Towards Buddhist and Islamic Coexistence: Indigenous Thought as a Conduit for Conflict Transformation

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Abstract

This paper seeks to answer the question: "What optional steps may Rohingya leaders take to resolve their troubled relations with the Burmese government through conflict transformation and relations normalization while meeting the health and nutritional needs of the population at risk?" Short and long-term recommendations, towards opening channels of communication are discussed through the dual lens of ecology and food justice, based on the weaving of an indigenous "Fourth World" transnational network that emphasizes the importance of traditional sacred space. Its goal is to remediate the alienating perception of Rohingya people specifically as "invasive land-grabbers" by proposing a shift of emphasis that could potentially unify all stakeholders: a deepened concern about the land and the environment as a basis on which government, religion, and enterprise can mutually move forward.

Keywords: *militarization of Buddhism, ecological economics, conflict transformation, ethnic genocide, non-dualism, transindigenous alliance (interethnic solidarity), Fourth World, globalization, hegemony, economic land concession, Islamic environmental ethics, United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).*

> *"WE STAND BEFORE this great world. The truth of our life depends upon our attitude of mind towards it—an attitude which is formed by our habit of dealing with it according to the special circumstance of our surroundings and our temperaments. It guides our attempts to establish relations with the universe either by conquest or by union, either through the cultivation of power or through that of sympathy. And thus, in our realization of the truth of existence, we put our emphasis either upon the principle of dualism or upon the principle of unity."*
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> *– Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali Poet, The Religion of the Forest (1922)*

Recalling Buddhism's Beginnings

Out from the dense ancestral jungles—profoundly dark, impenetrable canopies thrumming with the diversity of sense-organs belonging to a fully-sentient biosphere—Buddhist spirituality arose from meditation to return back to the heart of the ancient cities[1], where the sheltered Siddhartha Gautama ("the awakened one") first witnesses the ultimate expressions of human suffering and injustice. This is the legend underlying the footsteps of every Buddhist monk, who retreats into sacred forest pilgrimage to dwell on the philosophy of dharma[2] and consciously limits their political participation in order to better serve the social wellbeing of their local communities.

In approaching the precarious movements

1. "Buddhism arose in north India in the fifth century BCE at a time when the region was undergoing a process of urbanization and political centralization accompanied by commercial development and the formation of artisan and merchant classes. The creation of towns and the expansion of an agrarian economy led to the clearing of forests and other tracts of uninhabited land. These changes influenced early Buddhism in several ways. Indic Buddhism was certainly not bio-centric and the strong naturalistic sentiments that infused Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan appear to have been absent from early monastic Buddhism, although naturalism played a role in popular piety. Nonetheless, the natural world figures prominently in the Buddhist conception of human flourishing perhaps, in part, because of the very transformation of the natural environment in which it was born." Donald K. Swearer, *Buddhism and Ecology: Challenge and Promise* (*Earth Ethics* 10, Fall 1998).

2. Dharma: foundational Buddhist teachings rooted in the simple observation of phenomena as they reflect the flowing dynamic organization of natural law.

of Buddhist extremism and the fear-based militarization in present-day Burma (Myanmar)[3] against Rohingya Muslims—recognized by the United Nations as one of the world's most persecuted peoples—this paper suggests that this mythical account of original enlightenment represents an invaluable recognition of the matrix of interrelationships at the heart of an indigenous-inspired spiritual consciousness. In light of the humanitarian conflict underway in a majority Buddhist country, reflecting on the recognition embodied in original Buddhist lore inspires us to ask: How do communities and nations cultivate a sense of place and a primordial respect for living beings? How might such a question potentially metabolize a transformation of the visceral, lethal reality expressed in the conflict between Muslims and Buddhists, particularly in the westernmost state of Rakhine?

The Interpersonal Relevance of Crisis Transformation: Beyond the Fourth World

Why do ethnic conflicts matter? What comes out of contemplating the grim reality of ethnic elimination policies and genocide? Reflecting on the ongoing crisis in Burma (Myanmar), among the most significant contemporary efforts of ethnic cleansing— we are also called to consider a historical narrative that we all share, either through our own ancestry or lived experience. Acknowledging the greater undercurrent of conflict between various global forces and indigenous knowledge systems has widespread relevance because it is through the multiplication of local and marginalized perspectives that such larger-picture problems are most appropriately addressed. Global citizens are all at different stages of reestablishing healthy subsistence. Not to be overwhelmed by despair and indifference, this recognition may, as its ultimate expression, inspire the individual to hold space within his or her own communities wherein they have the greatest impact.

For the purpose of this discussion, the word indigenous invokes a dialogue based on reciprocal and ancestral land relationships. As a legal term, "indigenous" refers to culturally distinct people who, by the legacy of their ancestors, have lived in resilient stewardship within a unique natural environment. The legal history ("discourse") of indigenous nations speaks of those people who have been affected by the ongoing violence of colonialism that has alienated and physically displaced them from their maternal earth and implies the struggle of affirming/restoring such a relationship. As a counter to the indigenous/colonizer dichotomy that pervades the rhetoric against the people who call themselves the Rohingya, whose ancestors migrated across the porous borders of Bangladesh—both peacefully during ancient kingdoms and out of political duress, during the British colonial coercion— this paper serves to raise awareness of the "Fourth World," a term popularized by Secwepemc Chief George Manuel which includes state recognized and unrecognized original indigenous peoples.

It is important to note that the Fourth World remains defined by its relationship to colonialism. Indeed, the theoretical three-world divisions organizing the world signify

3. This paper use both "Burma" and "Myanmar" to alternatively name the same country, reflecting international indecision: whereas the national military authorities have formally promoted "Myanmar," "Burma" is the name used by opposition groups in defiance of the current political state. Not to lose sight of history, "Myanmar" refers to a political strategy for a military regime's international recognition.

degrees of control in the neocolonialist divide-and-conquer imagination whose treacherous game ("modus operandi") is strategic resource exploitation and wealth concentration. The term "Fourth World" as a political expression is both a product and a reaction to the language of transnational industry and the peculiar picture that it weaves which captures but an aspect of a certain limited sense of reality that may or may not be true to those whom it claims to include. What this term expresses differently is its location on the sphere of political power and economic development (within the particular realm of global transnational industry), where the first world is leading and the third world is (likewise, within the limited possibilities of industry) economically disadvantaged and dependent on first world infrastructures to access the global market and international mechanisms for expansion. First world nations form what some human rights activists perceive as predatory alliances (such as ASEAN, the Association of South East Asian Nations) against the sovereignty and local livelihoods of third world nations. But whereas third world nations are viewed as subjects of their concerned economic superiors, Fourth World nations (nations colonized by first, second, and third world states) do not even receive this level of international recognition because they are still entrenched in a colonialist reality of being deprived of not only their own territories and ancestral wealth but the continued existence of their cultural identity.

Fourth World nations exist without an internationally recognized political status on the peripheries and outside of the first world imagination—making it the case that the surviving Fourth World, made up of tightly-bound human communities, theoretically represents one of the greatest decentralizing forces and sites of resistance threatening the very self-legitimizing world order that refuses to include them as participants in the human political family.

Crisis Transformation: An Overview

This study is framed by the philosophy of "conflict transformation" and the research of international peace-building scholar Tatsushi Arai, whose focus on grassroots initiatives displays a fundamental commitment to a community-oriented framework. As opposed to mere "conflict management"[4] (metaphorically, only treating the symptoms) and "conflict resolution"[5] (treating the disease on an isolated case-by-case basis), conflict transformation is an expanded interdisciplinary approach of theorizing about conflict which aims to do

4. "Conflict management theorists see violent conflicts as an ineradicable consequence of differences of values and interests within and between communities. The propensity to violence arises from existing institutions and historical relationships, as well as from the established distribution of power. Resolving such conflicts is viewed as unrealistic: the best that can be done is to manage and contain them, and occasionally to reach a historic compromise in which violence may be laid aside and normal politics resumed. Conflict management is the art of appropriate intervention to achieve political settlements, particularly by those powerful actors having the power and resources to bring pressure on the conflicting parties in order to induce them to settle. It is also the art of designing appropriate institutions to guide the inevitable conflict into appropriate channels." From Hugh Miall, Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task (Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004).

5. "Conflict resolution theorists, in contrast, reject this power-based political view of conflict, arguing instead that in communal and identity conflicts, people cannot compromise on their fundamental needs. However, they argue that it is possible to transcend conflicts if parties can be helped to explore, analyze, question and reframe their positions and interests. Conflict resolution therefore emphasizes intervention by skilled but powerless third-parties working unofficially with the parties to foster new thinking and new relationships. They seek to explore what the roots of the conflict really are and to identify creative solutions that the parties may have missed in their commitment to entrenched positions." From Hugh Miall, Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task (Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004).

greater justice to the complex global context of contemporary violent conflicts "fueled on the one hand by local struggles and on the other by global factors such as the arms trade and support for regimes or rebels by outside states" (Miall, 2004, pg. 3). The practice of transformation requires viewing conflict as an extraordinary anomaly that requires attending to the worldview, or paradigm[6], from which it emerged.

