# 7

## Coda

## Choosing a New Headman

At the end of December 2015, after the NLD's landslide victory in the national election in November, the village headmen from the township of Monywa gathered at an official meeting and received instructions from the township GAD administrator to organize elections for new headmen. To that end, Ko Kyaw had to arrange the selection of new 'ten-household leaders' for each village of the tract because, as was the case in 2012, they would be the ones voting. It is a double process of selection because candidates for headship should first be selected as ten-house leaders. Ko Kyaw went to Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon to meet and inform their elders, current ten-household leaders as well as the clerk a few days later. The politics of headman selection was thus put into motion. In Gawgyi, the word was spreading by nightfall. The headman was about to change.

A few years back, in 2012, Ko Kyaw was Gawgyi's candidate. He ran for headship after a year of confusion. U Htay's withdrawal from the office after a five-year mandate, and his refusal to be a candidate again, led to a crisis in 2011. In that year, the new government of Thein Sein called for a new round of elections following its pro-democracy agenda. In Myinmilaung, that 'election' was chaotic. Most of the ten-house leaders of the village tract refused to participate and, allegedly, nobody wanted to be a candidate after U Htay. A couple of hours before the arrival of township officials, an official elder from Ogon called all the villagers to gather in Myinmilaung monastery. A few came. The elder preselected three candidates, one from Ogon, one from Mingalagon and one from Myinmilaung. Gawgyi was not represented. Villagers voted by show of hands. U Yin, from Myinmilaung, was thus chosen. In late 2012, a new round

Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 213.

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of elections was called, allegedly due to electoral fraud in Yangon. This time, all the ten-house heads were present and voting instructions were given. Under the patronage of U Htay, votes from Gawgyi heads were pooled for Ko Kyaw. He totalled fourteen, Myinmilaung thirteen, Ogon two and Mingalagon also two. Ko Kyaw took up his duties a few months later in 2013.

We could use the word 'selection' instead of 'election' to qualify the process of choosing a headman. This would highlight how handpicking, electing and justifying are all processes of selection across particular settings. When Ko Kyaw was selected headman in 2012, it was, according to him,[1] the first 'democratic' election in the tract. The relative population of villages, and the ability to compound votes, were the primary elements of this competition. There is a variety of stakes (one-upmanship, brokerage with officials, containing factionalism, displaying bigness) and people (competitors, elders, clerks, ten-house leaders, township officials) associated with headman selection. Because of the particular state-like quality to the office of the headman, it has typically been more in the interests of the state than the local population to have it. Nonetheless, most villagers want a headman who comes from their village. It can attract loans, NGOs, development funds for electricity, water and roads. It can also smooth the processes for securing land rights and agricultural support, for instance. It facilitates relations with government agencies and adds to village prestige. Having a headman from one's village – and its associated perks – is something to fight for to a certain extent. Even more so when such selections are climaxes in a sort of contest between Myinmilaung Proper and Gawgyi.

Prior to 2012, except for the 1960s, there was more artistry in the way headmen were selected. Generally speaking, they were either handpicked by the government (usually by a military officer; Thawnghmung (2003: 308) or elected by elders upon consensus. Sometimes, following precolonial practices, heredity was prevalent, the office was for life and thought of as a family duty. As in precolonial times, however, competition for office was paramount, and patronage and factionalism the main political dynamics. Often selections were justified *a posteriori*, emphasizing the achievement of this or that person, his charisma, his natural authority. The actual conditions in which the office of Myinmilaung headship was transmitted are always blurred. The only common point between the selections of most of the headmen is that they happened quickly. In other words, there was never one rule for selection but only peculiar cases in which procedures were barely involved. Such cases depended more on the history of the place, the balance of power, the personalities involved, the control of land, labour and taxation and extra-local events (such as the colonial 'pacification' of the countryside, the communist insurgency, the socialist turn, the military hardening post-1988). Collecting information about these successions is difficult, as shifts between headmen often reflect tensions in Myinmilaung tract. Even if the 2016

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case can be coined an 'indirect election', because all of the ten-house heads had a vote, the actual emergence of these heads and potential candidates was controlled by village big men to some extent. The concept of election carries a sense of free choice that is too loaded with the Western idea of democracy, such that its use misrepresents local political dynamics.

For this reason, the selection of a new headman which I witnessed in early 2016 weaves together the main conundrums that have been dealt with throughout the book. This coda is about two crucial days which I describe in an open-ended perspective. This writing strategy allows the reader to see how the history of the political landscape and the forms of engagement connect in a single situation. I use the present tense to render the events alive.

