

BRIDGES

Rohingya families from Myanmar are now living around the globe. Staying connected to home is an important way of preserving cultural identity and building bridges for future generations.

BY JAMES FRANCIS CERRETANI '17



Bridges is a visual anthropology project made in cooperation with Rohingya communities living in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and throughout Europe.

This photo-ethnography builds on research and multi-sited fieldwork that began during my first semester at Sarah Lawrence College.

Some names have been changed for privacy and protection.

ROOTS OF RESEARCH

The aim of the work has been to immerse myself in the lifeworld of Rohingya. I began in 2014, inspired by Rico Speight, my SLC documentary film professor. In late 2015 I went to the border between Thailand and Myanmar to gain insight into the lives of Rohingya who had taken exile by sea. I crossed over to the southernmost point of mainland Myanmar to the city of Kawthoung on a small boat. In the shadows of hilltop tea shops, I listened to men telling of the daily harassment they faced for practicing Islam in the Buddhist dominant country. One man, speaking in whispers, gave me directions to a mosque where he said Rohingya were being sheltered. I would need to go back across the Thai border to the port city of Ranong. Just before making it to the mosque, I was welcomed by a few men eating Roti, a staple food for Rohingya. At the mosque the ummah was doing its best to safely harbor Rohingya orphans who made it to Thailand. Since these youths' identities made them vulnerable to human traffickers and immigration authorities, they had been told not to talk about having come from Myanmar. An older Rohingya man spoke to me about his journey, how his family perished at sea, and the hopelessness he faced in Thailand where he could not legally work or become part of society.

Once back at Sarah Lawrence, my experiences at the border pushed me to go further in researching the lines of flight of Rohingya. In January of 2015 I returned to the region and made my first passage to Rakhine State.

Rakhine State sits in the northwest of Myanmar and is also known as Arakan—referring back to the Kingdom of Arakan, which was an autonomous kingdom for hundreds of years until the Burmese invaded in 1784. Arakan is the native homeland of Rohingya, and for centuries Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists lived there in relative harmony. The Burmese invasion planted seeds of separation between these sister communities, and the British annexation of Burma to make it a province of their Indian colony in 1824 along with the subsequent establishment of Burma as an independently administered colony set the stage for an era of divide and conquer. Six months before Burma's independence in 1948, the so-called "architect of independence," Aung San, was assassinated, leading to a period of instability that opened a power vacuum allowing for the 1962 coup by General Ne Win. Myanmar plummeted into a brutal military dictatorship following the rulebooks of both the British and Japanese imperialists. This became a turning point for the Rohingya. Ne Win's junta made successive efforts to rid Rohingya of their citizenship, including, most critically, the 1982 citizenship law that omitted Rohingya from the "135 recognized ethnicities" of Burma.

I arrived at the gates of an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in the capital of Rakhine State, Sittwe. Security forces stood at the entrance of the fenced-off camp disallowing Rohingyas to leave, depriving them of proper medical facilities, food, jobs, and education. In an absurd display of American privilege, I was allowed to enter. Two security officers hovered around me as I conducted informal interviews while making rounds in the camp with community leaders and teachers. The visit was cut short as the security forces were contacted via radio by a superior. While the officers pressured me to leave, the head teacher pleaded with me to tell the Rohingyas' story. "Without food, shelter, and clothing, how can we live here?" he said.

THE CHANGE THAT WAS NOT

In fall 2015, 68 years after Aung San's death, his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi lead the National League of Democracy (NLD) to what was called the first "free and fair" elections since the 1962 coup. In 1989, leading up to the last election in which her party ran, she was placed under house arrest. Although the NLD swept the 1990 elections, the junta disregarded the results and Suu Kyi was kept under house arrest for 15 of the next 21 years. Millions of people in Myanmar, especially those belonging to ethnic minorities, had a lot riding on the 2015 elections, but for Muslims across the country the vote would be far from "free and fair." An interview I conducted with a Rohingya human rights lawyer and former political prisoner Wai Wai Nu a month prior to the election spelled out the reality. The Myanmar government had recently rescinded the "white cards," the identity cards that allowed Rohingya to vote in the 2010 election. Wai Wai Nu said: "If they lose their right to vote and their right to participate, their right to run in the elections, then what? I mean, what can they hope for? Nothing."

