# *Naingkyin: Body of Sacrifice, Spirit of Resilience* (tentative title)

# Chapter 2 – Tracing Silences

Seinenu M. Thein-Lemelson, PhD

# Anthropology Department, University of California, Los Angeles

The Foundation for Psychocultural Research (The FPR)

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Seinenu M. Thein-Lemelson, The Foundation for Psychocultural Research (The FPR),

725 El Medio Avenue, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272.

Email: seinenu@ucla.edu.

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Chapter 2*—*Tracing Silences

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“I am fine,” Pyone Cho told his mother. “I am safe in prison.” [[1]](#endnote-1)

The first time Pyone Cho’s mother visited him in Insein Prison, in 1992, three years after he had been first captured and detained, he told her that she did not need to come again. He told her that she should only worry about his younger brother, Thet Win Aung,[[2]](#endnote-2) who was still in hiding at the time and, therefore, in more danger. He told her that in prison, he had enough to eat; all his needs were met. “There is nothing to worry about,” he said.

Pyone Cho’s mother took him at his word. So much so that twenty-five years after he was first captured, when I asked how she felt during that first prison visit, she told me she was relieved. She said she stopped worrying about Pyone Cho that day. In the evenings when she prayed, she reserved all her mantras for her youngest son, devoting entire chants to him. But Pyone Cho—he was okay. He had told her he was safe inside the prison, and a quarter-century later she still appeared to believe this.

During the combined twenty years that Pyone Cho was in prison, his father did not miss a single prison visit, never failing to bring him food, medicine, and supplies. His mother helped with the preparations at home, but Pyone Cho, his father, and his brothers spared her the prison visits. She only accompanied them every couple of years. After he was released from prison, Pyone Cho never shared with his mother the violence he had experienced there.

When I began interviewing him, he likewise never talked about the more personal forms of violence he had experienced. He gave many details of the prison—of the scarcity, disease, friends he had lost, even its architecture and his daily routine, all of which he remembered with an uncanny precision. But whenever we were on the verge of talking about the torture and brutality he experienced, he would pull back, look away, and become silent.

Pyone Cho was particularly reluctant to tell me about the years between 1995 and 2003. In 1995, he and twenty-three other *naingkyin[[3]](#endnote-3)* in Insein Prison surreptitiously organized prison newsletters.[[4]](#endnote-4) This was during a period when political prisoners were forbidden to read or write. The newsletters contained poetry and stories that the prisoners had written, documenting their lives and struggles for existence, but also expressing their belief in and continued commitment to the movement. It took several months to bring the newsletter into existence as they had to smuggle in the scraps of paper and other materials used to create makeshift writing implements. Pyone Cho was an artist and possessed beautiful handwriting. He took responsibility for rewriting everyone’s verses and sketching the pictures that accompanied each prisoner’s written submission.

When prison authorities found out about the newsletter, Pyone Cho was placed on trial again and sentenced to another seven years. He was also transferred from Insein to Tharrawaddy—one of the most brutal prisons in Burma. Pyone Cho described to me in detail how he painstakingly created the art and poetry that went into the newsletter, fashioning tiny paintbrushes out of broom bristles and his cellmate’s hair and then using chips of paint that had been snuck into the prison by his family. He also described how he and the other prisoners carefully circulated the small volume they had created among the other inmates. But he never shared with me what happened after the authorities discovered what he had done. I had a sense of what he had suffered, however, because there were other written accounts of the incident and I had interviewed other *naingkyin* who did not hesitate to talk about the monstrous cruelty they had endured.

When he did finally discuss that stretch of time in prison—the most brutal, lonely, and painful for him—it was because I had made a gentle request. It was two years after we had first met, and the 2015 Burmese elections were just a few weeks away. Pyone Cho was the only member of the 88 Generation to be selected by the National League for Democracy (NLD) to run for national parliament that year, and I knew it was a period of transition for him. We spoke several times about the uncertainty of whether we would be able to continue our interviews if he were to be elected to office. Adding to that uncertainty was massive flooding. Monsoons had swept across Burma, chasing away the oppressive heat that continually hung in the air, only to replace it with torrential rains that drenched and then flooded the earth. Most of Central Burma, from Sagaing to Mandalay, lay under water.

It was drizzling outside when I heard Pyone Cho tap on my door. I had worried the entire morning that he would not keep our appointment; he had canceled multiple times since I had requested the interview. He said it was due to his busy schedule and the beginning of the election cycle, but I also knew he was avoiding telling me about that phase of his life at Insein and Tharrawaddy. The trees rustled outside as he began speaking, and I heard the rain begin to fall.

When he finished his story, he told me he had never described to anyone the more private forms of violence he had suffered in the interrogation rooms and prisons. He said he felt a weight had been lifted from him. He also said: “You know I still carry all of this with me. I still think about it, but I also think that for everyone who has suffered this—I think to myself, yes, so these things happened, let it be! Let it be! I would like to have ceremonies that honor everyone who went through this. There are many more things that I could tell you about, Seinenu, more brutal than even this.”

I knew intuitively, however, that for the time being he would have nothing more to say. Pyone Cho got up and moved away from the couch where he was sitting next to me and sat down in the armchair beside the coffee table. It had stopped raining outside and the room was completely still.

# Tracing Silences in the Literature and Discourse on the Democracy Movement

In this chapter, I review and interrogate the literature on the Burmese democracy movement, noting many of the silences that exist in both academic and media representations. I focus on the silences because contemplating the subjectivities of individuals who have continually lived through both ordinary and extraordinary forms of violence requires that one pay attention to forms of knowledge that are “unspeakable and unspoken.”[[5]](#endnote-5) It is not sufficient to only reference that which is continually reproduced and subsequently cast as part of “rational discourse.”[[6]](#endnote-6) This is particularly true when ethnographers work in cultural contexts where families have had to carry the oppressive weight of political persecution and cope with the pain of state violence through an intergenerational concealment of affect and an intentional partitioning off of their inner lives. It then becomes an ethical imperative to “trace silences” across different realms of lived experience.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Certainly one of the main endeavors of this book is to disrupt these silences. To do so, it is necessary to identify and interrogate the forms of silence that have surrounded the democracy movement. Recognizing what has been suppressed or left unarticulated is particularly challenging with this community because its members have consciously sought to disrupt silences with their art, oratory, writing, and activism.[[8]](#endnote-8) Yet there are other silences significant to the movement as a whole, and they take on diverse forms, often spanning many fields of study and spaces of discourse. For example, there is the silence that is absence, evidenced by the surprising lack of scholarly work on the movement over the past thirty years. There is the silence that manifests itself as diversion, when intense focus on certain figures in the movement eclipses the community in which they are situated. There is the ironic silence that is created by relying solely on a neoliberal human rights framework, which often casts those who have suffered political atrocities only as passive objects of humanitarian intervention.

Related to this is the silence of what is not remarked upon when people cannot be boxed into the positionality of passive humanitarian objects. For actors in the democracy movement, particularly members of the NLD and 88 Generation, this means that their precarity has often gone unremarked. Academics and journalists rarely acknowledge their bodily, economic, and human vulnerability. Then there is the silence produced by relying on tired images of the Oriental Other. These representations vacillate between portraying democracy activists as either noble or savage; perpetrator or victim; cruel, violent, tyrannical Oriental despots; or passive, nonviolent Buddhists. They are portrayed as either Machiavellian in their rationality or compliant subjects enthralled to mystical superstitions pertaining to the number “8,” which clouds their rationality altogether. Finally, there is the overwhelming silence of erasure that manifests itself in denials that were prevalent throughout the military era about the existence of political prisoners in Burma. These forms of denial were reproduced in media and academic representations that either ignored or questioned the existence of a *naingkyin* community and diminished the violence and persecution they had suffered.

