

An Anthropological Perspective on Issues in Myanmar and Sri Lanka: *Ethnic Cleansing and Genocide of Rohingya*



Julie A. Moore

The College at Brockport, State University of New York

Keywords: Ethnic Cleansing, Genocide, Human Rights, Anthropology

Abstract

Myanmar and Sri Lanka are both countries with strong histories of Buddhism engrained in their political systems. Conflicts between Buddhist nationalist groups and Rohingya have led to ethnic cleansing and genocide. Buddhist nationalist groups view Islam as a threat to their nation. This is rooted in a cosmological belief that Buddhism will be wiped out in the “dark ages.” In both countries there are risk factors preceding genocide, preventative action that could have been taken, and appropriate ways to approach a post-genocidal country. Risk factors including social exclusion, economic expropriation, and state sponsored violence cause social fragmentation and democratic backsliding. The UN conducted a fact-finding mission in September of 2018 that determined the conflict in Myanmar met the criteria of genocide. This paper explores risk factors in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, then follows up with possible preventative action and appropriate responses in the wake of genocide.

Genocide is the most severe human rights abuse. Any other human rights violation committed is done so before genocide. It is the aggregate of all human rights abuses. Dr. James Waller of Keene State College defines risk factors of deeply divided societies that can result in genocide. These risk factors include classification and dehumanization, economic expropriation, state sponsored violence, and forced concentration. The human rights abuses in Sri Lanka and Myanmar clearly fit into these risk factors for a deeply divided society. Post-genocidal societies can take appropriate actions to begin the healing process. By understanding the oppression of Rohingya, we can see the culmination of ethnic conflict that led to genocide in Myanmar and the risk factors posed in Sri Lanka.

Mass atrocity is an umbrella term covering genocide, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. It is imperative to understand what each of these terms mean so that each of them can be identified and prevented (Straus 30). In 1944 Raphael Lemkin coined the term genocide. Genocide is derived from the Greek word “geno-” meaning race or tribe and the Latin word “-cide” meaning killing. Lemkin defines genocide as, “a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves” (Waller 14). The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines crimes against humanity (CAH) as anything “committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population” (Straus 36). The difference between genocide and CAH is that CAH are aimed at civilians and not a particular group of people like genocide. The motive of ethnic cleansing is to push a group out of a nation-state. The difference between genocide and ethnic cleansing is that the motive of ethnic cleansing is not annihilation but removal. Genocide cannot be compared to the crime of murder. The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was part of the world’s response to the horrible atrocity that was the Holocaust (Donnelly 183). Raphael Lemkin said, “Sovereignty cannot be conceived as the right to kill millions of innocent people” (Waller 6). Genocide is a crime which people are convicted of in tribunals and the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Rohingya Origins, Identity, and Citizenship

Rohingya people can be traced back to precolonial times, living in Arakan with the Arakanese. What was the independent kingdom of Arakan is the Rakhine state of Myanmar today. The Rohingya lived there peacefully until Myanmar was colonized by the British in 1825. Rohingya were further persecuted when they pledged allegiance to the British during the Second World War, and the Arakanese pledged allegiance to the Japanese. When the Japanese had control of Myanmar, 100,000 Rohingya were killed and 50,000 were forced to leave their homes and flee for Bangladesh. Burma declared independence in 1948, but Rohingya's persecution did not stop. In 1978, 250,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar at the hands of military violence aimed at removing all illegally residing people. Many eventually returned through a repatriation agreement. In 1982 the new Citizenship Law excluded any non-indigenous race from claiming citizenship in Myanmar (Milton et al. 942). For Rohingya to apply for citizenship, they must have physical documentation of residing in Myanmar before January 1948. This is not obtainable for the vast majority of Rohingya, leaving 800,000 people stateless (Burmese). For Rohingya this exclusionary law is a human rights abuse. Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has a right to a nationality" (Burmese).

The xenophobia in Myanmar and Sri Lanka is rooted in the marriage of religion and nationalism. In Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Buddhism is the hegemonic comprehensive doctrine. Violent acts carried out against Muslims are rooted in the idea that Buddhism is under threat. Nationalism is aimed at protecting Buddhist culture. The term "cosmological imaginary" is a common belief in cosmic and divine laws. It is these cosmological imaginaries that marry religion and nationalism in order to protect Buddhist values. The nationalist ideals in Myanmar and Sri Lanka aim at protecting the traditional cosmological imaginary to protect their "shared sense of legitimacy" (Gravers 5).

