The Rohingya Diaspora: A Narrative Inquiry into Identity

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Abstract: This study examined the key experiences and aspects of the life of Rohingya diaspora youth through exploratory Narrative Inquiry. Three semi-structured interviews were held with six participants from the Rohingya community in Malaysia. Responses were analyzed and categorized into three broad sections based on Cultural Historical Activity Theory: environmental impacts on lived experience, the diversity of sociocultural origin within the Rohingya community, and the impact of historical processes on cultural change. It was noted that the Rohingya culture is rich with diverse experiences and origins far beyond its current circumstances. Rohingya youth identify strongly with their experiences of life in Arakan and note that the younger generations missing this experience are less connected with their Rohingya identity. Beyond that, much of the threat to self-perception within the community came from external reductive narratives based only on their plight. In order to establish a constructive framework to support the Rohingya people, it is therefore critical to better understand them as a culture beyond their hardships.
Keywords: Rohingya, refugees, diaspora, cultural identity.

The Rohingya refugee crises of 2012 and 2017 have prompted mass migrations across Southeast Asia. While the crisis has done much to garner international attention, the incidents of 2017 were part of a longer, ongoing crisis that has pushed much of the Rohingya population out of Myanmar since the 1981 citizenship law (Farzana et al., 2020; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2000). As a diaspora, the Rohingya are faced with constant threats of cultural erosion and challenges to their collective identity (Slanina, 2014). They remain the target of ethnic cleansing through both violent repression and policy in Myanmar and are often overlooked in host country policies as refugees (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Stanton, 2017).

In the face of persecution and traumatic change, a key source of emotional well-being and resilience is a sense of agency and identity (Ward et al., 2021). Rohingya communities have long relied upon communal relationships, land, and language as the primary means of transferring this sense of identity (Rohingya Language and Preservation Project [RLPP], 2022). As people who have undergone trauma and loss in a violent uprooting, they are thus in a uniquely vulnerable state, as multiple primary sources of identity have been cut off (Figueira, 2021; RLPP, 2022). Such communities can become targets of attempts to rewrite identity narratives for political goals (Cabi, 2019).

In order to provide culturally sensitive and relevant support, education, and aid to a vulnerable population, one must first understand their unique needs and context (Uddin & Sumi, 2019). The bulk of the existing work for the Rohingya diaspora focuses on meeting immediate

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needs and the mitigation of real threats to the health, safety, and livelihood of individuals (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021b). Given that more than 40% of the Rohingya refugee population was less than 12 years old in 2019 and that they face the reality of statelessness and exclusion at a legal level, this study recognizes the importance of understanding how the exclusion is manifesting at a cultural level (UNHCR, 2021b).

To a community living in a diaspora, the relationship and importance of one's homeland versus one's host country are multi-layered and complex. The linkage is not only spatial but also manifests through community practices that were only possible in the environment and circumstances of the home country (Sankaran, 2022). A sense of connection and memories of the land can be a key source of emotional well-being (Ward et al., 2021). As such, it is important to understand the relationship between life in Arakan and Rohingya identity. Rohingya diaspora youth with memories of Arakan make up the youngest generation able to compare and bridge the gap between experiences of home in Myanmar and life as refugees. As such, this study specifically focuses on their experiences with identity and adaptation.

The aim of this research is to identify and understand the experiences in Arakan that continue to contribute to the sense of identity of Rohingya youth, even post-displacement. This is in order to better understand the aspects of the Rohingya identity currently being threatened by those growing up entirely in the diaspora. The objective is, therefore, to find out from the youth of the Rohingya diaspora key aspects of their identity from their experience both in Arakan and now in a host country. As such, the following research question and sub-question are posed:

1. What are the key experiences and aspects of life in Arakan that Rohingya diaspora youth identify with?
2. In what ways do young Rohingya generations feel that their displacement has impacted their sense of identity?

It is hoped that by better understanding the impact of displacement on what it means to be Rohingya, this study will have significance in better informing existing initiatives to empower Rohingya youth in their own cultural identity.

History of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis

The Rohingya are an ethnic group indigenous to Arakan, also known as the Rakhine state in western Myanmar. The majority of Rohingya are Muslims, with a small minority following Christianity and Hinduism. While Rohingya profess roots as early as the 8th century, connected to the arrival and mixing of Arab traders in the region, this view has been disputed and discredited by some academic sources, citing a lack of archaeological evidence (Chan, 2005; HRW, 2000). Burmese government sources additionally claim that the Rohingya are more recent illegal immigrants, and even the term Rohingya is hotly debated (Cheesman, 2017; Kipgen, 2013). Despite the contradictory narratives, there is unequivocal evidence of the existence of Muslim population centers in the Arakan region, which can be traced back to at least 1430CE (Chan, 2005).

Arakan state is separated from the rest of Myanmar by mountains and existed as a separate Kingdom until 1784, when the Kingdom of Mrauk-U was invaded and sacked by the Burmese King Bodawphaya. The invasion was followed by suppression and the fleeing of significant portions of the population to neighboring Bengal (Chan, 2005; Thawnghmung, 2016). With the annexation of Arakan by the British just 40 years later, in 1826, the trend of migration reversed as migrants traveled or returned to Arakan from Bengal. The British support for ethnic minorities during the colonial era was reversed in the postcolonial period when ethno-

nationalist discourse dominated Myanmar's Burmese majority (Farzana et al., 2020; HRW 2000; Thawnghmung, 2016). Despite Rohingya leaders working with General Aung San in the lead-up to Myanmar's independence, subsequent politics have continued to exclude and isolate them. Since 1962, both the democratic and military governments of Myanmar have pursued a policy of exclusion of Rohingya from politics, rejecting their ability to join political parties. The government's rhetoric indicated that the Rohingya were a threat to the country's integrity as a Burmese-majority nation (Jitpiromsri et al., 2020).

The Rohingya made up at least one-third of the population of Arakan state prior to the mass exodus in 2017, however, despite their longstanding heritage and historical roots in the region, they are not recognized among the ethnic groups named by Myanmar's 1982 citizenship law (Bhatia et al., 2018; Cheesman, 2017; Farzana et al., 2020). This lack of recognition has paved the way for the systematic repression of Rohingya in Myanmar and a history of escalating violence towards them (Kipgen, 2013; UNHCR, 2021a; Zakaria & Mohamedsha, 2020). The repression is not only physical but also economical. The UNPD's 2011 living condition survey notes that the poverty rate in 'Rakhine' state was more than 40%, almost double the country's average (United Nations Development Programme, 2011; Thawnghmung, 2016).