The first important observation to make concerning the democracy movement is that the scholarly literature on the movement itself is scant, practically nonexistent. The only academic book to focus on the movement was written more than twenty years ago by Gustaaf Houtman.[[9]](#endnote-9) Houtman recognized that the democracy movement had a distinct “mental culture” based upon Theravada Buddhist concepts and practices. Interest in the movement never took off within academic circles, however, and the two other book-length accounts of the democracy movement were written by journalists, almost sixteen years apart from one another.[[10]](#endnote-10) The more frequently cited of these two was written by Bertil Lintner, whose book was published in 1989, more than thirty years ago.[[11]](#endnote-11)

 A common idea across academic and journalistic accounts of the movement is that the movement did not continue after 1988. Kurt Schock wrote,[[12]](#endnote-12) along with many historians and journalists, that the democracy movement had been fully suppressed in 1988 or shortly thereafter. Erica Chenowath and Maria Stephan similarly concluded that the nonviolent movement begun in 1988 had failed.[[13]](#endnote-13) Lintner’s book, which is considered authoritative, does not grapple with the trajectory of the movement in its entirety because it was published so soon after the initial demonstrations.[[14]](#endnote-14) Some historians acknowledge that the movement continued at least until the 1990 national elections when the NLD, the main political party of the movement, won by a landslide (although the military prevented them from taking office), but they do not acknowledge that boycotts, demonstrations, and other acts of resistance continued thereafter, organized largely by the same network of activists. Two historians of modern Burma, Thant Myint-U and Michael Charney, refer to the democracy movement only in relation to the 1988 demonstrations and 1990 national election.[[15]](#endnote-15) The protest cycles of 1989, 1990, 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2004–2006 are not covered in their accounts. The Saffron Revolution of 2007 is depicted in Charney’s account as a separate movement altogether, led by members of the monastic order, rather than as being contiguous with a larger and ongoing movement. Robert H. Taylor, the well-known Burma scholar and imminent political scientist, did not acknowledge any of the protest cycles that took place after the 1990 elections, characterizing any such public demonstrations in Burma as “short-lived and isolated.”[[16]](#endnote-16) A recent dissertation by Mai Van Tran, whose fieldwork within the community overlapped with the latter part of my own, is one of the first scholarly accounts of the movement to acknowledge that there were “fresh rounds” of pro-democracy demonstrations through the decades, with each one possessing the same “spirit and fervor through the years.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

Scholarly treatments of the democracy movement have often overlooked that, in addition to the public demonstrations that have peak moments of contestation, there is a social movement community with a complex and continually evolving cultural and social system. Often, no other actors in the movement are identified than Nobel Peace Prize winner and internationally recognized figure Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been, in the Western imaginary, the main symbol of both Burma and its yearning to overthrow military rule. Hans-Bernd Zollner’s book, for example, focuses explicitly on Aung San Suu Kyi and provides few details of the *naingkyin* community and the broader democracy movement.[[18]](#endnote-18)

In addition to such scholarly analyses of Aung San Suu Kyi, there are several biographies for popular audiences focusing entirely on her life that do not mention the networks of individuals and families who comprised and sustained the movement.[[19]](#endnote-19) This lack of popular and scholarly focus on the *naingkyin* community, due in part to the inordinate focus on a single, charismatic leader, was recognized by Delphine Schrank in her popular account: “To assume [Aung San Suu Kyi] has stood alone, to extract her from the larger story of the dissidents and the deeper history around her, diminishes not only her achievements but the sheer human intelligence and the vitality of the culture which she roots her ideas and legitimacy.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Often, journalists and academics focus intensely on only one or a few “personalities” in the movement and then subsequently disparage those same historical actors as “tokens” or “figureheads.” On a deeper level, the consistent failure to recognize the existence of the *naingkyin* community can be analyzed as arising not only from public fascination with the democracy’s movement’s highly visible leadership, but also as a form of ontological denial.

The lack of scholarly work on the movement is startling. This is especially true within the interdisciplinary field of Burma Studies. The Burmese democracy movement, and the community of *naingkyin* and their supporters who comprised it, had a profound impact upon the trajectory of modern Burma. The main political party that was founded as a direct result of the 1988 nationwide demonstrations, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won national elections three times: in 1990, in 2015, and most recently in November 2020. The NLD was also the majority party in parliament between 2015 and 2020, initiating a variety of consequential reforms and policy agendas.[[21]](#endnote-21) If one were to date the founding of the democracy movement as 1988 (quite debatable, given that the origins of the movement had roots in previous protest movements), then we must acknowledge that it was also one of the longest sustained social movements in the history of contemporary Burma. It is also arguably one of the most impactful nonviolent movements in Southeast Asia, having realized the goals of bringing an end to the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government, its one-party system, and the rule of General Ne Win, as well as bringing about three multiparty elections that were largely free and fair, all of which the NLD won by large margins against the military’s proxy party.

The lack of attention to the democracy movement by scholars of Burmese history and society stems from multiple factors. Certainly, Burma’s economic and diplomatic isolation under successive military regimes, the closed nature of activist networks, the inaccessibility of the prisons and other physical spaces where activists dwelled, as well as the risk to life posed to researchers operating inside the country contributed to the scarcity of articles and monographs.

However, one primary but overlooked reason for the dearth of scholarship on the democracy movement—a noticeable silence on an undeniably consequential topic—is that the history of modern Burma has been written primarily as a narrative of the Burmese military and its many conflicts.[[22]](#endnote-22) While academic books and articles on the democracy movement are rare, there have been numerous volumes over the past thirty years on the military and its many actors. Indeed, many of the defining works on the history and politics of modern Burma, even if not explicitly stated as such, are studies of the *Tatmadaw* (military).

 Military history research, both within Burma and outside of it, is typically well funded. The *Tatmadaw* itself offered funding, incentives, and privileged access to those interested specifically in studying its history. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and its predecessor, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), the civil society wings of the military, effectively controlled the educational system inside the country, which provided opportunities for young people to gain upward social mobility.[[23]](#endnote-23) Many Burmese nationals who earned doctorates and other advanced degrees from elite universities in the West and East were those who had come up through the ranks of this educational system or were themselves literally children of the military. This was true of Dr. Nay Win Maung,[[24]](#endnote-24) who eventually started a think tank, Myanmar Egress, in the Thein Sein era (2010 to 2015).[[25]](#endnote-25) In contrast, youth who participated in the NLD, ABFSU,[[26]](#endnote-26) 88 Generation, Democratic Party for a New Society, and other groups and parties that made up the broader democracy movement were denied educational opportunities, and political prisoners and their families were often prohibited from entering university or going into certain professions such as teaching.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Many academic treatments emphasize the power and agency of the military, including the prowess of its principal “personalities.” Along with this focus on the power of the military comes an underestimation of the historical agency and contemporary and historical relevancy of actors in the democracy movement. Thant Myint-U’s renderings in his book, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma*, is particularly noteworthy for its portrayal of the democracy movement as irrelevant to the trajectory of modern Burmese history.[[28]](#endnote-28) The book was well reviewed in the US press, widely read by those interested in the region, and has had significant impact, in part because Myint-U is the grandson of former UN Secretary General U Thant. It is worthwhile, therefore, to spend the next few paragraphs interrogating some of the representations of the democracy movement in *The River of Lost Footsteps*.

Myint-U’s history of Burma is a history of military rule. He references the democracy movement only in passing, describing it in broad strokes and usually in a somewhat dismissive tone. He entirely omits, for example, the cycles of protest that took place between 1987 and 1988 in which Pyone Cho was active and which led to major demonstrations that took place on a national scale on August 8 and 9,1988. Somewhat bizarrely, his passing reference to the nationwide demonstrations are introduced with an anecdote about his coffee date with a military general at the Strand Hotel shortly before the event. There, the general complained about the lack of economic development under Ne Win, the dictatorial leader of the military socialist period who resigned after student-led protests took place in June 1988. Myint-U then frames the 1988 protests as being a “chance” for the military to implement their vision of Burma,[[29]](#endnote-29) treating the protests as “mere chance” and leaving the protesters and their “chances” for reform, as well as imprisonment and torture, silent. Indeed, describing the mass demonstrations of August 8 and 9, Myint-U writes: “Then Ne Win gave his speech calling for a return to democracy, and thousands took to the streets, demanding an end to military rule.”[[30]](#endnote-30) His subtle turn of phrase lends the impression that the nationwide protests of 1988—organized through painstaking effort and profound risk-taking by activists such as Pyone Cho—were called for by General Ne Win.

