

Pioneers of the plantation economy: militarism, dispossession and the limits of growth in the Wa State of Myanmar

The characteristic mobility of highland populations in Southeast Asia relied to a large extent on their particular adaption to an ecological environment: swidden cultivation of tubers on mountain slopes. This ecology corresponded to cosmologies in which potency was limitless, or at least had no fixed and delimited precinct (as did the rice paddies and Buddhist realms in the valleys). Military state building, modern transport, and new crops and agricultural technologies have effectively ended swidden cultivation. In this article, I follow the pioneers of the plantation economy in the Wa State of Myanmar, who dispossess local populations of their land and employ them as plantation labour. The limits of growth and potency they encounter are (a) in the natural environment and (b) in the resistance of local populations. Yet, even though there are such limits, the potency to which these pioneers aspire is still limitless. It is however channelled through a new economy of life, epitomised in the plantation, nourished in excessive feasting, and maintained by the kinship dynamics of capture and care.

Key words plantation, dispossession, life, economy, Wa

Introduction

A classic origin story told and retold among the Wa of China and Myanmar is about their flight from Keng Tung: in the long-ago past, the Wa ruled over the Shan in the great city of Keng Tung.¹ But they were tricked by the Shan, who came with an army of elephants and expelled them from the city. Those who went ahead broke plantain leaves along their path so that those coming behind would find the way. But plantains grow back very fast, and the latecomers got lost and had to stay in the plains: the Wa pioneers entered the mountains where they are until today, and the others are the 'left-behind Wa', the Wa Git, or the 'Hill Thai', Tai Loi. From then on, every time a new Sawbwa was installed in Keng Tung, some left-behind Wa were feasted at the palace and then ritually expelled (Enriquez 1918: 33; Mangrai 1981: 230). Today, the Shan of Kengtung recognise their Burmese overlords and have no Sawbwa anymore, but the Tai Loi, the descendants of the Wa, still play an important part in the rituals of Songkran, the Thai New Year Festival, specifically by carrying and playing drums. Even though the rituals imply mutual interdependence, it is clear that the Tai Loi subordinate themselves to the Tai Khuen, the Shan majority group in today's Keng Tung, thus annually repeating the humiliation of their expulsion centuries ago (Karlsson 2013).

Yet, about 100 km to the North of Keng Tung, in Pang Hsang, the capital of the Wa State, we can observe an inversion of the ritual of expulsion. Each year at the Songkran of Pang Hsang, Wa rulers receive gifts from local Shan villagers. Similar to the Shan princes

¹ This article is based on 18 months of fieldwork in the Wa hills of Myanmar and China during four fieldtrips between June 2014 and November 2017. The names of smaller places and ordinary people have been anonymised, following anthropological convention.

of the past, representatives of the Wa central authorities sit in elevated thrones, while the Shan villagers squat in front of them. During the rituals, the Shan villagers pay their honours to the Wa, deliver presents to them, including fruits, sweets and sticky rice, and in turn receive red envelopes with money from the Wa officials. Most of the leaders of the Wa State are from villages in the hills to the North of Pang Hsang and can easily be distinguished from their Shan subordinates: dark-skinned and in army fatigues, followed by an entourage of soldiers, no one would mistake them for a Shan villager.

The core leaders of the Wa State are relatives and associates of Tax Pang, also known by his Chinese name Bao Youxiang. Tax Pang, and his brothers Tax Rang and Tax Jiet, were born in the village of Taoh Mie in the 1940s and 50s. When they were children, neighbouring armies had just started to move into the Wa hills, and as teenagers they still took part in raids and headhunting rituals. They rose through the ranks of the guerrilla armies of the Communist Party of Burma during the 1970s and 80s, founded the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in 1989, and have been presiding over its de-facto state since. Like Tax Pang and his brothers, most members of the central committee and *politburo* of the Wa State are veterans of the Communist Party of Burma. All of them have accumulated substantial personal wealth – bureaucracy and administration is relatively weak, and most infrastructure construction in the Wa State is paid for directly by the elites. The trade in drugs played an important role in the emergence of this elite, but already in the 1990s, they started to diversify into other industries, including mining and food, as well as large-scale investments in China, Thailand and Myanmar (where they own, for instance, one minor airline). Ordinary villagers and Chinese traders often tell stories about the unimaginable wealth of the Wa commanders: for instance, one commander had so much cash stored in his warehouses that it got mouldy and had to be taken out. His servants dried truckloads of 100-Yuan batches in the huge courtyard for several days, just like other people would dry corn cobs or tea leaves. Wa villagers who have served in the army or at the house of a commander commonly know that a normal 50 kg rice-bag can carry three million Chinese yuan (the equivalent of € 380,000). In the warehouse of one Wa commander I have seen two Bentleys, and in one of Pang Hsang's large garages, a monster truck imported from Thailand that is said to be worth exactly one rice bag full of Chinese money.

