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Social Movements in Contemporary Southeast Asia

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The Militancy of Kinship, Intimacy, and Religion
New Approaches for the Study of Social Movements in Contemporary Southeast Asia

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Abstract   What are the distinctive features of dissent in Southeast Asia? In this article, we examine the rise of social activism in contemporary Southeast Asia, drawing on examples of popular protest from countries as diverse as Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Our analysis highlights the importance of examining situational power dynamics in specific locales, with particular focus on areas often considered apolitical in modern philosophy: intimacy, religion, and kinship. We argue that Southeast Asia is not merely a site for the reception of resistance theories, but a source of theoretical production in its own right.

Keywords   Social movements. Southeast Asia. Alter-politics. Kinship. Religion. Intimacy.

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1 Introduction

The post-1989 era has been dominated by neoliberalism. 'Market democracy' – the consolidated subordination of democratic principles to capitalist efficiency – has become the ideal standard of governance well beyond the global North (Postero, Elinoff 2019, 4). The emergence of transnational markets, production chains, digital technologies, and financial networks that transgress national boundaries, connecting world regions previously organized along Cold War blocs, has generated profound shifts in how development, societies, and humans are understood and governed. In many places, the 'neoliberal consensus' has replaced socialism, historical materialism, and class struggle analysis with quality-of-life politics, technocratic managerialism, and market-based reconciliation. At the same time, global democratization created conditions for marginalized individuals and communities worldwide to express their aspirations for respect of human rights, fairer work opportunities and greater political participation (5), engendering an ambivalent process in which the economization of public governance is increasingly contrasted by democratic resistance.

As neoliberalism has revealed its dark sides – from environmental destruction and the privatization of natural resources to the casualization of labor and the progressive demolition of the welfare state – communities, groups, and individuals who were formerly excluded from the political arena have thus made their voices increasingly heard. The Arab Spring and Occupy protests in 2011, the MeToo movement in 2017, the FridaysForFuture initiatives in 2018, and the Black Lives Matter network in 2018 are just but a few powerful instances of this often transnational, resurgence of social activism, which has unsurprisingly become the subject of a prolific body of scholarship.[1]

Comparatively, Southeast Asia has received little and discontinuous media coverage and scholarly attention, despite the impressive influence that marginalized groups (e.g. indigenous communities, women and children, LGBTQI+ organizations, religious actors, and the urban poor) have exerted over the re-definition of the commons, be they nations, digital spaces, or more-than-human cosmoses. This special issue offers one step forward in addressing this lacuna. It scrutinizes the remarkable florescence of social activism in contemporary Southeast Asia by bringing together case studies from contexts as diverse as Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia, as well as in transnational arenas where

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[1] Bayat 2015; Taylor 2016; Chandra, Erlingsdóttir 2020; Svensson, Wahlström 2023.

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political mobilization connects local struggles to globally relevant issues and forms of dissent.

Indeed, while democracy, gender equality, and human rights are policy objectives that seemingly unify the aspirations of activists in places as diverse as Bangkok, Yangon and Manila, their cultural articulations, social significations and manifestations in the political arena vary greatly. We argue that a context-sensitive approach to the study of such variations benefits from careful examination of situational arrangements of power in specific Southeast Asian locales, with particular attention to domains of feeling, thought and practice that are commonly deemed as apolitical in modern political philosophy, that is, intimacy, religion, and kinship.

2 Theory on Social Movements and Southeast Asia

Interrogating the role and the specificities of social activism in Southeast Asia demands attention to both local and global concerns and processes, as well as to the myriad cultural patterns, discursive repertoires, and socio-political forms that animate dissent in one of the world's most diverse regions (see Facal et al. 2024). In this respect, we follow the call for contextual analysis put forward by Michelle Ford in her intervention on the subject: *Social Activism in Southeast Asia* (2013). In this edited collection, which marks the first attempt to map this increasingly relevant field of inquiry within area studies scholarship, Ford poses two key questions: "How do the concerns of global social movements play out in the social and cultural contexts of the region and particular Southeast Asian states, and vice versa? To what extent are social movements forms and repertoires of action indigenous and to what extent are they products of 'globalization from below?'". These questions cannot be answered through an acritical – that is, de-historicized and de-contextualized – reading of social unrest. As Ford points out, the academic literature on social movements has been primarily developed by Western scholars and with reference to Euroamerican realities (4); as such, many of the available theoretical models reflect post-war Western Europe's secular preoccupations, identity politics, and universalist aspirations.

Notably, the wave of 'counterculture' that rocked North America and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s prompted the emergence of three identifiable scholarly approaches for the study of social movements, influential to this day. Positioning themselves in antithesis to the previous 'crowd psychology' model, these marked a shift away from the existing emphasis on the assumed irrationality of the masses (Barrows 1981) with scholars redirecting their attention toward people's anti-establishment concern with post-materialist issues (e.g. self-realization, individual freedom, and identity politics) that challenged

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the modern construction (and gendering) of the public/private divide as postulated within classical liberal theory (Kurzman 2008).

The first among these three schools, which is known as Resource Mobilization Theory, focuses on the behind-the-scenes work that is needed to sustain resistance – ranging from the management of finances to the accumulation of a know-how as well as the devising of moral narratives and cultural repertoires of resistance (Oberschall 1973; McCarthy, Zald 1977; Zald, McCarthy 1987). The second approach, New Social Movements Theory, seeks to de-centralize the importance given by previous studies to class-based resistance, emphasizing instead the increased prevalence of collective actors that voice personal grievances such as those linked to sexual and gender identities, as well as global concerns such as appeals to world peace and climate justice.[2] The third, known as the Political Process or Political Opportunity Paradigm, investigates the dialectic relationship between social movements and state agents (or related power holders), observing how specific political contexts may facilitate rather than hinder meaningful structural change.

These three models, which should not be understood as mutually exclusive (see McAdam, McCarthy, Zald 1996), provide useful analytical tools for the study of social movements worldwide. At the same time, once appropriately historicized and contextualized, the same paradigms also clearly reflect the distinctive nature of the social worlds they originate from, leaving us only partially equipped for the study of the specific socio-historical contexts of regions such as contemporary Southeast Asia, which feature highly complex, varied and dynamic cultures of contestation. As Ford (2013, 16) points out: "it is not possible to simply take a Northern template […] and apply it uncritically. It is only when […] complemented by the kind of detailed local knowledge that underpins the contributions to this collection that the conceptual toolbox of social movement studies becomes truly useful in Southeast Asia or, indeed, elsewhere in the global South". Anthropological approaches to the study of social movements, often intertwined with scholars' own engagement in activism, sought – in various ways – to adress concerns such as Ford's by making the contextual complexities of dissent a central focus of investigation (see Nash 2004).

The ideas that permeate this essay as well as the eight articles that follow began taking shape during a summer school on social movements in contemporary Southeast Asia which we organized in September 2022 at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. This unique one-week event gathered early-career scholars from around the world who are committed to the study of social movements in the region from a variety of perspectives. Many of them were born in Southeast

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2 Melucci 1996; Touraine 1981; Edelman 2001; Habermas 1981.

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Asia, shared a background in political activism, and were close – in generational, ethno-linguistic and political terms – with the resisting protagonists of their essays. Their perspective provides this collection with rare epistemic depth, contextual sensitivity, fine-grained analysis, ethical commitment as well as an approach to research that is often explicitly reflexive toward the colonial legacy of knowledge production in academia.

3 Resistance and the Alter-politics of Southeast Asia

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, as the scholarship on social movements flourished in Euro-America, the socio-political outlook of many Southeast Asian countries was hardly comparable to that of their wealthier and more politically stable Northern counterparts. Western democracy, development, and middle-class lifestyles – all of which, to be sure, always came about with hidden histories of inequality, violence and exclusion – were dreamlike aspirations for many people in Southeast Asia, a region predominantly regarded as part of the 'developing world'. Here, the irrepressible, carnally material urge to 'fill the belly' remained widespread.

The independence wars that put an end to the colonial period had left much of the region devastated. Mass movements grew, fueled by the hunger and the grievances of less privileged constituencies – mainly the peasantry and the urban poor, a disenfranchised and increasingly subversive majority advocating for greater social justice, land redistribution and labor rights. Until the 1990s, class equality made up the core of people's motivations to revolt. Social tumult in Southeast Asia did not only draw upon socialist creeds, however, but also on existing cosmologies, ritual appraisals, and millenarian framings of political oppression, all of which anchor class-based struggle to specific worldviews and modes of expression.

During the Cold War, the establishment of (US-backed) repressive regimes (Sarit in Thailand, Suharto in Indonesia, Marcos in the Philippines) crushed militant socialism throughout much of the region – paradoxically at a time when Communist forces in Vietnam were getting the edge on American imperialism. The ensuing collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a new era, which, by the 1990s, saw most Southeast Asian nations – including the communist strongholds of Vietnam and Laos – rehabilitated as full members of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and embracing forms of capitalism. It also marked the global triumph of the neoliberal order. This turn of events in turn scaled up regional and national development, shaping Southeast Asian polities in ambivalent ways.

On a one hand access to quality education, middle-class formation, technological advancement and NGO activism determined the

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emergence of more liberal aspirations and demands for greater democracy. Previously invisible groups (e.g. children, women, LGBTQI+ people, ethnic and religious minorities) stepped out onto the political stage and invaded the cyberspace, joining a global call for human rights, gender equality, antimilitarism and ecological justice. On the other hand, elite-driven counter-movements sought legitimacy via claims to restore 'Asian values' and the old political order through whatever means – authoritarianism included. The 2016 Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs in the Philippines, the 2020 Thai military government's judicial persecution of youth activists, and the 2021 Myanmar's brutal military coup are among the most recent cases in point.

This too short history of contemporary Southeast Asia suggests that the abovementioned theoretical models for the study of social movements are only partially suited to understand the nature of dissent in the region. Here, both progressive and conservative forces rely upon combinations of tradition and innovation as they articulate their agendas, charging categories such as 'democracy' or 'social order' with distinctive vernacular features.

We argue that Resource mobilization, New Social Movements, and Political Process theories subtend yet another epistemic limitation, as they tend to draw from a secular and largely Weberian understanding of politics that imagines the latter as a rational field of state-centered administration, policies, and juridical-institutional arrangements (Bolotta, Fountain, Feener 2020, 2). In Southeast Asia, modernities are in fact 'multiple' (Eisenstadt 2000), as supposedly universal notions such as sovereignty, democracy, and good governance, have been appropriated, re-elaborated, and contested by myriad state and non-state agents via varied processes of 'globalizations from below' (Portes 2000). Politics in Southeast Asia is not only construed as an affair of state. What modernity has artificially separated – public and private, state and religion, politics and kinship – re-emerges here as a complex amalgamation of motives that underpin diverse arrangements of power as much as its contestation. This, to be sure, actually happens everywhere, including in the so-called West, for – as Bruno Latour put it – "we have never been modern" (Latour 1993). The feminist slogan "the personal is political", which emerged in the 1960s in Euramerica, is an iconic attempt to awaken collective consciousness precisely about this. Differently than in Western Europe, however, Southeast Asia has been less interested in hiding this evidence.

In Thailand, for example, some young protesters have engaged creatively with divination, sorcery and other ritual technologies to predict and affect political change (Siani 2023), while others have appropriated traditional symbols of Buddhist kingship to signal their aspirations for sovereignty (Siani 2020). In Bangkok slums, single mothers draw on a Buddhist reformulation of children's rights discourses to claim their rights to housing (Bolotta 2017). In Myanmar,

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pro-democracy citizens bang pots and pans, an old practice aimed at chasing away evil spirits, against the regime (Egreteau 2023). In Indonesia's 'pious neoliberalism', NGOs activism channels Muslim notions of giving and charity into humanitarian fund-raising and technocratic projects of poverty reduction (Atia 2013). The list could be endless.

Our main argument here is that the analysis of social struggles in Southeast Asia, and the attending processes of solidarity, antagonism, and dissent, requires careful consideration of the cultural worlds within which the project of modernity takes shape. These worlds rest on complex interactions with globally circulating formulations of the political that transgress the boundary between spheres of thought and action commonly deemed antithetical because ascribed, respectively, to either the private or public domain: intimacy, religion, and kinship on a one hand, public life, secular politics and the state on the other. The distinction between materialist and post-materialist concerns is similarly out of place in contemporary Southeast Asia, since issues of class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and age are often intersectionally entangled (rather than disjointed like distinct claims or fields of knowledge).

We argue that, in addition to social movements literature, the anthropological scholarship on the political (e.g. Bolotta, Fountain, Feener 2020; Postero, Elinoff 2019), postcolonial and feminist theory (e.g. Fraser 2022; Bohrer 2019), as well as the social scientific study of power ontologies in Southeast Asia (e.g. Scheer 2021) and, more broadly, in the global South (Blaser 2009; de la Cadena 2010), are necessary supplementary references to expand our understanding of social movements in the region. We also deem it essential to understand social movements as productive for emerging 'alter-politics', that is, reimaginings of the common good (Hage 2015). The latter are not necessarily constructed in opposition to dominant sociopolitical forms and cultural norms (that is, as a form of anti-politics), but rather set forth new, other, and alternative 'pluriversalist ontologies' for humanity, the future, and-or more-than-human worlds in a time of global transformation (Escobar 2017).

Postero and Elinoff's (2019) anthropological take on (social movements') politics as 'practices of world-making' appears particularly useful here. This intentionally broad and theoretically open definition allows us to expand the analytical focus on social movements so that it may encompass a greater variety of cultural arrangements of power, solidarity and dissent, transcending the restricted field of state-civil society exchange. In this sense, world-making efforts to produce social change can be found in multiple venues (e.g. a shrine, a private home, a concert, a forest), where they express alternative ways to think of the commons and imagine the future.

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4 The Contributions to This Special Issue

The articles that make up this special issue investigate socially situated forms of dissent in different Southeast Asian nations, social groups and settings along these scholarly lines of inquiry. The case studies presented herein do not necessarily portray social conflict as a uniform process of struggle between clearly codified groups of actors with coherent visions of change. Rather, our contributors show that dissent entails creative and continuous negotiations between conflicting cultural worlds across multiple scales. Relatedly, readers will not only encounter Southeast Asian social movements – and the alter-politics brought about by their concerted aspirations – in the context of mass protest, nor will they see that their actions always translate into clear policy proposals, law amendments and public advocacy. In fact, more than often dissent finds expression via alternative world-making visions, solidarities, practices, sounds, and feelings that intertwine (and lead to) unexpected places and situations.

The article penned by Yên Mai, highlights the importance of identifying social movements outside the context of street politics and mass mobilization, as she takes readers to youth training and development programs in the context of one-party Vietnam. Here, young individuals, who are normally construed as passive recipients of state-driven education, display their political agency in subtle ways as active meaning-makers of social transformation. Mai's micro-sociological approach illuminates the intimate backstage of youth-led social change, as well as Vietnamese young people's complex appropriation/reformulation of cultural toolkits, including human rights and environmental sustainability, as a form of civic engagement in formally apolitical spaces.

Moving on to the context of Myanmar/Burma after the coup d'état of 2021, Johanna M. Götz explores how protest art and activist sisterhood seek to contrast military dictatorship's patriarchal constructions of women's subordination. The latter, as she shows, rests on Burmese religious formulations of female impurity, which form the basis of entangled structures of (male) authoritarianism. Drawing from the intersectional tradition, Götz argues that, in this context, highly heterogeneous pro-democracy movements – such as advocates for LGBTQI+ and ethnic minority rights – learn to cooperate as they build a vernacular repertoire of protest symbols through which to cultivate gendered and kin re-imaginings of a federal democratic Burma.

Rizky Sasono pushes for an understanding of post-reform Indonesia's social movements that considers political meaning through 'musicking', that is, how sounds and performances serve as a vehicle for expressing collective concerns. Engaging with the framework of audiopolitics, he shows that the indie music scene in Indonesia

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voices popular dissent against the government's authoritarian policies while simultaneously reflecting, in its commercial and industrialized arrangements, the neoliberal reconfiguration of political sounds. Through emotional song lyrics, musicians' performances, as well as listeners' collective intimacy, the meaning of Indonesian society is acoustically reworked as distinctive alter-politics of the common good are composed.

Marielle Y. Marcaida delves into how Filipina women – especially mothers – respond to the extra-judicial killings that accompanied former-President Rodrigo Duterte's infamous 'war on drugs' via the implementation of initiatives of mutual support that include legal assistance, psychological rehabilitation and livelihood programs. The political deployment of kinship is key here. She argues that these women engage in innovative ways with local, Christianity-infused notions of motherly care as they coalesce to set up and offer a range of communal services.

J Francis Cerretani explores the transnational underbelly of Rohingya dissent. Grounding the narrative in an ethnography of Ireland-based Rohingya activists, the author shows that engagements with online platforms and other multimodal technologies enable diaspora Rohingyas to form kin affinities with distant fellows, share knowledge and create shared identities that resist the modernist and inherently essentialist categories invoked by the Burmese junta in support of its hegemonic project. Cerretani's research, mostly conducted in the home of a Rohingya refugee family, underscores how affective intimacy and the warmth of kin ties – normatively construed as private realities – can actually function as key motivational forces in forging political commitments.

Also in the context of transnational dissent, Tuwanont Phattharathanasut examines the coming into being of the so-called Milk Tea Alliance – an important network through which young activists across Asia, and mainly in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand – share symbols from pop culture and digital strategies to support democratic transition in their respective countries. Grounding his contribution in social network theory, he challenges assumptions that see communication technology as the sole catalyzer of transnational activism. While social media provide young people with an important platform to voice their dissent, Tuwanont brings to light the equally crucial role played by intimate (as opposed to digital) connections. In tracing the Milk Tea Alliance's genealogy, he reveals longstanding histories of cooperation and grassroot interconnectedness between prominent activists of different nationalities. These interpersonal linkages – which normally pass unnoticed as 'private relationships' – form the intimate basis of today's digital organization.

In yet another culturally sensitive approach to the study of social movements, Amara Thiha draws attention to unexpected

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intersections between dissent and religion in post-2021 coup Burma/Myanmar. Challenging conventional applications of resource mobilization theory, he shows that groups of Burmese dissenters consider not only finances and protest strategies as resources for dissent but also ritual knowledge. Acting in both private and public contexts, these activists deploy astrology and black magic in a battle, at once political and cosmological, for different visions of the country's socio-political order.

Also in the realm of religion, Roberto Rizzo details the emergence of *Pemuda Buddhis*, literally 'Buddhist Youth', an organization that is actively engaged with the creative revival of Buddhism in the highlands of Central Java, Indonesia. He demonstrates that members of the movement draw from local and global discourses – revivalist stances, influences from nearby Theravada countries, Javanese and local identity tropes, and even entrepreneurial pushes – as they fight for the promotion and recognition of their faith, ultimately shaping up a form of Buddhist practice that displays distinct features.

We argue that a critical reading of these essays brings to the forefront three important dimensions of resistance in which contemporary Southeast Asian social movements thrive, displaying distinctive alter-politics. Specifically, we wish to highlight the intersectional ways in which dissenters in the region routinely mobilize intimacy, kinship and religion as key sites, forms and instruments of gendered, ethnic and class militancy in the public domain. An appreciation of the role played by these three interrelated axes in Southeast Asian cultures of dissent entails a radical reformulation of politics and the common good with respect to the modernist models that emerged in the wake of late colonialism and that continue to be sustained by today's (Western as Eastern) neoliberal order.

5 The Militancy of Intimacy

In a recent anthropological study on political dissent, Amarasuriya et al. (2020) draw attention to the previously overlooked role played by intimacy, understood as encompassing the complex and dynamic set of one's personal relations. The authors argue that

> (d)issidents are not simply lone individuals with abstract ideals; they are also caught up in other, sometimes contradictory aspirations and relationships and forms of responsibility. (…) Acts of dissent can therefore involve the making and breaking of specific intimate attachments of kinship, friendship and solidarity, just as much as commitments to high principles. (3-4)

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The realm of politics, in other words, encompasses lived realities that are not reducible to law proposals and electoral campaigns. People's motivations to engage in political struggles, join social movements, or participate in public demonstrations also originate in the purportedly apolitical, private space of affects. Foregrounding intimacy makes it possible to reveal the parochial quality of liberal notions of dissent, recognizing instead that would-be protesters are not necessarily recruited via the top-down deployment of totalizing visions of sociopolitical change. In fact, especially in authoritarian contexts, where there is little or no public space for the legal expression of dissent, the sentimental intimate – as a protected, less controlled dimension of social life – offers otherwise unthinkable opportunities to form solidarities of dissent. These same may scale up in open political demands and distinct alter-politics in the public realm.

Counterintuitively perhaps, intimacy in these contexts often includes more individuals than those who strictly belong to one's kin and circles of friends (4). In Herzfeld's (1997; 2004) usage of the term, intimacy designates people who share the same nationality, usually in contexts in which citizens profess a collective identity that sets them apart from (if not in opposition to) foreigners. Herzfeld argues that, especially but not uniquely in postcolonial societies, citizens discuss whatever 'open secret' risks corrupting their national image, but only among themselves or within their 'cultural intimacy', simultaneously concealing or denying them in front of strangers. Usefully, in this formulation, the term 'intimacy' extends to an assembly of individuals, membership to which requires belonging to the same imagined community (Anderson 1983).

Specific strands of social movements studies have analogously (if episodically) sought to deconstruct the modernist divide between intimate and public domains of action. As mentioned, New Social Movement Theory, especially when in dialogue with (second-wave) feminist scholarship, underscored that individuals' most private matters – including one's very sexual preferences – are a key locus of (biopolitical) governance in the modern nation-state (Melucci 1996, 102-4). In this special issue, we pursue and further this analytical approach as particularly apt to capture expressions of social unrest in Southeast Asia. As we explore the significance of intimacy in Southeast Asian movements, we indeed find it especially fruitful to look at its interplay with the public domain.

In the region, which is characterized by a well-documented tradition of state ceremonies, spectacular rituals and excessive pageantry (Geertz 1980), the state's management and control of public images plays a crucial role in expressing and reinforcing hegemonic power structures. Numerous scholars point out that contemporary Southeast Asian states ranging from Laos (Singh 2012; Mayes 2009; 2019) to Myanmar (Cheesman 2015), as well as the transnational body of ASEAN

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(Nair 2019), put great effort in promoting an extraordinarily polished self-image, further compelling their citizens not to disrupt it. Jackson (2004), who examines the working of this culturally specific mode of power with reference to Thailand, writes about an "intense concern to monitor and police surface effects, images, public behaviours and representations combined with a relative disinterest in controlling the private domain of life" (181). It follows that any individual behavior deemed problematic (as much as individuals' grievances with the state) must be relegated to the private, intimate sphere.

Given the political emphasis placed by many regimes of Southeast Asia on public images, protest in the region transgresses one among the most normative codes of behavior, enabling private grievances to spill into the streets and become visible. When discontents toward the existing, and aspirations for an alternative socio-political order, succeed in breaking state-imposed barriers, moving from the private into the public sphere, they disrupt the veneer of perfection of state-controlled images, acquiring distinctively radical connotations. As a final insult, social movements might even go so far as to take over the state's (supposed) monopoly over image by creating (alter-)spectacles of disobedience. They sometimes do so via symbols and slogans taken from international pop culture – the three-finger salute of *The Hunger Game* saga, the Guy Fawkes masks, the *liberté, egalité, fraternité* motto – signaling at once their belonging to a transnational community of dissenters. When their intimacy becomes public, it transforms into a clear threat to the existing political order. This is an extraordinarily powerful kind of symbolic militancy.

Acting in this fashion, the article by Rizky Sansono shows that militant intimacies are formed and put on display via the powerful medium of music. Exploding in the public domain with spectacles of dissent, Indonesian independent musicians put on shows replete with protest songs and theatrics that have the power to enrage and move to tears attendees. These contribute to a sense of *communitas* by evoking, for example, the joys and pains of common struggles and historical traumas. Creating a place where emotions and political affinity meet, music forges alliances that are even capable of obliterating state-defined boundaries as they generate destabilizing alter-politics of sound. The intimate here fully escapes the private sphere, giving shape to performances of grievance and aspiration.

Aside from affecting Southeast Asia's politics of representation, intimacy provides the emotional compost for processes of subjectivation, self-formation and solidarity. In this regard, brotherhood, sisterhood, comradeship, and friendship offer the grounds and affective labor necessary for (alter-)political action (Amarasuriya et al. 2020, 13). As McAdam reminds us, one of the greatest predictors of whether one person will participate in an act of dissent is whether they know someone who is already involved (1988). Yên Mai's essay on trainings programs

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in Vietnam is a powerful demonstration of this. The author argues that such programs provide activists with opportunities to cultivate a spirit of resistance by learning and experimenting with ethical practices aimed at addressing important social causes. Here, dissent comes across as being fostered in the milieu of an intimate communion of likeminded individuals, who meet and influence each other along the way to a common goal of greater awareness and conscious practice. Yên Mai's insistence of the constructive work needed by each activist for prompting meaningful change in society demonstrates that the intimate can offer a safe space where dissent grows undisturbed, only to eventually move on to affect the broader collective.

Similarly, in Johanna M. Götz's analysis of forming gendered solidarities among apparently unrelated constituencies in the Burmese pro-democracy movement, personal ties – whether pre-existing or forged by newly discovered political affinities – become increasingly visible in the public political arena. Here, displays of gendered intimacy between distinct militant groups give rise to a visual aesthetics of resistance that subverts the patriarchal strategies of the military junta. In fact, as relationships (horizontal and vertical) between different activists express themselves in the realms of protest art, they themselves come to represent the image and the embodiment of a more just society. In this context, politically engaged intimacy arises in virtual spaces that connect physically distant, but emotionally related, netizens, further blurring the lines between public and private.

6 The Militancy of Kinship

Turning to a theme that is strongly related – and that indeed overlaps with – intimacy, we now address how both vernacular and transnational ideas of family and relatedness affect and shape politics and dissent in Southeast Asia. Scholars have long deconstructed notions of kinship that are based on biological understandings of consanguineous ties – that is, the sharing of blood via filial relatedness – by showing how these, rather than universal, are imputable to the culturally specific project of Western modernity (Sahlins 2013). The anthropology of Southeast Asia has played a major role in the debate, shedding light for instance on the existence of local constructions of kinship according to which relatedness is achieved via individuals' co-residence and the sharing of food. A pioneer in this field, Carsten (1997) argues that, in Indonesia, kinship relies on the idea that consanguinity originates from the consumption of rice cooked on the hearth of the same household, entailing the continuous formation of new family ties in the context of convivial meals and feasts. Also writing with reference to Indonesia, Retsikas (2012, 70) explores the idea of siblinghood. He explains that the linguistic category of 'sibling'

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may designate individuals who share the same parents, who breast-feed from the same woman as well as neighbors who share food and even newlyweds before the arrival of their first child.

Although Eurocentric paradigms of twentieth century scholarship have distinguished kinship from politics, these notions of kin are clearly not devoid of political implications (Alber, Thelen 2022). Retsikas further argues that siblingship is "a differentiating relation as it points at once to similitude and hierarchy. As similitude it connects persons through highlighting the things they have in common. These might be blood, property, food or dwelling. At the same time, it connects persons through establishing distinctions as siblings are always hierarchically related to each other by means of birth order" (Retsikas 2012, 70). With these hierarchic connotations, non-biological kinship offers plentiful opportunities for political mobilization.

As is well known, authoritarian regimes throughout Southeast Asia have presented male leaders as benevolent paternal figures (and thus embodiments) of the nations they ruled. Notable examples include Marcos in the Philippines (Espiritu 2017, 105), Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam (Dror 2018, 191-2), King Bhumibol (Bolotta 2021) and some Cold War military leaders in Thailand (Thak 2007). As Bolotta (2024) shows with reference to Thailand, citizens are in turn often construed as the 'nation's children', who have filial duties (as opposed to rights) towards 'state parents'.

Authoritarian states have made ample use of kin-based concepts of nationhood as a mean to instill (or at least demand) respect and gratitude from the populace toward the patriarchs and matriarchs of the day. At the same time, however, activists have also exploited the same notions in support of resistance. It is significant, in this regard, that many pro-democracy protesters in the region self-identify (or are identified) as belonging to a 'new generation', committed to undermining the rigid political narratives of an unconnected gerontocracy as well as the cultural tropes that sustain 'age-patriarchy' in local social hierarchies – whether respect for teachers, gratitude to elder siblings, devotion to monks, or mandatory filial piety. Traditionally expected to act as 'obedient children' (Bolotta 2023), they can disregard longstanding traditions of showing reverence to elders, thereby showing their ability to understand the multiple entanglements between the languages of power and kinship, parenthood and childhood, that substantiate the symbolic-affective grounds of politics.

In Myanmar, many Burman dissidents refer to Aung San Suu Kyi as 'mother', creating a kin-based community that is implicitly more moral than the one led by the military generals (Seekins 2023, 44-7), In 2010 Thailand, members of the pro-democracy movement known informally as 'red shirts' merged kinship and magic as they organized a ritual aimed to curse then-PM Abhisit Vejjajiva, a royalist opposition politician who made it to the office in spite of having no

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popular consent. The activists gathered large quantities of their own blood – symbolic of a brotherhood/sisterhood of commoners, and thus deemed to be cosmologically potent – and poured it on the gates of the premier's party and House of Government (Cohen 2012, 217; Elinoff 2020, 72-8). In the 2020-21, young Thai protesters who rallied against the government of former-General Prayuth Chan-ocha publicly appealed to friendship-related status equality to extricate themselves (and the entire Thai citizenry) from their positions as 'elder and junior siblings', to disarticulate Thailand's normative kin-based hierarchy, and – ultimately – bring about full democracy in their country (Bolotta 2024).

Kinship, thus understood not only in biological terms but rather as a more inclusive, politically and emotionally connoted iteration of relatedness (Bolotta 2024), features in several among the case studies presented in this special issue. It does so, most explicitly, in the article that opens this section, by Marielle Y. Marcaida. Here, the author proposes to see the category of motherhood, which is charged with moral connotations, as a 'catalyst for political resistance' among Filipino communities affected by the war on drugs. She argues that, in the context of these women's engagement in society, the notion of motherhood is transformed, ultimately resulting in the expansion of their motherly duties, which, while remaining largely shaped by 'traditional', so to speak, expectations, outgrow the notion of kin as confined to the domestic sphere.

Even if less explicitly, J Francis Cerretani also draws attention to the constant work required to maintain and create kin in circumstances of political difficulty. Part of the author's work on diaspora Rohingyas is preoccupied with showing how uprooted communities seek to bridge the geographic distance between them and their relatives by making use of the internet and related technologies. The author also looks at how Ireland-based Rohingyas continuously forge new non-consanguineous kin ties by setting up 'communities of care', in which they share gardening labor, household-grown food as well as space for recreation. Cerretani also tactfully describes the author's own inclusion in the community as a resident ethnographer in a manner that evokes kin relations.

In his investigation of the development of the Milk Tea Alliance, Tuwanont also walks a fine line between intimacy and kinship. He writes that in April 2020, the Chinese government expressed its concern toward an altercation between Thai and Chinese netizens by invoking supposed longstanding familial ties between China and Thailand. The author describes this episode as pivotal for the emergence of the Milk Tea Alliance, since the concept of 'milk tea' was devised precisely as a means to counter the Chinese government's appropriation of the language of kinship. Young activists replaced the hegemonic idea of consanguineous relatedness with the suggestion that

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milk tea creates far more profound and politically meaningful relationships. "Milk Tea is Thicker than Blood", a popular hashtag among activists recites. It would be difficult to think a more powerful reiteration of the notion that kin and political relatedness can be constituted via the sharing of food.

7 The Militancy of Religion

In the more repressive regimes of Southeast Asia, resistance may not be unilaterally considered as sacrosanct. When expressed, however, it often makes ample use of symbols, cosmologies and practices that are associated to the sacred. This section aims to challenge the usefulness of the modernist dichotomy that would depict politics and religion apart as two separate spheres of life for the study of power, alter-politics and social movements in the region. As shown by an expanding body of literature on the subject, the political – including in ostensibly 'secular' contexts – continues in fact to look up (literally) at the transcendental, with abstract 'principles' (e.g. development or democracy) having historically replaced the divine as the ultimate source of significance and morality. As articulated by Wydra (2015, 5),

> (m)uch as in pre-modern societies, citizens in contemporary states require a sacred canopy, a web of symbols and meanings by which they can identify markers of certainty, be they social, ethnic, national, or ideological, in order to overcome voids of meaning. Paradigms such as the national interest, popular sovereignty, or human rights concern the priority of the sacred before the profane.

It follows that, if Catholic popes and, by extension, kings used to present themselves as worldly vicars of the Almighty in Christian Europe, contemporary heads of state in purportedly secular contexts seek legitimacy by means of invoking their embodiment of abstract principles such as Crown, Justice and Nation (Kantorowicz 1997). The religious and the transcendental, even if often disguised, continue to permeate and shape political life, in Western and Asian context alike (Bolotta, Fountain, Feener 2020).

Thanks to the global reach of ideas of development and modernity, secularization, understood as a hegemonic discourse that identifies the nexus between religion and power as a distinctive feature of a supposedly outmoded pre-modern worldview, also informs political practices throughout Southeast Asia. The persistent tendency of local governments to draw legitimacy explicitly from religious mythology, however, suggests that states here have been less interested in formally decoupling the political from the divine than their Western counterparts. Islam-majority nations such as Malaysia and Brunei uphold formulations

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of Sharia-inspired laws. Countries such as Thailand and Indonesia cite, respectively, 'religion' and 'God' among the ideals that provide for the foundation of society in nationalist discourse (Thailand's 'Three Pillars') or national state philosophy (Indonesia's 'Pancasila'). Throughout Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia – socialist Laos included (Ladwig 2015) – monarchs, military men, prime ministers and party cadres are celebrated as champions of good karma or as 'good men'.

In fact, early scholarship on Southeast Asian proposed that the region's societies hold notions of power that have more to do with religious cosmology than with what a Western audience might consider as political philosophy. Such studies focused on how these ideas – which ranged to notions of power as a cosmic life force to the very Buddhist concept of karma – often resulted in rather distinctive dynamics in the concrete realm of politics, including the ways in which leaders display their charismatic appeal as well as the very models of sovereignty and designs of the polity.[3] While some of these theoretical models have been correctly and appropriately critiqued (Howe 1991; Reynolds 1995), more recent approaches continue to engage with them, convinced of their value for the study of *realpolitik* in the region. As they do so, they seek to bridge the gap between such classical theories and the most cutting-edge approaches in the social sciences (Aragon 2022; Jonsson 2022; Tannenbaum 2022).

Amara Thiha's and Roberto Rizzo's articles demonstrate that collectives from 'below' – not only state agents – conceive of the religious realm as a key site for alter-political visions of the common good and as an arena that is rich of opportunities for militancy. Thiha's essay shows that, in the fraught politics of junta-ruled Burma/Myanmar, it is not only the military who make recourse to religion as means to gain or retain power. Young protesters do, too. Thus, while the generals seek to restore their legitimacy (and replenish their good karmic power) by consolidating longstanding relations with Buddhist monastics, some activists employ ritual strategies associated to astrology and sorcery to harm them, and further the cause of the people. The tension between the two opposing camps is also reflected by a battle between Buddhist orthodoxy, as represented by the rituals privileged by the military, and a spiritualized set of alter-politics, locally codified as unorthodoxy (the adjacent realm of Buddhist magic), that equips dissenters with instruments to resist oppression.

In a different context, Rizzo's article looks at the religious revivalist efforts of a Buddhist man in a rural village of majority-Muslim Java, portraying it as a commonly unnoticed instance of social movement. As the protagonist of this ethnography transforms his household and family into the fulcrum of an emerging local Buddhist

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3 Hanks 1962; Anderson 1972; Tambiah 1976; Geertz 1980.

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community, housing a library of Buddhist books and hosting religious discussions for sympathetic villagers, the practice and promotion of one's religion double as acts of dissent in their own rights.

8   Conclusion

Whether in more usual contexts for militancy such as street politics, or in more surprising venues such as the secluded realm of development programs and kin-based communities, online spaces and networks, or concerts and religious rituals, resistance in Southeast Asia is not only alive, but also in a perennial state of flux, able as it is to incorporate an ever-expanding repertoire of symbols and practices of dissent. Simultaneously local and transnational, resistance in the region voices domestic grievances such as calls for democratic reform in specific countries, as much as it embraces transcultural struggles such as that for greater human rights and the acceptance of individuals of non-normative genders and sexualities. Those who protest likewise make use of an impressive array of symbols and languages, drawing from a repertoire of dissent that is at once cosmopolitan and vernacular, and where international pop culture, liberal theory, religion and kinship may indeed coexist.

Approaches for the study of social movements like Resource Mobilization Theory, New Social Movement Theory, and the Political Process or Opportunity Paradigm, offer useful tools for the analysis of resistance in Southeast Asia. Crucially, they reorient the attention of scholars towards the cultural know-how and symbolism of protests, the perceived increased prevalence of identity-related issues and global concerns in social activism, and the ever-evolving relationship between civil society and state agents. At the same time, the same paradigms, which were originally developed in and with reference to the specific social realities of the Western world, naturally reflect the concerns and peculiarities of those cultural contexts. As such, they tend to reinforce a series of dichotomies that, even if often appropriately problematized, continue to influence dominant modernist views of the political. They require, we argue, some additional toolkits and adjustments were we to make sense of dissent as exemplified in the eight articles of this special issue.

Resistance in a region that is as diverse as dynamic as contemporary Southeast Asia may be approached from infinite perspectives. In this essay, we have chosen to focus on the spheres of intimacy, kinship, and religion. While by no means mutually exclusive or self-bounded wholes, these three domains, if explored carefully, reveal striking characteristics of militancy in the region, while simultaneously drawing us into the world-making aspirations or the alter-politics put forward by those who resist. With intimacy, we highlight the

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role of personal relations in forging political affinities and that of politics in forming community. When such politically charged affects become visible in public, they disrupt the spectacles of national unity privileged by state agents, doubling as powerful expressions of dissent and alternative visions of the future. With kin, we designate an arena of activism where political commitment blurs into biological and non-biological relatedness, the latter being a longstanding feature of Southeast Asian societies. Ideas of parenthood, deployed by governments to demand submission to fatherly (and motherly) heads of state, are appropriated by protesters, who respond by creating politically engaged kins such as siblinghood from below. Finally, with religion, we stress the role played by belief in a world area where the secularization of politics is not as blatant as in (post-)Christian Western societies, both in the realm of state power and its contestations. Resistance in Southeast Asia routinely expresses itself via creative engagements with existing cosmologies, doctrines and rituals, revealing that religion, far from being outdated or to constitute a discreet analytical category, continues to prove useful to imagine a different future, create compelling narratives, and develop ritual techniques for furthering one's political interests.

We believe that the insights presented in this special issue, once again if appropriately contextualized, may enrich comparative analyses of social movements. Our aspiration, ultimately, is to treat contemporary Southeast Asia, with its vibrant practices and cultures of social activism, as a site for the production, rather than the mere reception, of new theories of resistance.

Acknowledgments

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Audiopolitics and Social Movements: Popular Music in Indonesia's Corrupted Reform Era

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Abstract This article observes popular music practices and social movement ideals in Indonesia between 2019-24. It is an interrogation into traits of popular music through the framework of audiopolitics that underlines the political dimension of music practice. In the backdrop of the Corrupted Reform protest in 2019 as the period understudy, this article focusses on a cultural domain where neoliberal practices of popular music intersect with democratic practices that make up a social movement culture. In looking into this entanglement, this article takes a close study of songs, music performances, and extra-musical practices by musicians of the independent music scene in Indonesia with emphasis on their political meanings through culture-in-action.

Keywords Popular music. Indie music. Social movement culture. Indonesia. Audiopolitics.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Independent Music Scene and Performative Politics. – 3 Prefigurative Aesthetics as Social Movement. – 4 'Musicking' as Social Movement. – 5 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

In this article, I would like to ponder upon the relations between music and social movements in Indonesia during the tumultuous period of 2019-24, a time marked by a decline in democratic values under President Joko Widodo. This period is known for manifestations of civil anger that led to the *Reformasi Dikorupsi* (The Corrupted Reform) protest movement.[1] In the backdrop of the political dynamic that questions the state's neoliberal reconfiguration, raising concerns about corporate greed, oligarchy, and the establishment of a political dynasty, this article embraces the sounds of politics, which are, in many ways, produced and performed in relation to the civil quest for democracy. It investigates practices of popular music within the protest movement culture through the framework of audiopolitics,[2] that is, the politics of music-related practice.

In post reform Indonesia, after 1998, the independent music scene has contributed countless songs with socio-political content in response to issues of social justice. The popularity of these sounds of politics were enhanced by the establishment of the industry-oriented Do-It-Yourself (DIY) independent music scene. What was once a subcultural DIY movement now follows the logic of the mainstream. At the intersection of a capitalist industrial music culture and the moral awareness of social movement culture, I observe music performances being inseparable from the workings of power, shaping people's ideology and worldview. In the commercial culture of the independent music scene, this has shifted toward cooperative capitalism (Luvaas 2013, 10).

Popular music advances dominant ideas of what is normal and legitimate. Indeed, the sounds of politics have the capacity to construct collective identity within social movements. They can also sustain collective memory (Eyerman, Jamison 1998, 8). Without undermining the power of protest songs, I aim to focus on the cultural studies

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[1]   The period under study emphasizes the vernacular notion of *Reformasi Dikorupsi* (Corrupted Reform) which refers to the era following the political reform (*reformasi*) in 1998, when the authoritarian New Order regime under President Suharto was ousted. Although this reform brought relative freedom, it was deemed unsuccessful, as elements of the status quo still linger within the state system, and human rights issues and corruption – the biggest demands for change during *reformasi* – remain far from eradicated. Hence, the label of 'Corrupted Reform'. In almost every aspect, post-reform Indonesia became increasingly and perniciously neoliberal. The independent music scene, which once upheld subcultural ideals, grew more industry-oriented.

[2]   The term 'audiopolitics' has been used to capture the political dimension of recorded sounds. Notably, during twentieth-century colonialism, which focused on racial hegemony (Brofman 2016), the global capitalism of the vernacular music industry, and the appropriation of sound in shaping the national identities of colonized nations (Denning 2018). Taking the cultural affordances of sound as politics, I employ audiopolitics to describe the everyday politics of music practice.

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perspective of music practice, which emphasizes the relationship between power and culture. Although the sounds of politics are often inspired by specific political events or by a cognitive or affective understanding of moral issues, I question the extent of musicians' involvement in social movements beyond songwriting and the conveyed lyrical meaning.

This study is also informed by my own longstanding involvement in Indonesia's independent music (indie) scene. My interactions with the industrialized infrastructure of the scene serve as a reflexive node for examining music's relations with social movements. Some of my work has been inspired by, and advocates for, social justice. Often, I design my performances to reflect this, albeit in a metaphoric way. I have also aligned myself with initiatives concerning civil rights. For example, in 2013, I was involved in a compilation album for an anti-corruption campaign produced by ICW (Indonesia Corruption Watch). The release of the album, and the tour that followed, attracted media attention and drew in the indie 'scenesters'. The audience came to the shows and enjoyed the performances, as we musicians hoped they would. However, drawn heavily to the aesthetic aspects of music performance, I find myself reflecting on my participation in civil rights initiatives.

The meaning of music is not necessarily articulated through the organization of sound or song lyrics (Abbate 2004; Kramer 1990). Song lyrics or recorded sounds serve as 'signatures' that remain fixed, while the outside world and 'subjects' within it continue to change (Derrida 1982, 328). This idea also applies to performances. Therefore, instead of focusing on the sounds of politics through lyrical text or performances, the emphasis of audiopolitics lies in investigating social performances that are related to music. I question myself: Have I done enough to contribute to social movements? What critiques exist for musicians who articulate sounds of politics? How do sound performances relate to the broader scope of social movements? These questions resonate with me also on a personal level, and my observations stem partly from this.

The audiopolitical framework revolves around political actions, or musical actions, that correspond to the omnipresence of power structures, such as capitalism, dominant aesthetics, and patriarchal society, whereby musical meanings are determined by musician's responses to them. These responses encompass performances in a broader sense, incorporating musicians' social life, musical trajectory, and aesthetics – what Christopher Small (1998) defines as 'musicking'. We can also contextualize song lyrics through a political science lens, viewing political speech as more than just spoken text. The audiopolitical perspective recognizes that political ideas contain aspects of strategy in a way that is not secondary to or derivative of the 'real' idea. As Skinner (2002, 177) notes:

> [the] question of ideas in politics is always a question about the efficacy of particular political communications, the strategic deployment of which is fundamental to political activity.

It observes "the gap between rhetoric and reality, between discourse and action" (Fairclough 2000, 147). Building on this, I strive to interrogate popular music not as a mere static rhetoric but as texts that incorporate cognitive and affective dimensions, attributing musicking as social life. This approach considers ethos (Griffiths 2017, 26) and the institutions in which potential makers and distributors of ideas operate (Finlayson 2006, 541). The performance aspect of musicking emphasizes the fundamental nature and meaning of music in performances, social actions, and the formation of individuals, relationships, and culture. Rather than solely focusing on song forms or lyrics in relation to escalating protests, I thus examine the aesthetics and social performance of musicians. Musicking implies that music is 'not an object' but an activity – something that people do. It is a set of relationships that constitutes a performance, reflecting cultural meaning.

In the wake of the numerous socio-political songs produced by Indonesians musicians, and influenced by the neoliberal-oriented industrialized independent music following the political reform in 1998, the question of moral practices through song lyrics and musical performance reflects musicians' political actions in response to social movements. My intention here is to capture musicians' political performances, highlighting both the sound of politics and the politics of sound that arose alongside the intensive skepticism over reform, situated in a cultural labyrinth of moral praxis and economic doings. Within the context of utopian social movements and the neoliberal music scene, these practices are also political choices. This study considers "individual behavior that derives from quotidian, collective, even unconscious, influences" (cf. Davis 2008, 1), where musical meanings relate to the informal logic of actual life (Geertz 1973, 17) and inevitably involve a presentation of the self (read: the musicians themselves) (cf. Goffman 1959).

In this article, I will proceed as follows: the following section describes the formation of the independent music scene (indie) in Indonesia and examines music performances that account as political. Although these performances align with popular movement democratic ideals, they exist at the intersection of moral ideas and capitalist cultural hegemony, often representing only superficial aesthetic support for social movements. Second, I analyze a performance deeply rooted in its socially engaged Indonesian musician's political history, demonstrating how the creation of aesthetics became a crucial element of social movement practice. Third, in section 4, I expand the discussion from aesthetic performances to broader social and music-related performances, exploring how social movement culture is musically sustained.

