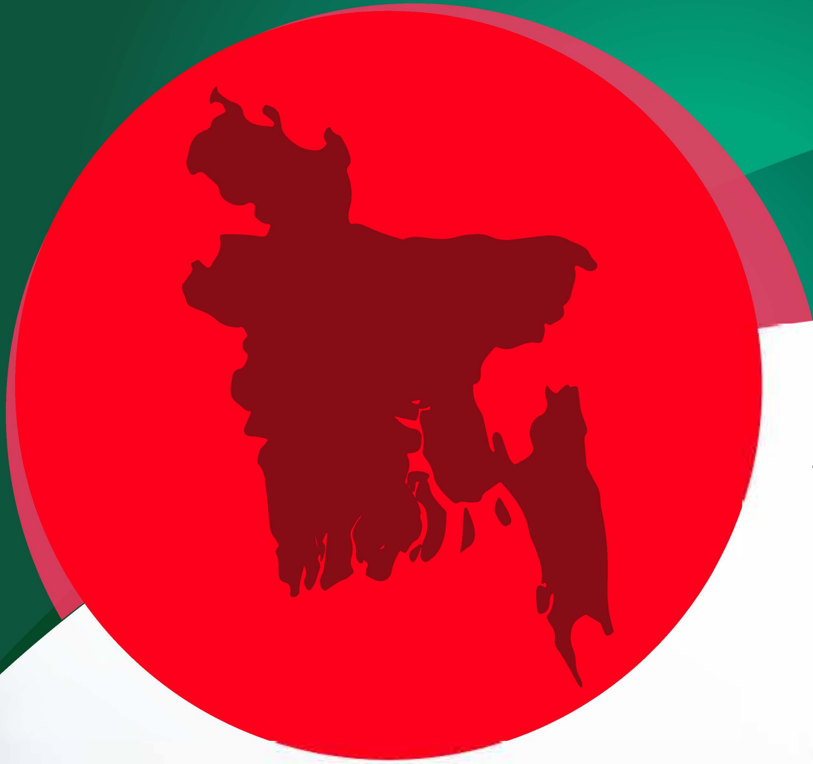
Volume 22
Number 1
Year 2020
ISSN 1529-0905



Journal of BANGLADESH STUDIES

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Weaponizing Paperwork: Rohingya Belonging and Statelessness

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the links between the documentary and the ontological in the (un)making of Rohingya identity. At decolonization, mobility narratives framed through a nation-centric lens -- in conjunction with other contingencies -- undermined Rohingya claims to belonging. Even as possession of the "right" documentation is today fundamental to claiming citizenship, the post-colonial Burmese state has systematically stripped Rohingya of the right to *any* documentation in its attempt to extinguish Rohingya subjectivity. The paper calls for decolonizing cartographies and dismantling narratives of belonging tied to nation-centric territorial claims. We might begin with an exploration of the ways Rohingya and Rakhine are historically co-constitutive rather than oppositional identity categories.

Keywords: Rohingya, bordering practices, paperwork

Introduction

Along the 170-mile border that separates Myanmar from Bangladesh, a familiar performance played out on August 22, 2019. The timing was symbolic; almost two years to the day that Myanmar's military launched their deadliest offensive yet against the Rohingya population in Rakhine state.[1]

Familiar bureaucratic rituals had already been set in motion. As before, Myanmar authorities unilaterally announced a date to begin the repatriation process of the approximately 730, 000 people who had fled across the border into Cox's Bazar and its environs in 2017 to escape the latest pogrom unleashed against them. In line with existing protocol, Bangladeshi officials, in conjunction with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), submitted a list of Rohingya names for "verification" by Burmese authorities. As it had in the past, Myanmar cleared only a tiny number, in this instance 3,540 of the 22,000 names submitted (Daily Star, August 16, 2019). Across the border, the Nga Khu Ya repatriation center, with its trailers, information booths and watchtowers, went through the motions of preparing for new arrivals. In the end, *not a single person* boarded the five buses and two trucks waiting on the Bangladeshi side to take them back.

The outcome of this ritualized performance, this tragi-comic script, was surely known to both the UNHCR and the two governments involved. Past attempts at repatriation had failed in the face of fierce opposition from the refugees themselves (Staples, 2012; Brinham, 2018; Long, 2017). Trapped in squalid and overcrowded camps, increasingly without meaningful documentation and a viable future, no Rohingya wants to be "pushed back" into Myanmar under existing conditions. Desperate to return, they seek the guarantee of citizenship, of UN-backed safe zones, return to the places from where they were driven out, and critically, recognition of their ethnicity as Rohingya.

With respect to the last point, the repatriation agreement brokered between Dhaka and Nay Pyi Taw on November 23, 2017, or the one after it (Bose, 2018), is deeply troubling. According to this *Arrangement on Return of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State* (henceforth The Arrangement), Myanmar would issue "returnees an identity card for national verification immediately upon their return." These National Verification Cards (NVCs), originally instated with the approval and assistance of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), require Rohingya to

register as either Bengali or as another category of foreigner (Fortify Rights, 2019). Sometimes referred to as "genocide cards," the NVCs effectively demand that Rohingya disavow their subjectivity, *and* invalidate any citizenship claims to Burma (Brinham, 2018). In a Kafkaesque twist, then, to return under such conditions would be to recognize the legitimacy of their expulsion in the first place. Not surprisingly, most Rohingya reject this offer of a return to bare life.

