

**ARTICLE**

# Para-nationalism: Sovereignty and authenticity in the Wa State of Myanmar

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**Abstract**

If nationalism is defined as a claim to sovereignty based on authenticity, para-nationalism is nationalism in the state of war: urgent, yet ultimately futile. Modern warfare makes it particularly urgent for historical latecomers to national unity to claim their national sovereignty. Those claims, however, sometimes have to be postponed for the very same reason of military pragmatism. The double bind of nationalism at war is illustrated with the case study of the Wa State of Myanmar: Persistent military threat imparts great urgency to the promotion of authentic culture, the purification of a shared language and the rationalisation of violence. Yet at certain moments and places, the same objectives are put aside, in favour of working with what is at hand. Rather than a semiotic circle, it is suggested that the entanglement of para-nationalism and war is primarily a pragmatic bond, which is accessible to ethnographic analysis.

**KEYWORDS**

authenticity, China, militarism, Myanmar, nationalism, sovereignty, Wa

The United Wa State Army (UWSA) is the strongest amongst Myanmar's non-state ethnic armed groups and governs two areas which together form the 'Wa State'<sup>1</sup>: a northern part at the Chinese border and a southern part at the Thai border. The Wa State is not recognised internationally but maintains relatively stable de facto sovereignty. This is largely due to the military strength of the UWSA, which emerged from the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). Even though the elites of the Wa State have diversified into other industries (mining in particular), the production and

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trade of illicit drugs have been their main source of income since the 1970s. The drug trade provided crucial financial support for military defence and facilitates the fragile de facto sovereignty of the Wa State.

In the 1990s, the UWSA fought against a local warlord, Khun Sa, whose army had been monopolising the opium trade in the region. In 1996, Khun Sa finally declared his defeat, and the UWSA won large areas of land at the Thai border that had been formerly under Khun Sa's control. The Wa army then forcefully resettled more than 120,000 people from the Wa region at the Chinese border to the new 'Southern Command' at the Thai border (Fiskesjö, 2017; LND, 2002). Against all odds, the Wa army and its leaders claim to represent the self-government of the Wa and several other ethnic groups in northeastern Myanmar. When asked by Hong Kong journalists, what distinguished the 'Wa State' from the 'Shan Country' of Khun Sa, the commander of the UWSA, Bao Youxiang, answered in 2008:

His viewpoints are different from ours. Because we govern the Wa State representing a people. He is a businessman. He flows like water, whereas we are stones, we cannot move away.<sup>2</sup>

This comparison of stones and water has obvious references locally: The Shan/Dai people are famous for their water festivals, whereas the Wa are well known as mountain warriors. Bao obviously wants to affirm his own sincerity in leading the Wa, as against the business interests of Khun Sa and other strongmen in the region. He does so by referring to an essential Wa autochthony. Elsewhere in the pronouncements of the Wa government and in local cultural production, this is extended into a full-blown nationalist discourse in which the essence of the 'Wa nation' marches through historical time. Wa nationalism is a pragmatic response to the threat of war, and while there is no reason to doubt the conviction and sincerity of its promotion, it should also be noted that the same nationalism is sometimes avoided and ignored, for equally pragmatic reasons.

Since the seminal works of Anderson (1991) and Gellner (1983), many social scientists have raised the question whether nationalism is a 'modular' phenomenon that repeats itself. It has been argued that the historical background of colonialism (Chatterjee, 1986) and empire (Duara, 2003) distinguish particular forms of (peripheral) nationalism from a supposedly universal (metropolitan) model. In what follows, I explore the proposition that the particular environment of late development and war makes a fundamental difference. It imposes exceptional urgency to nationalist projects yet at the same time makes them appear as ultimately futile.

The prefix 'para' lays emphasis on the sought resemblance of such nationalist projects with metropolitan nationalism but at the same time emphasises their difference. One main difference is that instead of industrialisation or print capitalism, para-nationalism is typically based on a form of militarism that is not recognised by the representatives of other nations, that is, para-militarism. Para-nationalism relies on voluntaristic and combative claims against all odds, in an environment in which the threat of war looms large. In such an environment the creation of a national community, and its international recognition, is constantly questioned and often seen as futile. It is precisely the hopelessness of these efforts that increases the urgency with which they are made. And contrary to their publicly stated intentions, para-nationalists sometimes pragmatically discard their ambitions toward authenticity and sovereignty, in particular for reasons of military defence.

Nationalism, at its most fundamental level, is a claim to popular sovereignty based on authenticity: Some shared essence that defines 'the people' as a nation of 'us' (Greenfeld, 1992, p. 3ff; Lindholm, 2013, p. 372). The nationalist claim to sovereignty typically entails a movement of self-objectification when it is performed for an audience (Rutherford, 2012): 'that is us, and we are we.' First, an objectification of authenticity ('that is us'), and second, a claim to sovereignty based on the same authenticity ('we are we'). The authenticity of the land and the people can be traced back to some primordial essence of ethnicity, as in *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Smith, 1986), or it can be seen in the emergence of a community in the making, that is, an imagined community (Anderson, 1991). Nationalism, so defined (as sovereignty based on authenticity), is the most common answer to the conundrum of popular sovereignty: If the people are sovereign, who rules over the people?

The predicament of modern nationalism is a tension between particularistic and universalistic tendencies; specifically, between the particular authenticity of a nation and the universal recognition of its sovereignty. In situations of late development, and in confrontation with neighbouring states perceived as more powerful and advanced, the question of 'authenticity' becomes particularly salient, as in the assertion of a local and national 'culture' against the universal and supranational ideals of 'civilization.' A classic example is the rise of German 'Kultur' against French 'civilisation'; many others can be found in more recent history. Prasenjit Duara, for instance, has emphasised the importance of authentic 'culture' for the claims to sovereignty of Manchukuo, the puppet state of imperial Japan in Northeast China (Duara, 1998, 2003). Manchukuo was a constitutional monarchy entirely dependent on imperial Japan, and it existed in this form only for 13 years, until Japan's defeat in 1945. Duara focusses on the apparent contradiction of Manchukuo's 'desperate claims to sovereignty,' when in fact the country was completely dependent on imperial Japan. Such claims to sovereignty rested fundamentally on the assertion that Manchukuo represented 'the authentic culture of the land and peoples' (Duara, 2003, p. 1). Duara explains how potential 'nation makers' produced a 'regime of authenticity' to substantiate their claims for sovereignty, emphasising the particularity and historical unity of the nation. This regime rested in particular on representations of the 'living embodiment' of authenticity in figures that are effectively denied agency in the public realm. The combination of two characteristics—evoking deep emotional engagement and lacking voice and power—works particularly well for 'living embodiments' of authenticity, and '[t]hus it is that woman, the child, the rustic, the aboriginal, and royalty often embody the purported authenticity of the nation' (Duara, 1998, p. 296).

