

# āarar dilor hota

VOICES OF OUR HEARTS

**CLAN,  
COMMUNITY, NATION:**  
Belonging among Rohingya living in makeshift camps



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# ABOUT THIS SERIES

Aarar Dilor Hota (Voices of our Hearts) is a series of Working Consultations produced by IOM's CwC team within Site Management & Site Development Unit. The objective of these consultations is to provide and build a better understanding of the thoughts, practices, traditions, culture, values, and perspectives of the Rohingya community as a group of people with differences in how they think, feel, and behave. These works are supported by relevant insights and research on the Rohingya population in Myanmar, Bangladesh and other contexts. The perspectives presented herein do not represent the views of IOM. To find out more, please contact IOM's CwC Team.



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# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<b>Term</b>	<b>Translation</b>
egana gusshi	Family clan that refers to both patrilineal and matrilineal side of family
elamdar	"Wisdom holder" or someone with wisdom
fara	Geographic unit, "neighbourhood," group of houses within an area
fonna-ola	Formally educated person
ghor	House
gusshi	Clan, extended family network
hafez	Man or women who has memorized the Quran
hajj	Pilgrimage to Mecca
handani gusshi	Gusshis with the most social capital, wealth or "honor"
imam	Islamic priest and religiously educated person who leads prayers and ceremonies within the Mosque.
izzot	Honor, social reputation
jummah	Islamic congregational prayer on Friday
koum	Ethnicity, nation
majhi	Representatives of the Rohingya community that were selected by the Bangladeshi military to facilitate relief distribution
malda	From Mahalla, meaning "congregation"
muezzin	In-charge of leading the call to prayer
murobbi	Respected, elder-men in Rohingya community
purdah	The practice of screening women from men or strangers
rae-mu	100 household representatives within the NaYaKa governance model
sae-mu	10 household representatives within the NaYaKa governance model
sawab or kudo	merit-earning (Rohingya & Rakhine term)
shomaz	Community, community representative committee
ukatta	Elected or selected chairman within the NaYaKa governance model
zakat	Socially obligatory charity that is given to the poor within Islam



# INTRODUCTION

This consultation began as an initial attempt to understand self-organization and collective identity units among the Rohingya population displaced in Bangladesh; both in terms of how they had historically organized themselves and how they are currently reconfiguring value systems and social structures to address their new context within the displacement camps. It has often been cited that little is known about the Rohingya as a cultural group.<sup>1</sup> This series of consultations arises out of an often stated need to better understand “the Rohingya” outside of a political or humanitarian context – ideally from one in which their worldviews and perspectives on issues are better represented. It is worth noting that a description of the political history of the Rohingya often prefaces many discussions about them but there is a noted lack of in-depth engagement in Rohingya’s understanding of their own identities, values, communities and histories outside of the dominant political discourses that continue to shape their lives. It is possible that in failing to understand Rohingya’s historical and contemporary cultural values and social systems, the very thing that differentiate them from other groups living in both Myanmar and Bangladesh, means that humanitarian assistance, political negotiations, and broader discussions surrounding the Rohingya have failed to take into account how the Rohingya identify themselves and how they socially organize. As a result, it is hard to claim that humanitarian action is responsive to Rohingya people’s own senses of being and belonging. There were no doubt many contextual and political reasons inhibiting engagement in these questions to date, including access restrictions to Rakhine prior to their displacement. However, the respondents involved in this consultation showed a sense of appreciation and openness when asked about their values, social systems, and histories. This consultation in no way makes claim to correcting a larger collective ignorance about the Rohingya, but hopefully contributes small but meaningful gains in understanding more about the Rohingya, as a people, and how we can better engage them in decisions about their lives and futures. In particular, this work sought to better understand how Rohingya were beginning to identify, organize, and situate their lives “within the camps,” which social memberships were most significant to them prior to and after displacement, and whether these social organizations and identities had undergone significant changes as they were displaced.

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<sup>1</sup>Leider (2015), Munsoor (2013), Washaly (2019), Smith (2019) among many other grey literatures cite a lack of anthropological, “Rohingya voices”, or studies concerning the Rohingya culture, identity or social groups.

# KEY FINDINGS

This consultation provides a very initial exploration into how Rohingya organize themselves within three important social systems, the values that underpin them, and some perspectives on how they have changed since displacement: gusshi (clan), shomaz (community) and koum (ethnic group or nation). Historical research suggests that the formation of tight-knit religious based communal units have a long history within the Arakan littoral<sup>2</sup> and the Muslim communities that live there; with some research arguing that religious based communalism was a prominent way in which communities “survived” through difficult and turbulent periods that threatened the people living within Arakan littoral.<sup>3</sup> British colonial rule heavily influenced historical migration patterns and the establishment of Muslim communities within Arakan. Out of these influences developed a system of tight-knit agrarian communities who organized themselves around gusshi (family-clans) of various izzot (social reputations). Gusshi collectively formed shomaz (“community” and “community representatives”) that were organized units that formed committees of male-representatives comprised of prominent family-clans within a particular local area. Shomaz oversaw a range of important social functions such as the maintenance of social infrastructures (mosques, water systems, schools); the redistribution of wealth to the poor (through religious practices associated with zakat and Qurbani Eid); and the mitigation of conflicts related to land, authorities and inter-clan family disputes.

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<sup>2</sup> The historical term referring to modern day region of Rakhine and the general coastal region that includes part of modern-day Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> Charney (1999) is discussed at length as possibly having identified historical origins to contemporary trends and social organizations.

Across all of these social organizations, the displacement has caused significant disruption in their function and operation and significant effort has been dedicated within Rohingya communities to try and reformulate traditional practices with various and limited degrees of success. Predominantly, the inability to re-establish similar tight knit social organizations similar to what was experienced in Myanmar has largely been due to social fragmentation that occurred during the process of displacement, the inability to re-establish social and religious traditions, and the breakdown in systems of social reputation and control. Unsurprisingly, many Rohingya have attempted to recreate and reformulate social organizations and relationships to authorities along similar historical patterns to what was perceived, experienced, and developed in Rakhine. In particular, this includes various means of negotiating and influencing systems of power that were unrepresentative of the Rohingya population, especially in later periods when governance reforms were introduced within Myanmar and Rakhine.

This consultation concludes with an initial exploration of people's understanding of the term "Rohingya" as they apply it to themselves and each other. This study found that unsurprisingly, as like many broad identity terms, there are different definitions surrounding what Rohingya identity encompasses, who it includes, and on what basis. Some Rohingya framed their identities in various combinations of geographic boundaries (being from Rakhine), others in terms of religious affiliation (Muslim), and some in terms of shared common experiences (of displacement & discrimination). Discussions also included civil society groups formed within the camps and their engagement in spaces and narratives where they claimed or identified themselves as "leaders of the Rohingya. Largely, this consultation found many disconnects between different groups of Rohingya and their understanding of leaders and leadership. In these discussions, there revealed notable differences in articulations and experiences of shared histories and imaginations of what it meant to be Rohingya that were heavily influenced on the region, educational achievement, class, gender and religious piety of a person. Despite the fact that many participants struggled to clarify the boundaries and common nature of what it meant to be "Rohingya," there was a strong sense of shared solidarity in its usage and its self-application.

# METHODOLOGY

This paper reflects consultations and discussions that the IOM's Communication with Communities (CwC) team have held with Rohingya living across displacement camps in Bangladesh. This paper also includes and reflects upon information gathered in the management of IOM's CwC programming, but also includes information from focused consultations aimed at developing better, basic understandings of Rohingya community dynamics. Information and perspectives reflected in this paper were not gathered through a singular approach, questionnaire, or methodology, and rather reflect the authors' unstructured engagement and deployment of different interview techniques to determine what avenues of questioning best elicited rich descriptions from informants.<sup>4</sup>

There are several limitations to be noted within this approach. First and foremost, this paper makes no claim to fully represent the entirety of dynamics that impact social relationships of the Rohingya people. Furthermore, certain dynamics were omitted to better focus this exploration; most notably relationships between Rohingya and host communities and a more detailed exploration of gender dynamics within the social structures in this paper. Social groupings and systems of organization are inherently gendered and heavily predicated on social norms and gender roles that govern individuals' behaviors. The omission of a more nuanced gendered analysis was also due to other research being conducted by IOM which will focus more specifically on gendered social norms of the Rohingya and their impact on women's leadership. There was also no attempt at randomized sampling to ensure geographic or gender representativeness in this consultation. It must also be noted that few of the discussions or interviews took place in Teknaf camps. The majority of discussions with informants were focused around camps where IOM acts as the Site Management Agency in Kutapalong Balukhali Expansion, namely Camps 9, 10, 18, 20, 20 extension, and 22. Discussions with men and women-led civil society groups took place wherever was easiest irrespective of IOM's programming. However, certain observations about displacement patterns and how Rohingya have organized themselves have undoubtedly omitted potential dynamics between host and Rohingya communities that characterize many camps. One of the reasons for these decisions was the developing nature of the consultation and its accompaniment of other programmatic responsibilities of the authors which made the selection of IOM camps logistically easier in

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<sup>4</sup> To this effect, researchers used structured interviews according to pre-set questionnaires, open ended focus group discussions and key informant interviews, mapping exercises where Rohingya were asked to physically map the boundaries of their structures, and discussions with Site Management staff to better understand what social institutions were encountered in their work.

terms of access to facilities for interviews and pre-existing connections within IOM camps. While camp contexts are no doubt varied, the general lack of literature on Rohingya community dynamics means that a closer examination of such dynamics anywhere already provided valuable new insights. Repeated visits to same camps with pre-existing relationships with various Rohingya also helped in terms of relationship building between the authors and informants.

A second major limitation is that all researchers were male and affiliated with the IOM Site Management Unit, which seem to be understood and perceived by many Rohingya as a pseudo-government with a high degree of influence over their lives as an important aid provider. This needs to be considered with respect to the fact that discussions and engagements with informants took place in camps that fall under IOM Site Management. Sometimes discussions involved Rohingya volunteers who worked for Site Management or helped organized discussions for this consultation themselves. Even when participants were randomly selected for interviews, authors continued to introduce themselves as a part of IOM's Site Management & CwC program. To this extent, it cannot be definitively said how this may have impacted discussions, but it was clear within engagements that there were certain subjects where informants may have been less willing to share information. The inverse, however, is also potentially true. Rohingya's history with authorities and governance systems may have transferred onto existing relationships and dynamics with aid providers that the CwC team found themselves within. Despite the potential problems with the authors' affiliation, many times participants stated their appreciation that IOM was asking "questions about them" - one person even commented that "in the past we were unable to talk to our government; so now we are happy that IOM comes to us to ask about these things."<sup>5</sup>

Limitations considered, researchers believe that this consultation is an accurate but not exhaustive reflection on the nuances encountered through both literature and engagements with Rohingya living within the camps. As a result, the authors' have attempted to preserve emic understandings of Rohingya values and social terminology so as not to "translate away" their particular, local meaning in discussions and to better signify that understandings of terms like "community" are culturally specific. This consultation preserves as much relevant Rohingya terminology as possible in order to better nuance the discussion of Rohingya's values and worldviews to also assist future stakeholders in using and understanding various terms used by Rohingya.<sup>6</sup> Researchers also sought to link the contemporary narratives they encountered with other historical and social literature on the Rohingya. This paper is further complimented by relevant humanitarian assessment information gathered within the response, including information gathered in the course of CwC programming.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mosque committee

<sup>6</sup> Rohingya is not a written language, despite various attempts to develop a standardized writing system. Due to this constraint, this paper uses a transliteration system using English letters and phonetics for the Rohingya words.