Buddhist nonviolence and religious ecology, as ritually practiced across generations of Southeast Asians and widely respected as a contemplative practice throughout the world, lends itself as a distinct ally to the goals of conflict transformation. Traditional principles such as Mett (loving-kindness and compassion), Dharma (teachings of interconnectivity based on the natural order), Karma (transpersonal extension of history) and the Eightfold Noble Path offer an ethical framework that is particularly centered on guiding the individual within their community in their moral and spiritual transformation. These principles share many parallels with conflict transformation models for nations in strife as described by Notre Dame Professor of International Peacebuilding, John Paul Lederach (A Handbook of International Peacebuilding: Into The Eye Of The Storm, 2002).

The Paradox of Buddhist Extremism: Identity Crises in Context of Social Unrest

Perplexingly, a radical faction within Burmese Theravada Buddhism has emerged: an anomaly that appears to contradict the foundations that it shares with other sects of Buddhist spirituality (Mahayana, Tantric Vajrayana, and Soto Zen, among others). The militarization of Buddhism and persecution of Rohingya Muslims in present day Burma/Myanmar is a direct historical product of evolving imperialistic power structures and abuses. In order to better understand its genesis, a brief overview of historical narratives is in order.

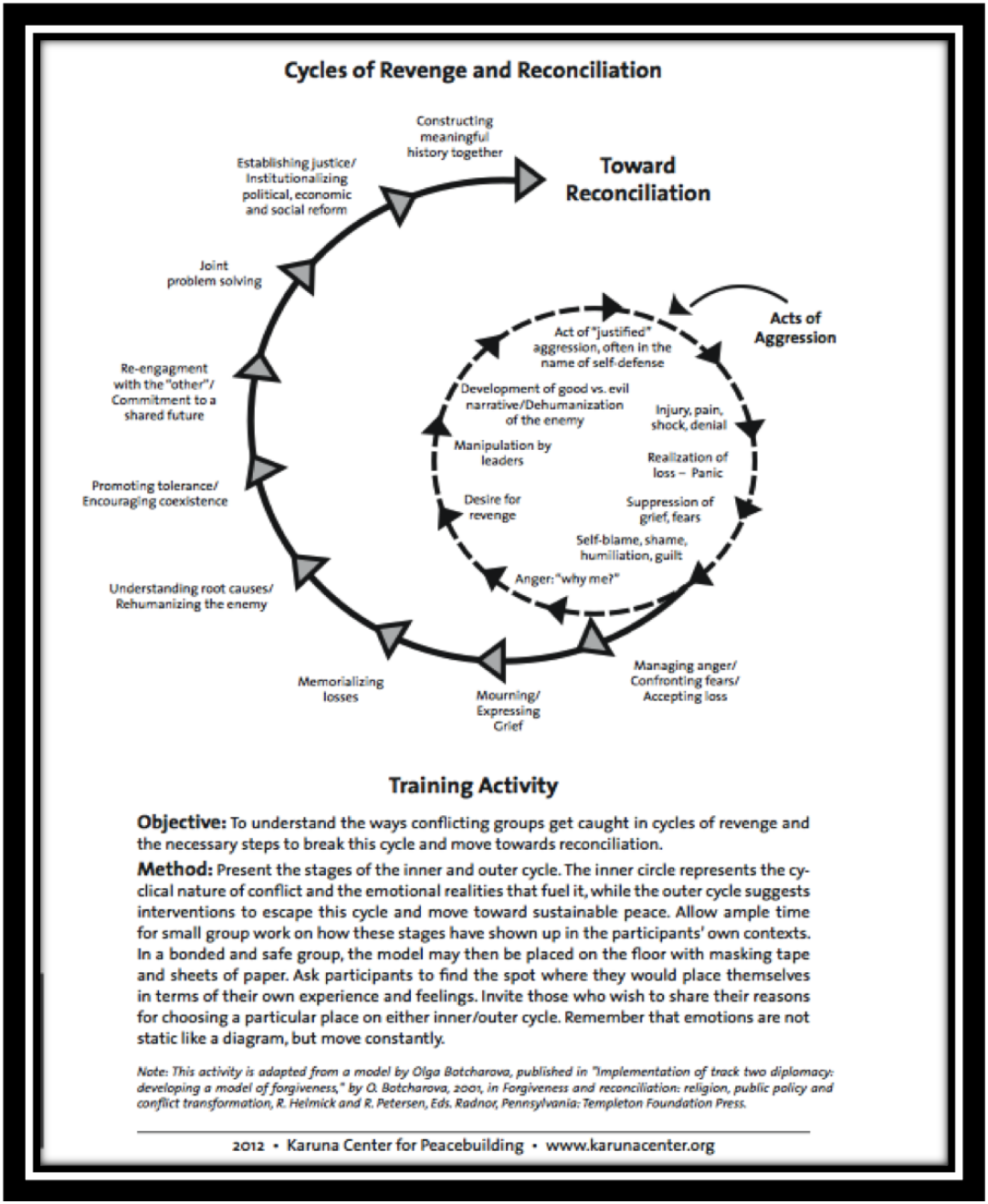
Who are the Rohingya? Within a self-identified Buddhist country, it is said that the Muslim Rohingya have no history; indeed, they are refused any enduring or legitimate grounds to maintaining a relationship with the land. According to the dominant political narrative, the Rohingya do not exist as a collective identity—and should not be able to exist, out of fear of the political and social changes that the meeting of stories, spoken from different perspectives, might imply. Towards Islamic and Buddhist coexistence, the purpose of this paper is to envision a meeting harmonized from a tense and complicated confrontation into a complex, resonating interweaving without suffering from a loss of complexity.

In their philosophical statement of purpose, the Center for Narrative and Conflict Resolution (CNCR) at George Mason University sets fourth:

> *Conflict is the discursive process in which people struggle for legitimacy, caught in stories they did not make (by themselves) and all too often, cannot change—the network of social relationships, histories and institutional processes restrict the nature of stories that can be told. Conflict, from this perspective is a narrative process in which the creation, reproduction and transformation of meaning itself is a political process—a struggle against marginalization and delegitimation, for legitimacy, if not hegemony. Narratives matter.* [7]

6. See Thomas Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions. A paradigm describes how a particular individual or collective perspective is framed by natural and cultural history.

7. Statement retrieved from CNCR's website (www.cncr.gmu.edu/about-cncr.htm).



Above: Conflict Analysis Tool drawn from Paula Green's Peacebuilding in Divided Communities: Karuna Center's Approach to Training, page 80.

The following historical overview should therefore be read as a non-definitive map of events that only identifies potential primary sources of interethnic conflict in Burma from past to present. The function of this paper's historical narrative of the Rohingya genocide is to foreground the vicious "cycle of revenge and reconciliation" (see previous page) within which all parties, regardless of political or religious affiliation, are implicated. The purpose of delving into the emotion-fraught territory of contested cultural identities is to recognize the mutual traumas on both sides as workable platforms for coexistence.

Before going any further, it is essential to define this ideal of coexistence. Coexistence does not mean assimilation, the loss of shared cultural practices, and individual uniqueness. Within an oppressive political rhetoric, the cost of diversity or inclusion can be forced annihilation. Genuine coexistence is not an annihilation of margins and marginalized; it is the "giving of space" which inspires peace and allows people to come together on interpersonal, international priorities. It also means respecting boundaries, recognizing common need, and celebrating diversity as united and sacred—as well as remembering the countless ways in which we are all profoundly interconnected. Moreover, this encompassing work can be achieved through science, philosophy, and art, among other symbolic and material ways of sharing meaning in non-monetary economies of exchange.

Ultimately, coexistence sets the following goal: to circumvent the brambles of identity issues to the transpersonal focus of land health stewardship issues in order to finally approach personal health of our physical bodies so vulnerable to disease in times of great instability.