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2 The Independent Music Scene and Performative Politics

The independent music scene, associated with the DIY ideology started in Indonesia in the 1990s during the last decade of President Suharto's oppressive New Order's regime. Just like anywhere else in the world, the indie music ideology originally served as an anti-capitalist business model (Dunn 2012, 140), privileging a set of social, economic, and political practices, such as social engagement based on an ethos of community participation and 'gift economy'. Based on anarchist ideas of the autonomous DIY culture, indie brings prefigurative sensibility for their "oppositional content, aesthetic experiments, community practice, anti-hierarchical organizational structures, prefigurative processes, anti-capitalist economics, and direct action" (Jeppesen 2018, 207). The ideology fitted with the escalating protests that highlighted the late New Order in the 1990s, which ultimately led to political reform in 1998. This was partly why DIY practices associated with indie and underground genres (punk, death metal, hip-hop, and experimental music) flourished (Sasono 2021).[3]

However, the independent scene itself has been long overrun by neoliberal trajectories.[4] Today, many of the indie practices in Indonesia have developed into modes of entrepreneurship. This has been in line with the state's view of cultural expressions as a potential industry of 'creative economy' (cf. Departemen Perdagangan Indonesia 2014; Purnomo 2016). It reflects the capitalist culture of the indie music scene, which encourages everyday social practices to follow the logic of neoliberal capitalistic social form. In a seminal study of the Indonesian popular music, Brent Luvaas asserts that "Global capitalism tends to co-opt and commercialize local music scenes, which can dilute the authenticity of subcultures" (2009, 263).[5] In my observation, small generative indie labels that grew in the 1990s, along with those that followed, adhered to comparable market-oriented models similar to the mainstream companies they originally sought to resist. Anything that appears subcultural is now often dismissed as pseudo-subculture (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 51-6).

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3 The term indie and underground are interchangeable. They both refer to certain music genres, but mostly associated with their music production ideals of Do-It-Yourself.

4 Hesmondhalgh 1999; Kruse 2003; Luvaas 2009; Moore 2013; Garland 2014; Kim 2019.

5 Despite this, Luvaas also emphasizes the resilience and adaptability of Indonesian musicians, who often navigate the capitalist pressures by blending global influences with local traditions or gaining some level of independence. While I agree with his views that put emphasis on confronting aesthetic traditions and negotiating with record companies, these perspectives are less relevant to the scope of political performance discussed in the article.

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Similarly, performances of political songs also follow the logic of the dominant culture of popular music. In such circumstances, musicians' engagements with democratic processes might be reduced to mere 'performative activism'. This term, often used pejoratively, expresses the suspicion that support for a political or social justice cause is shallow, artificial, ineffective, and primarily aimed at garnering social capital and supporters' recognition. The accusation hinges on a contrast between what supporters say and what they actually do (Thimsen 2022, 85). It implies that individuals associated with social movements might be involved in activism primarily with the goal of increasing one's social capital rather than because of one's devotion to a cause (Moore2021).

I would like to examine examples of audiopolitics that embellish the post-reform social movement soundscape and might be considered 'performative'.[6] To illustrate this, I draw on my own experience as a performer. During a 2013 with Indonesia Corruption Watch in Yogyakarta in 2013, my band and I performed for approximately forty-five minutes. Our one-hour setlist consisted of songs included in the compilation album *Frekwensi Perangkap Tikus* (The Mousetrap Frequencies – ICW 2012), and a long repertoire that depicts the murder of a human rights activist, Munir. The performance followed the logic of 'rock 'n' roll', focusing more on delivering an excellent show than on the political message. Does this make the performance performative? Possibly. Given that such music practices exist at the intersection of democratic ideals and the popular music star system, these assumptions are reasonable. While I criticize myself for 'talking the talk' without always 'walking the walk', the indie scene does provide a platform for sounds of politics to take place as an insincere attempt to jump on the bandwagon of social movements. The following observations prompt us to consider how political musical performances might sometimes aim to self-promote and build one's own personal or corporate progressive bona fides.

Jakarta based garage-rock band The Brandals has been investing in social critique since their establishment in the early 2000s. Their songs describe those who are victimized by Jakarta's urban modernity, depicting the dark side of urban life, including issues related to drugs and crime (*The Brandals*, Sirkus Record, 2003). They continue to articulate narratives about "trudging through life's hardships" (*Vice*, 7 November 2016). Their 2020 song *The Truth is Coming Out* was accompanied by a music video that extends this critique. The video features empathic visuals depicting the daily life of working class Jakartans, which seem to support the band's critique to

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6 The term 'performative' refers to its colloquial use, which is different from the 'performative' used in the scholarly discourse of performance studies.

the capital city's neoliberal trajectory. On the one hand, these images (and sounds) may serve as affective aspects that contribute to a deeper cognitive understanding of social inequality. On the other hand, such emotional images may also be instrumentalized to gain social capital.

One of the Brandals' best-known songs is entitled *Awas Polizei*! (Watch out, The Police!) – a song which addresses the notorious police institution. As one important institution for law enforcement, the Indonesian police force has been known by the Indonesian public for their obvious unlawful daily practice of bribery.[7] Despite the ongoing reform in the institution, the narrative of corrupt police officers who stop traffic violators and make offenders pay the fine to their benefit still lingers. The lyrics of *Awas Polizei!* was written to capture this.

> Enter through the back door | Chasing night and day | from small business to suicide | cars, motorbikes, city bus | rolling wheels on asphalt, and | Watch out *Polizei!* | oh watch out *polizei!* | watch out polizei! | oh watch out polizei! | standing tall at the crossroads | eyes looking to see who dials | hustling left and right looking for opportunities | muscles, sweat | let's bargain on the sidewalk and | Watch out *Polizei!* | oh watch out *polizei!* | watch out *polizei!* | oh watch out *polizei!* | Oh please try to understand | [We] serve and protect, yeah | We also need rice | [Go to] hell with dignity | no one cares. (*Awas Polizei!*, The Brandals, 2011)[8]

In 2007, the Brandals were invited as guest performers at a music festival in Jakarta. On stage, their lead singer Eka Annash (born 1976) publicly exposed the conflict between The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and the Police Force. That year, the relationship between the KPK and the Police led to a national tension when the KPK investigated allegations of corruption involving a Police leader and members of the Prosecutor's Office.[9] The song *Awas Polizei!* was performed to contextualize the notorious conflict between two

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[7] The theme of the 'Police' has been employed by many Indonesian musicians. Indonesian supergroup, Swami, for example, symbolically depicted the police as an "arrogant and antagonizing evil" in their hit song *Bongkar*. The slogan *Aparat Keparat*! (Fuck the Troops!), which is akin to the All Cops Are Bastards or ACAB, is often used in the underground punk communities, though it frequently lacks detailed understanding of the systematic violence it critiques (Sasono 2022). The underground scene has often criticized Indonesian democracy by incorporating issues of human rights violations by law enforcement into their music (cf. Wallach 2005; 2014; Donaghey 2016; Jauhola 2020). In 2019, the pop group Tashoora collaborated with The Jakarta Legal Aid campaign program to release a narrative about wrongful police arrests in their song *Aparat* (Troops).

[8] All lyrics translated by the author.

[9] The tension between the KPK and the Police remerged in 2012, with the Police launching counterattacks by also accusing a KPK leader of being a suspect.

prosecutor institutions: KPK and the Police. Although the song was not written for this specific case, the band framed the performance to suggest their support for KPK, which at the time was the 'cleaner' institution out of the two prosecuting institutions.

Awas Polizei! is a constant presence in their performance setlist. Ten years later, the band performed at another grand music festival in Jakarta. The song remained the same, but the context was different. The music festival was held just a week after a football tragedy in Malang, East Java, that killed more than 100 spectators. A match between regional rivals Arema Malang and Persebaya Surabaya ended with a crowd invasion. Although the situation could have been controlled, the police used excessive physical violence against on-field spectators. Additionally, they also fired tear gas into the stands, leading to hundreds trying to flee through the exits, which caused a deadly stampede. The incident has led to public anger, with much of it directed at the police and their use of tear gas.

With the incident still fresh in the minds of many Indonesians, the Brandals dedicated the song to the victims of police violence. They invited guest singer Bhaskara Putra, the lead singer of the prominent band Feast (discussed later) to perform the song collaboratively. The presence of two high-profile singers on stage added to the celebratory atmosphere, while the band played against a backdrop of abstract visuals projected on multiple screens. The Brandals lead singer covered his top with another layer of clothing, notably an Arema Malang football jersey, while Bhaskara wore a blue and white scarf around his neck – colors associated with the football team. Towards the end of the song the Brandals lift a red smoke flare – commonly seen in football matches – which the lead singer waved around the stage. At the end of the performance, the two lead singers embraced, congratulating, and thanking each other for a successful show [fig. 1].

The celebratory mood of the performed song raises questions about the relationship between the performance and those in despair, such as the families of the victims, and the extent to which the song advocated for public empathy regarding police misconduct. The semantic meaning of the song may align with the common view of the police as corrupt, and, in this case, violent against civilians. However, their performance introduced a dimension of aesthetic hegemony that distorted this idea. In commercial music festivals, the meaning of performances usually follows the logic of popular music. Although the band performed a political song, the interface between listening subjects and sounding music (this includes the concept and execution of the performance) is prescribed by concepts driven by values of the music industry. For example, the choice to perform *Awas Polizei!* as the final of their song of their performance most probably derived from the band's conception of 'save the best for last' a typical aesthetics flow in popular music performances. The

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Figure 1 Synchronize Festival, The Brandals at performing Awas Polizei! at Synchronize Fest 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQ15Mg6YlM0&t=1050s, Jakarta, Copyrights Synchronize Fest

use of red smoke flare and football jersey served as 'stage acts' intended to create a symbolic allyship with the football fans, victims of police brutality. Assumingly, the inclusion of Bhaskara Putra, as a guest vocalist, was borne out of popularity consideration rather than functionality. The costume changes, theatrical acts, and guest musicians can be viewed as part of a neoliberal framing that aligns with narratives of the oppressed and the political milieu. This transforms the performance into a representation of a political narrative rather than a straightforward political statement.

Performative politics in performance brings us to an ethical dimension of musician's orientation to social movements. Performance of politics can become spectacles. That is, a 'seen' performance that can be misleading and inauthentic. According to Guy Debord, modern capitalist societies are characterized by 'the spectacle', a pervasive and dominant cultural phenomenon arising from the integration of media, technology, and commodity culture (cf. Debord 1967). As the world is often mediated rather than experienced firsthand by individuals, spectacular experiences deprive us of authenticity and direct experience.

Spectacles are an inevitable part of popular music culture. Beyond music stages, they also permeate mediated spaces such as virtual platforms. As such, spectacles are a powerful tool for endorsing commercial ideas, including the attention economy. Through their attentive mode of marketing, albums, songs, and images have somewhat served as an emotional instrumentalization of the audience. During the study period, when political discussions became a fixture of everyday social life, spectacle cognitively linked these conversations with the worlds of politics and social movements. Consider the example of Feast, a Jakarta based garage rock band known to produce songs inspired by sociopolitical narratives (*Hypeabis*, 9 June 2024).

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In 2022, they released a digital mini album depicting the journey of a fictional character, Ali. The visual representation leading up to the album's release featured strong symbols of resistance. The cover of their single, released in April 2022, *Gugatan Rakyat Semesta* (Universal People's Lawsuit) offered a display of symbolism of resistance. For instance, the band employed nationalistic symbols reminiscent of Indonesia's founding father's struggle against imperialism **[fig. 2]**, and incorporated left-leaning ideological elements, such as the predominant use of red. The band even brought up ideas of the ideal of democracy by invoking the old and enigmatic Javanese folklore of *Ratu Adil* (Justice King), and imagined leader who would bring justice to the country. In contradiction to this utopian vision of justice, the image also depicted an elitist group sitting atop a human body lying under a table, symbolizing the oppressive nature of the state.

The band, however, has been subject of critiques, some coming from their musician slash activist colleagues, on 'political correctness'. This is best exemplified in the song *Padi Milik Rakyat* (Rice belongs to the People), a song that advocates for agricultural farmers as those who are pushed aside in the economic and political system. The song is formed through slogan-like verses about agricultural farmers' marginalized position against government-backed food chain industries. The sound of the fuzz in their blues-styled guitar riff may be the bridge that connects to their rock fan-base, but it may also obscure the true essence of rural life in Indonesia. The masculine sounding composition bolds the exclusion of women, who are key to agricultural sustainability. Moreover, a question looms: "Would a middle-class individual from metropolitan Jakarta be a good representative for the oppressed?" The lead singer claims the song idea derived from a short high-school internship program he had in a rural village in central Java in his younger days. Perhaps the short visit could be enough to capture the lived life of a farmer, which they turned into a song. The song's association to social movements, along with the band's cultivated social movement persona, could be enough to draw listeners to consider issues of social injustices. Nevertheless, some argue that, despite having the platform to amplify social justice issues, the band opted to voice these concerns in their own terms, using their own language rather than mediating for the powerless to speak for themselves (Spivak 2010).

While this reflection is assumptive, the discourse of musician's performative activism and prefigurative qualities can be pursued through their musical path. Feast's musical trajectory supports this argument. The band is managed by Suneater, which started as a digital content company, as opposed to a conventional record label. Suneater grew and developed mirroring inspirational corporations such as Marvel and Apple (Kukuh, pers.comm., 2022). From the macro

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Figure 2 Feast, band photo depicting symbols of nationalism, 2022.
@ffeast. Instagram. Jakarta, 2022. Copyrights Feast

perspective, Suneater employs the circulation of big data that can be mined for information and used in predictive modeling and other advanced analytics applications. They operate under the concept of platform capitalism, which focusses on the immaterial labor process, oriented toward the use and manipulation of symbols and affects (Srnicek 2016, 29). Feast's music and social media publications are designed to ensure that the public remains continuously engaged with their 'products'. The use of such an economic model reflects the currency of the music industry, which places high value on content, not necessarily music, as a strong aspect of public engagement. This denotes the possibility of framing current (political) issues in a way that captures public attention. Given the attention-driven economic model guiding their musical pathway, it is not surprising that the song structure of *Padi Milik Rakyat* closely resembles the song *Graves*, by the US bluegrass collective Whiskey Shivers, which was recorded four years earlier. On another occasion, in 2020, the band became subject of media attention when they threatened to sue a political party who used their song for a campaign without their permission (*Kompas*, 21 November 2022). While this case suggests that they embrace non-partisanism, it can also be viewed as a practice driven by attention economy. Arguably, music production influenced by the attention economy, especially in fields related to moral obligations like activism, may be inherently performative.

These examples compel us to consider the perspective of subjects situated at the intersection of social movements and popular music. Performative activism is "an accusation that demands more action, more activism – more than social media posts and progressive advertising themes. In short, it demands more performance" (Thimsen

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2022, 84). In light of this, I can only reflect on my own case: How does my engagement with sounds of politics shape my political and musical trajectory? Have I ever engaged with victims or other social activists? To what extent have I committed to action following my sound of politics? Through this analysis, I do not intend to undermine the efforts of colleagues and other musicians who have been articulating critiques of state powers or advocating for social justice through their music. Many of them show significant solidarity for various civil society movements. My aim here is to explore how ideas from social movements can manifest in actions driven by different value regimes (cf. Appadurai 1986), whether these are moral or market-based. In the following passages, I describe music performances as embodiments of social movement culture.

3　　Prefigurative Aesthetics as Social Movement

To discuss the notion of prefigurative politics in opposition to performative politics, I take an example from the 2019 Corrupted Reform protests. The slogan *Reformasi Dikorupsi* became a rallying cry for students, activists, and others participating in the protests, calling for preserving democratic reforms and fighting against perceived restrictions on civil liberties. It was the first large scale nationwide protest since reformasi in 1998. An important trigger was the proposed revision of Indonesia's criminal code (RKUHP). The reforms included controversial provisions, such as criminalizing consensual sex outside of marriage, cohabitation, and insulting the president, as well as stricter laws on abortion. These reforms were viewed by many as a threat to civil liberties and personal freedoms. In addition, the government weakened the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), which had been one of the country's most effective institutions for fighting corruption.[10] Activists and the public were outraged by the new law, which reduced the KPK's independence and authority and viewed it as a move to protect corrupt politicians and elites. Protests were also fueled by concerns about environmental policies. Students and environmental groups voiced their opposition to laws perceived as benefiting corporations at the expense of protecting Indonesia's forests and indigenous communities, particularly in relation to deforestation and land use regulations.

The peak of the Corrupted Reform Protest in 2019 occurred on Thursday, September 17. It was the day the parliament issued a bill that severely limits KPK's authority. A song by an indie-rock band, Efek Rumah Kaca (ERK), *Mosi Tidak Percaya* (Votes of No Confidence)

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[10]　Asyikin, Setiawan 2020; Lane 2021; Putriyana, Rochaeti 2021; Mudhoffir 2022.

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was very contextual to the occasion. The song conveyed a deep erosion of trust in the government and a demand for their removal, as protesters no longer have confidence in their ability to lead. Protesters were singing the song. It became the soundtrack of the protest (*The Jakarta Post*, 30 September 2019). Often, netizens would refer to the song on social media showing their alignment to the protest movement. Following a massive protest earlier in the day, ERK's lead singer, Cholil Mahmud, performed solo in front of KPK's head office as part of a press conference. Instead of singing *Mosi Tidak Percaya*, he followed his emotions and performed an acoustic ballad, *Bunga dan Tembok* (Flowers and Wall), a song written by Wiji Thukul – a leftist poet and activist who was disappeared by the New Order regime in 1997. The exact poetry was then composed and recorded as a ballad by the late activist's son, Fajar Merah. In front of the KPK office, Cholil chose to sing a song rich with aesthetic symbols: 'flowers', representing life, and the 'wall', symbolizing the rigid and oppressive traits of the regime. Cholil sings:

> "If we are flowers | we are the ones you don't want to grow | If we are flowers | we are what you don't want us to be | You prefer building houses, seizing land | You prefer building highways, building iron fences. | If flowers | we are the ones you don't want to grow | If flowers | we are the ones who fall on our own earth | You prefer building houses, seizing land | You prefer building highways, building iron fences | If we are flowers | you are the wall | We have spread the seeds in your body | One day we will grow together | With confidence | You must be destroyed! | You must be destroyed! | You must be destroyed! You must be destroyed!" (*Bunga dan Tembok*, Fajar Merah/Cholil Mahmud, 2015)

The performance was theatrically devised, incorporating the dramaturgy of a funeral procession, with symbolic elements such as a bouquet, casket, and candles, indexing a vigil for the dead. Yellow flags, a local symbol of mourning, were raised, signaling the need for social awareness. As the singer entered the song's second verse, four women appeared from inside the head office's main entrance carrying posters that read *KPK sudah mati*: KPK is (proclaimed) dead. They took their positions on either side of the singer [fig. 3]. Next, a casket carried by four men made its way out of the building entrance. The top of the casket read 'R.I.P. KPK 2002-19', indicating the year the anti-corruption agency was established and the year in which it died. The group of men laid the casket behind the singing performer and placed candles around it. A bouquet of mourning was also arranged in the background with visibly written words of condolences.

This kind of performance was not new. In the struggle for *reformasi*, symbolic performances depicting funeral rites were ubiquitous. It

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Figure 3 Watchdoc, Cholil Mahmud of Efek Rumah Kaca performing 'Bunga dan Tembok' outside the KPK Head Office in 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjBBDtUCb7o Jakarta, September 2019. Watchdoc

remained common in smaller-scale protests to symbolize the demise of democracy. The performance in front of KPK's head office, however, was rooted in the embodiment of prefigurative political values. Prefigurative politics is "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs 1977, 100). It implies a deeper connection to the embodied values of social movements, rather than merely an aesthetic association with them.

The political circumstances demanded a comprehensive response to the systemic violation of democracy through "musical reality" – an imagined reality within the music world (Frith 1996, 165). *Bunga dan Tembok* is a song that reflects a poetic reality endured through multiple political regimes. It prompts listeners to think about the challenges facing democratic futures and represents an unaccomplished demand from the oppressed during the New Order era. It serves as a form of history from below, capturing the zeitgeist of the era's oppositional movements and resonating with countless numbers of people who have contributed to the democratization of politics (Mandal 2003, 196). It also conveys the worldly experience of its author, the late activist Wiji Thukul, who worked with marginalized groups such as laborers, farmers, and the urban poor during the New Order years. The song stands as a representation of the people – those marginalized and positioned at the lower strata of the political and economic structure (Weintraub 2006, 412).

Having been immersed in social movements since the ninetis, Cholil's performance exemplified the affective politics and politics of

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affect within the prefigurative trajectory of his social movement involvement. Affect, according to Sara Ahmed, is an emotional element of the body that takes shape through the repetition of actions and orientations over. Emotions shape what bodies can do, as "the modifications of the body by which the power of action on the body is increased or diminished" (Ahmed 2014, 4). Although the performance was constructed as a struggle to uphold the KPK's authority at the height of the 2019 protest, it emanates from a deeper dimension of the struggle for democratic futures, which the singer is well-acquainted with. Cholil's performance derives from a prefigurative sensibility that opens up aesthetic choices. I argue that this choice is shaped by the back-and-forth interplay of political affect and affective politics.

The musical reality that amplified popular dissent creates an aestheticized sentiment of the New Order struggle through what Sara Ahmed calls "intensification of feeling" (224). The melancholic, plucked guitar ballad serves as the backdrop to this affective politics. In addition to the semantic meaning of the song, the performance's focal point is underlined through its impression of grieving. This grief, however, extends beyond merely mourning the 'death of KPK' to a collective imagining of the New Order struggle. The performance transforms the death of KPK into a symbol of a deeper commitment to democratic ideals, as reflected in the song's line: "We have spread the seeds in your body. One day we will grow together". This prefigurative aesthetics generated an affective flow to connect the past with the present struggle for a democratic future. This emotional interplay adds a constructive dimension to the practice of social movements, furthering the idea of grief as a refusal to let go of the object of struggle, thereby keeping it alive in the form of an enduring impression (Ahmed 2014, 184-7). This manifestation of prefigurative politics brought emotional elements into the realm of democratic cognition, and back. Toward the end of the song, Cholil – his watered eyes and tense face – could not hide his sentiments. Members of the audience also felt the heartbreaking emotion that the performance carried. The performance supplemented an affective value to song performances as a distinctive form of social movement praxis. This emotional intensification of feeling makes the cognitive aspect (the corrupt government) more powerfully introjected, elaborated and retained by the public.

Cholil Mahmud's political choices can be scrutinized through his musical works and social history. ERK, which he leads, is renowned for his lyrical work that voices social-political critique. His songs reflect his social experience. For instance, two tracks from his band's self-titled debut album, *Di Udara* (In the air) and *Cinta Melulu* (Always Love), serve as popular examples. The former depicts the state-conspired murder of a human rights activist, Munir, in 1994. The latter was inspired by the increasing prevalence of insipid love songs

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worming their way into the local music scene (*Jakarta Globe,* 9 March 2011). Their second album *Kamar Gelap* (Dark Room), released in 2007, was pivotal in bringing indie artists into mainstream media. It includes tracks such as *Menjadi Indonesia* (Becoming Indonesia), a poetic introspection on the inertia that plagues the country; *Kenakalan Remaja di Era Informatika* (Teenage Delinquency in the Age of Information), a dig at rampant internet pornography. These songs emanate from ERK's social history in the sphere of student activism during the struggle for reform in the nineties. Singer and songwriter, Cholil Mahmud (born 1976) was a prominent figure in the student movement against the New Order regime in Jakarta. His wife, Irma Hidayana (born 1976), a member of the band's extensive lineup, was a former journalist with a critical student press group in Yogyakarta. Since they left college, the two have been working together or separately, in various civil society groups, including Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW), Legal Aid Institute (LBH), and have frequently participated in organized protests. ERK's advocacy for democracy, including Cholil's aesthetic choices during performances at KPK, reflects the prefigurative politics emerging from their involvement in social movements across political regimes.

4 'Musicking' as Social Movement

Cholil's embodiment with prefigurative politics, however, extends beyond mere affiliation with civil rights institutions or producing music with socio-political critique that could be easily labeled as symbolic. Rather, his band's prefigurative practices also encompass the idea of social movements as democratic practices aimed at collectively creating alternatives to neoliberal hegemony. In this section, I will explore the broader scope of social movement ideas in popular music, beyond just protest-related music performances. Within the larger context of social movement culture, individuals who embody prefigurative values often develop an awareness of other hegemonies and become advocates for social change.

In light of the critique of popular music as an industrialized form of cultural production and the need for a multi-dimensional approach to social movements, I here turn to the concept introduced by musicologist Chritopher Small (1998) regarding the meaning of music practice. Central to this analysis is the idea of music not as a static form but as an activity – musicking. Small emphasizes that music is not just an object or a product (like a score or a recording), but an active process. Everyone involved in the musical experience – not just performers – are participating in the act of musicking. Musicking is fundamentally a social activity, involving relationships between people – performers, listeners, composers, and even the space where

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the music is performed. Music, in this sense, becomes a medium for human interaction and expression. Through musicking, the essence and significance of music are found not in objects or musical works, but in actions and interactions of people. This perspective highlights that the fundamental nature and meaning of music are rooted in performances, social actions, and the formation of individuals, relationships, and culture.

Through this understanding, music practice is tightly knitted to the idea of culture as a battleground of ideologies. A social movement's culture is embedded in a broader tradition of ideas and practices – it draws on parts of it, challenges or rejects others, and subtly alters it through its actions. In the context of social movements, norms, values, and beliefs have no impact as long as they are locked in the mental life of individuals. However, when these elements are acted out, they provoke reactions from others and help shape the social representations that make up culture (Johnston 2014, 21). Culture, therefore, is a process of meaning-making activities rather than mere structures that impose themselves on individuals (cf. Spillman 2002). A meaningful social movement is thus the enactment of political opportunities within the realm of cultural creation. It is not confined in songs but acted out as a social practice in music-related activities.

Social movements often take advantage of political opportunities, which can vary across place and time (McAdam 1982). The affordance of political opportunities takes the form of 'free space' in the public sphere, where people are allowed to criticize the dominant culture within acceptable limits. However, the public sphere also serves as a site for contestation and the expression of alternative ideas. Popular music, as Theodor Adorno asserts, is a legacy of modern industrial society. It has been transformed into a neoliberal construct characterized by 'concept over matter'. This transformation is driven by commercial forces that manipulate music to placate and control the masses, who passively respond to it (Adorno [1941] 2006). Similarly, political theorist Herbert Marcuse criticizes consumerism and modern industrial society as "a form of social control that has imposed itself on every aspect of culture and public life, and has become hegemonic" (1991, 3). He argues that this hegemony has eliminated utopian thought, leaving society with only one-dimensional thinking that enforces compliance with the status quo (1991, 13). From this perspective, social movements are not only about opposing corporate greed, economic inequality, or unjust material distribution, but also about challenging the totality of the current system and the prejudices it enforces. Thus, social movement culture can be viewed as actors in the public sphere pushing for social change, engaging in meaning-making activities within specific rules.

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For some musicians who embody the spirit of social movements, what matters is not merely the music itself, but the social or economic system in which it is embedded. They are acting out a utopian vision, "without utopian vision, social movements may run the risk of being just as vacuous as the 'one dimensional society' that they are protesting" (Langman 2013, 516). Musicking as a social movement emphasizes those who, in their entirety as humans, share solidarity with the oppressed, grasp the complexities of the neoliberal system, and engage in prefigurative acts to challenge neoliberalism. These individuals take advantage of political opportunities and relate to their communities in ways that are more direct, personal, and comprehensive compared to the formal, abstract, and instrumental relationships typically found in broader societal structures (Breines 1980). Below are some examples.

In 2010, ERK launched their own record label, Jangan Marah Records, which includes musicians from their network. While the idea of starting a record label reminisces the notion of economic determinism, its establishment was driven by values of communal reciprocity rather than market orientation. The band had set aside some of their gig fees for three years to create a gift economy that accommodated friends who contributed to their creativity and helped elevate ERK to its current status (*Tempo.co*, 5 May 2010). In 2018, they established an 'indie-bookstore', *Kios Ojo Keos*, that serves as a community hub and promotes youth literacy. The initiative emerged from a desire to find a new medium for expressing concerns and contributing to the community. During one of my visits in 2019, the space held a fundraising tour featuring music and t-shirt prints from a farmer community protesting a cement plant in Central Java. Other events included book discussions, film screenings, and small gigs, fostering engagement among various communities. Prefigurative politics involves strategies and practices employed by political activists to build alternative futures in the present and effect political change without reproducing the social structures they oppose (Fians 2022). In Indonesian society, which often lacks political education, the establishment of a space where youth can access alternative ideas and engage with democratic practices globally represents a significative prefigurative action.

Connecting with the community has been central in vernacular political education. Another notable musician from the 1998 reform era is Herry Sutresna, known as a hip-hop artist under the name Homicide. The influential band from Bandung, which disbanded in 2006, is recognized for its politically charged lyrics that resist neoliberalism. For instance, their track *Boombox Monger* serves as a manifesto, intertwining themes of power and politics, which index neoliberal evils, within both global and local contexts. Take a look at the first few lines.

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"If the consumer is king, then industry is Kasparov | And every field vanguard is no more Lenin than Ulyanov | Looking for a shaft of Molotov | Nothing worse than critique of capitalism by George Soros | The compound of the soul of the creator | And the belch of the insurrectionist cosmos | Space outside workers and bosses | And election papers that you voted on | Where my comrade replaced the logos and dictionary with the stone of Sisyphus | Cut off state venous catheter and institutional IV lines until they die | In the land of co-opting tendencies Sony and "empty-V" and the phallus-sucking radios | 'must' preaching fascist swinging swords at the wings of every Icarus | With a hierarchy in the modus operandi worthy of *Kopassus* (the Indonesian army special force) | The microphone for us is the separation between silence and freedom that betrays | Militia without uniforms of colony, hip-hop philanthropy like Upski | Resurrection of the same boombox at Madison Park in the early eighties | That brings thousands of playlists from Chiapas, Kosovo and the Gaza Strip | Seattle and Prague, Chechnya, Genoa, Jerusalem, Dili and Tripoli | For the flames of militancy of activism that faded after the last Molotov was thrown in Semanggi". (*Boombox Monger*, Homicide, 2003)

While these words are symbolic discourse, Sutresna leverages his political agency to promote a prefigurative sensibility through practices of 'sharing discourse' and engaging in praxis. Together with musicians and activists in Bandung, Sutresna reevaluated their strategies and tactics for social change in the mid-2000s. Instead of focusing solely on 'taking power', they shifted their emphasis to daily political rituals, which Sutresna terms 'daily revolution' (cf. Sutresna 2024). In addition to continuing their DIY production and ethics, they also began to engage in more intense socioeconomic and political experiments. The movement became involved in self-managed economics, mutual aid initiatives like *Food Not Bombs* and *Arm the Homeless*, joining the labor movement by supporting strikes, and aligning with the urban poor movement. For instance, they utilized their network, Ultimus – an indie bookstore – as a hub for discussing leftist ideas and as a music venue. This contributed to the development of intersections between music and anti-authoritarian thought that persist into the following decades (Sutresna, pers. comm. 2024). Amid gentrification that sought to create a visually sanitized Bandung, they began to realize the importance of decentralization and space, leading them to build traditions within these autonomous spaces. Sutresna was involved in numerous space politics initiatives, collaborating with potentially displaced residents to host art and music festivals. A photo exhibition showcasing former residents and cooking classes led by local mothers are examples of the kind of cultural activism Sutresna and other politically conscious residents of Bandung advocate for.

Sutresna founded Grimloc in 2014 – a record label and store aimed at supporting homegrown bands. As a record label, Grimloc strives

Figure 4   Herry Sutresna, poster of a benefit event in North Maluku (left) and public gathering in response to gentrification in Bandung (right), 2024. Copyleft Herry Sutresna

to be fair to its community members in terms of royalties and compensation, which Sutresna claims as "far fairer than Spotify" due to its community-based model, as opposed to a producer-client logic (Sutresna, pers. comm., 3 February 2024). At Grimloc, some of the daily staff members are also part of the bands under its label – showing the use of resources of a DIY community. This approach values the community as a potential agent for social change, rather than as an object of capitalism. Moreover, Grimloc set up a progressive membership scheme termed DIWF (Do-It-With-Your-Friends) that allocates some funds for actions for social justice from friends in their network. Among other activities under the umbrella program Black September in 2024, they supported a benefit initiative to create a collective space in Halmahera, North Maluku, as an infrastructure for vernacular learning and organization of struggle in a region known for its massive exploitation of nickel reserves [fig. 4].

Prefigurative values often lead individuals to become aware of other hegemonies. The embodiment of such values regard experimentation aimed at countering these hegemonies, one of which is the dominant mode of music production. This type of experimentation was caried out by a Yogyakarta-based experimental noise duo, Senyawa. In 2021, they investigated alternative ways to democratizing music production's economic system. They released an album entitled *Alkisah* (Once Upon a Time) by creating an innovative distribution model

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that aligned with their culture of sharing (Sasono 2022, 230). Rather than being entrapped into a hierarchical power relationshi – such as submission to big streaming companies who know nothing about music's intrinsic and vernacular values – they issued an open call to invite record labels all over the world to act as co-producers, who would produce localized editions of the same record. Through this approach, Senyawa decentralized power and authority, relying on a network of trusted individuals. This trust network also allows the public to explore and reinterpret their works. Unlike traditional models where only selected labels negotiate distribution terms or formats (vinyl, cassettes, digital), this model allows the listening publics to transform the music into new forms beyond Senyawa's authority and original vision (Sabhara, pers. comm., 10 October 2021). Echoing the anarchist mode of production, which views DIY as a progressive mode of production (cf. Benjamin 1999), *Alkisah* is a subversion of the conventional economic mode of music production, where distributors and streaming companies have the tendency often hold disproportionate economic power.

The subversion of capitalist economic ideology through decentralization and egalitarian approaches highlight a shift toward more equitable means of production. As decolonizing economic practices, they also honor traditional local systems such as *swasembada* (self-sufficiency) and *gotong-royong* (mutual aid), which emphasize collectivism and communal service where people contribute their labor (Suwignyo 2019, 387). These practices resonate with the Western concept of 'gift economy' – an economy based on principles of generosity, community, and social relationships, as opposed to barter or market economies. For Senyawa, implementing the idea of gift economy extends beyond mere alternatives to conventional music production. In social realm, altruism and empathy, key elements of the gift economy, are also evident. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Rully Sabhara – one half of Senyawa – called out a 'help a neighbour-in-need' campaign in 2020. Amidst the state's inadequate social aid and work restrictions, grassroots awareness grew among daily wage workers. With two other musician colleagues, he campaigned for food aid through his musical network to collectively support those directly impacted by the state's policy. Senyawa's experimentation with sound, subversive modes of production, and economic practices question the dominant culture of popular music. Their endeavors can be viewed as practices of prefigurative politics, valuing mutualism and collectivity, as opposed to late capitalism's inherent individualism. Moreover, Rully Sabhara's prefigurative action go beyond the domain of music production, embracing broader societal and embodying a holist approach to community engagement.

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5 Conclusion

Popular music serves as a sphere where power is exercised and knowledge is used to shape human beings as subjects of that knowledge (Foucault 1977; 1983). It is a domain rich with deeply internalized habits, styles, and skills (Bourdieu 1977). While the sounds of politics often symbolize specific struggles, they also reflect the capitalist nature of popular music production. Neoliberal capitalism extends beyond the notion of an economic system to become a social form with profound consequences for culture (Taylor 2014, 179). It influences how musicians work with, against, and within today's capitalism (18). In this article, I have explored an array of Indonesian musicians' skepticism, critique, and actions against hegemonic powers, including the state and dominant corporate mechanism. I have shown how the sounds of politics are performed in ways that are seemingly contradictory. For some musicians, their politics of sound can carry prefigurative aspects of democratic doings as well as more ideals of communal resistance. For others, the meaning of their music is drained into the hegemonic forces of neoliberalism, resulting in a more 'performative' quality.

The omnipresence of moral demands and market economy obligations in popular music, as exemplified in relation to the musicians discussed in this article, underscores the need to determine key points in the cultural politics performed at specific times and spaces. This emphasizes the importance of framing the audiopolitics of social movements as a means to disclose a public discourse on cultural systems. It reinforces the 'political process' model of social movements, which highlights how movements respond to the broader structure of political constraints and opportunities (McAdam 1982).

In the wake of the Indonesia's Corrupted Reform movement in 2019, songs and performances that articulate political views continue to be produced and performed in various ways. While it is challenging to directly measure their impact on social movements, these musical works contribute to a persistent narrative supporting democratic agendas in Indonesia. Social movements studies often measure success by tangible change. Yet at the time of writing this article, the Indonesian governmental elites persist in suppressing democratic progress. This trend seems to intensify as the 2024 election approaches, with the consolidation of power seeming to be first on their agenda. Additionally, neoliberal forces remain influential in the practices of popular music culture.

However, studies of social movements should also account for the multiplicity of cultural regimes and forms influencing resistance performances within society, regardless of formal political success. As I have shown through the notion of musicking, democratic discourses can manifest in smaller, community-centered musical performances.

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These performances, along with various other forms of activism by politically conscious musicians, represent potential forces from below that can foster cognitive and affective awareness about the urgency of social change, powering ideas into practice for the publics. This embodied, musicking social movement culture can promote an enactment of anarchist values in the present (Graeber 2008; 2009), generating social structures that mirror the desired future and fostering supportive communities where resources and care are shared voluntarily. Anarchism, in this context, is not just about opposition, but about creating new, autonomous ways of living that disrupt hierarchies and power structures, thereby transforming everyday life. Living out the values and systems they hope to create in the future within their current actions (Shantz 2010, 154), such practices could potentially contribute to maintaining democratic integrity, just as they did at the time when this article was written. Uncoincidentally, some of the musicians discussed here were actively involved in the *Indonesia Darurat* (Emergency Indonesia, 2024) protests throughout August and September 2024, which were sparked by President Jokowi's efforts to consolidate power and establish a political dynasty toward the end of his presidential term. If Indonesian civil society's audiopolitics are not lured into the neoliberal world of popular music production, the democratic sounds of Indonesian grassroots politics will continue to be heard.

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Youth Civic Engagement in Vietnam: Envisioning Social Change Through Everyday Actions

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Abstract   This sociological investigation into youth training programmes illuminates how young people's civic engagement can be nurtured in a one-party political setting where actions that overtly challenge the state's authority are highly repressed. The study uses qualitative data collected in 2020 from participant observation at training programmes organised by Vietnamese civil society and in-depth interviews with young participants in these programmes. The findings show how such venues provide youths with frames of reference for their everyday civic engagement. As a contribution to scholarship on youth civic participation in the Global South, this study addresses how social transformation unfolds through everyday action and consumption.

Keywords   Social change. Youth. Vietnam. Authoritarianism. Civil Society.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 State and Civil Society Relations in a One-party Nation. – 3 Studying Youth Programmes in Vietnam: Methodological and Ethical Reflections. – 4 Everyday Civic Engagement and Respectful Resistance. – 4.1 Civic Action Through Responsible Consumption. – 4.2 Respectful Resistance Against Hierarchy and Authority. – 5 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

Social movement scholarship often blurs the distinction between social movements and mass mobilisation, such as public demonstrations and protests. In a review spanning two decades of research on social movements and emotions, Jasper (2011, 286) asserted that "social movement" and "protest" are two concepts that "overlap sufficiently". Similarly, Eyerman's (2005, 41) exploration of "how social movement moves" focused predominantly on the outward, performative aspect of social movements.

While public mobilisations have a pivotal role in social movements, it is also crucial to recognise the more silent forms of everyday resistance. Our understanding of politics must extend beyond formal political participation, such as voting or organised protests, to encompass "a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life" (Bakardjieva 2009, 92). Scholarship adopting this perspective (e.g. Juris, Pleyers 2009; Oinas, Onodera, Suurpää 2018) has enabled us to observe that civic engagement among the younger generation is not declining; rather, it has evolved into various forms: everyday consumption (Navne, Skovdal 2021), affective bonds (Horton, Kraftl 2009; Abdou, Skalli 2018), and creative expressions (Laine, Suurpää, Ltifi 2018; Mai, Laine 2016). Beyond the realm of formal institutional politics, this study acknowledges the intimate relationship between the stories of everyday life and the broader narratives that shape and inspire large-scale social movements (Ewick, Silbey 2003). This recognition allows for a more comprehensive grasp of the nuanced dynamics that drive social transformation.

Focusing on Vietnam, this research specifically examines everyday politics among the younger generation that lay the foundation for social movements. It argues that, within an authoritarian context, understanding social change and social movements requires a nuanced perspective that goes beyond traditional public mobilisations. This is particularly relevant given that overt confrontations with the authoritarian state often fail to yield meaningful outcomes. Instead, a more subtle and subversive form of political engagement, one that challenges prevailing cultural narratives and revokes stigma, is more effective. For instance, pragmatic negotiation is a key feature in Vietnamese lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activism, whereby civil society groups pursue social change without challenging the state's legitimacy (Faludi 2016; Mai 2022; 2024). This case illustrates how civil society actors, including but not limited to local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), promote change through subversive resistance.

With an emphasis on subversive resistance in an authoritarian context, this study explores Vietnamese training programmes for

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young people. Targeting youth across the nation, these programmes address various dimensions of societal development such as gender and sexual equality, sustainable development, and human rights. These programmes are organised by a wide range of civil society actors, including local NGOs, social enterprises, and grassroots networks. Typically, they are held in secluded locations for a specified period (often between two and five days), where the selected youths study and live together. The purpose of this setup is to enable the participants to solely focus on the training, without being distracted by daily demands.

Although the subjects of these programmes are diverse, they share a common goal: enriching the knowledge and civic responsibility of their participants, which empowers them as change agents. These programmes adopt the capacity-building approach, or the so-called 'teach a man to fish' philosophy (Swidler, Watkins 2009), often manifested in international development projects. By equipping young individuals with new perspectives and competencies, these initiatives aim to foster effective daily advocacy and bridge the socioeconomic divide among youths from diverse backgrounds.

This study employs in-depth interviews and participant observation to explore the cultivation of everyday civic engagement through participation in civil society initiatives. It illuminates how civic responsibility can be nurtured through participation in youth-targeted training programmes that shape young people's everyday civic actions. Thus, the research highlights the foundational role of these programmes in shaping broader social movements. These programmes not only equip young individuals with ideological frameworks and concrete practices but also contribute to the collective emergence of groups advocating for social transformation within the Vietnamese society.

2 State and Civil Society Relations in a One-party Nation

The development of civil society in authoritarian regimes has been a topic of significant interest in recent years. Many studies[1] have addressed how the operation of civil society in the region of Southeast Asia challenges several assumptions underlying the mainstream characterisation of civil society. This section provides a brief overview of these common assumptions and problematises them.

The most popular conceptualisation of civil society, commonly referred to as Civil Society I or the 'social capital' interpretation of civil society, takes root in Tocqueville (1969) and Putnam's (2000) work.

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1 Lee 2004; Wischermann 2010; Hsu 2010; Wells-Dang 2014.

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This perspective emphasises the value of civic associations, contending that civic associations generate social trust and foster democracy. Putnam (2000), in particular, argued that civic associations provide horizontal networks of civic engagement for citizens to collaborate. He maintained that a decrease in civic engagement would lead to decreased social trust as well as a range of social problems.

Another interpretation of civil society, Civil Society II, emerges out of the rise of anti-communist movements in Eastern Europe. This perspective constructs the totalitarian state as 'evil' and antithetical to democratisation processes. It depicts civil society as an autonomous sphere of action, capable of energising resistance against tyrannical regimes (Seligman 2002). Moreover, it views civil society as an important platform for marginalised voices and a source of opposition against the state (Cohen, Arato 1992), thus highlighting the political role of civil society.

Both conceptualisations presented above presume that civil society is an ontological entity distinct from the state. Scholars who study civil society in authoritarian settings have challenged this assumption and advocated for a more nuanced view of state-civil society relations. Lewis (2013, 326), for instance, aptly noted that state and civil society in authoritarian settings "are enmeshed together in a complex and multilayered network of material transactions, personal connections, and organisational linkages". This prompts the inquiry whether civil society can effectively act as a counterweight to the state, and if it does, what kind of strategies these non-state actors utilise in their negotiation with state officials.

To better understand how civic actions unfold within a political context that renders dissident voices and contention inherently problematic, this paper zooms into activities conducted by civil society actors in Vietnam. Given its political structure, Vietnam is an interesting case for observing the formation and functions of civil society: the country has been under the Communist Party's sole leadership since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Consequently, it is known as a one-party nation (London 2023). Thayer (2009, 3) uses the term "mono-organisational socialism" to describe this political system, in which state institutions, the armed forces, and other societal organisations all belong under the hegemonic control of the Communist Party. In this setting, all licensed social organisations are legally and practically connected to the state, all "linked by a chain of official ties to the central committee of the Communist Party" (Hayton 2010, 79). Given that everything is "part of either a Party or a state structure", there can be no officially truly "non-governmental" organisations in Vietnam (Hayton 2010, 79; Bedner, Berenschot 2023). Consequently, civil society in this context does not readily fit into either Civil Society I or Civil Society II's conception of a discrete sector. Furthermore, civil society's watchdog function is also restricted within this political structure.

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Does this mean Vietnam's civil society is fully restrained? This study sheds light on this inquiry by acknowledging that under conditions of high repression, civil society must adopt a "not blaming, but assisting" approach in its interaction with the state (Dai, Spires 2018, 75). Furthermore, the study proposes that even non-oppositional activities can lay the seed for everyday resistance. Acting as service providers, for instance, enables civil society actors to instil change on a small scale.

To illustrate this argument, this research investigates capacity-building programmes targeting young people organised by different civil society groups, such as local NGOs, social enterprises, and grassroots networks. By exploring the activities of these programmes and the reflections of the participating youths, this article demonstrates that the potential for social change lies within the narratives of young individuals who, through programme participation, acquire the skills to engage in everyday civic actions. This, accordingly, sheds light on the foundation for social movements in an authoritarian society.

