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Article

Reconfiguring Identity Politics and Social Exclusion: The Case of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of identity politics in the exclusion and statelessness of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Using an anthropological lens, the study explores how the Rohingya resist their marginalization through cultural practices and informal leadership within refugee camps in Bangladesh. The analysis, based on ethnographic fieldwork, draws on theories of homo sacer and cultural resistance to demonstrate how Myanmar's exclusionary national identity has stripped the Rohingya of citizenship, exposing them to violence and displacement. Despite this, the Rohingya actively preserve their identity and assert political agency, offering a critical perspective on statelessness and resilience.

Keywords: Identity Politics; Rohingya Crisis; Social Exclusion; Forced Migration; Statelessness; Resistance

1. Introduction

The Rohingya crisis is one of the most acute examples of statelessness and identity-based exclusion in the modern world. Despite their centuries-long presence in Myanmar's Rakhine State, the Rohingya have been systematically marginalized, stripped of citizenship, and rendered stateless by a state that has actively sought to erase their identity. This exclusion is deeply embedded in Myanmar's nation-building project, which has centered on a Buddhist-Burmese national identity that positions ethnic and religious minorities, particularly the Muslim Rohingya, as outsiders and existential threats. This process of identity politics, as conceptualized by Bauman (2013), operates as a mechanism of control, defining who belongs to the nation and who is excluded based on ethnic and religious markers.

The 1982 Citizenship Law formalized the Rohingya's exclusion, rendering them stateless and legally invisible within Myanmar. Without citizenship, the Rohingya were denied access to basic rights, including education, healthcare, and legal employment, leaving them vulnerable to systemic violence and exploitation. As Agamben (1998) argues in his theory of homo sacer, statelessness reduces individuals to "bare life," stripping them of legal protections and making them subject to arbitrary violence. This condition has been tragically exemplified in the repeated military-led crackdowns on the Rohingya, culminating in the 2017 military operation that forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, where they continue to live in precarious conditions.

This research examines the intersections of identity politics, statelessness, and cultural resistance through an anthropological lens, with a particular focus on how the Rohingya navigate their exclusion and assert their identity despite the state's efforts to erase them. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Rohingya refugee camps of Kutupalong and Bashan Char, this study seeks to understand how the Rohingya resist their marginalization through cultural practices, informal leadership structures, and grassroots political organization.

By integrating insights from theoretical frameworks such as Agamben's homo sacer and Malkki's (1995) concept of cultural resistance, this research provides a nuanced understanding of how the Rohingya maintain their identity and agency despite their statelessness. The study also critically engages with the broader political and historical context of Myanmar's identity politics, highlighting how the state's promotion of a homogenous Buddhist-Burmese identity has been used to justify the exclusion and persecution of the Rohingya.

In addition to the primary data collected during fieldwork, this research draws on secondary sources from political anthropology, refugee studies, and historical analyses of the Rohingya crisis. By interweaving primary ethnographic data with these theoretical perspectives, the paper offers a comprehensive exploration of how statelessness operates as both a legal and social condition, and how the Rohingya resist their erasure through everyday acts of survival and cultural defiance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Identity Politics and Statelessness*

Identity politics, as defined by Zygmunt Bauman (2013), refers to the construction and reinforcement of group identities based on political, social, and cultural markers such as ethnicity, religion, and nationality. In the context of Myanmar, identity politics has played a central role in the exclusion of the Rohingya from the national fabric. The state's construction of a national identity, rooted in Buddhist nationalism, has positioned the Rohingya as outsiders—both religiously and ethnically (Green, 2015). Despite the Rohingya's centuries-long presence in Rakhine State, the Myanmar government has perpetuated a narrative that frames them as "illegal Bengali immigrants," thus justifying their exclusion from citizenship and other fundamental rights (Ibrahim, 2018).

