Dear Readers,

After a longer than expected hiatus of several months, we have now completed the latest issue of the Bulletin of the Burma Studies Group. I have taken over duties from Ward Keeler. For those of you who do not know me, I have been involved in Burma Studies since I began studying the Burmese language in 1995. I have been living in Rangoon since 2006 and got a PhD in history in 2010, but I have also been working there since 2008.

After some discussion, we have decided that we can no longer justify bi-annual publication given the time involved in preparing each issue and the fairly small size of readership, which is currently under 150 subscribers. To address our small readership and printing expenses, not to mention the waste of natural resources involved with printing on paper, we have decided to try a new format for the Bulletin. I hope to bring it in line with other similar publications, such as the newsletters from the centers for Southeast Asia Studies in the US. These are generally short, color publications, usually under twenty-five pages, made as PDF files, but which can still be printed should readers choose to do so. Putting the Bulletin online will also mean that it will have a potentially far wider readership, and thus we may be able to expand our conversations beyond what has, up to now, been a fairly small group of people. If interest grows enough, we can reconsider the decision to publish only once a year.

I hope readers will find this new format to be more attractive and interesting, one which you all will want to contribute to. Eliciting contributions has been a long-standing problem for the Bulletin, so I thought it might be useful to talk a bit about who we are and what we look for in the Bulletin. From what I have been able to see as the new editor and formerly as a reader of the Bulletin for several years, it appears that readers are the “usual suspects”: Those of us who attend and present at the Burma Studies conferences held every two years either in DeKalb or abroad; academics involved in Burma Studies as a field—the people in art, anthropology, ethnomusicology, history, and linguistics, among others, who present at Burma panels at meetings such as of the Association for Asian Studies, or who have taught or published related to Burma; and others in the US and abroad, particularly Britain, who have some connection with Burma. While there have been subscribers who are in themselves in Burma, overall Burmese, especially those inside the country, have not been very involved. Is this the nature of the beast, that is, is something like a Burma Studies Group largely going to be of interest to academics and other people overseas? While the curtailed
participation of Burmese people inside the country has been understandable until quite recently, is there more we could do to reach out to people inside the country?

From what I have seen, the Bulletin is one way for people in the Burma Studies community to talk to each other, keep each other informed of what they have been doing, and to learn about what others have been doing. Inevitably there has been a strong emphasis on academics and language teaching and learning, which reflects the reality of how many of us have come to the Burma Studies Group. As part of that role of the Bulletin, I would like to encourage some sustained conversations. We already have Michael Charney’s Burma Research listserv, which is a useful way to ask questions and elicit help or information. Other than that, there are some websites like the New Mandala that combine aspects of academia and journalism with an element of the chat room, offering articles with a space for postings from readers in reaction to the articles.

I see the Bulletin as falling somewhere in between the two. As started under Ward Keeler’s tenure, I would like to build on themes: for example, earlier issues had a number of contributions from students and teachers of the Burmese language asking them to tell us their stories of how they came to study the language and their experiences. Our discussion or contributions need not be academic in the sense of the Journal of Burma Studies, which is a peer-reviewed academic journal. Rather, the Bulletin can be a place for scholarly – perhaps better put as “informed”—discussion.

When I have talked with some Burma Studies friends and colleagues, we have turned over ideas that have been discussed more widely in outside society, not just academia, but which people inside Burma Studies have not yet really taken up. Some themes that have emerged that we might think about as a group. I have alluded to some of these already – is Burma Studies too focused on North American academia? Are we aware of what’s going on elsewhere in the world, as in Europe and Japan? What do we make of the fact that so many people in Burma Studies are not from the country. Does that matter? Yet again, does being from the country grant someone a privilege or burden of representing the whole country? Some have asked, what has academic inquiry done for the people of Burma? To the last question, we could ask, is academic inquiry meant to do something in the same way that an “intervention” in the sense used in the development world?

I would like to think that these discussions can indeed be useful and interesting for all of us, not just those of us who are involved in academia in the traditional sense, especially now that there appears to be some opening in Burma and there is again discussion of engagement with Burma and Burmese educational institutions.

This Issue

In the meantime, I’ve brought together some contributions for your consideration. The most recent is the International Burma Studies Conference held at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL on October 5-7, 2012.

• Lilian Handlin gives us her thoughts on the most recent Burma Studies Conference.

• Kinue Weinstein has contributed a photo essay from a recent trip to Myanmar.

• Hans-Bernd Zöllner has contributed an essay on the by-elections from January 2012.

• Jacques Leider, a historian of Burma who has specialized in Rakhaing history, has contributed an essay to help us understand the situation of the Rohingya and the recent violence.

• Finally, I have contributed a short account of a recent trip that Mathias Jenny and I took in Mon State looking for Lao speakers.

I hope in future to generate more discussion from an ever-greater number of participants and contributors, especially those in Asia and in Burma itself.

Patrick McCormick
From March 23rd to April 10th this year, I visited Myanmar once again. The main purposes of my visit were to investigate the possibility of holding a workshop on the Nagani Book Club, on which my Myanmar Literature Project is based, and to advertise my “Minesweeping through Mindsweeping” project, which aims to compile a “people’s history” of Myanmar acceptable to all political and ethnic groups in the country. Unavoidably, the by-elections on April 1st constituted another focus of the journey. The following are some excerpts from my travel diary. They by no means give a balanced account of the events and its meaning, but are merely some of what I noticed.

Saturday March 23rd

Pilgrimage to Watheinka
I have been invited to join a trip to Watheinka, the village which Aung San Suu Kyi has chosen as her residence in her constituency, Kawhmu Township, in Yangon Region. The three middle-aged Burmese family members I know want to see the place and want me to see it as well. We start at seven in the morning and I have the feeling that I’m embarking on a pilgrimage and a trip into the unknown. My hosts give only vague answers to how many miles we’ll have to cover (maybe 40, maybe 60) and how long the journey will last (between one and a half and three and a half hours).

