



Rohingya children at the Kutupalong refugee camp attend class. Efforts to preserve the group's cultural heritage have been hampered by a general lack of literacy. (Munir Uz Zaman / AFP via Getty Images)

# Rohingya Cultural Preservation: An Internationally Coordinated Response Is Urgent

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## Executive Summary

The Rohingya people face an existential threat, not merely to their physical survival as genocide victims but also to their ethnic identity itself. The state-backed disenfranchisement of the Rohingya in Myanmar, including stripping them of citizenship in the 1980s and other exclusionary policies that followed, leading to their mass expulsion in 2017, have had calamitous effects on the free expression and development of Rohingya cultural and linguistic practices in the civic

space. Given that now the majority of the Rohingya people have been forced outside of their homeland, the international community, including host states, INGOs, and other stakeholders, have principally fixated on addressing the immediate humanitarian needs of these refugee populations and renewing demands for their safe repatriation.

One of the more overlooked aspects of the current Rohingya genocide is the targeted campaign against the Rohingya ethnic identity. Rohingya cultural traditions and their unique language have been subjected to sustained attacks within their homeland,





resulting in a distinct lack of institutions within the Rohingya community concentrated on cultural retention and reproduction. Due to the assimilatory and globalizing pressures that the Rohingya face disconnected from their country of origin, it is imperative that Rohingya culture and language preservation be given due attention.

This paper maps the current stakeholders and heritage initiatives among the Rohingya community, chronicles existing challenges, and presents policy recommendations for integrating cultural preservation schemes into the international response to the Rohingya crisis. The report ends with a series of recommendations to the international community to play a proactive role in efforts at cultural preservation and production toward the Rohingya people. This report has been produced with the consultation of numerous independent experts, whose insights have been included throughout.

## Background of the Rohingya Crisis

The United Nations has termed the crimes of the Burmese regime against the Rohingya people as acts of genocide.<sup>1</sup> Genocides take place as targeted campaigns of destruction based on aspects of collective identity, including along cultural and linguistic lines.<sup>2</sup> The Rohingya people were driven out of their ancestral homeland and continue to experience the effects of the genocide. Due to their history of persecution, they have lacked centralized institutions focused on cultural production, which traditionally preserves culture beyond geographical belonging.

In Myanmar, Rohingya people were slowly stripped of their citizenship status by the state as part of a broader process of identity destruction and violence. The state-sponsored denial of their history and post-independence ethnic and legal status has occurred alongside state terror and mass expulsions from their homelands in the Rakhine region of Myanmar. The first wave of migrations of the Rohingya from their ancestral homeland in Arakan (modern-day Rakhine state) began in the 1950s and 1960s and accelerated in the 1970s following a series of military incursions into the state.<sup>3</sup> While less than a million Rohingya remain in their homelands in Myanmar, an estimated 2 million to 3 million live in

diaspora in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Middle East, as well as Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia.

Post-independence, the Rohingya people in Arakan were full citizens and had varying levels of civic participation and expression of their culture. The government permitted shortwave radio broadcasts in the Rohingya language, and Muslim representatives from the region were elected to Parliament. The military regime's coup in 1962 began a gradual sidelining of the Rohingya people and their cultural identity and language under a program of Burmese nationalization.<sup>4</sup>

The Burmese Broadcasting Service eventually removed the Rohingya language. In 1982, the Rohingya were excluded from being listed as a Taingyintha ethnicity under the Burma Citizenship Act, gradually removing their citizenship rights and rendering subsequent generations stateless. In the late '80s, under the Burmanization program, names of traditional townships and landmarks historically resided in by Rohingya were changed.<sup>5</sup> In effect, the Rohingya were denied the capacity to freely build and reproduce their cultural identity within their homeland for decades.

