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Calibrated Engagement

Chronicles of Local Politics in the Heartland of Myanmar

Stéphen Huard

Calibrated Engagement

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Preface

Calibrated Engagement is an ethnography of power dynamics in an internal frontier of the Myanmar state. The book explores a rural society riven by uncertainty after half a century of dictatorship. It is based on unique fieldwork as I immersed myself in a village for seventeen months. This work counters the opacity surrounding politics in authoritarian states by thinking creatively of a region and its people so often described in the language of timeless tradition and agrarian reproduction.

The events I deal with in this book took place in Anya, the dry lands of central Myanmar where the majority of the Burmese Buddhist population, called the Bama, resided historically. Following the classical anthropology of Southeast Asia, Anya belongs to the category of lowland societies. It thus ought to be a state space (Scott 2009), where divine kingship (Leach 1960), clientelism (Nash 1965) and hierarchy (Keeler 2017) are supposed to be the main ingredients of politics. In this book, I show that the nature of authority and the power dynamics in Anya are less about hierarchical and patron–client arrangements than about uncertainties and agency. There, politics is about evaluation and about how people act on that evaluation: how people calibrate the way they engage with each other.

Politics is evaluated each day: not only in government offices, but in domestic spaces, in farm fields and during conflicts and ceremonies. To chart the transformations of a polity under military surveillance, the book looks at local politics as made of chains of relationship, of memories and of forms of engagement. My ethnographic exploration of village elections, familial dilemmas, land conflicts and collective activities redefines male leadership as mediating boundaries of meaning about responsibilities and obligations. The book connects past and present to show how changing structures, hierarchies and institutions are reflected through moral ruptures and shifting conceptions of *bigness*, defined as the character of what has influence, is socially important and politically powerful. In direct and

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indirect ways, this is an ethnography of local politics that speaks to rural worlds across Asia and beyond where uncertainty is rampant.

The book explores how people make politics at a distance with the state in the vein of anarchist anthropology. It takes the reader to the heartland of Myanmar, and shows the value of weaving together ethnography and history to reveal the depth and originality of rural politics after decades of dictatorship. Despite its centrality in the country's history, the Anya region remains quite unknown compared to other places in Myanmar. Part of the reason for this lacuna is that long-term fieldwork has been almost impossible since the 1960s. This situation resulted from the isolationism of the successive autocrats who ran the country through coups, guns and cronies. One consequence is that we tended to overestimate the homogeneity of Bama society and to imagine the central drylands as a state space.

This work is an anthropological take on politics defined, following Postero and Elinoff, as 'a practice of world-making that proceeds through constellations of critique, disagreement, difference, and conflict' (2019: 6). As Li pointed out (2019), the concept of politics is often used in a binary mode to contrast practices of critique and contestation (politics understood as disrupting power relations) on one side, and configurations of power (politics understood as settling power in a new form), on the other. The theoretical construct I create for understanding politics in a landscape riven by uncertainty is *engagement*. Engagement could also be a binary: to engage or not engage. But it is not the case here. I capture the different ways and intensities in which people engage with each other through the idea of *calibrated engagement*. This reflects how people gauge obligations, relations, the past and potential futures through interactions and situations. It captures how people scale, imagine and engage in personal, familial, collective and state affairs.

This pragmatic approach is productive in making sense of politics in an authoritarian landscape where local leaders have no real binding power. It destabilizes the idea that (karmic) hierarchy is the social glue in Anya, and allows an ethnography of 'practices that politicize what appears to be fixed, or that support existing configurations of power and forge new ones' (Li 2019: 32–33). Looking at how people fashion and calibrate responsibilities and obligations during interactions reveals the different networks and domains organizing local politics. Describing the course of a ceremony, of an election or of a conflict reveals multiple temporalities and shows how the past is sedimented and mobilized in the making of a place. The book links a series of narratives about former men of power, indigeneity, morality and the effects of state violence to uncover a male geography of responsibilities and belonging in which village and social affairs progressively became valued domains of action and avenues for bigness against a background of dispossession and corruption.

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My approach will thus appeal to researchers who think creatively about ethnography as a way of observing the multiple modalities and intensities of participants' engagement in situations (Katz and Csordas 2003). I use it as both a way of producing knowledge by working through language, material devices, gestures and transfers and, in a pragmatic sense, a way of understanding the networks of memories, actions and meanings embedded in a singular situation. The book rethinks political institutions as anthropological foci at the intersection of singular practices and intentions. This entails a shift from the typology of institutions, the characterization of procedures and the classification of strategies towards the study of the capacities deployed in action. The book's redefinition of male leadership, as a process of mediating boundaries of meaning about responsibilities and obligations, will also be of interest to readers interested in masculinities.

This work relates in many ways to the scholarship that has expanded our understanding of politics in rural societies, from the early 'anarchist anthropology' of Radcliffe-Brown, Mauss and Clastres, to Scott's work on everyday forms of resistance (1985) and infrapolitics (1990), to name only a few. The main difference I wish to highlight with Scott's work is that my conceptualization of politics as calibrated engagement does not solely focus on contestation or resistance. It also emphasizes how configurations of power shape a political landscape, and, in that sense, this study also resonates with his earlier work on the moral economy of peasants (1976).

In its conclusion, the book attempts to make sense of the current rural guerrilla warfare in the dry zone of central Myanmar, following Min Aung Hlaing's military coup of February 2021. The fact that people in Anya came to engage in a direct fight against the military first appeared as a historical anomaly. The idea of calibrated engagement helps us to resolve this enigma by configuring the emergence of local forces as the latest episode in an ongoing history. This mobilization resonates with a continuum of violence in a region that has remained in the shadow of the conflicts that took place in the highlands and border areas of the country. It calls for researching how previous experiences of violence, agrarian dispossession, the variegated nature of the local forces and the diverse forms of sovereignty in the region are shaping the fragmented political territories composing Myanmar's internal frontier. The book will thus appeal to readers, scholars and practitioners interested in the making of political territories and in how violence transformed political relations in this area before the 2021 coup.

Location

As I began fieldwork for this project in the autumn of 2013, Myanmar was undertaking its so-called democratic transition under President Thein Sein, the former prime minister of the previous military government. It was a moment of

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hope and expectation. A moment when the conflation of the state and the military was put to the test with the coming of a civilian government, still run by ex-soldiers, and a growing civil society. By that time, it became progressively possible to research the countryside, even if one remained under the watch of the Immigration Department and its daily authorizations. My first field sites were the villages I could visit the most while working for a research project on land tenure for a French INGO. Early on I internalized that thread of fear and paranoia when dealing with the Myanmar state, despite how crumbled its offices are. To stay in one place, I chose to keep a low profile. This strategy to a certain extent reproduces the silences by not looking directly at sensitive political issues, such as the mobilization against the Letpadaung copper mine, a China-Myanmar joint venture near my field site. I gradually focused on one place near Monywa town and managed to live there. To a degree, doing fieldwork in Anya under military surveillance means always evaluating the potential consequences of one's acts and discourses. To a degree, this is also true for the people living there.

The effective bookend for the research included here is 2019. That period witnessed intense debates about land reform, past and contemporary dispossession, the peace process, democracy, and religious and ethnic conflicts. It was a moment of experimentation and many pushed the boundaries of what they could do and say. Politics could be debated, but to what extent? And what seemed important and feasible to a growing cosmopolitan urban elite was different in Anya's rural areas. Its people were often described as still living a simple, innocent life, yet one exposed to dispossession and hardship – and in fact less affected by the military's wars that primarily targeted 'ethnic areas', that is, non-Bama populations and their diverse armed groups. Democracy held different and shifting meanings in the country. I did the bulk of my fieldwork in 2015–2016, when Aung San Suu Kyi and her party the National League for Democracy (NLD) came to power after the November 2015 national election. It brought a series of elections down to the most local officials in the rural society: the village headmen.

My imperative in this project is somewhat unusual for an ethnography of politics in Southeast Asia. I do not set out to document an ethnic group or Anya's troubling position at the boundaries of novel transnational trends ordering investment, land and labour (Li 2007; Hall et al. 2011). Instead, I work on place, people, events and on the sedimentation of history. I combine pragmatic anthropology and history to explore the enactment of local politics and how it transforms in a rural society. This is in part due to the constraints of doing fieldwork in Anya: I was bound to one place which I decided to explore intensively. Hence a large part of the book is about the sedimentation of forces and events that shaped and are mobilized in the making of a polity since the late precolonial period. This approach is grounded in the idea that social sciences deal with historical matter: subjects, actions and processes cannot be disconnected from

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historical contingencies. Hence, I take my theoretical cue from critical works about temporality and historicity (Fabian 1983; Koselleck 2018), process (Moore 1987), pragmatism (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) and local politics (Levi 1988).

The main contribution, and at the same time the main limitation of this work, is that it is an ethnographic and historical engagement with one particular place. To some degree, it aims at answering Charney's call for more local history 'upon which the historiography of other regions, such as Europe, has been built' (2007: 227). My objective is to shift the study of politics in lowland Myanmar from its focus on state, patron–client relations and Buddhism by exploring how people create, critique and navigate configurations of power. The book is motivated by the ethnography itself and not directly concerned with current debates about ethnicity, religion, state building and resource politics, or even about Myanmar's national politics. It proposes a unique exploration of how a political landscape transforms to expand our understanding of politics in an effort to connect rural institutions, moral ruptures, narratives of indigeneity, forms of hierarchy and conceptions about worthiness.

To study a place without reifying a 'cultural order' (Ferme 2001: 1), I explore local politics in the making, that is, during interactions. My ethnographic fieldwork was mostly about living with the family of a village headman and gradually becoming a member of his family. It meant following the flow of life, engaging personally in multiple affairs and paying attention to what defines interactions and to how people move from one situation to another. It allows us to understand the networks of memories, actions and meanings embedded in a singular situation such as an initiation ceremony, a land conflict or an election. Village headship and big men gradually appeared as anthropological objects at the crossroads between singular practices and intentions. I thus propose a phenomenological approach to the enactment of politics and mediation which illuminates how the personal, the political and the government domains organize local politics.

In turn, these domains reflect how certain historical possibilities and uncertainties unfold in the present. The historical part of this book therefore consists in locating the themes of power, morality, land and violence at different periods in the archives and through oral history to show their historicity without following a causal or evolutionary narrative. This approach reconfigures scholarship on power and authority in Southeast Asia, especially those focusing on traditional conceptions of power (Anderson 1972; Errington 1989), political systems (Tambiah [1973] 2013; Lieberman 2003), anarchy (Scott 2009), hierarchy (Keeler 2017), and the longue durée of clientelism (Schulte Nordholt 2015) and prowess (Wolters 1982). Cast in the context of the Anya lowlands, I question the idea that prowess (*hpon*) is key to local politics, either because of its karmic agency (Lehman 1984), or because of how it links rural polities to state power through patron–client ties (Nash 1965).

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Challenging the idea of prowess as a matrix for understanding male authority across places and historical moments in Anya, I show how power in this area is constantly negotiated through transforming local knowledge systems of kinship, morality, violence and powerlessness. First, I emphasize how the social memory of division between two villages links their conflicting relationship to precolonial dynamics and to the reconfiguration of headship boundaries during and after colonialism. Second, I explore competing narratives of indigeneity and morality. This decolonizing lens confronts the idea of lowlands as a 'state' space and contradicts the prevalent narrative of a colonial rupture through the removal of traditional authorities during the early colonial period (Scott 1976; Thant Myint-U 2001). I also highlight the linkages between intimate temporalities and questions of access, wealth, indebtedness and responsibility by showing how the dynamics of kinship, transmission, and of the moral and social obligations between family members have shaped land relations in the longue durée. I show that the way authority is achieved within family property is a matrix that serves to justify authority in other domains of politics. The idea of *stewardship*, of taking care of one's family, which justifies differences in wealth transmission, was key in how village leaders could become *guardians* of their village against a background of state disengagement and violence. These approaches eventually generate a reading of a transforming polity that crosscuts the classic divide between precolonial, colonial, nationalist, military and democratic periods by showing how men of power became embodied memories of places and village affairs a dominant political space.

Reading the Book

The topics I deal with here are fraught with complications for how one writes ethnographically. This does not make the project unusual; every ethnographer confronts unique challenges. The ones I face in this project stem from the peculiarities of writing about local politics, history and Myanmar and the three together. Writing this book involved a plurality of research operations with, at its core, a tension between ethnography and history. As Comaroff and Comaroff point out, 'if texts are to be more than literary *topoi*, scattered shards from which we presume worlds, they have to be anchored in the processes of their production, in the orbits of connection and influence that give them life and force' (1992: 34). My fieldwork was not just a matter of 'participant observation' but rather a series of processes carried out to understand the dynamics and temporalities at play in a place at a specific moment. My first fieldwork dates back to 2013. It lasted six months, during which I recruited a local interpreter. When returning in Myanmar for a longer period of fieldwork, I stayed for one month in Yangon to have intensive lessons in Burmese and went alone to the village right after.

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While living there, I resorted to extensive note taking and recorded a few life histories. Most formal interviews occurred at people's homes, where hesitations, inflexions in voices, norms of hospitality, silences and jokes sometimes mattered more than the actual content of speeches.

The bulk of the ethnographic chapters of the book, however, rests on day-to-day discussions and observations. I chose to use and describe specific affairs intensively, because it enables us to grasp how individuals engage with each other in different situations: through a day, when transmitting inheritance or making ceremonies I gradually get an understanding of transactions, reputations, ceremonies, agriculture, or how to deal with officials. Evening discussions were occasions to fully enter the stories running between people, generations and villages. The process of compiling notes from interviews, discussions and description together with papers, maps, testimonies and the exploration of networks was interwoven with a progressive understanding of what was becoming the subject of this book. It was a constant work in progress scattered with periods of clarification, reorganization of notes and definition of new lines of enquiry. In short, it was an incessant back-and-forth akin to what Jean-Claude Passeron (1991) has described as the process of creating knowledge in social sciences and humanities.

My language journey, the collection of data and my narrative choices intersect in this book. It deployed a distinctive style which can distance the reader from the data. The issue of language concerns the comings and goings between Burmese, English and French (my mother tongue) in data collection, transcription, analysis and in the writing. I gradually reached a certain level of fluency in Burmese and could transcribe interviews related to local history for instance. But the bulk of my ethnographic data rests on day-to-day note taking. Because I lived in a village, literally *with* my interlocutors, I chose not to record their speech too much: it would have felt like cluttering their lives even more by extracting information through the recording device. This personal feeling and decision can be legitimately called into question, especially regarding current pushes for open research data, and issues of verifiability and reproducibility. But using examples drawn from some people's lives, with their consent, was a way of producing an understanding of local politics that could not have been achieved otherwise. Besides, selecting case studies led to decisions about the level of detail and information regarding time, place and people as well as about balancing the use of past and present tenses to develop a descriptive language that would fit my exigencies.

In the same way that the fieldwork had not started in Myanmar, it was prolonged afterwards. Writing up the ethnographic 'data' in an academic atmosphere was a continuation, at a distance from the field, of note taking and shaping ideas and experiences into text. The voice deployed in this book echoes this variety of contexts of production together with my journey to develop my skills as a writer. Quite traditionally, I wrote the chapters as extended case studies, drawing

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from Gluckman (1940) and the work of the Manchester School since the 1950s. It allowed me to put the focus on events and situations while connecting them to wider social life and acknowledging its processual nature. The problem was to link situational analyses with the history of a changing political landscape, and the variety of perceptions about its very transformation. While working on specific parts of life stories, it became clear to me that there were long-term continuities and changes in how male leadership was performed and perceived. To articulate my ideas, I engaged in archival research at the British Library and focused on the colonial encounter. This was a fieldwork experience *per se*. I then started a dive into historical works to immerse myself successively in the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial periods, writing the chapters successively. I reviewed books and articles, took notes, compared them with my own interviews, notes and chronologies, and adjusted my argument incrementally. I tried to avoid my work being subsumed within the 'interpretative communities' (Aung-Thwin 2008: 188) that are shaping Burma studies, especially those interested in the political future of the country and those approaching 'the political' (Taylor 2008) either externally, in comparison with other countries, or internally, giving the priority to endogenous political logic. Most of these discussions are included in the historical chapters.

I rely extensively on the oral data I gathered and translated into English as well as on written accounts mostly produced by English speakers if not translated into English. The difficulty was to get an understanding of one locality through a variety of data and eventually to combine it with my ethnographic fieldwork. Again, harmonizing those sets of information requires choices. Grand sweeps of history demand rigorous attention to historical source material that goes beyond the mere identification of narrative. Therefore, relying mostly on data written (either first-hand or translated) in English remains problematic. Similarly, rendering micro-studies of ethnographic detail into a framework where they either speak more broadly to the understanding of places and peoples beyond the local microcosm or to the disciplinary literature that extends beyond that of a region requires creativity, intellectual rigour and tenacity. I tried to achieve both objectives in this book while developing a novel-like writing style, accepting my stance as an ethnographer and as an author who tries to unveil a situated and fragmentary understanding of one locale and its politics. The result is an unabashedly narrative-driven ethnography.

Outline of the Book

The introduction sets the scene of the book – a group of villages in Anya, the Bama Buddhist heartland of Myanmar – and takes the reader to this internal frontier of the state to ask how local politics transforms under an authoritarian

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regime. It develops in greater detail my understanding of local politics and focuses on how people engage in personal, familial, collective and government affairs to move away from state-centric and patron–client approaches and to consider how subjects scale and imagine politics under military surveillance. The introduction also shows how this understanding emerged. It reflects on my entry into the villages, including a discussion about the transformation of my position from an INGO intern to a 'son' of one village. While engaging with positionality and the relations between ethnographic and historical methods, it describes how I came to focus on leadership, on village affairs, and on transforming local political landscapes.

The seven full chapters of the book are divided into two parts. Part 1 adopts a historical lens and provides necessary background and context for understanding the subsequent chapters. Chapter 1 traces the history of the fieldwork area from the mid-eighteenth century to the early colonial period in the late nineteenth century. It first investigates the shifts in political affiliations and the role of land tenure, money lending and Buddhism in the making of local authorities before the direct annexation by the British in 1885. Second, the chapter narrows down its scope to two places and explores their narratives of foundation to show how their lasting divide is connected to competing narratives of indigeneity. The chapter then makes an incursion within the making of a colonial policy. It describes the context of warfare during the 'pacification campaign' (1886–1889) and explores how the *ad hoc* appointments of village headmen centred local politics at the village level.

Chapter 2 examines the effects of the colonial encounter and the fashioning of a village tract until the communist insurgency (1946–1956), using the succession of local headmen as reflecting changes in the political landscape. It explores the assessed worth of two leaders by connecting oral memories with political and cultural history and illustrates how they became exemplary figures of the moralization of behaviours and engagement in people's affairs when the villagers reimagined their role as Buddhists and challenged colonial rule. The chapter then shows how past and present contexts are connected through the political work of evaluating the worth of leaders. This period then appears as a phase of reorganization of authority along new lines where large farming families became the new local elites and where colonial devices were used to challenge the social obligations that allowed access to wealth and land.

Chapter 3 explores the transformations of the local polity from the early years of the socialist period (1962 onwards) to the democratic opening of the early 2010s to locate how village affairs became a dominant form of local politics. It describes how the socialization of society reinforced the control of peasants and ushered in an age of distrust while the main farming families continued to monopolize local leadership. The failure and the authoritarianism of the

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successive regimes resulted in the worsening of living conditions that ultimately led to the 1988 uprising, a rupture which temporality and moral dimensions relate to issues of corruption, collusion, forced labour and violence. This chapter argues that the violent character of the state and its disengagement from the countryside since the late 1980s provided space for an ethic of independence to hold ground, and for a group of men to give consistency to village affairs as a fragile political order.

Part II consists of four chapters. Chapter 4 explores the experience and enactment of politics by describing a day in the life of a village headman to show how an individual embodies and fashions headship through successive social settings. More specifically, this ethnographic device is a way to analyse what a headman, as a situated figure and a political institution embedded in a local society, mediates in context. The chapter discusses how a headman composes with multiple layers of responsibilities and chains of relationships, delineating uncertain boundaries between the personal, the political and the government domains that partly organize local politics in Anya.

By looking at the transmission of inheritance as a process of redefining authority and responsibility, Chapter 5 argues that what organizes land relations in the Anya region are the dynamics of kinship and the moral and social obligations between family members. It thus explores the transmission of inheritance to account for the temporality of family relationships and shows how the idea of stewardship ('taking charge of') pervades the conceptions about ownership and leadership. It draws on the history of land relations described in the historical chapters to show through a case study how ownership is constantly being redefined due to the overlapping of generations, claims and obligations. Transmission appears as a process where the tension between heredity and ability in the realm of filiation is intimately linked with the issue of rightful leadership in the Bama context.

Chapter 6 explores the worth of the village big men. It draws on the understanding of leadership as craftmanship and stewardship and links the rise of village affairs as the form of village politics to the question of the worth of the big men. The chapter describes three big men in specific situations (two ceremonies and one dispute) and argues that, by making village affairs a space of engagement where the worth of the people is evaluated, they legitimize a political order within the village. It also suggests that entrustment and exclusion are central processes of local politics in which the voices of villagers are channelled through, delegated to and often excluded by the big men.

Chapter 7 (*Coda*) proposes an ethnographic account of two crucial days in the 2016 selection of the headman. It offers a way to connect history and ethnography by showing local politics at work. This final chapter weaves together the different threads the book has unravelled. Describing two crucial days in

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the 2016 election of the headman, it offers a reading of how issues of competition, hierarchy, worth, obligations and engagement between people, families and villages intersect.

The main theoretical conclusion of this book is that political continuities are made of transformations. The book makes a case for seeing local leadership figures as paradoxical and ambiguous. It shows that the headman is extremely constrained in his position as an intermediary between the local inhabitants and the state. At the same time, it insists on the decisive role of big men as collective organizers. Yet, neither the headman nor the big men have any real binding power. Historically, one major insight is that, by focusing attention on the local operation of power and its everyday practice, the book helps to move away from a simplistic dichotomy between so-called highlands and lowlands in Burma/Myanmar. Rather than seeing power in lowland areas as coherent and institutionalized through patron–client relations, they also appear subject to constant negotiation through local knowledge systems relating to kinship, history, morality, responsibility, obligation, powerfulness and powerlessness. In many ways, this argument challenges the idea of 'state power' running seamlessly through institutions into a local setting. The book ends by showing that the idea of calibrated engagement could help us to analyse the post-coup rural warfare by capturing how violence, dispossession, power and territory intersect in the making of Myanmar's internal frontier.

It is clear that the local society studied here is a historical construct and this book attempts to outline some of the ways that landscape has been shaped from a particular and personal viewpoint. There has been and must be other ways. My aim is not to be fully comprehensive or objective, but to express as much as possible the particulars of a place and its people through encounters that can only be subjective. Hence the emphasis on the forms of engagement. My background, wishes and flaws influenced how I engaged with people in Gawgyi and beyond in singular situations. It produced an understanding of their life and dilemmas that I can only partially represent here. As much as any anthropological study is ridden with issues of trust and doubt, the same tension lies between this book and its audience. I chose to use specific life stories and situations as examples of the uncertainties, continuities and ruptures at play in one particular location. My aim is not to use their private lives to make my point, but to anchor any understanding of their dilemmas and experiences through a fragmentary, yet revealing account of their lives and history.

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Note on Text

Notes on Language, History and Currency

Throughout the text, I have followed Okell's (1971) guide for transcribing Burmese words that appear in their original characters in the glossary. I alter the writing with a dash (-) for the purpose of pronunciation in a few cases and do not accentuate the transcribed words, which results in the absence of any signs for tone variations but eases the reading for non-Burmese specialists.

The Burmese language uses a number of honorifics that indicate relative age as well as status. 'U' and 'Daw' are the male and female honorifics that are used in practice as a respectful 'Uncle' or 'Auntie', even when people are not related. They denote seniority. 'Ko' and 'Ma' stand for 'brother' and 'sister'. A senior monk, usually head of a monastery, is called 'Hsayadaw'. For bibliographic purposes, Burmese authors are catalogued by their names without the honorific.

People's names have been anonymized for ethical purpose when the persons are still living. The names of villages have not been anonymized as they are indicators of some of the ways in which the landscape has been shaped in the past.

The reference to 'Myanmar' rather than 'Burma' here reflects the fact that the military changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989 in a movement of 'Myanmafication' (Houtman 1999). The people of Myanmar are still known as 'Burmese' (*Bama*). I use 'Myanmar' when speaking about the country after the change and 'Burma' when talking about it before the change. I use 'Burma/Myanmar' when referring to the country or state in general terms.

Many names are used to refer to different political spaces at various periods. My area of study was part of the 'nuclear zone' of the late precolonial kingdom. It became part of the Lower Chindwin District during the early phase of the colonization of Upper Burma. The term Upper Burma was first used by the British to refer to the central and northern area of what is now Myanmar. After the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, Lower Burma was annexed by the British Empire,

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while Upper Burma remained independent under the Burmese Empire until the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885. After independence in 1948, the country was gradually divided into seven ethnic states and seven regions. Currently, our area of study is located within Monywa Township, Sagaing Region.

Throughout the text, I quote Myanmar kyat in US dollars to allow non-Myanmar specialists to compare the magnitude and value of amounts cited. For post-2011 amounts, the rate has been calculated at the average market rate during the bulk of my fieldwork between 2013 and late 2018: 1400 kyats to US$1 (with annual variations of +/- 200 kyats).

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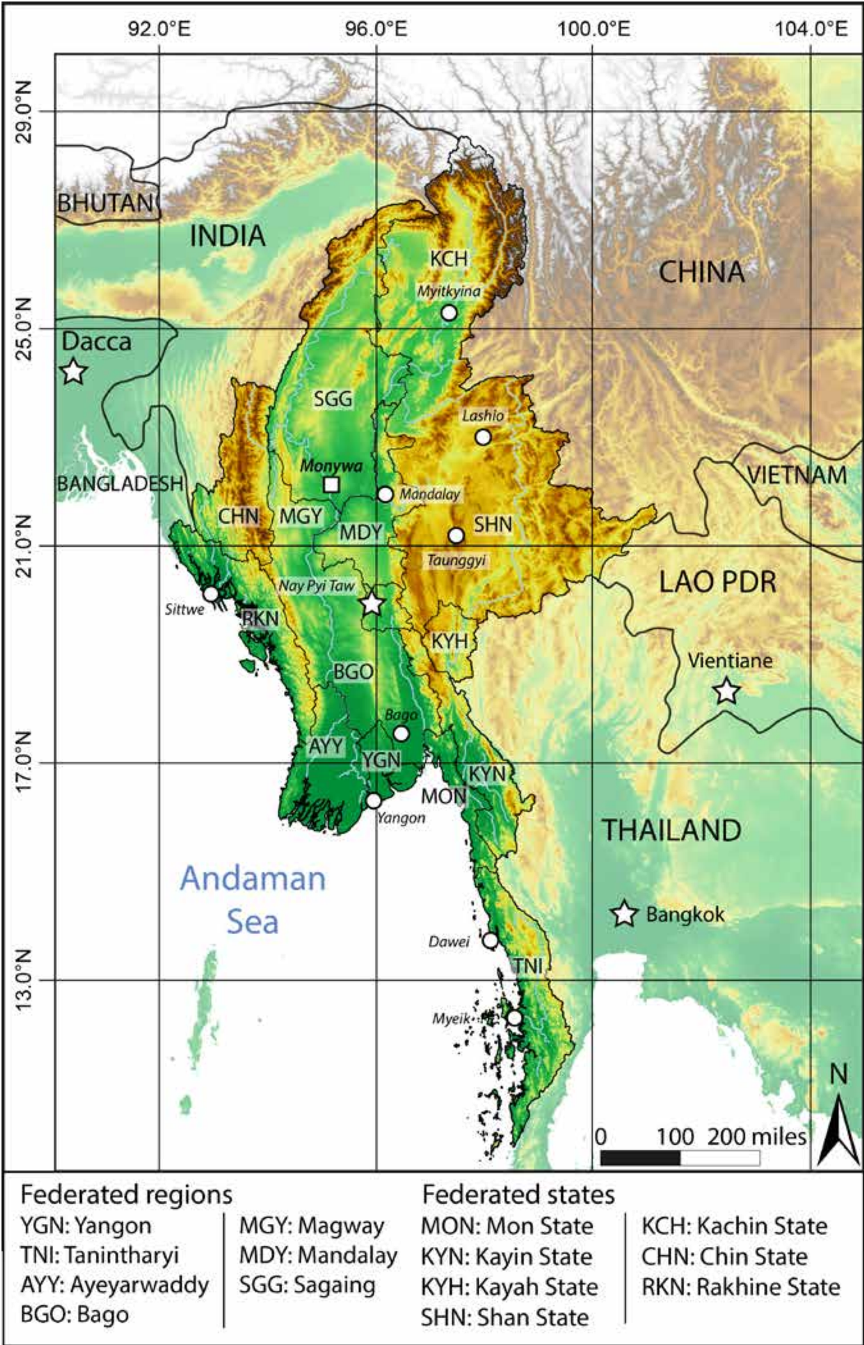

Map 0.1. General map of Burma/Myanmar. © Martin Michalon.

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Introduction

When entering the central plain of rural Myanmar in the 2010s, it was almost impossible to avoid meeting the village headmen. They embody a government institution imagined and imposed by the British to govern the land and its people during the violent pacification campaign of the countryside at the close of the nineteenth century. Since then, there have been two kinds of discourses about headmen, one stating that they are the most hard-pressed officials trying to do their best for their village, another saying that they are acting as petty kings, granting access and information at a price, being a client upwards and a patron downwards. Officially, they have to know the ins and outs of strangers within their village tract, an administrative unit that bonds several settlements under a single jurisdiction. The current name of this institution, *okchokyayhmu*,[1] echoes this conception and is close to the word 'administrator' in the sense of overseeing and being responsible for local order. There is a state-like quality to this rather 'male' office and most of the men I have met in villages during my fieldwork did not want to become headmen.

The official role of headmen, notably of police, has not transformed too much over time. What has changed are the persons embodying it and the meaning of politics. At first, the most common name given to headmen was *thugyi*, 'the great', drawing from a search of traditional authorities to be used as a device to control the newly colonized landscape. This name conveys the imagery of men of prowess in a rural society organized through patron–client relations that colonialism and market forces would gradually erode during the first half of the twentieth century, at least according to some analysts (Scott 1972b). In the early 1960s, Nash, an American anthropologist, argued that headmen had lost their power, even if sometimes the transmission of the office still followed hereditary claims. In contrast, charismatic leaders, which he called men of *hpon*[2] (or men of prowess, of sheer power, of great glory), were pre-eminent and illuminated the problem of building modern political parties (Nash 1963).

When I met Ko Kyaw in 2013 in his village called Gawgyi, he had just become the headman of Myinmilaung village tract. At that time, party politics

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 23.

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was not crucial in local affairs as almost everyone supported the National League for Democracy (NLD) of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi over the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), an organization set up by the military (*Tatmadaw*)[3] who ran the country from 1962 to 2015, the year of the NLD victory in the national elections. However, in the 2010s, calling a headman *thugyi* equated to scoffing at his authority. The way political institutions were embodied had shifted. Local politics was less a question of charismatic leadership than a matter of how past moral ruptures, embodied by previous leaders and related to changes in state practices, impinged on current villagers. The towering violence perpetrated by the military government in the 1980s–1990s while disengaging from the countryside after having imposed 'socialism' (1962–1988)[4] marks such a rupture. If there were men of *hpon* in the past, they were gone now.[5] In this process, the question of people's *worth* – of their value as human beings – to some degree replaced the question of their *hpon*. A new formation of power emerged.

This was salient in how the local elite, a few men called the *lugyi*,[6] or big men, made Gawgyi affairs a space of engagement where the worth of people was evaluated. By becoming a domain of engagement, village affairs became a domain of politics. These affairs include the organization of ceremonies, the management of the water and electricity supply systems, the rebuilding of roads, the treatment of the sick and handling of the dead, dealing with NGOs and the issue of enlarging the village. In that sense, village affairs have become the form and arena of politics in Gawgyi. Engaging in collective undertakings on the model of a traditional conception of social affairs (*luhmuyay*) has been part of a moral rupture with a violent and corrupt state following an ideology of self-reliance.[7] Gawgyi big men, who were entrusted to take care of village affairs and represent the top of a hierarchy dividing 'real farmers' (*taungthu*) from 'labourers' (*myaukthu*), gave a moral connotation to the meaning of *lugyi* as they keep their distance from the state.

Becoming headman at that moment thus meant donning the clothes of an ambiguous institution. For Ko Kyaw, being a village headman was a matter of craftmanship, not a simple expression of his achievements and karma. It meant avoiding, accepting and creating obligations, dissembling, showing competency in some domains, enacting incompetency in others. The particular configuration of past dynamics in day-to-day life was key to understanding that his dilemma was to align acts and words and to show trustworthiness while embodying a distrusted position. In the language of Latour's actor-network theory (2013), headship as an institution is the network of relations and associations that an individual embodies when becoming headman while constantly working to fashion a way of being the headman by assembling a variety of things and relations. Arguably, being at once a villager and an official, the headman is not just embodying an institution but also a node intersecting and acting upon multiple

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layers of responsibilities, chains of relationships and things. As for Ko Kyaw, among other roles he is also a son, a neighbour, a husband, a friend, a cousin and a member of the local elite engaging every day with people in situations of hospitality, intimacy, gaming and so on, where money, tea, betel and contracts circulate.

This book proposes to continue expanding our understanding of politics by being attentive to interactions, situations and experiences in order to explore the transformation of the political landscape Ko Kyaw was navigating. My fieldwork with him led me to imagine a new way to make sense of what I want to describe as a fundamental political dynamic: calibrating one's engagement with networks of relations delineated by uncertain boundaries between domains which I call the personal, the political and the government. The personal refers to affairs where personal responsibilities and obligations are at stake, involving relationships between two persons that cannot be transposed to other persons and ranging from home and family politics to patron–client relations. The political refers to what constitutes collective matters at the scale of a village and to how they were and are dealt with and by whom. In Gawgyi, this domain merges 'village affairs' (*yatywa keiksa*) with 'social affairs' (*luhmuyay*) and engages individuals' responsibilities towards villagers as a group of belonging as well as a form of bigness. I call it the political because it became the main configuration of power, the vantage point for evaluating the state of affairs in Gawgyi. Finally, the government domain simply refers to issues in which the headman has to be involved and to the debates about how successive headmen align or differ between each other. In other words, it is the local intersection of what Abrams (1988) called the state-system and the state-idea. Looking at politics in terms of calibrated engagement allows us to connect ethnographic and historical analyses to make sense of actions, memories and ruptures that fashion a particular political landscape.

Setting the Scene

Past and Present

Gawgyi is short for *gangawgyi*, which means 'large flat pond'. Two hundred years ago, it was a hamlet, first settled near a seasonal pond during a widespread famine. Some elders knew of the events that had pushed their ancestors to move away from Ywadon village further south. The famine was probably related to King Bodawhpaya (1782–1819) increasing demands for corvées, soldiers and taxes, leading to a great change in the kingdom's demography. During the military campaign against Siam in 1809, 'every town and village [was] required to produce a certain number of men' (Koenig 1990: 34). If the local hereditary chiefs – the gentry – failed to recruit, officials in charge of the conscription were ordered to

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confiscate villagers' properties and to administer corporal punishment. 'In the face of these exactions, many families decamped to less accessible rural locales' (ibid.), usually where they could find water. The combination of bad rains, lack of farm labour, recruitment of soldiers, migrations and frequent civil strife led to the Great Famine or 'Maha-thayawgyi [*sic*] of 1812' (Furnivall 1957: 39).

It seems that a dozen families converged in the place where a large seasonal pond appeared during the monsoon, and Gawgyi was thus named after this natural feature. The village is in the Anya region, the dry zone of central Myanmar, a place with a semi-arid climate that became the 'nuclear zone' of the precolonial kingdoms during the seventeenth century. From its creation during the early nineteenth century until the encounter with the British in 1885, Gawgyi was part of Badon/Alon Province,[8] a crucial pool of soldiers for the royalty since the Restored Toungoo dynasty (1597–1752). The population, head of cattle and extent of cultivated fields increased over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, impacting local forms of Buddhism as forest-dwelling monasticism increasingly gave way to village- and town-dwelling monasticism.

When one asks about the origin of Gawgyi, one is invariably sent to a few elderly people living in the oldest and most dense area of the village. The local theory is that the main lineages (*amyo-yo*)[9] of the village come from Ywadon families and were the first farmers in Gawgyi. After settling close to the pond, the villagers created a more permanent living space to the west. They organized that space around two main pathways, one going from east to west and the other from north to south to orient the flows of *mingala* ('auspicious influence') in favour of the villagers. The east is the auspicious entrance and the south the inauspicious exit leading to the cemetery. The construction of houses also followed village pathways, the village *naq* ('spirit') shrine[10] on the southeast side and the pagoda founded with the monastery by its first *hsayadaw* ('head monk'), U Za Nay Ya, in the early twentieth century.

Gradually, Gawgyi people affiliated with the larger chiefdom of Kyawkka via the agency of Ywadon. The cultivated areas – mostly dry lands first farmed through shifting cultivation of sorghum and peas and a few rice paddies – varied with the growth of the village population and their capacity to accumulate cattle and seeds and to obtain loans from the local gentry. Gawgyi villagers progressively created their farm fields by dealing to the north with Myinmilaung villagers and the Thazi chief, to the south with Ywadon village, and to the east with the Kyawkka chief (Map 0.2). The more or less formalized systems of hierarchies between crown servicemen (*ahmudan*) and commoners (*athi*), of taxation in kind and fees and of land tenure emerging from the stabilization of the settlements were always subject to change depending on natural hazards, wars and famine-led migrations and on the ability of chiefs to control manpower, harvests, cattle and land access. When the village headship emerged during the

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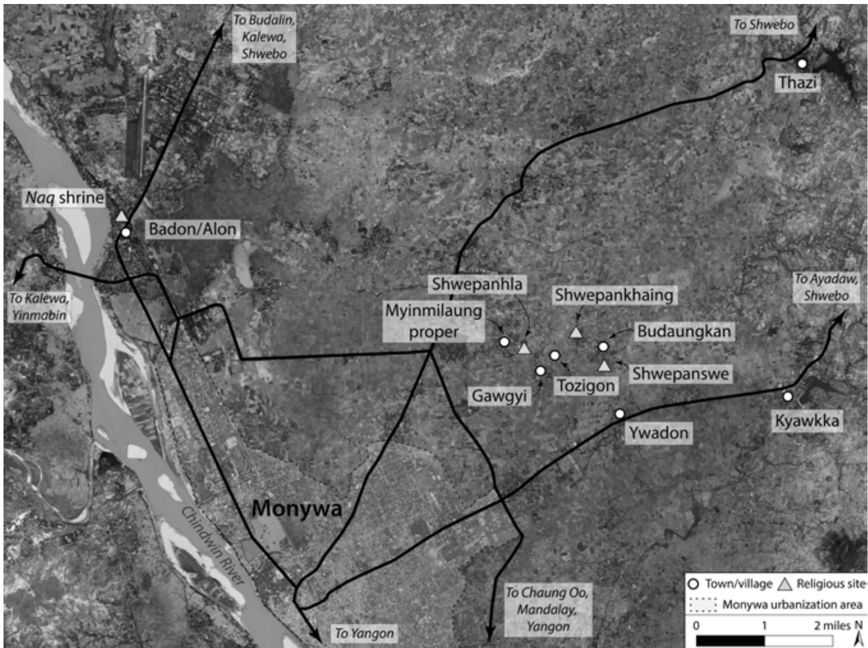

Map 0.2. The research area. © Martin Michalon.

British 'pacification campaign' and 'settlement operations' after the annexation of Upper Burma[11] in 1885, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung were grouped in one village tract under one headman liable for collecting land taxes. This simple political organization remained with little change throughout the twentieth century and the Japanese invasion (1945–1948), the battle for independence (1948), the communist insurgencies (1945–1956),[12] the military coup and subsequent 'Burmese way to Socialism' (1962–1988) and the tightening of military rule (1989–2010). But when I first reached the village in 2013 after the 'democratic' opening, the charismatic leaders described by Nash, those men of prowess, of power, also called the men of *hpon*, were gone. *Hpon* was still a quality present in individuals in varying quantities depending on their karma and achievements. However, almost nobody was worthy enough to be honoured in this way, apart from monks, called 'great hpon' (*hpongyi*). Forms of leadership seemed to have altered during the past century.

Today, Gawgyi is a small Buddhist village of almost six hundred Burmese people (*Bama*) six miles from the thriving city of Monywa,[13] the capital of Sagaing Region. Before the 2021 military takeover, this area had been largely spared from forced displacements and military violence, except in the case of land-grabbing at the Letpadaung copper mine, compared with 'ethnic', border and delta areas.[14] There has also been no direct violence towards Muslim

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minorities, although this has occurred in the neighbouring city of Shwebo, for instance. Nonetheless, the region, considered a Burmese hinterland, has a history of state violence (Chapter 3).

In Gawgyi, there was a public school (up to grade six) and the 130-odd houses were packed into an administrative grid that grouped households into ten, with one person among the heads of each house (*eindaunguzi*) designated as a (male) representative of the cluster and called a 'ten-house head' (*hse-eingaung*). Since 2012, they were the ones who, in theory, elected the headman every five years. The latter was paid a subsidy by the Ministry of Home Affairs through the General Administration Department (GAD; Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Arnold 2014: 34). Besides the headman and the houses' representatives, there was the tract's clerk, the second government employee, who was supposed to assist the headman in his tasks. There was also a variety of committees, *ad hoc* or permanent, that were empty shells or crucial arenas depending on the stakes involved. There was one for the fire brigade, another for the management of the pagoda and the monastery working in close relation with Gawgyi monks, a committee for handling the repayment of the recent government's development loan, another running an INGO's microfinance project and a committee for implementing the government's Greening Project (unsuccessful due to lack of funding), among others. The latest and most critical committee in Gawgyi was called the 'five-person committee' or 'land committee', and operated at the level of Myinmilaung village tract.[15] It was supposed to resolve any issue emerging from the land titling ensued by the 2012 farmland law, which aimed at reintroducing private property to enable the commodification of lands, reforming a 'stack' of laws and regulations mostly stemming from the colonial and socialist period.[16] Ko Kyaw's tenure as headman was intimately related to this reformulation of land regulation.

Myinmilaung tract is composed of four villages, namely Gawgyi, Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon. The last three villages share a common history of settlement and a sense of belonging. Gawgyi people have quite a tense relationship with the villagers from these other villages, whom they often indistinctly referred to as 'Myinmilaung people'. Football matches and headmen selections are climaxes in this rivalry. They openly say they dislike each other. In the eyes of Gawgyi people, *they* are autochthones, from the land, and Myinmilaung villagers have bad morals, are fickle and distrustful. In the eyes of Myinmilaung people, Gawgyi villagers behave as if they are superior, with better morals, but *they* are stronger and descend from soldiers. During most of my fieldwork, Myinmilaung tract's headman was Ko Kyaw, and he remained in this position for about three years from 2013 to 2016.[17]

In 2015, most villagers in Gawgyi were considered 'relatively poor' by the NGOs operating in Monywa Township,[18] and less than half of its overall

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population was still composed of farming families. In Gawgyi's vicinity, lands are mostly dry (*yamyay*), of average quality and rains less and less predictable. Farmers still grew sorghum as fodder for their cows, sesame, pulses and beans for the market. Rice, sometimes mixed with sorghum, was bought in various local markets and was the main staple food, together with a curry usually composed of a large variety of vegetables, soups made from tree leaves or beans and chicken or pork when the family's purse allowed it, usually after the harvests. The households live close to one another and, the settlement pattern being mostly neolocal[19] and inheritance divided equally between every child, the gradual expansion of the village 'ate up' the surrounding fragmented farmlands.

Farming in Gawgyi was no longer the main source of livelihood. The non-farming part of the population was growing and mostly engaging in different off-farm wage activities as skilled labourers, carpenters, longyi weavers, petty vegetable sellers and poultry breeders. In other words, the rural population was no longer composed mostly of farmers. Since the 2000s, there was a rapidly changing economy drawing on the capital derived from local farming, regional trading between India, Mandalay and China and rising land prices. This dynamic dovetailed with the progressive political democratization and economic liberalization of the country that started in 2010–2011 under the Thein Sein government. As Griffiths has shown for Sagaing Region, the rural communities 'exist in conditions best described as precarious: unfavourable agricultural policies and practice, an absence of effective welfare, rising debt, and significant levels of out-migration all eroding both financial and social capital' (2018: 152).

The recent changes have been a lot for villagers to take on, and the benefits of modernization are viewed ambivalently. Locally, several women invested in longyi weaving as an alternative to farm work, while farmers dug tube wells to enable the irrigation of new crops. Many men left the fields to become 'carpenters' on Monywa's construction sites and a few migrated seasonally. Rising inflows of meritorious donations helped refurbishment of monasteries and improved monks' living standards, although this did not please those who saw monkhood as detachment. Family savings were increasingly spent on schooling (notably private tuition) and private healthcare due to the miserable state of public infrastructure and services. In Gawgyi, as in many other neighbouring villages, farmers now had trouble finding affordable labour because daily wages had risen steadily since 2005.[20]

What had been a structuring divide between farmer owners (*taungthu*) and mere labourers (*myaukthu*) was slowly changing, transforming the balance of power within villages, the dependency relationships and the type of land contracts. Cattle husbandry for instance, crucial for farming, was on the decline. Artificial fertilizers, pesticides, rototillers and tractors gradually (re)entered farm fields[21] and replaced oxcarts and manure. Companies visited villages

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to demonstrate the reliability of their new products and NGOs attempted to enlist villages to their projects while educated staff navigated both institutions. Farmland plots tended to become enlarged and consolidated after several decades of division through inheritance (see Chapter 5). Land prices rose steeply between 2005 and 2017, depending on the proximity to main roads, access to water, land quality and speculation.[22] This fed donations to monasteries, the magnification of ceremonies and often resulted in the reappearance of old conflicts and new squabbles.

Outsiders and businessmen from Monywa progressively bought land in places where no one would have done so ten years ago. Rubber trees started to be harvested, and new labour groups were formed. Chinese goods of mediocre quality overran local markets and villagers joked about the virtual lack of any Myanmar-made commodity. The elders positively invoked the old days as periods of autonomy, hard work and hardship. Even if the government was unfair and violent, notably after the socialist impasse (1962–1988), some people had a sense of morality and loyalty. The youths now seldom work in the fields, but find employment in Monywa's industrial zone, have smartphones and play football with international stars' names printed on their shirts. Times have changed. Gawgyi villagers feel they have to juggle these changes one way or another. They craft their lives accordingly and navigate changing daily affairs.

After the victory of the NLD, the word 'democracy', silently used as a banner to resist dictatorship, became an empty shell. People started asking questions about its meaning. If it provided a horizon of improvement at the national level, the working of village politics followed a sense of morality, referring to the evaluation of conduct in relation to esteemed or despised human qualities (Humphrey 1997), that had more to do with the history of the local political landscape than universal human rights. The recent economic changes were rather seen as a force to be tamed, the same as for diseases or governments, before translating into opportunities to sustain life.

Landscape, Morality and Time

This section uses a distinctive voice which distances the reader from individuals' agency in order to delve into the metaphor of the landscape. The landscape is an interesting metaphor to describe the sedimentation of history in a place, how time is lived as well as how people gauge a variety of forces potentially influencing their life. The landscape is about space and time but also about memories and ruptures. Human activities and ideas mould the landscape, giving it the character of a process. Ingold defines the landscape as 'the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them' (1993: 156). The landscape tells multiple stories and is

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Figure 0.1. View from Kyawkka hill, looking westward towards the Chindwin River, 2016. © Stéphen Huard.

crowded by several entities and references to the past. Looking at – or rather in – Gawgyi, one could see and hear the different agricultural works depending on the season, the coming and going of villagers, the stories of foundations, the ways of dealing with heat, rains, auspicious flows and dead bodies, rituals and their cycles, the changing shape of the village, the successions and conflicts between generations, the links between neighbours, relatives and how a sense of belonging (or difference) is expressed and materialized. The list is endless. The metaphor of landscape is a way of seeing a place beyond institutional categories and histories to explore the persons, relationships and positions that have been important over time. Exploring the landscape in an open-ended perspective eventually highlights how people evaluate their engagement with their social and material environment. It leads us to imagine the political landscape as a network of personalities, hierarchies, stakes and memories present in current politics.

To its inhabitants, Gawgyi is a typical village of the dry zone, the heartland of the *Bama* realm and its royalty. This flat countryside is dotted with many settlements, pagodas and a few hills, rivers and creeks, about which there is a variety of stories combining references to the local unfolding of Theravada Buddhism,[23] to royalty and to spirit cults (*naq*). Buddhism, kingship and spirit cults thus

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often merge in stories of foundation (Chapter 1), allowing people to locate and entrench human dwellings within a Burmese vision of the landscape.

In broad terms, villages in the drylands constitute spaces of collective dealings with religious rituals (notably novitiates and Buddhist donations), life cycles (births, weddings, funerals and so on) and social affairs. The scope of this collective is intimately linked with how a traditional form of sociality, called *luhmuyay*, produces a landscape expressed in terms of common living space and kinship. In theory, the domain of *luhmuyay* concerns everyone and covers a wide set of relations from hospitality to strangers to the funerals of neighbours. But it bonds villages or excludes them. The collective or cohesive dimension should not be taken for granted[24] as processes of inclusion and exclusion – related to status, descent, work, obligations, debt, transmission and patronage – are always at play within families and between farmer-owners and labourers, for instance. The idea of village affairs captures an ethic of daily life imbued with – but not reduced to – Buddhism and visions of the local history where the worth of people, their engagement with others, is the backdrop against which patron–client politics and charismatic leadership can be explored in terms of uncertain engagements.

Village affairs are thus a domain of life encompassing a whole set of activities, including donations, weddings, Buddhist novitiates, funerals, schooling of children, coordinating development projects, maintaining the village pond, village loan recovery, road repairs and so on. Such activities require organization, commitment and networks. They are activities in which the worth – 'trustworthiness' or *thitsashihmu* – of people is evaluated. The village big men (*lugyi*) are entrusted to navigate and orient village affairs as a whole. This engagement with the collective creates legitimacy and authority according to local forms of responsibility and ethics that counter the way in which governments ruled the country from the second half of the twentieth century (bribes, coercion, violence and so on). The disengagement of the state from local affairs since the 1980s, coupled with the worsening of living conditions in the drylands, led to the rise of an ideology of self-reliance (*kotukotha*) and the avoidance of officials as much as possible.

In Gawgyi, the villagers are proud Buddhists who cultivate dry crops, follow the traditions (*ayoya*) in terms of rituals (marriage, funerals, pagoda festival, Buddhist initiation, spirit festival and so on) and see in the teachings of Buddha (*thathena*)[25] a simple, yet necessary, moral guide. This was once summarized for me in three sentences: do not do bad things, do not think bad things, do not kill life. The reference to Buddhism, manifested notably by monasteries, pagodas, texts and monks, offers a temporal guide too. Everything leans towards impermanence. Equanimity, a valued trait of character, also relates to this vision of time scattered by 'rebirth', karma (*kan*)[26] and merit (*kuto*) making. The dialectic between merit making and status captures this vision of time: social status is

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evidence of previously acquired religious merit that has come to fruition in the present. This way of seeing time gives the impression that a timeless ethic, based on the moral framework of Buddhism, pervades Gawgyi, and confers upon it the quality of being a good village.

Maintaining Buddha's legacy is referred to as *ahsaung-ama*. One could say that Buddha's teachings are like a fire, embodied in the relics enclosed in the pagoda, that need to be maintained and bolstered by multiple means to protect people from harmful forces (ghosts, bad luck and so on). To attract good influences, having a pagoda to worship at is essential, a monastery with monks to facilitate donations and merit making is even better,[27] and celebrating the annual pagoda festival is imperative. In short, the continuous upkeep and worship of the incarnations of Buddha and of his teachings helps to curtain off a human dwelling like Gawgyi. Thus, the village as a collective is at least maintained by Buddhism. At another level, however, Gawgyi's monastery and pagoda do not come from anywhere.

They come from an age of propriety. They were built under the monk named U Za Nay Ya during a period of moralization of behaviour after the colonial encounter and in line with the gradual shift from forest-dwelling to village-dwelling monasticism. Turner (2014) has notably shown that in the face of the sentiment of societal decay during the decade following the fall of the monarchy in 1885, laypeople took charge of Buddha's teaching. U Za Nay Ya, together with U To Kaing, headmen of Myinmilaung tract, was a local figure for the moralization of behaviour in the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, onto a timeless vision of Buddha's teachings is superimposed a change brought about by colonialism and a local story of men of prowess – men of *hpon* – who have made the display of propriety and the upkeep of local affairs a crucial aspect of the local political landscape.

A village is a place where people perform ceremonies, and many cycles of exchange link and bond settlements and their inhabitants. In contrast with the normal and quiet life (except during football matches), ceremonies are moments of intense collective activities marking a sense of belonging and punctuating rural life for centuries. Among them, the ceremonies of meritorious donation (*ahlu*), notably the boys' Buddhist novitiate (*shinbyu*), are central. The procession, the music projecting afar from faulty loudspeakers, the flows of guests and the offering of food, for a time bring a place like Gawgyi alive.

The recent dirt path leading to Gawgyi from Monywa crosses farm fields dotted with palm trees. It runs along the football pitch on the left and finally enters the village through its southward 'inauspicious gate' (*amingala pauk*). Passing the betel shop and the main grocery shop, a path going east divides the oldest settlement of Gawgyi in two and leads to its 'auspicious gate' (*mingala pauk*). East is the referent, the most auspicious cardinal point from which the

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village gate has never moved. The bamboo, thatched and iron-roofed houses are closer to one another as one moves towards this old area. Gawgyi can be roughly divided into three parts: the western part, the north-eastern part and the south-eastern part. These intersect at the collective well in the centre of the village. The circulation grid is thus made up of two branches with small paths connecting tinier footpaths sometimes crossing house enclosures depending on the gradual expansion of the village and the kin and neighbour relations. Overall, the

Figure 0.2. Pathways in Gawgyi, looking westward towards the water station, 2019. © Stéphen Huard.

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paths convey and orient a variety of flows: flows of auspices, processions, everyday walking, cattle carts, motorbikes, cars, children going to school on oversized bikes, water pipes since 2013 and electricity in the near future. The landscape is thus crisscrossed by a variety of flows that people try to accommodate and navigate.

The houses and their enclosures delineate the village space *per se*, a space that used to be surrounded by fences and gates during periods of turmoil and cattle rustling.[28] The foundations and alignment of houses are designed in relation to Gawgyi's pathways, as well as to the course of the sun and the moon or to the horoscope of the head of the house. To some extent, the monastery in the north and the cemetery in the southwest are not part of the village, nor is the spirit altar situated in a tiny wood in the southeast, on the road to Ywadon village from where the first settlers of Gawgyi came. In a way, the paths are the main connections current villagers have with their ancestors, who designed them, because they shape how successive generations would orient, curb or maintain a variety of influences by adjusting their lives according to the foundations of the village. Even if these ancestors are not worshiped, they link the current people to the landscape through a sense of indigeneity.

In contrast, the pagoda, monks and spirits are worshiped, and the village is *the* human dwelling space *par excellence*. Those entities, together with ghosts, witches (seven per village in theory), spirits and other beings, set aside or incorporated in the Burmese Buddhist cosmology,[29] are embodied in buildings, altars or tales and can influence villagers' lives a great deal. Here, nothing is clear-cut, and my point is not to stick with the Buddhist scriptures that most villagers are confused by. As Brac de La Perrière argued in her study of the field of religion in Myanmar (2009a), different kinds of religiosity interact but are dominated by the Theravadin tradition constantly redefining a 'pure' Buddhism in relation to national politics. A flexible approach to the local landscape while looking at one particular place thus allows a focus not simply on Buddhism through its texts or via its relation to nationalism or modernity, but as a lived experience where other forms of belief (such as spirit[30] and weiksa[31] cults) coexist, interact and contradict each other.

In Gawgyi, a household is composed minimally of a nuclear family, that is, a married couple and their children, usually building their own house following a neolocal pattern. Yet, among the 136 registered households, about one-third are living in a *hswemyotitthaik* or 'a nest (*titthaik*) of relatives (*hswemyo*)'. Most of these compounds are composed of only two houses, but the biggest ones (I listed seven of them) can count up to eight. Ko Kyaw, the headman, lives in one of these. They represent the accumulation of wealth by a few farming families along past generations and transcribe a tendency to gather relatives when possible. What June and Manning Nash saw in the dry zone of Burma in the 1960s

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was still true in the 2010s: ‘the richer a family is, the more likely it is to be of a compound or extended form, even if the several nuclear families composing it have individual living quarters within the compound owned by the senior generation’ (Nash and Nash 1963: 257). The main families of settlers were able to delineate larger compounds and appropriate more farmland than those settling later, coming from other locales or marrying within the village and receiving a share of inheritance growing smaller as it was divided equally among all the children on the death of the parents. Hence the concentric pattern of settlement of the village and the divide between the real farmers (*taungthu*), with bigger houses and cattle, and the mere labourers (*myaukthu*). The shape of the village is thus partly the outcome of the temporality of transmission within families, of the monopolization of positions of power by certain layers of the local society in the past, and of how kinship is organized.

It has often been argued that kinship of the *Bama* in central Burma/Myanmar is a loose system ‘of the optional variety’ (Nash 1965: 59), meaning that, beyond the nuclear family, relations need to be cultivated. The core was thus the nuclear family, defined through neolocal settlement, bilateralism in descent and equal division of inheritance among children. Family relationships are a matter of entitlement and of moral and social obligations transforming through time. Beyond the family, kinship in a broad sense can be seen as a field of politics, and what is interesting is how people bundle by affinity and often use the vocabulary of likeness to denote a sense of belonging that could encapsulate a common origin or simply a wish to maintain good relations. Spiro was already suggesting that kinship ties carry a moral force that defines a village as a social rather than a territorial group. For him, it is ‘their common membership in a cross-cutting network of extended kin that constitutes the main basis for the villagers’ sense of trust, shared identity and mutual responsibility’ ([1977] 1986: 99).

This sense of belonging through extended kinship is a way of thinking of and performing a sense of belonging, fragile as it may be. For instance, *hswemyo* (‘relative’) is a building block for several expressions about belonging. We saw it concerning the ‘nest of relatives’, but there is also *yathswe-yatmyo* which means ‘people akin by (sharing a) dwelling’, and it is used, for instance, by Gawgyi people to talk about the neighbouring village of Tozigon. It reflects a sense of mutuality and affiliation through extended bonds and a sense of autochthony in their case. However, Gawgyi people will never say the same about those from Myinmilaung, for instance, even if they intermarry and exchange snacks before and during each other’s pagoda festival. This expression combines *hswemyo* with a reference to the common dwelling area (*yat*). Such assemblage is also present in the title of village elders, *yatmiyathpa*, or ‘parents (*mihpa*) of the dwelling area’. The landscape is thus also imagined in terms of space of belonging, talked

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about in a flexible language of kinship, and the frontiers of which had varied following the local history and socio-economic changes.

Gawgyi is linked to neighbouring villages and farm fields via bullock-cart tracks – transforming into evacuation canals during the episodic monsoon – and footpaths – becoming motorbike routes since the massive arrival of Chinese goods in the late 2000s. Outside of the village is the field (*taw*). The village–field division structures the landscape. When one goes to one's farm field, one goes to his or her *taw*. The field is not just a place for farm work. The social control one experiences in the village, with its houses set close to each other, its gossip and its rules for male–female and junior–senior relationships, is also at play in the fields, notably when people work in groups, but in a different manner. *Taw* is foremost a place of more open sociality, where men exchange betel, talk about crops, where people make arrangements for the harvest, gauge each other's techniques, debate politics and the quality of the last ceremony, for instance. It is where the youth hide to drink toddy palm juice, and where they pursue their love affairs. It is where the men play games for money, often leading to such losses that rich families have to sell their land. *Taw* is also a place of untamed danger. The old trees harbour ghosts who trick people at dusk and are only visible to the cattle. The fields at times spit out remains of the battle during the Japanese retreat in 1945 in the form of cartouches and bullets. It is also where an old pagoda called Shwepankhaing stands, dating back to pre-colonial times, half eroded, alone with its invisible guardian, enclosing gold that no one should take home (Figure 1.1).

Myinmilaung

A last element of the landscape, perhaps the least romantic, is the way in which it has been impacted by successive governments. The making of Myinmilaung tract, the successive embodiment of headship and the transformation of the local political landscape are the subjects of the historical part of this book. From the precolonial period, when there was a landscape of fragmented sovereignties tied through patron–client relations and competition for offices, Gawgyi went on to become part of Myinmilaung tract during the colonial encounter, which imposed a 'village system' that remained in place throughout the Japanese invasion, the period of insurgencies, the military turn towards socialism, its gradual disengagement from the countryside and more recently the democratic transition. The rationalization of the political landscape within jurisdictions became tangible with the mapping of land and the enforcement of a revenue system by the British. It faded during the Second World War, but villagers soon saw their harvest being taken by the socialist state while the black market and cattle rustling (re-)emerged together with village fences.

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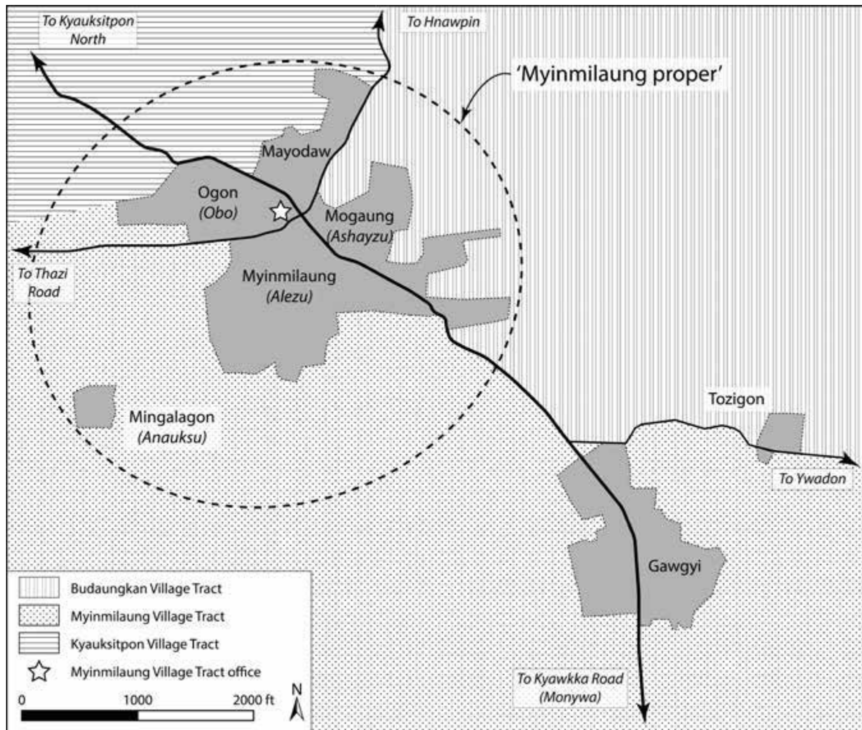

Map 0.3. The village tracts. © Martin Michalon.

The most enduring presence was the village headmen, whose demeanour and authority varied depending on how they were empowered by the government. In addition, some roads and dams are concrete memories of how the military tightened its grip on people through forced labour while disengaging from the countryside after the bloodshed of the 1988 crisis and the revolt of thousands of people across the country against the government. Locally, it opened an age of distrust embodied by an infamous (*luhso*) headman from Myinmilaung village, which increased the divide and animosity between this place and Gawgyi. From that moment on, a few big men from Gawgyi began to take care of village affairs on the model of previous men of propriety by combining a traditional form of sociality (*luhmuyay*) with new stakes.

What needs to be borne in mind is that Myinmilaung is a scalable political space and a historical artefact. One of the plots running through the historical part of this book is to explore how it comes to be the name of (one aspect of) the local polity. This name refers to multiple spaces (a village, a group of villages sharing a sense of belonging, a village tract). It came to be used as the name of the village tract after a *coup de force* by a man called U Nyunt, who took

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advantage of the colonial operations in the late 1880s to create for himself a jurisdiction while composing with (in the sense of dealing with) unsteady centres of power (Chapters 1 and 2). It sometimes refers to a single village but is mostly used to talk about a group of villages sharing a common history of settlement, despite the subsequent splits due to conflicts in village leadership. I call that settlement Myinmilaung Proper. The name 'Myinmilaung' has no permanent, spatial anchoring. It became a sort of referent once recognized as a governmental jurisdiction. The name in itself is a transformation of *Myinmalauq*, meaning 'not enough horses', and draws from a foundation narrative in which the royalty and the locality intersected in the middle of the eighteenth century. The narratives of the foundation of Myinmilaung Proper and Gawgyi allude to the fashioning of this political space and oppose the former, presented as 'genuine allochthone', to the latter, claiming autochthony.

Nowadays, Myinmilaung is the name of a jurisdiction, that is, Myinmilaung village tract. As mentioned above, it includes Ogon, Mingalagon, Myinmilaung and Gawgyi villages and one headman is selected for the whole tract. But the history of the area shows a number of splits between villages. During the foundation of Myinmilaung Proper in the 1750s, the people divided first into three corps, probably following the regimental affiliation at play in the region. Map 0.3 shows the different names of the villages. There was the 'West Corps' (Anauksu,[32] now Mingalagon), the 'East Corps' (Ashayzu, now Mogaung) and the 'Middle Corps' (Alezu, now Myinmilaung). These are the hamlets' old names – sometimes still in use – as recalled by current villagers. Myinmilaung as a single village then progressively referred to the 'Middle Corps' (Alezu), the central hamlet which tried to encompass the others under its leadership in the second half of the eighteenth century.

At a larger level, Myinmilaung Proper refers to five villages claiming a common origin. There were pushes and pulls between villages and many distanced themselves from Myinmilaung with more or less success. The 'West Corps' was progressively known as the 'Auspicious Hill' (Mingalagon), taking for itself the name given by a royal astrologer passing by. The other two villages that split with the 'Middle Corps' were also renamed. The 'East Corps' became Mogaung, the 'Good Rains', and affiliated with a different village tract. In the early years of colonization, the northwest village known as Obo was renamed Ogon, 'Brick Hill'. A fifth village, today called Mayodaw, was also created in the north, most likely in the late 1910s, and affiliated with a different tract. The villagers from these villages generally explain the splits as the fruits of tensions between big men and their cliques or group of relatives. Interestingly, Mayodaw also distanced itself by becoming independent in terms of ceremonies. They use the monastery and pagoda located close to Myinmilaung but have their own village properties in which to organize ceremonies. In short, the evolution of

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Myinmilaung Proper is as much about a common origin as factionalism and subsequent splits.

The last key point is that Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper have conflicting relationships. They do not share a common foundation history. Rather, they were bound to deal with one another in the same polity when Myinmilaung village tract was created. From that moment on, the evolution of headship has been linked to the competition between these two imagined communities. There is no clear-cut event that people recall to explain why they do not like each other. They just 'do not get along', and football matches, pagoda festivals and headman selections often turn into open clashes and fights. Yet they marry each other (mostly the non-farmers) and participate in gift-giving exchanges. For instance, villagers from both places share pre-pagoda festival presents, in the form of snacks, to foster certain kinds of alliances (between families, related to service exchanges and so on). Formally, the villages of the tract cohabit. But animosity tends to prevail. Gawgyi men often express this through stories of misconduct displaying Myinmilaung people as corrupt or amoral. And the latter joke about Gawgyi putting on a show of propriety. My affiliation with Gawgyi meant that tracing back the genealogy of this relation through oral history was sensitive.

