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THE LAST MEN OF POWER

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

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

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

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

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

The First Village Headmen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The first surveys by the Land Records Department² (1897–1902) created cadastral units called *kwin*, a survey unit corresponding roughly to a village in India and measuring about a square mile. This unit had to fit a standardized 11-inch map³ and was crafted alongside new jurisdictions – the village tracts – and the new local office – the village headman. According to Furnivall, ‘village boundaries, where known, might be adopted as boundaries of *kwin*’ [*sic*], but in most cases they were either undermined or could not be ascertained by the Indian surveyors and so *kwin*’ boundaries were determined by convenience of survey’ (1957: 207). Because the *kwin* maps should coincide with a village headman’s jurisdiction or a subdivision of it, however, these boundaries were also determined according to local political conditions. On the sketch shown in Map 2.1, Myinmilaung appears as a village tract composed of three *kwin* (nos 659, 660, 661).

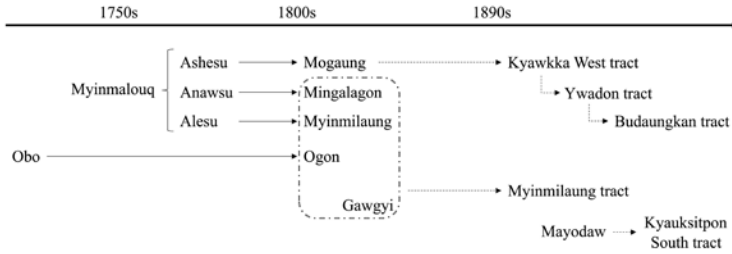
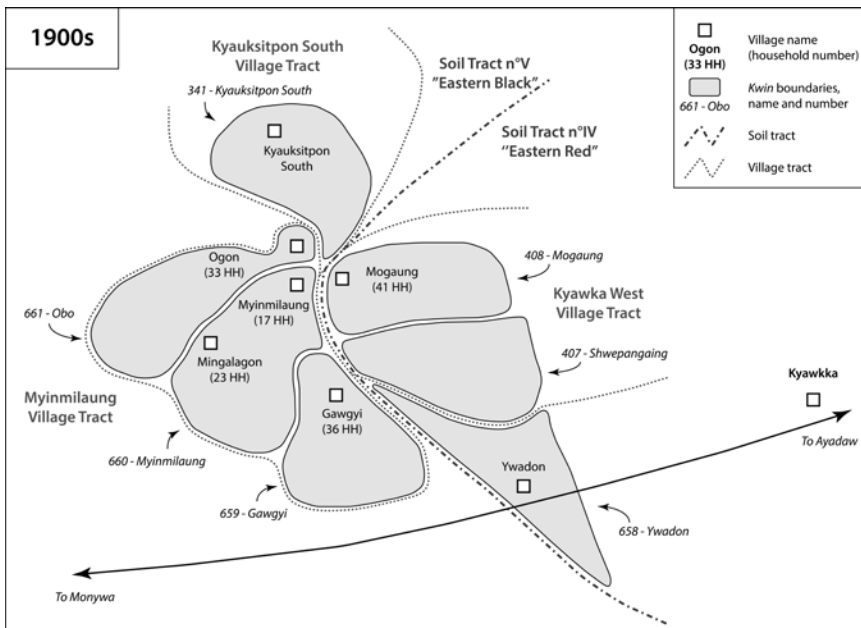


Figure 2.1. Timeline of the changes in village names and the creation of village tracts.

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

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



Map 2.1. Sketch of the divide between cadastral, soil and village tracts for the 1900s.

