“We are Like Water in Their Hands”

– EXPERIENCES OF IMPRISONMENT IN MYANMAR

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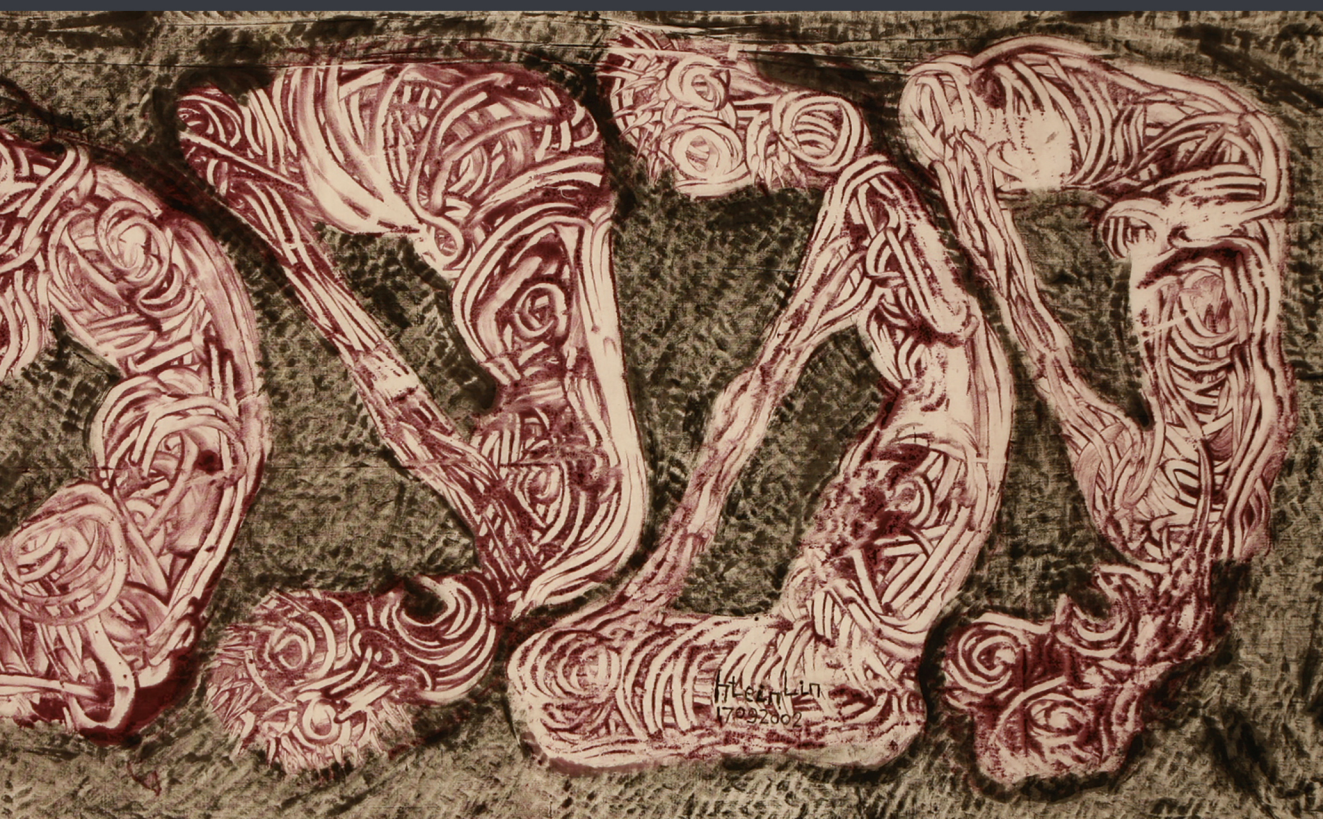

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Front page: *Ponsan Tain* painted by artist Htein Lin in Oh Boh Prison in 2002. © Htein Lin.

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Note on authorship: While the front page of this dissertation only lists one name, significant contributions have been made by several people. The photos in this dissertation have been taken by U Letyar Tun, Ko Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Htike, U Pho Nyi Htwe and U Sai Minn Htein. Additionally, Michael Muelay has contributed to fieldwork as a research assistant. His contribution has been vital, not only with translation but also with his aid in navigating the field. While I have put together the words on these pages, the honour of this work belongs as much to them as to me. The responsibility of any mistakes on these pages fall on me solely, as they have not gotten a chance to contribute with corrections.

CONTENT

English Abstract

Prisons are institutions through which states exert social control and deprive citizens of rights; where entitlements of citizens are limited to the bare minimum deemed acceptable to a given state. Therefore, prisons are institutions which reveal core aspects of the relation between a state and its citizens. In authoritarian regimes, as Myanmar was in a very recent past, prisons are places in which people are subjected to extreme punishments. In the post-authoritarian state of transition Myanmar is currently in, legacies of past regimes linger and show their face in various forms. By studying experiences of imprisonment, this study approaches experiences of subjects whose lives are under an intense state control. As it explores their experiences, it takes the temperature of the transition as it explores what changes have occurred and what legacies remain from past political regimes.

Until recently, Myanmar was closed off to the world while under military dictatorship. For the last decade, however, major changes have occurred and a political space has opened up in which it has become possible for researchers to do empirical research within the country and in which the first ever prison research project could be launched. This dissertation is part of the project *Legacies of Detention in Myanmar*, which explores how practices in Myanmar prisons today are shaped by legacies from past regimes. This dissertation focuses its attention on those who have gone through prisons as it analyses experiences of imprisonment in Myanmar. To do so, it builds on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork with former and current prisoners and an action research project conducted with four former political prisoners and photographers.

The dissertation poses the research question: What experiences do prisoners in Myanmar go through and how are they affected by such experiences? This question is addressed through four publications. Paper I shows how penal practices of today are affected by legacies from the past through an ethnographic history

of the practices concerned with fetters, convict officers, amnesties and torture. Paper II shows that access to experiences of imprisonment depend on other factors than physical access to prisons. Paper III shows that liminal experiences in prison can lead to positive development or suffering, depending on the presence or absence of guidance and communitas and on whether these experiences are forced or voluntarily. In doing so, it shows that solitary confinement represent structural violence, which can lead prisoners to become 'unhinged' from a sense of self and reality. Finally, Paper IV discusses the role of recognition in post-liminal re-integration of former prisoners and their opportunities to re-establish their lives after release.

Through these papers and the synopsis surrounding them, the dissertation shows that prisoners go through liminal experiences which can affect them in various ways. Through theory on liminal experiences, the dissertation has identified inadequacies of prisons that make them inherently harmful institutions. Prisons represent forced liminal experiences, in some cases without the guidance of a master of ceremony and a communitas with whom to go through liminality. Furthermore, upon release, when prisoners are supposed to exit liminal experiences, the lack of proper post-liminal rituals that enable parity of participation through recognition, prevent prisoners from re-establishing their lives and becoming the law-abiding citizens prisons are supposed to mould them into.

In addition, the empirical contribution on prisons in Myanmar shows that legacies from the authoritarian past are still practiced within prisons in Myanmar. As a prism on the state, the prison suggests that, while in transition, Myanmar has not completely left its authoritarian past behind. This suggest either a need for further reform if authoritarianism is to become a thing of the past, or it reveals a symptom of the shortcomings of the current disciplined democracy, which can lead to a return to authoritarianism in the future of Myanmar.

Acknowledgments

Like most major accomplishments, producing this dissertation has demanded the effort of a great number of people. Some of them have been indispensable for the project. It simply could not have taken place without them. Others have offered insightful comments, support and care along the way to further the process and make it bearable. To all of those who contributed to the project, I am immensely grateful.

First and foremost, I want to extend my gratitude to the current and former prisoners who participated in this study. Thank you for trusting me with your personal experiences.

Thank you also to the organisations of political prisoners who facilitated my contact with many participants, namely the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners and the Former Political Prisoner Society. Within the AAPP, I want to extend my personal gratitude to U Bo Kyi and U Htate Naing for engaging in countless meeting with me and my colleagues and to U Zaw Moe and his team of researchers for welcoming me as one of their own.

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I extend my gratitude to the Myanmar Prisons Department. As a prison researcher, interactions with prison services are sensitive endeavours. I am immensely thankful that my colleagues and I encountered people in the Myanmar Prisons Department who had the courage to engage with us when we were just unfamiliar faces, and who came to trust us enough to allow us access to their institutions, which were previously closed to researchers from the outside. I hope our collaboration will be the first of many the department engages in and that they will benefit those who live within the walls of prisons, staff as well as prisoners. A special thanks goes to the officers in Insein Central Prison, who facilitated my days within the prison. I realise it must have been daunting to be faced with this alien visitor whom you had to accompany based on orders from above, I hope your fears have been alleviated. Thanks also to the UNODC and Kriminalforsorgen, who facilitated exchanges with the Myanmar Prisons Department and created opportunities for mutual exchange of experiences. I also extend my gratitude to the teachers, dhamma helpers and yogis at Dhamma Joti Vipassana Meditation Centre, for letting me become a student and yogi and allowing me to gain needed first-hand experience before conducting interviews about meditation with prisoners in Insein Central Prison.

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Nwe Ni, U Khin Maung Win, U Kyaw Min San, U Kyaw Lin Naing, Ko Aung Lin Oo. And, especially, U Than Htaik, thank you for library tours and long discussions in teashops and beer stations, with the sweet smell of Red Star cheroots hanging in the air.

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prison research in the Global South. Special thanks goes to Ines Hasselberg, Carolina Boe Sanchez and Natália Corazza Padovani for inviting me to contribute to their special issue of Cadernos Pagu. Lastly, I want to thank the team at Border Criminologies, Oxford University, for giving me a channel through which to disseminate my research as it took form.

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Prologue

On the 8th of July 2018, the photo exhibition 'Beyond the Prison Gate' was launched in the Healthcare Centre for Political Prisoners (HCPP) on the outskirts of Yangon. It took an hour to get there by car or bus from downtown Yangon. On the way, the surroundings changed from the hustling and bustling of downtown streets lined by market stalls, to green fields appearing in between the houses and oxen occasionally crossed the road. Out there, the fields were cut into quadrant squares and small groups of houses were placed here and there in between the fields. In one of the groups of houses, a three story building towered over the other houses, this was the HCPP.

When the exhibition took place, the HCPP was a new health clinic, it had been running for around a year, and was still dependent on donations. The exhibition was held at the HCPP, so the rent for the space would contribute to the centre and be a way of giving back to the community of political prisoners; since the photographers, the people who were depicted in the photos and the people who helped prepare the exhibition all belonged to this community. The exhibition was held on the second floor, which had not yet been put into use.

The exhibition spread over two rooms. In each room, the photos were divided into different photo stories and accompanied by photo texts with information about the people in the pictures. In the room to the right of the entrance, were photos by two photographers. The photos by Ko Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Htike, which showed young activists still involved in the fight to improve the country. Several photos showed them engaged in anti-war demonstrations, a struggle which was still ongoing at the time of the exhibition. One photo showed one of the activists at court, being scolded by an officer for giving an interview to a journalist with a camera. The photo captured the ambivalence of the current political situation – the country had opened up enough to be able to show a photo like this at an exhibition, but freedom of speech was limited, in the event in

this picture and beyond. Another series of photos by Phyoe Dhana referred to struggles of the past. It featured U Nay Win who was imprisoned the first time in 1989 for being a member of the communist party, the same party as the beloved leader General Aung San, father of the nation and of the current State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. One of the photos of U Nay Win also speaks to the future. In it, he was joined by his daughter and grandson. Ma Phyoe Phyoe Aung, his daughter, is also a former political prisoner. At one point, father and daughter were both held in Insein Central Prison and had family visits between the different wards inside the prison. The future will show if the legacy will live on and the grandson will grow up to become a political prisoner, or if the struggles for improvement of the country will have succeeded sufficiently by then to allow him to live his whole life in freedom.

At the other end of the room was a series of photos by U Letyar Tun. These showed the family members of fallen political prisoners, who died before they were released from prison. In the photos, the family members hold portraits of their loved one and memorabilia belonging to them. One is holding a small mirror, which her son used while in prison. Another is holding a page from a calendar of the day her husband died, the release slip they produced, even though they were releasing a dead body, and their marriage certificate. The family members on the photos ranged from old parents, some of which have passed away by now, to young people who lost their parents. U Letyar Tun hopes to go back to the families and take new pictures that show how the families have changed with time, while the memorabilia and portraits remain the same, as if frozen in time.

In the second room of the exhibition were photos by U Sai Minn Thein and U Pho Nyi Htwe. The day before the exhibition, U Pho Nyi Htwe told me he would bring his parents to the exhibition. Finally, he said, he could show them something good that happened because of his time in prison. On the day of the exhibition, he introduced me to his 80-year-old mother. His eyes where sparkling and his back straight. I had never seen him this proud and happy before. Several times during the launch of the exhibition, I observed him watching the people who were looking at his photos.

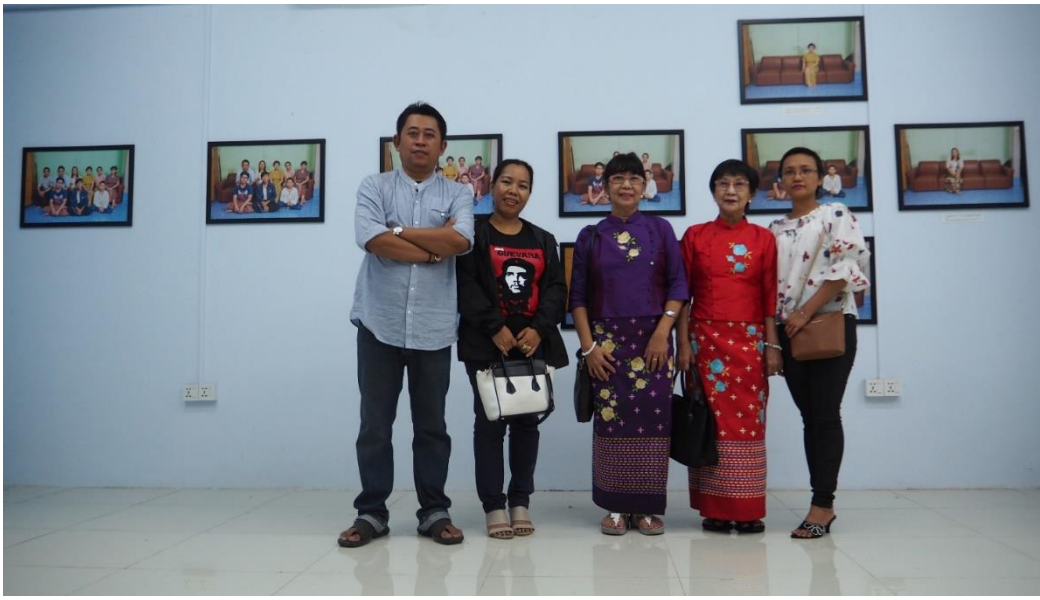
Among U Pho Nyi Htwe's photos was a series of U Pho Kyaw, who was also present at the exhibition. The pictures showed him struggling for everyday survival, working by the side of the road, eating in a simple teashop and relaxing in his home. On this day however, it was a different side of U Pho Kyaw we saw. His long hair was nicely done in a ponytail and he was wearing a button-up

shirt. While the pictures showed him as a survivor, maybe even a victim, on this day we saw him as a hero who fought for democracy. He stayed near his photos for a large part of the day and engaged with people who came to see them.

Another person from one of U Pho Nyi Htwe's series was also present. U Kyi Soe, who was depicted while selling lottery tickets and volunteering in the clinic. The walls of the clinic were painted in a characteristic bright blue colour. The photos of U Kyi Soe assisting a doctor featured a bright blue wall, exactly like the one they were hanging on. The bright blue colour rendered the close connection between the photos and the place evident to those who came to see the photos. When observing the people who viewed the pictures of U Kyi Soe, it was clear to see that the friends of the HCPP recognised him. Like the faces of iconic leaders of the student uprisings are known to everyone in Myanmar, his face was here an iconic representation of the kindness of the volunteers.

U Kyi Soe also featured as volunteer in one of U Sai Minn Thein's photos. The photo was part of a series about U Ye Lwin, a famous musician who had been a patient at the clinic. The photos in this series also featured a visual echo of the blue walls, as exhibited *in* and also exhibited *on*. Only a few days after the exhibition was launched, U Ye Lwin passed away due to the liver cancer he had received treatment for in the clinic. As he was a famous musician, numerous news articles, viral Facebook posts and a wake attended by many, commemorated his death. Following his passing, the photos became a tribute to him, at which the visitors of the exhibition familiar with his fate paid their respect.

The people depicted in the other series by U Sai Minn Thein were also present at the launch of the exhibition. This was the Sanchaung family. This series of family portraits depicted the sad story of how the family was separated by the regime and sent to various remote prisons across the country. Here they were all together again, happy and smiling. It added a layer to the experience of seeing the photos that so many of the people depicted in them were walking around among the rest of the audience.



The Sanchaung family in front of the photos that depict how their family was split up by imprisonment. The photos of the family that they are posing in front of and the photo above were taken by U Sai Minn Thein.

During the launch, we held a short opening ceremony. I gave a speech in English and Daw Phyu Phyu Thin, the director and founder of HCPP shared her opinion on the exhibition in Burmese. U Letyar Tun, one of the photographers, translated both so everybody understood.

The room quieted down and I started my speech. I talked about how recognition had appeared as such an important topic in my research that I wanted to engage further with the topic. The photographers and I hoped to be able to contribute to recognition in some small way through this exhibition. I emphasised that these photos only show the stories of a few of the former political prisoners, but that we hope they speak to issues others too will find important and that they will create a space to share experiences of other former political prisoners. With this exhibition, we tried to create an understanding of the challenges political prisoners face after release and the important role they played in the history of Myanmar. I thanked the many people who had helped create the exhibition – those who helped set up the exhibition and the people in the photos. At some point during the preparations, I counted more than twenty people working in the exhibition space. Lastly, I

congratulated the photographers for their great work and thanked them for all the effort they had put in.

After I finished my speech, Daw Phyu Phyu Thin took over. She began with the words: 'These are not beautiful pictures…' and went on to describe how the life of former political prisoners after release is not always beautiful. Yet, what is normally shown in pictures of former political prisoners are the heroes and survivors, and often only the few who went on to become famous. These photos, she recounted, were more like a documentary, which showed the real life of former political prisoners, the ones this clinic tries to help. Such pictures can sometimes be depressing, but they are important to look at. Lastly, she added that she was happy to see this was also an occasion for old friends to reunite.

After her speech, I noticed Daw Phyu Phyu Thin speaking to one of my Burmese friends, also a former political prisoner. I asked how they knew each other. They laughed and explained they had been in hiding from the military regime together. Alongside the exhibition, numerous reunions where taking place. If these former political prisoners could not find solace through recognition from the state, at least they could find it through the community with those who shared their experiences.

This prologue has taken the reader on a guided tour through the launch of the photo exhibition 'Beyond the Prison Gate', which was created through action research as part of this project. This guided tour is an invitation for the reader to open their mind and imagine the sensory aspects of experiences exhibited in this dissertation. Later chapters will add more details about the methodology of the action research project, which resulted in the exhibition and analysis of the data it generated.

This dissertation exhibits experiences of imprisonment of Myanmar in multiple ways. These experiences are the topic of systematic analysis, they have been explored through long-term fieldwork and they are presented in quotes from former and present prisoners. In addition, they are presented visually through the photos of an exhibition, which was produced as part of this project. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'to exhibit' means: '*To submit or expose to view; to show, to display.*' Sub-definitions add, that to exhibit can mean: '*To manifest to the senses, esp. to the sight, to present (a material object) to view.*' (7a) and '*To present to mental view*' (7b, Oxford English Dictionary 2019). In line with

these definitions, this dissertation invites the reader to experience what will be exhibited on the following pages in a multitude of ways. Readers are invited to use their senses. To use their sight as they scan through the letters and explore the pictures; and also to imagine the feel, sound and smell of what is exhibited on these pages. Imagine the hot days in Yangon, the sound of pouring rains, yells of street merchants and chants of monks that have been the background during so many of the interviews and the experienced recounted in them. Imagine the sweet smell of tobacco and spices as a cheroot is lit and gives a prisoner a quiet moment in an otherwise demanding day; imagine the feeling as the smokes fill his lungs and he finds joy in the small act of resistance it is to light a cheroot in a prison where smoking is prohibited. Imagine the sweet taste on their lips, as prisoners take sips of cups of coffee, brewed on sachets of coffee mix that simultaneously represents a beverage and functions as a currency among those not allowed to hold money.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

We are like water in their hands, those were the words a former political prisoner used to describe the relationship between prisoners and prison authorities. With this Burmese proverb, he implied that the prisoners were fully dependent on the prison staff, like a handful of water would be dependent on a careful but firm grasp to stay in the hand. Water, however, continues to be, even if it seeps through the cracks and takes on different shapes than a handful. Similarly, this former prisoner described how he had disobeyed prison staff on multiple occasions, which had significantly changed the conditions he was subjected to. During his imprisonment, he spent many hours alone in a solitary cell. When he was let out for short periods to shower or empty the toilet bowl, he extended his stay away from the cell by refusing to return to his cell when he was ordered to do so. He refused to go back into his cell and thereby changed his day by adding more time outside the cell. Later in his imprisonment, under a less strict regime, he started planting vegetables in the yard. Upon seeing this, the prison authorities sent in other prisoners to plough the area to support the vegetable farming, which in turn supported the poor diet available to prisoners. Thus, while he described prisoners as *water in their hands*, as fully dependent on prison staff, it was clear from his account that even water can change the shape of rocks. In spite of his acts of resistance, the time in prison and his feelings of complete dependence on prison authorities had left him a changed man. He came into the prison as what he described as a *hardliner.* As an idealist who stood up for his beliefs and as someone who had played a leading role in the 8888 uprising. In prison, he changed to become a *softliner*, while still willing to stand up for his beliefs, he was now conscious of seeing things from both sides and the importance of striking compromises. After his release, he established a new life and did not take part in politics or activism again. He now dreamt of a quiet life, where he could live with his wife in a house outside the city and where he could play guitar and relax in his garden.

This dissertation is motivated by a strong sense of justice and an awe for the strength of those who survive extreme suffering. This motivation has led me to work with topics and contexts where injustices are commonplace and later to engage with prisons (Gaborit 2013; Gaborit and Jefferson 2013; 2015; Jefferson and Gaborit 2015). In this study, this motivation brought me to a previously unfamiliar country, Myanmar. Myanmar is a country in an extremely complex situation affected by legacies from past royal, colonial and authoritarian regimes; and where abolishing injustices that citizens face at the hands of the state, is an enormous task. In the prisons of Myanmar, people have endured suffering unimaginable to most. Some were silenced by death, but others survived to tell their story. Through the voices of these survivors, this dissertation explores how human beings go through experiences of suffering. It explores the kind of harm they were subjected to, by the state through penal practices, how these practices pushed them to the edge of the world as we know it and finally, how they managed come back to this world and be re-integrated into society after release, or, how they remain in a permanent state of liminality unable to come back.

For many years, Myanmar was closed off to the world, like a national prison. Only within recent years has the country begun to open up to globalisation. Within the closed borders of the country, confinement has been experienced by many. It was experienced by those in prisons, labour camps, IDP camps and prison-like institutions run by non-state actors. Prisons have played an important historical role for the country, as they have been passed on as a legacy from the colonial regime to the independent state. Within these institutions, penal practices have mutated and persisted across the colonial period, half a century of military dictatorship, and the current period of transition governed through 'disciplined democracy' as defined by the 2008 constitution. Moreover, since 1962 when General Ne Win and the military regime took power, the prisons have housed great numbers of political activists as political prisoners,[1] including the famous case of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. At this time, the prisons house 92,000 prisoners (as of 2018 World Prison Brief 2018) who live under scarce conditions and severe overcrowding. Myanmar therefore represents a unique case to study experiences of

[1] In this dissertation 'political prisoner' is used as an emic category used by those who identify as, or identified by others as political prisoners. This emic category mostly refers to pro-democracy activists who were imprisoned. Other conceptualisations of political prisoners do exist, and some have even debated if the term is useful at all (Llorente 2016).

imprisonment, one where confinement is of key relevance due to historical and political reasons. Furthermore, it is a case that has been inaccessible until recently. Only recently, after the reforms of the U Thein Sein government from 2011 and the transition to a civilian government in 2016, has a political space emerged in which topics that were previously taboo can now be discussed in public; once, to even speak about such topics represented a risk of imprisonment. In this context, it was possible to conduct the first-ever prison research project *Legacies of Detention in Myanmar*,[2] and with this project, it was possible for me to be granted access to Insein Central Prison, as the first prison researcher.[3]

This dissertation explores experiences of imprisonment which prisoners go through. It explores what they go through while inside and what they become after release. It does so through the narratives of former and current prisoners collected during 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork. The accounts of prisoners have been explored through an abductive approach. Prior to fieldwork, *experiences of imprisonment* had been defined as the phenomenon of interest. The original research questions sought to explore these experiences as processes of subjectification. However, as the project progressed it was clear that subjectification was not the most suited analytical concept to understand experiences of imprisonment in this context. Conceptualisations of subjectification (Dreier 2009; Foucault 1982; 1993; 2010; Holzkamp 2013) have been developed within Western societies, within which common understandings of the self and the experiences the self goes through differ a lot from the Myanmar context. Thus, it became clear that to apply this concept, substantial theoretical developments were needed to make the concept fit the context in which it was applied. Rather than embarking on this theoretical project, the analysis below is empirically driven and applies concepts that fit the data. Thus, in between the first and second round of fieldwork, the theoretical framework was adapted and the focus narrowed to

[2] Legacies of Detention in Myanmar is a five year research project at DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture, which includes two more researchers based in Denmark and four researchers and two PhDs based in Myanmar. The project is funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[3] Previously some NGO researchers have gained access to evaluate conditions in confidential reports. These researchers have however not been allowed to publish result publicly and thus contribute to the generation of knowledge on prisons in Myanmar. Previous published research is either historical (Thet Thet Wintin 2006; Brown 2007b) or in one case, conducted mainly by public servants under conditions with little freedom of speech (Le Le Win et al. 2010). 'The first researcher' in this context thus means the first academic researcher with freedom to publish results independently on prisons in Myanmar in recent times (1988-2018).

experiences of solitary confinement and meditation inside prisons, and recognition and re-integration after release. Finally, after fieldwork was concluded, 'liminality' was identified as the main analytical concept in the study of experiences of imprisonment and the theoretical framework was elaborated upon (V. Turner 1979; van Gennep 1960).

This dissertation approaches experiences with inspiration from multiple sources. It takes inspiration from Lisa Guenther's (2013) conceptualisation of critical phenomenology, in which she builds on Husserl but goes beyond him and classic phenomenology by adding an intersubjective conception of the self. The critical phenomenological approach is combined with the late work of Victor Turner (1985), in which he proposed the potential of experience-focused social sciences. Moreover, this dissertation builds on the works of Bruno Latour, William James and Max Weber, all of whom paved the way for working with experiences that are mystical, out of the ordinary and religious as concrete social phenomena within social sciences (Weber 2013; James 2012; Latour 2005). And lastly, the conceptualisation of experiences within this dissertation draws inspiration from the ontological turn which invites playful experimentation in regard to what can exist within various ontologies (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Castro 2014; Mol 2002b).

With inspiration from these scholars, experiences are defined within this dissertation as embodied and sensed but also as more than that. They are thoughts, rational as well as irrational, they are shaped by personal history and ideas about what objects and subjects are being sensed and they shape personal histories of those who live through them. Some experiences are conscious and can be put into words, as is the case for the experiences recounted in interviews. Some too are unconscious, and though we might be unable to put these into words, they affect us through the ways we perceive that which is conscious to us and through moods and intuitions. Experiences are more than just rational reflections upon sensory inputs. Some are rational, but some too are irrational, incoherent and shaped by emotions. Some appear meaningful, while others remain chaotic and devoid of meaning. Because experiences are all of the above, they cannot be measured according to some outer material reality. Such evaluation would correspond to measuring the quality of great novels by counting the number of different letters in the alphabet presented in them. Experiences are more than that; they are the meaning that arises when letters are presented in a certain order, they are the musicality of well-written

phrases and they are the writing in between the lines and the mental imagery great poetry can evoke (see Chapter 4 for further conceptual and theoretical discussions).

This study is guided by the following research questions to explore how different practices of imprisonment have been lived through by prisoners under different regimes in the period 1988 to 2018. The research questions consist of one main research question which runs throughout the dissertation and four sub-research questions which are addressed in one research paper each.

What experiences do prisoners in Myanmar go through and how are they affected by such experiences?

1. *How are experiences of imprisonment in Myanmar today shaped by legacies from the past?*

2. *How can experiences of imprisonment be accessed through ethnographic methods?*

3. *What factors cause differences in experiences of imprisonment?*

4. *Why do some prisoners experience being stuck in prolonged liminality unable to re-establish their lives after release?*

Question 1 is addressed in Paper I, through an ethnographic history of selected penal practices. This paper describes conditions in Myanmar prisons today and connects them to the historical legacies of dynastic, colonial and authoritarian periods. Question 2 is addressed by Paper II, which argues for a reconceptualization of access in ethnography. It presents lessons learned from doing fieldwork in a field with limited access and suggests that doing research outside prisons allows for building trust, following participants across different spaces and observing the participants in situations where they have more agency, and shows how this offers the potential to provide a different perspective on personal experiences. Question 3 is taken up in Paper III, which discusses similarities of spiritual experiences of receiving visits from spirits and hearing voices while in meditation and in solitary confinement inside prisons. The paper argues that these are liminal experiences, and that absence of some of the structures present in rites of passage when in solitary confinement explains why spiritual experiences in

solitary confinement are ascribed with more suffering than similar experiences during meditation retreats inside prisons. Finally, Paper IV addresses the final question in a discussion about the challenges political prisoners face after release and their repeated calls for recognition. The paper shows that when imprisonment is understood as a liminal experience, a post-liminal ritual is needed in order to establish a new status to enable re-integration after release. In the absence of such, political prisoners find themselves struggling and calling for recognition. Additionally, the paper argues that justice will not be served through recognition of their identity as political prisoners alone, but also calls for re-distribution which grants them access to parity of participation in society.

As a publication-based dissertation, this work consists of two types of texts: four publications in which the analytical contributions are presented and a synopsis, which frames the papers within a general project and shows the connections in between them. Ordinarily, the synopsis is followed by publications in appendices. In this dissertation however, papers are integrated within the synopsis to create a natural progression where papers build upon each other. The synopsis and the publications are written with different audiences in mind, depending on readers of the respective journals, and the publications are supposed to be stand-alone components. Therefore, this dissertation is a somewhat repetitive and polyphonic experience to read as one collected work. This is the nature of publication-based dissertations.

In addition to the textual 'voices' of this polyphony, there are visual 'voices'. As part of the research on recognition and re-integration after release (research question 4), an action research project has been conducted during fieldwork. The project was conducted with four former political prisoners, who took photos of the everyday lives of other former political prisoners, to document their life after release. The project culminated in an exhibition of 60 photos in Yangon, 40 of which have later been exhibited in Copenhagen. The action research project is described in detail in Chapter 3 (section 3.2) and informs the analysis in Paper IV. The photos will feature throughout this dissertation. They are presented as visual interludes in the form of photo stories told by the photographers. By each photo story, a short description adds information about the photos. The photos communicate to the reader, now becoming a viewer, in a different mode than the text and add a layer to the sensory experience of this research. The reader is invited to experience this dissertation as it exhibits experiences of imprisonment in Myanmar in multiple ways.

The dissertation is organised as follows. Firstly, the project is positioned in Chapter 2, through an introduction to the context (Myanmar) and research field (prison research). The introduction is immediately followed by the first publication: *'Royal, Colonial and Authoritarian Legacies in Myanmar Prisons of Today - An ethnographic history of punishment'* which is accepted for review in the book Asian Prisons, edited by Mahuya Bandyopadhyay and Rimple Mehta, to be published at Palgrave Macmillan. This publication connects ethnographic accounts of prisons today, to historical descriptions of the history of the present. As such, it familiarises the reader with life inside prisons in Myanmar, while presenting analytical insights about the historical developments of penal practices in Myanmar.

Chapter 3 presents reflections on methods, ethics and researcher positioning. The chapter is followed by the second publication: *'Looking through the Prison Gate: access in the field of ethnography'* published in English and Portuguese in Cardernos Pagu, 2019, no. 55. The chapter presents general reflections on methods used for this study, while the paper discusses the methodological dilemmas that arose as a consequence of not having access to prisons while doing prison research. The dilemma caused reflections on what 'access' and 'the field' is when doing research about prisons.

Chapter 4 returns to the theoretical framework already touched upon in previous chapters and unfolds it in detail. It fleshes out the connections between a critical phenomenological approach to reflexive ethnography, the ontological turn and a liminal conceptualisation of experiences of imprisonment. The chapter is followed by the two remaining papers. The first paper is *'Visited by Spirits – 'betwixt and between' in meditation and solitary confinement in Myanmar'* which is under revision after first review (minor/major revisions) to be published in Incarceration. The paper discusses similarities between the experiences of hearing voices in meditation during imprisonment and in solitary confinement, and shows the potential of applying a liminal understanding to explain why guidance, communitas and degrees of voluntariness affects whether experiences are possibilities for personal growth or lead to suffering. The final paper *'Beyond the Prison Gate – Recognition through photography with former political prisoners in Myanmar'* is under review for Visual Anthropology. This paper explores the potential of combining a liminal understanding of imprisonment with different conceptions of recognition, to understand the

challenges prisoners face in regard to becoming (re-)integrated after release.

Lastly, Chapter 5 discusses the connections between the four papers and combines their findings to present the contribution of this dissertation and discuss future implications of these findings. The overall contribution of this dissertation speaks to gaps in existing literature on three levels: empirical, methodological and conceptual. The dissertation contributes to the empirical gap of underrepresentation of prisons in the Global South in prison research and absence of empirical research in Myanmar prisons from 1988-2018. Further, the findings contribute to understandings of access within ethnography when working with human experiences, demonstrating how 'the field' of ethnography corresponds with the field in which research participants live and is not limited to the place in which the phenomenon studied takes place. Thus, for prison research, the field stretches beyond the walls of the prison to the places where people live before and after imprisonment. Lastly, this dissertation has argued for the potential of a liminal understanding of experiences of imprisonment and demonstrated its use in practice through application in Papers III and IV. In addition, application of the concept of liminality in prisons research, has led to theoretical developments by combining existing literature on liminality with existing literature on recognition and by proposing the continuum between forced and voluntary as a new dimension to the categorization of different types of liminality.

VISUAL INTERLUDE I

The photos in this project have been created through action research under the title Beyond the Prison Gate with four photographers. The photos in the project present the everyday lives of former political prisoners in Myanmar anno 2018. In this dissertation, they function as interludes that add a visual dimension to the dissemination and encourage the reader to engage with the material on multiple levels (for methodological considerations of the project, see Chapter 3, for analysis of selected photos see Paper IV)[4]. The current interlude introduces the photographers.

Photo: Chris Peken

Sai Minn Thein aka Sai Bo Bo Soe (1981) was arrested on August 23, 2007 for protesting against the rising fuel prices in the prelude to the Saffron Revolution. He was sentenced to four and a half years on multiple charges. He served almost four years in Hkamti Prison before his release on May 17, 2011.

[4] Repetition occurs between photo texts in interludes and Paper IV and between the detailed description of the action research project in Chapter 3 and the shorter description of the project in Paper IV. Lastly, the final blog post in Annex 6 'Beyond the Prison Gate – Recognition through Photography and Action Research in Myanmar' includes rewritten versions of the photo texts and thus also entails repetition. While repetition occurs, the different sections have different foci in their descriptions. The visual interludes focus on adding a visual layer to the dissertation, Chapter 3 focuses on methodological reflections, Paper IV offers a short description of the project but is focused around analysis of the process as a process of recognition and lastly, the blog post in Annex 6 was written with public dissemination in mind.

Through his pictures, Sai Minn Thein shows the double punishment many former political prisoners faced. Not only were they imprisoned, they were sent to remote prisons far from their families, just to aggravate the suffering. In his family portrait series, he elegantly shows how imprisonment tore a family apart for years. One by one, members of the family were arrested and placed in various prisons across the country. Those outside prison had to travel to faraway locations across the country just to visit their family members in prison. Today the family has finally been reunited despite their history of forced separation.

In his second series, he depicts a struggle that many political prisoners face after their release: dealing with health issues that have arisen after years of living in prison. Inside prisons, most political prisoners survive on a poor diet and minimal medical care. After release, many continue to suffer with ongoing health issues caused by poor treatment in the prison.

Photo: Chris Peken

Pho Nyi Htwe aka. **Myo Kyaw** (1973) was arrested three times for his involvement in the pro-democracy movement in 1990, 1991 and 1996. Each time he was charged under the emergency act, section 5J. He was last released in 2002. After release he continued the fight for democracy as video journalist during the Saffron revolution. In 2010, he was forced to go underground, but continued his work as a video journalist. Today, he works as an editor for a news journal.

Through three different stories, Pho Nyi Htwe depicts how various political prisoners live very different lives after release,

although they still have a shared cause. His pictures showcase survivors – those who have faced tremendous challenges and loss, but who continue to struggle for survival. These former political prisoners continue to fight, in part to make a living, by selling lottery tickets or weighing people on the street, and also for the good of the nation, by volunteering in HCPP and remaining politically engaged.

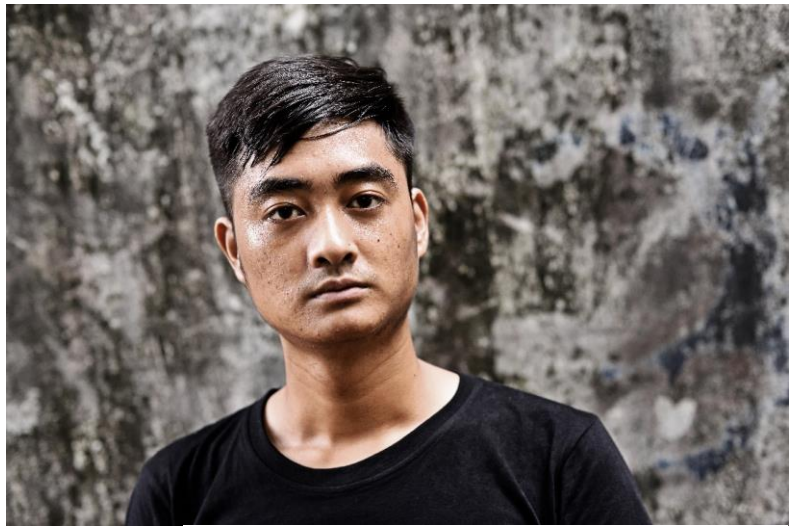


Photo: Chris Peken

Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Thike (1994) was arrested during the uprising for a new education bill in 2015. He spent one year detained in Thayerwaddy prison while awaiting judgement. He was finally released in April 2016. Today Phyoe Dhana is a photographer, and he is still strongly committed to supporting the development of an inclusive, just, and democratic society in Myanmar.

His pictures showcase the strong spirit of former political prisoners who manage to maintain a sense of happiness in spite of all the challenges they have faced. They find happiness in love, in kindness to others, and in a continued commitment to creating a better future for Myanmar.

There are many generations of political prisoners in Myanmar. Some of which go far back and are not alive to be photographed today. Phyoe Dhana's pictures reach across different generations of political prisoners still alive. The first of his subjects was arrested in 1989, while the last still has an ongoing case.

Photo: Chris Peken

Letyar Tun (1972) was first arrested in 1988 while working for the newspaper Nyi-nyoot-yay (To Unite). After his release, he joined the All Burma Student Democratic Front on the Thai/Burma border. He was re-imprisoned in 1998 when sentenced for high treason. He has spent 18 years of his life in prison, 14 of these on death row. He was finally released on November 19, 2012, via a presidential amnesty in connection with President Obama's visit to Myanmar. Today he is a writer, editor and photographer.

The idea for Letyar's photos sprung out of the project "Framing the Transition." This series show the families of political prisoners who died in prison holding portraits, documents, and other belongings of their deceased family members. In this ongoing series, Letyar continues to photograph these families over the years, poignantly reminding viewers how the lives of the family members go on as the remains of the fallen political prisoners stay the same. The pictures give voice to fallen political prisoners and raise awareness of the fact that these people gave their lives in the fight for democracy.

CHAPTER 2

Prison research in Myanmar

This chapter serves as an introduction to the context of this study on three levels. First, it describes the context in which fieldwork was conducted, to place the accounts by prisoners that will follow in later chapters within this context. Secondly, a short state of the art of prison research presents the context within which this research is placed. Finally, the chapter is concluded by the first publication in this dissertation, and in it, the first bits of analysis. Paper I is a book chapter for the edited volume Asian Prisons (edited by Mahuya Bandyopadhyay and Rimple Mehta) which presents an ethnographic history of selected penal practices in Myanmar. The paper explores four penal practices: the use of fetters for restraint, convict officers, amnesties and torture, which have been identified through ethnographic data and traces them back in time through a genealogically inspired analysis. As a whole, these two sections and Paper I provides the reader with a thorough understanding of the context in which this study is placed.

In addition to the literature reviewed within this chapter, each of the publications present relevant literature on their respective topics. Thus, Paper I presents historical sources on Myanmar prisons, Paper II presents methodological literature on ethnography, Paper III presents literature on spiritual experiences and solitary confinement and finally, Paper IV combines existing literature on recognition with that on liminality.

