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BEING THE HEADMAN

This chapter describes a day in the life of Ko Kyaw to show how he crafted his authority when he was headman of the Myinmilaung village tract from 2013 to 2016.¹ As we have seen, village headship was created in the late 1880s as an armed wing of local governance. Since then, the power of village headmen has waxed and waned depending on how far local authorities entitled them to implement policies and organize local politics. Today, village headmen are most often seen not as persons of authority, but as officials with ascribed powers and as political entrepreneurs. They are – like the headmen depicted by Thawngmung (2004: 94–102) and the ward’s administrators by Prasse-Freeman (2015: 95–96) – uncanny officials whom people have to deal with one way or another.

Locally, authority is about recognition and achievements. It is a quality embedded in the person, his life, his actions, and is linked to the display of propriety as a gauging standard resulting from past experiences. The stance, achievements and memories of previous headmen and monks influence how Ko Kyaw crafts his own way of being headman as they contributed to and exemplified the transformation of the local understanding of morality, headship and collective affairs across the past century. As we have seen in the historical part of the book, the emphasis on propriety and morality stems from two men (U Za Nay Ya and U To Kaing) who are, for our contemporaries, the archetypical and last men of *hpon*. They were able to influence people’s conduct and embodied a renewal of propriety in the contest against colonialism. On a different note, U San was more of a negotiator empowered by the socialist state to bring about socialism and whose prerogatives fostered factionalism within the village tract. The tightening of the local polity on the village tract worsened when the state partially disengaged from the countryside and U Win, the Infamous headman from Myinmilaung Proper, embodied, for Gawgyi people, corruption, forced labour

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and unsolvable conflicts. U Htay then appeared as a moral rupture, drawing from the examples of previous men of *hpon*, propriety and impartiality. Ko Kyaw became headman when the latter distanced himself from official positions while remaining central in the organizing of Gawgyi affairs.

Ko Kyaw sums up the uncertainty surrounding what (government) power is and how it operates in a peculiar way. For him, 'it's only in the mouth', meaning that what powerful people say is doubtful and should not be taken for granted. As a counterpoint, it suggests that authority implies *thitsashihmu*, that is, aligning acts and words, and showing a degree of 'trustworthiness'. How Ko Kyaw articulates this rupture when talking about power relations shows that local politics are gauged on a moral scale. Even Spiro, reflecting on his fieldwork, wrote about how issues of trust were key in village political life: 'as a newcomer to the village, I had not yet learned that general distrust was a pervasive feature of village life' (1992: 159). For him, one 'characteristic of factional behavior is the discrepancy between words and action' (*ibid.*: 165). In contrast with Spiro, distrust is understood here as a product of past experiences, not a psychological inclination for factionalism.

So, what is 'it'? And what does the mouth symbolize? 'It' refers to government orders, officials' stance and to how political entrepreneurs are perceived. It is display and strategy. The 'mouth' is a mouth speaking words that align or not with acts, a Janus. Interestingly, his statement is about how words do or don't describe reality, or rather, to the incongruity between words and deeds. If power is associated with distrust, then past deeds and achievements are the counterpoint. They create a degree of legitimacy which requires time and evaluation. For Ko Kyaw, being a village headman meant evading obligations while abiding by local ethics, being responsible while dodging various forms of contention. On a day-to-day basis, he had to dissemble as he was representing layer upon layer of individuals through the institution, and not simply his own authority via the institution. The tools at hand were his family's reputation, his way of haranguing, smiling, being silent; of accepting, refusing and giving things; of forming, avoiding and manoeuvring factions; and also his manner of complying with the village big men (*lugyi*) and having a fair idea about the lines he should not cross. As one follows Ko Kyaw in his routine, it becomes clear that he does not represent the government as an entity. He gives 'arms and legs' to an institution that has a peculiar role in a network of personalities.

Village government has its own history in Myinmillaung tract. Today, it is represented by the headman, the tract clerk, the ten-house leaders and one 'official elder' (*yatmiyathpa*). Ko Kyaw, as headman of Myinmillaung tract from 2013 to 2016, was the most local embodiment of the government. Officially, headmen, called Village Tract Administrators, 'are the anchor of the GAD's² vertical role in public administration, and they effectively act as an extension of the GAD's

Township administrator who supervises them' (Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Arnold 2014: 34). Technically, Ko Kyaw was not a government employee, as he received a subsidy, not a salary, of about 100 USD a month from the Ministry of Home Affairs through the GAD. Ko Kyaw was accompanied by the village tract clerk who is, however, a direct employee of the GAD. Nonetheless, the headman is responsible for the whole tract. In addition, Ko Kyaw was heading multiple committees *de facto*.³ He took office in 2013 but was elected in 2012 by the ten-house heads who do not have official duties. They have to assist the headman in some cases, such as providing free labour for government projects until recently. Among them, some are economically important; others want to be influential. Most are simply people known for being helpful in Gawgyi. They are the pool of persons from which a candidate for headship can usually be found (Chapter 7). Typically, villages in the dry zone of Myanmar have a varying number of elderly people, also called *yatmiyathpa*, literally, 'parents of a common dwelling place'. They can also be labelled 'village spokespersons' because they are (supposed to be) recognized for their knowledge and balanced judgement. They *can* speak for the village because they are knowledgeable about it. One of them is chosen by the headman to be the official elder for administrative purposes. When Ko Kyaw was headman, the official elder was U Htay, a previous headman respected for his honesty and loyalty.

As a theoretical step in the ethnographic task of showing what the headman mediates in context, I propose to describe it in terms of embodiment and fashioning. In the language of actor-network theory (Latour 2013), headship as an institution represents the established web of connections and affiliations that an individual assumes upon becoming a headman. This entails continuously fashioning a role as headman by assembling a diverse array of things and relationships. Embodying and fashioning are simultaneous processes. Following Stewart and Strathern, I understand embodiment as a way of describing 'patterns of behavior inscribed on the body or enacted by people that find their expression in bodily form' (2011: 389) such as silences, smiles, embarrassment, distancing, or the changing of clothes. These gestures and behaviours hint at how an individual, by becoming headman, takes upon himself a legacy, a set of responsibilities and expectations. One could argue that as both a villager and an official, the headman does not merely represent an institution but serves as a node intersecting and acting upon various layers of responsibilities, networks of connections and things. In the case of Ko Kyaw, his roles extend beyond that of a headman; he also fulfills responsibilities as a son, a neighbor, a husband, a friend, a cousin and a member of the local elite. Each day, he engages with individuals in contexts of hospitality, intimacy, socializing and more, where commodities such as money, tea, betel and agreements are exchanged. Fashioning, in the sense of working with existing and improvised materials, is close to craftsmanship or

bricolage as it focuses on the act of making or practise in its broader meaning. Fashioning emphasizes the idea of giving a certain shape to something, usually a cloth, and in this case the clothing of headship. It is a way of describing how a person fashions headship by calibrating how he engages with the networks and domains that make up local politics.

In the case of Ko Kyaw in Gawgyi village, I contend that embodying and fashioning headship necessitates engaging with networks of relations delineated by uncertain boundaries between the personal, the political and the government domains. The personal domain encompasses matters where individual responsibilities and obligations hold sway, involving intimate relationships that are unique and not easily transferable to others. These range from domestic and familial dynamics to relationships of patronage and dependency. The political domain pertains to collective matters at the village level and the mechanisms by which they have been historically and presently addressed, and by whom. In Gawgyi, this domain encompasses both ‘village affairs’ (*yatywa keiksa*) and ‘social affairs’ (*luhmuyay*), engaging individuals’ responsibilities toward their fellow villagers as a group of belonging as well as a distinct form of bigness (Chapter 6). I label it the political because it serves as the standpoint for assessing the state of affairs within Gawgyi. Lastly, the governmental domain refers simply to matters necessitating the involvement of the village headman, and to the debates about how successive headmen align or diverge from one another.

