the State, Experiencing the Nation

As discussed in the previous chapter, most Rakhaing experienced the state mostly in terms of the local governments and the police. For a Rakhaing, acquiring an influential position within these institutions was difficult. Thawdeejya/Chowfaldandi Union Parishad in Cox’s Bazar District was the only Union Parishad that made provision for a reserved Rakhaing seat, since there was a substantial Rakhaing population in Thawdeejya Rakhaing village under the Union. In other local government constituencies, there had not been any Rakhaing recently elected to an office. For most ordinary Rakhaing, the state institutions in the local level were represented by Bengali Muslims who were socially, economically and politically more powerful than themselves. Moreover, these powerful local individuals, particularly the Union Parishad Chairman, were the most involved state officials in the everyday lives of most Rakhaing people: in resource distribution, conflict resolution, and social and criminal protection.

In the northern Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing village of Zaadow Khali (comprising 30 households) all households bar three, had migrated to Burma in the 1970s. However, after a few months of living in Akyab, the villagers returned to Zaadow Khali when they could not find proper employment. The Bengali Chairman then told those Bengali people who had bought the land from these Rakhaing families to sell it back to the Rakhaing returnees at the same prices that they had paid. These Rakhaing understood this gesture as the Chairman looking after them. In another southern Rakhaing village, the Union Chairman had been said to provide ‘protection’ to the villagers from the local criminals and to ‘help’ at the time of natural disasters. However, such cordial relationships between the local patrons and Rakhaing were not exactly the same for every Rakhaing village.
Being locally elected does not guarantee that a Chairman will always be protective of Rakhaing interests. Rakhaing might even face difficulties from the abusive behaviour of locally powerful individuals. In the previous chapter, I discussed cases involving locally powerful Bengali individuals who had social links to those with a political position, namely the Chairman. However, in some cases, the Chairman himself could be the perpetrator of abuse against the Rakhaing people. In Thawdeejya/Chowfaldandi, for example, the Chairman himself was said to have grabbed the Rakhaing cemetery for his personal use. Majid (2005, pp. 115-124) outlines the incidents of land grabbing from the 1980s which occurred ‘under the umbrella of the Chairman of No. 12 Barobagi Union Parishad...’ Since they were locally elected, Union Chairmen were sometimes embedded within the local social structures, where some Rakhaing might not be positioned highly. In these cases, the Chairman might even become a destructive tyrant instead of a protective patron for the Rakhaing.

For most Rakhaing, as for many ordinary people in Bangladesh, complaining against such individuals to higher state agencies, such as the district and national courts, was a difficult affair. For instance, a land dispute case could last for up to 35 years in legal process (The Daily Star 2003a). Moreover, a land dispute could drain Rakhaing money and energy. Such prolonged land disputes had been said to be one of the main reasons for some Rakhaing families in Ah-"wa-kwan having lost their property, both land and other forms of wealth (also in Majid 2005, p. 120). Not only were those who possessed land the victims of the abusive behaviour of locally powerful individuals, other Rakhaing also faced difficulties in accessing the services of many state institutions. Abusive local political leaders and the police represented the state in their daily lives.
In terms of their encounters with the state agencies, Rakhaing experiences were often not different from other citizens of Bangladesh, whether they were Bengali Muslim or not. For most Bangladeshis, the state institutions have been difficult to access and are full of corruption. However, people do not only encounter the state in terms of accessing the services of state institutions. The relationship between the state and the people involved both the everyday practices of the local instruments of the state (or local bureaucracies) and ‘the discursive construction of the state in public culture’ (Gupta 1995, original emphasis). When the public culture of Bangladesh is focusing on aspects of Bengaliness and Islam, Rakhaing do not feature within the state’s construction of citizenship.

From the Rakhaing perspective in Bangladesh, the state is not only an inaccessible entity; it is also comprises political institutions mainly operating in the interests of Bengali Muslims. In commenting on the issues of land-grabbing from Rakhaing by powerful local individuals, the then Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Patuakhali District, Prashanta Bhushan Barua, said that such events occurred equally to the Bengali majority community (The Daily Star 2005a). While Rakhaing share such experiences with other Bengali Muslim; however, their imagination of the state is not the same as that of the Bengalis, as I discussed in the previous section. In other words, the discursive construction of the state is different for Bangladeshi Rakhaing, as their experience of the state is informed not only by their encounters with state practices, but also through the cultural production of their social experiences in relation to their dominant Bengali Muslim neighbours.
Rakhaing Understand ‘the Nation.’

In our conversation about the behaviours of government officials in Ah-wa-kwan area, Thein Hlaing recounted how a Buddhist Barua\(^5\), who had been posted as the Deputy Commissioner, helped Rakhaing.

He made sure that Kulas would not violate the laws in the land disputes with Rakhaing. He helped Rakhaing to get some share of land distribution given by the government. He also helped Rakhaing to get government jobs within the district administration, in police and similar positions. 60 houses that we got from the government were also because of him.

These were 58 (not 60) houses which were built free of charge for Rakhaing in some Kuakata villages by the Bangladeshi government. These houses, made of concrete, timber and corrugated iron—expensive building items by the local standard—were said to be modelled on Rakhaing traditional architecture, featuring stilts (see Figure 21). While an educated individual commented that these houses were built with the money from the Prime Minister’s Emergency Relief Fund, most people attributed these houses and other similar projects to the work of the Barua DC. For most Rakhaing, these projects were individualised as the activities of the bureaucrat whom they had known personally.

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\(^{5}\) Barua refers to the social category of Buddhist people with Bengali ‘culture’ and phenotypes. Barua is also the last name of most such ‘Bengali Buddhists’ from Bangladesh. Thein Hlaing was referring to DC Prashanta Bhushan Barua mentioned in the previous page.
In other places where beneficial activities of state agents were involved, they were attributed to individual persons, whether the Chairmen, Police Officers, DCs or other officers. The benefits were talked about as a result of these good individuals. Rakhaing used the term, Kray or ‘looking after’ to express how these ‘good’ officials had looked after them. Indeed, when they were faced with disadvantageous activities, they still attributed them to the characteristics of ‘bad’ individuals. However, when these disadvantageous activities were explained in generalised terms, they used cultural expressions of the nation-state, that is of Bangladesh as a country of Bengali Muslims. Herzfeld (1993, p. 99) points out that ‘at the local level, the moral distinction is between those whom one (literally) knows and those whom one (literally) does not.’ Hence, the localised experience was explained in terms of personal relationships between Rakhaing and particular individual agents. In explaining their relationships with state agents in general terms, most Rakhaing perceptions of the state became ‘concerned progressively
less with people and more with cultural traits’ (Herzfeld 1993, p. 99). These cultural understandings were informed not only by the public discourse which informed people mostly through the media, but also through the discourses within the Rakhaing community.

The longer part of my stay was in Phaloung Chait, but I also travelled to Ah-wa-kwan for a short period. Compared to Cox’s Bazar, Ah-wa-kwan was not easily accessible from Dhaka, with a limited number of bus services and no air transport. Most Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaing villages were hard to reach from each other. Most of these villages were connected with dirt or brick roads while the most common transport was trishaws. Despite their physical remoteness, these villages have a close social link. In each village, I was warmly welcomed, though I had never met the villagers before. I was identified less as a researcher from Australia, and more as an Arakanese/Rakhine person married to someone the villagers knew from Cox’s Bazar. My visits to most villages of Cox’s Bazar also occurred through these familial and social connections. Most of my Rakhaing informants were socially connected to each other, even though they were located physically at far distant locations, sometimes across the country. For most of my hosts who were socially connected within the Rakhaing community, Rakhaing in other locations did not simply refer to members of an ‘imagined community,’ but to socially known individuals.

One of the consequences of this sociality between Rakhaing individuals is that any breach of social norms would be known through informal information networks. Hence, for most Rakhaing, an individual’s activity will always remain an individual act. When a conflict occurred between two known Rakhaing individuals, the manipulation of legal, political, and social norms for one’s own interests would always be understood as the individual’s own abusive behaviour. Hence, as many examples of Rakhaing manipulative behaviour
were talked about, they were always attributed to the ‘bad’ characters of these ‘literally known’ individuals. For instance, when a Rakhaing breached a commercial agreement, the activity was talked about as that of the known individual or of a relative of a known individual. Hence, there is no need to refer to the cultural traits of those from other places in talking about these individual behaviours.

However, when it came to talk about a conflict between a known Rakhaing and an unknown outsider, the outsider would be identified in essentialised terms, emphasising the assumed cultural traits of these ‘others,’ as Herzfeld (1993, p. 99) points out. Those Rakhaing who were agents of the state and who were also known socially, were talked about in terms of their individualised persons. When these individuals were inaccessible, they were talked about as not looking after their fellow Rakhaing, not as the parts of inaccessible state services that Rakhaing experienced in their everyday lives. In understanding the behaviours of Rakhaing individuals, Rakhaing social networks allowed them to see each other as individually constituted persons. They do not need to use cultural traits to talk about themselves with each other.

However, when it came to understanding the behaviour of the officials who were not Rakhaing; these behaviours were generally understood as those of Bengali Muslims looking after their own interests. Rakhaing view Bengali state agents in terms of the ‘inaccessible’ state as well as through their ethnicised perceptions that the Bengali did not have any interest in promoting and protecting Rakhaing affairs. Rakhaing would talk about a negative act of a Bengali Muslim in relation to a Rakhaing in terms of the ethnicity of the individuals and the ethnic relations that had been imagined, that is Bangladesh as being the country for Bengali Muslims.
However, not Rakhaing were socially connected to other Rakhaing in distant places. To be connected to others in distant villages involved an ability to maintain long-distance and long-lasting relationships, both geographically and socially. While most Rakhaing were able to maintain such relationships, some were not parts of such distantly constituted social realms. A Rakhaing informant from a village of northeastern Cox’s Bazar replied to my question about migration to Burma:

This is my native village, this is my pray (country). Here Rakhaing and Kulas (Bengali Muslims) are the same. They do not disturb us. In fact, once we had a fight with the Kulas from Saitway (referring to the ‘Rohingyas’ from Burma), the local Kulas came to our help. They told those people (‘Rohingyas’) not to cause division among the local people.

