

# Dressing the Myanmar Migrant Body: (In-)Visibility and Empowerment in Thailand

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## Abstract

*The invisibility of migrants has been widely analysed in relation to states' policies and practices. I argue in this article that emphasising the role of states and institutions in marginalising vulnerable populations by rendering them invisible throws a shadow over the multifaceted ways in which migrants interpret and relate to invisibility. Among Myanmar migrants in Thailand, as we shall see here, the notion that invisibility provides a protective shield to migrant bodies is in fact widespread. While invisibility is at times perceived as a threat to the future of these people, conceiving of invisibility solely as a tool of domination precludes us from fully understanding the complexity of Myanmar migrants' experiences in Thailand and, more specifically, the many forms of empowerment that shape these experiences. Privileging the discourses and practices of Myanmar migrants in Thailand about their sartorial choices reveals that migrants appreciate invisibility for its capacity to create control over their own bodies. Further, it reveals the complexities of negotiating and expressing diasporic sartorial conventions.*

**KEYWORDS:** migration, invisibility, dress, Myanmar, Thailand

## INTRODUCTION

WITH THE RISING FLOW of persons across international borders, migrants' bodies have emerged as a site of contestation; their bodies are variously regulated, controlled, detained, and deported (Anderson 2010, Andersson 2014; Griffiths 2014; De Genova and Peutz 2010). At the same time, despite their growing presence everywhere, migrants' bodies have disappeared, rendered invisible by being removed from our sight. Studies of migrants' invisibility have contributed in important ways to conceptualising the processes that shape our vision and inform our imaginaries about the belongings of people in the present and past (Bron dizio 2004; Bryce-Laporte 1972; Wing 2007). Invisibility, so the argument goes, has become a tool of domination for states to deny agency to people.

In this article, I argue that, contrary to this prevailing notion of invisibility as a tool of domination, there are instances in which migrants also experience

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invisibility as liberating and empowering. This emancipating aspect of invisibility has been obscured, as most attention has focused on the systemic ways that states and other institutions render migrants invisible. Emphasising these powerful, structural conditions, which, for example, often prevent migrants from obtaining necessary services, throws a shadow over the multifaceted ways in which migrants can interpret and relate to invisibility. Providing analytical room for conceptualisations of invisibility beyond oppression, the pertinent perspectives of Myanmar migrants reveal the complexity of negotiating and expressing diasporic sartorial choices. Among Myanmar migrants in Thailand, as we shall see here, the notion that invisibility shields migrant bodies was in fact widespread. Migrants who advocated this position experienced invisibility as a form of empowerment and a tool to regain power and control over one's body by dressing inconspicuously. Self-imposed invisibility, however, was also perceived as a threat to the future of Myanmar migrants as a distinct identity. Documenting and analysing various perspectives among migrants allows us to broaden our understandings of invisibility and to reflect on the positionality of different migrants. The discordant interpretations of invisibility also provide insights into the ways in which migrants create, conceive, and contest emerging social norms in a diasporic context.

This approach to invisibility as a protective shield also ties in with debates about the marking and unmarking of (migrant) bodies. The emergence of whiteness studies has pointed out the ways in which white skin colour confers privileges by forming the unmarked norm whose presence is taken for granted (Linke 1999; McIntosh 1997; Wolf-Meyer 2015). The ethnographic narrative of this article takes place outside a majority-white population, and skin colour is not the primary marker of difference between migrants and local residents. Instead, bodily and sartorial practices become markers of difference and/or sameness. This is not unique to this context but reflects the role that sartorial practices play in addressing social norms (Entwistle 2015).

This article addresses questions such as: How can bodies become unseen? What are markers of alterity? What role do appearances play in creating marked and unmarked bodies? What sacrifices are entailed in unmarking bodies? This article suggests answers that are rooted in the sartorial and discursive practices of Myanmar migrants in Thailand.

The term 'precarity' has primarily been employed to reflect on the effects of increasing neoliberalisation of the workplace and the economic insecurities that often result from it (Campbell 2013; Kong 2011; Millar 2014; Molé 2010). This article, however, draws on a related conceptualisation of precarity. Banki (2013) argues that additional conceptualisations of precarity – in her case, she uses the term 'precarity of place' – should be considered alongside the traditional understanding of precarity to fully comprehend the circumstances labour migrants live and work in. In a similar vein, this article does not focus on situations of precarious labour or employment but, at the same time, is intricately tied to these, as

the very act of labour migration creates the conditions under which migrants come to live. In the ethnographic context here, migrants often remained able to choose between various sectors of work and types of labour and were able to avoid remaining in abusive or precarious work environments. At the same time, migrants needed to develop encompassing strategies to navigate their mobile lives, and this article speaks to the everyday experiences of being a labour migrant – highlighting the intertwined nature of work and life as a labour migrant.

