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Embodying and fashioning headship. A day in the life of a village headman in the center of  
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Arguably, the headman is an exemplary methodological entry-point for an anthropology concerned with the enactment of local politics. This claim, however, should be qualified considering the history of the headman in anthropology and the forms of mediation that headship engages. Initially described as an intermediary between a local group or village and an englobing polity by the Manchester school (Gluckman *et al.* 1949), the headman was retrospectively designated as the first example of political brokerage by the scholars of the interactionist school interested in development (Biershenk *et al.* 2002). In Myanmar studies, headship oscillates between various types of mediation ranging from patronage to the brokerage of state authority depending on the historical contexts, the figures embodying headship and the analytical lenses. Yet, arguing that the headman is a methodological starting point leads to a discussion concerning what the headman, as an ethnographically situated figure, actually mediates. How does one describe the ways a headman engages with local power relationships and what does it tell us about local politics?

The headman was a classic topic in the anthropological literature as an approach to understanding local-level politics and change during the colonial and postcolonial periods. Gluckman, Mitchell and Barnes' "village headman" (1949) is perhaps the most well-known example, albeit criticized by Kuper (1970) and later by Biershenk *et al.* (2002) for focusing solely on the dilemmas the headman faces within the village. The anthropology of brokerage subsequently emerged against Gluckman's "passive" headman to emphasize the room for maneuver that brokers have in various historical contexts. While headship as a sociological type has lost anthropological focus, this paper argues that the headman is still a pertinent ethnographic figure for the study of political mediation in village societies. I propose to follow how a headman embodies and fashions headship during a day in his life in order to describe the organization of the domains of local politics in central Myanmar.

In Gawgyi village, I met Ko Kyaw, a young man in his thirties.<sup>1</sup> For him, being the headman meant embodying a defamed position while showing a degree of loyalty (*thitsashihmu*)<sup>2</sup> to his peers in the handling of local affairs against a backdrop of past government violence and detachment. In Burmese, headman (*okchokyayhmu*)<sup>3</sup> is closely related to the word “administrator” in the sense of overseeing and being responsible for local order. They seem ubiquitous as local agents of the government charged with ordering the local polity since the colonial period.<sup>4</sup> Ko Kyaw is from and lives in Gawgyi and, from 2013 to 2016, was headman of Myinmilaung Tract, an administrative space on the rural outskirts of Monywa. Four Buddhist villages were grouped within Myinmilaung Tract during the colonial Pacification Campaign and the implementation of the village system from 1887 onward. Myinmilaung Tract is composed of Gawgyi, Myinmilaung, Ogon and Mingalagon villages. Each village has its political institutions<sup>5</sup> but the headman runs the whole Tract and is paid a subsidy by the Ministry of Home Affairs. At a distance from government affairs, a group of big men (*lugyi*) supervises Gawgyi affairs including the organization of ceremonies, the management of the water supply and electricity grid, the maintenance of roads, the expansion of the village, schooling, the relations with monks and NGOs, as well as the treatment of the sick and the disposition of dead bodies, for instance. They scale and orient a space of collective responsibilities (Author 2019b). Nash, an anthropologist working in central Myanmar in the late fifties, considered that these men were recognized as important elders because “they do not overstep the vague but delicate line that separates individual responsibilities” (Nash 1965: 270). Ko Kyaw’s practice of headship was exactly about dealing with vague and delicate lines, but the question is what do they separate individual responsibilities from? To answer this question, I chose to distinguish several domains of politics depending on the kinds of responsibilities and obligations at play for each one. My interlocutors differentiate

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<sup>1</sup> I first came to Gawgyi in 2013 for a six-months fieldwork during my master degree and came back in 2015 for a year-length doctoral fieldwork during which I lived with Ko Kyaw.

<sup>2</sup> Conventional transliteration without accent following Okell’s (1971) romanization.

<sup>3</sup> *Ok* means to cover, to restrain, to take charge or look after; *chok* means to hamper the free movement, to bind, confine, or lead; taken together *okchok* means to administer, to direct; *yay* substantiate the compound (*okchok*) in terms of affairs and *hmu* is a marker of an office. Past headmen were sometimes be called *thugyi*, “the great.”

<sup>4</sup> Our research setting became part of the Upper Burma during the third wave of British colonization starting in 1886.