# GUSSHI (CLAN) IN RAKHINE

Like other traditional South Asian communities, the Rohingya are highly collectivist and place a heavy emphasis on family and communal identities over the individuals living within them. The most basic social unit among the Rohingya people is the *ghor*, which means “a house” or “a household”. *Ghor* does not carry the same connotation, nor the same level of importance, as the English term “family.” The term is used to refer both to a physical household and the people living in it, even if they are from different “families.” In this, ghors are the smallest collective unit but don’t bear much social significance, authority, or identity within the larger community. Rather, the smallest unit of organization for Rohingya was found to be gusshi<sup>7</sup> – the clan, lineage, or extended family of a person. This word and social structure is found in other neighboring Indo-Aryan languages like Chittagonian, Bengali, and Assamese.<sup>8</sup> In all of these languages, including Rohingya, gusshi means “clan” or “lineage.” In contrast to *ghor*, the term gusshi captures both the abstract and concrete concepts of the English term “family”, but also includes the extended family members, either living or deceased. Rohingya people seldom use gusshi on its own in conversation, but rather say *egana-gusshi* to refer to an extended gusshi that includes the matrilineal side of the families.<sup>9</sup>

Gusshi are patrilineal, meaning clans claim descent through the father’s lineage from an important male ancestor.<sup>10</sup> The ancestor who founded the clan can be a recent, traceable ancestor or can be a historical or fictitious figure. Rohingya households are also patrilocal, meaning women move into their husband’s house after marriage, which means wives will live alongside her husband’s family. Some of the Rohingya described their gusshi as being small enough that they knew all the members within their gusshi, whereas others were as large as several hundred distant relatives. Wealthier groups within a gusshi may eventually form their own gusshi by purchasing or settling a new area away from their original gusshi.<sup>11</sup> This is possibly how many Rohingya gusshi were formed through the historical processes of migration across Rakhine in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Several households from the same gusshi or even unrelated gusshi come together to form a *fara*,<sup>13</sup> a geographic “neighborhood” or cluster of homes. Depending on the size of the gusshi,

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of *gushti* exists in other Indic communities, however they do not use the word *gushti*. For example, in Hindi, they say *vansh* and in Nepali, *bangsha*. Bengali also has a similarly derived word *bongsho*, used interchangeably with *gushti*.

<sup>8</sup> Rohingya borrows heavily from Arabic and Persian terminology in lieu of using indigenous terms because of Islamic religious influences. *Egana* is derived from Persian *yeganeh* used to mean both “unity” and “kinsmen,” and highlights again the importance of “unity of kinship” within Rohingya communities; this is discussed more later.

<sup>9</sup> Khan (2015)

<sup>10</sup> FGD with men with higher education

<sup>11</sup> See Charney (1999) Chapter 8 for a discussion of historical migration patterns in these periods.

<sup>12</sup> See Charney (1999) Chapter 8 for a discussion of historical migration patterns in these periods.

<sup>13</sup> Equivalent to *para* in Bengali

one gusshi may be limited to one fara or spread across several or even entire villages. Gusshis are therefore both known and imagined social networks with paternal male cousins, uncles, and great-uncles usually fulfilling similar social roles as a brothers, fathers, and grandfathers would do in nuclear families. As reported in interviews, gusshis were important social support structures for members within it during difficult times: “when someone is sick, your gusshi members will take you to the doctor and even carry you there. Your gusshi doesn’t ask for money to support you.”<sup>14</sup> Respondents also explained that gusshis were critical in arranging funerals, marriages, land purchase, and other social functions. Funerals, in particular, were important events wherein a deceased members’ gusshi would ensure their burial on family land within the same physical grave to the side of the last gusshi member who passed away. A Rohingya person’s gusshi therefore is vital in ensuring their last rights and their belief in the afterlife.<sup>15</sup>

A fara’s identity is often linked to a particular trade or profession of the gusshi members. If the gusshis in a fara are mostly involved in fishing, the fara will usually be known as “fisherman’s fara.” If the fara was settled by a gusshi whose clan originator was a qazi (Islamic judge), the fara may then be known as Qazi Fara. Another example that was encountered was the “Democracy gusshi” which was more modern in origin and formed around contemporary Rohingya civil servants who served as Ukkatta (chairman) in the local government of Rakhine. However, faras are not always clearly defined, and not all faras are associated with a trade or a singular gusshi; some faras for example may have generic geographic names, like “west fara.” These faras may have multiple gusshis living in the same locality and internal hierarchies between gusshis. On the same note, members of a particular gusshi can live in separate faras and eventually separate from each other to form new gusshis over generations depending on how much contact they have.

The trade-basis of many faras suggest that the origination of gusshi system lies in ancient Hindu caste-based societies of South Asia, where nuclear families unite to form larger trade-based castes that are also sometimes derived from Hindu deities and ancestors. Indeed, the gusshi structure helped maintain many caste norms and functions according to the interactions and hierarchies of these gusshis. However, as a vast majority of the Rohingya are Muslims, their social units of fara and gusshi were adapted to Islamic principles and social norms. For example, the Muslim Rohingya gusshi does not formally maintain any caste hierarchy, mostly like because Islam traditionally forbids casteism.<sup>16</sup> Muslim Rohingya gusshi also forego the many social restrictions still present in Hindu Rohingya gusshis, such as the prohibition of intra-clan marriages. They also appear to have fewer restrictions on who they marry - meaning that they often marry with other members of their gusshi.<sup>17</sup>

Among and between gusshis there exists a social hierarchy on the basis of a gusshi’s izzot (honour).<sup>18</sup> In Rohingya, izzot is perhaps better understood as “social standing” or “social reputation.” To this effect, izzot can refer both to an individual or collectives’ social reputation

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<sup>14</sup> KII with Mosque Committee

<sup>15</sup> FGD with mosque committee and Murobbis

<sup>16</sup> However, South Asian Muslims did go through a historical phase where Muslims in the subcontinent were categorized into “Ashraf” (foreign-descent or noble), “Ajlaf” (‘clean’ native converts), and “Arzal” (converts from formerly Hindu untouchable communities). This categorization is largely defunct in modern Muslim South Asian societies, however remnants of it can be seen in concepts like handani and still found in social structures of Pakistan’s Punjab and Sindh provinces (Falahi 2015, p 4).

<sup>17</sup> Hindu social norms dictating gushti put a strict taboo on intra-clan marriage, treating it akin to incest taboo. On the contrary, Muslim gushti encourages intra-clan marriages to strengthen familial ties and manage resources.

<sup>18</sup> FGD with men with higher education levels

and the two are often intertwined across South Asian and Rohingya communities. From interviews, historical sources on the Rohingya, and understanding of other South Asian communities, Rohingya communities largely seem to similarly understand izzot as being derived from three sources: religious piety and observation of religious practices, financial wealth, and educational achievements.

The first basis of izzot, religious piety, for Rohingya men, is accumulated by following the model and Sunnah (tradition) of Prophet Mohammed. The Sunnah clearly dictates many details of life, from what clothes to wear, to how to shave one's facial hair, and how many fingers to use when eating food, and people who follow the Sunnah are seen as more pious.<sup>19</sup> Attendance at congregational prayers (jummah) at mosques is also important in displaying piety to fellow community members and a lack of attendance at congregational prayers was noted by many Rohingya as a sign of people's lack of faith. The ultimate source of religious izzot is achieved through the completion of pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), where he or she is given the esteemed title haaji. Though the Rohingya community traditionally did not follow a strict shariah-based social governance system, elements of it were observed, particularly relating to women. A woman's izzot was linked to her adherence to purdah<sup>20</sup> a social practice of women's seclusion to "private" spaces. However, there is still unclarity as to how strictly Rohingya communities adhered to purdah in Myanmar across different contexts and their understanding of the value. This is perhaps because many Rohingya were historically largely agrarian and maintaining purdah was difficult for both men and women working together in fields. How much of the purdah system was a recent adoption from globalized Islamic culture is uncertain, especially given various reformist trends within Islam. Regardless, there was still a sense of gender segregation or prohibition in areas deemed sacred, such as mosques and graveyards. A Rohingya woman's izzot was also linked to her paternal gusshi's izzot and is an important factor in marriage negotiations. For men, a woman's dishonor may "stain" the family's social standing and diminish her marriage prospects as a result.

The second source of izzot, financial status, is often interlinked with more public displays of wealth based on Islamic traditions. Historically, wealth was contained in the hands of a few landed elites and urban merchants, which were known as the handani gusshis.<sup>21</sup> These gusshi were wealthy and generally expected to display their wealth by supporting religious traditions and social functions - by giving zakat during Ramadan, distributing Qurbani meat and ensuring mosques were properly maintained. Ironically, the redistribution of wealth to obtain izzot simultaneously established people as patrons but also limited their accumulation of capital - those with more wealth were expected to redistribute and support the community more to maintain their standing. Interestingly, both Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine communities stress the importance of "merit earning" activities, known as kudo in Buddhism and sawab in Islam.<sup>22</sup> Historically, Charney's work stresses "the importance of mosque building in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Arakan because the mosque serves not only as the place of worship for Muslims, but also as a potential center... for the formation of a Muslim community. In other words, the mosque has social as well as religious functions."<sup>23</sup> Wealthier gusshi were literally expected to "construct" the institutions around which Muslim's societies were and still are socially organized. However, the ability and act of such a construction is intertwined with the socio-economic capacity to do so and the status that is accumulated through such an act.

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<sup>19</sup> General field observations and FGD with mosque committees

<sup>20</sup> Pronounced or referred to as "forda" within Rohingya

<sup>21</sup> Handan is derived from the Persian word khandan, also meaning clan. Though the word handan and gushti are at times used interchangeably, there is a tendency to use the word handan for families with a higher social standing. This tendency may allude to the historical usage of the term for those Muslim families that were perceived to have more izzot. Thus, handan became an adjective, handani, and is used to mean reputable for either an individual or group.

<sup>22</sup> Munsoor (2013), p 234 and Charney (1999)

<sup>23</sup> Charney (1999), p 239

Finally, education is greatly valued in Rohingya society especially given their historical deprivation of access to various forms of education. The educated can be divided into two groups: those educated through traditional Islamic education and those through the Myanmar state curriculum. Both groups were usually from families with pre-existing financial or social capital.<sup>24</sup> Secular or Myanmar state education was also valued, especially because it enabled Rohingya to better communicate with Myanmar's governance structures and because it also signified a certain social reputation or place within the larger Myanmar nation. However, the value of Myanmar State education was also limited in the sense that many Rohingya were prohibited from obtaining higher levels of education and capitalizing on better forms of employment that would coincide from being educated.<sup>25</sup>

Other authors exploring izzot within the Rohingya population have noted similar observations and patterns regarding izzot even if their translation of the term differs.<sup>26</sup> Izzot is something to be acquired through public performance of various actions, cultivation of specific qualities, and general adherence to religious and social norms. In this way, personal and collective forms of izzot play an orienting and anchoring role for Rohingya - they place individuals within larger collectives, like gusshi, and give them social standing and purpose. The ways in which izzot is gained and accumulated are intangible and often imperceivable to outsiders; izzot can only exist and operate within tightly knit communities that are based on intimate social networks where people know each other, their clans, and their collective histories. It is only through this knowledge that a person's or group's izzot can be properly interpreted. Hence, izzot allows community members to develop and maintain standings within their larger collective identities and acquire a sense of belonging; however, the same processes that construct value also have implicit implications for how such standing can be lost.

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<sup>24</sup> Rohingya use the term *fonna-ola* to refer to educated persons. Sometimes it is suggested the term *elamdar* also means "educated person" but this is actually better translated as "wise person," which can be held by someone who does not necessarily have a formal religious or secular education.

<sup>25</sup> FGD with men with higher education levels

<sup>26</sup> Holloway and Fan (2019) translate izzot as "dignity" but this translation seems to have been partially informed by their research approach to Rohingya's understanding of dignity instead of an exploration of izzot as a broader social value. In other research on izzot, "honor" or "social reputation" is a more commonly used translation than dignity. Regardless, the findings are similar in that there are both personal and collective elements to the term and a basis in social, economic, and religious values.

# SHOMAZ (COMMUNITY) IN RAKHINE STATE

The majority of conversations and discussions with Rohingya across the camps began with and focused on the concept of “community,” or Shomaz, a shared term across South Asia. For Rohingya in particular, the term can have several distinct applications and meanings:

- a) Shomaz as an immediate community historically based on highly localized settlements, such as fara.
- b) Shomaz as a committee or council of individuals with izzot from within the community that oversee various social functions; hereafter referred to specifically as shomaz committees.
- c) Shomaz as a more general term referring to a broader imagined community better translated in English as “society” than community. This definition occasionally blurs with the first definition above.

For Rohingya historically in Rakhine, shomaz were made up of groupings of gusshis rather than individual members or households. Often socially isolated from each other, it is important to understand Rohingya “communities” as existing within a longer historical perspective of Muslim and Buddhist communities living alongside each other within Rakhine.

Charney’s work on the history of Muslim and Buddhist community interactions is particularly useful in understanding how religious based communalism developed within Rohingya communities. In particular, he points to the fact that from the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries there is “little evidence of inter-religious confrontation between Buddhist and Muslims” in Arakan.<sup>27</sup> However, by the 19th century new sentiments within the Buddhist lay community began to arise: “to be Muslim no longer simply meant to worship another god or partake in a different system of religious belief; it additionally meant to be part of another social group which should be excluded rather than included in the local community.”<sup>28</sup> The development of religious and hyper-local communal groups arose in a period Charney describes as “chaotic, as the kingdom, quite literally fell apart.”<sup>29</sup> During this time, the Arakan kingdom succumbed to the conquest of the Burmese King Bodawphaya in 1784.<sup>30</sup> Muslim and Buddhist residents during this time were threatened by internal political destabilization and conflict between rural gentry and central courts where villages were repeatedly fought over by local strongmen, natural chaos from droughts, earthquakes and other natural disasters, the introduction of Christian missionaries who attempted to convert local patrons, and raids from slavers.<sup>31</sup> These challenges necessitated communities turn towards their faith as a coping

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<sup>27</sup> Charney (1999), p 219

<sup>28</sup> Charney (1999), p 221

<sup>29</sup> Charney (1999), p 247

<sup>30</sup> See Leider (2008) for an extended discussion.

