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## Contested Identity and Making Sense of Atrocity: Understanding The Rohingya Crisis In Myanmar

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**Contested Identity and Making Sense of Atrocity: Understanding  
The Rohingya Crisis In Myanmar**

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

Christopher Long

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May this project be dedicated to my great-grandfather, the late U Khin Maung Yin.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Myanmar's recent transition towards democracy has caused western leaders to become increasingly optimistic about the future of human rights within the country. However, since emerging on the international stage in 2012, the Rohingya crisis has drastically upset such expectations, leaving the international community in complete shock over the issue. Attempting to shed light on this human rights tragedy, international media coverage has produced an overly simplified depiction of the Rohingya crisis. In addition, very little academic literature exists seeking to explain the root causes of the issue. By utilizing interviews conducted at the University of Mandalay this paper attempts to make sense of how the Rohingya crisis is understood within Myanmar. Through analyzing archival research, contesting historical narratives, and citizenship law this project seeks to lay out the conditions which have created the Rohingya crisis. Failure to take seriously views on the crisis, held within the country, has further intensified the conflict and has arguably worsened the condition of the Rohingya. This project hopes to provide nuanced historic context to the Rohingya crisis, which will inspire new international approaches to addressing the atrocity in Myanmar.*

“Should the Rohingya receive citizenship?” reads the shy student off of a slide on a PowerPoint presentation slide given in a political science course at a University in Myanmar. “NO!” erupted a classroom of students in response. The voices immediately dispersed into indiscernible sea of side-comments made to peers sitting next one another. Even after studying the convoluted ethnic-religious conflict for several years, and conducting prior field research on views held on the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, I was unnerved by the degree of certainty with which the students stated their claim.

“They can receive human rights, but not citizenship”, a fellow student stated bravely. A second wave of side-comments broke out immediately once again, but this time with an air of hesitance and uncertainty. No explanation was sought for what human rights looked like for the affected Muslims living in Rakhine state, nor was there a discussion on how these people would receive such rights. However, a few points were clear from those last minutes of class. The students were familiar with the conflict in Rakhine; many held strong opinions on the issue; and the disconnect between how human rights NGOs or international media cover the violence, versus how students living in Myanmar see the issue, could not be more stark.

The Rohingya are a stateless religious minority fleeing persecution in Rakhine state. They have been stateless since the ruling military junta, at the time, effectively stripped them of citizenship in 1988. The plight of the Rohingya caught the international world’s attention in 2012 after growing tensions between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya tensions left 200, predominantly Rohingya, dead and approximately 150,000, displaced.<sup>1</sup> In October 2016, A militant Rohingya group, who refer to themselves as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) allegedly attacked a Myanmar military border post in Rakhine State, killing nine police officers, leading to a military crackdown which drove 86,000 Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent ARSA coordinated attacks, followed by Myanmar military counter-attacks, have led 700,00 Rohingya fleeing Rakhine state since August 2017. Reports of Rohingya villages being burned, systemic rape, and murder have left little doubt in top U.N. officials’ minds that the violence being carried out in Rakhine state is nothing short of genocide.

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<sup>1</sup> Why Is There Communal Violence In Myanmar?". 2018. *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18395788>.

<sup>2</sup> Burma: New Violence In Arakan State". 2018. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/10/26/burma-new-violence-arakan-state>.



Human Rights activists loudly denounce the actions of the Myanmar military ruthlessness and the newly democratic Myanmar government's complacency in the violence being committed in Rakhine. However, cries from the international community land on relatively deaf ears in Myanmar. From my two trips to Myanmar where I conducted interviews with students at the University of Mandalay, I learned that a dramatically different story is being told in Myanmar; one entirely disconnected from the conversations being held in the west. This paper attempts to make sense of how the Rohingya crisis is understood in Myanmar. In no way does it justify the immense violence being committed towards the Rohingya. However, as will be seen, there are immense discrepancies in how this issue is being viewed between the international community and the Myanmar people. This project, first, strives to capture what popular perspectives on the Rohingya crisis looks like and then inquiries into what are the underlining historical factors which have both created these views and the crisis itself.

In the rare occasion that academics or western news articles attempt to document the causes which have led to the Rohingya crisis, rising nationalism and anti-muslim sentiment present within the country are the few, and only, accounts offered. Surely xenophobia, Buddhist-nationalist extremism, and state media propaganda play crucial roles in views developing views held on the violence in Rakhine within the country. However, I will argue, that these very real factors fail to accurately explain, in total, what has led to the current persecution of the Rohingya. By failing to take the views of Myanmar people seriously, or to account for them at all, the international community has drastically over simplified how the Rohingya crisis is framed. The result is an uncritical adoption of simplistic and self-satisfied narratives in lieu of a necessity to contend with complex and highly contested historical narratives.

I will argue that the failure to confront the full complexity of the Rohingya crisis has, in many ways, worsened the situation of the Rohingya and thus made it far more difficult for them to receive protections. However, this project would speak highly dishonestly if it were to blame to the actions and approaches of human rights NGOs alone. Rohingya writers and those who have contributed to their historical narrative, which is frequently depicted in international media, have played a significant role in fueling tensions. Rakhine and Myanmar people see their account of history and claim to ethnicity as fraudulent and pleas to their international community as manipulative.

In order to attempt to bridge this gap, Chapter 1 will lay out the two primary narratives which have arisen over the Rohingya issue: the international community and the Myanmar narrative. By contrasting these two narratives, I will expose their differences and highlight the major inconsistencies within each of them. I emphasize again that listening to the Myanmar people's perspective on the violence in Rakhine in no way legitimizes the horrors being committed towards the Rohingya. Attempting to learn what the international community as misunderstood about the Rohingya crisis is paramount to producing effective responses to the violence. Through taking seriously claims made by the Myanmar people, the root of the ideological debate over the Rohingya crisis will be found in contesting views on who is considered a Myanmar ethnic group. These opposing views on legitimate ethnic belonging is a product of the dominant conception of ethnicity within Myanmar.

In Chapter 2, I will investigate how this conception of ethnicity came to hold such primacy. I will demonstrate how this conception of ethnicity was constructed by the colonial British system of categorizing ethnicity. The British reified ethnic distinctions and produced a primordial notion of ethnicity, which not only set the Rohingya crisis into motion, but all of

Myanmar's ethnic conflicts as well. This conception of ethnicity was transferred into post-colonial Burma and implemented into Myanmar Citizenship law producing a unique and dangerous position for the Rohingya. Unidentified by the British as an ethnic group and unable to fit into the neatly defined conception of ethnicity codified into Myanmar Citizenship law, the Rohingya would eventually be completely bared citizenship.

In Chapter 3, at the risk of provoking controversy among western writers I will put forward a history of the Rohingya, which explains what has led to their present stateless condition. I attempt to provide historical context as to why the Rohingya were not recognized as an ethnic group in pre-colonial Burma and why they did not fit Burma's post-colonial conception of ethnicity. Muslims in Arakan (present-day Rakhine state) only began to politically organize and identify themselves as a political group in post-independence Burma. As indigenous Myanmar ethnic groups today are defined, in Citizenship law, as those who existed before colonial times, the Rohingya's claim to being an ethnic group has been seen with immense skepticism and offended Myanmar people. Westerners, oblivious to this debate and its complexities, have centered their advocacy for the Rohingya around demanding the Myanmar government to recognize them as a legitimate ethnic group. This approach has shown to be less than successful at securing the Rohingya rights or freedom from violence, and less left the Myanmar people unsympathetic to their cause.

The goal of this paper is to explain why the West's current un-nuanced approach to solving the issues in Rakhine will not be effective. As seen over the past twenty years, sanctions placed on Myanmar and condemnations of the Myanmar government have done virtually nothing to change the views and actions taken by the Myanmar government. Changes in the country have always come from the Myanmar people themselves. Simply yelling the word "Rohingya" at the

country has not, and will not, change the stance of the Myanmar government. Alternative approaches must be sought in order change the hearts and minds of the Myanmar people. This paper hopes to take part in shed light on what is necessary in order to generating more innovative strategies.

Is it “Burma” or “Myanmar”?

Confusion around what name should be used to identity the country often referred to as Myanmar, Burma or Myanmar (Burma) is widespread. Answers vary among people from, and living within, the country. The ruling military junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) officially changed the name from “Burma” to “Myanmar” or *Myanmar Naing-ngan* in 1989.<sup>3</sup> Several other cities, states and townships names were also renamed that same year: most notably Rangoon to Yangon, Moulmein Mawlamyine and Karen to Kayin. Some of these decisions are seen as means to the rid the country of its colonial-sounding names, many frame the changes as a part of a wider “Burmanisation” project directed to impact the country’s ethnic groups.<sup>4</sup>

Others see the specific change of “Burma” to “Myanmar” as an attempt to become more inclusive of the country’s multiple ethnic groups, by not modeling the country’s name after one specific ethnic group, the Burmese or *Bamar*. Regardless, many within and outside the country remain skeptical of the name change because it was initiated by the unelected military government. Notably, the NLD, and others, used the name “Burma”, in the 90s, as means of

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<sup>3</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

protest against the former military government.<sup>5</sup> However, NLD leader and current State Counsellor, has frequently referred to country “Myanmar” since taking office. Amongst participants interviewed for this study and students attending the University of Mandalay, generally, using either name did not possess a political motive and often the names were used interchangeably; “Myanmar” being used as a more formal settings and “Burma” being used as a more colloquial term.

In order to contextualize events in a historically accurate and clear manner, for the sake of this paper, the term “Burma” will simply be used to refer to the country pre-1989, and “Myanmar” post-1989.

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<sup>5</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

## CHAPTER 1: CONTESTING HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

In the quest to make sense of the perplexing Rohingya crisis in western media, a certain narrative has taken hold on the international community. This narrative bears with it the assumption that oppression of the Rohingya is solely based in anti-Muslim sentiment and discrimination. There is truth in this framing. Discrimination against Muslims has been prevalent in Myanmar since British colonial times. However, an alarming new wave of Buddhist Nationalism has resurfaced over the transitional democratic country. Figures like Ashin Wirathu, a prominent extremist Buddhist Monk, has grown increasingly popular in Myanmar for promoting derogatory rhetoric against the Rohingya and Muslims in Myanmar.<sup>6</sup> Hate speech has grown so rampant on social media that the U.N. has cited as having Facebook playing a “determining role” over the on-going violence being perpetrated against the Rohingya in Myanmar.<sup>7</sup>

More widely, there is an abundance of academic research and journalistic reports accounting for widespread islamophobia in Myanmar. Muslims across the country (not exclusively the Rohingya) regularly face discrimination.

“Myanmar also has a Muslim population distinct from the Rohingya who live in a mostly assimilated manner in other parts of the country outside Rakhine. Yet Muslims of every

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<sup>6</sup> Beech, Hannah. "Straying From The Middle Way: Extremist Buddhist Monks Target Religious Minorities | TIME.Com". *TIME.Com*. <http://world.time.com/2013/06/20/extremist-buddhist-monks-fight-oppression-with-violence/>.

<sup>7</sup> Miles, Tom. "U.N. Investigators Cite Facebook Role In Myanmar Crisis". 2018. *U.S.*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-facebook/u-n-investigators-cite-facebook-role-in-myanmar-crisis-idUSKCN1GO2PN>.

kind become targets of scapegoating in times of tension, a trend that has grown in recent years” (AP).<sup>8</sup>

In 2013 religious clashes broke out in Meiktila, a city in the Mandalay Region. Buddhist-led attacks against Muslims resulted in “killing at least 44 people and destroying 1,400 mostly Muslim-owned businesses and houses” (Human Rights Watch)<sup>9</sup>. Several other similar incidents have been seen to occur across the country at times when distrust and religious tensions reach a boiling point. Islamophobia within Myanmar has certainly played a large role in creating and fueling the Rohingya crisis. One can go as far to say that recent surges of islamophobic hate speech have further dehumanized the Rohingya, allowing the Myanmar people to feel less sympathetic to their plight.

However, insistence by the international media to blame islamophobia as being solely responsible for producing Rohingya crisis, has resulted in immense over-simplifications being made in their coverage of the issue. When international news articles seek to answer why the Rohingya are being pushed out of Myanmar, more often than not writers solely rely on explanations such as xenophobia and rising buddhist nationalism within the country.<sup>10</sup> This has led to the crisis being understood as nothing more than religious persecution. While racism towards Muslims does play a significant role in the Rohingya crisis, and can accurately describe

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<sup>8</sup> Grant, Peck. "Myanmar Rohingya Hatred Has Roots In Buddhist Nationalism". 2018. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/bcf889617f2341e5888019937595431d>.

<sup>9</sup> "Burma: Communal Violence Undercuts Rights Gains". 2018. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/21/burma-communal-violence-undercuts-rights-gains>.

<sup>10</sup> Siddiqui, Usaid. "The Rohingya: The Latest Massacre In A Violence-Filled History". 2018. *Studies.Aljazeera.Net*. <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2017/10/rohingya-latest-massacre-violence-filled-history-171001105229956.html>.

the particularly insidious character of the persecution, xenophobia, alone, fails to address the vast historical complexities embedded in the Rohingya crisis.

After spending time in Myanmar and talking to dozens of citizens about the Rohingya crisis, I have learned that a another narrative exists; one which completely diverges from the one put forward by the international community. This narrative sees the Rohingya crisis, not as primarily a religious conflict but as an issue of ethnic belonging. It provides a different historical framing than the one purported by the Rohingya, and loudly echoed by the international world. There are plenty of factual inconsistencies present within this narrative, which oftentimes are expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment attempting to rationalize itself. However, listening to perspectives on the Rohingya crisis from within Myanmar can reveal how these two narratives understand Myanmar and Rohingya history differently. The intention behind listening to Myanmar people's perspective on the Rohingya crisis is not to justify racism, but rather to hear what has been left out of the international community's account of this seemingly simple human rights tale.

