universität wien

DISSERTATION / DOCTORAL THESIS

Titel der Dissertation /Title of the Doctoral Thesis

Contested Frontiers: Land Enclosures and Indigenous Politics in Myanmar's Chin State

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doktor der Philosophie (Dr.phil.)

Wien, 2019 / Vienna 2019

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt / degree programme code as it appears on the student record sheet:	UA 792 278
Dissertationsgebiet lt. Studienblatt / field of study as it appears on the student record sheet:	Internationale Entwicklung
Betreut von / Supervisor:	Univ.-Prof. Dr. Wolfram Schaffar

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many people, organizations and institutions. Unfortunately, I will not be able to name them all, but I will do my best to include as many as possible. First, my deepest gratitude goes to my family, my parents and sisters, who supported me during many years of studies. I am deeply indebted to my wife who had to bear with me for several years, sometimes under difficult conditions. She also had to take the main responsibility for our newborn son. I dedicate this thesis to both of them.

Furthermore, I am thankful to the Department of Development Studies at the University of Vienna and the Department Head, Univ.-Prof. Dr. Petra Dannecker, for giving me a chance to pursue my doctoral studies. I have to thank in particular my advisor Univ.-Prof. Dr. Wolfram Schaffar, who always encouraged me to follow my interests and who carefully guided me through the entire process. In his altruistic manner, he released me from the usual administrative obligations to fully dedicate my time to my studies. My colleagues at the Department of Development Studies, Alexandra Heis, Nora and Alev, need to be mentioned for their excellent moral support and friendship over five years. I also want to thank the University of Vienna for supporting me financially with grants during my field research and for granting me an *Abschlussstipendium*.

In spite of all the support from the university, my field research would not have been possible without the support of my friends and colleagues from Myanmar. I was lucky enough to find close friends – some of them former colleagues – who encouraged me to pursue my studies in Myanmar and in particular in Chin State. They generously extended a helping hand whenever possible. In particular, the support of Mr. Rual Lian Thang over several years was integral to the success of this research. Thanks also to Mr. Michael Lidauer and his family, as well as Aye Ko for supporting me during my research in Yangon.

Without the support of all my research and interview partners in Myanmar, and in particular Chin State during field research, this thesis would not exist (for reasons of research ethics most of them will remain anonymous). More than once I was touched by the openness of my research partners and the great hospitality I experienced. I very much hope that I did not abuse their trust. Sometimes I did not feel worthy of their support and regretted that I could not return their favors as much as I wanted.

I would also like to thank the *Chin State Academic Research Network* (CSARN) for organizing a conference panel at the EuroSEAS 2019 conference in Berlin and for inviting me to present parts of my findings. I wish CSARN to become an important network for coming scholarship on Chin State that I hope will foster young academics from the region. CSARN also kindly organized an external peer-review of my thesis draft. Thanks to Min Jung Kim, Hans-Bernd Zöllner, Van Cung Lian, and Alexander Trupp for their feedback.

Finally, I want to thank Univ.-Prof. Dr. Karl Husa for extending his mentorship and friendship long after the end of my graduate studies. He and Dr. Alexander Trupp are the main 'cuplrits' for my long-standing research interest in Southeast Asia (in particular Thailand and Myanmar). I would also like to thank my colleagues at the *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* (ASEAS) for inviting me to join the editorial team of the journal and expand my knowledge on the region as well as improve my editorial skills.

Dedicated to Wan & Matteo

1. INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2013, dozens of people gathered in front of the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C. They were dressed in clothes and jackets made from traditional textiles revealing themselves as part of an ethnic diaspora originating from Myanmar. [1] In their hands they held the national flag of the 'Zomi' and self-made signboards with English language slogans written on them such as "FREE ZOGAM", "CHINA QUIT ZOGAM", "CHINESE IMPERIALISM DOWN DOWN", or "WE ARE INDIGENOUS, STOP PROJECT, INDIGENOUS RIGHTS".[2] A red banner identified the protesters as the "Zomi Nickel Movement". The protest was organized by the *World Zomi Congress* (WZC), an organization of "Zomi human rights activists worldwide" (WZC, n.d.).[3] The protest opened with a song resembling an anthem, played from a mobile phone and amplified with an old-fashioned megaphone. Afterwards, the president of the organization announced the reason for their gathering. Speaking in Tedim dialect and translated into English, he explained:

> We are here gathering today as Zomi National Indigenous People from Burma who were oppressed by our government. The reason we are here for today is that the Chinese North Mining Company and the Chinese government and the Burmese government are mining in our land, our indigenous, our own land. . . As the indigenous people in Myanmar, we have the right to claim according to UNDRIP article 25 and 27. That is why the *Gullu Mual* Nickel project . . . is our own property and we are

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[1] Throughout this thesis, the name 'Myanmar' will be used for the period following 1989, when the SLORC military regime changed the name from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar'. For the period before 1989, 'Burma' is used. This does not imply any political statement but follows the convention of using 'Myanmar' in international contexts, as well as domestically. This is also true for many persons interviewed in ethnic regions who use 'Myanmar' to refer to their country of residence. In addition, the two terms have the same origin with 'Burma' being a local alteration and colloquial name for the formal word 'Myanmar' ("Should it be Burma or Myanmar?", 2007). During times of international sanctions, however, the use of either 'Myanmar' or 'Burma' became a political symbol, positioning the speaker in either one of the two divided political camps also affecting academic circles (Metro, 2011). The name Burma is used often by ethnic and human rights organizations, such as in the case of the World Zomi Congress in their statement above, who reject the changing of names by the military junta.

[2] As will explained further over the course of this thesis 'Zo' is an alternative term to 'Chin' to describe the people in the Western uplands of Myanmar and extending beyond the border to India. There are ideological and political conflicts among academics and intellectuals over these terms.

[3] According to its Facebook presence, the *World Zomi Congress* "was formed on July 4, 2010 by Zomi human rights activists worldwide. WZC in the process of registered INGO under IRC Section 501(c) (3) of United States of America. WZC is an umbrella organization of Zomi across the globe and our mission statement is: 1. WZC stands for Zomi Freedom. 2. WZC promotes, protects and struggles for Zomi Right to Self-determination and human Rights. 3. WZC serves Zomi Refugees and Rescue missions. 4. WZC works for Zomi development and Prosperity" (World Zomi Congress, n.d.).

> here to stop it today. Therefore, until the Burmese government has changed our constitutional law which will give us the right to own our land, we will stop this project. . .We will find many ways, domestically and internationally to stop it. (WZC Channel, 2013 [transcript of YouTube video, min. 8:45-12:42])

Following the short speech, the protesters began loudly chanting the slogans on the signboards. Afterwards, an official statement by the World Zomi Congress was read out. The statement "strongly condemn[ed] the partnership between Myanmar's quasi-military regime and communist China mining nickel deposits in *Zogam*, currently known as *Chin State* of north-west Myanmar". It again referred to the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as well as the *Panglong Agreement*, which according to the statement, "empowers the Zomi to govern themselves" (World Zomi Congress, 2013).[4] The protest continued with other speeches that were, at times, very emotional, with the speakers close to tears. They accused China of harming the ethnic people of Burma while supporting the military regime, which had abused their human rights over decades.

The entire protest in Washington was recorded on video and uploaded on YouTube by the WZC (WZC Channel, 2013).[5] It was one of several other protests organized by 'indigenous Zomi' taking place at that time in faraway places such as Norway, Australia and India (Khaipi, 2013). To observers familiar with the context in Myanmar, the video raised several questions. What was going on in "Zogam" usually referred to as *Chin State*, a region not well known for land and resource conflicts, unlike other ethnic states such as Kachin or Shan State.[6] Moreover, who were the "indigenous Zomi peoples" mentioned in the protest?

The video on the *Gullu Mual (or Mwetaung)* nickel mining case became a first lead in my investigation for the following thesis, lasting from 2015 to 2019. It also prompted me to travel to the actual project site on the foot of the Chin Hills and talk to people from neighboring villages about what they thought of the project and if they shared the perspective of the diaspora community. The research also led me to several other places in Southern and

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[4] See also chapter 4 on the history of the Panglong Agreement.

[5] The video of the protest in several parts can be accessed online at the World Zomi Congress Channel (WZC Channel, 2013). Also other protests of the WZC, for instance in Oslo are documented on YouTube (Zogam Aksi, 2013).

[6] "Zogam" means "the land of the Zo". It is an alternative name for Chin State or "Chinram" meaning the land of the Chin". See chapter 6 for further discussion on the terms 'Zo(mi)' and 'Chin'.

Central Chin State. To my surprise, in many interviews during my field research, I repeatedly came across notions of 'indigeneity', either directly or indirectly. Like in the *Gullu Mual* case, the use of indigenous rights was usually related to issues over access to land and resources, which had become increasingly problematic. This was puzzling for me in many ways. During previous years, while working for a non-profit organization in the development field in Myanmar (from 2010 to 2014), I rarely came across the discourse of 'indigeneity' in the country. Indeed, for most local Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), with whom I was in contact over several years, it was hardly relevant. So why was this concept suddenly emerging at this moment in time? Was it just a coincidence or was it linked to the overall political and economic changes termed as "transition"? What did it say about the changes in the relationship between the center and the periphery (and ethnic) states during these times of transition?

Motivation

Initially, the main motivation for this research, starting in 2015, was to better understand the implications of the ongoing economic and political changes, which I had closely observed while working in Myanmar. My first visit to Yangon was about one year ahead of the 2010 general elections, which generated considerable excitement among the 'development community' inside Myanmar and international observers and media abroad. My engagement with Myanmar was purely coincidentally and just beginning at a time of major political changes. As part of my work, I frequently met civil society representatives and members of political parties in Yangon, anxiously awaiting the 2010 elections. Many saw the elections as a chance for democratic reform, however small, and for the departure of the military junta that had repressed the country for decades. This was especially true for a group of people called the "Third Force" (Mullen, 2016). They regarded themselves as offering a way out of the decades-old stalemate between the *National League for Democracy* (NLD), under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, on one side (which had boycotted the 2010 election) and the Myanmar military (the *Tatmadaw*), on the other side (Einzenberger, 2010; Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2012, 2014; Mullen, 2016).[7] In addition, many ethnic parties regarded the elections

[7] The 'third force' is, in particular, represented by *Nay Win Maung* whom I had met several times at the beginning of my work in Myanmar and with whom I had been in regular contact. He was a kind of gatekeeper of western INGOs and a mastermind behind many pro-democracy and ethnic parties competing in the election. He had founded an organization called Myanmar Egress and a weekly newspaper, "the Voice", and wielded considerable influence among Yangon based civil society. According to Mullen (2016), "Nay Win Maung was one of the most debated figures (if not the most debated) in the struggle for change in military-ruled Myanmar. In the same way that Aung San Suu Kyi was the face of the public opposition, Nay Win Maung was the face

as an opportunity for more political participation (in the newly established regional parliaments, for example). From the perspective of the military, the elections were a major stepping-stone towards their roadmap to a "*disciplined democracy*" (also known as the seven-step roadmap), which had been proposed by the military junta since 2004. In the academic literature and in countless reports, the changes in Myanmar were termed as a "transition", "protracted transition" or "metamorphosis" (Bünte, 2011, 2016; Egreteau, & Robinne, 2015; Jones, 2014a; Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2012, 2014). The term 'transition', implying a "teleological promise" of a better future, became one of the dominant narratives and catchphrases often used by international donors and media without much reflection (Girke & Beyer, 2018, p. 235).[8] However, soon it became clear that the change was following a 'top down' approach, led by a military elite, dictating the terms of the transition from a position of strength, not weakness. Few would have expected that the main opposition figure, Aung San Suu Kyi, who, even in early 2011 had still steadfastly rejected the elections as sham and the semi-civilian government as not trustworthy, would join the army to form a new government a few years later in 2016.[9]

While renewed international interest in the (political) reforms in Myanmar started only with the 2010 general elections, the origins of the current transition date back much earlier. It started with the political and economic crisis of the 1980s, which culminated in the public uprisings of 1988 (Lintner, 1990a). This year marked a watershed in the modern history of Burma/Myanmar. Not only was it the beginning of the political opposition under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy, it also brought about a series of reforms. The most important concerned economic liberalization, which, however was overshadowed by the international sanctions against Myanmar. Thus, the

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of the Third Force. He was a proud defender of those who broke with the convention in their efforts to be transformative".

[8] In this study, 'transition' is used as a "crutch" (Girke & Beyer, 2018, p. 235) for want of a better term to describe the political and economic changes since the early 1990s and in particular the past ten years. However, the core aim of this thesis is to get a clearer picture of the concrete processes underway as part of this transition in parts of the countries periphery.

[9] A few months after the formation of a new government under President Thein Sein, I had the opportunity to meet some representatives of the new government in the country's capital, Naypyidaw, as well as Aung San Suu Kyi in her home in Yangon as part of a delegation trip organized by an embassy. While the new ministers emphasized their earnest intentions for reform, welcoming western support and donors, Aung San Suu Kyi was very vocal in her rejection of the new government in Naypyidaw. However, only a few months later after her meeting with president Thein Sein did she consider some cooperation, finally leading to her party participating in the by-elections of 2012 and 2015 general elections, which she won by a landslide.

political developments in 2010 were widely regarded as the biggest changes in the country since the 1990 elections.

Similar to other cases of 'post-socialist transition', the change from a nominally socialist 'command economy' to a 'market economy' and from a one-party system to a multi-party system caused considerable ruptures "throwing property, identity and social relations up in the air, and opening up considerable room for manipulation" (Sturgeon & Sikor, 2004, p.1). In the case of Myanmar, a significant characteristic of the early transition was increasing conflicts over land and natural resources (Buchanan, Kramer, & Woods, 2013) and related "politics of dispossession" (Einzenberger, 2018; Levien, 2013). This became evident in the day-to-day media reports on contested cases such as *Myitsone dam* in Kachin State, the *Letpadaung copper mine* near Mandalay or the *Dawei Special Economic Zone* (SEZ) and deep-sea port project to name just a few. The increased coverage was also a result of the flourishing of local media, which had experienced a significant liberalization and decreasing of censorship since 2011 (Brooten, McElhone, & Venkiteswaran, 2019).[10] Many of these investment projects were located in the countries periphery, financed by an inflow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and facilitated by a series of economic reforms (including legal reforms such as the land laws, investments laws, and Special Economic Zones law) (Buchanan, Kramer, & Woods, 2013). Some of the projects, such as the Myitsone dam, met strong resistance from an emerging and vibrant civil society movement in Myanmar that found new spaces and opportunities to articulate themselves. When President Thein Sein surprisingly suspended the Mytisone dam in 2011, it was seen as a major success and interpreted by some as a change of the new semi-civilian government's attitude ("Myanmar Halts China Dam", 2011). However, the NLD-led government, taking over from Thein Sein in 2016, was reluctant to cancel the project for good, due to increasing pressure from China (Einzenberger, 2016). The observation of growing pressure on land and resources as part of the transition prompted me to look further into issues of resource governance in the context of my work engagement (Allan & Einzenberger, 2013). This interest continued following the end of my non-profit work, as I began to study the academic literature on this topic in more detail.

Critical academic analysis of the unfolding transition delivered a rather sobering assessment. In his political economic analysis, Jones (2014a) argued that Myanmar's "dual transition

[10] In 2018, however, the media was again under pressure with several local journalists persecuted or imprisoned for breaking laws (Paddock, 2018).

from state socialism to capitalism and from dictatorship to democracy" was "highly rapacious and coercive" and "experiencing the early phases of primitive accumulation" (p. 167). Jones (2014b) highlighted the essential role of the periphery in the "centre-periphery struggles" between the 'Bamar dominated' central government and ethnic (and former communist) insurgencies in the borderlands. Only through coercively integrating the periphery, exploiting its abundant resources and reducing the risk from ethnic armed groups could the regime realize its vision of a 'disciplined democracy' while still "holding the ring" (Jones, 2014a, p. 156). In a process described by Woods (2011) as "ceasefire capitalism", the Myanmar army (*Tatmadaw*) awarded logging, rubber and land concessions for agribusiness to co-opt ethnic elites and ethnic armed groups in the border areas. Thus, the military redirected trade and finance flows to the center with the support of transnational (often Thai and Chinese) capital and enabled "a military-state building" in the ethnic frontiers (p. 748). Without the financial revenues from the periphery and the exploitation of its resources, the military regime would not have been able to finance its continuing grip to power. Similarly, Schaffar (2008) recognized the significant role of the ceasefires in the periphery, which enabled an economic regime based on primitive accumulation. In the same way as Woods (2011), he interpreted this as part of an ongoing "nation building" project in order to strengthen state power and the central government at the expense of the periphery.

Aims and objectives

Following analyses of Schaffar (2008), Woods (2012) and Jones (2014a, 2014b), the aim of this thesis is to enhance the understanding of the central role of the periphery and its resource base in the context of the ongoing political transition, specifically since the general elections of 2010. This seems particularly apt as attention gradually shifted away from the border areas (in particular the Thai-Myanmar border) to the political center following 2011 (South, 2018). As I experienced myself while working in the developing sector, international observers and development organizations tended to increasingly focus on the economic and political center in Yangon and Naypyidaw, the seat of the new government where most ministries were located. The border areas, in particular the Thai-Myanmar border which hosted (and still hosts) countless of organizations providing support for refugees and migrants from Myanmar have been increasingly neglected by the development sector and international community.[11]

[11] One result of this trend is the decreasing funding from the international community for the refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border. For instance, *The Border Consortium*, which provides food and shelter for 138,000 refugees in several camps, had its funding cut by half between 2012-2017, while the refugee population

One exception, however, was the recent global attention on Northern Rakhine State along the border to Bangladesh, following the renewed outburst of extreme violence in 2016 and 2017 (International Crisis Group, 2017, 2018). The violence, which involved the armed forces, paramilitary groups and militant insurgents (amongst others), killed up to 10,000 people and drove over 700,000 Rohingya people out of Rakhine State into Bangladesh. It has since been termed by international human rights organizations and the United Nations as "ethnic cleansing" and possibly "genocide" (Lewis & Thu Thu Aung, 2018; United Nations Human Rights Council; 2018).[12] Yet while the documented human rights violations and the role of Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi were widely condemned, the local structural conditions of the conflict are little understood and often neglected.[13] While much more in-depth research is necessary to better comprehend the context of the tragic events in Rakhine State, it is not the focus of the present thesis. Unfortunately, empirical research in many border areas is hardly possible, in particular in Rakhine State, where access is strongly restricted by security forces.[14] Nevertheless, this thesis aims to shed light on the center-periphery relationship by focusing on a particular part of the border through a case study approach. Since the Thai-Myanmar border has been one of the more researched border areas of Myanmar, this study does not focus on the eastern borderlands. Instead, it focuses on Chin State, another largely neglected border area, situated just north of Rakhine State and Northwest of Yangon, which has been regarded as one of the most isolated areas of the Union. Nevertheless, Chin actors have been relatively influential on the national stage, with the current vice president (Henry Van Thio) originating from Chin State. Its probable status as 'least researched' area was not the only reason that Chin State was chosen as a case study area. Other practical reasons included the relatively good accessibility of the region since 2012. Previously it was closed to the outside world for almost five decades. In addition, it was relative stable and secure after a ceasefire agreement in 2012, and relatively low levels of violence. Only recently have clashes between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army

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declined by less than 50%. Thus, the funding sources declined faster than the number of refugees (The Border Consortium, 2018).

[12] According to the United Nations Human Rights Council (2018), "In the light of the above considerations on the inference of genocidal intent, the mission concludes that there is sufficient information to warrant the investigation and prosecution of senior officials in the Tatmadaw chain of command, so that a competent court can determine their liability for genocide in relation to the situation in Rakhine State" (p. 16).

[13] There have been attempts, for instance by Saskia Sassen (2017), to look at the economic drivers behind the crisis in Rakhine State, linking the conflict to land grabs. Yet this has been criticized as rather speculative, lacking any evidence and not grounded in empirical research (Jones, 2017).

[14] The author once visited Rakhine State prior to the violent events of 2012. Already at that time, movements by foreign visitors were closely watched and trips beyond the tourist areas of Sittwe, Mrauk-U were prohibited.

increased in the South of Chin State ("1,300 Chin State villagers flee", 2017; Radio Free Asia, 2019). Another major factor for the decision to select Chin State as a case study area was the encouragement and support by friends and former colleagues originating from the region. Without their support, this endeavor would have been virtually impossible.

As mentioned earlier, the main research interest for this study was largely empirically driven, by the observations and experiences of working in Myanmar on issues of democratic change and resource governance over several years. This stimulated further interest to better understand the current transition and its impact on areas outside the political center. Rather than trying to verify or falsify theories of political transitions, it aims to enhance the understanding of the center-periphery relation through an explorative research design.

The main research questions guiding the investigation for this case study were:

1. How do the changing political and economic conditions in Myanmar – often framed as 'transition' or 'metamorphosis' – impact on the periphery or borderlands?
2. How do actors on different scales respond to these changes? And related to this question:
3. What is the role of indigenism, as a newly emerging discourse and identity construction in the uplands?

Yet beyond its pure empirical value, the present work also seeks to contribute to the theoretical debate on border studies. It aims in particular to highlight the continuing relevance of contemporary (post-colonial) *frontier theory* for the understanding of center-periphery relationships in general and of contemporary Myanmar in particular.

Research on Myanmar's borders

In general, this study positions itself within the broad field of *border studies*. It draws on a wide range of academic research on the border areas of Burma/Myanmar and its center-periphery relations, from historical studies (including colonial sources) and ethnographies to political scientific studies. Academic interest in Burma's notorious borderlands already began with the colonial period (1824-1948), when colonial administrators were keen to explore the 'white spaces' on the maps of their new dominion (Carey & Tuck, 1896). As in other places, scientific research went hand in hand with colonial expansion. The research activities often occurred in connection with 'punitive' expeditions into the 'rebellious'

uplands (Woodthorpe, 1873).[15] Interest in Burma and its borderlands again increased during World War II as the country had a strategically important position in the 'China-Burma-India Theater' as the 'back door' to China (Selth, 2010). Among the most prominent scholarship on Burma's borders are the classic studies conducted in the early post-colonial period by Leach (1954/1964, 1960) and Lehman (1963), which had a major influence on the discipline of anthropology as a whole.[16] In the *Political Systems of Highland Burma,* Leach (1954/1964) studied the dynamic relationship between upland Kachin of Northern Burma and Shan populations in the valleys. In his 1960 article on the *Frontiers of Burma* (1960), he further highlighted the significant differences between the hill people and the valley people regarding, ecology, agricultural practices, religion and social organization, as well as how this shaped their interaction. He observed that, in the post-colonial period, territorial control of the state in the frontier areas was still very limited. Following a similar approach, Lehman (1963) studied the relationship between the Burman 'civilization' and the Chin, 'tribal people' on the western frontier. He regarded the Chin 'tribes' as 'sub-nuclear society', which had partly adapted to their neighboring Burman 'civilization'. Further scholarship on the borderlands of Burma was suddenly cut-short by increasing militarization and conflicts in the border areas and the military coup of 1962. During the following decades of self-imposed isolation under the *Burma Socialist Programme Party* (BSPP) from 1964-1988, foreign researchers were not welcome and empirical research within the country was largely banned (Selth, 2010, 2018). Empirical social scientific research was almost impossible (also for local researchers), except at extraordinary risk.[17]

Only with the gradual opening of Myanmar in the 1990s did the academic interest in Myanmar slowly return. Nevertheless, researchers still faced major obstacles and restrictions under the ruling military regime. Following the stream of refugees to the Thai-Burma border after the 1988 uprising, most research focused on the eastern border areas where access from Thailand was relatively easy. In particular, the Thai border town of *Mae Sot* became a hotspot for the Burmese diaspora, international organizations, NGOs, but also researchers

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[15] Modern 'Burma Studies' started with European colonialism (1852-1942) and culminated in the founding of the *Burma Research Society* in 1910, which regularly published the *Journal of the Burma Research Society.* Both ceased to exist during the military period (Selth, 2010). On the relationship between anthropology and Colonialism in Asia, see also Bremen and Shimizu (1999).

[16] The post-colonial period also saw the opening of the Rangoon-Hopkins Center for Southeast Asian Studies in Rangoon in 1954, which was again closed down after the military coup (Selth, 2010).

[17] Although not a 'classic academic', one exception was the journalist Bertil Lintner who sneaked into Kachin and Shan state in the late 1980ies through the green line via India in order to investigate the Communist Insurgency in Northern Burma (Lintner, 1990b).

(Décobert, 2016).[18] Research mainly focused on issues such as ethnic conflict, human rights, refugees and migration (Selth, 2018). Beginning with the 2000s, further research on the political-economic situation in the border areas emerged, such as Lambrecht's study (2004) on the "oxymoronic development" in the border areas as a result of the military's border development schemes. Callahan (2007) attempted an overall 'mapping' of the differentiated political authority and "emerging political complexes" in the border areas (Duffield, 2001 as cited in Callahan, 2007, p. xiv). MacLean (2008) described the commodification of the borderlands after the 'entrepreneurial turn' of the military junta in the early 1990s. These studies were also part of an increasing general academic interest in border studies at that time, which was not limited to the Asia region alone, and has been growing ever since (cf. Berg & Houtum, 2003; Donnan & Wilson, 1999; Duncan, 2004; Gainsborough, 2008; Horstmann, 2006, 2011; Horstmann & Wadley, 2006; Horstmann, Saxer & Rippa, 2018; Houtum, Kramsch, & Zierhofer, 2005; Sturgeon, 2005; Walker, 1999).[19] One of the first volumes especially dedicated to Myanmar's borders, *Myanmar's Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes,* was published only very recently (Oh, 2016).[20] The rationale behind this type of research was that "much can be learnt about the centres of power by focusing on their peripheries" (Donnan & Wilson, 1999, p. xiii). Researchers of border areas acknowledged that far from being 'left over spaces' at the edges of states, borders are important locations of contestation and negotiation, which are key to state-making processes. As Korf and Raeymaekers (2013) put it: "border zones are not just reflective of power relations at the 'center', but they are also *constitutive* of them" (p. 5).

Related to the evolving field of border studies was also an increasing historical research interest in the 'margins' of classic area studies (such as Southeast Asia Studies or South Asia Studies), as proposed by Van Schendel (2002, 2005). He coined the term *Zomia*, describing the transnational upland areas of mainland Southeast Asia, Southwest China and the Himalaya region (including the uplands of Myanmar). These areas were usually ignored by classic area studies and their constructions of 'regions' that focused on the developments in the power centers (Giersch, 2010). James C. Scott took this proposal a step further in his

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[18] Mae Sot is a Thai border town near the large refugee camps such as the Mae La camp which still sheltered over 30,000 refuges as of December 2017. Along the whole border to Thailand, about 100,000 persons were still officially registered as refugees (The Border Consortium, 2018, p. 6). In the last year, it has become a boom town with "border capitalism" benefitting from cheap (illegalized) labor (Campbell, 2018).

[19] The *Asian Borderlands Research Network* was established in 2008.

[20] A new volume on Asian borderlands also includes several contributions on Myanmar (Horstmann, Saxer & Rippa, 2018).

cutting-edge book "The Art of Not Being Governed" (2009). In this book – which also became a major inspiration for the present study – he developed an 'anarchist' political history of one of the largest 'non-state spaces', as he defined Zomia. A space "whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states" (p. ix). According to Scott, the uplands of Zomia constitute a space of refuge for people fleeing from the coercive state in the lowlands (from war and taxes), into ecological niches in the isolated uplands. Through cultural and political adaptations, they actively resist the states incorporation. What appears to be signs of backwardness are in fact conscious choices of resistance. However, other historians of the region such as Mandy Sadan (2010), criticized Scott for his 'over-generalization', 'geophysical obsession' and disregard for complex local histories. She presented herself an extensive historical account of Kachin transnationalism and the genesis of political ideology, which connects the borderlands of today's India, Myanmar and China without trying to provide a 'grand history' of the region. As a result, she sets a new standard for contemporary studies of histories "beyond the state", paying attention to concrete local historical experiences interconnected with global developments (Sadan, 2013).

With the general elections of 2010 and the extensive media coverage on the so called "Burmese Spring" (2013), international attention towards Myanmar increased rapidly. In addition to the arrival of numerous journalists, international development organizations, donors and entrepreneurs, academic interest reached new heights, reflected in the rapid increase of academic publications on Myanmar (Selth, 2018).[21] Yet while much of the research focused on the countries' politics and economy on a rather general level, relatively little research was dedicated to the developments in the border areas. Nevertheless, important contributions on the political economy of the border regions came from 'activist scholars' and international think-tanks, some of whom were already engaged in the country for many years (cf. Buchanan, Kramer, & Woods, 2013; Kramer & Woods, 2012; Mark, 2017; Woods, 2011). A relatively recent and promising development has been the increasing research conducted by a generation of young scholar's native to Myanmar, who often studied abroad on foreign scholarships. While local universities in Myanmar still lacked the capacity or opportunity to conduct empirical research, Burmese students studied abroad and conducted their own empirical research in the border areas (cf. Khun Moe Htun, 2018; L Gum Ja Htung, 2018; Myint Myint Kyu, 2018; Rual Lian Thang, 2012; Tantikanangkul & Pritchard, 2016;

[21] "Burma has never been a popular subject for research" (Selth, 2010, p. 402). Indeed, the renewed academic interest remained modest, at least among European research institutions.

Zaw Aung & Middleton, 2016). In particular, Thailand's Chiang Mai University published a remarkable series of empirical studies under the title "Understanding Myanmar's development". Some of these pioneer studies also take up issues of development and (cultural) change in Chin State (cf. Cin Khan En Do Pau, 2016; Kyin Lam Mang, 2017; Salai Myo Chit, 2016). Yet this is just the beginning; there remains a big gap in scholarship regarding Myanmar's periphery areas, in particular, those areas not accessible to researchers until recently.

A frontier-approach

This study approaches the center-periphery relation and the processes of incorporation (or exclusion) in Myanmar through the concept of the *frontier* as a key conceptual framework. The frontier concept is part of the broader transdisciplinary field of border studies. Yet the frontier differs from a classic border studies approach in many respects. First, the frontier is not a line but territorial and characterized by a "diffuse zone of transition from one set of social, political and economic geography to a different set of geography" (Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013, p.12). Second, the dynamic of frontiers and borderlands are different, as is their orientation: The borderland dynamic is defined by "the spatialities and flows of circulation *across* borders" and therefore include a transnational border perspective. The frontier dynamic on the other hand is more 'inward looking' (or outward from the perspective of the center) shaped by the difference "between the center and periphery" and focuses less on transnational flows of goods and people (Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013, p.12). Since its origins in US colonial history (Turner, 1893), the frontier has been freed from the 'stain' of its colonial past and revised and adapted in recent years to post-colonial contexts.[22] The frontier concept is still well suited to tracing changing conditions at the "fuzzy edges" of states under capitalist conditions (Geiger, 2009, p. 195).

Contemporary social scientific literature defines frontiers as remote spaces (physical as well as imagined), close to state borders, rich in natural resources and sparsely populated, with limited administrative control by the state (cf. Cottyn, 2017; Barney, 2009; Geiger, 2009; Hall, 2002, 2012, 2013; Kelly & Peluso, 2015; Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013; Peluso & Lund, 2012; Tsing, 2003). Yet, despite usually being located at the periphery of states, frontiers are not the end, but the *beginning* of the state where the process of *incorporation* is unfolding.

[22] Geiger has called this aptly "Reclaiming the 'F' word", indicating the historic negative connotation of the term 'frontier' (Geiger, 2009, p. 20).

In other words, "frontiers are where the action is" (Hall, 2012, p. 51). Focusing on the processes of incorporation, Peluso and Lund (2012) understand frontiers as sites "where authorities, sovereignties, and hegemonies of the recent past have been or are currently being challenged by new enclosures, territorializations and property regimes" (p. 669). Among the most common processes at the frontier is the formalization, privatization and commodification of land and resources, previously used under customary rules in the absence of state institutions (Cottyn, 2017). Consequently, Geiger (2009) regards frontiers as "theatres of accumulation" and "arenas of dispossession" (p. 77).

While the frontier approach may be accused of being somewhat 'state centric' it also puts an emphasis on the perspective and agency of the 'periphery' itself, at least in its updated version. It acknowledges that *both sides* in the process of a dialectic relationship influence and shape each other's historical trajectories of change, thus avoiding the one-sided perspective of earlier versions (Hall, 2012). Since the frontier can be understood as a *space, process*, as well as *historical experience* (Cottyn, 2017), it offers a broad framework for an analysis of changing peripheral regions. It integrates different scales into its analysis, from the local, regional, to the global, which all intersect at the frontier in certain ways. In other words, in order to understand the local developments in the periphery, a wider regional and global perspective is necessary (as also argued by Sadan, 2013).[23] A *frontier* approach facilitates a multi-scalar understanding, in particular, in combination with a world-systems perspective as proposed by Cottyn (2017). While not explicitly part of the theoretical core of world-systems theory, frontiers can nonetheless be understood as *zones of incorporation* into the world system, which Wallerstein (1989) referred to as "external arenas" (as cited in Hall, 2012, p. 47).

Incorporation into the national state and world-system does not go uncontested in most cases. Unlike Turner (1893), who just ignored indigenous populations and considered the frontier as an empty space of 'wilderness' to be conquered by European settlers, contemporary (post-colonial) frontier theory highlights the important role of the periphery and *peripheral agency* (Cottyn, 2017). It emphasizes the fact that "incorporation is always an interactive process" that shapes the center-periphery dynamic in both ways (Hall, 2012, p. 48). The process of incorporation by a state trying to impose its own economic, administrative and cultural logic on peripheral regions provokes resistance or at least attempts to *negotiate* the terms of

[23] Sadan (2013) argues for a "more integrated understanding of the role of this borderworld in regional and global histories" (p. 20).

incorporation by those absorbed. Resistance in the frontier is often targeted against concrete acts of dispossession (such as land, resources or political power) or against attempts of cultural assimilation by the state. It is frequently articulated in terms of ethnic group identities (in particular ethnic nationalism), which are themselves a legacy of colonial rule in many peripheral areas of the Global South. This has been studied in the case of Chin State by Lian Sakhong (2003), who examined the important role of colonialism and in particular Baptist missionaries in the making of a "Chin ethnic identity". He argued that the formation of 'Chin identity' was the result of the fundamental transformation caused "by powerful outside forces" during the colonial period (p. xv). The colonial powers as a 'common enemy' helped to forge wider political coalitions amongst scattered uphill populations, which hitherto had been in regular conflict with each other. Furthermore, the introduction of Christianity provided a common ideological basis for the conversion of 'clan' and 'tribal' identities to a wider 'Chin national identity'.[24] For the case of the Kachin in the borderlands of northern Myanmar, Sadan (2013) argued, in contrast, that the "colonial experience did not produce a unifying identity through the experience of militarism or conversion" (p. 462). Alternatively, she offers a re-reading of the complex history and colonial experience that has shaped Kachin ethnicity over time and links it to wider regional and global transformations going well beyond colonial Burma. According to Sadan (2013), at the end of the colonial period, Kachin identity was still very much in flux and is still re-negotiated, according to the changing socio-economic and political situation.

What becomes clear from these accounts is that ethnic identities in the periphery are "politically crafted and designed to position certain group vis-à-vis the state or other groups in competition for power and resources" (Scott, 2009, p. 244). According to Scott, who describes this process as "ethnogenesis" (see also Hall, 2002), the creation of tribes and ethnicities are a "mode of claim-making by stateless people who interact with states" (p. 263). This process is necessarily relational because each group asserts a boundary vis-a-vis other groups falling outside this boundary. Nonetheless, ethnic identities are not designed randomly "in circumstances of their own choosing" (p. 244), but out of a repertoire of readily available and politically salient ideologies, also influenced by wider regional and global political developments. In the past decades, group resistance (including armed insurgency) in Burma/Myanmar has been mainly mobilized based on ethno-nationalism (and communist discourses prior to 1989) (Smith, 1991). For the last few years, there has been a rise of

[24] Though this perspective has been challenged by 'Zomi Historian' Son-Doerschel (2013).

'*indigenism*' or '*indigeneity*' as indicated at the beginning of this introduction. Ethnic struggles are increasingly re-framed in terms of indigenous claims. From an instrumentalist perspective, indigeneity serves a as a political resource for peripheral groups to re-position themselves in their struggle vis-à-vis the state. It is closely linked to ethnicity yet differs in several aspects, in particular, regarding its focus on territory and (ancestral) land (cf. Baird, 2013; Becker, 2015; Li, 2000, 2010). Against the backdrop of this study, indigeneity appears as what I call *frontier identity*. It is deeply intertwined with state building processes, the incorporation of frontier areas into global capitalism, and is taken up as strategic and discursive resource for resistance and negotiation. It emerges in conjuncture with increasing economic integration, gradual political liberalization and increasing space for civil society, transnational networks and international support. It gets its dynamic from the contestation for access over land and resources typically for frontiers as "arenas of dispossession" (Geiger, 2009, p. 77). The present study extends beyond an analysis of the specific situation in Chin State and in Myanmar. As will be argued, the processes which can be captured by the concept of frontier identity play an important role also in other areas and regions and increasingly so.

Methodology

A Critical Realist (CR) perspective informs the methodological approach of this thesis. CR differs from a pure constructivist or empiricist perspective and can be said to provide a 'third way' in the contested debate around an appropriate theory of science (Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). A CR perspective proposes a stratified conception of reality where different levels (including the physical, biological and social etc.) are related and emerge from each other but cannot be reduced to one another. According to CR, "society consists of sets of social relations through which social practices are carried out" (Jones, 2003, p. 227). Rather than only deconstructing concepts of reality, CR is interested in identifying inherent *mechanisms*, *patterns* and *tendencies* that can possibly explain concrete social events or improve our understanding of it. From a CR perspective, it is necessary to link *structure* and *agency* to one another and examine its interrelation in order to understand how social phenomena emerge and are related. For this particular research, this means that also the 'extra discursive realities' in particular structural elements that shape the actions and discourses of peripheral agents are important. This includes changing access to land and resources and modes of production in the frontier because of increasing incorporation of the periphery into the state and capitalist world-system.

For this study, an *intensive* research design was chosen, which focuses on the "discovery of generative mechanisms" (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 163) or "causal explanations" (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014, p. 25). A common approach used in intensive studies, is the *case study*. It allows to better identify specific mechanisms in a context of reduced complexity. In my empirical research, I consider Chin State, a sub-national administrative entity located on the western border of Myanmar as the study 'case'. Nevertheless, a 'case' does not need to be defined in narrow terms but can also be understood more broadly (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014). Rather than being a single case, the case study design in this study is actually divided into multiple smaller cases that are presented in the following chapters as evidence. The 'case' of Chin State also is not bound to the administrative unit itself. It includes individuals, groups and organizations related to the region who are not necessarily located *in* the region itself. The case is not defined by spatial relations alone but by 'actual' relations (for instance networks or organizational structures). This necessitated a *multi-sited* empirical research covering different geographic locations as well as political and social scales (Barnard & Spencer, 2010, p. 485). Research sites therefore included towns and villages in Chin State (Falam, Hakha, Thantlang), as well the town of Kalay and the economic center of Yangon.

For my empirical research, I decided to apply a mix of qualitative methods, including ethnographic observation and different forms of open and semi-structured interviews. However, the structural conditions of working in an authoritarian, post-conflict setting also put some limitations to the selection of methods. In total, over 60 interviews with a wide range of actors were conducted, including farmers, activists, politicians, officials, and many more, often with the help of local translators. The interviews were complemented by participant observation at several conferences and different village visits. However, since access to the field was restricted to short periods and to a few selected locations, participant observation had its limits. Therefore, I also included social media and audiovisual data (Facebook, YouTube) of Chin civil society groups and media in the analysis. Since Myanmar opened its gates for global telecommunication corporations following 2012 the use of social media has dramatically surged and is an important tool of communicating among civil society.[25] Other important sources were grey literature, specifically, research reports by local and international NGOs as well as local media reports. This was also suitable for the chosen

[25] As became evident in the case of the Rakhine Crisis, social media also played a very negative role (Mozur, 2018).

case study design, which "relies on multiple sources with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion" (Yin, 2003, p. 14).

Structure of the study

This study consists of seven chapters in total. Following this introduction (chapter 1), the theoretical framework of the frontier theory as the main theoretical underpinning of this study will be summarized in chapter 2. While it is not possible to exhaustively discuss the numerous frontier theories developed over the past one hundred years, it will trace the transition of the frontier from a contested colonial to a post-colonial concept. The chapter will also elaborate on the relation of frontier theory to the broader discipline of border studies as well as its links to world-systems theory. At the focus of the chapter are the processes of 'frontier making', including land enclosures and ethnogenesis as a way to 'negotiate' incorporation. Chapter 3 will provide a more detailed account of the methodological approach of the empirical case study, which was inspired by a Critical Realist (CR) research paradigm. Besides the methods of data collection and analysis, it also addresses questions of research ethics and positionality when conducting research in an authoritarian post-conflict setting as well as resulting limitations.

The three core chapters of this study address the three main dimensions of frontiers, namely, *time*, *space*, and *agency* (Cottyn, 2017). Chapter 4 provides a discussion of the *time* dimension, which is the historical background and concrete historical processes of 'peripheralization' in the case study area of Chin State. It traces several phases of frontier expansion following the pre-colonial frontier based on secondary literature. Of particular importance are the implications of the colonial frontier-making processes and the post-colonial frontier expansion. Following a phase of stagnation during times of political isolation under the military regime, since 1988, a new round of frontier making has been initiated. The *spatial* dimension of incorporation of the frontier in this latest phase is discussed in the empirical chapter 5. It argues that Chin State is confronted with a gradual transformation of its landscapes dominated by shifting cultivation into landscapes of capital accumulation. Customary forms of land use are changing into private and formalized land tenure regimes. At the core of the chapter are empirical examples of modes of enclosures and dispossession ranging from land grabs (due to militarization) to urban expansion and conservation. It also includes a brief discussion of the *Gullu Mual* (*Mwetaung*) mining case as introduced at the beginning. Chapter 6, the second main empirical chapter, investigates

the dimension of identity formation or ethnogenesis at the frontier: the *agency* of frontier populations in shaping and negotiating the terms of incorporation and peripheralization. Of particular interest are discourses of *indigeneity* as a frontier identity and the formation of indigenous coalitions at the local, regional and national level. This chapter seeks to answer the question why indigeneity became a relevant discourse and how it is linked to contestations over land and resources at the Chin frontier. It shows not only how customary rights are defended by self-declared indigenous actors, but also challenged by feminist indigenous groups, amongst others. Chapter 7, the last chapter, provides a summary and analysis of the empirical findings as well as the limitations of this study. It also offers suggestions for a future research agenda on Myanmar's frontiers.

2. THE BEGINNING OF STATES: FRONTIERS AS 'ZONES OF INCORPORATION'

"Frontiers are where incorporation takes place"

(Hall, 2012, p. 51)

2.1. Introduction

This thesis adopts a *frontier perspective* on the periphery of Myanmar/Burma in order to trace the changing center-periphery relations and the processes of uneven integration (or exclusion). Frontier theory can be largely located within the interdisciplinary field of border studies or borderland studies. Border studies as an academic area of interest experienced a renaissance in social sciences in recent decades and continues to stay relevant in times of increasing nationalist politics and securitization of national borders. While the past few decades have seen the research focus move from frontiers to borders, recently a shift back from to borders to frontiers can be observed. Given the continuing expansion of the extractivist mode of capitalist production within the world system and the increasing commodification of land and nature in post-colonial states – in particular as a result of the crisis of late capitalism since 2008 – the view that the 'frontier' is still very much 'alive' has gained some currency. Different from the border perspective, which generally focuses on trans- or cross-border processes (migration, trade) or the 'everyday experiences' of the borderlands as such, the frontier perspective is mainly interested in the center-periphery relations as already noted. Originating from US-American historical studies, the frontier as a concept was subject to major revisions and re-interpretations in recent years to make it suitable for post-colonial settings. However, rather than being a unified theory it consists of a 'bundle' of 'frontier theories' encompassing a variety of perspectives that often complement each other. The frontier can be conceived, for instance, as a physical space, imaginary or symbolic space, as well as a historical process and experience (Cottyn, 2017). While there is not one generally accepted standard definition, there are however some common rudimentary characteristics of a frontier, such as a particular spatial relation to the center, a (perceived) remoteness usually at the 'edge' of states, an abundance of natural resources, a (perceived) emptiness (sparsely populated) and a lack of state control or hybrid political authority. Despite usually being located at the periphery of states (though not necessarily), frontiers are not the end, but the 'beginning of the state' where the process of

incorporation is unfolding. The openness of the frontier concept to incorporate different social, economic and cultural phenomena is its strength and weakness at the same time. There is a certain danger of overstretching the concept while losing its analytical value. Often it is not very clear where and when the frontier 'begins' and where and when it 'ends'.[26] Nevertheless, despite the latent fuzziness of the concept, it is argued here that the frontier concept can still be usefully applied as a heuristic device in the context of post-colonial of Myanmar in order to analyze diverse processes of incorporation and resistance as well as complex forms of hybrid authority and cultural change. In particular, when it comes to changing land relations and processes of territorialization or "nationalizing spaces" (Geiger, 2009) the frontier concept can function as a powerful analytical tool in order to understand process of change at the periphery on multiple scales.

This chapter will briefly introduce contemporary border studies and related concepts as a necessary theoretical background for the discussion of the empirical case study in the coming chapters. First, it will discuss the frontier concept in relation to borders and borderlands to clarify commonalities as well as distinctions. This will include a discussion of the relevance of Asian borders to the academic debate in general. Second, it will focus on the particular frontier perspective and trace the historical genesis and transition of the frontier from a contested colonial concept to a tool of critical inquiry in post-colonial contexts. Selected definitions of frontiers will be presented as well as an approach to the study of frontiers recently presented by Cottyn (2017), which will be adopted in this thesis to structure the empirical analysis in the following chapters (4, 5 and 6). However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an in-depth account of the vast literature on frontier theory spanning over a century.[27] Third, the relation of the frontier approach to a world-systems perspective will be clarified in order to embed the discussion of frontiers within the larger, important debate on unequal global development. The fourth section will focus on the particular processes of incorporation, examining the land frontier with special reference to the production of state space and related processes of enclosure and dispossession. This section will also draw on materialist state theory and Marxist theory in order to link the production of the frontier with global processes of capital accumulation. *Finally*, incorporation will be

[26] Theoretically, at some point the frontier ceases to exist. According to Lamar & Thompson (1981) "The frontier 'opens' in a given zone when the first representatives of the intrusive society arrive; it 'closes' when a single political authority has established hegemony over the zone" (p. 7).

[27] Geiger (2009) in his PhD thesis offers a more complete overview of the academic debate about frontiers over the past decades.

discussed as a process of negotiation in which people(s) in the frontier have a certain degree of agency in shaping center-periphery relations. Thereby resistance to and negotiation of incorporation often reshapes the 'ethnic landscapes' and activates processes of ethnogenesis. A particular kind of identity to be discussed in this context is the *indigenous* identity, which is particularly relevant for the present study.

2.2. Borders, Borderlands and Frontiers

Research on international state borders and borderlands has been on the rise in the last few decades and today represents an established academic field of continuing relevance (Kolossov & Scott, 2013; Newman, 2006). While borders previously attracted little interest among academics – with the exception political geographers – at the beginning of the 1990s and the end of the Cold War other disciplines, such as anthropology, history, sociology and others start directed their attention towards state borders (Wilson & Donnan, 2012). Influential works were presented for instance by Martínez (1994), Wilson and Donnan (1998, 2012), Donnan and Wilson (1994, 1999), Baud and Schendel (1997), Rösler and Wendl (1999), followed by an expanding literature on border studies (c.f Berg & Houtum, 2003; Gainsborough, 2008; Houtum, Kramsch, & Zierhofer, 2005; Horstmann 2006; Horstman & Wadley, 2006; Horstmann, Saxer, & Rippa, 2018; Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013; Pavlakovich-Kochi, Morehouse, & Wastl-Walter, 2004; Schendel & Abraham, 2005; Wastl-Walter, 2011; Walker, 1999). Specialized border conferences and journals dedicated to border studies covering different regions emerged as well as institutional structures (Kolossov & Scott, 2013, p. 2). This was ironically at a time when the effects of globalization and free trade seemed to increasingly render national borders obsolete and weaken the sovereignty of nation states in favor of a growing influence of the transnational political scale. This perspective in western European academia was in particular the result of the fall of the iron curtain and the EU integration process in the early 1990s (with the creation of a common Schengen area without border control) and other political developments. Yet modern border studies questioned the narrative of a 'borderless world' and highlighted the continuing or even increasing relevance of the nation state and its borders (Newman, 2006; Wilson & Donnan, 2012). According to Saxer, Rippa & Horstmann (2018), "the imaginary of unimpeded global flows for the benefit of human-kind may have been little more than a delusion of a moment of hubris" (p. 2). The recent global tide of nationalist politics in which the securitization of national borders plays a particularly important role in the agenda of many right-wing populists (from Trump's 'wall project' at the US-Mexico border and the

new border fences in Hungary and Austria) dramatically confirmed this assessment (Saxer, Rippa & Horstmann, 2018, pp. 1-2). Borders continue to influence people's lives, arguably more than ever before and therefore remain highly relevant as objects of inquiry for social scientists. Borders are ambivalent and have a filtering, classifying and ordering function. They function as a kind 'membrane', filtering desired from undesired goods and migrants whereby often "foreign labour is desired, but the persons in whom it is embodied are not desired" (Kearney, 1998, p. 125). On the one hand, flexible borders are regarded as necessary to fuel economic growth, while on the other hand, tight borders are seen as necessary to ensure 'national security' (Kolossov & Scott, 2013 p. 11).

However, it is not only the border per se which are of interest. Scholars of state borders argue that "borders help us to understand . . . major forces of change that seem to be sweeping the globe, forces often included as aspects of globalization, but which may also be seen as neoliberalism, neo-imperialism, late modern capitalism and supranationalism" (Wilson & Donnan, 2012, p.1). Border studies thus provide an apposite perspective to understand a variety of issues, for instance, new political movements, forms of mobility, identity formations, forms of citizenship, processes of capital accumulation and many more. These things may be relevant not only at the borders of states but also at the political centers. Yet the border perspective allows us to see them clearer as though through a magnifying glass. According to Donnan and Wilson, "much can be learnt about the centres of power by focusing on their peripheries" (1999, p. xiii). It is, in particular, the "dialectic relations between border areas and their states" which make them such a relevant object of research for social sciences (Wilson & Donnan, 1998, p. 3). For instance, the "great fiction" of the nation state – often based on ethnic and cultural homogeneity – produced at the political center, becomes nowhere clearer than at the border where it is often subverted through the daily lives of the borderlanders (Donnan & Wilson, 1999, p. 4; Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013, p. 6). Borders shape identities (such as ethnic, local, class identities and others) and borderlanders often construct their own ambiguous, or hybrid identities. In particular, ethnicity is a "fundamental force found at all borders, and it remains the bedrock of many political, economic and social activities" (Donnan &Wilson, 1999, pp. 5-6). The production of ethnic identities is itself a process involving the reproduction of (symbolic and cultural) boundaries, which may or may not coincide with political boundaries. In many post-colonial contexts, boundary lines drawn by colonial governments have little influence on ethnic identities of borderlanders. Yet, particularistic ethnic identities at the border, often providing a platform for ethnic nationalism, are frequently seen by the state as a threat and provoke

violence and military means to regulate the contested border zones (Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013). However, the border is also a zone where the influence of the state, its monopoly of violence and political authority is often limited and contested. Illicit and illegal flows of goods and people across borders are common, yet not considered as illicit for locals who often have a different perspective on the borderline (Schendel & Abraham, 2005).

Classic (political geographic) border studies were mostly concerned with classifying physical borders according to their history, function and morphology, regarding borders as 'natural' lines separating 'natural' bounded entities (Wastl-Walter, 2009, p. 332). Research focused usually on political aspects, disputed areas and boundaries as well as changes of borders and was generally descriptive and less interested in social and political processes or in developing a general border theory. Since the 1970s, anthropologists began to increasingly study borders and how "cultural landscapes" transcend political boundaries with the border of Italian Tyrol being an exemplary case study (Wilson & Donnan, 2012, pp. 6-7). Only since the 1970s have borders been increasingly conceptualized as "artificial social and political constructs". The early period of border anthropology studied the impact of borders on local cultures, movements across borders, and the meaning of the border in the daily life of borderlanders with a view on the borders 'from below'. The US-Mexico border – now again an issue in global news – where most of the research was conducted, became the 'mother of border studies' (ibid.). With the 'boom' of borders studies since the 1990s, historians increasingly started to look at borderlands and their agency. While in the past, the focus was mainly on how "states dealt with their borders" historians started to ask how "how borderlands have dealt with their states" (Wilson & Donnan, 2012, p. 10). In this context, important contributions came from research on Asian borderlands (uplands) ant their relationship with the (lowland) central states (see below).