The systematic exclusion of the Rohingya from Myanmar's national identity reached its legal zenith with the enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Law, which officially denied the Rohingya citizenship (Human Rights Watch, 2000). This law not only removed the Rohingya from the list of 135 recognized ethnic groups but also rendered them stateless, leaving them without legal protection and vulnerable to violence. Bauman (2013) argues that identity politics, when deployed in this exclusionary manner, serves as a tool for maintaining social control, allowing the state to define who belongs and who is excluded from the political and social order.

2.2. *Giorgio Agamben's theory of homo sacer (1998A sacred man, in Ag*

The politics of exclusion in Myanmar is deeply intertwined with the state's efforts to consolidate a homogenous national identity. Scholars like Walton (2013) have examined how the Myanmar government has used identity politics to marginalize ethnic and religious minorities, positioning the Rohingya as "outsiders" in order to maintain a Buddhist-Burmese hegemony. This exclusionary narrative, reinforced by laws like the 1982 Citizenship Law, has legitimized state-sponsored violence against the Rohingya and facilitated their mass displacement. Agamben's notion of "bare life" helps explain why the Rohingya are viewed as expendable and why their exclusion from the state's legal and social protections has been normalized by the Myanmar government.

2.3. *The Anthropology of Refugeehood and Resistance*

The statelessness and marginalization of the Rohingya has not rendered them passive victims. Instead, they engage in various forms of cultural and social resistance to assert their identity and challenge their exclusion. This dynamic is explored by Liisa Malkki (1995), who challenges the conventional view of refugees as "uprooted" and disconnected from their homeland. Malkki argues that refugees actively construct and reconstruct their identities through cultural practices, narratives, and communal rituals. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant when examining the Rohingya in the refugee camps of Bangladesh, where cultural resistance plays a critical role in maintaining their identity as a distinct ethnic group (Ibrahim, 2016).

Malkki's concept of "mythico-histories" (1995), or the collective retelling of history to preserve identity, can be observed in the Rohingya camps, where storytelling, religious rituals, and communal gatherings are used to keep their cultural heritage alive. For example, during fieldwork in Kutupalong camp, Rohingya refugees engaged in storytelling sessions where elders recounted their life in Rakhine State, emphasizing their historical presence in the region and rejecting the Myanmar government's narrative that they are "illegal immigrants" (Thesis, 2022). These practices not only preserve the Rohingya's cultural memory but also act as forms of resistance against the erasure of their identity.

Further, Malkki (1995) emphasizes the role of cultural practices in resisting the "uprooting" effects of forced migration. In the camps, the Rohingya continue to practice communal prayers, celebrate religious festivals, and maintain traditional customs despite the harsh conditions of refugee life. These cultural practices serve as acts of defiance against the marginalization imposed on them by both the Myanmar government and, to some extent, the host country of Bangladesh. As Green (2015) points out, cultural resistance is an important mechanism through which stateless populations like the Rohingya maintain their sense of dignity and belonging in the face of exclusion.

Additionally, the Rohingya's engagement with informal leadership structures within the camps represents another form of resistance. These structures, often led by community elders or respected figures, allow the Rohingya to negotiate with humanitarian organizations and local authorities for resources and services. These informal governance systems reflect the refugees' capacity to organize and assert agency within the constraints of statelessness, challenging the notion that they are powerless victims of displacement (Mobasher, 2022).

2.4. Critical Engagement with Existing Literature

While existing literature has extensively documented the Rohingya's statelessness and persecution, there are gaps in the scholarship that require further exploration. For instance, much of the literature has focused on the legal aspects of statelessness, often overlooking the ways in which the Rohingya actively resist their exclusion through cultural and social practices. This research seeks to fill this gap by emphasizing the role of cultural resistance as a form of political agency. Moreover, while scholars like Agamben (1998) and Malkki (1995) provide valuable theoretical frameworks for understanding statelessness and refugeehood, there is a need for more empirical studies that integrate these theories with the lived experiences of the Rohingya in refugee camps.

