

**Beyond the village headman**

**Transformations of the local polity**

**in central Myanmar**

**(1750s-2010s)**

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an anthropological study of how village headship became an ambiguous position of power in Myinmilaung village tract of central Myanmar. Based on twenty months of fieldwork between 2014 and 2019 and on archival research, it explores headship as a matter of craftsmanship and personality through the evolving relationship between the government and villagers. It focuses specifically on the making of the local polity of Gawgyi, the village which controlled the headship of Myinmilaung tract during most of my stay, and shows how, besides factionalism and clientelism, a group of bigmen took care of village affairs with or without the presence of the headman. They embodied notions of propriety and upheld an ethics based on earlier models of power. They also kept their distance from the state which, after having forcefully tried to bring about socialism in the countryside, was a more disengaged presence during my stay. Myinmilaung headship is an ambiguous position because it sits at the juncture between village government, village affairs and family relations, the balance depending on who embodies the position and at which time.

The historical part of the thesis explores the fashioning of Myinmilaung tract and the way this brought about debates over conceptions of power, on the transformation of land relations and on contestations about local history. In these debates, headmen are described as either usurpers of precolonial chiefs, as servants of a foreign state, as buffers against state demands, as charismatic patrons anchored in a local, as corrupt officials, or as political entrepreneurs. However, as much as headship is debated in history, its everyday practice goes beyond the institution and requires the ability of navigating relationships and gauging obligations. I argue the authority of a village headman is based on craftsmanship and that diverse forms of engagements pervade social processes and leadership such as the transmission of inheritance, the making of ceremonies and the caretaking of village affairs.

Showing how each of these forms of engagement is shot through with ambiguity, this thesis suggests that the questions of responsibility, obligation and morality are crucial to local politics insofar as the temporality of relationships is accounted for. In doing so, this research renews the literature on local politics in Myanmar from an ethnographic starting point and combines history and anthropology of uncertainty and of morality; it contributes to political anthropology

at large by exploring key concepts – power, authority, headship, bigmen, patronage – and the way they play out in the Burmese context; and to a wider set of debates about gift-giving, ethics, masculinities, land tenure, colonialism and the state.



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## GLOSSARY

The glossary includes the most relevant Burmese terms used in this thesis.

<i>adunay adusa</i>	Lit. “living and eating together”, expressing commensality (together with <i>tit-o tit-ein</i> , lit. “one cooking pot, one house”).
<i>ahkwint-ayay</i>	Right or opportunities.
<i>ahlu</i>	Meritorious donations.
<i>aku-ngway</i>	Lit. “aid-money”, referring to the money given by the guests to the host during certain ceremonies (during weddings, it becomes a <i>lethpwe</i> ).
<i>akywinme ahlu</i>	Donation without remainder. A donation with remainder is called <i>akywinshi ahlu</i> .
<i>amway</i>	Inheritance (its main rule is <i>anyi ahmya</i> , referring to an equal division between all children).
<i>ana</i>	To have <i>ana</i> is to have the capacity to enforce one’s order (it has been translated by “power” (Spiro 1997) or “authority” (Nash 1965)).
<i>a-na-de</i>	Feeling of uneasiness.
<i>apyan ahlan</i>	Expression meaning “one good turn deserves another” and underscoring the ethics of living together.
<i>apyin pyitsi</i>	Outer property (of a household), in opposition with inner property ( <i>atwin pyitsi</i> ).
<i>ahsaung-ama</i>	A generic way to describe an exhortation to follow morals, often referring to Buddha’s teachings.
<i>athet</i>	Life as a vital breath. Life as a condition of existence is called <i>bawa</i> .
<i>athi / ahmudan</i>	Commoner / serviceman (bearer of an obligation); precolonial division of the population in status groups depending on their relation to the king.
<i>auratha</i>	A legitimate son or the ablest child in Burmese Buddhist Law (also transcribed as <i>orasa</i> or <i>aw-ra-tha</i> ).
<i>awza</i>	Authority to command, ability to impose judgment.
<i>bayin</i>	Title of a king as cosmic pivot.

<i>beiktheikhsaya</i>	Master of ceremony.
<i>bobuapaing</i>	In relation to land, it refers to a form of hereditary private tenure.
<i>dago</i>	Supernatural potency.
<i>dama-u-gya</i>	In relation to land, it is a claim by first clearing.
<i>eindaunguzi</i>	Head of a household.
<i>eindaung keiksa</i>	Household affairs
<i>gaing</i>	Monastic grouping.
<i>gon</i>	Honour or virtue.
<i>gawthagan</i>	Area of a monk/pagoda/monastery's outreach.
<i>hpon</i>	An individual's quality, a substance, translatable as charismatic power.
<i>hsayadaw</i>	Honorific for monks heading a monastery.
<i>hse-eingaung</i>	Ten-houses' head
<i>hswemyo</i>	Kinship terms meaning relatives or kin (also called <i>amyo</i> ). Term used in expression denoting belonging such as <i>hswemyotitthaik</i> , lit. “nest of relatives” or extended compound, or <i>yathswe-yatmyo</i> , lit. “people akin by (sharing a) dwelling”
<i>htitat</i>	To know something and act accordingly without the need to spell it out.
<i>kan</i>	Karma (from the Pali <i>kamma</i> ).
<i>kotukotha</i>	Lit. “rising by and defining oneself”, expression denoting self-reliance.
<i>kuto</i>	Merit.
<i>kwin</i>	Cadastral unit created during the colonial period (land plots are called <i>upaing</i> ).
<i>kyayzushin</i>	Benefactor, lit. “master of gratitude”.
<i>kyun</i>	Temporary debt bondman.
<i>lethpwe</i>	Wedding gift.
<i>lok-a-pay</i>	Forced labour.
<i>lokpainghkwint</i>	Authorisation to cultivate a land (legal land access under the socialist state).

<i>lubyogaung</i>	Head of the bachelors' group, also called <i>kalathagaung</i> , the head of the virgin girls' group is <i>apyogaung</i> head of virgin girls.
<i>lugyi</i>	Bigman.
<i>luhmuyay</i>	Social affairs or people's affairs. It is a domain minimally encompassing the "joys" ( <i>tha-yay</i> ) and "grieves" ( <i>na-yay</i> ); sometimes opposed to <i>kokoyay</i> , lit. "one's own affairs".
<i>luhso</i>	Bad person, infamous.
<i>mingala</i>	Good auspices. A term found in <i>mingala pauk</i> , lit. "auspicious gate".
<i>myaukthu</i>	Labourer as opposed to farmer ( <i>taungthu</i> ). Labourers and daily workers are also called <i>myayloktha</i> , <i>hpangan</i> , <i>kulikunga</i> , or <i>lokdana</i> ).
<i>myaydaing</i>	Revenue collector during the precolonial period.
<i>myayshin</i>	Landlord.
<i>myayzupay</i>	Lit. "giving the share of the land", one of the main forms of tenancy agreement in precolonial times in our area of research, together with <i>thonsutitsu</i> , lit. "three parts one part".
<i>myo</i>	Kind or type. Applied to people ( <i>lumyo</i> ) it is close to "race" in American English. With a different tone, <i>myo</i> also means a town. In precolonial times, hereditary chiefs were called <i>myothugyi</i> and their area of power was called <i>myonay</i> , which is today the word for township.
<i>myook</i>	Township officer during the colonial period mostly used in Lower Burma.
<i>myowun</i>	Provincial governors during the precolonial period.
<i>myoza</i>	Appanage holders during the precolonial period.
<i>nalehmu</i>	An understanding, a trade-off, an agreement.
<i>naq</i>	Spirit, usually of an individual who died violently.
<i>ngwayhtein</i>	Lit. "guardian of wealth".
<i>okchokhmu</i>	Stewardship, a form of authority over a family and its properties.
<i>okhteinhmu</i>	Guardianship, in the sense of taking care/charge of a domain of activities.

<i>paingsainhmu</i>	Ownership.
<i>pyuzu saunshauk</i>	Obligation of care between parents and children.
<i>samyay</i>	Land given as appanage.
<i>hsounhsaya</i>	Master of ghosts and evil spirits.
<i>shinbyu</i>	Buddhist noviciate ceremony.
<i>sittan</i>	Royal administrative inquests.
<i>ta-yay</i>	One of the names for ghost.
<i>taik</i>	Frontier province during the precolonial period.
<i>taw</i>	Farm field or forest, as opposed to village, <i>ywa</i> .
<i>thathena</i>	Buddha's teachings (Pali: <i>sasana</i> ).
<i>thathameda</i>	Capitation tax introduced in the early 1860s.
<i>thitsashihmu</i>	Trustworthiness or loyalty.
<i>thugyi</i>	Old name for the leader of a village or group of villages. It became the name for “village headman” which are today called <i>okchokyayhmu</i> .
<i>thwaythauksu</i>	Lit. “blood-drinker corp”, a regiment of servicemen during the precolonial period.
<i>tintha-ngway</i>	Wealth promised during engagement ceremony. It is also called <i>hkinwin pyitsi</i> or the “properties (given) to enter (the relation) in good terms.
<i>tintaung</i>	Bride price. <i>Tintaungpwe</i> is a name for the engagement ceremony, also called <i>apyaw</i> .
<i>wunthanu athin</i>	Lay association crystallising part of the protest against colonialism while defending Buddhism in the early 1900s.
<i>yahman-ngway</i>	Lit. “the guessed price of the land”, a mortgage agreement on land which usually does not involve interests and lasts for one to three years.
<i>yaungsade</i>	Lit. “eating the sale”. Sometimes expressing a misappropriation of wealth.
<i>yatmiyathpa</i>	Lit. “parents of a common dwelling place”, elders who can be called village spokesperson or official elder.
<i>yonkyi</i>	Trusting, believing, nominalised as <i>yonkyihmu</i> .
<i>yuhsa</i>	To believe, nominalised as <i>ayu-ahsa</i> .
<i>ywabon pyitsi</i>	Village properties.

*zawgyi*

A semi-immortal human gaining supernatural powers by  
“entering the fireplace” (*hpowin*).

## NOTE ON LANGUAGE, HISTORY AND CURRENCY

Throughout the text, I follow Okell's guide (1971) for transcribing Burmese words. I altered the writing with a dash (-) for purpose of pronunciation in a few cases and did not accentuate the transcribed words, which resulted in the absence of any signs for tones variations, but which ease the reading for Myanmar non-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' stands 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 anonymised for ethical purpose when the persons are still living. But villages' names have not been anonymised as they are indicators of some of the ways 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. Our 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 colonisation 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, while Upper Burma remained independent under the Burmese Empire until the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885. After the 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 dissertation 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).

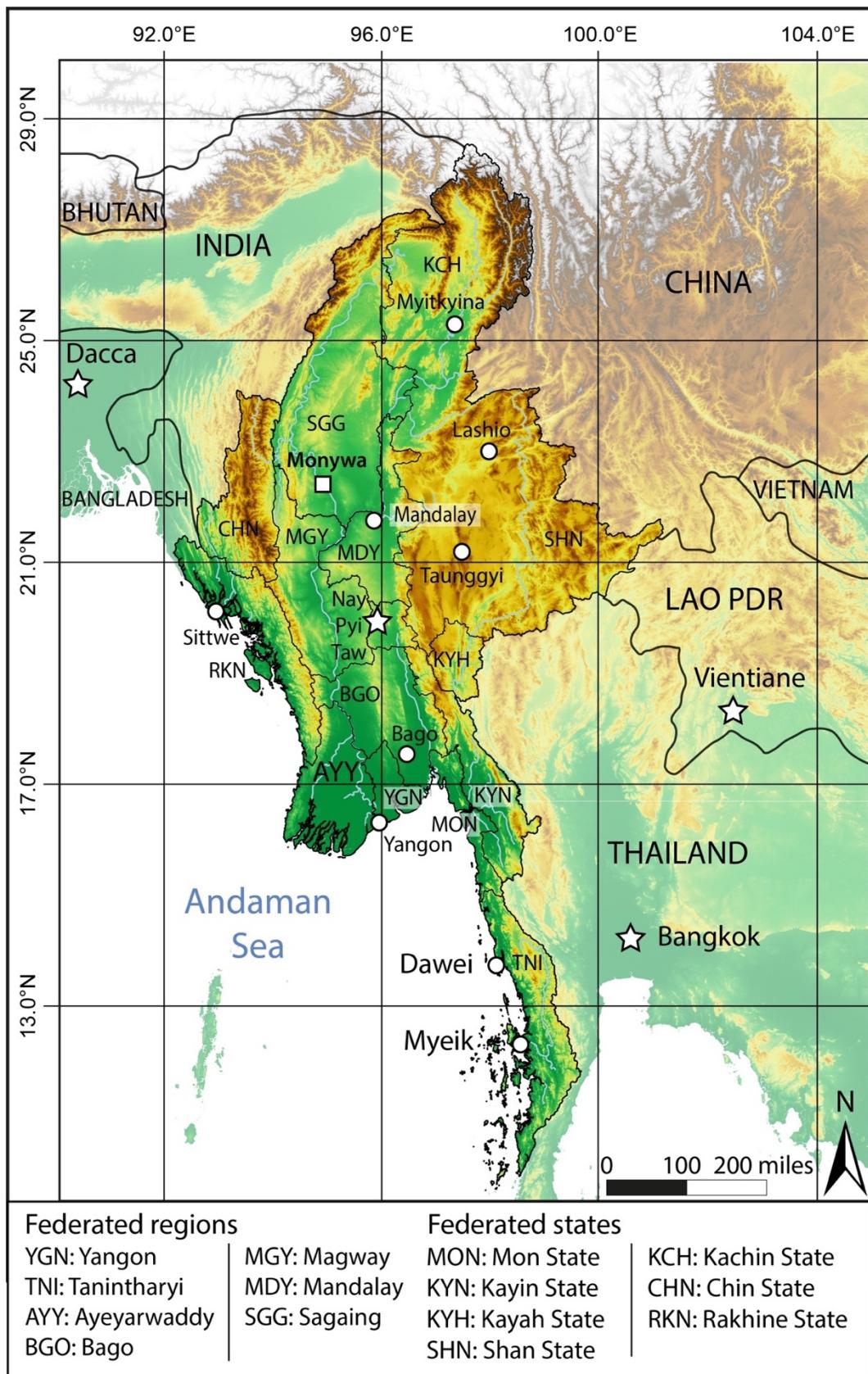


Figure 1. General map of Myanmar

## INTRODUCTION

### THE HOOK

At first glance, the village headmen are ubiquitous in local politics. One cannot really avoid them when going in the villages of the central plain of Myanmar. There are two kinds of discourses about village headmen in Myanmar countryside: one stating that they are the most hard-pressed officials of the government trying to do their best for their village; another saying that they are acting as local kings, granting access and information at a certain price, being a client upward and a patron downward. Officially, they have to know and acknowledge the ins and outs of strangers within their village tract which bonds several settlements under a single jurisdiction. The current name of this institution, *okchokyayhmu*,<sup>1</sup> echoes this conception and is closed to the word ‘administrator’ in the sense of overseeing and being responsible for the local order. There is a state-like quality to this rather ‘male’ office and most of the men I have met in villages today do not want to become headman.

Village headship is a vestige of the colonial encounter with the British in Upper Burma during the late 1880s and its official role, notably of police, has not transformed too much over time. What has changed are the persons embodying it and the forms of leadership in local politics. For instance, the most common name given to headmen at first was *thugyi*, “the great”, drawing from a search of traditional authorities to be used as a device to control the newly colonised landscape. This name conveys the imagery of men of prowess in a countryside organised through patron-client relations that colonialism and market forces would gradually erode.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1960s, Manning Nash, an American anthropologist, argued that headmen have already become mere administrators, even if sometimes the transmission of the office still followed hereditary claims. In contrast,

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible to break this term down as follow: *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* substantiate the compound (*okchok*) in terms of “affairs” and *hmu* is a marker of an office held by a person.

<sup>2</sup> This relates to the classical debate about the effect of colonialism that Scott framed as an erosion of patron-client politics, cf. Scott (1972b).

charismatic leadership, which he called men of *hpon*<sup>3</sup> (or men of prowess, of sheer power, of great glory), was preeminent and it illuminated the problem of building modern political parties (Nash 1963).

When I met Ko Kyaw in 2013 in his village called Gawgyi, he has just become headman of Myinmilaung village tract. At that time, party politics was not crucial in local affairs as almost everyone was more or less covertly supporting the National League for Democracy (NLD) of Daw Aung San Su Kyi over the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the umpteenth organisation set up by the military (*Tatmadaw*)<sup>4</sup> who ran the country from 1962 to 2015, the year of the NLD victory in the national elections. However, today, calling a headman *thugyi* equates to scoffing at his authority. For Ko Kyaw, being a village headman was a matter of craftsmanship and political navigation, not a simple expression of his achievements and karma. It meant avoiding, accepting, and creating obligations; dissembling, showing competency in some domains, valuing incompetency in others. The particular configuration of past dynamics in day-to-day life was key to understand that his dilemma was to align acts and words and to show trustworthiness while embodying a distrusted position. Thus, to make sense of local politics, I had to look beyond the headman and focus on the merging of the private and the political and on how the past shapes the present.

For instance, in Myinmilaung village tract, the selection of the headman in 2016 displayed how the competition between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung proper is a crucial dynamic of the local polity, a rivalry resting notably on diverging narratives of foundation and belonging. The selection I attended in 2016 does not correspond to old and stable modalities of succession but is rather the result of successive and continuous transformations of leadership from the pre-colonial period to the present day. Besides, local politics today is 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. Cast in the realm of Myinmilaung politics, the towering violence the military government has perpetrated in the 1980s-90s while disengaging from the

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<sup>3</sup> 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 (2009) '*pon*'.

<sup>4</sup> On Tatmadaw, its history and functioning as one of the main political force in the country's modern history, see Callahan (2003) and Seltz (2002).

countryside after having imposed socialism (1962-88) marks such a rupture. If there were men of *hpon* in the past, they were gone now.<sup>5</sup> In this process, the question of people's worth to some degree substituted the question of their *hpon*.

This is salient in how the local elite, a number of men called the *lugyi*,<sup>6</sup> or bigmen, makes Gawgyi affairs a space of engagement where the worth of people is evaluated. Village affairs nowadays include the organisation 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 or the issue of enlarging the village for instance. In that sense, saying that village affairs have become the form and arena of politics in Gawgyi refers to how the engagement 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.<sup>7</sup> Gawgyi bigmen, who are 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 distance with the state and combines old conceptions with new stakes.

Finally, looking beyond the headman led me to explore how authority was conceived within families through the issue of transmission. After having studied how Ko Kyaw has crafted his position as headman, investigating the transmission of inheritance and *in fine* ownership as a matter of stewardship (*okchokhmu*) allowed to understand village male leadership and the role of the *lugyi* in terms of guardianship (*okhtehinhmu*). This semantic leaning reflects the juncture of the rise of village affairs as the form of politics with the reorganisation of the local hierarchy and the transformation of village leadership.

To make sense of changes in the local polity, this thesis combines history and ethnography, the latter being the anchor to the former, and the chapters are organised in chronological order. The historical chapters (from 3 to 5) explore the transformation of the political landscape while the ethnographic ones (6 to 8) focus

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<sup>5</sup> Except for Buddhist monks who are defined by this quality and called *hpongyi* (“great *hpon*”)

<sup>6</sup> 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 legitimise a political order by making village affairs a space of commitment where the worth of the people is gauged.

<sup>7</sup> Called *kotukotha* and which can be translated by “rising by and defining oneself”.

on the current conceptions and practices of leadership. The following present the scene of the thesis and explore the local landscape and its temporalities. It then describes Ko Kyaw and the previous headmen of Myinmilaung tract to discuss the literature about local politics and problematise historical dynamics. The last part presents the concepts used to make sense of current forms of male leadership emerging from the ethnography.

## SETTING THE SCENE

### Past and present

Gawgyi is short for *gangawgyi* and means “large flat pond”. Two hundred years ago, it was a tiny hamlet, first settled near a seasonal pond during a widespread famine. Some of the elders knew of the events that had pushed their ancestors to move away from Ywadon village located further south. The famine was most probably related to King Bodawhpaya (1782–1819) increasing demands for corvées, soldiers and taxes leading to a great change in the kingdom’s demography.<sup>8</sup> During the military campaign against Siam in 1809, “every town and village [were] 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 confiscate villagers’ properties and to make corporal

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<sup>8</sup> Koenig’s calculation of population trends based on the 1783 and 1802 record of administration (*sittan*), (1990: 241). For instance, he has shown 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, canals and pagodas construction, or escape state demands by migrating away. So Gawgyi people, moved from a local and went to “the forest” where there was a source of water. The greatest restructuring of tenures in the early Konbaung period occurred as a result of the famine of 1805–1812. This event, coupled to the widespread social disorder and rebellion that accompanied it, caused massive demographic instability and a concomitant movement toward shifting cultivation and much of the abandoned land was taken over by headmen during this period cf. Koenig (1990: 142–143). Thant Myint-U also highlighted the importance of migrations during this early modern era, when periodic wars and famines and attendant displacement of people led to frequent abandonment and re-colonisation of villages, particularly in less productive areas. In addition, the low density of population in all but the most intensely irrigated places, and places close to the main river-ways, meant that new communities were constantly being formed by immigrants. These immigrants included settlers from nearby upland areas such as the Maru, Jingpaw or Mizo speakers of the related Tibeto-Burma languages. Others were immigrants from overseas, or war captives who were settled in newly colonised land by the crown. (2001: 29–30).

punishment. “In the face of these exactions, many families decamped to less accessible rural locales” (ibid.), usually where they could find water. And 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<sup>9</sup> converged where a large seasonal pond appeared during the monsoon and Gawgyi was thus named after this natural feature. The village is located in the “dry zone” (*anya*) 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,<sup>10</sup> a crucial pool of soldiers for the successive dynasties.<sup>11</sup> The population, head of cattle, and extent of cultivated fields increased over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and it impacted local forms of Buddhism as forest-dwelling monasticism increasingly gave way to village- and town-dwelling monasticism.<sup>12</sup>

The Lower Chindwin Valley regional history is relatively well documented<sup>13</sup> but not the very local one. When one asks about the origin of Gawgyi, one is invariably sent to a few elderly people living in the oldest and densest area of the village (figure 2). The local theory is that the main lineages<sup>14</sup> (*amyo-yo*) of the

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<sup>9</sup> The first census appeared in Hardiman’s Settlement Report found in the British Library archive file 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 to as Hardiman 1910. The figures appear pp.176-194 of the report which numbered thirty-six households, thus, following the hypothesis that the village was created in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the lapse of three generations over eighty years most probably has multiply the population by three.

<sup>10</sup> Alon was known as Badon until Bodawpaya (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. For a discussion about the scope and history of this province and the internal politics, see chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> Notably since the Restored Taungoo dynasty (1597-1752) and more effectively during the Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Charney (2006, 2007 and 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Either directly or indirectly through historical scholarships (Charney (2006, 2007, 2011), Lieberman (1984), Thant Myint-U (2001), Toe Hla (1987)), colonial reports found in the British Library archives (cf. Bibliography) or the study of spirit cults (Brac de la Perrière (1998)).

<sup>14</sup> 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 also has 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

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 on the west. They organised 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<sup>15</sup> 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 village population and their capacity to accumulate cattle and seeds and to contract loans from the local gentry. Gawgyi villagers progressively created their own 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 (figure 3). The more or less formalised systems of hierarchies between crown servicemen (*ahmudan*) and commoners (*athi*), of taxation in kind and fees,<sup>16</sup> and of land tenure emerging from the stabilisation of the settlements was 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. And when village headship emerged during the British ‘pacification campaign’ and ‘settlement operations’ after the annexation of Upper Burma<sup>17</sup> in 1885, Gawgyi and

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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 neo-local pattern which means that newly-wed couples usually created their own housing area. For Nash (1965) and Spiro (1986), neo-local 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*.

<sup>15</sup> *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 in the village altar.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Mya Sein (1973: 166-171).

<sup>17</sup> The 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 Bamar, whereas Lower Burma was historically Mon-speaking until the

Myinmilaung were grouped in one village tract under one headman liable of collecting land taxes. This simple political organisation remained with little change throughout the twentieth century and the Japanese invasion (1945-48), the battle for independence (1948), the socialist insurgencies (1945-1956),<sup>18</sup> 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, except from monks, called “great hpon” (*hpongyi*) by definition. Forms of leadership seemed to have altered during the past century.

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early 19th century. The Frontier Areas, as designated by the colonial administration, included ethnic minority areas, such as the Shan States and modern Kachin State.

<sup>18</sup> 1956 is when the White Flag Communists deserted the outskirt of Monywa.

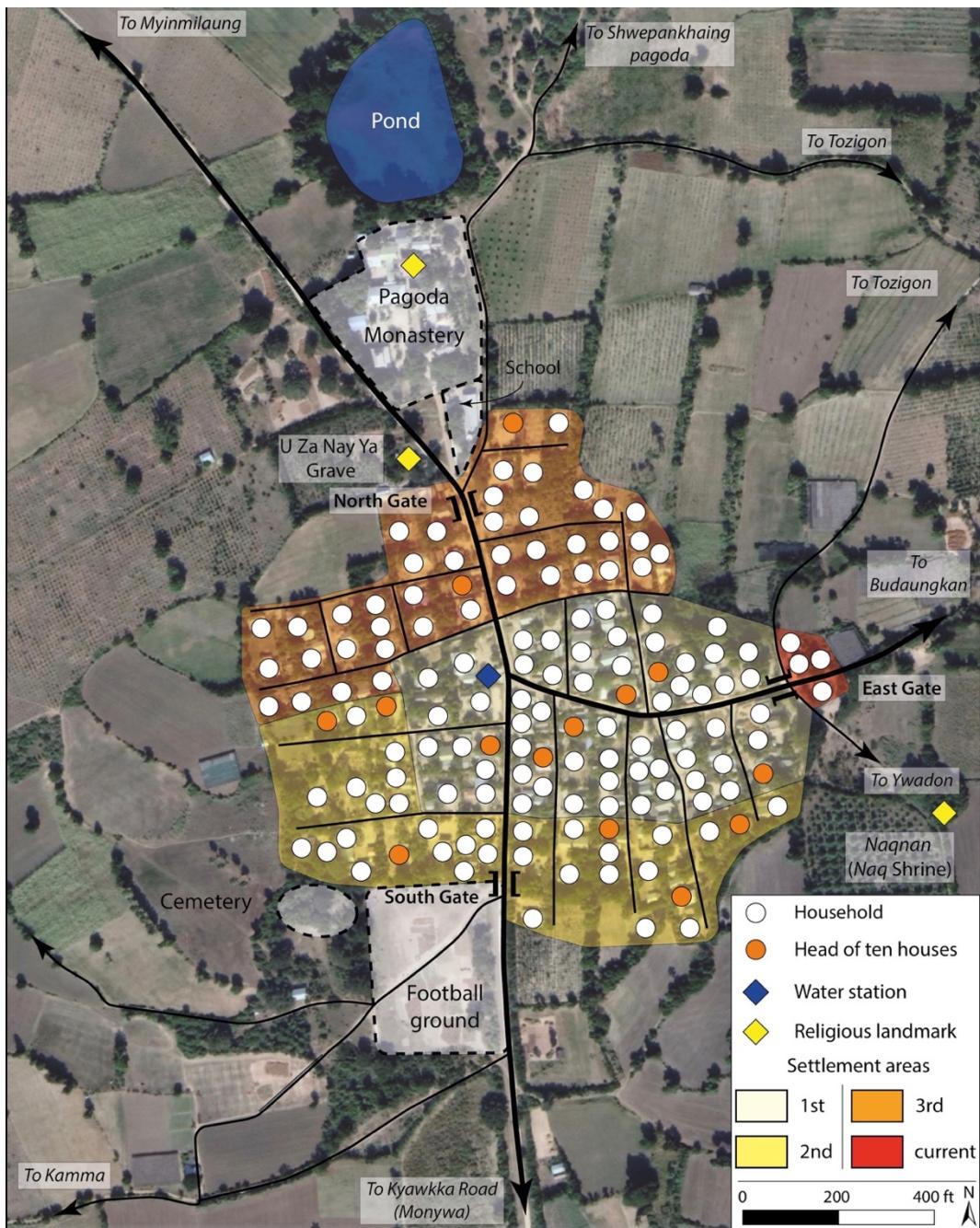


Figure 2. Map of Gawgyi village

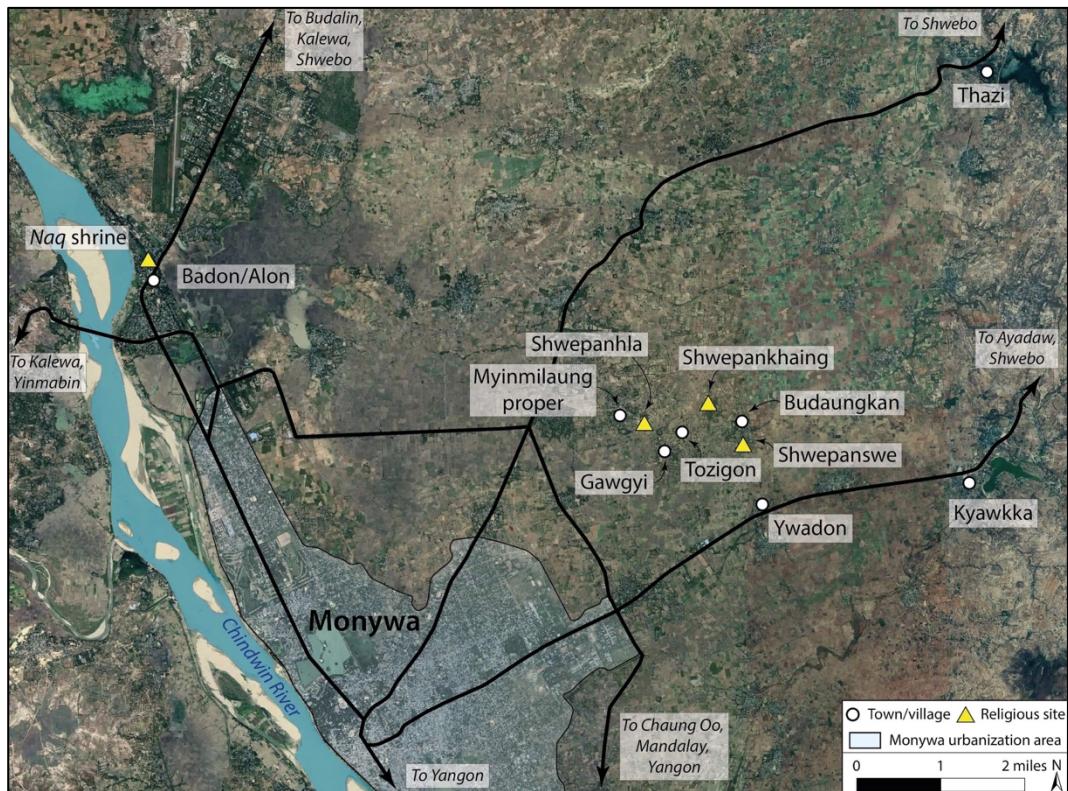


Figure 3. Map of the research area

Today, Gawgyi is a small Buddhist village of a little less than six-hundred Burmese people (*bama*) six miles from the thriving city of Monywa,<sup>19</sup> the capital of Sagaing Region. This area has been relatively spared from forced displacements and military violence, except concerning the recent case of land-grabbing at the Letpadaung copper mine, compared with ‘ethnic’, borders and delta areas.<sup>20</sup> There has also been no direct violence toward Muslims minorities, although it has occurred in the neighbouring city of Shwebo for instance. Nonetheless, the region, considered as a Burmese hinterland, has its own history of state violence (explored in chapter 5).

In Gawgyi, there is a public school<sup>21</sup> and the one hundred and thirty-odd houses are packed into an administrative grid that groups households into ten, and

<sup>19</sup> 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* published by the Department of Population under the Ministry of Immigration and Population in May 2015.

<sup>20</sup> For the Letpadaung case, see Amnesty International (2007) and Prasse-Freemand and Phyo Win Latt (2018), on stories of ethnic construction in relation with Burmese and military domination see Gravers (2007) for an overview, Sadan (2013) for the Kachin case and Bouthry (2015) concerning the Delta area.

<sup>21</sup> Until grade six.

one person among the heads of each house (*eindaunguzi*) is designated as a (male) representative<sup>22</sup> of the cluster and called a “ten-houses head” (*hse-eingaung*). Since 2012, they are the ones electing the headman every five years in theory. The latter is paid a subsidy by the Ministry of Home affairs through the General Administration Department (GAD; Kyi Pyar Chit Saw & Arnold 2014: 34). In addition to the headman and the houses’ representatives there is the tract’s clerk, the second government employee, who is supposed to assist the headman in his tasks. There is also a variety of committees, *ad hoc* or permanent, that are empty shells or crucial arenas depending on the stakes involved. There is one for the fire brigade, another for the management of the pagoda and the monastery working in close relation with Gawgyi monk, 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 most recent and critical committee is called in Gawgyi the “five-person committee” or “land committee” and operates at the level of Myinmilaung village tract.<sup>23</sup> It is 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.<sup>24</sup> 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 called “Myinmilaung people” indistinctly. Football matches and headmen selections are climaxes in this rivalry. They say they dislike each other. For Gawgyi people, *they*

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<sup>22</sup> On the gendered aspect of politics, cf. the subsection on “Ko Kyaw’s political navigation”.

<sup>23</sup> It is known, in English, as Village Land Management Committee.

<sup>24</sup> On the current debates about the effect of the new land laws, see Boutry et al. (2017), Mark (2016), McCarthy (2018), Willis (2014), Oberndorf (2012), 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), Farmer Right 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.

are autochthones, from the land and Myinmilaung villagers have bad morals, are fickle, and distrustful. For 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, a man from Gawgyi, who remained in this position for about three years from 2013 to 2016.<sup>25</sup>

As for 2015, most villagers were considered 'relatively poor' in Gawgyi by the NGOs operating in Monywa Township<sup>26</sup> and less than half of its overall population was still composed of farming families. In Gawgyi vicinity, lands are mostly dry (*yamyay*), of average quality and rains less and less predictable. Farmers still grow sorghum as fodder for their cows, sesame, pulses and beans for the market. Rice, sometimes mixed with sorghum, is bought in various local markets and is the main staple food, together with a curry usually composed of a large variety of vegetables, soups of tree leaves or beans and chicken or pork when the family's purse allows it; usually after the harvests. The households live close to one another and, the settlement pattern being mostly neolocal<sup>27</sup> and inheritance divided equally between every child, the gradual expansion of the village 'ate' the surrounding fragmented farmlands.

At first glance, it seems that farming is the main activity in Gawgyi. However, it is not so anymore. The non-farming part of the population is growing and these days mostly engaging in different off-farm wage activities as skilled labourers, carpenters, longyi weavers, petty vegetable sellers, and poultry husbandry. In other words, the rural population is no longer composed mostly of farmers.<sup>28</sup> Since the 2000s, there is 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 goes in hand with the progressive political democratisation and economic liberalisation of the country started in 2010-11 under the Thein Sein government. The recent changes have been quite a lot for villagers to take on and

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<sup>25</sup> The selection happened in 2012 but it takes several months before the position was handed over.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Okamoto (2018) and Thawnghmung (2018).

the benefits of modernisation are viewed ambivalently. Locally, several women invested in longyi weaving as an alternative to farm work, while farmers dig tube wells to enable the irrigation of new crops. Many men left the fields to become ‘carpenters’ in Monywa’s construction sites and a few migrate seasonally. Rising inflows of meritorious donations help refurbishment of monasteries and improve monks’ living standards, although this does not please those who see monkhood as detachment. Family savings are increasingly spent on schooling (notably for private tuitions) and private healthcare due to the miserable state of public infrastructures and services. In Gawgyi, as in many other neighbouring villages, farmers have now troubles finding affordable labour because daily wages have risen steadily since 2005.<sup>29</sup> What has been a structuring divide between farmer owners (*taungthu*) and mere labourers (*myaukthu*) since the colonial period is now slowly changing, transforming the balance of power within villages, the dependency relationships and the type of land contracts. Cattle husbandry for instance, a crucial arrangement for farming, is on the decline. Artificial fertilisers, pesticides, rototillers and tractors gradually re-enter farm fields<sup>30</sup> and replace oxcarts and manure. Companies visit villages to demonstrate the reliability of their new products and NGOs attempt to enlist villages to their projects while educated staffs navigate both kinds of institutions. Farmland plots tend to become enlarged and consolidated after several decades of division through inheritance. Land prices rose steeply between 2005 and 2017, depending on the proximity with the main roads, access to water, land quality and speculation.<sup>31</sup> This fed donations toward monasteries, the magnification of ceremonies and often resulted in the reappearance of old conflicts and new squabbles. Outsiders and businessmen from Monywa progressively buy land in places where no one would have done ten years ago. Rubber trees start to be harvested, and new labour groups are formed. Chinese goods of mediocre quality overflow local markets and villagers joke about the virtual lack of any kind of

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<sup>29</sup> For instance, daily wages have rose from less than 1USD to 3.5 USD per day for men between 2005 and 2015.

<sup>30</sup> The first attempts occurred during U Nu Pyidawtha Plan (on this plan, cf. Gerard McCarthy’s thesis section (2018) on “The rise and fall of interventionist welfare capitalism (1948-1962)”) and during the socialist period in the late 1960s.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, the price of land plots adjacent to Kyawkka road at the crossroad with Gawgyi pathway had multiplied by ten between 2013 and 2016, from around 2500 USD to 25000 per acre. The price of land plots for housing purpose in villages had also been multiplied by 5 to 10 depending on the remoteness of the location and the potential for development.

Myanmar-made commodity. The elders evoke 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, they can be employed in Monywa's industrial zone, have smartphones and play football with international star's names printed on their shirt. Times have changed. Gawgyi villagers face those changes with a feeling of having to juggle with it one way or another. They craft their life and navigate the 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 follows a sense of morality, referring to the evaluation of conduct in relation to esteemed or despised human qualities,<sup>32</sup> that had more to do with the history of the local political landscape than universal human rights. And the recent economic changes are rather seen as a force one has to tame, as for diseases or governments,<sup>33</sup> before translating into opportunities to sustain one's life. In other words, the persons I worked with had particular ways of imagining and making sense of continuities and discontinuities, of violence, trustworthiness and contradictions.

### **Landscape, morality and time**

The landscape is an interesting metaphor for describing the sedimentation of history in this 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. The anthropology of landscape<sup>34</sup> has shown how human activities and ideas mould the landscape, giving it the character of being 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). A world that "we come to recognise and understand through fieldwork

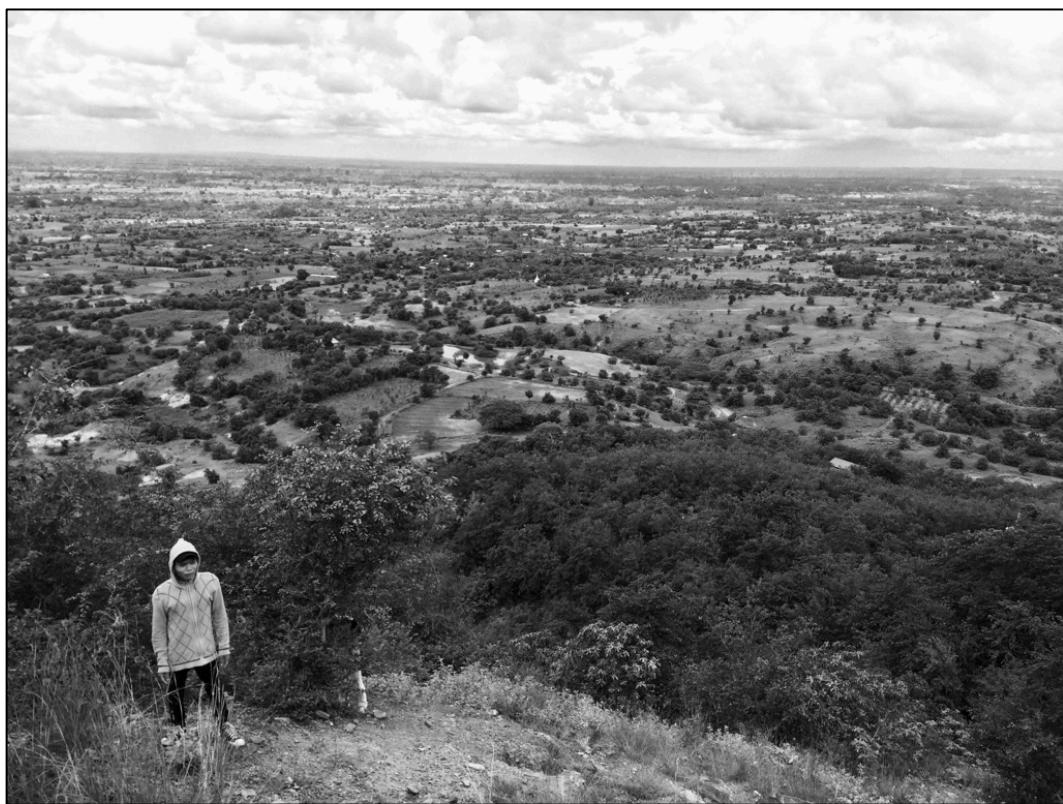
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<sup>32</sup> This perspective draws from Humphrey (1997).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Maung Maung Gyi (1983) or Spiro (1997) for a discussion of the government as an unpredictable force.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Stewart and Strathern (2003), Ingold (1993) Hirsch and O'Hanlon (1995), Hirsch, (1995), Bender (2002).

and through ethnographic description and interpretation" (Hirsch 1995: 2). The landscape tells multiple stories and is crowded by several entities as well as references to the past. Looking at – or rather in – Gawgyi, one could see and hear the different agricultural works depending on the seasons, the coming and going of villagers, the stories of foundations, the ways heat, rains, auspicious flows and dead bodies are dealt with, the 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 materialised for instance. 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. The following explores the landscape in an open-ended perspective to eventually highlight how people evaluate their engagement with others. A second use of this metaphor is employed in a different section below that focuses on the fashioning of the local political landscape as a network of personalities, hierarchies, stakes and memories present in current politics.



*Figure 4. View from Kyawkka hill, looking westward toward the Chindwin river*

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 by many settlements, pagodas and a few hills, rivers and creeks about which exist a variety of stories combining references to the local unfolding of Theravada Buddhism,<sup>35</sup> to royalty and to spirit cults (*naq*). Buddhism, kingship and spirit cults thus often merge in stories of foundation, such as the one about Myinmilaung village (chapter 3), as it allowed people to locate and entrench human dwellings within a Burmese vision of the landscape.

In Gawgyi, they are proud Buddhists,<sup>36</sup> 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 (*thatthena*)<sup>37</sup> a simple, yet necessary, moral guide. It once has been synthesised 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. As Turner explains:

“Buddhist temporal cosmology adopts Indian ideas of cyclical progression of eons of decline, destruction, and renewal, termed “*kalpas*” (Pali: *kappa*). *Kalpas* are further broken down by the appearance of Buddhas and their dispensations. [...]. The most relevant and orienting division of time becomes the era of each Buddha’s enlightenment and the duration of his teachings: his *sasana*. [...]. The current era is the *sasana* of Buddha Sakyamuni, and time is made meaningful and intelligible in relation to his enlightenment and the continuation of his teachings.” (2014: 26)

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<sup>35</sup> 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, which 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 19th century and has since become popular with the laity in both traditionally Theravada countries (Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Sri Lanka) and in the west.

<sup>36</sup> On the argument around “Being Burmese is being Buddhist”, see Rozenberg (2008) and Robinne (2016).

<sup>37</sup> “Buddha’s teachings” is transcribed as *thatthena* from the Burmese, and *sasana* from the Pali.

This helps explain why nobody tried to convert me: because one day I will realise myself that Buddha was right. There is no point arguing. Everything leans toward impermanence. Equanimity, a valued trait of character, also relates to this vision of time scattered by ‘rebirth’, karma (*kan*)<sup>38</sup> and merit (*kuto*) making. The dialectic between merit making and status captures this vision of time: social status is an evidence for previously acquired religious merit that has come to fruition in the present. This way of seeing time gives the impression, reinforced by discourses, 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 legacy is called *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 from harmful forces (ghost, bad luck and so on). To attract good influences, having a pagoda to worship is essential, a monastery with monks to facilitate donations and merit making is even better<sup>39</sup> and celebrating the annual pagoda festival is indispensable. In short, the continuous upkeep and worship of the incarnations of Buddha and of his teachings help curtaining off a human dwelling like Gawgyi. Thus, the village as a collective is at least maintained by Buddhism. But at another level, 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 moralisation of behaviours after the colonial encounter and in line with the gradual shift from forest-dwelling to village-dwelling monasticism.<sup>40</sup> Turner (2014) has notably shown that in face of the sentiment of societal decay during the decade following the fall of the monarchy in 1885, laypeople became in charge of Buddha’s teaching. And U Za Nay Ya, together with U To Kaing, headmen of Myinmilaung tract, were the local figures for the moralisation of behaviours in the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, to a timeless vision of Buddha’s teachings is superimposed a change brought about by

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<sup>38</sup> Transcribed as *kamma* in Pali.

<sup>39</sup> 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 *thatthena*.

<sup>40</sup> Itself related to changes in the region’s demographics and socio-political organisation, cf. Charney (2006, 2007), Lieberman (2003).

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 exchanges 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 as if they have been punctuating rural life since 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 make, for a time, a place like Gawgyi alive. But beyond celebrating a formidable trait of Burmese culture, ceremonies are also moments when people evaluate each other. There are two types of meritorious donations: the “donation without remainder” (*akywinme ahlu*) and the “donation with remainder” (*akywinshi ahlu*).<sup>41</sup> The first form is 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 return directly. It mostly concerns donations for religious buildings and the ‘best’ is not to put one’s name or picture as a dedication mark on the edifice. And when the donor dies, this good deed will be remembered and taken into account for his or her rebirth. The second type of donation is the most common and happens during Buddhist novitiate, funerals and weddings for instance when guests make offerings to the donor. To some extent, people cannot escape the obligation stemming from this kind of gift because there is a ‘remainder’ which underscores the continuity of a relation between people. Given the relatively high number of occasions a person is invited to ceremonies during their lifetime, these transactions involve obligations and liabilities. They create cycles of transfer between people and scattered the temporality of relationships between people, neighbours and families within and beyond Gawgyi under an ideology of donation.

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<sup>41</sup> 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).



Figure 5. Feeding the guest during a shinbyu in 2017

At another level, 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*). Passed the betel shop and 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 and where the village gate has never moved. The bamboo, thatched, and iron-roofed houses are closer to one another as one moves toward this old area. Gawgyi can be coarsely divided into three parts: the western part, the eastern-north and eastern-south parts (figure 2). Those intersect at the collective well in the centre of the village. The circulation grid is thus made of two ways branching out with smaller ones that connects tinier footpaths sometimes crossing house enclosures depending on the gradual expansion of the village and the kin and neighbour relations. Overall, the paths convey and orient a variety of flows: flows of auspices, processions, everyday walking, cattle-carts, motorbikes, cars, kids 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 which people try to accommodate and navigate.



*Figure 6. Pathway in Gawgyi, looking westward toward the water station (in blue).*

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.<sup>42</sup> House foundations and alignment are designed in relations to Gawgyi

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<sup>42</sup> The references to fences or stockades in the literature is interesting as it indicates the comings and goings of period of unrest. They were a crucial element of villages during the ‘pacification

pathways, as well as to the course of the sun and the moon or to the horoscope of the head of the house for instance. 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 where the first settlers of Gawgyi came from. In a way, the paths are the main connections current villagers have with their ancestors, who designed them, because it shapes how successive generations would orient, curb or maintain a variety of influences by adjusting their lives according to the foundations of the village. And 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,<sup>43</sup> are embodied in buildings, altars or tales and can influence a great deal of villagers' life. 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 (2009), different kinds of religiosity interact but are dominated by the Theravadin tradition constantly redefining a 'pure' Buddhism in relation with national politics. A flexible approach to the local landscape and a focus on 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<sup>44</sup> and weiksa<sup>45</sup> 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 hundred and thirty-six registered households, about one third is living in a *hswemyotitthaik* or "a nest (*titthaik*) of relatives

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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 period of warfare (Koenig 1990, Thant Myint-U 2001). Nash (1965) also indicated that the maintaining of fences by villagers marked their belonging the political community in the early 1960s. During my own fieldwork I realised that they gradually disappeared from the villages in the late 1990s, together with the decrease of cattle-rustling (cf. chapter 5).

<sup>43</sup> 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.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Brac de la Perrière (1989, 2009, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Brac de la Perrière et al. (2014) and Rozenberg (2015) among others.

(*hswemyo*)”. Most are only composed of two houses, but the biggest ones (I listed seven of them) can count up to eight. Ko Kyaw the headman is living in one of them. They represent the accumulation of wealth by a few farming families along past generations and transcribe a tendency to gather relatives when possible.<sup>46</sup> What June and Manning Nash saw in the dry zone of Burma in the 1960s was still true in 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 & Nash 1963: 257). The fact being that the main families of settlers were able to delineate larger compounds and appropriate more farmland than the persons settling later, coming from other locals or marrying within the village and receiving a share of inheritance growing smaller as it was divided equally among all the children of blood around the death of the parents. Hence the concentric pattern of settlement of the village (figure 2) and the divide between the real farmers (*taunghu*), 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 monopolisation of position of power by certain layers of the local society in the past and of how kinship is organised.

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 the children.<sup>47</sup> 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 relatedness,<sup>48</sup> 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 just a wish to maintain good relations.<sup>49</sup> Spiro was already suggesting that kinship ties carry a moral force and

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. notably Nash and Nash (1963).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Spiro (1971, 1986), Nash (1965), Nash and Nash (1963), Koenig (1990), and Kumada (2015).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Schneider (1984) and Carsten (2000).

<sup>49</sup> In a similar vein, the creation of relation and obligations between people is often expressed in terms of friendship. Cf. Spiro on power (1997) and appendix on “How to get screwed”.

“are a crucial basis [...] for the undifferentiated exchange of those rights and duties which define the village as a social (in contrast to a mainly territorial) group. 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” (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 for instance used 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. But 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 about in a flexible language of kinship and which frontiers had varied following the local history and the 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 – turning into motorbike routes since the massive arrival of Chinese goods in the late 2000s. Outside of the village are the field (*taw*). The village-field division structures the landscape. And 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 planted close to each other, its gossiping and its rules for male-female and junior-senior relationships are 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 techniques, debate about 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 stories. It is where the men<sup>50</sup> play money games, often leading to such losses that some rich families had 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 by 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. And it is also where an old pagoda called shwepankhaing, dating back to pre-colonial time stands, half eroded, alone with its invisible guardian, enclosing gold that no one should bring home (figure 3).

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<sup>50</sup> There was an obvious gender bias in the ethnography, and I deal with this issue in the chapter 1 on reflexivity.



*Figure 7. Bullock cart tract leading to the field during the monsoon.*

A last element of the landscape, perhaps the least romantic, is how it has been impacted by the 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 thesis. From the precolonial period where there was a landscape of fragmented sovereignties tied through patron-client relations and competing for offices, Gawgyi later became part of

Myinmilaung tract during the colonial encounter which imposed a ‘village system’ that remained throughout the Japanese invasion, the period of insurgencies, the military turn toward socialism, its gradual disengagement from the countryside and more recently the democratic transition. The rationalisation 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 black market and cattle rustling (re-)emerged together with village fences. 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. And from that moment onward, a few bigmen from Gawgyi started taking care of village affairs on the model of previous men of propriety by combining a traditional form of sociality (*luhmuyay*) with new stakes.

When I arrived in Gawgyi in 2013 for the first time, I encountered this configuration of temporalities, places, networks and meanings at a specific moment with the help of Ko Kyaw. Following him was a matter of trailing his political navigation within and beyond Gawgyi. ‘Political time’ was suddenly moving fast and disproportionate to the sedimentation of Buddhism in the region or to the succession of generations for instance. The selection of the headman, the handling of factions through online games such as Clash of Clans (chapter 6) occurred in moments that articulate, match and contradict other temporalities, and created dilemmas to overcome.

Overall, the landscape is crowded by a large array of entities: pagodas, monks, the monastery, *naq*, memories of men of prowess, ponds, ghosts, cattle, trees, neighbours, the headman, online teams, mountains, creeks, administrative tracts, relatives, and so on. It is delineated differently depending on what one wants 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 it as relationships one engages with or not. 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 chose to engage with this or that person, monk, pagoda, spirit or belief. In a sense, people navigate the landscape and craft their lives. In his anthropological study of “immortal” beings in Myanmar, Rozenberg (2015) has made a case for distinguishing two verbs in Burmese corresponding to the English “to believe”. There is *yuhsa* (to believe, nominalised 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 a person 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.” (Rozenberg 2015: 15-16). For instance, Ko Kyaw, the village headmen, often insisted that he did not believe in *naq*. That is, he did not worship them, but he did not deny their existence either. This distinction reflects one of the ways people engage or not with entities or persons. It is a matter of gauging influences and obligations, and thus it is part of how people navigate the landscape. The emphasis on experiences and agency in people’s lives indicates that a key process is the gauging of others. What is true for the relationships with non-human entities is also true for everyday interactions between villagers. You relate to and chose 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 all the time and choose to engage differently with others depending on their ability to curb influences and craft their position.

## Village affairs

This thesis aims to shift the study of politics from its focus on state and Buddhism<sup>51</sup> by exploring the temporalities, practices and discourses about

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<sup>51</sup> This theme is dealt with at length in the section “Contributions and limitations” below.

leadership in one specific place. In this perspective, village government and village affairs (*ywahmu*, or *ywayay*) are two distinct things. While government is about the formal institutions and policies ruling a village tract, village affairs is about collective undertakings. I approach the local political institutions (village headman, elders, patrons, bigmen, head of a ten houses cluster) in terms of leadership and contexts in which personalities, achievements and the upholding of village affairs reflect local understandings of authority and history. This viewpoint allows to explore the political landscape beyond the state while making sense of the historical transformation of the local polity.

Village government has its own history in Myinmilaung tract, as we will see in chapters 4 and 5. Today, it is represented by the headman, the tract clerk, the ten-houses' 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 Administrator, “are the anchor of the GAD’s<sup>52</sup> vertical role in public administration, and they effectively act as an extension of the GAD’s Township administrator who supervises them” (Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Arnold 2014: 34). Technically, Ko Kyaw was not even a government employee, as he received a subsidy, not a salary, of about 100USD a month from the Ministry of Home affairs through the GAD. Ko Kyaw was also 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*.<sup>53</sup> He took office in 2013 but was elected in 2012 by the ten-houses' 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 just people known for being helpful in Gawgyi. But they are the pool of persons from which a candidate for headship can be usually found (chapter 2). Typically, villages in the dry zone of Myanmar also have a varying number of elders, also called *yatmiyathpa*, literally, “parents of a common dwelling

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<sup>52</sup> 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.

<sup>53</sup> Notably the Village-tract Land Management Committee. For a study of this committee, cf. Boutry et al. (2017: 250).

place". They can also be labelled 'village spokesperson' because they are (supposed to be) recognised for their knowledge and balanced judgement. They *can* speak for the village because they are knowledgeable about it. And one of them is chosen by the headman to be the official elder for administrative purpose. When Ko Kyaw was headman, the official elder was U Htay, a previous headman respected for his honesty and loyalty. After the 2016 headman selection in Gawgyi, U Maung, another bigman and master of ceremony, became the official elder.

To some degree, village affairs became important because village government became violent and untrustworthy. Today, these affairs include the making of ceremonies, the organisation of water supply and electricity grid, the maintenance of roads, the expansion of the village, the relation with monks, with NGOs, the treatment of the sick and dead bodies for instance. To some extent, there always were 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 5) – 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 toward the managing of local affairs influenced how people understood worthiness and, as a consequence, in how they will 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. Villages affairs were nothing new, but its transformation as a space of engagement in relation to state violence and corruption was a novelty.

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 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. But it bonds villages or exclude them. The collective or cohesive dimension should not be taken for granted<sup>54</sup> 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 toward others, is the backdrop against which patron-client politics and charismatic leadership can be explored in terms of uncertain engagements.

By focusing on one place in particular and by exploring its long-term history, this thesis contrasts with scholarship linking Burmese Buddhism and politics. It anchors politics in the way a local landscape has been fashioned through time as a meaningful network of personalities, stakes and memories. It is thus distinct from the reinterpretations of Buddhist teachings and the moral framework that enable political actions thanks to a shared “moral universe” (Walton 2017),<sup>55</sup> and from the scholarship about the ways in which the Burmese Buddhist worldview is actualised and transformed through lay, religious, or state-orchestrated movements.<sup>56</sup> My perspective thus puts the emphasis on local forms of sociality rather than on Buddhist visions of morality. Hence the use of Burmese words instead of Pali idioms. It also contrasts with the ‘grey literature’ about leadership and politics in Myanmar.<sup>57</sup> The latter for instance divides villagers between groups<sup>58</sup> to understand

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<sup>54</sup> There is a large body of scholarship deconstructing the village as a cohesive space. Cf. 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 volume of journal *Sojourn* (1989, vol. 4, n° 1, “Peasants and Cities, Cities and Peasants: Rethinking Southeast Asian Models”) and the research note by Ruiter and Schulte Nordholt (1989).

<sup>55</sup> Walton defines Burmese Buddhist’s moral universe as the shared belief that the world is a place governed by particular moral rules allowing to reinterpret historical and political changes following a logic of cause and effect that remains an important lens through which Buddhist in Myanmar make sense of politics. This concept of moral universe allows to challenge the narrative of the disappearance of a totalizing cosmology through the colonial encounter and the shift from traditional to modern Burmese Buddhism.

<sup>56</sup> Cf., among other works, Braun (2013), Gravers (2012), Houtman (1999), Jordt (2007) and Schober (1996, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> An interesting example of the ‘governance’ approach is the report by UNDP Myanmar (2015).

<sup>58</sup> Sometimes divided between core, secondary, tertiary leaders, VERP or Village Elders and Respected Person, cf. Kempel and Myanmar Development Research (2012), Pursch et al. (2017), Kempel and Aung Tun (2016) and Kyed et al. (2016).

local conceptions of authority and forms of local accountability. These distinctions are useful to map out power relations from a transverse outlook. Another perspective is to look at villages as social spaces with their narratives of settlement, rules for cohabitation, and family histories for instance. A more holistic approach enables an understanding of what local politics means in a place. It shows that, in Gawgyi, the forms of accountability emerged in relation with state practices and articulate the question of the worth of people with their engagement in village affairs. This local unfolding of politics is also related to a wider process recently described by McCarthy (2018)<sup>59</sup> as the development of an ‘authoritarian welfare capitalism’ in government-controlled areas. While the junta outsourced state redistributive functions to provincial elites since the post-socialist era, ideals and practices of private redistribution (charitable donations and work for other) became the means to achieve social equity. In contrast and complement with this approach, this thesis shows how the development of an ideology of self-reliance is rooted in an experience of state violence which produced distrust toward officials, the military and associated cronies, and led to the upkeep of village affairs by locals themselves. And so, the ‘informal redistributive institutions’ appear as forms of local leadership intelligible to locals but resisting state formalisation – ‘informality’ then connoting a distance from the state but not completely capturing how people make sense of this form of leadership.