<sup>5</sup> Gawgyi’s one hundred and forty-odd houses are packed into an administrative grid that groups households into ten, and one person among the heads of each house is designated as a representative of the cluster and called a “ten-houses head” (*hse-eingaung*). An official elder (*yatmiyathpa*; lit. parents of a common dwelling place) is also selected for the whole Tract while each village has its own. Besides these government-like positions, Gawgyi has leaders of groups based on marital status (called *lubyogaung* for the head of the bachelors’ group, and *apyogaung* for the head of the single girls’ group) as well as chiefs crucial in organizing feasts for ceremonies like weddings or religious donations. Gawgyi’s head monk (*sayadaw*) is not heavily involved in local politics.

between what belongs to “my affairs” (*kyundaw keiksa*), “village affairs” (*yatywa keiksa*), “social affairs” (*luhmu-yay*) and “government affairs” (*asoya keiksa*). I call the first domain the *personal*; I merge village affairs and social affairs as the *political* domain because it became the valued domain of engagement in recent history; and I refer to the last category as the *government* domain. These domains often work in the same situations but engage the headman (and many others) differently. There are more, but these three domains help understand how a village headman is a node intersecting multiple layers of responsibilities and chains of relations. For instance, when Ko Kyaw deals with a land conflict involving fellow villagers and former officials, he does not just apply government instructions or answer villagers’ claims. Rather, he finds himself in a situation where personal relations (kin, neighbors, friends) are entangled with the local leadership dynamics (influence of local big men in collective affairs), which relates to an issue pertaining to the government domain (handling a land conflict).

Showing these domains at work is a matter of ethnographic description. In this paper, the writing strategy is to follow the processual nature of a day to emphasize the social settings in which a headman acts, and the movement between them. The description of a day is then organized around the metaphor of embodying and fashioning headship. Embodying headship means putting on the clothing of the headman. In turn, fashioning is how a headman adjusts that clothing in a given situation. This descriptive device allows me to show how a headman engages with places, chains of relations and a wide variety of things (online games, money, contracts, land titles, tea, betel, snacks, etc.), while leaving space for body language, silences, smiles, and embarrassment. Eventually, describing the headman through a day, as an ethnographic device for the analysis of contemporary local politics, offers a vantage point for an anthropology concerned with history. In line with scholars such as Bazin, for whom every situation is by definition “the current moment of an ongoing history” (2008: 429, my translation), this paper argues that such descriptions make it possible to question the series of historical possibilities and uncertainties constituting a situation at a particular time.

### **Debating the headman**

For Beirschenk *et al.* (2002: 11-16), the study of the village headman retrospectively precludes the anthropology of political mediation. In “The village headman in British Central Africa,” Gluckman theorizes the headman as “the personality in whom the domestic-kinship and the political systems intersect” (1949: 93) while Mitchell and Barnes detail the headman position

among the political bonds that make up local politics in the Yao and Ngoni societies. Later, Kuper (1970) criticized this approach by arguing that the headman is not just an in-between and passive position hamstrung between the traditional (local) system and the modern (colonial) administration. For Kuper, Gluckman “underplays the headman’s real, if limited, room for maneuver” (1970: 356). The shift from a headman intertwined within local power relations towards a headman manipulating outside authorities under colonial domination is crucial to the story of how the broker became a social type: “a human actor who gains something from the mediation of valued resources that he or she does not directly control, which can be distinguished from a patron, who controls valued resources, and a go-between or a messenger, who does not affect the transaction” (Lindquist 2015a: 870). While the study of brokerage flourished in the study of community-state (Wolf 1956) and patron-client (Boissevain 1974) relationships before resurfacing to examine the multiplication of intermediaries in the context of development (Mosse and Lewis 2006) and as a critical tool for analyzing issues of rapid change (James 2011) and migrations (Lindquist 2015b), interests in the headman in relation to local politics has almost vanished. Besides, if seeing Gluckman’s village headman as someone passive made it possible to highlight the agency of brokers, the interactionist approach, as developed in Biershenk *et al.* (2002), has also reduced brokerage and politics to levels, forms of governance, “strategies and arenas” (Mosse and Lewis 2006: 14). Another perspective is to understand the configurations of meaning and power headmen are dealing with locally.

In the Myanmar case headship remains imagined as an ambiguous institution more or less relevant as exemplar of historical dynamics. In the Bamar society of central Myanmar, the village headman is the most local official for rural administration since British colonization and first appeared as a historical conundrum. A considerable metanarrative (Mya Sein 1973, Taylor 1987, Thant Myint-U 2001, Iwaki 2015) about the impact of colonial rule draws on the idea that the introduction of the headman and village system<sup>6</sup> in the late nineteenth century was transformative and destabilized traditional authority by removing local elites and reorganized space around new lines (Author 2019b).<sup>7</sup> In this vein, Scott (1972a, 1972b) sees in the Burmese case an example of how traditional systems of patronage have

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<sup>6</sup> Village headship was first imagined by Crosthwaite, Chief Commissioner of Burma (1887-90), as a traditional institution and designed for pacifying the countryside.

