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Abstract:

*“Hope is home”: Property, citizenship, and displacement in Rakhine State, Myanmar*

My research examines the role of post-colonial land and property regimes in the production of genocidal violence against the Rohingya community in Myanmar. Relying on archival research and over fifty oral history interviews with displaced Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and Japan, I argue that the genocide against the Rohingya community must be understood as a spatial process. I organize my argument into four parts- first, focusing on the Wasteland Rules of Arakan of 1839 and 1841, I argue that interventions in land and property in the colonial era formed a key vector of how racialization of communities unfolded. Second, I focus on the model village program (named the Natala village program) that aimed to resettle Buddhist communities on Rohingya land along the border with Bangladesh to show post-colonial land and property interventions hastened the dispossession and displacement of the Rohingya community. Third, I argue that combined with dispossession of private land and property, restrictions on customary access to commons such as forest, pastureland, marine, and urban commons served as a conduit of impoverishing and displacing Rohingya communities. Lastly, going beyond the national boundaries of Myanmar, I show how ideas of home and property belonging endure and circulate among Rohingya refugees in urban Japan. I conclude by taking inspiration from the Rohingya slogan “Hope is home”, which suggests that decolonizing land and property regimes are a central prerequisite to realizing the Rohingya right to return and citizenship. In this, my research contributes to the existing literature by examining questions of citizenship’s entanglements with land and property.