Yangon, the former capital of Myanmar—whose name translates literally to "end of strife"—was roiling with anticipation in the dawn of the 2015 elections. It was hard to find anyone who was not supportive of Suu Kyi; her face was emblazoned over food stalls and the NLD flag was found in every imaginable incarnation from T-shirts to headbands to face paintings. Media giants poured into NLD headquarters, all waiting to cover what was propped up as Suu Kyi's Mandela moment. As the election fervor rose, more than 120,000 Rohingya in Rakhine were fenced in camps with their votes and voices silenced.

On the morning of election day, I arrived early at the National League for Democracy's headquarters. I spoke with activists from Burma's famous '88 generation—a group of mostly student activists who influenced Suu Kyi to be a leader in Burma in the run up to her political campaign that derailed so dramatically in 1989-90. As thousands of NLD supporters flowed into the streets, members of local and international media jockeyed for position.

After waiting more than 36 hours, with stretches of pouring rain and an eventual early morning evacuation of thousands by the authorities, the large group reassembled the following day. When Suu Kyi finally took the stage, silence came over the chanting crowd. In her speech, Suu Kyi all but claimed victory, asking her supporters to be gracious when the results were final and reminding everyone that the losers and winners should be treated with dignity. The NLD won by overwhelming margins across the country with few exceptions, one of them being Rakhine State.

SPECTRES OF A SEPARATED STATE

After the elections, I returned to northwest Myanmar and spoke with Rohingya and Rakhine about the election. Rohingyas were hopeful that Suu Kyi would speak on their behalf in alignment with her pledge to put human rights at the forefront of her party's plans. Upon having their suffrage stripped from them while watching more of their land being taken from them every day, many Rohingya hoped—but expected little from Suu Kyi. The Rakhine people I spoke with had mixed feelings about Suu Kyi, most were not fully supportive of the NLD and expressed a desire for their independence. Among other concerns, they were skeptical of whether they would see any benefits of the development projects in the resource-rich state, including a deep sea port and an oil pipeline in conjunction with China.

I returned to Sarah Lawrence, and, again, my work in Myanmar felt unfinished. A month later, I went back, focusing my time in Rakhine State, visiting a small fishing village outside Sittwe (which will remain unnamed for the protection of its inhabitants). I also went north by boat to the former seat of the kingdom of Arakan, Mrauk-U. There a Rohingya man led me to the site of a mosque built in 1433 that had been razed while his village was set on fire and his parents killed.

The photographs I made from that trip were at the center of my work in a yearlong ethnographic research class with Robert Desjarlais. He opened doors into the language of anthropology, helping me to see the invisible and even spectral qualities of the people I was working with.



Fishing Village. Sittwe, 2017



Md. Noor, the eldest member of the fishing village. Sittwe, 2016



Rohingya girls ride a path connecting homes in the fishing village. Sittwe, 2017

From the election in 2015 until October 2016, the situation for Rohingyas worsened. In early October 2016, the military, joined by local extremists, conducted so-called “clearance operations” in Rakhine. The armed forces burned villages to the ground, arbitrarily murdered Rohingyas, and used rape as a weapon in their systematic usurpation of Rohingyas’ land¹. Thousands were forced to flee across the Naf river to Bangladesh, and more than 1,000 Rohingyas were killed. This was not the first exodus of Rohingya to Bangladesh; similar military operations had been carried out for decades. Rohingya have long languished in camps along the banks of the Naf river. In late 1991, the military began “Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation,” systematically displacing 250,000 Rohingyas. The majority of these asylum seekers crossed the Naf river to Bangladesh. In 2009, after 17 years in the Bangladeshi camps, 13 families totaling 64 people were selected by UNHCR for resettlement in Ireland.