How does one describe the interweaving of networks and domains of local politics without disconnecting them? Depending on the networks, the domains and the situations we focus on, we tend to interpret differently what kind of intermediary a headman is. For instance, by re-establishing the register of land ownership in the 2010s, Ko Kyaw could have been described either as a simple broker of state authority because he allowed access to formal ownership, as a patron when he paid the fees for his clients, or as a good headman if he asked everyone the legal price, thus aligning with his uncle, who was praised for his honesty when he was headman. To overcome this issue, I choose to portray a day in the life of Ko Kyaw, as the temporality of a day makes it possible to describe the interweaving of social settings in which he acts, linking different situations that therefore cannot be interpreted only in terms of patronage or brokerage. For Weber (2001), a social setting refers to the context in which interactions take on meaning to their participants, which works as a framework constituted by language, place, history, things, gestures and various procedures for qualifying action. Social settings are not reduced to physical co-presence and so, when I describe Ko Kyaw in different settings, these are also informed by chains of relationships and by mutual knowledge about past events or reputations.

In the following sections, the narrator and the reader follow Ko Kyaw during a day as a more or less omniscient character. The first part is a brief

recap of Ko Kyaw's story. The core of the text is then divided into parts of a day re-created from multiple days (referred to in each subsection). It is thus partly a fiction, but not an imaginary one. The constraint was to render daily life in a written form condensing an experience while describing how the past affects people. Ko Kyaw acknowledged that it could reflect his journey as a headman, but his normal days are usually less busy. At times direct speech is used and mostly draws from recollection of memories and notes. Indirect speech draws from the same sources. Past events and events that I have not witnessed are recalled by cross-cutting information from interviews and casual discussions.

Ko Kyaw's Background Story

Ko Kyaw comes from a relatively well-established family living in the oldest settlement area of the village. Son of the village healer, he used to follow his father in his peregrinations in Gawgyi and beyond and thus his name is quite famous locally. Since his teenage years, he has been known for being a helpful person, notably having collected donations for the hospitalization of a child from a poor family. Through the support and affiliation with Gawgyi *lugyi*, he ran for headship in 2012 against three other contenders who were from the other villages of Myinmilaung tract. Selected as headman in a context of political reformism and democratic transition, the bulk of his work was to remake the village tract families' registration list and organize the formalization of land titles. The implementation of the 2012 Farmland Law was a major undertaking for him as it entitled him to settle disputes, making him responsible for the recording of rights after several decades during which people got around the law in order to transfer rights. He also had to officialize land agreements, set up loan schemes, deal with NGOs, organize village 'security' and so forth. As a broker between villagers and government agencies, he had to find trade-offs between them, either acting as a buffer against state demands or taking advantage of his position, depending on who is talking about him. He had to fill out government injunctions, translating village realities into administrative categories. Progressively, he saw the value of not being competent in certain matters, such as land disputes, and found trade-offs between collusion and support (with officials and fellow villagers) because he was never sure of his authority in a given arena. Meanwhile, he married and became a father, implying a change in residency while opening a debate on transmission of inheritance. He also distanced himself from the local head of monks due to the latter's repeated demands for more donations. Eventually, he hosted me, acting as a gatekeeper and caretaker. Finally, in 2016, he organized the headman selection in which he found an exit from headship. From that moment on, he gradually reduced his involvement in village affairs.

While going through this chapter, the reader should keep in mind how the competition between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper, the transformations of the local hierarchy, the embodied ethical ruptures, the rise of village affairs and the issues of obligations, patronage, engagement and worthiness are shaping the local political landscape.

A Day in the Life

8am. Family Matters

Ko Kyaw wakes up a little bit later than the rest of the people living in the house.⁴ I enter through the back door and find him lying on a bench with his *puso*⁵ used as a blanket. The marital bed is right there, in the conjugal room in the southwest corner of the square-shaped living room, but Ko Kyaw sleeps on the bench because the bed is too small for him, his wife and their daughter. The living room gives an impression of controlled chaos, with items piled up to make space for the flows of daily life moving around them. A table and two more benches, used for welcoming guests and evening discussions, are encased in the northeast corner. Beside the table is an old desk, riddled with woodworm, on top of which stands a shrine to Buddha adorned every day with flowers, water and rice by Ko Kyaw's mother. The desk is surrounded by some huge green trunks full of papers, tools and pieces of metal. Next to it lie two loudspeakers, a Yamaha keyboard and several sound boxes that Ko Kyaw rents out for ceremonies. The table, desk and boxes overflow the eastern part of the living room, divided by a large path from the entrance to the back door. In the western part of the building are the beds. People always sleep with their heads pointing eastwards. A second path, leading to the separate kitchen, corners Ko Kyaw's mother's bed in the northwest. The very making and positioning of the whole housing compound, including the living room, the kitchen, the toilet and two showers (one for males, one for females), was organized a decade ago following Ko Kyaw's father's calculation to facilitate flows of fortune.⁶ Ko Kyaw's father was Gawgyi's healer and was also versed in astrology.

Ko Kyaw's mother enters the main room from the door leading to the kitchen. She has just finished the meal she cooked for herself. Earlier today she went with her pair of oxen coupled to the oxcart to plough other villagers' farm fields before the first rains. While tightening her worn *longyi*, she asks her son to give back some money, which she gave him a few days ago to visit his father in Mandalay public hospital where he is awaiting a stomach operation. He goes to the bedroom, lifts a box of clothes, opens another. He hands her the remaining banknotes she borrowed from a local money lender a week ago in order to pay for the hospital fees, the operation and the feeding of guests visiting the sick old man. When the



Figure 4.1. Inside Ko Kyaw's house, Gawgyi, 2016. © Stéphen Huard.

latter decided to go to hospital, Ko Kyaw took charge of making sure his stay there went smoothly. Since childhood, his parents had appointed him to take care of them, their health and wealth, and thus he is still living with them. This type of relation is called *adunay adusa*, literally 'living and eating together'. It emphasizes complementarity and dependency between two generations. It is never fully achieved and remains in a state of becoming. The origin and use of incomes are

central to this relationship. Ko Kyaw's father would die a few weeks later, officially from stomach cancer, though no one dies here except from sorcery or 'evil influences'. The debt related to the hospitalization will be the sole responsibility of Ko Kyaw's mother until he receives his inheritance and becomes responsible⁷ for the whole house (Chapter 5 on transmission).

Ko Kyaw drinks some tea and then goes to the small kitchen. He eats the meal cooked by his wife Ma Khin and joins me to smoke cheroots and chew betel nuts. After unplugging his phone from a battery linked to a solar panel, he checks the state of his team on his favourite game, 'Clash of Clans' (hereafter CoC). A great number of villagers, invariably male, have been playing this game for a year or so. Three years ago, only a few wealthy people had phones but now most villagers have one and use their Facebook accounts as one of the main sources of news. CoC is special. It is a collective game, yet people create individual strongholds. They then gather in a team and compete with other coalitions all around the world. Seeing her husband on his phone again, Ma Khin, upset, huffs and puffs. Ko Kyaw answers by squeezing out a smile, his best-loved weapon. His nickname – Sweet Smile – originated in that very gesture. She shouts: 'We just came back from my mother's place to live here. There is plenty to do and you're playing on your phone again!' Indeed, Ko Kyaw, his wife Ma Khin and their young daughter have been settling back into his parents' house on the east side of Gawgyi for only a few months. This place is the biggest compound in the village and is located in the oldest area of settlement. One striking feature of this location is that most of the males settle in this compound with their wives, building new houses or taking over their parents' place. While neolocal settlement is paramount in this area, fixing people in a place, whether it be marital partners, children, relatives or dependants, shows 'bigness' and influence. Ko Kyaw moved to Ma Khin's place in the western part of Gawgyi when she gave birth to their daughter. Changing houses was a manifold project. On the one hand, it was an opportunity for the baby to spend time with and receive care among his mother's family. On the other hand, it was an investment in kinship to potentially access resources (taking care of the land of Ma Khin's mother means maybe claiming part of it later). Going back and forth between both parents' places is a negotiation between Ko Kyaw, his wife and their respective families. Ko Kyaw tries to get the upper hand, forbearingly. The complaints about the time he spends on his phone are a way to gauge if he is able to amend his behaviour. Yet CoC is special to him: as well as being the current headman, Ko Kyaw is also the leader of the online village team, a team mostly composed of young males from fourteen to twenty-two years old who help him in many ways.