“Us” and “Them”
We drive westwards and after crossing three rivers and canals on bridges the ruling junta built in recent years, and after turning south and passing a Shinbyu procession, we reach Twante Township after about an hour’s drive. In the old days, it took much longer. But that’s no reason to be thankful to the Tatmadaw leaders: “They” just used “our” money. The same applies to the asphalt road we’re using. Some green banners inform the traveller that it was built by the USDP, the ruling party, with the financial assistance of a certain company.

In one of the villages of Twante Township, we notice a big red signboard and a number of people sitting in a compound at the roadside. A new NLD office is just being opened. We stop to have a look and I am invited to take a seat as a guest of honor in the first row behind the speakers’ table. The number of NLD members has increased in recent months, I’m told. Before the decision of the NLD to re-register in November last year, there were just 1000 in the whole township; now more than 5000 are enrolled. The people are not afraid anymore to assemble under the red banners of the NLD with the fighting peacock emblem.

The chairmen of the township branch and local unit give short speeches. With the assistance of “our leader,” as Aung San Suu Kyi is always called, a new era has begun. Then a guest speaker elaborates on the difference between “old” and “new.” The times of the “dictators (anashin)” are over, the time of freedom and independence has come. I ask about the main difference between the two kinds of leadership. “We love our leader and hate the dictators” is the answer.

Entering Aung San Suu Kyi-Country
The border between Twante and Kawhmu Townships is clearly marked. Immediately after leaving Twante, the road is lined with Aung San Suu Kyi posters and red-colored NLD logos. Aung San Suu Kyi in Burmese dress besides her father in a green uniform, Aung San Suu Kyi wearing a baseball cap, Aung San Suu Kyi’s face in an oval frame looking like a medallion, almost always with a hint of where to mark one’s vote on the ballot: beside the peacock symbol of the NLD. From time to time we see a poster of the candidate, too. He’s a physician wearing
a white doctor’s coat and a stethoscope around his neck. He looks rather pale compared to the colorful placards of the NLD. He seems to have resigned from the beginning of the contest, which is no contest at all, but a clear victory for the NLD leader.

**Reaching a Dead-End Village**

After leaving the concrete road, the election signboards disappear. From now on, the road is a bumpy cart track. There are no signboards. At every intersection we have to look for someone who can tell us how to get to Watheinka. Sometimes our car has to turn back because the road is in such bad shape. A hut or a monastery comes into sight from time to time. Fortunately, there isn’t much traffic: One or two trucks requiring some maneuvering around, and some motorcycles. There’s bamboo growing abundantly. Sometimes there are rice fields and rubber plantations to be seen. After two hours and about 15 miles, we reach Watheinka, easily recognizable by a poster of Aung San Suu Kyi.

**The Residence**

Most of the houses are bamboo huts, though a few are concrete buildings, one of which we are looking for. It’s been freshly painted. As we arrive, some people come out of the house to direct our car into the compound. We are not the first visitors to this special place. A large bamboo structure has been erected in the compound. Here, a Japanese film crew will cover the Aung San Suu Kyi will give on the evening of March 30, a day before election day. She’ll sleep here one night before returning to Yangon, we are told after having been invited into the house. We are asked to sit down and served drinks and some fruits. A middle-aged man acts as the speaker. He is not a member of the NLD, just a helper, and there is no NLD office here yet.

Why did Aung San Suu Kyi choose this house as her residence in her constituency? “I don’t know exactly, perhaps because this is a Karen village.” Christian Karens? “No, mainly Buddhists. And she wanted to do a favor to the widow who owns the house and offered it to her.” On the wall are some family photos, together with portraits of Aung San Suu Kyi and her father. The old lady, who might have been acquainted with Aung San Suu Kyi for some time, is not here. What do the villagers expect after the elections? “Nothing.” I am surprised, I reply, because I would have expected that the villagers would like to get better roads after what we have suffered coming here. Better communication could make life easier. “No, Daw Suu was here once and she told us that she doesn’t promise anything. But she will do her best. We are just happy that she is around.”

What has changed since the new government took over last year? “Nothing – except that they allowed Daw Suu to contest in the elections.” Why might the government have cleared the way for Daw Suu’s participation? “Because they listened to the people, who love Daw Suu.”

Before leaving to walk through the village to a sports ground which shows a freshly-painted podium to take a group photo, I’m asked to sign a guest book. A correspondent from the *New York Times* has been there before, as have some Japanese journalists, and some Burmese from Yangon.

**Kawhmu Village**

We take a different road back to the main concrete road. It isn’t very bumpy, but very dusty. Sometimes it feels like driving through a sandstorm in the Sahara. After two hours we reach Kawhmu and have a rest in a teashop opposite the head office of the USDP. We open our packed lunches and eat. The tea is free. I go to the office to have a closer look. Some people are in the courtyard of the big building, but nobody asks me to come in. Back at the teashop, I ask the owner what the people think about the candidate whose picture is hanging up on the wall of the USDP building. “They don’t care much for him. He’s not from around here, but just offered his medical services two months ago. Before that, he belonged to a medical team travelling around the country.” Most probably, he was employed by the USDA as a social worker and was asked to serve as a candidate.

*continued on pg. 6*
in the elections. “I wonder what reward he’ll get for being willing to be soundly beaten by Daw Suu,” comments one of my companions.

What about the outlook of the teashop owner? “I’m content here. Business could be better, but it’s quiet and peaceful here and I have my family with me. I lived in Yangon for some time, but came back to take over the shop after my father died. I expect to die here.” What if you won a million kyat in the lottery? “I would donate most of it to the monks.”

At five in the evening we are back in Yangon, rather exhausted but happy—for different reasons—that we’ve seen a bit of what is at the core of Suu Kyi’s campaign.

Monday March 26th

At NLD headquarters

The ground floor of the house on Shwegondaing Road looks like a souvenir shop. Since my last visit in November last year, some stalls have been set up beside the entrance. Here, as well as inside are sold T-shirts, posters, calendars, badges and other items carrying pictures of Suu Kyi and her father. They perform other business also, like dealing with foreign visitors like me. I hand them my business card at the reception counter. A young campaign assistant tells me that Daw Suu has gotten seriously ill and that NLD members have advised her not to go to Watheinka on the weekend. The assistant heard that the owner of the house in Watheinka lived in Yangon on University Avenue for some time and is poor. Daw Suu wanted to help her by accepting her offer to take up residence in her village.

