

## CONCLUSION

### History, Power and Violence

The main theoretical conclusion this work points towards is that the ways in which people calibrate their engagement with each other is a key political process. It allows us to see how continuities are made of transformations. The book departed on a journey through history leading to the ethnographic present of situations encountered during fieldwork. The intention was to trace the development of village headship over time before introducing the reader to the social and moral forms of leadership underpinning day-to-day life in Gawgyi village. By now, I hope to have shown that local politics cannot simply be seen as a series of institutions, but is rather understood as the latest episode in a long history of ideas, practices and personalities in which a particular sedimentation of the past is present.

#### **Fashioning the Political Landscape**

The historical part of the book has described how the configurations of power have transformed in a place. One major historical insight is that the colonial period should not be configured only as a rupture. A considerable metanarrative about the impact of colonial rule on Burma draws on the notion that the introduction of the headman and village system was traumatic and transformative and that it completely destabilized existing authority by removing traditional elites and reorganized space and land around new lines. By suggesting that the operation of traditional elites was less homogeneous than this narrative requires, and that the local conflicts around who possessed authority, its limits and operations, was a pre-existing framework onto which the headman system became attached rather than was displaced by, this work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of historical continuities and changes. In addition, the social memory of division

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between two villages shows historical relations to be fraught with tensions and contests that relate as much to precolonial structures as to a reconfiguration of village system boundaries during and after colonialism. The legacy of this older relationship remains inscribed even until today, while the meanings attached to the figure of the headman have also evolved through time and in relation to the wider politics of local and national domains.

By focusing attention on the local operation of power and its everyday practice, the book also helps us to move away from a simplistic dichotomy between the so-called ‘highlands’ and ‘lowlands’ in Burma/Myanmar. The Anya political landscape was predicated on that dichotomy: as a ‘lowland/valley’ society (in contrast to ‘uplands/hill’ societies), it was characterized by non-unilineal kinship (vs. patrilineal), charismatic despotism (vs. hierarchy), Buddhism (vs. animism), rice agriculture (vs. slash and burn), and by the presence of a state (vs. anarchism). Yet, messy political processes are what uplands and lowland landscapes have in common. In this book, I have shown that instead of seeing power in lowland areas as coherent and institutionalized, it rather appears subject to constant negotiation through local knowledge systems relating to kinship, history, morality, responsibility, obligation, powerfulness and powerlessness. In many ways, this argument challenges the idea of ‘state power’ running seamlessly through institutions into a local setting via the figure of the headman and presents as messy a daily landscape as seen *elsewhere*.

If one follows Nugent’s (1982) and Friedman’s (1998) critiques of Leach’s oscillatory model (1954),<sup>1</sup> this ‘elsewhere’ could very much be found in an upland society such as the Kachin. Nugent has shown that no historical evidence can be found of a political order oscillating between autocracy (*gumsa*) and democracy (*gumlao*). Instead, the rise of *gumlao* orders in the late nineteenth century was mainly related to the disruption of the regional economy which hindered *gumsa* chiefs’ capacity to control and redistribute essential resources such as ‘opium, slaves and tolls from the trans-frontier trade’ (1982: 523). There was also a tendency to conflate these political orders with the prerogatives of their leaders. A *gumsa* (autocratic) chief became the sign of a *gumsa* order whereas a headman with no real binding powers was a proof of the existence of a *gumlao* (rebellious) order.<sup>2</sup> The nature of a leader to some extent came to infer the nature of an order. Yet there seems to have been much confusion in how colonial powers identified and recognized political institutions in Kachin,<sup>3</sup> partly due to the economic and political changes brought about by ongoing conflicts in Upper Burma and Yunnan in the second half of the nineteenth century. In other words, disordered, messy political landscapes were a common condition in the lowlands and the uplands at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The focus on the precolonial period in Anya has shown that competition for leadership, traffic in affiliations and fragmentation of authority were the main

political dynamics in the countryside and that they endured the colonial encounter. Descent groups developed their settlements by dealing with a landscape shaped through the expansion of farm cultivation, the transformation of spirit cults and Buddhism and the affiliation with local chiefdoms. This produced and delineated diverse, if not opposed, senses of belonging. In that vein, Gawgyi and Myinmilaung's founding narratives claim specific links with the landscape which show how the fluid system of precolonial status groups (servicemen vs. commoners) still pervades the political landscape in the form of differentiated entitlements to indigenouness (genuine allochthones vs. autochthones). Therefore, this book has enjoined seeing local legends and myths as historical sources *and* discourses about contemporary issues.