<sup>31</sup> Charney discusses how this shift arose from increasing power within the rural gentry and a general destabilization of the region. For further discussion of this history see Charney (1999), Chapter 8 “When things all apart.”

mechanisms in order for both Buddhist and Muslim communities to survive; however, “a turn to religion for safety [also] meant increased religious devotion.”<sup>32</sup> The possible origination for religious communalism therefore may have arisen out of a tumultuous period where hyperlocal affiliation to religiously organized communities provided safety and security for Arakanese Muslims.<sup>33</sup>

These schisms continued to develop over time. Charney argues that in the 18th century while “religious identities existed, weaker for some and stronger for others, there is not a good deal of evidence to suggest that most groups in Arakanese society linked community membership to religious identity.”<sup>34</sup> It wasn’t until the 19th century that religious communalism fully developed in Northern Arakan, arising from mutually interlinked dynamics of population growth, over cultivation within the Arakan region, migration, and land competition between Muslim and Buddhist communities. Within this dynamic the British Empire favored Muslim cultivators because they were believed to be superior to Buddhist cultivators who were “overly fond of finding comfort in opium and indolence.”<sup>35</sup> Land competition drove a turn towards local communities and religious leaders in order to cope with the challenges of surviving on limited cultivatable land. Religion and religious leaders began to provide the primary means of collective action and social organization. Religious and social projects became a part of supporting both the immediate communities’ needs and the development of a wider imagined Muslim community. Much of this was encouraged and facilitated through changes in British colonial administration policy which sought to increase revenue through new taxation schemes. Religion, centered around community mosques and monasteries, therefore became the primary socio-political institution for Muslim and Buddhist communities, and effectively drew clear lines between the two.<sup>36</sup>

There is a significant and serious gap in the historical record and scholarship regarding the early 20th century developments of Arakanese Muslims in terms of social and organizational identities. The Rohingya shomaz was largely described by respondents as being a Muslim community organized around a mosque or group of mosques and comprised from various local gusshis that largely resembled the broad historical characteristics of Muslims living in historical Rakhine.<sup>37</sup> Even if other households or religious communities lived nearby, it seems they were not imagined as belonging to the same shomaz. This is perhaps because shomaz membership seems to have largely been determined through active participation within the Mosques as the central organizing social and religious institution.<sup>38</sup> Gusshi, particularly handani gusshi, most likely led the formation and creation of shomaz in Arakan as a part of both historical migration across the region and through izzot and merit-accumulation systems that encouraged the construction of Mosques and social infrastructures. Shomaz leaders and handani gusshi members therefore could be the descendants of the original settlers of a fara, meaning they

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<sup>32</sup> Charney (1999), p 248

<sup>33</sup> The term Arakanese Muslims is used instead of Rohingya to refer to Muslim communities living historically within Arakan because the word “Rohingya” has unclear and disputed origins within the historical record and was not in popular use during this time. See Leider (2013) for further discussion of this.

<sup>34</sup> Charney (1999), p 269

<sup>35</sup> Charney (1999), p 283

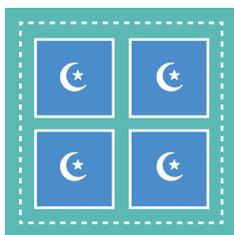
<sup>36</sup> Charney (1999), p 302-306

<sup>37</sup> FGDs with imams and men

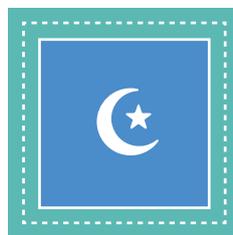
<sup>38</sup> This largely can be linked to Charney’s observation of historical communalism in Rakhine: “Villagers thus relied upon the ‘community’ which arose from village Buddhism (and in the case of Muslims, rural Islam) with the rural monastery and the rural sangha as its center (as in the case of the mosque and the mullahs in rural Islam in Arakan).” (Charney 1999, p 306)

were the original builders of the mosques around which shomaz were constructed. Interview participants often mentioned the presence of “schools, ponds, Mosques and Madrassas,” as well as key important social stakeholders, such as Imams, Muezzin, traders, and representatives as central to their definitions of shomaz. The physical structures designating wealth and status along with the presence of wealthy and pious members within shomaz highlight how “honor” or social-reputation systems become central to belonging within Rohingya communities.

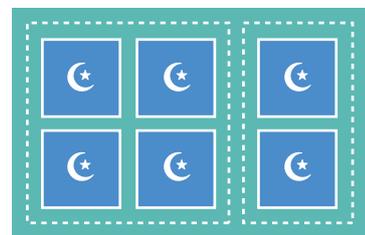
The organization and composition of shomaz was dependent on the particular demographics of an area. As discussed, a fara may consist of several sub-clans of a gusshi or multiple, unrelated gusshi within its borders. Depending on the size of the fara and relationships between gusshi, a fara may be further subdivided into different maldas or “congregations.”<sup>39</sup> Each malda contained a mosque that was presided over by the mosque committee required for its maintenance and the management of traditions and ceremonies that characterize Muslim communal life. If a fara was small enough, then it was not subdivided, and there were then no distinctions between fara and a malda. There was often a single mosque in these small faras that had a mosque committee, which by extension, acted as the shomaz committee. People from these faras still use the word shomaz and malda interchangeably; for others, there are notable connotations between the terms “mosque committee” and shomaz based on the size and dynamics of the communities that they represented. In most cases, faras were large and contained many people and were thus subdivided into maldas; therefore, larger faras had multiple mosque committees. While these mosque committees operated with a certain level of autonomy, many faras had a larger socially representative structure also called a shomaz. Some faras may have one united shomaz or it may have had multiple shomaz within its borders. The latter often happened if gusshis and their maldas separated from a larger shomaz (or were excommunicated) and formed a new shomaz within the same fara. Whichever the case, each malda often sent one or two representatives from its mosque committees to their respective shomaz committees in a larger fara.<sup>40</sup>



Multiple malda within one combined fara + shomaj



One combined malda, fara, shomaj



Multiple malda and shomaj within one fara

<sup>39</sup> The term is reportedly derived from the Arabic mahallah, for neighbourhood but this point was only known by Rohingya with stronger Arabic language education.

<sup>40</sup> FGDs with mosque committees, previous shomaz members, and educated men.

Shomaz committees were largely comprised of elderly men (murobbi) with higher levels of social capital and izzot within the community that represented different sizes of community groups across various gusshi, fara, and malda. Women were largely excluded from these spaces because they were seen to generally lack sufficient “qualifications” to serve in leadership roles within the community; though some women notably did obtain both religious or non-religious education. This is important to note because while terms may be interchangeable in certain cases, they connote different representational structures and levels from within the community. While imams can be understood as religious leaders of the mosque, they were often hired from outside of the community from larger madrassas within the region, and thus had a unique position within the shomaz, being religiously significant but also socially distant because they came from “outside” the community. Shomaz committees were often comprised of members of different prominent handani gusshis who were responsible within the shomaz. To this extent, many of the shomaz committees were comprised of wealthier members of the wider community who had more izzot because of their ability to provide zakat and support Mosque maintenance. However, Munsoor notes in his findings that this was not always the case and found one case in Rakhine where people identified a “poor” committee member who was chosen to be on the shomaz committee because of his “respected” status. This essentially reaffirms the point that social status and izzot are not solely equivalent to class and wealth.<sup>41</sup> However, women are largely excluded from shomaz committees even though Munsoor did find one woman on a shomaz on the basis that she had educated herself and could act as an important link between the committee and other women in the village.<sup>42</sup> There were no reports of women serving on shomaz committees within this consultation.

Shomaz committees play an incredibly important role as the social leaders and representatives of their communities. In this they perform a diverse set of functions that are both religious and non-religious in nature:

*In the case of Gone Nar, the 'Shomaz' groups have their own mosque, trusteeships and are responsible for its operation and up-keep. They perform an important function of arbitrating in civil disputes, within their respective Shomaz groups. One of their central functions revolves around the 'sacrifice' of animals and the distribution of the meat to the poor and family during the Eid or Islamic festival times. The Shomaz is governed by an Islamic ideology and is pro-poor as demonstrated by some of the functions that it carries out. As one of the poor member of the community points out 'If poor people pass away the Shomaz takes care of the funeral expenses. The Shomaz has been supporting the Madarrasa and the teaching of religion to the poor. The main benefits to the poor is that we can hire Mullahs (religious leaders) from the funds we have collected from the community and pay the Mullah...' The Shomaz is seen to enforce a 'moral code'. It takes action on those who are not following the Islamic code or not consulting its members on important issues.<sup>43</sup>*

Ripoll further explains that the role of the shomaz “is to enact community members’ obligation to each other” in order to “reinforce the ‘social bonds’ of the community,” actualizing the imagined Ummah (community of all practitioners of Islam) within an immediate locale. In this definition, their role is to help construct the imagined society through an immediate community of shared religious beliefs and practices, maintaining social harmony and serving as a safety net for poorer members of the community.

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<sup>41</sup> Munsoor (2013), p 293

<sup>42</sup> Munsoor (2013), p 301

<sup>43</sup> Munsoor (2013), p 296

This was reaffirmed many times within interviews with the Rohingya in the camps, who repeatedly described their shomaz committees as fulfilling similar functions in Rakhine; of particular note was the ritual sharing of meat during Qurban Eid, provision of zakat, and maintenance of social harmony and unity between rich and poor.<sup>44</sup> Emphasis on the shomaz as a “unified society” where rich and poor came together was a theme within our discussions:<sup>45</sup>

*In Myanmar, Shomaz was formed based on masjid and madrasha. If there is any ceremony (mela), communal feast (fatiya), Islamic lecture (waaz), or during Qurban (ritual sharing of meat and food), then the somaz was usually involved in the process. Somaz means to be the children of same mother but it is not only your relatives (gusshi) that are included. You have to take all, whether they are your relatives or not. Rich or poor, all the people of shomaz have to visit me whether I have money or not. They have to pray in one mosque. They have to be united in their opinions.<sup>46</sup>*

Unity was affirmed many times as an important quality and value within shomaz across all interviews with different Rohingya from all social backgrounds in the camps. For Rohingya, unity of shomaz in beliefs, actions, and opinions is the basis on which the strength of a shomaz can even be derived. For one male respondent, shomaz was literally defined as “working together with unity and living together with unity.”<sup>47</sup> This heavy emphasis on the importance of unity was elaborated in a discussion with a hafez<sup>48</sup> who was also a member of a Rohingya civil society organization: “How can the fingers of a hand accomplish anything if they are not united? How can we accomplish anything if our voices are not the same?”<sup>49</sup> It is of interest to note anxiety surrounding unity and Rohingya’s unwillingness to dissent from a publicly stated opinion when speaking together as groups. This is elaborated by explanations in Munsoor’s work that Rohingya in his research dissented in their opinions over a school committee nomination through their “tone of voice,” using either low or high pitch tones to show interest in candidacy or support for a candidate. In the event of disagreement candidates were asked to leave while the disagreement was discussed so as not to cause disunity or factionalism within the group.<sup>50</sup>

Shomaz committees’ role in socially policing and overseeing members in their community was frequently mentioned as a part of process through which unity, and thereby strength, was maintained. Their authority on conflict resolution largely stems from their ability to exert social influence on various people within their shomaz because of their own social reputations. In Myanmar, social exclusion and banishment from participation within one’s gusshi or shomaz seemed to be the primary means of social control and a way of maintaining “Islamic teachings and a code of ethics based on religion:”

*There are some people, who are not following the religious rules, who are not really working with the Shomaz or giving their contributions, they are kept out of the Shomaz’. Further, those who are drunkards, alcoholics, [and] gamblers...are also excluded.<sup>51</sup>*

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<sup>44</sup> FGDs with men and women

<sup>45</sup> See Charney (1999, p 297), who finds this dynamic arising within 17th and 18th centuries within Muslim communities, Ripoll who briefly mentions zakat or donations to the poor (2017, p 23), and Munsoor who refers to the “pro-poor” mentality of shomaz (2013, p 225)

<sup>46</sup> FGD with women

<sup>47</sup> FGD with men

<sup>48</sup> Someone who has memorized the entire Quran, a hafez is generally well respected by religiously educated people within Rohingya communities.