Most notably, the Rohingya are one of the multiple groups who have been the target of state-led ethnic cleansing with genocidal intent from the armed forces of Myanmar since the 1990s (United Nations [UN], 2018; UNHCR, 2021b). Persecution has continued to escalate and intensify with new policies enacted over time. In 1992, restrictions were imposed on Rohingya marriages, and by 2005, official documents often required couples to sign agreements not to have more than two children (Islam, 2021). There have also been reports of Rohingya being forced into 'model village' detention camps by the armed forces, living under poor conditions, and the denial of basic rights (Farzana et al., 2020). In addition to this, Rohingya were banned from traveling or working outside their villages without a permit, facing heavy fines, imprisonment, torture, and sexual violence if found in violation of the restrictions (Mahmood et al., 2016). Under the democratic transition from 2008-2020, the Rohingya were disallowed from participation in UN-sponsored national censuses, and many of their identity documents were seized and destroyed.

In 2012, the murder of a Buddhist woman from Rakhine was a catalyst for fresh waves of violence against the Rohingya, beginning with mob killings and followed by military strikes against Rohingya in the state, as well as against Muslims throughout the rest of Myanmar (Islam, 2021; Kipgen, 2013; Stanton, 2017). In 2015, the Rohingya people were barred from voting, and new waves of violence against them began (Islam, 2021). The atrocities since committed have been consistent with the stepping-stones towards acts of genocide throughout history and have come to include racial and religiously motivated abuse, sponsoring vigilante violence, rape, human trafficking, torture, land confiscation, and eviction and destruction of homes (Stanton, 2017; Sudheer & Banerjee, 2021).

By 2017, the persecution escalated into a series of intensified attacks at the hands of Myanmar's military. This forced a new wave of Rohingya migration that prompted heavy media attention amid a growing new refugee crisis in Southeast Asia (UNHCR, 2021b). It is estimated that over 1.1 million Rohingya fled across the Myanmar-Bangladesh border between 2017-2020, where the majority have been forced to settle in the refugee camp Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh's Kutupalong complex or travel to neighboring countries. A large proportion of these refugees are young children, with more than 40% of the refugee population being under the age of 12 at the time of displacement (UNHCR, 2021a, 2021b).

Approximately 90% of the Rohingya refugee population currently reside in Bangladesh and Malaysia, both non-signatories to the 1951 refugee convention. The two host countries are not obligated by the UN agreement to provide refugees with access to education and healthcare (UNHCR, 1951). Furthermore, the Rohingya are not recognized by the Myanmar government

and are not granted citizenship in their host countries, rendering them stateless (Kipgen, 2013). Although there have been calls for a regional response to the ongoing crisis, Southeast Asian nations are bound by the 'The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia', which prevents them from intervening in what is considered another country's internal affairs (Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], 1976). As such, they have not put forward any coordinated plan to deal with the crisis, and Rohingya refugees live in a state of uncertainty regarding their legal status (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Bhatia et al., 2018; Kiragu et al., 2011).

As a result, many Rohingya communities exist as an invisible diaspora and suffer exploitation at the hands of the informal economy that takes advantage of their lack of legal rights (Farzana et al., 2020; Koo, 2019; Wake & Cheung, 2016). As such, most must rely on refugee aid organizations to provide education. This education is generally basic primary education in English or the languages of host countries. As young Rohingya grow up with disrupted educations in foreign environments, there exist gaps in knowledge of their own language, heritage, and identity (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Literature Review

In order to better understand the context of the Rohingya diaspora, this study reviews the literature regarding the prevailing attitudes and policies governing refugees globally; the role of and barriers to refugee empowerment; and the state of the Rohingya people as refugees. Additionally, it further explores the role of religious identity among the Rohingya, as well as the challenges of cultural loss and cultural preservation across diasporas in general.

Rohingya Refugee Policy and Rhetoric

In host countries, policy, and attitudes towards refugees often neglect the preservation of dignity and identity, and while they can be economically uplifting, they typically result in active or passive marginalization of the communities they target (Figueira, 2021; Sankaran, 2022). Although initially welcomed, the relationship between the Rohingya and the host population in Bangladesh has deteriorated amid heightening economic pressure due to this mass migration (Ansar & Khaled, 2021). While official terminology highlights that Rohingya are 'temporary migrants', the education systems available to refugees do not support their Rohingya language and culture (Bakali & Wasty, 2020). The country instead articulates a policy of repatriation despite the continued persecution and killings in Myanmar (Khaled, 2021). More recently, it has pursued a practice of relocating Rohingya from refugee camps on the mainland to the flood-prone island of Bhashan Char, despite worries about food security, infrastructure, and isolation from the larger Rohingya community (Radio Free Asia, 2021; Rahman, 2020).

In Malaysia, the country hosting the second-largest population of Rohingya, the government holds a 'resettlement' policy in which refugees are also seen as temporary migrants waiting to be allowed to settle in developed host countries such as the UK, the US, Australia, and European countries (Shaw et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2021a). As such, the country pursues a policy of non-inclusion. Having no legal status for refugees and asylum seekers bars access Rohingya to education and healthcare to emphasize their temporary residence (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Koo, 2019).

The bulk of aid provided to the Rohingya focus on short-term, immediate relief of food and medical supplies (UNHCR, 2021b). Despite the protracted and growing nature of long-term displacement status, there have been no long-term solutions developed in the SEA region, leaving refugees mired in uncertainty and open to economic exploitation (Bhatia et al., 2018; Kiragu et al., 2011; UNHCR, 2021a; Wake & Cheung, 2016). This state of reliance is caused not only by inaction but by specific government policies that bar refugees from finding work.

These policies force refugee communities to find illegal employment or rely on handouts from aid organizations (Brown, 2018; Carpeño & Feldman, 2015). Grassroots organizations and efforts for refugees to self-organize and empower their own communities are often at significant risk of arrest and crackdowns from authorities that may claim that the organizations are in violation of the host country's employment policies (Carpeño & Feldman, 2015; Wake & Cheung, 2016).

Rohingya Identity and Islam

Although there is a presence of minority Hindus and Christians among Rohingya, much of the fear, discrimination, and genocidal acts against the Rohingya in Myanmar are prompted by Islamophobic sentiment (Howe & Karazsia, 2020; Thawnghmung, 2016). Despite this, faith and religion appear to be a central source of strength and identity for the Rohingya Muslim community in the face of violence and attempted cultural erasure (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014; Tay et al., 2019). In fact, repressive policy from home countries may often reinforce the religiosity of the diaspora living abroad. In some cases, religious identity grows to surpass ethnic identity as the community's main marker of self-identification (Abdulbakieva, 2020).