## Preparing the Scene

The eve of the vote is upon us when Ko Kyaw begins the selection of the ten-house leaders. The window of time is short, so alliances cannot be built up easily. To win, they must gather votes for only one candidate. The problem is that nobody really wants to be that man, at least at first.

Around 4pm, Ko Kyaw and I go together to U Maung's house. There, they discuss the listing of household heads with a list prepared in advance. It is incomplete. They call on two other people: the village teacher, U Lin, and the official elder, U Htay. The reason they are in charge of the selection is because of their role in local politics and it displays their bigness. After discussing petty issues, they start making another list of village houses by groups of ten. The school teacher is the main reference for the listing, due to his extensive knowledge of the villagers and his proven ability as an organizer. The other three men help to fill in missing names. 'Oh, and on that side, near U Thu, what is her name… yes, yes, Daw Yee.' The grouping of houses on the list reflects the mental geography of the village, which is split into three main parts, following the main roads created during settlement. These include the northeast, the southeast and the western parts (the latter being the last area to be settled).

U Maung and U Lin become vote collectors for the next few hours while U Htay and Ko Kyaw remain at a distance. I go with the first two and we walk from the furthest east side down to the west part, to finally reach the northeast the following morning. The distribution of houses by groups of ten is quite natural for the southeast side of the village but more difficult in the last settled area. It is easier to group people who are closer, kin and neighbours, in the area that was settled long ago. It is rather less natural in the western part, notably the northwest, because it is mostly composed of newer individual houses, where affiliations and descent are not as clear. In the northeast, collecting votes is also complicated. Most of the *lugyi* live on the southeast side of the road. In the northeast live a

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few important families, notably big land owners. They often stay out of official representation but have their say in village affairs.

As we collect the votes, people are amused by my presence and many are surprised to have to publicly choose a 'responsible' man for a more or less virtual group of ten houses. In practice the collection goes as follows: the vote collectors visit every house, one by one, asking to see the house head. They quickly explain the process to their host and show them the group to which they belong on a list displaying the names of the household heads, which they choose from. The collection is quite easy in the southeast part. Votes are generally influenced by collectors, notably when the head of the house is absent. I try to be transparent as much as I can. Often a child who knows how to write inscribes the 'selected' name. Sometimes the collector writes it himself after getting the agreement of the family. Slight changes of intonation while reading out names from the list emphasize the 'good' one. Direct indication in favour of the person that is suitable is also commonplace. Villagers often ask who to vote for, most of them showing little interest in the process, wondering why they are involved. This is not the case for those who are already ten-house leaders, those seen as important villagers or families, such as big farmers or respected elders, and those active in village affairs. With them, the collectors spend more time showing them the list and explaining the situation while sharing a moment to chew betel nuts and drink tea. Women are often asked for their vote, but even if many are, in practice, considered as household leaders, none are on the list. They are inevitably excluded from local politics, apart from credit, health, school and monastery groups, because men monopolize the formalization of politics. Overall, it seems that villagers are not used to this 'democratic' process. It seems it is the first time they have had to express such a choice. Even though it is an unimportant issue for most, votes are collected in a hurry with great skill.

As I wake up the following morning, I realize that I have been deliberately set aside from vote collection in the northeast part of the village. The person who emerged as Gawgyi's candidate comes from this area and is from an old lineage of large farmers. The history of the settlement of this village, from a central node divided in three, is woven together by kin and neighbour networks with room for dissent due to old conflicts concerning land disputes, gambling, donations and money lending. These elements are critical in the listing of people. Most of the individuals who were projected to be ten-house leaders were already known before the vote collection. At one level, their selection is an administrative formality to be achieved by vote collectors. At another level, there are reasons why this or that person is selected. Six out of the fourteen ten-house leaders are from the southeast part, due to its high density of population, but also to a stronger hold on village politics by the people living there (where the current village

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leaders mostly come from). Thus, the whole process is about filling as many positions in the social hierarchy of the village as possible, and acknowledging or pressing people to select the number of ten-house leaders required by the government. Who are these leaders?