The Rohingya identity has been a contested subject within the scholarship on Burmese ethnic groups. A Rohingya communal narrative asserts the historical presence of their people for centuries in the land of Arakan, dating from the time of first contact by Arab traders in the littoral in the ninth century and including a flourishing period in the Kingdom of Mrauk U from the 15th to 18th centuries. Historian Jacques Leider asserts that the Rohingya represent a politically constructed, hybridized ethnoreligious identity formed post-independence by largely settler communities tracing their historical origins primarily to Bengali migrants brought during the British colonial period.<sup>6</sup> Anthropology scholars Elliott Prasse-Freeman and Kirt Mausert push back against the notion of a completely constructed political identity formation for the Rohingya, arguing for the probability of a proto-Rohingya ethnic strain that predated independence and British colonialism of the 18th and 19th centuries, and through a process of ethnogenesis led to the development of the modern Rohingya formation, which is still fluid to a certain extent.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless,



international relations scholar Niloy Ranjan Biswas maintains that Rohingya identity in the diaspora continues to be at a crossroads between politics and society.<sup>8</sup> The individual community member does not form such an identity in a cultural vacuum but also in relation to how host societies deal with him or her; the language itself that the Rohingya speak is an example of this intersectionality.

## The Development of the Written Rohingya Language

Ethnic state suppression of the Rohingya has also led to a stunting of the development of written Rohingya resources in Rakhine state. Hence, Rohingya remains largely a spoken language among the Rohingya worldwide, with only recent efforts to introduce written scripts that have gained some currency in the diaspora. These competing efforts include the introduction of Rohingyalish, formalized in 1999 by E.M. Siddique Basu, which employs Roman characters as a modern typeface.<sup>9</sup> The other alternative offered is the Hanafi Rohingya script, developed by Mohammed Hanif in the 1980s and used for limited newsprint circulation in the following decades. It has recently been accepted by the Unicode Consortium to become a recognized digital script, allowing Rohingya to text and email in their own language.<sup>10</sup>

However, there has yet to be widespread adoption of either of these written formats by the Rohingya. In the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, a majority of the Rohingya surveyed are unaware that such scripts even exist, even though they indicate their desire to use the script should they have access to and knowledge of it. Aside from their lack of familiarity with the scripts, nearly 80% of the Rohingya in the camps are illiterate.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, those with basic literacy are primarily familiar with the Burmese written language, having been taught it in Myanmar before migrating, or with Urdu, or with Arabic, which is used as the medium for religious education in madrassa schooling.<sup>12</sup> In the absence of a formal script, events of Rohingya historical and cultural memory are inevitably passed down through oral storytelling and folk songs.<sup>13</sup> Given that there is no universally agreed-upon Rohingya written script and high levels of illiteracy among the Rohingya, the loss of language

represents a threat to those wishing to maintain a sense of collective cultural identity in the diaspora across generations.

## Community Concerns

Community leader and founder of Rohingya Women's Development Network Sharifah Shakirah conveys the complications of rebuilding Rohingya heritage post-genocide, as those who fled Myanmar have divergent experiences from their contemporaries in the diaspora community. Customs and traditions practiced in villages in Myanmar, such as *honlas*, songs communicating emotions at weddings, funerals, or special celebrations, are unfamiliar to and not performed by most diaspora members. Shakirah says genocide "disrupted" preservation, producing a "gap" in the cultural production process, exacerbated by the lack of land or physical location to express and enact their heritage freely. In utilizing UNESCO's conceptual framework to map prevailing threats to intangible culture across at-risk communities, Shakirah's insights classify the Rohingya people as vulnerable to "negative attitudes," experiencing "weakened practice and transmission," and coping with the "loss of objects or systems."<sup>14</sup>

Many Rohingya in the refugee camps are troubled by the barriers to practicing their religious duties, ceremonies, and rituals, as one community member and respondent noted while raising the apprehensions voiced during his field research in Cox's Bazar. As the Rohingya are a stateless Muslim minority group, Islam remains significant not only to identity but also in governing the daily lives and decisions of the majority of Rohingya families. Community members mourn that few children are able to attend madrassas to receive primary training on Islam. Families fear the erosion of social respect as they raise their children with degrees of separation from their cultural homeland. The Rohingya people were historically an agricultural community in rural Rakhine state, where around 75% of the population engaged in farming.<sup>15</sup> Barred from this facet of their identity, Rohingya people have been deprived of exercising and transmitting the expertise of their trade vocations.