One sign of this dynamic is the role of the *lugyi*, or bigmen, who make the village a collective by upholding local ethics in different arenas. In this light, the headman then appears as a sort of broker buffering officials demands while keeping villagers at a distance with the state. In Gawgyi, the *lugyi* are U Htay, U Maung and U Lin. Each one has a particular role and are entrusted to take care of local affairs. U Htay, the Worthy, is the one resolving conflicts, the one people seek advice from, the one needed when NGOs come to the village. In short, he is described as being beyond partisan politics. He embodied a moral rupture with a previous headman and gradually distanced himself from government positions after having been headman from 2006 to 2011 and official elder from 2013 to 2016. U Maung was in charge of the national election committee for the village tract in 2015 and he is regularly “master of ceremony” (*beiktheikhsaya*), as during pre-wedding

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<sup>59</sup> McCarthy thesis is not yet published so I paraphrase his main arguments and so any error is mine.

ceremonies when he embodies village morality through his speeches and the conduct of rituals. Finally, U Lin is the teacher of Gawgyi school and assumes the role of “head of bachelors” (*lubyogaung* or *kalathagaung*) together with a woman, Daw Mya who is the “leader of virgin girls”<sup>60</sup> (*apyogaung*). Their duty is mostly to organise socio-religious events such as weddings, Pagoda festival or Buddhist donations. They help activate kin networks of the donors, manage village common properties, and organise the completion of tasks taking place within the village (buying and cooking food, calling and dispatching people, renting village’s furniture, and so forth). Nonetheless, village affairs are monopolised by men, and mostly by men with credentials. Those who can be *lugyi* descend from the main farming families, those who have invested in village leadership during the twentieth century, and even if a woman can be described as a *lugyi* within her group of extended relatives, this qualification vanished in the realm of extra-familial politics.

Village affairs is thus a concept encompassing a whole set of activities such as donations, weddings, Buddhist novitiates, funerals, schooling of children, coordinating developments projects, maintaining the village pond, village loan recovery, roads repairs, and so on. Such activities require organisation, commitment and networks. They are activities where the worth – “trustworthiness” or *thitsashihmu* – of people is evaluated. And the village bigmen are entrusted to navigate and orient village affairs as a whole. This engagement toward the collective creates legitimacy and authority according to local forms of responsibility and ethics that counter the ways government ruled the country since the second half of the twentieth century (bribes, coercion and violence, and so on). And 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 a self-reliance (*kotukotha*) ideology and the avoidance of officials as much as possible.

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<sup>60</sup> *Apyogaung* is the only gendered equivalencies of a leadership position I was able to find. This person, the only women to be in charge of some collective affairs with the school teacher, is not considered by men for taking care of village affairs. However, some women are considered *lugyi* and their opinion respected if an issue necessitates their participation.

## BEYOND THE VILLAGE HEADMAN

This section argues that understanding local politics requires looking beyond formal institutions of government and instead to focus on the transformation of leadership throughout the history of Myinmilaung tract. It first explores village headship as navigating a local landscape informed by past moral ruptures and reorganisation of hierarchies. It then discusses how politics have been understood so far in this region of Myanmar by focusing on the work of Manning Nash and his understanding of leadership in terms of prowess and clientelism and how this perspective has been used by other scholars. The relation between headship and colonialism is then problematised as a matter of accommodation of colonial rule in order to ground the study of politics in relation to the past by looking at the fashioning of the local political landscape. Finally, it describes the notion of engagement as an analytical tool capturing power relations beyond the concept of patronage and present the different forms of leadership explored in the ethnographic part of the thesis (headship, stewardship, guardianship).

### **Ko Kyaw, headman of Myinmilaung village tract**

#### **Ko Kyaw's political navigation**

The ethnographic part of this thesis is anchored in the relations I developed with Ko Kyaw. I make sense of his experience as headman as a matter of political navigation and craftsmanship. The notion of political navigation is derived from Vigh's conceptualisation of practice in terms of 'social navigation' (2009). For him,

"we organize ourselves and act in relation to the interplay of the social forces and pressures that surround us, and that social navigation designates the practice of moving within a moving environment. Due to the intersection of the multiple factors constituting it, our social environment is always emergent and unfolding, in consequence requiring of the agent the capacity to 'adapt' and 'read' 'capricious environments' (Scott 1998: 331). 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. Social navigation, in this manner, adds an extra dimension to practice as we become able to focus on the way people's movement in their social environments is constantly attuned and adjusted to the unfolding of the environment itself and the effect this has on possible positions and trajectories." (2009: 425).

In other words, people navigate the landscape and this thesis is an effort to explore the transformation of the political landscape through time by grounding the analysis in Ko Kyaw's political navigation. The navigation is coined political rather than social in order to underscore the tensions at play in relationships in terms of obligations and uncertain engagement.<sup>61</sup> Following Ko Kyaw was thus an opportunity for navigating the relations and dilemmas he encountered in day-to-day activities. Understanding the political landscape then required me to explore more deeply the history of this area through the discourses about Gawgyi and Myinmilaung foundations and the triangulation of a variety of historical sources. But the first step was to make sense of the node of relationships I encountered with Ko Kyaw.

He comes from a relatively well-established family living on 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 is known for being a helpful person as notably he collected donations for the hospitalisation of a kid 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 organise the formalisation 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

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<sup>61</sup> The notion of engagement is explored below in the section "From patronage to engagement".

people got around the law in order to transfer rights. He also had to officialise land agreements, to set up loan schemes, to deal with NGOs, to organise 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 advantages of his position, depending on who is talking about him. Meanwhile, he became married and a father, implying a change in residency while opening a debate on transmission of inheritance. He also distanced himself from the local monk due to the latter’s repeated demands for more donations. Eventually, he hosted me, acting as a gatekeeper and caretaker. Finally, in 2016, he organised the headman selection in which he found an exit from headship. And from that moment onward, he gradually reduced his involvement in village affairs.

His experience as headman was as much a matter of one-upmanship as a burden. When he justifies why he became headman, he, like many others, says that he was pushed by his fellow villagers. Yet, he, among the pool of potential candidates, had credentials. In Myinmilaung tract, the transmission of headship stopped being hereditary since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but coming from one of the main families of farmers – who monopolised positions of power and authority in Gawgyi – means that he was selectable. He was also educated, knew people around, could deal with older and younger generations and, to a certain extent, was supported by Gawgyi’s bigmen. For Ko Kyaw, being a village headman was a matter of craftsmanship or *bricolage*. It meant negotiating obligations while abiding by local ethics, being responsible while dodging various issues 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. The tools at hand were his family reputation, his way of haranguing, smiling, being silent; of accepting, refusing and giving things; of forming, avoiding and manoeuvring factions; and also, of complying with the village bigmen 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.

In Gawgyi, authority and leadership are 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 local history. Ko Kyaw sums up this ambiguity in a peculiar way. For him “it’s only in the

mouth”: what powerful people say is doubtful and should not be taken for granted. This sentence is a critique of what (government) power is and how it operates. As a counterpoint, it suggests that authority implies *thitsashihmu*, that is aligning acts and words and showing a degree of “trustworthiness”. Ko Kyaw’s craft was thus to embody a mistrusted position in a space where trustworthiness matters. Local politics today are thus gauged through a moral scale dividing what is doubtful, on the one hand, and what is trustworthy, on the other hand. And past personalities are gauging standards in local politics. The stance and actions of previous headmen and monks shaped Ko Kyaw’s ability to craft his own authority because they participated in the transformation of the local understanding of morality, headship and collective actions along the past century.

The emphasis on propriety and morality stems from two men: U Za Nay Ya, the first head monk of Gawgyi monastery from 1910s to 1949, and U To Kaing, village headman from the mid-1920s to the early 1960s. They are, for our contemporaries, the archetypical and last men of *hpon*, that is, charismatic leaders or men of prowess, whose virtue, karma and worldly achievements justified and produced their power and authority. They were able to inspire people to emulation and embodied a renewal of propriety in the contest against colonialism. On a different note, U San, headman during the socialist era, was more of a negotiator empowered by the state to bring about socialism. Yet, his prerogatives – notably the control of land ownership – generated factionalism within the village tract. It unfolded in a period when villagers had more and more to get around the law and negotiate with officials. The tightening of the local polity on the village tract worsened when the state partially disengaged from the countryside and U Win, headman from Myinmilaung proper (1995-2006), embodied, for Gawgyi people, the figure of a corrupt man, making money out of forced labour and fake contracts. Finally, U Htay (2006-2011), brother-in-law of Ko Kyaw, is a counterpoint. His stance was to display, on the models of previous men of *hpon*, propriety and impartiality. And he gradually distanced from official positions while remaining central in the organising of Gawgyi affairs.

### Headmen of Myinmilaung tract

From Myinmilaung proper	From Gawgyi	Period
U Nyunt		1890-1900s
U Shwe		1900s-1920s
U To Kaing		1920s-1964
	U San	1964-1989
	U Mya	1989-1995
U Win		1995-2006
	U Htay	2006-2011
U Yay		2011-2013
	Ko Kyaw	2013-2016
U So		2016-

*Figure 8. The successive headman of Myinmilaung tract*

Ko Kyaw is but one headman after others. Yet, the ethnographic study of how he crafted his position allows to see that discourses about the past carry the question of morality, trust and doubt that pervades the present, on the one hand. And it also enables to see the crafting of headship as about ambivalent engagements permeating daily life and relationships such as the transmission of inheritance, the making of ceremonies and the caretaking of village affairs, on the other hand. By looking at headship as a matter of uncertain engagement, political navigation and craftsmanship, this thesis renews the anthropological study of village headship (chapter 6). The particular configuration of past dynamics in daily life is key to understanding power and authority in our context. Ko Kyaw's dilemma was to align actions and words and be trustworthy. In practical terms, his challenge was to shape the dynamics that were imposed upon him because of his position, as he did not simply represent his own authority through the institution. People's situations, positions and strategies are influenced by the way actors order the past into stories. In this respect, trustworthiness is a matter of time and examples. The last men of

*hpon*, the moral rupture at the turn of the twentieth century, the rise of village affairs are turning points. It limited Ko Kyaw in his ability to be a leader as much, if not more, than the legal definition of his rights and duties. While he was headman, the men of *hpon* had gone, the government had shown its violence, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung had been competing for decades if not centuries and village affairs were guided by the local elite. Ko Kyaw thus navigated a different political landscape than the *lugyi*, as they chose to keep away from the state and created another field of politics through village affairs. But Myinmilaung tract was not the sole arena for him and being a headman was about embodying a position people distrust while having to be trustworthy.

The political navigations of Ko Kyaw and the *lugyi* offer insights on how masculine identities become problematised through the lenses of power, obligations, responsibility, trust, and abilities for instance. However, this work partly achieved its potential in that regard (chapter 1) and do not push the reflection on gender to the maximum. This stands for a number of reasons but mostly because it took me time to realise that entering the field through male sociality was in itself a way to study gendered politics. At first, I approached it as if I should have something to say about women. For instance, as I was close with Ko Kyaw's wife and mother, I witnessed how being married completely changes the norms about social distance and restraint between men and women. Married women more easily engage petty conversation with males, they can walk at night more freely and have less pressure from their family of origin as they live within a family of orientation acknowledged collectively through the ceremony of engagement and the wedding. Males, married or not, talk, joke and navigate more easily. Unmarried people are statutory members of 'virgin groups'. Such groups are crucial in the making of village ceremonies. Once married, males are supposed to become the providers of their family livelihood and females to be in charge of the "household affairs" (*eindaung keiksa*) and to be the "guardians of wealth" (*ngwayhtein*). At Ko Kyaw's place, there was, so to speak, two houses under the same roof. As a by-product of male domination, the scope of women's authority can reach up to the level of the extended compound, as for Daw Than, the grandmother of Ko Kyaw, who was considered as a big woman, a *lugyi*, because she was knowledgeable about family affairs, because she has proven honesty and foresight and was a local patron for a few neighbours after her husband passed away. So, married women are often

considered as the “head of the household” (*eindaunguzi*) and her votes were collected during the selection of the ten-houses’ heads. But this is where it ends. None are candidates for headship or ten-houses’ head in Gawgyi. Their names almost never appear as “head of a household” on any official listing.<sup>62</sup> In the process of publicization of politics, when certain matters are dealt as collective issues, they are relegated to the background. This is one aspect of the effects of the ideology of male domination in Gawgyi and in Burmese society. Women are most often excluded from what is deemed political, with the noteworthy exception of Daw Aung San Su Kyi who is now running the country.

The qualities that constitute bigness are also gendered, and *hpon* is a case in point. Brac de la Perrière (2000) has pointed out the different discourses on the possession or not of *hpon* by women. The Burmese normative version excludes this possibility, limiting the *hpon* to a male attribute located in the right shoulder, while many people, men and women alike, report the presence of *hpon* in the latter, especially in their bun. Women can pollute men and so Ma Khin and Daw Hlaing hang their longyi and underwear on separate and lower clotheslines to prevent people from passing their heads – the purest part of the body as opposed to the feet – underneath. In addition, in the Burmese Buddhist cosmology, women are by nature inferior to men, for being a male is the utmost rebirth, and only they are initiated and become monks. This conception is also articulated with the cults of *naq* (spirit), the latter being “nothing more than men who died of violent death and whose butterfly soul was not processed normally and so persists in a disembodied form.” (1989: 92, my translation). The *naq* are wandering souls the Burmese worshipped through possession and the mediums (*naq kadaw*) are mostly women or transsexual men because their butterfly souls (*leippyā*)<sup>63</sup> are believed to be more fragile than those of men, and thus more easily replaced by the *naq* during the possession. The ideology of male domination also pervades the laws and Crouch (2016) has shown how the Burmese Buddhist law<sup>64</sup> has largely been defined by

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<sup>62</sup> A plot of land can be registered under the name of a woman, notably if she is single, divorced or a widow.

<sup>63</sup> *Leippyā* 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).

<sup>64</sup> Crouch (2016) indicates that while it derived from the *dhammathat*, Burmese Buddhist law was a construction of lawyers and judges in the colonial era and that the writings of legal practitioners

men, allowing polygyny until recently<sup>65</sup> and carrying no penalty for adultery committed by men, although women risk divorce and the loss of property. And so, as Than Tharaphi has argued (2014), the image of Burmese women like Ma Khin or Daw Hlaing as powerful agents, free in the economic sphere and enjoying high status and equal rights to men is far from the reality.

But in Gawgyi, there are other ways women do politics. For instance, they do so in the way they arrange labour groups and embody connections between families and neighbours, creating flexible and enduring bonds that work as safety nets in case of bad harvests. They perform the tasks necessary to the cycles of exchanges, such as the offering of snacks to neighbours, relatives and patrons before Gawgyi pagoda festival for instance. They are also crucial actors for the making of ceremonies as we will see in chapter 8 and a formidable audience for the monks giving speeches during many rituals. And if they are evicted from the headman selection, they are active in the micro-finance, health, school and monastery groups, even though the latter are almost always headed by a man. Women are also crucial in the politics of transmitting inheritance, and chapter 7, developing on this theme, shows how performance of masculinities are also central to family relationship. In short, the political navigation of males and females participate in what Weiner (1976, 1992) has coined the ‘cultural reproduction’ of the local society, where males dominate the hierarchy.

Before describing the historical transformation of the polity in more detail, it is necessary to focus on how Myinmilaung tract became an uncanny arena of local politics.

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operate as a definitive restatement and source of the law, rather than as a book to help lawyers or judge locate the law.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. the Monogamy Law No. 54/2015

## 'Myinmilaung'

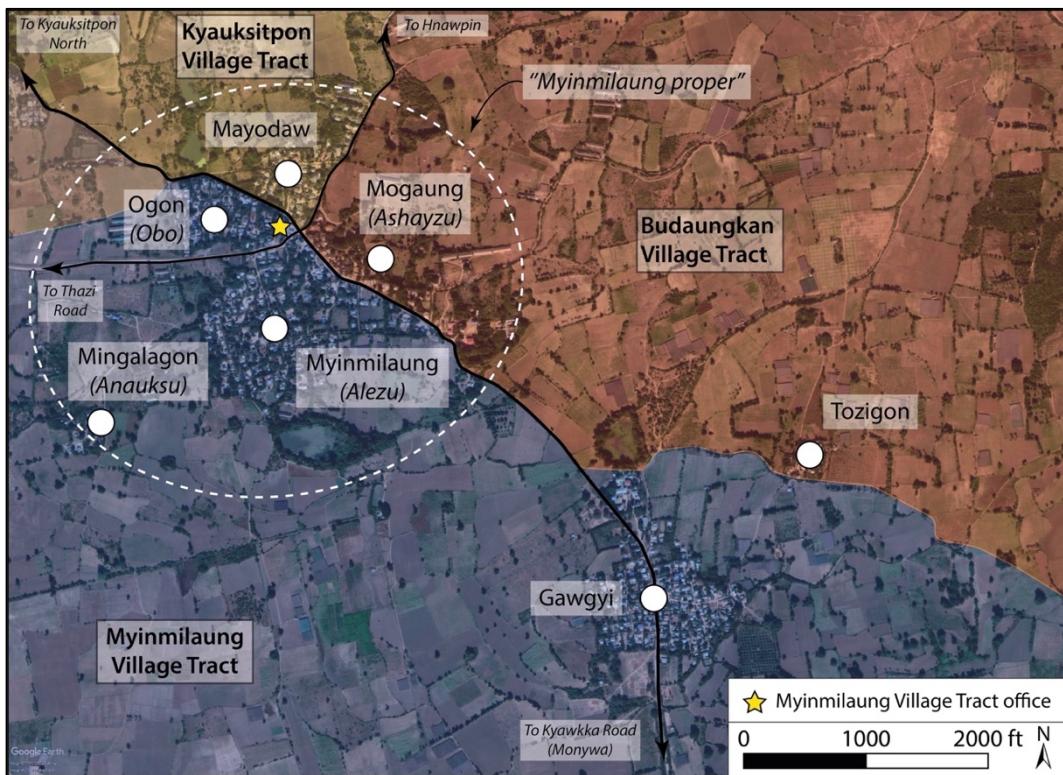


Figure 9. Map of the village tracts (with villages' old names).

What needs to be borne in mind is that Myinmilaung is a scalable political space and a historical artefact. One of the plots running throughout the historical part of this thesis 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 has been used as the name of the village tract after a *coup de force* from a man called U Nyunt who took advantage of the colonial operations in the late 1880s to create for himself a jurisdiction while composing with unsteady centres of power (chapters 3 and 4). 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 recognised as a governmental jurisdiction. The name in itself is a transformation of *Myinmalaug*, meaning "not enough horses", and draw from a foundation narrative where the royalty and the locality intersected in the middle of the eighteenth century. The narratives of 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, i.e. Myinmilaung village tract. 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, most probably following the regimental affiliation at play in the region. The map above shows the different names of the villages. There was the “West Corp” (Anauksu,<sup>66</sup> now Mingalagon), the “East Corp” (Ashayzu, now Mogaung), and the “Middle Corp” (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 Corp” (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 Corp” was progressively known as the “Auspicious Hill” (Mingalagon), taking the name given by a royal astrologer passing by for itself. The other two villages that split with the “Middle Corp” were also renamed. The “East Corp” became Mogaung, the “Good Rains” and affiliated with a different village tract. In the early years of colonisation, the northwest village known as Obo was renamed Ogon,<sup>67</sup> “the brick hill”. A fifth village, today called Mayodaw, was also created in the north most probably in the late 1910s and also affiliated in a different tract. The villagers from these villages generally explain the splits as the fruits of tensions between bigmen 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 to organise ceremonies. In short, the evolution of Myinmilaung proper is as much about a common origin as factionalism and subsequent splits.

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<sup>66</sup> The word “su” (sometimes pronounce “zu”) refers to the idea of a compound and in this case to a corp of servicemen.

<sup>67</sup> Because bricks (“o”) were made out of the soil from which piling residues formed a hill.

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 since Myinmilaung village tract was created under U Nyunt. From that moment onward, the evolution of headship is linked to the competition between these two imagined communities. There is no clear-cut event that people recall for explaining why they do not like each other. They just “do not get along” and football matches, pagoda festivals and headman selection 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 alliance (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 it through stories of misconduct displaying Myinmilaung people as corrupt or amoral. And the latter jokes about Gawgyi showcase of propriety. Tracing back the genealogy of this relation through oral history was sensitive as I was affiliated with Gawgyi.

The relative opposition between these two ensembles sometimes reduced the potential for factionalism – or segmentation – within each settlement. For instance, during the last headman selection of the headman in 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-eighteen century onward, thus allows one to explore how this opposition is expressed in terms of competing vision 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 relate to precolonial dynamics and transformed following who embodied it in a wider context of socio-political change during the twentieth century.

## Selections

I choose to use the word ‘selection’ instead of ‘election’ to qualify the process of choosing a headman. It highlights that handpicking, electing and justifying are both processes of selection across particular settings and, as described above, I tried to contextualise the stakes and the condition of selection for each headman.

When Ko Kyaw was selected headman in 2012, it was, according to him,<sup>68</sup> the first ‘democratic’ election in the tract. Each ten-houses’ head had one vote and Ko Kyaw gathered fourteen, Myinmilaung candidate’s thirteen, Ogon’s two and Mingalagon’s also two. In other words, the relative population of villages, and the ability to compound votes, were the primary elements of this competition. As we will see in chapter 2 on the 2016 selection, there is a variety of stakes (one-upmanship, brokerage with officials, containing factionalism, displaying bigness) and people (competitors, elders, clerk, ten-houses’ leaders, township officials) associated with headman selection. Because of the particularly state-like quality to the office of headship, it has typically been more in the interests of the state to have the institution than the local population. This is why the headman is imbued with particular powers of brokerage. It is important also to note that headship is not a position that everybody seeks out. On the contrary, many people in Gawgyi for instance avoid being enlisted. Yet, many are not even credited as potential candidates by those organising the selection. Nonetheless, most villagers want to have the headman coming from their village. It could attract loans, NGOs, development funds for electricity, water and roads. It could also smooth the processes for securing land rights and agricultural supports 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 derby between Myinmilaung proper and Gawgyi.

Prior to 2012, and 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)<sup>69</sup> or elected by elders upon consensus. Sometimes, following precolonial practices, heredity was prevalent, the office was

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<sup>68</sup> ‘Democratic’ elections of headmen were held in the 1960s, cf. chapter 5.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Thaunghmung (2003: 308).

for life and thought of as a family duty. But, as in precolonial times, competition for office was paramount, and patronage and factionalism the main political dynamics. Often selections were justified *a posteriori*, emphasising the achievement of this or that person, his charisma, his natural authority. But 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 fast. In other words, there never was one rule of selection but only peculiar cases. And such cases depended on the history of the place, the balance of power, the personalities involved, the control of land, labour and taxation and the 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 those succession is difficult, as shifts of headmen often reflect tensions in Myinmilaung tract, as for instance when U Win the Infamous was replaced by U Htay the Worthy in 2006. And even if the 2016 case could be coined an ‘election’, because all of the ten house heads had a vote, the actual emergence of these heads and potential candidates were controlled by village bigmen to some extent (chapter 2). Thus, 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 the processes involved in choosing a headman in our case.

## **Debating local politics**

Studying village headship in central Myanmar from a particular case enables to locate and challenge the debates on the conceptions of power and authority, on the transforming of land relations and of local history. In these debates, headmen are described variously as usurpers of precolonial (hereditary) chiefs, as servants of a foreign state, as buffers against state demands, as charismatic patrons anchored in a local, as corrupt officials, and as political entrepreneurs. Some of these debates are historical in that they pertain to peculiar moments in the history of the region such as the colonial period. Others are about the nature of local politics in general but, nonetheless, they also relate to temporalities and contexts. One example is that of the thorough ethnography of village life in the dry zone by Manning Nash (1965).

## Uses of Nash's work

“There is the sense of attachment to a victorious leader, a man who can get things done, who can build a clientele who will share with him and enjoy with him the fruits of power. The idea of aligning with a powerful, successful leader is old and continuous in Burma's past and much more operative in the shaping of political events, at any level of social organization, than is the recent and alien ideology of government by law and rule by majority.” (Nash 1965: 275).

Concerning local politics, Nash's argument is to say that Burmese people have a political system based on charismatic leadership and so, party politics, which he witnessed during fieldwork, was bound to enter the realm of patron-client relationships. To do so, he combined an individual quality, called *hpon* and 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. But having done fieldwork in a place where there were no more men of *hpon* and where headmen were navigating uncertain political spaces, I argue that this rationalisation of leadership blurs the more moral aspects of politics due to the ahistorical nature of this quality and its use as a retrospective justification. The force of Nash's conception is that it provided an anthropological ground to the study of clientelism and patronage. The historical part of this thesis, however, shows that local contexts, ethical shifts and temporalities of change need to be considered to fully capture the transformation of the local polity. For instance, the rise of village affairs and the worth of the village bigmen are better understood in relation to the historical context of state violence and disengagement from the countryside than in terms of individual quality, even if the idea of achievements still plays a large part in people's bigness.

Nash did his fieldwork in two villages located around Mandalay, the last capital of the last kings, in 1960-61, that is during the parliamentarian period (1960-62) after the military caretaker government (1958-60), the insurgencies (mid 1940s-late 1950s), independence (1948), and the Japanese invasion (1942-45). Nash highlighted the ambiguities attached to village headship by linking it to the local

conceptions about government and administration. Government is traditionally put in the class of “natural, unforeseeable, and uncontrollable disasters” or the Fifth Evils together with water, fire, thieves and enemies.<sup>70</sup> Administration is however seen as a “necessary burden” and the headman is a mix of both. For Nash, “any concrete headman is a feature of historical and social circumstance.” (*ibid.*: 75). In his successive fieldworks in Nondwin in the drylands and in Yadaw in a rice-growing environment, he distinguishes two political organisations. First, in Nondwin the headman was not a man of power. He was merely an administrator that inherited his position from his father-in-law while being elected following a ‘democratic’ procedure by all household heads whose involvement in maintain village fences and payment of taxes to the headman marked their belonging to the political community (*ibid.*: 74). There was, however, a man of power, U Sein Ko, who kept a certain cohesion in the village and remained undisputed. Officials and political parties dealt with the village through him. In Yadaw, located nearby Mandalay, the situation was rather different. The contested local implementation of the land redistribution program in the wake of independence had created a context of disputes and factionalism alongside competing claims for ownership. But no one could claim leadership in the same way than a previous headman in charge prior to the Japanese invasion of 1942. In the late 1950s, there was no clear-cut man of power and “the election for headman turn on party membership, vote canvassing, and direct intervention by political agents from the cities and the capital.” (*ibid.*: 276). In short, in one case a leader was responsible for a whole village in which the headman was but an official with no authority. In the other, the loss of a legitimate leader combined with a complex history of successive settlements and competition for land ownership drove headship control into faction politics.

Nash describes power relations throughout the nexus of three concepts: *hpon* (Nash transcribed as *pon*), *awza* and *gon*. His analysis oscillates between reifying the idea of power as inhabited in individuals and power as relational, flowing between people and situations.

“The village Burman has a trinity of concepts about power, and these ideas are key to understanding the political organization of villages in

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<sup>70</sup> For an elaboration of this view, cf. Maung Maung Gyi (1983: 154-155) and Spiro (1997).

Upper Burma. Three concepts pon, gon and awza [sic] define relations of power, influence, and authority among villagers. Pon, in its secular meaning, is the power to carry out plans, to bend others to one's will, to move destiny to one's advantage. Awza is the authority to command. Officials have awza, but this authority rests in law and must be backed by the coercive apparatus of the police and the courts. The awza of a man with pon stems from his personal powers, his marked and conspicuous abilities to succeed in this world. The notion of gon is akin to the English idea of virtue. It connotes a sterling personal character, special religious learning or piety, or even the trait of impartiality in dispute. Pon and awza are the power dimensions of social relations; gon is the moral content." (*ibid.*: 76).

For Nash, *hpon* is the key concept. Defined as "power or glory" (*ibid.*: 52), it is a quality located in a person. Nash provides a list of six qualities indicating the amount of *hpon* found in a man's "demeanour": industry, alertness, mercy, patience, judgment and perspective (*ibid.*: 77). Nowadays, villagers hardly use *hpon* to describe a leader, and even less for a headman. This quality seems to be left for monks – called *hpongyi* or "great glory", who by definition represent *hpon* as they are able to live a more-than-human life and embody and sustain Buddha's teachings. Thus, *hpon* also relates to spiritual qualities and social skills deriving from a certain ethic of Buddhism acting as a benchmark to value people behaviours. Individually, a person's *hpon* eventually rests on his *kan*, the concretion of one's past deeds and misdeeds carried throughout countless lives. For Nash, the quantity of *hpon* is defined in everyday interactions and perceived through achievements and successes or any signs of good or bad fortune. It is a sort of force carrying a person who should, in return, foster it. *Hpon* is thus a matter of personal achievement and social inference. It is a person's skills and others' recognition of such skills determine the possession of *hpon*. It is an individual quality revealed across social inference related to a local ethic and in tune with Buddhist precepts.

What Nash describes in the early 1960s fits very well the scholarship of the late twentieth century on power, authority and sovereignty 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 pre-colonial 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 *hpòn* in our case. ‘Men of prowess’ needed to earn such a status during their lifetimes. The transmission of authority was then problematic as it was attached to the person, not the position. The polities that came into being around ‘men of prowess’ were thus highly personalised, very fragile and based on patron-client ties.

Lieberman, a leading historian of the pre-colonial 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 explain the rise and fall of dynasties between 1580 and 1760.

“The greater the military conquest, wealth, and religious benefactions of a king, the more credible his claim to religious veneration in general and to Embryo Buddhahood in particular. In contemporary parlance, a king’s *hpòn* [sic] (charismatic glory, innate power), *let-yòn* (force, especially military force) and *a-na* (domination, authority) were proportional to the maturity of his Perfection and to his accumulation of good *kamma*. [...]. Insofar as the state was synonymous with the ruler, rebellion could be justified by the doctrine of *kamma*: by definition, a successful usurper had more *kamma*, hence was more entitled to religious respect, than his victim. As one never knew his kammatic destiny, rebels were tempted by dreams and portents to launch attacks and trust to fate. While such challenges were most likely to afflict newly ascended kings, established sovereigns were also vulnerable if (as in the 1590s, 1661, or 1752) major catastrophes suggested that they were possessed of little *hpòn* (a reflexion of poor *kamma*) and were neglecting *dhamma*. [sic]” (Lieberman 1984: 75, referring to Nash 1965: 79).

And Lieberman describes Alaunghpaya, founder of the Konbaung dynasty, as a man who “was able to satisfy the popular yearning for a man of great *hpòn* [sic],

to crush opposition by force of arms, and thus to reorganize the population under a more tightly unified patronage structure.” (Lieberman 1984: 229). The *hpon* described by Nash in the 1960s was part of the self-legitimation rhetoric of kings and an essential ingredient to the making of personal obligations and ties that gave form to the divine kingship (or galactic polity) in Burma. 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 can be seen as being part of the ‘longue durée’ of patron-client relations in Southeast Asia.

In addition of being used to support the history of kingship dynamics, Nash work also served the study of patron-client politics in Burma/Myanmar. Such studies gained much momentum in anthropology, sociology and political science in the 1960s-70s as they allowed to depart from the analyse of politics through the concepts of class, ethnicity and religion and to focus on ‘informal’ or ‘*ad hoc*’ groupings. In the words of J.C. 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).<sup>71</sup> 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 system of patronage have lost their moral force during the colonial period. Concerning Burma in particular, Scott used Nash’s description of Yadaw and Nondwin political dynamics to support the view that “(w)here one local landowner or traditional leader had once dominated he now faced competitors” (Scott 1972a: 107) as the factionalism and fight for headship shows in Nondwin; and that “directly ruled lowland areas tended to develop factional competition among different patrons, while less directly ruled areas

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<sup>71</sup> The studies of ‘patron-client’, ‘dyadic contract’, ‘personal network’, ‘clientelism’, ‘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 though to be applicable) in any country at various scales; cf. Schmidt et al. (1977).

(especially highland areas<sup>72</sup>) more frequently retained some unity behind a single patron who remained their broker with the outside world.” (*ibid.*: 107, note 47).

The aim of this thesis is not to reveal broad political structures but to explore the transformation of leadership in one specific area. To look at local politics in a long-term perspective requires to look beyond charismatic leadership or patron-client relations and the figure of village headship offers an entry to analyse continuities and ruptures.

### **Were there any headmen before the headmen?**

The question at stake now is, if colonisation broke down the precolonial figures of authority, then what were they, and did the creation of village headship had a role in this? Scott’s point was to say that traditional authorities were patrons, buffers of state demands, who depended more on the local organisation of force and access to office as the sinews of their leadership than upon hereditary status or land ownership. Thant Myint-U (2001) and Mya Sein (1973) put forward another argument. For them, the creation of village headship during the ‘pacification campaign’ of Upper Burma in the late 1880s had a major impact on local politics. It did nothing less than cut off the previous hereditary gentry from their prerogatives:

“[...] the gentry class [...] governed the countryside under varying degrees of royal direction. Often titled and granted sumptuary privileges, these men served as intermediaries between the distant Court [...] and the thousands of villages and hamlets scattered across the lowlands. And yet British policy-makers, rather than attempting to co-opt their services into the next regime, deliberately shunted them aside. Myothugyi quickly lost their dominant position. What had been a complex hierarchy of local hereditary offices dissolved into a sea of undifferentiated and salaried village headmanships.” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 4–5).

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<sup>72</sup> Nash does not specify this point, and it should be noted that both Nondwin and Yadaw were in the lowland. Yet, the point on the type of land and cultivation remained valid.

Taylor, a leading scholar on state making in Burma/Myanmar, also reflects these views. For him,

“The headmen were no longer the natural leader of their communities, able to defend their client interests against a rapacious state, but the salaried tax-collector of that state providing the funds for the policies, police and court [...]. Bribery and corruption, the new name of clientage aspect of local administration, now became a major administrative ‘problem’ for the state, as well as an additional burden upon peasantry.”  
(Taylor 2009: 87-91).

There are two problems here, both related to the same question: who are the headmen? The belief that colonialism invented headship out of the blue, irrespectively of what pre-existed, explain the discourse about the colonial rupture. However, as has been demonstrated by Berry (1993) for many African societies, the case for colonial invention has often overstated colonial power and its ability to manipulate institutions to establish hegemony. None of these institutions were easily fabricated and colonial dependence on them often limited its power as much as facilitating it according to Spear (2003). In our case, village headship was first imagined by Crosthwaite, Chief Commissioner of Burma from 1887 to 1890, as a traditional institution, “the only form of organic life which Burman society exhibits.”<sup>73</sup> Discourses about headmen then display a degree of continuity between the precolonial and the colonial organisation of local powers. It created the narrative that there used to be headmen but since the colonisation headmen are of a different type. As Donnison, a colonial officer and historian, put it, “in the villages, matters remained much as ever before” and headmen acted like they always did (1953: 34-35). This leads us to the second problem, namely, that there is no clear picture of precolonial forms of power and sovereignty. Donnison, writing on the ‘pacification campaign’, is again evocative:

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<sup>73</sup> This extract is taken from the British Library archive file L/PJ/6/216. *A Regulation to Provide for the Establishment of a Village System in Upper Burma* (hereafter REVSUB). This file contains meeting minutes, the regulation and telegraphs of correspondences. This particular extract refers to a letter dated 8 September 1887 and written by Smeaton, Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner Croswaite who imposed the village system (cf. Interlude).

“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.” (*ibid.*: 23).

Challenging the legitimacy of the colonial co-optation of an indigenous ‘village system’, Mya Sein (1973) draws a picture of the late pre-colonial period where the township hereditary chiefs (*myothugyi*) were the real rulers of the countryside. For her, “[t]ownships were often divided into smaller units known as the village or hamlet, under the Ywa-ok or Ywa-gaung [sic] appointed by the Myothugyi. Sometimes the village acquired a certain amount of independence and the head (then usually known as Ywathugyi) would receive an appointment order from the crown.” (1973: 44). Another issue is to understand the ambiguous disparities between localities. Lieberman notably shows that “township leaders [were] often known as *myo-thu-gyi*, whereas their subordinates, depending on departmental affiliation and local tradition, might be *pyei-zòs*, *ywa-thu-gyis*, *myìn-zìs*, *kyei-gaings*, *tàw-kès*, *myei-daings*, *kalans* [sic], and so on.” (Lieberman 1984: 93, note 92). In addition, the royalty attempted to impose a state-centred administration on top of regional fragmented sovereignties and segmented the society by dividing the bulk of the population between commoners (*athi*) and servicemen (*ahmudan*), both liable of different obligations to the crown and local authorities. Yet, this segmentation was not as sharp as proclaimed by the state. And people could change their status by moving away, shifting their affiliation from one authority to another. Overall, there was nothing as such as a system of village headmen at the time the British conquered Upper Burma in 1886.

Thus, the question of the nature of precolonial authority is misleading because it assumes, but does not prove, that there was a shift in how power was exercised due to the colonisation, the transition from a system of chiefs and fragmented sovereignties competing for manpower and wealth to a territorialised system of headmen. Nonetheless, village headmen, first called *thugyi*, “the great”, were used as the liminal, and thought of as the traditional, figure of power in the countryside.

And thus, village headship embodied a contradiction between the old, the traditional, office-based and personal authority; and the new, the colonial, the territorialised jurisdiction. Village headship is, since the beginning, an ambiguous figure of power.

### The fashioning of the 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. This idea stems from my encounter with Ko Kyaw and the difficulties to make sense of his practice of headship. Being a headman was a move for one-upmanship, but his role was beyond a mere brokerage of government authority as his ability of ‘administrating’ Myinmilaung tract was constrained by past personalities and ethical shifts. The rise of the *lugyi* as caretaker of village affairs was certainly a rupture. Besides, Ko Kyaw became headman because of his credentials, but also because of the hierarchical relations in Gawgyi. And they had transformed. In addition, the tension between heredity and ability runs deep in the history of Burmese politics and so any understanding of leadership should take into account the realm of family inheritance and the succession of generations. In short, studying the fashioning of the local political landscape equalled to explore the past of a polity from an understanding of its present.

To make sense of these continuities and shifts, we need to explore the long-term history of the local polity and analyse the creation and transformation of headship in a specific area. From that standpoint, and concerning Myinmilaung tract, it appears that the *ad hoc* introduction of headmanship was but another episode of competition for offices and traffic in affiliations that characterised the precolonial polity. The political dynamics in central Burma prior to the colonisation were marked by pulls and pushes of a centre-oriented but centrifugally fragmenting polity similar<sup>74</sup> to those analysed by Tambiah (1973, 1976) in his seminal work on galactic polity.<sup>75</sup> The precolonial Burmese state formed of pulsating polity with a

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<sup>74</sup> Lehman (1981, 1984, 1987) concurred with Tambiah and saw the precolonial period in Burma as an example of galactic polity.

<sup>75</sup> Tambiah (1973) was reprinted in 2013.

cosmological centre embodied by a king surrounded by satellite principalities (known as *taik* and *myo*) replicating the centre and tied to the king through patron-client relationships and oaths of allegiance.<sup>76</sup> The political order in precolonial Burma was also called “patrimonial” (Lieberman 1984: 86),<sup>77</sup> or “patrimonial-bureaucratic” (Koenig 1990: 99),<sup>78</sup> that is “based on a personal, traditional authority with obedience to the person rather than the office.” (Koenig 1990: 99). The king was the patron of patrons, the chief of chiefs. And even if heredity was a strong claim for office, it was not enough. There was no “powerful ascriptive element” justifying once and for all a leader, even for the king (Lieberman 1984: 83). And if the patron-client bonds virtually linked all authorities together, they also shifted continuously, hence the pulsating metaphor. The kingdom was a vast assemblage “of quasi-sovereign entities whose rulers were bound to the High King by personal and ceremonial obligations” (*ibid.*: 38) but because “each might metamorphose into the other (...) ambitious regional leaders were constantly tempted to accumulate sufficient strength to effect the transformation” (*ibid.*: 46).

In our case, Myinmilaung and Gawgyi settled in Badon/Alon, a principality gradually incorporated within the kingdom and which eventually became a key pool of recruitment of soldiers. Myinmilaung’s founding narrative connects the rise of a new king, Alaunghpaya (1752-1760), with the fall of Badon/Alon chief, known as *Bahtukyweh*, who was then turned into a sovereign spirit (*naq*). Myinmilaung founders posit themselves as retainers of that local sovereign when he fled from Alaunghpaya while the latter appointed new authorities in this area. In other words, the founding of Myinmilaung happened in period when dynastic cycles intersect,<sup>79</sup> when the hierarchy, “continually subject to the dynamics of pulsation and changing spheres of influence” (Tambiah 2013: 511), is transforming.

From that period onward Myinmilaung settlement divided following regimental and lineage links and affiliated with the neighbouring authorities depending on the balance of power, pre-existing territories and access to land and loans. So did Gawgyi which was created during a great famine in the 1810s, most probably resulting from the continuous demands for corvée, soldiers and taxes by

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<sup>76</sup> On the conceptions of Burmese kingship, cf. Aung-Thwin (1981, 1983, 1985a, 1990), Candier (2007), Lehman (1981, 1984, 1987), Gravers (1993), Koenig (1990), and Lieberman (1984, 1991).

<sup>77</sup> Lieberman used Weber’s classification (1968: 1042-1044).

<sup>78</sup> Koenig used Blake’s typology (1979).

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Lieberman (1984).

king Bodawhpaya (who previously received Badon in appanage). The history of these settlements then shows how the countryside is a constantly changing polity where fragmented authorities competed for office and the associated control of manpower and wealth. If hereditary offices were the main form of authority ruling the backcountry, as opposed to the officials appointed by the crown, factionalism and shifting affiliations were the main processes. There was an assemblage of authorities constantly in the making using various resources (heredity, patronage, money lending, revenue collection and land control) to consolidate their position. Thus, those authorities were a mix of hereditary chiefs, local patrons and rising leaders. And when the British decided to annex Upper Burma, Alon and the Lower Chindwin plain were already a hotbed of rebellion against the crown and its officials after King Mindon (1853–1878) tried to curb local authorities by centralising his administration and increasing revenue at the expense of the gentry.

So, when British military officers like F.D. Raikes, Deputy Commissioner of the Central Division in Alon, ‘pacified’ the countryside and appointed intermediaries,<sup>80</sup> it was another episode of competition for office and shifting affiliations. In our case, it was an opportunity for a local leader to build for himself a jurisdiction: Myinmilaung village tract. As Scott puts it, “access to colonial office replaced to some extent victory in the previously more fluid local power contests as the criterion for local patronage.” (Scott 1972a: 101). In the same vein, the subsequent recording of land rights to create a system of land revenue was a means to challenge pre-existing forms of ownership by locals. And some gentry families resorted to loans, mortgages and tenancy to maintain their hold on the countryside.

The colonial ‘village system’ was performative in the sense that it centred local politics on the village level. The jurisdictions were territorialised, wealth gradually stemmed from land taxation instead of dues and duties, but the local power contests followed precolonial lines. On the one hand, headship was invented to have a ruling class that was legible to the system of government that colonialism imagined. But on the other hand, headship swept into the ongoing competition for power in the countryside. And the merging of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi within a single village tract resulted from this shift in the local political landscape.

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. The British Library archive file MSS Eur B391. *Campaign diary of Captain Frederick Duncan Raikes* (1886-1887), hereafter referred to as *Raikes Papers*, relating to the pacification of Upper Burma following the Third Burmese War.

Since advent of colonisation, it became more in the interest of the state to have headmen than for the villagers.<sup>81</sup> The stance, or style, of the successive headmen of Myinmilaung tract was thus related to how governments empowered them in a certain extent. But it also relates to how villagers reacted to what they see as decline in morals or plain corruption. Along the twentieth century, headmen were generally described following a menu of options, as usurpers of precolonial chiefs, as servants of a foreign state, as buffers against state demands, as charismatic patrons anchored in a local, as corrupt officials, and as political entrepreneurs. In our case, headship is closely related to factionalism between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung proper as it became one of the loci of their competition. In addition, the styles of the successive headmen and the way they succeed one another mixes supralocal and local politics and is thus one angle from which to analyse the history of this place.

The first headman was U Nyunt (late 1880s-1900s) from Myinmilaung proper who built for himself a village tract. Officially, all villages of the tract were collectively responsible for any infraction and U Nyunt derived his wealth from the collection of capitation and land taxes for the Township government of Monywa. Nobody knew him directly and although U Nyunt is depicted as a strong personality, he is described by Myinmilaung elders as a ‘bad’ ruler. Besides, he had a gun and people apparently had no choice but to obey his order. They mention that he had *ana*, meaning that he was backed by an external force,<sup>82</sup> the state, and impose decision through coercion. He could fine people, he tied up drunk men during pagoda festivals for instance and could even sentence temporary jailing. Interestingly, his son, U Shwe, came to office after his death (1900s-1920s). The hereditary transmission of offices was justified following a local theory of habitus in which what a man handles, his children should *know how* to handle. Yet, Gawgyi people do not even remember U Shwe, and they do not share that theory of habitus when applied to Myinmilaung. The one headman they know is his successor, or rather challenger, U To Kaing, seen as one of the last men of *hpon*.

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<sup>81</sup> This subsection is an overview of the historical chapters 4 and 5 in which sources are documented and problematised.

<sup>82</sup> Spiro (1997) has attempted to expand Nash’s conceptualisation by focusing on *ana*, which he translated by power and used it to describe the relationships between township offices and village headmen.

The coming of U To Kaing makes sense in a broader context of rural protest against colonialism and moral reform in the first decades of the twentieth century. As Turner (2014) has shown, lack of respect toward elders, drinking alcohol, frequentation of opium shops and billiards parlours, excessive gambling, consumption of beef, all were evidences of decay. It is in this period that a monastery was built in Gawgyi with an influential monk, U Za Nay Ya, involved in moralising in lay affairs. He, and not U Shwe the headman, was consulted by Gawgyi villagers for cases of divorces and apparently even for land disputes. The apparent decline of headmen's authority was, for the British, one of the signs of contestation, along with the politicisation of local associations against taxes. The rural protest is associated with the idea that headmen were merely the 'maid of all work' for the government in contrast with precolonial authorities. It seems that U To Kaing took over U Shwe as he embodied a focus of moral upholding and was active in lay associations. Besides, born in Gawgyi but married and living in Myinmilaung proper, he is seen as the one who could hold together both factions. U To Kaing remained headman during the economic crisis of 1930<sup>83</sup> and the local unfolding of independence politics in the 1930s, the Japanese invasion and rule (1942-45) followed by a political maelstrom (from 1946-48) and the ensuing civil war – when the U Nu government attempted to secure rural support through a land reform – until the military 'caretaker government' restored order (1958-60) and eventually seized power by force (1962). In other words, he remained the local authority during a period of political change. His bigness stems from this achievement and current villagers express it by referring to his personality: a man of charisma, of *hpon*, whose order were respected. But he is also described as a man of virtue who participated, and at times led, the moral reformation of villagers. Nonetheless, he used political changes and the growing push toward an agrarian reform to rearranged land ownership in favour of some farming families in the village tract.

The next headman, U San, was a man from Gawgyi who was nominated in 1964 by the military to implement the socialist policies developed after Ne Win's coup. While U San became the operator of the compulsory procurement of harvests and the head of the land committee empowered to organise a 'land to the tiller'

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<sup>83</sup> See Brown (2005, 2013) for how the economic depression hit Myanmar at large.

policy, U Than from Myinmilaung proper became head of the tract cooperative. In the following two decades, factionalism between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi and patronage by Gawgyi's main farming families were the mechanisms through which socialism operated. The latitude to negotiate depended on connections, on the bureaucratic functioning and, for the farmers, on the stance of the headman, the relations developed with him, his ability to 'forum shop' between institutions and the power balance in the tract. U San and U Than were either described as fine negotiators buffering state demands for crops and delivery of consumables or as corrupt men who took advantage of the system and fuelled the black market. By the mid-1980s, the authoritarian functioning of the bureaucracy and the failure of the economic reforms worsened the conditions of life for villagers. Making a living was more and more about finding trade-offs with village authorities to get around the law. The institutionalisation of socialism through local men made Myinmilaung tract a more tightened polity because villagers depended more on arrangements with these persons for their living.

U San was replaced by U Mya, also from Gawgyi, in 1989 after the bloodshed of 1988 once the military government, renamed SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council 1989-1997), reasserted its hold over the region of Monywa. U Mya came from a large family of farmers and was already a member of the previous People's Council of Myinmilaung village tract. The villagers remember his time as a moment when the headman had to maintain order by any means necessary. The military was disengaging from the organisation of local affairs and economy. In addition, the degradation of economic conditions stiffened the complex hierarchy and dependency relations between farmers and daily workers. While the government partially withdrew from the agricultural chain, village elites were able to accumulate more wealth. In this context of disengagement of the state a new headman emerged in 1995. This man is U Win, from Myinmilaung proper, and he is described as an infamous person. How and why he became headman is uncertain. Forced labour for the construction of dams and roads started to be used at a larger scale after he took office, and people's movements were increasingly controlled. A general sentiment in Gawgyi is that this man embodied corruption: a greedy and immoral official who worked for a militarised government which relied on violence and pushed people to cheat. Under U Win, the villagers of Myinmilaung tract experienced a new kind of state violence. Stories of people being beaten, women

abused, and pagoda relics and treasures stolen by soldiers spread across the whole township. In Myinmilaung tract, he is notably linked with multiple land disputes and cases of embezzlement.

U Win was succeeded in 2006 by U Htay from Gawgyi and the shift from the former to the latter crystallised a rupture in local politics. The violence of the state and its partial disconnection from Gawgyi farmers has resulted in the disengagement of village leaders from official positions in favour of engagement in village affairs along the lines of previous men of power (the last men of *hpon*). U Htay is described as a counterpoint from U Win and embodied a notion of trustworthiness based on earlier model of propriety. During this transition, the organisation of Gawgyi affairs has been monopolised by the villagers, drawing from a more traditional form of collective sociality called *luhmuyay* and an ideology of independence (render in the expression *kotukotha*, “rising by and defining oneself”). The idea of trustworthiness become represented to and lodged in subjects through the influence of this exemplary person.<sup>84</sup> U Htay did not create a new political order all by himself but has contributed to a larger movement that saw village affairs becoming the form of Gawgyi politics. And this is when the *lugyi* came to represent a new kind of authority in Gawgyi. U Htay maintain involvement in Gawgyi affairs after deciding not to be candidate for the 2011’s round of selection following the announcement of a democratic transition under Thein Sein’s government. This selection was chaotic, and it underscores the crisis and moral rupture brought about by the change from U Win to U Htay. U Yin from Ogon became headman, but only for one year. In 2012, a new selection round was organised which saw the coming of Ko Kyaw as headman of Myinmilaung tract. Ko Kyaw was selected thanks to his personal credentials, his reputation and affiliation with Gawgyi bigmen at a specific juncture of local and national politics. The state was apparently changing radically its stance toward democratisation and the moral rupture in Myinmilaung leadership was over.

The ethnographic focus on Ko Kyaw’s time as headman provides an entry point to make sense of this particular configuration of personalities, ethical shifts and transformation of the local polity. The fact that there were no more men of *hpon*

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<sup>84</sup> This perspective refers to the literature on politics and morality and notably to Humphrey (1997) and Robbins (2015).

indicated that a change occurred in how people conceptualise the politics of the past versus the present. Any reading of current practice of leadership in terms of patron clients would not have yielded the same result than a focus on how people engage with one another. And the next section presents this conceptual transition.

### **From patronage to engagement**

Clientelism, factionalism and patronage are loose systems of affiliation that help explain shifts in local politics. But the flesh of actual relationships remained blurred and I found patronage too vague a concept for an ethnographic description of day-to-day power relations. The same stands true for the concept of *hpon* as an individual quality and merit making as a way to enhance one's standing. Yet, both ideas have partly structured how leadership and hierarchy were produced in this part of the country: Nash proposed a secularist perspective while Schober (1989), after Lehman (1984), offered a version attuned with Buddhist conceptions. Yet, in an everyday perspective, the vocabulary of help, of good and bad behaviours, of family obligations, of hierarchy, and of collective affairs is central and the evaluation of peers in daily encounters shows how local ethics is produced and frame politics.

The perspective adopted in the ethnographic parts of this thesis is to look at how people craft their position, how family leadership is conceived and how the worth of people is evaluated in relation to village affairs. And these political fields are analysed by exploring how people engage with one another. Before presenting the conceptions and practices of leadership as processes, the following section discusses the limits of the concept of *hpon*.

### **Limits of the concept of *hpon***

When I arrived in Gawgyi, there were no more men of *hpon*. But the functioning of patronage that stems from this concept deserves close attention to better anchor my analysis in terms of engagement. 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 into a person and inferred by his or her peers. My perspective is, however, to study leadership and authority as processes articulating past dilemmas and current stakes. Nash's approach is secularist in the sense that he shows that a person's power is more closely linked to his performances, achievements and their recognition by peers throughout life than to Buddhist cosmology. A person's *hpon* is function of one's engagement with others in daily life through trials, failures and successes. Nash deduces from this that a man of *hpon* does not build an organisation, but a clientele:

“The presence of *pon* [sic] cannot be institutionalized. It always is the possession or attribute of a concrete, living person. When he loses it, it is gone, when he dies, it dies. In the political sphere a man of *pon* does not build an organization: he builds a clientele. The power structure of Nondwin is a series of dyadic, interpersonal relationship having its center in U Sein Ko. His clientele shares in part his success; they bask in the aura of his *pon*.” (*ibid.*: 79)

To this, two elements must be added. First, 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. But these transactions are negotiated, challenged, accepted, requested or refused and potentially create social and moral obligations. Second, one person's responsibilities and obligations toward another is at the heart of the patron-client relationship. For instance, if we conceive that the *lugyi* are *lugyi* because they take charge of village affairs, then the question becomes: can the worth of the *lugyi* result from clientelist relationships? This is the path Nash has taken and it can be quite relevant to understand the local political arena. But we saw that their worth is rather linked to how they make the realm of village affairs a space of commitment during a specific moment in village history. Thus, clientelism could partially explain what keeps people together in Gawgyi. On the one hand, a recognised man of power may keep people together through dyadic relationships, on the other hand, power is said to be consensual, with the authority of people rarely rising beyond their nuclear family (Nash 1965: 58). Nash ruled out the possibility that taking charge of village

affairs can be a form of engagement used to evaluate people and thus produce their worth. For him, it is only the man of power who makes a collective hold (*ibid.*: 85).

In local conceptions, the ideal type of a 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.<sup>85</sup> Gifts – in the form of care, presents, donations – to these benefactors are acknowledgement of an obligation to be grateful. This kind of hierarchical relationship pervades many other domains of social life and has been described as what could be called 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 legitimise Burmese presence in frontiers areas and articulate their interactions with locals of different cultures. Schober clearly articulated the relations between transactions, obligations and hierarchy:

“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. They 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. On the other hand, 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 kindness, obligations must be repaid. On account of the dependency thus created, the recipient comes under the influence and power of his benefactor whom he owes gratitude (kyei:

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Graeber (2007) for a distinction between debt and obligation.

zu: shin) [sic] and in whose dominion of power he now exists.” (Schober 1989: 105).

The relation between a person and his benefactor is clearly hierarchical and stems from Buddhist cosmology. From this standpoint, Schober expands Lehman 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: 122-123).

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’. And this typical situation is found in the most celebrated donation ceremony called the *shinbyu*, the boys' initiation ceremony to monkhood. In short, the Burmese Buddhist gift is a case of how giving obliges and creates hierarchy.

But a close analysis of how a *shinbyu* is made, how it is organised, 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 8). Gifts oblige to a certain extent, but they are also negotiated. And most importantly, the making of

ceremonies needs a collective organisation to happen. It is therefore necessary to describe these practices 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 formalised transactions between people (money, merit, food), they also take place in specific 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.

Thus, neither the secularist version of *hpon*, nor its articulation with merit are adequate to study day-to-day politics in an open-ended perspective because they convey an idea of socio-political structures from which time and contingency are virtually absent. They crystallise meanings but obscure actual processes.<sup>86</sup> Our perspective is different as it focuses on one place in particular.

### **Engagement and leadership as process**

To account for those tensions, I chose to see people’s interactions as forms of engagement, ridden with ambiguity and uncertainty, and “contained between the poles of violence and friendship.” (Naepels 1998b: 328, my translation). To put it simply, there are differences 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 where people have to craft their position. Family is for instance a group where relations between parents and children are quite straightforward. As the

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<sup>86</sup> Schober has since expanded the scope of her research and notably considers the transformation of Burmese Buddhism since the colonial encounter and throughout the succession of political regimes (2011).

transmission of inheritance shows (chapter 7), what makes a family (hierarchy, blood, commensality, gratitude, care) and the mutual obligations between its members create entitlement to property. And yet, for one of the children, who usually receive more, it also means tacking upon oneself parental patrimony and liabilities. The temporality of family relations is then crisscrossed with uncertainty 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 where people adjust their position.

One can say the same for Ko Kyaw in his quality of village headman. This position for him meant navigating social and moral obligations while abiding by local ethics, being responsible for a whole tract while dodging situations where 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 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 monk and previous headmen, complied with the village bigmen and was careful not to cross the lines 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.

This is where the anthropology of uncertainty joins the anthropology of morality. To reflect the tensions at play in relationships I see them as *engagements*. Thévenot has renewed the notion of engagement by moving away from its meaning in the sense of a will to change things. At the sociological level, engagement

“[...] emphasises a dependency with the world that the person cares about and seeks to secure benefits from by having the appropriate guarantees [or gages]. In this, 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 is about turning dependency into power.” (Thévenot 2007: 238, my translation).

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), of obliging somebody (sort of potlatch) and it can be most of those 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. 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 a something (a length, a weight, a stake) through a scale (to gauge) and acting upon that evaluation. It highlights a process where someone gauges and can commit or defy. It is Exit, Voice and Loyalty in one word. 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...) marks this commitment which transform the responsibilities between the persons. Engaging in this or that kind of relation thus creates obligations between the person and the gist of that relationship is materialised in what circulates between them (help, services, money, patrimony, protection...) and how it is qualified. Putting 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 the debates about gift-giving, about the value of people and of what circulates.

The question now becomes how people in Gawgyi engage with their parents, friends, partners, family (of blood, in-laws), workers, employers, ritual exchange partners, government officials? And, at a larger level, does engagement toward the village has a collective makes sense, and how is leadership conceived today? To answer these questions, the ethnographic chapters explore the conceptions and practices of leadership through the crafting of headship by Ko Kyaw (chapter 6), the transmission of land within families (chapter 7) and the caretaking of village affairs (chapter 8).

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 dealt with the local understanding of worthiness. The question of

leadership is then expanded to family relationships through the issue of transmitting inheritance. The latter appears as a process of redefining authority and responsibility over things, and obligations between people. Within the realm of family relations, authority is conceived as a process of stewardship (*okchokhmu*): taking care of a patrimony and of the persons attached to it. It appears that the field of family relations was a matrix for thinking about rightful filiation (continuity) and by extension about leadership. 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 politics in the Burmese context.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the idea of ‘taking charge of’ as a form of authority related to personal abilities and mutual obligations between ‘parents’ and ‘children’ to some extent pervades other conceptions and practices of leadership. And this idea echoes 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 okhteinmu*). In other words, exploring Ko Kyaw crafting headship as a process ridden by uncertain engagements allows to transform the question of transmission of property within families into a study of family leadership conceived as stewardship which, in turns, enables to qualify the leadership of Gawgyi bigmen in the political field of village affairs as a matter of guardianship.

The question of the worth of the bigmen deserves further consideration. At one level, what keeps people together in Gawgyi is a sense of shared blood, that is the existence of several cores, or lineages, called *amyo-yo*, and a sense of difference with other villages, notably Myinmilaung proper. In that sense, Gawgyi is not a “mixed” (*yaw*) village. At another level, what bonds people is the upholding of local ethics. Those ethics, often described as timeless, are nonetheless a produce of history. For instance, the self-reliance ideology, the fact that people took care of their own affairs since few decades, is related to how the government engaged with villagers. But local ethics also insist on family responsibilities and obligations, the code of morals for making a good marriage as explained during premarital (or engagement) ceremonies, or the need to help for donations and weddings for

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<sup>87</sup> Koenig (1990) has been the most explicit about the linkages between leadership and heredity present in numerous texts concerned with the Burmese Buddhist law.

instance. To some extent, a sense of morality (a ground to trust and distrust) pervades most forms of transactions between people from mutual help to repair houses to how sharecropping is organised. However, engagement toward the collective is not straightforward. The challenge is to make it happen, to organise ceremonies, the delivery of water, the extension of the village, the building and maintenance of roads, the selection of candidates for village headship and so on. As stated above, a few people are entrusted to organise and orient the village collective. And their worth stems from their engagement toward village affairs to some extent. But it is never assured and has to be reaffirmed all the time.

