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## THE COMING OF VILLAGE HEADSHIP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Dynamics of the Precolonial Polity**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Competing Discourses of Indigeneity**

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

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

### *The Genuine Allochthones*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

### *The Autochthones*

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Composing with Local Powers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

### **Warfare and Pacification**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Emergence of the Village System**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Notes

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

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

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

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