<sup>7</sup> This hypothesis overstated the ability of colonial power to manipulate institutions and to establish hegemony. Rather, the operation of traditional elites was less homogeneous, and the local conflicts around who possessed authority, its limits and operations, was a pre-existing framework onto which the headman system became attached instead of being replaced.

lost their moral force (partly) due to the imposition of the village headman. Meanwhile, interest in how power was conceptualized locally, following authors such as Anderson (1972), intersected with the study of patron-client relations. Nash (1963, 1965) exemplifies this trend in the Burmese case. For him, the headman was a mere administrator, whereas the man of *hpon*, of power and prowess, was key to the vertical networks of patron-client relations that make up Burma party politics after independence in 1958. Prowess would become a central theme in Southeast Asian studies, as in Lehman's (1984) analysis of power in precolonial Burma in relation to Buddhist worldview and the making of merit following Hanks's (1962) work on Thailand. Spiro's (1997) work on political power depicts a headman in the early 1960s protecting the welfare of the village from autocratic authorities. More recently, Thawngmung's (2004) analysis on rural perceptions of the authoritarian state legitimacy renews the idea of intermediary by describing headmen as either using their position to extract wealth or to buffer state demands for their fellow villagers. During the 2010s, village headmen and their urban counterparts, the ward administrators, were depicted as uncanny officials who people have to deal with and whose elections put the country's democratic transition to the test (Kyed *et al.* 2016). Today, the headmen appointed after the 2021 military takeover are often targeted, injured or killed, in attempts to resist and counter the military ability to control. Each period and author produced debates assigning different attributes, roles and moral connotations to the headman: they were categorized either as usurpers of precolonial chiefs, as servants of a foreign state, as buffers against state demands, as charismatic patrons anchored in a local, as petty administrators, as corrupt officials, or as political entrepreneurs, engaging a state-like or a more traditional authority depending on the larger context (colonialism, state crisis, socialism, authoritarianism, transition).

As a theoretical step for 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 the actor-network theory (Latour 2013), headship as an institution is the stabilized network of relations and associations that an individual embodies when becoming headman while constantly working to fashion a way of being the headman by assembling a variety of things and relations. Embodying and fashioning are simultaneous processes. Following Strathern and Stewart, 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 behavior hint at how an individual by becoming headman takes upon himself a legacy, a set of responsibilities and expectations. Arguably, being at once a villager and an official, the

headman is not just embodying an institution but also a node intersecting and acting upon multiple layers of responsibilities, chains of relationships and things. As for Ko Kyaw, among other roles he is also a son, a neighbor, a husband, a friend, a cousin and a member of the local elite engaging everyday with people in situations of hospitality, intimacy, gaming, and so on, where money, tea, betel, contracts, circulate. 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 practice in its broader meaning. But 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 adjusting, transforming and engaging with the networks and domains that make up local politics.

In the case of Ko Kyaw in Gawgyi village, I argue that embodying and fashioning headship requires engaging with networks of relations delineated by uncertain boundaries between domains which I call the *personal*, the *political* and the *government*. The personal refers to affairs where personal responsibilities and obligations are at stake, involving “existing relationships between two persons that cannot be transposed to other persons” (Pannier 2021: 41, my translation), and ranging from home and family politics to patron-client relations. “The political” refers to what constitutes collective matters at the scale of a village and to how they were and are dealt with and by whom. In Gawgyi, this domain merges “village affairs” (*yatywa keiksa*) with “social affairs” (*luhmu-yay*) and engages individuals’ responsibilities towards villagers as a group of belonging as well as a specific form of bigness (Author 2019). I call it the political because it became the vantage point for evaluating the state of affairs in Gawgyi. Finally, the government domain simply refers to issues in which the headman has to be involved and to the debates about how successive headmen align or differ between each other. In other words, it is the local intersection of what Abrams (1988) called the state-system and the state-idea.

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 reestablishing the register of land ownership in 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 the legal price to everyone thus aligning with his uncle, who was praised for his honesty when he was headman. To overcome this issue, I chose 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 only interpreted 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 that 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.

### **A day in the life of Ko Kyaw**

Following Ko Kyaw meant navigating the situations we encountered in day-to-day activities while I lived in his house and became a member of his family. Within my relationship with him coexisted friendship, family care, fear of manipulation and spirituality. This ethnographic account divides a day in five parts<sup>8</sup> and mixes descriptions and analyses of social settings in an open-ended perspective. Each part of the day emphasizes movements between domains. We start in Ko Kyaw's house and see how making a family requires fashioning personal relations, rules and resources, which intersects with an understanding of bigness as an ability to take care of affairs beyond one's family. The second part shows Ko Kyaw as a patron using a clique built through an online game to maneuver politics of hospitality and place to deal with land titling. He is less active in the next sequence where the personal, the political and the government merge. It brings us first to a neighboring village for a premarital ceremony before heading back to Gawgyi for a land sale and shows Ko Kyaw acting successively as a big man and a headman by the book to make sure everything runs smoothly. We regain focus when Ko Kyaw joins Gawgyi big men gathered to repair a roof while discussing the ins and outs of a land conflict. It shows how sometimes he values incompetence to fashion the dynamics that are imposed upon him because he embodies the headman when his personal responsibilities are at risk of being conflated with the political and government domains. The last part shows Ko Kyaw moving from a teashop where he more or less unwittingly redistributes wealth to his clique, to the big men's council where he makes an appearance, and

