

Myanmar Activists in the Making Navigating in a Changing Political Landscape

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Based on four months of anthropological fieldwork this article contributes to an understanding of the lives of Myanmar youth activists. The aim is to portray how this particular group of youth differs in their motivations and activist practices from previous generations. In taking action, the youth of our research draw on capacities for building individual knowledge and skills acquired during training provided by an INGO (international non-governmental organization). Through the theoretical concept of the trickster, we argue that these youths embody an ambiguous and mediating role when engaging in activism. We show how the youth navigate and challenge the social and cultural norms of present society. They do this by negotiating and bridging ideas of democracy and human rights to their communities in such a way that the ideas become socially accepted and translated into a local context. These youth do not want another revolution. They want profound development and consolidation.

Keywords: Activism, change, Myanmar, trickster, youth

There is a strong tendency in both Asia and the Middle East for youth to engage in activism, and demand more democratic-like conditions (Bowie, 2005; Edmonds & Ho, 2008). This article provides a Myanmar perspective on the matter. Many within the international media are questioning to what extent the country is in fact becoming a more free society. Nonetheless, it is argued among scholars that new possibilities to engage in political work have occurred since the military junta initiated a move away from dictatorship towards democratic-like reforms in 2010 (Gravers & Ytzen, 2014). We are witnessing a transition period, where politicians, mainly from the opposition parties, and civil society question the norms of the past six decades that have dictated submission and obedience. However, the habit of compliance will not change overnight. For decades, the regime has managed to frighten the population into not daring to speak their minds through the use of violence, lack of education, poverty, discrimination and armed conflict (Fink, 2009 [2001]). Yet international non-governmental organizations, INGOs, can now legally offer training on activism that prepares people to utilize the increased freedom to speak and act in

public, which has gradually been permitted by the government under President U Thein Sein.

We wish to give the reader an understanding of why and how young people in Myanmar engage in activism. We find this to be of relevance as in the history of Myanmar, youth have played a central role when it comes to social change at several events. Initiating resistance towards the dictatorship, the youth have helped in altering the mentality of the population during the student uprisings in 1988 and the Saffron Revolution in 2007 (Gravers & Ytzen, 2014). Despite the military strategy of controlling the younger generation through an inadequate educational system it was a group of young students who initiated the national uprisings of August 8, 1988. Before this historical day when the students went to the streets and where thousands were killed in Yangon alone, students at the Yangon University initiated several demonstrations, demanding the possibility to establish student unions that could work for their interests (Gravers & Ytzen, 2014, p. 50-51). As the situation developed, the students started criticizing the authority of the regime (Fink, 2009 p. 47).

In this article, we look at how the young people in present-day Myanmar may differ from the politically active youth of the past in their reasons for engaging in activism. Our research shows that these youth do not want another revolution like that of 1988 but hope instead to contribute to a steady and permanent democratization of Myanmar.

Research Design

This article is based on empirical material collected during fieldwork conducted in Myanmar from January to May 2014. In order to get access to the field, we collaborated with an INGO training hub situated in Yangon. By attending a reunion for former participants, we got in contact with 23 young people. Our interlocutors defined themselves as youth. They were all between 20 and 33 years of age. During the INGO training, they were addressed as youth. Furthermore, as a result of their specific social and political work, they often had no stable economic situation or a family of their own, which, according to Myanmar customs, withheld them culturally from entering adulthood. As we have chosen to make use of this definition in our analysis, youth is to be seen as both an emic and etic term. Karen Tranberg Hansen (2008) argues that youth inhabit more agency than children and, like adults, have more responsibilities than adolescents (Hansen, 2008, p. 8-9). Based on comparative research among youth in Brazil, Vietnam, and Zambia, Hansen argues that the youth category is a social and cultural construction that differs in form and meaning depending on the situation (Hansen, 2008, p. 209).

The young people were engaged in different projects in a multitude of places with different groups of people. They had their connection to the INGO where they had attended a particular training session on activism in common. The projects of our interlocutors include among others organizing workshops for farmers about land

rights and teaching both adults and youth about health and human rights.

We carried out participant observation by watching the youth in action and we met with their families, friends, and colleagues. Apart from carrying out fieldwork in Yangon where two thirds of our interlocutors lived, we went to cities and rural villages in the Mon, Kayah, and Shan States, the Magway Division and the Delta Region. In order to achieve a more profound understanding of their motivations and practices, we conducted recorded interviews with all 23 interlocutors. We asked about what their activist practice entailed, what their motivations to engage had been, what challenges they faced in their daily work, and what dreams they had for the future.