The research for this article was conducted over a period of 18 months between 2011 and 2012. Throughout this period, I was based in “Khuan Charoen,”<sup>2</sup> a township in Phang Nga province on Thailand’s west coast. My main research tool was participant-observation, in addition to a limited number of semi-structured interviews. I rented a small house in a small cluster of rental units mostly inhabited by Myanmar migrant workers. I volunteered as a teacher at a school for children of migrant workers, accompanied NGO workers to countless trainings specifically targeting Myanmar migrants, went on field trips exploring the living conditions in various parts of the province, was involved in the work of the public library for migrants, and spent many hours at markets and in migrants’ homes.

## **INVISIBILITY AND STATE PRACTICES**

The ethnography of invisibility overwhelmingly understands invisibility as a marginalising condition that further hurts already vulnerable populations. This relationship has been demonstrated across the fields of science studies (Sele 2012), gender and sexuality studies (Gross 2001), critical race theory (Rollock 2012), and migration studies (Naber 2000). Across these different disciplines and approaches, scholars have argued that invisibility is the result of intersecting processes that, in the end, limit our vision and restrict our ability to perceive diversity. This predominant notion of invisibility as injury – particularly in migration studies – is, however, the result of understanding invisibility primarily as a condition that is imposed by states, their policies, and institutional practices on migrants against their will.

Writing about the African diaspora at large in Europe, Carter (2010) examines how routines that states put in place effectively erase the presence of migrants from public acknowledgment. More importantly, he argues, these routines naturalise the vision from which migrants have been excluded: “Invisibility is not a once-and-for-all event but is rather an ongoing, often occasional or flexible employment of power, politics, and social positioning that must be

<sup>2</sup>To ensure the anonymity of my sources, this article refers to the town as “Khuan Charoen” rather than by its actual name. Likewise, all the personal names used in this article are pseudonyms.

configured as a kind of routine practice capable of being reinstated into the flow of everyday events” (6).

One source of migrants’ vulnerability to becoming invisible is their marginal position in the enduring conceptual framework of nation-states (Göle 2011). Policies and legal tools that regulate the presence of migrants create blurred legal spaces of existence and, ultimately, invisibility (Coutin 2000; Galemba 2013; Reeves 2013). At other times, migrants become invisible by virtue of their presence not being documented in existing systems of population classifications (Mac an Ghail 2000; Parla 2007). Institutional invisibility can have serious consequences affecting the overall health and well-being of migrant communities (Bail *et al.* 2012). The focus on the possibly oppressive consequences of state policies and practices resonates with scholarly accounts of Myanmar migrants and their encounter with the state. Domestic workers in particular suffer from a lack of access to services as they are rendered invisible (Sirithon 2004; Toyota 2006), but the contributions of agricultural workers have also been erased from the public eye (Sai Latt 2011).

The recurring emphasis on state actions as the cause of migrants’ invisibility has contributed to the conceptualisation of invisibility as overwhelmingly negative. This perception is also palpable in studies that emphasise not the role of states but other ways in which the erasure of migrants occurs. Popular and literary narratives shape our imaginations about the lives of migrants, often creating and reinforcing stereotypes and thereafter creating blind spots in perceiving migrants’ presence beyond stereotypes (Samie 2013; Wald 2011). In a similar vein, scholars who highlight the perspectives of migrants on invisibility focus mainly on strategies by migrants to overcome this situation (Aguilar-San Juan 2009; Garbin 2013; Vogel 2014). If we shift the focus from invisibility as a tool of systemic domination to the material ways in which presence and (in-)visibility is marked by migrants, the potential for invisibility to empower migrants becomes apparent. The emphasis in this article is on invisibility vis-à-vis the communities that migrants live in; this includes ordinary citizens as well as state representatives such as police officers.

## **INVISIBILITY AND MATERIAL CULTURE: PERCEIVING OPPORTUNITY**

Drawing attention to the role that material culture plays in constructing (in-)visible communities of migrants, Juul’s (2014) analysis of ritual performances opens the possibility of conceiving of invisibility as a desirable condition. She points out that migrants employ invisibility strategically to influence the perceptions of others. Influencing the perception of others, or rather, deflecting attention from one’s person, also plays a crucial role in Miller’s (2010) analysis of migrants wearing jeans in London. In his analysis, jeans serve as a “postsemiotic

garment” that marks migrants for “nothing other than their own ordinariness” (421). These studies illustrate that invisibility can serve multiple purposes and document the opportunities it provides to migrants.

Miller’s (2010) study also relates to a body of literature that interrogates the strategies and responses of migrants to living abroad. These studies have contributed to a more multifaceted understanding of invisibility, particularly regarding migrants’ strategic use and employment of the concept. While scholars mostly do not refer to migrants’ play with material culture as manipulating their visibility, the resulting analysis describes how migrants strategically influence their perceived identities, at times navigating between multiple roles they inhabit (Handa 2003; Mills 1999) or strategically advancing or contradicting appearances of assimilation (Malkki 1995). Following the line of inquiry suggested by the latter studies, this article advances the notion of invisibility as a multifaceted concept that at times might work to the detriment of migrants but also can be strategically evoked and moulded to serve the interests of migrants.

