

# Sovereignty as Care: Acquaintances, Mutuality, and Scale in the Wa State of Myanmar

HANS STEINMÜLLER

*Anthropology, London School of Economics, UK*

According to Bodin’s classic definition, sovereignty is “the absolute and perpetual power of a commonwealth” (1992[1576]:1).<sup>1</sup> Political philosophers and social scientists have long discussed what such absolute power entails, citing jurisdiction, extraction, coercion, protection, and other features. Yet the combination of these features cannot be reduced to one single package, or a single transition toward political centralization. Part of the reason is that many states emerged from long and intractable wars, and in fact most states in their early stages behaved like crime syndicates (Tilly 1985). The violence of early state-building was later compensated by the development of pastoral and protective institutions, and some argue that actual state-building only begins when predatory behavior is combined with protective action—when “roving bandits” become “stationary bandits” (Olson 2000). Rather than such a transition from violence to care, I will argue here that both violence and care belong to sovereignty from the beginning, or rather, that what defines sovereignty is the extension of practices of violence and care toward a larger group—a “commonwealth.”

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<sup>1</sup> “La souverainete est la puissance absolue et perpetuelle d’une republique” (Bodin 1992[1576]: 152).

The combination of violence and care captures the paradox that is at the core of sovereignty: supreme rule needs to be justified somehow, but to be absolute and supreme, this justification cannot be based on anything else. The same paradox is at the heart of Foucault's and Agamben's influential writings on sovereignty, the main source of inspiration for what anthropologists and other social scientists have had to say about the problem recently.<sup>2</sup> Yet when confronting the depth of normalizing discourse, or the enigmas of the state of exception, anthropologists are at peril of forgetting classical insights from their own discipline, such as the vast literature on ritual and kingship, from the comparative outlines of Frazer (2009[1890]) and Hocart (1969[1927]; 1970 [1936]), to numerous ethno-historical studies of local kingdoms, for instance in the Sudan (Simons 1992) and in Orissa (Schnepel 2002). In this literature, the sovereignty paradox is embodied in the particularity of the figure of the king, and therefore countless kings were strangers or fools, or otherwise marked as different from the ordinary people. The difference of the appearance and behavior of kings thus replicated the social difference between the king and the people. If the difference is the basis for the sovereign's exercise of violence, its institutionalization in sacred kingship can also limit the king's excesses, as Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber have forcefully re-stated recently (Graeber and Sahlins 2017). One of the core arguments of their book is that royal sovereignty is the result of ongoing struggles, what they call the "constitutive war between the people and the king" about the fundamental meaning of authority: if the people win, they manage to limit the king through "adverse sacralization"; if the king wins, he still faces the challenges of succession.<sup>3</sup> This constitutive war therefore hinges on the same paradox of finding a social justification that, however, needs to be erased. These struggles are only further exacerbated once we deal not with kings but with popular sovereignty. If "the people" are to be sovereign over themselves, who guarantees their sovereignty? Who are "the people," anyway?

I will argue that an ethnographic analysis of personal relations of violence and care is the best way to understand these contradictions of sovereignty: how the sovereign is both part of a moral community and separate from it, and how "the people" are both the subject and the object of sovereignty. Extending care creates significant others and care is therefore essential to creating moral community. Violence separates people from moral communities and makes them into objects. The combination of both movements is the essence of the absolute and supreme power of sovereignty, which relies both on being part of a community and being separate from it, at the same time. Similar combinations can be found in ritual and specifically in sacrifice, as actions that combine

<sup>2</sup> For overviews, see Hansen and Stepputat (2006); and Jennings (2011).

<sup>3</sup> See in particular chapter 7, "Notes on the Politics of Divine Kinship" (Graeber 2017b).

nourishment and predation. Kings emerged from the rituals of birth and death, planting and harvesting, as carers-in-chief, who could also exercise violence upon others. Life-renewing rituals re-created royal authority and thus also limited that same authority, and all these entanglements concretely expanded through relations of care and violence. Frazer, Hocart, Graeber, and Sahlins have left us elaborate schemes to understand sovereignty as care (and violence) in kingship and ritual. We need to take one step further to apply their insights to popular sovereignty. To become popular sovereignty, the scale of such relations needs to change: rather than to one specific sacrificial victim, relationships of predatory violence and nourishing care have to be extended to a much larger group of people. Concomitantly, the logic of sovereignty, combining violence and care, must be exerted and intensified in personal relations.

This article deals with the emergence of popular sovereignty in relations of violence and care. The focus on care is a corrective to the excessive reliance on textual and philosophical analysis by many social scientists, anthropologists included. Instead of philosophical texts, I focus on the lived experience of care in personal relations and analyze how they are transformed historically. Additionally, the emphasis on care is meant to provide a counterbalance to the analysis of violence. It is a rare academic definition of sovereignty that fails to mention violence, but quite a few do not emphasize the attentive, shared, and nourishing aspects of supreme power.

I will describe the emergence of popular sovereignty as a transformation of care, based on my fieldwork in the Wa State of Myanmar. I focus on the “paradox of sovereignty” just mentioned, but rather than a philosophical, legal, or even a bureaucratic problem, I deal with this paradox at the level of everyday social relations. The Wa State provides an excellent case study to do so: this relatively recent de-facto state is governed by an insurgent army and lacks an effective bureaucracy yet provides relatively stable government on the basis of military force and what political scientists describe as the “networks of former insurgent leaders, traditional leaders, businesspeople, and traders” (Callahan 2007: xiv). The elite networks that are the backbone of the Wa State today are, however, fundamentally different from the kind of personal relationships Wa villagers cultivated before the first modern armies arrived in the Wa hills in the second half of the twentieth century. What distinguishes them is a whole new system of relations, of acquaintances and anonymity, and these networks are also counterbalanced by the ideal, if not the reality, of popular sovereignty. This article explains precisely which roles attentive care played in this new system of relations and in creating and perpetuating the ideal of popular sovereignty.