While there were examples of abusive powerful locals in some economic transactions within this village, other Rakhaing from my informant’s village also described examples of protective and cooperative local Bengali leaders. One such leader was a Union Parishad member from the Rakhaing majority constituent. The above informant’s economic and social position was not particularly high, since her family relied on the irregular daily income of her husband. At the same time, her family possessed no more than a homestead only large enough for the house and without a proper toilet. Her economic position restricted most of her social experience to localised interactions with literally known individuals. Though she might have shared the same cultural understanding of the Bangladeshi state as her fellow Rakhaing, her localised experience had given her a perspective in which the nation-state had lesser role in her understanding of life within the localised context.
However, another informant from the same village, with a little better economic background, and with a daughter living in Phaloung Chait asserted:

I want to go to Rangoon, but I will have to have some capital to start a small business there. But, we will have to go there eventually. We cannot live here. We have to go one day.

After making these comments, the informant and his wife departed to travel to Phaloung Chait for his daughter’s childbirth, while his other daughters continued to live on in their homestead industry, making raw materials for alcohol. The informant’s final produce was sold wholesale to a Bengali Muslim distributor from a distant town. In his encounter with the Bangladeshi state, his more powerful Bengali buyer was able to traverse across the distance without being disturbed by the agents of the state. However, my informant understood that he, as a Rakhaing, would have difficulties in transporting these ‘illegal’ items. There were many examples of Rakhaing traders with such items as alcohol and untaxed consumer goods being detained by the police. Having more active social and economic connections in more distant places, the informant shared with other Rakhaing the cultural imagination of Bangladesh as a Muslim Bengali state.

The common Rakhaing understanding of Bangladesh as a Muslim Bengali country was not only caused by the inaccessibility of the state structures. In the close-knit Rakhaing community, everyday problems of negotiation for Rakhaing religious and cultural practices contrasted sharply with the visually and vocally dominant Bengali Muslim cultural practices. While Phaloung Chait Rakhaing were able to conduct their religious and cultural functions without much restriction during my stay, many informants recounted for example that in rural places, the Rakhaing would have to stop the use of loud speakers for their religious or cultural proceedings during the times of the prayer calls. Having to accommodate the practices of the majority population, thereby
compromising their own activities, was viewed by Rakhaing as an indication of their marginalisation in Bangladesh.

At the same time, most Rakhaing understood Burma to be their ‘rightful’ Buddhist nation-state. For them, the difficulties relating to the wider society were informed by the cultural understanding of Bangladesh being the nation-state of Bengali Muslims. Hence, in explaining the economic and social difficulties, these Rakhaing presented the cultural understanding that they were not the real members of Bangladesh, the nation-state which did not protect or promote their interests.

However, while most Rakhaing with limited social and political powers had received limited benefits from the state directly, other Rakhaing had better access to the state structures for the promotion or protection of their personal as well as community interests. For the Phaloung Chait Rakhaing community, the two-day-long War Kyut is the second most important festival of the year, celebrating the end of Buddhist lent on the Thing ground. In 2006, a few male Ah-Phaw groups set up marquees where the town people came to worship the Buddha Image and donate money and food. The last festival day involved the ‘dawn rice donation’ (Thamung Htoung) by female Ah-Phaw groups and the evening lantern raising by male Ah-Phaw groups. In 2006, there was a rumour that there could be a disturbance from local Bengali Muslim youths who were connected to the then ruling political parties, including the Jamaat-e-Islami Party. It was said that these young Bengalis would take revenge for a brawl with a Rakhaing youth group that had occurred the previous night. However, when the time came, many Rakhaing attended the festival. There were a few police officers on the ground. More importantly, a government minister and some local senior members of the ruling party attended the lantern raising
ceremony as the guests of the Rakhaing community leaders. The festival concluded without any problem.

About a week afterwards, an individual with a Rakhaing name posted on an Arakanese online email list a message with the title ‘Helpless Rakhaings need your attention.’ The post referred to the incident of the Wa Kyut festival, describing an account of the clash between Rakhaing and Bengali youths. It stated that many Rakhaing youths were being chased by the Bengali boys, and three Rakhaing were tortured. It claimed that the Bengali conducted a house-to-house search in the Rakhaing community. It says because of such behaviour, Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar were ‘afraid of security of both their children and themselves.’ The post also mentioned, ‘Rakhaings are scattered in Bangladesh in groups everywhere beaten by Bengolis [sic].’

A week after this post, a Bangladeshi Rakhaing who lived in Dhaka countered the account, especially the torture and house-to-house search. He asserted ‘...communal harmony between the Rakhine (sic) and the Muslim community is prevailing well in Cox’s Bazar.’ In the follow-up post, he said ‘No racial discrimination is meted out against minorities here. ... We live in peace in our ways.’ Another Rakhaing who was also involved in a Rakhaing community organisation posted in the same online group that the original account was ‘totally baseless and bull shit [sic]’ and that ‘[the p]resent Government is so encouraging for Rakhine culture and heritage.’ He accused the author of the original post of being against the Bangladesh government and for wanting ‘to destroy our Government’s goodwill in abroad [sic].’
An informant also categorically stated in an interview that ‘there is no discrimination in Bangladesh.’ He used the English term ‘discrimination’ to indicate his perspective.

Another informant also commented:

No governments [in East Pakistan and Bangladesh] have ever been destructive for us [Rakhaing]... Whatever you want to call it, the administration system or the government policies, I don’t think they are too bad for Rakhaing. These haven’t been destructive [Original English term] for Rakhaing. Whenever we asked help from the government, there hadn’t been any time it was not given.

While other Rakhaing regarded their experience in Bangladesh as ‘discriminatory,’ a few of them viewed Bangladesh positively, even though they shared the understanding of Bangladesh as a nation-state of Bengali Muslims (Kulapray). Even when the former group expressed positive experiences, they talked about them in terms of the ‘marginalised’ status of Rakhaing in Bangladesh. Indeed, it could be regarded that, in general terms, the majority of Rakhaing people were suffering from ethnic discrimination at the hands of the majority Bengali people, while the small number of elite Rakhaing within the community were contented with their high social status. In order to comprehend the differences in understanding their role in the context of Bangladesh nation-state, their experience as citizens has to be analysed in localised and differentiated situations.

Servants of the State, ‘Sirs’ of the Nation.

Mahazow/Mahiskhali has a large Rakhaing settlement of five villages on an island northwest of Phaloung Chait. The easiest route to travel to Mahazow from Phaloung Chait is by speedboat ferries, each of which carries eleven people crammed in for the journey of 15 to 20 minutes. Mostly, the ferry would depart when it was full. In order to reach the
ferry from the riverbank, one would have to cross the pier by paying a small fee. In early November 2006, Roa Gree (Greater village) of Mahazow celebrated Katina, a Buddhist religious ceremony conducted at the conclusion of the rain retreat. I travelled to Mahazow for the ceremony with a Rakhaing friend. Upon our arrival at the pier, a group of fee collectors stood up to salute, rather than asking for the pier fees. These private fee collectors were not saluting me because of their regard for my anthropological concerns. They were saluting my companion who had been working in Cox’s Bazar District as Assistant Commissioner/Magistrate. We, more correctly he, were escorted by a fee-collector to a speedboat ferry, which departed without being full, giving my companion more room to sit comfortably during the trip. It was not only my friend, a senior official from the DC office, that was given special treatment by the collectors. I also witnessed another official from the DC office being treated with similar courtesy in another visit to Mahazow.

As an Assistant Commissioner, my friend had worked supervising a supporting corps of officers, including a few Rakhaing from Cox’s Bazar. As these officers were older than him, in a normal social situation in the Rakhaing community he would have to address them with appropriate honorific terms such as Ah-ko (elder brother) or Ah-khung (uncle), while they could address him by his name without any such a suffix. However, in an official capacity, the supportive officers had to address the younger Rakhaing as ‘Sir’. He, in turn, addressed them by their names without any suffix. Similarly, other agents of the state structures, such as the police and local bureaucracies, would address him as ‘Sir’. He could be referred to as ‘the Rakhaing Magistrate’ in ethnic terms, as Rakhaing had termed the Deputy Commissioner of Barua background, ‘the Barua DC’ in Ah-wa-kwan.

6 In our private conversations regarding one of the supporting officers, who was a relative of my wife, he referred to him as ‘your relative’ instead of simply using his name.
However, as an agent of the state in his national bureaucratic career, he had a superior position to those in the lower level of the hierarchy.

As an agent of the state, not only within his own jurisdiction, a bureaucrat also had a great influence and was able to garner easier access to state agents in other parts of the country. Being ranked higher in the hierarchy of the state structure, individuals associated with state structures are able to either protect or procure their own or their associates’ interests from other state services, even beyond their direct areas of responsibility. An Ah-wa-kwan Rakhaing informant recounted an incident involving some of his land that had been seized by the district bureaucracy as ‘enemy property’. The informant was able to reverse the land seizure, not because he was an active supporter of the Bangladesh liberation movement, and hence able to counter the bureaucrat’s claim, but because he had a better political connection than the bureaucrat did. He recounted:

The MP [name] was my school mate. Because of him, I was able to regain the land with only a few thousand Taka of bribe. My friend MP scolded the Additional Deputy Commissioner [the bureaucrat involved in the case].

In another incident, it was claimed that a Rakhaing informant was able to secure entrance to a prestigious University for his son through his schoolmate, a senior academic at the institution. A junior bureaucrat from the land survey department also was said to be instrumental in his native villagers gaining official recognition for the village cemetery. I was also informed about another Rakhaing public servant helping other Rakhaing in acquiring positions within government services, which were not under his direct responsibility.

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7 An ‘enemy property’ (sometimes ‘vested property’) is the property of those who migrated to India especially during the Pakistani period. Tajuddin (1999) points out that ‘the Vested Property Act is being rampantly misused to appropriate the properties of Hindus by declaring them as migrants to India before 1965. The Hindu owner might not have migrated to India and may be a citizen of Bangladesh. The act has become a tool in the hands of the rural elites to dispossess and displace the Hindus.’
In contrast to these ‘positive’ cases, those positioned higher in the state hierarchy could act against the interests of Rakhaing themselves. An informant recounted a Rakhaing ordeal in a physical assault case at the district court. He was involved in an altercation with a family member of the Rakhaing Member of Parliament. Despite the attempted reconciliation from other community leaders, the MP’s family resorted to forcing the police with her political influence. Eventually after more than half a decade at trial, costing huge emotional and monetary burdens, he was acquitted. The informant said that the MP’s family were able to order the police to act in accordance with their wishes due to her political position.

