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Shifting perspectives under political stress: Interviewing Burmese students stranded in Japan

Studying refugees

In my third year at university, I was doing a student-led research project about refugee issues of Japan in an anthropology class, working on the stories of a Nigerian who fled his home country to escape persecution, seeking refuge in Japan. The research experience taught me about the global and domestic treatment of refugees in crisis, as well as about the questionable nature of how Japan handles issues pertaining to forced migration; it also developed my interest in anthropology and oral narratives as a research approach. One year later, after there was a military coup back in my home country Myanmar, my positionality switched very quickly. In an effort to document the persecution of my own people, I began to work on the stories of five native Burmese students who were studying at Japanese universities, focusing on their experiences with the coup and its impacts on their lives in Myanmar and in Japan. The shifting of my positionality in these two projects has not only expanded my knowledge as a researcher by placing me in the position of a "native anthropologist" (something I had never heard of until that time), but made me reflect upon my previous experience with the Nigerian informant. I found myself transformed from an ardent student researcher to a fully engaged native anthropologist, researching in equal parts for political activism and academic scholarship.

As someone who grew up in a poor country ruled for decades by military regimes, my young and naive self imagined Japan as a developed and wealthy country, advanced not only in economy and technology, but in how it handles issues of social justice as well. I imagined every Japanese person to be aware of racial inequality, political instability around the globe, and the importance of self-rule and democracy, amongst others. As I continued my learning journey in Japan and in Japanese Studies, I eventually understood that after all Japan is as fraught as other countries. After taking the Digital Oral Narratives class taught by David Slater in my third year, I realised the importance of educating myself about forced migration and refugee issues in Japan.

Working on Gabriel's stories has enlightened me about how far behind Japan is in protecting human rights compared to other developed countries. Gabriel is a Nigerian who came to Japan on a tourist visa in the early 1990s. One day, a terrorist group, Boko Haram, made accusations against his book on Christianity for offending their religious views, and a *fatwā* was issued against him, a threat of death if he ever returned home. Gabriel applied for refugee recognition in Japan, but he was rejected. Watching the video clips of Gabriel's past interviews and learning about his struggles applying for refugee status over the past three decades only to be rejected every single time, I was dumbstruck and frustrated. Even now, he is living in fear of being detained and deported by the Japanese government, whose transparency about decision-making has always been questionable (Japan Association of Refugees n.d.). Later on when I interviewed him myself and got to know him better, I found myself questioning why Japan fails to protect vulnerable people like Gabriel. In addition to the endless bureaucracy, refugee applicants in Japan have no rights to health-care insurance. They may or may not be given a work-permit, depending on how lucky they are. There are refugee-support organisations, but as long as the government does not give a proper status to Gabriel and does not help him survive the statelessness and social stigmas in Japan, Gabriel's future is hopeless. This is a Japanese Studies that is different from what I once imagined when I began my study in college, but maybe a more urgent study.

Becoming displaced (myself)

A semester after working together with my group to tell Gabriel's stories[1], my understanding of Japan's refugee issues became much more personal. In February 2021, there was a military coup in Myanmar, my home country, moving my own feelings from sympathy (for someone I felt bad for) to empathy (being able to identify myself in the same situation as another). The democratically elected government was overthrown by the military junta, which has a long history of exploiting the country's politics and economy exclusively for their own benefit while at the same time suppressing any form of democratic movement. The moment I heard the appalling news, I was speechless, confused and frustrated because all I could feel was that the cynical nature of Myanmar's political history and its destructive impacts on people's lives were about to repeat once again. Since 1962, successive military dictatorships have constantly violated the human rights of its own people. The majority Bamar ethnic group is favoured by the government, causing many ethnic minorities to suffer from large-scale marginalisation and the various armed conflicts initiated by the mil-

1 https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/narrators/gabriel/

itary (South / Lall 2016b, 3; Nicholson 2014, 1). Growing up in the conflict-free zone of the Mandalay region, I was blind to these atrocities. I was only awakened from my ignorance after years of unlearning the ideas that were instilled by the education system propagandised by the military government.

As a student living in Japan, although my study of Gabriel's situation brought the injustices that refugees like him face to light. At the same time, after what happened in Myanmar, I am also aware that I am most fortunate to be in a relatively safe and secure country, Japan. Although my plan was always to return to Myanmar after graduation, I am now caught in a dilemma of whether to return or stay. I discovered that the political crisis had disrupted the plans of other Burmese students as well. Many of us had dreams of returning to Myanmar in the near future to build upon an increasingly prosperous national economy and stable political system. Now, this dream seems impossible to realise. As the military's persecutions against anyone either at home or abroad who challenges the junta have only intensified over the past year, our dilemma continues. As a fellow student positioned in a similar situation, I decided to conduct research focusing on the stories of five university students from Myanmar who were studying in Japan while they (and I) helplessly watched the situation back home unfold into violent turmoil.