Recent studies, such as those by Ibrahim (2018) and Leider (2018), have made important contributions to understanding the historical and political dimensions of the Rohingya crisis, but they do not fully explore the everyday forms of resistance practiced by the refugees. By combining ethnographic data from fieldwork in Kutupalong and Bhashan Char with these theoretical frameworks, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of how the Rohingya navigate their statelessness and exclusion while actively asserting their identity and agency.

3. Historical Context of the Rohingya Crisis

3.1. Rohingya Identity and Marginalization in Myanmar

The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority who have resided in Myanmar's Rakhine State for centuries. Despite this long-standing presence, the state of Myanmar has consistently framed the Rohingya as foreigners, specifically as "illegal Bengali immigrants" from neighboring Bangladesh (Ibrahim, 2018). Historical records suggest that Muslim communities have been present in the region since the 8th century when Arab traders introduced Islam to the coastal regions of what is now Myanmar (Leider, 2018). However, the Rohingya's historical roots have been systematically erased by successive Burmese governments, particularly in the post-colonial period, when ethnic and religious identity became central to the nation-building project.

Following Myanmar's independence from British colonial rule in 1948, the country sought to define its national identity along ethnic and religious lines. This led to the exclusion of certain minority groups, most notably the Rohingya. The 1982 Citizenship Law was an important turning point in this process of exclusion. The law officially stripped the Rohingya of their citizenship by categorizing them as foreigners and excluding them from the list of 135 officially recognized ethnic groups in Myanmar (Human Rights Watch, 2000). According to Leider (2018), the law was a key mechanism through which the Burmese state sought to homogenize its population by reinforcing the dominance of the Buddhist majority and marginalizing ethnic and religious minorities such as the Rohingya.

This legal exclusion marked the beginning of the Rohingya's statelessness and laid the groundwork for subsequent waves of violence and persecution. As Green (2015) argues, the 1982 law institutionalized the marginalization of the Rohingya, making them vulnerable to state-sponsored

violence and systemic discrimination. The law also framed the Rohingya as a demographic and security threat, further justifying their exclusion and the state's attempts to "cleanse" them from Myanmar's social fabric.

3.2. Waves of Displacement and Violence

The Rohingya have experienced several significant waves of displacement over the past five decades, all of which have been driven by state-sponsored campaigns of violence and military crackdowns. The 1978 military-led "Nagamin" operation (Dragon Ki)

The 1991-1992 exodus marked another significant episode of displacement, with approximately 250,000 Rohingya fleeing across the border to escape renewed military persecution (Ibrahim, 2018). These waves of violence were justified by the Myanmar government as efforts to root out illegal immigrants, a narrative that framed the Rohingya as foreign intruders rather than an indigenous ethnic group with historical ties to the region (Leider, 2018). This narrative has been reinforced by both state-controlled media and the education system, which portray the Rohingya as outsiders who threaten the nation's Buddhist identity (Walton, 2013).

These cycles of violence and displacement illustrate the deeply entrenched nature of the Rohingya's exclusion from Myanmar's political and social order. By rendering the Rohingya stateless and framing them as a security threat, the Myanmar government has been able to legitimize its use of violence against them, thereby perpetuating their marginalization. As Leider (2018) notes, this process of "othering" the Rohingya has not only justified their exclusion but has also facilitated the state's broader efforts to consolidate ethnic and religious homogeneity.

3.3. The 2017 Crisis and Mass Displacement

The most severe and widely condemned episode of violence against the Rohingya occurred in 2017. Following attacks on police outposts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the Myanmar military launched a brutal crackdown on Rohingya villages in northern Rakhine State. Entire villages were burned to the ground, thousands of people were killed, and widespread reports of sexual violence and mass executions emerged (Amnesty International, 2017). By the end of 2017, over 700,000 Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh, joining hundreds of thousands of previously displaced refugees in camps like Kutupalong (UNHCR, 2018).