It is important to emphasise that the particularity of such 'living embodiments of authenticity,' as well as the universality to which nationalist efforts aspired, appear in specific claims made in historical settings. Duara has written elsewhere against the Hegelian roots of the modern nation within linear history, as the unfolding of universal spirit (Duara, 1995). The universality of the nation is not given within empty and universal time but is constructed and assumed by particular historical actors. This is particularly relevant when we look at the embodiments of this presumably universal form: flag raisings, national anthems, parades, museums, and so forth—specific practices that have spread all around the world to mark national difference.

As Harrison (2003) has pointed out, the nation as a social form of cultural difference relies on denying resemblances. Harrison outlines three forms of denying resemblance, depending on the perceived power balance between the national self and others. In contexts where aspirant nation makers see their nation as an inferior when compared with more powerful others, the latecomers typically strive to imitate the forms and frames of nationalist self-assertion used by metropolitan others. Such frameworks for the negotiation of cultural difference emerge in mimetic communities. By virtue of shared experiences, foreign frameworks are imitated, reproduced and adopted, and 'common practices and understandings about how to differ' emerge and spread (Harrison, 2008, p. 354). Yet the same mimetic process that makes the recognition of difference possible within a shared framework is generally under-acknowledged and sometimes denied. Such mimetic communities form, for instance, amongst cosmopolitan intellectuals who adopt ideas of language reform in metropolitan contexts and try to introduce them elsewhere. As will be shown below with regard to language politics, the members of such mimetic communities typically deny that borrowing occurred. The same process of mimesis and refusal increases the contradiction between the particular identity of the late-coming nation, and its universal recognition. If we add to these characteristic difficulties of late-comers the urgency imposed by war, we arrive at the particular constellation of para-nationalism.

The importance of war for the development of the modern state and nationalism has often been noted. Mann (1996), for instance, emphasises the importance of military politics and violence for the centralisation of state power, and the differences in warfare, taxation and geopolitics for the emergence of different regimes—absolutist, constitutional and later authoritarian and liberal. At an even more fundamental level, Tilly (1985) has pointed out that modern states fundamentally are built as criminal organisations in war. The balance that resulted in different countries between the principles of war making, protection, extraction and state making ultimately also explains the different organisation of modern states (Tilly, 1985, p. 183ff). In the international system that emerged in Europe since the 17th century, resource flows, competition and coalitions were increasingly channelled by states, and war,

in turn, became the normal condition of the international system, which strengthened the unity of its member states and the separation between their 'internal' and 'external' relations. Tilly draws an analogy between these processes of war and state making on the one hand and organised crime, on the other. He further argues that in 'old national states of Europe,' this analogy might be less visible, but in the rest of the world, the analogy remains 'tragically apt' (Tilly, 1985, p. 186): States which emerged from decolonisation or 'through reallocations of territory by dominant states' lacked 'the same internal forging of mutual constraints' that was typical for European states (such as internal struggles between peasants and lords that resulted in the growth of civilian administration, fiscal bureaucracies and parliamentary representation). In these states, according to Tilly, military organisation outweighs and overshadows all other forms of organisation (ibid.). The cultural form that typically accompanies military state formation is the subject of this article: para-nationalism.

Para-nationalism, therefore, is characterised by three features: First, it is a claim of sovereignty based on authenticity, that is, the cultural homogeneity of a group of people. This is common to any form of nationalism, but para-nationalism is distinctive because of two further features: It refers to a situation of perceived inferiority or late coming, and its logic is inseparable from the logic of war. In the following, I will discuss these three features of para-nationalism for the case of the Wa State of Myanmar.

By way of background, I will first give an overview of the recent history of war and state building in the Wa hills and the emergence of the drug trade and ethno-nationalism in the region. This is followed by a section on the 'culture of authenticity' produced by the propaganda of the military state and the role of culture in relationship to business interests and militarism. The third section deals with language policies in the Wa State today, focussing on the problems of national language and lingua franca. The promotion of cultural authenticity and linguistic standards rely on mimetic communities through which particular cultural forms spread and in which they are contested. The threat of war renders the nationalist project particularly urgent, yet the exigencies of war sometimes force potential nation makers to postpone the efforts at authentic representation. War and violence, thus, are the focus of the fourth section, which leads to the main argument: the distinctive pragmatism of para-nationalism.

## 1 | NARCO-ARMY OR ETHNO-NATIONALIST PARTY?

Ethnic Wa live on both sides of what is now the international border between China and Myanmar. In China, the Wa are one of the 55 officially recognised minorities, whereas in Myanmar, most Wa live in the Wa State. Before the 20th century, most Wa lived in fortified villages without any form of government beyond some loose alliances between villages. The international border line was agreed between the new governments of China and Myanmar in 1956. Since then, the Chinese side has been 'pacified,' whereas on the Burmese side various armies vied for predominance, including battalions of the Chinese KMT army that had escaped into Myanmar after the end of the Chinese civil war and later the guerrilla army of the CPB in the 1960s. Led by Burmese revolutionaries and supported by the People's Republic of China (PCR), the CPB recruited large numbers of Wa soldiers. In 1989 several contingents of mid-level Wa soldiers in the CPB rebelled against their Burmese leaders and took command. The Wa insurgents took over and founded the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the United Wa State Party (UWSP) in the same year, and these two organisations have governed the Wa State since.