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<sup>8</sup> These parts of a day are reassembled from multiple ones. It is thus partly a fiction. Ko Kyaw acknowledged that it could accurately reflect his daily routine, but his days were usually less busy. At times direct speech is used, but the indirect speech is mostly drawn from recollection of memories and notes. Past events and events that I have not witnessed are recalled by cross-cutting information in interviews and informal discussions.



finally to his home where he remains silent: a silence that is a way of maintaining consistency and avoiding confusion when several domains of local politics intersect in a single individual.

### *Family Matters*

Ko Kyaw wakes up a little bit later than the rest of the people living in the house. I enter through the back door and find him lying on a bench with his longyi (a long piece of cloth worn around the waist) used as a blanket. The living room gives an impression of controlled chaos where items are piled up to make space for the flows of daily life moving around them. A table and two benches are encased in the northeast corner. The desk is surrounded by huge green trunks full of papers, tools and pieces of metal. Next to it lay two loudspeakers, a keyboard and several sound boxes rented out for ceremonies. The table, desk and boxes overfill the eastern part of the living room divided by a large path from the entrance to the back door. In the western part are the beds. 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 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.

[Figure 1. Inside Ko Kyaw's house]

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. While tightening her worn longyi, she requests her son to give back some money. She had given him some a few days ago to visit his father in a 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 moneylender a week ago in order to pay the hospital fees. When his father decided to go to the hospital, Ko Kyaw became responsible for making his stay there go smoothly.

Since childhood, his parents chose him to take care of their health and wealth, and thus, he is still living with them. This type of relationship can be called *adunay adusa*, "living and eating together." The origin and use of incomes are central to this relationship. It emphasizes complementarity and dependency between at least two generations. What makes a family in principle – hierarchy, commensality – and the mutual obligations between its members –

gratitude, care – create entitlement to wealth, and especially to land through inheritance (Author 2018, 2020). But it is never fully achieved and remains in a state of becoming because making a home is a process of redefining authority and responsibility over people and wealth that impacts several families. Ko Kyaw’s father will die a few weeks later, officially from stomach cancer. And reimbursing the debt related to the hospitalization will be the sole obligation of Ko Kyaw’s mother until he receives his inheritance and becomes responsible for the whole house.

Ko Kyaw drinks some tea and then goes to the kitchen. He eats the meal cooked by his wife Ma Khin and joins me for smoking cheroots and chewing betel nuts. After unplugging his phone from a battery, he checks the state of his team on his favorite game, *Clash of Clans* (hereafter CoC). It is a collective game, yet people create individual strongholds. They gather in teams to 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. She shouts: “We just came back from my mother’s place to live here. There is plenty to do and you’re just playing on your phone!” Indeed, Ko Kyaw, his wife and their daughter had settled back in his parents’ house only a few months ago. It sits in the biggest compound of the village located in the oldest settlement area. One striking feature 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, fixing people in a place, whether it be marital partners, children, relatives or dependents, shows bigness and influence (Nash and Nash 1963). Ko Kyaw moved to Ma Khin’s place when she gave birth to their daughter. Changing houses was a manifold project. It was an opportunity for the baby to spend time and receive care among his mother’s family. But it was also an investment in kinship to potentially access resources (taking care of the land of Ma Khin’s mother in order to maybe claiming part of it later).

Moving back to Ko Kyaw’s parents and settling his family there was also a way of fashioning personal relations (family of origin, family of alliance), rules (about settlement and inheritance) and resources (land, labor) in order to align with the understanding of what bigness is made of. If one succeeds in making a large home, one has credentials for being responsible for collective affairs. Besides, without a dedicated state office in Gawgyi, Ko Kyaw needs a place that shows bigness.

*Game Theory*

Around 10am, Ko Kyaw makes a phone call to his nephew and asks him to come over to prepare the forthcoming war campaign on CoC. While we put out our cheroots, the boy arrives on his brand-new scooter. He visits us nearly every day and is often commissioned with doing 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 defenses and strengthens attacks in one-on-one battles to gain loot. Joint fights are climaxes. The troops – accepted beforehand by the team leader – are ranked by levels. They need to combine resources to win a war in successive duels.

[Figure 2. Clash of Clans]

The success of a campaign depends on group coordination, on the support of its leader and on the respect of the rules of thumb. Ko Kyaw coordinates the campaigns. He endlessly shares resources, advises on war strategies, provides resources 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 involved in village affairs to varying degrees. CoC is a perfect metaphor for how a faction is built up and maneuvered. Being the patron of his clique, Ko Kyaw fashions the variety of personal bonds that make up this network to accomplish government tasks.