3   Studying Youth Programmes in Vietnam: Methodological and Ethical Reflections

As previously mentioned, this study focuses on training programmes aimed at young people organised by various civil society groups and networks, including both local NGOs and grassroots citizen groups. To achieve this objective, I created a research design utilising in-depth interviews with young participants who have attended at least one of these youth training programmes. Data was also collected from my participant observation at two training programmes.

Out of 31 interviews conducted, 19 took place online due to COVID-19. While online interviews may have some limitations in terms of building rapport, they allowed me to collect data from the participants who lived in different regions of Vietnam. All in-person interviews took place at a coffee shop, per the interviewee's preference.

To ensure that the interviews collected the same area of information from each individual while still allowing for a certain degree of flexibility, I developed a guide for semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Besides asking follow-up questions and giving these young people ample time to express their views, I offered them the opportunity to ask me any questions. I also openly shared my personal reflections, if asked. This approach was meant to build trust and rapport, making open dialogue possible. Overall, these techniques enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of these young individuals' perspectives and capture nuances that would not have

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been possible with more structured interviews. The average interview length was 90 minutes, with the shortest lasting 50 minutes and the longest over 200 minutes.

I also conducted participant observations at two youth training programmes to supplement my interview data, which helped me clarify many things I had found puzzling or unclear from the interview accounts. The experience also gave me a glimpse into the concrete space and time that civil society organisations have allocated to youth. As the data collection period coincided with the first wave of COVID-19, participant observation opportunities were severely restricted. Vietnam's strategy to combat the pandemic involved mandatory masks, quarantine, contact tracing, and eventually nationwide isolation. All youth programmes scheduled during this period were cancelled. Consequently, I was only able to conduct two participant observations during my six-month stay in Hồ Chí Minh City from January and July 2020.

My first participant observation took place in February 2020, prior to the outbreak. It was a one-day workshop organised by a grassroots youth group focused on community development and educational initiatives. The workshop featured a presentation by a youth leader on development objectives and methods, and included a discussion for attendees to share their experiences and reflections. Despite the requirement to wear face masks, over 60 participants attended the workshop, most of whom were active in various civil society groups and development networks in southern Vietnam.

My second participant observation took place in June 2020, a few weeks after Vietnam lifted its first nationwide quarantine measures. The programme under discussion was organised by an interregional youth network with the objective of broadcasting the United Nation's (UN) 16 sustainable development goals following the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. 34 young individuals, most of whom were college students at the time of the event, participated in this two-day programme.

Throughout my participant observation, my role as a researcher was clearly communicated to the organisers and participants, both in the application form and during the ice-breaker introduction. My positionality as a late-20s Vietnamese with native language skills, familiarity with cultural slang, and knowledge of community development allowed me to maintain a 'low-key' presence in the field. Additionally, I benefited from an atmosphere where most programme participants were new to each other and expected to be open and welcoming.

Ethical considerations were central to my approach to research and my interactions with the interlocutors of this study. A strong ethical framework was essential given the broader context of an authoritarian state and these young people's involvement with civil society initiatives. These considerations remained relevant even

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when these programmes already received state permission to operate, and some even had state officials present. Informed consent was obtained by providing detailed information about the study's goals, the scope of participation, and confidentiality measures, both verbally and in writing. The interlocutors could opt out of the study at any time with no repercussions. The data collection process was followed by meticulous data storage procedures to protect these individuals' identity.

In this article, I present selected findings from a thematic analysis of the interview data, focusing on narratives from six interlocutors. Selecting only a subset for in-depth analysis ensures a nuanced engagement with the narratives, giving each individual's voice sufficient space. To contextualise the analysis, I also used notes from participant observation. In presenting the findings, I used pseudonyms for all the young people featured and anonymised the programmes mentioned, referring to them as Programme [Letter]. Additional information about each programme and the organising civil society groups is included in the footnotes.

4 Everyday Civic Engagement and Respectful Resistance

As previously mentioned, this study builds on existing scholarship exploring youth everyday politics as a foundation for social movements (e.g., Oinas, Onodera, Suurpää 2018; Juris, Pleyers 2009). It acknowledges that civic engagement can be observed through youths' lifestyle choices, consumption habits, and daily activities, broadening the definition of 'civic engagement' beyond formal processes such as voting (Trott 2021). Through everyday organising, networking, and horizontal collaboration (Juris, Pleyers 2009; Riley, More, Griffin 2010), youth can participate in peaceful social transformation, effecting change through "small steps and small wins" (Navne, Skovdal 2021, 314). This approach to studying young people's civic engagement is particularly useful in authoritarian regimes where overt political confrontation is discouraged, or in societies where age-based hierarchies consistently marginalise youth voices and contributions.

In the discussion of age-based hierarchy and power dynamics, the concept of 'respectful resistance' (Quiñones 2016; Laine, Suurpää, Ltifi 2018) is particularly relevant. While the notion of resistance, in its traditional meaning, refers to an individual or a group reacting against oppression by a ruling class, 'respectful resistance' manifests in daily concerns and interpersonal encounters. This form of resistance can be observed in acts of negotiating with or challenging various forms of authority, whether it be an authority figure, age-based hierarchy, or societal cultural and religious norms. Previously, the concept has been applied to study how young musicians (Laine,

Suurpää, Ltifi 2018) and young women in patriarchal society (Mai, Laine 2016) express their discontent in creative ways. This is a useful framework to study how youths manage tensions and hierarchical dynamics, as well as strive for change, without challenging the prevailing social structure (Quiñones 2016).

Applying this lens enables us to observe youth civic engagement in various areas of expressions (Riley, More, Griffin 2010). The following subsections explore civic action in two areas: responsible consumption and resistance against authority and cultural hegemony.

4.1 Civic Action Through Responsible Consumption

One emerging area of everyday political engagement involves young people addressing climate concerns (Navne, Skovdal 2021). This engagement often centres on consumption practices, with young individuals increasingly mindful of their choices and environmental impact. Evidence of such practices is found in both interview and participant observation data.

In June 2020, I attended a youth training programme organised by a Vietnamese interregional youth network, referred to as Programme A, which focused on sustainable development goals. The programme attracted 34 participants, most of whom were youth leaders active in different youth clubs and development projects. Held over two days, Programme A took place in a rented office space in Hồ Chí Minh City.

A few days before the programme began, an announcement about lunch arrangements provided insights into the norms of the space I was about to enter. It specified that lunch would be available at the venue for pre-order, or participants could bring their own food from home. Two aspects of this announcement stood out. First, participants were encouraged to bring their own eating utensils to reduce single-use plastic. Second, the organisers emphasised that they "**do not take responsibility for and disagree** [bold in the original] with those who buy food outside or order food delivery for lunch" (official announcement, posted by programme organisers on 3 June 2020, author's translation). This was explained as a measure to minimise plastic waste and align with sustainable development values.

To understand the rationale behind this announcement, it is important to consider the infrastructure of modern Vietnamese food culture, where plastic consumption is prevalent and often ingrained as a habit (Makarchev et al. 2022). For instance, sugarcane juice, a popular product sold by street vendors, is typically served in disposable plastic cups and packaged in plastic bags with straws. Plastic is also widely used for takeaway food, with foam containers and plastic cutlery common for items like sticky rice, baozi, and summer rolls.

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The rise of food delivery applications has further exacerbated plastic consumption, with disposable items such as straws, cups, and bags providing convenience for consumers (Châu et al. 2020).

Amidst the prevalent use of plastic, the lunch announcement of Programme A served as a reminder that even small contributions to a healthier environment are valuable. To reduce plastic waste, the organisers pre-ordered lunch from a nearby restaurant and had it delivered in reusable trays. These trays were collected and returned to the restaurant after meals. Although participation in the pre-ordered lunch was optional, the organisers discouraged the participants from purchasing their own lunch outside the venue or using food delivery apps, thereby imposing concrete limitations on lunch behaviours.

This emphasis on climate considerations in daily consumption reflects a broader movement. As highlighted by Trott (2021), many young people are changing their own and influencing others' consumption habits as part of their everyday climate activism. In this study, the interlocutors frequently noted that their involvement in civil society programmes requires them to consider their environmental impact, even if the programme they had attended did not specifically focus on sustainable development. These programmes often enforced concrete rules on participants' behaviours, as expressed by 23-year-old Lan:

> When I attended [Programme C],[2] the organisers said we could not bring single-use plastic products [...] Later, at [Programme D],[3] the rule was that the items we brought had to be natural and environmental-friendly, so for example, no synthetic soap or detergents. In general, we had to be mindful of how we used resources.

Similar to Programme A, the two programmes Lan referred to set specific rules requiring participants to act in an environmentally conscious manner. In response to the climate crisis, these programmes advocate for solutions rooted in responsible consumption (Sachdeva, Jordan, Mazar 2015). Youth are encouraged to make eco-friendly choices, reduce waste, conserve energy, and adopt sustainable lifestyles. These programmes provide a framework for understanding

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2 Programme C was organised by a local NGO dedicated to youth and community development. It targeted individuals aged 18 to 35, aiming to equip them with the skills necessary to advocate for sustainable development and to provide a networking platform for youth groups from various regions. Between 2015 and 2021, the programme was held multiple times and trained over 600 participants.

3 Programme D was organised by a local NGO focusing on environmental education and raising awareness about climate change. The two-day programme aimed to equip participants with knowledge about the causes and impacts of climate change, as well as recommend actions for adapting to and mitigating climate change's effects.

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the climate crisis in more manageable terms, promoting the idea that individual behaviours are closely linked to the environment's well-being and that individuals can drive large-scale change through daily choices. These guidelines extend beyond physical participation. For example, 23-year-old Thanh discussed how her lifestyle was impacted after participating in civil society programmes:

> In 2017, I was living alone and using a lot of plastic. Then I attended [Programme D] and saw how mindful everyone was. That experience changed me. After the programme, I read extensively about how to minimise my environmental impact. That programme showed me how changes could be done in a sustainable way. Now using plastic bags makes me feel uneasy, and I rarely use disposable items. Overall, it has completely transformed my lifestyle. I am now more mindful and always consider the environment.

From Thanh's perspective, civil society programmes not only connected her with a green-oriented community but also provided practical tools for adopting a responsible lifestyle. She viewed her participation in Programme D as a pivotal moment, where she gained the knowledge and skills needed to live sustainably and make environmentally friendly choices.

What is particularly intriguing in this narrative is how Thanh links her individual actions, such as her choice to "rarely use disposable items," to broader societal changes. This perspective reflects her understanding of social change through responsible and mindful consumption. This aligns with previous studies on youth climate activism in various contexts, where young people "tactically break up the climate crisis into manageable actions", exerting their influence through "small steps and small wins" (Navne, Skovdal 2021, 314; Trott 2011). Like Thanh, other interviewees emphasised the significance of individual actions and civic responsibility, noting how their participation in civil society programmes altered their everyday behaviours. Many talked about replacing plastic products with alternatives such as bamboo straws, glass jars, thermal mugs, and cloth bags. Thảo (aged 21) brought her own mug to the coffee shop for the interview, while Xuân (aged 25) requested that the interview be conducted at a coffee shop that did not serve drinks in plastic containers. These actions reflect their commitment to environmental protection, demonstrating how they applied the strategies learned from civil society programmes. For 21-year-old Việt, responsible living means a broader sense of civic duty that goes beyond environmental concerns:

> Through my participation in [Programme C] and the environmental club, I learned the importance of reducing plastic use and opting for recycled items. I have switched to using glass items. My

sense of responsibility has also increased. For example, where-as I used to, like everyone else, throw all types of waste, including glass, into one bin, I now sort my trash. I place glass waste in a separate bag and label it 'glass' so the garbage collectors know it contains glass. This ensures they avoid injury when handling the trash.

Considering how others could be affected by thoughtless waste management, Việt's narrative highlights the dimension of care in his everyday actions (Horton, Kraftl 2009). His rationale for lifestyle changes goes beyond reducing his environmental footprint, showing a commitment to taking responsibility for others' welfare. The narrative emphasises the connection between caring for the environment and caring for the broader social collective. By considering the potential harm to the garbage collectors, Việt viewed his individual actions as impacting society as a whole, framing a simple choice like waste sorting as an act of civic responsibility. Thus, this narrative highlights the interdependence between personal daily habits and the well-being of the community, solidifying the link between the individual and the broader society.

This section provides insights into how civil society programmes foster a youth culture centred on environmental awareness, mirroring previous research on school-like settings (Trott 2021; Navne, Skovdal 2021). Youths' commitment to living an environmentally conscious lifestyle is a form of civic engagement embedded in everyday life (Collins 2021). By applying the strategies they have acquired through civil society programmes, these Vietnamese youths demonstrate the ability to adapt their lifestyle within a context of pervasive plastic use. Their consumption habits reflect a departure from a food infrastructure that prioritises convenience over environmental sustainability.

4.2 Respectful Resistance Against Hierarchy and Authority

Previously, I discussed how young people can adopt an environmentally conscious lifestyle as a form of civic engagement. Collectively, their modest individual efforts contribute to a broader shift towards sustainability, emphasising that everyday responsible consumption can lead to lasting change.

This section examines additional practices and choices by young people that embody the spirit of 'respectful resistance' (Quiñones 2016; Laine, Suurpää, Ltifi 2018). An example can be found in Kim's (aged 26) narrative, a young woman whose decision to leave a workplace reflects the desire to strive for change without confronting prevailing social orders. Upon graduating from college, Kim found a job

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that initially suited her well and allowed her to work on issues she was passionate about. However, this job exposed her to a system of petty corruption. Kim shared that it caused her months of internal struggle – she wanted to resign, but her struggle was invalidated after consulting her family:

> When I thought of quitting, I shared my concern with my family, but they kept saying that I had just graduated and already found a stable job with a good salary, so why would I even consider quitting? They said I was overreacting, because it's not like I actually gained any extra money from those acts of corruption, so why let it bother me so much?

Following months of internal turmoil as a bystander witnessing the corruption, Kim resigned from the position despite not having a safety net. For Kim, resigning meant giving up economic stability and family support to maintain an ethical sense of self. In the following quote, she explained her decision:

> [Programme B][4] taught me about the value of integrity and transparency. In my work and daily life, I find that these principles personally affect me and help me improve. I strive to fulfil these principles. I work on projects that involve fund management, so first, I need to be honest with myself to overcome petty corruption. Second, I refuse opportunities to go too far in material matters […] That's what [Programme B] has taught me. It's like a mirror reflecting my integrity.

By maintaining transparency in her work, Kim established herself as leading an ethical life. The impact of Programme B on her life choices was evident in her use of analogy: it became a "mirror", a means of self-reflection in which she held herself accountable for her own action (or inaction). Kim identified Programme B as an ethical frame of reference that guided her everyday actions, serving as a repertoire for a kind of politics "submerged in the flow of everyday life" (Bakardjieva 2009, 92).

While Kim's decision to resign from her workplace does not involve confronting systemic corruption directly, it highlights a commitment to ethical practices in everyday life. Kim's decision also demonstrates

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[4] Programme B was organised by a local NGO with the mission of educating youths about transparency and combating corruption, a particularly sensitive subject in Vietnam's political landscape. The programme ran six times over five years, with each session recruiting 30-40 participants and lasting an average of five days. As of the writing of this article, the NGO that managed this programme has ceased operations, leading to the programme's discontinuation.

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her rejection of societal expectations that view petty corruption as normative or acceptable behaviours. Her choice to resign against her family's wishes reflects a respectful challenge to authority (Quiñones 2016). Kim explained that participating in Programme B provided her with the guidance and inspiration to act ethically, even in situations where others seemed silent or complacent. Her narrative illustrates how a commitment to being a good citizen can manifest in everyday life choices outside of formal politics. Such actions lay the foundation for a social movement that challenges hegemonic social norms.

The same 'respectful resistance' can be found in another narrative shared by Khánh, a 23-year-old medical student, who viewed civil society programmes as opportunities to grow as a doctor. This motivated her to apply to several training programmes:

> I want to expand my knowledge and not become narrow-minded. When I participate in these programmes, I gain a more comprehensive view. With this multidimensional perspective, I can treat my patients better. [...] Working in the health sector, I see that those who don't attend these [programmes] tend to have a partial, one-dimensional view. For them, being a doctor guarantees a good income and power over patients. They only care about improving their expertise so that after med school they can start making money and live a well-off life.

At the time of the interview, Khánh was in her final year of medical school and was doing clinical rotations at a hospital where she frequently observed power imbalances between doctors and patients. She described how participating in various civil society programmes allowed her to listen to experts in other fields, helping her understand the different challenges and disadvantages that patients face. This experience informed her practices, enabling her to address patients' problems more comprehensively. Khánh emphasised that being a "good doctor" means not only having expertise but also treating patients with respect and empathy:

> [The patients] may not know their rights when entering a medical facility. As doctors, we cannot touch the patient's body without their permission, but the patients may not be aware of that. When they come to the hospital, they listen to us, doctors in our white coats, and do everything we tell them to do. They are not aware of their rights; they don't know many things that can be useful when going to a hospital. I realised this after attending a programme on human rights.

In highlighting the symbolic value of doctors' positions, especially in contexts where they are seen as authority figures, Khánh suggested

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that doctors' abuse of patients might stem from this authority. Similar to Kim's narrative, Khánh's perception of being a good doctor also incorporates an ethical dimension: she argued that the desire to "make money and have a well-off life" should not be the priority for a "good doctor". Khánh attributed these insights to her participation in civil society programmes, which she saw as a pathway to becoming an ethical individual. For Khánh, living ethically meant resisting the temptation to abuse the power that doctors usually hold over their patients.

Similarly, 31-year-old Quang established a clear link between his participation in civil society programmes and a transformative realisation that contributed to his self-improvement. For Quang, participating in development programmes meant stepping out of his comfort zone, where his perspective was "limited and confined", to gain new knowledge and insights into his role in society:

> Before [participation], I was a simple guy. I just stayed at home, took care of the farm, and did normal everyday stuff. I used to believe whatever people in authority or those with high degrees said, thinking their words were absolute and that I had to follow them. But after the programmes, I felt I had a voice and could discuss topics like corruption or human rights. Previously, when I heard about corruption, I thought it had nothing to do with me […] For example, there are many development projects on roads where people can take a little from the budget for themselves. I used to think that because the roads belonged to the state, the authority could do whatever they wanted. Now I realise that the funding for these projects comes from taxes, which are paid by people like us. Now I understand that taxes are part of what I pay every day – through electricity bills, VAT, and even when I buy a box of milk. So I find it necessary to speak up and reject wrongdoing.

This quote offers much to unpack. To illustrate the transformative impact of participation, Quang detailed his self-perception before engaging in civil society programmes. He described his "previous self" as naïve and simplistic, preoccupied only with day-to-day economic routines. This "previous self" was portrayed as detached and indifferent when faced with social problems or authority misconduct, seeing no personal connection to these issues. Quang characterised this "previous self" as having a "limited and confined" perspective, which, he implied, contributed to his detachment and inaction regarding social injustice. By contrast, he depicted his "current self" – post-participation – as an active contributor to society. He repeatedly emphasised the need to "speak up" and "reject the wrong", highlighting his shift towards a more engaged and responsible stance.

This quote highlights the mediating role of civil society programmes

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in bridging the private and public realms. Namely, participation in Programme E,[5] which focused on human rights and universal values, enables Quang to link his individual action, such as buying milk, with his broader right and responsibility to address social issues like petty corruption. In other words, Quang's recognition that his everyday actions are connected to national issues fuels his desire to act. This awareness enhances his sense of agency, transforming him from someone who passively accepts hierarchical norms and authority to an active citizen willing to confront and challenge wrongful actions by those in power. Quang's evolving understanding of his role and rights in society illustrates 'respectful resistance'.

The narratives presented in this section highlight a form of civic engagement embedded in everyday life, where young individuals use their autonomous actions to realign their life choices and interactions with authority figures in line with their ideological beliefs (Benedicto 2013). By challenging passive obedience to authority and by questioning established norms and practices perceived as unethical, these young people exhibit their respectful resistance. Moreover, they link their daily activities with their rights and responsibilities to drive broader social transformation. Thus, these findings highlight the significance of considering 'everyday politics' (Riley, More, Griffin 2010), where the complexity and indeterminacy of everyday actions can lay the foundation for substantial societal change.

5　Conclusions

This paper illustrates how social movements can be understood through everyday actions. Focusing on young people who participate in training programmes organised by civil society actors in Vietnam, the study explores youth civic engagement through everyday action and consumption, which deviate from traditional notions of political participation. Whether it involves embracing green living, rejecting petty corruption, or reflecting on one's power over vulnerable groups, these young individuals demonstrate a commitment to ethical actions and responsible choices aimed at bettering their society. In this way, the study contributes to existing scholarship on youth political engagement (e.g., Oinas, Onodera, Suurpää 2018; Navne, Skovdal 2021), showing that various activities offer new perspectives on 'everyday politics' (Riley, More, Griffin 2010). Such activities provide

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5　Programme E was a three-day workshop organised by a local NGO focused on education and empowerment for women and minority groups. Its objective was to promote the understanding and practice of universal values, including freedom, fairness, equality, tolerance, human rights, dignity, justice, and peace. The programme has been held over ten times, with each session recruiting 25-30 young individuals aged 18 to 35 years.

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a foundation for social movements that seek to alter cultural hegemony and hierarchical relations without being overtly confrontational.

The young people in this study attribute changes in mindset and behaviours to participation in programmes organised by civil society actors. These capacity-building programmes equip youth with tools and values that encourage them to act with greater mindfulness and ethical consideration. By fostering an accountable self committed to just actions, these individuals emphasised their connection to and responsibilities within the collective. Accordingly, this study highlights how civil society, even within an authoritarian context, can subtly promote the public sphere and advocate for social change. This is achieved through redefining what constitutes the 'public' and the 'political', thereby translating civic engagement into more flexible forms of everyday expressions (Benedicto 2013).

This study positions youth as key agents of social change, highlighting that activism in an authoritarian society often manifests in subtle forms beyond public demonstrations and mass mobilisations. The findings enhance our understanding of youth civic participation in the Global South, offering insights into social transformation processes within the constraints of authoritarian regimes by focusing on everyday life as a site of contention. It emphasises that youth should not be regarded as passive followers of norms; rather, they are active agents who intimately shape how social transformation unfolds.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations. Notably, most civil society training programmes take place in urban centres, making them more accessible to urban youth than their rural counterparts. This urban-rural disparity may affect the demographic profile of the programme participants, who predominantly come from middle-class backgrounds and may have greater freedom to make choices without substantial economic constraints. Future research should explore the extent of this urban-rural divide as well as identify strategies to improve access and inclusivity for youth from less privileged backgrounds to participate in civil society initiatives.

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Visual Aesthetics and the 2021 Burma/Myanmar Spring Revolution
Tracing Relational Solidarities

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Abstract   The 2021 attempted military coup in Burma/Myanmar has uprooted a decade of – partially corrupted – democracy-making. Simultaneously, a creative pro-democratic mobilization has emerged, with calls for alliances that had long been unthinkable. Tracing connections across space and time as symbolically manifested in protest art, this article suggests that insights from the intersectional tradition – in its theoretical conceptualizations and its rootedness in activist praxis – may help to trace the complexity and multiplicity of contemporary mobilization. Moreover, it proposes that an intersectional lens may allow to pay attention to the critical crossroads of imagining a future liberated Burma/Myanmar, beyond the common enemy and towards genuine relational solidarity.

Keywords   Intersectional Tradition. Symbolism. Protest Art. Mobilization. Htamain Revolution. Three Finger Salute.

Summary   1. Introduction. – 2. Conceptualizing Relational Solidarities. – 3. Relational Aesthetics and the 2021 Spring Revolution. – 3.1. Symbols of Resistance: On Clenched Fists and the *Three Finger Salute*. – 3.2. Mobilizing Local Particularities Within the *Htamain* Revolution. – 4. Relational Solidarities and the Imagining of a Future Burma/Myanmar.

1   Introduction

She* stands tall and strong. One arm raised up high to show the *Three Finger Salute* [fig. 1], which is used in *The Hunger Games* and has become a symbol of pro-democracy movements across Southeast Asia since the 2014 coup d'état in Thailand (e.g. Bolotta 2023; Hui 2020). She* holds a speakerphone in the other hand, and *htameins* are waving above her* safety helmet-covered head. Strength and determination are reflected in her* gaze. A multitude of deeply entrenched struggles and topics come to mind: The three fingers as a symbol of silent protest by the oppressed, borrowed from pop-cultural adaptation. The masses on the street, loudly demanding #RespectOurVote. A gendered revolution challenging long-held "patriarchal norms, misogyny and sexism rooted in the dictatorship" (Khin Khin Mra 2021, n.p.). Strategies exchanged among movements, friends, and siblings (Bolotta 2024) in Hong Kong, Thailand and beyond. #MilkTeaAlliance.[1]

Following 1 February 2021, the attempted military coup has uprooted much of what Burma/Myanmar has come to be over the last decade, including processes of state-building and the stalled peace negotiation process. Simultaneously, a vivid, strong, and creative pro-democratic movement has emerged with calls for solidarities that

1   The #MilkTeaAlliance can be described as a loose, leaderless, transboundary (online) network/movement that finds its origins in a 2020 'meme war' connected to the One China principle between Thai and Chinese netizens/actors. Deeply entangled in pop cultural references, within mere days this conflict erupted into wider, wittily led debates integrating topics around democratic values and anti-authoritarianism, binding together milk tea-consuming Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (in delimitation from Chinese non-milk tea). Subsequently, the #MilkTeaAlliance was expanded in solidarity with other pro-democratic mobilizations including, following the February 2021 attempted coup, in Burma/Myanmar. For more detailed analyses on the emergence and characteristics of the #MilkTeaAlliance, see, for instance, Schaffar, Praphakorn (2021) and Bolotta (2023).

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Figure 1   Aung Ye, 2021. Digital protest art. Reproduced with kind permission and courtesy of the artist

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had long been unthinkable, including during the prior NLD-led government. This has led the previously less audible voices of women, the LGBTQIA+[2] community, ethnic nationalities, and Gen Z, amongst others, to move to the centre stage of protests, both on-site and online. Thereby, photos of protest banners shared on social media, voices heard in online debates, protest art, and videos captured by citizen journalists showed the world a united front with the joint goal of overthrowing the '(military) junta'.[3] Simultaneously, with multiple and diverse voices becoming audible, nuances in the imagining of a future democratic, federal country are being revealed. Those are reflected in multiple overlapping – and at times contrasting – aspirations based in the complex, historically grounded socio-political mosaic of Burma/Myanmar.

Revolutions and protest are complex across time and space, as insights from both social movement studies and the intersectional tradition (Bohrer 2019) show. This dynamic includes the very politics about mobilization itself and its constant negotiation over which claims are legitimized (or not), heard (or not), and carried over into an envisioned future (or not) – whether that be through conscious debates or unconscious highlighting and omitting of voices and structures. The 2021 Burma/Myanmar Spring Revolution – which I understand as represented in the multiplicity of sites, voices, tactics, peoples, and identity positions that have joined forces against the 'junta' in ever-fluid (and at times contested) modes following the attempted coup – has opened up a space where previously dominating hegemonic voices, topics, and symbols have been cracked open to shed light on deep-seated, long-established structures of privilege and discrimination. These cracks leave space for

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2 I use the abbreviation LGBTQIA+ for the entirety of this article. I do so purposefully to take a political stance on the importance of inclusive language and to voice my solidarity. Yet, I do so with acknowledgement of the diverse and unequal lived realities within and across varying identities. For instance, when I write here that less audible voices of the LGBTQIA+ community have moved to the centre stage of protests, I do not want to suggest that this visibility is equally distributed.

3 Taking into consideration debates around the politics of language, I aim to be as critical as possible in my own choice of words given my positionality as a white woman who will never "have to embody the pain of local people" (Chu May Paing, Than Toe Aung 2021, n.p.). As such, I choose to use the term 'attempted coup', for instance, to reflect the fact that the 'military junta' – currently under the command of Min Aung Hlaing (MAH/MAL) and responsible for the ongoing violent crackdown on 'their own' peoples (see Desmond 2022; Aung Kaung Myat 2022 for a nuanced reflection) – has at no point been successful in fully controlling the country or its peoples. Along those lines, I have also decided to use scare quotes for the purpose of this text (for lack of a more suitable term) when referring to the '(military) junta' to show my disagreement that it represents "a *government*, especially a military one, that *has taken power* in a country by force and not by election" (Cambridge Dictionary 2023, emphasis added). That said, any misuse of terms remains my responsibility alone.

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different demands to be claimed. Yet, moving from joint aims or demands to building genuine solidarities is not straightforward as Ryan, Mai Van Tran, Swan Ye Htut (2024) show in a recent analysis of interethnic digital solidarity-building in Burma/Myanmar. More so, as Thirteen (2024) pointedly demonstrates, the term 'solidarity' is anything but clear-cut and its meaning and qualities need to be constantly reflected on.

Being grounded in unstructured research since the attempted coup on 1 February 2021,[4] I suggest in this article that insights from the intersectional tradition – both in its theoretical conceptualizations and in its rootedness in activist praxis – allow better understandings of the critical crossroads of imagining a future liberated Burma/Myanmar. I show that the intersectional tradition functions as a powerful tool when uncovering the complexities of differentiated forms of oppression, and it may simultaneously contribute to formulating strategies of liberation. Mobilizing an understanding of 'relational solidarities' (Bohrer 2019), I trace the potentials for radical liberation through – but importantly beyond – the current political situation, which unites people against a common enemy. To approach this, I engage the unique lens of visual aesthetics to suggest that art – emerging from within revolutions – should not be understood as mere empirical data but rather as a unique but critical theory-contributing voice. To clarify, as della Porta (2016) reminds us, social movements always leave behind certain traces of their demands. I argue that (some of) these demands – and connections – have been manifested not only in texts and talks but importantly and powerfully also within visual traits, from photography to protest art. In this paper, I mobilize the latter and indicate how (protest) art moves through – but crucially beyond – documenting the resistance, as art reinterprets it. Thereby, I argue that by creatively engaging demands emerging from within resistance, protest art connects to wider movements, demands, and histories in unique ways. Without arguing that these connections automatically lead to solidarities across time and space, I believe that they can serve as memory and as a way of imagining more just futures.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I set the terms that frame my conversation as they emerge from the intersectional tradition. Concretely, I clarify my situatedness within it and outline my engagement with 'relational solidarities'. Against this, in section 3 I move on to situate the Spring Revolution's visual

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4 The main focus is on insights collected until July 2022, when the first draft of this article was finalized, but it also expands to importantly integrate further nuances beyond that point. I combine insights generated through an inductive conversation with protest art and a more traditional interrogation of media content as well as other published documents (including reports, press releases, and policy-related documents, among others).

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aesthetics within a wider reflection on symbols used to ally with and across movements. Within two subsections, I then bring into conversation insights from my intersectional grounding with two recurring symbols of the Spring Revolution: the *Three Finger Salute* (§ 3.1) and the *htamain* (a type of women's longyi/sarong/wrap skirt) (§ 3.2). By doing so, I trace both alliances across movements and related particularities manifested in visual cues. I close this paper by arguing that the traces of more radical demands for liberation spark hope for relational solidarities to emerge.

2 Conceptualizing Relational Solidarities

In order to engage with my argument, there is a range of terms that need clarification and contextualization first.[5] These concern the positioning of my analysis within the 'intersectional tradition' (Bohrer 2019) and how an understanding of 'relational solidarities' emerges out of a close engagement with this rich and diverse body of thinking. Thereby, I draw upon Ashley Bohrer (16), who conceptualizes the 'intersectional tradition' as both "a definite, specific concept, named and elaborated by particular people and at a particular moment" – as for instance Kimberlé Crenshaw, who is often named as the grounding figure of intersectionality – *and* simultaneously a much broader sphere of *related* heterogeneous textual and more-than-textual insights of a theoretical, conceptual, activist, historical, and inquiring nature. It is beyond the scope of this article to outline the complex and multifaceted body of activist and scholarly work done within the spheres of the intersectional tradition.[6] Thus, rather than trying to fit this rich tradition into the limiting box of a working definition, I seek to highlight and explain how I think the conceptualization of 'relational solidarities' (Bohrer 2019) may prove to be a helpful stepping stone when both reflecting upon contemporary resistance in Burma/Myanmar and imagining radical liberation across time and space.

Before moving into this, however, there are a few caveats to consider. First and foremost, intersectionality as a term is often used in rather convoluted ways; it can be misused, appropriated, depoliticized, and too often employed with limited (or absent) engagement

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6 For comprehensive insights into the intersectional tradition, see, for instance, Bohrer (2019) and the recently published *The Routledge Companion to Intersectionalities* (Nash, Pinto 2023).

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with the complex and heterogenous body of academic/activist work it originates from. Importantly, Mary E. John highlights the tendency of mistaking an understanding of multiple oppressions as an additive exercise rather than acknowledging that these experiences "prove to be *more than*, or *other than*, the sum of the various 'parts' that are thought to constitute it" (John 2015, 73; emphasis added); as such, subject positions are incommensurable (see Bohrer 2019). A helpful example is Carolin Hirsch's (2023, 154) analysis of Hnin being a "female person of mixed ethnicity and Muslim background" within a Yangon punk community. The discrimination experienced here is not one of being a woman *and* not-only Bamar *and* with a Muslim background; rather it is the incommensurable experience of this particular subject position that Hnin needs to navigate within a patriarchal, Bamar- and Buddhist-dominated society and also within her own punk community, which has been moulded by that society as well.

Second, it is crucial not to forget or silence intersectional thought's grounding in a long history of struggles that date far beyond the articulation of the actual term and move through – and importantly beyond – class, race, and gender (Bohrer 2019; John 2015). Highlighting its origins within Black feminist resistance and its fluid and rich evolution across time and space (see, e.g., Davis 2016) reminds us of intersectionality's unapologetic and political stance. This becomes a key reminder that an intersectional analysis must always be historically sensitized, including when we carefully move across space into Burma/Myanmar (see § 3.2). In like manner, the origin of the term 'intersectionality' within Black feminist thought and its rootedness in the U.S. American context carry the danger of remaining untranslated or being mistranslated into other contexts,[7] including Burma/Myanmar. Furthermore, when intersectional thought and resistance are mobilized across borders, as John (2015) reminds us, we have to avoid unidirectional travel where intersectional thought flows into non-U.S. vernacular analysis but not vice versa. This becomes especially crucial when thinking about solidarities to be forged. John (2023, 196) advocates that "we need to think with *and* without intersectionality" and acknowledge the theorizing outside the realms of intersectionality that "nonetheless [have] been of value to our theorizing".

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[7] As a case in point, Françoise Vergès articulates the limitations of an intersectional approach that "only studies class, gender, and race" especially when looking at vernacular, non-Western/U.S. contexts or in countering 'civilizational feminism' and its colonial legacies (Vergès 2017; Bechiche 2021). It is through, rather than despite, this advocating for a "multidimensional analysis of oppression" which takes into consideration the "*totality* of social relationships" (including privileged positions), avoiding a "hierarchy of struggles" (Vergès 2017, 20-1) that I see crucial, if non-reducible, conversations with the 'intersectional tradition' (Bohrer 2019) emerging.

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It is through this expanded understanding of the intersectional tradition that this paper shall address and illuminate the relational solidarities mobilized by the 2021 Spring Revolution's visual aesthetics. As mentioned, solidarity as a term is anything but straightforward. One expresses their solidarity in daily organizing or when claiming to #StandWithMyanmar and voicing their #SolidarityForMyanmar. Yet, there remains the real danger that solidarity becomes an empty signifier exempt from any political meaning. Simultaneously, the question arises, where is solidarity situated? Where does solidarity start and/or end? It is against this inquiring of the quality of solidarities that I see the specific strength in thinking with, through, and beyond the expanded intersectional tradition. Concretely, it necessitates to weave together the particularities of incommensurable identity positions (across multiple axes) as they emerge uniquely across space and time, *without* neglecting the larger systematic structures and oppressions that bind everyone together within the 'house of difference' (see Lorde 1993; Bohrer 2019). To clarify, as Ashley Bohrer (2019) notes, human beings are *always already* connected within the 'matrix of domination' (Collins 2000) although (importantly!) "in distinctly and incommensurably different ways" (Bohrer 2019, 252). Acknowledging such a relational analysis is not only helpful when trying to understand the complexities of "inhabiting a world shaped by oppression and exploitation" (257) but also when thinking about projects of liberation.

Based on these conceptual considerations, in this paper I approach the aesthetics of protest art through a relational reading of differentiated subject positions within society. I explore solidarities as situated beyond the smallest common denominator (i.e. the fight against the 'junta'), based on the key intersectional tenet that "unity,[8] not uniformity" (Bohrer 2019, 254) defines the core of solidarity in activist praxis. To do so, it is crucial to situate my analysis, and present how such relationalities have manifested within the complex historically grown, sociocultural and political multiplicity Burma/Myanmar is made up of.

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[8] At this point, it is necessary to briefly mention the long-standing and fluid claims for 'unity' within Burma/Myanmar. While noting that analysis would go beyond the scope of this article, I want to point out that this is another term – similar to solidarity – that needs careful reflection across time and space, including, for instance, how unity when interpreted as 'oneness' has inhabited interrelated processes of homogenization and heterogenization in the form of Burmanization, standing in rather stark contrast to an intersectional framing introduced here. Further analysis, including in relation to contemporary claims for 'unity in diversity', might prove interesting (for an engagement with 'unity', see, for instance, Callahan 2007; Walton 2015).

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3   Relational Aesthetics and the 2021 Spring Revolution

The history of protest and resistance is ultimately bound to visual cues and symbolic representations, which are used to show allegiance within and across movements. Thereby, symbols – like the raising of a clenched fist (arguably one of the most widespread symbols of resistance and one we shall return to in § 3.1) or the rainbow flag – can be used overtly to easily show common cause. In history, however, cues have also been used in subtle ways that are only comprehensible to insiders, including, for instance, within queer contexts. As such, visual cues serve a double function of solidarity and protection. In their urgency within specific resistance, they are unique, as no words are needed to show protest through visual aesthetics. However, this can quickly change; when symbols are mobilized, travel, and become translated, they need to be reflected against local particularities. Just as the use of English-language, Western-born notions like feminism, patriarchy, and LGBTQIA+, amongst others, need to be carefully reflected upon in order to avoid the dangers of a mainstreamed, whitewashed feminism, it is crucial to closely analyse how symbols are integrated, translated, appropriated, and re-signified within the context(s) of Burma/Myanmar.

In a related manner, Pryzbylo et al. (2018, 1) remind us how (feminist) symbols can also be a sign of division by representing certain realities more than others and by resonating "with those they represent while acting as reminders of the exclusion and expulsion of those they fail to speak for and to and with". As such, one can trace the very quality of the solidarities they inhabit, as well as those they obscure: one case in point concerns the variations of rainbow flags and their queer use (for instance, visibly including transfeminist demands or not).

As mentioned before, art has the power to reinterpret issues in unique ways. While documentary photography is far from neutral, considering, for instance, the framings used (see Butler 2009), the expression of visual art can add a different layer of reflexivity. This is what I am interested in here. Colours and symbols are neither given nor arbitrary; instead, they carry meaning and intent. While there has emerged a wide range of different artworks within the context of the 2021 Spring Revolution, for the purpose of this article my analysis will focus on what I call 'protest art', namely, (digital) visual representations that were – and are – emerging from and shared within online and offline activist spaces and created by individuals (not all self-describing as artists), particularly in the early days of resistance. While visual representations have been widespread and varied, reflecting the overall character of the revolution, it is beyond the scope and purpose of this article to analyse them in their totality. Accordingly, in the following, I outline a non-exhaustive list of themes and related symbolisms recurrently appearing within the protest art of Burma/Myanmar.

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Especially during the early days when people were still gathering on the streets to protest the 'junta', protest art included depictions of the 'common enemy' and its evil. These depictions served in at least two ways: on the one hand, they captured the cruelty of the 'junta' and connected entities (depicting, for instance, bullet holes and weapons, blood, and arrests); on the other hand, they – especially pictures of 'junta' leader Min Aung Hlaing (MAL) – were used to ridicule and degrade the enemy both online (e.g. through depictions of MAL as Pinocchio or "rest(ing) in pieces") and offline (i.e. by stepping on them as an act of disrespect).

At the opposite end of the spectrum and in much greater quantity, we have a multitude of examples of protest art depicting 'the people' in a range of different ways, including the people vs the 'junta', and the variety of tactics (from frontline street protests to keyboard warriors), peoples (with an increasing depiction of symbols and colours associated with different ethnic nationalities/minorities), and forms of protest (e.g. pots and pans protest, flower strike, boycotts, the Civil Disobedience Movement [CDM], or peopleless protests). We can also observe a type of protest art that could be described as 'archive-in-the-making', where specific places, people (including 'fallen heroes'), and moments of the Spring Revolution are captured and at times combined with its recurring symbols, like the *Three Finger Salute*.

While these themes capture(d) the revolution as it was unfolding, there is a set of symbolisms and protest artworks that connect the Spring Revolution across time (to previous anti-authoritarian mobilizations and generations) and space (i.e. to the #MilkTeaAlliance and when calling upon the 'international community' for help). At this point, it is worth noting that historical references remain mostly within the hegemonic narration of history, especially in referring back to dominant figures (such as Aung San) and symbols (e.g. the peacock) without the much-needed recovering of other histories. However, when reflected against the aforementioned archives-in-the-making, these are accompanied by increasing attention towards the multiplicities within the country.

It is crucial to emphasize that symbols are not in and of themselves signs for and of solidarity; indeed, they can be shallow or misused. Nevertheless, they can trace (potential) connections between peoples and movements and serve as reminders of the legacies of previous liberation movements. They can also allow for aspirations and imaginaries for the future to manifest. Against this, rather than seeing symbols, protest art, and other visual representations as empirical materials to be analysed, I turn to a thinking-with them. Bringing them into conversation with an intersectional analysis, I understand art as a guide through the 2021 Spring Revolution, which allows us to trace solidarities without claiming any determinisms.

To do this, in the following I mobilize two exemplary recurring symbols of the Spring Revolution, namely, the *Three Finger Salute* (§ 3.1) and the *htamain* (§ 3.2). I choose these two due to their centrality within visual representations of the early days of resistance and because they trace solidarities in different yet intertwined ways. As we will see, while the *Three Finger Salute* emphasizes a mobilization across space and movements, the *htamain* strikingly shows the particularities of Burma/Myanmar and the Spring Revolution. Thinking these together allows us to understand the potential for relational solidarities without neglecting the historical complexities and cultural specificity of Burma/Myanmar's multiple subject positions.

3.1 Symbols of Resistance: On Clenched Fists and the *Three Finger Salute*

The raised arm (often with a clenched fist) is likely one of the globally most widespread symbols of resistance. Sara Ahmed (2017, 85) traces the arm as the limbs of the labour(er) *and* as a "revolutionary limb", connecting the central themes relevant for our understanding of relational solidarities. Through the arm one can trace both the complexities of structures of oppression and the potential for liberation. In an intersectional tradition, staying with the symbolisms of the arm emphasizes that we are always already entangled: when an arm – abused as a tool for labour within the factory or the household of the (white/hegemonic) masters – becomes freed, one must always ask if this freeing of one's arm comes at the expense of other arms being forced into labour (see Ahmed 2017). When symbolic gestures of revolutionary – arms, fists, three fingers – are raised to demand liberation, an intersectional approach hints towards potential relationalities of struggles across time and space. Without suggesting any pregiven or straightforward alliances between black liberation, the global labour movement or feminist struggles, and contemporary Burma/Myanmar, they do have in common the raised arm as symbol against differentiated forms of oppression. In the 2021 Spring Revolution it often appears as the *Three Finger Salute*, thereby connecting to other contemporary instances of anti-authoritarian mobilization within Southeast Asia (as also seen in Figure 1).

Let us for a moment return to *The Hunger Games*, where the popcultural adaptation of the *Three Finger Salute* originated from, in the context of contemporary mobilization in Southeast Asia. In their analysis, Burke and Kelly (2015) usefully point out how in the spaces of Panem – the polity within which the books/movies are set – certain inequalities (i.e. around race, gender, and sexuality) are not talked about as if they were non-existent within this dystopian future; at the same time, within the organization of everyday life, the

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Hollywood-produced film repeatedly shows that they indeed are very much present (e.g. black = poor; women = household and care work, the private; men = labour in mines, the public). Keeping in mind these "patterns of visibility and invisibility around various systems of inequality" (61), let us move back to contemporary Burma/Myanmar, where we might ask: Who is represented in the masses raising their arms to showcase their oppression/resistance through the *Three Finger Salute*? What are they demanding and what futures are they imagining (and for whom)? Thus, we can try to unpack the quality of solidarities that are being forged.

Thinzar Shunlei Yi and Mimi Aye mention the leadership role that young women and women workers have played from the start of the pro-democracy protests by being the "first ones to get out on [the] streets in Yangon. [...] Especially the workers, the labour unions members and the workers women" (Thinzar Shunlei Yi in an embedded video in Mimi Aye 2021). As a crucial part of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), women workers from the garment sector have stood side to side with doctors and teachers, amongst others. As such, questions around gender have, from the very start of the protests, been ultimately intertwined with labour issues, both on the streets and online, where hashtags like #fightlikeagarmentworker[9] have carried meaning to allow for "shared interests rather than shared identities" (Cole quoted in Bohrer 2019, 94) to distil. Again, rather than seeing women or workers at the forefront, an intersectional approach necessitates an understanding of the particularities of mobilizing as women workers/working women. Acknowledging this highlights that struggles are always already interrelated.

As such, the early days of the revolution saw a combination of clenched fists and three fingers being raised by the masses that joined the protests across the country. Figure 2 was created in relation to the nation-wide 22222 general strike (five twos, held on February 2, 2021: 22/2/2021), which were the largest demonstrations at the time. While highlighting especially the role of women generally, the concrete date-related reference (organized as strike and thus carrying a crucial labour notion)[10] allows for multiple intersecting

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[9] The # (hashtag) can arguably itself be understood as a symbolic space spanning a limbo between 'slacktivism' (Tufekci 2014) and meaningful hashtag activism/feminism (Jackson, Bailey, Welles 2020). Similar to other mobilizations of the last decade, social media has proven to be a crucial 'expanded space' (Grammatikopoulou 2020) for organizing and spreading information of #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar. While different in their mechanisms, the relevance of the quality of solidarities does not depend on their locality but their political and liberational stance (see also Tufekci 2014).