Contemporary border studies also investigate borders as processes and symbolic spaces. They are interested in the social reproduction of boundaries and borders, as well as (bordering) practices. According to this perspective, borders are neither natural nor neutral but always a social, cultural, and political construct (Paasi, 2005). For Houtum, Kramsch and Zierhofer (2005, p. 3) "the *b/order* is an active verb", emphasizing the everyday practices which constitute borders and borderlands as lived spaces. Research – for instance, on local identity and historical memories of borders – increasingly moved away from state borders as the classic case to include other regional, territorial, political and cultural borders and boundaries.

As the diverse perspectives and approaches suggest, contemporary border studies is not a new discipline with a unified theory. Rather, it is an interdisciplinary (or "post-disciplinary") field with many sub-fields and different conceptual approaches and theories, drawing from a diverse range of disciplines (Wilson & Donnan, 2012, p. 20; Kolossov & Scott, 2013, p. 1). Yet it shares some basic ideas and concepts of what constitutes a border. Donnan and Wilson, (1998) for example, identify three main elements of state borders:

> the legal *borderline* which simultaneously separates and joins states; the *physical structures* of the state which exist to demarcate and protect the borderline, composed of people and institutions which often penetrate deeply into the territory of the state; and *frontiers,* territorial zones of varying width which stretch across and away from borders, within which people negotiate a variety of behaviours and meanings associated with their membership in nations and states. (Donnan & Wilson, 1998, p. 9, emphasis added)

The *borderline* or the *boundary* refers to an imaginary line, a political abstraction that is becoming manifest in many ways along the border. Physical structures such as walls, fences, boundary stones or border crossings can manifest this borderline, but in some cases these may not exist at all. While borders and frontiers are often used synonymously to describe peripheral regions, the frontier conceptually differs from the 'border' or 'boundary'. The frontier does not represent a borderline but is territorial in nature and characterized by a "diffuse zone of transition from one set of social, political and economic geography to a different set of geography" (Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013, p.12). Frontiers are located at the "at the fuzzy edges of state authority", and are not clearly demarcated (Geiger, 2009, p. 195). While they are often located in peripheral border areas, frontiers do not need to only be in border areas (Korf, Hagman, & Doevenspeck, 2013). In addition to the conceptual differences of borders and frontiers, the dynamic of frontiers and borderlands are different, as is their orientation: The borderland dynamic is defined by "the spatialities of flows and circulation across borders" and therefore include a transnational border perspective (see also Figure 1) (Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013, p.12). The frontier dynamic, on the other hand, is more 'inward looking' (or outward from the perspective of the center) shaped by the "difference between the center and periphery" and focuses less on transnational flows of goods and people (ibid.). Thus, taking a *frontier perspective* means following a particular interest that will differ from a classic border perspective. Besides the frontier, which will be

discussed in more detail below, another concept which has been widely used in border studies has been the concept of the *borderland.* It has been defined as the region cut through by the boundary line in which people on both sides have been affected by the border and are connected through legal and illicit relationships (Wilson & Donnan, 2012, p. 9). The borderland is often characterized as an area of transgression and (illicit) cross-border flows with border towns as nodes connecting the local economy with the global market (Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013, p. 9). Different kinds of borderlands have been described, according to the interaction between both sides: from one extreme of *alienated borderlands* (where little or no exchange is taking place), to *coexistent borderlands*, *interdependent borderlands*, and *integrated borderlands* as the other extreme (where no barriers exist anymore) (Martinez, 1994 as cited in Wilson & Donnan, 2012, p. 9).

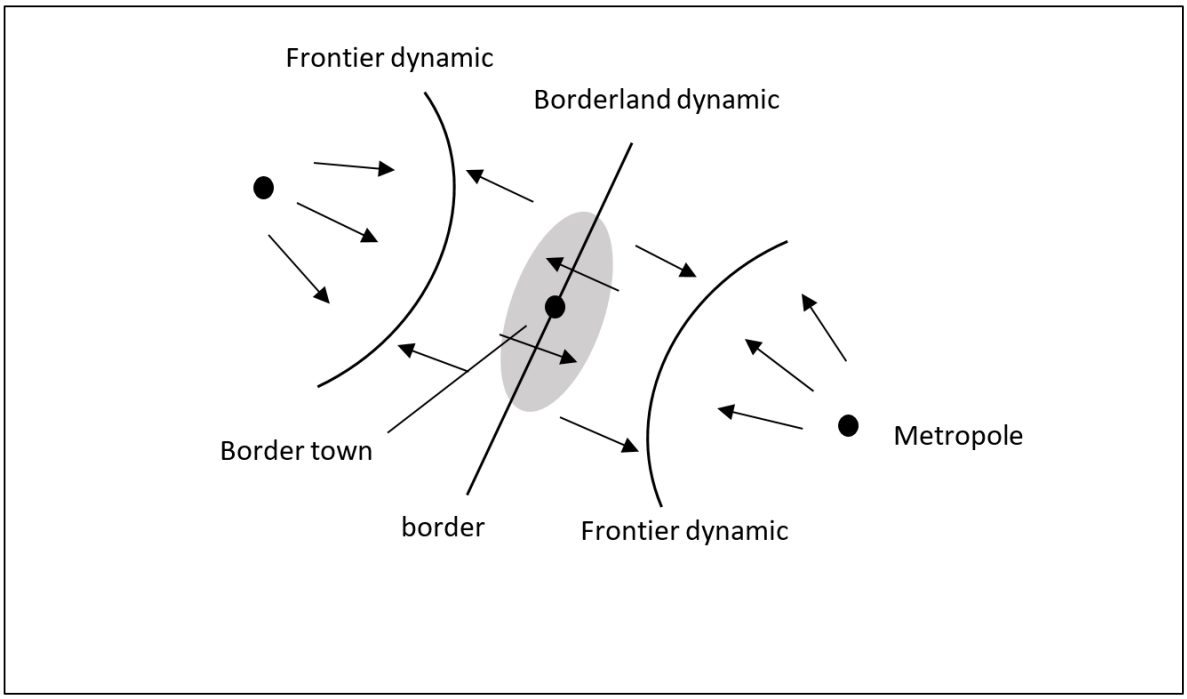

Figure 1: Schematic illustration of spatiality and dynamic of frontiers and borderlands (source: own illustration adopted from Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013, p. 12)

Asian borderlands and frontiers

Asian borderlands "are not fundamentally different from other borderlands around the world" as Saxer, Rippa & Horstmann (2018, p. 8) argue. Yet borderlands in Asia have been a particularly fruitful field of academic inquiry with a lasting impact on many academic

disciplines from historical studies to anthropology and others (Schendel, 2002, p. 654). As in other world regions – in particular in the so-called 'Global South' – state borders in Asia (as fixed lines on a map) are a relatively novel phenomenon and largely the result of colonial administrative practices of the 19th century. This has been famously argued for instance by Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul (1994), who examined the impact of modern mapping technologies on the emergence of the Tai 'geo-body' with clearly demarcated borders and conceptions of Thai nationhood. Pre-colonial states in the region were usually not organized territorially and had no need for fixed borders. They were more concerned with labor power than territory, which was more than abundant in times of low population densities. Most wars were fought over labor power and often large parts of the defeated populations were displaced and settled in the area of the victor where they gradually assimilated into mainstream society. The power of these states or principalities originated from a charismatic ruler, whose charismatic power radiated outward from the political center into the periphery or hinterland, similar to the "light of a bulb with varying degrees of illumination" (Scott, 2009, p. 59). The further away from the political center (usually the ruler's residence), the lower the political authority and influence of the ruler.

This political system of pre-colonial states in Southeast Asia has been conceptualized as the *mandala system* (Wolters, 1982) and was further developed into the model of the "galactic polity" (Tambiah, 1977) or "solar polity" (Lieberman, 2003). Thereby, the influence of small, localized kingdoms or vassal principalities often overlapped. Many areas also "belonged to no-one" such as the mountain ranges between Siam and Burma (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2014, p. 56). Smaller power centers were dependent on bigger ones or payed tribute to several larger power centers as far as Beijing (Seekins, 2006, p. 140). Populations on the margins of these kingdoms and principalities thus often fell under the influence of more than one ruler and manipulated the multiple relationships to their advantage. "'Hard' boundaries within which 100 percent sovereignty prevailed" were avoided (Scott, 2009, p. 59). When the British colonial officers, for instance, approached the Thai king to define the borders of his kingdom, he was initially irritated by this proposal (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2014, p. 56). The mandala system was highly dynamic with dozens of competing power centers evolving and waning within a short period. Some of the mandalas, usually located in fertile plains suitable for intensive wet-rice cultivation, became larger 'overlord states' ("paddy states") such as Angkor, Bagan or Aytthaya and transformed into modern (colonial) states (Bourdier, Boutry, Ivanoff, & Ferrari, 2015).

Path-breaking research on Southeast Asian borderlands, which influenced generations of academics to come, was conducted by Leach (1954/1964, 1960) along the northern Burmese frontier. In his anthropological studies among the 'Shan' and 'Kachin', Leach noted significant differences between the lowlands and the uplands along the border not only regarding the ecological context, but also in terms of social and political organization. This was explained by him mainly by the different influences of the two 'great centers of civilization' (India and China) along Burma's frontier. He saw the "Valley system" as influenced by the "Indian political model" where all authority was individual and temporary (Leach, 1960, p. 66). The "Hill system", on the other hand, was influenced by the "Chinese political model" with power vested in particular lineages or reserved for individuals who "achieved a particular social status (e.g. by passing examinations or by working through a graded series of sacrificial feasts)" (ibid.). However, Leach considered all of Burma "a frontier region continuously subjected to influences from both India and China" (p. 50). In addition, the frontiers between the small principalities ("petty political units") within Burma were not clearly separated by borders but by overlapping zones of interest. Leach's research on the "*Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*" (1954) represented a major contribution to anthropological theory in general with continuing relevance until today, despite many critical debates (Robinne & Sadan, 2007). His aim was to understand the dynamics of political systems, which in many upland societies seemed to 'oscillate' between 'democratic' and 'autocratic' forms (in the case of the Kachin, the '*gumsa-gumlao dynamic'*) which, despite this, could never encompass larger systems (to put it simply).[28] For Leach, the relations between the highland systems and the lowlands were important to understand the emergence of such political and social structures. He also understood ethnicity and ethnic identity in relational terms describing the process "by which Kachins have become Shans and Shans have become Kachins" (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1955, p. 390). Thus, he noted that there are no clear-cut boundaries between ethnic groups but instead, dynamic relations, anticipating later anthropological conceptions of ethnicity such as those

[28] "In the Kachin Hills area, the author points out, we do not find one generally accepted and approved political system, but two inconsistent and contradictory ideal modes of life. One of them, known as *gumlao*, is a republican, equalitarian, and even 'anarchic ' political organization, characterized by the absence of chiefs, by the equal rank of all lineages, by territorial units comprising several villages of the same status, by judicial authority resting with a council of elders, and by the absence of status differences in ritual matters. The other ideal type, known as *gumsa*, is a feudal system modelled on the Shan concept of a hierarchic order and the autocratic rule of a chief. The central point of Leach's thesis is that neither *gumlao* nor *gumsa* societies are ever stable, but that in practice Kachin communities oscillate between the two types. Consequently there are two contradictory value-systems, and a course of action meritorious under one may be regarded as objectionable under the other code" (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1955, p. 390).

by Barth (Antweiler, 2015). Similarly, Lehman (1963) in his studies on the Chin society highlighted the close relationship between the lowland societies and upland groups whom he regarded as 'sub nuclear groups' of the lowland society (Keyes, 1995).

Recent interest in Asian borderlands was sparked again – amongst others – by historians such as Van Schendel (2002; Schendel & Abraham, 2005), who directed attention to the margins of classic area studies. He argued that area studies (such as Southeast Asian Studies or South Asian Studies) reproduced "geographies of ignorance" that were mainly concerned with the perspective of the 'heartland' (Schendel, 2002). This construction of 'regions' usually ignored the Southeast Asian highlands as periphery (Giersch, 2010).[29] Thus, he coined the term *Zomia* ("an area of no concern") for the transnational upland areas of mainland Southeast Asia, Southwest China and the Himalaya region (including the uplands of today's Myanmar) (Schendel, 2002, p. 653). The term "Zo-mi" (or "Zo") is used for "highlander" in a number of languages in the border areas of Myanmar, India and Bangladesh also in the form of "*Mizo*". "*Zo* is a relational term meaning 'remote' and hence carries the connotation of living in the hills; *Mi* is translated as people 'people'" (Scott, 2009, pp. 15-16).[30]

James C. Scott adopted the concept of Zomia in his groundbreaking book "The Art of Not Being Governed" (2009), in which he developed an 'anarchist' political history of Zomia. This history was generally ignored in official accounts written by historians in the political centers who were only interested in the pacification of the periphery. Scott, therefore, wrote a political history from the perspective of the frontier describing how people in the periphery dealt with the emerging states in their regions. He defines Zomia as one of the largest 'non-state spaces', "whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states" (p. ix). According to Scott (2009), the upland areas of Zomia constitute a space of refuge for people escaping from the coercive state in the lowlands (from war and taxes) into an ecological niche in the isolated uplands. Through cultural and political adaptations, they actively resisted the states incorporation. For Scott, it was a self-conscious strategy to evade the state. He argues that, "far from being 'left behind' by the progress of civilization in the valleys

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[29] "The outer reaches of `areas' are less well known because most research has been concentrated on problematiques dealing with what are perceived to be heartlands and centres of power and change" (Van Schendel, 2002, p. 661).

[30] However, Zomi historian Vumson (1986) rejected the translation of Zomi as 'highlander': "There are intellectuals who translate Zo as "Highlanders". They automatically conclude that the people call themselves 'Zo' or 'Highlanders' because they live in the highlands. This is simply absurd because they called themselves "Zo" when they lived in the plains of the Chindwin Valley (pp. 5-6).

[the people in the hills] have, over long periods of time, chosen to place themselves out of the reach of the state" (Scott, 2009, p. 22). Accordingly, the agricultural practice of shifting cultivation, the absence of written scripts and the diversity of languages are interpreted as expressions of a conscious choice of 'hill peoples' to adapt to the remote ecological niche of the uplands in order "to keep the state at arm's length" (Scott, 2009, p. 62). However, historians of the region such as Mandy Sadan (2010) criticized Scott for his 'over-generalization', 'geophysical obsession' and disregard for complex local histories. She herself presented an extensive historical account on transnational Kachin history and the genesis of political ideology connecting the borderlands of today's India, Myanmar and China, without trying to provide a 'grand history' of the region. In her work, she sets a new standard for contemporary studies of border histories "beyond the state" paying attention to concrete local historical experiences and their connections to global developments (Sadan, 2013).

2.3. The Frontier Perspective

As discussed earlier, the study of frontiers can be regarded as a sub-field of border studies. Nonetheless, the frontier and the border are rather different concepts and take different perspectives on the periphery or center-periphery relationships. The *frontier* as a scientific concept has been used already long before Leach's influential discussion of the *Frontiers of Burma* (1960) in which he describes the "frontier as a border zone through which cultures interpenetrate in a dynamic manner" (p. 50). Whenever states and empires emerged over the course of history, they gave birth to a 'frontier' representing the 'other side' beyond their sphere of influence. According to Kristof (1959), etymologically, the meaning of the word 'frontier' is "that which is 'in front'" (p. 269).[31] He elaborates further: "Given the theory that there can (or should) be only one state – a universal state – the frontier meant quite literally 'the front': . . . thus the frontier was not the end ('tail') but rather the beginning ('forehead') of the state" (p. 270).

One of the most influential academic work on frontiers had already presented by Frederick Jackson Turner at the end of the 19th century. His book "*The Significance of the Frontier in American History*" (1893) has been considered as "a landmark in border studies" (Wilson &

[31] "The English word is derived from the Latin *frons* . . . meaning "forehead," that is, "forehead of a man," but figuratively it means the forehead of anything, be it material (e.g., the front of an approaching cold air wave) or spiritual (e.g., the frontiers of a new intellectual or artistic movement) (Kristof, 1959, p. 269).

Donnan, 2012, p. 9). For Turner (1893), the American frontier was something of a meeting place "between savagery and civilization". It was a wilderness full of 'free land', unregulated by the government, which in a continuous westward movement was "developing . . . out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life".[32] According to Turner, "this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character". He argued that the 'frontier experience' and the need to adapt to the conditions of the 'wilderness' had an impact on the identity construction of the colonizers and shaped the 'American character' – not always in the best ways, as Turner admits.[33] Turner's theory became one of the most famous theories in American historiography. For a long time, it was widely accepted, that the 'frontier experience' made the US 'exceptional' and moved them away from the European influence creating its unique traits. Only decades later, historians began to study the historical role of the frontier in many other regional contexts, often critically referring to Turner. Influential works have been put forward, for instance, by Lattimore (1940) on the border zone between China and nomad societies of inner Asia, or by Kopytoff on the African frontier (1989). Comparative historical frontier studies have since abandoned much of Turner's assumptions and his claim of the uniqueness of the American frontier (cf. Miller, 1977; Wyman & Kroeber, 1965).

With the beginning of the post-colonial period, Turner's frontier thesis became increasingly discredited. The concept of the frontier was criticized as glorifying American settler colonialism and as unsuitable altogether. Turner was accused as ethnocentric, if not racist, and narrow in his perspective (focusing only on the impact of the frontier on the white colonizers rather than on the colonized) and idealizing the 'victory' over nature and the original 'indigenous' inhabitants (Geiger, 2009). His ideas were seen as influenced by a "nationalist ethos permeated by social Darwinism and the rise of the United States to the status of a major world power" (Lamar & Thompson, 1981, p. 4). Geiger (2009) agrees that:

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[32] In the early Census of the USA, the frontier was defined in terms of low population density per square mile (Turner, 1893).

[33] As Turner writes: "I have refrained from dwelling on the lawless characteristics of the frontier, because they are sufficiently well known. The gambler and desperado, the regulators of the Carolinas and the vigilantes of California, are types of that line of scum that the waves of advancing civilization bore before them, and of the growth of spontaneous organs of authority where legal authority was absent. . . . The humor, bravery, and rude strength, as well as the vices of the frontier in its worst aspect, have left traces on American character, language, and literature, not soon to be effaced" (Turner, 1893).

> Turner's gaze was clearly the gaze of the white, male Anglo-Saxon, and his tale was a tale of praise for the perseverance of the pioneer who turned wilderness into civilization. The indigenous Other was written out of the picture; in his refusal to address the conflict between conquerors and conquered, and his denial of the fact that the Europeans had slaughtered their way across the continent, Turner's was an apologetic settler discourse. (Geiger, 2009, p. 19)

The post-colonial frontier

In recent years, the frontier concept is experiencing a revival in social sciences as indicated by an increasing number of publications with case studies ranging from Africa to Southeast Asia (c.f. Barbier, 2010; Barney, 2009; Cottyn, 2017; De Koninck, 2000, 2006; Fold & Hirsch, 2009; Geiger, 2009; Hall, 2002, 2012; Hirsch, 2009; Imamura, 2015; Kelly & Peluso, 2015; Korf, Hagmann, & Doevenspeck, 2013; Kyed & Myat The Thitsar, 2018; Laungaramsri, 2012; Peluso & Lund, 2012, Tsing, 2003). Despite the 'dark history' of the frontier concept and its 'abuse' by imperial powers trying to legitimize their expansionism, some scholars, while abandoning Turner's 19th century thinking, did not completely disregard it. They tried to "reclaim the "F" word" (Klein, 1996 as cited in Geiger, 2009, p. 20), revise it and 'turn it on its head'. Rather than using the frontier as an apologetic settler discourse to justify colonial conquest and genocide, scholars such as Geiger (2009) and others engaged in a critical reading of the frontier. They sought to free it "from an exclusive association with the past age of Caucasian colonialism and the pioneer lore of settler nations" (p. 3). Moreover, the frontier concept was developed further "as a frame of analysis for the contests for property and resources and the struggles for cultural dominance which take place at the internal peripheries of developing nations" (ibid.). This revision of the frontier approach also involved a change in perspective. At the heart of the contemporary "Post-Turnerian Frontier Concept" is now the study of inter-ethnic relations (not privileging the perspective of the center or the colonizers), taking into account the power disparities, interactions of conquest and (internal) colonization (Geiger, 2009, p. 20). This perspective also acknowledges the "active historical agency" of frontier populations, not just as victims of (internal) colonialism, but also as shaping the "reciprocal nature of interactions" as will be further explained below (ibid.). In his ambitious comparative empirical study on frontiers in Asia, aimed at reviving the frontier concept from a 'bottom up' perspective, Geiger (2009) tried to distill common characteristics of "contemporary frontiers in the developing world".

For him, empirically, the most common characteristics of current frontiers are (Geiger, 2009, p. 45):

- Low population densities;
- Absence of full-blown civil administration and routine state control;
- Pronounced presence of non-native private actors;
- A tendency for the state and private actors to deny indigenous inhabitants ownership claims to land and natural resources;
- A tendency of the state and private actors to define indigenous inhabitants as standing outside the moral universe by symbolically associating them with "untamed nature";
- A tendency of resource management on the part of the intruding society to be wasteful and destructive;
- A tendency for economic relations between intruders and indigenous inhabitants to be predatory, or at least based on unequal exchange;
- Failure of the state to establish or credibly assert its claim to the monopoly of violence.

In addition, Geiger (2009) differentiates three types of frontiers depending on how the expanding state (colonizer) intends to make use of the frontier. These include (2009, pp. 33-34):

1. *Frontiers of settlement (secondary settlement frontiers):* where colonizers move to the frontier often through agricultural expansion (mainly farmers as migrants).
2. *Frontiers of extraction (resource frontiers)*: where the main reason for incorporation or invasion is not to settle migrant populations, but to extract resources (depending on the commodity: timber frontier, mining frontier, agricultural frontier etc.)
3. *Frontiers of control*: where state agency is challenged by rivalling local authorities such as local armed groups. In such cases, the state often takes a pragmatic approach and confines itself to control major frontier towns, infrastructure and the border trade.

These three different types of frontiers are not mutually exclusive. The essential features of frontiers listed above also do not apply to all frontiers in the same way. However, according to Geiger (2009), if a majority of those characteristics is to be found, one can speak of a 'frontier'. In his discussion on land frontiers Hall (2013), identifies similar characteristics but adds some more dimensions such as (2013, pp. 52-8):

- Location of frontiers usually at 'edges' of states
- Temporary or permanent migration flows
- Frontier land as contested territory; land use management spread among groups and agencies
- Imaginations about frontiers; frontier populations also have their own imagination about the center
- Frontiers as areas of retreat for rebel groups; security threats of frontiers
- Frontiers as transnational spaces

According to Cottyn (2017), the *land frontier* represents the most important frontier in the expansion of global capitalism. In her discussion of land frontiers, she proposes a theoretical framework of the frontier, which entails a three-dimensional approach to analyzing frontiers namely: *time (phases)*, *space (zone)*, and *agency (negotiation)* (p. 520). The *time* dimension refers to the different *phases* of incorporation that is changing with expanding or contracting frontiers. *Space* refers to the production of space in the frontier *zones* and the transformation of spatial settings, in particular changing property relations (formalization and fixation). *Agency* refers to the active role of frontier populations in the shaping and *negotiation* of center-periphery relations. The present study will adopt this framework for its empirical analysis of the contemporary land frontier in Burma/Myanmar in the following chapters. In the following sections, the frontier will be further discussed from a world-systems perspective as suggested by Cottyn (2017) in order to highlight the frontiers' "local-global and internal-external relations beyond isolation or opposition" (p. 517). In addition, it will shed further light on the fundamental processes of incorporation and negotiation within frontiers.

2.4. Frontiers and the World-System

The frontier concept can be usefully combined with a world-systems perspective (Cottyn, 2017), which describes the uneven integration of new areas and peoples into the ever expanding capitalist world-system of unequal exchange over the *longue durée* (Frank, 1998; Wallerstein, 2004).[34] It allows to integrate a micro and macro perspective to analyze the processes of incorporation on the local or regional scale in combination with changes in the world-system at large. While the world-systems theory itself rarely uses the term *frontier*

[34] Cottyn (2017) calls this a "World-Systems Frontier Perspective ".

explicitly, it is nevertheless concerned with the processes of *incorporation,* which are defining features of frontiers (Cottny, 2017; Hall, 2002; 2012). According to Wallerstein (1989):

> …incorporation involves 'hooking' the zone in the orbit of the world-economy in such a way that it can virtually no longer escape, while peripheralization involves a continuing transformation of the ministructures of the area in ways that are sometimes referred to as the deepening of capitalist development. (as cited in Hall, 2012, p. 48)

Wallerstein (1989), distinguishes three phases of incorporation which are however not static: "being in the external arena, being incorporated and being peripheralized" (as cited in Hall, 2012, p. 47). The different "waves of incorporation" follow changes in the world-system and often occur in cycles; they can be reversed, but a complete reversion hardly occurs (Hall, 1986, p. 391). The 'frontier zone' can be considered as the "spatial dimension" of these processes of incorporation within the periphery of the world-system (Cottyn, Vanhaute, & Yang, n.d.).

From a Marxist perspective, it is capitalism's need for continuous accumulation and endless geographical appropriation, which drives its extension to new 'uncommodified' spaces around the globe (Cottyn, 2017, p. 516). In the words of David Harvey "capitalism, we might say, is addicted to geographical expansion much as it is addicted to technological change and endless expansion through economic growth" (Harvey, 2001, p. 24). According to Harvey (1982/2006) the main cause of capitalisms expansionist tendencies "is to be found in its inner contradictions" (p. 192). Among these contradictions, the crisis of over-accumulation, which is defined as the "surplus of capital relative to opportunities to employ that capital", occurs in regular cycles (ibid).[35] Therefore the opening up of ever new 'terrains of accumulation' (including frontiers) are a necessary means in order to keep the cycle of global capital accumulation ongoing and overcome the inner contradiction of capitalism (accumulation crisis). The concept of *spatial-fix* developed by Harvey describes capitalism's drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographic expansion and restructuring (Harvey, 2001). This spatial-fix for over-accumulated capital can take different forms. One form, as mentioned, is the opening up of new regions with cheaply available resources as

[35] Harvey thereby builds on Marxist explanations of imperialism by Luxemburg (1965) and Lenin (1962).

spaces of capital accumulation, and the penetration by capitalist social relations to absorb capital. Consequently, the restructuring of newly incorporated regions and its peoples in capitalist frontiers into a dependent position within the world system "corresponds to a process of peripheralization" (Cottyn, Vanhaute, & Yang, n.d., p. 13). For Harvey the capitalist history of spatial fixes already dates back centuries and "has been going on since at least 1492 if not before" (Harvey, 2001; p. 25). Wallerstein (2004), on the other hand dates the beginning of the modern capitalist world-system to the 16th century.[36] Although it was first limited to Europe and the Americas, it slowly expanded further to encompass the whole globe. Portugal and Spain led the way to establish colonies overseas but could not sustain them in the end. Subsequently, some core nations gained hegemony to dominate the modern world-system.[37] Within this system, a division of labor developed between the *core* nations, the *periphery* and *semi-periphery*, where surplus value was constantly flowing from the periphery to the core through unequal exchange. First the United Provinces (today Netherlands) gained hegemony in the 17th century after devising a new financial system and building a massive ship-fleet, soon dominating world trade. The hegemony of the Dutch was later replaced by the British Empire in the mid-19th century which extended their colonies to all continents. Burma too, came under British control during this time, beginning with the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824 (see chapter 4). Following World War I, the USA were taking over the lead from the British who started a process of decolonization following World War II (with Burma gaining independence in 1948).

Corresponding to changes in the world-economy and boom-and bust-cycles, the world-system pulsates and stagnates, with important consequences for its peripheries. Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has been on the rise as a 'new coming' hegemon within the modern capitalist world-system parallel to the declining US hegemony. For some observers this is rather a return of an 'old hegemon', since up until the late 18th century "China was the leading country in her own East Asian or Confucian cultural and economic sphere" (Zhang, 2017, p. 314). The return of the center of economic power to Asia in the 21st century thus rather represents a return to its original center before the (relatively recent)

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[36] Wallerstein (2004), defines a capitalist system as a system, which „gives priority to the endless accumulation of capital". It does not only depend on markets or the form of money, which is also present in non-capitalist social formations.

[37] According to Wallerstein (2004), hegemonic means that "they were able to establish the rules of the game in the interstate system, to dominate the world-economy (in production, commerce, and finance), to get their way politically with a minimal use of military force (which however they had in goodly strength), and to formulate the cultural language with which one discussed the world" (p. 58).

rise of European powers (Frank, 1998). While some have argued that China has saved global capitalism following the crisis of Fordism in the late 20th century (Harvey, 2005; Neuwirth, 2018), over the past few decades it itself has experienced signs of an over-accumulation crisis. Consequently, China also started to experiment with a *spatial-fix*, as a solution to the problem of over accumulation "by expanding the geographical and spatial dimension of capital accumulation, through incorporating new natural resources, new markets and labour into a capitalist system based on the emerging power's preferred rules of the game" (Zhang, 2017, p. 319). China began to aggressively expand its investments into the 'frontiers' of its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia and beyond. Following its 'going out' strategy at the turn of the millennium, China soon became one of the largest investors in the Southeast Asia Region challenging Japan's position (Romei & Reed, 2018). In 2013, it announced its massive *One Belt One Road Initiative* (OBOR), also known as *Belt-and-Road Initiative* (BRI) (Zhang, 2017). With an investment volume of an estimated USD 800 billion funded by China and supported by the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* (AIIB) and the *New Development Bank* (NDB) the plan involves massive infrastructure development (including harbors, ports, highways, railways, pipelines etc.) (Alon, Zhang, & Lattemann, 2018). It includes multiple transportation corridors over land (via central Asia) to connect China with Europe, as well as maritime trade routes (via South Asia as well as Southeast Asia). Eventually, BRI seeks to include over 60% of the world population, accounting for about a third of the global GDP and trade, potentially overshadowing the US Marshall Plan. The aim of the initiative is to integrate as many countries as possible into the economic and political sphere of China through infrastructure and export of labor and capital. While US imperialism has used free trade agreements and (forced) market liberalization as a means to extend its political influence (Harvey, 2001), China is building connections through infrastructure development. The strategy is to replace the Washington Consensus with the '*Beijing Consensus'* and diminish the strategic US influence in the region. In Beijing, it is seen as an instrument to achieve the 'Chinese dream' of "restoring and legitimizing the reemergence of China as a world power" and of turning China "from being a rule-follower to becoming a rule-settler or norm-shaper" (Xing, 2019, p.7). However, in many countries BRI initiatives and infrastructure projects are increasingly "met with criticism and political opposition, as well as fears of loss of sovereignty" (Hoering, 2018, p. 121). It has been criticized, in particular, for creating a dependency or debt bondage for partner countries which some have called "creditor imperialism" (Chellaney, 2017). While it is not possible here to go further into the details of the consequences of the rise of a China-centered world-system and the

implications for Myanmar's frontier regions, we will come back to this issue, at least briefly, in chapter 5 by looking at the empirical example of Chin State.

2.5. Frontier Making: Processes of Incorporation

It is not the capitalist dynamic alone which is driving the process of incorporation of new frontiers to fuel its endless need for accumulation, as the world-system theory seems to suggest. In addition, "states are a fundamental source of incorporation" (Ferguson and Whitehead, 1992 as cited in Hall, 2012, p. 53). There are no frontiers without states, as mentioned earlier, since the frontier – by definition – describes a zone of transition, of (cultural, social, economic) interaction and negotiation between the periphery and its political center. Historically, frontiers often functioned as "zones of refuge" for people who sought to evade the grip of the state (Scott, 2009, p. 7). Before modern states started to govern territories rather than people, the peripheries located in remote upland areas or dense forests provided 'free land' for 'renegades' at the margins of states to carve out their own 'space of autonomy' or 'non-places' (Poulantzas, 1978/2000, p. 103). The frontier outside the political influence of states also served as the imaginary 'other' (the wild, uncivilized, barbarians etc.) for the identity construction of the center, as antithesis to the frontier (as the center of civilization and culture). In today's discourses, the notion of the 'uncivilized' has sometimes been replaced by representations of the frontier as 'poor and underdeveloped' (Li, 2000). Therefore, in principle, this dichotomy and the pejorative assessment of frontier peoples as 'poor' and their economic practices (shifting cultivation for example) as 'primitive' and 'unproductive', continues in many post-colonial states, such as Myanmar.

While the pre-modern states often limited themselves to reducing the threat of resistance by 'ungoverned' rebel frontiers through occasional warfare or establishing tributary systems, the introduction of the modern state during colonial times and the post-colonial nation-state changed the relationship between the center and its frontiers, with lasting consequences. States (or state elites) increasingly believed in the necessary unity of culture, identity, territory and nation and intended to close its frontiers (Donnan & Wilson, 1999). As Scott (2009), notes:

> Only the modern state, in both its colonial and its independent guises, has had the resources to realize a project of rule that was a mere glint in the

> eye of its precolonial ancestor: namely to bring nonstate spaces and people to heel. (p. 4)

Geiger considers the process of expansion of the nation state into the domains of 'non-state' peoples as "frontier making" (Geiger, 2009, p. 3). Gaining access to land and resources was one of the most crucial factors in states incorporating frontiers in the past as well as present. This is not only for political reasons to gain territorial control over land within the state's official territorial boundaries, but also for economic reasons to mobilize resources for further expansion.

Production of state space and territory

From the perspective of the political center, the frontier was a "land without a master" ("herrenloses land") or a "leftover from a premodern past . . . where territorial and institutional penetration of the modern state has (not yet) been completed and which was waiting for its incorporation" (Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013, p. 10). However, in order to establish its territorial control, the state needs to employ a variety of "spatial strategies", to "secure the reproduction of the state . . . to reconfigure the sociospatial dimensions . . . and to promote specific accumulation strategies, state projects, and hegemonic visions" (Jessop, 2016, p. 139). Several scholars have highlighted the fact that what is 'naturalized' as 'state territory', is actually a political process of *territorialization*.[38] As Lefebvre (1991, 2009) argues, every society and every mode of production creates its own space. For instance, the space produced by the capitalist nation state differs from the socially produced space in 'non-state' areas (in frontiers for example). The capitalist mode of production created an "abstract space" that "appears to be homogenous and thus devoid of differences" (Brenner, 2009, p. 358). Abstract space enables "continuous, rational economic calculation in the spheres of production and exchange" to further capital accumulation. This is "in contrast to 'absolute' spaces of precapitalist social formations, which were organized with reference to politico-religious differentiations among sacred and profane locations" (ibid.). According to Lefebvre (2009), the production of state space is inherently political and full of conflict, since it is contested by other "social forces" who simultaneously "attempt to create, defend or extend spaces of social reproduction, everyday life and grassroots control" (Brenner,

[38] According to Jessop (2016) "territorialization denotes the division of the earth into more or less clearly demarcated areas that are governed by a political authority empowered to make decisions binding on the residents of these areas" (p. 29).

2009, p. 358). The homogenization of space is thus constantly defied through the reproduction of different spaces (heterogenization) (Cottyn, 2017).

Following Lefebvre's notion of *abstract state space*, Poulantzas (1978/2000), in his state theory, introduces a similar concept of the *spatial matrix*, which the modern nation state produces to provide the basis for capital accumulation and its reproduction.[39] This spatial grid is completely artificial and has "nothing to do with the natural features of the land" as Poulantzas contends: it "homogenizes differences, crushes various nationalities within the frontiers of the nation-State and wears away the rugged features of the land that is included in the national territory" (1978/2000, p, 107). The modern state "materializes this spatial matrix in its various apparatuses (army, school, centralized bureaucracy, prison system)" and institutions (p.104). Further, it is "rooted in the labour process and social division of labour" where "the direct producers are freed from the soil only to become trapped in a grid" (pp. 105-106). The modern state monopolizes "the procedures of the organization of space" and tends to expand it to establish "national unity" (pp. 104-106).

Poulanztas (1978/2000) recognizes the "totalitarian roots" which are inscribed in this spatial matrix, which can lead to extermination of "foreign bodies" within its very frontiers (p. 107).[40] For him frontiers are the specific spaces of enclosure and integration into the "national space", where an internal market is constituted and people living within it are homogenized: "Within this very space are inscribed the movements and expanded reproduction of capital, the generalization of exchange, and monetary fluctuations" (1978/2000, p, 104). He sees 'the state' not just as an ensemble of institutions and apparats

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[39] Poulantazs concedes, that Henri Lefebvre's work on the State, was "closer than others" to his positions (Poulantzas, 1978/2000, p. 50).

[40] According to Poulantzas (1978/2000), *genocide* can be one result of the expansion of the territorial form of state power: "Genocide is also a modern invention bound up with the spatialization peculiar to nation-States – a form of extermination specific to the establishment or cleaning up of the national territory by means of homogenizing enclosure. Pre-capitalist expansion and conquest neither assimilated nor digested: the Greeks and the Romans, Islam and the Crusaders, Attila and Tamerlane all killed in order to clear a path in an open, continuous and already homogeneous space; that accounts for the undifferentiated massacres which marked the exercise of power in the great nomadic empires. Genocide becomes possible only when the national space is closed on foreign bodies within its very frontiers. Is this a symbolic image? Well, the first genocide of this century, that of the Armenians, accompanies precisely Kemal Ataturk's foundation of the Turkish nation-State, the establishment of a national territory on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, and the closure of the Golden Horn. Genocide and concentration camps are inscribed in one and the same space. . . The roots of totalitarianism are inscribed in the spatial matrix concretized by the modern nation-State – a matrix that is already present in its relations of production and in the capitalist social division of labour" (p. 107). Poulantzas' explanation of genocide would warrant its own investigation concerning the role of state formation and territorial 'homogenization' efforts in Myanmar, in particular regarding the so-called genocide targeting the Rohingya population in Northern Rakhine State over the past few decades.

alone, used by the dominant class to rule over the other classes, but rather as the "specific material condensation of a relationship of forces among class and class fractions" (p. 129). Thus, the social relations within a state can be discerned within the material dimensions produced by the state, which are transformed in conflictive processes, also involving (indirect or direct) violence. This is particularly the case with land rights and land tenure, which can be exemplarily studied at the frontier, where class fractions, capital interests and local forces are engaged in a permanent struggle in order to impose their regulations and institutions to gain or maintain access to land and resources. Representing the 'beginning of the state', as mentioned earlier the frontier is therefore an 'arena of state formation' and an 'ideal' setting to investigate the underlying political contestations and its material and ideological dimensions.

Land enclosures and formalization

As briefly explained above, states seek to establish territorial and administrative control over the frontier by imposing institutional and legal frameworks that produce a certain "spatial matrix" on which capital accumulation and 'economic development' can build upon. To this end, private property rights and a land market need to be established. Therefore, as Araghi and Karides (2012) argue, "the history of capitalism begins with the transformation of land rights" (p. 1). The 'land frontier' is the very foundation of many frontier-making processes. Consequently, Peluso and Lund (2012) define land frontiers as spaces "where authorities, sovereignties, and hegemonies of the recent past have been or are currently being challenged by new enclosures, territorializations and property regimes" (p. 669). It is characteristic of frontier regions that land tenure regimes are often hybrid, fragmented and contested. Local populations (indigenous groups) often maintain their own customary land tenure regimes and agricultural practices that are antithetical to the interests of states which seek to make their practices more "legible" (Scott, 2009). These include very flexible and mobile forms of agriculture such as shifting cultivation (as in the case of upland Southeast Asia), which is mostly practiced on a self-sufficiency basis and only produces a small surplus, if at all. Such systems depend to a large extend on common pools of natural resources (such as communal land, forest, water resources, etc.) and only allow for limited private ownership of resources (Bollier & Helfrich, 2012). Land in these systems is rarely traded on a land market but is instead part of a complex system of social relations that is closely connected with local religious institutions (see also chapter 4). Thus, in order to turn land into a "fictitious commodity" (according to Polanyi, 1944/2001) to function as one of the main input factors

of capitalist production (together with capital and labor), it needs to be 'enclosed' and privatized. As Scott (2009) describes:

> [States] have tried to replace open common-property land tenure with closed common property: collective farms or, more especially, the individual freehold property of liberal economies. They have seized timber and mineral resources for the national patrimony. They have encouraged, whenever possible, cash, monocropping, plantation-style agriculture in place of the more biodiverse forms of cultivation that prevailed earlier. The term *enclosure* seems entirely appropriate for this process, mimicking as it does the English enclosures that, in the century after 1761, swallowed half of England's common arable land in favor of large-scale, private, commercial production. (p. 5)

Concerning the process of enclosure of common pool resources in non-state spaces, in his statement, Scott makes an explicit link to the historical process of the English enclosures, which lasted from the 16th to the 18th century (Polanyi, 1944/2001). Marx used the term "original accumulation" ("ursprüngliche Akkumulation"), describing this period as the very beginning of the process of accumulation in the history of capitalism, considering it the "original sin" in political economy (Marx, 1867/1909):[41]

> And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority that, despite all its labour, has up to now nothing to sell but itself, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly although they have long ceased to work. (1867/1909, p. 785)

As Marx explains further, while classic economic theory (also contemporary neoclassic theory) tells "'idyllic' stories about 'rights' and 'labor' as the sole means of enrichment . . . as a matter of fact, the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic" (ibid.). Violence and coercion or "blood and fire" in the words of Marx, mark the history of early capitalist accumulation. This becomes perhaps nowhere more tangible than at the frontier, where violence (and the lack of the monopoly over violence) is one of its defining characteristics (Foweraker, 1981; Korf, 2015). The frontier as the 'beginning of the state'

[41] In Chapter 24 of "Das Kapital Band 1" Marx describes as what he calls "The so-called primitive accumulation" (1867/1909).

unveils the intrinsic 'violent nature' of the modern capitalist state. By definition, no single political authority has enduring monopoly over violence at the frontier (Hall, 2002). According to Korf, Hagmann, & Doevenspeck (2013) "particular configurations of order and disorder, often of a violent nature, manifest themselves in the frontier" (p. 33). It is part of the state's incorporation process to establish a monopoly over the violence within its territory, which is contested by other non-state actors (for instance armed separatists) or illicit organizations. In particular, when the state tries to establish its sole authority, frontiers turn into spaces of open violence. At times, however, the state also actively cooperatives with such illicit organizations, builds pragmatic alliances and 'privatizes' power in order to assert its (economic) interests (Schaffar, 2008).

Similarly, for Harvey (2003), the state continues to play a key role in primitive accumulation which by no means belongs to the past. According to him, "all the features of primitive accumulation that Marx mentions have remained powerfully present within capitalism's historical geography up until now" (p. 145). It describes a wide range of processes that are still ongoing. These include:

> The commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; the commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); the monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trajdefand [sic] usury, the national debt, and ultimately the credit system as radical means of primitive accumulation. (Harvey, 2003, p. 145)

However, in order to emphasize the contemporary relevance of the concept and to take into account "wholly new mechanisms" that go beyond what Marx described over 150 years ago, Harvey (2003) substituted Marx's "original accumulation" term with "accumulation by dispossession" (p. 67).[42] Accordingly, Geiger considers frontiers as "arenas of dispossession" (Geiger, 2009, p. 77). The concrete process of dispossession and

[42] Similar to Harvey (2003), since it seems peculiar to call an ongoing process 'primitive' or 'original' I shall, in what follows, substitute these terms by the concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' (p. 144).

incorporation at the land frontier involves several steps (Cottyn, 2017): First, the transformation of customary rights to formalized land titles (*formalization*); second, the transformation of property rights to concrete physical spaces (*fixation*); third, the transformation of land into a form of capital (*rationalization*), which finally can be traded on a land market (privatization). All these stages will be illustrated in more detail in the empirical case study in chapter 5.

2.6. Negotiated Incorporation and Frontier Identities

Incorporation and (the threat of) dispossession in the frontier, however are not uncontested. They usually engender "resistance and the attempts to control or negotiate the process. In short, incorporation is always an interactive process" (Hall, 2012 p. 48). Hence, 'peripheral groups' are not only victims of incorporation and state expansion at the frontier, but also active 'agents' that seek to negotiate the terms of their incorporation and participation. Kardulias (2007) has described this as "negotiated peripherality":

> Kardulias' concept of 'negotiated peripherality' explains how peripheral groups' 'willingness and ability [...] to determine the conditions under which they will engage' in frontier-creating practices (trade, marriage, religion, ideology etc.) involves them as decision-makers in the encounter with agents of expansive systems (2007:55). Incorporation thus proceeds through feedback loops, tempering the ambition of complete assimilation and even generating a boomerang potential that may alter the course of incorporation. (Kardulias, 2007 as cited in Cottyn, 2017, p. 519).

The process of negotiated incorporation is marked by an interplay of *confrontation* (ranging from ignorance of rules to lawsuits, sabotage or war) as well as *cooperation* (including marriage, economic partnership, political cooperation etc.) (Cottyn, 2017, p. 519). Often peripheral groups also take up dominant political discourses to co-opt them (take, for example, political nationalism) and turn them to their own advantage or engage in economic partnerships despite political disagreement. This perspective allows for a more complex picture of incorporation processes that does not treat peripheral groups as 'monolithic' blocks, but takes into account internal differences along gender- and class divides as well as political frictions. Fault lines sometimes might not clearly follow ethnic divides. They can divide apparently 'homogenous' groups or dominant and subaltern groups within the frontier

itself. The concept of negotiated incorporation also encourages a non-dichotomous representation of people at the frontier as either fully incorporated or 'outside' the state (for instance, indigenous peoples at risk of disappearing) (Cottyn, 2017).

According to Hall (2002), the resistance to and negotiation of incorporation often reshapes the 'ethnic landscapes' and activates processes of "ethnogenesis" at the frontier that transform collective and individual identities and social relations. Thus, identities of "populations on the margins of centralized states" are not only shaped by external (economic or political) forces but also "by their own agency" (Michaud & Forsyth, 2011, p. 2). For instance, what has been described as 'tribal groups', was rather a 'political project' devised by peripheral groups to deal with incorporation into colonial states. As Scott (2009) argues, "there is, clearly, no such thing as a 'tribe' in the strong sense of the word—no objective genealogical, genetic, linguistic, or cultural formula that will unambiguously distinguish one 'tribe' from another" (p. 243). Nevertheless, the "ambiguity and porosity of identities" in peripheral areas – in particular in many upland areas – was and continues to be "a political resource" (ibid.). This resource can be successfully exploited for political and economic ends, as will be shown in the following chapters ("University of Cologne Forum", 2015).

Prior to colonial encounters, peripheral groups had often little awareness of a common origin, cultural or political unity (Li, 2000). The colonial classification of ethnic groups by colonial authorities was rather random, in many cases usually based on languages. This method of classification in a multilingual context has been considered as 'nonsense' by Scott (2009, p. 239) [43] Nevertheless, sometimes the colonial construct was long lived and even adopted by the local populations themselves (see the genesis of the ethnic identity of "Chin" in chapter 4 as an example). Once created, such an institutionalized identity could take on its own history and dynamic and turn into an essentialist idea that inspired its followers and demanded allegiance. This was also the case with ethnic nationalism in the frontier areas of Burma, which emerged following colonial expansion and in particular religious conversion. However, as Scott (2009) points out, the Karen and Kachin – one might also add Chin – national identities for whom many people in the frontiers had fought and died for, were "no less fictitious and constructed than most national identities in the modern world" (p. 243).

[43] Scott (2009) mentions the problem of using languages as a defining criterion in a multilingual context: "Language groups were not established by heredity nor were they stable over time. This use of language to infer history was therefore 'nonsense'. It is a conclusion shared by most who have considered the issue closely" (p. 239).

In many ways, the creation and formation of (ethnic) identities need to be understood *in relation* to other (dominant) groups (at the political center):

> Ethnic identities in the hills are politically crafted and designed to position a group vis-à-vis others in competition for power and resources. In a world crowded with other actors, most of whom, like modern states, are more powerful than they, their freedom of invention is severely constricted. They craft identities, but not in circumstances of their own choosing, to paraphrase Marx. The positioning in question is above all a positioning vis-à-vis the lowland state and other hill peoples. That is the function of hill identities (Scott, 2009, p. 244)

Ethnic boundaries are shaped and reproduced particularly during specific periods of confrontation and engagement (Li, 2000). Thus, for Scott (2009) rather than asking whether an identity construct is real or not, the key question is to ask is *why* groups choose a certain construct and not another at a certain *moment* in history.

Indigeneity as 'frontier identity'

Following the rise of ethnic nationalism as a dominant form of political identity in many frontier areas in the second half of the 20th century, another '*frontier identity*' has gained momentum in response to process of incorporation and internal colonialization in post-colonial states. This is the conception of *indigeneity* and will be discussed in detail in the following chapters of this study. Indigeneity generally refers to "the quality of being indigenous" or "membership of an indigenous group" (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). In this study, it is also understood as encompassing political, social and cultural identities which are linked to a global movement of indigenous peoples and international rights frameworks (Birrell, 2016, p. 8). In order to explicitly refer to the global movement that "aspires to promote and protect the rights of the world's 'first peoples'", the term *indigenism* is used (Niezen, 2003, p. 4).

Since indigenous peoples themselves insist on self-identification in order to maintain control over the concept's boundaries and avoid definitions by states there is no generally accepted definition of indigenous peoples (Corntassel, 2008). However, some important criteria that have been proposed include: "first-come, non-dominance, cultural difference, and self-ascription" (Barnard & Spencer, 2010, p. 377). Originally, the notion of indigeneity first

appeared in the struggle against European colonialism in the settler states of the Americas. In recent decades, however, it has been adopted globally, as well in peripheral areas of the 'global south' (Tauli-Corpuz, 2008). While travelling the globe, indigeneity has been gradually transformed and has attained new meanings in the process of adapting to new contexts. Communities in different areas began to "weave indigeneity through a multifaceted array of space and time to revive identities and cultural practices and to regain or retain land, human rights, heritage, and political standing" (Oxford Bibliographies, n.d.).

Indigeneity as a modern concept has developed out of a globally shared experience of marginalization and exploitation of autochthonous minorities by modern nation-states trying to assimilate them into a homogenous society (Niezen, 2003). The state, in the words of Poulantzas (1978/2000), "homogenizes differences, crushes various nationalities 'within' the frontiers" (p. 107). Therefore, similar to other identity constructions, indigeneity must be understood *in relation* to the state, as indigenous activist Tauli-Corpuz, argues: "modern nation-state building contributed to the creation of indigenous peoples" (2008, p. 81).

Indigeneity offers a new way of constructing an identity framework that refers to familiar primordial notions of ethnicity while at the same time adopting a globalized identity that also subscribes to universal norms and transnational legal frameworks (Hall, 2012; Niezen, 2003). It is rooted in local struggles yet entails elements of transnational solidarity. This differs from ethno- nationalist particularism, which is usually not organized internationally and often seeks secession from the state. Indigenism, in general, does not primarily engage in armed struggle but accepts, to a certain extent, the state's discourse while trying to influence it through political mobilization and advocacy from the local to the global scale (Castree, 2004). Sometimes, as we will see in the following case study (chapter 6), there is a close connection or even a fluid transition between ethnic armed struggle and indigenous mobilization. It is thus difficult to make a clear distinction between *indigeneity*, *ethnic minorities* and *ethnic nationalities* since it is more a continuum rather than clear-cut categories (Niezen, 2003, p. 5). Nevertheless, chapter 6 will try to make some distinctions.[44]

Ancestral territory' and the permanent attachment to a fixed area of land is central to the understanding of 'indigenous peoples' (Li, 2000). The articulation of indigenous identities

[44] According to Gurr (1994 as cited in Corntassel, 2008) ethnic-nationalist and indigenous are different categories since "Indigenous peoples who had durable states of their own prior to conquest . . . are classified as ethnonationalist, not indigenous" (p. 55).

becomes particularly relevant in connection with land disputes, privatization, and enclosure in land frontiers (Tauli-Corpuz, 2008). In many cases – also in the present case study as will be argued – the formulation of indigeneity is triggered by land disputes, provoking local minorities to self-identify as 'indigenous' in order to counter dispossession. Thus they 're-valorize' their stigmatized identity and claim ownership over the disputed lands based on international legal mechanisms such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2008). According to Li (2000), the "tribal slot" as she describes the notion of indigeneity, "opens up some maneuvering room unavailable to ordinary villagers" (Li, 2000, p. 168). While the term indigenous can be seen as essentialist since it draws on primordial notions of culture, it represents a program of 'strategic essentialism' versus the state, a kind of "resistance identity" (Castree, 2004) that seeks to carve out an autonomous space.