These senior bureaucrats were also regarded highly in other aspects of the Rakhaing community. An indicator of one’s high social position in Bangladesh’s Rakhaing community was marriage preference for such state agents. Those from wealthy families have especially sought senior officers as marriage partners. The marriage negotiation would normally involve the groom’s family approaching that of the female, but the latter party could also indicate its willingness to be approached. The families of many young bureaucrats were shown great hospitality by the families with available daughters. Although I do not know the exact details of marriage negotiations of these bureaucrats, all such individuals were married into wealthy families. Being able to have social connections to a senior bureaucrat is regarded as being very important. An old friend of a senior bureaucrat commented, ‘We have been friends from long time. It is good that he becomes [a senior bureaucrat]. We could go to him in the time of need.’ Their social benefit was not just restricted to the Rakhaing community; bureaucrats were regarded highly in the wider society, even though their economic benefits might be less than other comparable employees, such as NGO workers (White 1999, p. 313).
While bureaucrats had enormous influence within the country, a person with a senior political position, such as parliamentarian or minister, was able to assert greater influence over the bureaucracy and other parts of society. Especially if from the ruling party, the parliamentarian could assert great influence over bureaucratic processes. As discussed in Chapter 2, a Rakhaing female was appointed as a parliamentarian for the reserved seat during the period of 1996-2001. However, Halder (2004, p. 54) points out the lack of political significance of most Bangladeshi female parliamentarians in the reserved seats and terms them as the ‘ornaments of the parliament.’ The real decision making lies with the political leadership within the political parties (Rahaman 2008, p. 45). Apart from this female MP, there has not been a Rakhaing in the national leadership of major political parties, even though there were some Rakhaing activists in the local branches of the political parties. A Rakhaing campaigned unsuccessfully for a parliamentary seat from a minor party in Patuakhali. However, no other Rakhaing had since stood in the national election, including the ninth national parliament election that I witnessed.

The campaign for the ninth national parliament began in late 2006. The traffic on the streets of Cox’s Bazar was interrupted with the political processions of different candidates. While we were watching these festival-like displays of enthusiastic slogan shouting, my Rakhaing companions greeted their Bengali friends who were participating in the processions. When I asked why they were not participating in such Michil (or electoral processions), they replied, ‘If we participated, we will get beaten up.’ They were referring to the violence that is prevalent in Bangladesh party politics (Rahaman 2007). Even when the same procession had gone into the back streets, which had a smaller chance of political violence, they still insisted that there would be such violence. They

8 She was re-selected to the national parliament as part of the female quota of the governing Awami League (The Daily Star 2009b).
had the opinion that when such violence occurred, Rakaing participants would be targeted more than the Bengali. However, they commented that they had in fact participated in a political procession for a Rakaing standing for the post of a ward member of the Cox’s Bazar Municipal Council (Paurashava). Even though they did not say whether the Rakaing’s Michil was subjected to political violence or not, there had not been any Rakaing participation in the elections of Phaloung Chait Municipal Council or most other rural Unions. Except in Chowfaldandi Union, which had a Rakaing reserved member position, no Rakaing since the independence of Bangladesh had been successful in winning a publicly elected political office in Cox’s Bazar.

Even though getting an influential position within the political establishment was difficult for a Rakaing, there were some opportunities for a Rakaing to get a bureaucratic position. The selection process of the BCS, Bangladesh Civil Service, provides for a quota of about 11 percent for non-Muslim people, which also consists of a 5 percent ‘tribal’ quota for appointment of the cadres. Selection of the BCS cadres involves ‘a single competitive examination’ (Zafarullah 2007, p. 166) and an interview by a board (Bangladesh Public Service Commission 2005). Most of the candidates possessed strong academic credentials from prestigious Bangladesh universities. Entrance to these universities required a strong educational background. Having a good education in Bangladesh’s educational system has been regarded as the only way to gain government jobs and become a highly ‘achieved’ individual. However, the selection process has been accused of being corrupt (Karim 2007). A Rakaing candidate from Cox’s Bazar reported that he would have to pay about seven hundred thousand Takas after passing his written exams, which is also in line with the report of Transparency International (Karim 2007,

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9 Even though such a quota exists, a cadre would not know whether he was selected as part of the quota or not, according to a BCS cadre.
10 This amounted to about 10,000 USD in early 2007.
p. 40), a non-government organisation monitoring corruption in Bangladesh. The problem for his wealthy family was not just about finding the money to ensure the final appointment after the interview, but they also needed to find the right people to bribe or the right ‘channel/connection’ (Karim 2007, p. 39). The Rakhaing candidate indeed had excellent educational credentials from a leading university. Even if he did not get this Administrative BCS cadre position, he would eventually gain prestigious employment, either in the government or in the private sector. Similar to his situation, many educated Rakhaing people end up working in either lucrative or prestigious (most of the time both) employment in Bangladesh. However, their achievement in Bangladesh made their views on Burma different from those of their fellow Rakhaing.

Being well embedded within the socio-economic system of Bangladesh, they do not regard their potential lives in Burma highly. Talking about a potential migration to Burma, an informant working in a government educational institution said, ‘What kind of job would we be able to get with our Bangladeshi education? We will have difficulty getting a job there.’ Another such informant said, ‘I will have to go and work in a private business, like setting up a shop. I had tried such a business in Bangladesh. I don’t think I can spend the whole of my life in such a career serving other people.’ Moreover, most of those educated in the formal system were illiterate in either Rakhaing or Burmese languages. They would lose their educated status if they were to migrate to Burma. More importantly, being associated with the structures of the state, these educated Rakhaing bureaucrats and technocrats had higher social status compared to the majority of illiterate Bangladeshi people. Even though their economic benefits might be limited, the higher status attached to these ‘intellectual’ jobs was highly regarded due to what Kraus, Maxwell and Vanneman (1979, p. 141) call ‘the traditional Asian stigma’ associated with a career in private commerce. Being educated led these Rakhaing to become more closely
associated with the elite status within Bangladesh through their bureaucratic, political and social connections to other equally educated individuals. This social connectedness to the upper layers of society allows them to access the services that the state provides more easily than most other Rakhaing and indeed most other Bangladeshis for that matter. Compounded with their higher social status within the wider society, these Rakhaing now observe that ‘there is no discrimination in Bangladesh for us.’ Moreover, a Rakhaing bureaucrat commented that he would just enjoy his privileged position in Bangladesh, rather than going to Burma to start everything from the beginning. Such privileged social positions had produced a different understanding of their ethnic identity than that of the majority of Rakhaing, who faced difficulties in everyday life as a ‘minority’ in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi Rakhaing

According to the personal naming system of Rakhaing, which is the same as that of Burmans, ‘there is no compulsory rule for representing parents’ names in children (there is no system of family names – all names are, in a sense, first names)’ (Houtman 1999, p. 29). Except for those with the family title such as Chowdhury and Talukda, Rakhaing names are without a surname. A person would identify herself to another Rakhaing using her whole name, such as ‘I am Than Tun.’ However, some Rakhaing have started to use a ‘surname,’ ‘Rakhaing’ or ‘Rakhain,’ in their official documentation. Particularly those born after Bangladeshi independence were likely to have such a suffix in their name.

When I quizzed a friend about having the name ‘Rakhaing’, he simply responded that he used it to differentiate himself from other people who were ‘not Rakhaing’. A Rakhaing
informant from Thawdeejya/Chowfaldandi also echoed this sentiment, justifying the ‘Rakhaing’ surname ‘because people in Bangladesh do not know us as Rakhaing, they used to call us Magh.’ A group of Rakhaing workers in Dhaka also commented that they put the suffix ‘Rakhaing’ to express their social identity.

We put ‘Rakhaing’ as our titles [surnames]. All of us have the ‘Rakhaing’ titles. We put Rakhaing titles at the office.\(^{11}\) If there isn’t such a title, we would be mistaken as Chakma or Marma [other larger and more well-known minority groups associated with the Chittagong Hill Tracts]. In our certificates, such as the Chairman Certificates and High School Certificates, we have ‘Rakhaing’ as our title. Chakma and Marma people also use such a title [‘Chakma’ and ‘Marma’ as a person’s surname]. We use the ‘Rakhaing’ title to let others know who we are. Many people do not know that we are Rakhaing. We don’t put the title ‘Rakhaing’ when we write our names in the Rakhaing language, but we only use it when we have to write our name in Bangla.

While these Rakhaing expressed their conscious decision in asserting their identity through the use of ‘Rakhaing’ as their title/surname, they also referred to the wider contexts of bureaucratic conditions, education, and the ethnic politics with the wider Bengali and other non-Bengali peoples in their answers. A Marma commented that in fact it is compulsory to have a title (surname) for a child to start her formal education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Rakhaing, who were originally from Cox’s Bazar villages, but living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, were compelled to adopt the surname ‘Rakhaing’ in their interaction with state agencies. However, those in Cox’s Bazar or Ah-ва-kwan were not compelled, but ‘chose’ to indicate their ethnic belonging to the wider society through the last name, ‘Rakhaing’. In such representation of ethnic distinctness, the Rakhaing mode of expression conformed to that of the cultural norms of the majority Bengali community, having a surname to identify a person’s heritage. In other words, the Rakhaing expression of ethnicity to wider the Bengali community had, in fact, been in accord with what a Rakhaing informant called ‘Bengalinization’.