Since the late 1960s, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) started sending red guards to support the CPB, Chinese support has been decisive for political developments on the Burmese side of the Wa hills. Red guards from China advised the guerrillas of the CPB (and some of them remained and became officials in the UWSA); Chinese traders and businesses followed suit. On the basis of the historical links with the CPB, the PCR continues to support the UWSA until the present day, ignoring for a long time the involvement of the UWSA in the production and trade of opium and other drugs (Chin, 2009; Lintner, 1990a, 1990b). By the 1980s and 1990s, opium had become the preeminent crop in the Wa Hills, and the Wa Special Region the main producer of opium in the 'Golden Triangle.' Following international (and especially Chinese) pressure, the UWSA has been fighting opium production and

announced in 2005 that opium production had ceased completely. Campaigns against opium production and investment in infrastructure (roads, electricity and mobile phone networks) have been accompanied by an expansion of government institutions and the creation of an administrative system modelled on the Chinese party-state (Renard, 2013).

The Wa Special Region uses Chinese currency, has a Chinese mobile phone network, and much of its infrastructure, including the electricity network, is built by Chinese companies. Even local time reckoning follows Chinese standard time, and only government offices run at Myanmar time, which is set at 1.5 hours earlier than Chinese time. Most people have their mobile phones set to Chinese time, however, and this obviously can lead to misunderstandings. Even though the Wa State is so obviously dependent on China, the leaders of the Wa Special Region themselves continue to claim recognition of their 'statehood' (Kramer, 2007, p. 12). While it lacks international recognition, the UWSA is a 'de facto' sovereign and has built a 'de facto state' (Pegg, 1998) within its circumscribed territory, with capacities (in terms of policing, tax collection and governance) that are comparable to internationally recognised governments. This 'de facto' sovereignty is primarily built on its military success. With the support of China, the UWSA has been very successful in eradicating opium; it has been also very ruthless in dealing with its own population and has forcefully resettled about 120,000 people into areas gained in the 1990s from the Shan warlord Khun Sa (LNDO, 2002). Wa leaders have always justified the resettlement programmes, just like the eradication of opium, as being ultimately in the best interests of the people.

Since the days of the CPB, members of the Wa elite have accumulated substantial wealth and at least part of this wealth originates in the production and trade of drugs. Since opium poppies have been eradicated, there has been a surge in methamphetamine production. But aside from drugs, the Wa elite has also diversified its businesses and members of the Wa elite own large stakes in the mining industry (for instance in tin, rare earths, gold and jade), in real estate, in trade, and in transport in Myanmar, Thailand and China.

Chinese and Western observers generally focus on drugs and war in their accounts of the Wa State (Fisher, 2016; Lintner & Black, 2009; Marshall & Davis, 2002; Xiang, 2009). Thin on analysis but full of juicy details, the book *Merchants of Madness* (Lintner & Black, 2009), for instance, provides a collection of the stereotypes that are used to describe the UWSA as a warlord regime motivated by greed. The authors describe the drug eradication efforts and infrastructure building of the UWSA as poor excuses for their continuous involvement in the drug trade. In our context, what is most significant is Lintner and Black's point that it is a mistake to believe the leaders of the UWSA. That is the mistake, they point out, of other writers who treat 'the leaders of the UWSA as if they were representatives of the governments of Canada or Norway, taking all their outlandish claims at face value' (Lintner & Black, 2009, p. 102). Elsewhere in their sensationalist account, the authors acknowledge the ethno-nationalist aspirations of the UWSA but are always quick to dismiss them (e.g., Lintner & Black, 2009, p. 85). Such cavalier treatment does not do justice to the complexity of the entanglement of the drug trade, war and para-nationalism. There is more at stake here than the politics of greed and power than journalistic sensationalism is able to identify. If we acknowledge that the UWSA is *both* a narco-army and an ethno-nationalist party, as the authors do, (Lintner & Black, 2009, p. 85), the question remains how the purposes of the drug trade, military defence and ethno-nationalism impact on each other.

## 2 | DARING SOLDIERS AND BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

Since the 1950s, marooned battalions of the Chinese nationalist army, the CPB and finally the UWSA built roads and military camps and enrolled Wa foot soldiers into their ranks. Forced conscription into the UWSA continues to be common, and children enter the army at a young age (Steinmüller, 2019). Even though the UWSA has tried to build a semi-civilian administration; the entire state apparatus still relies on the army. Every government official I met in the capital of Pang Hsang would say that he or she is a member of the army, and at important events, such as the traditional festivals or anti-drug rallies, officials and employees of government offices would don military uniforms. Many stops on the main roads of the area, and place names, still carry the names of military divisions. Villagers

commonly wear military fatigues and regularly have to participate in compulsory labour organised by local administration and army, and at every level of government, there are rural militias that organise regular military training.

The military was and continues to be a driving force in the creation of a nation state-like culture in the Wa State. Schooling is far from universal, the spread of the lingua franca (Chinese) remains limited and political campaigns were not implemented in the countryside (in fact, a large number of Wa villagers in China escaped into the Wa State during the chaos of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in China). Many boys learn Chinese and the standard dialect of Wa that is used in the military<sup>3</sup>; some military units also teach elementary literacy (in Chinese). And so the military promotes in many ways a standardised culture—basically what modern nationalism needs. Yet in the Wa State, this process of standardisation is definitely not a consequence of industrialisation and urbanisation (as in Gellner's classic argument about modern nationalism, Gellner, 1983) but rather a corollary of military organisation. The unifying force of going to war together is also directly emphasised in military parades, and in recurrent anti-drug rallies, which are held every year on 26 June, the 'International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking' declared by the United Nations.

The official discourse and commentary that accompanies the construction of the military state is increasingly focussed on the promotion of a 'nation state-like' culture. The promotion of 'Wa culture' indeed has become a core objective of the Wa central administration. There are propaganda units and dance troupes at every district of the Wa government and in every army unit. These troupes perform at major events such as inaugurations and festivals, as well as the private celebrations of the Wa elite.