Most, but not all, are people known for taking collective responsibilities such as managing water delivery and fee collection, gathering people for road repairs, helping at events related to the monastery, and sometimes resolving small disputes if they are influential enough. A typical example is someone who engages in village affairs. However, most do not want to take on official responsibilities. Ko Kyaw summarizes the selection of these leaders with a metaphor: 'If you press, it will spring out', in other words, put their back up against the wall. They do not bear many formal duties; they assist the headman in some cases such as providing free labour for government projects in the past or electing him today. None of them are particularly known for being helpful. Some are economically important, such as big farmers who stay involved in village affairs by keeping an eye on local politics in the Myinmilaung tract because it is at this level that state institutions empowered to channel access to land can be controlled. Others want to become influential, and climbing the government ladder is one way of achieving this. A few are backed by a portion of influential villagers interested in having a headman who will be compliant. In Gawgyi, most are simply people known for being helpful and good, agreeing to be somehow responsible for the village to a certain extent. Therefore, while the vote collectors have to fill out the numbers, the chosen persons are a blend of important, involved or interested men who are able to be ten-house leaders. Overall, this group is the sublayer of the local elite which takes care of village affairs at large. The most stable and important ones – the men organizing the vote collection like U Maung, the school teacher and U Htay – keep their distance from government agents and bodies while being trusted by most villagers. This distance is a result of how local affairs (beyond state interests) became the form of local politics at the turn of the twenty-first century after decades of disengagement by the military regime.

At this stage of the selection process, Gawgyi *lugyi* act as checks and balances, reinforcing their authority by taking care of the process. They make the selection by taking into consideration the main elements of local politics: the mental geography of local hierarchy, the interests of the main villagers, the degrees of involvement of potential leaders and the issue at stake: controlling headship against Myinmilaung. What one should bear in mind is that having a 'good' headman is advantageous to access officials, to avoid extra fees for land registration, to be included in development projects (water, electricity, roads, loans and so on), to have a buffer against government policies if the headman knows how to deal with officials and so forth. There is also a long history of successive headmen whose personalities (or memories of their personalities) reflect

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how villages coped with various levels of power. There is an apparent contradiction between the fact that the selection of the ten-house leaders was experienced by most as an unimportant matter and the fact that it was crucial for these *lugyi* to handle it properly. It shows that such handling becomes an important way of demonstrating one's skill or bigness.

## Competing for Candidacy

It's D-Day. The second list is finished. U Maung and the school teacher arrive at Ko Kyaw's house. They make a third list because U Htay does not want to be on it. They erase his name and choose another person instead. They ask me to write this person's name on the new list. It feels like cheating in an exam. The final version is now completed and polished. Among the fourteen names on the piece of paper, one will be Gawgyi's candidate. Overall, the ten-house heads selected today are mostly the same as those chosen in 2012 by U Htay, but no one has yet emerged as *the* candidate. And no one has openly campaigned for it in the past days.

The group of men is called to the headman's house at noon to agree on one name. They arrive gradually. Discussing who might be headman is something of an issue. The school teacher and U Maung are no longer present. The ten-house leaders check the list. The discussion goes from jokes to complaints about the difficulties in finding a good person: someone able and willing to take on such a responsibility. Those who want to are often discredited as unfit, lacking personal skills or distrusted by others. The required skills include literacy, ability to appreciate general and specific issues, capacity to understand new and old generations, good knowledge of the intricacies of life outside the village and in the region, and finally skills to be able to negotiate with everyone, officials and commoners alike.

Two points hold the most importance. First, it is clear to all, and U Htay insists upon it, that the fourteen votes should be grouped under a single candidate. Because the selection is based on the number of ten-house leaders per village, as in 2012, they must vote collectively to keep control of the headship. Ko Kyaw has sensed that this time, unlike 2012, the villagers from Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon are going to pool their votes too. Second, the candidate should not be too rigid. In Gawgyi, the inner factions might choose one man over another if he is manoeuvrable to some extent. This was what Gawgyi big men did when patronizing the emergence of candidates: they prepared the scene before the show.

Candidacy emerges either from an individual's will or from collective coercion. While it is possible to impose this charge on some people, it is impossible for others due to their 'bigness'. This shows that headship is but one level of

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local politics. For instance, concerning the 2012 selection, Ko Kyaw says that he was half-forced to be a candidate and half-willing to become headman. Yet people like U Htay (who had been headman and who withdrew his name from the list) cannot be pushed forward. U Maung (who agreed to be ten-house leader) never positioned himself as a runner. These *lugyi* choose to stay away from official positions as much as possible. The school teacher also stays out of the competition because he already has a government job. During the meeting at Ko Kyaw's house, two men stand up as candidates for Gawgyi.