Myint-U also did not give much credence to the activists’ ability to organize, plan, and effect change. In a passage from his book, Myint-U describes being in the Kachin Hills around Christmas 1991. The Kachin are one of the cultural and ethnic groups in Burma, some of whom have participated in the Kachin Independence Movement as well as in armed conflict with the Burmese military. Many ethnic Kachin also participated in the democracy movement. Myint-U describes how his hosts, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), put on a nativity play for him. He mentions in passing that the carolers for the play were “ethnic Burmese university students, mostly from Mandalay, who had fled to Pajau following the end of the uprising in 1988.”[[31]](#endnote-31) That ethnically Burmese, likely Buddhist, university students who had fled in the wake of the 1988 demonstrations and massacres were still in the Kachin hills two years later deserves explanation. That these student activists were assimilated into Kachin society to the extent that they were caroling for one of the Christmas nativity plays also requires further examination. Yet Myint-U trivializes their significance, neither contextualizing the presence of the student activists nor going deeper into their struggles and what they might mean for the future of Burma. He diminishes them, and the entire encounter, by remarking: “With their Christmas cheer, they did not seem the hardened revolutionaries they wanted to be.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Myint-U’s dismissive tone is also at work in his descriptions of Aung San Suu Kyi, whom he calls “schoolmarmish”[[33]](#endnote-33) and refers to as “Aung San’s daughter” instead of as an activist or democracy leader in her own right.[[34]](#endnote-34) The silences in Myint-U’s book come not only in terms of omitting historically significant facts, but in his subtle disparagement of the movement and its actors.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Nor is it only Thant Myint-U who minimizes the historical agency of the people in the democracy movement. For example, a special report by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), a federal institution, states in its opening summary that although some democratic transitions are the result of “social movements, mass protest, or instability,” the 2010 transition in Burma was “planned” by the military leadership.[[36]](#endnote-36) Like Thant Myint-U, who emphasizes Ne Win and the *Tatmadaw’s* agency, the report goes on to state: “When Ne Win stepped down amid the chaos of the 1988 popular uprising, he instructed his cabinet to return the country to multiparty parliamentary governance. His military successors took this as an order and began almost immediately to plan a transition.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Than Shwe, the head of the military from 1992 to 2010, is similarly described as having “choreographed” the “transition plan.” The same report describes the ruling council of the military as having “painstakingly” drafted the new constitution,[[38]](#endnote-38) having planned “gradual steps” toward a multiparty system, as well as “doggedly building the foundation” for holding multiparty elections.[[39]](#endnote-39)

 Along with this emphasis on the agency and meticulous planning of the military comes an underestimation of the rationality and goal-directed action of actors who took part in the democracy movement. The widely disseminated name given to the events of August 8 and 9,the “8888 Uprising,”[[40]](#endnote-40) belies the details of the careful planning of protest leaders. The term “uprising”[[41]](#endnote-41) lends the impression that the nationwide protests and strike were the result of a spontaneous eruption of emotions, rather than the result of meticulously executed actions that had the challenging goal of organizing millions across the country to gather publicly at the exact same moment.[[42]](#endnote-42) This image of a sudden explosion of pent-up grievances and the photos and videos of violence emerging from the protests gave credence to a narrative that the military government would promote—that there was just and reasonable cause for the regime to “contain the explosion” through the perpetration of violence. In the same USIP report, the demonstrations of 1988 and the prospects of a civilian government headed up by the NLD and other leaders of the democracy movement are consistently referenced using terms such as the “chaos” and “confusion”—a continuation of the discourse that the 1988 demonstrations were not an organized social movement.

As with the colonial rebellions of the past,[[43]](#endnote-43) historians and journalists often narrated the events of 1988 as having an indeterminate relationship to native propensities toward superstition. For example, internationally circulated newspapers and magazines widely reported that August 8, 1988, was picked as the date for nationwide protests because the number “8” was regarded as “auspicious” by both the organizers and the Burmese populace. In 2013, on the anniversary of the protests, NPR reported that the nationwide general strike was on 8/8/88 because of the date’s “numerological power.” Historian, David Steinberg wrote an article in *Nikkei Asia* describing how Burma’s “pro-democracy opposition … believed that eight was its lucky number. Hence, the massive (and ultimately unsuccessful) ‘people’s revolution’ was launched on Aug. 8, 1988.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Ant Bwe Kyaw, who was there for the organizational meetings leading up to the protests, offered another reason for the date in an interview I conducted with him in 2014: “It was easy to remember; easy to get the word out.”

Ant Bwe Kyaw’s answer indicates that the reason the date was selected was carefully thought out and determined by a group of protest organizers who were cognizant of the difficult dynamics necessary to recruit millions of people from across the country to participate in a nationwide strike. The reason he gives conveys “practical rationality,” which Gananath Obeyesekere defined as “the process whereby human beings reflectively assess the implications of a problem in terms of practical criteria.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Obeyesekere wrote that the idea of the “natives” possessing such pragmatism rubs up against the stereotype that they are only motivated by cosmological beliefs, which are viewed as being inherently inflexible. Practical rationality, instead, involves a variety of “strategies” and “situational judgments,” as well as “inventiveness” and an ability to adapt to change.[[46]](#endnote-46)

In my conversations with Ant Bwe Kyaw and many of the other student activists who participated in planning the 8888 demonstrations, I discovered that they held multiple meetings over the course of several weeks in order to organize the main demonstration that took place on August 8 and 9. As many as thirty activists participated in any one meeting. They determined ahead of time the exact moment they would begin the protests and the precise route they would take, who would hold the flags, and who would lead the column of protesters who were expected to join them. Individual activists were assigned specific tasks, including who would engage in “crowd control” and who would be the runners and messengers to carry information back and forth. Each of the thirty activists who sat in on the main organizational meetings was in charge of anywhere from a handful to upwards of twenty or thirty other activists whom they oversaw. These were not submissive Orientals nor superstitious natives: they were highly practical and eminently rational, determined to reshape Burmese civic society.

# Humanitarian Objects and Voiceless Emissaries

Of the silences surrounding the democracy movement, the *naingkyin’s* inner, private life, including their emotions, thoughts, and moral sentiments, is what I focus on in this book. In the scholarly and journalistic works about the democracy movement, there are almost no accounts of Burma written from the *naingkyin*’s point of view, and few accounts that represent them as complex, whole, reflexive human beings embedded in an equally complex, whole, reflexive culture and community.

Houtman’s early analysis of the movement examined how Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD, and other actors in the democracy movement employed Buddhist discourse and techniques for coping with state-sponsored violence; it is one of few works that describes modern Burmese politics from the perspective of political prisoners and democracy activists. He recognizes that modern democracy activists had a distinct culture, consisting largely of what he calls mental or mentalized concepts, with qualities that were different from the culture espoused by the military.[[47]](#endnote-47)

Houtman’s analyses are largely textual, drawn from political speeches and Buddhist texts. There is very little of the phenomenological.[[48]](#endnote-48) Not being a psychologically or psychologically inclined anthropologist, Houtman also does not define what he means by “mental” and what constitutes mentalizing. Because the focus of his analyses is the interface between the “political domain” and the “Buddhist domain,” particularly as it is manifested in *vipassana* meditation practices, there is sparse detail on the subjectivity of the political prisoners and their supporters as it pertains to other domains of life. Particularly missing is how their psychologies are constituted again and again, not only by recruiting Buddhist concepts and engaging in meditative practices, but through their everyday lived experience as manifested in ritual, kinship, caregiving, material exchange, and transactions between the public and private, as well as a host of other processes and phenomena linked to complex processes of affect, sentimentality, and emotion. Matthew Walton similarly describes a Buddhist “moral universe” as it relates to political participation, contrasting the *lawki* (mundane) and *lawkouttara* (enlightened) realms.[[49]](#endnote-49) Walton’s analysis, which does not focus on the democracy movement nor the *naingkyin* but on the broader Burman Buddhist society, is mostly a study of political theory and religion. It does not delve into how individual subjects and psyches can also become conflicted sites of moral contestation and subsequently enter into the domain of the political and historical.

Tamas Welles recently published a book examining notions of “democracy” held by activists, aid workers, and democracy leaders working in Burma.[[50]](#endnote-50) Welles contrasts the liberal vision of democracy, held largely by Western NGO workers, with what he terms the “benevolence” model of democracy, held by those in the NLD. Welles spent time in Burma between 2013 and 2015, and he offers keen observations drawn from interviews and participant observations. He describes the extent to which those from the NLD focused on internal motivation and selflessness as integral to ideals of governance, leadership, and democracy. Welles is concerned primarily with contrasting that focus with Western ideas and practices disseminated and advocated largely by international aid workers. Lynette Chua writes about the “vernacular mobilization of human rights,”[[51]](#endnote-51) describing how activists adapt the human rights discourse so that it fits local environments. Neither Welles nor Chua are anthropologists and the goals of their investigations are to unpack local understanding of foreign terms such as “democracy” and “human rights.” Their primary concerns are not to understand and interpret local meaning systems. Their studies focus only on the public domain of life and do not unpack how other facets of the activists’ life-worlds, including their personal histories and relationships, shape their judgments, and color their affect, sometimes outside of conscious awareness.