[10] Including in news reporting such as the Irrawaddy's stating that "Myanmar woke up [...] to a nation in which many businesses [...] were shut down [...] as people went out to join the strike". (Kyaw Phyo Tha 2021).

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struggles to be read from this depiction (whether intended when creating or not). I argue that a thinking-with such artworks helps when thinking through historically embedded, structurally moulded relationalities among people(s) that have become unveiled within the 2021 Spring Revolution.

The colourful images arriving on my screen – through social media analysis and via private messages from friends and colleagues – from the early stages of mass mobilization also importantly included

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people from the LQBTQIA+ community, who played an active role. For instance, the *LGBT Union Mandalay* and the *LGBT Alliance Myanmar*, while not huge in their followers count, cultivated rather active social media presences. It is also key to remember the vital role that non-Bamar ethnic nationalities/minority[11] women have played (and continue to play), representing a clearly observable widening of the pro-democratic mobilization compared to previous instances. This is not to say that these are homogenous groups or that such multiplicity has not been present all along; rather, I would argue that the active and visual participation of previously less considered voices allows for a crucial opening in revealing within the wider societal understanding existing structures of oppression.

Visual images – both in photos/videos and in digital art – emphasize this when showing diverse women or members of the LGBTQIA+ community as an integral part of the revolution. Geoffrey Aung emphasizes the diversity within the political struggle:

> [It] would be a mistake to locate this resistance in a singular political subject, grounded in the working class or otherwise. Rather, we might see efforts to compose political struggle across difference – a strength coming not from a formal whole but the concatenation of many fragments. Here, people who do not necessarily share very much – drag queens and garment workers, or Zoomer meme makers and highland farmers – find themselves suddenly thrown together, trying to coordinate practically to bring down this regime. (Geoffrey Aung in Levenson 2021, n.p.)

While Geoffery Aung's analysis, similarly to a relational solidarities lens, continues in a call against homogenization, the quality is ever so slightly different: taking into account a relational solidarity allows us to go one step further, to acknowledge "identities *as* coalitions" (Bohrer 2019, 252; emphasis added), meaning that neither highland farmers nor drag queens are homogenous groups in themselves (even if they are made so through structures of oppression with real material consequences). This highlights that 'bringing down the regime' is not something to be achieved despite difference but through it, as

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11   For the purpose of this article, I use (non-Bamar) 'ethnic nationalities/minorities' to acknowledge the favouring of the former term by some groups, against the argument that they are majorities in some of the areas where they live (see International Crisis Group 2020). Beyond that, Sai Wansai (2016) stresses the real marginalizing effects of being treated as a minority – rather than being an equal partner – including in the building of a union. On the other hand, the latter term acknowledges the immense ethnic diversity within Burma/Myanmar and reminds us of those numerically smaller ethnic nationalities, some of whom themselves (strategically) use phrases such as 'minorities within minorities' to call attention to their unique situatedness.

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well as through being bound together in it. It is worth quoting Audre Lorde here at length:

> You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other. I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities. And in order to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness. (1993, 142)

There remains the obvious risk of painting an overly romantic picture against the socio-political and historical complexities of Burma/Myanmar, especially from my white, Western situatedness. There are very nuanced debates taking place within civil society that need close attention, especially for those of us who are outsiders. Importantly, Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung (2021, n.p.) pointedly emphasize the need to "Decolonize Burma Studies!" away from a White gaze but also from Bamar-centred and male-dominated scholarship. They further criticize the "transportations of white Western feminism in the Global South like Burma", which "ignore the countries' colonial histories and their current internal neocolonial practices". Along similar lines, Tharaphi Than (2021) challenges the Western donor-driven, mostly urban-based feminist interventions during the 'pseudo-democratic' (Aye Lei Tun 2023) pre-2021 era, with its stipulation to make a previously less easily visible (especially from a Western gaze) Burma/Myanmar feminism not only more observable but also part of a universal feminism based in individualism rather than collective liberation. This both undermined the unique specificities of a historically embedded, culturally shaped 'feminism' and simultaneously reinforced the detachment from ethnic women movements and other important intersectional issues arising from struggles of farmers (e.g. land rights) or garment workers (e.g. fair wages) (see Tharaphi Than 2021). If we can take away anything from a careful intersectional analysis of and activism for Burma/Myanmar, I would argue that it is exactly this countering of universalization while striving for collective (yet differentiated) liberation.

With that, I want to return to the symbolism of the *Three Finger Salute* that this analysis emerged from. Within the online sphere, we can trace a flood of depictions of it, for it is still used as a clear signifier for protest across the region. What is the significance of this for refining our understanding of relational solidarities? In its symbolism we are reminded of transboundary alliances across the region, including neighbouring Thailand. Simultaneously, it relates itself and comes paired with the clenched fist, representing connectivity across movements. Yet, one should abstain from making

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oversimplified, romanticized claims of solidarity, especially against Burma/Myanmar's complex and multi-layered history, as well as the multifaceted transboundary relations that both need attention while moving towards a different, more just future.

With this in mind, I want to draw our attention to Figure 3, which connects the *Three Finger Salute*, a symbol that emerged out of related resistances, with another recurrent symbol of the Spring Revolution, the *htamain*, which emerged from the very particularities of vernacular experiences.

Figure 3   BlackDesign. 2021. Digital protest art. Reproduced with kind permission and courtesy of the artist

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3.2 Mobilizing Local Particularities within the *Htamain* Revolution

Other than the *Three Finger Salute*, the *htamain* (i.e. a sarong/women's garment) is far less universally comprehensible as a symbol for resistance. This brings us even closer to how oppression and resistance function within the particularities of Burma/Myanmar. Let us start by taking a look at the following quote by Bamar writer Pyae Moe Thet War, who engages with the standing of women within 'Myanmar culture':

> I don't want to make the blanket statement that Myanmar culture hates women, but it doesn't love us, not unconditionally, and sometimes it seems like it will respect other men before it respects its own women. (Pyae Moe Thet War 2022, 38)

There are several things that need to be unpacked here. To start with, while this quote may seem universally adoptable, it is important to stress its situatedness within the cultural, socio-political context of Burma/Myanmar, including against certain interpretations of the concept of ဘုန်း (*hpone*) against specific Theravada Buddhism-based traditions within Burma/Myanmar to which this quote refers and which I will engage with below. This concept has been powerfully appropriated to resist the 'junta' within the ထဘီ (*htamain*/sarong) revolution by hanging women's *htamains* on ropes over the streets as temporary roadblocks and as a means of epitomizing strength and victory, as indicated in the digital artwork by the artist kuecool **[fig. 4]**.

Considering that the *htamain* has become a strong symbolic representation of localized contemporary resistance, it is worth unpacking not only what *hpone* is (in order to understand how it has been reappropriated), but importantly what it does within and across different sets of subject positions. The concept of ဘုန်း (*hpone*) – in its contemporary dominant iteration – can be understood as the socio-culturally embedded belief in a supposedly innate superiority of cisgender men over women. It is a quality, which men are contemporarily said to be born with and which is described by Than Than Nwe as

> a highly abstract quality that has no practical relevance. It gives men the advantage of a special status, higher than that of women. Having hpon is having hpon, not much else. But losing hpon is wrought with unknown dangers. Thus, at the spiritual level, the position of Burmese women fares badly [based against the] belief in the attainment of Buddhahood as possible only for a male and the pollutive effects of women on men's hpon. (2003, 7)

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Figure 4 kuecool "Our Longyi ⚡ Our Flag ⚡ Our Victory 🏳️🏴". 2021. Digital protest art.
Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CMHharAFT-2bfYvX5lFgi_KNfKehDVS9XNkumw0/.
Reproduced with kind permission and courtesy of the artist

Within this superiority of men over women, this particular (if hegemonic) interpretation of ဘုန်း (*hpone*) includes the assumption that a man's *hpone* may be diminished by women in multiple ways, with real material consequences for everyday life. As such, it defines women's place in society as based in a spatial hierarchy where a woman is not to inhabit (physically and thus metaphorically) higher places than men when sleeping or sitting, and regulates participation in specific religious practices, like the in/ability to touch Buddha statues or enter certain areas in pagodas.[12] Moreover, the gendered storing and washing of clothes has been engrained in the (crumbling?) majority of society.[13]

While a detailed historical analysis of this concept is beyond the scope of this paper,[14] the ways in which *hpone* has evolved across time and space illuminate how it has become instrumentalized. As

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[12] Important crossovers of religious-based constructions include, for instance, gendered restrictions based on women's supposed impurity or regarding merit-making; these are found in other spaces across Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia in similar yet distinct ways (see, e.g., Falk 2007).

[13] For a comprehensive analysis of *hpone* and the *htamain* revolution, see also Marlar, Chamers, Elena (2023).

[14] See Khin Mar Mar Kyi (2012) for a detailed analysis of how *hpone* has historically evolved and Tharaphi Than (2021; 2014) on the deep historical entanglement of women's mobilization with the independence movement and the nationalist cause.

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Tharaphi Than (2021) suggests, the women's movement in Burma/Myanmar cannot be understood disconnected from the independence movement; rather, any causes of the Bamar women's movement have stood in the shadow of the nationalist cause. Within this independence climate, Khin Mar Mar Kyi (2012, 119) traces the emergence of an othering where *hpone* "became a political tool to express Burman inherent [racial] superiority over the colonial rulers" creating a "new ideology of nationalism [...] using the idea of hpon as extended to the whole nation". Following independence, during different phases of military rule, *hpone* was mis/used by those in power and morphed to "become increasingly nationalised, Burmanised, and sexualised (masculinised)" (107).

Against this brief historical reading, we can see how *hpone* has been instrumentalized, not only to manifest a 'simple' superiority of men over women but to (re)create a 'matrix of domination', in Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) sense. In order to make this more approachable, let us return to the question what *hpone* does[15] against an intersectional reading. Two processes are of importance here. The first is how *hpone* has been used to homogenize certain groups of people in delimination vis-à-vis others (e.g. (cis)men vs women*; Buddhists vs non-Buddhists; Bamars vs Others; nationals vs non-nationals) in order to create hierarchies based on these categorizations.[16] While these dualist categories are easy to dismantle (and indeed this is at the core of much intersectional resistance), they have real material consequences, as we have seen. Furthermore, beyond the immediate structures of discrimination emerging from these, they have – and this brings me to my second point – shaped social relations in their totality (Vergès 2017). As such, they have moulded not only those in positions of discrimination but also those who inhabit a hetero cis-gender male (Bamar) Buddhist position within society – albeit in incomparably different ways. This becomes relevant when we now turn to evaluating the *htamain* revolution's potential to forge relational solidarities.

Taking a closer look at the ထဘီ (*htamain*) revolution emphasizes some important nuances within this action: namely, the *htamain* used as a specific protest strategy and the dismantling of the structures that make this usage possible in the first place. In an article

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15 I borrow this from Sara Ahmed's (2014) analysis of what emotions *do* (rather than what they *are*). While *hpone* is not an emotion, I believe it to be a helpful inquiring including as certain emotions seem to stick to *hpone* in interesting ways that would benefit from further probing.

16 At this point we may also have to critically question Pyae Moe Thet War's introductory statement, which needs a more explicit articulation regarding which situations (that is, involving which group of other men) women are less respected in. One could equally ask, what does the categorization of 'its own women' (Pyae Moe Thet War 2022) imply?

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entitled *Women fight the dual evils of dictatorship and patriarchal norms in Myanmar*, Khin Khin Mra comments on the hanging of *htamains* as barricades:

> Images of security forces trying to remove these htamain shared on social media show that this strategy challenges deep-seated misogynistic/patriarchal beliefs held by the military, and demonstrate that the htamain has been turned into an empowering symbol of resistance. (2021, n.p.)

We can follow Audre Lorde's (1993, 112) famous elaboration of how "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" when looking at the ထဘီခံတပ် (*htamain* barricades). By serving as a protest tool that can (following Bohrer 2022, 79) be positioned within harm-reduction politics and as such does show "strength [in] its actionable immediacy" – namely, in slowing down the security forces – it still plays under the rules invented by the master (i.e. the risk of losing *hpone* by walking under women's clothes). If we follow Audre Lorde's prefigurative politics (see Bohrer 2022), we have to acknowledge that the connections between the *htamain* as a protest tool and the dismantling of patriarchal and misogynistic beliefs are more complex – and indeed more fragile – for the master's tools "may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 1993, 112). This is far from implying that these tactics were not powerful, both in their immediacy and in allowing for radically different futures to be envisioned. To be clear, the symbolic acts of the *htamain* revolution carry the potential – and have already contributed – to open up radical changes and demands; however, as with any symbolic act, there is no guarantee.

The lens of relational solidarities asks us to also pay attention to those who are made by *hpone* while inhabiting a position of 'privilege'. As Bohrer (2019, 258) makes clear, not being oppressed by a specific form of oppression

> does not mean we have not been made by it. What is often called 'privileged' is in reality this molding, a conditioning that shapes certain groups to be comfortable with exploitation and oppression, to be unable to see it, to be unable to see how it has been present at every step, in every moment of our lives as well.

Without meaning to conflate experiences, the making of men under *hpone* comes with its own harms of living in a system of toxic masculinity, with certain expectations attached to one's identity position. As a case in point, let us remember Than Than Nwe's (2003, 7) quote on how "losing hpon is wrought with unknown dangers". What does this imply, then, when men are wearing *htamain* wrapped around their

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heads? I agree with Jane Ferguson (2023, 10), who states that "to stake a claim not to believe in hpon is a different act than calling out others' sexist behavior" and that it may carry stigmatism towards others who do believe in *hpone*. The underlying meanings and motivation of this action would need further empirical exploration and are dependent upon the particularities of specific subject positions. In addition to asking what *hpone* is (or is not) for any individual, an analysis of underlying structures of oppression may be addressed by questioning what *hpone* does to re/create forms of privilege and discrimination across time and space. Tracing the 'matrix of domination' that *hpone* inhabits, can give insights into the ways life becomes moulded under (a contemporary iteration of) *hpone* including for those in privileged positions. Thereby, it can showcase that "toxic masculinity is so named because it is toxic not only to those who are not men, but precisely also *for* men" (Bohrer 2019, 259). This also highlights the deeply interwoven relationality of a patriarchal dictatorship – that is, without abolishing the one, one cannot be freed of the other – as the 2021 attempted coup so painfully exemplified. As such, within the context of Burma/Myanmar, gender (and related categorizations) cannot be understood detached from an understanding of *hpone* – both what it *is* and what it *does* across time and space – which in turn cannot be understood detached from its historical evolution, including its connection to the independence movement and the nationalist cause.

Within this section, I have employed visual representations (i.e. protest art) emerging from the revolution to bring them into conversation with insights from the intersectional tradition to show how symbols qua cues – manifested in the Burma/Myanmar context for instance within the *Three Finger Salute* and the *htamain* – can help us trace systems of oppressions *and* potential alliances across space and time. In the next concluding section, I draw upon these insights to examine how relational solidarities may be a fruitful way to think about a future liberated Burma/Myanmar.

4 Relational solidarities and the imagining of a future Burma/Myanmar

> As social movement studies have often suggested, the effects of contentious waves [of protests] are complex, never fully meeting the aspirations of those who protest, but rarely leaving things unchanged. (della Porta 2016, 3)

Looking at the evolution of the 2021 Spring Revolution since 1 February 2021, it appears obvious that 'things' will never be the same in Burma/Myanmar. Those who have and continue to follow and/or

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live through it are aware of the violence inherent in this revelation across all fabrics of society. Indeed, as I hope to have shown through my analysis, the patriarchal, racist, heterosexist* system as represented within the 'junta' – in its historical continuation of previous dictatorships – has and continues to affect all peoples of Burma/Myanmar, albeit in highly differentiated ways (see also Thirteen 2024). Through an intersectional conversation with a range of symbolic cues as represented within protest art, I have attempted to sketch parts of this 'matrix of domination' that structures so much of contemporary life. At the same time, I have suggested how through the 2021 Spring Revolution we can start to trace relational solidarities working towards radical liberation. This is not to say that these are inevitable or that everyone is working towards a future that allows for multiplicity to exist in 'unity'. However, I do believe that the insights from the intersectional tradition that I have explored above may serve as a constructive thread when thinking about contemporary resistance in Burma/Myanmar, its historical legacies, and a future that moves beyond the common enemy and aims to dismantle all the intersecting oppressions that uphold domination.

To be clear, I argue here that Burma/Myanmar is at a critical crossroads of forming new – and at times previously unthinkable – alliances based around the experiences of contemporary violence induced by the 'junta' following the 2021 attempted coup. The very quality of these alliances and the imaginaries for a future liberated Burma/Myanmar emerging from them is ultimately bound by understanding how the oppressions under the 'junta' are not only a renewed iteration of historically grown violences that have been present all along (including in the form of Burmanization, coloniality, decades of civil war, the Rohingya genocide, and patriarchal violence, amongst others) at the 'fringes' of society. Indeed, they have shaped and made all of society (in critically and incommensurably different ways, depending on one's relative situatedness of privileges and/or discriminations). In this article, I have thus suggested that insights from the intersectional tradition allow for a better understanding of these structures and processes while providing a unique comprehension of relational solidarities based in "unity, not uniformity" (Bohrer 2019, 254). I argue that such an understanding can not only be brought into fruitful conversation with the particularities of the multiplicities Burma/Myanmar is made of but also when working towards a future liberated society.

Understanding this paper as an interim insight – a snapshot – future research may or may not find it useful to build upon some of these thoughts, for instance, through in-depth interviews with activists or in the form of a detailed embedding in or re-reading of histories. There is no way of knowing what future institutional arrangements will look like; however, as Donatella della Porta (2016, 349)

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argues, what actually changes through revolutions "is much more than preferences – rather, those very identities that precede preferences are built". In this sense, looking at imaginaries that have been unveiled – importantly including those that ask questions ultimately targeting underlying structures of domination/oppression within society – there is real potential for a future grounded in more radical liberation. There is hope – at the very least – as shown in an important and inspiring insight from the *School of Arts' Manifesto*, which epitomizes the ability to critically observe and creatively imagine a future based in multiplicity:

> This is a call to establish approaches to art, history and theory true to the realities of our condition. [...] The shapes of our societies are not made of polar opposite ends but of triangles, circles, squares and hearts. Abolish the dichotomies. [...] A country without proper support and understanding for arts, culture, and research will always be vulnerable and insecure. We demand a respectable place for artists, thinkers and scholars in the new [Myanmar] [Burma] [?]. (School of Arts – Spring University Myanmar 2022, 21)

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Resistance Through Mothering and Care Work Under the Philippine "War on Drugs"

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Abstract   This study sheds light on the motherist community initiatives which emerged as a response to the state-sanctioned extrajudicial killings under President Rodrigo Duterte's 'war on drugs'. This research examines the role of motherhood in the formation of the political and moral agency of grandmothers, mothers, and widows whose loved ones have been victims of the drug war. By analyzing the mothers' stories of resistance located in three community initiatives, this article posits that motherhood has served as a liberating force in the face of state attacks against women, their families, and homes. Furthermore, this study attempts to argue the transformation of mothering and the collectivization of care work – a reaction to the crisis of care exacerbated by the gendered impact of the Philippine drug war.

Keywords   Philippines. War on drugs. Duterte. Motherhood. Social movement.

Summary   1. Background. – 2. The Politics of Mothering. – 3. Methodology: Women's Narratives of 'felt Suffering'. – 4. Findings: From Drug War Victims to 'Women Warriors'. – 4.1. Rise Up for Life and Rights and Its Legal Support. – 4.2. Project Sow and Its Livelihood Programs. – 4.3 *Baigani* and Its Psychosocial Interventions. 5. – Analysis: Mothers in the Frontline against the Drug War. – 5.1. The Impact of the Drug War on Women. – 5.2. Resistance in Its Multiple Forms. – 5.3. Mother's Agency and Faith. – 6. Conclusion.

1 Background

The gendered impact of President Rodrigo Duterte's 'war on drugs'[1] has been overlooked in both policymaking and scholarly literature. The human costs of the drug war go beyond the 12,000 to 30,000 fatalities estimated by the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Ratcliffe 2021a). According to the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (2018), "an EJK death does not end the human rights violation... it is an inciting incident to a host of interrelated negative conditions that have gravely undermined the economic and social rights of the families left behind". As the *Oplan Tokhang*, the flagship anti-drugs campaign of the Duterte administration killed male breadwinners in urban poor communities, women are left behind to carry the multiple burdens of taking care of their children and grandchildren and providing for their families (Pangilinan et al. 2021). The widespread impact of the drug war ranges from elderly mothers and widows of EJK victims struggling to afford funeral and burial costs to children dropping out of school due to lack of financial support, bullying, and trauma (Pangilinan et al. 2021; PhilRights 2018). For Dionisio (2020), the gendered violence that the drug war has inflicted on women has turned them into the "new underclass among the urban poor" (v).

Through this research, I highlight the plight of grandmothers, mothers, and widows who have suffered the loss of their loved ones from the drug war. I aim to examine the ways in which these women have fought back and mobilized against state-sanctioned violence. This study builds on and stems from my previous work (Marcaida 2021) on the grassroots movement of urban poor mothers against drug-related violence in the Philippines, similarly employing the 'motherist' framework (Howe 2006; Schirmer 1989; 1993) that approaches motherhood as a social construct as opposed to the universalist and essentialist underpinnings of maternalism as a framework (Ruddick 1989).

The narratives and experiences of women directly affected by the *Oplan Tokhang* will be drawn from three selected community initiatives, each emphasizing various services for the victims. These initiatives include the legal support of Rise Up for Life and for Rights,[2] the livelihood programs of Project Solidarity for Orphans and Widows

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[1] Former President Duterte launched his electoral campaign for the highest elective position during the 2016 elections, promising to eradicate the country's illegal drug problem within three to six months. The self-proclaimed deadline was not met as Duterte's six-year term ended with the continued operations of the illegal drug trade within the country and thousands of human rights violations associated with the controversial policy.

[2] Rise Up for Life and for Rights is hereafter referred to as Rise Up.

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(SOW),[3] and the psychosocial rehabilitation offered by *Baigani*, all of which are directed toward the protection of families of EJK victims. The selection of cases was based on two aspects: first, those that emerged as a reaction to the violence caused by the drug war, and second, those that are directed toward addressing the needs and welfare of left-behind families of EJK victims. In analyzing these three community initiatives, I raised three questions. First, what are the effects of *Oplan Tokhang* on women in targeted communities? Second, what strategies and services do these community initiatives provide to address the needs of families of EJK victims? And last, in what ways do these women through the community initiatives resist the drug-related violence brought by the drug war?

I seek to forward two primary arguments. First, as the 'war on drugs' disrupts, harasses, and violates a woman's household and family, motherhood becomes a catalyst for political resistance. And second, the expansion of care work through the collectivization of mothering within the community initiatives serves as a response to both the state-sponsored killings of poor men accused of drug use and the state abandonment of the duty to protect the rights and welfare of women and children. Evidence to support these arguments will be drawn from the women's personal narratives and experiences from three selected community initiatives. My analysis is informed by a decolonial feminist approach following Million's (2009) "felt analysis" of the "emotional content" of "felt knowledge" (58) derived from the "individual and collective experiential pain as point of analysis" (71), as manifested in various forms, such as testimonies, interviews, social media posts, poetry, prayers, and protest actions.

The nature of this study is exploratory and constrained with limitations in terms of analysis and data. Further and extensive research can be conducted to determine the role of religion in transforming women's participation, given the religious nature of the community initiatives covered in this study. The Latin American 'marianismo' as a gender role script can be analyzed in the context of the rise of motherist movements in the Philippines.[4] Deeper analysis can also be pursued to examine the gendered understandings of the concept of justice.

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3 Earlier reports covering Project SOW referred to it as Project Support for Orphans and Widows.

4 The politicization of *marianismo* by the Rise Up mothers has been the focus of my ongoing research (Marcaida 2023) and the development of my dissertation project.

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2 The Politics of Mothering[5]

'Mothering' is defined as the practice of nurturing and caring for another (Glenn 1994) for the fulfillment of the demands of maternal work: "preservation, growth, and social acceptability" (Ruddick 1989, 17). Motherhood has been an essential resource for peace politics (de Alwis 2009), citizenship (Werbner 1999), and social justice (Lemaitre 2016). However, its deployment as a source and instrument of political resistance has been problematized. Existing literature has explored the tensions between the conservative nature and radical potential of mothering and being a mother. I have framed these opposing viewpoints in my previous study as 'motherist' and 'maternalist' politics to denote the opposing views on motherhood (Marcaida 2021). The former, drawn from Howe's (2006) "motherist tradition" and Schirmer's (1989; 1993) 'motherist movements', refers to the "historically and culturally variable relationship" of motherhood (Glenn 1994, 3). The latter is grounded on difference feminism and essentialism (O'Reilly 2016).

In analyzing motherhood and its role in community participation and volunteerism, I adopt the 'motherist' lens by approaching the mothering practice and role as social constructs and reconciling traditional motherhood with political resistance (Marcaida 2021). According to Schirmer (1993), the cultural essentialism ingrained in maternalism is drawn from an "anti-militarist model of mothering within 'politically stable' states" (59). Hence, maternalism dismisses contexts, such as the prevalence of state violence in the Philippines under the Duterte administration, in which repressive circumstances necessitate the politicization of motherhood (Schirmer 1993).

Instead of viewing women's volunteer activity as liberating women while keeping them in place (Kaminer 1984), this research perceives extending the mothering practice through community participation as enabling the transformation of the traditional 'mother' role beyond the confines of domesticity (Pardo 1990) and allowing for the negotiation of gender roles without sacrificing their moral identity and authority as mothers (Abrahams 1996). By allowing both the accommodation and resistance to traditional gender roles (Stephen 1997), feminist analysis can avoid relegating motherhood and mothering to the subordinate end (Glenn 1994) and being trapped into 'false duality' associated with the Western feminist lens (Schirmer 1993, 60).

Furthermore, I employ Naples' (1992) concept of 'activist mothering', which challenged the essentialist interpretations of 'maternal practice' and 'maternal work' (see Ruddick 1989). Naples (1992), in

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5 The section builds on and extends the discussion from the literature review found in my initial study (Marcaida 2021).

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her study on African-American and Latina women's community work in low-income neighborhoods, used the term 'activist mothering' in defining how the women expanded their mothering practices beyond their own kinship group and in all actions to address the needs of their communities, including their children (448). The women's acts of resistance and experience in their community work "defined the dominant definition of *motherhood* as emphasizing work performed within the private sphere of the family or in face-to-face interaction with those in need" (449, emphasis in original).

I seek to contribute to the scholarship on the politics of motherhood in the Global South. While research on mother-based movements has been abundant in Global South studies, limited attention has been given to Asia and specific regions, such as Southeast Asia. Significant works that have been written include De Alwis' (2009) research on the feminist peace activism in Sri Lanka where describes the collective mobilization of maternalism as having the "seemingly unquestionable authenticity of these women's grief and espousal of 'traditional' family values," which allowed for the opening up of an "important space for protest at a time when feminist and human rights activists… were being killed with impunity" (84). Yang (2017) also wrote on Taiwanese women's participation in the Sunflower Movement where she argued the radical potential of maternalism contrary to the critique of its irredeemable conservatism. Both works, however, approach motherhood from a maternalist framework, which I seek to interrogate and challenge in my previous (Marcaida 2021) and ongoing research.

By writing on the mothers of the Philippine drug war, I seek to contribute and engage with the works written on motherhood that touch on the complicated and dynamic relationship between the moral worth of traditional motherhood and the strategic use of its political, social, and cultural value in the Southeast Asian context. For instance, Bolotta (2017), in his work on the leadership of Thai slum mothers' mobilization against eviction, argued how traditional gendered representations of mothers have served as valuable and productive political resources that enabled them to be in ideal positions surrounding the non-governmental organizations (NGO) discourses on childhood rights in the face of political and economic marginality. He touched on the strategic value of mothers' privileged relationship with children and the matrifocal nature of local family structures in establishing political alliances with both national and international actors. Works on motherhood have also been written in the Philippines, albeit not focusing on mother-based leadership and participation in social movements. In Parmanand's (2021) study, she analyzed how microcredit has reshaped Filipino mothers' relationship with their families, poverty, and the state, challenging the neoliberal discourse of female empowerment by demonstrating how

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microcredit further entrenches burdens on women as it regulates motherhood on the moral basis of their willingness and ability to uplift their families from poverty. Gacad (2020) also studied the meaning and performance of good motherhood among urban poor women in the Philippines in relation to reproductive freedom and sexuality by arguing how sexuality and motherhood, even when shaped by patriarchal structures and material conditions, can serve as potent sites in challenging capitalist and patriarchal control over women's identities, bodies, and desires.

I intend to contribute to the scholarship of motherhood in the Philippines by demonstrating how traditional motherhood values, roles, and practices often deemed as oppressive and confining can serve as sites for radical resistance and empowerment through the study of Filipina mothers who have transformed from being victims of the drug war to women warriors fighting for justice and accountability. Through the framework of 'activist mothering', I argue the transformation of mothering and expansion of care work in response to Duterte's 'war on drugs', which both inflicted gendered violence against women and produced a crisis of care in society.

I also seek to engage in the scholarship surrounding the gendered rule of the Duterte administration. Several studies have focused on the masculinist rhetoric that accompanied the leadership of Duterte. Discourse analyses written by scholars have focused on his campaign and presidential speeches to understand the reasons behind the widespread support and popularity of his rule. Encinas-Franco (2022) wrote about the gendered rhetoric and practice employed by Duterte in governing Filipino migrants. Lanuza (2022) highlighted Duterte's misogynistic microassaults against strong women in his public speeches, describing how it contributed to the consolidation of his 'misogynist fascist power' while reinforcing the traditional sex roles imposed on women, such as "passivity, obedience, and docility" (143). Conversely, other studies paid attention to the emerging resistant discourses that challenge Duterte's rule, such as Ladia (2024) who highlighted the grassroots feminist rhetoric found in the public addresses of opposition leader and former Vice President Leni Robredo during the COVID-19 pandemic that promoted inclusive policies to address the impact of the virus. I seek to join the conversations surrounding the gendered order imposed by Duterte, focusing not on masculinist rhetoric that bolstered his populist rule but the acts of resistance of non-sovereign subjects, the urban poor families and women who have been harmed by Duterte's policies and who have sought to go against both the rhetoric and policy that has targeted and demonized their communities.

3 Methodology: Women's Narratives of 'Felt Suffering'

I approach the study on the gendered impact of the Philippine 'war on drugs' from a decolonial feminist lens. This research analyzes the stories of resistance of the mothers of drug victims by looking at and listening to the individual stories and actions, including the collective and concerted practices of resistance that reflect the shared and communal experiences and struggles of the women – the once silent victims speaking up against Duterte's drug violence.

The findings of this study are derived from three case studies – Rise Up, Project SOW, and *Baigani* – through the stories of mothers who are part of the community initiatives. These groups serve as the unit of analysis of this study. While other organizations with similar causes have long been established, this study is limited only to these groups with their distinct community services created from the outset of *Oplan Tokhang*, responding to the needs of impoverished communities targeted by the policy. Moreover, while there are other cases that sprung as a reaction to the drug war sharing the same objective as the cases covered in this study, I have specifically selected the three cases as the evident depiction, highly visible, and well-documented representation of the varying facets of state failure and neglect in protecting vulnerable groups which have been taken up by these civil society initiatives. Additionally, the study focused on the three cases for their distinct yet overlapping objectives and interconnected mobilizations.

The qualitative data come from transcripts of public interviews, social media posts, and artistic outputs made public by the mothers. The women's narratives are augmented with supporting information from the posts on the community initiatives' Facebook pages and public interviews with founders and church leaders. In the aspect of confidentiality, the use of all information and interviews are drawn from publicly available sources, most of which have been featured in multiple mainstream media outlets and online public platforms. While most of the names mentioned in this study are pseudonyms, the others have been disclosed by the individuals themselves in various public and political contexts, which in itself serves as a courageous act of resistance in going against the rampant attacks on free speech witnessed under the Duterte administration.

The decision to rely on publicly available data was made to adjust to the resource constraints and movement limitations brought by the COVID-19 pandemic when the study was conducted. The use of secondary material in conducting a narrative analysis, however, while allowing an expansive look at the workings of the groups and the testimonies of its members, presents certain caveats and weaknesses. For instance, social media posts may have been edited by people other than the stated author. Given such limitations, future research

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undertakings are necessary to take an in-depth look into specificities of individual experiences of the mothers and the commonalities that they all share.

The method of this study is informed by the decolonial feminist and queer scholarship that considers "emotions as an embodied knowledge" (Million 2009, 71).[6] Specifically, this study follows Million's (2009) framework of felt theory in understanding the lived experiences of mothers who suffered from drug violence by looking into the emotional knowledge found in individual and collective stories found in interviews, prayers, posts, and poetry, among others. Million focused on Canadian First Nation women's political resistance through the first-person and experiential narrative on the racialized, sexual, and gendered nature of settler colonialism. Through 'felt analysis', she analyzed the works of Indigenous women and the impact of their scholarship in creating the language of native communities that reveals the history of their own people through their lived experiences grounded in rich emotional knowledge. The use of experiential narratives as evidential sources of knowledge significantly informs the ways in which my research on the gendered impacts of the drug war have been felt by urban poor women who have suffered the most under the policy. The act of 'telling' strongly relates with the acts of resistance of the mothers I focus on in this study, as regards their use of testimonies in sharing their grief, anger, pain, and hopes as a way of speaking truth to power and exposing the harsh reality of the 'war on drugs'. This study seeks to recognize the value of personal stories as felt knowledge, testimonies that carry the "emotionally-laden affective force to transcend the individual's experience", thus becoming collective stories (Million 2014, 32).

Finally, my positionality as a Filipina researcher currently undergoing academic training in Western academia has significantly influenced the pathways of research that I decided to pursue, privileging theoretical frameworks that reflect the complexity of the link between patriarchy, religion, and motherhood in conflict-ridden societies while critically interrogating feminist representations from the Global North that fail to capture the cultural nuances and material conditions found in the Global South, such as in the Philippines. Moreover, this research involves the interpretation of findings from

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[6] Part of the decolonial task of this study is to problematize the colonial conceptions of motherhood shaped by Catholicism and patriarchy. In line with Lugones' (2010) call "toward a decolonial feminism" I explore initially in this study and in more detail in my ongoing research the 'coloniality of gender' in the Philippine context, finding the ways in which resistors challenge their "colonized, racially gendered, and oppressed existences" (746). I examine this in the agency exercised by mothers in their use of religious, traditional, and conservative ideals of motherhood to legitimize their political actions as human rights activists under the Philippine drug war.

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the evidential narratives of the mothers that are greatly constrained by my position as a middle-class researcher who has not been directly impacted by drug violence. Despite the limitations brought by my positionality as a researcher, I hope to shed light on the stories of the mothers, highlighting the feminist and radical nature of their activism anchored on motherhood and the mother's far-reaching love for their families, their community, and the entire Philippine society.

4　Findings: From Drug War Victims to 'Women Warriors'

The discussions in this section are dedicated to three case studies: the legal support of Rise Up, the livelihood programs of Project SOW, and the psychosocial rehabilitation of *Baigani*. The backgrounds of the civil society movements are discussed, focusing on the strategies and services they deliver for the women affected by the drug war. The narratives of women on how their families have dealt with the brunt of the drug war are also presented, highlighting the ways in which they resisted *Oplan Tokhang*.

4.1　Rise Up for Life and Rights and Its Legal Support

The first case this study seeks to analyze is the Rise Up alliance initiated by the Roman Catholic Church, the United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ (Stoner 2017).[7] The group serves as a network of human rights advocates, religious groups, and families of the victims of EJKs. Through the Rise Up alliance with the legal counsel of the National Union of People's Lawyers (NUPL), the mothers found the courage to protest against police corruption and violence (Lumibao 2017), file cases against the perpetrators before the Ombudsman (Marquez 2019), and forward a complaint against President Duterte before the International Criminal Court (Gavilan 2018).

　　Along with the six mothers first to publicly file a petition to the ICC is *Lola*[8] Llore, a massage therapist who became an activist for Rise Up after her two sons were executed and thereafter accused of

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[7]　Religion has played a significant and powerful role in the history of Philippine politics. The union between the Catholic Church and the state marked the Spanish colonial rule which was thereafter replaced by a secular rule under the American occupation. This paved the way for the proliferation of other churches apart from the Catholic Church and their pluralistic participation in Philippine politics. An important episode in the history of church-state relations is the People Power Movement of 1986, leading to the end of the Marcos dictatorship, which the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations mobilized to overthrow.

[8]　*Lola* is the Tagalog word for grandmother.

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being robbers who fought back against the police (Ratcliffe 2021b). As Lola Llore mourned her loss, she suffered economic hardships and intimidation from the police. In one of Rise Up's (2021) newsletters, she shared:

> Life is more difficult now. I have to look after my grandchildren and I still have to work, despite my age. Even though my sons were killed in 2017, the police still come and look for them in our place, sowing worry and fear in the family. (4)

While Lola Llore is aware that the pursuit of justice will be a long fight, she expressed that she must show courage and present her testimony in order to win the struggle. Moreover, in one of her public posts shared on Facebook, Lola Llore remembers her sons with the caption, "They tried to bury us. They did not know we were seeds" as she wore a "Stop the Killings" shirt and face mask that say, "I am Juan Carlos" and "I am Crisanto" (Pasco 2021).

Together with Lola Llore is Emily, a community leader in Caloocan who was initially in charge of reporting the drug dealings within the neighborhood to the police. However, when her 15-year-old son was killed during a drug raid and treated as collateral damage, she turned her back on Duterte's drug war, now actively working with Rise Up to seek justice for the killings (Agencia EFE 2018). According to her, "I used to be [a] simple mother. After the tragedy and with the support from advocates, I am now a fighting mother" (Rise Up 2021, 4). Emily always carries with her a folder containing photos of her son. She would show the photos every time she spoke with others who had lost family members due to *tokhang*, encouraging them to come forward and stand up against the killings (Qatar Tribune 2018). She added, "We want to show Duterte that we are working together and rising up against the violence". The mothers of Rise Up also collectively call for the end of the drug war. As stated in one of the public posts from the Rise Up (2022) Facebook page:

> The lives of the dead and their dreams will never be restored. From the very beginning, they knew that the WAR ON DRUGS was wrong – they were killing us poor people and they continued to do so left and right. The police did not even take action on the countless deaths... JUSTICE is what we want.

During a press conference of the Rise Up alliance, the United Methodist deaconess Norma Dollaga, one of the alliance conveners, stated that they would not ignore the killings of the poor and defenseless as they continue to document the cases of state killings (Mangiduyos 2017). The alliance also insisted "rehabilitation, counseling and community involvement" as the better way to address the drug problem

(Aurelio 2017). As Rise Up stands together with families in filing EJK cases, they declared in a statement that "Through court actions, Rise Up seeks to expose the evil being perpetrated upon the poor. We pray the courts will act with haste and show themselves as reliable venues for obtaining justice" (Nonato 2017).

The Rise Up mission also began from the collective efforts of priests and parishes in offering sanctuary to people involved in drugs who want to change their lives (Aurelio 2017). Within their network, religious groups provide other services such as counseling sessions, livelihood programs, and acupuncture sessions to drug addicts, while human rights groups provide training in documentation (Aurelio 2017). In addition, the alliance amplifies the campaign by mobilizing in protest actions (Nonato 2017).

4.2 Project SOW and Its Livelihood Programs

The second case study included in the analysis is Project SOW, an initiative focused on offering livelihood support to families of EJK victims. The community initiative was launched by the Vincentian priests and brothers, pastoral workers, and private groups and individuals in the Ina ng Lupang Pangako Parish, Payatas, Quezon City (Ladrido 2019). Livelihood programs through sewing production are offered to mothers and widows to ease their financial burden.

The mothers earn 250 pesos (about 5 US dollars) per day by creating household items and bags (Conde 2020). However, they struggle to be constantly present at work because they have to take care of their children and act as the sole breadwinners of their families (Ladrido 2019). According to Rhoda, one of the mothers working as a sewist:

> As a mother, I am unable to have a complete attendance in the livelihood program. I admit that, because sometimes, it cannot be avoided that my children get sick, and have problems in the household. There were times I am summoned at our barangay because I am a leader in our district. So, there were moments I cut my working hours. (Project SOW 2017)

Despite her struggles, she remains part of the livelihood program as it helps with her family's daily meals.

Apart from the difficulty in balancing responsibilities to their families, the mothers also shared the estrangement and stigma they experienced in their communities. Linda[9] mourned the death of her husband alone as she listened to the harsh words of her friends saying

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[9] An alias used by the media outlet GMA News and Public Affairs.

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that her husband, who had a history of drug use and selling, was a *salot* or pest in society deserving of death (GMA Public Affairs 2019). According to her, what hurt the most was how no one sympathized with the death of her husband, who – like anyone else – was a human being. She found comfort in the words of a Vincentian Father who expressed that despite what people said, her partner is still a "loving father and a loving husband" (GMA Public Affairs 2019). As she worked hard for her family's survival, she still lived in fear that the same fate might happen to herself and her seven children.

Cris[10] shares the same yearning as Linda – the understanding and acceptance of people, a second chance in life, especially for her husband, who was released from his two-year imprisonment due to drugs in 2016 (GMA Public Affairs 2019). However, after seven months, her husband disappeared and was killed on their daughter's birthday. The last time they saw him was when he left their home to look for money to buy cake. In that same interview, the daughter blamed herself, saying that if it were not for her, her father would still be alive today (GMA Public Affairs 2019). As for her mother, she expressed focusing on working hard to ensure that her children would finish their studies while holding onto her belief in God and that justice would be served.

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when mask supply was low, the mothers of Project SOW shifted their focus to sewing washable face masks. Father Pilario (2020), a member of the Vincentians, described how these women who were "once victims of armed men wearing face masks and bonnets who killed their husbands in EJK… now turned 'swords into plowshares' by helping us protect ourselves from COVID-19". The Office of the Vice President (OVP) under Leni Robredo[11] also cooperated with the sewists in the local production of personal protective equipment (PPE) suits and gowns (Robredo 2020). In addition, the women of SOW were behind the sewing of masks for Project *Busal* (AieBalagtasSee), whose mission was to "[un]mask human rights abuses, protect free speech and expression, and defend press freedom" through the creation of common Filipino sentiments stitched on "statement masks" (Project BUSAL 2020).

Apart from livelihood programs, Project SOW (n.d.) also provides psychosocial interventions and treatments for children and other family members suffering from trauma (Project SOW), similar to *Baigani*, which will be discussed further in the next section. Additionally, identical to the efforts of Rise Up, the project is also involved

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10 An alias used by the media outlet GMA News and Public Affairs.

11 Maria Leonor 'Leni' Robredo won the vice presidency in 2016. She served as a leader of the opposition under the Duterte administration, being a staunch critic of its bloody anti-drugs campaign. She ran as a presidential candidate during the 2022 Philippine Elections but lost against Ferdinand 'Bong Bong' Marcos Jr., who allied with the Dutertes and won by a landslide.

in documenting cases of EJKs and providing networks to legal and media groups as victims pursue accountability for the killings.

4.3 *Baigani* and Its Psychosocial Interventions

The last case included in the analysis is the women's group called *Baigani*. During the first year of the Duterte presidency, the community group was created to provide widows, mothers, and children of EJK victims psychosocial rehabilitation to process grief and share traumas in a safe space (Ladrido 2018). Baigani conducts a 'family camp' where they invite 10 to 12 families to go out of town for a series of therapy sessions (e.g., art therapy for children and laughing therapy for mothers) facilitated by licensed counselors (Ladrido 2018). Beyond the camp, the group supports families "to meet their food, education and livelihood needs, and helps empower mothers and children" (Baigani n.d.).

For Lea,[12] who resided in Caloocan and lost her husband to the drug war, *Baigani* became her new family, especially after her neighbors ignored and judged her after her husband's death (Lopez 2017). She said, "I almost went insane, that I even thought of ending my life, as well as my children's, to end our misery". Being with people who can relate to the same traumatic experience, she added, "For the first time, I am able to speak without others judging me. I am with people who understand me" (Lopez 2017). Grieving with other women who can understand the pain Lea has been harboring has become a source of strength and comfort for her, especially in a society and a government that has deprived the poor and accused of their right to live.

Oftentimes, mothers and widows of EJK victims are left with little to no time to grieve at all as they are immediately faced with the urgent responsibility of caring for the orphaned children. Lola Trining,[13] a grandmother aged 85, lost her youngest son to *tokhang* while her pregnant daughter-in-law was arrested in a 'palit-ulo' (exchange heads) scheme where the police would only release a relative in exchange for another person named in the drug list (Subingsubing 2017b). Due to the arrest and the killing, Lola Trining now finds herself responsible for the young lives of her seven grandchildren. According to her, "My grandchildren are the only reason I wake up in the morning. Without them I have no more reason to live". Furthermore, as she waits for her daughter-in-law to be released and for her son's killers to be arrested, "I leave it up to God to help us resolve this case

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[12] An alias used by the journalist Eloisa Lopez who covered this story and interview.

[13] An alias used by journalist Krixia Subingsubing who covered this story and interview.

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... I also ask forgiveness from Him for wishing that the (police), too, would experience the hell we've gone through" (Subingsubing 2017b). Through the support provided by *Baigani*, private individuals, and local church groups and the income she gets from selling street food, she is able to send the children to school and provide for daily needs.

To say that the drug war spares no one is untrue. The horrifying reality of *Oplan Tokhang* is that while it spares the rich and influential, it does not spare the youth and children. Olga,[14] a mother of six, while on her way to condole with another family of an EJK victim, witnessed her husband being shot by masked men in 2017 (Baigani Community 2018a). Despite the trauma, Olga and her children participated in protests to stand up for their rights and attended meetings on the actions families could take to seek justice. However, when her eldest son was diagnosed with leukemia, she had to work harder to pay for the treatment on top of caring for her six younger children. In 2018, Olga's son lost his battle against leukemia due to the lack of adequate and timely access to health care (Baigani Community 2018b). *Baigani* had stood with Olga during the death of her husband, supported her from the hospitalization of her son to his burial, and amplified the call for justice for both her husband and son.

