

## PART I

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# *Histories*

‘History is never sure.’

—Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*

The objective of the historical part of this book is to describe the fashioning of a *local political landscape*. The local political landscape is a metaphor referring to the networks of past and present personalities, hierarchies, stakes and memories that are meaningful in current politics; and its fashioning, the process of sedimentation of these elements through time. The challenge is to weave together anthropology and history. There is a long debate on the relationship between these disciplines, which I will not recall here.<sup>1</sup> More than simply considering the past, I take into account the internal social dynamics of the groups under consideration *and* the variable regimes of historicity. In addition, the ‘ethnographic’ fieldwork was not secluded from the analysis of ‘historical’ data. The whole process was rather a constant coming and going between notes, documents, ideas, scholarship, contexts and recordings. As a result, three perspectives concerning the transformation of the political landscape in Gawgyi and Myinmilaung are assembled in the final text: one about a change in how time was experienced and how some persons embodied rupture and continuities, another about the relations between myth and history and the influence of contemporary stakes in the enunciation of historical narratives, and a last one about the sedimentation of layer upon layer of history in a ‘longue durée’ perspective.

The first perspective relates to the argument that if contemporary politics in Gawgyi is conceptualized in terms of village affairs upheld by worthy leaders, it is related to the moral rupture that happened during the first decades of colonialism and which saw the rise of new leaders described today as the last men of

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*hpon*. If there are no more men of *hpon* now, it is also related to how the shift was experienced from the socialist regime engaged in village economy and politics to the military regime disengaging from them, resorting to physical and symbolic violence. These experiences are framed in terms of the diverging morality of local leaders who came to exemplify and embody corruption or trust. Engaging in village affairs and embodying local ethics, that is, being worthy, is how actors made sense of their past while it shapes the contemporary scale of politics on village welfare, drawing upon memories of past ‘exemplary’ men and the more traditional form of sociality called *luhmuyay*. There are thus multiple moments of rupture – colonial encounter, change of the role of lay people, socialism in practice and violent militarism – that are reflected in leaders and which are the means to articulate change in how time was experienced.

The second perspective concerns the foundation narratives of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi studied in Chapter 1. This chapter triangulates myths, oral testimonies and archives to locate the foundation of Myinmilaung and Gawgyi. This chapter is where the context of speech is notably problematized in relation to the animosity between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung. Attention was paid to ‘how the story is told, what is told of the story, by whom, to whom and for what purpose, what is a landmark or not’ (Naepels 2010: 881, my translation). When narrated, certain events come to serve as a matrix for subjective experiences and for the historical consciousness of the actors. The argument is that the foundation narratives of both villages are intimately linked to them being enclosed within a single jurisdiction and competing for leadership. They present opposing stories of foundation to claim their differences and legitimate their presence in the landscape. The ‘Myinmilaung story’ features its people as the junction between the royalty, the regional sovereign spirit and the religious patronage to support their claim as genuine and legitimate allochthones. The ‘Gawgyi story’ posits its people as autochthones with intimate relationships with some neighbouring villages. It also anchors villagers’ knowledge of the region in pre-royal times. These claims to some extent exclude one another by drawing a line that can only be understood in relation to the current atmosphere of violence and bitterness between the two villages. And if we further the connection with village affairs, the current opposition, as displayed in stories of foundation, is the backdrop against which the inclusion or exclusion of neighbouring villages within a collective makes sense.

The last perspective borrows the vocabulary of geology (‘sedimentation’) to describe how the local political landscape sits on top of and is shaped by layer upon layer of history. This outlook is broad, influenced by the Annales School,<sup>2</sup> and not contained in one specific part of the book but rather runs within it in an open-ended way. It concerns the shaping of the landscape and the different types of temporalities as described in the introduction; but it also relates to the coming of Buddhism and its evolution and, more directly, to the transformation of local

hierarchies as depicted in Chapter 2. Ultimately, this flexible approach is central to the book because it nuances the question about the reasons and the effects of the merging of villages under a single polity.

These different forms of history get mobilized in the text and subtext of village politics during collective undertakings and moments of competitions, for instance. It was present when selecting the headman in 2016 (cf. Chapter 7): each side – Myinmilaung vs. Gawgyi people – was silent and tension was tangible, almost physical. When operating the water station and collecting the fees from villagers, the *lugyi* produce and enact a sense of collective and at times compare it to the poor handling of village affairs in Myinmilaung. Or when they help organize ceremonies in Tozigon, it emphasizes a sense of common belonging. If we do not account for the history of this place, then we would see these big men as mere patrons, the headman as a petty broker and his selection as a trifling competition. And yet, an ethnographic approach combined with my attempt at historiography reveals that local politics consists of excluding some individuals and entrusting others (the *lugyi*) to ‘take charge’ of local affairs while being the elite at the top of a local hierarchy that has evolved over the past century and that the village tract is but one arena of politics with its own history of moral ruptures.

## Notes

1. For a synthesis, see for instance Kellogg (1991) and Naepels (2010). Temporalities and social dynamics came to the forefront within political anthropology with researchers such as Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1950) and Edmund Leach (1954). In the meantime, the notion of ‘situation’ allowed Max Gluckman (1940) and the Manchester School, notably Victor Turner (1981) and J. Clyde Mitchell (1983), to differentiate synchrony and static in order to emphasize the need to look at the history of societies to understand the present. The subsequent scholarship which criticized the ahistorical character of classical ethnographic descriptions, especially Johannes Fabian (1983), Nicholas Thomas (1996) and Marshall D. Sahlins (1993, 1995, 2004), was crucial in articulating ethnography with the type of research developed by historians. The subaltern studies on colonial knowledge, such as the work of Talad Asad (1973) and Edward Said (1989), were also critical in the historical inflexion of anthropology while also rearticulating the position between the anthropologist and his/her interlocutors and the practice of anthropological writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The postcolonial perspective then took note of the critics of colonial categories while proposing deep descriptions of specific societies within a broader context, as in the work of John and Jean Comaroff (1992).
2. Cf. Bloch (1961, 1973), Le Goff (1964) and Braudel (1958).