Attempts to understand the democracy movement in terms of a liberal humanitarian framework were evident if one skimmed through the scant number of articles written about Burma in international newspapers and magazines between 1988 and 2012. During this period, one finds democracy activists inside the country depicted almost exclusively as oppressed and voiceless and therefore needing to be helped and “freed” by those outside of Burma. Liisa Malkki has written about the silencing of refugees and the extent to which they become ahistorical, depoliticized, and universalized.[[52]](#endnote-52) Within this neoliberal, humanitarian framework, migrants are viewed as “passive objects of humanitarian intervention,”[[53]](#endnote-53) void of political motives rather than specific persons with specific histories, local positionalities, and a range of both political and nonpolitical motives that inform and guide their actions. Refugees become “speechless emissaries” to the world largely through the circulation of images that are trafficked throughout the world.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Indeed, during this period, those outside of Burma were much more likely to encounter visual representations of Burmese political prisoners, such as Aung San Suu Kyi behind bars with the words “Free Burma” written across their faces, than they were to actually read about their ideas and motivations or hear the circumstances of their life histories as narrated by them. Apart from granting them a vague desire to “be free,” media often represented democracy activists as being devoid of motivations, emotions, sensibilities, practical rationality, and individualized subjectivities. The main embodiment of this idea of a hapless but moral Other who needed “freeing” was, of course, Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma’s best-known leader and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize while under house arrest. Freeing Burma was greater than simply getting Aung San Suu Kyi out of her house, although she made an apt symbol for journalists.

 The gaze cast from the West saw a dichotomized landscape. This was evident in the homogenization and Orientalization of representations whereby the movement and its diverse range of actors came to be portrayed “limitlessly by means of a handful of reckless general and repeatedly deployed clichés.”[[55]](#endnote-55) These clichés often took the form of simplistic dichotomies that contrasted the *naingkyin* to the Burmese military. Just as the imprisoned activists appealed to those outside of Burma as passive victims, so the Burmese military was represented as highly agentic in their brutality. If Aung San Suu Kyi and other democracy activists were the “noble” Other, then the Burmese generals were ignoble savages. In the same manner that a political prisoner like Pyone Cho was viewed as a “human rights figure,” the generals were understood to be uncivilized, barbaric, and cowardly perpetrators of human rights violations.

What was at stake in this discourse was not any effort to discern who the democracy activists truly were, what motivated them, and what informed their behaviors and shaped their sentiments, but forms of legitimization that contrasted notions of “civilized” versus “uncivilized.”[[56]](#endnote-56) Burma was portrayed as a country divided between Orientalist images of inhumane generals and passive Buddhists. Indeed, the representations of Aung San Suu Kyi and the other Burmese political prisoners as “noble” functioned best in contrast to the savagery and immorality of the Burmese generals. These two ideas could not be disentangled from one another because they were two sides of a single representational coin.

The thin line separating these categories—their easy dualism and the lack of attention to the actual people behind the depictions—meant that it was easy for these representations to shift entirely in the opposite direction. During the period of my fieldwork, from 2013 and right up until the military coup of February 2021, the *naingkyin*, once again epitomized by the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi, were increasingly cast in the same disparaging light as the Burmese military. Once represented as noble and courageous if lacking in voice and political agency, they increasingly gained the voice and cruel agency of the inhumane savage, tinged not with risky courage but with shameful cowardice. Just as the ruling generals had been previously portrayed as immoral, violent, and genocidal, so Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD, and the 88 Generation came to be portrayed in the same manner. Nicolas Kristof, the journalist known for writing bestselling books that popularize humanitarian sentiment, wrote a widely read *New York Times* op-ed piece about Aung San Suu Kyi’s “shame.” In it, he quotes Kenneth Roth, the director of Human Rights Watch, on how Aung San Suu Kyi “symbolizes cowardly complicity.” *The New York Times* ran several op-ed pieces in which their editors and contributors referenced Aung San Suu Kyi and other democracy activists as “coward[s]” and “pariah[s].”[[57]](#endnote-57)

This shift in discourse was due, in part, to the atrocities, including ethnic cleansing and possibly genocide, perpetrated by the military against the ethnic Rohingya population in Rakhine state. Western media widely articulated that the NLD government under Aung San Suu Kyi was itself responsible for or complicit in those crimes. My endeavor in this book is not to trace these complicities or to analyze the very real and tragic suffering of Rohingya communities.[[58]](#endnote-58) I am merely tracing the silences in the existing discourses, especially as they were present during the period of my fieldwork, which lasted from 2013 to 2020. I am especially interested in how the discourses that dominated the media and elsewhere—including the prevalent discourse that the NLD was responsible for violence against the Rohingya—marginalized or foreclosed other possible discourses, other ways of recognizing the subjectivities and personal experiences of the *naingkyin*, their aspirations as well as their shattered, reformed, and continually evolving relationships with themselves and their environment.

Tamas Welles, in his book, points out that many of the negative representations of the NLD and other democracy activists, especially those that likened them to the military, preceded the 2017 attacks on the Rohingya.[[59]](#endnote-59) As early as 2012, well before the major atrocities committed against the Rohingya and prior to members of the NLD being elected into office in November 2015, Western journalist William McGowan wrote of Burma’s Buddhist Theravadan culture’s “chauvinism” and “xenophobia.” He wrote that “the majority Burman Buddhists” possessed a sense of “racial and religious superiority.” Apparently without having conducted any interviews or interacted with any of the newly released democracy activists, he concluded that “this seems to be true of Burma’s pro-democracy community as well, including leading figures in Suu Kyi’s NLD and the 88 Generation.” In the case of the 88 Generation and hundreds of other *naingkyin* in the NLD, which McGowan lumps together and stereotypes, they had been out of prison for less than one year. Among those who had been just released were 88 Generation and NLD members who were neither ethnic Burman nor Buddhist.

McGowan’s article mobilizes the idea that not just the military but the Bamar as a race and people had particular characteristics, including a propensity toward savagery, violence, and genocide. The democracy movement, including the NLD and 88 Generation, which were also often characterized as being “Bamar” and Buddhist (although my fieldwork indicated otherwise), were represented as possessing these same brutish qualities. Such characterizations were not confined to the general media. A guest editorial by Elliott Prasse-Freeman, an academic, in *Anthropology Today* obscured the differences between the military and political prisoner communities, including the NLD, writing: “It is not just the military, but the sclerotic NLD leadership that ‘weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.’”

What was lacking in both media and scholarly representations of the *naingkyin* was attention to, and even celebration of, “the depth of [their] personhood as vulnerable, failing, and aspiring human beings.”[[60]](#endnote-60) Between 2013 and the 2021 military coup when I presented some of my research regarding the community of *naingkyin*, I would often be accosted by audience members who would get up and shout that the former political prisoners in Burma were genocidal. I felt shaken by these encounters and sometimes wondered whether I should quit researching this community and documenting the violence they had suffered. In short, it made me feel that I should retreat into silence.

I was also concerned during this period to see how easily Aung San Suu Kyi and her associates were portrayed as “monsters” and “pariahs.” There is a great deal of continuity between the dehumanizing manner in which early military propaganda portrayed the members of the *naingkyin* community, including Aung San Suu Kyi, throughout the decades of their persecution and the images that later circulated on social media. Media images of Aung San Suu Kyi, for example, with blood gushing out of her mouth or her face altered to resemble a zombie or monster with one eye gouged out, are in keeping with the military and USDP’s hegemonizing discourse about the inherent illegitimacy, worthlessness, and inhuman nature of not just Aung San Suu Kyi but the entire *naingkyin* community.

The focus on the NLD and others who had participated in the democracy movement as perpetrators, bigoted supporters of the *Tatmadaw’s* policies, as monsters, who are as atrocious—if not even worse than the Burmese military—contributed to a discursive space where there was little opportunity between 2013 and 2021 to contemplate in a profound way the violence, executions, deaths, and rape that the *naingkyin*, their families, and supporters had also suffered at the hands of the military. Thus, while the *naingkyin* themselves have produced poetry, biographies, articles, and other accounts of their experiences, there are few attempts in the English-speaking media and in (what is largely English-language) academic literature to examine how their subjectivities have been shaped to a considerable degree by being the targets of state-sponsored violence. Western journalists have, at times, minimized or overlooked this violence altogether. This was particularly noticeable in the immediate aftermath of the 2021 coup. Shortly after the military began violently arresting, kidnapping, and detaining many from the *naingkyin* community, one commentator characterized the coup as a “squabble among court factions.”[[61]](#endnote-61)

# An Unremarked Precarity

It was apparent to me throughout the period of working on this ethnography the extent to which *naingkyin*, including members of the NLD and the 88 Generation, led a precarious existence, one that has gone unremarked in media and academic descriptions of them, even as they themselves become cast as elites and perpetrators.[[62]](#endnote-62) For Pyone Cho, his precarity was a constant, unnegotiable aspect of his life, palpable in the daily dilemmas and degradations that he and his family faced. During the course of my fieldwork, there was an ever-present fear that Pyone Cho and other *naingkyin* could be recaptured at any moment by the military, the state, or their many actors. Indeed, there were many times during my fieldwork when *naingkyin*, including Pyone Cho and San Zaw Htway, were temporarily taken away for interrogation. There were also cases where my friends in the movement were detained or imprisoned for long periods. This ever-present threat took on its most pernicious form in February 2021 when the military staged yet another coup, illegally detaining at gunpoint hundreds of parliamentarians and civil society leaders.[[63]](#endnote-63)

The *naingkyin’s* precarity was not, however, only in terms of the threat of violence to their bodies but also in the almost complete lack of resources accessible to the community. Food, clothing, medical care, and material possessions were hard to come by. There were no educational opportunities and chances for upward mobility for their children. *Naingkyin* and their families experienced homelessness and hunger. Such economic vulnerability was true of most *naingkyin* families whom I knew. Thus, while some *naingkyin* were better off than others—usually because a family member had a successful business in the face-to-face markets—most faced a grinding and oppressive poverty. This was true even of well-known activists. Mee Mee, part of the 88 Generation along with Pyone Cho and herself a recognized public figure, was homeless when she passed away from a car accident in 2018.[[64]](#endnote-64) When Pyone Cho was in prison between 2007 and 2012, his wife, Wah, had to ask to borrow money from a friend for an envelope and stamps. The friend refused her in a manner that was degrading—an incident she recalled to me in tears.

