

# 3

---

## THE RISE OF VILLAGE AFFAIRS

One of the advantages of doing fieldwork with a village headman was that I was able to meet the people who had previously held this position. Once Ko Kyaw stopped being headman in March 2016, this became almost inconceivable. On 5 December 2015, I convinced him that I needed to meet U Win, who was in charge of Myinmilaung tract from 1995 to 2006. We went to his place. U Win was infamous for a number of reasons. To some degree, he embodies the worsening of the ways in which the government interacted with villagers during post-socialist military rule. Under his tenure, the state disengaged from the organization of village life after the collapse of the socialist system in the late 1980s and resorted more to violence to tighten its hold on the population. Another set of reasons is related to local disputes, notably over land, in which U Win's corruption often comes to the forefront. To some extent, he is the U Po Kin, the corrupt magistrate, of Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934). But I was not yet fully aware of how all these aspects related to one another. Sitting with them both on that day at U Win's house, I was the unwitting instigator of a strange situation.

Most of the questions I asked were answered by banalities covering up U Win's misdeeds. Ko Kyaw knew they were lies, but he never pointed them out directly. He felt awkward and gave ready-made statements when the discussion turned awry. In the following weeks, Ko Kyaw gradually provided me with other versions of the facts. The situation in and of itself is worth describing first. As I was interested in how he became headman, U Win told me that his election was democratic: the ten household leaders sought villagers' opinions, put the name of the candidate they chose in a box and the previous headman and his assistant counted the votes. Ko Kyaw nodded. But this was a copy paste of the conduct of the 2011 selection, except for the vote count. I had doubts that elections were

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 126.

performed like that twenty years ago under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Ultimately, the reasons for U Win's emergence as village headman remain uncertain. Our meeting turned into a political cant and it did not stop there. When I asked U Win if there was any public land in Myinmilaung, referring either to the cooperative shop built in Myinmilaung in the early 1970s, the football ground or some threshing floors, he was taken aback. Ko Kyaw, hiding underneath his longyi (*puso*) as if he was taking a nap, immediately answered: 'There is no such thing in Myinmilaung'. U Win nodded. A few weeks later, I learned that he had actually built his house where the cooperative shop used to stand. Beyond the fact that U Win was corrupt, using his position as headman to acquire wealth in ways contradicting local ethics, this situation offers another insight. Ko Kyaw, even as headman, was not in a position of force. He feigned ignorance and covered up facts in front of U Win to keep face. In other words, he was going along with the situation and the stakes of the moment, notably because he was required to solve a land dispute involving U Win at the same time.

Things were quite different when I attempted to meet U Htay, U Win's successor in 2013. U Htay is from Gawgyi and he held Myinmilaung office from 2006 to 2011. In the first few weeks, I had difficulty arranging a meeting with him. He kept avoiding me. Some days, it became a game of hide-and-seek. In November that year, we finally had a formal discussion during which he remained laconic. Our relationship changed completely when I came back in 2015 for a much longer period. I gradually realized that he kept his distance not only from me, but also from many others, mostly officials. He tried, and still tries, to stay away from the government while being at the centre of Gawgyi politics. This apparent paradox enabled me to understand that his tenure marked a shift in local politics. That shift was a transition from U Win to U Htay, from distrust and corruption to trustworthiness and propriety. From the Infamous to the Worthy. U Htay was a counterpoint to U Win. This was one of the main narratives about the transformation of the local polity after the socialist period. Of course, it was not as if everything changed with the replacement of one man by another; factionalism and corruption were still present under U Htay (and after), and some people challenged U Win during his mandate. But it is part of a larger movement in Gawgyi. U Htay's commitment to local matters reflects how village affairs were monopolized by the villagers who articulated new stakes within a more traditional form of collective sociality called *luhmuyay* or 'social affairs' (from which Myinmilaung Proper was excluded). In other words, engagement in village affairs became the (fragile) form of local politics in Gawgyi at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

This chapter explores the transformations of the local polity from the early years of the socialist period (1962 onwards) to the democratic opening of the early 2010s to locate how village affairs became the principal form of

Gawgyi politics. The literature used for this chapter mostly draws from studies about the socialist period, economy and development at large, agriculture, the experience and meaning of the 1988 revolts, the functioning of military rule and its daily experience, and about the transformation of the state and its political economy. One of the contributions of this chapter is to document the functioning of socialism at the village level, a scale often left out due to the impossibility of fieldwork, leading to a focus<sup>1</sup> on textual analysis of political philosophies and on the macroeconomy. The chapter goes deeper into the texture of daily lives to describe forms of engagement in a much more embodied way.

The first section introduces the reader to the general historical backdrop of the period covering the socialist (1962–1988) and the militarist (1989–2011) eras. It presents the implementation and failure of the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ under the dictatorship of Ne Win which eventually led to the mass revolt of 1988 followed by the reassertion of military power under the SLORC/SPDC<sup>2</sup> government until the partial democratic opening under the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government of Thein Sein in 2011. It describes how the socialization of society reinforced control over peasants and ended in an age of distrust. The failure of the agricultural policies and of the authoritarianism of the regime resulted more generally in the worsening of living conditions that ultimately led to the 1988 uprising. The rupture, however, had a different temporality in Myinmilaung tract and a more moral dimension when corruption, collusion, forced labour and violence became the tools with which the military and a series of officials administered the countryside.

The next two sections shift the focus from a state-centred narrative to an emphasis on how this period was experienced by villagers and on the transformations of local politics. It first argues that Myinmilaung tract became a polity closed in upon itself during the socialist period (1962–1988). Class divisions between farmers and dependants were reinforced in villages as the main families were able to control the local institutions empowered by the socialist state. The final section explores the SLORC/SPDC period as lived by the villagers. It is divided into two parts, focusing on two headmen – the Infamous and the Worthy – in order to reflect the temporality of the moral rupture that accompanied the rise of village affairs as the main form of politics in Gawgyi. This chapter is informed by a series of interviews and informal discussions in Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper as well as in other villages.<sup>3</sup> The latter were visited either under the auspices of the INGO I worked for or as a guest accompanying people from Gawgyi during daily trips and while attending ceremonies. This approach allows me to compare the past experiences of a variety of villages and to fill in the gaps in the chronology of significant events for Myinmilaung tract.

## Historical Backdrop

In the two years between the coup and March 1964, by which time the bulk of the economy had been nationalised, the Revolutionary Council declared all political opposition illegal, took over the direct management of most educational and cultural organizations, and established the nucleus of a political party with ancillary mass organizations and its own ideology, through which it was intended to mobilise support for the state. (Taylor 2009: 295)

Yet, the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ – the official ideology of the Revolutionary Council and the Burma Socialist Programme Party after the military coup – took some time to find its way into villages. On paper, all forms of agricultural and industrial production, distribution, transportation and external trade were declared to be owned by the state or by cooperatives. The reorganization of the economy and society followed the line of the previous government, but rapidly turned into a more radical – yet ‘piecemeal’ (ibid.: 300) – process of nationalization.<sup>4</sup> Under Ne Win, the centralized system of crop procurement and goods distribution became more interventionist and expanded to virtually all products, while the government promised an agrarian revolution ‘that would bring the tenancy system to an immediate end’ (Charney 2009: 123). In the first decade of the socialist period, many attempts were made to transform the local polity by appointing new authorities linked to a centralized administration. However, the government gradually fell short of its ambitions and the authoritarian functioning at the top of the administration, in which loyalty, obedience and mistrust were key, pervaded all levels of the bureaucracy. One-upmanship was about meeting the expectations of senior officials who ‘came to practise the three mas – ma-loke (not doing any work), ma-shote (not getting involved in any complication) and ma-pyoke (not getting dismissed)’ (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2003: 35). This kind of attitude shows that withdrawal from public affairs became to some extent ingrained within the state, with repercussions for how officials engaged in rural affairs.