The relative opposition between these two ensembles sometimes reduced the potential for factionalism – or segmentation – within each settlement. For instance, during the headman selection of 2016, two candidates competed, one for Gawgyi, one for Myinmilaung Proper (here composed of Myinmilaung, Mingalagon and Ogon). But this was not always the case, and the selection of headmen is a critical moment when the drama of local politics plays out. A look at the long-term history of this area, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, thus allows us to explore how this opposition is expressed in terms of competing visions of indigeneity – autochthony vs. genuine allochthony – and to locate how village headship, as a new form of leadership brought about by colonialism in the late nineteenth century, both relates to precolonial dynamics and transformed following who embodied it in a wider context of socio-political change during the twentieth century.

Engagement

The landscape I encountered was crowded with a large array of entities: pagodas, monks, monasteries, *naq*, memories of men of prowess, ponds, ghosts, cattle, trees, neighbours, headmen, online teams, hills, creeks, administrative tracts, relatives and so on. It could be delineated differently depending on what one wanted to see, remember, talk about or avoid. But such a crowd is not an overwhelming structure imposed on villagers' imagination. Instead, an interesting way of putting it is to think of the landscape as made up of networks of relationships one

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engages with or not; or, more precisely, made up of the ways people calibrate their engagement with the social world. The villagers are not relating at all times with all possible entities that could inhabit the area. They have a certain degree of agency visible in how they choose to engage – with a certain intensity and to a certain degree – with this or that person, monk, pagoda, spirit or belief. In a sense, people navigate the landscape by calibrating their engagement with the world and, by doing so, critique and/or reproduce formations of power.

Even though I was not at first interested in the ethnography of religious practices, the idea of engagement resonates with the writings of Rozenberg about belief. In his anthropological study of 'immortal' beings in Myanmar (2015), he made a case for distinguishing two verbs in Burmese corresponding to the English 'to believe'. There is *yuhsa* (to believe, nominalized as *ayuahsa*) and *yonkyi* (believing, *yonkyihmu*). 'Ayuahsa refers to a statement that requires no argumentation or proof. It is the expression of an opinion as to the truth of a phenomenon not amenable to practical demonstration …; a collective representation.' In this vein, that Gawgyi people believe (*yuhsa*) in Buddha is unquestionable, for example. On the other hand, *yonkyihmu* is used when someone takes a personal position and 'acknowledges the power of the beings in question and the influence they may exercise over his or her person and life course' (2015: 15–16).

This distinction is an interesting metaphor reflecting some of the ways in which people can engage with a variety of human and non-human entities. It is a matter of gauging influences and obligations. The emphasis on experience and agency indicates that a key process is the gauging, the evaluation of others. You relate to and choose to act differently with friends, patrons, ghosts and officials for potentially multiple reasons. To me, what is key in Gawgyi day-to-day life is how people gauge each other and choose to engage differently with others depending on their ability to curb influences and craft their position.

To account for these tensions, I choose to define politics as made up of forms of engagement, ridden with ambiguity and uncertainty, and contained between the poles of violence and friendship, as Naepels puts it (1998: 328). To put it simply, there are differences – in form and intensity – in how someone deals with his family, with neighbours, with friends, with employers, labourers, patrons, monks and so on. Among these relationships, seniority, gender, religious status, intra-family obligations and friendship are the core ingredients of sociality. They are nonetheless arenas in which people must craft their position. Family, for instance, is a group in which relations between parents and children are presumably quite straightforward. Studying the transmission of inheritance (Chapter 5) shows that what makes a family, and the mutual obligations between its members, creates entitlement to property. And yet, for one of the children, who usually receives more, it also means taking upon oneself parental patrimony and liabilities. The temporality of family relations is then crisscrossed with uncertainty

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because the transmission entangles multiple generations, moments (marriage, adoption, death) and strategies to access wealth that requires one to redefine liabilities and responsibilities between people. Thus, the family, even if conceived through a set of rules and status, is a space in which people adjust their position.

One can say the same for Ko Kyaw in his quality as village headman (Chapter 4). This position for him meant navigating social and moral obligations while abiding by local ethics, being responsible for a whole tract while dodging situations in which he could become obligated. He was never sure of his authority in this or that arena and had to dissemble as he was not solely representing his own authority via the institution. He used his family's reputation, adjusted his speeches, at times remained silent, received or gave things, help, pieces of advice; he formed a faction of youngsters through an online game, avoided the head of monks and previous headmen, complied with the village big men and was careful not to cross the line between individual, familial and collective responsibilities. In short, he crafted his position within a variety of social settings where the worth of what circulates, and *in fine*, the worth of people, are constantly evaluated.

To reflect the tensions at play in relationships, I see them as engagements. The interesting part of the word engagement is that it combines the ideas of evaluation, of pledges and of fight. In English, to *en-gage* expresses the act of evaluating something (a length, a weight, a stake) through a scale (to gauge) and acting upon that evaluation. It highlights a process through which someone gauges and can commit or defy. It is exit, voice and loyalty in one word. Engagement refers to the act of binding, committing, contracting and taking responsibility by assessing the appropriate pledges and obligations. This notion, both a legal and ethical category, evokes that of 'being hold under control', or 'sway' in English, and in a sense is close to what Chateauraynaud has called 'emprise' in French (2015). In the sense of 'to deposit or make over as a pledge' (Oxford English Dictionary), engaging refers to the idea of involvement, being part of. And 'something' (a bride price, a promise, a bonding gift, an inheritance, a service, a loan, a ritual exchange etc.) marks this commitment which transforms the responsibilities between the persons.

In the vein of Thévenot's work (2006), I propose to separate the concept of engagement from its usual meanings (humanitarian, military, political etc.) to make it a tool capable of capturing how people inscribe themselves in forms of action and evaluate obligations, relationships and the past in the course of more or less extensive social interactions and situations. To paraphrase Thévenot, engagement emphasizes a dependency on the world that the person cares about and seeks to secure benefits from by having the appropriate guarantees. 'Engagement aims at mastery, at power understood in a more open sense than the current meaning of the term power in social and political sciences. Engagement

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is about turning dependency into power' (2006: 238, my translation). Thévenot's work on engagement primarily aims at renewing our understanding of social action by defining several 'regimes of engagement' able to capture how individuals coordinate and adjust their actions with their material and social environment. My aim, however, is to show how power relations are made up of calibrated engagements that give texture, density and life to different affairs and domains of politics that form a temporary configuration of power.

In that sense, my approach differs from Keeler's argument (2017) that, in the *Bama* society, politics is about navigating hierarchy. He uses the metaphor of road traffic to exemplify how navigating hierarchical arrangements is like in everyday life. For him, following Dumont's work (1967), hierarchical relations, as an organized form of inequality, are marked by tremendous degrees of agency. I agree that acknowledging 'the hierarchical nature of social relations does not mean that [people] accept the specific distribution of roles, prestige, and prominence that they encounter in any given instance' (Keller 2017: 22). Yet I do not think that politics, as a form of critique, can be reduced to people 'playing constantly on the constraints and opportunities that any given situation presents them with' (ibid.). If so, then politics, as a form of power, would entail the reproduction of the same hierarchical principle over and over, and history would repeat itself. I take from Keeler that hierarchy is a powerful idiom that expresses a broad configuration of power in *Bama* society, but I adopt instead a pragmatic perspective that helps us to describe the difficulties people face in dealing with each other in contexts of uncertainty.

For instance, offering food can either be an act of hospitality (to a guest), of sharing (with friends and close relatives), of making merit (in ceremonies) or of obliging somebody (a sort of potlatch), and it can be most of these at the same time. How people act can be approached in a flexible way, leaving room for uncertainty, evaluation and strategy without eroding the value of the idioms used to describe relations, such as patronage, friendship or family solidarity, for example. Engaging in this or that kind of relation thus creates obligations between the persons, and the gist of that relationship is materialized in what circulates between them (help, services, money, patrimony, protection etc.) and how it is qualified. Successfully installing oneself 'under' a patron is, for instance, turning a dependency into a power (giving something out to be sure to get something back). In this sense, the notion of engagement relates to debates about gift giving, about the value of people and of what circulates.

The valuation and testing of modes of being in relationships is often carried out through transfers. A 'meritorious gift' (*ahlu*), 'mutual aid' (*apyan ahlan*), the transmission of 'inheritance' (*amway*) or a 'ritual offering' made to the spirits (*kadaw bwe sek-*) are all transfers that, when described in context, make it possible to analyse the issues underlying social situations. Following Pickles' (2020) and Pannier's (2021) works, the concept of transfer is understood in a restricted

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analytical sense, namely as the simple passage of something (good or service) from one entity to another. In line with polyphonic theories of nested worlds, as developed by Zelizer (2005) and Weber (2007), I emphasize that different social scenes make possible and give meaning to the multitude of transfers taking place, for example during a singular event such as a novitiate ceremony (Chapter 6), where the evaluation of the appropriateness of a transfer is articulated with a set of other transfers (past or future). The interpretation of transfers thus depends on the responsibilities and obligations at stake. And the plasticity of some of them (e.g. mutual aid or the gift of food), and of certain scenes (e.g. hospitality or a meritorious ceremony), allows power relations to play out in a more or less visible way by oscillating between the poles of violence and friendship.

This framework of analysis was also nourished by a reflection on the temporality of transfers and on how they give substance to political domains, such as through the case of the transmission of inheritance and the intrafamilial domain. This transmission is fundamental in the production of power relations, because people do not transmit mere things, but a responsibility and an authority over those things. The domain of kinship, for central Burmese society, has been described as belonging to a flexible system 'of the optional variety' (Nash 1965: 59). This means that beyond the nuclear family, relationships must be cultivated. The core is the nuclear family, defined by neolocal settlement, bilateralism in descent and equal division of inheritance among children (Nash and Nash 1963; Spiro [1977] 1986; Kumada 2015). What is part of the fabric of a family – hierarchy, commensality – and the mutual obligations between its members – gratitude, care – are essential, as they justify possession (Chapter 5). In this sense, a person can be engaged in various relational knots towards family members and following the temporality of devolution of things. Paying attention to transfers within families therefore makes it possible to grasp the family as a political domain in tension, and family engagement as ways of placing oneself in a network of responsibilities, potentialities and obligations.

The forms of engagement approach then builds on the pragmatic reappraisal of Nash's (1965) work on 'big men' (*lugyi*), whom he describes as 'elders' devoid of influence in contrast to men of 'power' (*hpon*). I show that by making village affairs a space of engagement where people's worth is evaluated, the *lugyi* legitimize a political order within villages (Chapter 7). The greatness of individuals seems rooted in the fact that they hold together different domains of political life, from family and intergenerational relationships, to patronage relationships, to mutual aid, to the neighbourhood and hospitality. Analysing the ways in which an individual navigates between these different political domains and networks helps to give them substance and to show their transformation. The example of the village headship in central Myanmar is central in this respect. The headman embodies an institution understood as a nodal point that intersects with, and

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acts upon, multiple layers of responsibilities, chains of relationships and things. The person who embodies headship shapes his or her role by adapting, transforming and engaging in the networks and domains that characterize a political space. This approach captures several political domains in terms of the types of responsibilities and obligations at play for each. And, as stated before, my interlocutors distinguished between 'my business' (*kyundaw keiksa*), 'village affairs' (*yatywa keiksa*), 'social affairs' (*luhmuyay*) and 'government issues' (*asoya keiksa*).

By distinguishing various domains of engagement – the personal, the intra-familial, the political and the government – I propose a move from the interactionist understanding of local politics as made up of levels, arenas or forms of governance, towards a more pragmatic approach to the enactment of politics and mediation. Describing these forms of engagement is thus an ethnographic device for an anthropology concerned with the contemporary, but also with history. For instance, what I came to call 'the political' is a reading of how certain historical possibilities and uncertainties unfold in day-to-day life, especially in the life of Ko Kyaw when he was headman. Why did being headman mean to him embodying a position people distrust while showing a degree of loyalty? How have these values and forms of engagement become central? What kinds of responsibilities are involved and towards whom? These questions link a series of narratives about former men of power, men in power and the effect of state violence, creating a rather masculine geography of responsibilities and belonging in which village and social affairs become valued domains of action and avenues for bigness.

Notes

1. It is possible to break this term down as follows: *ok* means to cover, to restrain, to administer, to take charge or look after; *chok* means to hamper the free movement, to bind, confine, head or lead; taken together *okchok* means to administer, to direct; *yay* substantiates the compound (*okchok*) in terms of 'affairs' and *hmu* is a marker of an office held by a person.
2. The transcription of this word changes according to the authors. Following Okell's guide (1971), I write it *hpon*. However, Nash (1965) wrote *pon*, Schober (1989) *hpoun* and Brac de La Perrière (2009b) *'pon.*
3. On Tatmadaw, its history and functioning as one of the main political forces in the country's modern history, see Callahan (2003) and Selth (2002).
4. Fenichel and Khan (1981), in their assessment of the nature of Burmese socialism, indicate that while Burma established the formal structures of a socialist economy, it did not effectively implement those structures.
5. Except for Buddhist monks, who are defined by this quality and called *hpongyi* ('great *hpon*').
6. The term *lugyi* is polysemic and can refer to different scales of worth used to qualify people, such as fame, rank, charisma, or the embodiment of a common good. Here, it refers to the persons who take care of village affairs at large and legitimize a political order by making village affairs a space of commitment where the worth of the people is gauged.

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7. Called *kotukotha* and which can be translated as 'rising by and defining oneself'.
8. Alon was known as Badon until Bodawhpaya (1782–1819), sixth king of the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885), also known as Badon Min ('King of Badon'), renamed it after having ruled this area as an appanage before ascending the throne.
9. The term *amyo-yo* means 'bone (*yo*) of a kindred (*amyo*)'. The village is thus to some degree imagined as deriving from a descent group. As Thant Myint-U has described, in Burmese *myo* (a term that, written differently in Burmese, also means fortified town) has come to imply a shared origin or a common descent. It has also come to have a more general connotation of 'sort' or 'kind'. For instance, *lumyo* is usually translated as race (kind of people (*lu*)). In addition, descent was reckoned biologically, that is, both the mother's and father's relations were regarded as the individual's *amyo* (Thant Myint-U 2001: 29). According to this historian, marriage tended to be endogamous, within the circle of one's *amyo*, and residence mostly followed a neolocal pattern, which means that newly-wed couples usually created their own housing area. For Nash (1965) and Spiro (1986), neolocal residence was still the prevailing pattern in the mid-twentieth century, and they described kinship as a loose system in which the distinction between kin and non-kin was more a matter of moral obligation and entitlement. During my fieldwork, marriages were proscribed between close *amyo*.
10. *Naq* are the spirits of individuals who died violently. The official pantheon of the Thirty-seven Lords refers to *naq* eliminated by the Burmese kings who then transformed them into ministering spirits of a domain (Brac de La Perrière 1989). In Gawgyi, the *naq* of the village community, called Bo Bo Gyi, is represented by a white horse puppet on the village altar.
11. This term was first used by the British to refer to the central and northern area of what is now Myanmar. After the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, Lower Burma was annexed by the British Empire, while Upper Burma remained independent under the Burmese Empire until the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885. Upper Burma was also known as Burma proper. Historically, Upper Burma was predominantly *Bama*, whereas Lower Burma was historically Mon-speaking until the early nineteenth century. The Frontier Areas, as designated by the colonial administration, included ethnic minority areas, such as the Shan States and modern Kachin State.
12. 1956 is when the White Flag Communists deserted the outskirt of Monywa.
13. The 2014 census states that Monywa city was populated by 207,489 inhabitants while the figure is 372,095 for Monywa Township (and so the number of rural population is 164,606). Cf. *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. Sagaing Region, Monywa District. Monywa Township Report,* published by the Department of Population under the Ministry of Immigration and Population in October 2017. https://dop.gov.mm/sites/dop.gov.mm/files/publication_docs/monywa_0.pdf
14. For the Letpadaung case, see Amnesty International (2017) and Prasse-Freeman and Phyo Win Latt (2018); on stories of ethnic construction in relation to Burmese and military domination, see Gravers (2007); for an overview, see Sadan (2013) for the Kachin case and Boutry (2015) concerning the delta area.
15. It is known in English as the Village Land Management Committee.
16. On the current debates about the effect of the new land laws, see Boutry et al. (2017), Mark (2016), McCarthy G. (2018), Willis (2014), Oberndorf (2012), and Shivakumar and Saw Hlaing (2015), among others. The stack of laws in question are notably the Tenancy Act (1936), Land Nationalization Acts (1948, 1953), Enterprises Nationalization Law (1963), Farmers' Right Protection Law (1963), Tenancies Law Amending Act (1963), Procedures Conferring the Rights to Cultivate Land (1964,

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rule 64/1), Law to Protect the Implementation of the Socialist Economic System (1964), the Farmland Law (No. 11/2012) and the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law (No. 10/2012).

17. The selection happened in 2012 but it takes several months before the position is handed over.
18. Cf. GRET's *Dry Zone Project Baseline Survey by Village Profiles* (unpublished). GRET stands for Groupe de Recherches et d'Echanges Technologiques. The other INGO operating during the time of fieldwork was Solidarités International.
19. Neolocal residence is a type of post-marital residence in which a newly married couple resides separately from the husband's birth household and the wife's birth household.
20. For instance, daily wages rose from less than 1USD to 3.5 USD per day for men between 2005 and 2015.
21. The first attempts seem to have occurred during U Nu's Pyidawtha Plan (on this plan, cf. Gerard McCarthy's thesis [2018], section on 'The rise and fall of interventionist welfare capitalism (1948–1962)') and during the socialist period in the late 1960s.
22. For instance, the price of land plots adjacent to Kyawkka road at the crossroads with Gawgyi pathway had multiplied by ten between 2013 and 2016, from around 2500 USD to 25,000 per acre. The price of land plots for housing purposes in villages had also been multiplied by five to ten, depending on the remoteness of the location and the potential for development.
23. Theravada (literally 'School of the Elders') is the most commonly accepted name of Buddhism's oldest school. The only complete Buddhist canon (dhamma) surviving in Pali language serves as the school's sacred language and lingua franca. In contrast to Mahayana and Vajrayana, Theravada tends to be conservative in matters of doctrine and monastic discipline, while meditation practice was reintroduced in the nineteenth century and has since become popular with the laity both in traditionally Theravada countries (Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Sri Lanka) and in the West.
24. There is a large body of scholarship deconstructing the village as a cohesive space: Adas (1998) and Mya Than (1987) for the Burmese case; Kemp (1991) for the Thai case; and, concerning villages in the anthropology and history of Southeast Asia at large, see the special issue of the journal *Sojourn* (vol. 4, no. 1, 1989) titled 'Peasants and Cities, Cities and Peasants: Rethinking Southeast Asian Models' and the research note by Ruiter and Schulte Nordholt (1989).
25. 'Buddha's teachings' is transcribed as *thathena* from the Burmese, and *sasana* from the Pali.
26. Transcribed as *kamma* from Pali.
27. Donation to monks (*alhu*) is one of the main ways to produce merit, the monks acting as a 'field of merit' (Schober 1989). Brac de La Perrière (2009a, 2015) has also shown that religious donation in the Burmese context contributes to the differentiation of a Buddhist-defined 'religious' field called *thathena*.
28. References to fences or stockades in the literature are interesting as it indicates the comings and goings of periods of unrest. They were a crucial element of villages during the 'pacification campaign' of Upper Burma, for instance (Furnivall 1957); the British also imposed the fencing of villages (Charney 2009), but they were already there in the precolonial period, notably in periods of warfare (Koenig 1990; Thant Myint-U 2001). Nash (1965) also indicated that the maintaining of fences by villagers marked their belonging to the political community in the early 1960s. During my own fieldwork I realized that they gradually disappeared from the villages in the late 1990s, together with the decrease in cattle rustling (cf. Chapter 5).

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29. Cf. Brac de La Perrière (2015) and Houtman (1999) for an overview of how the Burmese Buddhist ideology dominates the definition of religion in Myanmar.
30. Cf. Brac de La Perrière (1989, 2009a, 2015).
31. Cf. Brac de La Perrière et al. (2014) and Rozenberg (2015), among others.
32. The word '*su*' (sometimes pronounced '*zu*') refers to the idea of a compound and in this case to a corps of servicemen.

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PART I

Histories

‘History is never sure.’
—Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*

The objective of the historical part of this book is to describe the fashioning of a *local political landscape*. The local political landscape is a metaphor referring to the networks of past and present personalities, hierarchies, stakes and memories that are meaningful in current politics; and its fashioning, the process of sedimentation of these elements through time. The challenge is to weave together anthropology and history. There is a long debate on the relationship between these disciplines, which I will not recall here.[1] More than simply considering the past, I take into account the internal social dynamics of the groups under consideration *and* the variable regimes of historicity. In addition, the ‘ethnographic’ fieldwork was not secluded from the analysis of ‘historical’ data. The whole process was rather a constant coming and going between notes, documents, ideas, scholarship, contexts and recordings. As a result, three perspectives concerning the transformation of the political landscape in Gawgyi and Myinmilaung are assembled in the final text: one about a change in how time was experienced and how some persons embodied rupture and continuities, another about the relations between myth and history and the influence of contemporary stakes in the enunciation of historical narratives, and a last one about the sedimentation of layer upon layer of history in a ‘longue durée’ perspective.

The first perspective relates to the argument that if contemporary politics in Gawgyi is conceptualized in terms of village affairs upheld by worthy leaders, it is related to the moral rupture that happened during the first decades of colonialism and which saw the rise of new leaders described today as the last men of

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 29.

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hpon. If there are no more men of *hpon* now, it is also related to how the shift was experienced from the socialist regime engaged in village economy and politics to the military regime disengaging from them, resorting to physical and symbolic violence. These experiences are framed in terms of the diverging morality of local leaders who came to exemplify and embody corruption or trust. Engaging in village affairs and embodying local ethics, that is, being worthy, is how actors made sense of their past while it shapes the contemporary scale of politics on village welfare, drawing upon memories of past 'exemplary' men and the more traditional form of sociality called *luhmuyay*. There are thus multiple moments of rupture – colonial encounter, change of the role of lay people, socialism in practice and violent militarism – that are reflected in leaders and which are the means to articulate change in how time was experienced.

The second perspective concerns the foundation narratives of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi studied in Chapter 1. This chapter triangulates myths, oral testimonies and archives to locate the foundation of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi. This chapter is where the context of speech is notably problematized in relation to the animosity between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung. Attention was paid to 'how the story is told, what is told of the story, by whom, to whom and for what purpose, what is a landmark or not' (Naepels 2010: 881, my translation). When narrated, certain events come to serve as a matrix for subjective experiences and for the historical consciousness of the actors. The argument is that the foundation narratives of both villages are intimately linked to them being enclosed within a single jurisdiction and competing for leadership. They present opposing stories of foundation to claim their differences and legitimate their presence in the landscape. The 'Myinmilaung story' features its people as the junction between the royalty, the regional sovereign spirit and the religious patronage to support their claim as genuine and legitimate allochthones. The 'Gawgyi story' posits its people as autochthones with intimate relationships with some neighbouring villages. It also anchors villagers' knowledge of the region in pre-royal times. These claims to some extent exclude one another by drawing a line that can only be understood in relation to the current atmosphere of violence and bitterness between the two villages. And if we further the connection with village affairs, the current opposition, as displayed in stories of foundation, is the backdrop against which the inclusion or exclusion of neighbouring villages within a collective makes sense.

The last perspective borrows the vocabulary of geology ('sedimentation') to describe how the local political landscape sits on top of and is shaped by layer upon layer of history. This outlook is broad, influenced by the Annales School,[2] and not contained in one specific part of the book but rather runs within it in an open-ended way. It concerns the shaping of the landscape and the different types of temporalities as described in the introduction; but it also relates to the coming of Buddhism and its evolution and, more directly, to the transformation of local

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hierarchies as depicted in Chapter 2. Ultimately, this flexible approach is central to the book because it nuances the question about the reasons and the effects of the merging of villages under a single polity.

These different forms of history get mobilized in the text and subtext of village politics during collective undertakings and moments of competitions, for instance. It was present when selecting the headman in 2016 (cf. Chapter 7): each side – Myinmilaung vs. Gawgyi people – was silent and tension was tangible, almost physical. When operating the water station and collecting the fees from villagers, the *lugyi* produce and enact a sense of collective and at times compare it to the poor handling of village affairs in Myinmilaung. Or when they help organize ceremonies in Tozigon, it emphasizes a sense of common belonging. If we do not account for the history of this place, then we would see these big men as mere patrons, the headman as a petty broker and his selection as a trifling competition. And yet, an ethnographic approach combined with my attempt at historiography reveals that local politics consists of excluding some individuals and entrusting others (the *lugyi*) to 'take charge' of local affairs while being the elite at the top of a local hierarchy that has evolved over the past century and that the village tract is but one arena of politics with its own history of moral ruptures.

Notes

1. For a synthesis, see for instance Kellogg (1991) and Naepels (2010). Temporalities and social dynamics came to the forefront within political anthropology with researchers such as Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1950) and Edmund Leach (1954). In the meantime, the notion of 'situation' allowed Max Gluckman (1940) and the Manchester School, notably Victor Turner (1981) and J. Clyde Mitchell (1983), to differentiate synchrony and static in order to emphasize the need to look at the history of societies to understand the present. The subsequent scholarship which criticized the ahistorical character of classical ethnographic descriptions, especially Johannes Fabian (1983), Nicholas Thomas (1996) and Marshall D. Sahlins (1993, 1995, 2004), was crucial in articulating ethnography with the type of research developed by historians. The subaltern studies on colonial knowledge, such as the work of Talad Asad (1973) and Edward Said (1989), were also critical in the historical inflexion of anthropology while also rearticulating the position between the anthropologist and his/her interlocutors and the practice of anthropological writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The postcolonial perspective then took note of the critics of colonial categories while proposing deep descriptions of specific societies within a broader context, as in the work of John and Jean Comaroff (1992).
2. Cf. Bloch (1961, 1973), Le Goff (1964) and Braudel (1958).

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1

The Coming of Village Headship

It was quite natural for me to visit Myinmilaung Proper with Ko Kyaw when he was the headman of the whole village tract. We met several times with elders, previous headmen and the current clerk of the tract. On 5 December 2013, we met with U So[1] at the teashop tucked in the middle of the village at the crossroads between three village tracts. U So was described to me as the local expert on village history. During this encounter, I was fully aware of the deep resentment between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung villagers. Relating back to this moment, it appears that the context *and* the content of speech are clues enabling us to question both current and past local politics. Here is an extract from the notes I took during this interview:

> During the period of the Pagan dynasty, the king Anawrahta, founder of the Bagan empire (from the eleventh to the thirteenth century), gave Alon[2] to Bahtukyweh. The foundation of the village is related to a conflict between these two persons. At that time Alon was a royal city and Monywa a simple village. Because people complained about Bahtukyweh's handling of the region – he was a jealous and unjust ruler – Anawrahta chased and killed him in 1111 B.E. (1749–1750 C.E.). Having heard of his imminent death, Bahtukyweh fled with his soldiers and hid, for a time, in a forest. But when the royal troops approached, there were not enough horses for the whole cavalry to escape. Bahtukyweh ran away but eventually drowned himself in the Chindwin River. But some of his followers stayed in this hideout. This is how the village was founded and its first name, Myinmalauq, means 'not enough horses'. As time passed, the pronunciation of Myinmalauq was altered to finally be voiced as Myinmilaung. In 1147 B.E. (1776 C.E.) the village

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> was renamed by U No, a royal astrologer, who stopped by when returning from the capital. He founded a pagoda (the current one) on the eastern limit of the villages and named the settlement Mingalagon, meaning the 'Auspicious Hill'.

U So told me that teachers at the university would confirm this story. But my questions about Myinmilaung were too specific and historians could not answer them. Later, I tried to question U So and others about the reasons that led to the division of the 'original settlement' into a collection of villages (Mogaung, Ogon, Myinmilaung, Mingalagon, Mayodaw), which were further divided into different village tracts following the colonial 'settlement operations'. But nobody was able or willing to tell me. In Gawgyi's case, there was no such narrative of village foundation. The best hypothesis – congruent with the genealogical depth of its main lineages – is that it was founded during the first decades of the eighteenth century by about ten families who fled the neighbouring village of Ywadon to escape state requests (corvées, soldiers), as well as a famine. The question is, what to do with these stories?

There are at least two ways to understand them: as key chronological markers that help to reconstruct the history of the local polity, and as current discourses about history. This chapter uses both approaches concurrently. For instance, in U So's narrative, only the founding date seems accurate (1749/1750 C.E.). The other historical references shed light on how people imagine time and space. First, the village establishment could not have taken place under King Anawrahta because he reigned from 1044 to 1077 C.E. Nonetheless, he is referred to as the founder of the first Burmese dynasty, introducer of Buddhism in his realm during the eleventh century, and tamer of animist spirits called *naq* by incorporating them in the royal pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords.[3] As such, he appears in many myths, stories and chronicles as the founder *par excellence*. Second, Bahtukyweh is central in the history of the region, even if he is not part of the official pantheon. Also known as 'Alon's Grandfather', he was transformed into *naq* by the royalty and since represents local indigenousness and sovereignty.[4] Thus, U So produced a narrative of foundation that posits Myinmilaung at the intersection of the royalty and the locality. He used stabilized elements – Anawrahta's founding gesture, Bahtukyweh as the local sovereign and the ineluctable fight between them – to graft the settlement within a metanarrative that makes sense locally.

Oral memories draw out connections to the past at the expense of others. This narrative displays layer upon layer of history linking Myinmilaung people to a founding king, to a local sovereign and to religious patronage that, eventually, make these villagers indigenes in the sense of genuine allochthones. But it fails to mention the fission of the original settlement and the dynamics of leadership

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which are crucial to understanding how Myinmilaung and Gawgyi were grouped under a single polity at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a different way, Gawgyi people posit themselves as people from the land, with thick connections to neighbouring villages; in short, as indigenous people in the sense of real autochthones. To some degree, these two sets of claims underscore the current animosity between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi and relate to how contemporary village affairs in the latter exclude the former.

At another level, this chapter lays the first stone in the study of how Myinmilaung village tract came to be and explores how the political dynamics of the late precolonial era shaped the colonial encounter and the creation of village headship. Did the introduction of village headship mark a colonial rupture in the power dynamics at play in the rural countryside? Headship was established in 1887 as a device to crush the 'guerrilla warfare' encountered by colonial officers during the annexation of Upper Burma (1885–1886). As an institution, it swept into local politics and became the office to compete for, a means to negotiate pre-existing political affiliations. On the whole, the precolonial period offers a landscape of fragmented sovereignties competing for offices following a 'galactic polity' pattern. Furthermore, the history of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi is that of villages learning how to deal with shifting centres. This traffic in affiliations reflects how they engaged with preceding and incoming authorities. Both settlements were created in times of unrest: the rise of a new king (Alaunghpaya, 1752–1760) leading to the appointment of new office holders concerning Myinmilaung; the migrations and famines under Bodawhpaya (1782–1819) concerning Gawgyi. The fragmented authorities competing for office were usually gentry leaders – hereditary office holders – and royal officials making the most of migration, warfare, money lending and changes in the crown's ability to govern the countryside to compete for power. Yet the royal revenue inquests, called *sittan*, and notably those undertaken under Bodawhpaya (1783 and 1802), describe a rather fixed countryside where timeless arrangements and customs regulated a society divided by ranks.

In contrast, scholars such as Koenig (1990), Lieberman (1984, 2003), Scott (1972a, 1972b, 2009) and Thant Myint-U (2001) have long insisted on the fact that factionalism and shifting affiliations were the underlying processes of the precolonial polity. The gentry may appear as a monolithic group, but it was rather an assemblage of powers constantly in the making, using various resources (heredity, patronage, money lending, revenue collection and land control) to consolidate their position through a continuously changing political landscape. When the last two Burmese kings tried to create a more modern bureaucracy and introduced new taxes in the second half of the nineteenth century, the ensuing warfare was a renegotiation of unstable agreements between the state, local sovereignties, officials and rising 'bandits'. These dynamics shaped the political

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landscape surrounding Gawgyi and Myinmilaung, but they also influenced how the British imagined the functioning of society in Upper Burma.

What type of governmentality, then, has British colonialism been willing to create[5] in Upper Burma? Looking at how village headship emerged helps to answer this question. For Colonel Sladen, a British army officer with long experience in British India and Burma,[6] the ideal headman (*thugyi*, meaning 'the great') should be a local with personal influence, a sort of patron with moral authority, inclined and able to implement British policy. For historian Thant Myint-U, colonialism destroyed the precolonial hierarchy that organized the countryside based on the gentry (2001: 4–5). For the Chief Commissioner of Upper Burma Charles Crosthwaite (1887–1890), who imposed the village system, the latter was the most stable feature of local government, and so it should be the first level of colonial administration.[7] To some extent, these views relate to many debates. For instance, Scott's argument, partly related to the peasantry in the rice frontier of Lower Burma, is that the erosion of patron–client bonds (1972b), the subsistence crisis and peasant rebellions (1976) were intimately linked to the practice of colonialism. Iwaki (2015) has already argued that the establishment of the village system reveals the differences of opinion between Crosthwaite and other officials over how precolonial society should be conceptualized, but that in spite of a big difference in the local situation from one region to another, the colonial government went ahead with the legislation, on the assumption that Burmese society had been homogeneous and that one administrative system had been prevalent throughout. Following scholarship that challenges the idea of colonial invention, such as that by Berry (1993) and Spear (2003), I choose to talk about the 'emergence' of headship to give room for continuities, ruptures, reinterpretations, reforms and reconstructions. In this vein, I argue that the creation of headmanship was but an episode of competition for leadership understood as a *longue durée* dynamic of the local polity. Thus, the question of whether or not the British broke the moral and administrative control of local Burmese elites is set aside to the benefit of studying how village headship became a central institution of colonialism in order to explore how it actually evolved in Myinmilaung village tract.

The village system imposed that each village was responsible for police matters under a headman. Its implementation lasted for decades, the villages being segregated, grouped, divided and regrouped depending mostly on revenue and land administration. Yet, its inception happened in a context of warfare during the 'pacification campaign' (1886–1889) following the annexation of Upper Burma in 1885. The fashioning of this policy stems from a search for local tradition but was also derived from the experiences of government in Bengal, Punjab and Lower Burma. On the ground, colonial administrators tried to work out who to work with, giving a lot of space for entrepreneurs to fashion themselves as clients of

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the new regime. The gathering of intelligence about the local authorities showed a rather diverse political landscape. Nonetheless, village headship was devised as if it were an indigenous institution. This policy was a legal *bricolage* that used local customs to fit colonial purposes. For instance, the supposed joint responsibility of villages concerning cattle rustling – already found in Punjab – was then transformed into a collective responsibility of villages for denouncing and fighting those ambushing British forces. Even if headship, as a new type of leadership, was swept into precolonial dynamics, the village system created a climate of suspicion and promoted the insulation of villages, now responsible for their own affairs within a village tract and under a centralized government. As we will see in the following chapters, it had a lasting effect as a matrix of local government. It insulated villages within groups, or village tracts, and became the subject of protest against colonialism (Chapter 4), and will remain the base of local governance.

The first part of this chapter adopts a chronological approach and combines first-hand data,[8] colonial archives and secondary sources to reconstruct the political dynamics of the precolonial polity in Badon/Alon Province at large, and of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi in particular. The second part of the chapter has a specific voice as it draws from archival research[9] and secondary sources but not from field data *per se*. It is a foray into the making of a policy and relates to scholarship that studied colonialism as a non-monolithic enterprise.[10] Throughout the following sections, a stronger emphasis is placed on Myinmilaung because its oral history is denser and because the evolution of this settlement was easier to trace in colonial records. Thus, I use a sedimentary approach in which the current terrain – the politics in Myinmilaung village tract – sits on top of and is shaped by layer upon layer of history. In that sense, the foundation narratives condense key chronological markers that help us to reconstruct the history of the local polity while showing how people reflect on their own history according to present stakes. By looking at history through the lenses of a particular place, this chapter relates to major works on the precolonial politics of Burma and argues that dynamics of affiliations, competition for leadership and fragmentation of authority were the main dynamics in the countryside and endured during the colonial period. The ideas of charisma, *hpon*, patronage and rightful succession were part of the landscape, but authority was fragile, never really achieved, and thus the competition for and fragmentation of leadership pervaded local politics beyond the colonial encounter. Finally, it appears that local legends – usually placed outside of the Buddhist-centred narrative of Burma/Myanmar history because they relate to the spirit cult – are crucial sources condensing historical references and discourses about contemporary issues.

The first section describes the political dynamics of the precolonial period and focuses on Badon/Alon Province. The 'galactic' metaphor is used to locate the context of creation and installation of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi. This allows

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questioning of the nature of local authorities (notably the gentry) and shows that one of the main dynamics is the competition for and consolidation of offices in a fragmented countryside via different means (succession, bribery, mortgages, force, money lending). The second section narrows the scope to the villages and explores their foundation narratives. They are key chronological markers that make it possible to write a history from below while also taking on current politics because they justify the *raison d'être* of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi. Framed in terms of allochthony and autochthony, these discourses also reflect how a common area is imagined and thus relates to how Gawgyi came to imagine its village affairs by excluding Myinmilaung. The third section looks at how these villages dealt with their neighbours after settlement. It focuses particularly on the logic that pushed Myinmilaung to divide into several hamlets. I then analyse the reconfiguration of political affiliation with local authorities before the coming of the British. The fourth section describes the context of warfare during the 'pacification campaign', and the last explores the *ad hoc* appointments of headmen in Alon subdivision and focuses on the content of the village system.

Dynamics of the Precolonial Polity

Myinmilaung was founded at a turning point in late precolonial history, when U Aung Zay Ya, a village chief and warrior from Shwebo, rose as the founder of the last Burmese dynasty (Konbaung, 1752–1885) under the name of Alaunghpaya. The previous dynasty, the Restored Toungoo (1597–1752), was on the decline after having crafted its hold over the kingdom by placing the royal family in the capital, by subjecting appanage holders (*myoza*) and provincial governors (*myowun*) to closer supervision, by reorganizing the servicemen (*ahmudan*) and non-servicemen (*athi*) populations in the nuclear zone, and by structuring the administration into territorial[11] and departmental[12] jurisdictions. This dynasty had been slowly collapsing since the early eighteenth century, facing dissidence among the king's relatives, ministers and the local gentry, who either retreated to their localities or allied with the Peguan kingdom of the south spreading north, along with Tai and Manipuri raids in Upper Burma. My area of study was part of the nuclear zone which represented the northern sector of the dry zone. Residing at Ava, roughly in the centre of the nuclear zone, the king and his chief ministers exercised direct authority over hereditary local headmen throughout this region according to Victor Lieberman (1984: 64). It was here that the early seventeenth-century monarchs obliged most appanage holders to reside, that they concentrated the military service population, and that the body of appointive officials was most numerous and diverse.

The nuclear zone is thus a political construction of the landscape made by the Burmese kingship. Myinmilaung, today in Monywa Township, was then in

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Badon (Alon) Province near the fortified town (*myo*) of Badon. The history of this area is that of a province gradually becoming the northwest outpost of the nuclear zone. Badon Province was first a frontier area (*taik*) integrated into the kingdom during the expansion of the Pagan dynasty in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Such areas were usually entrusted to men of lesser rank, perhaps from powerful local families, known as '*taik*-leaders' (*taikthugyi*), living off appanage grants and local gratuities, and having within their territories concentrations of royal servicemen (*kyundaw* or *ahmudan*). In the stories about Bahtukyweh, the latter is an Indian prince defeated by his brother and entrusted by Anawrahta to rule Badon. Bahtukyweh is positioned as the founder of a local lineage (*amyo-yo*) that became the rulers of Badon through heredity. This is how an imagery of continuity is produced by the legend: the leader of Badon was anchored in a province that was gradually integrated into the kingdom until local sovereignty was broken down by the royalty (and the local sovereign became a spirit).

As it was progressively incorporated within the successive Burmese kingdoms,[13] Badon was 'traditionally awarded' to a prince as appanage[14] (Lieberman 1984: 181) on top of having a provincial sovereign (called *myothugyi*, that is, the 'leader' (*thugyi*) of a 'fortified town' (*myo*)). In addition, Badon became a central pool of recruitment of soldiers for the royalty as early as the sixteenth century and a place where elite military garrisons were stationed, notably the 'blood drinker corps' (*thwaythauksu*). This kind of garrison was employed as royal guards during the heyday of both the Restored Toungoo and the later Konbaung dynasties. In their foundation narrative, Myinmilaung people claim to be the descendants of this elite guard. After chasing Bahtukyweh from Badon, Alaunghpaya (1752–1760), the founder of the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885), designated another chief[15] and specific revenues from the province were redirected in 1764 to one of his sons called 'Badon prince' (whose posthumous name is Bodawhpaya). The latter changed the name of Badon to Alon when he became king in 1782.

Badon is part of the Lower Chindwin Valley which, according to Charney (2007: 228), had become the second largest population centre and was the chief contributor to the royal pool of servicemen by the end of the precolonial period. This rise in population and cattle and the expansion of agriculture happened in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Raids against Manipur, forced migrations, grants of land and reorganization of the population within groups of servicemen stabilized this frontier area during the consolidation of the Konbaung dynasty (1752 onwards). From the 1780s and well into the 1820s, the Lower Chindwin Valley shouldered the heaviest burden in providing royal servicemen to the royal court. Alon was the single largest population centre in the kingdom and the busiest trading centre outside of the royal capital. The Lower Chindwin, with Alon at its centre, thus amounted to 'a special royal bastion in the Konbaung state' (ibid.: 231).

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It had an important impact on local agriculture and animals, with the production of dry crops used as fodder for cattle and horses on large scales. It also affected religion. Forest-dwelling monasticism increasingly gave way to town- and village-dwelling monasticism, and thus contributed to the spread of popular Buddhism, while a number of orthodox-minded monks used the royal court to assert state protection. This group of monks, which Charney (2006) has named the Lower Chindwin literati as they drew their authority from both Pali and Sanskrit texts, used their connections with King Bodawhpaya to attempt to assert control over religious and lay knowledge in the kingdom as a whole. The spread of Buddhism went hand in hand with the expansion of towns and villages and the rise of village monasteries. Gawgyi monastery is a case in point. It was founded during a moment of reformulation of Buddhism along new lines at the turn of the twentieth century, notably through the influence of Ledi Hsayadaw. The latter, representing a middle ground between forest- and village-dwelling monks, made Buddhism understandable to the general lay audience, through poems and stories and the presentation of Buddhism in less traditional ways, while simultaneously producing scholarly work on Buddhism and influencing the contest against colonialism.

From the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, Badon's hinterland included villages ruled by a more or less independent and hereditary gentry, such as the Monywa, Kyawkka and Thazi village chiefs. The Badon chief did not rule undisputed over the others. The former controlled different kinds of village leaders, revenue collectors and the like, depending on local settings and customs. Even if the gentry held important offices of rural government by hereditary right and provided the critical connection between royal courts and the general population, there was always competition for office and wealth. From a *longue durée* perspective, the state attempted to organize society by dividing the bulk of the population into ranks. Simply put, there were the royal relatives, the local hereditary gentry and the commoners. The latter were subdivided into three main groups, namely the 'crown servicemen' (*ahmudan*), the 'free commoners' (*athi*) and the 'bondmen' (*kyun*), liable to different obligations to whomever they were affiliated with. Yet, this segmentation was not as strict as proclaimed by the state. People could change their status by moving away, shifting their affiliation from one authority to another and through mortgaging themselves or their family (Aung-Thwin 1984).

The literature posits kings as acting as the ultimate patrons over all subjects alongside patron–client chains down to the villagers, following multiple lines of territorial and departmental (or regimental) affiliations. For Koenig, from '*wungyi* [governor] down to village headmen' the relationship between ruler and official was based on the delegation of authority and concomitant rewards by the former in exchange for the total fidelity and service of the latter. He described the

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nature of this relationship as 'personal, as opposed to legal or contractual' and 'formalized at least once a year for all officials on ceremonial occasions known as *kadaw*, an untranslatable[16] term' (1990: 138). Koenig thus coined the political structure as 'patrimonial', or 'patrimonial-bureaucratic', that is, based on a personal, traditional authority with obedience to the person rather than the office. The political dynamics can, however, be called 'galactic' or 'solar' in analogy with other kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia. Lieberman describes the typical Southeast Asian realm as a solar polity, that is, 'a system of quasi-sovereign satellites in orbit around a central sun whose gravitational pull, in lieu of fixed borders, ebbed with distance' (2003: 22). This description is, to some extent, a replication of Tambiah's concept of galactic polity describing the Southeast Asian kingdoms as 'centre-oriented but centrifugally fragmenting polities' based on a collective representation of the cosmos as a *mandala* design where satellites are arranged around a centre and duplicate it ([1973] 2013: 509).

Cast in the realm of Burmese precolonial politics, the royal capital was the centre, and fortified towns (*myo*) the satellites. The links between powers were oaths of allegiance (*kadaw*), and these alliances followed patron–client chains between persons. Even if heredity was a strong claim for office, it was not enough. There was no powerful ascriptive element conclusively justifying a leader, even the king. Heredity, personal prowess and religious notions were claims to access or to justify access to office. For instance, Alaunghpaya, the founder of the Konbaung dynasty, used this rationale to legitimize his position as the new king. Because of his low hereditary credentials, and after he vanquished the Peguan forces which destroyed the Ava Kingdom, he claimed that his achievements stemmed from his *hpon*, itself reflecting his *kan*, the concretion of past meritorious deeds. Furthermore, personal patronage was conceptualized as a 'debt of gratitude' (*kyayzu*) enacted through an oath of allegiance. On the one hand, personal ties were thus the main political link between authorities. On the other hand, gentry chiefs were the backbone of Burmese administration because they controlled revenue collection and office succession and were the ultimate judges within their jurisdiction.

Yet the rising local leaders represented a constant threat of fission and shifts of spheres of influence, hence the 'pulsating' character of this kind of polity. Tensions, fragmentation and reaffiliations are thus as important as moments of consolidation and structuration. Leadership and the hereditary principle giving legitimacy to office holders are fragile and never really achieved. The pulsating metaphor also helps to describe periods of unrest and political changes as moments of traffic in affiliation, such as when a new dynasty is founded or when the British 'pacified' Upper Burma. This is interesting because Myinmilaung was founded during the transformation of the larger polity and, later, village headship was imposed after the collapse of the Burmese kingdom.

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In Myinmilaung's case, during the fall of the Restored Toungoo dynasty in the first half of the eighteenth century, Badon's countryside looked like a patchwork of existing and nascent hereditary chiefs, appointed officials and rising leaders. A quote from Lieberman helps to capture the context:

> As the court lapsed into impotence, a medley of cult figures, bandits, and gentry headmen established unchallenged control over the rural population … Headmen and platoon leaders transferred their ambitions from the court to the locality … Ministers lost contact with their departmental charges, while princes became isolated from their appanage population. (1984: 194)

At the local level, hereditary chiefs focused on their own area of influence when the kingdom collapsed. A rising leader could reinforce his sway over a territory by consolidating the number of his followers either through territorial expansions (taking royal land and revenues), money lending and protection to farmers, alliances with other leaders or by marshalling crown servicemen as his own guards. This was, as we will see in the next sections, the context in which Myinmilaung was settled.

Gawgyi was founded later, when the Konbaung dynasty reached the apex of its strength under King Bodawhpaya. One of the tools the crown employed to control hereditary offices and revenues was to make the countryside legible through inquests. The most well-known were conducted under King Bodawhpaya in 1783 and 1802 – from which were derived many of the documents called *sittan.* A *sittan* was an administrative document recording officials' duties, dues, the boundaries of their jurisdiction (usually a town or group of villages), the population and status groups living within it and the taxes they collected by custom. Based on these – largely incomplete – inquests, the legitimacy of hereditary office holders to rule the countryside was sanctioned by the distant crown. The inquests stabilized for a (short) time the distribution of power and authority in the countryside *as if* deriving from the crown.

More interestingly, a *sittan* can be seen as a snapshot displaying the state of local 'traditions' in one place. The general picture offered by the *sittan* can help us to understand the general context in which Gawgyi emerged. They display localities where customs slowly emerged from local history and settings in an area ruled by a hereditary chief who coexisted with crown units, Buddhist authorities and appointed officials. Villagers' dues to various offices (chief, Sangha, clerk, crop broker, crown) are clearly recorded and the chief is central in judicial affairs. It corresponds to a static image of local governance with stable provinces gathering groups of villages ruled by the same families for decades. The latter approved the succession of smaller hereditary offices in their countryside and

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judged or reported cases, organized the collection of revenues through nominated revenue collectors, buffered the crown's demands and reported to crown-appointed officials. Many of these 'traditions' reflect a hierarchical organization of the local society that was imposed through force and which became customary over time.

If we reduce the scale down to village government, the question of the control of labour, land and harvest comes to the forefront. The work of Toe Hla (1987) is revealing in this regard. He reconstituted the land distribution of Thayet-taw (1987: 51), a village of servicemen located near the royal capital of Mandalay, from the patent of land allotment issued by the *Hlutaw*, the Royal Council, in 1801. The bulk of the land was cultivated by the villagers. The families of servicemen worked on the land granted by the crown which, once inherited, became *bobuapaing myay*, that is 'grandparents' land' (and by extension meaning ancestral land transmitted through inheritance). In the nuclear zone, most of the land was known as *bobuapaing* during the nineteenth century. People could mortgage and sell those lands, but they were not privately owned because they were primarily an inheritable asset (Chapter 5). The Thayet-taw chief held a substantial estate and apparently controlled the allocation of land to newcomers as well as the extension of farmland to uncultivated areas included within the village territory. Such extensions were known as *dama-u-gya myay*, meaning land owned by right of first clearing. Later these lands became inheritable. Some other land parcels, called *samyay*, were given as appanage to a member of the royal family and to appointed or hereditary officials. Some villagers were tenants on those lands and the crops became revenue – due to the crown, the gentry and to the estate holders – when collected by the chief or by a land surveyor after harvest.

For Toe Hla, however, the local gentry was not a landed class. Labour control was essential because 'land was plentiful [but] labour was scarce' (1987: 58).[17] Nonetheless, his study clearly shows that some gentry families near Alon accumulated large estates through money lending as a way to consolidate their hold over the countryside. On the whole, local hereditary officials appear to have used the wealth derived from such sources as tax and sales commissions to acquire control of substantial tracts of land through mortgages. Headmen sometimes claimed private status for other lands under their control as well. William Koenig went a step further when he wrote that 'there was some tendency for headmen to use their offices to build up what might be termed "estates," which were farmed by a tenantry' (1990: 143). Myinmilaung and Gawgyi probably had to deal with this kind of power to normalize their settlement.

In the early nineteenth century, once the gentry families were recognized or created via the inquests, there were fewer avenues to access political office. One could be recognized by another authority, inherit the office or buy it. These practices were not mutually exclusive and often combined. The first option relates to

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the custom for the local authorities to decide collectively on the succession to a local office (Trager and Koenig 1979: 41). If the office is inherited, it passes on through lineal descent, usually via primogeniture – to the eldest son, or *auratha* in legal literature[18] – but not always. Rapidly, bribery and the formation of factions around disputing claimants made the competition for hereditary office 'the essence of local politics' (Koenig 1990: 146) in the nineteenth century:

> in almost every town and village in Burmah [*sic*] there are two parties of conflicting interests: the local officers for the time being, and some individuals, or the heirs of descendants of some who had been in office at some former period. The latter closely watch the proceedings of the former. By setting one against the other, the Burmese government generally contrives to elicit the truth. (Burney 1842: 338)

In other words, and to paraphrase the title of Berry's seminal book (1993), *no condition was permanent* in the countryside.

Another way to access office was to buy it. Competition for office also stemmed from the practice of mortgaging. The more the crown lost its hold over the countryside, the more offices were mortgaged, the easier it was to buy it. This also led to increasing conflicting claims for offices in many locales. In the last decades of the Konbaung dynasty, an increasing number of offices passed from hand to hand, to the great displeasure of the crown who attempted, in the meantime, to reform the administration. As Mya Sein noted, a 'considerable amount of confusion and dispute resulted from this alienation of office and in 1245 B.E. (A.D. 1883), Thibaw's government issued instructions to Myothugyis and Ywathugyis forbidding the mortgaging and selling of the hereditary offices such as Myothugyi, Ywathugyi, Myingaung, Myinsi, Daing-gaung, Ahun [*sic*] etc.' ([1958] 1973: 49).

Thibaw (1878–1885) had to deal with his predecessor's administrative reforms. Mindon (1853–1878) had tried to change the configuration of power at the expense of the gentry and encountered strong resistance in the countryside. His reforms attempted to curb local authorities by centralizing and modernizing his administration in order to increase crown revenues and to cope with competing powers like British India. For instance, he tried to reduce local court jurisdiction and to fix judicial fees given to the local or higher court judges for various cases. He also planned to rationalize the gentry by creating a single category of local hereditary officer in place of the varied patchwork of local powers that still existed. This plan failed but the crown became more active in regulating succession of hereditary office and sometimes dismissed people for not being of the chiefly family as listed in the 1783 and 1802 inquests. By introducing a single and more systematic tax – the household tax or *thathameda* – in the early

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1860s in Lower Burma, the crown struggled to suppress the old fiscal system. This system, according to Thant Myint-U, was 'divided between the granting of appanages, collecting rent on crown lands and receiving a portion of the various gentry-controlled customary fees and obligations, as much in kind or specialized manpower as in cash' (2001: 121).

The *thathameda* tax was in theory an income tax amounting to one-tenth of household income and progressively stabilized at a rate of ten rupees. But it proved to be more of a property tax based on people's wealth and activities. In Alon, the tax mostly impacted the people farming the best irrigated lands and added to the debt burden of many peasants. Instead of undermining the revenue position of hereditary office holders (this tax was a key complaint during later armed rebellion against the crown), they were left in charge of its collection and could also require long-standing dues. Mindon, and later Thibaw, also increased the powers of the appointed provincial officials (*myowun*) and introduced new institutions modelled on the British administrative apparatus of Lower Burma, such as the township officer (*myo-ok*) around Mandalay. Yet the reforms were unable to significantly transform the most local level. Coupled with a succession crisis, these reforms partly led to warfare in the countryside: 'By the early 1880s, in many areas two or more persons were claiming the same chiefly position … By annexation, British sources said that some rural offices were changing hands as often as every few months' (Thant Myint-U 2001: 168).

Overall, the battle for office caused political turmoil during the few years prior to the colonization of Upper Burma. Warfare, pervasive in the countryside, was a renegotiation of unstable agreements between the state, local authorities, officials and 'bandits'. At the crown level, the fall of the Konbaung dynasty in the late nineteenth century looks similar to the political crisis of the mid-eighteenth century. But instead of a new dynastic cycle, the royalty was replaced by a direct colonial administration. At the local level, the variety of officials, of bands of 'bandits' and the remaining hereditary gentry leaders were the ones competing for shifting political spaces. The pre-existing and shaky balance between various local authorities and powers was strongly challenged over a period of more than a decade before the British arrival. This state of affairs eventually shaped how the British conceived administrating the countryside and led, in our case, to the grouping of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi under the same jurisdiction under a single headman.

Competing Discourses of Indigeneity

This part of history has been mostly forgotten by villagers, but a few legends remain alive and have been cast into the politics of the Myinmilaung village tract. They underscore the atmosphere of animosity between Myinmilaung

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Proper and Gawgyi. This section explores both villages' founding narratives as current discourses about history and as key chronological markers that help us to reconstruct the history of the local polity. The Myinmilaung founding narrative links them to a founding king, to a local sovereign and to religious patronage to support their claim as genuine and legitimate allochthones. In contrast, Gawgyi people posit themselves as autochthones, from the land, with thick connections to neighbouring villages and anchoring their knowledge of the region since pre-royal times. These claims, legitimizing each other's presence in the countryside, are grounded in different logics. They tell stories in which people from Myinmilaung and Gawgyi are not the same. This is the backdrop against which the rise of village affairs as the main form of politics in Gawgyi can be understood.

The Genuine Allochthones

In U So's narrative, transcribed at the beginning of this chapter, Myinmilaung was created when the local sovereign, Bahtukyweh, was chased by a king in the mid-eighteenth century and eventually killed himself. But who was Bahtukyweh? And what was he in charge of? In the villager's narrative, Bahtukyweh was the lord of Badon. He may have become the Badon chief during this period. He may also descend from the gentry family that ruled Badon for decades. The best hypothesis is that he embodies the figure of Badon sovereignty before the rise of the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885). What is certain is that he is at the centre of the regional spirit cult. As such, he is known as the 'Grandfather of Alon', the local sovereign spirit. The legend of this deity follows a typical narrative in which kings subdue local sovereigns and turn them into spirits. In his 1912 Lower Chindwin Gazetteer, J. P. Hardiman, Deputy Commissioner of the Lower Chindwin District and Settlement Officer, gave an account of this legend:

> Much of the tradition of the district centres around Bodaw-gyi, or Batha-gywè, and introduces the Buddhistic revival of the eleventh century A.D. Bodaw-gyi was the son of the king of the island of Thitala and, on their father's demise, he and his brother contested the succession. Batha-gywè was defeated, and the younger brother, Patai-kaya, ascended the throne. The elder entered the service of Anawrahta, King of Pagan, won his way into favour, and was allowed to assume the prerogatives of a king under suzerainty and to choose his own capital. He proceeded up the Irrawaddy and arid Chindwin; captured a white elephant, Nga-yan-aung, at Sinbyu-gyun; landed at Kinmun, now on the Sagaing side of the Lower Chindwin border, and was presented with the skin of a lizard, out of which he made a drum. It was on this occasion that he met a maiden selling cakes and made

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> her his queen, after the fashion of Cophetua and the beggar maid. Mônywa means the village of cakes and commemorates the incident. Continuing his march, he fixed on Kyibadôn (Badôn or Alôn) as the site of his palace. Every three years Batha-gywè paid tribute to Anawrahta and, after that monarch's death, to his successors up to the time of Sawmunit, when he refused tribute. Sawmunit marched on Kyibadôn and surrounded the place, but Batha-gywè mounted Nga-yan-aung, beat on the magic drum, and routed Sawmunit and his army. Sawmunit then employed Brahmans to win the ear of Batha-gywè. They came to his court and persuaded him to cover the drum with another kind of skin and to cut off Nga-yan-aung's tusks. Sawmunit again attacked Kyibadôn, and this time with success. Batha-gywè fled to Salun, a few miles north of Alon on the Chindwin, was closely followed, and threw himself into the river, where he and his company, thirty-seven in number, perished [*sic*]. (Hardiman 1912: 27–28)[19]

Drawing from an interview with the guardian of Alon's spirit palace in the 1990s, Brac de La Perrière specifies that when Sawmunit found the dead bodies on the Chindwin bank, two centuries after Anawrahta gave an office to Bahtukyweh, 'he beat them with his sceptre, and they appear in a position of homage. Transformed into *naq*, the king installed them in a palace in Alon and appointed guards' (1998: 313, my translation). Typical elements included in the tales related to the creation of *naq* by the royalty are present: the regalia and their magic, the ruse, the wrath of the king, the violent death, the transformation into a spirit through royal agency. Simply put, the Grandfather of Alon fled, with his dependants, from a king he deceived to eventually perish in violent circumstances. Even if the 'Grandfather of Alon' had and still has a particularly strong cult, and even if this cult was key in the succession of possession ceremonies delineating the core area of the kingdom, it was not integrated in the royal pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords.[20] Nonetheless, he is a recognized figure of local power integrated within the narrative of the founding of kingship. Bahtukyweh may not be a specific person. As *naq*, he represents both 'indigenousness, … an emanation of the local communit[y]' from which he derives his powers and 'the local sovereignty that the king is forced to recognize' (Brac de La Perrière 1996: 49–50, my translation). Thus, the Bahtukyweh cult was integrated into the narrative of kings as *naq*s' tamers and was the figure of local sovereignty. He may be the first ruler of Badon/Alon but also potentially any of the successive rulers. He could also be a prominent local person[21] who became Badon/Alon chief *de facto* when royal control declined.

In the Myinmilaung version, Bahtukyweh is a sort of timeless ruler of Badon/Alon. But he was allegedly chased in 1111 B.E. (1749/1750 C.E.), and this is the moment when Alaunghpaya, the founder of the Konbaung dynasty, marched

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in this region to fight the forces which supported the more southern kingdom of Pegu. This period marked the collapse of the Restored Toungoo dynasty (1597–1752) after it lost its sway over local administration and chiefs from the late seventeenth century onwards. Once again, a quote from Victor Lieberman helps us to capture the context:

> At Mônywa, Kin-u, Mok-hsò-bo, Okpo, Pegu [*sic*], and other locales, people consulted omens and prophecies to identify the new ruler that they might quickly attach themselves to his cause … Unable to retard the growth of local autonomy, Maha-dama'-ya-za-di'-pati' [the last Toungoo King from 1733 to 1752] bestowed titles and insignia on the most successful headmen and bandit chiefs in an attempt to assert nominal control over their forces. Thus in 1745–1746 he rewarded local leaders, while authorizing them to amass arms and men in their own districts. Of the six names listed in this order, five were on the north shore between the Chindwin and upper Irrawaddy, where famine and invasions were least debilitating and where in consequence headmen could marshal the largest following. (1984: 196)

Two villages traditionally under Badon chieftainship, Thazi and Kyawkka, were listed in the 1745–1746 king's order (Lieberman 1984: 195, note 231). In other words, Thazi, Kyawkka and Badon chiefs affiliated with the Peguans, the then-rising enemy of the declining Restored Toungoo dynasty, while the 'Lord of Monywa' did not.[22] Local chiefs affiliated with the camp they deemed successful. The usual independence faded between the servicemen – governed by a hereditary regimental chief – and the chief of the area they were living in. The tale about Myinmilaung's creation intersects with Alaunghpaya's campaign in the Lower Chindwin where he vanquished Pegu's most loyal northern supporters. He targeted the descendants of the Talaing (also called Mon or Peguan) people, garrisoned in Upper Burma as military servicemen, and the members of the local gentry who supported the Peguan kingdom. In Myinmilaung's story, Bahtukyweh was in charge of Badon and, according to Hardiman and Lieberman, the Badon chief was on Pegu's side:

> At the beginning of Alaunghpaya's reign, in 1752, Kyaukka, Thazi, Alôn (Badôn), Amyin (in Sagaing), and Tabayin in Shwebo, joined Talaings[23] who had escaped from the Talaing garrisons in Upper Burma on Alaunghpaya's accession to power, and rose against that monarch … Alaunghpaya despatched a flying column in their rear, burnt Alôn, Ngapayin and Kinzan, both east of Kudaw, the Burmese contingent deserted, and the Talaings in the garrison were easily overcome. Some of

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> the Talaings fled to Kyaukka, but were massacred by the Burmans of that place. Alaunghpaya left garrisons in the villages east of the Chindwin, appointed headmen, and took oaths of allegiance. (Hardiman 1912: 20)[24]

In other words, Alaunghpaya rose as the founder of a new dynasty and the ruler of Badon perished violently in his flight. These events bear a striking resemblance to the legend of the Grandfather of Alon and may have been the historical material from which it was crafted. It means, for Myinmilaung people, that their village was created when Bahtukyweh (embodying Badon sovereignty) tried to escape the king's wrath. And some of his followers stopped during the flight because there were 'not enough horses'.

If Myinmilaung was founded by Bahtukyweh's followers, who were they? Since at least the sixteenth century, Badon had to marshal a substantial military population while keeping a tradition of independent sovereignty in its hinterland. Badon was recorded early on as a fortified town which had to provide hundreds of soldiers to the king's army.[25] Some of them belonged to a specific group of a society organized in ranks according to their closeness to the king. From the 1780s and well into the 1820s, the Lower Chindwin Valley assumed the heaviest burden in providing servicemen to the court and Alon was the single largest population centre in the kingdom. Badon/Alon harboured an important number of servicemen during the eighteenth century,[26] notably a group called the 'elite crown service unit' (Koenig 1990: 305) whose members were bound by blood drinking oaths (*thwaythauksu*).[27] This kind of platoon usually lived on irrigated lands granted by the crown near the fortified town of Badon. In other words, Myinmilaung's founders were potentially Bahtukyweh's close retainers. During the period of 'unrest' of the late 1740s, and the decline of royal authority, Bahtukyweh was the patron of Badon's elite crown service unit *de facto*. It also means that those who stayed in hiding and founded Myinmilaung were theoretically hereditary servicemen of high status.[28] This is at least the underlying claim of the current villagers who, by narrating and connecting the founding of their village to an event of importance, legitimize their presence by underscoring their link with the sovereign of the region and imagining themselves as descendants of a prestigious group of the crown's servicemen.

In addition to the affiliation with a chief who became the subject of the most important cult in the region, and to the royalty, U So's narrative also emphasizes a more religious legacy. In 1776 (1147 B.E.), that is, thirty-seven years after its foundation, the village was given another name. This time it was U No, a royal 'astrologer',[29] who stopped by on his way home from the royal capital of Ava. He allegedly founded a pagoda, called Shwepanhla (Map 0.2), on the eastern side of the village and named the settlement Mingalagon, the 'Auspicious Hill'. From 'Not Enough Horses', denoting Bahtukyweh's debacle, the name became

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'Auspicious Hill' and the village received a pagoda, which became in this period an essential element in the making of a human settlement. In other words, the discourse about the village's early years displays how Myinmilaung literally put itself under better auspices through the agency of a royal official.

Overall, Myinmilaung's founding narrative condenses layers of history connecting it to a regional sovereign, to a group of elite soldiers, and to a royal official making the landscape more Buddhist. Such connections serve to legitimize the very existence of the settlement. Myinmilaung's story is thus not about autochthony, but about being genuine allochthones with enough credentials to give legitimacy to their presence in the landscape. In short, they play the servicemen's card (*ahmudan*), as it refers to royalty, soldiery and sovereignty, in order to justify their place and position in the current landscape.

The Autochthones

Gawgyi people have a different story about the foundation of the Shwepanhla pagoda, even if the village was created later. For them, U So failed to mention that it belongs to a series of three pagodas that were not created by U No, but by an alchemist long before Badon became a fortified town. There is Shwepanhla near Myinmilaung (recently renovated), Shwepanhswe near Budaungkan (also renovated) and Shwepankhaing located in the farm fields north of Gawgyi (Map 0.2). The three pagodas dot an old road between Kyawkka and Badon/Alon. On 31 August 2016, we visited Shwepankhaing with Ko Kyaw and his brother.

Shwepankhaing is a ten-minute drive from Gawgyi, followed by a five-minute walk. Nowadays, nobody really goes there. We get off the bikes and stop by a small pond. Ko Kyaw and his brother had both repeatedly told me that they were just Buddhist, that they do not believe (*yongyi*) in *naq*. Yet, as we approach the abandoned pagoda, Ko Kyaw's brother plays recitations of Buddha's teachings on his phone, to ward off bad spirits, he says. When we reach the edifice, my companions quickly kneel and pray.

The alchemist who founded the pagodas knew how to make gold. He was travelling in this area with five hundred carts full of gold in a search of a place where he could perform a ritual to become a *zawgyi*, that is, a semi-immortal human with supernatural powers. Along the way, whenever a cart's wheel hub broke, a pagoda was established. The persons who helped build them, putting the gold (*shwe*) inside before sealing it, died (maybe sacrificed) and became a *hsoun* (a sort of ghost acting as the guardian spirit of the pagoda) that can catch you with its gaze. Nobody, however, can see them, except for cows. This pagoda is now almost abandoned, for only a few persons from Budaungkan celebrate a festival for it. People are afraid to come here. People used to come a generation

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Figure 1.1. Shwepankhaing, the abandoned pagoda, 2016. © Stéphen Huard.

ago, but when somebody took the gold home, that person suffered from severe itching until the gold was restored. The alchemist eventually reached a hill on the other side of the Chindwin River and there, after meditating and eating magical food, he 'entered the fireplace' (*hpowin*) and was reborn as a *zawgyi*. That hill is called Powintaung[30] and the legend of the *zawgyi* is said to have happened before the advent of Theravada Buddhism in the country,[31] and even before the Bagan Kingdom (ninth–thirteenth centuries C.E.). Some even believe that the alchemist story happened before the legendary Tagaung dynasty descending from the

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Sakya clan of Buddha himself. In other words, Shwepankhaing, the pagoda north of Gawgyi, is part of a landscape shaped during the ancient history of the region, where chronology does not matter, and is an early trace of Buddhism. By reading the landscape in these terms, Gawgyi people anchor their settlement in continuity with this history.