First, I will layout a sketch of the international media's coverage on the Rohingya crisis in order to provide a more in-depth picture of how the crisis is being discussed in the international community. Second, utilizing interviews conducted in Myanmar, I will demonstrate how the Rohingya crisis is typically seen from within the country. Next, I will interrogate some of the contesting historical accounts offered from both narratives and dispel factually incorrect and misleading assertions. Finally, I will provide an in-depth history of the Rohingya people, which will shed light on the first arrival of Muslims in Arakan, alleged pre-colonial documentation, and their formation as a political identity. Typically, all attempts by Westerners to discuss the Rohingya crisis with people from Myanmar are disappointing and fruitless



because of their vastly different interpretations of the issue. This project attempts bridge a gap between these two different narratives, which can produce approaches that will more realistically and effectively secure rights for the Rohingya people.

Through analyzing archival records and sorting through contested historical claims, complications in the oversimplified image painted by the international community will emerge. It is to be anticipated that the historical trajectory of Rohingya identity I put forward will be received as controversial by most Western readers. It unearths a critique of the Rohingya's claim to existing as an ethnic group in Myanmar for hundreds of years, not presently discussed within popular Western media. The history of the Rohingya, as put forward in this paper, presents an inconvenient truth which somewhat complicates the straightforward human rights reading of the Rohingya crisis in international media. It is of the utmost importance to stress that the act of critically analyzing long standing claims to ethnicity made by the Rohingya does not, in itself, justify violence committed against them. That being said, there are particular conditions which have produced the Rohingya crisis. It is important to take these factors seriously and not allow self-serving narratives guide our thinking on such important issues.

### Dislodging Fallacy and Racism

For the sake of establishing an ideological framework the international media can be put on one side of the debate, while the Myanmar government, and Burmese people can be put on the other. Violence towards the Rohingya has occurred in Rakhine state over the past several decades. However, the crisis has only recently sparked the attention of the international community, generating a vast amount of global news coverage in the past few years. While the

crisis has become more widely known across the world, the complexities of the issue have also begun to fade out of focus within international coverage. On the other hand, within Myanmar, many commonly held views, regarding the violence in Rakhine, are often expressed through anti-muslim rhetoric and remain largely unverified by 3rd party news source. State-sponsored media and social media posts are typically how most people within the country stay informed about the issue. In order for honest engagement with the Rohingya crisis to take place, it is important to parse out the inconsistencies present within each of these narratives.

The legitimacy of the Rohingya identity, as a Myanmar ethnic group, can be found at the very center of the ideological debate surrounding the human rights crisis. Rohingya, and western sympathizing academics, have often taken many liberties when establishing a history of the Rohingya identity. These writers frequently attempt to ground the Rohingya as far back, and as predominant, in Rakhine history as possible, while minimizing the number and significance of Muslims who arrived during or after the colonial period. Due to the complexity of this issue, the origins of Rohingya identity will later be returned to and analyzed in-depth. However, for now, it is at least important to be cognizant of the international news' tendency to uncritically reproduce these claims with little distance or speculation. On the other hand, the Myanmar government, Buddhist Nationalists and even Myanmar intellectuals often greatly diminish the presence of Muslims in pre-colonial Burma while vastly over emphasizing allegations of illegal immigrants entering from Bangladesh. More extremist claims within the country dismiss the presence of all Muslims and muslim influences before the colonial period. Simple analysis of early trading routes and early migration patterns can easily disprove this claims.

Since this project has tasked itself with taking Myanmar views on the Rohingya crisis seriously, it is important to not only distinguish between fact and fiction but also to identify

explicit, or implicit, racist views (often posing as historical accounts) and call them out for what they are. The Rohingya crisis is often depicted as a product of the Myanmar government's racist views towards Muslims. Many westerners have thus rejected any arguments or appeals to understanding Myanmar's broader historical issues before speaking out on the Rohingya issue. This paper finds that there is something valuable in understanding the conditions which have created this tragedy, and that Rohingya crisis cannot be explained solely as a symptom of xenophobia. Therefore, arguments rooted in delusion and racism will be exposed in order to keep from passively accepting ideas which cloud judgement around the Rohingya crisis.

An example of such racially charged misinformation was expressed in one of the conducted interviews. Stressing how recent of an invention Rohingya identity is, a student claimed that the word Rohingya was "made up in 2012 by Bengalis". The willingness of the Myanmar government and people to identify Muslims living Rakhine as "Bengalis", in general, is rather questionable and deserves academic investigation. However, there is a plethora of available evidence which proves people identifying as Rohingya throughout parts of the second half of twentieth century. Such blatantly inaccurate information must be rejected.

At the same time, Rohingya writers go to great lengths to downplay the number and significance of Muslims brought in during the colonial period as labors, as well as those who have migrated in more recent years. Rohingya academics and human rights NGOs also play up the prevalence of Rohingya ethnic identity existing during or before colonial times. The international media's total, and uncritical, acceptance of Rohingya being indigenous to the Rakhine region, has significantly magnified frustrations amongst the Myanmar people. Even the most pro-democracy students in Myanmar, who "loved reading international news", have

become completely disillusioned by the coverage of the Rohingya crisis and of their leader Aung San Suu Kyi and have since relinquished their trust of international media altogether.

### International Media Narrative

The Rohingya are widely described in international media as “an ethnic Muslim minority” with a population estimated around 1,200,000. The Rohingya claim to possess ancestral connections to Rakhine state, the westernmost state in Myanmar, bordering Bangladesh, situated on the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. Their longstanding presence within the country is made clear at the beginning of news articles and human rights reports, which stress that the Rohingya have been “living in Rakhine for centuries”. The London based, Arakan Rohingya National Organisation, a conglomerate organization of Rohingya political groups,<sup>11</sup> similarly declare that the "Rohingyas have been living in Arakan from time immemorial". As will be seen, both the issue of ethnicity and whether the Rohingya possess a long history within the country has been crucial to the Rohingya legal status question in Myanmar. International media outlets rarely ever engage in this debate, but rather accept the Rohingya’s claim to existing as an ethnic group for centuries without question.

Despite atrocities being committed towards the Rohingya since the 1970s, the Rohingya crisis has not always been under the spotlight of the international media. Human rights NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented abuses suffered by the Rohingya over previous decades, but mainstream media outlets gave significantly less

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<sup>11</sup> Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) and the, Armed Wing:Rohingya National Army

attention to the issue before the 2015 elections. The tone of the international media's coverage on the Rohingya crisis cannot be captured in full without an awareness of prior news reports on Myanmar. Arguably much of the outrage found in coverage on the Rohingya crisis is influenced by the international communities excitement for the governmental and political changes made within the country. In light of Myanmar's recent turn towards democracy, and the improvement of political and civil rights, most western countries were quite optimistic for the future of human rights in Myanmar.<sup>12</sup>

The international community erupted in enthusiasm upon Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyii's landslide victory in the 2015 election; the country's relatively open democratic election in over 25 years.<sup>13</sup> Aung San Suu Kyii, or "The Lady" as she is often referred to within the country, was praised by the west for her pro-democratic activism and inspiring human rights messages. Aung San Suu Kyii accrued widespread international sympathy, and the image of human rights icon, after being put under house arrest, for 15 years, after repeatedly speaking out against the military junta.<sup>14</sup> Freed from house arrest in 2010, Suu Kyi immediately returned to promoting her non-violent philosophy, often credited for

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<sup>12</sup> Hilary Whiteman, CNN. 2018. "Historic Day In Myanmar As Aung San Suu Kyi Takes Power - CNN". *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/31/asia/myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-nld/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> "A Brief Guide To Myanmar'S Elections". 2018. *Nytimes.Com*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/06/world/asia/myanmar-election-president-aung-san-suu-kyi-explainer.html>.

<sup>14</sup> "Profile: Aung San Suu Kyi". 2018. *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11685977>.

popularising democracy in Myanmar by advocating its compatibility with the Buddhist religion.<sup>15</sup>

Although barred from becoming President,<sup>16</sup> upon the NLD's election victory, Aung San Suu Kyi was made State Counsellor, an overseer position of the president; effectively bypassing the military-written 2008 Constitution, which kept her from taking office.<sup>17</sup> However, Aung San Suu Kyi has quickly fallen out of grace with the international community for not speaking out against the Rohingya crisis, as violence in Rakhine state intensified dramatically. Once hailed as a "Human Rights Heroine" now widely seen in the international community as "Culpable of Genocide". After 2 years of holding executive power, Aung San Suu Kyi has failed to denounce the violent actions committed by the military, lay out substantial protections of the Rohingya, or even use the word "Rohingya" to refer to the persecuted Muslims in any public appearances.<sup>18</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi has since been vilified by many in the west for her seemingly apathetic responses to the Rohingya crisis; as evidenced by the widely publicized removal of her portrait

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<sup>15</sup> Moni Basu and Dan Rivers, CNN. 2018. "Aung San Suu Kyi, A Tenacious Fighter For Democracy - CNN". *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2011/11/18/world/asia/myanmar-suu-kyi-profile/index.html>.

<sup>16</sup> As well as being barred from taking office due to having been married to a British citizen, now deceased, and having 2 British sons. See Chapter 3, No 59(f) of the Constitution.

<sup>17</sup> "New 'State Counsellor' Role Affords Aung San Suu Kyi Overarching Power But May Test Relationship With Military". 2018. *South China Morning Post*. <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/1933986/new-state-counsellor-role-affords-aung-san-suu-kyi>.

<sup>18</sup> "Crimes Against Humanity By Burmese Security Forces Against The Rohingya Muslim Population". 2018. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/25/crimes-against-humanity-burmese-security-forces-against-rohingya-muslim-population>.

from Oxford University<sup>19</sup> and rescinding of the Elie Wiesel human-rights award given by the Holocaust Memorial Museum in D.C.<sup>20</sup>

Although often misreported as the “first”<sup>21</sup> attack committed towards the Rohingya, recent violence arose in 2012 after a Rakhine Buddhist women was allegedly raped and murdered by Rohingya in Rakhine state.<sup>22</sup> The event sparked riots and sectarian violence in Rakhine state, between Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine creating “approximately 75,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) most of them Rohingya”.<sup>23</sup> The Myanmar military was accused of contributing to the violence through mass arrests and arbitrary violence targeted at the Rohingya. Following attacks in 2012 and then again in 2016, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled to Bangladesh. Following an attack on a Myanmar police base, committed by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, a militant Rohingya group, in August 2017, another military-led crack-down left an estimated 700,000 Rohingya fleeing Rakhine state.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Oxford College Removes Suu Kyi Portrait". 2018. *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-41446510>.

<sup>20</sup> "U.S. Holocaust Museum Rescinds Human Rights Award From Aung San Suu Kyi". 2018. *NPR.Org*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/07/591518672/u-s-holocaust-museum-rescinds-human-rights-award-from-aung-san-suu-kyi>.

<sup>21</sup>"Why Is There Communal Violence In Myanmar?". 2018. *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18395788>.

<sup>22</sup> Why Is There Communal Violence In Myanmar?". 2018. *BBC News*. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18395788>.

<sup>23</sup>"Burma: New Violence In Arakan State". 2018. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/10/26/burma-new-violence-arakan-state>.

<sup>24</sup>"What Forces Are Fueling Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis?". 2018. *Council On Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis>.

In addition to the physical violence committed against the Rohingya and destruction of their property, the international community is gravely concerned, and rightly so, with the terms used to identify the Rohingya. The Myanmar government actively refutes usage of the word “Rohingya” and refers to the affected Muslims living in Rakhine state as “Bengalis”<sup>25</sup>. The west largely sees this as a move by the Myanmar government to further dehumanize the Rohingya by stripping them of their identity. By calling the affected muslims “Bengalis” the Myanmar government is seen as framing them as belonging, conceptually, outside of the Myanmar state and seeking to rewrite the basic facts of the Rohingya crisis. As far as the international community is concerned, the Rohingya have just as a legitimate claim to being an ethnicity as any other of the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups in Myanmar.<sup>26</sup> Thus, westerners heavily lamented Pope Francis’ decision to avoid the word “Rohingya” during his trip to Myanmar in November 2017.<sup>27</sup> Such acts are seen as promoting the erasure of the Rohingya identity, which the Myanmar government so keenly desires.

The language used by top UN chiefs to describe the Rohingya crisis has become increasingly definitive. Reports accusing the Myanmar military of systematic rape, murder and burning of Rohingya villages has led UN human rights commissioner, Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein in

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<sup>25</sup> "Crimes Against Humanity By Burmese Security Forces Against The Rohingya Muslim Population". 2018. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/25/crimes-against-humanity-burmese-security-forces-against-rohingya-muslim-population>.

<sup>26</sup> "Crimes Against Humanity By Burmese Security Forces Against The Rohingya Muslim Population". 2018. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/25/crimes-against-humanity-burmese-security-forces-against-rohingya-muslim-population>.

<sup>27</sup> McPherson, Poppy. 2018. "Pope Francis Fails To Mention Rohingya In Myanmar Speech". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/28/pope-francis-to-meet-aung-san-suu-kyi-on-first-full-day-in-myanmar>.



