

## PREFACE



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Location**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Reading the Book

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Outline of the Book

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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