Rather than recognize the *naingkyin’s* precarity and daily struggles, there is persistent discourse both in the media coverage of Burma and in academic circles that large segments of the *naingkyin* community, especially those who comprise the NLD and the 88 Generation, are “elites.”[[65]](#endnote-65) For example, one anonymous reviewer commented on a draft of a piece I wrote in *Anthropology Today* where I suggested the need to interrogate representations of the NLD as being elite: “Can you explain to readers familiar with the NLD why the group should not be defined as composed of elites? They were founded by disgruntled generals and have purged many of their youth over the years when these youth challenged their authority. During the 2015 elections Aung San Suu Kyi had to tell supporters to ‘vote for the flag’ when they complained that local NLD reps were displaced by those chosen by the center.” The information that people such as Mee Mee and Pyone Cho faced an ever-present precarity was not purged by the NLD; instead, these stories were silenced by media and academic reports, which continue to represent them as special and privileged actors.

Sherry Ortner has written about the tendency of ethnographies to overlook the psychological and social complexities of individuals and communities that engage in resistance.[[66]](#endnote-66) She observes that ethnographers who study communities of resistance engage in forms of “refusal” by neglecting forms of ambivalence that might exist within the communities. Subaltern groups and social movement communities are themselves divided by ideology, generational differences, gender, social status, rank, goals, and personality. These differing subject positions and those who occupy them have their own politics, including palpable “tensions,” “frictions,” and “struggles for primacy.”[[67]](#endnote-67)

The reality that some dissidents occupy positions of leadership and high status within their communities while others have less power and leverage, and perhaps different experiences in resisting as well as different perspectives on the project of resistance, overturns ideas that the entire group or community is “elite.” The notion of an elite community of state-torture survivors and former political prisoners presents its own ironies and contradictions, yet this has become fairly standard discourse in Burma Studies when talking about the NLD, 88 Generation, and other *naingkyin* groups. The *naingkyin’s* histories and subjectivities have become disconnected from studies of the subaltern. Thus, the monstrous violence that unfolded in the interrogation camps and prison, the *naingkyin’s* grinding poverty outside of the prisons, the assaults on their lives, the confiscation of their property, and their conscious exercise of agency to resist these many forms of dominance and subjectivation have often been analyzed as the political maneuverings of cosmopolitans, rather than of subalterns or victims.[[68]](#endnote-68)

The tendency to discount the historical violence inflicted against *naingkyin* is connected to the political nature of vulnerability and invulnerability. Within the human rights frame, designating certain populations as vulnerable, can have the unintended effect of devaluing their own modes of resistance and refusal.[[69]](#endnote-69) In the case of the *naingkyin*, the exercise of their own agency foreclosed the acknowledgement by those in the human rights community that they, like any other victims of violence and persecution, remain deeply vulnerable.

The bodies of *naingkyin*, including and most especially NLD and 88 Generation members, are not portrayed as worthy of grief in the same manner as other persecuted groups inside Burma. Prasse-Freeman and Ko Khabar deny, for example, that the NLD is a special target of violence in the 2021 coup, stating that to assert so was a logical fallacy: “[Seinenu] Thein-Lemelson implicitly uses a syllogism: the military is killing people during the coup; the military has always killed NLD; therefore, the people now being killed are NLD.”[[70]](#endnote-70) They made this shocking assertion in the aftermath of several public cases in which NLD members had been tortured to death during interrogation or massacred;[[71]](#endnote-71) this includes a six-year-old girl whose family was involved with the local NLD chapter and who was shot inside her home.[[72]](#endnote-72) A photograph of the child wearing a red NLD t-shirt circulated on the internet as the junta raided NLD offices across Burma and prepared to bar the party from participating in future elections.[[73]](#endnote-73) Many more NLD officials were imprisoned, killed, or brutally murdered while being interrogated in the months that followed.[[74]](#endnote-74) Apparently, this six-year-old girl and other NLD members were not bodies that mattered. This is perhaps why a community that has long been vulnerable on a basic, corporeal level as well as dispossessed in other fundamental ways (including being dispossessed of property,[[75]](#endnote-75) educational attainment, and, in the case of those *naingkyin* who fled into India and Thailand, citizenship and state status) has often been cast as elite.

As Ortner pointed out, it is imperative that anthropologists write holistic ethnographies of dissident communities, including the prevalence and complexity of their own conflicts with one another. Yet researchers should be wary of focusing too much on that which is “fluid” and “fragmented”[[76]](#endnote-76) in the democracy movement if it means that it negates the existence of the community or serves to deny the reality of the violence committed against them as a group. As scholars, it is critical that we do not unintentionally reproduce the unequal relations of brute power that existed between the military–USDP and the *naingkyin* community, including the very prevalent narrative that democracy activists were never vulnerable or victimized and, for a variety of reasons, deserve the violence and hate directed at them. We must also be mindful not to reproduce, even if unintentionally, the many silences that already surround the *naingkyin* and their history.

# A Turn toward Personal Experience

Now that I have traced some of the silences in the existing literature on the democracy movement, I will discuss how this book attempts to fill them. The approach I use in this ethnography is a theoretical and methodological orientation that focuses on the relationship between culture and human experience, particularly the often-overlooked domains of personal, private experience. This focus on personal experience is well-trodden ground within psychoanalysis and philosophy, as well as psychological and medical anthropology.

Irving Hallowell was one of the first anthropologists to write extensively on the culturally constituted nature of experience, including emotions, mood states, temporality, and even spatial orientation, with a particularly keen eye toward how perceptual and motivational processes interact with these varied domains. In *Culture and Experience*,[[77]](#endnote-77) Hallowell explores, among other topics, the nature of the self, including what he terms “ego involvement” or the “identification of the self with things, individuals, groups of individuals,” as well as more abstract concepts such as “selfishness, self-love, and self-interest.” In his classic paper, *The Ojibwa Self and Its Behavioral Environment*,[[78]](#endnote-78) Hallowell analyzes how the Ojibwa conceptualized the notion of a soul and cohesive self as it relates to a physical body.

Hallowell’s work was furthered by his student, the psychological anthropologist Melford Spiro. Spiro was a giant in the field of psychological anthropology and looms particularly large in my own work, not only because of his extensive theorization on the relationship between culture and human experience, but because he wrote about the interplay between these two domains as it pertained to the inhabitants of a village in Upper Burma, where he carried out psychocultural research in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This fieldwork was cut short by the military coup in 1962, and Spiro had to leave abruptly, but he produced three definitive volumes, including *Buddhism and Society*,[[79]](#endnote-79) *Kinship and Marriage in Burma*,[[80]](#endnote-80) and *Burmese Supernaturalism*,[[81]](#endnote-81) which continue to be seminal works within psychological and medical anthropology, Buddhist Studies, and Burma Studies.