2.1 Finding the field – doing fieldwork in Myanmar

> On the 5th of February 2018, I landed in the airport of Yangon to commence my second round of fieldwork. The airport had changed since I was last there. I walked through unfamiliar hallways in the

new building until I reached the area in front of the immigration gates, where only a glass wall divide arrivals from families and friends picking up their loved ones, I was happy to spot a familiar face. It was Myo Naing[5]. He was a former political prisoner and taxi driver and he had helped me during the two pre-investigation trips before I started fieldwork. I was happy to see him. As we drove through the city to the apartment I would stay at, he pointed out landmarks on the way. The first was right outside the airport, he told me this is a military compound, it used to be an investigation centre, he had been detained there. He only said he was detained; I knew he would have been tortured during interrogation. Along the way, he pointed out several sites of old military interrogation centres. I realised his mental map of the city was very different from what I saw around me, it was painted with the bloody history he had lived through. We passed Inya Lake, and I remembered the story he had told me the first time I arrived in Myanmar, when we drove past the northern shore. There, at the banks of the lake, the military and police had beaten up hundreds of students and pushed them into the lake in the Inya Lake Affair in 88. Today, the bank is a well-kept lawn with flowers beautifully arranged into the words 'welcome', in Burmese and English. The brink of the lake is lined by benches where students hang out and couples cuddle up.

Downtown Yangon is a vibrant place. Colour, scents and sounds can be overwhelming to a Scandinavian at first. There are many people in the streets. People on their way to somewhere, people selling goods, boys playing chinloun (cane ball), and groups of street dogs. The streets are lined with a mix of old colonial buildings and new high-rises built on crony money. In between them, trunks of huge trees that seem so old that they outdate even the colony, spread their branches. On the sides of the trees, there are shrines where people give offerings to the Nat spirits, the animist belief that continues to be practiced alongside Buddhism. Since Buddhism is the main religion, Pagodas, pointy temples, are also present throughout the city. Most famously, the Shwedagon Pagoda, which can

[5] Pseudonym.

> be seen from most places of the city, due to its vast size, its placement on a hill and its bright golden colour. Shwedagon is the most auspicious pagoda, not only because of its size and historical importance, but also because a lock of the Buddha's hair is said to lay under the pagoda.

This section serves to give a short introduction to the context of this study, it aims to give a taste of the flavours of Myanmar, a brief introduction to the political context and the main organisations with whom fieldwork was done. It is out of the scope of this section to give a thorough introduction to the history or current situation in Myanmar. For a more details on the historical developments concerning prisons in Myanmar see Paper I.

Myanmar, formally named Republic of the Union of Myanmar and formerly known as Burma has a population of 55,622,506 (estimate 2018). It is a melting pot of different ethnic groups, 135 of which are recognised as ethnic groups within the country. With them, they bring different religions – Buddhism being the majority, followed by Christianity and Islam. Animistic beliefs are also present, either in their pure form or in combination with the previously mentioned religions (Central Intelligence Agency 2019). The combination of Buddhism and animistic beliefs is very common. This composition of the population can be attributed to the geographical placement of the country by the Zomia (South East Asian transnational highlands) in an area where various ethnic groups migrated either as nomads, for trade, or to avoid being under the governance of various kingdoms (Scott 2009). Due to the isolationist politics of the previous authoritarian regime, Myanmar remains among the poorest countries in South East Asia. Approximately 26% of the population live in poverty (Central Intelligence Agency 2019).

The modern prison system in Myanmar was created by the British colonial regime from the 1820s. The system gradually developed as the colonial power established their rule over the territory that is known as the country Myanmar today. The British established the basic structures for a prison system: brick buildings, many of which are still in use today, and the legal framework of the penal code and the Burma Jail Manual (1883), which still applies. After independence in 1947, the prison system was handed over to the Burmese authorities, who continued to govern prisons by the rules established by the British.

Even before prisons existed in Myanmar, when punishment was corporal and confinement only took place while waiting for the real

punishment, punishment was used as a political tool to control the population and punish enemies of the king (Thet Thet Wintin 2006). During colonial times (1820s until 1947), the British imported the 'modern prison' and unruly subjects now faced imprisonment. Since 1962, when the authoritarian regime led by General Ne Win and the military took hold, counter regime uprisings began to take place and those opposing the state became political prisoners. This practice was continued by succeeding regimes during the uprisings in 1988, 1991, 1998 and 2007 and led to large numbers of political prisoners (Brown 2007b; Lintner 1990). Even today, in a political climate often described as a transitional and disciplined democracy, new political prisoners are still being arrested, though their numbers are counted in the hundreds instead of thousands, as was the case in the past.

Today, the main characteristic of prisons in Myanmar is the vast number of people they house. The prison population has seen a steady increase – an upward curve that is only broken by the yearly amnesties, which release hundreds, sometimes thousands of prisoners. As of 2018, there were 92,000 prisoners in Myanmar according to official figures. 12.3% of them were women (World Prison Brief 2018). This percentage is high when compared to the world average, but standard within the region, where drug trafficking by women is common (Jeffries 2014). The uneven distribution between men and women in the prisons is also reflected in the data collected for this project. Since majority of the participants are male, male pronouns are used when writing about prisoners in general and female pronouns used when speaking specifically about women prisoners.[6]

Inside the prisons, prison management struggle to provide healthcare and a decent living standard for a large number of people, on a scarce budget. Most prisoners live in dormitory cells, often with more than 100 people in the same room. When congestion is at its worst, they have to sleep back-to-back, only able to lie on their side, and only allowed to turn when everybody turns at once. The food served twice daily lacks nourishment. Many prisoners therefore supplement their diet with food from outside, brought by their families during visits. Families bring more tasteful curries, dried fish and fish-paste (*ngapi*) to add taste to the prison food. Prisoners who do not receive family visits have little access to supplements to their food. Some however do receive food from

[6] When speaking about researchers, female pronouns are used, since the main researcher in this project is female.

fellow prisoners, are able to work for food or have the financial resources to buy food from others unofficially, since prisoners are not allowed to have money inside the prisons.

The prison provides some activities for rehabilitation or reform. Among these are work, meditation and school. Prisoners being able to sit for the matriculation exam has been broadly publicised as a success story. However, when looking closer at the numbers, it is clear that very few prisoners out of the vast prison population sit for the exam (Kyaw Ko Ko 2019). For most prisoners, serving time means waiting for time to pass until release. Fortunately for some, many get released early on amnesties. This, however, leads prisoners to wait in uncertainty about their final release date. Sentences given by the court are harsh, but many get years cut off the sentence through amnesties (see annex 6 for further discussion of the use of amnesties, Gaborit and Jefferson 2019). The historical development and political consequences of the use of amnesties is discussed in Paper I.

While the prison conditions described above apply to the general prison population, this dissertation is also concerned with a special group of prisoners who live under special conditions: The political prisoners. Generally, political prisoners have suffered less from the high congestion rates, since they were isolated in special wards. In these wards, political prisoners stayed either away from all other prisoners, or as was the case in Insein Central Prison, with other special categories of prisoners, such as those serving a death sentence[7] or life imprisonment. In these special units, political prisoners stay in smaller cells. Sometimes in groups and sometimes in solitary confinement. Generally, the data collected for this project suggests that political prisoners often lived under better material conditions than other prisoners and received better treatment by prison staff. These better conditions, however, came at a high price, since political prisoners also had to deal with the Military Intelligence. Political prisoners where often arrested by Special Branch Police or Military Intelligence and taken to military investigation camps before their imprisonment. In these camps, they faced severe torture. In some prisons, Military Intelligence officers were present in the areas where political prisoners were housed. These officers were in charge of continued torture and humiliation of prisoners (AAPP 2005). This practice seems to have been phased out, but it has not been established when it ended or if

[7] Officially, capital punishment has not been carried out since 1988. People are however still being convicted with death sentences. Often these are later commuted into life imprisonment and in some cases prisoners are later released on a second amnesty.

it has been completely abolished. Possibly, the focus of the U Thein Sein government on decreasing military presence in government offices has contributed to the decrease of military staff in prisons.

This project is concerned with experiences of imprisonment – experiences that take place inside prisons that I had little access to during fieldwork. Of the 15 months spent in Myanmar, only three days were spent inside the part of Insein Central Prison where prisoners live, and one day was spent in staff buildings. This raised questions about what kind of prison research one can conduct outside prisons, where 'the field' of such research was, and what it meant to get access to such a field. All of these questions are addressed in Paper II. During fieldwork, I learned that much data about experiences of imprisonment was available outside the prisons. While I did not have the ability to observe everyday interactions inside the prison, I was now able to interview former prisoners who were outside the reach of the prison system, and therefore felt free to share parts of their experiences that might have otherwise gone untold. This section describes the context outside the prisons in which fieldwork was conducted.

Fieldwork took place between October 2016 and August 2018. At this time, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had recently been inaugurated as the new government (April 2016). Thus, when the fieldwork began, there was a hopeful atmosphere. For the first time, a democratic election had led to an opposition party taking over power and the country was now led by a Nobel Peace Prize laureate who had promised peace, democracy and respect for human rights – the things that activists had fought for for more than half a century. Within the period of fieldwork, however, hope turned to disappointment for many, as the new political leadership did not lead to the changes people had hoped for.

One of the main priorities of the new government was to create a peace agreement with the ethnic armed groups in conflict with the Tatmadaw (Burmese military). While the new government had the political power to lead such negotiations, they still did not have control over the military. Thus, the tri-party negotiations between the government, Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups (18 of which are included in peace talks with the government) proved too complicated a task to be solved within the first election period of the government. At the time of writing, the 2020 election draws closer, armed conflicts are intensifying and a peace agreement remains absent. Additionally, in 2017, fighting broke out in Rakhine State, leading to the exodus of Rohingyas who fled to

Bangladesh. The ethnic conflict in Rakhine and discrimination against Rohingyas has gone on for many years. In 2017, however, it escalated to a level previously unseen and resulted in more than 700,000 Rohingyas fleeing to Bangladesh and condemnation from the UN, who argued that the violence of the army represented crimes against humanity and lived up to several of the criteria for the definition of genocide (United Nations Human Rights Council 2018).

In addition to the horrifying consequences for the people suffering directly under this conflict, the conflict had an effect on Myanmar's international relations and the respect for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In connection with the conflict, she remained largely silent, and when she did speak, she often questioned the truths of the reports of violence in Rakhine. This conflict made it clear that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, in spite of her iconic status, was not stepping in to secure human rights and that she was not in control of the military. This led to disappointment among the activists, who had fought for democracy and supported the NLD, whom they expected to fulfil their hopes for the country. During fieldwork, many of the people I interacted with were thus conflicted about whether to continue to support the NLD and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, or whether to give in to the disappointment with their heroine and accept that they were still in a situation where their interests were not represented by the government.

In spite of the disappointment with the NLD government, major violations of human rights, and armed conflicts taking place, Myanmar has gone through a significant development. Since 2011, during the previous quasi-civilian government, led by the former General U Thein Sein, the country increasingly opened up to the outside. To improve international relations, the regime eased the repression of the people, by for example dismantling the censorship board, establishing a National Human Rights Commission, releasing significant numbers of political prisoners and allowing people who had previously been blacklisted to re-enter the country. This gave space for organisations concerned with political prisoners to start working in Myanmar. Three main organisations arose: Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), Former Political Prisoner Society (FPPS) and the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society (88 Generation). All three organisations were founded by former political prisoners and engaged in support of current and former political prisoners.

AAPP was established in Mae Sot, Thailand, where the founders were living in exile. From exile, a group of former political

prisoners started to document the situation of political prisoners in Myanmar and support them and their families. The organisation received international support and grew in size and scope. They expanded their activities to include counselling of former political prisoners. Initially, they advocated for the rights of political prisoners, and took part in the Scrutinizing Committee, which was supposed to identify political prisoners[8] for release on amnesty. As time passed, their focus on political prisoner have been somewhat expanded, as their advocacy now also focuses on prisoners' rights in general (AAPP 2016b; 2018). Through their documentation work, they have established themselves as a credible source of knowledge drawn upon by media, as well as by state agencies such as the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission and the Myanmar Prison Department themselves. During fieldwork, I interacted with the AAPP in several ways. Like others, I sought them out for information about the situation inside prisons. I had meetings with key actors in the organisation, interviewed staff and volunteers around their office, and at one point, I spend several days with their documentation team, looking through survey data, which they have collected from more than 3500 former political prisoners. Thus, the AAPP were a key gatekeeper to various types of data.

The FPPS similarly aims to support former political prisoners. They offer counselling to former political prisoners and their office in Yangon serve as an informal halfway house, where people stay just after release, when they come to Yangon from other parts of the country or simply when they are in need. The FPPS also participates in some advocacy and documentation activities, sometimes together with AAPP (AAPP and FPPS 2016). They are slightly smaller than the AAPP and have less involvement with international donors. During fieldwork, I visited the FPPS office on numerous occasions to do interviews and learn about the organisation.

The 88 Generation differs from the two other organisations, since it is not only focused on political prisoners. Rather, this organisation engages in the continued struggle to make Myanmar a better country. They do advocacy concerning democracy, human rights and education. Thus, they push for many of the same agendas as their comrades in the NLD, but have decided to do so as a CSO, rather than becoming part of the state. The founders of the organisation are U Min Ko Naing and U Ko Ko Gyi, who are

[8] The committee used the term 'prisoners of conscience' as the term political prisoners is not recognised by the state. The committee was disbanded in the beginning of 2015 and replaced by the Prisoners of Conscience Affair Committee in which AAPP representatives were not included.

famous activists, who took part in the 88 uprising and who were closely connected to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi when she first entered the political scene during the revolution. While the 88 Generation focuses on contributing to the positive development of the country as a CSO, key actors from within the group also wanted to join politics. After the disappointment in the lack of results from the NLD government, a political party therefore sprung from the 88 Generation under the leadership of U Ko Ko Gyi. The party is named People's Party and is expected to run in the 2020 election. During fieldwork, I went to the office of the 88 Generation once to learn about their work.

These are the three key organisations when working with political prisoners in Myanmar. Due to their advocacy and their interest in furthering knowledge about political prisoners in Myanmar, the presence of these groups made it easy to get in touch with political prisoners who would participate in research. Finding former ordinary prisoners to interview was, however, a different matter. For this, I snowballed my way through personal relations to individual former prisoners. Some political prisoners stayed in touch with ordinary prisoners and prison officers they had met while inside prison, and these contacts were of key importance for me to get in touch with ordinary prisoners.

Additionally, I went on two visits to Myitkyina in Kachin state, to scope out the possibility of doing multi-sited fieldwork. Due to the considerations about finding the field when doing prison research outside prisons (Paper II) and the practical reality of there being fewer former prisoners in a smaller town like Myitkyina, the idea of multi-sited fieldwork was abandoned. However, while in Myitkyina, I visited a drug rehab three times and interviewed six patients of the rehab who had previously been imprisoned. Myitkyina is placed, not only on the border of an armed conflict, but also in an area where drug production and consumption is very high. Therefore, the populations of drug rehabs and prisons coincide. While in Myitkyina, I also visited two camps for internally displaced people and interviewed two former political prisoners.

The fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted in a space where developments over recent years had allowed many to re-enter the country and enabled organisations working for political prisoners to be public about their work without facing reprisals. However, it was still a space where new political prisoners were continuously being arrested. These new cases mostly concerned freedom of speech and defamation. The new political prisoners

were people speaking up against the Tatmadaw or, in some cases, against named NLD politicians. Thus, during this period, Myanmar was a place where it was possible to work for democracy, justice and prisoners' rights, though there was an awareness that this work was not without risks. In this uncertain situation, three of the participants in this study, all former prisoners, were re-arrested based on cases on defamation and freedom of assembly. Two of them have since been released and one remains imprisoned at the time of writing.

2.2 The prison – state of the art of critical prison studies

The above section described the geographical and cultural context in which the study took place. This section positions the study within the context of prison research. When doing so, it is important to note that 'prison research' is not a discipline in itself, but a multidisciplinary field concerned with studying the phenomenon of prisons. The disciplines involved include sociology, anthropology, psychology, criminology, penology, zemiology and law. This section gives a brief introduction to this field of research and discuss how this project is positioned in relation to previous studies.

Though not established as an independent discipline, critical prison studies have existed for centuries. Cesare Beccaria wrote one of the foundational texts when he published *On Crimes and Punishments* in 1764 (2008). His critique originated during the Enlightenment and argued for the reform of punishments towards more humane practices. Parts of his critique, such as his critique of the death penalty, are still relevant today. Beccaria was writing at a time when the idea of the modern prison as we know it today was taking form, when societies were replacing corporal punishment with confinement, and before the first modern prisons had been imported to Myanmar by the British colonial powers. Critique of the foundational ideas of prison as punishment have thus existed since the creation of the institution itself.

After the modern prisons had taken hold and been established as a key component of 'the state', other scholars contributed with studies of how prisons came to be and what role they play in society today. Foucault famously added his genealogical study of the birth of the prison in *Punishment and Discipline* (1977). His analysis added important understandings of the power at stake in prisons

through surveillance and the docile bodies created through this system of governance.

Scholars continued to criticize the shortcomings of the prison system and its role in modern society. David Garland, by drawing on and going beyond Foucault's analysis, argued against punishment and for social integration. He concludes:

> Despite recurring Utopian hopes and the exaggerated claims of some reformers, the simple fact is that no method of punishment has ever achieved high rates of reform or of crime control – and no method ever will. (Garland 1990, 288)

In spite of the continued critique, prisons remain a corner stone of justice systems in most countries and imagining alternatives remains a challenge (Davis 2011; Pavarini and Ferrari 2018).

Most studies concerned with the role of prisons in society are written within stable contexts. Myanmar however, represent a different picture as it is in a state of transition. In her pioneering study of post-soviet prisons in Russia, Piacentini argue that societies in transition represent a particular case which call for special considerations. In her study, Piacentini argues that the human rights discourse, which is often used when talking about prisons in such contexts, has merit which can translate into improvement of life in prison, but that other factors must also be considered in the special case of transitional societies.

> The social relations that characterise prisons in transitional societies should not just be about exposing inhumane physical conditions. They should also be about assessing the overall patterns of imprisonment, their institutional context, cultural attachments to penal sensibilities and the general causes and consequences of imprisonment in exceptional societies. (Piacentini 2004, 186)

Piacentini argues that prison research, unlike the specific critique of physical conditions by NGOs, has the potential to cultivate critical reflection and 'deliberating fresh frameworks for punishment in transitional states' (2004, 186). As shown in Paper I, Myanmar has transitioned between a series of regimes (dynastic, colonial, authoritarian and 'disciplined democracy'). In such a context there is an immense need for prison research which enables Myanmar authorities to reflect and decide for themselves what kind of justice system they aspire to and what legacies from past regimes should be continued, reformed or abolished. This study sets out to

produce knowledge that can be the foundation for such reflections, in a context where a bulk of existing knowledge has been produced by NGOs calling for alignment with international human rights standards (Amnesty International 2016; AAPP 2016b).

This study is placed within the growing field of prison ethnography. The aim of prison ethnography, different from some of the more sociological or criminological studies, is to study everyday life in prison as it is, rather than as it is supposed to be (Jefferson and Gaborit 2015).

Through observations of everyday life inside prison, prison ethnographers have identified important aspects of prison life, which differ from Foucault's description of the total surveillance of the panopticon and Goffman's descriptions of total institutions (Foucault 1977; Goffman 1961). Through prison ethnography, researchers have shed light on aspects of the prisons otherwise not revealed by the not-so-all-seeing eye of the panopticon and shown how even prison walls are permeable and that no prisons are truly total institutions, in every sense of the word (D. H. Drake, Earle, and Sloan 2015; Jefferson and Gaborit 2015). On a global level, the trend of carceral expansionism, privatisation which moves prisons further from the state and into a system of neo-liberal logics, and increased criminalisation of immigration expands notions of crime. Prison studies therefore remain as relevant today as ever.

While the classic studies of Beccaria, Foucault and Garland described the role of prisons in state and society, prison ethnographers tend to focus on the inner workings of prisons and their effect on those who go inside. The history of prison ethnography stretches back to 1958, when Gresham Sykes published *The Society of Captives* in 1958 based on fieldwork in New Jersey State Prison and famously described 'the pains of imprisonment' (1958, 63–83) as consequences of various types of deprivations. The deprivation of: liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security. While Sykes identified these pains at a different time and in a significantly different context to that of Myanmar, it is worth noting that these deprivations still accurately describe what participants in this study have spoken of as the reasons for their suffering while imprisoned. Thus, while modern prisons were designed with an ambition of not only punishing, but also reforming or rehabilitating prisoners, it would appear they instead created a different way of inflicting pain on the convicted.

The research field of prison ethnography did, however, not steadily develop from the publication of Sykes. By the early 2000s,

the research field was so scarce that Wacquant argued there had been a *'curious eclipse of prison ethnography'* (Wacquant 2002). Others however, argued that this was a nascent field on its way to flourishing (Rhodes 2001). Little more than a decade later, the field had grown to a size which warranted the publication of *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography* (D. H. Drake, Earle, and Sloan 2015), which not only served as a guide for future studies, but also demonstrated the existence of a strong group of prison ethnographers who contributed to the volume.

Prison ethnography added important insights about the inner lives of prisons. Among these are the conceptualisations of quality of life and moral climates inside prisons (Liebling and Arnold 2004). Through ethnographic methodology, Liebling and her colleagues argued for the importance of the moral climate and positive relations among prisoners and between prisoners and prison staff as key factors in determining the quality of life of prisoners. Further, Liebling describes how prisons are particular institutions that bring out aspects of human nature:

> Both extremes of human nature – its capacity for good and evil – are present in prison in perhaps their starkest form. All variations on human behaviour – from our compassion and wisdom to abuse and lifethreatening violence – are observable, or implicit in the daily round of events… Prisons are raw, and sometimes desperate, special places. (Liebling 1999, 152)

These *special places* function as a prism for human nature, in which confinement of a group of people for periods of time push people to their extremes. What can be observed in prisons is also part of human nature outside, but just as a prism can refract and enlarge rays of light, the prison can allow us to see parts of human nature otherwise hard to see.

This study is not only placed within the field of prison ethnography, but also within the sub-field of prison ethnography in the Global South. Generally, most studies of prisons take place in Western contexts such as America (L. Guenther 2013; Reiter 2016; Rhodes 2015), the United Kingdom (Crewe 2012; Liebling, Arnold, and Straup 2011; McEvoy 2001) or Scandinavia (Smith and Ugelvik 2017; Ugelvik 2014). Research on Western prisons has a strong hold on understandings of 'the prison', due to the under-representation of studies of prisons in non-Western contexts (S. Armstrong and Jefferson 2017). However, across the world many prisons differ significantly from those in the West. Drake (2012),

for example, described how securitization and technology affect prisons in England, while in Sierra Leone, prison officers expressed their frustration with having to confine prisoners in a building that had no door (Jefferson and Gaborit 2015). Prisons in the Global South are often characterised by a poverty, which prisoners and prison staff alike have to cope with. This massive difference between the prisons from which theories about punishment are generated, and the prisons in the Global South calls for research on prisons in such different contexts. Some progress has been made within this field in recent years (Bandyopadhyay 2007; Darke 2018; Lindegaard and Gear 2014; Martin, Jefferson, and Bandyopadhyay 2014). Though progress has been seen in the generation of research about prisons in the Global South, the Asian prisons are still scarcely described by research (Bandyopadhyay 2016). In Myanmar, no prison ethnography had been conducted before this project commenced and little knowledge about the prisons therefore existed. The existing documentation consisted mainly of autobiographies (Aung Soe 2015; Kyaw Zwa Moe 2018; Ma Thida 2016)[9] and NGO reports (AAPP 2016b; Amnesty International 2016). The only existing research was based on document analysis, the most important contributions being the historical studies of the pre-colonial and colonial prisons conducted by Thet Thet Wintin and Ian Brown respectively (Brown 2007b; 2009; Thet Thet Wintin 2006; Thet Thet Wintin and Ian Brown 2005). This dissertation represents the first in-depth study of Myanmar prisons from 1988 to 2018.

Above the broader research field on which this dissertation is based has been described and narrowed down to the specific position of this research within prison ethnography and studies of prisons in the Global South, it is however also worth noting what this research is not part of. Firstly, it is not a criminological study, in the sense that it is not concerned with criminal behaviour and does not seek to add to the stigma faced by prisoners by identifying them as criminal. It is positioned within critical studies that see prisons as a tool for social control and crime as the breaking of rules defined by the state (Garland 1990). It is also not a comparative study. Though comparison of prisons in different context can bring about insights (Lazar 2012), this study is concerned with prisons in Myanmar in their own right. This project devotes its full attention to the prisons in this context, where little research has been

[9] See also Karen Connelly's 'The Lizard Cage' (2007) for an insightful description of life in Myanmar prisons in her novel based on thorough research with former prisoners in Myanmar.

conducted before. While it is not the focus of this study to compare prisons in Myanmar with those in other contexts, it should be noted that the aspects of imprisonment studied here are comparable with a variety of contexts. Thus, penal practices in all countries are affected by legacies from the past, ethnographers in all contexts can learn from reflecting upon how they access experiences of another person, solitary confinement has been shown to result in hearing voices in multiple contexts, and finally, re-integration in post-prison life has proved to be challenging for many. That these issues occur in contexts with vast differences, suggests that they are universally relevant to understandings of prisons and of human experiences. The universality of these phenomena also means that in some cases, it has been possible to draw on research from other contexts. When research from significantly different contexts has been drawn upon, it has been chosen based on its suitability within the context. Thus, when research from Western prisons is included, it is based on the observation that it is concerned with processes and phenomena also present in Myanmar contexts. This was the background for excluding subjectivity (Dreier 2003; Holzkamp 2013) and replacing it with an analysis of imprisonment as liminal experiences (Stenner 2017; V. Turner 1979; van Gennep 1960) in order to adapt the theoretical framework to a socio-centric rather than ego-centric context.

Finally, *experiences* of imprisonment are the primary focus of this dissertation. While resistance runs throughout the work as an underlying theme, actions of prisoners are not the primary analytical theme of this dissertation. This focus is an attempt to get closer to an understanding of what prisoners go through, but is not meant to suggest that other aspects of prison life are not relevant or that prisoners do not have agency or do not resist (Foucault 1977; Scott 1990). They most definitely do, in Myanmar and in prisons across the world. For an example of resistance in Myanmar, see the report by All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF) about the legal consequences a group of political prisoners faced after producing a newspaper while inside prison (ABSDF 1997). There are many examples of political resistance through grand gestures or everyday resistance inside prisons. These deserve attention in their own right (Bosworth and Carrabine 2001; Cohen and Taylor 1972; Crewe 2012; Gaborit 2016; Gaborit and Jefferson 2019), but are not the focus of this dissertation.

2.3 Gaps in existing literature

This dissertation speaks to three identified gaps in literature, one empirical, one methodological and one conceptual. Firstly, this study speaks to an empirical gap on research on prisons in the Global South, Asia and Myanmar in particular. While accounts suggest major changes have taken place in Myanmar prisons, there is little way of documenting these changes without proper documentation of the situation inside the prisons. For prisons in Myanmar, the only existing research is historical (Brown 2007b; May Sapai Kyi 2009; Thet Thet Wintin 2006) or, in the one case of recent empirical work, conducted mainly by state employees (Le Le Win et al. 2010). Knowledge about the situation in the postcolonial prisons therefore mainly stem from grey literature in the form of biographies of former prisoners (Aung Soe 2015; Ma Thida 2016) and NGO reports (AAPP 2005; 2016b; 2018; AAPP and FPPS 2016; Amnesty International 2000; 2016). Both NGO reports and biographies are written with the purpose of conveying a message, either that of the lessons learned while in prison or advocacy for prison reform. This dissertation represents the first empirical academic research on prisons in Myanmar. While most of the fieldwork was conducted with former prisoners, four days were spent in Insein Central Prison. This represents a unique access to empirical data, which is normally only available to those NGOs who vow to keep information confidential from the public before they enter the gates of the prisons (such as ICRC). Thus, this study represents a significant empirical contribution to a context in which little research has been produced before.

In addition, while the literature reviewed above approached a multitude of aspects of prisons from various perspectives; much research on prisons maintain a focus on the institution and its role in society. When prisoner perspectives and experiences are included, it is often as a tool to understand the inner workings of the institution. Bosworth and colleagues have previously criticised criminology for being devoid of humans, even as it describes institutions filled to the brim with human beings.

> Criminologists tend to present their analysis of the prison in the form of inhuman data. As a result, prison studies have become cold, calculated, surgical… These days, most criminologists make precision cuts – no blood – no humanity. Why? So no one will care. Keep it statistical, inhuman, no compassion. (Bosworth et al. 2005, 259)

This leaves a gap in the literature for research that explores experiences of prisoners in their own right. Thus, while Liebling aptly posed the question 'what matters?' to prisoners and prison staff, she did so in an attempt to understand the inner workings of the institution, and her work has later been adapted to become a tool for the evaluation of prison climate, used by the British prison service (Liebling, Arnold, and Straup 2011). This dissertation picks up where Liebling left off. It asks prisoners 'what matters' to them, not as prisoners but as human beings with a life before, during and after imprisonment. It stays with their experiences as human beings and relates it to literature on human experiences in other fields, rather than to literature on the prison experience. By doing so, it speaks to the empirical gap in prison research described by Bosworth and colleagues, a gap of research about prisons in which prisoners are not just prisoners, but human beings.

On a methodological level, this dissertation speaks to a gap in methodological reflections about how to understand experiences of imprisonment. Previous studies have pointed to the limitations of prison ethnography, even by stating that prison ethnography can only ever be 'quasi ethnography' due to the restrictions ethnographers face in prison (Murtagh 2007). Others have argued that the vast difference between academics and prisoners make prison ethnography an especially challenging endeavour (Wacquant 2002). Still, ethnographers continue to engage with this challenging context, and learn lessons from it that can be transferred to ethnography in other contexts (Gaborit 2019a; Reiter 2014; Rhodes 2015). This study reaches within and beyond the context of the prison as it studies experiences of imprisonment. It seeks to go beyond the prison wall to understand experiences of imprisonment as part of the life trajectories of those who lived through these experiences (Jefferson and Huniche 2009). This study approaches experiences of imprisonment not only by speaking to prisoners at different points in their life trajectories, before, during and after imprisonment, but also through shared experiences with research participants. Thus, the author took part in a ten-day Vipassana course on equal terms with other yogis, to become part of the communitas of yogis, of those who had gone through similar experiences. This enabled a change in the relation, not only to the yogis who took part in this specific event, but also those with whom the author later shared group sittings and with those interviewed in Insein Central Prison. When visiting Insein Central Prison, the shared communitas manifested itself, both in interviews where all

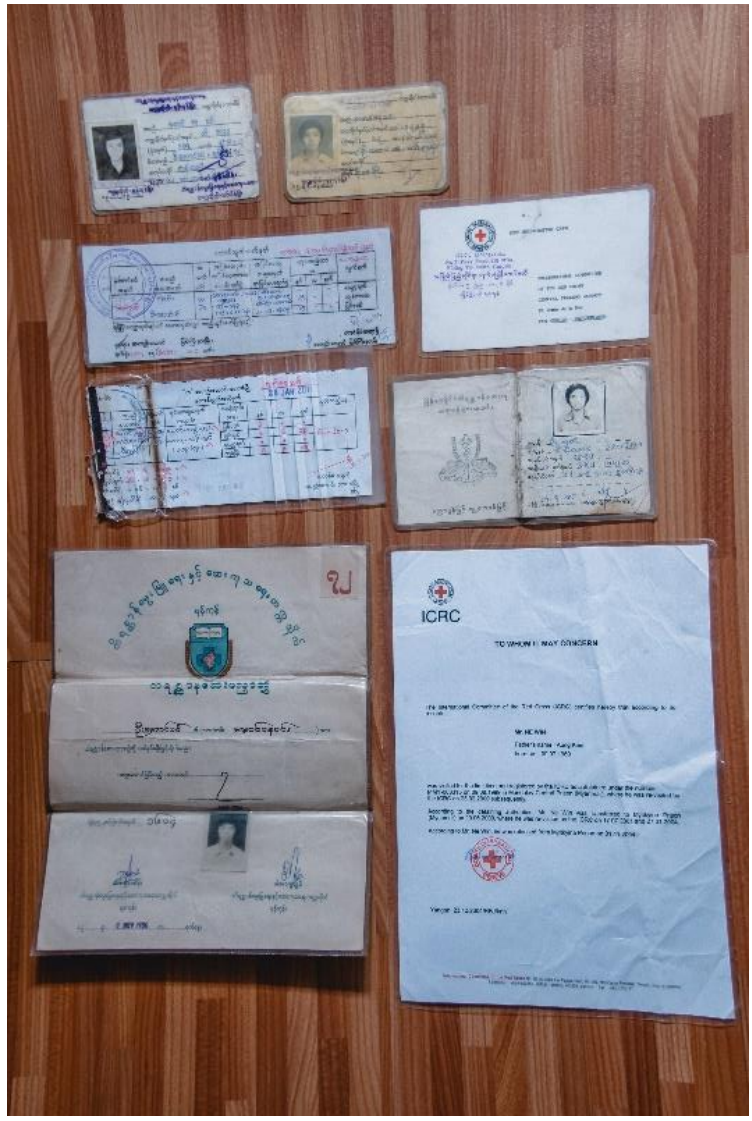
yogis inquired about the author's own meditation practice and during a shared group sitting with yogis who were going through a ten-day meditation retreat. This dissertation contributes to the gap in research on how to access other people's experiences through Paper II, which discusses the issue of access in ethnography.

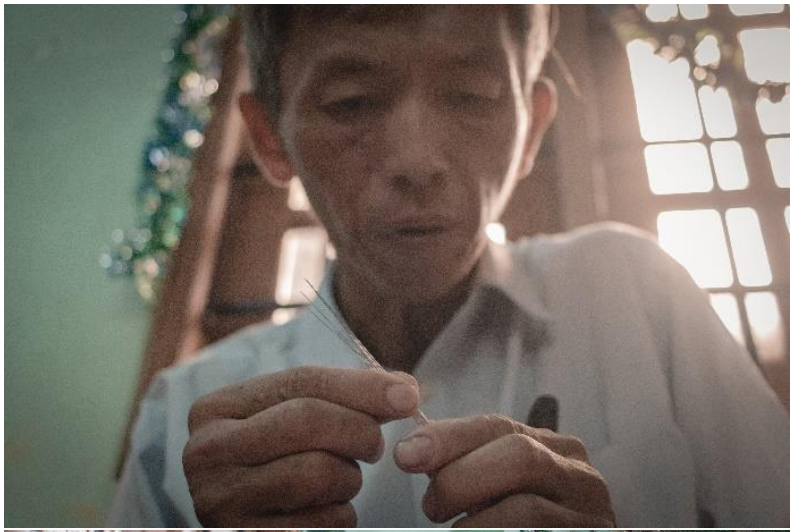
The third identified gap in literature is conceptual. This dissertation proposes that approaching experiences of imprisonment as liminal experiences represents a significant potential to further understandings of what prisoners go through. Only few have previously used liminality as a theoretically informed concept in studies of prisons (Green 2016; Jefferson 2016; Jewkes 2005; Moran 2013; Suttner 2010). Much is therefore to be gained by further research applying this concept within prison research. This dissertation argues that understanding imprisonment as liminal experiences contribute to understandings of the distinctive character of life inside prisons (Bosworth et al. 2005) and inform understandings of the challenges faced by prisoners at release, when they exit liminal experiences and are re-integrated in society or stuck in prolonged liminality (Stenner 2017; Thomassen 2015; V. Turner 1985). Additionally, the final paper shows the potential of bringing together the extensive literatures on liminality and recognition in studies of post-prison life or other experiences of prolonged liminality (Fraser 2018; Honneth 1996).

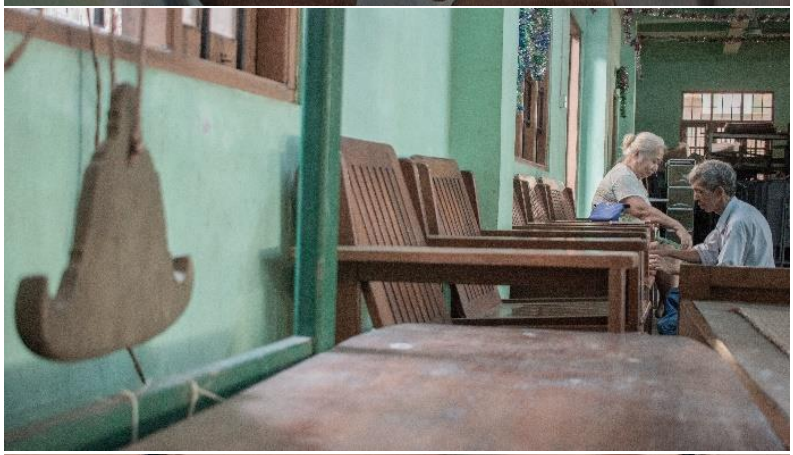
This chapter has placed the study within a geographical and theoretical context and has demonstrated the three gaps in the literature, which this study addresses. The chapter is followed by the first of four papers in this dissertation. The following paper elaborates on the description of the context of this study by providing an ethnographic history of prisons in Myanmar. The ethnographic history takes inspiration from Foucault's genealogical approach and combines it with ethnographic data about life inside prisons of Myanmar today, as it gives insights into the penal practices in Myanmar and their legacies from dynastic, colonial and authoritarian times.

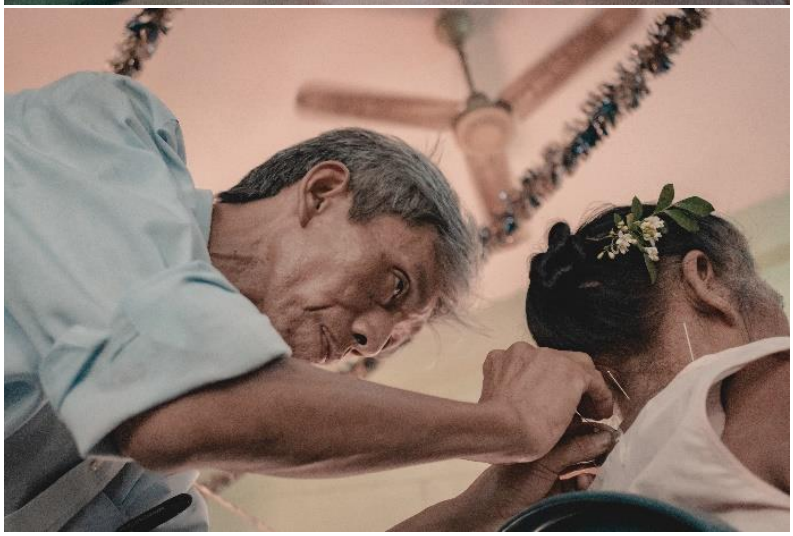
Visual Interlude II

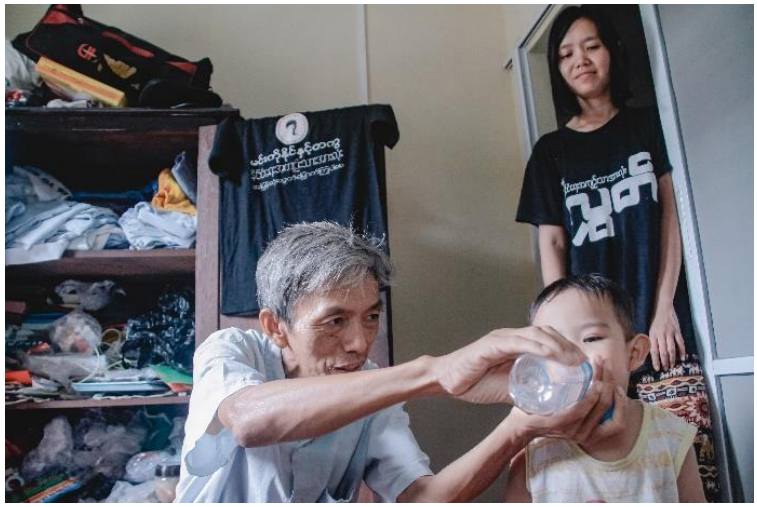
U Nay Win was first arrested in 1989 and served 15 years and 4 months for being part of the communist party. He was released in 2005 but arrested again in 2008 while burying victims of the Cyclone Nargis and charged with harbouring a fugitive. The fugitive was his daughter, Phyoe Phyoe Aung, who was fleeing charges for her part in re-establishing the All Burma Federation of Students Union. In the pictures, you see him together with Phyoe Phyoe Aung and his grandson and working as an acupuncturist offering free treatment to people in need. (Photo: Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Thike)

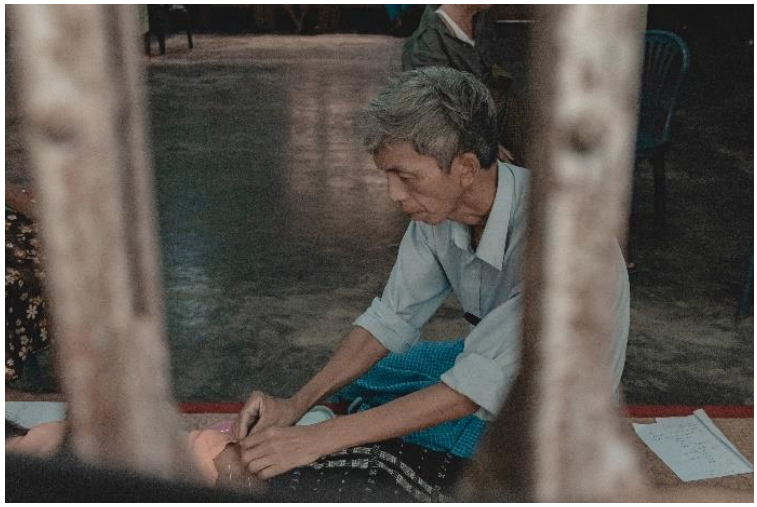


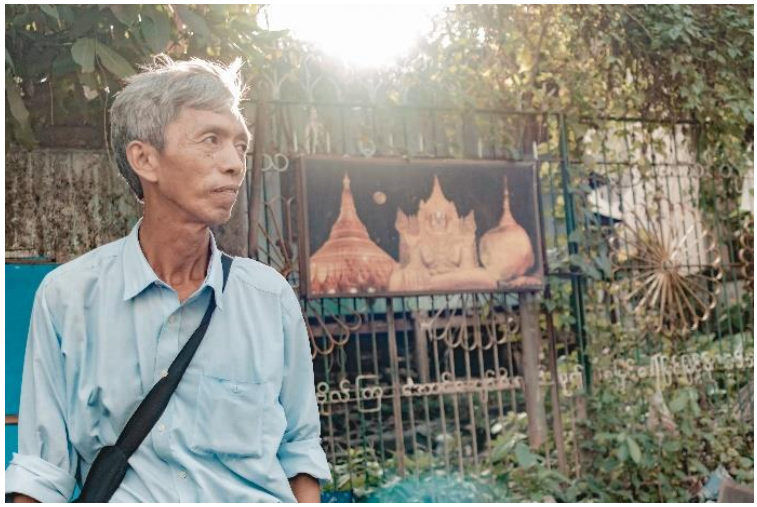












Chapter 3

Reflections on methods, ethics and positionality

This dissertation is a multidisciplinary project using a set of ethnographic methods. This chapter presents a short introduction to methods and data and a discussion of selected issues in connection with these methods. The set of ethnographic methods chosen for this project and the ways in which they have been used aimed at getting a deeper understanding of experiences of imprisonment.