Various themes were explored in this research project. By asking the informants about their backgrounds, I was able to understand the motives behind their choice of Japan rather than other countries to study. I asked them about their political and educational experiences in Myanmar and in Japan to understand how their views and feelings had changed as they went from enjoying the privileges of overseas study to facing the prospect of never being able to return home. Most importantly, I tried to identify any impacts—both physical and emotional—the recent coup had had on them and examine how their hopes and future goals had been disrupted due to the impact of the coup. I myself was a digital activist and got quite involved in the creation and dissemination of information about the coup among other Burmese at home and in Japan. While I still see this work as important, I also came to believe that one way to address the dire situation in Myanmar is to use my scholarly training to document and amplify the voices of the Burmese community in Japan and to spread awareness about my home country to the world.

Context behind the dilemmas

To better comprehend the political context my informants were in, I kept myself updated through previously published scholarly works as well as reports by the mass media. I found that the personal stories of my narrators

were very intertwined with the geopolitics and, like myself, my narrators were closely monitoring the events in the regions they come from, where they had family and friends. More than a year had passed since the coup when we began the research, and the ongoing conflict continues to cause displacements within and beyond the borders. In the regions where opposition groups had impressively resisted, the military used heavy weapons to target the entire area, setting civilians' homes on fire, killing innocent people, and thus causing many residents to flee to camps for internally displaced persons (Dominguez 2022). Meanwhile in big cities, the military regime uses state surveillance and various forms of violence to crackdown on the resistance movements. Many civilians have been imprisoned, tortured and killed. As of July 2022, 2,092 civilians had been killed and more than 10,000 had been detained (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners 2022). The number is still rising as the military launches more attacks on civilians to suppress their resistance and consolidate its power. Chances for the country to transition into a more inclusive, economically developed and globally competent nation have been replaced by more discrimination against the ethnic minority population, nationwide poverty and a series of future uncertainties for people both at home and abroad.

As a Burmese living in Japan and observing Japan's response since the first day of the coup, my narrators were all hoping that Japan would take rapid and impactful actions against the Myanmar military junta. However, the Japanese government refused to impose sanctions against the Myanmar military or to suspend the existing infrastructure projects operated under the agreement of the two governments (Dominguez 2021). Additionally, the Japanese government continues to accept Myanmar military personnel and provide them with training through a joint program established in 2015 (Kasai 2022). All these actions of Japan have raised both questions and suspicions. Some of my informants mentioned in the interviews that they were shocked about the position of Japan as a democratic nation that refused to more fully support the pro-democratic civilians on the ground. Others pointed out that this refusal was in part the result of wanting to protect large amounts of commercial investment and oversees development aid. For them, the government of the place that they once felt welcome and secure in has betrayed them, and changed the way they thought about their own place in Japan.

Eventually, Japan issued some Designated Activities visas for Burmese residents who felt that they could not return to Myanmar. Under the new visa which comes with a work permit, they are allowed to stay and work in Japan from six

months to one year. As of December 2021, there were 2,889 Myanmar nationals who applied for refugee status in Japan, and 1,730 of them were granted the Designated Activities visa (Immigration Services Agency of Japan 2022). The Designated Activities visa with a work permit seems to be a reasonable solution for the time being for students like my informants and myself. Nevertheless, as a democratic nation, presumably Japan could do better to support the civilians of Myanmar. As one of the informants described it, "The UN tried—they had emergency meetings and everything. And there were a lot of countries that condemned the coup, but they couldn't really do anything because it's internal affairs. Japan is also one of them. I feel like none of the countries tried their best".

As the crisis continued, my narrators' views of their own situation changed. The narrators kept their goal of someday returning to Myanmar to help it rebuild but they felt that they could not yet return to Myanmar. With the university-level education the informants have acquired in Japan, presumably, it is rather manageable for them to pursue good jobs without returning to Myanmar and without resorting to the refugee-status application. Internationally educated young people like the informants will always be of great help to build a better future for Myanmar. And yet, we discovered that the informants were strongly attached to Myanmar because it is the only place that they consider home, usually as linked to the idea that home is where family is. We also learnt that the informants often associated their definition of home with their hopes for Myanmar as a nation. As they verbalised their emotional attachments towards their family and the country, they revealed their hopes for the return of democracy, which is the only way that they see themselves with any future in Myanmar. As the situation in Myanmar shows no sign of improving, many of the students are losing the hope they had. This loss of hope also describes my own situation.

Walking through "native anthropology"

I never had any knowledge of native anthropology until I started preparing to conduct interviews on people from my own community. Native anthropologists, as defined by Narayan (1993, 671), are those who "are believed to write about their own cultures from a position of intimate affinity". As a native student anthropologist, I found it both convenient and challenging to interview my informants. Highly interested in political and social issues and having been personally affected by a severe political crisis, I was eager to learn not only about the general views and observations of my informants on Myanmar, but about the diversity of their personal experiences with the coup.