Thus, by analysing the moments where the worth of the *lugyi* is produced (chapter 8) it is possible to see the upholding of village ethics *and* the making of authority. By making village affairs a space of engagement where the worth of the people is evaluated, the *lugyi* legitimise a political order within the village and are entrusted to do so. In this sense, the *lugyi* are worthy because they each operate a “process of generalizing” to promote a common good by taking charge of village affairs (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 7). Boltanski (2011) emphasises that ‘generalising’ is a process that tends to lower the weight of a particular justification in specific situations over a more general principle.<sup>88</sup> This process is how the *lugyi* assert a village political order in specific situations where the prevalence of individual, family, intergenerational, and clientelist relations is reduced in order to highlight a common good.

Overall, the variety of forms of leadership at play in Gawgyi are all processes: headship as craftsmanship, family and property stewardship, and village guardianship. There must be other forms. But these ones in particular are clearly articulated with past dilemmas and ways to organise the local society.

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<sup>88</sup> Boltanski (2009) emphasises that the process of generalising is about disseminating a particular justification (what we aim here in terms of engagement in village affairs) in specific situations where disputes occupy a central position.

## CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

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) even if this work is not related to one specific period and is thus open to critique on this basis. The narrative choices made through the writing, based on my will to develop a personal style, and the effacement of Burmese through transcriptions as well as the reliance on almost exclusively English sources have the potential effect of distancing the reader from the more ethnographic data and thus represent another ground for legitimate criticism (chapter 1). In addition, the thesis is not directly concerned with current debates about ethnicity, religion, state building, and resource politics nor about the democratic transition but proposes a unique contribution drawing on political anthropology and history to explore the transformation of a specific political landscape and to expand our understanding of politics in the Burmese context. Considering that the literature on Burma/Myanmar is intimately linked with its national or regional political history and on the relations between religion and politics, and that my work explicitly focuses on a small place within it and does not centre on Burmese Buddhism, I shall start by expressing the fields which my thesis does not make direct contributions to as a second limitation.

Walton has convincingly argued that a wide range of actions, from "electoral politics to civil society activities to proper moral conduct in daily social interactions" (2016: 129) are forms of political participation for many Burmese Buddhists. But this thesis intentionally takes a different angle and draws more from how politics and leadership unfold in rural society through time. Therefore, it discusses and connects works that are mostly concerned with the anthropology and history of central Burma/Myanmar and engages a close discussion with Manning Nash's old-fashioned ethnography. This thesis is not directly concerned with how the moral framework of Burmese Buddhism has been used in politics over time,<sup>89</sup> but it attempts at capturing how moral ruptures and local dynamics have shaped the

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<sup>89</sup> Cf., among other works, Braun (2013), Gravers (2012), Houtman (1999, 2000), Jordt (2007), Schober (1996, 2011) and Walton (2016).

political landscape by looking at narratives of indigeneity, forms of hierarchy and debates about worthiness, giving ‘arms and legs’ to these shifts by tracing the succession of village leaders while following local temporalities and meanings.

By looking at the fashioning of the local landscape in these terms, this thesis contrast with state-centric approaches<sup>90</sup> and offers a way to make sense of how people articulate past and present. For instance, the focus on the precolonial period shows that dynamics of affiliations, competition for leadership and fragmentation of authority were the main dynamics in the countryside and endured during the colonial period. It emphasises the ability of people to negotiate their position in society and the multiple means by which authorities competed for and strengthened their leadership. In addition, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung’s founding narratives claim specific links with the landscape and show how the fluid system of precolonial status groups (servicemen vs commoners) still pervades the political landscape in the form of differentiated entitlements to indigeneity. It enjoins seeing local legends and myths, often combining references to spirit cults, kingship and Buddhism, as historical sources and discourses about contemporary issues and challenges the understanding of ‘the gentry’ as a monolithic group and the imposition of village headship as a change in the nature of authority.<sup>91</sup> The colonial period should thus not be configured as an historical rupture and the introduction of village headmanship was not as traumatic and transformative. It did not completely destabilised traditional authority by removing traditional elites and reorganised space and land around new lines. This work suggests that the operation of traditional elites was less homogeneous than the ‘rupture’ narrative requires, and that the local conflicts around who possessed authority, its limits and operations, was a pre-existing framework onto which village headship became attached rather than was displaced by. This thesis proposes to look at the emergence of the village system as a process of accommodation of colonialism which provided the means to challenge the obligations regulating access to land and wealth and opened onto a reorganisation of local hierarchies around the ability to farm and to monopolise

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<sup>90</sup> Notably embodied by the works of Aung-Thwin (1990), Koenig (1990), Lieberman (1984), Mya Sein (1973), Taylor (2009), Thant Myint-U (2001) or Tinker (1967).

<sup>91</sup> An argument notably found in Mya Sein (1973), Iwaki (2015), Taylor (2009) and Thant Myint-U (2001) and discussed in the section “Where there any headman before the headman” in the general introduction. Concerning the gentry, Saito (1997) has also described how it gradually became a landed group in one rice-growing areas of the dry zone.

village state institutions. The fact that some leaders became exemplary figures of the moralisation of behaviours engaged in lay affairs during the contest of colonial rule marks a gradual shift in the form of authority from charismatic leadership toward worthiness and propriety. It allows us to put Nash's work in perspective and make sense of how the more recent rupture in Myinmilaung leadership furthered the connection between the *lugyi* and village affairs and the latter disconnection with headship.

Another limitation of this work is that, at times, it deals with the government as if it was a single or uniform entity. Thawnglmung has demonstrated how it could blur any understanding of legitimacy in the Burmese context and I should add that a thorough study of the multiple articulations between the layers of government, regional elites and villages would greatly enhance our comprehension of the country. In my defence, I can only say that the people I have met along the course of fieldwork quite often did not distinguish the military from more local officials for instance,<sup>92</sup> notably when expressing their grievance or talking about collusion and corruption. In addition, I might have reflected more on the role and perception of the current head of Gawgyi monastery, as it would have yielded a more detailed account of the local political arena.

Another limitation rests in the difficulty I encountered in translating my positionality into a research device concerning the issue of gendered politics. As stated in the introduction, this work partly achieved its potential in that regard as I did not fully realise that entering the field through male sociality was in itself a way to study gender. My first reflex was to approach gender as if I should have something to say about women. This stance partly relates to the current climate in academia where gender studies are almost deserted by male scholars. As for sexuality in the field, it remained in the research's black box.<sup>93</sup> I think this work is clearly yearning for being something else than this alone but I must recognise that I was not yet completely able to articulate how masculine identities are performed through the lens of power, obligation, responsibility, ability and achievement. To make the best out of this limitation, acknowledging it opens a new field for future

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<sup>92</sup> Except when talking about specific individuals.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Clair (2016).

research, for which I will reorient my understanding and analysis in relation to positionality and reflexivity and transform my research devices.

On a different level, the country has a long history of intense ethnic and armed conflicts, the Rohingya situation<sup>94</sup> being one of the most recent and dramatic examples, and so, a large body of texts has been devoted to studying ethnic politics,<sup>95</sup> more or less in relation with state building,<sup>96</sup> shifts in the military<sup>97</sup> and the political economy of resources.<sup>98</sup> The following does not draw from these debates, notably because the field site is free from major disputes (apart from the neighbouring case of Letpadaung copper mine). However, this study expands our understanding of the socialist period and the scope of politics to new fields, such as the practice of headship, family relationships, the making of ceremonies and the caretaking of village affairs, by underscoring the forms of engagement and evaluation at play in day-to-day life.

Following a village headman in his daily life allows to understand the weight of the past in current politics and to renew the anthropological debate about headship. By looking at it as a matter of uncertain engagement, political navigation and craftsmanship, this thesis argues that it is not just an intercalary position hamstrung between the state and the villagers<sup>99</sup> that gives room for manoeuvre.<sup>100</sup> My work rather shows 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 and translated into the moral dilemma of being trustworthy while taking a position that most people do not trust. Furthermore, the issue of transmitting inheritance is conspicuously missing from many discussions on wealth, debt, and gender in the current context of rapid re-commodification of land and so, this thesis attempts to address some of the gaps in recent scholarship by focusing on the role it plays in kinship, in the history of land tenure as well as in

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<sup>94</sup> Cf. Boutry (2014), Holliday (2014), Leider (2016), McCarthy and Menager (2017), de Mersan (2016), Prasse-Freeman (2017).

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Gravers (2007) for an overview.

<sup>96</sup> Taylor (2009) is a central example.

<sup>97</sup> See Callahan (2003), Seltz (2002) and Skidmore (2004) among others.

<sup>98</sup> For instance, cf. Kramer et al. (2013), McCarthy (2018), Transnational Institute (2013, 2014) and Woods (2011, 2015).

<sup>99</sup> The idea of intercalary position comes from Gluckman et al. (1949) and has been developed in Gluckman (1955, 1963). Nash (1963, 1965), Lubeigt (1975) and more recently Thawnhmung (2004) proposed a similar description of headmen's position in Burma/Myanmar.

<sup>100</sup> Kuper (1970) criticised Gluckman's idea and proposed to see headmen as individual with room for manoeuvre and empowered by colonial states with new powers.

'development' issues like debt, access to credit, and land registration.<sup>101</sup> In addition, studying transmission allows us to better understand the temporality of family relationships and how the idea of stewardship pervades the conceptions about ownership and leadership, but it fails to account for the dynamics of transmission outside farming families for instance. Finally, by arguing that village affairs became the form of Gawgyi politics where bigmen build their authority, as during the selection of the headman, the making of ceremonies and the resolution of disputes, this work offers an insight on the nature of politics that might be missed if only the formal institutions of government are studied. An ethnographic approach combined with history uncovers the fact that local politics is a matter of excluding some individuals and entrusting others (the bigmen) to 'take charge' of local affairs<sup>102</sup> while being the elite sitting at the top of a local hierarchy that has transformed during the past century. This helps explaining why 'participatory approaches', flourishing since the beginning of the democratic transition, might miss the fact that the voices – of dependents, of women, of those NGOs want to empower – are channelled, delegated and often excluded through, to and by this type of leader. The last and perhaps the most difficult limitation to overcome is related to my positionality as a man engaged mostly with other men often coming from the main families of the village. I tried to reflect other views, multiply interviews, use these limitations as methodological devices, but failed to some extent in translating it into a productive research device and resorted to deal with these issues at the margins in different parts of the thesis.

Many questions remain, but one eclipses the others, that is, how to link dynamics of leadership from a particular place like Gawgyi with larger politics, as Nash did by showing how party politics were imbued with patron-client relationships? A next step would be exploring politics within Monywa region at large, but it already exceeds the scope of the present study.

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<sup>101</sup> Cf. Andersen (2015), Faxon (2017), McCarthy (2018), Oberndorf (2012), Srinivas Shivakumar and U Saw Hlaing (2015), Su Phyo Win, (2017), and Willis (2014) among others.

<sup>102</sup> In Gawgyi, it was notably because they exemplify propriety through their engagement toward the collective, but in many other places, such as in Myinmilaung proper or many villages of the Ayeyarwady delta, such engagement did not occur at all.

## OUTLINE

This thesis shows how village headship became an ambiguous position of power through an ethnographic and historical engagement with a village of central Myanmar. It departs on a journey through history leading to the ethnographic present. The intention is 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 the end of the thesis, I hope to have shown that local politics is not seen simply 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.

The above has introduced the reader to the scene of fieldwork and the specificities of the research area. Two points emerged from debating the literature on village headship, power and authority. First, historical dynamics of headship reflect political changes to some degrees (in terms of personalities, patronage, and morality). Second, looking beyond village headship means focusing on a large array of relationships. To that end, I moved the focus from patronage to engagement, the latter understood as how people craft their relationships in day to day life.

The first chapter (*On reflexivity and methods*) outlines the details of my methodological stance in order to anchor the reader in the process that produces the thesis. It provides an account of my entry into the village, including a discussion about the transformation of my position from an INGO intern to a ‘son’ of the village. While engaging with positionality and the relations between ethnographic and historical methods, it describes how I came to focus on headship and leadership, on village affairs, and on how people engage with one another.

Chapter 2 (*The 2016 selection*) is an ethnographic opening on the threads running through the thesis. It describes two crucial days in the selection of the village headman of Myinmilaung tract in 2016 from Gawgyi perspective. It is a description of a specific situation that anchors the study of the local polity through history and ethnography by showing the intertwining of competition, hierarchy, worth, obligations and engagement. The rest of the thesis is divided between historical chapters (3 to 5) and ethnographical ones (6 to 8) following a chronological order for clarity purpose. The history explores the fashioning of the

local political landscape and the ethnography extends the study to the current forms of leadership.

Chapter 3 (*Traffic in affiliations, 1750s-1880s*) first traces the precolonial history of the fieldwork area from the time of the creation of the villages in the mid-eighteenth century to the verge of their integration under a village tract during the early colonial period in the late nineteenth century. It investigates the shifts in political affiliations that governed this part of the kingdom and the role of land tenure, money lending and Buddhism in the making of local authorities prior to the direct annexation by the British (1885). By narrowing the scope on the villages and exploring their narratives of foundation and local legends as sources and claims condensing historical references, this chapter shows how the divide between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung is framed in terms of competing narratives of indigeneity (autochthony versus genuine allochthony). This chapter relates to major works on Burma precolonial politics but contrast with their state-centric approaches and avoid reifying ‘the gentry’ as a monolithic group to challenge the understanding of the imposition of village headship as a change in the nature authority.

This chapter is followed by an interlude (*The emergence of village headship, 1880s-1890s*) thought as an incursion within the making of a colonial policy. It describes the context of warfare during the ‘pacification campaign’ (1886-89) to then explores the *ad hoc* appointments of headmen in our area of study and focuses on the content of the ‘village system’ – a cheap bureaucratisation of the countryside based on villagers’ joint responsibility under a headman acting as a police officer and revenue collector – as it centred local politics at the village level.

Chapter 4 (*The last men of hpon, 1890s-1950s*) examines the colonial encounter and the fashioning of Myinmilaung tract and headship from its inception until the socialist insurgency (1946-56), using the succession of headmen as reflecting changes in the political landscape. It explores the worth of two leaders by connecting oral memories with political and cultural history and illustrates how they became exemplary figures of the moralisation of behaviours and engagement in people’s affairs during a moral rupture when villagers reimagined their role as Buddhist and challenged colonial rule. This perspective allows us to rethink Nash’s concepts by showing the relations between past and present contexts with the evaluation of the worth of leaders and enables to see this period as a phase of reorganisation of political authority along new lines where large farming families

became the new local elites and where colonial devices enabled to challenge the social obligations that allowed access to wealth and land.

Chapter 5 (*The rise of village affairs, 1960s-2010s*) explores the transformations of the local polity from the early years of the socialist period (1962 onward) to the democratic opening of the early 2010s to locate how village affairs became the form of *Gawgyi* politics. It describes how the socialisation of society reinforced the control on peasants and opened in an age of distrust while the main farming families kept monopolising village leadership. The failure and the authoritarianism of the successive regimes resulted in the worsening of living conditions that ultimately led to the 1988 uprising, a rupture which had its own temporality in Myinmilaung tract and a more moral dimension in relation to corruption, collusion, forced labour and violence. The rupture was embodied by the shift from an Infamous headman to a Worthy one at the turn of the twenty-first century and 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 grounds, and for a group of men – the *lugyi* – to give consistence to village affairs as a fragile political order.

Chapter 6 (*Crafting village headship*) describes a day in the life of Ko Kyaw when he was headman. It follows him through different parts of that day and highlights how setting up a family was a matter of negotiating obligations and investing in kinship, how creating a small faction with an online game eased the handling of some affairs and helped in dodging potential obligations by shortcircuiting hospitality rules and how he is not just a mere embodiment of the state. Being a headman for him meant navigating multiple socio-political spaces, from a ceremony to a land sale and the farm field, being an official, an employer, a relative, a patron or a husband, in situations where obligations and memories affect how he engaged with others. Ko Kyaw's craft was to be at the junction between past and present dynamics and this perspective allows see headship beyond its classical understanding as an intercalary position constrained by bureaucratic and village demands and with room for manoeuvre, but as a process of crafting the dynamics that are put upon a person due to his position.

Chapter 7 (*Transmitting land*) then 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 redefining due to the overlapping of generations, claims and obligations. Transmission thus 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 Burmese context.

Chapter 8 (*Guarding village affairs*) investigates what makes the worth of the village bigmen. It draws on the understanding of leadership as craftsmanship and stewardship and link the rise of village affairs as the form of Gawgyi politics to the question of the worth of the *lugyi*. The chapter describes three *lugyi* 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, the *lugyi* legitimise a political order within the village. It argues 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 *lugyi*. Finally, the concluding chapter provides a summary of the findings and implications of the thesis.

## CHAPTER 1. ON REFLEXIVITY AND METHODS

The heart of this thesis stems from the relationship I developed with Ko Kyaw from 2013 onward. The understanding of the local political landscape this work attempts to make is strongly entangled with this relationship. I arrived at a specific moment in Gawgyi and Myinmilaung tract history and entered networks of persons and knowledge to a large extent through this encounter. It does not mean that I was looking over his shoulder to collect data but rather that almost all the lines of enquiry I explore have their origins in a particular situation. The curiosity for the kind of authority displayed by the village bigmen in contrast with the headman, the reconceptualization of ownership on Burmese terms, the reconstruction of local history since precolonial times; all these fields of research find their roots in a peculiar configuration of interests, personalities and contexts. Ko Kyaw's voice thus informs a lot of the data collected and I tried to organise my data following the main dilemmas he and others expressed while balancing their points of view with those of others.

Another person was key: Manning Nash, an anthropologist now deceased who wrote one the most extensive monographies about rural life in Myanmar. I took his book as a guide and as something to challenge. My first interests for land and governance were counterbalanced by a blunt wish for not to study 'religion' or spirituality as I thought – wrongly – that most of the anthropologists I knew<sup>103</sup> were already working on it in some way or another. I came across all the categories once typified in ethnographic monographies (religion, political system, economy, and so forth) but found myself more intrigued by how ethical dilemmas and incertitude are key in understanding contemporary politics. I had a strong inclination to bring in a glimpse at politics from angles overlooked in Myanmar where political studies, notably in relations to the 'military dictatorship', the 'democratic transition' and the 'rule of law', to 'Buddhism' and more recently to the 'Rohingya crisis', represent a large part of the work published.<sup>104</sup> Thus, this work attempts to show how local

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<sup>103</sup> Among others: Boutry, Brac de la Perrière, Kumada, Lehman, Nash, Schober, Spiro, Robinne and Rozenberg.

<sup>104</sup> Among the growing scholarship on Myanmar politics, I refer here to a few works: Cheesman (2015), Cheesman et al. (2013), Egretteau and Robinne (2016), Fink (2009), Gravers and Ytzen (2014), Jones (2014), Kyaw Yin Hlaing et al. (2005), Leider (2016), Lintner (1994), Pedersen et

politics can be explored in the day-to-day, in how people think of and frame their own affairs, in how male leadership is concerned with issues of worth and in how the family is also a political arena when seen in terms of dilemmas, responsibilities and obligations.

One of the main difficulties was to make history and ethnography talk to each other. It resulted in the fact that this thesis has two voices, one more historic, the other more ethnographic. Harmonising that divide impacted the use of sources and data and I had, for instance, to make choices about the use of Burmese language. I attempted to limit the divide once I became able to articulate how the understanding of local politics I gathered while living in the village could orient the historical analysis. The link between past and present is captured in the idea of the local political landscape, defined in introduction as a network of past and present personalities, hierarchies, stakes and memories fashioned through time and meaningful in current politics. This idea of the local political landscape is large, inclusive and flexible enough to study the relation between history and ethnography through 1) the changes in how time was experienced and how people embodied rupture and continuities; 2) the relations between myth and history and the influence of contemporary stakes in the enunciation of historical narratives; and 3) the sedimentation of layer upon layer of history in a ‘longue durée’ perspective.

This chapter addresses these challenges by describing how I accessed the field-site and became a person (first section), the plurality of research operations (second section), some of the limitation of my work and how I partly overcame them (third section), and finally by explaining how I connect anthropology and history (fourth section).

## **ARRIVING AS AN INTERN, LIVING AS A GUEST, LEAVING AS A SON**

I first arrived in Gawgyi on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 2013. As a master student and an intern for the French INGO called GRET, my work consisted in researching land issues in Myanmar. I had to choose between Dry Zone or the Ayeyarwady Delta.

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*al.*(2000), Prasse-Freeman (2014, 2015), Seltz *et al.* (2002), Simpson *et al.* (2018), Skidmore (2005), Skidmore and Wilson (2007, 2008), and Steinberg (1981, 2010, 2015).

The heat of the Dry Zone was more appealing than humidity. In the city of Monywa, the staff of the INGO helped me to get authorisations from the Township Immigration Department on a weekly basis in order to visit the villages<sup>105</sup> where development projects were under way. As soon as I arrived in Monywa I started travelling to villages whenever it was agreed that a member of the farming development project's team could take me on a trip. Most of the time, the people welcomed me as a guest and were ready for focus group discussions. It took me several weeks to undo the effects of this kind of interaction which ultimately ended when I chose to do an intensive research in a few villages rather than an extensive in many. That village was Gawgyi because its headman, Ko Kyaw, became a friend and, later, an older brother. I first arrived there on a Thursday in the month of October 2013, at the rear of the motorbike of a field agent, driving side by side with the INGO officer in charge of Monywa Township. I now know this road by heart, having looked at all the details I could grasp alongside the way, the storefronts, the renowned teashops, the betel stalls, the concrete and wooden houses, the recently refurbished monasteries, the slow progress of the city eating the countryside. And then come gradually the changing farm fields.

We did not have to scramble on the tiny path of Gawgyi to meet him. He was, with few other men, at the new water station located right in the middle of the village, on the main south-north way, past the betel shop. I first performed a typical self-presentation and, pretending to be serious, checked the water pumping system and the tank providing water to all the houses at once, asking about the depth of wells, underground water levels, pumping capacities...as if I knew technical issues. As an INGO member and apprentice ethnographer, I often thought I ought to investigate tiny details that we might call 'technical'. It gives vocabulary and show interest in what people do, may it be in the oil of an engine or the mud of a farm field. For instance, understanding the basic engineering of the water system helped me to get an idea on how villagers mitigated water scarcity during recent history. More, it provided clues on how village affairs are dealt with. In short, to construct this water system they had to be on the target list of several NGOs, collect money from villagers (fees and donations), organise a lottery, activate networks of external

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<sup>105</sup> These villages were Hnawpin North, Hnawpin South, Inte, Ayadaw, Kyawka, Thazi, Ywadon, Budaungkan, Kyawispion, Booba, Minzu, Zeehpyubin, Salingyi, Nyuangpinthar, Kothan, Hledar and Aungchanthar either located within Monywa, Yinmabin and Budalin townships.

donors, and set up a committee administrating water delivery and money collection. ‘They’ were the local big men, or *lugyi*, who assembled efforts, knowledge, money and donations. In other words, investigating the water system ultimately enabled to question power relationships, what responsibility is made of, how it is perceived, and how collective affairs are performed. Yet, nothing was such when I first looked at the pump with a green eye while they started the engine to show me how it works.

For about half an hour we watched and talked about the pumping system. Eventually, we were invited for tea, coffee and snacks – basic elements of hospitality – in two houses before reaching the headman’s place. To reach it, we first turned eastward at the crossroad that marks the middle of Gawgyi. This road leads to the eastern entry of the village, the *mingala pauk* or auspicious gate. By entering Gawgyi on the recent main road in the south, we in fact arrived through the *amingala* entrance via which deceased bodies exit the village boundaries for burial after three days of mourning. When I heard of it, I thought it was a mistake to enter the village through this gate, but it was not a problem for flows of auspices are relevant in certain situations, as when people died, but it did not concern daily journeys. Finally, we engage in one of those tiny tracks going up and down the east road to reach the place where the headman is used to welcome visitors. I later found out that it was not his own place, but rather his grandmother’s, Daw Than, and that Ko Kyaw at times accommodated guests there to keep face as his house was messier and of a lower standing. Daw Than is an old widow respected as a *lugyi* by her extended family who lives, for the most part, within the same compound.<sup>106</sup>

The living area is delimited by fences made of trees, spiky bushes, cactus, wooden barriers and an old gate, blasts of the times when villages were surrounded by fences against ‘bandits’ – in British archives, they call them ‘dacoits’ – and cattle thieves. Standing at the gate, one can see the houses grouped in two ensembles, one on each side of the path continuing the track southward. This compound is actually inhabited by the descendants of a couple whose two sons settled on each side of the compound. And, within the last three generations, most of the sons settled here with their wives, building new houses or taking over their parents’ place. The sedimentation of history is part of the landscape.

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<sup>106</sup> In their study on kinship and demography, Nash and Nash (1963) already insisted on the idea that gathering relatives was a sign of bigness.

Our arrival triggered a redeployment of bodies around the table at Daw Than's house. All the women, except Daw Than, stood at once to give their place on the benches. While fetching new plates filled with snacks, they bowed their heads when passing in front of me. Even grown men, uncles of Ko Kyaw, insisted that we take their seats. The formality of seat attribution varies greatly from one context to another. Sometimes people emphasise the honour to welcome a guest, some other times the matter is trivial. The familiarity with hosts, the context of a meeting, the organising of space according to auspices are basic elements for understanding hospitality. The field agent was familiar with Gawgyi. He helped placing us around the table. I was a visitor of an unusual kind: a white, foreign, English-like male who also happens to be an INGO representative and a researcher. Finally, we sat in front of Daw Than and her visiting son, the Township officer next to me, accompanied by Ko Kyaw and some of his uncles, while Daw Than's daughter sat on a chair and the field agent on another.

The movement of bodies around tables when newcomers arrive shows, in my case, that people made sense of my presence as an honourable guest. The very reason of my presence was not very important at first. In the Buddhist cosmology, welcoming people is ultimately a meritorious act. Feeding them is even better. It connects to an ideology of donation. However, treating people as guests sets a scene that enables one to decide how to deal with the person, as host or guest. Who is coming? Where do they sit? How fast do they sit on this or that side of the table? How modest is this person? Is he feigning modesty? What kind of language does he use? What does he actually do, want? And the same goes backward. Who are those people? Where shall I seat? Shall I be quick, and show that I master the codes, or wait a bit longer, and display forbearance? Am I feigning modesty? Why no one is moving for me? These are retrospective questions. During that very moment, I just followed what people told me to do and tried to perform as well as possible the gestures and words deemed respectful before asking any questions.

As we were starting to map out the family tree of the people living in the compound on a large sheet of paper, my interlocutors asked me to occupy the place left vacant by Daw Than who went for a rest. "The light is better here," they argued. I sensed a growing degree of familiarity between us and an effort to satiate my curiosity. We moved from genealogy and village history toward inheritance (*amway*). Here is a glimpse at the notes I took during this encounter:

*Inheritance:*

*They say “equal share of land allocation by parents to sons and daughters after dying” = oral agreement for this transfer (“in the past”) and now contract with the authority person (AP) on paper. AP can be the eldest brother, an uncle, the widow of the former AP, i.e. no rule in the sense of kinship but this person must be a part of the family (i.e. family compound? Family staying in the village?) otherwise it’s not possible.*

*Why an uncle? He can be influent in the family, it’s him if he is “fair and square”, trustworthy.*

*When does the AP is chosen? It is not clear. It seems that it is the person with the most authority who will influence the other member of the family. Then what are the boundaries of a family? Criteria: to be a relative and to have authority, i.e. a knowledge and influence proved through time, combining a knowledge of family matters as well as an ability to make decision to orient the group. Not chosen by vote, they say it is “natural”. It is generally a man but can also be a woman too, depending on personality and intra-family history. Father/uncle/elder brother: it can be contentious, but they also always say there is no problem with them.*

*AP fields of competence?*

- can choose land allocation
- can choose who will take care of the parents
- ...???

From the distance, I can see now my main mistakes, reminiscences of anthropological readings (why do uncles have to represent a sort of authority? Why kinship should only be a set of rules?) and an oversized interest in land issues. “AP” or authority person was the translation the field agent kindly gave me for *eindaungizi*, which is commonly coined as head of a household. The fact that there is a name for such a position led me to think about power as if already institutionalised. And yet, there was no selection process formalised in a set of rules. This category might also be the product of decades of administration by a government trying to make reality legible in order to regulate it. Or just a tradition.

The interest of the extract lies where the questions remain unanswered and where nuances come to the forefront. When is an AP chosen? This question received no answer because there shall be no election. It is both a conjectural – for instance when the head of a household died suddenly – and a long-term decision – people prove themselves through time – shaped by malleable social norms and a cosmology favouring mostly men. I first translated that seemingly fluid way of building authority as something ‘natural’, i.e. normal for them. I now think that what is relevant are the processes: in how people reach a consensus for instance; in how local ethics are maintained in collective undertakings, in how trust is said to have changed (paper better endorsed decisions now while words were bonding ‘in the past’), in how people blow hot and cold when talking about the past.

From that first encounter onward, I became close with Ko Kyaw. Until the end of the fieldwork for the master thesis in March 2014, I came every other week with an interpreter, dividing my time with another village.<sup>107</sup>

When I came back to Gawgyi in October 2015, Ko Kyaw agreed to have me living with his family. Once the authorisation from the Immigration Department had been secured, I joined them. Ko Kyaw was now married with Ma Khin and they were living, with their daughter, in the west part of the village in the house of Ma Khin’s mother, Daw Nu. The first weeks of this second stay were full of mistakes, laughs and rice. I slowly learned what I could do, should do and cannot do. In particular, I realised that I was a guest again. Loosening this status became a sort of goal once Ko Kyaw, his wife, daughter and myself moved to settle at his parents’ place two months later. Being a guest means being at a specific distance from others, and this could be quite formalised. In some ways, you can and cannot participate at the same time. Take an evening meal at Ko Kyaw parent’s place for instance. After following Ko Kyaw in his village pilgrimages, we arrive at home around 6pm. ‘Usually’, people have their meals in turns in the kitchen. At first, I hardly got to enter this kitchen and only ate at that table after a couple of weeks. We arrived at sunset and sat in the living room on the benches circling the table. “Shall we serve the meal?” asks Ma Khin. Ko Kyaw nodded with a “sweet smile”, a smile that became his nickname in his childhood. At once, the table is washed, a

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<sup>107</sup> I choose not to describe this village (Hnawpin) further as I did most of the PhD fieldwork in Gawgyi only.

large tray filled with dishes of vegetables, eggs, peas, chili, tree leaves and bitter soup arrives, and several plates are placed around the table with the rice's pot standing in the middle. Daw Hlaing, Ko Kyaw's mother who already had dinner, watches out for any missing items. They ask me to change bench and sit on the 'better' one. Rice is served in turns and guess who has to be served first. I awkwardly try to delay my turn. Ko Kyaw serves eggs directly in my plate and apologises because the "dish is not good" tonight, meaning that there is no meat, no force-giver ingredients such as fish, chicken or pork. Tonight, like every night, I am supposed to get the best dish first, a situation I try to alter with little success so far. "Eat slowly". "Eat to fill your belly". Feeding me is their responsibility. Yet, I would like to do something, at least clearing the table. They finish their plates quite quickly, remove them and engage small talks while I painstakingly finish the rice in mine. As soon as my plate is empty, Ko Kyaw takes it from me and give it to Ma Khin. I stand up and start clearing the table but am asked to remain seated, one more time. It took me several weeks before I could help clearing the table and even more to wash my plate and yet, I always had to argue to be allowed to do so.

My dinner dramas exemplify what being a guest is like.<sup>108</sup> It is a dilemma for who wants to 'participate', as ethnographers surely do. When, dinner after dinner, someone takes your plate off your hand, what do you do? How do you make sense of it and, more personally, how do you reciprocate? If you harden up your stance, show perseverance for cleaning the plate, will this be assumed to be a 'caring' gesture, showing your desire to be treated as a normal person, or an attack, a move that transfers your ethical dilemma onto your host? Because, if I was not at ease in being a guest, they were not either when I tried to be something else. It was only with time and through a variety of situations and events where my status has become blurred that the fine lines between being a guest and being something else faded. And sometimes, when I felt close, I became a guest again.

I realised later on that the persons I was very close with treated me as a guest to avoid situations where I would become obliged. The kind of distance provided by this status was a sort of social shield. While accompanying me in the village, they taught me how to decipher the potential liabilities stemming from accepting or

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<sup>108</sup> For another aspect of the guest dilemma, cf. the essays on the forms of engagement in Appendix B.

refusing presents, food or services. It mostly depended on the relations between the persons, their personality, the stakes at hand and the ramifications of their relationships alongside past generations, kinship, service giving, griefs, accountability, debt and so on. This understanding led me to look at transfers (of things, words and services) as the way relations and hierarchies are produced but also, and mostly, negotiated. Even the most ritualised transactions which punctuate cycles of exchanges then appeared as part of a complex web of more day-to-day transfers between people. Being a guest minimised the potentiality of being obliged by putting most of the things that circulated toward me under the umbrella of hospitality to a certain extent. And thus, I started to conceptualise transfers as engagements (a pledge, a commitment and a fight) producing specific temporalities between people. In other words, the evaluation of what circulates, and the history of these exchanges became a field of research stemming from whom I became.

As I evolved into a member of one family, I was able to participate in other domains. To participate and give ‘something’, I became the football trainer of the village team composed of about fifteen boys from 14 to 27. In the meantime, I became a member of the bachelors’ group. It multiplied our encounters and showed me how they engage with elders, parents, monks, girls and peers. With them, I slowly realised that I embodied the role of a ‘teacher’ (*hsaya*), who provides knowledge and know-how. This was a direct entry into the realm of hierarchy coupled with friendship and fruitful misunderstandings, such as when, for training purpose, I bought too many balls and by doing so embarrassed the captain of the team who called me for dinner straight away (Appendix B).

Village ceremonies were another field of village life that opened up. It was easier to wash dishes and serve plates during weddings and donations than when invited as someone’s place. And this involvement in collective tasks further transformed me as a son of Gawgyi. In ceremonies, I was not a guest, but part of the collective organising the hosting. A member of the bachelor group, I had a place and tasks were assigned to me. Engaging myself toward the collective made sense. This is how I realised the difficulties of putting a collective at work, but also how dense relations between families unfold in help or defiance and how ‘common properties’ and leaders of bachelor/spinster groups were crucial to hold ceremonies. Washing dishes in a way marks an engagement toward those who organise the event, but it also shows a commitment toward the village. And this is where village

ethics come to the forefront, as well as during pre-wedding meetings, for organising water delivery, maintaining roads and so on. That level of engagement was not straightforward, and a few persons – Gawgyi bigmen – took care of upholding village ethics, making village affairs as space where the worth of people is evaluated. I met them first at the water station two years ago. I met them during INGO meetings. I followed them during the collection of water fees or during the selection of the headman. And it slowly became clear to me that engaging in collective affairs was fragile. Even if it was a reason behind the claim that Gawgyi was a ‘good’ village, these undertakings stemmed from the recent history while drawing upon older forms of sociality.

My progressive entry into a variety of groups and networks – Ko Kyaw’s family, the football team, the bachelors’ group, the bigmen – allowed me to more easily appropriate the landscape and found a place that was meaningful for the villagers and for me. Yet, it constrained my ability to research more dominated groups for instance. It is also clear that my encounters were foremostly constrained by gender politics. I was constantly with boys or men and had more intimate relations only with my friends’ wives and older women who may have been a mother or a grandmother. With others, my status as a bachelor overwhelmed my stance as a researcher. I was a potential husband. Ceremonies (Buddhist novices, weddings, pagoda festivals) were the acknowledged moments for more romantic encounters in the village, the ‘outlaw’ meetings happening outside, in the field, behind bushes when young people come back from school or work. The more I became a sort of local, the harder it became to shortcut the norms of encounters and the less I could talk to women without being teased. Even when working in the fields, it was hard to get beyond jokes to be able to acquire knowledge of how the daily workers (almost always women from twenty to forty years old) conceptualise their life and local politics. This is one of the main limitations of my work which focuses on and discusses mostly men and farmers and failed to tackle issues of sexuality for instance.<sup>109</sup> One mistake was to confine the issue of gender politics as something about ‘women’s affairs’ and to partially remain blind to the fact that I could make a contribution to the study of masculinities for instance.

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<sup>109</sup> Cf. Clair (2016).

Finally, there was also a more spiritual reason for me being there. Even if I was neither Buddhist, Christian, nor anything, me being in this village, coming back and showing commitment, were but credentials of a meaningful and pre-existing relationship. As Ko Kyaw once told me, if we get along so well, we must have lived together in our previous lives. I did find this perspective appealing and it showed me that for my interlocutors, friends and family, it did not matter if I was Buddhist or not. Ultimately, I will become one, in this life or any other. Thus, my stance as a researcher was overshadowed by the simple fact that I was just a person living with them, with my habits, tastes, flaws and sense of humour. This had implications in my ability of ‘doing research’ because the more I knew the people, the harder it became to ask questions I knew were difficult to answer. So, I had to abandon certain projects, such as the genealogy of the whole village coupled with a mapping of the transmission of inheritance, because it became too sensitive and was reopening old disputes.

## A PLURALITY OF RESEARCH OPERATIONS

“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.” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 34)

The process of production of this thesis was a plurality of research operations and of moments combining in its core an ethnographic and a historical perspective. Fieldwork was not just a matter of ‘participant observation’ but rather a series of processes carried out to understand the socio-political dynamics and the variety of ‘regimes of historicity’<sup>110</sup> at play in a place at a specific moment.

In my case, the pre-fieldwork period for this thesis was obviously influenced by an earlier work of six months in the same area for a master’s degree. Thus, the

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<sup>110</sup> The concept of regimes of historicity is a heuristic tool, conceived by the historian François Hartog (2015), and designating the modes of articulation of the past, present and future. It raises the question of how societies, or individuals, think about their relationship to time, particularly about moments of crises.

‘pre-fieldwork’ already included several research operations. During this first work, I was accompanied by an interpreter, May Myo Oo, and collected a large body of data through semi-structured interviews, life histories, mappings of villages and the collection and translation of documents mostly concerned with land tenure.<sup>111</sup> The methodology for enquiring headship during the first fieldwork consisted mostly in gathering information systematically about land agreements, disputes and previous and current headmen: what they did on a daily basis, what kinds of affairs did they deal with, when and how they were selected, for how long, and so on. Ko Kyaw was clearly helpful for that matter. His help was the main reason for focusing on Gawgyi. From this experience stems my will to avoid ‘focus group discussion’ and to live with villagers. I wrote the thesis in Marseille, submitted it,<sup>112</sup> got funding for a PhD at UEA in Norwich and started reading more extensively about the history of the country and learning its language.<sup>113</sup>

When returning in Myanmar for the ‘real’ fieldwork, I stayed a month in Yangon to get intensive lessons in Burmese and went alone to Gawgyi right after. Living in Gawgyi was to some extent becoming a child again due to a lack of proficiency at first. Semi-structured interviews were not really feasible during the first couple of months. I depended on the persons close to me, who knew what I meant with my questions, to gather information. So, I focused a lot on gestures, on what circulated between people and how they moved in and out of the village. The method was to be curious about almost anything on a day-to-day basis, questioning the functioning of petty activities (shops, weaving, brick making...) and learning the agricultural and ceremonial cycles while following and helping my hosts in the farm fields for instance. In addition, I filmed many ceremonies and did video editing for the donors when they wanted it, or for the monastery after the pagoda festival in Gawgyi. This activity taught me what was deemed ‘acceptable’ to film, what people wanted to display (the donation), and what was deemed uninteresting, such as the cooking of food in the back kitchen or simply the daily life.

When I felt confident enough about making in-depth interviews, I resorted to extensive note-taking and recorded a few life histories. It was clear with Ko Kyaw that we will not record our discussions, more for a reason of practicability – I was

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<sup>111</sup> Sales contracts, procurement booklets, adoption agreements, tax receipts, and so on.

<sup>112</sup> Huard (2014).

<sup>113</sup> Okell (1971), Okell *et al.* (1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d).

with him a large part of my time – than for an ethical issue. Overall, the more ‘formal’ interviews most often concerned village histories and occurred generally at people’s home, where hesitations, inflexions in voices, offerings of food, silences and jokes mattered sometimes more than the actual content of speeches. Gradually, I followed a former friend working for the INGO – who was as good in English than me in Burmese – in other villages and towns such as Thazi, Kyawka, Innte, Budalin and Yinmabin and thus was able to compare their history, see the differences and test my hypotheses about village affairs. We also managed to access cadastral maps (Appendix A) thanks to the courtesy of the former head of the Township State Land Record Department.<sup>114</sup> And when I came back in February 2019 for a last fieldwork dedicated to gather more historical information thanks to a fieldwork grant funded by the French School of Asian Studies, I tried to frame my questions in an open-ended way and let my interlocutors visions of history unfold. My attempts to collect data in the national archives were quite unsuccessful due mostly to geographic and time constraints and to the state of the collections even if the archivists were really helpful in many matters. Therefore, I rely on the material I gathered along the years at the History and Geographical Department of the University of Monywa and Mandalay, making copies of the master’s and PhD’s thesis<sup>115</sup> whenever they contained interesting information. Thus, this work rest almost exclusively on sources written or translated into English and so there is still a need to apply more rigour to the historical data if the weight of the revisionist argument in relation to colonial rupture is to stand the test of scrutiny by historians of the period and of the region. Discussions with local historians (from the universities and beyond) were fruitful as I learned how history was produced<sup>116</sup> while they introduced me to ‘knowledgeable’ persons about Monywa history. I also navigated a variety of places during daily trips for football matches, the delivery of harvest in town, and visits to Ko Kyaw’s friends and relatives for ceremonies.

The bulk of the ‘ethnographic’ chapters of the thesis rests on day-to-day discussions and observations which were the basis for questioning the history of the place. I chose to use and describe specific situations which show the blur between

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<sup>114</sup> Now called the Department of Agricultural Land Management and Statistics (DALMS).

<sup>115</sup> Notably Aung Aung Hla (2013) and Than Hlaing (2013) unpublished dissertations.

<sup>116</sup> Most of the historical work I was able to consult concerns the late precolonial period (Konbaung dynasty) and, as a state rule stemming from the military regime, historians were forbidden to explore the last fifty years, that is, most of the socialist period and subsequent militarisation of the country.

the private and the political, such as during a day of the headman, when transmitting inheritance or during the making of ceremonies. I was progressively able to deepen my understanding of specific subjects (the transaction of goods, help, services, and money between people, this or that person's reputation, the tenure of previous headmen, the agricultural policies of the state, the relations with officials, the animosity between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung) while evening discussions with Ko Kyaw and his family and the usual 'night meeting' of village bigmen were occasions to enter fully 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 were completely interwoven with a progressive understanding of what was becoming the subject of this thesis. It was a constant work in progress scattered by periods of clarification, reorganisation of notes and definition of new lines of enquiry when I was not 'lost in translation'. In short, it was an endless comings and goings akin to what Passeron (1991) has described as the process of creating knowledge in social sciences and humanities.

In the same way that the fieldwork had not started in Myanmar, he continued afterwards. In late 2016 I came to Paris and integrated the Southeast Asia Centre and started working on my 'ethnographic' data. At that time, I found Ingold's argument appealing (2014). Challenging the classical division between ethnography and anthropology, his point was that ethnography was the moment anthropologists write about people and thus, it occurs when they have left the site of research. But quickly I realised that I was already writing about the people when in Myanmar, it was just a continuation at distance with more books and colleagues. The thing was that now the data were texts shaped by my ideas, experiences, and personality. I had the chance to enrol into Burmese lessons as well at INALCO and test out if my knowledge of local, or peasant, sociality and language was attuned with more formalised teachings. The 'ethnographic' chapters of this thesis – on headman selection, on crafting headship, on transmitting land and on the worth of the *lugyi* – were framed during this period, in an academic atmosphere, and the voice deployed in them echoes this context of production as well as my will to develop my skills as a writer. It was a moment of textual analysis and comparison

with others' work<sup>117</sup> allowing to find a way of producing my own approach and style. Quite traditionally, I wrote them as extended case studies, drawing from Gluckman and the members of the Manchester School<sup>118</sup> development of this method during the 1950s in an attempt to elucidate and explain processes of social change that could not be captured through the functionalist methodologies. It allowed me to put the focus on events and situations while connecting them up to wider social life and acknowledging its processual nature. The problem was to link case studies and situational analyses with the history of transformation of the local political space and the variety of perceptions about it. I chose to use specific parts of life stories and situations as examples of the uncertainties, continuities and ruptures at play in a place. I almost unconsciously left the problem of connecting history and anthropology for later. It was clear for me that there were long-term continuities and changes in how leadership was performed and perceived for instance, but I was not yet able to articulate clearly my ideas. So, I engaged in archival research at the British Library in November 2017 and focus on the colonial encounter. This was a fieldwork experience *per se*, as it took time to get accustomed to the inner workings of the Library and even more time to finally find information relevant for a study at the village scale. I then started a dive into historical works to immerse myself successively in the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial periods, writing the chapters successively. To do that I reviewed books and articles, took notes, compared with my own data and chronologies, and adjusted my argument incrementally while seeking to avoid my own voice being subsumed within the scope of other scholarships or the "interpretative communities" (Aung-Thwin 2008: 188) that emerged since the colonial encounter and how the 'political' (Taylor 2008) has been studied in the past.<sup>119</sup> Most of the discussion of the literature is included

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<sup>117</sup> Notably Boutry, Brac de la Perrière, Chambers, Houtman, Lehman, McCarthy, de Mersan, Nash, Prass-Freeman, Robinne, Rozenberg, Sadan, Schober, Spiro, and Walton among others.

<sup>118</sup> Notably Mitchell (1956, 1983),

<sup>119</sup> Maitrii Aung-Thwin (2008) has described how scholarship about Burma/Myanmar has been shaped through different 'interpretative communities'. The strong interest in the political future of the country has fostered an important, but sometimes restrictive framework that has not only contributed to how we write about Myanmar / Burma, but how we read and interpret the wide range of scholarship that is being produced about it, notably concerning issues of military violence, past rebellions and democracy. In the same volume, Taylor has argued that the 'political' was approached in two ways, either externally, in comparison with other countries and situations sharing commonalities with Myanmar and often related to the difficulties to access the country, and internally, giving the priority to endogenous political logics. In this thesis, each chapter explores the work it relates to and debate the relevant literature in an attempt to delineate a personal voice for the study of politics and history in a specific area of the country.

in the chapters, in the introductions or within the sections. The final step was the articulation of anthropology and history, a process that I explore below.

But first I would like to explain how my language journey, the collection of data as well as my narrative and personal choices intersect in this thesis. This work is an exploration in developing a distinctive style which can distance the reader from the data. The sense of distancing is the product of choices emerging at different stages of the research. A critical question was how to harmonise the data while considering its diversity, my personal choices, the practicalities of fieldwork and the issue of audience?

One of the main questions is that of language and concerns notably 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 was able to 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, with ‘my’ interlocutors, I chose not to record their speech too much. I did not want to ‘extract’ information; that was a personal feeling and a decision that can be called into question if one makes other methodological choices, which are, incidentally, quite legitimate.<sup>120</sup> People in Gawgyi were already accepting me. I could be accused of not properly rendering their voice. In the same vein, I was encapsulated within one group – a relatively big family – and was less able to capture the points of view and practices of the most dominated. But this positionality allowed me to get an understanding, among many potential others, of local politics. As explained above, I chose to frame my ethnographic data into case studies and used Burmese language – transcribed into English – sporadically, bearing in mind that the audience attention can be lost easily. And because places and their names (villages, pagodas, and so on) are part of the landscape, I could only anonymised people’s name to mitigate the risk of exposure. My aim was not to use private lives to make a point, but to anchor any understanding of their dilemmas in their own terms rather than putting on a voiceover. The scarce use of audio recordings is a main limit in this regard. But I think that using specific examples drawn from Ko Kyaw and other persons’ lives,

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<sup>120</sup> For critical reflexions around ethnography as a subjective and scientific methodology, cf. Weber (2001), Naepels (1998a, 2006, 2011). On the ethnographer as author, cf. Clifford and Marcus (1986) and Rabinow (1977) among many others.

with their consents, was a way of producing an understanding of local politics that could not have been achieved otherwise. In addition, selecting case studies also led to make decisions concerning the level of details and information about time, place and people as well as about balancing the use of past and present tenses<sup>121</sup> in order to develop a descriptive language that would fit my exigencies while trying to avoid subsuming people's voice under the umbrella of 'the villagers'. I have only partly achieved my goal in that matter and used the category 'the villagers' when my interlocutors did; i.e. when they did not refer to a person in particular, notably when talking about local history. This is also a legitimate ground for criticism and can again unfold in a sense of purposely distancing the reader.

Concerning the more historical enquiry, I rely extensively on oral sources translated into English and written accounts mostly produced by English speakers if not translated into English.<sup>122</sup> The difficulty was to get an understanding about one specific locality throughout a variety of data and eventually to combine it with my ethnographic fieldwork. Again, harmonising those sets of information requires to make 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 and 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 work but remained at risk depending on the audience. For example, I chose to prioritise English at the expense of Burmese while highlighting how key ideas (e.g. headship, stewardship, guardianship) make sense if understood on local – Burmese – terms. This decision came in pair with my will to develop a novel-like writing style, accepting my stance as an ethnographer and as an author who tries to unveil a located and fragmentary understanding of one locale and its politics.

Acknowledging these choices is a first step toward objectifying the conditions of this research. Reflecting more about the fieldwork and its aftermaths – how it

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<sup>121</sup> On the politics of time and the variegated uses of present and past tenses in anthropological writings, see for instance Fabian (1983) and Tsing (1993).

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Bibliography.

impacted me as a person, how I had to become somebody in Gawgyi and in academia, how I became a writer, someone supposedly expert of the Burman society whose fluency in Burmese is challenged differently depending on the audience, how my positionality as a white male, youngish scholar, like Manning Nash some sixty years ago, influenced my work – would provide future avenues of enquiry and require methodological reorientations. Thus, this thesis is to be read as something to think with and to challenge in order to get a better understanding of local politics in contemporary Myanmar. The next section presents how I overcome one limitation of my initial project by accepting the particularity of my experience as an ethnographer.

#### **#ERROR 404. GOVERNANCE NOT FOUND**

I came to Gawgyi to study land governance, that is, the configuration of actors, arenas, norms and practices in relation to land and “how interests are pursued and countered, authority exercised and challenged, and power institutionalised and undermined” (Le Meur and Blundo 2001: 2). The village tract headman was obviously a key actor of local land governance because of how he was empowered to organise land titling (Farmland law 2012) and to resolve the disputes stemming from it:

“This power can be explained by the central role of the village headman in organizing land management: by liaising with different departments, and by transforming informal practices [...] into formal ones (such as changing the name in SLRD’s registers)<sup>123</sup> through different arrangements. [...]. Finally, the headman is the chairperson of all village tract committees [...]. Among those committees, the Village Tract Farmland Management Body (VLMB) created after releasing the new Farmland Law 2012, is in charge of regulating land use, land transfers, registration, land use rights and related conflicts, and

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<sup>123</sup> SLRD stands for State Land Record Department.

Scrutinizing requests for changing from prescribed crops to another, among other responsibilities [...].” (Boutry et al. 2017: 249-250).

In other words, the headman was at the centre of local land governance. One problem was that, in Gawgyi, people did not talk about governance. The same problem occurs when translating English words used to describe political dynamics occurring within the country (democracy, federalism and so on). Besides, many Burmese concepts that are key to depict social relations, such as *a-na-de*<sup>124</sup> or *luhmuyay*,<sup>125</sup> remained marginally used. So, going back to land governance, the question became what the scope of local politics and land relations is, and how do people talk about and conceive it.

Starting from an ethnography of land relations, the methodology was to look at how land is entangled with other relationships. To that end I studied the transmission of inheritance within farming families. That was a biased approach as I lived with one of the main ones and thus, my account does not integrate the cases of other types of families. Nonetheless, it allowed me to see how land was articulated with family obligations and to question ownership in Burmese terms. For instance, as we were walking by his betel garden, Ko Kyaw told me that “nobody owns” this land (*behdhuhma mapaingbu*). How to make sense of it in a context of formalisation of land rights? Saying that nobody owns the land did not mean that no one can claim ownership, or that no one had secured land rights on paper. It rather means that it is uncertain who will own this or that piece of land. It indicates that at one level, ownership is not a right, but a process requiring one to become the steward of a family, and thus of a patrimony. It emphasised the temporality of family relationships, of inheritance, and of how obligations and responsibilities entitle to property.

Following Ko Kyaw in his daily routine led me to the conclusion that the language of governance does not adequately reflect how he embodied the position of headman. If he was so central in land governance, then why was he unable to solve an important land conflict involving previous headmen? Why did he had to manoeuvre with youngster from his village to perform petty tasks and avoid being

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<sup>124</sup> Cf. the text titled “Football misunderstanding” in Appendix A.

<sup>125</sup> Often translated as “the social”, the scope of this concept is however rarely studied, except by Gerard McCarthy (2018).

obliged through hospitality? Why did he comply with Gawgyi bigmen? It became clear that he did not represent the government as an entity. As stated in the introduction and explored in chapter 6, he rather gave ‘arms and legs’ to an institution that has a peculiar role in a network of personalities. Being a village headman was a matter of craftsmanship or *bricolage*. Thus, my aim was to describe the flow of life of a village headman, the weight of the past, and show the ambiguous ways a person in this position is crafting his authority. On the one hand, authority appears to be about recognition and achievements. It is a quality embedded in the person, his life, his actions and is linked to the display of propriety and trustworthiness as a gauging standard resulting from local history. On the other hand, what powerful people say is doubtful and it should not be taken for granted: “it’s only in the mouth” (*bezathehmabè*). Thus, local politics is more adequately described as a space where behaviours are evaluated through a moral scale dividing what is doubtful, on the one hand, and what is trustworthy, on the other. And village affairs seemed to be an important scale where people engagement toward the collective is evaluated and where worth of the bigmen is conceived in terms of guardianship (*okhtehinhmu*).

## **ANTHROPOLOGY AND HISTORY, BACK AND FORTH**

“History is never sure” (de Certeau 2000: 1).

There is a long debate on the relationship between anthropology and history. The historical approach in anthropology was present during its inception as a discipline with the evolutionist movement. The functionalist and culturalist schools reacted to the speculative histories exposed in the evolutionist theories by producing ethnographic researches emphasising synchrony. Temporalities and social dynamics came to the forefront later within political anthropology, with researchers such as Evans-Pritchard (1950) or Edmund Leach (1954). In the meantime, the notion of ‘situation’ allowed Gluckman (1940) and the Manchester School<sup>126</sup> to differentiate synchrony and static in order to emphasise the need to

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<sup>126</sup> Notably Turner (1981) and Mitchell (1983).

look at the history of African societies to understand the present. Nonetheless, anthropology often built itself against history, “like its residue” (Naepels 2010: 876). The subsequent scholarships<sup>127</sup> which criticised the ahistorical character of classical ethnographic descriptions were crucial in articulating ethnography with the type of research developed by historians:

“More than simply considering the past, it is taking into account, on the one hand, the internal social dynamics of the groups under consideration and, on the other hand, the variable regimes of historicity that then becomes possible and necessary.” (Naepels 2010: 877, my translation).

The subaltern studies on colonial knowledge<sup>128</sup> 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.<sup>129</sup> The postcolonial perspective stemming from this evolution took note of the critics about colonial categories<sup>130</sup> while proposing deep descriptions of specific societies within a broader context.<sup>131</sup>

In this thesis, there are several ways anthropology is closely linked with history. As stated above, the plurality of research operations derived from a practice that did not seclude an ‘ethnographic’ fieldwork from and a ‘historical’ one but was rather a constant coming and going between notes, documents, ideas, scholarships, contexts and recordings. Three perspectives concerning the transformation of the political landscape in Gawgyi and Myinmilaung, and related to the articulation of ethnography and history, 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.

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<sup>127</sup> Especially Fabian (2014), Thomas (1996), and Sahlins (1981, 1995, 2004).

<sup>128</sup> See, among others, Asad (1973), Edward Said (1989), and a perspective by Pouche padass (2004).

<sup>129</sup> Notably Clifford and Marcus (1986).

<sup>130</sup> As the thesis seeks to do for the category of headship (cf. Interlude).

<sup>131</sup> For instance, see Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) and Jean Comaroff (1985).

The first perspective relates to an argument running through the chapters entitled *The last men of hpon*, *The rise of village affairs* and *Guarding village affairs*. The argument is that if contemporary politics in Gawgyi is conceptualised 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 *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 economics 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, are 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 the chapter *Traffic in affiliations*. It triangulates myths, oral testimonies and archives to locate the foundation of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi. This chapter is where the context of speech is notably problematised in relation to the animosity between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung. Attention was paid to “(h)ow the story is told, what is told of the story, by whom, to whom, and for what purpose, what is landmark or not” (Naepels 2010: 881). When narrated certain events come to serve as a matrix for subjective experiences and for the historical consciousness of the actors.<sup>132</sup> 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. ‘Myinmilaung story’ features its people as the junction between the royalty, the regional sovereign spirit and to religious patronage to support their claim as genuine and legitimate allochthones. ‘Gawgyi story’ posits its people as autochthones with intimate

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. Bloch (1998).

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 make sense.

The last perspective borrows to 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,<sup>133</sup> and not contained in one specific part of the thesis but rather runs within it in an open-ended way. It concerns the shaping of the landscape and the different type of temporalities as described in introduction; but it also relates to the coming of Buddhism and its evolution and, more directly, to the transformation of local hierarchies as depicted in chapter 4. Ultimately, this flexible approach is central to the thesis because it nuanced the question about the reasons and the effects of the merging of villages under a single polity.

These different forms of history get mobilised 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 (chapter 2): each side – Myinmilaung vs Gawgyi people – were 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 organising ceremonies in Tozigon, it emphasises a sense of common belonging. If we do not account for the history of this place, then we would see these bigmen as mere patrons, the headman as a petty broker and its selection as a trifling competition. And yet, an ethnographic approach combined with history 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.

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<sup>133</sup> Cf. Bloch (1961, 1973), Le Goff (1964) or Braudel (1958).

## CHAPTER 2. THE 2016 SELECTION

This chapter introduces the main conundrums that will be dealt with throughout the thesis. It describes two crucial days during the selection of the village headman of Myinmilaung tract in early 2016 from a Gawgyi perspective.<sup>134</sup> It is not an extended case study, but a situational analysis presented in an open-ended perspective. The reader should pay attention to how the main characters behave, notably Ko Kyaw the headman and the Gawgyi bigmen: U Htay the official elder, U Maung the master of ceremonies and U Lin the school teacher and leader of the bachelor group. Their actions guide the understanding of the local polity in 2016 as a product of both the past and the present. Overall, the description of a specific situation serves the purpose of anchoring the study of the local polity through history and ethnography. The first three sections portray the unfolding of events and the last one presents a series of questions stemming from the description. These questions are the red threads organising the rest of the thesis.

### PREPARING THE SCENE

At the end of December 2015, after the landslide victory of the NLD during 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 organise an election of new headmen. To that end, the Ko Kyaw had to arrange the selection of new ‘ten household leaders’ for each village because, as it was the case in 2012, they will be the ones voting. It is a double process of selection because candidates for headmanship should be at first selected as ten-houses’ leaders. Ko Kyaw went to Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon to meet and inform their elders, current leaders of ten households 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.

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<sup>134</sup> This selection happened on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2016.

The eve of the vote is upon us when Ko Kyaw begins the selection of the ten house leaders. The lapse of time is short, so alliances cannot be built up easily. To win, they have to gather the votes for only one candidate. The problem is that nobody really wants to be that man, at least at first. Around 4 pm, 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 the village houses by groups of ten. The school teacher is the main reference for the listing, due to his extensive knowledge about villagers and his proven ability as an organiser. The other three men help filling 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. The latter is split into three main parts, following the main roads created during settlement times (figure 2). These include the northeast, the southeast and the western parts (the latter being the last settled area).

