Connecting and Disconnecting

Exploring Prisoners' Relations with the Outside World in Myanmar

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Abstract

Drawing on a case study carried out in Myanmar, this article elaborates on the concept of connectivity as a rich and critical articulation of the way prisoners and their relatives develop and sustain relationships during incarceration. The notion of connectivity offers an alternative analytic frame to that provided by established notions of prisoner–family contact. Drawing primarily on interview data, we examine how people connect and disconnect in situations of chaos, control and surveillance; how they suffer under circumstances of not-knowing; and how they establish protective exchange relations. We illustrate the utility of the concept of connectivity for interrogating the fundamentally relational practice of imprisonment and show that common notions of inside and outside are partially deconstructed through prison actors' agentic efforts to cut ties or tie strings across prison walls.

Keywords: connectivity, prisoner–family contact, Myanmar, prison visits, relationships

Teza waits for the footsteps to fade out, then squats down in front of the parcel. Having been searched, it is already open, but he carefully and slowly folds back the flaps of the cardboard. It is a gift from his mother. There are plastic bags filled with peanuts, deep-fried beans, sesame seeds, the pickled tea-leaves he particularly adores. ... When he takes out the bundle of fish, tears of relief fill his eyes. This is what he has been waiting for, the dark brown and gray half-coils of these water creatures, their bodies preserved with salt. They are life to him. ... Four blocks of thanakha slide into view. Rubbed in a little water in his hand, the fragrant bars of ground bark become a paste he applies to his sores. His mother claims that thanakha is the reason that Burmese women have such a lovely skin. ... He peels the plastic wrap off one of the bars and smells it: the faint scent returns him to a childhood morning, when he left the house in a sulk because she forced him to go to school with thanakha swirled on his cheeks ...

This excerpt from *The Lizard Cage*, a fictional account of everyday life in Myanmar's prisons by Karen Connolly (2008: 122–23), evocatively captures how much it meant to a prisoner to receive food from his mother and connect to a life of taste, nourishment and care.¹ In interviews conducted and transcribed as part of a collective research project, we have read multiple accounts of the significance of such connections, analysis of which casts new light on people's efforts to relate at the prison/society interface. The thick meaning of the thanakha paste is a vivid example of what we call connectivity, a process of connecting that goes beyond classic understandings of the separateness of prison and society and captures more fully the experience of prisoners and their families than established legal and administrative discourses about prisoners' contact with the outside world. The thanakha paste does not represent physical contact or face-to-face encounter; nevertheless, it powerfully points us towards the significance of both human and non-human actors in practices of connecting and disconnecting.

We hereby direct attention to the array of indirect, ambiguous forms of relating that people – in this case prisoners and their relatives – establish and maintain and/or avoid and cut. Prisoners connect before, after, alongside, between, despite and in place of formal contact. As such, a focus on connectivity factors in the illegal, tenuous, ad hoc, mediated, indirect and abrupt forms of connecting that prisoners and their families strive to make and unmake.

The social scientific literature on connectivity has developed significantly since John Barnes could write in 1969 that 'applied to social networks, the words "connectedness" and "connectivity" may refer to properties of the distance between persons, the number of paths between them, whether there is a path at all, or the proportion of possible paths actually in existence' (1969: 215). But themes of proximity, the presence or absence of links and the distribution of potential paths remain salient. This article can be seen as a response to Darl Kolb et al.'s call to pay more attention to states of connectivity 'in and around organizations' (Kolb, Caza and Collins 2012: 270). But we attend to a rather peculiar organization – the prison – and focus not on its relation to other organizations, but on the relations of its members with external, though implicated, actors. Writing from the perspective of organizational studies, Kolb (2008) points out that connectivity is not simply the concern of technical sciences but also the social sciences, a central characteristic being that it demands work and often happens under constraints (Angwin and Vaara 2005). This is clearly the case in the prison context.

This article also resonates with Matei Candea et al.'s (2015) call for practices of attachment and detachment to be granted equal analytic weight, though with an important reverse twist. Where they argue against privileging attachment at the cost of ignoring detachment, our argument is for paying more attention to connectivity in the face of dominant understandings of prisons as cut off, separate and detached.²

Candea et al. push back against a scholarly emphasis on relations as against a new kind of orthodoxy. They claim that practices of disengagement and detachment have been given short shrift in the literature, pointing to the contemporary

popularity of ideas about participation and engagement and suggesting that social scientists have ‘forgotten that life is constituted as much through practices of detachment as through relating and engaging’ (ibid.: flyleaf). Whether one accepts this or not, the point that disconnection, distance and detachment do productive work is well made³ and borne out by our analysis.

