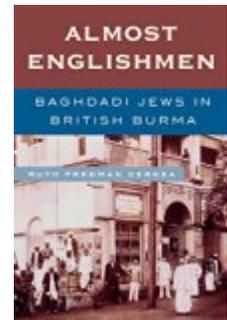




Ruth Fredman Cernea. *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma.*
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Reviewed by Priya Satia

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Ruth Fredman Cernea's book on the Jews of Burma boasts an intriguing title and curious subject likely to lure British and imperial as much as Jewish historians. *Almost Englishmen* offers a painstaking record of the rise, flourishing, and slow death of the prosperous community of Baghdadi Jews in Burma (today's Myanmar). With the keen eye and sympathetic ear of the anthropologist, Cernea has gathered the memories and contemporary impressions of a lost world of merchants at once devoted to tradition and enchanted by the cosmopolitan modernity of British India. As she chronicles the twinned collapse of Jewish identity and the Jewish population during and after World War II, she also usefully details Burmese Jewish relations with the wider Jewish community and the new state of Israel in the post-war world--a rarely opened transnational window.

The lovingly resurrected details of the thriving religious, commercial, social, and domestic life of this nearly forgotten community might satisfy some of the poignant itch for recovery that partly motivates the writing of histories of Jews in differ-

ent parts of the world. But the portrait drawn primarily from the lives of the wealthy families that, inevitably, have left the richest source material might trouble Jewish historians searching for a more fine-grained evocation of a community of diverse social origins and experiences--whose hierarchies, by Cernea's own account, only hardened as the elites strove to assimilate British notions of class and race. They would search equally in vain for a methodological account of how memory might mediate reconstruction of such a world.

Those drawn by the title's inviting invocation of a complicated diasporic identity might find themselves somewhat more disappointed; the book eschews any attempt at grappling with the important ethical and historical questions posed by the complicated sociology of modern empire--all that is yearned after and left unrealized in being "almost Englishmen." What are the differences among collaborators, settler colonialists, economic migrants, and diasporic merchant communities? between making the best of circumstances and exploiting them? In what ways were the

Baghdadi Jews different, in their relation to Burmese society and its imperial rulers, from the British or Indian or Chinese or any other merchant community? While movingly describing the quick waning of Baghdadi tradition--its languages, rituals, and so on--in the brilliant glare of British imperial culture, Cernea never quite explains why a community so proudly and devoutly rooted in the Middle East should have seen itself in the British mold in the first place (if, that is, any but the upper crust at the heart of this book ever did so). Nor does the book explore the role of colonial institutions--ethnically ordered municipal councils, standardized surnames, state-subsidized religious schools--in the making of Baghdadi identity.

The impulse to become "almost English" is, however, less a mystery than a foregone conclusion arising from Cernea's uncritical acceptance of Niall Ferguson's view (from *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* [2003]) that "the British Empire acted as an agency for promoting free markets, the rule of law, investor protection and relatively incorrupt government" (p. 3). Needless to say, such a view precludes consideration of the preexisting regional and oceanic ties (detailed most recently in Sugata Bose's *A Hundred Horizons* [2006]) that might also have drawn Baghdadis to west India and thence to Southeast Asia (a term Cernea somewhat quaintly uses to encompass South *and* Southeast Asia). It is also a view that renders Baghdadis' anglophilia only natural and Burmese anticolonialism and xenophobia tragically irrational--hence, for instance, the nostalgic evocation of the "Beautiful Burmese Days" of wealthy Baghdadi families served by enormous staffs of Indian servants. Those families' rigorously enacted cultural distance from Indians, Burmese, and others is never analyzed, save in one interesting chapter on the Baghdadis' efforts to deny the Jewish identity of the Bene Israel. The frequent descriptions of the Baghdadis' disinterest in Burma in favor of their imaginary homelands of Britain and Jerusalem leave one wondering what ultimately the loss of their Burmese

world meant. This slim volume is a reminder to historians of the empire of what is at stake in setting the record on the empire straight, lest otherwise empathetic scholars and readers outside the field fall unwittingly under its spell.

Indeed, the book's marginalia--such as an oblique reference to the children of illicit liaisons between Baghdadi men and Burmese women--gesture at a whole other story that might be told about Baghdadis' relationship to their adopted home, an intimate realm of colonial cosmopolitanism that might also help us make sense of Burma's cozy postwar relationship with Israel at a time when so many other postcolonial states, including India, were united in an anti-Israel posture. Meanwhile we have Cernea's eulogy, useful in its place. Indeed, it is easy enough to sympathize with the book's closing sigh for the "time of peace and beauty before their world erupted" (p. 137); it is the careless elision of the tragedy of the world war with the "tragedy" of Burmese anti-colonialism that gives pause. It is thus, for instance, that a book that paints such a rich portrait of Baghdadi Jews' travailed wartime escape from Japanese-occupied Burma manages to utterly miss the significance of the parenthetical observation that Burmese were not allowed on the boats; it is a book about Burma that brackets Burma itself.

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