



Marginalized and Misunderstood: How Anti-Rohingya Language Policies Fuel Genocide

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Abstract

Language plays a role in the genocide of the Rohingya people in Myanmar and continues to shape their experiences in displacement, yet their linguistic rights are rarely discussed in relation to their human rights and humanitarian concerns. International human rights standards offer important foundations for conceptualizing the “right to language” and identifying how linguistic rights can be violated both in situ and in displacement. The Rohingya case highlights how language policies are weaponized to oppress unwanted minorities; their outsider status is reinforced by the country’s language education policy and they face additional rights challenges in displacement—including obstacles to effectively accessing humanitarian aid. Moving forward, norms associated with self-determination and language rights offer a conceptual foundation for shifting attitudes and altering negative perceptions of Rohingya identity.

Keywords Language rights · Rohingya · Myanmar · Forced displacement · Genocide · Language endangerment

In Arakan, they kill and bury you under the treasure of human rights.

– From “My Life” by Rohingya poet Pacifist Farooq (2019)

The history of the Rohingya people in Myanmar is a long and complicated one, stretching back to the precolonial Buddhist kingdom of Arakan and continuing through the colonial period, military rule, its (controversial) parliamentary republic,

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and its recent return to military governance.¹ State repression during the country's authoritarian regimes (1962–2011) ended hopes for ethnic recognition but fostered the formation of a shared identity, both within Myanmar and among the diaspora in Southeast Asia and the Middle East (Leider 2018). Genocidal violence in August 2017 triggered the largest and most rapid Rohingya refugee influx to Bangladesh, following years of human rights abuses and previous waves of violence (in 1978, 1991–1992, and 2016). An estimated 745,000 Rohingya—including more than 400,000 children—fled to Cox's Bazar, now known as the world's largest refugee camp (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs n.d.). Despite international outrage against the mass atrocities committed in Myanmar, the following years have not brought adequate responses to human rights and humanitarian challenges impacting the Rohingya inside and outside the country (Morada 2020).

Language plays a role in the ongoing persecution of the stateless Rohingya people in Myanmar and it continues to shape their experiences in displacement. The Rohingya speak an Indo-European language of the Southeastern Bengali branch, called Ruáingga or Rohingya, that is understood in Bangladesh's southeastern Chittagong region but is foreign to Myanmar's majority of Burmese (Bama saga) speakers. This difference, combined with the fact that the Rohingya people are Muslims in a predominately Buddhist state, fuels accusations that the Rohingya are illegal "Bengalis" unworthy of attaining legal nationality. In Burmese public schools, the Rohingya language is barred and classes are taught in the Rakhine or Burmese languages, which Rohingya students often cannot understand. Teachers say they are banned from teaching the Rohingya language, history, and culture—and are even prohibited from using the term "Rohingya" in schools (Klug 2018).

Anti-Rohingya language policies fuel human rights abuses in Myanmar, including the 2017 mass atrocities that sparked forced displacement to neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, and they should be recognized as such. Discriminatory language policies are just one weapon in the arsenal of discrimination against the Rohingya people in Myanmar, and the violation of their language rights has continued in displacement—all while linguistic rights are rarely discussed in relation to human rights and humanitarian concerns. This article resulted from a collaboration between a linguist and a human rights scholar, who sought to fill this research gap with their combined expertise in human rights, language policy, and humanitarian practice. First, an overview of international human rights standards related to language highlights vital connections to rights norms associated with the protection of minorities, children, and Indigenous peoples—including the prevention of cultural

¹ Myanmar's military dictatorship had supposedly ended (in 2011) by the time the Rohingya people were displaced in 2017, with the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) (under de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi) heavily criticized for stifling dissent and diminishing democratic space. Human Rights Watch (2019b) argued that the NLD was "doing little to address the country's weak rule of law, corrupt judiciary, or impunity for security force abuses" and noted that the 2008 constitution placed the Ministries of Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs under the control of the military (para 3). The Burmese military took over Myanmar's government in a February 2021 coup and charged Suu Kyi with corruption. Anti-coup protests were ongoing at the time of this writing.

