

## 8 Sounding Resilience and Resistance

Tarana Songs of Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia

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### Abstract

The Rohingya ethnic minority from the Rakhine state of Myanmar has been forced to become a stateless community currently living in some countries in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. They are regarded as a persecuted community that has encountered structural inequality and systematic violence in Myanmar for decades due to their religious and ethnic identity. The painful experiences and collective memories remain alive in their diasporic life in the form of verbal arts, poems, and songs (*tarana*). Rohingyas in Malaysia often take refuge in the *taranas* for mental peace, for the construction of a political identity, and to envision a better future.

**Keywords:** Rohingya, forced migration, diaspora, survival strategies, Malaysia

Malaysia is hosting a significant proportion of the Rohingya population. Of the total 177,800 refugees and asylum seekers registered with the UNHCR Malaysia 101,280 are Rohingyas from Myanmar (April 2020). Additionally, an estimated 30,000–40,000 Rohingyas live undocumented. However, since Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, there is no official framework to deal with the refugees in Malaysia. Unlike many other countries, Malaysia does not confine the refugees into camp settlements; it rather allows them to remain among the local population in urban and rural settings. This policy allows the refugees to remain scattered and invisible.

Among the refugee groups, the Rohingyas are arguably the most vulnerable, marginalized, and underprivileged. This essay suggests that religious sounds and particularly a traditional genre of songs called *taranas* represent a strategic way to cope with their life in exile in Malaysia. While the existing

literature on the Rohingya mostly focuses on Myanmar and Bangladesh (e.g., Ahmed 2010; Chaudhury & Samaddar 2018), the Rohingya's exile life in Malaysia is an under-explored area. A few valuable studies have been conducted from the perspectives of mental health and psychology (e.g., Low et al. 2018; Tay et al. 2019) but these are mostly on Myanmar refugees in general, therefore they do not add to our understanding of how Rohingya refugees employ strategies of resilience and resistance drawing upon sonic practices from their cultural and religious traditions. Other works on Rohingya refugees are overly concerned with national security, children's education, and human rights issues (Letchamanan 2013; Nadarajan 2018). The cultural aspects that shape the different ways refugees relate to the notion of home and identity have been largely ignored. This chapter sheds light on the resilience and resistance of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia by analyzing songs composed and performed by the refugees in their displaced lives. We argue that these sonic and religious practices help displaced people to maintain their dignity and identity against all odds.

## Methodology

Data for this socio-ethnographic research come from fieldwork conducted in Malaysia (March 2019–June 2020) as part of a larger study on Rohingya journeys of violence and resilience.<sup>14</sup> This field study was conducted in four different states—Selangor, Kedah, Perlis, and Penang. We conducted a total of 60 in-depth interviews and several group discussions with the refugee population to record their narratives and oral histories in Malaysia (Figures 8.1 and 8.2).

The particular type of field data that this research is built upon is related to the refugees' cultural and religious life. This is characterized by music, symbols, and ritual activity. These data go beyond logocentric and ocularcentric interviews and are enormously helpful to understand the refugees' strategies of adaptation and resilience in the Malaysian context. While refugee studies research tends to underestimate cultural, religious, and performance traditions, in the course of our research we realized more and more that understanding these 'non-conventional' aspects in the study of refugee life was extremely important.

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Figure 8.1 Interview with a Rohingya refugee at a tea shop in Kedah, in 2019. He works as a cleaner at the local wet market. In this photo, he is showing us his refugee card. Source: Kazi Fahmida Farzana's personal collection.

As this community maintains a strong oral tradition, their history is kept alive in their common social memory expressed through various aesthetic means such as poems and songs known as *tarana*. These constitute the main focus of this essay. *Taranas* are amateur compositions, often composed orally and transmitted, as well as preserved, through oral tradition. Many of the composers might be illiterate but their compositions are later recorded in written form or, more recently, in electronic devices. Additionally, even though *taranas* are basically patriotic songs—nostalgic songs about a lost homeland—these are also inspired by religious sentiments and some are directly based on religious beliefs and themes.