The elites of the Wa State have effectively turned around the old story of the Wa's expulsion from the highlands and have re-conquered the lowlands. During the 1970s and 80s, when they fought with the Communist Party of Burma, Wa soldiers entered the plains of Pang Hsang, Meng Pok and Meng Yawn – traditionally settlements of their Shan neighbours. Since then, the Wa have established a de facto state the size of Belgium, and the core leaders of this state are tightly connected through kinship and business ties. Most of them have grown up in villages at the Chinese border. In their lifetime, they saw huge changes: they have conquered the surrounding valleys and since then have also overseen huge changes to the villages in the hills, where they had grown up. They started off, quite literally, as pioneers, that is, foot soldiers,² in the Communist Party of Burma. Even though the first generation of Wa leaders rose through the ranks of the army and have become agrarian capitalists, they still define themselves by a pioneering ethos that will become apparent. They have been pioneers in many ways, but here I want to focus on the plantation economies that they have established in the Wa State. Using their income from

² The etymology of the English word 'pioneer' goes back to Old French 'peonier', 'foot-soldier', cf. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pioneer>

elsewhere, the elites of the Wa State have invested in new forms of commercial and large-scale agriculture. The rubber and tea plantations they have opened rely on the new technologies of transport, communication and production that in the Wa hills were introduced for military purposes. The plantations also required large-scale forced resettlements, which took place especially during the 1990s but continue until the present day. The plantation economy requires a lot of investment, it often incurs losses (especially rubber, in recent years) and is generally not very profitable. But even so, it is an essential part of the de facto sovereignty of the Wa State, not least because it is a core institution of the military state and its 'garrison-entrepôts' (Roitman 2005): plantations provide radical means to control populations, and thus offer a core nexus between the elites of the Wa State and ordinary villagers – as well as with animals and plants.

What have been the effects of the plantation economy on concepts of potency and the good life among the Wa? In the past, the ecology of swidden cultivation and hunting in the highlands of Southeast Asia was generally accompanied by animistic worldviews and political arrangements that emphasised autonomy, mutuality and incommensurability. Even though possibly there have been similarities between the worldviews of the valleys and the hills (Tooker 1996), one classic contrast is between the limitless potency of the highlands and delimited power in the valleys: whereas in the highlands, political, economic and ritual systems remain open in principle, in the valleys there are clear borders and restrictions in each realm. If we understand 'potency' as the horizon of possible action, it was limitless in the open system of the uplands, and delimited in the fixed frameworks and insurmountable inequalities of the lowlands (Tannenbaum 1989). This opposition of different forms of potency is part of a long series of contrasts between the highlands and the lowlands of Southeast Asia, in terms of their ecology, religion, politics as well as kinship arrangements (Leach 1954; Kirsch 1973; Durrenberger 1981; Russell 1989). The pioneers of the plantation economy in the Wa State have turned these oppositions on their head: former highlanders, they now rule over the lowlands.

The schemes that Nicola Tannenbaum, Thomas Kirsch and many others have used to describe the differences between lowland and highland Southeast Asia have been suggested for a world that had not yet been connected by roads, air travel, modern weapons, chemicals and social media. In fact, it seems the opposition between highland and lowland ecology only holds as long as those modern technologies are not present – a point that James Scott also has insisted on in the introduction to his acclaimed book on *The art of not being governed* (2009). But what happened to the opposition between highland and lowland ecologies after the introduction of modern technologies?

The machines and technologies of the plantation obviously make a huge difference. Plantations require technical assemblages that make plants, animals and humans 'legible', that is, uniform, visible and therefore manipulable. The rubber plantations of the Wa State, for instance, rely on saplings brought from other plantations, chainsaws, and machines for rubber processing. More fundamentally, they rely on fundamental capacities of statecraft to make populations legible, so as to resettle, dispossess and exploit. In the Wa State, all these investments cannot be separated from the income provided by the drug economy.

In this article, I briefly introduce the history of militarism and dispossession that form the background for the plantation economy today. Revolutionary changes in the technologies of transport, communication and production have led to local politics that are a far cry from the classical oppositions between egalitarian uplands and hierarchical lowlands. The pioneers of the plantation economy have not simply adopted lowland

models, but instead have created a new ‘economy of life’ that is premised on the violent capture of local populations and their submission into a plantation economy, as well as the harnessing and care of the same populations. This includes human populations, as well as animal and plant populations: by ‘economy of life’ I mean an economy that centres on the capture and care of life, be it human, animal or plant life, as well as the technologies of capture and care.³ Such a formulation allows us to include radically different beings, as well as pay attention to the specific modalities and actions of each of them: in our case, the people, machines, plants and animals that take part in the plantation economy. Within such economies of life, potencies emerge and encounter their limitations. ‘Potency’ refers to the horizons of action that are given in particular cosmo-technological frameworks, that is, the uses of technology that are embedded in specific social and cosmological practice. The main purpose of this article is to describe the contours of the current economies of life in the Wa hills and the potencies that emerge within them; building on earlier outlines of potency in highland Southeast Asia (especially that of Tannenbaum), I will also briefly reflect on the new limits potency comes up against; that is, the limits of growth in a militarised frontier region of Southeast Asia today.

