



Beyond Support: Collective Action for Identity and Cultural Preservation among Rohingya Refugees

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Abstract

This study explores both offline and online entrepreneurial efforts adopted by Rohingya refugees to protect and promote their cultural heritage. Through content analysis, ethnographic observations, and long-term engagement with Rohingya in research, it investigates how entrepreneurship functions both as a form of communal action for cultural identity and as a survival strategy. Online activities such as digital storytelling, heritage promotion and community-based learning initiatives, both offline and online, are interconnected with cultural identity preservation. By tracing the intersections between physical and virtual spaces beyond non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and agency supports, the study highlights the agency of Rohingya refugees in resisting cultural erasure, mobilising community limited resources, and envisioning their return and reintegration into Myanmar's identity and belonging.

Introduction

Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, the Rohingya have been denied recognition as one of the 135 official ethnic groups in the country, and their historical claims have been consistently rejected by Myanmar governments. Despite the fact that many Rohingya have centuries-old roots in Myanmar and have participated in elections, they are regarded as 'illegal Bengali' from Bangladesh (Uddin, 2020). They have resided in the Rakhine state for nearly a century; yet, the Rohingya ethnic community is now considered stateless due to the 1982 Citizenship Act enacted by the Myanmar military government (Albert and Maizland, 2020). This exclusion policy is closely tied to Burma's colonial boundary-making. As Shahabuddin (2019) argues, the doctrine of *uti possidetis* (Latin for 'you possess') entrenched fixed postcolonial borders and privileged narrow state-centric identities, denying recognition of plural and overlapping affiliations.

In August 2017, following violent military crackdowns in Myanmar's Rakhine State, over 750,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh. They joined earlier waves of Rohingya refugees who had escaped during the 1970s and 1990s. At that time, Rohingyas faced killings, displacement, rape, beatings, and other atrocities. The severity of the Myanmar army's systematic attacks has been referred to as 'genocide' (Ibrahim, 2018; Lee, 2021; Uddin, 2020). These levels of persecution have not stopped in the last decades, with ongoing displacement of Rohingyas from Myanmar's Rakhine State to Bangladesh. According to the latest briefing note of July 2025, UNHCR reports that over 150,000 new Rohingya were forced to flee Myanmar to save their lives and joined over 1.4 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh in the world's largest refugee camp near Cox's Bazar.

In Bangladesh, the Rohingya community has endured limited access to food, shelter, health, and education facilities for over eight years. In spite of limitations, many Rohingya activists use offline and online communication tools for activism and identity preservation beyond NGOs' and agencies' support. Although existing research offers important insights into refugee entrepreneurship, collective identities and political mobilisation (Ansar and Khaled, 2023); digital diaspora networks (Aziz, 2022); tech-led violence to empowerment (Nandi and Hossain, 2025); and Rohingya art (Rahman, 2025), there is a dearth of intersectional examination of these topics in the context of the Rohingyas. In particular, little is known about how offline cultural entrepreneurship and online cultural initiatives interact, and how they work together to preserve identity through collective action. By studying both domains concurrently, this paper begins to provide a picture of how Rohingya refugees use knowledge to protect their cultural heritage during periods of camp life.

As a Bangladeshi born in Chittagong, my mother tongue, the Chittagonian language, is almost the same as the Rohingya language; this facilitates ease of communication and cultural understanding. Over the past three years, I have engaged extensively in research on Rohingya refugees within camp settings. My familiarity with Rohingya culture is further enhanced through longstanding connections with numerous Rohingya activists—many of whom are active on social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn—who advocate for citizenship rights and the preservation of their collective identity. During the summer of June 2025, as part of anthropological fieldwork focused on cultural practices and community education, I spent one month residing in the Rohingya refugee camp of Cox's Bazar. This enabled me to conduct in-depth discussions with Rohingya educators and content creators who employ their skills to inform, inspire, and educate their community. In parallel, I examined the work of Rohingya activists and analysed content on Rohingya-led social media channels, including from groups who circulate culturally and educationally oriented digital materials. This combination of linguistic proximity, prolonged research engagement, and the establishment of trusted networks provided me with a unique positionality, enabling me to write on this topic.

This paper addresses one central research question: how do Rohingya refugees utilise offline and online entrepreneurship to maintain and promote their cultural identity and heritage? To explore this question, the analysis proceeds in two strands. First, it examines offline and online language and educational initiatives, with particular attention to how these efforts promote the Rohingya language and sustain community-led schools as vehicles for identity formation. Second, it considers the ways in which Rohingya communities preserve their collective history through artistic expression, music, and the creation of archival resources, thereby safeguarding intangible heritage for future generations and documentation for justice.

Rohingya Language and Education: A Core Part of Rohingya Identity

The Rohingyas, originally full citizens of historical Arakan post-independence, experienced a significant decline in their cultural and linguistic identity following the 1962 military coup in Myanmar. This coup sponsored a nationalisation program that produced anti-Rohingya hate speech (Lee, 2019) and systematically marginalised the Rohingya community, including the removal of their language from the Burmese Broadcasting Service in 1964. The 1989 'Burmanisation' process further erased Rohingya cultural markers by replacing Rohingya names with Burmese ones, such as changing 'Arakan' to 'Rakhine State' and 'Akyab' to 'Sittwe' (Rowley, 2013).