Daniel Coyle, a field researcher in Cox's Bazar, implicates refugee camp conditions in ongoing



cultural decay. He cites the community's distress over their children lacking livelihoods and education, their inability to accumulate resources to follow the proper ceremonies for their holidays, and the lack of assets and support in consolidating oral histories as "tantamount proof and evidence of the loss of culture." Coyle also recounted high levels of anxiety around elders dying, in particular. Besides the bereavement of human life, this represents the loss of cultural memory, especially of their physical homeland, Arakan, and broaches an often-unspoken dynamic of displacement involving families being forced to choose one grandparent to assist throughout the refugee journey.

## The Significance of Cultural Heritage in Post-Genocide Contexts

Genocide manifests through the intentional destruction of social identity, which comprises the common faculties binding individuals to a group, including language, traditions, social structures, land, or physical objects.<sup>16</sup> Group identity reinforces a shared history and memory, with one cultural heritage scholar naming genocide a "memoricide."<sup>17</sup> This mutual narrative provides a stable positioning in the world associated with the ability to perceive a meaningful future. Regarding the Rohingya crisis, several international law scholars have contested that the overemphasis on physical destruction disregards the severity of "crimes that destroy the very fabric of a group."<sup>18</sup>

## Framing Cultural Heritage

Dr. Anne Gilliland, director and professor at the Center for Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, distinguishes three aspects of cultural heritage targeted in instances of genocide. The first is religious, cultural, and other physical sites being deliberately attacked, erasing the imprints of home and sense of belonging. Second, other aspects of tangible culture might be eliminated, including the destruction or denial of documentation of participation in civil life. Lastly, the intangible aspects dissipate more inadvertently. UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage, sometimes termed "living cultural heritage," as "practices, expressions, knowledge and skills" that are validated by the community and frequently manifested through "oral traditions; performing arts; social practices, rituals, and festive events; knowledge

and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship."<sup>19</sup>

This definition highlights emerging theories in the heritage sector exploring the historical Western proclivity for tangible culture, with funding precedence given to monuments, cultural sites, and other physical artifacts.<sup>20</sup> Heritage scholars hypothesize that the West, oriented toward a more "scientific materialism," has been less inclined to espouse culture's metaphysical and transcendental aspects.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, some fret that this materialism has constructed static definitions of culture focused mainly on "concrete manifestations," yielding interventions attempting to merely catalog while "fixing or freezing intangible cultural heritage to some pure or primordial form."<sup>22</sup> Research from the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property alternatively asserts that culture is not stagnant but, while constantly evolving, is "dynamic and can be seen as production."<sup>23</sup>

These theories could be relevant to the Rohingya crisis due to an intuitive reliance on intangible heritage as a people cut off from their physical territory and cultural sites and thus already dependent on oral traditions. Outside of their homeland, shifting localities over time may engender varying Rohingya cultural expressions and ways of being among the diaspora. Therefore, recognizing the living nature of culture embraces the past, present, and future in the "massively creative enterprise," as Rasa Davidavičiūtė puts it, of ongoing heritage production.<sup>24</sup> Preservation efforts may require more innovative and underfunded approaches to uphold cultural memory, capture and revitalize intangible heritage, and integrate the metamorphosis of Rohingya identity.

## Integrating Cultural Heritage Into Crisis Response Policy

In post-genocide and conflict literature, research suggests the necessity of merging cultural heritage activities into the recovery process, ensuring holistic solutions equivalent to the severity of the offense. The intuitive community reaction of immediately reviving culturally significant structures and practices in post-conflict settings showcases the "strong psychosocial need to re-establish the familiar and





cherished following a phase of violent disruption of normal life.”<sup>25</sup> Besides reclaiming familiarity, post-conflict settings have demonstrated how “reaffirming identity” through cultural heritage work can build resilience amidst precarious circumstances.<sup>26</sup>

The high volume of immediate physical needs following war or genocide results in cultural heritage rarely achieving precedence and the phenomena of “culture must wait.”<sup>27</sup> When funding perchance is procured for cultural reconstruction activities, the amount tends to be meager, often financing monitoring and evaluation reporting or lending itself to “narrow interpretations” of heritage concerned with physical property and structures.<sup>28</sup>