We applied three methods in collecting the aforementioned data. Firstly, we collected copies of written available *taranas*; secondly, we listened to some *taranas* verbatim and transcribed the texts; and thirdly, we collected some that were pre-recorded by the community in audiovisual devices such as mobile phones. We translated some of those *taranas* into English but ensured accuracy through follow-up discussions with the community members. With the help of informed participants, we further discussed the meaning of the songs and their contextual explanations. Furthermore, while collecting these songs we also paid keen attention to the participants' body language, facial expression,



Figure 8.2 Focus group discussion with Rohingya women at a community-based organization in Kuala Lumpur in 2019. *Source:* Kazi Fahmida Farzana's personal collection.

long sighs and silences as expressions of their inner feelings. We argue that these aesthetic formations constitute a valuable archive of a marginalized group's experiences in the form of sonic productions of social resistance.

### The context of exiled Rohingya in Malaysia

The Rohingya came to Malaysia in waves, with the highest number of arrivals in the 1980s, 1990–1994, 2000–2004, 2012–2015, and 2017. According to the narratives of the refugees, they arrived in Malaysia either by boat or via land routes (Map 1). When they took their desperate sea journey by rickety boats, they were unsure of their destination, sometimes ending up in neighboring Bangladesh and other times on the shores of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. They were relatively unknown to Malaysian society due to the invisibility imposed on them by the authorities until recently, when the Southeast Asian “boat people crisis”<sup>15</sup> and the discovery of 139 mass graves of Rohingya victims in 28 suspected human-trafficking camps on the Malaysia-Thailand border were reported in 2015 (Maier-Knapp, 2017).

15 The “boat people crisis” traditionally referred to the Vietnamese refugees who took to the sea to find refuge in other Southeast Asian countries. However, the term also was used for the Rohingya refugees at least since 2015 when thousands of them were found stranded at sea in Southeast Asia after being abandoned by smugglers.

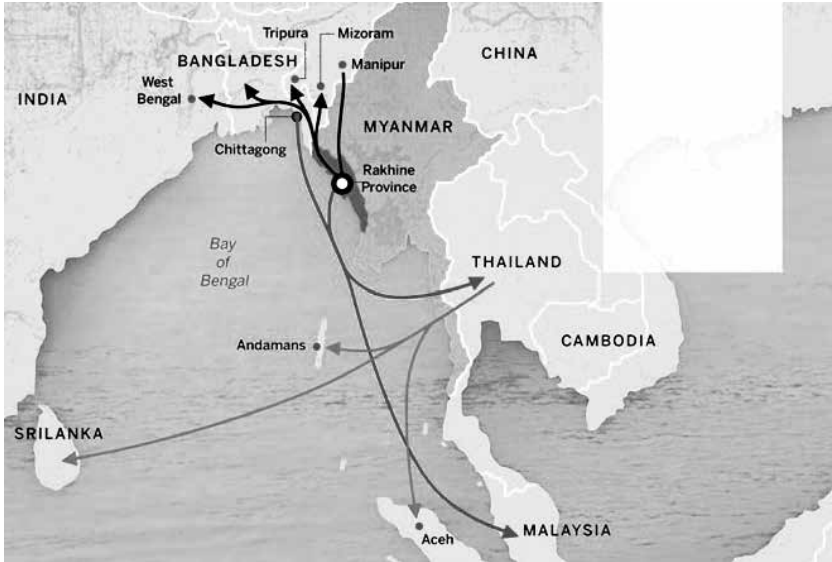


Figure 8.3 Rohingya's Forced Migration: Sea Routes to Malaysia. *Source:* adapted from [kathakata.com/the-rohingya-in-regional-politics](http://kathakata.com/the-rohingya-in-regional-politics). (Accessed February 5, 2021)

While the majority of Rohingyas obtain UNHCR cards, there are an estimated 30,000-40,000 Rohingyas who carry no official documentation. However, with or without the UNHCR cards, most of the refugees are scattered all over Malaysia, especially on the outskirts of the capital and other main cities, working in the cleaning and construction sectors. Being non-recognized by the states as refugees, they are effectively deprived of any social, economic, health, or educational benefits from the Malaysian government. Such vulnerabilities are further compounded by some unscrupulous and corrupt law-enforcing agents and exploitative rent-seeking practices that impose extra burdens on the Rohingyas. Add to that the fact that they are considered illegal migrants rather than refugees; while the government is highly tolerant to them on humanitarian grounds based on compassion towards fellow Muslims (Hoffstaedter, 2017), this does not ensure their social survival or security, nor does it provide any lasting future prospects in Malaysia.