On the whole, the implementation of socialist policies during the 1960s–1970s empowered new institutions in villages but the authoritarian functioning of the bureaucracy and the failure of the economic reforms worsened living conditions for villagers by the mid-1980s. Making a living became more about making trade-offs with village authorities to get around the law. Despite this, officially, the state sought to secure people’s support by creating supra-local networks and a centralized administration. The institutionalization of socialism through local men made the Myinmillaung tract a more insular polity because villagers depended more on arrangements with these individuals in order to make a living.

Organizing the agriculture and the economy along socialist lines was gradual. Officially, farmers now worked on the land as tenants for the state and sold a quota of their crops to the government at a fixed price. Since the 1963 Tenancy Act, farmers had become state tenants liable for their production with a formal interdiction to transfer – sell, mortgage and, since 1965, rent – their land, except through inheritance, in order to eliminate landlordism, the ghost enemy of socialism. Thereafter, in the districts ‘classified as “planned” areas, distant administrators with little agricultural expertise or experience directed cultivators as to which crop to grow, how, and when’ (Brown 2013: 141). The pressure was acute for rice cultivators, but dryland farmers were also targeted. Villagers would also have to buy rations of commodities (rice, oil, clothes, soap, etc.) from the township cooperative via a local proxy.

Overall, the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ did not bring about an agrarian revolution (Fenichel and Khan 1981). In 1971, between one-third and one-half of the land in the Chindwin region still operated via small-scale tenancies (Steinberg 1981a: 121–27). Estates fragmented through generations – mostly due to the nature of inheritance patterns – apart from a few families who managed to expand their holdings by controlling the village tract Land Committee. The possibility and profitability of accessing land decreased and the lives of villagers – and daily labourers in particular – worsened significantly during the second half of the 1980s. There were fewer avenues for migration, less food, less cash and less work. Three-quarters of the country’s currency became valueless when ‘the government announced the most stringent demonetization (not a devaluation of the currency but the declaration that certain bank notes were no longer legal tender and could not be redeemed) in modern history’ (Steinberg 2010: 76). The effect was disastrous. Peasants refused to sell their harvests because they were their main asset, and the whole chain of exchange between locals was impacted (in markets and in daily transactions for labour, credit and so on). Farmers were increasingly afraid of crop and cattle thefts, and village stockades and night watches resumed after a short interlude of relative peace. Many, if not most, resorted to eating sorghum mixed with rice as staple foods. The poorest – the daily labourers – picked tree leaves to make and sell soups while breeding goats and eating ‘one meal a day’ to make ends meet, while farmers and tenants prioritized their nuclear family at the expense of clients and dependants. There was a growing and unbearable contradiction between the state’s demands and the actual lives of the people. Food prices were no longer subsidized and thus rose steeply. Headmen were again required to control and record individuals’ movements.

The failure of socialism ‘was seen each day in Burma in the shortages, queues, rationing, the poverty of choice, quality, and provisions – the endless struggle for basic survival for the many, but privileged access for the few – and announced

to the world when, in December 1987, the United Nations classified Burma as a “least developed country” (Brown 2013: 160). Things turned awry in the capital, Rangoon, and many student-led demonstrations were ruthlessly quashed by the army in March, June and July 1988. A change was called by Ne Win himself, the dictator who isolated Burma internationally, when, purposefully or not, he acknowledged in his address to the party’s emergency congress on 23 July 1988 that ‘the bloody events of March and June show a lack of trust in the government and the party’, before announcing his resignation. Ne Win nonetheless remained in command and the revolts against the government increased in August 1988 and took the form of mass movements in Rangoon and beyond, involving monks, workers, civil servants and students calling for a more democratic government and the halt of exactions, corruption and killings. This series of events, known as the ‘Democracy Summer’, constituted the largest popular uprising in Burma/Myanmar’s modern history until the post-coup revolution of February 2021. The revolt crystallized in the Four Eights Movement, in reference to the general strike that began on 8 August 1988, seeking to force the resignation of Sein Lwin, the puppet chairman of the Burma Socialist Programme Party and president of Burma. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary townspeople participated in the movement across the country’s main cities. Sein Lwin, called the ‘Butcher of Rangoon’, stepped down on 12 August, but only after hundreds of demonstrators had been killed or wounded by the army.

From July to early September in Monywa, several hundred students gathered at the Shwezigon pagoda located in the city centre. Pick-ups toured the countryside to gather potential supporters. Soon, the movement split into two groups.<sup>5</sup> While many democratic figures emerged (such as Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, the father of Burmese independence), or re-emerged (such as U Nu), on the national political scene in August and early September, protests continued under the watch of local committees which largely controlled Monywa ‘with more the character of gangs than activist cells. ... When security forces and government officials abandoned their positions, activist committees that replaced them soon encountered problems of maintaining order, policing food supplies, preventing smuggling and resolving local disputes’ (Boudreau 2004: 208).

In Monywa, what is most often remembered and spoken of in low voices in teashops is the moment when a number of ‘spies’ were beheaded. They were four in total, accused of working either for the government or for one of the two groups in revolt. Their heads were put on spikes and transported all around the city in a macabre procession. This event marked one of the apexes of the 1988 revolt in Monywa. The second was the violence of the soldiers when General Maung Saw and the military retook power in the country, established a new government, the SLORC, and imposed martial law on 18 August. The army battalion that ‘restored order’ in Sagaing, which was also the theatre of exactions such as

the ‘Sagaing Massacre’,<sup>6</sup> came by train to assist the garrison posted in Alon. A looming threat of bloodshed and imminent death blew over Monywa. Most people returned to their villages. Within a few nights, the rebellion ended abruptly, and the universities were closed for four consecutive years.

There are various discourses about these events in the villages of Monywa Township. For instance, those who were employed as civil servants under the socialist government condemn the uprising because it was led by ignorant people. The beheadings exemplify their foolishness and the so-called democratic movement used them to swell the ranks of the opposition. These ‘ignorant’ people did not understand that taking care of people’s affairs required an overarching organization (the army) in place beyond political factions as embodied by parliamentarianism. After all, socialism was not that bad in theory. For most people, however, the violence and repression of the new military regime was merely a continuation of past policies and went hand in hand with the worsening living conditions. Over the next few years, new headmen were appointed (mostly people not involved in the revolt) and most socialist organization of agriculture was officially abandoned. Yet the 1988 interlude did not bring about massive change in how agriculture was controlled. It rather led to a status quo in living standards with yet more cases of resource dispossession and extractive practices by a series of officials in continuity with the past decade.

The general narrative about the state in the second half of the twentieth century tells a story in which once the socialist government had begun to lose its tight grip over the countryside due to its economic failure, the subsequent military regime (SLORC/SPDC) imposed hard-line governance mixing partial market liberalization and a command economy. In her study on rural perceptions of state officials and policies in rice-growing areas, Ardeth Thawngmung (2004) argued that the changing presence of the state is visible in the shifts in agricultural policies. If peasants were a group the state wanted to rally to its cause in the mid-1960s, they became a mere source for wealth extraction about ten years later. As Steinberg put it, ‘agriculture had effectively been de-emphasized’ under Ne Win (1981b: 32). Thawngmung gives the same diagnosis.<sup>7</sup> While the financial and material ability to operate the Burmese Way to Socialism declined and the black market pervaded the countryside, new directions were taken, first through the introduction of ‘high yield varieties’ (1975–1985), then via a very ‘partial liberalization’ from 1987 onwards, and finally with forced cropping policies and agri-business experiments in the 1990s. In short, the agricultural policies moved from a command economy virtually merging peasants’ production and state capital to intensive farming based on inflows of inputs. When liberalization was finally abandoned under the SLORC, a strategy of extensive farming was adopted.