Due to the abductive approach of this project, methods, methodology and theory work together through dialectic processes. Given the structure of this dissertation, methods are presented first, because they give an overview of the research project, which equips the reader for the readings to come. As a consequence of this approach, methodological considerations are distributed across Chapters 3 (on methods) and 4 (on theory).

Following the phenomenological tradition, the starting point for analysis is first person experiences. However, in accordance with the intersubjective definition of selves and thus also of experiences described in the introduction, first person experiences serve as point of departure for methodological reasons rather than representative of an ontological stance about the self. Selves are conceived as always intersubjective, as the first I observed is the Thou, in which the self is mirrored. Based on the perception of the other, an I is formed, and in continued interactions with others in this world, the I is shaped (L. Guenther 2013, 23–38). Still, the I remains the entry point through which human experience can be studied. Thus, in this study, the phenomenological approach is reflected in continued attempts to get closer to understanding the first person experiences of current and former prisoners in Myanmar. The intersubjective character of experiences reveals itself in the experiences recounted in the analysis and in the experiences of those who become 'unhinged' in solitary confinement in the absence of others (for further elaboration see Paper III and L. Guenther 2013). The

intersubjective character also revealed itself in shared experiences between researcher and research participants in the field and in the formation of relations between the two. In becoming part of the communitas (of those who have lived through experiences together) and community (of those gathered around a common third) the researcher herself participated in the intersubjectivity that shapes some of the experiences recounted.

> [U]nder liminal conditions the contrast between individual perspectives is lifted and the shared experience leaves common imprint. (Szakolczai 2015, 22)

While the researcher never experienced imprisonment on her own body, shared intersubjectivity informed understandings of accounts of experiences of imprisonment. Shared experiences took place when researcher and research participant went through significant liminal experiences together. When we transitioned from strangers to friends, from lay people to yogis, when we became those who created an exhibition, those who marked the thirty year anniversary of the 8888 or those took part in the first research interviews in Insein Central Prison. Such shared experiences left their mark on all of those who participated in them and allowed for the researcher to find new vantage points as she studied experiences of imprisonment (Gaborit 2019a; Gaborit and Jefferson 2015; Schatz 2009).

The present chapter consists of four sections. The first section is a brief description of the fieldwork and data created. The second section describes one specific part of fieldwork, the action research project, which resulted in the photo exhibition 'Beyond the Prison Gate', from which all photos in this dissertation originate.[16] The third section describes ethical considerations. Finally, the fourth section discusses positioning of the researcher in the field and in academia. This chapter is not an exhaustive description of the methods used or issues that are relevant to discuss, but a short discussion of central issues. The chapter is concluded by Paper II '*Looking through the Prison Gate: on access in the field of ethnography'* (Gaborit 2019a).

[16] With exception of some photos in Annex 6, which were taken by the author during fieldwork.

3.1 Description of data and methods

Before fieldwork started, I had already been to Yangon twice while preparing a funding application for the research project Legacies of Detention in Myanmar, of which this PhD is part. During these trips, we (co-supervisor Andrew Jefferson and I) assessed that there were former prisoners who were willing, even eager, to share their stories. We had established contact with organisations working with prisons in Myanmar (such as AAPP, FPPS, UNODC) and identified a starting point for snowballing during fieldwork. Funding was granted for Legacies of Detention in Myanmar and the project commenced in June 2016. In addition to the PhD leading to current dissertation, Legacies of Detention in Myanmar included funding for employment of four researchers at a local law firm (JFA), two Myanmar PhDs at Mahidol University in Thailand (who started in 2019) and the involvement of two senior researchers at DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture (Tomas Martin, as a full time post.doc for two years and Andrew Jefferson, as a part time Primary Investigator throughout the five year project). While the author has engaged in continued discussions and received feedback from other members of the team in Legacies of Detention in Myanmar, the data collection for current dissertation has been conducted independently.

When the project commenced, data was collected during fifteen months of fieldwork, conducted in two parts of respectively nine and a half months of exploratory fieldwork, and six and a half months of fieldwork focused on recognition, solitary confinement and meditation (October 2016 – June 2017 and February – August 2018). Fieldwork was conducted mainly in Yangon, though trips were taken outside the capital to scope out the possibility of doing multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus 2011). Based on these trips, it was decided to conduct fieldwork only in Yangon, due to the higher number of organisations working with former prisoners, which facilitated access to participants.

Through ethnographic fieldwork four types of primary data were generated: field notes, interviews, documents written by former prisoners and photos.

The main bulk of data produced consists of field notes. When possible, I recorded field notes by hand while observing. This was, for example, the case when I participated in meetings or public events where taking notes was possible for me and acceptable to other people present. In other cases, it was not possible to write notes because I was on the move or in the rain, or had similar practical challenges. In some cases, I abstained from recording

notes in the situation, to facilitate a more informal space for conversations. Finally, sometimes, when I thought I was off the clock, simply relaxing and spending time with friends, things would occur that I thought relevant to field notes. In such cases, I wrote a note on my phone to remember important details.

After events had taken place, I entered the field notes on my computer. When it had been possible to make handwritten notes during observations, this proofed to be advantageous both in regard to the level of detail, sometimes even quotes from people present, and as a trigger to my memory that enabled me to write the field notes days or weeks after the events had taken place. For instances where I was unable to, or chose not to write notes by hand during the events, I tried to write field notes as soon as possible after the events. This often meant the day after they had taken place.

The length of field notes varied according to the method of note taking. Thus, when I did a meditation retreat, during which yogis were not allowed to write, I wrote 13,742 words of field notes after the retreat, to describe 11 full days. When I got access to prison visits in Insein Central Prison, I was aware of the unique access I had gained and tried to squeeze every final drop of data out of the visit. For these visits, three days of 5-7 hours, I recorded 38,510 words and used up several notebooks and pens while inside. Thus, types of field notes varied depending on practical possibilities in the field, concern for how my behaviour affected the field and on the importance I attributed to the observed events (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

The field notes include descriptions of the events that took place as well as my reactions to them, both while they took place and sometimes additional reactions as I was entering the field notes on a computer (Davies and Spencer 2010; Jewkes 2012). They also include descriptions of my life in Myanmar, to ensure my way in to and relation to the field was documented to enable methodological reflections about my own position (for an example of field notes see Annex 2).

While most observations took place where I was physically present, there were also a virtual dimension to observations. Within recent years, internet penetration has increased dramatically in Myanmar and Facebook has become a major communication channel (Shadrach 2018). It was therefore a natural part of fieldwork to connect with people via Facebook and to receive information through debates on the platform. In a few cases were the interactions via Facebook recorded in field notes. However, as a means of communication, this social media platform has proven

valuable. Moreover, given the virtual nature of this platform, it has affected the process of leaving the field. Even after I physically left Myanmar, I have been in touch with some of the participants in this project. This continued connection represents a continuation of relations established in Yangon and continued access to information about the subject of study (Georgakopoulou, Spilioti, and Varis 2016). Such continuations on one hand represents a potential, for the human relations as well as the research, but on the other also complicates the process of taking a step back from the field to reflect on a different analytical level (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

The second type of data is interview data. The categorization of which conversations 'count' as 'interviews' can be complicated when doing long-term fieldwork. Many conversations I had could be described as 'unstructured interviews' (Kvale 2009), while also being interactions engaged in during participant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). For this project, I define the conversations in which I had an interview guide and created a detailed record, either in written notes or audio recording, as interviews. These interviews were of a semi-structured nature (Kvale 2009). I had prepared an interview guide, which consisted of one page of handwritten questions structured chronologically according to the experience of imprisonment (for examples of interview guides see Annex 3). Thus, interviews started at the arrest and finished with questions about release and thoughts about the future. This structure ended conversations by taking us back to the present situation and discussing hopes for the future. Since interviews often included emotional and traumatic experiences, I sought to end the conversation with the interviewee in a calm mental state, thinking about hopes for the future (more on this topic in the section on ethics below).

43 interviews were recorded in audio. These interviews included 1 former prison officer, 34 former political prisoners and 8 former ordinary prisoners. Some people were interviewed multiple times and one recorded interview was with a group of four political prisoners. 16% of interviewees were women, this is reflexive of the prison population in which 12% are women (World Prison Brief 2018). The gender distribution in these interviews is thus indicative of the gender distribution in prisons, rather than reflexive of a methodological choice to focus on any gender. 26 of the recorded interviews have been transcribed. The interviews that were transcribed have been chosen based on their richness (for an excerpt of a transcribed interview see Annex 4). In addition to

interviews with former prisoners, ten interviews were conducted with prisoners inside Insein Central Prison. These were recorded in handwriting.

Quotes appear verbatim to the furthest extend possible. In some cases however, quotes have been edited for grammatical errors to avoid such errors clouding the message. These corrections have been made based on my knowledge of Myanmar language (see section 3.4 for further elaboration). Due to major differences in grammar rules between Burmese and English, some mistakes are common when translating between these two languages or when a native speaker of one speaks the other language. One example of such systematic mistakes is the case of male and female pronouns. In Burmese, the pronoun is defined according to the one who speaks, while in English the pronoun is defined according to the one spoken about. This lead to a pattern in the mistakes made by Burmese speakers when speaking English. Such mistakes have been edited when occurring in quotes.

A third type of data for this project is the written accounts by former prisoners and prison officers. Several of the participants in this study had published memoirs about their experiences in prisons. Most of these memoirs are in Burmese and were only available to me after translation by research assistant Michael Muelay. Since these translations were unofficial and not checked by the authors, they have mainly served as background knowledge before repeat interviews. Furthermore, I was given the privilege of reading the diary of a political prisoner, written during the last three years of his imprisonment. Most of this diary was recorded in English, to make it harder for prison officers to read. The diary added rich detail to descriptions of everyday life inside prisons. These sources differ from the material created through fieldwork. The main difference being that here, the former prisoners and prison officers have deciding power as authors. Thus, they both added detail to the topics I identified as relevant during fieldwork, and spoke to other topics which the authors found more relevant. Such writings, together with convict criminology, add invaluable insights to prison research (Narag 2005; Newbold et al. 2014).

Lastly, visual material has been produced for the project. During fieldwork, I occasionally took photos in public spaces or at public events. These photos serve as documentation and are used in connection with dissemination (e.g. in blog posts, see Annex 6). Additionally, photos have been produced as part of an action research project (described below) for the exhibition ‘Beyond the Prison Gate’. These photos are taken by former political prisoners

and portray everyday life of former political prisoners in Myanmar in 2018, 30 years after the 8888 uprising. 60 photos were part of the exhibition and three of them are included in Paper IV.

One regret of this dissertation is that I am unable to fully unfold the richness of all the data generated. Much of it is not used directly in the dissertation. All of it, however, has contributed to the understanding of prisons in Myanmar presented here. The data calls for many additional topics to be explored than what is possible within the scope of this dissertation. Among these are, for example, the diary of a former political prisoner, the 57 photos not included in the publications and several interviews; all represent the potential for additional publications. While the four papers in this dissertation address core issues in the data, more remains to be said. Hopefully this dissertation only represents the start of what will be a long series of publications based on this data. I am deeply thankful to the people who shared their personal stories with me. For those who do not see their stories featured in this dissertation, I urge you to be patient as I continue to publish based on the material created for this project.

3.2 Beyond the Prison Gate – doing action research

When I started my first of two rounds of fieldwork in 2016, I wanted to include a visual element to my research, though it was still undefined what form this visual element should take. During the first round of fieldwork, I took photos myself and participated in a photography workshop in Myanmar. In between my first and second period of fieldwork, an idea crystallised. The idea sprung from the identification of recognition (Honneth 1996) as an important analytical concept and from conversations with former political prisoner artists in Yangon. One former political prisoner artist recounted how his exhibitions were places where former political prisoners gathered and a way to receive recognition for their role as former political prisoners (Dunant 2018). Recognition and support from the state is otherwise non-existing for this group, in spite of high numbers of former political prisoners among members of parliament and several former political prisoners having been elected as president. Recognition from other sources exists to some degree, but still the former political prisoners call for recognition after release.

Meanwhile, 2018 marked the 30 year anniversary for the 8.8.88 uprising. On August 8 in 1988 students gathered in mass

demonstrations against the then military regime, which later faced a violent crackdown from the military and the imprisonment of thousands of political prisoners. The original idea for the project was therefore to create a photo exhibition, in collaboration with former political prisoners, under the title '88 today'. The exhibition was to show where political prisoners are today, 30 years after the big uprising and after having been released for a substantial amount of time. While having gained freedom from the prison, many former prisoners still suffer due to challenges in gaining employment, employers having faced harassment for hiring former political prisoners in the past and the interruption of education for imprisoned student activists. In addition, their relationships with friends and family had been strained by years of separation during imprisonment (AAPP and FPPS 2016).

The original idea was adapted at the very first meeting I had with a possible participant, as he called attention to the fact that the title '88 today' would make other generations feel excluded – such as the '62, '91, '99, '07 and '15 generations. Therefore, the project got the working title *Former Political Prisoner Photographers*, or FPPP, an acronym resembling some of the other acronyms of groups concerned with former political prisoners (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, AAPP and Former Political Prisoners' Society, FPPS).

Through my existing contacts, I spread the word about this project among former political prisoners in Yangon and about the opportunity to participate. After having met with five photographers who expressed their interest, I called for the first group meeting. Some of the photographers invited others to come along to the meeting. When the meeting finally happened, only three people showed up. For several months, it was a pattern that some people who were expected to come did not show up and while new people kept joining. At the meetings, I tried to explain the idea for the project – we were producing pictures about everyday life of former political prisoners today, in order to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges they face. Often I had to start over with my explanation for newcomers. Aside from the introduction at these meetings, I tried to facilitate development of ideas for pictures and photo essays.

After two months of chaotic and futile meetings, a group of photographers formed. The group consisted of: U Letyar Tun, the first photographer I had approached and a contact from previous fieldwork. I approached him to help me facilitate the project and get in touch with other photographers. From the very outset, he made it

clear he would not have time to take new pictures, but that it would be possible to use pictures he had taken previously. The second photographer to join was U Pho Nyi Htwe, an experienced photographer who had been part of the Burma Video Journalists[17] and contributed to a previous campaign with photos of former political prisoners campaigning for the release of political prisoners who were still in prison. He was an editor and news photographer and had a strong motivation to tell the world about the struggles of former political prisoners. The third photographer to join, who made it in time for our first full day workshop was Ko Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Thike. He was the youngest of the group and had been imprisoned in the 2015 demonstrations against a new education law. At first, he was in doubt about whether to claim the title as political prisoner, since he had never been convicted, but 'only' spent one year in prison as pre-trial detainee. I decided to include him under the label of political prisoner for this project and the others accepted this categorization.[18] Phyoe Dhana worked as a professional wedding photographer and was excited about the opportunity to take a different kind of pictures. The last to join was U Sai Minn Thein, a professional portrait photographer with great technical skill. He was initially very critical of the project and doubted the genuineness of the declared aim to increase the understanding of lives of political prisoners and contribute to their recognition. After being very critical at the first meeting, he came around on the second meeting and became a strong supporter during the rest of the project.

I attempted to recruit photographers from various backgrounds for a broad representation. It proved complicated to recruit people from different religions, other ethnic backgrounds than Barmar (the majority in Myanmar) and to recruit women. One dimension in which it proved possible to recruit a diversified group was in age. Having photographers of different ages also meant that the project represented the different generations of political prisoners. Thus,

[17] Burma VJ are a group of video journalists who famously documented the violent crackdown on the Saffron revolution in 2007 and smuggled the videos out of the country for the world to see. They are most well known for their contribution to Democratic Voice of Burma, a news platform based in Norway, and the documentary *Burma VJ* that tells the story of how they worked.

[18] The issue of who can be categorized as a political prisoner was also raised in connection with another photographer who participated in one meeting. For this person, it was the fact that people disagreed about whether he was imprisoned for political reasons, which led the group present to categorise him as not belonging to the category. To my regret, he decided not to participate in the project after one meeting where it was clear he was not accepted by other participants as part of the group. For a critique of the concept 'political prisoner' see Llorente (2016).

the photographers have been arrested in connection with the 1988, 1998, 2007 and 2015 demonstrations. Other generations do exist (e.g. '62, '91 and '99). While the photographers do not cover all generations, the group reaches across different generations, displaying to the audience that this project does not belong to a certain generation and thus excludes others. While this served to show inclusiveness, it also made it harder to create cohesiveness in the group. While I had imagined the group members would support each other in the development of their ideas and through discussion of photos taken, it proved hard to create a team atmosphere where that was possible. At meetings, I facilitated discussion and shared my reflections upon ideas and pictures taken, but the exchanges of feedback between photographers was limited. When feedback was given by one photographer to another, it was often ill received. The kind of peer support I had imagined the project would include, did not fit well with the very hierarchical culture of Myanmar or the fact that these photographers came from different generations of political prisoners, and represented some of the internal struggles in the political prisoner community.

Harald Wydra has proposed a way to understand such generational differences. According to Wydra, generations are formed around the magnetic field of threshold experiences – such as, for example, a specific uprising. These threshold experiences affect the temporalities and ontologies of generations (Wydra 2018, 9). Therefore, generations can have differing perceptions of the past and current situation in Myanmar, which can lead to conflicts between generations. The differing perceptions of different generations explain some of the challenges faced in this project. However, the group managed to unite around the cause of creating recognition through the exhibition. It was of key importance for this unity that they all agreed to demand recognition from the current government, rather than the actual perpetrators from the past.

While it was defined from the beginning that the project would lead to an exhibition in Yangon, later to be repeated in Copenhagen, it was not defined where or in what form this would be. Several places were discussed as possible venues. A prominent exhibition space was offered – 'The Secretariat', the old parliament in Yangon and the place where General Aung Sang, father of the nation, had been assassinated. An exhibition here would have received a large number of visitors, as we would be showing our photos next to an exhibition by former political prisoner artists and would be sharing the audience that either exhibition could draw. Today, however, The Secretariat is maintained by a group that includes 'cronies',

tycoons with ties to the former military government, and the photographers did not agree with the idea of our exhibition supporting these cronies in any way. The other former political prisoners who exhibited in the buildings took a more pragmatic stance to this, and used their show as a way to take back these historical buildings. Since the photographers had strong opinions on the issue, and I wanted to act according to their ideals for our exhibition, we had to find another venue. Some of the photographers approached the city council of Yangon and were offered Mahabandoola Park – a big park in central downtown, which also hosts the yearly photo festival. This option was declined due to the high workload that would entail – building scaffolding to stick the pictures on, the quality of the pictures that could be exhibited – vinyl prints, and the risk of the weather making the exhibition inaccessible and blowing away our pictures. In the end, we settled on a model with two exhibition spaces in Yangon: first, the pictures were exhibited at Healthcare Centre for Political Prisoners (HCPP) and then they were moved downtown for a short period to be exhibited in a private gallery. The idea for this model sprung out of long discussions about how to give back to political prisoners. The photographers wanted to give money to the people we took pictures of, which would be in line with the Burmese tradition of giving donations. Meanwhile, I referred to scientific standards, traditions within photography and the rules of the donor[19] to explain why this was not a possibility. The issue was discussed several times in heated discussions. In the discussions, it was hard to find a compromise, as the two ethical systems combined in the project were not in agreement on this topic. In the end, I found a compromise acceptable to all – if the pictures were exhibited in a place that supported former political prisoners, we could indirectly support the subjects, by contributing with rent for the exhibition space to an organisation, which potentially benefitted the people who had been part of the project or people like them. Therefore, we decided to exhibit the pictures at HCPP. A benefit of having HCPP as exhibition space was that the pictures were in a space where former political prisoners normally came. Thus, more former political prisoners saw the pictures and the visitors who came from the outside were 'closer' to the people in the pictures, as they were surrounded by people with similar stories. The only downside to the exhibition space at the HCPP was that it was located in North

[19] The project was funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the research project Legacies of Detention in Myanmar at DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture.

Dagon, a suburb of Yangon almost an hour's drive from downtown. This meant that many visitors would not come simply because of the location. Therefore, we decided to also have the exhibition downtown, though for a shorter period. Thus, the exhibition took place on July 7 – August 2 in HCPP and on August 4 – 6 2018 in Moon Art Gallery. The negotiations of exhibition space represent a classic case of 'the paradox of participation' often present in participatory action research (Arieli, Friedman, and Agbaria 2009). While participatory action research methods include ideals about democratic values and equal influence of researcher and other participants in the project, such ideals are in many cases unobtainable. Thus, while I tried to facilitate democratic dialogue during our meetings, it was clear that I was facilitating. It was also clear that I had decision-making power over the budget and that I had to answer to my employer, the university and the donor. At certain stages, the disagreements seemed to risk the whole project, but in the end, after the compromise was reached, all participants engaged and worked hard to reach the goal of creating the exhibition in the spaces selected. The commitment of the photographers after the discussion is a sign that the paradox of participation was resolved to a satisfactory degree for all participants, it is still however important to be aware of how inequalities like this seep in, even to the parts of research that aim for democratic ideals.

For the content of the pictures, I tried to brainstorm with the photographers to identify relevant topics. I asked them – what is our message? What does the audience need to see to better understand the life of former political prisoners? While I tried to speak conceptually and get the photographers to think about what themes and topics they wanted to depict, the photographers tended to think about the people they wanted to take pictures of and tell me about all the different aspects of the lives of the subjects they wanted to take pictures of. Somewhere in between these different approaches to taking pictures, we discussed what stories could be told that covered the different subjects each photographer had chosen. I recorded our discussions in audio and handwritten notes to be able to follow the process and learn about their conception of political prisoners. The photographers sometimes took pictures during meetings – sometimes with their phones to upload on Facebook or sometimes with each other's cameras, playing around with the equipment.

The exhibition had approximately 400 visitors in Yangon and was featured in national and regional media in 6 different articles

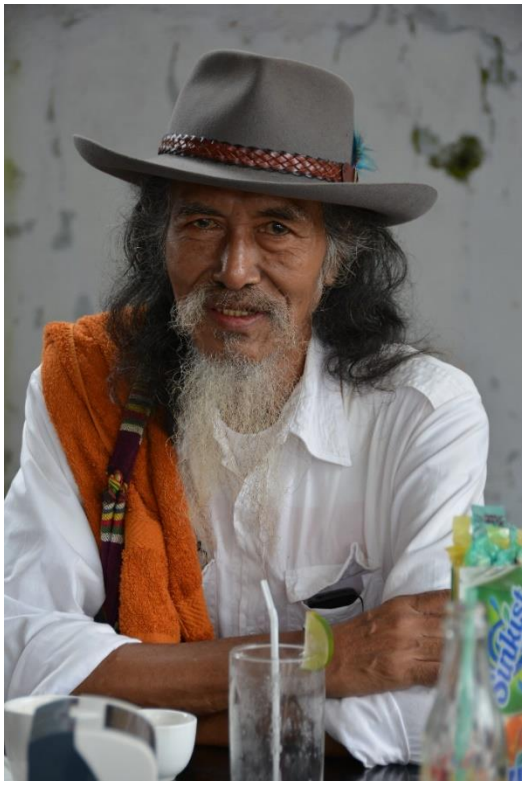
and videos (Burmese and English language) (see Annex for an overview of media coverage, e.g. Dunant 2018; San Lin Tun 2018). At the launch, the audience was composed of Myanmar people as well as foreigners. There were other political prisoners, friends and families of political prisoners, NGO workers from organisations concerned with the topic and expats who had not encountered political prisoners in person before.

From March to August 2019, the pictures were exhibited in Copenhagen at a public community house (Kulturhuset Indre By). U Letyar Tun came to Copenhagen for the launch of the exhibition and shared his reflection about being part of the project and being a political prisoner himself (see Skov 2019 for an article about the exhibition in Denmark). After being exhibited at the community house for 5 months, the exhibition was moved to Roskilde University Library for exhibition in September and October 2019. Both exhibitions were in public places where people encountered the pictures in connection with other activities. Such places were chosen to reach an audience who would not normally seek out information about political prisoners in Myanmar. After the last exhibition, a blog post has been created with a selection of the photos to give the exhibition a continued online life (Gaborit 2019b, reprinted in Annex 6).

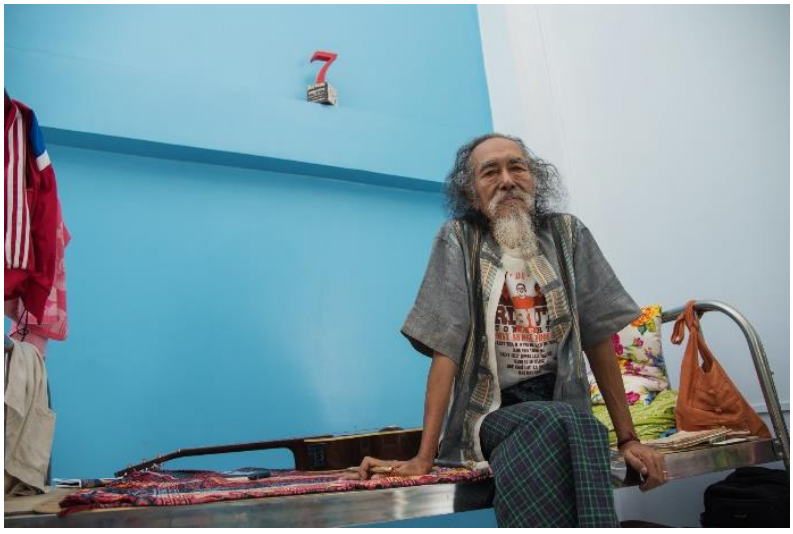
Thus, the action research project Beyond the Prison Gate generated visual data for research, while disseminating in a form that had an outreach few academic publications can claim. The photos were able to reach people who spoke different languages, people who do not normally engage with academia and people who would not necessarily have sought out information about prisons in Myanmar. Dissemination through a photo exhibition also differs in the content disseminated. Through these photos, viewers were able to get one step closer to shared experiences with former political prisoners, by adding the sensory experience of a photo, to the cognitive process of reading a picture text and a catalogue. The experience of the viewer is, however, also open to interpretation (Banks 2007; Pink 2006). Interpretations varies from the Burmese audience, among which, many had personal memories about or relations to subjects in the photos, to a Danish audience, among which some did not even know the country Myanmar, much less the political struggles of its activists. The goal of the exhibition was to raise awareness and show that these activists, who became prisoners and are now released, still go through struggles, and are still in need of recognition. Hopefully, this central message has

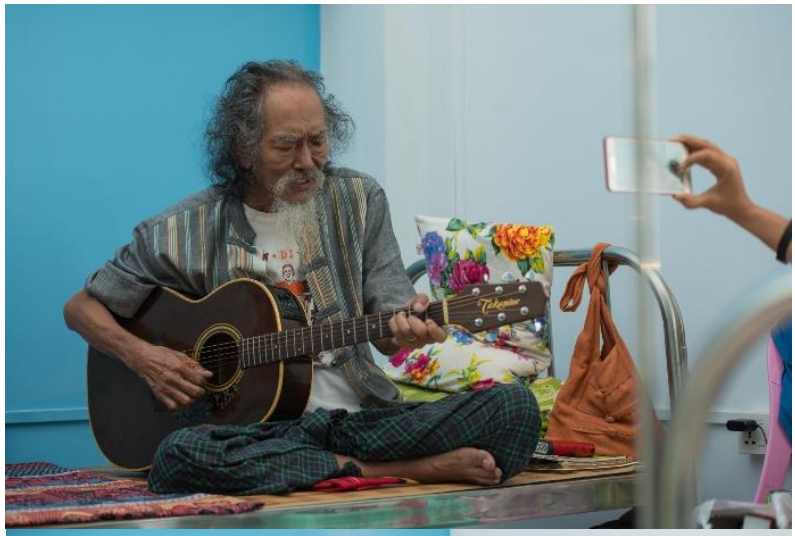
made it across, while the interpretations of photos surely vary among the different audiences of the exhibition.

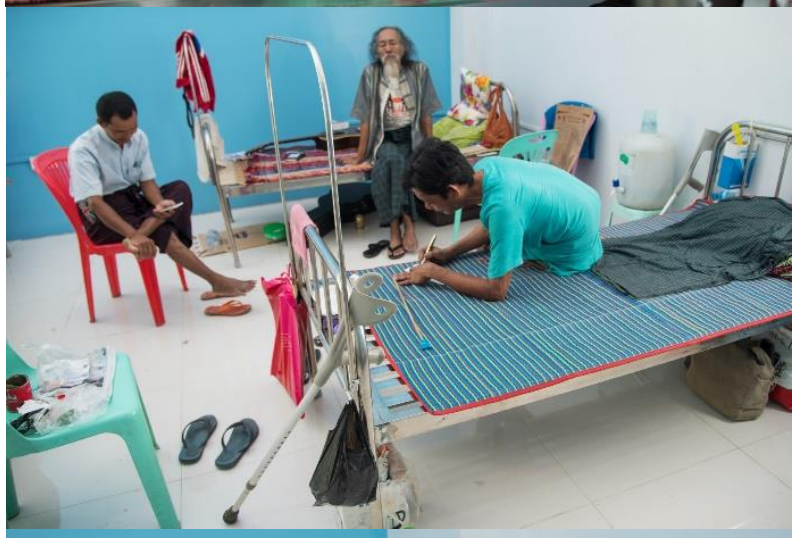
Visual Interlude III

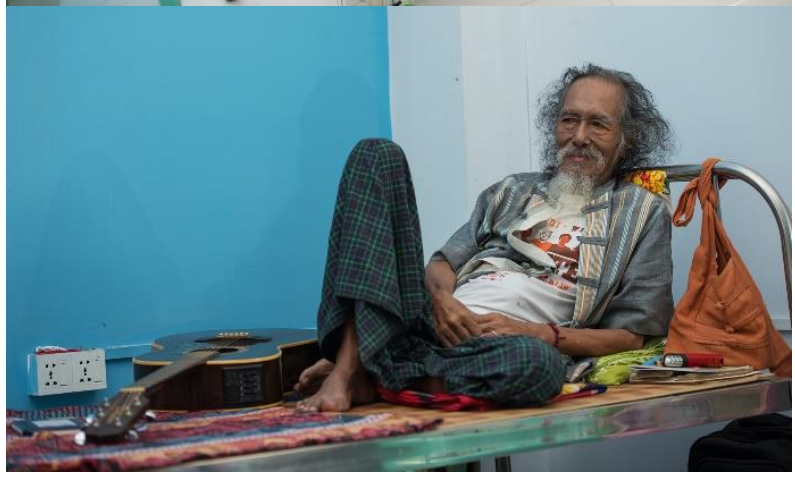


Ko Ye Lwin was a famous singer, guitarist and composer in Panyelann (Path of Flowers). He was arrested in September, 2007 and released in December 2007. He was known for playing at teashops and in the streets to collect donations for IDPs and support the NLD. These pictures were taken while he was a patient at Healthcare Center for Political Prisoners. Ko Ye Lwin died on the 10th of July 2018 year, only two days after these pictures were first shown to the public. (Photo: Sai Minn Thein)

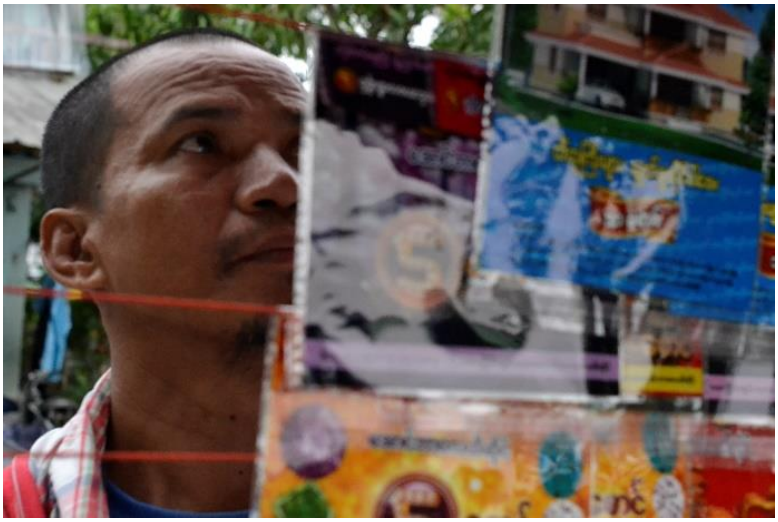


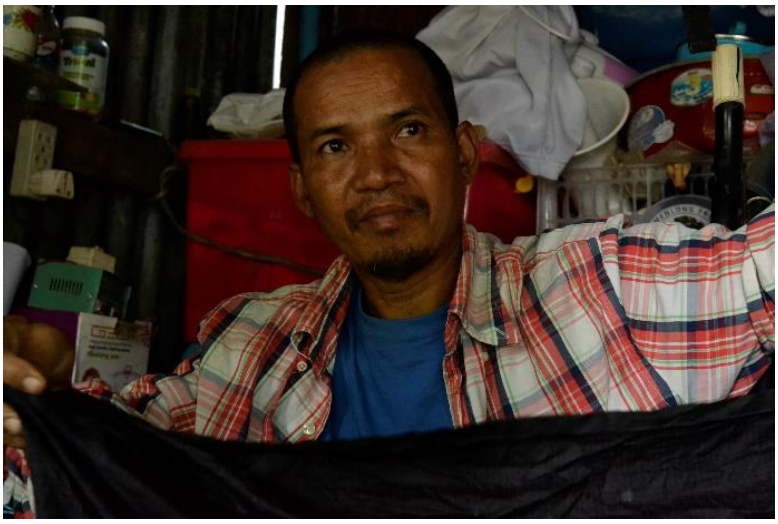

Takamine

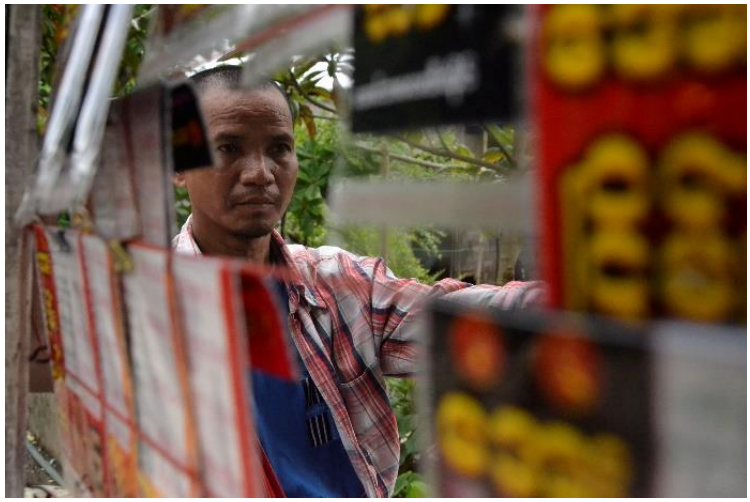


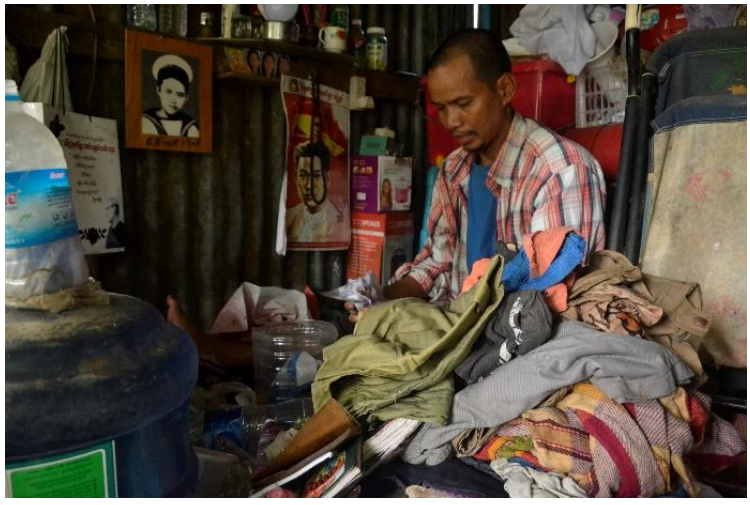


Ko Kyi Soe, was arrested on May 25, 1991 and sentenced to 6 years. He was released on December 28, 1995 from Insein. In the pictures he is earning for his daily living selling lottery tickets and volunteering for the HCPP. (Photo: Pho Nyi Htwe)









3.3 Ethical reflections

For this project, many ethical issues have been considered and several ethical dilemmas were encountered. Formally, there was no demand for ethical approval from either Roskilde University or DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture. There was however a demand for a project description to be approved by the PhD school at Roskilde University within the first three months of the project. This project description included a discussion of ethical consideration for the project. The description of ethics included references to relevant ethical guidelines (Dansk Pyskolog Forening 2016; The Council of the American Anthropological Association 2012) but also emphasised that ethics during long-term fieldwork has a processual nature and must be considered and discussed from beginning to end of a research project like this (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Ethical dilemmas have thus been raised and discussed with supervisors and research participants before, during and after fieldwork. This section presents reflections on some of these considerations and dilemmas.

From the outset, it was clear that this research topic was sensitive for numerous reasons. In the political context of Myanmar, speaking about political prisoners and torture has previously carried the risk of reprisals. During pre-investigations, we were told that torture was still taboo and we were careful when speaking about it. Human rights on the other hand were becoming a more acceptable topic of conversation and mandatory courses in human rights were implemented at law departments in Myanmar universities while this research was carried out. Though torture was not the focus of the research, it was part of many interviews. Additionally, the name of the host organisation of the project: DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture, explicitly referred to this tabooed topic. For the first round of fieldwork I edited the logo on my business cards, so it only showed the shortened version of the name: DIGNITY.[20] This was to prevent that the business card in itself was frightening to people. When asked, I was however open about the nature of the organisation and presented it as a human rights organisation working against torture.

When torture did enter the research field, it was not as an abstract phenomenon, but in deeply personal accounts of traumatic experiences. When doing research about such traumatic experiences, the researcher must be sensitive to the well-being of

[20] During the second round of fieldwork it was possible to bring business cards from Roskilde University to avoid this issue.

research participants. In dealing with traumatic experiences recounted by research participants, the researcher has drawn on extensive experience and knowledge of the field. In addition to being a researcher, I am a trained psychologist. I have received training in crisis psychology and I have experience with working with suicidal clients in Denmark and torture survivors in prisons in the Philippines. Moreover, I have worked with prison research in several countries with conditions similar to those in Myanmar. This served as a foundation for conversations about some of the traumatic events research participants had lived through.

While these traumatic experiences were not shared by the researcher and research participants, familiarity with such events equipped me to get closer to an understanding of the experiences and engage with research participants in ways that showed I could relate to their experiences.

Once, a research participant was asked by a common friend of ours, if it was hard to talk about these things and if I asked hard questions. He told her:

> No, it is not hard. Liv knows, she has been inside. (personal conversation, March 2018, answer of research participant as recounted by common friend)

At this point, I had not been inside prisons in Myanmar. But my past experiences inside prisons in other countries (Philippines, Sierra Leone, Lebanon, Denmark and England) combined with intercultural skills and empathy had been sufficient for me to display insights on a level that qualified me as an insider in his mind. As illustrated by his answer, this insider perspective made our conversations less challenging.

Doing research about violence – about the slow grinding structural violence present in experiences of imprisonment, which was a primary focus, and the brutal violence of torture which was closely connected to the experiences in focus in this research – confronts research participants and researcher with painful memories from the past. One might question whether it is ethical to ask people to recount such experiences and having them be confronted with painful memories. Might it not be better to leave such painful matters in the past? On the contrary, this study argues that light must be shed on these practices in order to further understandings and ultimately prevent them from occurring again. In arguing so, this dissertation is positioned in line with the paradigm within trauma research that privileges an experience-

focused perspective (Das 1990). Priya and colleagues argue that this paradigm represents a shift from a medical materialist views on trauma, such as those behind the diagnosis Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Priya and colleagues write that with the work of Veena Das (1990) a paradigm change took place within trauma research:

> [F]rom predominantly psychiatric perspective towards an experience-focused perspective that locates trauma experiences within the cultural and structural contexts. (Priya 2019, 81)

This paradigm is in line with the approach in this study, which privileges experiences as seen through a critical phenomenological perspective and speaks against pathologisation of reactions to imprisonment. Based on this approach to trauma, Das argues that sensitively conducted research represents a potential for survivors rather than a risk for victims:

> Das accentuates that one finds voice 'in company of others', and once a survivor shares his or her experiences, 'even if it's fallible, then other voices will join, either to correct or to amplify, or to revise one's view' (p. 139). (Das quoted from interview with DiFruscia (2010) in Priya 2019)

Thus, by giving voice and being truthful in the depiction of experiences people live through, this research represents a chance to create a shared story and find strength in community.