Rashid. Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 2018

¹<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya/government-will-take-over-burned-myanmar-land-minister-idUSKCN1C200U>



Shadowed. Kutupalong Refugee Camp, Bangladesh, 2018

A NEW PATH IN IRELAND

As the recipient of the 2017 Meredith Fonda Russell International Fieldwork Fellowship, I spent the summer living with one such family in the Rohingya Community of Ireland (RCI). I conducted one filmmaking and one screenwriting workshop with Rohingya youth, volunteered as a translator, and offered an extra pair of hands at cricket matches and grocery store runs. What I contributed, however, could not compare to what I received: intimate storytelling, language lessons, music, sports, food, and a lasting connection with the global Rohingya community. I was privileged to gain this experience.



My host family (left to right, not including shopkeeper): Jamalida, Waheeda, Rafique, and Rafika, *At The Halal Shop*. Ireland, 2017

Many facets of my fieldwork emanated from my host family, such as the film workshops Rafique requested after hearing I had a background in film. Rafique and Rafika were born in Myanmar, but violence in 1991 forced them to flee with their families. They crossed the Naf river into Bangladesh and, after a half-decade of shuttling around different camps against their will, they both ended up living in Kutupalong refugee camp, where they met and eventually married. In 2007, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) offered them the chance to relocate, but they made the difficult decision to wait rather than separate from their parents and siblings who stayed back in the camp. In 2009, they were offered relocation once more, this time to Ireland. Rafique's father lamented that they should take the opportunity, as it could be their last chance to leave, and Rafika was pregnant at the time. Their first daughter, Jamalida, was born in Kutupalong just before the new family made the journey to Ireland.



Sofiat, Arsalan, Ismail, and Jamalida (left to right). *Summer Spin*. Ireland, 2017