In an earlier *CSSH* article, “Conscription by Capture in the Wa State of Myanmar” (2019), I outlined the transformations of personal relations that have taken place in the Wa State since the 1970s. Technologies of communication and transport connected to new forms of warfare and military organization made it possible to extend personal relationships onto new scales. The new relationships

formed in the military and cut across the former allegiances of kinship and local community, thus allowing for the exercise of state violence in the absence of an effective government bureaucracy. Those relationships include new networks of acquaintanceship, as well as new forms of anonymity. Building on the new networks of acquaintanceship, new forms of mutuality can be created, but, in turn, the possibility of mutuality may be actively rejected. All four relationships can be schematized in the following way, depending on whether we speak of a basic relationship or its further valorization, and whether a relationship is asserted (+) or rejected (-):<sup>4</sup>

	+	-
Basic Relationship	Acquaintance	Anonymity
Further Valorization	Mutuality	Rejection of Mutuality
	↓ Care	↓ Capture

FIGURE 1: Relationships of Capture and Care.

The relationships on the right side of this diagram, anonymity and the rejection of mutuality, create the conditions of possibility for predatory violence. In general, such violent action is exercised against others who are anonymous, or otherwise, others with whom possible relations of mutuality are actively rejected, and the capture of child soldiers is a prime example for both (see *ibid.*). In this article I will focus on how such child soldiers are cared for in the houses of commanders. The nourishment and protection the commanders offer to the children in their houses thus follows the violent capture of those same children. The capture of children and how they are taken care of in the commanders' houses is but one example, but a prime one, of the kind of relationships that exist between villagers and the elites of the Wa State. The focus on care in this article thus complements the earlier theme of capture, and further expands the logic of acquaintances and mutuality.

<sup>4</sup> In the 2019 article, I used "patronage," but I have decided to replace that with "mutuality." The reason is that patronage refers to hierarchical and parental relationships. Many of the relationships that I describe here are indeed parental and hierarchical, but some are not. For instance, people might spend a lot of time together in army units or in schools, and then treat each other as "friends" or "brothers." Mutuality includes all such relations, and I use the term to mean relationships of co-being in the broadest sense, following Sahlins' suggestion that such mutuality is what defines kinship: being "members of one another" and "participating intrinsically in each other's existence" (2011).

In “Conscription by Capture,” I described how new media enabled the spread and formation of new networks of acquaintances and patronage. Yet, the same changes also enabled new forms of anonymity and the rejection of mutuality that was characteristic and necessary for the performance of sovereignty across locations. In this article, I’ll look at those same networks from another perspective—care—which will illuminate the different kinds of valorization that take place along those relations. I understand care, most fundamentally, as the opposite of capture: instead of violent predation, care is attentive co-action. While I use “capture” to signify the aggressive incorporation of other beings, “care” refers to all action that allows for peaceful co-growth.

If traditionally “care” has been researched in relationship to kinship, anthropologists have recently pointed to the central importance of care for social organization in general (Read and Thelen 2007; Thelen 2015; Black 2018; Cubellis 2020). In doing so, they are influenced by the work on care done by feminist philosophers, in particular, who have defined “care” very broadly,<sup>5</sup> and have argued for its central importance to questions of political engagement (Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1993; Held 2005), both evaluative (the work of care has been overlooked and should be recognized) and normative (care should motivate action).

Care, as a processual organization of social life, can help us to understand the connections made in everyday life between politics and economics, suggests Tatjana Thelen (2015). Taking care of significant others can integrate private and public, as well as point to their separation. This is particularly relevant when care is extended beyond the circle of those who are familiar. The most fundamental precondition for someone to enter a field of significant others is to be cared *about*. Caring about someone implies acknowledging the presence of some significant other. The field of those we care about is predicated on the cognitive abilities and the mediatic technologies of attention that are at hand in particular circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Caring *about* something or someone is the precondition of caring *for* them. While caring about implies acknowledging the presence of some significant other, caring *for* implies a particular action toward that significant other. In between the acknowledgment and the particular

<sup>5</sup> The most general definition of “care” is the one suggested by feminist philosophers Joan Tronto and Berenice Fischer: “On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto 1993:103).

<sup>6</sup> To “care about something” means to distinguish what is significant from “what goes without saying.” When dealing with another agent, this requires the capacity to differentiate social roles from their occupants. Cognitive anthropologists have argued that this capacity, as well as the capacity to differentiate between play and reality, and to imagine the intentions of others (so-called “theory of mind”), are human universals (Bloch 2012: 111ff.). Beyond those cognitive abilities, the mediatic environment also plays a decisive role: tools of communication, ritual objects, as well as writing, make it possible to care about distant others.

action, there are manifold possibilities and gradations of care, depending on the intentions and constraints actors face, as well as the particular others that are the object of care.<sup>7</sup>

For care to become operational in terms of sovereignty, a characteristically unequal distribution needs to emerge between the sovereign and the many: the many have to care about the sovereign, whereas the sovereign cannot care about the many. The sovereign, on the contrary, is supposed to care for the many; the many, however, can only care for the sovereign in their position of “many-as-one.” If the many are “many-as-few” they cannot care for the sovereign, because as such, the “many” remain singularities. I am inspired here by the terms suggested by Nurit Bird-David (2017a; 2017b) to understand the mode of being together and “being many” in small-scale foraging societies, which she calls “pluripresence”<sup>8</sup> and opposes to the mode of “being many” typified in the “imagined communities” of the modern nation-state. I am skeptical whether group identities of “many-as-one” were ever wholly absent from human sociality, but acknowledge that the scale of acquaintances and anonymity is indeed crucial to distinguish particular forms of sociality and group identity. And such changes are intrinsically connected with the expansion of sovereignty, which relies on the opposition between sovereign and subject. I will argue that the transformations of care (and violence), specifically the acknowledgment of “group care,” are the vectors of scale that create the possibility of popular sovereignty.