Myanmar EGRES

I have a chat with one of the young analysts at this well-known institution promoting “capacity building” and education about democracy. Different concepts of democracy have been surfacing in the current campaign, the analyst says. He’s afraid that Suu Kyi’s presence in Parliament could hamper democratic procedures because the entire world – inside and outside of the country – just looks to the party leader, regardless of the fact that she’s just one of 440 parliamentarians in the Pyithu Hluttaw. Other candidates will not be judged on their expertise, but on how close they are to Suu Kyi’s cause. I argue that the rules governing parliamentary procedures might contribute to a fading away of Suu Kyi’s fame. Another middle-aged sympathizer of EGRES declares that he regards Suu Kyi as a very intelligent person, but is afraid of her followers inside Myanmar and her admirers outside the country, a lot of leading politicians included.

Saturday March 31st

Recording of a Press Conference

Suu Kyi is to deliver a short statement on the election campaign and answered questions of journalists covering the event. The press conference is held in the yard of 54 University Avenue, her private residence. I can’t attend because I’ve forgotten to apply for a ticket issued at NLD headquarters. However, some Chinese journalists who are staying in my hotel lend me an audio-recording of the event. The gist of Suu Kyi’s assessment: The election campaign has by no means been conducted in a free and fair manner as shown by an event that happened just a day ago. Someone threw a betel nut at a party candidate. The election observers, in their assessment of election day, should keep what happened in mind.

Ma Thida

This medical doctor and writer spent some ten years in jail because of her activities supporting the Burmese democracy movement. She has just published a wonderful book entitled The Roadmap under the pen name Suragamika. Like many others, she’s afraid that Suu Kyi will accept a government office and
have to leave Parliament as a consequence. That would be a death blow for her party. I tell her that Suu Kyi excluded that choice at her press conference, and stated that her party absolutely did not depend on her.

Sunday April 1st

*Having a Look at Elections in Mingala Taungnyunt Township, Yangon*

In the 2010 elections, U Aung Kyi, a very popular ex-military officer who is the former labor minister, “relation minister” for contacts with Suu Kyi, and present information minister, won the seat in this township. After his promotion to a cabinet post, according to the regulations of the 2008 Constitution, he had to resign from Parliament. Some weeks back, he came here again to present gifts to people over 70. Today, everybody is convinced that the NLD candidate will win, one of the many women who Suu Kyi encouraged to stand for elections to raise the small number of female members of parliament. The polling site we visit is in a school.

The list of voters is pinned at the wall of the building. We are allowed to see the interior of the room where the ballot boxes are standing and even take photos. That was very different in November 2010. On the TV in the home of the host who took us around to see the elections is the Democratic Voice of Burma. One interview comes from Mingala Taungnyunt. The people are happy they can vote freely. They went to the polls in 2010 as well, but as robots. The interviews concentrate on sympathizers and members of the NLD. No member of the USDP’s “Lion Party” appears on the screen.

**NLD election party**

Shortly before five o’clock, the people at NLD headquarters are in a festive mood. Red flags displaying the party’s emblem, the fighting peacock, are swaying. Supporters are standing along both sides of Shwegondaing Road, with people wearing armbands directing traffic to make sure the flow of traffic is undisturbed. Loudspeakers emit a deafening noise. The NLD anthem highlighting the words “Aung San Suu Kyi” and “Democracy” is the backbone of the song, which both represents and reinforces the confidence of the people assembled.

Above the entrance to headquarters, a screen displays election results in Burmese. Each new piece of information is greeted with jubilant cheers. “We won in Naypyidaw!” exclaims one female party member, who does a little dance of joy. There are many foreigners here, some wearing NLD shirts and headbands, being sold today as usual. Among them is a group of young blonde Danish women, who are happy that so many other foreigners can be met at this occasion. Suu Kyi is not expected to come today, but Tin Oo, the party chairman, is here giving interviews, autographs, and posing for photos. Like all the other Burmese, he’s enjoying the looming landslide victory to the fullest.

Tuesday April 3rd

*The New Light of Myanmar*

The official newspaper announces the election results. Of the 45 seats contested in the elections, the NLD won 43.

Thursday April 5th

*We love Suu*

With a Burmese friend, I discuss the “We Love Suu” stickers being sold on street corners. She had done her own observations of the election on Sunday and noticed how many voters didn’t really know much about the people standing for elections. They just ticked the box next to the peacock symbol on the ballot, as had been displayed on the party’s election posters beside the image of Daw Suu. Another amazing observation was the enthusiasm of the voters to participate in the polling. People complained when they couldn’t find their names immediately on the list of voters. Even old, crippled women were being helped to the polling stations – out of love for Suu Kyi.

In short: The taste of these elections is bitter and sweet–ambivalent as is almost everything in human life.

_Hans-Brend Zollner_
“Rohingya,” Rakhaing and the Recent Outbreak of Violence - A Note

Jacques P. Leider

“Rohingya” is both an old noun and a new label. Old, but exceedingly rare in both Western and Asian sources, new, though widespread in the international media. Not unreasonably challenged as an ethnic denomination, it is indeed unfamiliar to large parts of the Muslim community of Arakan that it is supposed to name. It was, as far as we know, the endonym of Muslims who lived there in pre-colonial times. The term was noted by Dr. Francis Hamilton in his article, “A comparative vocabulary of some of the languages spoken in the Burma Empire,” published in volume V of Asiatick Researches (1799), where he distinguished six languages and three dialects in the kingdom. One of these dialects “evidently derived from the language of the Hindu nation,” he says was spoken by the “Mohammedan who have long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan” (p. 237). He further writes that the “Yakain, the proper natives” of Arakan called the Muslims “Kulaw Yakain, or stranger Arakan.” Two distinct cultural communities thus co-existed at the time the Burmese conquered the Arakanese kingdom in 1785.