For the 30th anniversary of the Wa State in 2019, a series of historical gazetteers were produced with the help of retired schoolteachers and government officials from China. In the history sections of the gazetteers, the origins of the 'Wa nation' are re-told and connected with the Lawa and Lua of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos. The Department of Education and News edits a journal called 'Wa State Today,' and there is a TV station in the capital Pang Hsang that broadcasts 1 hour a day. Most of what is written or broadcast in these media is straightforward and stiff propaganda modelled on similar Chinese discourses; there is also some complement in Burmese and in Wa—even though very little. But there are various genres of music and song, performed by Wa singers from the Wa State, as well as from China, Myanmar and Thailand. Major occasions at which music, dance and song are celebrated are military parades, as well as civilian festivals (such as the 'new rice festival' at harvest time).

At such 'cultural festivals,' an objectified and standardised version of 'Wa culture' is promoted. Aside from official events, social media has become an extremely powerful tool in the objectification of 'Wa culture.' One popular video circulated on social media, for instance, is about the Wa language itself. Entitled 'if you don't speak Wa' (*son ang pu vax grai*), the core line of the song means that the Wa will lose out if they don't speak their own language.<sup>4</sup> But the most frequent topics of the new Wa songs that are performed at festivals, as well as circulated on the internet, are love and militarism. There are countless love songs in the Wa language, in which men and women appear in 'traditional' Wa dresses.<sup>5</sup> The ethnic dresses have been standardised by Chinese and Wa tailors, with particular patterns of tin rivets and standard icons, such as the bull head, representing the Wa. Famous songs deal with the elegy of a bird who lost his partner and a couple combing each other's hair during courtship.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from romance, the main stock of Wa folklore is pride for the army. The Wa singer Nyi Kap Lun, for instance, has a popular song about the 'Unity of the Wa State' (*rob rom meung Vax*), with lines such as 'I am prepared to give my life for our Wa State' (*yum im aux sang tawx ju tix son meung haktiex ex Vax*). While there are some pictures of leaders of army and party in the accompanying videos, most of the images are of ordinary Wa soldiers. The dialectic unification of militarism and love are songs that deal with the mutual sacrifice of boys (who sacrifice themselves for the army) and girls (who sacrifice themselves for their men). For instance, in the song 'The boy leaves his girl and goes to war' by the Wa singer Ai Rong Sigu, in which a soldier (in uniform) says goodbye to his girl (in ethnic dress). He comforts her and says that he will come back soon, and meanwhile, she should take care of the house and of their old parents.<sup>7</sup>

The combination of beautiful girls and daring soldiers that stand for the Wa State is precisely the kind of 'authenticity' that Duara writes about. 'Ordinary' girls and boys embody the people 'as they are,' and their

authenticity justifies the sovereignty of the Wa para-nation. The gendered performance of themes of love and war also improvises on the other core themes of para-nationalism: the inferiority of the new nation, as well as its martial nature. The particular genres and styles (of music, material culture and dress) that are used here have been formed in trans-border mimetic communities: Wa singers, for instance, are based outside the Wa State, in towns on the Chinese side of the border, elsewhere in the Shan state, and in Thailand. Burmese and Chinese tailors, together with local Wa, have created a standardised 'Wa dress,' including particular patterns of tin rivets and clothes for women, as well as red and black vests with the bull horn icon for men. Local intellectuals in the Wa State use their own Wa script that is based on the missionary script (first created by Baptist missionaries in the 1930s) and the Chinese unified script used by Communist Party officials in China but also different from both (see Watkins, 2013). And ordinary Wa circulate and like Wa songs and videos (such as the ones quoted above) produced in China, Myanmar and Thailand. Yet Wa villagers were rarely interested in the sources of Wa songs and dresses, and local intellectuals commonly rejected that these things might have been learned from distant others: My pointing out that the Wa vests were a recent invention or that some Wa songs sounded exactly like Burmese songs often drew hostile reactions from people like Ai Pleek, the deputy head of a local propaganda department. Local nation builders in the Wa State either downplay or deny their participation in the mimetic communities in which the genres and styles of Wa nationalism are exchanged, as Harrison (2003) argues is the case for most nationalism in the configuration of 'difference-as-superiority,' that is, nationalism that defines itself against others seen as more powerful.

The particular emotional intensity of para-nationalist performance is due to its martial character: The threat of war conveys a dramatic quality and an inevitability to personal and collective sacrifice. The threat of war might be just an ideological creation of the army elites to promote nationalism. But it certainly has a lot of appeal in the villages of the Wa State, where most families have lost fathers, husbands and brothers in the wars of the 1990s and have family members serving in the army today. In songs such as the one about the soldier who leaves his bride to go to war, Wa para-nationalists deal with the classic symbols of nationalist sacrifice that have been described the world over (Marvin & Ingle, 1999). Successive generations of anthropologists have emphasised the gendered nature of such nationalist performances (Delaney, 1991; Herzfeld, 1985). In the Wa State, too, these performances are deeply gendered, and uniform and ethnic dress stand for the relationship between the military defence and cultural essence of the Wa State. The officials responsible for culture, propaganda and media are clearly seen as subservient and secondary to the army and the military. What is more, cultural work, including song and dance, is feminised when compared to military defence: More women are involved in cultural work than men, as dancers, singers and officials. The promotion of Wa culture itself is seen as the task of women. In the Wa Women's association, for instance, the wives and daughters of Wa commanders do some charitable work for orphans, they organise some dance troupes and they also practice the Wa script. Feminine cultural work is seen as complementary to the masculine military, but it is also clearly subordinated: The singers and dancers of the propaganda groups, as well as the heads of culture departments, are always second in command to military commanders.

The gendered nature of the para-national project corresponds to changing gender relations in households and local communities; here, too, the performance of sacrifice becomes a crucial axis of gender relations (men are supposed to sacrifice themselves and women are supposed to sacrifice their sons and husbands).<sup>8</sup> Political philosophers have argued that the nation state imagined as born of gendered sacrifice 'comes fully to life' only in war (Elshtain, 1991). Anthropologists, however, can show that even the most serious sacrifices are pragmatic performances: As compelling as the combination of daring soldiers and beautiful girls might seem, these performances are not compulsory—or at least not always compulsory.

Each morning, women and men in the Wa State decide whether to don a UWSA uniform or an ethnic dress. For men in the countryside, military attire is indeed the most common dress, as it is for soldiers, as well as commanders. But women, sometimes at least, also wear uniform: The women in the central propaganda department in Pang Hsang, for instance, usually show up in military uniforms at events such as the annual drug burning (held on 26 June, the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking). And men, in turn, also don ethnic dresses: My host, headman Nap, for instance, often pondered whether to wear fatigues or his Wa vest when visiting the district government.