The 2017 military operation was widely condemned by the international community, with the United Nations describing it as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing" (United Nations, 2017). Despite Myanmar's claims that the military actions were aimed at rooting out terrorism, organizations such as Amnesty International (2017) and Human Rights Watch (2018) documented clear evidence of systematic violence directed at civilians. Scholars such as Ibrahim (2018) argue that the 2017 crisis was the culmination of decades of systematic dehumanization and marginalization of the Rohingya, driven by state-led efforts to eliminate the Rohingya as a demographic group.

According to Green (2015), the Myanmar government's actions in 2017 must be understood within the broader context of ethnic nationalism and the state's militarized politics. The Rohingya have long been portrayed as an existential threat to Myanmar's national identity, and the military's actions in 2017 were part of a broader strategy aimed at securing the dominance of the Buddhist majority. This violence, as Ibrahim (2018) points out, was not an isolated event but the result of sustained policies aimed at forcibly removing the Rohingya from Rakhine State.

3.4. International Response and Ongoing Humanitarian Crisis

Despite global outrage and condemnation, the Rohingya crisis remains unresolved. Bangladesh, which now hosts over one million Rohingya refugees, has struggled to provide adequate resources for the refugee population, leading to severe overcrowding in camps like Kutupalong, the largest refugee camp in the world (UNHCR, 2020). Conditions in the camps are dire, with limited access to healthcare, clean water, and education. The Bangladeshi government's attempt to relocate refugees to Bashan Char, a remote island, has been heavily criticized by human rights organizations for its lack of infrastructure and the potential for human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

International organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Amnesty International have played important roles in providing emergency aid and documenting the human rights abuses faced by the Rohingya. However, the international community's response has largely been reactive rather than proactive, focusing on addressing the immediate humanitarian needs of the refugees without tackling the root causes of the crisis (Green, 2015). The International Criminal Court (ICC) launched an investigation into the atrocities committed against the Rohingya in 2019 (ICC, 2019), but progress has been slow, and Myanmar's military leaders have yet to be held accountable.

Efforts to repatriate the Rohingya to Myanmar have also faced significant obstacles. Despite diplomatic efforts by Bangladesh and the international community, the Myanmar government has consistently refused to guarantee the safety of the Rohingya or restore their citizenship. As Amnesty International (2019) notes, the Rohingya are reluctant to return to Myanmar without assurances that they will be recognized as citizens with full rights, rather than being subjected to further persecution and violence.

3.5. Regional Dynamics and Geopolitical Considerations

Regional powers such as China and India, both of which have significant economic and geopolitical interests in Myanmar, have played a important role in shaping the international response to the Rohingya crisis. China, in particular, has been reluctant to criticize Myanmar due to its investments in the Belt and Road Initiative, which includes key infrastructure projects in Myanmar (Sun, 2018). India, while expressing concerns over the violence, has also been hesitant to pressure Myanmar too strongly, given its own regional security concerns and historical ties to the country (Ramachandran, 2018).

This lack of regional pressure has been a major impediment to achieving a lasting solution to the Rohingya crisis. Without concerted diplomatic efforts from neighboring countries, Myanmar has been able to continue denying the Rohingya's rights with little consequence. As Leider (2018) points out, the geopolitical calculus of regional powers has contributed to the Rohingya's isolation and perpetuated their statelessness.

4. Methodology

This research draws from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Rohingya refugee camps of Kutupalong and Bashan Char, Bangladesh. Employing participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs), the study captures how the Rohingya navigate statelessness and assert their identity through cultural resistance.

As a Bangladeshi researcher, I was able to build rapport with participants due to shared cultural and linguistic ties. This proximity allowed for more in-depth access to daily life in the camps, where I observed communal prayers, storytelling, and cultural performances that serve as mechanisms for preserving Rohingya identity. These observations were complemented by semi-structured interviews with refugees, community leaders, and NGO workers, revealing personal narratives that rejected the state-imposed labels of "illegal immigrants" or "Bengalis." Participants expressed a deep-rooted desire to return to Myanmar as recognized Rohingya, with many emphasizing the importance of passing their cultural heritage to future generations.