How are we to understand the ritualized rites of return enacted along the Bangladesh-Burma border? What idea of Rohingya being does the language of The Arrangement reproduce or elide? For that matter, how does a population in its own territory and in possession of at least some citizenship rights until recently become a reviled non-minority deserving of elimination? After all, the Rohingya were not obvious candidates for obliteration from the political imagination of a future independent postcolonial Burmese.[2]

In this paper, I share some reflections on how the ontological and documentary have been inextricably linked in the (un)making of Rohingya identity, tracing along the way the slow violence of bureaucratic practices involved in the denationalization process. To that end, I provide a brief sketch of the set of complex historical and global conjunctures through which the murderous expulsion of the Rohingya from the Burmese national body comes to be. I show that the framing of mobility narratives through the grid of the nation state, in conjunction with the selective reworking of pre-colonial and colonial cultural memory, have proved to be particularly deadly for Rohingya claims to national belonging. In this context, it is critical to recall that Rohingya and Rakhine as political categories were co-constituted and relied on each other for boundary setting (Prasse-Freeman and Mausert, 2020). The reconfiguration of a world of empires into the current nation-state system generated bureaucratic and other bordering practices that demanded the production of identity categories as singular, bounded and "naturally" tied to particular national territories (Ludden, 2018; van Schendel, 2005). Thus, the general situation, if not the genocidal outcome, is not exceptional to Myanmar but part of the shared predicament of postcolonial nations (Pugh, 2013; Shahabuddin, 2019).

I end with a reading of the 2017 Arrangement, in which the vocabulary of "repatriation" not only re-inscribes Rohingya statelessness but actively produces the erasure of Rohingya subjectivities. In putting its signature on documents such as The Arrangement, the Bangladesh government effectively helps to write the Rohingya out of the Burmese nation once more. Further, the framing of the problem as one of crisis and repatriation, I suggest, enables and legitimates this kind of a "solution," one that discounts Rohingya humanity by non-recognition and non-naming.

A Note on Crisis Narratives

What is a crisis and for whom? When do crises begin and when do they end? Crisis narratives tend to conjure up singular, catastrophic events that are temporally bounded, with a beginning and a discrete end. Myanmar has never made any secret of its long-term intentions toward the Rohingya, who occupy the unenviable position of being the world's "most persecuted" minority, according to the United Nations. Over the years, before and after the restoration of formal democratic politics, the state made little effort to hide explicitly discriminatory and invariably violent policies, from severe limitations on mobility and marriage to slash and burn techniques of dispossessing villagers of life and property, not to mention mass rape as intimidation (Human Rights Watch, 1996; 2012; 2013; Ahmed, 2020; and Irish Centre for Human Rights, 2010). Over these same years, sometimes in a trickle, sometimes en masse, an estimated 200,000 Rohingya were desperate enough to seek refuge across the border into Bangladesh. Clearly, this is a population that has been "in crisis" for decades. This is their third exodus to Bangladesh in 20 years (Long, 2017; Murshid, 2018). Yet, it was only after the carnage unleashed by the August 2017 attack by security forces, and the horror generated by the media coverage that followed, that a Rohingya humanitarian/refugee crisis emerged on the global stage.

For that matter, why is this named a Rohingya crisis, not a crisis for the Burmese state?[3] Who decides and who judges? A crisis framing allows for the redistribution of responsibility and accountability in strikingly uneven ways, along lines of existing asymmetry. It is worth noting that in the three weeks following the August attacks by the Myanmar army, Bangladesh received more refugees than all of Europe did in 2016 at the height of the conflict in Syria. The country, which constitutes less than 0.3 percent of the world's population, currently hosts 4.7 percent of its total refugees. In comparison, the unimaginable brutality of the Syrian war became an international crisis only after large numbers of Syrians, desperate to escape the carnage in their home country, sought refuge in Europe. Even then, it was not Syria but the shores and edges of Europe that were constituted as sites of crisis. What unfolded was understood to a *refugee* crisis, *for Euro-American* nations. Thus, crisis discourses can legitimize a range of projects,

declarations, and logics. In Europe, the idea that refugees represent a crisis, and a threat, has legitimated a set of repressive, brutal practices, including detention, deportation, and various forms of violence (Cantat, 2016).

What possibilities does the crisis concept enable and which does it foreclose? Narratives of crisis amplify some issues – the explicit savagery of singular events – and occlude or minimize others – the normalized violence of everyday bureaucratic practices, for instance. Crisis implies an interruption in the customary flow of everyday life, a disruption of normalcy, an aberration. Consequently, a crisis framing can displace attention to the quotidian and normative practices responsible for such “aberrations” in the first place (Roitman, 2011; Barrios, 2017). After all, everyday life was anything but “normal” for the Rohingya population in Burma well before 2017. State and non-state violence on Rohingya bodies, spaces and social relations have long been routinized and normalized for the majority Burman population.

National crisis narratives are often accompanied by the creation of fictionalized enemies (the Muslim Rohingya terrorist or the Muslim male immigrant in Europe), subjects or objects in danger (Euro-American values, Buddhist/Bamar culture), and ideal agents of rescue (Euro-American humanitarian organizations, among others). Further, naming the “problem” as the *unauthorized* movement across national boundaries, as in a refugee crisis, necessarily re-inscribes some kinds of mobility as illegitimate and exceptional, and others as legal and sanctioned. This move reinforces the state’s sovereignty over its territory and right to control movement across borders (Mazumder, 2019).

National Sovereignty and Making Stateless

> Human rights, including the moral rules that bind humans universally, are intrinsic to all persons irrespective of their “cultural” make-up. Yet the identification and application of human rights laws has no meaning independent of the judicial institutions that belong to individual nation states (or to several states bound together by treaty) and the remedies that these institutions supply – and therefore of the individual’s civil status as a political subject. (Talal Asad, 2003, p. 129)

In the passage above, Talal Asad hones in on the fundamental conceptual paradox in the operations of post-World War II human rights regimes. On the one hand, a document such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrines the apparent universality and inalienability of human rights. Everyone has these natural rights by virtue of being born. On the other hand, these abstract universal rights can only be materialized through the individual’s membership in a particular national political community. The exercise of *universal* rights – or the right to have rights, as Hannah Arendt put it so memorably -- hinges on political citizenship (Arendt, 1951). Even if we set aside questions of who counts as human and associated hierarchies of suffering, *claims to and exclusions from* a rights regime depend upon the individual or group’s relationship to a nation-state. In other words, the loss of national rights, as Arendt noted, entails the loss of human rights.

To be nation-stateless, then, is to be right-less and, by extension, for others to treat you as less than human. One’s suffering does not count since one is not counted as human or as human enough. It is this interstitial, liminal space of not-belonging that the Rohingya inhabit. Put differently, statelessness is the denial of the “right of every individual to belong to humanity (Arendt quoted in Pugh, 2013 p. 9).”