<sup>49</sup> Fieldnotes, May 2019

<sup>50</sup> Munsoor (2013), p 302

<sup>51</sup> Munsoor (2013), p 296-297

This was repeatedly reconfirmed within interviews with Rohingya who identified and equated the shomaz committees and structures as the main source of control, religious and social, that was recognized and supported by Rohingya themselves. Participants often described the shomaz as generally enforcing the religious adherence of shomaz and gusshi members, encouraging households who were less active in attending Mosque functions to attend.<sup>52</sup> Keeping in mind the fact that social reputation, izzot, was derived from being perceived as pious, anyone with social standing was therefore more or less forced to also display their piety in order to obtain social reputation regardless of their actual devotion.

It is important to distinguish between social and political governance systems in Rakhine, noting that shomaz committees were not officially recognized governing bodies. Rohingya people in the camps largely explained that political authority to govern rested with the Village Administration of Myanmar's local governments. Briefly, Myanmar's local governance system similarly revolves around villages as the central units of organization with two key institutions:

*The first is, what was then still called the Village Peace and Development Committee (VPDC), locally known as the Ya Ya Ka. The second is the set of formal recognized elders in the village, locally known as the NaYaKa, also known as Village Elders and Respected Persons (ERPs). Though both of these committees were formally recognized, both locally and in the eyes of the administration, there was little in the way of formal guidelines... The VPDC was the only formal institution that is found in every village. At the village level, the VPDC included three main types of position holders, 10-household leaders, 100-household leaders and the tract level representatives, also known as the president, chairman or 'member one'. Ten-household leaders were recognized but had relatively limited standing within the village, and their role was limited to participating in village meetings. The importance of the 100-household leaders varied according to their number in the village, which generally ranged from one to three, and whether the village was home to 'member one' or the tract chairman. The role of the VPDC extended far beyond enacting official township orders. As the formally recognized village leaders, the senior Ya Ya Ka [VPDC] supported villagers in various ways: helping them resolve conflicts, mobilizing and managing funds for community development, and mediating between the village and township officials. The importance of the VPDC was largely a reflection of the fact that important and powerful social leaders tended to occupy these positions, and that there was a strong interface between the VPDC and embedded local relations and structures more generally.<sup>53</sup>*

However the reality within Rakhine was reportedly different than what was officially mandated between the NaYaKa and the VPDC. Most interviewees in the consultation describe a two-Ukatta (chairman) system that operated under the NaYaKa administration: one Rakhine and one Rohingya. Though Maungdaw and Buthidaung districts were majority Muslim, most village tracts had at least one area that was Rakhine not Rohingya. The NaYaKa often appointed an Ukatta from the Rakhine communities as the administrator regardless of their numerical insignificance in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships. Elected or selected Muslim Ukkattas were always subservient to the Rakhine Ukatta. However, both Ukkattas were perceived more as informants or "messengers" of the Myanmar government, rather than governors, by the Rohingya community.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> FGD with Imams, FGDs with men

<sup>53</sup> UNDP (2015), p36-37

<sup>54</sup> KII with former Ukkatta

Though the Rohingya Ukkattas lacked formal governing powers, they were nonetheless important within the shomaz. They were the shomaz's primary link to the formal Myanmar government, and increasingly the main arbitrators in the social lives of Rohingyas, which was another reason that more powerful Rohingya were selected as representatives. Historically, the shomaz committees exerted greater influence within the Rohingya community, but with the enactment of the NaYaKa system, the authority of the shomaz may have declined steadily over the years. Social roles and functions that were traditionally the purview of the shomaz and its committees were later put directly under the jurisdiction of the NaYaKa administrators. Marriages, number of children, domestic violence, and other information had to be reported to the NaYaKa via the Ukkatta and his associates. They served as the formal, yet tenuous link, between the Myanmar government and the previously autonomous local shomaz units. This status also enabled them to take and extract bribes in exchange for the numerous approvals required for marriage and travel- this point was noted by Rohingya living in camps who often describe the system as dominated by corruption, especially in recent history.<sup>55</sup>

The enactment of the Village Tract and Ward Law in Myanmar in 2012 significantly changed many relationships between shomaz and Myanmar's governance institutions.<sup>56</sup> These reforms replaced traditional methods of selecting Ukkatta with popular election, whereas historically they had been selected from locally important community figures by Myanmar officials.<sup>57</sup> Within a series of reforms, the law provided one vote per head of 10-household, which, except in the case of widows, was always a man.<sup>58</sup> This new form of election was perhaps a source of social upset to existing shomaz committees though there is insufficient evidence from our consultations to draw definitive conclusions regarding this. Within interviews, Rohingya commented that elections were not perceived as fair because handani gusshi candidates or individuals with high izzot often ran unopposed because of their ability to exert social pressure on other potential candidates. In this, elections were perceived to have been socially pre-determined before ballots were even cast. Again, dissent, even in anonymous elections, seems to have been largely avoided and socially prevented. Interestingly, for Rohingya the structures 10-household leaders (sae-mu) and 100-household leaders (rae-mu), which were a part of the NaYaKa governance model, were mostly used in the arrangement of forced labor and payment of ad-hoc taxes from Rohingya households. For Rohingya, the rae-mu and sae-mu were often appointed by the Ukkatta and at times, overlapped with shomaz committee membership. However, generally the rae-mu and sae-mu systems were negatively perceived by Rohingya in this consultation and also partially accused of participating within corrupt and discriminatory systems of the Myanmar government to various extents.

Therefore, while shomaz committees on their own had social authority and respect from Rohingya gusshi within a community, they were able to formalize their authority through participation in the VPDC and EPR committees. One shomaz member from Munsoor's study also noted that shomaz often enacted their power by influencing other administrative structures within the area, such as the VPDC.<sup>59</sup> From this standpoint, shomaz can also therefore be understood as an interesting nexus between formal systems of the Myanmar government and informal social institutions based on Islamic values and social practices. Both Ripoll and Munsoor further note that shomaz's significance seems to have declined prior to displacement

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<sup>55</sup> *Kil with former Ukkatta*

<sup>56</sup> *UNDP (2015), p 37*

<sup>57</sup> *Davies (2018), p 9*

<sup>58</sup> *More specifically, following the selection of the head of 10 households, they would select a head of 100 households who would then nominate and elect the ukkatta to be appointed by Department of General Administration.*

<sup>59</sup> *Munsoor (2013), p 296*

due to persistent pressures and discrimination experienced by the Rohingya at the hands of the Myanmar government. Ripoll cites Wakar Uddin, the General of the Arakan Rohingya Union, that the “constant attack on local institutions of the Myanmar government... has ‘undermined the social fabric’ of Rohingya society. Even in the case of mullahs and mulvis, he highlights how the persecution of religious people, the destruction of mosques, higher religious education institutions, and historical documents have undermined the status of these figures.”<sup>60</sup> Many of these attacks were policy level restrictions placed on Rohingya that progressively stripped them of rights within the Myanmar government. There was also the notorious NaSaKa, or border guard police, that was responsible for enforcing harsh and discriminatory measures on the Rohingya.

In appreciating the inter-relationship of the shomaz, its inherent logic and values, and its relationship with the formal Myanmar state apparatus, a set of mutually reinforcing social dynamics that helped perpetuate and maintain social cohesion within Rohingya communities are evident. The importance of unity as a social value arises because social exclusion largely requires the wider set of gusshis to enforce and support the decision of the shomaz committee regarding social matters. Shomaz committee members were the highest holders of izzot, vital brokers between the Rohingya and the Myanmar government, arbitrators, and an important part of social safety networks for the poor. As a result, they no doubt were able to encourage and enforce consensus and collective action against dissenting group members. Social exclusion, as a punishment, needs to be understood as an incredibly threatening prospect for families who rely on their shomaz not only because they were important social units of belonging, membership, and faith but also important social support systems that worked as intermediaries with Myanmar’s authorities, provided or facilitated livelihood opportunities, and offered a social safety net for families who were unable to support themselves. Within these dynamics “social deviance” from Islamic values is largely conflated with social criminality meaning that there is little differentiation between the two and that both carry the same potential punishment - social exclusion. Hence, the system of izzot, social hierarchy, wealth redistribution, and punishment of religious or social dissent are a reinforcing set of social dynamics that kept communities socially united and religiously devoted.

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<sup>60</sup> Ripoll (2017), p 9

# SHOMAZ & GUSSHI AFTER DISPLACEMENT

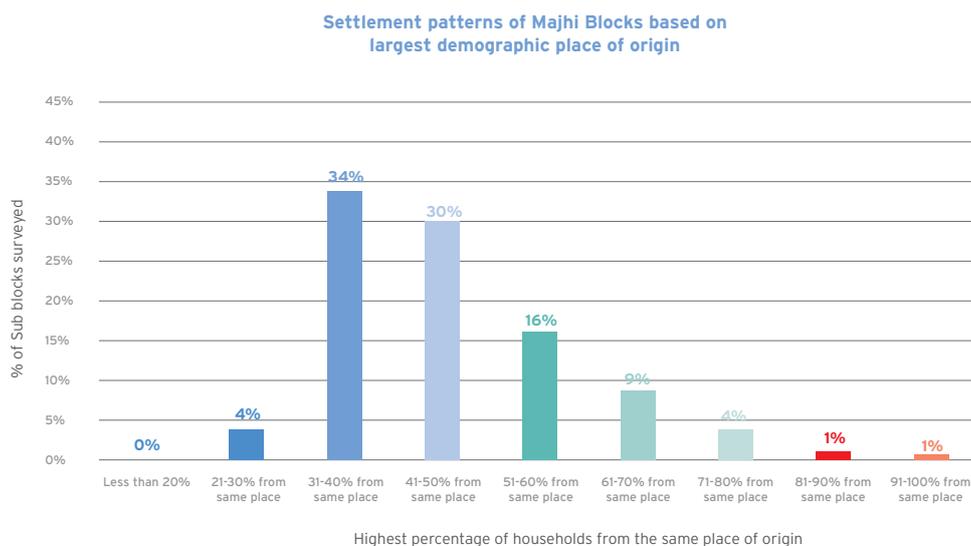
One of the first questions in considering shomaz after the displacement was whether and how much the shomaz remained “intact” within the camps. In understanding shomaz and gusshi as comprised of a series of social networks, to understand whether shomaz “survived” displacement requires a better understanding of displacement patterns across the camps and whether shomaz and gusshi largely resettled together. There are competing anecdotal narratives from various humanitarians to support both accounts and often it is wrongly argued that the reality is an either/or scenario. Staff working in IOM’s Site Management Unit argue that displacement patterns vary significantly according to camp, with certain Camps, like Camp 20 extension, being highly fragmented due to the fact that residents were largely relocated again after their initial arrival for road and facility construction projects. This idea stands in contrast to camps along the eastern side of Kutupalong Balukahli Expansion which many people argue contain groups of Rohingya that fled and settled together from the same places of origin.<sup>61</sup> Fortunately, there are several sets of data which can begin to illuminate this picture.

The first and largest data set was gathered within Round 9 of the Needs and Population Survey where respondents were asked to report the three largest places of origin within their Majhi-block.<sup>62</sup> To better understand whether groups of Rohingya fled and settled with people who were from the same village tract, this data was analyzed to determine the largest possible percentage of people from the same reported place of origin within the surveyed Majhi block. This analysis is limited by the above understanding that a single village tract had multiple fara, shomaz and gusshi, meaning that members from the same place of origin didn’t necessarily know each other or share the same group memberships or general locality. However, this data does provide insights into whether people settled as groups based on a generalized place of origin. In examining the largest demographic with a shared place of origin, it is possible to see how communities potentially remained “intact” or “fragmented” within the new administrative boundaries of the displacement camps.

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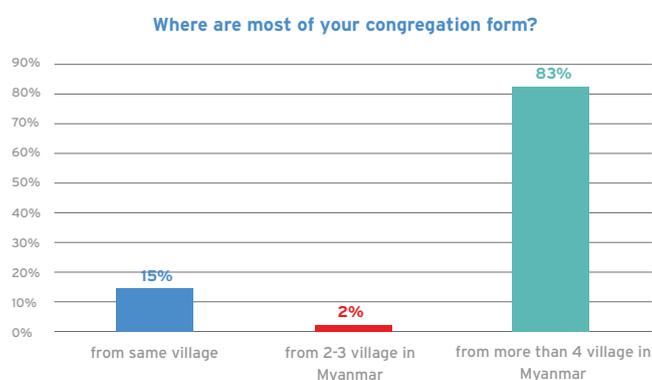
<sup>61</sup> Discussion with IOM Site Management team active during 2019 of the response.