2017, to call the situation in Rakhine “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in 2018 Yanghee Lee, The Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar stated "I am becoming more convinced that the crimes committed following 9 October 2016 and 25 August 2017 bear the hallmarks of genocide".<sup>29</sup> Much of the international media’s coverage since has become fixated with the language that international leaders should use to describe the violence. Human rights NGOs frequently put much time and energy pressuring leaders to use terms such as “ethnic cleansing”, “genocide” and “Rohingya”.<sup>30</sup>

One challenge to reporting on the Rohingya crisis is that the Myanmar government has widely restricted international and domestic journalists from accessing the conflict-ridden areas of Rakhine state.<sup>31</sup> Apart from satellite images, which have become increasingly relied on to substantiate claims of Rohingya villages being burned,<sup>32</sup> most accounts of violence that are reported comes Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The Myanmar government possess a shaky history of reporting reliable statistics, pertaining to deaths and destroyed buildings. Any claims

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<sup>28</sup>"UN Human Rights Chief Points To ‘Textbook Example Of Ethnic Cleansing’ In Myanmar". 2018. *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar>.

<sup>29</sup>Bard Wilkinson, CNN. 2018. "UN Official Convinced Of Myanmar Rohingya 'Genocide'". *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/12/asia/myanmar-rohingya-un-violence-genocide-intl/index.html>.

<sup>30</sup>"Genocide | Burma Task Force". 2018. *Burmataskforce.Org*. <https://www.burmataskforce.org/genocide>.

<sup>31</sup>"Myanmar Says U.S. Official Barred From Rohingya Conflict Zone". 2018. *U.S.*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya/myanmar-says-u-s-official-barred-from-rohingya-conflict-zone-idUSKCN1BQ0KU>.

<sup>32</sup>"Burma: New Satellite Images Confirm Mass Destruction". 2018. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/17/burma-new-satellite-images-confirm-mass-destruction>.

that make the state look bad are typically avoided. Frequently, human rights groups must qualify that the statistics they publish need to be verified by a third party to guarantee their validity.

It is important to note that the Rohingya crisis is not just a historical issue, but is currently an on-going one. The nearly 700,000 Rohingya who sought refuge in Bangladesh have put a strain on the country's already meager available resources.<sup>33</sup> Much of the conversation on the Rohingya has shifted towards what will be the future of this Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh. In January 2018, the Myanmar government provided its full commitment, in an agreement with Bangladesh, to accepting the refugees back into Rakhine.<sup>34</sup> However, as expected, numerous challenges have arisen and the repatriation process has proved incredibly slow, if not at a complete standstill. At the time of writing this paper, it is not clear that a single Rohingya refugee has officially been repatriated back into Rakhine state.<sup>35</sup>

Western agencies have numerous reasons to be skeptical of the Myanmar government's commitment to the repatriation process. The government has not made any general claims to offering repatriation to refugees as "Rohingya", but rather has maintained its language choice of "Muslims" or "refugees from Rakhine state".<sup>36</sup> In addition, recent satellite imagery shows the military bulldozing, and building military bases over, some destroyed former Rohingya

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<sup>33</sup>"Burma: New Violence In Arakan State". 2018. *Human Rights Watch*.  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/10/26/burma-new-violence-arakan-state>.

<sup>34</sup>"Bangladesh 'To Return 300 Rohingya A Day'". 2018. *BBC News*.  
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42699602>.

<sup>35</sup> Bard Wilkinson, CNN. 2018. "UN Disputes Myanmar Rohingya Repatriation Claim". *CNN*.  
<https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/16/asia/myanmar-rohingya-bangladesh-un-intl/index.html>.

<sup>36</sup>"Union Minister Says Accepting Bengalis Doesn'T Mean Giving Them As Myanmar Citizenship | Eleven Myanmar". 2018. *Elevenmyanmar.Com*.  
<http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/politics/12183>.

villages.<sup>37</sup> The Rohingya citizenship question also remains fundamentally unresolved with no promises being made to offer the refugees citizenship. There are numerous fundamental issues involved in the Rohingya crisis that a simple agreement to repatriating refugees, does not address. An attempt to understand how the Myanmar people understand the issue, and what the underlying conditions causing are, must be made in order for any solutions to be seriously considered

## Research Methods

My research for this project included ethnographic observations and conducting interviews. 12 participants were interviewed, all of whom lived in Mandalay and held various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Participants were selected primarily based on the snowball sampling method. Students attending courses or extracurricular activities which addressed political issues, such as debate or student union, were the initial participants interviewed for the study. Those who were particularly interested, and were comfortable speaking about Myanmar political issues, were primarily sought. Living on-campus and actively engaging with the student body, put me in proximity to a wide range of students. Although none of the participants identified in this study identified as Rohingya, a diverse range of religions (Buddhist, Christians and Muslim) as well as ethnicities (Burmese, Karen, Mon and Kachin) were included. The majority of participants in the study were college-age students holding some relationship with a

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<sup>37</sup>"Burma: Scores Of Rohingya Villages Bulldozed". 2018. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/23/burma-scores-rohingya-villages-bulldozed>.

university (student, teacher, etc.). Interviews typically lasted about an hour and were conducted in English. Names of participants in this paper have been changed to maintain anonymity.

### Myanmar Narrative

It would be disingenuous to say that there is a single “Myanmar perspective” which can encompass the spectrum of views held on the Rohingya crisis within in Myanmar. However, as found in this study, there are significant similarities among among these views, and differ drastically from those expressed by the international community. The most common initial reactions to conversations on the “Rohingya crisis” or “violence within Rakhine state”, made by participants in this study, included reference to the state’s list of “official 135 ethnic groups”.<sup>38</sup> The ethnicities included in this list are the only ethnic groups officially recognized by the Myanmar government as citizens and native to country. “Since the start of this country. There are 135 tribes in Myanmar and we have never heard of a Rohingya one”, confidently stated EC.<sup>39</sup> Precise information on how or when this list was compiled is largely unknown among Myanmar people. It is widely assumed that the official list has been used since Independence with only a couple minor adjustments made over time.

Through investigative research, a few academics have determined that this list only began to be used with prominence by military officers in 1990.<sup>40</sup> Although, the list appears to have

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<sup>38</sup>“Embassy Of The Union Of Myanmar, Brussels”. 2018. *Embassyofmyanmar.Be*. <http://www.embassyofmyanmar.be/ABOUT/ethnicgroups.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant name)

<sup>40</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

been heavily based off a census carried out by the British in 1931. This colonial list documented 135 distinct ethnic groups living in Myanmar at the time.<sup>41</sup> The British primarily using linguistic differences, as the basis for determining ethnicity in this census.<sup>42</sup> There are few variations between the 1931 census list of ethnicities and the official list of Myanmar ethnic nationalities currently recognized by the Myanmar government. However, the changes that have occurred are seen as minor and inconsequential. Regardless, most Myanmar people find the fact that the Rohingya are not listed as one of the 135 officially recognized “ethnic nationalities”, to be conclusive enough evidence to dismiss their claim to being an indigenous to the country. Therefore, in the minds of Myanmar people, if they are not a part of a Myanmar ethnic group they must be illegal immigrants (“Bengalis” as stated by most participants) using the title “Rohingya” to make a false claim to Myanmar indigeneity.

A common theme echoed throughout many of the conducted interviews is the fear of a growing Muslim population in Rakhine state and the subsequent effects this will have on the country. “They [Rohingya] want to take over all of Rakhine state”, stated a Muslim university student.<sup>43</sup> “They marry Myanmar women. You can even tell in their faces. Rakhine faces are starting to look like Arab faces. It's like our people disappearing” states EC.<sup>44</sup> While these sentiments tend to easily veer into overtly anti-Muslim sentiments, expressed not only in

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<sup>41</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

<sup>42</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

<sup>43</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant name)

<sup>44</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant name)

Myanmar but all over the world, a historical increase in the Muslim population of Rakhine state has very rarely been included in western conversations on the Rohingya crisis.

Reverend Comstock, American Baptist missionary found in 1842 there to be 20,000 “Mussulmans” in Arakan state with a total population of 250,000 (8% Muslim).<sup>45</sup> In 2014, the Muslim population in Rakhine (including the Rohingya population, which is notably excluded from the 2014 Population and Housing Census) was around 1,200,000 with a total population a little over 3,000,000 in Rakhine state (roughly 40%).<sup>46</sup> The changing makeup of the region has been very worrying for Rakhine Buddhists, as they feel that Islam will eventually spread throughout the state. While the likelihood of Islam systematically taking over historically Buddhist villages is unfounded, especially considering the massive numbers of Rohingya that have now been driven out of the country, the changing demographics of the region, have been giving little to no consideration by the international community.

All participants in this study were aware of the violence in Rakhine state. However, questions on who exactly was cause violence, and their intentions behind doing so, generated varying answers. A few interviewees willingly provided some acknowledgement of the state’s efforts to restrict their knowledge of violence in Myanmar. “I read the news and I don’t know exactly who is attacking who. No one does. Because Myanmar government puts ban on travel

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<sup>45</sup>Stilson, L. 2018. "Journal Of The American Oriental Society".  
<http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/18470101-JSTOR-notes-on-arakan.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> "Human Rights Documents Online". 2018. <http://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Rakhine%20State%20Census%20Report%20-%20ENGLISH.pdf>.

and journalists...They don't want the people to know about the conflict for the image of new democratic government"<sup>47</sup>, stated a member of Mandalay University's student union.

Other participants preferred to place much larger attention on the alleged role of "Bengalis" (self-identifying Rohingya) or "terrorists" in producing violence against Buddhist Rakhine communities. "The Bengalis attack Rakhine people and burn their villages as well. No one talks about that", exclaimed Khin.<sup>48</sup> Upon questioning Khin and other participants who spoke of "Bengalis" perpetrated violence, it was often difficult to nail down what specific acts violence they intended to refer to, or when they occurred. Typically, participants did not intend to reference acts committed towards police bases, which are often reported by "biased BBC and CNN news", as sparking cruel military-led crackdowns.<sup>49</sup> Rather, they were referring to ongoing acts of violence they had seen on social media or were informed about by their Rakhine friends.

A Buddhist Rakhine participant, notably who has not lived in Rakhine state but has visited the region to visit family, co-opted the international community's language when stating, "its like they [Rohingya] are committing a genocide on us [Rakhine]".<sup>50</sup> Legitimate news sources are unable able to confirm the amount of violence committed by the Rohingya, or by radicalized members of the Rohingya community. However, there is overwhelmingly enough evidence to suggest the violence being committed by the Rakhine and Myanmar military is exponentially greatly than violence perpetrated by Rohingya. However, it is true that the Rohingya have been

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<sup>47</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant's name)

<sup>48</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant's name)

<sup>49</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant's name)

<sup>50</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant's name)

largely depicted in international media with sweeping generalizations, which depict the whole population as being free from committing or instigating any violence.

Warnings of ISIS or other jihadist organization taking advantage of the delicate situation in Rakhine state has greatly worried many people in Myanmar. ARSA, the group responsible for the attack on a Myanmar military base in August 2017, has not been found to have connections to internationalist terrorist groups. However, a few participants felt assured in their suspicions that “ISIS is hiding in Bengalis”.<sup>51</sup> Some compared their concerns with “Bengali terrorists” with the “refugee issues” present “in western countries”.<sup>52</sup> One participant made reference to the Indian government’s claim to discovering ISIS links amongst its Rohingya refugee population. Frustrations towards the international communities lack of concern or awareness for threats of terrorism in Myanmar, in regards to the Rohingya crisis, was rooted in why many participants thought of the international media as strongly “biased” or “hypocritical”.<sup>53</sup>

Participants also frequently mentioned the role of “Bengalis” burning down their own villages. “They burn their own villages so they get lots of international news... In the report they can then say ‘oh look at these poor Rohingya’ but really the Bengalis do it”.<sup>54</sup> Photographs of Rohingya allegedly burning their own houses have frequently circled on social media. These pictures can be incredibly difficult to verify. However, on a rare foreign journalist trip to

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<sup>51</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>52</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>53</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>54</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)



Rakhine state, BBC was able to identify a Rakhine women who was in one of these photographs posing as a Rohingya women burning down her own house.

One participant, Shwe Ye possessed incredibly rare perspective and experience for a Myanmar college student. At the time of the interview she had returned only weeks prior to Mandalay from a volunteer humanitarian assistance trip to Northern Rakhine. The trip was sponsored by the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development (UEHDARD), an organization established by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyii.<sup>55</sup> The organization “aimed at providing humanitarian assistance, resettlement, rehabilitation and working for development of Rakhine State”.<sup>56</sup> The volunteers took part in giving out resources to affected muslim villages in *Maungtaw, a township in Rakhine state*. Shwe Ye was one of the first to attend these volunteer trips to Rakhine.

On the topic of who is burning Rohingya villages in Rakhine, Shwe Ye answered “Truthfully I don’t know. I didn’t see these....But I heard from a person in the village that they [muslim terrorists] point guns at them [Rohingya] and tell them to burn their own villages”.<sup>57</sup> Although, allegedly reciting an account told by Rohingya living in Rakhine, claims that “Bengalis extremist terrorists” are forcing Rohingya to burn their own houses is not out of line with dominant narratives within the country. However, her work with UEHDARD did produce

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<sup>55</sup> Myanmar, Global. 2018. "The Implementation Process Of The Union Enterprise For Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement And Development In Rakhine State". *Global New Light Of Myanmar*. <http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/implementation-process-union-enterprise-humanitarian-assistance-resettlement-development-rakhine-state/>.

<sup>56</sup> Myanmar, Global. 2018. "The Implementation Process Of The Union Enterprise For Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement And Development In Rakhine State". *Global New Light Of Myanmar*. <http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/implementation-process-union-enterprise-humanitarian-assistance-resettlement-development-rakhine-state/>.