Corruption and rent seeking continued to pervade the military regime under the SLORC/SPDC. Thawngmung described a rural society in which most

extension agents<sup>8</sup> were corrupt, selling the pesticides, fertilizers and products they were meant to distribute, taking bribes to admit peasants to advantageous programmes and exclude them from damaging ones, seizing land outright, making tours of inspection into bribe-collecting circuits in which their subordinates and the local population had to shower them with gifts and cash. To some extent in the drylands, the command economy lost its grip on villagers but some structure for wealth extraction remained, notably the system of forced procurement and tax on exportation of beans and pulses,<sup>9</sup> with variations from one place to another. Overall, the distance between the government and the peasants widened in the mid-1980s and that gap took on a more moral drive later on.

In Monywa region, the period ranging from the early 1980s to the late 2010s is an age of distrust, violence and silence in which the state's emphasis moved away from the control of land to the control of people and sought to restore its legitimacy through a process that Houtman (1999) has coined 'Myanmafication'. Myanmafication amounted to positioning the state as a defender of Buddhism, reinventing national unity within a horizon of 'disciplined democracy', patronizing the *sangha*, building pagodas and creating an auspicious country while revisiting Myanmar's archaeology to rewrite human origins. Under the SLORC/SPDC, forced labour became a main tool through which to control the people, mostly those secluded in villages. Cattle rustling almost disappeared and village fences stopped being maintained in most places. Beyond cases of bribery and corruption, the construction of dams for irrigation projects to support double cropping (notably the summer paddy programmes) was carried out with forced labour which fed a series of grievances towards the military. Villagers simply became used to keeping their mouths shut, and in that sense the 1988 events did not bring about a decisive rupture – even if the uprising was of national importance and became a turning point in the grand narrative of the country's politics. The events of 1988 and their aftermath had an impact on morality because they fed the growing feeling of distrust towards the government. Even if the military regime developed a massive new organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), membership of which enabled access to services and positions, people were not fooled; many, if not most, remained silent and avoided direct confrontation.

Villagers were even called on, and paid, to mobilize in support of the USDA's operations. One of these operations, known as the 'Depayin Massacre' or 'Black Friday', has had a lasting impact in their memories and was allegedly organized by the USDA. When returning from a visit to Kachin State on 30 May 2003, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (DASSK) and members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) were attacked by a large gang of men armed with bamboo staves and other crude weapons in Depayin (or Tabayin), a one-hour drive from Monywa to the northeast. 'The assailants were believed to be members of the



progovernment Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), and the violence left as many as 70 or 80 persons dead (the official figure was four)' (Seekins 2006: 111). Hundreds were arrested and injured. What villagers recall is the dexterity of DASSK's driver, who managed to get her out of the situation. I also met a man in Monywa in March 2016 who acknowledged that he had been called one or two days later for some paid work. That job was to burn the dead bodies. These kinds of events and memories, coupled with the encounters with violent soldiers and forced labour, created a context of fear. Prices were kept low to avoid unrest. To some degree, politics was banned from the public space, but it unfolded in other forms.

As we will see in the following subsections, the various policies targeting the countryside empowered village headmen and the farming families who were able to monopolize state institutions at the local level. Thus, even if conditions worsened for the general population, notably the small farmers and the landless, there was room for manoeuvre. Situations varied from one village to another, and headmen were key players in dealing with the competing and overlapping claims made by local branches of state departments and agencies. Under the military regime, there was a lot of confusion and diversity in the way leaders were chosen. As Thawngmung put it, they were either hand-picked or elected locally depending on power balances between villages, the will of township chairmen and the connections between candidates and officials (2004: 95). Her studies and my own fieldwork show that villagers would prefer to have someone responsive to their needs who is able to buffer the changing demands of officials with whom they may develop patron–client relationships. She describes a series of men holding this office under the SPDC government in several rice-growing areas in order to demonstrate a gradient of perceptions of legitimacy to challenge the image of the military regime as a monolithic entity. As Scott (2007) argued, however, it is not because some headmen were better than others that they were perceived as legitimate. Headmen were needed because they made it possible, since colonial times, to control and administer villages as responsible yet disposable native officials. One of Thawngmung's insights – and a critique of the 'moral school of thought' (2004: 168) – is that each locality has its own history. How people evaluate their headman, their 'degree of leniency' towards them, depends 'on their past and present relationships with state authorities' (ibid.: 168).

In that vein, and to open up a more detailed analysis of Myinmilaung tract, it is interesting to look at one case in particular, and not to confine the question of legitimacy to officials, because they are only one kind of leader. If we look at headmen beyond the institution, and take this as an entry point, we see how particular headmen can exemplify a variety of moral stances. For instance, those described as 'kings in their domain' are quite often accused of corruption and collusion. They embody the bad treatment inflicted on the population from the

1970s to the 2010s. Others may have embodied a shift in how local affairs are organized. It depends on the circumstances. The following case shows how the exactions, the killings, the ‘stealing’ of harvests through imposed quotas, the jailing of those unable to provide it, the forced labour and the growing corruption of officials during the 1990s fed a movement of self-organization of local affairs at a distance from a disengaging state. In other words, when the military abandoned the idea of organizing village life, local officials used their position as gatekeepers (of loans, land records, agricultural input and so on) to extract wealth. In Gawgyi, as in many other areas, villagers’ ideology of autonomy came to the forefront: they simply ‘do it by themselves’ and avoid dealing with state agents. They call this *kotukotha*.

### **Violence and the Tightening of the Local Polity**

When looking back, farmers see themselves as ‘the machete’s ferrule’ (*dhamanawpeiqkue*), a round piece of metal that one smacks on a hard surface to tighten the blade.<sup>10</sup> This means that each time the government had a plan, villagers would bear the consequences. Even if they created close relations between the government and the peasants, the socialist policies of the military regime ultimately leaned towards greater extraction of wealth from the countryside and a tighter control over the rural population. The policy of crop procurement is a case in point, and more complex and intimate processes of exclusion were also at play.

Once the socialist government had stabilized its hold over Monywa, in 1964–1965, the Township Security and Administration Council (TSAC),<sup>11</sup> composed of military officers, started appointing and creating new institutions in the countryside. In the Myinmilaung tract, after the news was spread by village criers, a captain from the TSAC came to ask who wanted to be appointed as the headman, as members of the Village Tract Security and Administration Council (VSAC), as well as the head of the tract cooperative. U To Kaing declined the offer. U San, from Gawgyi, became headman and U Than, from Myinmilaung Proper, became head of the tract cooperative and ‘member two’ of the VSAC. All of this happened in a single meeting, but this partition of powers would have consequences in the further development of the local polity. When I asked how things worked, most Gawgyi elders gave me a general statement about how the selections operated under the military. Those appointed either had connections with the government, were able to act as community leaders or were those who knew how to ‘show their face’.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it was a matter of pre-existing connections, ability to get information, and, in our case, the balance of power between Myinmilaung Proper and Gawgyi.

This balance of power, embodied by the appointment to village headman, remained in favour of Gawgyi until 1995. The main families of Gawgyi and

Myinmilaung Proper staffed a variety of local committees – mostly the Peasants’ and Workers’ Councils and the Socialist Youth – created to organize the society along socialist lines and membership of which brought auxiliary benefits such as access to officials and rewards. Once the village tract’s SACs were transformed into the Village People’s Council in 1974, elections were held to select its members and thus the headman. U San and Gawgyi big men managed to secure the People’s Council and chose people from among their members to staff their Executive Committees, to which most of the work fell, and the People’s Courts, as well as their Inspection and Affairs Committees. The positions of power were monopolized by a few farming families and, for the villagers, most members of these committees were just names on paper, while the headman retained most of the prerogative in practice. In other words, the institutions created to support the state became a means to control village tract politics to a certain extent. This is notably true for the tract Land Committee, which was empowered to organize the agrarian revolution on the ground.