## **SEEING MYANMAR MIGRANTS IN KHUAN CHAROEN**

The awareness and visibility of Myanmar migrants in Thailand have increased significantly since the fishing industry and its abusive working conditions have been brought to international attention.<sup>3</sup> These recent reports of abused migrants resonate with existing scholarly observations that document the abuse and challenges Myanmar migrants experience abroad (Grundy-Warr 2004; Kim 2012; Pearson and Kusakabe 2012). This one-dimensional portrayal has resulted in imagining the figure of the migrant primarily through the lens of victimhood, exemplified by Okamoto’s portrait of the sex worker (2013). While these representations are certainly truthful, abusive conditions such as those on fishing boats are not representative of the working environments of the majority of the estimated two to three million Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand.<sup>4</sup> These portrayals have rendered invisible alternative accounts that analyse the ways in which migrants seek empowerment and have fortified scholarly notions of invisibility as injury. This article seeks to contribute to debates about invisibility and migration but also aims to construct an image of Myanmar migrants beyond the chokehold of state policies and the abuse by employers. Such an approach is

<sup>3</sup>In July 2015, a special report in the *New York Times* documented the work conditions under the title “Sea Slaves: The Human Misery that Feeds Pets and Livestock” [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/world/outlaw-ocean-thailand-fishing-sea-slaves-pets.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/world/outlaw-ocean-thailand-fishing-sea-slaves-pets.html?_r=0). More recently, the CNN covered a report by Human Rights Watch that documents ongoing abuse: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/23/asia/hrw-thailand-fishing-reform-report/index.html>

<sup>4</sup>Estimates about the number of Myanmar migrants in Thailand vary widely. An article by the Migrant Workers Rights Network (2015) estimates that there are 1.7 million documented Myanmar workers and a total of approximately three million Myanmar migrants living and working in Thailand.

intended to create room for more nuanced conversations in which migrants are not bystanders but participants in negotiating their daily lifeworlds.

Myanmar migrants work and live throughout Thailand, though there are especially large populations on the Andaman coast, along the Gulf of Thailand, in and around Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and along the 2400-km Thai-Myanmar border. Khuan Charoen, a rural township situated among the sparsely populated rubber and palm oil estates of Phang Nga province, is markedly different from many of these densely populated areas. Many of the estimated 20,000–80,000 Myanmar migrants in Phang Nga province (Kyaw Soe Htoo Htoo *et al.* 2012; Veerman and Reid 2011) have found employment on these plantations, and a growing hospitality industry and strong construction sector provide additional employment opportunities. Migrants live in scattered, small settlements. The area's residents must travel far to commute to work, shop for groceries, and meet others outside their homes. Although pickup trucks are a common sight on Phang Nga's roads, motorbikes are the most common form of transportation.

Most migrants in Khuan Charoen come from rural Dawei, as Thanintharyi province in southern Myanmar is colloquially referred to. For the majority, it is a new experience to live outside the social boundaries of their familiar communities and villages. Ranong – a three-hour bus-ride from Khuan Charoen – on the Thai side of the border is the southernmost border crossing between Thailand and Myanmar. It serves as a gateway to Dawei that migrants can reach after entering Myanmar through Kawthaung by boat from Ranong. Ranong is a bustling border town, and everywhere are signs of the presence of Myanmar people: Burmese-language signs in store fronts and along the roads, or products such as thanaka or betel nuts prominently displayed in stores and markets. However, the obvious signs marking the presence of Myanmar migrants become rare the farther one travels from the border. Khuraburi, a coastal fishing town, is one of the few towns in Phang Nga province where migrants unapologetically lead public lives. In Khuan Charoen, the careful observer might encounter incidental signs along the road advertising produce or jobs in Burmese, but the presence of only a few public sites to gather and to meet renders this migrant population largely invisible to passers-by.