genocide. These standards offer important foundations for conceptualizing the “right to language” and identifying how linguistic rights can be violated both in situ and in displacement. Second, the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar highlights how language policies are weaponized to oppress unwanted minorities, including through the use of mass atrocity crimes. Denied “national race” status and thus Burmese citizenship, the Rohingya’s outsider status is reinforced by the country’s Burmese and English language-oriented education policy—in combination with a coordinated array of further human rights abuses. In displacement, the Rohingya are further denied their language rights while facing additional challenges for accessing humanitarian aid. Lastly, important work to alter negative perceptions of the Rohingya (including their language and culture) is being undertaken in a variety of innovative ways, and existing norms associated with self-determination and language offer a conceptual foundation for shifting attitudes.

Language Rights

Although there are no binding international conventions specifically on linguistic rights, several international human rights standards impact language policies and outline minimum protections for minority linguistic groups. Restrictions on the use of a particular language in private affairs are a violation of freedom of expression, for instance. Banning private educational instruction in a minority language or prohibiting the use of names in non-official languages also violates such freedom. State services should be available when a linguistic group is sufficiently large. Such minimum standards are reflected in documents such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic Minorities, the Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities, and the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention on the Rights of National Minorities (de Varennnes 2012, pp. 43–44).² Fernand de Varennnes (2012) contends that “international law has developed in such a way that governments no longer have *carte blanche* in relation to language policies and planning. They have legal and political – even moral – obligations to not only respect, but in some cases use other languages and even promote others” (pp. 44). Indeed, the continuing evolution of language rights follows three basic trends: human rights instruments for the protection of individual rights, the protection or promotion of linguistic diversity, and the protection of endangered languages (de Varennnes 2012, pp. 44).

The issue of language rights in education is a key concept in broader discussions of children’s rights, at home and during displacement. Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees children from ethnic, religious, or religious minorities the right to enjoy their own culture, which includes the right to “use his or her own language” (United Nations Human Rights 1989). Zehlia Babaci-Wilhite (2015) contends that using the local language in education satisfies the rights

² Language rights are also prominently featured in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as discussed in the final section of this article.

criteria of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability (see Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, for instance)—and that blocking students from learning in the local language can impair their learning capacity and reduce the quality of their education (pp. 108–109). “The use of a local language in the educational system adds self-respect and contributes to de-colonizing local culture,” she writes. “By reinforcing the importance of local languages, one reinforces the interest in local knowledge and skills” (Babaci-Wilhite 2015, pp. 111). For instance, there have been positive results for student achievement stemming from the use of the Hawaiian language in schools in Hawai’i, including for students’ achievement in English and other domains (Wilson and Kamanā 2013, pp. 159). By not providing education in a child’s own language, especially one with strong ties to cultural identity, a government makes a clear and negative statement in regard to the value of that language and its people.

Indeed, it is important to stress that discriminatory language policies are no accident; they are targeted state efforts to marginalize minority populations, deny political membership, and erase cultural identities—meanwhile, often fueling ethnic tensions leading to conflict and mass atrocities. Stephen May (2018) argues that “there is widespread belief that the recognition of language rights for linguistic minority groups...is, by its very nature, a grave threat to social and political stability” – even if “active repression of minority languages often fosters ethnic conflict and entrenches political instability, rather than the reverse” (pp. 236, 244). James W. Tollefson (2013) writes that “language policies in education must be understood with reference to the aims and institutions of the nation-state and associated processes of nationalism, especially the fundamental state function of allocating among social groups access to economic resources and political power” (pp. 18). A variety of cases—including the privileged position of Serbo-Croatian in the years leading up to the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, for instance—further demonstrate that “war and military institutions often play a major role in language policy” (pp. 19). Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) further warns against linguistic genocide—which, like cultural genocide, was included in early drafts of the UN Genocide Convention but not in the final, binding document. Linguistic genocide “represents (actively) killing a language without killing the speakers (as in physical genocide) or (through passivity) letting a language die” (pp. 312). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) continues: “If a minority group or [I]ndigenous people are allowed to learn and transmit further their own language, they also reproduce themselves as a minority group or [I]ndigenous people....one of the reasons for linguistic genocide is that it can reduce the number of (potential) nations, meaning peoples who could demand the right to first internal, then external self-determination” (pp. 311). She argues that most languages do not die a natural death today—it is related to “linguicide,” which means there are agents involved in causing the language death (see pp. 369–370).