The first is U Han, a man in his late thirties known for always being helpful in village affairs, notably for road repairs or managing water distribution. He is also the head cook for ceremonials, the person entrusted to control the handling of food pots.[2] A relative of Ko Kyaw, he always lends a hand in preparing weddings and donations. Furthermore, he is the village *hsounhsaya*, or 'master of ghosts'. Despite his rather low influence against underground magic, he protects villagers' lives to some extent. However, he is not yet considered a *lugyi*. Why not? There is no clear-cut answer to this. He is one of the largest farmers in the village, but he allegedly has poor negotiating skills, especially with officials, and lacks writing proficiency and general knowledge. Ko Kyaw backs him anyway. They have developed and entertained mutual trust and support for several years in the management of village affairs, but Ko Kyaw supports him principally because he does not want to become a candidate again himself. He wants to exit headship. Therefore, he stands for U Han even if he doubts that he could be a 'good' headman. During the meeting at Ko Kyaw's, U Han is set a little aside and subject to a profusion of jokes ('Go away, we need to discuss serious matters!', and the like).

U Thein is the second candidate. He runs a shop in the southeast part of the village and is also related to Ko Kyaw. The son of a big farmer who is absent from most village events, he is not known for being helpful or involved in village affairs. On the contrary, he is rather notorious because he bribed a woman to avoid having to acknowledge the paternity of their child even though he was already married.[3] He is nonetheless literate because his parents invested in his education. In addition, he has been a ten-house leader for many years. However, U Thein did not come to the meeting at Ko Kyaw's house. For the ten-house heads, this is a clear move: U Thein will run for candidacy. His absence could be perceived in two ways. Either he will accept whatever the group decides, or he disagrees. It is obvious to everyone that it is the second option, but no one says a word. While eating the cheese and dry sausages I brought, they gradually agree unenthusiastically on U Han. But the game is not over.

On our way to the office in Myinmilaung, we come across U Thein arguing loudly with fellow villagers near the shelter at the north edge of Gawgyi, past the housing area before reaching the monastery and the school. We stop our

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motorcycle. The real negotiation for candidacy is about to begin. The location is interesting. It is at the edge of Gawgyi, but still within it. The shelter is outside the jurisdiction of any house and thus free from personal obligations. In comparison, the house of the headman was not a neutral area and U Han received support there due to his affinity with Ko Kyaw. U Thein chooses to wait at the shelter, which offers no hold through personal affiliation, except that of Gawgyi village. The discussion[4] lasts for about ten minutes and is a rare moment of politics being openly discussed in the village.

'I don't want to do it,' says U Thein as we reach the shelter, answering the few men who are already there. After we park our motorbikes, some other men insist on the fact that the future headman must improve the development of Gawgyi. Ko Kyaw, entering the debate, acknowledges U Thein's candidacy as he tells him directly: 'We need to choose a person that is capable. Can you do it? You will lead as you want'. U Thein replies that he does not claim to be the candidate. I realize, almost incredulous, that I am assisting in a political squabble. Another man in the background says that, actually, U Thein does want to and can do it. U Thein then starts a tirade about his worries of being stuck between his own business, his family and headship.

U Thein's candidacy is now official. He positions himself as if under coercion from his peers. U Han does not interfere in the discussion at any point. He has just lost his chance and I can see on his face that he has resigned as a candidate. U Thein monopolizes the discussion, but he has yet to be entitled.

A debate starts about whether or not the chosen candidate will have to select the leader of the bachelors' group and the official elder (which are pivotal positions in organizing village affairs, ceremonials and accessing collective properties). One group argues that if 'the one who wants to be headman' does not state his choice now, then his word would not be respected later on. This group wants U Thein to position himself, to garner support among the villagers and his faction, and to see if he will follow the directions given by the main *lugyi* who occupy such positions. Other men reply that such questions can be tackled later, insisting that U Thein answer clearly whether he wants to be the candidate or not. U Thein does not clearly acquiesce. Not yet. The standstill ends when a man says: 'If you [U Thein] don't want to do it, then we will send a report [to the township authority] and we will choose again later'. Everybody starts talking at once, the voices melting into each other. I feel almost invisible among them. Finally, a consensus is reached. They will back U Thein: 'Ok, you do it, you do it. You can do as you want [i.e. select the leader of bachelors and official elder that suits you], we choose you'.