In face of such economic difficulties and other livelihood challenges, the refugees turn to cultural activities such as singing and composing traditional songs (*tarana*), while becoming more devotional in their religious life to develop a closer spiritual relationship with God in the hopes of attaining mental solace. These aesthetic formations, articulated through the religious vocabulary of Islam, constitute sonic productions that reinforce a sense of identity and belonging while sounding social resistance.

## *Tarana* and religious practices: Tools for resilience and resistance

As a displaced community, the Rohingyas maintain everyday religious practices that signal attachment to various religious sounds. These sounds include paying attention to the call for prayer or *azan*, recitation of the Quran and heeding its meaning, and listening to Islamic sermons known as *waj/waz* from social media and internet sources.<sup>16</sup> The Rohingyas follow such rituals as the profession of faith (*shahada*), prayer (*salat*), and fasting (*sawm*). Although some of them need to work several jobs at different times of the day, whenever they have time, our respondents reported that they try not to miss their five daily prayers. They also make sure to attend the Friday noon prayer (*jummah*) and read the Quran.

As expressed by a Rohingya refugee named Muhammad Siddik, 52: “When I recite Quran, particularly a chapter like Al-Alaq, I find inner peace. I know that one day we [the Rohingya] will get justice.” The chapter Al-Alaq in the Quran, particularly verses 9-15, reads, “Did you see the tyrant preventing my servant from praying? ... Doesn’t he know that I am watching? If he doesn’t stop, he will be punished.” Here, by “tyrant” the text refers to Abu Jahal, one of the leaders of Mecca who led the persecution of the early Muslims. The recitation of the Quran serves to soothe the hearts of the refugees as they put their trust in a divine higher power that is just and merciful; it works for them as “a source of emotional, spiritual and socio-political empowerment” (El-Aswad, 2010, 59).

Attachment to God plays an important role in Rohingya refugees’ cultural life as part of their coping strategies in Malaysia. Being able to pray, going to the mosque or reciting the Quran, activities that they could not do freely in their country of origin, provides moral strength, also in the form of informal resistance to oppression and injustice, strengthening resilience and the trust that divine justice will be ultimately provided. This perspective is important as existing studies of Rohingya refugees have largely overlooked religious practices as tools of identity-making and social empowerment.

The spiritual life of the Rohingyas is also reflected in their production of songs called *taranas*. *Taranas* can be understood as sounds of displacement that share memories of the past and maintain such memories in their oral tradition to keep their history alive in the present. They might exchange songs when they occasionally gather in their *rumah kecil*—a small house, shared among fellow Rohingya to reduce living costs (those who are factory

16 A number of Rohingya Waz are available on the YouTube. The most popular one appears to be the one by Mv Masood (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNvj7QNqOu4>).

workers, mostly male and single, often live with other Rohingya sharing the small space provided at the factory site). While sharing their feelings they might start to sing aloud a *tarana* that connects them as a community. This act of singing reflects their memories of the past, creates bonds with their fellow refugees, and makes sense of the present.<sup>17</sup> The themes of the *taranas* often revolve around devotion to religion, claiming belonging and territorial authority. Although these *taranas* are not composed in order to overtly subvert the power of the authorities, if we pay attention to such texts, it is not difficult to understand that they represent the voice of the oppressed, expressing their resistance. The songs can be understood as inducing refugees/listeners to take control of their spiritual life through developing a stronger spiritual and emotional relationship with God as an ultimate shelter in life.