Since the 1950s, the term “Rohingya,” which went unrecorded in British administrative sources, has been claimed by vocal representatives of the Muslim community of Rakhaing State as an ethnonym for their community. Though no one contests that the overall majority of Muslims in Arakan originate from Bengal, either in the past or the recent present, the Muslims there themselves paradoxically are opposed to any reference to their land of origins. They want to be called “Rakhaing Muslims,” neither “Bengali Muslims” nor “Rohingya.” The term “Rohingya” spread with great success after the refugee crises in the 1970s and 1990s. The media outside of Myanmar now commonly refer to all Muslims of Rakhaing State uniformly as “Rohingya,” though the name has stuck in particular with those of the population who live abroad or who have claimed refugee status. To put the matter another way, a careful delineation of the term Rohingya reveals that while the term has a lineage of several centuries, the way it is used today by some members of the Muslim community in Rakhaing State to refer to themselves is of fairly recent origin. Most Muslims in Rakhaing State—which includes many non-Rohingya Muslims—do not like or use the term. Many people outside the community, both in Rakhaing State and elsewhere, tend to call anyone who is a Muslim in Rakhaing State a “Rohingya.” In the correct sense, “Rohingya” only applies to a portion of the Bengali-origin Muslim population of Rakhaing State, to those who wish to call themselves that way. Outside of this self-designated group, there are other Muslims who are largely—though not exclusively—of ultimate Bengali origin, but who are nevertheless not Rohingya.

Rohingya leaders both inside and outside of Myanmar who speak on behalf of the Muslims of Rakhaing State claim to be the descendants of the old, pre-colonial Muslim community of Arakan. Nobody doubts the historical existence of that community. But the composition of the Muslim communities in Myanmar is much more complex than many of the “streamlined” accounts would have it. Most of the Indian Muslims came to Arakan during the 19th and 20th centuries, when during the colonial period they were unrestricted by migration regulations, and then also after independence. Taking a long-term view, one has to keep in mind that there has been migration back and forth along the north to south coastline of Arakan for a long time, including of Rakhaing into what is now Bangladesh. The superficial judgement that all Muslims in Rakhaing State are de facto post-independence illegal immigrants cannot be justified.

1 I have used the following terms: “Rakhaing” to denote both the people and language, but also an adjective in some contexts; “Arakan” to denote the place before independence in 1948 – the adjectival form being “Arakanese”; and “Rakhaing State” to denote the modern political entity. This is not a perfect solution, but goes a long way to alleviate the ambiguities the term “Rakhaing,” which potentially covers all these senses.
Having said that, one cannot fail to see that illegal Bangladeshi immigration exists and persists. In Assam, for example, Bangladeshi immigrants are numerous, but they do not claim to be a separate ethnic group of Northeast India, claiming rather to have an "Indian Muslim" identity.

With regard to the current situation in Rakhaing State, extreme statements on the balance between the Rakhaing Buddhist and Muslim populations have had great popularity in the absence of reliable statistics and records. As any particular statement provokes a counter-claim and breeds further mistrust, the long-standing communal tensions between Buddhists and Muslims have made predictable the most recent clashes. These tensions are clearly not new; British observers noted them in the 1920s. Neither then nor later has any relevant government tried to introduce any sensible policies to remedy the situation. Searching for legitimacy in the absence of legal security, each side has turned to history, which they have used and abused. Indeed, neither side has been satisfied with citing widely-accepted historical fact for their rhetorical strategies: All too often they have amplified, if not embellished or distorted, the meager historical record. To say that the Rohinyas are descended from Arab seafarers of the seventh century is a matter of sheer belief. From Arab sources, we know nothing of the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal, as a look at Tibbetts' 1979 *Study of the Arabic texts Containing Material on South-East Asia* will show. The acceptance of such interpretations is more a matter of personal conviction than something based on evidence. The visit of the Buddha to Arakan is a deeply-held belief of Rakhaing Buddhists, but does not withstand the critical eye of historical scholarship.

As a Persian inscription in Mrauk U shows, the historical antecedents of Muslim settlement go back at least to the late 15th century, when the cultural influence of the prestigious sultanate of Bengal was manifest, for example, in the design of local coins. During the rule of the Mrauk U kings, Muslims coming from various Indian lands were an altogether marginal community, but they undoubtedly played a noteworthy role in the fortunes of the independent Buddhist kingdom of Arakan in the 17th century. We know relatively little about their history. Their competition with the Portuguese for influence at the court prevented them from having any dominant cultural or political impact there. In the early 17th century, the Arakanese kings ran a lucrative slave trade that was based on the deportation of peasants from East Bengal. Until the 18th century, there was an official policy to keep the most qualified of the deported in Arakan. A famous example is the great Bengali poet Alaol, who thrived at the court of King Candasudhammarājā (1652-1670) and praised the king, his benefactor, as highly knowledgeable of the Buddha. Many of the Bengali peasants deported in the late 16th and early 17th centuries were settled on agricultural lands in Arakan.

The Rakhaing proudly remember the golden era of their 16th and 17th century kings, who were warriors, but also shrewd businessmen and Maeceneas-like patrons of literature at the court. The loss of their kingdom is quite prominent in the historical memory of the Buddhist Rakhaings. Among the educated that Indian Muslim traders were involved in the seasonal trade with ports on the Coromandel of India, but did not settle in Arakan. For the pre-colonial period, nothing is known about those Muslims who, gradually arriving as mercenaries, came to settle in Arakan and ultimately supported the Arakanese king's anti-Mughal foreign policy until 1666, when the Rakhaing lost the port of Chittagong, a main pillar of their trade.

The majority population of Arakan has been and still is the Rakhaing, who are Buddhists and ethnically akin to the Burmans. The history of Arakan in the early modern period (15th to 18th centuries) is foremost the history of a Buddhist kingdom which had privileged, but often strained, relations with neighboring Buddhist capitals, such as Ava, Pegu, Kandy and Ayutthaya, whose monkhoods generally adhered to the Sri Lankan Mahāvihāra textual tradition. The supreme symbol of the Buddhist virtue of the Rakhaing kings was the Mahāmuni statue, now the most revered Buddha statue in Myanmar. It was deported to Amarapura from its site in Arakan in early 1785 after the Burmese king Badon Min's (*aka* Bodaw Phaya's) conquest of Arakan.