There is a voluminous body of scholarship on citizenship and nation-state formation. For the purposes of this paper, several points from that scholarship are worth restating. It has been argued that the state is brought into being by acts of classifying, enumeration, and sorting, and that states are real to the extent that they constitute themselves through various practices (Mitchell, 1999). State formation relies on the idea of a “people” or ethnos over whom state sovereignty is be exercised, as well as the ability to persuade the population of the validity of such determinations. As historical and political constructs, both the existence and the authority of nation-states must be continuously secured through various practices of statecraft (Soguk, 1999; Mitchell, 1999). At the same time, the imagined community mobilized into being by the state must *appear to be* timeless, natural, and bounded.

Second, the process of constructing a singular or pure ethnos usually involves the active suppression and remaking of cultural memories – of historical forms of plurality and conviviality. Such ideological projects – of re-categorization through census operations and other enumerative techniques of governmentality, the subordination or

disavowal of local/regional linguistic, religious and cultural practices, state-imposed regimes of "remembering" and "forgetting" through schooling and media – are highly contested and often violent (Ferguson, 2015; Mookherjee and Pinney, 2011).

Third, since nationalism is an exclusionary process, the imagined majoritarian national Self – Bengali, Bamar, whatever – is co-constituted with imagined minority Others (Pandey, 1999; Pugh, 2013). That is, the idea of a majority is *not prior to or independent from that of a minority*; indeed, majorities need minorities to exist (Appadurai, 2006). In this sense, nationalism is as much about the politics of exclusion as it is about inclusion. Further, the minority/majority opposition is neither stable nor preformed but the product of particular historical and material conjunctures.

Not all minorities occupy the same place in a nation state, of course (Siddiqi, 2018). Very few end up, like the Rohingya, as the object of extreme hatred, expulsion, and/or elimination. Appadurai calls such populations bio-minorities – those whose difference from national majorities is seen as a form of bodily threat to the national ethnos or the people. Since all nation-states rely on some idea of ethnic purity, he avers that such a "biominor" plurality is a source of constant threat.

In the context of the 19th and 20th centuries, state-building also has been called a "refugee making process" (Zolberg, 1983). Zolberg shows that the transition from various empires to nation states led to conditions encouraging the persecution of specific groups along existing racial, religious, and other social fault lines. Consolidation of newly sanctified borders resulted in the mass displacement of those who were deemed as outsiders, foreigners, and enemies within. By extension, state-making is also a subject making process – in that "it produces the political subjectivities that it deems acceptable and desirable (the national-citizens) and those which it deems illegitimate and undesirable" (Cantat, 2016, p. 13). This capacity to make distinctions, to determine what counts as "normal", acceptable identities and what constitutes the abnormal or exception is foundational to national sovereignty. The "sorting" process is neither linear, nor modular, but contingent. Biopolitical determinations of belonging and non-belonging, yoked to particular ideological projects that may or may not align with existing social relations, are necessarily violent. The production of undesirable or dangerous Others tends to play out along existing or emergent fractures.

The prospect of becoming a reviled outsider, arguably, is built into the structure of the nation state form, rather than being an anomaly, or product of imperfect national formation (Balibar,1990). In this light, we can read the expulsion and genocidal violence unleashed on the Rohingya as an extreme version of a more general predicament of the nation-state form in the present moment in conjunction with historically and politically contingent factors.

Finally, the context of empire and decolonization is foundational to contemporary global politics and to the hyphenated entity that is the postcolonial nation-state. Most obviously perhaps, inherited national borders often bore little correspondence to ground realities (Mamdani, 1996). In the words of one historian, "Imperial politics imposed a cookie-cutter world map of national territories, which provided the institutional basis for contemporary globalization […]. A radically new territorial system emerged abruptly in the mid-20th century with the collapse of an imperial order that had developed for five centuries" (Ludden, 2018).

This radically new territorial system of national spaces dramatically recalibrated the relationships of persons to borders. Long established routes of circular migration within the boundaries of empire were now subject to national bordering practices. Both to assert territorial sovereignty and produce singular imagined communities tied to particular geographies, newly independent states demanded the disavowal or erasure of these older histories of mobility (Amrith, 2013). Even as passports and visas were introduced to regulate populations and borders, long established paths of mobility across these new national borders became criminalized, and terms such as illegal migrant or undocumented persons emerged with new meaning. Postcolonial nation-states did not just acquire a monopoly over violence in their territories but also absolute control over what counts as legitimate movement (Torpey, 2000). Put differently, modern citizenship is built on obscuring or erasing these histories of migration and movement. The question remains as to why are some populations and not others rendered outsiders in national cultural imagination, regardless of actual ties to the space of the nation. While it is not possible to provide a definitive answer, it is instructive to trace the processes through which Rohingya gradually were made outsiders within the Burmese nation.

Memories of Mobility

Normalization of the nation-state idea, including absolute state sovereignty over bodies within a given territory, calls for the "forgetting" of histories across spaces yet to be nationalized (Amrith, 2013; Ludden, 2018; van Schendel, 2005). Thus, in the postcolonial period, "every nation set out to create its unique history and identity, so as to make its territorial claims appear to be natural and inevitable, if not eternal" (Ludden, 2018, p. 3). In short, writing national histories, is a profoundly political project. The same set of "historical facts" can be framed to tell radically different stories. How the story is told, and by whom, which stories are remembered, and which forgotten, are fundamentally implicated in practices of statecraft and corresponding relations of power. In this section, I present a brief glimpse of the now "forgotten" mobility and fluidity – cultural, linguistic, political, commercial, and religious – of the borderland spaces between contemporary Bangladeshi and Myanmar.

Pre-colonial Arakan (today's Rakhine state) was a "multi-ethnic" and multilingual space with deep connections to Arabo-Persianate and Sanskrit worlds (D'Hubert, 2014; Iqbal, 2017; Ludden, 2018). Separated by a mountain range from central and upper Burma in the west, Arakan was oriented eastward, and toward the Bay of Bengal. Indian Ocean trade and missionary networks had long connected Arakan and Bengal, ties consolidated by the search for refuge in times of political crisis. Mrauk-U, the capital of the Arakan Kingdom and Chittagong in Bengal represented nodes in a wider zone of mobility, diversity, and cosmopolitanism. Mosques and temples, seminaries and libraries dotted the landscape, in which Danish, Portuguese, Arabic, and Bengali, among other languages could be heard.