In Myinmilaung tract, the socialization of agriculture and the economy developed gradually. Officials from Monywa Trading Corporation compiled information about the tract from the land records (land types, areas, cadastre registered by the SLRD), the cultivation data (township branch of the Ministry of Agricultural Service (MAS)) and the list of farmers and family members via Myinmilaung SAC in order to determine the quantity of harvest to be expected (per basket) from each farmer and the delivery of consumables per family. U San was then in charge of updating the farmers’ booklet every year, recording the plots they worked, their quality and the crops planted. U Than had to follow a similar procedure for each family who also received monthly vouchers to collect commodities, rice, soap, clothes and other items from his house. On the one hand, the headman’s house in Gawgyi became the place where farmers came to update land records and to store their harvest quotas. On the other hand, people had to get their supplies from the house of the cooperative head in Myinmilaung. This meant a virtual monopoly by two men in the circulation of products coming into and out of the tract.

At the beginning, it was as if the officials coming to the tract (from the SLRD or the Trading Corporation) ‘knew our land better than us’, according to many elderly people I met throughout my fieldwork in the region. They had more *ana* (capacity of coercion) than the headman. Villagers could not under-report their holdings or harvests and thus had to sell most of their crops to the Trading Corporation or, at an even lower price, to military garrisons. The socialization process impacted household economics in two ways. First, the 1964 demonetization of the K100 and K50 banknotes – officially to fight domestic and foreign capitalists – affected their savings to some extent, even if gold, clothes, land, cattle and sometimes rubies formed the bulk of farmers’ capital. Second, the state’s

ability to organize the centralization of procurement and deliveries failed to make ends meet as fewer products and foodstuffs could be found in daily markets and the cooperatives' stores in the early 1970s, while the nationalized industries, mills and transportation were poorly operated by the Trading Corporation. In addition, procurement prices were kept very low, with a slight rise in the early 1970s, until the official abolition of the system in 1997. From this standpoint derive many stories of grievances, misrule and growth of the black market.

In the Myinmilaung tract, there are two types of discourse about U San. In Myinmilaung Proper, U San is said to have under-reported the crops brought by the farmers in order to sell the surplus on the black market thanks to a bargain he made with a man from the Trading Corporation. In this view, the headman and government staff are depicted as those cheating the farmers; this kind of story pervaded the countryside. To counter it, farmers would bring their crops to his house at the last minute, bribe U San, or try to sell their crops directly to the Corporation (but bearing the cost of transportation to its store in Monywa if and when the army did not blockade the main road to avoid crops being sold illegally). In addition, headmen were pivotal to get around the law and register (forbidden) changes of ownership. They could even dispossess farmers through the Land Committee – the courts were barred from hearing most land conflict cases<sup>13</sup> – if their quota was not reached and, thanks to the Tenancy Act, tenants working on a plot of land for up to five years could now claim the right to cultivate it in their own name.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the recognition of ownership and tenancies – officially illegal – was in the hands of the Land Committee, thus of U San, and in turn also in the hands of a few of Gawgyi's main families who outnumbered those of Myinmilaung Proper. These powers concentrated in the headman's hands fuelled stories of dispossession/repossession and factionalism based on grievances stemming from the changes that happened during the 'land reform' less than a decade earlier. From around 1975 to the late 1980s, the only positive fact recalled by villagers was the good rains. Things got worse because the procurement system turned from a minutely calculated system into an apparatus of imposed quotas depending on regional targets notwithstanding local land types and irrigation capacities.

In Gawgyi, as opposed to Myinmilaung Proper, U San is inversely depicted as a patron buffering the state's demands. He was selected as headman at quite a young age, allegedly because he was educated and already involved in village affairs as leader of the bachelor group (*lubyogaung*). Farmers had to fulfil the quota based on the potential of each township and each village tract – by referring to out-of-date data and despite the failure of new crops that were forcefully introduced. U San also managed the credit system based on how many acres a farmer was cultivating. As the years passed, fewer officials justified the quotas based on the capacities of a given tract. The more credit was insufficient, the

more debt rose and the black market expanded. The targets materialized in the number of acres to be cultivated for each crop and how many baskets of pulses, beans, cotton or rice would have to be sold at the government price. In practice, the story goes like this: a crier was sent to the village to announce the coming of the officials. The headman called all farmers for a meeting by beating his drum with a fast pace. If the meeting was for a routine inspection, some plots were ready for display. If it was for announcing the planned targets, U San asked the farmers to be silent while the officials were there. There was no way to negotiate with them directly, but there were possibilities to find trade-offs before and after the meeting: with the headman who allocated the quota to each farmer in the tract; with other farmers to exchange quotas depending on land types; and even with brokers to buy crops one could not produce to sell at a fixed price later on. U San also made a case for bad rains and arranged the figures with the SLRD or MAS officials when the quota was not met.

If Gawgyi was in a position of strength during the socialist period, Myinmilaung Proper was not to be outdone. Indeed, one of its villagers was head of the cooperative and his house occupied the cooperative until a dedicated building was built on ‘vacant’ land next to his house around 1971. If, in the 1970s and 1980s, the ‘state distribution network failed to meet the needs of Burma’s population’ (Brown 2013: 146) – the classic imagery was that of bare shelves – it was a means for accumulating wealth and manoeuvring village factions, nonetheless. U Than had to go to Monywa’s cooperative store to fetch both the products to be sold at cheap prices to villagers and the vouchers rationalizing the amount each family could get. Soon, he was accused of selling products ‘on the road’, that is, on the black market.<sup>15</sup> He also lent money to villagers by accepting their vouchers as mortgage security. Allegedly, no one could really complain, and everyone saw the livelihood of U Than rising while the store at his house gradually emptied of commodities. An attempt was made by U San to bring him down. When U Than called for the construction of a real store, U San tried to have a man from Gawgyi enrolled as a clerk (i.e. able to see the incomings and outgoings in money, vouchers and products). This failed, however, and the store remained in the hands of Myinmilaung Proper. During the readjustment of the socialist policy in 1972/73 – emphasizing prior failures and the problems of corruption – new rules were enacted, notably in the functioning of cooperatives. From then on, the cooperative head would have to be elected every two years by the members of a committee of fifteen people from all villages in the tract. This, apparently, was a means to put pressure on U Than, but the leadership of the cooperative seems to never have left Myinmilaung Proper.

The variety of men and institutions empowered to bring about socialism controlled how people could access products and credit, sell their crops and farm their land. The black market was a means of resistance as much as a burden,

while it also helped officials to sustain state policy because ‘the illegal economy reduced the prospect of social unrest and made it possible for the party-state at the local level to function’ (Brown 2013: 166). Along with the failure of government policies in the 1980s, villagers were pressured more and more by officials to answer state demands. There were, of course, trade-offs and avenues through which to sell and buy things on the black market but for even more exorbitant prices as the shelves of the cooperatives emptied. The tension between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper intensified along with the empowerment of local men in new or redefined roles. U San, the headman, saw his capacity for coercion (*ana*) growing as he was able to monopolize most of the apparatus built to bring about socialism. As in the village of Lower Burma studied by Mya Than – after David Pfanner (1962) – the ‘Village People’s Council leaders ... came from the same families as the former headmen and other village elders, and these tended to be individuals “who represent[ed] the “upper layer” of the village and who live[d] in the “best” houses.’ The same individuals also tended to dominate the leadership of other local branches of central organizations such as the BSPP, the Lansin Youth and the cooperative society [*sic*]’ (Taylor 2009: 332, citing Mya Than 1978: 14). In Myinmilaung tract, factionalism between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi and patronage by Gawgyi leaders were the mechanisms through which socialism operated. The latitude to negotiate depended on connections, on bureaucratic functioning and, for the farmers, on the stance of the headman, the relationships developed with him, his ability to practise forum shopping between institutions and the power balance between villages in the tract. In a long-term perspective, the fact that the socialist policy and practice empowered farming families strengthened the local hierarchy between farmers (*taungthu*) and labourers (*myaukthu*) as well as the dependency of the latter on the former.