Young people also sometimes wear civilian fashion, which can be bought on local markets. This might seem trivial, but I think the everyday choice of dress embodies the pragmatic nature of para-nationalism. Uniforms and dresses stand for the gendered authenticity of the nation at war, yet, precisely because of the urgency of war, there might be no time to dress in a uniform: and even though wearing an ethnic dress, headman Nap, would never hesitate to state that 'we' would be ready to defend the Wa State, whenever such an affirmation seemed required or appropriate.

Whether to dress in a uniform or an ethnic dress in the morning is both a semiotic and a pragmatic choice: It depends on the particular circumstances and relations. The same is true for all the different ways in which the para-nationalism of the Wa State is created and promoted, for instance, by purifying and standardising the Wa language.

### 3 | LANGUAGE PURIFICATION

While most ethnic Wa speak the Wa language, there is only a very limited space for the exchange of written discourse. Chinese and Burmese are much more powerful majority languages, and given the long-term influence of China, Chinese has become the lingua franca of the Wa State—even though the Wa State tries to promote the use of the Wa, and to a lesser extent, the Shan languages. Several Wa scripts exist, one created by Baptist missionaries in the 1920s and another one by Chinese Communist Party officials in the 1950s. But outside the Wa Christian churches, only very few people in either China or Myanmar are able to read and write the Wa script. General levels of education are low, and those who can afford it will send their children to Burmese, Chinese or Thai schools. Yet there is a growing community of intellectuals, officials and army representatives in the wider Wa region who promote the use of the Wa language.

There is, for instance, Sam Kaw, one of the officials in the News Department of the Wa State capital, Pang Kham. A lapsed Buddhist monk, who reads three languages and speaks five, he is employed to translate official pronouncements into the Wa language. Aside from his day-job in the propaganda department, Sam Kaw works tirelessly creating and linking websites for the promotion of Wa language and culture and is continuously chatting on Facebook and Wechat with other Wa users in Myanmar, Thailand and China (often using voicemail functions for those who are unable to read and write in the Wa language). Another important member of this community of nation builders is Ai Pleek, the deputy head of the propaganda department of Meng Maw county, mentioned above. Like Sam Kaw, Ai Pleek spends much of his time promoting the use of the Wa language. In his job, he has to translate signboards and government announcements into Wa and curate the Wa textbooks used in schools. He is also very active on social media participating in group discussions and posting about Wa culture. One of his hobby-horses is the promotion of Wa terms for those modern things that are generally referred to by foreign loanwords: from gadgets and machines (TV, radio and car) to institutions and concepts (party, society and state).

In their quest to promote the use of the Wa language, intellectuals such as Sam Kaw and Ai Pleek are facing three characteristic problems. First of all, there are only very few modern objects that have common Wa names. When people refer to cars, TVs and mobile phones, they commonly use the Chinese (and to a lesser extent Burmese and Shan) loanwords. The same is true for the institutions of the modern state, the army and modern society: 'party,' 'brigade' and 'the people' are commonly referred to by their Chinese words. Even though there have been efforts to promote Wa nouns for all these words, a unified Wa lexicon has not yet been realised. There is a lot of disagreement about the Wa words that should be used—for example, school could be '*nyiex gau lai*' ('house learn letter'), or '*nyiex ah lai*' ('house say letter'), or '*nyiex cawng*' (using the Burmese word for school) or '*xuexiao*' (Chinese for school)—and then, most of these words are not common and so many people would not understand them.

What complicates the use of the Wa language further is that there is not an agreed standard Wa language and standard Wa script: dialectal variations are huge, and three different scripts are used. The standards promoted by the Christian church, by the minority departments of the Chinese government and by the Wa Central Authorities are all different. And even if everyone would agree on a standard language and script, there is yet another problem in the sense that many subjects of the Wa State are not ethnic Wa, but Shan, Lahu and Chinese who do not necessarily



understand the Wa language. Given these difficulties, rather than insisting on the use of the Wa language, people often switch into Chinese. Chinese is perceived to be more convenient, given it is taught in many schools, used for business purposes, and as the hegemonic language in the bureaucracies of army and state.

The different linguistic groups in the area always made use of some lingua franca, which in the past was the Shan language, but during the 20th century increasingly became Chinese. Chinese was used by the CPB and thus became the language of the new government institutions established by the CPB with the support of the Chinese government, army and Chinese volunteers.

The three obstacles to the use of the Wa language (lack of modern words, no agreed standard and language diversity) speak of a general dilemma of secondary nationalism: how to create unity in the face of diversity and domination. The difficult establishment of a standard language, that is, a standard form of communication, illustrates particularly well what is a general predicament in late-coming nation states: The desire to promote a unified standard is constantly disappointed, yet precisely because it is recognised as utopian, it acquires peculiar strength. An environment of constant military threat only adds urgency to this emotional turmoil. Whether or not to promote a national standard is always a pragmatic decision, but it can become a question of life and death. The politics of language standardisation in a military state thus exemplify the characteristic double bind of para-nationalism: It might be impractical to devote too much time to language purification, in particular if it impacts on the war effort and doesn't allow for swift defence. Yet if the Wa language (and Wa culture) continues to decline, there won't be any people left who recognise themselves as Wa and are recognised as such by others.

In the Wa State, the military itself has been one of the main institutions through which language standardisation has taken place. During the era of the CPB, ethnic Wa learned Chinese in the guerrilla army. Since the establishment of the UWSA in 1989, there have been concerted efforts to promote the use of Wa in the army. Yet here, the same problems mentioned above stand in the way of a sustained use of the Wa language: Many of the modern institutions of the army were introduced by Chinese and don't have agreed Wa names, and not all soldiers are Wa. Given these difficulties, soldiers sometimes switch to Chinese (or to Shan). Others might reprimand them and encourage the use of Wa instead. The district head of Taoh Mie (where I did fieldwork), for instance, admonished the soldiers who did annual military exercises in the local middle school, to speak Wa and to use Wa when giving orders, every time he visited the school.