Much of this book is done in conversation with Spiro’s ideas, as well as those of his students, including Gananath Obeyesekere, Douglas Hollan, and Jason Throop. This lineage of intellectual thought, descended from Hallowell and extending to Throop, constitutes the very fertile ground upon which I attempt to sow my own work. And while each one of these scholars has theorized on a range of subject matter, for the purposes of this book, I am only able to discuss those aspects of their research and ideas that help to frame and guide our understanding of the Burmese democracy movement and its community of *naingkyin.*

Spiro was deeply interested in how personal experience provides psychological confirmation for the truth of religious doctrines. With regard to Buddhism, he observed how Burmese villagers in his fieldwork site of Yegyi reinterpreted or otherwise modified religious teachings that frustrated their psychological needs, while embracing those that satiated them.[[82]](#endnote-82) Spiro drew much from Freud and was working very much within a psychoanalytic framework that emphasized fulfillment versus frustration of basic drives. He argued that some of the main tenets of Theravada Buddhism were exasperating to Burmese villagers in Yegyi.[[83]](#endnote-83) The villagers’ frustration stemmed from the abstract nature of Buddhist doctrine and the difficulty they had in comprehending it. More relevant to the topic of this ethnography, however, is that the lay villagers also found Buddhist dictates to be vexing because the ideals they espoused went against some of their most basic psychological inclinations, including those to protect, enhance, and aggrandize the self.[[84]](#endnote-84)

Spiro described extensively how the doctrine of *anatta* (no-self, no-soul) in Buddhism set up a particularly vexing dilemma for the lay Burmese practitioner of Buddhism because it denies the existence of a self and soul. He observed that this metaphysical position in Buddhism—that there is no permanent, abiding, or “real” self and no incorporeal essence in the form of an eternal soul—was tremendously challenging for the average villager to wrap their minds around. Spiro noted that when he asked the residents of Yegyi about the premise of *anatta*, they often confused it with the other Buddhist principles, such as the doctrine of impermanence. The doctrine of *anatta* also proved frustrating for villagers because it set up an ethical goal by which “good Buddhists” must strive toward extinction of the self. The downregulation of one’s ego, even in its quotidian form, was not easy for the average villager, and Spiro observed that the villagers with whom he conducted fieldwork did not, in fact, strive for extinction of the self but for the perpetuation of their ego.[[85]](#endnote-85)

I extend Spiro’s ideas about the motivated nature of religious belief into the domain of moral and political life, arguing that judgments, sensibilities, and “beliefs” pertaining to these two domains are also deeply motivated. I argue, however, that for the *naingkyin* and their supporters, the motivation to actualize the virtue of selflessness is as pressing as any other psychological need, including the need to have the ego persist. Indeed, it is the tension between these two psychological motives (realizing the ideal of humility and selflessness versus satiating one’s desire for self-aggrandizement and ego fulfillment) that is a common and shared experience of the *naingkyin* whom I interviewed. Ridding the self of conceit, vanity, and greed, especially when those passions went against what was beneficial to the community, movement, and nation-state as a whole, was the primary psychological conflict for many *naingkyin*.

I also move Spiro’s discussion of the conflict between religious ideals of selflessness and people’s motives to engage in ego enhancement and self-protection forward by focusing on an indigenous moral concept: *anitnah*. *Anitnah* bears a resemblance to the English term “sacrifice” and references the willingness on the part of *naingkyin* to engage in selfless acts that render them vulnerable to bodily and psychic suffering in order to further the cause of the movement and nation-state.

I provide a more complete definition and account of *anitnah* in subsequent chapters, so I will not linger too long on it here, except to point out that *anitnah* is a salient moral concept not only for Pyone Cho and the many other actors in the democracy movement but also for their supporters and the broader Burmese-speaking society. Despite the pervasiveness of *anitnah* in everyday discourse, there are no explicit references to the term in ethnographies or histories of Burma. In *Buddhism and Society*, Spiro described the “importance of sacrifice as a dominant theme in Burmese (Buddhist) culture,”[[86]](#endnote-86) but he does not identify any lay or popular terms that reference it, such as *anitnah*. Indeed, although Spiro acknowledges how much the Burmese value the theme of sacrifice, he does not provide the same types of deep psychological analyses that he does in relation to other Burmese Buddhist concepts such as *dukkha* (suffering), nirvana, *dana* (giving or generosity), and “the ideal of the *arahant*”[[87]](#endnote-87) to which he devotes entire chapters.

Per Buddhist ideology and mythology, in its most extreme forms, *anitnah* involved loss of life or limbs. This ideal of selflessness as rarefied in voluntary self-abnegation became an unimaginable goal for the common person, and only those who could claim to be true virtuosos of the religion would be able to undertake such extraordinary acts. Moreover, even the truly rare *naingkyin*, such as Pyone Cho, who become virtuosos in self-sacrifice must continually work through forms of psychic conflict, finding mental and emotional pathways to downregulate ego involvement and train their minds and bodies to surrender what can be argued to be an intuitive inclination for self-preservation and ego fulfillment.[[88]](#endnote-88)

Obeyesekere was one of Spiro’s students and was deeply interested in how personal experience was relevant to the creation and manipulation of collective cultural symbols. He described the transmutability and mutual constitution between private and public symbols, often collapsing this dichotomy. Based on his fieldwork in Sri Lanka, he observed that Buddhist ascetics often transformed cultural symbols into personal ones that carried private meaning. His theoretical arguments shaped my ideas about how the *naingkyin* transformed deep motivations connected to political action, familial connection, maternal love, and sacrificial action, as well as deeply personal, private memories of violence into collective symbols, beliefs, and repertoires of thought and behavior that provide them with existential meaning. These instances of meaning-making, sublimated and rarefied in elaborate rituals but also instantiated in everyday, concrete acts both in and out of the prisons, provided the *naingkyin* and their supporters with “avenue(s) for self-reflection, communication with others, and in exceptional cases, for radical transformation of (their) being.”[[89]](#endnote-89)

To the extent that the type of sublimation that I describe can be considered virtuous, I also explore in this book the nature of moral experience. In attempting to understand moral experience, I was influenced by the work of Throop,[[90]](#endnote-90) who in his ethnography of the Yapese[[91]](#endnote-91) wrote about sentiments regarding the moral dimensions of bodily pain. The community articulated physical pain as moral only when it occurred as part of labor performed to cultivate ancestral land handed down through a patrilineal system. Throop described how the Yapese utilized a “metric of suffering” to gauge how much pain each person had endured.[[92]](#endnote-92) I argue that the *naingkyin* use a very similar metric of sacrifice to calculate social prestige and moral worthiness.

Throop’s observation of moral forms of suffering as being related to “work” and belongingness to the “land” in the Yapese moral universe also opened new horizons of theoretical meaning in how I understood the *naingkyin’s* attachment to the country and nation-state, as well as their commitment to what Pyone Cho often explicitly referenced as his own “work.” The concept of work related to the Burmese–Pali term *widiya*,[[93]](#endnote-93) which promoted a sense of steadfastness and encouraged a state very similar to what Western scientists and interlocutors would recognized as “flow.”[[94]](#endnote-94) The commitment that many *naingkyin* demonstrated to the nation-state can be analyzed as being similar to the articulation of moral experience by the Yapese as being tied to bodily suffering on behalf of the land.

Hollan, who was a student of both Spiro and Obeyesekere, utilized the metaphor of “work” to make sense of how villagers in Toraja sought to transform their suffering into culturally accepted meanings and symbols. Hollan highlighted how the concept of “work” leaves open the possibility that individuals could either succeed or fail in deriving meaning from their suffering and that “even apparently successful transformations of suffering may bring only temporary relief.”[[95]](#endnote-95) Hollan’s theoretical framing influenced how I viewed the *naingkyin’s* engagement with their own suffering, as well as the ideals of selflessness toward which they strived. I realized that the *naingkyin*’s complex ritual life, as well as their activism, creativity, patterns of relationality, and affect, could be viewed as an iterative process of “work.”[[96]](#endnote-96) Moreover, *naingkyin* often failed to realize their own ideals of sacrifice, which led to interpersonal anxiety, conflict, and ambivalence.

While I draw much upon the ethnographies and theorizing of Hallowell, Spiro, and their intellectual descendants, I also draw from a host of other scholars within anthropology and the social sciences. Understanding the complex interplay between culture and personal experience as it relates to intense and often unimaginable forms of human suffering as brought on by everyday violence, illness, war, mass migration, structural poverty, state repression, and large-scale human atrocities have been taken up by scholars such as Byron Good,[[97]](#endnote-97) Mary-Jo Good,[[98]](#endnote-98) Veena Das,[[99]](#endnote-99) João Biehl,[[100]](#endnote-100) Michael Jackson,[[101]](#endnote-101) Alex Hinton,[[102]](#endnote-102) and Arthur Kleinman,[[103]](#endnote-103) to name just a few. Their scholarship, theories, and ethical orientations inspired and informed my work on the *naingkyin*. Kleinman, for example, emphasized the need for researchers to understand what is truly at stake for the individuals and communities with whom they work, and I adopted this same ethical stance, always circling back to what mattered most to Pyone Cho and the other *naingkyin*.

Byron Good’s writings on the scope of subjectivity were deeply influential for me, most especially his observation that anthropologists need to also consider “that which is *not* said overtly.” He encouraged ethnographers to pay attention to that which is “hidden,” “secret,” “*ir*-rational and incomprehensible.”[[104]](#endnote-104) This turn toward the margins, silences, and gaps shaped both how I approached the written history of and discourses on the democracy movement as well as the very endeavor of fieldwork itself. Indeed, I would not have discovered much of what I describe in the following pages if I had not searched out that which was both intentionally and unconsciously kept hidden.