A Brief Introduction to the History of a Two-Named Country

Nestled between Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, and Thailand, Burma (Myanmar) shares a transnational relationship through the Bay of

Bengal (see map). As a result of its geographical proximity to the ocean, the western part of the country has invited a remarkable wealth of intercultural exchange across the ages: a history that has scarcely been recorded but shines through example of the archeological recovery of pre-fifteenth century coin currency simultaneously bearing Islamic (Bengal) and Burmese characters. According to Dr. Moshe Yegar, scholar of Islamic relations in Asia:

> *Bengal became Muslim in 1230 but it remained the furthest eastern point of Islam's expansion. Muslim influence in Arakan (today known as Rakhine) was of great cultural and political importance. Ancient Rakhine was the beachhead for Muslim penetration into other parts of what is now called Burma[8] even if it never achieved the same degree of importance [as it did when it was known as Arakan].*

Today, Rakhine State is one of the least economically developed regions in modern Burma, defined by minimal infrastructure, subsistence agriculture, and mostly unexplored potential natural resources. Due in part to its proximity to Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim nation, Rakhine also has the largest population of Muslim Rohingya ethnic communities who are currently subject to government regulations that limit their living conditions and push them into conditions of genocide and further diaspora. Within the Burmese state, the Rohingya community's presence is subject to an extreme range of interpretations. According to the research of Dr. Jacques P. Leider, scholar on Rakhine history:

> *There is no doubt about the influence of the Sultanate of Bengal on Arakanese kingship [since antiquity]. The open debate is about the nature and the importance of the influence exercised. Interpretations reach from political ascendancy over intermittent cultural prevalence to virtual rejection of any specific cultural identity (Leider 1998).*

Legacies of Colonialism

Although both living and historical accounts[9] of the time have reported the Rohingya[10] having long-participated in ongoing cross-cultural exchange, trade and inhabitation of Burma's territories prior to colonialism, beginning in the British colonial regime (1824 until Burma's political independence in 1948) the national population—consisting of more than one hundred unique national identities[11]—was arbitrarily polarized into the local Buddhist

8. The geopolitical entity known as Burma was preceded by 1,500 years of dynastic emergence—among them, the Pyu city-states (200 BCE to 1050 CE), the period of warring states (1297 to 1824) Myinsaing and Pinya (1297 to 1364) and Rahmanya (1287 to 1539)—up to the British colonial period (1824 to 1948). The Union of Burma emerged as an independent state in 1948.

9. For a concise and eloquent summary of the cultural history of Muslim presence in Burma, see Steffan Balsom's article, "Rohingya: A Nation Orphaned by History" in Intercontinental Cry Magazine. In his paper The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar) (2005), reports that "[t]he Muslims in the Arakan State can be divided into four different groups, namely the Chittagonian Bengalis in the Mayu Frontier; the descendents of the Muslim Community of Arakan in the Mrauk-U period (1430-1784), presently living in the Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw townships; the decendents of Muslim mercenariesin Ramree Island known to the Arakanese as Kaman; and the Muslims from the Myedu area of Central Burma, left behind by the Burmese invaders in Sandoway District after the conquest of Arakan in 1784."

10. Out of the 1.33 million Rohingya in Burma, all but 40,000 are stateless due to the country's 1982 Citizenship Law, which denies Rohingya equal access to citizenship rights.

11. Among these are the Shan, Karen, Rohingya, Karenni, Chin, Kachin and Mon. Burma is an example of a consolidated indigenous nation (Burmans) essentially colonizing other fourth world nations. Britain's decolonization of what became the Union of Burma permitted the re-colonization of more than 100 fourth world nations, including the Rohingya.

Burmese nationals and Muslim Rohingya immigrants who had been encouraged to migrate from India to British-occupied Burma in order to supplement "the lack of labors and cultivators in order to develop the country under the colonial system."[12] Like elsewhere in the world, colonialism—more specifically, imperialist trade and empire-driven agriculture—acted as the primary destabilizing force of traditional culture, introducing a foreign rift within the complexity of indigenous identities. According to Dr. Kei Nemoto, whose research specializes in the modern history of Burma,

> *It is also important to indicate that the Buddhist Arakanese adopt the same criterion as the present military government of Burma does: recognizing the people who came into Burma after 1823 (a year before when the First Anglo Burmese War began) as non-indigenous people. In other words, the year 1823 is understood by both the military government and the Buddhist Arakanese as a meaningful criterion to differentiate the people residing in Burma between "us" and "them," which is the same standard shown in the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law (Nemoto). "*

The driving force behind this perpetual polarization, which ejected the Rohingya ethnicity into decades of abject statelessness (formally acknowledged by the UN as "Internally Displaced Person"), is twofold: a desire to maintain and the fear of losing control. In the words of Aung San Suu Kyi, Burmese democratic activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate who had been imprisoned under house arrest by the Myanmar military government for 15 of the past 21 years since her release in 2010,

> *"It is not power that corrupts, but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it" (Freedom From Fear 1991). Out of this fear of losing power, the first polarizing force was expressed in the imperialistic need to externally "contain" ethnic strife and separatism that was carried on by Myanmar's authoritarian regime as a reason to justify their 50-year military totalitarian dictatorship. The second part directly follows from the first and persists into the present Rohingya genocide: the Buddhist majority's internal desire to affirm a pure unified nationalism in order to reclaim a sense of sovereignty beyond the unspoken collective traumas brought on by foreign rule. In the perspective of conflict transformation, such "[i]nternal conflicts are increasingly associated with fragile states and maladaptive reactions to the impact of globalization" (Miall, 2004, pg. 8).*

Buddhism and the Saffron Revolution

During the 1930s, the Rakhine monk Ashun U Ottama (known to the Burmese state as "the light of Asia") was the first person to be imprisoned, repetitively over the course of several years, in British Burma as a result of his anti-colonialist political speeches; after years lost in solitary incarceration, he perished while on a hunger strike and awakened a generation of politically inclined Buddhist monks. Following U Ottama's legacy of dissent, Buddhist na-

12. Kei Nemoto, "The Rohingya Issue: A Thorny Issue Between Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh". According to Dr. Aye Chan, in his paper "The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)" (2005), [t]he flow of [Bengali] Chittagonian labor provided the main impetus to the economic development in Arakan within a few decades along with the opening of regular commercial shipping lines between Chittagong and [the capital of western Rakhine state Sittwe, formerly known as] Akyab. The arable land expanded to four and a half times between 1830 and 1852 and Akyab became one of the major rice exporting cities in the world."

tionalism ushered an exponentially larger revolutionary movement when it emerged again in 2007, braving the contradiction of Buddhist political engagement and fearlessly leading the people in a non-violent uprising against the oppressive and morally corrupt government defended by the military dictatorship.

The peaceful demonstration, known as the Saffron Revolution (for being led by tens of thousands of crimson-orange robed monks), resulted in torture, incarceration, and fatalities of Burmese civilian protestors, as well as the death of an international journalist documenting the unprecedented procession of monks with downward-turned alms bowls—a symbol of their silent refusal to accept offerings from officials of the Myanmar regime. Outside of the public eye, countless monks were threatened with public defrocking, arrest or assassination, alongside the sacking of Buddhist temples in brutal crackdowns conducted by government officials. The march was as much a resistance to the political military rule as it was a campaign for democracy, insisting on the liberation of democratic leader and political prisoner Aung San Su Kyi who was unjustly imprisoned under house arrest, due to her overwhelming electoral success, on behalf of National League for Democracy in the 1990 election, that was nullified by the regime.

In the wake of the latest evolution of Buddhist nationalism moving towards political reform— celebrated in the release of Aung San Su Kyi, who intends to run in Burma's 2015 presidential elections—a more prolonged social protest movement arose in 2012: the "969 Movement." Unlike the Saffron Revolution, this provocative monk-led campaign stands to defend the institution of Buddhism itself. Its leader, Ashin Wirathu Thera, asserts that national Buddhism has been victimized and is under immediate threat by the socially marginal Muslim community (mostly Rohingya) who, from the outset, lack political representation. Fueled by dehumanizing rhetorics depicting Rakhine state Rohingya communities as invasive scourges that threaten to overrun Myanmar, local Buddhists have incited numerous atrocities against the "uncivilized" Muslim community. Anti-Muslim propaganda has so far led to changes in the national government, itself undergoing radical restructuring, to further disable the Rohingya: such as restrictions on freedom to travel, access to healthcare and humanitarian aid, reproductive rights, limitations on economic market access, policies on interfaith marriage (specifically targeting Buddhist women marrying into Islam), and limitations on education. Since the surge of interethnic violence in the Rakhine state began in mid-2013, the Buddhist group has formed an Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (known in Burmese as Ma Ba Tha) through which it is pressuring the Burmese national parliament to adopt bills perpetuating the persecution that Burma's minority faiths have historically experienced by the former military regime. The parliament began its debate about the proposed legislation in January 2015.

In nearly every respect, the Rohingya are shackled by national denunciation. The majority Buddhist population, traditionally inclined to revering monks as beyond reproach, now enforces racist polemics out of an exacerbated fear for religious purity and of different faiths commingling. Muslim people have consequently responded to such insecurity with violence and through mobilizing their own reactionary groups.