The history of militarism

The Wa of Southeast China and Northwest Myanmar have been typical Zomians: until the 1960s, most ethnic Wa lived in fortified villages independent of the surrounding states. Even though Chinese armies, miners and missionaries had entered the Wa hills previously, most of the people in the central Wa hills lived beyond the reach of state administrations and world religions. Swidden cultivation remained the mainstay of local livelihoods into the 20th century, and before the arrival of Baptist missionaries in the 1930s, no Wa script existed.

In China, the Wa lost their autonomy soon after the establishment of the People’s Republic, whereas on the other side of the newly established international border, Wa communities followed local strongmen who were supported by foreign armies (including the People’s Liberation Army, the Kuomintang, the Tatmadaw and the CIA). At the end of the 1960s, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) established their headquarters in the Wa hills, and with Chinese support, quickly unified all the remaining armed groups and warlords. The CPB established lasting government institutions beyond the level of villages and village-circles, including a hierarchical structure of government offices and a number of schools. In the 1970s, the CPB built the first dirt roads – though the armies still relied on the better roads that existed on the Chinese side of the border for supply and transport.

³ What I call an ‘economy of life’ is similar to what Fernando Santos-Granero (2009) calls a ‘political economy of life’ in his study of slavery and war in the Americas. While Santos-Granero focuses specifically on the problem of war captives, the French anthropologist Perig Pitrou suggests a general theoretical framework to study the emergence of life, what he calls (somewhat awkwardly) a ‘cosmo-bio-politics’ (2016) or a ‘general pragmatics of life’ (Pitrou 2014). Pitrou highlights how actions (of humans, animals, plants and spirits) are coordinated to create ‘agentive configurations proper to life’ (Pitrou 2014: 102). I understand both as revivals of a classical anthropological project, namely the unified analysis of the biological, political and cosmological arrangements that allow ‘life’ to emerge – fundamentally similar to the attempts by Frazer and Hocart, for instance, to understand the articulation of kinship and kingship.

During the two decades of rule of the Communist Party of Burma, a small group of Wa soldiers rose through the ranks and two of them – Tax Pang (Bao Youxiang) and Tax Lai (Zhao Nilai) – became deputy brigade commanders and members of the *politburo* of the CPB in the 1980s. Unlike most of their peers, Tax Pang and Tax Lai had been to Chinese schools across the border. Since they had entered the CPB in the early 19670s, they had spent considerable time away from their home villages, together with Chinese, Burmese, Lahu and Shan soldiers. The lingua franca in the CPB during the 1970s and 80s was Chinese, given that much of the manpower, machinery and technology was supplied by China. But the support from China started to fade soon after the high tides of the Cultural Revolution (1968–71), and the army units of the CPB had to find alternative sources of revenue. Given local industries and trade were negligibly small, opium soon became the main source of income: at first, through the taxation of the opium trade, and soon also by overseeing large-scale opium transports to the Thai border. Army commanders of the CPB started to collaborate with local middlemen and representatives of other armies in the region. Particularly influential traders came from Nanpaklin, a village of Wa originally from Aishuai in China, who had fled the Communist Armies in the 1950s and settled across the Salween, near Mount Loi Maw. The leaders of Nanpaklin, the brothers Tax Sah and Tax Tao, and their business partner Wei Mingcheng and his son Wei Xuegang, quickly became important middlemen, being fluent in Chinese and Wa as well as having strong connections both in China and in Burma, and across the the entire region that came to be called the 'Golden Triangle'.

The same commanders, Tax Lai and Tax Pang, led a mutiny against the Burmese leadership of the CPB and established the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in 1989. These men, and their extended families, have since then amassed substantial personal wealth. As mentioned, some of this wealth came from opium taxes, and later involvement in the production and trade of narcotics. But today the Wa elites have diverse business portfolios with substantial investments in mining, gemstones, real estate as well as a series of other industries in the Wa State and in the region.

Opium had been produced in the Wa hills for at least a century, providing Wa farmers with some cash income. In the best times of opium production, in the 1980s and 1990s, most of the area suitable for opium was used for this crop. Small-scale farmers obviously did not benefit from the profits made in the opium trade and later in the production of heroin. These were monopolised by some business groups that had emerged from the marooned KMT and CCP armies in the region, and later collaborated with the CPB and other armed groups. The CPB at first only taxed the opium farmers and traders, but soon also got involved in the opium trade, and CPB commanders organised large mule caravans transporting raw opium to traders in the Golden Triangle.