After settling the detail of the next war campaign, Ko Kyaw asks his nephew to fetch U Min. U Min, a farmer in his late forties, arrives fifteen minutes later. He was awaiting Ko Kyaw's call. He has recently bought a piece of land located in the west of Gawgyi. One of the main jobs for Ko Kyaw as headman was to reregister individual plots for the cadastral units composing Myinmilaung Tract.<sup>9</sup> He needed to gather information on almost every plot. In U Min's case, the location of the land is sensitive. The cadastral map in question had been stolen a few years ago by a previous land officer who then allegedly disappeared. Meanwhile, an army officer grabbed those lands in order to build a poultry factory in the area. Remaking and updating the land record is thus a delicate endeavor.

As U Min arrives, Ko Kyaw 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 from the back of his longyi and sits in front of Ko Kyaw who offers him coffee-mix. When they finally touch upon the question at hand, Ko Kyaw stands up and

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<sup>9</sup> Following the 2012 Farmland law (No. 11/2012), Land Use Certificates had to be handed to farmers.

searches for a plastic folder where he amasses his files. That gesture marks the transition from a setting of hospitality between villagers towards a setting where Ko Kyaw is actively embodying headship. He tells U Min that the land officer will eventually give him the Land Use Certificate in the next few months. He adds on that from his last meeting with the head of the Township General Administration Department, he learned that the cadastre was almost completed. U Min nods without hope. They joke about the labyrinth of institutions, offices and personalities one has to navigate and maneuver to get things done. After a minute or two of silence, U Min leaves.

Calling U Min to come to his place through the intermediary of his nephew was a way to limit how hospitality obligations can influence the headman's job. While accompanying him in the village, Ko Kyaw taught me that the chances are greater to be trapped at someone's house than at one's own place. The politics of place and hospitality operate between the poles of friendship and violence. In this case, it is about gauging the potential liabilities stemming from accepting or refusing presents, food or services depending on where the meeting happens. It also depends on the stakes at hand and the ramifications of people's relationship pertaining to past generations, kinship, service-giving, grievances, accountability, debt, and so on. And as Ko Kyaw does not use the government office based in Myinmilaung, the place where he lives or is becomes a sort of public space when the situation is ritualized as an interaction relating to government stakes.

In this sequence of the day, Ko Kyaw thus fashions personal relations as well as the politics of place and hospitality to perform a government task. He uses the personal bonds that make up his (online) clique to fetch a villager at his home, creating a favorable space that lowers the potential liabilities stemming from a situation of hospitality in order to embody and be the headman. At other times, Ko Kyaw's way of being the headman, and a big man, is to do as little as possible.

### *Playing by the Book*

After finalizing the details of the next conquest campaign on his phone, we stay for a little while talking about the latest news from the English Premier League. Chelsea, his favorite team, lost. The discussion shifts to the Gawgyi football team's failure during the last match. A woman in her fifties arrives. A premarital meeting, called *tintaungpwe*, is going to take place in Tozigon, a village nearby. She calls Ko Kyaw to come along. He puts on a white shirt and changes his longyi.

Administratively, Tozigon is attached to the neighboring Tract of Budaungkan. Yet, Tozigon belongs to Gawgyi polity. Its villagers do their weddings, donation ceremonies, or burials with the help of Gawgyi's villagers and use and rely on Gawgyi's organization of village affairs for catering to their needs. Gawgyi and Tozigon are close neighbors, both spatially and socially. They call it *yathswe-yatmyo*, meaning people akin by (sharing a) dwelling. This expression is a combination of a building block of kinship (*hswemyo*) with a reference to the common dwelling area (*yat*). Their proximity stems from close relations between preeminent farming families whose descendants settled progressively in Gawgyi. Access to land and livelihood through marriage and inheritance enables individuals to maintain relatively good relationships and to be integrated within the same domain of social affairs while belonging to different jurisdictions.

The meeting is held between a family of Tozigon, marrying their daughter, and a family from another village, marrying their son. We quickly take our motorbikes and drive there. U Lin, the head of the Gawgyi bachelors' group, is crouched next to the fire, preparing tea with U Htay, the main leader of Gawgyi, while sharing betel chews under the sun.

[Figure 3. Preparing tea in Tozigon]

Ko Kyaw's presence is not strictly required. He came as a local big man and as a witness. Picture three tables aligned. On the left, relatives of the bride's side sit while people from the bridegroom's side sit on the right. The parents of the couple take their place in between, accompanied by elders from Gawgyi and Tozigon. This is the negotiation table, where U Maung, from Gawgyi, operates as master of ceremonies (*beiktheikhsaya*). He begins his address about what marriage means and how to behave for the best. Then, he announces what both families are willing to give to the couple. The boy's father says that he, as daily worker, cannot provide much but, as per custom, he will pay for the wedding. Both spouses' parents agree in front of everyone. Gawgyi political institutions embodied by U Htay, U Lin and U Maung, and Ko Kyaw, facilitate and are key witnesses for this agreement. Even if they do not do much, they have to be there. In this situation, Ko Kyaw just goes with the flow and does not interfere. At last, the headman and the hundred-houses' head of Budaungkan Tract arrive on a motorbike. They do not come to witness the marital engagement. Rather, they come to finalize a land sale. Ko Kyaw was waiting for them.

