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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"

Francis Wade
London: Zed Books, 2017, 280 pp.

Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other" by British journalist Francis Wade presents a vivid description of how the contestation over an ethnic minority's identity is jointly manipulated by Buddhist extremists and the oppressive military government in Myanmar. This is a remarkable book, especially for non-experts, discussing the factors that fuelled violence within Myanmar with disastrous results for several ethnic communities, Rohingya being the primary victims. Wade depicts a group of people forcefully isolated on their own land by Myanmar's unwavering nationalist Buddhist politicians. The narrative demonstrates that by constantly threatening the identity and beliefs of groups of people within a national geographical boundary, the government undertook a project of exclusion and persecution of the threatened groups that included chasing out, burning out, murdering, and otherwise exploiting them.

The book revolves around two main ideas, one being the construction and maintenance of ethnic identity for hundreds of years that turn minorities into the "other" in their own country—although this is the central premise of the book—and the other is the Myanmar government's practice of political violence that eliminates religious and racial diversity.

Wade uses the prologue of the book to introduce the context of the situation to his readers, skilfully shedding light on Myanmar's nationalist, anti-Islam, Buddhist perspective. Such a perspective is a clearly visible contrast of beliefs within the Buddhist community. The narrative of a young man, a member of a movement led by Buddhist monks known as the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, which is locally known as Ma Ba Tha, points to the contrasting belief. On the one hand, he claims that "Buddhism stands for truth and peace" (5) while, on the other, the Buddhist community continues killing and persecuting Muslims. They justify these acts in the name of preserving their religion, race, and nation.

This book is a narrative of ongoing persecution of the distinct ethnic minorities living in Myanmar up to the October 2016 eruption of violence. Wade traces the roots of violence in Myanmar back to the British colonial period, when ethnic communities were bitterly subjugated for over a hundred years. Following British rule, this continued for decades in the form of a military dictatorship. Both forms of rule offered nothing but oppression to its people whose racial, ethnic, and religious identities differed from the majority people of Myanmar. This history has left a legacy of conflict between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar.

His deeply personal interviews and observations help readers develop an understanding of the recent worsening situation in Myanmar. The book is divided into eleven chapters. The first chapter focuses on the beginning of civilian-led violence in 2012; the second points to the effect of British colonial rule in Myanmar and the emergence of the Buddhist nationalist movements; the third elaborates on how Ne Win's rule planted antagonism between "the civilized Bamar"—the Buddhist—and "the unruly" Muslims—the Rohingyas particularly; the fourth highlights the manipulating divides between ethnic and religious communities in Myanmar; the fifth presents the dimensions of Buddhist settler projects in the Rakhine state that singled out one community—the Rohingya—as the target of exploitation; the sixth well represents the title of the chapter by offering an in-depth analysis of violence in 2012; the seventh reveals the spread of violence, particularly in Meikhtila; the eighth focuses on the manufactured nature of violence spread by Ma Ba Tha—a Buddhist monk–led movement; chapter nine shows the partitioning between Buddhist and Muslims; the tenth introduces the reader to U Maung, an individual who never witnessed any violence nor was directly affected by violence, yet he illustrates "all the blood spilled in the contestations over identity in Myanmar" (229). The book ends with chapter eleven, leaving questions of hope and dreams for a peaceful future.

Although the chapter titles offer variety, the book is repetitive. Lack of background information is one shortcoming of this book. It lightly touches on Buchanan's account of the evidence of Rohingya presence in Burma long before British colonization (65) but does not use Buchanan's work in showing the origin of the term *Rohingya* in the Arakan region. This lapse is significant when Wade discusses Suu Kyi's evasiveness in not using the name *Rohingya* as a strategy of labelling them "other" (129). In addition, the author's conversation with Hla Hla—the little Mon girl who was compelled to change her identity—leaves a question in the reader's mind. This young girl was warned by her parents of the consequences of disclosing her identity, yet she discloses

everything about her Mon identity to the author. It is not clear how the author was able to gain her trust.

While Wade tries to show how the Muslims in Myanmar become the "other," he does not sufficiently present the differences among various Muslim ethnic minorities living in Myanmar in terms of their history, language, dress, cultural practices, and values. Besides, ethnic minorities in Myanmar also include Christians, who are not given adequate coverage in the book. Another weakness of this book is its failure to discuss Muslim presence, not only in the royal court of Myanmar but also in the cultural, administrative, and political sector who substantially contributed to social progress in Myanmar, even until the late 1980s. Another important lacuna is the absence of a discussion of how the Myanmar government views the connection of two ethnic communities—Rohingya and Rakhine—with Bangladesh. The Buddhist Rakhine from Bangladesh are accepted in Myanmar, while the Muslim Rohingya are not, again clearly confirming the narrow perspective of the Myanmar authority and its religious bias.

Despite these shortcomings, this is a timely book that provides insightful information. Wade rightly points out that the brutal acts continuously committed by Myanmar's government not only deny citizenship rights to its people but also violate human rights in opposition to Buddha's teaching.

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