<sup>57</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

some unique insights. In addition to giving out humanitarian resources to the affected Rohingya communities in Rakhine, the organization also recorded “information like how many people lived in a house” and “ethnicity”.<sup>58</sup> She stated that “when in the Rakhine village, we write 1,2,3 people live in a house...but when in the Muslim (Rohingya) villages we just wrote down Muslim because we don’t want any conflict”.<sup>59</sup>

In some ways, Shwe Ye’s personal views seemed to mirror the procedures used by the UEHDARD organization. Referring the names “Rohingya” and “Bengali”, she stated “I don’t use any of those words”.<sup>60</sup> Shwe Ye explained both names to be unnecessary and are “used to cause hate”.<sup>61</sup> She prefers to call just them “Muslims”.<sup>62</sup> Shwe Ye was the only person I met during both of my stays in Myanmar that actively avoided using the word “Bengali”. She confirmed that typically, “Myanmar people think using the word ‘Rohingya’ recognizes them as a (Myanmar) ethnicity”.<sup>63</sup> This is seen as greatly problematic because the Rohingya are not one of the 135 officially recognized Myanmar ethnic groups. While she did not express believing the Rohingya to be a legitimate Myanmar ethnic group herself, Shwe Ye found peace with avoiding both of

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<sup>58</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>59</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>60</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>61</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>62</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>63</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

these controversial words knowing that the word “‘Rohingya’ upsets Myanmar people” and “‘Bengalis’ upsets Muslims people in Rakhine”.<sup>64</sup>

Upon inquiring into any possible solutions on the “Rohingya crisis”, answers again varied. The majority of participants felt that “Bengalis” had no place in Myanmar, and should not be allowed to stay or re-enter the country.<sup>65</sup> A few individuals expressed being open to the idea of “coming as refugees... but they can’t have citizenship”.<sup>66</sup> Shwe Ye was the only participant that gave any consideration to the idea of granting citizenship to affected “Muslims”. “I think the children born in the country should be citizens”, she said uncertainty.<sup>67</sup> However, maintaining her view of seeing them not as “Rohingya” but rather “Muslims” it was clear, that Shwe Ye did not believe it possible to give all Rohingya citizenship categorically. Shwe Ye, fundamentally spoke of a system of granting citizenship that looked beyond ethnicity. The rarity of this viewpoint in Myanmar cannot be overstressed. Ethnicity is widely seen as a foundational component of Myanmar identity and has become basis of Citizenship Law in Myanmar.

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<sup>64</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>65</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>66</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

<sup>67</sup> C. Long, personal interview, (moniker used for participant’s name)

## CHAPTER 2: THE CONDITIONS WHICH CREATED STATELESSNESS

### Colonial Categorization of Ethnicity

Since the colonial period, issues concerning ethnicity have become central to Myanmar's political landscape. There is a long history of ethnic groups, and insurgent groups, mobilizing people by ethnic identity in order to fight for civil rights and political autonomy within the country. Frequently, these violent struggles for political freedom have devolved into seemingly irreconcilable decades-long ethnic conflicts. For example, ongoing clashes with the Myanmar military and Karen insurgent groups have occupied areas of Karen state in armed conflict for over 60 years earning it the title of "the world's longest running civil war".<sup>68</sup>

I will argue the prevailing concept of ethnicity in Myanmar, which has produced numerous long-standing cases of ethnic conflict, emerged out of British colonial rule. Through systematically grouping people by observed cultural and linguistic characteristics, the British introduced and constructed the operative category of ethnicity in Myanmar.<sup>69</sup> The British also reified ethnic distinctions of local tribes people, by classifying them according to a set of characteristics which they determined to constitute ethnicity.<sup>70</sup> These actions have largely produced and solidified the ethnic groups which still exist today. The British system of categorizing people by "ethnic group" produced a primordial notion of ethnicity in colonial Burma, which was adopted and later carried over into post-independence Burma. This

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<sup>68</sup> "David Miliband: How To Bring Peace To The World'S Longest Civil War". 2018. *Time*. <http://time.com/4597920/myanmar-peace/>.

<sup>69</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

<sup>70</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

understanding of ethnicity has produced the numerous examples of ethnic conflict which have dominated Myanmar politics since colonial times.

Most of the international world has received brief glimpses into the Myanmar's complicated issues of ethnicity through the Rohingya crisis. As observed among interviews conducted in Mandalay, the inability to see Rohingya as Myanmar people is largely articulated as an issue of ethnic belonging. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how this issue of ethnicity diverges from the standard framework of ethnic conflict in Myanmar; separating the Rohingya crisis from typical ethnic conflicts within the country. The Rohingya have not simply been barred from civil and political rights, on the basis of restricting ethnic groups from holding significant political autonomy, in order to maintain the government's unitary state vision of power. On the contrary, within the country, Rohingya are not seen as a Myanmar ethnic group at all. Thus seeing the Rohingya crisis as simply another example of ethnic conflict in Myanmar is to misunderstand the crisis entirely.

In order to fully grasp how this issue arose, it is important to analyze the role of colonialism in creating the country's current ethnic distinctions. All Myanmar ethnic groups which exist today, including the Rohingya, are directly or indirectly constructed from effects of colonial rule.<sup>71</sup> The colonial-instituted conception of ethnicity is greatly responsible for producing the ethnic conflict which exists today. While the plight of the Rohingya, and the plight of the Karen (or any other officially recognized Myanmar ethnic group) are dramatically different, the ways in which these ethnic groups and ethnic conflicts are seen operate under a

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<sup>71</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

conception of ethnicity rooted in colonial history.<sup>72</sup> Through looking at Citizenship law in Myanmar, I will demonstrate how the Rohingya's failure to fit the legal designation of an ethnic group or ethnic-nationality, as formulated by the British, has had led to the Rohingya being excluded from citizenship in Myanmar.

### Colonial Categorization of Ethnicity

The argument in favor of barring Rohingya from receiving Myanmar citizenship, and the widespread belief within Myanmar that Rohingya are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, is largely contingent on a conception of ethnicity which, I will argue, was formulated in colonial Burma. Colonial rule in Burma was fundamental in producing today's dominant mode of conceptualizing ethnicity in Myanmar through two main outlets. First, the colonial system of categorizing ethnicity introduced the concept of identifying oneself exclusively by ethnic group. Categorizing ethnicity was a key feature of colonial policy, which is used to maintain colonial power in Burma, but would end up leaving a lasting impact on the country's prevailing conception of ethnicity and the future of ethnic conflict in Myanmar. Second, the colonial strategy of "divide and rule", reified ethnic distinctions and created the ethnic groups which exist today.<sup>73</sup>

The British carried out their objective of conquering Burma over the course of three consecutive wars. Starting in 1824, the British won the 1st Anglo-Burmese war, which resulted

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<sup>72</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

<sup>73</sup> Taylor, Robert H, and Robert H Taylor. 2009. *The State In Myanmar*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

in the annexation of Arakan, the region which borders Bangladesh, the Bengal Bay and includes the area where the Rohingya crisis has occurred. The British claimed lower Burma, also referred to as “ministerial Burma”, through 2nd Anglo-Burmese war in 1853. The rest of Burma would not come under colonial rule, until the end of the 3rd Anglo-Burmese war in 1886. The British toppled the ruling Konbaung kingdom by abducting Burmese King Thibaw and exiled him to India. Thus they effectively abolished the Burmese monarchy and paved the way for a new administrative system.<sup>74</sup>

A fundamental characteristic of British rule in Burma was its proximity and close relationship with the British colony in India.<sup>75</sup> Burma was in many regards ruled as an extension of British India, and would remain so until Burma and India were officially separated as distinct colonies in 1937.<sup>76</sup> Many colonial policies and approaches to governance utilized in British India were transferred on to Burma. A primary example would be the British colonial strategy of “divide and rule”, which many Myanmar politicians and scholars have cited as the root to all contemporary issues of ethnic conflict in Myanmar.<sup>77</sup> Divide and rule, a colonial strategy which can be found in many British colonies, can be characterized by keeping local communities both separate and unified. As seen in colonial Burma, divide and rule is able to produce tensions and pit tribes and ethnic groups against one another. Implementing such a strategy was in the interest

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<sup>74</sup> Taylor, Robert H, and Robert H Taylor. 2009. *The State In Myanmar*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>75</sup> Taylor, Robert H, and Robert H Taylor. 2009. *The State In Myanmar*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>76</sup> Taylor, Robert H, and Robert H Taylor. 2009. *The State In Myanmar*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>77</sup> Taylor, Robert H, and Robert H Taylor. 2009. *The State In Myanmar*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

of the British in order to pacify growing resentments colonial rule and to keep local tribes unwilling to unite together to revolt against the colonial empire. In Burma, divide and rule was instituted administratively through a dual approach to governance, which involved governing some lands under “direct rule” and others with “indirect rule”.<sup>78</sup>

Upon British arrival, the central plains and delta area were predominantly populated by the Bamar tribe, or the ethnic Burmese majority. This area was identified as “Ministerial Burma” or “Burma Proper” under the colonial administration. The “frontier areas” included the vast hill tracks and the rest of the periphery where numerous “hill tribes” and non-burman ethnic minority groups (Karen, Kayah, Kachin, and Chin) lived.<sup>79</sup> “Burma proper” was governed under direct rule, while the “frontier areas” were administered via indirect rule. Today, these two colonial administrative regions roughly correspond to the country’s modern administrative makeup of the country. The frontier areas are now made up of states which represent the country’s main ethnic minorities: Karen state, Kayah state, Kachin state, Chin state, Mon state and Rakhine state. “Burma proper” still primarily is populated by Burmese (Bamar), however, it possesses the country’s largest and most cosmopolitan cities, where different ethnic groups coexist and live together, generally peacefully.

The British began the process of drawing up the geographical boundaries of “frontier” and “burma proper” (or as notated on the map - excluded and ministerial areas) in 1826.<sup>80</sup> Burma

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<sup>78</sup> Thant Myint-U. 2005. *The Making Of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>79</sup> Taylor, Robert H, and Robert H Taylor. 2009. *The State In Myanmar*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>80</sup> Gravers, Mikael. Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007.



historian Mikael Gravers writes, “The colonial practice used ethnic (racial) classification emphasizing cultural differences, boundaries and places on a map”.<sup>81</sup> These decisions were guided by the colonial British’s limited understanding of the region’s cultural and linguistic diversity. Early ethnographic markers were informed by 19th and 20th centuries theories on race which led to groups being distinguished “primitive” and “civilized”. The British typically identified the former with minority groups living in the “frontier areas” and the latter with Burmese (Bamar) living in “Burma proper”.<sup>82</sup>

The British cited the Burmese Kingdom’s inability to extend their rule throughout the “excluded” or “frontier areas” as what kept other tribes from developing and allowed them to live primitive lives.<sup>83</sup> As problematic as this justification is, its analysis of pre-colonial relations between the Burmese Kingdom and tribes in the “frontier areas” has remained relevant in modern ethnic politics in Myanmar. The lack of meaningful connections between ethnic minority groups and past Burmese kingdoms throughout the country’s history has been used to bolster claims for political and cultural autonomy by ethnic minorities.<sup>84</sup> However, the extent to which the British impeded on the formation of these ties should also not be understated.

The separation of “burma proper” and the “frontier areas” broke down key pre-colonial tributary relationships. Ethnic Politics historian Ashley South writes, “This bifurcation limited

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<sup>81</sup> Gravers, Mikael. *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007.

<sup>82</sup> Gravers, Mikael. *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007.

<sup>83</sup> Gravers, Mikael. *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Gravers, Mikael. *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007.

the opportunities for lowland politicians to organize in the hills, and to reduce the scope of those ‘colonial pilgrimages’ which might have fostered a stronger sense of pan-Burmese identity” among the colonised”.<sup>85</sup> Although, Buddhist Burmese did not share many cultural or linguistic similarities with tribes in the “frontier areas”, non-hostile relationships, unconcerned with ethnic distinctions based off of commerce, flourished in pre-colonial Burma.<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, British “indirect rule” in the “frontier areas” allowed local tribe leaders to hold a significant degree of autonomy. After receiving commitments of loyalty and obedience from respective village heads, tribes in the “frontier areas” were permitted to maintain their own systems of governance without much interference from British colonials. “All civil, criminal and financial affairs continued to be administered by the hereditary rulers and chiefs”.<sup>87</sup> For many tribes living in the “frontier areas”, British rule did not necessary intrude on their daily life.<sup>88</sup>

As for the Buddhist Burmese living in “Burma Proper”, colonial rule was a much more invasive period. The British held direct control over governing cities and replaced Burman village headman with British appointed “thugyis” *leaders*.<sup>89</sup> In addition, the British selected ethnic minorities to military, governmental and law positions over the Burmese. Ethnic minorities were “disproportionately sought as a result of their early and easy access to modern

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<sup>85</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

<sup>86</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

<sup>87</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (New York: Zed Books, 1993)

<sup>88</sup> Notable exceptions existed with Kachin, as explained in Martin Smith’s chapter on “Order Without Meaning”.

<sup>89</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (New York: Zed Books, 1993)

education”<sup>90</sup>. In 1939, Karen troops were found to outnumber Burmans in the British Burma army 3 to 1.<sup>91</sup> Allowing ethnic minorities political autonomy and preferential treatment in employment opportunities, allowed for closer colonial relationships to develop with the British. The suppression of anti-British revolts led by disgruntled Buddhist Burmese, by Karen in the colonial military inflamed growing resentments of ethnic minority “collaboration” with colonial forces.<sup>92</sup> These animosities held during the colonial period would only fester and accelerate in post-independence Burma.