Waheeda and Rafika on the way to school. Ireland, 2017

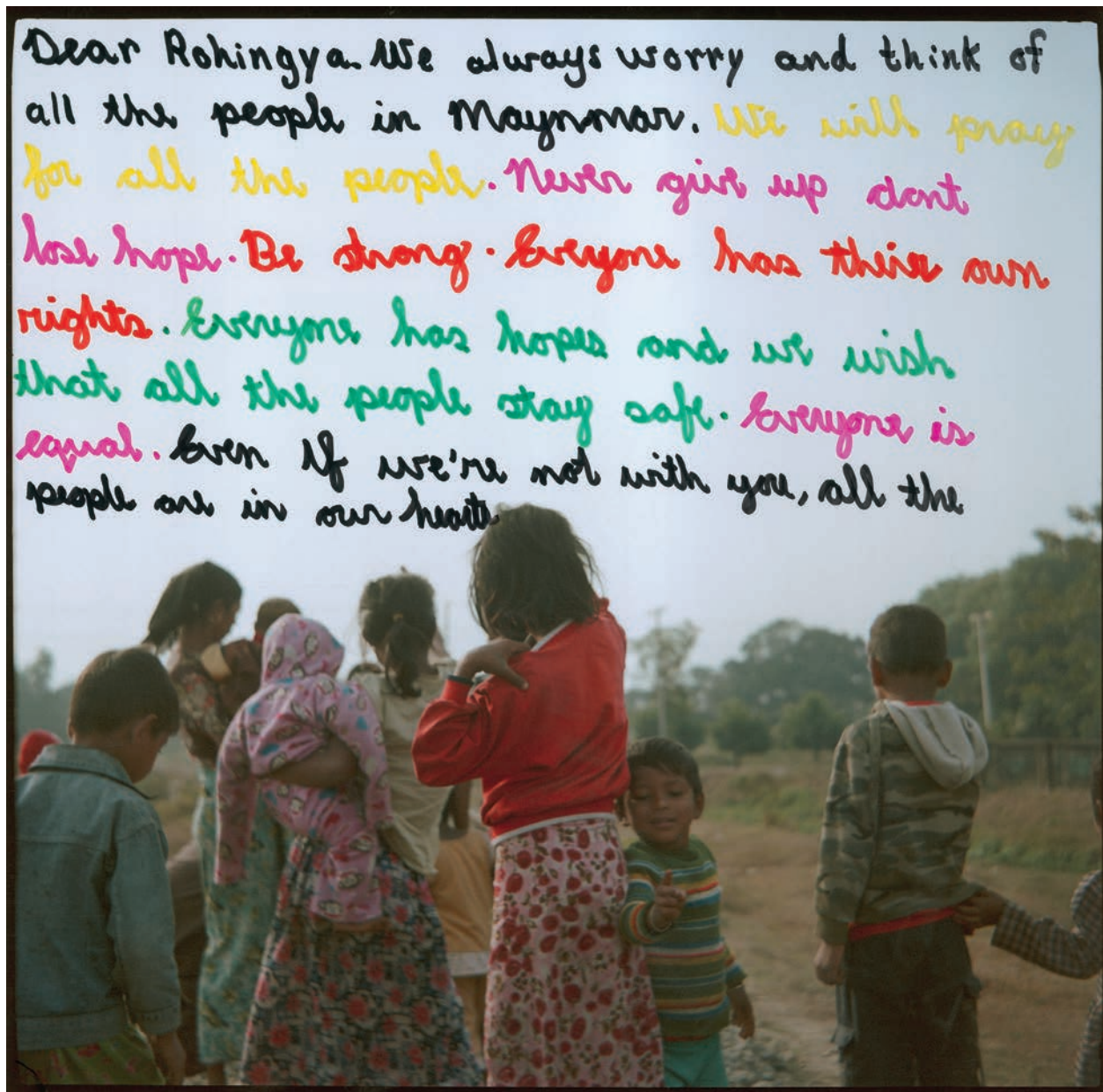
PHOTO-MESSAGES OF COMPASSION AND ENCOURAGEMENT

In 2017, during my final year at Sarah Lawrence I studied narrative photography with Joel Sternfeld. Under his tutelage, I worked with text and photos of Rohingya communities from Rakhine State. I wanted to take the project a step further, and I was given the chance with the Meredith Fonda Russell International Fieldwork Fellowship. I printed the photographs and brought them to Ireland. Youth who were part of the filmmaking workshops for the six weeks prior brought their parents along to create photo-messages as part of an art therapy exercise. Using the enlarged prints of the photographs I took in Rakhine State, members of the RCI wrote messages to the Rohingya in the photos. I planned to return to the sites where the photos were made and hand deliver these photo-messages to the people pictured.

The final workshop was scheduled for August 25, 2017. However, the evening before, the Myanmar security forces had begun the final wave of their genocidal campaign. I watched as families received texts and calls with messages that their relatives had been killed by the military, or that they were missing. During many sleepless nights in my host family's home, I watched Rafique and Rafika try to track down those who were unaccounted for. In the months that followed, more than 700,000 Rohingya were forced across the border, fleeing for their lives to Bangladesh.

The following week was the Muslim holiday of Eid-Al-Qurban. I saw strength as the ummah came together to pray on the morning of Qurban. Family and friends shared meals and gifts throughout the day. Rohingya work tirelessly to keep their traditions alive around the world while facing genocide in their homeland.

As the school year began for the youths who took part in the filmmaking and screenwriting workshops, my fieldwork was concluding. I consider myself lucky to have been able to return a couple weeks later and run the photo-messages workshop.



Let Myanmar Children Have a Bright Future. By Rabeya (13). Ireland, 2017

Dear Rohingya,

We always worry and think of all the people in Myanmar. We will pray for all the people. Never give up and don't lose hope. Be strong. Everyone has their own rights. Everyone has hopes and we wish that all the people stay safe. Everyone is equal. Even if we're not with you, all the people are in our hearts.



Be Safe. By brothers Robi (16) and Sofiat (18). Myanmar/Ireland, 2016-17



We Love You All. By Rafika, (29) Myanmar/Ireland, 2016-17



Live Up to Your Goals. By sisters Jamila and Kulsum (15) and (14). Myanmar/Ireland, 2016-17

I kept in contact with community members back in Ireland. Ismail, one of the youths from the filmmaker's group, sent me a message a few weeks after I left. "My grandfather died this morning. He was too old and the last one left from his family and friends (generation). He wanted to die in Burma but couldn't ... Rohingya people don't even have the choice to die where they are born happily."