In the face of colonial influence, and cultural erosion, a community's connection with heritage must be maintained by being passed down through respected figures in the community. Having specific places where this cultural learning can be passed down is critical to the community's resilience and well-being (Cabi, 2019; Ward et al., 2021). For the Rohingya Muslims, the most trusted and respected sources of this are typically religious authorities and institutions. Mosques and Madrasas (religious schools) are the primary source of cultural learning and identity and are considered safe spaces for the most vulnerable members of their communities (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Tay et al., 2019). As religious leaders among the Rohingya garner great respect from the community, their presence and credibility balance out the otherwise one-sided power dynamic of secular aid administrators. These leaders serve to preserve the culture of the community and allow them to reject and sort between secular aid projects that sideline their religious practices and those that do not (Mim, 2020).

Cultural Loss, Understanding, and Preservation

Many diasporas face a sudden shift from community and family-centric agrarian societies to highly technocentric urban societies (Im & Neff, 2021). Refugees must also navigate the often-invalidating host-country practices, balancing their sense of a unique identity with gratitude for their state of relative physical safety among a host population. Often, they struggle with tension at this gratitude with the awareness that their relatives in their home country continue to go through extreme risk (Figueira, 2021; Slanina, 2014).

One effect of communal loss is the growth of inter-generational tensions within a community. Diasporas find themselves dealing with new norms that often conflict with and invalidate their cultural practices. Youth are particularly susceptible to assimilative forces, and as youth lose touch with traditional social structures, they stop functioning in the same way as they might be expected in their home country. In doing so, they stop affording elder generations the respect and social positions they would typically hold in their home countries. This results in significant cultural trauma for older populations, often deteriorating inter-generational relationships. The loss or change of social status, respect, practices, and rituals between generations leads to increased stress, familial burden, and strained family bonds that ultimately erode the community's well-being (Im & Neff, 2021).

In addition to this, the states accepting refugees typically ignore their cultural needs. Although they may provide pathways for integration, practices, and policies of host countries withhold or fail to provide protection for refugee culture and dignity, thus, leaving them in an especially 'invisible' and vulnerable state (Figueira, 2021). They often neglect the importance of multilingualism in their policies, either actively pursuing or allowing discrimination against the use of the native languages of refugee communities. This practice removes it as a key vehicle of cultural inheritance (Figueira, 2021; Sankaran, 2022).

There is a significant academic discourse on addressing the social and emotional needs of a diaspora. In general, it is understood that understanding the way in which individuals from different cultures cope with stress and trauma on a social, cultural, and religious level is key to providing necessary relief (Akrim et al., 2021; Eisenbruch, 1991; Islam, 2019; Kanagaratnam, 2020; Uddin & Sumi, 2019). This understanding is highly important, as the impact of the crimes committed toward diasporas prior to fleeing cannot be classified into diagnostic categories (Kanagaratnam et al., 2020; Rivera, 2021).

Failure to understand the culture of a population prevents the detection of disorders in refugees who show no signs of clinical symptoms defined by Western practice (Bishop, 2021; Eisenbruch, 1991). Expressions of mental distress cannot, for example, translate well between Rohingya culture and Western definitions of mental disorder. As such, mental health experts often lack understanding of Rohingya culture and cannot meet their needs through conventional training alone. In order to address a Rohingya community's needs as an outsider, it becomes important to reflect on one's ethics, values, and their interfacing with the local culture's ethics and values (Islam, 2019; Uddin & Sumi, 2019).

Case and Methodology

This study focused on a qualitative exploration of the personal experience of Rohingya youth from Arakan. Wider theories of Cultural Historical Activity Theory or 'CHAT' and Narrative Inquiry were examined as guidelines for the purpose of building an adaptable methodology that could address the needs of the study. These included the distinct nature and subjectivity of inter-generation and cross-cultural experiences and the interpretations posed by the research question.

Three semi-structured group interviews were carried out with Rohingya participants based in Malaysia and from Arakan, that had spent at least a significant part of their childhood there and were comfortable sharing and elaborating on their experiences. The research focused on the participants' lived experiences, social context, and opinions about growing up in the state. Following the interviews, discussion sessions were held with community members regarding interpretations of interview content. These discussions were not transcribed, but notes were made regarding their content to further guide and expand on the findings.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

The Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, or 'CHAT', suggests that actions and their goals are the product of individuals actively engaging in the world (Yamagata-Lynch, 2007). The theory suggests that human 'activity' is beholden to social and environmental factors, contrary to frameworks that view human action as entirely the product of an isolated self (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004).

While there is variation in opinions within CHAT proponents, the theory's grounding assumptions are: human subjectivity is based on the sociocultural origin; organisms exist as part of a dynamic ecosystem; historical processes simultaneously work to make humans unique from previous generations while establishing their continuity (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004).

Ultimately, the theory emphasizes that a person's identity, choices, and actions cannot exist in isolation of context.

The principles of CHAT were used to design guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews that focused on three key areas of life in Arakan. The first was environmental: exploring the impact of climate, landscape, and geography on experiences. The second was social: inquiring about the everyday life and significant interactions of communities in Arakan. Finally, historical and inter-generational factors were examined, looking at the way in which generations interacted and stories were transmitted from person to person.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative Inquiry was chosen as the guiding theory for this study's methodology as it emphasizes contextualizing experiences and aligning with counter-colonial agendas (Quayle & Sonn, 2019). Not only does it give credibility to different cultures and voices, but it also rejects the idea that valuable research can only be obtained by strict adherence to rationality within the scientific method (Ospina & Dodge, 2005).

Aid for ostracized communities can often be unintentionally disempowering without accounting for community perspectives and contexts (Khaled, 2021; MacLaren, 2012). As such, Narrative Inquiry studies aim to develop a method that assigns research value not only to stories in isolation but also to the identity and interpretations of the communities that tell them (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). It makes use of a response community, which provides feedback on developing research in the context of its findings, analysis, and conclusions, allowing the stories to be contextualized in both the telling and interpretation (Caine et al., 2021).

Narrative Inquiry also recognizes that storytelling is not a one-way process but rather a two-way exchange between the interviewer and interviewee (Riessman, 2012). Throughout the research and data collection process, texts must continuously be shared with the participants and community alongside their understanding and input (Clandinin & Caine, 2008).