When asked, “Why do you compose a *tarana*?” Nizamuddin, 35, shop-keeper and single father of two from the Langkawi Island of Kedah, stated: “I compose a *tarana* based on what I see, what I have seen and of course I hope it is inspirational [...] *Tarana* liberates me. When I compose a *tarana*, all those nights of terror and fear in Borma [Myanmar] I am leaving behind when I compose my *tarana*.”

| Arkani original  | English translation  |
|--|--|
| <b><i>Korbollar Moidan</i></b>   | <b><i>The Battlefield of Karbala</i></b>   |
| Arkan re banai feler Korbollar Moidan,<br>Hajar hajar shohid hoi jai Rohingya Musolman.<br>Nijer Jaigot nijere gulam banay shorkare,<br>Gujuri gujri kande Rohingya Musolman.<br>Deshor manush bideshot jai ghorer ayashi,<br>Arkan deshot manush marar Aung Sun Suu<br>kyi.<br>Arkan re banai feler Korbollar Moidan,<br>Hajar hajar shohid hoi jai Rohingya Musolman.<br>Hare jaiyum hone aara Rohingya Musolman,<br>Gujri gujri kande Rohingya bukot loy Quran. | Arkan has turned into the battlefield of<br>Karbala<br>Thousands of Rohingya Muslim are martyred.<br>Enslaved in their own country<br>Thousands of Rohingya Muslims wail.<br>People leave their own country for a shelter<br>Aung Sun Suu Kyi is killing people in Arkan.<br>Arkan is turning into the battlefield of Karbala<br>Thousands of Rohingya Muslim are martyred.<br>Where shall we, the Rohingya Muslims go?<br>They wail holding the holy Quran on their<br>chest. |

The above song was composed by Nizamuddin. The context of this song is Arakan, or the Rakhine state in Myanmar. In this song, he is comparing the condition of Arakan with the famous battlefield of Karbala in Iraq,

17 These activities have been restricted at factory sites during the COVID-19 pandemic as restrictions on movement and socialization had been implemented.

where Imam Husayn was brutally killed in 680 CE (10 Muharram 61 AH of the Islamic calendar). Many of his relatives and companions were killed in this battle and the surviving family members were taken as prisoners. Nizamuddin refers to Karbala to indicate Husayn's suffering and death as a symbol of sacrifice in the struggle for right against wrong, and for justice and truth against injustice and falsehood. By comparing the situation in Arakan with the battlefield of Karbala he provides a sense of heroism for those who died in Arakan, framing them as martyrs.

Moreover, the song articulated resentment against the Myanmar authorities and leadership that allowed and participated in such heinous killing, challenging the oppressors whom they cannot confront directly. The last portion of the song indicates the inability to find a safe place to live in their own country, and that is why they had to spend a life crying in a foreign land "keeping the holy Quran on their chest." In songs like this *tarana*, drawing upon religious imaginaries and vocabularies, this refugee finds comfort and relief.

The next *tarana* was composed by Shumaila Akhtar, 37, resettled in Kuala Lumpur. Her family is better off than other Rohingyas in the community as she and her husband both are currently working in informal sectors. They can afford to send their seven-year-old son to the nearest private elementary school. This song was shared with the researchers on a day when Shumaila had a day off from her work. We met her at her aunt's house where she and some of her relatives were invited for lunch. Shumaila started singing this *tarana*, then her relatives slowly joined her in chorus.<sup>o</sup>

| <i>Julum</i>  | <i>Persecution</i>   |
|---|--|
| Arar Arkan deshor opor shorkare julum gorer<br>Rohingya hon bichar noghorer!                        | The government is inflicting pain on the people of Arakan  |
| Mojid madrasor pore dorjad tala mare, ja<br>dehile choker pani jore re...Allah                      | The Rohingya people do not get any justice!<br>They seal off all mosques and madrasahs   |
| Arar Arkan deshor opor shorkare julum gorer<br>Rohingya hon bichar noghorer!                        | My tears keep rolling when I see these...<br>O Allah, the government is inflicting pain on the people of Arakan  |
| Porton no dey elem shikkha,<br>Gorot no dey hater bidda,<br>Bepsha gorle rasta gate, hai pele hari. | The Rohingya people do not get any justice!<br>They don't allow us the light of education,   |
| No pay kono dushi, kola hoi hoi mare ghushi<br>re<br>Dhukkho hare bujaitam Allah...                 | We can't learn livelihood skills at home,<br>If we run roadside businesses, they beat us even without any fault  |
| Arar Arkan deshor opor shorkare julum<br>gorer, Rohingya hon bichar noghorer!                       | O Allah, who will understand our torments...<br>The government is inflicting pain on the people of Arakan, The Rohingya people do not get any justice! |