Ko Kyaw's phone rings. The men stop talking – the village tract clerk in Myinmilaung is asking when they will arrive, and they do not want him to overhear what is happening. When he gets off his phone, they start arguing about

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whether or not the headman will have to make decisions collegially. The debate is now if and how the ten-house leaders will have a say in village government. An old man reminds the group that they had already chosen U Han and, addressing him directly, tells him that he can govern alone. Others, notably the younger men, argue for negotiations to take place. 'But it can't happen,' retorted another. Ko Kyaw intervenes to smooth things over. He says that the headman can change things, that from his own experience it is difficult to make decisions, it is not as simple as people think. To round up the debate he declares that 'you guys don't want to lead and don't want to follow'. The argument also focuses on the critical balance between getting money from headship and being unpopular for taking it. This directly refers to past experiences with different headmen and officials, some such as U Win, 'the Infamous', being well known for taking bribes and U Htay, 'the Worthy', for refusing any payoffs while in office. Ko Kyaw reorients the conversation to avoid this issue, saying that a headman's salary is not high, but that U Thein could try it.

'We now have a candidate, chosen by me,' shouts an old leader. U Thein's candidacy is backed. The backers seem to form a different group from those who supported Ko Kyaw. The authority of the current big men might change in the future, but that is not an issue for now. The rest of the group talks loudly for a while. One man expresses his feeling that the impending situation (the change in national government) will be difficult to handle. Ko Kyaw answers that it is not as bad as he thinks. He says that what a headman does is little more than taking care of the village and that responsibilities are even lighter than before. Another man loses patience: 'We don't care about this. The important point is to get the headman in Gawgyi'. From that moment on, the need to pool the fourteen votes unites their opinions. The same person then directly asks U Thein: 'Will you do it? If yes, say it! I am tired of doublespeak'. A heavy silence reigns for a few seconds and finally U Thein says: 'I will do it!'

The name of the candidate has changed. U Thein is now entitled. He has said it, so he is engaged towards the others. We all get back on our motorbikes and head towards the office in Myinmilaung Proper. As we are about to leave, a man shouts from behind us: 'Ko Thein! When we arrive, don't change your mind. If you do, we'll beat you'.

## Against Myinmilaung Proper

The government office in Myinmilaung Proper was built in 2005 on a previous cemetery at the crossroads of four villages (map 0.3). The boundaries of the tracts are not visible but are intimately related to the evolution of these settlements. The building is the 'front' of the Myinmilaung tract as a jurisdiction, but the content of politics lies in people's relationships, not in the building, which is almost always

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closed. Concerning the cemetery, there is a rumour that a previous headman, U Win, wanted to take this land for himself and sell it but then changed his mind and built the office. Gawgyi villagers spread around the office as we arrive. I follow some of them inside the nearby teashop. Sitting there, some men exchange courtesies with the locals, many of whom they dislike. U Win is there, sitting in the back, watching the scene from a distance. Most Gawgyi men do not dare go inside the teashop. Only those who are confident enough walk in. U Maung, U Lin and Ko Kyaw are among them. There, we wait for the arrival of township officials, staying semi-silent, sharing edgy smiles and chewing betel compulsively.

Three officials finally arrive in a big black truck. As they walk into the teashop, everyone stands up. I stand too and catch their gaze. My presence is not expected, but my companions are not worried about it. Bit by bit, it all becomes formalized. The two main officials, the chairman of the Township General Administration Department and a person from the Education Department, sit and talk with Ko Kyaw and the clerk. The latter is showing off. He sits – is seen sitting – at the 'biggest' table during this interlude. Ko Kyaw, my host and the one organizing the election, is rather pleased. He is finally about to give up the position to another man. The government representatives drink their tea very slowly. Everyone glances warily in their direction every now and then. It is like watching sand run through an hourglass, measuring the time of the meeting. Once the cups are empty, everything is ready. The village headman pays the bill quickly – officials are always paid for when they come to villages. The election is about to start.

Under the tin roof of the office, the township chairman stands behind a table, facing the voters. These are the ten-house leaders from the respective villages included in the Myinmilaung village tract. They sit on a plastic tarp spread out on the floor, a common position adopted during meetings, teaching and preaching. On the left side sit Gawgyi men, with people from Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon to the right. Both groups face the table. Around the table are posted an assistant, the clerk and the official elders. Among the latter, the absence of U Htay is felt. The chairman talks about the election process, asking who cannot write. Polite and respectful during this occasion, he allows a foreigner to assist in a democratic election while looking at me some ten metres behind the scene.