The design of the study's guiding questions was informed by the theory of narrative inquiry. Having identified areas of focus through CHAT, the academic nature of the questions was re-coded to be more natural and conversational. Additionally, the focus was on developing a fluid, community-feedback-oriented analysis rather than a rigid framework that risked decontextualizing or misrepresenting participants' responses.

Research Bias

In following a narrative inquiry guideline, this study does not collect stories in isolation of the researcher and storyteller. The role of bias or human error, influence, and interpretation are inherent parts of the research methodology (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). Rather than pursue an objective telling of stories, it is more important to this study that the stories told remain authentic to the communities and storytellers from which they originate. As such, this study relies heavily on the response communities for feedback (Caine et al., 2021; Ospina & Dodge, 2005). However, it should be noted that sampling bias may be present. In interviewing only, a small number of Rohingya youth from the same host country, the data collected only grants a view of the experience of one part of the wider Rohingya community.

Ethical Considerations

In working with a vulnerable community, three primary areas of ethical considerations appeared. The first was in data protection due to ongoing violence, discrimination, and targeting of Rohingya voices both in Myanmar and in countries that host Rohingya populations. In

addition to the anonymization of names through pseudonyms, placenames in Arakan mentioned by participants were also anonymized so as not to increase the vulnerability of populations and individuals.

The second area of ethical consideration was in understanding the power dynamics and the pressuring nature of the interview process, particularly with regard to existing institution-community relationships. In order to prevent participants from feeling forced to share stories and information, interviews were conducted by those who had worked with and had existing relationships with the community (Bishop, 2021).

The final area of note was the provision of informed consent and the danger of misrepresenting participant data. Although institutional requirements grant participants information and the right to withdraw their consent and data, it became clear that, firstly, a breakdown of written rights in legal language was not the best way to inform participants of their rights. Secondly, as the interpretation of data developed, the issue of authenticity to the participants' intended message was consistently considered. In order to address this, data was shared with the response community, and conclusions and analyses were discussed with respect to the intended message of participants.

Research Design

This research focused on gathering authentic qualitative data from participants, with an emphasis on the free-sharing of stories in effort to avoid reinforcing harmful researcher-participant power dynamics (Quayle & Sonn, 2019). As such, the interviews were not time-capped, and participants were encouraged to speak as much or as little as they were comfortable sharing. The interviews were semi-structured, guided by wider questions focusing on the environmental, social, and historical context of life in Arakan. Interviews were conducted in groups in order to pursue a more comfortable and organic environment for sharing, allowing participants to explain and share ideas with each other as well as with the interviewer. For logistical reasons, one interview was conducted individually. In addition to the data gathered in the interviews themselves, the interpretations of the data were shared with and discussed with response communities, supplementing preliminary interpretations and discussions with additional data and direction.

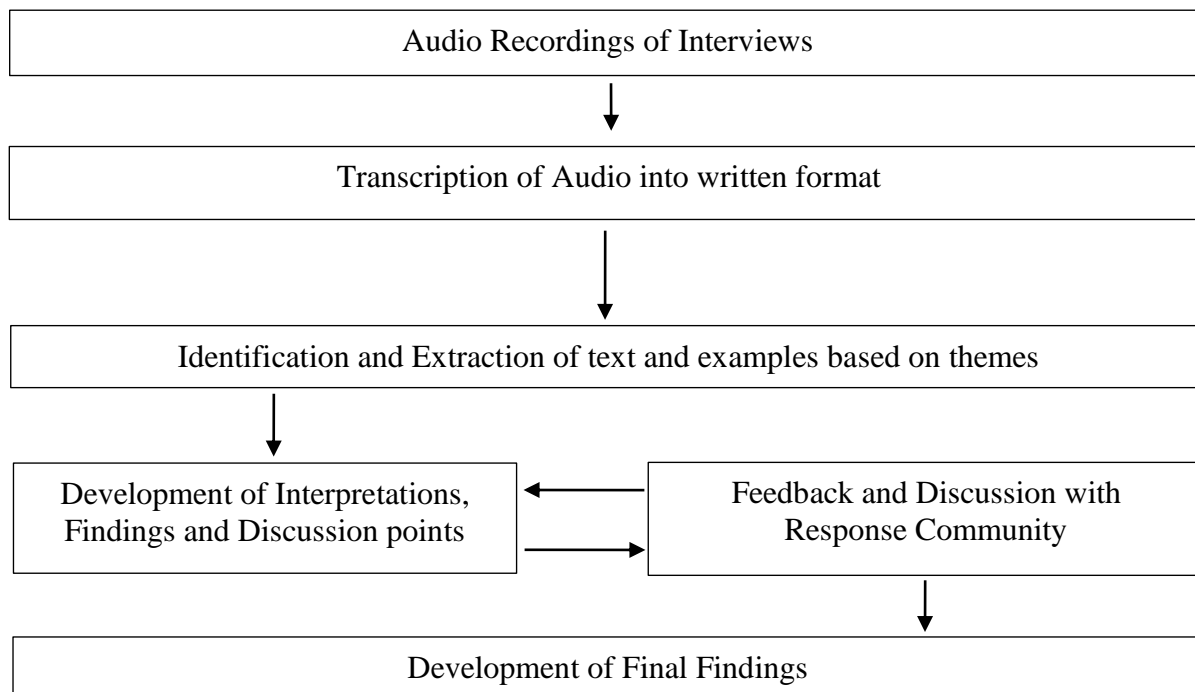## Data Collection and Sampling

The first step in data collection was to contact individuals with established respectful relationships with members of the community, as well as developing a shared understanding of the research that garnered mutual interest and support. Participants were selected from a Rohingya community in Malaysia based on their experience and familiarity with life in Arakan. This study focused specifically on the experiences and reflections of Rohingya youth whose childhoods have been split between their pre-displacement life in Arakan and their post-displacement life as refugees. These youth have strong recollections of and identify with their experience in Arakan state. All participants interviewed belonged to this 'category' of the community and were gathered through word-of-mouth snowball sampling as the study began.

Participants were contacted and interviewed between October and December of 2021. Due to the changing regulations and challenging refugee community situation with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, a variety of contact methods and interviewers assisted in collecting interview data, including both online and in-person interviews. Recordings were then transcribed in English. Finally, interview transcripts, preliminary analysis, and conclusions drawn from them were taken back to community members to discuss and provide further elaboration and guidance.

Data Analysis

Figure 1
Flow Chart of Data Analysis Process


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│              Audio Recordings of Interviews                  │
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│            Transcription of Audio into written format        │
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│   Identification and Extraction of text and examples based   │
│                        on themes                             │
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┌──────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────┐
│  Development of           │  ←──   │  Feedback and Discussion │
│  Interpretations,         │        │  with Response Community │
│  Findings and Discussion  │  ──→   │                          │
│  points                   │        │                          │
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│              Development of Final Findings                    │
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Note. Visual representation of the analysis process as designed by the authors.