Subjected to an era of military dictatorship and corruption, the survival of Buddhism as a social cornerstone has in part depended on its ability to maintain a strict sense of internal hierarchy. Holding to certain exclusionary practices birthed a form of hyper-conservative

preservation of identity—manifesting most blatantly in the contemporary attitude of the 969 Movement. By denying the existence of Rohingya people, the movement's anti-Muslim historical narrative can be seen as an effort to assertively inject Buddhist spiritual supremacy into the past in order to purchase a greater sense of rootedness to offset its own traumatizing history of displacement by the military regime. However much an expression of non-Buddhist attachment such a strategy may be, seen through a broader non-judgmental lens allows us to understand more about Burmese Buddhism's own suffering. Burmese Buddhists, as human beings, are also reactive subjects who are striving towards restoring a certain neutral-mindedness through obtaining an uncontested national sovereignty that would grant them the illusion of a new beginning, a blank slate (tabula rasa). However, the shared experience of Burmese citizens (and non-citizens) that permeates the layers of race, gender, and belief, cannot be simply erased; indeed, many are the closest witnesses to each other's suffering.

Burma as it Opens

Before 2011, Burma/Myanmar was a closed country, with activists and reporters risking their lives to disclose any evidence of human rights violations to the international media. The loosening of policing of media and documentation comes as a direct result of welcoming international evaluation, presumably for the primary purpose of initiating trade agreements. The indirect result is that uncensored representations of the Burmese citizen's experience is coming out and other countries now have the possibility to also hold the country of Myanmar to human rights criteria as they choose. The upside of this "opening up" is that it is now vulnerable to external evaluation from a strictly economic standpoint.

Since 2011, President Thien Sein has pushed for economic and political reforms, in line with the European Union's trade sanctions, ending half a century of military rule in order to "open up Myanmar" to international investment. Under the banner of the economic development coalition of leading political figures known as ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), state-to-state negotiations are currently underway. Meanwhile, Myanmar's history of severe human rights abuses by political authorities—including forced labor, torture, displacement, rape, and extrajudicial killings—remains unaddressed, both nationally and, under the pretext of non-interference of internal affairs, internationally. Beyond the international pretense of democratization and development, violence continues in Burma's ethnically-based internal states, where most of the country's abundant natural resources reside.

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) refuses to even address the deplorable situation of the Fourth World Rohingya, who suffer from mass evacuation into internment camps and from what Burmese scholar at the London School of Economics and activist-in-exile Maung Zarni calls the "slow-burning genocide" that consists of starvation and political blockades of international humanitarian groups such as Doctors Without Borders.[13] A pervasive refusal of recognition of Rohingya genocide is expressed in the outright denial of President Thein Sein: "We don't have the term Rohingya.[14]" As the bureaucrat-

13 The Nobel Prize winning medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres Holland (MSF-H) and Malteser International—two of the largest charities that supplied healthcare in northern Rahkine state—are banned from returning by local authorities. After having treated Rohingya Muslims, victims of a massacre in early March 2013, the government, who outright denied that killing ever happened, ordered MSF to suspend all activity in Myanmar. Though the government allowed the group to resume its work,

ic infrastructure is actively seeking to eject a population of people within a greater political body, the task of regenerating links as they are being cut resides in the people themselves: more specifically, in the resilient solidarity that has historically liberated indigenous peoples and indigent minorities from their oppressive governments who aggressively assert supreme authority over the land and its natural and human resources.

Caught between Burma and Myanmar, the country's government finds itself at a pivotal time in defining its identity. This can be accomplished through a philosophy of exclusion or inclusion. By exclusion, the Buddhists possibly broadcast a powerful message of Burmese identity and make a forceful political and spiritual statement. By continuing its policy of exclusion, it attempts to shrink the population. By being inclusive, and allowing diversity, it minimizes disturbing its people. By granting citizenship rights to the Rohingya, it does not commit to the arduous bureaucratic work of executing a sort of ethnic cleansing that can be seen as a militarized state's legacy. By prioritizing peaceful integration and allowing the Rohingya people to affirm their distinct cultural community, the Burmese government chooses to frame a national identity in positive terms.

Though it is not completely out of the question, Rohingya autonomy as a sovereign nation would require the declaration for self-determination come from the Rohingya ethnic minority themselves – a determination which could be reinforced with the supportive pressures from Burma's neighbors to the North and South (Bangladesh and Thailand) whose governments have mutually-held stakes in their rejection of Rohingya refugees fleeing the genocide in Burma. However, such a declaration of complete autonomy (in the larger sense of religious and political independence) has not been a statement that any Rohingya leader has been willing to dare. Until the basic rights and protections are afforded to them, however, efforts towards self-governance are limited to the work of individuals and citizen groups on a localized scale.

Conflict Transformation Evaluation

How can those individuals who courageously position themselves as peaceful leaders in this crisis begin to address the underlying concern and legacy of fear that involves all parties embedded in the hegemonic structures of the oppressive militarized state which notoriously fends for its supremacy by means of economic and political subversion? And who will be the first to make reparations when both parties suffer from loss of faith and injury?

In order to clear the grounds for peaceful dialogue, communities must be brought to mend the severed dialectics that have contributed to ethnic genocide of the Rohingya. How might this process begin? It is imperative that genuine efforts are made by regional stakeholders to ground the discussion about the country of Burma/Myanmar not merely as an abstract political entity, a disjointed representation, but as a land, a sentient part of Earth, with rights and limitations. This is where indigenous philosophies that have emerged out of territorial conflicts between communities and economic interests can help move the conversation in a mutually beneficial direction. In this light, conflict transformation views this conflict as being less about religious and ethnic differences and more about social imbalance and a genuine

14. Chatham House, London, 15 July 2013. Politically Rohingya do not really exist and are considered either illegal immigrants from Bangladesh or Bengali settlers who had been brought in by the British Raj in 1951.

fear of resource scarcity.

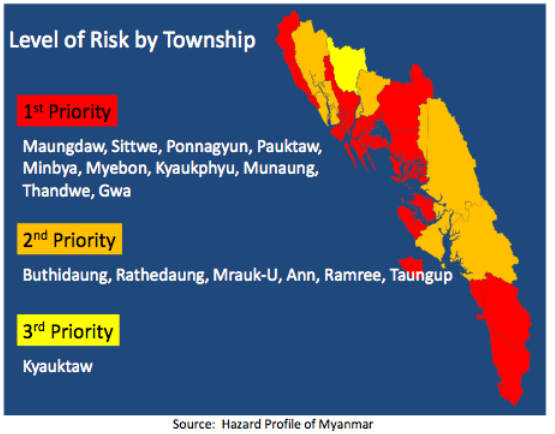
The price of sustained conflict comes at the cost of natural and human resource degradation—and with war, external intervention—whereas the price of peace can be sought internally. Discussions about ecological economics should be kindled in order to establish the conditions for caretaking the land—and the consequences of transgression. The concept of economics can be restored to its original sense of "the laws [nomos] of our home [oikos]" if communities choose to relate more deeply to the ecological undercurrent running through an earth-based human existence. At this crossroads, anti-corruption measures could be elaborated to regulate the extent of economics with sustainable national ecology in priority. With these conditions enumerated, it will become clear that the most dangerous plagues that have beset Burma are, and have been, the militaristic authoritarian figures that seek to control the national opinion of the masses through the manipulation of non-essential differences. *These differences only serve to distract from the serious task of restoring a damaged connection to the land—of which extreme territoriality, on one side, and hostile alienation, on the other, is a life-threatening symptom.*

Interethnic solidarity can be restored through promoting an indigenous position on land issues. Without a stable and sustainable connection to the land—which the Rohingya are deprived of, just as other Myanmar national citizens have suffered in the past—physical and mental health is critically endangered. Viewed through this ecological understanding, the political perceptions of the Rohingya people's "parasitism" on national identity is allowed to finally emerge as a failure of the state itself, as it is undergoing radical social upheaval, to integrate a population of willing human participants into a greater plan of restorative sustainability that begins with basic nutrition (irrefutably essential to personal health) and extends to compassionate resource management (equally as essential to the collective health of human populations). As a state that is still in the throes of emerging from colonialism and the ensuing national fascist regimes, such complex and evolving challenges are perhaps almost inevitable: whether it can move past its reactionary extremism is a question of translating defensiveness into solidarity. In the words of comparative indigenous literary studies Professor Chadwick Allen, beyond the "vertical binary" of conventional transnational theories that subordinate indigenous peoples, we may at any time choose to follow a vision of "transindigenous alliances" that inspires us to work towards transcending "the national borders of contemporary" states to engage with direct indigenous-to-indigenous relationships instead (*Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*, 2012).