U Maung and U Lin become vote collectors for the next few hours while U Htay and Ko Kyaw remain at distance. I stay with the first two and we walk from the furthest east side down to the west part to finally reach the north-east the following morning. The distribution of houses by group 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 that are closer, akin and neighbours in this area settled long ago. It is rather less natural in the western part, notably the northwest because it is mostly composed of recent individual houses, where affiliations and descent are not as clear. In the northeast, collecting votes is also complicated. Most of the *lugyi* are living on the southeast side of the road. In the northeast live 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 of

paper displaying the names of the household heads that 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 speaking out names from the list emphasise 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 the persons that are already ten-houses’ 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 to show the list and explain the situation while sharing a moment to chew betel nut and drink tea. Women are quite often asked for their vote, but even if many were, in practice, considered as household leaders, none are part of the list. They are inevitably excluded from local politics, apart from credit, health, school and monastery groups, because men monopolise the formalisation of politics. Overall, it seems that villagers are not used to this ‘democratic’ process. It seems it is the first time they have to express such a choice. And even though this is an unimportant issue for most, votes are collected in a hurry with great skill.

As I wake up the following morning, I realise that I am deliberately set aside from vote collection in the northeast part of the village. The person who then 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 dissension due to old conflicts concerning land disputes, gambling, donations and money lending. These elements are critical in the listing of people. But most of the individuals who were projected to be ten-houses’ 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-houses’ leaders are from the southeast part due to high density of population, but also to a stronger hold on village politics by the fringe of people living there (where the current village leaders are mostly from). Thus, the whole process is about filling as many positions

composing the social hierarchy of the village and acknowledging or pressing people to select the number of ten-houses' leaders required by the government. But then, who are they?

Most, but not all of them, are people known for taking collective responsibilities such as managing water delivery and fee collection, gathering people for road repairs, helping for 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. But most do not want to take official responsibilities. Ko Kyaw summarises the selection of those leaders with a metaphor: "if you press, it will spring out", in other words, to put their back up against the wall.<sup>135</sup> They do not bear much formal duties; they assist the headman in some cases such as providing free labour for government projects in the past or electing him today. All of them are not well-known for being helpful. Some are economically important such as big farmers that stay involved in village affairs by keeping an eye on local politics in 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 it. A few are backed by a portion of influential villagers interested in having a headman that could be compliant. In Gawgyi, most are just people known for being helpful and good, accepting 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 that are able to be a ten-houses' leader. 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 organising the vote collection like U Maung, the school teacher and U Htay – are keeping their distance with government agents and bodies while being entrusted by most villagers. And this distance is a result of how local affairs (beyond state interest) became the form of local politics at the turn of the twenty-first century after decades of disengagement of 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

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<sup>135</sup> He gave this expression on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2016.

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...), to have a buffer against government policies if the headman knows how to deal with officials, and so forth. But there is also a long history of successive headmen whose personalities (or memories of their personalities) reflect how villages coped with various levels of power. There is an apparent contradiction between the fact that the selection of the ten-houses’ leaders was experienced by most as an unimportant matter and the fact that it was crucial to handle it properly for these *lugyi*. It shows that because *lugyi* is an achieved rather than an ascribed status, such handlings become important ways 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 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 the latter’s name on the new list. It feels like cheating for an exam. The final version is now completed and polished. Among the fourteenth names on paper, one is going to be Gawgyi’s candidate. Overall, the ten-houses’ heads selected today are mainly the same as those chosen in 2012 by U Htay. But no one has emerged yet 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 little by little. Discussing who could be headman is something of an issue. The school teacher and U Maung are not present anymore, as for U Htay. The ten-houses’ 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 responsibility. Those who want to are often discredited as unfit, lacking personal skills or untrusted by others. The required skills range from literacy, ability to appreciate general and specific issues, capacity to understand new and old generations, good knowledge about the intricacies of life outside the village

and in the region, and finally negotiating skills with everyone, officials and commoners alike.

Two main stakes matter the most. First, it is clear for 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-houses' leaders per village, as in 2012, they must vote corporately to keep controlling headship. Yet, Ko Kyaw sensed that this time, unlike 2012, the villagers from Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon are going to compound their votes too. Second issue, the candidate should not be too rigid. In Gawgyi, the inner factions could push a man over another if he is manoeuvrable to some extent. And this was what Gawgyi bigmen did when patronising 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'. And this shows that headship is but one level of local politics. For instance, concerning the 2012 selection, Ko Kyaw says that he was half-forced to be 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-houses' leader) never positioned as runner. These *lugyi* chose to stay away from official positions as much as possible. And the school teacher also stays out of the competition because he already occupies a government job. During the meeting at U Kyaw house, two men stood up as candidates for Gawgyi.

The first one is U Han, a man in his late thirties known for being always 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<sup>136</sup>. A relative of Ko Kyaw, he is always giving a hand for preparing weddings and donations. Furthermore, he is the village *hsounhsaya*, or "master of ghosts". Despite his rather small influence against underground magic he protects villagers' life to some extent. But he is however not considered a *lugyi* yet. Why? There is no clear-cut answer. He is one of the largest farmers of the village, but he allegedly has poor negotiating skills, especially with officials, and lacks writing proficiency and general knowledge. Ko Kyaw backs him anyway.

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<sup>136</sup> This is important considering that most act of witchcraft are allegedly done through food offering.

They have developed and entertained mutual trust and support for several years in the management of some village affairs. But he supported him principally because he does not want to become a candidate again. He wants to exit headship. Therefore, he stands for U Han even if he doubts that he could be a ‘good’ headman. During that meeting at Ko Kyaw’s, U Han is set a little aside and subject to a profusion of jokes (“the *lugyi* only like chili so don’t eat French pork!”, “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. Son of a big farmer that is absent from most of the 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.<sup>137</sup> He is nonetheless literate because his parents invested in his education. In addition, he has been a ten-houses’ leader for many years. The thing is that U Thein did not come to the meeting at Ko Kyaw’s. For the bunch of ten-houses’ heads, it 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 decided, or he disagrees. It is obvious for 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’s name. But the game is not over.

On our way to the office in Myinmilaung, we cross U Thein arguing loudly with fellow villagers near the shelter at the north edge of Gawgyi, pass the housing area before reaching the monastery and the school. We stop our 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 any house’s jurisdiction and thus free from personal obligations. In comparison, the house of the headman was not a neutral area and U Han got support there due to his affinity with Ko Kyaw. U Thein chooses to wait at the shelter. It offers no hold for personal affiliation, except that of being from Gawgyi village. The discussion<sup>138</sup> lasts for about ten minutes and is a rare moment of politics being openly discussed in the village.

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<sup>137</sup> Being engaged does not forbidden to have another ‘wife’ for Burmese males but having other children without being married and not assuming the responsibility of being in charge of the children (pay for his food, schooling, Buddhist noviciate) is seen as immoral and indicates the kind of the person.

<sup>138</sup> The reconstruction of the dialogue and its main themes was done through the recollections and

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“I don’t want to do it” says U Thein as we reach the shelter, answering the few men 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”. And U Thein replies that he does not claim to be candidate. I realise that I assist, almost incredulous, to a political squabble. Another man in the background says that, actually, the latter does want to and can do it. U Thein then starts a vehement couplet about his worries of being stuck between his own business, his family and headship.

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

A debate starts on whether or not the chosen candidate will have to select the leader of bachelor groups and official elder (which are pivotal positions in organising 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. That group wants U Thein to position himself, to garner support among the villagers, his faction, and to see if he will follow the directions given by the main *lugyi* that occupy such positions. Other men reply that such questions could be tackled later, insisting that U Thein answer clearly if he wants to be candidate or not. But U Thein does not clearly acquiesce. Not yet. The standstill falls when a man said that “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 the same time, the voices melt 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.”

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discussions about this moment with some participants and from my field notes.

Ko Kyaw's phone rings. The men stop talking at once – the village-tract clerk in Myinmilaung is asking when they will arrive – and they do not want him to overhear what is happening. Once he gets off his phone, they start arguing about whether or not the headman will have to make decisions collegially. The debate is now if and how the ten-houses' leaders can 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, and 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. And 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 payoff while in office. But Ko Kyaw reorient the conversation to avoid this issue, saying that a headman salary is not high, that U Thein could try it.

"We now have a candidate, chosen by me" shouts an old leader. U Thein's candidacy was backed. But the backers seem to form a different group than those who supported Ko Kyaw. The authority of the current bigmen might change in the future. But that is not a main issue for now. The rest of the group discusses loudly for a time. One man expresses that the impending situation (the change in national government) will be difficult to handle. But Ko Kyaw answers that it is not as bad as he thinks. He says that what a headman does is a little more than taking care of the village and that responsibilities are even less 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 onward, the need to compound the 14 votes merges their opinions. The same person then directly asks U Thein: "will you do it? If yes, say it! I am tired of doublespeak". Silence reigns for a few seconds and finally U Thein says: "I will do!".

The name of the candidate has changed. U Thein is now entitled. He said it, so he is engaged toward the others. We all get back on our motorbikes and headed toward the office in Myinmilaung proper. As we were about to leave, a man shouts

from behind “Ko Thein! When we arrive, don’t change your mind. If you do, we’ll beat you.”

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## AGAINST MYINMILAUNG PROPER

The government office in Myinmilaung proper was built in 2005 on a previous cemetery at the crossroad of four villages (figure 9). 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 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 arrived. I follow some of them inside the nearby teashop. Sitting there, some men exchange courtesies with the locals, whom they often dislike. U Win is there, sitting in the back, watching the scene at a distance. Most of Gawgyi men do not dare going inside the teashop. Only confident enough persons walk in. U Maung, U Lin and Ko Kyaw are among those. 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 in the teashop, everyone stands up. I stand and cross their gaze. My presence is not expected, but my companions are not worried about it. Bit by bit, it all becomes formalised. The two main officials, a chairman from 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 organising this 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 is glancing warily in their direction every now and then. Their drinking pace is like running sand in an hourglass. It measures 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.



Figure 10. Pictures of the 2016 selection at Myinmilaung office

Under the thatched roof of the office, the Township chairman stands behind a table, facing voters. Those are the ten-houses leaders from their respective villages

included in 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 sits Gawgyi men, with people of Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon at their right. Both groups face the table. Around that 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 elections 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 meters behind the scene.

The election goes on. The clerk calls the voters one after the other. The person stands, takes a piece of paper, writes down the name he wants on another table, folds the paper, gives it to the chairman who puts it in a bowl. Finally, the latter picks up all the papers one by one, reads the names aloud, shows them to the audience to prove that there is no cheating, and makes a chalk line on the blackboard. Only two names appear on it. U Thein, from Gawgyi, gathered fourteen votes while U So, from Myinmilaung, got seventeen. The ten-houses' leaders from Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon have compounded their votes against Gawgyi, as predicted by Ko Kyaw. The last time, there were four candidates and Ko Kyaw won. The men on the right side applaud. On the left, Gawgyi villagers growl about the situation. Anger rises, but they remain semi-silent. We quickly go back to the motorbikes. A stone flies in our direction. A young man, allegedly a fool, threw a rock at us. In seconds, members of our faction armed with stones and sticks ask the offender to come closer. But nothing goes further. The atmosphere is tense, Gawgyi has been defeated. The sound of roaring engines fills the scene. Once back in the village, we quickly 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 them, referring to the previous election when votes were divided in four camps. They ask each other if there is a way to change the repartition of voters, or they will always lose if it stays this way. And then everyone goes home.

## THE RED THREADS

*Competition, hierarchy, worth, obligations, engagement.*

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 bigmen who guide local affairs and keep their distance with the state. Let's start with a blunt 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 channelling access to wealth. There is a particularly state-like quality to the office of headship, as it has typically been more in the interests of the government to have the institution than the local population. This is why the headman is imbued with particular powers of brokerage. But each village tract has its own stories and history. In our case, anger outbursts are signs of contained disputes. It is something else rather than a simple fight for an institution, and to understand why the 2016 election happened this way, we need to explore the past of this polity. How does each village justify its presence in this landscape? Is there a relation with the fact that both settlements have *competing* narratives of village foundation? What can we learn from them about the past and the present? In the same vein, if headship is a position of power within a village tract, then when was it created in this particular place and why were those villages bound under a single jurisdiction?

Another point relates to the positioning of Gawgyi bigmen during the election. They *engage* in village affairs and monitor the emergence of a Gawgyi candidate as a way of achieving their bigness. They also represent the elite of village farmers, the top of the local *hierarchy*. But has it always been the case? Are there ways in which controlling institutions help consolidating the *hierarchy* in a certain direction? These questions relate to the long-term past of the local polity, and more precisely to the twentieth century. Looking back at them during the election, why do they keep a certain distance with 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? If village headship is but one part of local politics, then what is the rest? Can we learn something about

how it is conceived and practiced by exploring the positioning of these bigmen? To do that, we need to locate the moment when village affairs became the main form of Gawgyi politics and how certain personalities in specific contexts embodied *trustworthy* leaders. This allows one to think about current politics, such as how current ceremonies are performed or how conflicts are settled, in terms of *engagement* toward the collective, that is, in terms of what became a critical stake in daily life. And so, the positioning of Gawgyi bigmen during the 2016 selection opens up into an exploration of the *worth* of leaders and of 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 will soon stop coping with multiples personalities and *obligations*. So, what does his exit tell us about being a headman? On a daily basis, it means adjusting one's position according to a series of situations and stakes. During his time as headman he was notably empowered to implement a new land law which brought to the forefront old disputes for instance. But 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 bigmen, officials, neighbours and family in a dense social landscape. His demeanour opens up the question of everyday politics beyond headship and the kind of *obligations* and power relations organising it.

It is now time to explore the fashioning of the local political landscape by focusing on Myinmilaung and Gawgyi's narratives of foundation.

## CHAPTER 3. TRAFFIC IN AFFILIATIONS (1750S-1880S)

### “NOT ENOUGH HORSES”

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 the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2013, we met with U So<sup>139</sup> at the teashop tucked in the middle of the village at the crossroad between three village tracts.<sup>140</sup> 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 to question both current and past local politics. Here is a part<sup>141</sup> of the text written after this interview:

*During the period of the Pagan dynasty, the king Anawrahta, founder of the Bagan empire (eleventh to thirteenth century), gave Alon<sup>142</sup> 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. (1749-50 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 was not enough horses for the whole cavalry to escape. Bahtukyweh ran away but eventually drowned himself in the Chindwin river. But a part of his followers stayed in this hideout. This is how the village was founded and its first name, Myinmalaug, means “not enough horses”.*

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<sup>139</sup> This person is not the same man who became headman during the 2016 selection.

<sup>140</sup> The division of Myinmilaung proper into three tracts will be analysed in chapter 4.

<sup>141</sup> The following is drawn from the notes taken during our interview and is thus not a transcription.

<sup>142</sup> 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.

*As time passed on, the pronunciation of Myinmalaug was altered to finally be voiced as Myinmilaung. In 1147 B.E. (1776 C.E.) the village 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 even if the Konbaung dynasty is a central focus of studies at the Historical Department of Monywa University, my questions about Myinmilaung were too specific and they could not answer them. Later on, 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 British’s ‘settlement operations’. But nobody was able or willing to tell me. After all, I chose to live in Gawgyi, and they do not get along well. In Gawgyi’s case, there was not such a 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 reconstruct the history of the local polity, and as current discourses about history. This chapter uses both approaches co-currently. For instance, in U So’s narrative, only the founding date is 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 during King Anawrahta because he reigned from 1044 to 1077 C.E. Nonetheless, he is referred to as 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.<sup>143</sup> As such, he appears in many

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<sup>143</sup> Cf. Brac de la Perrière (1989) or Robinne (2000). Brac de la Perrière defines the cult in honour of the Thirty-Seven Lords as an institutionalised spirit possession cult addressed to guardian spirits (the *naq*) of particular domains in Upper Burma that once formed the core of the classical Burmese

myths, stories and chronicles as the founder *par excellence*.<sup>144</sup> 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.<sup>145</sup> Thus, U So produced a narrative of foundation that posits Myinmilaung at the intersection of the royalty and the locality. He used stabilised 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.<sup>146</sup>

But oral memories draw out connections to the past at the expense of others. It displays layers upon layers 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 which are crucial to understanding how Myinmilaung and Gawgyi were grouped under a single (uncanny) polity at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a different way, Gawgyi people posit themselves as people from the land, with thick connections with 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 relates 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 below, how the political dynamics of the late precolonial era shaped the colonial encounter and the creation of village headship. Headship was established in 1887 as a device to crush the ‘guerrilla warfare’<sup>147</sup> encountered by colonial officers during the annexation of

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Buddhist kingdom. This cult is organised around the pantheon of the Thirty-Seven Lords who are honoured in annual public festivals and with whom individuals engage in privately-organised spirit possession ceremonies.

<sup>144</sup> Brac de la Perrière (1996: 40) has argued on the necessity for the Burmese dynasties to make the first Burmese king the founders *par excellence*. Anawrahta is also the archetypical founders of religious edifices creating a Buddhist landscape while integrating such territories within the royalty. For instance, in his study of the entrepreneur monks in central Myanmar Rozenberg (2002) shows how their constructions of spectacular religious buildings are modelled on the ‘founding gesture’ of Anawrahta who, according to the Burmese chronicle, built such edifices as symbols of his sovereignty in all the regions he submitted.

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Brac de la Perrière (1996: 49-50).

<sup>146</sup> This accounts for a strong tendency to anchor establishments (of places, of *naq* rituals, of pagodas and so on) as if time folds in on itself.

<sup>147</sup> Charney argues that warfare was normal condition of rural life in precolonial Burma, as well as

Upper Burma (1885-86). As an institution, it swept into local politics and became the office to compete for, a means to negotiate pre-existing political affiliations. At large, the precolonial period offers a landscape of fragmented sovereignties<sup>148</sup> 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. I call it a “traffic in affiliations” to reflect 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 migrations, warfare, money lending and changes in the crown ability to govern the countryside to compete for power.<sup>149</sup> Yet, the royal revenue inquests, called *sittan*,<sup>150</sup> 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<sup>151</sup> 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.<sup>152</sup> And 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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in other Mainland Southeast Asian polities, in which competition for offices and resources was a cause for squabbles. Cf. Charney (2004) and Charney and Wellen (2018).

<sup>148</sup> The concept of fragmentation is borrowed from Lund (2011) and the dynamics are mostly drawn from Lieberman (1984) and Koenig (1990).

<sup>149</sup> I chose to draw attention mostly on hereditary offices because they were the main form of authority ruling the backcountry, as opposed to the officials appointed by the crown. One of the avenues for the gentry families was to base their claim for power on heredity, on customs and on crown and local patronage.

<sup>150</sup> They represent the main historical sources on rural life during the Konbaung period. Cf. Trager and Koenig (1979) or Toe Hla (1987) for instance.

<sup>151</sup> Such as Furnival (1957), Koenig (1990), Lieberman (1984, 2003), Scott (1972a, 1972b, 2009) or Thant Myint-U (2001)

<sup>152</sup> Cf. Saito (1997).

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

This chapter adopts a chronological approach and combines first-hand data,<sup>153</sup> colonial archives<sup>154</sup> 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. Throughout the following sections, a stronger emphasis is placed on Myinmilaung because its oral history is denser and because the evolution of this settlement – key to understanding the creation of the village tract – was easier to trace in colonial records. Thus, I use a sedimentary approach in which the current terrain – the politics in Myinmilaung village tract as described in the epilogue – sit on top over and is shaped by layer upon layer of history. In that sense, the foundation narratives condense key chronological markers that help 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 Myanmar precolonial politics and argue that dynamics of affiliations, competition for leadership and fragmentation of authority were the main dynamics in the countryside and endured during the colonial period. As argued in the general introduction, the local perspective also allows for a contrast of state-centric approaches by showing the ability of people to negotiate their position in society and the multiple means by which authorities competed for and consolidated their leadership. In this vein, I attempt to avoid reifying ‘the gentry’ as a monolithic group to challenge the understanding of the imposition of village headship as a change in the nature of authority.<sup>155</sup> 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 Myanmar

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<sup>153</sup> Gathered in Myinmilaung proper, Gawgyi, Budaungkan, Tozigon, Ywadon, Kyawkka, Thazi, Zaloke and, concerning the the Grandfather of Alon, with the guardian of the spirit palace in Alon.

<sup>154</sup> Presented in the bibliography.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. the section “Where there any headman before the headman?” in the general introduction for a long development of this issue.

history because they relate to the spirit cult – are crucial sources condensing historical references<sup>156</sup> and discourses about contemporary issues.

The first section describes the political dynamics of the precolonial period and focuses on the Badon/Alon province. The ‘galactic’ metaphor is used to locate the context of creation and installation of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi. This allows for questioning 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, mortgage, 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.

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<sup>156</sup> See Brac de la Perrière (2009) for a call in this direction concerning the domination of Buddhist narratives, and an example of how spirit cults reflects regional history (1998).

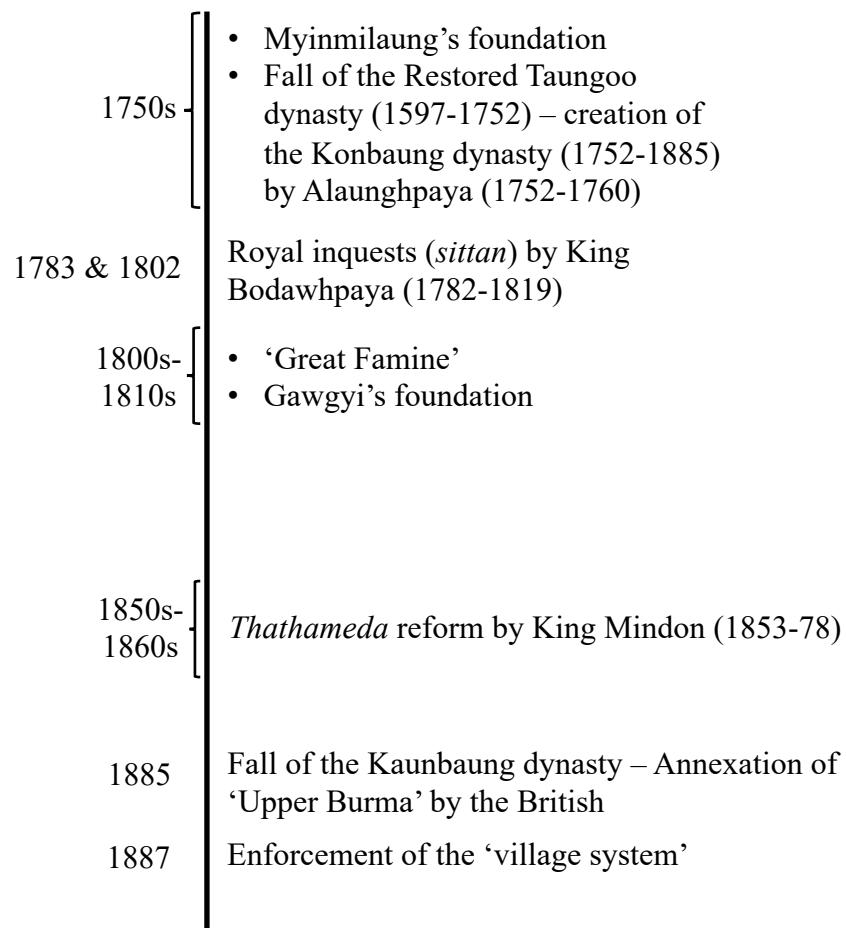


Figure 11. Timeline of the precolonial period

## DYNAMICS OF THE PRECOLONIAL POLITY

Myinmilaung was founded at a turning point in late precolonial history,<sup>157</sup> 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 Taungoo (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*) under closer supervision, by reorganising the servicemen (*ahmudan*) and non-servicemen (*athi*) populations in the nuclear zone, and by

<sup>157</sup> One of the turning points of the politico-administrative cycles that shaped the politics of Burmese kingdoms according to Lieberman (1984).

structuring the administration into territorial<sup>158</sup> and departmental<sup>159</sup> jurisdictions<sup>160</sup>. This dynasty was slowly collapsing since the early eighteenth-century, facing dissidences among the king's relatives, ministers and the local gentry who either retreated to their localities or allied with the Peguan's kingdom of the south spreading north.<sup>161</sup> My area of study was part of the nuclear zone which represented:

“[...] the northern sector of the dry zone. It resembled an ellipse with the four outer points at Myedu, Madaya, Yamethin, and Kani. Residing at Ava, roughly in the centre of the ellipse, the king and his chief ministers exercised direct authority over hereditary local headmen throughout this region. 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 variegated.” (Lieberman 1984: 64)

The nuclear zone is thus a political construction of the landscape made by the Burmese kingship. Myinmilaung, today in Monywa Township, was then in 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 (Lieberman 2003: 96). 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 *ahmu-dans*)” (Lieberman 2003: 113). In the stories about Bahtukyweh, the latter is an Indian prince defeated by his brother and entrusted by Anawrahta to rule Badon. In one version of the legend,

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<sup>158</sup> This relates to the princes and officials who were allocated appanages or specific revenues over one or several townships in quality of *myowun* or *myoza*.

<sup>159</sup> The departmental jurisdiction refers the charges concerned exclusively with specific groups of population regardless of their location, such as the servicemen.

<sup>160</sup> On this distinction see Lieberman (1984: 63-112).

<sup>161</sup> Along with Tai and Manipuri raids in Upper Burma. See Lieberman (1984: 188-194).

Bahtukyweh was to “assume the privilege of a minor king”.<sup>162</sup> In pre-Konbaung vocabulary, this is called a *bayin*. Modelled after the king, a *bayin* is the “cosmic pivot”<sup>163</sup> (Lieberman 1984: 35) of the local society and usually of royal blood. Bahtukyweh, who was not a relative of the royal family, is nonetheless positioned as the founder of a local lineage (*amyo-yo*) that became the rulers of Badon through heredity. This is how imagery of continuity is produced by the legend: the leader of Badon was anchored in a province which was gradually integrated into the kingdom until local sovereignty was broke down by the royalty (and the local sovereign became a spirit).

As it was progressively incorporated within the successive Burmese kingdoms,<sup>164</sup> Badon was “traditionally awarded” to a prince as appanage<sup>165</sup> (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 16<sup>th</sup> century and a place where elite military garrisons were stationed,<sup>166</sup> 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. And in their foundation narrative, Myinmilaung people claim to be the descendants of this elite guard. After chasing Bahtukyweh from Badon, Alaunghpaya (1752-60), the founder of the Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885), designated another chief<sup>167</sup> and specific revenues of 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.

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<sup>162</sup> Cf. British Library archive file 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; the extract is taken from GUBSS, vol. 1, part 2: 7.

<sup>163</sup> This may relate to why the spirit worship of Alon Grandfather focussed on Bahtukyweh.

<sup>164</sup> 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 (ROB, vol. 2: ix) and was considered as a royal town in the seventeenth century (ROB vol. 2: xv). Alon boundaries seems to have been measured and fixed as an administrative unit following a royal order in 1692 (ROB vol. 2: 61).

<sup>165</sup> For instance, “specified revenues” were alienated by King Tanninganwei (1714–1733) when he came to power to his brother known as the Badon prince who died around 1728 (Lieberman, 1984: 78, 187).

<sup>166</sup> This trend was strengthened once Badon King rose to the throne in 1782.

<sup>167</sup> The historian Mya Sein makes a reference to Thamata Schwe Sanda who was Alon *myothugyi* in 1811; cf. Mya Sein (1973: 52).

Badon is part of the Lower Chindwin Valley which “by the end of the precolonial period, [has become] the second largest population center and was the chief center in contributions to the royal pool of servicemen.” (Charney 2007: 228). This rise in population, cattle and expansion of agriculture happened in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Raids against Manipur, forced migrations, grants of land and reorganising of the population within groups of servicemen stabilised this frontier area during the rise of the Konbaung dynasty (1752 onward).

“From the 1780s and well into the 1820s, the Lower Chindwin Valley shouldered the heaviest burden in providing royal servicemen to the royal court. Only the royal capital rivaled the Lower Chindwin governorships of Alon (Badon) and Tabayin in numbers of settled royal servicemen and Alon was the single largest population center in the kingdom (including the royal capital). The Lower Chindwin, with Alon at its center, thus amounted to a special royal bastion in the Konbaung state. [...] Alon was the kingdom’s busiest trading center outside of the royal capital.” (*ibid.*: 231)

It had an important impact on local agriculture,<sup>168</sup> animals, and religion notably because forest-dwelling monasticism increasingly gave way to town- and village-dwelling monasticism, and thus “contributed to the spread of popular Buddhism, while a dwindling number of orthodox-minded monks used the royal court to assert state protection” (*ibid.*: 228). That group of monks, that Charney has named the Lower Chindwin literati as they drew their authority of both Pali and Sanskrit texts, used their connections with the King Bodawhpaya (also known as King Badon) to attempt to assert control over religious and lay knowledge in the kingdom as a whole.<sup>169</sup> The spread of Buddhism went in hand with the expansion of towns and villages and the rise of village monastery up to today. Gawgyi monastery is a case in point as 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 who, representing a middle ground between forest-

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<sup>168</sup> Notably resulting in the production of dry crops used as fodder for cattle and horses on large scales.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. Charney (2006).

and village-dwelling monks, made Buddhism understandable to the general lay audience, through poems and stories and the presentation of Buddhism in less than traditional ways, while simultaneously producing scholarly work on Buddhism and influencing the contest against colonialism.

From the seventeenth to the late nineteenth-centuries, Badon 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 latter 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” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 35), there was always a competition for office and wealth. From a *longue durée* perspective, the state attempted to organise the 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 in three main groups, namely the “crown servicemen” (*ahmudan*), the “free commoners” (*athi*) and the “bondmen” (*kyun*), liable of different obligations to whom they are affiliated with. Yet, this segmentation was not as strict as proclaimed by the state. And people could change their status by moving away, shifting their affiliation from one authority to another and through mortgaging themselves or their family.<sup>170</sup> Kings acted as the ultimate patrons (“Lord of Life”, Lieberman 1984: 10) over all subjects alongside chains of patron-client down to the villagers, following multiple lines of territorial and departmental (or regimental) affiliations. In this view, the local polity was shaped by a tension between shifting patronage dynamics and attempts at structuring the administration (creating and reforming various layers of offices, charges, taxes, status groups, and so on).

“From *wun-gyi*<sup>171</sup> down to village headman, 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. The nature of this relationship was personal, as

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<sup>170</sup> Cf. Aung-Thwin (1984).

<sup>171</sup> Governors appointed by the king.

opposed to legal or contractual, and was formalized at least once a year for all officials on ceremonial occasions known as *kadaw*, an untranslatable<sup>172</sup> term.” (Koenig 1990: 138).

Seen from the crown’s point of view, the political structure was “patrimonial” (Lieberman 1984: 86), or “patrimonial-bureaucratic”, that is “based on a personal, traditional authority with obedience to the person rather than the office.” (Koenig 1990: 99). The king was the patron of patrons, the chief of chiefs. The political dynamics can however be coined ‘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. Insofar as each planet had its own moons, which in turn had their dependencies, each satellite replicated in miniature the organization of the solar system as a whole.” (Lieberman 2003: 22). This description is, to some extent, a replication of Tambiah’s concept of galactic polity describing the Southeast Asian kingdoms as “center-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 duplicating it (Tambiah 2013: 509). Tambiah insists on the pulsating quality of such a polity because, “if we introduce at the margin other similar competing central principalities and their satellites, we shall be able to appreciate the logic of a system that as a hierarchy of central points is continually subject to the dynamics of pulsation and changing spheres of influence.” (*ibid.*: 511).

Cast in the realm of Burmese precolonial politics, the royal capital was the centre and fortified towns (*myo*), the satellites.<sup>173</sup> The link between powers were oaths of allegiance (*kadaw*), and these alliances followed patron-client chains between persons. And even if heredity was a strong claim for office, it was not enough. There was no “powerful ascriptive element” justifying once and for all a leader, even for the king (Lieberman 1984: 83). Heredity, personal prowess and religious notions were claims to access or to justify access to office. For instance,

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<sup>172</sup> A possible translation could be a homage or tribute ceremony.

<sup>173</sup> For analysis of the terms relating to power and territory (notably *myo*, *nay*, and *taik*) see Lehman (1981).

Alaunghpaya, the founder of the Konbaung dynasty, used this rationale to legitimise his position as 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 were stemming from his *hpon* (“charismatic glory”), itself reflecting his *kan*, the concretion of past meritorious deeds (*ibid.*: 229 & 240). Furthermore, personal patronage was conceptualised as a “debt of gratitude” (*kyayzu*) enacted through an oath of allegiance (*ibid.*: 73).<sup>174</sup> On the one hand, personal ties were thus the main political link between authorities. But on the other hand, gentry chiefs were the “backbone of Burmese Administration” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 34–35) because they controlled revenue collection, office succession and were the ultimate judges within their jurisdiction.

The local rising leaders represented a constant threat of fission and shifts of spheres of influence; hence the ‘pulsating’ character of this kind of polity. One interest of the ‘galactic’ or ‘solar’ theories is to show that tensions, fragmentation and reaffiliations are as important as moments of consolidation and structuration. It allows one to see leadership and the hereditary principle giving legitimacy to office holders as fragile and never achieved. But the pulsating metaphor also helps 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 the founding of Myinmilaung happened during the transformation of the larger polity and, later, village headship was imposed after the collapse of the Burmese kingdom.

In Myinmilaung’s case, during the fall of the Restored Taungoo dynasty during the first half of the eighteenth century, Badon’s countryside looked like a patchwork of existing and in-the-making hereditary chiefs, appointed officials, and rising leaders:

“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

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<sup>174</sup> Koenig has shown that this bond was notably enacted by drinking the water of allegiance (1990: 138).

their departmental charges, while princes became isolated from their appanage population.” (Lieberman 1984: 194).

At the local level, hereditary chiefs focused on their own area of influence when the kingdom collapsed. A rising leader could reinforce its sway over a territory – and ultimately became a new chief – by consolidating his number of followers either through territorial expansions (taking royal land and revenues),<sup>175</sup> money lending and protection to farmers, alliances with other leaders or by marshalling crown servicemen as their 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.<sup>176</sup> The most well-known were conducted under King Bodawhpaya in 1783 and 1802 – from which were derived many of the documents called *sittan* or record of life and administration.<sup>177</sup> A *sittan* was a “statement by the official in charge of a particular jurisdiction” (Trager and Koenig 1979: 5) of his duties, dues, the boundaries of his jurisdiction (a town or group of villages mostly), the population and status groups living within it and the taxes he collected by custom. The inquests thus produced a number of documents used “for all cases of disputed inheritance of local office and boundary disputes.” (Koenig 1990: 162). Based on these – overall incomplete – inquests, the legitimacy of hereditary office holders to rule the countryside was sanctioned by the distant crown. In other words, the inquests stabilised for a (short) time the distribution of power and authority in the countryside *as if* deriving from the crown. Thus, a *sittan* is like a snapshot displaying the state of local ‘traditions’ in one place. Let’s take a look at the 1783 *sittan* of Taya village, located on the west of Alon, presented by Hardiman:

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<sup>175</sup> See Koenig (1990: 31), Lieberman (1984: 165).

<sup>176</sup> Koenig indicates that these inquests may existed as soon as the fourteenth century, but we lack any record of those. The earliest records date back from the seventeenth century and notably of the inquest ordered by king Thalun in 1635-38 to reorganised crown administration. Alaunghpaya also attempted to make such inquest, but it failed (cf. Koenig 1990: 161).

<sup>177</sup> Cf. Trager and Koenig (1979).

“After reciting the boundaries of Taya village-lands, it continues: “From rice land bestowed as a gift on the Church,<sup>178</sup> the Church dues are one tenth of the outturn, and there are, in addition, the writer's fee, the grain-dealer's fee and the village headman's fee, one basket of unhusked rice to each. On lands cultivated with dry crops, the Church dues amount to twice the amount of the seed sown, and there are similar additional dues. The State revenue is collected from Royal lands at the same rates, and there is a customs duty, on all food-grains sold, one-hundredth part of the value. The mortgage money payable for a slave is one viss of silver: the purchase-money is three times that amount. For every ox and buffalo sold the customs due is one-eighth and one-fourth of the value respectively. Raw cotton pays one viss for every cart-load sold, and earthenware is mulcted in the fine of one pot for every cart-load. For every basket of pickled tea sold, the headman claims half a viss of the leaves as his due. One-twenty-fifth of the value is the duty leviable on all other sales, and half the receipts go to the captain of the militia regiment which recruits from Taya village. When a head of cattle dies, the headman's share is one rump and one rib. In litigation over cattle, half the court-fee goes to the headman and half to the captain of the regiment. Within the jurisdiction are the villages of Nyodon, Mwedon, Tane, Hlawga, Inmati and Ngayaukthin, and all criminal cases from all these villages are triable by the Taya headman, to whom are payable fees for his presence at the taking of the oath, or at trial by the ordeal of eating rice, or of immersion in water.” (Hardiman 1912: 25)

The general picture offered by this *sittan* displays a locality 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

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<sup>178</sup> What Hardiman call a Church is in reality the Buddhist Sangha or congregation of monks which, unlike a Church, is not organised as an institution *per se*.

image of local governance. Stable provinces gathered groups of villages ruled by the same families for decades. The latter approved the succession of smaller hereditary offices in their countryside and judge or report cases, organise the collection of revenues through nominated revenue collectors, buffer the crown's demands and report to crown appointed officials. Nonetheless, many of these 'traditions' reflect a hierarchical organisation 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 land and harvest come to the forefront. For instance, Toe Hla (1987: 51) reconstituted the land distribution of Thayet-taw, a village of servicemen located near the royal capital of Mandalay, from the patent of land allotment issued by Royal Council (*Hlutaw*) 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 "father's and grandfather's land" (Thant Myint-U 2004: 41). 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 (cf. Chapter 7). The Thayet-taw headman 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<sup>179</sup> 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<sup>180</sup> after harvest.

But for Toe Hla, the local gentry was not a landed class. Labour control was essential because "land was plentiful [but] labour was scarce" (1987: 58).<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> There was a large variety of tenancy agreements, see Toe Hla (1987: 75), GUBSS (part 1, vol 2: 351), for the early colonial period in the Lower Chindwin, see Hardiman (1912) and more recently Boutry et al. (2017) and Huard (2016).

<sup>180</sup> Often called *myaydaing*.

<sup>181</sup> Ferguson (2014: 197) insisted, after a long tradition of scholar, on that Power was not derived through 'territory' *per se* but rather through controlling labour as well as relations with regional powers and central authority waxed and waned.

Nonetheless, his study clearly shows that some gentry families<sup>182</sup> near Alon accumulated large estate through money lending as a way to consolidate their hold over the countryside. At large,

“local hereditary officials appear to have used the wealth derived from such sources as tax and sales commissions to acquire private control of substantial tracts of land through mortgage. [...]. Headmen sometimes claimed private status for other lands under their control as well [...]. Thus, there was some tendency for headmen to use their offices to build up what might be termed “estates,” which were farmed by a tenantry.”  
(Koenig 1990: 143)

And Myinmilaung and Gawgyi had to deal with this kind of power to normalise their settlement (cf. next section and chapter 4).

In the early nineteenth-century, once the gentry families were recognised or created via the inquests, there were fewer avenues to accessing political office. One could be recognised by another authority, inheriting the office or buying it. These practices were not mutually exclusive and often combined. The first option relates to 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 called *auratha* in legal literature<sup>183</sup> – but not always (this have implications in how leadership in farming families is conceived and practice, chapter 7 on inheritance transmission). 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

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<sup>182</sup> Notably the Lezin Family.

<sup>183</sup> 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).

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 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 these posts” (Trager and Koenig 1979: 41). 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, “[c]onsiderable 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.” (1973: 49).

Thibaw (1878-85) became king after Mindon (1853-78). The latter's administrative reforms<sup>184</sup> encountered a strong resistance in the countryside precisely because they tried to change the configuration of power at the expense of the gentry:

“Between 1853 and 1878, and especially in the late 1850s and early 1860s, Mindon and his ministers set in motion a series of policies which, taken together, amounted to a vast change of political power. Administration was centralised, royal agencies were bureaucratised, and a completely new system of taxation was constructed. Underlying these reforms were efforts to rationalise government, *to do away with vagueness, haphazardness and local variation, to construct clear lines of authority and more definite boundaries of jurisdictions*. Centralisation of administration meant increasing the power of appointed provincial officials over the many and varied chiefs

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<sup>184</sup> For another perspective on these reforms, cf. Candier (2014).

of the rural office-holding class [...].” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 115, my emphasis).

Mindon attempted to curb local authorities by centralising and modernising 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. It also planned to rationalise the gentry by creating “a single category of local hereditary officer in the place of the enormously confusing and varied patchwork of local magnates which still existed” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 116). 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 (*ibid.*: 117). By introducing a single and more systematic tax – the household tax or *thathameda* – in the early 1860s, the crown struggled to suppress the old fiscal system “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 specialised manpower as in cash” (*ibid.*: 121). The *thathameda* tax was in theory an income tax amounting to one-tenth of household income and progressively stabilised at a rate of ten rupees. But it proves to be more of a property tax based on people's wealth and activities. In Alon, the tax impacted mostly 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 – yet this tax was a key complaint during later armed rebellion against the crown – they were left in charge of its collection with all the liability for requiring long-standing dues. Besides, Mindon, and later Thibaw, increased the powers of the appointed provincial officials (*myowun*) and introduced new institutions modelled from the British administrative apparatus of Lower Burma like the township officer (*myook*) around Mandalay.<sup>185</sup> Yet, the reforms were unable to profoundly transform the most local level. Coupled with a succession crisis, these reforms partly led to warfare in the countryside:

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<sup>185</sup> The post-1878 government also created ten district commissioners (*hkayaingwun*) or decentralised agents of the kingdom.

“This neglect of the gentry encouraged the increasing penetration by outsiders of still important hereditary offices as well as much infighting among local elite families over chiefly positions. The last proper accounting of local hereditary offices and office-holders had taken place in 1805. 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.” (*ibid.*: 168)

Overall, the battle for office turned into political turmoil during the few years prior to colonisation. Warfare, pervasive in the countryside,<sup>186</sup> was a renegotiation of unstable agreements between the state, local authorities, officials and ‘bandits’. At the crown level, the fall of Konbaung dynasty in the late nineteenth-century looks like 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 during more than a decade before 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 FOUNDING NARRATIVES

This part of history has been mostly forgotten by villagers. But a few myths and legends are still alive and cast into the politics of the Myinmilaung village tract. They underscore the atmosphere of animosity between Myinmilaung proper and Gawgyi. This section explores both villages’ founding narratives as current discourses about history and as key chronological markers that help reconstruct the

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<sup>186</sup> Cf. Charney (2004, 2018).

history of the local polity. As stated earlier, oral memories draw out connections to the past at the expense of others. It displays layers upon layers of history linking Myinmilaung and Gawgyi residents to two different sets of references. 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. But it fails to mention how Myinmilaung and Gawgyi were united under a single polity at the turn of the twentieth century. In contrast, Gawgyi people posit themselves as autochthones, from the land, with thick connections with neighbouring villages and anchoring their knowledge of the region since pre-royal times. These claims, legitimising each other's presence in the countryside, are mutually exclusive. People from Myinmilaung and Gawgyi are not the same. And this is a backdrop against which the rise of village affairs as the main form of politics in Gawgyi – disregarding Myinmilaung but integrating Tozigon village – can be understood.

### **The genuine allochthones**

In U So's narrative, the creation of Myinmilaung occurred 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. But 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 sure is that he is at the centre of the regional spirit cult.<sup>187</sup> As such, he is known as the 'Grandfather of Alon', the local sovereign spirit. The legend of this deity follows a typical narrative where kings submit local sovereigns and turned them into spirits. In his 1912 Lower Chindwin Gazetteer, J. P. Hardiman, Deputy Commissioner of the Lower Chindwin District and Settlement Officer, gave the first account of this legend:

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<sup>187</sup> Alon festival is part of the annual cycle of the main *naq* festival performed in central Myanmar, see Brac de la Perrière (1998).

“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, Pataikaya, 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 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 Brahmins 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).<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Hardiman Gazetteer was found in the British Library archive file 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. 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: 313-316). I also collected a version on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2015 with Alon palace's guardian.

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.” (Brac de la Perrière 1998: 313, my translation). The typical elements included in the tales related to the creation of *naq* by the royalty are presents: the regalia and their magic, the ruse, the wrath of the king, the violent death, the transformation into spirit through royal agency. Simply put, the Grandfather of Alon fled, with his dependents, 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 it was a key event 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.<sup>189</sup> Nonetheless, he is a recognised figure of local power integrated within the narrative of the founding of kingship.<sup>190</sup> Bahtukyweh may not be a person in particular. 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 recognise” (Brac de la Perrière 1996: 49-50, my translation). Thus, 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 chiefs. But he can also be seen as a prominent local person<sup>191</sup> 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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<sup>189</sup> There is no well-established history of how this Pantheon was created and 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 Grandfather, cf. Brac de la Perrière (2005: 231). Spirit cults can be an entry to study specific regions without focusing on state-centred narratives as *naq* stories condense and reconstruct elements of local history within relatively standardised narratives.

<sup>190</sup> Cf. Brac de la Perrière (1989).

<sup>191</sup> Bahtukyweh literally means “the wealthy one”, a title referring to his position in a society largely divided between status groups organised 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).

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 onward:

“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.” (Lieberman 1984: 195)

Two villages traditionally under Badon chieftainship, Thazi and Kyawkka, were listed in the 1745-46 king’s order.<sup>192</sup> 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.<sup>193</sup> Thus, local chiefs affiliated with the camp they deemed successful. In the same vein, the usual independence faded between the servicemen – governed by a hereditary regimental chief<sup>194</sup> – and the chief of the area<sup>195</sup> they are 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” (Lieberman 1984: 236). He targeted the descendants of the Talaing (also called Mon or Peguan) people, garrisoned in Upper Burma as military servicemen, and the

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<sup>192</sup> Cf. Lieberman (1984: 195, note 231).

<sup>193</sup> 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.

<sup>194</sup> Cf. Mya Sein (1973: 42).

<sup>195</sup> Cf. Lieberman (1984: 97) also indicates that the leaders of departmental or territorial jurisdiction located within a township were subordinate to the *myothugyi*.

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, Badon chief was in 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<sup>196</sup> 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 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)<sup>197</sup>

In other words, Alaunghpaya rose as the founder of a new dynasty and the ruler of Badon perished violently in his flight. These events have a striking resemblance with 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 was "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.<sup>198</sup> Badon was early on recorded as a fortified town which had to provide hundreds of

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<sup>196</sup> '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 captive and then transformed as servicemen under the Restored Toungoo kingdom when it vanquished the southern Peguan kingdom. Colonial administrators and early historian often assimilate Talaing, Mon and Peguan in their narrative, using ethnic lenses to explain political affiliations. However, as Lieberman (1978) explains, it is far from obvious that ethnicity was used as a political tool at that time.

<sup>197</sup> 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.

<sup>198</sup> Lieberman (1984: 32), Charney (2006: 62-69).

soldiers to the king's army.<sup>199</sup> Some of them belonged to a specific group of a society organised in ranks according to their closeness with 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.<sup>200</sup> Badon/Alon harboured an important number of servicemen during the eighteenth century<sup>201</sup> and notably<sup>202</sup> a group called the “elite crown service unit” (Koenig 1990: 305) whose members were bond by blood drinking oaths (*thwaythauksu*). This kind of platoon usually lived on irrigated lands granted by the crown near the fortified town of Badon. In other words, Myinmilauq 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 a hideout and founded Myinmilauq were theoretically hereditary servicemen of high status.<sup>203</sup> 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, legitimise 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 emphasises a more religious legacy. In 1776 (1147 B.E.), that is thirty-seven years after its foundation, the village received another name. This time it was U No, a royal astrologer,<sup>204</sup> who stopped by on his way home from the royal capital of Ava. He allegedly founded a pagoda, called Shwepanhla (figure 3), on the eastern side of the village and named the settlement Mingalagon, the “Auspicious Hill”. Name

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<sup>199</sup> Cf. Toe Hla (1995: 37-38), cited from Than Hlaing (2013: 8).

<sup>200</sup> See Charney (2007).

<sup>201</sup> In 1783, according to Koenig's evaluation of population's trends during the Konbaung era, about 56% of the people in Badon Township were crown servicemen who represented 9,684 persons out of 17,418 (Koenig 1990: 241). Among the large variety of servicemen (soldier, boatman, horsemen, gardeners, astrologers...) the type of servicemen living away from the capital area, as for Badon, were mostly soldiers (Lieberman 1984: 94).

<sup>202</sup> Personal communication from U San Tiha, senior associate professor of history at Monywa University.

<sup>203</sup> The *thwaythauksu* platoons were, according to the listing of over 200 types of servicemen made in 1691, the elites guards enjoying the highest social standing among the servicemen (Lieberman 1984: 174).

<sup>204</sup> Astrologer does not correctly render the Burmese *ayudawmingala amatgyi* but relates to how this person read omens.

changes are a quite common practice for villages but also for people and reflect a layering of histories in a person's or a place's trajectory. A person may change his or her name when he or she deems it useful. "This is especially the case when a person considers himself "unlucky", literally "not having good karma". However, one does not change one's name only when things go wrong, but also when the person is at an important turning point in his life and one must place this new beginning under the best omens." (Robinne 1998: 92, my translation). In our case, from "Not Enough Horses", denoting Bahtukyweh's debacle, the name became "Auspicious Hill" and the village received a pagoda, which became at 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.

But overall, Myinmilaung's founding narrative condenses layers upon 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 legitimise the very existence of the settlement. Myinmilaung story is thus not about autochthony, but about being genuine allochthones with enough credentials to give legitimacy 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**

But Gawgyi people have a different story about the foundation of Shwepanhla pagoda, even if the village was created after. For them, U So failed to mention that it belongs to a series of three pagodas which were not created by U No, but by an alchemist long before Badon became a fortified town. There is Shwepanhla near Myinmilaung (recently renovated), Shwepanhswé near Budaungkan (also renovated), and Shwepankhaing located in the farm fields north of Gawgyi (figure 3). The three pagodas dot an old road between Kyawkka and Badon/Alon. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2016, we visited Shwepankhaing with Ko Kyaw and his brother.



Figure 6. Shwepankhaing, the abandoned pagoda

It is a ten-minute drive from Gawgyi, followed by a five-minute walk. Nowadays, nobody really goes there anymore. We get off the bikes and stop by a small pond. Both of them repeatedly told me that they were just Buddhist, that they do not believe<sup>205</sup> in *naq*. Yet, as we approach the abandoned pagoda, Ko Kyaw's

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<sup>205</sup> Using the verbe *yongyi*, which means, following Rozenberg argument (2015), that they do not personally and actively engage with *naq*.

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 for a place where he could perform a ritual to become a *zawgyi*, that is, a semi-immortal human with supernatural powers. On the way, whenever a cart's wheel hub broke down, a pagoda was established. The persons who helped building them, putting the gold (*shwe*) inside before sealing it, died (maybe sacrificed) and became *hsoun* (a sort of ghost acting as the guardian spirit of the pagoda) that can catch you with their 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 this pagoda. People are afraid of coming here. People used to go there one generation ago, but when somebody took gold and brought it 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<sup>206</sup> as a *zawgyi*. That hill is called Powintaung<sup>207</sup> and the legend about the *zawgyi* is said to have happened before the advent of Theravada Buddhism in the country,<sup>208</sup> and even before Bagan Kingdom (9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E.). Some even think that the alchemist story happened before the Tagaung dynasty<sup>209</sup> (9<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.). 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 this terms, Gawgyi people anchor their settlement in continuity with this history.

They, however, 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 of Gawgyi elders said that a famine pushed their ancestors to move away. The most important famines in

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<sup>206</sup> The local legend says that he was reborn directly as an adult.

<sup>207</sup> Powintaung is a major archaeological site harbouring a complex set of caves displaying mural paintings and status 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.

<sup>208</sup> Theravada Buddhism was allegedly introduced under the King Anawrahta (1044-78).

<sup>209</sup> The Tagaung Kingdom is a semi-legendary state officially proclaimed to be the first Burmese Kingdom by the Royal Chronicle (*Hmannan Yazawin*) of the Konbaung dynasty which links this dynasty to the Sakya clan of Buddha himself.

this area were related to King Bodawhpaya's increasing requests for corvées, soldiers and taxes which led to a great change in the kingdom's demographics in the early nineteenth century.<sup>210</sup> For his campaign against Siam in 1809, "every town and village [were] required to produce a certain number of men" (Koenig 1990: 34). If the local hereditary chiefs failed to recruit, officials in charge of the conscription were ordered to confiscate villagers' properties and to carry out 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 and the systemic lack of farm labour, due to state recruitment and people migrations, led to the great famines from the 1800s to the 1810s.

Gawgyi settlers went a few miles away from Ywadon (figure 3) and the village's spirit shrine is located on the way between these two places, on the verge of Gawgyi. It seems that a few families joined where there was a "large flat pond" (*gangawgyi*) appearing during the monsoons. The village was named after this pond. Today, most of the villagers are part of loosely structured lineages evolving through descent and marriage. The local political theory is that the main lineages of the village come from Ywadon families who became the first farmers in Gawgyi. After settling close to the pond, the villagers created a more permanent living space to the west. They organised that space around two main pathways going from east to west and north to south. Since that time, these ways orient the flows of *mingala*, or "auspicious influence"). The east is the auspicious entrance and the south the inauspicious exit leading to the cemetery.<sup>211</sup> The construction of houses also followed village pathways. Gawgyi pagoda and monastery, the other elements delineating village space, were founded later in the north by an influential monk, U Za Nay Ya, who lived there since the early 1900s (chapter 4). This matrix of settlement influences how village space is imagined and, as we will see in chapter 6 and 8, negotiated.

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<sup>210</sup> Cf. Koenig 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, canals and pagodas construction, or escape state demands by migrating away. Cf. Koenig (1990: 142-143) and Furnivall (1957: 39).

<sup>211</sup> Cf. the general introduction and the section on landscape.

In the Gawgyi narrative, the idea is thus that they are indigenous locals. They come from the land and, as many villages, settled near a waterhole. They do not justify their presence with a narrative connecting their presence with the royalty or a local sovereign. With the shape of the village, the concentration of houses in 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 with Myinmilaung, play the commoner's card (*athi*), whose strict definition – “landowners living permanently in one locale” (*ibid.*: 114) – supports their claim for 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, Shwepanhsw. However, during the same period, more families from Ywadon also moved and settled near Gawgyi to create Tozigon village. And today, Tozigon villagers depend upon Gawgyi for conducting ceremonies (as we will see in chapter 6 and 8) since its main families were integrated within Gawgyi lineages. The scope of what is common in village affairs (chapter 4 and 8) was thus extended to Tozigon, but never encompassed Myinmilaung proper nor Budaungkan.

Therefore, the different narratives of foundation also reflect the long-term relations between neighbouring villages. In this perspective, the opposition between Myinmilaung proper and Gawgyi is expressed, at one level, in divergent, if not competing, narratives of indigeneity: one emphasising its 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 organisation 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 with Kyawkka (figure 3). Both Thazi and Kyawkka chiefs traditionally ruled areas of dry lands of more or less good quality while the “Lord of Monywa” looked southward toward irrigated soils mostly (Lieberman 1984: 236).

Gawgyi was created when King Bodawhpaya tried to stabilise 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 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 were recognised as ten-houses’ 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 mobilised if affiliated with a local chieftainship. Koenig points 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 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was not many differences between servicemen and commoners: almost every commoner was a serviceman. The difference laid mostly in the kind of agreement they were able to negotiate with the neighbouring chiefs.

The cultivated areas – mostly dry lands first farmed through shifting cultivation and a few rice paddies – varied with the growth of the village population and their capacity to accumulate cattle and seeds as well as being able to get loans from the local gentry. Gawgyi villagers progressively created their own cultivation area by trading to the 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 more or less formalised system of tenure – and taxation – emerging from the stabilisation of the settlements was always subject

to change depending on natural hazards, war, famines, migrations and on 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 stabilisation of villages then integrated the larger fiscal system of the royalty “divided between the granting of appanages, collecting rent on crown lands and receiving portion of the various gentry-controlled customary fees and obligations, as much in kind or specialised manpower as in cash” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 121). 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 recognised by the royalty. For instance, according to an order dated on 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 also the paying of taxes.<sup>212</sup> Local chiefs like the Kyawkka leader gathered more wealth and fixed manpower while villagers like Gawgyi people were recognised 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 (Obo). A better understanding of the political dynamics of that period can be drawn from the study of how this settlement was standardised. 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?

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<sup>212</sup>Cf. Mya Stein (1973: 166-171).

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> 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 [...]. [P]atoon members commonly received lands as a conditional grant from the crown. [...]. In return for these tokens of royal favor, 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 them periodic gratuities that were quite distinct from their responsibilities to the crown.” (Lieberman 1984: 96–101)

If we assume that Myinmilaung founders were living under almost similar conditions near the fortified town of Badon before Alaunghpaya chased them, then why did they not go back to their homeland afterwards? Let’s get back to what Hardiman stated about Bahtukyweh’s flight as a start:

“[...] the Burmese contingent deserted [...] Alaunghpaya left garrisons in the villages east of the Chindwin, appointed headmen, and took oaths of allegiance.” (Hardiman 1912: 20).

The neighbouring chieftainships (Badon, Thazi and Kyawkka) were fragmented and competing when Myinmilaung was founded. One scenario is that Myinmilaung founders were recognised through their former military status. But instead, the village was established near another one called Oo Bo 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 Corp” (*Anauksu*), the “Eastern Corp” (*Ashayzu*), and the “Corp of the Middle” (*Alezu*). These are the old names – sometimes still in use – recalled by current villagers and they clearly denote a regimental organisation (*su* or *zu*). (figure 9).

Even if Bahtukyweh was ultimately their chief, the servicemen gathered in the flight may not have all been from the exact 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 were essential manpower for the royalty<sup>213</sup> and local sovereigns. Leadership – usually at the royal and gentry levels – was legitimated in terms of charismatic power, of patronage and of rightful filiation. As seen in the general introduction, a chief was chosen either because of his achievements, his affiliation with supra-authorities through patron-client relationships, and because he posits himself as the head of 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 organisation and/or affiliation on kin ties shaped the making of this new political entity.

But what did they become? Were they still servicemen or did they become *athi*, that is commoners solely liable of 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,<sup>214</sup> one of the main avenues for a serviceman to change his hereditary status was debt bondage,<sup>215</sup> by mortgaging himself and/or his family to a patron. But our case may be different. Myinmilaung founders gradually entered under the authority of the Thazi chief who expanded his territory. We assume so because there is no evidence – neither in

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<sup>213</sup> The servicemen population was notably expanded and reorganised in the mid-seventeenth century under the Restored Taungoo dynasty, notably under the king Thalun (1629-1648) who ordered the recording of servicemen appanages' acreages and boundaries, taxes and obligations due, population statistics and precising the role of village 'headmen' in recording population's movements in 1635-1638 (cf. Lieberman, 1984:104). This prefigures a larger reorganisation of servicemen under the Konbaung King Bodawpaya (1782-1819).

<sup>214</sup> Cf. Lieberman (1984: 102, 107, 166). Lieberman also relates to Adas (1981: 226-228) and Hanks (1962) in his discussion of whether debt-slavery was an act of protest or a way to accommodate a deteriorating situation.

<sup>215</sup> There were broadly three categories of bondmen: the religious ones donated to a monastery for its upkeep for instance; the hereditary ones, usually prisoner 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, or those willing to change their status to escape the obligations ascribed to it. Cf. Lieberman (1984: 107).

historical accounts nor in early colonial reports<sup>216</sup> – showing that land was allocated to military servicemen where Myinmilaung was created.

So, 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 agreed 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 1887-90, but it later disappeared in favour of Ogon (the “Pots’ Hill”) in Hardiman’s Report of the Regular Settlement of 1909. My hypothesis is that U Bo Bo<sup>217</sup> 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 one 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.<sup>218</sup> 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<sup>219</sup> to be the loci of a gentry family sovereign over a large group of villages (the usual form of local office). It was, however, a small village chief who 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 Corp”, “East Corp” and “Middle Corp”) were probably considered as 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 ahi 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” (Koenig 1990: 114). In other words, people creating a village sooner or later faced

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<sup>216</sup> 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 (cf. chapter 4).