5 Analysis: Mothers in the Frontline against the Drug War

5.1 The Impact of the Drug War on Women

The first question raised in this study is what are the effects of *Oplan Tokhang* on women in targeted communities? This research analyzed the narratives of mothers and widows of EJK victims who are part of three community initiatives: Rise Up, Project SOW, and *Baigani.* Across the stories of women, three interrelated and recurring themes emerged: *trauma, social exclusion, and worsened economic condition*. These themes coincide with the services and strategies provided by the three community initiatives: *legal support and documentation of killings, psychosocial rehabilitation and counseling, and financial assistance in the form of donation drives and livelihood programs*. These themes address the second question: what strategies and services do these community initiatives provide to address the needs of families of EJK victims?

The summary executions of husbands and sons have caused trauma among the women in this study. Even after the deaths of the men

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14 An alias used by *Baigani*.

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in their families, the mothers and widows continued to live in fear for their lives and their family members. In most times, these women were not even given the opportunity to grieve their loss as they were suddenly thrown into the harsh reality of being alone to care for their children and work for their survival. Furthermore, it is not only the women who suffer from trauma but also the children who lost their fathers to the drug war. A member of *Baigani* described how the drug war "is no different from conventional warfare as it, too, has created a nation of widows and orphans" (Subingsubing 2017a).

The trauma suffered by these women has further been exacerbated by the social exclusion they faced in their communities. The prohibitionist and punitive policy paradigm of the 'war on drugs' and the criminal rhetoric forwarded by former President Duterte to justify the killings have reinforced the stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs, which also shapes society's treatment towards left-behind families. Furthermore, the culture of violence and impunity during the peak of the killings enabled by Duterte's 'permission to kill' to the police (BBC News 2020) has compelled communities to completely shun and disassociate themselves from families with members named on the drug list and targeted by the police.

For Mercado, the founder of *Baigani*, "The deeper wound of our society is the numbness to the killings" (Gutoman 2021). She described this as the deterioration of the social fabrics that bind our communities: "When you suffer loss due to *Oplan Tokhang*, you will not feel the sympathy of the people around you because apart from trauma, the fear of other people, Tokhang is also stigmatized" (Gutoman 2021). These groups provide sanctuary to women suffering from collective trauma in a society that has shunned and abandoned them. Christine from *Baigani* shared how she became friends with her fellow widows, saying, "now we can joke around and talk about things other than our trauma" after she first narrated her husband's story to them as they shed tears from the shared pain (Lopez 2017). Furthermore, despite the difficulties in fighting for justice, she added, "while there is no justice for our loved ones yet, there is justice in the constant support we receive, because we draw from it our strength to fight" (Lopez 2017).

Apart from trauma and social exclusion, the women also suffer from economic conditions worsened by the deaths of the breadwinners of their families. Widows and grandmothers not only have to care for their children who experience trauma and bullying but must also desperately find sources of income for the survival of their families. The multiple burdens of caring and providing for the entire family placed on the lone shoulders of these women have led others to contemplate suicide, as seen in the case of Lea, who struggled with thoughts of ending her and her children's lives due to misery and hopelessness.

Without access to adequate health care to address the mental, emotional, and physical needs of the women and their children, community

initiatives such as Rise Up, Project SOW, and *Baigani* have stepped up to extend support in the form of psychosocial intervention and counseling, as well as financial assistance in the form of livelihood programs and donation drives. While these community initiatives can only go as far as the resources and political space will allow them to operate, they are fundamental in forging a safe space for these women who have suffered trauma, ostracization, and economic hardships.

The state's responsibility is to protect the welfare of women and children. The 'war on drugs' has done the opposite, resulting in a crisis of care. It has ruined the present and future of these families and aggravated the social and economic conditions that the women and children live in. According to Deaconess Dollaga from Rise Up, "It is the whole system of rottenness. The state could not deliver the best services to the people – the social justice, the social services. Poverty grips the jobless, the internal migrants, the poor" (Mangiduyos 2017). In the face of state aggression and neglect, civil society groups take on the duty to protect the oppressed and the marginalized, while grandmothers and mothers are driven to mobilize and assert their rights and seek justice.

According to Gilmore (1999), in her study of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC) in Los Angeles, grassroots organizing emerged in a hostile and bloody political climate that constituted the daily struggle of the mothers to reclaim their children by means of 'radical self-help', in which organizing strategies, grounded on mothering techniques that are extended beyond the traditional domestic spheres, are deployed in places where there is conflict (25). This radical self-help is evident from the ways in which the mothers of drug war victims resist drug violence and seek justice and accountability for the deaths of their loved ones.

5.2 Resistance in Its Multiple Forms

This study raised a third and final research inquiry: In what ways do these women, through the community initiatives, resist the drug-related violence brought by the drug war? The recurring themes of resistance that emerged from the narratives include *speaking truth to power, holding on to religion, and engaging in activism*.

The grandmothers and mothers resisted the killings and challenged the drug war rhetoric by speaking truth to power with the intent to raise awareness of the human rights violations and to expose the Duterte administration's 'war on drugs' to what it truly is – a "war against the poor" (Amnesty International 2017). As this study relied on the stories of women made publicly known and accessible to anyone, the act of telling and the decision to share their suffering with the public represented the courage mustered by these women to fight

for justice. Furthermore, mothers like Emily, who always carries with her photos of her son, encourage other victims to stand up and share their stories to call for solidarity and demand justice.

Mercado, the founder of *Baigani*, described how differently the women view justice: "Some are seeing it as judicial justice: there is trial, there is due process. While others, it is their stance. That they were able to say that the [drug war] was wrong and that the killings should stop" (Gutoman 2021). Speaking truth to power for these women – either through posts on social media, protest actions in the streets, testimonies in courts, and even in the form of poetry and dance – are manifestations of how there is strength in sharing the pain, grieving together, and fighting beside each other.

Normita, a mother of nine who joined Rise Up after losing her 23-year-old son, Djastin, from *tokhang*, felt the urge to draft a poem after listening to the indigenous people share their experiences of suffering from the summary executions in Mindanao (Espina-Varona 2017).[15] Entitled "Anak sa Sinapupunan ng Isang Ina" (Child in a Mother's Womb), the poem begins with the mother's joy of raising a child and witnessing them grow, only for the poem to narrate the abrupt end of her son's young life due to the drug war. The piece was Normita's way of speaking to her late son:

> Hindi bale anak, naging madali man ang ating pagsasama
>   Darating din ang panahon, tayo din ay magkakasama doon sa buhay na walang hanggan
>   Ako'y iyong hintayin at muli tayo'y magkikita

> Do not worry, son. While our union has been short
>   The time will come when we will be together again in eternal life
>   Wait for me and we will see each other again

The grief and pain of losing her son embodied in her poem end with a call for justice:

> At bago pa man lang pumikit ang aking mga mata,
>   Sana mabigyan na ng hustiya ang iyong pagkamatay, aking anak.

> And before I close my eyes,

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15   Under the Duterte administration, the Lumad (collective term for Indigenous peoples of Mindanao) suffered from military attacks leading to killings of Lumad leaders and children and the selling of their ancestral lands causing their forced removal from their homes and closing of schools (Tajon 2021).

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I hope justice will be served for your death, my son.
(Lopez 2017 as cited in Ramos 2019)

Normita filed murder charges against the Manila police for the killing of her son, who was an epileptic. She asserted, "He was frail. How could he be a killer?" (Espina-Varona 2017). After 16 months, in a rare instance, the judiciary decided in favor of the poor victim by ordering the filing of the murder case and the dismissal from service of the police officer who shot her son (Cayabyab 2019).

Art and performance served as channels for the mothers to speak truth to power, as well as to process their loss, grief, and healing, as seen in Normita, who now has a notebook of her own poetry that she shares with other families suffering the same loss (Espina-Varona 2018). Apart from poetry, the mothers of Rise Up also use theatrical performances to release their pain. Nel[16] was one of the dancers in a performance that centered on waiting for loved ones to come back home during a protest in Duterte's State of the Nation Address in 2017 (Umil 2017a). Upon losing her 28-year-old son from the drug war, she said "I am waiting for no one now. I am just waiting for justice". For her, performing helped release the pain she felt from losing her son and witnessing her 10-month-old grandson being orphaned. Despite the pain, she commits to helping his son's left-behind family for the rest of her life.

Religion and belief in God have been integral sources of comfort and strength for mothers who suffer from grief and loss. Religious groups have been fundamental in comforting and uniting these women, fostering sympathy, compassion, and forgiveness in a society with a government that refuses to recognize the humanity of drug users. According to United Methodist deaconess Dollaga, "We rise and hope for every life that was sacrificed in the name of terror against people. Resistance is a gift. Redemption and liberation is what we need. Justice will shepherd us through" (Mangiduyos 2017).

Religious rituals through novenas and vigils also serve as means to remember the lives lost and platforms to condemn the violence inflicted by the state. In 2017, *Baigani* held the 'Prayer vigil for the slain: All Saint's Day of Women' to support families sharing traumatic experiences (Lopez 2017). In the vigil, artists dedicated songs and poems, volunteers and supporters lit candles and prayed for the EJK victims, and the women were given candles placed on the altar as they recited the names of the people killed in the drug war. The candles lit in front of a glass box containing yellow chicks that feed on grains, a practice usually done on top of a crime victim's coffin representing the traditional belief that the chick's pecking would eat away the

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16 An alias used by journalist Anne Marxze Umil who covered this story and interview.

killer's conscience (Lopez 2017). Days before this, a novena was also organized by the EveryWoman human rights coalition, which *Baigani* is part of. A member described how the novena sought to recognize women's role as life-givers and "an important safeguard in the continuing deaths under the Duterte administration" (Subingsubing 2017b). Motherist resistance against the drug war is rooted in morality grounded in both religion and motherhood – the protection of life (Marcaida 2021). While the grueling pursuit of justice may be difficult, holding on to religion gives the women hope that justice will be served in God's time, as well as the strength to continue surviving for the sake of protecting their families.

The last remaining theme that emerged from the narratives of resistance is the engagement of the mothers in activism, who have been described as "fighting mother[s]" (Rise Up 2021, 4) and "women warriors" (Lopez 2017), capturing the meaning of "activist mothering" (Naples 1992, 442). With the lack of police action and slow pace of justice, the women of Rise Up took it upon themselves to volunteer to document the police killings and guard their villages (Umil 2017b).[17] The widows of Project SOW have sewn statement masks in support of political advocacies like Project *Busal* and produced masks and PPEs during the pandemic. Moreover, the three community initiatives with the mothers and widows also actively participated in the recent elections, campaigning for presidential candidate and former Vice President Leni Robredo, who was a staunch critic of Duterte's drug war.

Bolotta (2017), in his study of Thai slum mothers who have become "warrior mothers" as they held positions as social movement leaders, challenged the Western assumptions of motherhood as depoliticizing and confining to the domestic sphere by arguing that they can "become political actors outside the domestic space because of their role as mothers and by strategically adopting a local gender category highlighting the equivalence between womanhood and motherhood" (222). In the case of the mothers of drug war, the literal and figurative absence of men who have been targeted and killed by the drug war compelled women to mobilize against the state killings (Marcaida 2021), making them the strongest and legitimate voice as "human rights victims and claimants" (Racelis 2020, 1).

Despite the ultimate loss of Robredo and the landslide wins of now-President Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos together with his running mate and former presidential daughter, now-Vice President Sara Duterte, the mothers continue to mobilize to seek justice for the drug

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17   This study is limited by its lack of in-depth data on the extent and details of the documentation and village volunteer work done by the individual mothers of Rise Up. To read more on civilian night patrols led by mothers during the drug war, see my previous work on the grassroots initiative of Pateros mothers (Marcaida 2021).

killings. Lola Llore from Rise Up wrote a poem written in Tagalog entitled *Ang eleksyon at bayan* (*The Election and Nation*) that reflected the shared persevering love for the country despite the outcome of the election (Pasco 2022):

Aming samu't tanging dasal
    Sa poong Diyos nating mahal
    Ang mga taong inihalal
    Dinggin sana at lingapin
    Suliranin nitong bayan
    Huwag sanang ibasura
    Magagandang pinagmulan
    Nang sa gayo'y magagalak
    Pilipinas nating mahal.

Our only prayer
    To our loving God
    That the people who got elected
    Listen and care
    For the plight of the people
    Hoping it will not be put to waste
    The good things we achieved
    So that we can all rejoice
    Our beloved nation.

Llore closes her poem with a dedication: "Para sa lahat ng mga nanay na handing lumaban!" (To all of the mothers who are ready to fight!). It is a vow to collectively and fearlessly pursue the journey for justice across all the difficulties and victories it brings. According to her, she wrote her first poem "dedicated to the mothers, encouraging them not to be sad, because they are not alone, because there are many of us rising up" (Cayabyab 2019). She describes her poetry as a combination of their experiences. Her work constitutes a source of community knowledge that manifests the lived experiences shared by the mothers fighting and resisting the repressive state. Llore served as one of the leaders of Rise Up, representing families of drug war victims and contributing to the submission of reports before the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (Villanueva 2022).

As the drug war disrupted the home and created a crisis of care, motherhood became a catalyst for these women to enter the public sphere and demand justice and accountability for the drug killings. Evident in the narratives and experiences of the mothers in the three cases covered in this study, motherhood is shared among women who have gone through the same pain and loss, transcending the women affected by the drug war and forging an emotional and political connection to other mothers of *desaparecidos* during the Arroyo

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administration (Espina-Varona 2018) and the Lumad community who have been targeted by military attacks under the Duterte administration (Espina-Varona 2017). Furthermore, mothering practice is expanded within community initiatives whose movements have been geared towards the provision of care to women and children and the protection of life, compelling acts of "radical self-help" on the part of the mothers (Gilmore 1999, 25).

The individual and collective stories of these mothers portray them as individuals that ought not to be reduced to passive victims of drug violence devoid of agency. The act of telling their stories of pain is an act of resistance in itself. By sharing that experience collectively with other mothers carrying the same struggle, the pain of losing their loved ones from the drug war is transformed into communal comfort for women who are not suffering alone, who are holding onto their belief in God together, and who are resisting hand in hand with the hopes of delivering justice for the deaths of their husbands and sons.

5.3　Mother's Agency and Faith

A prevailing element across the narrative experiences of mothers covered in this study is the role of religion in invigorating hope and visions of justice in spite of the lack of justice and accountability. In resonance with the acts of resistance found in my research, Racelis (2020), in her introductory chapter on *Women and the Duterte Anti-Drug Carnage*, noted how extended kin, neighbors, friends, NGOs, and faith-based groups stepped up in response to the government's refusal to take responsibility for the impact of the anti-drug operations on women and families. She also described how the brave women covered in the book have given their testimonies which served as the basis for human rights challenges against state perpetrators. She also narrated how the mothers engaged in public performances of lamentation and condemnation of the killings through community street dramas during religious events relating Jesus' suffering to the plight of the poor under the drug war.

The depictions of suffering in Catholic moral theology have been viewed as oppressive as it results in victim consciousness among women through "the putting up of the ideal woman as one who is self-sacrificing, long suffering, patient, meek, etc." (Mananzan 1999, 9). However, the interaction of religion with motherhood as seen in the mothers' stories complicates the link between patriarchy and religion. As they reinforce Christian conceptions of femininity and motherhood as suffering and sacrificing women, they simultaneously transform traditional and conservative virtues of good motherhood and roles into radical ones, embracing the identity as 'warrior women'

fighting for the lives of their children and husbands lost from the drug war most evidently demonstrated by the Rise Up mother-activists.

Mananzan (1999), a Filipina feminist theologian, argued how the role of Christianity in women's lives can allow both the co-existence of oppressive and liberative elements. She forwarded a feminist theology of liberation – which goes beyond calling out the roots of women's oppression in religion as non-redemptive in pursuit of remedying the situation through active participation in women's movements. Moreover, Roces (2008), in her study of Filipino Catholics nuns as transnational feminists, challenged the link between religiosity and patriarchy by arguing how in societies like the Philippines where the Catholic Church continues to be a major obstacle to women's movement, the location of religious women in feminist theorizing serves as a powerful and legitimate challenge to oppressive constructions of the feminine. My research on the politics of motherhood remains exploratory with limitations in terms of analysis and data leading to vast pathways for further study. Future inquiries can dig deeper into the constructions of the feminine among the mothers of the drug war and explorations of the cultural nuances of the Latin American gender role script of 'marianismo'[18] in the Philippine context.

6 Conclusion

This research sought to unpack the gendered impact of the Duterte administration's 'war on drugs' by analyzing three motherist initiatives which emerged as a response to the killings. By examining the narratives of women who have been directly affected by the murder of their loved ones, I explored the far-reaching consequences of the drug war in aggravating the social, economic, and psychological conditions of women and their children. The collective stories of the mothers forming the community initiatives covered in this study reflect their emergent resistant subjectivities grounded on motherhood and religion, which have been bastions of the sanctity and protection of life under Duterte's bloody rule. The 'activist mothering' (Naples 1992) embodied in the testimonies and practices of the women found in the community initiatives demonstrated a yearning for an alternative political society that is built through care and compassion and not brutality and force.

As the study juxtaposed the expansion of care work within the community and the state's failure to protect women and children, it

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[18]   I focus on 'marianismo' and the complex relationship between motherhood and religion in the Philippine context in both my ongoing research (Marcaida 2023) and my developing dissertation project.

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stresses the urgency for the current administration under Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to completely overhaul the 'war on drugs' and replace it with a drug policy that is grounded in "science, health, security and human rights"(Global Commission on Drug Policy 2011, 3). Since assuming office last July 2022, the killings have ensued and the promised reforms have yet to materialize under the Marcos administration (Human Rights Watch 2023). While Marcos attempted to reform the law enforcement institutions through mass resignations, the move was criticized by Fernandez and Tugade (2023) as ineffective in addressing the culture of corruption and patronage in the police as opposed to meaningful reforms that require overhauling the organization. Moreover, the current president's stance on shutting out ICC after losing an appeal to halt the investigation into Duterte's drug war is still resolute (Reuters 2023).

With Marcos Jr. completing his second year as president, it is time to demand the president to deliver his campaign promise to "treat drug addicts as patients, in need of a cure" and to pursue the anti-drugs campaign "in a different way" (Manabat 2022) that focuses on the prevention, such as youth education and rehabilitation (CNN Philippines 2021). Furthermore, the current administration must learn from the failures of Duterte's 'war on drugs' and seek accountability for the human rights violations and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by the state. Genuine drug policy reform and healing on the part of the grandmothers, mothers, and widows can only be achieved through the pursuit of accountability and the delivery of justice for all the victims of the drug war.

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Multimodal Archipelago: Social Movement Knowledge Practices Among Transnational Rohingya

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Abstract Social movements of Myanmar and the *archipelagic affinities* which complexly connect them are like islands, both dividing and connecting communities of Myanmar via multidirectional channels of staked arguments, and knowledge-sharing practices. This article traces how (dis)connections are being (re)made in the aftermath of the attempted coup both online and on the ground. Drawing from the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Akyab, Burma (Myanmar) and with the Rohingya Community in Ireland, their diasporic networks, and the interventions they make in the ongoing genocide in Myanmar, this article highlights the diffuse, and fractured pangea of digital social movements in order to contribute towards understandings of how *archipelagic affinities* can be viewed as mobilising forces against the military's attempt at centralising power.

Keywords Transnational. Social movements. Multimodal. Network. Burma. Myanmar. Rohingya. Ethnography. Anarchism. Southeast Asia. Refugee. Diaspora.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Anti-Military Affinities. – 3 Transnational Rohingya Networks. – 4 Conclusion: Archipelagic Affinities.

1   Introduction

Drawing on a collaborative ethnographic research project with transnational networks of Rohingya, this essay foregrounds the digital and creative labour these actors are involved in to build social movements through multimodal practices. Through the processual and inventive nature of multimodal practices among transnational Rohingya networks, actors intervene in contemporary crises of ongoing genocide, protracted forced migration, inter-ethnic conflict, the attempted military coup of February 2021[1] and its aftermath in Burma. These networks are crucial not only in getting to grips with forces they are in resistance to, but also vital in disseminating information across displacement-affected networks.

The creative practices of these networks generate films, poems, photography exhibitions, news websites, and an array of other multimodal formations which make meaning and mobilise social movements. These distinct, yet malleable, networks share lines of affinities (Cuevas-Hewitt 2011) which intersect with multiple social movements in and of Burma. The etymology of affinity, with the latin *ad-finis* meaning *to border* and *affinis* meaning related, helps to linguistically hold together the antinomy of the points of separation and connection or archipelagic affinities. My fieldwork has been multi-sited in the sense of working in Burma, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Ireland, Germany, and the United States as well as multi-*web*-sited, having traced (dis)connections and collaborations across social media apps, and Rohingya-operated news websites. This approach has led me to explore affinities and see them as differing from solidarities, but rather as nexus where collaboration, aversion, disruption, and resistance imbricate along varying scales to create polyvocal meanings among the heterogeneous actors involved in these networked social movements.

This article explores the basis of connection for these intersecting social movements of Burma by looking at how mobilisation of these social movements is vested in the digital. This article uses the lens of archipelagic affinities (Cuevas-Hewitt 2011) to transcend the Burmese state's essentialized conception of identity politics. Intersecting social movements learn from, support, or embrace one another, while retaining their distinct cultural difference, this phenomenon is analogized through a metaphor of water and channels (dis)connecting islands of an archipelago. The writing style and flow of this article is intentionally varied so as to match the archipelago

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[1]   Multiple resistances have effectively quelled the Myanmar military from the dominating position that is typically associated with a successful coup. Therefore within Myanmar and the diaspora the *coup d'etat* is not commonly accepted as *fait accompli*, and is thereby referred to as an attempted coup.

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metaphor – separate, but together, with choppy waters at moments, and glass-like stillness at others. The archipelagic frame makes visible the important paradox of distinct cultural identities sitting alongside what Tomlinson refers to as *complex connectivity*, "the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterise modern social life" (1999, 1).[2] The changing landscape of Burmese opposition politics that have come since the attempted coup opens many avenues and yet-to-be built bridges between intersecting social movements in Burma connecting their knowledge practices. This article seeks to explore the basis for those connections while paying attention to the ways in which, what Amarasuriya et al. describe in *The Intimate Life of Dissent* (2020, 121) as "conditions of possibility" for varying political acts to be made while reflecting on how those acts are shaped and perceived along channels of competition and conflict among the people who are entangled within the movements.

2 Anti-Military Affinities

The pre-colonial, and colonial histories of the Burmese state have come face-to-face with intersecting social movements, presenting complex challenges for all the actors involved. The underpinning connection among the various social movements is their opposition to the Myanmar military (Ryan, Tran 2022). With the onset of the attempted coup, the history and future of Burma are being reconsidered in complex terms. The Burmese military's infamous propaganda machine's long pushed nationalist narratives by are being questioned now more than ever. A culture of imperialism in which the Burmese military carries out the 'Bamanization' of indigenous communities whilst multiple resistances form in opposition to this subjugating force, build the foundation for affinities which go beyond the exclusionary basis for belonging penned into law and policy by Burma's colonial-cum-military dictators – to emerge and take root. In simple terms Bamanization can be understood as a colonial force formed by the ethnic majority Bamar, acting upon the indigenous minorities of the territories of Burma. Those enacting Bamanization use coercion to acculturate minorities to a majoritarian cultural identity through hierarchies similar to many colonial projects, the aim is subservience and sub-citizenry to the Bamar as well as to create a larger armed force to perpetuate the state-building project (Callahan 2004a; Boutry 2016).

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2 For further see Cuevas-Hewitt 2011.

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In February 2021, the Burmese military, (known as *sit-tat* which translated literally to military), attempted a coup in Myanmar. Since the coup, signs of mutual support have emerged on the streets of Yangon, along the Mayu Peninsula, and across the internet as an archipelago of understanding that the Burmese military is the common enemy. As the technological developments shift, or at times leap forward, those resisting and opposing military oppression must similarly use technology like organising via social media, to outwit the military.[3] Given the military regime's disproportionate size to population ratio compared to other Southeast Asian nations,[4] their quasi-state control of transportation, banking, education, and other realms of civic life, the opposition(s) must be more inventive with the resources they have than the regime. In *Hybrid Media Activism*, Emiliano Treré argues for a more culturally attuned reading of digital activism, arguing that earlier social movement theorization:

> adopted a functional understanding of social movements and the media [...] neglecting the consequences that the use of particular forms of communication can have on the internal structure of a movement. (2015, 3)

In Burma the oppositions' multimodal inventiveness (Dattatreyan & Marrero-Guillamón) against the Junta is key in producing effective, multi-fronted, on and offline resistances (Prasse-Freeman 2023a). An emphasis on the organisational feature of online activism often overshadows *how* these networks evade, deter, and combat the military, through what new social movement theorists like Melucci (1985) describe as the collective identity factor – the "cultural factors, emotions, and networks of meanings", that bring about mobilisation (Treré 2015, 4). A wide range of resistance forces, online and offline, work to find military blind spots and undermine the quasi-state's attempt to seek legitimacy through an attempt at monopolising violence (Springer 2016). This pattern is perceived by the many parties involved across memes, videos, and other digital outputs which percolate from the waters of resistance.[5]

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3 https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/exclusive-myanmars-junta-rolls-out-chinese-camera-surveillance-systems-more-2022-07-10/.

4 Thailand estimates 350,000 armed forces for a population which is 15 million larger than Myanmar who claims to have upwards of 500,000 troops – though those figures are contested, and this is not a complete analysis of their efficacy see: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-s-military-numbers; and Kyed, Lynn 2021.

5 Including but not limited to, the National League for Democracy (NLD), National Unity Government (NUG), Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), National Unity Consultative Committee (NUCC), various civil society organisations (CSOs), and

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The ways in which these various stakeholders chaordically (Werbner 2002) work off one another with both order and chaos can be viewed as means of mobilisation against the quasi-state. As it tries to centralise, the opposition strategically decentralises (Graeber 2004). This is not to say these actors agree with one another; in fact, there are many instances in which they are staunchly opposed to one another's views. Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO's) have been left with a feeling of betrayal (Brenner 2017) and this sour political history plays to the military's favour by dampening the perception of the National League for Democracy (NLD) for many (Passeri 2019). Aung San Suu Kyi's denial of genocide and defence of the military in The Hague is complex in her reasoning being in line with the military's current arguments against multiple armed uprisings in Burma (Putra et al. 2021) while attempting to construct a positive image of the country in the international court.

Burma's modern history of social movements is often conflated with the democracy movement and Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party. On the one hand there is a push for a Federal State by various EAOs, this imagined state which is separate yet harmonious intersects and contrasts with Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD-cum-NUG, which is described by some as a refreshed (Thuzar, Tun 2022) or others as a merely rebranded version of the NLD (Campbell, Prasse-Freeman 2021). So what about Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD – the elected government, which was ousted by the coup? Prasse-Freeman and Kabya work to sum up the paradoxes of the NLD's legacy in the current movement(s).

> Simultaneous impossibility and necessity of the NUG leadership: they are both critical for the revolution even as they must change aspects of their politics. The same issue holds for the people writ large (and this is a point that transcends Myanmar and applies to people's movements around the world): a genuine social revolution will require that the polity drastically alters many of its fundamental assumptions about exclusion and privilege. (Prasse-Freeman, Kabya 2021, 2)

It is where these two ideas put forth by Treré, and Prasse-Freeman and Kabya meet that bring us to a thinking about why the decentralised nature of the resistance(s) is working to keep the Myanmar military on their toes and keeping a social revolution in Burma growing. The anarchic notion of *affinities*, which are not based on traditional notions of identity, but, instead, as Magsalin (2020), an anarchist based in the Philippines writes, "unity on the basis of the affinity of

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Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), diasporic networks, NGOs, INGOs, and the multifarious, decentralised entities which preside mostly online.

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Figure 1 J Francis Cerretani, A Burmese nun watches a large screen projecting the International Court of Justice's initial hearings in the case of Genocide against Rohingya. 2019. Photograph. Yangon, Myanmar. Copyright J Francis Cerretani

all who struggle for liberation" (10). At the core of many issues of disharmony in Burma are essentialised forms of ethnic or national identity crafted by the military like *taingyintha* or the use of national races as a basis for citizenship. If we instead turn the focus to affinities formed against the military dictatorship which transcend existing trappings of the military-generated identity categories, we can come to understand the importance of *how* online social movements are creating awareness of such affinities as shared grievances and are making networks of meaning through creative labour and affect.

Are the multimodal affinities among multiple social movements central factors in keeping the *coup d'état* from achieving fait accompli?

For those who are similarly resisting state power, online movements could be an affinity, a call to mobilise albeit perhaps in differing directions. However, at the height of forced displacement of Rohingya Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) was overwhelmingly supporting the military's genocidal operations against Rohingya and abetting the divisions through their own internet postings on the State Councillor's Facebook page (Fisher 2017).[6] Since the coup there have been more signs of change among those who did not support Rohingya and who now realise their common

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6 Burma garners its name from the largest ethnic group, the Bamar.

enemy in the Tatmadaw. Proclamations of regret and support have come from political figures and online activists alike (FRONTIER 2021; Sharma 2021). While there are fair doubts to the genuineness and timing of these claims it is certain that the coup has awakened many to look beyond the divisive propaganda of the quasi-state and the figure of the common enemy – the Myanmar military – has emerged. This is not to say that solidarity has formed on a broad scale with Rohingya, but rather that the common anti-military stance has been like a hurricane moving waters of resistance at great speeds across varying island and channels of social media making affinity in hybrid resistances which build upon knowledge practices established by those who were most at the margins prior to the coup.

While the military is not to be underestimated, the speed at which these opposing networks adjust and mobilise is far beyond the military's expectation (Bächtold 2023). While the NLD (National League for Democracy) with National Unity Government (NUG) is staking out rhetoric of reconciliation and unity, to centralise power, I argue it is paradoxically the decentralised nature of varying oppositions which has kept the movements from being easily dismantled. Co-option of key thinkers and movements is commonplace among the actors with more consolidated power, but the NUG's – 'the government-in-hiding'[7] – inability to centralise power is not necessarily to its detriment as there is now more interest from various actors across the country in the future of the central government as many see the moment as a possible reshaping of the future away from its prior trajectory one often seen as an elitist power struggle between groups like the NLD and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) among others.

The propaganda-fuelled divide and conquer tactics of the Myanmar military trace back into pre-colonial periods in which the Burmese kingdom acted as an imperial force crossing mountains to claim new bodies of land, and more importantly human bodies in the form of slaves, into its empire prior to the British invasion (Beemer 2009; Callahan 2004b; Charney 2022). These methods then took on a colonial taxonomy of division during the British annexation of Burma, the effects of which continue to linger as colonial legacy in laws and policies which are still on paper from that era. The military are now faced with a wide array of opposing forces which, thanks to the internet, can communicate in ways they could not during previous social uprisings, like the student led movements of 1988, and the Saffron

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7   The NUG is often referred to as in hiding, or in exile, as most of its leaders are not able to make themselves visible in daily life in Myanmar, and therefore live outside the country or outside major metropolitan areas such as in territories which are under the control of a resistance army.

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revolution in 2007 when there were still historically pervasive levels of internet censorship in Myanmar. There is now a place, beyond the physical realm, to build as Treré (2015, 4) suggests, "a collective identity", online, based on anti-military affinities which need not align with a single political party to be highly effective. The anti-Sit-Tat (Burmese language for military) connection connection is supported by Megan Ryan and Van Tran's (2022) research analysing Facebook posts related to Burma after the coup. They found that, "dissident forces focus their online activism primarily on anti-military narratives and broadcasting protest activities in order to motivate and mobilise grassroots resistance to the coup" (1). It is this focus on anti-military narratives which dominate the top viral postings according to Ryan and Tran's data, that suggests the anti-military affinity is much stronger than any specific political formation which has risen out of the power vacuum of political instability.

While many youth movements cannot imagine a future with the Sit-Tat, other geopolitical powers like ASEAN are having difficulty coming to consensus on whether to broker a future with the Myanmar military or not (Reuters 2022). This begs the question about whether similar forms of governance – i.e., the military-NLD composite – are viable for a future Myanmar? Prasse-Freeman and Kabya (2021) point out that past divisions were harboured by the NLD's government, and that demands to move past this type of caretaking, pseudo-democracy, are tied into the current struggle for liberation. For many, including those pushing for a federal charter and more self-determination, the time has come to start to unfold and deal with the past in a way that envisions a future which sees the next generation as not living with the precarity of potential coups. This is another leap, like those in technology, to move past the 'care-taking government' that was in place from 2010-20. That so-called democracy *in transition* (see Girke, Breyer 2018) in which the military drafted constitution gave the sit-tat veto power over parliamentary decision, effectively rendering the authoritarian government into a business-centric, pseudo-democracy, had been sanctified by foreign governments as a step towards democracy, though more accurately the aim was opening of Myanmar for business from all parties. The attempted coup instead places the stakes much higher as the tolerance for this pseudo-democracy has worn out among the general population.

For Rohingya who face genocide at the hands of the military the idea of a future with the Sit-Tat having any power undermines the necessary conditions for their return to a safe and secure home. The multiple international court cases against the Junta incubating at the Hague, in both the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Court, may provide partial justice over a protracted period of time, and have implications for Burma as a nation and its people. Meanwhile Rohingya have taken efforts into their own

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hands. Through multimodal creative labour youth are (re)imagining their futures in Burma alongside diasporic networks and those seeking refuge, as well as in collaboration with activists and scholars. Whether through what Karen Strassler (2020) calls 'demanding images' that germinate online and make demands about rights, recognition, and grievances, or through an array of modalities such as news websites, poetry, short films, collaborative online activism and ethnofiction, the networks being built are generating new affinities which transcend essentialised notions of identity and give strength to the solidarity among those who oppose the Myanmar military. Many Burmese youth are demanding that now is the time to remove the sit-taw from their futures (Kyed 2022). It is to these texts and movements that the article now turns.

3 Transnational Rohingya Networks

The connections and bridges among transnational Rohingya communities are collaboratively created into the above collage. This collage is ever-growing, and, as more connections emerge through this project, the collage will grow in reflection of the multifarious nodes of Rohingya networks. Where the photos and *photo-messages* imbricate are representative of some of the various ways through which these diasporic Rohingya networks demonstrate mutual care and work together to mitigate the effects of the ongoing genocide in their homeland of Burma (Myanmar). Some of the connections are familial, like Dalil[8] and his brother in Polaroids (upper left) taken in Bangladesh and Malaysia or the Rafiques (centre bottom) picking up grocery items from Burma at their local shop in Ireland and Rafique's father who is holding in his hands in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh, that same photo from the grocery store. Other overlappings like the several *photo-messages* – image-text amalgamations which make connection through their co-creation across borders, or in the case of the *photo-message* (centre lower middle) above a photo of Rafique riding the local bus (lower middle right), it's both his written words, "*Ken Aso*[9] Never lose hope, good things coming soon, keep going", and his place of origin – Sittwe, Burma, which connect him with those he has written the message to. In the image the men are carrying fish back from the Bay of Bengal to their cordoned-off

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[8] Certain names are anonymized for the protection of interlocutors, others who are public figures and explicitly request to have their real names used are exercising ownership of their stories.

[9] Rohingya language phrase, *Ken Aso*, translates to "How are you?"

Figure 2 Rohingya Community Ireland (text) & J Francis Cerretani (images), *Collage showing the Bridging connections of Transnational Rohingya networks*. 2019. Photographic collage. Myanmar, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Ireland. Copyright J Francis Cerretani 2019

village on the perimeter of Sittwe, Rakhine State or as Rafique refers to by the pre-colonial names Akyab, Arakan.[10]

My multi-sited fieldwork from 2014-20 among transnational Rohingya communities provides insight into the knowledge practices of transnational Rohingya youth. A focus on the modes and meaning makings of networks may offer potential links and affinities towards the basis for the connections to be made within the current social movements in Burma. My descriptions and experiences of working with Rohingya communities are based on specific contexts and are by no means applicable or representative of all people identifying as Rohingya.

The Rohingya Community in Ireland is approximately one hundred persons who were displaced from Myanmar in 1991-92 during what the Burmese military referred to as, Operation Clean Nation. These families subsequently spent seventeen years from 1991-2009, living

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10 Like Rafique, many Rohingya regularly use 'Arakan' rather than the Burmese military-led government's official name, 'Rakhine State', when referring to their home and place of origin. This is in part because the name, 'Rakhine State', like many state names in Burma, essentialises a territory to a single people when there is in fact much more diversity. As is commonplace in Burma, the British' taxonomy and essentialization of peoples and places has been carried forth by subsequent Burmese dictatorships and military Juntas creating many fissures. In the case of Arakan, it is to name the state, 'Rakhine', after the majority, Rakhine people.

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in various camps on the Bangladesh side of the Naf River which borders Burma, before resettling in Ireland. At the time of independence, Rohingya were active participants in the civil and political world of Burma. However, the successive military coups brought with them dictatorship-directed ethno-nationalist policies that would falsely cast Rohingya as outsiders slowly stripping them of their citizenship and freedom of movement, resulting in over four million Rohingya being stateless and leaving many to seek refuge across the Naf River and around the world.

Throughout my time in Ireland, I began to gain more insight into the politics of representation among Rohingya. Photos and video depictions of Rohingya, particularly of violence against Rohingya bodies, were prevalent in the quotidian experiences of my host family and were pullulating online where they would change forms and find new nodes of resonance over time. The living room was a 24/7 newsroom, where Rafique, my key collaborator and host, received hundreds of messages daily, many videos and photos sent directly from Rakhine State where ongoing violence against Rohingya was occurring. The experience of seeing these images, and having their context explained to me by Rafique prior to my seeing the same images making rounds on social media, and then onto international media drew me to deeply question the way Rohingya were being represented, and the news cycles through which race is mediatized. Representations of Rohingya amid exile from Myanmar to Bangladesh which were channelled through mass media outlets, stood in contrast to the moments of family-life that occupied the same living room in which some of those images first surfaced from Rakhine State. I was familiar with Rafique's news website and some others, like R-Vision, and the Arakan Times, and have since met with the news staff and organisers of these and other Rohingya news outlets. These interactions have opened up an understanding for me around the labour and care that goes into transnational media for those seeking refuge, and living in diaspora.

Rohingya and Rakhine have been increasingly subjugated since the Burman invasion of Arakan, the native land of Rohingya, and subsequent conquest, in 1784.[11] Prior to Burmese invasion Arakan was an independent state centred around the Kingdom of Mrauk-U – an important trading city with a key geographical position in the Bay of Bengal. Contemporary Arakan is divided from what was once a more fluid transcivilisation space. Prasse-Freeman and Mausert (2020)

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11 Aung San Suu Kyi's position within the government which she made for herself to be above the president, as a law written by the prior Military government barred her from being president on the basis of having family members (her late husband and children) who were nationals of another country (United Kingdom).

dive into the historiography of the region to show how around 1666 the Mughal invasion and Dutch displacement of Arakanese naval monopoly are key historical moments for creating divisions in the region. When the British arrived, boundaries were remapped with Burma's Rakhine State, taking the majority, and Bangladesh absorbing a smaller part of the former state.

There exist many interpretations of the history of Arakan. Multiple ethnonationalist, ethnoreligious, narratives are promoted by the Burmese state, making for an ill-informed public (Schissler et al. 2017; Wade 2019) and ripening conditions for ethnic cleansing and genocide. The Burmese military makes the claim that Rohingya are outsiders, despite the many historical accounts and contemporary scholars that show otherwise (Uddin 2020). Rohingyas' claim to citizenship has been at the crux of their struggle for recognition and belonging in Burma. A host of scholars of Arakan, and contemporary Burma (Gerharz et al. 2017; Lee 2021; Uddin 2020) validate Rohingyas' claim of indigeneity to be in-line with the 1982 Citizenship Law, and importantly many scholars argue that the policy of 135 ethnic groups or *taingyintha*, and the overall citizenship frameworks are not only designed to unjustly exclude Rohingya, but are an ill-contrived, corrosive force on the people of Burma, creating ethnic hierarchies, and tiers of citizenship which playout in their everyday citizenship practices (Walton 2017). Rohingya struggle to fit into the citizenship framework, not because they would not qualify as Cheesman (2017) argues, but because the intention of the laws is to exclude them (Rhoads 2023). Given the wide effect of this on people of Burma there is a basis for an affinity which would work against these policies and colonial concepts of dividing ethnic groups and offering limited-rights based on static conceptions of identity.

Transnational Rohingya who face genocide and protracted forced displacement have heterogeneous lived experiences (Nursyazwani, Prasse-Freeman 2020; Prasse-Freeman 2023b). Where it is their varying lines of flight from refugee camps to relocation, or awaiting repatriation the varying spatio-temporalities that Rohingya experience are some of the many ways in which their quotidian experiences are highly differentiated. This multiplicity extends to all people of Burma and is a starting point to unravelling the affinities across various intersecting social movements. Because essentializing, homogenising, or generalising in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, age, or religion is at the helm of the Burmese military's propaganda and division tactics, we must keep our attention to not reify the same ethnic divisions while pointing towards the basis for (re)imagined futures. Whilst the Burmese propaganda machine seemingly never sleeps, Leehey (2010) argues that many people of Burma snooze on the Propaganda altogether ignoring it, and the crux of Ryan and Tran's (2022) work on Facebook in Myanmar that Burmese people continue to use

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FB as a way to organise despite the massive risk and policing of Facebook that the sit-tat pursue. At the same time, we must not erase the differences in equality faced across the intersections of ethnic, racial, class, gender, and (dis)ability. This is a challenge in any context, and as someone positioned as coming from outside of Burma, raised in the United States, and as an academic researcher in anthropology – one fraught history of serving colonial projects and the taxonomy of peoples, it calls for an especially vigilant approach to ethics in methodology to mitigate the worst effects of the kinds of anthropology which bring about the question of whether the discipline should be left to burn? (Jobson 2020) As transnational communities find themselves geographically separated from their kin there is an increasing need to understand how these communities stay connected. Social and mass media have the widest reaching influence in shaping an image of groups of people (Forkert et al. 2020). Participatory media-making storytelling and self-representation practices are effective ways to disrupt homogenous narratives and make visible the agency of transnational networks.

The interweaving experiences of transnationalism that pass through multimodal messages exchanged between Rohingya families and networks were central to the daily experiences of my Rohingya collaborators. Later, I will expand on the use of *photo-messages* – collaboratively-made analogue, photo-textual objects that represent bridges that connect transnational communities seeking refuge – to open an understanding to the importance of multimodal, digital exchanges between Rohingya networks towards their existential challenges, but let me begin with a basis of theory and methods on which the *photo-message* methodology is built.

The bonds of these transnational families and the Rohingya community at large are laboured around the clock, with constant calls, messages, audio clips, and audio-visual materials bouncing back and forth from Burma, and Bangladesh – where Rohingya were fleeing to escape the pogroms. Care, concern, and connection were constantly performed through stories, photos and memories. Arnold (2021, 139) describes this labour among transnational Salvadoran families, "Through cross-border communication, transnational families carry out the everyday labour of care that keeps them together despite political-economic and discursive forces that would tear them apart".

The Rohingya community in Ireland's penchant for mutual care is perennially cultivated. A common theme of the calls I was in Rafique's living room for, and continue to have with Rafique to this day myself, are around gardening and meal-prep. Community gardening is two pronged in the RCI. There is a shared plot designated for the Rohingya community at Carlow's community gardens. There are also backyard, home-grown gardens. Each member of the community who has a green space utilises it for gardening, recreation for the youth, and

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intergenerational gatherings. What one household grows is shared with the others and vice versa. These care communities extend wide beyond the boundaries of Carlow, connecting across digital currents of social media and messaging applications to one's kin and care networks regardless of the spatio-temporal differences that come with transnational relations.

The regularly performed care (Arnold 2021; McKearney, Amrith 2021) and creative labour of Rohingya networks works to build bridges and make meaning through the digital diaspora. A large portion of my fieldwork in Ireland during the summer of 2017 was spent in the living room of my host family where Rafique and I sat with our laptops open and our phones at our fingertips. We were constantly receiving and interpreting photos, videos, accompanying text, and audio recordings from villages in Rakhine state, ground zero for Myanmar military's genocidal actions. My housemates were taking calls from their network of news informants in Myanmar who use smartphones to combat the suppression of information coming out of Rakhine state. Rafique was constantly making ethical decisions about the safety of his informants based on the information in the images, as to whether or not he could publish them through his Rohingya-focused news site, share them via twitter, or assist international media organisations such as the BBC, who called him to verify the authenticity of videos they wanted to air on network television as the violence of the military escalated after 25 August 2017.

Rafique's intimate relationships with his interlocutors and the images they made are complex and he has a working ethics about how and what to share to what outlets. As he received images it was undoubtedly important for them to make it out of Burma, as per what Arielle Azoulay (2012) describes as a way of undermining state sovereignty.

I began to think about how relationships among people were being shaped through a visual economy (Campt 2020). I wondered how the interpretation of a visual representation, like a Facebook post about the Rohingya Genocide, were being reshaped as the intimacy of these images is broken along the bridge of hermeneutics from interpersonal (among kin) to international media. When an image is deterritorialized from the place it was made, ie. the Naf river banks, into the living room in Ireland with Rafique, who is looking at it with care for those he shares some kinship with, and then that image makes its way to the BBC in a narrative context of news cycles from late summer 2017, the reterritorialization has become so far removed that to intimate with this images is perhaps no longer their utility. Looking at the phenomena in which people actively increase or cease their engagement with such images in which people show their interest in a subject and apply value based on how long one chooses to engage with the image, how it is shared, and where it is traded (Sontag 2004). What is the latent power of knowing rather than seeing

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Figure 3 J Francis Cerretani, Rabeya picking Mula Faátha, in Ireland transplanted from Kutupalong refugee camp, Bangladesh. 2017. Photograph. Ireland. Copyright J Francis Cerretani 2017

that such images, like brutal police killings, exist? How do news cycles influence the ways Rohingya must be inventive to keep the general public knowing about the genocide in Rakhine state? Thinking through the phenomenology of image-events (Strassler 2020) which cause people to *pay* attention or to look away from things more broadly, brought me to deeply consider what modes of representation would contribute to a more heterogeneous set of representations of Rohingya (Nursyazwani, Prasse-Freeman 2020).