Candea et al. reluctantly accept that detachment is always already a kind of relation, though other contributors to their edited volume embrace this more readily. Casper Bruun Jensen and Brit Ross Winthereik, for example, recognize as we do that ‘being relationally defined, attachments and detachments cannot themselves be fully disentangled’ (ibid.: 201). It is the interdependence and concomitance of attachment and detachment that we unpack in this article through the notion of connectivity.

In what follows we analyse empirical manifestations of connectivity in Myanmar prisons and explore their meaning and significance. In line with many of the contributions to this special issue, our analysis of the porosity of the prison/society interface is based on the experiences of embodied, situated subjects. Our focus is not on the circulation of bodies between prison and poor urban neighbourhoods (except in the sense that prisoners’ relatives do this), but on the continuous processes of negotiating and co-producing states of connectivity that implicate both prisoners and their relatives and have consequences for lives inside and outside prison.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, we examine the limits of dominant understandings of contact. We then introduce the case study and the Myanmar context before presenting analysis of some of the data that illustrate the various ways and various conditions under which prisoners and their relatives struggle to connect. Subsequently, we further elaborate on the concept of connectivity as a way to scrutinize prison actors’ ambiguous practices of engaging the economy of carceral relations. We do this with reference to two processes, first tying and second cutting.

From contact to connectivity

Phenomenologists, existentialists, psychoanalysts and attachment theorists such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Buber, Lacan, Kristeva, Benjamin, Bowlby, Ricoeur and many others have articulated the importance of intersubjective relationships for human flourishing. Within the prisons literature, this argument has been made strongly by Craig Haney (2006) and Lisa Guenther (2013) who argue that relationships constitute our humanity and forced isolation is radically destructive. To a certain degree, the prison, where human beings are deliberately deprived of their liberty and separated (symbolically if not always fully in practice) from society, might be understood as undermining this basic human need and potential to relate. One of the fundamental effects of imprisonment is to take control away from prisoners and their families, including control of their modes of relating and whom they relate with. Some of the empirical examples we will present below are about

exactly the ways in which people seek to wrest back some control over this. In the face of immense obstacles, they nevertheless forge opportunities to connect.

Apparently acknowledging the fundamental importance of human intersubjectivity, the semi-legal and procedural notion of 'prisoners' contact with the outside world' seeks to protect and defend people faced by the compromising conditions of deprivation of liberty. There exist two dominant discourses pertaining to prisoners' contact with the outside world, one that is rights-based, normative and intrinsic, another that is corrections-centred, managerial and instrumental.

The first is informed by ideas about prisoners' well-being and human rights. Prisoners need and have a right to contact with the outside world (UN 2016: rule 58, 61). Refusing any form of contact between inside and outside of prisons would be inhumane and go against the claim that prisons are supposed to rehabilitate as well as punish. This way of thinking rests on the idea that prisoners do not lose their status as members of wider communities just because they are in prison; they are simply temporarily removed from society and most are likely to return. Maintaining a connection between themselves and especially their families is therefore important. With this in mind, international human rights law defines prisoners' contact with the outside world as key to the protection of prisoners' rights. Contact with the outside world facilitates prisoners' rights to maintain family ties and social networks, ensures that they can have meaningful legal representation prior to sentence or should they wish to appeal, and enables external oversight of prison life as a safeguard against abuse.

The second common way of thinking about prisoners' contact with the outside world is informed by ideas about how prisons ought to be run. Whereas the first way of thinking is normative and about human dignity, this way of thinking is more instrumental and espoused by penal policy-makers and prison managers and studied and written about by criminological researchers (Coyle 2009; Mitchell et al. 2016). From this perspective, allowing for contact between the prisoner and the outside world is a means through which to maintain stability and order. Visits can, for example, be withdrawn in the event of bad behaviour or offered as an incentive for good behaviour. Allowing prisoners contact with their families and others gives them something to look forward to. It breaks up the daily routine of prison life and is a potential source of hope, encouraging the prisoner to avoid crime in the future and successfully reintegrate into society (De Claire and Dixon 2017; Duwe and Clark 2013).

There exists also a third and darker approach to prisoners' contact with the outside world, namely the punitive and authoritarian approach of actively depriving people of contact, of holding prisoners incommunicado or in so-called black sites as a form of punishment or torture or repression, or as a collateral effect of wars on drugs/crime/terror (Gregory 2009; Simon 2007). Such approaches have certainly featured in Myanmar's not so distant past, and exist as an ongoing spectre haunting prison practice today.