3. THE FRONTIER AS A METHOD: A CRITICAL REALIST APPROACH

3.1. Introduction

As elaborated in the previous chapter, this thesis examines the periphery or border areas of upland Myanmar from the perspective of the frontier. Thereby the frontier can serve not only as a basic theoretical framework in order to analyze processes of incorporation and negotiation between the center and the periphery, it can be also used as an analytical and methodological framework, similarly to the 'border as a method' as proposed by Kron (2011) or Mezzadra and Neilson (2013). Nevertheless, the border and the frontier differ in their perspectives as argued earlier. The frontier perspective opens an analytical window into the uneven local-global interactions underlying world-systemic incorporation processes at the 'beginning' of states. It captures relations of domination and dispossession and local struggles in the global capitalist dynamic. Cottyn (2017) suggests differentiating between the *time*, *space* and *agency* dimensions of frontiers. This approach will also help to inform the empirical chapters of this thesis and structure the analysis.

On a meta-level, the present research is informed by the Critical Realist research paradigm, as a theory of science. This approach follows a 'middle path' between a strong constructivism and a naïve realism. While still far from becoming a 'mainstream' approach (Gorski, 2013), in recent years CR has become a more widely accepted meta-theory also adopted in post-graduate studies in the social sciences (cf. Mark, 2017; Pichler, 2014; Schweitzer, 2015, Smallwood, 2015). Accordingly, rather than following a strong constructivist approach, limited to a "literary method" and focusing on discourses alone (Yashar, 2005, p. 13), this research also considers structural conditions and material transformations, which contribute to shaping identity constructions and subjectivities in the frontier.

In this chapter, I will *first* give a basic introduction to a Critical Realist (CR) understanding of the (social) sciences and its conception of the world it seeks to explain.[45] *Second*, I will explain how this approach informed the overall research design of the present study; and

[45] For a more detailed overview see Collier (1994); Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, (2002); Edwards, O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014 or Sayer (2000).

third the selection of methods. In doing so, I will elaborate on how each method relates to the CR research paradigm. *Finally*, ethical and practical questions concerning field research in an authoritarian and (post-)conflict situation will be raised in the last part of the chapter.

3.2. Critical Realist Foundations

Critical Realism was developed in large part by Roy Bhaskar (c.f. 1975, 1979, 1986, and 1989), and others (Collier, 1994; Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002) over the last quarter of the 20th century (Gorski, 2013). A key characteristic of CR is its rejection of the 'epistemic fallacy', that is, to take the world – as it can be *observed* – as what we can *know* about it. Rather CR emphasizes the need to distinguish *ontology* (meaning how the world *is*) from *epistemology* (what we can *know* about it). CR assumes that the world exists "independently of people's perceptions, language, or imagination" (O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, p. 2). This is a major difference to other scientific paradigms, which often conflate ontology and epistemology, such as positivism, which in general states that only what can be *tested*, *observed* or *measured* also *exists* (meaning only what we can *know* is *real*). Extreme constructivists deny the possibility of a world existing outside of our mind and therefore focus only on the discursive construction of meanings rather than its relation to the 'outside world'.

Critical Realists on the contrary assume a strong relationship between the 'material world' and society, which is deeply grounded in it. CR is therefore regarded as a '*third way'* between the classic positivist sciences, which try to proof or disproof scientific 'laws' from empirical observations on the one hand, and strong forms of social constructivism, which often limits itself to deconstructing conventional categories of knowledge on the other hand. In contrast, CR criticizes positivists for simply focusing on correlations between certain variables and disregarding the broader context from which social phenomena cannot be arbitrarily separated. "As a result, positivists and empiricists produce 'thin' accounts of research phenomena, which can only describe, but not explain, empirical events" (O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, p. 4). Because a simple number of correlations alone does not say much about *causal mechanisms*. Social constructivists on the other hand, though often producing 'tick accounts' of empirical events, often lack theoretical explanations which go beyond the specific case for ontological reasons. Since for them every case is unique and comparisons beyond local knowledge systems are impossible. Contrarily, CR is interested in empirical research that is 'thicker' but also exploratory. "Indeed it is typically [for Critical Realism] to

identify, discover, uncover . . . structures, blocks, and (generically) causes. . . ” (Bhaskar in Edwards, O’Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, p. vi).

Open social systems

For CR the artificial dichotomy between positivists typically dealing with numbers and facts (usually applying quantitative methods) and social constructionists exploring socially produced meanings (usually applying qualitative methods) is pointless and “creates a false illusion of ‘two distinct worlds’” (O’Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, p. 3). In this sense, the CR paradigm is applicable to both, natural as well as social sciences. However, it postulates a fundamental difference between the natural sciences and the social sciences, with important implications for empirical research. Because while it may be possible to uncover a basic mechanism governing the *natural world* in a ‘closed-system’ through experimental interventions by “putting the nature to the question” (Collier, 1994, p. 34), this is not easily possible in the *social world*. Already Marx emphasized that, “in the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use” (Marx, 1909 as cited in Collier, 1994, p. 41). It is rather difficult to put complex and emergent social systems to a test through simple experiments (or algorithms), not to speak of ethical questions of using people for closed scientific experiments. Social beings are “conscious, intentional, reflective and self-changing” and are therefore necessary influenced by any experimental settings (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 43). Since social phenomena occur in *open systems* with an unlimited multitude of relevant mechanism and relations (and not in closed ‘lab-like’ conditions) experiments in social sciences are often limited to ‘*thought experiments*’ by “the force of abstraction” (Marx in Collier, 1994). The kind of abstractions generally used in a CR approach and the corresponding methods applied will be explained in more detail below.

Stratified ontology

For a CR researcher, “the world is a stratified, open system of emergent entities” (O’Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, p. 6). The world’s entities are organized hierarchically and represent different ‘layers’ of the world comparable to an ‘onion’ (see Figure 2). The most basic layer is the physical and *material layer* of the universe that already existed before any living organism, and even our ‘world’. It is governed by basic ‘natural laws’. From this layer over time emerged *living organisms* and later on (according to evolution theory) humans as cognitive and *rational beings* and human society with all its material and immaterial sub-systems (Collier, 1994). In order to understand complex social phenomena, it is therefore

important to know how the different entities *relate* to each other as part of a greater whole. The capitalist system as a sub-system for example "is constituted of a complex array of related entities (money, commodities, the stock exchange. . . . and so on) which result in enduring patterns of institutions and events across history" (O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, p. 7). Yet the sum of the relationships is greater than the individual parts of different entities and has new *emergent properties*. Water for instance has new *emergent properties* that oxygen and hydrogen atoms as elements of water on a lower level do not have. Equally, one cannot reduce a capitalist system to money or commodities, or exploitation of labor in the absence of the other crucial entities (such as property laws or surplus value etc.). A society that uses money is not necessarily a capitalist society ruled by capitalist principles.

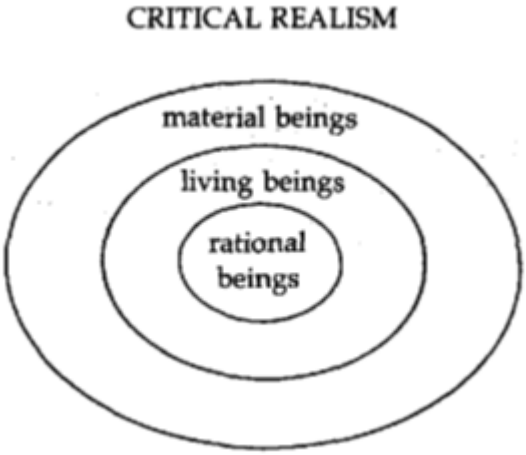

Figure 2: Stratification model of kinds of being according to CR (source: Collier, 1994, p. 108)

Depth model

The ontological 'depth model' of CR postulates that not all that can be observed is *real* and not all that is 'real' can be *observed* (or is actually happening). This means that the world – independent from the observer and the actual process of observation – can be ontologically divided into three different domains of which not all are easily accessible for researchers and scientific enquiry. These are 1) *empirical*, 2) the *actual* and 3) the *real* (see Table 1). Only the domain of the *empirical* is directly accessible for the social scientist through observation. Sayer (2000) provides the example of the Marxist distinction between labor power and labor. "The former (the capacity to work) …is equivalent to the level of the real, while labor

(working), as the exercise of this power … belong to the domain of the actual" (Sayer, 2000, p. 12). In other words, the worker has the capacity to work (level of the real) without necessarily 'actually' working (level of the actual). This is independent of whether the researcher observes the worker while working (level of the empirical) or not. In open social systems, multiple mechanisms in the domain of the *real* trigger a series of events in the domain of the *actual* that may or may not be experienced in the domain of the *empirical*. Mechanisms in the domain of the real also *exist independent* of events that they may trigger or not (for instance an earthquake of a certain scale has the capacity to trigger a tsunami even if it is not actualized).

	Domain of Real	**Domain of Actual**	**Domain of Empirical**
Mechanisms	X		
Events	X	X	
Experiences	X	X	X

Table 1: Depth model and ontological domains (source: Collier, 1994, p. 44)

The eventual aim of CR research is to establish connections between the empirical, the actual and the real domain of reality and to identify *generative mechanisms* at the level of the *real* beyond the mere empirical observation (O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014). In other words, the concern is to discover the mechanisms behind the events, which are usually not easily visible (Sayer, 2002, p. 22). This can be achieved, as indicated above, mainly through different strategies of theoretical 'thought experiments' or abstractions. In general, four different processes of abstraction (or thought operations) are used in the sciences: deduction, induction, abduction and retroduction. For CR methods, *abduction* and *retroduction* are particularly important tools (Danermark et al., 2002).[46]

[46] Deduction is used to infer from the particular to the general. For instance, to logically deduct or infer from basic assumptions of a hypothesis through empirical testing (where possible) and proving or disproving that assumption. Thus, it is a common method in the positivist sciences. *Inductive* inference means that a conclusion is drawn "from a number of observations of individual phenomena assumed to be true of a larger number of phenomena than those we have observed" (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 85).

Modes of abstraction: abduction and retroduction

Abduction and *retroduction* are important complementary modes of inference "in a social science seeking knowledge of structures and mechanisms" which are however rarely discussed in the methodological literature (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 88). Both "represent a more comprehensive way of reasoning, arguing and relating the individual to the universal/general" (ibid.). In simple terms, *abduction* re-describes and contextualizes observable events in a more general way. Thus, the re-contextualization can show the social phenomenon under study in a new light, highlighting new relationships between objects, which might add new meaning. For instance, in the case of this particular research, a public street protest concerning a conflict over land ownership can be re-described in the context of an anti-dispossession movement or indigenous rights movement and larger processes of incorporation in the frontier. The concept of the frontier itself is already an abstraction, a generalized/universal account of processes related to the expansion of capitalism and the state in peripheral areas. According to Danermark et al. (2002), "social scientists do not discover new events that nobody knew about before. What is discovered is connections and relations, not directly observable, by which we can understand and explain already known occurrences in a novel way" (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 91).

Another mode of abstraction, *retroduction* seeks to discover the basic "transfactual conditions for the events and phenomena under study" (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 96). It asks the question what the context must be like (basic prerequisites or preconditions) for the observed social phenomenon to exist. This mode of abstraction tries to isolate the most important conditions from other contingent elements. Danermark et al. (2002) give some examples, including the case of the Holocaust and the question: "What made it possible" (p. 99). By means of retroduction, renowned sociologist Zygmunt Bauman could identify a main cause in the structure of rational modern society with its "strategies to control and create perfect order…" (Baumann, 1989 as cited in Danermark, et al., 2002, p. 99). Poulantzas (1978/2000), as indicated in the previous chapter, similarly regards the modern nation state and its materiality (the "totalitarian roots" which are inscribed in its spatial matrix) as one reason for the occurrence of genocide. In the case of this empirical study, one question that I will raise over the course of the following chapters will be: What made the discourse of 'indigeneity' and indigenous politics in Myanmar possible at present? How is this possibly related to structural changes in the frontier or other important mechanisms?

In practice, however, the inference modes of abduction and retroduction are often not separate steps but done in one 'thought movement' for simplicity reasons (O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014). Through abduction and retroduction it is possible to examine connections and structures which are hidden and not obvious in the empirical everyday reality (on the empirical level). Yet, in order to be able to contextualize it and put it into perspective a CR research needs to be guided by theories in "repeated movement between the concrete and the abstract, and between particular empirical cases and general theory" (Sayer, 2000, p. 23). It looks for the 'best theory' applicable to describe the data in an abstract way or further develop the theory to find a better explanation. It does not necessarily aim to generate a new theory or prove/disprove any existing theory.

Structure-agency in Critical Realism

Critical Realism also provide an advanced perspective to one of the central questions of social sciences: that is the relation between *social structures* and people's *actions* (or *agency*) and to what extent actors are constrained by structural conditions. As mentioned before "Critical realism is critical of the conflation of structure and agency" (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 201). This means it follows neither a pure structuralism, leaving the individual out of the equation, nor a 'methodological individualism', overemphasizing the role of the individual over social structures. Rather it argues that *both* are important in explaining social phenomena but "are two completely separate phenomena with qualitatively different characteristics" (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 12). Structures are "made up of internally related objects" and "may in its turn also be part of a greater structure" (for instance the labor market, the family or an organization). They themselves emerged from human actions but assume different emergent properties. Structures, while not always obvious, can be analyzed through uncovering the relationships between the objects through abstraction (as explained above). Agency on the other hand is understood as the ability of a person to set goals and act upon them intentionally. Influenced by CR, Archer (1995) developed a 'transformation model' that differs from previous structure-agency models, such as Giddens' "Structuration Theory" (Giddens, 1984). Archer's 'analytical dualism' introduces an additional time dimension to the model and argues that structures necessarily precede human agency, since human action always take place in an already *given* social setting. Giddens' model did not consider the time dimension or the potential transformation of social structures by agents. This is highlighted in Archer's transformation model, which explains how structure and agency

interact and how agency reproduces or changes preexisting structures. According to Danermark et al. (see Figure 3):

> At the beginning (T1) a social structure lays down conditions (in the form of constraints and enablements) for the actions of agents. In the next phase (T2–T3) the action and social interaction of agents takes place within these conditions. And finally (T4) the interaction results in the structure in question being reproduced or transformed – the elaboration. In fact this is rather a cycle than a string, as the elaborated structure in the next instant becomes the condition for the next interaction (a new T1), and so on. (Danermark et al., 2002, pp. 181-182).

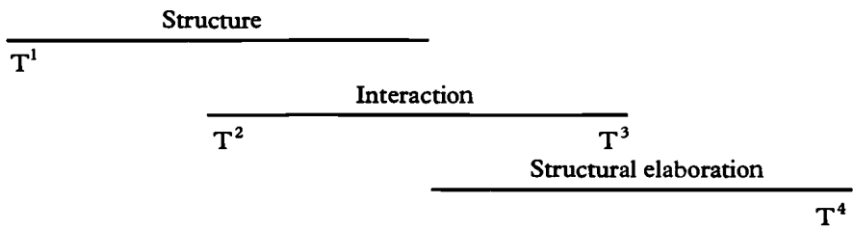

Figure 3: The morphogenetic sequence (source: Archer, 1995, p. 76)

In social science, it is important to link structure and agency to one another "through examination of the interplay between structure and agency over time" (Danermark, et al., 2002, p. 182). The best way to do this is the examination of social structures, their powers and liabilities, mechanisms, tendencies, and their interaction with human agents, in order to "change or eliminate existing social structures and to establish new ones" (ibid.)

3.3. A Critical Realist Methodology

In order to explain social phenomena and identify the main mechanisms behind them, CR research involves empirical research that 'describes' the empirical "things and events" and at the same time analyses them through theory. This is done in an iterative movement between the *concrete* and the *abstract* over the course of the research process. In other words, applied CR research "moves between conception and application, so that ideas are tested

against what can be found and observed in empirical research" (O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, p. 13). This necessarily involves much theoretical work, which is never finished but improved over time. Knowledge about the 'real world' and theories about it are always fallible, but some explanations are better than others (Danermark et al., 2002). In research areas where there is no previous existing research, or little is known about the expected mechanisms involved, a grounded theory approach may be applicable. However, it is recommended to start with a literature review where possible, to look for already existing scientific theories, in order to identify "the mechanism the researchers might expect to be at play at the research area […] and to identify gaps" (O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, pp. 13-14). The aim is to identify a "best fit" theory, which might change or develop over the course of the research as more and more data is collected and analyzed. The theories involved may be differentiated according to the relevant ontological levels and related mechanisms they describe. The general realist metatheory provides the philosophical "underlabouring" theory. Yet for the empirical research, "domain specific meta theories" and "domain specific theories" are needed to guide the research (O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, pp. 13-14). In the case of this particular research project, some (but not all) of the domain specific (meta)theories discussed in the previous theory chapter are listed in Table 2.

General Realist Meta-theory
Domain Specific Meta-theory
World-system theory
Historic-geographic materialist theory
Materialist state theory
Domain Specific theory
Theory of Frontier (and borderlands)
History of Non-State Spaces/Anarchist history of 'Zomia'
Theory of ethnicity and ethno-genesis

Table 2: Levels of realist theorizing as applied for this study (Source: adapted from O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, p. 15)

Following a preliminary literature review and having gained some basic ideas about the "potential mechanisms active in the empirical domain", the empirical research and data collection follows (O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, p. 15). The first entry into the 'field' and establishing contacts and trust with research partners is a critical moment in any empirical research (Dannecker & Englert, 2014; Girtler, 2001). This is particularly complex in a multi-

lingual context – such as Myanmar – where Burmese as the official language is not widely spoken in all parts of the Union (in particular the 'ethnic states') and where a history of authoritarian rule and conflict makes empirical research particularly challenging (Helbardt, Hellmann-Rajanayagam, & Korff, 2010; Matelski, 2014; Metro, 2011). Establishing first contacts in a country unfamiliar to the researcher can be very time consuming and sensitive (Girtler, 2001; Morgenbesser & Weiss, 2018). Fortunately, due to my previous working experience in Myanmar, I had access to an existing network of contacts, including former colleagues, local development professionals as well as civil society representatives. Before developing a research-proposal based on preliminary literature review, I also discussed my initial ideas with former colleagues and friends in Myanmar. Many of them had studied development studies abroad in academic institutions in Thailand following the Anglo-American model and shared a similar perspective on current developments in the country. As many of my contacts originated from Chin State, soon the idea emerged to select it as a 'case study' for the research.

Since Chin State had been off limits for 'outsiders' from the early 1960s onwards, until the ceasefire of 2012, it had certainly received little (academic) attention and was regarded as generally neglected (as compared to the areas bordering Thailand) not only in terms of academic research. I decided to conduct a first preliminary 'explorative' field visit over several weeks in early 2015, in order to assess the feasibility of an empirical research in the area, given the limited experiences so far. Former colleagues from the region introduced me to the field and helped me to get access to local organizations and communities. In addition to the explorative trip to Chin State I also conducted a brief trip to Kayah State (to Loikaw and its surroundings) to explore the feasibility of a comparative approach.

The fieldwork itself lasted for a period of about six months and was divided into three separate research phases (see Table 3). After the preliminary explorative field trip in 2015, the main empirical research phase in late 2016 lasted about three months. It was based on the findings of the exploratory phase and followed a more comprehensive research design. The main purpose was data collection including interviews, participant observations and more (see below). A third field trip was conducted one year after the main data collection, in winter of 2017, over a period of about one month. The intention for this final field trip was to follow-up on some research questions, which had emerged from previous interviews and to close some 'empirical gaps'. Thereby the previous (interview) data was built upon in

an iterative process moving back 'from the abstract to the concrete' and re-considering the theoretical concepts and explanations that had arrived so far.

Research phases	Locations	Periods 2015-2017
First exploratory field research	Yangon, Kalay, Hakha, Thantlang, Mindat, Kanpetlet, Loikaw	April-May 2015
Second data collection phase	Yangon, Kalay, Hakha, Thantlang, Falam	October-December 2016
Third (final) data collection phase	Kalay, Hakha, Yangon	November-December 2017
		total: ca. 6 months

Table 3: Research phases of field research

Intensive – extensive research strategy

Most handbooks on research methodology in the social sciences make a difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches (Dannecker & Englert, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Kaplan, 2004). However, according to a CR perspective "employing this dichotomy creates a false illusion of two distinct worlds: objectivists deal with numbers and facts, social constructionists explore meaning systems of social selves" (O'Mahoney, & Vincent, 2014, p. 15). A CR approach instead distinguishes between an *intensive* and *extensive* research design. An *intensive* approach focusses more on the "discovery of generative mechanisms" or "causal explanations" on the level of the *real* (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014, p. 25). The *extensive* approach focuses in general on the "context in which mechanisms operate" on the *empirical* level (ibid.). An extensive approach alone will be unlikely to reveal substantial causal explanations and relations between objects, but rather taxonomic groups or formal (statistical) associations (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 163; Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014, p. 25).

The difference in the research designs also lies in the dominant mode of abstraction, whether *abduction* or *retroduction* is used as the principal mode of enquiry as mentioned above. While a combination of extensive and intensive approaches can be meaningful in some cases to answer certain research questions, I choose an *intensive* approach for this empirical case study. The reason was that I was more interested in uncovering the 'generative mechanisms' behind the transformations in Myanmar's periphery and local responses than to explore common patterns or regional differences. In addition, the availability of reliable quantitative

data needed for an extensive study was (and still is) extremely limited in the particular case of Myanmar. To conduct an extensive (mainly quantitative) survey by myself at the outset of the research project was not feasible due to limited (time and financial) resources available. A quantitative survey in an area of limited access requires major logistical arrangements, a large number of interviewers or co-researchers as well as institutional support. Nevertheless, some initial quantitative survey data, such as for instance 'situational analysis' on (changing) land use and farming systems, conducted amongst others by local non-governmental organizations was available to better understand the research context (CORAD, 2016; Frissard & Pritts, 2018; GRET, 2012; Kmoch, Palm, Persson, & Rudbeck Jepsen, 2018; Vicol, Pritchard, & Yu Yu Htay, 2018). Nonetheless, the data is still patchy and limited in scope, mainly covering central and northern Chin State with a clear focus on agriculture.

Case study

A common approach used in *intensive* studies, is the *case study*. According to Yin (2003), a case study is an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within is real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). The case study allows to better identify specific mechanisms in a context of reduced complexity. Thus, the mechanisms at work can be identified easier through retroduction to explain the fundamental necessities for the research phenomenon to exist and its internal relations that define it. Since in real conditions different mechanisms cannot be observed in isolation, this requires some "through operation, counter-factual thinking and the ability to abstract" (Danermark et al., 2002, pp. 80-81). Whereas a case study in itself can reveal considerable results, a combination of comparative cases can help to clarify the mechanisms identified and their properties looking at variations (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014, p. 31). For the empirical research described in this thesis, a comparative design was initially planned, comparing two periphery areas in different border areas of the country (in Chin State and Kayah State). Again, after the first explorative field trip in 2015 it became evident that due to the complex and challenging research context in Myanmar and related constraints (logistics, financial and time resources) a single case study was more

feasible.[47] Nevertheless, according to Ackroyd & Karlsson, a 'case' does not need to be defined in too narrow terms but can also be understood more broadly (2014).

In my empirical research, I consider 'Chin State', a sub-national peripheral region located on the western border of Myanmar as the 'case study' (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). The decision to choose Chin state as a case study area was influenced by two reasons. First, it was considered safe for foreigners since active conflict had largely stopped following the ceasefire agreement with the government in 2012. In the past, military conflict in the area was generally lower compared to other border areas. Second, it was regarded as 'under researched' in comparison to other border areas. Some friends coming from the region had motivated me to conduct research in a region, which they claimed had been much neglected. At the same time, it was assumed that Chin State had nevertheless been similarly affected by recent political-economic changes. Yet it was unclear to what extent and how.

Rather than being a 'single case', the case study design is divided into 'multiple cases' which are presented in the following chapters as evidence. The 'case' of Chin State also is not bound to the *administrative unit*. It includes groups and organizations related to the region which are not necessarily located *in* the region itself. The case is not defined by spatial relations alone but by 'actual' relations (for instance, networks or organizational structures). This necessitated a *multi-sited* empirical research covering different geographic locations as well as political and social scales (Barnard & Spencer, 2010, p. 485). Research sites therefore included towns and villages in Chin State (mainly Falam-, Hakha-, and Thantlang Township), as well the town of Kalay and the economic center of Yangon (see Table 3 and Figure 5).

[47] For a comparative approach see for example Mark (2017).

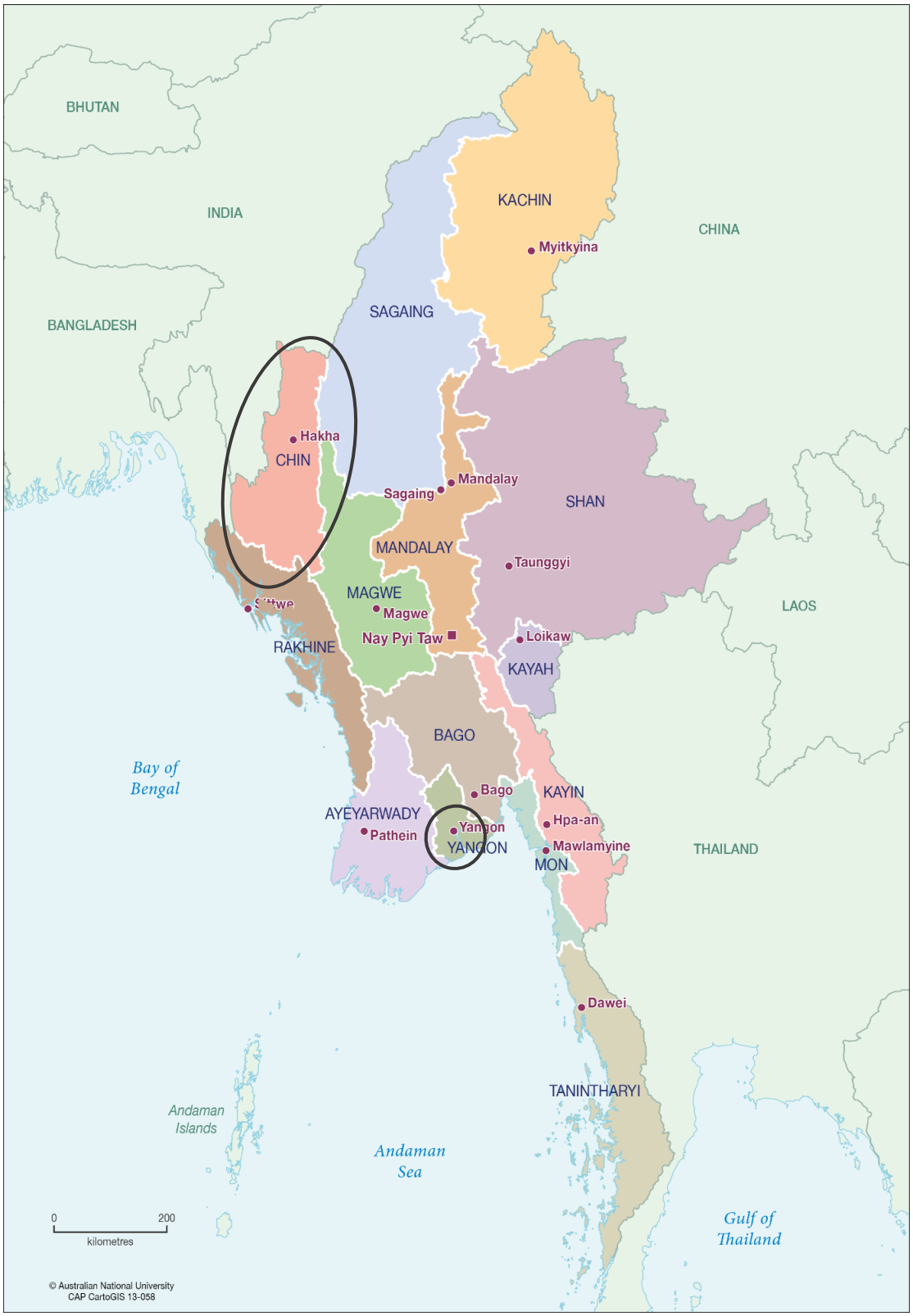

Figure 4: Administrative map of Myanmar States and Regions with capital cities (source: Australian National University, 2012, own editing)

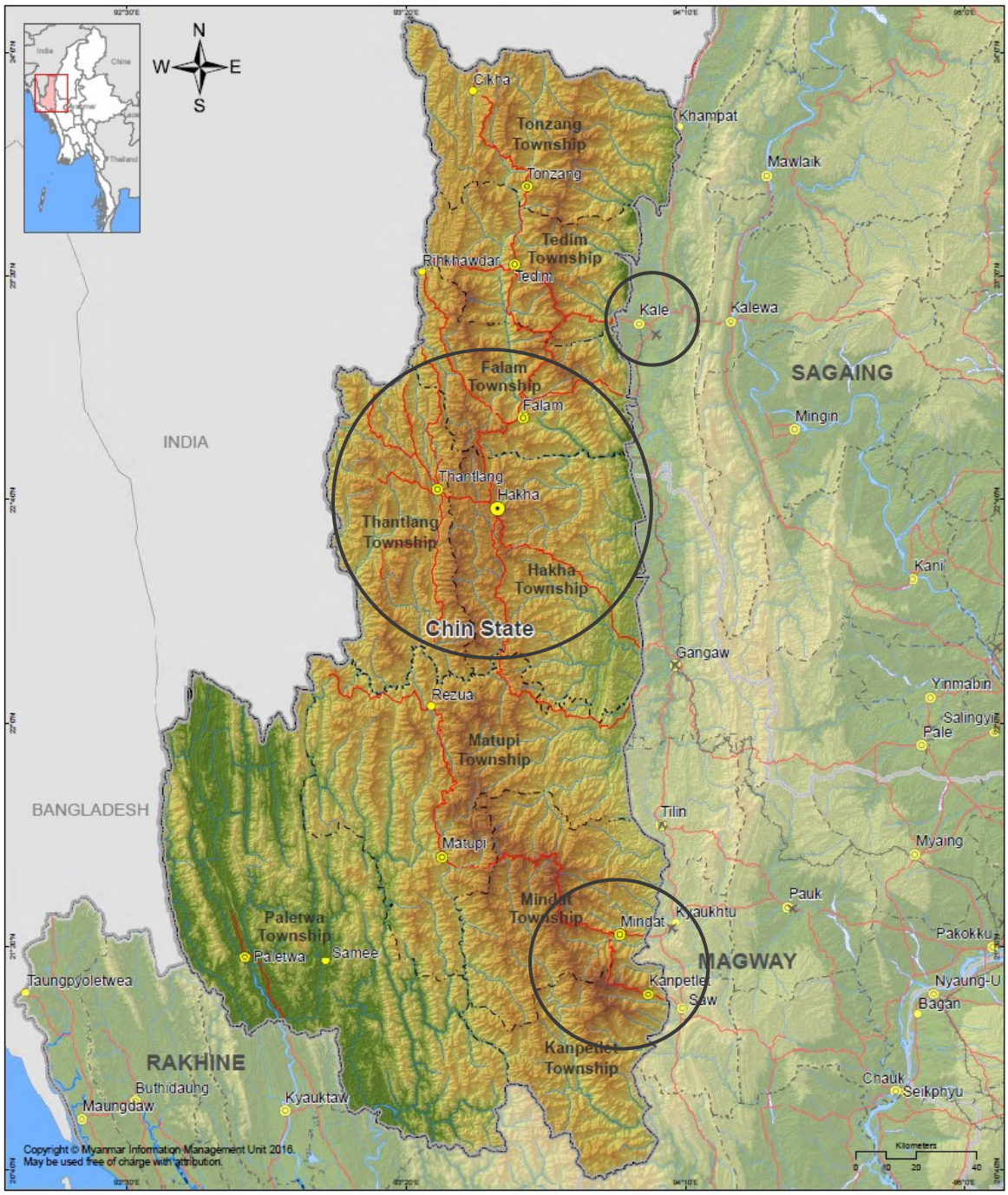

Figure 5: Map of Chin State (Source: MIMU, own editing)

Research map

In order to guide a CR research project that "tries to place a studied phenomenon in a context" (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 168), a research map has been proposed by Layder (1993 as cited in Danermark et al., 2002). According to the 'analytical dualism' endorsed by CR, this includes both structural dimensions as well as the level of the individual. In the research map these are conceptualized as the *context*, the *setting*, the *situated activity* and the *self* (see Table 4). A comprehensive account of the social phenomena under study and the mechanisms activated (or not) under certain conditions can only be achieved by inducing all elements in the research. In practice, however it may not be feasible to include all aspects in a single study and the focus may lie on selected elements of the research map that concern the main mechanisms of interests in the particular study (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 169). The focus of this research is therefore on the *context, setting* and *situated* activity. While the *self-identity* and experiences of social individuals play a role, they are not the particular focus of this research. At the center of interest are expressions of *group identities* and related *social activities*. As each level or element will require appropriate methods to relate to the relevant mechanisms, the selection of methods will be discussed in the next section.

History	**Context**	Macro-Social Organisation
	Setting	Intermediate social organization
	Situated Activity	Social activity
	Self	Self-identity and individuals' social experience

Table 4: Research map of contextualized research (adapted from Layder, 1993 as cited in Danermark et al., 2002, p. 72)

Another differentiation regarding the research design proposed by CR concerns the level of *engagement* or relative *detachment* of the researcher from the research object and social actors involved. This means the level of engagement as well as the change envisioned by the research intervention and level of cooperation with research partners. In the case of this empirical study, I would have preferred a more engaged 'action research' approach since I had been involved also in participatory action research programs in Myanmar before while working in the development sector. As opposed to conventional research:

> Action research is inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them. It is a reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions. What constitutes evidence or, in more traditional terms, data is still being debated. (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 3).

However, the actual routines of being 'embedded' in an academic institution was a barrier to more 'directly engaged' research. *First*, my position as University staff with a contract and compulsory attendance resulted in a large distance from the research location itself. Therefore, regular visits and a proper support of 'insiders' or research participants on the ground was not possible. *Second*, the official requirements for PhD candidates at Universities to produce a 'fixed' structured and scheduled research proposal in order to pass the faculty's approval process limited the flexibility and openness usually necessary for an 'action research' approach (Herr & Anderson, 2014). *Third*, financial requirements for a larger research project involving external research partners and institutions would have resulted in the need for third party funding and related application and administration procedures. For all these and other reasons, a more 'orthodox' approach had to be adopted with some regret. This also raised a number of ethical questions concerning the actual beneficiaries of the research undertaken and the positioning of myself as an outsider from my 'research partners' on the ground and related expectations. I will come back to some of these questions at the end of this chapter. However, from a CR perspective, the value of scientific research is not only determined by its level of engagement or detachment. Danermark et al. (2002) even go one step further and argue that:

> Practitioners within different fields can make use of results not only from so-called applied research, even if this seems to be the predominant opinion among researchers and practitioners alike. With a changed distribution of work, researchers may pass on knowledge of the social structures, mechanisms and tendencies identified by social scientific theories. The application of such knowledge on concrete social problems thus becomes the responsibility of practitioners, too. (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 197).

What makes social science relevant "is the critique of social structures behind the problem of investigation – this also refers to false beliefs" (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 194). This can be achieved in different ways, not only through action-oriented or applied research alone.

3.4. Methods of Data Collection

According to Danermark et al. (2002), "there is no such thing as the method of critical realism" (p.73). Therefore, there are also no "cookbook prescriptions" of methods to be used for researchers guided by CR for their empirical studies (Sayer, 2000, p. 19). They may include a wide range of different qualitative methods, such as interviews, observation, or ethnography as well as quantitative methods, such as quantitative surveys and statistical analysis. All kinds of methods can be applied as long as they help to improve the understanding of the phenomenon being studied. As mentioned above, CR does not regard a dichotomization of methods in qualitative or quantitative methods as very productive. In essence, there are no limitations and a *pluralism of methods* (or "*critical methodological pluralism*") is actually encouraged (Danermark, et al. 2002, p. 2). The point is to find the appropriate method to "connect the inner world of ideas to the outer world of observable events as seamlessly as possible" (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014, p. 21). This will depend to a large extent on the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher and the research design. Yet, it does not mean an arbitrary ('anything goes') approach to the selection of methods. For my empirical research, I decided to apply a mix of mainly qualitative methods, including ethnographic methods and different forms of interviews. The methods chosen were suitable for the case study design, which "relies on multiple sources with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion" (Yin, 2003, p. 14). However, the structural conditions working in an authoritarian, post-conflict setting also put some limitations to the selection of methods (see below).

Interviews

Interviews are an important part of most empirical research in social science (Dannecker & Vossemer, 2014). They are an "indispensable starting point of social inquiry" irrespective of the epistemological position informed by either a constructionist-, grounded theory approach, or positivist approach (Bhaskar as cited in Smith & Elger, 2014, p. 122). Yet different approaches vary in their use of different forms of interviews (from highly structured

and formalized, to open, informal, narrative, biographic etc.) as well as in their interpretations and readings of the interviews:

> Critical realists seek to utilize interviews and other social research methods both to appreciate the interpretations of their informants and to analyse the social contexts, constraints, and resources within which those informants act. This entails a non-relativist conception of these social relations and structures, and thus an evaluation of the adequacy of competing accounts of this social reality, albeit one that often emphasizes its layered and complex character. (Smith & Elger, 2014, p. 111)

Taking a CR approach to interviewing also suggests a more theory driven method of inquiry whereby an analytical framework guides the interview and the interviewer takes a more active role in steering the situation (Smith & Elger, 2014, p. 119). Theories are developed in this process in a rather 'cooperative manner' together with interviewees and not completely separated from the data collection and theory-generation upon leaving the field.

For this empirical study 65 qualitative interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2018 (see ANNEX 1 for a complete list of interviews). Expert interviews or 'elite-interviews' usually were more structured and led by guiding questions. The interview partners for expert interviews were initially selected from a list of pre-existing contacts (and contacts collected during the explorative field trip) as well as from public NGO directories and other databases, according to their working areas, expertise and experience (The Myanmar Information Management Unit, [MIMU], n.d.). Other interviews included open-ended or narrative interviews with farmers, activists, religious leaders and others. Another important method, later in the field, was the 'snowball sampling' whereby interview partners were asked to recommend other possible contacts with potentially relevant experiences or expertise (Given, 2008). This method worked particularly well in local contexts where impersonal communication (for instance via email) oftentimes failed to produce any outcome. Sometimes it also led to unexpected and particularly fruitful encounters and invitations.

In general, interviews were guided by a theoretical framework but were "grounded in the lives of the conversational partners" as much as possible (Rubin & Rubin, 1995 as cited in Dannecker & Vossemer, 2014, p. 154). In many cases, this involved asking the interview partners about their particular activities relating to the subject of interest or inquiring about concrete events and experiences. While the interviews were more or less loosely structured,

I tried to remain as open as possible to unexpected outcomes and perspectives. Creating an atmosphere of trust and reciprocity by sharing my own understanding or analysis or by revealing personal information was important to facilitate a dialogue. The interview partners were ensured anonymity, in order to protect them from eventual repercussions given the still authoritarian political context. All were informed prior about the purpose and the objective of the research and consent was given verbally. I did not use written forms for acquiring informed consent since it would have created more distrust rather than trust in such a sensitive context (Wilson, 2018) (see also below).

In many cases, the interviews were conducted in English language since several of the interviewees (in particular in the NGO field) were fluent in English. Even some of the village youth had studied English abroad in neighboring countries such as India with the support of church institutions or development organizations. In other cases, the help of an interpreter was necessary to translate from the local dialect (Falam, Zomi, Hakha) to English or from Burmese to English and vice versa. Therefore, translators were recruited locally whereever possible. In most cases, the interviews were audio recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis with the vetbsl approval of the interviewee. In other cases, when audio recording was declined, minutes of the discussion and field notes were taken.

Ethnographic methods

In comparison to other methods, "interviews do have distinctive weaknesses, largely because of the uncertain relationship between talk and action" (Smith & Elger, 2014, p. 115). Therefore, interviewing people will be "most valuable when it is conducted and analysed as part of a wider research design, both in terms of iterative interviewing and other research methods" (Smith & Elger, 2014, p. 131). A useful supplement can be *ethnographic methods*, which provide a means of "gaining insights into causal mechanisms and structures' through their effects" (Rees & Gatenby, 2014, p. 17). Ethnographic *observations* were an important method for this particular research, in particular during the initial exploratory phase, when I entered an unfamiliar environment where also language barriers complicated initial communication. The observations were recorded in field notes together with the reflections and experiences for subsequent analysis.

My *level* of 'participation' during the observations varied as well as the *form* of participation. In some cases, it involved *complete participation* and very physical active participation (Given, 2008). For instance, during long walks through villages and across hills in order to

observe land use patterns and village boundaries, while questioning local farmers and community leaders. It also involved active participation in village meetings when my interview partners sometimes reversed the interview situation and I had to answer questions in front of a whole village committee. In other cases, the participation was limited to *observation*, as for instance during conferences at the regional and national level. Thus, the line between 'engaged' and 'detached' research sometimes blurred.

In general, participation in events and conferences provided a welcome opportunity to get further perspectives and insights in addition to the interviews. The discussion and presentations during the conferences (including the "International Conference on India-Myanmar Relations" in Yangon and the "Forum on Natural Resources Federalism and Revenue Sharing" and "Chin State Development Actors Conference" in Hakha) also helped to identify further interview partners. The "Indigenous Farmers Union" organized a particularly interesting Conference in Hakha, in December 2016, to which I was invited as an observer. It was one of the first such conferences which focused on 'indigenous' issues and 'customary land use' in Chin State (see following chapters). It explicitly discussed issue of state legislation and its conflicting relationship with local customary land tenure systems. On the one hand, it was a confirmation of the importance of the discourses and statements already voiced earlier during interviews. On the other hand, observations concerning the procedure of the conference or the participant's actions and attire (such as the wearing of 'traditional' ethnic dresses including a headdress) provided some hints concerning the self-representation of the participants and the level of organization amongst others.

Social media and audio-visual data

Since access to the field was restricted to short periods and a few selected locations, participant observation had its limits. In one case, I was unfortunate to miss a significant event that turned out to be one of the biggest public protests concerning land confiscation in Chin State. The protest took place just days after my departure from the field. Fortunately, I received a link to a Facebook page of a local news outlet, which had filmed parts of the protest and uploaded the audiovisual material. Several persons I had previously interviewed also appeared in the video, answering questions from a local journalist about their reasons for staging the public protest in the streets of Hakha. The video document confirmed the accounts I had gathered during interviews, which were largely consistent with the actions taken and the interviews given in the video. Facebook pages were also a suitable source of

up-to-date information concerning activities of several relevant NGOs, who regularly updated their Facebook profiles and provided (photo) documentation. I could also access this information after I returned from the field on a regular basis. Besides Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are also relevant social media platforms, which are increasingly used in social science research (Giglietto, Rossi, & Bennato, 2012). However, social media only played a minor role in this research with a simple content analysis of a few audiovisual documents and text documents usually from institutional or accounts or media outlets. One major challenge regarding research on social media in Myanmar is, once again, the multilingual context with online posts and comments written in multiple local dialects and languages.

'Grey literature' and primary documents

Over the past few years, there has been much improvement in Myanmar concerning the availability of official government reports and statistics, compared to the times of complete secrecy under the previous military regime prior to 2010. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to access information on many relevant sectors and in particular the ethnic areas, where the role of the military is still dominant. For this reason, grey literature provides a particularly important source of information to broaden the scope of research and fill the gaps left by standard academic literature. In general, grey literature is understood as "not produced for commercial publication, not available through standard distribution means, no standard bibliographic controls, not peer-reviewed, ephemeral and historically difficult to find" (Mahood, Van Eerd, & Irvin, 2014, p. 222).

In the case of Myanmar, local and international NGOs are an important source of grey literature, publishing a variety of (research) reports, policy documents etc. While some sources such as the *Online Burma/Myanmar Library* (n.d.) collects grey literature on Burma/Myanmar, not all are easily available online. Therefore, participation in regional and national conferences and workshops, as well as meetings with civil society organizations provided an opportunity to collect several key documents. One important report was given to me by a local civil society network calling themselves the Chinland Natural Resources Watch Group (CNRWG). They published a 'self-documentation' report of their activities concerning the *Gullu Mual* nickel mining project on the border to Chin State. The report documented the activities of the coalition of civil society actors and the events that finally led to the halt of the mining project that was threatening several communities (CNRWG,

2013) (see also chapter 5). In the case of the 'Indigenous Farmers Union Conference', in addition to legal texts, a "Chin National Land Use Policy" in Burmese language was circulated among the participants for discussion. The document provided insights into the group's internal understanding of their local historical context and practice of 'customary land tenure'. It also included a draft of the 'Sub-National Land Use Policy' (Indigenous Farmers Union, 2016). Other important documents of local civil society actors included a pamphlet on "Land Rights and Indigenous Rights" (Rights Watch, n.d.) published by a local civil society organization in a local dialect. This suggested the apparent relevance of 'indigenous rights' discourses on a local level.

Besides reports, additional *primary documents* obtained during field research included official *complaint letters* from communities addressing local authorities concerning the enclosure of their communal lands by local businesspersons or international companies. However, written letters were not the ony important (primary) sources of information to be collected during field research. In addition, several interview partners presented *maps* and documents of *land titles* as 'material evidence' of competing claims over access to land and related resources. In one village, a local teacher showed me an unofficial map of a planned protected forest area. The villagers obtained the map from forest department officials during a 'consultation' meeting. They claimed that the authorities pushed them to consent to the demarcation of the protected area even though it overlapped with the village boundary and communal pasture areas. Another interviewee presented his 'land title' – a piece of paper from colonial times with a drawing of topographic features and boundaries on it. The piece of paper was to prove his 'customary' claim over a huge plot of land in an urban area. However, local authorities had not recognized his claim and title document.

Data analysis

The conducted interviews were transcribed (if audio recorded) or written down in research memos and (partially) coded using qualitative analysis software (Atlas.ti). This was also done for observation or conference protocols. A more focused coding strategy was applied, guided by the research questions and preliminary theoretical framework (Given, 2003, p. 87). The interview data was then triangulated with other data sources as described above. Triangulation is understood in social sciences as a strategy "to identify, explore, and understand different dimensions of the units of study" (Given, 2003, p. 892). The crosschecking of complementary data allows to identify common patterns and themes and

verify verbal (interview) accounts. "But perhaps more significantly these different data sources become the basis for retroductive reasoning as attempts are made to infer patterns and causation from them" (Kessler & Bach, 2014, p. 171).

3.5. Ethical Issues and Limitations

Over the course of this research, I was not only confronted with several practical and methodological challenges but also ethical issues. This started with the question of how to conduct research in an authoritarian political setting and whether to do research in such a context at all (Matelski, 2014). In addition, conflict and post-conflict situations further complicate any attempts to conduct field research and raised further ethical questions (Helbardt, Hellmann-Rajanayagam, & Korff, 2010). At the time of field research (from 2015 to 2017), large parts of the country were still active conflict zones, or just recently emerging out of the 'darkness of civil war'. As it would become painfully clear over the previous years, war and conflict in Myanmar was far from over. In Rakhine State on the western border, neighboring Chin State, violence was further escalating into mass killings with hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the country. How to continue one's research, while security forces less than 200 km away were committing unimaginable atrocities? While I conducted field rsearch visible violence was oddly absent creating a delusive impression of peace and stability.[48] Nevertheless, the sight of security forces, military battalions, and military checkpoints was a familiar one and reminded of the fragility of the situation.

Politization and Polarization

The question whether to actively enter an authoritarian and (post-)conflict context such as Myanmar, which had been subject to international sanctions for decades, had already been a familiar one to me since my time as an active NGO staff in Thailand in 2009. During that time, intense arguments were exchanged between international exile and solidarity groups, international aid originations, and actors inside the country for and against direct engagement *inside* Myanmar/Burma. This was connected with the debate about whether to use either the

[48] I had earlier had the experience of just how delusive the impression of a seemingly peaceful and stable region can be when I traveled to Sittwe and Mrauk-U in Rakhine State in spring 2012 just months before the massive 2012 riots. I remember a German tourist talking to me about her impression of a peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Buddhist communities in Sittwe. I myself did not notice any tensions while traveling the area for a few days although I knew about the history of communal violence.

name *Burma* or *Myanmar* as the politically correct term.[49] The politization and polarization of the 'aid industry' also affected the scientific community at that time (Metro, 2011). I had met researchers from Europe who were conducting research *on* Myanmar/Burma without having ever been *inside* the country for ethical reasons as they claimed. They argued that it was not justifiable to enter the country and financially support the military dictatorship indirectly (through visa fees and other expenses). This, of course, raised questions concerning the quality and diversity of sources and the quality of the research results. In some cases, the role of researchers and activists were quite difficult to distinguish. On the other hand, researchers deciding to research *inside* the country were accused as being unethical. Ethical considerations also shaped the general research focus of the scientific community regarding Burma/Myanmar. Matelski (2014) for instance reports how the caution of University's research ethics committees who preferred to approve 'less risky' graduate research projects led to the disproportional focus on Myanmar refuges residing inside neighboring Thailand (see also Selth, 2012). Research inside Myanmar was often considered as too risky and therefore remained very limited at least until the beginning of the so-called political 'transition' in 2010/11. However, during that time, the international development organization I had worked with, decided to enter Myanmar to support civil society groups and provide scholarships for socially engaged youth from all parts of the country (this was then known as 'pro-engagement' approach). This had been the outcome of a long debate with many different groups inside and outside Myanmar/Burma and the changing political context. As a result, my professional engagement inside the country slowly expanded, as did my academic interest. Since I had previously not been part of any solidarity movement, I was not (yet) strongly politicized and agreed with the plan to support 'progressive forces' inside Myanmar.

Since official procedures or government institutions for handling NGO engagement or academic research were still nonexistent or unclear at that time, much of it happened

[49] As I observed, this debate was of more importance *outside* the country, as inside the country both names were often used interchangeably, except by ethnic political organizations. Metro (2011) observed that "Burmaphiles are likely to be prodemocracy, left-leaning Burmese exiles or foreigners sympathetic to the 'Free Burma' movement. They are often found on the Thai-Burma border or in Scandinavia, the UK, Australia, or the US. Myanmarites, on the other hand, are more likely to live inside the country or visit frequently, whether they are Burmese or foreigners. Their politics are more likely to be social democratic than radical, although there may be conservatives among them. They may be involved in a local or international aid organization or an educational project. As scholars, they may take either a traditional objectivist stance or a post-activist approach (p. 9).

necessarily in a 'grey area'.[50] The plan for the present research started after my engagement with the non-governmental organization had ended. There was no link to my previous work engagement except that my interest was directed towards questions of natural resource and land governance in the peripheral areas of Myanmar which had been often outside the focus of international aid organizations.

While in countries like Thailand it is usually part of the official procedure and a question of research ethics to apply for an official research permit, in the case of Myanmar this was different. None of the researchers I had met before had any official research permit or even knew of the possibility of how and where to acquire one. Even if it would have been possible, it might have limited the academic freedom to conduct research free from government control and surveillance. As Wilson (2018) argues, in authoritarian contexts, the government's "ethical approval procedures function as a convenient mechanism of political censorship and the surveillance of 'foreign activity'" (p. 7). This would have certainly been the case in Myanmar where, until very recently, social scientific research was prohibited even for local universities. The most viable option for researchers was therefore to apply for a tourist or business visas and operate 'under the radar' as much as possible. Therefore, I choose to keep a 'low profile' and decided to go into the field without any institutional affiliation. I did this to have sufficient academic freedom to take my own decisions, to reduce administrative burdens and not to create troubles for any host institutions in case of problems arising. Also, the (potentially negative) reputation of any institution or prejudices against them might have affected my position in the field in relation to the interview partners. This could have been the case for instance with an international non-governmental organization being accused of following a certain development agenda, or a Burman dominated organization being seen as too close to the central government or military. Coming from a European academic institution with no particular agenda by itself helped me to be perceived as more 'neutral', at least this was my hope (more below). In addition, since I had long established personal networks in the country through my professional engagement, there was no need for institutional support to access networks.