10am. The Game Theory

Ko Kyaw makes a phone call to his nephew and asks him to come over to prepare the forthcoming war campaign on CoC.⁸ While we put out our cheroots, the promising boy – he is majoring in geology at Monywa University – arrives on his brand new scooter, a ‘one two five’. He visits us nearly every day and is often commissioned to carry out petty tasks. The online challenge is going to be a difficult one and thus Ko Kyaw provides bits of advice to improve the attacks. CoC operates in a warlike language. A person builds a stronghold, bolsters his defences, strengthens his attacks in one-on-one battles to gain loot. Joint fights or war campaigns are climaxes. The troops – accepted beforehand by the team leader – are ranked by level. They need to combine resources to win a war in successive duels. The success of a campaign – which lasts twenty-four hours – depends on the coordination of the group, on the support of its leader and on the respect of the rules of thumb. CoC is a perfect metaphor for how a faction is built up and manoeuvred. Ko Kyaw coordinates the campaigns of his team. He shares resources with followers, advises on war strategies, provides defences and plans battles. The composition of his team is not random. Most of them are players on the Gawgyi football team and form a more or less cohesive group who have gradually become involved in village affairs.

After settling the detail of the next war campaign, Ko Kyaw asks his nephew to fetch U Min, a villager. U Min, a farmer in his late forties, arrives fifteen minutes later and the nephew, getting off his motorbike, tells Ko Kyaw that the monk wants to see him. U Min has been awaiting Ko Kyaw’s call. He has recently bought a piece of land located in the southwest of Gawgyi. One of Ko Kyaw’s main jobs after being selected headman in 2012 was, along with the land officer, to reregister individual plots for the four cadastral units composing Myinmilaung tract.⁹ He needed to gather information on nearly every plot of land for the officer. What is sensitive in U Min’s case is the location of his land. The cadastral map in question had been stolen a few years ago by the previous land officer in charge of this area, who then ‘disappeared’. In the meantime, an army officer grabbed land in order to build a poultry factory in this area. Remaking and updating the land record is thus a delicate issue.

U Min arrives at Ko Kyaw’s, who has prepared fresh betel nuts to share. I get off the bench to make way for the guest and join Ko Kyaw’s nephew sitting on a chair. U Min takes off his straw hat, removes his machete (*dah*) from the back of his *puso* and sits in front of Ko Kyaw, who initiates the discussion. Ko Kyaw offers him coffee mix – tea (literally ‘hot water’) is too casual on this occasion – but U Min refuses; he, as a real farmer, always prefers ‘hot water’. When they finally touch upon the question at hand, Ko Kyaw stands up and searches for a plastic folder in which he keeps his files. He tells U Min that the land officer will

give him the Land Use Certificate in the next few months. He adds that from his last meeting with his direct superior – the monthly meeting with the head of the Township General Administration Department – he learned that the cadastre is about to be completed. U Min nods without hope. He had tried to give some money to Ko Kyaw but the latter refused, arguing that the process is not over yet and that he had already paid the registration fee (0.4 USD). They joke about the labyrinth of institutions, offices and personalities one has to navigate to get things done, and that the prospect of compensation for those victims of land grabbing is ‘only in the mouth’. After a minute or two of silence, U Min leaves. I tell Ko Kyaw that navigating the village might be easier than government offices, but it could be tricky too. And tricky it seems to be for Ko Kyaw, notably since he became headman.

If the government authorities are a labyrinth, the village is a maze. CoC is not a mere game in this perspective. The core of the Gawgyi CoC team was assembled by Ko Kyaw when he became headman. He recruited them to convey information, to call on people and to escape the influence of his fellow villagers in petty cases. In short, Ko Kyaw minimizes the chances of being under someone else’s roof by using his group of followers. They are often sent to fetch villagers to come to Ko Kyaw’s house when he has to make new ID cards, conduct the census of family members, record people’s age, marital status, activities and so forth. Calling U Min to come to his place through the agency of his nephew was a way to limit negotiation. The place where the headman lives becomes a sort of public space. Even if Ko Kyaw casually navigates from one location to another, he avoids as much as possible situations where his position as headman could be undermined by personal relations. Thus, recruiting youngsters as intermediaries eases his tasks,¹⁰ at least in Gawgyi. There are many ways to become obliged to somebody. For instance, at his place, Ko Kyaw is the host. If he goes to U Min’s, he might have to refuse food. While accompanying me in the village, he taught me how to gauge the potential liabilities stemming from accepting or refusing presents, food or services. It mostly depends on the relations between people, their personalities, the stakes at hand and the ramifications of their relationship pertaining to past generations, kinship, service giving, grievances, accountability, debt and so on. The chances of getting trapped are greater at someone else’s house than at one’s own.

After U Min’s departure, I ask Ko Kyaw about a dispute involving people from Myinmilaung Proper. It relates to a long-lasting land conflict now in court known as the U Myo case. The Township Farmland body is about to give his verdict. Ko Kyaw tells me that both sides are going to appeal. The dispute reopened in 2013 when farmers applied for Land Use Certificates. Five plots were claimed twice. Each case involved a man named U Myo from the Budaungkan village tract next to Gawgyi. A village committee¹¹ had to handle

the cases. Created by government order to resolve any issue emerging from land titling, the Myinmilaung ‘land committee’ consists of the headman (Ko Kyaw), the land officer, the official elder of the village tract (U Htay), the leader of farmers¹² and the clerk.¹³ Three out of five members are from Gawgyi. This is how the headman and Gawgyi big men permeate crucial institutions with people from ‘their’ side. Yet, for Ko Kyaw, there is no way to settle the case. Eager to meet the protagonists of this affair, I try to convince him to go and visit some of them in Myinmilaung. He tells me that it’s not that easy. I reply, ‘Why don’t you go see your father’s “small” wife, and use this to visit friends to see if these men are around?’ I suggested this because I knew he had often accompanied his father on medical tours in the past decades, so he has acquaintances in Myinmilaung, even family. But he refused. This is due to the animosity between the villages. This antagonism has lasted for as long as people can remember, and the selection of headmen marks, like football matches and pagoda festivals, a climax in the rivalry. Hanging out in Myinmilaung Proper is not a pleasure for most Gawgyi villagers. For Ko Kyaw, who was selected over the Myinmilaung candidate, it is a matter of diplomacy. ‘So why not fetch them like you did with U Min?’ Ko Kyaw remains silent, looks at me, smiles and says, ‘It’s not easy, brother’. Any mistake could create an opportunity to challenge his authority. Myinmilaung Proper is not an area in which he is as influential as in Gawgyi, even as the headman. His nephew – listening carefully with his lips sealed – should not be involved in that.