As much as Ai Pleek and other intellectuals try to promote Wa names for phone, party and places, the responses they get are often just lukewarm: At best, people are curious about the lists of new words in Wa that are forwarded on social media, and at worst, they are ridiculed. In everyday parlance, people often switch back to Chinese and Shan loanwords for convenience. Some Wa words are simply not agreed upon by everyone, whereas others are not well known. And all the intricacies of the Wa language will escape those who do not understand Wa, such as the local Shan and Han Chinese populations.

The choice whether or not to insist on the use of Wa is a pragmatic decision: Wa intellectuals, just like Wa leaders and Wa soldiers, make such choices all the time. Similarly, they also make choices about when and how to promote Wa culture or to join the armed struggle. Nationalists elsewhere face similar choices, in particular when they lack international recognition. West Papuan nationalists, for instance, strive for recognition of their position and voice in international settings. As Danilyn Rutherford points out, colonial powers saw Papuans as 'impressionable children' and 'imperial puppets' instead. She points out that amongst the Papuans, 'there have been two contrasting responses to this dilemma': the first one being armed struggle and the second particular discursive strategies that performatively enact the subject position of the nation (Rutherford, 2012, p. 186). In her analysis of West Papuan performances of sovereignty Rutherford focusses exclusively on the latter. Sovereignty needs to be performed before audiences, and audiences need to recognise such performances: This can be a flag raising, a declaration of independence or even the use of pronouns (third-person pronouns in particular). Armed struggle and violence in general are also 'performances' that need audiences, Rutherford argues. Violence, she argues, is fundamentally a semiotic process, in the sense that it is a 'forceful reframing of a situation' (Rutherford, 2012, p. 101) imposed on others. Perhaps only slightly less radical, others point out that violence is a limit case of meaning making, in the sense that violence excludes further interpretation and imposes a certain meaning onto the victim (Riches, 1991).

The weakness of such semiotic approaches is that they make it impossible to assess the relative strength of a performance, the relative importance of an audience and most importantly, the impact of violence. Both a sharp remark and a hired assassin can hurt people, but they do so in entirely different ways and with entirely different results. The choice between armed struggle and ethno-nationalist propaganda in West Papua, as well as in the Wa hills, ultimately is a pragmatic choice. To avoid the tautology of a semiotic circle (caught between violence and audience), in the next section, I suggest a pragmatic focus on the uses of violence in para-nationalism.

## 4 | VIOLENCE AND PRAGMATISM

The lack of international recognition and the threat of military intervention impose a particular urgency to the promotion of Wa culture and language. At the same time, the promotion of culture and language is sometimes postponed to focus on the immediate exigencies of military defence instead. Which purpose has precedence depends on the particular situation and context, and this is particularly clear when we look at physical violence.

Even though there have been low-level skirmishes and confrontations with other armed groups (in particular factions of the Shan State Army), the UWSA has actually not taken part in open battle since 2003, and the possibility of the UWSA entering military conflict with the Burmese National Army or other neighbouring is actually fairly low. Yet the Wa authorities constantly present the military might of the UWSA through their uniforms, offices, parades and media. The UWSA also takes part in various forms of exchanges with other armed groups, the Burmese national army and government and representatives of the Chinese, Thai and Lao governments. As extensions of their diplomatic efforts, the Wa authorities also sometimes intimidate their neighbours, offer themselves as intermediaries or receive people forced to leave their homes because of other armed conflicts (Nyein, 2019). When in 2016, the neighbouring National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Mongla seemed to open up to the national government under Aung San Suu Kyi, the UWSA occupied two hilltop fortresses near Mongla and took a number of NDA soldiers hostage. Observers interpreted the act as a reprimand against the NDA's rapprochement with the national government (SHAN, 2016). Whatever its intentions, the UWSA clearly demonstrated its military superiority over the neighbour.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, whether and how military strength is shown is a question of utmost importance for the Wa leadership: They participate, for instance, in different forums of so-called ceasefire negotiations with the Burmese National Army yet at the same time exhibit the strength of their military by broadcasting military parades, as well as by military exercises that are visible to other armed groups. All these decisions, just like the decision whether to wear a uniform or an ethnic dress, are performances that need to be recognised and understood by audiences. Even the violence of war itself is a performance and a particularly powerful one at that. Yet if we limit our interpretation of these performances to their semiotics, we run the risk of homogenising the performance and the performers: as if it was a unified group, acting with conviction and sincerity. This is problematic because it does neither allow for internal differences (e.g., between commanders and soldiers) nor for the particular and pragmatic decisions that are characteristic of para-nationalism.

As long as the danger of war is looming, it can be always argued that the necessity of unity and solidarity will have to override internal differences. But the 'para-nationalist' efforts of intellectuals and officials always have to deal with embodiments of authenticity that sometimes can disrupt unity, even though they are relatively powerless: such as the primitive, woman and 'the people.' While such icons represent the 'authentic Wa,' they also need the guidance of intellectuals and officials, representatives of the Wa State often emphasise. Officials, for instance, sometimes force 'the people' to use Wa words that hardly have any meaning for them. Because of all the difficulties mentioned, the same officials might switch back to Chinese. When talking about government's business in the Wa language, Wa leaders often use loanwords from Chinese, such as *tuanjie* (solidarity or unity), *renmin* (people) and *laobaixing* (ordinary people). These China loanwords embody the core principle of mass sovereignty: The government is supposed to represent the masses of the people and derives its legitimacy from this act of representation. Yet because the authenticity of the masses is intrinsically connected to them being primitive and backwards, a characteristic dilemma emerges: between a particularistic tendency (authenticity) and universal recognition (modernisation).

The unifying effect of going to war together, and sharing a common enemy, has been often noted. Having a common enemy played a crucial role for the development of German nationalism and American nationalism, for instance. At the dawn of World War I (WWI), numerous German intellectuals joined the war mobilisation praising the binding power of martial patriotism. Thomas Mann, famously, lauded the unifying function of war, to defend German *Kultur* against the values of civilisation represented by France.<sup>10</sup> James Dewey, in 1917, published a piece writing against the hesitation on the part of the United States to join the war, which he said was based on the lack of a 'national mind.' Lacking a shared history of kinship and custom, the United States should build national coherence through the state and in particular the constitution (Dewey, 1929, p. 446). Francis Mulhern has described this emphasis on the unifying nature of the founding texts of the United States 'a kind of para-nationalist constitutional fetishism,' 'one of the true *longues durées* of American culture' (Mulhern, 1981, p. 55).