We finish our plate of cakes and cups of tea. As I walk toward the fire, U Lin tells me that he needs our help this afternoon. We drive back to Gawgyi, followed by the two officials from

Budaungkan and a man from Tozigon, named U Htoo. This man, Ko Kyaw's cousin, 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 of the appropriate headman is mandatory. U Htoo has already given the third of the price to Daw Than to formalize the agreement. He is a former daily laborer who wants to start growing betel leaves. We stop at Daw Than's house. The stakeholders arrive one by one. I stay to the side on a bamboo chair. Budaungkan headman requests Ko Kyaw to write the contract and then stamps it. He, and not Ko Kyaw, will deal with the land officer to update the cadastre. U Htoo gives the rest of the money to Daw Than and she gives money to both the Budaungkan headman and his sidekick.<sup>10</sup> Ko Kyaw received nothing directly. Akin to both contractors, he facilitates the transaction. 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 came back a moment earlier from their greenhouse. 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 carrying the straw baskets to fetch the precious green leaves. We slalom between the palm trees and finally reach the field and have lunch with U Htoo and his wife.

In the sequence of these social settings, the personal, political and government domains clearly intersect. We moved along Ko Kyaw's personal chains of relationships (his cousin buying land from his grandmother), political responsibility (being a witness in a village belonging to Gawgyi polity) and government duties (writing a contract). He successively embodies a big man and the headman while not really being active. He rather follows the flow of activities, playing a minimal role in two transactions, first as witness for a marital engagement ceremony and then as a go-between for a land sale. The way he fashions headship here is to be passive but present, to play both the local big man and the headman by the book in order to make sure everything runs smoothly without overstepping the delicate line between his personal, political and government responsibilities.

*“It's Not Easy, Young Man”*

Back from the field, we take a rest at Ko Kyaw's house. After an hour or so, I remind him that his uncle U Lin asked for our help. He is currently rebuilding the roof of a shelter for his cattle. Building repairs require collective help. In theory, everyone comes to give a hand, but

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<sup>10</sup> The amount given is usually ten percent of the land price.

in practice, it often displays a relational engagement. For this shelter, the roof, made of palm leaves, needs to be changed. When we arrive there, a small group of men are bustling around. The scene is familiar. Those men are the ones 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 the 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.<sup>11</sup> "You guys aren't early", U Lin mocks us. Whereas Ko Kyaw starts slicing strings in no time, I try in vain to make myself useful and finally give up and sit. 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 of crop prices, the next pagoda festival, and so forth. I pour coffee. U Lin unpacks snacks. U Htay offers betel chews and U Maung lights his cheroots. Tea, coffee, smokes, and betel nuts are the ingredients of male sociality. The offering of any of these items follows a basic understanding: *apyan-ahlan*, meaning one good turn deserves another, the ethics of living together. Assistance, help, and offerings follow a simple rule of reciprocity but depend on and reflect the state of relationships. Coming here to give a hand shows a degree of affiliation. I remember that Nash said that elders are not powerful because they do not "overstep the vague but delicate line that separates individual responsibilities" (Nash 1965: 270). Rather, I see in them a certain power because they take care of the political domain. 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 (Author 2019a). And yet, "the vague but delicate line" is all that is on my mind. So, 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?" U Htay answers: "Who else would do it?" Deep silence follows. Everyone gazes in different directions. After a minute that feels like an hour, U Maung teases me: "It's not easy young man." The lack of exchange on that issue reveals that village big men have no binding power. Their influence is limited to the orientation of Gawgyi affairs, when dealing with specific issues such as the water supply, village conflicts or ceremonies. They can exhort, maneuver, but rarely sanction. They fashion the local understanding of what should be to scale the village as a collective. But they act carefully

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<sup>11</sup> However, the concentration of leadership particularly reflects how some farming families have secured and gathered, through alliances and descent, land, cattle and know-how. To such an extent that being an accomplished farmer (*taungthu*) is a valued status. But when asked about what makes a person (*lu*) big (*gyi*), they always emphasized propriety and achievements.

when their personal responsibility merges with the collective. And so, the reason behind their bigness remains unspoken publicly.