The process of analysis is illustrated in Figure 1. The primary lens through which the data was analyzed was a framework built from Cultural Historical Activity Theory. Three specific lenses were used in examining participant responses: Culture-environment interconnection, Sociocultural origin, and Historical processes affecting change (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). In doing so, participant responses were examined for themes aligning with the three areas. Insights on these areas were then paraphrased or extracted from the transcripts of the texts. Preliminary observations were then made regarding the insights, which were then shared with a Rohingya response community to authenticate analysis and provide further perspective in order to ensure that the participants' responses and experiences were not misrepresented (Caine et al., 2021).

Findings

Examining the data through the lens of CHAT allowed the findings to be categorized into the following areas: Culture-environment interconnection, Sociocultural origin and settings, and Historical processes that define and differentiate cultures. These broad topics were further contextualized; firstly, participants clearly defined and elaborated on the relationship between activity and environment. Secondly, participant responses indicated two distinct sociocultural origins in Arakan, describing the social, economic, and technological backgrounds of rural compared with urban settings. Finally, the historical processes of migration discussed highlighted the positive and negative changes in community relationships.

While experiences are elaborated on and classified further, it is important to highlight that the findings generally reflect an overall diversity of ideas and opinions, even within a specific generation. One participant noted:

So being a Rohingya that came from Arakan is not the same as being a Rohingya born in abroad country. It's totally different. Sometimes you bring the trauma from there. So like you have - you have seen things that - unnatural things back in there. [...] There are things that have happened in your favor, there are things that have happened not in your favor. So some people have a good story, some people have a bad story.

Impacts of Environment on Lived Experience

The environment played a distinct role in shaping experiences, and participants were able to describe the direct impact of geography and climate on their experiences in Arakan. They described an array of sceneries, seasonal games played by children, and seasonal fruits that were the subject of many fond memories. When asked what they felt post-displacement Rohingya children were missing out on from the experience of having grown up in Arakan, one participant said, "They [are] miss[ing out on] the village, the weather, the hill, the place that we did whatever we did before." When posed the same question, another participant described the fruits:

I mean, they will never get the taste. The real taste of the fruits. Like you know watermelon, here is like - I would say it's not the actual watermelon. [...] Fruits here, we can have it at any time, it's cheaper, and anybody can buy anything and eat at any time. But all the fruit here is like – used by the chemical. The real taste... they keep in the refrigerator, so the taste (is) automatically gone. And something fresh, just take it from the tree and having it is like - it's a special taste, it's a totally different taste.

The seasonal changes played a major part in the experience of Arakan. As agriculture was a primary source of livelihood for many communities, changes in the season were highlighted by both adults and children. A change of seasons meant different kinds of crops were grown, different foods were eaten, and children played different games. As the participants were children when leaving Myanmar, they spoke with great nostalgia about the games they used to play:

In the rainy season, we cannot go play ball. Because [...] we play football in the paddy fields, but in the rainy seasons, the paddy fields is full of water or people are using it. And in summer it's empty so [...] we use that to play football. But in the rainy seasons –[...] beside marbles we also play in the water games, like everybody will go to one pond - to one water pond and then will play games inside the water.

In hearing from participants, the descriptions of the environment are plentiful and always actively described. Many spoke about the sea, rivers, and ponds they used to swim in, the hills they used to travel over, and the fields they used to play in. They described the rules and variations of games they played as children with marbles, football, 'Dang' (a cricket-like game), swimming, and hide-and-seek. As the games changed with the seasons, they noted the anticipation and excitement for the next coming season. As such, it quickly becomes clear that the environment was central to their experience and subsequent memories of being from Arakan.

Sociocultural Origins: Rural and Urban Life

Participants were particularly descriptive about the rural-to-urban divide within Arakan. A number of participants from rural backgrounds described their shock and sense of wonderment at the amenities and transport available in urban areas. They described their own experiences:

> *In our island, since we don't have like cars, road and buildings […] so it's like we see something like very strange for us, it's a totally new thing. Seeing a flat like […] four stories: it's like, oh my God, how big it is, how tall it is! So I was seeing a big bus or car or a motorbike, even a cycle - is like something very unusual. […] We only can see that when we go to the town area.*

The expressions of wonderment make it clear that the technological infrastructure of urban areas was not easily accessible or even visible to rural communities. Not only does this indicate the exciting novelty and positive outlook of technology to people, but it also highlights the practical reality of transport and connection with the outside world. In contrast to the urban centers, participants from rural communities traveled mainly by foot, sometimes taking multiple-day trips to travel to other villages.

While participants heavily emphasized their nostalgia at the rural lifestyle, they also described their appreciation for access to convenient and practical benefits of technology. Some specifically noted the dangers of this lack of access:

> *For example, if a girl (is) giving birth, and it becomes dangerous for her to give birth at home, but she needs to go to the hospital - emergency, but there is no transport and there is nothing we have to bring her with a cycle – the cycle will break – so it takes like 1 hour and 2 hour, it's really painful for her […] if like that, the people are dying. In Myanmar most of the time we get expired medicines. And then the doctor are not the proper doctor with education and then they give the wrong medicine and the people die because of that.*

Another participant added, "It happens a lot with the villages because whenever you get the emergency if there is no hospital, you die on the spot. So you can only rely on Allah. […] Having doctors in villages are rare, very rare." In the face of this reduced access to services in Myanmar, participants noted that there was a significant sense of community and mutual support. Communal events were described with great nostalgia, with a strong sense of bringing people together. In addition, participants expressed clear inter-community solidarity:

> *So when there is a festival I get to see a lot of people, I get a lot of different kinds of foods you know, I get a lot of love from everyone. And then also like, when I need help, I don't have to go even "help me help me!" If people see me, like (if) I fall down they just come and help me because everyone knows me.*

The Rohingya from urban backgrounds in Arakan described vastly different lifestyles to those in rural settings. While rural community members described long walks to access services in the closest urban centers or villages, those from urban backgrounds traveled less, as they could access basic needs in their own towns. When asked whether their paths would have

crossed if they were still living in Myanmar, many participants contrasted their lifestyle with those from the other setting and suggested it was highly unlikely.