In this article, I examine three aspects of care: (1) caring about; that is, paying attention and making acquaintance; (2) caring for; that is, the kind of purposive action that creates co-growth and mutuality and (3) the scales of care that create unified group categories. My threefold definition of “care” is thus at once broader than healthcare or eldercare and more specific than the ordinary language term “care.” There is a nascent health and social care sector in the Wa State; there are numerous philanthropists and villagers who take care of the old and sick at home. All these various aspects and forms of care could be analyzed

<sup>7</sup> My distinction between caring about and caring for is similar to the first two elements of care in the now classical definition of Joan Tronto (1993): *caring about* and *taking care of*. The other two elements she defines as caregiving and care-receiving, that is, the competence and responsiveness of care, are subsumed below into the social dynamics emerging in the imbalanced distribution of care. While Tronto reconstructs the building blocks of an ethics of care, my aim is to outline the kind of social relationships that make care operational for sovereignty.

<sup>8</sup> “Throughout the day, every day, the fewness of these people, all relatives, impresses itself on the observer—especially the depth of each person’s presence to the others, the constant exposure of each not just to one or a few others but to almost all of the others, all of the time, throughout a lifetime” (Bird-David 2017b: 214). There is a risk however, if “pluripresence” is understood to imply that there is no concept of group at all. As Bird-David points out in an earlier article, even among foraging societies, rules and roles emerge in social interaction, and if roles exist, imaging several people fulfilling one rule at least is a possibility (1995).

using this framework, but they will not figure prominently here.<sup>9</sup> Instead, my red thread ties together the care relations that are essential to the construction of sovereignty. I start from Wa expressions of care at the smallest scale, and then trace the gradual expansion of networks of acquaintances and practices of attention, specifically among soldiers and veterans who care about distant others. The core section of the article discusses how people are cared for in the houses of the commanders of the Wa army. The respective relations of attentive care (caring about others) and active care (caring for others) are the core ingredients of sovereignty, and once they are scaled up and applied to the mass noun of “the people,” then it becomes possible to speak of “popular sovereignty.”

#### CARE IN WA

People who call themselves Paraog and Vax today live on both sides of the international border between the People’s Republic of China and the Union of Myanmar. Historically, most ethnic Wa have been typical “Zomians”; that is, throughout their recorded history they remained outside the reach of neighboring states (Schendel 2002). This changed with the influx of modern armies since World War II, and especially during the Cold War, when various armed groups sponsored by the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of China, Myanmar, Thailand, and the CIA battled to dominate the region. Today, the Wa are an officially recognized “ethnic minority” in the People’s Republic in China, whereas in Myanmar, most Wa live in the de-facto state governed by the so-called “United Wa State Army” (henceforth UWSA). The UWSA is today the strongest of Myanmar’s non-state armed groups and governs two areas of land along the Chinese and the Thai borders, separated by swaths of land controlled by the Burmese national army.

The UWSA emerged as a splinter group of the guerrilla armies of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which had established the first rudimentary structures of government in this region in the 1970s. In 1989, a group of ethnic Wa and Chinese soldiers staged a coup against the mostly Burmese leadership of the Communist Party and established the UWSA. Both the CPB and the UWSA relied on Chinese support and on the trade and production of opium and illegal drugs. But the elites of the Wa State have diversified their business investments in recent years, and now govern a sizeable de facto state at the Chinese and Thai border. While the members of

<sup>9</sup> For Wa concepts of healthcare, see Fiskesjö 2017. Other than for their health, people in Wa State also care for machines and plants, for instance. Care is absolutely central to understand the economy of life embodied in the plantation (Steinmüller 2021). Public donations, development assistance, and independent philanthropy in the Wa State create different “communities of care,” each uniting a set of actors and recipients along a particular moral logic (Ong and Steinmüller 2021).

the elite live in large mansions, and a few towns have grown in the last decades, the large majority of the Wa population lives as peasant farmers in villages under UWSA control.

As subsistence farmers, the livelihoods of Wa villagers are intimately connected to the care of plants and animals. One core idiom of care is to provide food. In the Wa language, the same word, *priex*, means both “food” and “to take care” of someone or something; it can also mean in other contexts “to persist,” and “to remember” (Watkins 2013: 753–54). *Priex mhawm* is to take care of someone, and often that might be, of course, to provide food for them, or *yuk priex*.

Among the Wa, the primary relationship of feeding and caring is that between parents and children: parents and grandparents prepare food and take care of their children. Children in turn take care of their parents in old age. This intergenerational exchange is similar to the “cycle of yang” in Chinese societies (Stafford 2000), except there is much less emphasis on commensuration and equivalence. In Yaongrai, for instance, people would shoulder duties of eldercare and perhaps even complain about it, but they would never measure them against what their parents had done for them as children, let alone draw up contracts to divide shares and duties of care (something that has long been common in Chinese societies; see for instance Cohen 2005: 252ff.).

In village life, the brothers and sisters of the father are very similar to the parents, and children would spend time at their houses, eat and work with them, in the same way as they would in their parents’ house. Children’s behavior changes markedly in the presence of the affinal parents, specifically the mother’s brother and the father’s sister (both called *paox* in Wa). They are expected to show some polite deference to the *paox*, whereas the relationship with the cousins is generally light and, especially with cross-cousins, playful and sometimes flirtatious. Traditionally, Wa married according to the rules of patrilateral cross-cousin marriage, and hence for a boy, paternal cousins (FZD), and for a girl, maternal cousins (MBS), were the preferred marriage partners. Between cousins who could potentially get married, joking relationships were the rule, especially before marriage.

Beyond the family, the relationships structured by the lineage traditionally also defined different forms of relatedness, which are reproduced by the “care” people extend toward each other. In the past, these forms were mainly those between the members of a lineage, and between affines. Along the lines of kinship, at every special occasion the right legs of sacrificial animals are passed on to agnates and the left legs to affines, thus marking through the presence and action the continuity of the lineage as well as its affinal links. Every man recognizes an older brother, uncle, or paternal cousin as his “Master of the Leg” (*cao ba*), and at important rituals always has to give the right leg of the sacrificial animal to this relation.