For ethical considerations, two sets of guiding principles have been used: The Ethical Principles for Scandinavian Psychologists (EPSP, Dansk Pyskolog Forening 2016) and the ethical guidelines of the AAA (The Council of the American Anthropological Association 2012). The EPSP presents a set of guidelines useful for conversations with people who have gone through traumatic events and offer a description of the confidentiality I offered participants as a Danish psychologist. The AAA presents a more flexible set of guidelines, which reflect the situational character of ethical considerations during ethnographic fieldwork. These add guidelines for how to act when doing observations, which is not a usual task for psychologists. Based on these guidelines and considerations of the local context, it was decided to work based on informed oral consent when doing interviews and with transparency about my identity as researcher when doing observations. Additionally, consent forms were designed for the photographers who contributed to Beyond the Prison Gate, to make sure

documentation for shared copyright could be presented if requested by a journal and to guarantee the photographers that I could only use the photos for research purposes, while they were also allowed to sell them and were only obliged to consider the dignity of those depicted in photos. During negotiations about the phrasing of the consent form, the photographers made it clear that they perceived the written form as a symbol of lack of trust in the relation rather than a guarantee of their rights. Based on this discussion, we agreed they could work with oral consent from the people photographed. In addition, it was decided to include the identity of photographers and the people depicted in the pictures in order to be true to the purpose of the photo project: to contribute to the recognition of former political prisoners. This decision was made based on reflections about the politics of naming and not naming research participants. While anonymization is a standard practice within most qualitative research, Katja Guenther has aptly pointed out that such practices are not always in line with the interests of research participants. Especially in the cases where researchers seek to give voice to the voiceless or work with political activists, it is often against the interests of research participants to work with anonymization and this practice rather reflects the interests of researchers and research institutions to protect themselves (K. M. Guenther 2009). With the decision to include names in the work about recognition, followed ethical consideration about what information to share about the people who had been named. Because of these considerations, most people depicted in the photos have not been interviewed, since the intimate details revealed in interviews could not be shared with names. In some cases, photos were taken of people whom I had already interviewed. In these cases, interview data has not been used for the analysis in which they are named.

In the remaining part of this dissertation, research participants have been anonymised. This was done to enable sharing of intimate details about experiences of imprisonment, which research participants might not feel comfortable sharing with people who knew their identity. Thus, for example, some interviewees remarked that they had never spoken this openly about their experiences, not even to close family members or friends. In other cases, I witnessed the increased openness that accompanied the development of my relationship with research participants. As we had interacted repeatedly over longer periods of time, some relationships took on a character more akin to friendship than to researcher and research participant. In regard to information shared in such trusting

relationships, it is especially important that the researcher considers what can be shared and how such information can be shared. Lastly, some of the research participants were key actors in political uprisings and as such are famous in Myanmar. When these people chose to share sensitive information, which might hurt their public reputation if shared, it was my responsibility to protect their identity, to do no harm.

To enable anonymization, quotes are marked by year, month and title of the person quoted. Information about the place a given interview or observation took place is left out, since it would in some cases enable identification of research participants. Concerns about anonymization also means that, while this chapter describes general processes and examples of encounters from the field, parts of the process is left out due to concerns pertaining to confidentiality. Among the participants and gatekeepers are people who would be easily identified based on their position in a certain organisation, government agency or because they are well-known political actors. Such people are only referred to directly when they have given their explicit consent and I have evaluated that the writing does not pose a risk to them.

3.4 Researcher Positions

Doing ethnographic research entails stepping into a series of different positions (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2012). Some are carefully tailored through impression management (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), others might be uncomfortable and reflect how the researcher is perceived by others (Gaborit and Jefferson 2015). Most, however, are a combination of attempts by the researcher to be perceived in certain ways and the perceptions of others. In Paper II, reflections are presented on positions during fieldwork in connection with gaining access. This section discusses positions not only in the field but the reflections upon my role as a researcher in general, which arose from interactions in the field.

My very first encounters with Myanmar, during pre-investigations, confronted me with dilemmas about not only how to position myself in the field, but also as an author of scientific publications about this place. During the first visit, I was faced with emotionally charged accounts by former political prisoners in a political climate where remnants of the authoritarian regime were still present. I visited organisations that were not allowed to register officially, and who were therefore always at risk of being shut

down. The air was heavy with the fear of repression. Thus, from the onset, it was clear I was now working in a context where there were political forces operating, which strongly conflicted with my basic human values. While I was familiar with how the ideal of a neutral researcher has been left behind in reflexive parts of anthropology, I was unfamiliar with doing research in a context where I was so clearly opposed to some of the actors in the field. This presented me with a dilemma: What role would my political stance against authoritarianism and oppression play for this research? Would it be possible to include such values in the research? Or would I have to repress them while doing research?

Other researchers have struggled with similar dilemmas when working with Myanmar. Monique Skidmore, for example, has studied the culture of fear in Myanmar. In her fascinating book *'Karaoke* Fascism *Burma and the Politics of Fear'* she describes the position she took:

> Ethnography conducted under conditions of fear and terror defies traditional methods of data collection. My fieldwork interpretations and the very framework by which I determine whom to interview and why are consciously embedded in a belief in the need to write against terror (Taussig 1987). I am an activist-by-proxy… I also place myself, as one opposed to human suffering and authoritarianism, in the ethnography. (2004, 33–34)

Thus, doing research in a context such as Myanmar or on topics such as prisons, resistance and dissent can call for writing against terror, human suffering and authoritarianism. It can call for not only placing oneself within the reflexive approach to anthropology (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), but to actually become an activist-by-proxy by acting as medium for voices that are normally overheard or to engage in action research and attempt to generate knowledge that can alleviate some of the observed human suffering.

This, however, raises further dilemmas about how the researcher is implicated by the people she researches with. Such dilemmas are dealt with in vastly different ways by prison researchers who find themselves doing research about practices they are critical towards.[21] The spectrum ranges from abolitionists who argue that doing research with prison authorities and working

[21] Prison research which is not critical towards the prison as institution does exist. This dissertation, however, is placed within critical prison studies. See State of the Arts (Section 2.2) for more details.

for prison reform legitimises the prison as institution and therefore counteracts the final goal of abolishing all prisons (Pavarini and Ferrari 2018). At the other end of the spectrum are prison reformists, who work for improvement of conditions inside prisons through reform (Crewe 2011; Jewkes 2013; Liebling, Arnold, and Straup 2011). Even established researchers, such as Alison Liebling, a prominent voice among researchers speaking for prison reform in the British context, still reflect upon their position as researcher. Liebling (2015) found herself provoked when colleagues called her a 'policy advisor' when describing different positions of prison researchers. While she was aware there was no neutral position when engaging with prison authorities, she did not see herself as a policy advisor. She describes her original attitude to research as more 'purist', and concluded she had now changed her position by taking one step closer to practice and arguing that researchers must not only create knowledge but also 'show how this can operate as powerful mechanism in reform' (2015, 19). Implicit in her presentation of this argument, is her belief that the needed change is reform rather than abolishment. The argument, however, could apply to all researchers creating knowledge that could contribute to social change. If researchers not only have the responsibility to produce knowledge that can create change, but also to show how such changes can take place, all research becomes highly political.

While Liebling writes mainly about the output of research, about the knowledge created, it is important to also consider the effects of the process of conducting research. That is, to consider how during fieldwork and writing the researcher is involved in political practices and can support change.

Recognising the politics of one's position as a researcher, and actively engaging in the politics of the field one is working with, however, comes at the risk of conflicts between agendas of academia and the political field within which one is moving. These conflicts can present themselves in different ways. There might be a demand to present oneself as an authority and expert within one's own field in academia, which corresponds poorly with a constructive attitude when working with local communities for social change. Holdren and Touza have described the position of the militant researcher, an extreme position on the spectrum of politically engaged academics, as:

> Militant research does not teach, at least not in the sense of an explication which assumes the stupidity and powerlessness of those whom it explains…

> Such a perspective is only possible by admitting from the beginning that one does not have answers, and, by doing so, abandoning the desire to lead others or be seen as an expert. (Holdren and Touza 2005; 600)

At first glance this position might seem to contradict Liebling's argument about not only creating knowledge that enables change, but also showing the way for how to create change. This contradiction, however, depends on what kind of knowledge and how it is implemented. In this project, I was inspired by both of the above arguments. On the one hand, I have worked in the spirit of militant researchers by giving voice to the voiceless and disregarding my own preconceptions as I tried to understand their experiences. I have tried my utmost to avoid becoming a neo-colonial knowledge extractor by approaching people as experts on their own experiences and by including them as participants who have a say in the study (Sanjek 1993; S. Turner 2010). On the other hand, I have interacted with prison authorities and when doing so, I have brought the knowledge of research participants to them. When doing so, as a researcher, I have had the responsibility to condense knowledge created through many interviews and disseminate it in a way that supports dialogue as a means to future change and prevention of suffering (Liebling 2015; Skidmore 2004).

Interactions with prison authorities took place during fieldwork. Since fieldwork was concluded, there have been few opportunities to interact directly with agents of change. This has led attention to be drawn to another aspect of the conflict between the position as academic on one hand and being politically engaged on the other: a conflict between the kinds of outputs that lead to change and those that are recognises within academia. I dare to argue, that scientific articles are not the most suitable format to create social change; conversely, pamphlets are probably better suited for gathering demonstrations than presenting in-depth knowledge. In this dissertation, there are four publications that are recognised in academia, but which have little chance of creating social change. In between them, there are photos that were part of a photo exhibition which gathered a bigger audience than any of the articles can expect to get, which had extensive media coverage, which caused strong emotional reactions in the audience and which raised awareness of the struggles of political prisoners. These photos, however, receive little formal recognition in academia and do not 'count' as a publication in this dissertation. The photo project demanded significant resources in the form of time as well as money. The

financial part was covered through the generous funding of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but would not have been covered if the Ph.D. had been subject to the standard financial terms at Danish universities. As for the time expenditure, it was a choice to put in the hours to present the knowledge generated from this project in a way that was accessible to all, rather than encouraged by the academic elite. This choice was based on a researcher position as an activist and researcher, positions that partly overlap and concur, but which in certain instances lead to inner as well as outer conflicts. Such conflicts can cause frustrations as well as insights and they lead us to reflections about our own position, as they did for Liebling. By the end of her reflections Liebling concludes:

> We [as researchers] don't so much offer advice as show things as they are… We change the world by 'right description'…. We can only do this if we meet whole beings with our whole being. (Liebling 2015, 30)

Thus, while being an academic researcher and an activist is at times challenging, bringing both positions are part of our whole being. Liebling argues that we have to meet whole beings with our whole being to understand things as they are. During fieldwork, the activist position presented in different ways. It was foregrounded when I engaged in action research in connection with Beyond the Prison Gate, as described above. But when I interacted with prison authorities it took a different, more subtle form. Though I am an abolitionist, I am also pragmatic. Prisons will not be closed from day to day, and such decisions do not lie with the management of individual prisons. In these interactions, the activist position led me to ask certain questions and to be delighted when a senior prison officer asked me whether I believed there was a connection between the softened approach to prisoners and the increase in prison population.[22] Being able to reject such a myth and offer an alternative explanation, gave the officer an argument to abstain from going back to harsh practices of the past.

These are the foundational positions: I am an activist and a researcher and both of these positions take different forms in

[22] I rejected this theory by referring to the 'Scandinavian exceptionalism' – a soft approach in countries with low imprisonment rates, and to the harsh approach in US prisons where imprisonment rates are higher. As alternative explanation, I suggested maybe the increasing prison population in Myanmar is a sign of the country catching up with global trends after the country opened to outside influence in 2011.

different situations. I have also been positioned according to other dimensions. Some, such as gender, time spent in Myanmar and my connections to other people are discussed in Paper II. Others, pertaining to language and my connections with two specific people, my language teacher and my research assistant, are discussed below.

On language and positions

The reflexive turn in anthropology has contributed significantly to understandings of the researcher's role in fieldwork, and how it affects the knowledge generated. These reflections however tend to omit details about the role of language and translation. According to Borchgrevink (2003), there is a taboo within anthropology about not being fluent in the language fieldwork is conducted in and the need for interpreters can thus be perceived as a reflection of the shortcomings of the researcher. Borchgrevik critiques this taboo and questions the perceived language capabilities of some of the founding fathers of anthropology. Sarah Turner (2010) concurs with the critique of lack of reflection on the topic and adds her reflections on the role of research assistants as partners in the field. In line with these debates, this section discusses the role of language during fieldwork and how it affected not only my own position, but our position in the field as I worked closely with a research assistant. This section includes reflections on two of the people who played an important role for positioning during research: Saya[23] Htoo Htoo, the Myanmar language teacher, and Michael Muelay, the main research assistant and translator on the project.

When I arrived in Yangon in October 2016 to commence the first period of fieldwork, I embarked on an intensive language class in Myanmar language. For one month, I went through an introductory course and learned the basics of the Myanmar language. By the end of the course, I went through a written and oral exam. In spite of passing the exam top of the class, I still had far to go for my Myanmar language to reach a useful level. I decided to continue my studies with a private tutor together with a fellow student from the previous course. I vividly remember the first classes with our teacher, Saya Htoo Htoo. He was like a whirlwind of energy. He went through basic grammar at an intense pace, while evaluating what we had learned from the first course and assessed at what level our sessions needed to be. He gave us stacks of

[23] Saya is the honourable title used to address teachers in Myanmar. In literal translation, Saya means teacher.

handouts written by himself, with lists of useful verbs, grammar models and exercises. While he taught, he laughed; acted out the sentences we were asked to translate and encouraged us to try repeatedly. After a few sessions together with my fellow student, I decided to continue with individual tutoring, which would be easier to schedule. This changed my language classes immensely, not only because of the increased demand of individual classes, but because this was where Saya Htoo Htoo and I realised that we had a common interest: Htoo Htoo had himself been imprisoned for many years. The content of the language classes therefore changed. While we continued to work on my basic language skills and grammar, the vocabulary we trained now concerned the experiences Saya Htoo Htoo thought I would have to discuss with prisoners; experiences he had himself gone through. I learned about the architecture of prisons and the words used to describe different wards, gates and titles of prisoners as well as prison staff. I learned about torture methods, sentences and amnesties. Sometimes, he added personal accounts from his own experiences to explain why it was important for me to learn certain words. After we finished the last lesson, we met one more time to record an interview where Saya Htoo Htoo told me about his experiences as a political activist before imprisonment and as a political prisoner. Thus, language classes became much more than just studying the Myanmar language. From the onset, the language classes functioned as an introduction to understanding Myanmar culture, and when I studied with Saya Htoo Htoo, the classes became the study of not only Myanmar culture and language, but also everyday life inside prisons. It was a serendipitous coincidence that Saya Htoo Htoo became my teacher, and I am still immensely thankful for this coincidence and for Saya Htoo Htoo's willingness to share his experiences.

Saya Htoo Htoo was not only a language teacher and a participant in this study, he was a cultural meditator (Bassnett 2011). He taught me valuable lessons about Myanmar culture and prison culture. During one lesson, he remarked about Myanmar grammar:

> You can move all the elements around, except for the verb. The verb must come last, and that cannot be changed. It is like the constitution of Myanmar, it will never be changed. (para-phrasing from field notes)

Thus, he graciously connected lessons about Myanmar language, to the culture and the political situation around us, where

the NLD engaged in a futile fight to change the constitution against the wishes of the military representatives in parliament. His own position as a former political prisoner, increased his motivation (which I am sure is already very high for all his students) to make me master the language, and his increased engagement in return made me even more eager to live up to his expectations. To my regret, in spite of many hours spend studying; my Myanmar language never became good enough for more than a simple conversation. It increased my understanding of the everyday life I was immersed in, but for the research, I was still in need of a translator.

Recruiting a translator meant considering what qualities where important for good data collection. I interviewed and tried to work with several translators. In the end, the choice fell on Michael Muelay. He was a young student who was familiar with critical thinking and had a gentle appearance that engendered trust. While some of the other translators interviewed had more advanced language skills, Michael's interpersonal skills far exceeded the other candidates. He appeared curious, empathetic, respectful and brave. He easily established report with research participants and managed to faithfully translate the content of my questions, while adapting them to be comprehensible and polite according to Myanmar standards. He had a way of making it feel as a natural part of the interview, when he asked me clarifying questions before translating or when he added by the end of a translation 'actually, he did not answer what you asked', to let me know the answer had not gone lost in translation, but the question was left unanswered. Thus, he naturally became part of interviews rather than simply a medium of translation. He was a not only a research assistant, but a research associate as Molony and Hammett (2007) have suggested would be the right term to describe the important role many 'research assistants' play in the research.

During the first round of fieldwork, Michael worked on a freelance basis and was only hired for the days where we conducted interviews or I was going to do observations, where I expected to need translation. In the second round of fieldwork, he was employed full time. On days where we had no interviews or observations that needed translation, he transcribed interviews we had conducted, translated autobiographies by former prisoners and prison officers and assisted in facilitating Beyond the Prison Gate. As his participation increased and he became part of the majority of the fieldwork, his presence is also important to consider when considering how we were positioned. Therefore, this section

includes reflections on some of the characteristics of Michael that affected our interactions with research participants.

One important aspect to consider is gender roles (Gaborit 2019a; Gaborit and Jefferson 2015; Phillips and Earle 2010). As a young woman, I have experienced being disregarded and virtually invisible when in Myanmar with my Danish senior male colleagues. Meanwhile, for this research I was mainly interacting with men, so I knew I had to find a way to bridge the divide between genders, not only to be heard, but also to make men comfortable sharing intimate stories about the experiences they had gone through. Some former prisoners have gone through sexual torture, and such experiences are hard to share in all cases, and can be even harder to share across genders. By recruiting a young male researcher, I hoped to enable us to represent both genders as interviewers, in case participants were more comfortable sharing their story with a person of one gender rather than the other. In some cases, this seemed to work, as interviewees changed which of us they addressed while speaking. Sometimes this meant they addressed me, looking in my eyes as they expressed themselves in Myanmar language, and Michael's presence was backgrounded, even if he was still translating. In other cases, it meant an interviewee would focus entirely on Michael, while I provided the questions, I became backgrounded almost as if I was only a notepad full of questions. Of course, this did not erase our genders, but social dynamics during interviews suggest that it did add a certain flexibility to how we engaged with gender dynamics. Meanwhile, his younger age meant that we were perceived as more equal, than what I had experienced in the presence of my senior male colleagues. Though his gender would often be attributed with more authority in this culture,[24] I was of the age that would be attributed authority, and this allowed me to speak and be listened to while by his side.

Another aspect of importance was Michael's ethnicity. He is of mixed ethnicity, but looks Kachin, normally lives in Lashio in Kachin state and speak Jingpaw, a Kachin language. In Yangon, several participants suggested this signalled inclusiveness to other ethnic groups and minorities. During fieldwork in Myitkyina, it became an asset beyond what I had imagined. Not only did Michael speak the local language, but he was also able to enter into kinship-like relations with participants. Thus, every interview in Myitkyina

[24] Gender roles are being questioned, discussed and reformed in Myanmar these days. Since most of the former prisoners who participated in this story are from an older generation, many of them still refer to older more conservative gender roles (Naujoks and Myat Thandar Ko 2018).

with a Kachin person started with a few minutes where Michael and the participant discussed possible family connections. After the discussions, Michael turned to me and concluded they had now established they were actually 'brothers in law', and the interview could begin. 'Brother in law' never meant we were speaking to the husband of a sister, but always meant they had identified a common relative, friend or village. Given that armed conflict was taking place between the Tatmadaw and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) while we were doing fieldwork, the trust that was established by Michael being positioned as connected to the community has likely had a big effect on the data gathered during our time in Myitkyina.

Both Michael and Saya Htoo Htoo put significant efforts into teaching me about Myanmar culture and functioned as cultural mediators. Michael, however, also faced demands from others when it came to his local knowledge. As a newcomer, I experienced a certain level of tolerance towards my cultural ignorance – what Robson has described as the 'role of naïve idiot' common to researchers entering the field (Robson 1994:47 in S. Turner 2010). Meanwhile, I observed how some participants required Michael to have detailed knowledge about the topics we discussed. Michael, however, had not worked with prisons before and was too young to have lived through some of the events we discussed. One example of the demands he faced presented itself in translations of events like *demonstrations*, *uprisings* or *revolutions*[25]. These are highly politicised words, as competing discourses have been created by state and opposition. The state would call an event a demonstration to play down the importance of it, while the activists would call it an uprising or revolution to emphasise the importance. If Michael translated these words differently than the agreed way within the community of political prisoners, he was criticised by participants, even if his translation conveyed the meaning of the account to me. The nuances were politicised, and Michael being from Myanmar, they expected him to know these exact nuances.

[25] For demonstrations the government tend to use the word *hsanda hpaw htokedeh*, while demonstrators tend to use *hsanda pyadeh.* Both words mean demonstration and refer to the literal meaning 'to show desire'. The government phrasing is however softer than the one used by demonstrators and thus tone down the significance of the demonstration. On occasions where government does ascribe demonstrations with importance, they do so by referring to their violent character. In such cases they use *manyeinmathet hpyitdeh*, which translates to riot and literally mean: disturbance of peace and order (for more on the interchanging use of 'peace' and 'law and order' see Cheesman 2015). When demonstrators speak of more demonstrations of key importance they are more likely to speak of *tawhlanye,* which means revolution (based on personal correspondence with two former political prisoners).

3.5 Gaining access to prison

While the reflections above are concerned with the process of fieldwork in Yangon in general, this section offers a practical description of the steps taken to get inside prisons. The section is followed by Paper II, which describes how working without access to prisons for most of the duration of fieldwork forced me to reconsider and reconceptualise 'access' and 'the field'. Due to the challenges of gaining access to prisons, access is a topic of great concern to prison researchers. Previous research has discussed issues arising with gaining formal access, being physically and temporally restricted, navigating relations with prisoners and prison staff simultaneously and seeing what is being kept out of sight (Bandyopadhyay 2015; Jefferson and Gaborit 2015; Reiter 2014; Rhodes 2001; Watson and van der Meulen 2018). Paper II deviates from previous research by discussing how experiences of imprisonment can be accessed through fieldwork outside prisons. However, in the final phases of fieldwork, access was gained to Insein Central Prison. The following section describes the process through which this access was gained.

I commenced fieldwork with a plan A and B. Plan A was to try to gain access to prisons through different channels, while plan B was to conduct fieldwork outside prisons. An incremental strategy was used to gain access to prisons. It was important to establish a proper understanding of Myanmar before even considering approaching the Myanmar Prison Department. As a team (with Andrew Jefferson and Tomas Martin), we therefore took time to get to know the context and the actors within it.

In Yangon, I identified two possible roads to access. In the end, they proved fruitful in combination. The first road was access through the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The UNODC had a country programme for Myanmar, which included work with the justice sector. As part of the programme, the UNODC had conducted a survey in selected prisons to evaluate health standards and they were now developing standard operating procedures for health issues inside the prisons and collaborating with United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), who were building health clinics inside the prisons, in which the standard operating procedures were supposed to be implemented (during fieldwork construction of these clinics was still at a planning stage).

The second actor, which was key to gaining access to prisons, was Dhamma Joti Vipassana meditation centre. This meditation centre was part of the organisation responsible for the meditation centre inside Insein Central Prison, where prisoners could

participate in meditation retreats. Dhamma Joti coordinated the retreats and made sure that teachers and food donations made their way into the prison. I had read an account from a former prisoner who had gone to the meditation centre as a volunteer and assessed that this might be a possibility for me too (Swe Win 2013).

I went to the meditation centre and talked to the teachers. It quickly became apparent that I would need to become an 'old student' myself to be a volunteer at a retreat. That meant I had to sit through a ten-day retreat myself. In addition, the teachers informed me they would agree to have me as a volunteer at a retreat inside the prison, but only if I managed to get permission from the prison department first.

During the first round of fieldwork, we had several meetings with officials from the UNODC and began to offer input on their prison work. Meanwhile, I nurtured contacts to the meditation centre, sat through a ten day retreat and joined group sittings with old students.

In between the first and second round of fieldwork, we were able to arrange a visit from the Myanmar Prison Department to Denmark with the help of UNODC. This offered a unique opportunity to engage for a full week with senior staff in the Prison Department and to build trust and show them that the Danish Prison Service knows and appreciates our research. The visit consisted of visits to two Danish prisons, the headquarters of the prison service (Kriminalforsorgen), the training school for prison officers and DIGNITY's offices. And, maybe most importantly, it was a chance to spend a whole week with the officials who would later be key in gaining access for us.

When I returned for the second round of fieldwork, I went to the headquarters of the Myanmar Prison Department, in the formal capital: Naypyidaw, met with the senior authorities who had been part of the delegation in Denmark and proposed a study of meditation inside their prisons. The idea was warmly received, but still had to go through formal procedures and be approved on a ministerial level. This took an additional four months. In June, when there was less than two months left of the fieldwork, I received an email stating that I had been granted access to visit Insein Central Prison for three days to conduct interviews with prisoners and observe an ongoing meditation retreat. The three dates were pre-defined, and the first was the following day.

I went to the prison with Michael Muelay, who assisted with translation and wrote short field notes of the visits. We were followed by two senior guards and a young guard with a camera

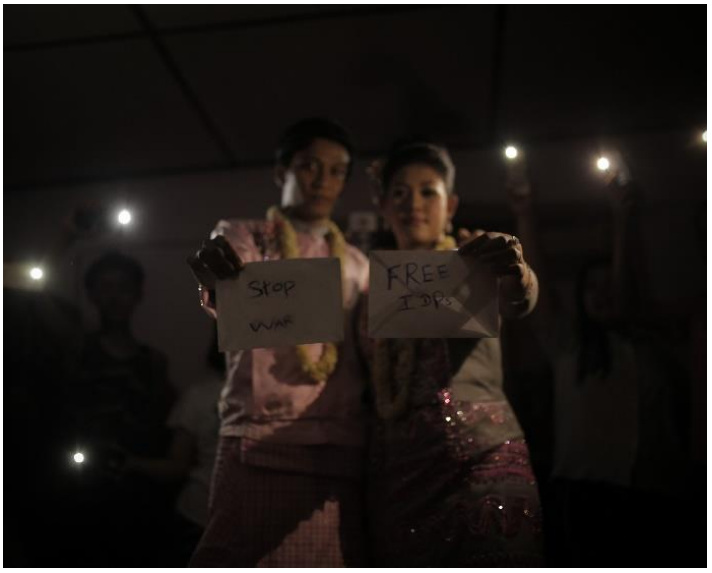
who took photos of everything that we did and everyone we interviewed. We interviewed 10 prisoners, while the senior staff were still within sight, but outside hearing range.

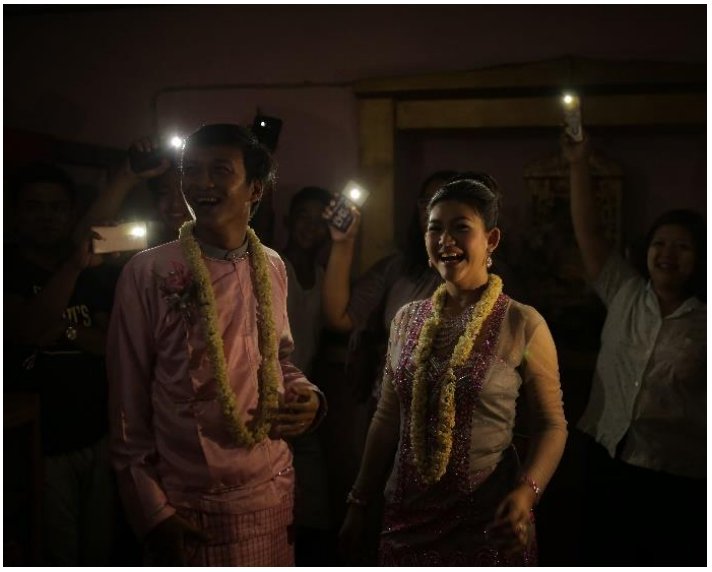
After the three days, I came back one more day to conduct a workshop with around 25 senior prison staff from the prison. The day consisted of two presentations about Danish prisons – one by me on request from the Prison Department, and one by a senior staff member in Insein Central Prison, who had been part of the delegation to Denmark. These were followed by a presentation of the preliminary analysis of the ten interviews. Due to the lack of confidentiality, in this setting where they knew which prisoners I had interviewed, I was very careful with my words. I did a presentation about all the benefits of the meditation retreats and encouraged more rehabilitative activities.

These visits generated unique data, as I was the first foreign prison researcher to gain access to a prison in Myanmar. They also offered a chance to get first-hand experience with some of the aspects of prison life that were described in interviews with former prisoners.

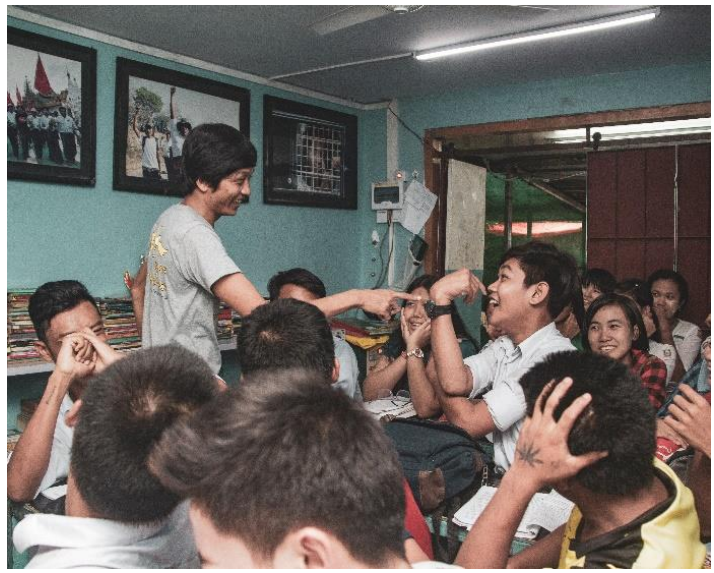
The visits, however, took place after a year of fieldwork about prison, outside prison. The practical limitation of not having access to prison during this time confronted me with a different reality and taught me a lot about what other factors are at stake when accessing knowledge about experiences of imprisonment. These other factors are discussed in Paper II.

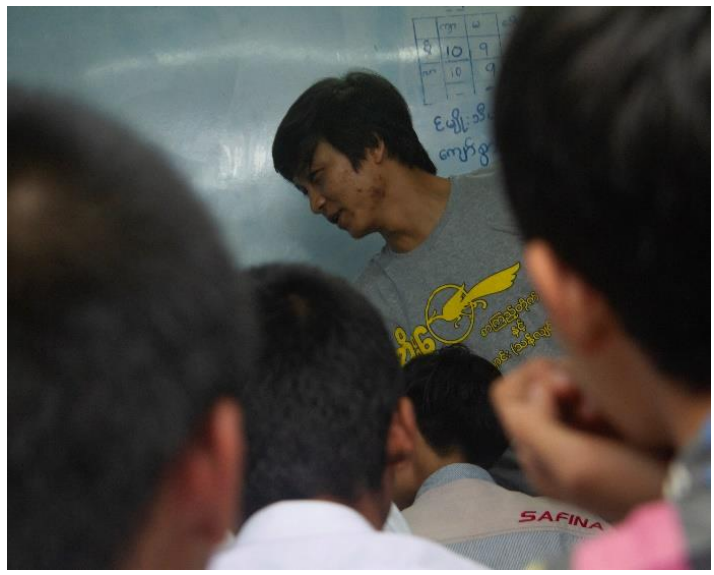
Visual Interlude IV



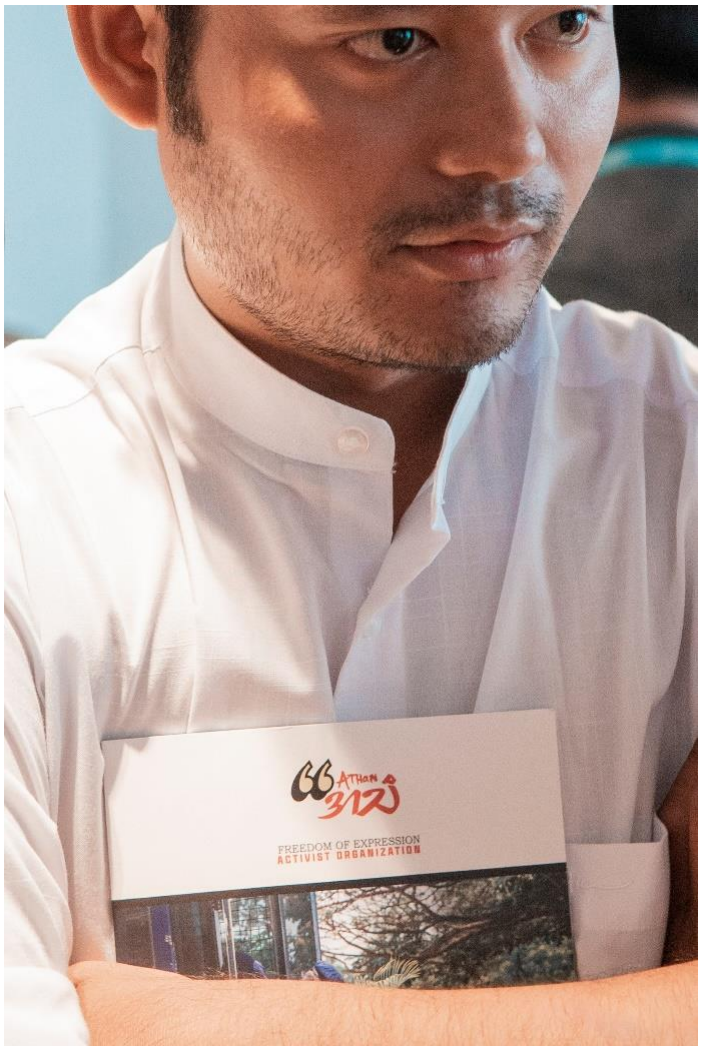


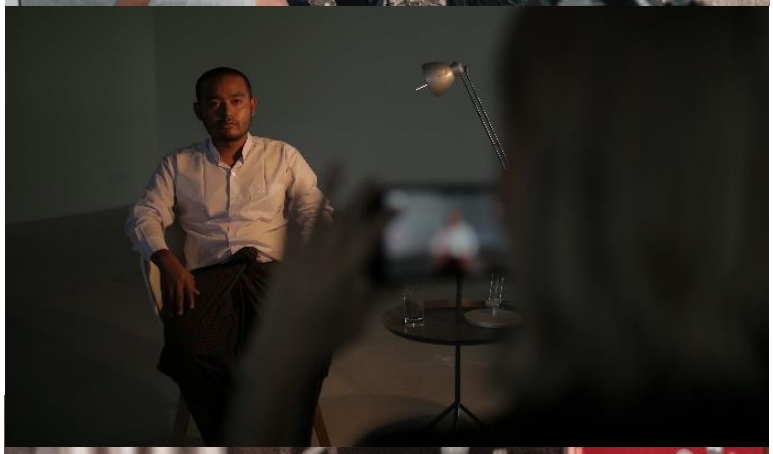
Ko Min Thaway Thit was imprisoned in 2015 for his role in the protests against the new education bill and released in 2016. The pictures show how activism makes it into the most happy and intimate moments as Ko Min Thaway Thit and Ma Po Po decided to campaign for the IDPs in Kachin even on their wedding day. Other pictures show how Ko Min Thaway Thit's contributes to improved access to education through volunteering at Thanlynn Owai Free Education Centre. (Photo: Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Thike)

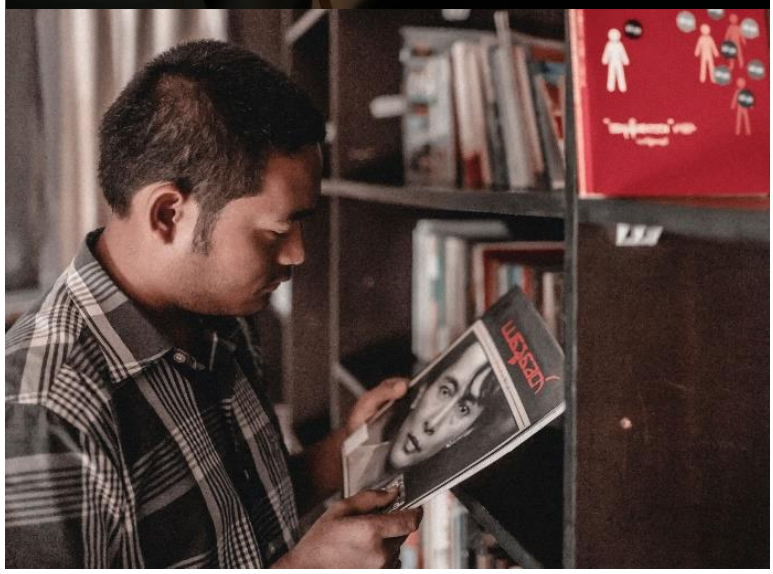




Maung Saungkha was first arrested on November 5, 2015 and charged with defamation under telecommunication law for a poem he posted on Facebook. He was released on May 24, 2016 when he received his sentence of 6 months, the same amount of time he had already spent in detention. He was recently detained again, on May 19, 2018, for his involvement in the demonstration for peace at Tamwe. He was released on bail and the case is still ongoing. He undauntedly continues to work for freedom of expression. (Photo: Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Thike)







CHAPTER 4

Theoretical framework:
Imprisonment as liminal experience

In this theoretical framework, the main theoretical approaches of this dissertation are discussed and specific concepts defined. The general approach draws on critical phenomenology (L. Guenther 2013) as it takes *experiences* as point of departure for analysis, while understanding subjects as constituted socially. This conception is placed within an ontological perspective that allows moves between multiple ontologies encountered in the field (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Mol 2002b), when subjects for example switch between secular and spiritual understandings of their experiences, and in analysis, when experiences are communicated in ways that both respect the ontology embedded in the data at hand, and the ontology of imagined readers of these publications.

The phenomenological approach calls for taking experiences seriously, independent of how and if they correspond to a material reality, since they shape the way we interact with this world (James 2012, 19). Critical phenomenology goes one step further by looking at the process as dialectic, that is, the self is created through interaction with the world while simultaneously experiencing the world. The ontological approach allows us to venture even further and see different experiences as different ontological realities existing simultaneously (Mol 2002a). In this dissertation, this approach allows for analysis in which social and spiritual transcendence are understood as equally 'real' in their respective ontologies. Thus, critical phenomenology argues that the self is socially constituted and the ontological approach adds that the remainder of the world too is created through social practices (L. Guenther 2013; Mol 2002b).

In addition to this overall framework, this chapter describes the specific analytical concept of *liminality* and how it is used to approach the complex reality in Myanmar in general and prisons in

particular (van Gennep 1960; V. Turner 1970). This dissertation identifies liminality as an analytical concept that offers a potential to understand aspects of experiences of imprisonment otherwise hard to grasp. This adds a significant theoretical contribution to the field of prison studies previously explored by few scholars (Jewkes 2005; Moran 2013; Green 2016).

4.1 Linking theories and realities through ontological perspectives and critical phenomenology

This study engages with multiple existing ontologies (Mol 2002b). One of these is grounded in the spirituality ever-present in Myanmar (Walton 2016). To understand experiences of imprisonment in this specific context, this spirituality must be considered. On many occasions, prisoners have described experiences that might be categorised as hallucinations or even psychosis if seen through the ontology of medical materialism. By pathologising, however, the structural violence of prisons risks being individualised as a psychiatric diagnosis. Instead of pathologising, this study approaches such experiences as real, as experiences lived through, though in a different ontology. In the Myanmar prison system, another prominent ontology is present in parallel with the spiritual ontology. The modern prison springs from the Enlightenment period and have since been shaped by colonial powers, local political developments and the international society (Garland 1985). This system is based on realism, which influences the rules and regulations that govern Myanmar prisons. Through this system, prisons are governed according to ideas about security, punishment, rehabilitation and reform, through an ontology that differs significant from the spirituality that permeates Myanmar society.

Additionally, this research is written with an audience in mind that might be unfamiliar with life within an ontology that recognises spiritual experiences like the ones described in Paper III. This creates a need to explain and justify the experiences, to grant them the space they deserve when read through a different ontology. In this dissertation I try, to the best of my ability to perform this translation as I make sense of the data in the intersection between these ontologies. Let me apologise in advance for any shortcomings in this endeavour, and invite the reader to join me on a journey to see the world from different vantage points.

Prisoners and prison staff navigate between multiple ontologies every day (Mol 2002b). They refer sometimes to one and sometimes to the other ontological stance in their explanations of why things are as they are. One prisoner told me she believed she was imprisoned due to her previous wrongdoings, not in a legal sense, but in the form of bad karma. Bad deeds in this or a previous life had led her to the suffering she faced in the form of imprisonment. Through this belief, she used prison as an occasion to change and committed herself to be a faithful Buddhist after release, to make up for these previous wrongdoings. When I asked her if the same applied to her brother who also went to prison, she told me that his was a very different situation. Her brother suffered because he was a drug user, and drug use is a societal problem not connected to his individual behaviour. Thus, she navigated in between different explanations of why people go to prison, drawing on different ontological perspectives. In one, people's lives are determined by past actions, in another lives are determined by societal structures. While she willingly took on the fault for her own imprisonment, she did not ascribe the same guilt to her brother. Instead, she drew on a different explanation of why people go to prison, one that would relocate the cause of his suffering to a more abstract entity of 'society'. To the corrupt state she had fought against, in which drug lords are allowed to operate if they pay off the right people, while drug users are criminalised. By changing between these two modes of explanation, she navigates in a way similar to other people inside as well as outside prisons in Myanmar.