The suppression of the Rohingya language and culture has had profound effects on the community. Despite these efforts to suppress their culture, the Rohingya language persists, primarily as a spoken language. Recent initiatives have introduced written scripts, such as Rohingyalish; this addition to the Hanafi Rohingya script, developed by Mohammed Hanif (a Rohingya teacher) in the 1980s, has been used for limited newsprint circulation and has recently been accepted by the Unicode Consortium, allowing Rohingyas to text and communicate in their language (Omniglot, n.d.). Currently, they are using their language in different digital platform like social media posting, commenting and introducing educational contents. Despite this, Rohingyas continue to face significant challenges in preserving their linguistic and cultural identity, especially in refugee contexts where mixed languages are used. Mayyu Ali, a Rohingya refugee and the author of *EXODUS: Between Genocide and Me* stated in Cultural Survival magazine:

The worst thing is that the NGOs and agencies that operate in the refugee camps seem blind to this loss; some NGOs and agencies have been using this mixed language in awareness-raising campaigns for Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. The Myanmar government often accuses us of being Bengali, saying that we migrated to Myanmar illegally. One day, we will return to our homeland in Myanmar. But returning with this mixed tongue and mixed culture will give validity to those who say that we are simply illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and will make our lives difficult in new ways. In terms of our identity, Rohingyas have lost almost everything. Our oral language is the last piece of identity we have... (Ali, 2021, p.n/a).

This situation potentially undermines their claims to their heritage and complicates their future repatriation. However, Rohingyas' oral language practice and online language activism continue to be a crucial part of their identity.

Turning Shelters into Classrooms: (Informal) Education in Cox's Bazar Camp

Since their arrival in Bangladesh, Rohingyas have been facing a threat of generational loss due to the lack of formal education and to NGOs and other stakeholders' policies that are disconnected from refugees' ways of learning and aspirations. This issue is compounded by the influence of NGOs and donors, who often lead cultural preservation and education initiatives without adequate input from the Rohingya community. This lack of representation can lead to projects that cater more to the interests of donors and the international community than to the needs of the Rohingya people. As Barakat (2020) argues, the short-term, quick-fix, pre-planned project culture of many humanitarian organisations often prioritises visual displays of success over meaningful, long-term education and cultural preservation.

In my view, cultural reproduction and identity depend on the presence of basic literacy within a population. Among the Rohingyas, literacy levels remain critically low as a result of systematic exclusion from formal education at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in Myanmar, as well as of restricted access to quality education in refugee-hosting states in Bangladesh. In response to these barriers, some Rohingya activists and educators have established refugee-led schools for their community.

During my summer 2025 fieldwork, I visited several schools in Cox's Bazar and spoke with Rohingya teachers. Typically, the schools operate in two shifts: an early morning session from 6:00 am to 8:00 am and an evening session from 5:00 pm to 8:00 pm. When asked about this schedule and the motivation behind establishing these schools, one educator, Rahim (pseudonym) explained, 'From 9:00 am to 4:00 pm we work as volunteers for various NGOs. The early morning and evening are the only times we can teach, and most of us do so voluntarily'. The majority of educators I interviewed expressed concern over the growing involvement of Rohingya youth in harmful activities, including gender-based violence, harassment, and recruitment into armed groups—patterns they linked directly to the absence of educational opportunities. They emphasised that their primary motivation was to safeguard the future of their community. Rohingya activists were also critical of NGO-run schools, noting that these often employ underqualified teachers and prioritise donor agendas over the community's own cultural norms and needs.

It is worth noting that most of these 'schools' are not located in a dedicated bamboo shelter or separate classrooms. Instead, they are often hosted within Rohingya shelters that have larger rooms. At the agreed teaching time, the host family clears the space, and children from surrounding shelters gather to use the room as a temporary classroom. This flexible arrangement demonstrates both the resource limitations in the camps and the community's collective action for learning spaces under constrained conditions. Notably, each school maintains a dedicated Facebook page or group—examples include *Life Destination High School*, *ANR Education Light*, and *New Light of Rohingya CHS*. Through these platforms, they share a variety of educational activities, such as conducting examinations, promoting certificate award ceremonies, and displaying student performance and achievements. These integrated offline and online educational practices reflect a collective conviction in Rohingyas' right to education and a sustained hope that, upon eventual repatriation, students will be able to pursue higher education and secure employment opportunities in Myanmar and beyond.