Chickens and pigs are sacrificed on an everyday basis, and in many Wa villages large-scale buffalo sacrifice is relatively common. Through such sacrifice people relate both to human and meta-human others. The conduct of sacrifice from the smallest instance of pouring liquor up to the biggest communal sacrifice is thus another government of care extended to significant others: specifically, those with whom meat and liquor is shared, and those who are invoked in ritual (ancestors and spirits). These are the various beings that ordinary humans would care about—in the sense that they were recognized as meaningful others—as well as care for, by addressing them, feeding them, and eating together with them. The relations of kinship and sacrifice, therefore, are also structured according to actions of caring about and caring for significant others. And here too we already see particular imbalances of care: younger brothers are supposed to pass on sacrificial meat to older brothers, and older brothers acknowledge the gift; a niece pays deference to her uncle (her mother's brother) who decides on her marriage, and the uncle will graciously support his niece. Exchanges of words and deeds maintain kinship positions and are fundamentally unequal.

While these relationships of kinship and sacrifice are still extremely important to people who live in villages, since the 1960s they have been accompanied, over-shadowed, and sometimes co-opted by new networks of mutuality built on the basis of acquaintances made in local militias, the CPB, and since 1989, the UWSA. In the next section I briefly sketch the big changes that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century in the Wa hills.

#### MILITARIST STATE BUILDING

Until the 1960s, most ethnic Wa lived in fortified villages that remained autonomous from 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 remained outside the influence of either Chinese administration or Buddhist networks. Swidden cultivation remained the mainstay of local livelihoods into the twentieth century, and before the arrival of Baptist missionaries in the 1930s, no Wa script existed. Only a decade after Burmese Independence (1947) and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949) the two new nation-states agreed on the exact border line in this mountain area. The new international border was inaugurated in 1960 and effectively divided the Wa hills into two. On the Chinese side, ethnic Wa lost their autonomy under successive campaigns from 1958 onwards. On the other side, Wa communities followed local strongmen who were supported by different armies (including the Chinese Communist army, the Kuomintang, the Tatmadaw, and the CIA). At the end of the 1960s, the CPB established their headquarters in the Wa hills, and with Chinese support quickly unified all the remaining armed groups and warlords. It established lasting government

institutions beyond the level of villages, 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 for supply and transport on the better roads on the Chinese side of the border.

During the two decades of CPB rule, 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 CPB’s politburo in the 1980s. Unlike most of their peers, Tax Pang and Tax Lai had been to Chinese schools across the border, if just for a few years. When they entered the CPB in the 1960s and 1970s, they spent considerable time away from the villages, together with Chinese, Burmese, Lahu, and Shan soldiers. The lingua franca in the CPB during the 1970s and 1980s was Chinese, given that China supplied much of their manpower, machinery, and technology. But the support from China started to fade soon after the high tides of the Cultural Revolution (1968–1971), and the CPB’s army units had to find alternative sources of revenue. Aside from some very small operations selling local crafts and products, opium soon became the main source of income, at first through taxation of the opium trade but soon also by overseeing large-scale opium transports to the Thai border. Collaborating with local middlemen and representatives of other armies, CPB commanders got involved in the drug trade in the wider region of what came to be known as the “Golden Triangle.”

The two Wa members of the politburo, Tax Lai and Tax Pang, led a mutiny against the Burmese leadership and established the “United Wa State Army” in 1989. The members of the army elite have since then amassed considerable personal wealth. At least some of this wealth might have to do with their (or their business allies’) continuing involvement in the production of and trade in narcotics. But the Wa elites have diversified their business interests ever since, and have substantial investments in mining (Martov 2015), gemstones, real estate, and a series of other industries in the Wa State and the region.

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 then forcefully resettled about 120,000 people from the Wa hills at the Chinese border to this new “Southern Command.” This Southern Command is effectively led by Wei Xuegang, a long-time business associate of the Wa elites. Since its establishment, the UWSA has not taken part in open battle, but only in various smaller skirmishes with some of the surrounding armed groups.

One crucial aspect of modern warfare was the introduction of new technologies of communication, transport, and weapons. Roads, telegraph, and later mobile phones facilitated new scales of social relations. Primarily,

these media were introduced by the army for the purpose of military defense. Once established, transport and communication allowed soldiers to keep in touch with others across the former horizon of the village. Soldiers who spent long stretches in the army, far from their home villages, established close connections with distant acquaintances and could maintain them even after they returned home. Obviously, commanders and ordinary soldiers did not have equal access to the same networks, but the scales of the networks relevant to both groups have expanded substantially since CPB days. In the next section I illustrate those scales for the army veterans in the village where I did fieldwork.

#### PEOPLE CARE ABOUT COMMANDERS

Sai Pao, a neighbor of mine, in his fifties, would often ask to use my phone to speak to his sister in the Southern Command. He had not seen her since the last time she had come back, about five years earlier, and yet he had not managed to buy talk time that would allow him to call from the Chinese network (which most people in the Northern Wa use) to the Thai network (common in the Southern Wa). Of Sai Pao's immediate family, most people are either in Pang Hsang (the capital of the Wa state, about 80 kilometers from Yaong Rai) or in Meng Yawn (about 400 kilometers from Yaong Rai, at the Thai border). Sai Pao himself had left the village in 1992 when he was forcibly recruited into the army, and had been away for several years, during which a third of the families of Yaong Rai, including his sister, were resettled to the Southern Command. His neighbor, Tax Gawm, stayed and became village headman at that time. More than two decades later, the two elders remembered momentous events of the 1990s, on the battlefields in the south and in the exodus of the villagers, as if they had happened yesterday. But rather than the plight of their relatives, their stories invariably zoomed in on the actions and deeds of the army commanders. For instance, they recounted how Ai Rong, the nephew of Tax Pang, had started out as a truck driver in one brigade, or how Wei Xuegang built barracks and schools, or what happened when Wei Saitang, a powerful commander in the Southern Command, fell from grace in 2002.

