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Cyclone Nargis and Displacement: Sensing the Places

This paper seeks to map the lived experiences of those displaced by climate change, focusing on the embodiment of landscapes. Places such as land and temporary shelters are the site of embodied memory, creating intersubjective spheres between insiders and outsiders. I take Myanmar's devastating Cyclone Nargis in 2008 as a case study. Drawing on observations from fieldwork in Myanmar, this paper shows that the researcher's and cyclone survivors' perceptions and sensory experiences of landscapes are critical to understanding the survivors' everyday lives and producing knowledge about their experiences of the cyclone.

Introduction

Displacement and migration induced by climate change have gained increasing attention. In 2019, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC 2020: 4) recorded the displacement of 24.9 million people associated with natural disasters across 140 countries. South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific were the most affected regions. Despite the growing literature on climate change, displacement and migration, we know little about how people experience and narrate natural disasters and displacement over a longer period of time.

Cyclone Nargis, the worst natural disaster in Asia since 1991 (UNEP 2009: 4), struck Myanmar in early May 2008, resulting in nearly 140,000 lives lost (UNDRR 2009) and approximately 2.4 million people affected (Lateef 2009: 106). While millions of people sought shelters in monasteries, churches and schools, others remained without shelters (Suwanvanichkij et al. 2009: 51). Much of the research, including NGO reports and newspaper articles, focused on the immediate circumstances of those displaced by the cyclone and on the official response. Yet, there is limited understanding of those with lived experiences of the cyclone. I analyse the disaster and its impact, including displacement as a long-term process. I argue that we can gain a new perspective on the present through landscapes that reflect past events, including how displaced people experience landscapes and how insiders and outsiders engage with landscapes.

In August 2019, I visited Talokekone village, one of the villages that was severely damaged by Cyclone Nargis, and conducted interviews with the villagers who experienced the cyclone. I found that survivors' narratives were often initiated by their perception of places. This paper thus sheds light on the meaning of places when recounting the experience of the cyclone and displacement. It aims to show the interplay between the interviewees and the researcher through these places.

Landscapes: A bridge to the present and the researcher

Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) concept of space, landscapes can be seen as a social product that incorporates the aspects of physical, ideal and experiential. We can phenomenologically observe, perceive and sense landscapes through our bodies and therefore they have a significant influence on our thoughts (Tilley 2010: 26). Here, landscapes are something more than just a physical form. People interpret their world and express their values through landscapes that form part of their lives (Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017). Landscapes provide individual and social practices that inform the construction of lives and identities (Tilley 2010), and the experience of landscapes can also create narratives and stories.

Cyclone Nargis had a devastating impact on homes, infrastructure, agricultural lands and fishing grounds. Survivors' perception of such landscapes plays an essential role in creating

the narratives of post-cyclone experiences. Survivors' houses had existed, trees had existed and animals had existed. Recognising physical loss enables them to perceive the disaster. However, physical landscapes do not stand alone. Physical lands, for example, affect culture and culture, in turn, influences the perception and meaning of the lands.

Many people in the Ayeyarwady Region¹, where the damage was the most severe, engage in agriculture. In particular, in Talokekone village², farming and fishing cultures flourished. To the villagers, land and water are valuable. Their values play an important role in the villagers' everyday lives and contribute to a sense of identity and well-being. However, the cyclone has changed the land and water, leading to soil salinity, and therefore it has also changed their culture, livelihoods and identities. Those who used to farm or fish for their livelihoods have difficulty planting and fishing due to salty water. Indeed, the smell and taste of the land and water have been different since the cyclone. The salty land and water are connected to the memory of the disaster, and it has materially changed their lives.