When Bamar forces/the Kingdom of Ava invaded Arakan in 1408, the Rakhine king Nara Meikhla took shelter in neighboring Bengal. Upon regaining his throne, Nara Meikhla is said to have ordered the relocation of 80,000 craftsmen from Chittagong to his kingdom, which was now a protectorate of the Bengal Sultanate. In a reversal, Chittagong became part of the Arakanese Kingdom from 1578-1666 under a later Rakhine king. Bengalis, Muslims and Hindus, entered Arakan during this period. As is well known in Bangladesh, the Moghul emperor Aurangzeb's brother Shah Shujah and his followers took asylum in Mrauk-U in 1660. During the Mrauk U period (1433-1785), the Bengali language served as an intermediary between the local sphere and the vast trade networks of the Bay of Bengal.

From available sources, it can be concluded that Bengal Muslims were active at all levels of the administration of Arakan, played a critical role as cultural brokers, and were frequent patrons of literary works (D'Hubert, 2014). 16th century Arakanese kings struck coins with their names in Persian and Pali, as well as in Arabic and Sanskrit. This could be interpreted as sign of the abiding of influence of Islam on Arakan kings, though it has been suggested that in the prevailing environment, this was a means of becoming culturally legible to powerful neighbors, and the sultanates beginning to emerge around the Bay of Bengal (D'Hubert, 2014, p. 55). It is likely that large-scale Muslim settlements were established in the 16th and 17th centuries when Arakanese and Portuguese raids into southern Bengal brought thousands of Bengalis to Arakan as slaves. By the 1620s, the borderlands of Bengal and Arakan had emerged as the region's most important slave market, to which the Mogul conquest of Chittagong put a stop in 1666 (Amrith, 2013). It was through a slave raid that Alaol famously became the court poet of the Arakan kingdom.

Before moving on, two points are worth noting. First, the history of this long and intimate traffic between Bengal and Arakan (or Chittagong and Mrauk-U) has been obscured by nation-centered historiographies informed by colonial cartographies. Second, in contrast to the outsider status of Muslims today, those who identified as Muslim were not considered to be aliens or enemies. Muslims of various stripes comfortably inhabited a pluralistic social milieu in which Islam was not out of place.

Following the Bamar annexation of Arakan in 1785, many Buddhist and Muslim Arakanese fled to neighboring Bengal. Many felt safe to return only after the first Anglo-Burman war in 1823 and in the presence of colonial authorities. The colonial policy of expanding labor-intensive rice cultivation in the general region (including Assam and Sylhet) led to the migration of mostly Muslim workers from Bengal. In 1886, Burma formally became a province of British India and any Indians who moved there were considered "internal" migrants. Indians soon became active at all levels of the economy, from banking and commerce to plantation labor in colonial Burma. In Arakan, some migrants were seasonal workers, while others settled down permanently. By 1941, the Muslim population of Arakan, including those who self-identified as Rohingya, was listed as 27% of the total population, according to the Census (Ludden, 2018). British officials in 1824 authorized the first formal boundary of Arakan. This administrative

boundary between Arakan in British Burma and Bengal in British India later became the international border between Bangladesh and Burma in 1947. In other words, Arakan was not a fixed territorial space and its meanings were multiple and shifting. Bordering practices, the national production and policing of "us" and "them," is obscuring longer histories that inform nation state formation. Older narratives of mobility cannot be accommodated within the hardening of cultural and political borders that unfolded.

Unhoming Arakan's Rohingya

> Centuries of mobile Arakanese territorial identity came crashing to an end [at independence in 1948]. Now all the people of Arakan were forced into a rigorously defined national state territory, based in Central Burma, dominated by Burmese nationalists and military men, for whom all the Muslim and Bengali cultural elements and spatial connections which had been integral parts of Arakan for a thousand years seem to be alien imports, first from India, then from Pakistan and Bangladesh (Ludden, 2018, p. 14).

How did the Rohingya become illegal Bengali immigrants in popular discourse as well as official documents? How did they lose their claim to belong to Rakhine state given the rich cosmopolitan history of the Arakan kingdom? And how did Muslims come to be associated with reviled and dangerous foreigners whose existence threatened the nation?

In an important intervention, Prasse-Freeman and Mausert productively reframe the debate over Rohingya indigeneity and nationalist claims by reminding us that both Rohingya and Rakhine are historically constructed political categories (Prasse-Freeman and Mausert, 2020). They interrogate the logic underlying readings of available records (the British colonial archives and Arakanese royal chronicles) that produce Rohingya and Rakhine as unrelated ethnic groups. Along with tracing shifts in the meaning of Rakhine and Rohingya identity over time, they ask how it is that cultural emblems and practices associated with Arakanese spaces have come to be associated exclusively with the former.

Prasse-Freeman and Mausert assert that the "Arakan/Chittagong system" began to unravel with the annexation of Arakan by the Bamar/Ava Kingdom in 1785. The subsequent "Irrawaddy-fication"[4] of Rakhine identity, produced a gradual reorientation of Arakan toward the east to central Burma and Chittagong to the west and the wider Muslim world. It is noteworthy that Rakhine nationalist historians account for the obviously Indic character of early Arakanese civilization by arguing that the Rakhine trace an original pure channel to the Budhha through royal "Aryan" blood. This political claim undercuts actual historical proximity to Indians/Muslims. Critical shifts in Arakan from 18th century onward – Buddhification, the declining role of Muslims in trade with the rise of the Dutch VOC, and the Mughal invasion (to which Bengali Muslims were seen to be sympathetic), resulted in a crystallization of religious identities and magnification of differences.