Navigating villages thus requires a knowledge of ongoing relationships and various strategies to accommodate role, status and obligations. Recruiting the youngsters was a way of easing the handling of some affairs in Gawgyi. CoC emulates the creation of a faction led by Ko Kyaw in a space where he had achieved a degree of bigness. It is a matter of performing his duty through personal relationships while dodging potential obligations. His authority mixes his stance as a headman and as a person because of his origins, his achievements, his affiliations, the networks of patronage he navigates, those he avoids, and the challenges surrounding his tasks. Yet CoC found its limit in the bigness of other personalities and in the stakes of the ongoing land case.

IIam. Beyond the Ceremony

After finalizing the last details of the next conquest campaign on his phone, we stay for a little while talking about his father’s health, his brother’s secret lover and the latest news from the British Premier League.¹⁴ Chelsea, his favourite team, had lost. The discussion shifts to the Gawgyi football team’s failure during the last match. A relative of Ko Kyaw (at some point, most of the villagers are relatives) joins us, makes a chew of betel from Ko Kyaw’s supply and shouts:

‘Gawgyi youngsters! They all have shoes, but we lose against barefoot fellows’. A woman in her fifties arrives and stops the discussion. A premarital meeting, called *tintaungpwe*, is going to take place in Tozigon, a village nearby. She calls Ko Kyaw to come along.

Administratively, Tozigon is attached to the neighbouring tract of Budaungkan, but villagers from Tozigon conduct their weddings, Buddhist novitiates and burials with the help of Gawgyi’s villagers, institutions and the pagoda. In other words, they use and rely on Gawgyi organization of village affairs to cater for their own needs. Gawgyi and Tozigon are close neighbours, both spatially and socially. They call this *yathswe-yatmyo*. It means ‘people akin by (sharing a) dwelling’ and is made of a combination of a building block of kinship (*hswemyo*) and a reference to the common dwelling area (*yat*). Such a mix is also found in the title of village elders, *yatmiyathpa*, or ‘parents of the dwelling area’. Ko Kyaw’s mother used to live there and a high number of intermarriages occurred between the two villages before Gawgyi absorbed most of Tozigon’s population. Intermarriages, however, which also happen between Myinmilaung and Gawgyi, cannot justify why they feel bonded. Their proximity has more to do with a shared history translating into close relations between pre-eminent families of farmers whose descendants settled progressively in Gawgyi. Thus, access to land and livelihood through marriage and inheritance enabled individuals to maintain relatively good relationships and to be integrated within the same domain of social affairs (*luhmuyay*) while belonging to different jurisdictions.

The meeting is held between a family from Tozigon, marrying their daughter, and a family from another village, marrying their son. We quickly take our motor-bikes and drive to their house. There, U Lin, the head of the Gawgyi bachelors, is crouched next to the fire, preparing tea with U Htay, the main leader of Gawgyi, while sharing betel chews under the sun. In the house, several women – kin and neighbours of the bride’s family – cut cakes into pieces. Three tables are aligned. On the left one, relatives and acquaintances from the bride’s side sit, while people from the fiancé’s side sit on the right one. The spouses’ parents take their place in between, accompanied by elders from Gawgyi and Tozigon. This is the negotiation table, where U Maung operates. In this kind of situation U Maung acts as the master of ceremonies (or rituals) and it recognizes and produces his bigness (Chapter 6 on the *lugyi*). The women serve small cakes, and the men cups of tea.¹⁵ U Maung begins his address about what marriage means and how to behave for the best. This part of the speech is named *ahsaung-ama*, a generic way to describe an exhortation to follow morals.¹⁶ He then announces what both families are willing to give to the couple. The boy’s father starts talking about why he, as a daily worker, cannot provide much but that, by custom, he will pay for the wedding. Both spouses’ parents agree in front of everyone. Gawgyi traditional institutions, embodied by U Htay, U Lin and U Maung and the headman (Ko Kyaw),

facilitate and are key witnesses to such an agreement. Even if they do not do much, they have to be there. At last, the headman and the hundred-house head of the Budaungkan village tract arrive on a motorbike (Tozigon officially belongs to the Budaungkan tract). They do not come to witness the marital engagement. Rather, they come to finalize a land sale.

We finish our plate of cakes and cups of tea. As I walk towards the fire, U Lin tells me that he needs our help this afternoon at his house. We drive back

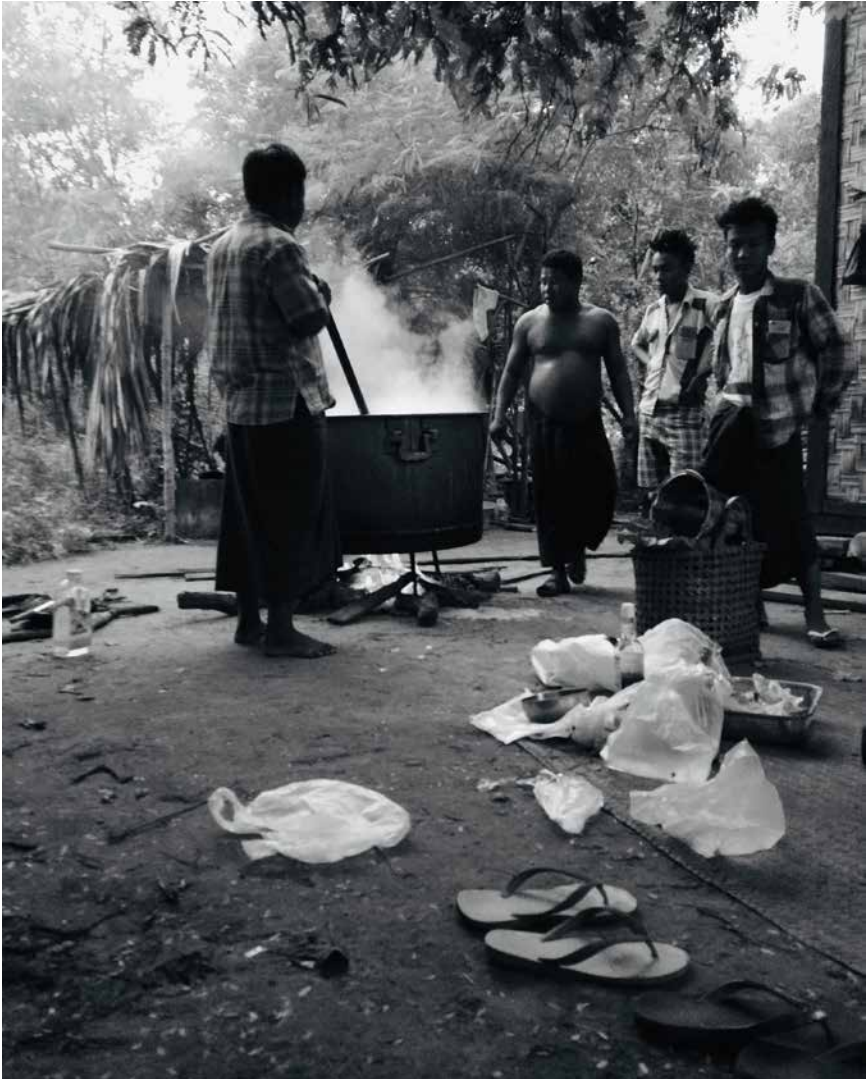


Figure 4.2. Preparing tea in Tozigon, 2016. © Stéphen Huard.

to Gawgyi, followed by the two officials from Budaungkan and a man from Tozigon, named U Htoo. This man is buying a plot of land that belongs to Daw Than, Ko Kyaw's grandmother. Because the land is located in Budaungkan tract, the signature and stamp of the appropriate headman are mandatory. U Htoo has already given her a third of the price to formalize their agreement. He is a former daily labourer who wants to start growing betel leaves. He borrowed money and sold most of his goats to buy land and a pump, to dig a well and build a bamboo greenhouse. On the way, I overhear Ko Kyaw, sitting on the back of my motorbike, confirming to U Htoo that he will provide him with the cuttings of betel soon. We stop at Daw Than's house. She is waiting with two of her grown-up children. One, a son paid monthly to farm her land, lives next door with his own family. He knows about his mother's land. The other is her last child, a daughter in her thirties, still single. She is 'living and eating' with her mother and will take charge of her estate. The stakeholders arrive one by one. As a sign of respect, they take off their slippers before stepping onto the concrete floor. I stay to one side on a bamboo chair. In a 'bossy' gesture, the Budaungkan headman asks Ko Kyaw to write the contract. The former stamps and signs it. He, or maybe his henchman, will deal with the land officer to update the cadastre. U Htoo gives the remaining two-thirds of the money to Daw Than and, following their prior agreement,¹⁷ she gives money to both the Budaungkan headman and his henchman. Ko Kyaw receives nothing directly. Akin to both contractors, he facilitates the transaction. His status, network and knowledge of land laws and contracts ensure the procedure runs efficiently.