In persuading humanitarian actors of the urgency of cultural preservation efforts among genocide survivors, Gilliland raises the case of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, established by the United Nations to hold accountable those responsible for crimes of ethnic cleansing and mass atrocities in the Balkan region throughout the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> Their efforts converged on building databases of documentation and testimonies as evidence against perpetrators, an argument understood by aid agencies, justifying the immediacy of preserving documents. Nevertheless, Gilliland claims that “what victims did not understand was that prosecution was not interested particularly in the human aspects of being a victim” and that the intangible and narrative nature of the database became more important to survivors.

When surveying other heritage intervention approaches, Gilliland included Native American populations, where U.S. federal action has aimed to apprehend their dissipating language. Among the Bosnian diaspora, a surge of digital efforts has spawned “trans-local virtual villages” as a platform for community members to experience their heritage immersively; however, project longevity limits the understanding of its effectiveness. Gilliland noted the Armenian community’s success in achieving community-driven approaches due to their innate resilience and unified determination for heritage preservation in response to the sheer extent of the brutality during the Armenian genocide.

## Mapping Current Cultural Preservation Efforts

The movement by international actors to address unique cultural threats facing the Rohingya has been slow, with much of the attention and resources poured toward humanitarian relief. In the past five years, though, several initiatives have arisen, both within and outside of the Rohingya community, that are particularly focused on aspects of Rohingya cultural memory. At the moment, this handful of initiatives represents individual efforts of concerned grassroots actors or development agencies operating more or less independently of each other, with some situated at the heart of Cox’s Bazar refugee settlements while others operate across the diaspora networks.

## Centers for Rohingya Cultural Expression

Various centers promoting Rohingya culture have been founded throughout the crisis. One flagship project is the Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre (RCMC) located in Cox’s Bazar. The RCMC is the product of an in-depth study conducted in the camps in 2019, which revealed that the loss of identity was a central issue in the Rohingya’s sense of depleted well-being. Following this was an intensive effort by field workers to map tangible and intangible aspects of the Rohingya cultural experience.

The RCMC initially began as a virtual archive and subsequently as a physical showcase of a comprehensive collection of tangible objects, such as domestic items used in everyday life, including basketry, pottery, and embroidery, as well as woodwork, architectural models, visual arts, and various artifacts related to the ancestral heritage of the Rohingya in their homeland in Arakan. David Palazón, the former curator of the RCMC, describes the mapping procedure as a research-to-production process. The resulting cultural memories were graded, edited, archived, and presented back to the community in an enhanced format for their perusal through a series of community consultations, focus groups, workshops, and interviews with knowledge-holders.

According to Palazón, through this process, the RCMC aimed to “mediate a narrative of the Rohingya experience fully owned by the community.” He



explained that the items in the collection are framed on one side by memories of their beloved homeland of Arakan and on the other by the endurance of the Rohingya refugee community in Bangladesh. He further added that these mementos could be classified into three major areas: items of emotional or economic value rescued during their escape from Myanmar, items produced by artisans through their own memory, knowledge, and skills, and lastly, ingenious items created in the refugee camp as a practical mode of survival.

Aside from the RCMC, other centers have been established outside the region serving resettled Rohingya populations. This includes the Rohingya Culture Center serving an expanding Rohingya refugee population in Chicago. The center not only facilitates the assimilation of the newly arriving refugees into American society but also acts as a platform for the Rohingya to practice and present their own cultural experience while in the diaspora.

Rohingya Women's Development Network, one of the first Rohingya woman-led organizations, provides language, livelihood, and religious programming for Rohingya women in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The organization also provides a communal space where Rohingya can coalesce and connect to their culture through events, workshops, and celebrations. Founder Sharifah Shakirah encourages her community to engage in seemingly small yet powerful acts of heritage transmission, like speaking the Rohingya language with their children and preparing Rohingya cuisine in their homes to cultivate a deeper attachment to their cultural roots. Shakirah has emerged as a global activist tackling gender inequality in her community and championing the cause of justice for the Rohingya genocide.