After 1989, the UWSA quickly established itself as one of the strongest armed groups in Burma. For most of the 1990s, it maintained good relations with the Burmese military government, which it supported against Khun Sa's Mengtai Army, then the most powerful armed group in the Golden Triangle. After defeating Khun Sa, the UWSA occupied some of the areas that had belonged to his army at the Thai Border, and forcefully resettled about 120,000 people from the Wa hills at the Chinese border to this new 'Southern Command'. The Southern Command is effectively led by Wei Xuegang, the long-time business associate from Nanpaklin who later also joined the UWSA. Since the establishment of the Southern Command,

the UWSA has not taken part in open battle, but in various smaller skirmishes with some of the surrounding armed groups. On the basis of the military strength of the UWSA, the Wa leadership plays important roles in mining (Martov 2015), real estate, trade, transport and other businesses in the wider region. Rather than their business interests outside the Wa State, what interests me here is local agriculture and, to some extent, local industry in the Wa State.

Having grown up in villages of peasant-warriors themselves, the older generation of Wa leaders all invested in farms and plantations in their home villages or elsewhere, once they had the wherewithal to do so. Many of them own huge farms, with granaries that appear grotesque in size when compared to the much smaller granaries of ordinary farmers. In Taoh Mie, the home village of the head of the Wa government, Tax Pang, huge mansion-palaces and government buildings mix with newly built farm houses, and irrigated paddies dug into the slopes near the few streams. Those mansion-farms are surrounded by large plantations of rubber, pine and tea.

The plantation: transport, communication, production

The plantations that the elites have built are similar to commercial plantations across the border in China, where monocultures and cash-cropping have become increasingly common. Since the 1990s, local governments have promoted commercial mono-cropping all over China (Steinmüller 2013: chap. 3). In some areas, this has led to new forms of large-scale agribusiness (Zhang and Donaldson 2008). One key challenge for investors has been to appropriate enough land for large-scale commercial agriculture. In China, agricultural capitalism is held at bay by communal land rights at the village level; in the Wa State there is little resembling formal land rights for small farmers. While the majority of the population are still subsistence farmers, commercial agricultural has expanded rapidly in the last two decades. In a small de facto state governed by an insurgent army, the dispossession of local populations for the purpose of large-scale cash cropping continued earlier efforts by the military states at sedentarisation and drug substitution. Until the 1990s, many farmers in the Wa State still practised some swidden cultivation and relied on opium for cash income. The policies of opium substitution, in particular the resettlement of local populations into the Southern Command (always justified by local elites in terms of economic development and drug substitution), as well as the main substitute crop, rubber (which requires large-scale and long-term plantations), provided models for the new plantation economy.

Another long-term development had been the government push against swidden agriculture and the introduction of irrigated rice paddies. Even though the CPB had promoted these objectives, strong advances were made only after the establishment of the UWSA in 1989.⁴ There is no doubt that the steep slopes in most of this

⁴ Assessing the state of agriculture at the end of the 1980s, a former CPB official writes: 'Except for the traditional ways of planting poppies in the winter and dry rice in spring, there were no cash crops, let alone any irrigated rice paddies, it was exactly the same as in the 1970s, slash-and-burn cultivation, the era of primitive and backwards agriculture' (Shi 2012: 106).

area pose clear limits to agricultural productivity, yet in the last two decades, with a lot of manpower, numerous rice paddies and irrigation channels have been cut into the hills of the Northern Command. Partly because of ideological reasons (irrigation being seen as a sign of progress), and partly because of increasing pressure on land use, local governments now strongly discourage swidden cultivation. Exhortations in this respect were often part of the political meetings held regularly by the district government of Taoh Mie (where I did fieldwork).

Additionally, plantations were facilitated by the huge changes in the Wa State's transport network. In the last two decades, tarmac roads have been built connecting Nandeng, Mengmao, Pang Hsang and Meng Pok, Taoh Mie and Sao Pha - the major towns of the Northern Command. Many of the dirt roads have been improved and can now be easily used by large trucks - critical for transporting hardware as well as harvested products - and people.

At the same time, modern technologies of communication are readily available even to ordinary people in the Wa State, and many people own mobile phones. During the 1970s and 80s, the CPB made huge efforts in building a military telegraph network, but even so, the communist guerrillas often relied on Chinese help - on the Chinese side, the telegraph networks were always more reliable and a telephone network was already established in the 1980s. Since the 2000s, the Chinese mobile phone grid has been extended into most of the neighbouring areas of the Wa State. Even though on all maps, the Wa State is part of the Union of Myanmar, the mobile phone network of the Northern Wa State today is mainly that of China Mobile and China Unicom.

Related to these technological innovations in transport and communication, are the new technologies of production, often connected to particular machines - such as SUVs and trucks, cement mixers, conveyors, ventilators and ovens. All these machines are used in the rubber and tea plantations of the Wa State; additionally, the plantations rely on the technology used in the down-side production chains (often situated on the Chinese side of the border).