It is precisely the socially marginalized who should be positively involved in social stabilization projects, given that it is they who are usually the most vulnerable to being adversely affected. This entails decentralizing natural resources and encouraging basic nutritional sovereignty instead of globalizing resources in the international market in order to support and depend on political party infrastructure (with its notorious vulnerability to corruption), which frequently reproduce conditions of dependence. What this could require is a concerted effort towards a redefinition of the convention of "economic land concession" (a pro-development government policy of giving away land to agricultural corporations for resource exploitation), not merely as a commercial enterprise in a politicized (militarized) economy but as a compassionate enterprise that holds the promise of promoting the conditions of sympathetic symbiosis.

Part of the conflict transformation process

is the art of reframing "the context of conflict [so] that [it] may radically alter each party's perception of the conflict situation, as well as their motives" (Miall, 2004, pg. 9). The transformational element essential to alchemize such a change is a shift in individual social consciousness that fosters a psycho-spiritual sense of love over one based on fear. In the conflict between the Rohingya and Burmese nationals, the capacity of religion to motivate social cohesion around humanitarian values can be drawn from in order to unite people around components that are absolutely vital to human life, whose very absence are the conditions of disease and poverty, such as clean water and nutritive foods free from the high costs of importation and industrial chemical contamination.



Source: Hazard Profile of Myanmar

Without Land, Nothing: Struggle of Internally Displaced People

If the source of bigotry originates in a fear of overpopulation and cultural dilution, as the 969 Movement maintains, then a radical strategy could be to grant the Rohingya community, in parts or as a whole, the protection of temporary autonomy over a tract of continuous land in Burma/Myanmar –instead of the Rohingya state being broken apart and concentrated in genocidal "refuges" for Internally Displaced People that morbidly reflect the short-term nature of the relationship that the nation of Burma projects in the lack of basic facilities and inadequate resources for livelihood. Autonomy, notably, does not necessarily mean complete authority over the land and permission to abuse its resources beyond reasonable need. Effectively, this reinterprets the practice of naturalization by focusing on a citizen's commitment to non-exploitative investment in a sustainable economy that is the broader goal of nation-building. Recognizing the political identity of the Rohingya state through conceding land to the community would form a non-dependent relationship between the two populations where mutualism and equal exchange can take place – while satisfying the Burmese nationalist's prerogative to preserve Buddhism as a fixture of the Burmese national identity. Likewise, the aggressive and violent enforcements of the threat of arrest experienced by any Rohingya currently travelling beyond Rakhine state does not consist in providing a safe haven. Rather, it is an act of corralling them into more vulnerable refugee communities that can be displaced at the government's discretion, such as for economic and electoral convenience. The Rohingya people utterly lack a safe common space where education and healthcare are freely available to those who are willing to engage on a level in which all parties can agree would be mutually beneficial without coercion. Indeed, in Tatsushi Arai's strategic evaluation, *Transforming the Cycle of Violence in Rakhine State: Towards Inter-Communal Peace in Myanmar* (2013), he prioritizes the national commitment of guaranteeing the displaced Rohingya people a provisional safe haven as a necessary preliminary peacekeeping measure underlying all further work that must be made towards conflict transformation.

In order to secure the commitment of individuals to such a vision, the government would benefit from working with Rohingya community leaders towards establishing an Islamic Protectorate of Myanmar to register citizens so as to restrict entry of individuals that would otherwise have another optional home (such as Bengali Muslims who some Myanmar nationals argue might take advantage of the chaos to emigrate as Rohingyas). Alternatively, the government may reconsider the Organization of Islamic Co-operation's rejected proposal to open an office to help Rohingyas due to the current Burmese government's injunction against any organization that may choose to focus on the Rohingya community, even though they may have greater need at this time.

However, the development of a Muslim enclave would require a mutually-held commitment to peaceful resolution—the very obstacle holding the crisis in force. Paralleling Buddhist social engagement, there has also been a history of political interventions of Rohingya leaders towards the creation of a Rohingya State since the Union of Burma's independence in 1948 from British colonial administration into a succession of military regimes: in 1951, not long after Burma's independence, an Arakan Muslim Conference was held in Alethangyaw Village and published The Charter of the Constitutional Demands of the Arakan Muslims, which demands that "North Arakan should be immediately formed [as] a free Muslim State as [an] equal constituent Member of the Union of Burma like the Shan State, the Karenni State, the Chin Hills, and the Kachin Zone with its own Militia, Police, and Security Forces under the General Command of the Union (Department of the Defense Service Archives, Rangoon: DR 1016/10/13). When the 1982 Citizenship Law was put into place to restrict citizenship to any ethnic groups who were recognized to have lived in Burma before the First Anglo-Burmese War began in 1824, the Rohingya voice was publicly disqualified throughout its continued efforts to organize under other political banners (such as the National Democratic Party of Human Rights) that sent some underground and others into exile.

In the long term, the creation of a separate refuge state based on religious creed (such as in the case of Israel) risks perpetuating and accentuating the friction between Buddhism and Islam in Burma. Not only that: the creation of an exclusively Rohingya territory may be a detriment of Rakhine state's many indigenous inhabitants who might resist, either immediately or later down the road when their respective communities are impacted by land issues and affected by evacuation justified by economic development.

Current Land-Based Emergencies in Burma

Given the political history of closed attitudes of land concession, the resistance from the Burmese Union to restore Rohingya's rights and the urgency of the crisis, this paper will continue by suggesting less radical approaches in favor of workable suggestions that consist in more grassroots interventions.

According to the document entitled "Inter-Agency Preparedness/Contingency Plan—Rakhine State, Myanmar", immediate action must be taken to protect the 140,000 displaced people during the monsoon season beginning in May:

> *[a] critical decision is required from the Government for the allocation of suitable land for shelter … which will in turn influence planning on provision of services and access to livelihood. For those IDPs [Internally Displaced Peoples] living on land that will flood during rainy season,*

they must be moved to safer locations in appropriate temporary shelters that will not flood before the rains start.

The document delineates a clear plan of actions that must be prioritized, including: the "construction of temporary learning spaces," the need for the government to "address the issue of scarcity of manpower, logistic and communication means, as well as referral and threats to health and humanitarian workers," and the need for "government, community, and religious leaders [to] take firm action against those who are intimidating humanitarian workers." In order not to unpredictably extract members of Burmese society that would otherwise offer valuable services to the Buddhist community, the document recognizes that there needs to be practical incentives to keep a dedicated force of doctors and other social servants within the Muslim communities so that they can lift themselves out of the coercive limbo of dependency on obstructed social services.

Since the beginning of the 2014 rainy season, more than 30 have died from cholera and dysentery due to inadequate waste management; many tent encampments are located in rice paddies where improvised latrines have poor drainage, arising in overflow and water contamination issues and a shortage of safe drinking water. Suspended in a state of abject poverty, countless small camps barely sheltering the 140,000 Rohingya refugees—who have for decades, if not centuries, called Rakhine their home—are increasingly vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters brought by heavy monsoon floods and cyclones. Engaging with organizations focused on providing access to hot water for sanitation purposes and treating (by ecological remediation strategies) contaminated water ("grey-water" or "black-water") will ultimately serve the Rohingya people more than indirect appeal to unsympathetic and unaffected authorities who coldly rely on the suffering of the Rohingya as a way of evacuating them from the country by any means necessary.

Sumatran Connections through the Darwin Initiative Project

Outside of Burma/Myanmar, neighboring Malaysia has the highest population of resettled Rohingya refugees. Sumatra—and, to a lesser degree, Malaysia—stands to offer proof of Islamic responsible land stewardship. If the Burmese government can be convinced to allow external participation to resolve its internal conflicts, then it is through the encouragement of its national neighbors with which the stakes of relationships are higher and where, moreover, further negotiations and collaborations on connected issues can take place. In order to involve the Rohingya Muslim population as active participants in the collective healing of national trauma, joint symposiums between Sumatran Islamic ecological scholars and organic farmers and Rohingya leaders in ecological sustainability programs could be facilitated.