Focus group discussions with specific demographic groups, such as young men, women, and elders, highlighted how informal leadership structures within the camps offer the Rohingya a form of agency. These structures enable them to organize and advocate for resources, demonstrating their resilience and political engagement despite their statelessness. Reflexivity was essential throughout the fieldwork, ensuring an ethical approach to the researcher-participant relationship and minimizing potential power imbalances.

The data, analyzed through thematic analysis, revealed recurring patterns related to identity reconstruction, cultural resistance, and survival strategies. These themes were then integrated with secondary sources from refugee studies and political anthropology to offer a comprehensive

understanding of how the Rohingya resist their marginalization and maintain their collective identity despite being rendered stateless.

5. Findings: Identity Politics and the Rohingya

This section presents the key findings from the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Rohingya refugee camps of Kutupalong and Bashan Char, Bangladesh. The findings reveal how the Rohingya engage with and resist identity politics that frame them as stateless and excluded individuals. Drawing from both the data collected and theoretical perspectives, the Rohingya's lived experiences of marginalization, exclusion, and identity reconstruction are critically explored here.

5.1. *The Construction of Exclusion: Identity Politics Against the Rohingya*

The fieldwork revealed that the exclusion of the Rohingya from Myanmar's national fabric is a clear example of how identity politics operates to marginalize and erase certain populations. As framed by Bauman's concept of identity politics (2013), the state has constructed a national identity that is both ethnic and religiously homogenous, rooted in a Buddhist-Burmese identity. The Rohingya, who are primarily Muslim, are thus positioned as outsiders and framed as a demographic threat.

From interviews with Rohingya refugees, it became evident that their exclusion is deeply ingrained in state policies that systematically label them as "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh, despite their historical presence in Myanmar. Many of the refugees recalled being repeatedly referred to as "Bengalis" by Myanmar officials and military personnel, reinforcing the state-imposed narrative that they did not belong in Rakhine State (Final Paper, 2021). These experiences align with what Green (2015) refers to as the politics of othering, where the state uses legal, social, and rhetorical means to frame the Rohingya as foreigners, further justifying their exclusion.

The 1982 Citizenship Law was a significant tool of exclusion mentioned in nearly all interviews. Refugees described how this law stripped them of their citizenship, denying them access to education, healthcare, and legal employment (Thesis, 2022). Agamben's (1998) concept of homo sacer provides a useful.

5.2. *Statelessness as a Form of Violence*

The findings also show that statelessness itself constitutes a form of structural violence against the Rohingya. Many refugees expressed how the loss of citizenship and legal identity left them exposed to state-sponsored violence, particularly during the military-led crackdowns in 1978, 1991-1992, and, most notably, in 2017. The 2017 military operation, which forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, was frequently cited as the most traumatic event in the refugees' lives, where they experienced mass killings, sexual violence, and the burning of entire villages (Amnesty International, 2017). Survivors described these acts of violence not as isolated incidents but as the culmination of decades of systematic exclusion and dehumanization by the state.

In this context, the Rohingya's statelessness acts as a mechanism of control, where the state not only denies them legal recognition but also uses their lack of citizenship to justify extreme acts of violence. As Ibrahim (2018) argues, statelessness for the Rohingya is not just a legal condition but a political strategy aimed at erasing their presence both physically and symbolically. Fieldwork revealed that this erasure extends beyond Myanmar's borders, as the Rohingya remain stateless even in Bangladesh, where they are treated as refugees and denied any legal pathway to citizenship (Thesis, 2022).

5.3. *Cultural Resistance and Identity Reconstruction*

Despite their exclusion, the Rohingya refugees actively resist the state's attempts to erase their identity through cultural and religious practices. Drawing on Malkki's (1995) analysis of refugeehood, this research found that the Rohingya in the camps engage in acts of cultural resistance as a way to reclaim and maintain their identity. Interviews revealed that communal prayers, religious festivals, and storytelling are central to how the Rohingya preserve their sense of belonging. These

practices serve not only as spiritual acts but also as forms of defiance against the state's efforts to erase their identity.