The technologies of transport, communication and production that made the plantations possible were adopted over the course of two generations in the Wa hills, and have become essential mediators between humans, plants and spirits. As such, these technologies are essential elements of the contemporary 'economy of life', that is, the capture and care of various classes of beings. Technology does not determine the shape of this economy - obviously roads, mobile phones and tractors can be used for all kinds of purposes. But specific technologies create specific possibilities and specific constraints for social actions and for social relations. The point is perhaps most obvious when we compare it with the absence of technology in the classical arguments made about the opposition between highland and lowland society in this part of the world: the formalisation of kinship systems that Leach (1954) and Kirsch (1973) proposed, the evolutions of 'Asiatic' social formations that Friedman (1998 [1979]) outlines and the anarchic spirit of Zomia's 'escape formations' (Scott 2009) are only possible in the absence of SUVs, AK47s and mobile phones. Instead, those vintage

arguments rely on the presupposition of a shared and relatively ‘simple’ level of technology; if this assumption was contestable in the past, it is untenable today.⁵

To understand the new economies that have appeared in the Wa Hills since the 1970s in general, and the plantation in particular, in the next section I look at the local appropriation of these technologies and the new possibilities they opened up; technologies of transport, communication and production entered into feedback cycles with social arrangements, specifically with local kinship. These feedback cycles can be seen clearly in the labour arrangements at the plantation: the plantations required large numbers of labourers to be available nearby. This was made possible by the break-up of local village communities through large-scale forced resettlement programmes, all done with the help of the aforementioned technologies.

Kinship, capture and care

Plantations rely on radical measurements of legibility, imposed both on plants and on people. Plants are planted *en masse* and in line, all of the same variety and species. Hybrid seeds, pesticides and herbicides are generally produced by large multinationals and planters buy them on markets. People are frequently resettled to make space for plantations and to supply the labour force required on the plantations. In the Wa State, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, labour regimes combine free and unfree labour (Murray Li 2017), and land enclosures correspond to different ‘regimes of dispossession’ (Levien 2013). The new labour arrangements of the plantation are based on social technologies of kinship that emerged in population movements, voluntary and forced.

Since the 1950s, many Wa villagers fled incoming armies and migrated elsewhere. Under the leadership of millenarian prophets and local warlords, some villagers escaped into areas east of the Salween, and others went to the Golden Triangle proper, closer to the Thai border. During the high tide of the Cultural Revolution in China, numerous Wa from China went across the new international border and settled in the areas controlled by the Communist Party of Burma. Even though most of these village groups followed some local leaders, these movements were not centrally organised by government. This changed in the 1990s, when the new military government of the UWSA forcefully resettled a large part of the Wa population. As mentioned above, after the victory over Khun Sa in 1996, the UWSA resettled about 120,000 villagers to

⁵ Whether ecology and technology could be understood as ‘external’ to a systemic understanding of the upland–lowland contrast was of course a main point of contestation in those earlier debates. Nugent (1982), for instance, had pointed out that Leach’s model of an oscillation based on matrilineal cross-cousin marriage was only possible by ignoring the economic history of the region, and specifically the opium trade. Friedman’s (1998 [1979]) structural Marxist model is based on notions of yield, carrying power, population density and the like; altogether he aimed at including ecology and technology into a much larger system of social production for which he offered mathematical formulae. Scott (2009), finally, is very clear that his theory of ‘escape formations’ ends with the introduction of modern transport. Fiskesjö (2010) summarises some of these arguments in relationship to the Wa chiefs and offers corresponding explanations for why such chiefs ultimately did not promote the creation of stable and centralised government. None of them, however, explicitly problematises and theorises the technological constraints under which these models of political change were possible: constraints of transport (by foot, mule or truck), communication (oral, literate or electronic) and production (by knife, hoe or machine).

the new Southern Command at the Thai border (LNDO 2002). At the same time, the military government also actively arranged resettlements in the Northern Command, trying to concentrate settlements along the new roads and plantations that were built at the same time.

About 200 of the 500 households in the village of Yaong Rai, for instance, were resettled to the Southern Command at the Thai border in the 1990s. Some of them received their own plots in the new villages in the Southern Command, but many others work in rubber plantations or at the houses of commanders. One commander, Li Lao'er, who is originally from Yaong Rai, also has established several rubber plantations near the capital Pang Hsang, and tea and pine plantations in Yaong Rai. During my fieldwork, the entourage of this commander in his mansions in Pang Hsang and in Yaong Rai included about 30 workers with their families, most of them relatives or neighbours from Yaong Rai. Additionally, the village headman sometimes ordered co-villagers to work on the plantations of this commander in Yaong Rai, as part of the regular compulsory labour villagers have to do.

