

Gudar Mia, an eighty-year-old Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh, with smoke-filled lungs, croaks an old Rohingya folk song.¹ The melody is a testament to the perseverance of Mia and his people, under constant threat but never without loyalty to their tradition. Through art, they contend that they are human. In the eyes of the government of Myanmar and much of its population, the Rohingya people deserve eradication. From past atrocities imposed on similarly vulnerable ethnic minorities, an essential truth can be derived and applied to the plight of the Rohingya: that to revel in culture is to be human, and to be recognized as such is monumental towards compelling third-party involvement against unrelenting persecution.

Victims of genocide often seek cultural recognition to preserve that which defines their people. In the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge's 1975 genocide in Cambodia, in which over two million deaths occurred, "sociopolitical organizations-- ranging from national governments to religious revivalists-- frequently [deployed] music, song, and dance to inspire their followers."^{2 3} Subsequently, however, the Khmer Rouge banned such cultural practices and instead promoted arts which celebrated the deaths of critics to the genocide.⁴ The regime stole the means of a vulnerable population to maintain dignity and signal humanity, allowing the genocide to continue with little sympathy from distant nations.

Absent that recognition of humanity, genocide is remarkably easy for fascists to impose. From the Holocaust, for example, one can gather that the perception of a scapegoated minority group as detrimental to the wellbeing of the nation-state can inspire persecution.⁵ In particular, the Nazis cultivated an ideology of biological determinism in Germany which posited that Jews

¹ (Lewis 2019)

² (Bauer, Matthias Giesecke, and Janisch 2017)

³ (Hinton 2002)

⁴ (Hinton 2002)

⁵ (Monroe 1995)

were born to be dangerous.⁶ Similarly, in Myanmar, the media manipulate fears over terrorism to accuse guiltless Rohingya people of conspiracy.⁷ At the heart of genocide is the ignorant refusal to see the most ostracized of society as anything more than monsters.

Aesthetic practices, as essential signals of humanity, are thus key to garnering sympathy for the Rohingya. In Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees paint murals of their old homes and families in expression of their culture and remembrance of their loved ones.⁸ They practice calligraphy, a long-time tradition of the Rohingya, inscribing the tombs of their dead.⁹ They play hawla, traditional wedding songs, on the harmonium and violin.¹⁰ But, their music falls on deaf ears; as loud as they play, the international community does not want to hear.

Though the United Nations have met time and time again to condemn the act of genocide, those nations with the means to intervene see little motivation to do so.¹¹ But when the art of the Rohingya people becomes seen and heard throughout the world, nations bound to the will of their people must heed calls to action. Those with greater awareness of the suffering of the Rohingya people, then, must amplify the music of those refugees so that their humanity can be recognized and defended. And what could be more human than to sing, paint, and express oneself in the constant struggle to stay alive?

⁶ (Lerner et al. 1992)

⁷ (Bhattacharjee 2014)

⁸ (Brown 2021)

⁹ (Ali 2020)

¹⁰ (Lewis 2019)

¹¹ (Karazsia 2019)

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