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

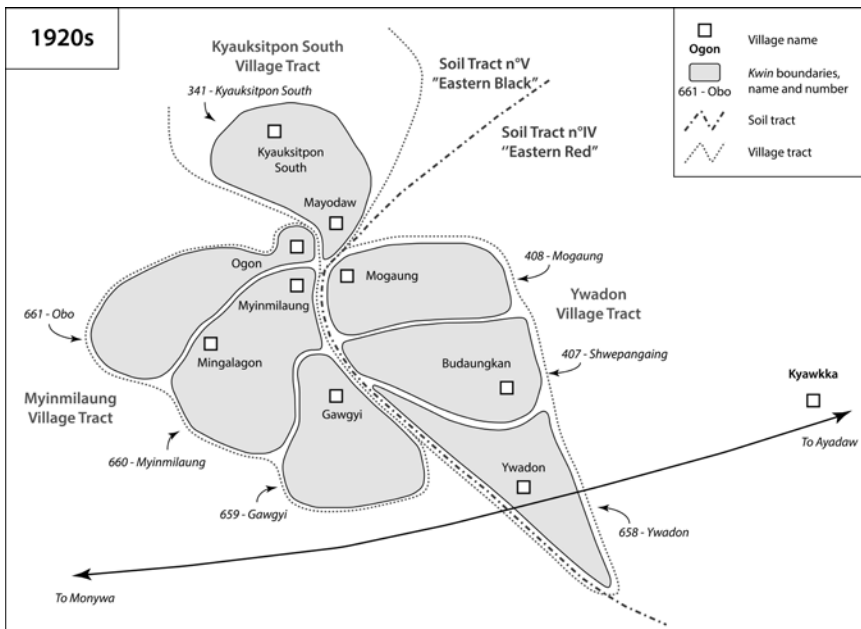
Further changes happened in the following decades. Gradually, the revenue circles had to be broken up to adjust headman remuneration – a portion of the taxes collected in their tract – according to the size of their jurisdiction. For historian Mya Sein, the subdivision of village tracts was carried out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

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

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

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Mingalargôn	660, Myinmilaung <i>kwin</i>		
Ogôn	661, Oo Bo <i>kwin</i>		
Myinmilaung	660, Myinmilaung <i>kwin</i>		
Mayadaw	341, Kyauksitpon South <i>kwin</i>	Kyauksitpon South	No. IV Eastern Red
Mogaung	408, Mogaung <i>kwin</i>	Ywadon	
Ywadon	658, Ywadon <i>kwin</i>		
Budaungkan	407, Shwepangaing		



Map 2.2. Sketch of the divide between cadastral, soil and village tracts for the 1920s.
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blocks, each under a se-ein (ten house) gong [sic] who was subordinate to the headman. He was usually elected by a group of 10 or so houses which he represented and was mainly responsible for police matters' (Mya Sein [1958] 1973: 161). In theory, U Nyunt also had to promote sanitation, education and improve communication. He was also supposed to control people's movement, that is, to report newcomers, emigration and village demographics. His income was now limited to a share of the taxes he collected within the tract, first the capitation tax and, as the settlement operations devised a new tax system, from land revenue as well. Villagers were to assist him or else be fined or imprisoned. As we will see in the next section, high taxes became a central issue in the first decades of the twentieth century leading to rebellion against the colonial state and, among its officials, primarily the village headmen.

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

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

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

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

The Last Men of *Hpon*

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

U Za Nay Ya

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

U To Kaing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Those with no livelihood sought employment in the labour battalions⁷ created by the Japanese-controlled independent Burmese government. People also enrolled in the underground militia, often affiliated with communists and other armed groups fighting the Japanese. In early 1945, the British forces came back to Burma to fight the Japanese. Near Monywa, they gathered in the monastery of Zalok. In retaliation, the village was half burnt to the ground by the Japanese concentrated in the city. Immediately after the Japanese retreat in March 1945, these armed groups, traditionally called *tat*, gained prominence while the British came back into power (1945–1948). The Communist Party of Burma was notably influential in our area after being expelled from the main political coalition,⁸ and began negotiating the terms of British departure. By 1947, there were at least eight militias operating in the countryside, according to Smith (1991: 66). It was not clear to locals which group had authority over the government. Ultimately, the White Flag faction of the Communist Party of Burma took over our area of study⁹ shortly after independence in early 1948. The railway east of Monywa became the demarcating line between the pro-government forces concentrated in the town and the White Flag soldiers in the countryside. For about eight years, villagers say that they had to pay a ‘contribution fee’ (*hsehkyay*) to this armed group which kept coming back and forth during periodic intervals. U To Kaing, like other headmen,¹⁰ became a *de facto* member of the White Flag CPB after pledging allegiance. Villagers continued to grow their usual cash crops and went to Monywa markets freely. Finally, the White Flag was driven out of Monywa Township around 1956, and U To Kaing reintegrated the state administration. Finally, after the 1962 military coup by Ne Win, another person was appointed to implement the socialist policy of the Revolutionary Council (1962–1974).