The Role of Technology on Post-migration Change

For Rohingya from both origins, even those who were more exposed to urban life in Myanmar, there was still a significant 'technology shock' in coming to host countries. Reflecting on the sudden exposure to technology and increased digital connection as a result of moving out of Myanmar, one participant shared:

> *Yeah, it's like before, my mother's generation, my grandmother, they didn't have any technologies, so they didn't explore anything new. For example, now everyone there, like even the smaller kids, also have mobile phones, so they can see other people, how they are living, how they are different from us. But before they didn't have any technologies, there was just like, a fog in a way - like that is the whole world, like outside - there is nothing outside that world.*

The increased connectedness experienced by the generation was consistently described as something to be grateful for. However, participants also weighed some of the costs of this level of access on their prior lifestyles. Specifically, they described some of the same challenges faced by urbanizing populations today, in which their technological and, therefore, global connectivity has improved, but their in-person connections have reduced. As such, participants looked upon their pre-exposure experiences with nostalgia.

> *And here like, yeah it's fun that we have advanced technology, we don't have to walk to school, we have mobile phone to watch television, to entertain us, but when we are in our country, like in Arakan state, we didn't need this technology 'cause we had our friends. We came back from school, we are bored, we just call everyone "let's go", and then we just all [...] go to a shop or restaurant, buy things, we enjoy ourselves.*

Although it was primarily positive, the role of technology was referred to as a potential point of disconnect between younger and older generations of Rohingya from Arakan. For the generation that has moved to host countries as youth, adapting to new technological and social norms has been easy. However, elder generations have struggled to accept the increasingly important role of technology in everyday life. This gap in culture, however, is a further point of diversity between lived experiences across the community.

Relationships and Changing Cultural Dynamics

In experiencing heightened exposure, participants also highlighted the influence of other cultures and the challenging of norms in their society. As participants were children when they lived in Arakan, they describe their relationship with the adults of their community. Many expressed both a fondness as well as a certain level of distance from the older generations due to norms around the respect of elders. However, they also highlighted the change in community dynamics as a result of displacement.

> *Wherever our elder brothers sit, we don't get to sit there because it's one of our cultural things. We don't get to go where our brothers are. So we stay far away from them. Not like here […] when we see them we sit here.*

Following displacement, some of the social hierarchy within families have changed, and participants indicate that their families are now closer and more communicative since they have left Myanmar. Further elaboration makes it clear that this adult-child distance was also context and relationship dependent. In contrast to their relationships with older brothers or fathers, multiple participants indicated strong, more communicative relationships with their grandparents. They highlighted memorable activities, sharing, and closeness that they had with them:

> *Normally the older grandma or grandpa they do this: they ask the grandson or the other little-little kids to lie down beside him and they start sharing. They will start telling a story - either it can be fictional or it can be not fictional. I like to listen to stories so I always asked them 'come on, say something' or 'come on, tell a story' and then we hear it and then whenever all the friends are at one place then we share the story to each other.*

Another aspect of Rohingya culture highlighted by participants was the issue of child marriage. Multiple participants identified the practice as something they did not like about their culture in Arakan, noting that child marriage, especially for young girls, was the norm. Following the migration, they noted that this norm was subject to very slow change:

> *Everything is changing, like the culture, they are getting modern day by day. But this child marriage still remains the same. Even though it's changing a bit, by like – maybe decreasing like – changing by 2 percent, 3 percent, the rest 98 percent they are still getting underage marriage. Like most of the villages there […] the girl will get married at 13 (or) 14 like that, you see.*

Participants acknowledged that the oldest generations of the community were "holding that—underage marriage, (…) like their main culture. They are not changing that thing at any moment." In referring to the practice, the community was referred to with 'they' rather than the usual 'our', indicating the generational divide in opinions. Instead, participants discussed their hopes that, over time, globalizing influence and younger generations would reduce the practice.

Changes and Challenges to Identity

Online tools were not only seen as a way in which the Rohingya culture might be changed but also as a way to preserve identity and educate younger generations. In fact, greater access to the internet was seen as a way in which one might overcome the physical distance from Arakan. Participants suggested that through images and online resources, they might be able to share some of their experiences with their children:

> *Because nowadays we get a lot of pictures in online so I will just search in Google and explain them about the games, […] about the village, how it was, and… definitely I will teach them the games. So I want them to have the fun that I have had when I was in Myanmar.*

While many of the influences and changes to Rohingya society were considered positive by participants, they did note discomfort and inter-community conflict with aspects of identity loss that they viewed in a negative light. In one instance, a participant described the adoption of the host culture's language by some in the Rohingya community:

> *One example from our (friends) who (are) always like you know, speaking in Malay. I don't like (it). Whenever we gather with our friends like, let us speak our language, increase the language. He is like, "Hey, you don't need to talk that (Rohingya)," he just say, "improve in your other language." So this, I don't like that.*

In addition to language, another point of note was the sense of belonging or concern with the land of Arakan. One participant mentioned that for many Rohingya who has never set foot in Arakan, there is no sense of concern for what happens in Myanmar:

> *So when we came here, people is different. Like those who are born here (Malaysia), compared to that they don't have any thought, they don't have to worry what's happening there (Arakan), they don't have to worry what's going there. They don't have to think about what's happened before and what's going to happen. They don't have to worry about all of this because they find their parents here. […] The difference between me and other kids that grown up here, is anything happen there, I start worrying. But for them it's nothing. They don't—even I don't think—I mean they don't even discuss about anything back in Myanmar.*

Here, the sense of attachment is explicitly tied to personal experience with family and suggests a difference between individuals who still had family in Myanmar that they have met and those who no longer had or had never met family in the country. The presence of family and personal experience brought a personal connection to the land of Arakan. "So the love that we got for our place, for our land in Myanmar, that those who are born here (Malaysia), they don't have it."

Interestingly, another participant felt the very same comment applied to him. Rather than mentioning an attachment to Myanmar, he compared his current life outside of the difficult circumstances in his home country:

> *I come to Malaysia now I don't care what happen in Myanmar. Because I already get a good life here, I can study, and I can even ride a motorbike here, example. So, in Myanmar I couldn't do that because even I want to buy a bicycle it's too hard for me, so I don't even know how to ride a bicycle.*

While participants could see much of the cultural and practical change in their communities in a positive light, they considered the Rohingya language and its preservation with high importance. In fact, the language alone was highlighted as one of the most important

factors in retaining a sense of Rohingya culture amidst social pressure and changing circumstances. It was described as a central pillar to rebuilding self-image and repairing the sense of identity that is inevitably challenged in a refugee context.