<sup>62</sup> The full dataset has not been released due to sensitivities around the collection of names of places of origins. However, the NPM Round 9 report is available on Humanitarian Response.



From the above it is clear that 64% of all surveyed Majhi blocks reported that only between 31-50% of their block was from the same place of origin. This means that while some families did indeed settle with people from their place of origin, rarely did they constitute a majority within their new sub-blocks. This analysis was repeated at camp level and despite various conceptions of humanitarians, there is a similar pattern of displacement and fragmentation across all the camps without a significant difference between any of them. While there are no doubt some Mahji Blocks where this is not the case, as is evident from the above, the predominant narrative arising from this analysis is that communities were largely fragmented as they fled. In considering that the above doesn't even mean people knew each other before they fled, it further suggests that a higher degree of social fragmentation occurred than what is presented in the above.

The second data set was gathered as a part of an IOM Mosque Mapping exercise to better understand the formation of mosque congregations and committees.<sup>63</sup> Within this exercise, Imams representing 86 different Mosques from three camps were asked various questions about their congregations. In summary, on average Imams reported 128 households attended Jumma prayer but reported that only 13% of their congregation was the same congregation they had in Myanmar. This was reconfirmed with another question that explored the congregations' respective places of origin:



<sup>63</sup> Data for this was gathered in March 2019 across Camps 20, 20 extension, and 9 during regular meetings with Imams. Of the 89 mosques within those camps, only three chose not to provide information.

To further strengthen the findings, when asked whether the Mosque committees were comprised of members of the same or different villages, all except one reported that Mosque committee members were all from different local places of origin within their sub-block even if they were from the same township or village tracts.

These findings were further corroborated qualitatively during interviews. When participants were asked how many households from their current subblock they knew when they lived in Rakhine, the number never exceeded 10-20 households.<sup>64</sup> As one woman explained, "when we arrived we were so tired and relieved to be in a safe place that we went to the first available place and stopped because we were exhausted."<sup>65</sup> This sentiment and the immediate experience of arrival in the camps for many Rohingya is one of relief but also chaotic randomness. While detailed surveys may reveal a more granular trend in post-displacement settlement patterns, this consultation found only narratives of fragmentation and social isolation following their flight from Myanmar. This is perhaps echoed in the repeated accounts of respondents who reported that they were unable to settle with or nearby their gusshi. Rather, gusshi members were reported as being scattered across the camp, often in different parts of the camp that inhibited people's ability to maintain social ties. Many people said that they did not even know where many members of their gusshi resided in the camps. The conclusion of this consultation is that it would be incredibly rare to find shomaz and gusshi structures from Myanmar intact within the displacement camps.

It is difficult to summarize the many changes to these structures that occurred in the course of displacement, especially because they were already diverse in Myanmar. It is helpful to imagine tight-knit communities bound together within small social units in a context where Rohingya experienced many external social, political, and economic pressures encouraging them to be united in all aspects of life. Gusshi and shomaz were intertwined with the fara-based Rohingya societies of Rakhine. Shomaz were critical sources of support and mitigated against the harsh realities of life for Rohingya within Rakhine State. Furthermore, they were historical social structures dating back generations with incredibly close ties between households and gusshi. All of this underwent a rapid transformation and to some extent "death through separation" as people fled, lost members, were separated, and eventually settled in different parts of the camps. This transformation is not just about separation from social networks and family members but a transformation in how people were forced to reorient themselves from living highly communal lives to suddenly living highly individualized ones based on humanitarian understandings of nuclear families that are reified through relief distribution mechanisms.

It is understandable that across traumatic events, people seek to recreate familiar patterns of social organization even when circumstances and contexts vary significantly. In all discussions, interviewees discussed their "new shomaz" in Bangladesh. At the time of this consultation, it had been nearly two years since the initial displacement; for many residents this meant that dealing with immediate needs had largely become more scheduled and routine for most families.<sup>66</sup> These new structures were sometimes referred to as shomaz, malda, or mosjid shomiti (mosque committee), especially when people were referring to the committee of the shomaz. This linkage between mosque and community seems to have replicated itself within the camps and most people identified their own or a combination of geographically neighboring

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<sup>64</sup> This series of questions was repeated multiple times over our interviews and focus group discussions.

<sup>65</sup> FGD with woman in Camp 9

<sup>66</sup> This is reflected in statistics which point to various needs being met; of particular note is that already by July 2018, 84% of refugees reported having access to "life-saving" information, which suggests that people had largely informed themselves on how to survive and operate within the new camp environment. See Bailey et al (2018).

Majhi blocks as constituting their new shomaz. This is perhaps interesting in that Majhi blocks were and are largely arbitrarily and quickly formed social groupings of households that were created to facilitate aid distribution in the immediate aftermath of the influx.<sup>67</sup> Majhi were sometimes identified as a part of the shomaz committee because of their ability to secure approvals from Camp in Charges for various activities. As a result of these factors, it seems that arbitrarily defined sub-blocks became the de-facto basis for forming new social groups. As one input noted, “here shomaz does not include people who live outside of the block. Here the people under the majhi are in one shomaz, they go to the same mosque and are in one sub-block.”<sup>68</sup>

Interestingly, this consultation finds established parallels in how shomaz functioned vis-à-vis other authorities within Rakhine, such as the Ukkata, and “top-down” governance structures within the camp. Always at some level of Myanmar’s government, village tract authorities were “embedded in a wider system of governance where the higher levels they respond to are not democratized;” for example, more socially representative structures like the shomaz or Ukkata largely reported to undemocratically selected Myanmar officials.<sup>69</sup> This largely parallels the reality of life in camp where Rohingya’s self-selected representative systems are largely restricted to their immediate localities within sub-blocks and exist in a context where “larger governance structures,” such as humanitarian agencies and the Bangladeshi government, do not include them as official representatives. Just as head of 10-household and head of 100-household representatives were often selected by Ukkatta, who were then approved by the Myanmar government, Majhi are also selected and approved by the Bangladeshi army and Camp in Charges. To this date, there is a lack of broader over-arching democratic representational systems within the camps. Decision making and representational authority is largely limited and concentrated within humanitarian and government actors who have different practices and approaches towards “community consultations.” As a result, shomaz committees within the camps largely attempt to exercise their influence by establishing linkages with these actors under various auspices in order to exercise authority.

An example of this historical dynamic recreating itself can be seen in the way many shomaz and mosque committees function vis-à-vis Majhis within the camp.<sup>70</sup> The selection, authority and perpetuation of Majhis’ control within the camps is often argued as resulting from agencies who continue to use Majhis to coordinate their relief operations and from the Bangladeshi government camp authorities, including the Camp-in-Charges and the Bangladeshi army, who use Majhis as key interlocutors between themselves and the wider population. As such, Majhis were initially selected and held their position as representatives because they had some command of Bengali,<sup>71</sup> most likely due to previous travel in Bangladesh. This is in contrast to traditional means of leadership selection based on izzot or shomaz membership. However, it should be noted that Majhis continue to be interlocutors and critical linkages to systems of power; the multi-sector needs assessment found that 94% of people report that “speaking with the Majhi” was their primary means of providing feedback or reporting a problem.<sup>72</sup> From this

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<sup>67</sup> *Majhi* (from Bengali word for Boat Captain) were selected by relief agencies in the military to represent groups of households. The locations of the households represented by a particular Majhi became a “Majhi block.” See Wake (2019) and Olney (2019) for a discussion of the Majhi system.

<sup>68</sup> FGD with Imams

<sup>69</sup> Kyed et al (2016), p3.

<sup>70</sup> For a broader discussion of Majhi system see Olney (2019) and Wake et al (2019)

<sup>71</sup> Wake et al (2019), p 23-24

<sup>72</sup> MSNA (2019)

consultation, it is possible to understand that Majhi's power and positions are also maintained through a third dynamic - their willingness and capacity to act also as interlocutors on behalf of shomaz that have reformed within their particular Majhi block.

Despite being prevalent in every Majhi-block where this consultation took place, shomaz and mosque committees are largely formally un-engaged by humanitarian and Bangladeshi government stakeholders, which perhaps is one reason why Rohingya still "go through" Majhis to resolve problems. While imams are incorporated within various programs and initiatives, the more formal understanding and engagement of these locally representative structures seems to be lacking. As such, shomaz committee members reported making strategic linkages to Majhis, sometimes even including them on their committees. Similarly, some shomaz committees have formally approached camp management and requested meetings directly with Site Managers as separate and independent representative structures to the Majhis.<sup>73</sup> As such, it should be noted that shomaz are key actors in the maintenance of social harmony, providing justice and redistributing wealth even though they are largely unengaged and disconnected from humanitarian relief systems and programming. This is not to say that the services or roles they play in the community are compliant with humanitarian standards or "fair" to women or other marginalized groups, but that they were reported by respondents as being important actors within this sphere.

Other direct parallels can be drawn between shomaz structures in Rakhine and how "new shomaz" operate within the camp, and it is important to understand ways in which they differ and are not directly equitable. When asked how their shomaz had changed over the course of displacement, it was clear in interviews that while participants were adamant in their affirmation of the existence and function of their "new shomaz," this often seemed a part of the active reformation of these social units. However, when asked to compare their new shomaz to the shomaz they had in Rakhine, many admitted that their new shomaz were "weak" or "not united." The theme of "disunity" within the new shomaz became an ever-prevalent part of discussions and was repeatedly mentioned as a core problem many Rohingya were grappling with. As one woman stated, "we are surviving here like orphan family. Orphans can call everybody brothers and sister [but have none]. We are also calling everyone brother and sister here, but we are from different places. Our gusshi is not with us. We call each other family but we are just living together." Within this dynamic, people clearly felt that the experience of displacement and their daily challenges for survival over the past two years had united them together in some ways but that these bonds lacked the authenticity, legitimacy or strength of their old shomaz in Myanmar.

There were several reasons why shomaz were said to not function as effectively as before. Prominently, the theme of "being from different places" and a lack of unity in their opinions seem to be a major reason for the lack of "strength" of the new shomaz. As one man explained,

*Here in our shomaz there are 200 types of people. People are from different villages in Myanmar. Here none of us are relatives but still we are staying together. Here the shomaz is a floating shomaz, a refugee shomaz. Here we can't do anything as we want. Here we are living in scarcity. Here people don't listen to leaders. All of us are poor, so we can't help each other.*

Within this person's view, the lack of a clear leader, whether gusshi patriarch, malda committee, or shomaz representative meant people were unclear as to whose voice they should follow and

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<sup>73</sup> This linkage largely arose from the Site Manager being a local Bangladeshi from Cox's Bazar who had worked in the camps several years prior to the influx and has a strong command of Rohingya.

the basis on which someone should be followed. The “floating shomaz” of Rohingya are imagined and experienced as disconnected social units that lack the necessary wealth to reproduce izzot and thereby recreate connection, unity, and belonging among members. Without gusshi as organizational structures supporting the shomaz, it felt to participants that there was a vast number of households whose voices lacked intermediaries to consolidate perspectives, achieve consensus and discourage dissent. Now households require individual representation whereas previously they were represented through larger collective units of gusshi. The historical means through which group and communal consensus was achieved and maintained is now a significantly more difficult prospect for Rohingya in the camps. Concordantly, “unity” as a shomaz has also become a challenging enterprise to achieve.

Along these lines, the lack of unity also entailed an inability to control the actions of shomaz members, particularly members who disobeyed a social norm or broken an agreement. The lack of feeling as belonging to a shomaz similarly has meant a weakened sense of social obligation. Both of these factors have significantly hampered social harmony between neighbors and other members of these new communities. Firstly, shomaz and gusshi were vital support structures for many poorer Rohingya.<sup>74</sup> People noted that the lack of gusshi meant that for the first time they were having to pay for support that was historically provided for free because a lack of feeling socially obliged to help other members of their new subblocks. For example, one Mosque committee explained that a person’s gusshi would help take care of them when they were sick either by paying for medical expenses or helping carry them to medical facilities – both of which they said were things they now had to manage within their nuclear family.<sup>75</sup> Within Rakhine, social exclusion from these structures was easier to impose and economically more damning than the current dynamics within the camps given the comparative isolation and economic dependency upon gusshi and shomaz structures. Now, social exclusion might at most mean a family has to relocate to another camp but often has no consequences at all – there are no longer clear punishments for social “disunity” to the extent there was before. In a context where aid and employment in Cash for Work programs are provided independently and not directly through the shomaz itself, the penalties and implications of being “cut off” are far reduced. Equally, social exclusion as a coordinated act imposed upon “offenders” is also harder to enforce especially given the fragmented demographics of “200 types of people living together.”