Back in the living room, I was asked by Rafique to help with technical editing of English language translations of the audio descriptions which accompanied images coming in from Arakan. This entailed reviewing the image repeatedly to make sure that the English text was as accurate as possible in describing what was happening in the photos and videos while asking Rafique and others in the house questions to decode the embedded aesthetics and meanings of certain landscapes, places, language, timing, and other contexts. They would relay any questions they could not answer to the news informants on the ground in Arakan through voice memos sent over WhatsApp and other messaging applications. I was not tasked with creating any original captions or words, but rather making sure the best language, grammar, and punctuation were being used, which came

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with multiple considerations and constant refining beyond what I had expected in mere technical editing. Some days there were dozens of stories, and the constant inward and outward flow of these images caused me to reflect on the representations of Rohingya, where they originated from and how once they were out of the hands of those who directly interpreted them, they were reframed into various media contexts, and turned into cultural capital by a variety of actors, namely large media outlets, human rights organisations, the Burmese state, and many online seeking to use the images with their narrative (on cultural accumulation see also Collins, Durington, Gill 2017). My own position in this newsroom was of constant reflection, as this method of participant observation caused me to reflect on the constant ethical decisions that are made when editing news stories (see Gursel 2016).

The atrocities being committed against Rohingya in Myanmar needed to be seen and understood, and the endless stream of images of violence against Rohingya that continue to come out of Rakhine State even with the state sanctioned attempts at blocking the flow of information out of Rakhine via internet shutdowns and laws which ban smartphones for Rohingya, confirms the importance of such images in bypassing the boundaries of the Burmese regime (see Azoulay 2012). Images take on complex lives of their own (Strassler 2020). In some cases, entire scenes and photographs were constructed and shared by heads of the Myanmar military, like when head general, Min Aung Hlaing, shared images meant to convince the public that Rohingya were setting their own homes on fire. These images were then debunked by Rohingya themselves using their own form of Forensic Architecture (see Forensic Architecture 2022; and The Observers 2017) and used instead as proof of the military's propaganda efforts.

In the evening of 24 August 2017, as many in Burma would just be starting their day, Rafique and his family's phones started to ring incessantly. There was suddenly a shift in temporality in the living room, as the calls coming in from his contacts were now mixed with those of family who were uprooted or sharing news of the death of loved ones, there was no time or space to decompress or process what was going on. The military had launched a "planned purge" (McPherson, Lone 2022), under the guise of a counter reaction to what they called "insurgent violence".

From that point on the living room lights never turned off. The strength in the multi-layered web of community members living in diaspora threaded through to their families in Myanmar or exodusing to Bangladesh was evident in the never-ending stream of connection, creativity, and care. This latent image of Rohingya networks developed in the darkness of the living room calls became to me, the clearest image, depicting the multiplicity of Rohingya and their networks. The diffuse nature of the Rohingya communities pointed not only towards the obvious struggle of displacement, but also towards

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the nascent strength in a spectrum of representations of Rohingya that was widespread, fractured and diffuse, as opposed to the homogeneous reduction of millions of individuals into subjects of a crisis framing which were produced and reproduced by mass media and humanitarian actors (Forkert et al. 2020). This was seen in the WhatsApp groups, where attempts to organise in the immediate aftermath of Burmese pogroms of 25 August 2017 flourished. This is where difference in ideas, strategies, and practice in the face of genocide were formed and reformed, showing strength in fracture. From this point of fissure many varying ideas about what it was and was not to be Rohingya were contoured by a multiplicity of actors multimodally.

Members of my host family were active in Rohingya media worlds (Ginsburg 2002). They worked with Rohingya journalists who used their mobile phones to capture the realities on the ground in Rakhine State. Using their unique expertise of media, my interlocutors relayed harrowing stories of state violence to mass media outlets like the BBC and published their stories on their own cultural and news websites and circulated them across social media platforms. My Rohingya interlocutors used images made *by* them to combat images made *of* them. Examples of such *image-wars* (Pinney 2011) and *demanding images* (Strassler 2020) continue to emerge in the aftermath of the attempted coup atmosphere of online activism in and of Burma.

There were many messages relaying back and forth from the Rohingya networks and families of the community in Ireland. The most prominent themes which align with affinities found across intersecting social movements in Burma; are *hope, futures, and education* as ways of advancing the collective aim to undermine the regime.

While living with the Rohingya community in Ireland I became attuned to the ways we regularly used our phones and computers to share combinations of text, audio, and images – sending such image-texts through applications like WhatsApp, Messenger, Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, and TikTok has become such a regular practice that the ontology of sharing and conversing around images are obscured. The rate at which new images appear on Instagram and are crowded with comments, then followed by a subsequent *post* or *story* exemplifies the commonality of this phenomena. Theorists often take for granted these platforms as mere instruments of connectivity (Treré 2015) while others see how cultural meaning and collective identity is imbued through the processual usage of digital communication (Melucci 1995).

I listened and learned from the community about how they were already connected and collaborating with their family and friends around the globe. If I was to contribute something purposeful it would be to highlight and document these already existing networks. To do so meant a careful, ethical approach to understanding the relationships and history among these transnational families, fitting within the geo-political context of migration and moorings.

4 Conclusion: Archipelagic Affinities

The affinities of hope, education, and aspirations for secure futures which are prevalent among dispersed Rohingya communities and evident in the photo-messages overlap with many of the shared desires and goals of other contemporary social movements in Burma and throughout the Burmese diaspora. The Photo-Messages method bridges between networks that persistently proliferate despite the geographic separation which Rohingya and other people from Burma face as part of the far-flung nature of seeking refuge. The participants writing to Rohingya with whom they feel a connection for either being from the same townships or being similar in age, show some of these affinities on a micro scale, while mirroring the themes of hope which are sent to their family members via digital communication. The connections Rafique makes with hundreds of Rohingya who share with him stories from the ground are also responded with care, hope, and consideration as Rafique receives these messages through the same social media channels, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, as the concerns from his family who remain in Kutupalong refugee camp, and are also sharing messages of hope, and indeed finding hope in seeing their families strength in exile like their ability to receive education, and to mount online resistances. The personal is constantly overlapping with the political while spatio-temporal differences are being transcended through digital transmissions, like islands in an archipelago that are kept separate yet connected by water.

Cuevas-Hewitt (2011) draws on "what John Tomlinson (1999) calls, *complex connectivity*, rather than homogenous 'unity' allowing for commonalities to be constructed *across* differences, rather than at the expense of them"(2011). Similarly, to the existential threats placed upon those within Burma being felt within the Rohingya community in Ireland – the wider Burmese diaspora and those seeking refuge are all part of the archipelago and are affected by the friction across common fault lines, but work collaboratively across channels to outwit the oppressors.

In Rafique's transnational networks of displacement affected news-media website workers there were those who could collect the video evidence on the ground in Myanmar, to those who could receive and decipher what content was safe to share and disseminate outside Myanmar. The ways in which Rafique and his Rohingya networks balance their need to expose the military's crimes and retain privacy of those who share the videos and photos shows a great ethics of care involved in their practices.

If we take Cuevas-Hewitt's consideration of the diaspora as a part of an archipelago, we can see a cluster of connectivity that spreads out across intersecting media worlds. This decentralised,

Figure 4. Ei Thin Zar (text) & J. Francis Cerretani (image), Text by community-school teacher Ei Thin Zar. A top of a photo I took while the International Court of Justice (ICJ) proceedings were taking place in Yangon in 2019, she comments, "resist injustice with the truth". Ei Thin Zar explicitly identifies primarily as a teacher as opposed to ethnic and religious identities. She works on the border of Thailand in Mae Sot with those seeking refuge from Burma. 2022. Photograph with written inscription. New York. Copyright J Francis Cerretani 2019

network-oriented, transnational reimagining of sociality pushes against Newtonian-Kantian Enlightenment-era figurations of centralised social order towards more indigenous, horizontal conceptions of community and belonging which are anti-binary, anti-exclusionary, and arguably anarchic (Graeber, Wengrow 2021).

The common repression from the military serves as the main producer of grievances which connects many networks against the regime. The military's approaches to digital repression are constantly shifting to continue its campaign of online suppression, whether the existential threat of being identified through social media and being arrested or targeted in public or the targeting of someone living in diaspora's family members who live in Burma. The internet shutdowns, taking down of websites, rescinding media permits, and IP tracing are some of the many forms of repression which the opposition(s) must constantly outmanoeuvre.

Ryan and Tran (2022) point to interesting conclusions around the evolving nature of digital protest, in that they observed a decrease in anti-coup engagement and an increase in pro-military posts. They have offered several potential reasons for this: that public interest for activists has decreased or activist content has moved to private

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groups and encrypted platforms to avoid infiltration. Pro-military supporters may find a greater sense of protection using public and main-stream platforms given the military is seen as the main threat on these platforms. The spontaneous connection on more protected platforms shows a shared use of knowledge practices to evade the gaze of the military and demonstrates how quickly online protestors work collectively to evolve and exchange information and most importantly how affinity and connection are being built through these exchanges not always in an immediate rupture but rather a more resonating, shelf-shifting movement.

When thinking broader than a movement defined solely by either a contentious politics or grievance, the lens of networked social movement theory opens to a more diffuse reading of the various uprisings, resistances, those which were pre-existing, newly formed, or rebolstered in response to the February 2021 coup, and how they have unique and overlapping knowledge practices which when placed in an anarchic frame of affinities, creates the basis for connecting and sharing those practices. From this archipelagic framework there may emerge certain potentialities to transcend typical identity politics in order to surmount shared goals whilst remaining on separate islands. Instead of essentializing racial, ethnic, gender, religious, or age groups, the string of affinities which may tie together as a *net* for these *net-works* are the common aims, goals, and struggles upon which they face – most namely, working against the Sit-Tat (Myanmar military). Conceiving of affinities as not being solely built around identity allows for the finding of strength in difference through the plural roles we can play towards shared needs, and common desires. One of the central affinities that connects the metaphorical 'archipelago' (Cuevas-Hewitt 2011) in ways that doesn't aim to homogenise, but rather plays to the strength of the different roles and strengths of fragmented, decentralised, networks – is the opposition to the quasi-state as the oppressive force which is deterring the plural goals of networks in Burma and in diaspora. Transnational networks of Rohingya have developed many knowledge practices in opposition to the Myanmar military and other forces of oppression. The pre-existing work that Rohingya were doing to archive the atrocities committed against them laid the groundwork for communities to learn from each other different methods for resisting the military. This knowledge sharing is creating more fronts against the military than ever before. As of this writing, many argue the Sit-Tat is losing the civil war as they are trying to fight against not one, but many separate yet (dis)connected islands of an anarchic archipelago in Myanmar and among people of Myanmar living transnationally.

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Transnational Youth Activist Networks in Asia: The Evolution and Dynamics of the Milk Tea Alliance

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Abstract This study examines the development and dynamics of transnational youth activism in Asia, focusing on the case of the Milk Tea Alliance (MTA). It addresses two research questions: "How did it emerge?" and "How has it continued until today?". Through interviews with 50 activists across Asia, the study argues that the MTA networks were developed and nurtured over many years, rather than being solely facilitated by digital communication technologies. The study identifies two key networks: the triangular network among Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai youth activists, and the Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA). While the triangular network was crucial in the early days, the NOYDA network became a key actor after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. By using network analysis and a transnational historical approach, the study provides a more nuanced explanation of the recent wave of youth and student political activism in Asia. It also highlights the grassroots interconnectedness between East and Southeast Asia in the contemporary period.

Keywords Milk Tea Alliance. Transnationalism. Youth activism. Protest. Asia. Social Network theory.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Building a Transnational Youth Network in Asia. – 2.1 The Triangular Network Between Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai Activists. – 2.2 The Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA). – 3 The Role of the Personal Triangle Network in the Dawn of the Milk Tea Alliance. – 4 From the NOYDA Network to the Milk Tea Alliance of Myanmar. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

The meme war between Thai and pro-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) netizens began on 4 April 2020, after Vachirawit Chivaaree, known as Bright, a Thai celebrity who is famous in China due to his Boylove (BL) series, liked a tweet by a photographer named @ Yamastdio, who tweeted a photo of Hong Kong and called it a 'country'. This action was perceived by many pro-CCP Internet commentators as a statement of support for Hong Kong's independence. Despite Bright's apology on 9 April, a new wave of Internet conflict had already been triggered. The pro-CCP netizens found the social media account of Bright's girlfriend and believed she had insulted China and abused the 'One Chine Principal' of the Beijing government by supporting the independence of Taiwan because she commented on her Instagram photo during her trip to Taiwan that she considered her fashion style similar to that of a Taiwanese rather than a Chinese girl (Salam 2022). The conflict quickly spread across Asia, where many netizens joined the Thais to fight against Chinese attacks. A few days later, they established a loose transnational coalition, namely the Milk Tea Alliance (MTA).

Starting from a meme war on social media, the MTA developed into a transnational youth-led coalition to promote democracy and expand its influence across Asia. From the streets of Taipei to Bangkok, Hong Kong, and beyond, the MTA has become a new political cultural symbol that youth and student activists have adopted to support each other's political struggles and causes.[1] Simultaneously, it has become a space for social movements in Asia to introduce and exchange protest symbols, cultures, tactics, strategies, as well as human rights and democratic experiences. This cross-border dynamic demonstrates that activists in Asia can cooperate with each other to promote human rights and democratic values in the region. It also

1 From 2019 to 2021, a series of mass demonstrations occurred across East and Southeast Asia. It began with the Anti-Extradition Law Movement in Hong Kong, followed by the Free Youth Movement in Thailand, and the Spring Revolution in Myanmar. These movements took place at different times and locations, but they all shared anti-authoritarian values and considered themselves as part of the MTA.

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illustrates the flow of knowledge and action between and within East and Southeast Asia beyond economics (Shimizu 2010; Ba 2014) and pop culture (Siriyuvasak, Shin 2007; Baudinette 2023).

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the development and dynamics of transnational youth activism in Asia by focusing on the case of the MTA. In particular, it tackles two key questions: "How did the MTA emerge?" and "How has it continued until today?". To respond to these questions, I apply network theory, with the aim of moving beyond dominant narratives about the MTA to discover its hidden dynamics and relations (Krinsky, Crossley 2014, 1). In addition, I rely upon a transnational historical approach to analysis, allowing the capture of the long-term dynamics that extend beyond the nation-state (Iacobelli, Leary, Takahashi 2016). In doing so, this article illuminates the cross-border flows of activism that the MTA is grounded on, as well as the transnational connectivity that has united, over the years, individual activists throughout the region. Throughout, I approach the MTA as a transnational solidarity network with a flexible and open architecture, enabling it to accept members from diverse groups. This flexibility, it is argued, prevents any single entity from fully claiming ownership, and allows members to move in and out of the network dynamically.

Several studies in the literature have aimed to understand and discuss the recent youth collaboration and protest diffusion under the banner of the MTA,[2] with two main implications. First, they considered the MTA as an organic coalition that emerged suddenly as a component of the meme war. As noted by Kreutz and Makrogianni (2024, 1), "no reports that the transnational nature of the 2020 movement could have been facilitated by pre-existing networks of activists". They also mentioned the failed physical connection between Hong Kong and Thai activists due to Joshua Wong's restriction from entering Thailand in 2016 (Dedman, Lai 2021, 14-15). Second, most scholars mainly focused on and interpreted it based on virtual relationships and online behavior, such as an 'imagined digital political community' (Huang, Svetanant 2022) and 'fandom war' (Schaffar, Wongratanawin 2021). This would suggest that the main driver of international youth activism relied greatly on digital media rather than on face-to-face interaction.

However, these studies do not capture the entire complexity and multi-faceted nature of activism (Diani 2003, 1). While important, their focus on specific events or a singular aspect of the MTA's characterization, such as digital space, might overlook providing the necessary context for, and the social dynamics of, its emergent features.

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2 E.g. Dedman, Lai 2021; Schaffar, Wongratanawin 2021; Huang, Svetanant 2022; Wang, Rauchfleisch 2022.

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In fact, the role of personal (as opposed to digital) relationships in the development of the MTA starts to become visible, with studies beginning to show the relevance of pre-existing personal connections between individual activists that facilitated the MTA's maturation (Teeratanabodee, Prommongkol 2023; Wasserstrom 2023; Phattharathanasut 2024), as well as the role of diaspora communities in supporting its further consolidation (Wang, Rauchfleisch 2022). Against this backdrop, I argue that the network approach needs to be applied less sectorially and more comprehensively to explore the connected events across time and space, link the patterns of interaction involving individuals, groups, and organizations, and understand how these relationships influenced the eventful moments. By examining activism over a longer time frame, this study seeks to do so, delving into transnational Asian youth political activism in depth, in order to offer nuanced insights. Additionally, it seeks to illuminate the grassroots interconnectedness between East and Southeast Asia during the contemporary period.

This study argues that the MTA phenomenon emerged and continued because of two pre-existing networks of transnational youth activists in Asia that had been developed and fertilized for many years, rather than spontaneously occurring because of netizens and fandom collaboration. The first pre-existing network was the triangular network among Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai youth activists, which was an accumulation of individual ties. The second network was the Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA), the pan-Asian youth coalition operating between 2016-17. These two networks were separate, despite some overlapping members, and influenced the MTA during different periods. While the triangular network was crucial in the early days, the NOYDA network became a key actor after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, as they transformed themselves into the #MilkTeaAlliance Friends of Myanmar. In short, the triangular network helped create the MTA phenomenon, and the NOYDA network converted this phenomenon into a more collaborative force, which has enabled it to sustain itself until the present day.

I gathered data by conducting semi-structured interviews using a snowball sampling strategy with 50 student activists from various geographic locations comprising Hong Kong, Myanmar, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam, between January and June 2023. All interviews were conducted by the author in one of three languages: English, Chinese, and Thai. Most of these interviews were conducted during my fieldwork in Taiwan and Thailand. However, for activists who were not readily available for in-person meetings, such as those in exile, online interviews were conducted using platforms like Google Meet and Zoom. I also observed many solidarity events in Taiwan to support the Thai youth demonstrations between 2020 and 2021. Finally, I collected secondary data available in Burmese,

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English, Chinese, and Thai to strengthen this research analysis and sharpen my argument, including news reports, Twitter tweets, Facebook posts, memes, books, and short articles.

The challenge of understanding Asian transnational youth activism reflected an ongoing issue in activism and social movement studies, which have often viewed political action as spreading spontaneously (Castells 2012) "like a fever" (Walzer 1960, 114). This perspective heavily relied on the role of new digital communication technologies following the expansion of the Internet in the twenty-first century (Castells 2012; Bennett, Segerberg 2013), seeing it as a main driver for several movements, such as the Anti-American War Movement (Walgrave, Rucht 2010), the Egyptian Revolution (Holmes 2012) and Occupy Wall Street (DeLuca, Lawson, Sun 2012). However, recent evidence suggests that digital technologies cannot be considered the sole factor for mobilizing and sustaining a coalition and movement, as face-to-face interaction and social ties remain important factors (McAdam, McCarthy, Zald 2004; van Dyke, McCammon 2010). For instance, the Egyptian Revolution was significantly influenced by the offline networks of political opposition, labor movements, and Islamic organizations (Clarke 2014), Similarly, the 2020-21 student protest in Thailand was based on youth networks in various universities across the country that had developed over many years (Horatanakun 2024). Therefore, the current study crucially extends the understanding of the importance of networks and social ties as a precondition for political activism, and illustrates the necessity of tracing the history of networks.

'Networks' are always an integrated part of activism because they influence the likelihood of active members and supporters engaging in ongoing participation (Tindall 2015, 231), and are the primary drivers of campaign diffusion (Andrews, Biggs 2006; Wang, Soule 2012). According to Tindall (2015), a network can be categorized into two types. The first is a 'personal network'. Personal or ego networks are a focal actor and the set of entire social ties that an individual knows and communicates with (Boase 2008, 493). The second category is the 'group network'. A group or whole network comprises all of the nodes and all of the ties among the nodes, which create social grouping (Tindall 2015, 232). A network could occur because of either face-to-face or virtual interactions (Poell, van Dijck 2015, 533). Nevertheless, the networks that occur from face-to-face interactions would likely be stronger and play an influential role, especially when conducting activities that would rely heavily on trust, such as political campaigns (Haug 2013).

Additionally, the nature of ties in the network can be divided into two categories. The 'informal ties' are loosely coordinated with only occasional group communication. For instance, actions between actors with informal ties might involve planning to create a joint event

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together, but would not pursue action further than that (van Dyke, McCammon 2010, XV). On the other hand, 'formal ties' could introduce an umbrella organization and form its own staff and resources to initiate coordinating action among the members (XV-VI). They might also set up regular meetings among members to monitor activities and determine campaign strategies. It is not always necessary that formal ties facilitate more information sharing and collaboration among network members; instead, it depends on the level of trust between actors (Chang 2004). In addition, the forms of ties would typically change because they are constructed through interactions, which would always entail a degree of contingency and fluidity (Diani, Mische 2015, 309).

In the next section, I discuss the background of triangular networks between Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai youth activists and the NOYDA network. The subsequent section examines how the triangular network led to the emergence of the MTA. Next, I illustrate how the NOYDA network played an influential role in transforming the MTA into a more collaborative force for solidarity action after the military coup in Myanmar. Finally, I discuss how the MTA has changed the political resistance landscapes and the future of youth activism in East and Southeast Asia.

2 Building a Transnational Youth Network in Asia

2.1 The Triangular Network Between Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai Activists

The triangular network, which consists of collaboration between young activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand, has a bilateral, personal structure, centered around only a few actors. The development of theses ties occurred over several distinct periods, beginning with bilateral relationships between the new generation of Hongkonger and Taiwanese youth activists. The network between youth activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan, who became involved in politics after 2010, was established in 2012 following the Anti-National Education Campaign in Hong Kong and the Anti-Media Monopoly Movement in Taiwan, when Hongkonger activists visited Taiwan to discuss and exchange knowledge (Taiwanese #1, pers. comm.). This trip happened because Wang Dan, a former student leader of the Tiananmen protest in 1989, inivited a group of high-school Hongkongers, known as Scholarism, to participate in the New School for Democracy in Taiwan (Solomon 2016). The offline space played a crucial role in facilitating interactions among these groups of youth activists and creating a group network. This relationship, which had been

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nurtured for a year, bore fruit when these youth organized two significant demonstrations in 2014: the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. For example, the Hongkonger activists diffused the occupy strategy from the Sunflower Movement occupying the Legislative Chamber's campaign (Taiwanese #1, pers. comm.), and Joshua Wong spoke after the prerecorded video speech by Lin Fei-Fan, a Sunflower movement leader, before announcing the surprise sit-in at the Central government office that started the Umbrella Movement (Ho 2019, 93).

Unlike the connection between Hong Kong and Taiwan, the network between the Thai activists and those from Hong Kong and Taiwan was very personal and informal in nature. The informal network between Thai and Hongkonger activists was established in 2016 after Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal met Joshua Wong in Hong Kong.[3] At that time, Netiwit and his friend had planned to hold the fortieth-anniversary commemoration of the Thammasat Massacre on 6 October 1976 at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, and they wanted Wong to be the keynote speaker at the event (Wasserstrom 2023).[4] Unfortunately, Wong did not reply to his invitation email, which prompted Netiwit to take a risk and travel to Hong Kong to invite Wong in person. Finding Wong was not difficult at that time, as it was the electoral campaign season, and Wong was actively participating in Nathan Law's campaign for a legislator position. When Netiwit found Wong, he informed him of the commemoration and the political situation in Thailand, after which Wong immediately accepted his offer to join the event in October (Netiwit, pers. comm.). However, Wong never had a chance to participate in the event in person since he was detained by the authorities after his arrival, and was sent back to Hong Kong (Cheung, Phillips, Holmes 2016). Netiwit mentioned that Wong's deportation significantly changed his perception of domestic and international politics, and led him to become involved in transnational activism. This is illustrated by his later campaigns such as the 1989 Tiananmen Commemoration in Bangkok, solidarity campaigns to support Hongkonger activists, and the publication of several transnslated books related to human rights issues in China when he established the Sam Yan Press (Teeratanabodee, Prommongkol 2023; Phattharathanasut 2024). This demonstrates that despite Wong

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3 This study refers to Thai activists by their full name when they are first mentioned. Subsequently, they are referred to by their first name, as it is more common in Thai culture to address others by their first name.

4 The Thammasat Massacre was a violent crackdown led by military and a number of radical conservative groups against student protesters who were demonstrating against the return of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, a former military dictator, to Thailand from exile. The massacre was named after Thammasat University, where the violent crackdown occurred.

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failing to enter Thailand, the personal tie between Netiwit and Wong had already been established.[5]

Netiwit first learned about Taiwanese politics in 2017 after a Taiwanese student in Thailand invited him to visit Taiwan. The ties between Netiwit and Taiwanese youth activists were further strengthened in 2019 when he visited Taiwan as a speaker of the Oslo Freedom Forum. It was during this visit that he reconnected with his old friend, Akrawat Siripattanachok, whom he had previously met at the Anti-2014 Coup Campaign in Thailand (Phattharathanasut 2024, 12). Both agreed that there was not much Thai civil society overseas and decided to establish the Thailand-Taiwan Friendship Organization to support democracy in Thailand and foster connections between Thai and Taiwanese activists. Akrawat quickly introduced this idea to other Thai students in Taiwan, activists, and scholars based on his personal connections (Netiwit, pers. comm.; Akrawat, pers. comm.). They also invited the Vice-President of the National Taiwan University Student Association (NTUSA) to serve as Vice-President of this organization, a role he happily accepted (Taiwanese #2, pers. comm.). The attempt to establish the organization helped different actors combine their networks together, leading to a larger network that includes more nodes. Regrettably, the organization faced several struggles and was quickly dissolved, leaving an infrastructure that would facilitate further cooperation between Thais and Taiwanese in the near future.[6]

I chose not to label this network as a group network, despite it involving three groups of youth activists, because they did not necessarily communicate or collaborate with each other simultaneously, and the focus was on only a few key actors. Strong ties between the Hongkonger and Taiwanese youth activists did not include the Thai activists. Netiwit, who went to Hong Kong to meet Wong, also did not ask Wong to help him connect with the Taiwanese; instead – as I shall show – it was due to another reason that helped him connect with the activists in Taiwan. Netiwit's connection with the Hongkonger activists appeared to be more personal, as he preferred to communicate directly with Wong rather than through the Demosisto Party or other organizations. Furthermore, Hong Kong and Thailand interacted with different groups of activists in Taiwan. Hong Kong contacted the Sunflower Movement activists, while Netiwit and his friends connected with post-Sunflower university student activists.

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[5] In the end, Joshua Wong virtually attended the Thammasat Massacre Commemoration via Skype.

[6] For more details about Netiwit's connections with Hongkonger and Taiwanese activists, refer to Phattharathanasut 2024.

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2.2 The Network of Young Democratic Asians (NOYDA)

NOYDA first came to public attention on 5 October 2016, when Joshua Wong posted on his Facebook fan page to thank his Thai friends, including Netiwit, and NOYDA who supported him after he was rejected from entering Thailand by the Thai authorities while traveling to join the Thammasat Massacre Commemoration. The next day, NOYDA issued a collective urgent statement to condemn the Thai government's violation of Joshua Wong's personal security and freedom of movement by detaining him without any legal reason (Law 2016). Many members and people in their networks across the region posted and shared this statement. However, NOYDA did not emerge after Wong was detained. Rather, it had already been established for a while, but had been maintaining a low underground profile.

NOYDA was first established in April 2016, six months before Wong was detained in Thailand, as a result of a three-day congress held in Manila, the Philippines. It was the alliance of committed young people and activists in Asia with the goal of

> achieving a peaceful, equal, and sustainable society through democratic processes and people-oriented development. By confronting common challenges, we defend human rights, stand in solidarity with civil society and the oppressed in the region. (NOYDA 2018, n.p.)

It also aimed to help connect activists in the region to facilitate mutual understanding and support. NOYDA had 14 official members, two representatives from each of its seven member countries or territories, including Hong Kong, Japan, the Philipines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam (Solomon 2016). Furthermore, NOYDA had observer members, such as Myanmar. NOYDA included activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand, similar to the triangular network discussed earlier. However, this study considered the two networks separately because they consisted of different groups of activists, even though some members overlapped. For instance, Wong and Netiwit were not part of NOYDA.

NOYDA was disassembled sometime during the last quarter of 2017, due to lack of funding and disagreement about its agenda (Thai #1, pers. comm.; Taiwanese #3, pers. comm.). The NOYDA Facebook page occasionally posted political situations in East and Southeast Asia, such as demanding a free and fair election in Thailand (NOYDA 2018) and condemning the Hong Kong government for a violation during the 2019 Hong Kong protest (NOYDA 2019), but there were no official conferences or events that gathered members together. This minimal interaction gradually transformed the nature of the NOYDA network into an informal type, as activists remained connected but rarely communicated or interacted.

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The existence of the triangular network between Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai activists, as well as the NOYDA, demonstrates that the new generation of youth activists in East and Southeast Asia had attempted to build transnational networks and begun conducting transnational activism many years before the rise of the MTA. In the next section, I will reveal how these two pre-existing networks contributed to the emergence and development of the MTA.

3 The Role of the Personal Triangle Network in the Dawn of the Milk Tea Alliance

The meme war between Thai and pro-CCP Internet commentators began on 4 April 2020, after Vachirawit Chivaaree, known as Bright, a Thai celebrity who is famous in China for being a main actor in the Boylove series, liked a tweet containing a photo of Hong Kong, and called it a 'country'. This conflict later expanded when, on 9 April, the pro-CCP found that Bright's girlfriend, Weeraya Sukaram, known online as Nnevvy, commented on her Instagram photo during her trip to Taiwan that she considered her fashion style to be more like that of a young Taiwanese woman rather than that of a Chinese girl. This topic suddenly became a hot issue in China when the hashtag #Nnevvy reached more than 1.4 million posts and four million views on Weibo (Global Times 2020). The posts condemned her and her boyfriend while demanding an apology. In response, Thai netizens fought back with humor and sarcasm to protect their celebrities, even when Chinese netizens insulted Thailand and its monarchy. Bolotta (2023) observed that the Thai youth responses were not merely fans fighting to protect their celebrities, but rather a way for Thai youth to struggle against 'age-patriarchy' and 'monarchical paternalism' that has suppressed them for many years.

Most Hongkongers and Taiwanese were unaware of the meme war until 12 April when Nathan Law and Joshua Wong, two prominent Hongkonger activists, tweeted about it **[Fig. 1 and Fig. 2]**. These tweets demonstrated their support for the Thai netizens and condemned the attacks by the Chinese nationalist Internet users. They also attached a photo from *Phro Rao Khu Kan* เพราะเราคู่กัน (2gether) to demonstrate that they were also fans of this series, and to express their support for the LGBTQI+ community. The posts by Wong and Law significantly changed the landscape of the conflict, from a bilateral tension between Thailand and China, to a multilateral conflict, as it was joined by Hongkongers and Taiwanese netizens. It quickly made the hashtag overwhelmed with anti-China posts, and transformed what was previously perceived as a fandom fight into a transnational political confrontation. So, what prompted them to tweet in support of the Thai netizens?

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Figure 1 Law, N. So Funny Watching the Pro-CCP Online Army Trying to Attack Bright. 2020. https://x.com/nathanlawkc/status/1249219916323942400

Figure 2 Wong, J. 1. Hong Kong stand with our freedom-loving friends in Thailand against Chinese bullying! #nnevvy. 2020. https://x.com/joshuawongcf/status/1249254158538072064

According to Netiwit, the Hongkonger activists were not aware of the ongoing Internet war; it was he who made them know about it by using his personal tie with Wong. He said:

> I had no idea about the Internet war between the Thai and Chinese until my junior at Chulalongkorn University informed me. After learning about it, I decided to contact Joshua and ask him to take some action about it. (Netiwit, pers. comm.)

Soon after, Wong shared this information with Law, and both tweeted to condemn the pro-CCP Internet accounts and to support the Thai side on the same day. The tweets by Law and Wong helped raise awareness in Hong Kong about this online conflict, and many of them decided to join the Thai side to push back the pro-CCP Internet commentators. At the same time, these tweets also drew attention from Taiwanese society, given Wong and Law had been developing ties with Taiwanese activists since 2012. Many Taiwanese news outlets and politicians, such as Hsiao Bi-Khim and Cheng Weng-Tsai, started publicizing this Internet conflict. This topic also gained significant attention on Dcard, a popular social media and networking platform in Taiwan. Shortly thereafter, many Taiwanese netizens also decided to join the meme war against the Chinese nationalists.

Thus, the examination of the communication between Netiwit and Wong, as well as the networks between Hongkongers and Taiwanese

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activists, shows that the spread of the meme war into Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the transition from fandom conflict into transnational solidarity, were not spontaneously achieved solely through digital communication technologies. Instead, they were facilitated by the triangular network between activists from three different geographical locations, which had been nurtured for many years. Without the existence of this pre-existing network, the Internet conflict might never have gained full awareness in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the MTA might not have subsequently occurred.

The term Milk Tea Alliance was first coined by @ShawTim, who posted, "#nnevvy we are the #MilkTeaAlliance" (quoted in Dedmen, Lai 2020, 2), one day after Wong and Law's tweets. The term became viral after the Statement by the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy Concerning Recent Online Statements Related to China was posted on the Embassy of the People's Republic of China Bangkok's Facebook page on 14 April 2020. The statement mentioned the Chinese government's concern about the ongoing conflict between the Thai and Chinese netizens, and tried to claim a longstanding family relationship between China and Thailand by repeatedly emphasizing the phrase "*Zhong Tai Yijia Qin* 中泰一家亲" (China and Thailand as one family) (Chinese Embassy Bangkok 2020). Responding to the statement, the youth promoted "milk tea as a counter concept" (Schaffar, Wongratanawin 2021, 17) to reject the blood relationship propounded by the Chinese Embassy. The campaigners chose 'Milk Tea' as a symbol not only due to the shared passion for the drink among urban middle-class youth in the region, but also as a cultural marker distinct from the Chinese way of drinking tea, as Chinese people traditionally drink tea without milk. This turned China into a symbol of authoritarianism, while Milk Tea became a symbol of democracy, justice, and human rights through the message that "where you drink tea with milk you fight for democracy" (Bolotta 2023, 295). They also used hashtags such as *Cha Nom Khon Kwa Lueat* ชานมข้นกว่าเลือด (Milk Tea is Thicker than Blood) and #MilkTeaAlliance as the centerpiece of the campaign to show their unity.

Following the meme war, various MTA groups across Asia were founded with minimal collaboration. This dynamic shifted when the Thai youth anti-government protests resumed on 18 July 2020, prompting MTA members to organize parallel rallies in solidarity with the movement in Thailand.[7] For instance, the Hongkonger activists rallied in front of the Royal Thai Consulate-General in Hong

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7   The 2020-21 youth movement in Thailand can be separated into two waves. The first wave, between February and March 2020, began immediately after the Constitutional Court dissolved the Future Forward Party (FFP) on 21 February 2020, since the party had accepted a loan from Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the party leader. However, with the outbreak of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in mid-March, the

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Kong to show their support for the protests in Thailand (Bangkok Post 2020). Many held banners that read "Stand with Thailand", and prominent Hongkonger activists such as Joshua Wong frequently cited #StandWithThailand when discussing Thai politics on their Twitter accounts. Before the campaign, Wong contacted Netiwit and asked him to help promote the campaign on his social media account to inform the Thai protesters that Hong Kong was supporting them (Netiwit, pers. comm.)

On the other hand, in Taiwan, the solidarity movement was prominent and was perceived as a model for MTA collaboration. An alliance of Thai students, Taiwanese students, and other foreign allies established the Taiwan Alliance for Thai Democracy (TATD). They immediately declared themselves part of the MTA and frequently organized parallel campaigns in Taipei to show their solidarity with the movement in Thailand. During the first event held in front of the Thailand Trade and Economic Office (Thailand's de facto embassy) in Taipei on 2 August 2020, most of the participants were Thai students in Taipei with a majority from National Chengchi University (NCCU) and the National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. The event was quickly organized by two Thai students from NCCU and served as a catalyst for further action. At the event, they were not yet a formal association, but a number of participants who met that day gathered over dinner a few days later to discuss how to sustain their actions of solidarity with the protests in Thailand. It was then that they decided upon the TATD as their group's name (Chen-Dedman, pers. comm.; Akrawat, pers. comm.).

To prepare their largest campaign event on 16 August at Taipei Main Station, held in parallel with a large protest in Thailand, TATD received extensive support from the Taiwanese activists, primarily current and former students of the National Taiwan University.[8] These activists were mostly those whom Netiwit and Akrawat had contacted when they planned to establish the Thai and Taiwanese student organizations in 2019. According to a personal interview with Akrawat, a co-founder of TATD, Taiwanese authorities initially denied them permission to hold a solidarity campaign due to concerns it could harm Taiwan-Thailand relations and warned that campaigners might be deported from Taiwan if they continued their campaign.[9] However, with assistance from local activists, TATD eventually obtained permission to organize the event. Moreover, these Taiwanese

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campaign was temporarily suspended. The protests resumed on 18 July when the Free Youth group organized the protest at Democracy Monument.

8   For more details, refer to Dedman, Lai 2021.

9   To clarify, like many countries, Taiwan has no official diplomatic relationship with Thailand due to the 'One China Principle' of the Beijing government.

activists helped expand the TATD network by linking them with many scholars from renowned universities, members of political parties including the Green Party and the New Power Party, and local civil societies and media outlets such as Amnesty International (Taiwan), Hong Kong Outlander, and New Bloom (Akrawat, pers. comm.). As a result, the TATD's events were very successful, as they could invite many speakers and audiences from diverse political groups in Taiwan, thanks to a pre-existing network between Thai and Taiwanese students that was built a year earlier. This event was also covered by TV outlets in Thailand. After the event at the Taipei Main Station ended, Akrawat told Reuters that:

> This is the first physical expression of the Milk Tea Alliance [...] We don't want to just talk about it online. We want a pan-Asian alliance for democracy. (Tanakasempipat, Chow 2020)

In the early days of the MTA phenomenon from April 2020 to early 2021, most of their significant campaigns were launched within the triangular network among Hongkonger, Taiwanese, and Thai youth activists. The personal tie between Netiwit and Wong helped the meme war expand into Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the dense network between Hongkongers and Taiwanese activists made this online conflict more prominent in Taiwanese society, causing many Taiwanese netizens to join the Thai side to push back the Chinese. It was not until the resurgence of the Thai youth movement in July 2020 that the MTA began to clearly demonstrate its influence in the offline world. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan organized parallel protests with the protesters in Thailand, especially in Taiwan, where a strong coalition operated under the name of TATD. However, this triangular network suffered a setback after most Hongkonger activists were arrested or forced into exile following the implementation of the 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law. Taiwan's network also became less active following the declining trend in the Thai protests from late 2020 to early 2021. In the next section, I discuss how the NOYDA network stepped in to inherit the legacy of the MTA and transformed this phenomenon into a more solid political action after the military coup in Myanmar in 2021.

4 From the NOYDA Network to the Milk Tea Alliance of Myanmar

The NOYDA network disbanded in late 2017, but the members maintained informal ties and occasionally contacted each other. For example, some activists who were part of the network issued a solidarity statement to support the youth protests in Thailand when the police

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attempted to crackdown on the rally and arrested Parit Chiwarak, known as Penguin, who participated in the NOYDA meeting. Then, the 2021 military coup in Myanmar became a critical juncture that transformed the NOYDA network from informal ties back to formal ties, as it created routine communication among the network actors and led to their re-emergence as the #MilkTeaAlliance Friends of Myanmar (MTAFoM).[10]

Although Myanmar did not officially become a member of NOYDA since it did not join the first congress in the Philippines, it earned observer member status with the help of the Thai activists (Thai #2, pers. comm.). This reflects the important role of Thai activists in linking Burmese activists with the NOYDA network. Thai and Burmese activists had been friends since the late 1980s when many Burmese students fled to Thailand after the army brutally cracked down on the pro-democracy movement led by students in 1988. This tie was passed down from generation to generation of civil society workers. The political transition in Myanmar that began in 2010 facilitated interaction between the two countries' activists with many knowledge exchange events and training programs being held during the decade of Myanmar's quasi-democratic political system (Burmese #1, pers. comm.; Thai #3, pers. comm.). For instance, the group of Burmese student activists who organized the Anti-Education Law Movement in 2015 came to Thailand and shared their resistance experiences with Thai activists (Burmese #2, pers. comm.; Thai #1, pers. comm.). As a result, NOYDA members developed strong ties with the Burmese activists, thus fostering friendships and mutual understanding for many years. This has led to increased awareness and concern for the sociopolitical situation in Myanmar among activists of the NOYDA network, as they see the issue as affecting old friends.

The attempt to create a solidarity group to support the pro-democracy campaign in Myanmar occurred after the military coup when a Burmese activist reached out to a Filipino friend, both of whom were NOYDA members, to inquire about accessing the MTA network. While the Filipino friend did not have access to the MTA, as it was still a very loose network at that time, mainly centered in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand, they decided to create their own MTA group to support their Burmese and other ethnic group friends inside Myanmar. To build this network, they utilized the existing infrastructure

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10 On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar army, under the command of General Min Aung Hlaing, staged a coup to halt the opening day of the newly elected parliament. They also detained several important civilian government and National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. Mass demonstrations immediately broke out in major cities on the first weekend, and soon spread to many cities and towns across the country. The uprising was later named the 'Spring Revolution'.

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of NOYDA by gathering many ex-NOYDA members into the group. Simultaneously, they also extended the network by recruiting activists and civil societies who were not part of NOYDA (Burmese #3, pers. comm.; Filipino #1, pers. comm.). This significantly expanded the NOYDA network and made it become active again after its disbandment in late 2017. It was then that they decided upon the MTA-FoM as their new group's name. According to an ex-NOYDA member from Thailand:

> One day, my friend decided to choose the MTA as the group name. First, I opposed them using this name because it might cause conflict with other groups that also used the name MTA. However, my friend said, "It is okay. Everyone can be the MTA". Therefore, we became the MTA. (Thai #1, pers. comm.)

This conversation reflected the flexibility of the MTA as a term and how everyone could be part of this solidarity movement, as no one could claim to be the owner of this campaign, and there were no clear criteria for membership (Huang, Svetanant 2022, 134). The renaming also transformed the MTA from a phenomenon to a more formal network due to its clear agenda and routine communication.

Before NOYDA named their group MTAFoM, there were several MTA groups based in different countries and territories who conducted online activism. Most country-based groups worked independently and only helped each other share information on social media, mainly on Twitter (renamed X). After NOYDA became the MTAFoM, they attempted to invite all country-based MTAs to join their group (Thai #1, pers. comm.). Even though they failed to recruit many country-based MTA groups, as many of these online groups were not interested in offline activism, the MTAFoM could be considered the very first 'international Milk Tea Alliance' since it included members from various countries and regions and took solidarity actions in the offline world. Shortly after, the MTA became a symbol of support from neighboring countries for Myanmar activists fighting against the authoritarian government.

The MTAFoM has been assisting Myanmar since the military coup occurred, and one notable campaign they are working on is the Blood Money Campaign (BMC). The BMC was a campaign initiated in 2021 by the collective efforts of Burmese and other ethnic groups, including members of the General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN). They intended to stop revenue from reaching the military government by pressuring foreign companies that were still doing business with the military, both directly and indirectly (Burmese #4, pers. comm.; Burmese #5, pers. comm.). The main BMC campaign focuses on the oil and gas industry by targeting the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), which was owned by the Ministry of Finance and the

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state-owned bank. The industry is the most significant income source for the junta, accounting for at least 20% of the export products in value terms (Nikkei Asia 2023). By targeting one of the main economic sectors in the country, this campaign directly involved many foreign firms doing business with MOGE, such as TotalEnergies, Chevron, and the Petroleum Authority of Thailand Exploration and Production (PT-TEP). In order for this campaign to be possibly successful, it was necessary to gain support from civil societies outside the country. This is when the BMC campaigners discovered the MTAFoM.

The BMC campaigners reached the MTAFoM due to strong ties between the GSCN and a group of Burmese activists who had been participating in NOYDA and, later, the MTAFoM (Burmese #4, pers. comm.). This shows how individuals can play a role in linking their own network into the broader network. One of BMC's main campaigns was to pressure the PTTEP, the largest petroleum company in Thailand and one of MOGE's leading business partners, to stop doing business with the junta. The MTAFoM crucially assisted the BMC campaign by lobbying the Thai government and educating the Thai people about human rights violations in Myanmar. Although the BMC campaign in Thailand had yet to succeed since PTTEP had not stopped doing business with MOGE, stating that their business was not related to human rights violations in Myanmar (The Nation 2022), the collaboration of the MTAFoM on this issue helped these activists gain experience in transnational activism. It has also strengthened their relationships and prepared them for campaigns in the upcoming future.

NOYDA established a network infrastructure for youth activism, enabling collaboration in support of Myanmar following the 2021 military coup. This collaboration led to the reformalization of the network, evolving NOYDA into the MTAFoM – a transnational political solidarity group with a working agenda and weekly routine communication on the Myanmar issue. Thus, the case of NOYDA demonstrates network fluidity and the role of personal networks in expansion. It also highlights that MTA's expansion to the Myanmar issue resulted from pre-existing networks, not spontaneous action, as mentioned by an anonymous Burmese activist during a personal interview, "If they were not NOYDA, we would not have the #MilkTeaAllianceFriendsofMyanmar" (Burmese #3, pers, comm.).

5 Conclusion

Through network theory and a transnational historical approach, this study found that the MTA phenomenon and solidarity campaign under its name did not simply arise due to the information technology algorithm. Instead, it resulted from a transnational youth activist network in Asia that had gradually developed over the years. Specifically, two

networks played an essential role in the MTA. The first is the triangular network among young activists in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand. This network originated in 2012 when new generation activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan began to collaborate, and later expanded to Thailand when Netiwit invited Wong to Thailand in 2016. This network played a crucial role at the initial stages of the MTA because it faciliated the spread of the meme war between the Thai and pro-CCP Internet commentators into Hong Kong and Taiwan, and subsequently across Asia. The first physical expression of the MTA also occurred via this network when the TATD and Hongkonger activists organized a parallel protest with the protesters in Thailand.

After the role of the triangular network weakened and the MTA phenomenon declined due to the implementation of Hong Kong National Security Law and the decline of youth protests in Thailand, the NOYDA network stepped in. It reformalized its network under the name MTAFoM after the military coup in Myanmar. MTAFoM transformed the MTA into a more formal entity by establishing a weekly communication channel and physical workshops. This was different from the earlier version of the MTA, which only had occasional contact and no comprehensive working agenda. Additionally, it provided more tangible assistance by supporting Burmese and other ethnic group activists in the BMC campaign to cut off revenue to the Myanmar junta. This campaign shifted transnational activism in Asia beyond solidarity statements and expanded a solidarity movement into a more extensive support campaign.