> *So since we don't have the identity we need to make our own identity now. So to do that we need to have our language, we need to have our own understanding, our own story in our own language, to say who we are, to believe where we came from.*

Discussion

The persecution and forced displacement of the Rohingya have been happening since at least the 1990s and span multiple generations of the community (UNHCR, 2021a). Although catering to the needs of the Rohingya people is the subject of many studies, these typically explore and heavily examine the context of tragedy and persecution suffered by the population (Sudheer & Banerjee, 2021). While this understanding is critical to providing services, pursuing such discourse makes it easy for an outsider to define the Rohingya by the oppression they suffer. This image, however, is dangerously reductive, as it is clear that no people or culture is defined solely by traumatic experiences. It is, therefore, important to explore the culture of a people beyond their communal suffering and immediate circumstances. Painting a picture of life in Arakan is not only a way of passing down inter-generational knowledge but also of informing existing work being done with and for the Rohingya.

The findings suggest that Rohingya diaspora youth identify strongly with both their pre-displacement and post-displacement experiences within the Rohingya community while also seeing life in Arakan as a missing experience for those born and raised in the diaspora. The wide and complex scope of responses indicates a dynamic, diverse culture that confronts the question of cultural loss with a much greater scope for complexity than originally assumed. It is, therefore, necessary to ask the question: If the Rohingya community is not monolithic, cannot be defined by their tragedies, and understanding the current state of hardship is not enough to provide adequate support, how can a better understanding be pursued?

This study proposes that facilitating inter-community understanding can only be achieved by better understanding and exploring the lived experiences of Rohingya outside of shared suffering. In order to do so adequately, it will be important to approach the community with an awareness of its resilience and adaptability. As such, the following topics are discussed in more detail: The diversity of culture within the Rohingya community; the perceived role of cultural change and loss; and the implications and subsequent recommendations for interventions and support programs.

The Rohingya as a Diverse Community

Throughout academic and media discourse, there is a consistent sense and description of the Rohingya as a single group, characterized by a single home setting that has now been taken away from them (Sudheer & Banerjee, 2021; UNHCR, 2021b). Although they are indeed united by the attempt of genocide against them, they are not a homogeneous group (Slanina, 2014; Stanton, 2017). The findings of this study indicate that there is a significant difference between the rural-to-urban culture of Rohingya, as well as significant differences between the expectations, idealized practices, and lived experiences of various Rohingya generations.

More than once, participants referred to the common incidence of child marriage as a specific point of division between older and younger generations of their community. This societal norm is often referred to as one of the largest barriers to education in the community

and is widely discussed across academic discourse (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Prodip, 2017; Shair et al., 2019). Participants from this study, who were primarily male young adults, spoke about the role of their own generation confronting the issue, mentioning that their "generation will definitely change this (underage marriage) – at the moment they get the chance." This statement establishes two points of note; firstly, that this was an existing point of contention already within the community, and secondly, that a power dynamic currently exists that concentrates the power of decision-making with the elders. The existence of this power dynamic is seen across societies, and it is not uncommon for elder generations to expect respect and status (Im & Neff, 2021). Although many NGOs and humanitarian organizations pursue the removal of forced gender roles, it is clear that breaking the traditional power dynamic to achieve this is harmful to the integrity of the community (Im & Neff, 2021; Khaled, 2021). By understanding the generational dynamics at play in society, efforts can then be made to establish a dialogue with and between social groups. By approaching issues at the appropriate level of society, with the correct lens, and the establishment of trust, offered solutions are more likely to be accepted (Mim, 2020). Often, those most well-equipped to address these issues and enact sustainable change are not outside players but members of the community themselves (Uddin & Sumi, 2019).

There was also a significant difference between perceived gender roles in rural and urban settings in Arakan. Participants often referred to the role of women in urban communities as being more visible and visibly active compared to rural communities. Women in villages "cannot go out from the house […] no study, no nothing, just stay and cook for the family." In contrast, a participant who lived in an urban setting said his mother had a job tailoring and was especially popular for her work in the community. Participants noted the divide between the two settings, suggesting that "there is a bit (more) gender equality in town." When the otherwise distinct communities were forced together to flee from Myanmar, individuals and families would have had to navigate a spectrum of cultural norms and expectations. Awareness of the mismatch of expectations and mixing of social strata may shed new light on existing studies that describe gender roles and gender-related issues in the Rohingya community.

Perceived Role of Cultural Change and Loss

Beyond immediate societal issues and nostalgic elements of Arakan, much of the discourse around culture was characterized by the shift of perspective between loss and change. Where both, in fact, resulted in loss and changes of practices, many globalizing influences were not seen as culturally erosive but as a source of awareness and positive change. Conversely, on topics such as language, change was seen as purely negative—a loss of language was fundamentally a loss of identity.

Although studies suggest that the breakdown of age hierarchy and respect can be traumatic to a community, findings suggest that families may have been brought closer together as a result (Im & Neff, 2021). Participants described on multiple occasions how they experienced barriers in closeness to their older siblings and parents in Arakan. However, they described their families being brought closer together, with far more interaction in their post-displacement lives. While the participants of this study may not be reflective of the whole community, it is possible that adversity and the breakdown of some cultural norms have strengthened familial bonds. Although participants described a change in their norms regarding respect, they still spoke of their elders in respectful terms and tone, suggesting that although some practices of showing respect had changed, the value of respect had not.

Language is seen as one of the most important markers of the Rohingya culture across the findings of this study, as well as in multiple studies on Rohingya. Participants described not only the sense that the Rohingya language was part of their identity but also the feeling of threat

or loss when some members of their own community expressed disinterest in their language. Although language is inherently important to a culture, NGOs and support organizations in host countries often disregard its importance, ignoring the native language in favor of teaching the host country's dominant language (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Figueira, 2021; Koo, 2019; Sankaran, 2022).

In fact, because the Rohingya language has only recently developed its own unique script and has been historically written in the dominant script of the time, many organizations refuse to teach it and deny its credibility or value as a language (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Omniglot, 2022; Rohingya Language Foundation, 2012; Wake & Cheung, 2016). This questioning of value is not only harmful in preventing the teaching of the language but also demeans and devalues one's sense of identity, reflecting an attitude that attempts to embarrass the community into assimilating (Figueira, 2021; Im & Neff, 2021; Kanagaratnam et al., 2020; RLPP, 2022; Sankaran, 2022). In addition to the external pressure from host-country institutions, the Rohingya community also faces the challenge of language education. As a diaspora fleeing Myanmar, the majority of Rohingya have suffered some form of disrupted education and may have spent a disproportionate amount of time learning a host country's language (Bhatia et al., 2018; Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; UNHCR, 2021a). As a result, fluency and eloquence in their own language are diminished, and with no formal institutions to teach the language, there are significant risks that it is not adequately passed down between generations (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Sudhere & Banerjee, 2021). While the community is open to change and has indeed lost and altered many of its existing norms, language remains a critical part of the Rohingya identity—a strongly consistent message across academic works and community sentiment.