The resulting loss of social cohesion has direct consequences on conflict between households that often arise from the general congestion of the camps and minor events, such as inconsiderate trash or wastewater disposal. As one Imam explained,

*Love among the people is reduced, yelling happens among the people. As being people from different places who are living in the same shomaz, people don't know the respectable persons, hence they don't show respect to them. Here we don't find one another to cooperate, here 80% people don't go for pray, here we can't advise people to go to pray. Imams are not that respected in camp. The camps are not under any rules. With no rules, people don't respect each other, rather they fight.<sup>76</sup>*

Within this framing, another key issue undermining the operation of new shomaz can be understood – the inability of members within a sub-block to “know” each other’s izzot. This

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<sup>74</sup> The over-arching experience of poverty was explored in Munsoor’s work, with Rohingya reporting that about 90% of their communities self-identified as such.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Mosque Committee

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Imam

theme played out repeatedly in consultations regarding community representation structures and selection of leaders within the camp. Many people felt their distrust of others was rooted in the fact that “trust” was something intimately intertwined with a person and their gusshi’s izzot.

Previously, social representations were known and people or groups’ qualification for leadership were clearly demonstrated through their active participation in izzot systems. Now even a religious person’s qualifications are subject to question: “many people are putting on white robes and saying they are murobbi [educated or religious community elders] when they have never studied.”<sup>77</sup> The shared communal understanding of a person’s reputation and status within a community space itself was a historical necessity for trust and communal action. Another man explained that,

*“Before when there were problems with the Myanmar government our leaders would go and try and resolve them. Even if they failed, people would believe that they were honorable and tried. Now when majhis or people try to resolve the communities’ problems, people do not trust them and think that there was some corruption. This is why I would not want to be a majhi.”<sup>78</sup>*

No doubt this dynamic is further exacerbated by the fact that living within the camps exposes Rohingya to instances of exploitation of relief aid by more powerful families. The inability to trust and perceive others’ izzot combined with Rohingya’s inability to easily re-establish the traditions that produce izzot was clearly a barrier to the selection and operation of leadership and representational systems in the camps.

It would be assumed that over time Rohingya living in camps would increasingly build trust and get to know each other; however, many pointed out that the ways in which izzot and shomaz were socially produced no longer function as expected within the camps. Of particular note, were the traditional ceremonies within shomaz that necessitated the sharing and exchange of food between households, including fatiya ceremonies, Qurban Eid, marriage celebrations, and funeral arrangements. As one woman shared, “IOM is giving us many things and for that we are grateful. But we are only receiving things and not sharing with each other because we are all poor.” The idea that people within the new shomaz were all recipients instead of producers or contributors of izzot largely hampered the reestablishment of social ties. This was no doubt compounded by the fact that aid distribution systems largely limit or reject the involvement of Mosque groups because of secular principals.

Here the common experience of poverty was a palpable shared statement made in many different discussions – with some people stating strongly that “everyone living in the camps was poor.” This class-free articulation of difference strongly contrasts the noticeable inequalities that are present within the camps between households with various levels of socio-economic earning capacity. The lack of wealth also means that these families are deprived of key means to re-establish and assert their izzot within their new shomaz. Despite a mutual feeling of being “people of the tarp,” a phrase used by many participants, the lack of resource and support sharing between households was a key driver in their will to return to Myanmar: “If we can return to our country we can build a strong shomaz because we have a lot of property, businesses and rich people in our community [handani gusshi] to rebuild our own shomaz like it was before.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> FGD with Imams

<sup>78</sup> Community representation consultation discussion with male FGD participant

<sup>79</sup> FGD with women

Where in Myanmar there was a self-reinforcing value system of communalism that helped maintain unity, mitigate conflict, redistribute wealth, and establish leadership; there now exists an inability or difficulty in re-establishing these arrangements even though there is clear evidence of many Rohingya are attempting to do so. Communalism has not disappeared and many Rohingya continue to share and establish ties with each other; however, the prevailing experience is that their gusshi no longer exist and their new shomaz only a semblance of what it was before. Whether and how these new shomaz continue to reformulate themselves is uncertain, but the attempts to recreate such structures is unquestionably experienced as a positive development that many participants wished could continue. While historical shomaz were no doubt complicated social systems with people who benefited and suffered under their operation, a return to the familiarity of the shomaz in Rakhine was generally viewed positively because of the traumas associated with the displacement. No doubt, many individuals and groups, especially those that were "excommunicated," such as women, people not conforming to Islamic social norms or marginalized groups, may have provided alternative or more critical views of their function and operation.

## KOUM (NATION & ETHNICITY)

There is a complete lack of in-depth sources about Rohingya identity to support a contemporary analysis of the dynamics in the camps. Often, texts that seek to explore the historical basis of Rohingya identity seek to place or displace the Rohingya and their political claims within or outside of Myanmar's definition of legitimate national races. Modern historians note a lack of detailed studies on early Muslim political organizations, historical armed groups within the Rohingya political movement, or an anthropological exploration of people's experience and definition of what it means to be "Rohingya."<sup>80</sup> Social constructivist approaches aimed at better understanding the active processes through which people construct and articulate their identities are prone to contemporary political misappropriation - that such approaches may seem to suggest that because the Rohingya identity is "constructed," it therefore lacks legitimacy. To this extent, it needs to be clearly stated that in exploring the differences in narratives surrounding Rohingya identity, this work in no way seeks to undermine legitimate claims to identity, human rights, or any other political claims made by various Rohingya groups and people. Rather, the discussion should be understood as exploratory and akin to similar research around what it means to be a member of any identity group. This section seeks to engage in a more detailed discussion of how different groups are increasingly representing "the Rohingya" and their understanding of what it means to represent and lead them.

It also juxtaposes the claims of these "Rohingya representatives" with more local understandings of what everyday people living in the camps think and feel about "being Rohingya."

Before this division is examined, it is perhaps useful to identify and separate two groups of "Rohingya leaders" from this consultation. Both Rohingya inside and outside civil society groups drew a noted division between "Rohingya leaders outside Bangladesh" and "Rohingya leaders living in the camp" when discussing "who represents the Rohingya." In particular, there was a solidarity that came with being "people of the tarp," a powerful image of homelessness, scarcity and displacement that drove the separation between different camp residents and other diaspora groups of Rohingya.<sup>81</sup> For civil society leaders, there was also the feeling that Rohingya leadership groups outside of Bangladesh and Myanmar were potentially capitalizing on the suffering of those within the camps because they attended events in relative luxury while not having to experience the same camp conditions. In this regard, there were notions that this split represented a clear division between types of groups, even though many groups formed in the

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<sup>80</sup> See works by Leider (2004; 2016). It should also be noted that older Rohingya living within the camps perhaps offer a valuable historical record and insight into some of this history and a way to explore some of the outstanding historical questions related to the details of historical political and civil society organizations in Rakhine.

<sup>81</sup> Phrases referring to people living "under a tarp" or "people of the tarp" occurred both in discussions with civil society leaders in camps and in FGDs and interviews.

diaspora now claim to be active in the camps. Consultations largely focused on groups formed within the camps whose leadership primarily resided there – though many groups possess ties to various diaspora networks.

An overview and general description of different Rohingya civil society groups in the camps has already been conducted.<sup>82</sup> However, an exploration of various dynamics these groups have with respect to discussions on what it means to be Rohingya has yet to be conducted. Amongst the civil society organizations, the origination of the term “Rohingya” seems to have arisen as a political narrative within the second half of the 20th century and was supported by specific groups of Rohingya who were often urban-based, educated elites. Historically, Rohingya activists and armed groups were largely comprised of these elite circles of Rohingya society and, notably, all lacked multi-generational stability.<sup>83</sup> These were often connected in some way to students, academics or teacher’s groups.<sup>84</sup> Information regarding political or civic organizations is also greatly limited and Leider points to the “difficulty at present to understand the links between the militant organisations and the Muslim population in Rakhine.”<sup>85</sup> Additionally, multiple sources point to historical and contemporary diversities and divisions between Muslims’ ethnic origins and social backgrounds in pre-modern Rakhine.<sup>86</sup> Charney’s work in particular traces the development of “two different groups of Bengali Muslims” that emerged in the Arakan Littoral and even their lack of common Muslim identity prior to the mid-seventeenth century: “one rural and non-elite, and the other urban and at least partly elite.”<sup>87</sup> Among a broadly diverse “Rohingya” population, for Leider, “the observable fact is that members of the educated Muslim class in Maungdaw and Buthidaung started to claim a separate “Rohingya” identity as they engaged in their fight for political autonomy after the Second World War.”<sup>88</sup> This division between rural and urban-elite is also reiterated in more contemporary anthropological examinations of differences within Rohingya populations who were internally displaced and living inside and outside of Sittwe’s displacement camps.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> See Olney (2019)

<sup>83</sup> Leider (2014), gives the following summary of armed groups: “The Rohingya movement has seen the story of innumerable inner conflicts and divisions as a brief chronological overview of its organizations shows. The Rohingya Independent Force (RIF), created in 1963 (1964?) united in 1969 with the Rohingya Independent Army (RIA) which in 1974/72 became the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), all led in succession by the same leader, Jafar Habib (or B.A. Jafar). In 1982, a new militant organisation, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) was founded by Dr Mohammad Yunus in Bangladesh. While according to Andrew Selth, the RSO was first created to represent the interests of the refugees, it became a militant movement that fought for the “creation of an autonomous Arakan state uniting the Rohingyas of Burma and Bangladesh”. The RSO is the Rohingya organisation that had reportedly the strongest connections to Islamist movements, but it never posed a threat to the security forces in Myanmar. Following its cooperation with the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami party and training of its members in Afghanistan in the 1990s, it was repressed by the Bangladeshi authorities in 2001 and broke into three factions. In 1995, the Rohingya National Alliance (also referred to as Rohingya Solidarity Alliance) was formed and meant to unite RSO and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), under Nurul Islam, an organisation that had broken away from RSO in 1986 (or 1987?). The Alliance was succeeded in 1999 by the foundation of the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) with the aim to unite the Rohingya movement. Its military arm, the Rohingya National Army, had no military impact. The unity of the various Rohingya associations gained some strength after 2005 when Harn Yawnghwe of the Euro-Burma Office in Brussels advocated for the Rohingya. In May 2011, a convention of senior Rohingya leaders founded the Arakan Rohingya Union under the patronage of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Under the leadership of Wakar Uddin, head of the Burmese Rohingya Association of North America, the new organisation has tried to establish itself as a new lobby for Rohingya interests.” (p 22).

<sup>84</sup> For example, the Jammiyat Rohingya Ulema formed in 1936 by a group of teachers seems to be the first organization to begin to express a desire for a Rohingya-governed state within Myanmar. This is discussed in Leider (2014)

<sup>85</sup> Leider (2014), p23

<sup>86</sup> Leider (2014), p14

<sup>87</sup> Charney (1999), p 186

<sup>88</sup> Leider (2014), p15

<sup>89</sup> Boutry (2016), p5; 18-19

This paper largely found that members of Rohingya civil society from within the camps were largely comprised of Rohingya who were more likely to have had formal education, be from urban areas, and have been part of previous governance systems in Myanmar. Civil society groups themselves often imagined and explained a clear divide within the Rohingya population – those that were educated and those that were not. Many discussions with different youth and Rohingya civil society groups referred to the fact that “many people in our community are uneducated” and, as a result, did not have valid opinions or perspectives on issues regarding repatriation or community representation. Here, religious education is devalued over more secular and modern education that was often more likely to be valued and accessed by wealthier and urban-based Rohingya. This theme featured prominently when it came to discussion of community representation structures. Many groups, in particular youth groups, whose membership mostly included matriculation pass students,<sup>90</sup> felt that consultations with uneducated community members were invalid and one group even went so far to assert that whenever IOM consulted Rohingya there should be an educated person present to speak on behalf of everyone. Interestingly, for these groups, leadership was also something that “should be paid for” and many members of civil society said that unless community representatives were paid, they would be unwilling to resign from other paid volunteer positions they held in camps. While others also felt that Rohingya representatives should be paid; they often suggested that this would help prevent them from engaging in corruption. Civil society’s understanding of these roles reflects a more formal understanding of leadership as equivalent to civil service positions instead of more traditional and unpaid understandings of leadership and representation that were clearly present in the shomaz of Rakhine. In the conduct of this consultation, interviews with largely illiterate people on community representation were also criticized by members of Rohingya civil society because they were not “knowledgeable” about issues of leadership qualities or representing their community.<sup>91</sup>