However, they do not have a narrative of foundation comparable to Myinmilaung's. Gawgyi was most likely established by settlers fleeing a nearby village during the reign of Bodawhpaya (1782–1819). Some Gawgyi elders said that a famine pushed their ancestors to move away. The most important famines took place under King Bodawhpaya's and led to a great change in the kingdom's demographics in the early nineteenth century.[32] Facing famine and forced recruitment, Gawgyi settlers went a few miles from Ywadon (Map 0.2). The village's spirit shrine is located between these two places, on the edge of Gawgyi. It seems that a few families settled in an area where a 'large flat pond' (*gangawgyi*) appeared during the monsoons. Today, most of the villagers are part of loosely structured lineages evolving through descent and marriage. The Gawgyi pagoda and monastery, which are key elements delineating village space, were founded by an influential monk, U Za Nay Ya, who lived there from the early 1900s (Chapter 2). This matrix of settlement influences how village space is imagined and, as we will see in chapters 4 and 6, negotiated.

In the Gawgyi narrative, the idea is thus that they are indigenous locals. They come from the land and, like many villages, settled near a waterhole. They do not justify their presence with a narrative connecting their presence to the royalty or a local sovereign. With the shape of the village, the concentration of houses at the village core, the story about farming families becoming the main lineages, all these elements contribute to defining them simply as autochthones. Gawgyi, in contrast to Myinmilaung, plays the commoner's card (*athi*), whose strict definition – 'landowners living permanently in one locale' (Koenig 1990: 114) – supports their claim to indigenousness.

This is also obvious in how they talk about the neighbouring village of Budaungkan. Inhabited later than Gawgyi, most likely in the 1920s–1930s, they see it as 'mixed' (*yaw*), where populations were merely a blend of migrants that settled near an old pagoda, Shwepanhswe. However, during the same period, more families from Ywadon also moved and settled near Gawgyi to create Tozigon village. Today, Tozigon villagers depend upon Gawgyi for conducting ceremonies (as we will see in Chapters 4 and 6) as its main families are integrated within Gawgyi lineages. The scope of what is common in village affairs was thus extended to Tozigon, but never encompassed Myinmilaung Proper or Budaungkan.

The different narratives of foundation therefore also reflect the long-term relations between neighbouring villages. In this perspective, the opposition

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between Myinmilaung Proper and Gawgyi is expressed, at one level, in divergent, if not competing, narratives of indigeneity: one emphasizing their legitimacy as genuine allochthones, the other as autochthones. These stories are as much an entry into the study of the political landscape at the time of the creation of villages as they are to local understandings of their history and current relationships. It shows how the precolonial organization of status groups became a register of claims about the relations people have with their landscape.

Composing with Local Powers

This section explores the evolution of the political landscape in Myinmilaung and Gawgyi after their settlement. It first looks at Gawgyi's case and then at the internal logic that pushed Myinmilaung to divide into several settlements before finally analysing the reconfiguration of political affiliation with local powers. This area is located between two old routes linking Monywa with Thazi and Kyawkka. Both Thazi and Kyawkka chiefs traditionally ruled areas of dry lands of more or less good quality, while the chief of Monywa looked southward towards mostly irrigated soil.

As just described, Gawgyi was created when King Bodawhpaya tried to stabilize regional and local authorities through revenue inquests while at times entire villages evaded his requests for manpower. If we follow the spirit of these documents, we can imagine how Gawgyi was integrated into the local political landscape. During the last years of the reign of this king, the village was integrated into larger political spaces through the patronage of the Kyawkka chief and the agency of Ywadon, Gawgyi's 'home' village. Gawgyi may have had a man nominated as a revenue collector (*myaydaing*) or some villagers recognized as ten-house leaders. But this is not certain. Gawgyi villagers, approximately a dozen families, were not a special corps of servicemen and thus tended to be commoners who could always be mobilized if affiliated with a local chieftainship. Koenig points out that the sharp administrative division between servicemen and non-servicemen produced by state policies was rather 'a continuum running from total service without local labour commitments and land taxes at the far end of the crown service sector to mostly dues and little local labour at the far end of the *athi* sector' (Koenig 1990: 115). In other words, and in the context of the Badon Province at the turn of the nineteenth century, there were not many differences between servicemen and commoners: almost every commoner could be a serviceman. The difference lay mostly in the kind of agreement they were able to negotiate with the neighbouring chiefs.

The cultivated areas varied with the growth of the village population and their capacity to accumulate cattle and seeds and to obtain loans from the local gentry. Gawgyi villagers progressively created their own cultivation area by trading to the

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north with Obo and Myinmilaung villages under Thazi gentry, and to the south with Ywadon village under Kyawkka chieftainship. Control of land, manpower, harvests and the establishment of dues and duties between villages and local authorities was gradual. The system of tenure – and taxation – emerging from the stabilization of the settlements was always subject to change depending on natural hazards, war, famines, migrations and the ability of leaders to control land access to build up their territory. At first glance, the evolving property relations mixed shifting cultivation – turning to inheritable permanent holdings (*bobuapaing*) through right of first clearance (*dama-u-gya*) – with dues to local authorities on many kinds of production, especially on harvests of millet and beans. The making and stabilization of villages then integrated the larger fiscal system of the royalty. Thus, Gawgyi's case seems rather conventional: its affiliation with Ywadon makes it possible for Kyawkka gentry (appointed in the mid-eighteenth century) to integrate Gawgyi within its domain. And the local forms of patronage were recognized by the royalty. For instance, according to an order dated 7 February 1758, people under a chief 'may carry out whatever service is required of them, be it the carting of bricks, timber or stone, other miscellaneous jobs, the building of temples and monasteries, social work such as marriages, funerals, etc. together in unison' (Yi Yi 1968: 110). On top of the dues to the gentry was the payment of taxes (Mya Sein [1958] 1973: 166–71). Local chiefs like the Kyawkka leader gathered more wealth and fixed manpower while villagers like those in Gawgyi were recognized as legitimate occupiers of the land. This eventually reinforced the claim for autochthony which, a few decades later, would be based on the idea that they are 'real farmers' (*taungthu*).

Myinmilaung's case is again more complex and we need to return to the time of its foundation. The settlement split into three hamlets which, as a whole, affiliated with a neighbouring chief and took over a pre-existing village. A better understanding of the political dynamics of that period can be drawn from the study of how this settlement was standardized. To look back on the unfolding of events, a question needs to be asked: if the founders of Myinmilaung were elite servicemen previously fixed on land granted near Badon, why did they not go back there once Bahtukyweh was defeated? According to Victor Lieberman, in the late eighteenth century, servicemen like the Myinmilaung founders commonly lived with their families in the same village under a low-ranking chief responsible for the regiment. Along with their wives and children, these men commonly inhabited the same village. 'Thus the village headman was also the platoon leader … Platoon members commonly received lands as a conditional grant from the crown.' In return for these tokens of royal favour, a fixed proportion of each platoon was required to be on duty, usually at the capital, to execute those hereditary tasks in which the platoon specialized. 'On-duty ahmu'-dàns [*sic*] had to perform private chores for their superiors and to give

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them periodic gratuities that were quite distinct from their responsibilities to the crown' (1984: 96–101).

If we assume that the Myinmilaung founders were living under similar conditions near the fortified town of Badon before Alaunghpaya chased them away, why did they not go back to their homeland afterwards? Let us return to what Hardiman said about Bahtukyweh's flight as a starting point: '… the Burmese contingent deserted … Alaunghpaya left garrisons in the villages east of the Chindwin, appointed headmen, and took oaths of allegiance' (1912: 20). The neighbouring chieftainships (Badon, Thazi and Kyawkka) were fragmented and competing when Myinmilaung was founded. One possible scenario is that the Myinmilaung founders were recognized through their former military status. Instead, the village was established near another one called Obo and then divided into several hamlets when the logic of village leadership and recognition gained momentum over the necessity to hide. Myinmilaung was divided into three hamlets following regimental and/or kin affiliations. There was the 'Western Corps' (*Anauksu*), the 'Eastern Corps' (*Ashayzu*) and the 'Middle Corps' (*Alezu*). These are the old names – sometimes still in use – recalled by current villagers and they clearly denote a regimental organization (*su* or *zu*) (Map 0.3).

Even if Bahtukyweh was ultimately their chief, the servicemen gathered in the flight may not have all been from the same village and/or under the same leader. Hence, the division into several villages reflects either a scission in leadership and/or a split based on kin ties. What we know is that servicemen villages, which were often kin groups, tended to be closely governed by either an appointed headman or a hereditary chief because they provided essential manpower for the royalty and local sovereigns. Leadership – usually at the royal and gentry levels – was legitimated in terms of charismatic power, patronage and rightful filiation. A chief was chosen either because of his achievements, his affiliation with supra-authorities through patron–client relationships, or because he posited himself as the head of a founding lineage. That is not to say – far from it – that every village had a chief; sometimes people living in the same locality were dependent upon different chiefs. The nature of the local polity was fundamentally fragmented. Nonetheless, Myinmilaung's past regimental organization and/or affiliation on kin ties shaped the making of this new political entity.

What did these servicemen become? Were they still servicemen or did they become *athi*, that is, commoners solely liable for taxes? The most probable assumption is that they were both (or none *per se*) and that they reaffiliated within a new regiment through the agency of a local chief. According to Lieberman,[33] one of the main avenues for a serviceman to change his hereditary status was debt bondage,[34] by mortgaging himself and/or his family to a patron. But our case may be different. Myinmilaung founders could have gradually entered under the authority of the Thazi chief who expanded his territory. I assume this is

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the case because there is no evidence – either in historical accounts or in early colonial reports[35] – showing that land was allocated to military servicemen when Myinmilaung was created.

What was the (political) landscape around Myinmilaung? The hideout was in a *partly* uncultivated forest. Close to Myinmilaung in the north was a village called Obo (the 'old man's pot'). The elders in Myinmilaung agree that U Bo Bo is the name of the oldest chief they can remember, and it seems to be, like Bahtukyweh, the generic name of a local authority. Obo village also appears in the first cadastral map produced by the British around 1887–1890, but it later disappeared in favour of Ogon (the 'Pots' Hill') in Hardiman's *Report of the Regular Settlement* of 1909 (Hardiman 1910). My hypothesis is that U Bo Bo[36] was the Obo chief, or head of the local lineage, and the person Myinmilaung settlers had to negotiate with. In addition, this village was surrounded by small plots of rice paddies, the only ones in the area, and those plots were recorded in the same map under the name of what seems to be the descendants of a certain U Bo.[37] Thus, U Bo Bo is a generic name for the head of the lineage populating Obo when Myinmilaung was settled. Obo village was too small[38] to be the locus of a gentry family sovereign over a large group of villages (the usual form of local office). However, a small village chief could have facilitated the affiliation of these newcomers with a gentry family on a territorial and regimental basis.

The families of the three hamlets forming Myinmilaung ('West Corps', 'East Corps' and 'Middle Corps') were probably considered outsiders (*katpa*) by local authorities who granted them land *a posteriori*. For Koenig, 'kat-pa were migrants from other communities and were only allowed to work athi land with the permission of the local authorities. Such permission was contingent on the migrant's agreement to share the community's dues and service obligations' (1990: 114). In other words, people creating a village sooner or later faced different types of authority. The customary dues and duties owed to each other, as they appear in the *sittan*, stemmed from the agreements settled during their encounters.

In the Myinmilaung case, it became gradually encapsulated within the expanding village territory of the Thazi chief appointed by Alaunghpaya in the early 1750s. Such office holders were crucial political players who could act as patrons or protectors trying to maintain or gain power. Competition, the main dynamic at the gentry level, depended on recognition from royalty, affiliation with other local rulers, and the establishment of dues and duties with villages (under a territory) and/or people associated with a chief (status group). Another means to expand one's hold over the countryside was money lending. In the Thazi-Myinmilaung case, this relationship persisted (Chapter 4) and it questions the place of land tenure in the making of local politics as, eventually, Myinmilaung villagers became a sort of tenantry under the Thazi gentry.

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In the Badon/Alon countryside, the crown became a relatively distant power and the town and village chiefs buffered against its requests while defending their prerogatives according to local customs freshly renegotiated. Aside from traditional dues and duties between rulers and subjects, money lending was crucial leverage for the local gentry and may have led to the creation of landed estates. Villagers became indebted to avoid military conscription, to afford burials, weddings or Buddhist novitiate ceremonies, to rent draught cattle, to buy seeds, pay for labour and sometimes taxes and to finance court fees in case of inheritance disputes. A village chief sometimes also took out loans to pay crown taxes. Loans were mostly contracted from April to July, that is, before and during major agricultural work. They were part of a web of transfers that created and rested on a complex set of obligations. According to Toe Hla, peasant proprietors, whenever they were faced with economic hardship due to failure of rain, political unrest, natural calamities or epidemics, mortgaged their land. 'Thus, they became tenants. People who did not possess land or other valuable property resorted to the sale of their children, wives, or themselves' (Toe Hla 1987: 78). While mortgages were commonly usufructuary during normal periods, in times of hardship, the local money lenders, usually the gentry families, provided money to the mortgagor who often continued to work on the same land. The local gentry, as the main money lenders in the countryside, progressively accumulated the land peasants mortgaged to pay their debts. For instance, Thant Myint-U, using Toe Hla's data (1987: 156–60), shows an incremental transformation of some local gentry families as land owners near Badon in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

> An example is the Lèzin [*sic*] family, who were the hereditary *myinsi*, or cavalry officers, of villages near the town of Alon in the lower Chindwin Basin … The Lèzin family, together with two other related families, dominated much of the countryside, holding all the important administrative and judicial offices and slowly building up sizeable landed estates. The three families were in turn related to nearby chiefly families. Through money-lending and the buying of land from indebted farmers, this gentry family acquired more than 600 acres outright during the early nineteenth century and controlled the land of over one hundred other families in the area who had mortgaged their holdings. (Thant Myint-U 2001: 39)

Thus, the local gentry was also establishing its hold over a fragmented countryside through money lending from the second half of the eighteenth century. We lack the same data concerning the Thazi family, but the period is contemporaneous and money lending from the Thazi family had a lasting effect on Myinmilaung politics. One descendant of that family, drawing from his family's contractual relations with many villages, became an infamous money lender

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during the colonial period. Thazi's successive chiefs are called, *a posteriori*, *myayshin* – a name denoting control over land, harvests, debts and manpower rather than ownership – by the elders in and around Myinmilaung. Thus, if the new gentry of the Badon/Alon polity did not own very large estates *per se*, they controlled large estates through money lending and debts. In the case of Myinmilaung, this was done by first making the new settlement liable to them. Over time, Myinmilaung people were initially also able to clear new lands through shifting cultivation, but they hardly met the strict category of commoner because of their dependency on the Thazi family.

Overall, cast in the realm of contemporary politics, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung's founding narratives are tales about their differences in terms of indigeneity anchored in precolonial socio-political organization. They each have a specific link to the landscape, and the fluid system of status groups (servicemen vs. commoners) thus still pervades the fashioning of the political landscape in the form of differentiated claims to indigeneity. Myinmilaung's story is not about autochthony, but about being genuine allochthones with enough credentials to legitimate their presence. Gawgyi's is about autochthony. This difference, to some degree, reflects the scope of possible commonalities between the two settlements. They had to live together under the same village tract from the early nineteenth century, they intermarried and exchanged ceremonial presents. But they are not in solidarity. The question now is to look at how village headship was imagined and imposed during the British 'pacification campaign' (1886–1889) of Upper Burma in order to then explore the merging of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi within a single village tract at the turn of the twentieth century.

Warfare and Pacification

From the late 1870s, Alon and the Lower Chindwin plain were a hotbed of rebellion against the king and its officials. By 1883 the situation had become so bad that 'no district commissioner could be posted to either Sagaing or Alon because of the complete breakdown of government authority … Three hundred of the North Marabin regiment together with the elite Natshinyway ('chosen by the gods') were sent to Alon' (Thant Myint-U 2001: 173). The revolt gathered gentry leaders, their followers and 'bandits' rallying against the crown. But the warfare also included local squabbles between villages over resources and leadership. There was not one unified 'rebellion' against the crown with a clear-cut agenda and temporality; rather, many dynamics were at play. The gentry leaders who maintained their position, like Monywa and Thazi chiefs, fought openly or covertly against the king. They gradually stopped transferring revenue and kept appointed officials out of local affairs. They also retained as far as possible their claim over judicial jurisdictions, once again used servicemen and soldiers

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as private retainers, expanded their territory and accumulated enough wealth to maintain their position. When the kingdom's sway diminished, the gentry leaders previously deprived of their office also fought to regain it and local settlements fought each other over resources in the midst of large migrations towards the forests and British-controlled Lower Burma.

At the close of 1885, the British started conquering Upper Burma, that is, the falling Burmese kingdom, its tributary regions and areas that were not even under the crown's influence. British troops went nearly unchallenged to Mandalay, the then capital. King Thibaw was sent into exile in India and the Burmese kingship disappeared overnight. The Chief Commissioner first attempted to rule through the Royal Council and the few officials and ministers not openly in rebellion. The British soon decided that the Burmese state could not be transformed into a protectorate due to his weak hold over its former empire. They chose to rule most of the kingdom's 'nuclear zone' directly, and most of its prior tributaries indirectly.[39] The imposition of direct rule was gradual. The first step was the 'pacification' of the countryside, during which precolonial turmoil often turned into guerrilla warfare, in continuity with the precolonial period. Throughout the 'pacification', colonial administrators gathered and shared diverging information about how to and through whom it would be possible to rule the countryside at a low cost. The champion of this search for traditions, Sir Charles Crosthwaite, devised the 'village system' to break down local rural warfare when he became Chief Commissioner in 1887. His view was that villages were the only functioning institution in Upper Burma and so the village headman was an ideal customary position to administer the countryside and to crush rebellions.

The formal annexation of Upper Burma by British India was followed by more than two years of violent fighting with 'at its peak in 1886–7 over 40,000 British and Indian troops and military police' (Thant Myint-U 2001: 198). Alon subdivision was quickly 'pacified' during the first months of 1886. In many other areas there was more or less organized fighting against colonial rule. It started at the fringes of pre-existing political spaces under the leadership of crown unit chiefs, rising leaders, gentry chiefs, ex-officials (including *myowun* and *myoza*), prominent monks and 'malcontent Princes, or persons calling themselves Princes'.[40] Of these leaders, 'the most prominent was Hla U, who persistently eluded attack and held his own on the borders of Ye-u, Sagaing, Shwebo, and the Chindwin district' (Thant Myint-U 2001: 120). For Crosthwaite, warfare was not mere brigandage but 'a system, a long-established system, of government by brigands'. People were helping the 'bandits' and 'paying tribute to the leaders, who did not need to use coercion' (Crosthwaite 1912: 103, 83). The kingdom officials recently appointed were a prime target.

To some extent, 'social banditry', outright looting and resistance were conflated into one picture of endemic rural violence that required colonial rule.

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Cheesman argues that there was a deliberate misuse of the terms 'rebel' and 'dacoit' (or 'bandit') by the colonial administrators as that allowed them to ignore the grievances that could explain the violence (2015: 194–95). In addition, Charney shows that the Burmese sources 'make clear that the fighters were made up of entire rural settlements and the fighting was often between one settlement against another … One can easily imagine a heritage of violent conflicts between rural settlements in competition for water, trade, or other resources' (2018: 170–71). Village headship became a resource to fight for in the Alon region. It is possible to imagine how some people turned out to be clients of the new regime and sought opportunities locally by becoming headmen.

The Emergence of the Village System

Crosthwaite's village system was born out of an ideology of pacification, of colonial officers' experience in British India, of their knowledge about society and of their helplessness to make local government legible. On the ground, the creation of a working administration was gradual and office holders were 'replaced, sometimes by members of the same family … sometimes by *myo-ok* … or sometimes by other "influential men" or "men elected by the people" who were hastily selected on the spot' by touring officials (Thant Myint-U 2001: 213).

In February 1886, F. D. Raikes was established as Deputy Commissioner of the Central Division in Alon, which later became the headquarters of the Lower Chindwin District. 'The country in the immediate neighbourhood of the post was first settled, and in April a garrison arrived, and was followed in July by the Chindwin Military Police' (Hardiman 1912: 24). Myinmilaung and Gawgyi fell rapidly under colonial rule within Alon subdivision and later in Alon Township. Raikes' diary,[41] written during the 'pacification campaign' in the Chindwin District, shows that the nomination of local intermediaries was an *ad hoc* process. It involved the need to find pre-existing authorities or reliable candidates, to fight dacoits, to secure supply routes and to include population and territories within legible jurisdictions whenever possible – jurisdictions that could be transformed afterwards. The gradual creation and delimitation of political spaces such as divisions, subdivisions, townships and village circles followed this *ad hoc* process. Locally, this dynamic was also dependent on the pre-existing experiences of colonial officers and on the accuracy of information gathered via interpreters. In short, when pacifying and laying the foundations of a colonial rule around Alon, Raikes focused on military needs, on submissive and stable authorities following pre-existing colonial practices.

The creation of the village system also resulted from the compilation of information on the local political systems. From this search for traditions emerged the picture of a messy countryside. On 22 March 1887, Crosthwaite gave instructions

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and asked for reports from all Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners 'on the subject of the organization of village police':

> *It is believed that nearly every village in upper Burma has its thugyi or headman*; that these men collect taxes, for which they are paid a percentage; that under the Burmese Government they had powers of dealing with small offences and were held responsible for the police of their villages; that they were often, if not usually, hereditary; and that the villagers were consulted more or less in making such new appointments (and) that in some cases they held land by virtue of their office … The village thugyi should be a person of some rank and position (and) ought to occupy a position similar to that of the police patel in Bombay … The villages will then be grouped for police purposes in circles under some post or outpost … If there are circles for revenue purposes, the police circles should coincide with them so far as may be.[42]

This reflects the main purpose of Crosthwaite's *Regulation to Provide for the Establishment of a Village System in Upper Burma*. This policy was presented as a way to kill two birds with one stone: a weapon for crushing the revolts against the British and a tool for administrating the countryside following the practices developed in British India and Lower Burma. What was clear for Crosthwaite – that there existed a timeless and indigenous village system in Upper Burma – was, however, slightly unclear for most of the colonial officers on the ground. They rather encountered a large variety of office holders. First, there was the so-called *thugyi*, which became a general category for naming a local authority. There were also crown service chiefs like *myin-gaung* and *thwaythaukgyi*, hereditary or appointed officials like *myothugyi*, *myowun*, *myook*, *ywaok*, *myaydaing*, *shwayhmu*, *ngwayhmu* and so on. As Frank S. V. Donnison, a colonial officer and historian, puts it, 'one of the greatest difficulties was to make sense of the inconsistencies of Burmese administrative arrangements: most difficult of all did they find the personal jurisdiction which existed alongside, or rather woven through, the more intelligible, though still unstereotyped, territorial jurisdictions … In size, authority, condition of tenure, in fact in every respect, it was hard to find two charges alike' (1953: 23). These had to be fitted into a 'regular' system. The challenge for the officers was to define who was subordinate to whom, who could appoint whom, what revenue existed, how it was shared and why a position was legitimate against another. In his answer to Crosthwaite's call for information, Raikes provides the following statement concerning Alon:

> In Alôn subdivision, 5 Myothugyis and 213 Thugyis have been appointed; in Alôn Township there is 1 Myothugyi and 66 Thugyis. In the Alôn

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> subdivision, 113 Thugyis administer more than one village … In the Alôn Township the average number of villages in a Myothugyi's circle is 23 … The remuneration received by Thugyis varies considerably and depends very much on individual influence. The recognised fees are - 1) ten per cent. commission on the thathameda collection; 2) fees in petty civil and criminal cases; marriage-fees … Many Thugyi hold land which was granted to them by the Hlutdaw, others have simply annexed lands on their own account without permission. As soon as land taxation is introduced, exemption might with advantage be allowed up to a certain extent to Thugyis who own and cultivate land. I am informed that the majority of the Thugyis in Lower Chindwin are not landholders … Maps showing proposed grouping of villages for police purposes under posts or outposts are submitted for the Alôn, Kindat, Legayiang, and Kubo Valley subdivisions … Sé-eingaungs exist in most villages in the Chindwin … they hold no official position; they act as assistants to Thugyis and help getting in thathameda collections and in carrying out of orders of officials in their villages; they receive a small remuneration from Thugyis and are exempted from payment of tax.[43]

Raikes does not depict a uniform countryside dotted with independent villages, each under one *thugyi*. His laconic report – like those of his cohort – is rather an attempt at making a political maelstrom legible through averages and generalizations. Only *thugyi* and *myothugyi* are described. They are numbered, their jurisdiction is assessed according to how many villages they control to produce trends and their revenue is standardized as much as possible. Matching local jurisdictions with police posts meant recognizing authorities emerging out of warfare. Raikes fought, judged 'dacoits', appointed office holders, dismissed others, reinstated few, fought again, looked for informants to kill 'dacoits', issued certificates for some office holders, secured telegraph lines, had his administration listing local authorities, villages, potential boundaries… It became clear for colonial officers on the ground like Raikes that localities were very different from one another ('*thugyi* remuneration depends on individual influence') and that in the past there was much in-fighting to control land and wealth ('land was annexed by force'). In fact, the British were another player in the competition for power and wealth as the main political dynamic of the countryside. The village system was imagined in a different perspective.

On 28 October 1887, Crosthwaite's regulation was enacted:

> The Deputy Commissioner shall appoint a headman in every village or group of villages. In appointing a headman, the Deputy Commissioner shall have regard, so far as circumstances admit, to any established custom which

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> may exist respecting the right of nomination or succession or otherwise and to claims based thereon … When in any village or group of villages there are two or more headmen one of whom by custom exercises authority over the other or others, the Deputy Commissioner shall decide which of them shall be the headman for the purpose of this regulation, and … may make rules to define and regulate their relations to each other.[44]

The regulation was a 'how to' organize the countryside and appoint authorities. It gave a high degree of flexibility for colonial administrators, but also for local leaders and political entrepreneurs who could build a jurisdiction for themselves. Let us first look at how the imposition of the village system was justified by Crosthwaite himself in his memoirs published in 1912 under the title *The Pacification of Burma*:

> The Village Regulation … established on a legal basis the ancient and still existing constitution of Upper Burma. While emphasizing the responsibility of the village headman, it … also enacted the joint responsibility of the village in the case of certain crimes; the duty of all to resist the attacks of gangs of robbers and to take measures to protect their villages against such attacks. In the case of stolen cattle which were traced to a village, it placed on it the duty of carrying on the tracks or paying for the cattle. It gave the district officer power to remove from a village, and cause to reside elsewhere, persons who were aiding and abetting dacoits and criminals. This enactment … was framed in accordance with the old customary law and with the feelings of the people … Without the Village Regulation, the military police would have been like a ship without a rudder. (Crosthwaite 1912: 82–83)

First, throughout Crosthwaite's writing, village headmen are portrayed as a timeless indigenous institution, the only form of organic life in a society with 'no hereditary aristocracy and no tribal or caste system'.[45] There were, as we have seen above, gentry leaders and a system of status groups more or less organized by the crown. This system was fragile and often shifting. Rural warfare and the diversity of leadership in Upper Burma resulted from a traffic in affiliation and contributed to the argument that a standardized system was needed. But the imagery of the village system also draws from the past experiences of administrators.

Crosthwaite's solution to the problem of local government first comes from the situation in Lower Burma – constituted after the first (1824–1826) and second (1852) Anglo-Burmese wars. In Lower Burma, 'the village headman generally styled kyedangyi, has degenerated into a kind of village watchman and drudge; he is described as a person who has no influence in his village and whose orders

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no one will obey'.[46] Mya Sein, in her book about Burma administration ([1958] 1973), points out how the British created an Indian-like bureaucracy in Lower Burma. They established district officers (called *myook*), who had little or no anchoring within localities. Headmen of village circles were appointed, but gradually lost their police and judicial powers, and after the Police Act of 1861 they became mere revenue collectors when the government's 'attention was called to revenue matters, surveying and land-measuring' (Mya Sein [1958] 1973: 77). Instead, lesser officials such as *ywagaung*, *ywaok* and *kyedaingyi* became the rural police officers. In short, Mya Sein supports Crosthwaite's argument by saying that local officials in Lower Burma lost their original authority because police, judicial and revenue powers were separated, thus further decreasing their political foothold. They were said to be inefficient, 'unable to detect, capture, and bring to punishment the numerous disturbers of the public peace who have, for some years past harassed many of the districts in the lower province. A similar system of treatment will very soon reduce the Thugyi of Upper Burma to the level of kyedangyis of the lower province'.[47] To defend his policy, Crosthwaite postulated that headmen's authority was still alive in Upper Burma and needed a legal basis.

There were other motives too: being able to crush ambushing dacoits and especially pressuring those who helped them with a cheap system that 'will work to some extent irrespective of the personnel of the officers administering it' (quoted by Thant Myint-U 2001: 215). Before going back to Burma as Chief Commissioner, Crosthwaite explained his ideas to Lord Dufferin, Viceroy of British India, about how to effectively fight banditry in Upper and Lower Burma. His idea came from his first appointment in Burma a few years before[48] and was broadly to give officials the 'power of summarily removing persons who, while they themselves appeared to be living harmless lives without reproach, were enabling the insurgent or brigand gangs to keep the field' (Crosthwaite 1912: 23). The Viceroy supported the draft regulation, which was circulated to district officers even before Crosthwaite arrived in Burma in 1887. In the regulation, the latter's view is found in two key measures: the joint responsibility of villagers under their headman for crimes committed in the village, and the power to deal with people who 'intend to commit crime'.

The headman then had to assist every higher official for any purpose, to investigate and report cases in his jurisdiction and to pass on information related to dacoits. He was to arrest 'any person whom he has reason to believe to have been concerned in the commission … of offences',[49] to report newcomers, resist bandits' attacks and to stockade his village. A headman also had to supply 'food or carriage for troops or police', to furnish workers for 'public works' and to register population demographics.[50] Finally, he was responsible for tax collection and for allocating 'unoccupied land' within his jurisdiction. In return, villagers

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were to assist the headman in the execution of his duties or else be fined or imprisoned. In other words, the headman became the new armed wing of the colonial government. The joint responsibility of all villagers was also a crucial element, however. One can find it in articles 9 and 13 under the rubrics 'Fine on villagers accessory to crime' and 'Power to require residents to remove from villages' respectively. The Deputy Commissioners were able to impose fines on all or any villagers 'if they have colluded with or harboured or failed' to prevent the escape of criminals. People could be removed 'when the Deputy Commissioner has reason to believe, on the report of headman or otherwise, that a person [is] in the habit of harbouring, aiding or abetting dacoits, robbers or cattle thieves'. Villagers and headmen were thus responsible for the political order the British wished to create in the countryside and which turned suspicion into a legitimate tool for regulation.

Just as they imagined the headman as an indigenous institution, colonial officers supported the enactment of village joint responsibility by using 'local customs'. This is important because the 'joint responsibility' had the lasting effect of centring village government on small groups of villages, as the 2016 selection also shows. The custom unearthed from locales was related to stolen cattle, and was soon associated by the British officers coming from Punjab with a 'similar' law adopted there. The supposed joint responsibility of villages concerning stolen cattle was then transformed into a general responsibility for denouncing and fighting those ambushing British forces. In 1886, while 'pacifying' the countryside, the Deputy Commissioners were asked for their views on the existing laws that should be passed to better govern the country. One proposition from Ava's Deputy Commissioner intersected with the drafting of the village system. For the latter, a 'custom was that a village into which the traces of stolen or dacoited cattle led was bound either to produce the cattle, to trace them to another village … or to pay the value of them'.[51] Reporting this custom to the Chief Commissioner in January, the Commissioner of the Central Division added that 'this custom has received the sanction of law in Punjab'.[52] For another officer, these suggestions 'are based on well-known national custom … and if we borrow a page from Burmese law and embody it with our own, a very powerful instrument for the detection and absolute suppression of dacoity will have been found'.[53] The alleged purpose of the custom – to avoid cattle rustling – was thus replaced by the need to fight dacoits. What is left is only a supposed joint responsibility of each village to maintain order: 'The holding of each village commune responsible for the acts of its members is not only politic, but is … in accordance with Burmese ideas of equity'.[54]

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Overall, the precolonial period in the Badon/Alon area displays a landscape of fragmented sovereignties competing for offices following a galactic polity pattern. Myinmilaung and Gawgyi had to deal with unsteadying centres by engaging with preceding and nascent authorities. Both villages were created during times of 'turmoil', either during the fall of a royal dynasty, when different powers and authorities centred on their locales (1750s), or during migrations related to a widespread famine following crown demands for labour and soldiers (1810s–1820s). Internally, village settlement followed lineage or regimental affiliations, depending on their previous experiences. Externally, villagers had to engage in multiple and shifting political affiliations. They notably had to face gentry leaders using migration, warfare and changes in royal ability to govern the countryside to increase their jurisdiction. People's status and positions were often negotiated, and the gentry's hold over the countryside was transformed. This traffic in affiliations at the local level shows that the gentry was not a monolithic group, but rather an assemblage of powers constantly in the making using various resources (heredity, patronage, money lending, revenue collection and land control) to consolidate their position through a continuously changing political landscape. In this perspective, the history of the countryside is that of a competition to access office either by force, by claiming entitlement via familial succession, local customs and individual ability, or by buying mortgaged offices. Renewed attempts by the kings to control these fragmented sovereignties from the 1850s onwards led to a renegotiation of local leadership and warfare. This was the very situation the British encountered when colonizing Upper Burma, and for a complex set of reasons they created village headship to control the countryside. One effect of early colonialism was to centre local politics on the village arena. Furthermore, Myinmilaung and Gawgyi were eventually bound under the same jurisdiction when Myinmilaung's first headman used village headship to craft his own jurisdiction. In other words, across this period of more than a century, the stakes of the competition for leadership changed, but the competition remained.

British colonialism devised through the village system a new form of governmentality: a cheap bureaucratization of the countryside based on villagers' joint responsibility under a headman acting as police officer and revenue collector. But the appearance of change did not quite match the lived experience of it. It was messy and the continuities were a better guide to what was to come than the apparent changes. This chapter has shown that, beyond the debate about whether or not colonialism eroded the patron–client relationships based on moral and administrative control by the gentry, the emergence of the village system was but another episode of competition for leadership. During the 'pacification campaign', colonial officers encountered wide differences between offices and were enjoined to report on solutions that could help to systematize a bureaucracy

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based on local customs whenever possible. At that time, however, the gentry was far from being a corporate group, and competition for leadership – through warfare, office buying, claims to heredity – was a main political dynamic.

The large variety of office holders were amalgamated under the *thugyi* rubric. Yet, this gradual change of meaning is not entirely consistent with the Burmese concept and echoes the will to free offices from personal influence for the sake of effective administration (while postulating the need for personal anchorage at the same time). *Thugyi* refers generally to a hereditary leader from among the gentry and is close to the concept of chief in British colonial thinking. A headman is more of an appointed person, by definition the head of a group of people governing in the name of an administration. Of course, there was never a clear division, and the late precolonial period exemplified how offices could blur into one another. Some colonial officers such as Sladen pushed to co-opt *thugyi* because of their anchorage within their locality. In theory, headship was created to have a ruling class that was legible to the system of government that colonialism imagined. But in practice, headship was swept into the ongoing competition for power in the countryside. The merging of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi within a single village tract resulted from this dynamic.

This chapter has also made a case for approaching the early colonial period in Upper Burma in relation to previous forms of colonialism. The search for traditions, through the collecting of reports for instance, was part of a broader process linking experiences from Bengal and Lower Burma with the situation in Upper Burma, while the imminent agenda was to 'pacify' the countryside. The colonial village system was performative in the sense that it centred local politics at the village level. It imposed a villagization of governance by enforcing the joint responsibility of groups of villages under a single head. In that sense, the colonial village system became the matrix of headship as an institution. Depending on their will to organize the local society directly or indirectly, the successive governments made use of the village system, whether for implementing socialist policies or organizing forced labour under direct military rule (Chapter 3). It created a cheap system to control people's movement and extract wealth, mainly through land taxes.

If we now relate back to Myinmilaung and Gawgyi in the late 1880s, they were grouped within the same village tract during the first decades of the colonization under the village system policy. In the previous chapter, we saw that Myinmilaung was probably dependent upon the Thazi chief and Gawgyi upon Kyawkka's before the 'pacification campaign'. These links survived the colonial encounter to a certain extent. Many Myinmilaung farmers were still tenants of the Thazi chief in the aftermath of annexation. As noted by Raikes, Alon still had a *myothugyi* ruling over twenty-three of the sixty-six *thugyi* recognized within the township. Thazi and Kyawkka chiefs were probably among the

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forty-three remaining in 1887. Myinmilaung, however, became a village tract under its first headman, a man from Myinmilaung Proper. The following chapters explore how village headship was accommodated in our area of research, how it was embodied by different persons, and how local stakes transformed this institution.

Notes

1. This person is not the same man who became headman during the 2016 selection.
2. Alon is the name of the city given by U So, but it was known as Badon until Bodawhpaya (1782–1819) renamed it before ascending the throne. I keep the name given by U So to respect the context of speech.
3. Cf. Brac de La Perrière (1989) and Robinne (2000). Brac de La Perrière defines the cult in honour of the Thirty-Seven Lords as an institutionalized spirit possession cult addressed to guardian spirits (the *naq*) of particular domains in Upper Burma that once formed the core of the classical Burmese Buddhist kingdom. This cult is organized around the pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords who are honoured in annual public festivals and with whom individuals engage in privately organized spirit possession ceremonies.
4. See Brac de La Perrière (1996: 49–50) on the idea that some *naq* represent indigenousness and local sovereignty.
5. See Prasse-Freeman (2023a) for an analysis of British governmentality in relation to ethnicity in Burma and India.
6. Cf. Colonel Sladen (1883), cited in Mya Sein ([1958] 1973). Sir Edward Bosc Sladen (1831–1890) was a British army officer who worked in India. He served as the organizer of provisional government in Upper Burma and oversaw the surrender of King Thibaw (1885). From 1876 to 1885, Sladen was commissioner of the Arakan division and he accompanied the force sent against King Thibaw as chief political officer.
7. Cf. the British Library Archive file L/PJ/6/216. *A Regulation to Provide for the Establishment of a Village System in Upper Burma* (hereafter referred to as REVSUB), letter dated 8 September 1887 and written by Smeaton, secretary of Charles Crosthwaite.
8. Gathered in Myinmilaung proper, Gawgyi, Budaungkan, Tozigon, Ywadon, Kyawkka, Thazi, Zalok and, concerning the Grandfather of Alon, with the guardian of the spirit palace in Alon.
9. Cf. notably REVSUB; and the following British Library Archive files: V/6606. Scott, James G., and John P. Hardiman. 1900–1901. *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States*. 2 parts, 5 vols. Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing (hereafter referred to as GUBSS); I.S.BU.35/38. Hardiman, John P. 1910. *Report on the Regular Settlement of the Lower Chindwin District, April 1906–June 1909*. Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing (hereafter referred as to Hardiman 1910); I.S.BU.35/42/2. Hughes, T. L. 1932. *Report on the First Revision Settlement Operations of the Lower Chindwin District, Season 1928–31*. Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing (hereafter referred to as Hughes 1932); I.S.BU.147. Hardiman, John P. 1912. *Gazetteer of the Lower Chindwin District, Upper Burma*. Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing (hereafter referred to as Hardiman 1912).
10. See notably Berry (1993, 2000) for a general approach, Saha (2012, 2013) and Saito (1997) for the Burmese case and Spear (2003) for a literary review.

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11. This relates to the princes and officials who were allocated appanages or specific revenues over one or several townships in the quality of *myowun* or *myoza*.
12. The departmental jurisdiction refers to the charges concerned exclusively with specific groups of population regardless of their location, such as servicemen (cf. Lieberman 1984: 63–112).
13. According to the Royal Orders of Burma translated by Than Tun (cf. Than Tun 1983–1990. *The Royal Orders of Burma, A.D. 1598–1885.* In 5 volumes. Kyoto: Center for Southeast Asian Studies; hereafter referred to as ROB vol.), Alon (Badon) is one of the main towns controlled by Ava in the early fifteenth century (ROB vol. 2: ix) and was considered a royal town in the seventeenth century (ROB vol. 2: xv). Alon boundaries seem to have been measured and fixed as an administrative unit following a royal order in 1692 (ROB vol. 2: 61).
14. For instance, 'specified revenues' were given by King Taninganwei (1714–1733), when he came to power, to his brother known as the Badon prince who died around 1728 (Lieberman 1984: 78, 187).
15. Most likely Thamata Shwe Sanda, who was Alon *myothugyi* in 1811; cf. Mya Sein ([1958] 1973: 52).
16. A possible translation could be a homage or tribute ceremony.
17. Jane Ferguson (2014: 297) insisted, after a long tradition of scholars, that power was not derived through 'territory' *per se* but rather through controlling labour as well as relations with regional powers and central authority.
18. Melissa Crouch (2016b) has shown that the Burmese word *auratha* (also transcribed as *orasa* and *awaratha*) comes from the Sanskrit *aurasa* (a legitimate son, literally 'from the breast'). For an explanation of the law concerning the status and rights of the *auratha* according to Burmese Buddhist law, see Lahiri (1957).
19. Cf. Hardiman 1912. A version of this legend can be found in GUBSS vol. 1, part 2: 7–8. Another version of this legend can be found in Brac de La Perrière (1998: 313–16). I also collected a version on 20 January 2015 from Alon palace's guardian.
20. There is no well-established history of how this pantheon was created or how spirits were selected. It seems to be a state artefact for self-legitimacy and the first official list of *naq* known for the kingdom of Ava dated from King Pindale's reign (1648–1661) and does not include Alon's Grandfather; cf. Brac de La Perrière (1989).
21. Bahtukyweh literally means 'the wealthy one', a title referring to his position in a society largely divided between status groups organized by the crown. According to Thant Myint-U, *thu-kyweh* stands for an inferior grade of the hereditary money-lending class (Thant Myint-U 2001: 43–44).
22. Cf. Lieberman (1984: 236, note 31). Monywa was still under a *myothugyi*, the 'Lord of Monywa', who followed Alaunghpaya because of his network of relatives.
23. 'Talaing' is a name sometimes used to describe either Mon people or their language. In this citation, it refers to the people taken as war captives and then transformed into servicemen under the Restored Toungoo kingdom when it vanquished the southern Peguan kingdom. Colonial administrators and early historians often assimilate Talaing, Mon and Peguan in their narratives, using ethnic lenses to explain political affiliations. However, as Victor Lieberman (1978) has explained, it is far from obvious that ethnicity was used as a political tool at that time.
24. Hardiman's account draws from Maung Tin's *History of the Alaunghpaya Dynasty* (1905). Maung Tin was Sagaing Township officer at the early stage of British settlement operations in the 1890s.
25. Cf. Toe Hla (1995: 37–38), cited in Than Hlaing (2013: 8).

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26. In 1783, according to Koenig's evaluation of population trends during the Konbaung era, about 56% of the people in Badon Township were crown servicemen, representing 9,684 persons out of 17,418 (Koenig 1990: 241). Among the large variety of servicemen (soldiers, boatmen, horsemen, gardeners, astrologers etc.), the type of servicemen living away from the capital area, as for Badon, were mostly soldiers (Lieberman 1984: 94).
27. Personal communication from U Saw Tiha, senior associate professor of history at Monywa University.
28. The *thwaythauksu* platoons were, according to the listing of over 200 types of servicemen made in 1691, the elite guards enjoying the highest social standing among servicemen (Lieberman 1984: 174).
29. 'Astrologer' does not correctly render the Burmese *ayudawmingala amatgyi* but relates to how this person read omens.
30. Powintaung is a major archaeological site harbouring a complex set of caves displaying mural paintings and statues dating from as early as the fourteenth century (cf. Munier-Gaillard 2010) and is now one of the most visited places in the region, attracting tourists and pilgrims.
31. Theravada Buddhism was allegedly introduced under King Anawrahta (1044–1078).
32. Cf. Koenig's calculation of population trends based on the 1783 and 1802 royal inquests (1990: 241). For instance, Koenig shows that Alon lost about 60% of its registered population between 1783 and 1802. This figure is an approximation, but it appears that a large share of this population was either recruited for war campaigns, canal and pagoda construction, or escaped state demands by migrating. Cf. Koenig (1990: 142–43) and Furnivall (1957: 39).
33. Cf. Lieberman (1984: 102, 107, 166). Lieberman also relates to Adas (1981: 226–28) and Hanks (1962) in his discussion of whether debt-slavery was an act of protest or a way to accommodate a deteriorating situation.
34. There were broadly three categories of bondmen: the religious ones donated to a monastery for its upkeep, for instance; the hereditary ones, usually prisoners of war; and the debt-bondmen who were the most numerous. Debt bondage covers a large array of situations ranging from people unable to pay their taxes, such as servicemen, to those willing to change their status to escape the obligations ascribed to it. Cf. Lieberman (1984: 107).
35. Cf. Hardiman (1909, 1912). Yet, people could have under-reported land given through kings' orders as it was considered 'state land' by the British and those were the first lands surveyed and taxed (Chapter 4).
36. As for Bathukywe, U Bo Bo is a generic term used to name an authority of the past. It means the 'old man' and probably refers to the person who gave his name to this village specialized in the making of pots ('O').
37. These names (U Bo Shwe, U Bo Nyunt, U Bo Hla and so on) cover the best land surrounding the village. The adjunction of an ancestor name in that of the children, rare in the Burmese context, indicates a common lineage when it happens to such an extent.
38. Composed of 33 households in late 1810, while Thazi was home to 622 households (the figures correspond to the number of households assessed for the payment of tax in the late 1910s). Cf. Hardiman (1909: 179–80).
39. Gradually becoming, among others, the Shan (cf. GUBSS), the Kachin (Leach 1954; Robinne and Sadan 2007; Sadan 2013) and the Chin (Lehman 1963) areas.
40. Cf. GUBSS vol. 1, part 1: 119.
41. Cf. the British Library Archive file Mss Eur B391. *Campaign Diary of Captain Frederick Duncan Raikes (1886–1887).*

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42. Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph no. 949, my emphasis.
43. REVSUB, Telegraph no. 53–8 by Raikes dated 24 June 1887.
44. Cf. REVSUB, art. 3 of the final regulation.
45. Cf. REVSUB, letter dated 8 September 1887 and written by Smeaton.
46. Cf. REVSUB, letter dated 8 September 1887 and written by Smeaton.
47. Cf. REVSUB, letter dated 8 September 1887 and written by Smeaton.
48. He replaced the then Chief Commissioner on a year's leave in 1883–1884.
49. Cf. REVSUB 1887, art. 5 of the regulation.
50. Cf. REVSUB 1887, art. 5 of the regulation.
51. Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph no. 89–2 by Gates dated 27 December 1886.
52. Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph no. 801 by Fryer dated 3 January 1887.
53. Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph no. 60 by De La Courneuve dated 14 February 1887.
54. Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph no. 212-1-20 by Eales dated 19 February 1887.

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2

The Last Men of Power

This chapter explores the history of the local polity from the 1890s to the early 1950s. It focuses successively on the crafting of Myinmilaung tract with its first headmen, on the embodiment of moral change and authority by the last men of *hpon*, and on the gradual transformation of the local political order. It highlights how several villages were grouped under a single headman once the British 'pacified' the countryside and designed a new system of government based on direct rule through settlement operations. The early colonization period was but another episode in a space characterized by political fluidity, fragmentation and competition. It also created a political arena centred on villages and provided the means to challenge traditional obligations regulating access to land and wealth. Beyond the institution, headship became a matter of individuals as successive leaders adopted different positions echoing local stakes. Some of them became exemplary figures of the moralization of behaviours and engagement in secular affairs when villagers reinterpreted their role as Buddhists and contested colonial rule. The chapter ultimately makes a case for seeing the whole period as a moment when claims to authority were channelled by belonging to farming families. It shows how local hierarchies were transformed and headed by the 'real farmers' who used colonial devices, state and armed group projects to challenge pre-existing affiliations and get a hold over the leadership of Myinmilaung tract.

The map of the village tract (Map 0.3) is part of a theme developed throughout this book centred on how Myinmilaung became the name of the local polity. The current repartition of the villages into different tracts, with their respective headmen, relates to the implementation of the village and land revenue systems. The practical questions that guide the reflections are the following: why was Myinmilaung Proper, the settlement founded in the mid-eighteenth century, divided, right in the middle, through three village tracts? Why did Gawgyi become

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 99.

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part of Myinmilaung tract? Who were the first headmen, and, beyond village headship, how did local forms of authority and hierarchy evolve? To answer these questions, this chapter is composed of three parts. The first two follow a chronological order and the last analyses the whole period. The first section looks at the colonial encounter as well as the framing of the village tract and headship based on a triangulation of oral memories, colonial archives and cadastral maps. It shows that village headship was as much a product of local politics as a colonial device, while Myinmilaung tract became the locus of politics and land tax a main means to accumulate wealth. It also shows that beyond the institution, successive leaders have embodied different postures reflecting local political issues.

The second section explores the worth of two leaders by connecting oral memories about them with the political, economic and cultural history of the early decades of colonial rule. It illustrates how these personalities became exemplary figures for the moralization of behaviours and engagement in people's affairs when villagers reimagined their role as Buddhists and challenged colonial rule. This perspective allows for the rethinking of Nash's concepts of power and authority, namely *hpon*, *gon* and *awza*, by showing how past and present contexts are critical in evaluating the worth of leaders. It also enables us to think about this period not only as a moment of social disintegration, as described by Aung-Thwin (1985) and Furnivall (1948) for instance,[1] but as a phase of reorganization of political authority along new lines.

The third section presents the way in which large farming families progressively became the new local elites. It focuses on how colonial devices – the village, the revenue systems and the courts – were all simultaneously concerned with 'localized' politics within the village tract and enabled the challenging of the social obligations that allowed access to wealth and land – in terms of family relations and tenancy agreements. The remnants of the precolonial gentry were not entirely uprooted from the landscape, but their hold was reduced as the families of large peasants were able to buffer the state's and armed groups' land reform projects by monopolizing local leadership as well as organizing the hierarchy between 'real farmers' (*taungthu*) and mere 'labourers' (*myaukthu*).

The First Village Headmen

> Unlike the *thugyi* of the Burmese regime, the new headmen were moulded after a pattern – an influential man, agreeable to the village (elections were always held) with hereditary claims if possible. (Mya Sein [1958] 1973: 152)

U Nyunt was the first headman of Myinmilaung village tract. Was he an influential man? Undoubtedly, as he managed to have a village tract of his own. Was he

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agreeable to the village? Maybe. But the making of Myinmilaung tract at the turn of the nineteenth century entailed another split of this settlement, allegedly due to U Nyunt's greed. Was he elected? Elections were not held initially. The first headmen were appointed during the 'pacification campaign' based on military and revenue needs. When U Nyunt died, his son, U Shwe, took over thanks to his hereditary credentials in the eyes of the Myinmilaung elderly people. Later, appointments by higher officials, elections by locals (elders, big men or *lugyi*) and heredity claims became the ingredients for the politics of headman selection between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi. This section explores how the fashioning of the village tract became a matrix that partly shaped local politics by merging Myinmilaung and Gawgyi.

The 'pacification campaign', as seen from the British perspective, did not last long in what became in 1888 the Lower Chindwin District. Most of the fighting happened in the Kudaw circle, in the northeast of Monywa. The main precolonial circles, or governorship (*nay*), in the district – Alon, Kani, Kudaw, Ayadaw, Pagyi, Amyint, Kyaukmyet – then served as a basis for administration, with later transformations in subdivisions and boundary modifications. Revenue collection started by retrieving the capitation tax (*thathameda*) rolls provided by local authorities. The administrative and military centre of the district was then quickly transferred from Alon to Monywa, and our area of study included Monywa Township, created in 1894.

At the village level, the aim of the colonial policy in Upper Burma was 'one village one headman'. As stated in the previous chapter, however, local situations were far from this ideal and it was left to the officers' discretion. Headmen were first appointed during the 'pacification campaign' and the Pre-Summary Settlement (1886–1887), either directly by the Deputy Commissioner of the Central Division (Raikes), or indirectly by Alon's *myothugyi*. Headmen were used as land surveyors to record land types and land owners and to estimate the *thathameda* tax within their circles up until the late 1890s. John Percy Hardiman, in charge of the Regular Settlement of the District (1906–1909), gives a picture of the situation twenty years later:

> There are over 1,000 hamlets, or self-contained groups of houses, in the district, and these are controlled by 671 headmen … But whereas, in Burmese times, many of the headmen's charges comprised a large area of country and twenty or thirty villages, each under a subordinate village headman, who in many cases received no remuneration at all, the existing policy is gradually … *to rearrange the component villages in several smaller groups, and within each small group to appoint a single headman, drawing the full commission on the revenue collections*. Thus one independent village headman will take the place of all the old subordinate

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> village headmen within the new group; there will be a single remunerated official, instead of several unremunerated. (Hardiman 1912: 159–60, my emphasis)

The creation of village headship was a moment of competition and negotiation for political recognition. It covered battles for power and revenues within localities as local government transformed. For instance, until the 1920s, village tracts were often fragmented to such an extent that even hamlets began to appoint headmen of their own, according to Mya Sein ([1958] 1973: 152). In the district, the number of headmen of large circles of villages decreased from 127 in 1902 to 88 in 1908, while the headmen of small groups increased in number from 152 to 239 (ibid.: 157). The persons of local influence were far from being simple clients of the colonizer. The successive tracting of the landscape – into tax tracts, soil tracts, cadastral tracts, village tracts – offered opportunities to redraw territories, channel revenues and challenge pre-existing affiliations between villages, families and leaders. Myinmilaung village tract is a case in point.

It is most likely that U Nyunt became headman between 1887 and the late 1890s when the pacification was over and the territorial segmentation of the countryside under way. The consecutive tracting of our area of study reveals two processes. First, there was the rise of Myinmilaung as the leading village of a new tract under U Nyunt and the absorption of Obo (renamed Ogon) and Gawgyi under its command. Second, Mogaung distanced itself from Myinmilaung by successively affiliating with two other village tracts (first in the 1900s, then again in the 1920s), adding another layer of fragmentation within the original settlement. As a result, the old settlement was divided, right through the middle, into three village tracts (Figure 2.1, Maps 2.1 and 2.2 and Tables 2.1 and 2.2).

The first surveys by the Land Records Department[2] (1897–1902) created cadastral units called *kwin*, a survey unit corresponding roughly to a village in India and measuring about a square mile. This unit had to fit a standardized 11-inch map[3] and was crafted alongside new jurisdictions – the village tracts – and the new local office – the village headman. According to Furnivall, 'village boundaries, where known, might be adopted as boundaries of *kwin'* [*sic*], but in most cases they were either undermined or could not be ascertained by the Indian surveyors and so *kwin'* boundaries were determined by convenience of survey' (1957: 207). Because the *kwin* maps should coincide with a village headman's jurisdiction or a subdivision of it, however, these boundaries were also determined according to local political conditions. On the sketch shown in Map 2.1, Myinmilaung appears as a village tract composed of three *kwin* (nos 659, 660, 661).

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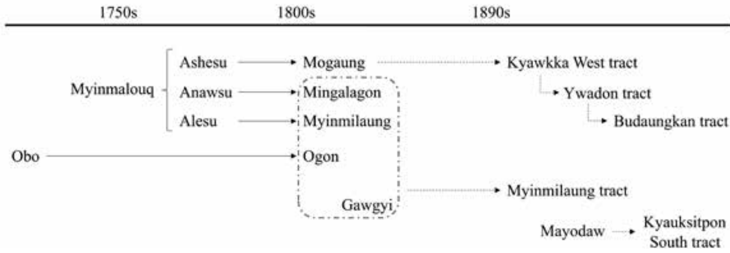
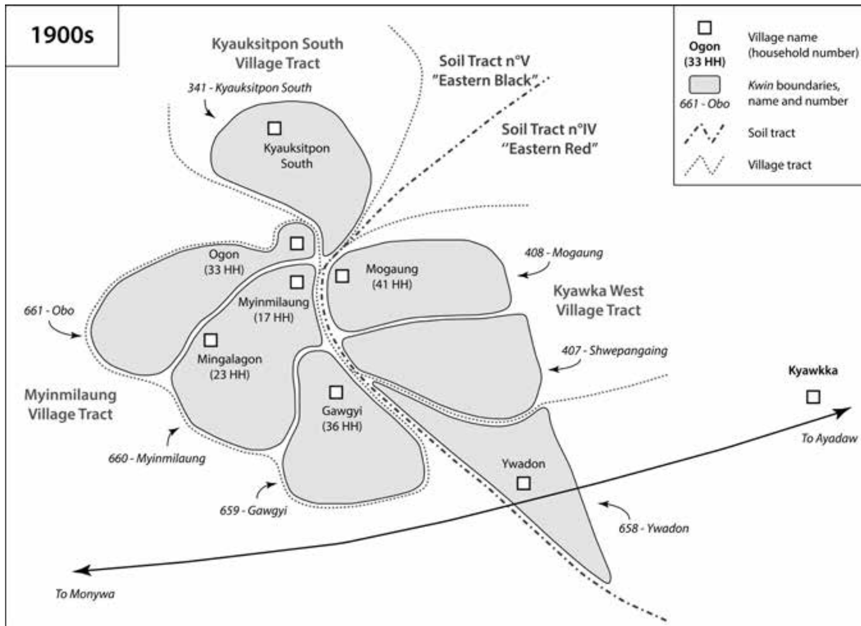


Figure 2.1. Timeline of the changes in village names and the creation of village tracts.

Table 2.1. Summary of the organization of village tracts, *kwin* and soil tracts for the 1900s.

Villages	*Kwin*	Village tract	Soil tract
Gawgyi	659, Gawgyi *kwin*	Myinmilaung	No. V Eastern Black
Mingalargôn	660, Myinmilaung *kwin*		
Ogôn	661, Obo *kwin*		
Myinmilaung	660, Myinmilaung *kwin*		
Mogaung	408, Mogaung *kwin*	Kyaukka west	No. IV Eastern Red
Ywadon	658, Ywadon *kwin*	Ywadon	



Map 2.1. Sketch of the divide between cadastral, soil and village tracts for the 1900s.
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The division between soil tracts IV and V was drawn between Myinmilaung (tract V 'Black Eastern') and Mogaung (tract IV 'Eastern Red'). The records also show that in the 1900s, the grouping of hamlets within village tracts again separated Myinmilaung and Mogaung. Myinmilaung became the chief village of an eponymous tract that included Ogon (previously Obo), Mingalagon (the 'West Corps') and Gawgyi, but not Mogaung (the 'East Corps'). Instead, Mogaung became part of Kyawkka West village tract, the western portion of the previous Kyawkka territory.[4] A simple hypothesis is that the split between these two villages – which share a common history – was the outcome of a rivalry between their leaders. This is, at least, the local explanation and the 'West Corps' took for itself the name of Mingalagon and moved a little further west. The demographics are also telling. Myinmilaung (17 households) was the least populated of its own tract, while Mogaung (41 households) had a relatively high population in comparison (the average for the tract being 27 households). The Myinmilaung leader U Nyunt was influential enough to get a village tract of his own. Another faction, however, led the Mogaung leader to affiliate with other authorities to avoid U Nyunt's hold. At the same time, Obo was renamed Ogon and, although it was the oldest settlement with a recognized lineage, it came under U Nyunt's sway. In addition, Gawgyi partly severed relations with Ywadon, its home village. Overall, the creation of village tracts and headmen was both a confirmation of local dissensions and another way to negotiate affiliations. The striking feature of this area is the divide into three village tracts (Myinmilaung, Kyawkka West, Kyauksitpon) right where soldiers hid and settled about a century and a half ago.

Further changes happened in the following decades. Gradually, the revenue circles had to be broken up to adjust headman remuneration – a portion of the taxes collected in their tract – according to the size of their jurisdiction. For historian Mya Sein, the subdivision of village tracts was carried out drastically for some time 'till it was realized about 1909–1910 that undue and excessive subdivision weakened the authority of headmen … Steps were taken in 1912–1913 to revise such subdivisions as were thought too minute, and where the amount of commission did not justify the retention of separate headmen, the small charges were consolidated' ([1958] 1973: 157). Yet, in the 1920s, the split into three tracts remained, and Myinmilaung's unchanged. Kyawkka West tract was broken down and Mogaung integrated with Ywadon's. In addition, two new villages were created between the 1900s and the 1920s. First, Mayodaw settled in Kyauksitpon tract. This allegedly resulted from a new split, either within Myinmilaung or Mogaung depending on the villagers, and Mayodaw chose to settle at their gate but under a different headman. The second one, Budaungkan, settled east of Gawgyi, in a *kwin* named after an old pagoda (Shwepankhaing; see Chapter 1), was composed of several migrants from different places. Overall, and beyond the details of the splits and reconfiguration

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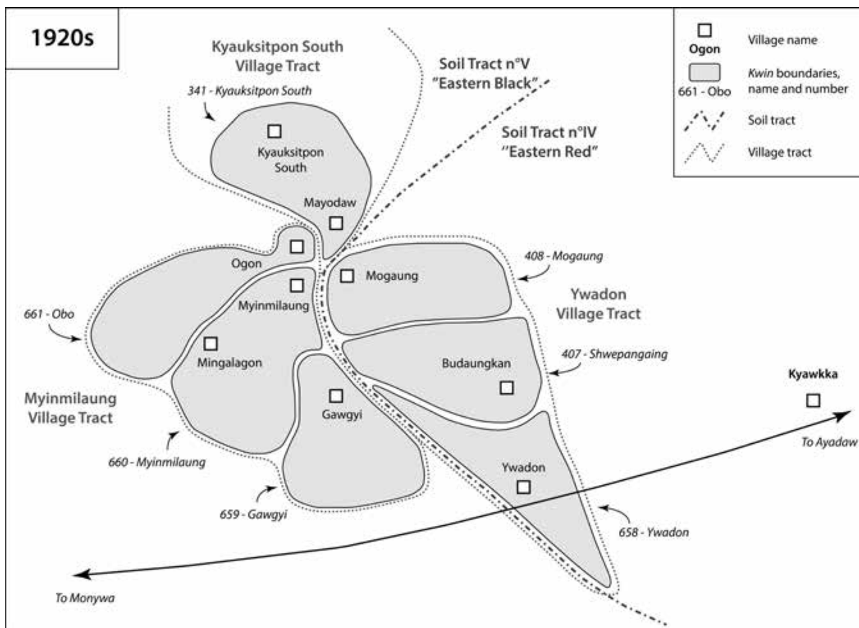
of the village tracts, the creation of Myinmilaung tract shows how local power dynamics permeated the village system.

Officially, U Nyunt had to protect his village from banditry and cattle theft, maintain village stockades and organize night watches. To do so, an old Burmese institution, the ten-house heads (*hse-eingaung*) – crucial in the 2016 selection – was grafted onto the village system. The villages were divided 'into a number of

Table 2.2. Summary of the organization of village tracts, *kwin* and soil tracts for the 1920s.

Villages	*Kwin*	Village tract	Soil tract
Gawgyi	659, Gawgyi *kwin*	Myinmilaung	No. V Eastern Black
Mingalargôn	660, Myinmilaung *kwin*		
Ogôn	661, Oo Bo *kwin*		
Myinmilaung	660, Myinmilaung *kwin*		
Mayadaw	341, Kyauksitpon South *kwin*	Kyauksitpon South	
Mogaung	408, Mogaung *kwin*	Ywadon	No. IV Eastern Red
Ywadon	658, Yawadon *kwin*		
Budaungkan	407, Shwepangaing		



Map 2.2. Sketch of the divide between cadastral, soil and village tracts for the 1920s. © Martin Michalon.

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blocks, each under a se-ein (ten house) goung [*sic*] who was subordinate to the headman. He was usually elected by a group of 10 or so houses which he represented and was mainly responsible for police matters' (Mya Sein [1958] 1973: 161). In theory, U Nyunt also had to promote sanitation, education and improve communication. He was also supposed to control people's movement, that is, to report newcomers, emigration and village demographics. His income was now limited to a share of the taxes he collected within the tract, first the capitation tax and, as the settlement operations devised a new tax system, from land revenue as well. Villagers were to assist him or else be fined or imprisoned. As we will see in the next section, high taxes became a central issue in the first decades of the twentieth century leading to rebellion against the colonial state and, among its officials, primarily the village headmen.

When asked about U Nyunt, however, Myinmilaung elders grin. They call him *thugyi* (the 'great one', the 'chief') and smile because there is no *thugyi* anymore, at least not in Gawgyi or Myinmilaung. Nobody knew him directly, and although U Nyunt is depicted as a strong personality, he was a 'bad' ruler. He was bad because he was allegedly responsible for the fragmentation of what was once a common settlement: his ambition and activities as headman led to the split with Mogaung. In addition, he had a gun (most were confiscated during the 'pacification campaign' and distributed to headmen only), and people apparently had no choice but to obey his orders. They mention that he had *ana*, meaning that his orders were backed by an external force, that he was empowered by the state to impose decisions through coercion. For example, he could fine people, tie up drunk men during pagoda festivals and impose temporary jail sentences. Apart from his gun, the fragmentation of Myinmilaung Proper and the punishments he administered, little is remembered about U Nyunt.

His successor was his son, U Shwe, also born in Myinmilaung. Again, he had a gun and that is about all we know. When asked why U Nyunt's son became headman, the answer is interesting. The Myinmilaung elderly people I met in March 2019 have a local theory of masculine habitus. They say '*montso nani montso*; *tenga nani tenga*', meaning 'he who lives close to a hunter becomes a hunter; he who lives near a fisherman becomes a fisherman'. For them, before 1988, the position was for life and, if at all possible, transmitted to a male within the same extended family. A nephew, a grandchild or a son-in-law could be the successor, as long as he gathered experience by living close to the one in charge. This is a justification based on principle, not a statement about what actually happened. The legitimacy of the hereditary transmission of offices (or of skilled occupations) comes from the fact that experience and practice ease the acquirement of the necessary skills by someone in this or that position. What a man successfully handles during his mandate, his children should consequently *know how* to handle too. The succession of generations channels potential achievements.

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The ways in which village headmen could succeed one another apparently followed how precolonial hereditary offices were transmitted. The office was tied to a family, ensuring a degree of continuity, even if it was created by force. I will explore the connection between the transmission of property within families and the transmission of leadership in more detail in Chapter 5.

This section has demonstrated that village headship was, on the ground, as much a product of local politics as it was a colonial device. Myinmilaung tract became the locus of politics which took the form of a competition between villages for controlling headship. But beyond a mere institution, it became a matter of personalities. The successive headmen embodied different postures reflecting what was at stake in local politics. For instance, Gawgyi people do not even remember U Shwe, and they do not share the theory of habitus when applied to Myinmilaung. The one headman they know is his successor, U To Kaing, presented as one of the last men of *hpon* who participated in the moralization of behaviours.

The Last Men of *Hpon*

I explore now how local personalities became exemplary figures in the moralization of behaviours when villagers were rethinking their role as Buddhists after the colonial encounter. In Gawgyi, the first half of the twentieth century is often remembered as an age of propriety and morality. A few elderly people remember it vividly, and villagers in their thirties today talk about men of this period with respect. Recollections of the past reflect how they view the present, that is, a potential shift towards corruption, low morals and military rule (Chapter 3) with the advent of democracy. Such memories, when triangulated with other historical narratives, enable us to picture some of the changes that happened during the early colonial period. Propriety and morality were embodied, and two persons stand out: U Za Nay Ya, the first head monk of Gawgyi monastery from the 1910s to 1949, and U To Kaing, village headman from the mid-1920s to the early 1960s. These men are remembered as being strict, intransigent, but reliable and influential. They were, for our contemporaries, the archetypical and last men of *hpon* involved in village affairs.