Indigenous languages of the United States and Canada, for instance, have suffered severe losses because of English-only education. One of the driving forces of the Boarding School Era in North America was to eradicate Indigenous languages by forcing Indigenous children to use only English, and severely punishing them for using their languages (see, for example, the case of the Chickasaw language in Fitzgerald and Hinson 2016, pp. 525). Scholars link this destructive practice of

settler colonialism with the concept of cultural genocide, noting that these efforts to eradicate Indigenous culture were part of a longer process of group destruction (Carasik and Bachman 2019). Of the 187 Indian languages still being spoken in the United States and Canada in 1992, 149 were not being passed on to the next generation, which meant that 80% of the Indigenous languages in North America were severely endangered (Krauss 1992, pp. 5). Data collected between 2006 and 2010 in an American Community Survey (ACS) of Native North American languages showed that of those who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native alone, more than one in five people over age 65 reported speaking a Native North American language, while only about 1 in 10 people aged 5 to 17 did so (Siebens and Julian 2011, pp. 3). This shows the continued decline in the usage of Indigenous languages in North America. Cranney (2019) concluded from the 2013–2017 ACS that there are some Indigenous languages that are demographically holding steady, such as the Central Yupik and Eastern Keres languages. However, most North American Indigenous languages showed evidence of the decline in this (most recent) survey.

The issue of language endangerment has gained increased attention in relation to Indigenous peoples,³ but is still rarely discussed and prioritized in situations of forced displacement. Julia Sallabank (2012) notes that causes of language endangerment include the consequences of war and genocide, as well as overt repression against linguistic minorities. To measure the health of a language, one must consider things like the availability of materials for language education and literacy, government language policies, minority groups' attitudes toward their own language, and the amount and quality of documentation. "Language endangerment may be the result of external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation, or it may be caused by internal forces, such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language" notes the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003). "Internal pressures often have their source in external ones, and both halt the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions" (pp. 2). In the case of the Rohingya, the external pressures working against the maintenance of their language are seemingly insurmountable in the presence of multiple majority and world languages, backed by military might. As Suzanne Romaine (2007) writes, "maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity is a matter of social justice because distinctiveness in culture and language has formed the basis for defining human identities" (pp. 130). Yet, there is little social justice in cases like the Rohingya's, when people are forced to learn a less useful global language while being prohibited from using their native language and from learning a local majority language that would benefit them more and allow them to thrive. By controlling the languages that an already-disadvantaged group may use, language policy is being utilized essentially as another weapon of persecution. According to Leanne Hinton (2013, pp. 39), "language policy has often been a tool for the oppression of minority languages, but it can serve as a tool for their survival and public

³ The United Nations observed the International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019 and 2022–2032 marks the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

enhancement.” This call to arms for language policy to support language rights and thus minority populations is particularly relevant to the case of the Rohingya.

The Rohingya Case

The name “Rohingya” became part of public discourse in the late 1950s, when Muslim leaders and students in Myanmar’s North Rakhine State used the term to assert a distinct ethnoreligious identity, and it spread widely following reports of human rights abuses there in the 1990s and again after 2012 (Leider 2018, pp. 2). Studies of the Rohingya as a culturally distinctive Muslim community are rare and access to documentation is limited—indeed, “no research has been done on the East Bengali dialectology that would enlighten us on the regional linguistic variety” (Leider 2018, pp. 21). Primary source documents from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries note linguistic differences within the area’s Muslim community (see Leider 2018, pp. 5), and Muslim nationalists in the twentieth century debated the proper spelling of Rohingya for years—highlighting how the term had been transmitted orally, not in written form—until agreeing on the current rendition around 1963 (Leider 2018, pp. 9). The Union Citizenship Act of 1948 defined Myanmar’s “national races” as those groups that lived permanently in the country before the First Anglo-Burmese War (before 1824) (see Leider 2018, pp. 14). In response, the quest for “an encompassing Muslim identity called *Rohingya*” in the 1940s and 1950s led to the creation of a condensed historical account and an identity based on localized ethnicity rather than shared culture (Leider 2018, pp. 11). This “streamlined account of the past” that defined the Rohingya as an ethnic group that “existed since antiquity” was problematic, but it was seen as necessary for constitutional recognition and national belonging in independent Myanmar (Leider 2018, pp. 11–12).