Similarly, these different socioeconomic groups have varied narratives and definitions of the origination of “Rohingya” within Rakhine state – often pointing to different moments of historical waves of Muslim migration (and mass conversions) in the region.<sup>92</sup> The most widely known and earliest historical mythology surrounding the origin of Muslims in Rakhine was often cited as the arrival of Arab traders who were shipwrecked on the Arakan littoral. A variant of this origin story is shared by many coastal South Asian Muslim communities, including in Chittagong, who have traditionally been connected to Middle Eastern ports for millennia through Indian Ocean trade networks.<sup>93</sup> Another claim is that the Rohingya people, or at least some of them, descended from Mughal mercenaries and court officials, similar to the claimed descent of the Kamein Muslim ethnic group within Myanmar. This story relates to the relationship between the Kingdom of Mrauk U and the Bengal Sultanate, and later, Bengal Subah, who had several centuries of close economic and cultural interactions with Mrauk U. During this period, a group of Muslims courtiers, poets, merchants, etc., migrated to the Arakan courts in Mrauk U and other areas within Rakhine, who were later a part of the urban elite within historical Arakan. There are also other historical events that increased the size of the Muslim population in Arakan that are seldom recollected or altogether dismissed in the origin stories of the Rohingya. The Portuguese and Magh (Rakhine) piracy in the Bay of Bengal led to the large-scale enslavement of Bengalis from the Ganges delta, who were then sold to different parts of the bay and beyond, including the Arakan coast.<sup>94</sup> A more contested and political event

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<sup>90</sup> *Passing matriculation is seen as a sign of status as few Rohingya obtained that level of education.*

<sup>91</sup> *This occurred in several discussions with civil society groups and recommendations from educated Rohingya people who knew about the research.*

<sup>92</sup> *Multiple sources discuss origination histories, including various works by Leider and Washaly (2019).*

<sup>93</sup> *FGD’s with various demographics*

<sup>94</sup> *See Ray (2015)*

is the large-scale employment of migrant agrarian workers from rural Chittagong and Gangetic Bengal during the British era. These various migratory flows would also explain the variety of origin myths, the various linguistic differentiations within the Rohingya language, and the social hierarchies that exists within Rohingya society.<sup>95</sup>

The connections between the various understandings of being “Rohingya” are unsurprisingly linked to the educational achievements of those who posit them - as it implies their own greater understanding of history, a sense of “noble descentance” and older belonging to Rakhine - the last of which being vital to Rohingya’s claims to indigeneity required within Myanmar’s understanding of national races. Several notable observations need to be made within this linkage between this national narrative and members of Rohingya civil society. Namely, that civil society groups saw themselves as distinctly and differently “Rohingya” in perhaps a more “authentic” manner than other “uneducated” Rohingya. To them, their ability to engage in and understand the “larger” political dynamics surrounding the crisis merited their superiority and candidacy as leaders within the Rohingya community, especially on matters of repatriation. Interestingly, one Rohingya teacher with a BA in education, a rare accomplishment among Rohingya, poignantly offered the observation that “in your country you would never call someone who is matriculation pass educated [high school level equivalent].”<sup>96</sup>

Another observation is that the linkage between education and the understanding of a historical “Rohingya” identity went hand in hand. Rohingya with education, especially youth, were always found to be engaged in one or more civil society organizations and never without employment; namely because organizations sought to recruit such individuals. That being said, it can hardly be claimed that Rohingya civil society youth groups represented the entirety of “youth” in the camps, who predominantly were and are largely deprived of similar educational opportunities. Youth within civil society spaces were also much closer to Myanmar in terms of their capacity to engage in Myanmar media through their ability to speak and read Burmese.<sup>97</sup> Equally, these groups often stated that their core purpose was to provide education services and promote educational opportunities for Rohingya. At the center of this claim was their frustration regarding the lack of opportunity to continue the Myanmar curriculum at higher levels. Such an opportunity was, in Myanmar, restricted to very few Rohingya due to limited socio-economic requirements required to obtain higher education that was restricted to them.<sup>98</sup> Within this framing, the desire to receive an education based on the Myanmar curriculum can be seen both as a genuine interest in education but also as a politically significant act of “nation-building.” Receiving education according to Myanmar’s curriculum, which includes Burmese language instruction, is not just about obtaining access to social mobility but also about asserting rights to participation in the Myanmar national identity and political sphere. It is no surprise therefore, that all civil society groups claimed to be engaged in educational activities to some degree or another.

While still an important issue, education and access to education featured less prominently as key agendas among older members of Rohingya civil society, who were more focused on debates directly related to political claims concerning the 2017 genocide. Membership within these groups was similarly restricted to wealthier and more educated members of Rohingya society, often to those who had participated within various governance related functions within Myanmar or lived in more urban areas. This and other recent research noted a lack of

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<sup>95</sup> See Charney (1999)

<sup>96</sup> Interview with teacher

<sup>97</sup> Several times they were quick to point out spelling mistakes within Burmese signage and IEC around the camps.

<sup>98</sup> See Olney (2019)

coordination, trust or even at times cordiality between various groups, particularly their leaders.<sup>99</sup> For example, within these spaces, women-led civil society organizations largely accused male-led groups of only caring about tokenistic inclusion or participation of women. It was noted that women felt largely excluded from internal discussions and dialogues - with one group explicitly having broken off from another because they felt that women's representation was largely ingenuine and arose out of a desire to placate foreigners' desire to see their inclusion in such spaces. Women's participation in these circles also was partially predicated on being educated and coming from a certain class background, as women's groups without this were largely isolated from important decisions. Herein, civil society groups were found to be hyperaware of outsider perceptions and expectations of them above what members within their own organizations or wider community thought and experienced. It should also be noted that these external expectations did not seem to result in genuine or more inclusive changes within Rohingya civil society groups.

Despite the fact that most civil society organizations shared a common agenda, they rarely met and often were at odds with one another at senior levels - especially over issues of representation and engagement by various agencies and stakeholders. Recently, a Humanitarian Policy Group paper made the astute observation that,

*Representing refugee voices in high-level political and policy discussions is critical, but often results in either token representation or misrepresentation through diaspora or community groups that may or may not reflect the perspectives of refugees. In the case of Rohingya refugees, diaspora or community groups engaged in these discussions often do not live in the same locations as the refugees they say they represent, and it has been unclear how Rohingya refugees in Bangladeshi feel about such representation.<sup>100</sup>*

This dynamic was found repeatedly in interactions with various civil society groups which were focused on discussions over how to improve IOM's engagement with communities and how to improve humanitarian service delivery within the camps. Even this low level of engagement by IOM created a competitive space between organizations who viewed other groups' engagement as a "loss" of a limited representational space. From various sides, they admitted that there was very little cooperation between them outside of "key issues" - such as reporting on the events of the genocide.<sup>101</sup> Often these discussions were derailed and put on hold whenever "higher-level" delegations came to discuss repatriation, Rohingya leadership or crimes related to the genocide.<sup>102</sup> The feeling that a group was not invited to participate as stakeholders or not engaged in a discussion on repatriation was a point of friction and disunity between civil society organizations.

It is also broadly worth describing the spectrum of opinions within this space related to Rohingya nationalism and political claims. Among the civil society organizations, it can be noted that there is a lack of any significant difference in their political platforms - for example, all want citizenship as a precondition for repatriation. However, they did differ in their positioning with respect to wider understandings of Rohingya nationalism and various imaginations of "who the Rohingya are." Within this sphere it is important to consider the Arakan Rohingya Salvation

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<sup>99</sup> "Competition and mistrust were, for instance, a feature of Rohingya community-based organisations' relationships and interactions in Kuala Lumpur" Wake et al (2019), p 23.

<sup>100</sup> Wake et al (2019), p23.

<sup>101</sup> Discussion with civil society member.

<sup>102</sup> Several times groups were unable to meet for weeks due to preparations or engagements on meetings they perceived to be more important.

Army (ARSA) and discourse surrounding it as an alternative Rohingya identity-narrative. Herein, ARSA is not analyzed as a traditional armed group or political institution but considered as an alternative ethno-national identity based on traditional Muslim values of Rohingya communities. This is perhaps also a useful framing since despite years of operation, the group lacks a list of demands or manifesto about its political objectives. Rather, many of the actions carried out in “support of ARSA” in the camps are generally related to the enforcement, often with force or threats, of socially conservative values upon different groups of Rohingya living with the camps, such as female volunteers working for NGOs and women participating in various “un-Islamic” activities.<sup>103</sup> In this, ARSA could also be understood as a conservative Muslim group upholding or enforcing traditional Muslim social norms and principles within the Rohingya population - not as an ethnic armed group.

Within this, it can largely be understood that many claiming to be ARSA use sympathies and nationalist rhetoric to forcibly extract rents regardless of whether they possess any formal linkages to any purported networks of ARSA militants. The rhetoric of “acting on behalf of the Rohingya” is useful in legitimizing their extraction of rents in front of others. More significant in this discussion is an examination of these two differing notions of Rohingya identity. The first is an image of a modern, educated Rohingya citizen of Myanmar who are noble descendants of traders and members of Royal courts. The second, an identity based on conservative, Islamic nationalism strongly rooted within Deobandi teachings<sup>104</sup> with fewer clear political objectives but an assertion of belonging predicated on the armed strength.

Both of these articulations of “Rohingya” exist simultaneously among Rohingya living in camps; albeit in less clearly delineated ways wherein they are not “essentialized” or experienced as mutually exclusive. People’s primary understanding of their identity was their shared experience of displacement and life in the camps - which was commonly voiced by groups of Rohingya who lived in isolated rural areas or women who followed strict interpretations of purdah. For these Rohingya people, their understanding of “being Rohingya” was largely learned in the course of displacement and life in the camps. In this, “being displaced” often coincided with a larger political awareness of “becoming Rohingya” that elevated this identity above others which no longer existed, such as shomaz or gusshi affiliations. One female FGD participant poignantly pointed out this observation by listing “refugee camps” as one of the characteristics of Rohingya Koum.<sup>105</sup> As a result, displacement and shared experiences of life in camps has undoubtedly helped to solidify and disseminate an understanding of the identity itself.

This is not to say that many people did not identify themselves as Rohingya before displacement but that the meaning and characteristics of this definition were largely difficult for people to explain. Among the religious members of Rohingya society, particularly imams and men with higher religious education, the idea of Rohingya koum has very strict religious parameters. For them, Rohingya and Islam were interchangeable and equivalent. However, while in Rakhine their religion largely differentiated them from others, it fails to do so in Bangladesh. For example, if asked whether Arab Muslims were also Rohingya their understanding was rearticulated as “Muslims living in Rakhine”. When asked about the Kamein, a Muslim ethnic minority that also lives in Rakhine, there was a difference of opinion about whether or not the

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<sup>103</sup> Many conservative Rohingya feel that female friendly spaces in particular are places where women are taught values that are inherently against the core teachings of Islam.

<sup>104</sup> Deobandism is an Islamic movement that began during British colonialism within India. The movement sought to “reform” and purify Islamic practices within Muslim populations, which was understood as the reason the Muslim Mughal Empire was defeated. Many Deobandi traditions and groups persist across South Asia and the world to this day.

<sup>105</sup> FGD with women

Kamein were “true Muslims,” meaning here “true Rohingya” due to the similarities between Kamein and Buddhist Rakhine communities, which include language.<sup>106</sup>

However, while the idea of “Rohingya” as a “Muslim from Rakhine” was the general understanding of the term, this understanding was often complicated and unclear when it came to specifics. On more than one occasion after finishing group discussions, the authors were approached by respondents to speak privately on the topic of Rohingya koum. These respondents explained that they did not feel comfortable speaking freely in the larger group, as their understanding of Rohingya identity could be met with criticism by the other members or may have been interpreted this as showing a lack of unity. For these people, being part of the Rohingya koum did not require a person to be a Muslim. They argued that anyone with origins in the region called Rohang can be part of the Rohingya Koum.<sup>107</sup> For these men, geography and a shared language formed the basis of Rohingya koum regardless of religious affiliation. Similar patterns were found among secularly educated Rohingya youth, who largely de-emphasized the exclusive Islamic understanding of the term, and in lieu, stressed the importance of shared language, history, and place of origin. These definitions lead to the various inclusion of other “Rohingya” groups within Rohingya koum, such as Rohingya-speaking Buddhists.<sup>108</sup> However, Hindus were clearly stated as not being a part of the Rohingya identity on the basis that they “came from India” and therefore were not “Muslims from Rakhine.” Others argued that all communities within Rakhine were a part of Rohingya koum, surprisingly even the Buddhist Rakhine, which suggests a stronger geographic basis to the identity than expected.<sup>109</sup>

Notably, some Rohingya people have already begun to creatively navigate different understandings and experiences of “being Rohingya” as a way to retain their unity. Some people have begun to articulate different “types” (zaat) of Rohingya by redefining the term as a supra-identity that covers different “types of Rohingya.”<sup>110</sup> Within this imagination there is a historical convergence of Islamic concepts of koum with the concept of jaati, the basis for the Hindu caste system, in similar ways that exists among other South Asian Muslim ethnic groups that experience similar differences. For the Rohingya, the structure and articulation of the koum and zaat system differs depending on which demographic is being spoken to. Religiously-aligned people would emphasize Islam as the basis of the Rohingya koum and thus include Rohingya and Kamein as different zaat within this koum; whereas others who defined Rohingya koum along linguistic or geographic definitions would identify Buddhist, Hindus and other groups within Rakhine as being different “types” within Rohingya koum. This creative reimagination and application of South Asian value systems familiar to the Rohingya demonstrates a willingness to imagine a more diverse and inclusive space than what is generally suggested at higher levels of discourse surrounding what it means to be Rohingya.