Ismail (19). Ireland, 2017



Ismail's relatives in Kutupalong camp, 27 years after becoming refugees. Bangladesh, 2018

Since summer 2017 I have continued to work with Rohingya communities worldwide. The last step of the photo-message project was to return to Myanmar to deliver the photos. In December 2017, I traveled back to the small village in Sittwe, Myanmar, to present the photo-messages. In January 2018, I worked with a small school for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, giving lessons on media literacy and helping to make a fundraiser video. In February 2018, I conducted preliminary fieldwork in Bangladesh, where more than one million Rohingya now live in refugee camps stretching along the shore of the Naf river bordering Myanmar. In Kutupalong refugee camp, I met with family members of a few people from the Rohingya Community Ireland. We spoke about their lives in the camps and the lives of their families in Ireland. I became a messenger who brought photos from Ireland to them in Bangladesh.



Younus (11) waiting on a bridge in Kutupalong refugee camp. Bangladesh, 2018

ONE YEAR LATER

On August 25, 2018, I returned to Ireland for Rohingya Remembrance Day. I screened the film produced in the workshops and shared prints from last summer's fieldwork. Polaroids were used to make new photo messages I intend to bring to Rohingya in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Myanmar, and elsewhere next year. On August 27, 2018, The United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar released a report stating: "The crimes in Rakhine State, and the manner in which they were perpetrated, are similar in nature, gravity and scope to those that have allowed genocidal intent to be established in other contexts."²



Girls from the screenwriting workshop secure ribbons to a fence at Carlow College for Rohingya Remembrance Day. Each of the 1,000 ribbons carried the name of a genocide victim.

²<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/MyanmarFFM/Pages/ReportoftheMyanmarFFM.aspx>

In Ireland I spent time with hardworking families who had faced atrocities. They were living happily, despite signs of trauma. Most of the people spoke regularly of their family members in countries around the world such as Malaysia, the United States, Pakistan, Bangladesh Canada, and Myanmar. Staying connected to one's kinfolk is a key to cultural heritage.

My Sarah Lawrence college professors—Robert Desjarlais, Jerrilyn Dodds, Joel Sternfeld, Kristen Sands, Fred Strye, Rico Speight, Intan Paramaditha, Sara Magenheimer, Marvin Frankel, and Vijay Seshadri—inculcated a mix of skills: seminal theory, the confidence to pursue my work with passion, diligence, and radical empathy. The Meredith Fonda Russell International Fieldwork Fellowship granted me the most significant summer of my life and a chance to continue my work beyond my time at Sarah Lawrence. The entire Rohingya Community Ireland, and especially my host family the Rafiques, imbued my work with the spirit of humanity. This project will continue as long as the persecution of Rohingya persists.



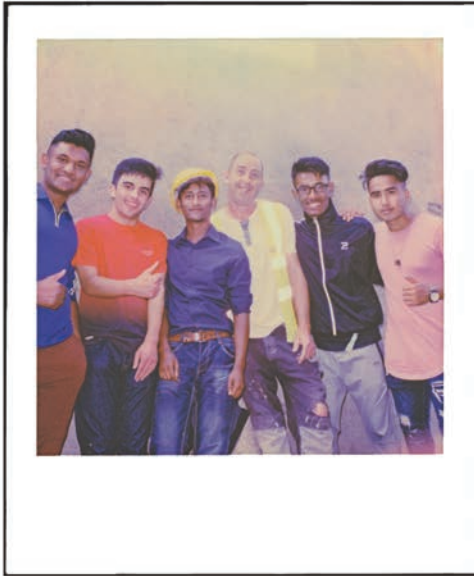
Rabiya (63) picking Mula Faátha, a radish leaf transplanted from Kutupalong refugee camp to Rafika's garden. Ireland, 2017.

We will always remember your hardships



You can't get up without falling

You Can't Get Up Without Falling. By Jamila (17). Ireland, 2018



Work and Play. By Ismail (20). Ireland, 2018

There's more to beauty than
meets the eye



Every imperfection is a
story to tell