Ko Kyaw smiles again, and we resume our petty discussion until he touches upon U Myo's case. He gives details about the current unfolding of the dispute. Around 2003, eleven farmers mortgaged their land to U Myo, at that time a moneylender and gambler from Mogaung. Usually, this kind of agreement does not involve interest and lasts for one to three years. U Win, Myinmilaung headman from 1995 to 2006, wrote and stamped the contracts. Both U Myo and U Win have the reputation – at least in Gawgyi – of being crooked and powerful men. Three years later, after U Myo became headman of Budaungkan Tract, the dispute started. Most farmers asked for an extension as they could not reimburse him yet. He refused. The eleven farmers, accusing him of changing the agreement by asking for interest, went on to seek resolution with U Win, who refused. So, they sent the case to the Township authorities which 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 contracts that turned mortgages into land sales. In 2008, U Myo unsuccessfully attempted to get the land registered in his name. Eventually, six out of 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, remained hidden. Nothing moved forward until the Farmland Law was implemented in 2013. The old grudge was revived. The plots were claimed for title twice so the land committee<sup>12</sup> had to judge the case. Ko Kyaw asked for a meeting between all stakeholders in May 2014 to reach a consensus. It failed. And now the case has been transferred to the township level.

Under U Lin's shelter everyone's eyes drop to the floor. Once Ko Kyaw says that the case has not been settled yet but the odds are in the favor of U Myo, the air thickens with unspoken thoughts. Silence. Trying to find a consensus was a way for Ko Kyaw not to be at odds with the previous headmen, with the farmers and with his superiors. Reaching a compromise is the most common way of settling disputes. But Ko Kyaw chooses to do just that while he could have pushed the case in one way or another.

When he became headman against Myinmilaung candidates, Ko Kyaw started embodying an

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<sup>12</sup> The committee is officially named Village Tract Farmland Management Committee and consists of Ko Kyaw, an external land officer, the official elder of the Village Tract (U Htay), the leader of farmers (staffed with a villager from Gawgyi) and the clerk (staffed directly by the government several years ago with a villager from Myinmilaung proper).



institution and took upon himself a legacy of conflicts and animosities. How he mediates conflicts is connected to this history. Thus, showing incompetence for solving this case avoids making a sharp decision in favor of the farmers that could trigger hostilities between Gawgyi and Myinmilaung proper. Accusing U Win and U Myo of forgery and collusion openly could trigger a vendetta in many shapes of form. Embodying the headman also means that Ko Kyaw needs to deal with a series of expectations, especially in Gawgyi. Him updating the big men is a way of aligning with the idea that, even if as headman he embodies a defamed position, he has to show a degree of loyalty to how village affairs are handled, and thus to whom handles it. In other words, playing the incompetence card in this case is how Ko Kyaw engages with the chains of relationships, things and events at play: with previous headmen, farmers, Gawgyi big men, with the historic animosity between villages, with contracts, lands, money, land titles, and so forth.

And this is the point, that on a day-to-day basis he has to refashion, compose and at times dissemble because he is a node intersecting networks of people, things, events and memories composing the domains of the local political life. Ko Kyaw is just not big enough for this case. Nor are Gawgyi big men. And the value of not being competent sometimes enables him to craft the dynamics that are imposed upon him because of his position. He says: “In a few months, I’m done.”

### *Being Silent*

Once we run out of toddy leaves, we get back home where we resume the ongoing war campaign on CoC. In this last sequence, we follow Ko Kyaw moving back and forth between his house, Monywa town and the small village council. It shows how Ko Kyaw engages with places, silence, wealth, smiles, the treating of coffee, tea, betel, snacks and deference rules to navigate local politics. The discussion stops short as Ko Kyaw’s 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 field. We pack the loaded baskets and secure them with straps. Later in the evening the workers will come to Ko Kyaw’s wife to get paid. The precious green leaves will soon be valued in a broker house in Monywa. Back at Ko Kyaw’s house, his wife and cousin unpack the leaves, clean and pack them up again with wet longyis. His brother joins us before the departure with a bag of betel chews to share. We carefully load the baskets on the motorbikes one more time and begin the journey toward Monywa. The shortest way is a dirt track intersecting with Kyawkka Road that goes eastward from

Monywa. When we arrive at the destination, two young men help unload the baskets. The broker warehouse is bustling. Waiting for our turn, we go in a nearby teashop while keeping an eye on the merchandise. Once the leaves are turned into cash, we drive to a downtown teashop famous for its local fried specialties. Some Gawgyi youngsters, active on CoC, join us. Ko Kyaw makes a point in treating us, his small troop of followers, to food and drinks. He does that without being bossy. He got paid so he pays. But he cannot completely hide that he is somehow above the others. There are no explicit expectations that he would pay for us. And even if he does not want to be seen as a patron, his behavior, his deeds and his assets put him in that position. The fact that people implicitly anticipate things from him and that he aligns with these expectations allows him to demand things in return in a potentially endless game. The friendly atmosphere is emphasized upon to keep in mind that no hierarchy is overtly at play. This fluidity contrasts with the more hierarchical relationships Ko Kyaw was dealing with a few hours ago. When everybody has eaten and smoked, and Ko Kyaw's generosity could not be pushed further, we promptly find our motorbikes parked in the heap of engines and plastic.