British occupation of Arakan appears to have accelerated the hardening of cultural boundaries between the categories of Rakhine and Rohingya. Now familiar nationalist tropes – of Buddhism in danger, the impending decline of Burmese (implied to be Buddhist and indigenous) civilization, and the fear of being overrun by foreigners or immigrants – found life in this period. In the emergent nationalist imagination, British colonial conquest signified not only the extraction of resources and the control of indigenous populations but also a threat to Buddhism (Zarni and Briham, 2017). In fact, the last King Thibaw framed the British as anti-Dhamma Kala or alien heretics. Further, the large-scale movement of Indians laborers, moneylenders, and administrators in the 1870s and 1880s, in response to the demands of the fast-growing rice cultivation industry in Lower Burma, provoked considerable unease among some sections of the population, especially the British educated elite, with a newly developed sense of national consciousness. The threat of "Indian penetration" and its impact on the future of Burma as a predominantly Buddhist society became a major theme in burgeoning nationalist discourse among the political elite. Resentment of Indian migration became a major theme of Burmese nationalism, most visibly in the press. Rohingya were implicated in the interchangeable use of Indian, Muslim, Rohingya and illegal migrant through the pejorative term, Kala.

Languages of nationalist resentment tend to be recurring and familiar. So it is that in 2010, the Burmese government blamed "wild Muslim extremists" and "armed bands of Bengalis" for violence inflicted on the Rohingya population (Pugh, 2013, p. 14). Increasingly, the language of nationalism and the language of immigration came to be co-constituted in the mainstream Burmese struggle for freedom from British rule.

By the 1920s, vernacular texts spread a new self-conscious national identity, often through the voices of lay monks. For instance, U Ottama, a monk of Arakanese descent, frequently delivered speeches on behalf the Young Men's Buddhist Association (Amrith, 2013). Founded in 1906, the YMBA's chief platform was the perceived decline of Burmese civilization in the face of a growing tide of foreign civilization and learning. Nationalist narratives of the "Indian problem" intensified during the worldwide economic collapse in 1929-30. Public resentment over growing unemployment reflected the belief that Indians were responsible for taking scarce jobs away. The contraction of the colonial economy went hand in hand with the rise of xenophobic nationalism. Such sentiments were expressed in slogans such as "Burma for Burmans," popularized by the Thakins party -- the banner under which Rangoon University students, including Aung San, mobilized in the 1930s (Mazumder, 2013). Official Burmese delegates to the British Parliamentary Roundtable of 1931 to 1932 declared that the "diseased" condition of their society was the result of uncontrolled immigration (Shahabuddin, 2019, p. 355). As Buddhist monks became the militant cultural vanguard of nationalism, Theravada Buddhism soon became the ideological glue for a diverse Burman population and its aspiring allies, including Arakanese Buddhists (Ludden, 2018).

Capitalizing on anti-Indian sentiment and an already tense racial atmosphere, the Burmese nationalist press produced "scandals" that generated ethnic, religious, and sexual anxieties around the figure of the Indian as well as of the Muslim (Zarni and Brinham, 2017). "Race" riots between Muslim and Buddhists broke out in Rangoon at this time. Interreligious marriages, especially between Muslim men of Indian origin and Buddhist local women became a particular point of contention (Amrith, 2013; Zarni and Brinham, 2017). These marriages of Zerbadi Rohingya (sometimes known as Bamar Muslims) were recast as a threat to a predominantly Buddhist national way of life. Zarni and Brinham note that the situation became violent only after incitement by the Burmese press, radical nationalist Thakins, and colonial era Burmese politicians working for their own agenda.

Until the 1942 Japanese occupation of Northern Arakan, the active exclusion of Rohingya from the imagined Burmese nation did not appear to be inevitable. But Arakan was on the frontlines of the battle between the colonial British state and emergent Burmese nationalist forces, and British forces recruited a segment of the Muslim Arakanese population to fight against Japanese backed Burmese nationalists. In exchange, they were promised some degree of protection and autonomy. Not surprisingly, as in so many other cases, the colonial state reneged on its promise, leaving all Rohingya on the "wrong" side of national history in the making. In the wake of a massacre of Muslims in 1942, at least 22,000 Rohingya fled to Chittagong where they were put up in refugee camps (HRW, 2000). Sectarian violence broke out as thousands of Indians fled Burma through Arakan to India, and again in 1948. Rohingya-Rakhine differences were magnified at this time by tensions between Arakanese Buddhists and Muslims over competing property claims.

In light of the consolidation of Bamar Buddhist nationalism and their experiences of WWII, Muslim groups in Arakan began to organize for safety, autonomy, and separate political representation following independence. A 1946 proposal by one such group to the Muslim League in Karachi, requesting that parts of Northern Arakan be incorporated into the future East Pakistan, was rejected (Mazumder, 2019). Most Rohingya nationalists sought to affirm their ethnic identity as full citizens of the Union of Burma. A small section took up arms in what became known the Mujahid rebellion.

The framing of the Mujahid rebellion by Rakhine and Rohingya nationalists is revealing in this regard, at least as captured by an official report of the British Foreign Office. The writer notes that in March 1952, the Arakanese Independent Parliamentary Group held a press conference in Rangoon in which they demanded that all *unauthorized inflow of Pakistani nationals* be immediately stopped and that the "mujahid rising was even more dangerous to the unity of Burma than was the Kuomintang trouble in the Shan states" (Pearn, 1952. p. 9, italics added). Pearn records that in response, the two "Rwangya" Members of Parliament from Maungdaw and Buthidaug vociferously refuted allegations of widespread support among Rohingya for the Mujahid or that "infiltration" was ongoing. It appears the MPs in question were anxious to represent their constituents as "peaceful, law-abiding and loyal Muslims of Northern Akyab" and who "were as strongly opposed to infiltration from [East] Pakistan, as were the Arakanese" (Pearn, 1952). Here we see Rakhine nationalists attempting to consolidate their claim to indigeneity through mobilizing a discourse of infiltration, Jihadi violence, and dual loyalty of Arakanese Muslims. The self-identified Rohingya representatives also betray a deep fear of the consequences of being labeled as disloyal outsiders and terrorists. The British Research Officer, in the meantime, confidently cast the rebels as criminals and smugglers. Rohingya have not always been able to shed this image of criminality – it is one frequently mobilized in the popular imagination in Bangladesh. The trope of Bengali/East Pakistani infiltration or illegality was already in circulation, it would appear.