\(^{11}\) They were responding to my question why she did not put the Rakhaing suffix in her name written in her consent form for the interview with me.
This ‘Bengalinization’ was expressed not just in terms of Rakhaing people adopting their ethnonym as surnames, but it was also described in terms of the ways of life they perceived to be different from that of a Rakhine/Arakanese. ‘We are now like Bengali. We eat the food cooked by the Bengali maid.’ This was a friend’s comment made on the food served at a get-together dinner with some Rakhaing who were working or studying in Dhaka. Associating food and ethnic identity was just one of the ethnic markers he understood about his ethnicity. Like him, most of the educated Rakhaing were well-versed in the expression of present-day youth cultures in Bangladesh. Employed in the multitude of governmental, private or non-governmental sectors, their everyday lives had more commonality with fellow privileged Bangladeshis than with the majority of Rakhaing in Bangladesh or Arakanese/Rakhine in Burma. Moreover, being unable to understand the Burmese language, their attachment to Burmanized Buddhism and Arakanese/Rakhine ways of life had been weakening. Having a weaker sense of shared culture with Burmese Arakanese/Rakhine, their sense of belonging to Burma or the Arakanese/Rakhine nation was taken over by the perception that they were Bangladeshi Rakhaing.

For these Rakhaing, their everyday lives had almost nothing to do with the cultural characteristics that were said to define their Rakhaing ethnicity. As their everyday lives were not defined by these characteristics, they felt little of the effect of the political hegemony of the Bengali Muslim middle class, which pushed the ethnicity of other people to the margin. Moreover, being able to enjoy certain privileges of the affluent middle class in Bangladesh, their lives were far from being marginalised. However, whether a new imagined identity with less emphasis on cultural similarity with Burma,
and developed more within the setting of the Bangladesh nation-state, would become dominant among these Rakhaing in Bangladesh has yet to be seen.

For these Rakhaing, the most meaningful changes in their calendar would occur at the end of the month of December. Thungran as the calendric change that is important for many other Rakhaing does not require completion of certain rituals for them. For most of these more privileged Rakhaing, Thungran is the commemoration not to mark the calendric change, but the celebration to express their ethnic identity to themselves and to other people of Bangladesh. Many of the cultural activities, such as not working on the Thungran days, visiting the monastery or throwing water on each other, might not be practical in their environment. More importantly, meanings associated with these cultural activities had less significance to their everyday requirements. For these well-to-do Rakhaing in Bangladesh, Thungran is just another activity, which was claimed by their fellow Rakhaing, Arakanese/Rakhine and scholars, to be central to their ethnic identity.

Bangladesh’s Rakhaing

While they still faced the notion of not culturally belonging to Bangladesh, the majority of Rakhaing lived among the Bengali communities without large communal threats from their neighbours. At the same time, the government authority generally left the Rakhaing to conduct activities which they believed to be related to Rakhaing ethnicity. For instance, when Rakhaing people consumed alcohol during their cultural festivals, such as Thungran celebrations, the authority did not seek to enforce the laws against the use of alcohol for Bangladeshis. State agents generally allowed them to enjoy what a senior bureaucrat called ‘privileges’ in Cox’s Bazar and Ah-wa-kwan, as long as their activities were not a great ‘disturbance’ to the wider society.
Rakhaing were not just left alone to conduct their own ethnic activities; there were some governmental development programs especially targeted at the Rakhaing. These development projects oriented mainly to Rakhaing people can be attributed to the political leadership wanting to claim Bangladesh as a moderate Muslim country, as declared by the ‘right-leaning’ BNP (The Daily Star 2005c), or as a secular democratic nation, as claimed by the leader of the ‘left-leaning’ Awami League (The Daily Star 2004c; The Daily Star 2009a). Even the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, which was a partner in the coalition government between 2001 and 2006, and identified as being the ‘Islamist’ party with a strong ideological and personal link to the armed, underground movement (Kabir 2005; Riaz 2007), claimed to aspire to transform Bangladesh into ‘a modern, democratic welfare state... [and also to provide] protection of life and property of [the] Non-Muslim community’ (Jamaat-e-Islami 2008). While these claims could be dismissed as political rhetoric, they also provided a small number of opportunities for development programs for small minority communities. Hence, there were development projects that were solely for the benefit of Rakhaing, such as the establishment of the Kuakata Rakhaing Mohila Market, building free houses, and the grant to establish a Rakhaing Cultural Institute in Ramu from the BNP-led centre-right coalition government. While many ordinary Rakhaing had not individually received material benefits from these projects, they still recognised that these were opportunities the government granted them as a minority community.

Even though there are some social and economic opportunities available for Rakhaing, these positions were understood to exist as only secondarily to those of Bengali Muslims. Talking about a chance of a Rakhaing elite person being appointed as an ambassador, I asked whether he might be posted to Australia. The informant, his relative, replied that
he would only be posted to countries like Burma or Thailand, instead of the developed nations like Australia. In talking about the opportunities of these few privileged Rakhaing, the common understanding among the community was that these people would always be a second choice after the Bengali. As a minority population, Rakhaing would have had some exclusive opportunities, such as reserved minority quotas in academic, bureaucratic or sometimes NGO agencies. However, in these opportunities, Rakhaing still believed that they would always experience differential treatment from the dominant Bengali elites. However, since they were also members of the dominant elite class, they would be able to access state agencies far more easily than most ordinary people, Bengali, Rakhaing or other people, in the country.

For most ordinary Rakhaing, these substantial benefits from the state rarely arrived. When they received the government’s assistance, they were mostly in small amounts or only through the control of elites. For them, Bangladesh was a Kulapray, and it had little to do with their individual economic, social, political, cultural and religious interests. They understood that the social, cultural, and political securities they were enjoying presently would soon disappear under the increasing dominance of Islamism and Bengali cultural and economic interests. Despite there being some social, political and economic benefits as citizens of Bangladesh, they saw themselves as culturally closer to Burma, as they understood their everyday lives to be dominated by the interests of Bengali Muslims. They saw themselves as being a group of people not really belonging in their nation state. They saw themselves simply as Rakhaing without any cultural belonging in Bangladesh, who happened to be its legal citizens—Bangladesh’s Rakhaing.
By seeing themselves as a marginalised minority people of Bangladesh, Rakhaing have come to rely upon themselves to protect their own interests. In early 2006, two Cox’s Bazar Rakhaing houses accidentally caught on fire. The fire attracted a large crowd of Bengali and Rakhaing onlookers, some of whom tried to help put out the fire. Unbeknownst to all of us present, an elderly person perished in the fire. When the body was recovered after the fire, her relative wailed, ‘How come these Rakhaing did not help her [the deceased]?’ Even though the fire-fighters had arrived before her house was fully alight and there were some Bengali people around, she only referred to the Rakhaing as not being able to help her aunty, another Rakhaing. For her, as well as most other Rakhaing in Bangladesh, their interests are not promoted or protected by the Bengali majority and the state organs controlled by them. Rather, they have to rely on each other, or finally they will have to migrate to the country of their cultural, religious and historical origin.

This sense of being marginalised has three implications on how Rakhaing understand the state. First, Rakhaing view the failure of the state in providing services especially accommodated for their ethnic and cultural requirements is normal, as they understand that the political interests of the state lie squarely with the interests of the dominant Bengali Muslims. Hence, they see themselves having to accept the minimal provisions accorded to them for their religious, cultural and ethnic needs. Second, ordinary Rakhaing have to be content that their own ethnic elites who achieve elevated social, political and economic status are unable to serve their own community interests beyond what the Bengali Muslim elites of the country allow them. Hence, the ordinary Rakhaing have to accept the existing social inequalities within the Rakhaing community itself, in which the Rakhaing elites will always enjoy their dominance. Third, a cultural understanding exists among Rakhaing that even though there are many opportunities available for Rakhaing
because of their strategic location within the framework of global and national democratic and development politics, they will never be able to achieve full citizenship status within Bangladesh. That is the citizenship which encompasses both socio-cultural and legalistic notions. They will eventually have to migrate to Burma to fulfil these cultural and social rights as citizens in a Buddhist country with similar culture. Hence, their social ‘escape’ will always concern their migration to Burma. The sense of marginalisation within the nation-state of Bangladesh is understood as shared amongst all Rakhaing. This sense of marginality in Bangladesh, as the hegemonic cultural understanding among Rakhaing, has been central in how they understand their social, political and economic experiences, whether they were materially advantaged or not. This sense of marginality has also been central in community leaders’ calls for the people’s support. The leadership of the community organisations always talks about the need to unite (nyee: literally, ‘be uniformed’) to counter the increasing dominance of the people with a different culture to their own.

Notwithstanding this sense of marginality, Rakhaing live in neighbourhoods mixed with Bengali people in Phaloung Chait and in rural villages in close proximity to other Bengali villages. Their political, social and economic activities demand everyday interaction with Bengali Muslims. As I have discussed above, some of these Bengali neighbours have become close friends and sometimes serve as patrons for the benefit of their everyday lives. While most Rakhaing families with substantial wealth and social connections are able to set up a form of livelihood in Burma, some Rakhaing without enough capital and strong social connections find economic possibilities difficult in Burma. Yet faced with a greater struggle in Burma to acquire a livelihood comparable to what they had enjoyed in Bangladesh, they sometimes return to Bangladesh. Families who engaged in ‘illegal’ businesses in Bangladesh would also have similar kinds of daily economic struggle in
Burma. Although they were threatened by the everyday corruption of the police, having an understanding of the nature of the Bangladeshi police and the state, these Rakhaing were able to maintain their livelihood in Bangladesh. Moreover, although there are problems in dealing with the state and some segments of society, they have not faced communal violence.

However, such widespread communal violence had come close to actualisation in the late 1970s. Khaing Mra, an elderly female informant from Cox’s Bazar, recounted her experience:

There has not been any problem from Kulas [referring to both Pakistanis and Bengalis]. There had only been once rumours that Rakhaing would be killed by Kulas [in this context, she was referring to the local Bengalis]. I can’t remember which year it was, [she put it to about 30 years ago from 2006, saying her 33/34 year old son was about three]. That was the ‘fire’ coming from Burma. Many people [Muslims from northern Arakan] came to Bangladesh. These people claimed that ‘Maghis’ tortured us. They said women were raped, men were forced into hard labour, and they were being tortured. Many of these refugees stayed along the Cox’s Bazar-Teknaf road. Some local Muslims were angry and they wanted to exact retribution on Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar. People were verbally abused, and people didn’t dare to go out much, during the night, they just kept quiet during the night. We heard that houses and women were being earmarked to be occupied after the attack.