As we arrive back home, Ko Kyaw's cousin is standing at the kitchen door while his mother finishes her meal. The cousin came to get her daily wage and organize the next rounds of work. Ko Kyaw passes on the banknotes to his wife who vanishes into the living room to come back a few seconds later and discretely hands over her salary. Ko Kyaw is reminded by his wife that he should not spend too much in teashops. He smiles at her and pouts until she grins back. I then shower and eat up my dinner with him in the living room, followed by the usual cheroots. Another routine waits ahead.

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. 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. Giving up one's seat shows deference and such seat politics are clues for understanding local hierarchies to some degree. Yet, it is a convivial time between relatives, neighbors or friends. Still, not everybody dares joining this small council of village affairs. A council from which Ko Kyaw will gradually withdraw after he stops being headman.

We finish our cup of coffee. I refuse an umpteenth chew, for my mouth is burning and we head back to Ko Kyaw's. Alone with him and his brother, we pursue our discussion. I plainly ask him why he wanted to be headman. He says he was pushed by fellow villagers. For him

it's just not worth it anymore. The responsibilities are well above 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" to officials and line up for opportunities. But on the other hand, Ko Kyaw insists that it means being responsible for the Tract, putting in time and effort to get things done while being poorly paid.<sup>13</sup> Ko Kyaw never openly complains about being the headman, nor does he say he enjoys it; he just remains silent about it. Becoming the headman can be seen as move for one-upmanship or a way to comply with the big men and stand up for his village because he has credentials, yet these will always be merely partial interpretations. Being silent is perhaps a way of keeping things consistent and avoiding more confusion about how his personal responsibilities merge with collective matters and his duties as headman. At times, silence speaks louder than words. His brother also stays silent, playing CoC with his own team with members from all around the country. On our side, we won 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 because he was embodying headship. This article 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 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 than when it is.

Following how a headman embodies and fashions headship during a day 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.

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<sup>13</sup> His salary was about 120.000MMK per month (less than 100USD), the same as a daily worker on construction sites in Monywa in 2015.

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. But, more fundamentally, we saw how the 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 shortcutting rules of hospitality. By using the personal bonds that make up his clique to call someone home, Ko Kyaw fashioned a conducive space diminishing the obligations that may 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 for them to run smoothly. This sale, that many would see as the most strategic or stressful element, is perhaps the smoothest part of the day. It is rather when his role is less clear or distinct that require more work, 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 distance with the state. This sequence has also shown that he has to act along 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, the chains of knowledge about past headmen and inter-village rivalries. Ko Kyaw also appeared as a sort of patron, more or less unwittingly redistributing wealth while sharing a good time with his followers. But being headman was not all fun and games and he mostly remained silent about it. Being silent is not being passive, but to make a choice, reflecting how mediating several domains of local political life is more about acts 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 things we saw circulating can be assembled. In this journey, we moved from Ko Kyaw's home to a neighboring village, a teashop, a field, several neighbors' houses; we encountered his family, his clique, some big men, other and former headmen; we navigated a ceremony, situations of hospitality, of exchange, of mutual help, 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, along with his family reputation, his way of haranguing, smiling, being silent; of accepting, refusing and

giving things; of forming, avoiding and maneuvering factions; complying with the village big men and having a fair idea about the lines he should not cross. Focusing on how a headman engages with different layers of responsibilities and obligations in successive settings illuminates some key domains that organize local politics. 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 of levels, arenas or forms of governance, towards enriching the understanding of brokerage as assemblage (Koster and van Leynseele 2018) with a more phenomenological approach to the enactment of politics and mediation. In line with Lindquist for whom “[t]he problem of how to describe and conceptualize what the broker mediates is [...] primarily ethnographic” (2015b: 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 the question of *how* does a headman embody and fashion an institution led to the question of *what* a headman mediates, in Ko Kyaw’s case domains of local politics.

Describing a headman throughout a day is thus an ethnographic device for an anthropology concerned with the contemporary, but also with history. For instance, what I came to call “the political” is a reading of how certain historical possibilities and uncertainties unfold during Ko Kyaw’s day. Why did being headman mean for him embodying a position people distrust while showing a degree of loyalty? How have these values and forms of engagement become central? What kinds of responsibilities are involved and toward whom? These questions link a series of narratives about former men of power, in power, and the effect of state violence, creating a rather masculine geography of responsibilities and belonging in which village and social affairs became valued domains of action and avenues for bigness. In this sense, an ethnographic description grapples with political readings and “uses of the past” (Naepels 2010: 880, my translation), but offers nonetheless ways of analyzing them.

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