1pm. In the Field

Once the contract is signed, Ko Kyaw goes to his house. He swaps his shirt and *longyi* for a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. His wife, Ma Khin, had come back a moment earlier from their greenhouse of betel leaves. It is harvest time, which occurs every two weeks. They pack their meal and a batch of betel nuts, cheroots, water and snacks for their workers. I help carry the straw baskets to fetch the precious green leaves. We slalom between the palm trees and finally reach the field. A group of girls and women – relatives, neighbours and acquaintances – as well as Ko Kyaw's wife's uncle – an alcoholic – have been working in the greenhouse since morning. The uncle controls the flow of water while the women collect leaves. The leaves should neither be too small nor too big, of a clear and dense green catching the rays of the dimmed sun. Picking the right ones requires sharp eyes, agile hands and bearing the pain of walking crouched down for several hours. In current times, labourers are scarce. There has been a rise in day labour opportunities in Monywa for males, notably as builders and, to a lesser extent, for females as weavers working from home. In addition, seasonal and long-term

migrations cause shortages of farm workers and raise daily wages, a situation favouring the labourer (*myaukthu*) usually seen as lower status than the farmer (*taungthu*; Chapter 2, section on transforming hierarchy). Ma Khin organizes the labourers, looks for more workers, checks their availability, sets agreements and pays them. She combines her previous network with the one she is progressively crafting out of her husband's relations. Labour relationships are thus made up of needs, opportunities and timing on a daily basis.

Now consider Ko Kyaw in his greenhouse, ploughing a furrow to ease water flows. This place and the adjacent plots enriched his extended family for decades before they were sold off, like today. He grew up there and knows every little thing around. Yet Ko Kyaw is not really a landowner. A few months later in the same location, gazing at the land he envisions for a second greenhouse, he will tell me that 'nobody owns' it (Chapter 5). Thus, he is rather a would-be owner and a farmer in-the-making. Take the greenhouse. He built it in late 2015 on his parents' land. It is a regular source of income that requires substantial capital to set up: digging a well, buying a pump, an engine and pipes, building the greenhouse and purchasing saplings. Ko Kyaw's parents supported the investment, which he reimbursed after one year of activity. Now he is planning to create a second and larger greenhouse on his own, but still on land officially owned by his parents (he did the land registration). Usually, people access land through inheritance at various times during their life (Chapter 5).¹⁸ Accessing land depends very much on family strategies. As we will see in the next chapter, the biggest dilemma is to achieve a livelihood while supporting the children to make their own later on. Relations of commensality are emphasized and partially resolve this dilemma. Ko Kyaw accesses part of his parents' estate because he is their would-be caretaker. He gradually took responsibility for organizing the farming of his parents' land along with them. Beyond mere consultations on farming strategies, their relationship also involves land sales and loan politics. Ko Kyaw smiles at me and jokes that, if he does not succeed as a farmer, he will come to France on his rototiller.

Seeing U Htoo and his wife walking around the plot they just bought some two hundred yards away, Ko Kyaw shouts over to them. 'Come eat with us!', he yells from afar. Five minutes later, they arrive with their lunchboxes. We sit there on a wickerwork tarp while the nephew joins us. Plates and dishes are gathered between us. Once again, I, an uncanny guest, am asked to eat more every time I finish a handful of rice. Each couple displays overt hospitality to the other, offering to taste that dish, this soup of beans, that salad of leaves. But everyone politely eats mostly the dishes they brought.

Ko Kyaw gives more details on when and how the cuttings of betel will be available. U Htoo and his wife need about four hundred to start and will reimburse him once they can harvest it. In short, Ko Kyaw invests in them and,



Figure 4.3. Lunch next to the greenhouse, Gawgyi, 2016. © Stéphen Huard.

beyond being cousins, it further solidifies their relationship, in which Ko Kyaw is a sort of patron. After another cheroot, several chews of betel and an umpteenth look at the ongoing war on CoC, we head back to Gawgyi.

4pm. The Big Men

Back from the field, we take a rest at Ko Kyaw's house. After an hour or so, I tell him that his uncle U Lin has asked for our help. He is currently rebuilding the roof of a shelter for his cattle. Building repairs are moments of collective help. In theory, everyone comes to give a hand, but in practice it often displays a relational engagement under the rubric of help. For this shelter, the roof, made of palm leaves, needs to be changed. Now that the main crops are harvested, most villagers do such repairs before the peak of the summer heat. When we arrive there, a small group of men are bustling around. One of them splits leaves from branches with his machete. Another, holding his machete with his feet, slices the edges of the branches and soaks them in water to make strings. The last one makes incisions in the leaves to tie the strings that will eventually be attached to the bamboo structure. The scene is familiar. These men are the ones we met earlier at the premarital ceremony. U Lin, Ko Kyaw's uncle, teacher of the village school and leader of the bachelor group, is accompanied by U Htay,

Ko Kyaw's brother-in-law and official elder, and U Maung, the most respected elder often officiating as master of ceremonies. They are the main village big men. To a certain extent, they represent a familial accumulation of leadership positions. However, as most villagers are relatives in some way, the concentration of leadership particularly reflects how a few farming families have managed to secure and gather, through alliance and descent, land, cattle and know-how, to such an extent that being an accomplished farmer (*taungthu*) is *the* valued status. When asked about what, in their opinion, makes a man (*lu*) big (*gyi*), they always emphasize propriety and achievements (Chapter 2 on the last men of *hpon*).

'You guys aren't early', U Lin mocks us. I retort with a joke I know will work: 'That's because Ko Kyaw is afraid of his wife!' They all laugh. Whereas Ko Kyaw starts slicing strings in no time, I try in vain to make myself useful and finally give up and sit down. They take a break a short moment later and engage in casual discussion. We talk about the morning's ceremony, the current change in government, fluctuations in crop prices, the next pagoda festival and so forth. I pour coffee. U Lin unpacks snacks. U Htay offers Ko Kyaw a betel chew and U Maung lights his cheroots. Tea or coffee, smokes and betel chews are the ingredients of male sociality. The offering of any of these items follows a basic understanding: *apyan ahlán*, which means 'one good turn deserves another', the ethics of living together. To some extent, assistance, help and offerings follow a simple rule of reciprocity. It is also a highly relational matter, depending on and reflecting the state of relationships. In the same vein, us coming here to give a hand shows a degree of affiliation, for the place is saturated by big men. I recall that Nash, an anthropologist working in the dry zone in the late 1950s, said that these kinds of men are not powerful. He wrote:

The *lugyi* do not set style; they do not necessarily move anyone to emulation, and they have no power, only the recognized right to use moral suasion One of the reasons these men are elderly people is that they do not overstep the vague but delicate line that separates individual responsibilities. (Nash 1965: 270)

I see them as people taking care of village matters. They make village affairs a space of commitment where the worth of the people is gauged, and thus create a political order within the village. And yet 'the vague but delicate line' is all that is on my mind at that moment. I ask: 'Why do people call you the village big men?' They laugh. 'We are not', replies U Lin. I retort, 'So why do you take care of village affairs (*ywayay okhteinhmu*)?' U Htay answers, 'Who else would do it?' A deep silence follows. Everyone gazes in other directions. After a minute that feels like an hour, U Maung teases me: 'It's not easy, young man'. Ko Kyaw smiles again, and we resume our petty discussion until he touches upon a specific subject.