Taking into account the unspoken aspects of personal experience also involves embracing embodied ways of attending, knowing, remembering, learning, and being-in-the-world. This work has been taken up by anthropologists such as Tom Csordas,[[105]](#endnote-105) Robert Desjarlais,[[106]](#endnote-106) Kathyrn Geurts,[[107]](#endnote-107) Throop,[[108]](#endnote-108) and many others. As an ethnographer, attending to what was happening to the *naingkyin’s* bodies involved much empathic imagining as I attempted to make sense of what occurred inside the interrogation centers and prisons. This journey through the interrogation centers, as well as the slashing, cutting, and violations that the *naingkyin* described, bore a ritual similarity to one another.

Recognizing the commonalities across prison narratives led me to the literature on “rites of passages.” I began to recognize that the *naingkyin’s* encounters with torture and dehumanization can be likened, in many ways, to rites of terror that young initiates undergo in many cultures, particularly within bands of warriors, armed revolutionaries, and other groups that require their core members to endure extreme bodily pain and sacrifice. This is also well-trodden ground within anthropology, and this literature on rites, which includes among many others the works of Arnold van Gennep,[[109]](#endnote-109) Victor Turner,[[110]](#endnote-110) Gilbert Herdt,[[111]](#endnote-111) Scott Atran,[[112]](#endnote-112) William Swann,[[113]](#endnote-113) and Harvey Whitehouse,[[114]](#endnote-114) also shaped my thinking about the lifeworld of the political prisoners and the phenomenology of the prisons.

This book is an account of the *naingkyin’s* sacrifices, which are most significantly, although not entirely, bodily in nature. This book is in equal parts about the *naingkyin’s* transformative journey through the violence of the prisons and the moral and social meanings that they and their supporters derive from their experiences of bodily sacrifice.

For me, as a researcher, ethnographer, social scientist, and psychological anthropologist, there are so many awe-inspiring aspects of the history and culture of the democracy movement that deserved closer examination. Yet the vast majority of articles, blogs, commentaries, and editorials that I read in both traditional and social media about the democracy movement and members of the *naingkyin* community, published between 2013 and 2020 in the English-speaking world, were dismissive if not outright contemptuous. The community of *naingkyin* had developed a moral economy, a system of labor and material exchange not based on neoliberal economic principles but on something profoundly different. It was a system of mutual moral obligations centered around concepts of *anitnah* (sacrifice). Leaders and supporters of the democracy movement, possessing next to no monetary reserves or financial resources, had sustained this system—not only kept it in existence but organized effectively with it—for close to thirty years. Individuals such as Pyone Cho had gone through extreme forms of violence, dehumanization, and deprivation for his entire adult life and yet remained remarkably resilient. Rather than learning from this community and individuals like Pyone Cho, I feared the unceasing disparagement coming from multiple directions with its uncomfortable similarity to and continuity with the propaganda pushed forth by Burma’s military junta, was driving both the leaders of the democracy movement and their constituencies toward a perpetual—and possibly permanent—silence.[[115]](#endnote-115)

If you do not have the deep connections to this community, as I do; if you do not see the value in the lives they have led, as I do; if as an anthropologist, ethnographer, or social scientist, you do not feel an infinite fascination about the elaborate moral and cultural system that they both spun and lived out, as I do; if as a fellow human being you do not empathize with their suffering, as I do—then you will still want to know about the community of *naingkyin* because they hold the key to Burma’s future. If you care about the 2021 military coup and whether the National Unity Government (NUG) will ultimately prevail against the *Tatmadaw*, then you will care about this community. If you care about the Rohingya crisis—the 900,000 refugees that remain on the border of Burma and Bangladesh—then you will care about this community. If you care about the results of Burma’s next election, then you will care about this community. They are certainly not the only key to understanding these issues—but they are a fundamental variable that has too often been underestimated or too casually written off in the existing academic literature. Their practical rationality, agency, and ability to organize, transform, and bend the arch of history toward their own vision and values have been too easily dismissed.

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1. Pyone Cho spent twenty years as a political prisoner in Burma. Along with other former political prisoners, he founded the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society (Win, “Democracy Activists Arrested in Myanmar; Moe, “The Last Night in the Cell”). Pyone Cho was elected into the *Pyithu Hluttaw* (Lower House of Parliament) in 2015 as a member of the National League for Democracy (NLD). From 2015-2020, Pyone Cho was a Member of Parliament (MP) representing Dawbon constituency, one of the townships in the greater Yangon area. In November 2020, he was elected into the Yangon Regional Parliament, with public anticipation that he might be the next Chief Minister of Yangon. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Thet Win Aung was a lifelong democracy activist, who was arrested by the Burmese military government in 1998 and sentenced to 59 years in prison for organizing peaceful, small-scale protests for educational reform. Thet Win Aung sustained life-threatening injuries after being tortured during interrogation and never received proper medical treatment. His mental and physical health deteriorated further while imprisoned as he continued to be subject to inhumane treatment and torture. Thet Win Aung died in 2006 in Mandalay Prison at the age of 34 (Amnesty International, “Myanmar”). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The formal word in Burmese for “political prisoner” is *nainganyeiakyintha* for male prisoners and *nainganyeiakyinthu* for females, but most simply use the shortened term, *naingkyin*, to describe themselves and others. The term *naingkyin* is a local, indigenous concept resonant to the political prisoners with whom I worked inside of Burma. Throughout this book, I use this word in lieu of transnational terms, such as “activist,” “political prisoner,” “political detainee,” or “prisoner of conscience,” because it encapsulates a set of meanings, histories, forms of resistance, instances of refusal, reassertions of dignity, as well as repertoires of sentiment, emotion, and relationality that are not captured by these other terms. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF), *Pleading Not Guilty in Insein*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The topic of silence, including what is “unspeakable and unspoken,” has been written about extensively in the scholarly literature, including by Byron Good, Michael Jackson, Robert Weller, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. The title of this chapter is taken from and inspired by Ana Dragojilovic and Annamarie Samuels’s forward to a special edition of *History and Anthropology*. Dragojlovic and Samuels, “Tracing Silences”; Good, “Theorizing the ‘Subject,’” 515–35; Good, “Afterword”; Jackson, “The Prose of Suffering”; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*; Weller, “Salvaging Silence.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Good, “Theorizing the ‘Subject,’” 515–35. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Dragojlovic and Samuels, “Tracing Silences,” 1–9. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Silence, itself, has been used by democracy activists and former political prisoners inside of Burma to engage in forms of both resistance and refusal. On December 10 2021, the political prisoner and activist community in Burma circulated: “#silentstrike” on social media. Shopkeepers refused to open up their stalls at the markets; taxi, bus, and trishaw drivers did not go out; and all other civilians stayed home, and the streets of major cities in Burma, such as Yangon and Mandalay, were completely empty. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Bertil Lintner’s book was published more than thirty years ago, in 1989, directly after the first cycle of protests and state-sponsored violence, and encompasses only the first year of the movement, mostly what is referenced widely as the 1988 “Uprising.” Delphine Schrank’s book, written for a popular audience, was published in 2015. Lintner, *Outrage*; Schrank, *The Rebel of Rangoon*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Lintner, *Outrage*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Schock, “People Power and Political Opportunities,” 355–75. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Chenowath and Stephan, “Why Civil Resistance Sometimes Fails.” [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lintner, *Outrage.* [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footstep*; Charney, *A History of Modern Burma.* [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Taylor, “Stagnation and Stalemate.” [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Van Tran, “Resilience of Contentious Movements under Repression,” 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Zollner, *The Beast and the Beauty*. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Popular books written about Aung San Suu Kyi include Pederson’s *The Burma Spring*; Popham’s *The Lady and the Peacock*; and Wintle’s *Perfect Hostage*. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Schrank, *The Rebel of Rangoon.* [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Giry and Moe, “Myanmar Peace Talks Begin”; Lone, “Myanmar Repeals Emergency Law”; Paing, “Lower House Abolishes Overnight Guest Registration.” [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*; Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*; Selth, *Burma’s Armed Forces*; Callahan, *Making Enemies*; Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*; Pedersen, *Promoting Human Rights in Burma*; Nakanishi, *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution*; Egreteau and Jagan, *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma*; Selth, *Secrets and Power in Myanmar.* [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Skidmore, *Karaoke Fascism.* [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Htwe, “Tributes Flow for a Man Who Put His Country First.” [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Mael Raynaud in his tribute to Nay Win Maung names some of the young people from the military-founded think tank Myanmar Egress who were able to enroll at undergraduate and graduate institutions in the West, as well as attain consequential positions at Western NGOs. Raynaud, “Remembering Nay Win Maung.” [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. All Burma Students’ Democratic Front. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Being prohibited from entering university or otherwise making progress on their education was a common struggle that children of political prisoners described during the interviews I conducted with them, as well as in the public events where I invited them to speak. Wai Hnin Pwint Thone, the daughter of 88 Generation leader Mya Aye, described during a public presentation at UCLA on March 12, 2021, how she had aspired to be a teacher but was denied that opportunity because her father was a political prisoner. In the same panel, Phyu Pannu Khin, also the daughter of a political prisoner, described how she was pressured to join the youth association of the Union Development and Solidarity Association (USDA). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps.* [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 328. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 320. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps,* 320. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps,* 320. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps,* 334. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps,* 334. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Trouillot (*Silencing the Past*, 96) described two formulas of narrative and historical erasure. The “formula of banalization,” which is typically employed by specialists in a field, involves the “empty[ing of] a number of singular events of their revolutionary content so that the entire string of facts, gnawed from all sides becomes trivialized.” [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Clapp, “Myanmar: Anatomy of a Political Transition,” 1–2. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Zoltan Barany (“Armed Forces and Democratization in Myanmar”) similarly describes the 2015 election as “the culmination of a deliberate—if extremely cautious and non-linear—liberalization process, the [military] regime started over a decade earlier.” He writes that this liberalization process was started with former Prime Minister and General Khin Nyunt’s “Roadmap to Democracy” and carried forth by General Than Shwe. The “opposition” is described as “deeply divided” and not relevant to the process of democratization prior to the NLD’s electoral win in 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Clapp, “Myanmar,” 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Clapp, “Myanmar,” 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Trouillot (*Silencing the Past*, 114) wrote in relation to the designation of the year 1492 as the “discovery” of America: “the isolation of a single moment thus creates a historical ‘fact.’” Ant Bwe Kyaw, Phone Cho, and other *naingkyin* emphasized to me during the interviews I conducted with them that protests against the military government had been occurring for several months prior to August 1988. The date of August 8 was significant only because it was the first day “when then entire country joined.” These nationwide demonstrations continued after August 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. The naming of historical events and adoption of certain terminologies over others can set up a field of power. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. The designation of the cycles of protest and contestations that took place between 1987 and 1988 as an “uprising” qualifies as a “formula” that “erase[d] directly the fact of a revolution.” Trouillot (*Silencing the Past*, 96) wrote that this more simplistic formula of erasure is typically employed by “generalists and populizers.” [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King.* [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Steinberg, “The Magic in Myanmar’s Numbers.” [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook,* 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook.* [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Wikan, “Toward an Experience-Near Anthropology.” [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Walton, “Politics in the Moral Universe.” [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Wells, *Narrating Democracy*. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Chua, “The Vernacular Mobilization,” 302. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries.” [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries,” 390. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries,” 377. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Said, *Covering Islam*, Ii. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Said, *Orientalism;* Trouillot, *Global Transformations.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Paddock, “From Hero to Pariah,” [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Uddin, *The Rohingya*. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Wells, *Narrating Democracy*. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Biehl, Good, and Kleiman, *Subjectivity*, 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Win, “Aung San Suu Kyi.” [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. #  Mahtani, Shibani and Myo Myo, “Myanmar’s Political Elite Gathers”; Fisher, “How a Deadly Power Game Undid Myanmar’s Democratic Hopes.”