U Za Nay Ya

Alicia Turner (2014) has shown that in the face of the feeling of societal decay during the decade following the fall of the monarchy – the king being the traditional supporter of Buddhism and of the community of monks called the *sangha* – laypeople became the protectors of Buddhism in charge of Buddha's teachings (*thathena*). These teachings, embodied in texts, chants and rituals, are

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'the conditions for making merit and liberation, but it is also impermanent, and it is in the decline since it was revealed by Buddha' (Turner 2014: 1). After King Thibaw was sent into exile in 1885, a rhetoric of decline developed, as if the Burmese society was on the brink of a moral breakdown. John Percy Hardiman also echoed this sentiment of decline when he wrote that, in the Lower Chindwin, Buddhism became 'little more than a name' (1912: 34).

From 1890 to the 1920s, lay Buddhists created hundreds of associations in the main cities, and in smaller towns and villages. They campaigned for Buddhist education and moral reform and engaged in conflicts with the colonial state. The efforts of the multiple voluntary associations brought waves of publishing, preaching and organizing, and forged a 'moral community' out of a 'common ethical project' (Turner 2014: 2, 77). Most associations were concerned with the behaviours of Buddhists, which became a barometer for the decline of morals. Lack of respect towards elders, drinking of alcohol, frequentation of opium shops and billiards parlours, excessive gambling, consumption of beef, all were evidence of decay. However, as Turner suggests, such evidence does not 'come from a single register of tradition, but from a range of actions, new and old' (ibid.: 85). The condemnation of beef consumption, for example, was of a new type. It stemmed from a beef boycott that had its roots in the Lower Chindwin region and was articulated in one of the first texts (*The Letter on Cows*) of Ledi Hsayadaw (1846–1923), the most famous monk of the first decades of colonization.

This monk was born in a village close to Monywa, in the middle of our area of study, where the network of influential literati at the courts emerged (Chapter 1). As Braun put it, 'his approach depended on the localized development of an elite Buddhist tradition that stressed the use of texts … as the way to answer societal and religious problems' (2013: 7). Ledi wrote *The Letter on Cows* in the late 1880s when he came back from Mandalay to settle in Monywa when the British arrived. This call for a boycott originated in the intersection of dynamics specific to the region, namely the effects of the demographic increase and agricultural expansion since the eighteenth century as well as, according to Charney (2007: 235), the influence of Hindu revivalism, along with admonitions against eating fish and beef, emanating from Manipur and moving down the Lower Chindwin.

Beyond that, *The Letter on Cows*, written in a simple style accessible to all, was a lesson about the communal dimensions of karma. In short, the consumption of beef was associated with immorality. Prohibition of intoxicants was nothing new; it was the last of the five precepts laypeople were expected to follow. But for Ledi, 'the Burmese had brought about their own national destruction by engaging in immoral behavior' (Ledi, quoted in Braun 2013: 37). For Ledi, decay was thus about karmic justice. Accumulating merit through donation was not enough. Behaviours should be changed. When on tour giving sermons, Ledi

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asked people for pledges of morality – mainly the avoidance of intoxicants and festivities – instead of offerings. In addition, for the new Buddhist journals and lecturers, Turner shows that the 'need for morality and its potential benefits had overtaken the karmic benefits of donation' (2014: 87). Thus, lay Buddhist associations and influential monks developed a pedagogy of introspection teaching individuals to police themselves and to uphold moral behaviours.

How do memories about U Za Nay Ya relate to these transformations? In the same vein as Ledi, U Za Nay Ya (1889–1949) was involved in the moralization of daily lives, but, unlike Ledi, he stayed in one locale. He became the first monk in the first monastery of Gawgyi, after his full ordination around the age of eighteen in the nearby monastery of Zalok. His arrival thus coincides with the creation of the Gawgyi monastery and pagoda in the late 1900s. The Zalok and Gawgyi monasteries were and still are part of the same parish (*gaing*), linked with another monastery in Sagaing. For their construction, a piece of land north of the village was donated, and a few donations were given by individuals from and outside Gawgyi. Villagers mostly gave time and labour and received merit for it. In the meantime, a pond north of the monastery was enlarged and deepened to avoid flooding during the rainy season. The monastery-monk-pagoda complex enabled the promotion of Buddhism to a certain extent. Buddha's teachings were like a diminishing fire, embodied in the relics enclosed in the pagoda, maintained and bolstered by multiple means to protect from harmful forces (ghosts, bad luck, immorality). Having a pagoda to worship, a monk who facilitates donations and merit making, and a monastery to which to send one's child as a novice were critical in Gawgyi life in general. The ability of this monk to build up this monastery is still sometimes praised. More importantly, however, he was also involved in the lives of laypeople, and his 'area of influence' (*gawthagan*) extended miles beyond Gawgyi. Such memories contradict how monkhood was seen by Hardiman during the same period: 'The practical interference in affairs, which was a right of the priesthood in Burmese times, has also disappeared and, with it, some of their hold on the people' (Hardiman 1912: 34). At that moment, it seems to have been quite the opposite in Gawgyi.

The language used to describe U Za Nay Ya matches the emphasis on morality in village life – in line with Turner's argument – and his engagement in village affairs. U Maung, one of the Gawgyi elders, sometimes talked about that period as 'an age of rule by monks' (*hpongyi ouqdeh kheq*). U Za Nay Ya, and not U Shwe the headman, was consulted by villagers in cases of divorce and apparently even for land disputes. Mostly, he enforced prohibitions to rectify behaviours: allegedly, he forbade anybody to put their feet in the pond to avoid pollution; women could not walk from the pond to their house wearing the same longyi after bathing; he beat anyone drinking alcohol in public; and he conducted night watches in the village. This was how my interlocutors condensed nearly

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fifty years of experience living under U Za Nay Ya. He took care of villagers' morality, but he was also a man of knowledge. He knew Pali script and was competent in performing all necessary ceremonies. He also provided medicine for villagers, notably by introducing small amounts of gold into their veins from time to time (making the bodies resistant to blade cuts).

Figure 2.2. U Za Nay Ya's grave, Gawgyi, 2016. © Stéphen Huard.

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Thanks to the monastery and the pagoda, Gawgyi people were able to integrate ritual exchanges more fully between villages, and the aura of U Za Nay Ya radiated for miles, attracting donations that enabled them to enhance the buildings. In 1964, five years after his death, U Za Nay Ya's body was removed from the monastery and placed in a grave outside once the villagers had collected enough money to build it.

Overall, the work of U Za Nay Ya as the caretaker of behaviours in Gawgyi shows how the more general emphasis on morality unfolded in the first decades of the twentieth century. He is seen as a man of virtue who strictly followed Buddhist rules and whose knowledge was extensive. While talking about him, I tried to draw a parallel with the concept of *hpon* notably developed by Nash. He was, by definition, a 'great *hpon*' as this is the Burmese word for monks. But the stories about him showed that he had achieved a certain level of greatness. I asked if he had *ana* (the power to impose decisions) and *awza* (authority or influence),[5] and was answered in the affirmative. U Za Nay Ya was a man of *hpon*, but nobody could say the same for anybody living today in Gawgyi. To some degree, the vocabulary used to depict the worth of U Za Nay Ya matches Nash's framework (1965), but it also shows that beyond the concept, the achievements of a person are related to a context, and U Za Nay Ya's authority stems from him embodying morals, propriety and Buddhist teachings at a specific time. In Nash's work, morality is set aside and relegated to the influence of elders (called *lugyi lugaun*, a question that is raised in Chapter 6). In a different way, the worth of U Za Nay Ya stems from the conjunction of the transformation of Buddhism, his engagement in village affairs and his personal qualities. In short, he set an example to follow. The general cultural transformation highlighted by Alicia Turner thus impacted the local polity as U Za Nay Ya eclipsed the then village headman to some extent. In addition, the successive headman U Shwe, the son of U Nyunt, was eventually replaced by another man of *hpon* in the late 1920s.

U To Kaing

This brings us to U To Kaing, a man born in Gawgyi who eventually married and settled in Myinmilaung. He too is depicted as a man of *hpon*: he participated in the moralization of daily life, was involved in village affairs but also dampened the tension between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi. We saw above that the previous headman accessed the office by succession in the 1900s. So why did U To Kaing become headman before the latter's death? How did he handle headship and why did he become an exemplary person for current villagers?

He became headman quite young in a context of rural protest against colonialism when headmen were often targeted as 'maids of all work' for the government (1910s–1920s). He remained headman during the economic crisis of 1930

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and subsequent political turmoil for independence, and the Japanese invasion and rule (1942–1945), which was followed by a period of parliamentarianism, civil war and insurgencies until the military 'caretaker government' took over (1958–1960) and eventually seized power in the 1962 coup. In other words, he remained the local authority during a period of great political change. His bigness retrospectively stems from this achievement, and current villagers express it by referring to his personality: a man of charisma whose orders were followed. Again, Nash's concepts fit the description. But he is also described as a man of virtue who participated in, and at times led, the moral reformation of villagers by forbidding distilleries and gambling and controlling the handling of donations at local Buddhist festivals.

The coming of U To Kaing makes sense in a broader context of rural protest against colonialism. The apparent decline of headmen's authority highlighted by Cady ([1958] 1960: 271) was, for the British, one of the signs of such contestation, along with the politicization of local associations against the *thathameda* and land taxes in the late 1910s. One movement in particular, called *wunthanu athin*,[6] gained momentum in this period and, by 1924 'there were *wunthanu athin* organized in almost every village in Burma' (Taylor 2009: 194). These organizations, along with others, empowered villagers in their conflicts with officials and, in our case, were a means to challenge local politics. Indeed, the village system was based on the joint responsibility of the villagers in a tract. The government policy of forbidding headmen to participate politically in the *wunthanu athin* in effect isolated them from the sympathy and cooperation of most of the villagers, who were expected to accept joint responsibility under headman leadership, according to Cady ([1958] 1960: 272). We can imagine that because Myinmilaung tract was forcefully created by U Nyunt, the authority of his son, U Shwe, was challenged at that very moment. The joint responsibility of these two settlements under that man may have been problematic. U Shwe could not have been part of *wunthanu athin*, and thus could not embody the upholding of morals. He was the one collecting taxes when farmers' conditions deteriorated, and the *thathameda* became a greater source of grievance because the headmen were no longer able to adjust it on an informal basis to fit changing economic conditions, according to Robert Taylor (2009: 190).

The government's answer was to reform local governance and support headmen to ensure that the villagers participated in local government. Most of these efforts failed. The Burma Rural Self-Government Act of 1921 created elected village committees conferred with special criminal and civil powers to assist the headman. But it was never operative. The Crime Enquiry Committee even recommended in 1923 that the selection of headmen be by election. But while the 1924 Amending Act authorized the election of village committees sharing the headman's judicial powers, he remained the armed wing of the state. His powers

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to 'requisition services and supplies were reduced, but he still could fine villagers refusing to do public duties' (Cady [1958] 1960: 273). Finally, all the reforms were reversed in 1927. On the whole, villagers did not invest in the committees, but rather in a shadow organization duplicating the official administration. The *wunthanu athin* apparently 'set up their own with a hierarchy of village, circle and district boards' and 'encouraged the people and monks to refuse services, including food and religious ceremonies, to non-European officials' (Taylor 2009: 195). They also organized their own court, protested the Village Act, and, with the help of monks, restored arbitration techniques to settle disputes. We now have a better understanding of why U Za Nay Ya is said to have been involved in village affairs. Beyond that, we can imagine that the political context in Myinmilaung tract was that of a growing contest against U Shwe.

I do not know if U To Kaing was the leading figure of the local branch of the *wunthanu athin* or of another association. He certainly could have been. There was an escalation of tension against headship and by extension against U Shwe. If a man rose up, he was most likely politically active, and these associations were avenues for such a trajectory. In any case, he was a man of compromise because his personal trajectory reconciled Myinmilaung and Gawgyi to some extent. He was from Gawgyi and thus linked to one of its main lineages. This was important because leaders in Gawgyi are never outsiders. He married and settled in Myinmilaung Proper, with his parents-in-law, before becoming headman. He thus navigated both spaces and it shows that, even if the villages did not like each other, they had to live under the same 'roof' somehow. They intermarried, participated in each other's ceremonies, though Gawgyi now had its own monastery and a monk upholding morals. The balance of power between the two settlements changed in the first decades of the twentieth century. By becoming headman when village headship was castigated, U To Kaing must have gathered enough backing and held a degree of trust from the villagers. In other words, moral reformism and the contestation against the state were the ingredients for the transformation of the local polity in the early twentieth century.

The *Pax Britannica* was eventually disrupted due to the repression of peasants leading to the so-called Hsaya San rebellion of 1930 as well as student protests, which produced a generation of national leaders fighting for independence. The historiography usually presents the following decades as a period of political experimentation, factionalism, conflicts, insurgencies and wars across the country, ultimately leading to Ne Win's military coup in 1962. Villagers, however, recall this period, from the late 1920s to the late 1950s, as the age of U To Kaing's rule, presenting a degree of stability in local politics against a background of corruption and warlordism. To a certain extent, he did maintain village affairs, but he mostly buffered and/or took advantage of multiple forces. There was the corruption of low-ranking officials and then the Japanese battalions,

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invading Burma in 1942 before fleeing in 1945, which monopolized the little infrastructure that was left intact during the war, leading to food and goods shortages. They forcefully recruited labour through headmen who, relabelled *okkhata*, organized it with the village ten-household heads. One positive aspect beyond the exactions on civilians was that in our area the cultivators, who were relatively prosperous because of their diversified output, were able to pay off accumulated debts in cheap Japanese currency (Cady [1958] 1960: 459).

Those with no livelihood sought employment in the labour battalions[7] created by the Japanese-controlled independent Burmese government. People also enrolled in the underground militia, often affiliated with communists and other armed groups fighting the Japanese. In early 1945, the British forces came back to Burma to fight the Japanese. Near Monywa, they gathered in the monastery of Zalok. In retaliation, the village was half burnt to the ground by the Japanese concentrated in the city. Immediately after the Japanese retreat in March 1945, these armed groups, traditionally called *tat*, gained prominence while the British came back into power (1945–1948). The Communist Party of Burma was notably influential in our area after being expelled from the main political coalition,[8] and began negotiating the terms of British departure. By 1947, there were at least eight militias operating in the countryside, according to Smith (1991: 66). It was not clear to locals which group had authority over the government. Ultimately, the White Flag faction of the Communist Party of Burma took over our area of study[9] shortly after independence in early 1948. The railway east of Monywa became the demarcating line between the pro-government forces concentrated in the town and the White Flag soldiers in the countryside. For about eight years, villagers say that they had to pay a 'contribution fee' (*hsehkyay*) to this armed group which kept coming back and forth during periodic intervals. U To Kaing, like other headmen,[10] became a *de facto* member of the White Flag CPB after pledging allegiance. Villagers continued to grow their usual cash crops and went to Monywa markets freely. Finally, the White Flag was driven out of Monywa Township around 1956, and U To Kaing reintegrated the state administration. Finally, after the 1962 military coup by Ne Win, another person was appointed to implement the socialist policy of the Revolutionary Council (1962–1974).

Beyond the influence of national politics on the village, people remember U To Kaing as a leader in terms similar to Manning Nash's when he wrote about the men of *hpon* who have 'those special traits of leadership, that run of luck, that visible stamp of being the recipient of benign fate and auspicious destiny that makes a man a leader in the village' (1963: 198). However, when we talked about U To Kaing's greatness, unlike the monk U Za Nay Ya, my interlocutors acknowledge that the context, his engagement in daily affairs, how he displayed propriety, and his ability to buffer state or armed group demands are key

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components of his worth. It made him exemplary in people's memories. This affects the current polity because U To Kaing became a reference, a standard that allows for the evaluation of the worth of leaders, which is intimately linked to the context in which they live and to the memories of their predecessors, as we will see in the next chapter.

Transforming Hierarchies

This section is more impressionistic by nature. It argues that while colonialism fashioned new structures of land revenue and tenure, it also offered opportunities to renegotiate the obligations channelling access to wealth and ownership. Colonialism allowed the main farming families to become the local elites, monopolizing state institutions and local leadership (1900s–1930s). During the period of insurgencies, war and independence (1930s–1950s), they were able to take over various projects of land reform, supported either by the state or by armed groups. Throughout this period, the local hierarchy transformed from a landscape of status groups affiliated with multiple patrons to a divide between farmers (*taungthu*) and labourers (*myaukthu*). It created a world where claims to authority through social identity – belonging to the main farming families – became more important. The remnants of the precolonial hierarchy, such as U Po Shi, an important money lender descending from the Thazi gentry, disappeared when land tenure was internally 'reorganized' in the middle of the twentieth century.

Land Titling and the Courts

Thant Myint-U has argued that in codifying and enforcing a system of land revenue based on a division of state and non-state land and on a *thathameda* assessment, British policy-makers created a structure of private ownership free of the gentry control. For him, the result was a decade of confusion and competition, reflected in the new colonial courts that were quickly put to work. In other words, the question is: how did the colonial land system affect local hierarchies?

The settlement operations were gradual. First, the officers tried to collect the *thathameda* taxes according to what they understood of the Burmese system. British knowledge about land was rudimentary and a revenue system able to sustain direct rule was needed quickly. Based on previous experiences, the Upper Burma Land and Revenue Regulation was enforced in 1889. Two master categories were officialized: state and non-state lands. The key test was whether the land was inheritable (non-state) or not (state). No doubt, this division did not correspond to any kind of tenure that existed in Upper Burma. It was rather 'made in line with the long-standing British Indian concept of the state being the ultimate owner of the land or was justified in part by citing the Burmese notion

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of the king as the "lord of water and earth (yé-myé-shin)"' (Thant Myint-U 2001: 229). In Alon territory, state lands were taxed first but represented only 1.7% of the circle in 1906.[11] Besides, decades of in-fighting and competition over offices had largely blurred what could have been a revenue system. Thus, revenue was firstly drawn from the capitation tax. This inflow entered both the district coffers and the headmen's pockets – the latter ascribing individual household shares. Soon, non-state lands were targeted. This is where the Summary (1900–1903) and Regular Settlements (1906–1909) stepped in. Quite conveniently, non-state land became synonymous with private ownership. They covered mostly what is called *dama-u-gya* and *bobuapaing* lands. Both terms refer to the way in which a person justifies his relations to land: through clearing (*dama*: knife, *u*: first, *kya*: fall) or inheritance (*bobua*: grandparents; *paing*: ownership). Yet the creation of the land revenue system meant that claims could become rights, that is, recognized (written) by law ('Records of Rights').

> The general tenure enquiries made it clear that the bulk of the occupied land was, in Burmese times, held on a tenure which included *full rights of transfer*, whether to a resident in the same village tract or to an outsider; *of inheritance*, whether by a resident or a non-resident heir; and *of letting*, whether by a resident or a non-resident owner and to any tenant he pleased. The right *of sale* was everywhere asserted, though sales seldom took place … Except in a few instances in out-of-the-way parts of the district, the exclusive proprietary right of the first clearer was found to be strongly asserted …. (Hardiman 1912: 41, my emphasis)

Burmese land ownership apparently displayed, almost exactly, the feature of individual private ownership. The cadastral mapping and recording of rights started on these premises. The cadastral survey took place from 1897 to 1902. In the meantime, the register of rights and tenancies was compiled. Officially, the registration of rights on cadastral maps was done by an officer of the Settlement Department when on tour, asking villagers 'to walk round the boundaries of the land that he claimed to possess in company with the claimants to adjacent holdings' (Furnivall 1957: 209). Plots became 'permanent holdings'[12] recorded under the name of a land rights holder. In theory, people also had to indicate the origin of their rights, whether by inheritance, purchase or lease, to establish whether it was state land or not. If the person declared himself a tenant, or a usufructuary mortgagee, it was the name of the landlord or of the mortgagor that was recorded on the registers. Although this process seems straightforward in theory, it was messier in practice.

In Upper Burma, unlike Lower Burma, conditions were much more complex, estates remained long undivided, outright sales of land were rare and 'it was the

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exception rather than the rule for the person in occupation of land to be the sole person interested in it' (Furnivall 1957: 211). But who was interested in land? People bypassed others' claims thanks to the land titling process. As Furnivall put it, the Record of Rights became a 'Record of Wrongs' (ibid.: 92), and registration started anew in 1906. During this period (1890s–1900s), the courts saw a growing number of land cases:

> The Reports on Civil Administration of the 1890s tell a story in which Burmese people, realising that all land was in effect becoming 'private', became quickly familiar with the colonial judicial system, and then fought intensely through the courts for ownership of land. Throughout the reports, the British expressed repeated surprise at the amount of litigation and the extent to which members of sometimes quite small communities were challenging one another in court. (Thant Myint-U 2011: 216)

Thant Myint-U listed more than seven thousand land cases judged in 1889 and more than nine thousand in 1890, particularly for breaches of contract on land all over Upper Burma. In the Lower Chindwin District, the courts also witnessed a rise in litigation. For Hardiman, this was mostly because the 'settlement operations led to the investigation of titles to land and the discovery of points of dispute as to ownership' (1912: 162). To the great surprise of colonial officers, the contests occurred mostly within communities (which were supposed to be 'organic'). The cases were broadly of two types: suits for the division of ancestral property and for the redemption of mortgaged land. It seems that the courts were dealing with conflicts in which confusion prevailed as to who had rights over what. Three levels were entangled, namely occupancy on, ownership of and jurisdiction over land. The courts were a means to contest local customs, or more precisely to renegotiate or bypass the obligations that enabled someone to access land. The following subsection explores the question of ownership – through family relations – and occupancy – via tenancies – by looking at how colonial administrators attempted to create a system of land revenue. The next one takes up the problem of jurisdiction to show how precolonial authorities were gradually challenged.

Families and Tenancies

In the early twentieth century (Hughes 1932: 40), as for the 2010s (Boutry et al. 2017: 101–103), the two main avenues through which to access land and become a farmer were by inheritance or through a variety of tenancies. Land was mostly attached to nuclear families and tenancies often ran between kin until, for instance, the family patrimony was divided on the death of the parents. The colonial administrators tried to match a system of land tenure anchored in kinship

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with their idea of private ownership. Furnivall, critical of colonialism, wrote that during the titling process 'the occupant was usually taken as the owner, although probably in a large majority of cases the family property had not yet been divided and the occupant was cultivating as the tenant or the mortgagee of the family as a whole' (1957: 92). This is a key point. Up to the present day, the idea has persisted that land is individually owned, but the arrangements regulating land use and access remind us of a system of joint tenure.

Ownership was and is a process intimately linked with the temporality of the transmission of inheritance (Chapter 5). As was the case in other Southeast Asian precolonial polities, forms of 'hereditary private tenure' (Boomgaard 2011: 448) existed in what became the Lower Chindwin Division. The bulk of the land was cultivated by the villagers. The tenure was hereditary because it was inherited, and thus the term 'private' is merely a reflection of the temporary authority a person had over a family estate that could be sold, rented or mortgaged. When someone cleared a plot, it became one of the things that person had to transmit to his children in equal shares. This means that a person could be recognized as the main authority over an estate quite late in life. Before that, he might farm plots as a tenant (for his parents, co-heirs, neighbours, local landlord and so on), or as the usufructuary mortgagee, for instance. 'Outright' sales were rare, and a right of pre-emption on sale and mortgage by 'relations' (Hardiman 1912: 52), that is, by kinsmen, heirs and even neighbours, was often asserted. Migration did not erase potential claims. Even 'land obtained by inheritance and held in joint ownership may be worked before division either by each heir in turn or by one heir as tenant of all the heirs' (ibid.: 52). Colonial officers were confounded by how what they called a 'sentimental' relation to land (Hardiman 1910: 35) could influence its value and the conditions of transfer. All these elements converge towards the conclusion that there was a difference between working on a plot of land and the potential claims upon it.

Occupants could claim ownership because land titling was made as if 'most of the land is held in private ownership, on what is practically a full freehold tenure, and in small estates' (Hardiman 1912: 150). On the ground, ownership was more a matter of stewardship because entitlement to property was (and is) created through family relationships between parents and children: living together entitled one to property because the mutual obligations between people created claims over things. Thus, if ownership had to be linked to a single person, it was more of a temporary recognition of the responsibility and authority of that person over a household (usually by a man but not always): a steward. There was a complex web of obligations between generations, offering opportunities but also entailing more obligations.

Thus, what structured ownership were the customs organizing the dynamics of kinship (alliance, descent and the succession of generations) and the moral

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obligations between family members (transmission to children, taking care of the parents). The titling created owners on paper, however, and thus offered opportunities to bypass these obligations. Hence conflicts between co-heirs about their share of the inheritance, if one of them registered all of it in his name, or if they disagreed about what was owed to the others. In short, the land belonged to the person momentarily responsible for it, but was soon claimed by others and the family estate divided.

While the ownership of land was linked to a family's relationships, agreements on land were also quite flexible. The actual occupancy followed a variety of agreements and so a variety of types of occupants. Renting, sharecropping and mortgages were common and took many forms. John P. Hardiman took a close interest in the functioning and diversity of tenure. In our area of study, 47% of the occupied land was rented in 1909,[13] that is, about 24,000 acres. In the whole district, about 15% of the land was mortgaged and 18% of the land acquired by mortgage was in the hands of non-farmers. To the British officers, this was a sign that, unlike in the Delta of Lower Burma, land was not concentrated in the hands of non-agriculturists. For them, the district harboured a relatively unregulated land market, albeit with very few sales. It was even assumed that the high frequency of renting originated in the regimental system when 'cultivators compelled to render military service had to let their lands during their absence at the capital' (Hardiman 1910: committee proceedings, paragraph 13).

Tenancies followed various principles depending on the quality of the land, access to water (inundation/irrigation), the level of competition for land and the relations between the contractors. The main agreement on drylands was called *thonsu-titsu* ('three parts one part') (Hardiman 1910: 20), meaning that the tenant gives one-third of the harvest to the landowner. It was the norm for the latter to make a contribution to the tenant for expenses of cultivation and land revenue. It could last for a year up to a decade or more and this kind of agreement mostly concerned family members in our area of research, notably when the parents let their offspring build up their capital by farming on a parental estate. Furthermore, in the soil tract V, among the tenants, three-quarters had long-term tenancies (i.e. more than six years) and had to provide half of the harvest to the owner. This kind of agreement, called *myayzupay* ('giving a share of the land'), was formed between the main farmers – usually descendants of the founding lineages who mustered the biggest estates – and other farmers and would-be farmers. In the meantime, competition for land increased as migrants returned and virtually all arable land was farmed (the total occupied area in the soil tract V rose only by 5.7% between 1909 and 1931). The turnover of renters offered opportunities for villagers to access land depending on their abilities, capital and network while awaiting their inheritance. Thus, for the British, landlord–tenant relations were egalitarian: 'there is no well-defined line separating the tenant from the landlord

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class. A's landlord is frequently B's tenant' (ibid.: 24). In other words, if there was no 'sale market', there was a 'tenancy market', with most of the transactions occurring between acquaintances, if not neighbours or family members.

When tenancies and mortgages mostly occurred within communities, their forms follow a sense of what is just and fair about such transactions.[14] At the village level, one of the main problems was the ability to cultivate land. Since colonialism impacted the status hierarchy depending on military regiments and obligations to various chiefs, the social hierarchy slowly organized around farming. Gradually the *taungthu* – the real farmers – became the main elite and the *myaukthu* – the labourers – the dependent.[15] The difference between the two 'ideal' groups lies mostly in the ability to farm land, that is, to have capital (cart, cattle, tools), skills and networks. It is the product of an ideology emphasizing the superiority of 'real peasants' over mere daily workers. Because most of the work was in the fields, the *myaukthu* largely depended upon the *taungthu* for their survival.

In this context, colonial land titling did not lead to the discovery of points of dispute over ownership. Rather, it created an arena for disputing ownership, challenging customs and testing whether and how the new political order could enforce individual claims. Hence the returning migrants going to court to reclaim land registered by their mortgagee, for instance, and the old gentry's tenants claiming the land they cleared as their own. The use of courts strongly resembles Benda-Beckmann's 'forum shopping' (1981) in which Minangkabau villagers chose between various arenas to settle their disputes. While gradually suppressing the prerogative and authority of the old gentry leaders, colonial officers tried to find them a role in the hope that they 'and other local lugyi (or "big people") could "arbitrate" disputes … The feeling was that some sort of arbitration was the "traditional system"' (Thant Myint-U 2001: 216). But 'when people come to court they prefer to get the court's decision. When asked why they do not go to the lugyis, the reply is we cannot agree with the lugyis, we do not trust the lugyis, we want an order from the court, etc.' (Report on the Administration of Civil Justice in Burma 1890: 9, quoted in Thant Myint-U 2001: 216).

The Tale of U Po Shi

If the old gentry leaders used to be the ones judging most cases, the village system limited these prerogatives to a certain extent. According to colonial records and historians' narratives, most of the gentry lost their hold over the countryside. For Thant Myint-U, for instance, in Upper Burma, 'the old ruling lineages lost control over land to their former tenants' (2001: 233) through the new British courts after having devised 'a structure of genuinely private ownership, entirely free of the gentry or aristocratic control or involvement' (ibid.: 231). After the

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violence of the 'pacification campaign', the intersection of the village system with the territorialization of land revenue and the new judicial system was a blow to the precolonial polity. Yet, in the Lower Chindwin District in the 1900s, some headmen held on to large estates,[16] and, 'at the end of 1908, 31 village headmen [were] empowered to try civil suits of a petty nature' (Hardiman 1912: 161). The jurisdiction and territory of the old gentry shrunk and their means to accumulate wealth were disrupted. But the countryside was not completely restructured. Debts were not forgotten. Some precolonial authorities kept their hold over the countryside via money lending. In Myinmilaung and Gawgyi, a story is told about a man called U Po Shi:

> Before the Japanese left, U Po Shi had many lands in the area and a wife from every village. Farmers had to bring him his share of the harvest with their own cart … After his death, he became a buffalo! (U Maung, Gawgyi elder, 26 February 2016)

Since the early eighteenth century, gentry families in Badon Province controlled large estates through money lending. They progressively accumulated land sold as a redemption of debt and contracted tenants to farm it, or had the mortgagors working on their own land as tenants. These families were known as *myayshin* ('master of lands'), not because they owned land but because they controlled loans and debts related to land. Thus, even though Myinmilaung people were no longer liable for dues and fees to the previous gentry families since U Nyunt became village headman, these families still controlled loans.[17]

According to Gawgyi and Myinmilaung elderly people, as well as to a historian of Monywa University and U Po Shi's grandson (eighty-six years old in July 2016), U Po Shi was the descendant of the gentry family of Thazi village. He had a large amount of land and loaned money in fifteen to twenty villages from at least the late 1900s, moving back and forth between Thazi and Monywa where he built several houses and attended theatre performances. What people remember most is that he settled permanently in Monywa after the Japanese were defeated and while communist underground groups were gaining territory and advocating for land redistribution. He allegedly came there with fifty pots full of gold mounted on his tenants' oxcarts. In one account, the figure is seven hundred pots. Some interviewees say he had seven wives, others say twenty, sometimes one in each village, and at times even a hundred. Also, people disliked him. His tale is told as follows. Due to his bad deeds, he was reincarnated as a buffalo. One of his sons, weary of hearing this story, sued one of the men spreading the rumour. The two men, a judge and the buffalo in question were present at the trial. The defendant looked towards the buffalo and said 'Po Shi'. The animal came to him, and he won the case. Unlike U Po Shi's grandson, most villagers

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laugh at this story. It became a common joke that insinuates 'a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity' (Scott 1990: xiii). For them, this man became an animal because of his excesses. His journey to Monywa mounted on his tenants' oxcart was not a sign of splendour. The people who carried his wealth after the war were not strictly speaking his clients. They were his debtors and his tenants, and they had to be there.

One of the main problems for villagers was getting money in times of need. Previous office holders and money lenders had the wealth to support them. They funnelled loans into villages for decades and mustered fragmented estates for rent. When rains and harvests were bad, people could resort to seasonal migration, but they also often mortgaged their land if they had any, or the poorest contracted loans. For Toe Hla, those 'who did not possess land or other valuable property … resorted to the sale of their children, wives, or themselves' (1987: 78). These were not sales, in my opinion, but temporary debt bondage, or *kyun*. They were either signs of alliances or of extreme poverty. In our case, my hypothesis is that U Po Shi's numerous wives were in fact his bondmaids, waiting for their families to repay the debts. A 1782 *dhammathat*, or Burmese Buddhist customary law, stated that 'when the borrower is weak, and the lender powerful' and if the borrower 'cannot furnish the security and have not the means of paying, let this "person be sunk" (become a slave) and let his wife, children or grandchildren, his heirs, if living with him, also become slaves' (Richardson 1847: 71). Such an obligation was thus recognized by law. The fact that people have always insisted that U Po Shi had so many wives was a sign that he was a wealthy and important man, from whom people could get money but at a heavy price.

U Po Shi also invested in land, notably mortgages, and assembled an estate for rent. The mortgaged land was rented to tenants who were either the mortgagors or other people that could only access land outside family relationships by becoming a client of the mortgagee/money lender. The sort of debt patronage that had existed since at least the eighteenth century continued. The precolonial office holders traditionally provided such loans and accepted land, or people, as security. Deprived of their office with the village system, some were recorded as 'rent receivers' and 'non-agriculturists', and represented the chief category of people acquiring land by mortgage or purchase since the 1900s in the soil tract V.

The biggest landlords in the district sometimes required services from their tenants such as 'the cutting of firewood' and assistance when they were 'giving an entertainment (a-hlu) [*sic*] and the like' (Hardiman 1910: 25). Exactions were 'rare' according to Hardiman, and the Thazi family was never mentioned in the 1910 or 1932 settlement reports. Its virtual absence from the records is due to the British methods of computation. Fragmented estates escaped the settlement's radar[18] and debts were not recorded according to who loaned the money. In the meantime, the large landlords were presented as rack-renting their tenants.

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Even if large estates were apparently 'not numerous' and landlords who kept land stewards were 'very few' (ibid.: 22), the tenants complained about them:

> When a land steward conducts the appraisement, he usually takes as remuneration, in grain, two-and-a-half per cent. of the total appraised yield, and this the tenant has to pay in addition to the rental. The land steward receives no salary. *The tenant usually bears the cost of carriage to the landlord's house* … There are cases – the most prominent being those of *the landlords living in Mônywa* [*sic*] – where appraisement is conducted stringently, and it is then accompanied by abuses. (Hardiman 1910: 22, my emphasis)

In other words, and as recalled by the elders, the terms of the relations between U Po Shi and his tenants were not fair.[19] Obviously, this kind of tenancy was different from the flexible agreements that usually prevailed between residents of localities. By accepting tenancies, and taking loans with them, the farmers accepted such landlords as their superiors. The obligations stemming from the rentals were not justly quantified. They had to carry the harvest on their cart to the landlord, let his trusted men estimate his share, pay them and pay all, or a portion, of the land revenue. The obligation to provide services is remembered as unfair, such as carrying his wealth towards Monywa. This is why they laugh about U Po Shi becoming a buffalo and underline his excesses when talking about his numerous wives. For them, that he became a buffalo was karmic justice.[20]

This kind of obligation and patronage (at this level) pervaded the countryside for a long time. U Po Shi's retreat to Monywa marks a long-term change affecting the type of hierarchy in place, which was based on debt bondage and money lending and embodied by local patrons, heirs of the precolonial gentry, whose rule was ending. Instead, a new hierarchy was taking shape in the countryside as the main farming families of villages were able to monopolize local leadership and use state and armed group projects to consolidate their wealth and position.

Farmers' Power

Since the late 1940s, the White Flag communists 'advocated a policy of "land to the tiller" and land redistribution' (Smith 1991: 131). In fact, farmers had not paid any land tax since the outbreak of the Second World War. It is mostly under U To Kaing that indebted tenants in Myinmilaung and Gawgyi were able to change their situation. This does not mean that tenancy agreements disappeared overnight, however. On the contrary, tenancy conditions were, besides taxes, a paramount grievance expressed in the last decades, notably in Lower Burma and concerning the Chettyar money-lending Visayan caste from Chennai (Madras).

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The U Nu government tried to outflank the communists and secure rural support by enacting a Land Nationalization Act in 1948 whose objective was to turn every farmer into a state tenant by proclaiming state ownership of all land and resources. It had limited effects and scope, however. Most of the countryside was out of reach for the central government in 1948 and throughout the constitutional period. In 1953, a more detailed Land Nationalization Act was enacted, but again its implementation was slow and 'disrupted by the communist insurrection and the continuing lack of security across much of rural Burma well into the 1950s' (Brown 2013: 97).

In the Chindwin region, the communist insurgency was an opportunity to renegotiate property relations in certain cases, but not for most. What first went 'to the tiller' was most likely the land held by gentry descendants and contested money lenders like U Po Shi who could not maintain their hold through debts.[21] In Myinmilaung, the central government was able to regain control around 1956. Farmers started repaying land taxes to U To Kaing instead of a fee to the White Flag group as the State Land Records Department (SLRD) started remaking cadastres for U Nu's land redistribution scheme. For the elderly who have some knowledge about that period, it was just about getting land use titles. How it was implemented locally remains a partial mystery in which corruption, party engineering, insurgency, counterinsurgency and local factionalism were the main ingredients.

As Brown put it, 'there were far too few officials on the ground with training, experience, political judgement, and indeed the honesty[22] that were undoubtedly required' (2013: 97). The official stance was to abolish landlordism by suppressing tenant farming, providing credit and supporting the creation of cooperatives. According to the law, a six-man committee[23] had to be selected in each tract by the open-voice procedure to take charge of the distribution in the tract. Farmer owners could retain a maximum of fifty acres and had to declare their dependants. The policy was to give about ten acres to eligible cultivators, that is, 'actual farmers' with tools, oxcarts, cattle and know-how.

In practice, the implementation depended on the previous changes of ownership that occurred before the central government returned. It was also contingent on local settlement histories, on the type of cultivation (dry or wet lands) and on the power relations at play in village tracts. I do not know precisely how it was implemented in Myinmilaung tract. However, the work of Manning Nash and Melford Spiro shows how local farming families moved to the top of the local hierarchy and competed between themselves to accumulate wealth by monopolizing village leadership.

For Spiro, land nationalization was one of the historical roots of factionalism in Yeigyi, a rice-growing village in which he carried out fieldwork in the early 1960s. One faction was led by the village headman who had just been re-elected

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to this position in 1960 after the military interlude (the office was kept in the same family). Before that, he and his faction 'exploited their influence with insurgents, their official positions in the Village Solidarity Society, and their power in the Land Distribution Committee to deprive certain of their fellows of wealth' (Spiro 1992: 151). The committee received bribes to allow some land owners to retain more land than legally allowed while, on paper but not in reality, transferring the possession to their former tenants. The new wealthy farmers that were not part of Yeigyi's traditional farming elite saw their land seized even after paying bribes. Overall, the land reform was a means for the old elite represented by the headman to keep the new one at bay. Some tenants may have received land, but it seems unlikely that the land went 'to the tiller'.

For Nash, the land reform in some cases reinforced factionalism, and in others political fragmentation was buffered by the authority of a man of *hpon*. He worked successively in Nondwin (remote drylands on the road between Monywa and Mandalay) and in Yadaw (a rice-growing village of in-migrants south of Mandalay) in 1960–1961. In Yadaw, the land reform started in 1953 ended in 1958–1960 with the officialization of the *status quo ante* when the army took over and suspended the programme of land distribution. 'The farmers of Yadaw reverted to the land they had customarily farmed, prior to the program of grant land. When U Nu resumed the reins of government, he legalized the tenancy of farmers on the land they were farming, thus freezing the Yadaw squatter pattern, which emerged after the British landlord had fled the Japanese' (Nash 1965: 286). Some land went 'to the tiller', but before and not in the way promulgated in the Act. Furthermore, land distribution resulted in a murder, many jailings and the formation of factions tied to national parties. The committee, composed of '*lugyi lugaun*', was accused of favouritism and corruption. The problems were related to the different qualities of land and to how some farmers 'were asked to move from good land they had been farming, as tenants, for years, to poorer land, or other cultivators were shifted about from one plot to another for no apparent reason' (ibid.: 285). It discredited the office of headship and was symptomatic of the 'attenuation of traditional control by a man of pon' (ibid.: 286). The land reform led to factionalism and unfolded through party engineering during the national election organized by the military caretaker government in 1960.[24] In the drylands of Nondwin, it is as if nothing happened. Nash did not even mention the land reform. In this dryland area, with no irrigation system, the village appears as a community of kinsmen, not as the fruit of migrations or displacements. There was a paramount leader, U Sein Ko, the man of *hpon* who managed to cut off open competition.

Overall, changes in land tenure were mostly a matter of village big men politics because large land owners (or tenants in the case of Yadaw) came to form the upper class of villages. Small-scale tenants and labourers (in many cases the

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'tillers') were dependent upon big farming families. Changes in social stratification and local politics depended on the type of cultivation, with more competition and potentially more factionalism in rice-growing areas whose settlement histories are marked by various waves of migrations. The main farming families used the successive changes and overlapping of supra-village authorities (the British, the Japanese, the communists, the army, U Nu's government) to compete for resources and power by investing in leadership and monopolizing the implementation of land policies. In his work on rural administration in villages of central Burma, Lubeigt (1975) has shown a similar trend, namely that the people who invested in local leadership were almost all large farmers. When Mya Than (1987) 'revisited' a village studied some twenty years earlier by Pfanner (1962), she reached the same conclusion.

In the Myinmilaung tract, changes in land ownership followed similar lines. It exacerbated factionalism between Myinmilaung Proper and Gawgyi and was perhaps mostly contained within these villages. For instance, Gawgyi's main farmers of that period were able to get more land. The figures traced from the transmission of inheritance for today's main peasant families – but not all – show an increase of their holdings three generations ago, that is, during this very period. For instance, Ko Kyaw's grandparents – receiving a total of fifteen acres as inheritance from both sides – mustered a holding of more than thirty acres at the time of their death. These main farmers from Gawgyi were allegedly part of the land committee in charge of the distribution under U To Kaing. The same is said to be true for Myinmilaung Proper but I was not able to verify this. U To Kaing thus may have buffered against political fragmentation – as did U Sein Ko – thanks to his authority and his influence as a man of *hpon*. He may also have taken advantage of the situation. Some people from Myinmilaung started giving their land tax – the system was revived once U Nu's government reclaimed sovereignty over this area in 1957–1958 – directly to the township administration to bypass and confront him.

Overall, the distribution of ownership was not completely transformed during the 1940s and the 1950s. There were cases of aggrandisement by some farmers over others and of some tenants over landlord and money lenders like U Po Shi, whose power was diminishing. Some 'tillers' benefited indirectly from the state and/or armed group projects as they could access land by becoming or remaining sharecroppers for the main peasant families. Most importantly, this period witnessed a rearticulation of local hierarchies because the obligations and affiliations towards previous authorities were gradually challenged since the colonial encounter. Ultimately, the local hierarchy came to divide (real) farmers, the *taungthu* and the labourers, or *myaukthu*.

* * *

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This chapter has explored the history of the local polity from the 1890s to the early 1950s by focusing successively on the crafting of the Myinmilaung tract with its first headmen, on the embodiment of moral change and authority by the last men of *hpon*, and on the gradual transformation of the local political order. Since the emergence of the village tract, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung have been fighting over its control. Not much is remembered about the first headmen, U Nyunt and his son U Shwe. Villagers draw a rather sleazy picture of them, even in Myinmilaung where they came from, notably because they were (allegedly) responsible for the split of the settlement. U Nyunt became a leader during a moment of colonial violence when control by the bureaucracy over the countryside was far from complete. The Lower Chindwin District witnessed an increasing population who competed more and more for land. People who fled the fighting gradually came back. When harvests were bad, seasonal migration – to the rice fields of Lower Burma and Shwebo, or as daily workers in Mandalay – filled the income gap and only decreased in the 1920s. U Nyunt and his son ruled during these decades, a time when the institution of headship crystallized the protests against colonialism in an atmosphere of moral breakdown. The moral universe was shifting as laypeople came to think about their role as protectors of Buddhism now that the king was gone. The moralization of behaviours in daily lives intersected with the contestation of colonial authority.

The next headman, U To Kaing, was described as a strong and a respectable man who embodied a new authority and appeased the dissent between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung. For people in Gawgyi, he was, together with their first monk U Za Nay Ya, the archetypical and last man of power, or *hpon*. In short, both embodied a moral renewal coupled with an engagement in local affairs and, thus, are examples to draw upon for present-day villagers. U To Kaing remained headman during the economic crisis of 1930, the local unfolding of independence politics in the 1930s, the Japanese invasion and rule (1942–1945), followed by a political maelstrom (from 1946 to 1948) and the ensuing insurgencies and civil war – when the U Nu government attempted to secure rural support through a land reform – until the military 'caretaker government' restored order (1958–1960) and eventually seized power by force (1962). To some extent, the worth of U To Kaing stems retrospectively from how he embodied a new kind of authority based on his achievements and social belonging. Yet his authority is expressed today using the vocabulary of charismatic leadership: a man of *hpon*, thought to be one of the last. U To Kaing, as a descendant of a large farming family, also represents a longer-term change that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century. From a landscape of people organized in status groups affiliated with a variety of patrons (chiefs, hereditary office holders, money lenders and so on), the main farming families gradually came to the top of the local hierarchy as they were able to challenge and control access to wealth by monopolizing leadership.

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I have also shown how Gawgyi, Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon villages were gathered under the same village tract and a single headman during the British 'pacification' of the countryside and the following settlement operations. The colonial encounter offered opportunities for some people to challenge shifting affiliations and establish their own power. As described by Berry in Africa, 'British efforts to build a stable system of native administration on customary foundations had the effect of maintaining fluid, flexible social boundaries and structures of authority' (1993: 37). The early colonization of our research area is just another historical episode in a region characterized by fluidity, fragmentation and competition. It also forged a political stage centreed on villages and facilitated challenges to customary obligations governing land and wealth access. Beyond mere institutional roles, headship became personalized as successive leaders assumed varying positions reflecting local interests. Some emerged as moral exemplars and actively engaged in local matters, reinterpreting their role within the context of Buddhism and contesting colonial governance. The convergence of new circumstances and the rise of new leaders prompts a reevaluation of power and authority in terms of worth, transcending the traditional focus on charismatic leadership. Ultimately, the chapter has advocated viewing the entire period as one in which assertions of authority were shaped by membership in agricultural families. It illustrated how local hierarchies underwent a metamorphosis, with 'true farmers' utilizing colonial devices, state structures, and armed initiatives to challenge existing affiliations and get a hold over the leadership of Myinmilaung tract.

The next chapter explores the rise of village affairs as a form of Gawgyi politics against a background of state disengagement and violence.

Notes

1. For Aung-Thwin, the colonial order lacks meaning for the Burmese subject, and Ne Win restored order after decades of conflict. For Furnivall, the Burmese society became a 'plural society', the product of colonial rule and the introduction of market force without regulation which atomize individuals within a society composed of racial groups that are divided into separate sections, where each racial group is an aggregate of individuals rather than an organic whole. See also Guan (2009).
2. Known as the Land Records Department in the archives related to the Lower Chindwin District, this institution was first created in 1879 (Revenue and Survey Department) to streamline the implementation of an agricultural and property registry. It was reorganized in 1883 and became the Land Revenue and Agricultural Department (LARD). In 1905, it became the Settlement and Land Records and Agricultural Department (SLRAD), then in 1906 the Settlement and Land Records Department (SLRD), making room for an independent Ministry of Agriculture. In 2017, it became the Department of Agricultural Statistics and Land Management (DALMS).
3. Cf. British Library archive file V/10203. *The Burma Land Records Manual*. 1928. Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing. These surveys have

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been carried out in continuation with the Great Trigonometrical Survey started in India. Cf. Furnivall (1957: 206) for the Burmese case and Sarkar (2012) for a more global overview.

4. Kyawkka West included at first five villages (Tanaungwin, Pamèdaw, Ywathit, Mogaung, Sindè) and its population represented about 188 households. Kyawkka East covered the rest of the territory and was divided between two villages, Kyawkka North and South.
5. This interview was conducted with U Maung during my first period of fieldwork, on 6 February 2013 after a *shinbyu*.
6. Taylor translates this as 'organisation supporting own race' (Taylor 2009: 193–94) in a nationalist or patriotic sense. The *wunthanu athin* were promoted and supported by the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) in 1921–1922, the general council of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) that came to the forefront of the contest against colonialism on nationalist terms after the Yangon university strike of 1920.
7. Called '*Let yon that*' (Cady [1958] 1960: 459).
8. The Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, notably under the leadership of Aung San, hero of the independence.
9. One of the White Flag leaders, U Hla Maw, controlled the 'Monywa-Shwebo-Mandalay districts' during this period (cf. Smith 1991: 126).
10. In Yeigyi village, Spiro explains that the insurgents chose another man to be their representative and collector of the fee. During the day, the central government ruled, and at night it was the insurgents. This story is one of the explanations given to Spiro to explain factionalism in this village (Spiro 1997).
11. Cf. Hardiman (1910, statement IV 'Regular Settlement statistics' in Appendix).
12. If the demarcations were accepted by the persons involved, the official would delimit the plots on the *kwin* map. Otherwise, he would refer the dispute to a senior official. At the end of this process, the parcels (called *upaing*) were assigned a serial number referencing the name of the person who now owns it, and who then became liable for the land tax. The rate was determined following land types dividing drylands (*ya* - recorded Y) and rice lands (*leh* - recorded R). The land type of every plot was then indexed as per soil quality (Y1, Y2… R1, R2, R3). Impermanent holdings include spaces for which it was difficult to assign affiliation. This includes land subject to annual reallocation, and parcels for which boundaries are indefinite because of their use for shifting cultivation or as an agricultural experimentation area.
13. This figure concerned the soil tract V and stems from my calculation (cf. Hardiman 1910: 17).
14. For instance, the repartition of the shares between owners and tenants (in fractions such as one-half, two-fifths, one-third) depended on the quality of the soil, the level of competition for land, access to irrigation, distance from towns, the relation and power balance between the contractors and eventually on the actual amount of crop harvested. Mortgage value was usually two-thirds of the land value and the person taking the land generally farmed it (sometimes the mortgagee even added more money during the length of the agreement).
15. In the soil tract V, 57% of households were classified as *taungthu*, while 26% were considered *myaukthu* (among them, 20.3% were classified as 'coolies').
16. Monywa headman is an exception, with an estate of 3.826 acres in 1909, the only estate of such size in the district (cf. Hardiman 1910: 27).
17. Even if the colonial government created a system of credit, there were also the money lenders U Kha Kha from Kyawkka, U Ho, Daw Mya Mya and Daw Chaw from Monywa.

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18. Because estates of less than fifty acres per *kwin* were not recorded and because land obtained by usufructuary mortgage appeared under the name of the original owner, there was no way to see U Po Shi as a landlord in the figures collected for revenue purposes (cf. Hardiman 1909: 27).
19. Interestingly, U Po Shi allegedly employed about twenty 'land stewards' known as his *luyon* ('trusted man') and the tenants as *myayloktha* (literally, 'son of the work on the land'). Interview with Zalok *yatmiyathpa* on 21 June 2019.
20. David Graeber offered an interesting insight on such cases. He wrote that in medieval Hindu law codes it was often emphasized that a debtor who did not pay would be reborn as a slave in the household of his creditor, or in later codes, reborn as his horse or ox. These warnings of karmic revenge against borrowers reappear in many strands of Buddhism, but when the usurers were thought to go too far the logic was reversed, and karmic justice was reduced to the language of a business deal (2011: 11–12). Graeber took as an example the fate of Hiromushime, a greedy money lender charging enormous interest around 776 C.E. in medieval Japan. On the seventh day after her death, her body sprang to life as a half-human, half-ox. For the author of this story, a monk, it represented a clear case of premature reincarnation as the woman was being punished by the law of karma for her violations of what is both reasonable and right.
21. The system of small-scale tenancies (as described in Hardiman 1910) remained in place through the second half of the twentieth century (Steinberg 1981a: 121–27). The land that did go 'to the tiller' related to localized and sporadic cases, depending on the waxing and waning of the authorities at play in the villages.
22. The organization created by U Nu's government to handle the redistribution of land, called the Burman Farmers' and Labourers' Council (voiced PaTaLaSa), was quickly accused of clientelism and corruption, redistributing as it pleased fertile land suitable for paddy, and so was renamed by villagers as the Burman Dishonest Villagers' Council (also voiced PaTaLaSa).
23. Known as the Farmers' and Labourers' Council during the AFPFL and later transformed into the Village People's Council after Ne Win's coup, with other subgroups (Socialist Youth Council and so on) also created in villages.
24. Between U Nu's Union party known as the Clean AFPFL, Ba Swe's Stable AFPFL, and the National United Front.

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3

The Rise of Village Affairs

One of the advantages of doing fieldwork with a village headman was that I was able to meet the people who had previously held this position. Once Ko Kyaw stopped being headman in March 2016, this became almost inconceivable. On 5 December 2015, I convinced him that I needed to meet U Win, who was in charge of Myinmilaung tract from 1995 to 2006. We went to his place. U Win was infamous for a number of reasons. To some degree, he embodies the worsening of the ways in which the government interacted with villagers during post-socialist military rule. Under his tenure, the state disengaged from the organization of village life after the collapse of the socialist system in the late 1980s and resorted more to violence to tighten its hold on the population. Another set of reasons is related to local disputes, notably over land, in which U Win's corruption often comes to the forefront. To some extent, he is the U Po Kin, the corrupt magistrate, of Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934). But I was not yet fully aware of how all these aspects related to one another. Sitting with them both on that day at U Win's house, I was the unwitting instigator of a strange situation.

Most of the questions I asked were answered by banalities covering up U Win's misdeeds. Ko Kyaw knew they were lies, but he never pointed them out directly. He felt awkward and gave ready-made statements when the discussion turned awry. In the following weeks, Ko Kyaw gradually provided me with other versions of the facts. The situation in and of itself is worth describing first. As I was interested in how he became headman, U Win told me that his election was democratic: the ten household leaders sought villagers' opinions, put the name of the candidate they chose in a box and the previous headman and his assistant counted the votes. Ko Kyaw nodded. But this was a copy paste of the conduct of the 2011 selection, except for the vote count. I had doubts that elections were

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 126.

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performed like that twenty years ago under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Ultimately, the reasons for U Win's emergence as village headman remain uncertain. Our meeting turned into a political cant and it did not stop there. When I asked U Win if there was any public land in Myinmilaung, referring either to the cooperative shop built in Myinmilaung in the early 1970s, the football ground or some threshing floors, he was taken aback. Ko Kyaw, hiding underneath his longyi (*puso*) as if he was taking a nap, immediately answered: 'There is no such thing in Myinmilaung'. U Win nodded. A few weeks later, I learned that he had actually built his house where the cooperative shop used to stand. Beyond the fact that U Win was corrupt, using his position as headman to acquire wealth in ways contradicting local ethics, this situation offers another insight. Ko Kyaw, even as headman, was not in a position of force. He feigned ignorance and covered up facts in front of U Win to keep face. In other words, he was going along with the situation and the stakes of the moment, notably because he was required to solve a land dispute involving U Win at the same time.

Things were quite different when I attempted to meet U Htay, U Win's successor in 2013. U Htay is from Gawgyi and he held Myinmilaung office from 2006 to 2011. In the first few weeks, I had difficulty arranging a meeting with him. He kept avoiding me. Some days, it became a game of hide-and-seek. In November that year, we finally had a formal discussion during which he remained laconic. Our relationship changed completely when I came back in 2015 for a much longer period. I gradually realized that he kept his distance not only from me, but also from many others, mostly officials. He tried, and still tries, to stay away from the government while being at the centre of Gawgyi politics. This apparent paradox enabled me to understand that his tenure marked a shift in local politics. That shift was a transition from U Win to U Htay, from distrust and corruption to trustworthiness and propriety. From the Infamous to the Worthy. U Htay was a counterpoint to U Win. This was one of the main narratives about the transformation of the local polity after the socialist period. Of course, it was not as if everything changed with the replacement of one man by another; factionalism and corruption were still present under U Htay (and after), and some people challenged U Win during his mandate. But it is part of a larger movement in Gawgyi. U Htay's commitment to local matters reflects how village affairs were monopolized by the villagers who articulated new stakes within a more traditional form of collective sociality called *luhmuyay* or 'social affairs' (from which Myinmilaung Proper was excluded). In other words, engagement in village affairs became the (fragile) form of local politics in Gawgyi at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

This chapter explores the transformations of the local polity from the early years of the socialist period (1962 onwards) to the democratic opening of the early 2010s to locate how village affairs became the principal form of

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Gawgyi politics. The literature used for this chapter mostly draws from studies about the socialist period, economy and development at large, agriculture, the experience and meaning of the 1988 revolts, the functioning of military rule and its daily experience, and about the transformation of the state and its political economy. One of the contributions of this chapter is to document the functioning of socialism at the village level, a scale often left out due to the impossibility of fieldwork, leading to a focus[1] on textual analysis of political philosophies and on the macroeconomy. The chapter goes deeper into the texture of daily lives to describe forms of engagement in a much more embodied way.

The first section introduces the reader to the general historical backdrop of the period covering the socialist (1962–1988) and the militarist (1989–2011) eras. It presents the implementation and failure of the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' under the dictatorship of Ne Win which eventually led to the mass revolt of 1988 followed by the reassertion of military power under the SLORC/SPDC[2] government until the partial democratic opening under the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government of Thein Sein in 2011. It describes how the socialization of society reinforced control over peasants and ended in an age of distrust. The failure of the agricultural policies and of the authoritarianism of the regime resulted more generally in the worsening of living conditions that ultimately led to the 1988 uprising. The rupture, however, had a different temporality in Myinmilaung tract and a more moral dimension when corruption, collusion, forced labour and violence became the tools with which the military and a series of officials administered the countryside.

The next two sections shift the focus from a state-centred narrative to an emphasis on how this period was experienced by villagers and on the transformations of local politics. It first argues that Myinmilaung tract became a polity closed in upon itself during the socialist period (1962–1988). Class divisions between farmers and dependants were reinforced in villages as the main families were able to control the local institutions empowered by the socialist state. The final section explores the SLORC/SPDC period as lived by the villagers. It is divided into two parts, focusing on two headmen – the Infamous and the Worthy – in order to reflect the temporality of the moral rupture that accompanied the rise of village affairs as the main form of politics in Gawgyi. This chapter is informed by a series of interviews and informal discussions in Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper as well as in other villages.[3] The latter were visited either under the auspices of the INGO I worked for or as a guest accompanying people from Gawgyi during daily trips and while attending ceremonies. This approach allows me to compare the past experiences of a variety of villages and to fill in the gaps in the chronology of significant events for Myinmilaung tract.

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Historical Backdrop

> In the two years between the coup and March 1964, by which time the bulk of the economy had been nationalised, the Revolutionary Council declared all political opposition illegal, took over the direct management of most educational and cultural organizations, and established the nucleus of a political party with ancillary mass organizations and its own ideology, through which it was intended to mobilise support for the state. (Taylor 2009: 295)

Yet, the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' – the official ideology of the Revolutionary Council and the Burma Socialist Programme Party after the military coup – took some time to find its way into villages. On paper, all forms of agricultural and industrial production, distribution, transportation and external trade were declared to be owned by the state or by cooperatives. The reorganization of the economy and society followed the line of the previous government, but rapidly turned into a more radical – yet 'piecemeal' (ibid.: 300) – process of nationalization.[4] Under Ne Win, the centralized system of crop procurement and goods distribution became more interventionist and expanded to virtually all products, while the government promised an agrarian revolution 'that would bring the tenancy system to an immediate end' (Charney 2009: 123). In the first decade of the socialist period, many attempts were made to transform the local polity by appointing new authorities linked to a centralized administration. However, the government gradually fell short of its ambitions and the authoritarian functioning at the top of the administration, in which loyalty, obedience and mistrust were key, pervaded all levels of the bureaucracy. One-upmanship was about meeting the expectations of senior officials who 'came to practise the three mas – ma-loke (not doing any work), ma-shote (not getting involved in any complication) and ma-pyoke (not getting dismissed)' (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2003: 35). This kind of attitude shows that withdrawal from public affairs became to some extent ingrained within the state, with repercussions for how officials engaged in rural affairs.

On the whole, the implementation of socialist policies during the 1960s–1970s empowered new institutions in villages but the authoritarian functioning of the bureaucracy and the failure of the economic reforms worsened living conditions for villagers by the mid-1980s. Making a living became more about making trade-offs with village authorities to get around the law. Despite this, officially, the state sought to secure people's support by creating supra-local networks and a centralized administration. The institutionalization of socialism through local men made the Myinmilaung tract a more insular polity because villagers depended more on arrangements with these individuals in order to make a living.

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Organizing the agriculture and the economy along socialist lines was gradual. Officially, farmers now worked on the land as tenants for the state and sold a quota of their crops to the government at a fixed price. Since the 1963 Tenancy Act, farmers had become state tenants liable for their production with a formal interdiction to transfer – sell, mortgage and, since 1965, rent – their land, except through inheritance, in order to eliminate landlordism, the ghost enemy of socialism. Thereafter, in the districts 'classified as "planned" areas, distant administrators with little agricultural expertise or experience directed cultivators as to which crop to grow, how, and when' (Brown 2013: 141). The pressure was acute for rice cultivators, but dryland farmers were also targeted. Villagers would also have to buy rations of commodities (rice, oil, clothes, soap, etc.) from the township cooperative via a local proxy.

Overall, the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' did not bring about an agrarian revolution (Fenichel and Khan 1981). In 1971, between one-third and one-half of the land in the Chindwin region still operated via small-scale tenancies (Steinberg 1981a: 121–27). Estates fragmented through generations – mostly due to the nature of inheritance patterns – apart from a few families who managed to expand their holdings by controlling the village tract Land Committee. The possibility and profitability of accessing land decreased and the lives of villagers – and daily labourers in particular – worsened significantly during the second half of the 1980s. There were fewer avenues for migration, less food, less cash and less work. Three-quarters of the country's currency became valueless when 'the government announced the most stringent demonetization (not a devaluation of the currency but the declaration that certain bank notes were no longer legal tender and could not be redeemed) in modern history' (Steinberg 2010: 76). The effect was disastrous. Peasants refused to sell their harvests because they were their main asset, and the whole chain of exchange between locals was impacted (in markets and in daily transactions for labour, credit and so on). Farmers were increasingly afraid of crop and cattle thefts, and village stockades and night watches resumed after a short interlude of relative peace. Many, if not most, resorted to eating sorghum mixed with rice as staple foods. The poorest – the daily labourers – picked tree leaves to make and sell soups while breeding goats and eating 'one meal a day' to make ends meet, while farmers and tenants prioritized their nuclear family at the expense of clients and dependants. There was a growing and unbearable contradiction between the state's demands and the actual lives of the people. Food prices were no longer subsidized and thus rose steeply. Headmen were again required to control and record individuals' movements.

The failure of socialism 'was seen each day in Burma in the shortages, queues, rationing, the poverty of choice, quality, and provisions – the endless struggle for basic survival for the many, but privileged access for the few – and announced

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to the world when, in December 1987, the United Nations classified Burma as a "least developed country"' (Brown 2013: 160). Things turned awry in the capital, Rangoon, and many student-led demonstrations were ruthlessly quashed by the army in March, June and July 1988. A change was called by Ne Win himself, the dictator who isolated Burma internationally, when, purposefully or not, he acknowledged in his address to the party's emergency congress on 23 July 1988 that 'the bloody events of March and June show a lack of trust in the government and the party', before announcing his resignation. Ne Win nonetheless remained in command and the revolts against the government increased in August 1988 and took the form of mass movements in Rangoon and beyond, involving monks, workers, civil servants and students calling for a more democratic government and the halt of exactions, corruption and killings. This series of events, known as the 'Democracy Summer', constituted the largest popular uprising in Burma/Myanmar's modern history until the post-coup revolution of February 2021. The revolt crystallized in the Four Eights Movement, in reference to the general strike that began on 8 August 1988, seeking to force the resignation of Sein Lwin, the puppet chairman of the Burma Socialist Programme Party and president of Burma. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary townspeople participated in the movement across the country's main cities. Sein Lwin, called the 'Butcher of Rangoon', stepped down on 12 August, but only after hundreds of demonstrators had been killed or wounded by the army.

From July to early September in Monywa, several hundred students gathered at the Shwezigon pagoda located in the city centre. Pick-ups toured the countryside to gather potential supporters. Soon, the movement split into two groups.[5] While many democratic figures emerged (such as Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, the father of Burmese independence), or re-emerged (such as U Nu), on the national political scene in August and early September, protests continued under the watch of local committees which largely controlled Monywa 'with more the character of gangs than activist cells. … When security forces and government officials abandoned their positions, activist committees that replaced them soon encountered problems of maintaining order, policing food supplies, preventing smuggling and resolving local disputes' (Boudreau 2004: 208).

In Monywa, what is most often remembered and spoken of in low voices in teashops is the moment when a number of 'spies' were beheaded. They were four in total, accused of working either for the government or for one of the two groups in revolt. Their heads were put on spikes and transported all around the city in a macabre procession. This event marked one of the apexes of the 1988 revolt in Monywa. The second was the violence of the soldiers when General Maung Saw and the military retook power in the country, established a new government, the SLORC, and imposed martial law on 18 August. The army battalion that 'restored order' in Sagaing, which was also the theatre of exactions such as

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the 'Sagaing Massacre',[6] came by train to assist the garrison posted in Alon. A looming threat of bloodshed and imminent death blew over Monywa. Most people returned to their villages. Within a few nights, the rebellion ended abruptly, and the universities were closed for four consecutive years.

There are various discourses about these events in the villages of Monywa Township. For instance, those who were employed as civil servants under the socialist government condemn the uprising because it was led by ignorant people. The beheadings exemplify their foolishness and the so-called democratic movement used them to swell the ranks of the opposition. These 'ignorant' people did not understand that taking care of people's affairs required an overarching organization (the army) in place beyond political factions as embodied by parliamentarianism. After all, socialism was not that bad in theory. For most people, however, the violence and repression of the new military regime was merely a continuation of past policies and went hand in hand with the worsening living conditions. Over the next few years, new headmen were appointed (mostly people not involved in the revolt) and most socialist organization of agriculture was officially abandoned. Yet the 1988 interlude did not bring about massive change in how agriculture was controlled. It rather led to a status quo in living standards with yet more cases of resource dispossession and extractive practices by a series of officials in continuity with the past decade.

The general narrative about the state in the second half of the twentieth century tells a story in which once the socialist government had begun to lose its tight grip over the countryside due to its economic failure, the subsequent military regime (SLORC/SPDC) imposed hard-line governance mixing partial market liberalization and a command economy. In her study on rural perceptions of state officials and policies in rice-growing areas, Ardeth Thawnghmung (2004) argued that the changing presence of the state is visible in the shifts in agricultural policies. If peasants were a group the state wanted to rally to its cause in the mid-1960s, they became a mere source for wealth extraction about ten years later. As Steinberg put it, 'agriculture had effectively been de-emphasized' under Ne Win (1981b: 32). Thawnghmung gives the same diagnosis.[7] While the financial and material ability to operate the Burmese Way to Socialism declined and the black market pervaded the countryside, new directions were taken, first through the introduction of 'high yield varieties' (1975–1985), then via a very 'partial liberalization' from 1987 onwards, and finally with forced cropping policies and agri-business experiments in the 1990s. In short, the agricultural policies moved from a command economy virtually merging peasants' production and state capital to intensive farming based on inflows of inputs. When liberalization was finally abandoned under the SLORC, a strategy of extensive farming was adopted.