Activism in Myanmar

The use of the concept of activism in Myanmar shows how the country has changed politically. Practicing activism was banned both in speech and in action during the military rule, but when INGOs started entering the country in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, people started to use the English term activist in public (Petrie & South, 2014, p. 232). During our time at the INGO, trainers and participants referred to themselves as activists. However, once we left the training hub, where the youth received training in governance, human rights and democratic ideas, this was no longer the case. When following our interlocutors in their local communities, they would not translate the English term of an activist into their ethnic language to describe themselves. They told us how they instead applied the meaning of the English definition of a social and community worker. They argued that the activist word was still too controversial to most villagers. Nonetheless, when asked about it, the youth would define most of their work as being activist in character. As 24-year old Aye, who was spreading knowledge about reproductive health among young people in the rural South, told us,

“An activist is the person who does the things that people do not dare to do. They are active in doing something good. I used it when I attended the training but I do not use it in my work as it is forbidden to do”.

Too many negative connotations are still attached to the activist concept, especially among people older than our interlocutors, as they continue to be affected by the aggressive propaganda that was exercised by the military over half a century. To them, being an activist is dangerous and associated with risk, imprisonment and fear. Up until 2010, expressing your opinion in public was condemned, criminalized, and brutally punished (Fink, 2009). Our interlocutors wish to express their points of views even though activism is still a highly political word. What motivates them to take action is the strong emotions that originate from their experiences with injustice and violations of human rights during the military rule. This echoes other research on how taking action correlates with the awakening of indignation within a person (Beyerlein & Ward, 2007, p. 1; Hodgeson & Brooks, 2007, p. 18).

Through the INGO training the youth in our research have become more articulate about the activist qualities of their work, yet they do not label their daily activities as activism. Our interlocutors had no problem applying words such as “capacity building” or “campaign strategy” when explaining their work to us. However, when Htway, a 24-year-old man living in Yangon and organizing strikes, told factory workers about their rights, he would adapt and translate words like these into words that the factory workers could relate to. This highlights how the youth navigate surroundings that are not necessarily ready to embrace and make use of activist vocabulary. We argue that the aforementioned English terms provided during training become the activist language of the youth when they are with their peers or sharing their projects with outsiders, but it is not the language they use when interacting with their communities.

In the following we show that our interlocutors, at an interpersonal level, are contributing to the reshaping of the norms of family life and the norms of the kind of political activity that is socially accepted in Myanmar today. They are able to do this by belonging to the socially defined category ‘youth’, but also through their conscious choice to create change as activists.

Confronting Norms

Bourdieu (1977) addresses what makes one group believe that a certain kind of practice is natural or possible, while another group finds it unthinkable or scandalous. He defines habitus as something practically and bodily induced which creates naturalized values through socialization (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 80). Habitus is a system of dispositions through which agents perceive, judge, and act in the world, and as such, it legitimizes and reproduces the way things are. Bourdieu states that “the habitus, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices” (ibid, p.82). In the following we will show how the practices of our interlocutors are influenced by the history of Myanmar.

Htway confronted the norms within the family sphere, which made the relationship with his parents rather tense. As he was working to improve the rights and working conditions of factory workers, he felt it necessary to confront his parents about their exploitation of child labor in their teashop:

“I have said to you that they don’t like my ethics because sometimes I am a little bit against the injustice [...] For example, my family opens the cafeteria and the children have to work for a long time, not 8 hours but 15 or 14 hours, so I am against that. They think I destroy their profit, but it is not like that.”

By criticizing his parents, Htway broke with a strong tradition of respecting the decisions of elders and authorities in society (Fink, 2009, p.

134). Due to the rule and practice of the recent military regime, the discussion of worker's rights and the establishment of unions was something quite new to the public. Even though he was a front-runner in the fight for the rights of exploited factory workers, he had not yet gained acceptance or convinced his family about the logic and good intentions behind his work.

Aye, who is concerned with health issues, described how she was working in the space between the very traditional ideas within her target communities and her desire to promote awareness among the younger generations:

"I am the one who lead the young people so I have to care a lot [...] about my young people, my colleagues, my peers. I think I can share knowledge but I cannot make a big workshop or big change. We have a lot of gaps [in our society], and we don't make any demonstrations or marching".

According to Aye, for the time being demonstrations were not a constructive way to change people's minds. She would rather create dialogue within communities and raise awareness by taking a one-on-one approach and telling the young people how they were "holders of certain rights". In doing so she implemented the human rights based approach (HRBA) that she had been taught during her training.

