

PART II

Making Politics

We have now reached the part of the book exploring the ethnographic present of the fieldwork period. This work is anchored in the relationship I developed with Ko Kyaw. I make sense of his experience as headman, and mine as an ethnographer, as a matter of political navigation and craftsmanship. The notion of political navigation is derived from Vigh's conceptualization of practice in terms of 'social navigation' (2009). For him, because 'navigation designates motion within motion, it forces us, in a social perspective, to consider the relation between the environment people move in and how the environment itself moves them, before, after and during an act' (2009: 425). Following Ko Kyaw was an opportunity for me to navigate the relations and dilemmas we encountered in day-to-day activities.

This book is an effort to explore the transformation of the political landscape through time by grounding the analysis in Ko Kyaw's political navigation within various domains of engagement. In the first part of the book, I described the fashioning of the local political landscape by triangulating a variety of discourses and historical sources. In this second part, I explore the node of relationships I encountered by describing more or less extended situations and interactions in the vein of Gluckman's (1940) and Glaeser's (2005) approaches.

The following chapters thus aim at widening our understanding of politics. They provide a gradual exploration of what I call *forms of engagement* and *domains of politics*. I first focus on the experience and enactment of politics by describing a day in the life of Ko Kyaw to show how an individual embodies and fashions headship through successive social settings. This ethnographic device is a way to analyse what a headman, as a situated figure and a political institution embedded in a local society, mediates in context. It shows how a headman engages with multiple layers of responsibilities and chains of relationships, delineating uncertain boundaries between the personal, the political and the government domains that partly organize local politics. By focusing on an

‘intermediary’ position, the virtue of Chapter 4 is to give texture to these domains by showing how a headman engages with them.

The next two chapters give more consistency to the family and village domains and show how the idea of ‘taking care of’ is key in understanding the work of worth and authority in these domains. By looking at the transmission of inheritance as a process of redefining authority and responsibility, Chapter 5 argues that intrafamily relationships are a field of politics. This is in part because dynamics of kinship and the moral and social obligations between family members have organized land relations in the *longue durée*. But also because what makes a family – hierarchy, commensality – and the mutual obligations between its members – gratitude, care – create entitlement to property. Focusing on transfers of wealth within families allows us to see them as a crucial domain of engagement. Foregrounding the fact that land is entangled in multiple relationships, this chapter describes ownership as a matter of stewardship: taking care of a patrimony to which others are also entitled. The field of family relations, as a matrix for thinking about ownership through transmission, is key to understand how authority is justified within families. Ascribed in terms of heredity but achieved in terms of aptitude, authority thus takes the form of ‘taking care of’ a domain of engagement.

Chapter 6 scales up this argument by exploring the domain of village affairs by questioning the worth of village big men. It draws on the understanding of their leadership as guardianship and links it to the rise of village affairs as the form of village politics. The chapter describes three big men in specific situations (two ceremonies and one dispute) and argues that, by making village affairs a space of engagement where the worth of the people is evaluated, they legitimize a political order within the village. It also suggests that entrustment and exclusion are central processes of local politics in which the voices of villagers are channelled through, delegated to and often excluded by the big men.

Finally, the coda in Chapter 7 brings together the different threads woven throughout the book. It describes two crucial days of the village headman’s election in 2016 to show local politics at work.