Finally, with the gradual collapse of Ne Win’s regime, finding trade-offs with the Myinmilaung headman and cooperative was no longer seen as a strategy, but rather as an incentive to cheat and bribe. The malfunctioning of the government corrupted people, or at least this is how it was seen. If the bloodshed of 1988 was not a rupture in Gawgyi as it was in the capital city of Rangoon, it nonetheless contributed to increased distrust towards officials at many levels. Locally, the rupture came later, when an Infamous headman was succeeded by a Worthy one.

### **The Infamous and the Worthy**

This section continues to explore changes in Myinmilaung tract’s politics after the fall of the socialist government. It follows the succession of its headmen from 1989 to 2012 as a red thread and focuses on two persons in particular: U Win the Infamous and U Htay the Worthy. This denomination underscores the intersection between personalities and shifts in morality during these years. The passing

of the torch from U Win to U Htay crystallized a rupture in local politics, as local affairs became a domain of engagement against a backdrop of governmental violence and disengagement. I hereby refer to the argument, developed by Caroline Humphrey (1997) and Joel Robbins (2015), that values are presented to and instilled in subjects through the influence of exemplary persons. For U Win: distrust; for U Htay: worthiness. There are numerous examples of how a person embodies the ‘style’ of an era in national history, and Burmese language clearly displays this connection. For instance, the socialist period is ‘Ne Win’s time’ (*Ne Win kayt*) and the worsening of the military is known as ‘Than Shwe’s time’ – Senior General Than Shwe being the head of the junta from 1992 to 2011. The institution and the person are one and the same because they embody the stakes of an era. In other words, the perception of U Win and U Htay’s tenure as headmen reflects the state of local politics. The transition from one to the other represents a moral shift which unfolded during the rise of village affairs as a domain of politics in Gawgyi in the 2000s.

### *‘Don’t Deal with Them’*

‘Don’t deal with them’ is the clear-cut answer most people in the villages I visited gave me when asked about their past relations with the government. This means do not make deals with officials, do not give bribes, do not get involved. It was a piece of advice rendered in another expression – *kotukotha* – meaning ‘rising by and defining oneself’. It is also a moral take on state practice from the late 1970s onwards. If you start dealing with them, that is, making arrangements (*nalehmu*),<sup>16</sup> they can get you. It is better to stay away from officials and soldiers. This statement reflects a certain mistrust. My point is not to say that the government remains ‘the fifth evil’ no matter the period,<sup>17</sup> but rather to show how distrust towards village headship has crystallized and become a backdrop that explains the emergence of a particular political configuration in Gawgyi.

In 1989, a new village headman, U Mya, from Gawgyi, was handpicked directly by the military when it reasserted its hold over the region of Monywa. U Mya was from one of the main farming families of Gawgyi and a member of the previous People’s Council of Myinmilaung village tract. Apparently, he was not involved in the 1988 uprising against the government, and this made him a rather fitting candidate. Overall, people remember his tenure as a time when the headman had to maintain order by any means necessary. The military government was disengaging from the countryside and the organization of local affairs and economy. U Mya was left to rule almost alone, backed up, if needed, by the military apparatus. In short, he had *ana* and was accompanied by ‘members one and two’ (*ahpwe-win tiq hniq*) of the Village Tract Council, one from Myinmilaung Proper and the other from Gawgyi. The balance of power remained in favour of

Gawgyi, but Myinmilaung was represented. This is all that local people were willing to say about U Mya.

The situation for villagers in the 1980s and early 1990s was ambivalent. Those with enough land and capital could accumulate wealth while the bulk of villagers were on the verge of starvation. For the non-farmers, the *myaukthu* (in this case also called the *lokdama*, *kulikunga*), it was a period of harsh shortages and daily quests for livelihood. Most resorted to a combination of activities to face the growing lack of work, cash and food. Some started picking tree leaves to make and sell soups in Monywa while others sold their remaining goats, which they usually kept in the open pasture after the harvests for breeding and feeding. Even small farmers started climbing palm trees to collect sap (to produce alcohol or sugar) and leaves (to remake roofs), a risky activity usually reserved for the poorest. Many newly-wed couples migrated from one village to another in search of contracts with land and tree owners. Young men went to work in the mining and rice-growing areas but often came back empty-handed. Meanwhile, in the village most families reverted to sorghum, sometimes mixed with maize, as a staple food instead of rice. The degradation of economic conditions made the complex hierarchy and relations of dependency between *taungthu* and *myaukthu* appear in their crudest form. A person could be protected by a farmer, but few were, unless they were close relatives. Farmers were selling less of their crops to the *myaukthu*, preferring to consume them directly or sell them in Monywa. It became nearly impossible to access credit. Mutual help and service-giving were reduced to a minimum, family solidarity concentrated more on the couple and less on extended relations, and donation ceremonies, based on a family's savings, became rare. In short, distrust was rampant. Most of the *myaukthu* were considered a threat, crop thieves who would then sell them at the market in Monywa. Village fences were a fragile bulwark against bandits and cattle rustling.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the late 1980s and early 1990s were also years in which some families accumulated (and spent) wealth. While visiting a number of villages in Monywa Township to attend ceremonies and football matches, I noticed that the biggest houses and many private wells were often built during this very period – based on the dates on them. This is obviously related to the way in which some families monopolized local institutions empowered to control resource access, as we have seen in the previous section and chapter. It is also conjectural, however. The government notably decontrolled the price of crops in 1987 and for a time lifted the ban on the private export of agricultural commodities in late 1988 (except for rice). The following years witnessed increasing exports of beans and pulses (Brillion 2015). A case in point is the pigeon pea, a crop that nobody eats but which was grown by most farmers (until recently) and exported to India. In other words, while the government partially withdrew from the agricultural chain, village elites were able to accumulate more wealth. It is in this context of



disengagement by the state from local affairs and increasing inequalities between villagers that a new village headman emerged in 1995. This man was U Win, from Myinmillaung Proper, and he is the infamous person who embodied village headship from 1995 to 2006.

How and why U Win became headman is uncertain. He himself says that it was a democratic election, that he was chosen by each leader of ten households under the watch of elderly people. But such elections only started in 2011–2012. Others say that he was nominated directly by the township GAD. Nobody was clear on the matter. What is troubling is that the use of forced labour (*lok-a-pay*) increased in scale after he took office, and people's movements into and out of the village tract were increasingly controlled. A general sentiment in Gawgyi is that this man embodied corruption. He is depicted as an archetype of the SLORC era (1989–1997): a greedy and immoral official who worked for a militarized government that relied on violence and pushed people to cheat. There is a series of grievances and stories against and about him.