This work has also challenged the understanding of the precolonial gentry as a monolithic group and the imposition of village headship as a change in the nature of authority. In that sense, the emergence of the village system appears as a search for traditions in which 'local customs' travelled together with colonial officers in an attempt to 'pacify' the landscape. The actual creation of Myinmilaung tract was more a process of accommodation of colonialism which provided the means – the village system, the revenue system and the courts – to contest the obligations and customs regulating access to land and wealth, notably within family relations and tenancy agreements. Village headship was thus as much a product of local politics as a colonial device when Myinmilaung tract became a locus of politics. Myinmilaung then turned into a scalable political space while headship became a matter of individuals when successive leaders embodied different postures.

The shift from the first two headmen, combined with the arrival of Gawgyi's first monk, illustrates how some individuals – known as the last men of *hpon* – became exemplars of the moralization of behaviours and engagement in people's affairs when villagers reimagined their role as Buddhists and challenged colonial rule during the first decades of the twentieth century. This perspective has allowed us to think about this period not only as a moment of social disintegration, but as a phase of reorganization of political authority through belonging to large farming families. The remnants of the precolonial gentry were not entirely uprooted from the landscape during the first half of the twentieth century, but their hold was reduced as the families of large peasants were able to buffer land reform projects emanating either from the state or from armed groups during the decades surrounding the country's independence. These families monopolized local leadership when the hierarchy transformed into a divide between 'real farmers' (*taungthu*) and mere 'labourers' (*myaukthu*). The fact that some leaders became exemplary figures of the moralization of behaviours engaged in lay affairs during the contest of colonial rule marks a gradual shift in the form of authority from charismatic leadership towards worthiness and propriety. In turn,

it pushed for the rethinking of Nash's concepts about power and authority by showing how past and present contexts – and not just individuals' qualities such as *hpon* – are critical in evaluating the worth of leaders.

During the socialist period (1962–1988), state policies heightened the divide between farmers and labourers and tightened control over local affairs while producing the image of a countryside of farmers-owners – when many, if not most, were labourers, dependants and tenants. With the gradual collapse of Ne Win's regime, finding trade-offs with the local authorities was no longer seen as a strategy, but rather as a push to cheat and bribe. If the bloodshed of 1988 was not a rupture in Gawgyi as it was in the capital, it contributed to increased distrust towards officials on many levels. Locally, the rupture came later. After the disengagement of the state from local affairs following the revolts, U Win, headman from 1995 to 2006, embodied the growing corruption and violence of the state when forced labour was reintroduced on a large scale in the dry zone. The next change of headman, from U Win the Infamous to U Htay the Worthy, echoed a broader rupture in local politics. It was a shift from distrust and corruption to trustworthiness and propriety. U Htay's gradual estrangement from the state after his tenure was counterbalanced by a commitment to Gawgyi affairs on the model of the last men of *hpon*. Village affairs were progressively being reinvested by the local elite who were articulating new stakes within a more traditional form of sociality (*luhmuyay*), making collective undertakings the fragile form of local politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In other words, in reaction to state disengagement from local affairs, an ideology of self-reliance took place in Gawgyi and is symbolized by how a group of big men started making engagement in village affairs a field of politics. By doing so, they changed the meaning attached to the word *lugyi*, giving it a more moral significance. Yet they are nonetheless the descendants of large families of peasants who monopolized village leadership and remained influential by investing in inheritance whose transmission has organized local land relations throughout the past two centuries.

### Forms of Engagement

The book has also made a case for seeing local leadership figures as paradoxical and ambiguous. It has shown that the headman is extremely constrained in his position as an intermediary between the local inhabitants and the state. At the same time, it insists on the decisive role of big men as collective organizers. Yet neither the headman nor the big men have any real binding power. My choice has been to focus on interactions to widen our understanding of politics by looking at how people calibrate the ways in which they engage with each other. It has highlighted that the forms of engagement varied depending on the domain of

politics at stake during interactions and given a certain historical consistency to these domains.