However, such recognition did not materialize—particularly as the concept of “national race,” or *taingyintha*, became a pre-eminent political idea in Myanmar. Nick Cheesman (2017) argues that *taingyintha* surpassed the importance of citizenship in Myanmar and has served to exclude the Rohingya, who are not included in the country’s 135 officially designated racial categories. “To talk of the political community ‘Myanmar’ is to talk of *taingyintha*, and to talk to that community is above all to address its members not as citizens but as national races,” he writes (Cheesman 2017, pp. 470). National Registration Cards (NRCs) (“green cards”) were used as de facto proof of citizenship in the 1950s and did not include *taingyintha*, but North Arakan Muslims were no longer issued NRCs in the 1970s and many NRCs were allegedly seized by the authorities (Leider 2018, pp. 14; Cheesman 2017, pp. 471). Discrimination against the Rohingya was formalized in 1982 when Myanmar’s Citizenship Law made membership to a national race “the gold standard for citizenship and the primary basis for determining the rights of someone claiming to be a member of the political community...” (Cheesman 2017, pp. 471). Although the law had provisions to prevent large-scale statelessness, campaigns against “illegal” migration led to discriminatory application of the law (Cheesman 2017, pp. 472). People in Myanmar were forced

to give up identity papers in the late 1980s to obtain colored-coded Citizenship Scrutiny Cards (“pink cards”), but most Rohingyas were only given Temporary Registration Cards (so-called white cards) after 1995; these were then canceled in February 2015. In June 2015, new green cards were distributed to people who were “ready to be scrutinized for citizenship under conditions that denied them self-identification as Rohingyas” (Leider 2018, pp. 14). This vital link between “national races” and citizenship has forced people to think strategically about their identities in order to return to the political community. Cheesman (2017) writes that the only way available to the Rohingya politically and as a collectivity “is to submit to the politics of domination inherent in the national races project, and insist that they too are *taingyintha*. This is exactly what Rohingya advocates have done, causing them to become the targets of much anger from the members of other communities” (pp. 473).

In terms of language, the Rohingya language represents an extremely small linguistic minority in Myanmar, where the Burmese language has an estimated 36 million native speakers. Approximately 78% of the country’s population speaks a language in the Tibeto-Burman family (including Burmese and a variety of other languages associated with national ethnic groups such as the Kachin and Naga), while 9% speak Tai-Kadai (Shan) and 7% speak Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer) languages (McCormick 2019, pp. 244). Rohingya belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, which is more closely related to Hindi/Urdu (or even English) than it is to Burmese. (Technically, Burmese is a Tibeto-Burman language that can be further classified as Sino-Tibetan.) The Rohingya language is linguistically similar to Chittagonian, spoken in the neighboring Chittagong Division of Bangladesh (Hoque 2015), but they are still distinct languages. The fact that Rohingya is recognized by linguists as a distinct language (Eberhard et al. 2021) supports the classification of the Rohingya as a distinct ethnic group (Lindblom et al. 2015, pp. 42).

Just as there are many factors working against the vitality of the Rohingya people, there are many factors working against the continuing vitality of the Rohingya language. Most likely due to a history of continuous displacement and the dispersal of its speakers, Rohingya has remained primarily an oral language despite attempts to create a system of literacy. When communities of speakers are dispersed and unsettled, they are less able to produce a cohesive literature. The fact that Rohingya has multiple writing systems also possibly contributes to its detriment as a robust written language while confirming its linguistic status as a viable language. These writing systems include an Arabic script and a more recently developed Hanifi Rohingya script, which is a blend of Arabic, Burmese, and Latin scripts. Rohingyalish is another modern writing system that uses the Roman script (unlike Arabic, Urdu, Hanifi-Script, and Burmese), and is available for use on computers unlike Hanifi (Eberhard et al. 2021). Hanifi Rohingya has been included in a 2019 upgrade to the Unicode Standard, a global encoding system that changes written script into digital characters and numbers, so that Rohingya can now email, text, and post to social media in their own language (Pandey 2016; Abraham and Jaehn 2019). (This is discussed below.)