Like prisoners and prison staff, the analysis in this dissertation moves between ontologies, as it follows prisoners while they draw on various logics and when applying theory developed elsewhere within different ontological logics, to understand experiences of imprisonment. In the encounter between data and theory, one ontological approach is not privileged above another. Rather, the analysis navigates in between them and uses them to experiment with *'how things could be'* (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 293):

> Ontologically inclined anthropologists distinguish themselves by rendering their own thoughts (and therefore their own concepts) subject to the same degree – and ideally the same kind – of experimental intervention as the people whose lives they study and engage with in their field sites, including their own life as ethnographic fieldworkers. (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 24)

This approach is in agreement with the previously described methods inspired by action research and activism and action research (Arieli, Friedman, and Agbaria 2009; Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire 2003). Further, it adds to these approaches, by not only recognising participants as experts on their own experiences, but by also recognising the need for questioning and setting aside the researcher's own ontological assumptions.

To explore these experiences, the study draws on critical phenomenology as described by Lisa Guenther (2013) in her study of social death in solitary confinement. Guenther draws on classic phenomenological approaches, but argues that accounts of the phenomenon of social death in connection with solitary confinement reveal the shortcomings of a first-person singular perspective to understand human experience. She therefore argues that critical phenomenology must add understandings of the role of intersubjectivity in individual experience to add understandings of 'the complex textures of social life' to classic phenomenology (2013, xiii).

> For me, what is most valuable about the phenomenological tradition is the insight that there is no individual without relations, no subject without complications, and no life without resistance. (L. Guenther 2013, xv)

Through this perspective, individual experiences are understood as socially constituted. According to Guenther, this explains why some people become 'unhinged' in solitary confinement, when deprived of the social structures through which their experiences, consciousness and thus their being is constituted. When they become unhinged, they lose their sense of 'reality' and of their own being, they engage in self-harm in an attempt to define the border between themselves and the rest of the world and they become in doubt about the difference between thoughts and experiences. From this extreme phenomenon, Guenther deducts a characteristic of consciousness. Through the example of what happens to consciousness when deprived of intersubjectivity, she demonstrates that without the foundational intersubjectivity consciousness is at risk of falling apart.

There are many similarities between Guenther's description of 'becoming unhinged' and van Gennep and Turner's descriptions of liminal experiences. Both are experiences that occur after a 'social death', a suspension of aspects of the person before entering a liminal experiences. Both are experiences in which normal social

structures are suspended and, in the liminal conceptualisation, replaced by antistructure. The following theoretical framework describes how imprisonment can be understood as liminal experiences and discusses how this fits with a critical phenomenological approach explored through ethnography.

4.2 Imprisonment as liminal experience

In this analysis *liminality* is used as analytical concept to serve two purposes: Firstly, it equips us to better grasp a reality like Myanmar, where structures appear both in place and ruptured. This situation follows the many years of wars between kingdoms and revolutionary efforts against the colonial powers and changing military regimes. In some sense, Myanmar can be seen as stuck in a situation of permanent liminality, in a never-ending state of transition (Egreteau and Robinne 2016; Thomassen 2018). This is illustrated by the 2008 constitution in which the country is established as *disciplined democracy*, a betwixt and between, neither authoritarian nor democratic. It is also reflected in a lack of agreement on historical facts and a tendency for multiple versions of historical events to exist concurrently, e.g. which family can claim a lineage to the Buddha and which ethnicities truly belongs within the nation's borders. These disagreements on historical facts creep all the way into the present time and influence ethnic and nationalist debates, where, like in the rest of the world, fake news are debated, though with a recent legacy of propaganda by previous regimes.

Secondly, liminality represents a particular potential as an analytical lens for the study of experiences of imprisonment. Experiences of imprisonment function according to a structure much alike transitional rituals. They start with arrest, the pre-liminal rites of separation, continue into life inside prison - the liminal phase, and, end with a post-liminal re-integration as the prisoner is released. Not only can the structure of imprisonment be likened to that of a transitional ritual, taken a step further, the purpose of the

prison, to reform or rehabilitate 'the criminal',[26] is to change a person, and as such much alike the purpose of a rite of passage. While some researchers have identified this potential (Green 2016; Jefferson 2010; Jewkes 2005; Moran 2013; Suttner 2010), much is still to be gained from further exploring the potential for the study of imprisonment as liminal experience. This section argues for the potential of applying liminality as analytical concept in studies of imprisonment. The following two publications (Paper III and IV) apply the concept in analysis of spiritual experiences and suffering in mediation and solitary confinement and of the prolonged liminality that limits possibilities for re-integration for former prisoners after release.

Szakolzcai (2000) has argued that convergence between liminality on a societal level with liminal experiences on a personal level intensifies the significance of such experiences. Thus, when personal experiences of liminality in connection with imprisonment take place within a society either stuck in permanent liminality, as the political situation in Myanmar today, or in acute liminality, such as in the uprisings of the past, the significance of the liminal experience is amplified. Thus, for a person imprisoned as political prisoner during the 88 uprising, the convergence between societal and personal liminality will likely make this a life changing experience.

Liminality originates in the study of rituals, but has since been found equally useful to speak of other processes of becoming (Szakolczai 2015; Thomassen 2015; V. Turner 1985). Liminal experiences are *'…*experiences *that happen during occasions of significant transition, passage or disruption.'* (Stenner 2017, 14).

For prisoners, life is disrupted as they are arrested and taken to prison. They are in a liminal position in terms of space (the prison) and time (the sentence). They are betwixt and between, as liminal subjects, their identity is suspended together with the social structure they came from. In this liminal phase, prisoners are 'both/and' and 'neither/nor'. They are convicted as criminals, but are to become reformed citizens, they represent the potential to be

[26] The term criminal is problematic in itself, though inherent to the justice system and therefore hard to avoid in a study of imprisonment. Which actions are criminalised in a society is decided by the state, as such the construction of the category of 'the criminal' is a social construction caused by political decisions. It does thus not specify who the people positioned in this way are or about their morals. In this paper, the term 'criminal' will be used to describe the position in which prisoners are positioned by the state. While it does not inform us about who the people in the position are, it does point to the kind of treatment they face.

both, but they are also no-longer-a-criminal and not-yet-a-reformed-citizen (Stenner 2017, 15). Stenner describes how in liminal experiences *'solid psychosocial structures melt down into liquids, the better to be reformed into a new pattern'* (Stenner 2017, 16). It is through this framework that this article approaches spiritual experiences[27] of prisoners, as examples of what happens when psychosocial structures liquefy. This explains why such experiences can break with hegemonic conceptions of reality and raise ontological questions.

Stenner (2017) and Thomassen (2015) have suggested a number of dimension according to which liminal experiences can be categorised into different types of liminality. Thomassen (2015, 15) proposes that liminality can be described according to three dimensions: *space, time and subject*. *Space* refers to the area where liminality takes place – is it for example limited to the cell or the meditation centre inside the prison, the whole prison or maybe it extends to all of Myanmar. Liminality can be studied on all three levels, but will vary accordingly. *Subject* refers to who goes through the liminal experience – an individual prisoner, a group of yogis or a whole population. Here, population can refer to the population of the country of Myanmar as well as of the prison, such as Insein Central Prison where 12,000 prisoners live in a relatively closed-off society. There will likely be a close connection between the demarcation of the subjects who go through liminality and the space in which it takes place. Individual experiences are likely to be limited to a smaller space, while liminal experiences on population level is likely to cover more space. It is, however, also possible to imagine individual liminal experiences that cover more space, such as the prisoner who finds himself in permanent liminality after release, unable to integrate into society, no matter where he goes (see Paper IV for further elaboration). Lastly, the *temporal* dimension refers to the period liminality takes place – a moment, a period (such as a ten days retreat) or a prolonged or permanent epoch. The temporal dimension comes into play especially when prisoners find themselves stuck in liminality, unable to reconnect to social structures.

[27] Here, a broad conceptualisation of 'spiritual experiences' is used to refer to experiences which break with a socially agreed upon reality. These experiences include yogis who describe being visited by spirits and prisoners in solitary confinement who experience hearing voices. These experiences are conceptualised with inspiration from classic writings on religious experience (James 2012; Latour 2005; Weber 2013) from a critical phenomenological perspective with respect to the ontological positions of research participants and to avoid pathologisation through medical materialism (L. Guenther 2013; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; James 2012). For a more thorough discussion, see Paper III.

In addition to the dimensions proposed by Thomassen, Stenner proposes a set of binaries to describe different types of liminal experiences. According to Stenner, liminal experiences can be spontaneous or devised, structured or unstructured, staged and unstaged (2017). While there appears to be some overlap between the different binaries, they do describe different characteristics of liminal experiences. For experiences of meditation and solitary confinement in Myanmar prisons, the difference between devised and spontaneous liminal experiences is imperative.

> In traditional rites of passage, the 'passengers' are guided through by an experienced master of ceremonies or Shaman for whom liminal experience is the norm rather than the exception. In spontaneous liminal events, such guidance is typically lacking, and there are no guarantees about what will be made of the situation. The seed of fabulation that arises through 'separation' is delicate and vulnerable. It is easily dismissed as a mere hallucination. (Stenner 2017, 63)

Stenner points to two main differences between the devised and spontaneous liminal experience. Firstly, the person is guided through devised liminal experience in some way, whether it be through the presence of a master of ceremony, like a meditation teacher, or through a set of guiding principles. Secondly, spontaneous liminal experiences can cause vulnerability and risk being dismissed as hallucinations – since there is no pre-defined structure through which others can understand the liminal experiences. In the case of prisons, this offers a possible explanation of why spiritual experiences can be seen as rehabilitative when part of a programme such as a retreat, and pathological when arising in solitary confinement (Himelstein 2011; Smith 2006; Vipassana Research Institute 1994). Furthermore, the absence of guidance in solitary confinement offers a possible explanation for why prisoners in solitary confinement describe spiritual experiences as leading to suffering, while yogis describe them as passing experiences, which may be painful while ongoing, but which diminish after guidance from the meditation teacher.

Through the case of the prison this study has identified another binary that can be of importance: whether liminal experiences are *forced* or *voluntary*. Imprisonment is characterised by being a transitional experience forced upon the individual by the state. It is rarely the case that the prisoner has chosen to go to prison for reform himself. Rather, the state has deemed his actions unacceptable and

sent him to prison for punishment and reform. Thus, understanding the general framework of imprisonment as liminal, means studying forced liminal experience. Experiences of solitary confinement are experiences forced upon the individual.[28] Meditation retreats within prisons on the other hand are generally voluntary practices. While this dimension has been identified through a study of imprisonment as liminal experience, it is likely to apply in other contexts where social expectations for example can affect the degree of voluntariness of the person going through a ritual or other liminal experience.

4.3 Symbolic death

Symbolic death plays a role in descriptions of transitional beings (V. Turner 1970) as well as prisoners (L. Guenther 2013). Turner describes the symbolic death of the past self in the first phase of the ritual, as needed for the individual to be able to enter a new position after the ritual. Guenther describes the social and civic death that prisoners experience as a consequence of the social deprivations in prisons and the minimum of rights allocated to prisoners.

Gunther traces the penal practices in USA today back to the times when slavery was practiced. By doing so, she demonstrates how slaves and prisoners alike are liminal in the sense that they are positioned as inferior to other human beings in a position of social and civic death. While she takes departure in an American context, the same dynamics are applicable to the modern prison elsewhere (Garland 1985).

> Positioned at the edge of social life, neither included nor expelled, the slave is "in a permanent condition of liminality and must forever mourn his own social death" (60). (L. Guenther 2013, xx quoting Patterson 1982)

Quoting Patterson, Guenther makes the link between social death and liminality. While Guenther here comes into contact with the concept of liminality, and while her description is strikingly similar to descriptions of liminality, she does not take on the

[28] In some countries, segregation can also take place for prisoners who chose it voluntarily for their own protection, in such cases it would be possible to speak about voluntary segregation (though if fearing for one's life it can still be questioned how free the choice is). In Myanmar, such segregation is not the norm.

theoretical conceptualisation of the concept. Instead, she shows how the status of social and civic death can be traced back to slavery in the case of US, but also applies to prisoners today and defines social death as follows:

> To be socially dead is to be deprived of the network of social relations, particularly kinship relations, that would otherwise support, protect, and give meaning to one's precarious life as an individual. It is to be violently and permanently separated from one's kin, blocked from forming a meaningful relationship, not only to others in the present but also to the heritage of the past and the legacy of the future beyond one's own finite, individuated being. (L. Guenther 2013, xxi)

Prisoners are socially dead in the sense that they are deprived of their position in the social structures they would normally be part of. It might be useful to think of social as well as civic death as a question of degrees. Thus, a prisoner from Yangon who is imprisoned in Insein Central Prison might be able to receive family visits twice a month, while a prisoner from Yangon who is sent to a remote prison might rarely get to see his family. This will affect his relations to family and thus the degree to which he is socially dead. It is obvious, however, that even in the case where the frequency of visit is high, a visit in a prison visitation room is far from normal everyday life with your family.

Guenther describes how the social and civic death inherent in the structures of imprisonment in some cases can lead to experiences of 'becoming unhinged'.

> In the context of this inquiry, "becoming unhinged" is not just a colloquial expression; rather, it is a precise phenomenological description of what happens when the articulated joints of our embodied, interrelational subjectivity are broken apart. (L. Guenther 2013, xii)

Becoming unhinged is a most uncomfortable experience, which prisoners in solitary confinement are especially at risk of suffering as they are removed from human contact and experience sensory deprivation during the approximately 23 hours spent inside the cell. Even the short time outside the cell is often still alone in yard area, with limited sensory stimulation. When prisoners become unhinged, they experience what in the US is described as the SHU syndrome, named after the Security Housing Unit which solitary

confinement is named in the American Super Max Prisons (Grassain 1983; Reiter 2016). These symptoms include losing grasp of what is real, for example through hallucinations. Often prisoners also experience losing touch with the boundaries of themselves, physically this can lead to self-harm as they search for their own limits. Mentally, this can be experienced as doubt about which experiences took place, and which were imagined (Abbott 1991). Did I hear yelling from somewhere? Did I imagine it? Or, was I actually the one who was crying out?

While there are similarities between liminal experiences of transitional rites and experiences of becoming unhinged, there are also a significant difference: rites involve progression and development, whereas becoming unhinged describes a situation of decomposition of the self. The explanation for this difference lies in the descriptions of symbolic death. Guenther's description of 'social death and its afterlives' recounts the permanent damage faced by many prisoners who have been in solitary confinement. Van Gennep and Turner, in turn, describe a similar state of betwixt and between, but with the significant difference that the death of what was before leads to the potential for the birth of something new. Becoming unhinged corresponds with the second of three phases of transitional rituals. Unlike the ritual, in which the liminal personae is re-integrated in the third and final phase, the unhinged person is left in a permanent state of liminality.

The description of the process of rituals appear to be in agreement with the imagined purpose of the prison. Guenther describes the reasoning behind the construction of modern penitentiaries, in which solitary confinement were a central feature:

> All contact with the outside, including news, would be severely limited so that, after their time was served, they could emerge as new persons, unconnected to their old community or way of life. This was the gift of the penitentiary: the privilege of becoming a tabula rasa, a blank slate from which to begin again as a newly made republican machine, an individual without a past and with nothing but a clear, bright, productive future ahead. (L. Guenther 2013, 14)

At first glance, the reasoning behind imprisonment can appear meaningful when understood as a transition from one status to another through liminality. The prisoner is removed from his community and placed in a liminal space, where he has the privilege of becoming a tabula rasa. This tabula rasa corresponds well with

how Turner describes the liminal personae as ambiguous threshold people in some senses invisible to the world (V. Turner 1979, 95). However, as Guenther has shown, there are crucial differences between the children transitioning into adulthood or chieftains taking their position in Turner's descriptions and the prisoners becoming non-criminals in the prisons.

The full structure of rites of passage offer a possible explanation for these different outcomes of liminal experiences. Van Gennep divides the ritual process into three phases – separation, transition and re-integration. When studying experiences of imprisonment, focus is on the transitionary phase, where re-integration has not yet taken place and actualised the potential for change of going through a liminal experience. For the former prisoners who have been interviewed, they might well have been released from prison, but for many, the lack of a ceremony in connection with release appears to leave them in a state of prolonged liminality in which they are unable to take up a new and changed position. Another explanation for the relative absence of positive potential is that imprisonment is not a ritual one enters of one's own volition to become something new, it is a process one is forced to go through to stop being something that is deemed unacceptable to society, 'a criminal'. The implications of these theoretical reflections are bleak prospects of prisons producing the law abiding citizens they are supposed to, without a formalised procedure for re-integration of prisoners after release. While theoretical in nature, this argument fits well with the experiences many prisoners are confronted with after release (R. Armstrong and Durnescu 2016; Pavarini and Ferrari 2018).

While most participants in this study recounted experiences that match well with Guenther's description, in which the prison is a place that breaks people rather than transforms them into law abiding citizens, it is worth noting that there are examples of the contrary. The SHU syndrome and PTSD (which are indeed defined by very similar symptoms) are some of the names that have been given to the traumatic effects of solitary confinement, imprisonment and torture. Another term: 'post traumatic growth' tells the story of a different outcome for some (Westphal and Bonanno 2007). For a few of the prisoners who are part of this research, prison was an occasion for self-reflection and self-improvement. Almost like a rite of passage leading them from childhood to adulthood, they were imprisoned in their late teens and released years later, as adults. These people described how they had changed mentally, often by themselves in quiet reflection, through insights about who they were before (for examples see accounts in Kyaw Zwa Moe 2018).

The prison did not appear to actively support their transformation while inside, but the liminal position they were in allowed them to step back from who they were, and choose to become something else. Thus, they described entering prison as 'hot tempered', 'hardliner' or 'self-absorbed' and exiting as patient, softliners filled with loving kindness. While prisons are harmful places to most people, these exceptions to the rule reveal something about the nature of imprisonment. They too point to the liminal nature of the experiences. While liminal experiences can be stressful, even painful and harmful, when normal social structure is replaced by anti-structure, they also represent a potential for change:

> People can "be themselves," it is frequently said, when they are not acting institutionalized roles. Roles, too, carry responsibilities and in the liminal situation the main burden of responsibility is borne by the elders, leaving the neophytes free to develop interpersonal relationships as they will. (V. Turner 1970, 101)

Thus, while prisons are meant to break down certain aspects of people – those connected to 'being criminal' – it appears that in liminal experiences all positions the person used to take are suspended and can be subject to change. For most prisoners this experience is painful, as they did not seek or choose this opportunity to change from what they were. But in some cases, prisoners manage to use the liminal experience to change aspects of themselves that they realise they do not want to preserve. The prison is like a ritual without a pre-defined anti-structure. When imprisoned, people go through symbolic death and enter a space where social norms from the outside are suspended. Instead they find themselves in a space where anti-structure is established ad hoc by prisoners and prison staff alike. In such a liminal space, where psychosocial structures have liquefied, the possibilities for which new social structures a person can enter are plentiful. One can fall into the anti-structure established by prisoners, and maybe the prison will become like a 'university of crime' (field notes). One can become one of the lucky few that get access to rehabilitation activities, and the prison authorities might be able to guide the transition to something new. Or, one can end up in a state of prolonged liminality, of being in a transition going nowhere.

4.4 Anti-structure and communitas

In the liminal phase of the ritual and in prison, social structures are replaced by anti-structure. In prisons, this is reflected in the alternative social structure which arise after the prisoners give up parts of their previous status and become part of a communitas.

Turner works with the Latin term communitas, rather than community, to be specific about the nature of the communitas. Communitas is defined not as a social network, but: *'to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an "area of common living"'* (V. Turner 1979, 96). Communitas is thus spatially defined as the area in which a group of people go through a liminal experience together. Within this area, the communitas is separated from the community they previously belonged (and to which they might return). Moreover, communitas is also separated from temporal structure:

> Communitas is of the now; structure is rooted in the past and extends into the future through language, law, and custom. (V. Turner 1979, 113)

For prisoners, the past was suspended as they became liminal beings who can no longer claim the positions they held outside. An example of this is seen when monks are disrobed and forced to wear normal prisoner uniforms. Such an act would be unthinkable outside the prison walls, but in this liminal space, it is a possibility. As for the future, it becomes out of reach, due to the uncertainty about when imprisonment will end and what happens after (Gaborit and Jefferson 2019). Furthermore, in this imagined future, the communitas will likely cease to exist, when the prisoners no longer live in a shared area. Thus, the communitas of the prison only exists in the present. In cases where the communitas appears to continue after prison, like for political prisoners, it is often connected to a sense of permanent liminality that makes it possible and necessary for the communitas to continue (see Paper IV for further elaboration).

Within this spatially and temporally demarcated area, the communitas develops certain qualities. As described above, the liminal personae is in a betwixt and between situation where the position he used to hold has been suspended.

> The liminal group is a community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions. This comradeship transcends distinctions of rank, age, kinship positions, and, in

> some kinds of cultic groups, even sex. (V. Turner 1970, 101)

Inside prisons, previous social hierarchies are dissolved when all prisoners are treated equally. Their social status from outside prison is left behind and the prisoner has to re-establish himself. Here, a different social hierarchy arises. An anti-structure created on terms that only exist inside the prison. The dissolution of social status, following the arrest, allows for a flexibility when prisoners re-establish their position inside. Thus, there are examples of prisoners who struggled for survival outside, but who got by well inside and managed to earn a respect they never experienced before. However, the management and rules in Myanmar prisons also maintains a certain structure. The structure appears as a consequence of the allocation of prisoners to cells, when prisoners are classified according to the sentence they have (first time offenders, serial offenders or special cases such as political prisoners) and when prisoners are allocated to certain roles (*thansees* – prisoner leaders, *night watchmen*) or become responsible for certain duties (emptying toilet bowls, managing access to showers, kitchen duty). This anti-structure is like a prism of the structure outside – it appears in some ways similar but also distorted. Turner describes these contrasts as a movement between figure and ground, between structure and anti-structure, which makes both communitas and social structure accessible to our understanding.

> Buber lays his finger on the spontaneous, immediate, concrete nature of communitas, as opposed to the norm-governed, institutionalized, abstract nature of social structure. Yet, communitas is made evident or accessible, so to speak, only through its juxtaposition to, or hybridization with, aspects of social structure. Just as in Gestalt psychology, figure and ground are mutually determinative, or, as some rare elements are never found in nature in their purity but only as components of chemical compounds, so communitas can be grasped only in some relation to structure. (V. Turner 1979, 127)

Here, Turner refers to Buber as he contrasts the spontaneous nature of communitas with institutionalization. In prisons, both of these occur. On the one hand, the institution of the prison is governed by authorities who seek to create order by establishing rules and social structure. On the other, prisoners go through liminal

experiences within this institution. Using liminality as an analytical tool to unpack prisons therefore entails moving between figure and ground, between prison as institution and the liminal experiences that take place within the prison walls.

4.5 Applying the concept of liminality in prison research

In this theoretical framework, the potential of bringing the analytical concept of liminality to prison research has been presented. The combination of these different theoretical approaches and concepts has demonstrated how experiences of imprisonment can be conceptualised as liminal. This framework explains differences between life inside and outside prisons, such as the intensification of emotions and social processes and differences in moral structures (Liebling 1999). These processed are explained through the establishment of antistructures, in which social structures from before are liquefied and prisoners become liminal personae. Combining the liminal perspective with a post-phenomenological approach demonstrated how suspension of such social structure have immense effects on a person and can lead to experiences of becoming unhinged and losing touch with reality.

Thus, approaching experiences of imprisonment as liminal represents a significant potential to understand how they are different from other experiences and what they do to those who go through them. This theoretical framework suggests that there is a need for more research on experiences of imprisonment as liminal. In addition to the few previous studies of liminality in connection with imprisonment (Green 2016; Jefferson 2010; Jewkes 2005; Moran 2013; Suttner 2010), this dissertation adds empirical analysis of liminal experiences of imprisonment in the following two papers.

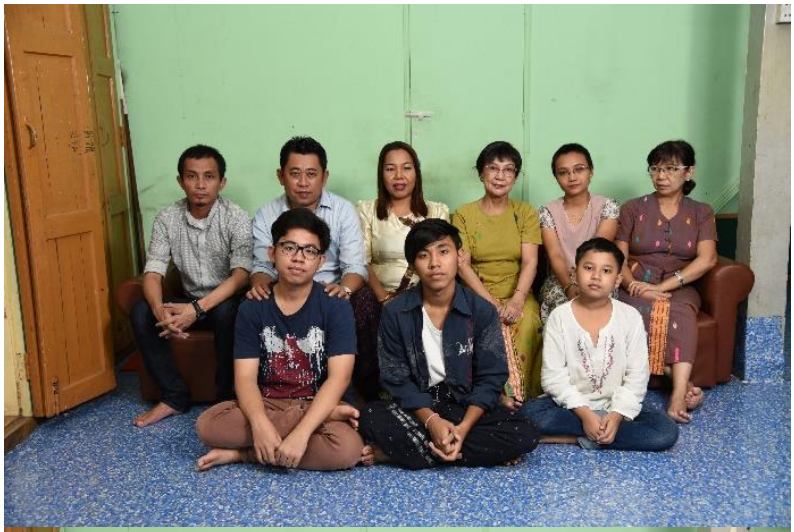
Paper III applies the theoretical framework in an analysis of spiritual experiences that occur for prisoners in meditation and in solitary confinement. While there are clear similarities in the spiritual experiences prisoners describe as arising in connection with meditation and solitary confinement, there appear to be a significant difference in whether the experiences are described as contributing to positive development (meditation) or as meaningless experiences of suffering (solitary confinement). Through the concept of liminality, the paper shows how the outcome of spiritual experiences depend on the absence or presence of guidance (master of ceremony), absence or presence of

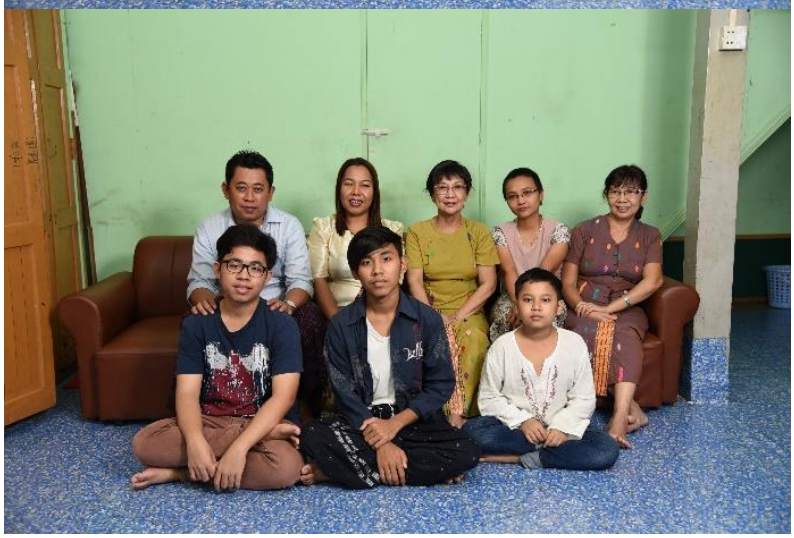
communitas and whether the liminal experience is devised or spontaneous (Stenner 2017) or forced or voluntary.

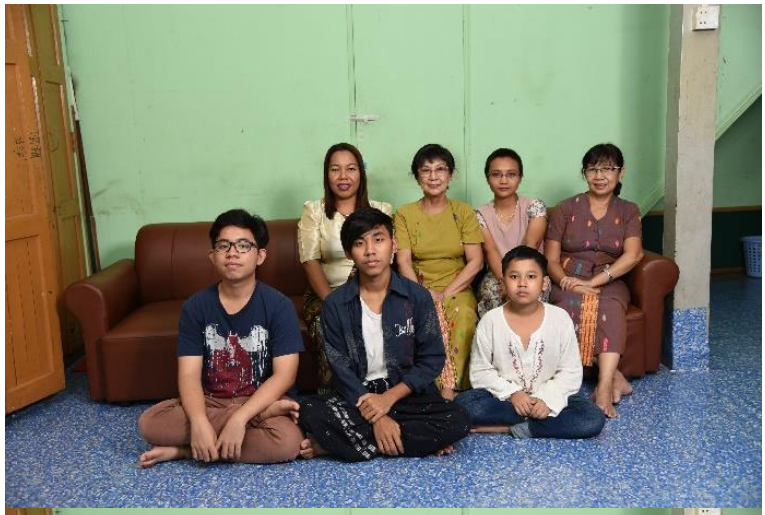
Paper IV is concerned with challenges prisoners face after release. Here, liminality offers a way to understand why re-integration is a struggle for many after release. Without the proper ritual to leave the liminal state they are in, and without recognition for their new changed status, prisoners are stuck in prolonged liminality. The paper combines the theoretical framework above with theories of recognition. Through discussion with Fraser's (2000; 2018) status model for recognition, the paper demonstrates how processes of recognition represent the third and final phase of a transition.

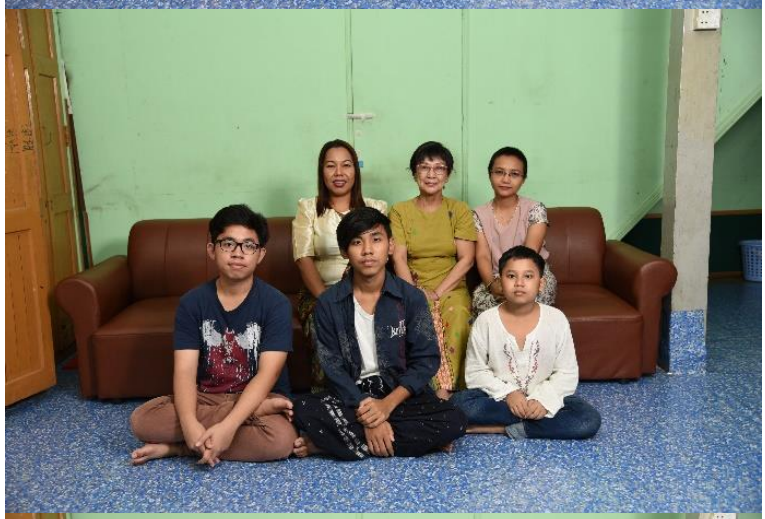
Visual Interlude V

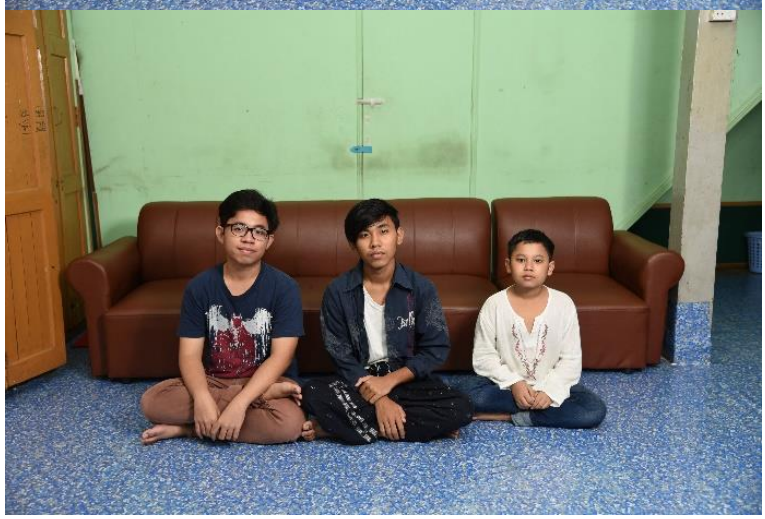
This series of family portraits show how one single family was affected by political imprisonment. The pictures illustrate how the family members were arrested one by one, leaving only few people on the outside. While in prison, the family members were separated and sent to different prisons. Therefore the people outside had to travel across the country to remote prisons to visit their relatives. (Photo: Sai Minn Thein)



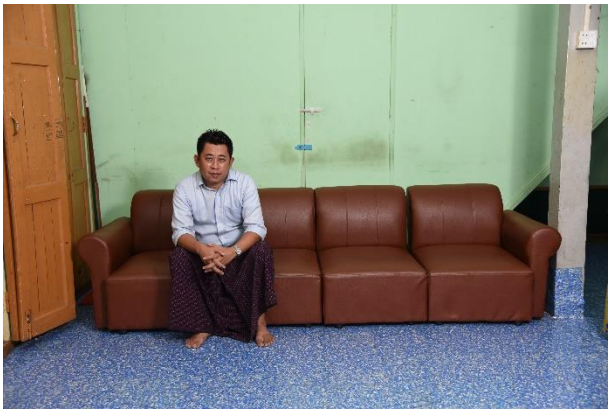




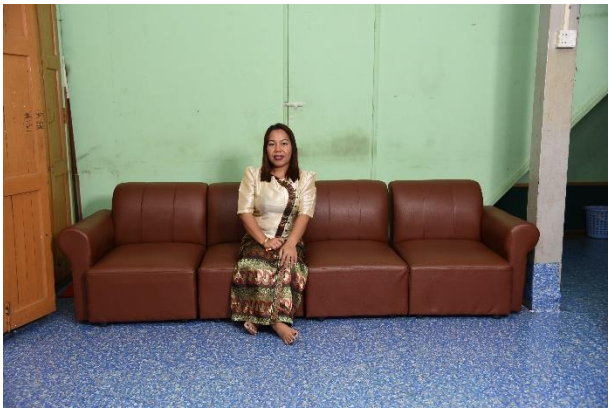




Left: Ko Htun Nay Aung aka. Jo Joe, arrested August 24, 2007, released November, 2007. Detained in Kyeik Ka San Interrogative Center and Kyauk Tan Police regiment. Right: Daw Su Su Kyi, arrested 1992, 1993 and on October 9, 2007, released November 2007. Detained in Aung Thapyae Interrogation Center.

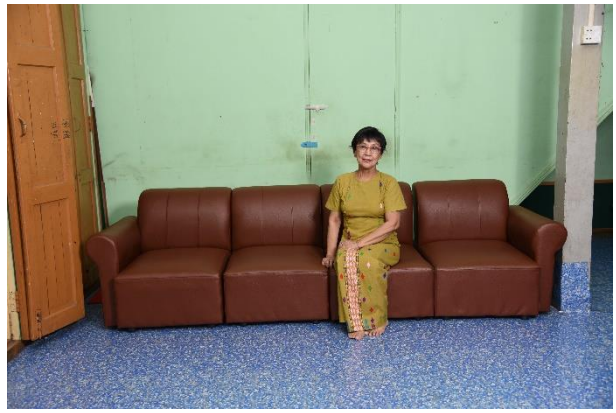


Ko Chit Ko Lin, arrested October 8, 2007, sentenced to 11 years and released October 12, 2011 from Pakokku Prison.

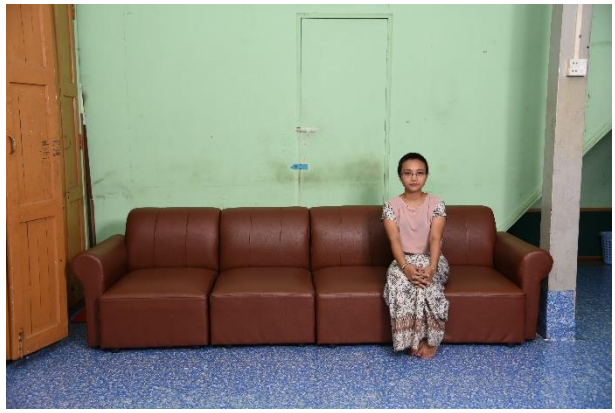


Daw Thet Thet Aung, arrested October 18, 2007, sentenced to 65 years on 6 different counts, released January 12, 2012 from Myin Chan Prison.

Daw Sann Sann Tin, arrested October 18, 2007, sentenced to 9 years and released October 12, 2011.

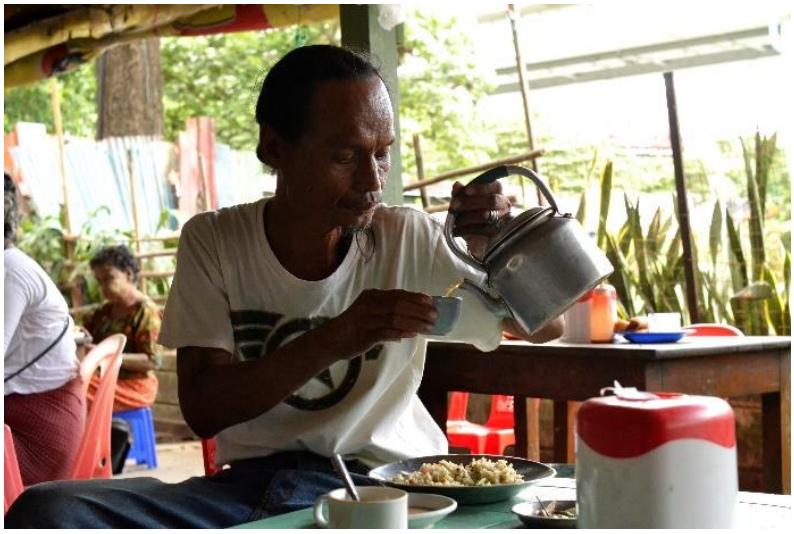


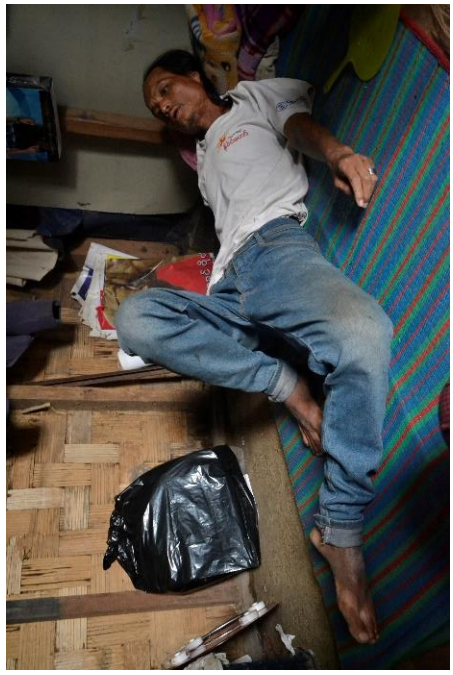
Ma Nwe Hnin Yi aka. No Noe, arrested October 18, 2007, sentenced to 11 years and released October 12, 2011 from Mau Bin Prison.