By following Ko Kyaw in his daily life, this book has argued that any analysis of village headship as a mere formal institution is doomed to miss the point. I attempted to renew the anthropological debate about headship by looking at it as a matter of uncertain engagement, political navigation and craftsmanship. It is not just an intercalary position hamstrung between the state and the villagers<sup>4</sup> that gives room for manoeuvre. I hope that my work has shown how the particular enactment of past ruptures and memories of previous leaders and current forms of engagement impinged on Ko Kyaw's practice of headship. By becoming headman, he endorsed a legacy and embodied a position most people distrust while having to comply with the organization of village affairs by following a model of propriety that is key to the definition of Gawgyi identity.

If no one overtly wants to become the headman, it is not only because headship does not 'offer sufficient incentives in terms of influence, prestige, religious merit or financial profit relative to disincentives such as time, financial cost, public criticism and ... exposure to pressure from township authorities' (Kempel and Myanmar Development Research 2012: 70). It is rather because it is where the private, the political and the government converge, in a landscape that has been fashioned throughout two centuries where memories of ruptures, violence and propriety have come to the forefront. The fight for headship is constrained by the state of local stakes in each village tract, the family stories, the filiation issues and the historical opposition between villages. It remains a move for one-upmanship for candidates with credentials who are part of the local elite that pushes for controlling headship, nonetheless. One also has to deal with forces and obligations that are intimately linked with the constant merging and distancing of the private and the political. Keeping this ambiguity may have been in the government's interest, as it provides a means to engage collective responsibility through a single person, but this remains a speculative assumption. Following Ko Kyaw's political navigation in a day of his life shows that being a headman meant dealing with the old and new in multiple social spaces where obligations and memories influence 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 he dealt with the local understanding of worthiness.

The question of male leadership was then expanded to family relationships through the issue of transmitting inheritance. The latter appeared as a process of redefining authority and responsibility over things, and obligations between people. Within the realm of family relations, male authority mainly stems from stewardship (*okchokhmu*): the process of taking care of a patrimony and of the persons attached to it. It appeared that the field of family relations was a matrix for thinking about rightful filiation (continuity) and by extension about leadership.

The emphasis on personal abilities goes beyond family relationships. The combination of, and tension between, heredity and ability (achievements, *hpon*, karma) are at the core of the theory of male politics in the Burmese context. The idea of ‘taking charge of’ as a source of authority related to personal abilities and mutual obligations between ‘parents’ and ‘children’ pervades other conceptions and practices of leadership. The rise of village affairs as the form of Gawgyi politics in the past decades as a political field enacted by ‘worthy’ leaders described as guardians who ‘take charge of’ village affairs’ (*ywayay okhteinhmu*) is but one example. In other words, exploring Ko Kyaw crafting headship as a process ridden with uncertain engagements allows us to transform the question of transmission of property within families into a study of family leadership conceived as stewardship which, in turn, enables us to qualify the leadership of Gawgyi big men in the political field of village affairs as a matter of guardianship. It shows how male authority pervades several configurations of power.

In the 2010s, the *lugyi* were entrusted to ‘take care of’ and to be ‘responsible for’ village affairs, that is, to be their guardians. This practice of leadership depends on the delimitation between what is the private and what is the political. On one side, village and social affairs came to be a space of engagement where the worth of people is evaluated, and which is scaled through the handling of ceremonies and the resolution of disputes, creating a space of belonging and mutual help. On the other side, family affairs and one’s own affairs are part of the private. Both ‘fields’ – the private and the political – speak the same language. This book has shown that through the transmission of inheritance, family leadership is also a matter of ‘taking care of’ the properties and the people belonging to a family tied together through social and moral obligations. In other words, the private and the political constantly merge and distance themselves from one another.