Landscapes are sites of embodied memory, and they offer existential grounds for experiences of the cyclone. As a researcher, my cultural background and general knowledge limit my understanding of the landscape and the cyclone. Yet, the physicality and materiality of landscapes act as grounds for comprehending experience of the cyclone and displacement. When I visited Talokekone village, I was able to fathom the severity of the cyclone and comprehend the hardship and pain of the villagers. I grasped the difficulty of sustaining farming and fishing as their primary livelihoods considering how wet and muddy the land is. Soil salinity due to Cyclone Nargis continues and it has affected the villagers' main livelihood activities prior to the cyclone. Their lives and stories are embedded in the wet, muddy land. This very real terrain enables outsiders to grasp the effects of the cyclone, appreciating the fragmentation of the villagers' everyday lives. Seeing most of their wooden houses had collapsed, walking on the muddy land, feeling damp and smelling the salt in the air helped me picture the situation during the cyclone and consider how their lives are still affected. It was extraordinary given that 11 years had passed.

Places such as shelters also have the potential to explicate the physical, embodied and sensory dimensions of the cyclone and displacement experience. During my fieldwork, some of the interviews took place in the church where the survivors stayed for around 20 days because their houses were destroyed. I found that the church holds meaning for them. Not only was it a haven during the cyclone, but it was a place that created solidarity when they were displaced. Waiting in the darkness of the church, where nothing could be seen, heard or done, strengthened the survivors' bonds. Speaking with the villagers in the church helped me imagine the situation and interpret their stories. While recounting the first day of the cyclone, one interviewee said coconut trees fell onto the roof of the church, making holes in it. Inside the church, the repaired roof is a legacy of the cyclone that continues to remind the survivors of it even today.

The sight, smell and sound of the landscape is associated with memories, and survivors' memories revolve around their narratives. The church and impoverished soil recorded the impact of the cyclone in the past, and in the present, they influence the survivors' lives and continue to recreate the stories of the past. Not only the physical and material features of the land and the church, but also their sensorial qualities – how they are perceived and sensed through the body (Tilley and Cameron-Daum, 2017), enable me to enter imaginatively into the

¹ Ayeyarwady Region is a coastal region located in southern Myanmar.

² Talokekone village is located in Ayeyarwady Region.

story of the cyclone and displacement. That is, the landscapes can create a bridge between the past and the present, and between the insiders and outsiders through their mutual interaction occurring within and around the landscapes.

My experience of Talokekone village was subjective, beyond the generalisation of survivors' experiences. I encourage readers to think of the stories in a specific place, at a specific time. In towns such as Labutta, which was also severely affected, many houses were rebuilt and the ground was not entirely muddy. Experiences vary according to places and the places alter through time. The way we understand places depends on how we engage with them. For instance, the routes taken to reach a place and its surroundings construct our perceptive experiences (Tilley 2010: 27), and these elements affect the narratives shared. Survivors' stories are intimately connected to the landscape itself. They emphasise the importance of perceiving and sensing places and highlight the cyclone's extraordinariness.

As a researcher, walking through the lands, touching them and smelling them, and sitting inside the church, provided a deeper insight into the stories of the cyclone and displacement. Admittedly, we received information from the media and reports, including the intensity of the cyclone, such as the number of the displaced and dead, or images and videos of damage. However, this information creates a sense of distance since such views are often sensorily deprived. Looking at how the cyclone was perceived and experienced by survivors, and focusing on how survivors remember it through their perceptions, fosters understanding of their lived experiences of the cyclone and displacement.

Conclusion

Landscapes are an important part of remembering and recounting the cyclone. They offer the researcher valuable opportunities to engage with participants and reach a more nuanced understanding of the experience of the cyclone, connecting to survivors' daily lives. In the field, I learned not only about the practice of using the land and church as a place to meet and chat with others about elemental aspects of their everyday lives, but also about their experiences with this extraordinary event and their displacement. My findings demonstrate that the focus on physical and material as well as sensory aspects of places can reveal a range of environmental, social and cultural perspectives. Landscapes can provide useful context through which to better understand insiders' and outsiders' experiences and their interactions. Participants' and the researcher's perceptions of landscapes may be different, but their engagement with landscapes provides a richer understanding of lived experiences and meanings associated with a particular place and event. As landscapes increasingly respond to climate change and affect livelihoods, the approach to landscapes is key to protecting vulnerable populations and building resilience.

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