

“I always dream of my house when I sleep”

Rohingya Memories of Home

Photography by Md. Azad

The Rohingya people cannot forget the houses of their homeland. They loom large in Rohingya memory and color their dreams. Some wealthier families lived in *totta ghor*, elegant two-story wooden buildings, perched on stilts, with long open verandas and many elaborately carved windows to allow the cool air to circulate. Woven bamboo panels formed beautifully textured walls that created a feeling of airiness. Others lived in mud houses with thatched roofs in small peaceful villages where life was centralized around the community pond. Nature was close by, sometimes literally underneath the house where livestock could be berthed. Women and girls picked wild henna leaves to grind into *mohdi* paste to apply during festivals. Children stole fruit from their neighbors' trees and hunted for small birds in the forest. Wives and mothers cooked vegetables from the garden in the kitchen attached at the back of the house. Families were large and multi-generational. On hot summer days, they would gather on the verandas to rest in the breeze.

“I always dream of my house when I sleep”: Rohingya Memories of Home is part of the Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre embroidery collection. IOM has commissioned a group of 10 Rohingya women to express collective and individual memory through *fultola*, a heritage craft. Most drew their childhood homes. One drew her current shelter in camp; another captured her married home; and another imagined the “dream building” where she imagines herself living one day in downtown Buthidaung, Rakhine state. After sketching, the artists selected skeins of colorful silk thread, and stitched textures, patterns and shapes in vibrant, jewel tones to bring these memories to life.

Called *fultola*, or flower-drawing, embroidery is a traditional decorative art for Rohingya women and girls. Flowers were the standard motif, and embroidered pieces were imbued with contextual and symbolic meaning. Through utilizing their traditional craft to express cultural memory and identity, these Rohingya artists promote community healing, preserve their heritage, and imaginatively represent ideas of ‘Rohingyaness’ in the face of exile.

“I lived in a peaceful village
with many beautiful houses.
We had a two-story wooden house
with three bedrooms and a kitchen
attached to the side.
I miss my country so much,
especially my native village.”

FATEMA BEGUM, 25



“Once, when I was ill, my parents took me to see a doctor in downtown Buthidaung where there were many beautiful buildings. I used to dream of those buildings. One day, after going back to Burma and I have money, I will build my dream building.”

ZAHEDA BEGUM, 22



“In our village, there were different styles and kinds of houses. Our house was made of mud, but it was designed to look like a building. I am always missing it. I always dream of my house when I sleep.”

HLA HLA BEGUM, 20



“We had a sweet, two-storied home
made of wood with a thatched roof
and walls of bamboo fencing.
I grew up there with six sisters
and three brothers.
I wish I could go back there.”

MORIYAN, 16



“This is my house after I got married. I lived with my husband and in-laws in a two-story house with four big bedrooms. We lived upstairs and used the ground floor as a storeroom.”

ROKEYA BEGUM, 22



“We stored firewood and the livestock
underneath our house.
Embroidering my home brings
the memories back to me.
I hope I will see it one day again.”

SHOMSIDA, 25



“In my homeland Arakan,
we had a two-story wooden house
with four comfortable bedrooms
and a kitchen. It was beautiful.
I tried to draw my sweet home
with the art of embroidery.”

YASMIN, 25



“In Burma, I lived in a muddy building with muddy walls. Now I live in the camps in a shelter given to us by an NGO with three bedrooms and a kitchen. I embroidered the shelter where I live now. I don’t want to remember my old mud home.”

UMME HABIBA, 16



“We had a two-story wooden house with a thatched roof and woven bamboo fencing. We had five bedrooms, two landings and a kitchen. Our house was on stilts because the waters would rise during the monsoons.”

SALEMA, 22



“In my childhood home,
we had *moricha gaas* vines
climbing up the side.
I lived there with my parents,
five brothers and a younger sister.”

SHOMIMA, 28