The spark in international attention toward the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar since the communal riots in Rakhine state in 2012 coincided with an awakening among much of the Rohingya diaspora in the region toward solidarity with those fellow Rohingya victims on the ground. This also manifested in a renewed effort by many transnational diasporic groups toward the revitalization of Rohingya ethnic identity that was not only suppressed in Rakhine state but also seen to have been at threat of multigenerational loss in the diaspora,

given the assimilatory pressures faced by communities in their various host countries. Shakirah represents this concerned group of diaspora members. In an interview on the urgency of Rohingya cultural preservation, she stresses the importance of Rohingya voices telling the world "who we are" and showing them "we are equal human beings" in order to defeat genocidal intentions, claiming "if we don't have that, then we are supporting the Burmese military to clear our names and identity and destroy everything that we have, chasing us away from the land. So we cannot let it happen."

### **Rohingya Media, Language, and Artistic Revival**

A proliferation of Rohingya media can be seen in the past decade, mostly available on digital channels, given that most Rohingya outside of Myanmar manage to access smartphones as a survival tool. While many of the products generated by Rohingya content creators cover current affairs and situations on the ground in the conflict zone, a minor portion of the content has been devoted to themes of Rohingya cultural art forms, ancestral history of their land of Arakan, and religious programming. Since 2012, R-Vision, considered the first Rohingya television channel, has broadcasted limited cultural segments, filming Rohingya expounding upon the meaning of cultural proverbs, hosting Rohingya singers and musicians, and endorsing reading and writing in the Rohingya language. Co-Founder Mohammad Noor says they "promote reviving the culture" by influencing viewers to preserve, save, document, and share cultural practices or artifacts.

Along with promoting Rohingya cultural identity, Noor's recent focus has shifted toward preserving the documentary record relating to the Rohingya presence in Arakan. One of his initiatives in this regard has been the Rohingya Historical Archive, which seeks to mobilize members of the Rohingya diaspora to create a digital record of a variety of identity documents and aspects of cultural memory related to the lived experiences of those who have lived in Arakan.

As the identity crisis and threat of language loss have become more pronounced in recent years, there has been a resurgence within Rohingya diaspora communities around language retention. When the Unicode Consortium officially accepted the Hanafi



script in 2022, community members began translating the Quran into the Rohingya script for the first time as well. Noor states that “preservation will ultimately be through the manifestation of the language,” and so “nourishing and empowering language is one of the key factors if we as a people want to survive.”

Aside from these attempts at halting cultural loss, there has been a flowering of disparate works across the wider Rohingya diaspora demonstrating a range of artistic and creative talent, particularly online. A prominent voice has been Mayyu Ali, a Rohingya poet and writer who has attempted to capture the narrative of the struggle of the Rohingya in his works. Hailing originally from Rakhine state and with a background in literature, he has sought to inspire other young Rohingya to move toward capturing their cultural experience and broadcasting it to a broader international audience. To this end, he founded The Art Garden Rohingya, a virtual platform showcasing the works of over 100 Rohingya writers, artists, and poets. His work has evolved into a youth-led research initiative, the Rohingya Language Preservation Project, which recently published a report titled “First They Targeted Our Language and Culture,” chronicling the history of Myanmar’s attacks on Rohingya identity and exploring the implications of genocide seen through the decline of the Rohingya vernacular in the Bangladesh camps.

Lastly, there has been the recent launch of the Rohingyaatographer, an online magazine composed of works by trained Rohingya photographers on the ground in Cox’s Bazar. Photography acts as a medium of empowerment and self-expression for these refugees to capture the unique moments in the lives of community members as they seek to negotiate the harsh realities of the camps.