## VISIBLE TRANSFORMATIONS

Upon my first visit to the home of a family of migrant workers, I witnessed how invisibility as a strategic tool was created and instrumentalised. A contact who was helping me get acquainted with life in Khuan Charoen took me on a trip to a rubber plantation. He was there in a professional capacity as an employee of an NGO that provides legal, medical, and educational support for migrants. The four of us – my contact, the couple working on the rubber plantation, and

myself – were all seated on a raised bamboo platform that at night served as the family's bed. Midway into the conversation between the NGO worker and the couple, the husband went into the other room of the secluded two-room bamboo shack. A few moments later, he returned to say goodbye, as he had to be elsewhere. He had changed from a *longyi* into shorts. Longyis, the generic term for the garment ubiquitously worn in Myanmar, were as popular among rural migrants in Khuan Charoen as in Myanmar. Longyis were commonly worn by men and women alike, although the designs and ways they were worn differed significantly. Men tied the 1 × 2 m tube-like piece of cloth into a tight knot, while women tucked it in on either side of their hips, creating a tightly fitting piece of clothing. In other parts of Southeast Asia, longyis were known as sarongs, yet the distinct patterns marked their wearers as migrants from Myanmar (Noack 2011). Wearing longyis in public made migrants unmistakably identifiable as such. However, the shorts that the rubber plantation worker had put on could have been purchased at the local market. They erased any obvious visual differences between him and residents of Phang Nga province, ultimately creating the conditions for invisibility.

Once my attention had been drawn to this simple act, I started to see similar habits all around me. My neighbours would change from their shorts or skirts into longyis as soon as they came home from work. Migrants living on rubber plantations spent their days in longyis when on the plantation but changed their attire whenever they left the plantation. At first sight, it might have read like a binary opposition between different fashion practices for domestic and public spaces, but it was not. I attended weddings, naming ceremonies, and funerals where longyis and other traditional items of clothing were worn by many attendees. Rather than representing binary oppositions between the home and public, dress and exploring various forms of material representation embodied the negotiations among migrants to articulate an emerging consensus around the figure of the migrant, an identity whose salience depended on the context.

## DRESSING THE INVISIBLE BODY

Clothes have long been recognised as an avenue for understanding the intersection between the embodied, individual self and the larger socio-political structures humans are embedded in (Küchler and Miller 2005). Dress has been analysed as offering its wearer a means of communicating beliefs, desires, belonging, status, and ideologies (Aranya 2007; Keeler 2005; Turner 1993). However, it has also been documented to serve as a form of domination that reflects on the body as a site of social control (An 2011; Body-Gendrot 2007; Naidu 2009; Bruck 2008).

I wondered about the reasons why migrants so commonly switched between longyis and pants and broached the subject with Daw Tin May, an elderly woman who, at the time of my research, lived with her daughter and granddaughter in

Khuan Charoen. In Myanmar, Daw Tin May had worked for a relative in a domestic setting. Moving to Thailand with her daughter and son-in-law should have marked the end of her work life. When her son-in-law unexpectedly died in a motorbike accident, however, Daw Tin May's plans changed. Her daughter was unable to work, as she was still nursing her own daughter and was in poor health. Thus, it was now up to Daw Tin May to provide for the family of three. She was lucky to find employment as a dishwasher in an Italian restaurant that, catering largely to tourists, was open only during the six-month tourist season each year. Daw Tin May worked from the afternoon until late at night. When she was not at work, her daily routine closely resembled her life in Mon state, where she had lived all her life before migrating to Thailand. She got up early in the morning, prepared food, ground thanaka for everybody,<sup>5</sup> did the laundry, and meditated. Her appearance included many of the features widely admired in women in Myanmar: long hair, a longyi, and thanaka. Moving to Thailand had not changed the overall rhythm of her life in the home.

What had changed, however, was her appearance outside of the home. In their modest shack in Khuan Charoen, Daw Tin May wore shirts and longyis at all times. Before leaving to work, she would change into shorts and a blouse. She had bought the shorts at the local market, as this was the first time in her life that she had taken to wearing them. She underwent a stunning transformation from a confident, elderly Myanmar lady to a migrant worker on her way to work. Daw Tin May despised shorts, as she had repeatedly shared with me, and hers would always at least cover her knees, in line with prevailing imperatives of modesty in Myanmar (Ikeya 2008). Daw Tin May was petite, no taller than 4 ft 1 in (124 cm), and many of the shorts she had picked at the market were designed for children, which looked unusual on her elderly body.

Responding to my question as to why she always changed into pants before leaving the house, she said it was easier to ride on a motorbike with pants than in a longyi. Ko Tin Tin, a colleague and fellow migrant worker, picked her up with a motorbike at home before work and dropped her off at night every day. While this was true, other women choose to sit sideways on a motorbike, and considerations of convenience seem to matter little to most. Some, for example, nurse their babies while on the back of a bike.

Daw Tin May's workplace required employees who worked in the restaurant to wear a uniform shirt, but as a dishwasher in the kitchen, she was exempted from this policy. Despite this exemption, she considered it necessary to change clothes before leaving for work. Daw Tin May added that changing into shorts also made it less likely that she and her colleague would be stopped by the police on the almost 30-minute-long commute from her house to the restaurant along the main road in the township. The permit for Ko Tin Tin's bike had

<sup>5</sup>Thanaka is a yellow paste created by rubbing the bark of a tree on a wet stone. It serves as make-up, sun protection, and a way to maintain cool skin in the hot climate.



expired, and a police inspection would have resulted in a fine. Irrespective of the invalid bike permit, migrants avoided interacting with the police at all costs, as they feared harassment.