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

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

Transforming Hierarchies

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

Land Titling and the Courts

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

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

of the king as the “lord of water and earth (yé-myé-shin)” (Thant Myint-U 2001: 229). In Alon territory, state lands were taxed first but represented only 1.7% of the circle in 1906.¹¹ Besides, decades of in-fighting and competition over offices had largely blurred what could have been a revenue system. Thus, revenue was firstly drawn from the capitation tax. This inflow entered both the district coffers and the headmen’s pockets – the latter ascribing individual household shares. Soon, non-state lands were targeted. This is where the Summary (1900–1903) and Regular Settlements (1906–1909) stepped in. Quite conveniently, non-state land became synonymous with private ownership. They covered mostly what is called *dama-u-gya* and *bobuapaing* lands. Both terms refer to the way in which a person justifies his relations to land: through clearing (*dama*: knife, *u*: first, *kya*: fall) or inheritance (*bobua*: grandparents; *paing*: ownership). Yet the creation of the land revenue system meant that claims could become rights, that is, recognized (written) by law (‘Records of Rights’).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Families and Tenancies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Tale of U Po Shi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The biggest landlords in the district sometimes required services from their tenants such as ‘the cutting of firewood’ and assistance when they were ‘giving an entertainment (a-hlu) [*sic*] and the like’ (Hardiman 1910: 25). Exactions were ‘rare’ according to Hardiman, and the Thazi family was never mentioned in the 1910 or 1932 settlement reports. Its virtual absence from the records is due to the British methods of computation. Fragmented estates escaped the settlement’s radar¹⁸ and debts were not recorded according to who loaned the money. In the meantime, the large landlords were presented as rack-renting their tenants.

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

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

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

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

Farmers’ Power

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

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

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

As Brown put it, ‘there were far too few officials on the ground with training, experience, political judgement, and indeed the honesty²² that were undoubtedly required’ (2013: 97). The official stance was to abolish landlordism by suppressing tenant farming, providing credit and supporting the creation of cooperatives. According to the law, a six-man committee²³ had to be selected in each tract by the open-voice procedure to take charge of the distribution in the tract. Farmer owners could retain a maximum of fifty acres and had to declare their dependants. The policy was to give about ten acres to eligible cultivators, that is, ‘actual farmers’ with tools, oxcarts, cattle and know-how.

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

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

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

For Nash, the land reform in some cases reinforced factionalism, and in others political fragmentation was buffered by the authority of a man of *hpon*. He worked successively in Nondwin (remote drylands on the road between Monywa and Mandalay) and in Yadaw (a rice-growing village of in-migrants south of Mandalay) in 1960–1961. In Yadaw, the land reform started in 1953 ended in 1958–1960 with the officialization of the *status quo ante* when the army took over and suspended the programme of land distribution. ‘The farmers of Yadaw reverted to the land they had customarily farmed, prior to the program of grant land. When U Nu resumed the reins of government, he legalized the tenancy of farmers on the land they were farming, thus freezing the Yadaw squatter pattern, which emerged after the British landlord had fled the Japanese’ (Nash 1965: 286). Some land went ‘to the tiller’, but before and not in the way promulgated in the Act. Furthermore, land distribution resulted in a murder, many jailings and the formation of factions tied to national parties. The committee, composed of ‘*lugyi lugaun*’, was accused of favouritism and corruption. The problems were related to the different qualities of land and to how some farmers ‘were asked to move from good land they had been farming, as tenants, for years, to poorer land, or other cultivators were shifted about from one plot to another for no apparent reason’ (ibid.: 285). It discredited the office of headship and was symptomatic of the ‘attenuation of traditional control by a man of pon’ (ibid.: 286). The land reform led to factionalism and unfolded through party engineering during the national election organized by the military caretaker government in 1960.²⁴ In the drylands of Nondwin, it is as if nothing happened. Nash did not even mention the land reform. In this dryland area, with no irrigation system, the village appears as a community of kinsmen, not as the fruit of migrations or displacements. There was a paramount leader, U Sein Ko, the man of *hpon* who managed to cut off open competition.