The largest following of Islam in the world is found in Indonesia and it is in Sumatra where the Darwin Initiative Project, with the theme of "*Integrating Religion Within Conservation: Islamic Beliefs and Sumatran Forest Management*," took place as a way of investigating and encouraging the connection of Muslim and indigenous people as they strived to establish food sovereignty in rural communities both towards the benefit of, and building upon, productive interfaith relationships. According to Professor Stuart R. Harrop, Director of the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology, University of Kent:

One of the prime purposes of the project

> *was to build local capacity by empowering and educating local teachers, religious leaders and community members to spread this important message in addition to putting the Islamic precepts and traditional knowledge into practice. These principles, found in customary law, stories and myths within local traditions and within the precepts and sacred texts of global religions, provide us with a heritage of sustainable practices that can potentially operate without the help of the state. Moreover, because of the strength of belief behind these ethics, there may be no need to strengthen their effect by bolstering them with obligations in national or international legal instruments. The power of religious belief may be all that is required to put conservation into effective practice…. [Likewise, if] behaviour patterns are to change, this may be more efficiently facilitated through ethical propositions that are meaningful rather than by calling on remote institutional precepts that may not resonate as strongly at the local level (McKay, 2013, p. 12).*

In his article *The Globalization of Muslim Environmentalism*, Dr. Richard Foltz, editor of Environmentalism in the Muslim World (2005), contributes an insightful complexity as he cautions such human rights projects addressing basic human needs as nutrition and agroecology—specifically, those involved with Islamic communities—against perpetuating what some have called the NGO-Industrial Complex:

> *It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that environmentalist policies and initiatives in the Muslim world are often seen as merely another example of Western imperialism, an attempt by foreigners, foreign interests, or foreign puppets to meddle in the affairs of Muslim communities for purposes of exploitation and control. It would seem that under such circumstances, environmentalism in Muslim societies would have to develop in an indigenously-derived form seen as locally-relevant, if it hopes to take root and flourish [emphasis added]. Unfortunately examples of home-grown environmentalism are not yet easy to find in the Muslim world, though they are not non-existent (Foltz).*

Foltz's point reinforces the level of sensitivity required to respond to the unique characteristics and conditions of the conflict as well as to the indigenous socioecology within which a project is physically nested. In reality, there are no quick solutions: ample monetary and technical assistance are by themselves insufficient to confront such intractable problems and complex conflicts perpetuated by Burma's particular challenge of ethnic conflict and religious extremism. Though a concerned international organization might be compelled to set, as its first goal, the project of developing culturally appropriate solutions that draw from the existing resources, if its ultimate objective is to liberate affected citizens from unnecessary and harmful dependency, its principal responsibility is to be a patient and attentive midwife to change, to help ask the right questions that will create the conditions for self-understanding, to supply desired information, and to keep the conversation going when real or imagined fear paralyzes progress.

Concrete Examples of Ecosocial Transformation Projects

Conflict transformation could be also achieved by way of a practical issue-based campaign focused on neutralizing racial violence by addressing the environmental

imbalance—and the economic interests behind contested physical and political borderlines—affecting a profound sense of personal mindfulness based on a shared respect of natural global interdependence. *Such an effort would require an intercultural study in consultation with constitutional and customary indigenous governments who have restored food and livelihood sovereignty from degraded environmental conditions and nonfunctional social infrastructure left by colonialism.* On-the-ground projects of this nature should appropriately reflect the needs of the community as much as the actual availability of physical resources and the pre-existing capacity of local food sovereignty and livelihood training organizations so as to broaden a network of expanding place-based practices.

For example, the popularity and success of edible mushroom cultivation workshops in Southeast Asia can be accounted for by a few considerations. Firstly, the knowledge of how to draw from byproducts of existing agricultural practices, such as identifying free substrates for mushroom production like rice straw after the grain has been harvested, or creative uses of available mediums as water hyacinth[15] (*Eichornia crassipis*), an invasive plant that is rapidly clogging up rivers and waterways of countries such as Africa and Cambodia. Secondly, the preexisting presence of wild-foraged and cultivated mushrooms in local food lore makes it an appealing product that is easily brought to the market without creating confusion over its value as a highly nutritional food and medicine. Thirdly, mushrooms are a post-harvest supplementary crop that follows the seasonal cultivation cycle without requiring much adaptation to create a favorable environment.

Another example can be drawn from the prolific Non-Timber Forest Product (NTFP) workshops that are given by conservation-focused organizations to support indigenous peoples who are still drawn to maintain the ancestral lifestyle of gathering traditional craft materials, such as bamboo and native tree resins, and edible species like rattan vine and jungle honey, in spite of economic pressures. Such workshops serve the dual purpose of educating interested communities in legal mechanisms for the protection of existing resources under threat and reinforcing traditional knowledge as a nation-building activity.

Though they take place in different social and environmental settings, both organic mushroom cultivation and non-timber forest product education are appropriate examples of projects that do not create additional needs but instead respond to local availabilities and serve to further social justice causes. In the case of mushrooms, the availability of growing food out of reclaimed excess "wastes" and the rapid production of potent compost as its byproduct, and in the case of non-timber forest products, the validation and further elaboration of pre-existing knowledge of native ecology with the understanding of contemporary systems of sociopolitical organization and conservation protocol.

For internally displaced peoples, such as the Rohingya, whose very issue is that they are denied a relationship to the land, *bioremediation* stands to be the most successful out of the many different kinds of workshops and practical on-the-ground trainings that would be most appropriate to their unique situation. An appropriate focus is determined both by the needs that characterize their physical location and by the social and environmental relationships that they decide to reinforce.

Bioremediation works with plants, fungi, and microorganisms to accomplish restoration of degraded or polluted land and contaminated water exclusively through natural processes

15. Water hyacinth spawns mushroom enterprise: http://www.new-ag.info/03-3/develop/dev04.html

and low-tech techniques that have little to no environmental impact of their own. Though industrial bioremediation has become an intricately researched scientific specialization in its own right, the basic practice of bioremediation can be accomplished by starting with the foundational building of healthy soil and water flows through the use of composting techniques and essential endemic micro-organisms. The technique of harnessing microorganisms in order to naturally increase the quality and nutrient value of the soil (and therefore the health of the plant and planet) has been extensively developed by the international organization Effective Microorganisms (EM). Developed by Professor Dr. Teruo Higa, Effective Microorganisms (EM) has decades of experience in offering capacity-building workshops dealing specifically with their trademarked process to rural farmers interested in smaller scale organic farming. Indigenous Micro-organisms (IMO)[16], a closely related technique belonging to Korean traditional farming, equally offers the opportunity to boost soil biological activity through the intentional harnessing of only regionally-sourced microorganisms to catalyze the chemical processes in the soil on an extensive variety of available substrates that would otherwise be discarded as byproducts.

Moreover, as an inclusive practice, participation to such workshops would be indiscriminately based on any individuals who currently have a relationship to the land entity known as Burma/Myanmar.

However, though such an educational-based approach could also exert a positive influence on the lives of neighboring populations, it would only be a secondary long-term recommendation and would not by itself initiate an immediate crisis-mitigating measure that the Rohingya desperately need. What is essential for such projects to take place is beyond resolution by physical means alone because of the unaddressed disembodied collective trauma that governs the minds of all parties involved in the genocide-by-neglect.

In order to address extreme malnutrition in the short-term, human health measures must include an environmental vision for cultivating a sustainable restorative relationship. Such an effort would also require a national ecology-based educational movement facilitated by third-party mediators trained in peace-building and cultural sensitivity in which Buddhist ecological philosophy and its insight into human suffering could be an indispensable ally. Reminding Buddhist extremism of these roots—and therefore popular concerns—could redirect their strong feelings in a way that could work in consonance with their care for the land as a nation. An emphasis on environmental education would include the topics of Soil Rights and Conservation, Water Rights and Conservation, Forest Rights and Conservation, and other natural rights guarding against resource exploitation and exponential unsustainable population growth including Food Justice and Environmental Remediation. Such information would model a constructive stance against the type of "third world" transnational economic development that is harmful to the self-reliance of a local community.

Complementary Elements Supporting Local Dialogue on Conflict Transformation

Conflict transformation, in its integrative perspective, offers a way to address more fully the structures of oppression, exploitation, and environmental degradation. Towards this greater goal, the first step in tending to this conflict would be to bring Rakhine Buddhist community leaders and Rohingya Muslim

16. See Dr. Hoon Park III's presentation: http://www.kswcd.org/conference/Dr%20Hoon%20Park%20III%20-%20Indigenous%20Microorganism%28IMO%29.pdf

community leaders in serious conversation about the naturalizing subject of land restoration as a shared platform to work on repairing deeper relationships *within the framework of conflict transformation:* what are the conditions of the water, forest, and soil that the ecological fertility and longevity that the security of Burma depends on? In order to diffuse interpersonal tension within such a gathering, this paper suggests the presence of two neutralizing elements.

First element: the presence of Sumatran Ecological Islamic leaders, to hold neutral sacred space for the Muslim Rohingya, and Buddhist monks of the Thai forest tradition, to hold neutral sacred space for the Rakhine Buddhists. With these two pillars binding and complementing the dualism, a ceremonial gathering can take place where traditional rites honoring both Buddhist and Muslim traditions can be conducted for a unified audience expressed as:

- A Buddhist Meditation for Metta (Metta-Bhavana).
- An Islamic Meditation for Water (See Darwin Initiative Project appendix 1 and 2, documenting Islamic "Sermon Appreciating and Conserving Water as a Show of Our Gratitude" and "Ceremah Ramadhan Sermon, 1432 H/2011 M Grateful for God's Favours: Water").