Daw Tin May's choice to change from a longyi into pants before work reflects her awareness that different spaces encourage different appearances. Daw Tin May's preference for wearing longyis at home is a continuation of a lifelong social practice, offering emotional comfort and a familiar somatic experience (Allerton 2007). Her choice resonates with scholarship that points out the important role of domestic spaces for self-expression among migrants (Clarke 2001). Yet emphasising the affective dimension of material practices in the domestic space might result in furthering the binary between the private and public by ignoring the importance of social norms in the home.

I experienced the importance of respecting social norms in the private space, when seven-year-old twin sisters living in my neighbourhood shamed me in my own house. They told me it was inappropriate to expose my legs as I did, lifting my longyi over my ankles while sitting on a low stool. Their reprimand illustrated the power of social consensus and its internalisation; even seven-year-old girls who had lived in Thailand for most of their lives had a clear understanding of the appropriate bodily comportment of women in Myanmar. Daw Tin May had internalised these rules long ago, and they provided comfort to her now, at a time in her life when other social conventions and practices were renegotiated.

The apparent emerging consensus that in Thailand migrants ought to wear pants caused Daw Tin May to respond ambivalently, embracing change and the resulting convenience, yet also experiencing unease. Wearing pants to work reflected Daw Tin May's recognition of the new set of social norms that had emerged among migrants in Thailand. At the same time, wearing pants was in violation of conventions in Myanmar and might have stirred a small controversy in her hometown. Her ambivalent response speaks to the context-dependent interpretations of dress, emphasising the ways in which dress is always a situated practice, embedded in particular historical and social trajectories (Ehrkamp 2013; Entwistle 2000; Tarlo 1996).

A discussion with students served as a powerful illustration that it was not only elderly migrants like Daw Tin May, who had spent most of her life embedded in one particular cultural context, who struggled with negotiating emerging dress conventions. I taught at a school for children of Myanmar migrants, introducing the students to social science research methods and their relationship to argumentative reasoning. The nine students were in their final year of school, on the brink of entering the working world. They all had moved to Thailand with their parents and in some cases siblings. They constantly reflected on their futures: where they would be, what they would do, and who they would become.

We watched a video clip in class produced and posted by a young woman from Myanmar. She regularly posted videos on YouTube under the moniker

MissBurmese.<sup>6</sup> Ordinarily, her videos introduced a presumably foreign audience to the Burmese language, but this video targeted a different audience: people from Myanmar living abroad. She criticised – or as she put it, ranted – about the persistence of thanaka among Myanmar people overseas. She said that while people were free to use thanaka as much as they wanted in Myanmar, outside the country it was no longer appropriate to wear and it looked ridiculous. She repeatedly invoked the saying “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” to berate those who continued using thanaka.

After clarifying all the words and phrases used in the video,<sup>7</sup> I asked the students about their opinions regarding the saying “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” The first student to respond agreed with the saying. According to him, migrants needed to avoid being spotted by the police at all costs, and markers such as thanaka or longyis made it too easy to be identified as a migrant. Kyaw Naing Oo, another student, objected, saying that the recent proliferation of legal papers made it less important for migrants to blend in, and therefore he opposed the saying. Asking about other things that the students considered typical of Myanmar, the students created a list that included longyis, long hair for women, thanaka, tea leaf salad,<sup>8</sup> and fish sauce.<sup>9</sup> There was wide agreement that these items all marked the identification and belonging of people to Myanmar. However, the students were less certain about the inverse effect of abandoning or imitating material practices.

I made everybody laugh by first asking whether the identity of Moe Oo, a student in class, as a person from Myanmar was questionable, as she had short hair. They laughed even harder when I followed up by asking whether, in their eyes, I could claim Myanmar identity as I wore longyis. Quickly dismissing my statements, they were eager to discuss cultural and material change when living outside one’s homeland. Reflecting on why fewer people wore longyis, some students brought up convenience as a reason. Longyis made it more likely to be singled out as migrants, an unnecessary potential threat. Another student mentioned insecurity or self-hatred. In the face of other customs, migrants might start questioning their own habits and might become insecure about practices that were hitherto taken for granted. Moe Oo pointed out that one might want to assimilate to different cultural conventions – particularly if one married a person from another country. Saung Oo suggested that migrants might want to hide their background and therefore changed established practices.

<sup>6</sup>The discussed video has since been removed.

<sup>7</sup>The video was in English.

<sup>8</sup>Tea leaf salad is a popular snack food prepared from fermented tea leaves that are prepared in oil and eaten together with a variation of fried garlic, peanuts, sesame, dried shrimp, and dried peas.

<sup>9</sup>Fish sauce is a pungent paste made from dried fish. It is eaten with rice or served alongside other dishes.