The strategy of “divide and rule” not only produced tensions between groups, it developed the notion of ethnic belonging itself. Groups such as Karen, Kachin and Chin “developed a sense of community (and nationhood) under colonial and missionary patronage, as the British authorities recruited large numbers of minority subjects (and immigrant Indians) into the lower levels of the colonial army, police force and administration”.<sup>93</sup> Isolating the Burmese and ethnic minorities also reified cultural differences. Robert Taylor states that “Colonial rule fostered the emergence of self-consciously distinct ethnic minority groups, who were encouraged to identify themselves in opposition to the Burman majority”.<sup>94</sup> Ethnic minorities, who may have possessed fluid relationships with Burmese on the outskirts of the Burmese Kingdom’s

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<sup>90</sup> Gravers, Mikael. *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007.

<sup>91</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (New York: Zed Books, 1993)

<sup>92</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

<sup>93</sup> "Burma/Myanmar: The Struggle For Democracy And Ethnic Rights \* - Oxford Scholarship". 2018. *Oxfordscholarship.Com*.  
<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0199277621.001.0001/acprof-9780199277629-chapter-12>.

<sup>94</sup> Taylor, Robert H, and Robert H Taylor. 2009. *The State In Myanmar*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

fluctuating empire during pre-colonial times, began embracing ethnic identity as way to distinguish themselves as culturally and politically distinct people in colonial Burma.

As found by Erin McAuliffe in her thesis on racial and caste categorization used in colonial Burma, the British struggled with making sense of Burma's racial or ethnic diversity.<sup>95</sup> Largely, influenced by their experiences in India, the British found that their assumptions of race and caste, a primary mode of identification in India, did not translate neatly over to Burma's greatly diverse tribal communities. According to C.C. Lewis, "the Burmese nature is so essentially democratic and regardless of social distinctions, that the Indian caste system has never been able to gain a foothold here"<sup>96</sup>. As seen in the image below, the definition for race used in each of the 7 census conducted in colonial Burma, dramatically changed over time.

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<sup>95</sup> "Caste And The Quest For Racial Hierarchy In British Burma: An Analysis Of Census Classifications From 1872-1931". 2018. University of Washington.

<sup>96</sup> "Caste And The Quest For Racial Hierarchy In British Burma: An Analysis Of Census Classifications From 1872-1931". 2018. University of Washington.

1872	India	Not defined; used in reference to <i>races and tribes</i> of Burma
	Burma	Not defined; described as common stock, origin, class, conquering ability, and blood lineage (p. 26-28) and as the cultivating valley civilization comparative to hill tribes (p. 26)
1881	India	Not defined; “aboriginal races” mentioned with regard to caste groups
	Burma	Not defined because not enumerated; described with regards to the purity of English blood (Ch. VI, p. 40), a Mongolian type (Ch. X, p. 64 & 67), Eastern race (Ch. VI, p. 40), indigenous races, Indian races, and European races (Ch. XI, p. 71); measurable by the same characteristics as nationality (mother-tongue and birthplace) (Ch. X, p. 64)
1891	India	Not defined; described historically as an alternative interpretation to caste or order (Ch. V, p. 127), and referring to the Aryas (particularly their purity of blood), Mongols, foreign races, and dark races (p. 122-124)
	Burma	“The terms “Race” and “Nationality” are used in the sense of genus and species” and are grouped by ethnic affinities (Ch. X, p. 188)
1901	India	Race “rests on foundation of fact scientific methods can confirm” (Ch. XI, p. 489) and refers to the primary divisions, or “types,” of mankind (p. 497, 514).
	Burma	Race is defined as “Amyo” in Burmese (Ch. VIII, p. 107) and refers to origin and diffusion of civilization (p. 112), stock (Mongolian specifically) (p. 114), and the European races, for example the English race (p. 132)
1911	India	Not defined; describes the Aryan blood and ancestry that influences rank (Ch. XI, p. 380) and also the Mongolian race, measured by birthmarks (p. 384)
	Burma	Defined as civilized (Ch. XI, p. 250) and dependent on historical, linguistic, and geographic considerations (p. 250); measured by birthmarks in the Mongolian race, and referred to as the ethnical classification in Burma that, along with tribe, takes the place of caste (p. 241)
1921	India	Race (in the anthropological sense) is “a main division of mankind the numbers of which have important physical characters in common and is usually applied to stocks of considerable antiquity” and corresponds to differences in cultural or economic progress (Ch. XI, p. 221)
	Burma	1) “For the purposes of the census [race] is narrowed down to a consideration of the extent to which tribal or local subdivisions of groups of kindred people are to be separately tabulated” (Ch. XI, p. 206); 2) “race in the census tables is not a purely biological matter; it is rather a matter of culture, in determining which descent is generally the most powerful but is not the sole factor” (p. 208); 3) “the races corresponding to each indigenous language group” (Appendix B, p. 282); 4) “in the anthropological sense “race” denotes “a main division of mankind, the members of which have important physical characters in common” and are of respectable antiquity” (p. 283); 5) “in the absence of any suitable term capable of exact definition, the word “race” was finally adopted as a general term to be defined by the units to which it has been applied” (p. 283); 6) “a group of a simple kind who at one time occupied a circumscribed area and had a common language, common government and a common action in warfare” (p. 283) 7) “a conglomerate composed by the fusion of such groups” (p. 283) 8) “the elements into which such a group has disintegrated” (p. 283)
1931	India	“[Race] was likewise determinate enough, and no attempt was made to define the term ‘race,’ which is generally used so loosely as almost to defy definition... in the census schedule its very looseness enabled it to cover returns which, though not strictly referable all to the same category, were quite adequate for the purpose intended” (Ch. XII, p. 425); if a definition is required: “a group of human beings, whose type has become unified by their rate of assimilation’s exceeding the rate of change produced by foreign elements.” (p. 425)
	Burma	Race is based on the same classification scheme as language (Ch. XII, p. 223)

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The British attempted to not only equate biological features to racial categories but also to incorporate cultural and linguistic characteristics into their organizational schema. In the last colonial census taken in 1931, the British notably defined “race” in Burma as “based on the same classification scheme as language”. According the 1931 census, 135 distinct ethnic groups were

<sup>97</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

indigenous in Myanmar.<sup>98</sup> While ethnic minorities today take great issue with questioning the legitimacy of their respective ethnic groups, colonial classifications which base ethnicity in primarily linguistic attributes have been significantly critiqued.<sup>99</sup>

Edmund Leach challenged primordial-based notions of identity through his ethnographic case study of the Kachin hill tribes in *Political Systems of Highland Burma*.<sup>100</sup> Leach deconstructed colonial classifications which designated all tribes people living in the northern frontier hill region to be under the same umbrella ethnic distinction. Leach found that an ethnic identity does not necessary constitute the existence of unchanging cultural or linguistic characteristics. People may possess different linguistic or cultural traits while taking part in the same political-social structure. According to Leach's findings, classifications on ethnicity made by the British can be criticized for both being too exclusive, and too broad. On one hand, they lump together groups who may have different dialects or cultures into one group, on the other, they section off groups who oftentimes posses relationships with people who share different languages and customs. However, irrespective of the multiple issues with colonial approaches to categorizing ethnicity, the ethnic groups created out of these classifications are the major political Myanmar actors today. The role of religion has played a large part in consolidating and perpetuating these ethnic distinctions.

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<sup>98</sup> Analysis of post-independence citizenship law in Burma, included later in this chapter, will show how this categorization of ethnicity, proved decisive for the fate of the Rohingya.

<sup>99</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

<sup>100</sup> Leach, E. R. 1965. *Political Systems Of Highland Burma*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Religion was a central part of instituting colonial policy throughout much of Burma. Colonial education sought to “promote conversion to Christianity and only thereafter to educate and civilise”.<sup>101</sup> Christianity contributed dramatically to the formation of ethnic identity among tribes in the “frontier areas”. Colonial schools implemented by British and other missionaries converted many hill tribe peoples to Christianity. Adopting the Christian religion, “fostered the emergence of self-consciously distinct ethnic minority groups, who were encouraged to identify themselves in opposition to the Burman majority”<sup>102</sup>. Many of the major ethnic groups that exist today (Karen, Kachin, Chin etc.) possess very large Christian populations. The Christian religion played a primary role in constructing and reinforcing ethnic identity. As found by South, Christianity served as “a new creative force of national identity for the Chin” and other main ethnic groups.<sup>103</sup>

Another key element of colonialism in Burma was the use of Indian labor in order to efficiently build the profitable colonial empire wished for by the British. The British imported a vast number of Indians to serve as civil servants, entrepreneurs, and cheap laborers.<sup>104</sup> Labor was needed to build railroads and cultivate the largely undeveloped lands. The British also trusted

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<sup>101</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (New York: Zed Books, 1993)

<sup>102</sup> South, A. 2009. *Ethnic Politics In Burma*. Lond.: Routledge.

<sup>103</sup> While Buddhist Burmese were also subjected to colonial education, there was never a widespread conversion to Christianity as was seen among ethnic groups living in the “frontier areas”. One reason why Christianity took such a firm hold within the frontier areas and failed to in Burma proper is because of the differences in already practiced religions within these two areas. Many hill tribes people practiced animism, while most Burmese practiced Buddhism. Many scholars have found animism is more adept to adopting Christian doctrine rather than Buddhism

<sup>104</sup> Yegar, Moshe. 2002. *Between Integration And Secession*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

Indians to governmental positions as they had much experience working with Indians in British Burma and, similarly to ethnic minorities to Burma, had early access to colonial education.<sup>105</sup> As stated by Taylor, “The Burmese began to feel that they were being “colonized twice first by the British, secondly by the Indians who, in particular, dominated the economy”.<sup>106</sup>

A new Indian moneylender class called “chettys” began to emerge. Chettys financed much of the farmland to Burma booming rice industry.<sup>107</sup> However, the Burmese felt taken advantage during the world economic crises in 1930 when the price of rice dramatically dropped and chettyar being obfuscating a large amounts of land from Burmese farmers unable to repay Indian moneylenders.<sup>108</sup> Mikeal Gravers stated, “75% of the peasants in the rich rice-exporting Irrawaddy Delta were in debt and 30-40% had lost their land, mostly to chettys”.<sup>109</sup> Many Burmese felt that they were being excluded from jobs by Indian immigrants willing to work for less than Burmese workers. In addition, to the affects “divide and rule” had over Burma, Burmese resentment towards Indians and Muslims would carry over into post-independence Burma.

The strategy of divide and rule used by the British would plague post-independence Burma with the issue of dis-unification for generations to come.<sup>110</sup> The developing concept of

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<sup>105</sup> Yegar, Moshe. 2002. *Between Integration And Secession*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

<sup>106</sup> Taylor, Robert H, and Robert H Taylor. 2009. *The State In Myanmar*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>107</sup> Gravers, Michael. 2013. *Nationalism As Political Paranoia In Burma*. Taylor & Francis.

<sup>108</sup> Gravers, Michael. 2013. *Nationalism As Political Paranoia In Burma*. Taylor & Francis.

<sup>109</sup> Gravers, Michael. 2013. *Nationalism As Political Paranoia In Burma*. Taylor & Francis.

<sup>110</sup> Gravers, Michael. 2013. *Nationalism As Political Paranoia In Burma*. Taylor & Francis.



ethnic identity, which became increasingly subscribed to, combined with post-WWII notions of self-determination, left ethnic groups craving political autonomy as their own separate nation at the end of the colonial period. The challenge of keeping a country unified, with numerous ethnic groups demanding rights to govern themselves, would become the paramount issue of post-independence governments in Burma.<sup>111</sup> However, the issue of a country disassembling over not maintaining a common identity or of minorities being forced to remain a part of a state unrepresentative of their identity or interests, is not a new issue or one that speaks exclusively to the Rohingya crisis. More crucial to the issue that the Rohingya face, is that a primordial conception of ethnicity was fully adopted at the end of the colonial period. Burma was no longer a country made up fluid tribal communities that possessed overlapping loyalties. In post-independence Burma, ethnicity, oftentimes combined with religion, determined one's identity and therefore political allegiance.

### Citizenship in Myanmar and the Removal of Rohingya Citizenship

The notion of ethnicity passed on from colonial Burma, is directly expressed in the country's citizenship law. The closest word for race or ethnicity in the Burmese language is *taingyintha*, which means "ethnic nationality". As noted by Nick Cheesman, international news articles and human rights organizations frequently state that the Rohingya were stripped of their

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<sup>111</sup> Gravers, Michael. 2013. *Nationalism As Political Paranoia In Burma*. Taylor & Francis.

citizenship due to the 1982 citizenship law.<sup>112</sup> Typically the citizenship law is reported as follows, “New citizenship law passed identifying 135 national ethnic groups. The Rohingya aren't one of them, effectively rendering them stateless”.<sup>113</sup> This quote from a CNN article would give readers the impression that, in 1982, the military junta of Burma fabricated a list of ethnicities, or national races, dictating which ethnic groups would be considered indigenous to Myanmar and intentionally excluded the Rohingya. However, there is no reference to the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups in the 1982 citizenship law.<sup>114</sup> The 1982 citizenship law does mandate Myanmar citizenship be reserved for members of Myanmar *taingyintha*, which is defined in the 1947 Constitution . In order to to gain an accurate sense of the change that occurred in the character of the country’s citizenship law in 1982, one must turn to the first citizenship law instituted in post-independence Burma.