Setting aside this third orientation to contact, what the two former ways of thinking express is a common desire to keep gates closed but not fully closed, to

separate people from society but not totally, to signal that punishment sets people apart but not to the detriment of themselves or the institutions in which they are sequestered. It is recognized that full closure potentially leads to destructive dehumanization, institutional demise and, in many parts of the world, even fatal consequences.⁴ These notions of ‘prisoners’ contact with the outside world’ valorize a particular set of formal actors (blood-related family members, lawyers, approved-of ‘friends’ etc.) and a particular set of administrative criteria: length, frequency, privilege/right, with/without physical touch and so on. The quality of this contact – its meaningfulness – is also delineated through measurable criteria such as levels of continuity, directness, empathetic exchange and so on. The term ‘meaningful human contact’ exists in soft law (UN 2016: rule 44) but is only defined (in relation to solitary confinement) in terms of what it is not (Penal Reform International [PRI] 2017: 89). It is not a prison officer delivering food, for example, or prisoners shouting at each other through walls or air vents.

Through this discursive packaging, the relationships between prisoners and outsiders are made ready for bureaucratic management and guaranteed by the protective rationale of rights. As such, established notions of contact produce relations (and their lack) according to rational-legal idioms of formal external norms and a system of procedures, structures, rules and conditions. Yet this sharp gaze on how contact ought to be entails a potential blindness towards what actually happens and what actually matters in local institutional contexts. Our orientation to connections rather than contact operates with a broader definition of what ‘meaningful’ might mean in practice. Whereas contact is something you either have or don’t have, connectivity is always tenuous, potential and aspirational. It can be in fantasy, in imagination, through incidental encounters that matter – or through the smell of thanakha paste.

By investigating connectivity, we thereby look beyond contact as an inherent ‘good’ that tempers – but thereby also inadvertently reaffirms – the total institutional logic of the prison as more or less, lawfully or illegally, open or closed to society. Connectivity rather denotes an interwoven web of relational ties and bonds between actors and through walls – a web (or in Turner’s [2016] terms a patchwork) that we argue must be analysed in local contexts and from a person-centred perspective (Martin, Jefferson and Bandyopadhyay 2014). A focus on connectivity is also attuned to practices of disconnecting (Kolb 2008; Pedersen 2013). It factors in the ways in which prisoners, for instance, actively seek to cut relations with dangerous knowledge, practices and people (including their relatives) to keep themselves and their loved ones safe and sane, or disconnect from all prison relations when they are released. Where contact is typically understood as a condition of being in touch – often quite literally – and as a question of what the law or institution prescribes and happens to afford, connectivity allows for the fact that prison actors (both human and non-human) are agentic and both more capable and more vulnerable than the contact paradigm acknowledges.

Prisoners' contact with the outside world in Myanmar – a case study

The analysis is based on a case study of family visits in Myanmar prisons and lock-ups conducted by a local team of researchers under our supervision. It is part of a broader research programme called 'Legacies of Detention in Myanmar'.⁵ This programme aims to explore the historical and contemporary role of detention in Myanmar and its significance for the reconfiguration of state and society – what we often refer to as using the 'prison as a prism' through which to view and examine power and change.

The case study was designed and implemented between May 2017 and July 2018 together with colleagues from Justice For All (JFA), a Myanmar-based organization consisting mainly of lawyers.⁶ Data were collected through analysis of laws and standards and other secondary sources (including archival materials and prisoner autobiographies) and through seventy-five semi-structured interviews with mainly former men and women prisoners and relatives, but also lawyers, prison monitors and NGO representatives and other stakeholders. The interviews were conducted during four field trips to different parts of the country, a country of ethnic divisions, ongoing civil conflict and ongoing tensions between civil and military leaders.

Earlier this century, after decades of authoritarian rule, Myanmar began to emerge from its isolated position on the global stage as the military dictatorship transformed into a military-led government and expressed its willingness to move towards a 'flourishing of a genuine, disciplined multi-party democratic system', as phrased in the basic principles of the Constitution of 2008. International sanctions were suspended in the hope that the discourse about democratic reform might be translated into genuine democratic development, a hope that culminated in the landslide election victory of human rights and democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party in 2015. Much official discourse and commentary about Myanmar implied a rupture and transition towards an imagined democratic future (Cheesman, Skidmore and Wilson 2012; Egretreau 2016; Egretreau and Robinne 2015; Kipgen 2015). Yet the deep-seated legacies of authoritarian and militarized rule remain strong (not least in terms of the army's continued grip on political power according to the 2008 Constitution), and were vividly and violently revealed in 2017 in the form of gross human rights abuses of the Rohingya population in Rakhine state, leading to mass exodus and an ongoing refugee crisis. In this light, any narrative about Myanmar's transition becomes highly equivocal and fiercely contested.