For instance, during a focus group discussion in Kutupalong camp, a group of Rohingya elders spoke about the importance of passing down their history and traditions to the younger generation. "We tell our children stories of our homeland, our mosques, our lives before the violence, so they don't forget who we are," one elder explained (Fieldwork, 2022). This process of storytelling aligns with Malkki's concept of "mythico-histories," where displaced populations use oral histories to reconstruct their identity and assert their presence despite being uprooted from their homeland.

Furthermore, religious identity plays a important role in the Rohingya's resistance to marginalization. Communal prayers and the observance of Islamic festivals in the camps act as key sites for reinforcing social cohesion and resisting the state's portrayal of the Rohingya as foreigners. As Walton (2013) notes, the state's promotion of Buddhist nationalism has positioned Islam as a foreign religion, further marginalizing the Rohingya. However, in the refugee camps, the Rohingya's religious practices serve as acts of resilience, where faith and community become intertwined with their struggle for recognition and belonging.

5.4. *Informal Leadership and Political Agency*

Another key finding from the fieldwork is the role of informal leadership structures within the camps, which offer the Rohingya a degree of political agency despite their statelessness. These informal governance systems, often led by community elders and religious leaders, provide a way for the Rohingya to organize and advocate for their needs. Many refugees described how these leadership structures helped them negotiate with humanitarian organizations for access to resources such as food, healthcare, and education (Thesis, 2022).

These forms of grassroots political organization challenge the notion that statelessness renders individuals powerless. On the contrary, the Rohingya's ability to organize within the confines of the refugee camps demonstrates their capacity to resist their exclusion and assert their rights, even in the absence of legal recognition. As Green (2015) points out, political agency does not require formal citizenship; it can manifest in informal spaces where marginalized groups find ways to assert control over their circumstances.

In the camps, informal leadership structures have also been instrumental in maintaining social order and reinforcing cultural norms. These systems offer a form of stability in an otherwise precarious existence, allowing the Rohingya to assert agency in the face of their statelessness. This finding aligns with Malkki's (1995) argument that refugees are not passive victims but active agents who engage in various forms of resistance and self-organization.

6. Discussion: Anthropology of Statelessness and Resistance

This research has brought into focus how identity politics and statelessness intersect in the case of the Rohingya, showing how these dynamics are important to understanding their exclusion, marginalization, and displacement. Through an anthropological lens, this study has emphasized the significance of statelessness as not merely a legal condition but as a deeply social and political one. By combining fieldwork data with anthropological theories, this discussion unpacks how the Rohingya's statelessness operates both as a form of violence and as a site of cultural resistance.

6.1. *Statelessness as Social Death: The Impact of Identity Politics*

Giorgio Agamben's theory of homo sacer (1998) frames statelessness as a form of social death, where individuals are stripped of their legal identity and reduced to "bare life," excluded from the protection and recognition of the state. For the Rohingya, statelessness has resulted in systematic exclusion not only from Myanmar's national community but also from the basic rights of citizenship, such as access to education, healthcare, and legal employment. The 1982 Citizenship Law was a pivotal moment in the Rohingya's exclusion, rendering them legally invisible within Myanmar and depriving them of the protections that come with citizenship (Human Rights Watch, 2000).