### Power in the Lowlands

What does the concept of calibrated engagement do to the study of power in mainland Southeast Asia? I cannot contend here with all the implications this question raises and will limit my answer to the patron–client paradigm. Clientelism, factionalism and patronage are loose systems of affiliation that help to explain changes in local politics. They have been abundantly used to make sense of power relations in Southeast Asia in history and in anthropology. These systems either proceed from a leader’s prowess (Aung-Thwin 1983, 1984; Koenig 1990; Lieberman 1984; Nash 1963, 1965; Pye 1962), are embedded – or not – in a moral economy (Adas 1980, 1998; Scott 1976), or are based on power flowing from merit making (Hanks 1962; Lehman 1984; Schober 1989). In the Burma/Myanmar case, I argue that the focus on prowess (*hpon*), and its articulation with merit (*kuto*), should be understood as historical formations of power

open to critique in everyday politics. Otherwise, this assemblage conveys an idea of socio-political structure from which time and contingency are virtually absent and actual relationships blurred. Nash proposed a secularist perspective of *hpon* while Schober, after Lehman, offered a version attuned with Buddhist conceptions. I follow these two threads to explore two issues with the patron–client paradigm: the problem of history and that of hierarchy.

### *Prowess, Clientelism and the Problem of History*

Translated as charisma, glory or grace, *hpon* has been analysed in several ways. For Nash (1965: 76), *hpon* belongs to a triad: *hpon* (or sheer power), *awza* (or authority, ability to impose judgement) and *gon* (or virtue, morality). These concepts are all qualities lodged in a person and inferred by his or her peers. For Nash, a person’s power was more closely linked to his performances, achievements and their recognition by peers throughout life than to Buddhist cosmology. A man of *hpon* did not build an organization but a clientele, because ‘[the] presence of *pon* [*sic*] cannot be institutionalized’. It is always the possession or attribute of a concrete, living person. When the person ‘loses it, it is gone, when he dies, it dies. ... His clientele shares in part his success; they bask in the aura of his *pon*’ (ibid.: 79). It is on these grounds that the idiom of *hpon*, as a form of power, gives flesh to the idea that Burmese people have a political system based on charismatic leadership. It combined an individual quality, stemming from a person’s karma and worldly achievements, with leadership. The plasticity of this form and its timeless nature – kings, gentry and village leaders potentially justified their power as men of *hpon* – were helpful to make sense of the continuities in the political landscape. I think that this rationalization of leadership blurs the more moral aspects of politics due to the ahistorical nature of this quality and its use as a retrospective justification. Yet Nash’s conceptualization provided an anthropological ground to the study of clientelism and patronage.

What Nash describes in the early 1960s fits very well the scholarship of the late twentieth century on power and authority in Southeast Asia. In the vein of the studies on power opened up by Anderson (1972), Wolters (1982) identified this kind of charismatic, achievement-based leadership with a broad social type, which he called ‘men of prowess’. He argued that ‘men of prowess’ of one sort or another were found in all the precolonial polities of the Southeast Asian region. Kinship was for the most part bilateral, and instead of power being passed from generation to generation through a lineage, authority was achieved through the actions of charismatic leaders, and attributed to magical or spiritual potency, the *hpon* in our case. ‘Men of prowess’ needed to earn such a status during their lifetime. The transmission of authority was then problematic as it was attached to the person, not the position. The polities that came into being

around ‘men of prowess’ were thus highly personalized, very fragile and based on patron–client ties.

Around the same time, Nash’s idea was used by historians. Lieberman, a leading scholar of the precolonial period in Burma/Myanmar, used Nash’s description to support his argument on the nature of kingship dynamics. For him, the achievement-based leadership of kings partly explains the rise and fall of dynasties between 1580 and 1760 (Lieberman 1984: 75, referring to Nash 1965: 79). The *hpon* described by Nash in the 1960s was akin to the self-legitimation rhetoric of kings and an essential ingredient in the making of personal obligations and ties that gave form to the divine kingship in Burma/Myanmar. Heredity was a weak claim to office and more generally speaking, as Schulte Nordholt (2015) put it, the rise and fall of men of prowess organized the ‘longue durée’ of patron–client relations in Southeast Asia.