The prison represents a specific site at the heart of Myanmar's history of repression. The fact that Myanmar's current *de facto* leader Aung San Suu Kyi was herself held for many years under house arrest regularly brought the theme of imprisonment to the world's attention (Popham 2011). Pro-democracy and human rights activists in exile were also vocal about the conditions and injustices associated with incarceration. Since 2011, organizations representing the interests of former political prisoners have become increasingly visible in the domestic penal landscape, where reforms have recently been applied. Increasing numbers of international

actors are involved in this process (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, International Committee of the Red Cross, etc.), and civil society organizations are seeking entry points through which to promote human rights and prevent abuses. Formal conditions around prisoners' contact with the outside world have also been subject to reform interventions: Myanmar's largest prison, Insein Prison in the capital Yangon, has expanded the visiting time from fifteen to twenty minutes and lifted the twice-per-month cap on the number of visits a prisoner may have. Visiting rooms have also been renovated in prisons and, despite unequal distribution and uneven implementation, prisoners' access to televisions, books and other written materials has increased gradually over the last decade.

Yet it is equally clear that legacies of the authoritarian past are massive and pervasive, not least as evidenced in the lives of former prisoners struggling to adjust. The history of silencing, non-transparency and stunting of public voice during Myanmar's period of 'karaoke fascism' (Skidmore 2004) seems to continue to impact discourses on punishment and detention. The appropriation of 'rule of law' as 'law and order' in Myanmar's legal and juridical field, with ensuing diffusion and depreciation of fair trial and individual rights, also seems to continue in the practices of justice sector actors – including prison authorities (Cheesman 2015). And the use of draconian colonial legislation to detain regime critics – most notably journalists – is also continuing⁷.

Thus, we can identify a slowly transforming interface between prison and society at the level of penal politics, a subtle mutation in response to liberal democratic forms of ordering, that co-exists with the persistence of (slowly reconfiguring) authoritarian traits and practices. As we have argued elsewhere, such times of transition call for an analysis of the way in which politicized and locally situated prison climates are responsive to changing societal dynamics engendered by pressures from within and without (Martin, Jefferson and Bandyopadhyay 2014). This article is less concerned with the changing prison/society interface at the institutional level and more concerned with how the interface is managed by actors caught up in it. Nevertheless, we believe that by examining states of connectivity from the perspective of implicated actors, we also cast light on the relation between the institution and its context.

Making connections at the porous borders of the prison

In this section, we present some illustrative quotes from a series of twenty-five ethnographic interviews that our colleagues at Justice For All conducted and translated into English, supplemented by material based on our own observations and interactions with ex-prisoners and their relatives in Myanmar. While the data do not allow us to paint rich, detailed portraits of particular people's lives, the accounts provided cast valuable light on people's everyday struggles to care and connect. More specifically, these voices provide a persuasive articulation of a common desire to nurture family relations against all odds under considerable strain. As one ex-prisoner put it as he contemplated the fifteen-minute visit that he looked

forward to so much every week: 'Only fifteen minutes. Then I would wish time flew and we reached to the next fifteen minutes.' From the perspective of the other side of the wire-mesh-divided, cramped visiting rooms, the voices of relatives express their desire to ensure the well-being of their incarcerated relatives via provision of food, medicine and news from home, and to be 'in the know' about how things are going inside. Just knowing how things are serves to quell the anxiety of uncertainty and provides a minimal basis for connectivity. As we will show below, this common desire to share care-through-connection is stifled, however, by the fact that the knowledge that is a precondition of such care is often absent.

Whereas notions of contact, typically thought of as a face-to-face encounter, appear to imply neutrality and straightforwardness, connectivity is ambiguous and implies qualification. Connection is not always good and attitudes to connection can be ambivalent. Visits, as is well documented, can be 'bad'. U Heik – a 29-year-old man who served a sentence for human trafficking – was visited every two weeks by his mother. One day, the visit he had so looked forward to caused a lot of distress:

My mother was not feeling well. She was a bit late but she got there in the morning. Me, I was waiting for her visit near the visiting area since 7:30 a.m. She did not turn up until the late afternoon. The visiting hours were almost ending. When she arrived in the last group to come in, there were already eight people. That was perhaps an unfortunate fact. The rest of the visitors and inmates were known and had their own connections. I was the new one. So they took out my slip to select whose families could visit. When it happened, my parents cried. I was so angry. I heard that she was waiting the whole day outside while she was ill. So it made me angry and I caused problems to everyone I saw. Due to that, I was shackled at the feet and put in the solitary confinement and my visiting right was revoked...

Another ex-prisoner, Thein Lin, reported with some discomfort how his elder brother accused him and other prisoners of being dirty and smelly. Arrested in his home, he had been imprisoned in connection with student activism. The quote below speaks to the high stakes associated with receiving visits, stakes where one's status as human can be brought into question. In this case, in a perverse reversal, it is the humanity of the visitor that is challenged:

One day, my dad and brother visited me. Dad did not say anything. Brother said, 'Hey you prisoners are stinky and dirty'. I told him, 'Please speak humane language, I am your brother you are my elder brother and I am suffering but you are not'. I told him, 'Don't meet me again, go back. Are you not human?'