Under U Win, the villagers of the Myinmillaung tract experienced a new kind of state violence, with forced labour becoming the main tool to build roads, canals and dams. Irrigation works were intended to support the new agricultural policies by drafting free labour without relying heavily on foreign exchange. First, they heard about the construction of a dam in Thazi, which started in 1994 (Map 0.2). The headman of Hnawpin, a small village close to Thazi, told me in February 2016 that stories of people being beaten, women abused and pagoda relics and treasures stolen by the soldiers spread through the whole township. In late 1995, once the Thazi dam was completed, the 20th Artillery Battalion under Captain So Win began supervision of the construction of another dam in Kyawkka. U Win most likely took charge of the Myinmillaung tract during that period. One person per family was requested to work for several days from dusk until dawn. If a family member could not come to work, he or she had to pay 100 Kyats per day to the army. Trade-offs could be found through the agency of U Win, who became a sort of labour broker. The poorest families either repaid part of their debt to richer families via forced labour or became indebted if they could not provide a valid worker in order to avoid being jailed. Being on U Win's good side made life easier for those who could afford it. To construct this dam, the villagers had to destroy a monastery and a pagoda. Some still fear karmic justice for such an unmeritorious act. The soldiers were immoral and drunk, they beat the workers, insulted their religion and disrespected people who could have been their parents or grandparents. These were not the same kind of soldiers the previous generations had dealt with under the socialist system.<sup>19</sup> A canal was built along the road between Kyawkka and Thazi, and so forced labour continued.<sup>20</sup> In addition, villagers' movements were increasingly monitored. For instance, they had to declare their comings and goings to the village headman, even to attend a

donation ceremony. All strangers had to announce their entry into the village as well. U Win kept records of all of this, but apparently gave his notebooks to his successor, who told me, in mid-December 2013, that he never saw any of them. Thus, it appears that U Win's job was largely to control manpower and people's movements. This gave him a certain hold over villagers, most of whom learned to stay silent in front of guns but who took their revenge in football matches against soldiers.

There are other local stories and rumours that allow me to explore how people gauge the worth of this headman. One of his first achievements was to take over the old building of the socialist cooperative, sell what could be sold and install his own house on this former 'public land'.<sup>21</sup> Villagers also recall that they had to pay high fees to record changes in ownership. Land transfers (apart from inheritance) were illegal until 2012, and so the headman and the agent of the SLRD in charge of the tract required fees to update the records and get around the law. This is widely known as 'eating the sale' (*yaunsadeh*) and it is important because the next headman (U Htay, 2006–2011) is recognized for not doing it while Ko Kyaw (2013–2016) was more ambiguous. U Win's official stamp was a means to extract wealth when formalizing contracts, registering families, giving travel authorizations and negotiating agricultural loans. U Win's vanity is said to have extended beyond his official position into the religious sphere. I heard multiple times how he and U Myo, a fellow from Mogaung (included in Budaungkan tract but part of Myinmilaung Proper), used to 'eat the sale' of cakes and embezzled donations during the Myinmilaung pagoda festival with the help of the clerk.

Their mischief did not stop here, but partly structured local politics, related to how ethics permeates leadership, the use of wealth and land arrangements. Eventually, the threat of an overwhelming collusion between them led to a shift in headmanship in Myinmilaung tract. For instance, there is a case of a land dispute involving U Win and U Myo. The case surfaced after 2012 and Ko Kyaw, who was supposed to solve it in his capacity as headman, could not reach a solution. The story goes as follows. Around 2003, eleven farmers mortgaged their land to U Myo, one of the biggest money lenders in the area. The type of agreement was unusual and called *yahman-ngway*, meaning 'the guessed price [of the land]'. Usually, those agreements do not involve interest and last for one to three years. U Win formalized the contracts and stamped them. Three years later, U Myo became headman of Budaungkan tract. The dispute started a few months later. Most of the farmers asked for an extension of the agreement because they could not reimburse U Myo. The latter refused and was later accused of changing the agreements by asking for interest. The eleven farmers went on to seek resolution with U Win, who initially signed it. However, he then refused and advised meeting with township authorities to settle the case. The latter sent the case back

to the village authorities. Over the following years, the situation remained at a standstill. At some point, U Myo and U Win were accused of having forged counterfeit contracts to turn the mortgages into land sales. U Myo tried, unsuccessfully, to register the plots under his name, arguing that he was the tiller and thus, following the socialist regulation,<sup>22</sup> he should have the right to cultivate the land. In other words, they used money lending, loopholes in the law and the monopolization of official institutions to extract wealth.

In the meantime, U Myo and U Win tried to get a hold over the cemetery located on either side of the path dividing Myinmilaung and Budaungkan tract at the centre of Myinmilaung Proper. On the Myinmilaung side, U Win's plan was cut short as U Htay, the main *lugyi* of Gawgyi, was selected as headman in 2006. On the Budaungkan side, U Myo managed to get the area registered under his name with the SLRD as soon as he became headman. He gave part of it to his son, who started building a house on it. Thus the scam came to light. Seeing this, villagers and the head of monks voiced their disagreement, but nothing changed. U Win eventually built a pagoda on a portion of the previous cemetery, but people were not fooled. Even if building a pagoda is the most meritorious donation, the merit of which could trickle down to the whole settlement, it was by no means an act that legitimated U Win's authority.<sup>23</sup> To some extent, the selection of U Htay was a reaction from both villages, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung, to the growing threat of collusion and unfairness if U Win and U Myo were to be headmen of the two neighbouring tracts. True or not, these stories are nonetheless the backdrop against which a new era of politics was taking shape in Gawgyi.

Overall, U Win was described as the Infamous. He embodied corruption, collusion and a certain impunity due to military support. That was his *ana*. Control was exercised less to extract wealth from harvests but rather focused on people's movement and manpower for state projects. To some degree, U Win reflected the clientelist game at play in political relations in Burma/Myanmar, based on personalities and networks, with village headmen being the brokers between villagers and government officials. He is but one example that partly, but not completely, contradicts the description of village headmen given by Thawngmung in her study on state legitimacy:

The village tract or village chairmen, who occupy the lowest rung of the ... security, political, and administrative structures are the most hard-pressed authorities. They are trapped between protecting the needs of the local population and fulfilling the demands of the central and local governments ... Although they are not paid a salary, there are many ways in which village chairmen can get reimbursed, depending on the economy of their villages. Village chairmen may earn money from imposing fines

on law breakers, charging fees on land contracts, and on visitors' registration. He may supplement his income by taking bribes from his villagers in return for covering up their activities that are considered illegal from the central authorities (one example would be under-reporting cultivated acres when it comes to selling the procurement quota). (Thawngmung 2003: 308–309)

My point is not to see whether or not U Win fits this description, but to show another side of the picture in order to explore the question of headship from a different perspective. In short, headmen may be brokers, either as hard-pressed or extractive officials, stuck between the government and the villagers. This fits the early qualification of headship as an intercalary position, an argument developed by Gluckman (1955, 1963; Gluckman et al. 1949). But they have their own stance, family background and networks, and are empowered by the state in different ways. Following Kuper's idea (1970), headship offers room for manoeuvre. Yet there is more to it. In my view, village headmen are benchmarks to evaluate the morality of a time, acting as a backdrop to explain the differences between today and the past. They are references or exemplary people drawn upon to explain the ups and downs of village morality and to show how ethical shifts transform the local polity.

### *'One of a Kind'*

After the first monsoon rains in July 2016, the Gawgyi electrification project became a reality. There were several steps to finalize this project, and a *sine qua non* condition was that all the paths in the village should be enlarged to install the pylons. This had the potential to cause disputes, and many villagers would have to give up some of their land. As well as causing disagreements between neighbours about how much each household should give away, the electricity project brought up the issue of the circulation of corpses and auspicious flows and eventually opened negotiations on village membership (Chapter 6). It became a potential maelstrom that almost no one was willing to take responsibility for. The headman – U So from Myinmilaung Proper, selected in January 2016 but who took office in March 2016 – was supposed to be responsible for it, but he left it up to the villagers. U Thein, Gawgyi's candidate in the last election, should also have been responsible in his capacity as hundred-house head, but it was clear to most people by August that he could not supervise the enlargement of the roads or solve the upcoming disputes. U Htay ultimately took responsibility. 'Why him?' I asked Ko Nway, the younger brother of Ko Kyaw. 'He is one of a kind', he answered (*thuka tiqmyo*). Nothing less, nothing more. When I enquired more systematically, everybody agreed that only U Htay could do such a job.

Nobody referred to him as a man of *hpon*, however. He was different; *hpon* was almost gone. He was rather an example, in the sense that he embodied the value of propriety and demonstrated trustworthiness throughout his life. When he became headman in 2006, U Htay personified a moral rupture with U Win the Infamous. His engagement with the village collective gave momentum for village affairs to become the primary form of local politics in Gawgyi.