They start talking about U Myo's case and Ko Kyaw gives the details of the current unfolding of the dispute (Chapter 3). Background information is required to understand it fully. In short, around 2003, eleven farmers mortgaged their land to U Myo, at that time a money lender and gambler from Mogaung. Usually, this kind of agreement (called *yahman-ngway*) does not involve interest and lasts for one to three years. U Win, the Infamous, wrote and stamped the contracts. Both U Myo and U Win have the reputation – at least in Gawgyi – of being rogues, crooked and yet powerful men. The dispute started three years later, after U Myo became headman of Budaungkan tract. Most of the farmers asked for an extension as they could not yet reimburse U Myo. He refused. The eleven farmers went on to seek resolution with U Win, who refused. They sent the case to the township authorities, who sent it back to U Win, who refused again. The situation remained at a standstill for a few years, during which U Myo and U Win were accused of having forged counterfeit contracts to turn the mortgages into land sales. In 2008, U Myo unsuccessfully attempted to get the land registered in his name. Later, six out of the eleven farmers managed to get their plots back – those of the poorest quality. The five remaining farmers awaited the successive headmen to handle the case, but no one did. The contracts, fake or genuine, stayed concealed. Nothing moved forward until the Farmland Law (2012) was implemented in Myinmilaung tract in 2013. Old grudges were revived.¹⁹ The plots were claimed for title twice so the 'land committee' had to judge the case. Ko Kyaw asked for a meeting between all stakeholders in May 2014 to reach a consensus. It failed, and the case has now been transferred to court. This was the point they touch upon while drinking coffee under U Lin's shelter.

Their gazes drop down again. When Ko Kyaw says that the court has not settled anything yet but that the odds are in the favour of U Myo, the air thickens with unspoken thoughts. Silence. Trying to find a consensus was the only way for Ko Kyaw not to be at odds with the previous headmen, with the farmers and with his superiors. It is the most common way of settling disputes. To put it simply, it is nearly impossible for headmen to engage the responsibility of previous ones. Even if in theory a headman can decide alone, Ko Kyaw simply could not take the risk or responsibility to rule on the matter by himself. This is the point, that on a day-to-day basis he has to dissemble because he represents layer upon layer of individuals and not simply his own authority via the institution. The stakeholders are too close. The past is too imbued with military-style rule. The men of power, if they were officials in the past, play the card of outright invulnerability. If they fall, others will too. Ko Kyaw is just not big enough. Nor are Gawgyi big men. The value of not being competent enables Ko Kyaw to craft the dynamics that are put upon him because of his position. He says, 'In a few months, I'm done'.

6pm. To the Teashop

When we run out of toddy leaves and betel nuts, Ko Kyaw brings me to his house.²⁰ There we resume the ongoing war campaign on Clash of Clans. The discussion stops short as his wife comes back from the field. It is time to fetch the harvest from the greenhouse. In a quick move, we get on our motorbikes and drive back to the sandy field. We pack the loaded baskets and secure them with straps. The workers eventually walk home. Later in the evening, once the yield is transformed into cash, they will come to Ko Kyaw's wife to get paid. The precious green leaves will soon be estimated in a brokering house in Monywa. Brokers²¹ and farmers often try to trick each other about prices and weights. Only after regular intercourse can they trust each other. Thus, 'having' a broker or two is an asset that farmers hardly share with newcomers, especially in this business, unless the latter (like U Htoo) depends on the former (like Ko Kyaw). Back at Ko Kyaw's house, his wife and cousin are unpacking the leaves to then clean and pack them up again with wet towels to keep them fresh. His brother joins us before the departure with a bag of betel chews to share. We carefully load the baskets once more onto the motorbikes and begin the journey towards Monywa.

Our first stop is the grocery store located on Gawgyi's main road to buy betel chews. As usual, U Htay is sitting behind the shopkeeper, close to the money box, on the high-mounted wickerwork mattress under the shade of the straw roof. At this time of the day, the shopkeeper makes betel chews as if on an assembly line. We each order a bag according to our taste. Ko Kyaw insists on paying. He is the one getting some money tonight. We resume our trip to Monywa. The shortest way is along a straight dirt track intersecting with Kyawkka Road that goes eastwards from Monywa. The dirt path was built quite recently in 2009, when U Htay was headman (2006–2011), following an ancient oxcart lane and spanning farmlands. Since this road has been built, land prices have risen on both sides of the thoroughfare and continue to escalate as it gets closer to the city centre. We come across many villagers driving back from their daily jobs. Once we reach the sealed road, we stop at the freshly built petrol station just around the corner. During the past couple of years, such stations have been mushrooming on road banks in the outskirts of Monywa. We turn westwards and pass the tollgate that nowadays stops loaded trucks only. We finally arrive at the destination. Two young men help unload the baskets. The broker warehouse is bustling, so while we wait our turn we go to a nearby teashop, keeping an eye on the merchandise. It is now up to the owner to explain to the clients why a foreigner accompanies Ko Kyaw. We politely end the discussion, for the baskets are going to be weighed.

With this bi-monthly wage in his pocket, Ko Kyaw drives us to a downtown teashop famous for its local fried specialities. Some Gawgyi youngsters, those

proactive on Clash of Clans, join us. Ko Kyaw makes a point in treating *us*, his small troop of followers, to food and drinks. He does so without being bossy. It is just normal. He got paid, so he pays. But in this case, Ko Kyaw cannot completely hide the fact that he is somehow above the others. There were no explicit expectations that Ko Kyaw would treat us. It is all implicit. Even if he does not want to be seen as a patron, his behaviour, his deeds, his experience, his age, his family and his assets put him in that position in this context. Moreover, the fact that people implicitly expect things from him and that he aligns with those expectations – he got paid, so he pays – allows him to expect things from others in return in a potentially endless game. The degree of obligation and the weight of expectations depend greatly on relationships and contexts. The same is true for daily services, sharing betel chews, cigarettes or playing Clash of Clans. At the teashop, the friendly atmosphere is emphasized to keep in mind that no hierarchy is overtly at play here. It is about having a good time. This fluidity contrasts with the more hierarchical relationships Ko Kyaw was dealing with a few hours earlier. Everyone orders tea to his taste and eats fried chicken sticks on coffee tables that fill the road as soon as the daylight fades. The waiter refills the pack of smokes as we empty it. The conversation flows from one subject to another, from lovers and university gossip to plans for improving our football team. Once sated, we spit copiously on the half-dirt, half-sealed road, a blood-like saliva produced by betel chews. When everybody has eaten, spat and smoked, and Ko Kyaw's generosity can be pushed no further, the group promptly seeks out their motorbikes parked in the heaped mass of engines and plastic.

Riding in a group is a pleasant thing. As soon as there are at least two drivers sharing a journey, people will travel side by side whenever possible. They cannot help it. We cruise back to Gawgyi, lights on, exchanging jokes, betel chews, pointing and gazing at girls, in gang-like fashion.