Metta is the Buddhist principle of "compassion" and "loving-kindness", that begins in the practice of cultivating benevolence in meditation. One starts compassion with the self, then with a beloved friend, a neutral person, and then a hated foe – then, all four equally, before gradually proceeding to the whole universe of sentient and non-sentient beings. Metta is used as a rite for mental purification and freedom from the corrupting influence of anger.

Water, vital to all life on earth, is highly symbolic in the context of the Rohingya refugee experience, where a lack of access to clean water is the most formidable health challenge experienced in the Burmese camps for Internally Displaced Persons. Water oscillates between death and rebirth, where a treacherous oceanic passage across the Bay of Bengal to unknown shores becomes a last desperate effort for the persecuted minority praying to drift into the Indonesian island archipelago where there is the change of encountering a compassionate Muslim community that might take pity on them instead of imprisoning their entire family.

A grieving or mourning process recognizing community trauma—both recent losses to ethnic violence and losses further in the past—would further serve to connect individual experience with the broader message. Whatever therapeutic structure is selected must also have an intergenerational dimension (including children and elders in the community) to address the multifaceted collective trauma and its diverse individual expressions. What this would look like is the intentional amplification of love and life at the root of fear and suffering that could reassure people of the security of their burdened emotions within their social network. Affected individuals can come together to address fundamental moral precepts based on basic human needs only when the solitude of trauma becomes mutually intelligible.

Second element: *a resolute and highly explicit bioregional focus for the purpose of grounding the ceremony with genuine care towards a sacred sense of place*. Beyond blessing the people and recognizing their suffering, both Buddhist and Islamic holy leaders can offer a blessing to the Rakhine state as the geographical epicenter of the conflict, where violence cracks and

surges like lightning and the sheer expression of unharnessed energy expresses itself physically across the restlessness of the people. This might include vows of protection of local natural sites essential to the wellbeing of the community to raise environmental consciousness of shared resources beyond the quarrel of differences. This approach would draw upon older traditions connected with their land and the spirits that guarded it—many of which still survive in fertility and animist cults, or have been absorbed into local Buddhist legends and continue to thrive in countryside folklore today. Far from being mere superstition, the act of engaging with local spirits and calling upon non-human guardians of the land mystically summons a space where a discordant collective may be allowed to access a transcendent impersonal "we" that would otherwise be locked up in the separateness of individuality.

Pragmatic aspects of the second element would follow in community-oriented projects, such as soil rehabilitation and microorganism diversity educational workshops, welcoming participation across Rakhine-state Fourth World communities. The key element to be addressed would be the question of establishing a politically neutral location(s). Other than location questions, the infrastructure constraints would be minimal because the purpose of such workshops would be increasing biodiversity and soil regeneration within local means. Potential short-term effects that could carry on into longer-term benefits would be the construction of basic public health and sanitation facilities with clean water access in order to accommodate an audience, which can be built for long-term use in commemoration of the ceremony.

Synthesis of the two elements: The rationale behind these two levels of participation is to empower local knowledge systems that have been corrupted over time through widespread trauma and the resulting progressive alienation that have created an effect of cultural amnesia. This practice of acknowledging the legacies and reclaiming the traditional practices that reinforce complex, place-specific wisdom which comes about when people have complex relationships to particular places and ecosystems, are part of the shared genealogy of indigenous people.

Mrauk U Convergence for Religious Peace

It is in the spirit of cooperation that the initial peacebuilding ceremony would ideally take place on land located in Rakhine state that is already considered sacred. Mrauk U, the ancient capital city in northeastern Arakan State in Burma, is one of the most endangered cultural heritage sites in Asia, according to the Global Heritage Fund and UNESCO (who still has yet to establish a working relationship with Burma).

What is unique about the ancient temples of Mrauk U is that it is located in Rakhine state and therefore reflects a history of intercultural diversity because of its antiquity (1430-1784 CE). In an essay entitled *These Buddhist Kings with Muslim Names* (1988), Rakhine history expert Dr. Jacques P. Leider writes: "The fact that an impressive number of Arakanese kings [in the ancient kingdom of Mrauk U] were apparently using so-called Muslim titles and names [well into the 16th century] has been used as a most convincing argument to prove that there has been a steadfast Muslim influence at the Arakanese court." Mrauk U, whose dynasty many consider as "the golden age of Arakan," holds a fertile symbol of Buddhist and Islamic peaceful coexistence, hidden in plain sight.

In this effort to prioritize the environment and set aside differences, it is conceivable that this ceremonial approach might be agreeable to Buddhism (the voice of the Burmese major-

Sacred Mrauk U, located in the Northern Rakhine State. Photographer unknown.

ity) on the basis of its spiritual relationship to nature. Rohingya Islamic people might agree on the basis of the urgency of their situation, if only out of a desire to seize the rare opportunity to relay their roots in a good way. With the increasing attention that the Rohingya genocide is receiving, the government—ideally under the influence of Aung Sang Suu Kyi—will stand to gain tourism and accompanying infrastructure based on the attraction of Rakhine's Mrauk U as a living place of peace.

By including Indonesian Islamic religious leaders in the opening conversation, such ceremonial, peace-making measures have the potential of making a difference in the mounting tension that has also spread across the ocean to distant relations who must contend with the feeling of being helpless witnesses from afar. On March 5th, 2013, incarcerated Burmese Muslims killed their Myanmar Buddhist compatriots in a Sumatran detention center, in reaction to photographs the prisoners saw of Muslim homes and mosques on fire in central Myanmar that resulted in over 43 Rohingya deaths. Here, the nature of the prisoner's detention is also significant: the Buddhists were incarcerated as illegal laborers on a fishing boat escaping lack of livelihood on their native soil and the Muslims were floating refugees in search for a new life, both victims of a socio-economic reality that transcends their respective ethnicities. Where a few images can passionately inflame, for the worse, a group from two thousand miles away, such an incident serves as a reminder of the deep interconnectedness of humanity that transcends physical distances.

Such a ceremonial gathering would be merely an activation of the grounds with intention—a metaphorical rainfall on scorched earth—on which seeds can later be sown. Peace is an art of cultivation, requiring patience, care, and attention to a diversity of elements. The Rakhine state does not require the Rohingya to be "weeded" out and exterminated, especially when it is shown that the region has the possibility of flourishing once animosity is set aside. Attention can then be redirected to restoring a healing relationship to the earth that has the power to sustain all, in a wealth of physical health and inner simplicity, if the conditions of destruction are set aside

for the greater good.

Subsequent actions would need to follow the tripartite model of the ceremony, where the land is seen as a medium joining and transcending Buddhist and Islamic disparity. The focus should be set on growing food sustainably and achieving independence from military presence (which conflict and instability only further justifies). The assistance of international human rights groups could be mobilized to support the transition into a self-determined community, unified in its ecological concern, by offering trainings in organic cultivation techniques that value traditional knowledge, community seed banks, and installing small-scale energy solutions (such as community biogas digesters). Inspired by the model of Dr. Vandana Shiva's Bija Vidyapeeth (Earth University), also envisioned by Bengali poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a School for Environment and Economy can be started in a central location where trainings can take place and research documentation can be collected.

Towards such secondary projects, the assistance of successful nature-oriented humanitarian projects in neighboring Thailand and aspiring permaculture projects in Burma can be called upon to support petitions to the local authorities. More valuable than financial support are the quality connections between organizations and the infrastructure in which these groups have an important foothold. It stands to reason that important lessons could be learned by working alongside such organizations and relating to how aid has been successfully established in nearby regions that follow similar premises (in terms of ethnic diversity and geographical climate).

Engaging the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The pragmatics and organization of the above suggestions are determined by the willingness of experts and teachers to spearhead such a movement as well as the ability to link the Rohingya community to the international grassroots network in order to bypass the inefficiency of governmental administration. Likewise, further consideration must be put into the transgovernmental mechanisms of conflict transformation that must be periodically re-engaged in order to keep dialogue open on various and increasingly encompassing degrees of involvement: specifically, of traumatized individuals, paying special attention to not only integrating Muslim and Buddhists alike but women and children whose voices are often marginalized, irrespective of their social status.

