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Citizenship and Genocide Cards: IDs, Statelessness and Rohingya Resistance in Myanmar

Yuriko Cowper-Smith^a

BOOK REVIEW

Natalie Brinham. *Citizenship and Genocide Cards: IDs, Statelessness and Rohingya Resistance in Myanmar*. Routledge, 2024, 258 pp. ISBN: 9781032799261 (paperback).

HISTORY Published 2025-04-07

Rohingya did not come to the region; imperial powers, states, borders, immigration rules, and identity documents came to the Rohingya. (p. 3)

Can you imagine being denied the right to ride a bike or write an exam at school? What if you could not walk from one neighbourhood to another in your city, unless you passed through dozens of checkpoints with the correct IDs or bribe money? Can you imagine armed security forces regularly showing up at your home to perform household checks? Can you picture being erased from existence if you were not home at a particular hour, the stroke of a pen striking you off the family list and banishing your right to reside in your home country? Can you imagine a crushing crescendo to the violence, with the wholesale destruction of your village happening before your eyes, forcing you to undertake a dangerous cross-border journey to one of the largest refugee camps in the world?

These scenarios seem dystopian. However, as described by Natalie Brinham in **Citizen-**

ship and Genocide Cards: IDs, Statelessness and Rohingya Resistance in Myanmar, the Rohingya community of Rakhine State, Myanmar, has contended with this reality for decades. Focusing on the intersection of ID cards, statelessness, and genocide, Brinham's main argument, which she expertly weaves throughout her writing, is that over time, the Burmese state has weaponized ID schemes and utilized them as a tool to marginalize the Rohingya population to the point of genocide.

This review first offers a succinct summary of the key chapters. It then critically evaluates its merits by discussing the main themes and highlighting the areas most significant to the book's overall influence in the fields of statelessness studies, state crimes, and, more broadly, global governance.

SUMMARY

After the introduction in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 puts forward Brinham's rich methodology, including narrative interviews, focus groups,

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and participant observation in Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia. She explains how analyzing participants' personal stories about state identification is valuable for understanding how statelessness and genocide are connected. In this chapter, Brinham recounts a family story related to a land tenure document told by a participant named Gulam. In doing so, she shows that these documents do not only tell a story; instead, they exemplify how the state has destroyed Rohingyas' ancestral roots in Rakhine State. In Chapter 3, Brinham argues that viewing state bureaucracies as neutral impedes us from understanding statelessness as a deliberate design. This is ultimately a problem on a global scale because this paradigm of neutrality then guides how international organizations that work on preventing statelessness and ID schemes deal with them.

Brinham's meticulous and scrupulous research is on full display in Chapter 4, where she details how ID schemes, from the British colonial period to Burma's independence, have been used to control people in British India (including Burma). She describes how Britain's empire-making utilized colonial categories to identify, enumerate, and categorize people according to imperial imperatives, such as controlling internal movement, building economies, and extracting a workforce. She labours to show readers how these colonial practices left legacies in the layout of today's ID schemes. Chapter 5 provides an essential explanation of the ID scheme used during Burma's immediate post-colonial period when Rohingyas were considered full citizens of the newly independent country. In this chapter, the author includes narratives from people who retained physical IDs from this period and family histories of these IDs, demonstrating that they can serve as evidence of later state crimes. Chapter 5 also provides an

indispensable backdrop to Chapters 6 and 7 by outlining the sociological process of genocide, whereby state ID schemes were a technology used to "reorganise national identities and social relations in such a way as to destroy Rohingya identity and establish a new exclusive national identity without Rohingya" (p. 12). Chapter 6 focuses on the National Verification Card (NVC), the last state ID scheme implemented with great violence and manipulation of the population. Brinham writes, "The NVC card remained in all Rohingya narratives, a powerful symbol of the state's attempts to destroy Rohingyas' belonging and identity, and an indication of Rohingyas' capacity to unite as a group to resist such attempts" (p. 148). Chapter 7, rounding out this part of the analysis, details how physical destruction of Rohingyas as a group was intricately tied to the symbolic destruction of the group.

Chapter 8, a key anchoring chapter of the book, is where the paradigm espoused by international policy approaches, mandates, and action plans, including UNHCR's iBelong Campaign and target 16.9 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with its push for legal identities for all, collides with Rohingyas' destructive experiences of ID schemes. Here, Brinham discusses UNHCR's historical involvement in Rakhine State and clarifies how incorporating legal identities in the SDGs buoyed the development of digital IDs into its own cottage industry, where they are viewed as "tools of freedom and liberation, the point at which tech, development, and human rights converged" (p. 199). At the same time, the universal IDs agenda saw an ally in the global push for integrated migration management. This period also coincided with Myanmar's political and economic "modernization" process, during which the international community was reluctant to say or do anything that

might hinder it. With all these convergence points, the context was set for “international support for the registration and national verification of Rohingyas and others” (p. 201).