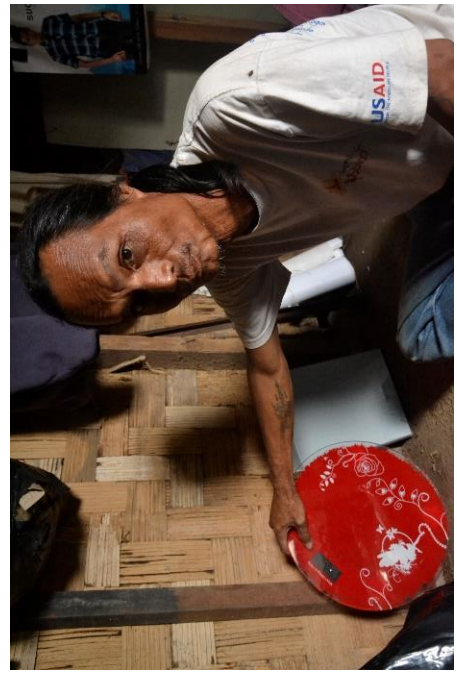


Visual Interlude VI

Ko Kyaw Min Swe aka. **Pho Kyaw** joined the ABSDF in the northern camp by the border to Thailand, after the democratic uprising in 1988. He fled from the camp after the northern incident in 1991-1992, where students turned on each other and some students were accused of being informers for the state. In 1998, he was arrested because of his participation in the anniversary of the 1988 uprising. He was sentenced to 7 years under section 5J of the emergency act. He was released from Oh Bo Prison on November 19. In the pictures, he is working in the street earning for his daily living by weighing people, relaxing in his simple home and eating in a teashop. (Photo: Pho Nyi Htwe)



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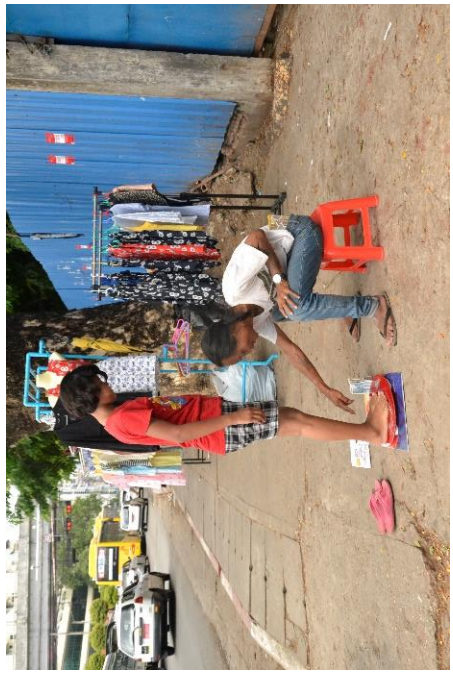
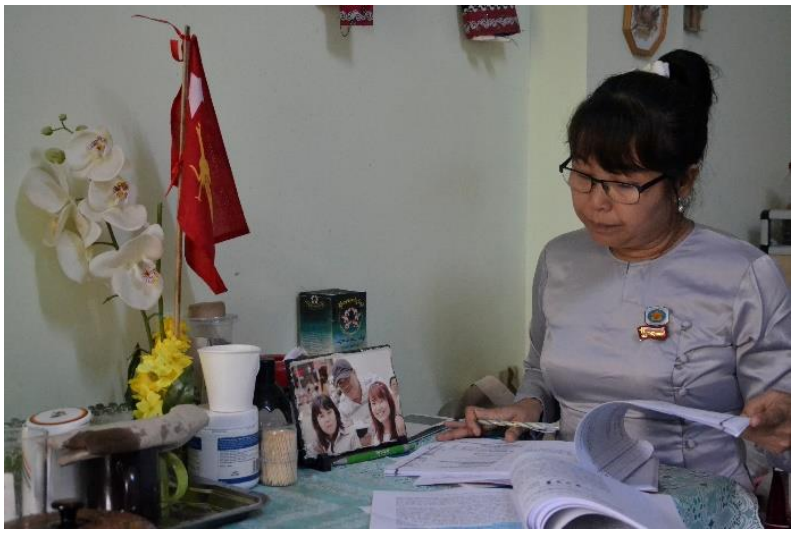
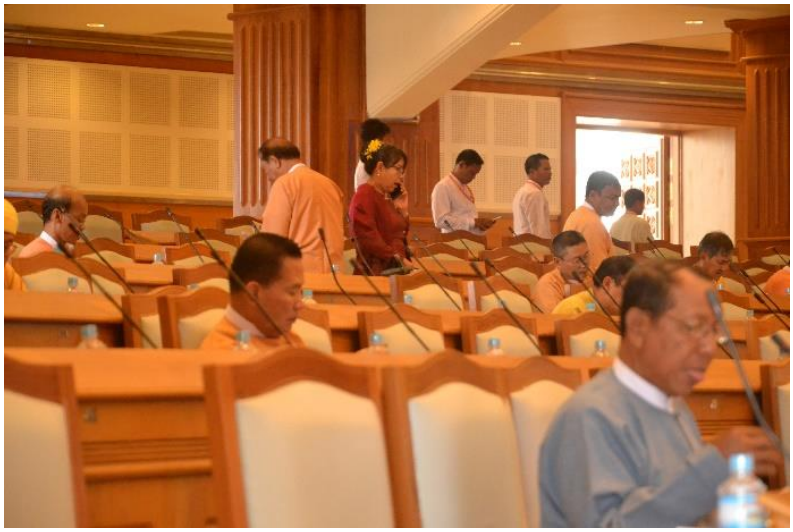
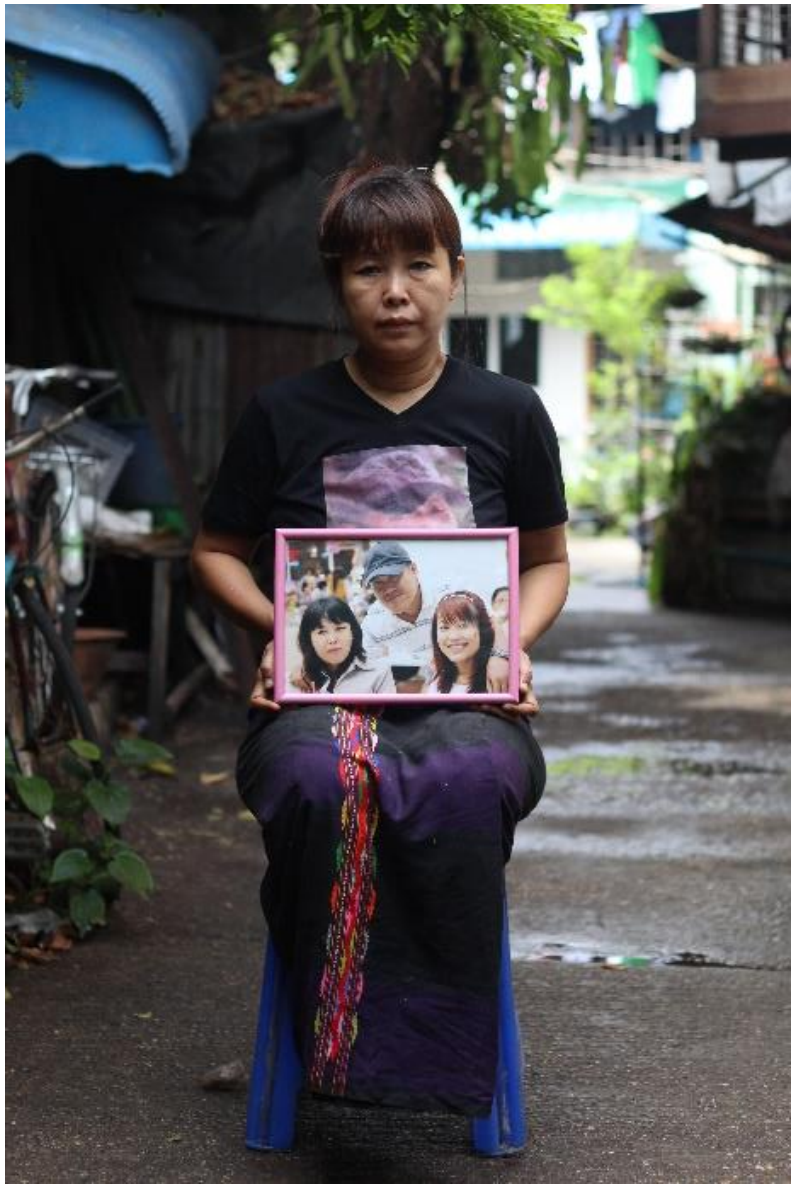


Ma Thanda was arrested on April 23, 2007 on the Thai/Myanmar border. She was sentenced to 28 years of imprisonment, of which she served 6 before being released on amnesty. In the pictures, she holds a picture of her late husband U Par Gyi who was executed in 2014 while covering a story on the fighting between ethnic groups and the military. Today she is a member of parliament (Hllutaw) for NLD. (Photo: Pho Nyi Htwe (this page) and Letyar Tun (right)).







CHAPTER 5

Conclusion and discussion of findings

This study has explored how different practices of detention have been lived through by prisoners under different regimes in the period 1988 to 2018. To do so, it has addressed the following general research question: What experiences do prisoners in Myanmar go through and how are they affected by such experiences? Through this line of inquiry, the study has addressed three gaps in existing research: one empirical, methodological and conceptual. While all three gaps have been addressed continuously throughout this dissertation, the primary contributions to these gaps are presented below.

The empirical gap in research was concerned with the scarce research on prison in the Global South, even less on Asian prisons and no empirical research on prisons in Myanmar within recent times (1988-2018). This gap in research was addressed through the first sub-research question: How are experiences of imprisonment in Myanmar today shaped by legacies from the past? While all papers in this dissertation have contributed to filling the empirical gap, Paper I directly addressed the first sub-research question. Paper I combined a genealogical approach with ethnographic findings about prisons in Myanmar today. In doing so, it traced how four penal practices mutated and persisted across time and across different regimes. It showed how the use of fetters for restraints of prisoners is a legacy from the time of colonial lock ups, in which material conditions necessitated the use of restraints to prevent escapes. It further demonstrated how, while the use of fetters have decreased significantly, they are still in use even though the brick walls of prisons today are more likely to prevent escapes than the bamboo walls of the past. Secondly, the paper showed how the use of convict officers had persisted across dynastic, colonial and authoritarian regimes and continues to be in use today. Thirdly, it traced the curious development of use of amnesties, which was a

legacy from dynastic times, subsequently taken out of use during colonial times, only to be reinstated in 1962 immediately after the military takeover that marked the start of General Ne Win's authoritarian rule. Thus, the analysis showed how this practice was closely related to sovereign rulers and questioned how such a practice can continue today under supposed democratic rule. Lastly, the paper showed how torture, like amnesties, was a legacy from the dynastic times, which the British colonial powers sought to abolish, but which returned even more violently with the authoritarian regime. While the use of torture appear to have decreased inside prisons, reports suggest it continues in conflict areas where the Tatmadaw still hold significant amounts of power. Overall, the paper demonstrated the potential of combining genealogy and ethnography in an ethnographic history, a 'history in practice' (Holland and Lave 2001). The ethnographic history written in Paper I suggests that there are connections between developments in penal practices and national governance, and that the remnants of legacies from authoritarian times in prisons today point to the shortcomings of the democratic transition.

The second identified gap in research was methodological and pertained to how to research experiences of other people through ethnography. This was addressed through Paper II, which presented reflections brought about by the experience of conducting prison research with limited access to prisons. The paper concluded that access to experiences is not the same as access to the places where experiences take place. By approaching experiences through interviews informed by critical phenomenology, in other contexts than the prison, immersed in the intersubjective experiences which contributed to the participant's consciousness, turned out to be equally informative. The paper argued for the potential of moving between different contexts with participants and showed how this offered a potential to witness different social structures that constituted research participants and to move to contexts in which participants felt more safe, able to recount experiences they would not have recounted while inside prison and had the freedom to exert agency over the situation in which the interview was conducted.

The last identified gap in research was conceptual and concerned the potential of understanding experiences of imprisonment as liminal experiences. This gap was addressed through two sub-research questions in the final two papers. One concerned with experiences inside prisons and one concerned with post-prison life.

Paper III addressed the issue of what factors cause differences in experiences of imprisonment. The paper showed how spiritual experiences in meditation (inside prison) are often described as contributing to a positive development, while spiritual experiences in solitary confinement tend to lead to suffering. By conceptualising these experiences as liminal, the article showed how liminal experiences with less suffering tend to include more elements also seen in rituals – such as guidance through a master of ceremony and a communitas with whom to go through the ritual sequence. The liminal experiences that led to suffering in solitary confinement, on the other hand, were characterised by an absence of guidance and communitas. Moreover, the article argued for adding the continuum from forced to voluntary as a dimension to existing classifications of types of liminality (Stenner 2017; Thomassen 2015). This dimension represent a theoretical contribution with possible potential for application in other contexts than prisons.

The fourth and final paper addressed the final sub-research question: Why do some prisoners experience being stuck in prolonged liminality unable to re-establish their lives after release? Paper IV was based on data from the action research project and photo exhibition Beyond the Prison Gate and explored the challenges faced by former political prisoners after release. The article argued that challenges with re-integration can be conceptualised as challenges with changing status, ceasing to be a prisoner, thereby leaving the liminal state connected with imprisonment. Through a discussion of three photos, and the process of creating the exhibition, the article showed how different types of recognition were at the core of the matter and how prisoners needed recognition (Honneth 1996) as well as redistribution and access to parity of participation (Fraser 2000; 2018) to be properly reintegrated. The article demonstrated the shortcomings of prisons in offering support for the processes needed for re-integration, and thereby failing to fulfil the purpose of being an institution that can reform and rehabilitate people.

This dissertation has shown the potential of approaching imprisonment as liminal experiences – for the development of theories of liminality as well as for understandings of imprisonment. For understandings of imprisonment, a liminal approach adds essential knowledge about the importance of guidance through liminal experiences. It also explains the difference between imprisonment and society outside as the replacement of social structure of the outside with anti-structure inside prison during liminality. This, for example, explains how the

status from outside is not directly transferred to the hierarchy inside prisons and how moral standards can change; such as standards regarding hygiene in a cell that does not live up to outside standards. Approaching imprisonment as liminal experiences contributed to understandings of why prisoners struggle to re-establish themselves after release. When imprisonment is conceived as a liminal experiences akin to transitional rituals, it appears that transitional rites consist of three phases, concluded by a post-liminal rite that serves to establish the subject with a new status. Without such a post-liminal ritual and a status to enter into, prisoners remain suspended in a status of no longer criminal, not yet good citizens.

While these are the findings of the dissertation, they also come with certain limitations, as does any research. Firstly, there is the question of validity of these findings. The findings presented above resulted from conceptualising experiences of imprisonment as liminal and thereby bringing an analytical concept into a context where it has seldom been used before (Green 2016; Jewkes 2005; Moran 2013; Suttner 2010). Approaching imprisonment as liminal experiences leads the project to conclude, in line with classic theory on liminality (V. Turner 1979; van Gennep 1960) that such experiences need the support of elements present in the transitional rituals from which the concept of liminality was first deduced. It is worth considering whether this conclusion reflects preconceptions associated with the theoretical approach or actual practices in the field. While this is a risk, and one that might better be evaluated by others than the author, precautions have been taken to avoid the findings being defined by preconceptions. Here, two considerations must be deliberated. Firstly, this study worked according to an abductive approach. Thus, the author had no predefined hypothesis or theoretical framework when entering the field. On the contrary, the original design set out to study processes of subjectification, but this focus was rejected based on the poor fit between theories of subjectification developed in ego-centric societies with a socio-centric research field. The theoretical framework has been developed in accordance with preliminary findings during the first round of fieldwork, which spoke to liminality and recognition, as such it is reflexive of processes in the field.

Secondly, it is worth considering that this study has included an ontological approach. While this approach was included to be able to work respectfully with multiple ontologies existent in the data and to engage with spiritual experiences, such an approach also has consequences for considerations about validity. According to Holbraad and Pedersen (2017, 293), the ontological turn allows

research to experiment with 'how things could be' according to different ontologies. While this does not dissolve the need for a connection between theory and the social practices analysed, it does present a different 'truth' criterion. In this light, this dissertation presents the possible consequences of understanding imprisonment as liminal experiences. By conceptualising imprisonment as liminal experiences, this study offers prisoners an explanation as to why experiences in prison differ from experiences in their everyday life outside. This can offer solace for some and make it easier to reconcile with actions committed according to moral structures inside prison, which conflicts with the moral standards on the outside. The conceptualisation has also pointed to factors which affect the degrees of suffering associated with liminal experiences. Thus, it offers potential coping strategies for prison management and prisoners coping with confinement by pointing to the importance of guidance and communitas. Lastly, this conceptualisation has pointed to the continuum between forced and voluntary experiences as contributing to suffering in experiences of imprisonment. This addition to understandings of liminality points to the inherent suffering connected with imprisonment. It adds to previous descriptions of 'the pains of imprisonment' (Sykes 1958) that no matter how 'humane' a prison becomes (Jones 2006), the basic tenet of deprivation of liberty is painful in itself. This suggest that even when prisons are governed according to ideals of reform and rehabilitation, they still exert punishment and inflict pain on those who they confine.

Another limitation of this study is its limited scope. As this is the first empirical contribution to research on Myanmar prisons in recent times, much is still to be said. This study has contributed with a general introduction to prisons in Myanmar (Paper I) and analysis of specific phenomena in connection with meditation, solitary confinement and post-prison life (Papers III and IV). In connection with this study a number of additional topics that call for further elaboration were identified. These where, however, outside the scope of this dissertation. One such topic is the issue of how prisons work in contexts where prisoner to staff ratios are high. Since such contexts differ significantly from the much researched contexts of Western prisons, little research have been done on this topic (for research on this topic see Darke 2013; 2018; Garces, Martin, and Darke 2013; Jefferson and Gaborit 2015; Narag and Jones 2017). The fact that prisons with high prisoner to staff ratios can function relatively peacefully calls into question conceptions about

'dangerous criminals' in need of reform, as it exemplifies prisoners who live as good citizens in the microcosm within the prison walls.

Another topic on which more research is needed is the role of religion in Myanmar prisons. This study has referred to the role that Buddhism played for some research participants (Walton 2016). However, more work is needed on the ways in which Buddhist philosophy and ideas of punishment co-exist. Buddhist philosophy and conceptions of punishment within the modern prison are in many ways contradictory and raise questions such as: How is imprisonment in current life, due to a specific act, understood when this life is seen as just one in the sequence of reincarnation? and, what are the consequences for prisons and the potential for reform and rehabilitation if prisoners believe they find themselves in this situation due to deeds in past lives rather than due to breaking the law in the current? Furthermore, this study has referred to Buddhism only, since this was the only religion directly referred to as helpful by research participants. It is, however, important to note that other religions exist in Myanmar and are present in prisons. Due to the political climate when fieldwork was conducted, several Muslim research participants were hesitant to speak about their religion. In addition, during the short research stays in Myitkyina, data suggested that many prisoners in Kachin State were ethnic Kachin with Christian beliefs. Even so, ethnic Barmar, who are Buddhist, remain the majority within the prison service. Thus, there are interesting ethnic and religious dynamics in prisons, which call for more research.

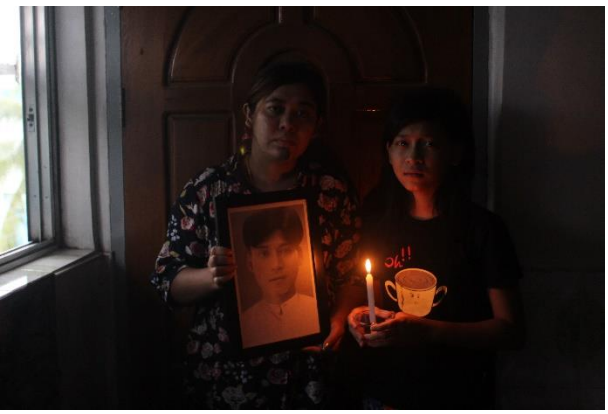
Finally, while this study has maintained a focus on experiences of prisoners, much is to be learned about the political situation in Myanmar by looking at the prisons. While Myanmar has seen significant development within the past decade and is now often described as being in a state of transition, little reform has been seen within prisons since the accession of the first civilian government in 2016. In spite of the National League for Democracy representing those who took part in uprisings against the authoritarian regimes of the past, in spite of the NLD being associated with human rights discourse and in spite of the State Counsellor being a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, new political prisoners continue to be arrested and freedom of speech remains limited. Prisons as state institutions represent 'the old ways' in Myanmar. They are governed by the Ministry of Home Affairs, which is under the control of the military according to the 2008 constitution and which holds judicial as well as executive power. When the State of Myanmar is seen through the prism of the prison, the shortcomings of the transition are revealed.

Myanmar might be a formal democracy, but it remains a *disciplined* democracy, which is far from liberal democratic ideals. Legacies of past authoritarianism remain fully alive today – as revealed in prisons and as present in the remainder of the country. Future research and developments in the judicial sector and prisons will reveal if the humane ideals espoused by the current political leadership and called for by the recurrent uprisings against past authoritarian regimes will ever be implemented.

Visual Interlude VII

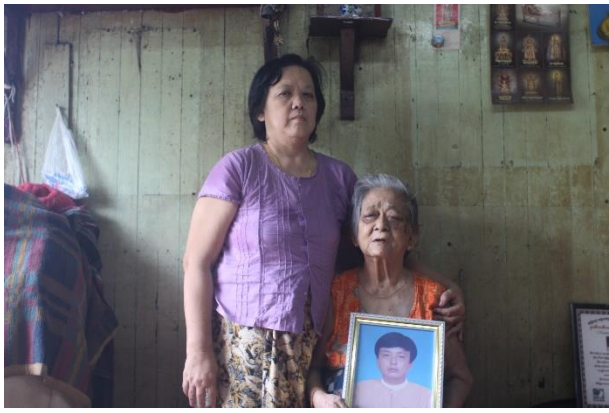
Framing the transition is a series of pictures of the family members of political prisoners who died inside prison. Through pictures of the family members with their belongings, Letyar Tun documents how the pictures of the fallen political prisoners are frozen in time while their family lives on (Photo: Letyar Tun).

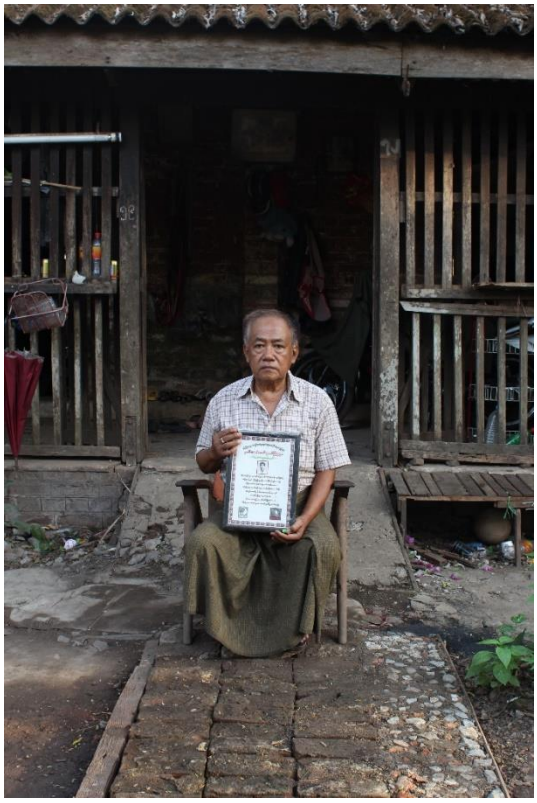
Ko Htet Win Aung was born in 1971. He took part in the student movement in 1988 as a high school student. He was arrested in October 1998 and sentenced to 59 years imprisonment. He died in Mandalay prison on October 16, 2006. In the picture his father, U Win Maung, and mother Daw Mya Mya Aye, hold a photo of their late son.



Ko Aung Hlaing was arrested on May 1, 2005 and died on May 7, 2005 at the age of 30. His family was informed he died of heart attack and that they could not receive his body for burial since it had already been cremated. They were offered a compensation of 100,000 kyat. His wife, Ma Hnin Sanda, filed a complaint against the authorities concerned with her husband's death. During the trial, information about physical injuries including multiple fractured ribs and dehydration of Ko Aung Hlaing Win's body was presented. Still, the court concluded that he died of natural causes. In the picture, Ma Hnin Sanda and their daughter hold the photo of Ko Aung Hlaing Win.

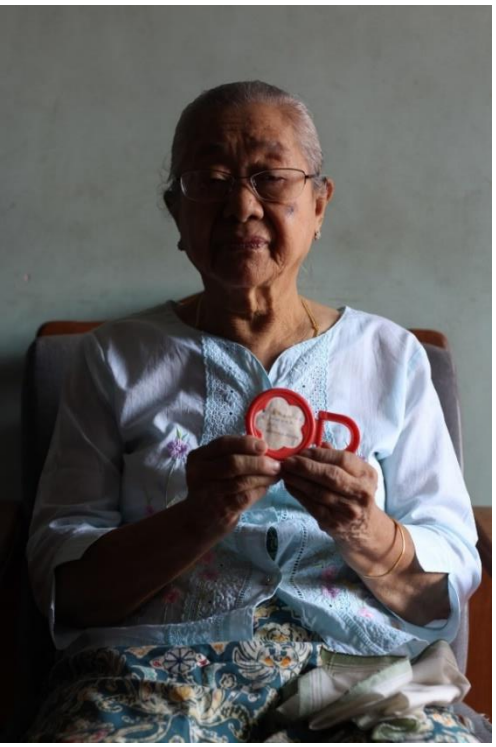
Ko Khin Maung Myint died at the age of 42 in Kalay prison on July 21, 2001. Arrested on October 28, 1997 for hosting the Latha Township office of the NLD in his home and trying to contact Daw Aung San Su Kyi. Was sentenced to 8 years in prison, but died after serving only half of his sentence. In the picture you see his sister and his mother. His mother died after the picture was taken.

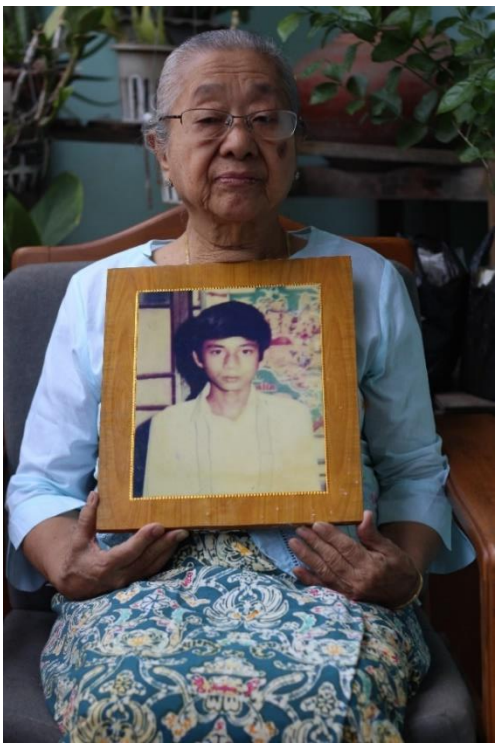




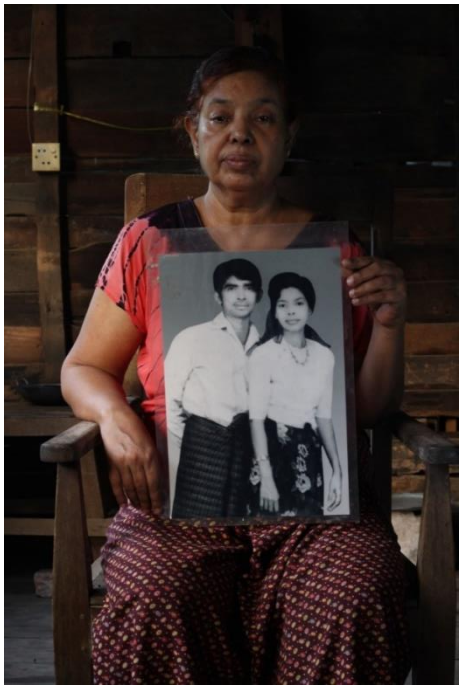
Ko Zaw Myo Htet was arrested on July 16, 2003 and died October 19, 2004 at the age of 28. He was accused of destabilizing the state and assassinating the Chief of State. He received a death sentence, which was appealed to the higher court where it was commuted and reduced to 3 years. He died of jaundice in the guarded ward of Yangon General Hospital as a prisoner patient. In the picture, his father holds a certificate of acknowledgement received from the Association of Assistance for Political Prisoners.

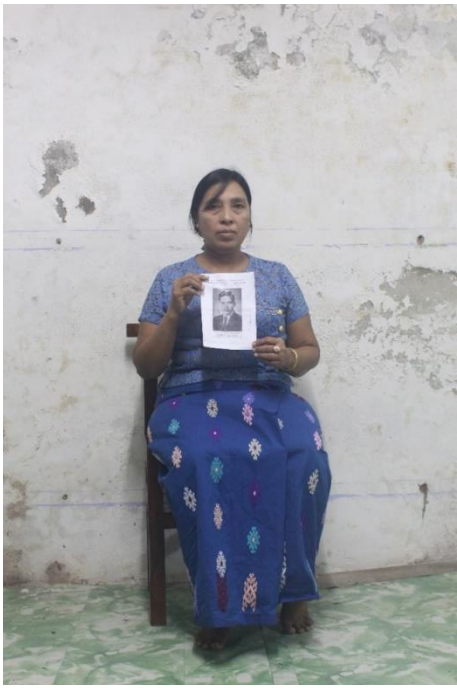
Ko Si Thu was born in 1966. He was imprisoned for his leading role in ‘All Burma Students’ Democratic Movement Organization’ during the 1988 democratic uprising. He died in 2001 in Thayarwaddy prison. In the picture Daw Khin Sein holds a photo and a mirror used by her son while in prison.



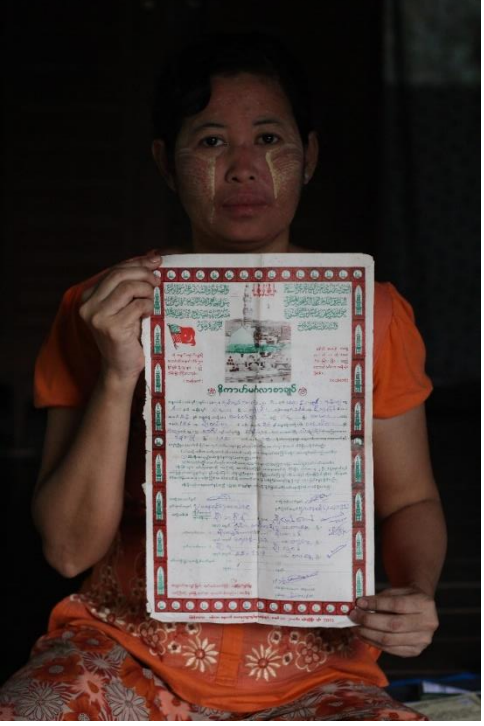


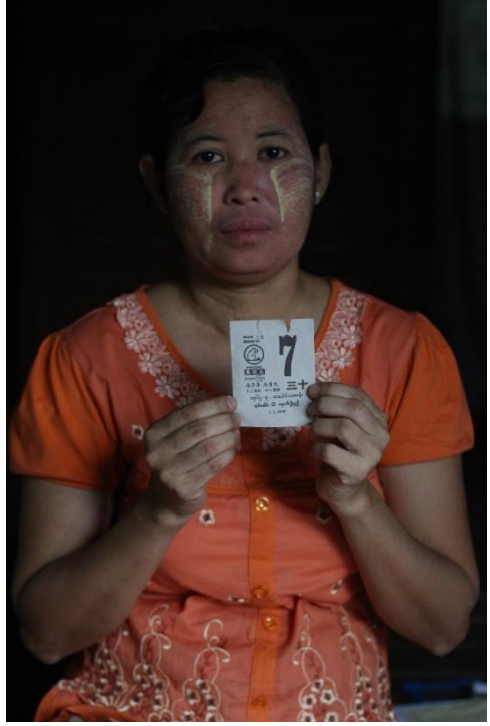
U Aung May Thu was born in 1941. He was a student activist, politician and chairman of the National League of Democracy in Min Hla Township. He was first arrested under the military dictatorship of General Ne Win and sent to the infamous Coco Island Prison. He was arrested again on November 6, 1989 and died in Thayerwaddy Prison in 2002. In the photo, his wife Daw Yin Yin Hlae is holding a picture of her and U Aung May Thu together.



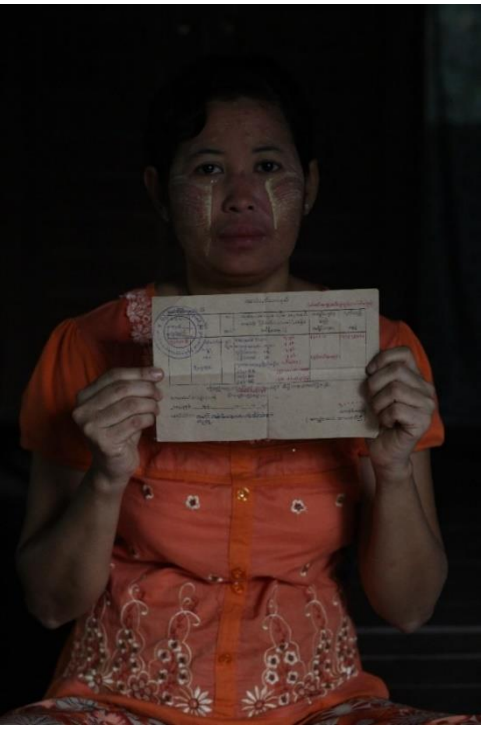


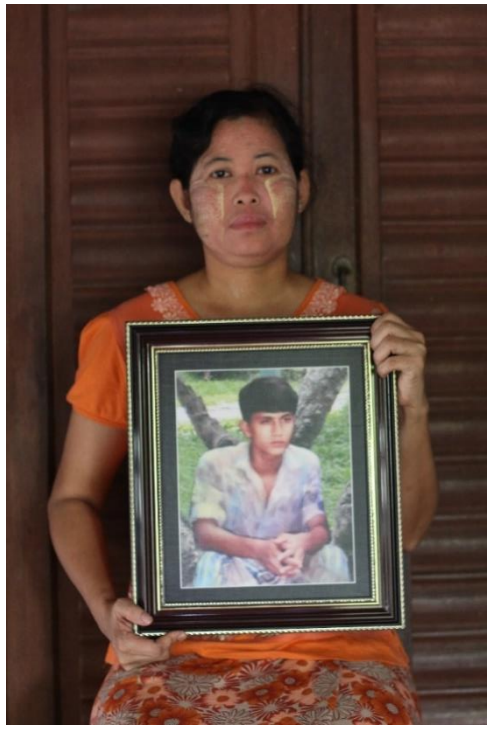
U Maung Ko (aka. **Maung Lay**) was a former member of the Burma Communist Party when he arrested was on December 11, 1990and taken to Millitary Investigation Camp 1 at the corner of Mandalay Palace. He died only one day after his arrest after being beaten to death. In the photo, one of his daughters holds a portrait of U Maung Ko.

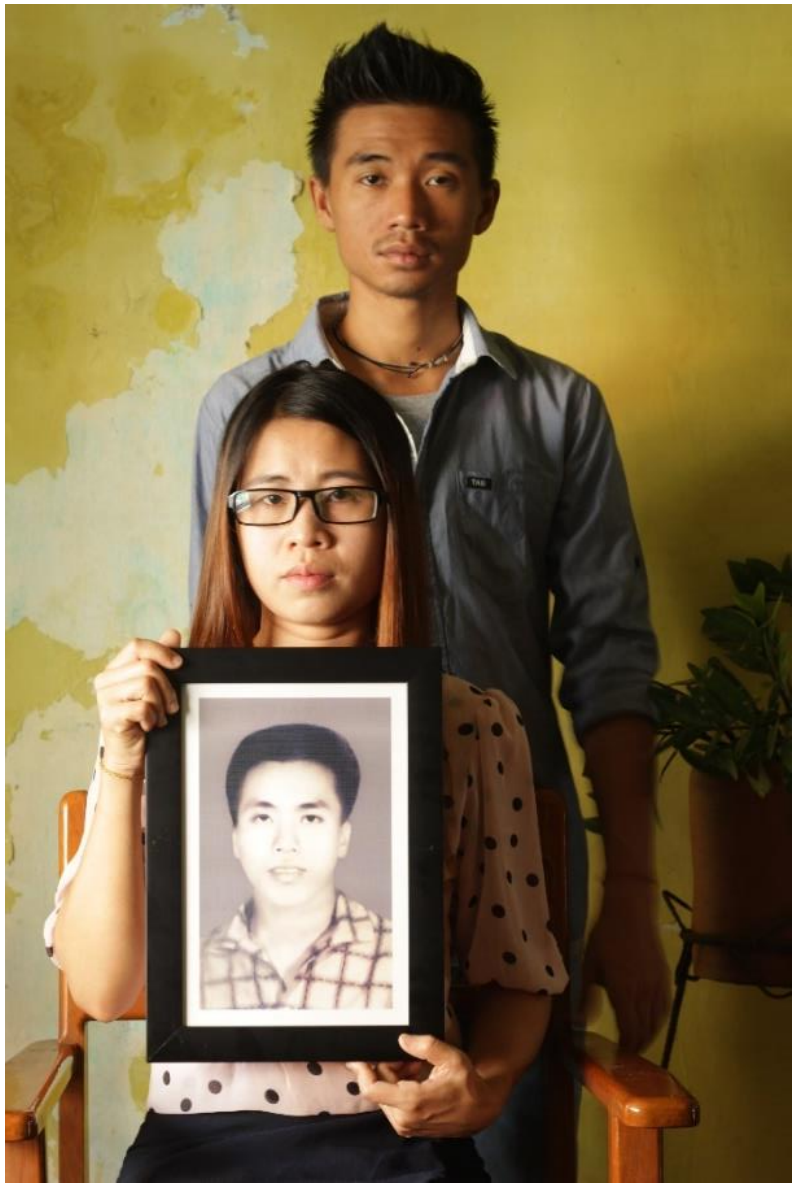




Ko Nu was born in 1968. He was a member of NLD during the democratic uprising in 1988 and in 1999 he was arrested by military intelligence. He died in Thayarwaddy prison in 2008. In the pictures his wife Ma Thida holds his release note, the calendar page from the day he died, their marriage certificate and a picture of Ko Nu.

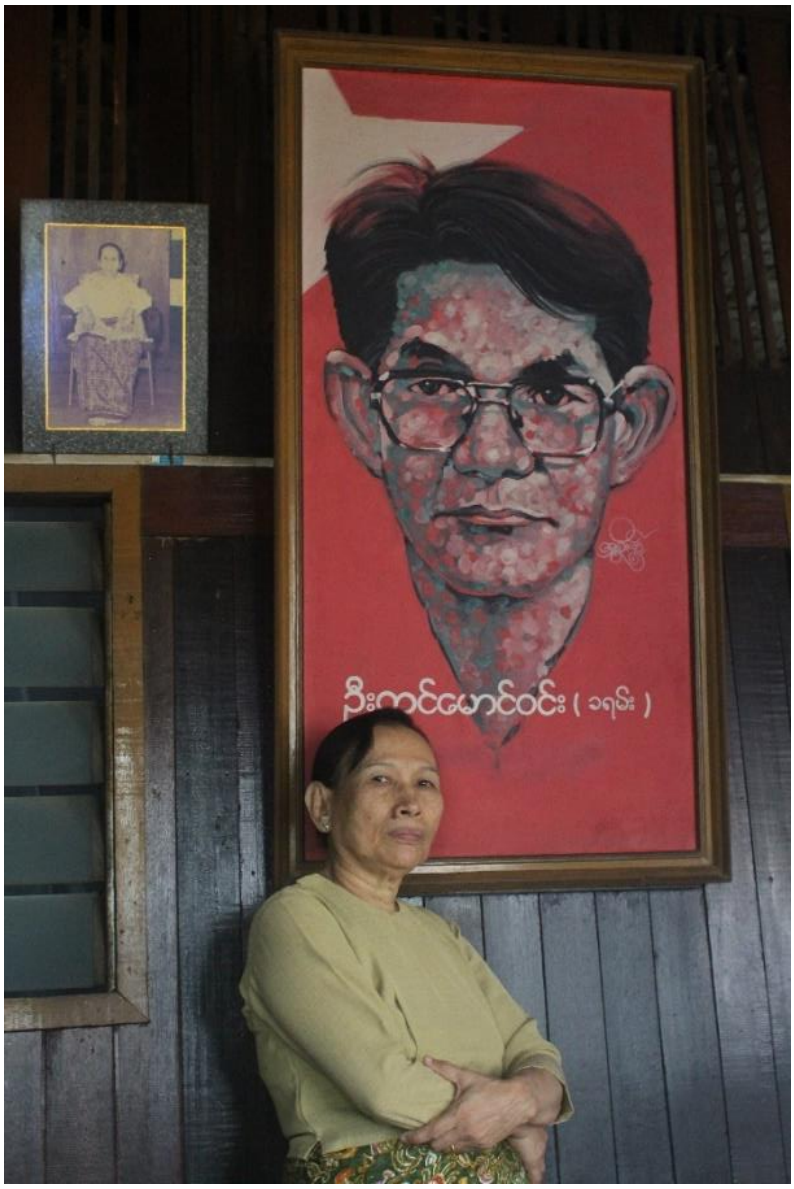


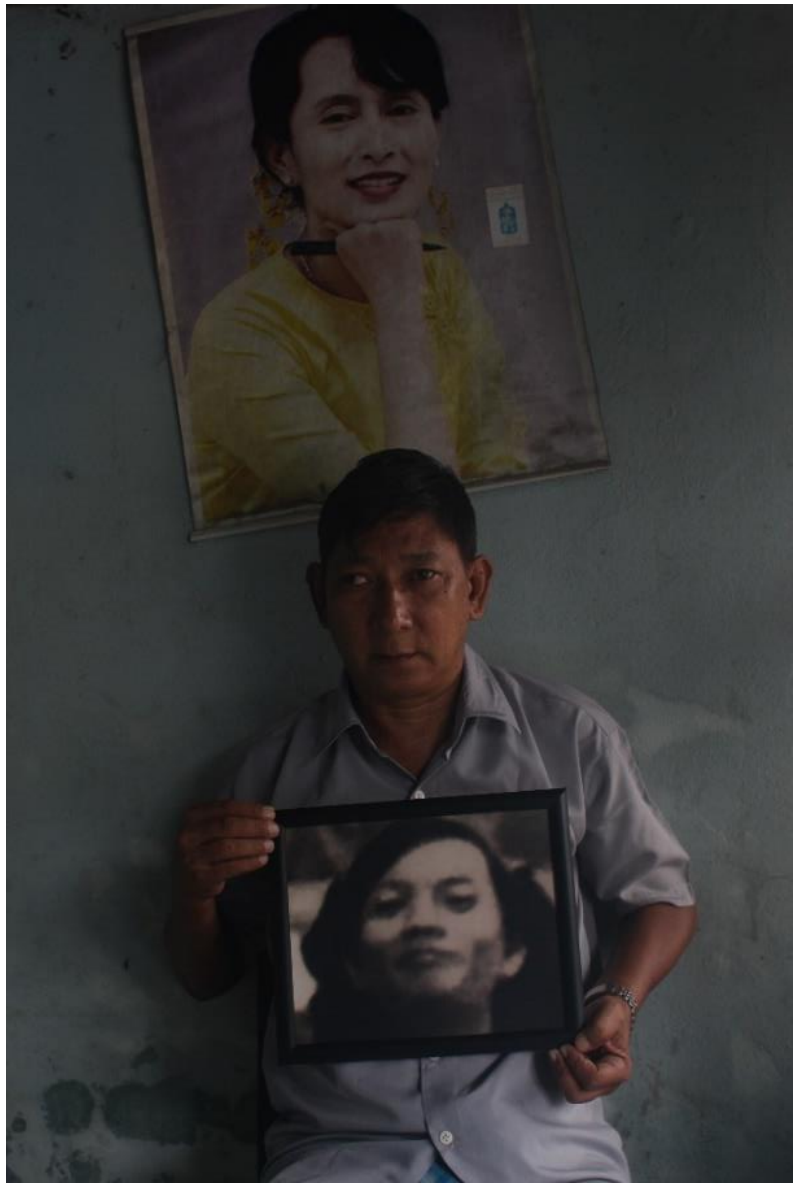




U Maung Ko was arrested in December 1996, accused of contacting the Communist Party of Burma. He was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment. During imprisonment, his heart disease was aggravated by torture and not being allowed access to medical care. He was transferred from Tharyarwady to Insein and died on 15 November, 2002. In the picture, the son and daughter of U Maung Ko holds a photo of him.