Nash’s work also served the study of patron–client politics. Such studies gained much momentum in anthropology, sociology and political science in the 1960s–1970s as they allowed a departure from the analysis of politics through the concepts of class, ethnicity and religion to focus on ‘informal’ or ‘*ad hoc*’ groupings. In the words of Scott, who influenced much of the debate concerning the Burmese context, patron–client politics ‘represent an important structural principle of Southeast Asian politics’ (Scott 1972a: 92).<sup>5</sup> Scott’s argument was to say that the traditional patron–client ties, ‘once viewed as collaborative and legitimate’, tended to break down during the colonial period due to processes of ‘social differentiation, the commercialization of subsistence agriculture, and the growth of colonial administration’ (Scott 1972b: 6). His subsequent landmark work on *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) developed on this theme, showing – but contested by Adas (1998) – through the analysis of peasant protests how traditional systems of patronage lost their moral force during the colonial period. Concerning Burma in particular, Scott used Nash’s work to support the view that ‘where one local landowner or traditional leader had once dominated he now faced competitors’ (Scott 1972a: 107); and that ‘directly ruled lowland areas tended to develop factional competition among different patrons, while less directly ruled areas (especially highland areas<sup>6</sup>) more frequently retained some unity behind a single patron who remained their broker with the outside world’ (ibid.: 107, note 47).

The historical part of this book has shown, however, that local contexts, ethical shifts and temporalities of change need to be considered together to fully capture the transformation of local politics. Beyond reconsidering the metanarrative about the colonial impact, the book has also made a case for understanding the rise of village affairs and the worth of the village big men in relation to the historical context of state violence and disengagement from the countryside rather than in terms of individual qualities. For Nash, a person’s *hpon* is a function of

one's engagement with others in daily life through trials, failures and successes. I take from this idea that engagement and evaluation are key processes. Their outcome can be subsumed under the idiom of *hpon*, but I think that, to understand local politics, we should think through contexts and situations by looking at how various forms of engagement produce value, worth and domains of politics.

### *Merit, Donation and the Problem of Hierarchy*

Nash's conception of prowess is closely linked with the idea that merit making produces hierarchy. A person creates a clientele because he or she distributes (merit, benefits, equipment, a network of knowledge, advice, services, loans and so on), thus creating chains of dependence or privileged relationships. These transactions are negotiated, challenged, accepted, requested or refused and potentially create social and moral obligations. By paying closer attention to what circulates and how, the book invites us to reconsider how transfers produce hierarchy.

In local conceptions, the ideal type of patron is called *kyayzushin*, a term loosely translated as benefactor and which literally means 'master of gratitude'. There are three kinds of benefactors: the parents because they sustain life, the Buddha because he provided the means to end suffering, and the teachers because they transmit knowledge. People are not indebted to them because they cannot call off the relation.<sup>7</sup> Transfers – in the form of care, services, presents, donations – to these benefactors are an acknowledgement of an obligation to be grateful. This kind of hierarchical relationship pervades many other domains of social life and has been described as a social structure of patron–client relationships. For instance, Lieberman showed how patron–client relations with kings were formulated as personal obligations, to the point that remembering 'one's debt of gratitude to the king and one's oath of royal allegiance ... became a stock phrase used to explain virtually every act of service' (Lieberman 1984: 73). In a different context, Boutry (2011, 2015) showed how the patron–client links between an individual and his *kyayzushin* served to legitimize the Burmese presence in frontier areas and articulate their interactions with locals of different cultures. Schober has clearly articulated the relations between transfers, obligations and hierarchy. For her, offerings are made to beings who belong either to the sacred domain beyond the social hierarchy of lay people or to individuals thought to be superior to the person making the offering. These transfers are viewed as an 'acknowledgement of gratitude and as a repayment of moral or social debt rather than as an attempt to create new obligations' (1989: 105). Yet food given to those below one's own station in life, even if it is given in a ritual context, 'is considered an expression of one's loving kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) for less fortunate ones and dependents. In return for this

kindness, obligations must be repaid' (ibid.). This is how, according to Schober, dependency is created: 'On account of the dependency thus created, the recipient comes under the influence and power of his benefactor whom he owes gratitude (kyei: zu: shin) [*sic*] and in whose dominion of power he now exists' (ibid.). The relation between a person and his benefactor is clearly hierarchical and stems from the Buddhist cosmology.