Nationalism and Xenophobia

The xenophobic worldview of Buddhists in Sri Lanka is also appropriated by their cosmological belief of being challenged by outside forces. They believe

Islam not only challenges their morality and doctrine, but the integrity of their nation (Jayasekera 111). The ancient sacred text *The Mahavamsa* traces Buddhists lineage in Sri Lanka to 543 BC, when King Vitaya ruled. Religion in Sri Lanka is deeply rooted in nationalism. We can see examples of the cosmological imaginary in Sri Lanka legitimizing riots and acts of violence against the Rohingya population. It is also important to note that not everybody who believes in Buddhism as a doctrine uses it to legitimize violence against people who identify with another religion.

In Myanmar, there is a power struggle between two parties. Both parties use Buddhism to legitimize their actions. Both parties also see Islam as a threat to Buddhism. This comes from the cosmological belief that Buddhism will be oppressed and wiped out in the “dark ages.” On one side there is the de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. The National League for Democracy believes Buddhism is translated into politics as democratic ruling, protecting equality and promoting compassion. The other side is represented by the army, the Union Solidarity Development Party, and nationalist monks. Their version of Buddhism is an aggressive nationalism. They believe Buddhism is not only part of nationalism but at the center of it and not compatible with western democracy (Gravers 3).

Risk Factors Posed Against Rohingya

Religious discrimination and persecution have led to genocide in Myanmar. In the 1930s a Burmese movement rose called “Master Race We Are, We Burmans.” They explicitly called their Muslim neighbors “enemy number one” (Gravers 8). The National League for Democracy led riots in 1993, 1997, and 2003 against Muslims. In addition to the persecution of Muslims, monks who stood against the riots were beaten and jailed by the military. This ethnic conflict culminated in mass killings and gang rapes of Rohingya by the military.

In propaganda and riots in Myanmar, hate speech is prominent and drives social divisions. A common theme is Buddhists accusing Muslim men of abusing and raping Buddhist women. One example is a Buddhist woman who was paid to make a false claim that two Muslim men raped her. The Myanmar 969 is a

Buddhist movement that uses hate speech and violent acts to dehumanize Muslims and create social division (Waller 182).

In Sri Lanka the group Budo Bela Sena is responsible for riots against Muslims. When their leader was questioned, he said, “We are not terrorists and it is the sole right of the Sinhalese Buddhists to protect Sri Lanka from all other forces” (Gravers 16). Monks there have attacked mosques, they speak out against interfaith marriages and even loot Muslim-owned stores during riots.

A deeply divided society’s risk factors for genocide include: classification and dehumanization, social exclusion, legal attacks on human rights, economic expropriation, state sponsored violence, mass expulsion, forced concentration and finally genocide. A deeply divided society has a centrality of social identity that is defined by social hierarchy, faith, language or race. There is also polarization of social identity that manifests in a history of violence, political division, differences in quality of life, communities of fear and isolation and a majority vs. minority conflict. When these risk factors are demonstrated, what follows is social fragmentation and democratic backsliding. Democratic backsliding is the gradual disintegration of democracy. Perpetrators divide groups into “us” and “them.” We can see examples of all these risk factors in Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Waller 150-153). There is social fragmentation and exclusion on the basis of race.

In the Rakhine state of Myanmar, Buddhists are oppressing Rohingya Muslims. Myanmar is a perpetrator of numerous human rights abuses, some of which are considered risk factors. The regime blocked aid after a cyclone hit in May of 2008, bringing a death toll of 134,000 (“Myanmar”). Land confiscation has increased in recent years, which is an example of economic expropriation. There was also state-sponsored violence, as activists were jailed or sentenced to hard labor. The United Nations has described these violent acts as organized.

Since 2011, land confiscation has grown in Myanmar. The government allows land confiscation from its own citizens for commercial, military and infrastructure development. Altsean-Burma, an organization promoting human rights in Southeast Asia, said, “Despite claims that these efforts are aimed at

poverty deduction, multiple investigations provide evidence that such projects decrease people's standard of living through forced displacement, involve serious human rights abuses, enrich a military-crony class, and trigger conflict" ("Land Confiscation"). Land confiscation in Myanmar shows a deeply divided society and polarization of social identity, both of which are predecessors to genocide. Hundreds of thousands have been displaced. This act of economic expropriation drastically reduces their quality of life. Protesters are met with state sponsored violence through excessive use of force, and in some cases fatal force. Citizens who resisted were jailed or sentenced to hard labor.

In September of 2018, the UN published the results of a fact-finding mission in Myanmar. They determined that organized physical acts of violence were committed against the Rohingya. These physical acts include, "killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, and imposing measures to prevent births within the group" (UN 356). This fact-finding mission determined that genocide had indeed occurred in Myanmar. Article II of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, also known as the Genocide Convention, defines genocide as "(a) killing members of the group, (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, or (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" (Waller 21-22). The acts committed against Rohingya mirror the acts of genocide defined by the Genocide Convention.