Logistically, I discovered that my experience aligns with the argument made by Forster (2012, 18) who stated that communicative competence serves as an essential tool in establishing trust and mutual understanding between the native anthropologist and the informant. My status as a native speaker of Burmese and a compatriot helped me establish trust, making the informants comfortable enough to share their stories with me, something that is a substantial concern when most of us suspected surveillance and feared retribution for any political engagement or even social-media critique. Another advantage of being a native anthropologist is that my knowledge on Myanmar's history, culture, language and politics enables me to generate analysis from an insider's perspective. Forster (2012, 18–19) stated that a native anthropologist's knowledge helps him or her to analyse the data more meaningfully. Compared to Gabriel's interviews, in the interviews that I did with the Burmese students, I was more emotionally involved too. This made it easier for me not only to connect and resonate with their experiences, but to fully grasp the messages that they were trying to convey.

One particular disadvantage of being a native anthropologist is that there were times when they forgot to mention a detail and I neglected to ask about it because I felt I knew what they wanted to say. Shared but assumed knowledge is important. Yet the most ideal way of telling the story in ethnographic interviewing and oral narrative research is through key quotations from the narrator. This never occurred to me as a problem during the interview, but during the writing process, especially when the neglected detail could play a crucial part in telling a compelling story, I realised the problem. There were times when this detail was lacking in my recording because I had assumed it. Another noteworthy drawback was lack of objectivity during the interviews. Without this objectivity, I tended to frame answers and make associations in ways that I had assumed were relevant. I did not always seek clarifications about their opinions involving the complex Myanmar situation, instead relying on my own knowledge as a fellow Burmese student. I later realised that even if my assumptions were probably correct, direct questions were necessary for such a piece of research in oral narratives. I found it interesting that one of the basic tenets of anthropology is that no one, including native anthropologists, can be objective in interpreting and evaluating social phenomena due to the mind-sets influenced by the society one is in (Jones 1970, 256). Reflecting upon my research experience, I discovered that either as a non-native or native anthropologist, it was impossible to remain objective the entire time. As a non-native anthropologist, I found it challenging not to make any

assumptions or judgements about Gabriel's motives behind the refugee-status application whereas as a native anthropologist, I found it difficult not to imagine myself as one of the Burmese informants.

As a way to address some of these disadvantages, I co-interviewed with another researcher in the project, one who was still in the process of familiarising herself with Myanmar's political context. After a period of trial and error, we decided that during each of the two-hour-long interviews, my co-researcher would focus on talking to the informants as the main interviewer while I took notes, paid attention to the flow of the interview, and asked follow-up questions. The method allowed both of us to have more freedom in asking questions for clarification; it also provided the informants with a better guide as to how much information they should provide. I noticed that they were as comfortable sharing their personal information with my co-researcher as they were with me. We initially decided to conduct the interviews in English since the informants had a high level of competency in English and since the eventual article would be published in English. The only downside of working with a non-Burmese co-researcher to conduct interviews in English was that some of the informants were not able to express themselves as fully in English as they could in Burmese, and naturally, misunderstanding occurred. To resolve the issue, some informants resorted to code-switching especially when they could not find an equivalent in English to explain complicated political and cultural matters.

Confidentiality and contributions

Due to the sensitive positionality of the Burmese narrators amid the ongoing crisis, the most challenging obstacle in this research project is to protect the privacy and identity of the informants. Their first reaction when I approached them was that they would agree to participate provided that there was absolute confidentiality. During the interviews, there were times when they revealed some sensitive personal information. Immediately afterwards, they explained that the purpose was to give the interviewers a context, stipulating that we not use the information for the article. During the writing process, even after using pseudonyms and leaving all the traceable information behind, I found myself anxious because any mistake I made could expose my informants' identity, which could eventually bring threats to their families, themselves or their future. As a researcher of this project and a Burmese student myself, I also could be targeted for creating, publicising and circulating contents that undermine the military's attempt to consolidate its power. By participating in the project, I am putting my future and my family in Myan-

mar at risk—I might be banned from entering the country in the future, and my family might become victims of arbitrary arrests and torture in prison. It is for this reason that I use a pseudonym.

Despite these risks, I feel that there is an urgent need to tell this story through systematic scholarly research. My current position as a student abroad and student researcher enables me to contribute through both political activism and scholarly research despite the potential dangers. Seeing that the situation in Myanmar is increasingly exacerbated by the military's atrocities, I would like to apply the expertise and skills that I have gained from being a student researcher at Sophia University. While my own research is very local, in fact, there are young people all over the world who are part of the Burmese diaspora facing similar situations. I have been accepted into a graduate programme outside of Japan, where I hope to expand my knowledge and acquire more advanced research skills, in hopes of pursuing a research-orientated career in an international organisation one day.

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