Corruption and rent seeking continued to pervade the military regime under the SLORC/SPDC. Thawnghmung described a rural society in which most

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extension agents[8] were corrupt, selling the pesticides, fertilizers and products they were meant to distribute, taking bribes to admit peasants to advantageous programmes and exclude them from damaging ones, seizing land outright, making tours of inspection into bribe-collecting circuits in which their subordinates and the local population had to shower them with gifts and cash. To some extent in the drylands, the command economy lost its grip on villagers but some structure for wealth extraction remained, notably the system of forced procurement and tax on exportation of beans and pulses,[9] with variations from one place to another. Overall, the distance between the government and the peasants widened in the mid-1980s and that gap took on a more moral drive later on.

In Monywa region, the period ranging from the early 1980s to the late 2010s is an age of distrust, violence and silence in which the state's emphasis moved away from the control of land to the control of people and sought to restore its legitimacy through a process that Houtman (1999) has coined 'Myanmafication'. Myanmafication amounted to positioning the state as a defender of Buddhism, reinventing national unity within a horizon of 'disciplined democracy', patronizing the *sangha*, building pagodas and creating an auspicious country while revisiting Myanmar's archaeology to rewrite human origins. Under the SLORC/SPDC, forced labour became a main tool though which to control the people, mostly those secluded in villages. Cattle rustling almost disappeared and village fences stopped being maintained in most places. Beyond cases of bribery and corruption, the construction of dams for irrigation projects to support double cropping (notably the summer paddy programmes) was carried out with forced labour which fed a series of grievances towards the military. Villagers simply became used to keeping their mouths shut, and in that sense the 1988 events did not bring about a decisive rupture – even if the uprising was of national importance and became a turning point in the grand narrative of the country's politics. The events of 1988 and their aftermath had an impact on morality because they fed the growing feeling of distrust towards the government. Even if the military regime developed a massive new organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), membership of which enabled access to services and positions, people were not fooled; many, if not most, remained silent and avoided direct confrontation.

Villagers were even called on, and paid, to mobilize in support of the USDA's operations. One of these operations, known as the 'Depayin Massacre' or 'Black Friday', has had a lasting impact in their memories and was allegedly organized by the USDA. When returning from a visit to Kachin State on 30 May 2003, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (DASSK) and members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) were attacked by a large gang of men armed with bamboo staves and other crude weapons in Depayin (or Tabayin), a one-hour drive from Monywa to the northeast. 'The assailants were believed to be members of the

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progovernment Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), and the violence left as many as 70 or 80 persons dead (the official figure was four)' (Seekins 2006: 111). Hundreds were arrested and injured. What villagers recall is the dexterity of DASSK's driver, who managed to get her out of the situation. I also met a man in Monywa in March 2016 who acknowledged that he had been called one or two days later for some paid work. That job was to burn the dead bodies. These kinds of events and memories, coupled with the encounters with violent soldiers and forced labour, created a context of fear. Prices were kept low to avoid unrest. To some degree, politics was banned from the public space, but it unfolded in other forms.

As we will see in the following subsections, the various policies targeting the countryside empowered village headmen and the farming families who were able to monopolize state institutions at the local level. Thus, even if conditions worsened for the general population, notably the small farmers and the landless, there was room for manoeuvre. Situations varied from one village to another, and headmen were key players in dealing with the competing and overlapping claims made by local branches of state departments and agencies. Under the military regime, there was a lot of confusion and diversity in the way leaders were chosen. As Thawnghmung put it, they were either hand-picked or elected locally depending on power balances between villages, the will of township chairmen and the connections between candidates and officials (2004: 95). Her studies and my own fieldwork show that villagers would prefer to have someone responsive to their needs who is able to buffer the changing demands of officials with whom they may develop patron–client relationships. She describes a series of men holding this office under the SPDC government in several rice-growing areas in order to demonstrate a gradient of perceptions of legitimacy to challenge the image of the military regime as a monolithic entity. As Scott (2007) argued, however, it is not because some headmen were better than others that they were perceived as legitimate. Headmen were needed because they made it possible, since colonial times, to control and administer villages as responsible yet disposable native officials. One of Thawnghmung's insights – and a critique of the 'moral school of thought' (2004: 168) – is that each locality has its own history. How people evaluate their headman, their 'degree of leniency' towards them, depends 'on their past and present relationships with state authorities' (ibid.: 168).

In that vein, and to open up a more detailed analysis of Myinmilaung tract, it is interesting to look at one case in particular, and not to confine the question of legitimacy to officials, because they are only one kind of leader. If we look at headmen beyond the institution, and take this as an entry point, we see how particular headmen can exemplify a variety of moral stances. For instance, those described as 'kings in their domain' are quite often accused of corruption and collusion. They embody the bad treatment inflicted on the population from the

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1970s to the 2010s. Others may have embodied a shift in how local affairs are organized. It depends on the circumstances. The following case shows how the exactions, the killings, the 'stealing' of harvests through imposed quotas, the jailing of those unable to provide it, the forced labour and the growing corruption of officials during the 1990s fed a movement of self-organization of local affairs at a distance from a disengaging state. In other words, when the military abandoned the idea of organizing village life, local officials used their position as gatekeepers (of loans, land records, agricultural input and so on) to extract wealth. In Gawgyi, as in many other areas, villagers' ideology of autonomy came to the forefront: they simply 'do it by themselves' and avoid dealing with state agents. They call this *kotukotha*.

Violence and the Tightening of the Local Polity

When looking back, farmers see themselves as 'the machete's ferrule' (*dhamanawpeiqkue*), a round piece of metal that one smacks on a hard surface to tighten the blade.[10] This means that each time the government had a plan, villagers would bear the consequences. Even if they created close relations between the government and the peasants, the socialist policies of the military regime ultimately leaned towards greater extraction of wealth from the countryside and a tighter control over the rural population. The policy of crop procurement is a case in point, and more complex and intimate processes of exclusion were also at play.

Once the socialist government had stabilized its hold over Monywa, in 1964–1965, the Township Security and Administration Council (TSAC),[11] composed of military officers, started appointing and creating new institutions in the countryside. In the Myinmilaung tract, after the news was spread by village criers, a captain from the TSAC came to ask who wanted to be appointed as the headman, as members of the Village Tract Security and Administration Council (VSAC), as well as the head of the tract cooperative. U To Kaing declined the offer. U San, from Gawgyi, became headman and U Than, from Myinmilaung Proper, became head of the tract cooperative and 'member two' of the VSAC. All of this happened in a single meeting, but this partition of powers would have consequences in the further development of the local polity. When I asked how things worked, most Gawgyi elders gave me a general statement about how the selections operated under the military. Those appointed either had connections with the government, were able to act as community leaders or were those who knew how to 'show their face'.[12] In other words, it was a matter of pre-existing connections, ability to get information, and, in our case, the balance of power between Myinmilaung Proper and Gawgyi.

This balance of power, embodied by the appointment to village headman, remained in favour of Gawgyi until 1995. The main families of Gawgyi and

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Myinmilaung Proper staffed a variety of local committees – mostly the Peasants' and Workers' Councils and the Socialist Youth – created to organize the society along socialist lines and membership of which brought auxiliary benefits such as access to officials and rewards. Once the village tract's SACs were transformed into the Village People's Council in 1974, elections were held to select its members and thus the headman. U San and Gawgyi big men managed to secure the People's Council and chose people from among their members to staff their Executive Committees, to which most of the work fell, and the People's Courts, as well as their Inspection and Affairs Committees. The positions of power were monopolized by a few farming families and, for the villagers, most members of these committees were just names on paper, while the headman retained most of the prerogative in practice. In other words, the institutions created to support the state became a means to control village tract politics to a certain extent. This is notably true for the tract Land Committee, which was empowered to organize the agrarian revolution on the ground.

In Myinmilaung tract, the socialization of agriculture and the economy developed gradually. Officials from Monywa Trading Corporation compiled information about the tract from the land records (land types, areas, cadastre registered by the SLRD), the cultivation data (township branch of the Ministry of Agricultural Service (MAS)) and the list of farmers and family members via Myinmilaung SAC in order to determine the quantity of harvest to be expected (per basket) from each farmer and the delivery of consumables per family. U San was then in charge of updating the farmers' booklet every year, recording the plots they worked, their quality and the crops planted. U Than had to follow a similar procedure for each family who also received monthly vouchers to collect commodities, rice, soap, clothes and other items from his house. On the one hand, the headman's house in Gawgyi became the place where farmers came to update land records and to store their harvest quotas. On the other hand, people had to get their supplies from the house of the cooperative head in Myinmilaung. This meant a virtual monopoly by two men in the circulation of products coming into and out of the tract.

At the beginning, it was as if the officials coming to the tract (from the SLRD or the Trading Corporation) 'knew our land better than us', according to many elderly people I met throughout my fieldwork in the region. They had more *ana* (capacity of coercion) than the headman. Villagers could not under-report their holdings or harvests and thus had to sell most of their crops to the Trading Corporation or, at an even lower price, to military garrisons. The socialization process impacted household economics in two ways. First, the 1964 demonetization of the K100 and K50 banknotes – officially to fight domestic and foreign capitalists – affected their savings to some extent, even if gold, clothes, land, cattle and sometimes rubies formed the bulk of farmers' capital. Second, the state's

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ability to organize the centralization of procurement and deliveries failed to make ends meet as fewer products and foodstuffs could be found in daily markets and the cooperatives' stores in the early 1970s, while the nationalized industries, mills and transportation were poorly operated by the Trading Corporation. In addition, procurement prices were kept very low, with a slight rise in the early 1970s, until the official abolition of the system in 1997. From this standpoint derive many stories of grievances, misrule and growth of the black market.

In the Myinmilaung tract, there are two types of discourse about U San. In Myinmilaung Proper, U San is said to have under-reported the crops brought by the farmers in order to sell the surplus on the black market thanks to a bargain he made with a man from the Trading Corporation. In this view, the headman and government staff are depicted as those cheating the farmers; this kind of story pervaded the countryside. To counter it, farmers would bring their crops to his house at the last minute, bribe U San, or try to sell their crops directly to the Corporation (but bearing the cost of transportation to its store in Monywa if and when the army did not blockade the main road to avoid crops being sold illegally). In addition, headmen were pivotal to get around the law and register (forbidden) changes of ownership. They could even dispossess farmers through the Land Committee – the courts were barred from hearing most land conflict cases[13] – if their quota was not reached and, thanks to the Tenancy Act, tenants working on a plot of land for up to five years could now claim the right to cultivate it in their own name.[14] In other words, the recognition of ownership and tenancies – officially illegal – was in the hands of the Land Committee, thus of U San, and in turn also in the hands of a few of Gawgyi's main families who outnumbered those of Myinmilaung Proper. These powers concentrated in the headman's hands fuelled stories of dispossession/repossession and factionalism based on grievances stemming from the changes that happened during the 'land reform' less than a decade earlier. From around 1975 to the late 1980s, the only positive fact recalled by villagers was the good rains. Things got worse because the procurement system turned from a minutely calculated system into an apparatus of imposed quotas depending on regional targets notwithstanding local land types and irrigation capacities.

In Gawgyi, as opposed to Myinmilaung Proper, U San is inversely depicted as a patron buffering the state's demands. He was selected as headman at quite a young age, allegedly because he was educated and already involved in village affairs as leader of the bachelor group (*lubyogaung*). Farmers had to fulfil the quota based on the potential of each township and each village tract – by referring to out-of-date data and despite the failure of new crops that were forcefully introduced. U San also managed the credit system based on how many acres a farmer was cultivating. As the years passed, fewer officials justified the quotas based on the capacities of a given tract. The more credit was insufficient, the

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more debt rose and the black market expanded. The targets materialized in the number of acres to be cultivated for each crop and how many baskets of pulses, beans, cotton or rice would have to be sold at the government price. In practice, the story goes like this: a crier was sent to the village to announce the coming of the officials. The headman called all farmers for a meeting by beating his drum with a fast pace. If the meeting was for a routine inspection, some plots were ready for display. If it was for announcing the planned targets, U San asked the farmers to be silent while the officials were there. There was no way to negotiate with them directly, but there were possibilities to find trade-offs before and after the meeting: with the headman who allocated the quota to each farmer in the tract; with other farmers to exchange quotas depending on land types; and even with brokers to buy crops one could not produce to sell at a fixed price later on. U San also made a case for bad rains and arranged the figures with the SLRD or MAS officials when the quota was not met.

If Gawgyi was in a position of strength during the socialist period, Myinmilaung Proper was not to be outdone. Indeed, one of its villagers was head of the cooperative and his house occupied the cooperative until a dedicated building was built on 'vacant' land next to his house around 1971. If, in the 1970s and 1980s, the 'state distribution network failed to meet the needs of Burma's population' (Brown 2013: 146) – the classic imagery was that of bare shelves – it was a means for accumulating wealth and manoeuvring village factions, nonetheless. U Than had to go to Monywa's cooperative store to fetch both the products to be sold at cheap prices to villagers and the vouchers rationalizing the amount each family could get. Soon, he was accused of selling products 'on the road', that is, on the black market.[15] He also lent money to villagers by accepting their vouchers as mortgage security. Allegedly, no one could really complain, and everyone saw the livelihood of U Than rising while the store at his house gradually emptied of commodities. An attempt was made by U San to bring him down. When U Than called for the construction of a real store, U San tried to have a man from Gawgyi enrolled as a clerk (i.e. able to see the incomings and outgoings in money, vouchers and products). This failed, however, and the store remained in the hands of Myinmilaung Proper. During the readjustment of the socialist policy in 1972/73 – emphasizing prior failures and the problems of corruption – new rules were enacted, notably in the functioning of cooperatives. From then on, the cooperative head would have to be elected every two years by the members of a committee of fifteen people from all villages in the tract. This, apparently, was a means to put pressure on U Than, but the leadership of the cooperative seems to never have left Myinmilaung Proper.

The variety of men and institutions empowered to bring about socialism controlled how people could access products and credit, sell their crops and farm their land. The black market was a means of resistance as much as a burden,

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while it also helped officials to sustain state policy because 'the illegal economy reduced the prospect of social unrest and made it possible for the party-state at the local level to function' (Brown 2013: 166). Along with the failure of government policies in the 1980s, villagers were pressured more and more by officials to answer state demands. There were, of course, trade-offs and avenues through which to sell and buy things on the black market but for even more exorbitant prices as the shelves of the cooperatives emptied. The tension between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper intensified along with the empowerment of local men in new or redefined roles. U San, the headman, saw his capacity for coercion (*ana*) growing as he was able to monopolize most of the apparatus built to bring about socialism. As in the village of Lower Burma studied by Mya Than – after David Pfanner (1962) – the 'Village People's Council leaders … came from the same families as the former headmen and other village elders, and these tended to be individuals "who represent[ed] the "upper layer" of the village and who live[d] in the "best" houses." The same individuals also tended to dominate the leadership of other local branches of central organizations such as the BSPP, the Lansin Youth and the cooperative society [*sic*]' (Taylor 2009: 332, citing Mya Than 1978: 14). In Myinmilaung tract, factionalism between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi and patronage by Gawgyi leaders were the mechanisms through which socialism operated. The latitude to negotiate depended on connections, on bureaucratic functioning and, for the farmers, on the stance of the headman, the relationships developed with him, his ability to practise forum shopping between institutions and the power balance between villages in the tract. In a long-term perspective, the fact that the socialist policy and practice empowered farming families strengthened the local hierarchy between farmers (*taungthu*) and labourers (*myaukthu*) as well as the dependency of the latter on the former.

Finally, with the gradual collapse of Ne Win's regime, finding trade-offs with the Myinmilaung headman and cooperative was no longer seen as a strategy, but rather as an incentive to cheat and bribe. The malfunctioning of the government corrupted people, or at least this is how it was seen. If the bloodshed of 1988 was not a rupture in Gawgyi as it was in the capital city of Rangoon, it nonetheless contributed to increased distrust towards officials at many levels. Locally, the rupture came later, when an Infamous headman was succeeded by a Worthy one.

The Infamous and the Worthy

This section continues to explore changes in Myinmilaung tract's politics after the fall of the socialist government. It follows the succession of its headmen from 1989 to 2012 as a red thread and focuses on two persons in particular: U Win the Infamous and U Htay the Worthy. This denomination underscores the intersection between personalities and shifts in morality during these years. The passing

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of the torch from U Win to U Htay crystallized a rupture in local politics, as local affairs became a domain of engagement against a backdrop of governmental violence and disengagement. I hereby refer to the argument, developed by Caroline Humphrey (1997) and Joel Robbins (2015), that values are presented to and instilled in subjects through the influence of exemplary persons. For U Win: distrust; for U Htay: worthiness. There are numerous examples of how a person embodies the 'style' of an era in national history, and Burmese language clearly displays this connection. For instance, the socialist period is 'Ne Win's time' (*Ne Win kayt*) and the worsening of the military is known as 'Than Shwe's time' – Senior General Than Shwe being the head of the junta from 1992 to 2011. The institution and the person are one and the same because they embody the stakes of an era. In other words, the perception of U Win and U Htay's tenure as headmen reflects the state of local politics. The transition from one to the other represents a moral shift which unfolded during the rise of village affairs as a domain of politics in Gawgyi in the 2000s.

'Don't Deal with Them'

'Don't deal with them' is the clear-cut answer most people in the villages I visited gave me when asked about their past relations with the government. This means do not make deals with officials, do not give bribes, do not get involved. It was a piece of advice rendered in another expression – *kotukotha* – meaning 'rising by and defining oneself'. It is also a moral take on state practice from the late 1970s onwards. If you start dealing with them, that is, making arrangements (*nalehmu*),[16] they can get you. It is better to stay away from officials and soldiers. This statement reflects a certain mistrust. My point is not to say that the government remains 'the fifth evil' no matter the period,[17] but rather to show how distrust towards village headship has crystallized and become a backdrop that explains the emergence of a particular political configuration in Gawgyi.

In 1989, a new village headman, U Mya, from Gawgyi, was handpicked directly by the military when it reasserted its hold over the region of Monywa. U Mya was from one of the main farming families of Gawgyi and a member of the previous People's Council of Myinmilaung village tract. Apparently, he was not involved in the 1988 uprising against the government, and this made him a rather fitting candidate. Overall, people remember his tenure as a time when the headman had to maintain order by any means necessary. The military government was disengaging from the countryside and the organization of local affairs and economy. U Mya was left to rule almost alone, backed up, if needed, by the military apparatus. In short, he had *ana* and was accompanied by 'members one and two' (*ahpwe-win tiq hniq*) of the Village Tract Council, one from Myinmilaung Proper and the other from Gawgyi. The balance of power remained in favour of

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Gawgyi, but Myinmilaung was represented. This is all that local people were willing to say about U Mya.

The situation for villagers in the 1980s and early 1990s was ambivalent. Those with enough land and capital could accumulate wealth while the bulk of villagers were on the verge of starvation. For the non-farmers, the *myaukthu* (in this case also called the *lokdama*, *kulikunga*), it was a period of harsh shortages and daily quests for livelihood. Most resorted to a combination of activities to face the growing lack of work, cash and food. Some started picking tree leaves to make and sell soups in Monywa while others sold their remaining goats, which they usually kept in the open pasture after the harvests for breeding and feeding. Even small farmers started climbing palm trees to collect sap (to produce alcohol or sugar) and leaves (to remake roofs), a risky activity usually reserved for the poorest. Many newly-wed couples migrated from one village to another in search of contracts with land and tree owners. Young men went to work in the mining and rice-growing areas but often came back empty-handed. Meanwhile, in the village most families reverted to sorghum, sometimes mixed with maize, as a staple food instead of rice. The degradation of economic conditions made the complex hierarchy and relations of dependency between *taungthu* and *myaukthu* appear in their crudest form. A person could be protected by a farmer, but few were, unless they were close relatives. Farmers were selling less of their crops to the *myaukthu*, preferring to consume them directly or sell them in Monywa. It became nearly impossible to access credit. Mutual help and service-giving were reduced to a minimum, family solidarity concentrated more on the couple and less on extended relations, and donation ceremonies, based on a family's savings, became rare. In short, distrust was rampant. Most of the *myaukthu* were considered a threat, crop thieves who would then sell them at the market in Monywa. Village fences were a fragile bulwark against bandits and cattle rustling.[18]

Yet the late 1980s and early 1990s were also years in which some families accumulated (and spent) wealth. While visiting a number of villages in Monywa Township to attend ceremonies and football matches, I noticed that the biggest houses and many private wells were often built during this very period – based on the dates on them. This is obviously related to the way in which some families monopolized local institutions empowered to control resource access, as we have seen in the previous section and chapter. It is also conjectural, however. The government notably decontrolled the price of crops in 1987 and for a time lifted the ban on the private export of agricultural commodities in late 1988 (except for rice). The following years witnessed increasing exports of beans and pulses (Brillion 2015). A case in point is the pigeon pea, a crop that nobody eats but which was grown by most farmers (until recently) and exported to India. In other words, while the government partially withdrew from the agricultural chain, village elites were able to accumulate more wealth. It is in this context of

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disengagement by the state from local affairs and increasing inequalities between villagers that a new village headman emerged in 1995. This man was U Win, from Myinmilaung Proper, and he is the Infamous person who embodied village headship from 1995 to 2006.

How and why U Win became headman is uncertain. He himself says that it was a democratic election, that he was chosen by each leader of ten households under the watch of elderly people. But such elections only started in 2011–2012. Others say that he was nominated directly by the township GAD. Nobody was clear on the matter. What is troubling is that the used of forced labour (*lok-a-pay*) increased in scale after he took office, and people's movements into and out of the village tract were increasingly controlled. A general sentiment in Gawgyi is that this man embodied corruption. He is depicted as an archetype of the SLORC era (1989–1997): a greedy and immoral official who worked for a militarized government that relied on violence and pushed people to cheat. There is a series of grievances and stories against and about him.

Under U Win, the villagers of the Myinmilaung tract experienced a new kind of state violence, with forced labour becoming the main tool to build roads, canals and dams. Irrigation works were intended to support the new agricultural policies by drafting free labour without relying heavily on foreign exchange. First, they heard about the construction of a dam in Thazi, which started in 1994 (Map 0.2). The headman of Hnawpin, a small village close to Thazi, told me in February 2016 that stories of people being beaten, women abused and pagoda relics and treasures stolen by the soldiers spread through the whole township. In late 1995, once the Thazi dam was completed, the 20th Artillery Battalion under Captain So Win began supervision of the construction of another dam in Kyawkka. U Win most likely took charge of the Myinmilaung tract during that period. One person per family was requested to work for several days from dusk until dawn. If a family member could not come to work, he or she had to pay 100 Kyats per day to the army. Trade-offs could be found through the agency of U Win, who became a sort of labour broker. The poorest families either repaid part of their debt to richer families via forced labour or became indebted if they could not provide a valid worker in order to avoid being jailed. Being on U Win's good side made life easier for those who could afford it. To construct this dam, the villagers had to destroy a monastery and a pagoda. Some still fear karmic justice for such an unmeritorious act. The soldiers were immoral and drunk, they beat the workers, insulted their religion and disrespected people who could have been their parents or grandparents. These were not the same kind of soldiers the previous generations had dealt with under the socialist system.[19] A canal was built along the road between Kyawkka and Thazi, and so forced labour continued.[20] In addition, villagers' movements were increasingly monitored. For instance, they had to declare their comings and goings to the village headman, even to attend a

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donation ceremony. All strangers had to announce their entry into the village as well. U Win kept records of all of this, but apparently gave his notebooks to his successor, who told me, in mid-December 2013, that he never saw any of them. Thus, it appears that U Win's job was largely to control manpower and people's movements. This gave him a certain hold over villagers, most of whom learned to stay silent in front of guns but who took their revenge in football matches against soldiers.

There are other local stories and rumours that allow me to explore how people gauge the worth of this headman. One of his first achievements was to take over the old building of the socialist cooperative, sell what could be sold and install his own house on this former 'public land'.[21] Villagers also recall that they had to pay high fees to record changes in ownership. Land transfers (apart from inheritance) were illegal until 2012, and so the headman and the agent of the SLRD in charge of the tract required fees to update the records and get around the law. This is widely known as 'eating the sale' (*yaunsadeh*) and it is important because the next headman (U Htay, 2006–2011) is recognized for not doing it while Ko Kyaw (2013–2016) was more ambiguous. U Win's official stamp was a means to extract wealth when formalizing contracts, registering families, giving travel authorizations and negotiating agricultural loans. U Win's vanity is said to have extended beyond his official position into the religious sphere. I heard multiple times how he and U Myo, a fellow from Mogaung (included in Budaungkan tract but part of Myinmilaung Proper), used to 'eat the sale' of cakes and embezzled donations during the Myinmilaung pagoda festival with the help of the clerk.

Their mischief did not stop here, but partly structured local politics, related to how ethics permeates leadership, the use of wealth and land arrangements. Eventually, the threat of an overwhelming collusion between them led to a shift in headmanship in Myinmilaung tract. For instance, there is a case of a land dispute involving U Win and U Myo. The case surfaced after 2012 and Ko Kyaw, who was supposed to solve it in his capacity as headman, could not reach a solution. The story goes as follows. Around 2003, eleven farmers mortgaged their land to U Myo, one of the biggest money lenders in the area. The type of agreement was unusual and called *yahman-ngway*, meaning 'the guessed price [of the land]'. Usually, those agreements do not involve interest and last for one to three years. U Win formalized the contracts and stamped them. Three years later, U Myo became headman of Budaungkan tract. The dispute started a few months later. Most of the farmers asked for an extension of the agreement because they could not reimburse U Myo. The latter refused and was later accused of changing the agreements by asking for interest. The eleven farmers went on to seek resolution with U Win, who initially signed it. However, he then refused and advised meeting with township authorities to settle the case. The latter sent the case back

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to the village authorities. Over the following years, the situation remained at a standstill. At some point, U Myo and U Win were accused of having forged counterfeit contracts to turn the mortgages into land sales. U Myo tried, unsuccessfully, to register the plots under his name, arguing that he was the tiller and thus, following the socialist regulation,[22] he should have the right to cultivate the land. In other words, they used money lending, loopholes in the law and the monopolization of official institutions to extract wealth.

In the meantime, U Myo and U Win tried to get a hold over the cemetery located on either side of the path dividing Myinmilaung and Budaungkan tract at the centre of Myinmilaung Proper. On the Myinmilaung side, U Win's plan was cut short as U Htay, the main *lugyi* of Gawgyi, was selected as headman in 2006. On the Budaungkan side, U Myo managed to get the area registered under his name with the SLRD as soon as he became headman. He gave part of it to his son, who started building a house on it. Thus the scam came to light. Seeing this, villagers and the head of monks voiced their disagreement, but nothing changed. U Win eventually built a pagoda on a portion of the previous cemetery, but people were not fooled. Even if building a pagoda is the most meritorious donation, the merit of which could trickle down to the whole settlement, it was by no means an act that legitimated U Win's authority.[23] To some extent, the selection of U Htay was a reaction from both villages, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung, to the growing threat of collusion and unfairness if U Win and U Myo were to be headmen of the two neighbouring tracts. True or not, these stories are nonetheless the backdrop against which a new era of politics was taking shape in Gawgyi.

Overall, U Win was described as the Infamous. He embodied corruption, collusion and a certain impunity due to military support. That was his *ana*. Control was exercised less to extract wealth from harvests but rather focused on people's movement and manpower for state projects. To some degree, U Win reflected the clientelist game at play in political relations in Burma/Myanmar, based on personalities and networks, with village headmen being the brokers between villagers and government officials. He is but one example that partly, but not completely, contradicts the description of village headmen given by Thawnghmung in her study on state legitimacy:

> The village tract or village chairmen, who occupy the lowest rung of the … security, political, and administrative structures are the most hard-pressed authorities. They are trapped between protecting the needs of the local population and fulfilling the demands of the central and local governments … Although they are not paid a salary, there are many ways in which village chairmen can get reimbursed, depending on the economy of their villages. Village chairmen may earn money from imposing fines

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> on law breakers, charging fees on land contracts, and on visitors' registration. He may supplement his income by taking bribes from his villagers in return for covering up their activities that are considered illegal from the central authorities (one example would be under-reporting cultivated acres when it comes to selling the procurement quota). (Thawnghmung 2003: 308–309)

My point is not to see whether or not U Win fits this description, but to show another side of the picture in order to explore the question of headship from a different perspective. In short, headmen may be brokers, either as hard-pressed or extractive officials, stuck between the government and the villagers. This fits the early qualification of headship as an intercalary position, an argument developed by Gluckman (1955, 1963; Gluckman et al. 1949). But they have their own stance, family background and networks, and are empowered by the state in different ways. Following Kuper's idea (1970), headship offers room for manoeuvre. Yet there is more to it. In my view, village headmen are benchmarks to evaluate the morality of a time, acting as a backdrop to explain the differences between today and the past. They are references or exemplary people drawn upon to explain the ups and downs of village morality and to show how ethical shifts transform the local polity.

'One of a Kind'

After the first monsoon rains in July 2016, the Gawgyi electrification project became a reality. There were several steps to finalize this project, and a *sine qua non* condition was that all the paths in the village should be enlarged to install the pylons. This had the potential to cause disputes, and many villagers would have to give up some of their land. As well as causing disagreements between neighbours about how much each household should give away, the electricity project brought up the issue of the circulation of corpses and auspicious flows and eventually opened negotiations on village membership (Chapter 6). It became a potential maelstrom that almost no one was willing to take responsibility for. The headman – U So from Myinmilaung Proper, selected in January 2016 but who took office in March 2016 – was supposed to be responsible for it, but he left it up to the villagers. U Thein, Gawgyi's candidate in the last election, should also have been responsible in his capacity as hundred-house head, but it was clear to most people by August that he could not supervise the enlargement of the roads or solve the upcoming disputes. U Htay ultimately took responsibility. 'Why him?' I asked Ko Nway, the younger brother of Ko Kyaw. 'He is one of a kind', he answered (*thuka tiqmyo*). Nothing less, nothing more. When I enquired more systematically, everybody agreed that only U Htay could do such a job.

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Nobody referred to him as a man of *hpon*, however. He was different; *hpon* was almost gone. He was rather an example, in the sense that he embodied the value of propriety and demonstrated trustworthiness throughout his life. When he became headman in 2006, U Htay personified a moral rupture with U Win the Infamous. His engagement with the village collective gave momentum for village affairs to become the primary form of local politics in Gawgyi.

U Htay succeeded U Win in 2006, and most villagers in Gawgyi felt this was for the best. I have never heard any criticism towards him. Before his selection, new heads of ten households were chosen, and it seems that it was at this moment that the threat of having the duo U Win and U Myo as local big men influenced the vote. Once selected, U Htay chose new official elders for all the villages of the tract. U Maung was chosen in this capacity for the whole tract and the power balance shifted once again, this time in favour of Gawgyi. The selection of U Htay was viewed as a turning point. Almost all the criticisms of U Win and his clique had their counterparts in the way U Htay managed his tenure. The land sales were no longer 'eaten', bribes to make contracts and identity cards and even to get loans from the Agricultural Bank became obsolete. In retaliation, the agent of the SLRD in charge of the tract apparently stopped going there to update the cadastre. In short, U Htay demonstrated that a sense of selflessness could short-circuit the way local affairs were managed.

It was not all peace and light, however. U Htay, in his capacity as the local rung of the government, had to organize the confiscation – without compensation – of farmlands located within the Myinmilaung tract for the creation of a poultry hatchery. The official of the land administration department, who did not dare go to Gawgyi, suddenly disappeared with the cadastral map in question. There was no longer a map, no official in charge, and only one member of the regional government willing to make money out of the poultry zone. On a different note, one of U Htay's achievements was the building of a road to shorten and ease transportation between Gawgyi and Monywa in 2009. To do so, he first convinced all the people whose land would be crossed by the future road to donate a part of it. He obtained the funding promised by the township administration to make the road, and organized the rest of the villagers, with the help of U Lin, Gawgyi's teacher and head of the bachelors' group, to carry out the necessary work. Finally, he approached a wealthy businessman in Monywa to ask for his help (i.e. to make a donation[24]) to build a bridge (over the canal that the villagers had dug a few years ago under forced labour). Since then, this road has been the main route to Gawgyi, used daily by an increasing number of daily workers.

U Htay continued to be involved in the management of Gawgyi affairs after he stopped being headman in 2011. He decided not to be a candidate for the 2011 round of selection following the announcement of a democratic transition under

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Thein Sein's government. The subsequent selection was chaotic. At that time, most of the ten-house leaders refused to participate and even fewer were inclined to put themselves forward as candidates. A few hours before the arrival of the township officials, some elders of Myinmilaung Proper attempted to gather all the villagers of the tract in the monastery. Only a few came. These elders reselected three candidates, all from Myinmilaung, and this is how U Yin became headman, though only for one year. U Htay withdrew from the candidacy by proclaiming himself the official elder of Gawgyi, and nobody challenged him. This was his first move in distancing himself from government positions. He remained a key actor in Gawgyi politics, however, and became the key interlocutor with the incoming INGOs that flowed into Gawgyi in the early 2010s. For instance, thanks to a sanitation project led by the UNDP, he attended workshops on the making of a water pumping system and pushed for the creation of a water station that would be built a few months before my arrival in Gawgyi. The water system was an assemblage of efforts, knowledge, money and donations. Gawgyi big men, U Htay, U Lin and U Maung, as we will see in Chapter 6, were the ones organizing it. The village first had to be on the target list of several NGOs, then fees were collected from all villagers, donations were given by the main families, a lottery was organized, networks of external donors were activated, and finally a committee administrating water delivery and money collection was set up. More recently, U Htay took the reins of the committee in charge of the distribution of a loan of about 30,000 USD granted to Gawgyi by the Monywa Rural Development Department. Repayments by the villagers fund new loans and the renewal of village commodities used in ceremonies (tables, chairs, cooking pots and so on). Thus, for most people, having U Htay in charge of a project, even in the background, guarantees its effectiveness.

Overall, U Htay has demonstrated his commitment towards Gawgyi and has set an example. He embodies propriety and the references in this domain are the last men of *hpon*, notably U To Kaing described in the previous chapter. In other words, he is inscribed in a genealogy of men of power, men remembered, rightly or wrongly, for their engagement with the enhancement of village life. If we follow the criteria set by Nash to distinguish a leader, U Htay fits the description:

> The qualities of a leader according to village standards are: industry (he is a hard worker), alertness (he does not appear sleepy or slow in movement; his speech is quick and pithy), mercy (he does not push his power to the limit), patience (he does not rush into things, but awaits the propitious moment for action), judgment (his decisions do, in fact, turn to his benefit), and perspective (he sees events from the right angle; he can tell more than other people about the meaning of events). (Nash 1965: 77)

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This description has the advantage of being suitable for any leader at any time in history because it emphasizes individual qualities and excludes the political and moral issues of a given period. The qualities of a typical leader are plastic enough to encompass a multitude of incarnations, but the meaning and the practice have changed. U Htay's actions and the perceptions of his achievements combine old references and new stakes. The embodiment of propriety clearly draws on the legacy of U To Kaing and U Za Nay Ya. The latter are the backdrop against which the worth of U Htay makes sense and is evaluated. Yet, nobody told me that U Htay was a man of *hpon*. This qualifier is reserved for people of a past era. Bigness became difficult to achieve through village headmanship because it was synonymous with wrongdoing and collusion from the 1970s to the 2000s. U Htay gave 'arms and legs' to village affairs, even if (or rather because) he gradually withdrew from government affairs. What makes him special in Gawgyi is that he personifies a moral rupture with U Win the Infamous. The sense of rupture was reinforced by an engagement with village affairs presented as a transition from raw clientelism and corruption to the defence of a common good. Trustworthiness, as exemplified by U Htay, became a value organizing local politics to some extent.

U Htay did not create a new political order out of the blue. He has contributed to a larger movement in which the management of local affairs became monopolized by the villagers against the state. This trend was articulated with a more traditional form of collective sociality called *luhmuyay* or 'social affairs'. This concept can encompass a variety of stakes. It includes potentially all kinds of collective undertakings, from the making of ceremonies to the resolution of disputes, and thus its scope changes according to what is deemed important at a given time. At a sociological level, *luhmuyay* is about taking responsibility for the welfare of a collective beyond individual and familial responsibilities. In theory, it concerns everyone and encompasses a wide set of relations, from the hospitality of strangers to the funerals of neighbours. In practice, it centres on a locality and, in our case, it includes Gawgyi and Tozigon but not Myinmilaung Proper. As we will see in chapter 6, the engagement of some individuals with a collective contributes to making village affairs the main form of local politics, as a space where the worth of the people is evaluated depending on their engagement with a common good.

It is a fragile state of affairs ridden with uncertainty, especially as this political order is linked to a few persons. Yet, other political dynamics are at play. As we will see in Chapter 7 in relation to the selection of a new headman in 2016, factionalism within the village and the battle between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi weaken the primacy of collective affairs as something to stand for. Even if village affairs are considered independent of government affairs, they inevitably overlap. At another level, village affairs depend eventually on people's engagement.

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If this engagement shapes some spaces as political, collective affairs are not the only field of power relations. Crafting one's place in the village is also about negotiating social obligations and responsibilities. Ko Kyaw's experience as headman, described in the next chapter, exemplifies a central dilemma: how far should a person be responsible for a collective when he has to be responsible for a family? The crafting of one's position is thus ridden with dilemmas in which the care of a collective is but one part.

* * *

Reflecting on my encounters with two headmen who succeeded one another, the introductory part of this chapter has shown how I came to realize that the shift from U Win to U Htay marked a broader rupture in local politics. It was a shift from distrust and corruption embodied by U Win the Infamous to trustworthiness and propriety with U Htay the Worthy. This narrative of change reflects how the conception of leadership moved from a discourse of an individual's *hpon* to one of people's worth. This transformation is intimately linked with the historical background of state violence and corruption and U Htay's gradual estrangement from the state was counterbalanced by a commitment to Gawgyi affairs. Village affairs were progressively being reinvested by villagers who were articulating new stakes within a more traditional form of sociality, making collective undertakings the fragile form of local politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

To account for this metamorphosis, the chapter has explored the local history from the early years of the socialist period to the democratic opening of the early 2010s. It has introduced the reader to the 'Burmese Way to Socialism', followed by the reassertion of military power until the democratic transition period. It has delineated the process by which the socialization of society further solidified dominion over peasants, culminating in an era marked by pervasive mistrust. The ineffectiveness of agricultural strategies and the regime's authoritarianism precipitated a broader deterioration of living standards, ultimately fueling the 1988 uprising. However, in the Myinmilaung tract, the rupture unfolded at a distinct pace and took on a more ethical dimension, characterized by the utilization of corruption, collusion, forced labour and violence as instruments of governance by the military and a succession of officials in overseeing rural areas.

This chapter has argued that the transition from U Win to U Htay marks this rupture as the latter practice of headship was a counterpoint to the former and that both were exemplary people who represented different values. U Win epitomizes corruption, collusion and embezzlement while U Htay embodies propriety, a value articulated with the memory of the last men of *hpon*. The transition from one to the other thus represents a moral shift anchored in the local understandings of the history of Myinmilaung polity. In reaction to state disengagement

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from local affairs, an ideology of self-reliance took ground in Gawgyi and symbolized how a group of people – the *lugyi* – started making engagement in village affairs a field of politics in Gawgyi in the 2000s.

Ultimately, this chapter and the previous one have offered a background against which to explore current forms of leadership. The study of precolonial politics (Chapter 2) in our area has shown that the antagonism between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper was expressed in terms of competing visions of indigenousness after the two settlements were grouped under a single jurisdiction and a headman. Headship then became a matter of persons as successive leaders adopted different positions echoing local stakes. Some of them became exemplary figures for the moralization of behaviours and engagement in lay affairs when villagers reinterpreted their role as Buddhists and contested colonial rule in a period a when claims to authority were increasingly channelled by belonging to farming families. This chapter has made a case for seeing Myinmilaung headmen as benchmarks to evaluate the morality of a time, acting as a backdrop to explain the difference between the present and the past. They are references for the ups and downs of village morality and U Htay's trajectory underscores the rise of village affairs as the current form of politics in Gawgyi.

The questions now are: (1) How does this background impinge on how Ko Kyaw embodies headship? (2) How is leadership conceived and practised within farming families? And (3) How do the *lugyi* actually perform village affairs?

Notes

1. With at least two exceptions that should be noted: Lintner's study of the fall of the Communist Party of Burma (1990) and Brown's book on economic history (2013).
2. SPDC stands for the State Peace and Development Council (1997–2011), the organization that replaced the SLORC.
3. Among these villages, the most notable are: Hnawpin North, Hnawpin South, Innte, Ayadaw, Kyawkka, Thazi, Ywadon, Budaungkan, Kyawsipon, Booba, Minzu, Zeehpyubin, Salingyi, Nyuangpinthar, Kothan, Hledar and Aungchanthar. I visited each of them several times in 2013–2014 and in 2015–2016.
4. Cf. the 1963 Nationalization Law and the 1964 Law to Protect the Implementation of Socialist Economic System.
5. I am not able for the moment to account for the reason for this split, or of the content of each revendication.
6. At the beginning of the Four Eights Movement, thousands of demonstrators marched on a police station in Sagaing. They were shot at by police and troops and, reportedly, 537 persons were killed. This was probably the worst event, in terms of casualties, to occur during the Democracy Summer outside of Rangoon (cf. Seekins 2006: 385).
7. Cf. Thawnghmung (2004: 78). She also wrote, referring to Steinberg (1981b), that 'public expenditure on agriculture declined from 11.3 per cent of capital expenditure in 1964/65 to 4.4 per cent in 1970/71. In 1972, only 1.8 million out of 4.4 million rural households in Burma had access to official credit, and only about 13 per cent of

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agricultural areas could be used for multiple cropping because of lack of irrigation' (2004: 78).

8. Such as the local managers of the Ministry of Agricultural Services, of the Irrigation Department, of the Myanmar Agricultural and Rural Development Bank, of the Myanmar Agricultural Produce Trading and of the State Land Records Department.
9. Beans and pulses, which were largely spared by state policies because the government focused primarily on rice cultivation, became two of the top products at the turn of the 1990s. Thawnghmung indicated that, while 'under the "socialist government (1972–88)," the cultivation of pulses and beans meant the death penalty or life imprisonment', under the new policies 'the sown area for pulses increased 85 per cent from 1984/85 to 1995/96. Since 1990–91 pulses and beans have taken over the top list of all other items of agricultural export, including rice and rice products, both in terms of value and volume' (2004: 143).
10. This expression was first given to me by U Than from Zalok village on 15 January 2014, and I have heard it multiple times in the villages where I had a chance to interview elders about local history.
11. Called *NaLaKa* in Burmese. The SACs are the main structures – present at all levels of administration – created by the Revolutionary Council to centralize the government authority. They became the People's Council with the 1974 Constitution (cf. Taylor 2009: 315–16).
12. The expression given to me goes like this: 'the big face gets the big part of the meal', meaning that the man who is famous, who presents himself nicely, wins people's favour.
13. The reforms introduced by the Revolutionary Council (the Farmers' Rights Protection Law and the Tenancies Law Amending Act in 1963) aimed to prevent the interference of civil justice in land matters by prohibiting seizures (of land, livestock, tools) and/or arrests for debts, for example – except in cases concerning inheritance and those in which the government is involved. In other words, justice between individuals over land matters – excluding inheritance – was organized through Village Land Committees. In addition, the government authorized, by administrative notification (act 1/64), the cessation of rent payments by tenants to their landlords. To achieve this, the SACs were instructed to institute a system of People's Courts, which continued after the 1974 Constitution, and so have become the only regulatory bodies for agricultural land use. The individuals who were tenants, by ceasing to have to pay rent as a means to fight landlordism, could then be granted a delegated right of use on the land they were cultivating if they were registered as such in the SLRD's registers.
14. Cf. Boutry et al. (2017: 116, 144) concerning Regulation 1/64, stipulating that a land cultivated by a tenant for more than five years consecutively may go to the tenant.
15. This information was confirmed by Myinmilaung elders during an interview conducted on 23 March 2019.
16. For an exploration of *nalehmu*, see Roberts and Rhoads (2022).
17. Maung Maung Gyi (1983: 154–55), Spiro (1997) and Nash (1965: 75) had presented this view of the government as part of the longue durée in the Burmese conception of politics. As this chapter shows, however, the distance from the state changes from one period to another and depends on who embodies this or that position.
18. Cattle rustling decreased in the late 1990s and thus villages' stockades were less and less maintained, to the point that during my own fieldwork, village gates had almost disappeared. They reappeared after the 2021 coup.
19. Thawnghmung made a case for how the change in recruitment of military personnel under the SLORC/SPDC distanced the Tatmadaw from villagers. While most were

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coming directly from the countryside during the socialist period, enrolment was then confined to relatives, families and associates of the military (2004: 82).

20. The renovation of the river embankment and the main roads in Monywa was also carried out largely by forced labour from the whole township.
21. For a study of the 'public' category, cf. Huard (2016).
22. Regulation called Act 1/64.
23. See the discussion of the relation between merit making and power in the general conclusion.
24. Donation and charitable funding to create 'public services' has been commonplace in this region, at least since the late 1990s. For a thorough study of this dynamic in another part of the country, cf. McCarthy G. (2018).

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PART II

Making Politics

We have now reached the part of the book exploring the ethnographic present of the fieldwork period. This work is anchored in the relationship I developed with Ko Kyaw. I make sense of his experience as headman, and mine as an ethnographer, as a matter of political navigation and craftmanship. The notion of political navigation is derived from Vigh's conceptualization of practice in terms of 'social navigation' (2009). For him, because 'navigation designates motion within motion, it forces us, in a social perspective, to consider the relation between the environment people move in and how the environment itself moves them, before, after and during an act' (2009: 425). Following Ko Kyaw was an opportunity for me to navigate the relations and dilemmas we encountered in day-to-day activities.

This book is an effort to explore the transformation of the political landscape through time by grounding the analysis in Ko Kyaw's political navigation within various domains of engagement. In the first part of the book, I described the fashioning of the local political landscape by triangulating a variety of discourses and historical sources. In this second part, I explore the node of relationships I encountered by describing more or less extended situations and interactions in the vein of Gluckman's (1940) and Glaeser's (2005) approaches.

The following chapters thus aim at widening our understanding of politics. They provide a gradual exploration of what I call *forms of engagement* and *domains of politics*. I first focus on the experience and enactment of politics by describing a day in the life of Ko Kyaw to show how an individual embodies and fashions headship through successive social settings. This ethnographic device is a way to analyse what a headman, as a situated figure and a political institution embedded in a local society, mediates in context. It shows how a headman engages with multiple layers of responsibilities and chains of relationships, delineating uncertain boundaries between the personal, the political and the government domains that partly organize local politics. By focusing on an

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'intermediary' position, the virtue of Chapter 4 is to give texture to these domains by showing how a headman engages with them.

The next two chapters give more consistency to the family and village domains and show how the idea of 'taking care of' is key in understanding the work of worth and authority in these domains. By looking at the transmission of inheritance as a process of redefining authority and responsibility, Chapter 5 argues that intrafamily relationships are a field of politics. This is in part because dynamics of kinship and the moral and social obligations between family members have organized land relations in the longue durée. But also because what makes a family – hierarchy, commensality – and the mutual obligations between its members – gratitude, care – create entitlement to property. Focusing on transfers of wealth within families allows us to see them as a crucial domain of engagement. Foregrounding the fact that land is entangled in multiple relationships, this chapter describes ownership as a matter of stewardship: taking care of a patrimony to which others are also entitled. The field of family relations, as a matrix for thinking about ownership through transmission, is key to understand how authority is justified within families. Ascribed in terms of heredity but achieved in terms of aptitude, authority thus takes the form of 'taking care of' a domain of engagement.

Chapter 6 scales up this argument by exploring the domain of village affairs by questioning the worth of village big men. It draws on the understanding of their leadership as guardianship and links it to the rise of village affairs as the form of village politics. The chapter describes three big men in specific situations (two ceremonies and one dispute) and argues that, by making village affairs a space of engagement where the worth of the people is evaluated, they legitimize a political order within the village. It also suggests that entrustment and exclusion are central processes of local politics in which the voices of villagers are channelled through, delegated to and often excluded by the big men.

Finally, the coda in Chapter 7 brings together the different threads woven throughout the book. It describes two crucial days of the village headman's election in 2016 to show local politics at work.

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4

Being the Headman

This chapter describes a day in the life of Ko Kyaw to show how he crafted his authority when he was headman of the Myinmilaung village tract from 2013 to 2016.[1] As we have seen, village headship was created in the late 1880s as an armed wing of local governance. Since then, the power of village headmen has waxed and waned depending on how far local authorities entitled them to implement policies and organize local politics. Today, village headmen are most often seen not as persons of authority, but as officials with ascribed powers and as political entrepreneurs. They are – like the headmen depicted by Thawnghmung (2004: 94–102) and the ward's administrators by Prasse-Freeman (2015: 95–96) – uncanny officials whom people have to deal with one way or another.

Locally, authority is about recognition and achievements. It is a quality embedded in the person, his life, his actions, and is linked to the display of propriety as a gauging standard resulting from past experiences. The stance, achievements and memories of previous headmen and monks influence how Ko Kyaw crafts his own way of being headman as they contributed to and exemplified the transformation of the local understanding of morality, headship and collective affairs across the past century. As we have seen in the historical part of the book, the emphasis on propriety and morality stems from two men (U Za Nay Ya and U To Kaing) who are, for our contemporaries, the archetypical and last men of *hpon*. They were able to influence people's conduct and embodied a renewal of propriety in the contest against colonialism. On a different note, U San was more of a negotiator empowered by the socialist state to bring about socialism and whose prerogatives fostered factionalism within the village tract. The tightening of the local polity on the village tract worsened when the state partially disengaged from the countryside and U Win, the Infamous headman from Myinmilaung Proper, embodied, for Gawgyi people, corruption, forced labour

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 155.

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and unsolvable conflicts. U Htay then appeared as a moral rupture, drawing from the examples of previous men of *hpon*, propriety and impartiality. Ko Kyaw became headman when the latter distanced himself from official positions while remaining central in the organizing of Gawgyi affairs.

Ko Kyaw sums up the uncertainty surrounding what (government) power is and how it operates in a peculiar way. For him, 'it's only in the mouth', meaning that what powerful people say is doubtful and should not be taken for granted. As a counterpoint, it suggests that authority implies *thitsashihmu*, that is, aligning acts and words, and showing a degree of 'trustworthiness'. How Ko Kyaw articulates this rupture when talking about power relations shows that local politics are gauged on a moral scale. Even Spiro, reflecting on his fieldwork, wrote about how issues of trust were key in village political life: 'as a newcomer to the village, I had not yet learned that general distrust was a pervasive feature of village life' (1992: 159). For him, one 'characteristic of factional behavior is the discrepancy between words and action' (ibid.: 165). In contrast with Spiro, distrust is understood here as a product of past experiences, not a psychological inclination for factionalism.

So, what is 'it'? And what does the mouth symbolize? 'It' refers to government orders, officials' stance and to how political entrepreneurs are perceived. It is display and strategy. The 'mouth' is a mouth speaking words that align or not with acts, a Janus. Interestingly, his statement is about how words do or don't describe reality, or rather, to the incongruity between words and deeds. If power is associated with distrust, then past deeds and achievements are the counterpoint. They create a degree of legitimacy which requires time and evaluation. For Ko Kyaw, being a village headman meant evading obligations while abiding by local ethics, being responsible while dodging various forms of contention. On a day-to-day basis, he had to dissemble as he was representing layer upon layer of individuals through the institution, and not simply his own authority via the institution. The tools at hand were his family's reputation, his way of haranguing, smiling, being silent; of accepting, refusing and giving things; of forming, avoiding and manoeuvring factions; and also his manner of complying with the village big men (*lugyi*) and having a fair idea about the lines he should not cross. As one follows Ko Kyaw in his routine, it becomes clear that he does not represent the government as an entity. He gives 'arms and legs' to an institution that has a peculiar role in a network of personalities.

Village government has its own history in Myinmilaung tract. Today, it is represented by the headman, the tract clerk, the ten-house leaders and one 'official elder' (*yatmiyathpa*). Ko Kyaw, as headman of Myinmilaung tract from 2013 to 2016, was the most local embodiment of the government. Officially, headmen, called Village Tract Administrators, 'are the anchor of the GAD's[2] vertical role in public administration, and they effectively act as an extension of the GAD's

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Township administrator who supervises them' (Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Arnold 2014: 34). Technically, Ko Kyaw was not a government employee, as he received a subsidy, not a salary, of about 100 USD a month from the Ministry of Home Affairs through the GAD. Ko Kyaw was accompanied by the village tract clerk who is, however, a direct employee of the GAD. Nonetheless, the headman is responsible for the whole tract. In addition, Ko Kyaw was heading multiple committees *de facto*.[3] He took office in 2013 but was elected in 2012 by the ten-house heads who do not have official duties. They have to assist the headman in some cases, such as providing free labour for government projects until recently. Among them, some are economically important; others want to be influential. Most are simply people known for being helpful in Gawgyi. They are the pool of persons from which a candidate for headship can usually be found (Chapter 7). Typically, villages in the dry zone of Myanmar have a varying number of elderly people, also called *yatmiyathpa*, literally, 'parents of a common dwelling place'. They can also be labelled 'village spokespersons' because they are (supposed to be) recognized for their knowledge and balanced judgement. They *can* speak for the village because they are knowledgeable about it. One of them is chosen by the headman to be the official elder for administrative purposes. When Ko Kyaw was headman, the official elder was U Htay, a previous headman respected for his honesty and loyalty.

As a theoretical step in the ethnographic task of showing what the headman mediates in context, I propose to describe it in terms of embodiment and fashioning. In the language of actor-network theory (Latour 2013), headship as an institution represents the established web of connections and affiliations that an individual assumes upon becoming a headman. This entails continuously fashioning a role as headman by assembling a diverse array of things and relationships. Embodying and fashioning are simultaneous processes. Following Stewart and Strathern, I understand embodiment as a way of describing 'patterns of behavior inscribed on the body or enacted by people that find their expression in bodily form' (2011: 389) such as silences, smiles, embarrassment, distancing, or the changing of clothes. These gestures and behaviours hint at how an individual, by becoming headman, takes upon himself a legacy, a set of responsibilities and expectations. One could argue that as both a villager and an official, the headman does not merely represent an institution but serves as a node intersecting and acting upon various layers of responsibilities, networks of connections and things. In the case of Ko Kyaw, his roles extend beyond that of a headman; he also fulfills responsibilities as a son, a neighbor, a husband, a friend, a cousin and a member of the local elite. Each day, he engages with individuals in contexts of hospitality, intimacy, socializing and more, where commodities such as money, tea, betel and agreements are exchanged. Fashioning, in the sense of working with existing and improvised materials, is close to craftsmanship or

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bricolage as it focuses on the act of making or practise in its broader meaning. Fashioning emphasizes the idea of giving a certain shape to something, usually a cloth, and in this case the clothing of headship. It is a way of describing how a person fashions headship by calibrating how he engages with the networks and domains that make up local politics.

In the case of Ko Kyaw in Gawgyi village, I contend that embodying and fashioning headship necessitates engaging with networks of relations delineated by uncertain boundaries between the personal, the political and the government domains. The personal domain encompasses matters where individual responsibilities and obligations hold sway, involving intimate relationships that are unique and not easily transferable to others. These range from domestic and familial dynamics to relationships of patronage and dependency. The political domain pertains to collective matters at the village level and the mechanisms by which they have been historically and presently addressed, and by whom. In Gawgyi, this domain encompasses both ‘village affairs’ (*yatywa keiksa*) and ‘social affairs’ (*luhmuyay*), engaging individuals’ responsibilities toward their fellow villagers as a group of belonging as well as a distinct form of bigness (Chapter 6). I label it the political because it serves as the standpoint for assessing the state of affairs within Gawgyi. Lastly, the governmental domain refers simply to matters necessitating the involvement of the village headman, and to the debates about how successive headmen align or diverge from one another.

How does one describe the interweaving of networks and domains of local politics without disconnecting them? Depending on the networks, the domains and the situations we focus on, we tend to interpret differently what kind of intermediary a headman is. For instance, by re-establishing the register of land ownership in the 2010s, Ko Kyaw could have been described either as a simple broker of state authority because he allowed access to formal ownership, as a patron when he paid the fees for his clients, or as a good headman if he asked everyone the legal price, thus aligning with his uncle, who was praised for his honesty when he was headman. To overcome this issue, I choose to portray a day in the life of Ko Kyaw, as the temporality of a day makes it possible to describe the interweaving of social settings in which he acts, linking different situations that therefore cannot be interpreted only in terms of patronage or brokerage. For Weber (2001), a social setting refers to the context in which interactions take on meaning to their participants, which works as a framework constituted by language, place, history, things, gestures and various procedures for qualifying action. Social settings are not reduced to physical co-presence and so, when I describe Ko Kyaw in different settings, these are also informed by chains of relationships and by mutual knowledge about past events or reputations.

In the following sections, the narrator and the reader follow Ko Kyaw during a day as a more or less omniscient character. The first part is a brief

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recap of Ko Kyaw's story. The core of the text is then divided into parts of a day re-created from multiple days (referred to in each subsection). It is thus partly a fiction, but not an imaginary one. The constraint was to render daily life in a written form condensing an experience while describing how the past affects people. Ko Kyaw acknowledged that it could reflect his journey as a headman, but his normal days are usually less busy. At times direct speech is used and mostly draws from recollection of memories and notes. Indirect speech draws from the same sources. Past events and events that I have not witnessed are recalled by cross-cutting information from interviews and casual discussions.

Ko Kyaw's Background Story

Ko Kyaw comes from a relatively well-established family living in the oldest settlement area of the village. Son of the village healer, he used to follow his father in his peregrinations in Gawgyi and beyond and thus his name is quite famous locally. Since his teenage years, he has been known for being a helpful person, notably having collected donations for the hospitalization of a child from a poor family. Through the support and affiliation with Gawgyi *lugyi*, he ran for headship in 2012 against three other contenders who were from the other villages of Myinmilaung tract. Selected as headman in a context of political reformism and democratic transition, the bulk of his work was to remake the village tract families' registration list and organize the formalization of land titles. The implementation of the 2012 Farmland Law was a major undertaking for him as it entitled him to settle disputes, making him responsible for the recording of rights after several decades during which people got around the law in order to transfer rights. He also had to officialize land agreements, set up loan schemes, deal with NGOs, organize village 'security' and so forth. As a broker between villagers and government agencies, he had to find trade-offs between them, either acting as a buffer against state demands or taking advantage of his position, depending on who is talking about him. He had to fill out government injunctions, translating village realities into administrative categories. Progressively, he saw the value of not being competent in certain matters, such as land disputes, and found trade-offs between collusion and support (with officials and fellow villagers) because he was never sure of his authority in a given arena. Meanwhile, he married and became a father, implying a change in residency while opening a debate on transmission of inheritance. He also distanced himself from the local head of monks due to the latter's repeated demands for more donations. Eventually, he hosted me, acting as a gatekeeper and caretaker. Finally, in 2016, he organized the headman selection in which he found an exit from headship. From that moment on, he gradually reduced his involvement in village affairs.

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While going through this chapter, the reader should keep in mind how the competition between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper, the transformations of the local hierarchy, the embodied ethical ruptures, the rise of village affairs and the issues of obligations, patronage, engagement and worthiness are shaping the local political landscape.

A Day in the Life

8am. Family Matters

Ko Kyaw wakes up a little bit later than the rest of the people living in the house.[4] I enter through the back door and find him lying on a bench with his *puso*[5] used as a blanket. The marital bed is right there, in the conjugal room in the southwest corner of the square-shaped living room, but Ko Kyaw sleeps on the bench because the bed is too small for him, his wife and their daughter. The living room gives an impression of controlled chaos, with items piled up to make space for the flows of daily life moving around them. A table and two more benches, used for welcoming guests and evening discussions, are encased in the northeast corner. Beside the table is an old desk, riddled with woodworm, on top of which stands a shrine to Buddha adorned every day with flowers, water and rice by Ko Kyaw's mother. The desk is surrounded by some huge green trunks full of papers, tools and pieces of metal. Next to it lie two loudspeakers, a Yamaha keyboard and several sound boxes that Ko Kyaw rents out for ceremonies. The table, desk and boxes overfill the eastern part of the living room, divided by a large path from the entrance to the back door. In the western part of the building are the beds. People always sleep with their heads pointing eastwards. A second path, leading to the separate kitchen, corners Ko Kyaw's mother's bed in the northwest. The very making and positioning of the whole housing compound, including the living room, the kitchen, the toilet and two showers (one for males, one for females), was organized a decade ago following Ko Kyaw's father's calculation to facilitate flows of fortune.[6] Ko Kyaw's father was Gawgyi's healer and was also versed in astrology.

Ko Kyaw's mother enters the main room from the door leading to the kitchen. She has just finished the meal she cooked for herself. Earlier today she went with her pair of oxen coupled to the oxcart to plough other villagers' farm fields before the first rains. While tightening her worn *longyi*, she asks her son to give back some money, which she gave him a few days ago to visit his father in Mandalay public hospital where he is awaiting a stomach operation. He goes to the bedroom, lifts a box of clothes, opens another. He hands her the remaining banknotes she borrowed from a local money lender a week ago in order to pay for the hospital fees, the operation and the feeding of guests visiting the sick old man. When the

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Figure 4.1. Inside Ko Kyaw's house, Gawgyi, 2016. © Stéphen Huard.

latter decided to go to hospital, Ko Kyaw took charge of making sure his stay there went smoothly. Since childhood, his parents had appointed him to take care of them, their health and wealth, and thus he is still living with them. This type of relation is called *adunay adusa*, literally 'living and eating together'. It emphasizes complementarity and dependency between two generations. It is never fully achieved and remains in a state of becoming. The origin and use of incomes are

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central to this relationship. Ko Kyaw's father would die a few weeks later, officially from stomach cancer, though no one dies here except from sorcery or 'evil influences'. The debt related to the hospitalization will be the sole responsibility of Ko Kyaw's mother until he receives his inheritance and becomes responsible[7] for the whole house (Chapter 5 on transmission).

Ko Kyaw drinks some tea and then goes to the small kitchen. He eats the meal cooked by his wife Ma Khin and joins me to smoke cheroots and chew betel nuts. After unplugging his phone from a battery linked to a solar panel, he checks the state of his team on his favourite game, 'Clash of Clans' (hereafter CoC). A great number of villagers, invariably male, have been playing this game for a year or so. Three years ago, only a few wealthy people had phones but now most villagers have one and use their Facebook accounts as one of the main sources of news. CoC is special. It is a collective game, yet people create individual strongholds. They then gather in a team and compete with other coalitions all around the world. Seeing her husband on his phone again, Ma Khin, upset, huffs and puffs. Ko Kyaw answers by squeezing out a smile, his best-loved weapon. His nickname – Sweet Smile – originated in that very gesture. She shouts: 'We just came back from my mother's place to live here. There is plenty to do and you're playing on your phone again!' Indeed, Ko Kyaw, his wife Ma Khin and their young daughter have been settling back into his parents' house on the east side of Gawgyi for only a few months. This place is the biggest compound in the village and is located in the oldest area of settlement. One striking feature of this location is that most of the males settle in this compound with their wives, building new houses or taking over their parents' place. While neolocal settlement is paramount in this area, fixing people in a place, whether it be marital partners, children, relatives or dependants, shows 'bigness' and influence. Ko Kyaw moved to Ma Khin's place in the western part of Gawgyi when she gave birth to their daughter. Changing houses was a manifold project. On the one hand, it was an opportunity for the baby to spend time with and receive care among his mother's family. On the other hand, it was an investment in kinship to potentially access resources (taking care of the land of Ma Khin's mother means maybe claiming part of it later). Going back and forth between both parents' places is a negotiation between Ko Kyaw, his wife and their respective families. Ko Kyaw tries to get the upper hand, forbearingly. The complaints about the time he spends on his phone are a way to gauge if he is able to amend his behaviour. Yet CoC is special to him: as well as being the current headman, Ko Kyaw is also the leader of the online village team, a team mostly composed of young males from fourteen to twenty-two years old who help him in many ways.

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10am. The Game Theory

Ko Kyaw makes a phone call to his nephew and asks him to come over to prepare the forthcoming war campaign on CoC.[8] While we put out our cheroots, the promising boy – he is majoring in geology at Monywa University – arrives on his brand new scooter, a 'one two five'. He visits us nearly every day and is often commissioned to carry out petty tasks. The online challenge is going to be a difficult one and thus Ko Kyaw provides bits of advice to improve the attacks. CoC operates in a warlike language. A person builds a stronghold, bolsters his defences, strengthens his attacks in one-on-one battles to gain loot. Joint fights or war campaigns are climaxes. The troops – accepted beforehand by the team leader – are ranked by level. They need to combine resources to win a war in successive duels. The success of a campaign – which lasts twenty-four hours – depends on the coordination of the group, on the support of its leader and on the respect of the rules of thumb. CoC is a perfect metaphor for how a faction is built up and manoeuvred. Ko Kyaw coordinates the campaigns of his team. He shares resources with followers, advises on war strategies, provides defences and plans battles. The composition of his team is not random. Most of them are players on the Gawgyi football team and form a more or less cohesive group who have gradually become involved in village affairs.

After settling the detail of the next war campaign, Ko Kyaw asks his nephew to fetch U Min, a villager. U Min, a farmer in his late forties, arrives fifteen minutes later and the nephew, getting off his motorbike, tells Ko Kyaw that the monk wants to see him. U Min has been awaiting Ko Kyaw's call. He has recently bought a piece of land located in the southwest of Gawgyi. One of Ko Kyaw's main jobs after being selected headman in 2012 was, along with the land officer, to reregister individual plots for the four cadastral units composing Myinmilaung tract.[9] He needed to gather information on nearly every plot of land for the officer. What is sensitive in U Min's case is the location of his land. The cadastral map in question had been stolen a few years ago by the previous land officer in charge of this area, who then 'disappeared'. In the meantime, an army officer grabbed land in order to build a poultry factory in this area. Remaking and updating the land record is thus a delicate issue.

U Min arrives at Ko Kyaw's, who has prepared fresh betel nuts to share. I get off the bench to make way for the guest and join Ko Kyaw's nephew sitting on a chair. U Min takes off his straw hat, removes his machete (*dah*) from the back of his *puso* and sits in front of Ko Kyaw, who initiates the discussion. Ko Kyaw offers him coffee mix – tea (literally 'hot water') is too casual on this occasion – but U Min refuses; he, as a real farmer, always prefers 'hot water'. When they finally touch upon the question at hand, Ko Kyaw stands up and searches for a plastic folder in which he keeps his files. He tells U Min that the land officer will

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give him the Land Use Certificate in the next few months. He adds that from his last meeting with his direct superior – the monthly meeting with the head of the Township General Administration Department – he learned that the cadastre is about to be completed. U Min nods without hope. He had tried to give some money to Ko Kyaw but the latter refused, arguing that the process is not over yet and that he had already paid the registration fee (0.4 USD). They joke about the labyrinth of institutions, offices and personalities one has to navigate to get things done, and that the prospect of compensation for those victims of land grabbing is 'only in the mouth'. After a minute or two of silence, U Min leaves. I tell Ko Kyaw that navigating the village might be easier than government offices, but it could be tricky too. And tricky it seems to be for Ko Kyaw, notably since he became headman.

If the government authorities are a labyrinth, the village is a maze. CoC is not a mere game in this perspective. The core of the Gawgyi CoC team was assembled by Ko Kyaw when he became headman. He recruited them to convey information, to call on people and to escape the influence of his fellow villagers in petty cases. In short, Ko Kyaw minimizes the chances of being under someone else's roof by using his group of followers. They are often sent to fetch villagers to come to Ko Kyaw's house when he has to make new ID cards, conduct the census of family members, record people's age, marital status, activities and so forth. Calling U Min to come to his place through the agency of his nephew was a way to limit negotiation. The place where the headman lives becomes a sort of public space. Even if Ko Kyaw casually navigates from one location to another, he avoids as much as possible situations where his position as headman could be undermined by personal relations. Thus, recruiting youngsters as intermediaries eases his tasks,[10] at least in Gawgyi. There are many ways to become obliged to somebody. For instance, at his place, Ko Kyaw is the host. If he goes to U Min's, he might have to refuse food. While accompanying me in the village, he taught me how to gauge the potential liabilities stemming from accepting or refusing presents, food or services. It mostly depends on the relations between people, their personalities, the stakes at hand and the ramifications of their relationship pertaining to past generations, kinship, service giving, grievances, accountability, debt and so on. The chances of getting trapped are greater at someone else's house than at one's own.