Before I choose Chin state as a 'case study' area, I intensively consulted with colleagues and friends coming from the region before taking any furthers steps or drafting any concrete

[50] Many international organizations in Myanmar prior to 2015 were operating on a semi-legal basis, with either no official operation permit or with their registration under review for extended periods, while running their programs.

research proposal. They confirmed that active conflict had cooled down at that time. I was not interested in the "dark glamour of war" (Helbardt, Hellmann-Rajanayagam, & Korff, 2010) and knew that active conflict zones were off-limits to foreign researchers for many reasons. Therefore, the risk of getting into trouble and putting local partners physically at risk seemed relatively low, unlike the experiences of earlier researchers in other active conflict zones.[51] Chin State had been officially open to tourists since the ceasefire 2012, for the first time since decades. Therefore, no special permit was required to access the area. This reduced the administrative burden and enabled relative freedom of movement, as tourists were welcomed in principle, although they were not very common. Nevertheless, the local police and special branch recorded every movement of foreign visitors. Registration forms in hotels and guesthouses requested information about the vehicles used for transportation as well as the previously visited destination and the future destination. When I once traveled by a private motorbike, I was asked upon my return by the receptionist about my whereabouts and the number plate of the motorbike used. On another occasion, I was traveling beyond the limit of where tourists were supposed to travel. While having lunch with my research partners, who introduced me to the area, a local police officer came over (after having sighted the 'foreigner') to ask about my reasons for being there. After checking my documents, he politely asked us to return to the state's capital city Hakha, which was considered as a suitable place for tourists. When we left for villages beyond the city areas, government control and surveillance was markedly reduced, since there was usually no police presence in the villages. Nevertheless, I avoided extended stays in villages exceeding as to not invite suspicion or any trouble for my hosts. This also put some limits to long-term ethnographic observation outside larger towns.

Even though the research area I had chosen was not an active conflict zone at the time of research (since then conflict has returned to some areas), there were still concerns of how to do research in an authoritarian context and whether this would somehow negatively affect my research partners. While foreigners were risking only deportation and visa bans, my local research partners would face much harsher punishment (such as prison terms or exile) if they were found to be violating any laws. Therefore, I decided to trust my local contacts and research partners who had decades of experience living under authoritarian conditions to assess the situation's risks and decide how far we could go and where we could move without

[51] In his highly interesting account of his journalistic research in rebel-controlled areas in northern Burma during the 1980s, Linter (1990) describes how his presence had caught the attention of the Burmese army who staged several offensives against the rebels groups hosting him.

getting into problems. I never imposed any decisions or plans, and sometimes declined offers to visit places, which seemed too risky to me. The general topic of the research was also determined in consultation with local research partners to ensure it would be feasible and not too politically sensitive. Religious issues for instance were still seen as still very delicate in the region. Just a few years ago, a local researcher whom I had personally known, had to flee the country after having conducted research on the topic of religious persecution in Chin State.

Another major issue with research in authoritarian environments is data transparency and data quality. In a (post-)conflict situation, where access to informants as well as reliable information may be restricted, the question arises how reliable this information can be (Helbardt, Hellmann-Rajanayagam, & Korff, 2010). The crosschecking of sources may not be possible in all cases. Official government data often is not accessible to foreigners without lengthy approval procedures or even classified. Full transparency of research data, sources and interview partners – often required from social scientists under 'normal' conditions – is impossible in such contexts. Identities of informants and sources had to be protected against potential harm. Even though the situation had been stable during the research period, this might again change any time in the future (or has already changed in some areas). Therefore, identities were generally anonymized and not recorded in the field data. In this study, the identities of research partners are described only in very general terms and only names of organizations are disclosed when regarded as uncontroversial. For this reason, official consent forms were not used during field research in order not to invite suspicion of interviewees and not to document their real names. Consent was instead obtained verbally (Morgenbesser & Weiss, 2018).

Positioning in the field

Another challenge in the field was my position as a privileged white European male, having the opportunity to repeatedly travel to Myanmar for research with university funding, potentially furthering my academic career. My particular positioning had a strong impact on the relationship with my research partners and interviewees and also shaped the process of data collection and analysis. In this regard, McCorkel and Myers (2003) highlight the role of "racial privilege" and the influence of "master narratives" on the researcher's problem definition and analysis. These narratives "originate within dominant groups but extend broadly throughout the society, shaping how members of both dominant and marginalized

groups interpret and judge their experiences as well as the experiences of others" (p. 202). However, the implicit power imbalance and relationship with my informants and research partners was shaped not only by categories such as race (or my origin as a 'European'), but also gender, class, education, religion and others (Dill & Zambrana, 2009).[52] This changed according to the context and the persons I engaged with.

My male *gender identity* obviously brought certain advantages in a patriarchal structured majority Christian society such as in Chin State (Ninu, 2018). Yet it also prevented me at times from getting a better understanding of the (changing) gendered practices, identities and the perception of gender relations. In particular in the villages, women were often not present or underrepresented in common activities or group conversations. When we had lunch in the villages for instance, the men had lunch first and the women had to wait until we had finished. This was an unusual practice for me; however, I did not openly question or criticize it out of courtesy to my hosts. Therefore, the data collection and analysis for this research are likely influenced by my predominantly male research partners and informants. Nevertheless, I had the opportunity to interview some feminist activists and female NGO staff and indigenous activists in the provincial cities and in Yangon. Thus, I tried to incorporate a more diverse perspective, although this was possibl only to a limited extent I must admit (see chapter 6).

My status as a person coming from a majority *Christian* country (although I am not a 'practicing Christian') might have helped to get quicker access to the mainly Christian community in Chin State. As part of the field research, I sometimes attended church mass as an observer. This might have helped to bridge otherwise great class and cultural divides. Nevertheless, at times the conservative orientation of some of the local churches or church members also produced feelings of distance, despite a shared religious background. Sometimes I was also involved in theological debates during long evenings, yet I was tolerated for defending my scientific positions against theological accounts.

On some occasions I was also perceived by my research partners or interviewees as an international *NGO-staff*. Most 'Westerners' in these areas, where tourists are still rare, were in fact staff of international NGOs. Most of the foreigners staying at the few guesthouses or

[52] Dill & Zambrana (2009) discuss intersectionality as an "innovative and emerging field of study that provides a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, physical ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality" (p. 1).

hotels I had met in Chin State were NGO or UN staff on duty visiting project areas or attending local conferences. This sometimes had the effect, that I was expected to help provide funding opportunities for local development projects, or provide travel grants for learning programs, even though I clearly identified myself as an independent researcher without any institutional backing or affiliation to an NGO. On another occasion, I was considered as a *'rich foreigner'* asked to invest in local business or help to establish business connections. At times this made me feel uncomfortable, since I had to disappoint the expectations of my interview partners. It also raised the general problem of reciprocity: how could the local research partners benefit from the research I was conducting which was (potentially) profitable for my personal career? In some cases, I could help to invite research partners to Europe for conferences and host them for a few days in return. However, in most other cases I could not offer any substantial support.

In addition, I was sometimes perceived as '*the knower'* (having graduated from a European university and pursuing a PhD). I was asked to give motivational speeches at local schools. In order not to offend my hosts, I sometimes agreed. Yet I was fully aware that my educational career was less as a personal achievement than an inherited status with my privilege middle class European descent (also having parents who graduated from university).

A more pleasant aspect of my changing positionality in the field was that in villages where even foreign NGO staff rarely payed visits, 'Westerners' were still a rare sight and something of a 'sensation'. On one occasion, during a visit to a village, local people were keen to see the 'tall foreigner' and frequently visited the house where I was staying for a few days, sometimes even bringing small presents to my hosts. This also brought advantages. Most of all, the 'research fatigue' described in other contexts, where local communities felt "over-researched" and were tired of countless researchers 'invading' their villages was largely absent (Clark, 2008). On the contrary, since it had been decades since researchers had visited the state, respondents felt that their area was ignored and were generally keen to tell their stories and felt positive about being asked questions. One memorable experience was an extended interview with a village elder, who waited every morning at the veranda of the house where I was staying to be interviewed. He said it was the first time that he had been asked about his opinion and life story, which began in the pre-colonial era, and he visibly enjoyed our conversations.

Of course, the willingness to share stories and information also varied with changing *power relations* and personal relationships. In some cases when I conducted 'elite-interviews' with local government officials or politicians, the power dynamic quickly reversed. In these cases, the willingness to share information was sometimes (although not always) limited. Some officials whom I approached declared that they had no particular knowledge of the issue and referred me to other colleagues after waiting for hours. Nevertheless, I was surprised that in a still authoritarian context some officials were willing to meet at all. This was also the case with corporate officials I had interviewed, whom in some cases were willing to share their information and opinion, to my great surprise.

While I was clearly an outsider with my European background and socio-economic status, also lacking the necessary language skills, this was not always a major disadvantage compared to other researchers. For instance, Myanmar researchers from local Universities who most likely do not speak any of the Chin languages would face similar language problems (although younger people in Chin State tend to speak Burmese relatively well). They might also face obstacles or even suspicion concerning their racial or religious background, since the issue of "racial privilege" does not apply to 'white (male) westerners' only. From the theoretical position of 'Critical Whiteness', it is not simply a question of skin color but also of inherent unequal power relations. Since Burmans are considered to have a privileged and dominant position within Myanmar society and ethnic minorities often feel discriminated against, Walton (2013) compares "Burman-ness" with the concept of "Whiteness". This has particular implications for the interactions between ethnic and non-ethnic people, including Burman academic researchers. Insiders, on the other hand, researching their own (ethnic) communities, are at times accused by their peers of pursuing their own (political or clan) agenda. This is evident in the case of Chin or Zo historiography (see also chapter 6). Chin historians are accused of furthering particularistic Chin nationalism, distorting historical facts while excluding the perspectives of Zo and vice versa. Therefore, there is no neutral or 'perfect position' for a researcher. Research can be valuable from both the inside and outside perspective, as long as the positionality is reflected upon and can be taken into consideration by the reader.

4. THE MAKING OF THE CHIN FRONTIER

„No Burman king had ever conquered Chinram"

(Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 209)

4.1. Introduction

In recent years, the history of upland Southeast Asia has been receiving increasing attention following the seminal work of Van Schendel (2002) and Scott (2009), on 'Zomia' (see also chapter 2). While these borderlands were largely ignored in the official chronicles and historiography of emerging nation states, an attempt was made to write a new (political) history of peoples on the margins of states. Scott (2009) argued that Zomia was "the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states" (p. V). While inhabitants in those areas were often considered as 'backward' or 'primitive' by the majority lowland population and governments, from the perspective of Zomia, this "primitivism" was instead explained as an active strategy to keep the state at "arm's length" and maintain their autonomy (p. x). This included their social organization in small political units, avoiding the accumulation of too much power, their language and culture as well as their economic practices, in particular shifting cultivation. Only during the second half of the 20th century, it was argued, did post-colonial nation states increase their efforts to "integrate and monetize the people, lands, and resources of the periphery" in what was described as the "last enclosure" (Scott, 2009, p. 4). The view of having lived largely outside the reach of the central state was also shared by many respondents, interviewed during the field research for this study. It was argued that at least, historically, the Chin Hills were independent from the lowland kingdoms as indicated in the statement by Lian Sakhong (2003) above.

Taking the case of the Chin Hills, this chapter looks at the concrete *historical process* of incorporation of upland Burma/Myanmar from a world-systems frontier perspective (Cottyn, 2017). While it does not aim at providing a comprehensive account of the complex local histories of this region on a few pages, it seeks to trace the different 'waves of incorporation'

following changes in the world-system.[53] Thereby, it looks at the process of economic transformations and the deepening of capitalist relations as well as related process of identity formation. This will provide a rudimentary historical background to better contextualize the contemporary frontier dynamics being discussed over the following chapters (chapter 5 and chapter 6). While the remaining chapters rely heavily on primary sources, this chapter mainly draws on secondary sources, colonial sources, as well as sources from local historians. This poses severe challenges, since historical studies on Chin State following independence have been very limited. Local Chin (or Zo) historians (and historians in the diaspora) oftentimes criticize the few recent studies published by their peers as being too partisan and strongly influenced by ideological or political views.[54] There seems to be little internal agreement on a generally accepted version of 'Chin history' and much needs to be done for future historians of that region. Yet this is also true for the historiography of other states and the Union of Burma/Myanmar in general, which was dominated by nationalist propaganda (Houtman, 1999).[55]

This chapter begins, *first*, with the pre-colonial period when the frontier in the uplands was functioning as a refuge for diverse peoples trying to evade the reach of the lowland kingdoms. It also provides a brief account of the pre-colonial history, economy and political organization of the Chin Hills. The *second* part looks at the colonial period and the incorporation into the British-dominated world-system at the end of the 19th century. This was the most significant event for the peoples in the Chin Hills, despite being largely excluded from direct colonial administration. The long-term effects of colonial rule, of dividing and defining the 'native' subject, are still felt in the 21st century. The *third* part of the chapter attempts to identify the different phases of frontier making unfolding as a consequence of the two World Wars. The post-colonial frontier was marked by a changing

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[53] For a more comprehensive account of the colonial history of the Chin frontier see Pum Kan Pau's (2019) recent work, which unfortunately was only published after the finalization of this chapter.

[54] This is especially true for the work by Lian Sakhong (2003) which has been heavily critizsed by Vumson Suantak (2008) and other 'Zo' historians.

[55] Several attempts have been made to establish a more 'balanced' and 'diverse' perspective on the history or 'histories' of Burma/Myanmar. Beginning with informal school education, Metro (n.d.) produced a textbook on the diverse perspectives on key historical events in Burma to sensitize students. According to Metro "there are many histories of Burma. Every person from Burma, or who has been involved in Burma, has a perspective on events. Many published histories—all over the world—look at only one perspective, which provides one point of view to historical events, people and situations. In this module, we try to show many different perspectives. However, we are aware that not all points of view can be represented" (Metro, n.d., p. ii).

dynamic of negotiation and resistance with the central state attempting to increase its grip on the border areas.

4.2. The Pre-Colonial Frontier: Evading the State

Before European colonizers imposed the model of a 'modern state' at the end of the 19th century, political power in what is now Myanmar was rarely dominated by one center, with the exception of the Toungoo Dynasty (1486-1597) and the Konbaung Dynasty (1753-1886). "For most of Burma's history, she was politically fragmented" (Renard, 1987, p. 258). A Mon-ruled kingdom, in the South, and the Arakan kingdom, in the West, were important rivaling powers to Burman dominated polities. The North was scattered with small 'Tai kingdoms' (Lieberman, 2003; see Figure 6). Political power in the region was not organized territorially but depended on the ruler himself, his personality and his military strength. "The monarchy and often the monarch himself was seen as the state" (Taylor, 2009, p. 16). A patrimonial system linked the kingdom's subjects to the ruler of the monarch. The political elites were those close to power, independent of the ethnic origin or 'race'. After wars with neighboring powers, prisoners of war were often brought back to settle down and became part of the kingdom's ethnically diverse heartland, often assimilating within a few generations. The power of the monarch was radiating outwards from the center through charisma and alliances, in what has been described as the *mandala system* (Scott, 2009, Tambiah, 1977, Wolters, 1982). However, the influence of the monarch diminished with increasing distance from the center and with physical barriers (such as inaccessible mountains or forests). It was also possible for influence to overlap with other rivalling power centers. The limits of the ruler's influence thus not only included the peripheral upland areas but also other underpopulated or hard to access interstitial areas.

Taylor (2009) classifies roughly three administrative zones for the pre-colonial Burmese kingdoms. First, the "*nuclear zone*" or the central plains, which was the "core of the state's territory", marked by an irrigation system controlled by the state, which generated the necessary economic surplus (pp. 22-23). Second, outside the core, were the "*dependent zones*" in the hands of centrally appointed officials. The upland areas ruled by Kachin, Chin or Shan chiefs and others were found in the third zone, the "*tributary zone*". Here, "the kings allowed them to conduct their affairs undisturbed" since "their economic surplus was so marginal" (ibid.). Similarly, Lieberman (1984) argues that the monarchs were not able to fully integrate the peoples in the periphery, socially, culturally and politically. Yet, despite

the lack of actual territorial control, they considered themselves nominally as "overlords of the marginal peoples and used them as spies, porters, and guides" (p. 135). Regardless of the nonexistence of direct control over the 'dependent zones', the frontiers were connected with the lowlands through trade and exchange networks. Forest products readily available in the uplands, such as animal skins, rattan, herbs, resins, minerals and more, were sought-after by the lowlanders who paid high prizes for them (Renard, 1987). Besides trade, raids were also a part of the 'exchange system' between the center and periphery. Some frontier people, such as the Chin, engaged in regular raids on the lowlands for goods as well as slaves (Pum Khan Pau, 2007; Lian Sakhong, 2003). Slaves or 'unfree labor' were an important part of the local economy in the hills (see below). Also the lowland kings occasionally raided the hills in order to source the much needed manpower for their labor intensive wet-rice cultivation. The 'ungoverned' periphery provided a welcome retreat for fugitives seeking to evade the grasp of the state (sometimes including renegade aristocrats) and remained a constant threat for the lowland settlements (Scott, 2009), who viewed the upland people with suspicion and regarded them as "uncivilized ruffians that were, in all probability, inferior human beings" . According to Renard (1987), "the lack of Buddhism or the adoption of only superficial elements of the religion, the absence of large, highly organized states, illiteracy, and simple architecture caused majority peoples to treat such communities with disdain" (p. 264).

Figure 6: Mainland Southeast Asia, c. 1540. The hatched area represents a zone of fluid, small-scale Tai polities (Lieberman, 2003, p. 29)

Pre-colonial Chin Hills

During the pre-colonial era, the hills west of the Chindwin valley were settled by different groups, who did not yet share any common name or identity, but referred to themselves as *Zophei*, *Siyin*, *Thado*, *Tashon* or *Sengthang* to name just a few.[56] Only when ethnic (proto)nationalism emerged in the (early) 20th century as a result of colonialism did debates start on what common name to adopt (see also chapter 6). While on one side, groups from the central Chin Hills preferred the name *Chin* as the only legitimate name (Lian Sakhong, 2003; Vum Ko Hau, 1963), on the other side, people from the Northern part argued that *Zo*

[56] Lian Sakhong (2003) lists over 60 "sub-tribes" speaking different dialects (p. 19).

(Dongno, 2016; Son-Doerschel, 2013; Vumson, 1986), also referred to as *Zomi* (meaning *Zo people*), was the original locally used term. According to Chin historian, political activist and intellectual Lian Sakhong (2003), the name *Chin* relates to the myth of a common origin of all 'Chin people' from a mythical site called *Chinlung* (literally "the cave or the hole of the Chin"; *Chin* meaning "people" and *lung* "cave") (p. 3). He quotes several historical sources to prove the origin of the name Chin, including a stone inscription by a Burmese king from the 11th century referring to *Khyan* which later reportedly changed to *Chin*. Zo historian Vumson (1986), however, rejects the name Chin as an exonym or 'alien name', coming from the Burmese word for 'basket' which was later adopted by the colonialists (p. 4). He prefers the endonym *Zo* as the legitimate name for the group.[57] Both sides however agree that the ancestors of the Chin/Zo groups originally settled in the lowlands along the Chindwin valley probably originally emigrating from China (Lian Sakhong, 2003; Vumson, 1986).[58] Having settled for some time in the Chindwin valley, they were later pushed into the nearby mountains by incoming Shan (Tai) groups who began to dominate Upper Burma, ruling over dozens small principalities (see Figure 6). They also built a fortress in *Kalamyo* at the foot of the hills at the end of the 13th century. Some stories on Chin history refer to compulsory labor and hardship under the Shan rule, which might have eventually driven the Chin/Zo groups into the mountains. Other traditional oral accounts report about flooding events, which might have resulted in migration movements into the hills west of the Kalay valley (Lian Sakhong, 2003). Yet some groups remained in the lowlands and became later known as *Asho Chin* (or 'Plain Chin').

Traditional Chin economy and political organization

As a result of the relocation and the different ecological and geographic situation in the mountains, with limited land to sustain larger settlements, the groups eventually split into

[57] According to Vumson (1986) "Many Zo people however cannot accept the name Chin, because they have never called themselves by that name, and, moreover, they know that the name Chin was officially used only after British annexation. As mentioned earlier, the British adopted it from the Burmans. It appears that the Burmans called the Zo people Chin from their very early contacts in the eleventh or twelfth century A.D. When the Burmans moved down the Irrawaddy River and came to the Chindwin they discovered a basket carrying people occupying the river valley. Hence they called the river "Chindwin", meaning "the valley of the baskets" as "chin" means basket in Burmese. The general Burmese population accept "chin" to be a word for basket, and they explain that the Zo people were so called because of their habit of carrying baskets" (p. 3-4).

[58] The historical evidence on Chin migration seems weak, and the origin of Chin/Zo groups in China is contested.

smaller sub-groups founding new village settlements.[59] Over time and in isolation, they developed their own languages and dialects.[60] However, the 'satellite-villages' remained in contact with the 'mother village' as part of a "tual community", sharing a common identity and spiritual connection with the village of origin (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 18).[61]

In order to adapt to the scarcity of suitable agricultural land in the hills, Chin communities practiced mobile forms of *shifting* or *swidden cultivation* (see chapter 5). Scott (2009) argues, that swidden agriculture was not only the best choice in the hills in terms of ecological adaptation but also "the most common agropolitical strategy against raiding, state-making, and state appropriation" (p. 193). This means that it was not only a practical decision but also a political choice given the powerful 'foe' in the lowlands. Shifting cultivation was and is until today the most flexible and efficient form of agriculture in such an environment, as argued by Cairns (2015). The staple crops are planted on plots which rotate (shift) every one or two years from one plot to another. The shifting cultivation plots are called *lopil* in the central and northern Chin Hills. In Burma/Myanmar, it is known as *taungya,* and across the border in India as *Jhum.* Each lopil consists of smaller units, called *lo*, cultivated by a single household (Lehman, 1963). The shifting of plots involves the cutting of trees and bush and the burning of residual vegetation to fertilize the soil. In the meantime, the unused plots are left fallow for several years for regeneration. When villages had to move due to war, water shortage or other reasons, new swidden plots could be opened without much effort and investment. Swiddening was also "more efficient in terms of return to labor than irrigated rice" (Scott, 2009, p. 162).

Apart from occasional trade and raids, the pre-colonial Chin society was largely based on subsistence agriculture. The main crops in pre-colonial times were maize (corn) and millet, peas and beans. Rice was only introduced during colonial times or later and considered as 'superior food' (Lehman, 1963). A large part of the harvest was used to produce traditional

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[59] One of the early settlements of Chin people, according to local history, is in the Lai-Lung area near todays Falam. A rock and a cave at Lai-lung (Lailun) is a popular tourist attraction nowadays among Chin who come to see the place of the 'ancestors'.

[60] Lian Sakhong (2003) is convinced that "historical evidence shows that the Chin were known by no other name than CHIN until they made their settlement in 'Chin Nwe'. However, after they were expelled from their original homeland, the Kale Valley in Upper Chindwin, by the flood as oral traditions recounts—or conquered by the Shan as modern scholars have suggested—the Chin split into different tribal groups with different tribal names and dialects" (p. 17).

[61] "The Tual community was usually begun by the same family or clan, settling in the same village. However, as the community became larger and the number of newcomers increased, they would also establish satellite settlements and villages, although they all shared the principle Tual village when they worshipped their guardian god, called Khua-hrum" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 18).

beer, called Zu, which was an important element of religious ceremonies. Additionally, livestock was bred with the *mithun* (*bos frontalis*, a large domestic bovine) being the most important animal in Chin society. It was not used for agricultural purposes but only for religious ceremonies. Every larger ceremony required the sacrifice of at least one mithun (Lian Sakhong, 2003). The *mithun* was the most prized possession and wealth was defined in terms of how many mithun one could have and sacrifice. Furthermore, fields, gardens, forests and streams were sources of food. Hunting played a particularly important role in Chin society since successful hunters could accumulate considerable social prestige (Lehman, 1963).[62] The achievements of famous hunters were also recorded in memorial stones which depict the hunting scenes in stone carvings (Robinne, 2015).[63]

The land tenure regime was part of a complicated system of institutions in which *economic use* was only one (but important) part of an "organic whole", which included social and religious institutions that regulated access to land (Stevenson, 1943).[64] Land ownership ranged from private to communal ownership with the rights of the claim maker dependent on his or her position within the community. However, land governance practices differed regionally. In the central Chin Hills, the village chiefs were mandated by the "guardian god" (*Khua hrum*) to hold religious and political authority over the villages. "Because of this mandate, he and his descendants also had the privilege and the right to control the entire land within the sovereignty of *Khua-hrum*, which was believed to be the guardian of the land" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 36). As *Ram-uk* (translated as "ruler of the land"), the chiefs had the right to distribute the land in the community and collect a tax from each household. Yet, as Stevenson (1943) writes:

> The right of the disposal of land by the headman does not in any sense mean that he is entitled to sell it or rent it, or even to loan it to persons not resident in his village. His first duty as a headman is to see that every resident of the village has a sufficiency of land to cultivate, and thus his

[62] Lehman (1963) reports of rhinoceros, elephants and gaurs having been hunted before independence. In the 1960s, sun bears, tigers, leopards, wild boars and monkeys were still hunted. Today most of these animals are extinct in the Chin Hills.

[63] Some memorial stones exist until today and show scenes of hunting, slave raids and, in rare cases, even head-hunting in elaborate stone carvings.

[64] See Stevenson (1943) for a detailed discussion of land tenure and its changes in the Central Chin Hills during colonial times.

> disposal right is in effect nothing more than a charter for his interference in the disposal of land according to individual rights. (p. 82)[65]

The members of the community had a "right to sufficient land" to provide for their basic needs (Stevenson, 1943, p. 86). This right was restricted to one plot in each field (*lopil*). Excess land was transferred back to the village chief for redistribution within the village to those in need. The welfare of the village had priority over private rights to land. The chief also had to ensure that land was available for newly married couples or immigrants from other villages. Furthermore, title holders were not able to refuse access to land to others within the village if they requested to use it (Stevenson, 1943). In this case, no rent was payable except for a small token (a chicken for instance). However, land ownership was restricted to resident members of the community only.

In pre-colonial times, most villages in the central Chin Hills were ruled under the *Ram-uk* system, with a hierarchy of chiefs who "ruled either the whole tribe, part of the tribe or at least more than two villages" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 43). Villages that were completely independent from another chief (*Khua-bawi* system) were rather rare, as were 'democratic villages' with an elected village council (such as the "Tlaisun Democratic Council"). In such 'democratic villages', the chiefs did not have authority over the land, as in the more 'autocratic villages', and the redistribution of land was the task of the village councils. The rights of the headmen, however, were conditioned by social obligations and rituals:

> almost all economic processes are operated through the medium of social institutions, that the village . . . is an almost autonomous unit within which the headman and his council provide law and order, the priest spiritual protection, the blacksmith implements and weapons, and finally bond friends, kindred and fellow villagers cooperative help in all the major economic operations. (Stevenson, 1943, p. 118)

A central part of this reciprocal village economy with complex patterns of re-distribution were regular institutionalized feasts (for birth, marriage, sacrifices during sickness or

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[65] Stevenson (1943) specifies: "Disposal rights of land can be subdivided into (a) the right of distribution of unoccupied* plots, (b) the right to split up large occupied plots into smaller units if and when increase of population or shortage of land requires such action, (c) the right of partitioning rotational fields (lopil) into plots (lo), (d) the right of delineation and alteration of the boundaries of rotational fields, (e) the right of granting permission to cultivate specially reserved areas such as tuklaw lands where sagat trees are common" (p. 82).

funerals and after hunting trips) in which drink and food (in particular fresh meat) were provided to members of the village. For this feast, certain obligations had to be paid in kind — in the absence of a cash economy — for instance, a pot of beer (*Zu*) or animals.[66] The *feasts of merit* were the "corner-stone of the Chin economic structure", in pre-colonial times, and the main occasions for distributing surplus resources within the village.[67] Feasts of merit were held by wealthy persons striving to attain a higher status and gain social prestige. The bigger the feasts provided, the higher the status of the generous donor. Honor gained through a big feast lasted even beyond the donor's death. "That was the reason why every Chin wanted dearly to give this feast". If a man held this feast in a village, "the news spread far and wide" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 67). Thus, in traditional Chin society, wealth was defined "not [by] the amassing but the spending of resources" to attain social prestige and fame for the family and the 'clan' (Stevenson, 1943, p. 164). The feasts were also recorded in memorial stones, erected in honor of the sponsor that would be a reminder for coming generations (Robinne, 2015). Big feasts required massive spending and the sacrifice of several mithuns and lasted for many days.[68]

Referring to Polanyi's (1944/2001) discussion of pre-market societies, it could be argued that pre-colonial Chin economy was not driven by the logic of accumulation but *embedded* in a web of reciprocal social relations and responsibilities.[69] The ultimate aim was not to accumulate material wealth but to gain social prestige with the aim of social upward mobility:

> The individual's economic interest is rarely paramount, for the community keeps all its members from starving unless it is itself borne down by catastrophe, in which case interests are again threatened collectively, not individually. The maintenance of social ties, on the other hand, is crucial. First, because by disregarding the accepted code of honor, or generosity, the individual cuts himself off from the community and becomes an outcast; second, because, in the long run, all social obligations are reciprocal, and their fulfillment serves also the individual's give-and-take

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[66] See Stevenson (1943) for a detail account on the feasts and the obligations involved.

[67] For a detailed account of the traditional feasts in pre-colonial times see Lian Sakhong (2003).

[68] Even today, the mithun is a valued possession and sometimes used for payment or as an equivalent to money.

[69] Before the nineteenth century, he [Polanyi] insists, the human economy was always embedded in society. The term "embeddedness" expresses the idea that the economy is not autonomous, as it must be in economic theory, but subordinated to politics, religion, and social relations (Polanyi, 1944/2001, pp. xxiii-xxiv).

> interests best. . . The premium set on generosity is so great when measured in terms of social prestige as to make any other behavior than that of utter self-forgetfulness simply not pay (Polanyi, 1944/2001, p. 48).

In addition, land in Chin society was not (yet) regarded as a 'fictitious commodity', to borrow Polanyi's term for the transformation of land into a commodity.[70] Land and the opening of land was deeply intertwined with religious institutions as Lian Sakhong (2003) illustrates. Land (*Ram*) was closely connected with the belief in a common origin (*Miphun*) and the way of life and related rituals (*Phunglam*).[71] According to the pre-colonial Chin belief system, places were inhibited by different spirits and gods (Lian Sakhong, 2003).[72] New settlements were established in particular locations that were believed to be protected by a kind "guardian god" (*Khua-hrum*), which was the 'god' related to physical space. These places were called *Tual,* sacred places that were the centers of the communities and marked with a banyan tree and a sacrificial stone that should not be removed or changed. The belief in spirits also strictly regulated which land was allowed to be accessed for agricultural purposes or other uses and which places were off limits due to evil spirits. This ensured that sacred forests (forest reserves) could not be cut down and sacred animals could not be killed (Int. 50, local farmers, Thantlang tsp., December 2016).[73]

4.3. The Colonial Frontier: Securing the Empire

With the third Anglo-Burman war in 1885 and the end of the monarchy in Burma, the pre-colonial frontier system ended. Yet, as Tinker (1956) argues, "the British did little more than carry on the traditional Burmese policies" (p. 337). Administratively, the British colonial

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[70] "For Polanyi the definition of a commodity is something that has been produced for sale on a market. By this definition land, labor, and money are fictitious commodities because they were not originally produced to be sold on a market. Labor is simply the activity of human beings, land is subdivided nature, and the supply of money and credit in modern societies is necessarily shaped by governmental policies. Modern economics starts by pretending that these fictitious commodities will behave in the same way as real commodities, but Polanyi insists that this sleight of hand has fatal consequences. It means that economic theorizing is based on a lie, and this lie places human society at risk" (Polanyi, 1944/2001, p. xxv).

[71] For Lian Sakhong (2003), these three elements are integral to his notion of chin as a "nation".

[72] Lian Sakhong (2003) distinguishes between "spiritual beings: such as Khua-zing, Supreme God; Khua-hrum, guardian gods; Khua-chia, evil spirits; and Khua-vang, shaman or diviner" (p. 22).

[73] The introduction of Christianity changed to a large degree the relationship of the communities to their environment. (Int. 50, local farmers, Thantlang tsp., December 2016; Stevenson, 1943). It could be argued that abandoning the belief in spirits and the conversion to Christianity led to an unregulated exploitation of natural resources that might have also led to their increasing depletion, in combination with other factors. The argument that the influence of Christianity led to an increasing anthropocentrism and the limited perception of the environment, reduced to a resource base to be used by the humans, was also put forward by White (1967).

government further simplified the division of the state territory from three types in pre-colonial times to two types: "These were 'Burma proper', which incorporated both the nuclear and the dependent province zones […] and the 'excluded' or 'frontier areas' of the surrounding hills" (Taylor, 2009, p. 80). The *frontier areas* (or Scheduled areas) were politically divided from *Burma Proper* (Ministerial Burma) in the lowlands and put under a different system of administration (Seekins, 2006). Comprising about 47 percent of Burma, the frontier areas included the upland areas of the Shan States and Wa districts, the Karenni state, the Karen hills, the Arakan Hill Tracts, the Chin Hills, the Kachin Hills, the Naga Hills, and a number of smaller administrative units ("Frontier Areas Committee", 1947) (see Figure 7). Burma Proper was *directly* ruled by colonial officials and divided into divisions and districts. The Frontier Areas, on the other hand, were administered separately through *indirect rule* and allowed to retain a certain level of autonomy with traditional local rulers administering local affairs.[74] The local chiefs were responsible for the collection of taxes on behalf of the British and the maintenance of peace and stability within their territory and received compensation for their loss of status and other traditional sources of income (Woodthorpe, 1873). Thus, the division of the lowland-upland division, which had developed over centuries, was largely carried forward and even further deepened by the new rulers. During this period, the British actively discouraged interaction between the hills and plains, though trade relations did continue. It followed a policy of preventing outsiders to settle in the frontier areas and also discouraged people in the frontiers to learn the Burmese language in schools (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 187).

Following the Government of Burma Act (1935), the Frontier Areas were further sub-divided into "Excluded" and "Partially Excluded Areas" (or "Part I" and "Part II" areas) (Seekins, 2006, p. 193).[75] The *Excluded Areas* were administered directly by the *Burma Frontier Service* and the governor to his discretion and not represented in any legislatures. The more 'politically advanced' *Partially Excluded Areas*, were within the ministerial sphere, though the governor could over-rule the decision of ministers. The idea was, that as

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[74] According to Mamdani (2012), Sir Henry Maine, British India's chief legal official and prominent social theorist, was one of the intellectual fathers of indirect rule, which was introduced in response to the mid-19th century crisis of colonialism in India. "Its architects claimed this mode of rule was no more than a pragmatic response to a dearth of resources, making for a weak state with a superficial impact, and thus called it "indirect rule". Yet Mamdani argues that while "this mode of rule claimed to preserve custom and tradition through indirect rule . . . the indirect rule state was not a weak state. Unlike the preceding era of direct rule, its ambitions were vast: to shape the subjectivities of the colonized population and not simply of their elites" (pp. 7-8).

[75] Before the reforms of 1919, almost all of these areas were "scheduled districts" under India Act XIV of 1874 and subject to special laws and administrative procedures (Ahmad, 1937).

the Partially Excluded Areas areas continued to develop, they would gradually merge with Burma Proper ("Frontier Areas Committee", 1947).

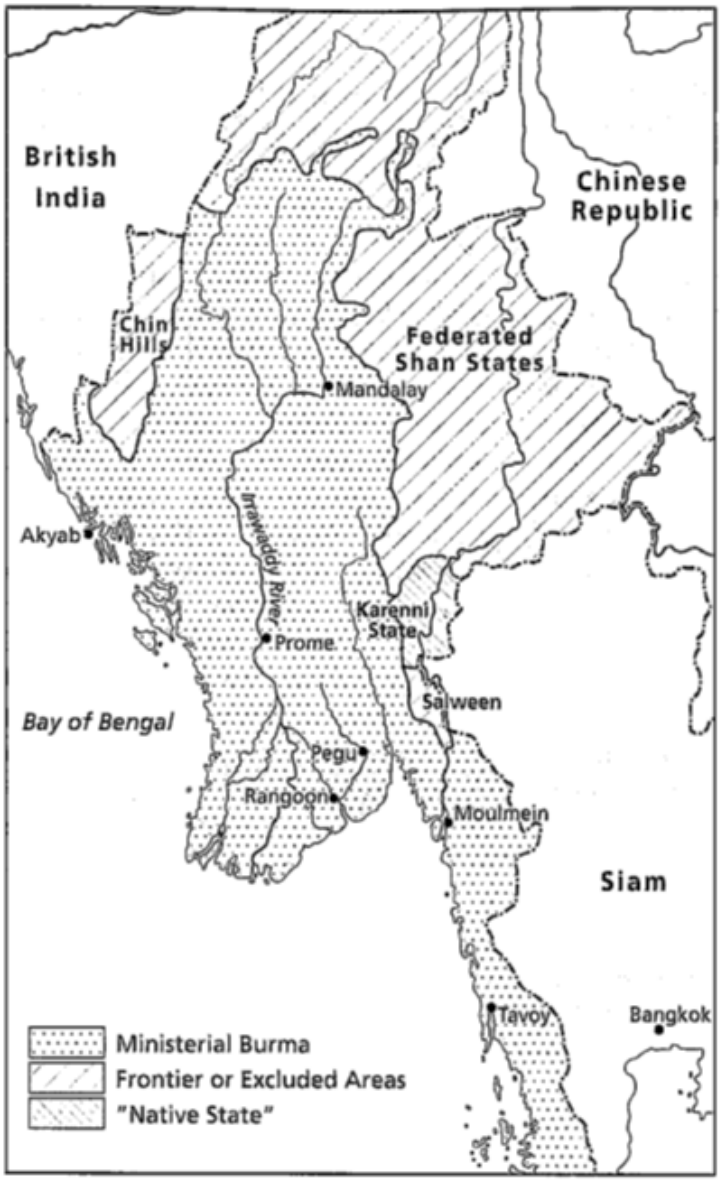

Figure 7: Administration of colonial Burma (Charney, 2009)

Frontiers of control

Whereas, in other provinces of British India (such as in Assam), the frontier or 'scheduled areas' were brought under control much earlier, in Upper Burma this happened only at the end of the 19th century. The *Chin-Lushai Hills* came under control in the late 1880s (Pum Khan Pau, 2007). Some places such as the Naga Hills, were brought under "some sort of

administration" as late as 1940 ("Frontier Areas Committee", 1947). The main reason for the colonial government extending its influence further into the 'non-state spaces' in the frontier was arguably to 'pacify' the uplands, which were functioning as kind of 'buffer areas' and to prevent raids on British settlements (Newland 1894; Pum Khan Pau, 2007; Stevenson, 1943; Zaib, 2013). The colonial perception of the frontier and its peoples as "uncivilized" and "backwards" was not unlike the native lowlanders' view as illustrated in many colonial accounts, such as by Woodthorpe (1873):

> The North-eastern frontier of India has ever been a fruitful source of trouble and expense to the Government of this Empire. […] Bordered by, or forming part of hill districts, inhabited by fierce and predatory tribes for ever making raids on their neighbours' villages, burning and plundering them, and carrying off the inhabitants it was not to be supposed that those under our protection should escape. When, in consequence of outrages on British subjects, the Indian Government has been forced to take steps for their protection, its policy towards the offenders has generally been one of conciliation rather than retaliation. (pp. 3-4)

Rather than an act of invasion, the 'punitive expeditions' in the *Chin-Lushai Hills* were justified by the colonialists as a necessary act of 'self-defense' (Newland 1894; Lian Sakhong, 2003; Stevenson, 1943). However, what has been described by Woodthorpe (1873) as a 'conciliatory' approach to the "predatory tribes", was seen by the residents of the area as a violent invasion. The resistance to the British imperialist's offensive against the Chin Hills was fierce. Numerous revolts and insurrections by frontier peoples have been documented (such as the Siyin Rebellion and the Anglo-Chin war in 1917) resulting in countless casualties (Pum Khan Pau, 2017; Lian Sakhong, 2003; Vum Ko Hau, 1963).[76] According to Carey and Tuck (1896), the Chins, well equipped with firearms, "whilst disputing every stage of our advance into their hills . . . showed considerable tactical ability by taking the offensive in the plains and attacking Shan villages and our posts in the rear of the advancing column" (p. 27).

One decisive event that is still remembered in Chin communities today was the fall of Falam during the *Chin–Lushai Expedition of 1889-1890*. This was the final expedition that led to

[76] Lian Sakhong (2003) argues that in the case of the Anglo-chin war as many as 10,000 people may have died because of the war or of indirect consequences such as famine and disease (p. 163).

the permanent occupation of the Chin Hills and the establishment of British military posts, including *Fort White* between Falam and Tedim (named after General George White). Three military columns approached the Chin-Lushai Hills from three different directions. The Western columns approached (what is now Chin State) with a total of over 3,400 men (Carey & Tuck, 1896, p. 13). The Chin clans united and resisted the British invasion (at least for some time) under the leadership of *Con Bik* (or *Tson Bik*) from the powerful *Tashon* (*Tlaisun*) clan who was later turned into a 'war hero'.[77] He outright rejected the British demands to pay a fine and hand over all captives and slaves. In the end, however, he had to realize that the enemy was too powerful to permanently resist (Carey & Tuck, 1896; Reid, 1893). According to Lian Sakhong (2003), the Chin resistance was stopped in 1895-96 not by the British army but by famine: "Famine occurred because the Chin had long been unable to cultivate the land properly because of the war. Moreover, the British armed forces burnt many villages to the ground together with a large quantity of grain in storehouses" (p. 101). But other historians argue that small skirmishes continued even long afterwards.[78]

The colonial administration used the reported slave raids by the Chin on the lowland areas as a welcome excuse for their military interventions and interpreted them as a sign of 'primitivism' justifying the colonial 'civilizing mission'.[79] Yet, the notion of "slavery" has been criticized by historians as an "inappropriate blunt term for describing a range of social and economic relations" (Sadan, 2013, p. 60).[80] In fact, the practice of war captives was common all over the region at that time. It was also applied by lowland states (in particular the kingdoms of Burma and Siam), engaging in constant wars over labor power (Sadan, 2013; Scott, 2009).[81]

Besides the security aspect, the colonial government had little economic interest as such in the remote mountainous areas (Lian Sakhong, 2003; Reid, 1893). With expected revenues from local taxes not justifying further engagement, it only introduced an "administration light" in the frontier areas (Taylor, 2009, p. 81). As Taylor writes, "during much of the

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[77] Today the house and the tomb of Con Bik are a tourist attraction in Thashon today a small village near Falam.

[78] Email communication with Zo historian, May 2019.

[79] "Between 1834 and 1854, the Chin made at least nineteen raids into Chittagong in which 107 people were slain, 15 wounded and 186 carried into slavery" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 87).

[80] Stevenson (1943) report that "for many years after the annexation *bawifa*" (a kind of debt bondage) "were believed to be slaves in the full sense of the term. It was not till later, when it was discovered that the *bawi pa* (*bawi* father) as the creditor is known, had none of the control possessed by a slave-owner over the daily life of his *bawi fa*, that it was realized that the term slavery would have to be discontinued" (p. 175).

[81] In Britain itself, slavery was only abolished officially in 1833.

British period, the central state's authority in more remote areas amounted to little more than periodic 'flag marches' in which the symbol of state supremacy was displayed and the promise of punishment for unruly behavior was made" (Taylor, 2009, p. 161). Different from the US American 'settler frontier', where pioneers moved westwards, hungry for new land to cultivate (Turner, 1893) the colonial frontier in British India was rather a "frontier of control" (Geiger, 2009) ensuring protection for the 'colonial heartland' from 'raiding tribes'.[82] Yet, in some areas of the British Raj, the expansion of tea plantations by settlers led to competition over land with indigenous communities and triggered further uprisings (Ahmad, 1937; Sadan, 2013).

Impact of colonial administration

Overall, social and economic institutions in the excluded areas were governed according to local 'customs' under the authority of the local chiefs (or headmen). This was defined in specific regulations drafted for the frontier areas by the colonial administration such as the *Kachin Hill Tribes Regulation* enacted in 1895, or *The Chin Hills Regulation* of 1896. The main issues stated in these regulations concerned the powers of the headmen, tax responsibilities and special rules regarding forest, firearms and drugs, highlighting the security focus in the frontier areas. As mentioned, the regulations extended the colonial judicial authority over the frontier or excluded areas and marked the completion of the 'pacification campaign' (Aung-Thwin, 1985).[83] At the same time, they separated the hills into administrative units such as Chin or Kachin Hills and other areas, and excluded them from the 'normal' administration of the country (in mainland Burma). According to Ahmad (1937), the main argument given for this practice was that:

> The elaborate system of law and legal procedure which prevails in the more advanced areas cannot be comprehended by backward tribes, and is not suited to their cultural level. It is argued that the British Indian system of administration will bring about a complete breakdown of the primitive communal organisations and will sap the economic and moral life of these tribes. The application of alien laws would throw these straightforward,

[82] Geiger (2009) differentiates frontiers into: frontiers of settlement, frontiers of extraction, and frontiers of control.

[83] Aung-Thwin (1985), mentions that "the success of pacification was also determined by the ability of the British to collect revenues: if revenue was collected or promises have been made to submit revenue than the area was considered pacified; if not, it was 'disturbed'" (p. 246).

> truthful and honest primitives into the clutches of exploiters coming from the more advanced territories, and by disturbing the tribal customs would create such conflicts and conflagrations in these areas as would involve the Government in serious difficulties. It is therefore, considered best to allow these primitive com- munities to live in their age-long isolation. (p. 5)

Contemporary post-colonial research criticizes this argument of "primitivism" by the colonial power as "a type of liberal imperial ideology of rule that has justified the subjugation of populations and places described as wild, savage or, simply, primitive" (Chandra, 2013, p. 138). This ideology was based on the idea of a "civilizational ladder", categorizing the colonial subject into different 'phases of development' with tribal peoples on the bottom and 'civilized' commercial society on the top. Tribal societies in the uplands, such as the Chin, were seen as "child-like and backward" and in need of paternalistic protection, who "could be denied the privileges of liberal citizenship by imperial governments" (Chandra, 2013, p. 138).[84] They were regarded as constrained by their traditional thought and had to be better educated before they could take part in national politics (Sadan, 2013, pp. 18-19).

The colonial practices of that time were informed by the upcoming academic discipline of evolutionary anthropology that tried to explain the 'least developed' human societies (Mamdani, 2013). In many cases, colonial administers had dual roles as colonial officials as well as researchers (c.f. Carey & Tuck, 1896 or Stevenson, 1943), trying to make sense of their subjects in terms of scientific explanations and ethnographic mapping. This was necessary in order to make the complex reality of the 'unknown frontiers' "legible" for the colonial state's administration (Scott, 1998). Social groups were put in categories, such as "tribal" according to scientific theories, and territorially 'fixed' to certain places which often were named after the 'tribes'. If reality did not fit the scientific explanations, new categories were created. The "native", as well as the "tribal", were the creations of intellectuals from an empire amid a crisis of justification and in need of a new legitimization.[85] According to

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[84] Yet this perception has also been challenged within the colonial administration. Stevenson (1943), for instance wrote: "the Chin is no simple happy savage waiting under a tree for the fruit to drop into his lap. [...] But all these products are gained only by hard work and the judicious use of time, and energy (p. 5)".

[85] According to Mamdani (2012) "The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a crisis of empire at both its ends, India and Jamaica, starting with the 1857 uprising in India, known as the Sepoy Mutiny, and closing with Morant Bay in Jamaica in 1865. Together, these developments made for a crisis of mission and a crisis of justification. In the reflection that followed the crisis, the colonial mission was redefined—from civilization to conservation and from progress to order" (p. 8).

Mamdani (2012), "this was no longer just divide and rule. It was define and rule" (p. 42). Gradually, these definitions of 'tribes' and 'races' became a reality in itself and subsequently played an increasing role in ethno-nationalist projects in the frontier over the course of the 20th century (see chapter 6). While occasionally still in use, some Chin/Zo local historians reject the notions of 'tribes' in favor of the term 'clans' (in the sense of family groups and lineages) (Vumson Suantak, 2008).

Even though the frontier areas were ruled indirectly, the expansion of colonial authority was the beginning of the incorporation process of the uplands into the (colonial) capitalist world-system. It was also the beginning of an ongoing history of peripheralization and marginalization, influenced by wider global and regional dynamics that would undergo several changes until today. For the Chin Hills, according to Lian Sakhong (2003), it was the first time in history to be "occupied by an outside power" (p. 101). However, some areas in the south of the Chin Hills did not come under any kind of administration by either the British or the Burman government until the mid of the 20th century (Lehman, 1963).

In terms of territorial administration, borders and boundaries became delineated and fixed to simplify administration and provision of infrastructure. Colonial authorities asked the headmen to demarcate village boundaries, which became grouped into administrative 'circles'. New villages could be established only with the permission of the authorities (Stevenson, 1943). The 'fixing' of villages in one place, however, was rather at odds with the usual fexible patterns of mobility in the hills, which required regular moves and the establishment of new villages according to agricultural and political objectives. While local practices facilitated migration, colonial regulations restricted it.[86] Land, hitherto defined by religious rituals and social relations, became subject to a rational territorial logic according to colonial conceptions of ethno-geography and not lineages (Sadan, 2013). One effect of the permanent fixing of villages was increasing village populations (since new villages could not be easily founded) and an increasing shortage of land. In some cases, the misreporting of village boundaries by the headmen also led to an unequal distribution of land between the villages (Stevenson, 1943, p. 95). The area of the Chin-Lushai Hills was also divided into three separate districts for administrative reasons: the Chin Hills District (today's Chin State in Myanmar); the Lushai Hills District (today's Mizoram State in India); and a portion in the south which was attached to the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bengal (today part of Bangladesh).

[86] Stevenson (1943) reports about a fine introduced by the British administration for persons migrating out of a "Tribal Area" (p. 16).

After the separation of Burma from British India following the 'Burma Act' of 1935, a new administrative border separated the Chin-Lushai Hills and its peoples, although, at first, the border did not have much of an influence on the local populations. This happened despite protests from within the administration (for instance by Sir Robert Reid), against the separation of tribes which "should comprise a single unit" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 187).

The indirect rule also fostered the "autocratic system of administration" and strengthened "parasitic feudal elements" among the local elites in the frontiers (Ahmad, 1937). Where more 'democratic' forms of governance existed, such as in the village council in the Tashon (Tlaisun) area, these were abolished by the colonial administration (Lian Sakhong, 2003).[87] In many parts of the frontier, a few tribal chiefs owned large areas of land (Ahmad, 1937) — although regional differences existed — while previous institutions of redistribution were undermined. In Chin society, the economic unit was the household, linked to "reciprocity-exchanging kinship groups" (Stevenson, 1943, p. 7). What might have appeared as irrational to colonial administrators was nevertheless perfectly rational from the perspective of the Chin economy and culture, according to Stevenson. As mentioned eaelier, the *feast of merit* played a central role in the uphill society, which ensured redistribution, consumption for pleasure and community purpose, investment for the donor and religious functions (Stevenson, 1943).[88] However, what could be called a 'moral economy' (Scott, 1977) conditioned by custom, with little role for the market, was slowly transformed into a market oriented economy (although with little market integration).[89]

> Though it was inevitable, I think it can be said truthfully that when Government annexed the Chin Hills it had to inject cash into the then existing subsistence barter economy mainly in order to make the payment of taxes possible. The early administrators had no means of coping with taxes paid in the local "goods", mithan, pigs, chickens and seu [sic] of

[87] According to Stevenson (1943) "On government taking over the hills it was held too unwieldy a system to cope with the increased administrative responsibilities, and so the prominent individuals of the day were appointed headman, succession going to their legal heirs" (p. 90).

[88] Stevenson writes that Chin economy was oriented towards a conception of wealth in terms of disposal of goods rather than accumulation of them (p. 104).

[89] Stevenson (1943) warned of the "the collapse of an economy so closely tied to the social structure" which "must inevitably bring social chaos. Any attempt to transform the Chin rapidly into a cash-cropper dependent on selling his produce to the outside world might well entail provision of a new system, other than feasts, of letting him get on socially both in this world and the next." He argued that "modernization here should aim, not at changing the old order, but at improving it" (p. 188).