The election goes on. The clerk calls the voters one after the other. The person stands, takes a piece of paper, goes to another table and writes down the name he wants, folds the paper and gives it to the chairman who puts it in a bowl. Finally, the chairman picks up each piece of paper one by one, reads the name aloud, shows it to the audience to prove that there is no cheating, and makes a chalk line on the blackboard. Only two names appear. U Thein, from Gawgyi, gathered fourteen votes, while U So, from Myinmilaung, got seventeen.

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The ten-house leaders from Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon have compounded their votes against Gawgyi, as predicted by Ko Kyaw. Last time, there were four candidates and Ko Kyaw won. The men on the right applaud. On the left, Gawgyi villagers growl. Anger rises, but they remain quiet. We quickly go back to the motorbikes.

A stone flies in our direction. A young man, allegedly a fool, has thrown a rock at us. In seconds, members of our faction armed with stones and sticks ask the offender to come closer. But nothing further happens. The atmosphere is tense; Gawgyi has been defeated. The sound of roaring engines fills the scene. Once back in the village, we stop at the shelter to comment on the defeat. They have the feeling of having been screwed. 'They must have been paid for it,' exclaims one of the men, referring to the previous election when votes were divided between four camps. They ask each other if there is a way to change the repartition of voters, as they will always lose if it stays this way. Then everyone goes home.

* * *

To some degree, in Gawgyi, this election was a matter of choosing a broker by manoeuvring electoral rules and village factions under the watch of big men who guide local affairs and keep their distance from the state. Let us ask a blunt

**Figure 7.1.** The 2016 selection of the headman at Myinmilaung office. © Stéphen Huard.

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question. Why does the selection of the headman turn out to be a competition between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung Proper? It may be related to the stakes associated with the control of headship. At large, it facilitates access to government officials and projects which in turn help channel access to wealth. Each village tract has its own stories and history. In our case, angry outbursts are signs of contained disputes. It is something other than a simple fight for an institution. To understand why the 2016 election happened this way, we can connect it to how the political landscape was fashioned, to how each village justifies its presence in this landscape, to the fact that both settlements have competing narratives of foundation. In the same vein, if headship is a position of power within a village tract, we have seen that it was a colonial institution, bounding several villages under a single jurisdiction, and embodied differently by successive men.

Another point relates to the positioning of Gawgyi big men during the election. They engage in village affairs and monitor the emergence of a Gawgyi candidate. They also represent the elite of village farmers, the top of the local hierarchy. To some extent, this relates to how controlling local state institutions has helped to consolidate this hierarchy, especially since the socialist period. Looking back at them during the election, why do they keep a certain distance from the state? Why does a person like U Htay, the main leader in Gawgyi who has been headman in the recent past, stay away from the 'scene' of the selection but is present in its background? We have located the moment when village affairs became the main form of Gawgyi politics and how certain personalities in specific contexts embodied trustworthy leaders against a background of state violence and disengagement. This allows us to think about current politics, such as how current ceremonies are performed or how conflicts are settled, in terms of engagement towards the collective, that is, in terms of what became a critical stake in daily life. Thus, the positioning of Gawgyi big men during the 2016 selection connects with how the worth of leaders happened to be gauged and to the transformation of the local hierarchy.

The last point concerns Ko Kyaw's demeanour. This selection was for him a way to exit village headship. He was tired of it. Of course, becoming headman was for him an avenue for one-upmanship, but he was content with the idea that he would not have to cope with multiple personalities and obligations for much longer. He was never sure of his authority in this or that arena and had to adjust his stance, dissemble and engage with the previous headmen, Gawgyi big men, officials, neighbours and family in a dense social landscape. This tells us that embodying political institutions in a rural society means being a node intersecting and acting upon multiple layers of responsibilities, obligations and chains of relationships. It requires engaging with networks of relations delineated by uncertain boundaries between political domains that organize local politics.

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## Notes

1. 'Democratic' headman elections were held in the 1960s (Chapter 3).
2. This is important considering that most acts of witchcraft are allegedly carried out through food offerings.
3. Being engaged for Burmese males does not mean it is socially forbidden to have another 'wife', but having other children without being married and not assuming responsibility for the children (paying for food, schooling, Buddhist novitiate etc.) is seen as immoral and indicates the character of the person.
4. The dialogue and its main themes are reconstructed from recollections and discussions about this moment with some participants and from my field notes.

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