The Rakhaing proudly remember the golden era of their 16th and 17th century kings, who were warriors, but also shrewd businessmen and Maeceneas-like patrons of literature at the court. The loss of their kingdom is quite prominent in the historical memory of the Buddhist Rakhaings. Among the educated

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2 This is true for all of Myanmar, where accurate census data are largely unavailable or undisclosed.
class, it has fuelled a persistent sense of loss of identity for over two centuries. The resentment against the Burmese as invaders has a surprising resilience. Unexpectedly, the thousands of Burman immigrants to Arakan in the 19th century, well documented in British sources, have been thoroughly Arakanized. Since independence, this lasting grudge against the Burmans has fuelled Rakhaing Buddhist nationalism, and has been a part of Rakhaing claims for greater autonomy.

The angry rejection of local Muslims’ claims to be an ethnic group of Rakhaing State under the Union of Burma and of the very appellation of “Rohingya” are other recurrent grievances of Buddhist Rakhaing nationalists and have been integral to their discourse since the 1950s. For decades, the Buddhist Rakhaings have felt that no outsider or any national government has paid serious attention to their anxieties that they have become increasingly marginalized in their own land. Some may question whether this marginalization is a reality or a reflection of Rakhaing self-perceptions of victimhood. But the reality of mutual antagonization between the two communities, and the considerable hostility of the Buddhist Rakhaing hostility towards the UN and NGOs in Rakhaing State show that we must take seriously their sense of being treated unfairly. In their eyes, the Muslim Rohingya community in northern Rakhaing State has been accorded preferential treatment. That group of Rohingya, especially as they have sought refugee status in Bangladesh, have been defined internationally as a “most vulnerable” group as displaced persons. This recognition and treatment are factors that have fuelled the recent protests of the Buddhist Rakhaing.

We should also keep in mind that the current economic, demographic, social and ultimately legal problems linked to the Muslim community and their coexistence with the Buddhists in Arakan do not go back to the pre-colonial period, when these communities lived side by side. As I have said, these communal problems have their origins in the immigration of Bengalis into Arakan during the British colonial period, which is well documented for the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Muslim communities of Indian descent are to be found all over Southeast Asia, starting with Myanmar itself. Such immigrants generally acknowledge their Indian roots and cultural identity and have followed various courses of communal integration. It is also well-known that the presence of such Indian communities, notably in port cities like Rangoon or Singapore, was intimately linked to the expansion of the British empire, its economic policies, and opportunities. In broader historical perspective, Bengali immigration to Arakan is thus but one chapter in the history of migration of Indians to serve British interests and administrative needs in colonial Burma.

So what is so different about the situation in Arakan? One aspect that could puzzle the observer is the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the arguments that the two sides put forward to legitimize their rivalling claims, and on the other hand, the representation of the conflict by those who have entered to mediate or remediate. To an unprecedented degree, both Muslims and Buddhists have been fixated on making claims for historical legitimacy, and counter-claims by Buddhicizing or Islamicising the Arakanese past. This is first of all a cultural war to gain hegemony over the interpretation of history. The antiquity of each community’s supposed first settlement in Arakan is used to oppose any contestation of what are factually untenable positions of propaganda. Again: Those who consider most Muslims in Rakhaing State simply as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh miss the point, while those who would deny that the border has always been porous, or that checks on migration have always been less than perfect, with corruption rife, are equally mistaken. In the end historical truths and counter-truths will be of little help to address the underlying social problems which have been made that much worse by reiterating extremist positions.

On the other hand, is it more helpful to represent and interpret the current conflict as an injustice (the non-recognition of...
citizenship), as a persistent failure of the government to protect parts of the population, or as successive humanitarian crises for the international community to address? All these perspectives are part of the problem as much as they are of any way to resolve the conflict. Depicting the Muslims as the eternal stateless victims who alone bear the brunt of oppression, and the Buddhists in Rakhaing State as criminal aggressors in collusion with the Tatmadaw or the Nasaka, is not the best way to understand the nature of the conflict. The recent situation and the violence in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Sittwe was not manifest in the same way in all places. While responsibility for the violence is allegedly shared equally in Sittwe, there was reportedly much less aggression in Buthidaung, where there is a greater numerical balance between the two communities. In Maungdaw, Buddhists form only two percent of the local population. Rakhaing Buddhists fight an uphill battle to have others understand that they are in the minority there and that they have been largely the victims of violence. In a better world, Buddhists and Muslims could work together for a better future for Rakhaing State, one of the most underdeveloped areas in Myanmar. They could do so by standing up to the central government when necessary, or defend their regional interests against the monopolizing tendencies of foreign economic interests. But they are unlikely to do so in the near future.

The intractability of the conflict at present is due to three overlapping reasons: cultural, demographic, and communication. Unlike in other areas of Myanmar, the Muslims of northern Rakhaing State or “NRS” are largely not integrated into Rakhaing society. This is an uncomfortable truth, but is how many Buddhists view the situation. The Kaman Muslims form their own exclusive society because they are a large majority and for any analytical purposes cannot actually be referred to as a minority, at least locally. The Buddhist Rakhaing resent this fact, as they feel threatened from many directions. The Rakhaing problems are more complicated than conflicts elsewhere in Myanmar because they are triangular, not binary, involving three parties: the central government, which is largely Burman; Rakhaing Buddhists; and Muslims. In the past, there was no trust between them, and at present there is none. The parties are talking past each other, not to each other.