The essentialization and distillation of Rohingya and Rakhine identity categories intensified in the postcolonial era. Post independent imperatives to construct a unified majority identity centered on Bamar Buddhist cultural resources. The consolidation of this identity drew on the erasure and reconstitution of cultural memory, including the supposed "disloyalty" of Arakan's Muslims during Burma's independence struggle. The Rakhine nationalists, seeking to consolidate their inclusion in Myanmar's "national races" embraced ideologies that privileged Buddhism and associated narratives of indigeneity. In order to stake a claim on a distinct ethnic identity, Rohingya elite tended to privilege Muslim identity over non-Muslim traditions (Prasse-Freeman and Mausert, 2020). In what followed, the nationalization of all businesses and expulsion of foreign, primarily Indian, business owners by General Ne Win in 1962, engendered an increasingly hostile climate for the acceptance of Rohingya claims to belonging. Bamar nationalist antipathy to India and Pakistan rendered Rohingya language and religion "tainted." Historical links across what had become hard borders rendered their loyalty more suspect (Ludden, 2018). The reworking of colonial era tropes of the so-called Indian Peril, and communal identity formations inherited from the colonial state also helped to popularize ideas of Rohingya as untrustworthy outsiders (Zarni and Brinham, 2017). The postcolonial state was able to use "decades of resentment" toward British colonial policies to successfully "Other" the Rohingya, casting them as illegal or Bengali settlers, and external threats to the nation.

In more recent times, land grab/resource extraction, the interests of military and international capital, along with transnational extremist Buddhist ideology, security, and war-on-terror narratives all converged to produce the current conjuncture. Islamophobia provides especially potent ideological fuel for the extrusion of Rohingya from the body politic. Burma's xenophobic Buddhist nationalism draws on transnational circuits of exchange in which a modern globalized imaginary of Islam as a danger to religion and cultural identity are central motifs. Burmese monks, for instance, travel to Sri Lanka where they encounter the Bodhu Bala Sena, which runs fiercely anti-Muslim and anti-Christian campaigns. Globalized imaginaries of Islam are translated and localized to a modern contest, as part of a globalized "ontological scare" (Gravers, 2015).

The militarized Burmese state and society draw strength from the silence and inaction of the international community. Political will is, not unexpectedly, deeply entangled in considerations of commerce and global political economy. Few, if any, governments or corporations are willing to jeopardize their current or future investments in a newly liberalized Burmese economy. For instance, telecommunications giant, Telenor, which has been accused by the Arakan Rohingya National Organization of indirect complicity in the August 2017 killings, refuses to use the word Rohingya in any of its communications (ARNO Press Release, December 22, 2018). Telenor is majority owned by the Norwegian government, which prides itself on being a staunch supporter of democracy.

Finally, the profoundly ahistorical premises on which UN style governance protocols proceed assume the timelessness of national borders, the immutability of identity and, critically for our purposes, the existence of documentation of legal records. This ahistoricity reproduces and enables the violent logic of the nation and corresponding technologies of rule. In the next section, I take a closer look at how ostensibly apolitical and neutral bureaucratic arrangements are fundamentally implicated in the production of ethnic identities and, in this case, the writing out of Rohingya from national memory, history, and culture.

Administrative Obliteration

> "All my life I've tried I can everything to fit in. But it's never enough -- the goal post for being truly Burmese keeps moving further and further back." Yasminullah. New York City, February 8, 2018.

The last decade has seen the emergence of a vast body of literature on documentary citizenship, and the violence of bureaucracy (Hull, 2012; Srivastava, 2012). Scholars have shown that documentary regimes are neither monolithic, nor fully dominant. Individuals and groups find inventive ways to negotiate or evade bureaucracies and borders (Carswell and De Neve, 2020; Ghosh, 2019; Siriman, 2018). One of the troubling aspects of Rohingya experience over time is the systematic stripping away of the right to *any* documentation that could verify their existence and ties to the territory of Burma. The NVCs are especially dangerous in this regard because they call for renouncing any rights to belonging in Burma. It seems that he recognition of Rohingya subjectivity now depends on whether they possess the *right to* documentation.

Burma's 1948 Constitution granted full citizenship to eight "indigenous" races along with those who had settled within the territory of the newly formed Union of Burma before the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1923 (Ferguson, 2015). A caveat stipulated that anyone whose parents and grandparents had lived on such territories could also be granted citizenship. In addition to this temporal aspect, Ferguson notes that the newly independent nation posited its indigeneity in opposition to foreign control, more specifically against non-indigenous capital. This discourse of indigeneity, explicitly tied to the need to resist foreigners, has been mobilized to great effect in subsequent years. As mentioned above, after 1962, all businesses were nationalized and foreign business owners (mainly Indian) expelled, the climate becoming more hostile for Rohingya claims to indigeneity.

Just before the 1982 census, the government revised the 1948 Citizenship Law. Drawing on ideas of *jus sanguinis*, they retained the first part of the citizenship law. Those belonging to the eight national races, and those ethnic groups who had settled within the state prior to 1823 would qualify for citizenship. It deleted the second part of the 1948 law, which had allowed people whose grandparents had settled in the territory to register as full citizens. The 1983 census introduced a new scheme for categorizing ethnicity: a list of 135 subcategories within the eight national races.[5]

There is general consensus today that national belonging is neither primordial nor given, but partly the function of bureaucratic arrangements. In Myanmar it appears to be negotiable and punctuated over time. This is evident in the moving lines for documentation necessary to be eligible to claim citizenship. A chronology of identifying documents and regulations issued by the Burmese state to reclassify its Rohingya population makes this evident:

1948 National Registration Certificates issued to all Rohingya.

1962 Citizenship no longer guaranteed – restrictions on mobility, increasingly difficult to join the civil service.

1974 Emergency Immigration Act; All citizens required to carry identity cards (National Registration Certificates), but the Rohingya only offered Foreign Registration Cards (FRCs). However, even without FRCs, "the local authorities did not grossly disrupt the daily lives of the Rohingyas, and those who needed them often found it possible to obtain them through bribery or forgery" (Human Rights Watch, 1996). Rohingya no longer accepted in the army.