U Tin Maung Win was born in 1939 in Khayan township. He became a political activist as university student. He was elected member of parliament for NLD in the 1990 election and arrested by military intelligence. Only a few months later he died in prison on January 18, 1991. In the picture, Daw Kyu Kyu stands in front of a portrait of her late husband.





U Mya Shwe was arrested in 1996, sentenced to 7 years and died on April 27, 1999. He was a member of NLD and was imprisoned for assisting students who took part in the 1996 December Student Movement. A few days before his death, he was transferred from Thayarwaddy prison to the township hospital for treatment of malnutrition, skin disease, dysentery, diarrhoea, weight loss and low blood pressure. The doctors were unable to save him. In the picture, U Mya Ngwe is holding a photo of his late brother.

Annex I

Danish Abstract

I fængsler udøver stater social kontrol, mens borgeres rettigheder begrænses til de mest basale rettigheder; til de rettigheder, der repræsenterer den mindste mængde af acceptable rettigheder for en borger af den enkelte stat. Fængsler er derfor institutioner, hvor det er muligt at observere centrale aspekter af relationer mellem en stat og dens borgere. I autoritære regimer, som Myanmar var det indtil for nylig, er fængsler steder, hvor borgere udsættes for ekstreme former for straf. I den post-autoritære transition, som Myanmar på nuværende tidspunkt befinder sig i, nedarves sociale praksisser fra tidligere regimer og kommer til udtryk i forskellige former, alt imens de fortsættes og forandres. Ved at studere indsattes oplevelser fokuserer dette studie på mennesker hvis liv er under intens statskontrol. Gennem analyser af indsattes oplevelser tages temperaturen på Myanmars transition, ved at undersøge hvilke forandringer der har fundet sted, og hvilke levn fra tidligere politiske regimer der fortsat praktiseres.

Indtil for nylig var Myanmar et militært diktatur afskåret fra resten af verden. I det sidste årti har store forandringer fundet sted, og et politisk rum har åbnet sig, hvor det er muligt at lave empirisk forskning, og i hvilket det har været muligt at iværksætte det første fængselsforskningsprojekt i landet. Denne afhandling er en del af projektet *Legacies of Detention in Myanmar*, som undersøger hvordan nuværende praksisser i Myanmars fængsler er formet af arven fra tidligere regimer. Denne afhandling fokuserer på dem der lever i fængsler ved at analysere indsattes oplevelser i Myanmar. Afhandlingen bygger på 15 måneders etnografisk feltarbejde med tidligere og nuværende indsatte samt et aktionsforskningsprojekt udført i samarbejde med fire tidligere politiske fanger og fotografer.

Denne afhandling stiller forskningsspørgsmålet: Hvilke oplevelser gennemgår indsatte i Myanmar, og hvordan bliver de påvirket af disse? Dette spørgsmål besvares gennem fire publikationer. Den første publikation viser, hvordan dele af nuværende strafmæssige sociale praksisser er gået i arv fra tidligere

regimer. Dette gøres gennem en etnografisk historie, der følger praksisser forbundet med fodlænker, brug af indsatte som fængselspersonale, amnestier og tortur. Den anden publikation viser, at forskeres 'adgang' til indsattes oplevelser afhænger af andre faktorer end fysisk adgang til fængsler. Den tredje publikation viser, at tilstedeværelsen af vejledning og communitas, samt om oplevelser er tvungne eller frivillige, er af afgørende betydning, for om liminale oplevelser i fængsler leder til positiv udvikling eller lidelse. Samtidig vises det, at isolationsfængsling medfører strukturel vold. Strukturel vold kan føre til, at indsatte mister fornemmelsen for, hvem de selv er, og hvad der er virkeligt. Den fjerde publikation diskuterer vigtigheden af anerkendelse for den post-liminale reintegration af tidligere indsatte og deres muligheder for at genetablere deres liv efter løsladelse. Gennem de fire publikationer og den omgivende kappe viser afhandlingen, at indsatte gennemgår liminale oplevelser, der kan påvirke dem på en række forskellige måder. Ved brug af teori om liminale oplevelser identificerer afhandlingen inhærente problemer ved fængsler, der gør dem til fundamentalt skadelige institutioner. Fængsler repræsenterer tvungne liminale oplevelser, som i nogle tilfælde er uden vejledning fra en ceremoniel mester og uden et communitas at gennemgå oplevelsen i fællesskab med. Yderligere mangler der passende post-liminale ritualer ved løsladelse, som gennem anerkendelse kan muliggøre lige adgang til deltagelse i samfundet og som kan muligøre, at indsatte træder ud af en liminal tilstand. Denne mangel forhindrer indsatte i at genetablere deres liv og at blive de lovformelige borgere, som det er meningen, at fængslet skal gør dem til.

Denne afhandling bidrager desuden til empirisk forskning om fængsler i Myanmar. Afhandlingen viser, at sociale praksisser nedarvet fra den autoritære fortid stadig praktiseres i Myanmars fængsler i dag. Når fængslet ses som en prisme, hvor igennem sandheder om staten kan ses, antydes det, at dele af arven fra tidligere autoritære regimer stadig praktiseres i dag, selvom Myanmar er i en transition. Dette fund antyder enten et behov for yderligere reformer for endeligt at kunne tage afstand fra arven fra det autoritære regime, eller en afsløring af et symptom på manglerne i det nuværende disciplinerede demokrati som kan forårsage en tilbagevenden til et autoritært regime i fremtiden.

ANNEX 3

Example of interview guide

Present annex contains two interview guides. The first was a general guideline for most interviews; the second is a specific interview guide for the ten interviews conducted in Insein Central Prison. All interviews were semi structured. Variations from the interview guide have therefore taken place in all interviews.

Example of general interview guide

Intro:

- Informed consent
- All information given in this interview will be anonymized when used in analysis

1. When were you first imprisoned?
2. Where were you imprisoned?
3. How long did you serve?
4. How were you released?
5. Can you describe what you saw the first time you entered the prison gate?
6. How did you stay?
    a. How did it look?
    b. Who did you stay with?
7. Did you ever stay in solitary confinement?
8. How were your relations to other prisoners?
9. How were your relations to the prison guards?
10. Did you receive family visits? How where they?
11. What was the most challenging part about being in prison?
12. What helped you get through the day while in prison?
13. How has it affected your life today?

Interview guide for qualitative interviews about meditation in Insein Central Prison

Intro:

- Informed consent
- All information given in this interview will be anonymized when used in analysis

Background questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What religion do you practice?
3. Why did you go to prison?
4. When where you arrested?
5. How long have you been in prison?
6. How long is your sentence?
7. What were you arrested for?
8. Have you been a regular drug user?

Meditation experience:

9. Did you meditate before? If yes, in what form and how long?
10. Did you do a meditation retreat before?
11. What did you believe meditation was before you entered the retreat?
12. Why did you join the retreat?

The retreat:

13. How was it for you to do the meditation retreat?
14. What was the best part?
15. What was the most challenging part?
16. What surprised you the most?
17. How did the meditation affect you?
18. What did you learn from the Dhamma talks?
19. How did you feel about being silent for 10 days? Did you stay silent for the full time?
20. Did you face any problems with living up to the code of conduct?
21. How was the retreat different from your normal life in prison?
22. Did you have any extraordinary experiences during the retreat?

After the retreat:

23. How has meditation affected your life in prison?
24. Do you plan continue your practice after the retreat?
25. Do you feel any difference compared to before the retreat?
26. Have your life in prison changed after the retreat?
27. Has your mood changed – in terms of anger? Sadness? Happiness?
28. Has meditation affected the way you see the crime you were imprisoned for?

ANNEX 5

Media coverage

English language media in Myanmar:

1. San Lin Tun (06.08.2018) *Beyond the Prison Gate: A tribute to those who sacrifice for democracy*, Myanmar Times https://www.mmtimes.com/news/beyond-prison-gate-tribute-those-who-sacrifice-democracy.html
   Article with interviews and reportage from the exhibition in Moon Gallery

2. Frontier (July, 2018, printed version) *'Whats on'*
   Print of invitation and description of the event at Moon Gallery

3. Irrawaddy (31.07.2018) *Ten things to do in Yangon this week*, https://www.irrawaddy.com/lifestyle/ten-things-yangon-week-42.html
   Invitation and short description of the event in Moon Gallery

4. Dunant, Ben (19.07. 2018) *Myanmar's contemporary artists confront painful past*, Nikkei Asian Review, https://asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Arts/Myanmar-s-contemporary-artists-confront-painful-past
   Article about multiple exhibitions by former political prisoners taking place in Yangon. Featuring interview with photographer Sai Minn Thein and a description of the exhibition in HCPP.

Burmese language media:

5. Pho Nyi Htwe (03.08.2018) Hot News Journal, printed version
   Article describing the exhibition ahead of launch in Moon Gallery downtown Yangon.

6. Cherry Htike (07.07.2018) Tachilek News Agency, https://www.tachileik.net/2018/07/ppartshow.html
   Interview with Letyar Tun and description of the exhibition

7. Jetty 201 Media (10.08.2018) *Beyond the Prison Gate*, https://www.facebook.com/jetty201media/?__tn__=kCH-R&eid=ARDSBt3oPlO1hqqJrH2xKzWnvJi3QXXSkx-RqlJcuFNgnSYQnML9IjA7u5WDN3E8bDKd4InxeCt25ohp&hc_ref=ARRhRCyZLESOgzcVAk3QsCb2qihvAiPRVX1xy9U98VlUKXO4YzO1JkvMtO2A4VzOvGo&fref=nf&__xts__[0]=68.ARAXqCbFIJhtz6RLplSTD_Nav2fKBRevPn2MEGqgSccZZuZCGeuiBUbnIW6zNC0Dc08MYAQcEltmPdAWePtgr5XhMIRfutDIaatT_yIxiMw42gCRRjVL2bfa0TEbGCqMpLy3TCjxHpgaP9vmsoGO6_HW6dkBsiMbQunQpVysgqsTr1neKpsXr_YkpdLaj_AEwENrGWCKvsBlPVIshtsrLngGmitrdR2XTAnsD34
   Short video featuring interviews with several of the photographers and a tour of the exhibition at Moon Gallery

Danish language media:

8. Malte Rune Skov (20.03.2019) *Tidligere politisk fange i Myanmar: "Vi kan tilgive, men aldrig glemme hvad der er sket"* (Former political prisoner in Myanmar: "We can forgive, but never forget what happened." Globalnyt, https://globalnyt.dk/content/tidligere-politisk-fange-i-myanmar-vi-kan-tilgive-men-aldrig-glemme-hvad-der-er-sket-0
   Article about the photo exhibition in Denmark. Includes interview with Letyar Tun and Liv Gaborit.

Annex 6

Public dissemination

Legacies of Detention in Myanmar

07.07.16, Blog of Border Criminologies, Oxford University, https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2016/07/legacies

This is the thirteenth instalment of the themed series on Border Criminologies network members. The series aims to present our members' ongoing research, recent publications, new course modules they might be developing, grants and awards, partnerships and collaborations, and questions they have been considering or struggling with.

Post by Liv S. Gaborit, PhD Student, Roskilde University and DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture.

Photo: Liv S. Gaborit

Myanmar, formerly Burma, is notorious for its harsh military regime and famous for Aung Sang Sui Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize winner and the country's new leader who has been fighting for democratic reforms for decades. These two elements, contradictory as they are, exemplify the history and present of Myanmar. Historically, the country has been ruled by authoritarian regimes, be it foreign colonial or national. In recent times, the country has taken important steps towards democracy, though not democracy typical of the west, but an Asian version described in the constitution as 'disciplined democracy.' Several national elections have taken place, the latest one being the presidential election in 2015, leading to the accession of the new government last April. The new government is the first to be led by the former opposition party National League for Democracy and as such this election represents a pivotal moment for the history and future of Myanmar. Although the opposition has gained power in the formal democracy, traces of previous authoritarian regimes remain. This is exemplified by the constitution forbidding the formal leader of the winning party, Aung Sang Sui Kyi, from taking seat as president, the allocation of 25% of the seats in parliament for military representatives, and three ministries (i.e., Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs) controlled by the military.

A political space has opened in Myanmar and changes are taking place. It's in this context a new research programme called Legacies of Detention in Myanmar was launched, which seeks to document the changes as they occur by studying the relations between state and citizen as illustrated by the relations between prison and prisoner. The research programme explores the historical and contemporary role of detention in Myanmar and its significance for the reconfiguration of state and society. Through the concept of 'legacy,' the programme seeks to capture the persistence and mutation of practices of detention as they affect individuals, institutions, state, and society.

The programme is based at DIGNITY – Danish Institute Against Torture headed by Andrew M. Jefferson and includes a PhD project by myself, a postdoctoral fellowship by Tomas M. Martin, and a partnership with the Department of Law at University of Yangon and the network for human rights lawyers called Justice for All. The programme will approach legacies by studying three dimensions—*experiences*, *technologies,* and *politics* of detention—to explain the ambiguous and contested nature of detention practices and efforts to reform them, and aims to offer insights to policy-

makers committed to supporting nascent moves toward rule of law and the realization of democracy and human rights.

Photo: Liv S. Gaborit

Within this broader programme, my PhD project will focus on the dimension of experiences. I aim to explore how experiences vary depending on what group a prisoner belongs to (ethnic or political), what point of history and thus under what political regime the detainment took place, and what kind of facility detention took place in (e.g., prison, labour camp, or IDP camp). In this study, experiences of different political and ethnic groups subjected to detention will be used to trace patterns of mutating and persistent detention legacies, and explore how different penal practices cause different processes of subjectification. By tracing patterns of prisoners' individual experiences, the study will be able to explore how different techniques of governance are applied to and experienced by subjects of the state through a phenomenological approach. The study also aims to contribute to understanding how prisons change, thereby creating important knowledge for prison reform work in Myanmar as well as in other countries.

The project will explore issues such as relations and identity of the more than 136 different ethnic groups in the country to study the connection between state and citizens through documenting experiences of detention practices. Some of these groups engage in armed struggle to free themselves from the influence of the state and the state has responded by seeking control over its territory and population through military operations and policies seeking to create a shared national identity, as evident in, for example, the presidential speeches of former president Thein Sein. This places

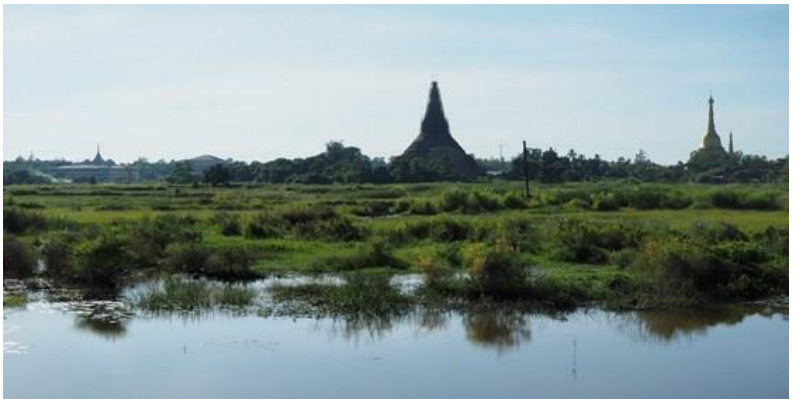
the study in a melting pot filled with concerns for nationalism, ethnic identity, natural resources, and political influence, in which political imprisonment, deprivation of the freedom of movement, and the creation of IDP camps become part of the conflicts.

The study will apply field based ethnographic methodology inspired by action research. To conduct fieldwork in prisons in Myanmar is to endeavour into a complicated setting for fieldwork filled with sensitive issues. At the moment, access to prisons in the country is very limited. Some of the few actors that have access are family members, lawyers, and the ICRC, whom have recently regained their access to conduct monitoring visits after a fall out with the government in 2012. Researchers or NGOs offering service delivery have so far not been granted access to prisons. The prisons will therefore be approached incrementally, starting with indirect studies of the prisons through fieldwork with ex-prisoners and then slowly approaching the actual prisons. Many prisoners have been released on amnesties, both historically and in connection to the recent election. Despite ex-prisoners' first-hand knowledge of how the state can act to stifle opposition, they are among the most outspoken critics of the continued use of detention to close down political space.

It's with great excitement that I venture in to this new project and I hope you will follow and contribute to discussions as the project progresses. Updates will be posted on this blog as fieldwork progresses.

Speaking with ex-detainees in Myanmar

12.01.17, Blog of Legacies of Detention in Myanmar, https://legacies-of-detention.org/news/uncategorized-da/speaking-with-ex-detainees-in-myanmar/



PhD-student Liv Stoltze Gaborit writes from Myanmar, where she is currently researching experiences of imprisonment through interviews with ex-detainees.

By Liv Stoltze Gaborit.
Photo: Liv Stoltze Gaborit, all rights reserved.

When I first moved to Yangon this October I started a three weeks' intensive language course. Before noon I went to language class, after noon I met with stakeholders in the project, by evening I passed out, my head feeling like it was going to explode from all the new things I had to learn.

I finished the language class and the day after I passed the exam I flew to Kachin in northern Myanmar, where ethnic armed groups are still present and in conflict with the Burmese army. Up there it was not well seen that I tried to use my Burmese, since some saw it as the language of the state they are fighting, so I was back to struggling to learn to say hello and thank you in yet another language and otherwise getting by with interpreter and English.

I am now back in Yangon, trying with a private tutor to fully grasp the Burmese language. New tutor means a new way to spell most words, since the real spelling is in their own alphabet and there is no standardized Romanization. Language is a struggle, but I see progress and hope that after this course I will be able to have actual conversations and follow at least part of the answers in my interviews.

The resilience of detainees

It is fascinating to hear about the different ways that people survive inside prisons, and see the variety of feelings in our conversations about prisons. One moment we can be talking about the humiliation of living in a cell with no toilet where you would be sleeping in your own excrement, humiliated and plagued by skin diseases and maggots, the next their face light up as they tell me how they were still able to resist this system in some small way.

One former prisoner told me how he and his cell mates built an oven out of metal plates and burned plastic from their trash to light it. The smoke of burned plastic didn't alarm the guards either (my guess is I have to prepare myself for some pretty smelly prisons if I gain access to the prisons). When they were done using the oven they had to dig a hole in the cell floor and hide it – they were happy they had a cell with plain dirt floor, not cement like some of the other cells.

Another striking moment was less happy. During an interview, the woman I was talking with began to tear up. The interview was conducted through interpreter, and until then she had faced him when she spoke and me when she listened to me or him. All of a sudden she turned her face at me and said the simple sentence "I remember" and then she began to cry. She was still feeling guilty because her friend had been imprisoned based on some of the evidence the police found when they searched her room. After the friend was imprisoned they shared a cell, and every time she saw her friend struggling or heard of her friends' family struggling to get by outside, she felt it was her fault.

Death penalty at the age of 16

One of the men I talked to had been sentenced to death for high treason when he was only 16 years old because he was part of the student groups against the military regime back in '88. After one year and nine months his sentence was changed to 20 years of imprisonment, because it was illegal to give the death penalty to someone so young. He was released after 18 years – so at release he had spent more than half of his life in prison. Still, he had managed to get married and find a good job and accomplish a lot in his career and in his continued political effort. He told me that he was one of the lucky ones – because he had now reached a stage where he could try to be happy, most people in similar situations couldn't.

These are the personal experiences that make up the history of Myanmar. I am truly thankful to the people who share such painful stories with me and join me in the effort to get a deeper

understanding of what has happened and is happening in Myanmar prisons.

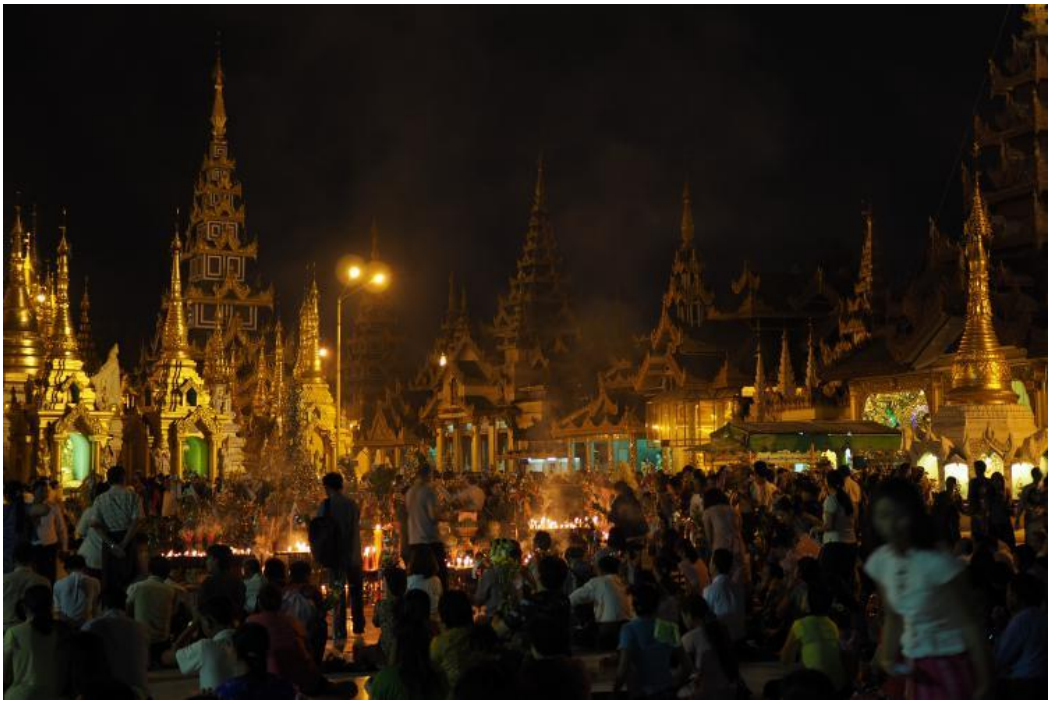
From the Field: Vipassana – Looking Inwards to Understand Experiences of Imprisonment in Myanmar

02.06.17, Blog of Border Criminologies, Oxford University, https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2017/06/field-vipassana

Post by Liv S. Gaborit, PhD student at Roskilde University and DIGNITY working on experiences of imprisonment in Myanmar. Liv is on Twitter @LSGaborit.

Since October of 2016 I have been living in Myanmar doing fieldwork for my PhD on experiences of imprisonment. This particular fieldwork experience is different for me, as it is the first time I am doing prison research without access to the prisons themselves. Developments in the country over the past few years have opened a political space in which prison research is possible, though access to penal institutions is still difficult to attain. We expect that our long term engagement in Myanmar via our project Legacies of Detention in Myanmar, will open these sites to researchers in the future. For now, however, I am working from the outside with several organized groups of former political prisoners (e.g., Assistance Association for Political Prisoners and Former Political Prisoners Society) and other NGOs that engage with former prisoners.

One of the organisations engaging directly with the prisons is a local meditation centre in Yangon practising the tradition of Vipassana. This centre coordinates 10-day Vipassana retreats for prisoners inside the notorious Insein Prison in Yangon. Several of the former prisoners I have talked to have participated in these retreats and still come to the meditation centre, following their release. I engaged with the centre and talked to some of the teachers to get to know more about their work with prisoners. Although the teachers willingly told me about their courses, they emphasised that the only way to understand Vipassana was through first-hand experience. After some consideration, I decided to join a retreat at the meditation centre myself.



Evening prayers at Shwedagon Pagoda (Photo: Liv Gaborit)

Personally, I have some experience with meditation and have been on two similar retreats before, though none as restrictive as this one. However, considering my past experiences, I felt relatively comfortable that I would be able to stick to this stricter regime, which demanded rising at 4am, meditating for more than 10 hours a day, and staying in silence for 9 of the 10 days. My main frustration as a researcher, was that the regime did not allow writing, so I was unable to record field notes in situ.

For the first couple of days, my thoughts focused on how the experience was useful for my work. I considered the differences and similarities of my voluntary confinement within the compound of the meditation centre to the confinement experienced by prisoners. I thought about how this situation - which for me was full of deprivations – from talking, writing, eating meat and moving outside the compound - might be an experience of increased privileges for many prisoners – better food, more space, and freedom from working and attending to other people's needs.

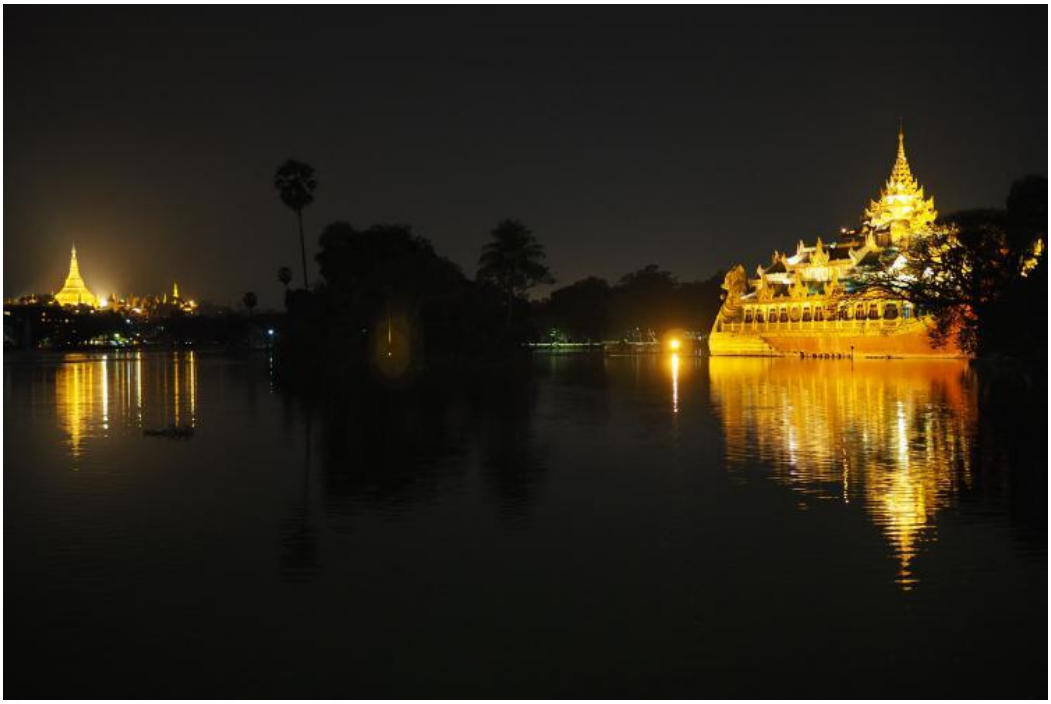
The first three days we did Samadhi meditations to prepare our concentration for what would come next. As expected, my mind wandered. During the first couple of days, as my thoughts

wandered, I mentally drafted this blogpost and began to reflect on the interviews I had already conducted with former political prisoners. During the subsequent couple of days, I forgot this mental draft altogether as I couldn't write it down. Slowly, thoughts about work subsided and I could focus on my experience in that particular moment. As I did, my role as tool for the research changed. Before, when I approached the field as a curious newcomer, I would use myself as a tool by being conscious of body language, adapting to local customs, when sometimes sharing carefully selected personal experiences or knowledge from previous work and when I recorded down my emotional reactions in fieldnotes. I did all these things to encourage trust building and enhance my understanding of the people I talked to. Now, I was not only a tool for the research by performing the role of the ethnographer, I was looking inwards to experience - on my own mind and body - what prisoners go through when they attend the Vipassana retreat inside prison. My position changed, from being a curious newcomer before the retreat, to a full participant during the retreat, and finally, after the retreat, to a newcomer with an improved understanding of the field in which I was engaged. And so, the emphasis as participant and observer dynamically fluctuated as I did participant observation.

The main technique used in this kind of Vipassana utilizes continuous and repeated bodyscans. As I scanned through my body, tensions, memories, and feelings came to mind. One by one I lived through them and let them go. I spent seven of the ten days struggling with a psychosomatic pain in my left shoulder. Every time I sat down for meditation, the pain arose, every time the bell rang, it evaporated. Finally, when the teacher asked if I was facing any challenges, I managed to say I was struggling with pain in my shoulder. As the sentence left my lips, I began to cry. The teacher told me to keep trying and I would succeed – which was her answer to most questions - and otherwise she did not dwell on this pain. It felt strange to me, not to engage in a conversation about it and to only receive this somewhat distant support. I would have to face the pain myself. I was unable to stop the tears from falling, so as I sat down for meditation again I was still crying. I sat there curled up with my arms around my knees crying silently for around an hour before the feelings of sadness subsided, and I was able to start meditating again. When I did, the tension in my shoulder disappeared together with the pain.

I have experienced strong emotions in connection with fieldwork before, but they have always been a reaction to the

encounter with the field. This was the first time fieldwork caused such strong emotions to arise based on introspection alone. These feelings were not connected to encounters in the field, the tragic situation of some of the people I had talked to, or the traumatic experiences they had gone through. These emotions were result of my own personal experiences long before I went on fieldwork. Through systematic introspection, I had brought my inner self into my fieldwork to a much larger extent than ever before.



Shwedagon Pagoda seen from Kandawgyi – a strong reminder of the role of Buddhism in Burmese culture, visible from most places in Yangon (Photo: Liv Gaborit)

How is this personal experience of vulnerability relevant for my research? My inner world is not the place to look for truths about experiences of imprisonment in Myanmar. By doing this retreat however, I reached a new level of understanding of what former prisoners had already told me. I began to see more nuances in what I had read and heard about meditation in the prisons here. Rather than finding answers, I left the retreat with my mind full of new and more qualified questions about the experiences of imprisonment. New questions were raised about how some find comfort and strength in the solitude of solitary confinement while others feel the

strain of it. Questions about the role of Buddhism for experiences of imprisonment; about experiences of the self and others; about perceptions of other prisoners and prison guards; the list goes on.

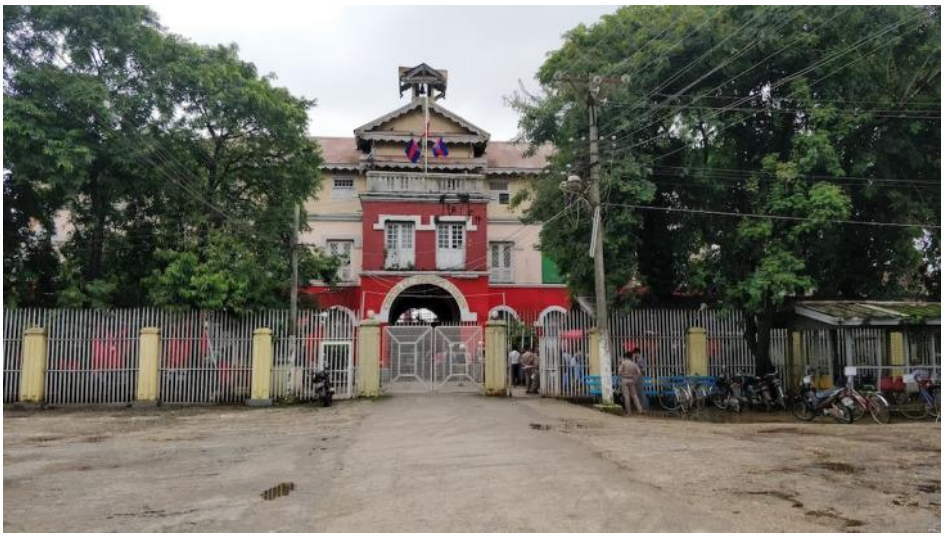
I had tried to reach an understanding of the role of meditation in prisons by talking with former prisoners about how they practiced it and how it helped them. I had talked to teachers and read research and the philosophy behind Vipassana meditation taught inside the prisons. But my level of understanding reached a new depth as I engaged myself in the same experience. While everyone goes through unique experiences in Vipassana, as well as in prison, having lived through the retreat I was offered a new and invaluable vantage point from which to understand the experiences that prisoners may have gone through.

Note: For more about Vipassana in Myanmar prisons, see: Ma Thida. 2016. Prisoner of Conscience: My Steps through Insein. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books and Win, Swe 2013. Back to Jail in Burma. Latitude Blog. New York Times.

Rioting for Rule of Law – Prison Amnesties and Riots in Myanmar

17.06.209, Blog of Tea Circle Oxford, University of Toronto, https://teacircleoxford.com/2019/06/17/rioting-for-rule-of-law-prison-amnesties-and-riots-in-myanmar/

Liv Gaborit and Andrew Jefferson discuss the value of amnesties in light of the recent prison riots.



Insein Central Jail, one of the prisons from which prisoners were released on this year's amnesties (Photo courtesy of Liv S. Gaborit)

Regular readers of the Tea Circle are likely well-aware that more than 23,000 prisoners were recently released on amnesties granted in connection with the celebration of Myanmar New Year in April. In this brief piece we raise some critical questions about the presidential power to pardon.

In Myanmar, New Year amnesties are a common practice and the releases are an annual feature of news reporting. This year the amnesties were accompanied by violence. The amnesties took place in three rounds on April 17th, 26th and May 7th. As the media presented joyful accounts of reunions with family members and expressions of relief at the prospect of freedom, unrest developed in the prisons. The unrest escalated into riots in seven prisons across the country on May 8th. On May 9th, the riot in Shwe Bo Prison came to a fatal conclusion after officials went in with tear gas and guns, killing four prisoners and wounding two.

A video streamed live on Facebook via an illegal mobile phone from Shwe Bo Prison on May 8th caught our attention. It features prisoners wandering around outside their cells cheering and shouting: *"We should be released like Moe Aung Yin – our cause, our cause".* In the slogan, their call for clemency was accompanied by the slogan associated with the pro-democracy movement that fought the former military regime and whose representatives from the NLD (National League for Democracy) now govern the country.

Statements from the President's office declared that the amnesties were given on humanitarian grounds with priority given to women and juveniles as well as elderly, sick, and disabled prisoners. The prisoners were protesting that the amnesties were not given on a systematic basis. They called for a fair and transparent amnesty practice; they called for rule of law. From their perspective, the selection and release of people such as Moe Aung Yin, a well-known Myanmar actor, and the Reuters journalists seemed arbitrary or at least not to fit the humanitarian criteria laid out. This situation is doubly ironic. Prisoners — those deemed criminal law breakers by the state — call for rule of law and stand up against the arbitrary expression of power and they do so echoing the protest slogans (*"Our cause, our cause!"*) previously used by the opposition movement as they stood up against the military regime.

After the riots, opposition parties raised a critique similar to the grievances expressed by the prisoners in a joint press conference by the National Unity Party, the National Political Alliance League and the USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party) on June 5th. While echoing the prisoners' critique of the arbitrariness of the amnesties, the opposition parties claimed that the lack of thorough investigation of which prisoners to release would lead to dangerous criminals bring released. As a reply, a spokesperson from the President's Office informed them that the amnesty was aimed at minor drug cases and considered appeals submitted to the President and the State Counselor. While this explains how famous cases of actors and journalists got included in what was presented as an amnesty on humanitarian grounds, it confirms the lack of transparency that makes the selection of prisoners included in the amnesties appear arbitrary.

Our research in Myanmar is about legacies of detention. We are especially interested in the way prison is experienced and the politics of imprisonment. The amnesties and the prisoners' response to them speak to these themes in interesting ways. Our research so far has made us aware that prisoners serving long sentences in

Myanmar historically came to look to amnesties as a potential route to release. Over the years, many prisoners have been released via the presidential pardon rather than on their court-mandated release date. But amnesties create uncertainty. They are at the discretion of the President's Office and the prisoner never knows whether he or she will be on the list. So, while the joyous reunions at the prison gate may make amnesties appear as overwhelmingly positive, they are more ambivalent in their broader effects when seen from the perspective of prisoners either anticipating amnesty or left behind.

We can also raise critical questions about the power to pardon and the practice of amnesties from the perspective of rule of law. In effect, amnesties are at odds with the logic meant to govern release of prisoners in a criminal justice system based on rule of law: they are arbitrary rather than systematic, discretionary rather than mandatory. Amnesties can be seen as a demonstration of executive power trumping judicial power and may have an undermining effect on the long-term efforts to transform the judicial system and bring it into line with international norms and standards for justice delivery. This is ironic given the emphasis the current administration has otherwise given to the rule of law.

Presidential pardons of this kind are perfectly legal, and relatively commonplace across the world; they serve as a gesture that emphasises executive power and reminds the judiciary that in certain situations it is subject to, rather than independent of, the executive. Complicating the situation in Myanmar is the uneasy balance of power between the NLD and the military that has the military controlling important government ministries, including those responsible for justice and prisons. It may even be the case that some aspects of the recent amnesties (for example the release of the Reuters journalists) can be seen as a kind of victory for the NLD as they were able to legitimately usurp authority from the military-controlled ministry formally responsible for the administration of sentencing and release.

Critical questions can also be raised about whether amnesties are a good solution to overcrowding, a common criticism of Myanmar's prisons. While amnesties of this size do contribute to decreasing the population of Myanmar's overcrowded prisons, they do not solve the systemic issue of over-population. Relatively large numbers of prisoners have been granted amnesties for years, but the population keeps increasing. Alternative strategies for decarceration are needed. One promising initiative in this direction is the decriminalization of drug use through ongoing reform of drug laws. In this vein, most of the amnesties have been granted to

prisoners with drug-related cases— a fact which also reflects that the majority of prisoners in Myanmar are imprisoned on such cases.

From a human rights perspective, one can ask whether pardoning is a practice that should be encouraged or frowned upon. On the one hand, the small contribution towards decarceration might ease the pains of imprisonment for those released as well as those left behind. On the other hand, it undermines the justice system's internal logic and adds to the uncertainty felt by prisoners. We might also ask whether, if someone can be released on humanitarian grounds in celebration of a holiday, there are really grounds for keeping him or her confined in the first place. In our view, rather than relying on amnesties, Myanmar politicians should look to ways of reducing the use of imprisonment through diversion, fair and proportionate sentencing practices, the decriminalisation of petty offences, and the use of alternatives to imprisonment.

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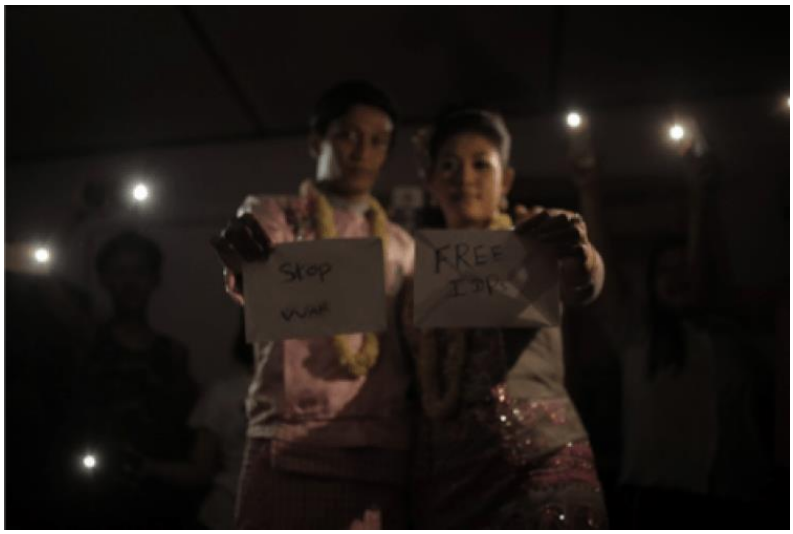
Beyond the Prison Gate – Recognition through Photography and Action Research in Myanmar

17.12.2019, Blog of Border Criminologies, https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2019/12/beyond-prison

'Beyond the Prison Gate' is an action research project carried out by Liv S. Gaborit and four Burmese photographers and former political prisoners: Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Htike, Sai Minn Thein, Pho Nyi Htwe and Letyar Tun as part of the larger research project Legacies of Detention in Myanmar. The project shows the everyday life of former political prisoners in Myanmar after they have been released. It shows how their continued struggles take many forms and addresses the call for recognition often set forth by former political prisoners. Today, they live in a post-authoritarian society, where the military regime they fought against has been replaced by 'disciplined democracy' and a civilian government, but where the military still holds strong influence and remnants of the authoritarian past endure (for more on the background click here to read a previous post).

Photographer Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Thike acknowledges the young generation of former political prisoners as they continue to work for democracy, freedom of speech and the right to education, the struggles which they were previously imprisoned for. His photos depict activists who were arrested and were in prison with him after the 2015 demonstration against a new education law. While the people in his photos are Barmar, the ethnic majority in Myanmar, through the selection of cases he represents, he is inclusive of other ethnic groups too. In the first photos Ko Min Thaway Thit and Ma Po Po create a political happening in their wedding photos, in the support of a group of internally displaced people in Kachin, who were caught in between the clash between the Tatmadaw (Burmese military) and Kachin Independence Army (ethnic armed group). In the second series, he depicts Maung Saungkha, a renowned activist for freedom of speech, who has spoken for the rights of Muslims, though he himself has grown up within the Buddhist majority Barmar. Lastly, Phyoe Dhana reaches beyond his own generation through a series about U Nay Win, the father of Ma Phyoe Phyoe Aung, also a political prisoner. This last series recognises the contribution of different generations of political prisoners. There are major differences in the struggles of activists against the military regime, and the struggles of activists

in the ‘disciplined democracy’ of today.



