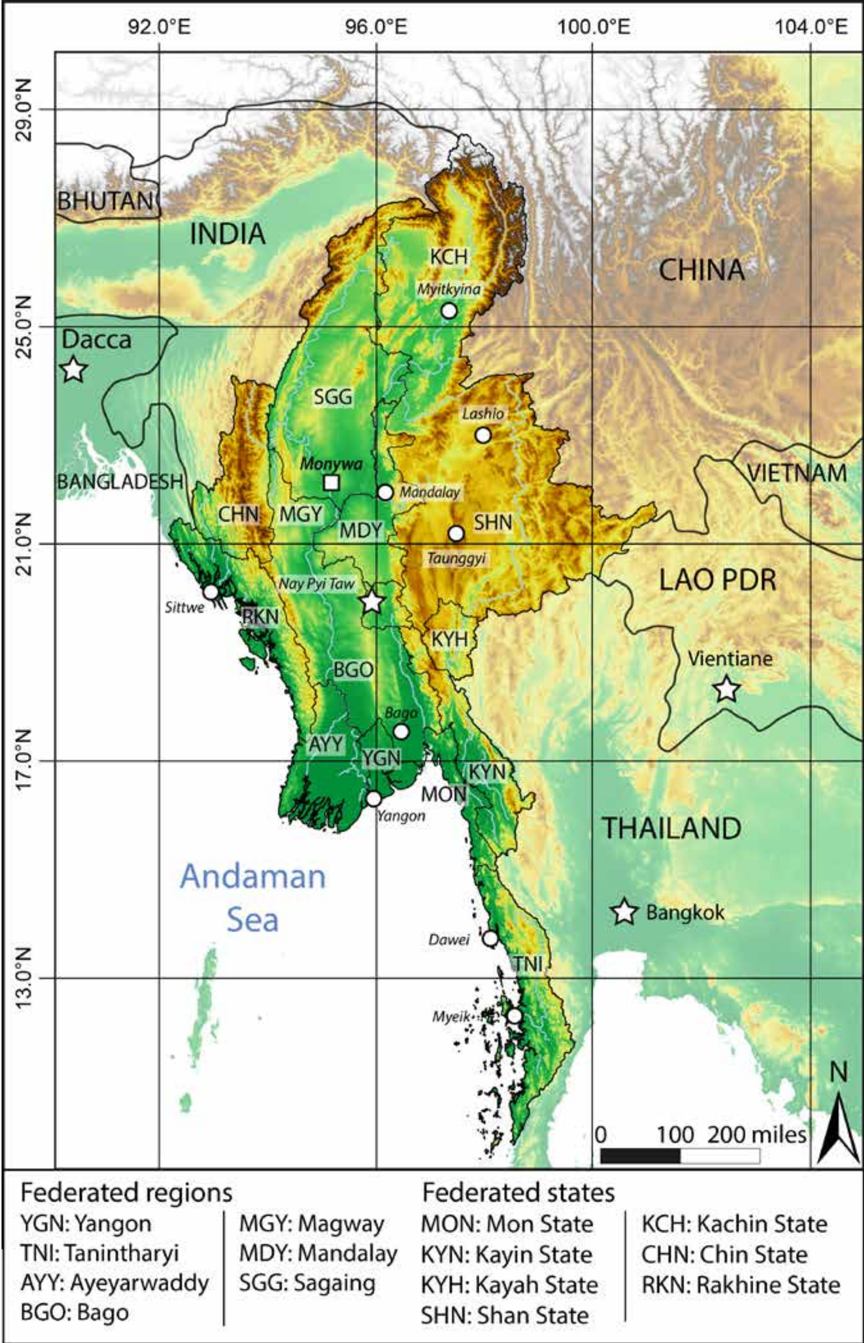

Map 0.1. General map of Burma/Myanmar. © Martin Michalon.

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Introduction

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

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

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

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 23.