Thein Lin had been detained both in a prison and in one of Myanmar's infamous labour camps. The case study confirmed the harshness of the extraction of labour in these camps and the hardships families faced in reaching the camps in far-off rural areas. Yet it also became evident that the camps represented a more lenient regime in terms of family visits, including considerably longer and free interaction and overnight stays and conjugal visits for married couples. Speaking of the more open

regime in a labour camp, which quite a few prisoners in fact coveted and actively sought (at least more recently), Thein Lin wondered sceptically about how much time one really wants to spend talking with one's relatives – indicating the taxing and uncomfortable situation of un-free proximity, not just to fellow prisoners but to one's own family under carceral conditions.

In the prisons literature there are some compelling accounts of the demands that separation by distance puts on family members (Christian 2005; Pallott and Katz 2017). Our data also feature such accounts. For example, after being informed by the International Committee of the Red Cross that their relative had been moved, a family described the exhausting journey they had to take over three to four days in the rainy season, first by bus to Mandalay, then by bus to Moneywa where they took a boat to Kalaywa up the Chindwin river, from where they took a bus to Kalay and another bus to the prison. This took a total of forty-two hours not including waiting time.

One of our interlocutors, May Win, described the considerable lengths she went to in order to visit and support her cousin. She had had multiple relatives go to prison, but this cousin did not have many other family members who were willing to help him with food and medicine for his stomach problems. It cost her financially and emotionally, and it threatened her relationship with her husband and children who resented the investment:

[My husband] would say something like, 'You have nothing to do with him. When his own real sister did not give him any money, why do you want to give him money? You don't need to give him'. Sometimes, we got into physical fight. So later on, I didn't let him know about my visit to prison. ... And sometimes, my kids would say that I am only for [my cousin], not thinking about the family problem. And I am sad when my kids say something like that. So yeah, I get angry, sad and emotional.

While family members and ex-prisoners emphasize the importance of maintaining an emotional connection, human connection alone is not enough to sustain life in prison. Basic needs must be met. Prisons are not self-contained enough to sustain the lives of their population. They depend on outsiders. May Win explained how she had to pay for her cousin's upkeep in police detention. The conditions for getting food across to him were good, but (or maybe rather because) no food at all was provided by the authorities themselves. When her cousin was transferred to a labour camp, basic food was provided but he still depended on her. May Win had also served a prison sentence and seemed to know these dynamics from the inside:

I don't want to meet him without having anything (money, food, etc.). If I go without bringing him anything, we would just chat and come back home. And it is not good for him either. When he says, 'Please come and visit', it means that he needs something like food. That's the reason he called us. If I go just like this, it is not good. I would go only with things he needed. Only then, it would be okay.

Until quite recently there was a prohibition against speaking about prison conditions and politics during visits; visits were closely monitored and records kept of the topics of conversations. Guards would be in close proximity and would reprimand visitors and prisoners if inappropriate topics of conversation were broached: 'If we informed what happened inside the prisons, we would be punished', as U Heik put it.

For some, self-censorship became a norm. Others found ways to communicate, for example by smuggling messages to one another or by speaking in quite elaborate codes or by paying off the guards – one price for not listening and a higher price for not being present. As Ay Aung, who had been imprisoned during the 1988 revolution and served time on death row for many years, said: 'The prison staff are listening to what we are talking about it. We need to pay money so that they don't listen. We pay money to him, [they] leave us'.

For self-identifying political prisoners, communicating about politics was one of the things they craved. Visits could thus be highly charged affairs, featuring risk for both parties. Connecting under such circumstances was not aided by visiting rooms being noisy, crowded, chaotic places where it was often difficult to identify each other and when time available was commonly limited to fifteen minutes or less. To compensate and expand connections in this compromised situation, political prisoners devised 'secret systems' and activated fellow prisoners in pursuit of information. Thein Lin described how they would use prisoners with special tasks, who could move more freely around the prison, to carry information and news:

Political prisoners contact each other consistently not by telephone nor by any form of communication device but by man. For example, there were a person who disposed of garbage, a person that would bring food from agriculture, and a person that would bring pot and plates, who would give oil and onion, salt and [MSG]... These people will tell what is happening in prison.

Connections were also made by activating non-human agents that could carry news and goods across prison walls: shit-buckets and coffins were, for instance, key vehicles for contraband transportation as their inherent barrier of impurity offered protection against searches and too much scrutiny.