In cases where we see risk factors of genocide it is the international community's Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Interfering in a country's sovereignty is something only to be done under extreme circumstances, such as genocide. In 2001, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) created the Responsibility to Protect in response to the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica (Waller 114). R2P was a transition for nation-states not only to protect people within their own territory, but people in

any territory. Sovereignty is now not seen as a right but a conditional privilege.

Responsibility to Take Preventative Action

There are upstream, midstream and downstream preventative strategies for genocide. Upstream preventative strategies are taken before violence occurs in order to maintain peace. Upstream preventative strategies are as follows: identity inclusiveness, resource development and distribution, equal access to basic necessities, involvement of women in corrective measures and the presence of impartial parties such as media, police and judiciary. Relief efforts during mass violence are considered midstream. Midstream preventative action involves cooperative and coercive tools for political, economic, legal and military change. For example, a cooperative economic strategy would be lifting sanctions whereas a coercive strategy would be trade embargoes. When upstream and midstream strategies do not work, downstream strategies aim to heal post-genocidal countries and prevent genocide from happening again. Downstream actions include attempt to rebuild a country after genocide and bringing the culprits of the crime to justice (Waller 179-180, 227-228, 282).

In the Wake of Genocide

Bringing perpetrators to justice is a way to help heal broken societies after genocide. Transnational justice begins to reconcile the damage that has been done. Waller says, “At its best, transnational justice gives force to human rights norms that were systematically and egregiously violated” (Waller 285). Translational justice helps victims live a dignified life. It may involve employment opportunities or simply integration in community activities. Retributive justice focuses on making the perpetrator pay for the crime they committed. An example of this is the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in the wake of the Holocaust. Restorative justice is aimed not only on making the perpetrator pay, but also for them to actively repair the damage they did. This involves material reparations or symbolic reparations. After the Holocaust, Germany paid Israel three billion dollars for their crimes. In addition, another 89 billion dollars have been compensated to individuals. Symbolic reparations can involve public statement of apologies, which are always inadequate in the wake of genocide

(Waller 286-287, 298, 303).

Truth commissions can begin the healing process in post-genocidal countries. A truth commission aims at constructing a report on past human rights abuses. They call for reform of social structures, reparation and memorialization. A truth commission can provide great insight into what should change; however, they can also be more damaging to victims. In this case, victims have to relive their past by recalling the crimes committed against them (Waller 310).

Memory of genocide is framed by individual experiences of trauma and social constructions. Memories of what happened shape social identities. It is important to remember mass atrocities so that history does not repeat itself. However, it is also important that these memories do not cumulate to compromise peace for the future. Collective memories are influenced by governments, media, and religion. These collective memories are constructed to fit a certain agenda (Waller 318-321).

The acts of violence committed against Rohingya in Myanmar and Sri Lanka mirror each other. We can see the risk factors that grew and grew in these countries. Nationalists deny ethnic conflict by excusing their violent actions based on religious supremacy. In Myanmar these acts resulted in genocide. Myanmar should acknowledge the genocide committed. Only then can the country begin to heal. Victims can begin to reconcile their loss when the perpetrators are brought to justice. Although the acts of violence against Rohingya in Sri Lanka are not yet categorized as genocide we can see by the risk factors posed that it is a likely narrative.

Works Cited

- Burmese Rohingya Organization. Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law and Rohingya. 12 December 2014. Brouk.org.uk.
- Donnelly, Jack. *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013.
- Gravers, Mikael. "Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka: Religious Violence and Globalized Imaginaries of Endangered Identities." *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-27.
- Jayasekera, Rohan. "Narratives of Hate." *Index on Censorship*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2013, pp. 110-13.
- "Land Confiscation and Human Rights Abuses in Burma/Myanmar Since 2011." *Alternative Sean Network on Burma*, 6 November 2015.
- Milton, Abul, et al. "Trapped in Statelessness: Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 14, no. 8, 2017, pp. 942. "Myanmar Profile - Timeline." BBC News, BBC, 3 Sept. 2018.
- Schonthal, Benjamin, and Matthew J. Walton. "The (New) Buddhist Nationalisms? Symmetries and Specificities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar." *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2016, pp. 81-115.
- Straus, Scott. *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*. Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016.
- United Nations, General Assembly. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Resolution 217A, 10 December 1948. www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/.
- Waller, James. *Confronting Evil: Engaging Our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.