Governments and army commanders are prepared to deal with policy and security issues, NGOs are prepared to deal with humanitarian and human rights issues. So is the UN in various instances. As things appear, they seem ill-equipped to face the cultural, psychological, demographic or communicative aspects involved in this conflict. Moreover, the persisting ignorance of the media and human rights organizations of the complexity of the relations between the three parties involved, together with the UN and INGOs being discredited in the eyes of the Buddhists because of ten years of unilateral support for the Muslims, does not inspire confidence or hope to see a sudden improvement in the general situation. The Muslim leadership will place their bets on outside intervention and eventually interference, as their lobbying of the international media has proved successful. The Buddhist Rakhaing lack charismatic leadership and are notoriously bad at lobbying. They nonetheless have a fair chance of counting on an increasing solidarity with other Buddhists in the country. Some will predictably interpret this solidarity as cultural empathy, others will denigrate it as racism. While a further drifting apart of the two communities looks as a likely scenario, it will not help that the educated members of both readily acknowledge their own intra-communal divisions.

For those out to criticize the actions of the government or the declarations of the Burmese political opposition, they will find this the easiest of all tasks. True, the government has its work cut out for them to reform the army to get them to respect human rights. But even then, once the government has set its troops to task, they will be accused of doing things the old fashioned way. If the army shows too much restraint, they will be accused of not protecting the citizens. The sad fact is that there is actually no political prize to be won in Rakhaing State because the conflict is deeply embarrassing in the long run and hampers the reform and progress of the whole country. It is probably an understatement to say that the future looks bleak.

Jacques P. Leider
Myanmar 2011: A Photo Essay

Kinue Weinstein

I spent twenty-seven days in Myanmar from November 8th to December 4th, 2011. It was an exciting time: the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by 1992 Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, rejoined the political scene as a registered party on November 18th and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made her historic three-day visit to the country.

The following are just three of the many photos that I took during the trip. I hope to show some of what I saw: some things that have been changing, and some things that reflect continuities in Myanmar society.

**Nuns and Orphans**

Ei Yeik Mon in Mandalay that serves as an orphanage founded in 1958. In 1963, the two founders expanded the facilities by purchasing about four acres of land and collecting private donations. Today, the facilities are run by four nuns and three staff members to accommodate 103 orphans from newborn to eighteen years old. The orphans, some of whom lost their parents from Cyclone Nargis, go to regular public schools and, if they wish, can continue to university. The nunnery has a computer room, sewing room, library, and other facilities to teach “life skills” to those who will not continue on to a higher education.

At the entrance of the nunnery, there is a large signboard stating how visitors can help. One can sponsor lunch or dinner for 80,000 kyats ($100) or breakfast for 40,000 Kyats ($50). There were brochures in German but not in English. “That’s because we receive many donations from German visitors,” explains the head nun, Daw Heima Htei Yi.

Local families also contribute regularly to the nunnery as an act of devotion. On the day I visited, a local family, who was celebrating their daughter’s first birthday, sponsored lunch.

**From the Editor:**

The number of orphanages in Burma is misleading: a great many of the children there do in fact have one or both parents living. Parents send their children to these institutions because they cannot afford to care for or educate them properly. While Burmese society looks favorably on these institutions as a way to make merit and to take care of the poor, there is little oversight: the quality of the education and care the children receive is uneven, despite the seidana and myitta (something like “good intentions” and “love”) that caretakers are meant to have. Nuns begging for alms are a common sight in places like Rangoon, especially where foreign tourists are present.
Transportation:

In terms of transportation, Myanmar is the most underdeveloped country I have ever visited, reflecting the country’s lack of infrastructure. Most taxis in Yangon are Japanese cars from the 1980s and 1990s and lack seatbelts.

Reflecting the state of the economy, local people ride in “line cars,” pickup trucks which have been fitted with seats in the back. Men often stand at the back or sometimes ride on top. Because they are unsafe, the government recently tried to prohibit these line cars in the center of Yangon. Busses are always crowded, so that line cars have made a reappearance. Although there is a train circling Yangon, it is slow and not practical for most people.

From the Editor:

The picture reflects some interesting social realities: two of the men in the picture are wearing pants, which has become increasingly common in urban areas for men under about thirty-five. We can also see nuns packed into the back, probably returning to their nunnery after making their rounds or purchases in town.

Women in Myanmar

Talking about the position of Myanmar women in society is complex, as it is in any country, and must be viewed in a variety of contexts, including the social connections, workforce, home, and religion. There is a general perception that the position of women in Myanmar is higher than in many other developing countries. For example, according to UN statistics for 2009, women’s wages in the manufacturing sector were 12% higher than that of men. A professor at Yangon University estimates that about 75% of the current students and 70% of the faculty are women.

At outdoor markets, the majority of the vendors selling meat and vegetables are women.

From the Editor:

The high status of women may be more of an elite Burman phenomenon than has been recognized. The status of women is less certain among many minority groups, where patriarchal values are often strong. Many young women and girls face harassment and abuse, as on public transportation, at school, or in their neighborhoods.
The International Burma Studies Conference took place at Northern Illinois University, October 5-7, 2012, once again testifying to the generous support the University and its Center for Southeast Asian Studies provide to the field of Myanmar Studies. Under the leadership of Dr. Catherine Raymond, director of the Center for Burma Studies, chaired by Dr. Lilian Handlin, and thanks to the invaluable assistance of the Center for Burma Studies secretary Beth Bjorneby, the tenth Burma Studies Conference took place in DeKalb, home of the university. Dr. Lisa Freeman, Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate School, opened the proceedings on behalf of the hosting institution, a reflection of her much-needed, generous support for the Center for Burma Studies and also of the University’s ambitious programs in its globalized setting.

The conference included, in addition to its academic and scholarly pursuits, a film event, showing “They Call It Myanmar: Lifting the Curtain.” Viewing was presided over by the film’s producer and director Robert Lieberman, who fielded questions from an academic audience, something of a novelty for him. An elegant reception in the Northern Illinois University Art Museum exposed participants once again to the fascinating holdings of the institution that even in these difficult economic times remains one of the best repositories of Burmese art and culture in the United States. The museum exhibit’s title, “Music for the Divine,” appropriately mirrored some of the conference panel presentations.