> iron, and so they had first of all to introduce money by giving paid work to the people, and then to collect it again in tax. (Stevenson, 1943, p. 101)

Instead of investing accumulated capital in the form of feasts, it was increasingly converted "into cash of which their villagers see nothing more" (Stevenson, 1943, p. 186). The integration of local elites into the British colonial service and, in particular, the colonial army provided opportunities for cash income and social upward mobility. However, the income from government injected cash into the village economies that mostly relied on a non-cash-based economy put pressure on the traditional economic system (Stevenson, 1943). Furthermore, the abolition of 'slavery' and taxation by the colonial administration had a huge impact on the local economy and the feasts of merit (Lian Sakhong, 2003).

The agricultural practice of shifting cultivation, which formed the basis of the economy in the hills, was considered as unproductive by the colonial government. The priority of the British was to extract the highest possible commercial value out of the landscape. "Slash-and-burn cultivation, pastoralism and other subsistence activities" were identified as "wasteful and destructive" (Whitehead, 2012, p. 14). According to Scott (2009), "swiddening has been anathema to all statemakers, traditional or modern" (p. 77).[90] The main reason was that shifting cultivation – while providing a higher return on the invested labor – produced a form of wealth, which could not be easily controlled and taxed by the state (Scott, 2009). Therefore, the British tried to develop 'improved' permanent agriculture techniques in the frontier areas, including terracing with the help of missionaries. New crops were introduced, such as potatoes, fruit trees, as well as tea and coffee in some areas (Lehman, 1963; Tin Cung, 2011). However, such innovations often did not take into account local contexts and were not always successful in their implementation. According to Stevenson (1943), communities instead focused on their traditional staple crops with little interest in producing cash crops for the market.

The colonial government not only encouraged agricultural innovations in the uplands, but also introduced forest conservation and new forest policies (Tin Cung, 2011). This had a long-lasting impact on the property rights of communities, with forests becoming the property of the state. Already before the annexation of Upper Burma, 'modern' scientific

[90] Dove (2014) shows that the political practice of vilifying shifting cultivation was not only limited to British India, but was indeed also common in Europe, where this form of agriculture survived up until the 20th century, before being banned by the state.

forestry was established in British India to ensure a long-term supply of timber for the colonial state. This was mainly the legacy of the German botany expert Dietrich Brandis who was considered the 'founder' of tropical forestry (Hesmer, 1975).[91] After all, timber, in particular teak, was a key factor for extending the colonial enterprise to Burma, which was rich in valuable teak forests (Bryant, 1997). Yet, after decades of uncontrolled 'laissez-faire' extraction in lower Burma, by handing out concessions to private timber companies, supply of timber, which was essential for colonial railway construction and shipbuilding, was running short (Bryant, 1997; Whitehead, 2012). For this reason, Brandis was instrumental in devising a 'modern' forest management plan that would result in the founding of the *Forest Department* and *India Forest Act* (1856).[92] The agricultural practice of shifting cultivation, still known today as *taungya,* were blamed by Brandis as a major cause of deforestation.[93] Whitehead (2012) quotes Brandis as follows:

> Another cause of deterioration . . . is the practice of temporary and shifting cultivation by clearing and burning the jungle, which is general in almost all hilly districts of India and Burmah . . . Besides the destruction by cutting and burning on the spot . . . the neighbouring forests are injured by the spread of the fire. The temporary character, however, of this cultivation is the principal source of evil. The spot cleared and burnt this year is deserted after yielding only one harvest, and thus a new portion of the Forest is every year doomed to destruction. (p. 11)

The scapegoating of shifting cultivation in the hills was a common strategy used by governments to 'shift' the blame from powerful corporate actors — providing much needed revenues for the central government — to remote local communities. As Bryant argues: "Whereas the British considered themselves to be 'good' ecologists, the Burmese [including the peoples in the hills] were viewed as being ecologically disruptive. This perceptual dichotomy was not unique to colonial Burma, or for that matter, to forestry" (Bryant, 1997,

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[91] According to Whitehead (2012), "Since England itself lacked a forest service, the first Inspector-General of Forests, Dr. Deitrich [sic] Brandis, was chosen from the German Forest Service. Not only was the German Forest Service considered the most scientifically advanced in Europe, it had recently cut its teeth prohibiting customary woodland uses by the Rhineish peasantry and in suppressing an 1848 peasant revolt against forest enclosures in that region" (p. 10).

[92] The Indian Forest Act of 1865 was the first comprehensive piece of legislation asserting a state monopoly over forests. It was replaced 13 years later by the 1878 Act (Whitehead, 2012).

[93] Additionally, Stevenson (1943) laments that the "the yearly destruction of seedlings and distortion and stunting of growing plants due to fire is reducing available supplies in some areas at an alarming pace" (p. 73).

p. 19). The idea of the 'destructive nature' of shifting cultivation and the assertion of state monopoly over forests, effectively excluding forest communities, continued in post-colonial forest policy (Bryant, 1997; Guha, 1983). The Forest Department and forest policies remained largely unchanged after independence and even the textbooks for forestry officials based on Brandis' principles of forest governance, remained basically the same. Despite the fact that the Chin Hills Regulation of 1896 stated, that "no prosecution under the Upper Burma Forest Regulation, 1887, or any rule thereunder, shall be instituted against any Chin except with the sanction in writing of the Superintendent", nonetheless the colonial government took measures to control the burning of forests (Stevenson, 1943; Tin Cung, 2011).

One of the most important legacies of British colonialism in the frontier areas was perhaps the introduction of foreign Christian missionaries to the hills at the end of the 19th century (Lian Sakhong, 2003; Son-Doerschel, 2013, Pum Khan Pau, 2012). Colonial officers supported American Baptists in establishing their missions in the frontier areas, viewing them as 'allies' to back their 'pacification project' and to provide education and health services financed by missions abroad. The idea was that the "wild tribes" would give up their warfare and raids once they became 'Good Christians'. Moreover, the ideology of the missions provided a welcome justification for colonialism, as 'good and necessary': "Colonialism was morally correct as long as the gun was accompanied by the Bible" (Bosch, 1991, as cited in Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 120). Many missionaries viewed the peoples in the hills through the same 'primitivist' lens as the colonial officers. They regarded them as "wild tribes" leading a "life of permanent unrest and unhappiness" and described the local cultures and religions as "pagan, demonic, evil" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 121). The first regular missionaries sent to the Chin Hills by the American Baptist Mission Society were Arthur and Laura Carson.[94] They established two stations during their 21 years of missionary activities, one in the plains among the 'Asho Chins' and, a few years later (in 1899), one in Hakha.[95] In their work, they were supported by Karen Baptists who converted decades earlier and who generally played a decisive role as 'indigenous missionaries' in Burma (Hayami,

[94] The American Baptist Mission was previouslly active in Lower Burma, with the arrival of the Judsons in Burma in 1813, who also published the first translation of the Bible in Burmese (Pum Khan Pau, 2012, Lian Sakhong; 2003). There had also been previous attempts by Catholic missionaries to enter the Chin Hills, but they were prevented by colonial officials at that time (Pum Khan Pau, 2012).

[95] The mission was later turned into the *Hakha Baptist Church and Hakha Baptist Association* (HBA) and still exists until today.

2018).[96] First, schools and hospitals – which had not existed prior in the hills – were built for the local population and attracted great interest. In particular, the schools were "regarded as the most effective 'instruments of evangelism'" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 126).[97] However, the early missionaries at first had trouble learning the local languages, due to some suspicion of the Chin communities who saw them as colonial agents. In addition, the diversity of languages and dialects in the hills and the lack of a written alphabet or textbooks for self-study were a major obstacle to teach the gospel in the local language. For this reason, Burmese was used as the language of instruction in mission schools, even though it was not the lingua franca in the hills. Only in later years, when the schools came under the control of the government, local languages were introduced in class. Yet, the dozens of languages and dialects were reduced to "three lingua franca, namely: Tedim, Falam, and Haka" (Pum Khan Pau, 2012, p. 8). Missionaries subsequently started to translate the gospel into the newly developed Romanized scripts of local dialects. According to Hayami (2018):

> The written script has done much to 'fertilize' indigenous culture, and the translation of the gospel also had momentous consequences, revitalizing the culture of the receiving people. It must also be remembered that it accompanied a homogenizing effect of a rich and varied language and culture. Once the gospel was translated into the vernacular, the native missionaries had a standard vocabulary to use in speaking to their own people. (p. 263)

The introduction of western education by the Christian missionaries allowed a few local men — usually the sons of the 'chiefs' — to become literate and find employment in the colonial administration as clerks, police officers and army officers. These men formed a newly created 'middle class', some of whom could reach high positions in the post-colonial government (Vumson, 1986).[98] In many cases, they also became preachers and missionaries

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[96] According to Hayami (2018), "the first Karen conversion of Ko Thabyu (ca. 1778–1840) took place in 1828, fifteen years after the arrival of the American Baptist missionary Judson in Burma. Ko Thabyu accompanied missionary George D. Boardman (1801–1831) to Tavoy (Dawei) to set up a mission, and was baptized there. This mission evolved rapidly thereafter" (p. 256).

[97] Yet not all who wanted schools also wanted to be converted. One missionary reports a local chief saying "school I want, the Heavenly Jesus I don't want. If we do not sacrifice chickens and pigs we die, therefore, I don't want the Jesus custom" (Pum Khan Pau, 2012, p. 11).

[98] One of these men who became part of the new 'middle class' was Dr. Vum Ko Hau (1963) who published his memoirs in the book "The profile of a Burma frontier man". Being a government official in the colonial services and leader during the Worl War II, he later became a Burmese ambassador. However, Vum Ko Hau is considered to have exaggerated his own historical role in his memoirs, for instance, in the case of the Panglong Conference.

themselves, and opened new churches and missions, in particular in the South of the Chin Hills.[99] According to Sakhong (2003), one principal reason for the relative success of Christianity in the Chin Hills was the crisis of local economic and social institutions due to the impacts of colonialism. For the missionaries, it was an opportunity to 'win over souls' who lost faith in the old belief system.[100] Yet, Christian missionaries also had to compete with an indigenous, messianic cult, which emerged in central Chin Hills around the same time as colonialism arrived. The cult was named *Pau Cin Hau* after a man from Tedim (born in 1859), who claimed to be some sort of prophet, having received 'revelations from god' and experiencing a healing 'miracle' after years of sickness (Pum Khan Pau, 2012, Vumson, 1986). The Pau Cin Hau cult also invented its own script and used it in the book "*The Sermon of the Mount*". The movement criticized the local belief in spirits and the expensive sacrifices of traditional Chin religion. But it was more compatible with local traditions, such as drinking *Zu* (an alcoholic drink), than Christianity. While it was more successful than Christianity at the beginning of the 20th century, according to Pum Khan Pau (2012) it also contributed to the spread of Christianity by breaking cosmological barriers: "The removal of fear [of spirits] paved the way for the easy access of Christianity" (p. 14). However, after Pau Cin Hau died in 1948, the number of followers declined, and the number of Christian converts surpassed the numbers of the cult.

The emergence of Chin ethnic nationalism

As outlined above, the expansion of colonialism into the Chin Hills brought great changes that were shaking the very foundations of the uphill societies. This was despite the 'indirect rule' of the frontier areas and their being excluded from Burma Proper in terms of colonial administration. According to Lian Sakhong (2003), British occupation was leading to a process of "de-tribalization" as the "old isolationism" and the "traditional way of maintaining the tribal group's identity was no longer effective" (p. xvi). The experience of the anti-colonial struggle against a 'common enemy', as exemplified by the Anglo-Chin war, arguably prompted the transformation and re-shaping of 'frontier-identities' and the emergence of proto-ethno-nationalism (Sadan, 2013). In addition, the exposure of many young men from the hills, fighting for the British overseas in World War I, change their

[99] After foreign missionaries had to leave the country in the 1960s, Baptist missions were run exclusively by indigenous members and expanded to all parts of the Chin Hills.

[100] Lian Sakhong (2003) reports on the cases of the first converts who suffered from severe illnesses. Unable to afford sacrifices, according to the traditions, they received medical help from missionaries and converted to Christianity as a consequence (p. 131).

perception of the world and themselves, bringing back new (political) ideas. Together with the anti-colonial struggle, Christianity became an important factor to bring the diverse isolated 'clans' together under the umbrella of the church. "Christianity itself became a new creative force of national identity for the Chin within this 'formative' process of powerful changes" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, xvi). It provided the diverse people in the Chin Hills with new "meanings and symbols" in a time of transition without completely breaking from their past. Christianity could build on an indigenous belief system that also centered on a 'creator god' and was thus to some extent compatible. The establishment of the *Chin Hills Baptist Association* (CHBA) in 1907 (later Chin Baptist Convention) with one institutional structure and common religious events helped to shape a new common identity in a transforming society. This institution allowed groups who usually did not engage much with each other, to accept each other as members of the same group, despite different languages (Lian Sakhong, 2003:

> The significance of the indigenous mission, unlike the foreign mission, was that it provided a new relationship between different Chin tribes who in their previous history had made war with each other as part of their way of life. The Christians now emphasized love of neighbour and enemy alike, which provided a fresh ideology and identity for the Chin. In their new society, various Chin tribes could identify themselves as being part of a single people. Not only did the old society and tribal barriers of the religion of Khua-hrum break down; a self-awareness of national identity based on their new Christian religion emerged. (p. 174)

Sakhong's argument that Christianity provided an ideological and institutional framework to unite the diverse Chin groups is largely in line with Scott's discussion of the role of Christianity among peoples of Zomia. For Scott (2009), it was the opportunity to embrace a 'modern identity', different from the religion of the lowland state, which therefore maintained the hill-valley distinction. For former aristocrat elites that had suffered a loss of power during colonialization, it was also the possibility to maintain distinction and transform themselves into a religious elite (Son, 2007).[101] Christianity's promise of literacy, medicine

[101] According to Bianca Son (2007), the conversion was separating different language groups from each other rather than unifying: "Conversion seems to have fulfilled its central purpose for the Chin in creating an elite, a small group endowed with power. The converted Chin have achieved this role first by separating themselves externally from the Burman and internally from other Chin, and then by using the particular role of Christianity

and material prosperity were additional attractions to become 'modern' and cosmopolitan but still retain one's 'indigenous' identity while keeping a distance from the lowland state (Scott, 2009). The fact that Christian missions became more 'indigenized' during the socialist period, as will be shown below, helped to further root Christianity in Chin society (Son, 2007). Rather than seeing it as colonial heritage, it was gradually considered by most Chin as an essential part of their 'indigenous' Chin identity. Nevertheless, despite the unifying element of Christianity, there can be no doubt that rivalry between churches perpetuated fragmentation within the uphill society (Son, 2007).[102] It was also not sufficient to engender a unified ethnic nationalist project, which still remains contested as the rivalry between Chin and Zomi nationalism indicates.

World War II: The Chin Hills between 'no man's land' and battle field

The beginning of World War II marked the beginning of the end of British colonialism in Burma and the end of the colonial frontier regime in the hills. The western frontier areas, in particular the Chin and Naga Hills, became a strategically important area in the *Burma Campaign* (1942-1945) (see Figure 8). One reason was the *Burma Road* — the main logistical route between China and India — which crossed the area (McLynn, 2011). It was the ambition of the invading Japanese Imperial forces to cut this important supply route to China in order to weaken Chiang Kai-Shek's *Kuomintang*. The decisive battles of *Imphal* and *Kohima* in 1944 eventually turned the tide against the Japanese invaders who had conquered Rangoon and driven out the British from Burma just two years earlier.[103] At that time, the Chin Hills were the only remaining area of Burma not yet under the control of the Japanese. For the people in the Chin Hills, it was the second invasion by a foreign army after the British invasion.

In the beginning, the Japanese forces were supported by the *Burma Independence Army* (BIA) (with general Aung San as one of their leaders) and by the majority of the Burman population who resented British occupation (Seekins, 2006).[104] Together with his legendary

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in the world to gain financial and political power. Externally, the separation from the majority, the Buddhist Burman, was a rejection of Burman rule" (p. 3).

[102] This is evident in the sheer number of churches per village and per capita and the competition among churches for believers and donations.

[103] The British Army fleeing the Japanese invasion withdrew from Burma through the border at Tamu and the governor of Burma flew to Shimla in India via Myitkyina in Kachin State. By June 1942, British forces had almost completely withdrawn from Burma.

[104] The Burma Independence Army (BIA) "was Burma's first postcolonial armed force" and the predecessor of the Tatmadaw (Seekins, 2006, p. 124). It was founded with the help of Japanese army members and the

Thirty Comrades, general Aung San – a leading young Burman nationalist – received military training in Japan and fought on the side of the imperial Japanese army with his BIA to drive out the colonialists. In the frontier areas, in contrast, many young and able men had been recruited by the *British Burma Army* in special divisions such as the *Chin Levies*, *Kachin Levies*, and *Karen Levies* to fight against the Japanese aggressor.[105] Yet some locals also resented the behavior of British administrators and joined the Japanese, while others worked with the Japanese occupying force in order to act as spies for the British and to organize underground resistance (Vum Ko Hau, 1963).[106]

In 1943, the Japanese Imperial forces invaded the northern part of the Chin Hills, which was lying on their route "On to Delhi", to ultimately invade British India and win the 'Greater East Asia war' (Vum Ko Hau, 1963; McLynn, 2011). The *Chin Levies* and *Chin Wags* (also a local force of resistance fighters) fought hard to block the advance of Japanese troops, causing many casualties on the side of the Japanese.[107] The advance was also further hampered by the extreme geographical conditions in the uplands and the lack of vehicle access-roads. Yet in the end the local resistance fighters could not stop the Japanese invasion and parts of the Northern and Central Chin Hills became occupied territory, too. In October 1943 the Japanese invaded Falam, then capital of the Chin Hills, and drove out the Chin

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thirty comrades, including Aung San who was senior staff officer. "Like the Tatmadaw and unlike the colonial-era army, the great majority of BIA recruits were Burman, with little or no ethnic minority representation" (p. 125).

[105] According to Vumson (1986) "The recruitment and training of the Levies was under the administrators Stevenson and Naylor, with the objective of building resistance to protect Zo villages. Accordingly, two cadres of Levies, "A" and "B", were established. The "B" Levy "was not normally a professional soldier, though military pensioners were frequently to be found in their ranks. . . ."The 'A' Levies were a full-time force, and to a large extent they were still embodied soldiers officially. Many of them were survivors of actions in Burma that had ended in the extinction of their units" (pp. 155-56).

[106] See Vum Ko Hau's "Profile of a Burma Frontier Man" (1963) for a detailed account of Japanese occupation of the Chin Hills during WWII. Vum Ko Hau himself worked for the Japanese as civilian administrator after he had worked under British administration. According to his account, he did this to be able to keep harm from the local population and organize an underground resistance against the Japanese. Yet, other Chin/Zo historians doubt the accuracy of his accounts and criticize his exaggerations (email communication with Zo historian, May 2019).

[107] Vum Ko Hau (1963) reports: "The first fierce battle the Chin Hills battalion and the Siyin Chin Levies fought against the Japanese Artillery Battalion was at No. 3 Stockade (near Theizang). In the fighting the majority of the advance Japanese troops including their commanders were killed. Captain Sakamaki told us after their occupation of the Chin Hills that very few of them returned to Kalemyo alive. He said that, he never had experienced such a percentage of casualties among his comrades since he left Japan to fight in China and Burma. Whenever he spoke about the Theizang battle he always shed tears" (p. 25).

Hills Battalion.[108] The Japanese occupation was a painful experience also for the people in the hills, as Vum Ko Hau (1963) reports in his memoires:

> As soon as the Japanese reached the heart of the Chin Hills they started killing people on the slightest suspicion. . . . Fear was in everybody's mind. Nobody would dare speak evil against the occupying forces who were called "To Thak" new masters. (p. 31)

Reportedly, twenty persons were ordered to be executed by the Japanese commissioner at the Falam headquarters. In order to secure the occupied area, the Japanese organized the *Chin Defense Army* (CDA) while their forces continued their advance to India. The task of the CDA was to drive out remaining British troops, yet the Japanese did not control all of the Chin Hills. "For a few years the Chin Hills formed a No Man's Land and troops in the Japanese occupied territories and those on the British occupied territories often met" (Vum Ko Hau, 1963, p. 37). Due to the heavy fighting and the demands to provide food and forced labor by passing troops on the civilians, most villages along the war-route (from Kalay—Fort White—Tedim to Tonzang) to India were deserted.[109] In August 1943, the Japanese declared Burma an 'independent' member of the "Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" in order to garner support from the local population, with Dr. Ba Maw as head of state. Yet, according to Seekins (2006), "Burma's independence was fictional, and the more arrogant Japanese officers treated its highest officials, including Ba Maw and Foreign Minister Thakin Nu, with barely disguised contempt" (Seekins, 2006, p. 24). In the Chin Hills, local leaders took the opportunity to organize themselves politically and militarily. Some had just been released from prison in lowland Kalay by the Japanese, where they had been detained by the British (Vumson, 1986). Out of these groups, the *Free Chin Movement* was born, which started to turn against the Japanese later on, as well as the *Chin Leaders' Freedom League*, which supported local people during the occupation in dealing with Japanese

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[108] The Chin Hills Battalion (Burma Frontier Force) "came into being following the separation of Burma from India in 1937. . .The Battalion was centered on Falam in the Chin Hills near the border with India and under the administration of The Maymyo Infantry Brigade Area. . . In 1939 the Battalion was organised with a headquarters company, a training company, six rifle companies and no mounted infantry troops. The sanctioned strength of the Battalion was 946 infantrymen. In addition to the Headquarters at Falam, outposts were maintained at Haka, Tiddim, Kalemyo, Kalewa, Mawlaik, Homalin, Tamanthi and Layshi" (The Burma Campaign, n.d.).

[109] According to Vum Ko Hau (1963) "The 300-mile long motor road from Kalemyo-Chin Hills to Bishenpur-lmphal was to be maintained by the local requisitioned labour; this gave no time for the local people to cultivate; the Japanese troops depended on the people's food and then they gave them no time to cultivate to produce food. This was impossible" (p. 52).

authorities. These activities provided the local elites with the opportunity to "taste what independence was; what an independent action looked like" and further drove their desire for independence (Vum Ko Hau, 1963, p. 78).

Figure 8: Remains of a bomb from WWII now used as a church bell in Central Chin State (Photo: by author)

In March 1944, the Japanese army launched their full-scale attack on Imphal and Kohima on the Indian side of the mountains (called operation "U-go"), but without success (Lyman, 2010).[110] The Japanese were lacking supplies and assistance by air, while the British resisted fiercely. As several months went by, with supplies gone and the monsoon arriving, the battle ended in a debacle for the Japanese Imperial Army, with over 50,000 soldiers killed (Vumson, 1986; Young, 2004).[111] However, even more soldiers perished on the long retreat through the Chin Hills due to starvation and illness (Young, 2004). Following the defeat at Imphal, the allied forces chased the retreating Japanese army on their way back to re-capture Burma. Within less than a year, with decisive battles in Meiktila and Mandalay in spring

[110] The plan was to capture Imphal until the birthday of Emperor Hirohito on the 29th April 1944. Vum Ko Hau argues that "it was madness to attempt to invade India without having proper food, ammunition, air power (if not to destroy cities or troops) to feed the advance troops" (Vum Ko Hau, 1963, p. 42).

[111] It was one of the major defeats in Japanese military history (Young, 2004).

1945, the Japanese forces were defeated and the way to Rangoon was again open for the British army (ibid.). At that time, the *Burma Independence Army* (renamed to *Burma National Army*) had already switched sides and started attacking Japanese units. Even though Aung San was seen by some British as a traitor, the Commander for South-East Asia, Lord Louis Mountbatten, recognized the Burma National Army as part of the allies against the Japanese enemy (Seekins, 2006).

4.4. The Post-Colonial Frontier: Negotiation and Resistance

Following the end of World War II, the British resumed their rule over Burma and also over the Chin Hills. However, it was clear that "the colonial *status quo ante* could never be restored" (Seekins, 2006, p. 25). The country's economy and infrastructure was in shatters and the political future more than uncertain. Major General Aung San, who was recognized by the British as the legitimate post-war leader of the Burmese population – despite his collaboration with the Japanese during the war – demanded immediate independence. He had founded the *Anti-Fascists People's Freedom League* (AFPFL) in 1944 to further push for independence and became a civilian politician and de facto prime minister under the British.[112] Aug San made it clear that he would not hesitate to use violent means again to achieve his aim of independence (Vumson, 1986). Since the new labor government in London was not interested in prolonging the colonial system, it was agreed in a meeting in London in January 1947 (known as the *Attlee-Aung San Agreement*) to give independence to Burma within a year (Lian Sakhong, 2003).[113] The agreement included the following provisions concerning the future of the *frontier areas*, which Aung San was determined to include in a future independent Burma. The British government however wanted to ensure proper consultation of the frontier people before making any final decision:[114]

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[112] The "Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), which had grown out of the wartime Anti-Fascist Organization . . . was a broad united front that included communist and noncommunist labor unions, peasant associations, women's and youth groups, and ethnic organizations representing Arakanese, Karens, and Shans, with a total membership of around 200,000" (Seekins, 2006, p. 26).

[113] At the 1945 elections, Winston Churchill surprisingly lost and the labor party under Clement Attlee took over, which had the independence of India and Burma as part of its program. Eventually, Attlee annulled the Conservative Party's 'Crown Colonial Scheme' which intended to create a separate British colonial province (Chin-Lushai Country) (Lian Sakhong, 2003).

[114] During the meeting in London, Stevenson also sent a message saying that "we wish to state emphatically that neither the Hon'ble Aung San nor his colleagues has any mandate to speak on behalf of FA [Frontier Areas]" (Tinker, 1956 as cited in Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 209). Two of the Burman members of the delegation refused to sign the agreement since they thought it might imply the risk of splitting up the Union (Lian Sakhong, 2003).

> Frontier areas: It is the agreed objective of both His Majesty's government and the Burmese Delegates to achieve early unification of the Frontier Areas and Ministerial Burma with the free consent of the inhabitants of those areas. At the time it is agreed that the people of the Frontier Areas should, in respect of common interest, be closely associated with the government of Burma in a manner acceptable to both parties. For this purpose it has been agreed:
>
> a) There shall be free intercourse between the peoples of the Frontier Areas and the people of Ministerial Burma without hindrance.
>
> b) The leaders and the representatives of the peoples of the Frontier Areas shall be asked, either at the Panglong conference to be held at the beginning of next month, or at a special conference to be convened for the purpose of expressing their views upon the form of association with the government of Burma which they consider acceptable during the transition period:. . .
>
> c) After the Panglong meeting, or the special conference, His Majesty's government and the government of Burma will agree upon, the best method of advancing their common aims in accordance with the expressed views of the peoples of the Frontier Areas.
>
> d) A committee of Inquiry shall be set forth with as to the best method of associating the frontier peoples with the working out of the new constitution of Burma (Chin Human Rights Organization, 2003, p. 9).

Aung San's AFPFL officially stated its "interest in the hill areas", and that it was "determined to ensure and safeguard the interests of 'national' minorities" and establish democracy "to enable the hill people to express their views freely" (Vum Ko Hau, 1963, p. 81). This went, somehow, against the plans of some members of the colonial administration. In particular, former superintendent of the Chin Hills (and director of the Frontier Areas Administration), Stevenson, preferred to keep the frontier areas under a separate

administration.[115] Also prior to the signing of the Attlee-Aung San agreement, a Karen delegation had visited London in August 1946 to express "their community's opposition to being included in an independent state dominated by Burmans" (Seekins, 2006, p. 240). For the Chin leader, Vum Ko Hau, however, Aung San seemed sincere in his concern for the welfare of the frontier peoples as he writes:

> I was naturally delighted therefore to hear that U Aung San took such an interest in the affairs of the Chin and other frontier tribes of Burma. He was the first Burmese of any stature to include the name of the Frontier peoples in his programme for uniting ministerial Burma and the Frontier Areas. (Vum Ko Hau, 1963, p. 81)

The Panglong Conference: Joining the Union

During the (second) *Panglong Conference* from 7 to 12 February 1947, only one month after signing the agreement with Clement Attlee, Aung San managed to gain the trust of some the frontier peoples (although only a fraction attended) and convince them to join the Union.[116] Vum Ko Hau, who also accompanied the Chin delegation to Panglong, reports that Aung San even claimed to have Chin ancestors in order to convince the Chin delegates of the close relationship between their groups.[117] He further quotes Aung San saying, "We the Burmans need you the Frontier peoples; and you need us the Burmans. One without the other would be like a body without limbs and vice versa" (Vum Ko Hau, 1963, p. 83). With his charm and charisma, Aung San won over the ethnic delegates. According to Vum Ko Hau (1963), "no doubt the various diverse frontier races trusted him, a thing they never did before with a single Burmese individual. His transparent honesty and sincerity won the hearts of the honest, slow but sure thinking frontier highland races" (p. 84).[118] Aung San also articulated

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[115] Stevenson made his United Frontier Union proposal "which, if adopted, would have created a jurisdiction within the British Commonwealth for the "hill tribes." Excoriated by the Anti- Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) for promoting "divide and rule", his proposal was rejected by the Labour government of Clement Attlee" (Seekins, 2006, p. 424). Stevenson made his proposal at a conference, which is also referred to as the "Frist Panglong conference", in March 1946 (Walton, 2008).

[116] The delegations were comprised of Chin groups, Kachin, and Shan, with Karen only participating as observers and Kayah not attending. Other groups such as the Naga or Wa were not included in the conference since they were considered too 'backward' to participate in political negotiations. The Mon and Arakanese were not included since they were considered to be part of ministerial Burma (Walton, 2008).

[117] This statement clearly did not miss its emotional effect on Vum Ko Hau, who reports: "These utterances which were new to me touched my heart deeply. I reported these statements to my fellow delegates; they also felt very touched" (1963, p. 82).

[118] And further: "The Frontier peoples, had they not been so sure of his sincerity and honesty would rather have remained by themselves for better or worse. They had fought alone at their annexation by the British with great

concerns about the consequences of a potential separation of the frontier areas from Burma proper, such as the latter's security, if surrounded by an independent frontier union, as well as its economic future. The main demands raised by Chin delegation during the conference were rather practical and concerned improvements in education, health, transportation and communication, which they complained had been neglected under British occupation.[119] Since Aung San promised all necessary financial support, the Chin delegation was ready to agree in principle and to defer discussions on the status of the Chin Hills as a separate state. However, Sakhong (2003) suggests, that Vum Ko Hau could not accurately translate to the other delegates speaking other Chin dialects (in particular Lai from Hakha). Yet other historians doubt this interpretation and Vom Ko Hau's role during the conference.[120] Stevenson, who was familiar with the Chin and who supported a separation of the frontier areas from Burma Proper, was forced to retire before the Panglong conference (Lian Sakhong, 2003).[121] With the agreement made between the Chin Committee, Shan Committee, Kachin Committee and the Burmese government (represented by Aung San), a basic declaration (known as the *Panglong Agreement*) could be signed on 12 February 1974 (today a public holiday known as "Union Day").[122] The agreement declared the cooperation of the frontier areas and the independence of Burma proper. It also stated the intention to establish Kachin State and the autonomy of the federated Shan States, equal treatment of the frontier areas in terms of economic support and representation in highest levels of government. Yet the agreement included only three of the main ethnic groups in the frontier areas and left many crucial issues unaddressed (Walton, 2008).

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success and again during the invasion by a modern Japanese army without the assistance of any third party. If insulted or if the/ are convinced about a cause there is no telling what havoc they can do either in individual or collective groups. Bogyoke rather praised them for their various stands made against the enemy and these episodes encouraged them and won their hearts. Any threats would have spoiled any possibility of a union of the Frontier Areas with ministerial Burma. It was a fact that although the valour of the Frontier people was recorded in books and gazetteers by the British invader, a Burman never had a chance ever to acknowledge it to the hill people themselves" (Vum Ko Hau, 1963, p. 84).

[119] Vum Ko Hau (1963) told Aung San by his own account: "The Chins want to know what Burma will do with the Chin Hills should they ask for independence together with Burma. The Chin Hills need improvement in everything, education, health, communications and administration. They want more employment, more money. The people have clamoured for a motor road and for high schools for years but nothing has been given. They want to retain the personnel of the Chin battalions" (p. 83).

[120] Other historians criticize Vum Ko Hau for exaggerating his role in the Panglong conference and also doubt that his interpretation had such a significant outcome. There were also other Chin/Zo chiefs involved who were able to speak Burmese (email communication with Zo historian, May 2019).

[121] Lian Sakhong (2003) argues that the "Chin were manipulated by both the British and the Burman and ended up without a separate nation-state in the Union of Burma" (p. 213).

[122] The signatories on behalf of the the Chin committee included the Chin chiefs Hlur Hmung (from Falam), Thawng Za Khup (from Tedim) and Kio Mang (from Hakha). While Vum Ko Hau did not sign, he presents himself as one of the authors of the Panglong agreement (Vum Ko Hau, 1963).

Between March and April 1947, the *Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry*, as mandated in the Attlee-Aung San agreement, chaired by Colonel Rhees-Williams, met representatives from the frontier areas to further investigate their opinions concerning the future of the Union and the possible inclusion in drafting a new constitution.[123] Due to the problematic situation of transportation in the Chin Hills, the commission met the Chin delegates in Maymyo (Pyin Oo Lwin) near Mandalay. The responses by the different Chin delegates from various areas in the hills were rather inconsistent and suggest differing opinions as well as internal confusion over the future status of the Chin Hills ("Frontier Areas Committee", 1947).[124] While most agreed on the need to manage their 'internal affairs' according to 'local customs', they also highlighted the need for more financial support concerning communication and transportation, education and health. But it was unclear whether this should be done as part of ministerial Burma or under a federal system, as the difference were not clear to all.[125] Subsequently, Chin representatives participated in the drafting of the 1947 Constitution under which the Chin Hills became *Chin Special Division* (and *Chin State* in 1974).

The constitution created a system that one of the drafters described as "federal in theory and unitary in practice" (Seekins, 2006, p. 153). It also introduced the positon of "the Minister for Chin Affairs" which was filled by Pu Vum Tu Maung (Lian Sakhong, 2003). In addition, the constitution guaranteed the right to secession to the Shan and Karenni State in chapter ten (Constituent Assembly of Burma, 1947).[126] Since the Chin Hills came under a "Special Division", they had no right to secession. Yet before the constitution could take effect, Aung

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[123] Again, Vum Ko Hau claims to have been involved in the committee (1963).

[124] The commission report says "On the evidence tendered before us, representatives from the Chin Hills do not desire to federate the Chin Hills with Burma proper but prefer an amalgamation of their area with ministerial Burma, stipulating only that there should be no interference with their tribal customs and traditions and that their chieftains should be allowed to administer their tracts as at present. The Chin Hills would otherwise become one or more ordinary districts of Burma proper. On the day after they had tendered this evidence, the witnesses submitted a letter saying that they had not understood the point correctly and that they intended to say that the Chin Hills should form a separate state within a federated Burma. The only conclusion we can safely draw is that the people of the Chin Hills are not yet in a position to come to a firm conclusion on this matter and that it will have to be left to their representatives in the Constituent Assembly to define their views precisely" ("Frontier Areas Committee", 1947).

[125] As the committee report admits, the statements made by some "witnesses was made without understanding precisely the difference between the terms "Union Government" and "Federal Government" ("Frontier Areas Committee", 1947).

[126] According to the 1947 constitution, chapter 10 "Save as otherwise expressly provided in this Constitution or in any Act of Parliament made under section 199, every State shall have the right to secede from the Union in accordance with the conditions hereinafter prescribed. . . .The right of secession shall not be exercised within ten years from the date on which this Constitution come s into operation" (Constituent Assembly of Burma, 1947).

San — who was to become the new prime minister — was assassinated in July 1947, supposedly as part of a nationalist conspiracy (Maung Maung, 1962).[127] After Aung San's death, U Nu was appointed to take over the government as prime minster, even though he was not keen to take on this role. According to Sakhong (2003), however, he betrayed Aung San's legacy by changing the constitution draft:

> The changing of Aung San's version of the Union Constitution proved to be the end of his policy for a secular state and pluralism in Burma, which eventually led to the promulgation of Buddhism as a state religion in 1961. In fact, it was the beginning of religious fanaticism, which finally led Burma into racial conflicts and narrow-minded nationalism, and a five-decade-long civil war. This also had serious repercussions on the position of the Chin in the Union of Burma (p. 220).

Chin National Day

Just after the declaration of independence, in February 1948, a large conference was held in Falam, then capital of the "Chin Special Division", with over 5,000 representatives from all over the Chin Hills. Among several issues discussed concerning the future of the Chin Hills, one of the most important was the system of administration and the 'traditional chief system'. "Most representatives felt that the traditional chiefs who had no modern education were no longer competent to cope with the rapidly changing political situation" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 221). The absolute majority of participants therefore voted for the abolishment of the old chief system and in favor of a democratic system in the Chin Hills from the national level down to the local level administration (in the Shan hills, the feudal system existed until the 1950s). The conference, which is since celebrated as *Chin National Day,* was not just the end of the old "tribal identity in all its political and religious forms" according to Lian Sakhong (2003):

> It was the beginning of a new national identity, which holds and ties the whole Chin race together in the name 'Chin', and no longer in the tribal names—e.g. Asho, Chó, Khó-mi, Laimi, Mizo and Zomi. They all

[127] Vum Ko Hau (1963) was at that time counselor for the Chin in Aung Sans Cabinet and survived the assassination plot because of another appointment. U Saw, a rival politician of Aung San, was later tried and hanged for the murder (Maung Maung, 1962).

> commemorate '20th February' as 'Chin National Day', not as a tribal day. (p. 222)

After independence, the *Chin Hills Regulation* of 1896 was replaced by the *Chin Special Division Act of 1948* (CSDA) (The Government of the Union of Burma, 1948) (again amended in 1957). The act continued to recognize customary practices to a certain extent and also included the representation of Chin through a *Minister of Chin Affairs* and *Chin Affairs Council*. However, according to a local historian and political activist, compared to the original Chin Hills Regulation, many essential and meaningful articles were lost:

> The 1948 Chin Special Division Act was the starting point, when we lost all our right to own the land in Chin State. For example, the Chin Hills Regulation of 1896 was applied not only in Chin State of Burma today, but also in Mizroam State and Nagaland in India. They still apply the Chin Hill Regulation as it was. If you go to Mizoram State or to Nagaland, you realize that no one from outside Mizoram State can own land in Mizoram State . . . . But in Burma, because the Chin Hills Regulation was unwisely neglected by the Burmese government, we lost the ownership of land in Chin Sate. Now the land in Chin State is not owned by the Chin people, it can also be owned now by the people from outside if they are a citizen of Burma. That was the biggest mistake we made in Burma. That was because of 1948 Chin Special Division Act. And then after General Ne Win took over state power and nationalized the ownership of land, we lost all the power and right to own our own land in our own Chin State. (Int. 65, Chin historian, activist, December 2018, online)

Chin State under the BSPP government

Following a democratic parliamentary period, in 1962, General New Win staged a military coup against the U Nu government. He suspended the 1947 constitution, including the right of the frontier areas to secede, which was a major factor for the coup. Given the increasing secessionist ethnic movements, the military legitimated its intervention with the argument that "the Union would disintegrate without a strong army" (Lian Sakhong, 2010, p. 77). The members of the military's Revolutionary Council were Burman dominated. According to Vumson (1986), "neither Zo nor other frontier nationals were included" (p. 214). As part of the military takeover, all members of the U Nu government were arrested, some politicians

were killed or 'disappeared' until today (Sargent, 1994). However, the minister of Chin affairs Zahre Lian was released from prison shortly after.

For the Chin Hills, as for the rest of Burma, the coup d'état was a watershed event, not only in terms of changing political relationship between the center and the periphery, but also concerning its socio-economic situation. However, there are very few detailed accounts how the changes under the regime of Ne Win and his *Burma Socialist Program Party* (BSPP) unfolded in the hills. This is, not least, because soon after Ne Win's takeover, all foreign missionaries, who had been close observers of daily life in the hills, together with most other foreign citizens in Burma had to leave the country (Johnson, 2007, Lian Sakhong, 2010). After the coup, no foreigners were able to return to the Chin Hills until after the 2012 ceasefire agreement (except for some areas or with special permission).[128] The expulsion of foreign citizens and their violent expropriation was the result of a policy of nationalization and 'self-isolation' under the new military regime (Mya Maung, 1991).[129] In addition, "General Ne Win targeted Christianity as an unwanted foreign religion, while viewing Christian missionaries as people who kept 'imperialism alive'" (Lian Sakhong, 2010, p. 49). In order to increase state control, missionary schools and hospitals were nationalized. Nevertheless, local missions continued to be active and have achieved considerable success in converting more people to Christianity since the 1960s. According to Lian Sakhong (2010), "the *indigenous form of Christianity*, that is, the church without foreign missionaries became a more valid expression of the Chin national identity in Burma" (p. 49). The local churches also played an increasingly important role under authoritarian conditions as an 'umbrella' for different kinds of social and political activities since political parties other than the ruling BSPP were banned. According to a local Human rights activist, "during the military government everything, celebrations, publications, everything was under the church" (Int. 48, Chin Human Rights activist, Hakha, November 2016). However, even though churches were not directly banned, they faced increasing pressure since the BSPP introduced harsh censorship laws that also affected Christian printing houses.[130] For

[128] During field research in Hakha in 2015, the author met by chance two members of a former missionary family who had visited the Chin Hills for the first time since they left in the mid-1960s, when they still were kids. Upon arrival, they were greeted by a 'welcome committee' at the Hakha Baptist Association who obviously had kept the missionary family in good memory.

[129] One famous personal account of the dramatic circumstances under which foreign citizens had do leave the country after Ne Win's take over was written by Sargent (1994).

[130] According to Lian Sakhong (2010), "Christians in Burma, especially non-Burman nationalities have mostly been unable to print the Holy Bible in their own language inside Burma. Chin Christians, for instance, printed the Bible in the Chin language in India, and smuggled it into Burma in the 1970s and 1980s. Even the Holy

instance, all non-Burmese publications had to be translated into Burmese or English for the censors and approved in a lengthy and costly process which severely limited literature of ethnic nationalities. Additionally, local Chin language newspapers were banned and only allowed again since 2013 (Downing, 2017; Lian Sakhong, 2010). In general, the BSPP "embarked on what ethnic minority leaders allege was a straightforward policy of *Burmanization* or *Myanmarization*" (Lian Sakhong, 2010, p. 51). A new military-drafted constitution written in 1974 "replaced federalism with central control and emphasized centralization and the primacy of state over the interests of individuals and subgroups" (Vumson, 1986, p. 220). It was regarded by the people in the frontier as "reversal of the Panglong-agreement" in which they had opted to join Burma under the condition of having the right to "handle their own affairs" (ibid.). This of course prompted resistance, mainly by youth and students from the frontier areas, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

Concerning the economic reforms under the '*Burmese Way to Socialism',* all commercial enterprises and banks were nationalized and the power and wealth moved "from the hands of the business people, who were in the majority Indians and Chinese, into the hands of the military" (Vumson, 1986, p. 216).[131] Around 15,000 enterprises had been nationalized by the end of the decade and tens of thousands of South Asians were bankrupted and forced to leave the country (Seekins, 2006, p. 34). The government also declared itself as owner over all land and natural resources and reformed the agricultural sector. Important laws were adopted against landlords with the purpose of protecting peasants' rights to land and property. The aversion to capitalism and non-Burmese landowners in the post-independence period had grown out of a bitter experience under British colonial rule, when the Burmese majority felt exploited by the British and other foreign business elites. Already under the leadership of the late General Aung San, a general program for building a socialist economy through national planning and state controls was developed (Mya Maung, 1970). But unlike the Soviet and Chinese Communist regimes "the Revolutionary Council did not collectivize agriculture and ban private agricultural land" (Seekins, 2006, p. 33). The 'Tenancy Law' and the 'Protection of Peasant's Rights Law' were enacted in March 1963, with the slogan 'land to the tiller'. According to Vumson (1986), this was "the first time a Burmese law directly

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Bible in Burmese, which was translated by Rev. Judson in the 1820s, never received permission to be reprinted from the Censor Board of the BSPP" (p. 51).

[131] The official ideology of the "Burmese Way to Socialism" was published in 1963 with the title "'The System of Correlation of Man and His Environment', which was socialist but non-Marxist, with Buddhist metaphysical elements and a dash of humanism as expressed in the aphorism, 'man matters most'" (Seekins, 2006, p. 34).

applied to Zoram" (p. 214). Thus, under Ne Win's rule, the central state tried to increase its control over the Chin Hills, after having been largely absent following independence (Leach, 1960). Yet, the laws enacted by a Burman-dominated Socialist government did not consider the special situation of the frontier areas. This had an impact on the agricultural landscape and land relations:

> The government promoted paddy production during this period, forcing farmers to build paddy terraces, even where the land was not suitable. Although the land was technically owned by the central government, there was an increase in informal land sales- farmers would buy and sell ancestral land for terrace construction informally. (Frissard & Pritts, 2018, p. 74)

However, while in the lowlands the government set compulsory delivery quotas for paddy farmers and determined which crops farmers had to plant, this policy did not apply to all frontier areas (Kyin Lam Mang, 2017; Seekins, 2006). During this period, the government also actively discouraged shifting cultivation, blaming it for deforestation and erosion. Nevertheless, "all households still practiced shifting cultivation, although the system started to be simplified bit by bit" (Frissard & Pritts, 2018, p. 74). Along with the promotion of irrigated rice schemes and permanent agriculture (including orchards), the government also introduced buffalos to the hills (in addition to the traditional mithun). Some livestock breeders consequently started to sell livestock across the border to India's Mizoram State

In terms of infrastructure, road development was on the government's agenda with the first piece of paved all-weather road connecting the Chin Hills with the lowlands in 1970 (Vumson, 1986, p. 215). Yet construction progressed very slowly and by the 1980s most areas were still difficult to reach, only connected by small dirt roads or footpaths. Following several rounds of demonetizations and increasing inflation, the economic experiment of the BSPP regime began to collapse in the late 1980s ushering in the end of the 'Burmese Way to Socialism'. The people, lacking the most basic necessities, resorted to smuggling with the black market controlling large parts of the economy. According to a 'Zo historian':

> Burmese leaders believed socialism and communism would work like magic in uplifting the primitive economy and industry of the nation. It was as if they were saying 'Let us halt production and make revolution.' In

> their eagerness to make the right ideological choice, they have undermined their understanding with the frontier people. (Vumson, 1986, p. 241)

4.5. Conclusion of Chapter 4

The aim of this chapter was to trace the 'making' of the frontier in the Chin Hills and socio-economic and political changes as part of the historical process of incorporation. As was shown, several shifts in the past 'frontier regimes' can be identified. Until well into the late 20th century, the Chin frontier was never fully incorporated into the post-colonial nation state. In pre-colonial times, as claimed by local historians the area west of the Chindwin valley "had never belonged to Burmese kingdoms" (Lian Sakhong, 2003). Being 'external' to the dominating powers in the lowlands (even though monarchs made symbolic claims), the hills were functioning as 'zone of refuge' for peoples trying to 'evade the state'. Its economy at that time was a largely self-sufficient 'pre-market' economy embedded in social and religious institutions and adapted to the ecological uphill environment. Yet trade (and raid) relations with the lowlands did exist.

The colonial period and the incorporation into the British dominated world-system at the end of the 19th century was the most significant change. Even though the incorporation at this point was rather weak, it was nevertheless shaking the very foundations of the peripheral societies in pre-colonial Burma, with dramatic consequences. A major factor was the spread of Christianity by foreign missionaries and interventions in the traditional economic system (inducing the abolition of 'slavery'). The colonial frontier was a 'frontier of control' and mainly concerned with providing security for its 'lowland dominion'. While at first, the British had little interest to extend their rule into the uphills the problematic security situation arguable forced them to act. The colonial administration was marked by a strong division between its core area (Burma Proper) and the indirectly administered 'Excluded areas' in the periphery. This division largely continued after independence.

Through World War II, the hills became an important battleground in the 'South-East Asian Theatre' for the allied and axis powers with devastating effects on the local population. Chin leaders were actively involved in the founding of the Union and the negotiations leading to independence, under the condition of being granted far-reaching autonomous rights. During a brief democratic period, they were also represented in the central political institutions. Nevertheless, the hope for a federal democratic union and economic improvement in the

hills was crushed by a military coup in 1962. Under a one-party state, Burma 'locked itself out' of the Western dominated world-system. The self-isolation of Burma during the second half of the 20th century also affected its frontiers which it nevertheless sought to (forcefully) incorporate through centrally directed development schemes that were perceived as 'assimilationist' and aiming at the 'Burmanization' of ethnic groups. Yet the results remained mixed at best and the Chin Hills remained politically marginalized and economically deprived. As a consequence, resistance increased, although to a lesser extent and later than in other frontier areas of Burma. The militarization following the 1988 uprising and related impacts on the frontier will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters. These chapters will also trace the latest phase of the incorporation of the Chin frontier marked by the end of the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' and the rise of a world-system increasingly shaped by China at the beginning of the 21st century.

5. LAND FRONTIERS: INCORPORATION AND ENCLOSURE

"There is no land which is not occupied
by our own people in Chin State".

(Int. 27, villagers, Mwetaung, November 2016)

5.1. Introduction

Chin State has been termed the "last frontier" of Myanmar, a remote region that is facing major changes in the wake of current national and regional developments (Project Maje, 2012, Vicol, Pritchard, & Yu Yu Htay, 2018). Indeed, Chin State, located on Myanmar's northwestern border, has been one of the most marginalized and inaccessible parts of the country. A lack of basic infrastructure and means of transportation in this mountainous state, combined with a low-level insurgency, has resulted in relative isolation and little engagement from the outside (except for the presence of the Tatmadaw). Until about 2012, the military government had barred foreigners altogether from entering Chin State, apart from some tourist destinations in the south of the State requiring a special permit.[132] Bordering Northeast India – itself a remote area, troubled by insurgencies and out-of-reach even for most Indians –the level of bilateral trade between India and Myanmar across this border has been negligible when compared to Myanmar's eastern and northern borders facing Thailand and China (except for petty border trade and local cross border migration) (Singh, 2007).[133] Yet, while Chin State has "been cut off from the outside world" for decades

[132] Even for foreigners having lived in Myanmar for decades and studying local Chin State languages it was impossible to visit the area. As So-Hartmann (2009) writes: "Due to travel restrictions for foreigners in Myanmar, the author was never able to live in a Daai-speaking village community. However, the author's home in Yangon was for many years also home to Daai family members and visitors from different parts of the Daai territory and often Daai was the language spoken around the table" (p. 33).

[133] According to Singh (2007) "the volume of official cross-border trade between India and Myanmar is very low because the number of goods that can be freely exchanged is limited to a specified 22 items" (p. 363); "Restrictions on trade have created incentives for engaging in the trading of contraband and harmful goods commanding super-normal profits despite the higher risk. The main items of seizure are precious stones, narcotic drugs, batteries, inverters, blankets, Myanmar currency, detergents, soaps, readymade garments and shoes. The high value of informal trade and products seized by the customs indicate the scale of illegal trade

(Thawng Zel Thang, 2013), this does not mean that the people in the region have not engaged with the outside world. On the contrary, following the political upheavals of 1988, which also affected people in Chin State, a flood of outmigration occurred. Tens of thousands of people from all parts of the state sought to escape repression and poverty in search for a better life (Murugasu, 2017; Int. 7, Chin business man, Yangon, May 2015).[134] Soon people from Chin State became one of the largest diaspora groups in the country, with Chin spreading all over the globe and often keeping strong ties to their 'homeland' (Hoffstaedter, 2014).[135] Following the recent political and economic changes in Myanmar since the 2010 elections and the ceasefire agreements in 2012, outmigration has somewhat receded and "taken on a more circular nature" (Vicol et al., 2018, p. 458).

At the same time, Chin State is turning from a 'backwater' region into a fast-changing frontier, with 'frontier towns', such as Hakha or Falam, experiencing construction booms and land speculation, though on a much smaller scale compared to the dynamic eastern frontier (compare for example the border towns Myawaddy/Mae Sot). The expansion of the urban frontier creates local conflicts between urban dwellers, neighboring rural communities and the city administration (Boutry, Allaverdian, Tin Myo Win, & Khin Pyae Sone, 2018). The rural areas dominated by shifting cultivation are experiencing a transition from customary land tenure to other – often more intensive and commercial – forms of private land use, including paddy farming and other monocultures.[136] Investment friendly policies and a new legal framework adopted in 2012 that prioritize privatization and formalization of land have advanced these developments (Ennion, 2015). Though reforms to a market-oriented economy are not entirely new and had already begun in the 1990s, the recent wave

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at the Moreh–Tamu sector, but also implies that there is a huge potential to increase formal official trade between the two countries" (p. 375).