The interview material provides clear evidence of the fact that prison authorities have a history of not sharing information about imprisoned persons' whereabouts with family members⁸ – especially in the immediate period following initial detention. Holding prisoners incommunicado is a means of control not just for high-profile political prisoners or for those who actively have to be hidden. When brick walls and other technologies are weak, and when the capacity and legitimacy of the system and the staff are low, the prison can put up a wall of silence to protect itself, by actively disconnecting captives from outsiders. Misinformation – or simply not telling – seems to have been a default strategy, a routine. Families were obliged to remain in the dark about the fate of their loved ones and prisoners were kept in the dark about the well-being of their families, adding to stress for

both parties. One ex-prisoner spoke of how he was not informed about the death of his mother. In this case, it was not the authorities that kept him in the dark but his own family who engaged in practices of disconnection – seemingly to protect him from the stress of bad news from home. To counter the not-knowing, prisoners relied on news received or delivered from or by other prisoners or even by staff. And the dynamic was also reversed, whereby prisoners withheld information from relatives to quell their anxiety or outright cut connections: many of the ex-prisoners interviewed, who were charged or sentenced for being sex workers, for instance, kept their imprisonment secret from their families. They sought to avoid further stigmatization, but exposed themselves to the vulnerabilities of not having any protective connections to provide for them in, and defend them against, prison.

Family members were also often not informed when their relatives in prison were transferred. We have multiple accounts of the sorrow that entails. One powerful example, provided by Nyi San, whose husband and father of her two children had been in prison, will suffice here. When her husband was initially arrested, she first found out from the radio, rather than from the authorities. This turned out to be indicative of the entire experience:

I didn't know that he was transferred. I went to Insein [Prison] to meet with him. On that day I had to submit permission letter twice, at the front gate and at the prison gate. Usually, I have to wait just fifteen or twenty minutes or maximum thirty minutes, but on that day I had to wait for a long time, and even the (food) parcel was sent into the prison. After that, they said he was transferred. They should have told us at the front gate not to waste time by waiting. They should have informed the clerks about the transferring of the prisoners. I was feeling so bad and sad at the time. I was angry and tears falling down... You know, even if he is guilty and arrested, he is not bird or chicken, he's a human who has a family.

Nyi San was subsequently informed that her husband had been moved to Mandalay Prison – a bus drive of more than twelve hours away – and later travelled there with her daughter, only to be disappointed again:

They checked the parcels and submitted the permission letter. My daughter was in Grade 1 at that time, she can talk well. So, she runs into the building saying 'I'll meet my dad'. I follow the child, carrying the parcels. Then, we missed again. The officer did not check the letter. It is written at the back of the letter that my husband was transferred to Myitkyina. We missed him again.

Despite time pressures and inhibiting structures, prisoners and families creatively seek to expand and sustain connection in an adverse environment, often through informal means, by taking risks, by trial and error and through dubious transactions. Thein Lin, who had built relationships with the staff during his long imprisonment, described how he would instruct a member of prison staff to deliver messages to his family and even shop for him:

Some would go out after their duty. And I would say, 'Hey, my friends I am suffering like this and that, please you go to my house, what ward, home number... I have my parents there. Ask for that amount of money. You buy medicine from such and such shop. I have to take that medicine.' That is how we have to ask them.

Note here how the productive connection is not to family but to sympathetic or purchasable officials, but not all prisoners were able to nurture such dependencies or afford such transactions. U Heik described how inmates without connections were subject to abuse, beatings, bullying and so on, and elaborated in a somewhat chilling fashion the consequences of not having access to family, as it was these visits that ensured the liquidity of the detainee.

When I got there first time, they said, 'Keep your head down, down, stay close to the wall, face the wall'. Then they stripped off my clothes and did the thorough body search. While doing that, they asked me if my family was going to come see me. If anyone answered that question with a tone they disliked, they beat them up... I was not beaten, I said my family would come to see me. So, they asked to bring 30,000 kyats and I said I would.

As the material above shows, the interface between inside and outside of prison is not simply characterized by the conditions of contact that the prison (or human rights law) provides, but by practices of connecting that prison actors generate – often in ephemeral ways and through struggle that sometimes transgresses the carceral condition. We see how prisoners and relatives struggle to make connections in situations of chaos, constraint and surveillance; how they try to connect in order to be in the know; and how they seek to thicken (and thin) connections to sustain caring and protecting relations. It is to these equivocal practices of connecting in a highly unwelcome (if not downright dangerous) carceral landscape that we now turn, to explore them analytically via the twin themes of tying and cutting.