## Current Challenges

### Funding Crisis

The prospect of the Rohingya experiencing a communitywide loss of identity and cultural erasure comes at a time when there is an overwhelming humanitarian crisis to meet the survival needs of their population, particularly in the largest refugee settlement in the world in Cox’s Bazar. In the past year,

the situation in the camps has dramatically worsened, with a spike in crime and gangsterism, as well as the proliferation of drugs. The desperate conditions have resulted in an increased wave of migration of Rohingya to Southeast Asia this past winter, further deepening the regional nature of the issue. Unfortunately, the past year has also coincided with donor fatigue, due mainly to the shift in international focus to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the aftermath of the pandemic stretching national budgets, as the Bangladesh government is now struggling to bear most of the burden of hosting such a large population. A recent effort by the international donor conference to raise sufficient funds to meet the Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya in Bangladesh resulted in an over 50% shortfall of over \$400 million.<sup>30</sup> This led to the United Nations’ unprecedented and highly criticized move to cut food rations, citing a lack of funds.<sup>31</sup> Currently, the U.N. is making a renewed push for further funds from donors to meet needs such as nutrition and health care.<sup>32</sup> Given the present realities of funding shortages, the enduring cultural crisis for the Rohingya will likely receive less financial consideration from certain stakeholders involved.

### Participation and Audience

Furthermore, a community consultation research project during the COVID-19 pandemic executed by the International Organization for Migration exhibits a growing distrust among the Rohingya community in Cox’s Bazar toward humanitarian organizations and aid workers, identifying a feeling of suspicion due to underrepresentation.<sup>33</sup> Even regarding preservation initiatives and decision making on which aspects of culture to safeguard, one field researcher in Cox’s Bazar remarked that “rarely were Rohingya leading that conversation.” The researcher also identified the potential harm by the humanitarian sector in projects catering to an audience of donors and the international community rather than to the Rohingya community itself.

Externally led projects risk the persistence of speculating about the Rohingya community instead of engaging their voices to ensure dignity and promote community-driven efforts. Further limitations include the “short-term, quick-fix, pre-planned project culture” of many humanitarian organizations or donor-funded





initiatives requiring expedited visual displays of success.<sup>34</sup> Instead, some heritage scholars contend for conditions and values promoting “participatory reconstruction” where local community involvement is prioritized to produce more tailored solutions and resist uniform responses from outside actors.<sup>35</sup> The risk looms of international organizations inserting their values into delicate post-conflict or crisis settings.<sup>36</sup> A healthy repercussion of responses administered by the Rohingya community includes transferring justice into the hands of internal group members and beyond external geopolitical actors.<sup>37</sup>

### **Siloization of Current Efforts**

Recent efforts lack the scale and resources to effectively deal with this community-wide cultural identity crisis that spans the region and several Rohingya population centers in various host states. These efforts, spearheaded by INGOs or CSOs, normally cater to the needs of the Rohingya refugee communities in their particular settings and lack transnational cooperation. Within the Rohingya diaspora organizations themselves, such coordination across boundaries on these issues is also rare, with disparate areas concentrating on isolated aspects of culture. On top of this, the deterioration of ground conditions in the camps in Cox’s Bazar, which hosts the largest single Rohingya population, further renders the task of fieldwork on cultural preservation or production unfeasible until the situation can improve. Consequently, Muhammad Noor advocates that “now the heavy burden on preserving culture is on people in diaspora.” He notes that while some diaspora members are still in dire situations, they are socioeconomically more advantaged than the community in Bangladesh and not endangered by cultural enactment, as are those still in the Rakhine state in Myanmar. Therefore, he urges those at liberty to practice Rohingya culture to participate in Rohingya festivals, cuisine, clothing, and language with their families.

### **The Impending Generational Loss of Cultural Memory**

While the Rohingya possess a multilayered and intricate cultural fabric linked with their lived existence in Arakan, the reservoir for much of this cultural

memory can be found in the hearts and minds of the older generation of Rohingya. This generation lived in the post-independence era in Myanmar, in which the Rohingya people had a degree of limited freedom to express themselves culturally in their own land and a vibrant society, before the imposition of the junta’s exclusionary policies and military persecutions beginning in the 1970s.