Dewey and Mann, then, represent the typical elements of para-nationalism listed in this article: a voluntaristic call to arms, at a time of war, that is ultimately utopian. Dewey and Mann's support for the entry of their respective nations into WWI met fierce criticism from some of their contemporaries. Randolph Bourne, for instance, chastised war supporters such as Dewey for their subservience to the state, their instrumentalism, and implicitly, their opportunism (Chaves, 2016, p. 60ff). Thomas Mann wrote directly against his brother Heinrich Mann, who supported the democratic and rationalist ideals of the French state against German patriotism. In both cases, one main point of contention was the utilitarian pragmatism with which Dewey and Mann promoted their respective nationalisms.

Dewey and Mann, thus, stand for the voluntarism that promotes national unity in the state of war. As long as national sovereignty is (a) yet to be achieved and (b) threatened by war, we can speak of 'para-nationalism' in the senses described here. The measure of its success is also the measure of para-nationalism's demise: Once the war was over, both Dewey and Mann substantially changed their positions.

As long as the three preconditions (authenticity-based sovereignty, inferiority and war) are present, we are bound to find the particular combination of urgency and pragmatism of para-nationalism, yet neither of these features by itself is not enough. The first feature of authenticity-based sovereignty is a typical feature of nationalisms the world over. But the second and third are less common. They are typically found in non-state nationalisms under the threat of war. Social scientists might identify the decline of the nation state or describe the international system of nation states as 'organised hypocrisy' (Krasner, 1999), but neither in the United States nor in most other industrialised countries, including China, is national sovereignty experienced as fundamentally fragile or absent, when compared with the Wa State and other de facto states lacking international recognition.

But it has been during WWI, and it might be during other wars today (think only of the war on terror): The main question here is not whether actual battle is taking place but whether and how the imagery of war is present in everyday life. If it is overwhelmingly present, as in the Wa State, it conveys particular urgency to the question of popular sovereignty. The choices that Dewey, Mann and other intellectuals faced are fundamentally the same that Wa intellectuals, soldiers and ordinary people face: How to create popular sovereignty, how to promote sovereignty as authenticity, when at war? War imposes an inevitability to these questions: If they are not answered, 'everything' might be lost. Whether war will thus create unity in the atavistic way that Mann describes, or necessitates the defence of reason, as demanded by Dewey—these are questions that are not fundamentally different to the choice of promoting the Wa language that Ai Pleek made, or the pragmatic dismissal of the same objective in the heat of the battle: when a commander switches to Chinese for convenience's sake.

These choices are both semiotic and pragmatic choices. But to identify the differences between para-nationalism and nationalism, it is necessary to take a pragmatic perspective. If we reduce violence to a semiotic process, it will be impossible to distinguish between nationalism and para-nationalism: Both of them equally want the impossible: a pure act of sovereignty, in which the authentic core of the people stands for itself and is recognised as such. In well-recognised nation states, as well as in a para-nationalist endeavour, popular sovereignty is something of a squared circle: If 'the people' are the sovereign, who rules over the people? Yet a pragmatic perspective, at least, allows drawing a difference on the basis of an interpretation of the threat of war. A pragmatic perspective, thus,

invites further comparisons of para-nationalism in Myanmar—for example, amongst Mon (South, 2003) or Kachin (Sadan, 2013)—and elsewhere.

From a semiotic perspective, daring soldiers and beautiful girls are absolutely crucial to the sovereignty of the Wa State. So is the Wa language, and the rational and legitimate violence used by the agents of the Wa State. The authenticity of culture, language and violence is the ground for the semiotics of sovereignty. From the same semiotic perspective, individuals—the soldier and the peasant, for instance—have to be sacrificed for the survival of the national body. From a pragmatic point of view, sometimes and in particular circumstances, the purpose of national sovereignty itself has to be sacrificed. Individual, particularistic and pragmatic necessities might appear as more important than authenticity-based sovereignty. The promotion of culture, for instance, is important, but it is subordinate to military necessities. The use of a standardised language encounters all kinds of obstacles (above I mentioned lacunas in the lexicon, disagreement over standards and language diversity) and hence hybrid loanwords are used for convenience. And finally, when people die and soldiers are killed, it is not always clear whether their death was a sacrifice for the national body or an absurd and meaningless loss.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The social and cultural form of the nation state implies the unity of the ‘nation,’ as a culturally homogenous group, with the governmental structure of the state. Whether nation building and state building coincide is primarily an empirical question. More than 40 years ago, Clifford Geertz suggested that the development of third-world nationalism would depend on the varying combination of nation and state building, that is, ‘concrete patterns of primordial diversity and different modes of political response to those patterns’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 278; as cited in Sidel, 2012, p. 115). Since then, the ‘fate of nationalism in the new states’ has taken different directions. Sidel (2012) has outlined possible axes of comparison for the study of nationalism beyond the domestic management of ethnic diversity (which had been Geertz’s focus). The two central axes in Sidel’s schema are colonial state formation and cold war integration, and along those lines, he distinguishes nationalism in mainland Southeast Asia (Laos, Myanmar and Thailand), which tends to be ‘primordialist,’ and nationalism in island Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines), which tends to be ‘constructivist.’ Loosely corresponding to Anthony Smith’s theory of ethnic nationalism (Smith, 1986), the new nations of mainland Southeast Asia tended to be built on the basis of ethnic homogeneity, while nationalisms in island Southeast Asia all seem to have read Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1991) and correspondingly emphasised the epochal difference of the nation state, with its new political institutions, and most importantly, its constitution, rather than ethnicity. Along Sidel’s two main axes of comparison (colonial state formation and cold war integration), both cases are clearly set apart: While in mainland Southeast Asia, there was relative continuity of state building over centuries focussed on the centres of what later became the nation states of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos, in island Southeast Asia, indirect rule and rebellion predated large multicultural entities such as Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

In this schematic opposition, Wa para-nationalism seems to fall into the first category of nationalism common in mainland Southeast Asia. And indeed, the models available to Wa nation builders, including Chinese and Burmese nationalism, and the ethnic policies of both countries favoured ethnic primordialism. But the para-nationalism of the Wa State is also epochal and constructivist: If the ethnic identity of the Wa plays an important role, at least in principle, the nation state in formation also goes beyond it. It includes a standardised national language (Wa) that in principle is available to everyone. It is represented by the uniforms of the UWSA that are worn by ethnic Chinese, Lahu, Shan and Wa alike. And it justifies a form of violence that is rationalised in relationship to the body of the emerging nation. All these ‘constructivist’ aspects are substantially weaker when compared to the primordialist emphasis on Wa ethnicity. But they are there as well, and just as important.