The concluding chapter calls for more scholarship on statelessness. Drawing on examples from India, the Dominican Republic, Uganda, Tanzania, Mauritania, and Kenya, Brinham argues that Rohingyas are not the only ones who have found their national identity undermined by ID schemes and that more interdisciplinary research is needed.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

Each chapter in this book unfolds in a well-planned manner, building on the foundation set in the previous chapters to ultimately present a robust case for the links between ID cards, statelessness, and genocide against Rohingyas. With steadfast resolve, this brilliant analysis contains at least three significant and interconnected ideas. First, Brinham convinces us that state registration procedures can be a powerful technology for destroying and imposing identities. ID cards do not just reflect external facts about individuals; ID cards or the lack thereof can **produce** identities. As the author writes, in the case of the Rohingya genocide, there was a “very targeted nature of the removal, destruction and denial of documents” (p. 173), and “theirs [Rohingyas’] is a story not of being uncounted or undocumented, but being recounted, re-registered, and re-documented as something they were not” (p. 174).

Second, in analyzing how the state slowly produced Rohingyas’ statelessness, Brinham flips the popular idea that stateless people are “invisible” to the state due to oversight or neglect. She writes that throughout post-independence history, Rohingyas have been ultra-visible to the state because their existence (and the destruction of their existence) has been instrumental to the con-

ception of the state as envisioned by the post-independence military junta. Indeed, the stateless person is not a “technocratically manageable object of global governance” (p. 57) who is just hidden or unknown to the state. For Rohingyas, “their experience is not one of invisibility or state neglect that preceded persecution, but one of hypervisibility and persecution through state ID and registration practices” (p. 174).

Third, the author shows how being marked and persecuted through state ID systems contradicts the approaches to statelessness espoused by international organizations and the global development agenda. Indeed, as she writes, universal identification has significant momentum because IDs are seen as lifting “invisible” people out of misery. However, she recognizes that state IDs may become a way to **deny** citizenship rather than vice versa. Although international organizations largely perceive identity registration as promoting “pathways to citizenship,” registration could also be seen as a way to produce a noncitizenship status. By articulating these points, Brinham shows that the mere provision of IDs will never solve statelessness if the state is guilty of bureaucratic violence and citizenship stripping in the broader context of genocide. Simply, states are not impartial; by extension, ID schemes are not impartial. Brinham astutely recognizes that identifying and documenting people is not a panacea to resolving statelessness; pushing for legal identities for all may not be a good thing in and of itself.

I recommend reading **Citizenship and Genocide Cards** for at least three reasons. First, the author’s layered argument is systematic, unequivocally brave, and groundbreaking. Her contribution to academia is invaluable, and this book will become a heavily relied-on resource that scholars draw on to understand how statelessness occurs in the

context of state crimes. Second, not only is the book a substantial academic study, but it is equally significant for understanding how ID schemes function and how statelessness occurs, as well as for helping convince the world of the case of the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar. Thus, Brinham's work is helpful to a wide range of readers: beyond scholars, policy-makers, practitioners, members of the Rohingya community, and the broader public will learn or see their stories reflected in this work. This is intentional; Brinham writes in an incredibly accessible style while retaining the work's scholarly, interdisciplinary, and academic nature. Third, her participatory research methodology, which prioritizes including participant voices, is integral to understanding phenomena like statelessness that affect countless millions on a visceral level and how international policies and plans interact with those realities. Her work is a prime example of how participatory research can be conducted ethically and rigorously while supporting academic and social justice goals that align with the community written about.

I end with a thought on the timing of this book's release, which coincides with an increasingly fraught global climate. Imperialistic thinking, hoped to be a relic of the

past—at least in democratic societies—is returning with a fierce vengeance, and people made marginalized by structural forces, especially forced migrants, are being scapegoated for wide-cast and innumerable grievances. We need this type of clear-eyed, critical thinking to see past the fog and cut through the deafening noise that aim to distract us from truly understanding the accumulation of power in this world in order to understand how power dynamics function at the state and international levels, and how they play out on the bodies of everyday people. This book has changed my own thinking, and I hope it changes yours too.

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