The 1948 Union Citizenship Act loosely designated a citizen of Burma as being a member of an indigenous *taingyintha*.<sup>115</sup> As found in the 1947 Constitution, a *taingyintha* consists of a “Arakanese, Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Mon or Shan race and such racial groups as had settled in any of the territories included within the Union as their permanent home

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<sup>112</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, Journal of Contemporary Asia, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

<sup>113</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/12/asia/rohingya-crisis-timeline/index.html>

<sup>114</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, Journal of Contemporary Asia, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

<sup>115</sup> "Union Citizenship Act, 1948 | Naturalization | United States Nationality Law". 2018. *Scribd*. <https://www.scribd.com/document/188512585/Union-Citizenship-Act-1948>.

anterior to 1823AD”<sup>116</sup>. The relevance of 1823 is that it is the year preceding the 1st Anglo-Burmese war, a marker of British arrival in Burma. Using this event as a cut-off marker to determine the indigeneity of ethnic groups, signifies that a *taingyintha* can only be considered indigenous if it was present during pre-colonial times.

The archival records of the earliest traces of Rohingya and Muslims in Rakhine will later be turned to in order to provide a more accurate depiction of when certain groups migrated to Burma. However, for now, it is adequate to assume that a portion of the Rohingya who exist now are related to Muslims who lived in pre-colonial Burma. While there is well documented evidence of Muslims residing in Arakan during pre-colonial times, there is no local documentation or colonial census signifying the existence of a “Rohingya” ethnic group.<sup>117</sup> For all intents and purposes, Muslims living in Arakan did not identify by a *taingyintha* but rather identified primarily by their religion.<sup>118</sup>

However, the 1948 Union Citizenship Act, did not refuse citizenship to Muslims in Arakan. It in fact steered away from requiring membership to an indigenous *taingyintha* to be the only grounds to provide citizenship.<sup>119</sup> The 1948 Union Citizenship Act specifically allowed for,

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<sup>116</sup> "Constitution Of 1947 - Myanmar Law Library". 2018. *Myanmar-Law-Library.Org*. <http://www.myanmar-law-library.org/law-library/laws-and-regulations/constitutions/1947-constitution.html>.

<sup>117</sup> Leider, Jacques. 2018. "“Rohingya: The Name, The Movement, The Quest For Identity.” Yangon, 2013." *Academia.Edu*. [http://www.academia.edu/7994939/\\_Rohingya\\_The\\_name\\_the\\_movement\\_the\\_quest\\_for\\_identity.\\_Yangon\\_2013](http://www.academia.edu/7994939/_Rohingya_The_name_the_movement_the_quest_for_identity._Yangon_2013).

<sup>118</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

<sup>119</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

“Any person descended from ancestors who for two generations at least have all made any of the territories included within the Union their permanent home and whose parents and himself were born in any of such territories shall be deemed to be a citizen of the Union”.<sup>120</sup> Therefore the Rohingya, or any unofficial *taingyintha*, living in the country for multiple generations were eligible to receive citizenship. However, it is important to note that the Rohingya were never recognized as citizens for being a part of an Myanmar *taingyintha*, but rather were offered essentially de-facto citizenship. The 1948 Union Citizenship Act clearly allowed for people who had established residency within the country to be citizens. Thus, many Rohingya identifying people from the early 1950s to the 1980s held citizenship.

The 1982 Citizenship law, which replaced the 1948 Citizenship law, introduced three new categories of citizenship: 1st, standard citizenship, which is concerned with membership to a Myanmar *taingyintha*, as outlined in the 1948 Union Citizenship Act. The 2nd, associated citizenship, applies to those who received citizenship through having established residency also addressed in 1948 Union Citizenship Act. The 3rd, applies to the process of naturalization which allows foreigners to become citizens.<sup>121</sup> If implemented properly, the 1982 Citizenship Law should not have stripped Rohingya of their citizenship. The Rohingya should have been eligible for the status of associated citizenship.<sup>122</sup> In fact, associated and naturalized citizens were even guaranteed to become the full citizens after remaining in the country for two generations.

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<sup>120</sup> "Union Citizenship Act, 1948 | Naturalization | United States Nationality Law". 2018. *Scribd*. <https://www.scribd.com/document/188512585/Union-Citizenship-Act-1948>.

<sup>121</sup> "Myanmar Citizenship Law 1982-Eng | Naturalization | United States Nationality Law". 2018. *Scribd*. <https://www.scribd.com/document/117948322/Myanmar-Citizenship-Law-1982-Eng>.

<sup>122</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

General Ne Win confirmed this in a speech given in 1984 where he explained the new citizenship law.

‘There are three types of citizens at present as said earlier. There will be only one type in our country at some time in the future; that is there will be only citizens. [...] When the grandchild is given citizenship, he will, just like any other citizen, become a full citizen.’  
(Ne Win 1982)<sup>123</sup>

To further belabor the point, the 1982 citizenship law also explicitly made clear that anyone who was a citizen before the law came into force would continue to be a citizen.

Why then were the Rohingya initially stripped of their citizenship? The answer lies in how the 1982 Citizenship act was implemented and the events preceding its enactment. Increasing muslim populations in Arakan prompted accusations by Burmese and Rakhine that people from Bangladesh were illegally immigrating to Arakan. In 1972, the government launched the “Nagamin operation” which claimed to identify, and expel illegal migrants. Through this military led campaign intense violence was directed towards the Rohingya. Up to 250,000 people fled across the border. However, in 1978 authorities in Burma buckled under international pressure and took back some 200,000.<sup>124</sup> Many suspicions amongst certain Burmese that their government was allowed Bengalis, posing as Rohingya, into Burma never fully dissipated.

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<sup>123</sup> "Ne Win's Speech - 1982 Citizenship Law | Myanmar | Citizenship". 2018. *Scribd*. <https://www.scribd.com/document/162589794/Ne-Win-s-Speech-1982-Citizenship-Law>.

<sup>124</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

When it came to implementing the new Citizenship law in 1988 the government required all citizens to send in their Green National Identity Cards, in exchange for Pink National Identity Cards.<sup>125</sup> However, amidst suspicions that many Rohingya were truly Bengalis claiming the name Rohingya, the government did not issue the Rohingya new Pink National Identity Cards. Instead, some 700,000 temporary Registration Cards or “white cards” were issued to Rohingya, until proof of residence was supplied, which most Rohingya were unable to provide.<sup>126</sup> No such actions were outlined or permitted in the 1988 citizenship law. However, through violence, the military government effectively put the Rohingya in a precarious position with their citizenship being put in jeopardy.<sup>127</sup>

In the lead up to the 2015 elections, white cards were revoked, effectively making the Rohingya entirely stateless, with no partial claim to citizenship or residency.<sup>128</sup> Such a claim that the Rohingya can re-apply for citizenship does not rid the Myanmar government from doing wrong, nor is demonstrably genuine. The Rohingya should have been able to receive citizenship based on their residence, not based on their ethnicity. The current civilian government has also not made any significant moves towards reinstating citizenship for the Rohingya.

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<sup>125</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

<sup>126</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

<sup>127</sup> When questioned about the “White Card” dilemma by *The Irrawaddy* in February 2015, Minister of Immigration and Population Khin Yi, stated “This has not happened during our term. It was in 1990 when their NRCs were seized, as there were reports of people obtaining fake cards. We have now allowed them to reapply for citizenship. When they apply, we issue them the appropriate documents....” cite However, applying for Myanmar citizenship today means declaring one’s *taingyintha*, ethnic nationality, and the Rohingya are not recognized as an official *taingyintha*.

<sup>128</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

There are two important takeaways from the successive citizenship laws, in regards to how these affected the Rohingya. The first is that the 1982 Citizenship law did not, in itself, take away citizenship from the Rohingya. Military violence, which temporarily displaced Rohingya people, improper execution of the citizenship law by the military junta, and inaction among successive governments to grant appropriate rights to Muslims living in Rakhine state is what stripped them of their citizenship.<sup>129</sup> However, the claim from the Myanmar state, and a typical response from Buddhist Burmese, is that the Muslims in Arakan state were not considered for citizenship after the 1982 Citizenship law because they opted to identify as Rohingya, in Myanmar's eyes, a fabricated identity.

The second point is that while the 1947 Constitution and the 1948 Union Citizenship Act did define Myanmar *taingyintha* as ethnic groups who existed in pre-colonial times, the 1988 Citizenship law enshrined citizenship with *taingyintha*. Cheesman writes that the 1982 Citizenship law, made “ethnic identity, which is to say, membership in a ‘national race’ category, the primary basis for citizenship”.<sup>130</sup> While the 1982 Citizenship law included other categories of citizenship, in application, belonging to a “national race” became “the gold standard for membership in the political community ‘Myanmar’ and also a guarantee of membership.”<sup>131</sup> The law technically is broad enough to allow the Rohingya citizenship, however it decisively ties

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<sup>129</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, Journal of Contemporary Asia, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

<sup>130</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, Journal of Contemporary Asia, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

<sup>131</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, Journal of Contemporary Asia, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

together the primordial colonial vision of ethnicity into a primary notion of citizenship. In the eyes of the Myanmar people the Rohingya do not fit this conception of ethnicity.

The transformation of Myanmar Citizenship law, from a non-*taingyintha* based to granting citizenship, to requiring membership to a *taingyintha* in order to receive citizenship can be demonstrated by looking at the cards themselves. The green National Registration Cards that was implemented in 1952, under the jurisdiction of the 1948 Union Citizenship Act did not contain an entry line for *taingyintha* to be written or specified.<sup>132</sup> However, the pink National Identity cards, which accompanied the 1982 Citizenship demanded one fill-in their *taingyintha* directly on the card<sup>133</sup>. The 1982 thus forced people to identify as one of the ethnic nationalities in order for these identity cards to be considered complete and legitimate.

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<sup>132</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476

<sup>133</sup> Nick Cheesman “How in Myanmar “National Races” Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2017.1297476



### CHAPTER 3: CLAIMS TO INDIGINEITY

As experienced through my research in and outside of Myanmar, much of the debate over the Rohingya issue can be boiled down to contesting views over when Rohingya people began to identify themselves as an ethnic group. However, most arguments fail to correlate to one another, because of differing understandings on relationship between ethnicity and indigeneity. Rohingya authors and supporting western academics tend to make claim that the longstanding existence of Muslims in Arakan, is proof that a Rohingya ethnic group existed in for hundreds of years. While on the other hand, Myanmar people find the complete lack of historical evidence of Muslims in the Arakan region identifying as “Rohingya” as proof that the Rohingya’s claim to being a native ethnic group of Myanmar is fraudulent. The former looks for a biological connection to the past in order to legitimize the Rohingya as a Myanmar ethnicity, while the latter is concerned when the ethnic group came into being and the Rohingya label being co-opted by truly illegal immigrants in an attempt claim Myanmar citizenship. The available historical and contemporary literature which substantiates, and de-substantiates, aspects both of these claims will be turned to in order to attempt to gain clarity on the history of the Rohingya.

#### The Origin of the word “Rohingya” and its discontents

There are various available historiographies which attempt to shed light on the roots of Rohingya identity and trace their presence in Rakhine state. There is a particularly popular origin story of the Rohingya, often retold by Rohingya academics and originally recorded in the British Burma Gazetteer by R.B Smart in 1917. He wrote, In “788 A.D...several ships were wrecked on

Ramree Island and the crews, said to have been Mahomedans, were sent to Arakan Proper and settled in Villages".<sup>134</sup> This tale recounts that the first Muslims in Burma were seafaring traders who sought refuge on the shores of Arakan. Many Rohingya writers attempt to link the present day Rohingya with these Muslims who arrived in the late 700's A.D.

Rohingya academic, Tahir Ba Tha, further expanding on this tale, writes "Those Arab crews sought sympathy of the people of the island, uttering the Arabic word 'Rahma'. So they were called Rahma people. The Rohingyas of Arakan are also the descendants of these Arab people".<sup>135</sup> Typically any claims made by Rohingya or western academics which attempt to link Rohingya to Muslims living in Arakan in pre-colonial times, become, in themselves, instant proof of the Rohingya's long standing ethnic identity. In regards to Tahir Ba Tha's account, it is widely accepted among academics, generally, that the first Muslims to have existed in Burma arrived in 700 A.D. However, there is very little evidence that these people were indeed called "Rahma people", and even less which provides an ancestral connection people between said "Rahma people" and today's present day "Rohingya"; other than, of course, similarities in religion and proximity.<sup>136</sup>

Pinpointing the genesis of Rohingya identity is a widely disputed topic in today's debate on the Rohingya. Therefore, it is essential to laying out a more general understanding of the

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<sup>134</sup> "Burma Gazetteer Akyab District Vol-A". 2018. *Archive.Org*. <https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.210387/2015.210387.Burma-Gazetteer#page/n111/mode/2up>.

<sup>135</sup> News, Kaladan. 2018. "A Short History Of Rohingya And Kamas Of Burma - Kaladan Press Network". *Kaladanpress.Org*. <http://www.kaladanpress.org/index.php/scholar-column-mainmenu-36/arakan/872-a-short-history-of-rohingya-and-kamas-of-burma.html>.

<sup>136</sup> Leider, Jacques. 2018. "'Rohingya: The Name, The Movement, The Quest For Identity.'" Yangon, 2013". *Academia.Edu*.

history of Arakan. Writers on the Rohingya issue often make the mistake of assuming the longstanding existence of Buddhist Burmese rule in Arakan. However, Arakan holds a history very distinct from that of Burma. The Burmese kingdom did not conquer Arakan until 1784, around 40 years before the British arrived. The history of Arakan is filled with rising and falling Kingdoms. However, the Mrauk-U period (1429 to 1785) is touted by Rohingya writers as being of the “golden age” of Muslim influence in Arakan.<sup>137</sup>

Evidence of Muslims residing in Arakan becomes plentiful when looking at the Mrauk-U period. King Naramekhla extended his Kingdom’s influence north into Chittagong in, what today is known as, Bangladesh. Although he and his successors were Buddhist, they were known for adopting Islamic titles, employing Muslims in high roles in the royal administration and even utilizing an Islamic system of coinage.<sup>138</sup> For much of the Mrauk-U period, Arakan was ruled under the same Kingdom as Chittagong, a primarily Muslim region, and would maintain so until the Mongol invasion of 1666, which separated Chittagong from Arakan. During this 200 year time period, a small population of Chittagonian muslims are believed to have migrated and settled in Arakan.<sup>139</sup> While more radical Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar today may claim that all Muslims in Burma are immigrants, there is a plethora of evidence which shows otherwise. The presence of Muslim communities in Rakhine is certainly verifiable from at least several hundred years ago.