[134] According to Murugasu (2017), about 50,000 Chin had migrated to Malaysia alone, where many of them attained refugee status. Khen Suan Khai (2009) put the number of informal migrants to Malaysia up to 150,000. In 2018, UNHCR announced to phase out the refugee status for Chin people since Chin State had been declared as a 'stable' region (Ruban, 2018). Yet due to the worsening security situation this decision was again taken back ("UNHCR says ethnic Chin refugees," 2018).

[135] There have been some studies on migration from Chin State as well as remittances. See for example Hoffstaedter, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2009; Khen Suan Khai, 2009; Murugasu, 2017; Pires Dos Reis-Keckeis 2013; Rual Lian Thang, 2012. One report lists about 1,000 emigrants and refugees from just one part of Thantlang township to about 14 different countries (GRET, 2012).

[136] Customary land is land governed by customary law. According to Oberndorf (2012), "customary law is the written and unwritten rules which have developed from the customs and traditions of communities. These customs and traditions are known to community members; followed by community members and enforced by them. Customary law in regard to land, usually incorporates the rights of community members in respect of land tenure, land-use, sale and inheritance of land. Customary law varies between communities and needs to be recognized and given equal status as statutory law" (p. 15).

of reforms drastically changed the dynamics of land tenure in the upland regions. Therefore, land conflicts are even increasing in apparently remote areas where one would not expect them.

All these observations hint to a changing dynamic which seems perfectly in line with the characterization of *land frontiers* by Peluso and Lund (2012) as spaces "where authorities, sovereignties, and hegemonies of the recent past have been or are currently being challenged by new enclosures, territorializations and property regimes" (p. 669) (see also chapter 2). Following this perspective on the land frontier, the following chapter will analyze the spatial dimension of the processes of incorporation in Chin State. This goes hand in hand with the transformation of customary rights to legal and written titles (formalization); concretely defined and enclosed physical spaces (fixation); the use of such demarcated landed property as a form of capital (rationalization); and the absorption into a land market (privatization) (Cottyn, 2017). As will be illustrated by the empirical material gathered during field research from 2015 to 2017 (see chapter 3), this often leads to conflicts on several scales and between actors that can assume quite diverse forms.

The first part of the chapter will provide an overview of Chin State's current socio-economic situation, in particular concerning land use and the predominant system of shifting cultivation and customary land tenure. The following section will discuss the changing legal and policy frameworks since 1988 that have had an impact on land tenure regimes. It will be shown how the resulting legal pluralism led to a confusing situation, to the disadvantage of local farmers. After a brief 'village study', different modes of enclosures and dispossession will be discussed in some detail. These include: 1) Land confiscations in connection to militarization since 1988; 2) Private enclosures including local elites; 3) Enclosures related to conservation and 'green grabbing'; 4) Enclosures related to urban expansion; 5) Infrastructure development related enclosures and; 6) Threats of dispossession through mining activities. However, this chapter does not aim at providing a complete overview of land and resource conflicts in Chin State, since this is beyond the scope of this research. Instead it provides a summary of selected cases, at the risk of not doing justice to the cases regarding their complexity and distinctiveness.[137]

[137] To the knowledge of the author, there is no complete quantitative dataset on cases of land conflicts in Chin State. The most complete dataset collected by an international NGO does not include cases from Chin State (Int. 64, international NGO (land rights), Yangon, December 2017).

5.2. Chin State: A Socioeconomic Overview

Chin State is among the least populated states in Myanmar with a total population of only 479,000 inhabitants, which is less than 1% of Myanmar's total population (Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015).[138] The state's inhabitants are very young, with a median age of only 20 years, mainly residing in rural areas (79%) in villages ranging from a handful to many hundred households (see Table 5). The vast majority of the population engages in agriculture since there are limited alternative economic opportunities, with manufacturing almost absent (except for a small 'cottage industry'). A small service sector, commerce and petty trade are concentrated in the few urban centers. According to several studies, poverty rates in Chin State are among the highest in Myanmar, a country that is itself among the poorest in Southeast Asia (Mohanty et al., 2018; Schmitt-Degenhardt, 2013). While the GDP per capita is less than half of the countries average, this is not surprising in a region that relies on a subsistence economy with little cash income for households.[139] In addition, social and health indicators are among the worst in the country with particularly high infant mortality rates and a comparably low life expectancy (see Table 5).

[138] With a population of 286.627, only Kayah State is smaller in terms of population size (Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2014).

[139] According to Mohanty et al. (2018), "people in rural mountain areas experience multiple deprivations. Although income is an important indicator, it is not sufficient to understand poverty. Mountainous regions are typically deprived in terms of basic services such as energy, water, and sanitation, have limited opportunities for non-farm employment, are poorly accessible, and are vulnerable to environmental change" (p. 24).

	Chin State	Myanmar (Union)
Total Population (million)	478,801 (2014) (= 0.9 %) 368,949 (1983) 323,295 (1973)	51.5 (2014) 35.3 (1983) 28.9 (1979)
Area (km2)	36,018.9	676,578
Population density (per Km²)	13.3 10 (1983)	76.1
Urban population (%)	21 14 (1983)	30
Rural population (%)	79	70
Mean household size (persons)	5.1	4.4
Median age (years)	20.1	27
Total Fertility Rate	5	2.5
Life expectancy (years at birth)	63.6	66.8
Literacy rate (persons aged 15 years and over) (%)	79.4	89
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000)	76	62
People with no identity card (%)	25.2	-
Religion: Christianity (%)	85 72.7 (1983)	6
Religion: Buddhism (%)	13 10.8(1983)	89
Material for housing (wall): wood (% of households)	60.1	41.2
Material for housing (wall): bamboo (% of households)	34.2	37.4
Households with no communication devises (Radio, TV, Phone) (%)	57.9	30.3
Use of electricity for lighting (% of households)	15.4	32.4
GDP/capita (USD)	336	745
Proportion of Employed Population Working in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (%)	73 92 (1983)	42.3

Table 5: Comparison of socio-economic indicators between Chin State and Union (source: Department of Population, Ministry of Labour Immigration and Population, 2014; 2015; n.d; The Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs

Therefore, outmigration and seasonal labor migration are common. Over the past few years, Chin State has had a clearly negative net-migration rate (Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015). Many households depend on remittances from family

members abroad, since the small-scale agricultural production cannot ensure enough food supply throughout the year (GRET, 2012; Myanmar Institute for Integrated Development [MIID], 2014; Rual Lian Thang, 2012). Additional food (mainly rice) has to be purchased and imported from the lowlands (in particular Kalay) to meet basic demand.

Chin State is one of the most densely forested states in Myanmar, with a forest cover of around 80-90% (about 37% intact forests and the rest degraded forests) (ALARM, Smithsonian Institution, GMAP, & American Museum of Natural History, 2016; Bhagwat et al., 2017; Leimgruber et al., 2005).[140] It has among the largest remaining intact forests in the country. However, Southern Chin State is also facing high losses of intact forest (Bhagwat et al., 2017). According to official land use data, 29% of the area is classified as "reserved forest" and "other forest" under the administration of the Forest Department. Another 34% are classified as "cultivable waste land" and the same amount as "other land" (34%) (including grazing land, roads, towns, etc.). Only around 3% of the land is actually used for agriculture, according to the official government data (MIID, 2014, p. 72). Yet, this data needs to be taken with caution, since the actual land use 'on the ground' is often very different and does not coincide with government categories and statistics as will become evident in the second part of this chapter.

Given the mountainous terrain with altitudes ranging from below 500 to over 3,000 meters above sea level and a lack of fertile, plain agricultural land, shifting cultivation (*taungya*) is generally the main form of agriculture and economic occupation as already mentioned earlier. About 80% of the agricultural land is *taungya* land. According to a recent survey in central Chin State, about 80-100% of the surveyed households practiced shifting cultivation (CORAD, 2016).[141] Traditionally, the main crop produced is maize (in addition to millet and beans and others) but is increasingly replaced by "rice-based semi-commercial farming" (GRET, 2012, p. 3). The practice of shifting cultivation is very different from agricultural practices of intensive paddy production in the lowland (Cairns, 2015).[142] It requires low population densities and large areas of reserve land, to be able shift from one plot to another.

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[140] According to Bhagwat et al. (2017, p. 9) Chin State lost 113,530 ha intact forest from 2002 to 2004 (about 1,135 km²). According to an NGO report, "the closed forest cover had been lost by 45% during the period from 1990 to 2010. It was turned into open forest which was again changed to scrub lands" (GRET, 2012, p. 75).

[141] To the knowledge of the author, there is no state-wide survey concerning shifting cultivation but several smaller ones focusing on areas in Northern and Central Chin State (GRET, 2012).

[142] For a detailed account of customary practices of shifting cultivation in Chin State, see also Stevenson (1943) and Lehman (1963).

While one plot is used for agricultural production, the other plots stay uncultivated (fallow) for 6 to 15 years for regeneration. The crop productivity is usually much lower than in permanent intensive agriculture in the lowlands, but also requires little input (Vicol et al., 2018).[143] In addition, the average size of landholding is very small compared to other parts of Myanmar (Schmitt-Degenhardt, 2013).

Shifting cultivation in Chin State follows customary rules that developed over generations and are enforceable under customary law. The rules were never codified in writing in most cases, given the absence of a written script until the arrival of missionaries, but passed on orally to the next generation and changing over time.[144] Ownership of land rests ultimately with the community, which manages the land in village committees (Ewers Andersen, 2014; Mark, 2016). While villagers have certain individual usage rights over plots, generally land is not regarded as a commodity according to customary practices but a common property resource, which cannot be easily alienated. The vast majority of upland farmers do not own any legal titles or official *Land Use Certificates* (LUCs) for their plots and farm on communal or private land available in the village.[145] This system ensures that farmers can rely on customary common property. Therefore, few farmers in the state are landless, as compared with other regions in Myanmar (Ewers Andersen, 2014; MIID, 2014; Schmitt-Degenhardt 2013). "Chin State retains relatively more equity in land use" due to its predominance of taungya cultivation (GRET, 2012, p. 49).

Since the government has traditionally been critical of shifting cultivation (see also chapter 4) and accused it as the main culprit responsible for increasing deforestation and land degradation, several programs have been introduced in the past few decades by the military government to facilitate the transition to permanent agriculture (GRET, 2012). Terracing of hill slopes has been practiced since 1960s to facilitate permanent cultivation, but the process was rather slow and costly, questioning the effectiveness in the light of a cost-benefit

[143] According to Vicol et al. (2018) "Rural Chin households have limited access to livelihood assets, and have historically depended on swidden agricultural production on marginal land to meet their food needs, growing a limited number of staple crops (typically millet and maize) with no inputs except for seed, human labour and organic fertiliser if available" (p. 455).

[144] Only recently, some villages attempted to formalize customary rules in writing in order to document it for registration purposes (see Ewers Andersen, 2014).

[145] According to Ewers Andersen (2014, p. 8), only about 15% of farmers in Myanmar have Land Use Certificates.

analysis (MIID, 2014).[146] In an interview, a former minister of agriculture (of the Chin State government) admitted that the financial support from the Union government was not at all sufficient to expand the transformation of taungya land into permanent terraces (Int. 5, local government, Hakha, 2015). Therefore, shifting cultivation was still needed, although treated with disdain by the government.[147] Other programs introduced by the central government to 'reclaim' the uphills since the 1960s have included tea and coffee plantations, which have generally not been successful (GRET, 2012). In the early 2000s, the government also attempted to introduce *Jatropha* plants for biofuel production and forced farmers to divert part of their land to cultivate the toxic plant. But the experiment ended in a fiasco with farmers losing land, income and harvests (Ethnic Community Development Forum [ECDF], 2008).[148] In recent years, the Chin State government has continued attempts to 'modernize' agriculture and introduce cash crops, such as the *Elephant Foot Yam*, exported to markets in East Asia (Macqueen, n.d.).[149] The local government sees the Elephant Foot Yam (locally also known as *Wa-U*) as the best potential cash crop for Chin-State (Int. 5, local government, Hakha, 2015). It seems better suited than Jathropa and also grows as a wild plant. It is exported to China and Japan for further processing where it is in high demand.

In the long run, the government wants to move away from traditional agriculture and stimulate agribusiness, eco-tourism and industrial growth as soon as basic infrastructure is in place (Su Phyo Win, 2017). Other sectors that have been promoted are the energy sector (in particular hydropower), urban development and mining. In 2017, a Chin State Chamber of Commerce and Industry was established to promote investment in the region ("Investor opportunities in Chin State's", 2018). However, hardly any foreign investment has been flowing in to Chin State so far and it is still a long way from building an industrial base (Schmitt-Degenhardt, 2013; Vicol et al., 2018).

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[146] According to MIID, the construction of 1 acre of terraces costs about 2,000 USD worth of labor power (MIID, 2014), which is a forbiddingly high cost for many local households with little opportunities for cash income.

[147] According to the minister, around 100,000 acres of terraces were needed to ensure food security in Chin State, but at a rate of 1,000 acres/year he admitted it would take 100 years to realize this plan.

[148] Jatropha curas (in Burmese *Jet suu*) is a small tree that originates from Central America. Its seeds contain more than 30% oil, which can be processed into biofuel. According to an NGO report, about 75% of the plants were damaged before harvest and many farmers lost their land on which they had to engage in forced labor. This further weakened the already precarious agricultural sector in the country (ECDF, 2008).

[149] According to the report "compared to an income per acre of about US$ 215-320 for maize, the income per acre from Elephant Foot Yam can be anything between US$ 2000-8500. Unsurprisingly, farmers want to grow the crop (and some have already established associations of farmers and traders in towns such as Mindat" (Macqueen, n.d.).

5.3. The "Burmese Way to Capitalism": A New Round of Incorporation

Chin State has always been affected by changes emerging from the political center and corresponding political transitions, as discussed in the previous chapter (chapter 4). The beginning of the current phase of frontier expansion and incorporation, marked by a strong shift towards privatization and enclosure of land, can be traced back to the end of Ne Win's era under the *Burma Socialist Program Party* (BSPP), following the countrywide uprising of 1988. During the following SPDC period, the economic reforms (the introduction of new market-oriented policies) had a tremendous impact on land relations in Chin State that have still strongly resonated with current economic and political reforms since 2011. The following paragraphs will discuss in more detail the main reforms undertaken since 1988, in particular regarding legislation on land and natural resource governance and its implications for Chin State.

Post-'88 reforms

Following the countrywide uprisings of 1988, the military government changed its economic policies after the *Burmese Way to Socialism,* introduced in the 1960s under Ne Win's *Burma Socialist Program Party* (BSPP), proved economically disastrous (Myat Thein, 2004). Following General Ne wins' military coup of 1962, most foreigners had been expelled from the country; industries and businesses were nationalized. Experienced civil servants trained under the British colonial rule were replaced by military personal close to the general. As a result of the self-imposed isolation prescribed by its military leaders "for 26 years Burma disappeared behind a bamboo curtain" (Smith, 2002). In order to keep food prices low in a declining economy, the regime tried to control agricultural production. It introduced a strict policy forcing farmers to follow specific quota and sell produce at fixed price to the state, usually below the market price (Myat Thein, 2004; Thawnghmung Maung, 2004). "Farmers had to provide the quota regardless of natural disasters or bad harvests. They were therefore forced to purchase rice at market prices and sell it to the government at slashed rates, some eventually winding up in debt, landless or migrating (ECDF, 2008, p. 10). This led to a decrease in productivity since there was no incentive for farmers to increase land productivity. The result "were shortages of rice and other essential foodstuffs which were either not available or were illegally sold in these black markets, often at exorbitant prices" (Myat Thein, 2004, p. 56). A demonetization of the national currency, the *Kyat* in 1985 and

1987 to combat the black market and curb inflation rendered much of the circulating currency useless and many people lost their live savings.

In the face of massive countrywide uprisings during 1988, and in order to save its own political and economic survival, the military again staged a coup and transformed itself into the *State Law and Order Restoration Council* (SLORC). Taking over a bankrupt economy, it introduced market-oriented reforms described as "entrepreneurial turn" (MacLean, 2008) or the beginning of a "Burmese Way to Capitalism" (Badgley, 1990). This also happened during a time of global political change at the end of the Cold War, as socialism was in decline and capitalist pragmatism became an international trend as exemplified by the *perestroika* in the USSR (Myat Thein, 2004). As a result, many transforming socialist countries privileged private property rights in their economic reforms due to the poor performance of socialist institutions. "This poor performance was explained through the erroneous reasoning that all property was owned by the state and thus the state was overburdened and unable to satisfy basic needs" (Benda-Beckmann, Benda-Beckmann, & Wiber, 2009, p. 5). In March 1989, the 1965 *Law of Establishment of the Socialist Economic System* was revoked (Myat Thein, 2004). A series of laws were introduced beginning with a *Foreign Investment Law* (1988) in order to open up the country for investors. It offered "the right to exploit the rich untapped natural resources of Burma to foreign investors in joint venture with state enterprises" (Mya Maung, 1995, p. 679). According to Bryant (1997):

> As the country was ostracized by much of the international community, foreign exchange reserves declined to as little as Us $12 million, and the government faced the prospect of being unable to service its nearly US $6 billion debt. In this situation, the need to intensify exploitation of the country's natural resources becomes readily apparent. (p. 178)

In 1991, the SLORC introduced new land laws with the establishment of the *Central Committee for the Management of Cultivatable Land, Fallow Land and Waste Land* (also known as "*Wasteland Instructions*"). The law paved the way for the private use of formerly nationalized land (so called 'waste land') for business purposes, including large-scale concessions for foreign investors. Declaring an area as 'wasteland' often meant ignoring the customary rights of actual users (Oberndorf, 2012). "By 2001 more than one million acres were allocated involving about 100 enterprises and associations" (Leckie, & Simperingham, 2009, p. 34). However, not only was the land surface to be economically exploited, but also

the sub-surface resources were regarded as potentially valuable. In 1994, the military government introduced the *Myanmar Mines Law* in order "to fulfill the domestic requirements and to increase exports by producing more mineral products" (The State Law and Order Restoration Council, 1994). The junta actively promoted foreign investment into mining in several "geologically favorable" areas, including ethnic areas such as in Chin State (see below) and other peripheral areas ("Invitation to Mining Investors", 1995). In addition, Myanmar's forestry sector faced dramatic changes since 1988 with the SLORC government handing out large-scale logging concessions to foreign companies (Bryant, 1997). In particular, Myanmar's neighboring country Thailand was more than eager to exploit the natural resources across its border and establish friendly relations with the military junta. Already a few months after the SLORC takeover, Thailand's senior general Chavalit Yongchaiyudh visited Myanmar to negotiate concessions for teak extraction in Myanmar, since Thailand's own forests had been already depleted.[150]

> In early 1989 Burma announced twenty logging concessions to Thai firms, and further concessions were subsequently awarded to Thai firms closely affiliated with the Thai government. In all, as much as 18,000 square km. may have been alienated in this way to forty-seven companies. The logging deals reflected a convergence of interests on the part of the Thai and Burmese around the issue of opening up to large-scale exploitation the hitherto remote and lightly worked border forests. (Bryant, 1997, p. 177)

A new *Forest Law* was introduced by the SLORC in 1992 (The State Law and Order Restoration Council, 1992), repealing the 1902 Forest Act, ostensibly designed to ensure compliance with international agreements on conservation biodiversity and forestry (Leckie, & Simperingham, 2009, p. 34). As became evident, besides allowing concessions for extraction it also aimed for the expansion of reserved forest areas, encroaching on shifting cultivators and other ethnic minority areas. According to Bryant (1997), this was also one of the goals of the military government since the reservation campaign sought to "complete in peripheral areas the internal territorialization achieved by the British in central Burma in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century" (p. 183). A contemporary example of how the

[150] According to Bryant (1997), in 1989-90 the timber exports "accounted for 42 percent of all export earnings" (135 million USD) (p. 178).

Forest Department seeks to establish control over areas in Chin State through national parks will be further discussed below.

In general, the early phase of the country's capitalist development since the early 1990s was – and essentially remains – based on processes of primitive accumulation and resource extraction for the sake of earning foreign exchange (Bissinger, 2012; Jones, 2014a; Lambrecht, 2004; MacLean, 2008). Much of the post-1988 exploitation of natural resources initially focused on the eastern border with Thailand and China. At first, the impact on Chin State was less severe, although the new legislation prepared the ground for future reforms. More relevant for Chin State was the increasing presence of military institutions in the form of military battalions resulting in land grabs (see below) and other border development programs.

Apart from general economic reforms, the SLORC government also introduced its own policy targeting the 'development' of the border areas with the *Development of Border Areas and National Races Law,* taking effect in 1993 (The State Law and Order Restoration Council, 1993), which aimed:

> to develop the economic and social works and roads and communications of the national races at the border areas, in accordance with the aims which are non-disintegration of the Union . . . to eradicate totally the cultivation of poppy plants . . . [and] to preserve and maintain the security, prevalence of law and order . . . (Leckie, & Simperingham, 2009, pp. 694-5)

The law symbolized the increasing engagement of the government in the frontier areas after 1988 and its interest in bringing these areas under its control to ensure the "non-disintegration of the Union". A new ministry was introduced: the *Ministry of Border Affairs*, known by its Myanmar acronym *Na Ta La*. While the ministry presented itself as a development actor "to bring about the development . . . to [the] brethren living in the remote border regions, who . . . were lagging behind in education, health, communication and economic development" (Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in Brazil, n.d.), it was in fact a military body mainly concerned with security and infrastructure development. Its main activity was the construction and maintenance of transportation infrastructure in order to incorporate the border areas, extract resources and consolidate control. This was done under the pretext of law and order and the fight against poppy cultivation. Rather than bringing development to Chin State, this often meant forced labor for the local population

(Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2009). In addition, a policy of "promotion and propagation of the sasana [Buddhist teachings] in the development areas" (The State Law and Order Restoration Council, 1993) brought the Na Ta La into conflict with the local Christian churches and increased resentment against the government and led to accusations of trying to 'Burmanize' the population in the border areas. (Chin Human Rights Organization [CHRO], 2012). In summary, according to Lambrecht (2004), rather than bringing development to the border areas "the primary means by which the government pursues its supposed goal of a developed, peaceful nation is through destruction and extraction and looting of material wealth" (p. 173).

Legal reforms following the 2010 elections

Following the 2010 general elections, in line with the military government's *roadmap to disciplined democracy* (Bünte, 2011) and the handing over of power from General Than Shwe to a semi-civilian government (mainly consisting of former military officers), a series of new reforms was initiated. It was the declared the aim of the government under the presidency of former General Thein Sein to advance Myanmar's economic transformation from "a centralized economy into a market-oriented one" together with a new peace process and democratic transition (Chongkittavorn, 2017). In order to push the economic transition, new legal frameworks were swiftly put in place to facilitate privatization, investments and ensure private property rights. Indeed, already before the general elections in November 2010, privatization plans of key enterprises were under way ("Myanmar Moves to Privatize", 2010). Hopes were high that after the partial lifting of international sanctions, following the elections and political reforms, Myanmar could further increase its economic growth through foreign investment.[151] An important law enacted by the new government was the 2012 *Foreign Investment Law*, replacing the previous Investment Law of 1988. The law's new framework permitted foreign investment by companies up to 100% foreign-owned, yet in limited sectors and under certain conditions. Some sectors, such as the mining sector, were still restricted to joint ventures with local companies. The new law also provided investors with the "right to lease or use land up to 50 years depending upon the category of the

[151] While the European Union lifted sanctions against Myanmar earlier, the US only revoked them in 2016 following the election victory of the NLD at the by-elections ("EU lifts sanctions against Burma", 2013; Fisher, 2016).

business, industry and the volume of investment" with the option of extension for 10 years (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012). According to an OECD (2018) report:

> The 2012 Foreign Investment Law and its accompanying implementing rules marked a milestone towards a more open and secure legal environment for investment but were only a first step. Their importance was partly symbolic, to show the government's desire to welcome responsible foreign investment after the disappointments following the first attempt at liberalisation after 1988, which offered few benefits in terms of inclusive and sustainable development. The 2012 FIL offered some improvements over the earlier 1988 law but left many questions unanswered, notably with respect to investor protection (OECD, 2014). The 2016 enactment of a new, all-encompassing investment law has closed the remaining gap, by introducing improved provisions on expropriation, non-discrimination and dispute settlement. (p. 116)

The Foreign Investment Law was complemented by the 2014 *Myanmar Special Economic Zone Law* (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014) allowing investors certain tax exemptions or tax holidays for investments in specially designated zones (Baulk, 2013). The Special Economic Zones are intended to push economic growth and jumpstart the manufacturing sector by reducing costs for investors (Khandelwal & Teachout, 2016). Three such zones are currently being developed in Myanmar: The Dawei Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Tanintharyi Region, the Thilawa SEZ in Southern Yangon and the Kyaukphyu SEZ in Rakhine State. The SEZs have come under much criticism, in particular for dispossessing farmers and communities of their land (Dawei Development Association [DDA], 2014).

Two other laws enacted in 2012 by the new government that continue to have a major impact on land tenure security, not only in peripheral areas, are the *Farmland Law* and the *Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law* (VFV Law) (Oberndorf, 2012; The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012). According to Oberndorf (2012), the *Farmland Law* attempted "to put in place a system of securing rural land tenure through a land use certificate and registration system" (p. 19). It created a land market and a system, which ensures private property rights in land documented with land titles, with the right to sell, exchange, and lease (Mark, 2017). In addition, it also opened the possibility for landowners to access credit. Land Use Certificates — so-called *Form 7* (Farmland Work Permit Certificates) — are issued

under this system by the *Farmland Administration Body* and registered by the *Settlement and Land Records Department* (SLRD) renamed as *Department of Agricultural Land Management and Statistics* (DALMS) in 2015. The process of drafting this law was a centralized top-down decision-making process, largely led by the president and his cabinet who were inspired by the experience of Thailand and Vietnam, with little or no involvement of civil society (Mark, 2017). It followed a practice of "one-man policy coordination" from 50 years of military dictatorship (Su Mon Thazin Aung & Arnold, 2018, p. ii).[152] While in some areas in central Myanmar and the Delta region many farmers received Land Use Certificates within a short period, this was not necessarily the case in the peripheral areas, such as Chin State, where titling was more contested or even unheard of (see below). According to Mark (2017), up until early 2016, only about 28,256 LUCs were given to 24,075 households in Chin State. This means that around 70% of all households did not hold any official land titles.[153] In rural areas, the number of households without titles is very likely much higher than in urban areas.

The *Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management Law* (short: *VFV Law*) (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012) allows for a long-term lease of 'vacant, fallow or virgin land' (up to 50,000 acres/ 20,234 ha) for private and commercial purposes up to 30 years. It permits foreign investors, but also local farmers to use land, which is not yet utilized according to the DALMS.[154] For Oberndorf (2012), the law is very similar to the laws enacted during colonial times (and during the SLORC era in 1991, see above) which intended to open up land —perceived as 'unused' or 'uncultivated' from the perspective of the political center — for cultivation and economic production (Oberndorf, 2012). The category of '*wasteland*', first introduced during colonial times, was a means of establishing hegemony and control as a "rhetorical device to justify dispossession" (Whitehead, 2012, p.

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[152] According to Su Mon Thazin Aung and Arnold (2018), "a debilitating legacy for Myanmar's contemporary governments is the lack of traditions or government architecture that support more sophisticated policymaking" (p. ii).

[153] According to the 2014 census, there were 91,121 households in Chin State (Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015).

[154] According to the law, *Vacant Land, Fallow Land* "means the land on which agriculture or livestock breeding business can be carried out and which was tenanted in the past and abandoned for various reasons and without any tenant cultivating on it and the lands which are specifically reserved by the State" and Virgin Land "means wild land and wild forest land whether on which there are trees, bamboo plants or bushes growing or not, or whether geographically (surface) topography of the land is even or not and being the new land on which cultivation has never been done, not even once. The said expression shall include the lands of forest reserve, grazing ground and fishery which have been legally nullified for the purposes of doing business of agriculture, livestock breeding, mineral production and other businesses permitted by the Government" (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, 2012).

19). The notion of 'wasteland' was influenced by European liberal philosophers of the 17th century such as John Locke. He legitimated colonization and enclosures of land by European powers with the lack of individual property rights and the 'unproductive' use of land by the indigenous population. According to Kuppe (2016), "the starting point for Locke to justify individual ownership over things and goods was labour" (p. 65). Only land, which had been transformed by individual labor, was considered as rightful property. Locke "argued that privatized lands that were intensively cultivated possessed a higher productivity than lands held in common by a multitude of subsistence-based households" (Whitehead, 2012, p. 4).[155] But even land that was not yet cultivated could be claimed by European colonizers:

> Enclosure, or "fencing" is seen as an essential aspect to mark out the boundaries of cultivated lands, and underlines the allotted parcels of settlers, taken out of the common goods of all. So, it was completely legitimate for civilized European people, to establish themselves in a country whose inhabitants had not established positive legal institutions, and who were taking fruits from the land, but had shown no will to establish private property. (Kuppe, 2016, p. 67)

The category of *common land* held by indigenous populations was thus equated with the category of the 'wasteland'. In contemporary Myanmar, the current 2012 VFV law maintains neo-colonial policies and potentially dispossesses ethnic groups that practice customary forms of shifting cultivation, as will be shown (Ewers Andersen, 2014; Ferguson, 2014). Around one third of Myanmar's land is considered as 'vacant, fallow or virgin' by the central government, which is overwhelmingly concentrated in the borderlands. Amendments to the VFV law in 2018 included a six-month deadline to apply for a permit to use land recorded as 'vacant'. "Land users, whether companies or smallholder farmers, who failed to apply for a permit by March 11 or had their application rejected, face eviction and prosecution for trespassing." (Dunant & Kyaw Ye Lyinn, 2019). As Ferguson (2014) argues, the current law on wastelands has less to do with an intrinsic quality of the land itself, than with the exercise of political and economic power by the state. This assessment is central to the main argument of this chapter concerning the production of space at the frontier. How political and

[155] According to Whitehead (2012) "By using North America as an example of wasteland, Locke was also expanding its potential geographical scale to all areas of the world in which lands were not commodified or intensively cultivated. Not only did supposed ''wild woods and waste'' exist in many continents, but the apparently wasteful use of them seemed to necessitate their appropriation by an 'improving hand' from England" (p. 5).

economic power is territorialized through legal reforms and practices will be discussed further in the following sections.

In response to the growing criticism voiced by farmers and civil society organizations over the new land laws and increasing land conflicts, a *National Land Use Policy* (NLUP) (The Republic of The Union of Myanmar, 2016) was drafted under President Thein Sein (Mark, 2017; Oberndorf, Shwe Thein, & Thyn Zar Oo, 2017). The ultimate aim of the land use policy was to:

> Promote sustainable land use management. . .; strengthen land tenure security, . . . recognize and protect customary land tenure rights . . . promote people centered development . . . and develop a National Land Law in order to implement the above objectives of National Land Use Policy". (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016, p. 3)[156]

After some preliminary drafts had been prepared by the inter-ministerial *Land Use Allocation and Scrutiny Committee* (LUASC), a draft version was published for public consultation in the summer of 2014.[157] According to Mark (2017):

> After its launch the government held three consultations at the Union and regional levels across Myanmar and called for written feedback on the draft [5th NLUP]. They received at least 909 written comments by February 2015, and likely more afterwards. The consultation process was supposed to be completed by the end of 2014. However, this was extended over three national-level consultations until August 2015. The NLUP was adopted by President Thein Sein's cabinet in January 2016. (p. 73)

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[156] The complete quote reads as follows: "The objectives of the National Land Use Policy are as follows: (a)To promote sustainable land use management and protection of cultural heritage areas, environment, and natural resources for the interest of all people in the country; (b) To strengthen land tenure security for the livelihoods improvement and food security of all people in both urban and rural areas of the country; (c)To recognize and protect customary land tenure rights and procedures of the ethnic nationalities; (d) To develop transparent, fair, affordable and independent dispute resolution mechanisms in accordance with rule of law; (e) To promote people centered development, participatory decision making, responsible investment in land resources and accountable land use administration in order to support the equitable economic development of the country; (f)To develop a National Land Law in order to implement the above objectives of National Land Use Policy (p. 3)."

[157] The drafting of the policy was also supported by international organizations and donors such as the European Union (EU), US Agency for International Development (USAID), SwissAgency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and The Land Core Group (LCG) (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2016).

Even though the outcome was not satisfactory for all groups involved and some participants of the consultation complained that their suggestions had been ignored, the final policy was defended by some parts of civil society who referred to it as "a big step forward" (Int. 51, International NGO, Yangon, December 2016). It was the first time that a consultation process for a policy in Myanmar involved all regions and states, and included a broad civil society coalition (Heinecke, 2018; Mark, 2017). After all, the final policy also included the recognition of *Land Use Rights of the Ethnic Nationalities* in chapter eight and planned the revision of existing problematic land laws. Nevertheless, since the election victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in November 2015, little has happened concerning the follow up of the policy, drafted by its rival USDP. On the contrary, in late 2016, the parliamentary *Commission for Legal and Special Issues Analysis* criticized the policy and proposed a revision of the document ("The Commission for Legal and Special", 2016). The attack on the NLUP came directly from Thura Shwe Mann, a former military member, USDP politician and parliament speaker who was regarded as an ally of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD after breaking with his own party ("Aung San Suu Kyi Hails", 2015). The commission proposed to revise the NLUP, thus throwing into question the relatively inclusive reform process on land governance. More specifically, it pointed out that "it is not necessary to include the ethnic nationalities' land use rights as a separate part in the National Land Use Policy" and also criticized the planned registration for shifting cultivation plots and the policy of equal rights of men and women regarding land ownership ("The Commission for Legal and Special", 2016).[158] One NGO representative argued that the government might have realized the implications of the provision for ethnic land rights, fearing a loss of control over resources and land (Int. 51, International NGO, Yangon,

[158] According to the statement submitted by the commission, the NLUP "is not in line with current conditions but mainly based on international standards and procedures". Further, it says that "In part (8) [of the NLUP] it is mentioned the ethnic nationalities land use rights as a separate part. The respective line departments and organizations are systematically managing land in line with land related laws (land and revenue act, towns and villages act, vacant, fallow and virgin land management law, farmland law, forest law etc.) and respecting customaries. Therefore, it is not necessary to include the ethnic nationalities' land use rights as a separate part in the National Land Use Policy. . . . Similarly, it is mentioned to register the rotating fallow taungya (shifting taungya) in the ethnic nationalities' land use rights. The shifting cultivation deteriorates natural environment therefore it has being replaced with advanced farming practice such as upland farm, terrace farm, agroforestry. The existing laws have protected the ethnic nationalities traditional farming not to be destroyed by other land uses. Therefore, the registration of shifting cultivation that is with unstable plotting arrangement, and that deteriorates the natural environment, should not be included in the policy. . . In part (9), it is mentioned those related to the equal rights between men and women. In basic principle 8(a), it was mentioned that women land tenure that is accepted by local community shall be legally recognized and protected. Equal rights between men and women have been in land related laws. In the ethnic areas, it has been recognized and actions have been undertaken in line with their traditional practices. If it is mentioned beyond the local community accepted ethnic traditional practices, if the ethnic nationalities cannot follow, it will affect the ethnic unity, thus, it should not be included in the mean time" ("The Commission for Legal and Special", 2016, p. 1-2).

December 2016). The statement mentions several times that the "State is the original owner of all natural resources under and above the land" which is also stipulated in the 2008 Constitution ("The Commission for Legal and Special", 2016). As of 2019, the debate over land laws is far from over and it remains to be seen whether the reforms promised in the NLUP will proceed anytime soon. Currently, as the 2020 elections draw nearer and the focus for the ruling party turns towards consolidating its power base, major reforms seem unlikely.

Legal Pluralism

The latest upsurge of legal reforms, including the governance of land and natural resources and the increasing penetration of state law into areas which before were not fully administered by the central government, exacerbates the tension with local customary practices (Kyed, 2018). As in many post-colonial states, *legal pluralism* is a reality in Myanmar, where colonial legislation, customary law and post-colonial reforms interrelate in multiple, often confusing ways (Benda-Beckmann, Benda-Beckmann, & Griffiths, 2009; UN Woman & Justice Base, 2016). This is particularly evident in relation to the delivery of 'every day's justice' on the local level. According to Kyed (2018), "the concept of legal pluralism captures the existence of more than one set of binding rules and normative orders within a social field" (p. iii). Yet from the perspective of the central state, it is the state's monopoly to issue laws. The central government in Myanmar accepts the reality of legal pluralism only to a limited extent. In particular, family law is governed by the different religious practices (Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, etc.) with state sanction (UN Woman & Justice Base, 2016).[159] Yet, regarding the governance of land and property, by different, sometimes contradicting (informal) legal orders, there is a strong tendency to privilege the central state's law as the normative framework.

> The term 'legal pluralism' suggests equity between normative systems that does not exist in practice. Law is embedded with assumptions, power and class relations, and where asymmetric power relations exist a struggle for ideological dominance often ensues . . . Historically this has tended to play out with a nation-state incorporating alternative justice structures into the

[159] "Family law is one area that the British singled out for governance by religious and peripheral authorities during the colonial era. Courts in Myanmar still enforce customary law in family matters, except in situations specifically governed by statutory law. For Buddhists, courts apply Burmese Buddhist Law and Christians may utilize the Christian Marriage Act of 1872 and the Divorce Act of 1869. For Hindus, customary law has been circumscribed somewhat by statute, including a law permitting remarriage for Hindu widows" (UN Woman & Justice Base, 2016, p. 39).

> national regime or reshaping the local justice practice into a more 'state-like' form. (McConnachie, 2014, p. 105)

In Myanmar, there is a general tension between *legal centralism* represented by the union government and a *legal pluralism* championed by ethnic groups. Several ethnic armed groups, who de-facto controlled (or still control) large 'liberated areas' or 'quasi states' in the borderlands, issued their own laws and provide 'everyday's justice' in their own local institutions and courts. Legal pluralism in Myanmar "is in this sense at least partly reflective of a plurality of authorities that *de facto* seek to govern different territories and groups" (Kyed, 2018, p. vi). For instance, in parts of Karen State, where the Karen National Union (KNU) established an "alternative state form", a "parallel justice system" developed that was not recognized by the central state (Kyed, 2018, p. vi). The KNU even has its own land policy and land governance system (Office of the Supreme Headquarters Karen National Union, 2015). Similarly, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) — the political arm of the Kachin Intendance Army (KIA) — maintains a "parallel state with departments of health, education, justice, and relief and development" (UN Woman & Justice Base, 2016, p. 12). Nevertheless, even in border areas partly or fully administered by the central government, the official justice system is generally avoided by the local population, which they see as inefficient, corrupt, costly and favoring the ethnic majority and wealthy. 'Traditional' customary dispute resolution mechanisms at the local level involving village councils or local administrators are generally preferred (Kyed, 2018; UN Woman & Justice Base, 2016).

Mark (2015) has described the legal pluralism of Chin State, in particular regarding the governance of land, as "fragmented sovereignty". The main ethnic armed group in Chin State, the Chin National Front (CNF) (see also chapter 6) neither had full authority over larger territories in the Chin Hills, nor established a parallel justice system the likes of Karen or Kachin State. Nevertheless, customary institutions governing family affairs, inheritance as well as access to land and resources, amongst others, are still predominant (although the CNF hardly plays any role in it). According to a recent study, in Chin State "legal disputes in the township, from motorbike accidents to incidents of rape, were 'mostly all' resolved outside the formal courts using Chin customary precepts as applied by members of the local village council or other respected leader" (UN Woman & Justice Base, 2016, p. 40).

During colonial times, the customary institutions in the frontier areas were 'protected' by the colonial state. The Chin Hills Regulation (1896) ensured "for a degree of local autonomy and the continuation of some degree of customary law and practices" (UN Woman & Justice Base, 2016, p. 27)[160] (see also chapter 4). The reasoning behind this was that 'law and order' could be better maintained if the colonial administrators did not interfere too much with local customs and religious practices, "but instead allowed limited application of customary law to certain 'native-law-zones'" (UN Woman & Justice Base, 2016, p. 27). Following independence, the *Chin Special Division Act* (CSDA) or '*Chin Act'* of 1948 replaced the Chin Hills Regulation (The Government of the Union of Burma, 1948). It stipulated which "enactments deemed applicable to Chins" and continued to recognize to a certain extent the Chin customs and traditions ("Revisiting the Chin Customary," 2019). Yet following decades of military rule with a steady decline of the countries justice system, the recognition of customary institutions also deteriorated. According to a Chin historian, the essence of the original Chin Hills Regulation has been lost in the post-colonial version (Int. 65, Chin historian, activist, online). It is unclear to what extent the revised Chin Act is still valid and in what social spheres the customary law is still applicable. During interviews with local activists and legal experts, different opinions emerged over the present-day relevance of the 'Chin Act'. However, the fact that in 2013 a process of revisiting the Chin Act was started by Chin political representatives, civil society organizations (CSOs), and other stakeholders to ensure "the respect, protection and enhancement of Chin traditions and customary systems" shows a renewed interest ("Revisiting the Chin Customary," 2019).

As has also been the case in post-Suharto Indonesia, it is not uncommon that new interpretations and versions of customary law occur during times of fundamental political and economic change (Benda-Beckmann, Benda-Beckmann, & Griffiths, 2009, p. 8). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this study to look in more detail at the coexistence and conflict between customary law and state law. What will become clear in the following sections, however, is that the current political transformation in Myanmar has created a situation in which there is increasing confusion over who has the authority to control access to land and over which legal norms and institutions this should be based on. Local actors often follow several norms or choose strategically between different systems. For instance,

[160] Chapter three, paragraph 6 of the regulation stipulated "Every headman shall within the local limits of his jurisdiction have general control, according to local custom, over the clan, or village, or both, declared subject to him" (The Chin Hills Regulation, 1896).

while customary institutions are still locally defended, some land rights activists recommend land registration according to Union law, in order to increase the chances of maintaining access. However, this is often limited to local elites who have the knowledge and means to maneuver within the new legal system, while others who are often unaware of the legal changes are left out.

5.4. Profile of Village B: Changing Land Use and Enclosures

In order to get a better understanding of actual land use practices and land tenure regimes on the ground, I repeatedly visited village B (as well as other villages in central Chin State) during the course of the field research.[161] There I was invited by villagers to conduct participant observation, informal interviews and transect walks over a period of about two weeks (see also chapter 3). The following section will provide an overview of village B, specifically regarding changing land use practices.

Village B, with a population of about 1,260 people or 180 households (including 335 persons living outside the country), is located about 80 km from Hakha town in central Chin State and about 30 km from the border to India (CORAD, 2016; Rual Lian Thang, 2012).[162] It is located just below the top of a mountain (as are most Chin villages) and includes a small river (valley) that cuts through the village territory. There is a small footpath from the village settlement down to the river (a few hundred meters in altitude), which by foot takes around one or two hours to reach.[163] The total area of village B is 10,129 acres (over 40 km²) resulting in a population density of about 23 persons/km² (Rual Lian Thang, 2008), which is less than one third of the union level population density (see Table 5).

The village area consists of a settlement area on the east side of the river, agricultural areas (including shifting cultivation plots, gardens and orchards), communal pastures (for cattle grazing) and communal forests, including a protected watershed area. According to oral history, the village was founded some 300 years ago, but tther is no exact date. Stone monuments (funeral stones) on the village territory suggest settlements in the area over a

[161] For reasons or research ethics, the name of the village and informants remain confidential.

[162] According to Carry & Tuck (1896) in 1893-94 village, B. had already 120 households or a population of around 600 persons.

[163] Or around 15-20 minutes by motorbike. However, the villagers were constructing a small road in 2016 in order to facilitate transportation from the paddy fields to the village by car.

longer period.[164] Reportedly the village descended from another neighboring village, which itself was formed long ago by migrants coming from what is today India. It was said that a conflict between villagers lead to a split and the founding of a new village. This followed the general pattern of mother villages forming "satellite settlements" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 18). The village territory was officially demarcated for the first time between 1917 and 1920 by the British colonial administration who started to fix village boundaries in order to facilitate administration. The boundary of the village, delineated with boundary stones, is generally well known by the villagers (Int. 50. local farmers, Thantlang Tsp., November 2016).[165] The village settlement itself moved several times within the village territory. The last time was in the 1970s due to a water shortage at the old location (water shortage is a major issue in many villages in Chin State). The old village-ground (with the old ceremonial location for sacrifices) is preserved and sometimes used for religious celebrations.

Residents in the village comprise exclusively of local Chin ethnic groups (with three to four different dialects spoken in the village). Except for some government employees such as teachers, no settlers from outside the Chin Hills were staying in the village. Hakha Chin dialect is used as a medium of communication with people from other villages who are not speaking the same local dialect. While the younger generation generally speaks Burmese reasonably well (only Burmese is used in local primary schools as a medium of instruction) the elder generation is not always able to speak, read or write in Burmese.[166] A small group of younger, better-educated students (studying at universities in the lowland or in neighboring India) also speaks English. With a few exceptions, all villagers are Christians of protestant denomination with four different churches in the village. In addition, there is a small health center with a health worker and a public school with around 200 students.[167] The village has also been running a small kindergarten with a playground for a few years as well as a small village library (both financed by remittances). Most houses are built from wood with the timber provided by communal forests and tin roofs purchased from town.[168]

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[164] During the field visit, the villagers could not recall when the stone monuments were actually erected. According to existing literature, it is likely capstones supported on three upright stones covering the graves with the urn of the deceased (Lehman, 1963).

[165] During one village transect walk, I was invited to walk along the village boundary through the forest.

[166] A village elder whom I interviewed during my visit to the village was not able to speak in Burmese or English but only in the local dialect.

[167] The public school employs Burman teachers coming from other parts of Myanmar, but increasingly hires local Chin teachers with a university degree in education.

[168] Land for houses is provided by the community. Construction is done with support from villagers but also with hired labor.

The quality of the houses in many cases is better than the prevalent bamboo huts in the lowlands.

To connect the village to the nearest town (Thantlang), the local population constructed a dirt road in the early 1970s. However, due to a lack of resources and support from the central government at that time, it was not big enough for bus and truck access and not usable during the rainy season. A respondent in his early 30s still remembered how he had to travel by foot over several days to reach the state capital during his childhood. Only in 2012 a new and bigger dirt road was constructed – as is the case all over Chin State – which improved accessibility by car or motorbike, reducing travel time considerably. In the last few years, motorbikes have become a more popular and affordable mode of transportation, but cars are still hardly available or affordable. Horses are still sometimes used to transport goods (such as paddy from the fields) (see Figure 9 and Figure 10).

Figure 9: View of the village in Chin State (photo by author)

Figure 10: View of the village in Chin State and horse transportation for carrying goods (photo by author)

During my first visit in 2015, there was still hardly any (mobile) phone connection (landline was only available in the neighboring village). However, some villagers were using mobile phone services from neighboring India. Yet after 2016, mobile phone services became available (though not in all areas in the village territory) with the expansion of the mobile phone network and the construction of new cell phone towers. Electricity was still not available at that time, except for a mini-hydropower turbine that supplied limited electricity for about 1-2 hours/day to the households (enough to charge a smartphone). The turbine was installed by the villagers themselves partly with donations from overseas (built for an estimated USD 10,000) and partly with support from the government and is currently being upgraded (Rual Lian Thang, 2018). In the 1990s, PVC water pipes (provided by the UNDP) were installed in the village to supply the households with running water from a spring (Rual Lian Thang, 2012).

As most other villages in the region, village B relies almost entirely on agriculture – mainly on a self-sufficiency basis – including shifting cultivation, The village has nine *lopils* altogether (communally held shifting cultivation plots) along the slopes of the hills within the village territory (see Figure 13). The *lopils* are in walking distance to the village settlement, however some more remote plots are several hours away. Every one or two years the plots rotate, and another plot is cleared of bush and forest in order to plant corn, beans or millet, etc. Afterwards, the plots remain uncultivated (fallow) for a period of up to 15 years (but usually shorter) in order to regenerate the soil. According to the villagers, no new *lopils* have been created in the past few decades in addition to the nine existing ones. This indicates that there is only limited pressure on land due to population growth. The *lopils*, as most other resources in the village, are common property resources to be used by all members of the village according to the communally established rules (Rual Lian Thang, 2018). The *lopils*, which all have a name (a toponym often relating to typical features of the landscape) are not registered according to the new land laws and have no legal owner. Communally held agricultural land cannot be registered according to the present legal framework. However, according to custom, every household has the right to use a piece of the *lopil* to meet their demand for basic food supply. Before the agricultural season starts in spring, a village council meeting in August decides which *lopil* should be chosen for the coming agricultural season. In order to avoid conflict over the allocation of land within the plot, a lucky draw is conducted (or a 'lottery' system) (Int. 50. local farmers, Thantlang Tsp., November 2016). A lopil has around 100 acres and a family can obtain a piece of the plot (*lo)* of about one acre (04, ha) or more, depending on the size and labor power of the family.

According to an informant, "all who want can farm, but some don't want to farm", either because they are physically not able or because they live on remittances (Int. 50. local farmers, Thantlang Tsp., November 2016). Households who are in need for more land to meet their demand can also use plots by other families (who do not need the land for agricultural practices) upon request. There is no rent or lease involved, only a small gift, for instance one chicken (Int. 50. local farmers, Thantlang Tsp., November 2016; Lehman 1963). In practice, however, the harvest from the plots is usually not sufficient to provide enough food supply for the whole year. In village B, only around ten percent of the households produce enough food for more than eight months per year (CORAD, 2016).[169] Almost all households therefore need to purchase food from Hakha town (imported from the lowlands) or ask for support from the community, which is usually granted.

In principle, the system of shifting cultivation practiced today is not much different from the system described by Stevenson (1943) and Lehman (1963) in the region many decades ago (see also chapter 4).[170] However, both reported on changes to the customary system of land tenure prior to the military coup in 1962. This shows that the customary system is not fixed but instead responds to external changes as a result of increasing economic incorporation. Indeed, the introduction of paddy cultivation brought many changes to the hills, such as the privatization of land, since rice was considered a luxury food with a high social status (Stevenson, 1943). In recent years, however, these changes have again accelerated after decades of relative stagnation during military rule.[171] A recent study on changing farming systems in the Hakha area showed that the shifting cultivation systems have been 'simplyfing' in recent decades, as compared to earlier periods. Less diverse crops are grown (more monocultures and cash crops), reducing the general biodiversity of shifting cultivation plots (lopils). This also effects the diet, with many nutrient rich traditional crops, such as legumes being lost (Frissard & Pritts, 2018).

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[169] The majority of households produces only enough food for only 4 to 6 months (CORAD, 2016).

[170] During the visit to village B, some black and white photos of Lehman visiting in the late 1950s were shown to the author. The photos had been provided by Lehman to the villagers who had stayed in contact following his research. Upon return to Vienna, the author found a copy of Lehman's study (1963) at the library of the department of Social and Cultural Anthropology. It had an original autograph signature of Lehman dedicated to his former teacher Robert von Heine-Geldern who taught in the US upon fleeing the Nazi Regime in Vienna in 1938 and is considered as one of the founders of Southeast Asian studies. He returned to Vienna in 1950 to teach at the department of Ethnology. Upon obtaining a copy of the book which included the very same photos shown in the village the author sent a scanned copy to his Chin informants.

[171] The self-imposed isolation began only four years after Lehman finalized his research in Chin State in 1958 (Lehman, 1963).