<sup>217</sup> As for Bathukywe, U Bo Bo is a generic term used to name an authority of the past. It means the “old man” and most probably refers to the person who gave his name to this village specialised in the making of pot (“O”).

<sup>218</sup> Those names (U Bo Shwe, U Bo Nyunt, U Bo Hla and so on) covers the best land surrounding the village. And the adjunction of an ancestor name in the one of the children, rare in the Burmese context, indicates a common lineage when it happens to such an extent.

<sup>219</sup> Composed of 33 households in the late 1810, while Thazi was the home of 622 households (the figures correspond to the number of households assessed for the payment of tax in the late 1910s). Cf. Hardiman (1909: 179-180).

different types of authority. And the customary dues and duties owed to each other, as they appear in the *sittan*, stemmed from the agreements settled during the first encounters.

In Myinmilaung case, it became gradually encapsulated within the expanding village territory of 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 dynamics at the gentry level, depended on the recognition from royalty, the 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). Yet, another means to expand one's hold over the countryside was money lending. In the Thazi-Myinmilaung case, this relationship lasted (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.

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 noviciate ceremonies, to rent draft cattle, to buy seeds, pay labour and sometimes taxes, and to finance court fees in case of inheritance dispute.<sup>220</sup> Sometimes, a village chief also took loans to pay crown taxes. Loans were mostly contracted from April to July,<sup>221</sup> that is before and during major agricultural work.<sup>222</sup> “Peasant proprietors, whenever they were faced with economic hardship due to failure of rain, political unrest, natural calamities or epidemics, used to mortgage 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<sup>223</sup> during normal periods, in times of hardship, the local money lenders, usually the

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<sup>220</sup> For a discussion of the impact of money lending on commoners, see Toe Hla (1987), and notably chapter 6 “Money lending and the common people” (pp.186-230).

<sup>221</sup> Cf. Toe Hla figures on distribution of loans on a monthly basis in Lezin village (1987: 221).

<sup>222</sup> A trend that is still prominent today, cf. Boutry et al. (2017).

<sup>223</sup> It means that the mortgagee was the one farming the land.

gentry families, provided money to the mortgagor who often kept working 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<sup>224</sup>, 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 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 since the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>225</sup> 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 during the colonial period. And Thazi's successive chiefs are called, *a posteriori*, *myayshin*<sup>226</sup> (literally “landlord”) by the elders in and around Myinmilaung. And 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.<sup>227</sup> In the case of Myinmilaung, this was done by first making the new settlement liable to them. Over

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<sup>224</sup> Cf. Toe Hla (1987: 156-160).

<sup>225</sup> Cf. Saito (1997) for a study of this process in a rice growing area.

<sup>226</sup> A name denoting control over land, harvests, debts and manpower rather than ownership.

<sup>227</sup> This is something that Hardiman, as Settlement Commissioner, will attempt to analyse when devising a system of taxation taking the various forms of tenancies into account.

time, Myinmilaung people were initially also able to clear new lands through shifting cultivation. But they hardly matched the strict category of commoner because of their dependency toward the Thazi family.

## CONCLUSION

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 unsteady centres by engaging with preceding and in-the-making 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 ensuing crown demands for labour and soldiers (1810s-20s). 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 change 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. The renewed attempts by the kings to control these fragmented sovereignties from 1850s onward led to a renegotiation of local leadership and to warfare. This was the very situation the British encountered when colonising Upper Burma and they, for a complex set of reasons, 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, along

this period of more than a century, the stakes of the competition for leadership changed, but the competition remained.

This chapter also showed that, 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 organisation. They each have a specific link in 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 toward 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 degrees, reflects the scope of possible commonalities between both settlements. They had to live together under the same village tract since the early nineteenth century, they intermarried, and exchanged ceremonials presents. But they are not in solidarity.

The question now is to look at how village headship has been imagined and imposed during the British's '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.

## INTERLUDE. THE EMERGENCE OF VILLAGE HEADSHIP (1880s-1890s)

### “THE IDEAL *THUGYI*...”

“[T]he ideal *thugyi* is a man who possessed influence and has good family connections in the circle in which he presides. [...] He must possess a good knowledge of land measurement and surveying. He should be able to exercise his influence for good in any way that affects the welfare of his circle without concentrating on revenue only; more particularly in matters relating to crime, and he should aid police enquiry by affording information of bad characters, by procuring evidence, by putting police in possession of those detective agencies with which his long residence and local experience on the spot will have made him familiar.” (Colonel Sladen 1883, cited in Mya Sein 1973: 79).

“[...] the gentry class [...] governed the countryside under varying degrees of royal direction. Often titled and granted sumptuary privileges, these men served as intermediaries between the distant Court [...] and the thousands of villages and hamlets scattered across the lowlands. And yet British policy-makers, rather than attempting to co-opt their services into the next regime, deliberately shunted them aside. Myothugyi quickly lost their dominant position. *What had been a complex hierarchy of local hereditary offices dissolved into a sea of undifferentiated and salaried village headmanships.*” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 4–5, my emphasis).

“The object of the Regulation is to establish on a legal basis the existing village system in Upper Burma. The Government of India is aware that the chief characteristic of Burman society is its inorganic nature. There is no hereditary aristocracy and no tribal or caste system. The only rank

which is recognised is official; even the differences in wealth between man and man are insufficient to give any preponderating influence to individuals. *It is therefore of the greatest importance that the only form of organic life which Burman society exhibits, namely, the village system, should be maintained and strengthened.*”<sup>228</sup>

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The above citations question the type of governmentality British colonialism has been willing to create in Upper Burma. For Colonel Sladen, a British army officer with a long experience in British India and in Burma,<sup>229</sup> the ideal headman (*thugyi*, meaning “the great”) should be a local with personal influence; a sort of patron with moral authority, incline and able to implement British policy. For Thant Myint-U, historian, colonialism destructed the precolonial hierarchy that organised the countryside based on the gentry. For Smeaton, voice of 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.

To some extent, these citations relate to many debates, one has just to think of Scott’s arguments, partly related to the peasantry in the rice frontier of Lower Burma, 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 establishing the village system reveals the differences of opinion between Crosthwaite and other officials over how precolonial society should be conceptualised, 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, in the assumption that Burmese society had been homogeneous and that one administrative system had been prevalent throughout. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the village system and headship have emerged in our area of study in order to connect it to a major transformation of Myinmilaung and

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<sup>228</sup> Cf. REVSUB, letter dated 8 of September 1887 and written by Smeaton.

<sup>229</sup> Sir Edward Bosc Sladen (1831-1890) was a British army officer who worked in India. He served as the organiser 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.

Gawgyi political arena in the next chapter. Following scholarship that challenge the idea of colonial invention,<sup>230</sup> I chose to talk about the ‘emergence’ to give room for continuities, ruptures, reinterpretations, reforms and reconstructions. In this vein, the chapter supports a narrative that underscores the historical part of this thesis, namely that the creation of headship was but an episode of competition for leadership understood as a *longue durée* dynamics of the local polity. Thus, the question of whether or not the British have broken the “moral and administrative control” of local Burmese elites (Thant Myint-U 2001: 198) 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 on revenue and land administration mostly. Yet, its inception happened in a context of warfare during the ‘pacification campaign’ (1886-89) following the annexation of Upper Burma in 1885. The fashioning of this policy stems from a search for local tradition<sup>231</sup> but 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 the new regime. The gathering of intelligence about the local authorities showed a rather diverse political landscape. Nonetheless, village headship was devised as if an indigenous institution. This policy was a legal *bricolage* that used local customs fitting 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. And 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 centralised government. As we will see in the following chapters, it had a lasting effect as a matrix of local government. It insulated villages

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<sup>230</sup> Notably Berry (1993) and Spear (2003).

<sup>231</sup> See the archive file REVSUB.

within groups, or village tracts, and became the subject of protest against colonialism (chapter 4) and will remained the base of local governance.<sup>232</sup>

This chapter has a specific voice as it draws from archives research<sup>233</sup> and secondary sources<sup>234</sup> but not from field data *per se*. It is an incursion within the making of a policy and relates to scholarship that studied colonialism as a non-monolithic enterprise.<sup>235</sup> While first section describes the context of warfare during the pacification campaign, the second explores the *ad hoc* appointments of headmen in Alon subdivision and the third focuses on the content of the village system.

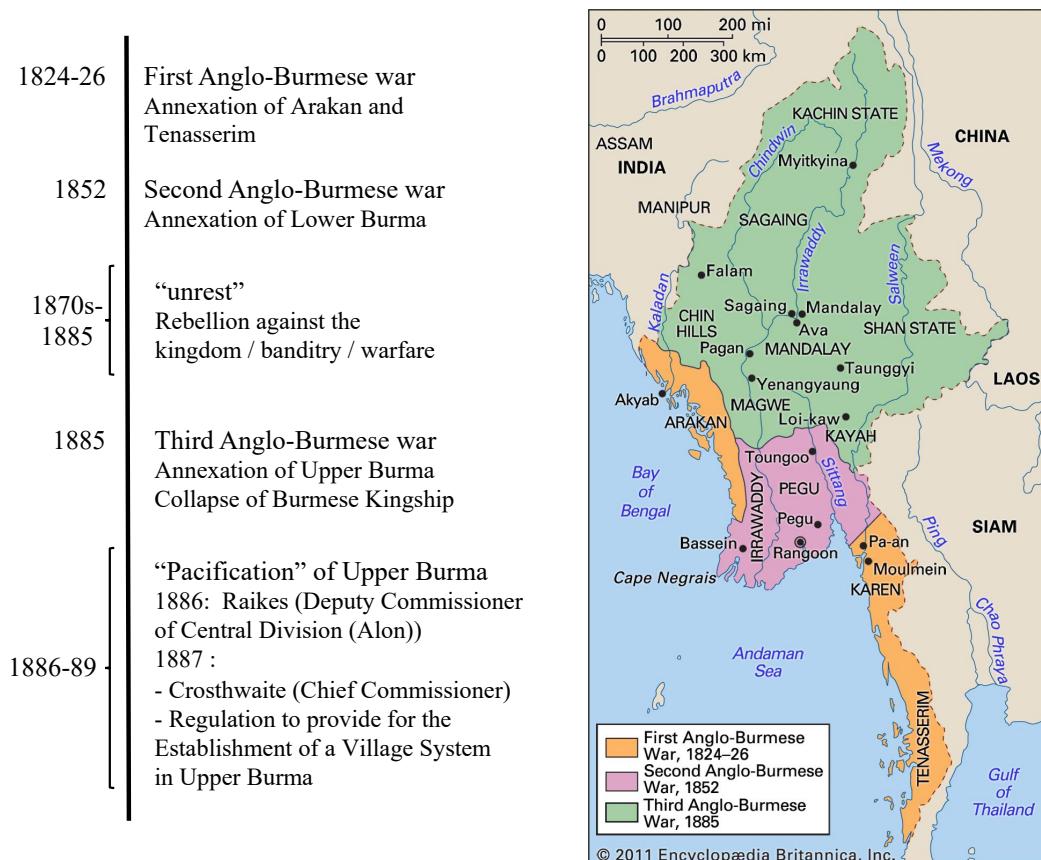


Figure 12. Timeline of the emergence of village headship and map of colonial Burma

<sup>232</sup> For instance, once the socialist regime collapsed in the 1970s, the ensuing military government will use headman to control people's movement, enforcing forced labour; cf. chapter 5.

<sup>233</sup> Cf. notably REVSUB, GUBSS, Hardiman (1909, 1912) and in the British Library Archive file 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).

<sup>234</sup> Notably Aung-Thwin (1985), Charney (2004, 2018), Cheesman (2015), Crosthwaite (1912), Iwaki (2015), Mya Sein (1973), Thant Myint-U (2001) and White (1913).

<sup>235</sup> 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.

## WARFARE AND PACIFICATION

Since 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 squabble between villages over resources and leadership. There was not one unified ‘rebellion’ against the crown with a clear-cut agenda and temporality but rather many dynamics. The gentry leaders who maintained their position like Monywa and Thazi chiefs fought openly or covertly against the king. They gradually stop transferring the revenue and maintained appointed officials out of local affairs. They also retained as much as they could their claim over judicial jurisdictions, used once again servicemen and soldiers as private retainers, expanded their territory and accumulating 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’s over resources<sup>236</sup> in the midst of large migrations toward the forests and the 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. The reigning King Thibaw was sent in exile in India and overnight the Burmese kingship disappeared. The Chief Commissioner first attempted to rule through the Royal Council and the few officials and ministers not openly in rebellion. Soon the British decided that the Burmese state could not be transformed as a protectorate due to his weak hold over its former empire. They chose to rule directly most of the kingdom’s ‘nuclear zone’ and indirectly for most of its prior tributaries.<sup>237</sup> The imposition of a direct rule was gradual. The first step was the

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<sup>236</sup> Cf. Charney (2018).

<sup>237</sup> Gradually becoming, among others, the Shan (cf. GUBSS), the Kachin (Leach (1954), Robinne and Sadan (2007), Sadan (2013)), the Chin (Lehman (1963)) areas.

‘pacification’ of the countryside during which precolonial turmoil often turned into guerrilla warfare, in continuity with the precolonial period.<sup>238</sup> 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. 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 – yet imagined – customary position able 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). Along subdivision was quickly ‘pacified’ during the first months of 1886. In many other areas there was a more or less organised 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”.<sup>239</sup> 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 “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). And the kingdom officials recently appointed were a prime target.

To some extent, ‘social banditry’,<sup>240</sup> outright looting and resistance were conflated into one picture of endemic rural violence that required colonial rule.<sup>241</sup> Cheesman argues that there was a deliberate misuse of the term rebel and dacoit (or ‘bandit’) by the colonial administrators as it allowed to ignore the grievances that

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<sup>238</sup> Cf. Aung-Thwin (1985b).

<sup>239</sup> Cf. GUBSS vol.1, part 1: 119

<sup>240</sup> Eric Hobsbawm (1959, 1969) defines social bandit or social crime as a popular form of lower-class social resistance involving behaviour characterised by law as illegal but supported by wider (usually peasant) society as being moral and acceptable.

<sup>241</sup> As Ranajit Guha (1997) has argued concerning India where rural violence (crime and resistance) had been homogenised by the colonial administration.

could explain the violence (2015: 194-195). 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<sup>242</sup> of violent conflicts between rural settlements in competition for water, trade, or other resources.” (2018: 169-171). Village headship became a resource to fight for in Alon region. And so, it is easy to imagine how some people turn out to be clients of the new regime and sought opportunities locally by becoming headmen.

## THE SEARCH FOR TRADITIONS

Crosthwaite’s village system was born out of an ideology of pacification,<sup>243</sup> 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<sup>244</sup> went rapidly under colonial rule within Alon subdivision and later in Alon

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<sup>242</sup> Smith (1991: 88-101) argued for seeing banditry as a social fact in the *longue durée* of the country history, as small groups of armed men, called *tat*, or pocket armies, were always present as during Alaunghpaya conquests, before and during the British ‘pacification’, in the 1920s-1930s, after British departure (from 1946/47 to the 1960s) and then it became located mostly in the hills area with ethnic minorities.

<sup>243</sup> Aung-Thwin (1985b) argued for a different understanding and temporality of the ‘pacification’ between the British and the Burmese. The former seeing it as the eradication of rebels and the territorialisation of revenues in a rather short time (1886-89), while the latter’s idea of pacification relates to a different temporality, in which only after Ne Win coup in 1962 was the country pacified, marking an end to the revolts and the restoration of order since the departure of the King.

<sup>244</sup> They were too small to appear in the records yet.

Township.<sup>245</sup> Raikes' diary,<sup>246</sup> written during the 'pacification campaign' in the Chindwin District, shows that the nomination of local intermediaries was an *ad hoc* process. It involves the need to find pre-existing authorities or reliable candidates, to fight dacoits, to secure supplies routes and to include population and territories within legible jurisdictions whenever possible – jurisdictions that could be transformed afterward. 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.

But 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 the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1887, Crosthwaite gave instructions 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 villages 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*

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<sup>245</sup> Once the Division was split into three townships.

<sup>246</sup> Cf. *Raikes Papers*.

for revenue purposes, the police circles should coincide with them so far as may be.”<sup>247</sup>

This abstract 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 double-edge sword: 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. But there was 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 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” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 212). The challenge for the officers was to define who is subordinate to whom, who can appoint whom, what revenue existed, how is it shared and why is a position 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 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

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<sup>247</sup> Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph n° 949, my emphasis.

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 *Hluttaw*, 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 *Thugyi*s who own and cultivate land. I am informed that the majority of the *Thugyi*s in Lower Chindwin are not landholders; [...]. Maps<sup>248</sup> 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 *Thugyi*s and help getting in *thathameda* collections and in carrying out of orders of officials in their villages; they receive a small remuneration from *Thugyi*s and are exempted from payment of tax.”<sup>249</sup>

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 generalisations. 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 standardised as much as possible.<sup>250</sup> Matching local jurisdictions with police posts meant recognising 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

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<sup>248</sup> I have not been able to find these maps.

<sup>249</sup> Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph n°53-8 by Raikes dated 24 June 1887.

<sup>250</sup> This relates to the questions concerning headmen’s remuneration (whether based on a share of the *thathameda* they collected or through tax exemptions and land allocations), concerning the potential usefulness of the ten-houses’ heads and the matching of police posts with village groupings.

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 dynamics of the countryside. But the village system was imagined in a different perspective.

## THE VILLAGE SYSTEM

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of 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 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.”<sup>251</sup>

The regulation was a ‘how to’ organise 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 built for themselves a jurisdiction. Let 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

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<sup>251</sup> Cf. REVSUB, Art. 3 of the final regulation.

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 writings 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.”<sup>252</sup> There were, as we have seen above, gentry leaders and a system of status group more or less organised by the crown. And, as stated in the previous chapter, this system was fragile and always shifting. Rural warfare and the diversity of leadership in Upper Burma resulted from a traffic in affiliation and contributed to the argument that a standardised system was needed. But the imagery of the Village System also draws from the past experiences of administrators.

Crosthwaite’s solution for the problem of local government first comes from the situation in Lower Burma – constituted after the first (1824-26) and second (1852) Anglo-Burmese wars. In Lower Burma, “the village headman generally style 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 no one will obey.” (Crosthwaite 1912: 82-83). Mya Sein, in her book about Burma administration (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 since the Police Act of 1861 they became mere revenue collector when government’s “attention was called to revenue matters, surveying and land-measuring” (1973: 77). Instead,

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<sup>252</sup> Cf. *incipit*.

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.<sup>253</sup> They were said 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 kydangyis of the lower province.”<sup>254</sup> To defend his policy, Crosthwaite postulated that headmen’s authority was still alive in Upper Burma and needed a legal basis.

But there were other motives: being able to crush ambushing dacoits and especially pressuring those who help 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 on British India, about how to fight effectively banditry in Upper and Lower Burma. His idea comes from his first appointment in Burma few years before<sup>255</sup> and is 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 for 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 “intent to commit crime”.

The headman then had to assist every higher official for any purpose, to investigate and report cases happening 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”,<sup>256</sup> to report new comers,

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<sup>253</sup> This argument also relates to Scott’s idea about the erosion of precolonial patrons due to the multiplication of offices during the colonial period (1972b).

<sup>254</sup> Cf. REVSUB, letter dated 8 September 1887 and written by Smeaton.

<sup>255</sup> He replaced the then Chief Commissioner on a year’s leave in 1883-1884.

<sup>256</sup> Cf. REVSUB 1887, art 5 of the regulation.

resist bandits' attacks and to stockade his village.<sup>257</sup> A headman also had to supply "food or carriage for troops or police", to furnish workers for "public works" and to register population demographics (*ibid.*). Finally, he was responsible for tax collection and for allocating 'unoccupied land' within his jurisdiction. In return, villagers were to assist the headman in the execution of his duties or else being fined or imprisoned. In other words, the headman became the new armed wing of the colonial government. But the joint responsibility of all villagers was also a crucial element. One can find it in the art. 9 and 13 under the rubric "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.

In the same way they imagined the headman as if an indigenous institution, colonial officers did support 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 thing is that the custom unearthed from locales was related to stolen cattle. Soon it was 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 about the existing laws that should be passed to better govern the country. One proposition from Ava 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

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<sup>257</sup> This is interesting to put in perspective with Nash's account, some fifty years later, that fence repair was a sign of belonging to a village polity (1965: 74).

another village [...], or to pay the value of them".<sup>258</sup> Reporting this custom to the Chief Commissioner in January, the Commissioner of the Central Division added that "[t]his custom has received the sanction of law in Punjab".<sup>259</sup> 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".<sup>260</sup> 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".<sup>261</sup>

## CONCLUSION

What was actually devised through the village system was a new form of governmentality: a cheap bureaucratisation of the countryside based on villagers' joint responsibility under a headman acting as a 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 as 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 systematising a bureaucracy based on local customs whenever possible. But at that time, the gentry was far from being a corporate group and competition for leadership – through warfare, office buying, claim to heredity – was a main political dynamic.

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<sup>258</sup> Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph n°89-2 by Gates dated 27 December 1886.

<sup>259</sup> Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph n° 801 by Fryer dated 3 January 1887.

<sup>260</sup> Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph n° 60 by De La Courneuve dated 14 February 1887.

<sup>261</sup> Cf. REVSUB, Telegraph n°212-1-20 by Eales dated 19 February 1887.

The large variety of office holders were then amalgamated under the *thugyi* rubric. Yet, this gradual change of meaning is not entirely consistent with the Burmese concept and echoes the will to extract offices of 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 member of 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 never was a clear division, and the late pre-colonial 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 swept into the ongoing competition for power in the countryside. And the merging of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi within a single village tract resulted from this dynamic.

The chapter also made a case for approaching the early colonial period in Upper Burma in relation with previous experiences 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’ of 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 and led to the islanding of the countryside 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 organise directly or indirectly the local society, the successive government made use of the village system, may it be for implementing the socialist policies or organising forced labour under direct military rule (chapter 5). It created a cheap system to control people movement and extract wealth through land taxes mostly. 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.

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 colonisation under the village system policy. In the previous chapter, we saw that

Myinmilaung was most probably dependent upon Thazi chief and Gawgyi upon Kyawkka's before the pacification campaign. These links endured the colonial encounter to a certain extent. Many of Myinmilaung farmers were still tenants of Thazi chief in the aftermaths of annexation. As noted by Raikes, Alon still had a *myothugyi* ruling over 23 out of the 66 *thugyi* recognised within the township. Thazi and Kyawkka chiefs were probably among the 43 remaining ones in 1887. But Myinmilaung became a village tract under its first headman, a man from Myinmilaung proper.

## CHAPTER 4. THE LAST MEN OF *HPON* (1890s-1950s)

### THE BIRTH OF MYINMILAUNG TRACT

The reader shall take a look back at the map of the village tract (figure 9). This map is part of a theme developed throughout this thesis centred on how Myinmilaung became the name of the local polity. The current repartition of the villages in different tracts, with their respective headmen, relates to the implementation of the village system during colonial times and of the mapping of the landscape to create a system of land revenue. But then why was Myinmilaung proper, the settlement founded in the mid-eighteenth century, divided, right in the middle, going through three village tracts? Why did Gawgyi became part of Myinmilaung tract? Who were the first headmen, and, beyond village headship, how did local forms of authority and hierarchy evolve?

Since the emergence of the village tract, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung have been fighting over its control and the 2016 selection of the headman exemplifies this dynamic (chapter 2). 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 from the bureaucracy over the countryside was far from complete. In the Lower Chindwin District, the general context was that of an increasing population who competed more and more for land.<sup>262</sup> 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.<sup>263</sup> U Nyunt and his son ruled during these decades, a moment when the institution of headship crystallised the protests against colonialism<sup>264</sup> in an atmosphere of moral breakdown.<sup>265</sup> The moral universe was shifting as laypeople came to think about

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<sup>262</sup> Cf. Hardiman (1909, 1912) and Hughes (1932).

<sup>263</sup> Cf. Hughes (1932).

<sup>264</sup> Cf. Cady (1960: 271)

<sup>265</sup> Cf. Turner (2014).

their role as protectors of Buddhism now that the king was gone. And the moralisation of behaviours in daily lives intersected with the contestation of colonial authority.

The next headman, U To Kaing, is described as a strong and a good 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 *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,<sup>266</sup> the local unfolding of independence politics in the 1930s, the Japanese invasion and rule (1942-45), followed by a political maelstrom (from 1946-48) 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 (1958-60) and eventually seized power by force (1962 coup). To some extent, the worth of U To Kaing stems from how he embodied a new kind of authority based on his achievements and social belonging. And yet, his authority is expressed today using the vocabulary of charismatic leadership: a man of *hpon*, thought to be one of the last. And 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 organised in status groups affiliated with a variety of patrons (chiefs, hereditary office holders, money lenders, and so on), the main farming families gradually became the top of the local hierarchy as they were able to challenge and control access to wealth by monopolising leadership.

This chapter explores the history of local politics<sup>267</sup> from the 1890s to the early 1950s in three parts. The first two follow a chronological order and the last covers 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.<sup>268</sup> It shows that village headship

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<sup>266</sup> See Brown (2005, 2013) for how the economic depression hit Burma at large. Hughes (1932) provides information of the economic trends in the Lower Chindwin region prior to the depression.

<sup>267</sup> This chapter does not directly address economic changes/agricultural transformations at larger scale, nor is it concerned with the impact of the economic depression at the turn of 1930s, nor about the rebellions and the anti-government movements.

<sup>268</sup> The archives are presented in the bibliography and a cadastral map is displayed in Appendix A.

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, headship became a matter of individuals as 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<sup>269</sup> of the early decades of colonial rule. It illustrates how these personalities became exemplary figures for the moralisation of behaviours and engagement in people's affairs when villagers reimaged their role as Buddhists and challenged colonial rule. This perspective allows for the rethinking of Nash's concepts<sup>270</sup> about power and authority 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,<sup>271</sup> but as a phase of reorganisation 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 – are all simultaneously concerned with 'localised' 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 tenancies 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 state and armed group land reform projects by monopolising local leadership as well as organising the hierarchy between "real farmers" (*taungthu*) and mere "labourers" (*myaukthu*). Thus, U To Kaing sits at the

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<sup>269</sup> Cf. Aung-Thwin (2011), Brown (2013), Cady (1960), Charney (2009), Donnison (1953), Furnivall (1957), Mya Sein (1973), Smith (1991), Steinberg (1981), Taylor (2009), Tinker (1967, 1968), Turner (2014).

<sup>270</sup> Cf. the general introduction, more precisely the section on the uses of Nash's work, and Nash (1963, 1965).

<sup>271</sup> There are, at least, two discourses about the effects of colonialism embodied by two scholars. For Aung-Thwin (1985b), the colonial order lack meanings for Burmese subject, and Ne Win restored order after decades of conflicts. For Furnivall, the Burmese society became a 'plural society', the produce of colonial rule and the introduction of market force without regulation which atomise 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. Cf. Furnivall (1948) and Guan (2009).

juncture between the colonial headman, the man of *hpon* and propriety on the one hand, and the representative of the new local order on the other.

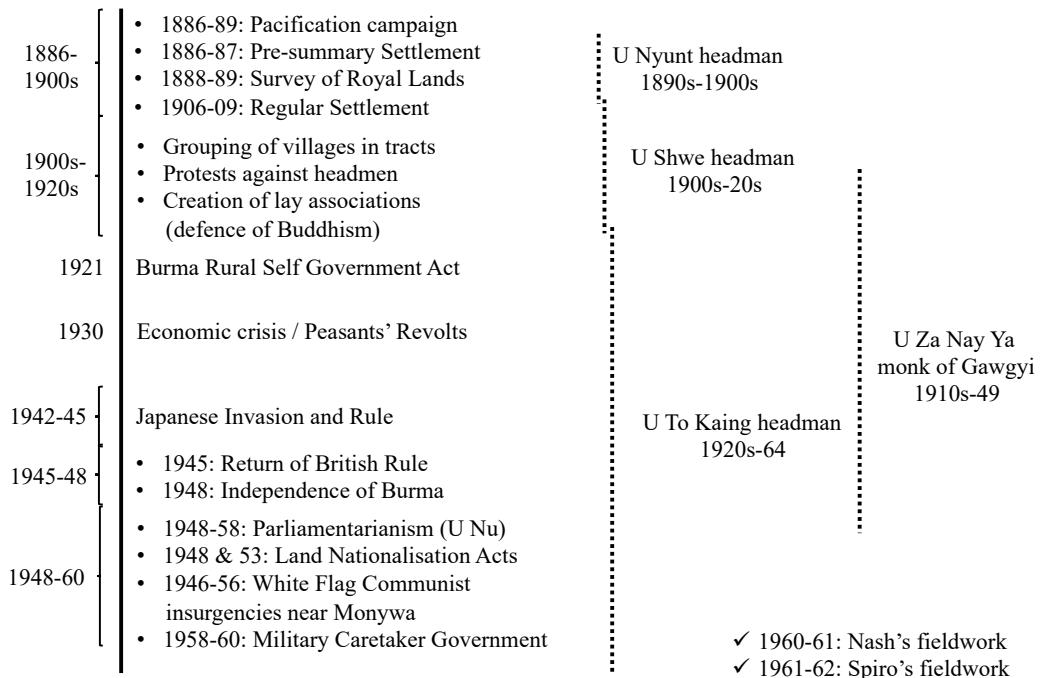


Figure 13. Timeline of the colonial and post-independence periods

## THE FIRST VILLAGE HEADMEN

### Headmen of Myinmilaung tract

From Myinmilaung proper	From Gawgyi	Period
U Nyunt		1890-1900s
U Shwe		1900s-1920s
U To Kaing		1920s-1964?

Figure 14. The successive headmen of Myinmilaung tract (1890 to the 1960s)

“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 1973: 152).

U Nyunt was the first headman of Myinmilaung village tract. Was he an influential man? Undoubtedly yes, as he managed to have a village tract of his own. Was he agreeable to the village? Maybe. 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 at the beginning. The first headmen were appointed during the ‘pacification campaign’ based on military and revenue needs. And when U Nyunt died, his son, U Shwe, took over thanks to his hereditary credential according to the Myinmilaung elders I have met.<sup>272</sup> Later on, appointments by higher officials, elections by locals (elders, big men or *lugyi*), and heredity claims became the ingredients for the politics of headmen’s selection between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi. Thus, this section explores how the fashioning of the village tract became a matrix that partly shaped local politics by merging Myinmilaung and Gawgyi together.

The ‘pacification campaign’, as seen from the British perspective, did not last long in what became in 1888 the Lower Chindwin District (Hardiman 1912: 157). Most of the fighting happened in the Kudaw circle,<sup>273</sup> in the north-east part of the region. The main pre-colonial 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’s (*thatthameda*) rolls provided by local authorities (mostly *myothugyi* and *ywathugyi*). The administrative and military centre of the District was quickly transferred from Alon to Monywa, and our area of study also included the Monywa Township created in 1894.

At the village level, the aim of the colonial policy in Upper Burma was ‘one village one headman’. But, as stated in the previous chapter, local situations were far from this ideal and room was left at the officers’ discretion to achieve it. Headmen were first appointed during the ‘pacification campaign’ and the Pre-

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<sup>272</sup> They notably insisted on the idea of heredity during the interview held on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2019.

<sup>273</sup> This circle will be transformed into Budalin subdivision in 1894 (Hardiman 1912: 157), and is located within the Lower Chindwin region, in the northeast of Monywa

Summary Settlement (1886-87), either directly by the Deputy Commissioner of the Central Division (Raikes), or indirectly by Alon's *myothugyi*. Then, headmen were used as land surveyors recording land types, land owners and estimating the *thathameda* tax within their circles up until the late-1890s. Hardiman, in charge of the Regular Settlement of the District (1906-09), 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 village headmen within the new group; there will be a single remunerated official, instead of several unremunerated.” (Hardiman 1912: 159-160, 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 have a headman of their own.” (Mya Sein 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 from 152 to 239 (*ibid.*: 157). The person of local influence (heads of village lineages, chiefs of a circle of villages, rising leaders, amnestyed dacoits) were far from being simple clients of the coloniser. Once accustomed to the British presence and ways of dealing with revenue and jurisdictions, they sometimes challenged authorities and once again competed for, and created, offices. The successive tractings of the landscape – tax tracts, soil tracts, cadastral tracts, village tracts – were 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 probable that U Nyunt became headman between 1887 and the late-1890s when the pacification was over and the territorial segmentation of countryside under way. The consecutive tractings of our area of study reveal two processes. First, there was the rise of Myinmilaung as the leading village of a new tract under U Nyunt and its 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 in the middle of it, into three village tracts (figure 9, 11, 12 and 13).

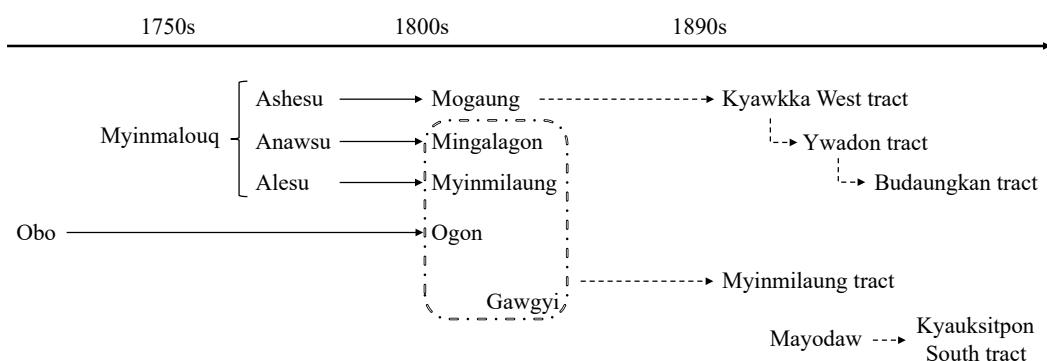


Figure 11. Timeline of the changes of villages' names and creation of village tracts

Villages	Kwin	Village tract	Soil Tract
Gawgyi	659, Gawgyi kwin		
Mingalargôn	660, Myinmilaung kwin	Myinmilaung	n°5 Eastern Black
Ogôn	661, Obo kwin		
Myinmilaung	660, Myinmilaung kwin		
Mogaung	408, Mogaung kwin	Kyaukka west	n°4 Eastern Red
Ywadon	658, Yawadon kwin	Ywadon	

Figure 12. Summary table of the organisation of villages tracts, kwin and soil tracts for the 1900s

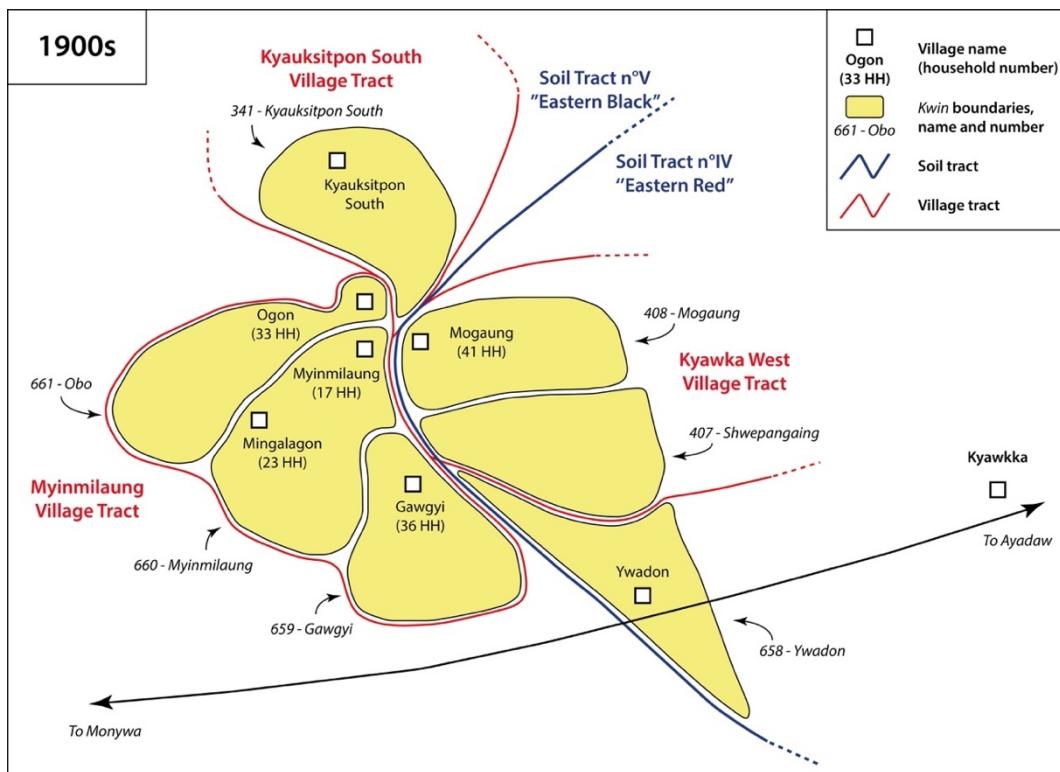


Figure 13. Sketch of the divide between cadastral, soil and village tracts for the 1900s<sup>274</sup>

The first surveys by the Land Record Department<sup>275</sup> (1897-1902) created cadastral units called *kwin*, “a survey unit corresponding roughly to village in India and measuring about a square mile” (Furnivall 1957: 90). This unit had to fit a standardized 11-inch map<sup>276</sup> and was crafted alongside new jurisdictions – the village tracts – and the new local office – the village headman. “Village boundaries, where known, might be adopted as boundaries of *kwin*” [sic], but in most cases they

<sup>274</sup> This sketch and the following (concerning 1920s) were created by analysing the successive tracting of the landscape (soil tracts, *thathameda* tracts and village tracts), by comparing the two successive settlement reports (1910, 1932) and by exploring the old cadastral maps collected during fieldwork. The names of localities in the sketches and the table are written as they appear in the records.

<sup>275</sup> Known as the Land Record 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 reorganised 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 Record Department (SLRD), making room for an independent Ministry of Agriculture. In 2017, it became the Department of Agricultural Statistic and Land Management (DALMS).

<sup>276</sup> Cf. The British Library archive file V/10203. *The Burma Land records Manual*. 1928. Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing. These surveys have been done 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.

were either undermined or could not be ascertained by the Indian surveyors and so *kwin*” boundaries were determined by convenience of survey [...].” (Furnivall 1957: 207). But because the *kwin* maps “should coincide with a village headman's jurisdiction or a subdivision of it”<sup>277</sup>, these boundaries were also determined according to what was convenient for local political entrepreneurs. On the sketch (figure 13), Myinmilaung appears as a village tract composed of three *kwin* (n°659, 660, 661).

The division between soil tracts<sup>278</sup> 4 and 5 was drawn between Myinmilaung (tract V “Black Eastern”) and Mogaung (tract IV “Easter Red”). The records also show that in the 1900s, the grouping of hamlets within village tracts again secluded Myinmilaung and Mogaung. Myinmilaung became the chief village of an eponymous tract that included Ogon (previously Obo), Mingalagon (the “West Corp”) and Gawgyi, but not Mogaung (the “East Corp”). Instead, Mogaung became part of Kyawkka West village tract, the western portion of the previous Kyawkka territory.<sup>279</sup> 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 corp” took for itself the name of Mingalagon and moved a little further west. The demographics are also telling. As shown in the figure 13, 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 its own. But another faction led the Mogaung leader to affiliate with other authorities to avoid his hold. At the same time, Obo was renamed Ogon and, even if it was the oldest settlement with a recognised 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 were both a confirmation of local dissensions and another way to negotiate affiliations. The striking feature of this area is *the divide*

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<sup>277</sup> Cf. *The Burma Land records Manual*. 1928. Rangoon: Office of the Superintendent, Government Printing.

<sup>278</sup> The soil tracts were realised during the Regular Settlement (1906-09) and created divisions within the District according to soil qualities.

<sup>279</sup> Kyawkka West included at first fives villages (Tanaungwin, Pamèdaw, Ywathit, Mogaung, Sindè) and its population represented about 188 households. Kyawka East covered the rest of the territory and was divided between two villages, Kyawka North and South.

into three village tracts (Myinmilaung, Kyawkka West, Kyausitpon) right in the middle of where soldiers hid and settled about one and a half centuries ago.

Further changes happened in the following decades. Gradually, “the revenue circles had to be broken up” (Mya Sein 1973: 152.) to adjust headmen remuneration – a portion of the taxes collected in their tract – according to the size of their jurisdiction. “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.” (*ibid*: 157). Yet, in the 1920s, the split in three tracts remained, and Myinmilaung’s unchanged. Kyawka West tract was broken down and Mogaung integrated Ywadon’s. In addition, two new villages were created between the 1900s and the 1920s. First, Mayodaw settled in Kyausitpon 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 (Shwepanhkaing, chapter 3), was composed of several migrants coming from several places. Overall, and beyond the details of the splits and reconfiguration of the village tracts, the creation of Myinmilaung tract shows how local power dynamics permeated the village system.

Villages	Kwin	Village tract	Soil Tract
Gawgyi	659, Gawgyi kwin		
Mingalargôn	660, Myinmilaung kwin	Myinmilaung	n°5
Ogôn	661, Oo Bo kwin		Eastern
Myinmilaung	660, Myinmilaung kwin		Black
Mayadaw	341, Kyausitpon South kwin	Kyausitpon South	
Mogaung	408, Mogaung kwin		n°4
Ywadon	658, Yawadon kwin	Ywadon	Eastern
Budaungkan	407, Shwepangaing		Red

Figure 14. Summary table of the organisation of villages tracts, *kwin* and soil tracts for the 1920s.

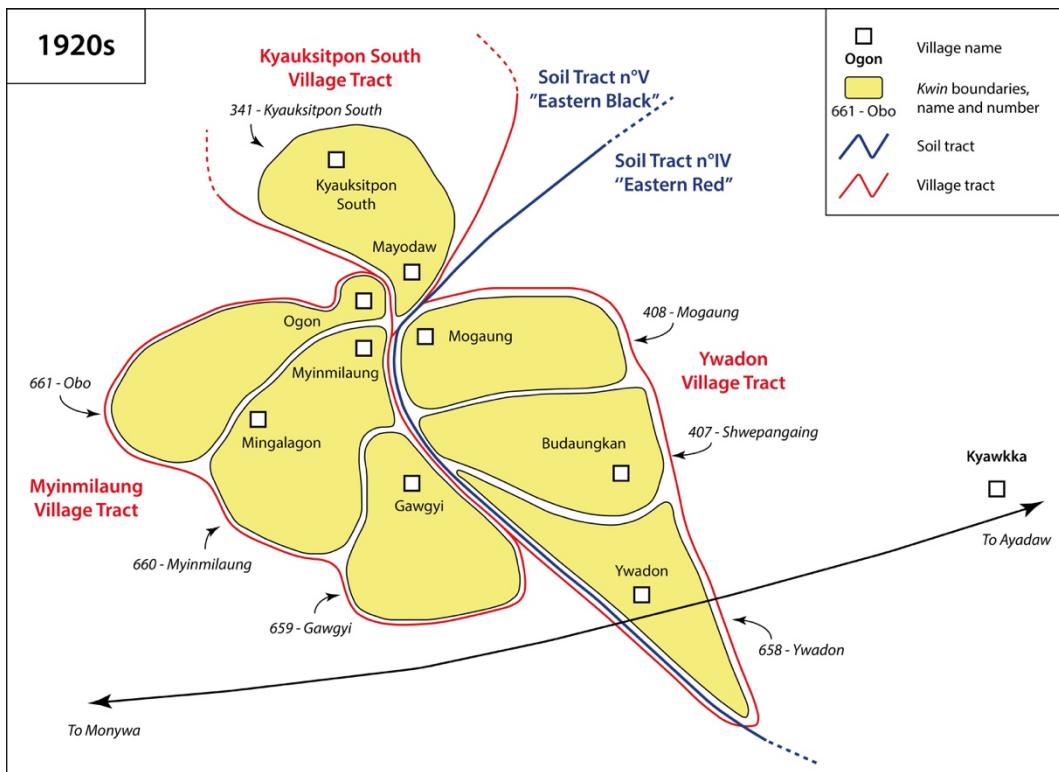


Figure 15. Sketch of the divide between cadastral, soil and village tracts for the 1920s

Officially, U Nyunt had to protect his village from banditry and cattle theft, maintain village stockades and organise night watches. To do so, an “old Burmese institution,” the ten-houses heads (*hse-eingaung*) – crucial in the 2016 selection – was grafted on to the village system. The villages were divided “into a number of blocks, each under a se-ein (ten house) young [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 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 villages 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.<sup>280</sup> Villagers were to assist him or else being fined or imprisoned. And, 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.

<sup>280</sup> Hughes (1932) show how the decrease of *thathameda* collection was more than compensated by the rise of land revenue.

Yet, when asked about U Nyunt, 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.<sup>281</sup> Nobody knew him directly and although U Nyunt is depicted as a strong personality, he was a ‘bad’ ruler. He was bad, allegedly because he was responsible for the fragmentation of what was once a common settlement: his ambition and activities as headman led to the split with Mogaung. Besides, 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. He could fine people, tie up drunk men during pagoda festivals for instance, and sentence temporary jailing. In other words, it seems that he used the creation of headship to build an office for himself. Apart from his gun, the fragmentation of Myinmilaung proper and the punishments, not much is remembered about U Nyunt.

His successor was his son, U Shwe, also born in Myinmilaung. Again, he had a gun and that is pretty much it. But when asked why U Nyunt’s son became headman, the answer is interesting. Myinmilaung elders have a local theory of 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”.<sup>282</sup> 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 gathers experiences 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 it too. The pace of life – the succession of generations – channels potential achievements. The ways village headmen could succeed one another apparently follow how precolonial hereditary offices were

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<sup>281</sup> In Hnawpin, a village close to Thazi where I worked from time to time, the headman was still called *thugyi* at times by his fellow villagers.

<sup>282</sup> This expression was given to me during the same interview held on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2019.

transmitted. The office was tied to a family, ensuring a degree of continuity, even if it was created by force. The connection between the transmission of property within families and the transmission of leadership will be explored further in chapter 7.

Thus, this section demonstrated that village headship was, on the ground, as much of 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 individuals. 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 moralisation of behaviours.

## THE LAST MEN OF *HPON*

In Gawgyi, the first half of the twentieth century is often remembered as an age of propriety and morality. A few elders remember it vividly, and villagers in their thirties today talk about men of this period with respect. Recollections of the past reflect how current villagers view the present, that is, a potential shift toward corruption, low morals and military rule (chapter 5) with the advent of democracy. Such memories, when triangulated with other historical narratives, enable one 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 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

This section explores how local personalities became exemplary figures of the moralisation of behaviours when villagers were rethinking their role as Buddhists after the colonial encounter. Turner (2014) shows that in face of the sentiment 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 (*thatthena*). These teachings, embodied in texts, chants and rituals “is 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” (*ibid.*: 81) developed, as if the Burmese society was on the fringe of a moral breakdown.

“The monks no longer held the same respect. Some were lax in their practices, but the authority of even the most esteemed appeared to wane in the face of a new set of experts: those trained in the bureaucratic sciences of colonial rule. Precepts that had guided moral life were ignored. Burmese drinking and gambling, precipitating a crisis of morals. Dress, comportment, manners, respect for elders – examined in the light of this moment – all offered up evidence to confirm the uneasy feeling that their world was sliding into decay.” (*ibid.*: 1)

Hardiman also echoes that sentiment of decline when he wrote that, in the Lower Chindwin, Buddhism became “little more than a name” (Hardiman 1912: 34). Yet, from 1890 to the 1920s, lay Buddhists created hundreds of associations in the main cities, but mostly in smaller towns and villages. They campaigned for Buddhist education, moral reform and engaged in conflicts with the colonial state. The efforts of the multiple voluntary associations brought waves of publishing, preaching, and organising, 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 the barometer of the decline of morals. Lack of respect toward elders, drinking of alcohol, frequentation of opium shops and

billiards parlours, excessive gambling, consumption of beef meat, 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 was of a new type for instance. It stems from a beef boycott that takes 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 colonisation.

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 court emerged (chapter 3). As Braun puts it, “[h]is 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.” (Braun 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 the influence of “Hindu revivalism, along with admonitions against eating fish and beef, emanating from Manipur and moving down the Lower Chindwin.” (Charney 2007: 235). Beyond that, *The letter on cows*, written in a simple style accessible to all, “is a lesson about the communal dimensions of kamma [karma].” (Braun 2013: 37). In short, the consumption of beef is associated with immorality. Prohibition against 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 from Braun 2013: 37). For Ledi, decay is thus about karmic justice. And accumulating merit through donation is not enough. Behaviours should be changed. When on tour giving sermons, Ledi asked to substitute pledges of morality – avoidance of intoxicants and festivities mainly – instead of offerings. In addition, for the new Buddhist journals and lecturers, the “need for morality and its potential benefits had overtaken the karmic benefits of donation [...].” (Turner 2014: 87). Thus, lay Buddhist associations and influential monks developed a pedagogy of introspection teaching individuals “to police themselves” (*ibid.*: 101) and to uphold moral behaviours.

So, 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 moralisation

of daily lives, but, unlike him, he stayed in one locale. He became the first monk in the first monastery of Gawgyi, right after his full ordination around the age of eighteen in the nearby monastery of Zalok. His arrival thus coincides with the creation of Gawgyi monastery and pagoda<sup>283</sup> in the late 1900s. The Zalok and Gawgyi monasteries were and still are part of the same parish (*gaing*)<sup>284</sup> linked with another monastery in Sagaing. For their construction, a piece of land north of the village was donated, 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 monastery was enlarged and deepened to avoid flooding during the rainy season. The complex monastery-monk-pagoda 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 send one's child as a novice were critical in Gawgyi life at large. The ability of this monk to build up this monastery is still praised sometimes. Yet, what is more important is that he was also involved in the lives of lay people and his “area of influence” (*gawthagan*) extended miles beyond Gawgyi.<sup>285</sup> And 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 very moment, it was 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 secular affairs. Gawgyi elders sometimes talk about that period as “an age of rule by monks” (*hpongyi ouqdeh kheq*).<sup>286</sup> He, and not U Shwe the headman, was consulted by villagers for cases of divorce and apparently even for land disputes. Mostly, he enforced prohibitions to rectify behaviours: he forbid anybody to put their feet in

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<sup>283</sup> The pagoda was achieved in 1910.

<sup>284</sup> Thus, the senior monk (the one with the most *wa*, that is with the higher number of years as monk after full ordination) was the head (*hsayadaw*) of the whole parish.

<sup>285</sup> This is the expression used by Ko Kyaw brother when we spent time at the grave on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2016.

<sup>286</sup> This expression was notably used by U Maung on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2019.

the pond to avoid pollution, women could not walk from there to their house with the same longyi after bathing, he beat anyone drinking alcohol in public and did night watches in the village. This is how my interlocutors condensed nearly 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 to perform all necessary ceremonies. He also provided medicine for villagers, notably by introducing small amounts of gold in their veins from time to time (making the bodies resistant to blade cuts.).

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



Figure 16. U Za Nay Ya's grave

Overall, the work of U Za Nay Ya as the caretaker of behaviours in Gawgyi is 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*” because this is the Burmese word for monks. But the stories about him showed that he had achieved a certain level of greatness. So, I asked if he had

*ana* (the power to impose decisions) and *awza* (authority or influence).<sup>287</sup> My interlocutors were a little taken aback because I knew these words even though nobody had really said them to me before. And they agreed. 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 promoting the good and 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 8). In a different way, the worth of U Za Nay Ya stems from the conjunction of the transformation of Buddhism, his engagement in secular affairs and his personal qualities. His worth, viewed by present-day villagers, relates to the moralisation of behaviours and is expressed in the vocabulary of charismatic leadership. In short, he set an example to follow. The general cultural transformation highlighted by 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 the other man of *hpon* in the late 1920s.

### **U To Kaing**

That person is 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 moralisation 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 became 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

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<sup>287</sup> This interview was conducted during my first fieldwork, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2013 after a *shinbyu*.

government (1910s-20s). He remained headman during the economic crisis of 1930 and subsequent political turmoil for independence, the Japanese invasion and rule (1942-45), which was followed by a period of parliamentarianism, civil war and insurrections until the military ‘caretaker government’ took over (1958-60) 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 stems from this achievements and current villagers express it by referring to his personality: a man of charisma whose orders were followed. Again, Nash’s concepts fits 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, money games and controlled the handling of donations in local Buddhist festivals. As we will discuss below, we can compare him to another headman of this period described by Nash.

The coming of U To Kaing makes sense in a broader context of rural protest against colonialism. The apparent decline of headmen’s authority (Cady 1960: 271) was, for the British, one of the signs of such contestation, along with the politicisation of local associations against the *thatthameda* and land taxes in the late 1910s. One movement in particular, called *wunthanu athin*,<sup>288</sup> gained momentum in this period and, by 1924 “there were *wunthanu athin* organised in almost every village in Burma.” (Taylor 2009: 194). These organisations,<sup>289</sup> along with other associations,<sup>290</sup> 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. And the “Government policy of forbidding headmen to participate politically in the Wunthanu Athins in effect isolated them from the sympathy and co-operation of a majority of the villagers, who were expected to accept joint responsibility under headman leadership.” (Cady 1960: 272). We can imagine that because Myinmilaung tract was forcefully created by U Nyunt, the authority of his son, U Shwe, was challenge at that very moment.

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<sup>288</sup> Taylor translates it as “organisation supporting own race” (Taylor 2009: 193-194) in a nationalist or patriotic sense.

<sup>289</sup> The *wunthanu athin* were promoted and supported by the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) in 1921-1922, the general council of the Young Man Buddhist Association (YMBA) that came to the forefront of the contest against colonialism on nationalist terms after the Yangon university strike of 1920.

<sup>290</sup> Cf. Charney (2009: 12).

The joint responsibility of these two settlements under that man may have been problematic in this case. 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." (Taylor 2009: 190).

The government's answer was to reform local governance and support headmen to ensure that the villagers participated in local government.<sup>291</sup> Most of it failed. The Burma Rural Self Government Act of 1921 created elected village committees conferred with special criminal and civil powers to assist the headman.<sup>292</sup> But it never was operative.<sup>293</sup> The Crime Enquiry Committee even recommended in 1923 that the selection of headmen be by election. But while the 1924 Amending Act authorised the election of village committees sharing the headman's judicial powers, he remained the armed wing of the state. His powers to "requisition services and supplies were reduced, but he still could fine villagers refusing to do public duties." (Cady 1960: 273). Finally, all the reforms were reversed in 1927.<sup>294</sup> At large, villagers did not invest in the committees, but rather in a shadow organisation duplicating the official administration. The *wunthanu athin* "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 organised their own court, protested against 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 secular affairs and settled disputes. 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. But he certainly could have been. There was an escalation of tension against headship and by extension against U Shwe. If another man rose up, he most likely was politically active and these associations

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<sup>291</sup> Cf. Cady (1960: 236-237, 272-274).

<sup>292</sup> Cf. Mya Sein (1973: 162).

<sup>293</sup> Cf. Cady (1960: 273).

<sup>294</sup> Cf. Cady (1960: 274).

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. And 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 inter-married, participated in each other’s ceremonies, but now Gawgyi has 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 had a degree of trust from 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<sup>295</sup> as well as student protests, which produced a generation of national leaders fighting for independence.<sup>296</sup> 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 late 1920s to late 1950s, as the age of U To Kaing’s rule, presenting a degree of stability in local politics against a background of “corruption” (Cady 1960: 410) and “warlordism” (Smith 1991: 127). To a certain extent, he did upkeep village affairs. But he mostly buffered and/or took advantage of multiple forces. There was the “corruption” of low-ranking officials (Cady 1960: 410-411) and then the Japanese battalions, invading Burma in 1942 before fleeing in 1945, which monopolised the little infrastructure left intact during the war, leading to food and goods shortages. They forcefully recruited labour<sup>297</sup> through headmen who, relabelled *okkhata*, organised it with the village ten-households heads. One positive aspect beyond the exactions on civilians was that in our area the cultivators, “who

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<sup>295</sup> On this rebellion and the different narratives about its origins and effects, cf. Aung-Thwin (2011), Herbert (1982), Scott (1976) and Solomon (1969).

<sup>296</sup> For an overview of this process, see Charney (2009: 41-44).

<sup>297</sup> Cady (1960: 452).

were relatively prosperous because of their diversified output, were able to pay off accumulated debts in cheap Japanese currency.” (*ibid.*: 459). This might have impacted money lenders like U Po Shi.

Those with no livelihood sought employment in the labour battalions<sup>298</sup> created by the Japanese-controlled Burmese independent government. People also enrolled in 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 (1945-48). The Communist Party of Burma was notably influential in our area after being expelled from the main political coalition<sup>299</sup> and began negotiating the terms of British departure. By 1947, there was at least eight militias<sup>300</sup> operating in the countryside. It was not clear for locals which group had authority over the government. Ultimately, the White Flag faction of the Communist Party of Burma<sup>301</sup> took over our area of study<sup>302</sup> 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 coming back and forth during periodic intervals. U To Kaing, as did other headmen,<sup>303</sup> became a *de facto* member of the White Flag CPB after pledging allegiance. Villagers kept growing 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. Around 1958, when the Army took over U Nu’s government to

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<sup>298</sup> Called “*Let yon that*”, Cady (1960: 459).

<sup>299</sup> The Anti-Fascist People Freedom League, notably under the leadership of Aung San, hero of the independence.

<sup>300</sup> Smith (1991: 66).

<sup>301</sup> On the Communist party, see Litner (1990).

<sup>302</sup> One of the White Flag leaders, U Hla Maw, controlled the “Monywa-Shwebo-Mandalay districts” during this period, cf. Smith (1991: 126).

<sup>303</sup> In Yeigyi village, Spiro explains that the insurgent 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 insurgent. This story is one of the explanations given to Spiro to explain factionalism in this village (Spiro, 1997).

officially restore order and organise national election, he was dismissed. When the U Nu's government won the 1960 election, he was re-elected headman. Finally, after the 1962 military coup of 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 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” (Nash 1963: 198). But, 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 components of his worth. It made him exemplary in people's memories. And this affects the current polity because U To Kaing became a reference, a standard that allows for the evaluation of the worth of leaders as we will see in the next chapter.

We can now step back and reflect on Nash's argument as we have reached one of its limits. It is clear that the worth of the last men of *hpon* is related to the context they lived in and how they embodied propriety and engagement in local affairs. Nonetheless, as described by Nash, the terminology used to talk about leadership is centred on *hpon*, even if it has nearly disappeared for present-day villagers. Expressed in the vocabulary of charismatic leadership, the worth of leaders is *in fine*, detached from any context. My hypothesis is that Nash's man of *hpon* was described to him by an individual – U Sein Ko from Nondwin village – who used for himself the timeless attributes of leadership detached from any historical reality. Nash had two examples of men of *hpon*: U Sein Ko and U Htun. The first was his main informant concerning Burmese conceptualisation of politics, allegedly the bigman of Nondwin. U Htun, headman (until 1948) of Yadaw village near Mandalay, “was reputed to have driven out local distillers, to have forbidden playing cards, and to have curtailed the number of pwes the village sponsored or donated money to, but, since this man of pon, no headman has exercised authority or power on a project he himself initiated.” (Nash 1965: 277). U Htun and U To Kaing lived and ruled during the same period. Nash has clearly shown how context (moral reformation) relates to bigness (man of *hpon*). But this relation was eclipsed by his will to think of power as a quality lodged into an individual explaining

patron-client politics, even if it is almost always, for both kings and commoners alike, a quality attributed *a posteriori*.<sup>304</sup> What can be taken from this is that the worth of leaders is intimately linked to the context they live in and to the memories of their predecessors. This point will be useful in the next chapter for understanding how village affairs were reconceptualised in the late twentieth century, but also how Ko Kyaw crafted his position as headman in the local political landscape.