After U Min's departure, I ask Ko Kyaw about a dispute involving people from Myinmilaung Proper. It relates to a long-lasting land conflict now in court known as the U Myo case. The Township Farmland body is about to give his verdict. Ko Kyaw tells me that both sides are going to appeal. The dispute reopened in 2013 when farmers applied for Land Use Certificates. Five plots were claimed twice. Each case involved a man named U Myo from the Budaungkan village tract next to Gawgyi. A village committee[11] had to handle

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the cases. Created by government order to resolve any issue emerging from land titling, the Myinmilaung 'land committee' consists of the headman (Ko Kyaw), the land officer, the official elder of the village tract (U Htay), the leader of farmers[12] and the clerk.[13] Three out of five members are from Gawgyi. This is how the headman and Gawgyi big men permeate crucial institutions with people from 'their' side. Yet, for Ko Kyaw, there is no way to settle the case. Eager to meet the protagonists of this affair, I try to convince him to go and visit some of them in Myinmilaung. He tells me that it's not that easy. I reply, 'Why don't you go see your father's "small" wife, and use this to visit friends to see if these men are around?' I suggested this because I knew he had often accompanied his father on medical tours in the past decades, so he has acquaintances in Myinmilaung, even family. But he refused. This is due to the animosity between the villages. This antagonism has lasted for as long as people can remember, and the selection of headmen marks, like football matches and pagoda festivals, a climax in the rivalry. Hanging out in Myinmilaung Proper is not a pleasure for most Gawgyi villagers. For Ko Kyaw, who was selected over the Myinmilaung candidate, it is a matter of diplomacy. 'So why not fetch them like you did with U Min?' Ko Kyaw remains silent, looks at me, smiles and says, 'It's not easy, brother'. Any mistake could create an opportunity to challenge his authority. Myinmilaung Proper is not an area in which he is as influential as in Gawgyi, even as the headman. His nephew – listening carefully with his lips sealed – should not be involved in that.

Navigating villages thus requires a knowledge of ongoing relationships and various strategies to accommodate role, status and obligations. Recruiting the youngsters was a way of easing the handling of some affairs in Gawgyi. CoC emulates the creation of a faction led by Ko Kyaw in a space where he had achieved a degree of bigness. It is a matter of performing his duty through personal relationships while dodging potential obligations. His authority mixes his stance as a headman and as a person because of his origins, his achievements, his affiliations, the networks of patronage he navigates, those he avoids, and the challenges surrounding his tasks. Yet CoC found its limit in the bigness of other personalities and in the stakes of the ongoing land case.

11am. Beyond the Ceremony

After finalizing the last details of the next conquest campaign on his phone, we stay for a little while talking about his father's health, his brother's secret lover and the latest news from the British Premier League.[14] Chelsea, his favourite team, had lost. The discussion shifts to the Gawgyi football team's failure during the last match. A relative of Ko Kyaw (at some point, most of the villagers are relatives) joins us, makes a chew of betel from Ko Kyaw's supply and shouts:

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'Gawgyi youngsters! They all have shoes, but we lose against barefoot fellows'. A woman in her fifties arrives and stops the discussion. A premarital meeting, called *tintaungpwe*, is going to take place in Tozigon, a village nearby. She calls Ko Kyaw to come along.

Administratively, Tozigon is attached to the neighbouring tract of Budaungkan, but villagers from Tozigon conduct their weddings, Buddhist novitiates and burials with the help of Gawgyi's villagers, institutions and the pagoda. In other words, they use and rely on Gawgyi organization of village affairs to cater for their own needs. Gawgyi and Tozigon are close neighbours, both spatially and socially. They call this *yathswe-yatmyo*. It means 'people akin by (sharing a) dwelling' and is made of a combination of a building block of kinship (*hswemyo*) and a reference to the common dwelling area (*yat*). Such a mix is also found in the title of village elders, *yatmiyathpa*, or 'parents of the dwelling area'. Ko Kyaw's mother used to live there and a high number of intermarriages occurred between the two villages before Gawgyi absorbed most of Tozigon's population. Intermarriages, however, which also happen between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi, cannot justify why they feel bonded. Their proximity has more to do with a shared history translating into close relations between pre-eminent families of farmers whose descendants settled progressively in Gawgyi. Thus, access to land and livelihood through marriage and inheritance enabled individuals to maintain relatively good relationships and to be integrated within the same domain of social affairs (*luhmuyay*) while belonging to different jurisdictions.

The meeting is held between a family from Tozigon, marrying their daughter, and a family from another village, marrying their son. We quickly take our motorbikes and drive to their house. There, U Lin, the head of the Gawgyi bachelors, is crouched next to the fire, preparing tea with U Htay, the main leader of Gawgyi, while sharing betel chews under the sun. In the house, several women – kin and neighbours of the bride's family – cut cakes into pieces. Three tables are aligned. On the left one, relatives and acquaintances from the bride's side sit, while people from the fiancé's side sit on the right one. The spouses' parents take their place in between, accompanied by elders from Gawgyi and Tozigon. This is the negotiation table, where U Maung operates. In this kind of situation U Maung acts as the master of ceremonies (or rituals) and it recognizes and produces his bigness (Chapter 6 on the *lugyi*). The women serve small cakes, and the men cups of tea.[15] U Maung begins his address about what marriage means and how to behave for the best. This part of the speech is named *ahsaung-ama*, a generic way to describe an exhortation to follow morals.[16] He then announces what both families are willing to give to the couple. The boy's father starts talking about why he, as a daily worker, cannot provide much but that, by custom, he will pay for the wedding. Both spouses' parents agree in front of everyone. Gawgyi traditional institutions, embodied by U Htay, U Lin and U Maung and the headman (Ko Kyaw),

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facilitate and are key witnesses to such an agreement. Even if they do not do much, they have to be there. At last, the headman and the hundred-house head of the Budaungkan village tract arrive on a motorbike (Tozigon officially belongs to the Budaungkan tract). They do not come to witness the marital engagement. Rather, they come to finalize a land sale.

We finish our plate of cakes and cups of tea. As I walk towards the fire, U Lin tells me that he needs our help this afternoon at his house. We drive back

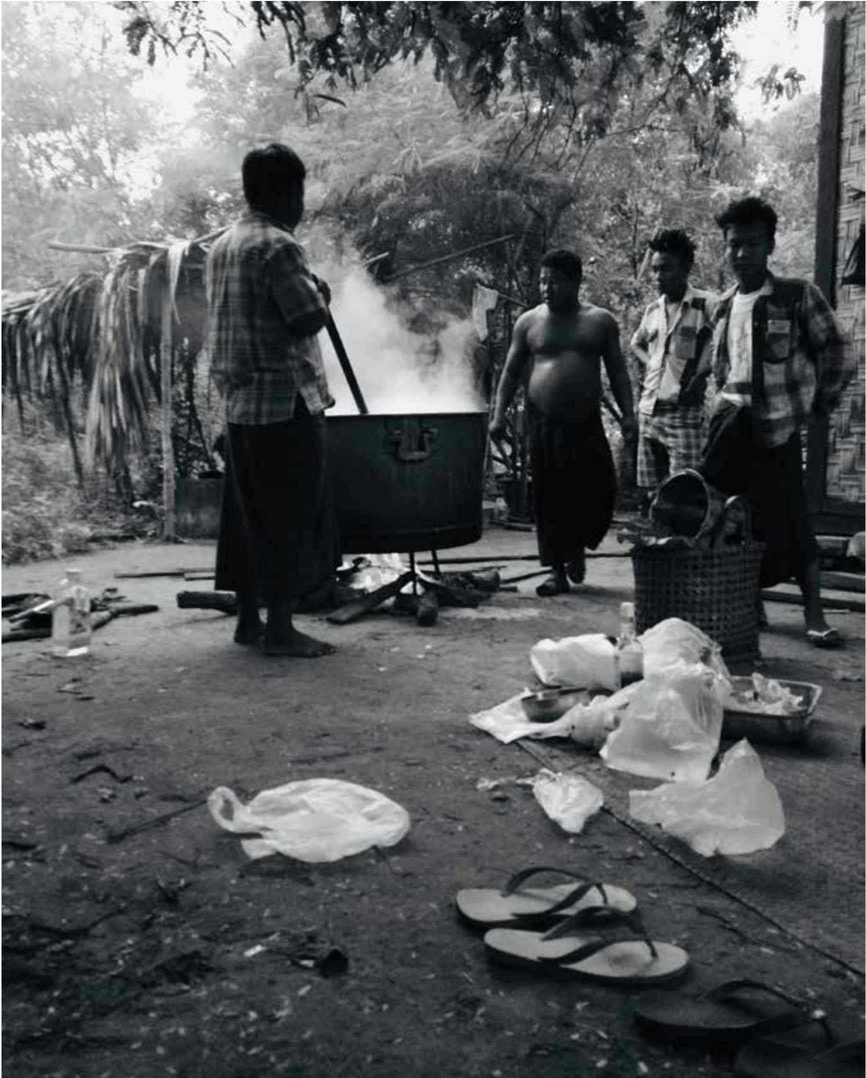

Figure 4.2. Preparing tea in Tozigon, 2016. © Stéphen Huard.

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to Gawgyi, followed by the two officials from Budaungkan and a man from Tozigon, named U Htoo. This man is buying a plot of land that belongs to Daw Than, Ko Kyaw's grandmother. Because the land is located in Budaungkan tract, the signature and stamp of the appropriate headman are mandatory. U Htoo has already given her a third of the price to formalize their agreement. He is a former daily labourer who wants to start growing betel leaves. He borrowed money and sold most of his goats to buy land and a pump, to dig a well and build a bamboo greenhouse. On the way, I overhear Ko Kyaw, sitting on the back of my motorbike, confirming to U Htoo that he will provide him with the cuttings of betel soon. We stop at Daw Than's house. She is waiting with two of her grown-up children. One, a son paid monthly to farm her land, lives next door with his own family. He knows about his mother's land. The other is her last child, a daughter in her thirties, still single. She is 'living and eating' with her mother and will take charge of her estate. The stakeholders arrive one by one. As a sign of respect, they take off their slippers before stepping onto the concrete floor. I stay to one side on a bamboo chair. In a 'bossy' gesture, the Budaungkan headman asks Ko Kyaw to write the contract. The former stamps and signs it. He, or maybe his henchman, will deal with the land officer to update the cadastre. U Htoo gives the remaining two-thirds of the money to Daw Than and, following their prior agreement,[17] she gives money to both the Budaungkan headman and his henchman. Ko Kyaw receives nothing directly. Akin to both contractors, he facilitates the transaction. His status, network and knowledge of land laws and contracts ensure the procedure runs efficiently.

1pm. In the Field

Once the contract is signed, Ko Kyaw goes to his house. He swaps his shirt and *longyi* for a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. His wife, Ma Khin, had come back a moment earlier from their greenhouse of betel leaves. It is harvest time, which occurs every two weeks. They pack their meal and a batch of betel nuts, cheroots, water and snacks for their workers. I help carry the straw baskets to fetch the precious green leaves. We slalom between the palm trees and finally reach the field. A group of girls and women – relatives, neighbours and acquaintances – as well as Ko Kyaw's wife's uncle – an alcoholic – have been working in the greenhouse since morning. The uncle controls the flow of water while the women collect leaves. The leaves should neither be too small nor too big, of a clear and dense green catching the rays of the dimmed sun. Picking the right ones requires sharp eyes, agile hands and bearing the pain of walking crouched down for several hours. In current times, labourers are scarce. There has been a rise in day labour opportunities in Monywa for males, notably as builders and, to a lesser extent, for females as weavers working from home. In addition, seasonal and long-term

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migrations cause shortages of farm workers and raise daily wages, a situation favouring the labourer (*myaukthu*) usually seen as lower status than the farmer (*taungthu*; Chapter 2, section on transforming hierarchy). Ma Khin organizes the labourers, looks for more workers, checks their availability, sets agreements and pays them. She combines her previous network with the one she is progressively crafting out of her husband's relations. Labour relationships are thus made up of needs, opportunities and timing on a daily basis.

Now consider Ko Kyaw in his greenhouse, ploughing a furrow to ease water flows. This place and the adjacent plots enriched his extended family for decades before they were sold off, like today. He grew up there and knows every little thing around. Yet Ko Kyaw is not really a landowner. A few months later in the same location, gazing at the land he envisions for a second greenhouse, he will tell me that 'nobody owns' it (Chapter 5). Thus, he is rather a would-be owner and a farmer in-the-making. Take the greenhouse. He built it in late 2015 on his parents' land. It is a regular source of income that requires substantial capital to set up: digging a well, buying a pump, an engine and pipes, building the greenhouse and purchasing saplings. Ko Kyaw's parents supported the investment, which he reimbursed after one year of activity. Now he is planning to create a second and larger greenhouse on his own, but still on land officially owned by his parents (he did the land registration). Usually, people access land through inheritance at various times during their life (Chapter 5).[18] Accessing land depends very much on family strategies. As we will see in the next chapter, the biggest dilemma is to achieve a livelihood while supporting the children to make their own later on. Relations of commensality are emphasized and partially resolve this dilemma. Ko Kyaw accesses part of his parents' estate because he is their would-be caretaker. He gradually took responsibility for organizing the farming of his parents' land along with them. Beyond mere consultations on farming strategies, their relationship also involves land sales and loan politics. Ko Kyaw smiles at me and jokes that, if he does not succeed as a farmer, he will come to France on his rototiller.

Seeing U Htoo and his wife walking around the plot they just bought some two hundred yards away, Ko Kyaw shouts over to them. 'Come eat with us!', he yells from afar. Five minutes later, they arrive with their lunchboxes. We sit there on a wickerwork tarp while the nephew joins us. Plates and dishes are gathered between us. Once again, I, an uncanny guest, am asked to eat more every time I finish a handful of rice. Each couple displays overt hospitality to the other, offering to taste that dish, this soup of beans, that salad of leaves. But everyone politely eats mostly the dishes they brought.

Ko Kyaw gives more details on when and how the cuttings of betel will be available. U Htoo and his wife need about four hundred to start and will reimburse him once they can harvest it. In short, Ko Kyaw invests in them and,

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Figure 4.3. Lunch next to the greenhouse, Gawgyi, 2016. © Stéphen Huard.

beyond being cousins, it further solidifies their relationship, in which Ko Kyaw is a sort of patron. After another cheroot, several chews of betel and an umpteenth look at the ongoing war on CoC, we head back to Gawgyi.

4pm. The Big Men

Back from the field, we take a rest at Ko Kyaw's house. After an hour or so, I tell him that his uncle U Lin has asked for our help. He is currently rebuilding the roof of a shelter for his cattle. Building repairs are moments of collective help. In theory, everyone comes to give a hand, but in practice it often displays a relational engagement under the rubric of help. For this shelter, the roof, made of palm leaves, needs to be changed. Now that the main crops are harvested, most villagers do such repairs before the peak of the summer heat. When we arrive there, a small group of men are bustling around. One of them splits leaves from branches with his machete. Another, holding his machete with his feet, slices the edges of the branches and soaks them in water to make strings. The last one makes incisions in the leaves to tie the strings that will eventually be attached to the bamboo structure. The scene is familiar. These men are the ones we met earlier at the premarital ceremony. U Lin, Ko Kyaw's uncle, teacher of the village school and leader of the bachelor group, is accompanied by U Htay,

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Ko Kyaw's brother-in-law and official elder, and U Maung, the most respected elder often officiating as master of ceremonies. They are the main village big men. To a certain extent, they represent a familial accumulation of leadership positions. However, as most villagers are relatives in some way, the concentration of leadership particularly reflects how a few farming families have managed to secure and gather, through alliance and descent, land, cattle and know-how, to such an extent that being an accomplished farmer (*taungthu*) is *the* valued status. When asked about what, in their opinion, makes a man (*lu*) big (*gyi*), they always emphasize propriety and achievements (Chapter 2 on the last men of *hpon*).

'You guys aren't early', U Lin mocks us. I retort with a joke I know will work: 'That's because Ko Kyaw is afraid of his wife!' They all laugh. Whereas Ko Kyaw starts slicing strings in no time, I try in vain to make myself useful and finally give up and sit down. They take a break a short moment later and engage in casual discussion. We talk about the morning's ceremony, the current change in government, fluctuations in crop prices, the next pagoda festival and so forth. I pour coffee. U Lin unpacks snacks. U Htay offers Ko Kyaw a betel chew and U Maung lights his cheroots. Tea or coffee, smokes and betel chews are the ingredients of male sociality. The offering of any of these items follows a basic understanding: *apyan ahlan*, which means 'one good turn deserves another', the ethics of living together. To some extent, assistance, help and offerings follow a simple rule of reciprocity. It is also a highly relational matter, depending on and reflecting the state of relationships. In the same vein, us coming here to give a hand shows a degree of affiliation, for the place is saturated by big men. I recall that Nash, an anthropologist working in the dry zone in the late 1950s, said that these kinds of men are not powerful. He wrote:

> The lugyi do not set style; they do not necessarily move anyone to emulation, and they have no power, only the recognized right to use moral suasion …. One of the reasons these men are elderly people is that they do not overstep the vague but delicate line that separates individual responsibilities. (Nash 1965: 270)

I see them as people taking care of village matters. They make village affairs a space of commitment where the worth of the people is gauged, and thus create a political order within the village. And yet 'the vague but delicate line' is all that is on my mind at that moment. I ask: 'Why do people call you the village big men?' They laugh. 'We are not', replies U Lin. I retort, 'So why do you take care of village affairs (*ywayay okhteinhmu*)?' U Htay answers, 'Who else would do it?' A deep silence follows. Everyone gazes in other directions. After a minute that feels like an hour, U Maung teases me: 'It's not easy, young man'. Ko Kyaw smiles again, and we resume our petty discussion until he touches upon a specific subject.

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They start talking about U Myo's case and Ko Kyaw gives the details of the current unfolding of the dispute (Chapter 3). Background information is required to understand it fully. In short, around 2003, eleven farmers mortgaged their land to U Myo, at that time a money lender and gambler from Mogaung. Usually, this kind of agreement (called *yahman-ngway*) does not involve interest and lasts for one to three years. U Win, the Infamous, wrote and stamped the contracts. Both U Myo and U Win have the reputation – at least in Gawgyi – of being rogues, crooked and yet powerful men. The dispute started three years later, after U Myo became headman of Budaungkan tract. Most of the farmers asked for an extension as they could not yet reimburse U Myo. He refused. The eleven farmers went on to seek resolution with U Win, who refused. They sent the case to the township authorities, who sent it back to U Win, who refused again. The situation remained at a standstill for a few years, during which U Myo and U Win were accused of having forged counterfeit contracts to turn the mortgages into land sales. In 2008, U Myo unsuccessfully attempted to get the land registered in his name. Later, six out of the eleven farmers managed to get their plots back – those of the poorest quality. The five remaining farmers awaited the successive headmen to handle the case, but no one did. The contracts, fake or genuine, stayed concealed. Nothing moved forward until the Farmland Law (2012) was implemented in Myinmilaung tract in 2013. Old grudges were revived.[19] The plots were claimed for title twice so the 'land committee' had to judge the case. Ko Kyaw asked for a meeting between all stakeholders in May 2014 to reach a consensus. It failed, and the case has now been transferred to court. This was the point they touch upon while drinking coffee under U Lin's shelter.

Their gazes drop down again. When Ko Kyaw says that the court has not settled anything yet but that the odds are in the favour of U Myo, the air thickens with unspoken thoughts. Silence. Trying to find a consensus was the only way for Ko Kyaw not to be at odds with the previous headmen, with the farmers and with his superiors. It is the most common way of settling disputes. To put it simply, it is nearly impossible for headmen to engage the responsibility of previous ones. Even if in theory a headman can decide alone, Ko Kyaw simply could not take the risk or responsibility to rule on the matter by himself. This is the point, that on a day-to-day basis he has to dissemble because he represents layer upon layer of individuals and not simply his own authority via the institution. The stakeholders are too close. The past is too imbued with military-style rule. The men of power, if they were officials in the past, play the card of outright invulnerability. If they fall, others will too. Ko Kyaw is just not big enough. Nor are Gawgyi big men. The value of not being competent enables Ko Kyaw to craft the dynamics that are put upon him because of his position. He says, 'In a few months, I'm done'.

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6pm. To the Teashop

When we run out of toddy leaves and betel nuts, Ko Kyaw brings me to his house.[20] There we resume the ongoing war campaign on Clash of Clans. The discussion stops short as his wife comes back from the field. It is time to fetch the harvest from the greenhouse. In a quick move, we get on our motorbikes and drive back to the sandy field. We pack the loaded baskets and secure them with straps. The workers eventually walk home. Later in the evening, once the yield is transformed into cash, they will come to Ko Kyaw's wife to get paid. The precious green leaves will soon be estimated in a brokering house in Monywa. Brokers[21] and farmers often try to trick each other about prices and weights. Only after regular intercourse can they trust each other. Thus, 'having' a broker or two is an asset that farmers hardly share with newcomers, especially in this business, unless the latter (like U Htoo) depends on the former (like Ko Kyaw). Back at Ko Kyaw's house, his wife and cousin are unpacking the leaves to then clean and pack them up again with wet towels to keep them fresh. His brother joins us before the departure with a bag of betel chews to share. We carefully load the baskets once more onto the motorbikes and begin the journey towards Monywa.

Our first stop is the grocery store located on Gawgyi's main road to buy betel chews. As usual, U Htay is sitting behind the shopkeeper, close to the money box, on the high-mounted wickerwork mattress under the shade of the straw roof. At this time of the day, the shopkeeper makes betel chews as if on an assembly line. We each order a bag according to our taste. Ko Kyaw insists on paying. He is the one getting some money tonight. We resume our trip to Monywa. The shortest way is along a straight dirt track intersecting with Kyawkka Road that goes eastwards from Monywa. The dirt path was built quite recently in 2009, when U Htay was headman (2006–2011), following an ancient oxcart lane and spanning farmlands. Since this road has been built, land prices have risen on both sides of the thoroughfare and continue to escalate as it gets closer to the city centre. We come across many villagers driving back from their daily jobs. Once we reach the sealed road, we stop at the freshly built petrol station just around the corner. During the past couple of years, such stations have been mushrooming on road banks in the outskirts of Monywa. We turn westwards and pass the tollgate that nowadays stops loaded trucks only. We finally arrive at the destination. Two young men help unload the baskets. The broker warehouse is bustling, so while we wait our turn we go to a nearby teashop, keeping an eye on the merchandise. It is now up to the owner to explain to the clients why a foreigner accompanies Ko Kyaw. We politely end the discussion, for the baskets are going to be weighed.

With this bi-monthly wage in his pocket, Ko Kyaw drives us to a downtown teashop famous for its local fried specialities. Some Gawgyi youngsters, those

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proactive on Clash of Clans, join us. Ko Kyaw makes a point in treating *us*, his small troop of followers, to food and drinks. He does so without being bossy. It is just normal. He got paid, so he pays. But in this case, Ko Kyaw cannot completely hide the fact that he is somehow above the others. There were no explicit expectations that Ko Kyaw would treat us. It is all implicit. Even if he does not want to be seen as a patron, his behaviour, his deeds, his experience, his age, his family and his assets put him in that position in this context. Moreover, the fact that people implicitly expect things from him and that he aligns with those expectations – he got paid, so he pays – allows him to expect things from others in return in a potentially endless game. The degree of obligation and the weight of expectations depend greatly on relationships and contexts. The same is true for daily services, sharing betel chews, cigarettes or playing Clash of Clans. At the teashop, the friendly atmosphere is emphasized to keep in mind that no hierarchy is overtly at play here. It is about having a good time. This fluidity contrasts with the more hierarchical relationships Ko Kyaw was dealing with a few hours earlier. Everyone orders tea to his taste and eats fried chicken sticks on coffee tables that fill the road as soon as the daylight fades. The waiter refills the pack of smokes as we empty it. The conversation flows from one subject to another, from lovers and university gossip to plans for improving our football team. Once sated, we spit copiously on the half-dirt, half-sealed road, a blood-like saliva produced by betel chews. When everybody has eaten, spat and smoked, and Ko Kyaw's generosity can be pushed no further, the group promptly seeks out their motorbikes parked in the heaped mass of engines and plastic.

Riding in a group is a pleasant thing. As soon as there are at least two drivers sharing a journey, people will travel side by side whenever possible. They cannot help it. We cruise back to Gawgyi, lights on, exchanging jokes, betel chews, pointing and gazing at girls, in gang-like fashion.

At Night

As we arrive back at Ko Kyaw's house, his cousin is standing in the kitchen doorway while his mother finishes her meal. The cousin has come to get her daily wage and organize the next rounds of work. Ko Kyaw passes the banknotes to his wife who vanishes into the living room, to return a few seconds later and discretely hand the cousin her salary. Ko Kyaw is reminded by his wife, for the record, that he should not spend too much in teashops. He smiles at her and pouts until she grins back. I shower and eat my dinner with him in the living room, followed by the habitual coffee, cheroots and betel. Another routine awaits us.

We walk to the village shop to buy betel chews and coffee bags before going to the house of the father-in-law of Ko Kyaw's brother in the middle of the village.

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There, a small gathering occurs almost every night. Drinking coffee is the stated reason for meeting up. U Htay and U Lin are already there, reading news on Facebook. We sit on benches and U Htay pours coffee for us. When U Maung arrives, most of us cannot help but offer him our seat. We usually do this for anyone who arrives, but especially with U Maung. He is old, wise and a big man. Giving up one's seat shows deference and such politics are clues for understanding local hierarchies to some degree. It is a convivial time between relatives, neighbours and friends, although not everybody dares to join in. In short, this meeting is the small council of village affairs. A council from which Ko Kyaw will gradually withdraw as soon as he stops being headman in a few years' time.

Tonight's conversations are about a ceremony that took place a few days ago. A novice monk, a native of Gawgyi, came back to the village after successfully passing an examination in a famous monastery in Sagaing. The ceremony (called *gonpyupwe*) was organized to honour his literary prowess and to ordain him. On the road from Monywa to Gawgyi monastery, he was mounted high on the quarterdeck of a pickup in a triumphal yet dignified posture, followed by a procession of villagers. The ordination ensued in the monastery, where invited monks gathered to read Pali texts. The quality of the procession[22] depends greatly on villagers, while the quality of the ordination hinges mostly on the *hsayadaw* ('head monk') of Gawgyi monastery. I know people like to gauge the quality of ceremonies, so I ask what they thought of it. They laugh about the fact that the speakers were faulty, notably when invited monks gave talks after the ritual. Most importantly, U Htay underlines the presence of a highly worshipped *hsayadaw* of a nearby village who, beyond being one of the few reading Pali, is said to have supernatural powers. This is no coincidence. Most men from Gawgyi in their thirties today were pupils of him in the past. He taught them Buddhism, morals and cosmological calculations, topics that are usually left out of school curriculums. More than a spring of merit, he is perceived as a fountain of knowledge and embodies living ethics and potency.

I discreetly tell Ko Kyaw that the Gawgyi *hsayadaw* called him today. He nods but says it is too late for this tonight. This monk is more respected because of his status than his achievements. He is the head of two monasteries given the number of years since ordination, but he hardly evokes the same sense of admiration. Rather, I noticed that many had distanced themselves from him over the last year or two, since he undertook the reconstruction of Gawgyi and Zalok monasteries. U Lin, organizer of most ceremonies, is in close contact with him and tonight spreads his word that donations of 1000 kyats per month per family would be needed to finalize the construction of a house for monks in Gawgyi monastery. 'Merit will flow from it', he says. Ko Kyaw avoids my gaze. In Zalok, on the periphery of Monywa, the meritorious donations from laypeople mostly draw from the recent rise in land prices and business opportunities, escalating in

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a race for prestige and merit. They sell plots, whose value has multiplied tenfold in some cases, and sponsor sumptuous ceremonies. In Gawgyi, there are fewer donations. Land prices have risen, but not to the same extent, and most of the new buildings were founded by outsiders' donations. U Maung pours a round of tea. Nobody talks about greed or openly criticizes the monk, but the fact is that he already has a house. The general attitude is avoidance, as much as possible. If one speaks his mind, he might regret it. Rather than voice his opinion – which could be 'only in the mouth' – Ko Kyaw prefers to remain silent, and only sets foot in the monastery for the main ceremonies. Avoidance means staying away from situations where intimate conceptions contradict reality. U Htay, sensing the dilemma, openly acknowledges that it is a complex topic that Ko Kyaw is not yet at ease with. There is ambiguity in every relationship. Keeping one's mouth shut is sometimes a way to be loyal to one's conceptions.

We finish our cup of tea. I refuse an umpteenth chew, for my mouth is burning, and we head back to Ko Kyaw's. His mother, his wife and daughter are already sleeping. Alone, finally, with him and his brother, we pursue our discussion. At some point, I plainly ask him why he wanted to be headman. He does not want it anymore, but was 'pushed' by fellow villagers. For him, 'it's just not worth it', the responsibilities are overwhelming for the pay grade. I tell him that many headmen are known for being political entrepreneurs who use the position to expand their network, take bribes, to show their 'face'[23] to officials and, if manoeuvred properly, to line up for opportunities (such as the deployment of rural development funds). On the other side, Ko Kyaw insists that it means being responsible for the tract, putting in time and effort to get things done (land recording, ID cards, loan requests and so on) while, at the same time, being 'poorly' paid.[24] I remark that he also gets money from transactions, notably land sales, and that U Htay is renowned for refusing such transactions when he was headman (2006–2011). Ko Kyaw expands on this example.

Here is his technique. When he measures a plot and fills out contracts for relatively normal sales, the buyer or the seller will invariably ask how much they owe him. These are tests wherein everyone tries to keep face, and it shows how Ko Kyaw is always judging situations and acting in them. If he answers with a specific amount, it becomes a request that sounds like any other headman asking for money. To ward off this dilemma, he says 'give me what you want'. People give money either way, unless he strongly refuses,[25] and thus short-circuits the rules of the game (as did U Htay the Worthy). However, by neither refusing overtly nor asking for a specific amount, Ko Kyaw plays with ambiguity.[26] People have to guess on the go. It becomes a test for them. Ko Kyaw gets money and keeps face. Thus, he adjusts how he performs headship according to previous headmen's stances, how obligations are brought about, agrarian customs and the running of village affairs at large.

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His brother stays silent, playing CoC with his own team whose members are from all around the country. On our side, we won the war against a coalition from South Korea. The coolness of the night invades the house as we light a last smoke before going to bed.

Mediating Domains of Politics

In late 2015, the position of headman was up for election again. Ko Kyaw decided not to stand. A first interpretation of his withdrawal could be that the time, the investment and the demands from villagers and the government were a burden. Yet, following Ko Kyaw going about his day gives a sense that headship is not the simple brokerage of state authority. Ko Kyaw stepped down to distance himself from the layers of responsibilities and chains of relations he had to deal with when he was embodying headship. This chapter has shown that headship needs theorizing not only through those times where a patron-client or a government sort of politics is on display but also through those moments that are less obviously political. It is these moments that underline how important forces, personalities and histories are. Embodying headship is as much about the times in the day when the cloth of headship is less apparent as when it is.

Historically, headmen were crucial in the control of land and people's movements, providing identity documents when a person wanted to travel or registering visitors coming into the village. In short, as they could register people's movements, crop procurements, loans and transfers of property, they were go-between for the villagers and government agencies. Thus, village headmen could be described as brokers between the villagers and the government as much as the latter tried to control people's movement and activities, and as much as people were willing to access or avoid its officials. Following Ko Kyaw for one day gives a sense that any reading of headship as patronage or as the simple brokerage of governmental authority is insufficient. Village headship is not just an intercalary position hamstrung between bureaucratic and village demands (Gluckman et al. 1949) that gives him room for manoeuvre (Kuper 1970). Gluckman's and Kuper's headmen, like Ko Kyaw, were living in a peculiar configuration of forces, personalities and histories.

The particular configuration of past dynamics in day-to-day life is key. As for Ko Kyaw, his dilemma was to align acts and words and to show trustworthiness. On a practical level, his challenge was to fashion the dynamics that are put upon him due to his position, as he did not simply represent his own authority via the institution. Situations, people's stance and strategies are informed by the past, or rather by how actors order the past into narratives. In this, trustworthiness is a matter of time and examples. The last men of *hpon*, the moral rupture between the Infamous and the Worthy, the rise of village affairs are turning points.

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It constrained Ko Kyaw in his ability to be headman as much as, or maybe even more than the legal definition of his rights and duties. We have seen that previous village leaders are benchmarks against which to evaluate the morality of a time, acting as a backdrop to explain the difference between today and the past. They are references, exemplary people drawn upon to explain the ups and downs of village morality and it shows how ethical shifts influence the local configuration of power. Ko Kyaw could not display the exact qualities of a leader enumerated by Nash, just as he could not be simply a political entrepreneur. While he was headman, the men of *hpon* were gone, the government had shown its violence, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper were competing for decades if not centuries and village affairs were oriented by the local elite. He had to deal with old and new in multiple social spaces where obligations and memories influenced how he engaged with others. Ko Kyaw's craft was to be at the juncture between past and present dynamics and he was evaluated according to how, in concrete situations, he aligned or played with the local understanding of worthiness.

Following how a headman embodies and fashions headship during a day thus offers a key to interpreting the organization of the domains of local politics in Gawgyi and beyond. We started in Ko Kyaw's home to show how personal affairs can connect with collective matters. We observed how making a family was about negotiating obligations to his parents while investing in kinship to access resources and gradually assuming responsibility for the family. It required fashioning personal relations, rules and resources. More fundamentally, we saw how success in making a home can intersect with the understanding of bigness as an ability to take care of affairs beyond one's personal responsibilities and obligations towards one's family. We then touched upon how creating a small faction with a game was a way to deal with government affairs and avoid potential obligations by short-cutting rules of hospitality. By using the personal bonds that make up his clique to call someone to his home, Ko Kyaw fashioned a conducive space, diminishing the obligations that might arise from a situation of hospitality in order to embody and be the headman. We also witnessed him playing the roles of both the big man and the headman by the book during a ceremony and a land sale, to ensure they ran smoothly. This sale, which many would see as the most strategic or stressful element of his day, is perhaps the smoothest part. It is rather when his role is less clear or distinct that more work is required, such as when he updated Gawgyi big men about the ongoing land conflict. To some extent, he is bound to inform them, and show a degree of loyalty, due to their personal relations and their role in handling village affairs at a distance from the state. This sequence has also shown that he has to act within the local debate about what is political and what pertains to the government; in other words, he mediates the history of the local polity, the values attached to bigness, and the chains of knowledge about past headmen and intervillage rivalries. Ko Kyaw also appeared as a sort of patron,

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more or less unwittingly redistributing wealth while sharing a good time with his followers. Being headman was not all fun and games and he mostly remained silent about it. Being silent is not being passive, but is a choice, reflecting how mediating several domains of local political life is more about actions than words.

The temporality of a day allowed me to describe the processual nature of the work involved in embodying and fashioning an institution through successive and connected scenes. This mode of ethnographic description shows how the multiple places we moved through, the individuals we encountered and the things we saw circulating can be assembled. In this journey, we moved from Ko Kyaw's home to a neighbouring village, a teashop, a field, several neighbours' houses; we encountered his family, his clique, some big men, other and former headmen; we navigated a ceremony and situations of hospitality, of exchange, of mutual help and of sociability where money, contracts, land titles, tea, betel, snacks, cigarettes and cheroots circulated. These were some of the things Ko Kyaw fashioned to embody the headman.

Focusing on how a headman engages with different layers of responsibilities and obligations in successive settings illuminates some key domains that organize local politics. One further avenue would be to compare this case with Amerindian chiefdoms – as institutions without power allowing the perpetuation of a consensus and the avoidance of an important social differentiation – or with the Oceania model of big men – those figures of entrepreneurial leaders who gather people around them in collective projects, but whose influence can collapse radically if they fail to redistribute. I prefer to focus on the capacity deployed in action rather than reifying political types. This suggests a position from which we might reconsider what a political institution embedded in a local society mediates. By distinguishing the personal, the political and the government domains, I propose a move from the interactionist understanding of local politics as made up of levels, arenas or forms of governance, towards enriching the understanding of brokerage as assemblage (Koster and van Leynseele 2018) with a more pragmatic approach to the enactment of politics and mediation. In line with Lindquist, for whom 'the problem of how to describe and conceptualize what the broker mediates is … primarily ethnographic' (2015: 174), the first step I proposed was to think of headship in terms of embodying and fashioning – taking upon oneself and dealing with – as simultaneous processes that can be described. Only then does the question of how a headman embodies and fashions an institution lead to the question of what a headman mediates, in Ko Kyaw's case the domains of local politics.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in 'Embodying and Fashioning Headship: A Day in the Life of a Village Headman in the Center of Myanmar', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 12(2) (2022).

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2. GAD stands for General Administration Department, usually seen as the 'backbone' of the military government which oversees local governance from the village and ward levels to the Union level, dealing with people's day-to-day needs including registration of births and deaths, land management, tax collection and budget planning.
3. Notably the Village-Tract Land Management Committee. For a study of this committee, cf. Boutry et al. (2017: 250).
4. This part of the day relates to the morning of 26 February 2016.
5. *Puso* is the name of the long skirt worn by men.
6. For a detailed examination of how space can be organized according to local cosmology, see Robinne (2000).
7. On the fact that transmitting inheritance is more about taking responsibility for a family than a transfer of ownership, see Huard (2018).
8. This subsection refers to 15 November 2015, when Ko Kyaw was finalizing the deliverance of Land Use Certificates.
9. Following the Farmland Law passed in 2012, Land Use Certificates had to be handed to farmers. The affair was long and troublesome. For a general description of the scheme, cf. Boutry et al. (2017).
10. It also shows his ability to bridge younger and older generations and it gives the youngsters an opportunity to experience adults' affairs.
11. The committee is officially named VTFMC or Village-Tract Farmland Management Committee.
12. A position created by the 2012 Farmland Law and staffed by Ko Kyaw with a villager from Gawgyi.
13. Staffed directly by the government several years ago with a villager from Myinmilaung Proper.
14. This subsection and the two following (1pm and 4pm) happened on 28 January 2016.
15. These expenses are covered by the parents of the fiancé and bought in advance by U Lin, leader of bachelors.
16. *Ahsaung ama* also refers to monks' sermons and the promotion of Buddha's teaching at large.
17. The amount given to headmen for such a service is usually 10% of the land price.
18. This could happen on marriage or a little before or after the death of one or both parents depending on their plan and the stakes associated with the patrimony; see Huard (2018).
19. For an analysis of this type of land conflict, see Boutry et al. (2017: 142–47).
20. This subsection and the next are drawn from events that happened on 19 May 2016.
21. *Pwesa*, literally the person making a living from connecting people.
22. This also includes the facilitation of the whole ceremony (cooking food for guests and monks, building the temporary structures and so on).
23. An interesting parallel can be found in Koenig (1990: 157) when he analyses corruption under the Konbaung dynasty.
24. His salary is 120,000 MMK per month (less than 100 USD). Minus compulsory purchase of government newspapers and stationery, his monthly income totals 100,000 MMK, the same as a daily worker on a construction site in Monywa in 2015.
25. This money is also given to ensure a change of ownership in official records.
26. Spiro (1997) shows a similar pattern when describing how Township Officers in 1960 used the rhetoric of help to talk about bribes.

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5

Transmitting Land

13 May 2016. It is 1pm and Ko Kyaw is about to leave his house to go to his betel garden on his parents' land further afield.[1] First, we join his wife, who packs some betel nuts, cheroots, water and snacks for their labourers as well as several straw baskets to carry the precious green leaves. On our loaded motorbikes, we depart for the field some five minutes away to the east of Gawgyi. The tracts are sandy in summer, water drains in the monsoon. We almost collide with an oxcart. 'The sun is hot isn't it,' shouts the driver. As we arrive, the usual group of girls and women, as well as Ko Kyaw's wife's uncle, welcome us with the usual 'Have you eaten yet?'

Ko Kyaw was ploughing a furrow to ease the flow of water when I asked who owns the piece of land he envisioned for a second betel garden. This place and the adjacent plots have enriched his extended family for decades, if not sold off to a neighbour. He grew up here and knows every little thing around. This landscape has been shaped by social life for centuries, and I could only guess how many hours he must have spent here building his dexterity in climbing mango trees and swinging his slingshot. He told me, in a deep, serious voice, gazing at the land and half-embarrassed by my recurring questions, that 'nobody owns' this land (*behdhuhma mapaingbu*). What I knew was that his parents were the owners on paper, that it was given to his father after his grandparents' death, that his sister also had a claim on it as inheritance and that building a second greenhouse was a further step towards taking care of his parents. In a way, investing in family relationships was a means to access land. But there was more to it.

By looking at the transmission of inheritance as a process of redefining authority and responsibility, this chapter argues that intrafamily relationships are a domain of politics and that transmission is about recalibrating people's engagement with each other. This is in part because dynamics of kinship and

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 175.

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the moral and social obligations between family members have organized land relations in the longue durée, but also because what makes a family – hierarchy, commensality – and the mutual obligations between its members – gratitude, care – create entitlement to property. Focusing on transfers of wealth within families allows us to see them as a crucial domain of engagement.

In this chapter, I use Ko Kyaw's statement as a line of enquiry for three questions: (1) How do the dynamics of kinship and the moral and social obligations between family members organize the transmission of inheritance? (2) How have they maintained a degree of continuity in the countryside? And (3) How can the transmission of inheritance, as a process of redefining authority and responsibility in families, inform how village leadership is imagined? This chapter adopts three different voices deployed in three sections. The first section takes a historical voice to look at how entitlement to inheritance has been a central feature of land relations in the history of Gawgyi village while several state projects and laws have attempted to orient and control land tenure. The second section is more conceptual and presents the ideas surrounding how inheritance should be transmitted. These historical and conceptual parts serve as a backdrop for exploring the actual dynamics of transmission through the case of Ko Kyaw's family. The concluding section links the question of transmitting inheritance with the issue of transmitting leadership to open up a possible comparison between 'taking care of' a family (stewardship) and 'taking care of' village affairs (guardianship).

Saying that nobody owns the land does not mean that no one can claim ownership or that no one has secured land rights. It is thus not directly about how land tenure has been formalized by a state at times lacking consistent infrastructural control and often dispossessing locals. It rather means that it is uncertain who *will* own this or that piece of land in a context where land disputes *could* have occurred mostly between villagers.[2] Hence, it is a statement about the temporalities of family relationships, about the dynamics of property transfers and about how people craft their lives. Exploring the transmission of inheritance as a redefinition of authority[3] and responsibility crisscrossed by uncertainty through Ko Kyaw's case shows that what makes a family – hierarchy, commensality – and the mutual obligations between its members – gratitude, care – create entitlement to property. Ko Kyaw's statement is thus a point of entry to revisit ownership and authority in the Burmese context. To sustain this claim, this chapter connects property, authority and kinship.[4] Land, and by extension property relations, have been analysed as a 'semi-autonomous' social field (Moore 1978), with its own set of (changing) rules, arbitration, competitions, actors, arenas and bypasses that have come to be studied under the rubric of land governance. An everyday perspective shows that land needs to be seen in its connection to other aspects of social and political life. Foregrounding the fact that land

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is entangled in multiple relationships, this chapter, based on an ethnography of land relations (Colin 2008), is an effort to describe how my interlocutors think about it in their own terms to provide an understanding of, among other things, how rights are conceived. Highlighting the dynamics and dilemmas of inheritance transmission allows for an exploration of how authority is conceived in family relationships. The core focus is the process, the temporalities of family relationships, how people engage with each other, and the outcome a redefinition of ownership (*paingsainhmu*) not in terms of rights (*ahkwint-ayay*), but of stewardship (*okchokhmu*).

In turn, this ethnographic perspective allows us to explore the history of land relations from a new angle, showing how family relations have accommodated state projects and laws. Around Gawgyi, farmlands and harvests have been commodified for at least two centuries and multiple state projects have been set up to organize land tenure. In the genealogy of such schemes, the rationalizing of the precolonial state, the creation of a colonial land tenure, the development of socialist land reform and, more recently, the introduction of a more open land market are turning points.[5] Yet the domain of inheritance operated to some extent alongside these projects and has been integrated into Burmese Buddhist law,[6] 'a construction of principles that apply to lay Buddhists and regulate matters of marriage, inheritance, and divorce' (Crouch 2016b: 86–87), mostly used in courts. On the ground, a large array of customs regulating land use and transfers have been operating in a countryside crossed by state and market forces. Among these customs, the entitlement to inheritance has maintained a degree of continuity in local land tenure for decades, if not centuries, because, as the ethnography of land relationships in Gawgyi village shows, transmitting inheritance is about redefining authority and responsibility over things, and obligations between people. In tracing the change in land tenure over time, I rely on different historical sources: colonial reports,[7] academic publications on the history of the country,[8] legislation,[9] and oral histories of villagers in Gawgyi and beyond.[10]

After having studied how Ko Kyaw crafted his position as headman (*okchokyayhmu*) in the previous chapter, describing the transmission of inheritance and *in fine* ownership as a question of stewardship (*okchokhmu*) allows us to question in the next chapter another form of authority, that of *big men*, in terms of guardianship (*okhteinhmu*). This perspective enables us to link a historical dynamic – the rise of village affairs as the form of Gawgyi politics – with local conceptions of authority.

A Short History of Changes in Land Tenure

This section relates to the historical chapters of the book to describe how the flexibility of land relations over the past two centuries made the countryside

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around Gawgyi a rent market in which debt, family obligations and arrangements for sharecropping operated outside the law to some extent. It shows that the colonial devisal of a private property-based system at the turn of the nineteenth century created a picture in which the person in charge of a household was the owner of the land. However, during the colonial period as for today, there were often differences between who farmed the land (occupancy), who (momentarily) owned it and who had a potential claim to it (inheritance and pre-emption). The 'owner' became a state tenant during the socialist period (1962–1988) and today is the person eligible to receive a land title. On one level, the major changes in land tenure in Gawgyi since its settlement relate to state projects which aim at either rationalizing the precolonial government, devising a colonial system of land tax, developing a socialist land reform or, more recently, creating a more open land market.[11] On the ground, however, many local rules regulating land use and transfer have remained. Small-scale tenancies were the norm, and the entitlement to inheritance was the most enduring claim,[12] which, when needed, could be defended in court following the principles of Burmese Buddhist law. Inheritance was thus a domain the state could mediate but not truly interfere with in day-to-day practice, and it was invested by the main farming families to muster estates and wealth. This section argues that beyond the formal land tenure system, and aside from patron–client politics, what organized land relations were the dynamics of kinship (alliance, descent and the succession of generations) and the moral and social obligations between family members.

'Hereditary Private Tenure' and the Colonial 'Record of Wrongs'

As Boomgaard noted for Southeast Asian precolonial polities, the question was more 'who owns the crop' than 'who owns the land', due to the scarcity of labour (2011: 449). Yet forms of 'hereditary private tenure' (ibid.: 448) existed in the Lower Chindwin area as it was an important trading centre of the country. On the whole, the bulk of the land was cultivated by the villagers. The families usually cleared land and the deriving claim is called *dama-u-gya*, meaning first clearing. When passed down through inheritance, it became *bobuapaing myay*, that is, 'grandparents' land'. The tenure was hereditary because it was inherited, and thus the term 'private' was merely a reflection of the temporary authority of one person over a family estate that could be sold, rented or mortgaged. The more or less formalized system of tenure of the early nineteenth century (appanage, first clearing, inherited lands and small-scale tenancies) was flexible enough to accommodate changes due to natural hazards, war and famine-driven migrations and competition for offices, and depended on the ability of local authorities to control land access and labour.

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One of the main changes was brought about by the British from 1886 onwards.[13] Their knowledge of the land was rudimentary, and a revenue system able to sustain direct rule was quickly put in place. Based on previous experiences in Lower Burma and Bengal, the Upper Burma Land and Revenue Regulation was enforced in 1889. Two major categories were officialized: state and non-state lands. The key test was whether the land was inheritable (non-state) or not (state). Decades of in-fighting and competition over offices had largely disrupted what could have been a revenue system. Thus, revenue was first drawn[14] from the capitation tax. Soon, non-state lands were targeted. The recording of rights started on the premise that Burmese land ownership (notably non-state land) was 'held in private ownership, on what is practically a full freehold tenure, and in small estates' (Hardiman 1910: 150). What was a form of hereditary private tenure (*bobuapaing*) was understood as individual private property. In the Gawgyi area, the cadastral survey took place from 1897 to 1902 and, in the meantime, registers of rights and tenancies were compiled. At the end of this process, the parcels (called *upaing*) were assigned a serial number referencing the name of the person who now owned it, and who then became liable for the land tax. Plots were now 'permanent holdings' recorded under the name of an owner (*paingshin*) on paper.

Far from being a successful enterprise, the formalization of land rights became a source of conflict and competition. As Furnivall put it, the Record of Rights quickly became a 'Record of Wrongs' (1957: 92), and Township Courts were quickly put to work and opened a new arena for forum shopping. The cases were broadly of two types: suits for the division of familial property and for the redemption of mortgaged land. We saw in Chapter 2 that in the second case, the use of courts was a way to challenge the precolonial gentry who accumulated land through money lending and mortgaging. In the first case, the conflicts stemmed from the confusion between occupancy and ownership. Indeed, during the titling process, 'the occupant was usually taken as the owner, although probably in a large majority of cases the family property had not yet been divided and the occupant was cultivating as the tenant or the mortgagee of the family as a whole' (Furnivall 1957: 92). In addition, nearly half of the land was farmed through small-scale tenancies at the turn of the twentieth century (Hardiman 1910: 17–27) and in the 1920s (Hughes 1932: 39–40). In other words, there were often differences between who worked the land, who owned it and who had a potential claim to it.

What is interesting is what this tells us about the forms of land relations. Once a plot was cleared, it became part of the possessions one could transmit to one's children, usually in equal shares, inheritance being almost fully cognatic (Hardiman 1910: 27; Koenig 1990: 40). Sometimes, a larger part was reserved for the eldest son or daughter, known as the *auratha*[15] (Thant Myint-U 2001: 30).

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Thus, *dama-u-gya* land eventually became *bobuapaing*, that is, a transmissible family estate. It was not ancestral property kept intact. Descent being usually bilateral and the family mostly nuclear, estates tended to be fragmented through time. In the early nineteenth century (Hughes 1932: 40), as is still the case nowadays (Huard 2018), people became owners mostly through inheritance, and tenant farming[16] was the main avenue to access land. This means that a person could be recognized as the main authority of an estate quite late in life. Before that, he might farm plots as a tenant (for his parents, co-heirs, neighbours, local landlord and so on), or as a usufructuary mortgagee, for instance. Outright sales were rare, and a right of pre-emption on sales and mortgages by relations, that is by kinsmen, heirs and even neighbours, was often asserted. Migration did not erase potential claims to land, and colonial officers were confounded by how the sentimental or religious attachment to family land influenced its value and the conditions of transfer. All these claims and forms of land transfer make up a bundle of rights[17] whose core is entitlement to the family estate. One of the ideas organizing land relations during the late precolonial and colonial periods was the fact that land would be given to the children, which pertains to the realm of family obligations. The pre-emption on sales and mortgages by relations, the ability to migrate and keep a claim alive, the conflict over inheritance, and the use of colonial courts to bypass local customs make more sense when understood in these terms. The formalization of ownership was but one aspect of local land relations.

'Land to the Tiller'

The next major change happened in the decades surrounding independence in 1948 and took the form of a push to allocate 'land to the tiller'. Once the Japanese had been driven out of the country and independence achieved, the U Nu government tried to bypass the communists and secure the support of the rural population by enacting land reform.[18] The objective was to turn farmers into government tenants by proclaiming the state as the sole owner of all land and resources. This anti-landlordism policy had limited effects and scope, however. Most of the countryside was out of reach due to communist insurrections. In Gawgyi, the promotion of a 'land to the tiller' reform by the White Flag communists was already an opportunity to negotiate property relations to a certain extent. What first went to the tiller was the land held by gentry descendants and contested money lenders who could not maintain their hold through debts. The delivery of land titles around 1956, when the central government regained power in the Monywa region, was considered a mere formality by villagers. For Nash and Spiro, who conducted their fieldwork at that time in the central plains of Burma, it was mostly a matter of village big men's politics.[19] In addition, the

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successive changes and overlapping of supra-village authorities (the British, the Japanese, the communists, the army, U Nu's government) were opportunities to compete for resources as they empowered some villagers in Gawgyi over others.

Nash has provided his own account of property relations in the drylands of central Burma. For him, land was owned by the head of the household, 'but with presumptive inheritance rights equally distributed among all members' (1965: 49). The key word is presumptive. Rights to inheritance were potential outcomes, claims that could be enforced in a particular context. He went on to talk about kinship relations and defined property stewardship as one of its bases:

> Property stewardship involves the overlapping claims of kinsmen in tangible, real property … chiefly land and cattle, house gardens, ploughs and jewellery … Overlapping claims in real property are always graded claims. A son and daughter, a brother or sister, have putative rights in the land and cattle owned by parents and siblings. The rule of inheritance, almost always followed, of equal shares among offspring, or among a sibling group, is a recognition of this overlap in claims to property. The possession of graded rights (control by the property holder, inheritance by the offspring, usufruct for part-time work by brothers, first employment of cousins for labour, gleaning rights by anyone who can establish kin links) ties some contemporaries into tighter kin nets than their fellow Burmese who do not have estates. (Nash 1965: 69)

While Nash described kinship as a rather loose social structure in the Burmese context, he nonetheless has shown how entitlement to property and access to resources relates to family relations to a large extent. This way of organizing and legitimating claims would eventually remain operative throughout the socialist period.

We saw in Chapter 3 that in Gawgyi, the unfolding of the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' was gradual. On paper, all forms of agricultural production were declared as owned either by the state or by cooperatives. The reorganization of the economy rapidly turned into a more radical nationalization.[20] The centralized system of crop procurement and product distribution became more interventionist, extending to almost all products. Meanwhile the government promised an agrarian revolution that would immediately put an end to the tenant system. Since the 1963 Tenancy Act, peasants had become state tenants with delegated land use rights. They were liable for part of their production while being prohibited from transferring their land (by sales, mortgages and, from 1965, rents), except for inheritance purposes, in order to root out landlordism.

The headman was pivotal to getting around the law and registering (forbidden) changes of ownership. He could – and did – dispossess farmers through

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the Land Committee if their quota was not reached, and tenants working on a plot for up to five years could claim the 'right to cultivate' (*lokpainghkwint*) it in their own name.[21] In other words, the local recognition of ownership and tenancies – officially illegal – was in the hands of the Land Committee, and thus of the headman, and it fuelled cases of dispossession, repossessions and factionalism. Throughout this period, and after the reorientation of the state in 1989, small-scale tenancies,[22] rentals, sales and mortgages occurred outside of the law. The legal land tenure system became a means for local officials to increase their wealth by, for instance, demanding fees for changing names on paper, while it also made it possible to keep ownership local. Follow-up on the land record and crop harvests decreased with the gradual abandonment of procurement as the state largely lost interest in controlling land tenure and focused more on introducing new high-yield crops for export (Thawnghmung 2004). More importantly, local customs organized land tenure arrangements during the socialist period and beyond, operating in parallel with legal norms. That is, as with the colonial period, the state only controlled the tip of the iceberg of land relationships. Paradoxically, even if farmlands were never legally classified as *bobuapaing*, the entitlement to inheritance was the only legal way to transfer land from 1963 to 2012. Many contracts written to support a transaction borrowed the vocabulary of family obligations (for instance, to transfer a land for supporting a family, for eating and so on) to accommodate reality and legality.

Post 2012

The last main change in land tenure happened around 2013, when the 2012 Farmland Law barged into the village to legalize the land market. It opened up an opportunity for farmers to apply for a Land Use Certificate during the titling process carried out by the SLRD. To some degree, it reintroduced the concept of private property[23] as land use rights could be legally sold, mortgaged, rented, pawned and inherited. In Gawgyi, the titling process opened a Pandora's Box, as some long-standing disputes came to the forefront. Eventually, it became more a matter of recognizing who has authority over which parcels and updating the cadastre at low cost. Overall, the flexibility of land relations made the countryside a rent market in which debt, obligations and arrangements for sharecropping have accommodated laws and state projects to some degree throughout the past two centuries. The colonial picture of individual and private land owners was followed by the image of farmers as state tenants who now have Land Use Certificates. The successive reforms may have changed forms of ownership,[24] but beyond the formal land tenure system, and aside from patron–client politics, we have seen that what organizes land relations are the dynamics of kinship (alliance, descent and the succession of generations), the moral and social obligations

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between family members and a conception of ownership as property stewardship. These domains are often overlooked as international NGOs, debates around the 'rule of law' and foreign investors drag the focus towards laws, policies and the recognition of customary rights.[25] As we will see in the next sections, an ethnography of land relations shows that transmission of inheritance is not only about land, but relates to the conceptions of the person, to how relationships create claims on things and to how authority is conceived.

Conceptions of Inheritance

This section describes the local conceptions that impinge on inheritance and links them to legal, historical and anthropological literature in order to anchor the subsequent case study on the actual dynamics of transmission.

In the countryside of central Myanmar, inheritance (*amway*) is supposed to be given by the parents after their death[26] to their biological children in an egalitarian way (*anyi ahmya*). This is how the villagers of Gawgyi formulate the rule governing the transmission of inheritance. In this village inheritance is still the main way to access land.[27] On the whole, an ideology of inheritance is a set of rules that defines a strategy to allow for the continuity of a farm (Rogers and Salamon 1983). In Gawgyi, it is a never-ending process of legitimation of claims, of exclusion and of redefining obligations.

In the broadest sense, passing on inheritance refers to the responsibility of parents to raise their children. Life is conceptualized according to two meanings: as vital breath (*athet*) and as a condition of existence (*bawa*). Parents do not give life in the first sense, but allow it in the second, and have a duty to promote it. They are benefactors (*kyayzushin*) for their children – as are Buddha and teachers – who are owed gratitude in return (Schober 1989). There is an obligation of care between parents and children (*pyuzu saunshauk*): first from parents to their children and later vice versa. It is dynamic. This must be known and applied without being said (*htitat*). Parents must pass on a set of knowledge, skills and possessions, but the children also have a responsibility towards their parents. In one of the written laws that were used to adjudicate cases in precolonial Burma, the metaphor of stewardship is deployed to explain how entitlement to property is created through personal relationships:

> The teacher has power over the property of the scholar, parents over that of their children, husbands over that of their wives, and the master over that of the slave. The scholar has power over the property of the teacher, children over that of their parents, the wife over that of the husband, and the slave over that of the master. Regarding these four kinds of power, when the teacher has taught the scholar his craft, and they are living

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> together, their property is in common; … Why is this? – because the scholar is the steward, the person in charge of the property. (Richardson 1847: 177–78)

In other words, *living together creates a relationship that entitles one to property because the mutual obligations between people create claims over things.* Being entitled is to be potentially in charge of the patrimony. Commensality, called 'living and eating together' (*adunay adusa*) or 'one pot, one household' (*tit-o tit-ein*), is crucial in defining what constitutes a family, like the sharing of the same eating pot or the pooling of resources. It has been noted early on that the equal division of inheritance eventually led to the fragmentation of estates (Hardiman 1910: 28). This centrifugal tendency was nonetheless counterbalanced by a centripetal one that can be described as a 'keeping-while-giving' paradox akin to Annette Weiner's theory developed in 1992.[28] The parents should pass on inheritance equally, but they often keep a part of it for the person who will take care of them and continue the family. Thus, if there is a tendency for families to fragment due to neolocal settlement after marriage, bilateralism in descent and equal division of inheritance, there is also an inclination towards maintaining continuity, notably within large farming families. The conceptions of kinship and family, in terms of shared blood, heredity and descent from a common womb and semen (Spiro [1977] 1986: 44–45), emphasize this disposition. One child in particular, called the *auratha*, in theory the eldest son or daughter, was supposed to take on the burdens and responsibilities of the parents:

> The status of a*w-ra-tha* [*sic*] was not solely ascriptive, however, as it carried with it certain functions which had to be fulfilled for the welfare of the family. The duties of the *aw-ra-tha* were to assume the responsibilities of the father, discharge his debts, and continue the family. It was therefore necessary that the eldest son be competent to meet these obligations. (Koenig 1990: 40–41)

This status still exists to some extent in Gawgyi, as we will see in the case study below.

In a narrow sense, inheritance refers to the material or tangible patrimony. This is divided into two categories following a centre–periphery distinction that shares commonalities with the galactic, or centre-oriented, traditional polities described by Tambiah ([1973] 2013). There is the 'inner property' (*atwin pyitsi*) of the household: gold, jewellery, house, vehicles, farm machinery, sometimes livestock and so on; and the 'outer property' (*apyin pyitsi*): agricultural land, trees, crop drying areas and so forth. In general, outer properties are given in

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equal portions to each child and those at the core are meant for the person who stays with the parents to take over responsibility for the family. The centre–periphery division of property is always subject to negotiations and thus should be understood as a sketch, and not a map,[29] of how to transfer inheritance. Passing on patrimony is a process that never really begins or ends and, because generations intertwine, the obligations between family members and the authority over people and things are constantly transforming.

Transmission is rarely carried out in one go at the time of the parents' death, but occurs at different times, such as during marriages or when the parents define how they will be cared for during their lifetime. A marriage officializes the creation of a new family and the spouses receive a wedding gift (*lethpwe*)[30] from their parents, usually in the form of a sum of money. To propose to their future wives, men (their parents) bring what Spiro called the 'bride price' (*tintaung*; 1975: 90), sometimes including land and which *de facto* constitutes all or part of their inheritance. Once married, the whole of the patrimony donated by the parents of the spouses becomes conjugal patrimony. During divorces, the contributions of each spouse can theoretically be separated if one or the other has committed a serious fault (adultery, non-involvement in the domestic economy, alcoholism, dubious expenses and so on). The general situation is that of children receiving bonding gifts to create their own family, and if those transactions include their share of inheritance, it can cancel out their entitlement to their parental patrimony. In addition, adoption is often used to designate a person (a niece, a nephew, a grandchild)[31] who will take care of the adopting parents, and that person then becomes entitled to inheritance. To advance the family, a 'close' outsider can thus be brought in, becoming a full member. Overall, transmitting inheritance means fulfilling one's obligations by taking into account the history of various transactions occurring within a family. It also depends on the strategies to access resources. To describe this difficult undertaking, let us follow the example of one family in particular.

Recalibrating Relationships

When we met in 2013, Ko Kyaw was about thirty-three years old and, unlike his older sister and younger brother, he was still single. Coming from a family of relatively wealthy farmers, he slept at his parents' house and ate food prepared every morning and evening by his mother, Daw Hlaing, for him and his father U Bo. In the evening, the latter went to sleep at his 'little wife's' (*meyange*)[32] house but still had dinner with Daw Hlaing. Sharing the same pot defines the restricted family sphere. Ko Kyaw, who was then the headman of the village tract (from 2013 to 2016), occasionally registered sales contracts, demarcated the plots of land and worked some of his parents' land.

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A year and a half later, his situation was quite different. He had married Ma Khin and they had a daughter. Settling at first with Ko Kyaw's parents, the couple then moved to live with Ma Khin's mother, Daw Nu, after the birth of their child.[33] Ma Khin stopped working at an electronics store in Monywa while Ko Kyaw had become more and more involved in agricultural work. His parents bought a tiller to make ploughing easier and lent him money to partially finance the construction of a greenhouse and the drilling of a well to establish a betel garden on one of their plots. Ko Kyaw can engage in such projects on his parents' land because he is seen as the child who will become responsible for them. The boundaries are porous between what belongs to the parents and what belongs to Ko Kyaw, even after his marriage. For example, the betel garden project, set up to support his home, was partly financed by a loan from his parents which Ko Kyaw repaid after the first harvests. Ko Kyaw's privileged access to his parents' patrimony is granted to him because their respective assets – those of the parents and those of the couple – are supposed to be combined in the long term. Deciding who has the right to access the parental estate is a delicate undertaking for his parents, as they have not yet defined what, how or when to give inheritance to all their children.

Marriages are crucial moments in the temporality of this transmission. Daw Hlaing and U Bo gave inheritance to only one of their three children, Ko Nway, at his wedding. Ko Kyaw's sister got married first. As is customary, she received her *lethpwe* at her wedding, but not her share of the inheritance. She married a former village headman who is in charge of his own parents. They promised him a large portion of their wealth at the wedding and the young couple settled in their house. Ko Nway, the last son, also received a *lethpwe* (approximately 100 USD) from his parents, who funded the wedding ceremony. He also received his share of the inheritance, in this case four acres and two zebus,[34] following the agreement reached during the engagement ceremony between the spouses' families. This marriage ensured a substantial economic base for Ko Nway and his family, uniting him with a woman whose patrimony was guaranteed. For her part, the bride, the eldest of six siblings, was adopted by her maternal grandfather, U Htoo, to care for him in the future.

Taking care of parents, whether through blood ties or adoption, also reinforces the legitimacy of claims over parental assets and even allows them to receive a little more. U Htoo has already given his two blood children their share of inheritance and since then has lived with Ko Nway and his wife, who thus gained access to his patrimony – a house and ten acres. The latter will become the owners after the death of U Htoo. Adoption can thus serve as a safeguard to avoid potential conflicts between rights holders while preserving land within families. It is a lever to secure a profitable alliance and ensure care for U Htoo in his old age. Changes of residence, marriages and adoptions are therefore crucial

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elements in understanding how inheritance transmission is configured according to family and patrimonial trajectories. The egalitarianism promoted by the rule of inheritance transmission is sometimes undermined. The dynamics of family formation, mainly articulated around marriage and adoption, are influenced both by strategies for controlling resources and the need to take care of people. Parents have to give equally but retain a larger share for the one who will be responsible for them. This is the keeping-while-giving paradox. It is justified by a sense of fairness: the person providing care and taking responsibility should get more. It relates to the precolonial definition of the *auratha* – the child who will take the burden of the parents upon himself – but is also seen as an investment in kinship to access land and resources.

For Ko Kyaw's parents, it was not yet time to clarify how the inheritance between him and his sister would be passed on. Once married, Ko Kyaw lived temporarily with his mother-in-law, Daw Nu, a widow since 2005. He worked hard to establish his home – he, his wife, their daughter – while anticipating how he would look after his parents. Ko Kyaw and Ma Khin did not receive their share of the inheritance for their marriage. When he came to live with his mother-in-law, the arrangement was that Ko Kyaw would farm her land without any direct benefit. The other children of Daw Nu never really farmed these plots. By joining forces with her son-in-law, Daw Nu ensured her harvest, as he had the necessary material capacities, knowledge and network. In addition, during the land titling process, certain parcels owned by Daw Nu were registered by Ko Kyaw – as village headman – under the name of his wife, Ma Khin, in order to apply for a larger loan from the agricultural bank. Thus, Ko Kyaw and his wife tacitly and partially took over Daw Nu's land, potentially creating rights to her property.

A year later, the couple returned to live with Ko Kyaw's parents because it is here that their home should flourish, he said. The two families lived together, but generally did not share meals. The two households remained side by side until the situation became clearer, that is, when the young couple would need to take charge of the parents. During this phase of uncertain relationship building between the two families, the definition of mutual responsibilities and the extent of the commitments made are tested. Ko Kyaw's father, U Bo, became seriously ill during this period. To finance his hospitalization, U Bo and his wife Daw Hlaing sold two zebus and some jewellery and contracted a debt of about 700 USD from a villager. U Bo died a few weeks later, officially from stomach cancer, though local rumour attributed it to witchcraft. After the death of U Bo, Daw Hlaing had to finance the funeral alone and repay the debt. It was her sole responsibility and duty as a wife. Her married children were not directly responsible for this debt, at least not while Daw Hlaing was able to pay it. To do this, she worked daily before the monsoons, ploughing the land of other villagers with her

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two remaining zebus. She could have sold a piece of land, but she chose not to. Selling in case of emergency, selling 'because you have a stomach-ache', would likely achieve a poor price. Moreover, there was no need to give away a piece of her patrimony to which a part of her offspring is entitled, and which, moreover, could be used as a pension.