She said Rakhaing community leaders were able to use their social connections with a senior bureaucrat in Dhaka to get a protection order from the President. Moreover, in addition to the President’s orders, members of local government institutions, such as the Chairman, ward members and the police, were involved in giving assurance to the Rakhaing people. Another informant also recounted a similar experience regarding the same event from his childhood; his female relatives in rural areas had poison ready for suicide in the event of a communal attack. He also named those Bengali Muslim individuals who were involved in giving assurance for their safety. While there have been many historical and contemporary incidents of communal violence in Bangladesh
targeted against other minority populations, sometimes with security force collusion, the Rakhaing have not faced such a large-scale ill fate.

The incident of refugee exodus from Burma, to which Khaing Mra referred, was the case of 200,000 ‘Rohingyas’ fleeing into Bangladesh following a Burmese military operation in 1977 (Amnesty International 2004). This Burmese military operation targeted people who were ‘ethnically and religiously related to the Chittagonians of southern Bangladesh’ (Lewa 2007). In the 1970s, this ethnic commonality was instrumental in the local Chittagonian antagonistic response against Rakhaing. However, the local responses to the refugees from Burma changed, as Khaing Mra said:

There has not been any such problem in the later cases of refugees coming from Burma. Those refugees from Burma didn’t say that they were attacked by the Burmese government [Bama Ah-sow-ra], but by Rakhaing/Maghis. Some good locals [she used Ah-koung; which indicates a general ‘good’ character of an individual] would say to them, ‘Here in Bangladesh, we live with Rakhaing as relatives. Do not come and incite communal violence between us’.

Khaing Mra attributed this positive response from the local Bengali community to the central government’s policy. However, another important contribution to this positive sentiment toward the local Rakhaing could be viewed in light of the negative stereotype of the refugees from Burma.

While the national media (The Daily Star 2006g) and international organisations (Amnesty International 2004) used the term ‘Rohingya’ to refer to these Muslim refugees from north-western Burma, the local Bengalis normally referred to them as ‘Bamayas.’ As it literally means the people from Burma, in Cox’s Bazar it implicitly refers to the people who do not belong in Bangladesh. While 28,000 of the refugees lived in camps
under protection from international humanitarian agencies, a large number\(^{12}\) of them lived ‘illegally’ outside the official camps throughout the district (IRIN 2008). The local Bangladeshi population responded negatively to those from Burma, especially those living outside the official camps. As one refugee stated:

> Local people don’t like us and sometimes beat us. They say we steal their jobs. But what can we do? The Myanmar [Burmese] government doesn’t want us either (IRIN 2009).

A Rakhaing informant recounted the story of his verbal conflict with a Muslim migrant labourer from Burma who was working as a trishaw puller in Cox’s Bazar. Nearby Bengali bystanders were said to have been involved against the trishaw puller, when they realised he was a ‘Bamaya’. The trishaw puller might have been asking inflated prices from the Rakhaing, and hence the bystanders might have involved themselves in the case. However, the informant’s articulation of this event in terms of ‘Burmaya’ versus ‘Bangladeshi’ reflected the relationships between the refugees/migrant workers from Burma and the local Bengali societies, and between the latter and local Rakhaing communities. Rakhaing understood that there was an inclusive attitude to them from the local Bengali community compared to the Muslim refugees from Burma, whom Rakhaing viewed as essentially ‘ethnic’ Bengali Muslims. Even when they have strong cultural and social identifications with the Arakanese/Rakhine community in Burma, Rakhaing understood that they lived in Bangladesh as members of Bangladesh nation-state. Moreover, however minimal or tokenistic their benefits might be, Rakhaing enjoyed a level of protection and some benefits for being legal citizens in Bangladesh.

\(^{12}\) An IRIN report (IRIN 2008) described that there are more than 200,000 Burmese Muslim refugees in Bangladesh, while the Bangladesh Newspaper, *The Daily Star* (2006g) quoted a Bangladeshi government official’s figure of at least 300,000.
These experiences of belonging to the nation-state of Bangladesh at the local level puncture the hegemonic understanding of Rakhain marginality at the national level. A young university informant (who strongly insisted that Rakhain were a marginalised people in Bangladesh) recounted a comment from a Rakhine/Arakanese from Burma that, ‘the Bengalis allowed you [Rakhain in Bangladesh] to live peacefully [without much disturbance]’. Even though she agreed that their lives in Bangladesh, as a Buddhist minority among the dominant Bengali Muslims, were not as bad as the lives of Muslim people in western Burma— those they considered to be cultural Bengali Muslims in Burma—she still upheld the view that Bangladesh is the country of Bengali Muslims.

Conclusion

In the dominant popular understanding, the national cultural identity of Bangladesh is mainly concerned with the notion of being a Bengali and a Muslim. The central debates on the issues of nationalism only have limited room for the presence of ethno-religious minorities, the ‘Others’. Moreover, legal and bureaucratic policies covering the whole of the Bangladesh nation-state fail to accommodate the specific cultural, social and economic needs of ‘minority’ peoples. These failures sometimes manifest in violent communal attacks on these ‘minorities.’ Even though they have not faced actualisation of communal violence, as have other minority communities of Bangladesh, Rakhain are constantly subjected to the activities of mostly Bengali officers enforcing or using policies and laws which are not compatible with the interests of many Rakhain people in Bangladesh. Mediated by the national discourse on cultural identity of Bangladeshi citizenship, these everyday realities of coercion and corruption from state agents and abusive individuals are understood as the hallmarks of marginalisation. This minority
Rakhaing identity within the nation-state of Bangladesh has arisen from the discursive process between the nationally dominant Bengali-Muslim identity and everyday Rakhaing experience in their relations with state agents. While there are some positive state gestures towards Rakhaing, the general failures of the state services to protect or promote their interests are understood in terms of a cultural imagination that the state exists only to uphold the interests of the Bengali Muslims, the dominant majority in the nation.

However, for those Rakhaing with a high social and economic status, their ethnic minority status does not preclude their access to state provisions. Because of the national political leadership’s attempt to promote Bangladesh as a democratic country before the international audience, some of these provisions exist exclusively for minority people. The privileged position of the elites mitigates the social dominance of the Bengali middle class in their interactions with those Bengali socially positioned lower than themselves. Ethnically, they are at the discursive margin of national identity imagination, but their everyday lives are not affected by this marginalisation. In fact, they see opportunities within this marginal position by claiming their ethnic difference from other people of Bangladesh, and benefiting by carving out political and social spaces within the nation-state to acquire special concessions from the state. Moreover, the perception as the marginalised status of being under threat from the dominance of Bengali Muslims maintains a sense of common ethnicity among the Rakhaing themselves. At the same time, this sense of marginalism helps the ordinary Rakhaing to accept the community leadership’s inability to provide much help in their everyday struggles.
While Rakhaing understand they are culturally distinct from their neighbours, they still interact with them in their everyday lives. Some of these interactions are not only friendly in nature, but also sometimes materially beneficial. More importantly, though culturally marginalised, their legal rights to live in Bangladesh have not been questioned in either official discourses or in everyday interactions. In contrast, most of Bangladesh’s political leadership, as well as the wider society, rejected the Muslims from western Burma, as outsiders, ‘the people of Burma’—while Rakhaing understand that these Burmese Muslims have similar religious and cultural characteristics as the local Bengali Muslims, just as they themselves have shared cultural background with the majority people of Burma. However, both the government and the local Cox’s Bazar Bengali community do not accept Burma’s Muslims as the people of Bangladesh. Their rejection was not only a government policy of exercising its legal and territorial jurisdiction, but it is also a process of everyday social exclusion by the local Bengali community to Burma’s Muslims as “outsiders”.

Rakhaing from Bangladesh do not face the same legal and social exclusion in Cox’s Bazar, as do recently arrived Burma Muslims. Their lives as the rightful people to live legally within the political contours of Bangladesh have punctured the notion Rakhaing did not belong to Bangladesh and that they really belonged to the nation-state of Burma. Citizenship and nationality are not just about the legal aspect of a citizen’s life; it also concerns about how one lives within the community of citizens. As Rakhaing faced the daily onslaughts of the cultural imagination of Bangladesh as the Bengali Muslim nation-state and the paramount social, political and economic inequalities, their sense of belonging to Bangladesh has receded, nevertheless, into the sense of marginalisation. The everyday experience of living as cultural and religious minority means having to
negotiate this contradiction, derived from the volatile political events occurring across Burma-Bangladesh border.

The self-perception of the Rakhaing as a minority population under threat from the domination of the majority Bengali Muslims is the product of the dominant national cultural identity that centres on their ethnic and religious characteristics. This subjectivity is expressed in their everyday lives in the language of ethnic domination and exclusion. For socially privileged individuals, being a Rakhaing is mainly about their ethnic identification. However, for those who face struggles against persisting social and economic inequalities and political exclusion in their everyday lives, this subjectivity of marginality is how they make sense of their experiences. Hence, there is not a singular “Rakhaing subjectivity”. Their subjectivity depends as much upon how they experience their everyday interactions with the people who are not Rakhaing, as it does on national discourses on their cultural identity.

In talking about their cultural lives as Rakhaing in Bangladesh, most informants refer to the festivals of Thungran and Warkyaut as times that they want to be within their community. Especially important is the Thungran; it is celebrated for the longest amount of time—six days. It is considered central to Rakhaing ethnicity. However, it is not an exclusive event for the Rakhaing alone, even though some activities within the festival may be. As some Rakhaing did not participate in Thungran, consequently not all participants were Rakhaing; as noted Bengali friends and bureaucrats were present in 2006 and 2007. However, for a Thungran celebration to have occurred in Cox’s Bazar, Rakhaing have to participate in the rituals, however much ‘outsiders’ have provided the supports. This is what defines Thungran as a Rakhaing festival.
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION: THE FESTIVAL FOR ETHNICITY

Thungran, Culture and Ethnicity

Despite my concern in early April 2006 that I might not be able to experience the Thungran celebration in Cox’s Bazar, Rakhaing celebrated their New Year with great festivity in both 2006 and 2007. The tense political situations of both year did not stop them celebrating Thungran. These Thungran celebrations followed general characteristics of what they considered to be a traditional ritual sequence. Based on interviews and my observations of the two festival occasions, I can summarise the general aspects of how Bangladesh Rakhaing celebrate their New Year festival. In both years, Thungran celebrations started with the spring-cleaning, followed by Phara Ree Cho Pway (the Buddha Bathing), and concluded with a Ree-Loung Pway (Water Play).