Anthropologically, statelessness represents more than just the absence of legal recognition. It is a condition of profound vulnerability, where individuals are denied the ability to participate in the political, social, and economic life of the state. The Rohingya's experiences reflect this, as their statelessness has been accompanied by state-sponsored violence, forced displacement, and exclusion from Myanmar's national narrative. In interviews conducted in the refugee camps of Bangladesh, many Rohingya refugees described feeling like "non-persons," unable to claim even the most basic rights due to their lack of legal identity (Fieldwork Interview, 2022). This mirrors Agamben's concept of "bare life," where the state not only excludes individuals but also denies their humanity, making them vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

This dynamic of exclusion is closely tied to identity politics, as theorized by Bauman (2013). Myanmar's construction of a Buddhist-Burmese identity has positioned the Rohingya as perpetual outsiders, framing them as a demographic threat to the nation's ethnic and religious purity. By defining national identity in terms of religious and ethnic homogeneity, the state has systematically marginalized the Rohingya, reinforcing their statelessness and justifying their exclusion. This exclusionary identity politics has been a key factor in the repeated military crackdowns against the Rohingya, including the 2017 campaign, which resulted in mass displacement and violence (Ibrahim, 2018). Thus, identity politics operates as a mechanism of control, defining who belongs and who is excluded, with statelessness serving as a key instrument of this exclusion.

6.2. Cultural Resistance: Reclaiming Identity in Exile

While statelessness has exposed the Rohingya to extreme vulnerability, it has also become a site for cultural resistance. Drawing on Malkki's (1995) work on refugeehood, this research has shown that displaced populations like the Rohingya are not passive victims of exclusion. Instead, they actively engage in practices of identity reconstruction and cultural resistance, using their social and cultural practices to assert their identity and resist the erasure imposed by the state.

In the Rohingya refugee camps of Bangladesh, communal prayers, storytelling, and religious festivals play a important role in maintaining social cohesion and reinforcing the Rohingya's collective identity. During fieldwork, it became clear that these cultural practices are not only ways of preserving heritage but also acts of defiance against the state's efforts to erase their identity. For instance, the elders in the camps pass down oral histories to the younger generations, recounting stories of life in Rakhine State before the violence, thereby preserving the memory of their homeland and rejecting the state-imposed narrative that they are "illegal immigrants" (Fieldwork, 2022).

This form of cultural resistance aligns with Malkki's concept of "mythico-histories," where displaced populations use storytelling to reconstruct their identity and maintain a sense of belonging. In the case of the Rohingya, these cultural practices serve as critical sites of resistance against the state's efforts to erase their history and presence. Religious identity, in particular, plays a key role in this resistance. The communal observance of Islamic festivals and daily prayers provides the Rohingya with a sense of unity and belonging, reinforcing their identity in the face of exclusion.

From an anthropological perspective, cultural practices function as both symbols of resistance and practical mechanisms for maintaining social order within the camps. Through these practices, the Rohingya resist the dehumanizing effects of statelessness by asserting their humanity and reclaiming their identity. This cultural resistance is a testament to their resilience, demonstrating that despite being rendered stateless, they continue to assert their existence and challenge their exclusion.

6.3. Informal Leadership and Political Agency

Another critical finding from this research is the role of informal leadership structures in enabling the Rohingya to navigate their statelessness and assert a degree of political agency. These grassroots governance systems, often led by community elders and religious leaders, provide the Rohingya with the ability to organize themselves, negotiate with humanitarian organizations, and advocate for their needs. Many of the refugees described how these informal structures helped them access vital resources, such as food, healthcare, and education, despite their lack of formal legal recognition (Thesis, 2022).

These findings challenge the notion that statelessness renders individuals politically powerless. While the Rohingya are excluded from formal citizenship and state structures, they have developed alternative forms of governance and organization that allow them to exert agency within the confines of the refugee camps. This grassroots political organization demonstrates the Rohingya's resilience and capacity for self-determination, even in the face of extreme marginalization. As Green (2015) points out, political agency does not require formal citizenship; it can emerge in informal spaces where marginalized groups organize to assert control over their circumstances.

Anthropologically, these informal governance structures can be seen as spaces of resistance, where the Rohingya assert their agency despite being denied formal recognition by the state. By organizing within the camps, the Rohingya are not only addressing their immediate material needs but also challenging the broader structures of exclusion that define their statelessness. These informal systems of governance offer a counter-narrative to the state's portrayal of the Rohingya as helpless and stateless, showing that they are capable of asserting their rights and organizing for collective action.