Types of land use/land tenure regime	Private use (with LUC)	Private use	Communal
Lopils (shifting cultivation plots)		X	X
Wet terraces	X		
Dry terraces	X		
Orchards	X		
Home gardens		X	
Communal forest			X
Communal grazing pastures			X

Table 6: Types of land use and tenure regimes in village B (Source: CORAD, 2016; Int. 50. local farmers, Thantlang Tsp., November 2016)

In addition to shifting cultivation plots, other main agricultural production systems for food and income in village B are wet paddy terraces, dry terraces, home gardens and orchards (see Table 6).[172] According to one survey, only 28% of the households in village B currently engage in shifting cultivation onn their *lopils* (see Figure 11). This is unusually low for this region with 80-100% of households in other villages practicing shifting cultivation. In village B, around 66% of the households have access to wet paddy terraces (CORAD, 2016). This can be partially explained by the relatively favorable geography of village B, with plenty of space for terraces nearby the riverbed that can be used for paddy production (see Figure 12). However, during major floods in 2015 many terraces along the river in village B – as well as in other locations aound Chin State –were destroyed. As a result, affected families had to fall back on the traditional lopils for food production (Chin Committee for Emergency Response and Rehabilitation [CCERR], 2015). Another main factor for why engagement in shifting cultivation has been declining in village B is additional income due to remittances by family members working abroad. According to a study from 2012, over 80% of the surveyed households (N= 30) received remittances. This considerably improved the household's total cash income and reduced the pressure to engage in farming for a living

[172] Some of the crops grown in these units are: in *lopils*: Corn, Millet, Taro, Paddy, Bean, Sulphur bean, Soya bean, Pigeon pea, Chili, Potato, Bitter brinjal, Brinjal, Ginger, Ground nut, Roselle, Pumpkin, Sesame; in *home gardens*: Cabbage, Onion, Garlic, ginger, mustard, lime, corn, Pumpkin, grape, Tapioca, chayote, Ginger, Passion Fruit, Non fruit trees, Bamboo; in *wet terraces*: Paddy, Straw for fodder in *dry terraces*: Rice, onion, garlic, cabbage, grazing (CORAD, 2016).

(Rual Lian Thang, 2012, p. 31). For some families, the cash from abroad also allowed them to buy paddy terraces or transform land into terraces. Thus, all in all, village B seems to be a comparably prosperous village, given the high percentage of households owning paddy land and receiving remittances.

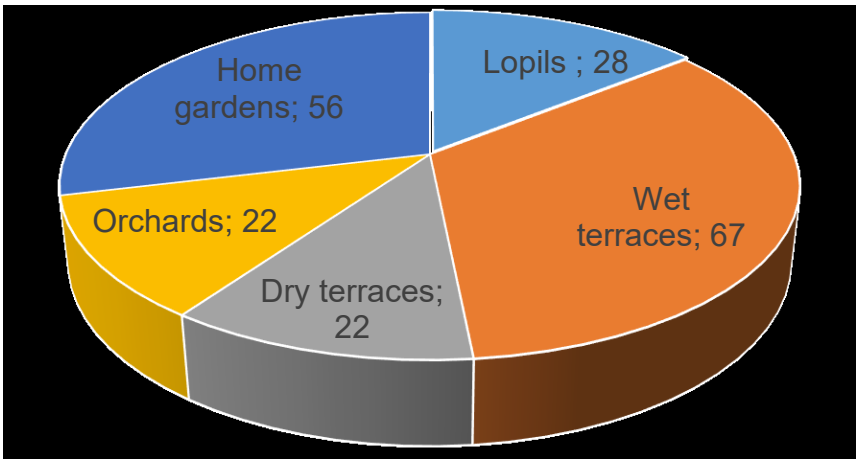

Figure 11: Percentage of households in village B engaging in different forms of agricultural production (source: CORAD, 2016; own illustration)

Figure 12: Wet paddy terraces in village B along the river (photo by author)

Figure 13: Lopil area in village B (photo by author)

Besides remittances, another source of cash income is traditional animal husbandry: the breeding of cows, buffalos, pigs and chickens to sell at the local market. Livestock is also a way to invest savings since Bank services were unavailable until recently (Frissard & Pritts, 2018). Due to limited access to markets inside Myanmar, villagers used to 'export' livestock to India informally by crossing the (unsecured) land border. During summertime, the villagers also cross the border for seasonal labor migration in order to find extra income for their family as casual laborers (usually in construction work) (Rual Lian Thang, 2012). Another source of income is hunting in the surrounding forests. Although much of the wildlife has already been decimated, villagers armed with old shotguns looking for wild game are a common sight in the region. Kills are increasingly being sold at the local market to improve cash income rather than sharing it with relatives as in the past (Lehman, 1963).[173]

Irrigated paddy land for rice production, which in the past has been regarded as superior 'luxury food' (Lehman, 1963), was introduced to village B in the late 1960s (Rual Lian Thang, 2018). At least since socialist times, the government tried to systematically expand paddy production in the hills. Different from lopils, the paddy land (wet terraces) and

[173] In interviews villages reported that tigers, leopards and other wild animals had been shot in the not so distant past, however they have since become very rare. Pictures of wild animals hunted by famous chiefs are also engraved in stone steles (memorial stones) found in some places in northern Chin State (Robinne, 2015). In recent years, the government tried to reduce hunting and the number of shotguns with limited success (Rual Lian Thang, 2018).

orchards are privately owned and can be also sold and bought on a local land market. While lopils are usually not allocated to persons residing outside the village, paddy land can be sold to outsiders. This is the case in village B, where at least two families from a neighboring village bought paddy land (Int. 50. local farmers, Thantlang Tsp., November 2016). The paddy land is also registered with the Department of Agricultural Land Management and Statistics (DALMS), which issues a Land Use Certificate (Form 7) according to the statutory law (Faxon & Spectrum, 2015; Oberndorf, 2012). Only taxable paddy land that is officially registered is eligible for agricultural credits by the government. Affluent families who benefit from remittances and families making an income with livestock-breeding can afford access to better paddy land, creating an increasing socio-economic inequality within the village. Households who do not have access to paddy land have to rely exclusively on shifting cultivation, gardens and forest products.

The introduction of the farmland law and VFL law in 2012 and the subsequent increasing economic pressure on land facilitated a trend towards formalization and privatization, not only in village B, but throughout the region. In addition, the improvement of transportation and the introduction of new cash crops such as Elephant Foot Yam, led to an increase in land registrations and an erosion of customary (communal) land tenure in the village (Rual Lian Thang, 2018). This also changed the local perception of land, which is increasingly regarded as a commodity and economic capital rather than a common resource pool and source of food for households. In recent years, even local elites living outside the village have been returning in order to secure land titles (Rual Lian Thang, 2018). As some villagers begin to register land, a vicious circle is set in motion whereby more villagers follow suit in order not to lose out in the 'rush for land'.

In addition to privatization and increasing formalization, another potential threat to communal land in village B appeared during a second visit in 2016. In interviews, villagers reported on a plan by the government to establish a national park near village B — the *Bawi Pa Taung* (or Bawi Pa Thlaung) *National Park* (see Figure 14). According to informants, in 2013, representatives of the local government agencies visited the villages along the proposed park boundary (located in the *Bawi Pa* mountain range between Hakha, Thantlang and Matupi) to gain consent for the national park project (Int. 50. local farmers, Thantlang Tsp., November 2016). About twenty villages are located nearby or inside the proposed park. Villagers were not properly informed of the planning process and only few were informed about the meetings with the forest department officials. Those attending the meeting in

village B found that, according to the official maps provided, the proposed park boundary would cross village territory and infringe on communal pastures used for grazing cows and mithun (bos frontalis), as well as on communal forests that provide important construction material for housing. The boundary was obviously drawn on the map without taking village boundaries and actual land use patterns on the ground into consideration. According to an informant, during the first meeting the government officials tried to deceive villagers to give their consent using an attendance list which was later claimed to be an agreement: "All men who attend a meeting unknowingly signed an agreement, but if they knew more clearly, they would not sign. They only said who attend the meeting must sign" (Int. 50. local farmers, Thantlang Tsp., November 2016). When government officials visited the village a second time in 2016, the villagers disagreed with the proposed boundary and a debate emerged with the authorities on how much land to cede to the park. Since no agreement could be reached, no more meetings have since been reported and no further information provided to residents of village B (as of 2018). However, according to a recent government newspaper from May 2018, the government still plans to implement the park with a proposed size of around 68 square miles (168 km²) together with a number of other parks in Chin State ("Eco-tourism underway in Chin", 2018). In contrast, according to the *World Database on Protected Area*s, with data provided by the *Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation,* the reported area of the park would be 581 km², more than three times the size ("Bawi Pa Taung National Park", n.d.). Thus, the risk remains that the park will be declared without free, prior and informed consent by the local population and will infringe on the communal village land of several villages, potentially affecting their livelihoods. This has happened already in other areas in Chin State and beyond (see below).

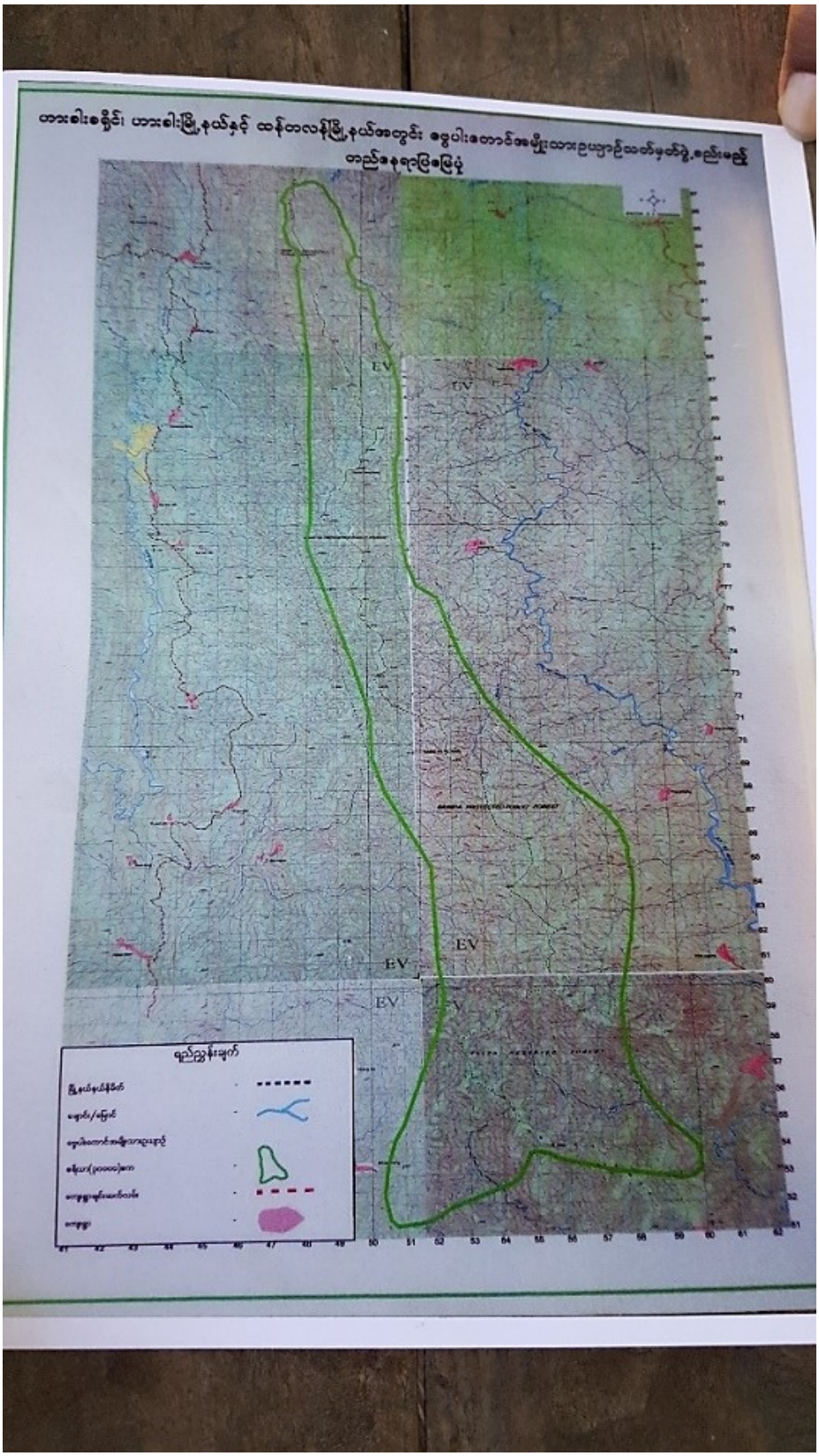

Figure 14: Map of proposed Bawi Pa Taung National Park (photo by author)

5.5. Modes of Land Enclosures and Dispossession

As illustrated in the profile of village B, there are several causes and drivers of formalization and enclosures of customary land. The following section will discuss different drivers and modes of land enclosures and dispossession by focusing on the most recent phase of frontier expansion in Chin State beginning with the post-1988 period and the political and economic transformations in recent years, in particular since 2010. According to the cases identified during the empririal research for this study, six main categories are discussed below:

1) Land confiscations in connection *to militarization* since 1988;

2) *Private enclosures* of common land including those by local elites;

3) Enclosures related to conservation and 'green grabbing';

4) Enclosures related to *urban expansion*;

5) *Infrastructure development* related enclosures and;

6) Threats of dispossession through *mining* projects.

This list is, of course, not exhaustive and another categorization or clustering of modes of enclosures would be possible. For instance, in their attempt to systematize land conflicts in Southeast Asia, Hall, Hirsch, & Li (2011) identify four main "powers of exclusion", namely; *regulation, market, force*, and *legitimation*. The six modes of enclosures discussed below are a mix, caused by all four of those "powers". For instance, frontier expansion in Chin State was initiated by *force* during colonial times and again later during a militarization phase, post-1988. During this time, large areas of land were taken by the military for infrastructure development and economic reasons. This was followed by the introduction of new *regulations* and legislation, in particular by the post-colonial state in order to create conditions conductive for the introduction of *markets* and capital accumulation. The legitimation was the 'development' of the 'poor and backward' upland areas, through the introduction of markets and a market economy. Some enclosures and dispossession (or "exclusions" in the narrative of Hall, Hirsch, & Li, 2011) were also *legitimized* on the pretext of environmental conservation and protection, as discussed below. Since shifting cultivation is still blamed for forest degradation and soil erosion, it is regarded as legitimate to call for an end of this practice and demand the transition to permanent farming. However, force, or at least the threat of force, remained a major factor in backing state regulations.

1. Militarization and land confiscation post-'88

Since the military coup in 1962, state formation and territorialization in the ethnic frontier areas is closely associated with militarization and the expansion of the Tatmadaw's presence. A first wave of land confiscation and land enclosures in Chin State thus occurred during the militarization of the region following the 1988 uprising, which also affected parts of the Chin Hills. The formation of the state's sole ethnic armed group, the Chin National Front (CNF) occurred the same year a few months earlier (Swift, 2017). Yet, it did not engage in armed resistance until a few years later (see chapter 6). According to a report by Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2009), prior to 1988, the Tatmadaw did not have any direct military presence in the Chin Hills.[174] The nearest battalions were stationed at the foot of the Chin Hills in the town of Kalay (and Gangaw). After 1988, however, the Tatmadaw's presence expanded considerably and the number of soldiers and battalions increased all over the country. By 2008, the number of battalions in Chin State had increased to "14 battalions with an average of 400 to 500 soldiers each and 50 army camps" (HRW, 2009, p. 22).

As in other parts of the country, the military confiscated large areas of land in Chin State to set up their extensive military camps and to sustain their operations. In particular, in the city of Kalay, land confiscations by the Myanmar army included large plots of land in the middle of the city, which has resulted in a number of land conflicts until today (Int. 52. Chin CSO representative, November 2017). In other towns in Chin State, such as Hakha, Falam, Tedim and Matupi, land confiscations by the military also occurred during the early 1990s (see Figure 18) (Int. 13, local NGO representative, Yangon, October 2016; "Landowners Can Reclaim", 2018). The army usually erected its military camps on strategically suitable locations on top of hills above the respective town settlements.[175] In many cases, Buddhist monasteries were constructed right next to the military infrastructure overseeing the predominantly Christian communities and symbolizing the military government's approach of promoting Buddhism in the border areas. According to the Chin Human Rights Organization (2012), the state-sponsored construction of Buddhist pagodas and monasteries

[174] This information is difficult to verify without access to military archives, however a handwritten list given to Bertil Lintner in 1988 detailing military units and their position do not include positions in Chin State ("Handwritten Document given", n.d.).

[175] In the case of Hakha "following the 1988 uprising, two military bases (the Kalay Light Infantry Brigade 266; and the Camp of the Tactical Operational Commander Office) were built on top of the Rung Mountain on the ridge road to Gangaw, clear-cutting forests in the process for the bases' construction". This led to the degradation of what had previously been protected as a watershed area and finally contributed to a major landslide in 2015 (Middleton, Thabchumpon, Van Bawi Lian & Pratomlek, 2017, p. 28).

already started under Ne Win, but intensified under the SLORC and SPDC regime (see Figure 15). Often the army extracted forced labor from the local Christian population to build pagodas and monasteries (CHRO, 2012).[176] Some reported cases of military related land confiscations have been as recent as 2004 when the military presence was further increased due to infrastructure development projects (see below) (Int. 13, local NGO representative, Yangon, October 2016). According to a local lawyer, one reason for land confiscations during that time was that:

> After the coup 1988 the military was asked to take care of themselves and live on the land and other resources; since the government was bankrupt, the army had to confiscate land and hired farmers to work on their land. On the ground the army camps grabbed 'vacant' land with the help of the land records department, even though the land was already customarily used without registration; but in the record all the land was recorded as 'vacant'. (Int. 54, Chin legal network, Kalay, November 2017)

The Tatmadaw's policy of 'self-reliance' for its army battalions resulted in the exploitation of locally available resources (including human resources), widespread landgrabs, as well as forced labor and other human rights violations (ECDF, 2008; HRW, 2009).

[176] This is an important aspect of the expansion and territorializing of religious Buddhist spaces in frontier areas which cannot be further explored here. The author could observe the same phenomenon in other frontier areas, such as a remote island in the Mergui archipelago, where pagodas were erected in predominately non-Buddhist villages, arguably to mark the territorial limits of state Buddhism and its sponsors.

Figure 15: Photo of Buddhist pagoda overseeing the town of Falam (Photo by author)

In one case in Hakha town, a man – here called Mr. C – claimed that the military and the local civilian government had grabbed land that he had inherited from his father decades ago (see also Boutry et al., 2018). In an interview conducted in November 2016, the Hakha resident reported that in 1992 the military had confiscated around 195 acres (79 ha) of land, which his father had bought from the Hakha chief back in 1945, before independence (Int. 42, Hakha resident & Chin CSO representative, Hakha, November 2016). Since his father was a sergeant in the Burma Army, he had obtained an official document of the land transaction, displaying the boundaries of the land issued by the government of Burma (see Figure 16 and 17). Later, the Tatmadaw had used parts of the land for agricultural production without his consent. During this time, he could not file any complaint without danger of being imprisoned. In 2012, however, he heard of the news that the new government announced the possibility to reclaim land confiscated by the military, if one could provide legitimate documents of ownership. He wrote nine complaint letters to the local government between 2012 and 2016. Yet, the local government responded that he would receive only half an acre of the total 195 acres, an offer he refused. Mr. C claimed that he was prepared to donate 155 acres to the town to preserve parts of it as a watershed area and keep 40 acres to himself. Later, he increased the offer to 180 acres for the town and 15 acres for himself. In any case, the local government declined the counter offer. Reportedly, following the

transition to a semi-civilian government in 2012, the land had been already taken by members of the local administration who divided the land in small plots and re-sold them at profit. In addition, local religious elites reportedly profited from the land sales. According to Mr. C, "the GAD and the Land registration department and the cronies of Hakha worked together. They did not give registration to me, so that they can use it for themselves" (Int. 42, Hakha resident & Chin CSO representative, Hakha, November 2016). According to a land rights activist who supported Mr. C in his struggle to get back parts of his land, this was not the only case. He recorded and collected the files of dozens of other cases of land disputes in the region. As a result, together with other activists and farmers, he founded an organization to lobby for the customary rights of local farmers in 2016 (see following chapter 6).

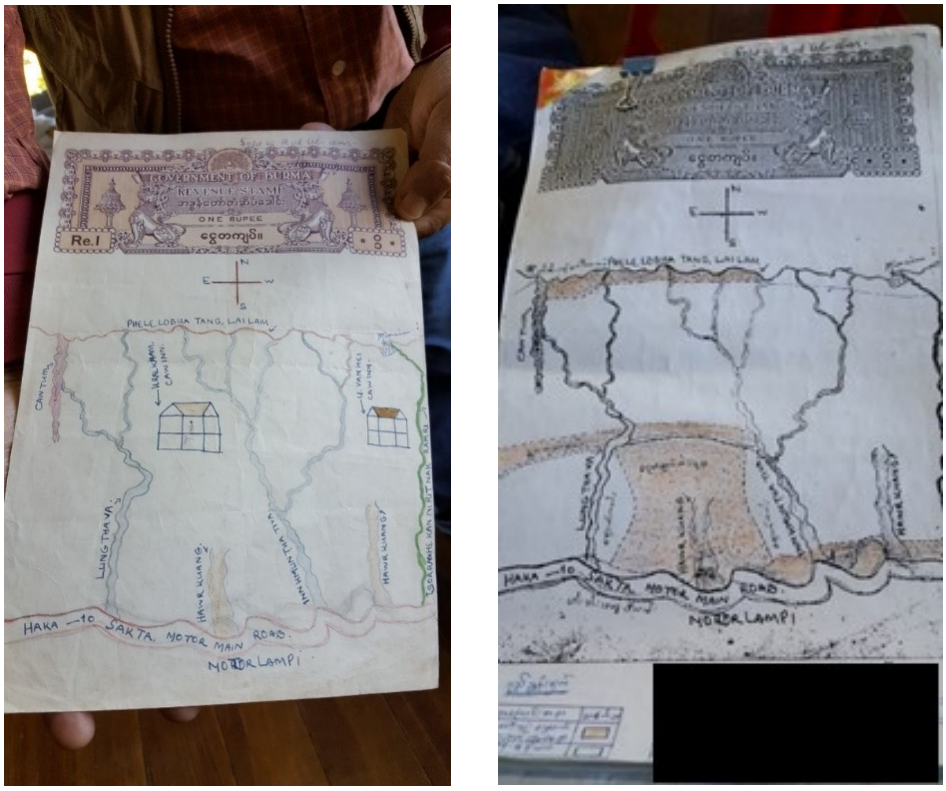

Figure 16 and Figure 17: Documents of land ownership issued by the colonial government to the father of Mr. C shown to the author in November 2016 (Photo by author)

According to reports by the *Parliamentary Land Investigation Commission* (which was set up in 2012), the army had been one of the biggest source of land grabs in the country.[177] An

[177] "In order to address the negative impacts that land grabs have on the development of the country and on its own legitimacy, in 2012 the Union Parliament established an Investigation Commission for the Prevention of

analysis of the commission's reports attributed 65% of the analyzed cases to the military, amounting to 247,077 acres (99,988 ha) of land (U San Thein, Khin Pyae Sone, & Diepart, 2017).[178] The cases analyzed by the commission originated mainly in urban areas in the lowlands, and hardly any cases from Chin State were included. Nevertheless, according to several respondents, Chin State is not an exception and military confiscations had a strong effect in Chin State.[179] Despite promises by army general Min Aung Hlaing in 2013 to return confiscated land to their rightful owners (Wa Lone & Lewis, 2016), only few farmers have had their land returned up until today. Many cases are still being negotiated with the support of local lawyers or land rights activists, some pending in court. However, often farmers cannot provide the required ownership documents or they are not recognized by the local authority (Int. 53, Chin land rights activist, Kalay, November 2017; Int. 54, Chin legal network, Kalay, November 2017; "Landowners Can Reclaim", 2018).

Figure 18: Land seized by the Tatmadaw in Tedim (Source: "Land Owners Can Reclaim", 2018)

Public Disenfranchisements Connected to the Confiscation of Farmland and Other Lands, also known as the Parliamentary Land Investigation Commission . . . The Commission was assigned to examine cases considered by farmers to be illegal grabs and to propose solutions to release the land to its original owner, in most cases a smallholder farming family" (U San Thein, Khin Pyae Sone, & Diepart, 2017, p. 1).

[178] However, the report only analyzed four of the 18 reports submitted by the commission in total (U San Thein, Khin Pyae Sone, & Diepart, 2017, p. 2).

[179] The case of military confiscation in Chin State would merit a research project on its own, which is beyond the scope of this study.

2. Private enclosures of common (customary) land

Other cases of land enclosures involve local businesspersons with connections to the Tatmadaw taking advantage of their powerful ally for their personal benefit. One case which emerged during field research, concerned a village nearby Hakha, here called village A.[180] The case also dates back to the time of militarization in the early 1990s when the Tatmadaw expanded its presence in the Chin capital. According to an interview with a local farmer and a village 'protest letter' ("Mithun complaint letter", 2014), a businessman from the village had started to enclose communal village pastures and plots used for shifting cultivation to raise his own livestock (cows and mithun) on the village land. The businessman's livestock was also partly owned by the local military. In principle, the communal land in the village was available to all villagers, according to customary rules, and could not be privatized and enclosed without the consent of the village. Yet, the businessperson, with the support of the local military, and in clear violation of local customary rules, single-handedly seized hundreds of acres of land. According to a villager's account, "he came and destroyed the fence and burned all the potatoes. He dared to do this, because he is cooperating with the military. Because here the military is very powerful" (Int. 47, local farmer, Hakha Tsp., November 2016). Reportedly, the village chief during that time was also involved in the enclosure behind the villagers' back. The land was subsequently declared state land by the local government, possibly categorizing it as 'fallow land' to be used for grazing.[181] Over 100 cows and mithun were held by the businessman and the army on the grazing pasture. Since the livestock repeatedly damaged crops planted by the villagers on nearby fields and no compensation was paid, they were forced to abandon cultivation in the area. For decades, nothing happened in this case since the villagers could not complain to the local military command without fearing reprisals. However, with the beginning of the political transition in 2010 and the installation of a new (semi-civilian) local government, the new village head started to complain about the enclosed land and demanded the return of the communal pastures. In 2014 the village tract administration submitted a letter of complaint to the local government concerning the "proclamation of demarcated grazing pasture areas within . . . village territory", including the Township Administrator and General Administration Department (GAD). The letter stated that:

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[180] For reasons or research ethics, the name of the village, the businessperson involved and of informants remain confidential.

[181] However, the details of the case and which legal justification was given by the local government remain unclear.

> The Government set up its objective of developing economy, health and education as prioritized for the whole community. But the concerned authority neglected to consider the whole community benefit instead of one person benefit . . . Therefore, for the sake of . . . villagers submit abrogation letter to remove demarcated pasture for mithun breeding within [village name] territory. ("Mithun complaint letter", 2014)

The local government promised to return the land to the community, however this has not yet been finalized as of 2017. The enclosure may have also had an impact on the long-term land use pattern of the village. While the village previously relied on shifting cultivation, it has since had to move to permanent cultivation of corn, paddy and potatoes, possibly because of the scarcity of available communal land. In addition, the proximity of the village to the capital Hakha and increasing in-migration may have also led to increasing land prices and pressure on the fast-growing village (see also Boutry et al., 2018). This has resulted in an internal differentiation and growing inequality within the village. While not all families had access to the limited paddy plots and orchards, some local elites, with their powerful supporters, profited from enclosing communal resources.

This trend, which can be described as a classic case of primitive accumulation (see chapter 2), can be observed in many areas of Chin State and is likely to increase over time. A more recent case of (attempted) land enclosure in Southern Chin State (Kanpetlet township), which gained more media attention, involved a Burman film actor from Yangon who planned to invest in an 'ecotourism business' near the *Khonuamthung* national park (also known as *Nat Ma Taung* National Park or *Khaw Nu M'Zung*).[182] According to newspaper reports, the actor, who already owned tourist businesses in Shan State, had been invited by the former head of the national park "to invest on vacant land in the hopes that the area could be responsibly developed with projects that would have an economic windfall on the community" ("Actor U Lwin Moe cancels", 2017). Yet, communities claimed that the 1,697 acres (687 ha) of land was in fact not 'vacant', but had been continuously used for generations by the local communities for their livelihood. Thus, they were concerned that "the land may be affected if large parcels are given to a private company" (ibid.). Due to continuing opposition by local villagers and a petition against the project, with the support

[182] Lwin Moe was popular for his TV series presented in Myanmar traveling mostly through Chin State.

of Chin political parties, it was finally canceled.[183] Ironically, while business people from outside are invited to invest near national parks, the local communities bordering the parks are regularly blamed for encroaching on the national park, as shown in the following example

3. "Eco-authoritarian" conservation and "green grabbing"

National parks and protected areas can be drivers for what has been termed as *green grabbing* in the literature, "the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends" (Fairhead, Leach, & Scoones, 2012, p. 238). The phenomenon of green grabbing "builds on a long and well-known history of colonial and neo-colonial alienation in the name of the environment" (Leach, 2012). Thereby, local community members are criminalized and excluded from areas that are being enclosed under the pretext of protecting biodiversity or combating climate change (Ojeda, 2012). Well-known cases of green grabbing in Myanmar were reported in areas such as Kachin State, where hundreds of families were displaced after the establishment of a tiger reserve, which in fact was used by a Myanmar company connected to the military for massive plantations (Graham-Rowe, 2005; Seamus, 2013). In many cases, conservation initiatives were supported by international conservation organizations who closely collaborated with the Myanmar military in order to prevent deforestation and loss of biodiversity. However, for the military, conservation motives were not of primary concern, if at all. It used the "conservation-military alliances" as a strategy to territorialize and gain access to frontier areas legitimated by international conservation partners (Noam, 2007). This has been criticized by researches also as "eco-authoritarian" conservation that disregards the rights of populations residing in proposed protected areas who rely on their environment and forests for their livelihood (ibid.). As shown above in the brief profile of village B, Chin State is not immune to green grabbing and "eco-authoritarian" conservation, even though there is limited documentation or research available.

The history of 'green grabbing' in Chin State dates back to the colonial period when areas such as the *Khonuamthung* (*Nat Ma Taung*) in the Southern Chin Hills was protected as "climatic reserved forest" in 1936. The current national park in the same area was proposed in 1997, and officially gazetted by the government only in 2010 (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Forest Department, n.d.). The *Nat Ma Taung*

[183] The petition against the project was signed by the Chin National Democratic Party, Chin Progressive Party, as well as the Chin National Front ("Actor U Lwin Moe cancels", 2017).

national park is unique for its important bird populations, plants, mammals and endemic species. It includes the highest peak in the Chin Hills (3,200 m), after which it is named. This peak is known under its colonial name as *Mt. Victoria*, *Nat Ma Taung* in *Burmese language,* or *Khonuamthung* in the local Chin language, and is a spiritually and culturally important site for Chin people.[184] Locally, the name Khonuamthung is preferred over the colonial and Burmese names. The park covers an area of around 176,000 acres (712 km²) of mountainous terrain in Mindat, Kanpetlet and Matupi Township. Today it is one of the main tourist attractions in Chin State with thousands of tourists visiting for bird watching and other eco-tourism activities. Tourism has been another major factor in establishing the park. Several hotels where constructed around the national park to accommodate tourists, often generating conflicts over access to land between investors and local communities ("Actor U Lwin Moe cancels", 2017).

There are around 68 villages around the national park with 12 villages inside the national park area (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Forest Department, n.d.). Several villages were practicing shifting cultivation in the vicinity (inside the buffer zone) or inside the park (see Figure 19 and Figure 20). Upon the establishment of the national park, some villages were resettled into a 'buffer zone' along the core area of the park (Pyi Soe Aung, Adam, Pretzsch, & Peters, 2014). According to Vicol et al. (2018) "many households lost access to individually and collectively held swidden land in this move, and are now restricted from opening up additional swidden plots by forestry officials" (p. 456). However according to Myint Aung (2007), "park boundaries are not completely marked, and local people are unaware of where the park begins" (p. 198). Until now, little research exists on land use conflicts in the Khonuamthung (Nat Ma Taung) area. It has also not been documented whether the relocation was voluntarily or whether there were any forms of compensation. However, a recent report by the Forest Department, acknowledges problems regarding land use between these villages and the park authority:

> Villager access to land in the protected area has been very complicated. Though village rights and privileges have been given, there has been a lot of unresolved land disputes and will need very comprehensive approach

[184] As with most ethnic names the transliteration of Khonuamthung varies widely - in a government report it is also written as Khaw Nu M'Zung (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Forest Department, n.d.).

and enough time frame to sort out. (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Forest Department, n.d, p. 20)

According to the Forest Department, the collection of fuelwood and other forest products has been degrading the forests in the national park. In addition, the expansion of Elephant Foot Yam cultivation and other cash crops has been documented in the villages (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Forest Department, n.d). Income from forest related activities is a significant financial source for households living along the park boundary, contributing to up to 55% of the annual income (Pyi Soe Aung, Adam, Pretzsch, & Peters, 2014, p. 8). A complete restriction of access to the forests will negatively affect households. While international organizations and donors support the park with millions of USD and while a new management plan (2018/19-2022/23) has been drawn to improve the co-management of the park, further research on land use conflicts in the park area from a political ecological perspective is needed. Conflicts over land in national parks are likely to increase over the coming years. According to a government newspaper at least seven new national parks are being currently planned in Chin State (see Table 7).

Name of proposed national park	**Size (square miles)**	**Area**
1. Kyeereey-antaung	13.10	Thantlang Township
2. Bwaybar-taung[185] (*Bawi Pa Taung)*	68.12	Thantlang Township
3. Zeinhmutaung	31.15	Haka Township
4. Miayepitaung	19.30	Thantlang Township
5. Hmantaung	2.20	Haka Township
6. Sarhmontaung	44.30	Thantlang Towsnhip
7. Laythataung	36.66	Tedim Township

Table 7: List of proposed new national parks in Chin State (source: "Eco-tourism underway in Chin", 2018)

[185] "Bwaybar-taung" national park is likely "Bawi Pa National Park" mentioned earlier. Due to the transliteration issues, the names keep changing in newspaper reports leading to confusion.

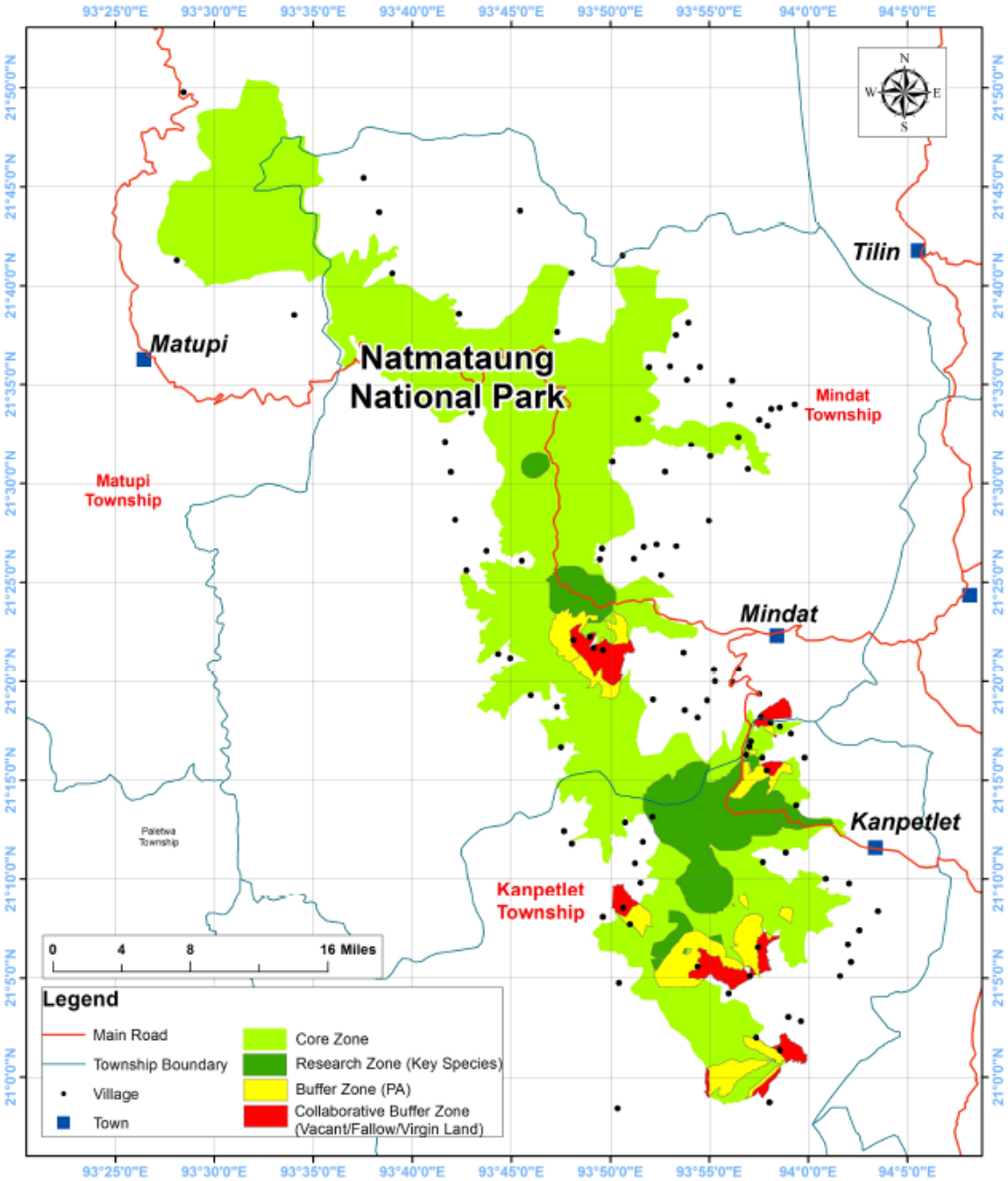

Figure 19: Proposed park zones and villages in Khonuamthung national park area (source: Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Forest Department, n.d, p. 37)

Figure 20: Agricultural plots in the vicinity of the Khonuamthung national park (photo by author)

4. The urban frontier

Even though it seems unlikely in the context of rural Chin State, one of the driving forces of enclosures and dispossession of customary land has been the expansion of the 'urban frontier', in particular in the capital Hakha, but also in Falam and other towns. Located on top of a mountain ridge at 1,868 m above sea-level, Hakha transformed itself from a small village with a few huts, back in the 1960s, into the fast-growing official Chin capital in 1964 (Boutry et al., 2018, p. 4).[186] Its population increased from around 1,300 at the end of the 19th century to about 25,000 in 2014 (Carey & Tuck, 1896; Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2015).[187] While still relying on shifting cultivation a few decades ago, Hakha is progressively turning into a regional commercial hub in the former economic backwater region. Despite currently lacking any major industry, the state

[186] Surprisingly, it is somewhat unclear when Hakha exactly became the state capital. Middleton, Thabchumpon, Van Bawi Lian & Pratomlek (2017) refer to the year 1965 (p. 4). Some sources assert 1974, when the new constitution came into effect creating Chin State as it is today. Other sources claim it has been capital of the Chin Hills Special Division since the 1960s ("How Chin Capital was Moved", 2012). Lian Sakhong (2003) claims Hakha (Haka) has been the capital since colonial times.

[187] According to Carey and Tuck (1896) Hakha had around 255 households (Kolun and Kotarr combined) (p. Ixxix); with an estimated average household size of 5 persons (as used by Carey and Tuck), which would amount to around 1,275 persons.

government has already developed plans for industrials zones (Chan Mya Htwe & Shiu Wang Chau, 2017). During the past few years, visitors to the city could observe increasing construction activities with new bank branches indicating the gradual expansion of the financial services sector and a new 'hypermarket' replacing the old traditional fresh market (see Figure 21, Figure 22 and Figure 23). While up until 2015 there was only one hotel offering simple rooms (some rooms with a bathroom and warm water), since then more and more guesthouses and hotels are catering to an increasing number over visitors (businesspeople as well as tourists). Meanwhile, the occasional foreigner, a rare sight prior to 2012, is becoming more familiar on the streets of Hakha. Even a small number of expatriates working for international (non-governmental) organizations settled in the city in recent years. It is especially on this dynamic urban frontier where customary land tenure systems intersect and overlap with modern market-oriented forms of land tenure, leading to tensions between rural communities in the peri-urban periphery and the city administration. However, according to a report by the NGO GRET:

> "'Urbanization' in and around Hakha is obviously incomparable with the urbanization process of lowland towns. . . However, we should see that a common point between lowlands and uplands peri-urban areas is the rise of a land market that developed through the 1990s to literally boom in much parts of the country following the 'land turn' in 2012". (GRET, 2017, p. 53)

Besides a booming land market, exacerbated by land speculation and increasing migration to the city, the pressure for (construction) land in Hakha, already particularly scarce in such a mountainous environment, surged following a major landslide in 2015. The landslide, which originated at the deforested Rung mountain above old Hakha (also a legacy of military intervention in the 1990s), destroyed or damaged 984 houses in Hakha town (and over 6,000 houses all over Chin State) (CCERR, 2015).[188] New houses were built for the victims on new resettlement areas on the outskirts of Hakha, since some of the land was no longer safe

[188] An overall of 54,537 persons were affected by the landslides and flooding in Chin State (CCERR, 2015).

for re-construction. This led to the appropriation of neighboring villages' land without proper prior consultation or compensation (see below).

Figure 21: View of Hakha from the mountain top (viewpoint) (photo by author)

Figure 22: New bank branch in Hakha town in 2017 (Photos by author)

Figure 23: A new supermarket under construction in Hakha town in 2017 (Photos by author)

Recently, in a contested move, the Hakha city administration planned to extend the township administrative area to 43.9 square miles (113 km²) for 'township development'. This would mean a "five-fold expansion of Hakha's municipal boundary" (Downing, 2017) and would compare in size to the 1.5 million town of Mandalay. Since customary land tenure has not been recognized within the municipal boundary and has not been considered during the planning and implementation of the city boundary's expansion, conflicts have been arising between the municipality and neighboring villages who feared losing their agricultural land, for which they did not have any official land titles. According to the affected villagers, the local government did not inform them properly about their city development plan. The government, however, claimed that they had consulted with villagers and received approval (Chinland News, 2017a; 2017b [transcript of Facebook video]).

In a rare public demonstration, hundreds of people from neighboring villages took to the streets of Hakha in December 2017, to protest against the local government's plans to extend the city area. Villagers displayed banners with statements written in Burmese language, such as "Everyone who claims there is no ancestral land is our enemy", "Peasants rights protection and promotion" and "Stop expansion of municipal area in Hakha" (see Figure 24 and Figure 25). However, the demonstrations did not receive much media attention apart from local media outlets.[189] In interviews conducted during the protests by local media, the villagers

[189] Except by local media outlets, the protest was neither covered in national nor international media. Other protests in Hakha in previous years that received more attention were related to religious freedom, demands for electricity, or demands for an end of attacks on ethnic groups by the Tatmadaw.

expressed their anger about the government's excessive city expansion plans and the land confiscations without any prior information or compensation:

> If you look at Hakha, you will see huge areas, I don't understand why the government decided to grab village's land. Recently, Hakha municipal government came and placed municipal boundary pillar near our village without any consultation. Compared to other villages, our village area is much smaller. Many of the village land were also destroyed by landslide in 2015. We plan to move resident areas to safer places as the current village resident areas are unsafe from landslides. But sadly, the government has taken almost all the remaining village land. We are very sad that we don't have safe place to move. In addition, there is no enough agricultural land left for the villager. That's the reason I came today to ask the government to reconsider their decision. (Chinland News, 2017a; [transcript of Facebook video])

While the demonstrating villagers rejected the plans for the city extension (which was unnecessary from their perspective), they particularly resented the disregard of the local government for their customary land rights and the incorporation of 'ancestor land' into the city area:

> It is silly to claim that there is no ancestor land within municipal areas. I also doubt the capacity of the government officials who made such ridiculous claims. We all inherit ancestor land. Especially in Chin State, almost all land can be claimed as ancestor land. Other states and regions also have ancestor land. We are very saddened by the Chin State government for denying our ancestor land. If land in Chin State is not ours, who is the owner of all this land? So, we want the government to recognize and respect our ancestor land according to the law. (Chinland News, 2017b; [transcript of Facebook video])

> Lairam (Chinland) is our land. We are the first settlers and we are the owners of Chinland. We have cultivated Chinland for many generations and we don't need any certification and approval from any outsiders. . . We don't need to pay tax to anyone for using our own land. Before Chin people came here, only wild animals were here. Therefore, I want to

> conclude by letting you know that this is our land we received from our forefathers. (Chinland News, 2017b; [transcript of Facebook video])

The protesting villagers also accused the responsible local politicians of not being honest about their plans and of corruption by illegally selling the confiscated land for inflated prices on the land market. Despite the protests and negotiations between villagers and city administration, in August 2019, over a hundred houses were bulldozed on the outskirts of Hakha, according to local media, leaving many residents homeless. Some residents blamed the state authorities of heavy-handedness during the forced eviction ("NLD Hruaimi Chin Cozah", 2019). The case of Hakha is a good example of statutory formalized city land encroaching into the realms of customary land, which is particularly vulnerable on the urban frontier. In Falam, the former capital of Chin State and an important early settlement of the colonial administration, a similar problem emerged in 2017. The local government had decided "to add four wards into the Falam township administrative zone, and to disband the Laizo Village Tract" ("Chin tribe fears cultural," 2017). The villages were also affected by the landslides in 2015 and had to partly relocate. Members of the *Laizo Land Management Committee* complained to the State government and Union government and planned public demonstrations. They worried about their "ancestral lands" which might "fall in the hands of others" and, in particular, their burial grounds ("Chin tribe fears cultural," 2017).

Figure 24: Participants of Hakha protest with a sign reading: "Stop expansion of municipal area in Hakha" (source: GRET, n.d.)

Figure 25: Protest against city extension in Hakha on 11 December 2017 (source: Chinland News, 2017b [screenshot of Facebook video, min 26:34])

5. Infrastructure development: Roads, highways and hydropower

Another important factor regarding changes in land use and property relations (not only in peripheral areas) is infrastructure development, including transportation, communication and electrification. Infrastructure is a precondition to unlock the capitalist space (spatial matrix) and produce "landscapes of capital accumulation" (Brenner & Elden, 2009). Therefore, every phase of frontier expansion and incorporation is accompanied by infrastructure development. In Chin State, road construction was started by the British as part of their expeditions into the frontiers, with construction parties being frequently targets of Chin resistance fighters trying to stop the advance of the invading power (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 95; Vumson, 1986, p. 116). After all, it was the rugged terrain and isolation of the mountains that allowed the Chin groups to 'evade the state' and maintain a certain level of autonomy. The construction of roads threatened to reduce the distance between the lowlands and the uplands. Major construction of road networks was also under way during World War II with the Japanese and British armies anxious to transport heavy weaponry and supplies through forbidding mountain terrain (finally the difficult logistical situation lead to the downfall of the Japanese) (see chapter 3). The road from Tedim across the border to Imphal, for instance, which was built by the British, fulfilled an important function during the reconquest of Burma from the Japanese (Pum Khan Pau, 2012). Many roads constructed

during WWII have fallen into disrepair following independence since the military regime never maintained them. Therefore, hardly any all-weather road existed in Chin State until the 1970s, except for the main connection between the town of Kalay in the lowland and the Chin capital Hakha (which was still difficult to reach during the rainy season in 2016). This reflects the status of the Chin frontier during the early post-colonial period. Until the 2000s, it was not uncommon for villagers to walk by foot over several days to reach the next larger settlement or town, especially given the lack of motorized vehicles. Following independence, the lack of proper roads has been one of the major grievances of the local population.[190]

Following the most recent political and economic reforms that have occurred since 2010, road construction has increased dramatically in Chin State (also as part of the election campaign) with many hundreds of kilometers of new road. In previous years, the Chin State government spent almost half of the state budget on construction, mainly of roads (48% in 2014-2015) (MIID, 2014, p. 25), as compared to only three percent for agricultural development. In addition, international donors were funding construction of new highways (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2017). Roadworks and diggers have been familiar sights to visitors to Chin State in the last few years, who regularly have had to wait for construction breaks to be able to pass (see Figure 26).[191] The road construction boom is having a major impact on the new 'land market' and land use in the region. First, increased connectivity and declining transportation costs make it more profitable to put land to commercial use, when previously it had been too remote to produce for the market. Thus, it increases the incentives to privatize and enclose land for cash crop production (for instance for Elephant Food Yam) as illustrated in the example for village B. Another factor is the threat of land dispossession without proper compensation in connection with larger infrastructure projects.

[190] Indeed, one of the demands voiced by Chin representative during the Panglong conference was an improvement of infrastructure (including roads) (Vum Ko Hau, 1963).

[191] Road construction was mainly done by motorized diggers, but the construction of the road surface was often done by hand. Due to the high construction costs of roads and the limited funds available, the quality of road construction was not good enough. Roads were soon damaged again after construction and maintenance was slow.

Figure 26: Road construction in Chin State in 2016 (photo by author)

One of the biggest infrastructure projects proposed so far for Chin State is the *Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project* (short *"Kaladan Project"*), developed by the Government of India in cooperation with the Myanmar government (Kaladan Movement, 2013).[192] The project, with an overall investment volume of more than USD 450 million (originally USD 200 million), is entirely financed by India and declared as Official Development Aid to Myanmar ("India Blames Myanmar for Kaladan", 2017). It is part of India's "Look East Policy" (recently upgraded to the "Act East Policy") reflecting its increasing interest in expanding economic relations with Myanmar and ASEAN, also in response to China's dominant influence in the region (Lall, 2008). Until recently, India has been left far behind by China and Thailand in terms of direct investment in its neighboring country Myanmar. From 1988 to 2017, India was ranking only ninth concerning the actual inflows of FDI (Directorate of Investment and Company Administration [DICA], n.d.). The purpose of the Kaladan Project is to connect Northeast India's Mizoram State with the deep-sea port in Sittwe (Rakhine State) in the Bay of Bengal and ultimately India's Eastern seaport of Kolkata. The expected benefits for India are, firstly, a shorter and faster route between India's remote Northeast and its Eastern Seaport, cutting through part of southern Chin State.[193] Secondly, it aims to boost trade with Myanmar and turn the former 'backwater' border region into a 'gateway' between India and Myanmar. Initially planned in 2003, a

[192] The Kaladan Movement is an alliance of three civil society organizations in Myanmar and India, namely: The Arakan Rivers Network (ARN); The Chin Human Rights Organisation (CHRO) and the Zo Indigenous Forum (ZIF).

[193] The deep-sea port in Sittwe constructed by India was finalized in 2016 and handed over the Rakhine State government in 2017. It was built for ships of up to 20,000 tons displacement ("India to hand back", 2017).

framework agreement for the Kaladan Project was signed in 2008 (Kaladan Movement, 2013). The project itself consists of a 160 km waterway on the Kaladan River, connecting Sittwe port with a port in Paletwa town (Southern Chin State) and a 160 km long two-lane highway from Paletwa to the Myanmar-Indian border at Myeik Wa/Lomasu (Kaladan Movement, 2013). Construction is implemented in four phases, with the construction of the jetties and port facility in Sittwe (phase 1) and dredging and widening of parts of Kaladan River (phase 2) already completed (see Figure 27). The construction of the highway in Chin State (phase 3) and a 100 km highway to Lawngtlai in Mizoram (phase 4), is not yet completed as of 2018 (Bhattacharyya, 2018).[194] Due to delays, which India blamed on Myanmar's inability to finalize its part of the highway, the initial date of finalization, 2015, had to be postponed (Bhattacharyya, 2018; "India Blames Myanmar for Kaladan", 2017). Recent fights between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw in Paletwa township in Southern Chin State may further delay the project ("AA, ARSA, Kaladan Multi-Modal", 2019).

Local civil society organizations on both sides of the border criticized the Kaladan Project, due to its potential negative consequences for local communities along the route (altogether over one million people). Among the concerns mentioned, are land confiscation and forced evictions, an increased military presence and violation of indigenous rights, amongst others (Kaladan Movement, 2013).[195] Another obstacle is the lack of transparency by the government. No proper prior information had been provided to the local population, for instance, on the planned route of the highway. According to a survey conducted by the Chin Human Rights Organization, among 621 interviewed persons living along the possible Kaladan Project route, 89% expected to suffer "severe" or "major" impacts from the project (Kaladan Movement, 2013, p. 31). Most of the respondents were mainly concerned about the loss of their land. Since the government does not acknowledge customary land claims, the prospects of proper compensation for confiscated land are low, especially given the poor track-record of other large-scale developments in Myanmar so far. On the Indian side of the border in Mizoram, the project was also delayed by protests and blockades of farmers upset

[194] According to Bhattacharyya (2018) delays on the Indian side occurred due to the difficult working conditions in the mountains with workers falling ill or dying, a long rainy season when work has to be suspended as well as slow supply.