Such an account of the ritual arrangements of this festival could be considered as structurally the same as the way Arakanese/Rakhine in Burma celebrate their New Year. It would also indicate that these ritual behaviours are different from those of Bengali New Year (Pahela Baishakh). It is possible to conclude that this similarity in Bangladesh’s Rakhaing and Burma’s Arakanese/Rakhine Thungran celebrations is a proof of Rakhaing’s cultural characteristics being the same as the Arakanese/Rakhine in Burma. Hence, it can be argued that this similarity is the evidence of their shared ethnicity across the Bangladeshi/Burma border.

However, I have argued in this thesis that such a view is only helpful to account for the cultural differences of Rakhaing from the majority Bengali or other minorities in Bangladesh. I have shown that these cultural differences are in themselves not the essence of Rakhaing ethnicity. More importantly, I have shown that these cultural differences are
embedded within the social, political and economic aspects of people’s lives. I have argued that understanding ethnicity of Rakhaings in Bangladesh means looking at the historical, economic, cultural, social and political relationships which produce exclusive membership for Rakhaing individuals. While viewing ethnicity as a relationship of exclusion, I have looked closely at how this exclusion manifested in everyday lives. Each chapter outlined accounts of these exclusions, from historical, cultural, religious, economic and social perspectives. However, I have also discussed that these relationships of exclusion can be strategically used in responding to challenges of being Rakhaing in Bangladesh. Using Thungran as an entry into Rakhaing social life, I situated Rakhaing ethnicity within their political, social and economic lives, to see how cultural characteristics define Rakhaing ethnicity in Bangladesh. By exploring the Thungran festival, I have outlined what it means to be a Buddhist Rakhaing in Muslim-Bengali majority Bangladesh.

Accounts of the Rakhaing, by such observers as Khan (1999), Majid (2005), Biswas (2007) and Hoque (2006), which focus on the descriptions of these cultural characteristics, highlight that there are people with cultural differences in Bangladesh, contrary to the view commonly held both within and outside the country that it is a culturally and religiously homogenous. More importantly, in an attempt to understand the political nature of a nation-state such as Bangladesh, highlighting these differences in cultural characteristics is helpful in elucidating how a section of the population has been discriminated against, whether socially, culturally, politically or economically. Moreover, descriptions of cultural characteristics, as in the study of Mustafa Majid’s *The Rakhaines*, show that there are historical, cultural and social continuities that transcend the geo-political boundaries of the nation-state. However, such shared cultural characteristics do not necessarily equate to a shared ethnicity that exists across the
borders. More importantly, such accounts do not answer how ethnicity is implicated in their everyday life. I have argued that it is in fact the sense of shared ethnicity among Bangladesh Rakhaing, which dictates them adopting cultural practices from the other side of the border, as in the examples of some rituals of Thungran festival from Arakan have become parts of the New Year celebrations of Bangladesh Rakhaing. In Thungran as well as in their everyday lives, Rakhaing see and present these cultural characteristics from Arakan and Burma as a reflection of their unique ethnicity, marking their difference from other peoples of Bangladesh and their similarity with the Arakanese from Burma.

Without considering the historical, social and political contexts of these rituals, the general descriptions of Thungran fail to explain two concerns relating to the concept of ethnicity. Firstly, there are many activities and participants in Cox’s Bazar’s Thungran who are not considered to be ‘ethnic Rakhaing’. Secondly, every Rakhaing does not attribute the same meanings to these ‘ethnic’ activities. Similarly, other cultural characteristics such as language, architecture, and traditional economic activities are not exclusive characteristics of the people who identify themselves as Rakhaing. Rakhaing speak Bangla and Burmese, live in ‘modern’ houses and have ‘other types’ of livelihoods than ethnic economic activities. A list of cultural characteristics, including the list of Thungran rituals, does not necessarily define the ethnicity of each individual, yet both Rakhaing and non-Rakhaing view the Thungran rituals and associated cultural characteristics define the individuals’ Rakhaingness. Moreover, due to the historical, social, political and economic imperatives that presented in their everyday lives, Rakhaing have come to see these characteristics to embody their unique ethnic identity in the nation-state dominated by Bengali Muslims. This thesis accounted for the reasons which produce this perception of cultural characteristics as embodiment of Rakhaing ethnicity.
Ethnicity as an analytical tool used in studying the social reality of the Rakhaing people highlights the cultural characteristics they share with the Arakanese/Rakhine people of Burma, and their belief that they belong to the same ethnic group. Viewed through the concept of ethnicity, these cultural characteristics appear as defining the social reality of the people who are identified as Rakhaing. However, these insights do not allow any determination as to how such characteristics come to define Rakhaing ethnicity and how the Rakhaing people live their everyday lives in Bangladesh—engaging in “non-ethnic” practices and experiences, while still maintaining their Rakhaing identity. Eriksen (1992, p. 165) states:

It seems likely that scholars studying poly-ethnic societies have often inadvertently overstated the case for ethnicity. For if we ask questions about ethnicity, then we shall no doubt find ethnicity.

If we formulate our research around the notion of ethnicity, we end up explaining the actions and feelings of the people that we study in terms of ethnicity (Banks 1996, p. 186; Eriksen 2002, p. 17). Such a bias is often also evident in popular discourse as issues relating to ethnicity are prevalent among the people that we study.

Thus, it is important to consider what Eriksen (2002, p. 17) called ‘native theory’ on ethnicity. While a direct translation of ‘ethnicity’ does not exist among Rakhaing, there exists a strong notion of cultural difference from the Bengali and cultural similarities with the Arakanese/Rakhine and Burmese. Hence, instead of using ethnicity as an analytical tool, I have conceptualised it as the subject to be queried in this study. I still take the view that ethnicity is a cultural differentiation between groups of people. However, I have not approached the study of ethnicity as simply an account of the cultural characteristics of an ethnic group, including their festivals. Rather, I have looked at how ethnicity is situated
not just within the local cultural dynamics, but also in relation to broader social and political contexts. By using the Extended-Case Method, I have presented in this thesis how these cultural characteristics are linked to social, economic and political dynamics in the people’s lives. The Thungran festival has been defined by both Rakhaing and other people of Bangladesh as part of Rakhaing ethnicity; but I have approached it more openly as one of the key social activities that are conducted by Rakhaing in Bangladesh. I have argued that it should be understood in reference to a number of issues, not just ethnic identification.

By paying close attention to how these rituals of the festival unfolded in 2006 and 2007, I have mapped out some of the social situations that relate to these rituals. I have thereby tried to explain how ‘ethnicity’ is being implicated in the everyday lives of Rakhaing in Bangladesh. Instead of considering ethnicity as cultural markers that define social distinctions, I have focused on how and why such distinctions are claimed and made pertinent both in the everyday interactions and in the national and international arenas.

Rakhaing ethnicity in Bangladesh entails a strong notion of social and political marginalisation that a minority experiences at the edge of the nation-state of Bangladesh, in both metaphorical and geographical senses. However, this marginalisation does not derive solely from the exclusionary politics of the Bangladeshi nation-state, but also from the Rakhaing’s historical and religious imaginations by which they link themselves to Burma. At the same time, I have argued that amidst these relationships of exclusion, Rakhaing find that being members of a religious and ethnic minority presented itself with opportunities which help them address the challenges of living in Bangladesh.
In this thesis, I have focused on everyday situations where Rakhaing face social exclusion in terms of their ethnicity, but also the ways in which they engage in socially, politically and economically with the broader society and the nation-state based on their distinct ethnicity. Situating ethnicity within everyday experience, extended out from the Thungran celebrations, reveals political, economic and social forces at play in Bangladesh which Rakhaing face as a consequences of their religious and ethnic minority status as well as their legal status as citizens of the country.

Ethnicity as a Relationship of Exclusion

The notion of Rakhaing people having a distinct ethnicity emerges out of their interactions with other people, namely Bengali and other ‘non-Bengali’ people in Bangladesh, as well as with Burmese and their “own” Arakanese/Rakhine people from Burma. In other words, their sense of exclusion from the broader society in Bangladesh derived as much from the exclusive discourses of Bangladesh’s nationalism, as from the strong sense of belonging Rakhaing felt toward Burma and the historical, religious, cultural and social characteristics it represents. Resulting from the central focus of Bangladesh’s nationalist discourses on Bengali-Muslim identity is the experience of social marginalisation felt by Bangladesh’s religious and ethnic minorities, including the Rakhaing. This sense of exclusion informs the daily experience of Rakhaing in Bangladesh. Rakhaing view their experiences of living in Bangladesh, whether positive or challenging, through this view of themselves as an excluded community from the Bengali-Muslim dominated nation-state.
In terms of Rakhaing ethnic origin, the most prominent narrative of Rakhaing’s arrival into Bangladesh is based on the colonial records about the migration of Rakhaing refugees from Arakan, now a province of Burma. This refugee migration, resulting from the Arakan-Burmese War in the early 19th century, is the main narrative for most Bangladeshi and also most Rakhaing. Despite this, there are other oral narratives, such as the fact that there could be residual Rakhaing living in the southern Chittagong where it was a part of Arakan until 1666. The dominance of this migration narrative of historic origins has led to a view both among the wider Bangladesh society and the Rakhaing community that the Rakhaing are ‘actually’ Burmese or a group of Burmese people, and that their actual home-land is in Burma. This Burmese ‘origin’ of the Rakhaing people influences popular understanding of Rakhaing ethnicity as being distinct from other people of Bangladesh, and of being linked to the people of Burma. I have argued that this understanding reinforces how both Rakhaing and the broader Bangladesh population view the former’s religious, cultural and economic characteristics as ‘Burmese’ in Bangladesh.