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<sup>137</sup> Yegar, Moshe. 2002. *Between Integration And Secession*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

<sup>138</sup> Yegar, Moshe. 2002. *Between Integration And Secession*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

<sup>139</sup> Yegar, Moshe. 2002. *Between Integration And Secession*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

The more complicated question, in regards to the Rohingya crisis, is not whether there has historically been a Muslim community, but (as exemplified in the citizenship law issue) whether that Muslim community identified as Rohingya, during pre-colonial times. This question is deeply rooted in competing notions of ethnicity. More specifically, when an ethnic group comes into being. In order, to keep oneself from getting trapped within the ontological question, colonial censuses and early ethnographic documentation from the region should be analyzed to as a useful indicator of how groups self-identified. Although contested by many Rohingya writers and virtually unknown to western audiences, among all colonial written records, there is only one (original) known use of the word “Rohingya”, (rooinga) made before the end of the colonial period.

The single colonial reference to the word “Rohingya” (rooinga) is now cited in many written works, which attempt to layout a history of the Rohingya people. However, Azeed Ibrahim’s new book *The Rohingya: a Hidden Genocide in Myanmar*, will be singled out because it is one of the few to become commercially successful internationally, since the recent violence. Like other Rohingya writes, Ibrahim strives to provide evidence that the Rohingya have existed in Rakhine state since before colonial times. A major piece of historical evidence which Ibrahim uses in his book are the anthropological findings of Francis Buchanan, a surgeon in the British East India Company. Buchanan who is widely hailed as the first person to ever document the word “Rohingya” (rooinga).

In 1785, Buchanan, traveled to Burma and in 1799 he published report called *A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire*. In this report Buchanan writes, “I shall now add three dialects, spoken in the Burma Empire, but evidently derived from the language of the Hindu nation. The first is that spoken by the Mohammedans,

who have long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves Rooinga, or natives of Arakan”.<sup>140</sup> Taking Buchanan’s words at face value, his ethnographic evidence does provide Ibrahim, and other academics, with a basis for the convincing argument that Rohingya or “Roogina” have existed since the beginning of the 18th Century. As directly stated by Buchanan, “the rooinga” have their own dialect, are “mohammedans” (an old term for describing Muslims), and have “long settled in Arakan”.<sup>141</sup> Although the definition of what constitutes an ethnicity is a rather contentious question, possession of a distinct language, religion and regional proximity, are typically what many consider to be the major attributes of ethnic groups.

Derek Tonkin, a former British ambassador to Thailand and Vietnam, is one of the few people to critically investigate Buchanan’s findings. Fiercely despised among Rohingya human rights advocates, Tonkin is seen as largely discrediting the legitimacy of the Rohingya identity altogether, and thus justifying the brutal genocide committed against the Rohingya. Tonkin controversially argues that Buchanan's famously recorded “Rooinga” was not a term used to distinguish an ethnic group, but rather a name used to specify the geographical location in which they resided<sup>142</sup>. Fundamentally, Tonkin questions the validity of the word “rooinga” to denote an ethnic belonging. Tonkin states, “This word 'Rooinga' would appear to mean no more than

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<sup>140</sup> Buchanan, Francis. 1798. *A Comparative Vocabulary Of Some Of The Languages Spoken In The Burma Empire*.

<sup>141</sup> Buchanan, Francis. 1798. *A Comparative Vocabulary Of Some Of The Languages Spoken In The Burma Empire*.

<sup>142</sup> "Analysis Of Francis Buchanan's 'Rooingas' And 'Rossawns '". 2018. [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/Khin-Maung-Saw-NM-2013-Analysis\\_of\\_Buchanan\\_%20Rooingas\\_and\\_Rossawns-en.pdf](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/Khin-Maung-Saw-NM-2013-Analysis_of_Buchanan_%20Rooingas_and_Rossawns-en.pdf).

'Arakaner' - a geographic locator rather than an ethnic designation”<sup>143</sup>. To follow Tonkin’s logic and provide an example of his claim, the equivalent would be of an Italian immigrant who recently immigrated to France saying he is “French”, in the sense of being “from the geographical location of France, rather than being ethnically French.

Tonkin also points out that Buchanan did not obtain these insights while in Arakan. Buchanan gained his information from speaking with Muslims who were deported from Arakan state and working as slaves in Amarapura, the Burman capital at the time<sup>144</sup>. Therefore, according to Tonkin, when Buchanan asked where the Muslim slaves came from, they simply replied that they came from Rohan or Rosan - the Bangla word for Arakan. Tonkin states, “They used the word Rooinga/Rossawn not as an ethnic qualifier, but simply to indicate their place of living before being deported”<sup>145</sup>. According to Tonkin, by adding the taxonomic “inga” to Rohan (Rooinga), the Muslims who Buchanan encountered were expressing that they were from the geographical location of Rohan (Arakan).

Ibrahim continues on to cite two other sources which use the word “rooinga”. One reference was published in the Classical Journal under the titled Languages in Burma in 1811.

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<sup>143</sup> "Full Text Of "The ' Rohingya' Identity British Experience In Arakan 1826 1948 By Derek Tonkin"". 2018. *Archive.Org*.  
[https://archive.org/stream/TheRohingyaIdentityBritishExperienceInArakan18261948ByDerekTonkin/The+%27Rohingya%27+Identity+-+British+experience+in+Arakan+1826-1948+by+Derek+Tonkin\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TheRohingyaIdentityBritishExperienceInArakan18261948ByDerekTonkin/The+%27Rohingya%27+Identity+-+British+experience+in+Arakan+1826-1948+by+Derek+Tonkin_djvu.txt).

<sup>144</sup> "Full Text Of "The ' Rohingya' Identity British Experience In Arakan 1826 1948 By Derek Tonkin"". 2018. *Archive.Org*.  
[https://archive.org/stream/TheRohingyaIdentityBritishExperienceInArakan18261948ByDerekTonkin/The+%27Rohingya%27+Identity+-+British+experience+in+Arakan+1826-1948+by+Derek+Tonkin\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TheRohingyaIdentityBritishExperienceInArakan18261948ByDerekTonkin/The+%27Rohingya%27+Identity+-+British+experience+in+Arakan+1826-1948+by+Derek+Tonkin_djvu.txt).

<sup>145</sup> “Rosan” and “Rossawn” are from another Bangla dialect, the equivalent of the word “Rohan” and “Rooinga”

Another was written by John Vater (wrongly spelt “Vateri” in Ibrahim’s book) in 1815, a report titled *Compendium of Languages Linguarum Totius Orbis*<sup>146</sup> *Index* published in both German and Latin, but this time used the name “ruinga”. However upon further investigation, both of these references ultimately cite and utilize information recorded by Francis Buchanan in the aforementioned report. The actual spelling in Vater’s report is “Ruīnga”. Although not explicitly stated, Vater, writing in German, used the word “Ruīnga” to explain how to pronounce the English recorded word “Rooinga” to his German speaking audience.<sup>147</sup>

When defending claims of Rohingya ethnicity, Rohingya and Western writers, consistently neglect the fact that word “Rohingya” did not appear at all in any of 7 colonial censuses conducted between 1872-1931. Up until 1921, Muslims in Arakan were documented, under the category of race, as “Musalman” but, by the 1921 Census, several race-categories were designated under the umbrella category “Indo-Burman race”.<sup>148</sup> Included in this category were the groups “Zerbadis, the Arakan-Mohamadens<sup>149</sup>, the Arakan Kamans and the Myedus”. The “Indo-Burman”, race were distinctly categorized as “non-indigenous” by the British. This is quite interesting considering that the “Kaman”, another Muslim group living in Arakan state, now posses Myanmar citizenship and are recognized officially recognized as a Myanmar ethnic group.

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<sup>146</sup> "Compendium Totius Orbis - Abebooks". 2018. *Abebooks.Com*.  
<https://www.abebbooks.com/book-search/title/compendium-totius-orbis/>.

<sup>147</sup> "Compendium Totius Orbis - Abebooks". 2018. *Abebooks.Com*.  
<https://www.abebbooks.com/book-search/title/compendium-totius-orbis/>.

<sup>148</sup> X, Volume. 2018. "BURMA P A R T I. R E P O R T".  
<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs22/1921-Burma%20census-report-full-tu.pdf>.

<sup>149</sup> An archaic word for Muslims

Rohingya have argued that the government has arbitrarily chosen to give the Kaman citizenship over the Rohingya. However, people from within the county have argued that possessing proof of existing as an ethnic group has during the colonial period has built a stronger cases for the Kaman being a legitimate ethnic group. The “Rohingya” were completely unknown to their meticulous British census workers. In addition to the lack of ethnographic or census evidence of the Rohingya in pre-colonial Burma, Buchanan also states himself that the true Arakan natives did not think of the “rooinga” as indigenous to the region. He writes, “for what reason I do not know, wanted to persuade me that theirs was the common language of Arakan. Both these tribes, by the real natives of Arakan, are called Kulaw Yakain, or stranger Arakan.”<sup>150</sup> Some Myanmar writers such as Aye Chan have used this quote to confirm beliefs that Rohingya are foreigners. However, this attempts looks a little too far into Buchanan’s findings, without providing wider historical evidence to back up his claims.

With no other mention of the “rooinga” in Buchanam’s work and the apparent complete absence of any colonial records, local records, or anthropological evidence of the word for “Rohingya” or variant, being actively used as a marker of ethnicity, it is reasonable to deduce that the Muslims whom Buchanan interviewed were not referring to an ethnically distinct population but rather a people from the Arakan region.

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<sup>150</sup> "Full Text Of "The ' Rohingya' Identity British Experience In Arakan 1826 1948 By Derek Tonkin"". 2018. *Archive.Org*.  
[https://archive.org/stream/TheRohingyaIdentityBritishExperienceInArakan18261948ByDerekTonkin/The+%27Rohingya%27+Identity+-+British+experience+in+Arakan+1826-1948+by+Derek+Tonkin\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TheRohingyaIdentityBritishExperienceInArakan18261948ByDerekTonkin/The+%27Rohingya%27+Identity+-+British+experience+in+Arakan+1826-1948+by+Derek+Tonkin_djvu.txt).



## The Formation of a political identity

In the face of immense persecution, Rohingya writers have made claims about their origins, in an effort to receive recognition as a legitimate Myanmar ethnic group and to secure basic protections. Rather than honestly embracing the way in which the Rohingya identity came into being, Rohingya writers have strategically reframed their history in a way thought to produce sympathy amongst the international community and political success in Myanmar. While the Rohingya have been incredibly successful in the former, they have drifted further away in the latter. Contrary to claims made by many Rohingya writers, Muslims in Arakan have not always solidified around a common Rohingya ethnic identity. They began to embrace the term “Rohingya” as a political identity during the 1950s and later.<sup>151</sup> The desire to identify as something other than “Muslims from Arakan” or “Arakanese-Muslims”, emerged out of suffered persecution and political necessity.

Japanese invasions during WWII dramatically heightened tensions between Rakhine Buddhists and Arakan muslims. Japan offered Burma the opportunity to set themselves free from British rule. Arakan would therefore serve as a battleground between Japanese-backed Arakan Buddhists in the south and British-backed Muslims in the north.<sup>152</sup> The violence that occurred between Arakan Buddhists and Muslims left a scarring memory on both groups. Muslims in

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<sup>151</sup> Leider, Jacques. 2018. ““Rohingya: The Name, The Movement, The Quest For Identity.” Yangon, 2013.”. *Academia.Edu*.  
[http://www.academia.edu/7994939/\\_Rohingya\\_The\\_name\\_the\\_movement\\_the\\_quest\\_for\\_identity.\\_Yangon\\_2013](http://www.academia.edu/7994939/_Rohingya_The_name_the_movement_the_quest_for_identity._Yangon_2013).

<sup>152</sup> Yegar, Moshe. 2002. *Between Integration And Secession*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

northern Arakan were seen by Arakan Buddhists as instruments of colonial rule, while Arakanese Buddhists were seen as antagonistic neighbors by Muslims.<sup>153</sup>

Some may wonder why the Rohingya have never been seen, or have made no attempt to being seen, as sub-ethnic group of the Rakhine people.<sup>154</sup> Attention to the hostilities between Arakan Muslims and Buddhist, which manifested under a period of being two times conquered by imperial forces, may shed light on this question. Similar animosities notoriously played out between the Burmese and Karen - particularly during the two years of clashes between the British-backed Karen and the Japanese-backed Burmese. However, the Karen were already widely understood as their own major ethnic group and were not fighting against a group, whom they could even foreseeably share an ethnic category with. The Muslims of Arakan, on the other hand, were not recognized as an ethnic group and possessed no record of identifying as an ethnicity. The violent clashes which occurred in Arakan solidified hostilities and removed any potential for Buddhist Arakan and Muslim Arakan to see each other as akin.