Since the end of the Internet war, the importance of the MTA has fluctuated in many activism contexts. We observed its decline in significance in the context of Hong Kong and Taiwan, its continuity in supporting activism in Myanmar and Thailand, and its rise in new places such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Japan (Phattharathanasut, Teeratanabodee 2024). The MTA has also extended its importance outside Asia, as the hashtag was adopted by diaspora communities in the United States and the United Kingdom to support resistance campaigns in Myanmar (Wang, Rauchfleisch 2022, 595-6). This dynamic could be further investigated in future studies to understand how the MTA expands beyond its original members, is run by non-youth activists, and extends outside the region where it originated. Such investigations could enhance the understanding of this transnational network beyond the scope of this study, as well as shed light on cross-regional connectivities and inter-generational linkages.

Undoubetdly, the rise of the MTA has transformed milk tea into a meaningful symbol for youth activism in Asia, and has opened up new possibilities for resistance, interaction, and cross-national/regional collaboration between activists in Asia and beyond. It has also created a new political space for both young and older activists to engage with their peers from other countries and regions. Even

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though this transnational alliance has yet to achieve its goal of bringing democratic change to the region, it has built cross-national ties between activists in East and Southeast Asia that should and will continue, even as the hashtag is forgotten or this network is transformed into another name.

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Keeping Hold of the Jewel: Buddhist Youth Activism and Multidirectional Migration in Mountain Java

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Abstract   The paper investigates the emergence of a youth organisation in rural Central Java and its relevance for the channelling of Buddhist revivalist stances in the Temanggung area. Rather than instantiating a linear "return", the Buddhist revitalisation efforts promoted by the group materialise a novel religious scenario marked by a sharper influence of Theravāda Buddhism and a mélange of ethnocultural stances. More specifically, the paper intends to show how the formation of the youth organisation and the on-the-ground activities implemented reflect wider dynamics of internal mobility as well as new economic/entrepreneurial sensibilities.

Keywords   Youth movements. Indonesia. Living Buddhism. Entrepreneurialism.

Summary   1. Introduction: a Buddhist activist in Muslim Java. – 2. Nation and devotion. A note on youth activism in post-colonial Java. – 3. Temanggung: marginality and centrality on the Javanese highlands. – 4. The formation of a 'Javanese Buddhist' militancy. – 4.1 Community (re)making through temple 'safaris'. – 4.2. Ethnopreneurialism and coffee-driven empowerments. – 5. Conclusions: the motions of a movement.

1 Introduction: A Buddhist Activist in Muslim Java

Nested on the highlands of the Sumbing-Sindoro volcanic range, in Central Java, Surjosari[1] is part of a scattered group of villages in the Temanggung region that include a substantial Buddhist population. To most visitors, local and non-local, this constitutes arguably a significant curiosity for a regency (and an island) which, albeit religiously diverse, has been long marked by Islam as its majoritarian orientation. Within Temanggung's demographics, the village of Surjosari stands out as the only one in which Buddhism figures as the overwhelming majority affiliation among its 140 households. However, when I visited the village for the first time, in early 2017, little suggested that the village could be carved out unmistakeably from the general pool of rural settlements in the Temanggung highlands. On the contrary, Surjosari appeared unassuming even in comparison to the other villages that stretch on the area's slopes when driving up from Semarang, the provincial capital on the north coast of Java. With one family-run shop and the village's margins dissolving into the vast plantations to the south and gradually blurring into a large forest to the north, Surjosari might give the impression of an aloof 'remote area' (Saxer 2016; Ardener 2012).

The scene was likely not so dissimilar from what Subagyo witnessed upon moving to the village three years before my first visit. Subagyo was a man in his early thirties and his biography mirrored, and sometimes channelled, the changes that were underway just below the surface through the period of my stays in Central Java, up to 2020. He was originally from a small port town on the north coast of the island, a much more vibrant province for its home furniture industry and resorts. Subagyo moved to the village upon marrying Metta, a girl from the Temanggung regency. They moved to Surjosari together with her father, who was originally born and raised in the village. The choice to move to a relatively secluded place was thoroughly meditated and not solely dictated by Metta's background.

Subagyo was not himself a farmer and had lived for most of his young adult life in places that had little to share with Surjosari's highland remoteness. On the contrary, he seemed exemplary of the contemporary educated, tech-savvy and highly mobile young urbanite. He graduated from high school in a private Protestant institution under the umbrella of a Christian foundation (*Yayasan Pendidikan Kristen*). Right after, Subagyo moved on to Jakarta where he studied an undergraduate program at STAB Nalanda, the most prominent institution in Indonesia for higher education in the field of Buddhist

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[1] The names of the smallest administrative units (villages/hamlets) and the names of the participants other than monks have been anonymised.

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studies and a religious milieu close to transnational Theravādin networks. Subagyo met his future wife, Metta, who was also enrolled at a Buddhist college in the town of Salatiga, at an event in Temanggung organised by STAB Nalanda in collaboration with smaller Buddhist organisations from Yogyakarta and Temanggung-city. After a stint in the cultural and educational hotspot of Yogyakarta, they relocated to the steep slopes of Surjosari in 2014, in a house belonging to Metta's father. Not long afterwards, Metta gave birth to a daughter, Aykia.

Subagyo was very mindful of his daughter's upbringing. He taught Aykia traditional Javanese children's games and photographed her multiple times every day against the background of the fields, the forest or by the village's *vihara*,[2] pictures which he later posted profusely on his social media. He intended to convey to his social media contacts the bucolic beauty of countryside living, as stated more or less overtly in his captions, referencing a presumably more authentic way of life. Simultaneously, Subagyo himself donned more and more frequently traditional Javanese attire in his day-to-day conduct. Upon my second visit in 2019, he wore a *sarong* and a *blangkon* (traditional lower garment and headwear respectively) in place of his older blue jeans.

He had also set up an extensive home library on Javanese arts, literature and mysticism, next to a number of books on Buddhist subjects from a variety of schools. Subagyo seemed very proud of the collection, although he admitted having "barely time to read any". Together with his library, icons in his house also began to expand. Where there used to hang only an Indian-stylised Buddhist poster, by the time of my last departure walls and shelves around the house accumulated various Buddhist imageries, from statuettes to framed pictures. Quickly, Subagyo and his house became a point of reference for Surjosari's communal life, his library the venue for public discussions and gatherings.

The lifepath of Subagyo is telling of the processes that were condensing in Surjosari and that reflected pervasive dynamics in contemporary Java. As many have observed after the fall of the New Order in 1998 (Aspinall 2011), one of the consequences of the massive decentralisation policies put in place in the post-Suharto era has been the revival or the re-invention of local ethnic identities in several parts of Indonesia. Perhaps surprisingly due to the status of the Javanese as a decades-long hegemonic ethnic group on all levels of national life, the (re)emergence of the concept of 'Javaneseness'

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2 In modern Indonesia, *vihara* identifies a functioning Buddhist temple. Although it is legally distinguished from a *klenteng*, a Chinese-syncretic house of worship, in popular parlance they are often used interchangeably. This reflects the decades-long ban on Sinic cultural features, lifted in 2006, during which Chinese worship venues needed to be reinvented through categories perceived to be more unequivocally Buddhist.

as an ethnofolk marker was no exception in this process. Javanese language has experienced a renaissance up to institutional quarters in Java (Rodemeier 2014) as well as seeping into mass media via specific representational forms (Bogaerts 2017). Programs on Javanese traditional music, weaving and medicine have multiplied in recent years across the island (Weydmann 2020; Rizzo 2020), while the highest Islamic council has recently issued a thorough restyling of the halal certification logo[3] with the lettering in Arabic fashioned by way of a *gunungan*, a symbol of the traditional shadow theatre. In 2022, the choice of the central government to name Indonesia's capital-to-be 'Nusantara', a mediaeval Java-centric connotation for the archipelago and used in post-colonial times as an indigenous surrogate for 'Indonesia', might be considered as falling within the same scope.

Such processes have important counterparts elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago (van der Muur et al. 2019). In the Javanese case, however, they signal a re-localisation and revalorisation of cultural fragments, from language to artistic conventions and architectonic styles, that in Indonesia's post-colonial history had shifted symbolically to a cultural scaffolding understood as a generic and semi-uprooted referent for Indonesian culture at large, through a process that some have characterised as the 'Javanisation' of Indonesia (Mulder 2005; Mayari 2023).

As is clear from Subagyo's life trajectory, Buddhism entertains a complex relationship with narratives on Javanese history and ethnic authenticity. While a thoroughly new religion in its present configuration (Yulianti 2024) and bound to the recent history of Indonesians of Chinese descent (Chia 2020), practitioners and observers alike have perceived and represented Buddhism as a linear 'return' of the religious culture of classical, pre-Islamic Java. The revivalist discourse that binds contemporary Buddhism with classical Java returns an alternative history of Javanese ethnocultural authenticity with respect to parallel claims posited by Islamic scholars between Javaneseness and traditionalist Islam.[4]

In the remainder of this contribution, I will outline, through fieldwork-based ethnographic data, how the activities of Subagyo and the youth association he established in the Temanggung countryside,

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3 See for instance: https://food.chemlinked.com/news/food-news/indonesia-unveils-new-halal-label-logo#:~:text=Indonesia's%20new%20halal%20label%20logo,logo%20can%20still%20be%20circulated.

4 Through a series of controversial publications, in 2012 the local Islamic academic Fahmi Basya had popularised a number of theories which postulated that also the eighth century Borobudur Buddhist heritage site, in Central Java, was in fact the evidence of Islamic numerology and symbolism in disguise. The monument should have been regarded, as such, as a Javanese-Islamic heritage site.

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Pemuda Buddhis, conveyed a distinct mélange of Theravāda Buddhism and Javanese identitarian stances. Simultaneously, the activism of the group demonstrates that attempts at revitalising the cultural and religious life of the Buddhist communities of Temanggung cannot be severed from practices aimed at breathing new life into the economy and sociality of the villages. This emerged with clarity in the efforts of the association aimed at implementing a modern coffee enterprise and preparing the grounds for the development of an eco-tourist industry. The religious and non-religious stances involved in the activism of the group also reflect new mobility patterns in Java, which no longer posit the countryside as the default departure point of migratory trails.

I do so through fieldwork-based ethnographic data and pre- and post-fieldwork communication, observations and online ethnography. The study is tightly related to a broader research project on contemporary Buddhist revivalism in Indonesia, to which I have dedicated three on-site fieldwork stints between 2015 and 2020. The practical involvement of research participants followed the chain of acquaintances that braided into my previous study on Javanese traditional music education. Subagyo and Sura in particular, the main research participants who figure in this article, have also acted as invaluable access points to an otherwise relatively remote field in the Temanggung highland region.

2 Nation and Devotion: A Note on Youth Activism in Post-colonial Java

Youth activism has a vigorous history in the chronicles of modern Indonesia and, at multiple junctions, it has been the vector through which major political and societal stances have been formulated. The mobilisation of the *pemuda* noun carries itself a specific semiotic history, as it rests on a semantic tension with another linguistic referent for youth, *remaja*. A substantivisation of the Melayu *muda* ('unripe'), the category of *pemuda* began to be documented as a localised rendering of the Euro-american notion of 'youth' in the later stage of the colonial period. However, its usage remained confined to the identification of bureaucratic ranks, and its circulation in everyday speech was only scantly documented thereafter (Lee 2016).

Naafs and White (2012) showed how, with the acceleration of consumer culture under the Suharto regime, a new term was popularised for identifying the emergence of 'youth' as a brand-new category. A term which would be double-bound to the diffusion of a commodity-driven global economy, one that was both agentive and objective in a novel and presumably transparent age division of market participation. The noun *remaja* fit that purpose and left, arguably, *pemuda*

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to the earnest domain of the political and military connotations in which it first appeared.

Through the Twentieth century, indeed, *pemuda* organisations saturated the militant realm, spanning the political spectrum from nationalist groups to far-left activism (see Peters 2013 for *Pemuda Rakyat*; Foulcher 2000 for *Sumpah Pemuda*; Ryter 1998 for *Pemuda Pancasila*). To this day, several political parties retain militant youth wings that operate very closely to the party's main leadership. The employment of *pemuda* in the associationist sphere, that is, cannot but convey a reference to its peculiar semiotic life also when its current domain may extend, on the surface, beyond the overtly political. Although most of the well-known youth nationalist movements were formulated on a secular platform, religion was never far from sight, as it wasn't from the conceptualisation of the Indonesian nation-state itself. Membership of prominent movements such as *Sumpah Pemuda*, navigated by the founders of the nation Soekarno and Muhammad Hatta, overlapped almost entirely with that of youth movements of a spiritualist kind, like *Pemuda Theosofi*, a spin-off of the globalist lodge.[5] From the same youth branch of the Theosophical lodge, in 1934 the first Buddhist association in contemporary Indonesia emerged as Batavian Buddhist Association (Yulianti 2024).

In the context of post-New Order Indonesia, with the restoration of democratic freedoms, including religious expression in civic life, the strengthened prominence of religion in the public sphere has been oftentimes filtered and driven through youth activism as well. This is most visible within Islamic domains, as youth and student groups have articulated movements and counter-movements on issues ranging from religious orthodoxy to feminism.[6] Within Indonesia's Buddhist affairs, the surge of Theravāda Buddhism from the 1990s was marked, among the launching of various organisations, by the formation of the youth organisation PATRIA, an acronym for *Pemuda Theravāda Indonesia*, whose name reflected the complex ties between Buddhism and the nationalist ethos despite the religion's minoritarian status.

Articulating a form of sociality and activism through the category of youth such as *Pemuda Buddhis* is significant for the web of meanings, associations and imaginaries with which the *pemuda* referent is charged. The mobilisation of the distinct category is not only relevant for drawing in specific nationalistic and patriotic connections, but it helps to instil an important motivational stimulus and an idea of social advancement. Above all, it triggers a sense of collective

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[5] The Theosophy lodge was particularly active in Indonesia and it influenced closely the local revivals of the dharmic religions, particularly in Java (de Tollenaere 2004).

[6] Ardhianto 2018; Feillard , van Doorn-Harder 2013; Nisa 2012; Rosyad 2007.

experience and effervescence which, as we'll see, is a facet of the local activism as crucial as the overt religionising mission in the Temanggung villages.

3 Temanggung: Marginality and Centrality on the Javanese Highlands

The revivalist stance at the heart of the *Pemuda Buddhis* movement is formulated in a context that expresses processes of marginalisation on many levels. A minority religious affiliation on a national scale,[7] Buddhism has entered complex power structures in the few rural settings in Java in which it found fertile ground in the proselytising missions of the 1950s and 1960s.[8] The lack of larger-scale networking and a solid infrastructure in terms of worship venues and religious specialists had produced an *umat*[9] that, according to many of my interlocutors, remained largely indifferent towards formal Buddhist learning and practice. Moreover, the crystallisation of Islam as a powerful tool in identity politics and an increasingly hegemonic force in the public sphere issued several episodes of outward or tacit tension among different groups, as well as policies of surcharged land taxations for non-Muslims. Over the years, episodes of 'economic conversion' into Islam were recounted as due to such policies, as well as occurring for the ambiguous status of inter-religious marriages. In order to avoid bureaucratic hassle and petty talk, many 'mixed' couples tend to wed into the same formal religion, with one of the partners formally converting into the religion of the spouse.

The sense of neglect and precarity sweeping the Buddhist community of the highlands is formulated against this backdrop. Enhancing the feeling of uncertainty for minority communities, the Temanggung area was also affected by multiple episodes of inter-religious

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[7] According to the 2010 census, Buddhists accounted for just under 1% of the population, approximately 1,7 million residents. A new census was underway at the time of writing.

[8] The modern Buddhist missionary activity in Indonesia is due predominantly to the Buddhayana project of the charismatic Indonesian monk Ashin Jinarakkhita. The movement tried to promote an ecumenic understanding of Buddhism, while remaining sensitive to the local traditional religions. He also worked for the recuperation of the Borobudur heritage sites in a religious sense (see Chia 2018). After the foundation of *Sangha Theravada Indonesia* in 1976, Theravāda Buddhism began to diffuse progressively as the de facto orientation of many Indonesian Buddhists. This was facilitated through a tight internal organizational web and important institutional relations with the Thai Thammayut order, which began to send monastic missions (and organized royal visits) to Indonesia from the 1970s onwards. In 2019, a comprehensive Thai temple (Hemadhiro Mettawati Vihara) was established in West Jakarta.

[9] Islamic-derived referent for 'religious community', routinely used in Indonesia also by Buddhists and Christians.

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friction. In 2011 Muslim-Christian clashes issued after the publication of controversial statements by the local Pastor Antonius Bawengan.[10] Between 2009 and 2018, the regency was raided several times by the anti-terrorist unit Densus88 for acts of violence or terror planification linked to the Jemaah Islamiyah group (Osman 2010). The Temanggung cell was charged not only for the attacks on the local police headquarters, but also for its links to the Bali bombings of 2002 and to the Surabaya churches attacks in 2018.

In addition to the religious concerns of the community, the Temanggung regency is marked by a further set of events that situate it at the same time at the margins and at the centre of broader processes. The traditional crop of the region – tobacco – is the main form of sustenance for the majority of the farmers. Over the last few years, work at the plantations had experienced the joint effects of the shrinking agricultural population to the benefit of urbanisation and of the stagnant revenues that the giants of the domestic tobacco industry remitted to the unions. A chain of highly televised protests between 2012 and 2015 mobilised many residents against the tobacco corporations in order to renegotiate the selling rates (see Sobary 2016).

The sense of precarity more or less explicit in the formulation of revitalisation projects in movements such as *Pemuda Buddhis* reflects also this set of dynamics, which pertain to the religious field as much as to non-religious domains. Dynamics that are not necessarily exclusive to the Buddhist community, that is, but that reveal specific fractures when intersected with a minority condition in a heated sphere such as the public expression of religion in contemporary Indonesia. The movement initiated by Subagyo was conceived as a counterweight against these trends. At the same time, it displayed features and practices that echoed wider developments at the heart of Indonesian Buddhism as well as in contemporary Javanese social and economic patterns.

4 The Formation of a 'Javanese Buddhist' Militancy

Shortly after he moved to Surjosari on a permanent basis, Subagyo began organising evening gatherings at his veranda, meetings that were still consistently being carried on weekly throughout my stay in Temanggung. The subject of the state of the Buddhist demography was a frequent topic of conversation, either on the occasion of the rumour about someone's conversion out of Buddhism or when

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10   Human Rights Watch (in Indonesian): `https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/28/indonesia-religious-minorities-targets-rising-violence`. Parts of the episode were also reported on international media, see NYT: `https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/09/world/asia/09indonesia.html`.

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discussing general news. In the narratives generated upon such informal gatherings, the reasons for the perceived demographic contraction were to be traced on the one hand to the expansion of Christian and Islamic educational institutions, a subject with which Subagyo was personally well acquainted. On the other hand, the quantitative decline and disengagement of the Buddhist community was also attributed to inter-religious marriage, a frequent topic of legal controversy and a perpetual item of gossip, in which case it was frequently the Buddhist counterpart to change his or her affiliation.

The particular concern with young people was also relatable to these motives, especially in the conversations taking place among 'senior' activists. On the side of navigating the internal mobility patterns, the youth was also naturally the population segment closest to educational policies and romantic flirts. Occasionally, Subagyo expressed this with an autobiographical note. Not only could he be considered an urbanised or highly mobile young adult, but he himself grew up in a Christian school and was on the verge of abandoning 'the way of the forefathers', which is the phrase by which, interchangeably, both the Javanist tradition and contemporary Buddhism as are often talked about.

However, Subagyo embodied also a different, less elicited trend, that is the multi-directionality of young people's mobility, a trend for which urbanisation is no longer the univocal movement intrinsic in internal mobility, as it has been the case for the past few decades (Batubara et al. 2022). Invested with a set of symbolic revalorisations and economic possibilities, the countryside is increasingly the terminus of mobility routes as well. If for Subagyo the value of rurality rested in its quality as the repository of authentic ethnoculture, for other activists it was the pool of unharnessed business opportunities. However, the two motivations were not necessarily mutually exclusive. They were not at least for Sura, one of the group's most engaged activists.

Sura was a couple of years younger than Subagyo and was born and raised in Tare, a hamlet a few kilometres north of Surjosari from a family of tobacco farmers. He was educated consistently as a Buddhist throughout his life, although he experienced an intensification of his religious commitment once he moved out of the countryside to study Economics at an undergraduate course in Semarang, the provincial capital. In the last year of his studies, he took the decision to move back to the village and returned to the city thereafter only in order to defend his B.A. thesis or for short-term jobs. Sura got in touch with Subagyo via social media first, and, after he moved back to the countryside, he began to be involved in the activities of *Pemuda Buddhis*, of which he quickly became one of the senior and most militant members.

Sura's decision to return to the village was animated by the joint desire of establishing a business in the countryside linked to coffee farming and participating in religious activism. In 2018, he became

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a *samanera*, the title for a monastic novice, often taken on temporarily. He also admitted he occasionally toured the highlands of Temanggung in order to identify possible sites of heritage linked to Buddhism that were still overlooked by the local administrations and communities. After he joined *Pemuda Buddhis*, the 'heritage hunt' became a group activity that involved some of the activists. They successfully managed to bring a few fragments of artifacts to the attention of regional heritage committees, although the activity as such was extremely difficult to carry out because of the several complications involved, from surveying the opinions of archaeologists to the paperwork needed to file the case to the regional boards.

In May 2016 *Pemuda Buddhis* was formally launched with an event participated by over 200 young Buddhists from the hamlets of Temanggung and the nearby regencies of Kendal and Semarang. The relatively vast attendance was the result of months of careful intra-regional networking on the side of Subagyo and Sura and a big role was played by the prior casual get-togethers that had oftentimes Subagyo's veranda as the main point of reference. They also understood the importance of combining concrete networks of acquaintances with online reach-outs. Subagyo was especially keen on communicating through Facebook groups (and, progressively, through the then-nascent Instagram), capitalising on the popularity of public and private groups on traditional Javanese culture and religion. While the main audience of such local and island-wide groups is generally on the adult side, it speaks to a base that is highly militant on all sorts of Javanese-related cultural issues and posts in these groups tend to have a broad and quick resonance. At least a dozen of the young participants joined the ceremony from Temanggung-city and from the Semarang region after learning about the event through online groups, either personally or through a family member.

As the pathways into the organisation suggest, *Pemuda Buddhis* emerged implicitly as a Javanese affair from the point of view of ethnic identification. However, in the years after its creation, with information about its initiatives spreading by word of mouth or through social media cross-posting, events began to be also attended by participants of Chinese-Indonesian or Balinese backgrounds and other formal youth groups from urban areas. On events taking place in 'core' areas such as Surjosari, the distinction remained visible in interactions and teamwork in the course of the initiatives. Such distinction between strictly members and non-members, Javanese or otherwise, was increasingly blurred as events took place in other areas. This was also facilitated by the fact that further membership remained a predominantly informal and fluid business.

Unlike other experiments under the historical *pemuda* rubric, which tend to be overwhelmingly male-marked, moreover, *Pemuda Buddhis* was characterised from the start by a relative balance in gendered

participation. This mirrored closely the gender configuration of Buddhist youth groups in cities, which tend to have an even make-up gender-wise, with sometimes female members exceeding male participation.

The launching event of *Pemuda Buddhis* was overseen by Ven. Atthapiyo, a charismatic Theravāda monk from the island of Flores. Atthapiyo gave an introductory speech by Surjosari's vihara in which he recollected his path to monkhood in his early twenties. Born in Catholic-majority Flores, which granted him the title of 'first monk from Flores', and from a religiously committed family he only began to learn about Buddhism at the age of twenty-two. In his speech, he recounted the struggle of being a young Buddhist in an area without a pre-existing *umat*, particularly among his peers, and of how the presence of a supporting association would have facilitated his personal and religious life. He realised then the meaning of the Buddha's maxim on the dharma being like a jewel and not a random brick: for, like a jewel, it was indeed a rare thing to find among the living. The speech of Atthapiyo was clearly a motivational input to the formation of the youth group and he concluded his talk wishing that the spirit of *Pemuda Buddhis* "could warm up the chilly highlands of Temanggung".

The remainder of the launching event was an oath for the cause of *Pemuda Buddhis* and the commitment to the revitalisation of Buddhism. After the recitation of the Pāli[11] chant *Devata Aradhana* (the 'summoning of the divine beings') some of the participants came to the front of the vihara in turns and recited a personal commitment they had written on paper. The vows were then individually closed in envelopes and placed in a basket. The commitments would be sent three months later to the address of the respective vihara that the 'activist' had written on the envelope. For Subagyo, this was meant to engage symbolically the youngsters with their own communities and further motivate them to the cause. He showed me one of such letters, belonging to seventeen-year-old Nirmala:

> I, Nirmala, in front of the altar of Buddha Sakyamuni, commit myself to keep hold of the jewel that I have received. And I promise to continue the struggle of those who have preceded me in the advancement of Buddhism.

At the time of our conversations, Nirmala was still active in the activities of *Pemuda Buddhis*, stated Subagyo, and she intended to enrol in a program for Buddhist Studies, although she had so far postponed the application. The evening culminated with the launch of white lanterns into the sky.

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11 The sacred language of Theravāda Buddhism.

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4.1   Community (Re)making Through Temple 'Safaris'

The main raison d'être of *Pemuda Buddhis* was the overt religio-communitarian mission, as it was clear from its name and the ceremony that marked its creation. The Javanese-Buddhist project of the association came out squarely from one of the earliest initiatives of the group, a series of didactic-socialising excursions that went under the name of *safari vihara*. As a particularly knowledgeable resident of the area, Sura acted very often as the chief guide in such activities. Usually held on Sundays, such excursions managed to gather a varying number of young participants from the wider area, ranging from as few as seven people to several dozen attendants and followers.

While the central objective of these 'safaris' was the socialisation of Buddhist youngsters, the initiatives encompassed a larger mission. One of the typical manifestations of such safaris, the touring of active or dismissed Buddhist temples in the region, served as a moment of reflection and acquaintance with the local Buddhist communities, young and old, or simply for a chat with the village chief (*kepala desa*). Within the revivalist vision of Sura and Subagyo, these occasions were useful for mapping the regency's Buddhist presence, including the state of the temples – many were in fact in a state of prolonged decay or had been closed permanently. These safaris related to the underlying conviction for which, through various communal initiatives, the rural Buddhist *umat* could grow more self-aware and interconnected, but also that a more precise image of the houses of worship peppered around the region might help producing a clearer representation of Buddhism in Temanggung which, in turn, could herald visibility and the potential of directing funds and donations.

Nevertheless, the safari excursions retained above all a religious significance. Visits at various temples of the region coincided sometimes with formal service, occasionally overseen by a monk. The departure point of most conversations hinged invariably on Buddhism as the common ground between the young Buddhists and the local hosts. This could be expressed through references or inquiries on local histories or unknotting the web of personal acquaintances and kin connections. Moreover, in a few instances, some of the more religiously advanced young activists began to take on the role of officiants in temple service,[12] just like Sura had done in his village of provenance. This included ritual guidance (meditation and chanting) and often also a short lecture.

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[12]   Like in many urban temples in Indonesia, in the absence of monks, formal service is usually conducted in villages by lay practitioners, addressed as *romo* (male) or *ramani* (female) who sometimes undergo specific training for the role. Buaban (2020) has observed how the increase in Theravādin monastic presence is progressively marginalising this informal institution within Indonesian Buddhism.

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Although Buddhism was a centrepiece of the *Pemuda Buddhis* temple excursions, the religious element was not confined to formal Buddhist devotion. Links to the Javanese tradition, a conceptually hybrid realm in contemporary Java between the religious (*agama*) and the domain of customs (*adat*), were in several ways in the front of many of the activities and initiatives organised around *Pemuda Buddhis.* In July 2019, the activists succeeded in organising in the outskirts of Surjosari a sizeable music festival called 'Java Connections', filled with references and lectures on Javanese art, literature and spirituality, with academic guests that Subagyo managed to invite from the provinces' main cities.

The association between an idea of Javanese authenticity and Buddhism surfaced implicitly on the occasion of the music festival, inferred from the staging of the festival in the Buddhist-majority village. In other instances, the same association was made more explicit. In one of the safari I followed, to the hamlet of Purwodeso, the more or less intentional merging of Buddhism and Javanism came out in stark relief. On that afternoon, after the official worship by the temple, the monk and a *samanera*, who remained in the village specifically for the visit of the *Pemuda Buddhis* youngsters, guided the guests that managed to gather on that day to a small tour of the village. Not far from the *vihara* grounds, the monk stopped at a giant rock by a tree where an offering tray was placed. He lit a bunch of incense sticks and uttered a short mantra in Javanese, followed by a prolonged moment of silence. The monk later explained how the tree would grant blessings on whoever stopped by and asked for refuge.

After the two kinds of worship – by the temple and by the tree – the monk continued the short walk to a small hut that had the look of a Muslim prayer house (*mushola*). He invited the young activists to notice a wide opening in the inner wall of the hut, which faced a dark intricate tangle of trunks and roots which was nothing other than the beginning of the forest which stretched right behind the hut. The opening in the wall allowed one to sit in meditation right under the tree roots and the half-filled offering bowls with a few soaked petals in it suggested that the spot was still somewhat in use. The only salient description that the monk gave to the young participants was that the kind of Buddhism of Purwodeso was "an example of how Indonesian Buddhism had become one with Javanese culture".

Episodes such as Purwodeso's safari were not atypical in their convergence of Buddhist and Javanese religious features in the activities put up by the young Buddhists movement. The two traditions were merged in more explicit terms with another initiative, that is the revitalisation of the local *nyadran*, traditional Javanese cemetery feast dedicated to kinship or community ancestors (see Rizzo 2024). In 2019, the ritual was thoroughly refashioned by the activists into a multi-day event open to outsiders for a live-in option (for a fee) and

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filled with excursions, guided meditations in the forest by ordained monks and temple visits. The event was successful enough to be replicated the next year.

Interspersed with notions and imaginaries of culture, the continuum in which the Javanese ritual tradition is positioned in post-colonial Java, the activities brought together by *Pemuda Buddhis* exceeded the strictly Buddhist sphere and spilled over from the domain of the religious. In the wider revivalist efforts shaped by activists such as Subagyo, Buddhism and Javanism were conceived as mutually related for the life of communities like Surjosari and the other villages of the highlands with a significant Buddhist demography. The willingness to rekindle a sense of religious sociality through the means of culture was also clear in the introduction of Javanese-style wear on major celebrations, the setting up of a gamelan music set in the basement of the temple, but also in the reproduction of Borobudur-inspired black *stupa*s and Buddha statues[13] that began to dot the yards of Surjosari during my stay.

The insistence on ethnocultural elements had also the implicit prospect of creating an 'attractive' community with respect to outsiders, an attractiveness which, capitalising on a renewed valorisation of cultural authenticity, could be mobilised for visibility and the initiation of a cultural-tourist economy. An image frequently evoked by activists and residents was that of *potensi wisata*, 'tourist potential', applied to a variety of situations, from the area's landscape and natural lushness to religious rituality. The sociocultural and religious revitalisation of villages like Surjosari was therefore contiguous with preoccupations of a more economic nature. From a trans-regional perspective, this echoed comparable moves that were unfolding at the same time in other contexts, such as the Maap Euang project in Thailand (Schertenleib 2022) in which agroeconomics and the building of a meditation centre open to outsiders are envisioned in unison to fuel social engagement and revitalization on a neighborhood level. Although with remarkably different undertones – not in the least, being a minority religious enterprise ensuing in a broader increasingly vocal Islamic backdrop – this aspect became unequivocal with a simultaneous agenda put forward by the *Pemuda Buddhis* activists, aimed at upgrading an entire entry into the local agricultural fabric, the production of coffee.

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13   See Rizzo 2022 for a case study on the novel emergence of shrines in rural Java.

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4.2 Ethnopreneurialism and Coffee-Driven Empowerments

Early in 2017, the activists of *Pemuda Buddhis* had explicitly pledged to dedicate more energy over that year to the economic empowerment of their religious community. Sensing that the wellbeing and survival of Temanggung Buddhism passed through its impression of vitality as a religion as much as through the economic relevance and strength of its community, the young activists had begun to collect ideas about the possible content and paths of that 'empowerment' (*pemberdayaan*). As I heard several times during their gatherings at Subagyo's place, many of the issues that affected the Buddhist communities of Temanggung could be traced to the fact that the countryside lifestyle and occupational perspectives, which meant predominantly farming, had become an undesirable option for most youngsters over the past decades. This seemed to imply that by reverting the set of symbolic and economic associations attributed to rural life, the negative demographic trends could be equally counteracted.

The narrative formulated on such meetings portrayed the economic and religious tendencies of Buddhist villages as being constantly weaved into one another. Discussions on these lines spanned all levels of formality, from veranda talk to regional conferences, all invariably juxtaposed economic action with the development and 'improvement' of religiosity. This seemed to be in part confirmed by the evidence provided by numbers. According to much statistical data, in fact, it so happened that the lower-income and less infrastructurally developed sub-districts in Temanggung were also those inhabited by the Buddhist communities.

Despite the mediatic noise around the 2011-12 protests, areas such as Surjosari appeared often at the margins of the regional developments about tobacco farming. According to Sura, this was largely due to the unorganised aspect of the tobacco chain in the area. Many farmers tended to sell their products on the informal market, autonomously and often at a rate even lower than the price set by unions in other districts. These practices tended to perpetuate patterns of relative poverty in areas such as Surjosari's, compared to other sections of the regency.

Rather than focussing on a traditional economic activity such as tobacco, an activity which, according to the Temanggung union, occupies in part or entirely the crops of nearly 90% of the farmers, *Pemuda Buddhis* activists shifted the attention for their vision of economic empowerment to other agricultural domains and practices: mushrooms farming, the implementation of permaculture principles and, especially, coffee. The coffee business in all its declinations – from farming techniques to the establishment of hip cafés – was a buzz topic in many conversations among the younger residents. The

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association between coffee and the Temanggung highlands was also established through plenary discussions and more formal settings, such as conferences and meetings with Buddhist institutions.

The starting point in which an actual plan of economic activism was formulated once again under the aegis of a formal Buddhist platform, this time the setting of a meditation retreat. From an idea of Subagyo, over the New Year's Eve of 2017, *Pemuda Buddhis* organised a meditation retreat intended mostly for young people. The retreat was led by Venerable Jatarika, an East Javanese monk who received ordination in the Thai Thammayut lineage. Apart from being an occasion for the practice of *atthasilani*, the eight moral precepts, the retreat was intended to bring together on a more or less formal platform a number of activists from the province in order to discuss and sketch in the spare time a blueprint of what 'economic empowerment' could mean for Temanggung Buddhists. It underscored, too, how the community empowering ideas of the main *Pemuda Buddhis* activists braided in the organisational and financial capacity of some of the formal Buddhist institutions of the country.

A few ideas for locating areas of economic potentiality (*potensi pemberdayaan*) in Temanggung were derived from a workshop attended by Sura in central Jakarta. The workshop was organised by Institut Nagarjuna, an inter-denominational Buddhist NGO devoted to the support of a liberal and progressive understanding of the dhamma, called *dhamma kontekstual*. The institute collaborated also with local NGOs for the promotion of the dhamma and for improving the living conditions of the *umat*. For Sura, coffee and earwood mushroom cultivation were the particularly strategic areas that could be harnessed in Temanggung and that would generate the most benefit for the residents in the mid-long term. Coffee was an especially profitable domain that could also let Temanggung Buddhists participate in the generalised flare of enthusiasm and trendiness that seemed to shroud coffee production and consumption in Indonesia at that time.

Like in other regions in Indonesia, coffee farming was introduced in Temanggung during the Dutch administration in both its present varieties, arabica and robusta. However, the crop remained largely a marginal agricultural entry for the domestic market, as much of the country's coffee production was pulled by the export market. The development of a local 'coffee culture' in recent years had somewhat reversed this pattern. The expansion of coffee plantations in several regions of the archipelago could not keep up with the booming business to the extent that Indonesia experienced a sudden increase in coffee import too.[14] In Java, like for tobacco farming, the

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14 BPS2019:https://www.bps.go.id/publication/2019/12/06/b5e163624c20870bb3d6443a/statistik–kopi–indonesia–2018.html.

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regency of Temanggung far outnumbered any other district in terms of hectares and productivity.[15] This was an effect in part of the wide support of the rural development program of the province initiated in the 1990s, which maintained that the intercropping of coffee and tobacco could counteract the risk of land erosion to which much of the region is exposed (Febriharjati 2015).

While these general trends explained part of the positive prospects of coffee production in the Temanggung highlands, Sura insisted that the farming of coffee seeds in Temanggung could be considered a particularly beneficial enterprise in that very moment. Between 2014 and 2016 the DJKI (General Directorate for Intellectual Property) issued a new act that brought under its protection two new varieties of coffee, the Sindoro-Sumbing Java Arabica and Temanggung Robusta. The first variety referred to the localities stretched on the Temanggung-Wonosobo slopes while the second applied to Temaunggung at large. Provided that cultivation and harvest met a specified set of requirements, farmers in the given areas could obtain a certificate of Geographical Indication, with its relative benefits on the upscaling market.

Two months after the resolutions that *Pemuda Buddhis* activists formulated over the meditation retreat, it was on coffee that much of the efforts of the group began to be concentrated. Through a chain of personal contacts, the activist group eventually reached out to a Buddhayāna organisation from Surabaya, who accepted to make a generous donation for the implementation of the agricultural program of *Pemuda Buddhis*. They decided to meet formally in February that year at a training centre near Semarang, the regional capital of Central Java. The administrator from the Buddhayāna group made it clear enough that the system of certificates of geographical indication needed to be harnessed in specific ways. In fact, one of the bases of the organisation's financial support was not only the acquisition of land but also the education of the local actors in marketing strategies.

According to Sura's accounts, coffee was a subject of conversation in connection to the affairs of the regional Buddhist *umat* even before the exploratory meetings with Buddhayāna and Institut Nagarjuna. Coffee farming was already associated with the *potensi pemberdayaan* of the area, when a report on the situation of coffee farmers in Temanggung was presented at a cultural festival in Borobudur. While the region could boast some of the best varieties of coffee worldwide, the quantity and quality of the final product placed on the

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market was highly uneven across the sub-districts. Buddhist-inhabited areas especially were deemed below the general standards. In order to meet immediate economic necessities, many farmers would sell the seed, to either the final buyer or to middlemen, when it was still on the tree. This meant little control and care given to the timings of the harvest, with the seed oftentimes collected unripe. For Sura, the result was a final product of low quality that had a market value much below its potential.

After taking into consideration all these factors and opinions, *Pemuda Buddhis* activists, in accordance with the Buddhayāna group, contracted a coffee plantation to be treated 'professionally'. The expertise needed for making the entire system more competitive would be guaranteed by inviting coffee farming and permaculture specialists. "I don't think we would get any far if we only gave abstract lectures to the farmers", said Sura, by far the most engaged activist on the matter, "Instead, we decided to pay some experts to move in here for a while and 'spin the wheel' (*menggerakkan roda*), so that the farmers could learn from a concrete example. I feel this is the most effective way".

The Buddhist, 'professional', coffee plantation was acquired at a rate of 10 million Rupiah (€ 647), and about 700 trees were being farmed by the end of 2017. Few months later, Subagyo acquired a state-of-the-art coffee roaster, which he shared profusely on social media. He also included the short cut of a coffee roasting scene in a promotional video of Surjosari submitted for a regional competition for the allocation of funds for village infrastructural upgrades.

Finally, the coffee project was expanded with the opening of a coffee shop serving both as café and roastery, in a hamlet just downhill from the Surjosari slope. The business was expected to turn remunerative once robusta GI certificates would be acquired but that could also serve, meanwhile, as a trendy and leafy gathering venue. The café became a reality in the middle of the 2020 Covid pandemic, promoting itself as 'the café in the middle of the forest' and showcasing a decorative style between Javanese and 'tiki' aesthetics.

5 Conclusions: The Motions of a Movement

The emergence of *Pemuda Buddhis* in the Temanggung highlands signals the formation of a Buddhist movement that condenses a set of historical, religious and economic stances in complex ways. Conceived as an intersectional organisation crossing religious affiliation and age (albeit 'youth' remained very generously defined), the association became the expression of a cultural-religious revivalist stance, formulated against the backdrop of a perceived sense of precarity. The feeling of marginalisation and of demographic contraction echoes the idea of 'relative deprivation', one of the features which early

writers on social movements such as Ralph Nicholas (1973) identified as the starting point for the articulation of any movement. Some of the more or less elicited motives in the projects of *Pemuda Buddhis* and in the perspectives of activists like Subagyo and Sura may appear to resonate with this model. However, rather than a form of deprivation understood in terms of political or economic subalternity – although, as we have seen, a feeling of economic marginality does feature in the area – much of the sense of 'lack' seemed to be located in the realm of visibility, (self)representation and both organised and unorganised forms of sociality. The formation of an organisation like *Pemuda Buddhis* is to be understood also in this frame.

The set of initiatives both religious and secular established by the group highlights furthermore the means through which a form of resistance is articulated. By mobilising fragments of ethnocultural history and narratives of religious 'return', the activists construct a specific kind of cultural memory. Importantly, the type of narrative pieced together is not antagonist to the official nationalist or hegemonic discourse, as it is frequently the case among culturally-conscious movements (Doerr 2014). In Java, the attention to history, including pre-Islamic religious history, is in itself a derivate of a century-long process of nation-building and the evocation of Hindu-Buddhist symbols and heritage sites constitutes a centrepiece of these discourses.

In this sense, the *Pemuda Buddhis* movement occupies an unsettled territory between dynamics of conservativeness and innovation, agency and structure. The conservative aspect of the movement is evident in its resistance to the broader trends in the Javanese religious landscape, trends that often converge islamising and secularising motions (Safa'at 2019), but also in its loyalty to a specific vision of what an authentic Javanese cultural history might be. Nevertheless, the practices, imaginaries and religious infrastructures mobilised by the activists rest on thoroughly innovative patterns. These include the revalorisation of rural lifestyle in positive and celebratory vocabularies, a pattern which radiates from urban-generated imaginaries and which heralds also optimistic economic prospects, in agroeconomic and eco-tourist keys. As the cases of Subagyo and Sura showed, this aspect is embodied in counter-dynamics of de-urbanisation that complexify the unidirectional template of sub-urbanisation in which Asian patterns of mobility are frequently described.

In religious terms, *Pemuda Buddhis* also functions as the carrier through which religious change diffuses in the area. Although vested as tradition, the revitalisation of waning or near-extinct Javanist religious practices is a visible outcome of the innovative efforts introduced with the establishment of the organisation. Less explicit perhaps is the innovative force issued with the tight links between the organisation and national Buddhist institutions, particularly with the expanding scope of Theravāda Buddhism in the country.

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In remote regions such as Temanggung, the attempts at strengthening Buddhist socialisation on a hamlet level through the activities of the youth group signified in many cases also the diffusion of Theravādin forms of linguistic and ritual practice, from the ubiquity of Pāli vocabulary (including in informal greetings) to mindfulness-based meditation techniques. These significant variations in temple conduct were often transmitted through the activists' very ritual guidance in temple service and resulted, in turn, from the embeddedness of some of them with the tight Theravāda organisational infrastructure emanating from the island's main cities. The inauguration of the group itself, moreover, as well as the group's temple excursions and the meeting revolving around economic empowerment, were all sanctioned, supported or at least overseen by Buddhist institutions and foundations and invariably attended by ordained Theravādin monks.

The establishment of *Pemuda Buddhis* emphasised not only the extent to which the margins of a movement may blur into cognate organisational dynamics (i.e. the expansion of Theravādin associationism), but also and especially how the attempts at breathing new life in a religious community are in continuity with economic, demographic and ethnohistorical concerns, obfuscating in doing so the edges of the 'religion' slot. The labour toward the implementation of a modern coffee entrepreneurialism on a religious platform in the Surjosari highlands portrays this aspect clearly.

The religious and non-religious dynamics that pivoted around Surjosari through the activism of *Pemuda Buddhis* were made possible by the intense traffic of funds, images and people. As the biographies of some of the activists suggest, religious and social-economic change might be as well driven by processes of mobility which extend beyond the well-known trails of urbanisation. In a context thematised by the simultaneous discursive revalorisation of rural life and the practical opportunities provided by the trending industries of coffee and eco-tourism, villages or 'remote areas' may come out not as marginal quarters in the pulls and draws of capitalism but as generative cultural ecologies instantiating unprecedented hubs of meanings and practice.

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Rituals, Lore and Legitimacy in Post-Coup Myanmar

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Abstract   This paper examines the strategic use of rituals in Myanmar after the 2021 coup, focusing on their role in political legitimacy. It explores how the military regime and protesters employed rituals in protests and observes divergent practices. The regime relied on symbolic rituals supported by monastic institutions, while protesters used rituals less aligned with normative Buddhist practices. The study highlights differing methods of ritual knowledge dissemination: hierarchical for the regime and network-based for protesters. Despite similar worldviews, their motivations and applications of ritualistic knowledge differ.

Keywords   Rituals. Legitimacy. Military Regime. Anti-Coup resistance. Myanmar.

Summary   1. Introduction. – 1.1. Working Definition of Ritual. – 2. Overview of the Rituals Activities during 2021. – 2.1. Instruction, Participation, and Knowledge. – 3. Protest Rituals. – 3.1 Banging Pots and Pans. – 3.2. The Longyi Campaign. – 3.3. Nine Knives Ritual. – 3.4. Mass Cursing at the Symbolic Locations. – 3.5. Justifications and Responses. – 4. Response from the Military regime. – 4.1. Rituals at the Each Layer of Engagement. – 5. Conclusion.