Transmitting inheritance is thus about changing and endorsing a division of responsibilities and authority over things and people. It is a cyclical process, in the generational sense, whose stages need to be clarified according to individual and family trajectories. Concerning Ko Kyaw and his mother, this clarification was still problematic.

The death of U Bo in late March could have triggered the union of the two homes: that of Daw Hlaing and that constituted by Ko Kyaw, Ma Khin and their daughter. But it did not, at least not yet. At the age of sixty, Daw Hlaing ploughs plots of land almost daily to pay off her debt and waits for her son and daughter-in-law to take care of her. For example, estimating that by herself she represents about twenty acres, she says they will only receive the house if nothing changes. She also says they should 'do the work for her' (*alok kyway*). This expression uses the verb *kyway*, close to 'treat' in English, in the sense of offering, serving (a meal) or doing for. Thus, it seems normal for Daw Hlaing that her son and daughter-in-law do the work for her, that they take her place and take care of her. That should be their responsibility.

Ko Kyaw and his wife mainly cultivate the betel garden. Ko Kyaw also ploughs his mother's land, that of his mother-in-law and others, thanks to the rototiller. They work partly for Daw Hlaing, but not to pay down her debt. The future of the relationship is uncertain. This fragile balance is reflected in the way food is shared. Every morning, Daw Hlaing cooks her own meals and rare are the dinners she shares with Ko Kyaw and Ma Khin. The tension is not obvious, and the partial absence of commensality symbolizes a situation in transition: eating together expresses a domestic union and a sharing of resources, home, property and debts. In addition, each family has its own money keeper (*ngwayhtein*), Ma Khin and Daw Hlaing respectively, who keeps track of their household's expenses.

Although the two domestic economies are partially entangled, Ko Kyaw and his wife do not take full charge of Daw Hlaing. This has to do with an inheritance problem that makes it difficult to redefine who has authority over the household and who is responsible for wealth and debts. In this case, the situation is at a standstill because Daw Hlaing's assets are not yet fully established. It is necessary to go up the generational scale to understand the dynamics associated with this heritage.

Daw Hlaing was born in Tozigon, a neighbouring village of Gawgyi. She was adopted during her adolescence by her paternal uncle who had no children.

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She later married U Bo, lived with him in Gawgyi for a few years, and the couple settled with Daw Hlaing's adoptive father until his death. Daw Hlaing then received her inheritance. The way she tells this story is significant. By way of inheritance, she received seven acres and a house. However, her adoptive father also bequeathed her a ruby, not as an inheritance, she said, but 'to eat'. Daw Hlaing and U Bo then returned to live in Gawgyi to care for his parents. Later, Daw Hlaing's blood parents, caught up in a difficult situation, asked her to give them the ruby to pawn, promising to repay her as soon as they could. She assented. During an evening discussion on this subject in late June 2016, Daw Hlaing and her two sons told me with some difficulty how her father, after having pawned the ruby to a lender in the nearby town of Kyawkka, lost almost all the money through gambling. Daw Hlaing has been waiting for her parents to repay this debt for over twenty years. The latter settled in Gawgyi, in an area adjoining the house of U Bo. Daw Hlaing's widowed mother still lives there with two of her sons. She is almost eighty years old and remains the guardian of the money for her entire household, collecting the income and deciding what to spend. She has not yet decided how the patrimony will be divided.

If, following Graeber (2011), we consider that debt is but one form of obligation characterized by the fact that it can be quantified and cancelled out, then the value of the ruby is now hardly quantifiable. It pertains to the realms of family obligations rather than debt and is an ambiguous obligation. The relationship between Ko Kyaw and Daw Hlaing therefore depends on the clarification of that obligation between Daw Hlaing and her mother. Since the death of her husband U Bo, Daw Hlaing has more or less openly evoked how she has not yet received any inheritance from her blood relatives. In theory, she is no longer entitled to it, having already obtained that of her adoptive father, but she adds that the ruby was not an inheritance *per se*. Describing it as a given thing 'to eat', and not as inheritance, legitimizes Daw Hlaing's claim on her blood relatives – given the debt associated with the loan of this ruby – by reformulating the status of a thing according to its context of transmission. If Daw Hlaing estimates her land holdings at about twenty acres, it is not because of her title deeds. She counts her parcels but adds the acres owned by her mother that could potentially pay off the ruby.

Finding an equivalence, or a substitute, in the search for fairness in the discharge of a debt is a delicate undertaking. It requires one to find an equivalence of value in a peculiar situation that contradicts the normative framework of family relationships. This is especially true here, as the families live on good terms and a conflict would inevitably impact them, as well as relatives, even the neighbourhood and potentially the entire village. No agreement has yet been found. It is now possible to answer a critical question: why does Ko Kyaw not take care of his mother? Ko Kyaw does not yet take care of his mother because if he does,

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he becomes responsible for her debts in an unstable situation. This would put him in the middle of a tense situation in terms of who owes what to whom and on what grounds. In addition, his sister has not received her share of inheritance, his father has just died and his mother, in debt for the hospitalization, is trying to put forth an obligation to her blood family. If Ko Kyaw takes care of his mother, he will somehow take her place. Formalizing such a relationship with her would transform his relationships with other people, as he would have authority over patrimony whose contours are under discussion.

This is why, ultimately, Ko Kyaw can say that a piece of land belongs to no one. The land in question was his father's on paper – he changed it under his mother's name – and his sister was also entitled to it. Most importantly, the question at stake was not who owns that land, but who will. This uncertainty is linked to the intertwinement of three generations. Thus, ownership is about gaining authority and responsibility over things, obligations and people. It is a process of becoming and an achievement. Because entitlement to inheritance is the most enforceable claim, it is the closest thing to 'a right that could exist outside of the context of realizing it' (Prasse-Freeman 2015: 96). Yet it is always a potentiality that could be realized, because even if it is vested in the status of a person, it comes to craft one's position within a dense social landscape. When someone is recognized as the owner of an estate, it means that this person has achieved a position of stewardship of that property. Ownership is but momentary and the idea of stewardship (taking care, being in charge of) reflects how authority and responsibility for things and people is conceived.

Transmission, Engagement and Leadership

At the end of this journey, we have seen that the transmission of inheritance is critical in the production of power relations, for people do not transmit simple things, but also a responsibility and an authority over those things. The short discussion on changes in land tenure has shown that entitlement to inheritance has organized local land relations since at least the eighteenth century alongside a series of state projects and legal codifications. In any case, it continued to operate to the point that inheritance remained the main avenue to access land in the early 2010s in the rural areas of central Myanmar. This transfer is not only about land but relates to how familial and personal relationships create legitimate claims on things. In Gawgyi, the rule of equal division between children thus appeared as a roadmap constrained by a keeping-while-giving paradox: the actual transfers of inheritance combine the push to provide a living to one's offspring and the pull to perpetuate the family. The main farming families had attempted to pull people and resources by using this paradox and muster estates and wealth. What makes a family – hierarchy, commensality – and the mutual

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obligations between its members – gratitude, care – are key because they create entitlement to property. For one of the children, who usually receives more, it also means taking upon oneself parental patrimony and liabilities. A case study of one farming family in Gawgyi has shown how this process is crisscrossed by uncertainty because the transmission entangles multiple generations, moments (marriage, adoption, death) and strategies to access wealth, to the point that one can say that 'nobody owns' this or that piece of land, given that the redefining of liabilities and responsibilities between people is under way. Ultimately, ownership is not about individual private property but about stewardship: taking care of land, of a family, being in charge, being responsible and taking upon oneself the obligations, the debts and the opportunities. 'Nobody owns the land' is thus saying that ownership is uncertain due to the complexities of life and family relationships. Who will end up as the owner is not completely foreseen, and ownership is never really finite as long as there are co-heirs and potential co-stewards.

The main conclusion is that the family domain is a configuration of power within which people calibrate their engagement with each other. Transmitting inheritance is a process of redefining authority and responsibility over things, and obligations between people. Focusing on transfers within families thus allows us to understand the family as a political domain in tension, and intrafamilial engagement as a way of situating oneself and manoeuvring in a network of responsibilities, potentialities and obligations.

It is now possible to expand the implications of this conclusion to the field of village leadership. Within the realm of family relations, authority is conceived as a matter of stewardship (*okchokhmu*): taking care of a patrimony and of the persons attached to it through kin ties. Yet the field of family relations was a matrix for thinking about rightful filiation and by extension about leadership. The arguments justifying how an office should be transmitted are similar to those defining in Burmese Buddhist law who can take over a family. The conceptualization of filiation and stewardship, through the concept of *auratha* (or ablest child), was a base for thinking about the transmission of offices in precolonial Burma when competition for leadership was a central stake in local politics (Chapter 1). Koenig has shown that personal abilities rather than primogeniture were key, because there was no ascriptive element strong enough in defining who among the children should succeed one's parents:

> Heredity was necessary to establish a primary claim to office, but the claimant was also required to be minimally capable of performing the duties of the office as determined by the other local officials. The Da-yit-za di-pani [Treatise on inheritance] of 1811 explains: If the son by the head wife is blind or deaf, or otherwise deformed, and is not known

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> to the local authorities, he is the eldest son only in name but does not obtain the status of one. The son who industriously performs his father's duties and is known to the local authorities is considered as the eldest son though he may be born of the lesser wife, and he shall succeed to the hereditary office … *Birthright was therefore contingent on competence and the consensus of the other officials, and primogeniture was qualified by the requirement of competence and the cognatic nature of Burman inheritance that gave all children some claim on the estate*. (Koenig 1990: 144–45, my emphasis)

Thus, in the realm of family transmission, as for the domain of filiation in gentry families holding offices in the nineteenth century, authority was ascribed in terms of heredity but achieved in terms of aptitude. The emphasis on personal abilities goes beyond family relationships and pervades the literature on leadership, from the legitimation of kings to the conceptualization of politics in terms of men of prowess and patron–client relationships. The combination of, and tension between, heredity and ability are at the core of the theory of politics in the Burmese context. Cast in the realm of Gawgyi politics, what does it imply?

Since the inception of the Myinmilaung tract, only the first two headmen were linked by heredity according to a local theory of habitus ('who lives close to a hunter becomes a hunter; who lives near a fisherman becomes a fisherman'; cf. Chapter 2). The succession of the next headmen (office holders) departed from this practice and they were selected following the balance of power within the village tract, the moral shifts and the ways in which the governments wanted to transform and control the countryside. Thus, village headship in Myinmilaung became an ambivalent position crossed by conceptions about rightful leadership, by factionalism, and at times embodied by persons who marked ethical ruptures. We saw that Ko Kyaw could not have been the 'administrator' (*okchokyayhmu*) imagined by the state, taking care of and responsible for the village tract. Nonetheless, the idea of 'taking care of' as a form of authority is present in family leadership, related to personal abilities and mutual obligations between 'parents' and 'children', and conceived in terms of stewardship.

What is interesting is that the village big men, the *lugyi* who take care of village affairs, are also named with an expression referring to the idea of 'taking care of'. This expression, translated in English as 'guardian of village affairs', is *ywayay okhteinhmu*. The word *htein* is preferred by Gawgyi people to the word *chok* – present in headman/administrator – because the former refers more to the idea of 'looking after', 'herding' or 'guiding', hence the translation as guardianship. This semantic leaning reflects the juncture of the rise of village affairs as the form of local politics with the transformation of village leadership.

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The question now is how far can the comparison between family stewardship and village guardianship be pushed to help us understand village affairs as a domain of engagement? If what makes a family and the mutual obligations between its members make families a domain of politics, then what is political about taking care of a village? What are the obligations between its members and how do they engage with each other? To explore these issues, we now need to look at how Gawgyi is shaped as a collective and question what the big men's worth is made of.

Notes

1. Portions of this chapter were published in 'Nobody Owns the Land: How Inheritance Shapes Land Relations in the Central Plain of Myanmar', *Journal of Burma Studies* 24(1) (2020b).
2. This chapter does not concern areas where ongoing or past land disputes involve resource extractions (such as the case of the Letpadaung copper mine near Monywa; cf. Amnesty International 2017; Prasse-Freeman and Phyo Win Latt 2018), military–private partnerships (cf. Woods 2011), ethnic conflicts (Transnational Institute 2013) or agro-industry (cf. Woods 2015).
3. On the relations between access, property, power and authority, see Sikor and Lund (2009).
4. On Burmese kinship, see, among others, Kumada (2015), Nash and Nash (1963), Nash (1965) and Spiro (1975, [1977] 1986).
5. Here I refer to the post-2012 land bills, notably the Farmland Law No. 11/2012 and the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law No. 10/2012 which foster the commodification of land.
6. As Crouch has shown, Burmese Buddhist law encompasses a series of precolonial texts called *dhammathat* compiled as a source of law by colonial lawyers and judges from which Burmese legal practitioners departed through comments and textbooks operating as definitive restatements of the law (cf. Crouch 2016b). On *dhammathat*, cf. Huxley (1997). For key works about Burmese Buddhist law, cf. E Maung (1970), Lahiri (1957) and Maung Maung (1963).
7. Cf. Hardiman (1910, 1912) and Hughes (1932).
8. Cf. Brown (2013), Cady ([1958] 1960), Charney (2006, 2007), Cheng Siok Hwa (1965), Furnivall (1957), Koenig (1990), Lieberman (1984), Steinberg (1981a), Taylor (2009), Thant Myint-U (2001), Thawnghmung (2004) and Toe Hla (1987).
9. Tenancy Act (1936), Land Nationalization Acts (1948, 1953), Enterprises Nationalization Law (1963), Farmers' Rights Protection Law (1963), Tenancies Law Amending Act (1963), Procedures Conferring the Rights to Cultivate Land (1964, rule 64/1), Law to Protect the Implementation of Socialist Economic System (1964), the Farmland Law (No. 11/2012) and the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law No. 10/2012.
10. Oral histories and data on the conceptions and practices of transmitting inheritance were also collected in several villages in 2013–2014 and 2015–2016 in Monywa, Yinmabin and Budalin townships, notably in Hnawpin North, Hnawpin South, Innte, Ayadaw, Kyawkka, Thazi, Ywadon, Budaungkan, Kyawsipon, Booba, Minzu, Zeehpyubin, Salingyi, Nyuangpinthar, Kothan, Hledar and Aungchanthar.

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11. For an example of a genealogy of how state projects were adapted and transformed by the successive governments, see Ferguson (2014).
12. I do not claim that the transmission of inheritance is a static custom that remained unchallenged and never transformed in the past decades. More research is needed to specify the transformation of customs pertaining to property relations in Myanmar at large. For an example of such a study, see Crouch (2016a).
13. Before colonial rule, King Mindon (1853–1878) attempted to reorganize the local systems of dues and duties between the villagers, the hereditary gentry, the appointed officials and the Crown by introducing a capitation tax. This could have changed the nature of political hierarchies by undermining local traditions, but it remained largely a failure and, while it led to the rebellion of many gentry leaders (Thant Myint-U 2001: 115, 173), it did not transform how inheritance influenced land tenure.
14. This inflow entered both the district's coffers and the (newly created) village headmen's pockets – the latter ascribing individual households' shares.
15. This word can also be written *aw-ra-tha* and *orasa*; see Crouch (2016b).
16. The local moral economy fixed the norms of these mostly sharecropping arrangements, depending on rains, relations, quality of the land, who pays the land tax, who provides the seeds, the tools, and so on (cf. Hardiman 1910; Huard 2016).
17. This notion was first used by Maine and was reconceptualized by Beckman as the arrangements of rights and obligations bundled in a thing – such as land – and is thus a metaphor used to describe property in its characteristic as a relation between different actors (cf. Maine 1861; Benda-Beckmann et al. 2006).
18. The 1948 Land Nationalization Act for the most part echoes the content of the unimplemented Tenancy Act of 1936, the objective of which was to resolve the tenancy problem in Burma.
19. Large land owners and tenants formed the upper class of villages and small-scale tenants and daily labourers (in many cases the 'tillers') depended on big farming families.
20. Nationalization was notably enacted through the 1963 Enterprises Nationalization Law and the 1964 Law to Protect the Implementation of Socialist Economic System.
21. Procedures Conferring the Rights to Cultivate Land, 1964, rule 64/1.
22. In 1971, between one-third and one-half of the land in the Chindwin region still operated via small-scale tenancies (cf. Steinberg 1981a: 127).
23. Although the state still remains the sole land owner. This law adds another layer within a system of stacked laws (cf. Mark 2016).
24. On this point, see Ferguson (2014: 298).
25. See for instance: Andersen (2015), Faxon (2017), McCarthy S. (2018), Oberndorf (2012), Shivakumar and Saw Hlaing (2015), Su Phyo Win (2017) and Willis (2014).
26. Traditionally, succession of parental properties is made on the third or the fifth day following burial of the last parent, during a commemoration ceremony at which all relatives gather. The elders among the relatives usually manage the division and distribution of the properties to the siblings. In practice, however, the division of inheritance often happens before the death of the parents.
27. Cf. Boutry et al. (2017) and Huard (2018).
28. My aim is not to follow Weiner's argument about how the inalienability of transmitted things is the basis of political hierarchy, but rather to focus on the personal relationships (Weber 2000) visible at the village level and not on the quality of objects, because this quality is evaluated according to the relationships at stake. Starting with family relationships, one can see how the transmission of a patrimony is nonetheless

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political because, through the ability to give and keep, the question of responsibility and authority is at stake (Weiner 1992: 150).

29. Seeing the norms for dividing inheritance as a sketch rather than a map – that is, as guidelines rather than strict rules – allows us to highlight the processual nature of this transfer. On the difference between a sketch and a map, cf. Ingold (2016).
30. The *lethpwe* also encompasses the things given by the people invited to the wedding and can be understood as a gift bonding the couple.
31. The adoption of young children is called *mwaysa*, while the adoption of adults (for the explicit purpose of continuing the family) is called *mwayhkan*.
32. On the question of polygamy under Burmese Buddhist law, male domination through law, the impact of recent changes in the legislation (the 2015 Monogamy Law and the Buddhist Women's Marriage Law) and the debates and changes over time in the use of the words to describe first, second and third wives, cf. Crouch (2016b).
33. The settlement pattern of newly-wed couples is mostly neolocal, but the issue of transmitting inheritance and of continuing the family (or just of saving enough money to build one's own house) often leads the couple to reside at the house of one of the spouse's parents, depending on life circumstances and strategies to access wealth.
34. A zebu is a type of cow (*Bos indices*) from South Asia, with a large hump on its shoulders, used in many forms of farm work.

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Figure 6.1. Feeding the guests during a *shinbyu*, Gawgyi, 2017. © Stéphen Huard.

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6

The Worth of the Big Men

> If a man has led a good life, not quarreled with neighbours … he may be one of the informal group of lugyi lugaun [who] chiefly give advice, moralize, and express the agreed-on folk wisdom … The lugyi do not set style; they do not necessarily move anyone to emulation, and they have no power, only the recognized right to use moral suasion … One of the reasons these men are elderly people is that they do not overstep the vague but delicate line that separates individual responsibilities.
>
> —Manning Nash, *The Golden Road to Modernity*

Guarding Village Affairs

In contrast to Nash's analysis, which saw in the *lugyi* 'elders' without influence, I argue that they do have an authority, that of asserting a common good by taking care of village affairs.[1] This means that the *lugyi* I met during my fieldwork were not of the same kind as those Nash encountered. They have changed the meaning attached to this status and morality has become central in politics. Some sixty years had passed and the question is how such men came to the forefront in Gawgyi's political landscape. In Chapter 3, on the rise of village affairs, we saw that the transition from U Win the Infamous to U Htay the Worthy crystallized a rupture in local politics. State violence and its partial disconnection from farmers in Gawgyi were echoed by the recalibration of village leaders' engagement from official positions to village affairs on the model of previous men of power (the last men of *hpon*). The management of local affairs was monopolized by the villagers, drawing from a more traditional form of collective sociality called *luhmuyay*. During my fieldwork, I frequently saw these men circulating in the village and they were always present during ceremonies. Ko Kyaw was often

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 200.

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among them, but he was the headman, not yet a *lugyi*, and his navigation was of a different kind. Progressively, I realized that by making village affairs a space of engagement where the worth of the people is evaluated, the *lugyi* were producing a political order as guardians of Gawgyi affairs.

The question of the worth of the *lugyi* is thus about the nature of social relations in Gawgyi and the history of contemporary central Myanmar: what place for village space and morality in the making of power and authority? This chapter takes up this question by analysing the making of the worth of the *lugyi* from the perspective of pragmatic sociology. Power and authority have previously been analysed in this region of Burma/Myanmar in at least two ways. First, some of the studies focusing on Burmese Buddhism have shown how meritorious activity produces a social order. For instance, the 'field of merit' theory (Schober 1989) defends the idea that obtaining merit through donation increases power (Lehman 1984). In a more secularist register, we saw how power relations have been analysed in terms of patronage – understood as the dominant model of politics in central Burma/Myanmar – where the individual charisma, the *hpon*, is key to the political alliance (Nash 1965). The point is not to oppose these analyses, but to conceive them as different idioms used to describe certain configurations of power which are reproduced and challenged by how people engage with each other. A person can thus be great by his donations or by his charisma. My hypothesis is that the worth of the *lugyi* comes from another form, namely an engagement in village affairs where the notion of the common good is at stake.

The term *lugyi* is polysemic. It can be used to talk about media personalities, elderly people in general and Generals in particular. The term *lugyi* is also, and chiefly, used to talk about influential and respected people in a locality. The quality of *lugyi* can therefore refer to different scales of worth to qualify a person, such as fame, rank, charisma, or the embodiment of a common good. To say that someone is a *lugyi* can be connoted positively or negatively depending on the context, the persons targeted and the interlocutors. For example, when Ko Kyaw organized the 2016 selection, it was called 'choosing the *lugyi*' by the people collecting the votes. But if one asks who the *lugyi* are in Gawgyi, the list is short and the silence often heavy. Being a *lugyi* in a locality is linked to what is at stake in a 'social space' (Condominas 1980), whether in everyday life or during special events. It is a quality difficult to ascribe to a person, because it implies a moral evaluation and refers to the state of relations in a social and political space. More specifically, the *lugyi* we analyse are also called *lugyi lugaung* or person (*lu*) great (*gyi*) and good (*kaun*). The evaluation of the morality of individuals and the ethics attached to collective life are ubiquitous in the attribution of this qualifier. Therefore, by analysing what is at stake between the villagers we can understand how the presence of people 'bigger' than others is justified. To analyse this bigness amounts to qualifying it in particular, in a social space

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where other scales of worth exist to qualify people, such as prestige, charisma or meritorious achievements, for example.

For Gawgyi's case, I choose to present three *lugyi* whom people describe as worthy because they each operate, in their own way, a 'process of generalizing' (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) to promote a common good by taking care of village affairs. The other name of the *lugyi* is *ywayay okhteinhmu*, the 'guardians of village affairs', and generalizing is a process of 'taking charge of' a collective. Boltanski (2011) emphasizes that the 'process of generalizing' is a process of disseminating a particular justification (what I aim for here in terms of engagement in village affairs) in specific situations among which disputes occupy a central position. Taking care of village affairs is how the *lugyi* assert and scale a political order in specific situations during which the prevalence of other forms of engagements is overtaken by the idea of the common good. These engagements consist mostly of familial, intergenerational, neighbouring and clientelist relations actualized in a variety of transfers, and the situations we will explore are two ceremonies and a dispute. Before describing them, it should be mentioned that taking care of village affairs is a matter of social and moral evaluation, of adjusting traditional conceptions to new stakes and of scaling a political space.

First, the question of the worth of the *lugyi* refers to a double process of evaluation. On the one hand, the *lugyi* are evaluated: this status is never completely achieved. On the other hand, villagers are gauged. Because taking care of village affairs is a process of creating a scale of engagement and a collective, it results in the worth of people being measured according to their engagement in this domain. The engagement of some persons towards a collective contributes to making village affairs the form of local politics, as a space where the worth of the people is evaluated depending on their engagement towards a common good. In return, this engagement produces the worth of these men whose position reflects the way previous examples of propriety blend into current politics.

Second, the scope of village affairs combines a traditional form of collective sociality with new stakes following the recent transformation of Gawgyi's political landscape. At a sociological level, *luhmuyay*, or 'social affairs', is about taking responsibility for the welfare of a collective beyond individual and familial obligations. Minimally, it refers to the mutual aid deployed for the 'joys' (*tha-yay*) such as marriages, and for the 'griefs' (*na-yay*) such as funerals. The *luhmuyay* is a concept encompassing potentially all kinds of collective undertakings from the making of ceremonies to the resolution of disputes. Its scope changes following what is deemed important at a given time. Today, village affairs include, among other things, the organization of ceremonies (individual, family and related to the monastery), the management of the water and electricity supply systems, the rebuilding of roads, the treatment of sick persons

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and dead bodies, dealing with NGOs and the issue of enlarging the village. In that sense, saying that village affairs have become the form of politics in Gawgyi refers to how the engagement in collective undertakings on the model of *luhmuyay* has been part of a moral rupture with a violent and corrupt state embodied by an Infamous headman and following an ideology of self-reliance (often called *kotukotha*, which can be transcribed as 'rising by and defining oneself').

Third, the rise of village affairs also reflects how the political landscape has been imagined and scaled. After following Ko Kyaw during a day in his life in Chapter 4, we saw that any understanding of the landscape in terms of administrative jurisdiction is not really workable. For instance, when he went to Tozigon for a premarital ceremony, it was a matter of *luhmuyay* as he was more a privileged witness to the engagement than a headman due to the social proximity of these two villages. In other words, Tozigon has been included within Gawgyi affairs. For instance, they help each other with ceremonies, Tozigon people rely on Gawgyi's collective properties and monastery for such events and they call each other *yathswe-yatmyo*, meaning 'people akin by (sharing a) dwelling'. This expression reflects a sense of mutuality and affiliation through extended kinship bonds. It is made of a combination of the word relative, or kin (*hswemyo*), with a reference to the common dwelling area (*yat*). Such an assemblage is also present in the title of village elders, *yatmiyathpa*, or 'parents' (*mihpa*) of the dwelling area.[2] It means that the traditional form of sociality produces a landscape expressed in terms of common living space and kinship. In theory the *luhmuyay* concerns everyone and covers a wide set of relations from hospitality to strangers to the funerals of neighbours. It bonds villages together or excludes them, the *yat* being to some extent the spatial scale of *luhmuyay*. This process of scaling depends on the history of the political landscape: while Tozigon has bonded with Gawgyi through their history and claim to indigeneity, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper have never really developed such a relationship. On the contrary, people from Myinmilaung Proper are clearly excluded from Gawgyi affairs, which means they have to rely on themselves to organize collective life. This divide goes hand in hand with the recurrent animosity between these two settlements. The history of this socio-political landscape has shaped how local politics unfold today.

Engaging the Collective

To show that the worth of the *lugyi* stems from the fact that they take charge of village affairs, it is necessary to show how they make the village a collective. To do so, I choose to present the *lugyi* of Gawgyi through three particular situations which form the following three subsections of this chapter. It should be

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borne in mind that even if they embody propriety, the *lugyi* also represent how the main farming families had monopolized village leadership. In Gawgyi, there are three men[3] whom almost everyone agrees are *lugyi*: U Lin, U Maung and U Htay. Each of them has a particular role contrasting with Ko Kyaw's practice of headship.

U Lin assumes the role of 'head of bachelors' (*lubyogaung*) for all village ceremonies: he, himself a bachelor, organizes village mutual aid based on statutory groups (unmarried men and women) to carry out ceremonies such as weddings or Buddhist novitiates (*shinbyu*). The role of U Lin is analysed through the description of a *shinbyu*, the Buddhist novitiate for boys and the meritorious donation *par excellence*. Describing the making of a *shinbyu* allows us, first of all, to show the village collective at work. It also enables us to question to what extent meritorious donations contribute to the greatness of people as the multiple forms of engagement (sharing of merit, offering food, mutual help and so on) entangle and are evaluated during the ceremony. Finally, it shows the crucial role of U Lin as the organizer of the village workforce and as the living memory of donations and transactions.

U Maung is frequently 'master of ceremonies' (*beiktheikhsaya*) during premarital ceremonies in which he embodies village morality through his speeches and the conduct of rituals. His role is explored through a premarital ceremony where the families of the future spouses meet publicly. The village system of reproduction and social ordering consists in the mediation of the engagement of these families, making the 'marriage' an agreement that goes beyond the couple and intra- or inter-family relationships. U Maung, as master of ceremonies, ensures that the village morality he embodies is heard. Describing such an encounter therefore makes it possible to show how the union of families calls for a 'process of generalizing' in order to go beyond individual and family interests so that marriage is collectively sanctioned.

Finally, U Htay is the *yatmiyathpa* and in this capacity he can speak for the village. The third subsection explores how U Htay settles a conflict linked to the arrival of electricity in the village. The trajectory of this *lugyi* within Gawgyi history, his achievements and abilities allow us to better delimit the sphere of village affairs. The ways in which U Htay positions himself through familial, neighbourhood and patronage relationships and his distancing from the government reflect how he embodies and promotes a common good. In this chapter, each of these people represents a form of the common good in Gawgyi: the organization of mutual aid (U Lin), the embodiment of morality (U Maung) and the defence of village affairs (U Htay). The worth of these *lugyi* is explored through specific situations understood as trials because they put collective issues to the test of family, neighbourhood and patronage relationships while paying close attention to how transactions are performed and evaluated.

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U Lin and a Shinbyu

This section first describes *the shinbyu* and then explores the making of *a shinbyu* in particular. The *shinbyu* is a Buddhist initiation ceremony and it represents the meritorious donation *par excellence* in this region. The making of a *shinbyu* shows the village collective at work and raises questions concerning how meritorious donations contribute to the worth of people. A *shinbyu* is a ceremony in which several forms of engagement (sharing of merit, offering food, mutual aid and so forth) are entangled and are constantly evaluated, and its description illustrates the crucial role of U Lin as an organizer and as a living memory of donations and transactions.

During a *shinbyu*, a young boy becomes an adult qualified for marriage by temporarily entering the monastic community (Sangha). The name of the ceremony is usually translated as 'making the king/prince' (Brac de La Perrière 2009b: 121), referring to how boys are made into kings in the first part of the ritual to become novices in the second. Spiro, a landmark anthropologist on the study of religion in Myanmar, describes the novitiate as the country's most important meritorious donation ceremony.

> The religious significance of the shin-byu [*sic*] is both symbolic and instrumental. Symbolically, it denotes the passage of the boy from the status of biosocial being to that of a spiritual person. No Burmese male is truly human … unless he has worn the yellow robe … Instrumentally, the initiation is the means par excellence for acquiring merit, not so much for the boy … as for the sponsors of the ceremony, typically his parents … The merit gained through sponsoring an initiation is so great that wealthy Burmans will frequently sponsor more than one …. (Spiro 1970: 234–36)

According to this account, a *shinbyu* is an achievement. Giving a *shinbyu* is crucial for parents and sons. When becoming a novice, the child compensates an obligation of gratitude towards his parents, his masters and Buddha, also called *kyayzushin* or benefactors. Brac de La Perrière has suggested that the experience of the novitiate is a trial that young boys overcome thanks to a spiritual quality:

> The spiritual quality with which male children must be endowed in sufficient quantity to endure the trial of monastic life is called *'pon* [*sic*]. This quality is unequally distributed among people according to their karma (*kan*), that is, it proceeds from karmic rewards, according to the merit acquired in previous existences, and indicates the level reached in the cycle of rebirths … men are [compared to women] better endowed in *'pon*, which indicates their degree of spiritual fulfilment and opens

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to them the path of renunciation, the only way to salvation. (Brac de La Perrière 2009b: 119, my translation)

In order to show how this ritual engages Gawgyi village as a collective, the following explores the ceremony through its kitchen rather than through its ritual stages. On 3–4 February 2016, before the Buddhist Lent, a couple from the village organized a *shinbyu* for their two sons after saving money for several years. Two weeks before the ceremony, the couple met with U Lin to finalize the preparations. U Lin, a teacher at Gawgyi public school, is also *lubyogaung*, or leader of the group of single boys. In duet with a woman 'head of the single girls' (*abyogaung*), he is in charge of organizing the village ceremonies, such as weddings and novitiates,[4] by mobilizing the statutory groups who will take care of preparations, welcoming guests, serving food and performing the necessary ritual acts. U Lin, however, is perceived as the main actor orienting the village workforce for ceremonies. He frequently circulates around Gawgyi and controls the village collective groups of single males and females. Present at every ceremony and recording every donation, he has become the living memory of the villagers' meritorious acts. A key player in village life, he is the guarantor and privileged witness of the villagers' commitment to the smooth running of the ceremonies.

During their meeting with U Lin, the couple set a provisional budget and agreed with him on the rental of the 'common property of the village' (*ywabon pyitsi*). This includes dishes, kitchen utensils, tables, chairs and stools, bamboo structures and plastic tarps commonly owned by the villagers and assigned by U Lin. The importance of a *shinbyu* depends on the donor. For this one, there will be a band of traditional Burmese musicians (*hsaingwaing*) coming from Mandalay who will be hosted in a large ceremonial pavilion (*man-dat*) assembled temporarily to welcome musicians, novices and guests. All this has a cost, which varies according to the duration of the *shinbyu* (from one to three days in general), the meals proposed, the number of guests, the reputation of the musicians, in addition to the rental of village things capped at 50,000 Myanmar Kyat (50 USD).[5]

A few days before the ceremony, the couple asked their close friends, family and acquaintances for help during the various stages of the ceremony. They bought some items to solicit their help. For example, cigars and tea leaf salads were offered to several villagers through young boys under the guidance of U Lin. These gifts are requests for help before, during or after the ceremony. They symbolize an engagement. On that day, Ko Kyaw and I received a cigar to help serve the guests and wash the dishes with an explicit question: 'Do you accept this responsibility?' In these ceremonies, Ko Kyaw is like any other villager, except that he often rents out his loudspeakers and sound system.

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The day before the ceremony, the two people in charge of the kitchen for this type of event simmered the main dishes in huge pots cleaned beforehand by several unmarried girls. The latter also helped with cutting vegetables while a group of young boys brought tables and chairs. In Gawgyi, the collective organization for this type of event is well established. The only problem for U Lin is to ensure that the aid is effective. The next day, before the first guests arrived around 6am, U Lin went with the donors to the monastery to offer food (*hsunkat*) to the monks. Between 6 and 9am, most of the villagers and many guests went to the ceremony, accompanied by the rhythm of the music played by the orchestra. In front of the ceremonial pavilion, some guests, before eating and sometimes even before greeting donors, stopped at a table on which fans were stacked. These were given to them in exchange for a sum of money called '*aku-ngway*' (literally 'aid money'). The amount was recorded in a book dedicated to this purpose and carefully kept by the donor. This is an account book that lets you know who gave what. Usually, U Lin and Daw Thu, the head of the single girls, collect the aid money and distribute the fans in return. A similar practice is found at weddings.[6] As Nash recalls, but without further analysis: 'as in all villagewide or supravillage festivities, guests make donations to hosts, and at every wedding someone, usually the school teacher, sits in a corner with a notebook and ballpoint pen, entering the names of donors and the amounts given' (1965: 250). Spiro added: 'The amount of each contribution is recorded so that the delicately balanced system of reciprocity may be maintained' ([1977] 1986: 183–84). In a *shinbyu*, the transfer of aid money is neither purely a gift nor purely a payment. This type of transfer is not found in all novitiates and not all guests necessarily give it (Huard 2021). When it is given, this financial assistance is part of a series of transfers[7] between individuals and families. In theory, a person gives what he wants, but in practice what is given will be given back in an equal or greater amount.

In general, there are two types of meritorious donations (*ahlu*): the 'donation without remainder' (*akywinme ahlu*) and the 'donation with remainder' (*akywinshi ahlu*).[8] The first form is very rare and is a zero-sum donation, a sort of pure gift that does not create liabilities between people and from which the giver does not expect a direct return. It mostly concerns donations for religious buildings and it is 'best' not to put one's name or picture as a dedication mark on the edifice. When the donor dies, this good deed will be remembered and taken into account for her or his rebirth. The second type of donation is the most common and happens during the Buddhist novitiate, funerals and weddings, for instance. The aid money is one example, even if it does not strictly correspond to the definition of *ahlu* as a transfer that requires the mediation of monks for the production of merit (Brac de La Perrière 2009a, 2015). To some extent, people cannot escape the obligation stemming from this kind of donation because there is a

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'remainder' which underscores the continuity of a relation between people. This kind of transfer belongs to the sphere of *luhmuyay* and bonds people. Given the relatively high number of ceremonies a person is invited to during his lifetime, these transactions involve reciprocal relationships, obligations and liabilities. Hence, also, the importance of U Lin, who is the collective memory of meritorious donations, but also of transfers made during ceremonies. These operations create or update an engagement between people. The amounts are scrupulously recorded so that, in the near or distant future, the person can give back. Such transactions also allow for a kind of collective financing of ceremonies. Thus, a *shinbyu*, the meritorious gift *par excellence*, is not really a 'donation without remainder' because of the sharing of merit that obliges the participants to some extent. During this ceremony a variety of transfers occur (aid money, food offerings, mutual help) and they are linked with many other local ceremonies such as weddings or funerals, where multiple transactions also take place and where villagers represent the largest number of participants.

After giving (or not giving) financial support, the guests crossed an alley where young girls offered them cigarettes and flowers before entering the pavilion where the two novices sat dressed as 'princes in the making' (*shinlaung*). Almost all discussions began with the formula: 'Have you eaten?' Once the ritual space was crossed, the guests were quickly brought to the eating area. Many people were busy around the tables, filling dishes, clearing plates, changing cutlery. The guests followed one another under the gaze of U Lin. Young boys took turns serving. Some adults organized the service, measuring the need for plates and cutlery. Behind the banquet, other men washed the dishes in turn. The atmosphere was convivial. Jokes were told. Cigarettes passed from hand to hand. Betel chews were exchanged like hotcakes. It was the same scene in the outdoor kitchen, where the men were adjusting the cooking of rice while gauging the flow of guests. A sense of camaraderie floats over these spaces if enough people help. Irritation and complaints erupt if someone doesn't get his hands dirty. Indeed, ceremonies are occasions when villagers are evaluated: the people who help are identified, *a fortiori* among singles, and the commitment of everyone is sanctioned. The morality underlying mutual aid is only recalled in moments of crisis, such as when there is no one to help serve food.

Offering food symbolizes giving in its raw form in our context. Feeding monks, teachers or parents during rituals is usually understood as 'an acknowledgment of gratitude and as a repayment of moral or social debt rather than as an attempt to create new obligations' (Schober 1989: 106). Food offerings can reflect obligations (parent–child, teacher–student), create liabilities (donor–receiver) and participate in cycles of exchanges as we saw through the making of Ko Kyaw's family and the issue of transmitting inheritance in the previous chapter. Following the theory of the field of merit, the

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guests who participate in a meritorious ceremony receive a share of the merit made by the givers through their donation, but individuals evaluate the obligations associated with these transactions. This is a consubstantial ambiguity of the gift in our context. Intentions are appraised and interpretation varies depending on the pre-existing relationships and whether someone wants to create or show. In short, food donations oscillate between two poles: the disinterested nature of the Buddhist gift and the obligation arising from the gift. How people engage with each other through these transactions is thus constantly evaluated.

The Figure 6.1 shows a shinbyu I filmed. At one point, the main givers emphasized their position as donors by serving food to their guests themselves. However, one old lady, on the left, refused to be served directly. She withdrew her plate in a gesture stressing her wish not to be taken too far in this situation. Besides the fact that the giver and the old lady do not get along, the latter's refusal relates to a difference in status between them. The old woman descends from a family of large farmers while the donor worked as a daily labourer until quite recently. This tiny gesture thus reflects how, even under the veil of a meritorious donation, transfers are evaluated because they potentially symbolize an engagement that could impact status and hierarchies. One cannot give something, help, offer food to anyone in the same manner. The way in which transfers are evaluated is thus key in local political dynamics, be it during a *shinbyu* or when Ko Kyaw dodged the risk of being trapped at someone's house by sending one of his followers from CoC to fetch the person. Hence, the drama of offering food can symbolize a meritorious act and create liabilities (that can be refused). The multiplicity of ceremonies, transactions and offerings between people within and beyond a village and across several generations are part of the political landscape, as for the histories of transmission among families. In other words, gift giving, even formalized in a cosmology, is always contextual. The engagement of villagers towards the collective is but one form of these transfers.

After eating, the guests drank and washed their hands near large jars arranged for this purpose. Some girls and women helped provide fresh water and ironed towels. The flow of guests increased sharply around 8 in the morning. The atmosphere calmed down around 9am. The dishes were washed, the tables cleaned and the rest of the food gathered for tomorrow's banquet or sent to the elderly who had been unable to attend the ceremony. The next step was a ritual procession which took place around 11am. This procession, the length of which can be another sign of prestige, wandered through the village following the main paths from the couple's home to the monastery. The 'princes in the making' were carried on wooden structures draped in the image of elephants and Ko Kyaw was among those carrying them. The procession represents the Burmese royal order

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and precedes the entry into religion, a crucial stage in the life cycle. A little later, in a more intimate stage, the close family went to the monastery with the young boys to clip their hair, help them put on the monastic robe and witness their commitment to follow Buddhist teachings as novices.

Finally, in the afternoon, monks from the monastery came to the ceremonial pavilion to celebrate the ritual of sharing merit. This ritual of consecration consists in declaring that a person shares the merit related to his gift with all existing beings in theory. To share merit is to 'make the water flow' in reference to the gesture of the donor. The latter makes a libation by pouring water into a silver plate at the same time as the monk recites the appropriate consecration formula to invite the goddess of the Earth to witness the meritorious act. The merit obtained by the donors through the donation then reflects on the people who participated according to the field of merit theory described by Schober (1989). The sharing of merit through the ritual of consecration creates obligations for those who enter the field of merit thus shared (with the guests and the persons who helped). Being in a person's field of merit is therefore a specific engagement. In other words, the ability to acquire and share merit through donations is essential to the fabric of power as it produces a hierarchy between donors and recipients. This theory therefore proposes an order of worth to evaluate people. However, we have seen how a meritorious donation is crisscrossed by tensions, diverging evaluations and by a variety of other transfers.

Overall, a *shinbyu* crystallizes and sets in motion a complex whole including at the same time various ritual devices, the activation of networks (family, neighbours, guests, monks and so on) as well as multiple transactions. It is noteworthy that a large part of these practices is possible thanks to the presence of a village collective controlled by U Lin. These collective activities, necessary for the realization of meritorious donations, are also trials. Generally speaking, the ceremony is in itself a test, or rather a set of trials gathered under the banner of 'meritorious donation'. As an essential 'rite of passage', a *shinbyu* tests the novice's spiritual capacity (*hpon*) to respond to monastic demands. This ceremony also puts to the test the status and reputation of donors and their ability to attract prestigious monks, for example. Last but not least, the ceremony puts to the test the relationships of mutual aid and the ability of U Lin to empower the village collective. The rumours circulating and gauging the more or less lavish expenditure as well as the quality of the meals, music or clothing echo the permanent evaluation to which people and ceremonies are subjected. Pretences are strongly denounced, both in private and in public. In this vein, the presence or absence of some villagers is revealing. For example, a person I knew for a long time, one of Ko Kyaw's uncles, was absent from most village ceremonies. When I asked around about this, I was told it was because this man was ashamed, not because he had made no donation but because he was more interested in his 'own affairs'

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(*kokoyay*) than in 'social affairs' (*luhmuyay*). Nash asks this question in similar terms when he says that the lack of unity of a village

> is also thought to be aggravated by two characteristics of the normal villager: (1) ko ha ko neide, the drive to live by and for oneself alone, and (2) hpathi hpatha neide, to be uninterested in others [*sic*]. It seems odd to me that these are said to cause trouble, since in a real sense they are among the honored, desired, and fostered attitudes in the ideal villager. But when cast in the political realm, there is some local appreciation of the negative consequences. If the village is peaceful, unriven by factions, led by a man of pon, then these traits help keep the peace and are fully desired …. (Nash 1965: 272)

The opposition between living by and for oneself and committing oneself to others helps to explain the absence of certain people during village ceremonies. This therefore highlights their collective nature. If avoiding ceremonies is 'selfish', then participating, all the more actively, is an engagement with the donor and the village. The very presence of U Lin in Gawgyi encourages us to understand how a *shinbyu* builds a village collective set up for a common good. The village is thus, beyond the statutory groups, functions, jobs and hierarchies, an important network of people which enables them to make donations during which the commitment towards the collective is evaluated. The organization of ceremonies is in itself a test under the watch of U Lin, who is the master of mutual aid. His worth is the result of a double responsibility: if U Lin is responsible for the ceremonies, then he can request the engagement of others for mutual aid. U Lin is thus a *lugyi*, because he invests himself in the village to make the necessary ceremonies in the life of each villager. His commitment to the collective is recognized and gives him, in part, his worth.

As for Ko Kyaw, he was on the fringe of the ceremony, being a simple villager navigating across networks of gifts, personalities, hierarchies and liabilities. He also has to display propriety and help serve the guests, for instance. The realm of village affairs, and ceremonies in particular, are a part of local politics that contrasts with government practices and yet falls within the local political landscape as they became a space of engagement.

U Maung and an Engagement Ceremony

In the chapter exploring how Ko Kyaw crafted his position as headman, we followed him during a premarital encounter in Tozigon. Such an event is intrinsic to village affairs and U Maung was officiating as master of ceremonies. Weddings are to some extent a collective issue, and the very presence of U Maung during

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engagement ceremonies highlights how they are part of village affairs and how the worth of this man is produced.

Premarital encounters (called *apyaw* or *tintaungpwe*) have not held the same appeal for anthropologists as novitiate or marriage ceremonies. Spiro ([1977] 1986: 181) and Nash (1965: 250) describe them rather briefly as a process of gradual engagement in which the parents of the future couple meet several times to gauge each other and negotiate what will be given to the couple by each family.[9] Spiro notes that the meeting formalizing the engagement

> is a public event, held in the presence of invited guests, and always including the headman, the village elders and the kindred of the engaged couple. The expenses are defrayed by the parent of the boy, despite the fact that the ceremony is usually held in the house of the girl … The ritual itself is brief. A master of ceremonies, usually the headman or a village elder, announces the amount and content of the dower … which had been agreed upon by the parents. ([1977] 1986: 181)

Spiro's description is very similar to the way marital engagements are organized in Gawgyi today, where they are known by a generic name, *say-sat-pwe*, or 'engagement ceremony'. During these ceremonies, the gift of *tintha-ngway*[10] is announced and/or negotiated between the parents. Spiro initially spoke of engagement in 'psychodynamic' terms (confirmation of the boy's intention, acceptance of sexual relations, protection of the bride's honour in the event of the fiancé's death) and then proposes a comparative anthropological analysis of the Burmese dowry (ibid.: 181–209). However, in Gawgyi, a real mediation system is set up with U Maung as master of ceremonies. U Maung, by his presence and during his speeches, promotes the morality governing relations within couples, families and villages. It is therefore possible to argue that marriage goes beyond the couple and intra- or inter-family relationships and that the village is a space of reproduction and social ordering, which in no way prevents tensions and conflicts from being expressed.

Around 4pm, on 8 December 2015, I was invited by Ko Kyaw to an engagement ceremony in which 'the girl's side' was meeting 'the boy's side' in order to agree on each family's commitments to the future couple for their wedding. This meeting was the last step before the union was sealed by a wedding ceremony. The family of the bride-to-be, living in Gawgyi, received at their home the family of the future husband, coming from another village. Before their arrival, the bride's family and some of Gawgyi's single females prepared tea and cakes. The main room of the house was emptied to install tables and benches under the instructions of U Lin. Little by little, the village elders arrived, including U Maung and U Htay. The future husband, anxious, helped with the preparations.

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The 'husband's side' then arrived in a compact group, composed of his parents, a few uncles and aunts, the 'official elder' and the headman of his village of residence. After a quick and courteous exchange between the two 'sides', everyone settled around the tables: one off-centre for the different elders, another to the south for the boy's side, another to the north for the girl's side and a fourth at the centre for the negotiations.

The parents of the future spouses faced each other in the company of U Maung and the headman of the bridegroom's village. Ko Kyaw stayed in the background and let U Maung manage the affair. Once tea and cakes had been served and consumed, the latter got up to speak. He began by insisting on the fundamental principles of the bonds of marriage, on the rules and duties of each spouse in a couple (the man must provide for the needs of the household, the woman must diligently manage the domestic economy, it is necessary to show mutual understanding and to avoid conflicts between spouses, with their families and their neighbours and so forth). He then listed the assets and amounts that the two families agreed to give to the future couple. The list was given to him shortly after the boy's arrival. Once his monologue was over, U Maung sat down and let whoever wanted to speak do so. The parents of each spouse remained silent at first, leaving the initiative to the boy's village headman. He was quickly cut off by the bride's mother. She asked who would pay for the wedding. Following the custom, the parents of the future husband agreed to pay for the ceremony to be held in Gawgyi. They therefore had to pay for the rental of Gawgyi's common properties on the spot. Gawgyi villagers would take care of organizing the workforce. Discussions restarted among the groups in a growing hubbub. Questions were flying. 'With what you have, you could give more, right?', 'Are we talking about an inheritance or just a wedding present?' The tension, palpable, increased. U Maung then took over with the help of the boy's village headman. They asked the parents of the future spouses to specify if what was given for marriage was to be considered as inheritance or not. Gradually, the two families reached an agreement. The room returned to calm; the agreement was stated aloud to all persons thus taken as witnesses. Before leaving Gawgyi, however, some women on the boy's side accused the bride of not being a virgin. The bodies tensed, they approached her, raising their voices, pointing at her, while she took cover behind the members of her family. The headmen and elders from both villages attempted to restore calm while getting the boy's family members out of the house and back to their motorbikes in a hurry. The wedding took place one month later.

This meeting shows how marriages are both a family affair and a village affair. A family affair because it implies a mutual evaluation of what can be given to the future spouses. Each family assesses the status, reputation and assets of the other beforehand, while evaluating its own ability to give and transmit.

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Marriage is a key stage in the constitution of individuals and potentially the time when one receives one's share of inheritance (Chapter 5). The stakes are high. It is therefore a time when parents must clarify their children's entitlement to property according to their socio-economic trajectories. Parents must also reflect on how they will carry out their future parental duties (novitiates, schooling, marriage, inheritance), while taking into account their own means of subsistence and potential risks unforeseen in the future. However, the meeting is also a village affair in that the cohesion of families eases the cohesion of the village. The mechanism put in place to negotiate and witness the agreement between families is based on the idea that the village is a collective space where the morality of individuals must be recalled, and commitments sanctioned. Negotiations between families are ordered in space (the four tables), mediatized and witnessed. The witness-mediators are all the more important because they embody both morality linked to experience, and a system of proof. On the one hand, the headmen of the two villages take note of the agreement concluded in the event that a conflict emerges in the future. On the other hand, a certain number of people experienced in this type of exercise are present: the 'elders' are privileged witnesses, as are the 'official elders'. U Maung is the traditional officiant for this type of meeting. He is known for his moderation and his ability to reconcile people by stressing in his speeches the difficult, but necessary, balance in human relations. And Ko Kyaw listened. The role of the officiant is assigned to U Maung because his word is legitimate. He can give a sermon on how to direct one's life in the right way, because he has proven it in the past and still proves it today. In other words, he embodies a certain village ethic and promotes a common good (a life without conflict, balanced alliances) which strengthens, while producing, his position as a *lugyi*.

Once again, Ko Kyaw appears at the margins of this event. As headman, he is a privileged witness to this ceremony of engagement, but the performing of the ritual and the meaning associated with marriage are fields of politics that go beyond headship and belong to the political landscape.

U Htay and a Dispute

Our last *lugyi* is the most important. This is U Htay, whom I called the Worthy in Chapter 3, a former village headman who then became the 'official elder' and Ko Kyaw's brother-in-law. His trajectory and how he takes charge of village affairs show another way in which the worth of a *lugyi* is produced, at the interface between charismatic leadership and the embodiment of the common good.

U Htay's past achievements have been described in Chapter 3. Among them, we can remember how he embodied propriety on the model of the last men of *hpon* (U To Kaing and U Za Nay Ya) during a moment of moral rupture that

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saw the emergence of self-reliance and the rise of village affairs as the form of Gawgyi politics. When headman, he notably embodied a shift in how headship was performed in contrast with U Win the Infamous. He also built a road connecting Gawgyi to Monywa, assembled donations for it and negotiated with villagers for them to give up part of their land. He was renowned for not taking bribes and he kept farmers' tax receipts at home in case any issues of ownership were to arise (as he experienced with the construction of a poultry zone). When he refused to compete for another mandate as headman, a political crisis unfolded in Myinmilaung tract. At that moment, he proclaimed himself 'official elder' in order to keep an eye on local politics while this status partially protected him from being pushed to become headman again. This was a first step in distancing himself from officials. Under his tenure, however, the domain of village affairs, drawing from the traditions of *luhmuyay*, expanded and nowadays includes the organization of ceremonies, the management of the water and electricity systems, the rebuilding of roads, the treatment of the sick and the dead, dealing with NGOs, managing government loans and enlarging the village, among other issues. These challenges were not totally new, and village affairs had existed to some extent since the creation of Gawgyi. What was new was the articulation of social affairs with new stakes at a moment of rupture with the state in the late 1990s and early 2000s. U Htay remained a central player in Gawgyi as guardian of village affairs, even more since he stopped being headman. His general knowledge is valued, and his understanding of Buddhist morality is called upon during conflict. He is also interested in astrology and his erudition is regularly used to name children or to guide the building of houses according to the flows of fortune and misfortune. Overall, he has chosen to take charge of village affairs by staying away from government control while emphasizing the responsibility of villagers in common affairs. This middle position, difficult to hold, makes the worth of U Htay.

The dispute explored below shows that, at the time of my fieldwork, he was the only one able to settle a conflict related to the building of Gawgyi's power grid. This case shows how conflict resolution requires the ability to supersede individual issues by invoking a common good, that is, to defend village affairs.

In the middle of the 2016 rainy season, the Monywa Township authorities announced that electricity would be delivered to villages within two miles of the city's administrative boundaries. Gawgyi was one of them. The newly elected village headman, U So from Myinmilaung, informed the villagers of this during a meeting at Gawgyi's school attended by at least one person per family. The conditions were as follows: in order to install the electric pylons, it was necessary to widen the roads of the village, to twenty feet wide for the largest and twelve for the others. Villagers should therefore clean, level and sometimes give up some of their living space to widen the paths. They should accept these conditions

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unanimously or else the project risked being aborted. The project was accepted, but tensions soon arose over the areas to be ceded, the rights of passage of the living and the dead and the question of the future expansion of the village.

In theory, the village headman and the heads of ten households should have been the mediators of the project. However, the task fell to the *lugyi*, and U Htay in particular. Ko Kyaw no longer had a say in this kind of issue. Having direct access to a path is essential for every household. The houses are built and oriented according to the main roads which channel auspicious and non-auspicious flows between the auspicious gate east of Gawgyi and the inauspicious gate to the south. For example, villagers who die in the village must be evacuated from their homes by a path going through the village and leading to the cemetery. The dead body's journey must be made without passing through the enclosure of a neighbouring house so as not to disorient the dead man's 'butterfly soul' (*leippya*)[11] to facilitate his transmigration. The paths thus structure the village space. It is the same for the cemetery (to the southwest), the monastery (to the north) and the altar of the village *naq* (to the southeast), which are not however 'part' of the village, but which limit its extension. The widening of roads had triggered the issue of road access, especially in newly inhabited areas, as well as the question of the future expansion of Gawgyi to the southeast. Overall, U Htay dealt with each problem on a case-by-case basis during the month of August 2016. The case below is interesting because it involves our three *lugyi*. Gawgyi is roughly divided into four parts by a north–south and an east–west route. The case in question is located in the southeast quarter where a path sinks towards the houses further south from the main east–west axis. This path passes in front of the house of U Maung to finish at the gates of the houses of A and B (who do not get along) and U Lin's house is located behind them. In other words, U Lin's family members do not have direct access to a village path. They must either go through a neighbouring house or leave the village. This does not pose any problems for accessing electricity, as it would suffice to extend the power line. However, the situation is more complicated because they want the path to be extended to their living space, even if it means cutting it in half. This path could then join a future road which would skirt the village on its southeast edge, and so promote its enlargement. In addition, U Lin's family demanded this extension in order to bring their future dead to the cemetery in the best conditions. How, then, can A and B agree to cede part of their land to the village without giving the impression of having to align themselves with U Lin's wishes while overcoming the animosities between neighbours?

The village headman was warned of the case but did not wish to intercede, knowing all too well that his instructions would not be listened to. For Ko Kyaw, it was an example of how hard it can be to 'perform' headmanship, as the authority of a headman cannot easily overcome how people want to deal

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with their own affairs. As for U Maung, who was close to the people involved, he preferred not to intervene in order to avoid any accusation of taking sides. For the road to be extended and widened, each of the three families (A, B and U Lin) must give up some of their land. This is not a problem for U Lin who wants to alienate a little of his housing space to have access to a path. But he can't be judge and jury. For A and B, who disagree on the portion to be given, the situation is different. A can only give two to three feet, because her house adjoins the edge of their modest living space. B, having a larger area, should then give at least ten feet. To convince the protagonists of the need to expand the path, one must be able to assert something legitimate, something that neither U Maung nor U Lin can do in this case. One has to be outside and above the game to be able to settle this consensually so that the village can gain access to electricity. Describing an intra-village conflict (a story of insults between neighbours), Nash relates how such an agreement was reached during his fieldwork:

> Restoration of 'cool minds' among neighbours can only be done if a direct confrontation between the contestants is avoided. A direct confrontation means that a quarrel is pushed to the point at which somebody must clearly be the victor and somebody clearly be the vanquished … The procedures of settling a dispute follow the dictate of making a clear issue out of the case. The process allows each person to keep his dignity, to compromise indirectly, and to indicate subscription to the norms of peaceful interaction. (Nash 1965: 83)

Nash therefore insists on the search for consensus as well as on the importance of the authority of elders and the village leader (the man of *hpon*) for solving conflicts. More precisely, making a clear issue out of the case is similar to what Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) call the 'process of generalizing': U Htay, grasping the ins and outs of the problem, took up this case. To resolve the conflict, he pleaded for the common future of the village whose extension to the south-east was being recorded. He argued with A and B – separately and without the two families confronting each other – about the need to anticipate the extension of the village, to create new paths to bring the dead to the cemetery and the need to reach a consensus so that electricity could arrive (finally) in Gawgyi. Furthermore, he promised B that the levelling of the land ceded to the village would not be at his expense, and that U Lin would be responsible for the works. The difficulty, concerning land, is related to what we described in the previous chapter, that there are potentially multiple claims on the housing area among both A and B's families. Convincing them to alienate part of it to facilitate the passage of a neighbour's dead in anticipation of

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the enlargement of the village can be demanding. It requires giving credit to all potential claims and showing why this or that perspective is greater in a specific context.

U Htay's ability to reach consensus stems from his ability to overtake specific claims and assert a common interest. Guarding village affairs in that sense is a 'process of generalizing' by enforcing an idea of the common good. The common good covers a broad spectrum ranging, in this case, from the treatment of the dead to the enlargement of the village while going beyond the level of neighbourhood relations. Anticipating the extension of the village, promoting the fortune of the villagers, organizing access to electricity: these are issues affecting Gawgyi as a whole. If U Htay is legitimate to assert and embody this interest, it is because he has demonstrated his worth in the past and continues to do so. He has achieved a certain degree of independence by moving cautiously between family and neighbourhood relationships, government and clientelism. He has the qualities of the leader described by Nash, but he does not sit at the top of a clientele. The men of *hpon* are long gone, but their memory remains, and the defence of village affairs is nowadays the fragile state of local politics in Gawgyi.

Inclusion and Exclusion

This chapter has explored how the worth of the *lugyi* comes from their engagement in village affairs by promoting different forms of common good. The three persons presented here had pushed in the past decades for village affairs to be maintained and enhanced, combining more traditional forms of sociality with new stakes in order to organize collective life following previous models of propriety in the face of a violent and disengaging state. To do so, they used local institutions (head of bachelors, master of ceremonies, official elder) which are central to the domain of social affairs and upheld local ethics in situations where the worth of people is evaluated (mutual help, union of the couple, consensus in disputes). In contrast with the analyses emphasizing clientelist and meritorious hierarchy, the question of the village as a collective is key to understand power relations in Gawgyi and, *in fine*, the worth and authority of its *lugyi*. Two points must be recalled. First, the fact that the current monk and his predecessor never really achieved a degree of recognition in the village as did U Za Nay Ya, and their disengagement from villagers' affairs is important to understand why the latter also 'did by themselves'. Second, the three *lugyi* have credentials: they are all part of the main lineages of the village, they are educated and are, except for U Lin, large farmers who can take time outside of the field. Thus, even if they participated in the transformation of the local political landscape, they are still part of an ingrained hierarchy (Chapter 3).

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Describing a novitiate ceremony first showed that, in addition to the ways in which people engage with each other through various transactions (meritorious, monetary, food offerings, mutual aid and so on), a *shinbyu* is also a village matter. Indeed, doing a *shinbyu* in Gawgyi requires the organization of a collective for the mutual assistance to take place and be effective. U Lin is responsible for it in the shadow of the ritual pomp. In addition, among the multiple forms of engagement occurring during a *shinbyu* (merit sharing, aid money, food offering, music, giving a son to the monastery and so forth), washing dishes, building the ceremonial pavilion, serving food and cooking are all tests that measure the involvement of people. Their engagement in collective affairs is then central to defining the village as a political space. We also saw the union of couples as a collective stake since a system of publicity and mediation sanctions the commitment of the spouses' families, a system headed by U Maung who embodies the good order of the local life to some extent.

The common good can sometimes include the issue of the treatment of the dead, the extension of the village, but also the regulation of neighbourhood relations. U Htay's ability to promote the common good is intimately linked to his past actions, through which he has demonstrated integrity and a constant commitment to the entire village. The *lugyi* are therefore village leaders of a different type than the 'man of *hpon*' described by Nash. Their worth does not depend on the quantity or number of their donations. Besides, neither patronage nor the field of merit – two forms of engagement that create hierarchy between people – fully reflect their bigness. This chapter has shown that in the hollow of the contradictions between the multiple forms of engagement lies the realm of *luhmuyay*, which, cast in Gawgyi's politics at the turn of the twenty-first century, became the domain of village affairs oriented by *lugyi*. The village issues therefore cross all the others, to different degrees, in that 'my affairs' (*kokoyay*) potentially belong to 'social affairs' (*luhmuyay*). Thus, by making village affairs a space of engagement where the worth of people is gauged according to a common good, the *lugyi* are producing a (fragile) social order dominated by masculine values. They created their role as guardians of village affairs in a specific historical context.

To some extent, there were always collective issues in each village. They are permanently re-creating the village and scaling the scope of local politics. They are not just the things that are happening in one place. Thus, saying that village affairs became the form of Gawgyi politics means that at some point in its history – the change from an Infamous headman to a Worthy one at the turn of the twenty-first century (Chapter 3) – local affairs became a domain of engagement against a backdrop of governmental violence and detachment. The posture and acts of the Infamous headman and military towards the managing of local affairs influenced how people understood worthiness and, as a

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consequence, how they would engage in collective affairs (e.g. not taking or giving bribes, upholding of ceremonies, investment in schooling and so on). It produced a fragile political order where patron–client politics are always present. In this respect, my work is just an attempt to make sense of the contemporary manifestation of this specific configuration of power relations and situate it in the history of a place where a group of men were entrusted to take charge of village affairs, following the example of previous men of propriety and building on a traditional conception of sociality. Village affairs were nothing new, but their transformation as a space of engagement in relation to state violence and corruption was a novelty.

To broaden the conclusions beyond the scope of this chapter alone, three more points should be added. First, by arguing that village affairs became the form of Gawgyi politics where big men build their authority, as during the selection of the headman in 2016, the making of ceremonies and the resolution of disputes, this work shows how local politics is a matter of excluding some individuals and entrusting others (the big men) to 'take charge' of local affairs. In Gawgyi, it was so notably because they exemplify propriety through their engagement towards the collective, but in many other places, such as in Myinmilaung Proper or many villages of the Ayeyarwady Delta, such engagement occurs at the margins.

Second, Gawgyi *lugyi*, no matter how legitimate they may be, still represent the elite sitting at the top of a local hierarchy that has transformed during the past century, as we saw in Chapter 2. They are not the same kind of patron that colonizers and scholars imagined as the natural chief of the countryside, but rather descendants of large families of peasants who monopolized village leadership and remained influential by investing in inheritance politics. As we will see in Chapter 7, the voices of villagers are channelled, delegated and often excluded through, to and by this type of leader who is entrusted to 'take care' of collective affairs.

Third, where does the headman sit in this picture? He is in a rather ambiguous position. Even if the official role of headship did not change much throughout the twentieth century, Ko Kyaw is in a different position than U Nyunt, the first headman of Myinmilaung tract, or U To Kaing for instance. He had to deal with other kinds of leaders (past headmen, current *lugyi*, township officials, monks and so on) and stakes, and the scope of his authority was constrained by the fashioning of the local polity. He navigated a different political landscape than the *lugyi*, as they chose to remain distant from the state. Ko Kyaw did not only operate in and for Myinmilaung tract. That was not the sole arena for him. He also had to craft his position in a landscape built in the past decades, a landscape delineated by the making of collective affairs, the evaluation of propriety and expressed through a sense of belonging.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in 'La grandeur des lu-gyi: Affaires villageoises et formes d'engagement dans le centre du Myanmar', *Péninsule* 79(2) (2019).
2. So far, I have referred to the latter as 'official elders' as one person is recognized by the state for each tract as a traditional institution. But there is often more than one *yatmiyathpa* and often they are *lugyi*.
3. Other people are called more or less great depending on the context of enunciation. Daw Than, an elderly widowed woman, was the only woman *lugyi*, without it being possible to put her in the same rank as U Lin, U Htay and U Maung because she was a *lugyi* due to her character, her lucidity and her 'natural' authority without taking charge of village interests in a public way. The chief cooks for ceremonies, the healer, the 'master of the lower ways' and the medium of the cult of the *naq* are also great figures.
4. The ceremonies in question are in a practical way called 'meritorious donation' (*ahlu*) because they always contain a form of donation, whether it is directed towards the monks and the monastery or not. For example, marriage does not necessarily include an intervention by monks, and therefore does not fall within the definition of a donation (*ahlu*) in its narrow sense. However, in practice, many people are fed at weddings, which makes it a form of donation in the broad sense as long as the offering of food produces merit.
5. The money will go to the village fund held by U Lin, which will be used to renew the utensils, tables, chairs and tarpaulins needed for the ceremonies.
6. At weddings, what is given is called *lethpwe* ('union of hands'), a term that covers, in the restricted sense, gifts in kind made by the guests as well as by the parents of the spouses for the establishment of the couple. In a broad sense, the *lethpwe* refers to gifts symbolizing a marital union and can therefore integrate what is given in cash under the name of aid money. Robinne (2000) specifies that the sums paid during a *shinbyu* can be given back to the monastery as a donation.
7. These transfers of goods and services can be more or less formalized and cover a wide range, including, for example, matrimonial services, assistance for the construction of the ceremonial palace or the services of guests during ceremonies, assistance during funeral vigils, the construction or repair of houses, services rendered during agricultural work and so forth.
8. On the notion of 'remainder' in Myanmar cosmology, notably concerning how personal names are calculated and the role of the remainder as a notion of randomness or freedom which minimizes the belief in karmic predestination, cf. Robinne (1998).
9. For Nash, the first visit, at the boy's parents' initiative, was called *kyaung lande* [*sic*], 'opening the road' (1965: 250). Spiro associates it with *sei sat gyin*, 'being connected' (Spiro [1977] 1986: 181).
10. A literal translation of *tintha-ngway* could be: the 'wealth placed (on the couple) for their enjoyment'. This gift is also called *hkinwin pyitsi* or the 'properties (given) to enter (the relation) in good terms'.
11. *Leippya* is a vital principle; it is the subject of many rites that mark the life cycles of an individual, including birth, early childhood and death. For a clarification about the butterfly soul, cf. Brac de La Perrière (1989) and Robinne (2000).