Fed-up with the quasi-independence allowed under imperial Japanese rule, Burmese General Aung San, who previously fought alongside the Japanese, almost overnight switched sides to lead the movement of expelling the Japanese out of Burma.<sup>155</sup> Following WWII, Muslims in Arakan, like many ethnic minorities, realized that they would not receive their own autonomous territory, as promised to them by the British. Once Burma received independence from the British in 1947, Muslims living in Arakan state were put in a difficult position. Many

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<sup>153</sup> Yegar, Moshe. 2002. *Between Integration And Secession*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

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<sup>155</sup> Thant Myint-U. 2005. *The Making Of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

wanted to claim allegiance to East Pakistan (today Bangladesh), but this option was struck down by the way in which border was drawn between East Pakistan and Arakan, and agreed upon by Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, and General Aung San. Despite numerous pleas by muslim militants in Arakan to be annexed under East Pakistan, Ali Jinnah declined their requests.<sup>156</sup> Jinnah did not want to disturb the agreement that was made with Aung San and become involved in the “internal affairs of Burma”.<sup>157</sup>

Out of fear of being ruled by the Arakanese Buddhists, a secessionist movement was prompted by Mujahidsan, a militant faction of the muslim community living in Arakan. The Mujahidsan would fight for their own Muslim state in northern Arakan on terms of self-determination until 1954. However, the Mujahidsan was not representative of all Muslims’ views in Arakan. As stressed by Rakhine historian Leider, there was great “diversity of Muslim communities and identities in Rakhine” in post-independence Burma.<sup>158</sup> In regards to diversity of origin, some Muslims were born within the country while others immigrated more recently. In regards to diversity of political aspirations, some Muslims remain committed to secessionist ambitions while others were more content with residing autonomously in Arakan.

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<sup>156</sup> Leider, Jacques. 2018. ““Rohingya: The Name, The Movement, The Quest For Identity.” Yangon, 2013.”. *Academia.Edu*. [http://www.academia.edu/7994939/\\_Rohingya\\_The\\_name\\_the\\_movement\\_the\\_quest\\_for\\_identity.\\_Yangon\\_2013](http://www.academia.edu/7994939/_Rohingya_The_name_the_movement_the_quest_for_identity._Yangon_2013).

<sup>157</sup> Jayita Sarkar, The Diplomat. 2018. "Rohingyas And The Unfinished Business Of Partition". *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/rohingyas-and-the-unfinished-business-of-partition/>.

<sup>158</sup> Leider, Jacques. 2018. ““Rohingya: The Name, The Movement, The Quest For Identity.” Yangon, 2013.”. *Academia.Edu*. [http://www.academia.edu/7994939/\\_Rohingya\\_The\\_name\\_the\\_movement\\_the\\_quest\\_for\\_identity.\\_Yangon\\_2013](http://www.academia.edu/7994939/_Rohingya_The_name_the_movement_the_quest_for_identity._Yangon_2013).

The Mujahidsan are recorded as being the first people to use the word “Rohingya” and accredited for attempting to construct a Rakhine Muslim identity. “During the parliamentary period of the 1950s, the name “Rohingya” was used by them [Mujahidsan] to demonstrate a distinct Rakhine identity of the Muslims of Chittagonian origins in northern Rakhine”.<sup>159</sup> As seen previously, the 1948 Citizenship Law did not specifically exclude non-native *taingyintha* from citizenship. Upon independence, it became increasingly clear that the Burmese government would only recognize claims for political rights and autonomy made by those who represented themselves as ethnic groups of Burma.

Muslim elites attempted to group the diverse muslim populations in Arakan under a Rohingya identity in order to warrant receiving political autonomy and, most importantly, to avoid being ruled under the authority of Rakhine Buddhists.

“Muslims in Arakan did not want to be part of a separate Arakan state dominated by the Buddhists...The Buddhist Rakhine, on the other hand, were adamantly opposed to the creation of an exclusively Muslim zone, which meant to them the de facto loss of a part of what they see as their homeland”<sup>160</sup>

In 1961, as Arakan was officially granted the status of statehood within the Union of Burma, U Nu reached a political compromise with Arakan muslims: given the Mujahidsan are to retire their

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<sup>159</sup> Leider, Jacques. ““Rohingya: The Name, The Movement, The Quest For Identity.” Yangon, 2013.”. *Academia.Edu*.  
[http://www.academia.edu/7994939/\\_Rohingya\\_The\\_name\\_the\\_movement\\_the\\_quest\\_for\\_identity.\\_Yangon\\_2013](http://www.academia.edu/7994939/_Rohingya_The_name_the_movement_the_quest_for_identity._Yangon_2013).

<sup>160</sup> Leider, Jacques. "Competing Identities And The Hybridized History Of The Rohingyas".  
<http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/Metamorphosis.pdf>.

arms, a section of Arakan state would be carved out for the Arakan Muslims. The region was Mayu Frontier Administration and is, today, made up of predominantly (destroyed) Rohingya Townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw. The Mayu Frontier Administration was administered directly under the control of the central government. The Mayu Frontier Administration would remain under the military's rule until 1974, when it was fully incorporated into (the newly renamed) Rakhine state.<sup>161</sup> After losing its special status, tensions between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya began to reemerge.

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<sup>161</sup> Leider, Jacques. "Rohingya: The Name, The Movement, The Quest For Identity." Yangon, 2013. *Academia.Edu*.  
[http://www.academia.edu/7994939/\\_Rohingya\\_The\\_name\\_the\\_movement\\_the\\_quest\\_for\\_identity.\\_Yangon\\_2013](http://www.academia.edu/7994939/_Rohingya_The_name_the_movement_the_quest_for_identity._Yangon_2013).

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This project has raised questions around ethnicity, specifically when does an ethnic group come into being? Questions of the appropriate relationship between indigeneity and citizenship? In chapter 2, an acknowledgement of the massive amount of racism fueled hate speech against Muslims was made, as well as an attempt to understand a historical narrative in which the Rohingya are seen as a much more recent invention, geared towards acquiring specific political ends.

How does one make sense of all of these questions? To what extent do any of these individually, merit reflection considering the outright atrocities being committed against the Rohingya? For most of my time studying the crisis, I have found any attempt to rationalize why the Rohingya are treated so poorly to be fruitless. Diving deep into colonial anthropological records and unearthing what seed of historic fact exists to explain why the Rohingya are treated differently than any other Myanmar ethnic group may appear, at least to some westerners, benign. Indeed, such an explanation would have not stopped Gawdu Thar Ya, a Rohingya village in Rakhine (as well as many more) from being burned after its people were forced out by the Myanmar army. However, it is also apparent that the countless condemnations of violence and demands to recognize the Rohingya as being a Myanmar ethnic group, have also done nothing to stop blatant acts of violence committed towards these stateless people.

From my research on Myanmar's history I have gathered that political or social change within the country has never emerged by imposing sanctions or denouncing the acts of the Myanmar people. Inversely, it has always been mobilized from within. I think that the West needs to take this reality seriously. There is an excellent counter-point to this suggestion, emphasizing that the discrimination and violence suffered by the Rohingya in Myanmar is

unprecedented, and teeters on the edge of genocide. Therefore, a heavy-handed approach must be taken in order to ensure that the Rohingya are not wiped off the face of the earth. The seriousness of this depiction of the issue and argument should not be taken lightly. However, it does not address how a deeper question of how the Rohingya will be treated if or when they are successfully repatriated back into Rakhine state.

That being said, the repatriation of the Rohingya must occur within a timely manner. If too much time passes before the Rohingya are repatriated, the Myanmar people will become even further unconvinced of their claims to holding any ancestral connection to Arakan. This will further solidify the idea, among Myanmar people, that the “Rohingya” are truly “Bengalis” posing as indigenous Myanmar people. An approach that advocates for a quick but responsible repatriation is essential. Appealing to rights on the basis of humanitarian grounds, rather than as a Myanmar ethnic group, is the most realistic way to produce tangible improvements in the conditions the Rohingya are facing. The concern of dropping the name “Rohingya” completely from the international community’s vernacular. Considering that the Rohingya are stateless, there is a genuine fear that if we halt their insistence on using the word “Rohingya” completely, then the Rohingya will become effectively invisible to world. The Myanmar government will have been successful in erasing the Rohingya from the earth and the international communities consciousness. This image, as presented, is truly terrifying, but I believe deserves some push back.

The process of receiving rights for the Rohingya will be a slow process, and may take place over several steps. Even if they are not initially granted citizenship, once the Rohingya are able to achieve some level of baseline protections, and as the country as a whole is able to exercise its democratic mechanisms of claiming and defending rights, I believe a normative

change will eventually occur, allowing the Rohingya to be gradually accepted into the body politic. The bigger concern rests in remaining trapped in an ideological stalemate, between Myanmar and the West, over whether or not the Rohingya are a legitimate ethnic group, which could provoke more violence and keep the Rohingya from receiving any rights.

More creative approaches to be taken to offer the Rohingya human rights. Simply screaming at the Myanmar people to use the word “Rohingya” and forcing them to identify the Rohingya as a Myanmar ethnic group, alone, will not put the Rohingya in any closer of a position of obtaining rights. In fact, such a narrow sided approach to advocacy could arguably worsen the condition of the Rohingya. Many ideologically driven human rights activists, stand firm in their belief that if the Rohingya desire to be called “Rohingya”, (although it is unclear if all Rohingya do feel strongly about this issue and not just a vocal few) their wish trumps all. However, as can be seen in Malaysia, Rohingya refugees are already giving up their Rohingya identity. In Malaysia, many refugees from Rakhine do not want to be recognized as “Rohingya”, but prefer to be just called “Muslims”.<sup>162</sup> Undoubtedly, there are other factors, which should be taken into account when speaking about the experience of refugees, such as not wanting to be recognized as a refugee. However, this example does show the reflexive character of identity and how people choose to self-identify. It very well might be the case that many Rohingya, individually, do not place identifying as “Rohingya” or being recognized as Myanmar ethnic group as high priority. However, the international media, has elevated the importance of this claim through their coverage on the crisis.

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<sup>162</sup> Verified citation needed. However, this idea was put forward by Parthiban Mauniandy, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Sarah Lawrence



An under addressed issue in this project is the role of the military that the military still has over governmental actions. Having mandated 25% representation of the Myanmar parliament, as written into the 2008 Constitution, the military holds a substantial amount of power in governmental power. The military will need to be faded out in order to free the Myanmar government from the military's influence. This will undoubtedly improve transparency and accountability within governmental decision making. Related to this issue is the unstableness of the newly democratic Myanmar government. Aung San Suu Kyi generated a substantial amount of Buddhist nationalism during her election, and was elected largely by Buddhist Burmese base; a people who possess a history of discriminating against Muslims in Myanmar. Many speculate that the reason Aung San Suu Kyi has not spoken out on the Rohingya issue is out of fear she will lose too much support from her base, and the military will take advantage of the unstableness by attempting to take control back from the civilian government; a fate very few in the western world would desire.

The core of the Rohingya issue lies somewhere between many Rohingya writer's misguided belief that claiming ethnicity will provide citizenship, and westerner's uncritical acceptance of Rohingya historic claims to the detriment of the Rohingya's ability to receive any rights at all. The international community's accepting the ethnicity of the Rohingya as an unchanging category is somewhat reminiscent to the ways in which the British categorized and reified ethnicity in colonial Burma. As more western media contributes to the topic, whether in the form of short news articles on the crisis, or NGO idealistic demands to grant the Rohingya overnight citizenship, I have become even more certain the condition of the Rohingya will not improve without finding some way to grant an identity to this group of people that is more acceptable to both the persecuted minority and the rest of Myanmar's population.

## APPENDIX I

### Research Method Background

The process of conducting research for this project, to put it lightly, did not go as expected. Numerous changes were made to the initial plan. In July of 2017, I traveled to Myanmar to conduct research for this project, and to teach English at the University of Mandalay. My teaching position consisted teaching 5 undergraduate English classes and acting as an out-of-class English language tutor. I also allowed the opportunity to attend political science courses on past and present Myanmar politics. However, even having conducted multiple years of prior research on the Rohingya crisis leading up to this trip, once in the country I found that many of the assumptions that I held about how people saw the issue within the country were inaccurate.

Through my prior research on Burma's struggle for democracy, I had gained insights into the fundamental role students played in putting pressure on the Myanmar government to produce political change within the country. Student-led protests were crucial in securing democratic and liberal rights within the country, such as being able to participate in free-and-open elections, significant improvements in freedom of speech and press, etc. Thus, during my first trip to Myanmar, I held the assumption that, if there were to be any population sympathetic to the plight of the Rohingya, or least at more likely to articulate the issue in a similar fashion to how it is reported by the international community, it would include college level students.

To my surprise, university students were not the activists for the plight of the Rohingya that I anticipated them to be. In fact, I did not encounter, or hear of, a single student who believed the Rohingya to be a legitimate Myanmar ethnic group or worthy of Myanmar

citizenship throughout my whole time in Myanmar. Students were just as unconvinced of the existence of a Rohingya ethnicity, as were extremist Buddhist monks in country who outwardly dehumanize the group through hate speech. In some senses, students were found to be swept up by prevailing Buddhist nationalism sentiments, which did not allow for the Rohingya to be accepted as Myanmar people.

In addition to having my original assumptions challenged, making the process of conducting fruitful research difficult, my first trip to Myanmar was cut short. Originally planned for 2 months, I was required to return to the US after 1 month due to visa-related issues. Fortunately, I was asked to return to the University of Mandalay to continue teaching English in January 2018, and was also approved to conduct more interviews with students at the university. My interviews, and countless conversations held about the Rohingya crisis, during my first trip, proved crucial developing a more refined approach to speaking about the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. Upon returning, I was able to ask more relevant questions and facilitate interviews which allowed participants to more freely express their feelings about Rohingya identity and the violence in Rakhine state.

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