Touching and tying

The etymological difference between contact and connection is significant. Contact refers to touching and stems from the word 'tangere', to touch and to stroke. Connection, however, refers to tying and stems from the word 'nectere', to bind and to tie. The contact paradigm gives primacy to the conditions where prisoners and relatives can be in touch, so to speak. As noted above, human rights and prison management discourse seeks to delineate the quantity of contact (sequence, length, facilities etc.) and its quality or 'meaningfulness' according to a rational-legal idiom. Our data show how prison actors in Myanmar do not just strive to have contact, but also struggle to make connections and establish ties and bonds against the grain of a carceral situation which is deeply compromising. They try to attach strings to/between each other: strings that are 'spun' from the repertoire of money, alliances, status, information and so on available to them; and strings that are 'elastic' enough to reach across the prison wall and still hold. They seek to develop ties that

can be sustained and perhaps even expanded and through which they can regain, step by step, a sliver of control over the relations that the carceral situation has so manifestly deprived them of.

Prisoners and relatives strive to make connections that recapture two main elements of human relations: knowing and exchanging. Knowing what goes on, where the incarcerated relative is and how s/he fares and feels is a basic prerequisite for the protective relations that prisoners and relatives strive to maintain – not least in the period of pre-trial detention. In Myanmar prisons, this knowledge is not readily available and ‘being in the know’ depends on prisoners’ and relatives’ ability to make ties with staff and other prisoners and relatives, who can mediate vital information informally. As one of our interlocutors coined it above, the practice of making ‘contact by man’ relies on a mixing of trust and illegality. These ties enable exchanges of information, but also, and very importantly, enable the exchange of goods and services that, for instance, allow relatives to get medicine and food through to prisoners. Ties with staff – built up over time – also enable prisoners to access contraband and attain privileges (like longer or private visits). And a lack of ties deepens the deprivation. Recall the prisoner who was waiting for his ill mother to visit. He noted that ‘the rest of the prisoners were known and had their own connections’, whereas he, ‘the new one’, had none. As the visiting time was running out, it was his visiting slip that was taken out of the pile and he who lost his place in the queue and had his visit cancelled. Ties do not necessarily have to be personal or intimate. They also take the form of a general ‘tying into’ the prison’s economy of knowledge and exchange and gaining know-how (and know-who) through bribery and appreciation and the circumvention and bending of rules. In one case, a relative told how she always bought ice-cream for staff before visiting to ease things up and make relations relaxed and conducive.

These states of connectivity are generative for prisoners’ and relatives’ practices of knowing and exchanging, but they are ambivalent and ambiguous. Tying into the carceral situation is taxing and costly. It entails a commitment to chime with processes of dependency and inequality; a submissive bonding with people who hold a menacing physical power over others (including yourself and people you love); and an exposure to the parasitic practices of financial and sexual exploitation that thrive in the borderlands of state institutions. Both prisoners and relatives tell numerous stories of women being routinely abused and sometimes pressed to have sex with male prison staff in exchange for helping their locked-up relatives to access different forms of care and protection. So, strings are indeed attached and ties stick – also in the form of stigma and vulnerability.

Cutting and dividing

Not only do prisoners and their relatives struggle to connect; they also act to cut and thin ties between themselves and others in and across the carceral situation. In line with Candea and colleagues’ rehabilitation of detachment (above), Morten Pedersen (2013) helpfully problematizes what he terms the ‘fetish of connectivity’,

taking issue with those who privilege connection and connectivity over disconnection and separateness. Detachment is an important part of being human too, and one can stay connected by cutting, splitting, dividing and so on, he argues. This means that 'ethnographers need to take seriously that the world is full of people who ... invest a considerable amount of energy into what might, to coin a term, be called the labour of division' (ibid.: 203). We should not, he continues, privilege proximity and closeness at the expense of separation and safe distance, or see connection as an inherent good. Prisoners' and relatives' agentic investment in ways of disconnecting are at play in Myanmar. Prisoners encourage their relatives not to visit to protect them from the strains of tying into the ambivalent economy of carceral relations. And relatives choose not to visit, because they do not have money for the much-needed goods and for the rent-seeking staff. Most vividly, perhaps, one former prisoner spoke about the 'forgetting tree' that stands outside every prison. Once you pass this tree, he said, you forget all the promises you made to fellow prisoners about keeping in touch, coming back to pay respects (and debts) and returning favours. Through a labour of division, prisoners and relatives cut prison ties and divert or impound the pain and dependency of the carceral situation. Pedersen's point is thus well taken. Yet for our purposes it is important to note that the labour of division or the energy being invested in being separate in prison is involuntary and coerced. Pedersen writes of volitional cutting, that is, an agentic labour of division. In the carceral situation, the majority of cuts and divisions are imposed on prison actors by the prison institution's active and collateral damage to human relations – a form of institutional agency that drastically disempowers and undermines the social agency of prisoners and relatives, who nevertheless strike back by making ties and bonds, though often at their own peril.