The rise and fall of some Wa commanders have been the object of much speculation, even by foreign journalists. For instance, the commander of the so-called "independent brigade," Wei Saitang, was removed from office apparently because he had tried to cut a deal with the Thai Third Army (Pathan 2005: 114). In about 2010 a rising star in the Wa army, Ai Ban, was caught by the Tatmadaw, and in 2016 the Wa central government demoted another high-flyer named Li Aisu. Meanwhile, the most powerful second-generation commanders, Ai Rong and Ai Qiang, expanded their power bases and business networks, as well as the numbers of their followers. All this is the stuff of a minor genre of Kremlinology among a few journalists and observers of the Wa state, who are based in China and Thailand.

The point I want to stress here is not that outside observers speculate about the personal relations and intentions of commanders, but that the subjects of those commanders do the same. Indeed, for them such information is of particular urgency; people like Sai Pao and Tax Gawm are interested in the commanders not just for the sake of nostalgic stories but because commanders and their networks wield immense power over everyday village affairs. The same commanders who arranged the forced resettlement of thousands of villagers in the 1990s today govern the brigades where relatives serve as soldiers, and control mansions where village children make up their entourages. The commanders grant mining rights to Chinese investors, and own pine, tea, and rubber plantations on village territory and elsewhere in the Wa State.

In principle, military commanders are not involved in local government, but they are consulted on issues of land appropriation, resettlement, and, crucially, recruitment. When commanders appear in the village they are generally received with utmost respect and as guests of honor. Evening conversations in Yaong Rai households often turned to the characters of individual commanders and their networks of relatives, business associates, and followers. Yet ordinary villagers rely on hearsay and rumor only, since they have very limited access to specific information about the commanders' connections. This separation is reinforced by means of communication and transport systems that maintain the army's elite networks. While commanders travel in Toyota Hilux trucks and keep in touch via mobile phones, ordinary villagers own no cars and sometimes cannot afford to call relatives by phone.

In this situation of highly unequal power, underpinned by different networks of acquaintances, relations of mutuality, and exclusive access to technology, villagers are forced to care about commanders, if for no other reason than a lot depends on commanders' actions. Inferiors who ignore their overlords risk being simply overlooked, but also being ordered around, captured, resettled, or imprisoned. Workers, therefore, must ponder their bosses' intentions, villagers would do well to put themselves in their headmen's shoes, and smart soldiers will be attentive to their commanders. These forms of attentive care are decidedly one-sided and backed up by the new acquaintances and the mutuality formed first in the army and later in business. The circles of acquaintances and the expansion of mutuality were facilitated by the introduction of new media (Steinmüller 2019; 2021) and distinguish the commanders from ordinary soldiers such as Sai Pao. This difference is reproduced in the politics of care, as it varies between foot soldiers and commanders: Because of their obvious and direct impacts on people's lives, ordinary people must worry about their commanders' intentions. Commanders, by contrast, cannot always care about all of the ordinary people, though they are supposed to care *for* their followers.

Caring about the commanders means, fundamentally, that ordinary people must pay attention to the commanders due to their threatening presence and

potential impact on people's lives. What emerges is a "lopsided structure of the imagination" (Graeber 2012: 118ff.) in which the underprivileged care more about the privileged than the other way around. In this unequal relation, some subordinates acquire particular skills in anticipating their superiors' actions and in reading their intentions.<sup>10</sup> Some may even empathize with those superiors, though pity for the great men and their duties is certainly uncommon. At any rate, it is not a necessary consequence of the unequal distribution of information and power. What is inevitably part of the new division between people and commanders, however, is an unequal distribution of attention. Ordinary people have to pay attention to commanders, and commanders cannot pay attention to every individual and every detail. In other words, people care *about* commanders, but cannot care *for* them. The concrete action of caring for, that is, the transitive action of exercising care for someone else, increasingly becomes the prerogative of the superiors.

These complicated and imbalanced relationships of care emerge especially at the houses of the Wa State's great commanders, where extended families, adopted children, followers, servants, and prisoners live together with the commanders' core families. I will now turn to the micro-dynamics of care as they appear in the houses of the commanders. Do these "big men" really care for the children who come into their houses as soldiers, adoptees, or captives?

#### COMMANDERS CARE FOR CHILDREN

A group of army commanders, connected by links of kinship, shared experiences in the army, and business ties, established themselves from the 1980s onward as the new elite of the Wa hills. These commanders today live in large mansions, together with entourages of followers that include children and teenagers. Typically, a boy or a girl is sent by their relatives to the house of a commander as a child. Though this is voluntary in principle, there are many cases where children are sent against their will or "captured" forcefully. When such children escape, commanders can ignore the fact, or attempt to arrest them. In some cases, they might take the child's relatives hostage, mobilizing their own networks and forcing someone in the line of command to reject possible mutuality.<sup>11</sup>

Those children then grow up at the house of the commander, and perhaps leave at the time of marriage. Commanders do not only gather entourages of children and youth; entire families often follow them. Next to the mansions of leading army commanders are sometimes rows of houses of their followers. The

<sup>10</sup> See Steinmüller (2022) for a reflection on the consequences of such a "lopsided structure of the imagination" in terms of reading the intentions of superiors.

<sup>11</sup> The children in the house of commanders today are in some ways similar to children that were "bought," and to war captives of the past. For a discussion of slavery and war captives then, see Fiskesjö 2011. For an extensive comparison and a discussion of the specific practices of capture today, see Steinmüller 2019.

commander of the 318 brigade, Ai Rai, and that of the 468 brigade, Sam Pang, are both nephews of Tax Pang and have built huge sprawling mansions in Taoh Sou near the Chinese border. Behind the palaces of the commanders are small villages built in uniform style. Every house is exactly the same, with wood imitations painted on the walls and a pair of bull horns on the gables. The families who live in them work in the commander's household and on his fields and plantations.

Young followers live generally in some kind of "servants' quarters" in the mansions of their masters. They own very little in terms of personal property aside from their clothes and sometimes a mobile phone, and even these personal belongings are provided by the master's household. Yet they can also use many of the things that are in their masters' houses, and they generally eat well, often better than do their parents in the village. They might be able to go to school if that is convenient and supported by their master. In some houses I have seen the servants and soldiers watching TV in the evenings in the same room where the master or his family would watch.