The Center for World Indigenous Studies' *Joint Statement of Constitutional and Customary Indigenous Governments*[17] comes at a crucial time to offer unprecedented support to the Rohingya nation, which shares a collective voice with 11 international indigenous nations through the peaceful cause of peoples marginalized by states' governments and within the global political economy. These struggles include confiscation and loss of ancestral territories through states' governmental legal proceedings and, in the case of the Rohingya, preventable health epidemics due to active discrimination in the highly-politicized Myanmar medical infrastructure. Stateless and disenfranchised, lacking any national identity, the participation of Rohingya people propels the multilateral dialogue on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into another domain which holds the potential to even im-

17. Introduced on behalf of the endorsing governments from four continents by endorsing government leader of the Yamasi, Ms. Lori Johnston to the 13th Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 12-23 May 2013. United Nations, New York City.

plicate self-identified non-indigenous[18] peoples from the Fourth World who nevertheless have an ancestral responsiveness to the land. Such a collaborative network has the power to draw from the local traditional knowledge systems across the world, adapting an appropriate strategy to attend to, according to their respective capacities, whatever course of action Rohingya leaders feel most confident to pursue.

Short-term Recommendations

In order to even approach neglected basic needs, a respectful public context (such as the imagined Mrauk U Confluence for Peace) must be created for the purpose of airing grievances, because without first clearing the grounds for dialogue, no message of concerted compassionate action can be effective and simultaneously coordinated and received. Pressure must be put on the government to permit a cooperative, incorporative event that transcends the violated "inviolable" rights of the individual (as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). In service of the dire need for broadcasting a mechanism for the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which has, so far, not been implemented or engaged, the rights of every individual regardless of ethnicity must be informed by the UNDRIP to the unprecedented benefit of the ongoing conflict negotiation process gaining indigenous dimensions.

By digging deeply enough with the techniques of conflict transformation, one can see that the imperialistic impulse of ethnic cleansing can be derived from a lack of a certain quality of indigenous connection to the land that necessitates human cooperation. Civilization, as a cosmopolitan convergence, has always been faced with challenges of consensus such as:

- How do we reach a true and mutual understanding with others?
- In the face of mutual unintelligibility or mental blocks, how can we reach another way of speaking amongst ourselves and work from there to communicating outward through whatever nonviolent levels of translation necessary?
- If we are beyond dialogue and risk disintegrating into violence, how can we adapt to coexist clearly within ourselves where the metaphysical attraction towards a paradise of peace manifests thorough the fulfillment of larger goals within the local matrix of our familiar individual relationships?

It is time to channel and challenge the storytellers and mythmakers of the modern world to weave the connection between past and future. There is great hope in the storytelling spirit: the people's self-documentation of personal cartographies (what might be thought of as sacred texts in the making) as place-making alternative histories wherein relationships mapped by abstract symbols that can coexist on different temporal planes. It is essential to emphasize that these three questions of communication exist on a recurring continuum such that everywhere is the right place to begin. Such a statement is not mere rhetoric if the intended purpose of these words is to establish practical actions towards caretaking of the land as our home in which we are (com)passionately dedicated to making better. By setting the funda-

18. The dispute on whether or not the Rohingya people are indigenous is based on the confusion of two distinct groups: those with long-established ancestors dating from pre-colonial eras (whose presence is manifest in the sacred Mrauk-U) and those whose ancestors were brought as laborers by the British imperialist administration from neighboring Bangladesh. By association of religious belief, both groups became known as Rohingya.

A novice monk at Mrauk U, ancestral land of religious confluence. (April 2010). Photo courtesy of David Lazar

mental focus on the natural sources of health and prosperity that nourish the human family by honoring the extended community of interrelationships, such questions have the power of being transformed into practical courses of action on a plurality of levels.

Long-term conclusion

A long-term approach should incorporate a land-based healing approach following a methodology which prioritizes direct consensus (consensus heard as unified sense or feeling) among the grass-roots majority and honors the intuitive gifts of local people who know and love the land and all that it grows.

This study proposes but one aspect of livelihood rehabilitation—a drop in the churning ocean of conflict. In the spirit of conflict transformation, its scope is holistic and ambition for change is horizontal in its growth pattern. It proposes an example of a small—and symbolic— industry (soil health remediation and natural fertilizer production) that is based on an upheld conversation flowing from the imaginary Mrauk-U Confluence for Peace and Understanding. The ecology workshops it proposes should be taught therapeutically, as a medium through which traumatized persons can work out their concerns as they holistically come to light.

Epilogue

The silence of Aung Sang Suu Kyi does not discriminate against the Rohingya: as a sensitive poet, philosopher, and politician, her wordlessness powerfully echoes the absence of rights of all Burmese people oppressed by the military regime. The stakes are too high to risk certain incrimination with shifting her focus on this fiery controversy. As the presidential election approaches, the government in place has amended the constitution to disqualify her participation on the basis of her personal relationship to the West; Suu Kyi's late husband was British and their two children hold British passports. The democratic platform has crumbled; but, as a woman of fierce hope and resilience, she has joined the parliament to give

her dissident democratic voice as a beacon of difference undoubtedly standing out amidst the monotony of the military junta majority. With Buddhist patience, she waits for the balance of power to turn. Suu Kyu is reported to have recently confided in an unnamed political analyst:

> *"I am not silent because of political calculation. I am silent because, whoever's side I stand on, there will be more blood. If I speak up for human rights, they (the Rohingya) will only suffer. There will be more blood."*

In this bleak political and legislative reality, she stands alone; like the Rohingya Muslims, in their situation, are alone. But the admiration and hope of millions of people who immaterially gather around her representation belong to another more mundane reality—of intergenerational education, of personal belief and of many individual choices towards greater independence from governmental instability—that slips between the cracks of the wide-cast net of military dictatorships.

At the tail end of 2014, Indonesian religious leaders from both Buddhist and Muslim communities arrived in Yangon to meet with their Burmese counterparts. Though muted within the country itself, the great suffering of the Rohingya has a far-off audience. After tension exploded in Rakhine in 2013, thousands of Rohingya have fled by boat to the shores of Indonesia, Sumatra, and Malaysia, where they face utter uncertainty and vulnerability. With compassion towards these refugees, a documentary film has been made in Indonesia with the distinct intention to illustrate the possibility of peaceful Buddhist and Muslim coexistence in their Muslim-majority country. More interestingly, this documentary parallels the central spire of this paper: the power of sacred sites to manifest interconnectedness. The essential difference between this paper and the documentary is the specific site held in common by ancient Muslim and Buddhist traditions: Borobudur temple is located in Central Java instead of the volatile Rakhine state's Mrauk-U, where Muslim and Buddhist faiths anciently intertwined.

Social media and the internet has become a safe haven for documentation and organization. The diligent efforts of the Rohingya Bloggers (a collective of journalists, scholars, and laypersons independent from international media) has been the most persistent outlet giving voice to the unspoken news of this genocide. In early November 2014, a colloquium on "Four Decades of Systematic Destruction of Burma's Indigenous Muslims" was convened by Harvard at Cambridge University, where Maung Zarni (a founding scholar of the Rohingya Blogger) and Indian philosopher and economist Amartya Sen spoke alongside Rohingya refugees who had come to present their direct experience.

The UN continues to speak out for the Rohingya as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. On December 28th, 2014, the U.N. General Assembly approved a resolution urging Burma to provide "full citizenship" to the Rohingya Muslim minority and to allow them to travel freely throughout the country. The resolution also urged the government to give the Muslim minority the righto to call themselves Rohingya instead of categorizing them as "Bengalis"—a name that implies that they illegally migrated from Bangladesh. Nevertheless, international economic sanctions have already been lifted from the developing Burmese economy—specifically, ones enabling foreign banks to do business in the country—rewarding the military before having actualized its promises to reform human rights policies.

The Rohingya remain systematically denied of public services, education, health care, and the right to travel beyond their displacement camps and detention centers. Absent from the census of their Burmese homeland, subject to violence and hate speech, the Rohingya are nonetheless recognized as global citizens with an undeniable relationship to other unprotected peoples, near and far, who belong to the acutely Fourth World awareness of historical suppression by inhuman economic policies put into place by oppressive governments.

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Proud granddaughter of Buddhist monks and Vietnam war survivors, Valérie E. Ng. recently returned from three years living in rural Cambodia in the outskirts of the temple city of Siem Reap and near the retreating jungle's edge bordering Laos and Vietnam. She joined the Center for World Indigenous Studies as an associate scholar with the intention of continuing with what had originally called her back to Southeast Asia: the desire to honor global interdependence and the shared interests of humanity. Over the last several years, she has been actively engaged in biological remediation projects (regenerative degraded landscapes through only natural means), food resiliency workshops, and the knowledge of traditional medicines. As a French-language translator and amateur mycologist, she spends her time inspired by her maternal grandparents, who passed on to her a lifelong love of languages and forest mushrooms.

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