Htway and Aye tried to mediate ideas and knowledge between old and new styles of thoughts and habits. Their interaction with their surroundings is an example of a clash between two sets of habitus that is produced by "different modes of generation" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). We see how they are both products, so to say, of the particular history of Myanmar. By doing the training they create a window of possibilities where they have access to knowledge about human rights and the constitutional laws. Furthermore, they have learned how to facilitate workshops and raise awareness about their causes. As such the

habitual practices that guide their actions become different from that of their parent's generation. The current time of transition in Myanmar society is providing a space where potential action can be facilitated. The youth and the communities find themselves between the consequences of the military regime and the potentialities of the new governmental system that are currently being negotiated.

Levine (2011, p. 426-428) argues that youth in times of cultural transition come to act as intermediaries and facilitators of change of culture. According to Levine, youth often indirectly and unintentionally end up introducing new habits to the people in their local communities when they return from urban educational centers. This may well apply to the youth of our research, but what characterizes them more is that they intentionally aim to create change in their role as not only youth, but as youth activists. As agents of change, the youths are breaking with the traditional patterns of behavior; they are breaking with the habitus of both their own and their parent's generation.

This leads us to the concept of the trickster, a historical and mythological phenomenon that in anthropological literature is presented as a figure with multiple characteristics (Brown, 1947; Radin, 1956; Pelton, 1980; Hyde, 2010[1998]). The paradoxical and ambiguous nature of the trickster relies on the fact that he/she is never fixed to a particular structure. Babcock-Abrahams (1975, p. 164) defines the trickster as "the embodiment of the contradictory power attendant upon the violation of fundamental taboos". By violating taboos for the profit of his group, the trickster is a mediator who is both sacred and profane. This figure represents opposites and can thus be interpreted in multiple ways – both as a trickster or outsider and as a cultural hero (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975, p. 161). It is this ambiguous, never fixed, and mediating role, which our interlocutors inhabit. They are brought up in different villages, towards which they feel a strong sense of respon-

sibility even though some of them no longer live in these villages. They attend training and are educated in Yangon where most of them only live temporarily. Consequently, our interlocutors felt as if they were constantly torn between rural and urban areas, traditions and new knowledge, and between being responsible community leaders and young activists.

The trickster helps us understand the complexity of the social role of our interlocutors as they confront the established norms and make long existing taboos visible. Examples include how Htway challenge social norms by confronting his parents about child rights and how Aye addressed long held taboos when discussing health and sex with young people in very conservative rural villages. They are dialogical, as they are outsiders in the sense that they do not act according to the majority and they are cultural heroes as they lead the way and guide their communities. Furthermore, they make sure that the knowledge they have access to in the urban areas is transmitted to people in the rural areas.

The youths are thus molding the idea of what an activist is within the population by moving away from the revolutionary approach practiced by the youth during the uprisings of 1988 and 2007 and instead by working with knowledge sharing and consolidation. It is by adapting their activist role to the social situation of their time that they achieve a position from where they can challenge and change status quo. In approaching our interlocutors through the trickster figure, we are given a concept that embraces the specific role of our interlocutors as mediators, not only as being youth or activists, but as those who challenge the norms of their society and who create a window for change through their projects. They show their communities an alternative. Babcock-Abrahams argues that one of the many functions of the trickster is that of being evaluative – of creating a space for reexamining the existing conditions, which can then lead to a possible change of things (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975, p. 183). This is what

Aye is doing when letting young women know that abortion is a possibility and what Htway is facilitating by arranging strikes with the factory workers. They are creating a space at a certain time and place where people are explicitly made aware of and invited to discuss and reflect upon the status quo.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined how youths in Myanmar engage in activism. Their actions are motivated by their personal experience with social injustices. They have had access to INGO facilitated activist training, which has provided them with the vocabulary and knowledge to address these injustices in a time of change. In applying their knowledge about social change to their local communities, these youths have to adjust and navigate in the often very conservative social settings of their projects.

In embodying the trickster qualities by being mediators as well as provocateurs, our interlocutors are indirectly given the mandate by their surroundings to challenge the established norms and promote new ways of thinking without being excluded from their communities. This feature is what characterizes youth activism in Myanmar today. Applying the trickster concept to analyze the social position of our interlocutors is done deliberately as to indicate how these youth are not compliant to conformity. They want to contribute to a profound change and improvement of the socio-economic-political situation of their communities. As the trickster, they will continue to develop, change, and adapt their practices to achieve this goal.

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