From Offline to Online: Music, Poetry and Art as Symbols of Everyday Resistance

Rohingya arts, music and culture are powerful tools for preserving identity and resisting oppression. These forms of expression document the struggles and resilience of the Rohingyas, maintaining their cultural heritage and providing a means of passive resistance. As these cultural practices are now shifting from offline to online, they continue to play a crucial role in the Rohingya's fight for identity recognition and preservation. Rohingya's *Taranas* (patriotic songs, cultural songs, or community anthems that express identity, history, or aspirations) provide an outlet for frustration and a way to express emotions, a glue for community bonding. For example, in Nayapara, refugees gather for singing sessions, using traditional instruments like the *juri* and *tabla*. These sessions offer entertainment and a collective way to express frustrations, recall memories, and transmit cultural heritage to the next generation. Some *Taranas* have gained attention thanks to online platforms like YouTube (through a number of individual channels); Zita Tv; Rohel Khan Rapper; Osman ARTV; Arakan Rohingya Cultural Association (ARCA), Rohingya Music Records, and more. These artistic productions and refugee-led initiatives persist among the Rohingyas, serving as a collective memory and a subtle form of resistance.

In her book, *Memories of Burmese Rohingya Refugees*, Farzana (2017) identifies three major types of Rohingya songs and poems: i) the perception of freedom and liberty; ii) the concept of migration and home; and iii) the concept of hope and despair. I argue that these songs and poems are powerful means of preserving identity and displaying passive resistance from those who lack the means to confront their oppressors directly.

A Proliferation of Rohingya-Led Initiatives

During my interactions with interlocutors, I observed that many of the Rohingyas' social media profile names had the 'RO' prefix added before their names. When I inquired about the meaning of the prefix and the reason it was added, respondents clarified that 'RO' was an abbreviation for Rohingya. It served as a deliberate assertion of their identity. Additionally, the proliferation of Rohingyas' digital cultural initiatives has played a crucial role in preserving and promoting the cultural identity of the Rohingya people amidst ongoing crises. These digital initiatives provide platforms for offline activities to online cultural preservation, education, and community support, both within refugee camps and in the diaspora. Notable digital media-based initiatives include:

Rohingya Vision: Since 2012, R-Vision, considered the first Rohingya television channel, has broadcasted limited cultural segments. These segments include Rohingya individuals expounding upon the meaning of cultural proverbs, Rohingya singers and musicians, and reading and writing in the Rohingya

language. This channel plays a significant role in promoting Rohingya culture and language through media.

Rohingya Historical Archive: The Archive, started by Rohingya activist Mohammad Noor, aims to gather Rohingya diaspora members to compile a digital archive of cultural memory and identification papers pertaining to the lived experiences of people from Arakan who have resided in Cox's Bazar Refugee camp. The goal of this archive is to protect the Rohingya's cultural and historical identity.

Rohingya Zee TV and The Arakan Times: Rohingya Zee TV is a YouTube channel providing daily news updates and other content relevant to the Rohingya community. Similarly, The Arakan Times focuses on news and issues affecting the Rohingya, aiming to raise awareness and document their experiences. These channels serve as important platforms for disseminating information and keeping the Rohingya community informed.

The Art Garden Rohingya: This is an online platform that features the writings of more than 100 Rohingya authors, artists and poets. It was started by Mayyu Ali, a Rohingya poet and writer. His efforts have led to the creation of the Rohingya Language Preservation Project, a youth-driven research project that has released a study titled *First They Targeted our Language and Culture*. This examines the effects of genocide as seen by the collapse of the Rohingya vernacular in the camps in Bangladesh and documents the history of Myanmar's attacks on Rohingya identity.

Rohingyatographer: An online publication that features photographs taken by skilled Rohingya photographers in Cox's Bazar. As they negotiate the hard reality of the camps, these refugees use photography as a means of self-expression and empowerment, enabling them to document special moments in the lives of community members.

The establishment of cultural initiatives has been instrumental in preserving and promoting the cultural identity of the Rohingyas. These efforts provide platforms for cultural expression, education, and community support, helping to maintain the Rohingya rich heritage amidst ongoing challenges.

Finally, cultural reproduction requires a certain level of literacy among the population. The Rohingyas face desperately low literacy levels as a consequence of being denied access to formal education at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in Myanmar and as refugees in Bangladesh. Even those who received education in Myanmar did not learn about Rohingya culture and traditions as part of the country's diverse ethnic makeup, due to the national Burmanisation policy in the educational curriculum. Efforts

by NGOs and donors, while well-intentioned, often fail to adequately involve the Rohingya community, leading to initiatives that may not fully address their needs. To make more Rohingya initiatives effective, addressing the educational crisis is essential for enabling the Rohingya to preserve and transmit their cultural heritage to future generations.

Conclusions

This paper reveals that Rohingya refugees actively engage in both offline and online entrepreneurial practices not only as mechanisms of economic survival but as meaningful tools of cultural preservation and identity affirmation. By bridging traditional forms of cultural expression with digital platforms, they demonstrate capacity to resist cultural erasure, sustain communal bonds, and assert their narratives in the face of displacement. These interconnected practices reflect a strategic mobilisation of limited resources and an enduring commitment to heritage and future aspirations. Ultimately, this paper underscores the importance of recognising refugee agency beyond the frameworks provided by NGOs, emphasising the role of grassroots initiatives in shaping collective resilience and envisioning pathways to identity preservation and belonging.

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About the author

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