Backed up by his own personal wealth and his rank in the military hierarchy, the gap between Li Lao'er and the villagers of Yaong Rai is huge. In fact, the emergence of this new elite of the military state has also created a new form of association – the following of a commander – that cancels out any egalitarian effect the earlier kinship arrangements might have had. Ethnic Wa traditionally marry according to a system of patrilineal cross-cousin marriage, which does not establish a permanent distinction between wife-givers and wife-takers. Instead the wife-givers of one generation are the wife-takers of the next generation.⁶ Even though cross-cousin marriage is still common today, village-level marriage is now much less important as a core social alliance than it was in the past. Younger commanders generally do not choose their marriage partner according to custom and might only pay ceremonial attention to the role of the uncle (*pao*, that is, the father's sister's husband for a boy and the mother's brother for a girl), who traditionally had to be asked for permission before marriage.

For poor villagers, whether marriage partners are cross-cousins is now much less important than whether or not they can claim some relationship with a powerful patron. Some villagers might thus send their children to the army, or to the house of a commander, whereas other children are forcefully captured. The followers often work on the estates of the elite: children stay in the mansions and help as servants,

⁶ It is important to note that patrilineal (bilateral) cross-cousin marriage is fundamentally different from the matrilineal cross-cousin marriage that was at the centre of Leach's and Kirsch's arguments about the oscillation of egalitarian and hierarchical systems in Southeast Asia. In the matrilineal cross-cousin systems, there is a tendency towards the establishment and long-term differentiation (and thus emergence of hierarchy) between groups of wife-givers and wife-takers. This tendency was crucial in the ideal-type theory of oscillation between relatively egalitarian *gumlao* and relatively hierarchical *gumsa* arrangements in Leach's analysis of Kachin society (1954), as well as Kirsch's culturalist reformulation of the same oppositions in terms of cultural values, such as 'ritual efficacy' and 'potency' (1973). In patrilineal systems, the 'wife-takers' of the last generation are the 'wife-givers' of this generation, and therefore there is little chance for 'chiefly lineages' to differentiate themselves from others – this is the reason why such systems were commonly called 'symmetric exchange systems'. The kinship system in general, and matrilineal cross-cousin marriage in particular, for Leach and Kirsch became a formalised system, through which an essentialised logic (of rational power for Leach, and symbolic power for Kirsch) realised itself. Such arguments could only work within certain ecological constraints, that is, in the absence of modern technologies of transport, communication and production.

whereas able-bodied men and women work on plantations. The social logic that connects elites and commoners is a logic of capture and care: it relies on the new acquaintances created in the military and the networks of patronage formed on their basis; but it also requires anonymity and the rejection of (potential) mutuality. These four elements (acquaintances, patronage, anonymity and the rejection of mutuality) allow for the exercise of capture and care. While capture and care have always been important in Wa kinship, together with the expansion of militarism (including the plantation economies described above), the scopes and scales of these logics have changed very much. They are now, fundamentally, the logics that tie up the village with the military state, through an extension and an expansion of kinship.

Elsewhere I have described in detail those personal dynamics of capture and care: children are often literally 'captured', that is, forcefully recruited into army units (Steinmüller 2019; Steinmüller n.d.). Violent recruitment is made possible on the basis of personal networks of acquaintance and patronage formed in army units, and on the basis of the anonymity of villagers and the rejection of potential mutuality with the victims of capture. This whole apparatus of capture is counter-balanced by the exercise of care: concretely, that is, the protection, support and mutuality of army commanders toward their followers. Children that are press-ganged in such ways sometimes grow to become 'right hands' of their commander, and might even become commanders in their own right.

The socio-logics of capture and care not only connect individual army commanders with the children in their mansions, but extend between the army elite as a whole and entire local populations, specifically when it comes to the institution of the plantation: commanders, such as Li Lao'er (mentioned above), in collaboration with local headmen, have ordered villagers to cede their fields and slopes for the creation of plantations; or on an even larger scale, order and manage the resettlement of entire villages (as they have done in the resettlement campaigns following the conquest of the so-called Southern Command at the Thai border). Such 'capture' of local populations is often accompanied by some measure of care for the same populations: for instance, followers are provided with housing, often built in uniform style as newly 'planned villages', sometimes even with local schools, and some social support in emergencies.

The labour regime in local plantations in the Northern Wa State combines the *corvée* labour of local populations, the free labour of household members and some paid labour for foremen and skilled workers, with *corvée* labour constituting the largest part. Commanders can mobilise this labour directly, when villagers have been resettled next to their new rubber plantations. In the process of resettlement, villagers commonly receive some support to build houses, for instance, building material and cooking utensils, and during the first few years in the resettlement camps are allocated a standard ratio of rice per household. In turn, villagers regularly have to work in the plantations. Work schedules here are commonly organised by local headmen and village clerks; even though such labour arrangements are far from transparent and generally do not take the form of wage labour, they are still measured in terms of quantity (hours, days, numbers of workers), and often lists are used by foremen and scribes.

Aside from the plantation itself, another core arena in which relations of capture and care have evolved from earlier kinship arrangements is the sacrificial feast. In the transformations of feasting, and specifically the lavish feasts that take place at the mansions of the commanders, the emerging horizons of potency can be seen most clearly.