At the subsequent gala event, participants witnessed a fascinating set of cultural performances and dances by Mon and Burmese troupes and heard the premier of an original musical piece performed entirely on Karen bronze drums which was composed by Greg Beyer, chair of the ensemble at the School of Music at NIU.

The Sarah M. Bekker prize, its committee chaired by Dr. Julian Wheatley, was awarded to Inga Gruss of Cornell University for her paper on the anxieties experienced by Burmese migrants in southwestern Thailand. This was followed by the presentation of inscribed plaques to Sayagyi U Saw Tun, recently retired professor of the Burmese language at NIU, and to Dr. David Steinberg, world-renowned Burma Studies expert and distinguished professor of Asian Studies at Georgetown University. Their equally invaluable services to Myanmar Studies over many years were recognized in speeches, and a moving address by Dr. Patrick McCormick, one of Sayagyi’s students, on behalf of his many others.

Conference participants were reminded to renew their subscription to the *Journal of Burma Studies*, edited by Dr. Alicia Turner, and temporarily by Dr. Lilian Handlin. The Journal is the only venue in the United States entirely dedicated to the publication of scholarly articles on Myanmar-related topics, is based at Northern Illinois University, and published by the National University of Singapore Press. Conferees were also reminded to check if their home institutions subscribe, and asked to encourage their students to use the journal’s web site in a way to show the journal’s utility—Dr. Turner urged everyone who uses articles from the web site to download articles individually, and not leave it to an instructor to distribute a single download. The current issue
of the *Journal* (16/2) includes several innovative articles on the subject of *weikza* (sometimes translated as “wizards”) whose long history and interpenetrations with Myanmar’s more textually informed Buddhist practices exemplify the complexities of local beliefs, rituals and coping technologies.

The busy three conference days were otherwise dedicated to twenty-one panels on diverse topics. The large number of participants and wide variety of papers attest to the increasing interest in Myanmar Studies, broadly defined, and the innovative and often subversive ideas that are gradually bringing the field, even if kicking and screaming, into the 21st century, something that is badly needed. Myanmar scholarship has for much too long been imprisoned not only by political realities that have made access to materials difficult, but also by the brilliant scholarship of earlier generations, primarily because of the languages in which it appeared (English, French and German) sustained it far beyond its useful shelf life.

Younger scholars’ better language skills in Burmese, Mon, and Pali, are recasting our understanding of Myanmar’s past, its history, literature, language and material culture. Numerous conference papers showed how received wisdom needs to be nuanced in light of better familiarity with original sources and recourse to the theoretical changes that have radically transformed the humanities and social sciences during the past quarter century. The abstracts of the individual panel presentations are available on the conference web site.

As a sign of changing times, a delegation of Chinese scholars, based mainly in Yunnan province, participated in a panel on Myanmar’s political reforms and Sino-Myanmar relations. The audience thereby had the novel experience of learning how non-western scholarship tackles Myanmar’s 21st century developments.

Even more significantly, for the first time, important Myanmar government officials were present in their authorized capacities, providing a current perspective on contentious issues. Two personal advisors to President Thein Sein, U Ko Ko Hlaing and U Than Kyaw, accompanied by Dr. Phone Win, formed an official delegation to the conference. In attendance was also the scholar U Khin Zaw Win. Their appearance, presentations and willingness to respond to contentious questions from an intermittently skeptical audience are a testament to a changing relationship between the United States and the government of Myanmar that will have an impact in how Myanmar Studies evolve in the coming years. Such profound changes, if they persist, will allow foreign scholars more immediate access to materials hitherto unavailable and create much closer bonds between western academics and their Myanmar counterparts. Such interactions promise to open a dialogue that has been missing from the field. These circumstances will also broaden the activities of the Burma Studies Foundation and the Burma Studies Group. The NIU Center for Burma Studies and the various associations are well situated to contribute their perspectives as the government of Myanmar reformulates the structures and content of Myanmar’s higher education.

The conference closed with the announcement that the next Burma Studies Conference, to convene in 2014, most likely will take place in Asia.

*Lilian Handlin, Chair*
Mathias Jenny, a senior lecturer of linguistics at the University of Zurich who has many years’ experience with Thai, Mon, and Burmese, had on one of his previous trips been on a bus somewhere in Mon State and overheard some young women speaking to each other in Lao. Intrigued, he asked them what they were doing in Burma. “We’re from here,” they replied, and said they lived near Mawlamyaing. Then just before meeting me in Rangoon, Mathias had been in Taunggyi where he heard a young man speaking Thai to another young Shan man in a restaurant. When Mathias asked the man speaking Thai where he was from, he said his name was “Iisaan” and that he was from Mawlamyaing. He also said he normally spoke Lao—technically, the Lao of the Isaan region of Thailand—at home and that he had learned some Central Thai when he went to work in Thailand.

Mathias had told me these stories and said that he hoped that we could go look for them together. When Mathias came to Rangoon in January of 2012 with one of his students, we planned a trip to Mawlamyaing, where we both try to go once a year not least because it has the only Mon-language bookstore in all of Burma. With Ko Hla U, Mathias’s Burmese research assistant, there were four of us. Knowing the difficulties of renting a car in Mawlamyaing, we rented a taxi from Rangoon and drove down.

Ko Hla U, who himself is from the border area not too far from where we were going, had heard that there were Lao-speaking villages between Kya In Seitkyi and Mudon. In Mawlamyaing, both Mathias and I started asking our friends and acquaintances about Lao speakers, which people there called Law Shan.1 People knew exactly what we were asking for and gave us the names of two villages east of Mudon, just as Ko Hla U had heard of. I was surprised because I had associated that part of Mon State only with Mon speakers. Neither Mathias nor I had been on the road going east from Mudon towards Karen Sate, so we didn’t know what to expect. Ko Hla U had been on it and thought we might be stopped at checkpoints. Would a story of looking for Lao speakers make any sense?