From this standpoint, Schober expands Lehman's argument for whom 'to make merit is to increase power' (1984: 241). Linking a person's power to his *hpon*, Schober defines the relations between meritorious donation (*ahlu*) and power through the concept of 'field of merit':

Through giving, he [the giver] becomes the patron of a field of merit, however extensive or insignificant. Burmese designate such patron in ritual contexts as *ku.thou shin*, 'owner of merit' ... Honorifics like owner of merit designate a patron over a particular domain of power and influence or a field of merit. [A patron] redistributes the benefits of his *hpoun*: to all who share in his deed (*kamma*) and merit (*ku.htou*) and thus create obligations among his clients ... Those who share in the patron's merit and *hpoun*: owe him gratitude and obligation [*sic*]. These are difficult to repay as redistribution of merit establishes a status hierarchy separating patrons from clients. (Schober 1989: 122–23)

The sharing of merit by a ritual of consecration at the end of a donation creates obligations for those who enter the 'field of merit'. This explanation of power relations, and the economy of merit in general, is an idiom for thinking and expressing authority and hierarchy. I obliged others through my ability to make donations. My ability to share merit comes from my *hpon* – intimately linked to my karma – and reinforces it. Donations give concrete expression to my power. The people present during donations become stakeholders in my 'field of merit'. This typical situation is found in the most celebrated donation ceremony called the *shinbyu*, the boys' initiation ceremony into monkhood. In short, the Burmese Buddhist gift is a case of how giving obliges and creates a hierarchy.

A close analysis of how a *shinbyu* is made, how it is organized, not in terms of ritual activity but through its kitchen, through the tiny acts that make it possible, shows that hierarchy is not straightforward (Chapter 6; Huard 2021). Gifts oblige to a certain extent, but they are also negotiated; transfers are crucial acts of calibrated engagement. The making of ceremonies needs a collective organization. It is therefore necessary to describe all of these activities in context, to know when such ceremonies take place, who is invited and who is not, if there is a difference between a donation made by a stranger to the village, by an influential farmer or by an ordinary worker. In addition, while village ceremonies involve formalized

transactions between people (money, merit, food), they also take place in social spaces where many exchanges take place all the time in the form of work, mutual help, gifts, loans and so on. The merit shared with the participants flows in many networks of people engaged in countless exchanges that structure a local hierarchy open to negotiation. Inviting people, helping, giving food, not coming to ceremonies are all choices that show how much people want to get involved. In short, the ‘field of merit’ approach, while indicating how exchanges, transactions and gifts between people produce order, uses the Buddhist idiom of patron–client (gratitude) to explain the flesh of social asymmetries but without making sense of the tensions between actors. In that sense, it is a configuration of power open to critique.

The secularist version of *hpon* and its articulation with merit are only aspects of politics: they crystallize meanings at the expense of describing actual processes. Focusing on how people calibrate their engagement enables us to counter the narrative that dependency–patronage relations are the main power dynamics in lowland Southeast Asia: it shows that dependency does not equal powerlessness<sup>8</sup> and that we should look deeper into ordinary entanglements of obligations and responsibilities. The way in which people act can be approached in a flexible way, leaving room for uncertainty and evaluation, without losing the value of the expressions used to describe relationships, such as patronage, friendship or family solidarity, for example. Engaging in this or that relationship creates obligations between people and the gist of this relationship is materialized in what circulates between them (help, services, money, assets, protection and so on) and in the way this is qualified.

### **Violence Redux: The Anya Enigma**

Finally, how could the idea of calibrated engagement help us to understand the widespread resistance that emerged in Anya against the military after the 2021 coup? In Burma/Myanmar at large, recent decades have been marked by wars between the military and various ethnic armed groups, especially in the highlands. They have also been marked by the junta repression of more or less short-lived revolts in the centre of the country. The nation as a whole has been portrayed to foreign eyes as in a state of perpetual war, with a combination of military violence, armed group violence, and inter-community and religious conflicts, resulting in multiple forms of dispossession, displacement, forced labour, executions, arbitrary imprisonment and ethnic cleansing. The military coup of 1 February 2021 abruptly ended the 2010s postwar transition and the democratic experiments. It was followed by a massive, multifaceted rejection of military rule: mass demonstrations, barricades, non-violent civil disobedience movements, the creation of alternative political institutions, monastic opposition

movements, ritual protest, online and diasporic activism, urban and rural guerilla warfare. Suddenly, the Anya region, the dry zone of central Myanmar which crosscuts the Magway, Mandalay and Sagaing Regions, became a key piece of the puzzle.