Despite the recognized linguistic status of Rohingya as a language (Eberhard et al. 2021), the Burmese government has historically promoted a Burmese and English language-oriented education policy that makes Burmese the core language of instruction while ignoring minority languages.⁴ Ethnic minority languages were banned in state schools in the 1960s⁵ and history was taught through the Bamar majority's ethnic and language lens, attempting to assimilate ethnic minorities and emphasizing nationalism. UNESCO characterizes Myanmar schools as "a vehicle for social division" based on the imposition of Burmese as the dominant and "unifying" language, among other things (UNESCO 2011, pp. 131), while the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar reports that Rohingya students are separated from other students, ignored by teachers, and unable to properly communicate with educators (Human Rights Council 2018, pp. 133). "The right to mother tongue language education has been one of the key demands of ethnic stakeholders in Myanmar's prolonged...conflicts," write Ashley South and Marie Lall (2016), who study ethnic minorities in Myanmar broadly. "At a minimum, ethnic nationalists have demanded the teaching of minority languages in schools, including state schools; a stronger version of this position is to demand teaching of the curriculum in the mother tongue, at least through primary schooling" (pp. 132). Despite government policies, many ethnic committees have supported private ethnic language literacy programs in Myanmar—but Rohingya is not among them. In 2016, the Myanmar government passed legislation creating space for mother tongue education in ethnic nationality-populated areas, after which some state and regional governments began to introduce minority languages into the government schools at the lower levels. Limited resources were provided but, unsurprisingly, Rohingya is not among the minority languages being reintroduced. In fact, a recent progress report on the new language education policy does not even mention the Rohingya language (Lo Bianco 2016).

In its attempt to foster a "unified" ethnic and national identity centered on the concept of *taingyintha*, the Burmese state has reinforced deep divisions and facilitated pervasive human rights abuses. Tun Khin, a Rohingya activist affiliated with the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, notes that centuries of Rohingya culture have been destroyed through government policies and genocidal violence—including attempts to erase the Rohingya language. Fellow activist Nay San Lwin of the Free Rohingya Coalition further argues that linguistic differences are used to segregate Rohingya and deny their membership in the broader Burmese community—of which they ought to be recognized as a national race and, therefore, legal nationals. "The denial of Rohingya history and culture created the structure that allowed this to happen," says Amal de Chickera, co-director of the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion.⁶ Furthermore, Ken MacLean (2019) argues

⁴ While Burmese is "the sole language of government administration, mass media, and the sole legal medium of instruction in government schools," Patrick McCormick (2019) notes that Burmese is often secondary to English in practice, especially in written form (pp. 247).

⁵ McCormick (2019) argues that it is "not clear whether using other languages was officially made illegal, or whether the practice was simply discouraged." Regardless, these measures created resentment and anger among ethnic groups and disadvantaged minority language speakers within the educational system. Burmese also became the sole medium of instruction in Burmese universities (pp. 248).

⁶ These comments were made during a Q&A session following a panel presentation at the World Conference on Statelessness and Inclusion, The Hague, The Netherlands, 27 June 2019. The event was hosted by the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion.

that the erasure of Rohingya in Myanmar has taken two forms: “lawfare” (the abuse of laws to achieve strategic military or political ends) and “spacio-cide” (systematic dispossession and destruction of living space) (see pp. 87, 90). Lawfare tactics aimed at transforming Rohingya into stateless persons without rights were achieved years ago, while spacio-cide tactics to destroy Rohingya property and their ability to return home are nearing completion (pp. 95). As satellite imagery shows, for instance, Rohingya homes were demolished and quickly replaced by new homes occupied primarily by Buddhist citizens. “Erasure entails the removal of all traces of something, with obliteration as its most extreme form,” writes MacLean (2019). “But erasure is never fully complete...Practices of erasure always leave discernable traces, if only in the form of an absence...” (pp. 84).