In the event, we passed a few checkpoints, mostly unmanned. At those that were, they just waved us through. Our destination, Chaung Hnakhwa village was on the other side of a stream (as its Burmese name implies). After crossing over the stream, we weren’t really sure how we would find someone. We sat at a café and having three foreigners in our group, we naturally drew a crowd. We started talking with some of the people that came up to us and found out that most of the people in the village are Mon speakers. Mathias asked me in English, “What do we do?” No sooner had he asked than our Burmese research assistant simply turned to someone to ask, “Hey, are there any Laos here?” People told us that there were and that there was a Lao temple just down the road. One of the standers-by told us that he would go find us a Lao to talk to.

A minute later, our friend was back with a young man in tow. He greeted us in Central Thai. Mathias, who is quite fluent in Thai and can speak some Lao, began to chat with him. As our new friend chatted with the others, Mathias and I conferred—he is speaking Thai, not Lao. Has there been some mistake? We asked him whether he he

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1 Closer to the Thai border, people tend to call Shan all speakers of Tai languages, whether Burmese Shan or Thai, and distinguish the two by saying di bet Shan (“this side Shan”) and ho bet Shan (“that side Shan”).
could take us to the temple and cheerfully agreed. Walking to the temple, I got out my very best Lao and asked him, “Nawng seu nyang? (What is your name?).” He replied in Central Thai, “Phom cheu Nat khrap (My name is Nat),” giving us a very Thai-style nickname. It wasn’t until we were passing a house under which some old women were talking that Nat spoke to them in what I was sure was Lao and not Thai. Mathias and I were reassured that there hadn’t been some sort of misunderstanding – migration to Thailand among villagers in Mon State is extremely common, and young people often become quite fluent in spoken, although not usually written, Thai.

One way to interpret Nat’s resistance to using Lao with us is to think not of the context of Burma, but of Thailand: Lao – in the form of the dialect or language of the Isaan region – is actually spoken by a majority of the population of Thailand, but it is not the official language. People from Isaan speak it informally as an insider language, using Central Thai in formal situations and with strangers. This is not the situation in Laos, where Lao is official language and Thai is not the high-status language used with outsiders. So Nat was likely simply doing what he had seen others do.

By the time we got to the temple, several of Nat’s other young friends had joined us. From the outside, the temple itself looked like any Burmese village temple, with typical decorations and a Burmese-language name. Only when we got inside to meet the abbot did we spot a few unusual things: a picture of the Thai king and queen (though we have seen these in Mon temples, too), and some of those lamp-like paper decorations found in northern Thailand and Shan areas. We greeted the abbot, who was happy to talk to us and even allowed Mathias to record the conversation. The abbot spoke to us in what was somewhere between Central Thai and Lao (often the vocabulary is the same, but the tones and some of the consonants and vowels differ). He explained to us that the Lao community in Chaung Hnakhwa was not especially large, but that there were many other Lao communities in neighboring villages, all together eleven, including places near Kya In Seit Kyi, only 20 miles away. In the immediate area, he estimated that there were perhaps 1000 Lao speakers. He said that while they were Lao speakers, the people of this village were actually from what is now the Isaan region of Thailand, and not from what is now Laos. He didn’t know why they had come to Burma, but knew that they came during the colonial era.

We asked about religion and what language he preached in. He told us that he chanted in “Lao” but showed a Thai-language book of chants and sutras. When we asked him his Pāli title, he couldn’t tell us the Pāli in the Thai or Lao pronunciation, but only in the Burmese.

After taking our leave of the abbot, Nat and his friends took us around the compound. I noticed that one of the young men, unlike all the others, was wearing Burmese clothes. I spoke to him in Thai, which he understood, but he was also willing to speak to me in Burmese. We talked about school, and he told me how he had finished 10th Standard but had not been to Thailand. His Burmese was of course quite fluent but I did notice that he had an accent.

Afterwards, Mathias and I thought a bit about what we had seen and heard. We had not expected to hear that the villagers’ ancestors were from what is now Thailand. Since they themselves weren’t sure how they came to be in Burma, we speculated: perhaps after the British took over Lower Burma – which was earlier, in

continued on pg. 18
1826, than in the rest of the country – villagers from as far afield as Siam were drawn there, perhaps under various lures. I speculated that, if the Lao villagers were fleeing Siam, they may have settled in the area without necessarily realizing that they had crossed a border, which in any case had a much looser meaning than they came to take on during the 20th century.

Since our trip, I’ve been able to ask some historian and Lao expert friends their opinions. The Siamese court made several efforts during the 18th and 19th century to move Lao populations out of what is now Laos and northeast Thailand, that is, the Isaan regions, for fear that their political rivals would conscript these villages in their attempts to challenge the central court. It is not surprising, then, that some would flee as far afield as Burma. Given the fairly small size of the population, the fact that the villagers still speak Lao – and not only Burmese, or Central Thai, for that matter, whose speakers live so much closer to them than do Lao speakers. The fact that no one can read any of the various scripts that have been used to write Lao is less surprising, given the kind of specialized monastic training literacy would entail.

There are still some mysteries: we had hoped to get a better sense of the histories of the Lao speakers. From my own experience talking to Mons, the fact that there is not much in the way of informal oral history from so long ago is not surprising. Mathias has heard from other Lao speakers in Burma that they are from Laos. This is entirely possible, but we have to be cautious when we hear people talking about modern nation-states to refer to events of even the recent past. A good example from another part of Burmese life is the Indian Muslim community. Asking such a person their ethnicity inevitably gets an answer of “Muslim.” If pressed – did your ancestors speak Guajarati? Bengali? the almost equally inevitable answer is, “Pakistan,” a country which did not exist when the ancestors of most of that population came to Burma.

Mathias is keen to return to the area to see what more we can learn about language and history. It is quite common, for example, that when speakers of a small language are the minority surrounded by a larger, more powerful society, that they gradually remodel the way they speak their own language to replicate the syntax and usage of the majority language. They may also start using loanwords. From the little we heard, there were no Burmese loanwords or Burmese-sounding expressions – that is, using Lao-Thai but in Burmese ways. No doubt, especially for younger people, the fact that the community is so close to Thailand is a factor.

Abbot of the Lao temple.
Bulletin of the Burma Studies Group

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