U Htay succeeded U Win in 2006, and most villagers in Gawgyi felt this was for the best. I have never heard any criticism towards him. Before his selection, new heads of ten households were chosen, and it seems that it was at this moment that the threat of having the duo U Win and U Myo as local big men influenced the vote. Once selected, U Htay chose new official elders for all the villages of the tract. U Maung was chosen in this capacity for the whole tract and the power balance shifted once again, this time in favour of Gawgyi. The selection of U Htay was viewed as a turning point. Almost all the criticisms of U Win and his clique had their counterparts in the way U Htay managed his tenure. The land sales were no longer ‘eaten’, bribes to make contracts and identity cards and even to get loans from the Agricultural Bank became obsolete. In retaliation, the agent of the SLRD in charge of the tract apparently stopped going there to update the cadastre. In short, U Htay demonstrated that a sense of selflessness could short-circuit the way local affairs were managed.

It was not all peace and light, however. U Htay, in his capacity as the local rung of the government, had to organize the confiscation – without compensation – of farmlands located within the Myinmilaung tract for the creation of a poultry hatchery. The official of the land administration department, who did not dare go to Gawgyi, suddenly disappeared with the cadastral map in question. There was no longer a map, no official in charge, and only one member of the regional government willing to make money out of the poultry zone. On a different note, one of U Htay’s achievements was the building of a road to shorten and ease transportation between Gawgyi and Monywa in 2009. To do so, he first convinced all the people whose land would be crossed by the future road to donate a part of it. He obtained the funding promised by the township administration to make the road, and organized the rest of the villagers, with the help of U Lin, Gawgyi’s teacher and head of the bachelors’ group, to carry out the necessary work. Finally, he approached a wealthy businessman in Monywa to ask for his help (i.e. to make a donation<sup>24</sup>) to build a bridge (over the canal that the villagers had dug a few years ago under forced labour). Since then, this road has been the main route to Gawgyi, used daily by an increasing number of daily workers.

U Htay continued to be involved in the management of Gawgyi affairs after he stopped being headman in 2011. He decided not to be a candidate for the 2011 round of selection following the announcement of a democratic transition under

Thein Sein's government. The subsequent selection was chaotic. At that time, most of the ten-house leaders refused to participate and even fewer were inclined to put themselves forward as candidates. A few hours before the arrival of the township officials, some elders of Myinmilaung Proper attempted to gather all the villagers of the tract in the monastery. Only a few came. These elders reselected three candidates, all from Myinmilaung, and this is how U Yin became headman, though only for one year. U Htay withdrew from the candidacy by proclaiming himself the official elder of Gawgyi, and nobody challenged him. This was his first move in distancing himself from government positions. He remained a key actor in Gawgyi politics, however, and became the key interlocutor with the incoming INGOs that flowed into Gawgyi in the early 2010s. For instance, thanks to a sanitation project led by the UNDP, he attended workshops on the making of a water pumping system and pushed for the creation of a water station that would be built a few months before my arrival in Gawgyi. The water system was an assemblage of efforts, knowledge, money and donations. Gawgyi big men, U Htay, U Lin and U Maung, as we will see in Chapter 6, were the ones organizing it. The village first had to be on the target list of several NGOs, then fees were collected from all villagers, donations were given by the main families, a lottery was organized, networks of external donors were activated, and finally a committee administering water delivery and money collection was set up. More recently, U Htay took the reins of the committee in charge of the distribution of a loan of about 30,000 USD granted to Gawgyi by the Monywa Rural Development Department. Repayments by the villagers fund new loans and the renewal of village commodities used in ceremonies (tables, chairs, cooking pots and so on). Thus, for most people, having U Htay in charge of a project, even in the background, guarantees its effectiveness.

Overall, U Htay has demonstrated his commitment towards Gawgyi and has set an example. He embodies propriety and the references in this domain are the last men of *hpon*, notably U To Kaing described in the previous chapter. In other words, he is inscribed in a genealogy of men of power, men remembered, rightly or wrongly, for their engagement with the enhancement of village life. If we follow the criteria set by Nash to distinguish a leader, U Htay fits the description:

The qualities of a leader according to village standards are: industry (he is a hard worker), alertness (he does not appear sleepy or slow in movement; his speech is quick and pithy), mercy (he does not push his power to the limit), patience (he does not rush into things, but awaits the propitious moment for action), judgment (his decisions do, in fact, turn to his benefit), and perspective (he sees events from the right angle; he can tell more than other people about the meaning of events). (Nash 1965: 77)

This description has the advantage of being suitable for any leader at any time in history because it emphasizes individual qualities and excludes the political and moral issues of a given period. The qualities of a typical leader are plastic enough to encompass a multitude of incarnations, but the meaning and the practice have changed. U Htay's actions and the perceptions of his achievements combine old references and new stakes. The embodiment of propriety clearly draws on the legacy of U To Kaing and U Za Nay Ya. The latter are the backdrop against which the worth of U Htay makes sense and is evaluated. Yet, nobody told me that U Htay was a man of *hpon*. This qualifier is reserved for people of a past era. Bigness became difficult to achieve through village headmanship because it was synonymous with wrongdoing and collusion from the 1970s to the 2000s. U Htay gave 'arms and legs' to village affairs, even if (or rather because) he gradually withdrew from government affairs. What makes him special in Gawgyi is that he personifies a moral rupture with U Win the Infamous. The sense of rupture was reinforced by an engagement with village affairs presented as a transition from raw clientelism and corruption to the defence of a common good. Trustworthiness, as exemplified by U Htay, became a value organizing local politics to some extent.

U Htay did not create a new political order out of the blue. He has contributed to a larger movement in which the management of local affairs became monopolized by the villagers against the state. This trend was articulated with a more traditional form of collective sociality called *luhmuyay* or 'social affairs'. This concept can encompass a variety of stakes. It includes potentially all kinds of collective undertakings, from the making of ceremonies to the resolution of disputes, and thus its scope changes according to what is deemed important at a given time. At a sociological level, *luhmuyay* is about taking responsibility for the welfare of a collective beyond individual and familial responsibilities. In theory, it concerns everyone and encompasses a wide set of relations, from the hospitality of strangers to the funerals of neighbours. In practice, it centres on a locality and, in our case, it includes Gawgyi and Tozigon but not Myinmilaung Proper. As we will see in chapter 6, the engagement of some individuals with a collective contributes to making village affairs the main form of local politics, as a space where the worth of the people is evaluated depending on their engagement with a common good.

It is a fragile state of affairs ridden with uncertainty, especially as this political order is linked to a few persons. Yet, other political dynamics are at play. As we will see in Chapter 7 in relation to the selection of a new headman in 2016, factionalism within the village and the battle between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi weaken the primacy of collective affairs as something to stand for. Even if village affairs are considered independent of government affairs, they inevitably overlap. At another level, village affairs depend eventually on people's engagement.

If this engagement shapes some spaces as political, collective affairs are not the only field of power relations. Crafting one's place in the village is also about negotiating social obligations and responsibilities. Ko Kyaw's experience as headman, described in the next chapter, exemplifies a central dilemma: how far should a person be responsible for a collective when he has to be responsible for a family? The crafting of one's position is thus ridden with dilemmas in which the care of a collective is but one part.