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7

Coda

Choosing a New Headman

At the end of December 2015, after the NLD's landslide victory in the national election in November, the village headmen from the township of Monywa gathered at an official meeting and received instructions from the township GAD administrator to organize elections for new headmen. To that end, Ko Kyaw had to arrange the selection of new 'ten-household leaders' for each village of the tract because, as was the case in 2012, they would be the ones voting. It is a double process of selection because candidates for headship should first be selected as ten-house leaders. Ko Kyaw went to Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon to meet and inform their elders, current ten-household leaders as well as the clerk a few days later. The politics of headman selection was thus put into motion. In Gawgyi, the word was spreading by nightfall. The headman was about to change.

A few years back, in 2012, Ko Kyaw was Gawgyi's candidate. He ran for headship after a year of confusion. U Htay's withdrawal from the office after a five-year mandate, and his refusal to be a candidate again, led to a crisis in 2011. In that year, the new government of Thein Sein called for a new round of elections following its pro-democracy agenda. In Myinmilaung, that 'election' was chaotic. Most of the ten-house leaders of the village tract refused to participate and, allegedly, nobody wanted to be a candidate after U Htay. A couple of hours before the arrival of township officials, an official elder from Ogon called all the villagers to gather in Myinmilaung monastery. A few came. The elder preselected three candidates, one from Ogon, one from Mingalagon and one from Myinmilaung. Gawgyi was not represented. Villagers voted by show of hands. U Yin, from Myinmilaung, was thus chosen. In late 2012, a new round

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 213.

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of elections was called, allegedly due to electoral fraud in Yangon. This time, all the ten-house heads were present and voting instructions were given. Under the patronage of U Htay, votes from Gawgyi heads were pooled for Ko Kyaw. He totalled fourteen, Myinmilaung thirteen, Ogon two and Mingalagon also two. Ko Kyaw took up his duties a few months later in 2013.

We could use the word ‘selection’ instead of ‘election’ to qualify the process of choosing a headman. This would highlight how handpicking, electing and justifying are all processes of selection across particular settings. When Ko Kyaw was selected headman in 2012, it was, according to him,[1] the first ‘democratic’ election in the tract. The relative population of villages, and the ability to compound votes, were the primary elements of this competition. There is a variety of stakes (one-upmanship, brokerage with officials, containing factionalism, displaying bigness) and people (competitors, elders, clerks, ten-house leaders, township officials) associated with headman selection. Because of the particular state-like quality to the office of the headman, it has typically been more in the interests of the state than the local population to have it. Nonetheless, most villagers want a headman who comes from their village. It can attract loans, NGOs, development funds for electricity, water and roads. It can also smooth the processes for securing land rights and agricultural support, for instance. It facilitates relations with government agencies and adds to village prestige. Having a headman from one’s village – and its associated perks – is something to fight for to a certain extent. Even more so when such selections are climaxes in a sort of contest between Myinmilaung Proper and Gawgyi.

Prior to 2012, except for the 1960s, there was more artistry in the way headmen were selected. Generally speaking, they were either handpicked by the government (usually by a military officer; Thawnghmung (2003: 308) or elected by elders upon consensus. Sometimes, following precolonial practices, heredity was prevalent, the office was for life and thought of as a family duty. As in precolonial times, however, competition for office was paramount, and patronage and factionalism the main political dynamics. Often selections were justified *a posteriori*, emphasizing the achievement of this or that person, his charisma, his natural authority. The actual conditions in which the office of Myinmilaung headship was transmitted are always blurred. The only common point between the selections of most of the headmen is that they happened quickly. In other words, there was never one rule for selection but only peculiar cases in which procedures were barely involved. Such cases depended more on the history of the place, the balance of power, the personalities involved, the control of land, labour and taxation and extra-local events (such as the colonial ‘pacification’ of the countryside, the communist insurgency, the socialist turn, the military hardening post-1988). Collecting information about these successions is difficult, as shifts between headmen often reflect tensions in Myinmilaung tract. Even if the 2016

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case can be coined an 'indirect election', because all of the ten-house heads had a vote, the actual emergence of these heads and potential candidates was controlled by village big men to some extent. The concept of election carries a sense of free choice that is too loaded with the Western idea of democracy, such that its use misrepresents local political dynamics.

For this reason, the selection of a new headman which I witnessed in early 2016 weaves together the main conundrums that have been dealt with throughout the book. This coda is about two crucial days which I describe in an open-ended perspective. This writing strategy allows the reader to see how the history of the political landscape and the forms of engagement connect in a single situation. I use the present tense to render the events alive.

Preparing the Scene

The eve of the vote is upon us when Ko Kyaw begins the selection of the ten-house leaders. The window of time is short, so alliances cannot be built up easily. To win, they must gather votes for only one candidate. The problem is that nobody really wants to be that man, at least at first.

Around 4pm, Ko Kyaw and I go together to U Maung's house. There, they discuss the listing of household heads with a list prepared in advance. It is incomplete. They call on two other people: the village teacher, U Lin, and the official elder, U Htay. The reason they are in charge of the selection is because of their role in local politics and it displays their bigness. After discussing petty issues, they start making another list of village houses by groups of ten. The school teacher is the main reference for the listing, due to his extensive knowledge of the villagers and his proven ability as an organizer. The other three men help to fill in missing names. 'Oh, and on that side, near U Thu, what is her name… yes, yes, Daw Yee.' The grouping of houses on the list reflects the mental geography of the village, which is split into three main parts, following the main roads created during settlement. These include the northeast, the southeast and the western parts (the latter being the last area to be settled).

U Maung and U Lin become vote collectors for the next few hours while U Htay and Ko Kyaw remain at a distance. I go with the first two and we walk from the furthest east side down to the west part, to finally reach the northeast the following morning. The distribution of houses by groups of ten is quite natural for the southeast side of the village but more difficult in the last settled area. It is easier to group people who are closer, kin and neighbours, in the area that was settled long ago. It is rather less natural in the western part, notably the northwest, because it is mostly composed of newer individual houses, where affiliations and descent are not as clear. In the northeast, collecting votes is also complicated. Most of the *lugyi* live on the southeast side of the road. In the northeast live a

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few important families, notably big land owners. They often stay out of official representation but have their say in village affairs.

As we collect the votes, people are amused by my presence and many are surprised to have to publicly choose a 'responsible' man for a more or less virtual group of ten houses. In practice the collection goes as follows: the vote collectors visit every house, one by one, asking to see the house head. They quickly explain the process to their host and show them the group to which they belong on a list displaying the names of the household heads, which they choose from. The collection is quite easy in the southeast part. Votes are generally influenced by collectors, notably when the head of the house is absent. I try to be transparent as much as I can. Often a child who knows how to write inscribes the 'selected' name. Sometimes the collector writes it himself after getting the agreement of the family. Slight changes of intonation while reading out names from the list emphasize the 'good' one. Direct indication in favour of the person that is suitable is also commonplace. Villagers often ask who to vote for, most of them showing little interest in the process, wondering why they are involved. This is not the case for those who are already ten-house leaders, those seen as important villagers or families, such as big farmers or respected elders, and those active in village affairs. With them, the collectors spend more time showing them the list and explaining the situation while sharing a moment to chew betel nuts and drink tea. Women are often asked for their vote, but even if many are, in practice, considered as household leaders, none are on the list. They are inevitably excluded from local politics, apart from credit, health, school and monastery groups, because men monopolize the formalization of politics. Overall, it seems that villagers are not used to this 'democratic' process. It seems it is the first time they have had to express such a choice. Even though it is an unimportant issue for most, votes are collected in a hurry with great skill.

As I wake up the following morning, I realize that I have been deliberately set aside from vote collection in the northeast part of the village. The person who emerged as Gawgyi's candidate comes from this area and is from an old lineage of large farmers. The history of the settlement of this village, from a central node divided in three, is woven together by kin and neighbour networks with room for dissent due to old conflicts concerning land disputes, gambling, donations and money lending. These elements are critical in the listing of people. Most of the individuals who were projected to be ten-house leaders were already known before the vote collection. At one level, their selection is an administrative formality to be achieved by vote collectors. At another level, there are reasons why this or that person is selected. Six out of the fourteen ten-house leaders are from the southeast part, due to its high density of population, but also to a stronger hold on village politics by the people living there (where the current village

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leaders mostly come from). Thus, the whole process is about filling as many positions in the social hierarchy of the village as possible, and acknowledging or pressing people to select the number of ten-house leaders required by the government. Who are these leaders?

Most, but not all, are people known for taking collective responsibilities such as managing water delivery and fee collection, gathering people for road repairs, helping at events related to the monastery, and sometimes resolving small disputes if they are influential enough. A typical example is someone who engages in village affairs. However, most do not want to take on official responsibilities. Ko Kyaw summarizes the selection of these leaders with a metaphor: ‘If you press, it will spring out’, in other words, put their back up against the wall. They do not bear many formal duties; they assist the headman in some cases such as providing free labour for government projects in the past or electing him today. None of them are particularly known for being helpful. Some are economically important, such as big farmers who stay involved in village affairs by keeping an eye on local politics in the Myinmilaung tract because it is at this level that state institutions empowered to channel access to land can be controlled. Others want to become influential, and climbing the government ladder is one way of achieving this. A few are backed by a portion of influential villagers interested in having a headman who will be compliant. In Gawgyi, most are simply people known for being helpful and good, agreeing to be somehow responsible for the village to a certain extent. Therefore, while the vote collectors have to fill out the numbers, the chosen persons are a blend of important, involved or interested men who are able to be ten-house leaders. Overall, this group is the sublayer of the local elite which takes care of village affairs at large. The most stable and important ones – the men organizing the vote collection like U Maung, the school teacher and U Htay – keep their distance from government agents and bodies while being trusted by most villagers. This distance is a result of how local affairs (beyond state interests) became the form of local politics at the turn of the twenty-first century after decades of disengagement by the military regime.

At this stage of the selection process, Gawgyi *lugyi* act as checks and balances, reinforcing their authority by taking care of the process. They make the selection by taking into consideration the main elements of local politics: the mental geography of local hierarchy, the interests of the main villagers, the degrees of involvement of potential leaders and the issue at stake: controlling headship against Myinmilaung. What one should bear in mind is that having a ‘good’ headman is advantageous to access officials, to avoid extra fees for land registration, to be included in development projects (water, electricity, roads, loans and so on), to have a buffer against government policies if the headman knows how to deal with officials and so forth. There is also a long history of successive headmen whose personalities (or memories of their personalities) reflect

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how villages coped with various levels of power. There is an apparent contradiction between the fact that the selection of the ten-house leaders was experienced by most as an unimportant matter and the fact that it was crucial for these *lugyi* to handle it properly. It shows that such handling becomes an important way of demonstrating one's skill or bigness.

Competing for Candidacy

It's D-Day. The second list is finished. U Maung and the school teacher arrive at Ko Kyaw's house. They make a third list because U Htay does not want to be on it. They erase his name and choose another person instead. They ask me to write this person's name on the new list. It feels like cheating in an exam. The final version is now completed and polished. Among the fourteen names on the piece of paper, one will be Gawgyi's candidate. Overall, the ten-house heads selected today are mostly the same as those chosen in 2012 by U Htay, but no one has yet emerged as *the* candidate. And no one has openly campaigned for it in the past days.

The group of men is called to the headman's house at noon to agree on one name. They arrive gradually. Discussing who might be headman is something of an issue. The school teacher and U Maung are no longer present. The ten-house leaders check the list. The discussion goes from jokes to complaints about the difficulties in finding a good person: someone able and willing to take on such a responsibility. Those who want to are often discredited as unfit, lacking personal skills or distrusted by others. The required skills include literacy, ability to appreciate general and specific issues, capacity to understand new and old generations, good knowledge of the intricacies of life outside the village and in the region, and finally skills to be able to negotiate with everyone, officials and commoners alike.

Two points hold the most importance. First, it is clear to all, and U Htay insists upon it, that the fourteen votes should be grouped under a single candidate. Because the selection is based on the number of ten-house leaders per village, as in 2012, they must vote collectively to keep control of the headship. Ko Kyaw has sensed that this time, unlike 2012, the villagers from Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon are going to pool their votes too. Second, the candidate should not be too rigid. In Gawgyi, the inner factions might choose one man over another if he is manoeuvrable to some extent. This was what Gawgyi big men did when patronizing the emergence of candidates: they prepared the scene before the show.

Candidacy emerges either from an individual's will or from collective coercion. While it is possible to impose this charge on some people, it is impossible for others due to their 'bigness'. This shows that headship is but one level of

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local politics. For instance, concerning the 2012 selection, Ko Kyaw says that he was half-forced to be a candidate and half-willing to become headman. Yet people like U Htay (who had been headman and who withdrew his name from the list) cannot be pushed forward. U Maung (who agreed to be ten-house leader) never positioned himself as a runner. These *lugyi* choose to stay away from official positions as much as possible. The school teacher also stays out of the competition because he already has a government job. During the meeting at Ko Kyaw's house, two men stand up as candidates for Gawgyi.

The first is U Han, a man in his late thirties known for always being helpful in village affairs, notably for road repairs or managing water distribution. He is also the head cook for ceremonials, the person entrusted to control the handling of food pots.[2] A relative of Ko Kyaw, he always lends a hand in preparing weddings and donations. Furthermore, he is the village *hsounhsaya*, or 'master of ghosts'. Despite his rather low influence against underground magic, he protects villagers' lives to some extent. However, he is not yet considered a *lugyi*. Why not? There is no clear-cut answer to this. He is one of the largest farmers in the village, but he allegedly has poor negotiating skills, especially with officials, and lacks writing proficiency and general knowledge. Ko Kyaw backs him anyway. They have developed and entertained mutual trust and support for several years in the management of village affairs, but Ko Kyaw supports him principally because he does not want to become a candidate again himself. He wants to exit headship. Therefore, he stands for U Han even if he doubts that he could be a 'good' headman. During the meeting at Ko Kyaw's, U Han is set a little aside and subject to a profusion of jokes ('Go away, we need to discuss serious matters!', and the like).

U Thein is the second candidate. He runs a shop in the southeast part of the village and is also related to Ko Kyaw. The son of a big farmer who is absent from most village events, he is not known for being helpful or involved in village affairs. On the contrary, he is rather notorious because he bribed a woman to avoid having to acknowledge the paternity of their child even though he was already married.[3] He is nonetheless literate because his parents invested in his education. In addition, he has been a ten-house leader for many years. However, U Thein did not come to the meeting at Ko Kyaw's house. For the ten-house heads, this is a clear move: U Thein will run for candidacy. His absence could be perceived in two ways. Either he will accept whatever the group decides, or he disagrees. It is obvious to everyone that it is the second option, but no one says a word. While eating the cheese and dry sausages I brought, they gradually agree unenthusiastically on U Han. But the game is not over.

On our way to the office in Myinmilaung, we come across U Thein arguing loudly with fellow villagers near the shelter at the north edge of Gawgyi, past the housing area before reaching the monastery and the school. We stop our

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motorcycle. The real negotiation for candidacy is about to begin. The location is interesting. It is at the edge of Gawgyi, but still within it. The shelter is outside the jurisdiction of any house and thus free from personal obligations. In comparison, the house of the headman was not a neutral area and U Han received support there due to his affinity with Ko Kyaw. U Thein chooses to wait at the shelter, which offers no hold through personal affiliation, except that of Gawgyi village. The discussion[4] lasts for about ten minutes and is a rare moment of politics being openly discussed in the village.

'I don't want to do it,' says U Thein as we reach the shelter, answering the few men who are already there. After we park our motorbikes, some other men insist on the fact that the future headman must improve the development of Gawgyi. Ko Kyaw, entering the debate, acknowledges U Thein's candidacy as he tells him directly: 'We need to choose a person that is capable. Can you do it? You will lead as you want'. U Thein replies that he does not claim to be the candidate. I realize, almost incredulous, that I am assisting in a political squabble. Another man in the background says that, actually, U Thein does want to and can do it. U Thein then starts a tirade about his worries of being stuck between his own business, his family and headship.

U Thein's candidacy is now official. He positions himself as if under coercion from his peers. U Han does not interfere in the discussion at any point. He has just lost his chance and I can see on his face that he has resigned as a candidate. U Thein monopolizes the discussion, but he has yet to be entitled.

A debate starts about whether or not the chosen candidate will have to select the leader of the bachelors' group and the official elder (which are pivotal positions in organizing village affairs, ceremonials and accessing collective properties). One group argues that if 'the one who wants to be headman' does not state his choice now, then his word would not be respected later on. This group wants U Thein to position himself, to garner support among the villagers and his faction, and to see if he will follow the directions given by the main *lugyi* who occupy such positions. Other men reply that such questions can be tackled later, insisting that U Thein answer clearly whether he wants to be the candidate or not. U Thein does not clearly acquiesce. Not yet. The standstill ends when a man says: 'If you [U Thein] don't want to do it, then we will send a report [to the township authority] and we will choose again later'. Everybody starts talking at once, the voices melting into each other. I feel almost invisible among them. Finally, a consensus is reached. They will back U Thein: 'Ok, you do it, you do it. You can do as you want [i.e. select the leader of bachelors and official elder that suits you], we choose you'.

Ko Kyaw's phone rings. The men stop talking – the village tract clerk in Myinmilaung is asking when they will arrive, and they do not want him to overhear what is happening. When he gets off his phone, they start arguing about

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whether or not the headman will have to make decisions collegially. The debate is now if and how the ten-house leaders will have a say in village government. An old man reminds the group that they had already chosen U Han and, addressing him directly, tells him that he can govern alone. Others, notably the younger men, argue for negotiations to take place. 'But it can't happen,' retorted another. Ko Kyaw intervenes to smooth things over. He says that the headman can change things, that from his own experience it is difficult to make decisions, it is not as simple as people think. To round up the debate he declares that 'you guys don't want to lead and don't want to follow'. The argument also focuses on the critical balance between getting money from headship and being unpopular for taking it. This directly refers to past experiences with different headmen and officials, some such as U Win, 'the Infamous', being well known for taking bribes and U Htay, 'the Worthy', for refusing any payoffs while in office. Ko Kyaw reorients the conversation to avoid this issue, saying that a headman's salary is not high, but that U Thein could try it.

'We now have a candidate, chosen by me,' shouts an old leader. U Thein's candidacy is backed. The backers seem to form a different group from those who supported Ko Kyaw. The authority of the current big men might change in the future, but that is not an issue for now. The rest of the group talks loudly for a while. One man expresses his feeling that the impending situation (the change in national government) will be difficult to handle. Ko Kyaw answers that it is not as bad as he thinks. He says that what a headman does is little more than taking care of the village and that responsibilities are even lighter than before. Another man loses patience: 'We don't care about this. The important point is to get the headman in Gawgyi'. From that moment on, the need to pool the fourteen votes unites their opinions. The same person then directly asks U Thein: 'Will you do it? If yes, say it! I am tired of doublespeak'. A heavy silence reigns for a few seconds and finally U Thein says: 'I will do it!'

The name of the candidate has changed. U Thein is now entitled. He has said it, so he is engaged towards the others. We all get back on our motorbikes and head towards the office in Myinmilaung Proper. As we are about to leave, a man shouts from behind us: 'Ko Thein! When we arrive, don't change your mind. If you do, we'll beat you'.

Against Myinmilaung Proper

The government office in Myinmilaung Proper was built in 2005 on a previous cemetery at the crossroads of four villages (map 0.3). The boundaries of the tracts are not visible but are intimately related to the evolution of these settlements. The building is the 'front' of the Myinmilaung tract as a jurisdiction, but the content of politics lies in people's relationships, not in the building, which is almost always

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closed. Concerning the cemetery, there is a rumour that a previous headman, U Win, wanted to take this land for himself and sell it but then changed his mind and built the office. Gawgyi villagers spread around the office as we arrive. I follow some of them inside the nearby teashop. Sitting there, some men exchange courtesies with the locals, many of whom they dislike. U Win is there, sitting in the back, watching the scene from a distance. Most Gawgyi men do not dare go inside the teashop. Only those who are confident enough walk in. U Maung, U Lin and Ko Kyaw are among them. There, we wait for the arrival of township officials, staying semi-silent, sharing edgy smiles and chewing betel compulsively.

Three officials finally arrive in a big black truck. As they walk into the teashop, everyone stands up. I stand too and catch their gaze. My presence is not expected, but my companions are not worried about it. Bit by bit, it all becomes formalized. The two main officials, the chairman of the Township General Administration Department and a person from the Education Department, sit and talk with Ko Kyaw and the clerk. The latter is showing off. He sits – is seen sitting – at the 'biggest' table during this interlude. Ko Kyaw, my host and the one organizing the election, is rather pleased. He is finally about to give up the position to another man. The government representatives drink their tea very slowly. Everyone glances warily in their direction every now and then. It is like watching sand run through an hourglass, measuring the time of the meeting. Once the cups are empty, everything is ready. The village headman pays the bill quickly – officials are always paid for when they come to villages. The election is about to start.

Under the tin roof of the office, the township chairman stands behind a table, facing the voters. These are the ten-house leaders from the respective villages included in the Myinmilaung village tract. They sit on a plastic tarp spread out on the floor, a common position adopted during meetings, teaching and preaching. On the left side sit Gawgyi men, with people from Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon to the right. Both groups face the table. Around the table are posted an assistant, the clerk and the official elders. Among the latter, the absence of U Htay is felt. The chairman talks about the election process, asking who cannot write. Polite and respectful during this occasion, he allows a foreigner to assist in a democratic election while looking at me some ten metres behind the scene.

The election goes on. The clerk calls the voters one after the other. The person stands, takes a piece of paper, goes to another table and writes down the name he wants, folds the paper and gives it to the chairman who puts it in a bowl. Finally, the chairman picks up each piece of paper one by one, reads the name aloud, shows it to the audience to prove that there is no cheating, and makes a chalk line on the blackboard. Only two names appear. U Thein, from Gawgyi, gathered fourteen votes, while U So, from Myinmilaung, got seventeen.

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The ten-house leaders from Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon have compounded their votes against Gawgyi, as predicted by Ko Kyaw. Last time, there were four candidates and Ko Kyaw won. The men on the right applaud. On the left, Gawgyi villagers growl. Anger rises, but they remain quiet. We quickly go back to the motorbikes.

A stone flies in our direction. A young man, allegedly a fool, has thrown a rock at us. In seconds, members of our faction armed with stones and sticks ask the offender to come closer. But nothing further happens. The atmosphere is tense; Gawgyi has been defeated. The sound of roaring engines fills the scene. Once back in the village, we stop at the shelter to comment on the defeat. They have the feeling of having been screwed. 'They must have been paid for it,' exclaims one of the men, referring to the previous election when votes were divided between four camps. They ask each other if there is a way to change the repartition of voters, as they will always lose if it stays this way. Then everyone goes home.

* * *

To some degree, in Gawgyi, this election was a matter of choosing a broker by manoeuvring electoral rules and village factions under the watch of big men who guide local affairs and keep their distance from the state. Let us ask a blunt

Figure 7.1. The 2016 selection of the headman at Myinmilaung office. © Stéphen Huard.

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question. Why does the selection of the headman turn out to be a competition between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper? It may be related to the stakes associated with the control of headship. At large, it facilitates access to government officials and projects which in turn help channel access to wealth. Each village tract has its own stories and history. In our case, angry outbursts are signs of contained disputes. It is something other than a simple fight for an institution. To understand why the 2016 election happened this way, we can connect it to how the political landscape was fashioned, to how each village justifies its presence in this landscape, to the fact that both settlements have competing narratives of foundation. In the same vein, if headship is a position of power within a village tract, we have seen that it was a colonial institution, bounding several villages under a single jurisdiction, and embodied differently by successive men.

Another point relates to the positioning of Gawgyi big men during the election. They engage in village affairs and monitor the emergence of a Gawgyi candidate. They also represent the elite of village farmers, the top of the local hierarchy. To some extent, this relates to how controlling local state institutions has helped to consolidate this hierarchy, especially since the socialist period. Looking back at them during the election, why do they keep a certain distance from the state? Why does a person like U Htay, the main leader in Gawgyi who has been headman in the recent past, stay away from the 'scene' of the selection but is present in its background? We have located the moment when village affairs became the main form of Gawgyi politics and how certain personalities in specific contexts embodied trustworthy leaders against a background of state violence and disengagement. This allows us to think about current politics, such as how current ceremonies are performed or how conflicts are settled, in terms of engagement towards the collective, that is, in terms of what became a critical stake in daily life. Thus, the positioning of Gawgyi big men during the 2016 selection connects with how the worth of leaders happened to be gauged and to the transformation of the local hierarchy.

The last point concerns Ko Kyaw's demeanour. This selection was for him a way to exit village headship. He was tired of it. Of course, becoming headman was for him an avenue for one-upmanship, but he was content with the idea that he would not have to cope with multiple personalities and obligations for much longer. He was never sure of his authority in this or that arena and had to adjust his stance, dissemble and engage with the previous headmen, Gawgyi big men, officials, neighbours and family in a dense social landscape. This tells us that embodying political institutions in a rural society means being a node intersecting and acting upon multiple layers of responsibilities, obligations and chains of relationships. It requires engaging with networks of relations delineated by uncertain boundaries between political domains that organize local politics.

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Notes

1. 'Democratic' headman elections were held in the 1960s (Chapter 3).
2. This is important considering that most acts of witchcraft are allegedly carried out through food offerings.
3. Being engaged for Burmese males does not mean it is socially forbidden to have another 'wife', but having other children without being married and not assuming responsibility for the children (paying for food, schooling, Buddhist novitiate etc.) is seen as immoral and indicates the character of the person.
4. The dialogue and its main themes are reconstructed from recollections and discussions about this moment with some participants and from my field notes.

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Conclusion

History, Power and Violence

The main theoretical conclusion this work points towards is that the ways in which people calibrate their engagement with each other is a key political process. It allows us to see how continuities are made of transformations. The book departed on a journey through history leading to the ethnographic present of situations encountered during fieldwork. The intention was to trace the development of village headship over time before introducing the reader to the social and moral forms of leadership underpinning day-to-day life in Gawgyi village. By now, I hope to have shown that local politics cannot simply be seen as a series of institutions, but is rather understood as the latest episode in a long history of ideas, practices and personalities in which a particular sedimentation of the past is present.

Fashioning the Political Landscape

The historical part of the book has described how the configurations of power have transformed in a place. One major historical insight is that the colonial period should not be configured only as a rupture. A considerable metanarrative about the impact of colonial rule on Burma draws on the notion that the introduction of the headman and village system was traumatic and transformative and that it completely destabilized existing authority by removing traditional elites and reorganized space and land around new lines. By suggesting that the operation of traditional elites was less homogeneous than this narrative requires, and that the local conflicts around who possessed authority, its limits and operations, was a pre-existing framework onto which the headman system became attached rather than was displaced by, this work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of historical continuities and changes. In addition, the social memory of division

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 227.

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between two villages shows historical relations to be fraught with tensions and contests that relate as much to precolonial structures as to a reconfiguration of village system boundaries during and after colonialism. The legacy of this older relationship remains inscribed even until today, while the meanings attached to the figure of the headman have also evolved through time and in relation to the wider politics of local and national domains.

By focusing attention on the local operation of power and its everyday practice, the book also helps us to move away from a simplistic dichotomy between the so-called 'highlands' and 'lowlands' in Burma/Myanmar. The Anya political landscape was predicated on that dichotomy: as a 'lowland/valley' society (in contrast to 'uplands/hill' societies), it was characterized by non-unilineal kinship (vs. patrilineal), charismatic despotism (vs. hierarchy), Buddhism (vs. animism), rice agriculture (vs. slash and burn), and by the presence of a state (vs. anarchism). Yet, messy political processes are what uplands and lowland landscapes have in common. In this book, I have shown that instead of seeing power in lowland areas as coherent and institutionalized, it rather appears subject to constant negotiation through local knowledge systems relating to kinship, history, morality, responsibility, obligation, powerfulness and powerlessness. In many ways, this argument challenges the idea of 'state power' running seamlessly through institutions into a local setting via the figure of the headman and presents as messy a daily landscape as seen *elsewhere*.

If one follows Nugent's (1982) and Friedman's (1998) critiques of Leach's oscillatory model (1954),[1] this 'elsewhere' could very much be found in an upland society such as the Kachin. Nugent has shown that no historical evidence can be found of a political order oscillating between autocracy (*gumsa*) and democracy (*gumlao*). Instead, the rise of *gumlao* orders in the late nineteenth century was mainly related to the disruption of the regional economy which hindered *gumsa* chiefs' capacity to control and redistribute essential resources such as 'opium, slaves and tolls from the trans-frontier trade' (1982: 523). There was also a tendency to conflate these political orders with the prerogatives of their leaders. A *gumsa* (autocratic) chief became the sign of a *gumsa* order whereas a headman with no real binding powers was a proof of the existence of a *gumlao* (rebellious) order.[2] The nature of a leader to some extent came to infer the nature of an order. Yet there seems to have been much confusion in how colonial powers identified and recognized political institutions in Kachin,[3] partly due to the economic and political changes brought about by ongoing conflicts in Upper Burma and Yunnan in the second half of the nineteenth century. In other words, disordered, messy political landscapes were a common condition in the lowlands and the uplands at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The focus on the precolonial period in Anya has shown that competition for leadership, traffic in affiliations and fragmentation of authority were the main

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political dynamics in the countryside and that they endured the colonial encounter. Descent groups developed their settlements by dealing with a landscape shaped through the expansion of farm cultivation, the transformation of spirit cults and Buddhism and the affiliation with local chiefdoms. This produced and delineated diverse, if not opposed, senses of belonging. In that vein, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung's founding narratives claim specific links with the landscape which show how the fluid system of precolonial status groups (servicemen vs. commoners) still pervades the political landscape in the form of differentiated entitlements to indigenousness (genuine allochthones vs. autochthones). Therefore, this book has enjoined seeing local legends and myths as historical sources *and* discourses about contemporary issues.

This work has also challenged the understanding of the precolonial gentry as a monolithic group and the imposition of village headship as a change in the nature of authority. In that sense, the emergence of the village system appears as a search for traditions in which 'local customs' travelled together with colonial officers in an attempt to 'pacify' the landscape. The actual creation of Myinmilaung tract was more a process of accommodation of colonialism which provided the means – the village system, the revenue system and the courts – to contest the obligations and customs regulating access to land and wealth, notably within family relations and tenancy agreements. Village headship was thus as much a product of local politics as a colonial device when Myinmilaung tract became a locus of politics. Myinmilaung then turned into a scalable political space while headship became a matter of individuals when successive leaders embodied different postures.

The shift from the first two headmen, combined with the arrival of Gawgyi's first monk, illustrates how some individuals – known as the last men of *hpon* – became exemplars of the moralization of behaviours and engagement in people's affairs when villagers reimagined their role as Buddhists and challenged colonial rule during the first decades of the twentieth century. This perspective has allowed us to think about this period not only as a moment of social disintegration, but as a phase of reorganization of political authority through belonging to large farming families. The remnants of the precolonial gentry were not entirely uprooted from the landscape during the first half of the twentieth century, but their hold was reduced as the families of large peasants were able to buffer land reform projects emanating either from the state or from armed groups during the decades surrounding the country's independence. These families monopolized local leadership when the hierarchy transformed into a divide between 'real farmers' (*taungthu*) and mere 'labourers' (*myaukthu*). The fact that some leaders became exemplary figures of the moralization of behaviours engaged in lay affairs during the contest of colonial rule marks a gradual shift in the form of authority from charismatic leadership towards worthiness and propriety. In turn,

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it pushed for the rethinking of Nash's concepts about power and authority by showing how past and present contexts – and not just individuals' qualities such as *hpon* – are critical in evaluating the worth of leaders.

During the socialist period (1962–1988), state policies heightened the divide between farmers and labourers and tightened control over local affairs while producing the image of a countryside of farmers-owners – when many, if not most, were labourers, dependants and tenants. With the gradual collapse of Ne Win's regime, finding trade-offs with the local authorities was no longer seen as a strategy, but rather as a push to cheat and bribe. If the bloodshed of 1988 was not a rupture in Gawgyi as it was in the capital, it contributed to increased distrust towards officials on many levels. Locally, the rupture came later. After the disengagement of the state from local affairs following the revolts, U Win, headman from 1995 to 2006, embodied the growing corruption and violence of the state when forced labour was reintroduced on a large scale in the dry zone. The next change of headman, from U Win the Infamous to U Htay the Worthy, echoed a broader rupture in local politics. It was a shift from distrust and corruption to trustworthiness and propriety. U Htay's gradual estrangement from the state after his tenure was counterbalanced by a commitment to Gawgyi affairs on the model of the last men of *hpon*. Village affairs were progressively being reinvested by the local elite who were articulating new stakes within a more traditional form of sociality (*luhmuyay*), making collective undertakings the fragile form of local politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In other words, in reaction to state disengagement from local affairs, an ideology of self-reliance took place in Gawgyi and is symbolized by how a group of big men started making engagement in village affairs a field of politics. By doing so, they changed the meaning attached to the word *lugyi*, giving it a more moral significance. Yet they are nonetheless the descendants of large families of peasants who monopolized village leadership and remained influential by investing in inheritance whose transmission has organized local land relations throughout the past two centuries.

Forms of Engagement

The book has also made a case for seeing local leadership figures as paradoxical and ambiguous. It has shown that the headman is extremely constrained in his position as an intermediary between the local inhabitants and the state. At the same time, it insists on the decisive role of big men as collective organizers. Yet neither the headman nor the big men have any real binding power. My choice has been to focus on interactions to widen our understanding of politics by looking at how people calibrate the ways in which they engage with each other. It has highlighted that the forms of engagement varied depending on the domain of

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politics at stake during interactions and given a certain historical consistency to these domains.

By following Ko Kyaw in his daily life, this book has argued that any analysis of village headship as a mere formal institution is doomed to miss the point. I attempted to renew the anthropological debate about headship by looking at it as a matter of uncertain engagement, political navigation and craftmanship. It is not just an intercalary position hamstrung between the state and the villagers[4] that gives room for manoeuvre. I hope that my work has shown how the particular enactment of past ruptures and memories of previous leaders and current forms of engagement impinged on Ko Kyaw's practice of headship. By becoming headman, he endorsed a legacy and embodied a position most people distrust while having to comply with the organization of village affairs by following a model of propriety that is key to the definition of Gawgyi identity.

If no one overtly wants to become the headman, it is not only because headship does not 'offer sufficient incentives in terms of influence, prestige, religious merit or financial profit relative to disincentives such as time, financial cost, public criticism and … exposure to pressure from township authorities' (Kempel and Myanmar Development Research 2012: 70). It is rather because it is where the private, the political and the government converge, in a landscape that has been fashioned throughout two centuries where memories of ruptures, violence and propriety have come to the forefront. The fight for headship is constrained by the state of local stakes in each village tract, the family stories, the filiation issues and the historical opposition between villages. It remains a move for one-upmanship for candidates with credentials who are part of the local elite that pushes for controlling headship, nonetheless. One also has to deal with forces and obligations that are intimately linked with the constant merging and distancing of the private and the political. Keeping this ambiguity may have been in the government's interest, as it provides a means to engage collective responsibility through a single person, but this remains a speculative assumption. Following Ko Kyaw's political navigation in a day of his life shows that being a headman meant dealing with the old and new in multiple social spaces where obligations and memories influence how he engaged with others. Ko Kyaw's craft was to be at the juncture between past and present dynamics and he was evaluated according to how he dealt with the local understanding of worthiness.

The question of male leadership was then expanded to family relationships through the issue of transmitting inheritance. The latter appeared as a process of redefining authority and responsibility over things, and obligations between people. Within the realm of family relations, male authority mainly stems from stewardship (*okchokhmu*): the process of taking care of a patrimony and of the persons attached to it. It appeared that the field of family relations was a matrix for thinking about rightful filiation (continuity) and by extension about leadership.

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The emphasis on personal abilities goes beyond family relationships. The combination of, and tension between, heredity and ability (achievements, *hpon*, karma) are at the core of the theory of male politics in the Burmese context. The idea of 'taking charge of' as a source of authority related to personal abilities and mutual obligations between 'parents' and 'children' pervades other conceptions and practices of leadership. The rise of village affairs as the form of Gawgyi politics in the past decades as a political field enacted by 'worthy' leaders described as guardians who 'take charge of' village affairs' (*ywayay okhteinhmu*) is but one example. In other words, exploring Ko Kyaw crafting headship as a process ridden with uncertain engagements allows us to transform the question of transmission of property within families into a study of family leadership conceived as stewardship which, in turn, enables us to qualify the leadership of Gawgyi big men in the political field of village affairs as a matter of guardianship. It shows how male authority pervades several configurations of power.

In the 2010s, the *lugyi* were entrusted to 'take care of' and to be 'responsible for' village affairs, that is, to be their guardians. This practice of leadership depends on the delimitation between what is the private and what is the political. On one side, village and social affairs came to be a space of engagement where the worth of people is evaluated, and which is scaled through the handling of ceremonies and the resolution of disputes, creating a space of belonging and mutual help. On the other side, family affairs and one's own affairs are part of the private. Both 'fields' – the private and the political – speak the same language. This book has shown that through the transmission of inheritance, family leadership is also a matter of 'taking care of' the properties and the people belonging to a family tied together through social and moral obligations. In other words, the private and the political constantly merge and distance themselves from one another.

Power in the Lowlands

What does the concept of calibrated engagement do to the study of power in mainland Southeast Asia? I cannot contend here with all the implications this question raises and will limit my answer to the patron–client paradigm. Clientelism, factionalism and patronage are loose systems of affiliation that help to explain changes in local politics. They have been abundantly used to make sense of power relations in Southeast Asia in history and in anthropology. These systems either proceed from a leader's prowess (Aung-Thwin 1983, 1984; Koenig 1990; Lieberman 1984; Nash 1963, 1965; Pye 1962), are embedded – or not – in a moral economy (Adas 1980, 1998; Scott 1976), or are based on power flowing from merit making (Hanks 1962; Lehman 1984; Schober 1989). In the Burma/Myanmar case, I argue that the focus on prowess (*hpon*), and its articulation with merit (*kuto*), should be understood as historical formations of power

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open to critique in everyday politics. Otherwise, this assemblage conveys an idea of socio-political structure from which time and contingency are virtually absent and actual relationships blurred. Nash proposed a secularist perspective of *hpon* while Schober, after Lehman, offered a version attuned with Buddhist conceptions. I follow these two threads to explore two issues with the patron–client paradigm: the problem of history and that of hierarchy.

Prowess, Clientelism and the Problem of History

Translated as charisma, glory or grace, *hpon* has been analysed in several ways. For Nash (1965: 76), *hpon* belongs to a triad: *hpon* (or sheer power), *awza* (or authority, ability to impose judgement) and *gon* (or virtue, morality). These concepts are all qualities lodged in a person and inferred by his or her peers. For Nash, a person's power was more closely linked to his performances, achievements and their recognition by peers throughout life than to Buddhist cosmology. A man of *hpon* did not build an organization but a clientele, because '[the] presence of *pon* [*sic*] cannot be institutionalized'. It is always the possession or attribute of a concrete, living person. When the person 'loses it, it is gone, when he dies, it dies. … His clientele shares in part his success; they bask in the aura of his *pon*' (ibid.: 79). It is on these grounds that the idiom of *hpon*, as a form of power, gives flesh to the idea that Burmese people have a political system based on charismatic leadership. It combined an individual quality, stemming from a person's karma and worldly achievements, with leadership. The plasticity of this form and its timeless nature – kings, gentry and village leaders potentially justified their power as men of *hpon* – were helpful to make sense of the continuities in the political landscape. I think that this rationalization of leadership blurs the more moral aspects of politics due to the ahistorical nature of this quality and its use as a retrospective justification. Yet Nash's conceptualization provided an anthropological ground to the study of clientelism and patronage.

What Nash describes in the early 1960s fits very well the scholarship of the late twentieth century on power and authority in Southeast Asia. In the vein of the studies on power opened up by Anderson (1972), Wolters (1982) identified this kind of charismatic, achievement-based leadership with a broad social type, which he called 'men of prowess'. He argued that 'men of prowess' of one sort or another were found in all the precolonial polities of the Southeast Asian region. Kinship was for the most part bilateral, and instead of power being passed from generation to generation through a lineage, authority was achieved through the actions of charismatic leaders, and attributed to magical or spiritual potency, the *hpon* in our case. 'Men of prowess' needed to earn such a status during their lifetime. The transmission of authority was then problematic as it was attached to the person, not the position. The polities that came into being

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around 'men of prowess' were thus highly personalized, very fragile and based on patron–client ties.

Around the same time, Nash's idea was used by historians. Lieberman, a leading scholar of the precolonial period in Burma/Myanmar, used Nash's description to support his argument on the nature of kingship dynamics. For him, the achievement-based leadership of kings partly explains the rise and fall of dynasties between 1580 and 1760 (Lieberman 1984: 75, referring to Nash 1965: 79). The *hpon* described by Nash in the 1960s was akin to the self-legitimation rhetoric of kings and an essential ingredient in the making of personal obligations and ties that gave form to the divine kingship in Burma/Myanmar. Heredity was a weak claim to office and more generally speaking, as Schulte Nordholt (2015) put it, the rise and fall of men of prowess organized the 'longue durée' of patron–client relations in Southeast Asia.

Nash's work also served the study of patron–client politics. Such studies gained much momentum in anthropology, sociology and political science in the 1960s–1970s as they allowed a departure from the analysis of politics through the concepts of class, ethnicity and religion to focus on 'informal' or '*ad hoc*' groupings. In the words of Scott, who influenced much of the debate concerning the Burmese context, patron–client politics 'represent an important structural principle of Southeast Asian politics' (Scott 1972a: 92).[5] Scott's argument was to say that the traditional patron–client ties, 'once viewed as collaborative and legitimate', tended to break down during the colonial period due to processes of 'social differentiation, the commercialization of subsistence agriculture, and the growth of colonial administration' (Scott 1972b: 6). His subsequent landmark work on *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) developed on this theme, showing – but contested by Adas (1998) – through the analysis of peasant protests how traditional systems of patronage lost their moral force during the colonial period. Concerning Burma in particular, Scott used Nash's work to support the view that 'where one local landowner or traditional leader had once dominated he now faced competitors' (Scott 1972a: 107); and that 'directly ruled lowland areas tended to develop factional competition among different patrons, while less directly ruled areas (especially highland areas[6]) more frequently retained some unity behind a single patron who remained their broker with the outside world' (ibid.: 107, note 47).

The historical part of this book has shown, however, that local contexts, ethical shifts and temporalities of change need to be considered together to fully capture the transformation of local politics. Beyond reconsidering the metanarrative about the colonial impact, the book has also made a case for understanding the rise of village affairs and the worth of the village big men in relation to the historical context of state violence and disengagement from the countryside rather than in terms of individual qualities. For Nash, a person's *hpon* is a function of

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one's engagement with others in daily life through trials, failures and successes. I take from this idea that engagement and evaluation are key processes. Their outcome can be subsumed under the idiom of *hpon*, but I think that, to understand local politics, we should think through contexts and situations by looking at how various forms of engagement produce value, worth and domains of politics.

Merit, Donation and the Problem of Hierarchy

Nash's conception of prowess is closely linked with the idea that merit making produces hierarchy. A person creates a clientele because he or she distributes (merit, benefits, equipment, a network of knowledge, advice, services, loans and so on), thus creating chains of dependence or privileged relationships. These transactions are negotiated, challenged, accepted, requested or refused and potentially create social and moral obligations. By paying closer attention to what circulates and how, the book invites us to reconsider how transfers produce hierarchy.

In local conceptions, the ideal type of patron is called *kyayzushin*, a term loosely translated as benefactor and which literally means 'master of gratitude'. There are three kinds of benefactors: the parents because they sustain life, the Buddha because he provided the means to end suffering, and the teachers because they transmit knowledge. People are not indebted to them because they cannot call off the relation.[7] Transfers – in the form of care, services, presents, donations – to these benefactors are an acknowledgement of an obligation to be grateful. This kind of hierarchical relationship pervades many other domains of social life and has been described as a social structure of patron–client relationships. For instance, Lieberman showed how patron–client relations with kings were formulated as personal obligations, to the point that remembering 'one's debt of gratitude to the king and one's oath of royal allegiance … became a stock phrase used to explain virtually every act of service' (Lieberman 1984: 73). In a different context, Boutry (2011, 2015) showed how the patron–client links between an individual and his *kyayzushin* served to legitimize the Burmese presence in frontier areas and articulate their interactions with locals of different cultures. Schober has clearly articulated the relations between transfers, obligations and hierarchy. For her, offerings are made to beings who belong either to the sacred domain beyond the social hierarchy of lay people or to individuals thought to be superior to the person making the offering. These transfers are viewed as an 'acknowledgement of gratitude and as a repayment of moral or social debt rather than as an attempt to create new obligations' (1989: 105). Yet food given to those below one's own station in life, even if it is given in a ritual context, 'is considered an expression of one's loving kindness (metta) and compassion (karuna) for less fortunate ones and dependents. In return for this

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kindness, obligations must be repaid' (ibid.). This is how, according to Schober, dependency is created: 'On account of the dependency thus created, the recipient comes under the influence and power of his benefactor whom he owes gratitude (kyei: zu: shin) [*sic*] and in whose dominion of power he now exists' (ibid.). The relation between a person and his benefactor is clearly hierarchical and stems from the Buddhist cosmology.

From this standpoint, Schober expands Lehman's argument for whom 'to make merit is to increase power' (1984: 241). Linking a person's power to his *hpon*, Schober defines the relations between meritorious donation (*ahlu*) and power through the concept of 'field of merit':

> Through giving, he [the giver] becomes the patron of a field of merit, however extensive or insignificant. Burmese designate such patron in ritual contexts as *ku.thou shin*, 'owner of merit' … Honorifics like owner of merit designate a patron over a particular domain of power and influence or a field of merit. [A patron] redistributes the benefits of his *hpoun*: to all who share in his deed (*kamma*) and merit (*ku.htou*) and thus create obligations among his clients … Those who share in the patron's merit and *hpoun*: owe him gratitude and obligation [*sic*]. These are difficult to repay as redistribution of merit establishes a status hierarchy separating patrons from clients. (Schober 1989: 122–23)

The sharing of merit by a ritual of consecration at the end of a donation creates obligations for those who enter the 'field of merit'. This explanation of power relations, and the economy of merit in general, is an idiom for thinking and expressing authority and hierarchy. I obliged others through my ability to make donations. My ability to share merit comes from my *hpon* – intimately linked to my karma – and reinforces it. Donations give concrete expression to my power. The people present during donations become stakeholders in my 'field of merit'. This typical situation is found in the most celebrated donation ceremony called the *shinbyu*, the boys' initiation ceremony into monkhood. In short, the Burmese Buddhist gift is a case of how giving obliges and creates a hierarchy.

A close analysis of how a *shinbyu* is made, how it is organized, not in terms of ritual activity but through its kitchen, through the tiny acts that make it possible, shows that hierarchy is not straightforward (Chapter 6; Huard 2021). Gifts oblige to a certain extent, but they are also negotiated; transfers are crucial acts of calibrated engagement. The making of ceremonies needs a collective organization. It is therefore necessary to describe all of these activities in context, to know when such ceremonies take place, who is invited and who is not, if there is a difference between a donation made by a stranger to the village, by an influential farmer or by an ordinary worker. In addition, while village ceremonies involve formalized

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transactions between people (money, merit, food), they also take place in social spaces where many exchanges take place all the time in the form of work, mutual help, gifts, loans and so on. The merit shared with the participants flows in many networks of people engaged in countless exchanges that structure a local hierarchy open to negotiation. Inviting people, helping, giving food, not coming to ceremonies are all choices that show how much people want to get involved. In short, the 'field of merit' approach, while indicating how exchanges, transactions and gifts between people produce order, uses the Buddhist idiom of patron–client (gratitude) to explain the flesh of social asymmetries but without making sense of the tensions between actors. In that sense, it is a configuration of power open to critique.

The secularist version of *hpon* and its articulation with merit are only aspects of politics: they crystallize meanings at the expense of describing actual processes. Focusing on how people calibrate their engagement enables us to counter the narrative that dependency–patronage relations are the main power dynamics in lowland Southeast Asia: it shows that dependency does not equal powerlessness[8] and that we should look deeper into ordinary entanglements of obligations and responsibilities. The way in which people act can be approached in a flexible way, leaving room for uncertainty and evaluation, without losing the value of the expressions used to describe relationships, such as patronage, friendship or family solidarity, for example. Engaging in this or that relationship creates obligations between people and the gist of this relationship is materialized in what circulates between them (help, services, money, assets, protection and so on) and in the way this is qualified.

Violence Redux: The Anya Enigma

Finally, how could the idea of calibrated engagement help us to understand the widespread resistance that emerged in Anya against the military after the 2021 coup? In Burma/Myanmar at large, recent decades have been marked by wars between the military and various ethnic armed groups, especially in the highlands. They have also been marked by the junta repression of more or less short-lived revolts in the centre of the country. The nation as a whole has been portrayed to foreign eyes as in a state of perpetual war, with a combination of military violence, armed group violence, and inter-community and religious conflicts, resulting in multiple forms of dispossession, displacement, forced labour, executions, arbitrary imprisonment and ethnic cleansing. The military coup of 1 February 2021 abruptly ended the 2010s postwar transition and the democratic experiments. It was followed by a massive, multifaceted rejection of military rule: mass demonstrations, barricades, non-violent civil disobedience movements, the creation of alternative political institutions, monastic opposition

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movements, ritual protest, online and diasporic activism, urban and rural guerrilla warfare. Suddenly, the Anya region, the dry zone of central Myanmar which crosscuts the Magway, Mandalay and Sagaing Regions, became a key piece of the puzzle.

Dozens of local forces have gradually emerged and controlled large swathes of the dry zone which was considered loyal to nationalist and military regimes since the country's independence in 1948. Some of these local forces have received explosives and training from experienced ethnic armed groups and have caused an unknown number of military casualties. Since the coup, the Anya region has regained consistency as a socio-spatial entity, not least because it has become one of the main theatres of fighting (Loong 2022). The junta exercised brute force, burning down tens of thousands of homes, attacking and displacing villagers (UNOCHA 2023) in manoeuvres reminiscent of the colonial pacification campaign. The military bluntly showed that 'making enemies' (Callahan 2003) is at the core of its fabric and is not limited to how it deals with ethnic minorities.

The enigma is thus: how did the people of Anya come to engage in a direct fight against the military takeover? Taking this enigma head-on requires us to configure the current events as the latest episode of an ongoing history. It calls for analysing how previous experiences of violence, agrarian dispossession, the variegated nature of the local forces (in terms of manpower, leadership, network and alliances) and the diverse forms of sovereignty in the region are shaping political territories. If Anya appeared as a pacified, rural, traditional and Buddhist space until the coup – while the military regime seemed to have a certain legitimacy because it offered a system of co-optation and recruitment – we now need a new way of thinking about this area. Drawing from Kopytoff's work on the formation of African societies (1987), I propose to configure the hotbeds of Anya resistance as an *internal frontier*: a space of internal colonization where violence, dispossession and migration shape the making of fragmented political territories.

The reaction to the coup has reignited a debate on the extent to which the Bama, the group that has dominated the country's politics and state apparatus since independence, have been spared by military violence, unlike many religious and ethnic minorities. For the past four or five decades, Anya seems to have been little affected by the army's counterinsurgency campaigns. Nonetheless, we gain a better understanding of the conflict in Anya by focusing on how the current rural warfare resonates with previous episodes of violence, from precolonial warring societies (Charney 2018) to the colonial pacification campaign, from the Japanese invasion to the anti-communist campaign, from the 1988 revolts to the 2003 Depayin massacre and the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Besides, current revolts and popular support for local armed groups are often justified by opposition to state violence framed as a cyclical experience throughout the

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Anya region. Mistrust and denunciation, as techniques of avoidance and control, have also massively reinvested and saturated social relations since the coup. The return of 'informers' (*dalan*) and the rise of counterinsurgency groups or militias – such as the *pyusawhti*, named after a legendary king, and the *thway thauk*, or 'blood drinkers' (International Crisis Group 2022) – more or less supervised by the military and whose violence is legitimized by some Buddhist monks, creates a climate of terror in which the resistance networks have formed. There is thus a *continuum of violence* (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004) to be investigated.

Another avenue for research is to look at the agrarian roots of the conflict. According to Callahan, it started after 1988 when garrisoned troops started preying 'upon the Dry Zone's almost mythically renowned small farmers' (2022). They were driven off their land by local or regional commanders and their family plots were handed over to 'mostly Yangon-based cronies, Thai or Chinese timber exporters and mineral miners. Heartland farmers endured forced cropping policies [and] failed agri-business experiments' (ibid.). Since the early 2010s, conflicts linked to the formalization of resource rights (Boutry et al. 2017), as well as policies to redistribute land confiscated by previous military regimes (San Thein et al. 2017), have brought local forms of justice and justification into tension.[9] They revealed an interplay between legality, legitimacy and clientelism for access to property, while at the same time generating competing claims and demands for justice. These demands have gradually been articulated by activists (Prasse-Freeman 2023b),[10] farmers' unions and local land committees. The number and extent of cases of land dispossession by government agencies and military forces over the past fifty years became an overt political matter in the countryside and played an important role in making the fight against the military a potential horizon of action.

Finally, the nature of the territories composing this countryside should also come under scrutiny. Local forces in this domain are important because of the way in which they define the nature of their activities: essentially, the defence of territories, which also implies the control of people, roads and of the circulation of wealth. They are often named after existing territories – such as 'towns' (*myo*) and 'townships' (*myo-nay*) – to delineate their origin and/or space for action. Their emergence also involves other logics of affiliations based on local ideas of autochthony and sovereignty. In this book, I have shown that a distinction can be made between a more 'warlike' history, anchored in forced migration and embodied in the relations between localities and tutelary spirits on the one hand, and a more 'royal' history expressed in the narratives that link localities to the origin of sacred places on the other. This kind of micro-local history might or might not help to explain the emergence of many local forces. It nonetheless highlights that local forms of sovereignty are diverse. It should be noted that one

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of the latest incarnations of territorial sovereignty are the tutelary spirits (*naq*) of the Ayeyarwady Valley (Brac de la Perrière 1998) who largely cover the hotbeds of resistance in the Anya region. It could thus be fruitful to analyse the reconfiguration of the local populations' relationships with spirit cults in past and current periods of unrest to better understand the making of territories.

Overall, the coup and its aftermath represent a moment of disjuncture and reconfiguration of politics, during which the main formation of power – the military – is openly contested because of its current and past actions. The book has shown how state violence and disengagement from rural affairs were embodied locally and generated a new configuration of power centred around the upholding of village affairs. The coup, the subsequent violence against civilians and the rural warfare in Anya are changing local configurations of power in places where, at the very least, previous experience of violence and land dispossession have affected the meaning of politics. The increase in the number of armed groups in the Anya region therefore seems to be linked to the gradual isolation of the villages, which have formed a constellation of small polities at a distance from the State.

I believe that the idea of calibrated engagement is a productive tool for analysing these transformations because it captures how people challenge and create configurations of power. By showing how people inscribe themselves in forms of action and evaluate responsibilities, relationships, the past and potential futures, it gives texture, density and life to different affairs and domains of politics. It helps us to understand how the collective work of politics coalesced in the form of new political subjectivities and transformative movements creating a new arrangement of the political (Rancière 1999). In that sense, describing the ways in which people recalibrate their engagement with each other and with the state at this critical juncture will help us to capture how violence, dispossession, power and territory intersect in the making of Myanmar's internal frontier.

Notes

1. For Leach, the Kachin have two different types of ideal political order: the *gumsa* 'autocratic' order and the *gumlao* 'democratic' order. He argues that the *gumsa* order is modelled directly on that of the valley-dwelling Shan from whom the Kachin have 'borrowed' the idea of 'divine kingship' justifying the autocratic political order and the autocratic chief. The gist of Leach's analysis is that there are inconsistencies within the ideal order of both *gumsa* and *gumlao* systems which serve to make both highly unstable. Thus, *gumlao* democracy tends to develop into *gumsa* autocracy, and *gumsa* autocracy tends to break down into *gumlao* democracy through revolutions. For Leach, Kachin society was continuously oscillating between these two ideal forms of order.
2. See Leach (1954: 198) and Nugent (1982: 511).
3. See Robinne and Sadan (2007) and Sadan (2013).

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4. The idea of an intercalary position comes from Gluckman et al. (1949) and has been further developed by Gluckman (1955, 1963). Nash (1963, 1965), Lubeigt (1975) and more recently Thawnghmung (2004) proposed a similar description of headmen's position in Burma/Myanmar.
5. The studies of 'patron–client', 'dyadic contract', 'personal network', 'clientelism' and 'factionalism' were not bound to Southeast Asia. As a reader on political clientelism published in 1977 shows, they mushroomed from the study of Third World politics but were also developed (and thought to be applicable) in any country at various scales (cf. Schmidt et al. 1977).
6. Nash does not specify this point, and it should be noted that both Nondwin and Yadaw were in the lowlands. Yet the point on the type of land and cultivation remained valid.
7. Cf. Graeber (2011) for a distinction between debt and obligation.
8. This point resonates with Keeler's approach to hierarchy (2017), especially regarding how putting oneself under a patron does not equal pure subordination and can transform dependence into power.
9. For an example of this kind of situation but in a different part of Myanmar, see Huard (2020a) on the case of Maubin in the Ayeyarwady region.
10. In his ethnography of activism (2023b), Prasse-Freeman shows that, in a sense, activists' work vis-à-vis other people is all about compelling them to reimagine the scope, scale and dynamics of their engagements.

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Glossary

adunay adusa (အတူနေ အတူစား). Lit. ‘living and eating together’, expressing commensality (together with *tit-o tit-ein* (တအိုးတအိမ်), lit. ‘one cooking pot, one house’).

ahkwint-ayay (အခွင့်အရေး). Right or opportunity.

ahlu (အလှူ). Meritorious donations.

ahsaung-ama (အဆုံး အမ). A generic way to describe an exhortation to follow morals, often referring to Buddha’s teachings.

aku-ngway (အကူငွေ). Lit. ‘aid money’, referring to the money given by the guests to the host during certain ceremonies. During weddings, it becomes a *lethpwe* (လက်ဖွဲ့) or wedding gift.

akywinme ahlu (အကြွင်းမဲ့ အလှူ). Donation without remainder. A donation with remainder is called *akywinshi ahlu* (အကြွင်းရှိ အလှူ).

amway (အမွေ). Inheritance (its main rule is *anyi ahmya* (အညီ အမျှ), referring to an equal division between all children).

ana (အာဏာ). To have *ana* is to have the capacity to enforce one’s order (it has been translated as ‘power’ (Spiro 1997) or ‘authority’ (Nash 1965)).

anya (အညာ). Name of the central dry zone of Burma/Myanmar.

apyan ahlan (အပြန် အလှန်). Expression meaning ‘one good turn deserves another’ and underscoring the ethics of living together.

apyin pyitsi (အပြင်ပစ္စည်း). Outer property (of a household), in opposition with inner property (*atwin pyitsi*, အတွင်းပစ္စည်း).

athet (အသက်). Life as a vital breath. Life as a condition of existence is called *bawa* (ဘဝ).

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athi (အသိ? modification from သွေ့သည်) / *ahmudan* (အမှုထမ်း). Commoner / serviceman (bearer of an obligation); precolonial division of the population into status groups depending on their relation to the king.

auratha (ဩရသ). A legitimate son or the ablest child in Burmese Buddhist law.

awza (ဩဇာ). Authority to command, ability to impose judgement.

bayin (ဘုရင်). Title of a king as cosmic pivot.

beiktheikhsaya (ဘိတ်သိတ်ဆရာ). Master of ceremony.

bobuapaing (ဘိုးဘွားပိုင်). In relation to land, it refers to a form of hereditary private tenure.

dago (တန်ခိုး). Supernatural potency.

dalan (ဒလန်). Informer.

dama-u-gya (ဓားမဦးချ). In relation to land, it is a claim to ownership by first clearing.

eindaung keiksa (အိမ်ထောင့် ကိစ္စ). Household affairs.

eindaunguzi (အိမ်ထောင်ဦးစီး). Head of a household.

gaing (ဂိုဏ်း). Monastic grouping.

gawthagan (ဂေါစကံ). Area of a monk/pagoda/monastery's outreach (formal: ဂေါစရဂံ).

gon (ဂုဏ်). Honour or virtue.

hpon (ဘုန်း). An individual's quality, a substance, translatable as charismatic power.

hsayadaw (ဆရာတော်). Honorific for monks heading a monastery.

hse-eingaung (ဆယ်အိမ်ခေါင်း). Ten-house head.

hsounhsaya (စုန်းဆရာ). Master of ghosts and evil spirits.

hswemyo (ဆွေမျိုး). Kinship terms meaning relatives or kin (also called *amyo*, အမျိုး). Term used in expressions denoting belonging such as *hswemyotitthaik* (ဆွေမျိုးတသိုက်), lit. 'nest of relatives' or extended compound, or *yathswe-yatmyo* (ရပ်ဆွေ ရပ်မျိုး), lit. 'people akin by (sharing a) dwelling'.

htitat (သိတတ်). To know something and act accordingly without the need to spell it out.

kan (ကံ). Karma.

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kotukotha (ကိုယ့်တူ ကိုယ့်သား). Lit. ‘rising by and defining oneself’, expression denoting self-reliance.

kuhto (ကုသိုလ်). Merit.

kwin (ကွင်း). Cadastral unit created during the colonial period (land plots are called *upaing*).

kyayzushin (ကျေးဇူးရှင်). Benefactor, lit. ‘master of gratitude’.

kyun (ကျွန်). Temporary debt bondman.

lok-a-pay (လုပ်အားပေး). Forced labour.

lokpainghkwint (လုပ်ပိုင်ခွင့်). Authorization to cultivate land (legal land access under the socialist state).

lubyogaung (လူပျိုခေါင်း). Head of the bachelors’ group, also called *kalathag-aung* (ကာလသားခေါင်း); the head of the virgin girls’ group is *apyogaung* (အပျိုခေါင်း).

lugyi (လူကြီး). Big man.

luhmuyay (လူမှုရေး). Social affairs or people’s affairs. It is a domain minimally encompassing the ‘joys’ (*tha-yay*, သာရေး) and ‘griefs’ (*na-yay*, နာရေး); sometimes opposed to *kokoyay*, (ကိုယ့်ကိုယ်ရေး) lit. ‘one’s own affairs’.

luhso (လူဆိုး). Bad person, infamous.

mingala (မင်္ဂလာ). Good auspices. A term found in *mingala pauk* (မင်္ဂလာပေါက်), lit. ‘auspicious gate’.

montso nani montso (မုဆိုးနားနီးမုဆိုး), *tenga nani tenga* (တံငါနားနီးတံငါ). Lit. ‘he who lives close to a hunter becomes a hunter; he who lives near a fisherman becomes a fisherman’. Local theory of masculine habitus.

myaukthu (မြောက်သူ). Labourer as opposed to farmer (*taungthu*, တောင်သူ). Labourers and daily workers are also called *myayloktha* (မြေလုပ်သား), *hpangan* (ပန်းရံ), *kulikunga* (ကူလီကူငှား) or *lokdama* (လုပ်သမ).

myaydaing (မြေတိုင်း). Revenue collector during the precolonial period.

myayshin (မြေရှင်). Landlord.

myayzupay (မြေစုပေး). Lit. ‘giving a share of the land’, one of the main forms of tenancy agreement in precolonial times in our area of research, together with *thonsu-titsu* (သုံးစုတစ်စု), lit. ‘three parts one part’.

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myo (မျိုး). Kind or type. Applied to people (*lumyo*, လူမျိုး) it is close to 'race' in American English. With a different tone, *myo* (မြို့) also means a town. In precolonial times, hereditary chiefs were called *myothugyi* (မြို့သူကြီး) and their area of power was called *myonay* (မြို့နယ်), which is today the word for township.

myook (မြို့အုပ်), Township officer during the colonial period mostly used in Lower Burma.

myowun (မြို့ဝန်). Provincial governors during the precolonial period.

myoza (မြို့စား). Appanage holders during the precolonial period.

nalehmu (နားလည်မှု). An understanding, a trade-off, an agreement.

naq (နတ်). Spirit, usually of an individual who died violently.

ngwayhtein (ငွေထိန်း). Lit. 'guardian of wealth'.

okchokhmu (အုပ်ချုပ်မှု). Stewardship, a form of authority over a family and its properties.

okhteinhmu (အုပ်ထိန်းမှု). Guardianship, in the sense of taking care/charge of a domain of activities.

paingsainhmu (ပိုင်ဆိုင်မှု). Ownership.

pyuzu saunshauk (ပြုစုစောင့်ရှောက်). Obligation of care between parents and children.

samyay (စားမြေ). Land given as appanage.

shinbyu (ရှင်ပြု). Buddhist novitiate ceremony.

sittan (စစ်တမ်း). Royal administrative inquests.

ta-yay (သရဲ). One of the names for a ghost.

taik (တိုက်). Frontier province during the precolonial period.

taw (တော). Farm field or forest, as opposed to village, *ywa* (ရွာ).

thathameda (သဿမေဓ). Capitation tax introduced in the early 1860s.

thathena (သာသနာ). Buddha's teachings (Pali: *sasana*).

thonsu-titsu (သုံးစုတစ်စု). Lit. 'three parts one part', a tenancy agreement in which the tenant gives one-third of the harvest to the land owner.

thitsashihmu (သစ္စာရှိမှု). Loyalty.

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thugyi (သူကြီး). Old name for the leader of a village or group of villages. It became the name for the 'village headman', who are today called *okchokyayhmu* (အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးမှူး).

thwaythauksu (သွေးသောက်စု). Lit. 'blood drinker corps', a regiment of servicemen during the precolonial period. Not to be confused with *thwaythauk* (သွေးသောက်) which appeared recently – together with the *pyusawhti* (ပျူစောထီး) groups – and refers to pro-military militias.

tintaung (တင်တောင်း). Bride price; *tintaungpwe* (တင်တောင်းပွဲ) is a name for the engagement ceremony, also called *apyaw* (အပြော).

tintha-ngway (တင်သငွေ). Wealth promised during engagement ceremony. It is also called *hkinwin pyitsi* (ခန်းဝင်ပစ္စည်း) or the properties (given) to enter (the relation) in good terms.

wunthanu athin (ဝံသာနု အသင်း). Lay association crystallizing part of the protest against colonialism while defending Buddhism in the early 1900s.

yahman-ngway (ယာမှန်းငွေ). Lit. 'the guessed price of the land', a mortgage agreement on land which usually does not involve interest and lasts for one to three years.

yatmiyathpa (ရပ်မိရပ်ဖ). Lit. 'parents of a common dwelling place', elders who can be called village spokespersons or official elders.

yatywa keiksa (ရပ်ရွာကိစ္စ). Village affairs.

yaungsa (ရောင်းစား). Lit. 'eating the sale'. Fig. exploitation, misappropriation of wealth.

yonkyi (ယုံကြည်). Trusting, believing, nominalized as *yonkyihmu* (ယုံကြည်မှု).

yuhsa (ယူဆ). To believe, nominalized as *ayu-ahsa* (အယူအဆ).

ywabon pyitsi (ရွာဘုံပစ္စည်း). Village properties.

zawgyi (ဇော်ဂျီ). A semi-immortal human gaining supernatural powers by 'entering the fireplace' (*hpowin*, ဖိုလ်ဝင်).

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