Feasting today

Traditionally, all important sacrifices and rituals in Wa villages were accompanied by large feasts. The feasting economy corresponded to cycles of ritual exchange, which are inter-connected with the wider ecology and have been studied extensively in Southeast Asia. Kirsch (1973), Lehman (1989), Tannenbaum (1989) and others have suggested that feasting cycles were a crucial platform of sharing and distribution through which hierarchies could emerge. No matter whether the emergence of hierarchy was conceptualised as a consequence of ambiguities within upland arrangements of rank and kinship, or of external economic pressures, all of these frameworks suggest a clear opposition between uplands and lowlands: that is, a broadly egalitarian system in the highlands, in which all players can be sponsors and recipients of feasting, and a hierarchical system in the lowlands, with clear differences between rich and poor, and between different ranks. 'As Tannenbaum puts it succinctly, [whereas] in the uplands system, potency and power were directly linked to production and participation in society, in the lowlands, power could be accessed through restraint and withdrawal or dependency on more powerful others' (Tannenbaum 1989: 81).

Traditional Wa feasting broadly corresponds to the upland type in this opposition. In the past, important occasions for feasting were village openings, the construction of bridges, as well as headhunting and tiger hunts. At a smaller scale, the inaugurations of houses and granaries, as well as life-cycle rituals, harvest and hunting, were accompanied by sacrifices and feasting. In all these rituals it was fundamentally important to deal in appropriate ways with potentially capricious ancestors, spirits and species-owners. Most of these rituals are still held at village level and are always accompanied by shared meals.

But now there are also large-scale sacrifices and banquets organised by the commanders of the military state. The members of the Wa elite today support churches and temples, and give donations to infrastructure projects (such as memorials, bridges and government buildings). As part of such sponsorship, they hold huge feasts and banquets. Even more lavish than these 'public events' are the celebrations for the weddings of the sons and daughters of the elites. In 2017, for instance, a three-day wedding was held for the daughter of the head of the Wa administration, Tax Pang. According to local gossip, there were 3000 tables (of eight guests each), and three nights of celebrations in the capital Pang Hsang included performances by several pop stars from China and Taiwan.

Some commanders also hold large-scale buffalo sacrifices in their home villages. In 2015, for instance, I attended a buffalo sacrifice held by Ai Lun, a member of the *politburo* of the United Wa State Party, in his home village. At the occasion, 15 buffalos were slaughtered, and hundreds of guests hosted, including relatives and neighbours, colleagues from government and army, as well as business associates from afar.

It is difficult to assess the motivations of commanders in sacrificing so many buffalos and inviting so many guests. Possibly one reason is simply that they *can* do it: resources are concentrated in the hands of commanders. There might be also an element of competition between members of the elite, who strive for rank and prestige. Yet, people only rarely make comparisons between the feasts and estates of high-ranking commanders, and each leader seems to stand out as a single personality when seen from the perspective of commoners. The number of tables at Tax Pang's house, the buffalos

at Ai Lun's house, as well as the cars of their children, the wealth in their storehouses and the size of their plantations – all this betrays new levels of insatiability.

In the feasting cycles of yore, no one could stand out, because everyone had the same access to resources and no monopoly could emerge. While the upland system was open in principle, it was limited by the life-force of each player – fundamentally, the constraints imposed by every player's exhaustion. Today, there are insurmountable differences between the elites and the commoners, specifically in access to technologies (of transport, communication and production), storage of resources and command over followers in estates. For most people, this is a closed system, and potencies are limited by one's position within the system. But for a small elite, the system remains open and they actively explore the possibilities of limitless potency.

The elites of the Wa State thus play a peculiar role in the new economy of life: their aspirations to potency were acquired in an older upland economy, yet they are realised on top of the plunder and exploitation made possible by garrisons, mansions and plantations. Even so, their aspirations also encounter limitations. The limits to the potency of every being are given by the constraints of the economy of life: that is, the actions possible (and impossible) within the organic configurations and technological modalities of capture and care.

Ordinary people are part of those arrangements of capture and care, often as objects but also sometimes as subjects. Even though they engage on equal terms with some of their relatives and neighbours, they frequently encounter limitations: there is not much forest left in the Wa State today, land is scarce and access to resources is extremely unequal. Most villagers have very few possessions and little place for storage.

The elites, in contrast, have accumulated lots of resources, have built huge mansions and have many followers. Beyond that, they have privileged access to land, via the new technologies of transport, communication and production. They still define themselves by their 'pioneering spirit', that is, by the ordinary ambitions of peasant-warriors of the past, which included opening up land, capturing enemies and hosting followers. But even so, their (potentially limitless) ambitions encounter limits in the obstinacy of others, including humans, plants, animals and objects: not all hills are suitable for specific plants, for instance. Even though the dispossession of local populations has been extremely successful and has encountered little direct resistance, ordinary people, sometimes at least, resist the work disciplines on the plantations and other impositions. Given the lack of other avenues, they might simply run away – which indeed they do quite frequently.