It is not a *tarana* that they themselves composed but they mentioned that they remember the lyrics as it reflects their experiences. The community depends heavily on social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube to share and circulate their *taranas* that connect the displaced groups of Rohingya.<sup>18</sup>

This *tarana* has highlighted different forms of injustice and persecution (*julum/zulm*) in Myanmar in the form of inflicting violence and hurting religious feelings by closing down mosques and madrasahs, depriving of education and the right to work. It ends with a line that says “the Rohingya people do not get any justice.” Such indicators of discrimination also refer to their powerlessness and subordinate position in society. Furthermore, refugees often defined their life in Myanmar as “prison” and mentioned various forms of religious persecution. They were not allowed to perform the ritual prayer (*namaz*), call for prayer (*azan*), or display religious symbols on their bodies. Another Rohingya in this group discussion, Abu Ahmed, 45, a religious teacher to young Rohingya children, said: “Religious freedom was one of the reasons why I chose Malaysia as opposed to Thailand as my destination. Here, at least I can hear *azan* and go to the mosque without fear.” Other females from this group also appreciated the religious freedom that they enjoy in Malaysia. Shumaila’s aunt said: “If I die here [in Malaysia], at least I will get a proper *janazah* [Muslim funeral prayer] before entering the grave.” This song and its context tell us how Rohingya refugees establish connections through sound between people, places, and identities.

## Sounds and memories of displacement

The next two *taranas* were shared by Hashimullah, 50, a day laborer and caretaker for a local *surau* (a prayer room)<sup>19</sup> in Sintok, Kedah. When the *imam* (a person who leads prayer) of the *surau* is not available, Hashimullah calls the *azan* himself, with a beautiful, passionate voice. The researchers met him several times on different occasions. We noticed that his recitation of the Quran is truly melodious and it creates a spiritually elated calm atmosphere. Probably that is why the locals accepted him as a caretaker for

18 Some links of online platforms: YouTube, “Rohingya Vision” (also known as RVision); YouTube, “Arakane Rohingya Muslims,” Facebook, “The Arakan Times,” website “The Arakan Times” ([www.arakantimes.org](http://www.arakantimes.org)).

19 *Surau*, a prayer room for Muslims, is a very small version of a mosque in the local community where assembly for worship, religious instruction, and festive prayers takes place. It is common in the region of Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia.

the *surau*. Moreover, he does not demand any payment for his job, and he is very grateful to the Malaysian society for accepting and providing him refuge. It has been more than a decade since Hashimullah came to Malaysia. He earns very little as a day laborer, as work is not available every day, and he depends on the mercy and kindness of the local community.

Hashimullah lives alone in Malaysia. Some of his family members are refugees in Bangladesh, and others are at home, in Myanmar. In all these years of exile life, he never had a chance to visit those in Bangladesh or go back to his family in Myanmar. Now at the age of 50, the loneliness and the fear of death sometimes paralyze him, and he wants to return to his family, although he knows that this will probably never be possible.

From this anguish, he composes *taranas* that he shares with his community on different occasions. While singing these songs for the researchers, the intensity of his facial expressions and emotional involvement was incredible. He was crying throughout the time of his singing. When asked how he felt while singing the song, Hashimullah wiped his tears and said:

When I sing I embrace the *tarana*. Momentarily, I did not exist here. I felt the wind in my country as if I am breathing the air again. Every time I close my eyes, the image of my homeland, my village, my relatives still haunt me.