At Night

As we arrive back at Ko Kyaw's house, his cousin is standing in the kitchen doorway while his mother finishes her meal. The cousin has come to get her daily wage and organize the next rounds of work. Ko Kyaw passes the banknotes to his wife who vanishes into the living room, to return a few seconds later and discretely hand the cousin her salary. Ko Kyaw is reminded by his wife, for the record, that he should not spend too much in teashops. He smiles at her and pouts until she grins back. I shower and eat my dinner with him in the living room, followed by the habitual coffee, cheroots and betel. Another routine awaits us.

We walk to the village shop to buy betel chews and coffee bags before going to the house of the father-in-law of Ko Kyaw's brother in the middle of the village.

There, a small gathering occurs almost every night. Drinking coffee is the stated reason for meeting up. U Htay and U Lin are already there, reading news on Facebook. We sit on benches and U Htay pours coffee for us. When U Maung arrives, most of us cannot help but offer him our seat. We usually do this for anyone who arrives, but especially with U Maung. He is old, wise and a big man. Giving up one's seat shows deference and such politics are clues for understanding local hierarchies to some degree. It is a convivial time between relatives, neighbours and friends, although not everybody dares to join in. In short, this meeting is the small council of village affairs. A council from which Ko Kyaw will gradually withdraw as soon as he stops being headman in a few years' time.

Tonight's conversations are about a ceremony that took place a few days ago. A novice monk, a native of Gawgyi, came back to the village after successfully passing an examination in a famous monastery in Sagaing. The ceremony (called *gonpyupwe*) was organized to honour his literary prowess and to ordain him. On the road from Monywa to Gawgyi monastery, he was mounted high on the quarterdeck of a pickup in a triumphal yet dignified posture, followed by a procession of villagers. The ordination ensued in the monastery, where invited monks gathered to read Pali texts. The quality of the procession²² depends greatly on villagers, while the quality of the ordination hinges mostly on the *hsayadaw* ('head monk') of Gawgyi monastery. I know people like to gauge the quality of ceremonies, so I ask what they thought of it. They laugh about the fact that the speakers were faulty, notably when invited monks gave talks after the ritual. Most importantly, U Htay underlines the presence of a highly worshipped *hsayadaw* of a nearby village who, beyond being one of the few reading Pali, is said to have supernatural powers. This is no coincidence. Most men from Gawgyi in their thirties today were pupils of him in the past. He taught them Buddhism, morals and cosmological calculations, topics that are usually left out of school curriculums. More than a spring of merit, he is perceived as a fountain of knowledge and embodies living ethics and potency.

I discreetly tell Ko Kyaw that the Gawgyi *hsayadaw* called him today. He nods but says it is too late for this tonight. This monk is more respected because of his status than his achievements. He is the head of two monasteries given the number of years since ordination, but he hardly evokes the same sense of admiration. Rather, I noticed that many had distanced themselves from him over the last year or two, since he undertook the reconstruction of Gawgyi and Zalok monasteries. U Lin, organizer of most ceremonies, is in close contact with him and tonight spreads his word that donations of 1000 kyats per month per family would be needed to finalize the construction of a house for monks in Gawgyi monastery. 'Merit will flow from it', he says. Ko Kyaw avoids my gaze. In Zalok, on the periphery of Monywa, the meritorious donations from laypeople mostly draw from the recent rise in land prices and business opportunities, escalating in

a race for prestige and merit. They sell plots, whose value has multiplied tenfold in some cases, and sponsor sumptuous ceremonies. In Gawgyi, there are fewer donations. Land prices have risen, but not to the same extent, and most of the new buildings were founded by outsiders' donations. U Maung pours a round of tea. Nobody talks about greed or openly criticizes the monk, but the fact is that he already has a house. The general attitude is avoidance, as much as possible. If one speaks his mind, he might regret it. Rather than voice his opinion – which could be 'only in the mouth' – Ko Kyaw prefers to remain silent, and only sets foot in the monastery for the main ceremonies. Avoidance means staying away from situations where intimate conceptions contradict reality. U Htay, sensing the dilemma, openly acknowledges that it is a complex topic that Ko Kyaw is not yet at ease with. There is ambiguity in every relationship. Keeping one's mouth shut is sometimes a way to be loyal to one's conceptions.

We finish our cup of tea. I refuse an umpteenth chew, for my mouth is burning, and we head back to Ko Kyaw's. His mother, his wife and daughter are already sleeping. Alone, finally, with him and his brother, we pursue our discussion. At some point, I plainly ask him why he wanted to be headman. He does not want it anymore, but was 'pushed' by fellow villagers. For him, 'it's just not worth it', the responsibilities are overwhelming for the pay grade. I tell him that many headmen are known for being political entrepreneurs who use the position to expand their network, take bribes, to show their 'face'²³ to officials and, if manoeuvred properly, to line up for opportunities (such as the deployment of rural development funds). On the other side, Ko Kyaw insists that it means being responsible for the tract, putting in time and effort to get things done (land recording, ID cards, loan requests and so on) while, at the same time, being 'poorly' paid.²⁴ I remark that he also gets money from transactions, notably land sales, and that U Htay is renowned for refusing such transactions when he was headman (2006–2011). Ko Kyaw expands on this example.

Here is his technique. When he measures a plot and fills out contracts for relatively normal sales, the buyer or the seller will invariably ask how much they owe him. These are tests wherein everyone tries to keep face, and it shows how Ko Kyaw is always judging situations and acting in them. If he answers with a specific amount, it becomes a request that sounds like any other headman asking for money. To ward off this dilemma, he says 'give me what you want'. People give money either way, unless he strongly refuses,²⁵ and thus short-circuits the rules of the game (as did U Htay the Worthy). However, by neither refusing overtly nor asking for a specific amount, Ko Kyaw plays with ambiguity.²⁶ People have to guess on the go. It becomes a test for them. Ko Kyaw gets money and keeps face. Thus, he adjusts how he performs headship according to previous headmen's stances, how obligations are brought about, agrarian customs and the running of village affairs at large.

His brother stays silent, playing CoC with his own team whose members are from all around the country. On our side, we won the war against a coalition from South Korea. The coolness of the night invades the house as we light a last smoke before going to bed.

Mediating Domains of Politics

In late 2015, the position of headman was up for election again. Ko Kyaw decided not to stand. A first interpretation of his withdrawal could be that the time, the investment and the demands from villagers and the government were a burden. Yet, following Ko Kyaw going about his day gives a sense that headship is not the simple brokerage of state authority. Ko Kyaw stepped down to distance himself from the layers of responsibilities and chains of relations he had to deal with when he was embodying headship. This chapter has shown that headship needs theorizing not only through those times where a patron-client or a government sort of politics is on display but also through those moments that are less obviously political. It is these moments that underline how important forces, personalities and histories are. Embodying headship is as much about the times in the day when the cloth of headship is less apparent as when it is.

Historically, headmen were crucial in the control of land and people's movements, providing identity documents when a person wanted to travel or registering visitors coming into the village. In short, as they could register people's movements, crop procurements, loans and transfers of property, they were go-between for the villagers and government agencies. Thus, village headmen could be described as brokers between the villagers and the government as much as the latter tried to control people's movement and activities, and as much as people were willing to access or avoid its officials. Following Ko Kyaw for one day gives a sense that any reading of headship as patronage or as the simple brokerage of governmental authority is insufficient. Village headship is not just an intercalary position hamstrung between bureaucratic and village demands (Gluckman et al. 1949) that gives him room for manoeuvre (Kuper 1970). Gluckman's and Kuper's headmen, like Ko Kyaw, were living in a peculiar configuration of forces, personalities and histories.