Conclusion: the limits of growth?

Modern technologies of production and communication have transformed the ecological frameworks within which potency and agency operate. I have highlighted here in particular transport, communication and agricultural production. The focus on the importance of modern technology should not blind us to the fact that technological mediation always played a role – including in the Wa economy of life prior to the arrival of modern transport, communication and production. Thus technologies such as swidden cultivation also imposed certain constraints onto aspirations to potency, even though the 'upland system [was] essentially open' (Tannenbaum 1989: 80). In Tannenbaum's analysis, potential competitors in the uplands all had similar access to

resources, and ‘the recipients of today’s generosity [were] likely to be the sponsors of tomorrow’s’ (1989: 81). Thus, potency in the uplands did not immediately encounter limitations in the rules and measurements imposed in everyday discourse (present in the lowlands specifically in the monks’ precincts and in the incomparably greater potency of the elite). Instead, all forms of potency only encountered their limits in the fatigue of each agent: my host, Headman Nap, often told me about the ways in which people worked the land in the past. As he remembered it, in the old days, people just worked until they got tired and then stopped (especially in swidden cultivation). But today, people work as long and as hard as they are able to, at any rate, longer than they would like to. That is the new work ethic that inspires not only the backbreaking toil on plantations, but also, and especially, the farmers’ work on their own plots, specifically on irrigated rice paddies: preparing irrigation channels and harvesting rice no doubt require more intense work and more cooperation than planting and harvesting tubers.


Headman Nap’s comments correspond to the opposition between agricultural work and industrial labour; the latter being work ‘against the clock’, that is, an effort that is constantly measured (Thompson 1967). Work in the Wa State today is still not measured by the clock, though – at least not the majority of plantation labour and farm work. But there are other measurements and comparisons constantly imposed on people. The technologies of statecraft, for instance, introduce clear property divisions of household and land (at least in principle, and when compared to the past). Even more than in the peasant economies of the village, in the large plantations, resources are constantly measured, bought and sold: seeds, plants, plots and people are all numbered and counted on a daily basis.

The limitations commoners encounter on an everyday basis in these regards contrast with the experience of the elite. For some members of the elite, ‘money is not an issue’ and in consequence they have become insatiable and make huge displays of their wealth, including in the feasts that they host at their houses. Compared with the relatively humble lives of commoners, the elites know few constraints. Such constraints exist nevertheless, for instance, in the obstinacy of matter – not everything can be done to the mountain slopes and plants in this region – and in the resistance of local populations.

Superficially, it appears that the lowlands have taken over: and the elites of the Wa State have moved from open forests to plains, from swidden cultivation to rice paddies, from animism to Buddhism, and from cross-cousin marriage to semi-feudal arrangements. But it is a mistake to say that these ‘pioneers of the plantation economy’ have simply adopted the lowland systems of the past. The oppositions of ecology, religion and kinship that provided the scaffolding of countless arguments about highlands and lowlands relied on particular technological constraints: fundamentally, the absence of modern technologies of transport, communication and production. Understanding these technologies as ‘cosmo-technics’, that is, technologies that are adapted to local cosmologies, can provide the building blocks of a new economy of life. This framework thus helps us understand what happened to the limitless potencies of the uplands. Such economies of life and their respective cosmo-technics provide the nourishing ground for the cultivation of ambitions and potencies. The same economies of life, however, also mark the limitations and constraints for the same potencies.

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Pionniers de l'économie de plantation: militarisme, dépossession et limites de la croissance dans l'État Wa du Myanmar

La mobilité caractéristique des populations des hautes terres d'Asie du Sud-Est repose en grande partie sur leur adaptation particulière à un environnement écologique: la culture des tubercules sur abattis-brûlis dans les régions de montagne. Cette écologie correspondait à des cosmologies dans lesquelles la puissance était illimitée, ou du moins n'avait pas de périmètre fixe et délimité (comme les rizières et les royaumes bouddhistes dans les vallées). La construction de l'État militaire, les transports modernes et les nouvelles cultures et technologies agricoles ont effectivement mis fin à la culture sur brûlis. Dans cet article, je suis les pionniers de l'économie de plantation dans l'État Wa du Myanmar, qui dépouillent les populations locales de leurs terres et les emploient comme main-d'oeuvre dans les plantations. Les limites de la croissance et de la puissance qu'ils rencontrent sont a) dans l'environnement naturel et b) dans la résistance des populations locales. Pourtant, même si ces limites existent, la puissance à laquelle ces pionniers aspirent est toujours sans limite. Elle est cependant canalisée par une nouvelle économie de la vie, incarnée par la plantation, nourri en festins excessifs et entretenue par la dynamique de parenté de la capture et des soins.

Mots clés dépossession, vie, économie, plantation, Wa