The elders retain, for the most part, the realities of that lived experience of the Rohingya people and the complex cultural matrix that had developed in Arakan, including a period of relatively harmonious intercommunal relations with their Rakhine neighbors and a more thriving local economy in which the Rohingya played an active part in fishery and farming. They, in turn, have passed their recollections of these experiences down to succeeding generations, mostly to those living in the diaspora who have never set foot in Arakan itself. The forms these recollections take are varied. They include the Rohingyas’ own historical narrative of the origins of the Rohingya people, dating their link to the land back centuries. They cover forms of oral storytelling of popular tales and incidents of note, interwoven with the struggles of the Rohingya people who persevered in the face of oppression and stories of those cultural icons who resisted the military regime. They encompass an entire lexicon of Rohingya special phrases, idioms, and a range of other terminological references connected back to their homeland. They also relate to the knowledge behind the practices of trades and crafts for which the Rohingya had their own distinctive methods that were deeply connected to the communal context and differed depending on clan, township, and village in Arakan.

The elders then represent the most significant resource for the Rohingya in retaining their intangible cultural heritage. Given their age and the precarious conditions in which they often live, they are also most vulnerable to various threats. Yet there has not been a concerted effort by the international community to consolidate and preserve their cultural memory despite the urgency presented by the extent of the loss once this generation passes away. Rather, the emphasis has been diverted toward preserving the more material and physically visible aspects of Rohingya culture. While these no doubt are valuable from the standpoint of the





Rohingya, they do not fully capture the broader context and organic reality of life back in Arakan, which holds a more profound significance for the people concerned. Unfortunately, UNESCO's mechanism designed to protect intangible heritage is inaccessible to the Rohingya community due to their civil and political status as a stateless population. In 2003, UNESCO's General Convention included a provision to publish annually the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and a List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.<sup>38</sup> However, the nomination process relies on the submission by a State Party, therefore excluding communities without government recognition and corroboration.

### Illiteracy as a Cultural Barrier

Cultural reproduction predicated a level of literacy among the population concerned. A significant challenge for the Rohingya is the desperately low literacy level among the population due to their being denied access to formal education at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in Myanmar and as primarily refugees in their host states in the region. Even for the few Rohingya who gained an education in Myanmar, any historical trace of the Rohingya people as a member of the diverse ethnic makeup of the country is absent from their teaching due to the decades-old policy of national Burmanization of the educational curriculum. In the diaspora, most Rohingya can only gain a religious education by attending an informal learning center, normally a community madrasa.

The historical legacy of lack of education access has led to the relative dearth of written cultural works and the delay in standardizing the Rohingya script. As the Rohingya continue in many contexts without education access, the likelihood of Rohingya now and in the future being able to engage with the Rohingya script and contribute constructively to perpetuating it as a written language dwindles. As mentioned previously, approximately 80% of the Rohingya who arrived in Bangladesh in 2017 lacked literacy. The Bangladesh authorities subsequently banned access to local education curricula for these Rohingya as well, and only a minority in the camps are now able to be taught from the Myanmar national curriculum.

Therefore, the Rohingya cultural crisis is directly linked to the Rohingya educational crisis, given that those literary and cultural products written in Rohingya scripts are limited in terms of readership among the wider Rohingya audience. Additionally, many aspects of the Rohingya historical and cultural narrative, which may be shared across the more privileged and vocal sections of the Rohingya diaspora, remain inaccessible to many lay Rohingya due to the literacy barrier. As these Rohingya outside Myanmar live longer in their host societies as informal residents, there will be an increasing tendency to assimilate. The sole force toward cultural retention of their Rohingya identity is the physical enclavization of the Rohingya themselves in clustered urban communities, such as in Malaysia, or camp settlements, as in Bangladesh.