This study's findings are consistent with other studies in identifying language and Islam as uniting factors between generations, seen as core features of the Rohingya identity (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Islam, 2019; Khaled, 2021; Mim, 2020). While participants did not explicitly speak of their Muslim identity, the underlying segregation and disconnect from the local Buddhist community in Myanmar were described as a given reality. Their explanations and descriptions of life in Arakan and as refugees consistently made references to daily prayers, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and belief in God as given markers of Rohingya practice and identity.

Unlike some studies, participants made no mention of cultural loss on account of the loss of their own religious institutions in favor of Malaysian institutions (Ansar & Khaled, 2021; Tay et al., 2019). Instead, much of their focus when speaking of younger generations was on their gratitude for greater access and freedom than in Myanmar. This attitude appears to be consistent across a number of other studies, as they were persecuted for their religious beliefs in Myanmar but now live in a society that shares their religious beliefs (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Mim, 2020; Uddin & Sumi, 2019). Interestingly, while a number of studies on diaspora discuss the common loss of religiosity of a displaced or migrant population, reports on Rohingya specifically note the heavy attachment to principles and practices they associated with religion (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Im & Neff, 2021; Mim, 2020).

Implications and Recommendations

In light of the findings and the contexts faced by Rohingya refugees, the following implications and recommendations are noted:

- As a diverse community with differing rural and urban norms, forced mixing and grouping of social strata in refugee camps may shed new light on research into social

- issues in the Rohingya community, including gender norms, and expectations in education.
- Supportive policy towards the Rohingya populations may entail creating pathways for Rohingya leaders to participate in forums and engage as stakeholders in decision-making.
- A similar recommendation may be made towards educational professionals, who might focus not only on academic attainment in learners but also on building up youth leaders and providing agency in education.
- Given the limited available platforms and power dynamics at play, the Rohingya community is already actively working to enact change and pursue long-term solutions to issues within its means. In light of this, the role of a supporting organization can be twofold:
- To provide platforms for Rohingya expression and leadership
- And to establish and support the growth of Rohingya culture by engaging multiple generations and groups of Rohingya in discussions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study present that Rohingya diaspora youth, with both pre-displacement and post-displacement childhood experiences, strongly identify with Arakan on two primary fronts; firstly, the connection with the agrarian lifestyle, games, environments, and nostalgia towards experiences in Arakan, and secondly, the feeling of belonging and concern for those relatives still in Arakan.

The primary issue of identity and identity loss were consistent with those mentioned in the wider literature. The Rohingya language was, time and again, referred to as a means of preserving, remembering, and belonging to the Rohingya diaspora. However, as a result of displacement, disruption of education, and demeaning attitudes towards the language in host countries, the language was coming under threat (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Sudheer & Banerjee, 2021). Participants themselves noted that some members of their community felt an aversion to speaking Rohingya and that they felt more connected to those who did speak it compared with those that did not.

Interestingly, the religious identity of the Rohingya Muslims did not appear to be under the same level of threat as language. If anything, participants expressed their greater freedom and spoke about their religious rights as a given compared with their experience in Myanmar. Traditionally, literacy, leadership, and religious authority have been heavily linked. Islamic education in Madrasas continues to be a prevalent source of credible education and credentials for the community (Bakali & Wasty, 2020; Cabi, 2019; Mim, 2020). Prior to their exclusion from political activity, religious leaders and authorities have been at the forefront of Rohingya political representation. In the face of racial and religiously-targeted violence, the Rohingya have undergone a strengthening of their sense of collective identity through Islam (Chan, 2005; Islam, 2019). Additionally, this religious identity and trust in its religious leaders have allowed the community to resist and reject aid programs that are seen as culturally erosive or harmful (Mim, 2020).

It is important to note, however, that while many other gaps were clearly identified and expressed, they were not always seen as negative. When speaking of practices of respect towards elders, it was noted that on some level, the breakdown of distancing practices, without the true loss of authority, had brought some families closer together. The changes to cultural norms are perhaps the inevitable effects of the practical needs of refugee and immigrant life. (Im & Neff, 2021). These changes not only depend on the circumstances and lifestyle of individuals in the host country, but also on the manner and timing from which they left their

home country (Slanina, 2014). Comparing their experiences to those born outside Arakan, participants generally focused on the positive aspects, noting that "nowadays children are getting their basic human rights."

Like other diasporas, the Rohingya sense of self is not primarily threatened internally but externally (Abdulbakieva, 2020; Kanagaratnam et al., 2020). Not only are they suppressed on legal and political terms, but the academic and media discourse around them focuses on their victimization (Bhatia et al., 2018; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Figueira, 2021; Wake & Cheung, 2016). Surrounded by reductive narratives, victimizing discourses, and demeaning interactions, Rohingya community members are challenged to find ways in which to define themselves in a dignified manner (Brown, 2018; O'Brien & Hoffstaedter, 2020; Wake & Cheung, 2016). However, the Rohingya community's self-awareness and ability to confront its own challenges are heavily understated.

As a predominantly young population, the Rohingya are a fast-growing culture with great variation in lived experience across Arakan and beyond. As such, this study's findings suggest that it is wrong to assume that the community is unable to reflect on loss and change and grow without outside assistance. Members of the community do not lack leadership or willingness to confront issues; instead, they are often the primary drivers of positive social change, without which even external aid organizations could not assist appropriately (Mim, 2020; Uddin & Sumi, 2019). Commonly held social and psychological paradigms that apply to highly Westernized societies do not always translate well to Rohingya culture. In fact, interventions with such perspectives can even be harmful to the identity and integrity of a community (Eisenbruch, 1991; Islam, 2019; Uddin & Sumi, 2019). It is, therefore, critical for outsider NGOs and supportive organizations to establish a respectful and holistic understanding of the Rohingya community before undertaking an aid project.

In order to establish a constructive narrative on Rohingya culture within academic and aid circles, this study proposes an additional focus area of Rohingya experience beyond their displacement experiences. In establishing curiosity about simple experiences and activities relating to the Rohingya identity, it is possible for outsiders to connect more meaningfully with members of the community. In doing so, organizations and individuals may be encouraged to classify the Rohingya not as a singular population of victims but as a diverse, resilient culture filled with valuable, profound experiences.

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