\* \* \*

Reflecting on my encounters with two headmen who succeeded one another, the introductory part of this chapter has shown how I came to realize that the shift from U Win to U Htay marked a broader rupture in local politics. It was a shift from distrust and corruption embodied by U Win the Infamous to trustworthiness and propriety with U Htay the Worthy. This narrative of change reflects how the conception of leadership moved from a discourse of an individual's *hpon* to one of people's worth. This transformation is intimately linked with the historical background of state violence and corruption and U Htay's gradual estrangement from the state was counterbalanced by a commitment to Gawgyi affairs. Village affairs were progressively being reinvested by villagers who were articulating new stakes within a more traditional form of sociality, making collective undertakings the fragile form of local politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

To account for this metamorphosis, the chapter has explored the local history from the early years of the socialist period to the democratic opening of the early 2010s. It has introduced the reader to the 'Burmese Way to Socialism', followed by the reassertion of military power until the democratic transition period. It has delineated the process by which the socialization of society further solidified dominion over peasants, culminating in an era marked by pervasive mistrust. The ineffectiveness of agricultural strategies and the regime's authoritarianism precipitated a broader deterioration of living standards, ultimately fueling the 1988 uprising. However, in the Myinmilaung tract, the rupture unfolded at a distinct pace and took on a more ethical dimension, characterized by the utilization of corruption, collusion, forced labour and violence as instruments of governance by the military and a succession of officials in overseeing rural areas.

This chapter has argued that the transition from U Win to U Htay marks this rupture as the latter practice of headship was a counterpoint to the former and that both were exemplary people who represented different values. U Win epitomizes corruption, collusion and embezzlement while U Htay embodies propriety, a value articulated with the memory of the last men of *hpon*. The transition from one to the other thus represents a moral shift anchored in the local understandings of the history of Myinmilaung polity. In reaction to state disengagement



from local affairs, an ideology of self-reliance took ground in Gawgyi and symbolized how a group of people – the *lugyi* – started making engagement in village affairs a field of politics in Gawgyi in the 2000s.

Ultimately, this chapter and the previous one have offered a background against which to explore current forms of leadership. The study of precolonial politics (Chapter 2) in our area has shown that the antagonism between Gawgyi and Myinmillaung Proper was expressed in terms of competing visions of indigenism after the two settlements were grouped under a single jurisdiction and a headman. Headship then became a matter of persons as successive leaders adopted different positions echoing local stakes. Some of them became exemplary figures for the moralization of behaviours and engagement in lay affairs when villagers reinterpreted their role as Buddhists and contested colonial rule in a period when claims to authority were increasingly channelled by belonging to farming families. This chapter has made a case for seeing Myinmillaung headmen as benchmarks to evaluate the morality of a time, acting as a backdrop to explain the difference between the present and the past. They are references for the ups and downs of village morality and U Htay's trajectory underscores the rise of village affairs as the current form of politics in Gawgyi.

The questions now are: (1) How does this background impinge on how Ko Kyaw embodies headship? (2) How is leadership conceived and practised within farming families? And (3) How do the *lugyi* actually perform village affairs?

## Notes

1. With at least two exceptions that should be noted: Lintner's study of the fall of the Communist Party of Burma (1990) and Brown's book on economic history (2013).
2. SPDC stands for the State Peace and Development Council (1997–2011), the organization that replaced the SLORC.
3. Among these villages, the most notable are: Hnawpin North, Hnawpin South, Innte, Ayadaw, Kyawkka, Thazi, Ywadon, Budaungkan, Kyawsipon, Booba, Minzu, Zeehpyubin, Salingyi, Nyuangpinthar, Kothan, Hledar and Aungchanthar. I visited each of them several times in 2013–2014 and in 2015–2016.
4. Cf. the 1963 Nationalization Law and the 1964 Law to Protect the Implementation of Socialist Economic System.
5. I am not able for the moment to account for the reason for this split, or of the content of each revendication.
6. At the beginning of the Four Eights Movement, thousands of demonstrators marched on a police station in Sagaing. They were shot at by police and troops and, reportedly, 537 persons were killed. This was probably the worst event, in terms of casualties, to occur during the Democracy Summer outside of Rangoon (cf. Seekins 2006: 385).
7. Cf. Thawngmung (2004: 78). She also wrote, referring to Steinberg (1981b), that 'public expenditure on agriculture declined from 11.3 per cent of capital expenditure in 1964/65 to 4.4 per cent in 1970/71. In 1972, only 1.8 million out of 4.4 million rural households in Burma had access to official credit, and only about 13 per cent of

- agricultural areas could be used for multiple cropping because of lack of irrigation' (2004: 78).
8. Such as the local managers of the Ministry of Agricultural Services, of the Irrigation Department, of the Myanmar Agricultural and Rural Development Bank, of the Myanmar Agricultural Produce Trading and of the State Land Records Department.
  9. Beans and pulses, which were largely spared by state policies because the government focused primarily on rice cultivation, became two of the top products at the turn of the 1990s. Thawngmung indicated that, while 'under the "socialist government (1972–88)," the cultivation of pulses and beans meant the death penalty or life imprisonment', under the new policies 'the sown area for pulses increased 85 per cent from 1984/85 to 1995/96. Since 1990–91 pulses and beans have taken over the top list of all other items of agricultural export, including rice and rice products, both in terms of value and volume' (2004: 143).
  10. This expression was first given to me by U Than from Zalok village on 15 January 2014, and I have heard it multiple times in the villages where I had a chance to interview elders about local history.
  11. Called *NaLaKa* in Burmese. The SACs are the main structures – present at all levels of administration – created by the Revolutionary Council to centralize the government authority. They became the People's Council with the 1974 Constitution (cf. Taylor 2009: 315–16).
  12. The expression given to me goes like this: 'the big face gets the big part of the meal', meaning that the man who is famous, who presents himself nicely, wins people's favour.
  13. The reforms introduced by the Revolutionary Council (the Farmers' Rights Protection Law and the Tenancies Law Amending Act in 1963) aimed to prevent the interference of civil justice in land matters by prohibiting seizures (of land, livestock, tools) and/or arrests for debts, for example – except in cases concerning inheritance and those in which the government is involved. In other words, justice between individuals over land matters – excluding inheritance – was organized through Village Land Committees. In addition, the government authorized, by administrative notification (act 1/64), the cessation of rent payments by tenants to their landlords. To achieve this, the SACs were instructed to institute a system of People's Courts, which continued after the 1974 Constitution, and so have become the only regulatory bodies for agricultural land use. The individuals who were tenants, by ceasing to have to pay rent as a means to fight landlordism, could then be granted a delegated right of use on the land they were cultivating if they were registered as such in the SLRD's registers.
  14. Cf. Boutry et al. (2017: 116, 144) concerning Regulation 1/64, stipulating that a land cultivated by a tenant for more than five years consecutively may go to the tenant.
  15. This information was confirmed by Myinmilaung elders during an interview conducted on 23 March 2019.
  16. For an exploration of *nalehmu*, see Roberts and Rhoads (2022).
  17. Maung Maung Gyi (1983: 154–55), Spiro (1997) and Nash (1965: 75) had presented this view of the government as part of the *longue durée* in the Burmese conception of politics. As this chapter shows, however, the distance from the state changes from one period to another and depends on who embodies this or that position.
  18. Cattle rustling decreased in the late 1990s and thus villages' stockades were less and less maintained, to the point that during my own fieldwork, village gates had almost disappeared. They reappeared after the 2021 coup.
  19. Thawngmung made a case for how the change in recruitment of military personnel under the SLORC/SPDC distanced the Tatmadaw from villagers. While most were

- coming directly from the countryside during the socialist period, enrolment was then confined to relatives, families and associates of the military (2004: 82).
20. The renovation of the river embankment and the main roads in Monywa was also carried out largely by forced labour from the whole township.
  21. For a study of the 'public' category, cf. Huard (2016).
  22. Regulation called Act 1/64.
  23. See the discussion of the relation between merit making and power in the general conclusion.
  24. Donation and charitable funding to create 'public services' has been commonplace in this region, at least since the late 1990s. For a thorough study of this dynamic in another part of the country, cf. McCarthy G. (2018).