Dozens of local forces have gradually emerged and controlled large swathes of the dry zone which was considered loyal to nationalist and military regimes since the country's independence in 1948. Some of these local forces have received explosives and training from experienced ethnic armed groups and have caused an unknown number of military casualties. Since the coup, the Anya region has regained consistency as a socio-spatial entity, not least because it has become one of the main theatres of fighting (Loong 2022). The junta exercised brute force, burning down tens of thousands of homes, attacking and displacing villagers (UNOCHA 2023) in manoeuvres reminiscent of the colonial pacification campaign. The military bluntly showed that 'making enemies' (Callahan 2003) is at the core of its fabric and is not limited to how it deals with ethnic minorities.

The enigma is thus: how did the people of Anya come to engage in a direct fight against the military takeover? Taking this enigma head-on requires us to configure the current events as the latest episode of an ongoing history. It calls for analysing how previous experiences of violence, agrarian dispossession, the variegated nature of the local forces (in terms of manpower, leadership, network and alliances) and the diverse forms of sovereignty in the region are shaping political territories. If Anya appeared as a pacified, rural, traditional and Buddhist space until the coup – while the military regime seemed to have a certain legitimacy because it offered a system of co-optation and recruitment – we now need a new way of thinking about this area. Drawing from Kopytoff's work on the formation of African societies (1987), I propose to configure the hotbeds of Anya resistance as an *internal frontier*: a space of internal colonization where violence, dispossession and migration shape the making of fragmented political territories.

The reaction to the coup has reignited a debate on the extent to which the Bama, the group that has dominated the country's politics and state apparatus since independence, have been spared by military violence, unlike many religious and ethnic minorities. For the past four or five decades, Anya seems to have been little affected by the army's counterinsurgency campaigns. Nonetheless, we gain a better understanding of the conflict in Anya by focusing on how the current rural warfare resonates with previous episodes of violence, from pre-colonial warring societies (Charney 2018) to the colonial pacification campaign, from the Japanese invasion to the anti-communist campaign, from the 1988 revolts to the 2003 Depayin massacre and the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Besides, current revolts and popular support for local armed groups are often justified by opposition to state violence framed as a cyclical experience throughout the

Any region. Mistrust and denunciation, as techniques of avoidance and control, have also massively reinvested and saturated social relations since the coup. The return of ‘informers’ (*dalan*) and the rise of counterinsurgency groups or militias – such as the *pyusawhti*, named after a legendary king, and the *thway thauk*, or ‘blood drinkers’ (International Crisis Group 2022) – more or less supervised by the military and whose violence is legitimized by some Buddhist monks, creates a climate of terror in which the resistance networks have formed. There is thus a *continuum of violence* (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004) to be investigated.

Another avenue for research is to look at the agrarian roots of the conflict. According to Callahan, it started after 1988 when garrisoned troops started preying ‘upon the Dry Zone’s almost mythically renowned small farmers’ (2022). They were driven off their land by local or regional commanders and their family plots were handed over to ‘mostly Yangon-based cronies, Thai or Chinese timber exporters and mineral miners. Heartland farmers endured forced cropping policies [and] failed agri-business experiments’ (ibid.). Since the early 2010s, conflicts linked to the formalization of resource rights (Boutry et al. 2017), as well as policies to redistribute land confiscated by previous military regimes (San Thein et al. 2017), have brought local forms of justice and justification into tension.<sup>9</sup> They revealed an interplay between legality, legitimacy and clientelism for access to property, while at the same time generating competing claims and demands for justice. These demands have gradually been articulated by activists (Prasse-Freeman 2023b),<sup>10</sup> farmers’ unions and local land committees. The number and extent of cases of land dispossession by government agencies and military forces over the past fifty years became an overt political matter in the countryside and played an important role in making the fight against the military a potential horizon of action.