1   Introduction

Two days before the February 1st, 2021, coup, rumours of a putsch circulated in the capital Naypyidaw as generals converged in a long VIP convoy, escalating political tension between the National League for Democracy (NLD) government and the Tatmadaw over voter list concerns. However, the purpose of the convoy was later revealed to be the performance of welcoming rituals for a marble Buddha image with senior abbots (DSINF 2021a). Meanwhile, NLD supporters signalled their opposition to the military by raising NLD flags. The State Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka Committee (MaHaNa) attempted to use its position as a venerated Buddhist institution to sway the military, requesting restraint and a peaceful solution (The State Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka Committee 2021), but to no avail, with the military overthrowing the civilian government on 1 February 2021.[1]

Ritual responses to the ensuing chaos sprang up almost immediately. The clamour of pots and pans banging against each other rang out at 20:00 on 2 February 2021 in the country's most populous city, Yangon, reflecting a traditional practice of driving out evil and coinciding with state news broadcasts. Three weeks later, some female activists leveraged widespread beliefs about luck and power by hanging their undergarments and skirts (*htamein*) above protest sites. Soldiers and police painstakingly removed these barriers, fearing the loss of *hpoun* incurred by walking under women's clothing. *Hpoun*, reflecting the power and glory from good deeds, is crucial in Buddhist concepts of authority and legitimacy (Dhamma Dhara Sayadaw 2023; Leider 2011). It serves as a shield against spiritual harm and is sustained through moral obligations and karma.[2]

Meanwhile, in homes and private religious sites, people cast hexes on the State Administration Council (SAC). In response, regime leaders sought protection through religious rites performed by prominent monks to safeguard their *hpoun* and ensure protection against spiritual threats.[3]

Rituals hold a profound significance beyond mere symbolism, mobilisation tools, or individuals seeking supernatural support to maintain political power. During the 2020 protests in Thailand, demonstrators engaged in rituals and turned to divination to guide their political actions. Independent of their political leanings or age, some in Thailand incorporate religious practices and cosmologies

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2   Harriden 2012; Spiro 1982; Walton 2017; Zin 2001.

3   Frydenlund, Wai 2024; Irrawaddy 2023; Jordt, Than, Lin 2021; Lusan, Hlaing, Fishbein 2021; Mra, Hedström 2024; Oak Aww 2022.

(ritualistic knowledge) into their political activities (Siani 2020; 2023). This comparison highlights the broader regional significance of ritualistic practices in political resistance, making Myanmar's case a compelling focus for further analysis. Similarly, in Myanmar, rituals were purposefully employed during the 2021 protests to invoke supernatural forces, inflict harm on military personnel, and stimulate political transformation with different ritualistic knowledge.[4]

Although the regime's and protestors' frequent use of rituals in the aftermath of the coup is striking, Myanmar's politics has always been deeply intertwined with monks, spiritual beliefs, and rituals.[5] Scholars have studied these phenomena through the lens of Buddhist practice and the institutional relationship between the military and monks, focusing on regime legitimacy and administrative support.[6]

Valuable as they are, these analyses often confine their examination of ritual actions and the agency relationship between monks and the regime to express its motive. They typically present the role of monks in ritual performance, portraying them primarily as coordinators fulfilling the regime's leaders' perceived needs for supernatural support (Matthews 1998; Selth 2020; Steinberg 2006) or attributing it to the influence of the so-called "dark wizard monk" (Jordt, Than, Lin 2021, 30). Similarly, anti-regime protestors' rituals are primarily viewed as mobilisation tools. They can be explained as creating collective effervescence and promoting social cohesion and shared beliefs (Olaveson 2001; Pickering 1984; Whitehouse, Lanman 2014).

However, while existing ritual theories and the academic literature on authoritarian politics and resistance have increasingly acknowledged the potential role of rituals in political processes,[7] much of the focus has remained on how ruling elites employ rituals to maintain and legitimise their authority,[8] with an emphasis on rituals' performative and symbolic elements, may offer limited explanatory power for addressing the complexities above involved.

In contrast, this study seeks a deeper understanding of the individual motivations behind ritual participation and performance, focusing on how rituals construct or contest political legitimacy. It explores the actions, underlying meanings, and the role of monks in rituals, offering insights into how rituals reinforce or challenge authoritarian legitimacy through social movements in autocratic

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[4] Frydenlund, Wai 2024; Jordt, Than, Lin 2021; Lusan et al. 2021; Mra, Hedström 2024.

[5] Foxeus 2022; 2023; Frydenlund 2022; Walton 2015; Walton, Hayward 2014.

[6] Frydenlund, Wai 2024; Steinberg 2007; Thawnghmung, Myoe 2008; Walton 2016; 2017.

[7] Bell 2009; Farneth 2023; Kertzer 1988; Kustermans et al. 2022; Singh 2014; Wedeen 2002

[8] Farneth 2023; Gökarıksel, Secor 2016; Kapferer 2011; Singh 2014.

contexts. Specifically, the study examines the dynamic relationship between rulers and the ruled and the source of authority that underlies the acknowledgement or contestation of the ruler (Beetham 1991; Easton 1965; Weber 1968). In this dynamic, rituals are tools to either consolidate or erode political legitimacy.

The regime often employs religious donations and merit-making ceremonies to bolster its authority, drawing on the Burmese concepts of *ana* (power) and *awza* (influence) (Steinberg 2007). These actions also accumulate *hpoun*, further strengthening the regime's claims to charismatic legitimacy (Walton 2017). Derived from *Puñña* (merits) and associated with *Karma* (actions), *hpoun* is a key concept in Buddhist cosmology. The term *hpoun kan* is commonly used to describe the accumulation of good actions and merits, which enhance one's spiritual power (Dhamma Dhara Sayadaw 2023). On the other hand, protestors perform rituals to challenge the regime's legitimacy, seeking to diminish the rulers' *ana* and *awza* through acts of non-recognition (Theresa 2022).

This paper examines the utilisation of rituals in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup. The study investigates the diverse motivations, associated knowledge of rituals, and roles of monks in these practices, analysing how different actors interpret and perform rituals and the potential implications for political legitimacy. The context of Myanmar, characterised by the extensive use of rituals by both the regime and protestors to strengthen or contest legitimacy, presents a compelling case study for exploring ritual practices in times of political upheaval. The publicly available data on social media platforms documenting the explicit performance of rituals by both sides provides a rich empirical foundation for analysis.

To explore these dynamics, this research employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating firsthand observations, digital ethnography, and qualitative interviews. I observed several ritual events in Yangon, Mandalay, and Pyin Oo Lwin during the initial months of 2021. Additionally, this paper drew on 42 distinct ritual-related events analysed through Digital ethnography by examining politically driven ritual activities documented on social media[9] from January to December 2021.

Additionally, this study prioritises capturing the diversity of ritualistic practices and knowledge across rural and urban contexts. This approach aims to validate local contextual knowledge. The data encompasses news articles detailing rituals the regime and anti-regime protesters performed, acknowledging the potential for bias inherent in politically motivated sources. Data collection focused on keywords related to rituals in the Myanmar context, such as a*siayin* (rituals

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9 Facebook, YouTube, Telegram.

with precise instructions for worldly rewards), *yadaya* (protective rituals), *yoyar* (traditions), *baydin* (astrology), and *tabaung* (prophecy).

Data analysis followed a two-layered approach initial web crawling to identify relevant events with keywords, followed by a Myanmar-language search on social media. The collected data was then categorised based on the degree of inclusivity and the hierarchy of knowledge dissemination, examining how specific instructions for ritual performance were communicated.

This analysis identifies six ritual categories: omens and astrological predictions, banging pots and pans, mass cursing activities, reciting Buddhist scriptures (sutta), pagoda and stupa building, and rituals to harm and protect.

The first category, omens and astrological predictions, highlights the role of prognostication in shaping public sentiment and action. The second, banging pots and pans, represents a sustained and collective act of defiance against the regime. The third category, mass cursing activities, encompasses a range of rituals aimed at invoking harm upon the regime members, drawing upon diverse forms of spiritual knowledge and practice. The fourth, reciting sutta, reveals the regime's appropriation of religious practices to protect and overcome the crisis. The fifth category, pagoda and stupa building, showcases the regime's use of rituals and symbolic representations to bolster its legitimacy. Finally, the sixth category, rituals to harm and protect, encompasses private practices often conducted with online guidance aimed at personal protection or inflicting harm on adversaries.

In addition to the digital ethnography, the author interviewed 23 astrologers, monks, and spiritual guides facilitated by longstanding ties. These interviews, conducted in person in Yangon and via video call from September 2022 to October 2023, illuminated underlying meanings and activities not readily available in public sources. Acknowledging the politically charged nature of rituals and the potential biases inherent in media reports, this study employed Norman Fairclough's tri-dimensional framework for discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995; 2013). This framework, encompassing linguistic text analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice, allowed for an investigation into constructing meaning through language, its interaction with social processes, and the reflection of power dynamics within the collected data. By examining the interplay between semiotic elements (signs and symbols) and broader social behaviours, this analysis explained the intricate relationship between language on media and social structures, particularly in constructing and contesting legitimacy in post-coup Myanmar.

Comparative hermeneutics, a methodological approach that combines the interpretive insights of hermeneutics with the broad analytical scope of comparative studies (Hedges 2016; Pye 1980), was

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used to analyse rituals encompassing diverse interpretations, narratives, and knowledge systems. This approach was particularly relevant for understanding the multi-layered symbolism inherent in rituals like the stupa renovation (BBC Burmese 2022), which integrated Buddhist and occult traditions.

1.1 Working Definition of Ritual

This study focuses on how rituals foster social cohesion, transmit cultural values, and fulfil various social and political processes. This focus emphasises the purpose and significance of rituals and their accompanying knowledge (ritualistic knowledge). For this study, 'ritual' refers to distinctive actions underpinned by beliefs, fostering collective effervescence and potentially serving as a moral compass. Crucially, the actions and beliefs associated with rituals are informed by ritualistic knowledge, offering interpretations and narratives that can either strengthen or contest the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes. This knowledge encompasses diverse astrological methods and other forms of lore.

This working definition includes three criteria drawn from existing ritual theories. First, the rituals examined are those used in political processes, aligning with the "expressive, symbolical, or communicative aspect" of rituals (Bell 2009, 70). Second, while rituals involve beliefs, they are analysed as performed actions, separate from conceptual thoughts like beliefs, symbols, religion, and myths (Lewis 1980, 10-11). This distinction allows examining the thoughts and beliefs that drive specific ritual actions. Third, explicit instructions for performing these actions are necessary, although motivation and meaning may not be required (Bell 2009, 18-19). Ritualistic knowledge, potentially including astrological or cosmological knowledge, is involved in collective performance. This knowledge also provides interpretations and narratives of the symbolic meanings of performing rituals, some of which may extend beyond the religious (Buddhist) dimension, including astrology (Siani 2020; 2023).

Although existing ritual theory considers ritualistic knowledge part of the thought process, this paper emphasises it for two reasons. First, it is contextually relevant, as rituals in Myanmar are characterised by their focus on precise instructions and specialised knowledge (*asiayin*). Second, even within the same worldview and motive, different ritualistic knowledge can be utilised diversely, as seen in the varying applications of astrology during rituals.

This emphasis on ritualistic knowledge is crucial for understanding Myanmar's sociopolitical landscape, where rituals are deeply embedded. They serve various purposes, from navigating the cycle

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of birth, death, and rebirth (Sansara) to addressing worldly needs (Lawki). Notably, rituals performed primarily for worldly benefits are termed *lawki asi ayin*, reflecting the diverse applications of ritual within Myanmar, including the construction and contestation of legitimacy.

2 Overview of the Rituals Activities during 2021

The initial phase of the protests saw anti-coup demonstrators engage in four distinct ritual practices: the widespread banging of pots and pans, public mass cursing rituals, individual rituals aimed at harming military families, and the dissemination of omens and astrological predictions. The first two months of the protests witnessed innovation and adaptation in ritual practices, fostering collective effervescence and seeking spiritual support against the regime. This trend began with omens and astrological predictions, followed by rituals aimed at harming regime leaders, culminating in mass cursing rituals after the crackdown. By late February 2021, mass cursing rituals evolved from symbolic actions to rituals infused with contextual knowledge that sought to harm regime members and their families directly.

While this study is qualitative, examining the frequency of different ritual types offers insights into trends and correlations between political events and ritualistic practices. Notably, after the March 2021 crackdown, mass cursing rituals gained prominence, with eight unique rituals of mass cursing rituals documented across both urban and rural areas, reflecting a rise in public anger and spiritual retaliation against the regime. These rituals often included oaths specifically designed to delegitimise the regime's authority and undermine the *hpoun* of its leaders. The escalation of spiritual activities in response to heightened repression suggests that these rituals served as a means for the populace to express their discontent and resist the regime's authority through spiritual means.

From April to September 2021, a significant decrease in anti-regime ritual activity was observed, potentially owing to increased state repression, the shift towards armed resistance, and the third wave of COVID-19. However, a resurgence of rituals, primarily prophecies and mass cursing, occurred in October 2021, coinciding with the anti-regime National Unity Government's call for armed resistance. This resurgence suggests these rituals may have provided moral support for armed resistance forces.

Conversely, the military regime escalated its ritual activities from July 2021 onwards. Early rituals focused on reciting Buddhist scriptures to overcome challenges, followed by renovations and constructions of stupas and religious sites with embedded rituals. The peak

in rituals intended for personal protection and legitimacy consolidation coincided with the anti-regime resurgence and the resumption of military campaigns in October 2021.

2.1 Instruction, Participation, and Knowledge

A clear pattern emerges in the types of ritual activities and actors involved. The regime engages in various ritual practices, mainly pagoda and stupa construction, renovations, and remedial rituals. These are supported by three key spiritual actors: guiding masters who provide precise instructions, influential monks and abbots who participate in merit-making, and MaHaNa abbots who offer political legitimacy to these religious rites as a performance of kingship. In contrast, anti-regime rituals do not involve direct participation from monks or Buddhist institutions. Prophecies may reference late influential abbots(Theresa 2022), but astrologers disseminate astrological predictions and omens. Astrologers also often presided over rituals intended to harm the regime. At the same time, collective actions at spiritual sites are overseen by ritual or spiritual leaders who provide general instructions and sometimes lead the rituals.

The regime's rituals exhibit high structure and precision, incorporating astrological knowledge alongside Buddhist narratives. The roles of monks, ritual leaders, and abbots are clearly defined, and the knowledge utilised is detailed and accompanied by precise instructions, as in other pagoda-building rituals(Tosa 2012). This hierarchical approach extends to both the application of existing knowledge and the dissemination of instructions for ritual actions.

In contrast, anti-regime rituals often lack precise instructions and may not reference verified sources or established frameworks.[10] This does not imply a complete absence of underlying reasonings but rather that these reasonings are not transformed into precise actions. Additionally, protestors might interpret or assign meaning to their ritual actions retrospectively. The dissemination of these principles occurs horizontally through networks, allowing for greater flexibility in ritual instructions and potentially appealing to a broader audience.

Based on the number of participants and the hierarchy of knowledge dissemination, ritual activities can be categorised into four quadrants of a knowledge-action matrix.

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[10] Notable exceptions include mass cursing rituals led by spiritual guides at religious sites.

Table 1 Four quadrants of the knowledge-action matrix

	Hierarchical Knowledge	Non- hierarchical Knowledge
High Participation (Wider Audience)	Mass cursing with guiding masters	Banging pots and Pans
Low Participation (Selected Audience)	Pagoda and Stupa building and renovation. Sutta reciting and chanting in selected places.Protective rituals (*yadaya*) to protections against harm	Omens and astrological predictionsPerforming rituals to harm including Women Longyi (Skirt) campaign

This more precise ritual activity by the regime can be attributed to several factors. First, the Tatmadaw has long-established relationships with astrologers, ritual masters, and monastic orders, regularly seeking their counsel and expertise. Second, the public performance of Buddhist religious rites is crucial for the regime to maintain its political position as the protector of the nation and Buddhism (Sasana), a core source of traditional legitimacy (Foxeus 2023). Finally, regime members believe that the hierarchical knowledge embedded within normative Buddhist practices can counteract the perceived threat of mass cursing and rituals associated with black magic (MAF-11, personal communication, March 1, 2023; Win 2022).

Conversely, anti-coup protestors harness all available knowledge to harm regime members, mobilise the populace, and foster collective effervescence. However, several factors often make their actions less precise than the regime's. First, to maximise participation and social unity, instructions are kept simple and accessible, avoiding complex procedures that might limit involvement (S. Kyaw (AM-1), personal communication, June 10, 2023). Second, protestors maintain a distance from monks and institutional Buddhism,[11] assuming a lack of complete alignment with their cause, contributing to distrust and limiting engagement (Frydenlund et al. 2021; Frydenlund, Wai 2024). Third, the narrative of supernatural-seeking regime members vs. justice-seeking citizens (Ferguson 2023, 1-27; Jordt, Than, Lin 2021) frames the regime's astrological reasonings and rituals as misaligned with Dhamma (interpreted as moral justice in this context), positioning them as forces seeking spiritual support for power (S. Nyunt, personal communication, June 12, 2023). This framing allows protestors to justify their ritual actions as a form of righteous

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11 Institutional Buddhism refers to the organised structures and systems through which Buddhism is practised, preserved, and propagated within a society. It includes formal institutions such as monasteries, educational centres, and governing bodies responsible for the Buddhist community's administration, doctrine, and rituals.

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resistance, strategically exploiting the regime's perceived reliance on esoteric practices to undermine its authority. In this way, protestors turn the regime's belief system against itself, leveraging it as a vulnerability.

In contrast to other anti-regime rituals, mass cursing rituals conducted at spiritual sites outside of urban areas often involve precise instructions and guiding figures. However, these instructions and figures are more associated with local spiritual guardians (such as Nats and Bobogyi). Rituals in urban areas reference more religious, astrological, and mainstream Buddhist practices.

This divergence in approach may stem from differing leadership styles and beliefs in urban versus rural contexts, the potentially deeper religious devotion found in rural communities, and a wider variety of spiritual practices. The rural populace may strongly believe in the efficacy of spiritual support for their cause, leading to a greater emphasis on invoking local deities and spirits.

Drawing on this understanding of the varied motivations and practices within the anti-coup movement, this paper focuses on the rituals initiated by protestors and the subsequent reactions from the regime. While some regime rituals have been longstanding practices, they were notably adapted in 2021 to counter the emergence and impact of protestors' rituals. Furthermore, not all rituals performed by protestors garnered universal acceptance within the wider community. The following sections will examine protestors' rituals, the public reaction, and regime responses.

3 Protest Rituals

Each of the rituals performed in February and March 2021 carried astrological significance yet lacked precise instructions for participants. The guidance primarily focused on the use of specific terms during the protests. This astrological reasoning spread horizontally throughout the public, fostering a sense of shared understanding and purpose within the movement. The combination of astrological justification and local knowledge contributed to the initial success of these rituals and the broader movement. However, disagreements regarding their performance emerged after a few months, ultimately leading to their decline and discontinuation.

3.1 Banging Pots and Pans

A nightly campaign of banging pots and pans at 20:00 for 15 minutes emerged as the first example of ritual resistance. Banging pots and pans resemble cacerolazo, a protest involving loud noises to signify

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discontent, but it has ritual significance in the Burmese context. The Burmese word that describes the practice *taw htote* focuses not on physical actions involved but conveys the ritual's intended effect: to drive away evil spirits. By engaging in this custom, protestors symbolically cast the military regime as malevolent spirits needing expulsion (Egreteau 2023). While similar practices were observed in the 1988 and 2007 protests, the frequency of this ritual in the 2021 protests surpassed prior instances and the specific term *than pone tee* for this practice. The practice persisted for over five months before dissipating in July 2021 during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The shared syllables between everyday terms and astrologically significant phrases create a powerful link between the mundane and the cosmic. For example, the act of banging on *than pone* (tin boxes) transcends its literal meaning, becoming an act of defiance against *thane pite* (forced occupation). Similarly, the chant *taw htote* resonates with *tite htote* (fighting against), signifying a struggle against forced occupation through the act of striking the *than pone*. (AST-12, personal communication, August 11, 2023). While there have been discussions about adopting alternative terms like *dae o yite*, hitting pots and pans in Burmese, some astrologers have resisted such changes (T.T. Zaw, personal communication, October 22, 2022). Zaw further noted that the term *than pone* was carefully chosen and popularised through protest songs, which replaced older songs from the 1988 Uprising. Older songs, like *The Dust in the Wind* cover, *Kabar Ma Kyay Bu*, (There Will Be No Pardon Until The Earth Ends) were considered to connote negatively for the cause and bad omen. Incorporating astrological knowledge in protest rituals imbues their actions and transforms them into potent symbols of resistance.

In the cultural context, banging pots and pans have emerged as a symbol of the anti-coup movement, but monks do not fully accept this practice. The monk Ashin Pyinya explained that

> some monks believed the worsening plague (COVID third wave in July 2022) resulted from the detrimental effects of banging pots and pans for months. This noise created disturbances for non-human beings, making them uncomfortable and unable to live peacefully, leading to their refusal to protect the community and even causing harm. (A. Pyin Nya, personal communication, January 7, 2023)

Therefore, he and other monks initiated a campaign to advise their Dakar (supporters) to stop banging pots and pans during the peak of the third COVID wave.

Burmese funeral customs could also have contributed to a decline in willingness to bang pots and pans nightly. After the death of a relative, family members typically offer meals and vigils and invite

monks to perform rituals to help the relative's lingering spirit transition to the next life. Banging pots and pans could prevent the recently departed from receiving merits offered by their relatives and the monks, condemning them to a ghostly state. This cultural belief, amplified by the widespread grief and loss during the pandemic, likely discouraged many from participating in pot-banging rituals, especially in neighbourhoods experiencing funerals. One respondent who mentioned ceasing participation after funerals occurred nearby supports this (H.H. Aye, personal communication, January 2023). Therefore, while government suppression contributed to the overall decline, the cultural context and the pandemic's impact could also be critical in explaining the specific decline observed after July 2021.

3.2 The Longyi Campaign

Another act of resistance was the utilisation of women's longyis, *htamein* in Burmese (a term phonetically similar to 'rising up' or *htabi*). Strung above streets where protests took place, women's garments paused soldiers, who preferred to carefully remove them rather than cross under them and deplete their hpoun (in this context, masculine power). This hesitation has been interpreted as evidence of the movement's success, highlighting the potent symbolism of this cultural artefact in the context of resistance(Egreteau 2023; Jordt, Than, Lin 2021; Mra, Hedström 2024). While many have embraced the *htamein* protests as a triumph over Burmese patriarchy, it's worth reflecting on how the original cosmological intent of the protests reified traditional notions of femininity and occult practices. Those cosmological roots help explain why the movement did not endure or expand beyond its limited urban context.

A ritual of placing a picture of junta leader Min Aung Hlaing's face on a htamein stained with menstrual blood (or with an affixed menstrual pad) inspired much of the *htamein* Protests. The act was meant to inflict harm on the junta leader and other junta officials whose pictures were placed on bloodied *htameins*. Self-proclaimed pro-democracy astrologer U Saw Win told me that *htamein* is traditionally implicated in black magic,[12] especially when linked with menstrual blood. Saw Win said that it was this connection that gave regime security

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[12] According to U Saw Win, the use of menstrual blood in black magic, though considered unethical, is believed to stem from its symbolic associations with both death (temporary infertility) and life (originating from a living person). This 'living death' is thought to attract spirits, which practitioners attempt to control for harmful purposes. A woman's longyi, potentially stained with menstrual blood, maybe a ritual tool. This belief echoes the concept of the *Penanggal*, a Southeast Asian spirit associated with detached female heads and entrails seeking menstrual blood.

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forces pause when confronted with *htameins* in sanitary pads fortifying protest barricades (S. Win, personal communication, October 31, 2022). The Shwe Yin Kyaw, a traditional Burmese healing association (*gaing*), has strict prohibitions against members passing under women's longyis (S. Win, personal communication, October 31, 2022). This act is believed to diminish the *hpoun* of practitioners, weakening their ability to counteract and ward off evil spirits. Passing under *htameins* could also nullify the spiritual defences endowed by the Yantra tattoos that many in the security services bear.

While the media has focused on how the protestors using *htameins* and menstrual pads against the regime were disavowing the associated traditional stigmas, U Saw Win argued that many did not. He asserted that protestors and security forces shared the beliefs in the connection between *htameins* and *hpoun* but sought to leverage those occult powers for different purposes. While protestors sought to inflict harm, junta leaders rallied with rituals overseen by friendly monastic orders to bolster their spiritual power. For some bystanders and security forces, the *htamein* Protests reflected occult beliefs surrounding the impurity and spiritual harm emanating from women's bodies rather than a challenge to stigmas toward menstruation and femininity. The dissipation of the *htamein* Protests after early 2021 reflected how some concentrated more on the spiritual risks of resistance methods rather than liberatory potential.

Activist Hnin Hin Aye explained that the failure of the protests to unseat Min Aung Hlaing actually reflected the power of his *hpoun* and warned that continued use of *htameins* in such a manner could be a spiritual risk for protestors.

> Whether we like it or not, Min Aung Hlaing reached his position of authority due to his *hpoun*. It may affect him when we bang pots and pans or put his face on menstrual stain blood as black magic, but he has a certain level of *hpoun* (in this context, accumulated merits); the detrimental effects can also impact us. (H.H. Aye, personal communication, January 2023)

Besides participants' own concerns for their spiritual well-being, Hnin Aye said that many local community members tolerated these transgressive practices for the sake of solidarity with the broader anti-regime movement. She added that liberal youths with strong ties to the international community spearheaded the campaign.

Her assessments also reflect the sentiments of residents in neighbourhoods where protests unfolded. Ma Cho, a 52-year-old resident of San Chaung Township, where much of the longyi campaign took place, said,

> although we usually dry longyi in the apartment, we rarely hang them outside the home or in front, as it's considered inappropriate.

> It could negatively impact the household members' *hpoun* (in this context, accumulated merit and karma). Since I have a spirit house, I believe it shouldn't be placed together in the same area or level. It might harm the person and reduce their luck. This principle also applies to the street, as there are guardians of the street and neighbourhood. (A.-12 Cho, personal communication, January 18, 2023)

She also conveyed the sentiment of locals like herself, who found the protests unsuitable and did not engage with them.

> *Htamein* protests are led by the younger generations and held at various locations with barricades (defence lines). First, it was on Main Street, followed by smaller streets the following day. These protests, however, are not initiated by locals and are often seen as inappropriate by many in the community. However, they can't express opposition due to political pressures and fear of being perceived as unsupportive of the protesters or aligned with the regime. (A.-12 Cho, personal communication, January 18, 2023)

3.3 Nine Knives Ritual

One of the earliest rituals organised in February 2021 to harm the regime leaders was the Nine Knives Ritual. This ritual involved placing nine knives in a circle, each pointing inward toward a candle in the centre. A candle was positioned on the flat of each knife blade, symbolising the intention to harm military regime members (Fowle 2022; Oak Aww 2022). The Burmese term for candle, *pha yaung dine*, aligns with the Burmese astrological naming convention, as both *pha* and *Min* belong to the same alphabet group associated with Thursday, thus sharing the same initial sound. Placing the knives in a circle pointing inward targets the regime leader. The gradual melting of the candles serves as a metaphor for the protesters' desire for the leadership to similarly "meltdown" (Local Protestor-2, personal communication, December 22, 2022). These ritual institutions reference the fusion of the Burmese astrological method and some well-known international rituals similar to the hexing method using knives (A. Zeya, personal communication, December 14, 2022). The guidelines regarding knife placement were disseminated through different social media pages focused on astrology.

Astrologer U Zeya, commenting on rituals intended to harm individuals, stated,

> I'm aware of Facebook pages and services offering such rituals. Based on my experience, not all are genuine black magic; some

are deceptions. Others utilise techniques translated from Western books or websites, which are popular due to their accessibility and lack of requirement for inherited knowledge. (A. Zeya, personal communication, December 14, 2022)

However, U Zeya emphasises the karmic consequences of such actions: "It's important to remember that there is karma. If you intend to hurt someone, regardless of the technique, there will be repercussions and pain in your life, particularly in black magic" (A. Zeya, personal communication, December 14, 2022). Although this ritual was popular, the young astrologer who initiated it, Linn Nhyno Taryar, was arrested the day after. Soon after, the rituals also died down.

3.4 Mass Cursing at the Symbolic Locations

Although less covered in the international press, different types of mass cursing were performed in rural areas. Notably, each incident featured unique actions. People gathered at local sacred sites, such as stupas, pagodas, shrines, spirit houses, and cemeteries, to hex military personnel and generals (Eleven Broadcasting 2021; Kamayut Online TV, 2021).

The first recorded cursing ritual was performed on 19 February 2021 (Kamayut Online TV 2021), at a temple connected to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's legitimacy-building efforts. Located in the ancient city of Bagan, the Htilominlo temple had frequently received patronage from the top general who, in 2020, hoisted an umbrella at the site in an effort to connect himself with the King of the Bagan dynasty (Mizzima 2020). A participant in the hexing ceremony told the author that protestors gathered at the temple because of its significance to the regime strongman (Local Protestor-1, personal communication, December 14, 2022). They began with prayers and placed coconut and banana in an offering basket (*pwe*) presented to a Buddha image and local spirits. They emphasised their communal participation and asserted the effectiveness of mass cursing against an illegitimate regime. Protestors took oaths while cursing to protect themselves from the spiritual repercussions of the hexing target, junta leaders, who may have greater *hpoun*. These oaths are rooted in the protesters' morality and pursuit of truth and justice, solidifying their commitment through a vow.

A retired senior military officer confirmed that the protestors picked their target well, saying that the historical significance of the temple mirrored Min Aung Hlaing's ascent to power (MAF-8, personal communication, December 28, 2022). The temple was constructed on a site where a prince was crowned king. To prevent a succession struggle the dying king convened the royal court and

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religious leaders at the site. There, they allowed the spirit of the white umbrella, a symbol of royal power and legitimacy, to select a new monarch. The umbrella leaned towards the youngest prince who accordingly became known as King Htilominlo (1175-1235): "the king chosen or mandated by the umbrella"(Ministry of Information 1994, 120). The senior military officer said that Min Aung Hlaing was also an unlikely contender for the throne when he was tapped to become the Commander in Chief in 2010. Likely recognising these parallels, the military strongman patronised the temple to consecrate his elevation as a mandate from the spiritual realm, *hpoun*, or Karma (MAF-8, personal communication, December 28, 2022) and cast himself as inheriting the king's legacy. Therefore, choosing this specific site for protest takes aim at Min Aung Hlaing's legitimacy by challenging the charismatic legitimacy of being the "chosen one".

The cursing in Bagan inspired similar activities elsewhere. Protestors often chose religious sites that received some form of military patronage to replicate the attack on regime legitimacy. Some also sought to harm the relatives of regime members, so they performed cursing rituals at spirit houses and shrines (*nat sin*) (Kamayut Online TV 2021; Kyaw Kyaw 2021). Oftentimes, protestors combined Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements. Protestors took their oaths pagodas and then chanted curses at the spirit house, saying, "We give oath at the Buddha and seek support from the guardians to curse and harm the regime" (Ayeyarwaddy Times 2021). Participants relied on Nats (spirits) to inflict harm because asking similarly of the Buddha would have violated the religion's nonviolent tenets, but they used Buddhist religious rites to create witnesses for their vows and symbolically challenge regime authority. Supernatural intercession to cause harm draws on the authority and contextual knowledge of the spirit house. Here, the concepts of Karma and *hpoun* remain consistent within the Buddhist karmic framework. Knowledge and reasonings regarding their roles and connections to this worldview drive the rituals.

Some doubted turning to Nats because of their predetermined roles within Burmese spirituality. A protestor voiced such concerns because many met tragic demises and were later institutionalised by kings (K. Myo, personal communication, May 12, 2023). "How can they challenge the regime's might?" he pondered, adding, "Yet, I like to believe they transcend any illegitimate authority. The regime's mandate is surely not sacred to the *nats*". Echoing this sentiment, Sein, a *nat kadaw* (spirit medium), (N. Sein, personal communication, December 11, 2002) argued that although *nats* protect believers and donors, they are powerless against the king's decrees, especially the official 37 *nats*. This sentiment might explain the subdued regime response to the 2021 protests directed at these spirits.

Legitimacy isn't merely about accepting those governed. It reflects the regime's demonstrated power and commitment to guarding our cherished Sasana (Buddhism and teachings of buddha). And our nats, in their diverse magnificence, are also protectors of the Sasana. (N. Sein, personal communication, December 11, 2002)

Sein and the protestor appeared to agree that the efficacy of spiritual support is intricately tied to the hierarchical power of the nats and the legitimacy of the governing body. However, some protestors sought to bypass this hierarchy by centring their rituals on figures perceived to be more attuned to community needs, such as local and regional spirits and guardians like U Shin Gyi and Bago Medaw (spirits from lower Myanmar not officially recognised by the king's decrees), and various Bo Bo Gyis (local guardians).

3.5   Justifications and Responses

Despite the disagreements regarding the rituals, various responses and justifications emerged to address these concerns and reintegrate the practices within existing knowledge frameworks. Three primary forms of justification and redress were observed: Buddhist justifications, appeals to political causes, and reinterpretations and narratives of hpoun.

Although the banging of pots and pans stoked various spiritual concerns for monks, they performed religious rites to mitigate the negative implications of banging pots and pans rather than ask ritual participants to stop. Abbot Ashin Pyinya Yangon explained that monks recited the metta sutta to alleviate the effects of the protest rituals on beings of other realms (A. Pyin Nya, personal communication, January 7, 2023). This concern stemmed not from esoteric religious beliefs but concerns for the wellbeing of communities hosting spirits. "These non-human entities also protect our community and us. It is not beneficial for the community if we force them out of their homes, as it can have detrimental effects," he said. Others were similarly inclined to make trade-offs for the negative spiritual externalities of ritual protest.

Regarding the *htamein* campaign, Ma Cho noted, "Because the youngsters are risking their lives, we (the neighbourhood) don't mind sacrificing some luck. But we did not continue the activity when the longyis were taken down" (A.-12 Cho, personal communication, January 18, 2023). This response illustrates another sacrifice for political causes.

Fundamentally, there are serious doubts about the viability of ritual protest given that rather than challenge the existence of hpoun and accumulated merit – which form the core of the military's traditional

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legitimacy – they reinforce their importance by targeting the military members' *hpoun* and merit. Given the successful overthrow of the civilian government and the endurance of the regime, many regard the efficacy of ritual protest as questionable. U Shwe, a political stakeholder, asserted that: "The Junta Chief's actions were wrong and inefficient, but his hpoun, power, and glory were at large. That's why he still survived until now" (U. Shwe, personal communication, January 22, 2023). Similarly, astrologers have noted the ineffectiveness of black magic rituals against military leaders, suggesting their hpoun acts as a shield (T.T. Zaw, personal communication, October 22, 2022).

4 Response from the Military regime

The generals responded by performing essential activities for Buddhist kings and conducting religious rites and rituals to accumulate karma and *hpoun*. The former serves to buttress their legitimacy, while the latter is meant to accumulate spiritual protective measures. These responses suggest the regime's perception of protest rituals as tangible threats, posing potential harm to them as individuals and possibly their legitimacy.

During this study, the junta has undertaken three significant initiatives to uphold traditional legitimacy. First, regime members have performed rituals as patrons of the Sangha. The second initiative was the construction of a new pagoda in Naypyidaw, incorporating symbolic rituals (DSINFO 2022). The third initiative has consisted of organising sermons and group chanting of Buddhist texts. These actions are closely tied to Buddhist religious rites and selectively involve specific participants to ensure the reproduction of traditional legitimacy. Many of these activities fall into long-established interactions between political-military elites and the monkhood. At a broad level, they seek recognition from monastic institutions as part of performing the kingly duty of upholding institutional Buddhism (Foxeus 2023; Walton 2017). On a personal level, these interactions follow the Sayar-Dakar (monk-devotee) relationship often observed in the Burmese cultural and political context (Frydenlund, Wai 2024; Steinberg 2007). Although many of these activities were common pre-coup, a retired military officer said that the regime had suggested that performing religious rites during this crisis time was more than just legitimising their rule but also accumulating Karma as part of the merit-making process (T.T. Zaw, personal communication, October 22, 2022).

4.1 Rituals at the Each Layer of Engagement

In response to the post-coup crisis, three distinct forms of regime engagement with monks and the Sangha community have been observed, each with varying implications for legitimacy. At the institutional level, the regime and monastic institutions foster a relationship of mutual dependency, reinforcing each other's relevance. The involvement of senior abbots in state religious projects, such as the construction of the Maravijaya Buddha Image in Naypyidaw, exemplifies this (DSINFO 2021b). Another type of monk focuses on ritual practices at the individual level, aiming to maximise merit-making for followers (DVB 2023; Mashikhana Sayardaw 2024; ShweMM 2024). This group provides specific instructions for ritual performance and may engage in activities perceived as contributing to worldly rewards (A. Vihitarlingaya, personal communication, January 28, 2023). Lastly, a third type of monk performs rituals to deliver idealised, give sermons, and mobilise support for political objectives (550 Sayardaw, personal communication, December 2021; MHT News 2022; Nilsen, Thiha 2023). The regime utilises all three layers of engagement to perform rituals and consolidate its legitimacy. However, due to its visible nature, the second type, focused on ritual practices, often garners the most attention.

While the prominent use of the number 9 in state-level projects like the Maravijaya Buddha Image pagoda project is not unprecedented (Ministry of Information 1997; 2010). Its excessive use in this context is noteworthy (DSINFO 2021a; 2021b; Myanmar Radio and Television 2021). Astrologer Zaw explains that this emphasis on the number 9 is a tactical move by the regime to co-opt religious legitimacy. The number 9 symbolises indivisibility and stability, qualities appealing to a regime seeking to project unwavering power. Furthermore, associating 9 with a path beyond Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path adds an esoteric dimension, suggesting an aspiration for supernatural power and influence(W. Zaw, personal communication, March 12, 2022). By linking the number 9 with the 'nine qualities' of the Buddha,[13] the regime associates their symbolism of power (*ana*) with the Buddhist narrative. In these state-level projects and associated rituals, which are primarily intended to benefit the state or institution (A. Khay Min Ta, personal communication, January 28, 2023), senior abbots play a crucial role in legitimising such practices in state-level construction projects (Ministry of Information 1997; 2010; Thura, Lay Kyaw 2020) with the Buddhist narratives. They often achieve

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13 The nine virtues of the Buddha are Worthy One, Perfectly Self-Enlightened, Perfect in Knowledge and Conduct, Well-Gone, Knower of Worlds, Incomparable Leader, Teacher of Gods and Humans, The Enlightened One, and The Blessed One.

this by invoking traditional Buddhist symbolism and numerology, grounding the regime's actions in religious and cultural traditions.

While some monks focus on institutional engagement, other monks and astrologers perform individual rituals to attain worldly rewards for their followers. This is evident in practices such as incorporating Ahbaya Zata magic squares[14] in renovated stupas in Pwint Phyu, Magway (BBC Burmese 2022; Office of the Commander in Chief 2020). Originally devoid of Buddhist connotations, the regime cleverly reinterpreted this symbol by associating each number within the square with a previous life of the Buddha from the Jataka tales, emphasising lives in which the Buddha was protected from harm (San Zarni Bo 2007). This reinterpretation signals that just as the Buddha was divinely protected in those lives, the regime is also shielded from external threats and malevolent forces (S. Min, personal communication, November 18, 2022).

Also, at the individual level, a military officer explained that junta officials seek out monks because their *hpoun* can neutralise the effects of black magic rituals conducted by protesters (MAF-12, personal communication, May 1, 2023). Monks also distribute amulets as protective talismans, like those worn by the junta leader and his wife. This highlights the regime's reliance on the Sangha community's spiritual and ritual support to protect *hpoun* – a source of charismatic legitimacy and personal protection. However, Abbot Ashin Pyinya argued that true protection stems not from physical amulets but faith in the Three Jewels of Buddhism (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) and adherence to Buddhist teachings (A. Pyin Nya, personal communication, January 7, 2023). He emphasises that those genuinely protected by the Metta (loving-kindness) of the Sangha and actively supporting the Sasana (Buddhist teachings) cannot be harmed, even by powerful spirits. This belief is rooted in Buddhist cosmology, where such spirits are considered to inhabit a lower realm and thus cannot affect those protected by higher forces.

In addition to construction and renovations, the regime has initiated ritual activities involving public participation, particularly among military families within military bases. These activities include chanting Buddhist Dharma texts, such as the eleven sutta, to ward off evil and harm and the Uppātasanti Gatta, to prevent war, evil omens, or public calamities.[15] Monks usually follow these events with speeches, offering spiritual security and strengthening the relationship between the Sangha and military communities. By doing so, they promote their influence (*awza*) within the institution.

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14   Mercury magic squares in Western occult contexts.

15   Khit Thit Media 2022; 2023; Kyaw, Din 2024; MITV 2023; Office of the Commander in Chief 2021.

Each of the three types of monk engagement serves a distinct purpose for the regime. The first, focusing on institutional engagement, seeks traditional legitimacy by upholding Buddhist norms and projecting an image of pious governance. The second type, centred on ritual practices, aims to accumulate merit and secure worldly rewards, thus enhancing charismatic legitimacy through perceived spiritual power. The third type, involving sermons and mobilisation, fosters social cohesion within the military and reinforces internal legitimacy by idealising the regime's relevance.

These regime-led activities, invariably involving structured rituals embedded with normative Buddhist narratives and guided by specific knowledge, are strategically deployed to consolidate power and legitimacy across various domains. The regime's engagement with monks and abbots, spanning institutional, ritualistic, and ideological dimensions, goes beyond coordinating efforts to seek supernatural support. Instead, an analysis that considers the regime's epistemology and goes beyond an institutional understanding of Buddhism may offer a more comprehensive interpretation of this relationship based on rituals and legitimacy.

5 Conclusion

The empirical data reveals a stark contrast between the regime and protesters regarding using lore and instructions for ritual practices. The junta relies on precise instructions, established knowledge, and narratives often justified through orthodox Buddhist doctrine. This is unsurprising given the military's decades-long construction of traditional legitimacy through monastic institutions, where the roles of monks and abbots in legitimising rituals are clearly defined.

Conversely, protesters have adopted a more flexible approach to ritual instructions. Their knowledge sources often lack direct references to normative Buddhism, possibly for several reasons. Firstly, protesters may wish to avoid associating their rituals with Buddhism because of the regime's perceived exploitation of religious practices for personal gain. This reflects a broader discourse on what constitutes genuine Dhamma (Buddhist teachings). Second, the lack of explicit Buddhist references could be a strategic move to widen participation by not requiring strict adherence to specific Buddhist practices. Thirdly, some protesters may believe that certain actions, especially those intended to harm, are incompatible with normative Buddhist principles. This departure from religious orthodoxy in Myanmar mirrors similar trends in Thailand, where the monarchy's use of Buddhist discourse has led protesters to distance themselves from institutional religious practices (Siani 2023).

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Consequently, protesters often seek knowledge from diverse sources, including astrology, local spirits, Western occult knowledge, and Buddhist-agnostic methodologies. This shift suggests the pursuit of alternative forms of legitimacy not controlled by the regime. In contrast, in Thailand, pro-democracy protesters have reappropriated the same cosmological symbols and astrological traditions that the monarchy and courts have long mobilised, using these as forms of political resistance (Siani 2023). Moreover, the dissemination of knowledge among protesters occurs through informal networks, contrasting with the regime's hierarchical approach. This decentralised dissemination allows for greater adaptability and responsiveness among protesters, potentially contributing to the resilience of their movement. Astrologers and monks leveraged social media to disseminate instructions distinct from scriptural Buddhism, drawing on the occult literature surge of the 1990s and its increased accessibility through the internet (S.W. Tun, personal communication, January 9, 2023). This democratisation of esoteric knowledge, once the domain of a select few, has empowered protesters to engage in ritualistic practices that challenge the traditional monopoly of the elite.

The Buddhist concept of *hpoun* remains crucial for understanding the various ritual practices observed, regardless of the specific knowledge employed. It serves to justify the use of rituals for asserting power, authority, and influence and enhancing spiritual capabilities. Rituals are used either to deplete the *hpoun* of adversaries or to accumulate merit and strengthen one's own *hpoun*. Similarly, merit-making (*Puñña*), derived from *Parami*, aligns with the Thai concept of *Barami*, as both refer to the accumulation of merit that enhances spiritual power and authority (Siani 2023). Rooted in Buddhist cosmology, these merit-making practices are central in shaping political legitimacy in their respective contexts. While respondents offer diverse interpretations of *hpoun*, a nuanced understanding requires moving beyond gendered and normative definitions to explore how it is perceived, constructed, and perpetuated within local contexts. From a legitimacy perspective, *hpoun* is a vital asset in establishing both traditional and charismatic authority, signifying the ability to govern effectively and garner support.

The escalation of armed conflict in Myanmar saw a decline in ritual activities deployed against the regime. In contrast, the regime intensified its religious efforts as a cornerstone of its legitimacy-building strategy in 2022 and 2023. This involved seeking the support of monastic orders for administrative actions, such as mobilising militias and galvanising ultranationalists through religious narratives (Aung, Mcpherson 2022; Foxeus 2022; Nilsen, Thiha 2023).

As anti-regime protesters transitioned to armed resistance alongside Ethnic Armed Organizations, distinct rituals emerged within these factions, including tattoos, war chants, blessings, and

talismans. Some of these practices draw from Buddhist tenets, while others are rooted in ethnic traditions. This opens a compelling avenue for future research, exploring the divergent nature of military and revolutionary rituals in ongoing conflicts and their integration with existing ethnic and anti-regime practices.

The gender dynamics in ritual execution also warrant further investigation. While the *htamein* protests gained global recognition as a symbol of defiance, local and non-activist perceptions may differ, particularly concerning *hpoun* and gender roles. Recognising women's instrumental roles in maintaining *Sayar-Daka* relations with monks, organising activities, and executing diverse ritual tasks is crucial for understanding how the bond between the Sangha and the wider populace is reinforced. This relationship, in turn, is fundamental to the regime's traditional legitimacy-building strategy.

The rituals performed during the 2021 anti-coup protests in Myanmar were not merely symbolic. They embodied local beliefs and knowledge systems, profoundly impacting the country's consolidation and contestation of legitimacy. In both Myanmar and Thailand, religious and cultural practices have played a central role in political resistance, underscoring the regional significance of ritual and cosmology in shaping political legitimacy. This phenomenon exceeds conventional understandings of legal legitimacy, highlighting the need for further interdisciplinary research to fully grasp the complex interplay of religion, politics, and power in Myanmar's ongoing struggle for democracy. Moreover, this dynamic is not unique to Myanmar. As seen in Thailand, similar cultural and spiritual traditions influence the perception of authority and legitimacy. Future studies could expand the scope to examine how these factors operate across Theravāda Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia, offering deeper insights into the role of religious and cultural contexts in shaping political legitimacy across the region.

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