 [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Thein-Lemelson, “‘Politicide’ and the Myanmar Coup.” [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. *The Irrawaddy*, “’88 Generation Student Ma Mee Mee Dies.” [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. #  Mahtani, Shibani, and Myo Myo, “Myanmar’s Political Elite Gathers”; Prasse-Freeman, “Grassroots Protest Movements.”

 [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal.” [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Prasse-Freeman and Khabar, “Revolutionary Responses.” [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, *Vulnerability in Resistance*. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Prasse-Freeman and Khabar, “Revolutionary Responses.” [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Head, “Myanmar: The Mysterious Deaths of NLD Party Officials.” [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. *BBC News*, “Myanmar Coup: Six-Year-Old Shot.” [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. *The Irrawaddy*, “Myanmar’s NLD Marks 33rd Anniversary”; J., “NLD Party Office Subject to Dozens of Attacks.” [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Aye, “Relatives Fear for Safety”; Cho, “Local NLD Official Shot Dead”; *The Irrawaddy*, “Another NLD Member Killed”; *The Irrawaddy*, “Myanmar Junta Jails Magwe Chief Minister”; *The Irrawaddy*, “Jailed Karen Chief Minister.” [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. *The Irrawaddy*, “Myanmar Junta Continues to Seize Homes.” [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Prasse-Freeman and Khabar, “Revolutionary Responses.” [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Hallowell, *Culture and Experience.* [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Hallowell, “The Ojibwa Self and Its Behavioral Environment.” [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society.* [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Spiro, *Kinship and Marriage in Burma.* [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism.* [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society.* [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society.* [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society.* [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society.* [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. The *arahant* is a being who has reached the fourth and final stage of Buddhist Enlightenment and will “immediately attain nirvana.” The *arahant* differs from a Buddha in three important ways. First, whereas Buddhas attain their own Enlightenment, the *arahant* follows the Path taught by a Buddha. Second, whereas a Buddha attains Enlightenment, omniscience, omnipotence, and universal knowledge, an *arahant* only attains Enlightenment. Third, whereas Perfect Buddhas delay their own Deliverance in order to help others achieve the same, *arahants* do not concern themselves with the Deliverance of others. This lack of interest in helping others achieve Deliverance is also the difference between an *arahant* and a Bodhisattva. As I discuss later, the Bodhisattva is typically seen as a figure in Mahayana Buddhism, but has been shown by Spiro to be very much present in Burmese Theravada Buddhism. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 60-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. In subsequent chapters, I discuss the same types of tensions that exist around other Buddhist doctrines, such as that of impermanence, renunciation, and suffering as it pertains to sacrificial action. In the second half of the book, when I discuss the subjectivity and motivations of the *naingkyin’s* supporters, I describe the Buddhist doctrine of atheism and the ways these supporters attempt to compensate for this doctrinal prohibition by forming deeply private, personal relationships with figures such as Aung San Suu Kyi, Pyone Cho, and others who are *azarnis* (martyrs) or *thuyegaungs* (heroes) in the movement. I point out, however, that this book is not an exegesis on Buddhism, but an ethnography on the *naingkyin* and a historiography on the democracy movement. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Throop, *Suffering and Sentiment*. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. Yap is located in the Federated States of Micronesia. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Throop, *Suffering and Sentiment.* [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. I am using a conventional transliteration of the Burmese word, based on how it is commonly pronounced by lay speakers. In spoken, colloquial Burmese, the /v/ sound is typically pronounced as a /w/ and the /r/ sound is typically pronounced as a /d/. The transliteration in Pali of the same word is *viriya*. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre, “Optimal Experience in Work and Leisure.” [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Hollan, “Suffering and the Work of Culture.” [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Hollan, “Pockets Full of Mistakes.” [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. Good, “Theorizing the ‘Subject.’” [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. Good, “12 Acehnese Women’s Narratives”; Good and Good “Ritual, the State.” [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. Das, *Life and Words*. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. Biehl, Good, and Kleinman, *Subjectivity.* [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. Jackson, “Whose Human Rights?” [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?* [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. Kleinman and Kleinman, “The Appeal of Experience”; Kleinman and Kleinman, “Suffering and Its Professional Transformation.” [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. Good, “Theorizing the ‘Subject,’” 519. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. Csordas, *Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology.* [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. Desjarlais, *Sensory Biographies*; Desjarlais, *Body and Emotion*. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Geurts, *Culture and the Senses.* [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. Throop, *Suffering and Sentiment.* [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage.* [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
110. Turner, *The Ritual Process*. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
111. Herdt, *Guardians of the Flutes*. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
112. Atran, “The Devoted Actor”; Atran and Gómez, “What Motivates Devoted Actors.” [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. Swann and Buhrmester, “Identity Fusion”; Swann, Gómez, Huici, Morales, and Hixon, “Identity Fusion and Self-Sacrifice”; Swann, Jetten, Gómez , and Whitehouse, “When Group Membership Gets Personal.” [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. Whitehouse, “Dying for the Group”; Whitehouse and Lanman, “The Ties That Bind”; Whitehouse, McQuinn, Buhrmester, and Swann, “Brothers in Arms.” [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
115. This was a fear I had throughout the period of my fieldwork, which lasted from 2013 to 2020. These fears came true when the military staged a coup in February 2021, silencing thousands from the *naingkyin* community through imprisonment, violence, torture, and murder. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)