#### Audio sample 8.1

A Rohingya song by Hashimullah, Kedah, Malaysia, 2019.  
Source: recording by the author.

| <b><i>Azadi</i></b>  | <b><i>Freedom</i></b>   |
|--|---|
| Desh chari bidesh ailam, boro beshi vul korlam,<br>Ma bap vai bon charidi, ailam bideshe choli<br>Ghor bari fele di jalai, moghe maredde lorai<br>Hode jaile payum shanti,<br>O Allah, jodi hoino pari | Came abroad leaving the country, made a big mistake<br>We left for a foreign land, leaving behind our parents and siblings<br>(Because) They burnt our houses (that) we built with sweat and love<br>They beat us, killed our kiths and kins. |
| O Allah, jodi korile raham, kori diba azadi<br>Desh chari bidesh ailam, boro beshi vul korlam.   | O Allah, I wish I knew where is a little peace for me   |

O Allah, tui amare desh milaide,  
Ase beggun tor kase, O Allah hat tui  
maiggum tui bade,  
Ara hoilam tor goittor, arar to nai bari ghor.  
Roilam re deshe bideshe, porer ghorer  
haishe haishe,

Jodi porer ghorer haishetton nia laile,  
Allah iman poyda kori de,  
Allah iman poyda kori de.

O Allah, would you be kind and grant us  
freedom  
Came abroad leaving the country, made a  
big mistake

O Allah, give us our country back  
You are the owner of all sovereignty, the  
lord of absolute ruling power  
We are your servants, we lost our shelters  
We live at the mercy of others

If we are to die in other people's country  
O Allah, let *iman* grow in my heart  
O Allah, let *iman* grow in my heart

The song indicates a passionate belonging to the homeland that was built “with sweat and love.” It provides the reasons why they had to leave their home and now have to “die in other people’s country” where they encounter multiple challenges and marginalization. This is also indicative of the host country that remains as a “foreign land” to the refugees despite living there for many years. Another important dimension of this song is that it sounds almost like a prayer as Hashimullah, the singer, is making an emotional and sincere request to God (“O Allah, give us our country back”) who he believes has the ultimate power, and asks for faith (*iman*) before embracing death. Expressing loss and grief through religious sounds, the song helps to articulate resistance through the vocabulary of devotion. It allows the singer to complain about injustice, remember a traumatic past, and invoke divine help for a better future.

The song *My Homeland* highlights how major Muslim festivals such as Eid-al-Fitr and Eid-al-Adha do not feel like a celebration for Hashimullah anymore in his exile life. Through this *tarana*, he mourns for the loss of his homeland where his heart belongs.

### ***Nijor Desh***

Eid kurban jaygo khushi chara,  
kobe deikkhum puji aindo chiara  
Eid kurban jaygo khushi chara,  
nijer deshot jai na pari ara.

Eid er kotha mone tulle,  
jaygo dui cokher pani.  
Hode deikkhum pajjar chiara,  
nijer deshot jai na pari ara.

### ***My Homeland***

The Eid of Sacrifice goes by without  
celebration,  
when will we see our joyous faces?  
The Eid of Sacrifice goes by without  
celebration,  
because we can't go to our own country.

My tears flow down when I think of Eid  
I do not know when I can see the faces of  
my family  
(As) I can't go to my homeland...

|  |   |
|--|---|
| kotte deikkhum dekhum desher chiara,         | How will I see my homeland?                 |
| kotte dekhum puji aindo chiara, nijer deshot | How will I see the faces of my darling wife |
| jai na pari ara.                             | and kids?                                   |
|  | (As) I can't go to my homeland...           |

The remoteness of “home” caused sharp pain as the memory of home feels so alive and near, and so distant and unreachable at the same time. This separation intensifies during the religious festivals of Eid, a time when friends and relatives gather to celebrate. By expressing the transient and uncertain status of the refugee stuck in between memories of home and forced displacement to a different land, the song counters both Myanmar’s official version of “stateless” identity for the Rohingya and Malaysia’s official version of “illegal Burmese immigrant” identity for the refugees.