To understand Rakhaing’s religiosity, I used the concept of ‘proxy citizen,’ as formulated by van Schendel (2002b), that is a citizen who is a member of a religious minority in her country of residence, but who also connects to majority religious community in the neighbouring country which has actively sought to represent that religious community. This concept has been useful in understanding the nature of Rakhaing’s religious practices and how they understand these practices in relation to Burma’s claim to be a Buddhist country. This concept highlights how Rakhaing see the Burmese form of Buddhism as their own—different from any other Buddhist majority country—and themselves as members of the same Burmese Buddhist community. Juxtaposed with the role Islam plays in the nationalist discourses in Bangladesh, Rakhaing understand themselves as belonging more to Burma than to their legal country, Bangladesh.
Highlighted by its discriminatory practices against Muslims from the western border regions, Burma gives the impression of being an exclusive Buddhist country. Rakhaing from Bangladesh see themselves as belonging religiously and culturally more to the nation-state of Burma than to Bangladesh. These different cultural and political forces are deeply involved in shaping the subjectivity of Rakhaing in Bangladesh—principally as an understanding that they are an excluded minority community repressed by the dominant Bengali Muslim majority.

At the same time, due to the shared language with Rakhine/Arakanese and the movement of people and nationalistic ideas from Arakan, Rakhaing in Bangladesh have access to the development in musical and cultural behaviours in Burma. These performative activities derived from Burma are widely available among Rakhaing in Bangladesh, as in the examples of the first Rakhaing language music album and traditional dances as explained in Chapter 5. These performative activities are presented to the national and international audience as the essence of Rakhaing culture, despite the fact that these performative genres, which have been born out of cultural politics in Burma, are not part of Rakhaing’s everyday entertainment. Bangladesh’s desire to represent itself as a moderate-Muslim democracy has provided opportunities for Rakhaing organisations to present Rakhaing cultural performances to the national and international audience, emphasising the cultural distinction of Rakhaing ethnicity. Ethnographic accounts of how Rakhaing youths trying to enact these cultural performance, even if they are not part of their everyday entertainment and enjoyment, also suggested that Rakhaing themselves inscribe their ethnicity in these performances. I have argued that Rakhaing enacting and witnessing these performances indicate to themselves, and to the wider community, that they are part of the broader Rakhine ethnic community which exists across the border and
that they are a different type of people from other people in Bangladesh, despite the fact that their everyday entertainment is almost the same as other Bangladeshis.

Rakhaing locations in Bangladesh happened to be in the two most popular sea-beach tourist attractions, and Rakhaing economically benefited from domestic tourism. Products said to be associated with Rakhaing ethnicity are being sold to domestic Bengali middle class tourists as souvenirs, though there is a fundamental difference in terms of how these products are presented in the two different locations. Cox’s Bazar’s Burmis Markets focused on the historical understanding of Rakhaing as people of Burma, and imported products from Burma as reflecting their ethnic characteristics. Kuakata’s Rakhaing Markets, carrying exactly the same product, emphasised Rakhaing ethnicity as that of an exotic tribe. The difference in these two locations reflects their histories; Kuakata’s market being developed by the Bangladesh state relatively recently as part of its nation-building process, while Cox’s bazar emerged out of the domestic tourism industry. This tourism-related industry, in either location, is fundamentally distinct from Rakhaing’s inter-ethnic economic activities, meaning trading products with other Rakhaings. This distinction of two different approach to intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic economic activities, which were the central focus of Chapter 6 reinforce the view of Rakhaing being fundamentally different from the broader Bengali community.

This sense of Rakhaing as an excluded community in Bangladesh has been reinforced by the personalised nature of social relationships among Rakhaing in Bangladesh. As discussed in Chapter 8, Rakhaing individuals’ behaviours are attributable to known individuals rather than ethnic predisposition, since most people in most villages have a knowledge of most members of the community. As outlined in that chapter, whether the experience with Rakhaing individuals is positive or negative, it is seen as indicative of
the characteristics of these individuals, but whilst those of other communities with whom the Rakhaing do not have personal knowledge are conceptualised in terms of shared cultural characteristics. The behaviours of individuals from other communities are thus understood as the different and distinct characteristics from those within the Rakhaing community. This was evident in the common view of Bengali Muslims as grabbing land from Rakhaing, rather than such instances as the corrupt behaviour of a particular local leader who is a Bengali Muslim. This cultural understanding of social behaviours is exacerbated by the weakness of the Bangladeshi state to protect and promote the interest of its citizens, including Rakhaing.

Looking at the everyday life of Rakhaing people in terms of historical, religious, cultural, economic and social aspects, I have argued that the notion of marginality emerges not just out of the antagonistic relationship between Rakhaing (as an ethnic entity) and the state (as a political entity). Ethnic essentialism which asserts that Rakhaing possess cultural characteristics distinct from other people, has also manifested through the social and political exclusions the Rakhaing face in Bangladesh. The Rakhaing ethnic group, as an exclusive social category, does not derive from innate Rakhaing characteristics. Rakhaing are culturally excluded from the mainstream of Bangladesh, not simply because of national identity politics in Bangladesh, but also because of their own understanding of their ethnicity and the political practices of the Burmese government.

Rakhaing consider their celebration of Thungran rituals as commemorating the change of a year in the Rakhaing calendar, but they can also be seen as an expression of their ethnic subjectivity. The Thungran celebration may be a form of rejecting hegemonic Bengali Muslim culture, but it also marks Rakhaing exclusivity from the other people of Bangladesh as a distinct people. These practices and characteristics have been made into
defining markers through different social interactions between Rakhaing and non-Rakhaing individuals.

The State and Ethnicity as Strategic Essentialism

In the study of social life in contemporary Bangladesh, ethnicity has been important in understanding the social exclusion Rakhaing perceive in their role as marginal members of the Bangladesh nation-state. However, in some social and political situations, this notion of membership of a marginal community has allowed Rakhaing to participate in the political and social processes of the nation-state. To understand how highlighting their ethnicity in the interactions with other peoples becomes a way of asserting themselves in Bangladesh, I have focused on social and political situations where the social relationships of belonging are actualised.

In describing the social, political, economic, cultural and religious interactions in the lives of the Rakhaing, I have shown how ethnic essentialism plays a key role in their dealing with the challenges of living in Bangladesh. This could be viewed as entailing the exploitation of their ethnicity by some Rakhaing to their own advantage in their relations with the wider society and the state. Instead of simply dismissing such practices as simply the essentialising of ethnicity, I have paid attention to how the essentialism surrounding the notion of ethnicity has permeated the social lives of the Rakhaing people, heeding Herzfeld (1997). The essentialised notion of ethnicity has been implicated in the processes of social exclusion of the Rakhaing people in some situations, but in other situations it has been used as a strategic tool for their community or individual benefits. This notion of a marginalised minority has been strategically important in the complex dynamics of international, national, local and intra-ethnic relationships.
In order for Bangladesh to claim that it is an internationally accepted democratic country, Rakhaing, who were considered as a marginalised minority, have been accorded a position as a people whose well-being the government has claimed to promote and protect. The interplay between the international development community, local non-government organisations and the government—as I have outlined in Chapter 2 about the emergence of the Rakhaing Buddhist Welfare Association (RBWA)—gives rise to a political and social space for the Rakhaing. Social and political leaders of Bangladesh have provided opportunities to the Rakhaing in the name of the development of their community. Hence, these political leaders promoted the Rakhaing people’s culture as being protected by the Bangladeshi state, promoting the uniqueness of their cultural characteristics, particularly through cultural performances, as I discussed in relation to national Cultural Festivals and other performative events. Rakhaing are one of a number of marginalised communities that are essential in presenting Bangladesh’s positive image in its international relationship agenda. Thungran celebrations gave such opportunities for public interactions between national social and political leaders, and the Rakhaing community.

From the Rakhaing community organisations’ perspective, these opportunities give a direct access to state representatives and international communities, who in turn provide access and resources for the benefits of the Rakhaing community. For the community leaders, being able to participate in these performance activities, along with national and international leaders, allows them to gain recognition from international and national actors as representatives of the Rakhaing community. Rakhaing individuals see that their community leaders with such access would be able protect or promote their interests. In the examples of land grabbing cases, I have argued that ordinary Rakhaings are using such practices of involving their community leaders to circumvent state processes to
protect their interests. While most politicians and bureaucrats are beyond the reach of the ordinary people, Rakhaing elites are able to approach them more easily due to their community leadership status or their leadership positions within community organisations. This ability to access the upper reaches of the state hierarchy allows these leaders to influence activities of local-level state agents. This influence can then be used for the protection and promotion of the interests of ordinary Rakhaing, who would normally be unable to access state agencies beyond the local level.

This can be seen as ordinary Rakhaing reacting to the state institutions at the local levels, which are ineffective at best and sometimes antagonistic to them. This strategic essentialism can only be understood if we look at how these ‘ethnic’ characteristics are linked to social, political and economic interactions among Rakhaing individuals, the local and national elites and the forces within the nation-state of Bangladesh. I have pointed out in the chapter “Shadowing the State” that this not only breaks down the state versus community dichotomy, but also that this is an important aspect in reinforcing inter-ethnic relationships of the Rakhaing community, in an institutionalised form of a community organisation.

Despite them being a small Buddhist minority community living within neighbourhoods of Muslim majority, Rakhaing are legal citizens in Bangladesh. Yet, having religious links to Burma’s Buddhist community, Rakhaing also enjoy access to Burma, whether they travel for economic, social or religious reasons. These social and religious links with Burma give them a sense of security that they would be able to migrate to Burma one day, if they are unable to continue living in a Bengali-Muslim dominated country.
However, a detailed ethnographic analysis of Rakhaing experience with the Burmese state and its security apparatus as illegal entrants to that country reveals the limitation of their “proxy citizenship” there. Ultimately, despite their sense of belonging to the Burmese nation, they are still citizens of Bangladesh enjoying full legal rights which are not available from Burma. This fact could be contrasted with the majority Bengali community’s antagonistic reactions against the Rohingya refugees inside Bangladesh and the illegal status of Burmese exiles living in the country.

Being recognised as ‘cultural others’ means that Rakhaing are viewed by middle class Bengali people as the tribal people with exotic cultural practices. Because of their cultural identification with Burmese products, understood as associated with their way of life, these are valued as exotic souvenirs by the middle class tourists to Rakhaing regions, Bangladesh’s two most popular domestic tourist destinations. In Cox’s Bazar’s Burmis Markets and Kuakata’s Rakhaing Markets, Rakhaing are able to sell “Rakhaing/Burmese products” because of the popular imagination of them as culturally Burmese. Even though Rakhaing do not numerically dominate this souvenir industry, especially in Cox’s Bazar, in terms of the number of shops, they still feature as its most important element.