The students' responses illustrate the futility of trying to pinpoint a single reason for migrants' hesitation to continue wearing longvis. The many changes that migration can bring into the lives of those concerned were reflected in the responses: changed views of self and others, and interest in other cultural practices, but also the greater likelihood that one's body would be objectified. The students' idea to try to hide one's body from the gaze of others has been documented as a strategy among migrants to avoid othering in other parts of the world as well (Dudley 2010; Ghorashi 2010).

### **THE SUSPECT MIGRANT BODY**

The students, like Daw Tin May, pointed to the importance of making their bodies invisible to the Thai police. Expectations of mistreatment by the Thai police were common among migrants. These concerns were rooted in negative encounters that some migrants experienced and the resulting anxiety-provoking stories that circulated widely. Coincidentally, I had witnessed how the bodies of migrants were suspect at all times in the eyes of Thai law enforcement. I attended a wedding celebration that was held outside the public library for migrant workers. The public library had been established by migrant workers for migrant workers and was one of the few public sites in Khuan Charoen that served as a gathering place for migrants. Any migrant was free to use the space for their purposes, and celebrations were commonly held there.

A tent had been set up outside to provide shelter from the sun, and guests sat around tables and enjoyed the food served by the newlywed couple. The small one-room building that housed the library was located along the road, and the tent was set up behind it, visible from the street but not in direct sight of those passing by. The property on which the library was built also housed two large trucks parked in an oversized garage, the centrepiece of the property, which made it look like a construction site rather than a public library.

As I stood in the doorway of the library with my back to the street, Ma Khin Sabae, the young woman with whom I was chatting, suddenly drew my attention to an unmarked police car behind me. I turned around to see a plain car and asked how she knew it was the police. She said she knew all the unmarked police cars in the area. Only a minute later, the same police car pulled up next to the library. Three officers got out, and Ma Khin Sabae rushed towards them; she was one of the few migrants present who spoke Thai. She maintained confidence in the face of the three officers and invited them to take a seat and to join the festivities. Two of the police officers sat down, and another migrant hurried to serve them bowls of soup.

While at first there seemed to be some friendly banter, the overall atmosphere was tense, as all of the guests had fallen silent and carefully watched how the conversation would unfold. Suddenly, the officers got up and approached

a young man sitting at the next table. As Ma Khin Sabae rushed to act as interpreter, all of the men suddenly stood up and removed their shirts, apparently following the orders of the policemen. Moments later, as more men stood and did the same, one of the officers turned around and saw me standing in the doorway of the library, where I had been watching the scene unfold. His surprise at finding a Caucasian among the crowd of migrants was written all over his face. Soon after spotting me, he ordered the other officers to get in the car, and they left. Ma Khin Sabae came over, and I asked what had happened. She said the officers were looking for a young man with a tattoo who had stolen something from a shop. The crowd of migrants was suspect in the eyes of the police, which was why they insisted on inspecting the male migrants' bare upper bodies.

While it is understandable that the police try to fulfil their responsibility of locating a thief, the manner in which they pursued this at the wedding speaks to the arbitrariness with which migrants can be subjected to state power. Forcing migrants to expose their bodies is an act of humiliation rather than criminal investigation. Tattoos were so common among migrants and Thais alike that they did not serve as individual identifiers, unless one was looking for a specific image. Events such as this, however, illustrated to migrants their own vulnerability and informed fears such as those shared by Daw Tin May and the students above. This vignette, which illustrates the potential penal power of the state, helps explain migrant concerns about police interventions. It also points to the ambiguous role that legal status plays in protecting migrants from arbitrary interventions, as Kyaw Naing Oo brought up earlier. The national verification (NV) process, which has been underway since 2009, serves as a way for undocumented migrants to obtain visas and work permits without the threat of deportation. The process that grants amnesty to undocumented Myanmar migrants living in Thailand has been criticised, and shortcomings have been documented (Hall 2012; Mahidol Migration Center 2011). It has, however, equipped more Myanmar migrants than ever before with official papers that grant them the legal right to live and work in Thailand. Students like Kyaw Naing Oo felt more secure about their presence in Thailand as a result of completing the NV process. The episode above, however, throws into question whether legal status will protect migrants effectively from arbitrary interventions. The police officers showed no interest in the legal status of the migrants present but considered the migrant body at-large suspect.

## DUPLICATING THE INVISIBLE MIGRANT

Anticipating disturbing encounters with law enforcement played a role in Daw Tin May's sartorial considerations and was also suggested by the students as a reason why longyis were no longer considered convenient to wear. In contrast to their lives in Myanmar, shifting unwanted attention from their bodies

became an important aspect of living in Thailand as a migrant. The emphasis on needing to anticipate unexpected encounters also resonated with advice given to newcomers by influential figures in the migrant community.