1977 Nagamin "Census" – all citizens required to register but the Rohingya were barred from doing so.

1982 Citizenship Law which instituted three tiers of citizenship – Full, Associate, and Naturalized, two of which can be revoked. Few Rohingya could fulfill the new requirement to prove pre-1823 origin/residence.

1989 Color coded Citizen's Security Cards.
Full Citizens: Pink
Associate Citizens: Blue
Naturalized Citizens: Green
Rohingya not issued any cards

1994 Rohingya children no longer issued birth certificates. Official permission from Border Security Force for marriage made mandatory. Family lists – records family members and date of birth but not place of birth, therefore does not count as evidence of birth in Burma.

1995 In response to UNHCR advocacy efforts, the Burmese government issues Temporary Registration Cards (white). The cards do not mark the individual's date of birth.

1990s Must apply for permission to visit family in neighboring villages and pay for a travel pass. Anyone overstaying their travel pass prevented from returning, and their names automatically deleted from the family lists, effectively leading to administrative obliteration. Travel limited to Arakan, excluding Sittwe/Akyab.

2015 Self-identifying Rohingya stripped of right to vote.

2016 Stipulation to accept National Verification Cards (NVCs) as condition for remaining in the country.

The stripping of rights and the downgrading of Rohingya citizenship has not been consistent or even, and has hinged on the demands of political expediency at any given moment.

More chilling in this regard is an observation by Etienne Balibar that in processes of mass extermination, victims are - so to speak - "prepared for elimination, i.e., progressively and institutionally marked as potential, future victims and collectively pushed into *a social symbolic corner where they acquire the status of living corpses, who are neither completely alive, nor yet already dead*. Without preparation, you cannot have elimination, but with the preparation, you still don't have the elimination itself, only its conditions of possibility" (Balibar, 2005, p. 32-33, italics added). In conjunction with other stipulations - the systematic withholding of basic health and education services, deliberate neglect of nutritional needs coupled with literal penning in to villages and detention camps - the state's objective seems to have been to prepare its Rohingya population for elimination, if and when necessary.

The shifting requirements listed above map on to individual experience of becoming a foreigner within, of slow denationalization. Here I want to quote from Mr. Nurul Islam, head of the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation, with whom I had a conversation in June 2016.[6] He had heard about an initiative with which I was involved on advancing exchanges between progressive Burmese-Bangladeshi activists and scholars. My colleague Firdous Azim and I met him one afternoon at BRAC University. It is his story that forced me take the subject of documentation – of administrative obliteration – seriously. As I looked through my notes from that conversation before writing this paper, the following statements resonated strongly:

- My father and U NU (the first Prime Minister of independent Burma) both had the same document of citizenship.
- I had the same card but with a seal and no guarantee of citizenship after 1962.
- My younger brother had no certificate but a temporary white card.
- Now we have all been issued a STAY PERMIT, a green card.
- In order to obtain a national verification card, you have to accept the designation of Bengali.

Mr. Islam spoke of how Burmanization became "Buddhization" after independence and the imposition of artificial colonial demarcations. I heard for the first time of the Panglong Conference to which the Rohingya were not invited. I learned that U Nu had acknowledged the Rohingya – the Health Minister under him had been R. Sultan Mahmood, and that between 1962 and 1964, all indigenous people, including Rohingya, had radio shows in their own language. Mr. Islam told us about the active participation of Rohingya students in the anti-dictatorship protests at Rangoon University in 1988, and the irony of not being able to vote for the first time *after* formal democracy was introduced. He mentioned in passing the destructive theories of the historian Jacques Leider, and the business dealings of the former British Ambassador, Derek Tonkin, with the military junta.

In Mr. Islam's account, there were no significant problems before 1942. That year, at the height of World War II, the British Military High Command was based in Akyab. It was the year that 80,000 people were killed in anti-Muslim pogroms. I learned that those who had fled to camps in Chittagong could still be found in Rangpur. Until then, I didn't know of the Landhi Colony Housing Society or the Barmi Colony in Karachi where many of Mr. Islam's people could be found. To my surprise, Mr. Islam said the contrast with life in Pakistan could not be greater.[7] Living in Bangladesh meant living with constant fear and frustration. The ever-present fear of being detained for being undocumented haunted their every move. He expressed frustration that to survive Rohingya had little option but to "befriend" those who seemed intent only on exploiting their powerlessness.[8]

Bordering Practices

> We will do anything, we can even dress like them, but we must be able to maintain our religion. […] We want to remain in Burma. Bangladesh is our neighbor. We need the help of Bangladesh.
> Nurul Islam. Dhaka, June 19, 2016.

The Arrangement on Return of Displaced Persons from Rakhine State between the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar finalized in November 2017 does not mention the word Rohingya in the text or in the title. The replacement terms, "Displaced Persons from Rakhine State" or "Displaced Myanmar Residents" embody the slow violence of bureaucracy that has dogged the Rohingya population since independence. The Burmese authorities' refusal to name the Rohingya and the Bangladesh government's complicity constitutes yet another act of administrative obliteration. For the purposes of the text, this community simply does not exist. The Arrangement once more writes them out of the nation in which they were once citizens. This not-naming means that returning home is conditional upon renouncing Rohingya selfhood. The text states:

> "Myanmar will take all possible measures to see that the returnees will not be settled in temporary places for a long period and their freedom of movement in the Rakhine state will be allowed in conformity with existing laws and regulations […] Myanmar will issue the returnees an identity card for national verification immediate upon their return" (p. 2).

Multiple erasures and re-framings are evident in the storyline embedded in the text, according to which "significant numbers of Muslims from Rakhine State" and other communities, who were "residents" of Myanmar took shelter in Bangladesh following "terrorist attacks of 2017, 2016 and earlier" (p. 1). The responsibility for the violence is displaced on the Rohingya themselves while the notorious Tatmadaw's genocidal attacks of August 2017 and October 2016 are written out of the narrative, as is the civilian violence that accompanied it. In this context, Rohingya resistance of any kind can only be read as terrorism.