Being understood as having certain characteristics different from Bengali Muslim, but similar to the peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, some Rakhaing are able to gain economic benefits by engaging in ethnic economies with their ‘ethnic cousins.’ In these industries, Rakhaing are considered as having a greater understanding of the products since these were considered to be an integral part of Rakhaing ethnic practices. Ethnic distinction is the important element in making these economic practices possible for Rakhaing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh.
Accessing state services in Bangladesh is a hard task for ordinary people, more acutely felt by ordinary Rakhaing individuals. However, those Rakhaing with higher social and economic status are able to access state services more easily. For them, exclusion in terms of ethnicity does not affect their higher social status within the wider society and their everyday life. Moreover, being considered as a marginalised minority community, these privileged Rakhaing are able to gain limited exclusive opportunities, which help them in achieving a greater social mobility. The benefits of essentialised ethnicity clearly depend upon how an individual is positioned strategically in their relationships with other co-ethnics, as well as other fellow Bangladeshis, as in the case study of ‘Sirs of the State’ in Chapter 8.

The politics of actualising the cultural identity of Bangladesh, through Muslim and Bengali identities, is related to the articulation of the Rakhaing ethnic identity as a group of people in Bangladesh with a significantly different or unique culture. This articulation of ethnicity touches on historical, religious, performative cultural and economic aspects. The celebration of Thungran also has been presented as an integral part of this unique culture. At the same time, the cultural uniqueness has been used to stage activities that may not necessarily be allowed in a normal situation, such as drinking alcohol in public. Cultural differences from the Bengali Muslim have been used as grounds to conduct the Thungran celebrations publicly on the streets of Phaloung Chait.

Situating Ethnicity, Situating Festivals

I have discussed that Rakhaing ethnicity is concerned with how their cultural characteristics have come to be viewed as being different to the Bengali, and the same as Burma’s Rakhine and similar to Burmese. In their role as the cultural other in relation to
the dominant majority, Rakhaing are considered as a marginalised minority within Bangladesh, a position validated by cultural distinction. Some Rakhaing are able to use this cultural distinction for their own political, social and economic benefit. However, most Rakhaing, who are not able to gain significant benefits from these limited opportunities, understand the struggles of their lives being marginalised because of their ethnicity. Labelled as having a different ethnicity from the Bengali majority and a similar culture to the people of Burma, Rakhaing consider Burma to be their real homeland. This sense of belonging to Burma has mediated how Rakhaing practice the cultural characteristics of Burma. These cultural practices normally identified with Burma reinforce the popular and their own perception that they culturally belong to Burma.

Even though Bengali and Rakhaing themselves consider they are culturally similar to the Burmese, most Burmese would not view them as Bama/ Burman, the dominant ethnicity in Burma. Rather, they would regard Rakhaing as members of the Rakhine/Arakanese ethnic group, one of the eight major nationalities of Burma. This ethnic distinction of being Rakhine/Arakanese occurs within the Burmese political context. In Bangladesh, the notion of common religiosity with the Burmese has almost overwhelmed this ethnic distinction between Burma’s dominant majority Burman/Bama and the Rakhine/Arakanese, as in the examples of Burmese spirit and religious behaviours being readily adopted among Rakhaing. However, without an ethnographic study on the ethnicity of Rakhine/Arakanese in Burma, we will not able to understand how these Rakhaing migrants interact with the Rakhine/Arakanese ‘hosts,’ the majority Burman and other peoples in Burma.
At the same time, the Rakhine/Arakanese community is not confined only to the Arakan State and Burma. In this globalised world, there are many Rakhine/Arakanese living in many other countries beyond Bangladesh and Burma. A number of Rakhine/Arakanese migrants in overseas countries have organised themselves as a formal association, and have attempted to impose their understanding of ethnicity upon the Rakhain community in Bangladesh. Some of the Thungran celebrations, especially the musical concerts and the account of the clash between Rakhain and Bengali youths at the Wa Kyut festival, drew intense interest from the diaspora communities, including substantial financial contribution. My discussion on international forces in this thesis has been focused on the development organisations such as foreign donors, because I have only been able to gather limited data on the interaction of this Diasporic movement with the Rakhain community in Bangladesh. One of the reasons has been that this movement was only nascent during my research in Bangladesh. Being able to understand its nature and activities would reveal how different global forces manifest differently in the local situation. This would complement what I have so far discussed about the lives of Rakhain in Bangladesh.

The lives of the Rakhain in Bangladesh, though popularly characterised in terms of distinct cultural characteristics, do not consist exclusively of living within the ethnic boundary. Individuals and families interact daily with other Rakhain and other peoples of Bangladesh. Still, the notion of ethnic distinction has helped them to make sense of their lives in a society politically and socially dominated by Bengali Muslims. I have outlined these interactions mostly focusing on the perspectives of the Rakhain people. Moreover, I have presented the popular understandings of these interactions expressed in English language media. A deeper understanding of the ethnic relationship would be gained if I was able to better understand how ordinary Bengali people understand their
relationship to Rakhaing, some of whom were socially, economically and politically more powerful than themselves. These local interactions are as important as national political and bureaucratic practices, international discourses and cross-border intra-ethnic relationships. All of these play an important role in the construction of Rakhaing ethnicity.

Commenting on the lives of the Rakhaing in Bangladesh and the Rakhine/Arakanese in Burma, a monk from a southern Cox’s Bazar village said:

For Rakhaing in Bangladesh, we need to look at the Bangladesh context [original English terms]. We live within Bengali culture, Bengali atmosphere, Bengali politics, Bengali land. [...] There [in Burma] is a different whirlpool, here [Bangladesh] is a different whirlpool. The whirlpool there isn’t the same as here.

However, the effects of political ‘whirlpools’ do not stop on either bank of the Naff River, the physical boundary that divides the two countries. Political and social changes occurring in Burma, especially in Arakan/Rakhine State are as important as those from Bangladesh. Moreover, these forces manifest through international dynamics as well as in the local society. The life of a Rakhaing in Bangladesh is negotiated between these different forces, which promotes ethnicity as the defining feature of their sociality. Their ethnic identity depends upon their subjectivity as much as the wider social and political conditions that allow that subjectivity. Talking about being Rakhaing in everyday life is not just about listing the cultural characteristics which define their ethnicity, but also how they experience social, political and economic challenges derived from their personal, local, national and international situations as Bangladeshis.
Since the conclusion of my fieldwork in 2007, the political situations in Burma had gone through major changes, mostly entailing increased democratisation and broadening social and economic reforms. However, in June and October 2012, violent communal conflicts occurred in the Rakhine State, leaving at least 192 people dead. In some international views, the Rakhine/Arakanese were blamed for this communal violence between Rakhine and the Muslim “Rohingya/ Bengali”1 communities (for example International Crisis Group, 2013), though most Burmese Buddhists sided on the Rakhaing side.2 These violent events incited strong reactions among the Buddhist communities in Burma and Burmese Muslims/Rohingya communities currently in Bangladesh. Compounding to this communal violence in Burma, Bangladesh faced its own communal violence between its Buddhist and Muslim communities in Ramu (Panwar), about ten kilometres away from Cox’s Bazar. Rakhaing monasteries and houses of Barua Buddhists were destroyed, in relation to an alleged Facebook post defaming the Quran. My friends and relatives informed me of the tense situations they faced and the concerns they had for their security, but they also commented about the security provisions they received from the government. They also commented critically on the news of violence against the Muslims in Burma, stating the possible impact on Rakhaing lives in Bangladesh, surrounded by their Muslim neighbours. Such events of communal violence did not occur during my fieldwork, and I would expect that such an event would have a huge impact on the way people react and understand their Thungran celebrations. It may be that some people might still participate in them but with great reservations. Moreover, their articulation of how they felt as an excluded minority within Bangladesh would most likely have a different emphasis.

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1 Ethnonym of this group is highly contested, the existing debate has taken a violence nature inside Burma.
2 The Burmese Government’s inquiry commission, however, did not put blames solely on the Rakhine/Arakanese (The report of the Inquiry Commission on the Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State, 2013).
Thungran celebrations in 2006 and 2007 have the same general characteristics of other Rakhaing Thungrans. However there are small variations and differences from the general pattern. Instead of dismissing these variations and differences, I have tried to understand them. Looking through these differences and the general characteristics of Thungran celebrations as they unfolded in 2006 and 2007, I have outlined the associated cultural, social, economic and political conditions. Using the extended-case method, I have analysed the situations which underline the Thungran celebrations of the Rakhaing people as well as their everyday life. Focusing on their everyday lives, I have shown how the state is implicated in Rakhaing’s ethnicity, though not just as a singular entity against the minority, but as complex sometimes contradictory relationships which influence how they understand both their ethnicity and their citizenship.

Whether certain Rakhaing participate in Thungran, and in which of its rituals, depends upon the social situations in which she find herself at the festival time, as well as her preference at the time. Whether a young Rakhaing in Cox’s Bazar participate, as in the examples of Kyoung Tha Phara Ree Cho Pway, will depend upon whether she is willing to attend it as much as whether she is a student and the ritual is celebrated in the town. However, being identified as Rakhaing, their participation in these rituals is considered by themselves and outsiders to be ‘natural and necessary’. In celebrating Thungran, they follow the general outline of a typical Rakhaing New Year celebration, but how they actually celebrate will depend upon the different social and political conditions that they face at the time of Thungran. Some of these conditions make them participate in these rituals as an ethnic activity. Hence, being considered Rakhaing will allow them to engage in these rituals, while participating in these activities differentiates them as Rakhaing, as against ‘others’. However, which rituals they would participate in is not necessarily defined by their ethnicity, but by other circumstances in their lives. Though they have
common ethnicity, Rakhaing also participate in the Thungran Festival as uniquely situated individuals, with various ties to their fellow Rakhaing and to the Bengali Muslim and other peoples with whom they interact—relations that can sometimes engender a sense of marginality, but, sometimes can also contribute to the joy of their participation.
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