No matter how good the relations might be between the master, his family, and the others living in their household, there is always a clear and marked difference between the big family and the servants: they sleep in different quarters, eat different food, and do different work. The children fundamentally rely on the "big man" and his family for their livelihoods. Even if they have left the house and returned to their village or to some army unit, they might still call on the "big man" for help. In cases of accidents, or when someone goes to prison, or any other significant incident, then ordinary people commonly first contact the patrons who might be responsive to their needs. People can only hope that a commander would care for them, give some money, pay fines, or otherwise sort out the situation. Whether or not he will in fact respond depends on his character, the particularities of the relationship, and the situation. Let me give a few examples.

Young men often work as drivers and maintain the cars of the houses of their masters. Sometimes they are allowed to drive the vehicles elsewhere for their own purposes. Sam Kat, for instance, is a soldier in the household of Tax Jiet, where he has become the personal bodyguard of the finance minister. He accompanies Tax Jiet everywhere and often has to administer the insulin injections the diabetic minister needs before his meals. As a trusted soldier, Sam Kat can use an SUV of his work unit for his own purposes, such as visiting his mother in the village. On such visits, he brings drinks, food, and presents for his family and relatives, and then hosts them for meals and drinks.

As a personal bodyguard, Sam Kat is particularly close to his commander and can expect help when he or his relatives are in need. Other members of a commander's entourage, though, might wait in vain for a response. When three teenagers from Yaong Rai were badly injured in a motorbike accident during my fieldwork, and I suggested taking them across the border to a Chinese hospital,

the local headman's first reaction was to ask at the house of the commander where one of the boys worked. The commander did not return anyone's phone calls, and so people knew no money to cover the hospital costs would be forthcoming. For the same reason, neither the headman nor the family was willing to risk a trip across the border.

Followers and servants take up various tasks in the household of their commander, such as cooking, working on the fields, stocking household supplies, and building maintenance. Some followers are entrusted with handling money and get involved in business transactions for their masters. Ai Yong, for instance, who had grown up in the Southern Command and entered Tax Kap Ton's household at age twelve, bought opium in the villages of the Northern Wa in the 1990s and arranged for its re-sale through Tax Kap Ton's connections. Ai Yong complains now that he earned little money at this because he had to deliver any surplus to Tax Kap Ton. But he got to know traders and made friends himself, forming a basis for a side business he started later.

The favor of the commander always hangs by a thread. Sam Kat and Ai Yong did acknowledge that their commanders "cared for" them, but when soldiers like them make mistakes, or worse, run away, their commanders will lash out, and actively reject any possibility of mutuality. They may ask for them to be arrested to do forced labor, take their relatives hostage, or have them beaten to death.<sup>12</sup> Or they may simply sever any possible link of mutuality. The fear of abjection, of not being cared for by a significant commander, is a core motive in the stories of many young followers.

Ai Yong, for instance, had to walk a fine line when he decided to leave his commander Tax Kap Ton's house. After he got married, he simply did not return to Tax Kap Ton's house, even though he had never formally asked Tax Kap Ton whether he could leave. Tax Kap Ton did not press the case, and even though Ai Yong's release was never approved, ultimately it was accepted as fact. But now, he says, he would not go to Tax Kap Ton and ask him for a favor, since they are no longer very close. In a sense, Ai Yong was quite lucky Tax Kap Ton did not follow up since he could have tried to have him arrested. A common practice to force runaway followers and soldiers to return is to arrest their relatives (Steinmüller 2019), but Ai Yong was an orphan, and his brothers were on the Chinese side of the border at the time, so this was not an option for Tax Kap Ton.

<sup>12</sup> One such case caused some stir in 2018. In April 2018, the deputy commander of an artillery unit was convicted and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment and indemnity payments for having ordered the torture of a young man suspected of having stolen a large amount of cash, 7 Million RMB according to press releases. The young man, a nephew of the commander, and his accomplices were held for about three months in the rubber plantation of the commander, and repeatedly tortured, until one of them died and others were crippled. That this case came to court, and was broadcast on Wa State TV, is perhaps due to the gravity of what the commander had done. It is possible that he had fallen from grace and had no one to protect him. See WA State TV, 1 Apr. 2018, [http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/VjthtW0IEoptIA0fzCOI\\_A](http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/VjthtW0IEoptIA0fzCOI_A) (accessed 3 Apr 2021).

As in Ai Yong's case, a young man's marriage is often a crucial turning point, at which it is decided whether a follower will leave a "big man's" entourage or continue working with him. If the marriage is held at the patron's mansion, or is paid for by him, then it can be assumed that the follower will stay at his master's house. In such weddings, the leader will commonly assume the position of patron, over-shadowing the young couple's parents if they are present. In principle, this might be difficult for the parents to accept, but in most of the families I knew in such situations the parents had either passed away or were glad to accept the patronage relationship their children had entered.

In the military, and in particular in the Southern Command, collective weddings are sometimes held simultaneously for dozens of couples.<sup>13</sup> Such marriages, of course, cannot stand up in comparison to marriages officiated by one leader himself. These collective marriages do not represent a particular bond of patronage with one leader, but they are one extreme example of a clearly defined group identity; of the "many-as-one" who stand for "the people."

#### NEW SCALES: FOR THE MANY, NOT THE FEW

We have seen how Wa soldiers have begun to care *about* new acquaintances, and how followers are cared *for* (or not) in the houses of commanders. In these examples, care creates mutuality, on the basis of acquaintance. But the object of care, or more fundamentally, the object of attention, does not have to be an individual you have met in person. It can also be a meta-person or a group of people, generally seen as extensions of earlier kinship groups.