Media in both Myanmar and Bangladesh foment anti-Rohingya sentiments and discrimination, often fueling public support for human rights abuses against the minority group. While the Rohingya language was once broadcast by the Burma Broadcasting Service’s radio service, that situation changed “considerably” following the 1962 coup (Lee 2019, pp. 3206). Official Myanmar media such as the *Global New Light of Myanmar* state newspaper represent extreme speech against the Rohingya in two main ways, according to Ronan Lee (2019). First, it characterizes the situation in Rakhine State as one in which the authorities provide development aid and economic benefits, but where the population is under siege from Muslim terrorists—and by implication, by the Rohingya. Second, it ignores atrocities committed by the Myanmar military against Rohingya communities that have resulted in forced migration and systematic human rights abuses. Lee (2019) further contends that this anti-Rohingya speech has influenced violent narratives about the Rohingya on social media, thus fueling an environment where rights abuses against the minority group are deemed acceptable. Relatedly, Md. Ali Siddiquee (2019) writes that recent atrocities against the Rohingya have been carried out “through the tactics of post-truth politics,” including the willful spreading of misinformation, appeals to emotions and personal beliefs rather than established facts, and a constant repetition of core motifs. The situation is strikingly similar in Bangladesh, where analysis of *The Daily Star* newspaper shows the “othering” of the Rohingya using three fundamental frame sets: the Rohingya as an impediment to Bangladeshi prosperity, as victims, and as intruders on Bangladeshi sovereignty (Ubayasiri 2019, pp. 265–266).

As Rohingya people look toward their futures and their “durable solutions”—possible return, integration, or resettlement—they find that language is once again an obstacle to rights protection and recognition. Language differences in camps have created challenges to the provision of aid; the nonprofit Translators Without Borders (TWB) (2018) notes that verbal communication in the Rohingya language is critical, and they have therefore developed an online glossary to assist humanitarian workers.⁷ They contend that 28% of refugees do not have

⁷ It is noteworthy that challenges associated with translation factor into other situations of displacement. On the U.S.-Mexico border, for instance, detained Guatemalan migrants who speak Mayan languages (and often speak little or no Spanish) struggle to navigate the U.S. court system and file asylum claims. They must often rely on for-profit translation services by phone as they navigate legal processes, including attempting to reunite separated family members (Nolan and Romero 2020).

adequate information, in part because of communication breakdowns with aid workers. Rohingya is the only spoken language that all refugees understand and prefer; two-thirds would prefer written communication in Rohingya but the lack of a universally accepted script prevents its widespread use, thus making verbal communication crucial. After struggling with language challenges in the early days of the crisis (such as misinterpreting “violence against women” as “violent women,” or misunderstanding kinship terms that led to unintentional family separation), TWB and other organizations are developing resources such as translation toolkits and image-based signage to improve communication.⁸ Notably, the circumstances of displacement are changing the Rohingya language in possibly permanent ways; the dialect of Rohingya spoken by earlier arrivals now differs from that of newcomers, with Bangla words creeping in from Bangladeshi host communities and English coming from aid workers (Scott 2018).

Looking beyond the camp, language policies range from being inadequate to outright obstructionist. In Bangladesh, the government prevents Rohingya refugees from learning the local language in an effort to thwart long-term integration. The Bangladeshi government does not allow refugees to attend local schools but simultaneously does not allow formal schools in camps, only allowing for Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) and Learning Centres where children can play and perhaps receive rudimentary lessons. The government contends that refugees are only in the country short term and that formal schooling will encourage families to remain (Schuetze and Neve 2019). Many parents hope to return to Myanmar and therefore want their children to learn Burmese as an aid to eventual reintegration, but Burmese language learning is limited in displacement⁹—thus continuing the cycle of segregation and discrimination that already existed within Burmese public schools. Some refugees learn English (including at other sites of displacement, such as within Indonesia; see Yasin et al. 2018) in preparation for potential resettlement to Western countries, but that language learning is limited—and possibly not useful, since resettlement to the West is hardly guaranteed.

