

The book is full of information, interestingly expounded, with the occasional gentle correction of previous scholars. The records are indeed rich. The VOC in fact used a great deal of paper, and even after it set up its own mill in Batavia its offices often ran short. They did not fill the paper for the sake of historians. But we must be glad they did, and grateful, too, when a historian makes such good use of them.

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Ruth Fredman Cernea, *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma*, Lanham; Boulder: Lexington Books; Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, xxv + 175 pp., ISBN 13-978-0739116470 (pbk.).

Well-written with hardly a trace of politically-correct jargon or formulaic social-science talk, indeed at times quite literary in its style, this book by an American anthropologist traces out the tragic history of the Iraqi-Jewish community in Burma from its foundations in the early nineteenth century to its demise at the end of the twentieth. The arrival of Baghdadi merchants in the first flush of British settlement led to high hopes of both commercial and social success in this distant colony, and the more Jewish merchants arrived the more they felt at ease, brought and raised families, and created the social institutions of a flourishing rabbinic society, with the required rabbis, teachers, and other synagogue and community officials. The Rangoon community formed one part of an extensive world-wide network of Sephardic Jewry, with a special emphasis and pride in their millennial history in Babylonia.

Gradually from the 1830s the newly constituted Burmese families transferred their social and political allegiances to the British Empire, though maintaining both their general Jewish heritage and their specific Iraqi identities, moving to a point by the close of the Victorian Era when they could see themselves, as the title to this book proclaims, as almost Englishmen. But, sadly, try as they might to dress, eat and perform the part of proper gentlemen and ladies in the style of the Raj, the old European prejudices against Jews and Easterners dogged them. English snobbery is hardly comic in the light of the life-and-death efforts of families to regain safety and dignity in their lives, though at times the glimpse of middle-class merchant families dressing up in tuxedos and evening gowns for formal meals in the torrid heat of a Burmese summer can be quite humorous. Nevertheless, bigotry against Jews as the non-European *other* was all along an ominous sign of things to come.

Externally the forces of history were against them. As today, too, despite efforts to deny its reality, anti-Semitism reared its ugly head, and was goaded on by the power of Burmese nationalism, Japanese imperialism, third-world anti-colonialism, and general anti-Zionism, until, finally, with the

close-down of Myanmar (alias Burma) under the military regime all but the last Burmese Jews have departed for America, Israel or Australia, barely a handful of stalwarts remaining to watch the once imposing and beautiful synagogue in Rangoon. Yet the narrative of the escape before the invading Japanese armies provides the most gripping part of the whole story, and to a great degree is based on first-hand accounts quoted *in extenso* by Cernea; yet her own prose enhances the robustness of this war-time tale.

Internally, too, geographical distance, commercial success and the onset of modern secular culture proved too much for the tiny and isolated Jewish community to withstand: new generations forgot their Iraqi pride and looked to Western Europe or North America – and then Israel – for models of behaviour and belief. There was, however, little assimilation, other than a few mixed-marriages, ambiguously sticking it out to the bitter end. Ironically, as the author points out, whereas many descendants overseas have lost touch with their Jewish roots altogether, it is from among these remnants of the mixed-marriage children that interest in Judaism and life in Israel has been rekindled.

Cernea's account is more history than sociology, more personal and involved than statistical and paradigmatic. She cites private letters and journals, as well as conversations with descendants and survivors of the Burmese community. The appendices also provide documentary lists of the Jews who sought refuge from the Japanese invasion, those who wished to emigrate to India or Israel, and those who now lie in the remaining (one hopes, although without real trust in the goodwill of the generals who want to destroy the physical remnants of this once thriving though small community) cemetery. Though Cernea explains in a delicate way necessary background in Sephardic Jewish customs and faith for the outsider, she seems to write — and this is a good thing, for general readers as well as the people it directly concerns — for the lost community, in honour of them, and with the nostalgia and respect due to them. If there is any quibble to make it is that many of the photographs reproduced in the book are so reduced it is hardly possible to see what they are meant to illustrate.

Reviewed by NORMAN SIMMS
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Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy, eds., *Decentering Empire: Britain, India and the Transcolonial World*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006, xi + 406 pp., ISBN: 81-250-2982-6 (hbk.).

This is a thought-provoking book exploring 'the boundaries conventionally drawn between imperial metropole and colonial periphery' (1). Its chapters are taken from a 2003 conference held at the University of California, 'How Empire Mattered: Imperial Structures and Globalisation in the Era of British Imperialism', a title which neatly summarises the central aims of the book.