Ko Kyi Maung was a public health worker who had completed informal medical training, monitored health concerns of migrants, and administered basic medical aid. He worked closely with his wife, who was pursuing an online degree in law in Myanmar. The patience and empathy with which the couple worked had turned them into well-loved advocates of migrants. Migrants turned to them for advice and followed their suggestions. Soe Moe and Ko Kyi Maung travelled widely in Phang Nga province to provide basic medical care but also provided a sounding board for migrants who did not know who else to turn to.

While I helped Ko Kyi Maung edit reports about the medical care he and his wife had provided to migrants over the previous few weeks, we started talking about advice he gave to newly arrived migrants. The transition was difficult for many, as few migrants had ever left their homes before migrating to Thailand. Ko Kyi Maung suggested to newcomers that one way to ease their transition was to adjust their appearance. By wearing clothes purchased at the local markets, they would not stand out as much. More specifically, he suggested that they not wear longyis in public, since it was a unique identifier of Myanmar migrants. I asked why it was important not to be recognised as a migrant. Ko Kyi Maung was evasive and responded that it was a good way of avoiding problems. I then asked whether it was specifically a way of avoiding becoming a target of police interventions. He shook his head and said that many of the problems migrants experienced resulted from interactions with the general public, not merely from friction with the police. He was aware of recurring problematic encounters with the police but did not see them as the main reason for advising migrants to change clothes. I asked whether, in his opinion, wearing different clothes made migrants invisible. Again, he hesitated to answer and continued saying that not wearing longyis in public was a way to attract less attention, if not become invisible.

Ko Kyi Maung did not think that the presence of migrants could or should be erased. Even if migrants opted not to wear longyis, they continued to speak Dawei or Burmese, often having animated and loud discussions wherever they went. Mannerisms such as holding on to the right elbow with the left hand – for example, when paying for produce at the market – were also cultural identifiers.<sup>10</sup> In Ko Kyi Maung's eyes, changing one's appearance communicated an earnest attempt to establish cordial relations with the Thai community. Ko Kyi Maung's advice was rooted in a keen sense of hierarchy, in which migrants

<sup>10</sup>In Myanmar society, it is considered polite to hold an object with both hands when handing it to another person. As this is not always convenient, lightly touching your right elbow with your left hand is the everyday embodied expression of this social convention.

were always placed lower than any Thai. Their lowly social status required compromise that, in a position of power, was not necessary. There were unpredictable social costs associated with violating unwritten rules of behaviour for migrants. For example, Ko Kyi Maung, as a well-known public figure in Phang Nga province, felt he could not explicitly implicate Thais in disrespecting Myanmar migrants. During our private conversations, he repeatedly hesitated, thinking of diplomatic ways to express his thoughts, placing the primary burden on migrants in navigating unknown social territory. In Ko Kyi Maung's opinion, decreasing visible difference was a tool to prevent potential friction and facilitate interactions with Thais. Dress was not the only visible identifier, but it was an identifier over which migrants had considerable control. Dressing as Thais was a way for migrants to ease into their new roles as migrants, a role that in his opinion required willingness to change and adapt.

Ko Kyi Maung's advice must be understood as almost a policy for migrants in Khuan Charoen and beyond. The authority he enjoyed as a result of his skills and dedication were unrivalled in Khuan Charoen. Migrants were grateful for the long distances he travelled to see them and recognised his care as sincere. The physical isolation many migrants experienced was aggravated by the lack of communication with others. Travel was difficult, newspapers rare, and phone calls expensive. For many migrants, therefore, Ko Kyi Maung's visits provided a connection with a larger community of migrants, and the information he shared with them was taken seriously. Still, as we are about to see, not all migrants agreed that embracing invisibility was the way to construct and maintain a public life as a community of migrant workers.

## DRESSING PRESENCE

“Uncle” worked as the cleaner at the daily morning market.<sup>11</sup> On one Sunday morning when I visited the market, he invited me for a cup of tea. We talked about a wide range of topics: his jobs, his boss, and his family. The appearance of a young woman changed the direction of our conversation. After a short introduction, Uncle started to criticise the appearance of my new acquaintance, Nyi Nyi, by contrasting our clothing styles. I was wearing a longyi and shirt, while Nyi Nyi was wearing shorts and a short-sleeved blouse. The blouse and shorts resembled the styles sold at the local market stalls. Uncle accused Nyi Nyi of looking like a Thai woman and told her that her current appearance would make it impossible for her to return to Myanmar. By comparison, Uncle continued, I looked like a Burmese woman. This otherwise friendly, caring, and supportive person had launched a vitriolic critique that put my new acquaintance on the defensive. Nyi Nyi assured him that she would wear different clothes upon her

<sup>11</sup>“Uncle” is one of the many kin terms that migrants use to address each other, each term representing one's own position vis-à-vis others in a system of hierarchy and respect.

return to Myanmar and pointed to her wrist, indicating that she would replace the short-sleeved blouses with long-sleeved blouses.