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

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

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

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

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

Setting the Scene

Past and Present

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

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

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

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

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

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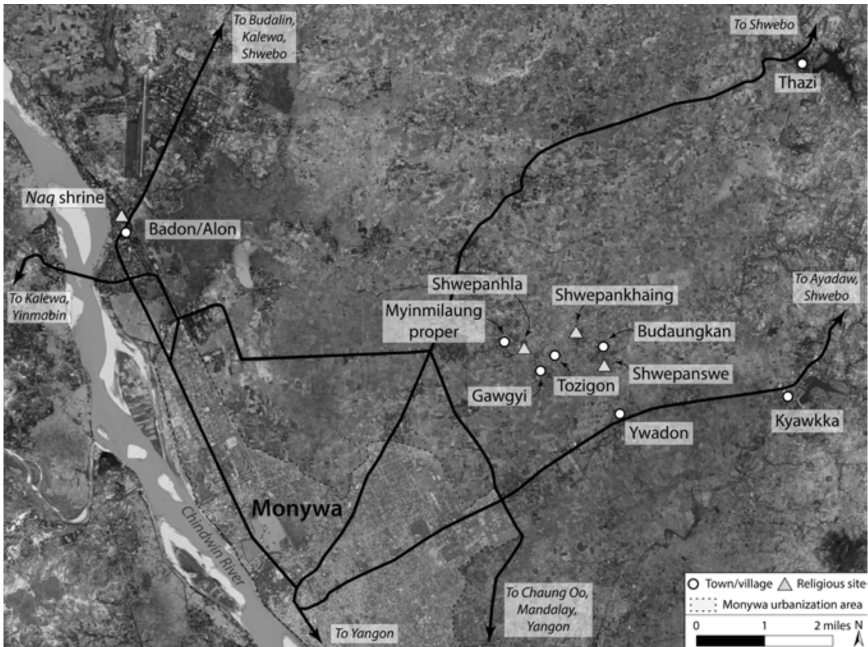

Map 0.2. The research area. © Martin Michalon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Landscape, Morality and Time

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Myinmilaung

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

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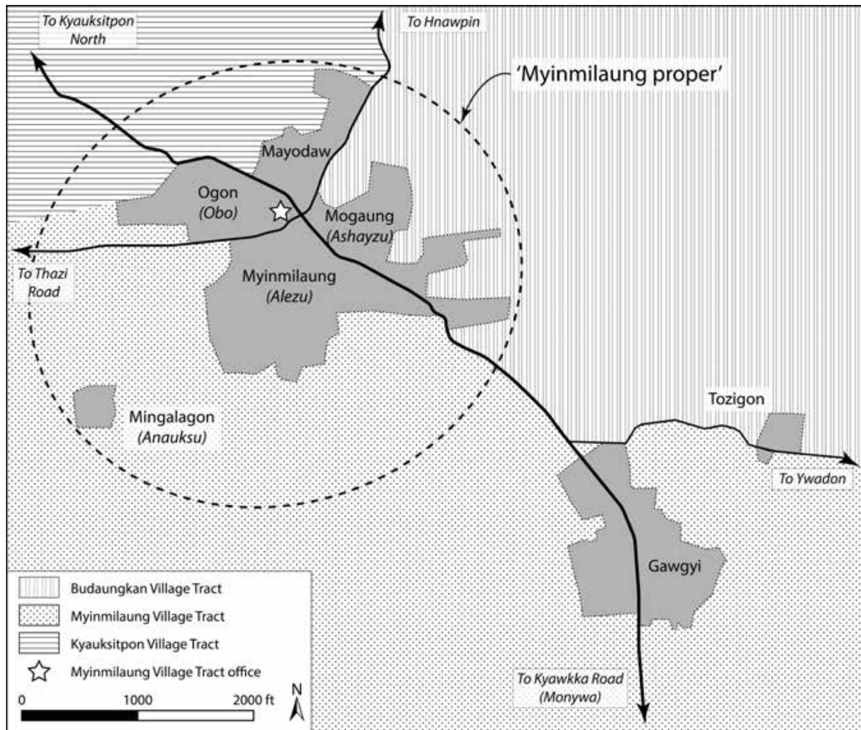

Map 0.3. The village tracts. © Martin Michalon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Engagement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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

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

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

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