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

- been carried out in continuation with the Great Trigonometrical Survey started in India. Cf. Furnivall (1957: 206) for the Burmese case and Sarkar (2012) for a more global overview.
4. Kyawkka West included at first five villages (Tanaungwin, Pamèdaw, Ywathit, Mogaung, Sindè) and its population represented about 188 households. Kyawkka East covered the rest of the territory and was divided between two villages, Kyawkka North and South.
 5. This interview was conducted with U Maung during my first period of fieldwork, on 6 February 2013 after a *shinbyu*.
 6. Taylor translates this as ‘organisation supporting own race’ (Taylor 2009: 193–94) in a nationalist or patriotic sense. The *wunthanu athin* were promoted and supported by the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) in 1921–1922, the general council of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) that came to the forefront of the contest against colonialism on nationalist terms after the Yangon university strike of 1920.
 7. Called ‘*Let yon that*’ (Cady [1958] 1960: 459).
 8. The Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League, notably under the leadership of Aung San, hero of the independence.
 9. One of the White Flag leaders, U Hla Maw, controlled the ‘Monywa-Shwebo-Mandalay districts’ during this period (cf. Smith 1991: 126).
 10. In Yeigyì village, Spiro explains that the insurgents chose another man to be their representative and collector of the fee. During the day, the central government ruled, and at night it was the insurgents. This story is one of the explanations given to Spiro to explain factionalism in this village (Spiro 1997).
 11. Cf. Hardiman (1910, statement IV ‘Regular Settlement statistics’ in Appendix).
 12. If the demarcations were accepted by the persons involved, the official would delimit the plots on the *kwin* map. Otherwise, he would refer the dispute to a senior official. At the end of this process, the parcels (called *upaing*) were assigned a serial number referencing the name of the person who now owns it, and who then became liable for the land tax. The rate was determined following land types dividing drylands (*ya* - recorded Y) and rice lands (*leh* - recorded R). The land type of every plot was then indexed as per soil quality (Y1, Y2... R1, R2, R3). Impermanent holdings include spaces for which it was difficult to assign affiliation. This includes land subject to annual reallocation, and parcels for which boundaries are indefinite because of their use for shifting cultivation or as an agricultural experimentation area.
 13. This figure concerned the soil tract V and stems from my calculation (cf. Hardiman 1910: 17).
 14. For instance, the repartition of the shares between owners and tenants (in fractions such as one-half, two-fifths, one-third) depended on the quality of the soil, the level of competition for land, access to irrigation, distance from towns, the relation and power balance between the contractors and eventually on the actual amount of crop harvested. Mortgage value was usually two-thirds of the land value and the person taking the land generally farmed it (sometimes the mortgagee even added more money during the length of the agreement).
 15. In the soil tract V, 57% of households were classified as *taungthu*, while 26% were considered *myaukthu* (among them, 20.3% were classified as ‘coolies’).
 16. Monywa headman is an exception, with an estate of 3.826 acres in 1909, the only estate of such size in the district (cf. Hardiman 1910: 27).
 17. Even if the colonial government created a system of credit, there were also the money lenders U Kha Kha from Kyawkka, U Ho, Daw Mya Mya and Daw Chaw from Monywa.

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