Finally, the nature of the territories composing this countryside should also come under scrutiny. Local forces in this domain are important because of the way in which they define the nature of their activities: essentially, the defence of territories, which also implies the control of people, roads and of the circulation of wealth. They are often named after existing territories – such as ‘towns’ (*myo*) and ‘townships’ (*myo-nay*) – to delineate their origin and/or space for action. Their emergence also involves other logics of affiliations based on local ideas of autochthony and sovereignty. In this book, I have shown that a distinction can be made between a more ‘warlike’ history, anchored in forced migration and embodied in the relations between localities and tutelary spirits on the one hand, and a more ‘royal’ history expressed in the narratives that link localities to the origin of sacred places on the other. This kind of micro-local history might or might not help to explain the emergence of many local forces. It nonetheless highlights that local forms of sovereignty are diverse. It should be noted that one

of the latest incarnations of territorial sovereignty are the tutelary spirits (*naq*) of the Ayeyarwady Valley (Brac de la Perrière 1998) who largely cover the hotbeds of resistance in the Anya region. It could thus be fruitful to analyse the reconfiguration of the local populations' relationships with spirit cults in past and current periods of unrest to better understand the making of territories.

Overall, the coup and its aftermath represent a moment of disjuncture and reconfiguration of politics, during which the main formation of power – the military – is openly contested because of its current and past actions. The book has shown how state violence and disengagement from rural affairs were embodied locally and generated a new configuration of power centred around the upholding of village affairs. The coup, the subsequent violence against civilians and the rural warfare in Anya are changing local configurations of power in places where, at the very least, previous experience of violence and land dispossession have affected the meaning of politics. The increase in the number of armed groups in the Anya region therefore seems to be linked to the gradual isolation of the villages, which have formed a constellation of small polities at a distance from the State.

I believe that the idea of calibrated engagement is a productive tool for analysing these transformations because it captures how people challenge and create configurations of power. By showing how people inscribe themselves in forms of action and evaluate responsibilities, relationships, the past and potential futures, it gives texture, density and life to different affairs and domains of politics. It helps us to understand how the collective work of politics coalesced in the form of new political subjectivities and transformative movements creating a new arrangement of the political (Rancière 1999). In that sense, describing the ways in which people recalibrate their engagement with each other and with the state at this critical juncture will help us to capture how violence, dispossession, power and territory intersect in the making of Myanmar's internal frontier.

## Notes

1. For Leach, the Kachin have two different types of ideal political order: the *gumsa* 'autocratic' order and the *gumlao* 'democratic' order. He argues that the *gumsa* order is modelled directly on that of the valley-dwelling Shan from whom the Kachin have 'borrowed' the idea of 'divine kingship' justifying the autocratic political order and the autocratic chief. The gist of Leach's analysis is that there are inconsistencies within the ideal order of both *gumsa* and *gumlao* systems which serve to make both highly unstable. Thus, *gumlao* democracy tends to develop into *gumsa* autocracy, and *gumsa* autocracy tends to break down into *gumlao* democracy through revolutions. For Leach, Kachin society was continuously oscillating between these two ideal forms of order.
2. See Leach (1954: 198) and Nugent (1982: 511).
3. See Robinne and Sadan (2007) and Sadan (2013).

4. The idea of an intercalary position comes from Gluckman et al. (1949) and has been further developed by Gluckman (1955, 1963), Nash (1963, 1965), Lubeigt (1975) and more recently Thawngmung (2004) proposed a similar description of headmen's position in Burma/Myanmar.
5. The studies of 'patron-client', 'dyadic contract', 'personal network', 'clientelism' and 'factionalism' were not bound to Southeast Asia. As a reader on political clientelism published in 1977 shows, they mushroomed from the study of Third World politics but were also developed (and thought to be applicable) in any country at various scales (cf. Schmidt et al. 1977).
6. Nash does not specify this point, and it should be noted that both Nondwin and Yadaw were in the lowlands. Yet the point on the type of land and cultivation remained valid.
7. Cf. Graeber (2011) for a distinction between debt and obligation.
8. This point resonates with Keeler's approach to hierarchy (2017), especially regarding how putting oneself under a patron does not equal pure subordination and can transform dependence into power.
9. For an example of this kind of situation but in a different part of Myanmar, see Huard (2020a) on the case of Maubin in the Ayeyarwady region.
10. In his ethnography of activism (2023b), Prasse-Freeman shows that, in a sense, activists' work vis-à-vis other people is all about compelling them to reimagine the scope, scale and dynamics of their engagements.