This wasn't the only dissonance between civil society's discourse and the broader populations understanding of their identity. There is a clear division between Rohingya living in the camps that don't participate actively in civil society organizations and those who do. For example, the

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<sup>106</sup> *The Kamein are also known as the Kaman.*

<sup>107</sup> *This etymology of the term is supported by Leider (2014), p 8.*

<sup>108</sup> *Rohingya-speaking Buddhists call themselves Maramagyi, but the Muslim Rohingya call them Borgwa. They, along with the Rohingya-speaking Hindus, are officially accepted by the Myanmar government as one of its 135 nationalities or sub-nationalities. Due to this and a history of intercommunal issues, the Hindu and Buddhist communities do not call themselves and their language “Rohingya.”*

<sup>109</sup> *A majority of participants said that Rohingya-speaking Hindus were not part of the Rohingya koum because they were thought to have originated in India; this corresponds with the Hindu community's own origin story.*

<sup>110</sup> *Here the term zaat was used; derived from Sanskrit jaati which refers to “type” or “caste” within the Indian subcontinent.*

Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights (ARSPH) claimed to have supported the reformation of shomaz across the 1,000 madrassas already in the camps to “restore social cohesiveness” and perhaps create a political base for themselves. However, none of the respondents who were unaffiliated with civil society groups could identify any Rohingya-led organizations within the camps or in the diaspora in response to the question “who represents the Rohingya.”<sup>111</sup> One person in all the focus group discussions did say that ARSPH had attempted to “reform Shomaz committees” but that this attempt largely failed and that the organically formed shomaz within the Camp blocks were the ones that were active while the ARSPH-formed Shomaz were “inactive.” While respondents did acknowledge there were “representatives,” they were rarely if ever known by name or felt to be connected to the individuals’ sense of community. It could be argued that this was intentional and meant to hide leadership; however, one woman’s remarks suggested otherwise: “I know we have many leaders inside the camps and outside the camps. I don’t know who they are though or their names.” Interviewers also failed to ever find a respondent who reported to be active and aware of civil society groups that was not from an educated background – indeed, some people even remarked that civil society groups were exclusively for “educated Rohingya” and that they were not allowed to join.

One potential reason for this perhaps lies in the fact that several researches, including this consultation, note that Rohingya often don’t have exclusivist approach or understanding of organizational participation. There was also no historical need, because of elections, to frame membership between Rohingya organizations as exclusivist, though no doubt this did happen because of people’s own choices. Munsoor reported that Rohingya in Rakhine often participated in multiple groups in a way that suggest participation in civil society organizations is largely non-exclusive and voluntary; people in his study who participated in multiple groups explained this as simply “changing hats” and arose out of their “volunteer spirit.”<sup>112</sup> Wake similarly identifies Rohingya organizations in diaspora as being “naturally fluid” with “blurry lines.”<sup>113</sup> This was also witnessed in meetings with youth civil society groups whose members would often attend multiple different meetings with us on behalf of different civil society groups on the basis of equal membership and status within these groups. These groups also interestingly lacked notable hierarchies within the group in terms of leadership positions. While this may seem strange, it perhaps is due to the fact that larger politically representative systems and patronage structures that form the basis of many South Asian democracies never existed for the Rohingya. Multiple affiliations of members show ways in which unity across these groups is also being contemporarily maintained despite existing tensions between their leadership. This is possibly the case for the many Rohingya civil society groups that, while competitive, also cooperate and balance themselves through key individuals that participate in multiple groups simultaneously.

Civil society groups are no doubt engaged in the organization of collective action, but it is important to question and better understand how they are connected or disconnected from narratives, social positions, and day-to-day lives of the wider population. Essentially, a key question arose from this work: what exactly do Rohingya mobilize for and on whose behalf - given that many people lacked awareness of the groups and individuals that claimed to be mobilizing them. For many, it simply seemed to be a common sentimentality and connection around shared experiences of displacement and life in the camps as opposed to a sense of

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<sup>111</sup> Olney (2019), p 18

<sup>112</sup> Munsoor (2015), p 213

<sup>113</sup> Wake (2019)

political membership or affiliation with a particular leader. Along this it should also be noted that discussions with educated youth or members of civil society ended quite differently - with the former generally asking questions and starting discussions on their political rights within Myanmar and the latter far more concerned with questions related to relief distribution and access to services. This alone creates a notable difference in the social positions of these different demographics. Furthermore, most people espoused a common understanding of Islamic-based Rohingya koum rooted on conservative values and social structures than the more elite articulation of Rohingya koum described by educated Rohingya participating in civil society.

# CONCLUSION & CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

*"The very notion of the state border or boundary has historically been a driver of ethnogenesis - the production and invention of ethnic groups and minorities."<sup>114</sup>  
~ Horstmann and Wadley*

*"The map of our shomaz has changed; both handani [gusshi] and [malda] shomaz. Everything is destroyed with the change of the map." ~ Imam from Balukhali*

*"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." ~ Antonio Gramsci*

It is somehow too easy to separate the contemporary humanitarian crisis from the longer historical past that continues to shape and reshape Rohingya's experiences of belonging to their communities, ethnicity, and nation. The same historical driver behind Rohingya identity formation continues to shape - and reshape - the formation of contemporary social identities within the displacement, marking both "destruction" and "recreation" of old and new systems of order. The arbitrary division of Majhi-block administrative boundaries and provision of humanitarian aid along those boundaries have largely defined the boundaries of new shomaz units but these units are largely experienced as weak, failing, and inadequate to cope with life in the camps. The "new shomaz" are caught in this interregnum.

This problem coincides with a discussion taking place among Rohingya about their shared similarities; a discussion that is in some ways hampered by the pervasive experience and anxiety of feeling "different" - with different and varied understandings of their pasts and identities. Internationally, the discussion of Rohingya people and their identity has predominantly been framed within political lenses. The "Rohingya" as a people with diverse thoughts and feelings seems to be conspicuously absent within texts, humanitarian practice, and political dialogue. The "Rohingya" that seems to be most commonly represented is a victim of political discrimination and survivor of genocide; Rohingya's collective stories don't seem to differentiate them but often bleed into larger shared narratives of oppression and displacement that fail to amount to coherent articulations of self and belonging. In many ways, humanitarians, journalists, activists and the wider international communities' engagement and desire to find and recognize "authentic leaders" within the Rohingya community have failed to largely understand "Rohingya" as a diverse people existing in what is for them a radically transformed social world that suddenly demands that they have an overarching, singular "leader." Concurrently, Rohingya's own historical value systems frame "strong leadership" in terms of

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<sup>114</sup> Horstmann and Wadley, "Introduction: Centering the Margin in Southeast Asia", p1

“unity” and “united voice” established through local shomaz, but such a thing was never accomplished at this level or scale and notably often accomplished through threat of expulsion. The two pressure are combined have created an unproductive dynamic wherein there is little space for an open discussion and exploration to the question “who are the Rohingya.” As a result, stronger shared notions of the term are struggling to be developed. These contemporary political demands to have organized leadership and clearly articulated identities have largely been thrust upon people before they have had the time, tools and appropriate spaces to develop social structures, cultural values, and organizational systems that would enable them to represent and balance diverse perspectives among themselves without tension, anxiety and conflict. This is clearly reflected in the lack of clarity among Rohingya surrounding larger representative structures that aren’t immediately local and known and in the general anxiety concerning any dissent to an established public opinion. Similar processes of identity formation occurred over decades in contexts where people had rights and access to public discourse, standardized education systems, mass communication, and civil liberties.<sup>115</sup> To suggest that the lack of over-arching “leadership” within the Rohingya displacement camps is a somehow a failure is to perhaps miss an observation that the gradual reimagining of leadership systems under such difficult circumstances, however problematic, is a significant development.

August 2019 marked the second anniversary of the displacement and genocide. One of the ways of referring to the events was “day of killing the koum”<sup>116</sup> - a phrase that is interesting to consider with respect to this consultation. In many ways, the Rohingya and their sense of koum have been strengthened and united by a shared experienced over their other differences, but what needs to be realized is that even though the Rohingya koum survived, many Rohingya’s shomaz and gusshi did not. This is not to say that Rohingya haven’t begun to recreate some of these structures or re-establish social connections, but to better appreciate the intangible losses and new demands placed upon the very social systems that kept them safe during tumultuous historical periods. This consultation has tried to re-establish connections between distant and near histories of the Rohingya in order to better illuminate a contemporary feeling of “floating” that coincides with displacement. This consultation has found that these social structures were historically and contemporarily vital to people’s sense of belonging and safety and that their disruption continues to cause disharmony, trauma and conflict to this day. Hopefully, in better understanding “the Rohingya,” it has become possible to better examine our own actions and how our own efforts contribute or fail to contribute to Rohingya’s own attempts to re-establish social order and belonging.

It is hard to draw linear recommendations related and bound within humanitarian sectors from an open ended and exploratory exercise; however, it is strongly hoped that this consultation will initiate a series of reflections and discussions on necessary changes and future considerations. In particular, this work suggests further exploration of the following series of questions:

- In what ways is humanitarian programming failing to understand and reflect upon internal differences and divisions within the Rohingya? How has the presentation of the “Rohingya” in research and programming generally assumed a homogenous population with similar needs, capacities, and perspectives?
- What are ways in which programming can help Rohingya re-establish their social reputations without continuing or perpetuating harmful social norms and practices? In what ways can

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<sup>115</sup> It should be noted that within the field of ethnicity and nationalism studies the access to modern education systems and mass communications is often presented as a key development enabling the formation of larger imagined ethnic and national communities and identities to develop.

<sup>116</sup> Koum hotom goronor din, “day of killing the Nation/Ethnicity”

community engagement encourage the re-formation of social ties between people within sub-blocks? The feeling of aid dependency seems to be a key obstacle in achieving this.

- What is the role of these social institutions in terms of information dissemination and consultations in camps? In what ways do shomaz committees represent their communities and which voices are conspicuously absent?
- Considering that educated youth form the backbone of many Rohingya volunteers and programming within the camps, what considerations are needed to avoid potential biases that arise from engaging the wider population only through this demographic? How might this consideration affect and change our wider engagement with the Rohingya population?
- How can representative structures better include and engage shomaz committees and existing Rohingya structures within their programming and planning? How does social cohesion and community security programming take into consideration the role of shomaz as arbitrators and mediators of disputes? How have they be capacitated and engaged?
- Women are often conspicuously absent in many of the leadership positions within Rohingya society, which this consultation also fails to explore. How can humanitarians encourage constructive reflection and transformation of gender-inclusive practices and values within the Rohingya communities? How can this work coincide with engagements of Rohingya shomaz? In what way do we need to understand the limited role women potentially play in these structures and create suitable alternatives to ensure equitable aid delivery?
- In what ways can humanitarian actors help re-establish social support systems that helped poorer and more vulnerable members of the community? How can these social values and practices be better incorporated within Community Based Protection Approaches? Does humanitarian programming need to reconsider its understanding of "family" and "community" with respect to the Rohingya?
- What are the cultural similarities between Rohingya communities' social organization and host communities? Is there sufficient overlap and synergies to be capitalized upon in social cohesion programming? Can linkages between shomaz and host community social organizations be used to mitigate and reduce conflict?
- Are there any opportunities that can be provided with Rohingya who wish to re-establish ties and live together with their gusshi if there are larger relocations within and outside the camps? Is this something that is desired? Are Rohingya already facilitating this through existing systems?

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