## TRANSFORMING HIERARCHIES (1890s-1950s)

This section is more impressionistic by nature. It argues that while it fashioned new structures of land revenue and tenure, colonialism offered opportunities to renegotiate the obligations channelling access to wealth and to ownership, allowing the main farming families to become the local elites monopolising state institutions and local leadership (1900s-1930s). And during the period of insurgencies, war and independence (1930s-1950s), they were able to take over various projects of land reform, either supported 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 claim to authority through social identity – belonging to the main farming families – became more important. And the remnant of precolonial hierarchy, such as U Po Shi, an important money lender descending from the Thazi gentry, disappeared when land tenure was internally ‘reorganised’ in the middle of the twentieth century.

### Land titling and Court

“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] for the first time a structure of genuinely private ownership, entirely free of the gentry or aristocratic

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<sup>304</sup> Cf. general introduction, notably the section titled “The uses of Nash’s work.”

control or involvement. The result was a decade of confusion and competition. The new colonial courts were quickly put to work.” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 231)

The Settlement Operations were gradual.<sup>305</sup> First, the officers tried to collect the *thatthameda* taxes according to what they understood of the Burmese system.<sup>306</sup> 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.<sup>307</sup> Two master categories were officialised: state and non-state lands. The key test was to ask whether the land was inheritable (non-state) or not (state). “This twofold division of land was made on the understanding that state land in ‘Burmese times’ paid rent to the royal treasury above and beyond any ordinary assessment.” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 229). 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 of the king as the ‘lord of water and earth’ (yé-myé-shin).” (*ibid.*: 229). In Alon territory, state lands<sup>308</sup> were taxed first but represented only 1.7% of the circle in 1906.<sup>309</sup> 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 (1900-03) and Regular Settlement (1906-09) stepped in. Quite conveniently, non-state land became

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<sup>305</sup> Hardiman distinguished the Pre-Summary Assessments (1886-87), the Survey of Royal Lands (1888-89), the Summary Settlement (1900-03) and the Regular Settlement (1906-09).

<sup>306</sup> First a rate of Rs.10 per household was imposed, but it was often paid in kind and channelled via the headmen. It has to be remembered that this capitation tax was introduced some years before the annexation participated in the upheaval of regional and local authorities – that depended on local fees and tax based on customs – against the King. For a summary of revenue collection, cf. Hardiman (1912, p38).

<sup>307</sup> The division between state and non-state already in place before the Act, it was present in the instructions given to people like Raikes. For instance, in the Lower Chindwin District, the survey of royal lands started a year before the enforcement of this regulation, cf. Hardiman (1909: 39).

<sup>308</sup> Thant Myint-U (2001: 228-229) gives the following list of what was declared state land in the 1889 regulation: *Ahmudan-sa* [sic] or “crown service lands”; *Si-sa* [sic], or “cavalry lands”; *Thugyi-sa* [sic], or “headman’s lands”; *Wun-sa* [sic], or “senior official’s lands”; *Min-mye* [sic], or “royal lands”; waste land and abandoned land.

<sup>309</sup> Cf. Hardiman (1909, statement IV “Regular Settlement statistics” in Appendix).

synonymous with private ownership. They covered mostly what is called *dama-ugya* and *bobuapaing* lands. Both terms refer to how a person justifies his relations to land: through clearing (*dama*: knife, *u*: first, *kya*: fall) or inheritance (*bobua*: grandparents; *paing*: ownership). These expressions are claims.<sup>310</sup> Yet, the creation of the land revenue system meant that claims could become rights, that is recognised (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 verbatim, 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 were 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’<sup>311</sup> recorded

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<sup>310</sup> And if we translate them in the European vocabulary of “land rights”, it gives something like: right by first clearing and right by inheritance. But both categories blurred into one another because ‘non-occupied’ land quickly became rare and thus gradually the claim by first clearing became rhetorical reference, insisting on that the land came from one family through inheritance mostly.

<sup>311</sup> 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 of 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, parcels for which boundaries are indefinite because of their use for shifting cultivation

under the name of a land rights holder. In theory, people also had to indicate the origin of their rights, whether it was by inheritance, purchase, or lease in order 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 exception rather than the rule for the person in occupation of land to be the sole person interested in it.” (*ibid.*: 211). But who was interested in land? People bypassed others’ claims thanks to the land titling process. The first register “was set aside en bloc [...] for faulty procedure, and was commenced *de novo* by the Regular Settlement.” (Hardiman 1912: 40). In other words, the Record of Rights became a “Record of Wrongs” (Furnivall 1957: 92), and the registration started over 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 7,000 land cases judged in 1889 and more than 9,000 for 1890, particularly for breaches of contract on land all over Upper Burma. In the Lower Chindwin District, the courts also witnessed a rise in litigations.<sup>312</sup> For Hardiman, this was mostly because the “Settlement operations

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or as an agricultural experimentation area

<sup>312</sup> There was the court of the District Judge, two courts of Subdivisional Judges, and six courts of Township Judges. There also were, at the end of 1908, thirty-one village headmen empowered to try civil suits of a petty nature. Cf. Hardiman (1912: 162).

lead 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 where confusion prevailed as per 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 one 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 early twentieth century (Hughes 1932: 40), as for today (Boutry et al.: 101-103), the two main avenues to access land and to become a farmer were by inheritance or through a variety of tenancies. Land was mostly attached to nuclear families and tenancies often occurred between kin until, for instance, the family patrimony was divided at the death of parents. But the colonial administrators tried to match a system of land tenure anchored in kinship with their idea of private ownership. Furnivall, critical about colonialism,<sup>313</sup> says 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" (Furnivall 1957: 92). This is a key point. Up until the present day, there is the idea 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 7). As it was the case in other Southeast Asian

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<sup>313</sup> Cf. Guan (2009).

precolonial polities, forms of “hereditary private tenure” (Boomgaard 2011: 448) existed in the Lower Chindwin Division.<sup>314</sup> 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 one cleared a plot, it became part of the things one had to transmit to his children in equal shares.<sup>315</sup> It means that a person was recognised as the main authority over an estate quite late in life. Before that, he might farm plots as tenant (for his parents, coheirs, neighbours, local landlord, and so on), or as usufructuary mortgagee for instance. “Outright” sales were rare (Furnivall 1957: 211; Hardiman 1912: 48) 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 (Hardiman 1910: 41). Migration did not erase potential claims.<sup>316</sup> Even “[l]and 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” (Hardiman 1912: 52). And 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 toward the conclusion that there was a difference between working on a plot of land and the potentials claims upon it.

Yet, the 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 of the mutual obligations between people<sup>317</sup> created claims over things. This will be explored further in chapter 7. Thus, if ownership had to be linked to a single person, it was more of a temporary recognition of the

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<sup>314</sup> Which has been an important trading centre since at least the seventeenth century, cf. Charney (2006, 2007).

<sup>315</sup> Hardiman, explained that the prevailing customs was to divide land equally to all siblings, male, female, eldest and youngest children alike, cf. Hardiman (1909:27). In some places, the eldest son, known as the *auratha*, could take the biggest share, cf. chapter 7. And today, the principle of equal division is everywhere asserted but varies in practice, cf. Boutry et al. (2017: 101s) and Huard (2018).

<sup>316</sup> Cf. Cady (1960: 49).

<sup>317</sup> For instance, giving inheritance vs taking care of parents.

responsibility and authority of that person over a household (usually by a man but not always): a steward. And there was a complex web of obligations between generations, offering opportunities but also entailing more obligations.<sup>318</sup>

Thus, what structured ownership were the customs organising the dynamics of kinship (alliance, descent and the succession of generations) and the moral obligations between family members (transmission to children, taking care of the parents). But the titling created owners on paper and thus offered opportunities to bypass these obligations. Hence conflicts between coheirs about their share of inheritance, if one of them registered all in his name, or if they disagreed about what was owed to each other. In short, the land belonged to the person momentarily responsible for it, but soon was 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. Hardiman took a close interest in the functioning and diversity of tenures. In our area of study, 47% of the occupied land was rented in 1909,<sup>319</sup> 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 the sign that, unlike in the Delta of Lower Burma, land was not concentrated in the hands of non-agriculturists.<sup>320</sup> 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 “[c]ultivators compelled to render military service had to let their lands during their absence at the capital”. (Hardiman 1910, committee proceedings, paragraph 13).

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<sup>318</sup> For example, a tenant – say a son of an old man who cannot farm it anymore – could have said that the land he farmed was own through a claim of first clearing, even if he never saw the plot being cleared. Nonetheless, he shared the harvest with his parents and coheirs. It was not his inheritance yet, but because he was part of the family's line of descent, this claim had much chance to be realised (if not the plot, then other things included in parental patrimony). The land in question could have been inherited by the old man's wife, and then became part of their conjugal estate. After his marriage, their son could rent others' land as well, and a neighbour could become tenant on the old man's plot for a time. In a moment of need, the plot could be mortgaged to this very man. Nonetheless, it would still be part of the family estate until its division is enacted, usually around at the death of the old man and his wife. And the son, if he came back to took over the family farm, would be responsible for their debts and assets.

<sup>319</sup> This figure concerned the Soil tract V and stems from my calculation, cf. Hardiman (1909: 17).

<sup>320</sup> Cf. Adas (1974a, 1974b), Bouthry *et al.* (2007), Brown (2005), and Cheng Siok Hwa (1965), Mya Than (2001).

Tenancies followed various principles depending on the quality of the land, access to water (inundation/irrigation), the level of competition for land and the relation between the contractors. The main agreement<sup>321</sup> on dry lands was called *thonsutitsu* (“three parts one part”) (*ibid.*: 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-fourths had long term tenancies (i.e. more than six years) and had to provide half of the harvest to the owner.<sup>322</sup> This kind of agreement, called *myayzupay* (“giving a share of the land”), was done between the main farmers – usually descendants of the founding lineages who mustered the biggest estates – and other farmers and would-be farmers. But 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 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.<sup>323</sup> At the village level, one of the main problems was the ability to cultivate land. And since colonialism impacted the hierarchy of status depending on regiments and

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<sup>321</sup> Other forms were: the tenants gives half of the harvest (with or without contribution from the owner to the expenses of cultivation and/or land revenue), two-fifths, one-third, one quarter, one-fifth, dead rent (in produce or in cash), no rent but payment of all the land revenue by the tenant.

<sup>322</sup> Cf. Hardiman (1909: 23).

<sup>323</sup> For instance, the repartition of the shares between owners and tenants (in fractions such as one half, two-fifth, one-third) depended on the quality of the soil, on the level of competition for land, on access to irrigation, distance from towns, on the relation and power balance between the contractors and eventually on the actual amount of crop harvested. Mortgage value was usually of two third 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). Cf. Hardiman (1909: 35).

obligations to the chiefs, social hierarchy slowly organised around farming. Gradually the *taungthu* – the real farmers – became the main elite and the *myaukthu* – the labourers – the dependent.<sup>324</sup> The difference between both ‘ideal’ groups lays mostly in the ability to farm land, that is to have capital (cart, cattle, tools), skills and networks (being the child of a farmer helps). It is the product of an ideology emphasising the superiority of ‘real peasants’ over mere daily workers. And because most of the work was in the fields the *myaukthu* largely depended upon the *taungthu* for their survival.

In this context, the colonial land titling did not lead to the discovery of points of dispute as to ownership. Rather, it created an arena for disputing ownership, challenging customs, and to test out if 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. Hence the old gentry’s tenants claiming the land they cleared as their own. The use of courts strongly resembles K. Von Benda-Beckmann’s ‘forum shopping’ in which Minangkabau villagers chose between various arenas to settle their disputes.<sup>325</sup> While gradually suppressing the prerogative and authority of the old gentry leaders, colonial officers tried to find them a role in 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 from Thant Myint-U *ibid.*).

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<sup>324</sup> In the soil tract V, 57% of the household were classified as *taungthu*, while 26% were considered as *myaukthu* (among them, 20.3% were classified as “coolies”).

<sup>325</sup> Cf. Benda-Beckmann (1981).

## The tale of U Po Shi

If the old gentry leaders used to be the ones judging most cases (with a possibility of appeal), the village system limited these prerogatives to a certain extent.<sup>326</sup> According to colonial records and historians' narratives, most of the gentry lost their hold over the countryside. In Upper Burma "the old ruling lineages lost control over land to their former tenants" (Thant Myint-U 2001: 233) because of colonial courts in the 1890s. It is thus tempting to imagine the villagers "entirely free of the gentry or aristocratic control or involvement" (*ibid.*: 231). After the violence of the 'pacification campaign', the intersection of the village system with the territorialisation 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<sup>327</sup> 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, there is a story 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 villages. 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<sup>th</sup> of 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

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<sup>326</sup> Thant Myint-U's argument (2001) is to say that the old gentry lost its prerogatives during early colonial period. Overall, the territory of the gentry families shrunk partly due to the creation of village headship. Some retained part of it, but most were officially turned into tax collector with, occasionally, civil powers.

<sup>327</sup> 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).

*myayshin* (“master of lands”), not because they owned land but because they controlled loans and debts related to land. Thus, if Myinmilaung people were no longer liable for dues and fees toward the previous gentry families since U Nyunt became village headman, these families still controlled loans.<sup>328</sup>

According to Gawgyi and Myinmilaung elders, as well as to a historian of Monywa University and U Po Shi’s grandson (86 years old),<sup>329</sup> 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 since at least the late 1900s and moved back and forth between Thazi and Monywa where he built several houses and patronised theatre performances. What people remember most is when he settled permanently in Monywa when the Japanese were defeated in 1945.<sup>330</sup> He allegedly came there with fifty pots full of gold mounted on his tenants’ ox-carts. On occasion, 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. A story about him goes this way: due to his bad deeds, he reincarnated into 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 toward the buffalo and said “Po Shi”. The animal came to him. And he won the case.<sup>331</sup> Unlike U Po Shi’s grandson, most villagers laugh at this story. For them, this man became an animal because of his excesses. His journey to Monywa mounted on his tenants’ ox-cart 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 to get money in times of need. Previous office holders and money lenders had the wealth to support them. They funnelled loans in villages for decades and mustered fragmented estates up for rent. When rain and harvests were bad, people could resort to seasonal migration. But

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<sup>328</sup> Even if the colonial government created a system of credit (Brown (2013), Turnell (2009)), there was also the money lenders U Kha Kha from Kyawka, U Ho, Daw Mya Mya and Daw Chaw from Monywa.

<sup>329</sup> I notably interviewed U Po Shi’s grandson with Monywa historians on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2016.

<sup>330</sup> He most probably has left because of the communist underground groups were gaining territory and advocating for land redistribution.

<sup>331</sup> This story was told to me on several occasion, the first time by Ko Kyaw on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2014.

they also often mortgaged their land for those who had some, or contracted loans for the poorest. And those “who did not possess land or other valuable property [...] resorted to the sale of their children, wives, or themselves.” (Toe Hla 1987: 78). Those were not sales in my opinion, but temporary debt bondage, or *kyun*.<sup>332</sup> 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 family to repay the debt. A 1782 dhammadhat,<sup>333</sup> 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 recognised by law. And the fact that people always insisted that U Po Shi had so many wives was a sign that he was a wealthy and important man, with whom people could get money but at a heavy price.

But U Po Shi also invested in land, notably mortgages, and assembled an estate up for rent. The mortgaged land was rented to tenants who were either the mortgagors, or other people that could thus access land outside family relationships by becoming a client of the mortgagee/money lender. The sort of debt patronage that existed since at least the eighteenth century continued. The precolonial office-holders traditionally provided such loans and accepted land, or people, as security.<sup>334</sup> 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 1909 and 1932 settlement reports. Its virtual absence from the records is due to the British methods of computation. Fragmented estates escaped the Settlement’s radar<sup>335</sup> and debts were not recorded as per who loaned the money. In the meantime,

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<sup>332</sup> In the sense of bondman, cf. Aung-Thwin (1984).

<sup>333</sup> On the Burmese Buddhist law, cf. Crouch (2016a, 2016b), Huxley (1997) and chapter 7.

<sup>334</sup> This was part of the patron-client relationship, along with the financing of festivals, exaction of services and dues that marked and repeated the hierarchy between them.

<sup>335</sup> Because estates of less than fifty acres per *kwin* were not recorded and that land obtained by

the large landlords<sup>336</sup> are presented as rack-renting their tenants. 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 appraisalment, 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 appraisalment is conducted stringently, and it is then accompanied by abuses.” (Hardiman 1910: 22).

In other words, and as recalled by the elders, the terms of the relations between U Po Shi and his tenants were not fair.<sup>337</sup> Obviously, this kind of tenancy was different from the flexible agreements that usually prevailed between residents of localities. By accepting tenancy, 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 him, let his trusted men estimate his share, pay them and pay all, or a portion, of the land revenue. The obligation to provide services are remembered as unfair, such as carrying his wealth toward Monywa. That is why they laugh about U Po Shi becoming a buffalo and underline his excesses when talking about his numerous wives. For them, he becoming a buffalo was karmic justice.<sup>338</sup>

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usufructuary mortgage appeared under the name of the original owner, there was no way to see U Po Shi appearing as a landlord in the figures collected for revenue purpose. Cf. Hardiman (1909: 27).

<sup>336</sup> The larger being the headman of Monywa with 3,826 acres in 1906.

<sup>337</sup> Interestingly, U Po Shi allegedly employed about twenty ‘land stewards’ known as his *luyon* (“trusted man”) and the tenants as *myaylokhha* (literally, “son of the work on the land”). Interview with Zalok *yatmiyathpa* on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2019.

<sup>338</sup> Graeber offers an interesting insight on such case. He wrote that in medieval Hindu law codes it was often emphasised 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). He took as an example the fate of Hiromushime, a greedy money lender charging enormous interests around 776 C.E. in Medieval Japan. On the seventh day after her death, her body sprang to life half human half ox. For the author of this story, a monk, it represented a clear case of premature

This kind of obligation and patronage (at this level) pervaded the countryside for a long time.<sup>339</sup> U Po Shi story's ended when the Japanese retreated from Monywa in 1945, or rather, before the communists (the White Flag group in our case) took over. This micro-event marks a long-term change, namely 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 monopolise local leadership and use state and armed group projects to consolidate their wealth and position.

### **Farmers power**

Since the late 1940s, the White Flag “advocated a policy of ‘land to the tiller’ and land redistribution” (Smith 1991: 131). In fact, farmers did not pay any land tax since the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>340</sup> And it is mostly under U To Kaing that Myinmilaung and Gawgyi that indebted tenants could change their situation. Yet, it does not mean that most tenancy agreements disappeared overnight, on the contrary. Tenancy conditions were, besides taxes, a paramount grievance expressed in the last decades, notably in Lower Burma and concerning the Chettyar moneylending Visayan caste from Chennai (Madras). The U Nu government tried “to outflank the communists and secure rural support” (Brown 2013: 97) by enacting a Land Nationalisation Act<sup>341</sup> in 1948 whose objective was to turn every farmer into state tenants by proclaiming state ownership of all land and resources. But it had limited effects and scope.<sup>342</sup> Most of the countryside was out of reach for the central government in 1948. In 1953, a more detailed Land Nationalisation Act was enacted, but again its implementation was slow and

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reincarnation as the woman was being punished by the law of karma for her violations of what is both reasonable and right.

<sup>339</sup> To some extent, the employment of young people in teashops today for instance shares some commonalities with debt bondage, may it be a debt of the parents to another person, or for the child to finance schooling.

<sup>340</sup> Cf. Taylor (2009) and Brown (2013: 86).

<sup>341</sup> The 1948 Land Nationalisation Act for the most part reproduced the unimplemented 1936 Tenancy Act which objective was to resolve the tenancy problem in Burma.

<sup>342</sup> Cf. Steinberg (1981), Brown (2013).

“disrupted by the communist insurrection and the continuing lack of security across much of rural Burma well into the 1950s.” (*ibid.*: 97).

In the Chindwin region, the communist insurgency was an opportunity to negotiate 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.<sup>343</sup> 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 Record Department (SLRD) started remaking cadastres<sup>344</sup> for U Nu’s land redistribution scheme. For the elders who have some knowledge about that period, it was just about getting land use titles.<sup>345</sup> But how it was implemented locally remains a partial mystery in which corruption, party engineering, insurgency, counter-insurgency 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<sup>346</sup> that were undoubtedly required.” (*ibid.*: 97). The official stance was to abolish landlordism by suppressing tenant-farming, providing credit<sup>347</sup> and supporting the creation of cooperatives. According to the law, a six-man committee<sup>348</sup> had to be selected in each tract by the open-voice procedure to take charge of the distribution in the tract.<sup>349</sup> Farmer-owners could retain a maximum of 50 acres<sup>350</sup> and had to declare their

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<sup>343</sup> The system of small-scale tenancies (as described by Hardiman, Report Settlement) remained through the second half of the 20th century (Steinberg 1981a: 121-127). The land that did go ‘to the tiller’ occurred in localised and sporadic cases, depending on the waxing and waning of the authorities at play in the villages.

<sup>344</sup> See the Cadastral map in Appendix A.

<sup>345</sup> This fact was highlighted in most discussions I had about this period with many elders, it was also emphasised by Zalok *yatmiyathpa* during our interview of the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2019

<sup>346</sup> the organisation created by the U Nu’s government to handle the redistribution of land, called the Burman Farmer and Labourer Council (voiced PaTaLaSa), was quickly accused of clientelism and corruption, redistributing as it pleases fertile land that can grow paddy, and so was re-titled by villagers: The Burman Dishonest Villagers Council (also voiced PaTaLaSa).

<sup>347</sup> The State Agricultural Bank (SAB) was created in 1953 for this purpose.

<sup>348</sup> Known as the Farmer and Labourer Council during the AFPFL and later transformed into the Village People Council after Ne Win coup, with other subgroups (Socialist Youth Council and so on) created in villages as well.

<sup>349</sup> Cf. Nash (1965: 285).

<sup>350</sup> Cf. Steinberg (1981: 125).

dependents.<sup>351</sup> The policy was to give about ten acres to eligible cultivators,<sup>352</sup> that is, ‘actual farmers’ with tools, ox-cart, cattle and know-how.

In practice, the implementation depended on the previous changes of ownership that occurred before the central government returned. But it was also contingent on local settlement histories, on the type of cultivation (dry or wet lands) and on the power relations at plays in village tracts. I do not know precisely how it was implemented in Myinmilaung tract. However, the work of Nash and Spiro show how local farming families became the top of local hierarchy and competed between themselves to accumulate wealth by monopolising village leadership. Relating the 2016 selection of Myinmilaung headman, it helps understanding how the lugyi and candidates are the ones monopolising the institutions of power.

For Spiro, the land nationalisation was one of the historical roots of factionalism in Yeigyi, a rice-growing village where he did fieldwork in the early 1960s. One faction was led by the village headman who just became re-elected 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 1997: 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 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 1960-61.<sup>353</sup> In Yadaw, the land reform started in 1953 ended in 1958-60 with the officialization of the *status quo ante* when the army took over and suspended the

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<sup>351</sup> Cf. Spiro (1997: 151).

<sup>352</sup> Cf. Nash (1965: 285)

<sup>353</sup> From 1960 to 1961, he did 18 months of fieldwork in Upper Burma.

program 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”<sup>354</sup> (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 jailing and the formation of factions tied to national parties. The committee, composed of “*lugyi lugaun*”,<sup>355</sup> 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 tenant, 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 headman 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<sup>356</sup> the military caretaker government organised in 1960.<sup>357</sup> 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. And there was a paramount leader, U Sein Ko, the man of *hpon* who managed to cut off open competition.<sup>358</sup>

Overall, changes in land tenure were mostly a matter of village bigmen 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 ‘tillers’) were dependents upon big farming families. Change in social stratification and local politics depended on the type of cultivation.<sup>359</sup> But the main farming families used the successive changes and overlapping of supra-village authorities

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<sup>354</sup> Before the Japanese left, ten families owned less than 10% of the 1,344 acres which means that the tract and the rest was tenant operated. After U Nu government was elected, 123 households held 52% of the total. See Nash (1965: 213, 224).

<sup>355</sup> Cf. chapter 8 for a discussion of the transformation of the authority of the *lugyi*.

<sup>356</sup> Between U Nu's Union party known as the Clean AFPFL; Ba Swe's Stable AFPFL, and the National United Front

<sup>357</sup> Cf. Nash (1963: 200).

<sup>358</sup> U Sein Ko was not headman. The latter was elected but this election was more a ratification of the consensus of the proper person for office than a political contest given that he comes from a line of headman.

<sup>359</sup> There was more competition and potentially more factionalism in rice growing areas which settlement histories is marked by various waves of migrations.

(the British, the Japanese, the Communists, the Army, U Nu's government) to compete for resources and power by investing in leadership and monopolising 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. And when Mya Than (1987) 'revisited' a village studied some twenty years before by Pfanner (1962), she reached the same conclusion.

In Myinmilaung tract, changes in land ownership almost followed the same lines. It exacerbated factionalism between Myinmilaung proper and Gawgyi and was perhaps mostly contained within these villages. For instance, Gawgyi 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. And 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 it. U To Kaing thus may have buffered against political fragmentation – as did U Sein Ko – thanks to his authority and his influence as man of *hpon*. He may have also taken advantage of the situation. And some people from Myinmilaung started giving their land tax – the system was revived once U Nu government reclaimed sovereignty over this area in 1957-58 – 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 because they could access land by becoming or remaining sharecroppers for the main peasant families. But most importantly, this period witnessed a rearticulating of local hierarchies because the obligations and affiliations toward 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*.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the history of the local polity from the 1890s to the early 1950s by focussing 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 highlighted how Gawgyi, Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon villages were gathered under the same village tract and a single headman once the British ‘pacified’ the countryside and designed a new system of government based on direct rule through 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 colonisation of our area of study was but another episode in a space characterised 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 moralisation of behaviours and engagement in secular affairs when villagers reinterpreted their role toward Buddhism and contested colonial rule. The junction of a new context and the emerging of new leaders allows one to think about power and authority in terms of worth, beyond the emphasis on charismatic leadership (*hpon*). The chapter ultimately made a case for seeing the whole period as a moment when claims to authority was channelled by belonging to farming families. It showed 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 next chapter explores the rise of village affairs as the form of Gawgyi politics against a background of state disengagement and violence.

## CHAPTER 5. THE RISE OF VILLAGE AFFAIRS (1960s-2010s)

### MEETING THE HEADMEN

One of the advantages of doing fieldwork with a village headman was that I could meet the people who had previously held this position. Once Ko Kyaw stopped being headman in March 2016, it became almost inconceivable. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of 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 the government interacted with villagers during post-socialist military rule. Under his tenure, the state disengaged from the organisation 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 lies covering 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. But the situation in and of itself is worth describing first. For instance, as I was interested in how he became headman, U Win told me that his election was democratic: the ten household leaders queried 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. And it was certainly not how it could have happened 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 there used to be the cooperative shop. Beyond the fact that U Win was corrupt, using his position of 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 dissembled ignorance and covered 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 moment.

Things were quite different when I attempted to meet his successor while conducting fieldwork for my master’s research in 2013. U Htay is from Gawgyi and he held Myinmilaung office from 2006 to 2011. In the first few weeks, I had trouble meeting him. He kept avoiding me. Some days, it became a game of hide-and-seek. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2013, we had one main formal discussion during which he remained laconic. Our relation changed completely when I came back in 2015 for a much longer period. I realised that he kept his distance not only with me, but also with many 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. And 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. That 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 had changed with the replacement of one man by another; factionalism and corruption were still present under U Htay (and after, chapter 2), 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 monopolised 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 21st century.

This chapter explores the transformations of the local polity from the early years of the socialist period (1962 onward) to the democratic opening of the early 2010s to locate how village affairs became the principal form of Gawgyi politics. It is divided in three sections. The first one introduces the reader to the general historical backdrop of the period covering the socialist (1962-88) and the militarist (1989-2011) eras. It presents the implementation and failure of the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’<sup>360</sup> under the dictatorship of Ne Win which eventually led to the mass revolt of 1988 followed by the reasserting of military power under the SLORC/SPDC<sup>361</sup> government until the partial democratic opening under the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government of Thein Sein in 2011. It describes how the socialisation of society reinforced the control over peasants and opened up to democracy 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 way 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 division between farmers and dependents 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 in two parts each focusing more closely to 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. The history of land relations is not directly addressed in the following sections. This task is devoted to chapter 7 which centres on the transmission of inheritance within farming families.

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<sup>360</sup> Cf. Aung-Thwin and Thant Myint-U (1992) and Steinberg (1982) among others.

<sup>361</sup> SPDC stand for the State Peace and Development Council (1997-2011), the organisation that replaced the SLORC.

In this chapter on transmission, a case study explores continuity and change in land relations and shows how the conceptions and practices related to property are articulated with family obligations. This ethnographic approach of land allows to reinterpret the transformations of ownership during the second half of the twentieth century and before.

One of the main challenges was to integrate my data into a historical narrative marked out by other academic interests while letting the materials reflect the experience of my interlocutors. This chapter is thus informed by a series of interviews and informal discussions in Gawgyi and Myinmilaung proper as well as in other villages.<sup>362</sup> 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 of the chronology of significant events for Myinmilaung tract. It also enables me to locate the particularities of this polity.

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<sup>362</sup> Among these villages, the most notables are: Hnawpin North, Hnawpin South, Innte, Ayadaw, Kyawka, Thazi, Ywadon, Budaungkan, Kyawsipon, Booba, Minzu, Zeehpyubin, Salingyi, Nyuangpinthar, Kothan, Hledar and Aungchanthar. I visited each of them several times in 2013-14 and in 2015-16.

## HISTORICAL BACKDROP

1962-74	<b>Union Revolutionary Council</b> (General Ne Win coup) Planed economy / Quota system / Rise of black market
1974-88	<b>Burma Socialist Program Party</b> (General Ne Win) Gradual worsening of living conditions Demonetisations (1985, 1987)
1988	Mass revolt against the military
1988-2010	<b>State Law and Order Restoration Council</b> (SLORC 1988-1997) <b>State Peace and Development Council</b> (SPDC 1997-2010) Forced labour / Partial liberalisation 30 <sup>th</sup> of May 2003: Depayin massacre
2010-2016	<b>Union Solidarity and Development Party</b> (USDP) Farmland law (2012) Democratic elections (2015 – victory of the National League for Democracy of Aung San Suu Kyi)

*Figure 15. Timeline of the military period*

The literature used for this chapter mostly draws from studies about the socialist period,<sup>363</sup> economy and development at large,<sup>364</sup> agriculture,<sup>365</sup> the experience and meaning of the 1988 revolts,<sup>366</sup> the functioning of military rule and its daily experience,<sup>367</sup> and about the transformation of the state and its political economy.<sup>368</sup> 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<sup>369</sup> on textual analysis of political philosophies and on the macro-economy (among others).

<sup>363</sup> Cf. Aung-Thwin and Thant Myint-U (1992), Hlaing (2003), Lintner (1990b), U Maung Maung (1969),

<sup>364</sup> Notably Brown (2013) and Steinberg (1981, 1982).

<sup>365</sup> Cf. Boutry et al. (2017), Kurosaki (2008), Kurosaki et al., (2004), Mya Than (1987, 1990), Thawngmung (2003a, 2003b, 2004), Warr (2000).

<sup>366</sup> Cf. Boudreau (2004), Ferrara (2003), Lintner (1990a).

<sup>367</sup> Cf. Callahan (2003), Fink (2009), Lehman (1981), Skidmore (2003, 2004).

<sup>368</sup> Cf. Steinberg (1981, 2001), Taylor (2001, 2009), Thawngmung (2003a, 2003b, 2004).

<sup>369</sup> With at least two exceptions that should be noted: Lintner study of the fall of the Communist Party of Burma (1990b) and Brown's book on economic history (2013).

One of the arguments that runs through this thesis is, however, closely related to Thawngmung’s studies on rural perception of state legitimacy (2003a, 2003b, 2004), and more precisely on how villagers engaged with local officials – notably village headmen – under the SLORC/SPDC government. In this chapter, and more broadly in the thesis, I approach village headship through a succession of particular individuals embodying the institution. One has to consider the ‘stakes of the moment’ to understand the politics of village leadership and this leads to the expansion of the question of legitimacy beyond formal institutions. This is particularly true when considering the authoritarian regime that ruled the central plains of Myanmar from 1988 to 2011. For instance, the rise of U Htay as a leader in Gawgyi happened in a context where old references – prior leaders, conceptions of worthiness, engagement toward the collective – were rearticulated while being faced with military violence in an atmosphere of collusion and corruption. The worth of people, rather than their “sheer power” or *hpon* was key in the rise of village affairs as the primary form of Gawgyi politics and U Htay gave ‘arms and legs’ to this dynamic. Thawngmung’s longitudinal analysis of a variety of headmen<sup>370</sup> ends up describing them as mere brokers either using their position to extract wealth thanks to patron-client ties or to buffer state demands for their fellow villagers. Therefore, the old debate about the nature of leadership in the countryside repeats itself.<sup>371</sup> Scott, reviewing Thawngmung’s book, makes a point in saying that “peasants are clearly capable of distinguishing a rather better local official from the overall quality of the regime” (2007: 121), but that does not make them legitimate by definition. Thus, and following Thawngmung’s call for taking into account the diversity of contexts and histories (2004: 168), this chapter centres its argument on the case of Myinmilaung tract.

“In the two years between the coup in 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 organisations, and established the nucleus of a political party with ancillary mass organisations and its own ideology, through which it was intended to mobilise support for the state.” (Taylor 2009: 295). Yet, the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ –

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<sup>370</sup> Notably in the chapters 2 and 3, pp.43-129.

<sup>371</sup> Cf. the general introduction, and more specifically the section “Debating local politics”.

the official ideology of the Revolutionary Council and the Burma Socialist Programme Party after the military coup – took some time to find its way in 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 re-organisation 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 nationalisation.<sup>372</sup> Under Ne Win, the centralised 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 centralised administration. However, the government gradually fell short of its ambitions and the authoritarian functioning at the top of administration, in which loyalty, obedience and mistrust were key, pervades 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).

At large, 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 the living conditions for villagers by the mid-1980s. Making a living was more and more about making trade-offs with village authorities to get around the law. Despite that, officially, the state sought to secure people’s support by creating supra-local networks and a centralised administration. In this period, one of the main dynamics was the closing off of the local polity on the village tract. The institutionalisation of socialism through local men made Myinmilaung tract a more insular polity because villagers depended more on arrangements with these individuals in order to make a living. It also reinforced patronage and factionalism (related to land), the political

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<sup>372</sup> Cf. The 1963 Nationalisation Law and the 1964 Law to Protect the Implementation of Socialist Economic System.

mechanisms through which socialism operated at the grassroots level in continuity with pre-socialist practices (chapter 4).

In Myinmilaung tract, organising 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 became 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 nip landlordism in the bud, 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. Besides, villagers would have to buy rations of commodities (rice, oil, clothes, soap, etc) from the Township cooperative via a local proxy.

But, overall, the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ did not bring about an agrarian revolution. In 1971, between one-third and one-half of the land in the Chindwin region was still operated via small-scale tenancies.<sup>373</sup> Estates fragmented generation after generation – mostly due to the nature of inheritance patterns (see chapter 7) – except for a few families who managed to expand their holdings by controlling the village tract Land Committee.<sup>374</sup> The possibility and profitability of accessing land decreased and the lives of villagers – and daily labourers in particular – worsened greatly during the second half of the 1980s. There were less avenues for migration, less food, less cash (Brown 2013: 154), and less work. Three-quarters of the country's currency became valueless, when less than a week after removing the control on domestic trade in September 1987, “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.”<sup>375</sup> (Steinberg 2010: 76). The effect was disastrous. Peasants refused to sell their harvests because they were their main asset, and the whole chain of exchanges between locals were impacted (in markets and in daily transactions for labour, credit and so on). Farmers were more and more afraid of crop and cattle

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<sup>373</sup> Cf. Steinberg (1981a: 121-127).

<sup>374</sup> Cf. Lubeigt (1975) for a similar pattern in another region of central Burma.

<sup>375</sup> The first ones were in 1964 and November 1985 but conversion was possible.

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 trees' leaves to sell soups while breeding goat and eating “one meal a day” to make ends meet while farmers and tenants prioritised their nuclear family at the expense of clients and dependents.<sup>376</sup> There was a growing and unbearable contradiction between the state's demands and the actual lives of people. Food prices were no longer subsidised and thus rose highly. In addition, 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 to the world when, in December 1987, the United Nation classified Burma as a ‘least developed country’.” (Brown 2013: 160). But events turned awry in the capital Rangoon and many student-led demonstrations were ruthlessly smashed by the army<sup>377</sup> in March, June and July 1988. A change was called by Ne Win himself, the dictator that isolated Burma internationally, who, purposefully or not, acknowledged that “the bloody events of March and June show a lack of trust in the government and the party” in his address to the party's emergency congress on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 1988 before announcing his resignation. Ne Win remained nonetheless 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, killings. This series of events, known as the ‘Democracy Summer’, constitutes the largest popular uprising in Myanmar's modern history. The revolt crystallised in the Four Eight Movement, in reference to the general strike that began on August 8, 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 country's main cities. Sein Lwin stepped down on August 12,

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<sup>376</sup> This expression was given to me on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2016 by U Htoo, a would-be farmer who bought land recently (Chapetr 6).

<sup>377</sup> Notably the infamous *Lon Htein* under Sein Lwin, known as the ‘Butcher of Rangoon’ for his role in the suppression of March and June demonstrations, cf. Lintner (1990).

but only after hundreds of demonstrators had been killed or wounded by the army.<sup>378</sup>

From July to early September in Monywa, several hundreds of students started gathering 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.<sup>379</sup> 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) onto the national political scene in August and early September, protests kept going under the watch of local committees which almost 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 told in a low voice at teashops, is the moment when ‘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 once General Maung Saw and the military retook power in the country, established a new government, the SLORC, and imposed martial law on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August. The army battalion that ‘restored order’ in Sagaing, which was also the theatre of exactions such as the ‘Sagaing Massacre’,<sup>380</sup> 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 years consecutively.

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<sup>378</sup> Cf. Seekins (2006: 161).

<sup>379</sup> I am not able for the moment to account for the reason of this split, neither of the content of each revendication.

<sup>380</sup> 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, five hundred and thirty-seven persons were killed. This was probably the worst event, in terms of casualties, to occur during Democracy Summer outside of Rangoon, cf. Seekins (2006: 385).

There are various discourses about these events in the villages of Monywa Township. For instance, the individuals who were civil servants under the socialist government condemn the uprising because it was led by ignorant people.<sup>381</sup> The beheadings exemplify their foolishness and the so-called democratic movement used them to swell the ranks of the opposition. They do not understand that taking care of people's affairs required an over-arching organisation (the army) in place beyond political factions as embodied by parliamentarianism. And after all, socialism was not that bad in theory. But for most people, 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 of the population. In the next few years, new headmen were appointed (mostly people not involved in the revolt) and most of the socialist organisation of agriculture was officially abandoned. But the 1988 interlude did not bring about massive change in how agriculture was controlled. It rather led to a deterioration of daily life due to 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 gradually had lost its tight grip over the countryside due to its economic failure, the subsequent military regime (SLORC/SPDC) imposed hard-line governance mixing partial market liberalisation and a command economy. In her study on rural perception of state officials and policies in rice growing areas, Thawngmung (2004) argued that the changing presence of the state is visible in the shifts of 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, “[a]griculture had effectively been de-emphasized” under Ne Win (1981b: 32). Thawngmung shares the same diagnosis.<sup>382</sup> While the financing and material ability to operate the Burmese Way to Socialism declined and the black market pervades the countryside, new directions were taken. First through the introduction

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<sup>381</sup> This was the point of view of one of Hnawpin South elders interviewed on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2015 for instance.

<sup>382</sup> Cf. Thawngmung (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 agricultural areas could be used for multiple cropping because of lack of irrigation.” (2004: 78).

of ‘high yield varieties’<sup>383</sup> (1975-85), then via a very ‘partial liberalisation’ from 1987 onward and finally with land reclamation 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. And when liberalisation was finally abandoned under the SLORC, a strategy of extensive farming was adopted.<sup>384</sup>

But corruption and rent seeking continued to pervade the military regime under the SLORC/SPDC. Thawngmung described a countryside where most extension agents<sup>385</sup> were corrupt, selling the pesticides, fertilisers and products they should distribute, taking bribes to admit peasants to advantageous programs 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 must shower them with gifts and cash. To some extent, in the dry lands 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,<sup>386</sup> with variations from one place to another.<sup>387</sup> Overall, the distance the government had tried to reduce with 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 has coined ‘Myanmafication’ (1999). Myanmafication amounted to positioning the state as a defender of Buddhism,

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<sup>383</sup> The HYV program required a more intense use of fertilisers and pesticides as well as new seeds. Even if it targeted primarily rice growing areas, this program had also concerned dry crops such as beans and pulses for the use of fertilisers and pesticides.

<sup>384</sup> Cf. Thawngmung (2004: 78-86)

<sup>385</sup> 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 Record Department.

<sup>386</sup> Beans and pulse, which were relatively spared by state policies because the government focused primarily on rice cultivation, became one of the top products at the turn of the 1990s. Thawngmung 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).

<sup>387</sup> In our area of study, crop procurement, notably concerning beans and pulses, seems to have disappeared in 1997.

reinventing national unity within a horizon of ‘disciplined democracy’, patronising the sangha, building pagodas, and creating an auspicious country while revisiting Myanmar archaeology to re-write human origins. Under the SLORC/SPDC, forced labour became a main tool to control the people mostly secluded in villages. Cattle rustling almost disappeared and villages’ 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 programs) was done with forced labour which fed a series of grievances toward the military. Villagers simply became used to keeping their mouth 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. 1988 and its aftermaths had an impact on morality because it participated in the growing feeling of distrust toward the government. And even if the military regime developed a new massive organisation, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) which membership enabled access to services and positions,<sup>388</sup> people were not fooled; many if not most remained silent<sup>389</sup> and avoided direct confrontation.

Villagers were even called, against remuneration, to rally USDA operations. One of them, known as the ‘Depayin Massacre’ or ‘Black Friday,’ has had a lasting impact in their memories and was allegedly organised by the USDA. While returning from a visit to Kachin State, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of 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 north-east. “The assailants were believed to be members of the 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

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<sup>388</sup> See Houtman (1999: 116-119) and Thawngmung (2004: 173-175).

<sup>389</sup> The word “silence” has been widely used to describe the attitude of civilian under military rule. See for instance the chapter five (*The Roots of Silence*) of Thawngmung book (2004: 169-205) and Fink’s book titled *Living silence. Burma under military rule* (2009).

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 degrees, politics were 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 monopolise state institutions at the local level. So, even if conditions worsened for the general population, notably the small farmers and landless,<sup>390</sup> there was room for manoeuvring. 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 puts 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: “Some are handpicked by the township and district PDC authorities, other are voted into office by their peers; the choice depends on the preferences of the township authorities” (2004: 95). Her study 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. But, as Scott argued (2007), it is not because half of headmen were better than the other half that they were perceived as legitimate. Headmen were needed because they made it possible to control and administer villages since colonial times as responsible yet disposable native officials. Yet, one of Thawnghmung’s insights – and critiques toward the “moral school of thought” (2004: 168) – is that each locality has its own history. How people evaluate their headman, their “degree of leniency” toward them, depends “on their past and present relationships with state authorities [...].” (*ibid.*: 168).

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<sup>390</sup> Brown stated that the number of landless in agricultural population was estimated to have “accounted for perhaps a quarter of all households in rural Myanmar in the 2000s, nearly ten million people, largely dependent on labouring wages alone.” (2013: 185)

In that vein, and to open up to 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 just one kind of leader. If we look at headmen beyond the institution, and take it 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’ quite often are accused of corruption and collusion. They embody the bad treatment inflicted on the population from the 1970s to the 2010s. Others may have embodied a shift in how local affairs are organised. It depends on the case. And the following case shows how the exactions, the killings, the ‘stealing’ of harvests through imposed quotas, jailing for those unable to provide it, the forced labour and the growing corruption of officials during the 1990s fed a movement of self-organisation of local affairs at a distance from a disengaging state. In other words, when the military abandoned the idea of organising village life, local officials used their position of gatekeepers (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 it *kotukotha*, which can be transcribed as “rising by and defining oneself,” an ideology of self-reliance.

## THE TIGHTENING OF THE LOCAL POLITY

### Headmen of Myinmilaung tract

From Myinmilaung Proper	From Gawgyi	Period
	<b>U San</b>	1964-1989
	<b>U Mya</b>	1989-1995
<b>U Win</b>		1995-2006
	<b>U Htay</b>	2006-2011
<b>U Yay</b>		2011-2012
	<b>Ko Kyaw</b>	2012-2016
<b>U So</b>		2016-

Figure 16. The successive headmen of Myinmilaung tract (1964 to 2016)

When looking back, farmers see themselves as “the machete's ferrule” (*dhamanawpeikgue*), a round piece of metal that one smacks on a hard surface to tighten the blade.<sup>391</sup> It means that each time the government had a plan, villagers would bear the consequences. Even if it created close relations between the government and the peasants, the socialist policies of the military regime leaned ultimately toward greater extraction of wealth from the countryside and a “tightening control over the rural population” (*ibid.*: 84). The policy of crop procurement is a case in point and more complex and intimate processes of exclusion<sup>392</sup> were also at play. The investment in, and monopolisation of, the institutions empowered by the state to control land and wealth by the main farming families exemplifies these processes.

<sup>391</sup> This expression was first given to me by U Than from Zalok village on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 2014, and I've heard it multiple times in the villages where I had a chance to interview elders about local history.

<sup>392</sup> Hall et al. (2011: 145-169) define intimate exclusion as a process of everyday accumulation and dispossession of wealth among neighbours and kin who share common histories and social interaction, which cumulatively produce agrarian classes.

Once the socialist government had stabilised its hold over Monywa, the Township Security and Administration Council (TSAC),<sup>393</sup> composed of military officers, started appointing and creating new institutions in the countryside in 1964-65. In Myinmilaung tract, after the news was spread by village criers, a Captain from the TSAC came to ask who wanted to be appointed as headman, as members of Village Tract Security and Administration Council (VSAC), as well as 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 repartition of powers would have consequences in the further development of the local polity. When I asked about how did it go, most of Gawgyi elders gave me a general statement about how the selections operated under the military. Those appointed either had connections with the government,<sup>394</sup> were able to act as community leaders or were those who knew how to “show their face”.<sup>395</sup> In other words, it was a matter of pre-existing connections, ability to get information, and, in our case, of the balance of power between Myinmilaung proper and Gawgyi.

This balance of power, embodied by who is the village headman, was kept in favour of Gawgyi until 1995. The main families of Gawgyi and Myinmilaung proper staffed a variety of local committees – mostly the Peasants’ and Workers’ Councils and the Socialist Youth – created to organise the society along socialist lines and which membership “brought ancillary benefits such as access to officials and rewards” (Taylor 2009: 316). 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 bigmen managed to secure the People’s Council and “chose people from among their members to staff their Executive Committees, on which most of the work fell, and the People’s Courts, as well as their Inspection and Affairs Committees” (Taylor 2009: 332). The positions of power were monopolised by a few farming families and, for the villagers, most of

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<sup>393</sup> Called *NaLaKa* in Burmese. The SACs are the main structures – present at all level of administration – created by the Revolutionary Council to centralise the government authority. They became the People’s Council with the 1974 Constitution, cf. Taylor (2009: 315-316).

<sup>394</sup> Usually expressed by using the vocabulary of friendship, cf. Spiro (1997).

<sup>395</sup> 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 gets people’s favour.

the members in 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 organise the agrarian revolution on the ground.

In Myinmilaung tract, the socialisation 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 do a similar operation for each family who also received monthly vouchers to collect commodities, rice, soap, clothes and other items in his house. On the one hand, the headman's house in Gawgyi became the place where farmers came for updating land records and to store their harvest quotas. On the other hand, people had to get their supplies at the house of the cooperative head in Myinmilaung. There was a virtual monopoly by two men on the circulation of products coming in 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 one elder.<sup>396</sup> And 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 socialisation process impacted household economics in two ways. First, the 1964 demonetisation of the K100 and K50 banknotes – officially to fight domestic and foreign capitalists<sup>397</sup> – affected their savings to some extent – even if gold, clothes, land, cattle and sometimes rubies were the bulk of farmers' capital. Second, the state's ability to organise the centralisation of procurements and deliveries failed to make ends meet as less products and foodstuffs could be found in daily markets

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<sup>396</sup> Gawgyi elders highlighted this idea many time but was emphasized upon clearly during the gathering of Gawgyi bigmen on the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 2016.

<sup>397</sup> Cf. Brown (2013: 151).

and the cooperatives' stores in the early 1970s, while the nationalised industries, mills and transportation were poorly operated by the Trading Corporation.<sup>398</sup> In addition, procurement prices were kept very low, with a mild rise in the early 1970s,<sup>399</sup> until the official abolition of the system in 1997.<sup>400</sup> And from this standpoint derives many stories of grievances, misrule and growth of the black market.

In 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 his bargain with the 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 at the last minute to his house, bribe U San, or tried to sell it 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). Besides, 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<sup>401</sup> – if their quota was not reached and, thanks to the Tenancy Act, tenants working on a land for up to five years could now claim the right to cultivate it in their own name.<sup>402</sup> In other words, the local recognition of ownership and tenancies – officially illegal – was in the hands of the Land

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<sup>398</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 149

<sup>399</sup> The failure of Revolutionary Council in the late 1960s led to a readjustment of state policies that occurred during the early 1970s and unfolds toward a focus on the exploitation of natural resources, the substitutions of importations while being partly constrained by international aid and loans, cf. Brown (2013: 149).

<sup>400</sup> Cf. Boutry *et al.* (2017).

<sup>401</sup> The reforms introduced by the Revolutionary Council (The Farmer's 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 organise through Village Land Committees. In addition, the government has authorised, 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, 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. Cf. Boutry *et al.* (2017), and Taylor (2009: 339).

<sup>402</sup> Cf. Boutry *et al.* (2007: 116, 144) concerning the Regulation 1/64, stipulating that a land cultivated by a tenant for more than five years consecutively may go to the tenant.

Committee, thus of U San, and in turn also in the hands of a few of Gawgyi main families which outnumbered those of Myinmilaung proper. These powers concentrated in the headman's hands fuelled stories of dispossessions/repossessions and factionalism based on grievances stemming from the changes that happened during the 'land reform' less than a decade ago. From around 1975 to the late 1980s, the only positive fact recalled by villagers are the good rains. But things got worse because the procurement system, from a minutely calculated system, turned 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 headman quite young, 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 un-updated data and despite the failure of new crops that were forcefully introduced. Besides, U San also managed the credit system<sup>403</sup> based on how many acres a farmer was cultivating. As the years passed, less officials justified the quotas based on the capacities of a given tract. The more credit was insufficient, debt rose, and the black market expanded.<sup>404</sup> The targets materialised in a 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 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 rhythm. If it 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 shut their mouths while officials were there. There was no way to negotiate with them frontally. But there was possibilities to find trade-offs before and after the meeting: with the headman who allocated the quota to each farmer of the tract; with other farmers to exchange quotas depending on land types; and even with brokers to buy some crops one cannot 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.

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<sup>403</sup> Cf. Turnell (2009) and Brown (2013) for the history of the credit system in Burma/Myanmar.

<sup>404</sup> This trend was explicitly stated in each and every villages I visited.

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 embodied the cooperative until a dedicated building was built on a ‘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 cooperative’s store to fetch both, the products to be sold at cheap prices to villagers, and the vouchers rationalising the amount each family could get. Soon, he was accused of selling products “on the road”, that is, on the black market.<sup>405</sup> In addition, he also lent money to villagers by accepting their vouchers as mortgage security. But, allegedly, no one could really complain, and everyone saw the livelihood of U Than rising while his house-store became less and less full of commodities. An attempt was made to bring him down by U San. When U Than called for the construction of a real store U San tried to have a man from Gawgyi enrolled as clerk (i.e. able to see the in and out of money, vouchers and products). But it failed and the store remained in the hands of Myinmilaung proper. During the readjustment of the socialist policy in 1972/73<sup>406</sup> – emphasising 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 credits, sell their crops, and farm their land. The black market was a means of resistance as much as a burden 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

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<sup>405</sup> This information was confirmed by Myinmilaung elders during an interview conducted on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2019.

<sup>406</sup> Cf. Brown (2013: 149).

demands. There was, of course, trade-offs, and avenues 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 monopolise most of the apparatus built to bring about socialism. As in the village of lower Burma studied by Mya Than – after Pfanner<sup>407</sup> – 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 organisations 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 practice forum shopping between institutions and the power balance between villages in the tract.<sup>408</sup> And, in a long-term perspective, the fact that the socialist policy and practice empowered farming families has 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 not seen as a strategy anymore, but rather as a push to cheat and bribe. The malfunctioning of the government corrupted people, or at least this is how people put it. If the bloodshed of 1988 was not a rupture in Gawgyi as it was in the capital city of Rangoon, it contributed to increased distrust toward officials at many levels. And locally, the rupture came later, when an Infamous headman was succeeded by a Worthy one.

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<sup>407</sup> Cf. Pfanner (1962).

<sup>408</sup> There are also a story in which a village headman from another tract in that period was jailed because he took some of the crops gathered at Monywa store. In one version, it was to give it back to farmers who were really poor. In another, it was to sell it again and make a profit. The point is that the headmen were often seen either as dubious persons or as protectors depending on the interlocutors.

## 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 of the torch from U Win to U Htay crystallised 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 that values are presented to and instilled in subjects through the influence of exemplary persons.<sup>409</sup> 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. And the transition from one to the other represents a moral shift which unfolded during the rise of village affairs as a field of politics in the 2000s in Gawgyi.

### **“Don’t deal with them”**

“Don’t deal with them” is the clear-cut answer most elders in the villages I visited gave me when asked about their past relations with the government.<sup>410</sup> It means: do not make deals with officials, do not give bribes, do not get involved in that. It was a piece of advice, rendered in another expression: *kotukotha*, meaning “rising by and defining oneself”. But it is also a moral take on state practice from the late 1970s onward. If you start dealing with them, that is, making arrangements

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<sup>409</sup> Cf. Humprey (1997) and Robbins (2015).

<sup>410</sup> It was notably formulated in this way by Innte elders on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2016.

(*nalehmu*), it could 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,<sup>411</sup> but rather to show how distrust toward village headship has crystallised and has 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 once 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 that made him a rather fitting candidate. Overall, people remember his time as a moment when the headman had to maintain order by any means necessary. The military government was disengaging from the countryside and the organisation of local affairs and economy. U Mya was left to rule almost alone and was backed, if case 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 force power remained in favour of Gawgyi, but Myinmilaung was represented. This is pretty much what 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 *lokdam*, *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 sell soups in Monywa while others sold their remaining goats they usually kept to breed and feed in the open pasture after the harvests. Even small farmers started climbing palm trees to collect its sap (to produce alcohol or sugar) and its leaves (to remake roofs), a risky activity usually reserved for the poorest. Many newly-wed couples migrated from one village to another in search for this kind of contract with land

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<sup>411</sup> Maung Maung Gyi (1983: 154-155), Spiro (1997) and Nash (1965: 75) had presented this view of the government as part of the longue durée in Burmese conception of politics. But, as this chapter shows, the distance with the state changes from one period to another and depends on who embody this or that position.

and tree owners. Young men went to work in the mining and the rice growing areas but often came back empty-handed. Meanwhile, in the village most families reverted to sorghum, sometimes mixed with maize, as staple food instead of rice. The degradation of economic conditions made the complex hierarchy and dependency relations between *taungthu* and *myaukthu* appeared in its crudest form. One could be protected by a farmer, but few did it or mostly towards close relatives. Farmers were selling their crops less and less 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 solidarities concentrated more on the couple and less on extended relations, and the ceremonies of donations, based on family's savings, became rare. In short, distrust was rampant. Most of the *myaukthu* were considered a threat, crop thieves who would then sell it at the market in Monywa. And village fences were a fragile bulwark against bandits and cattle rustling.<sup>412</sup>

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.<sup>413</sup> This is obviously related to how some families monopolised local institutions empowered to control resource access, as we have seen in the previous section and chapter. But it is also conjectural. 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.<sup>414</sup> The 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 disengagement of the state from local affairs and increasing inequalities between villagers that a new village headman emerged in 1995. This man is U Win, from Myinmilaung

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<sup>412</sup> Cattle rustling decreased in the late 1990s and thus villages' stockades were less and less maintained, to the point that during my own fieldwork, villages' gates had almost disappeared.

<sup>413</sup> The year of construction of many types of buildings (brick houses, wells, pagodas, monasteries) is often written on their facade.

<sup>414</sup> Cf. Brillion (2015).

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 elders. But such elections actually started in 2011-12. Others say that he was nominated directly by the Township GAD. Nobody was clear on that matter. What is troubling is that forced labour (*lok-a-pay*) started to be used on a larger scale since he took office, and people's movements in and out of the village tract were increasingly controlled in the region. A general sentiment in Gawgyi is that this man embodied corruption. He is depicted as an archetype of the SLORC era (1989-97): a greedy and immoral official who worked for a militarised government which relied on violence and pushed people to cheat. And there is a series of grievances and stories against and about him.

Under U Win, the villagers of Myinmilaung tract experienced a new kind of state violence when forced labour became the main way to build roads, canals and dams. Irrigations works were intended to support the new agricultural policies by drafting free labour “without relying heavily on foreign exchange” (Thawngthum 2004: 81). First, they heard about the construction of a dam in Thazi which started in 1994 (figure 3). Stories of people being beaten, women abused, and pagoda relics and treasures stolen by the soldiers spread through the whole township.<sup>415</sup> In late 1995, once the Thazi dam was completed, the 20<sup>th</sup> Artillery battalion under Captain So Win started supervising the construction of another dam in Kyawkka. U Win most likely became in charge of 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. But trade-offs could be found through the agency of U Win who became a sort of a labour broker. And the poorest families either repaid part of their debt to richer ones via forced labour or got indebted if they could not provide a valid worker in order to avoid jailing. Being on U Win's good side made life easier for those who could afford it. For this dam, some villagers had to destroy a monastery and a pagoda. Some still fear karmic justice for such demeritorious act.<sup>416</sup> And the

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<sup>415</sup> This notably relates to the interviews done in Thazi with Hnawpin headman on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 2016.

<sup>416</sup> On how military attempted to legitimise itself through donations and foundation of pagodas, cf.

soldiers were immoral, drunk, beating the workers, insulting their own religion and disrespecting people who could have been their parents and grandparents. Those were not the same kind of soldiers previous generations had dealt with under the socialist system.<sup>417</sup> A canal was then built along the road between Kyawkka and Thazi, and so forced labour continued.<sup>418</sup> Besides, villagers' movements were also increasingly monitored. For instance, they had to declare their goings and comings to the village headman, even to go to a donation ceremony. In addition, any stranger had to announce their entry into the village as well.<sup>419</sup> U Win kept records of all of it, but apparently gave his notebooks to his successor who told me, in mid-December 2013, that he never saw any of them. Considering this, it appears that U Win's job at large was to control manpower and people's movements.<sup>420</sup> And it gave him a certain hold over villagers, who mostly learned to stay silent in front of guns but who took their revenge when football matches were organised against soldiers.

But there are also more 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'.<sup>421</sup> At large, 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 this 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 recognised for not doing it while Ko Kyaw (2012-2016) was more ambiguous. U Win's official stamp was a means to extract wealth when formalising contracts, registering families, giving travel authorisations and negotiating agricultural loans. Legality was but "only in the mouth" (chapter 6). U Win's vanity is said to have extended beyond his official

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Houtman (1999) and Rozenberg (2002, 2009).

<sup>417</sup> Thawngmung made a case of how the change in recruitment of military personnel under the SLORC/SPDC distance the Tatmadaw from villagers. While most were coming directly from the countryside during the socialist period, enrolment was then confined to relatives, families and associate of the military (2004: 82).

<sup>418</sup> The renovation of the river embankment and the main roads in Monywa was also done for a large part with forced labour coming from the whole township.