Relying upon religious sounds, Rohingya refugees in Malaysia maintain an approach to life that helps them to adjust to the current circumstances. This resilient people identify their roots in Myanmar (their country of origin), while recognizing their marginalized situation in Malaysia. Their approach to life has been nurtured with patience and tolerance that comes from their spiritual attachment to God. Islamic piety, largely transmitted and lived through sonic practices, ultimately helps them to find calm and comfort, offering an ethical model in terms of attitude and action.

Some expressed their sense of guilt for breaking the law by coming to the shores of Malaysia without official permission. Others who participated in a group discussion in Kuala Lumpur said:

When a new Rohingya comes and joins our community, we remind him that this is a foreign land, we must prepare for the reality that waits for us, we must behave well when facing the police, do not run, be humble, and be submissive. We often discuss and remind each other—how to submit, how to not resist when confronted by authorities—while we are in Malaysia. Yet misfortune never leaves us alone.

Devotion and submission to Allah, underlying practices of listening, composing, reciting, and singing, are not simply a spiritual aspect of refugee life, but also provide the pulse of their resilience. The constant remembrance of God in the form of listening, praying, and singing sustains them. The songs or *taranas*, constituting a verbal and sonic form of remembrance, are vitally important as they open up a door to communicate with God, not only to express devotion, but also to advocate rights, addressing claims and complaints. Songs allow the refugees to indirectly resist those authorities, whom they cannot confront. Through songs, imposed identities

are questioned—the categories of “stateless”, “illegal immigrants”, and “refugees”—while multiple marginalities are interrogated, in the form of complaints addressed to God. *Taranas* help to ventilate frustration and release pain and grief, while building a relationship with Allah and with the community of fellow refugee singers/listeners. The feeling that they are not alone in this journey of life empowers them at the spiritual level and helps them to find hope within hopelessness and despair. *Taranas* are sounding instruments of resilience and resistance, providing meaning and hope even when life appears “subhuman” (Uddin 2020).

## Conclusion

Refugee life is always inherently painful, full of despair and uncertainty. Even though refugee status may open up new opportunities in new lands, it is highly circumstantial; if displacement from home is not recognized as refugeehood in the first place, then opportunities shrink. It is in such situations that Rohingya refugees take shelter in cultural and religious practices to maintain their identity and to experience relief from distress and helplessness.

Rohingya refugees are living embodiments of a painful history of Myanmar who are trying their best to live a meaningful and dignified life within adversity and marginalization in Malaysia. While they struggle for survival they maintain an eager desire to return to their place of origin. Adding to previous studies on religion and displacement (AbdAleati et al. 2016; Ai et al. 2003; McLellan 2015; Shaw 2019), this contribution focused on religious sounds and *tarana* songs to understand how the Rohingyas in Malaysia draw on cultural and religious traditions as sources of identity, inspiration, and comfort. Careful examination of *taranas* revealed that they play a significant role in their displaced lives. This oral transmission of emotionally charged songs constitutes an effective means of expressing resistance in a situation in which they cannot directly confront their oppressors. While music and performance traditions are often understudied aspects of refugees’ lives, *taranas* emerge as precious resources for the marginalized community.

Religious engagement in terms of sounding practices not only conveys the refugees’ profound devotional feelings but also functions as a non-conventional form of resistance towards the authorities that destroyed their way of life, forcing them to migrate. Such religious attachment offers ethical models of self-making and empowers them to resist adversity and shape their vision for a better future. Religious songs help to give voice to the refugees’ sense of expecting divine justice and seeking help. Studies on religion and migration

often focus on radicalization and religion has often been associated by many as a source of violence for the refugees or oppressed minorities (Murphy 2015; Mavelli and Wilson 2016; Wike et al. 2016; Antúnez 2019). However, in the case of the Rohingya refugees, seeking a deeper attachment to religion is perceived as a source of peace and relief, serving to build resilience and resistance through the language and sounds of Islamic practices. It can be argued that the persecuted Rohingya community finds refuge in religious sounds and employs the sonic instruments of Islamic piety to maintain cultural identity, construct the ethical self, and articulate aspirations for social justice.

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