In political discourse in the Wa State today, "the people" have become an object of care. There are many forms in which the idea of "the people" can be expressed in the Wa language, such as "the children-people" (*gawn pui*), "people-all" (*pui hun*), or "everyone-everybody" (*ku kaux ku pui*). But all of these forms tend to be used more in direct interaction, as in "everybody has arrived" or "tell everybody," referring to a concrete group of people present. People similarly express the idea that leaders should "care for the people of the village and for everyone" (*priex ren pui yaong pui hun*), but this tends to be understood as "care for everyone in the village." When, however, the political category of "the people" is referred to, stretching beyond particular places to a larger context, most often the Chinese loanword *laobaixing* is used. This slippage—"the people" being a mass noun from a foreign language—makes it easy to shift from care to violence and back (which might be more difficult if the people were referred to as "everybody" in Wa). But most fundamentally, this slippage indicates where this new idea of the people—as an abstract category

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, a picture report about such a wedding in 2017: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/27069348> (accessed 20 Mar. 2022).



referring to many imagined people who are not necessarily present—comes from: the Chinese education in the CPB.

Some of the Wa soldiers who entered the Communist guerrilla movement in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s learned how to read and write, mostly using Maoist propaganda texts as teaching material. Aside from the explicit indoctrination in army units and in the first schools, the materiality of the guerrilla armies was extremely appealing and impressive: uniforms, rifles, as well as the food served was all of a very different quality to those Wa soldiers had been used to. Such “matters of care” in the army came from specific commanders, or behind them, relatively vague categories of people such as “the Chinese” or “the army.”

Again, the particular relations to commanders were crucial for ordinary soldiers, such as the now-elderly Sai Pao and Taw Gawm. Spreading out from several core families, dense networks of mutuality formed around these commanders, especially Tax Pang and Tax Lai. While Tax Lai’s family was sidelined after his death in 2003, since then the family of Tax Pang has clearly been at the core of the relations of mutuality governing the Wa State. His two brothers are core leaders of army and state, and three nephews are heads of brigades and the most influential commanders of the second generation. Other family members are in powerful positions in the government and army, and several affines are core business associates. One of the richest men in the region, Xiao He, is married to the third daughter of Tax Pang, and the links to the conglomerates of Wei Xuegang and his brothers also fundamentally operate on the basis of marriage alliances. Wei is the godfather behind most of the trade in narcotics in the Golden Triangle and is serving as the official head of the Southern Command of the Wa State. And Wei’s cousin is the second wife of Tax Pang—according to Wa custom, affines are the best business partners, especially when they are a cross-cousin joking relation.

Relations of care, however, extend not only between the members of the elite themselves, but also between the elite seen as “the leaders” (*tax simiang*) and “the people” (Chinese *laobaixing*). The way in which leaders are addressed and talked about is clearly parental: they provide food for the children—the people—and care for them. But this projection of kin relations generally does not live up to the standard of a parent-child relationship, and instead transforms the same relationship at its core: Because of the level of abstraction, and because of the military idioms of obedience and discipline, it is easier for leaders to abnegate their servant followers, easier at any rate than it is for parents to disown their children.

The discourse of care that takes a group of (potentially anonymous) people as its object is constantly reproduced in government announcements and in particular in the new government discourses of public assemblies. Particularly powerful here are the metonymic extensions of some kinship categories to stand in for the larger “we-group” of “us, the Wa” or “us, the people of the Wa State.” For instance, at government-sponsored buffalo sacrifices, sometimes the

Burmese representatives are given the right leg of the sacrificial victim (thus representing the agnates) whereas the Chinese representatives are given the left legs, representing the affines. Alternatively, other ethnic groups that are now governed by the Wa army, such as local Lahu in the South, are described as “the younger brothers of the Wa” when Wa commanders justify appropriating their village lands. (Of course, this claim is contested and many Lahu reject the description.)

We have seen that military state-building made people care about distant others, and the dilemmas of unequal care in the houses of commanders. The expansion of care to the abstract category of “the people” is the third element of the transformation of care that creates the particular framework of popular sovereignty. It should be emphasized that even though there are scribes on every level of local government, most people in the Wa state learned about this new notion of “the people” by listening to government discourse, singing songs in the army, and so forth, rather than from written discourse. This is significant in that it further emphasizes the importance of particular registers of practical action and co-presence—that is, the registers of care (and capture)—for the emergence of popular sovereignty.

Since the days of the CPB, the military state has created institutions of civil government, including prisons, schools, and village governments. But even the government buildings often resemble army barracks, and at any rate, civil government is generally subordinated to the army. Both the army and civil governments have made considerable efforts to build formal procedures in administration and law: at every level, there are scribes and secretaries who collect data and statistics and produce documentation and announcements. There is a very basic medical service (that is provided mostly by foreign NGOs rather than the health office of the Wa State administration), and there are limited pensions for disabled veterans. However different such services are from the large medical bureaucracies of contemporary nation-states, we might describe them as forms of state care.

But the work of abstraction that creates “the people” is not done here primarily through the textual production of scientific standards, and for the same reason, it would be a mistake to understand these forms of governance as Foucauldian bio-power. The dynamics of care that I have described here, such as caring about distant acquaintances and caring for children and followers, do not depend on the kind of normalizing discourses that are reproduced in bureaucracies. Even when it comes to governing “the population,” the new scale of group identity, the new frame of “the people,” is not fully or even primarily determined by texts written and circulated. Instead, it emerges from the concrete experiences of care that I have been discussing. These include the experiences of living together for long periods in units of the army, or prisons, or government, and the dynamics of care that unfold there: between a leader who is supposed to care for followers, and followers who have to care about the leader.

The same unequal relationships of care are applied to the “leaders” and “the people” as a whole and promoted in political assemblies and public discourse.

## CONCLUSION

No rule, whether the rule of kings or the rule of the people, can be based on pure violence. Kings have been an object of both fear and admiration (for their subjects as well as for scholars) precisely because they unify the contradictions of sovereignty in one person. They are part of a moral community, yet they have to stand outside of it so as to be able to exercise violence on the same community. For the same reasons, kings sometimes are strangers, clowns, scapegoats, or children, given that these figures also embody extreme boundary positions between insiders and outsiders. Sahlins and Graeber (2017), analyzing these contradictions in the history of kingship, have pointed out the cultural logics at the heart of sacred kingship. They emphasize in particular the importance of care: for instance, how people and the court have to take care of irresponsible baby-kings (Graeber 2017a). Popular sovereignty, that is, the “supreme power” of the people, has to deal with the same conundrum: the ruler (previously a person, now “the people”) needs to be part of a community, yet at the same time have power over it.