6.4. Broader Implications for Anthropological Understandings of Statelessness

At the same time, this research has shown that statelessness can also be a site of resistance, where marginalized groups like the Rohingya engage in cultural and political practices to assert their identity and reclaim their humanity. By focusing on the Rohingya's cultural resistance and grassroots political organization, this study challenges the narrative that statelessness leaves individuals powerless. Instead, the Rohingya's experiences demonstrate that even in the face of extreme exclusion, marginalized groups can find ways to resist, assert agency, and maintain their sense of identity and belonging.

Through an anthropological lens, this research emphasizes the importance of examining statelessness not just as a legal condition but as a social and cultural one, where identity, power, and resistance intersect. The Rohingya's experiences offer valuable insights into how statelessness operates as both a mechanism of exclusion and a site of resistance, contributing to broader debates in anthropology about identity, citizenship, and political agency.

6.5. Conclusion of the Discussion

The Rohingya crisis represents one of the most profound examples of how identity politics can be weaponized by a state to exclude, marginalize, and erase an ethnic minority. This study has explored how Myanmar's construction of a Buddhist-Burmese national identity has systematically positioned the Rohingya as outsiders, rendering them stateless through legal instruments like the 1982 Citizenship Law and reinforcing their exclusion through state-sponsored violence. The identity politics at play in Myanmar, as analyzed through Bauman's (2013) framework, highlights the role of the state in defining who belongs within the national fabric and who is excluded, with the Rohingya being relegated to the latter category.

By rendering the Rohingya stateless, Myanmar has denied them not only citizenship but also basic human rights, as Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* (1998) aptly illustrates. The Rohingya have been stripped of legal protections, making them vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and displacement. The 2017 military crackdown, which forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, marked the culmination of decades of systematic exclusion, where the state's efforts to erase the Rohingya's identity manifested in acts of mass violence, displacement, and dehumanization.

Despite the state's efforts to marginalize and erase their identity, the Rohingya have actively resisted their exclusion through cultural practices and grassroots political organization. As Malkki's (1995) work on refugeehood demonstrates, displaced populations are not passive victims but engage in cultural resistance to assert their identity and maintain a sense of belonging. This study's fieldwork in the Rohingya refugee camps of Kutupalong and Bashan Char revealed how communal prayers, storytelling, and religious festivals serve as acts of defiance against the state's attempts to erase their

identity. These practices not only preserve the Rohingya's cultural memory but also reinforce their social cohesion, enabling them to resist their statelessness.

The role of informal leadership structures within the refugee camps has also been central to the Rohingya's ability to navigate their statelessness. These grassroots systems provide the Rohingya with a degree of political agency, allowing them to organize, advocate for resources, and maintain social order within their community. The findings of this study challenge the notion that statelessness renders individuals powerless; instead, the Rohingya have demonstrated resilience and political engagement despite their exclusion from the formal state apparatus.

In conclusion, the Rohingya crisis is not simply a humanitarian issue but a profound example of how statelessness and identity politics can intersect to produce exclusion, violence, and displacement. The Rohingya's experiences reveal the devastating consequences of being rendered stateless, where individuals are stripped of their rights and reduced to "bare life." However, their resistance—through cultural practices, informal governance, and everyday acts of survival—demonstrates their ongoing struggle for recognition and dignity. This research contributes to the broader understanding of how marginalized groups resist their exclusion and navigate the challenges of statelessness, offering important insights for future studies on identity, citizenship, and political agency.

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Note: This paper presents a condensed version of my master's thesis titled [*Thesis Title*], completed at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID), Geneva, in 2022. Researchers interested in a more detailed analysis, including extensive primary data, are encouraged to consult the full thesis for further insights and comprehensive discussions on the role of identity politics and statelessness in the Rohingya crisis.

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