<sup>419</sup> On this point it seems that the registering of newcomers has been a long-standing practice since the late precolonial period.

<sup>420</sup> To some degrees, this practice shares commonalities with the role of local chiefs in the precolonial polity, cf. chapter 3.

<sup>421</sup> For a study of the category public, cf. Huard (2016).

position and reached 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<sup>422</sup> with the help of the clerk.

But their mischief did not stop here and partly structured local politics because they related to how ethics permeates leadership, the use of wealth and land arrangements. And 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. Here is the story.<sup>423</sup> Around 2003, eleven farmers mortgaged their land to U Myo, one of the biggest moneylenders of 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 formalised the contracts and stamped them. Three years later, U Myo became headman of Budaungkan tract. The dispute started a few months later. Most farmers asked for an extension of the agreement because they could not reimburse U Myo. But 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. But he refused and advised on meeting with Township authorities to settle the case. The latter sent the cases back to village authorities. During 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. And U Myo tried, unsuccessfully, to register the plots under his name, arguing that he was the tiller and thus, following the socialist regulation,<sup>424</sup> he should get the right to cultivate the land. In other words, they used moneylending, loopholes in the law and the monopolisation of official institutions to extract wealth.

In the meantime, U Myo and U Win tried to get a hold over the cemetery located on both sides of the path dividing Myinmilaung and Budaungkan tract at the centre of Myinmilaung proper. On Myinmilaung side, U Win’s plan was cut

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<sup>422</sup> All the villages included in Myinmilaung proper (Myinmilaung, Mingalagon, Ogon, Mogaung and Mayodaw) participate in the Shwepanhla festival.

<sup>423</sup> I first heard about this story through Ko Kyaw on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2014.

<sup>424</sup> Regulation called Act 1/64, cf. note 369.

short as U Htay, the main *lubyi* of Gawgyi, was selected as headman in 2006. But 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. So the scam came to light. Seeing this, villagers and the monk voiced their disagreement. 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, whose merit could trickle down to the whole settlement, it was by no means an act that legitimated his authority.<sup>425</sup> To some extent, the selection of U Htay was a reaction of 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. And true or not, partly exact or just rumours, 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 immunity due to military support. That was his *ana*. Control was less exercised to extract wealth from harvests and 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 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, contradict the description of village headmen Thawngmung made 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 on law breakers, charging fees on land contracts,

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<sup>425</sup> See the discussion of the relation between merit making and power in the general introduction (section “From patronage to engagement”) as well as in chapter 8.

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)" (Thawngmung 2003b: 308-309).

My point is not to see if U Win fits this description or not, but to show another side of the picture in order to explore the question of headship in a different perspective. In short, headmen may be brokers, either as hard-pressed or extractive officials, stuck in-between the government and villagers. This fits the early qualification of headship as an intercalary position, an argument developed by Gluckman.<sup>426</sup> But they have their own stance, family background, and networks, and are empowered by the state in different ways. So, following Kuper's idea,<sup>427</sup> headship offers room for manoeuvre. But there is something else to it. In my case, the village headmen are benchmarks to evaluate the morality of a time, acting as a backdrop to explain the difference between today and the past. They are references or examples people draw upon to explain the ups and downs of village morality and show how ethical shifts transform the local polity (this discussion is continued in chapter 6).

### **“One of a kind”**

After the first monsoon rains in July 2016, the Gawgyi electrification project became a reality. There were further steps, and a *sine qua non* condition was that all the paths in the village should be enlarged to install the pylons. It had potential for causing disputes and many villagers would have to give up some land. Besides disagreements between neighbours about the 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 8). In July 2016, it was a potential maelstrom that almost no one was

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<sup>426</sup> Notably in Gluckman *et al.* (1949), and in Gluckman (1955, 1963).

<sup>427</sup> Cf. Kuper (1970).

willing to be responsible 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 just left it up to the villagers. U Thein, Gawgyi's candidate in the last election, should also have been responsible in his quality of hundred-houses' head. But it was clear to most people in August that he could not supervise the enlargement of the roads and solve the upcoming disputes. U Htay did. “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 job. But nobody referred to him as a man of *hpon*. He is different, but *hpon* is almost gone. He is rather an example, in the sense that he embodies the value of propriety and demonstrated trustworthiness in his life. When he became headman from 2006 on, U Htay personified a moral rupture with U Win the Infamous. And his engagement toward 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, in the mouth of most villagers in Gawgyi, this was for the best. I literally have not heard any criticism toward 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-U Myo as local bigmen 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 one more time, this time in favour of Gawgyi. The selection of U Htay was lived 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 not “eaten” anymore, bribes became obsolete to make contracts, identity cards and even to get loans from the Agricultural Bank. In retaliation, the agent of the SLRD in charge of the tract apparently stopped coming here to update the cadastre. In short, U Htay demonstrated that he was selfless and had a helping mind and short-circuited the way local affairs were managed.

But it was not all peace and light. U Htay, in his capacity as the local rung of the government, had to organise the confiscation – without compensations – of farmlands located within Myinmilaung tract for the creation of a poultry hatchery. The official of the land administration department who did not dare coming in Gawgyi suddenly disappeared with the cadastral map in question. There was no

more map, no official in charge, but one member of the regional government willing to make a poultry zone. And U Htay was the one who had to explain all of this to the villagers. On a different note, one of his achievements was the building of a road to shorten and ease transportations between Gawgyi and Monywa in 2009. To do so, he first convinced all the people who had their land crossed by the future road to donate a part of it. Then, he obtained the funding promised by the Township administration to make this road and organised 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<sup>428</sup>) to build a bridge (over the canal that the villagers 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 kept involved in the management of Gawgyi affairs after he stopped being headman in 2011. He decided not to be candidate for the 2011's round of selection following the announcement of a democratic transition under Thein Sein's government. That selection was chaotic. At that time, most of the ten house leaders refused to participate and even less were inclined to being candidates. A few hours before the arrival of the Township officials, some elders of Myinmilaung proper tried to gather all the villagers of the tract in the monastery. Only a few came. And the elder re-selected three candidates, all from Myinmilaung. This is how U Yin became headman, but only for one year. U Htay withdrew from candidacy by proclaiming himself the official elder of Gawgyi, and nobody challenged him. This was his first move in distancing himself from government positions. Yet, U Htay remained a key actor in Gawgyi politics. He became the key interlocutor of 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 (chapter 2). The water system was an assemblage of efforts, knowledge, money and donations. And Gawgyi bigmen, U Htay, U Lin and U Maung, as we will see in chapter 8, were the ones organising it. The village first had to be on the target list of several NGOs, then fees were

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<sup>428</sup> 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 (2018).

collected from all villagers, donations were given by the main families, a lottery was organised, 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). And 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 toward 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 chapter 4. In other words, he is inscribed in a genealogy of men of power. Men remembered, rightly or wrongly, for their engagement toward the enhancement of village life. And 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 witty), mercy (he does not push his power to the limit), patience (he does not rush into things, but await 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)” (1965: 77).

This description has the advantage of being suitable for any leader at any time in history because it emphasises 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 make 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. Yet, 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. And the sense of rupture was reinforced by an engagement toward 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 organising local politics to some extent.

But 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 monopolised 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 following 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. But 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 the chapter on the worth of bigmen, the engagement of some individuals toward 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 toward a common good.

But it is a fragile state of affairs ridden with uncertainty especially because this political order is linked to a few persons. When these men stop taking care of village affairs, then what happens? In addition, other political dynamics are at play. As we have seen in Chapter 2 about 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. And if this engagement shapes some spaces as political, collective affairs are not the only field of power relations. As we will see in the following chapters, crafting one’s

place in the village is notably about negotiating social obligations. And 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 one has to be responsible for a family? The crafting of one's position is thus ridden with dilemmas in which the care for a collective is but one part.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my encounters with two headmen who succeeded one another, the introductory part of this chapter has shown how I came to realise 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 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 gradual estrangement with 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 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 until the democratic transition period. It described how the socialisation of society has reinforced the control on peasants, tightening the local polity on itself and heightening the divide between farmers and dependents as the former were able to control the local institutions empowered by the socialist state. It has also opened in an age of distrust when the failure of the agricultural policies and the authoritarianism of the regime led to the worsening of living conditions ultimately giving rise to the 1988 uprising. This rupture had its own temporality in

Myinmilaung tract and took an ethical leaning when corruption, collusion, forced labour and violence became the way to rule the countryside.

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

Ultimately, this chapter and the previous ones have offered a background to explore current forms of leadership. Relating back to the selection of the headman in 2016 (chapter 2), the study of precolonial politics (chapter 3) in our area has shown that the antagonism between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung proper was partly anchored in competing visions of indigenousness once the two settlements were grouped under a single jurisdiction and a headman (interlude). Headship then became a matter of persons as successive leaders adopted different positions echoing local stakes. Some of them became exemplary figures of the moralisation of behaviours and engagement in lay affairs when villagers reinterpreted their role as Buddhist and contested colonial rule in a period when claim to authority was more and more channelled by belonging to farming families (chapter 4). This chapter 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 – he distanced himself from government affairs as during the 2016 selection – underscore the rise of village affairs as the form of Gawgyi current politics.

The questions are now: 1) how does this background impinges on Ko Kyaw's practice as headman? 2) how does leadership is conceived and practice within farming families? and 3) how do the *lugyi* actually perform village affairs? The issue of the worth of the *lugyi* is examined through the engagement in village affairs in chapter 8 while chapter 7 is devoted to study the entanglements between family

leadership, land relations and inheritance transmission. The following chapter (6) focuses on Ko Kyaw political navigation during a day in his life to explore Myinmilaung headship as a matter of craftsmanship.

## CHAPTER 6. CRAFTING VILLAGE HEADSHIP

### “IT’S ONLY IN THE MOUTH”

For Ko Kyaw, being the headman of Myinmilaung tract meant embodying a position people distrust while having to be trustworthy, playing both sides against the middle to craft his authority. If we approach village leadership as a set of uniform institutions, regardless of the place, the persons who embody it and the historical dynamics that have produced current political landscapes, we end up not seeing how people craft their position every day and navigate across spaces shaped by long-term dynamics and ethical dilemmas.

We have now reached the part of the thesis exploring present days’ politics and this chapter describes a day in his life to show how Ko Kyaw crafted his authority when he was the headman of Myinmilaung village tract from 2013 to 2016. As we have seen in the chapter of the emergence of village headship, the latter was created in the late 1880s as an armed wing of local governance. Since then, the power of village headmen waxed and waned<sup>429</sup> depending on how far local authorities entitled them to implement policies and organise local politics. However, their authority was and is also anchored in local relationships frequently described as patron-client.<sup>430</sup> 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 Thawngmung and the ward’s administrators by Prasse-Freeman<sup>431</sup> – uncanny officials with whom people have to deal with one way or another. Yet, locally, authority is about recognition

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<sup>429</sup> The metaphor of waxing and waning is borrowed to Sikor and Lund (2009). The nature of local polities and the peculiar position of village headmen are discussed at almost each political shift in Upper Burma/Myanmar, since the early colonial rule and throughout the coming of independence, the socialisation of the economy, and across the successive militarist agendas up to the recent so-called democratisation of the regime. See in particular: Bouthry *et al.* (2017), Donnison (1953), Furnivall (1957), Huard (2016), Iwaki (2015), Mya Sein (1973), Nash (1963, 1965), Scott (1972a, 1972b), Spiro (1997), Thant Myint-U (2001), Thawngmung (2004) and Tinker (1967).

<sup>430</sup> Patron-client relationships have been analysed as either proceeding from a leader’s prowess (Aung-Thwin (1983, 1984); Koenig (1990); Lieberman (1984); Nash (1963, 1965); Pye (1962)), as embedded – or not – in a moral economy (Adas (1980, 1988); Scott (1976)), or based on power flowing from merit-making (Hanks (1962); Lehman (1984), Schober (1989)).

<sup>431</sup> Cf. Thawngmung (2004: 94-102) and Prasse-Freeman (2015: 95-96).

and achievements. It is a quality embedded in the person, his life, his actions and is linked to the display of propriety<sup>432</sup> as a gauging standard resulting from local history. The stance, achievements and memories of previous headmen and monks influence how Ko Kyaw craft his own authority because they contributed in and exemplified the transformation of the local understanding of morality, headship and collective affairs along the past century. As we have seen in the last two chapters, the emphasise 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 bring people to emulation and embodied a renewal of propriety in the contest against colonialism. On a different note, U San was more of 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 worsen when the state partially disengaged from the countryside and U Win, the Infamous headman from Myinmilaung proper, embodied, for Gawgyi people, corruption, forced labour and unsolvable conflicts. U Htay then appeared as a moral rupture, drawing from the examples of previous men of *hpon*, propriety and impartiality. And Ko Kyaw became headman when the later distanced from official positions while remaining central in the organising of Gawgyi affairs.

Ko Kyaw sums up this ambiguity 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. This sentence is a critique about what (government) power is and how it operates. As a counterpoint, it suggests that authority implies *thitsashihmu*, that is, aligning acts and words, and showing a degree of “trustworthiness”. Ko Kyaw clearly articulates the moral rupture when talking about power relations. Local politics are thus gauged through a moral scale dividing what is doubtful on the one hand and what is trustworthy on the other. 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” (Spiro 1992: 159). For him, one “characteristic of factional behavior is the discrepancy between words and action.” (Spiro 1992: 165). But, in contrast with Spiro, distrust is understood here as a produce of past experiences, not a

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<sup>432</sup> The importance of morality in political dynamics has notably been emphasised by Turner (2014) and Walton (2017).

psychological inclination for factionalism.

So, what is “it”? And what does the mouth symbolise? “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. If governing is described as being “only in the mouth”, then achievements and past deeds are counterpoints. They create a degree of legitimacy which require time and evaluation. For Ko Kyaw, being a village headman was thus a matter of craftsmanship or *bricolage*. For him it means 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 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 bigmen (*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. Thus, this chapter describes the flow of life in a day of a village headman and shows the ambiguous ways a person in this position is crafting his authority.

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 background recap on how Ko Kyaw became headman. The core of the text is then divided into parts of a day re-created from multiple ones (referred to in each sub-section). 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 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 also draws from the same sources. Besides, past events and events that I have not witnessed are recalled by cross-cutting information in interviews and casual discussions.

## KO KYAW'S STORY

Ko Kyaw, as stated in the general introduction, comes from a relatively well-off family of farmers living in the oldest area of Gawgyi. His father, who is the village healer, is from Gawgyi and his mother from Ywadon. Ko Kyaw has built a reputation as a caregiver and a simple person, a reputation that radiates beyond Myinmilaung tract since he became headman. Through the support and affiliation with Gawgyi's big men, and notably U Htay, he ran for headship in 2012. This was a move of one-upmanship on the model of men of propriety. But being headmen was full of contradictions, as U Htay once warned him.

### Headmen of Myinmilaung tract

From Myinmilaung proper	From Gawgyi	Period
U Win		1995-2006
	U Htay	2006-2011
Ko Yay		2011-2013
	<b>Ko Kyaw</b>	2013-2016
U So		2016-

*Figure 17. The successive headmen of Myinmilaung tract (1995 to 2016)*

Ko Kyaw ran for headship at a moment of reconfiguration of local politics. U Htay's withdrawal from the office after a five-years mandate, and his refusal to be candidate led to a crisis in 2011. That year, the new government of Thein Sein called for a new round of elections following its pro-democracy agenda. But in Myinmilaung, that 'election' was chaotic. Most of the ten-houses' leaders of the village tract refused to participate and nobody wanted to be 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 pre-selected three candidates, one from Ogon, one from Mingalagon and one from Myinmilaung. Gawgyi was not represented. Villagers voted by show of hands. Ko Yay, from Myinmilaung, was thus nominated headman. In Gawgyi, this episode

is seen with contempt and described as a typical example of how bad Myinmilaung proper handles local politics.

In late 2012, a new round of election was called, allegedly due to an electoral fraud in Yangon. This time, all the ten-houses' heads were present and voting instructions were given. Under the patronage of U Htay, votes from Gawgyi heads were compound for Ko Kyaw. He totalised 14, Myinmilaung 13, Ogon 2 and Mingalagon also 2. Ko Kyaw took up his duties a few months later in 2013. He started reregistering families' plots and delivering land titles. He formalised land agreements, set loan schemes, dealt with NGOs, took care of the village 'security' and solved various kinds of disputes. 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 became a husband and a father and had to negotiate conflicting obligations. Family, friends, acquaintances, factions and rivals were demanding. Ethical considerations, experience, foresight and advice from village big men helped Ko Kyaw to stay the course and manoeuvre. Eventually, he hosted me, acting as gate keeper and caretaker. He finally found an exit from politics when the victory of the National League for Democracy at the national level triggered a new round of headmen selection in late 2015 and early 2016.<sup>433</sup> From that moment onward, he gradually declined his involvement in village affairs.

This chapter is an attempt to reconnect with the analysis of local politics in Myanmar. The study of patron-client relationships, the main feature of the local polity, is mostly left in the background<sup>434</sup> in order to transform the study of headship, seen as an 'intercalary position'<sup>435</sup> with room for manoeuvre,<sup>436</sup> by looking at it as a matter of craftsmanship: Ko Kyaw produces and navigates various social spaces and makes sense of, and uses of, a large array of relationships rooted

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<sup>433</sup> For an analysis of that election nationwide, see Kyed *et al.* (2016).

<sup>434</sup> One way of studying patronage is to look at what circulates between people and how accepting, avoiding or delaying offers of goods and services produces such relationships.

<sup>435</sup> The theory of headship as intercalary authority, stating that headmen are hamstrung between bureaucratic and village demands, was first proposed by Gluckman *et al.* (1949) and developed in Gluckman (1955, 1963).

<sup>436</sup> Kuper (1970) argues that headship is also a resource offering room for manoeuvre.

in the past. In this vein, describing concrete situations<sup>437</sup> enables one to decipher how people positioned themselves. But the stories and memories of the past are still present, in each encounter and linked to different temporalities. In short, how Ko Kyaw behaves in a given context produces his stance. Hence, this piece is written in a specific prose: it follows Ko Kyaw during a day and mixes descriptions and analysis of situations in an open-ended perspective aware of the incompleteness of ethnography while references to the past dot the text throughout. 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 have shaped the local political landscape.

## A DAY IN THE LIFE

### 8am. Family matters<sup>438</sup>

Ko Kyaw wakes up a little bit later than the rest of the people living in the house. I enter through the back door and find him lying on a bench with his *puso*<sup>439</sup> 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 a controlled chaos where items are 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 it is an old desk, riddled by woodworms, on top of which stands a shrine for 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

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<sup>437</sup> The importance of analysing social situations, and of extended case studies, was the leitmotiv of the School of Manchester (see Mitchell (1983)) and is akin to the pragmatic approach focusing on tests and performances in sociology and anthropology (cf. Barthe et al. (2013), Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), Naepels (2011) and Silber (2016)).

<sup>438</sup> This part of the day relates to the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2016.

<sup>439</sup> *Puso* is the name of the male long skirt, which they are called in general, and for women in particular, *longyi*.

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 eastward. 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 organised a decade ago following Ko Kyaw's father's calculation to facilitate flows of fortune.<sup>440</sup> The latter is Gawgyi healer also versed in astrology.

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<sup>440</sup> For a detailed examination of how space can be organised according to local cosmology, see Robinne (2000).



Figure 18. Inside Ko Kyaw's house

Ko Kyaw's mother enters the main room from the door leading to the kitchen. She just finished the meal she cooked for herself. Earlier today she went with her pair of oxen coupled to the ox-cart to plough other villagers' farm fields before the first rains. While tightening her worn *longyi*, she requests her son to give back some money. She gave him a certain amount a few days ago to visit his father in Mandalay public hospital where he is awaiting a stomach operation. He goes the bedroom,

lifts a box of clothes, opens another. He hands her the remaining banknotes she borrowed from a local moneylender a week ago in order to pay the hospital fees, the operation and the feeding of guests visiting the sick old man. When the latter decided to go to hospital, Ko Kyaw became in charge of making his stay there go smoothly. Since childhood, his parents 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 emphasises complementarity and dependency between two generations. But it is never fully achieved and remains in a state of becoming. The origin and use of incomes are central to this relationship. Ko Kyaw’s father will die a few weeks later, officially from stomach cancer. But no one dies here except from sorcery or ‘evil influences’. And the debt related to the hospitalisation will be the sole responsibility of Ko Kyaw’s mother until he receives his inheritance and become responsible<sup>441</sup> for the whole house (chapter 7 on transmission).

Ko Kyaw drinks some tea and then goes to the small kitchen. He eats the meals cooked by his wife Ma Khin and joins me for smoking cheroots and chewing 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 deal of villagers, invariably male, have been playing this game for a year or so. Three years ago, only a few wealthy people had phones. Now, most villagers have one with a Facebook account(s) – one of the main sources of news. But CoC is special. It is a collective game, yet people create individual strongholds. Then they 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!”. And indeed, for only a few months, Ko Kyaw, his wife Ma Khin and their young daughter have been settling back in his parents’ house on the east side of Gawgyi. This place is the biggest compound of the village and is located in the oldest area of settlement. One striking feature of this location is that most of the

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<sup>441</sup> On the fact that transmitting inheritance is more about taking responsibility over a family than a transfer of ownership, see Huard (2018).

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 and receive care among his mother's family. But 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. And Ko Kyaw tries to get the upper hand, forbearingly. The complaints about his time spent on the phone are a way to gauge if he could amend his behaviour. Yet, CoC is special to him: on top of being the current headman, Ko Kyaw is also the leader of the online village team, a team mostly composed of young males from 14 to 22 years old who help him in many ways.

### **10am. The game theory<sup>442</sup>**

Ko Kyaw makes a phone call to his nephew and asks him to come over to prepare the forthcoming war campaign on CoC. 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 with doing 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 levels. They need to combine resources to win a war in successive duels. The success of a campaign – that lasts 24 hours – depends on the coordination of the group, on the support of its leader and on the respect of the rules of thumb. CoC

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<sup>442</sup> This sub-section refers to the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 2015, when Ko Kyaw was finalising the deliverance of Land Use Certificates.

is a perfect metaphor for how a faction is built up and manoeuvred. Ko Kyaw coordinates the campaigns of his team. He endlessly 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 gradually involved in village affairs.

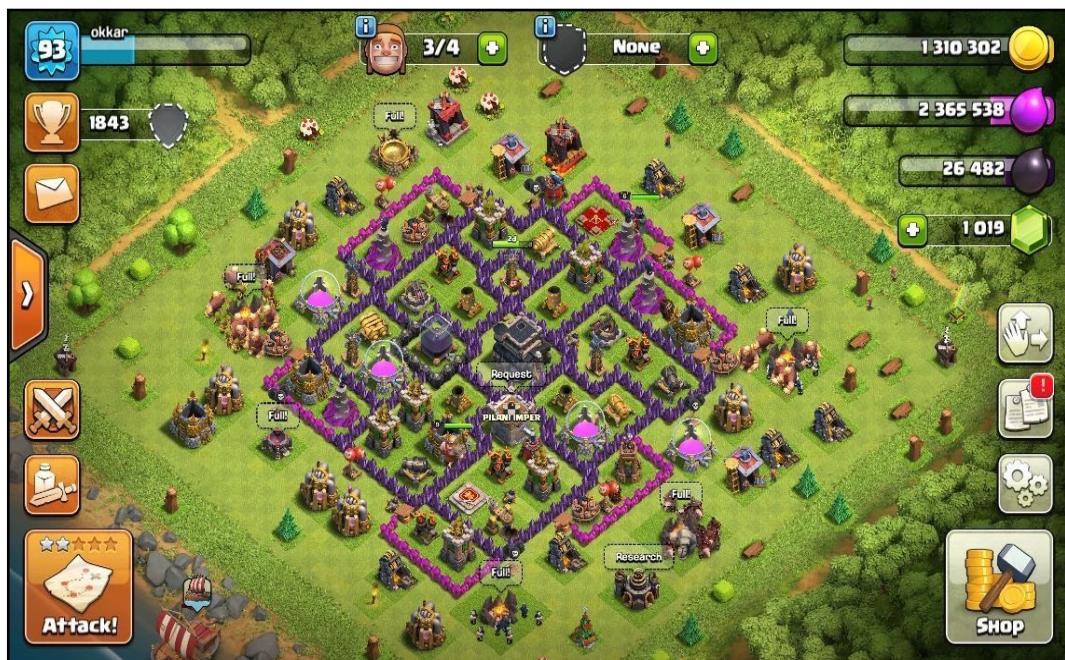


Figure 19. Clash of Clans

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 was awaiting Ko Kyaw's call. He has recently bought a piece of land located in the southwest of Gawgyi. One of the main jobs for Ko Kyaw after being selected headman in 2012 was, with the land officer, to reregister individual plots for the four cadastral units composing Myinmilaung tract.<sup>443</sup> He needed to gather information on nearly every plot of land for the officer. What is sensitive with 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

<sup>443</sup> 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. Bouthry et al. (2017).

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 delicate.

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 engages the discussion. Ko Kyaw offers him coffee-mix – tea (literally “hot water”) is too casual in 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 where he amasses his files. He tells U Min that the land officer will eventually give him the Land Use Certificate in the next few months. He adds on 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 tried to give some money to Ko Kyaw but the latter refused, arguing that the process is not over yet and that he 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 the prospect for compensation for those victims of land grabbing is “only in the mouth”. After a minute or two of silence, U Min leaves. I told Ko Kyaw that navigating the village might be easier than government offices. Yet 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 team on CoC was assembled by Ko Kyaw when he became headman. He recruited them to convey information, call on people and for dodging influence from his fellow villagers in petty cases. In short, Ko Kyaw minimises 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,<sup>444</sup> 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. And the chances are greater to be trapped at someone's house than at one's own place.

After U Min's departure, I ask Ko Kyaw about a dispute involving people from Myinmilaung proper. It relates to a 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. In each case it involved a man named U Myo from Budaungkan village tract next to Gawgyi. A village committee<sup>445</sup> had to handle the cases. Created by government order for resolving 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<sup>446</sup> and the clerk.<sup>447</sup> 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 visit some of them in Myinmilaung. He tells me that it's not that easy. So 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 told him that because I knew he often accompanied his father when on medical tours in the past decades, so he has acquaintances in Myinmilaung, even family. But he refused. This is notably due to the animosity between the villages. This antagonism has lasted since as long as

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<sup>444</sup> It also shows his ability to bridge younger and older generations (a shown off skill) and it gives the youngsters an opportunity to experience adults' affairs.

<sup>445</sup> The committee is officially named VTFMC or Village-Tract Farmland Management Committee.

<sup>446</sup> A position created by the 2012 Farmland law and staffed by Ko Kyaw with a villager from Gawgyi.

<sup>447</sup> Staffed directly by the government several years ago with a villager from Myinmilaung proper.

people could remember and the selection of headmen marks, like football matches and pagoda festivals, a climax in rivalry. Hanging out in Myinmilaung proper is not a sheer pleasure for most Gawgyi villagers. And for Ko Kyaw, who was selected against the Myinmilaung's 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 where he is as influential as in Gawgyi, even as headman. And 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 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<sup>448</sup>**

After finalising 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. Chelsea, his favourite team, 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: "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

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<sup>448</sup> This sub-section and the following ones (1pm and 4pm) happened on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2016.

to come along.

Administratively, Tozigon is attached to the neighbouring tract of Budaungkan. Yet, villagers from Tozigon do their weddings, Buddhist novitiates, or burials with the help of Gawgyi's villagers, institutions and pagoda. In other words, they use and rely on Gawgyi organisation of village affairs for catering their own needs. Gawgyi and Tozigon are close neighbours, both spatially and socially. They call it *yathswe-yatmyo*. It means "people akin by (sharing a) dwelling" and is made of a combination of a building block of kinship (*hswemyo*) with 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 population. But intermarriages, also happening 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 preeminent 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 jurisdiction.

The meeting is held between a family of 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. Imagine three tables aligned. On the left one, relatives and acquaintances of the bride side seat 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 master of ceremonies (or rituals) and it recognises and produce his bigness (chapter 8 on the *lugyi*). The women serve small cakes, and the men cups of tea.<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Those expenses are covered by the parents of the fiancé and bought in advance by U Lin, leader of bachelors.

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.<sup>450</sup> Then, he announces what both families are willing to give to the couple. The boy's father starts talking about why he, as 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), facilitate and are key witnesses for such an agreement. Even if they do not do much, they have to be there. At last, the headman and the hundred-houses' head of Budaungkan village tract arrive on a motorbike (Tozigon officially belongs to Budaungkan tract). They do not come to witness the marital engagement. Rather, they come to finalise a land sale.

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<sup>450</sup> *Ahsaung ama* also refers to monks' sermons and the promotion of Buddha's teaching at large.



*Figure 20. Preparing tea in Tozigon*

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

third of the price to formalise 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, 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 for U Htoo that he will provide him 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 become in 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 aside on a bamboo chair. In a "bossy" gesture, Budaungkan headman requests 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 rest (two-thirds) of the money to Daw Than and, following their prior agreement,<sup>451</sup> she gives money to both the Budaungkan headman and his henchman. Ko Kyaw received nothing directly. Akin to both contractors, he facilitates the transaction. His status, network and knowledge of land laws and contracts make the procedure go 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, came 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 carrying 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—a bunch of relatives, neighbours and acquaintances—as well as Ko Kyaw wife's uncle—an alcoholic—are working in the greenhouse since morning. The uncle controls the flow of water while the females collect leaves. The leaves should neither be too small nor too big, of a clear and dense green catching

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<sup>451</sup> The amount given to headmen for such service is usually 10% of the land price.

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 is a rise in day labour opportunities in Monywa for males, notably as builders and, to a lesser extent, as weavers for females at home. In addition, seasonal and long-term migrations cause shortages of farm workers and raise daily wages, a situation favouring the labourer (*myaukthu*) usually seen as lower status than farmers (*taungthu*; chapter 4, section on transforming hierarchy). Ma Khin organises 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 out of needs, opportunities and timing on a daily basis.

Consider now 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 out like today. He grew up there and knows every little thing around. Yet, Ko Kyaw is not really a landowner. A few months later on the same location, gazing at the land he envisions for a second greenhouse, he will tell me that “nobody owns” it (chapter 7). 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 that 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 7).<sup>452</sup> Accessing land depends highly 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. Relations of commensality are emphasised 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 organising the farming of his parents’ land with them. Beyond mere consultations on farming strategies, their relationship also involves land sales and loan politics. Ko Kyaw

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<sup>452</sup> It could happen at marriage time or a little before or after the death of one or both parents depending on their plan and the stakes associated to the patrimony; see Huard (2018).

just smiled 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 to hail them. “Come eat with us!”, he yells from afar. Five minutes later, they arrive with their lunch boxes. We sat there on a wickerwork tarp while the nephew joins us. Plates and dishes are gathered in-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.



*Figure 21. Lunch next to the greenhouse*

Ko Kyaw gives more details on the 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, beyond being cousins, it solidifies further 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 told him that his uncle U Lin 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 so before the peak of summer heat. When we arrive there, a small group of men are bustling around. One of them splits up 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. Those men are the ones 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, 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. But when asked about what, in their opinion, makes a man (*lu*) big (*gyi*), they always emphasised propriety and achievements (chapter 4 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 laughed at it. Whereas Ko Kyaw starts slicing strings in no time, I try in vain to make myself useful and finally give up and sit. They take a break a short moment later and engage casual discussion. We talk about the morning’s ceremony, the current change in government, fluctuations of crops 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 lit 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. But 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 remember that Nash, an anthropologist working in the dry zone in the late fifties, said that this kind 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 recognised right to use moral suasion (...). One of the reasons these men are elders is that they do not overstep the vague but delicate line that separates individual responsibilities.” (Nash 1965: 270).

Rather, 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. So, I ask: “why do people call you the village big men?”. They laugh. “We are not”, replied U Lin. I retort, “So why do you take care of village affairs? (*ywayay okhteinmu*)”. And U Htay to answer, “Who else would do it?”. A deep silence follows. Everyone gazes in other directions. After a minute that felt 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.

They start talking about U Myo’s case and Ko Kyaw gives the details of the current unfolding of the dispute (chapters 2 and 5). Background information is required to understand it fully. In short, around 2003, eleven farmers mortgaged their land to U Myo, at that time a moneylender and gambler from Mogaung. Usually, this kind of agreement (here called *yahman-ngway*, “the guessed price of the land”) does not involve interests 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 rogue, crooked and yet powerful men. Three years later, after U Myo became headman of Budaungkan tract, the dispute

started. Most farmers asked for an extension as they could not reimburse U Myo yet. But he refused. The eleven farmers, accusing him of changing the terms of the agreements by asking for interest, went on to seek resolution with U Win who refused. So they sent the case to the Township authorities which 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 on, six out of 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.<sup>453</sup> 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 now the case has been transferred to court. That was the point they touch upon while drinking coffee under U Lin’s shelter.

Their gazes drop down again. Once 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 to not 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 the matter all by himself. And 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 bigmen. And 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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<sup>453</sup> For an analysis of that type of land conflict, see Boutry *et al.* (2017: 142-147).

## 6pm. To the teashop<sup>454</sup>

Once we run out of toddy leaves and betel nuts, Ko Kyaw brings me to his house. 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 broker house in Monywa. Brokers<sup>455</sup> 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 one more time on the motorbikes and begin the journey toward Monywa.

Our first stop is the grocery store located on Gawgyi main road to buy betel chews. As usual, U Htay is sitting behind the shop keeper, 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 a straight dirt track intersecting with Kyawkka Road that goes eastward 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 through 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

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<sup>454</sup> This sub-section and the next one are drawn from the events which happened on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 2016.

<sup>455</sup> *Pwesa*, literally the person making a living from connecting people.

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 westward 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 in a nearby teashop while 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 specialties. Some Gawgyi youngsters, the ones 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 that 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. And 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. More, the fact that people implicitly anticipate 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. And the degree of obligation and the weight of expectations depend greatly on relationships and contexts. The same stands true for daily services, sharing betel chews, cigarettes or playing Clash of Clans. At the teashop, the friendly atmosphere is emphasised upon 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 before. Everyone orders tea to his taste and eats fried chicken sticks on coffee tables filling the road as soon as daylight fades away. 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 planning on how to improve 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, spit and smoked, and Ko Kyaw's generosity could not be pushed 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 go along side by side whenever possible. They cannot help it. There 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, Ko Kyaw's cousin is standing at the edge of the kitchen door while his mother finishes her meal. The former came to get her daily wage and organise the next rounds of work. He passes on the banknotes to his wife who vanished in the living room to come back a few seconds later and discretely hands over 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 then shower and eat up my dinner with him in the living room, followed by the habitual coffee, cheroots, and betel. Another routine waits ahead.

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. There, a small gathering occurs almost every night. Drinking coffee is the stated reason for meeting up. U Htay and U Lin were 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 it for anyone coming, but especially with U Maung. He is old, wise and a bigman. Giving up one's seat shows deference and such seat politics are clues for understanding local hierarchies to some degree. Yet, it is a convivial time between relatives, neighbours and friends although not everybody dares to join. In short, this meeting is the small council of village affairs. A council from which Ko Kyaw will gradually withdraw from as soon as he stops being headman a few years later.

Tonight's conversations are about a ceremony that took place a few days ago. A novice, native of Gawgyi, came back to the village after successfully passing an examination in a famous monastery in Sagaing. The ceremony (called *gonpyupwe*) was organised to honour his literary prowess and to ordain him. On the road from Monywa to Gawgyi monastery, he was high mounted 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<sup>456</sup> depends greatly on villagers while the quality of the ordination hinges mostly on the *hsayadaw* (“head monk”) of Gawgyi monastery. I know people like gauging 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 before. He taught them Buddhism, morals and cosmological calculations, topics that are usually left out of schools’ 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 distanced themselves from him since a year or two, when he undertook the reconstruction of Gawgyi and Zalok monasteries. U Lin, organiser 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 finalise the construction of a house for monks in Gawgyi monastery. He says, “merit will flow from it.” Ko Kyaw avoids my gaze. In Zalok, at the periphery of Monywa, the meritorious donations from laypeople mostly draw from the recent rise in land prices and business opportunities, escalating in 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 criticises the monk. But the fact is, 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.

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<sup>456</sup> This also includes the facilitation of the whole ceremony (cooking food for guests and monks, building the temporary structures, and so on).

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 at ease with yet. There is ambiguity in every relationship. Keeping the 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'<sup>457</sup> to officials and, if manoeuvred properly, to be able to line up for opportunities (such as the deployment of rural development funds). But 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.<sup>458</sup> I remark that he also gets money on 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 fill out contracts for relatively normal sales, the buyer or the seller will invariably ask how much they owe him. Those 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 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". The thing is that people give money either way, unless he strongly refuses,<sup>459</sup> and thus short-circuits the rules of the game (as did U Htay the Worthy). However, by neither refusing

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<sup>457</sup> An interesting parallel can be found in Koenig (1990: 157) when he analyses corruption under the Konbaung dynasty.

<sup>458</sup> His salary is 120.000MMK per month (less than 100USD), minus compulsory purchase of government newspapers and stationeries, his monthly income totals to 100.000MMK, the same as a daily worker on construction sites in Monywa in 2015.

<sup>459</sup> This money is also given to ensure a change of ownership in official records.

overtly nor asking for a specific amount, Ko Kyaw plays with ambiguity.<sup>460</sup> 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.

I tell him that I am not convinced. His brother stays silent, playing CoC with his own team which 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.

## RETHINKING VILLAGE HEADSHIP

Historically, headmen were crucial in the control of land and people movements, providing identity documents when a person was willing to travel or registering every visitor coming in the village. In short, as they could register people movements, crops procurement, loans and transfers of property, they were in-between villagers and governments agencies for them to access each-other.<sup>461</sup> Thus, village headmen *could* be described as brokers between the villagers and the government as much as the latter tried to control people movement and activities, and as much as people were willing to access or avoid its officials. But following Ko Kyaw during one day in his life 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 in an intercalary position hamstrung between bureaucratic and village demands (Gluckman *et al.* 1949) that gives him room for manoeuvre<sup>462</sup> (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 the key

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<sup>460</sup> Spiro (1997) shows a similar pattern when describing how Township Officers in 1960 used the rhetoric of help to talk about bribes.

<sup>461</sup> Concerning matters of taxation, land ownership securing, resolving conflicts, providing or escaping free labour for official projects, providing more or less crops for the procurement, providing agricultural loan following land type and land records from the State Agricultural Bank beyond others

<sup>462</sup> By taking into account only the capacity for manoeuvre, headmen end up qualified generally as political entrepreneurs.

point to understand power and authority in our context. As for him, Ko Kyaw's 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 of examples. The last men of *hpon*, the moral rupture between the Infamous and the Worthy, the rise of village affairs are thus turning points. It constrained Ko Kyaw in his ability to be the 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 to evaluate the morality of a time, acting as a backdrop to explain the difference between today and the past. They are references, examples people draw upon to explain the ups and downs of village morality and it shows how ethical shifts influence and scale the local polity. And so, Ko Kyaw could not display exactly the qualities of a leader enumerated by Nash<sup>463</sup> as well as he could not just be a political entrepreneur. While he was headman, the men of *hpon* were gone, the government has 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. Overall, being the headman of Myinmilaung tract was for Ko Kyaw a matter of embodying a position people distrust while having to be trustworthy, playing both sides against the middle to craft his authority.

He was, however, navigating a slightly different landscape than Gawgyi bigmen. The latter were making village affairs a political space at distance with the state and informed by an ideology of self-reliance. That landscape was delineated by the making of collective affairs, the evaluation of propriety and expressed through a sense of belonging which included Tozigon but partly excluded Myinmilaung proper. The fashioning of these political landscapes and the narratives defining it – the emergence of headship, the succession and monopolisation of

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<sup>463</sup> Industry, alertness, mercy, patience, judgment, perspective, cf. Nash (1965: 77).

leadership by large families of peasants, the shift in local hierarchy, the diverging senses of belonging at play in headmen selection, the transition from *hpon* to worth and propriety as political values – were rooted in the past. In that sense the village tract was but one arena, among others, where local politics unfold. Ko Kyaw was the one entrusted to deal with that part of politics under the watch of Gawgyi bigmen. But he also had to be trustworthy and involved in Gawgyi affairs in general. Therefore, his position was ambiguous as he had to navigate multiple spaces delineated by uncertain boundaries between the private, the political and the government, and because he was evaluated following how he enforced, minimised and avoided those boundaries.

## CONCLUSION: DOUBT AND TRUST

This chapter has explored Ko Kyaw's political navigation and how he was entangled in a variety of relationships and situations while headman of Myinmilaung tract. For him, setting up his family was a matter of negotiating obligations toward his parents while investing in kinship to access resources and gradually taking responsibility over the family. In Gawgyi, creating a small faction with CoC was a way of easing the handling of some affairs and dodging potential obligations by shortcircuiting hospitality rules. We also saw that he is not just a mere embodiment of the state as he participates in ceremonies beyond his jurisdiction with other villages' big men. And this relates to how the inclusion of other places in Gawgyi affairs is a produce of the past Ko Kyaw had to deal with. He navigated between social spaces, from a ceremony to a land sale and the farm field, being an official, a bigman, an employer, a relative, a patron, a husband. Becoming headman was certainly a move for one-upmanship. But how he interacted with Myinmilaung disputants and the Gawgyi monk for instance shows that his job also means avoiding, accepting, and creating obligations; dissembling, showing competency in some domains, valuing incompetency in others, and playing with ambiguities in land transactions for instance.

If, literally, a village headman in Burmese is an 'administrator' (*okchokyayhmu*), in the sense of overseeing local affairs and being responsible for the local order in a state-like fashion, following Ko Kyaw during a day allowed to

see village headship beyond the brokerage of government authority by underscoring the dilemmas at play in how he navigated across the local political landscape while continuously crafting his position. He could not completely ‘oversee’ local affairs and was careful not to put his responsibility at risk in various arenas, such as when resolving disputes or dealing with previous headmen. Nonetheless, the idea of ‘taking care of’, or ‘being responsible for’ pervades how leadership is conceived and practiced in other fields of village life. The following chapters thus explore how it reflects the political processes at play in two domains, first in family relationships through the issue of transmitting inheritance as a matter of stewardship (*okchokhmu*, chapter 7), and then in village affairs by analysing the worth of the *lugyi* in terms of guardianship (*okhtehinhmu*, chapter 8).

## CHAPTER 7. TRANSMITTING LAND

### “NOBODY OWNS THIS LAND”

13<sup>th</sup> of May 2016. Picture Ko Kyaw. It is 1pm and he is about to leave his house to go to his betel garden on his parent’s land further afield. First, we join his wife, who packs some betel nuts, cheroots, water and snacks for their laborers as well as several straw baskets to fetch 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,” shouts the driver. As we arrived, 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 water flow when I asked who owns the piece of land he envisioned for a second betel garden. This place and the adjacent plots enrich his extended family since decades, when not sold out to a neighbour. He grew up there 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 him building a second greenhouse was a further step toward taking care of his parents. In a way, investing in family relationships was a means to access land. But there was something else to it.

In this chapter, I use Ko Kyaw statement as a line of enquiry for three questions: 1) how the dynamics of kinship and the moral and social obligations between family members organise the transmission of inheritance; 2) how they have maintained a degree of continuity in the countryside; and 3) how the transmission of inheritance, as a process of redefining authority and responsibility in families, could inform how village leadership is imagined. This chapter adopts three different

voices deployed in four 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 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. And the conclusion 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) as a way of studying how authority is conceived in Gawgyi today (chapter 8).

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 formalised by a state at times lacking consistent infrastructural control and often dispossessing locals.<sup>464</sup> It rather means that it is uncertain who *will* own this or that piece of land in a context where land disputes occurs mostly between villagers.<sup>465</sup> Hence, it is a statement about the temporalities of family relationships, about the dynamics of property<sup>466</sup> transfers, and about how people craft their lives. Exploring the transmission of inheritance as a redefinition<sup>467</sup> of authority<sup>468</sup> 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 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.<sup>469</sup> Land, and by extension property relations, have been analysed as a

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<sup>464</sup> Cf. Prasse-Freeman (2012).

<sup>465</sup> This paper 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) and Prasse-Freeman and Phyto Win Latt (2018)), Military-Private partnerships (cf. Woods (2011), ethnic conflicts (Transnational Institute (2013)), or agro-industry (cf. Woods (2015)).

<sup>466</sup> Cf. Benda-Beckmann et al. (2006). In this book, property is defined as the legitimate cloth of wealth as property systems structure the ways in which wealth can be acquired, used and transformed. Property is understood as a matter of relationships and not as a tool of state regulation.

<sup>467</sup> On property as process, see Berry (1993).

<sup>468</sup> On the relations between access, property, power and authority, see Sikor and Lund (2009).

<sup>469</sup> On Burmese kinship see, among others, Kumada (2015), Nash and Nash (1963), Nash (1965) and Spiro (1975, 1986).

‘semi-autonomous’ social field<sup>470</sup> with its own set of (changing) rules, arbitration, competitions, actors, arenas and bypasses<sup>471</sup> that have come to be studied under the rubric of land governance.<sup>472</sup> An everyday perspective<sup>473</sup> shows that land needs to be seen in its connection to other aspects of social and political life. Foregrounding the fact that land is entangled in multiple relationships, this chapter, based on an ethnography of land relations,<sup>474</sup> is an effort to describe how my interlocutors think about it in their own terms to provide an understanding, among others,<sup>475</sup> of how rights are conceived. Highlighting the dynamics and dilemmas of inheritance transmission allows to explore how authority is conceived in family relationships. The core focus is the process, the temporalities of family relationships, how people engaged 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 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 were set up to organise 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.<sup>476</sup> Yet, the domain of inheritance operated to some extent alongside these projects and has been integrated into Burmese Buddhist Law,<sup>477</sup> “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

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<sup>470</sup> Cf. Falk Moore (1978).

<sup>471</sup> Among the landmark works on land and property relations, see Berry (2009), Griffiths (1986), Lund (2008) and Ribot and Peluso (2003).

<sup>472</sup> Cf. Hall (2013).

<sup>473</sup> Cf. Blundo and Le Meur (2009).

<sup>474</sup> Cf. Colin (2008).

<sup>475</sup> Cf. Prasse-Freeman (2015).

<sup>476</sup> Here I refer to the post 2012 land bills, and 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.

<sup>477</sup> As Crouch has shown, Burmese Buddhist Law encompass 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 text books operating as definitive restatements of the law. Cf. Crouch (2016b). On *dhammathat*, cf. Huxley (1997).

of customs regulating land use and transfers have been operating in a countryside crossed by state and market forces.<sup>478</sup> 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,<sup>479</sup> academic publications on the history of the country,<sup>480</sup> legislations,<sup>481</sup> and oral history of villagers in Gawgyi and beyond.<sup>482</sup>

Finally, this chapter relates to the central argument of the thesis by showing how the study of land and family relationships opens on a discussion of how authority is conceived at the village level. After having studied how Ko Kyaw has 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 to question village leadership in terms of guardianship (*okhteinhmu*) in the next chapter. This perspective enables to link a historical dynamic – rise of village affairs as the form of Gawgyi politics – with local conceptions of authority.

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<sup>478</sup> On the power of exclusion of forces such as market and state in Southeast Asia, cf. Hall et al. (2011).

<sup>479</sup> Cf. Hardiman (1909, 1912) and Hughes (1932).

<sup>480</sup> Cf. Brown (2013), Cady (1960), Charney (2006, 2007), Cheng Siok Hwa (1965), Furnivall (1956), Koenig (1990), Lieberman (1984), Steinberg (1981a), Taylor (2009), Thant Myint-U (2001), Thawngmung (2004), and Toe Hla (1987).

<sup>481</sup> Tenancy Act (1936), Land Nationalization Acts (1948, 1953), Enterprises Nationalization Law (1963), Farmer Right 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.

<sup>482</sup> Oral histories and data on the conceptions and practices of transmitting inheritance were also collected in several villages in 2013-14 and 2015-16 in Monywa, Yinmabin and Budalin townships, notably in Hnawpin North, Hnawpin South, Innte, Ayadaw, Kyawka, Thazi, Ywadon, Budaungkan, Kyawsipon, Booba, Minzu, Zeehpyubin, Salingyi, Nyuangpinthar, Kothan, Hledar and Aungchanthar.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF CHANGES IN LAND TENURE

This section relates to the historical chapters of the thesis to describe how the flexibility of land relations over the past two centuries made the countryside around Gawgyi a rent market where debt, family obligations and arrangements for sharecropping operated outside the law to some extent. It shows that the colonial devising 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. But, during the colonial period as for today, there was 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 state tenant under the socialist period (1962-88) and is today the legible person for receiving a land title. On one level, the major changes in land tenure in Gawgyi since its settlement relate to state projects which either aim at 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.<sup>483</sup> Yet, on the ground, 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,<sup>484</sup> which, in case needed, could be defended in courts 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 organised land relations were the dynamics of kinship (alliance, descent and the succession of generations) and the moral and social obligations between family members.

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<sup>483</sup> For an example of a genealogy of how state projects were adapted and transformed by the successive governments, see Ferguson (2014).

<sup>484</sup> 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 study, see Crouch (2016a).

## ‘Hereditary private tenure’

Two hundred years ago, Gawgyi was a tiny hamlet settled near a seasonal pond during a widespread famine. As we saw in the general introduction and chapter 3, Gawgyi settlers moved a few miles further south from their previous village. Today, most of the villagers are part of a loosely structured lineage called a *myo*<sup>485</sup> allegedly deriving from these settlers. During the last years of the reign of Bodawhpaya (1782–1819), the village integrated a larger political space under the patronage of a local chief. The cultivated areas – mostly dry lands first farmed through shifting cultivation and a few rice lands – varied with the growth of the village population and their capacity to accumulate cattle and seeds, and to get loans from the local gentry. Gawgyi villagers progressively created their own cultivation area by gradually adjoining those of other and older settlements nearby.

On a larger scale, Gawgyi was part of the Badon/Alon province which was slowly integrated into the kingdom’s galactic polity since at least the eleventh century,<sup>486</sup> which became a main pool of recruitment of soldiers during the Konbaung dynasty.<sup>487</sup> As Boomgaard noted for Southeast Asian precolonial polities, the question was more “who owns the crop” than “who owns the land” due to scarce labour (2011: 449). Yet, forms of “hereditary private tenure” (*ibid.*: 448) existed in this important trading centres of the country. At large, 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 “father’s and grandfather’s land” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 41). 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, competition for offices and depended on the ability of local authorities to control

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<sup>485</sup> Cf. Thant Myint-U (2001: 29).

<sup>486</sup> Cf. Charney (2007: 228).

<sup>487</sup> Cf. Charney (2006: 63–65), Koenig (1990: 12, 241) and Lieberman (1984: 64).

land access and labour.

### The colonial “Record of Wrongs”

As described in chapter 4, one of the main changes was brought about by the British from 1886 onward.<sup>488</sup> Their knowledge of the land was rudimentary, and quickly a revenue system able to sustain direct rule was 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 officialised: state and non-state lands. The key test was to ask 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<sup>489</sup> 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) were “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 owns 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” (1956: 92), and Township Courts

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<sup>488</sup> Before colonial rule, King Mindon (1853–1878) attempted to reorganise the local systems of dues and duties between the villagers, the hereditary gentry, the appointed officials and the Crown by introducing a capitation tax. It 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.

<sup>489</sup> This inflow entered both the District’s coffers and the (newly created) village headmen’s pockets – the latter ascribing individual household’s shares.

were quickly put<sup>490</sup> to work and opened a new arena for forum shopping.<sup>491</sup> 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 4 that in the second case, the use of courts was a way to challenge the precolonial gentry who accumulated land through money lending and mortgage. 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 1956: 92). In addition, nearly half of the land was farmed through small scale tenancies at the turn of the twentieth century<sup>492</sup> and in the 1920s.<sup>493</sup> In other words, there were often differences between who worked the land, who owned it and who had a potential claim to it.

But what is interesting is what it tells us about the forms of land relations. Once a plot is cleared, it became part of the possessions one has to transmit to his children usually in equal shares, inheritance being almost fully cognatic.<sup>494</sup> Sometimes, a larger part was reserved to the eldest son or daughter, known as the *auratha*.<sup>495</sup> Thus, *dama-u-gya* land eventually became *bobuapaing*, that is, a transmissible family estate. It was not an ancestral property kept intact. Descent being usually bilateral and the family mostly nuclear, estates tended to be fragmented through time.<sup>496</sup> In the early nineteenth century,<sup>497</sup> as it is still the case today,<sup>498</sup> people became owners mostly through inheritance, and tenant farming<sup>499</sup> was the main avenue to access land. It means that a person was recognized as the main authority on an estate quite late in his life. Before that, he might farm plots as a tenant (for his parents, coheirs, neighbours, local landlord...) or as a usufructuary

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<sup>490</sup> Cf. Hardiman (1912: 162) and Thant Myint-U (2001: 216).

<sup>491</sup> Cf. Keebet von Benda-Beckmann (1981).

<sup>492</sup> Cf. Hardiman (1909: 17-27).

<sup>493</sup> Cf. Hughes (1932: 39-40).

<sup>494</sup> Cf. Hardiman (1909: 27) and Koenig (1990: 40).

<sup>495</sup> Cf. Thant Myint-U (2001: 30). This word can also be written *aw-ra-tha* and *orasa*, see Crouch (2016b).

<sup>496</sup> Cf. Hardiman (1909: 28).

<sup>497</sup> Cf. Hughes (1932: 40).

<sup>498</sup> Cf. Boutry et al. (2017: 101-103) and Huard (2018).

<sup>499</sup> The local moral economy fixed the norms of these mostly sharecropping arrangements, depending on rains, relations, quality of the land, who pay the land tax, who provides the seeds, the tools, and so on. Cf. Hardiman (1909) and Huard (2016).

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 transfers. All these claims and forms of transfers of land make up a bundle of rights<sup>500</sup> whose core is entitlement to the family estate. One of the ideas organising land relations during the late precolonial and the 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 relation, 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. And 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 the ‘land to the tiller’. Once the Japanese were driven out of the country and independence secured, the U Nu government tried to outflank the communists and secure rural support by enacting land reform through the 1948 and 1953 Land Nationalization Acts.<sup>501</sup> The objective was to turn farmers into government tenants by proclaiming the state as sole owner of all land and resources. Yet, this anti-landlordism policy had limited effects and scope. 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 moneylenders who could not maintain their hold through debts. The delivery of

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<sup>500</sup> This notion was first used by Maine and was reconceptualised 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) and Benda-Beckmann *et al.* (2006).

<sup>501</sup> The 1948 Land Nationalization Act for the most part echoes the content of the unimplemented Tenancy Act of 1936 which objective was to resolve the tenancy problem in Burma.

land titles around 1956, when the central government regained power in the Monywa region, was considered a mere formality by villagers. But how it was implemented remains a partial mystery in which corruption, national elections, insurgency, counterinsurgency and local factionalism were the main ingredients. For Nash and Spiro, who did their fieldwork at that time in the central plains of Myanmar, it was mostly a matter of village bigmen's politics.<sup>502</sup> In addition, the 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 over others in Gawgyi.

Nash has provided his own account about property relations in the dry lands 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 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." (*ibid.*: 69).

While Nash described kinship as a rather loose social structure in the Burmese

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<sup>502</sup> Large land owners and tenants formed the upper class of villages and small-scale tenants and daily laborers (in many cases the 'tillers') depended on big farming families.

context, he nonetheless has shown how entitlement to property and access to resources relates to family relations to a large extent. And this way of organising and legitimating claims would eventually remain operative throughout the socialist period.

We saw in chapter 5 that in Gawgyi, the unfolding of the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ was gradual. On paper, all forms of agricultural production were declared owned by either the state or cooperatives. The reorganization of the economy rapidly turned into a more radical nationalisation.<sup>503</sup> The centralized system of crop procurement and goods distribution became more interventionist and expanded to virtually all products as the government promised an agrarian revolution “that would bring the tenancy system to an immediate end” (Charney 2009: 123). Since the 1963 Tenancy Act, peasants became state tenants with delegated land use rights. They were liable for part of their production while being prohibited from transferring (by sales, mortgages and, since 1965, rents) their land, except for inheritance purposes, in order to root out landlordism.

Hence, the headman was pivotal to getting around the law and registering (forbidden) changes of ownership. He could – and did<sup>504</sup> – even dispossess farmers through the Land Committee<sup>505</sup> 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.<sup>506</sup> 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 dispossessions, repossession and factionalism. Throughout this period, and after the reorientation of the state in 1989, small-scale tenancies,<sup>507</sup> 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 allowed to keep ownership local. The follow up on the land record and crop harvests decreased with

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<sup>503</sup> The nationalisation was notably enacted through the 1963 Enterprises Nationalization Law and the 1964 Law to Protect the Implementation of Socialist Economic System.

<sup>504</sup>Cf. Huard (2016).

<sup>505</sup> Through the 1963 Farmer Right Protection Law and the 1963 Tenancies Law Amending Act, courts of law were expelled from most land cases except for disputes concerning inheritance, cf. Taylor (2009: 339).

<sup>506</sup> Procedures Conferring the Rights to Cultivate Land, 1964, rule 64/1.

<sup>507</sup> In 1971, between one third and one half of the land in the Chindwin region were still operated via small scale tenancies, cf. Steinberg (1981a: 127).

the gradual abandonment of procurement as the state at large lost interest in controlling land tenure and focused more on introducing new high-yield crops for export.<sup>508</sup> But more importantly, local customs organised land tenure arrangements during the socialist period and beyond, operating in parallel to legal norms. That is, as with the colonial period, the state only controlled the tip of the iceberg of land relationships. One paradox was that, 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. And 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 create a 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.<sup>509</sup> To some degree, it reintroduced the concept of private property<sup>510</sup> as land-use rights could be legally sold, mortgaged, rented, pawned, and inherited.<sup>511</sup> In Gawgyi, the titling process opened a Pandora's Box, as some long-standing disputes came to the forefront. But eventually, it was more a matter of recognising who has authority over which parcels and updating the cadastre at cheap costs. Overall, the flexibility of land relations made the countryside a rent market where debt, obligations and arrangements for sharecropping have accommodated laws and state projects to some degree throughout the past two centuries. To the colonial picture of individual and private land owners followed the image of farmers as state tenants who have now Land Use Certificates. The successive reforms may have changed forms of ownership.<sup>512</sup> But beyond the formal land tenure system, and aside from patron-client politics, we saw that what

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<sup>508</sup> Cf. Thawngmung (2004).

<sup>509</sup> Now called the Department of Administration of Land Measurement and Statistics (DALMS).

<sup>510</sup> Yet, the state still remains the sole landowner and this law add another layer within a system of stacked laws, cf. Mark (2016).

<sup>511</sup> Cf. Bouthry et al. (2017: 34).

<sup>512</sup> On that point, see Ferguson (2014: 298).

organises land relations are the dynamics of kinship (alliance, descent and the succession of generations), the moral and social obligations 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 on laws, policies, and the recognition of customary rights.<sup>513</sup> As we will see in the next sections, an ethnography of land relations shows that transmission of inheritance is not only about land as it 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 it 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<sup>514</sup> 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.<sup>515</sup> At large, an ideology of inheritance is a set of rules that defines a strategy to allow for the continuity of a farm.<sup>516</sup> In Gawgyi, it is a never-ending process of legitimization 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

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<sup>513</sup> See for instance: Andersen (2015), Faxon (2017), McCarthy (2018), Oberndorf (2012), Shivakumar and Saw Hlaing (2015), Su Phyto Win (2017) and Willis (2014).

<sup>514</sup> Traditionally, succession of parental properties is made on the third or the fifth day following burial of the last parent, during a commemoration ceremony to which all relatives come to gather. The elders amongst the relatives usually manage the division and distribution of the properties to the siblings. But in practice, the division of inheritance often happen before the death of the parents.

<sup>515</sup> Cf. Boutry et al. (2017) and Huard (2018).