⁸ During the COVID-19 pandemic, New York-based arts education nonprofit Artolution employed Rohingya artists to share information in Bangladesh refugee camps. Murals offer a “universal language” despite high illiteracy rates, offering information related to key issues such as public health, environmental protection, and domestic violence (Brown 2021).

⁹ According to a 2019 report by Human Rights Watch, the Bangladeshi government deliberately deprived Rohingya refugee children of an education. This not only included blocking them from attending local schools, but also failing to provide education within the camps—and blocking humanitarian organizations from doing so, as well (Human Rights Watch 2019). In 2020, UNICEF launched a pilot program in Cox’s Bazaar with the aim of educating 10,000 Rohingya students from grades six to nine. This project, which introduced the formal curriculum from Myanmar with the aim of eventual return, added to UNICEF’s existing strategy of providing informal educational opportunities for children ages four to fourteen. (Reidy 2020).

Protecting Language Rights in Displacement

Ultimately, language policies have served to persecute the Rohingya in their (unrecognized) home communities within Myanmar, as well as in host societies during forced displacement. The Rohingya language—a marker of identity, culture, and shared history—remains deeply threatened, much like the people who speak it. McCormick (2019) argues that changes in Burmese language policies will depend on attitudinal changes since large segments of the mainstream population negatively view multilingualism. “There is still a lingering suspicion that allowing the use of languages other than Burmese will promote separationist sentiment,” he explains (pp. 254). Advocates are currently undertaking work to alter negative perceptions of the Rohingya and to celebrate their language and culture, however, and existing norms associated with self-determination and language offer a conceptual foundation for moving forward.

While the Burmese government does not recognize the Rohingya as a “national race”—and neighboring states such as Bangladesh also reject claims to indigeneity—norms associated with the global Indigenous rights movement nevertheless provide important starting points for considering the linguistic rights of the Rohingya. As noted earlier, the issue of language endangerment is frequently discussed in relation to Indigenous communities, but rarely in the context of other instances of forced displacement. Yet indigenous peoples’ focus on linguistic rights emphasizes the centrality of language in the protection of broader cultural heritage and universal human rights. In the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), for instance, Article 3 emphasizes the right to self-determination to pursue, among other things, social and cultural development. Ensuing articles specifically highlight linguistic rights: Article 13.1 outlines “the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.” Article 14 protects the right to education in one’s own language, while Article 16 ensures the right to establish media in those languages (United Nations 2007). The systematic destruction of Indigenous communities (in terms of both physical and cultural genocide) that necessitated the formulation of these language rights is also prevalent in Rohingya communities; while state governments may reject the application of UNDRIP’s norms to the Rohingya, this legal framework offers ways to conceptualize what positive change might entail. Indeed, the case of the Rohingya provides a starting point for expanding the language rights movement to advocate for marginalized minorities more broadly—including those displaced by mass atrocity crimes. As mentioned, advocates are already taking steps to demand Rohingya self-determination and mobilize for language rights. Increasingly, Rohingya diasporic activists use online and offline strategies to “contest the claims of authority of Myanmar, bringing into question the legitimacy of an established territorial state” (Abraham and Jaehn 2019, pp. 2). One such project is the campaign to have the Rohingya script recognized by the Unicode Consortium, a U.S.-based nonprofit that regulates the modern representation

of texts. Since the Rohingya language has primarily been a spoken one, its speakers have typically used Burman or Arabic scripts when they needed to write things down. In the early 1980s, in response to practical needs as well as pressure to assert the Rohingya as a distinct community, Rohingya diasporic scholar Molvi Hanif developed an alphabet for the language. The new script, called Hanifi Rohingya,¹⁰ was first used in print newspapers within Rakhine state and gained users among the diaspora in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. The Myanmar government, however, banned the teaching and use of the script. Muhammad Noor (Hanifi's grandson) gathered materials from the diasporic Rohingya community to illustrate the "bona fides" of the script; he estimated there were 300,000 students who had learned the Rohingya language at refugee camps and overseas schools, for instance, and the Hanifi script was used in a variety of teaching materials. Five years of data collection and several proposal drafts later, the case was made that Rohingya is a "living language" and that the Hanifi script is widely read enough to meet Unicode's requirements. The Consortium accepted the application and the Hanifi Rohingya script is expected to be released soon in the new version of Unicode (Abraham and Jaehn 2019, pp. 8).¹¹ "From language comes political identity," argue Itty Abraham and Miram Jaehn (2019). "The acceptance of the modern Hanifi Rohingya script by Unicode adds an enormously powerful new ally to the claim that there exist distinct and unique Rohingya people, in direct rebuttal of the claims of the Myanmar government" (pp. 9).