### Recommendations

1. Incorporate cultural preservation as a key theme in current international stakeholder and donor conferences focused on humanitarian relief, with the aim of drawing attention to the necessity of integrating heritage preservation in the Rohingya crisis response.
2. Given the present difficulties faced by the Rohingya in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps, empower voices in the Rohingya diaspora toward cultural production and facilitate the creation of a formal working group to connect and foster collaboration between disparate organizations, academics, and community members.
3. Redirect current interventions on Rohingya cultural preservation to target intangible aspects of Rohingya cultural identity as opposed to purely material demonstrations of Rohingya heritage to certify that efforts are upholding the most vulnerable and at-risk aspects of culture.
4. Given the present funding crisis faced in responding to the Rohingya humanitarian disaster, facilitate the opening of funds from alternative sources dedicated to cultural protection and restoration for Rohingya communities to ensure cultural preservation efforts are adequately resourced.
5. Support the production and utilization of materials in the Rohingya language, whether literature, poetry,



digital media, or educational materials, to promote the communitywide use of the spoken and written Rohingya language.

6. In addition to current archival efforts around documentation for genocide prosecution, build comprehensive archives capturing the oral histories of elders and others' accounts of life in Arakan, and the lived experiences of Rohingya communities in the diaspora, lending data to be used by researchers, authors, artists, and future generations.
7. Apply pressure on UNESCO to include the Rohingya community on their List of Intangible Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, forming other pathways for nomination outside State Parties. This action will raise awareness and provide additional resources to protect the Rohingya's cultural heritage.
8. Engage academic institutions regionally and internationally on topics beyond the humanitarian crisis and genocide, promoting anthropological research around Rohingya heritage. While broadening and deepening academic research on Rohingya culture, this will simultaneously cultivate intervention efforts less hindered by expedited project outputs or regional political agendas.
9. Allocate more funding toward grassroots projects being led by community leaders, where possible, to ensure community-led initiatives are supported and that preservation efforts are guided by those with the most credible and intimate knowledge of the Rohingya language, culture, and history.
10. Embrace decentralized and smartphone-accessible apps and platforms with the power to circulate cultural content to unite Rohingya throughout the global diaspora around a shared identity, traditions, language, and practices.
11. Develop consolidated reference books and other teaching materials on Rohingya ancestral heritage and culture to be taught in the current curriculum directed toward Rohingya youth who are able to access primary and secondary schooling to ensure transmission through education for future generations.

## Conclusion

The Rohingya community continues to express serious concerns regarding the erosion of its language and culture. The challenges faced by Rohingya diaspora members, such as the pressures to assimilate in various host countries, dire living conditions in the Bangladesh refugee camps, legal statelessness, and the inevitable passing of the elderly, have all raised the task of heritage preservation to a status of urgency. Considering their displacement from their physical homeland and the predominantly oral nature of their linguistic traditions, the intangible aspects of their culture remain at the highest risk of diminishing, underscoring the need for concerted efforts toward archiving them.

As survivors of a genocide, the revitalization and production of their cultural heritage are paramount in the process of healing and establishing a cohesive communal identity to nurture a sense of belonging among its members. Scholarly evidence suggests that cultural preservation initiatives for survivors of conflicts and genocides are as imperative as humanitarian aid in addressing the multifaceted needs of affected communities.

In response, the international community should make coordinated efforts to champion the protection of Rohingya heritage through immediate action. Policymakers and donors must advocate for funding toward Rohingya-led initiatives, accessible technology solutions that can increase engagement and unity throughout the diaspora, and endeavors that uphold interdisciplinary partnerships. Moreover, a crucial step would be the establishment of a dedicated working group to bring together cross-sector stakeholders to function as a cooperative task force. This network would aim to collaborate through consolidating resources and expertise, thus mitigating redundant efforts and moving forward with a coherent strategy.

Community members may continue embracing the practice of the Rohingya language and heritage collectively in their households and local communities, simultaneously engaging in activism and advocacy efforts through their involvement and leadership in various organizations. Furthermore, efforts to produce and disseminate cultural content should demonstrate





ingenuity in reaching a broader Rohingya audience and efficiently storing essential data, spanning educational materials, entertainment, and media, as well as literature and traditional proverbs in the Rohingya

script. The response to such a task necessitates comprehensive, innovative, and synergetic approaches for the paramount work of safeguarding the rich heritage and language of the Rohingya community.

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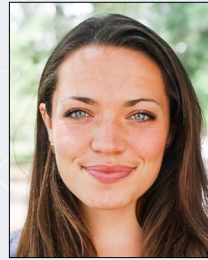
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