<sup>516</sup> Cf. Rogers and Salamon (1983).

owed gratitude in return.<sup>517</sup> There is an obligation of care between parents and children (*pyuzu saunshauk*): from parents to their children and vice versa later on.<sup>518</sup> It is dynamic. This must be known and applied without being said (*htitat*). And parents must pass on a set of knowledge, skills and possessions. But the children also have a responsibility toward 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 together, their property is in common; [...]. Why is this? — because the scholar is the steward, the person in charge of the property.” (Richardson 1847: 177-178).

In other words, *living together creates a relationship that entitles one to property because the mutual obligations between people create claims over things*. And being entitled is to be potentially in charge of 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 as for the sharing of the same eating pot<sup>519</sup> or the pooling of resources for instance. It has been noted early on that the equal division of inheritance eventually led to the fragmentation of the estates.<sup>520</sup> This centrifugal tendency was nonetheless counterbalanced by a centripetal one that can be described as a ‘keeping-while-giving’ paradox (Weiner 1990).<sup>521</sup> The parents should pass on inheritance equally, but they often keep a part

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<sup>517</sup> Cf. Schober (1989).

<sup>518</sup> Nash (1965: 264–265) also highlighted this tendency.

<sup>519</sup> Cf. Nash (1965: 45-47).

<sup>520</sup> Notably by Hardiman (1909: 28).

<sup>521</sup> 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

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 toward 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,<sup>522</sup> emphasise this disposition. And one child in particular, called the *awratha*, the eldest son or daughter in theory,<sup>523</sup> was supposed to take upon himself the burdens and responsibilities of the parents:

“The status of *aw-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 material or tangible patrimony. That set is divided into two categories following a centre-periphery distinction that shares commonalities with the galactic, or centre-oriented, traditional polities described by Tambiah.<sup>524</sup> There is the “inner property” (*atwin pyitsi*) of the household: gold, jewellery, house, vehicles, farm machinery, sometimes livestock...; and the “outer property” (*apyin pyitsi*): agricultural land, trees, crop drying areas, and so forth. In general, outer properties are given in equal portions to each child and those of the core are meant for the person who stays with his parents to take over the family. The centre-periphery division of property is always

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

<sup>522</sup> These aspects were also developed by Spiro (1986: 44–45).

<sup>523</sup> For key works about Burmese Buddhist Law, cf. E Maung (1970), Lahiri (1957) or Maung Maung (1963).

<sup>524</sup> Cf. Tambiah (1976, 2013).

subject to negotiations and thus should be understood as a sketch, and not a map,<sup>525</sup> 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.

For example, the transmission is rarely carried out in one go at the time of the parents' death, but occurs at different times, such as during marriages and when the parents define how they will be cared for during their lifetime. A marriage officialises the creation of a new family and the spouses receive a wedding gift (*lethpwe*)<sup>526</sup> 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). So, 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 call off their entitlement to their parental patrimony. In addition, adoption is often used to designate a person (a niece, a nephew, a grandchild)<sup>527</sup> who will take care of the adopting parents, that person then becomes entitled to inheritance. To advance the family a 'close' outsider can thus be brought in the family and so becoming a full right member of it. Overall, transmitting inheritance means fulfilling one's obligations by taking into account the history of various transactions occurring within a family. But it also depends on the strategies to access resources. To describe this difficult undertaking, let us follow the example of one family in particular.

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<sup>525</sup> Seeing the norms for dividing inheritance as a sketch and not a map, that is as guidelines and not as strict rules, allows to highlight the processual nature of this transfer. On the difference between a sketch and a map, cf. Ingold (2016).

<sup>526</sup> The *lethpwe* also encompasses the things given by the people invited to the wedding and can be understood as a gift bonding the couple.

<sup>527</sup> The adoption of young children is called *mwaysa*, while the adoption of adults (for the explicit purpose of continuing the family) is called *mwayhkan*.

## DYNAMICS OF INHERITANCE AND THE REDEFINITION OF RELATIONSHIPS

When we met in 2013, Ko Kyaw was about 33 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*)<sup>528</sup> house but still had dinner with Daw Hlaing. Sharing the same pot defines the restricted family sphere. Ko Kyaw, who was then 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.

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 Ma Khin's mother, Daw Nu, after the birth of their child.<sup>529</sup> 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 them 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 – that of his parents and that of his 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 and

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<sup>528</sup> On the question of polygamy under Burmese Buddhist law, male domination through law, the impact of recent change in the legislation (the 2015 Monogamy Law and the Buddhist Women's Marriage Law) and the debates and change over time in the use of the words to describe first, second and third wives, cf. Crouch (2016b).

<sup>529</sup> The settlement pattern of newlywed 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 led to the couple to reside at the parents' house of one of the spouses depending on life circumstances and strategies to access wealth.

when to give inheritance to all their children.

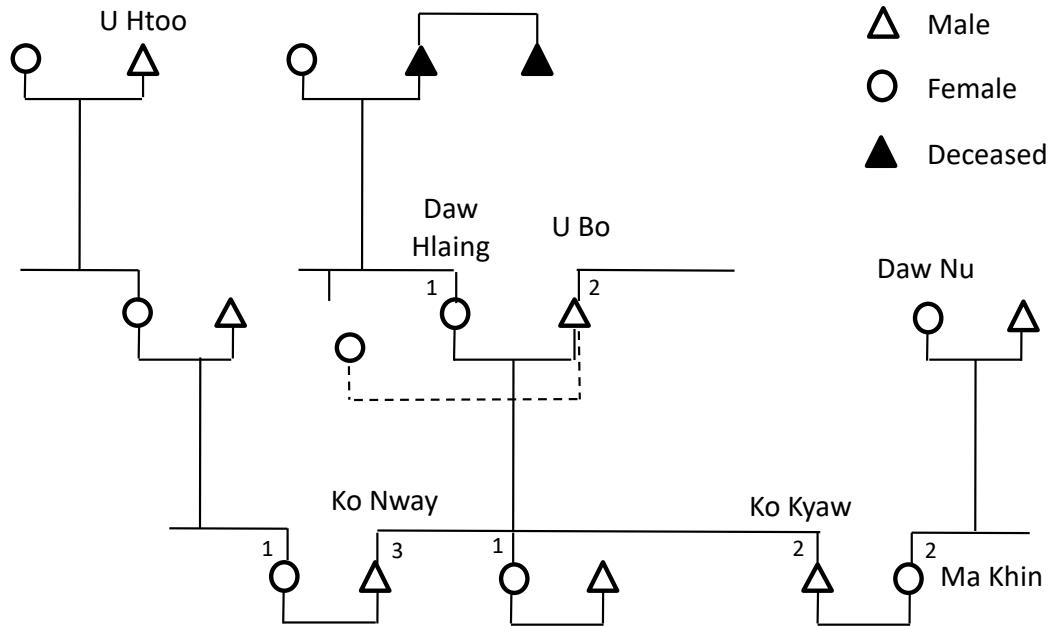


Figure 22. Ko Kyaw's partial family tree

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. But he also received his share of the inheritance, in this case four acres and two zebus, 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 10 acres. The latter will own it 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 elements in understanding how inheritance transmission is configured according to family and patrimonial trajectories. Thus, the egalitarianism promoted by the rule of inheritance transmission is sometimes undermined. The dynamics of family formation, mainly articulated around marriage and adoption, is 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 taking care and responsibility should get more. It relates to the precolonial definition of the *auratha* – the child that 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 temporarily lived 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, their arrangement was that Ko Kyaw farmed 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 of 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 have taken 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 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<sup>530</sup> and some jewellery and contracted a debt of about \$700 from a villager. U Bo died a few weeks later, officially from stomach cancer, from witchcraft according to the local rumour. After the death of U Bo, Daw Hlaing had to finance the funerals 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 two remaining zebus. She could have sold a piece of land, but she did not. Selling in case of emergency, selling “because you have a stomach-ache”, will surely come at 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 60, 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 just 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.

But Ko Kyaw and his wife mainly cultivate the betel garden. Ko Kyaw also

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<sup>530</sup> A zebu is a type of cow (*Bos indicus*) from South Asia, with a large hump on its shoulders and used in many farm works.

ploughs his mother's land, that of his mother-in-law and others, thanks to the rototiller. So, 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, who keep track of their respective households' 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. Therefore, 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. 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 on, Daw Hlaing's blood parents, caught up in a difficult situation, asked her to give them the ruby to pawn it, promising to pay it back as soon as they could. She accepted. 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 in gambling. Daw Hlaing has been waiting for her parents to pay this debt for over 20 years now. The latter settled in Gawgyi, on an area adjoining the house of U Bo. Daw Hlaing's widowed mother still lived there with two of her sons. She is almost 80 years old and remained the guardian of the money in her entire household, collecting the income and deciding what to spend. And 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 characterised 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, she 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, legitimises Daw Hlaing’s claim to 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. And 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 the 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 since the families live on good terms and a conflict would inevitably impact them, as well as relatives, or even the neighbourhood, and potentially the entire village. And no agreement had been found yet. It is now possible to answer a critical question: why does Ko Kyaw do not take care of his mother? Ko Kyaw does not yet take care of his mother because if he does, he becomes responsible for her debts in an unstable situation. It will put him in the middle of a tense situation in terms of who owes what to whom and on what grounds. Besides, 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, for he would have authority over patrimony whose contours are under discussion.

That 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. But most importantly, the

question at stake was not who owns that land. It was who will. And that 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 realised, because even if it is vested in the status of a person, it comes to craft one’s position within a dense social landscape. And when someone is recognised as the owner of an estate, it means that this person has achieved a position of stewardship on that property. Ownership is but momentary and the idea of stewardship (taking care, being in charge of) reflects how authority and responsibility on things and people is conceived.

## **CONCLUSION: ISSUES OF TRANSMISSIONS**

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 these things. The short discussion of changes in land tenure showed that entitlement to inheritance has organised local land relations since at least the eighteenth century alongside a series of state projects and legal codifications. In any case, it kept operating 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 obligations between its members – gratitude, care – are key because they create entitlement to property. And 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 underway. Ultimately, ownership is not about individual private property but about stewardship: taking care of a 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 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.

At this stage, we can say that transmitting is a process of redefining authority and responsibility over things, and obligations between people. 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 than those defining in the Burmese Buddhist Law who can take over a family. The conceptualisation 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 3). And Koenig has shown that personal abilities rather than primogeniture was the 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 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: 144–145, 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. We saw in the general introduction (section “debating local politics”) and in the historical chapters that the emphasis on personal abilities goes beyond family relationships and pervades the literature on leadership, from the legitimation of kings to the conceptualisation of politics in terms of men of prowess and patron-client relationship. The combination of, and tension between, heredity and ability are at the core of the theory of politics in the Burmese context. Cast in realm of Gawgyi politics, what does it implies?

Since the inception of Myinmilaung tract, only the first two headmen were linked by heredity according to a local theory of habitus (“who lives close to a hunter become a hunter; who lives near a fisherman becomes a fisherman” cf. chapter 4, section “The first village headmen”). 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 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 bigmen, the *lugyi* who take care of village affairs since the moral rupture embodied by the shift from U Win the Infamous to U Htay the Worthy, are also called with an expression referring to the idea of ‘taking care of’. This expression, translated in English as “guardian of village affairs”, is *ywayay okhteinmu*. The word *hsein* 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.

The question now is how far can be pushed the comparison between family stewardship and village guardianship to understand the making of authority in Gawgyi context? If what makes a family and the mutual obligations between its member create authority, then what makes a village? What are the obligations between its members and how do they engage with each-others? To explore these issues, we now need to look at how Gawgyi is shaped as a collective and how village *lugyi* produce their bigness.

## CHAPTER 8. GUARDING VILLAGE AFFAIRS

### THE WORTH OF THE *LUGYI*

“If a man has led a good life, not quarreled with neighbors [...], 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 elders is that they do not overstep the vague but delicate line that separates individual responsibilities.” (Nash 1965: 270).

In contrast to Nash's analysis, who 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. This signifies that the *lugyi* I met during my fieldwork, such as when I first arrived at the water station in 2013, 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 there are historical reasons explaining why such men came to the forefront in Gawgyi political landscape. In the chapter on the rise of village affairs, we saw that the transition from U Win the Infamous to U Htay the Worthy crystallised a rupture in local politics. State violence and its partial disconnection from farmers in Gawgyi was echoed by a disengagement of village leaders from official positions in favour of a commitment to village affairs on the model of previous men of power (the last men of *hpon*). The management of local affairs was monopolised by the villagers, drawing from a more traditional form of collective sociality called *luhmuyay*. During my fieldwork, I saw these men circulating a lot in the village and they were always present during ceremonies for instance. Ko Kyaw was often among them, but he was the headman, not a *lugyi* yet, and his navigations were of a different kind. Progressively, I realised 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 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.<sup>531</sup> Power and authority have previously been analysed in this region of Myanmar in at least two ways.<sup>532</sup> 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 Myanmar – where the individual charisma, the *hpón*, is the 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 how people engage with each other. A person can thus be great by his donations or by his charisma. The hypothesis is that the worth of the *lugyi* comes from another form, namely a commitment to 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. But 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 So-and-so is a *lugyi* can be connoted positively or negatively depending on the context, the persons targeted and the interlocutors. For example, when Ko Kyaw organised 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,<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> See, for example, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), Thévenot (2006), Boltanski (2009), Barthe et al. (2013).

<sup>532</sup> We leave aside here other studies that would make it possible to account for the multiple possible power relationships with influential entities such as arahants or saints (Kawanami 2009), the cult of the *naq* (Brac de la Perrière 1996), or that of the *weikza* (Rozenberg 2010).

<sup>533</sup> On the conception of social space in Southeast Asia at large, cf. 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.<sup>534</sup> 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 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* who are seen as worthy because they each operate in their own way a ‘process of generalising’ to promote a common good by taking care of village affairs (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). The other name of the *lugyi* is *ywayay okhteinhm*, the “guardians of village affairs”, and generalising<sup>535</sup> is a process of ‘taking charge of’ a collective. 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 are overtaken by the idea of common good. These engagements consist mostly of family, intergenerational, neighbouring, and clientelist relations actualised in a variety of transfers and the situations we will explore are two ceremonies and a dispute. But 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, and, for instance, we saw in the prologue how managing the emergence of a candidate for headship was a way of producing and consolidating their position. On the other hand, villagers are gauged. Because taking care of village affairs is a

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<sup>534</sup> In order not to reify villages as spaces where cohesion has reigned since times immemorial, we situate ourselves in the line of Kemp (1991) who analyses in detail the aporias and the academic and political stakes which underlie the study of villages in Thailand in terms of traditional communities for example.

<sup>535</sup> Boltanski (2011) emphasises that the “process of generalizing” is a process of disseminating a particular justification (what we aim here in terms of engagement in village affairs) in specific situations among which disputes occupy a central position.

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 toward a collective contributes to make village affairs the form of local politics, as a space where the worth of the people is evaluated depending on their engagement toward 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 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 “grieves” (*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. But its scope changes following what is deemed important at a given time.

Today, village affairs include the organisation of ceremonies (individual, family, monastery related), the management of the water and electricity supply systems, the rebuilding of roads, the treatment of sick persons and dead bodies, dealing with NGOs or the issue of enlarging the village for instance. 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.<sup>536</sup>

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, we saw that any understanding of the landscape in terms of administrative jurisdiction (Myinmilaung tract) 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 of 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 for ceremonies, Tozigon people rely on Gawgyi’s

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<sup>536</sup>*Kotukotha*, which can be transcribed as “rising by and defining oneself”.

collective properties and monastery for such event 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 assemblage is also present in the title of village elders, *yatmiyathpa*, or “parents” (*mihpa*) of the dwelling area”.<sup>537</sup> 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 the hospitality to strangers to the funerals of neighbours. But it bonds villages together or excludes them, the *yat* being to some extent the spatial scale of *luhmuyay*. And this process of scaling depends on the history of the political landscape: while Tozigon has bonded with Gawgyi through their history and claim for indigeneity,<sup>538</sup> Gawgyi and Myinmilaung proper have never really developed such relationship. On the contrary, people from Myinmilaung proper are clearly excluded from Gawgyi affairs, which means that they have to rely on themselves to organise collective life.<sup>539</sup> And this divide goes hand in hand with the recurrent animosity between these two settlements (chapters 2 to 5). This means that the history of this socio-political landscape shaped how local politics unfold today and, in that sense, it provides a better understanding of the difficulties for Ko Kyaw to be the headman of Myinmilaung tract. In other words, Ko Kyaw’s position was ambiguous as he had to navigate Gawgyi affairs *and* Myinmilaung tract and to embody a position people despise while showing a degree of trustworthiness.

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 sections of this chapter. It should be borne in mind

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<sup>537</sup> So far, I have referred to the latter as ‘official elders’ as one person is recognised by the state for each tract as a traditional institution. But there are often more than one *yatmiyathpa* and often they are *lugyi*.

<sup>538</sup> Their proximity is related to a share origin from Ywadon village translating into close relations between preeminent 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 jurisdiction (cf. chapter 3, section “competing foundations narratives” and chapter 6, section “in the field”).

<sup>539</sup> In the same vein, people from Mayodaw have pooled their resources to buy their own “village property” for their ceremonies in order to mark a difference with Myinmilaung village.

that even if they embody propriety, the *lugyi* also represent how the main farming families had monopolised village leadership. In Gawgyi, there are three men<sup>540</sup> who almost everyone agrees are *lugyi*: U Lin, U Maung and U Htay. Each of them has a particular role contrasting with Ko Kyaw crafting of headship.

U Lin assumes the role of “head of bachelors” (*lubyogaung*) for all village ceremonies: he, himself a bachelor, organises 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 novice of boys and the meritorious donation *par excellence*.<sup>541</sup> Describing the making of a *shinbyu* allows first of all to show the village collective at work. But it also enables one to question to what extent meritorious donations contribute to the greatness of people because the multiple forms of engagement (sharing of merit, offering food, mutual help, and so on) entangle and are evaluated during the ceremony. Finally, it also shows the crucial role of U Lin as the organiser of village workforce and as the living memory of donations and transactions.

U Maung is frequently “master of ceremony” (*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 these families, making the ‘marriage’ an agreement going beyond the couple and intra or inter-family relationships. U Maung, as master of ceremony, 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 generalising” in order to go beyond individual and family interests so that marriage is collectively sanctioned.

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<sup>540</sup> 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 so because of 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.

<sup>541</sup> In theory, an *ahlu* refers exclusively to a meritorious donation involving offerings to the monks. In practice, lay ceremonies such as weddings, which do not require donations to a monk, are also called *ahlu* because they are also a moment of donation through the form of food to the guest for instance.

Finally, U Htay is the *yatmiyathpa*<sup>542</sup> and in this quality he can speak for the village. The third section 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 to better delimit the sphere of the village affairs. The ways in which U Htay positions itself through family, 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 organisation 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<sup>543</sup> of family, neighbourhood and patronage relationships while paying close attention to how transactions are performed and evaluated.

## U LIN AND A SHINBYU

This section first described what is *the shinbyu* to 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.<sup>544</sup> 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 where several forms of engagement (sharing of merit, offering food, mutual aid, and so forth) are entangled and are constantly evaluated and its description

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<sup>542</sup> There can be several *yatmiyathpa* in the same village. However, one of them is appointed, at the request of the government and when the village headman is selected. Therefore, we choose to translate it as the “official elder” to reflect the process of selection.

<sup>543</sup> The notion of trial and test are in a broad sense to encompass both the sanction-test (associated with a mechanism for settling a controversy) and the challenge-test (referring to testing individuals throughout life), depending on the context (Martuccelli, 2015).

<sup>544</sup> The *shinbyu* is relatively well known in the anthropological literature about Myanmar. Shway Yoe (1896/82) described it as early as 1882. Nash (1965) and Spiro (1970), anthropologists by training who worked in central Burma after independence, analysed the ritual stages of the *shinbyu* by highlighting the ways in which they reveal a socio-cosmic order – relations between lay people and monks, man and woman, parents and children, master and student. More recently, Brac de la Perrière (1984) and Houtman (1990) have studied this ritual in more urban contexts in Lower Burma. Robinne first described the *shinbyu* in Shan State (2000) and then compared it with examples from Central Burma (2002). Finally, Brac de la Perrière has synthesised some of these approaches to show how the *shinbyu* operates a renunciation from the world in order to take a better place in it (2009).

illustrates the crucial role of U Lin as organiser and as a living memory of donations and transactions.

During a *shinbyu*, a young boy becomes an adult qualified for marriage<sup>545</sup> 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 the way boys are made kings in the first part of the ritual to become novice 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 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: 234-236)

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 toward 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

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<sup>545</sup> Cf. Robinne (2002).

endowed in ‘pon, which indicates their degree of spiritual fulfilment and opens 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. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 2016, before the Buddhist Lent, a couple from the village organised a *shinbyu* for their two sons after saving money for several years. Two weeks before the ceremony, the couple met with U Lin to finalise the preparation. The latter, teacher at Gawgyi public school, is also *lubyogaung*, or leader of the group of single boys. U Lin, in duet with a woman “head of the single girls” (*abyogaung*), is in charge of organising the village ceremonies, such as weddings and novitiates,<sup>546</sup> by mobilizing the statutory groups who will take care of preparations, welcoming guests, serving food and performing the necessary ritual acts. U Lin is however perceived as the main actor orienting village workforce for ceremonies. He circulates all the time across 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 made a provisional budget and agreed with him on the rental of the “common property of the village” (*ywabon pyitsi*). These include dishes, kitchen utensils, tables, chairs and stools, bamboo structures and other 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 for a time to welcome musicians, novices and guests. All this has a cost varying according to the duration of the *shinbyu* (from one to three days in general), the meals proposed,

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<sup>546</sup> 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 toward 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.

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).<sup>547</sup>

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 have bought some items to solicit their help. For example, cigars and tea leaf salads are 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 symbolise an engagement. That day, me and Ko Kyaw 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 villagers, except that he often rents his loudspeakers and sound system.

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 organisation 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 arrive around 6am, U Lin went with the donors to the monastery to offer food (*hsunkat*) to the monks. Between 6 and 9 am, most of the villagers and many guests went to the ceremony rhythmed by 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 where fans were stacked. Those were given to them in exchange for a sum of money called “*aku-ngway*” (literally “aid-money”). Its amount was recorded in a book dedicated for this purpose and carefully kept by the donor. It's an account book that lets you know who gave what. In the photo below (figure 22), 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.<sup>548</sup> As Nash recalls, but without further analysis: “[a]s in all villagewide or supravillage festivities, guests make

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<sup>547</sup> 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.

<sup>548</sup> 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.

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). And Spiro added: “The amount of each contribution is recorded so that the delicately balanced system of reciprocity may be maintained.” (1977: 183-184).



Figure 23. The two leaders of bachelor groups – in the middle and on the right – collecting the aid-money during a shinbyu (© Daw Htan Nu)

In a *shinbyu*, the transfer of aid-money is neither purely a gift nor purely a payment. Besides, this type of transfer is not found in all novitiates<sup>549</sup> and not all guests necessarily give it.<sup>550</sup> When it is done, this financial assistance is part of a series of transfers<sup>551</sup> between individuals and families. In theory, a person gives what he wants, but in practice what is given will be given back for an equal or greater amount.

<sup>549</sup> Invitation cards sometimes give clues as to whether or not it is appropriate for a guest to give.

<sup>550</sup> Giving aid-money refers to a moral obligation for guests. However, each villager is also a guest at one time or another during the ceremony, and, depending on the help they give and their relationship with donors, they gauge whether it is appropriate or not to give it.

<sup>551</sup> These transfers of goods and services can be more or less formalised 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.

In general, there are two types of meritorious donations (*ahlu*): the “donation without remainder” (*akywinme ahlu*) and the “donation with remainder” (*akywinshi ahlu*).<sup>552</sup> 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 return directly. It mostly concerns donations for religious buildings and the ‘best’ is not to put one’s name or picture as a dedication mark on the edifice. And 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 Buddhist novitiate, funerals and weddings for instance. The aid-money is one example of it even if it does not strictly correspond to the definition of *ahlu*.<sup>553</sup> To some extent, people cannot escape the obligation stemming from this kind of donation because there is a ‘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 occasions a person is invited to ceremonies 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 more or less near 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 obliged 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<sup>554</sup> 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

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<sup>552</sup> 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 minimises the belief in karmic predestination, cf. Robinne (1998) and the general introduction.

<sup>553</sup> On the strict definition of meritorious donation as a transfer that require the mediation of monks for the production of merit, cf. Brac de la Perrière (2009a, 2015).

<sup>554</sup> For example, Pannier (2015) offered a detailed analysis of the role of these multiple transactions in the production of village sociality in Vietnam.

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 is crossed, the guests were quickly brought to the eating area. Many people were busy around 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 organised the service, measuring the need for plates and cutlery. Behind the banquet, other men washed the dishes in turn. The atmosphere was convivial. Jokes followed one another. 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 one does not 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 moment of crisis, such as when there is no one to help serve food.



Figure 24. Villagers cooking the meal during a shinbyu

Offering food symbolises giving in its raw form in our context. Feeding monks, teachers or parents during rituals is usually understood as “an acknowledgement of gratitude and as a repayment of moral or social debt<sup>555</sup> 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. And following the theory of field of merit, the 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 those one wants to create or show. In short, food donations oscillate between two poles: the disinterested nature of the Buddhist gift<sup>556</sup> and the obligation arising from the gift. How people engage with each other through these transactions is thus constantly evaluated.



Figure 25. The donors serving food in the plate of fellow villagers

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<sup>555</sup> Drawing on our earlier differentiation between debt and obligation (cf. the general introduction, section on the “Limits of concept of *hpon*”), the acknowledgement of gratitude is not a repayment, but a moral obligation to fulfil.

<sup>556</sup> The less a gift is disinterested, the more it creates merit.

The image above reveals the tension at play in food offering. As I filmed the event, the givers (standing) emphasised their position of 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 for not being taken too far in this situation. Besides the fact that the two ladies do not get along, her refusal relates to a difference of status between them. The old woman descends from a family of large farmers while the donor worked as a daily labourer until quite recently. The tiny gesture thus reflects how, even under the veil of a meritorious donation, transfers are evaluated because they potentially symbolise an engagement that could impact status and hierarchies. One cannot give something, help, offer food to anyone in the same manner. The ways transfers are evaluated is thus key in local political dynamics, may it be 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 symbolise a meritorious act and create liabilities (that can be refused). But 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 formalised in a cosmology, is always contextual. And the engagement of villagers toward 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 providing fresh water and ironed towels. The flow of guests increased sharply around 8 in the morning. The atmosphere calmed down around 9am. The dishes are washed, the tables cleaned, and the rest of the food gathered for tomorrow's banquet or sent to the elderly 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 hauling them. The procession represents the Burmese royal order and precedes the entry into religion, a crucial stage in the life cycle.<sup>557</sup> A little later, in intimacy, the close

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<sup>557</sup> For a description of this procession, see Spiro (1970: 240). The village elders, first the men and

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 novice.

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.<sup>558</sup> 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. But we saw how a meritorious donation is crisscrossed by tensions, diverging evaluations and by a variety of other transfers.

Overall, a *shinbyu* crystallises and sets in motion a complex whole including at the same time various ritual devices, the activation of networks (family, neighbours, guests, monks...) as well as multiple transactions. It is interesting to underline 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 realisation 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

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then the women, lead the procession, followed by the beautiful women of the villages carrying betel boxes, followed by the "princes in the making", then the group of unmarried boys, the group of unmarried girls, and then the bulk of the guests and villagers wanting to mingle in the procession instead of watching it from their house, and finally comes the orchestra whose sound box is mounted on an ox cart.

<sup>558</sup> On this ritual, cf. Brac de la Perrière (2009: 126, 2015: 391).

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 uncle, was absent from most village ceremonies. When I talked about it around me, 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" (*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. 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, unruled 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 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 toward 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 to make donations during which the commitment toward the collective is evaluated. The organisation 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 toward the village to make the necessary ceremonies in the life of each one. His commitment to the collective is recognised 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 to help serving 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 fall 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 event is intrinsic to village social affairs and U Maung was officiating as master of ceremony. Weddings are to some extent a collective issue, and the very presence of U Maung during 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 had the same appeal to anthropologists as noviciate or marriage ceremonies. Spiro (1977: 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.<sup>559</sup> Spiro notes that the meeting formalising 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

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<sup>559</sup> 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: 181).

headman or a village elder, announces the amount and content of the dower [...] which had been agreed upon by the parents.” (1977: 181)

Spiro’s description is very similar to the way marital engagements are organised in Gawgyi today.<sup>560</sup> During these ceremonies, the gift of *tintha-ngway*<sup>561</sup> 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 ceremony. 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 the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 2015, I was invited by Ko Kyaw to an engagement ceremony where ‘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 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 indications of U Lin. Little by little, the village elders arrived, including U Maung and U Htay. The future husband, anxious, helped with the preparations. 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.

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<sup>560</sup> Where they are known by a generic name (*say-sat-pwe* [sic], “engagement ceremony”).

<sup>561</sup> 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”.

The parents of the future spouses faced each other in the company of U Maung and the village headman of the bridegroom. Ko Kyaw stayed in the background and let U Maung manage the affair. Once tea and cakes were served and consumed, the latter got up to talk. He began his speech 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 accepted 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 village headman of the boy. But he was quickly cut off by the bride's mother. She asked who will 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 had therefore to pay for the rental of Gawgyi's common properties on the spot. Gawgyi villagers will take care of organising 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 ask the parents of the future spouses to specify if what is given for marriage will be considered as inheritance or not. Gradually, the two families reached agreement. The room returned to calm; the agreement was stated aloud to all persons thus taken as witness. But before leaving Gawgyi, some women on the boy's side accused the bride of not being a virgin. The bodies clenched, 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. Marriage is

a key stage in the constitution of individuals and potentially the time when one receives one's share of inheritance (chapter 7). 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 risk 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), mediatised and witnessed. The witness-mediators are all the more important because they embody both a 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 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 of 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 5, 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 the greatness of a *lugyi* is produced, at the interface between charismatic leadership and the embodiment of the common good.

U Htay past achievements have been described in chapter 5. Among them, one 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 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 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 would 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 (chapter 5). At that moment, he proclaimed himself ‘official elder’ in order to keep an eye on local politics while this status protected him from being pushed to become headman again to some extent. This was a first move for distancing himself from officials. Yet, under his tenure, the domain of village affairs, drawing from the traditions of *luhmuyay*, expanded and nowadays includes the organisation 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 the enlarging the village among other issues. These challenges were not totally new, and village affairs existed since the creation of Gawgyi to some extent. What was new was the articulation of social affairs with new stakes at a moment of rupture with the state in the late 1990s, early 2000s. U Htay remained a central player in Gawgyi as guardian of village affairs, even more since he has stopped being headman. Besides, 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 emphasising 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, today, he is the only one able to settle a conflict related to the building of Gawgyi 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 will 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 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 which should be 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 unanimously or else the project risks 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 on the *lugyi*, and on U Htay in particular. Ko Kyaw did not have a say in this kind of issue anymore. 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, the villagers who died 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<sup>562</sup> 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

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<sup>562</sup> Cf. the section "Ko Kyaw's political navigation" in the general introduction.

village *naq* (to the southeast) which are not however ‘part’ of the village, but which limit its extension. The widening of roads has 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. But the case below is interesting because it involves our three *lugyi*.

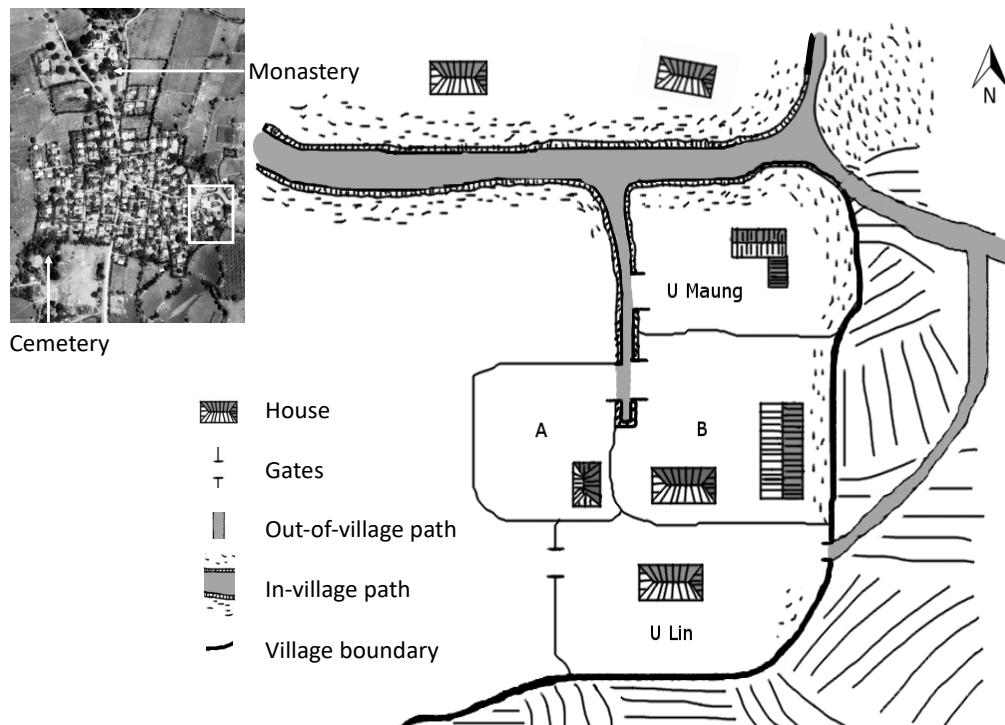


Figure 26. Sketch of the households involved in the dispute

Gawgyi is roughly divided into four parts by a north-south and an east-west route (figure 2). The case in question is located in the southeast quarter where a path sinks toward 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 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 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 gain access to electricity. Describing an intra-village conflict (a story of insults between neighbours) Nash tells how such an agreement was reached during his fieldwork:

"Restauration 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: 84).

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 (1991) call the “process of generalising”: U Htay, grasping the ins and outs of the problem, took up this case. To resolve this conflict, he pleaded for the common future of the village whose extension to the south-east is being recorded. He argued with A and B – separately and without confronting the two families to 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 arrives (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 A and B families. Convincing them to alienate part of it to facilitate the passage of a neighbour’s dead in anticipation of the enlargement of the village can be demanding. It requires to give credit to all potential claims and to show 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 generalising’ 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, organising 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 throne 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.

## CONCLUSION

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 organise collective life following previous model of propriety in 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 couple, consensus in disputes). In contrast with the analyses emphasising 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 4).

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 organisation 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 pump. 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, or cooking are all tests that measured 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 is also 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.

In addition, 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 where 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 showed 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 belongs 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. They created their role as guardians of village affairs in a specific historical context. 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 bigmen 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 bigmen) to ‘take charge’ of local affairs. In Gawgyi, it was so notably because they exemplify propriety through their engagement toward 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 4. They are not the same kind of patron that colonisers and scholars imagined as the natural chief of the countryside, but rather descendants of large families of peasants who monopolised village leadership and remained influential by investing in inheritance politics. As we saw in the description of the

2016 selection, the voices of villagers are channelled, delegated and often excluded through, to and by this type of leaders who are 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 has not changed a lot 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 keep distant with the state. But 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. Overall, it means for him embodying a mistrusted position while having to be trustworthy, playing both sides against the middle to craft his authority.

## CONCLUSION

We have now reached the end of a journey that brought us from the 2016 selection of Myinmilaung headman back to the creation of the villages in order to understand how headship became an ambiguous position of power. I hope to have demonstrated that Ko Kyaw's dilemmas were different from those of the first headman. For the latter, becoming headman has been a matter of accommodating colonialism when village headship emerged as a central political institution to compete for during a period of warfare. For Ko Kyaw, it meant embodying a dubious position while showing a degree of trustworthiness in his daily encounters to craft his authority. Between both individuals, the local political landscape has evolved as a network of past and present personalities, hierarchies, stakes, places and memories fashioned through time and made meaningful in current politics. The following first present the main historical and anthropological conclusions this thesis points at before summarising the findings drawn from each chapter.

The main theoretical conclusion this work points towards is that political continuities are made of transformations. Historically, one major insight is that the colonial period should not be configured as an historical rupture. A considerable historical 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 destabilised traditional authority by removing traditional elites and reorganised 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 contribute to a more nuanced understanding of historical continuities and changes. In addition, the social memory of division between two villages shows historical relations to be fraught with tensions and contests that relate as much to pre-colonial structures as much as 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. Another historical

implication is that, by focusing attention on the local operation of power and its everyday practice, the thesis helps move away from a simplistic dichotomy between so-called ‘Highlands’ and ‘Lowlands’ in Myanmar. Rather than seeing power in lowland areas as coherent and institutionalised, they rather appear also subject to constant negotiation through local knowledge systems relating to kinship, history, morality, responsibility, obligation, powerful-ness and powerless-ness. 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.

In terms of political anthropology, this study has 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 bigmen as collective organisers. Yet, neither the headman nor the bigmen have any real binding power. 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<sup>563</sup> – or with the Oceania model of bigmen — those figures of entrepreneurial leaders who gather people around them in collective projects, but whose influence can collapse radically if they fail to redistribute.<sup>564</sup> The local society depicted in this work appears very differentiated, and the influence of bigmen linked not only to their moral qualities but also to their belonging to great families. Therefore, refining this research would require studying the actual, material power of these families as well as the central power relations in which they are caught. This thesis has attempted to link with a variety of academic debates regarding history and political anthropology. New avenues for research have been identified with room for changes in terms of methodology, reflexivity and voice. The following summarises the more detailed findings of each chapter.

The focus on the precolonial period has shown that competition for leadership, traffic in affiliations and fragmentation of authority were the main political dynamics in the countryside and that they endured the colonial encounter.

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<sup>563</sup> As understood notably by Clastres (1989).

<sup>564</sup> As studied by Godelier and Strathern (1991) and Strathern (2009).

Descent groups anchored their settlements by composing with a landscape shaped through the expansion of farm cultivation, the transformation of spirit cults and Buddhism, and the affiliation with local chiefdoms. It 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 thesis has enjoined, via the example of the opposition between Myinmilaung proper and Gawgyi, 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. But the actual creation of Myinmilaung tract was more of 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 tenancies 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 as a scalable political space while headship became a matter of individuals when successive leaders embodied different postures reflecting local political issues.

The shift from the first two headmen, U Nyunt and U Shwe, to U To Kaing, combined with the arrival of Gawgyi's first monk U Za Nay Ya illustrates how some individuals – known as the last men of *hpon* – became exemplars of the moralisation 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 reorganisation of political authority through the belonging to large farming families. The remnants of the precolonial gentry such as U Po Shi, a money lender from Thazi, 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 either emanating from the state or armed groups during the decades surrounding the country's independence. These families monopolised local leadership when the hierarchy transformed into a divided between "real farmers" (*taungthu*) and mere "labourers" (*myaukthu*). U To Kaing thus sat at the juncture between the colonial headman, the man of *hpon* and propriety, on the one hand, and the representative of the new local order, on the other. The fact that some leaders became exemplary figures of the moralisation 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, it pushed for the rethinking of Nash's concepts about power and authority by showing how past and present contexts – and not just individuals' quality 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 its control on 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 not seen as a strategy anymore, 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. And 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 at 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. And U Htay gradual estrangement with 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, a self-reliance ideology took place in Gawgyi and is symbolised by how a group of bigmen has started making the 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 monopolised village leadership and remained influent by investing in inheritance whose transmission has organised local land relations throughout the past two centuries.

Today, the *lugyi* are 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 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. But both ‘fields’ – the private and the political – speak the same language. This thesis 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. This has two implications.

First, it means that in the field of the political – village affairs – the voices of villagers are channelled through, delegated to and often excluded by the *lugyi*. Entrustment and exclusion are central processes of local politics. Second, it means that the village headman – Ko Kyaw – was in an ambiguous position as he was sitting at the crossroads between village affairs, village government and family relationships. The memories of past men of propriety, the examples set by the *lugyi* and their estrangement with the violent state, the opposition between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung and the presence of ‘infamous’ persons in land disputes for instance all affected his ability to craft his authority. By following Ko Kyaw in his daily life, this thesis has argued that any analysis of village headship as a mere formal institution is doomed to miss the point. In an attempt to renew the anthropological debate about headship by looking at it as a matter of uncertain engagement, political navigation and craftsmanship, 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 organisation 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 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: 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. But 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.

It is clear that this local society is a historical construct and this thesis has attempted 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. Politics in this part of Myanmar have often been studied in relation to Burmese Buddhism or the state for instance, and this work intentionally took the risk to shift the focus to contrast and complement these approaches. Its aim was 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 and obligations. My background, wishes and flaws influenced how I engaged with people in Gawgyi and beyond in certain situations. It produced an understanding of their life and dilemmas that I could only partially represent here. As much as any anthropological study is ridden by issues of trust and doubt, the same tension lies between this thesis and its audience. As stated in the introduction and in the chapter on reflexivity, 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 was 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.

## APPENDIX A. GAWGYI CADASTRAL MAP



Map of Gawgyi *kwin* (made in 1897-98, remade in 1946-47, 1965-66 and updated until 2012).

## APPENDIX B. ESSAYS ON THE FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

One of the themes that particularly caught my attention was the ways people engage with each other. Contained between the poles of violence and friendship, I wanted to show how the various forms of engagement are characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty. To do this, I have studied the different forms of exchange and how the transfers of things and services both organise sociality, but are also always, and above all, subject to interpretation. The following texts (*Football misunderstanding* and *How to get screwed*) aim to describe a situation and an encounter that triggered this interest and allowed me to explain it. The style of these texts and their incompleteness made it difficult to integrate them within the thesis, but they are intimately tied to the ways I came to reflect on the subject of this work and so, I decided to place them in this appendix that works as a complement of some of the points raised elsewhere in the core of the text.

### FOOTBALL MISUNDERSTANDING

One telling example of my guest dilemma happened when I became trainer for Gawgyi's football team. After a month or so, I played regularly with youngsters in the evenings, taking advantage of the falling heat at sunset. As nearly all other villages in the region, Gawgyi has a team of its own. These teams compete in various leagues from the most local championships involving neighbouring villages, to regional ones. Gawgyi was not very successful anymore, to the great disarray of the previous generation which spot a lack of dedication in the current team. As Ko Kyaw's brother puts it, "it used to be better before". Matches are times of great intensity. During regional encounters, two hundred people would gather at a stadium. Football matches, together with pagoda festivals, donation ceremonies, spirit festivals and markets are the only gathering allowed. It is mostly composed of males who invariably chew betel, argue with the referee and tease the players at will. Females are fewer but louder when someone scores a goal. They gather at one end of the pitch and heartedly support their team which, usually, is from their village. Matches are also intense because there are like fights. A small group of

men, sometimes including monks, is always there, armed with sticks, to restore calm. Except for the local matches between neighbouring villages who “get along well”.

Gawgyi team has a captain, Moe Gyi, son of Daw Nu and Ko Kyaw’s stepbrother. Moe Gyi, in his mid-twenties, keeps the team’s ball and chasubles at home most of the time. Those are a kind of collective property and most villages have one or two balls at most. He recruited me for the evening trainings. These trainings were actually real matches and I could not help myself thinking that there was not a real team, but rather a bunch of young guys willing to score goals like their icons evolving in the Champion’s league. I was obviously judging with the standards I learned at the Football camp of my French hometown. So, I started to plan ‘real’ trainings. Having between ten and fifteen players but only one ball was a challenge. We manage with the means at hand. For instance, once the sorghum reaped – the football ground is used as a threshing floor after the harvest – we use the piles for slalom exercise. Every time, once the training was over, Moe Gyi or another fellow would attempt to offer me a soda. I could hardly refuse. After another month, I had to travel to the city of Yangon for a couple of weeks. There, I bought two balls of good quality, and bought three more in Monywa along with studs to enhance training sessions. I thought it would be accepted as I made a case for having several balls in order to do a proper training. When I arrived back in Gawgyi, the kids were thrilled. One of Ko Kyaw nephews, who is a major player in the team, took a selfie with the balls and posted it on Facebook straight away.

When Moe Gyi came back from work and saw the package, his face changed. I guessed he felt some sort of confusion. I did not understand why the ‘presents’ did not make him happy. He seemed not at ease at all. Those were just balls and plastic studs, nothing more. I tried to figure out his reaction while explaining my motives: the balls were my contribution for the team and for the village kids; they have been hosting me so far without asking me anything, so I wanted to reciprocate and being useful. When I finally asked him directly about his feeling, he explained his reaction by saying, “*a-na-lo*”. Literally, “because (*lo*) [his] strength (*a*) [was] hurt (*na*). *A-na-de* is a crucial concept in Burmese and its meanings overcome any single definition. I heard it several times, in a variety of contexts, making it difficult to grasp its significance. Moe Gyi’s face was fraught with meaning and, from that moment onward, acts as a souvenir of the plasticity of

words. The work of Bekker in social psychology based on a study of children's essays and adult interviews gives an idea of the potential meanings of *a-na-de*. For her, it is used in a large array of situations:

- “1. observance of respectful behaviour, especially as related to age; using proper language modes of address.
- 2. inability to express self-assertive needs or to resist social pressure which requires one to take part in unwanted social activities.
- 3. desire not to impose on others, not to be a nuisance or inconvenience to others, especially those who are not intimates; timidity.
- 4. control and fear of aggression by self and others, both inadvertent physical aggression and verbal aggression; avoidance of ridiculing, shamming, causing loss of face, or criticising in a face-to-face situation.
- 5. observation of proprieties of behaviour as formally defined by situation or status; *observing proper forms of giving and receiving hospitality*; observing sex taboos to conform with social expectations as to proper behaviour between the sexes.
- 6. *maintenance of balance of obligations*; being aware of obligations to family, neighbors, and friends; feeling distressed when unable to fulfil obligation to a benefactor; *feeling hesitant to accept favors from a stranger which can not be returned*.
- 7. sensitivity to others' needs; empathy, with desire to make friends or family members happy; compassion or pity for those in need, with stress on sharing.” (1981: 19, my emphases).

Another Burmese friend recently told me in plain English that for him, it could be translated as “feeling backward to put oneself forward.” In other words, the expression relates to the social and moral obligations between people and the latter changed depending on this or that persons' status during specific moments that create the temporalities of relationships (interactions, transactions, succession of generations, seniority, and so on). It expresses a feeling that something in a situation could go wrong.

Reflecting on this event, I think Moe Gyi felt *a-na-de* because I short-circuited the way proper forms in giving and receiving hospitality are observed. In

other words, because I was a guest in the village and because he was the captain of the team, I should not have been the one providing ‘things’. Buying balls and studs was interpreted by Moe Gyi as a failure to fulfil his responsibility to some degree. A guest should not be responsible for the team. Thus, what I thought being a way to do my bit transformed into a question of responsibility and obligations. At the very moment when I tried not to be a guest, I was pulled back into that position. In other words, the ethnographer is by nature in an ambiguous position which often comes up against the normal course of events. The day after, Moe Gyi and his wife insisted that I had dinner at their place. The following weeks, he insisted twice as much on buying me something at the betel shop after training sessions. I assume now that it was a way for him to rebalance our relationship, to fulfil or maintain a balance of obligations. But, somehow, the gift was too great to be given back. Moe Gyi was not rich and even if the balls were not expensive *for me*, they were *for him*. I could not argue on this and Ko Kyaw and his brother spent few hours explaining me this kind of relationship. From that event onward, I attempted to temper any situation that could put me in place of Moe Gyi’s ‘patron’.

This drama led to a reflection on the relationships between responsibility, *a-na-de*, reciprocity, obligations and patronage. When I gave (*payde*) the balls, Moe Gyi thanks me, or rather was grateful (*kyayzutinde*). Yet, because I am a guest, I should not be helping the team to a *certain degree*. Therefore, what I thought being a gift (without asking return) was understood as a sort of favour (*kyayzupyude*). Moe Gyi was thus in a dilemma: having a guest – toward whom he wanted to respect a set of obligations – who became a sort of benefactor (*kyayzushin*). His reaction (*a-na-de*) expressed this particular dilemma. And yet, it was nearly impossible for him to reciprocate. In Burmese, the expression “*kyayzu*”, commonly (and wrongly) translated as “to thank” is the intransitive form of the verb “*kyay*” which, in its transitive form (*hkyay*), means to loan or borrow (and by extension a fee). In other words, it refers to a transaction. Yet, there are two kinds of “borrowing transactions” according to its nature and especially to what is transferred: either one gives back the exact same thing, either it will be an equivalent (because the exact same thing cannot be returned). If I borrow (*hkyay*) money, then I am liable to give back (*saq*) an equivalent if I can; if I borrow (*hnga*) a pen, then I have to give back (*aq*) the exact same thing. In Graeber words (2011), the first act of borrowing creates an obligation, the second a debt.

In the case of *kyayzu*, being a gratitude, a favour, it cannot be given back as such. More, it is hardly possible to give it back at all. If I place my gratitude onto you for a service or help you gave me, I will say *kyayzutinde*, the very expression translated as “thanks” even if people hardly say it as much as westerners like me would say thank you. For instance, *kyayzushin*, literally “master of gratitude”, is often translated as benefactor. In the Burmese Buddhist cosmology, one person has automatically a set of three *kyayzushin* to revere: Buddha, one’s parents, and one’s teachers – the latter are also equivalent to masters). In addition, *kyayzushide* (*shi* means “to have”) is translated as either being indebted to somebody, or that something is beneficial, profitable. By extension, *kyayzushin* has been described as a social structure to explain how order between persons is conceived in terms of obligations and liabilities, masters and dependants (cf. introduction). In other words, *kyayzushin* became a crystallised social structure from which was derived that clientelism is pervasive to the whole society.

But on another level, it relates more to how the ‘person’ is conceived and how everybody crafts their position in the world than to a social structure. In that sense, the etymology of the expression can be of interest. Without trying to essentialised individuals’ quality or substance, it seems to me that if the “strength” is “hurt”, it says something about how people are expected to deploy their abilities in a landscape crowded by other entities whom they engage with, negotiate with or avoid on a day-to-day basis.

## HOW TO GET SCREWED

### “A friend wants to talk to you”

Ko Zaw, a villager from Gawgyi in his thirties, told me several times that he had a friend who spoke fluent English. Ko Zaw sometimes tries to converse in English and even has a Burma-French dictionary at home, where he lives with his parents when he is not on a business trip to sell fertilisers in the country. One day, during a novitiate ceremony in Gawgyi, I was washing dishes with Ko Zaw and Ko Nway, the village headman’s younger brother. When Ko Nway went to get a pile

of dirty plates, Ko Zaw asked me if I could follow him to Monywa one day to meet his friend. Apparently, this person would like to talk to me. Curious, I accepted and set the date for the following Thursday.

On Wednesday, I left Gawgyi early to work in the NGO's office. Unable to find me in the village, Ko Zaw called me to check if our appointment the next day was still on. We set the meeting at 10 a.m. in a nearby teashop. But on Thursday, at 7 a.m., I get another call. This time it's Ko Nway, on his way to work, who wants to warn me: "don't give your help", he tells me. His message is clear and yet it took me a long time to understand it. Ko Nway did not refer directly to Ko Zaw, but he knew something was going on. What seemed clear to him was still vague to me. Why shouldn't I help? What was going to be asked of me?

Ko Zaw was already having breakfast when I arrived at the teashop at 9:30am. Clearly in advance, he did not hide his joy at finally being able to make me meet his friend. My first mistake was to go with him on his motorcycle. We leave this first teashop to go to another one not far from there, where he and his musician friends meet regularly. When the owner comes to take our order, Ko Zaw makes the presentations: "This guy is French, does research in my village, works for an NGO, and speaks Burmese!". As usual, in this kind of situation, I feel like a trophy you walk around with.

Ko Zaw's two friends finally arrive. The first one says he is the singer of the band. He shows me pictures of their last concert at the Water Festival (Burmese New Year) in Monywa. The leader of this occasional group of forty-year-old guys seems quite rich. He apparently cultivates his telephone directory like a businessman. I figure he is the famous Friend. The second one is a guitarist. His friends cannot help but joke about the fact that he is still single. We laugh and discuss Mona Lisa, old French currencies, airline tickets and rock'n roll. None of them is the person Ko Zaw wants me to meet, it was rather an acquaintance of the Singer. After an hour of tea, jokes and Bon Jovi, it is time to go. The Singer pays the bill and the owner of the teashop gives me the t-shirt he had made to celebrate the 20th anniversary of his establishment.

Back at the back of the bike, we head towards the real meeting. Since the guitarist does not join us, I conclude that the Singer is the go-between. As we sneak into the city centre, Ko Nway's words come to mind. He knew someone is trying to meet me. He has guessed the how, but was afraid of the why. I was imaging my

way out, wishing I was on my own bike. When we take the street that leads to the NGO's office, I get anxious: but where are they taking me? We stop in a restaurant about a hundred feet from the office. My colleagues have told me about this place. It opened recently. We park in the inner courtyard and I scan the area in case someone familiar is around. No one. An old lady offers us tea while waiting for her son, the English Teacher, the famous friend who went shopping, to come home.

He finally arrives. Instead of sitting down and letting Ko Zaw or the Singer introduce me, he speaks directly to me in English, without even greeting anyone around the table. He explains that he has been teaching for a long time, that he has just opened the restaurant in his house where he also gives classes. He presents himself as a passionate musician, the first to have created a studio in Monywa after several attempts to make his own album in Yangon. In short, he is famous in Monywa. This scene is disturbing, for me, for Ko Zaw and for the Singer too. The Professor, using his English skills, bypasses the normal conversational game where presentations – via an intermediary – are required. We are under his roof and he monopolises the stage. English allows him to reduce the social distance between him and I and so, neither the Singer nor the Villager can claim the service they provide by introducing me themselves. As if he does not need third parties to make contact.

“Is he good in English?” asks the Villager. I can only approve. We talk for a moment about English grammar, then French and finally the reason for all this staging comes up: “Could you come here from time to time, during my class, to talk with my students?” That was it. All this staging to make the Foreigner speak in his class. He had seen me in the neighbourhood, learned that I spoke Burmese and lived in Gawgyi. And I agree, saying yes, I could come over from time to time to meet his students. I immediately have the feeling that I have been fooled. There was no way to step back. Yet, I want to give my interlocutors a hard time.

When the Villager asks me again if I would help the Professor – was he trying to get credit for my approval? – I add something like “... but I won't come on a regular basis, only when I can”. To reduce the sense of control, I take the opportunity of a remark on the quality of education in Myanmar to testify – in Burmese – of my commitment to free education, arguing that if it had not paid off for me, I could never have been here with them. That was my guarantee in case

there was money at stake. Feeling my embarrassment, and fearing that I would run away, they had to seal my commitment according to their standards.

“Are you hungry?” asks the professor. I ordered a plate of fried rice with pork and, again, felt like a novice. If I let him give me something, I became obliged. Does offering food could be an “advance payment” for my future help behind the disguise of hospitality? Maybe. Maybe I am getting paranoid. Ko Nway's voice echoes in my head. Finally, I impose myself (or free myself) by paying the bill, arguing that according to “the French tradition” good accounts make good friends. Feeling of victory. They knew it, but the story does not end there. “Are you free today?” asks the Professor. “I can help you with anything you need. If you want to take a ride in my car someday, just ask. If you have a problem, call me. I was a musician, people know me...”. The Professor, the Singer and the Villager are ready to offer me all kinds of services. I express my gratitude to them, but refuse, politely. “Do you want to have a cup of tea? Shall we go to the teashop?” continues the Singer. “My stomach is full,” I reply. Half an hour later, same question. But this time, with a slight change of intonation and the use of a particular term: “let's go to the teashop to seal this friendship”. It was no longer a simple proposal, but a request. And I accepted, both because I wanted to see what would happen next and because I could not really escape.

The Professor makes it a point of honour to drive us there in his car. I see my bike moving further and further away. Once there, we order tea according to everyone's taste. Many agreements are sealed in these teashops, which are often meeting places for brokers of all kinds. The one we choose is prised by car brokers. A young boy is serving us. The Singer immediately said: “It's okay now, you're going to help, aren't you?” The word is out, loud and clear: help. This was exactly what Ko Nway predicted earlier in the morning. I have no choice, no emergency exit. And they kept telling me that I could count on their future help.

I do not even try to pay the bill. There is no way to override my commitment now that it is sealed. The obligation is born and ratified. The Professor pays the bill and we go back to his restaurant. I could now leave, my word has been given, and given in front of witnesses. From there, I walk to the NGO's office, ask the guard to drop me off by my motorcycle and then returned to the village. In the afternoon, I told my story to Ko Nway when he got back from work. He and his brother knew something has happened. What worried them is that the Professor may take

advantage of my presence to increase his fees. The only way to clarify my position was to tell the class that I would be meeting them for free, which I did. That was my dilemma. Yet, I could not help but wonder why such a device had been mobilised to create this situation.

### **The vocabulary of help, friendship and hospitality**

It seems that this case partly reveals how people oblige each other by using the vocabulary of help and friendship during situation of hospitality. These situations and this vocabulary make it possible to reduce the social distance between people by offering a scene where standards of hospitality and mutual help pacify the relationship. But, as Spiro (1997) already pointed out, by showing how ‘corruption’ borrows from the vocabulary of help, this lexicon also makes it possible to hide power relations. Asking for help sometimes means giving an implicit order, reporting a difficult situation so that the other person understands that he or she should contribute. It can also be done in good faith, and often mutual help is deployed without the need to say it, just like family relationships, neighbourhoods or proximity where one must know when to engage. Mutual assistance therefore contributes as much to the creation of solidarity as it does to guiding power relations. It operates between violence and friendship and depends on the interpretation given, the reading of the forces involved and the techniques for affiliating oneself or exiting a relationship.

In my case, the forces involved (the Villager and the Singer) have been aligned to create a scene where hospitality (the restaurant, the teashop) makes it possible to make me do something. And the activation of this network also transforms relationships between people. Let us see where an analysis in terms of motivations, challenges and distance leads us. For the Professor, it seems to be adding value to his course by bringing the Foreigner into his classroom. It can also strengthen its reputation, recruit more students and thus improve his income and prestige, as the ability to attract people (a centripetal force) is appreciated and recognised as a sign of greatness. It is less clear for the Singer, especially because I was not able to gather enough knowledge about his position. He may be very close to the Professor, they may have made music together, it may be a matter of doing a service or maintaining their relationship. For Ko Zaw the Villager, the situation

presented many opportunities. It was he who made the meeting possible and used it to enter the Professor's network. This created an obligation for the Teacher to him. It was clear when, a few weeks later, we found ourselves in a beer station. Ko Zaw got drunk there, expecting the Professor to pay the bill, argued loudly with a young client and then accompanied us to a music studio where his behaviour almost damaged the Professor's reputation. Subsequently, the villager could no longer go to the restaurant and lost his credibility.

At another level, the Professor's restaurant is located near the NGO's office, but socially at a distance from it. As I had never been there before, the Professor could neither speak to me directly nor ask someone from the NGO to put us in touch. Yet he knew I lived in Gawgyi. How did he understand that through the Singer he could ask the Villager to take me to the restaurant remains a mystery. The fact is that to achieve this, he had to reduce the distance between us, i.e. use third parties first, then communicate directly in English. It also means that he had to let the Villager come near him to get me. Accepting to be a little obliged was the price to pay.

In the end, the whole scene was one of friendship and mutual help and there were many exchanges of words, promises, services and things. First, there were the teas, three in total, and I was never able to pay the bill, which marked my status as a guest receiving a t-shirt as a sign of welcome. The only time I was able to pay was for my plate of fried rice in the restaurant, which was a way to signify, to some extent, my doubt about what was going on. The motorcycle and car rides, presented as a service offered, were for me a loss of independence. And finally, there are the exchanges of words where the lexicon of mutual help ("you are going to help, aren't you?") and friendship ("sealing friendship") made it possible to mark reciprocal commitments with the promise of future services at stake. In other words, it was a question of creating obligations under the auspices of hospitality and mutual assistance.

This episode of my fieldwork opened up a whole new field of research for me on the role of transactions and their negotiation in the production of local ethics and forms of engagement. It also allowed me to better understand my status of guest in Gawgyi. An atypical status with fluctuating boundaries that was given to me by my host family so that I would remain as far as possible outside the social obligations that deeply organise sociality in Gawgyi.

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