In this article I have analyzed similar social dynamics at the heart of popular sovereignty in the Wa State. I have underscored the transformation of personal relations of care (and capture) that embody the paradox of sovereignty; that is, the sovereign must be part of the moral community—a community of care!—yet also stand outside of it. Modern warfare and new technologies of communication facilitated a transformation in relations of care in regard to both the scope of attention (caring about) and the dynamics of mutuality (caring for). Veterans like Sai Pao care about acquaintances from faraway villages, and ordinary villagers care about distant leaders. The same leaders are supposed to care for the people, but frequently fail to do so. The contradictions of care and of sovereignty are most clearly visible in the mansions of the commanders, where numerous followers worry about the commander’s intentions and hope that the commanders would care for them. The lived experience of the oppositions between “leaders” and “followers” is the basis for the emergence of the subject of popular sovereignty: “the people,” themselves both an object and a subject of care.

In those lived experiences, the valorization of mutuality (care) is just as important as its rejection (capture) for the dynamics of sovereignty. The same is true for the people as an abstract category: Inversely proportional to the expansion of care, another group appears—those that are not cared about. The former is “the people” as a first-person category of “us,” and the latter are “the people” as a third-person category (“they”). Both are anonymous masses which, in principle, exist only as a mass noun, a faceless group category. If new

networks of care and mutuality build up the subject of sovereignty (“the people”), new forms of anonymity and indifference allow for the emergence of the object of sovereignty (also “the people”). It is thus possible, for instance, to mobilize the networks of the army in the name of “the people,” so as to resettle “the people” forcefully and violently. Whereas on the large scale, such an action requires mere indifference, on the small and direct scale of personal action an active rejection of mutuality may be necessary—a direct denial of caring for someone. For instance, a headman may refuse the calls of his kin and allow the police to capture their children into the army (Steinmüller 2019), or a commander might beat a servant to death in rage. The possibility of abjection, of not being cared for, thus creates sovereign power.

I have argued here against the view that popular sovereignty was the result of a transition from predation to protection (once “roving bandits” settled down and started a welfare state; Olson 2000). Instead, my argument is that popular sovereignty rests, fundamentally, on a transformation of earlier logics of care. Both predation and protection, or rather capture and care, were essential to the logics of kinship, sacrifice, and warfare in the Wa hills before the arrival of modern armies in the twentieth century. Though kinship cycles were based on mutual care, they also had to be protected against enemies, and often required the (potentially violent) incorporation of outsiders. Such relations expanded and changed during the twentieth century, as new technologies facilitated new networks of acquaintance, and on this basis also new forms of mutuality (especially in the army). Corresponding to this, a new type of anonymity, and the rejection of possible mutuality, became common and necessary, for instance in the capture of child soldiers (Steinmüller 2019).

On the care side of the equation, these new relations of acquaintance and mutuality are embodied in the ways in which ordinary villagers (especially veterans) care about powerful commanders. Paying attention in this way is the precondition for active and mutual taking care for someone. The ways in which commanders thus care for children are paradigmatic for the radical unevenness and inequality of sovereignty. It is absolutely crucial, too, that this relationship of care is one-sided, and commanders often do not care. While commoners are forced to care about commanders, commanders are only supposed to care for commoners, and often do not.

In addition to the transformations of attention (caring about) and action (caring for), a third step is required to create sovereign relations: we need to scale up the groups involved. This group can be “the people” as the subjects of the sovereign, the king for example, or, in popular sovereignty, “the people” themselves as the subject of sovereignty. Popular sovereignty, therefore, requires imagining a new group identity of “the people,” which is made possible by an expansion of the circles of care, and specifically by an expansion of kinship identities, most obviously parents and children, but also affines, and in the Wa case, cross-cousins.

This could be seen as a transition from a small-scale “stateless” to a large-scale “state” society. But the change is clearly not just one of numbers and size. “The special character of the concept of scale lies in entailing a comparison and a judgement of significance on the dimension of size,” Fredrik Barth wrote in 1978, and scale “thus provides a qualitative rendering of quantitative properties” (1978: 254). Following the same thread, I could say that the qualitative rendering of quantitative properties that I have offered here is that of care, specifically who you care about and who you care for. Rather than looking for different interpretations of given numbers, I have examined the emergence of a new category of numbers: the “many-as-one” and “the people.” The framework of caring about and caring for that I have outlined here suggests an alternative way of thinking about sovereignty, an approach that focuses on the problem of attention (what people care about) and the mutual entanglement of action (who people care for). The attention and action of care open the scales that are the skeleton of what “sovereignty” means in the Wa State, and perhaps elsewhere.

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Abstract: Sovereignty always relies on a double movement of violence and care. It requires the power to exercise violence as well as the capacity to care, to protect, and to nourish. In the footsteps of Foucault and Agamben, numerous scholars have rediscovered the same paradox in philosophical and legal texts. Anthropologists writing about informal and practical sovereignty pay attention to violence, but sometimes ignore the importance of care for the exercise of sovereignty. Against such tendencies to focus on texts and on violence, this article deals with sovereignty as care. The concrete examples are the relationships of care between commanders, soldiers, and villagers in the Wa State of Myanmar, a de-facto state governed by an insurgent army. In the absence of an effective government bureaucracy, popular sovereignty in this military state relies on a particular logic of personal relations, in which care is central. Subordinates have to care *about* leaders, whereas leaders are supposed to care *for* subordinates. Care provides the balance and foil for the exercise of violence, and both are necessary for the exercise of sovereignty. The combination of violence and care in personal relations is scaled up to create “the people” as the subject and object of sovereignty. The article describes the logic of personal relations that allows for the exercise of popular sovereignty in the Wa State and elsewhere.

Key words: sovereignty, kingship, care, violence, mutuality, scale, Wa, network, Myanmar