Nyi Nyi's transformation towards the ideal of invisibility was so successful, according to Uncle, that she resembled a Thai person. I did not ask Nyi Nyi why she was wearing shorts and a blouse. She might simply have preferred this style over wearing longyi. Uncle's response, however, made her motivations irrelevant. He dismissed the practice of rendering one's body invisible, as in his eyes it was a threat to the community of migrant workers. Moreover, he put the responsibility on women to maintain normative ideas of tradition and modesty, drawing on a long history in which women's bodily practices were closely tied to ideal notions of womanhood (Ikeya 2011). In the eyes of Uncle, embracing invisibility implied abandoning existing social norms (Brenner 1996). To him, dress was not a situated practice that mediated between the embodied self and larger sociocultural norms (Femenias 2005; Roces 2005) but rather an essentialised routine. His statements were undergirded by the anxiety of the disappearance of existing norms and values and the people upholding these. Uncle wondered how it would be possible to ensure the future of Myanmar migrants in Thailand if they were not recognised as such at first sight.

### **(IN-)VISIBLE FUTURES**

The ethnographic narrative presents different visions and interpretations among Myanmar migrants of invisibility, speaking to the importance of taking into account the positionality of individuals, such as generational differences or gender ideologies. By documenting these differences, I aim to open up understandings of invisibility beyond a tool of domination. Focusing on the positions of Ko Kyi Maung and Uncle, it is insightful to ask what kind of communities are reflected in the two conceptualisations of dress, assuming that dress reflects communal belonging (Dudley 2003). If clothes are agentive objects (Gell 1998), what stories were told by the different conceptualisations of invisible and visible migrants?

Ko Kyi Maung's vision of the invisible migrant body was rooted in his perception that living in Thailand might cause friction for Myanmar migrants that was absent in their home country. Ko Kyi Maung knew about migrants' fear of the Thai police force, but he was concerned about other sources of friction as well. Ko Kyi Maung was an experienced community medic and had the opportunity to talk with many migrants all across Phang Nga province. He anticipated challenges that migrants would face while adjusting to living in Thailand. He did not explicitly point to the Thai community as a source of conflict but recognised the multiple challenges migrants faced, including negotiating life in a different community. Ko Kyi Maung was worried about the experiences of othering that migrants might face, and his advice was mostly directed at avoiding potential conflict – irrespective of the likelihood that it would actually occur. Dressing the

migrant body in inconspicuous ways was a crucial component of living peacefully. Creating an invisible migrant body, however, also meant that migrants inadvertently chose to render themselves a largely silent presence in Khuan Charoen. Ko Kyi Maung considered this public silence a necessary condition for creating an empowered community that was not readily subject to intimidation and violence. In his vision of an invisible migrant body, visual differences between Thais and Myanmar migrants were glossed over; yet the two postulated groups remained indistinguishably different and separate, enabling the community of migrants to thrive in Thailand. Unlike assimilation (Alba and Nee 1997), invisibility is a strategy that allows migrants to become unseen without becoming fully integrated into the existing social fabric in Thailand. In this context, invisibility can be considered a strategy to explicitly avoid assimilation.

Uncle also envisioned a time when Myanmar migrants would be able to lead productive lives in Thailand. However, he perceived invisibility as foreclosing this very possibility. In his eyes, a community of migrant workers could only continue to exist if they were recognisable by visual markers that, in his opinion, signalled their belonging to Myanmar. His heightened awareness and critical assessment of the sartorial changes among Myanmar migrants reflected an underlying anxiety about the disappearance of Myanmar migrants (Fortier 2003). He fears that Myanmar migrants will ultimately assimilate into Khuan Charoen society. While there is little evidence that Myanmar migrants in Thailand are assimilating (Dudley 2011; Lee 2014), the decades-long presence of Myanmar migrants in Thailand has caused critical reflections that bring into question whether returning to Myanmar is viable (Amporn 2017; Wathinee *et al.* 2012). By interpreting clothes as a direct reflection of one's singular identity, Uncle believed he witnessed the disappearance of norms and values that in his opinion constituted the identities of (female) Myanmar migrants. In Uncle's conceptualisation, migrants needed to uncompromisingly develop their own spaces within a public sphere that encompassed Thais and Myanmar migrants.

This disagreement about the sartorial "making and marking" (Goldstein-Gidoni 2001: 67) of the migrant body speaks to the challenges of negotiating social norms and rules as migrants. Diasporic communities have long been portrayed as an important site of creating hybrid or cosmopolitan forms of expression, as the global movement of migrant workers has transposed values, aesthetics, and expectations (Vertovec 2010; Werbner 1999). Yet the process through which mobile populations derive these alternative forms of expression is messy and brings to the fore deeply seated notions about appropriate ways of existing, expressing, and interacting.

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