The particular configuration of past dynamics in day-to-day life is key. As for Ko Kyaw, his dilemma was to align acts and words and to show trustworthiness. On a practical level, his challenge was to fashion the dynamics that are put upon him due to his position, as he did not simply represent his own authority via the institution. Situations, people's stance and strategies are informed by the past, or rather by how actors order the past into narratives. In this, trustworthiness is a matter of time and examples. The last men of *hpon*, the moral rupture between the Infamous and the Worthy, the rise of village affairs are turning points.

It constrained Ko Kyaw in his ability to be headman as much as, or maybe even more than the legal definition of his rights and duties. We have seen that previous village leaders are benchmarks against which to evaluate the morality of a time, acting as a backdrop to explain the difference between today and the past. They are references, exemplary people drawn upon to explain the ups and downs of village morality and it shows how ethical shifts influence the local configuration of power. Ko Kyaw could not display the exact qualities of a leader enumerated by Nash, just as he could not be simply a political entrepreneur. While he was headman, the men of *hpon* were gone, the government had shown its violence, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper were competing for decades if not centuries and village affairs were oriented by the local elite. He had to deal with old and new in multiple social spaces where obligations and memories influenced how he engaged with others. Ko Kyaw's craft was to be at the juncture between past and present dynamics and he was evaluated according to how, in concrete situations, he aligned or played with the local understanding of worthiness.

Following how a headman embodies and fashions headship during a day thus offers a key to interpreting the organization of the domains of local politics in Gawgyi and beyond. We started in Ko Kyaw's home to show how personal affairs can connect with collective matters. We observed how making a family was about negotiating obligations to his parents while investing in kinship to access resources and gradually assuming responsibility for the family. It required fashioning personal relations, rules and resources. More fundamentally, we saw how success in making a home can intersect with the understanding of bigness as an ability to take care of affairs beyond one's personal responsibilities and obligations towards one's family. We then touched upon how creating a small faction with a game was a way to deal with government affairs and avoid potential obligations by short-cutting rules of hospitality. By using the personal bonds that make up his clique to call someone to his home, Ko Kyaw fashioned a conducive space, diminishing the obligations that might arise from a situation of hospitality in order to embody and be the headman. We also witnessed him playing the roles of both the big man and the headman by the book during a ceremony and a land sale, to ensure they ran smoothly. This sale, which many would see as the most strategic or stressful element of his day, is perhaps the smoothest part. It is rather when his role is less clear or distinct that more work is required, such as when he updated Gawgyi big men about the ongoing land conflict. To some extent, he is bound to inform them, and show a degree of loyalty, due to their personal relations and their role in handling village affairs at a distance from the state. This sequence has also shown that he has to act within the local debate about what is political and what pertains to the government; in other words, he mediates the history of the local polity, the values attached to bigness, and the chains of knowledge about past headmen and intervillage rivalries. Ko Kyaw also appeared as a sort of patron,

more or less unwittingly redistributing wealth while sharing a good time with his followers. Being headman was not all fun and games and he mostly remained silent about it. Being silent is not being passive, but is a choice, reflecting how mediating several domains of local political life is more about actions than words.

The temporality of a day allowed me to describe the processual nature of the work involved in embodying and fashioning an institution through successive and connected scenes. This mode of ethnographic description shows how the multiple places we moved through, the individuals we encountered and the things we saw circulating can be assembled. In this journey, we moved from Ko Kyaw's home to a neighbouring village, a teashop, a field, several neighbours' houses; we encountered his family, his clique, some big men, other and former headmen; we navigated a ceremony and situations of hospitality, of exchange, of mutual help and of sociability where money, contracts, land titles, tea, betel, snacks, cigarettes and cheroots circulated. These were some of the things Ko Kyaw fashioned to embody the headman.

Focusing on how a headman engages with different layers of responsibilities and obligations in successive settings illuminates some key domains that organize local politics. One further avenue would be to compare this case with Amerindian chiefdoms – as institutions without power allowing the perpetuation of a consensus and the avoidance of an important social differentiation – or with the Oceania model of big men – those figures of entrepreneurial leaders who gather people around them in collective projects, but whose influence can collapse radically if they fail to redistribute. I prefer to focus on the capacity deployed in action rather than reifying political types. This suggests a position from which we might reconsider what a political institution embedded in a local society mediates. By distinguishing the personal, the political and the government domains, I propose a move from the interactionist understanding of local politics as made up of levels, arenas or forms of governance, towards enriching the understanding of brokerage as assemblage (Koster and van Leynseele 2018) with a more pragmatic approach to the enactment of politics and mediation. In line with Lindquist, for whom 'the problem of how to describe and conceptualize what the broker mediates is ... primarily ethnographic' (2015: 174), the first step I proposed was to think of headship in terms of embodying and fashioning – taking upon oneself and dealing with – as simultaneous processes that can be described. Only then does the question of how a headman embodies and fashions an institution lead to the question of what a headman mediates, in Ko Kyaw's case the domains of local politics.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in 'Embodying and Fashioning Headship: A Day in the Life of a Village Headman in the Center of Myanmar', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 12(2) (2022).

2. GAD stands for General Administration Department, usually seen as the ‘backbone’ of the military government which oversees local governance from the village and ward levels to the Union level, dealing with people’s day-to-day needs including registration of births and deaths, land management, tax collection and budget planning.
3. Notably the Village-Tract Land Management Committee. For a study of this committee, cf. Boutry et al. (2017: 250).
4. This part of the day relates to the morning of 26 February 2016.
5. *Puso* is the name of the long skirt worn by men.
6. For a detailed examination of how space can be organized according to local cosmology, see Robinne (2000).
7. On the fact that transmitting inheritance is more about taking responsibility for a family than a transfer of ownership, see Huard (2018).
8. This subsection refers to 15 November 2015, when Ko Kyaw was finalizing the deliverance of Land Use Certificates.
9. Following the Farmland Law passed in 2012, Land Use Certificates had to be handed to farmers. The affair was long and troublesome. For a general description of the scheme, cf. Boutry et al. (2017).
10. It also shows his ability to bridge younger and older generations and it gives the youngsters an opportunity to experience adults’ affairs.
11. The committee is officially named VTFMC or Village-Tract Farmland Management Committee.
12. A position created by the 2012 Farmland Law and staffed by Ko Kyaw with a villager from Gawgyi.
13. Staffed directly by the government several years ago with a villager from Myinmilaung Proper.
14. This subsection and the two following (1pm and 4pm) happened on 28 January 2016.
15. These expenses are covered by the parents of the fiancé and bought in advance by U Lin, leader of bachelors.
16. *Ahsaung ama* also refers to monks’ sermons and the promotion of Buddha’s teaching at large.
17. The amount given to headmen for such a service is usually 10% of the land price.
18. This could happen on marriage or a little before or after the death of one or both parents depending on their plan and the stakes associated with the patrimony; see Huard (2018).
19. For an analysis of this type of land conflict, see Boutry et al. (2017: 142–47).
20. This subsection and the next are drawn from events that happened on 19 May 2016.
21. *Pwesa*, literally the person making a living from connecting people.
22. This also includes the facilitation of the whole ceremony (cooking food for guests and monks, building the temporary structures and so on).
23. An interesting parallel can be found in Koenig (1990: 157) when he analyses corruption under the Konbaung dynasty.
24. His salary is 120,000 MMK per month (less than 100 USD). Minus compulsory purchase of government newspapers and stationery, his monthly income totals 100,000 MMK, the same as a daily worker on a construction site in Monywa in 2015.
25. This money is also given to ensure a change of ownership in official records.
26. Spiro (1997) shows a similar pattern when describing how Township Officers in 1960 used the rhetoric of help to talk about bribes.