The text assures returnees freedom of movement "in conformity with existing laws and regulations." As we have seen, existing laws and regulations not only punish mobility but are also at the heart of rendering Rohingya stateless and without identity. Finally, also with no apparent irony, the agreement states that the process of "verification for return will be based on evidence of past residence." This can best be described as Kafkaesque since Rohingya proof of citizenship has been systematically removed over the years, through confiscation, destruction, nullification, and targeted non-issuance of documents (Brinham, 2018). The point here is not only that The Arrangement erases Rohingya subjectivity and the history of violence that precedes it but that it is constitutive of the violence of present border making practices. The conditions for and criteria of eligibility reduce the right of return to a hollow but elaborate staging of bureaucratic power and protocol, a necessary fiction to produce a state effect (Mitchell, 1999). It appears that Burmese bordering practice have followed the Rohingya into Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The newness of postcolonial national borders and older non-national ways of being in the world have long been generative of conflict, not least along the borders of Burma and what is now Bangladesh (Mazumder, 2019; Sur, 2020). This is a simple but critical point that raises questions on how scholars, institutions, and media label and categorize people. Nation states, transnational bodies, and popular discourse tend to assume the stability of national and ethnic boundaries. Who is a migrant or a citizen when we take into account the "overnight" legal reclassification of British India into (East) Pakistan, Burma, and India? It is precisely the fuzziness of the lines between citizen and non-citizen across newly minted states of India and Pakistan that made it exceptionally undesirable for these new countries to accept, let alone ratify, the 1951 Refugee Convention. From this perspective, Rohingya are subject to the still unraveling implications or playing out of the 1947 partition of British India, and Arakan's place as a contested frontier between Bengal and Burma.

Much of the Rohingya debate today hinges on getting the history "right." Should they be referred to as Bengali Muslim migrants or Rohingya? Undoubtedly, it is critical to undo hegemonic historical narratives of Rohingya and Rakhine as mutually exclusive political categories. I suggest that more or better evidence is not necessarily going to solve the issue. Nor does the lack of evidence imply such forms of identification did not exist in the past. Discussions around the "authentic" history of Rohingya deflect attention from the problem of claiming citizenship through

ethnicity or indigeneity. The slow violence of bureaucratic practices is directly enmeshed in the constant invention of boundaries between Burmese nationalist conceptions of past, present, and future. In this world of documentary uncertainty, no document will ever be enough.

Extremist Buddhist monks in Myanmar are known to preach that the Rohingya are reincarnated from snakes and insects; by implication, killing them would be a service rather than a crime or sin. Yet, even if the Rohingya were acknowledged to be fully human, they would be excluded from Myanmar's political community, and thus the right to claim Myanmar citizenship since being a member in a "national race" is the critical condition for membership in the political community that is now "Myanmar" (Cheesman, 2017).

In the circumstances, it is urgent to reframe the question of belonging, and uncouple the idea of rights from citizenship and the shackles of the nation state. To this end, it is critical to dismantle existing narratives of belonging and citizenship tied to territory and "primordial" identities. How might the parameters of citizenship and belonging be re-imagined? Can we have forms of political community that transcend the citizen/no-citizen binary? First, we need to decolonize colonial cartographies, to open up the possibility for non-territorial or nation-state based imaginations of identity and belonging. In this regard, the recent call by Maung Zarni to "de-imagine" Myanmar and "re-imagine" a post-Myanmar free or federated states holds out the promise of inaugurating a less violent and more egalitarian political project (Zarni, 2020).

Endnotes

[1] In March 2017, several months before the genocidal violence of August 25th, the United Nations Human Rights Council urgently dispatched (through resolution A/HRC/RES/34/22) an independent international fact-finding mission, "to establish the facts and circumstances of the alleged recent human rights violations by military and security forces, and abuses, in Myanmar, in particular in Rakhine State, including but not limited to arbitrary detention, torture and inhuman treatment, rape and other forms of sexual violence, extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary killings, enforced disappearances, forced displacement and unlawful destruction of property, with a view to ensuring full accountability for perpetrators and justice for victims." UN experts declared that Rohingya in Myanmar are not only persecuted but continue to live under threat of genocide (United Nations, 2017).

[2] Most of us in/of Bangladesh have had to tutor ourselves hurriedly in the world of Burmese history and politics, in the face of "hosting" – almost overnight – what is apparently the world's largest refugee camp. It was in this spirit, partly for self-education, partly out of a sense of obligation that I began to look more closely at the processes that led to the extraordinary violence on, and expulsion of, the Rohingya. In other words, this is new territory for me, and I do not draw on formal ethnographic work for my analysis.

[3] Patrick DeSutter raised this point at a symposium entitled *Beyond the Crisis Narrative: Rohingya Statelessness and its implications for Bangladesh* held at the University of California, Berkeley on February 7, 2020.

[4] As quoted in Prasse-Freeman and Mausert (2020, p. 2).

[5] Ferguson notes there were numerous inconsistencies and overlaps within and among these subcategories (Ferguson, 2015, p. 15).

[6] Dina M. Siddiqi and Firdous Azim in conversation with Mr. Nurul Islam, June 19, 2016, English department, BRAC University.

[7] Those Rohingya who fled Myanmar in the late 1960s generally found a hospitable environment in Karachi, Pakistan. At the time, the lack of documentation posed few problems. Ironically, the securitization of the Pakistani state after 9/11, and a corresponding desire to document and control "unruly" populations meant that Rohingya migrants, along with Bangladeshis, found themselves labeled "illegal," criminal, and security threats (Anwar, 2013).

[8] In the months after the August 2017 attacks, ordinary Bangladeshis expressed considerable solidarity and support for Rohingya fleeing, though this has abated appreciably (Lewis, 2019). There is now more hostility than ever toward the Rohingya, whose populations inside Bangladesh is quite heterogenous. Recently that identity and belonging are increasingly mediated through expressions of faith/Islam, a move that - ideally - secures hospitality and solidarity.

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