Another advocacy approach is to encourage Rohingya artists and share their work with the global community. For instance, *I Am a Rohingya: Poetry from the Camps and Beyond* is a book of poetry that resulted from 2019 writing workshops in Cox's Bazaar organized by James Byrne and Shehzar Doja. Published in English, the book features Rohingya poets who have written in English, as well as had their work translated from Burmese and Rohingya. In the book's introduction, Doja (2019) reflects on his experiences visiting refugee camps since September 2017. He explains that NGOs and governmental bodies focused on healthcare and emergency relief, "but something vital was missing": "Where were the archives of written literature, poetry and songs?" he asked. "The simple truth is that the ethnic Rohingya population, which has existed for several centuries, was being systemically purged of its identity including, essentially, its culture, in a manner reminiscent of great ethnic purges of the past" (Doja 2019, pp. 19). In the poem "Birth," Rohingya poet Yasmin Ullah (2019) writes: "We self-identify as 'Rohingya' / so we won't lose the last glimpse of / history and its triumphs. / How great we once were. / How we have been trampled into / extermination – " (pp. 50). Furthermore, Rohingya poet

¹⁰ The Hanifi Rohingya script does not resemble Burmese or Bengali, but rather "bears a strong affinity" with Arabic. "Rohingya would certainly not want to be associated with Burman, and are accused by the Myanmar government of being illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, a charge they firmly reject. Choosing either the Burman or Bengali script under these circumstances had high costs." However, literate Rohingya learn Arabic as a second language or read the Holy Qur'an in that script, making the use of an Arabic template a more appropriate option. See: Abraham and Jaehn 2019, pp. 8.

¹¹ Google also created an online keyboard for the Rohingya language, which is available at: <https://language-tools-153419.appspot.com/rhg/>.

and activist Mayyu Ali reflected on writing in displacement in a 2019 interview. He noted that “no Rohingya is officially considered a writer or poet” in Myanmar, making it difficult to access “sources of inspiration” while being marginalized (quoted in Byrne 2019, para 17). “I learned the Rohingya language without its particular written form (which is two hundred years old and uses a version of Arabic script),” he explains. “While learning Rohingya as a language, I found that the culture and literature of my people have been eliminated because they are socially targeted...And yet Rohingya still belongs to the culture that my grandfather knew. He would often sing me to sleep with the songs and poetries written in our dialect. Unfortunately, today, we have lost our language” (quoted in Byrne 2019, para 10). His experiences have prompted him to write in English so that he can share his experiences of discrimination with people around the world; he contends that “writing for Rohingya people is activism” (quoted in Byrne 2019, para 15).

In the midst of forced displacement and genocide, the concept of “self-determination” is a valuable guiding principle for language policy—for the Rohingya, as well as other oppressed minorities. As noted, organizations such as Translators without Borders (2018) systematically survey displaced persons about their language knowledge and preferences to provide language-appropriate resources and train aid workers. Yet while some NGOs are making efforts to utilize appropriate language to provide effective aid, governments lag far behind in upholding language rights. Just as the Rohingya are blocked from using their language in schools and the media within Myanmar’s Rakhine State, displaced Rohingya are similarly denied opportunities to learn and communicate in their language in countries such as Bangladesh. The Rohingya should enjoy the right to self-determination, which includes the right to maintain their mother tongue language if they choose. Self-determination does not prevent them from learning additional languages (such as English or Bangla) that may help them integrate into new societies or succeed at home; rather, it empowers the Rohingya people to determine their linguistic futures. Indeed, any proposed solutions to the current human rights crisis must recognize and respect the Rohingya community’s rights to their own language as a vital step in achieving meaningful change.

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