Our argument for the importance of connectivity could easily be situated as part of the relational orthodoxy that Candea et al. polemically argue against. And yet we are not blind to the productive practices of cutting and detachment. Our commitment to understanding people as intersubjective beings constituted through encounters does not imply an inattentiveness to breakages, examples of separation or experiences of feeling cut off. In fact, the case of prisoners' contact with the outside world brings instantly to mind the harsh reality of broken connections, absences and separations. We have tried to analyse this default situation and the way in which people nevertheless struggle to connect. Yet we refuse to romantically reify connectivity. Our task has been to document the various modes of both attachment and detachment that are obligated or possible under fractured circumstances.

Conclusion

As the introduction to this special issue has already highlighted, Tim Ingold makes a helpful distinction between 'interwoven trails' and 'intersecting routes' (Ingold 2007: 81). Ingold proposes that the former is a preferable way of thinking. Certainly, the notion of a 'meshwork of interwoven trails' would seem to capture something of the various bonds and ties that prisoners and their families try to make and are

obliged to navigate. It is 'along' trails that 'life is lived' (ibid.), claims Ingold. In this light, our article can be conceived of as a (partial) mapping of the trails through which prisoners and their visitors instil disempowering circumstances of division and separation with the social quality of agentic connectivity.

By focusing on connectivity (understood as including practices of tying and cutting), we affirm the importance of attending to the interactions and quality of prisoners' relationships – to their peers, that is those incarcerated with them, and their controllers and supervisors, that is those to whose authority they are obliged to submit – and we have extended the frame to include those meaningful others beyond the walls, that is their relatives, lawyers, victims and so on.⁹ Ex-prisoners and their relatives in Myanmar emphasize the value of visits and they go to considerable lengths to make them happen. Opportunities to look each other in the eye (maybe), deliver a food parcel and shout at each other in a crowded room matter immensely within the limited economy of relating that is available.

Yet our application of the notion of connectivity should not be understood as a glorification of the many and varied ways in which people stay connected, though at times the endurance, sacrifice and commitment revealed is admirable (see Papilloud 2004). On the contrary, we are aware that the relationships described, evoked and anticipated are compromised from the beginning. The prison wall may be porous and somewhat open for the agentic practices of making ties, but its effects are still insidious and destructive, and it makes real sense to bear in mind the collateral damage that prison actors suffer as they seek to maintain relations against the odds. In fact, the acknowledgement that connectivity is tenuous, in process and never guaranteed may serve to remind us that the connections that are made can never approximate the quality of relationships under non-confined conditions.¹⁰

Drawing attention to people's struggles to inhabit and forge states of connectivity under conditions that privilege disconnection, control and constraint is particularly pertinent to the study of the prison–society interface, where conditions of contact are so compromised. We have shown the conceptual limits of the contact paradigm and integrated an expanded set of actors and actions in our analysis (including prison staff) who together make up a dynamic web of connections and play different, shifting and locally defined enabling (or disabling) roles. Connectivity offers a frame through which to analyse processes of cutting and connecting (in any institutional context) as integrated, ambiguous and generative. Unlike the notion of carceral continuums (Wacquant 2001), which traces (somewhat normatively and somewhat one-directionally) carceral power leaking out of the prison, the notion of connectivity also accounts for the 'street', in the form of outsiders, seeping in, and allows us to discern the potential of agentic and complex forms of relating that allow for the (partial and occasional) retention of non-carceral selves – albeit fleetingly, as when the taste of dried fish from a mother's food parcel explodes in the mouth.

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Notes

1. In a personal communication with the author, we have learned that *The Lizard Cage* is built open upon many long and intimate conversations with ex-prisoners on the Thai/Myanmar border. The power of the narrative reflects this, even as it provides a strong and evocative resonance with the material gathered through the case study reported here.
2. We are grateful to a sharp-eyed reviewer for drawing our attention to this work on detachment.
3. See also Maryon McDonald's (2015) fascinating account of surgeons' performances of detachment during organ transplantation, where she concludes that detachment is an important *social* accomplishment.
4. As we will exemplify below, jurisdictions challenged by poverty, or simply budgetary limits, cannot run prisons adequately without relying on outsiders – families providing food and medicine and development organizations and charities providing funds, and other services.
5. <https://legacies-of-detention.org/> accessed online 28 February 2020.
6. We acknowledge the central role of the JFA team in the data collection. Our conversations with them about the material have also informed our analysis. We are also indebted to our colleague Liv S. Gaborit for her support to the JFA team in the development and implementation of the case study, including ongoing training and supervision of the team.
7. See for instance <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/reuters-case-exposes-tensions-over-the-role-of-journalists> accessed online 27 February 2020.
8. One of the key roles of ICRC has been to make connections between prisoners and their families under such circumstances.
9. On the importance of a relational approach to imprisonment, see, for example, Jefferson and Gaborit (2014); Liebling and Arnold (2004).
10. On this point, see also Schneider's application of Sartre's notion of the genuine and the imaginary in this issue.

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