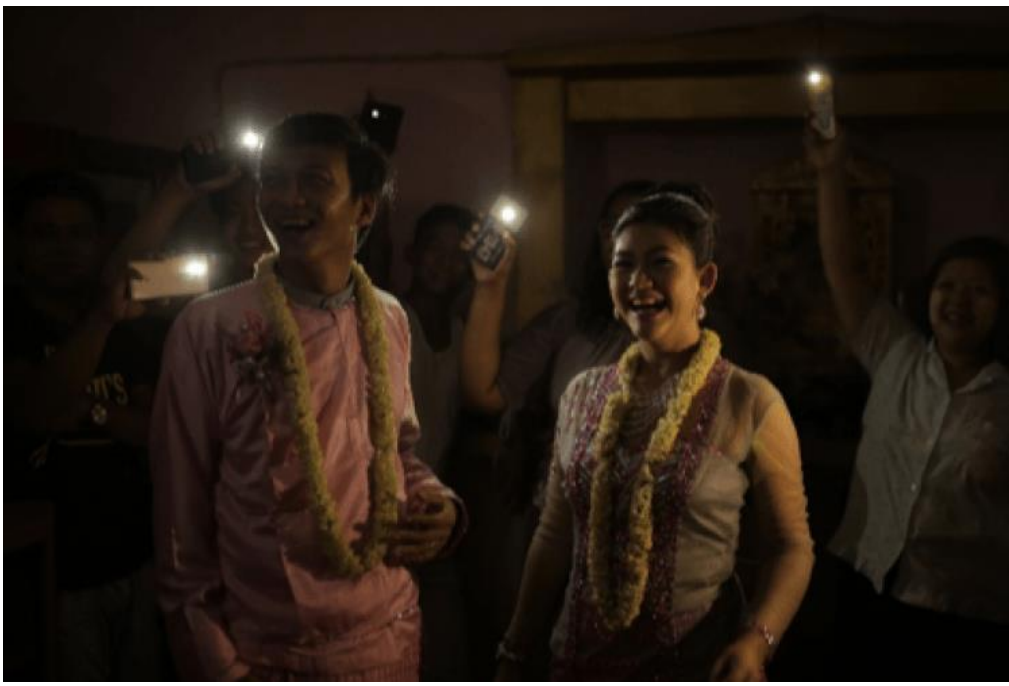


Photo caption: Ko Min Thway Thit was imprisoned in 2015 for his role in the protests against the new education bill and released in 2016. The pictures show how activism makes it into the most happy and intimate moments as Ko Min Thaway Thit and Ma Po Po decided to campaign for the IDP’s in Kachin even on their wedding day. (Photo: Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Thike)

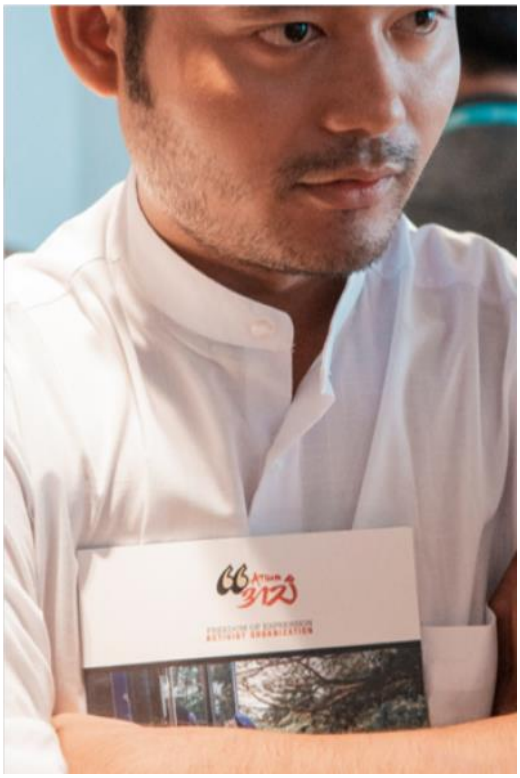
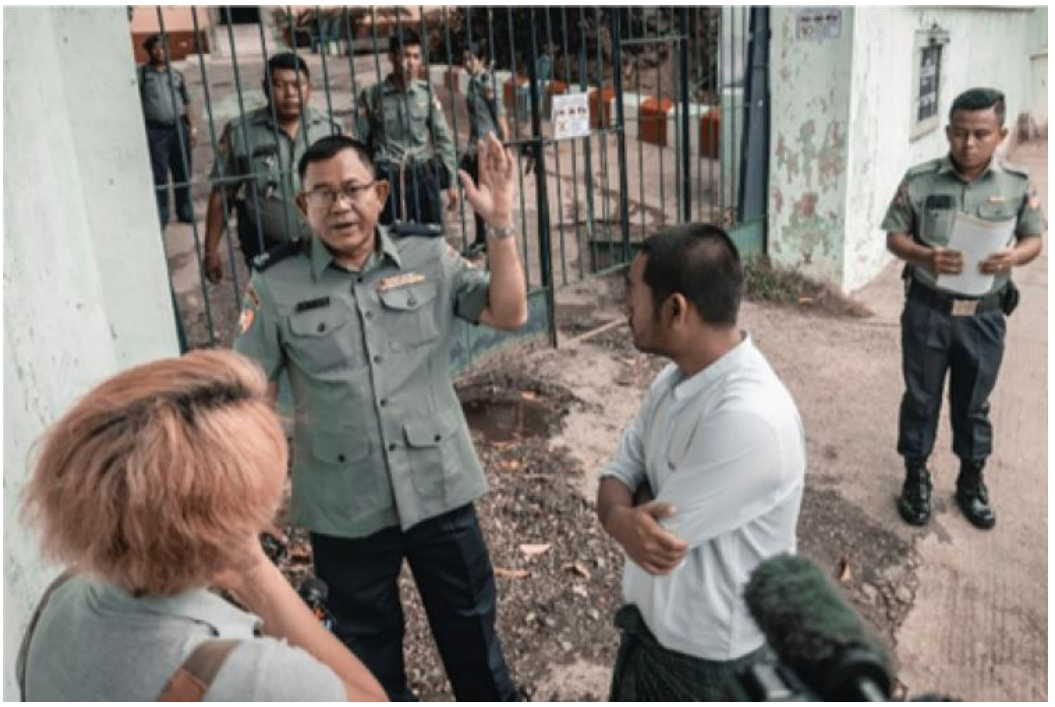


Photo caption: Maung Saungkha was first arrested on November 5, 2015 and charged with defamation under telecommunication law for a poem he posted on Facebook. He was released on May 24, 2016 when he received his sentence for 6 months, the same amount of time he had already spent in detention. He was detained again, on May 19, 2018, for his involvement in a demonstration for peace, this time he was released on bail. He undauntedly continues to work for freedom of expression. (Photo: Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Thike)



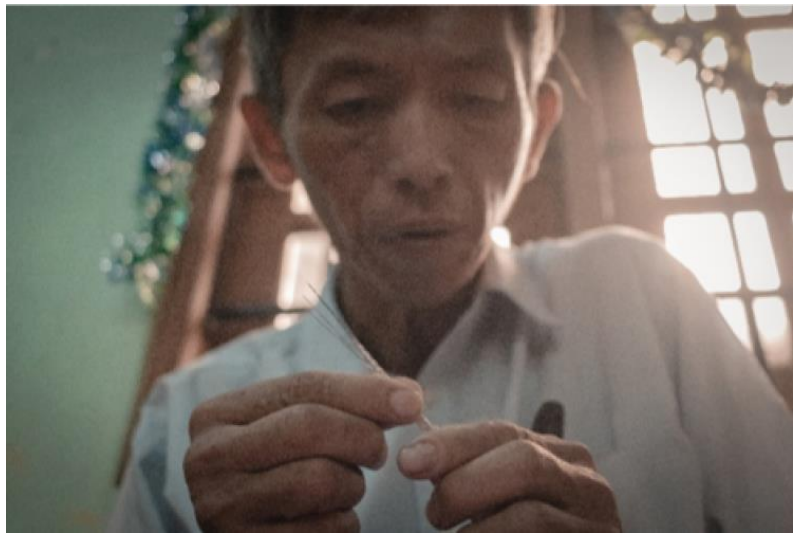
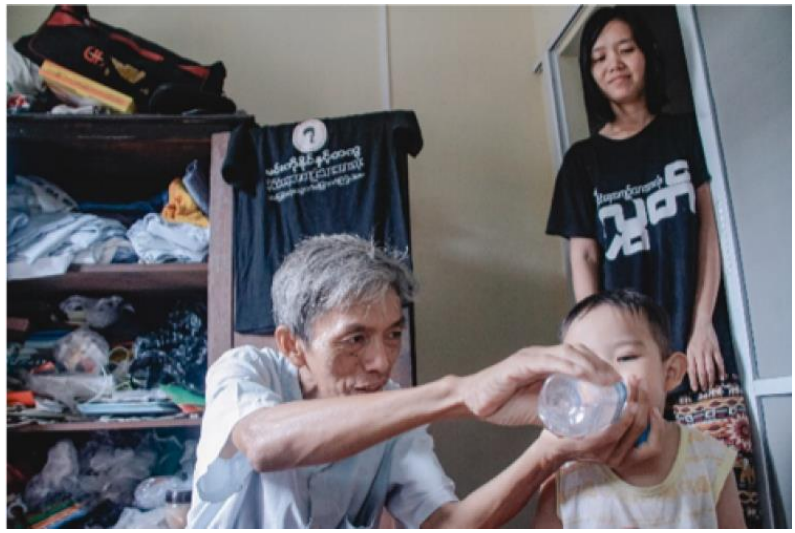


Photo caption: U Nay Win was first arrested in 1989 and served 15 years and 4 months for being part of the communist party. He was released in 2005 but arrested again in 2008 while burying victims of the Cyclone Nargis and charged with harbouring a fugitive. The fugitive was his daughter Phyoe Phyoe Aung, who was fleeing charges for her part in re-establishing the All Burma Federation of Students Unions. In the pictures you see him together with Phyoe Phyoe Aung and his grandson and working as an acupuncturist offering free treatment to people in need. (Photo Phyoe Dhana Chit Lynn Thike)



Photographer Sai Minn Thein engages in two topics with his photos, relating to recognition of the deprivations political prisoners face. In the first series he shows U Ye Lwin receiving treatment at the Healthcare Centre for Political Prisoners (HCPP). The HCPP offers free treatment to political prisoners for the many health problems they face as a consequence of torture and many years in prisons with little access to nutritious food and healthcare. The second series of images documents the deprivation of contact with family members political prisoners faced when they were sent to prisons in remote areas. He skilfully does this through a depiction of how the Sanchaung family is picked apart as they are imprisoned one by one and sent to prisons in different parts of the country.

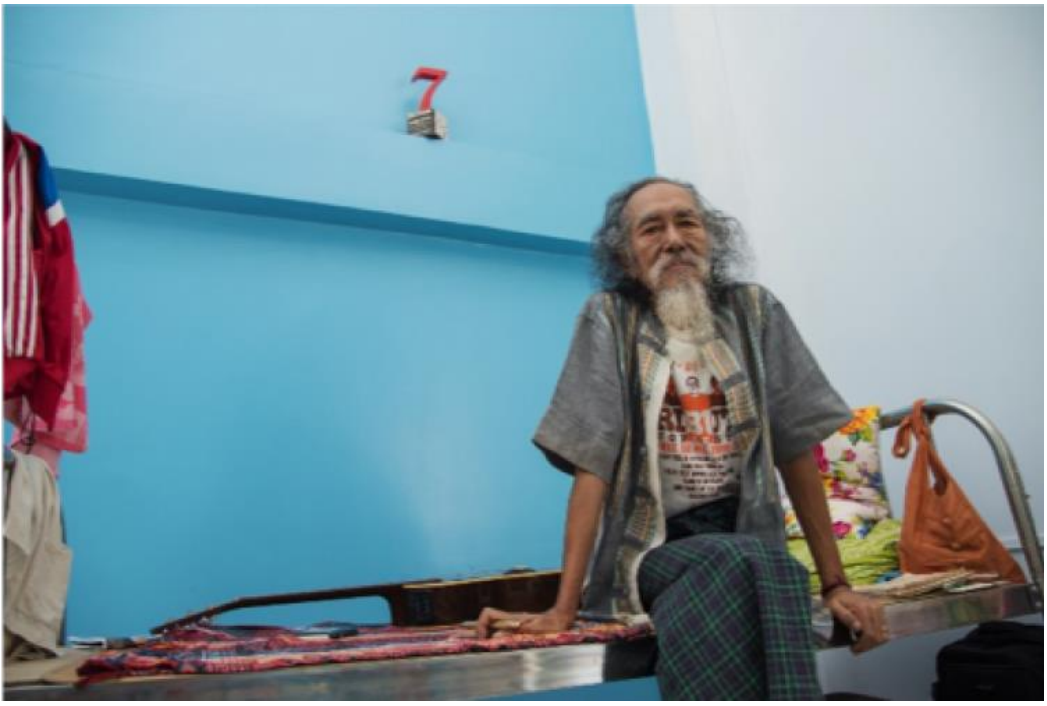
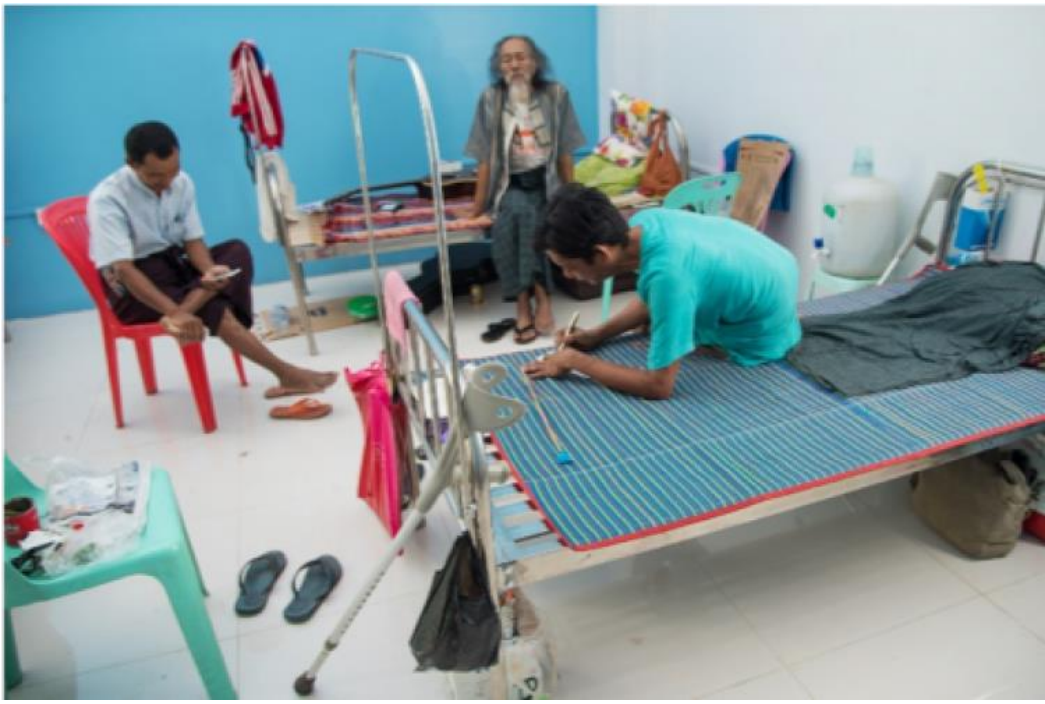
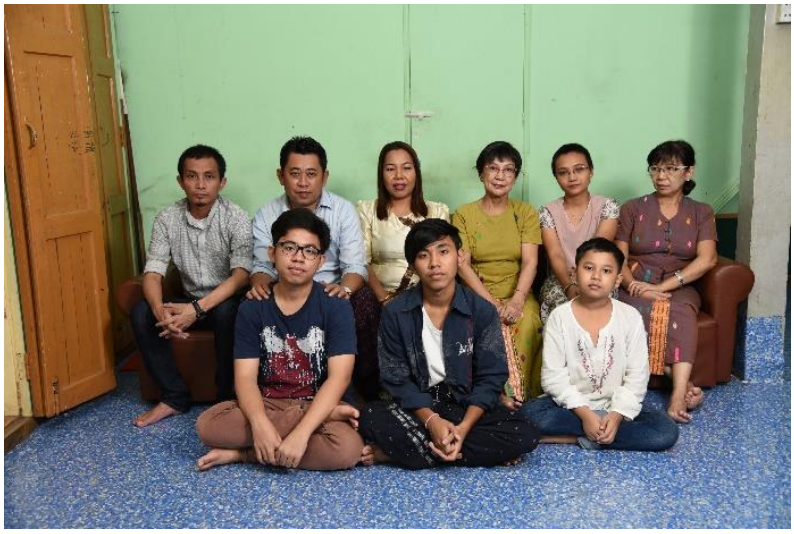
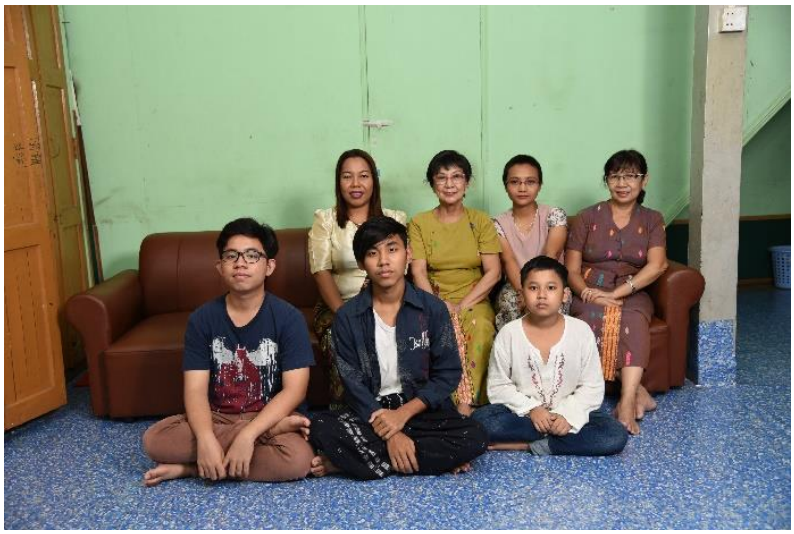


Photo caption: U Ye Lwin was a famous singer, guitarist and composer in Panyelann (Path of Flowers). He was arrested in September, 2007 and released in December 2007. He was known for playing at teashops and in the streets to collect donations for IDPs and support the National League for Democracy. These pictures were taken while he was a patient at HCPP. U Ye Lwin died on the 10th of July 2018, only two days after these pictures were first shown to the public. (Photo: Sai Minn Thein)







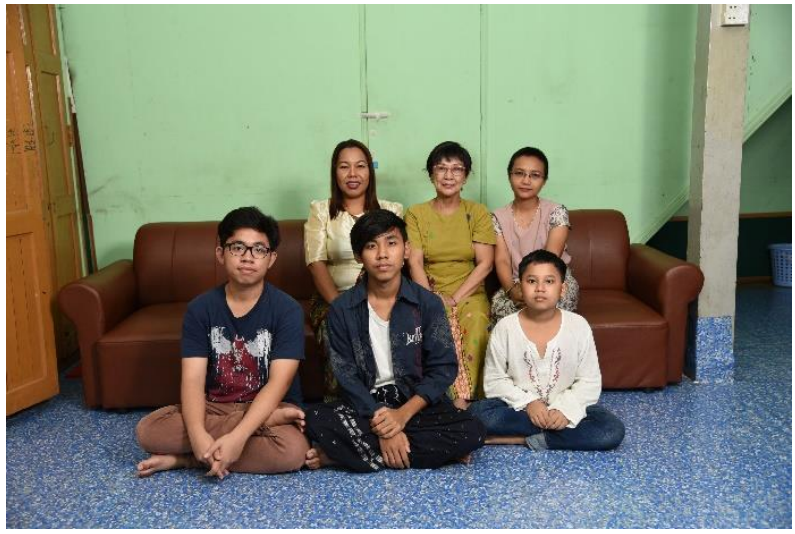
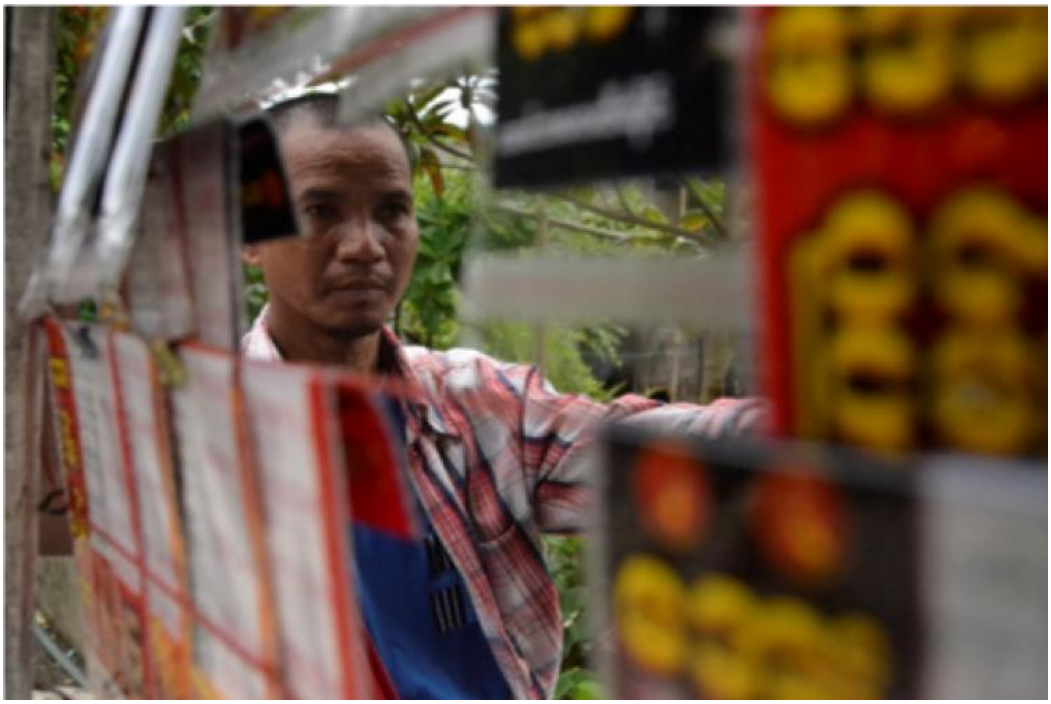


Photo caption: From left to right: U Htun Nay Aung aka. Jo Joe, arrested August 24, 2007, released November, 2007. Detained in Kyeik Ka San Interrogative Center and Kyauk Tan Police regiment; U Chit Ko Lin, arrested October 8, 2007, sentenced to 11 years and released October 12, 2011 from Pakokku Prison; Daw Thet Thet Aung, arrested October 18, 2007, sentenced to 65 years on 6 different cases, released January 12, 2012 from Myin Chan Prison; Daw Sann Sann Tin, arrested October 18, 2007, sentenced to 9 years and released October 12, 2011; Ma Nwe Hnin Yi aka. No Noe, arrested October 18, 2007, sentenced to 11 years and released October 12, 2011 from Mau Bin Prison; Daw Su Su Kyi, arrested 1992, 1993 and on October 9, 2007, released November 2007. Detained in Aung Thapyae Interrogation Center. (Photo: Sai Minn Thein)

Photographer Pho Nyi Htwe takes photos of how former political prisoners continue their struggle in various ways. His photos show Ko Kyi Soe and Ko Pho Kyaw struggling for their daily livelihood by selling lottery tickets or weighing people on the streets. The photos recognise their significant contribution to the struggle for democracy, while showing that today they struggle for everyday survival as their previous lives disappeared while they were imprisoned. In his images we also see Ma Thanda, who continues to fight for democracy within the system as a member of parliament, in spite of having lost years of her life imprisoned by the military regime, which later tortured and killed her husband, who was working as a journalist in the border areas where ethnic armed struggles take place.



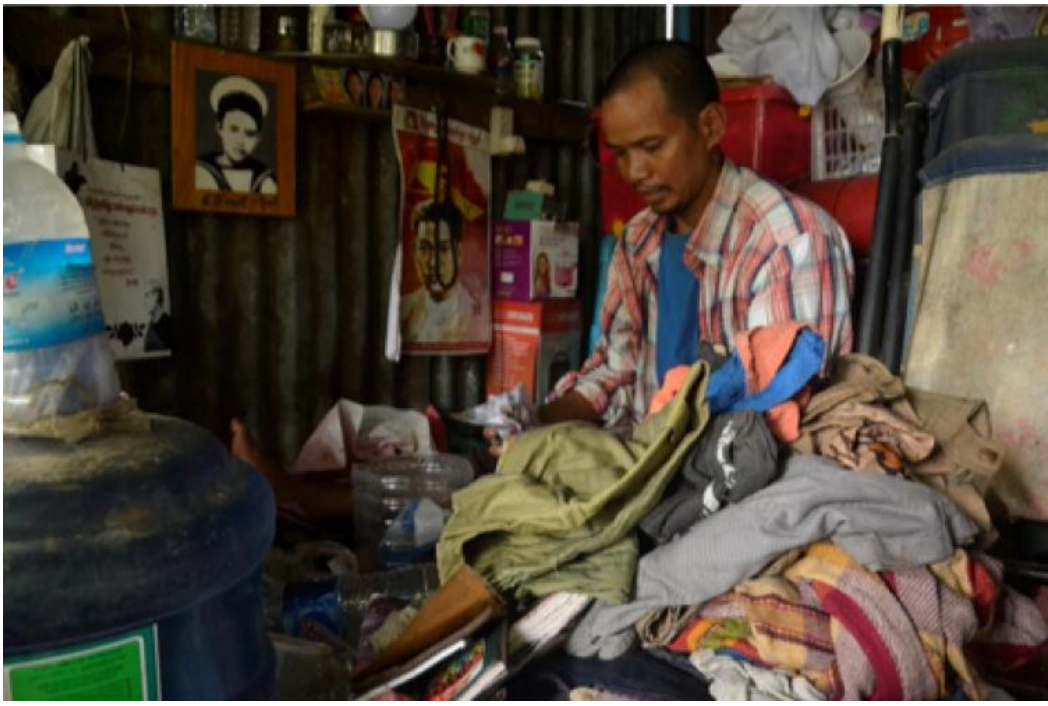
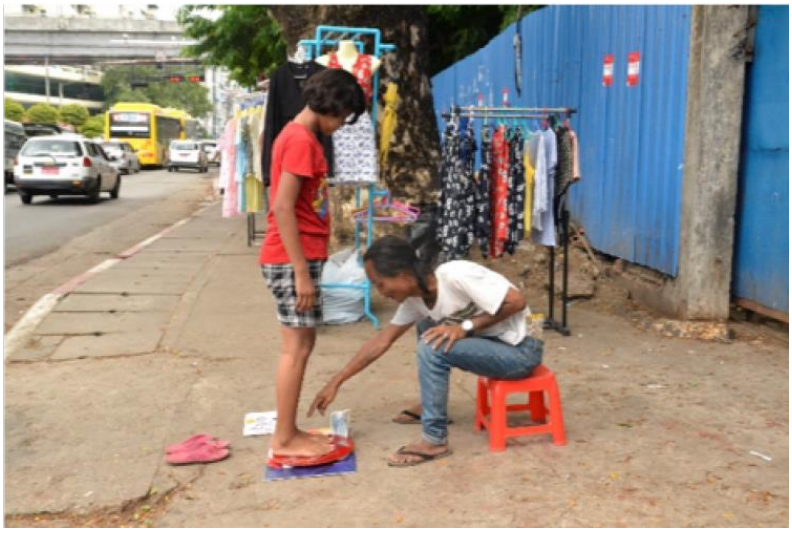


Photo caption: Ko Kyi Soe, was arrested on May 25, 1991 and sentenced to 6 years. He was released on December 28, 1995 from Insein Central Jail. In the pictures, he works for his daily living selling lottery tickets. (Photo: Pho Nyi Htwe)



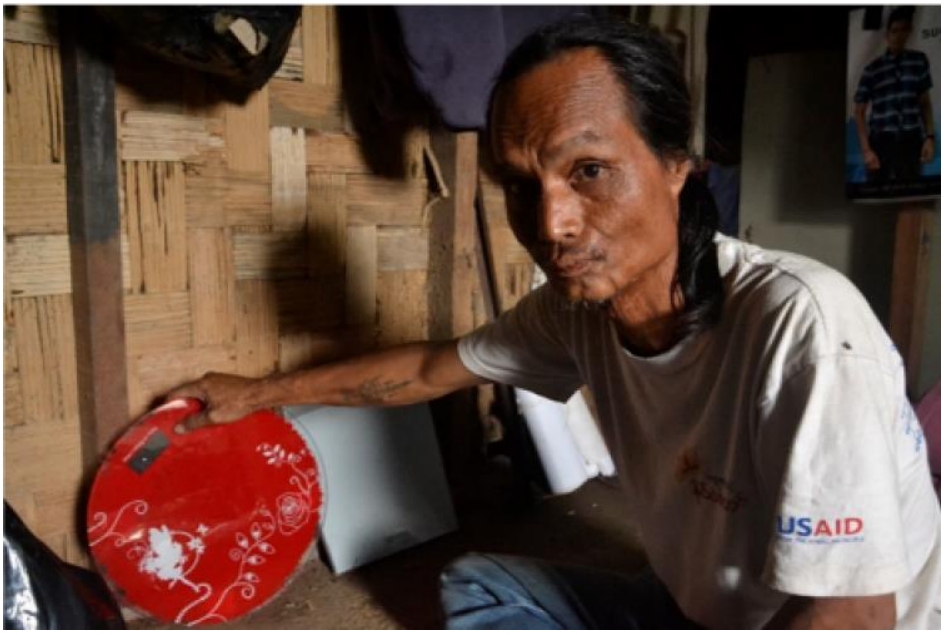


Photo caption: Ko Kyaw Min Swe aka. Pho Kyaw joined the All Burma Students Democratic Front in the northern camp by the border to Thailand after the democratic uprising in 1988. He fled from the camp after the incident in 1991-1992 where students turned on each other and some students were accused to be informers of the state. In 1998, he was arrested because of his participation in the anniversary of the 1988 uprising. He was sentenced to 7 years under section 5J of the Emergency Act. He was released from Oh Bo Prison in 2004. In the pictures, he is earning his daily living by weighing people. (Photo: Pho Nyi Htwe)

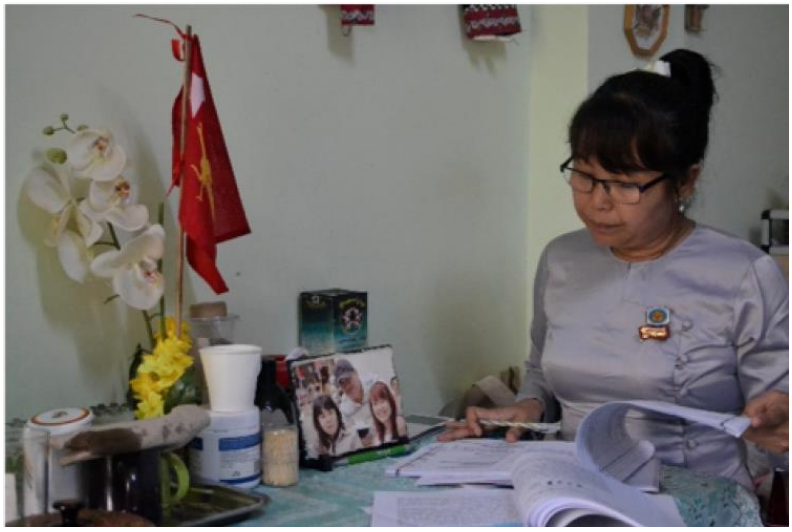


Photo caption: Ma Thanda was arrested on April 23, 2007 at the Thai/Myanmar border. She was sentenced to 28 years of imprisonment, of which she served 6 before being released on amnesty. In the photo she works in her office next to a picture of her late husband U Par Gyi who was executed in 2014 while covering a story on the clash between ethnic groups and the military. Today she is a member of parliament (Hllutaw) for the National League for Democracy. (Photo: Pho Nyi Htwe)

Photographer Letyar Tun recognises the families of political prisoners who died while still inside prison. He does so through a series of photos previously shown in the project Framing the Transition. The photos show family members of fallen political prisoners. Letyar Tun documents how memorabilia of dead political prisoners remain the same, as if frozen in time, while their families live on.

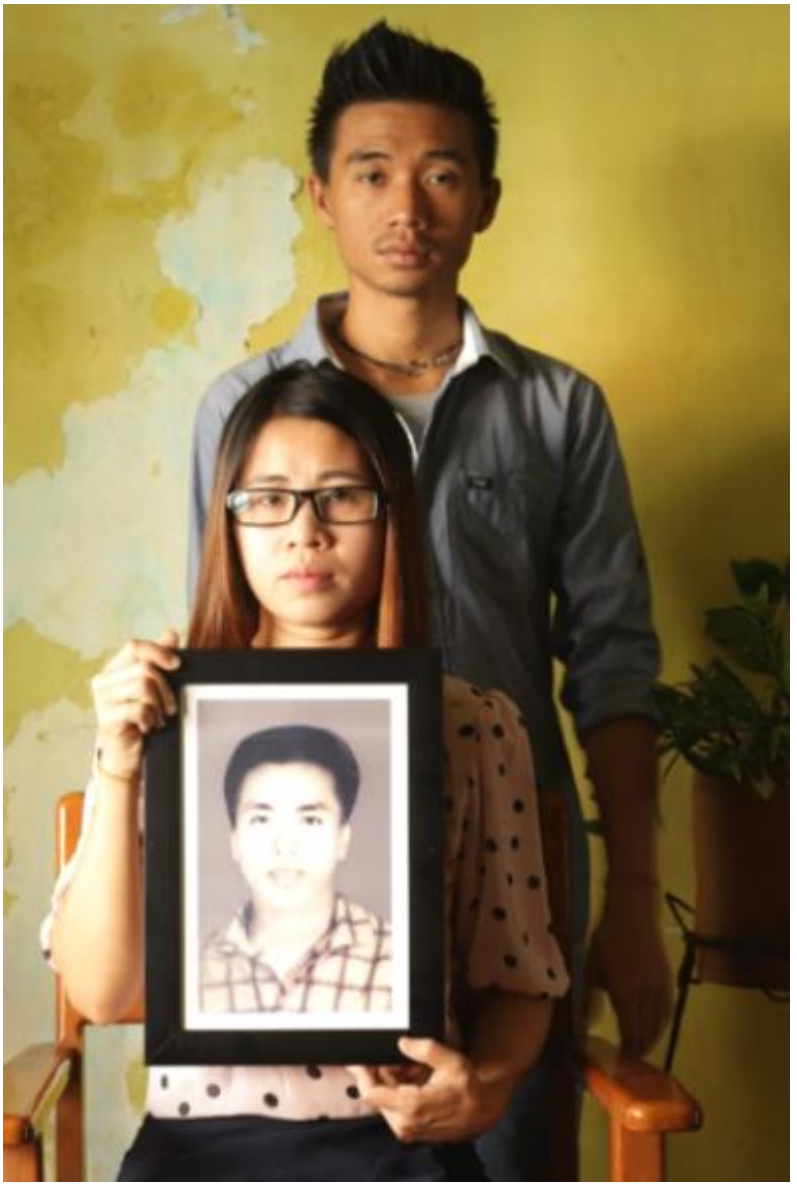


Photo caption: U Maung Ko was arrested in December 1996, accused of contacting the Communist Party of Burma. He was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment. During the imprisonment, his cardio disease was aggravated by torture and not being allowed access to medical care. He was transferred from Tharyarwady to Insein and died on 15 November 2002. In the picture his children hold a photo of him (Photo: Letyar Tun)

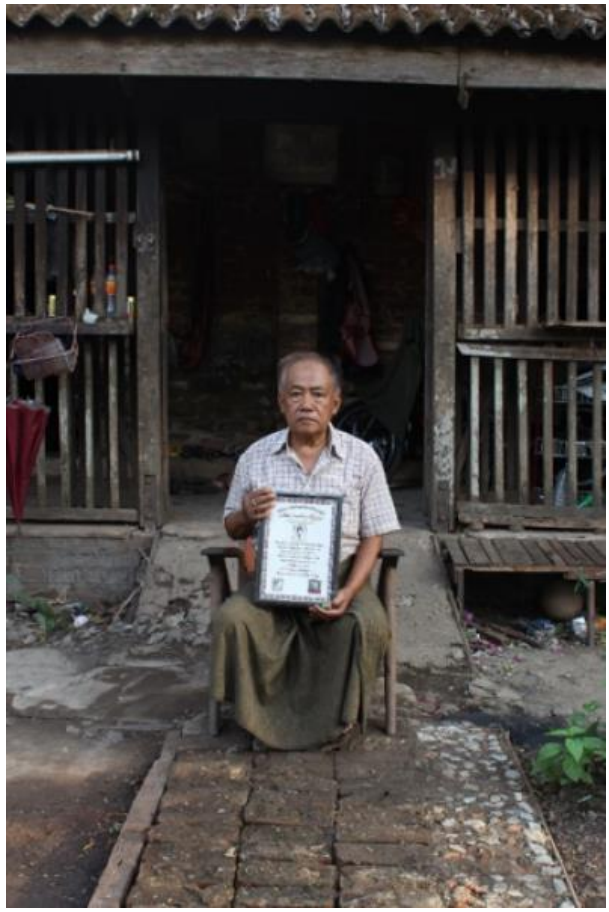


Photo caption: Ko Zaw Myo Htet was arrested on July 16, 2003 and died on October 19 2004 at the age of 28. He was accused of destabilizing the state and assassinating the Chief of State. He received a death sentence, which was appealed to the higher court where it was commuted and reduced to 3 years. He died of jaundice in the guarded ward of Yangon General Hospital as a prisoner patient. In the picture his father holds a certificate of acknowledgement received from the Association of Assistance for Political Prisoners. (Photo: Letyar Tun)

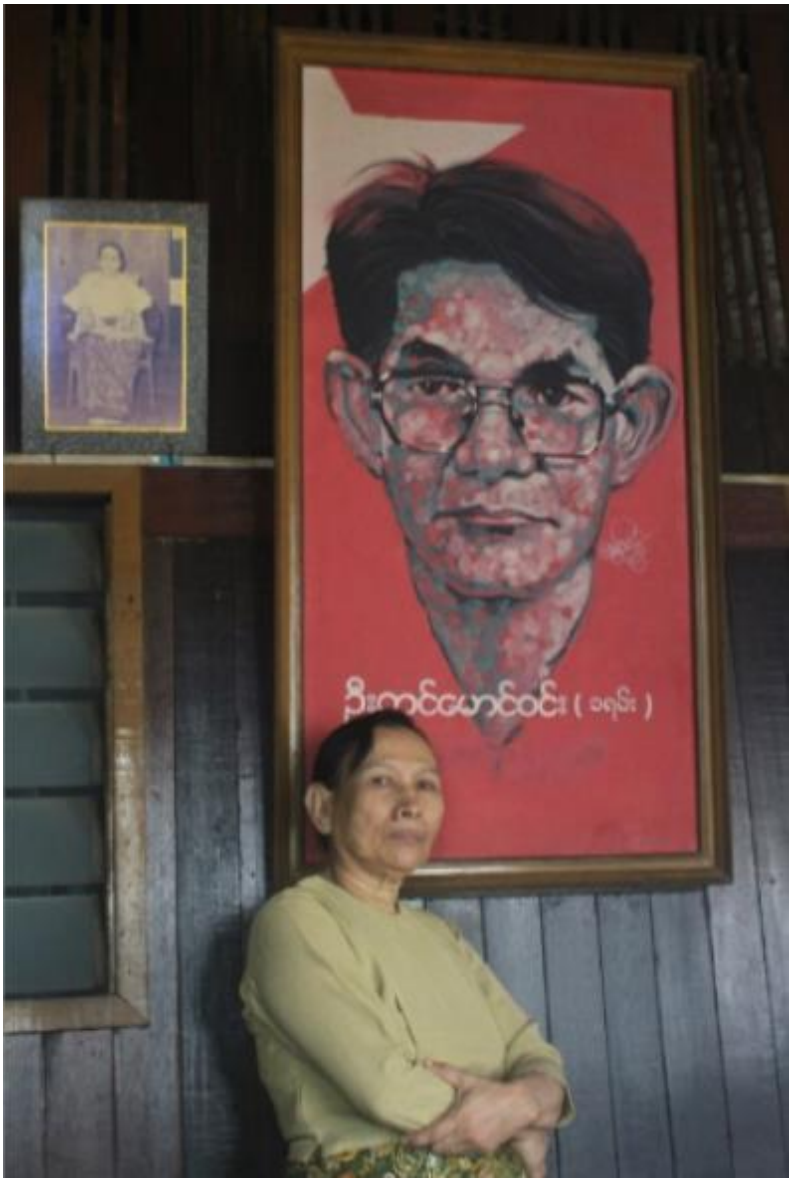


Photo caption: U Tin Maung Win was born in 1939 in Khayan township. He became a political activist as a university student. In the 1990 election he was elected member of parliament for the National League for Democracy and arrested by military intelligence. Only a few months later he died in prison on January 18, 1991. In the picture, Daw Kyu Kyu stands in front of a portrait of her late husband. (Photo: Letyar Tun)

Engaging in action research with former political prisoners through photography furthered the research in two significant ways. Firstly, by working together with former political prisoners, who

had experienced imprisonment and post-prison life on their own bodies, the project was able to add nuances to understandings of political prisoners, which were previously unseen in documentation of their experiences and which improved the general understandings of experiences of imprisonment in the research. Secondly, by using visual methods in co-creation with local actors, the project was able to reach a greater audience in Myanmar and beyond. By now, the photos have been exhibited in four places, two in Myanmar and two in Denmark. In all places, different audiences have interacted with the photos and learned about experiences of former political prisoners after release. The audiences range from other former political prisoners in Myanmar, who are intimately familiar with post-prison experiences, to a Danish audience, in which some did not know what and where Myanmar was, and who had no previous knowledge about the political situation in the country or the human lives that were affected. Through the visual communication, these very different audiences were able to engage with the human experiences of life after imprisonment.

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