Para-nationalism is a general type of nationalism that cuts across the logic of primordialism and constructivism. In my argument, both primordialist and constructivist nationalism are essentially a claim to sovereignty based on

authenticity. This is obvious for ethnic nationalism, which asserts the authenticity of ethnic identity. But authenticity is also necessary for imagined, multiethnic, and constitutional communities: Rather than the substance of ethnic identity, for this class of nationalism what matters is the form of national identification, a form that is made authentic by the conviction and sincerity of its bearers: the army uniform (instead of the ethnic dress), the standardised language (closer to a lingua franca than a native language), the rational violence of the constitution (rather than primordial war), becoming rather than being (in Sidel's terms) and Dewey rather than Mann.

In fact, a core characteristic of para-nationalism is that the choice between primordial and constructivist strategies acquires particular urgency and is experienced as an existential challenge by potential nation builders. On the one hand, the authenticity of some eternal and primordial essence needs to be asserted for the sake of a unified identity; on the other hand, a new and larger unity has to be built and local diversity has to be subsumed within it. The general conundrum of the particularity and universality in all forms of nationalism presents itself directly and immediately in para-nationalism, given the instability of authenticity-based sovereignty, which is threatened by war and perceived as inferior by their own makers. Similar nationalisms might appear in small nations, in anticolonial struggles, and in de facto states the world over. But para-nationalism is not simply nationalism in infancy or nationalism at war: Instead, it describes the particular combination of three elements: (a) authenticity-based sovereignty, (b) perceived inferiority and (c) the threat of war.

The label of para-nationalism draws attention to a situation where the link between nation and state is still a desideratum and where authenticity—primordial or constructivist—is constantly contested. Claiming to represent the authenticity of Wa people, against all odds, serves as a justification for the Wa State as a political entity towards the outside world, countering the geopolitical reality of an unstable buffer region between the People's Republic of China and the Union of Myanmar. Both the external relations and the domestic politics of the UWSA rely to a large extent on the performance and recognition of its claims to authenticity-based sovereignty. Given the perceived inferiority of such nations-in-the-making, and the environment of war, para-nationalism is characterised by pragmatism: War is the reason both to affirm authentic identities and to discard them. We have seen the intensity with which these choices impose themselves, as well as the pragmatism with which they are tackled: questions such as, whether to wear a military uniform or an ethnic dress, whether to speak the national language or the lingua franca, whether to apply violence or persuasion and whether to sacrifice oneself or to sacrifice the national purpose? As long as the nation state has not been stabilised and recognised, and as long the threat of war is looming, these questions remain particularly urgent and can only meet pragmatic answers.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Meung Vax* in Wa, or *Wabang* in Chinese, officially the 'Special Region 2 of the Shan State of the Union of Myanmar.' This article is based on 18 months of fieldwork carried out in the Wa Hills of China and Myanmar in four periods between 2013 and 2017, of which about 1 year was spent in the village of Yaong Rai in the Northern Command of the Wa State. All personal names and place names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. A transcript of the documentary originally broadcast by Phoenix TV in Hongkong in 2008 is available on this website: [http://phtv.ifeng.com/a/20150204/40971084\\_0.shtml](http://phtv.ifeng.com/a/20150204/40971084_0.shtml) (accessed 1 October 2020).

- <sup>3</sup> The dialect of Yaong: Soi: (Ai Shuai in Chinese) in Cangyuan county, China, is the source of standard Wa (Paraog) pronunciation and the basis of the various Wa scripts. For a summary of the various Wa scripts, see Watkins (2013).
- <sup>4</sup> Online at <https://www.facebook.com/100009385757251/videos/1415345858788259/?pnref=story> (accessed 18 November 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> See, for instance, this song by the Wa Singer Yi Bre at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8Mqq4iTO-M> (accessed 18 November 2020).
- <sup>6</sup> See, for instance, <https://v.qq.com/x/page/m0776zvc1oj.html> (accessed 1 December 2020).
- <sup>7</sup> 'Lih hu Khun daux lien khaing nang,' online at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WS5Rp\\_KpDrE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WS5Rp_KpDrE) (accessed 1 February 2020).
- <sup>8</sup> How people negotiate such sacrifices in everyday life and the consequences in the gendered political economy of households are topics beyond the scope of this article. Further analysis in this field could build on the pathbreaking work of Jenny Hedström on the militarization of gender relations in Kachin State (Hedström, 2016, 2017, 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> Both the NDA of Mongla and the MNDAA in Kokang (the UWSA's neighbours to the north) have similar para-nationalist aspirations. Like the UWSA, they emerged from the Communist Party of Burma, but different to the UWSA, most of their leaders are ethnic Chinese. The NDA in Mongla in recent years has also tried to promote ethno-nationalism and establish an "Akha Self-Administered Division": "The SR4 administration imagines that, with the establishment of their own Akha Self-administered Division, locals' self-determination and awareness of their own ethnic and political identity will be strengthened. More importantly, the legacy of the Special Region, which resonates with war and opium trading, could also be buried in the ethnic-nationalism-provoking term "Akha Self-determination" (Than, 2016, p. 165). So far, the Akha Self-Administered Division has not been recognised, and the para-nationalist efforts in Mongla, both in military and cultural terms, have only had limited success.
- <sup>10</sup> Mann wrote in his infamous *Reflections of a Non-political Man* about the function of war, to 'confirm, maintain, and strengthen national particularity' (Mann, 1960, p. 116).

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