[195] Altogether the Kaladan Movement report (2013) cites eight different "potential negative impacts": 1. use of forced labor during project construction; 2. land confiscation and forced eviction; 3. disruption of and loss of livelihoods; 4. increased presence of Burma Army troops in project area; 5. restrictions on freedom of movement and access to transportation; 6. illegal taxation and extortion; 7. pollution and environmental degradation; 8. violations of indigenous rights (p. 29).

over the little or no compensation for land that had been marked for confiscation (Bhattacharyya, 2018, Kaladan Movement, 2013). The situation of land ownership in Northeast India is similarly fragmented and complex, despite more local autonomy for land governance, provoking calls to re-organize land administration:

> The disagreement stems from discrepancies between the national, state and local level land tenure records as well as the recognition of customary land rights. The main issue is that land titles for "Degraded jhum land" [authors comments: Jhum means land used for shifting cultivation] issued by the Lai Autonomous District are not recognized by the Mizoram State and National governments. To date, the 747 outstanding claimants from Lawngtlai District have made land claims based on their title papers for "Degraded jhum land"; land which had been re-classified as "Forest land" in the revised DPR for the Phase four highway construction. (Kaladan Movement, 2013, p. 45)

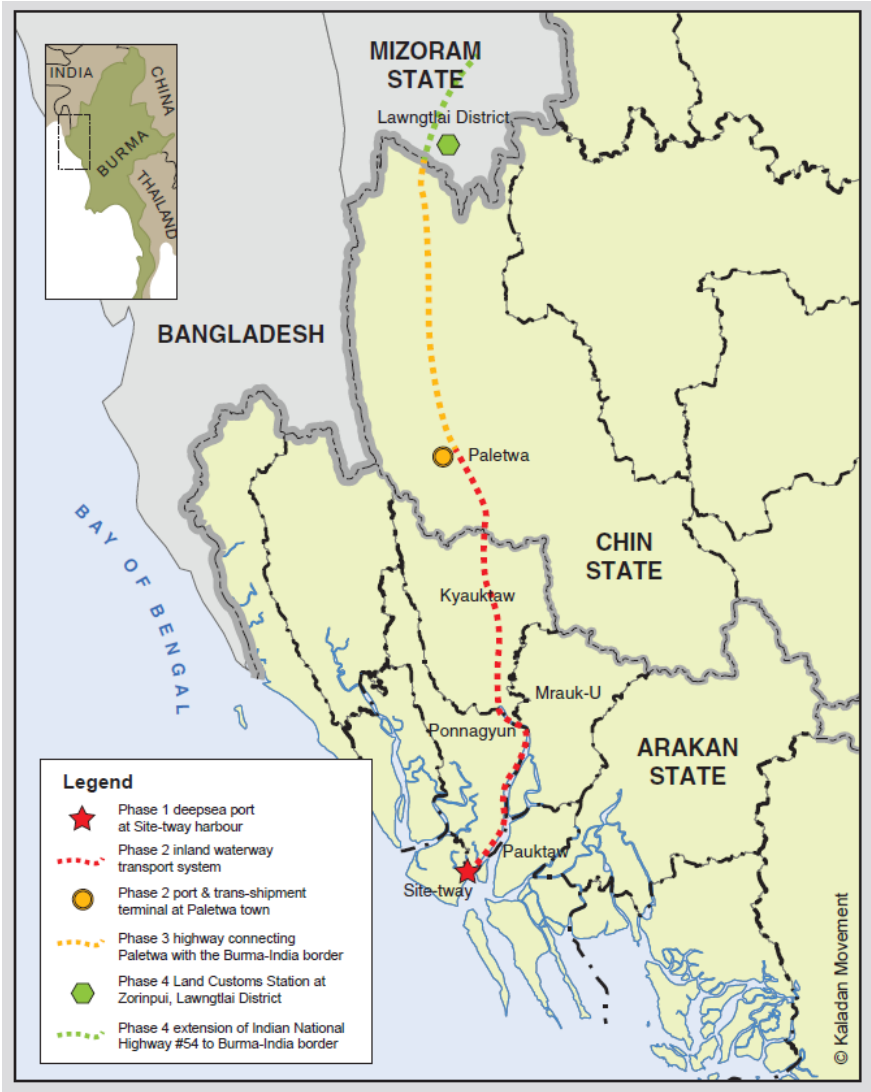

Figure 27: Map of the possible Kaladan Project route (Source: Kaladan Movement, 2013)

Besides road and highway construction, hydropower projects are also slowly emerging in Chin State, potentially affecting local communities and their customary land. The NLD led civilian government in Chin State is continuing plans, which started under the previous government, to invite investment into hydropower in the state (Chan Mya Htwe, 2016; Su Phyo Win, 2017). At least two hydropower projects are planned in Chin State as of 2018, with more projects likely to follow, given the potential for hydropower in the mountainous state and the current low level of electrification.[196] The largest hydropower dam proposed so

[196] The *Myanma Hydropwer Map* displays two planned projects in Chin State as of 2018. However further smaller projects are in the planning phase (Burma Rivers Network, n.d). According to a Hydropower database by the *World Bank's International Finance Corporation* (IFC) there are currently three planned dams in Chin State on the Lemro, Manupir and Mi Chaung rivers (IFC, n.d.).

far has been the *Lemro* (*Laymro* or *Laymyo*) hydropower dam located in southern Chin State (Paletwa) on Lemro River, with a proposed capacity of over 500 MW. The dam was to be developed by a joint venture of a Chinese company (Chinese Datang Overseas Investment Co. Ltd) and Myanmar partners (Shwe Taung Co. Ltd) at a cost of over USD 1.5 billion. A feasibility study had been conducted during the time of the military government in 2007, and surveys started in 2009 (Chin Rivers Watch, n.d.). Initially, the government intended to export 90% of the generated electricity to neighboring Bangladesh. However, due to local and national protests, criticizing power shortages in Myanmar and the government's energy export policy, this plan has since been canceled (Einzenberger, 2012; Van Biak Thang, 2012). During surveys at the project site, conflicts with local villagers emerged, who were being threatened, interrogated and accused of sabotage (Hoipang, 2012; Van Biak Thang, 2012). Local communities in the area were afraid of losing their gardens and agricultural plots and concerned about inadequate compensation ("Gold powder found in", 2012). According to a local pastor, insecurity and lack of transparency was a major concern: "We don't know exactly how many villages or people will be affected. But what we know is that damming on the Lemro river is like breaking our rice pots" (Van Biak Thang, 2012). After the project was suspended for unknown reasons, the plans for the Lemro dam have been recently revived, this time with a new company from France (Harris, 2016). A memorandum of understanding was signed with *Tractebel Engineering* in 2016 and a feasibility study conducted in 2017 for the proposed dam, with an expected reservoir area of 36 km² (International Finance Corporation [IFC], n.d.; Ministry of Electricity and Energy, 2018).[197] In May 2017, in Paletwa, around 150 persons from 33 villages along the river met with the Chin State minister for municipal works, electricity and industry to discuss the threat of potential evictions. According to the minister, no final decision was made, since the project was still in survey stage ("Locals afraid to restart", 2017).

> As the company is doing an initial stage of surveying only, after that they have to do EIA/SIA, then they have to make public awareness about the impacts on livelihood, environment, nature and others. There is a long way to go to restart the Dam project. ("Locals afraid to restart", 2017)

[197] The feasibility study was presented at the Ministry of Electricity and Energy in March 2018 (Ministry of Electricity and Energy, 2018).

6. Mining[198]

Compared to other border areas in Myanmar (in particular Kachin and Shan State), Chin State is not well known for its abundance of natural resources, other than land and forests (including its tremendous biodiversity). Indeed, there have been few reports about gems, minerals, precious metal deposits or mining activities in the past. Yet, the results of this empirical research confirm that, in recent years, there has been increasing interest from foreign investors to explore and exploit mineral resources in Chin State, in particular from neighboring countries (Chan Mya Htwe, 2016; Ei Ei Toe Lwin, 2013; Mirante, 2017; Int. 25, Chin CSO representative, Kalay, November 2016). Documented deposits in the region include talc, copper, chromite, limestone, nickel and iron, as published in a report by a local civil society organization (see Figure 28) (Chinland Natural Resources Watch Group [CNRWG], 2013).

[198] This sub-section is based on a paper published by Einzenberger (2018) on the Mwetaung (Gullu Mual) Mining Project in Chin State, which provides a more in-depth discussion of this case.

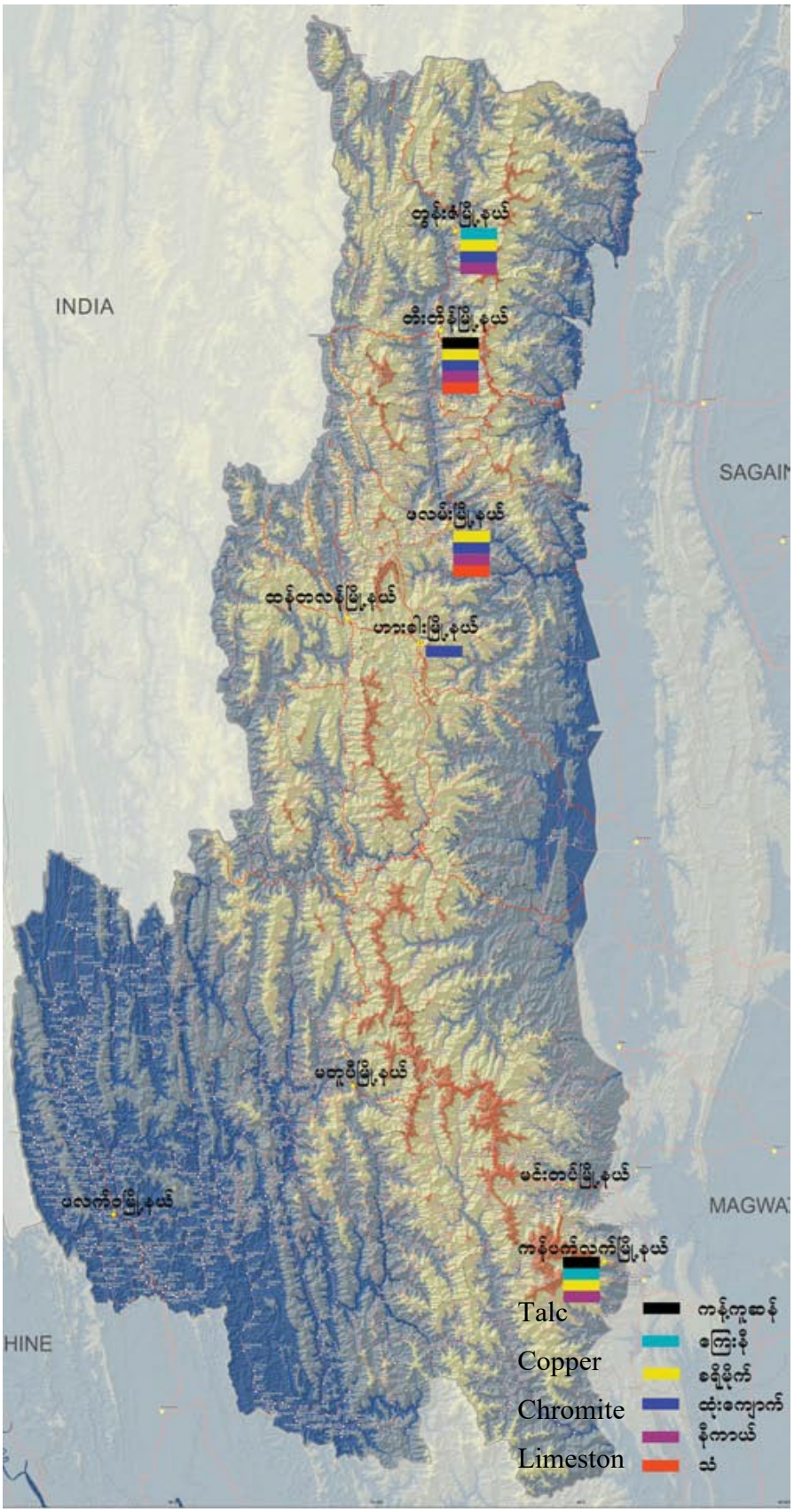

Figure 28: Map of potential mineral deposits in Chin State (source: CNRWG, 2013)

Like other well-known mining cases in Myanmar (in particular the *Letpadaung* case in Sagaing Region near Mandalay), proposed mining activities in Chin State threaten land ownership and customary land tenure of nearby communities, as exemplified by the case of the *Mwetaung* (*Gullu Mual*) mining project, which will be discussed in the following section.

Figure 29: Mwetaung/Phartaung mountain near Kalay, proposed for mining (source: google earth)

The mining project known as *Mwetaung/Phartaung* Project (which translates from Burmese as 'Snake' and 'Frog Mountain') or *Gullu Mual* (after the local name) is situated right at the border between Chin State and Sagaing Region (officially in Tedim Township) (see Figure 29). Since the 1960s, it has been known that the hills in this area are rich in nickel and chromite deposits (Barber, Khin Zaw, & Crow, 2017; Soe Win, & Marlar Myo Myint, 1998; Vumson, 1986). Nevertheless, during the BSPP era, no further explorations were conducted. Only following its 'entrepreneurial turn' the SLORC regime adopted new extractives policies (see above) and proactively encouraged foreign investment in the mining sector. An "invitation to mining investors" in "geologically favorable" areas, including the Mwetaung hills, was published in the government newspaper in 1995 ("Invitation to Mining Investors", 1995). However, potential investors emerged only in the early 2000s, mainly from China following its 'going out' strategy (Earthrights International, 2008). After the ceasefire agreement and the new investment policy were finalized by the Thein Sein government, a

new Chinese investor named *North Mining Investment Company* Ltd. (NMIC) showed interest in the Mwetaung area around 2012 ("Agreement Inked to Assess", 2012).[199] According to interviews conducted with local community representatives and local civil society organizations, in late 2012, NMIC assigned a Yangon-based service company named *Asia Guiding Star Services Company Limited* (AGSS) to visit some of the 15 villages surrounding the Mwetaung/Phartaung area to collect data for the environmental, social, and health impact assessments (Int. 27, local villagers, Mwetaung, November 2016; Kyemon & Ju Nine, 2013, p. 10). The company also tried to pressure the villagers and village headmen to give their consent to the project but was not successful. A representative of AGSS involved in the meetings recalls:

> They [the villagers] did not agree. What they said, is that "this is our land, this is our resources . . . why the Myanmar government want to take that resources, this is for our future generation" . . . The last meeting was very bad, they did not want to hear anything. They said, if you come here, we will surely protest. Then the chief minister suddenly stopped. The meeting was finished, we could not continue. They are complaining a lot. One Chinese company want to grow pine tree, but Chin State people were very angry. Don't come to our land, they hate China. In the big meeting, they said we don't want your technology. (Int. 61, Former representative of company in extractives sector, Yangon, December 2017)

Within a short period, following the first negotiations with the investors and an intermediary company AGSS, a broad civil society coalition was formed as a 'watch group' for the Mwetaung project, comprising of affected villagers and urban based civil society organizations (youth groups, student groups, political activists) from Kalay town (Einzenberger, 2018). This ad-hoc coalition was subsequently officially renamed *Chinland Natural Resources Watch Group* (CNRWG, 2013).[200] While the network was mainly comprised of Christian Chin/Zomi groups, it also included non-ethnic and Buddhist

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[199] According to Barber, Khin Zaw, & Crow (2017) the company was a "joint venture by Jinshan (Hong Kong) International Mining Company (100% subsidiary of Zijin Mining Group), China North Industries Corporation and Myanmar Government" (p. 11).

[200] The network partly existed already prior to 2012 under another name and was also involved in the activities around Letpadaung. It also had good relations with civil society networks in Yangon, such as Paung Ku. The activities of the CNRWG regarding the mining project were documented by the group in a Burmese language brochure, published in December 2013 (CNRWG, 2013).

members (including a monk). In 2013, the network organized dozens of events and public consultations in order to learn more about the mining project and find a common position towards the government and NMIC. Several consultations were held, including with the Chin State government and the Chinese investors. Soon it emerged that most of the residents rejected the project despite promises of 'development' for the region (including, jobs, schools, hospitals, electricity roads) (Thawng Zel Thang, 2013). The main concern for the villagers living around the project site was losing their farmland along the slopes and around the Mwetaung/Phartaung hills, which they depended on for their livelihood. Already before the plans for the mining project became public, villagers were afraid of being dispossessed of their land, since most of them did not own any legal land titles for their farmland (Int. 27, local villagers, Mwetaung, November 2016). They followed customary practices, engaging in shifting cultivation along the slopes of the hills (Mark, 2016). Officially, however, their farmland is located on 'reserved forest' land under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation. According to government sources, this designation has its origin in colonial times and has never been changed or verified since (Kyemon & Ju Nine, 2013). Since most villagers lacked any official land title, their land could be designated as 'vacant land' by applying the VFV Land Act (2012). A local land rights activist criticized those laws for turning the villagers into "illegal settlers" even though they had been farming in the area for decades. Moreover, he complained about the "Burman bias" in the current legislation since "the Burmese don't know anything about the traditional customary law of the ethnic people" (Int. 26, Chin land rights activist, Kalay, November 2016). Local communities were also aware of their precarious situation and challenged the state's perception of untitled land in the periphery as 'empty' and 'vacant' land to be brought to 'productive' use through foreign investment for the sake of 'development':

> The Union government does not care about our Chin customary law. In British times, this was practically applied even in the high courts, but this government does not care at all. There is no land which is not occupied by our own people in Chin State. The villages have exact boundaries and they occupy all areas. There is not even a single inch of land not occupied in our Chin customary land use system. But this is not accepted by our government. (Int. 27, local villagers, Mwetaung, November 2016)

The historical claims by the local communities, based on customary rights, were also accompanied by references to international indigenous rights discourses. One of the first public events, organized by CNRWG in several villages in the Mwetaung area, was a poster exhibition concerning the issue of *Free Prior Informed Consent* (FPIC) (CNRWG, 2013) (see Figure 35). The banners, donated by a local NGO explained the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) (United Nations, 2008) and the concept of FPIC as one of its core principles in the Burmese language. A main point of criticism regarding the proposed mining project in the Mwetaung area had been the complete lack of prior information and the lack of transparency. Neither the local government nor the investor NMIC had informed the residents in advance about the plans, despite long running preparations. No official project documents were disclosed to the public, even though all necessary reports were submitted by NMIC to the respective ministries and authorities (NMIC, 2013).[201] Instead, villagers were pressured to provide their consent ad-hoc without any clear and detailed information, being provided only some vague pamphlets (described by one activist as "propaganda") and empty promises (Int. 26, Chin land rights activist, Kalay, November 2016).

The mobilization of civil society from Chin State was not only limited to the local and regional level. As described in the introduction (chapter 1), in August 2013, several exile groups in cities in the United States, Norway, India and Australia, identifying themselves as 'indigenous Zomi', gathered on the streets outside the respective Chinese embassies to voice their protest against the planned mining project in their 'homeland' (see Figure 36). Yet it remains unclear exactly how the transnational 'indigenous Zomi' campaigns were linked to the civil society on the ground in Myanmar. According to representatives of the CNRWG, there was only limited contact with groups overseas (Int. 29, Chin CSO representative, Kalay, November 2016).

Following a year-long campaign across local, regional, and international scales, NMIC finally abandoned its plans for the mining project. Yet, according to a former consultant to NMIC, it was not only the local resistance that prompted the Chinese company to relinquish its investment, but also unsuccessful negotiations with the respective ministry of mines

[201] According to NMIC (2013) a feasibility study was submitted to the Ministry of Mines in February 2013. Yet the CNRWG or other local stakeholders did not receive any of the official documents. Additionally, AGSS declined to hand out any further documentation or reports to the author, referring to confidentiality agreements with NMIC.

concerning a sharing agreement and falling world market prices for nickel (Int. 61, Former representative of company in extractives sector, Yangon, December 2017).[202] Nevertheless, the local civil society alliance, with the CNRWG as its focal group, claimed the success for itself. While ambivalent in its character and comprising ethnic Zomi/Chin groups as well as Burman Buddhist groups, the coalition based its claims over the land and resources in the Mwetaung area partially in terms of ethnic identity and customary rights. This included demands for indigenous rights and self-determination (Einzenberger, 2018).

However, the risk of dispossession from mining activities in northern Chin State did not end with the withdrawal of the Chinese NMIC. According to an interview with a local land rights activist in Kalay, another company, this time from India, named *Balasore Alloys Ltd*., sought to get land concessions for three areas in northern Chin State's Tonzang Township in 2015/16 in order to explore chromite deposits (Chan Mya Htwe, 2016; "CNF wants to halt", 2016).[203] A company representative visited the area in March 2017 together with government officials to survey the area for the proposed concessions which reportedly would cover up to 27,000 acres (109 km²) (Int. 53, land rights activist, Kalay, November 2017). According to reports, the government officials told the communities that the land concessions had already been granted by the Union and State government and pressured the villagers to give their consent. They threatened the villagers with forced eviction if they were to disagree. Officials from the forest department claimed that the village area was officially located on forestry land. Despite having been already troubled with the Mwetaung case in 2013, the Chin State government again approved concessions for mining without informing local communities. Yet, after villagers again informed civil society groups in Kalay, several meetings were held and a letter of protest against the land confiscation was submitted to the Chin Chief Minister in July 2017, signed by almost 700 villagers.[204] The letter criticizes the violation of their indigenous land rights according to the UNDRIP and warns of the loss of agricultural land (tea farms, terraces, pastures) forests and water reserves ("Balasore Alloys Limited complaint letter", 2017).

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[202] The falling market prices and the reportedly excessive claims of the ministry concerning the share of the revenues had made the investment unprofitable at that time.

[203] Reportedly, the company worked together with the local company 3S (Mirante, 2017).

[204] The author obtained a copy of the letter by a local civil society representative.

5.6. Conclusion of Chapter 5

The aim of this chapter was to discuss the spatial dimensions of the incorporation of the Chin frontier, during the latest phase of economic transition that begun in the early 1990s. While Chin State is not well known for conflicts over land and resources, as compared to Kachin and Shan States, it has nevertheless been affected by the current developments. As the Mwetaung case has shown, there are mineral deposits in the region that are desired by foreign investors, threatening the dispossession of local communities. Yet, all this happened without much attention by (inter)national media or academia.[205] Overall, the empirical examples illustrated above clearly expose a tendency of customary (communal) land tenure to be increasingly "challenged by new enclosures" (Peluso & Lund, 2012, p. 669) and replaced by a titling system dominated by private ownership. This can be interpreted as a classic pattern of "primitive accumulation" symptomatic for an early phase of capitalist development in frontier areas (Jones, 2014a). According to Harvey (2003) "in the case of primitive accumulation as Marx described it, this entailed taking land, say, enclosing it, and expelling a resident population to create a landless proletariat, and then releasing the land into the privatized mainstream of capital accumulation" (p. 149). Primitive accumulation is often associated with violent dispossession and "spectacular episodes of dispossession by corporations (land grabbing)" (Li, 2014, p. 9). Nevertheless, capitalist relations and related dispossession can also emerge "by stealth" and in a "piecemeal" manner, as observed by Li (2014, p. 9) in her empirical account of upland Indonesia. Even though, in Chin State, violent evictions did take place, as the example of the Hakha urban frontier showed, it is the quiet and gradual privatization and enclosures which seem to dominate the process of changing customary land tenure. The main actors involved in land conflicts on the local level in Chin State remain (former) military and government officials colluding with local elites to secure privileged access to enclose (communal) resources. Some farmers, too, try to follow the example of local elites to get their 'share of the cake' provided they command the necessary skills, knowledge and financial capital. Nevertheless, the current process of enclosures and dispossession in the Chin frontier can still be interpreted as primitive accumulation, since at its core "it is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the

[205] Notable exceptions are Mark (2015, 2017) and some reports by the *Myanmar Times* and local media agencies.

means of production" (Marx & Engels, 1909, p. 786) or the transition of "non-capitalist social formations into capitalist ones" (Hall, Hirsch, & Li, 2011, p. 13).[206]

As this process is ongoing and still at an early stage in Chin State, its future implications are uncertain. Nevertheless, it is to be expected, given similar experiences in other regions, that farmers who are unable to compete under the new market conditions or lack the opportunities to acquire titles will be displaced and lose control of their land. Subsequently, they will be forced to sell the only means of production they have left, their labor power.[207] Unskilled labor, however, is often in low demand in a region lacking labor-intensive industries and outmigration is often the only viable alternative.

Additionally, as argued in this chapter, the state plays an important role in shaping the basic rules and conditions for this transition. In what has been described as *spatial matrix*, the state transforms 'concrete spaces' of customary uphill farming into 'abstract spaces' of capital accumulation (see also chapter 2). According to the state's logic, the frontier is perceived as unused wasteland to be put to productive use. Customary communal land institutions are not recognized and not 'legible' for the state. This perspective is also reflected in the legal infrastructure which was introduced by the central government after its capitalist turn in the early 1990s. With these laws, the central state ensured private property rights in land and turned land into a commodity. The most important changes, however, came only recently, with the 2012 land laws, including the FVF law. These laws bear resemblance to the colonial legislation that legitimized the occupation of indigenous land. According to local activists, the laws turned local communities into "illegal settlers" since all unregistered land owners became 'de facto' illegal occupants of 'vacant land'. Yet, the statutory law enacted by the central state could not penetrate all corners of Chin State resulting in a situation of unofficial legal pluralism, typical for a frontier region. This is particularly evident at the 'urban frontier' near larger agglomerations, where a formally administered 'urban space' directly clashes with communal customary land institutions. In addition to the legal infrastructure, the

[206] While it is true that according to Marx the "history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire" (1867/1909, p. 786) it does not mean that it necessarily involves an act of violence. In the present case studies, it is sometimes only the threat of violence or force that enables dispossession.

[207] According to Li (2014) in her empirical study, "the big shift occurred when they [the farmers] started to plant tree crops, which had the effect of making their land into individual property. Initial landownership was unequal and over time, efficient farmers were able to accumulate land and capital, and pay workers to expand their farms and profits. Farmers who failed to compete lost control of their land and were compelled to sell their labor— if they could find someone who wanted to buy it" (p. 7).

physical infrastructure (such as road networks, highways and hydropower dams) has expanded at an unprecedented scale in recent years, facilitating access to land and the emergence of a land market. In some cases, old roads built during World War II that had fallen into disrepair since independence are being revived now, signaling the arrival of a new phase of frontier expansion after decades of stagnation. Projects, such as the Kaladan project, demonstrate the ambitions of both the government of Myanmar as well as India to turn the former 'backwater region' into a new 'gateway' between India and Myanmar.

Further, as was shown above, some cases of (attempted) enclosures do not go uncontested. Farmers groups, villagers or activists actively demand the recognition of their customary land rights versus the local government or outside corporate actors. They base their claims on history and tradition, which often takes on the discourse of 'indigeneity'. Either explicitly, referring to the UNDRIP, or implicitly, by emphasizing their status as original settlers, predating the formation of the Union of Burma. To gain a deeper understanding, the following chapter will analyze, how the discourses of indigeneity are used by actors on different political scales in order to position themselves in their struggles over access to land and resources. It will further trace how the processes of incorporation at this particular frontier shaped the experiences and identities of its peoples.

6. NEGOTIATED INCORPORATION: INDIGENOUS POLITICS AND MOBILIZATION

"You don't get what you deserve,
you get what you negotiate."

(Kardulias, 2007, p.78)

6.1. Introduction

As the previous chapter showed, incorporation in the frontier and the resulting challenges to customary access to land do not follow a 'one-way' trajectory or a predefined path. Local actors are not merely passive 'bystanders' observing the developments as they unfold. They are also active agents equipped with certain powers, possibilities and room to maneuver. This chapter therefore highlights the *third dimension* of the frontier dynamic explored in this thesis: the dimension of those actors at the frontier having *agency* to shape and negotiate the center-periphery relations and the terms of incorporation (Cottyn, 2017). These negotiations can assume different forms and manifest in varied discourses and strategies depending on the actors involved and their respective positions. However, these actors do not constitute a monolithic block of 'frontier people' but are influenced by diverse motives as well as ethnic-, class- and gender dimensions, amongst others. In this process, new collective identity constructions emerge and are adopted or reactivated in response to socio-economic and political changes, depending on historical experiences and conditions.

What became evident in many interviews over the course of the research (partially presented in fragments in the preceding and present chapter) was a discourse of '*indigeneity*' referring to notions of tradition, cultural difference, marginalization, moral rights and historical claims to a 'homeland' that is emerging in relation to increasing land conflicts. In many instances, direct references were made to international indigenous peoples rights frameworks, such as the UNDRIP. While, in Myanmar, *indigeneity* – unlike categories such as 'national races, 'ethnic minorities' or 'ethnic nationalities'– is a rather new discourse on the national agenda (Einzenberger, 2016; Morton, 2017b), it is not an entirely new phenomenon in the (Southeast) Asian region itself (Erni, 2008; Baird, 2016; Morton, 2017a). At least since the

1990s, indigeneity has become a politically relevant factor in Southeast Asia, with the *Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact* (AIPP) as one of the most significant regional networks founded in 1992 (Morton, 2017b).[208] Over the course of several decades, the concept spread throughout the region, from the Philippines in the 1980s, to countries such as Indonesia (with the founding of the AMAN in 1999) and Cambodia in the early 2000s (Baird, 2011, 2016; Morton, 2017a). Myanmar is one of the last countries in the region to witness the emergence of an indigenous peoples movement, although it is still in a very early stage. In particular, since the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, despite all criticism, indigeneity is very much alive and likely continue to play an increasing role. In many cases, the first official recognition of indigenous peoples and their special rights occurred in times of major economic and political changes, in particular in connection with legislation governing land (Baird, 2011; Li, 2000). While traveling to different regions and countries, the concept of indigeneity is translated in different ways by local mediators, acquiring new meanings and even changing the original concept itself. According to Baird (2016), "the particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts of different places greatly influence the ways that indigeneity is being conceptualized and practiced" (p. 501). In Myanmar, the discourse of indigeneity is strongly conditioned by an ethnized and conflictive political landscape with the dominant categories being 'national races' and 'ethnic nationalities'. Therefore, it is articulated in a particular way that differs in many respects from indigenous discourses in other countries. It is closely linked to ethnic nationalist state building project and stays within the 'ethnocratic' hegemonic discourse rather than questioning the colonial heritage of racial divisions (Morton, 2017a).

This chapter will focus on the 'making of' indigeneity and indigenous peoples rights in the context of Chin State and beyond as one of the prominent discourses emerging in contemporary Chin State. While it is not claimed that it is the only or even the most relevant contemporary discourse (since classic modernization discourses and ethno-nationalist ideology are still prominent), it is nevertheless important to take a closer look. Through its adoption, it is gradually becoming an objectified reality. Therefore, it is necessary to ask why it is being adopted and what the consequences (opportunities and pitfalls) might be. The first part of the chapter will trace the origins of indigenous politics in Myanmar, which emerged out of a political discourse that was and remains dominated by ethnic nationalism.

[208] According to Morton (2017a), the "AIPP began operating as an informal regional network of Indigenous organizations in 1988 following an Indigenous Peoples Forum held in Chiang Mai under the auspices of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA)" (p. 8).

Since both concepts are closely linked, some clarifications on the differences are necessary. As will become evident in this chapter, Chin political actors were playing a key role in bringing indigenous politics to Myanmar's domestic political arena. The second part of the chapter discusses selected examples of how the concept of indigenous peoples or indigeneity is articulated on the local scale. As will be shown, like in other regional contexts, indigenous peoples rights are mainly referred to in relation to land conflicts in order to defend customary land tenure versus the central state's statuary law. Thereby indigenous actors rarely refer to alternative indigenous practices, traditional agricultural practices or spiritual links to land which set them apart from other indigenous movements of a more anti-capitalist agenda (for example, the Zapatista movement (Jung, 2008). Arguably, the main goal of adopting the concept of indigeneity is to secure access and control over customary land (including subsurface resources) and forests. As revealed in another section of the chapter, ethnic feminist groups criticize the gender specific unequal access to land under customary institutions and therefore avoid explicit indigenous peoples rights discourses which they find less helpful. Moving beyond the local scale, this chapter investigates indigenous advocacy and the involvement of Chin organizations and other groups on the national level and transnational level. It focuses, in particular, on the first national indigenous peoples network MIPENN and its activities. At the end of the chapter, the limits to indigenous politics in Myanmar and its challenges and pitfalls will be critically questioned, before coming to a chapter conclusion.

6.2. From Ethnic Nationalities to Indigenous Peoples

In order to understand the emergence of indigeneity in Myanmar, it will be helpful to briefly revisit the history of identity politics in the country and trace the dominant political categories by which inclusion and exclusion into the polity of Burma/Myanmar has been defined over the past decades. It is generally known that *ethnicity* – often used synonymously with 'race' – has been a major factor in Burma's post-colonial history and remained an important driving force for the political struggle of most peoples in the frontier areas over the past decades (see also chapter 4) (Smith, 1991; South, 2008).[209] While the concept of national races (in Burmese '*taingyintha')* has been the "gold standard" in Myanmar's domestic political discourse for some time, according to Cheesman (2017, p. 471), it is only since the 1980s that the "*taingyintha* truth regime", as he refers to it, was fully established

[209] For a detailed discussion of ethnicity in Myanmar see for instance Gravers (2007).

by the military government.[210] Since then, it became the dominant category and pre-condition for citizenship in the Union:

> In sum, people seeking to participate in the political community 'Myanmar' are legally encouraged if not compelled to make claims that they too are national races . . . Consequently, rather than question the ambiguities and inconsistencies inherent in the national-race truth regime, the advocates of marginalised or excluded groups bypass them. Instead of challenging they embrace the idea, and insist that they too deserve to be recognised as national races. (Cheesman, 2017, p. 474)

Ethnicity and race were powerful themes already during the Burmese nationalist movement before World War II (Taylor, 2015), which aimed at driving the British out of the country and bringing it back under the control of the 'native population'. Yet during the anti-colonial struggle, political leaders were hardly referring to *taingyintha* but "used terms like *taingthu-pyitha* ('countrymen and women'), *pyithu* for 'the people,' and as politics moved increasingly to the left, *ludu* for 'the masses'" (Cheesman, 2017, p. 463). The Panglong agreement did not refer at all to 'national races' but to "hill peoples", "citizens of the Frontier Areas", or the respective ethnic labels (such as "the Shans, the Kachins and the Chins"). Neither did the 1948 constitution refer to 'national races' (but "citizens" and "indigenous races").[211] According to Cheesman (2017), it was only under Ne Win that *taingyintha* assumed its important political role. In several speeches he lamented the mistrust between the *taingyintha* and invoked their unity for the sake of the countries' stability. In addition, the reform of the citizenship law of 1982 made membership to one of the official national races a precondition for citizenship. Following the fall of Ne Win in 1988, the SLORC regime, lacking a "coherent ideology" of its own, also drew on political frameworks from earlier times to justify its role as 'savior of the nation' (Cheesman, 2017, p. 467). The SLORC regime also fixed categories of national races with its new taxonomy of 135 groups.

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[210] Cheesman (2017, p. 467) writes: "By the 1980s the national-race truth regime, the domain for the production and ordering of what constitutes truth and falsity, was firmly established. It was by now the orthodoxy that political texts – all of which had to meet with the one-party state's approval before publication – at some point refer to national races' eternal solidarity, their historical fraternity and their intentionality in working together for a new socialist economic order. And although that economic order – and with it the political arrangements that conceived it – collapsed under the weight of nationwide protests in 1988, the national-race truth regime not only prevailed but emerged stronger than ever."

[211] According to the 1947 constitution, not only persons belonging to any of the "indigenous races" were eligible for citizenship but also persons who had resided for several years in Burma prior to independence (The Government of the Union of Burma 1947).

While partly based on colonial categories of language groups adopted from the 1931 British census, the exact criteria for choosing the 135 groups remain unclear and contested until today (Cheesman, 2017; Gravers, 2007; Taylor, 2015). According to Lintner (2017), a reason for the number of categories could be the regimes' well-known fascination with numerology. The first official list of all 135 national races was published only prior to the 2014 census and was heavily criticized by different ethnic communities for its arbitrariness.[212] While 'national races' was the dominant category used by the central government following independence, ethnic groups in the periphery preferred the term 'ethnic nationalities', to highlight their status as a distinct *nationality* with the right to self-determination (Smith, 2008). Ethnic nationalism in Burma has emerged at different times among the people in the frontier areas since the 19th century. Arguably one of the earliest ethnic nationalist movements emerged among the Karen who had come in contact with the British colonial administration already in the first half of the 19th century. *The Karen National Association* (KNA) was established in 1881 by Christian elites and became an important political organization promoting Karen nationalism.[213] Later, it developed into the explicitly ethno-nationalist *Karen National Union* (KNU) which declared war on the Burmese government and proclaimed the "Karen Free State" or *Kawthoolei* in 1949 (South, 2008).

Emergence of Chin ethnic nationalism

Chin ethnic nationalism emerged much later than Karen ethno-nationalism. By the time protestant missionaries had already converted large numbers of Karen to Christianity, who started to promote Karen nationalism, the western Chin Hills were still largely outside the colonial sphere of influence. The last British 'punitive expedition' (the *Chin-Lushai Expedition*) into the western Chin Hills took place only in 1889-1896 (see also chapter 4) almost ten years after the formation of the Karen National Association. Whereas the different groups in the Chin Hills had little common political structures or awareness of a common group identity prior to the arrival of British colonialists, this changed with the extension of colonial influence. The expansion of church structures and the indigenous missionary activities increased cooperation between previously isolated groups and facilitated the formation of a group identity. This was not unlike the Karen situation, where missionary

[212] At the time of writing, the list was under revision by the government. The new list may include 'new races', such as "mixed Mon and Karen races" (Pyae Thet Phyo, 2017).

[213] According to South (2008, p. 17) "the KNA was not a religious organization, but was intended as expression of, and vehicle for, Karen ethnic and national identity".

activities also played a key role in forming a pan-Karen identity (South, 2008). Smith (2002) regards organized religion together with warfare as particularly important in the process of "nation-formation" (pp. 23-24).

According to Lian Sakhong (2007), "Christianity could provide the Chin people with a means of preserving their identity and promoting their interests in the face of the powerful forces of change" (p. xvii). The reasons for the successful religious conversion were the dramatic socio-political changes brought by British imperialism, the activities of foreign and later indigenous missionaries, and arguably, the theological similarity between Christianity and local traditional religion (Lian Sakhong, 2007). Since Western missionaries had adopted the ethnic category 'Chin' already early on, indigenous church institutions also operated under this label. Yet, according to Lian Sakhong (2007), the name "Chin" was "not a foreign acquisition", but an 'indigenous' name originating from local oral history ('Chinlung') (p. 202). For Sakhong, the name 'Chin' refers to an ethnic community with a common origin, territory/homeland and culture, all features of a *nation* in the modern sense. He argues that these elements also have their expression in the local language: the term *miphun* refers to an ethnic group or people who believe in a common origin; *ram* refers to a homeland or nation claimed by its original inhabitants; and *phunglam* translates as "'ways of life', including all cultural and social aspects of life" (2003, p. xv).

This matches Smith's (2002, p. 15) definition of a *nation* "as a named community possessing an historic territory, shared myths and memories, a common public culture and common laws and customs (p. 15)." According to his ethno-symbolist theory of nationalism, ethnic groups or *ethnies* are the pre-cursors and "points of departure for the formation of various kinds of nation" (p. 15). [214] Even though any nation can necessarily be an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) and a modern phenomenon devoid of an essence yet combined with primordial elements, the naturalization and essentialization of ethnic identities are important instruments in the struggle for political legitimacy. Thereby, ethnic elites draw on a portfolio of local myths of origin and descent, as well as sources from outside, in particular colonial sources, to construct their imagined communities. For Sadan (2007), Sakhong's attempt to "indigenize" and "authenticate" the ethnonym 'Chin' demonstrates a "strategy that blends 'indigenous knowledge' with Western research

[214] There is, of course, a lengthy and broad debate on nationalism and ethnic nationalism, which cannot be further elaborated here. For further reading see Gellner (1983), Hobsbawm (1992), Ozkirimli (2010) and Smith (1998).

methods" (p. 42). However, with this practice he is not just taking over the colonial ethnic categories. It involves a complex construction from disparate elements and articulation, which implicates a considerable degree of agency (South, 2008, p. 15). This construction and reification of ethnic (political) identities is never completed and often contested from outside as well as within. According to Gravers (2007), "this struggle to represent an authentic vision of each ethnic group and its position in Burma is based on a dialectic exchange across ethnic boundaries, i.e. by a confrontation between internal and external classifications" (p. 5). An important part and precondition, of course, is to have a "collective proper name" (Smith, 2002, p. 24).

In the case of Chin ethnic nationalism there is an increasing debate about whether to use 'Zo' or 'Chin' (or even 'Lai') as the 'legitimate' umbrella term for the majority ethnic community living within 'Chin State'.[215] These debates take place not only in the literature and public sphere but also in cyberspace, in particular on social media (Dongno, 2016). Different camps refer to different (colonial) sources, each trying to disprove the other side and proof the validity of their sources and arguments (The Chin Forum, 2008). Groups originating from the northern part of the State refer to colonial sources mentioning the name '*Zo*' and claim this label as the only legitimate one (Dongno, 2016; Son-Doerschel, 2013; Vumson, 1986).[216] Contrastingly, groups from central Chin state (with Hakha or Thantlang origin) prefer the ethnic label '*Chin*' (Lian Sakhong, 2003, 2010). Both names have been used in the past for religious and secular organizations. For instance, the "Chin Hills Baptist Association (CHBA)" founded in Hakha in 1907 (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 140) was later renamed into "Zomi Baptist Convention" (Sing Khaw Khai, 1995) and renamed yet again into "Chin Baptist Convention" (Mungpi Suantak, 2013). However, *Chin* as an ethnic category and ethnonym has been in use since colonial times and it enjoys more "political weight" (ibid.).

The formation of an ethnic national identity under the label 'Chin' experienced several phases and crucial events since the establishment of the first common (church) institutions. The formation of the first political organization claiming independence of a Chin State

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[215] Stephen Khup Cin Pau writes "In more than fifty years, I've never seen such difference of opinion and parochialism among our Chin people as in this decade of the 21st century" (The Chin Forum, 2008, p. 63).

[216] According to Son-Doerschel (2013), "either way, it as has been very clearly shown, 'Chin' is an assigned term, not used by the Zo for self-identification" (p.58). Regarding the claims made by Lian Sakhong, Son-Doerschel writes: "Sakhong's reading of history is questionable. He seems to be revealing a larger political agenda" (p. 67).

emerged in the late 1930s (Keenan, 2012). In 1939, a gathering of the *Chin National Unity Organisation*, led by Pu Vom Thu Maung, which demanded Chin independence was held in Kanpetlet, Southern Chin State.[217] As a result, the British colonial authority imprisoned over one hundred Chin (The Chin Forum, 2008, p. 41). One important event, according to Sakhong (2003) was the "*Chin National Day*" in February 1948 in Falam, right after Burma reached independence. On this day, delegates from all 'clans' of the Chin Hills came together to decide how to organize their political representation under the 1947 constitution. Ever since, *Chin National Day* is celebrated annually on 20 February as a national holiday among Chin communities, including the Chin diaspora (Murugasu, 2017).

Following independence, Chin nationalism was advanced mainly by an educated young elite, in particular, youth from central Chin State who moved to study at Universities in Yangon or Mandalay (and later Kalay) (Lian Sakhong, 2003; Swift, 2013). There, they set up student organizations to provide a common platform for Chin students. One of the most important organizations or networks was the *Chin Literature and Culture Committee* (CLCC), which exists until today. It was established in the early 1960s at Yangon University after Ne Win's crackdown on university students (Swift, 2013).[218] The committee had several sub-groups, of which groups from the Hakha and Zophei (Thantlang) region self-identified most strongly as ethnic 'Chin'. While the CLCC was not explicitly political, the "student networks contributed to identity formation (such as development of Chin nationalism) and through these networks people were invited to participate in political activity" (Swift, 2013, p. 41). According to Swift (2013), many leading Chin activists were also in leading positions in the CLCC during their student years. One Chin student leader, Tin Maung Oo, was eventually sentenced to death for his political activism and hanged in Insein prison in 1976 (Khaing Htun, 2017; Swift, 2013).[219]

In the early 1960s, following the Karen, other ethnic nationalist movements took up armed resistance against the central government. The *Kachin Independence Army* (KIA) was

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[217] Pu Vom Thu Maung became later Ministers of State for Chin Affairs from 1948 to 1952.

[218] After Ne Win had taken over state power, he cracked down on students at Rangoon University. In July 1962, several students protesting against stricter campus rules were killed by the Tadmadaw. The official death toll was 15, the unofficial number is estimated to be much higher. In addition, the Rangoon University Students' Union building, a symbol of the anti-colonial nationalism struggle was blown up by the military regime (Seekins, 2006).

[219] According to a recent newspaper article, he is the only student activist who was *officially* executed by the military junta for his political activism. Reportedly "his last words on the gallows were: 'I will never kneel down to your military boots!'" (Khaing Htun, 2017).

founded in 1961 in response to the government's declaration to make Buddhism the state religion. A Chin rebellion followed suit, also inspired by an armed uprising of the *Mizo National Front* (MNF) in neighboring Mizoram (India) (regarded as part of 'Chinram') (Lian Sakhong, 2010). The *Chin National Liberation Army*, led by Hrang Nawl, together with the MNF attacked several towns in the Chin Hills in 1965 and controlled large areas. However, the rebellion was short-lived and crushed by a joint military operation against the Chin national movement by the Burma and Indian Armies (Lian Sakhong, 2010). Other attempts of Chin ethnic armed resistance in the 1970s remained small in scale and largely unsuccessful (The Chin Forum, 2008).[220]

The main armed Chin group, which also became key in promoting Chin ethnic nationalism and self-determination, is the *Chin National Front (CNF)*. It had been founded prior to the peak of the 1988 March uprising in Aizwal, another town on the Indian-Burma border (Swift, 2013, 2017).[221] Many Chin students from Universities in Rangoon and Mandalay who participated actively in the countrywide 1988 uprisings, which affected towns in Chin State such as Hakha, later joined the CNF. Again, among them were many members of the CLCC who were politicized through the network. Following the end of the uprising, some students moved to an Indian border camp near the city of Champhai in Mizoram. In the camp, Chin students formed the *Burmese Democratic Front* (BDF) together with other Burmese students, which had a clear pro-democracy agenda and was dedicated to armed resistance against the military regime (Swift, 2013; 2017). Despite initial differences with the CNF founding members, more and more Chin students finally merged with the CNF to participate in an armed struggle against the government.[222] They realized that their chances to engage in armed resistance with the BDF, lacking any military support from India, were slim. Yet the CNF followed a more ethno-nationalist agenda, which did not seem to deter Chin students to join (Swift, 2013). The CNF received some support from India and around 100

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[220] According to Pu Lian Uk, many of the leaders of those armed movements were imprisoned by the military government and, with the help of the Indian Army, some were killed extrajudicially (The Chin Forum, 2008, p. 42).

[221] In the 1990s the CNF had to relinquish its bases in India due to joint operations between the Burmese and the Indian military and moved to Camp Victoria in Thantlang township (Myanmar Peace Monitor, n.d.).

[222] As a former CNA soldier describes: "like thousands of students at that time in Burma, we both found our education and life being suddenly disrupted by the political upheaval of 1988. In the ensuring brutal crackdown against students and pro-democracy activists following the military coup, we both went to exile and found ourselves living in a refugee camp in Champai, a border town in India's Mizoram State. With the formation of Chin National Front, I was among a group of 100 Chin youth who volunteered to go to Kachin State to receive military training from the Kachin Independence Army, one of the strongest and oldest insurgency movements in Burma" (The Chin Forum, 2008, p. 38).

soldiers of its military wing, the *Chin National Army* (CNA), received military training for about two years by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Kachin State (The Chin Forum, 2008).[223]

Similar to other ethnic non-state armed groups, the goal of the CNF was to achieve "self-determination for the Chin people, to restore democracy, and to establish a federal Union of Burma" (Myanmar Peace Monitor, n.d.). Given the CNF's lack of military strength with less than 500 soldiers at its peak, it engaged in low-level military activity along the India-Myanmar border for several years. In contrast to the KNU, with its 'liberated areas', it could also hardly make any territorial gains (Jolliffe, 2015). The main tactics applied by the CNF were ambushes and assassinations to make it difficult for the Tatmadaw to control the area (Swift, 2017). Yet following the 1988 uprising, the presence of the Tatmadaw in the Chin Hills increased dramatically in the 1990s, with many new army camps built in strategic locations and major towns (see also chapter 5 in relation to land confiscations). A split occurred within the CNF with the 'Zo' fractions. According to South (2008), "in much the same way as the KNU has been dominated by S'ghaw-speakers and the KIO by the Jinghpaw, the majority of CNF cadres come from the Hakha-sub group" (p. 4). This fueled tensions further and therefore the CNF was not welcome to operate in the Northern parts of Chin State with a 'Zo' majority. Also due to taxation of the local population and targeted assassinations, the CNF became unpopular with parts of the population, although many seemed to support it (Swift, 2017; Zarni Mann, 2012).[224]

In 1995, after several years of armed resistance, with dozens of CNF soldiers killed in combat and limited military success, some members of the CNF started to build up a non-governmental organization, the *Chin Human Rights Organization* (CHRO). Its aim was to lobby "for human rights and democracy, and for restoration of civil and political rights for the Chin people and other ethnic nationalities in the country" (CHRO, n.d).[225] The idea

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[223] One of the former soldiers describes the conditions during the military training. The first casualty during the military training was due to disease and malaria. Later soldiers died in combat with the Tatmadaw "We suffered one casualty after another and it became more and more painful to cope with the losses. It was October of 1990 and we still hadn't gone back [to Chin State]. I did not know why we still remained in Kachin State" (The Chin Forum, 2008, p. 38).

[224] In 2012 there was a public protest in Tedim town by locals against the opening of a CNF liaison office. Some protesters complained that, the "CNF failed to protect its own people but forced us to pay ransoms and even killed its own people" (Zarni Mann, 2012). During the first part of the field research in Hakha in 2015 it was not uncommon to see CNF propaganda videos on TVs in tea shops, but this gradually declined until 2017.

[225] In 1995 some leaders of the CNF were also arrested, tortured and killed in the "Operation Golden Bird" by the Indian Army (The Chin Forum, 2008, p. 40).

behind the formation of the organization was to complement the political and armed struggle on the ground with transnational advocacy work to bring international media attention to Chin State and the suffering of the Chin people. In the mid-1990s, the international media coverage on Myanmar was mainly dominated by the Karen insurgency and the fall of Manerplaw on the Thai-Myanmar border, while the western border was not much of an issue.[226] Consequently, one of the first human rights reports published by CHRO was entitled: "All Quiet on the Western Front? The Situation in Chin State and Sagaing Division, Burma". According to the report, while the region of north-western Burma was "unknown to the outside world" it was also "the site of widespread and increasing human rights abuses" (CHRO, 1998). The report was prepared by former CNA fighters working from exile on the Indian border, who had received basic support from the Karen Human Rights Organization (KHRO) (founded in 1992) and international human rights activists.[227] While it was a challenge for former combatants – used to handling firearms – to learn how to document human rights abuses and write reports in English, the advocacy and lobbing activities had some success. International agencies such as the UNHCR started to collectively acknowledge the Chin people of Myanmar as a vulnerable group subject to human rights abuses (Murugasu, 2017). This "status made the process of gaining refugee status much easier, compared to those seeking refugee status on an individual basis, and resulted in a big leap in the number migrating out of Chin state" (p. 15).[228]

Adoption of indigeneity

Already since the beginning of its human rights campaign, CHRO had started to engage with the transnational indigenous peoples movement. Chin representatives had participated since 1997 in the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), which oversaw the drafting

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[226] Manerplaw in Kayin State was the headquarters of two armed opposition groups against the Myanmar government, the Karen National Union (KNU) and the All Burma Student's Democratic Front (ABSDF) mainly consisting of students who had fled to the border following the of the 1988 uprising. In January 1995 the Tatmadaw captured the town and drove the KNU further to the border and cut it from its resources. "Manerplaw's fall resulted in an increased number of Karen refugees fleeing to KNU-affiliated camps in Thailand, and left those remaining behind vulnerable to systematic human rights abuses by the Tatmadaw" (Seekins, 2006, p. 244).

[227] Its main concern was on human rights violations in Chin State such as forced labor, extortion and looting, religious persecution, forced conscription, abuses in areas of insurgency, extrajudicial, arbitrary and summary executions, rape and forced relocation.

[228] Recently UNHCR had decided to revoke the refugee status of the Chin refugees arguing that, "Chin refugees from Myanmar do not need their protection any more as the situation in Chin State is now stable and secure" (Bedi, 2018). This has led to a strong response by CHRO, claiming that the situation was not yet stable enough for Chin refugees to return (CHRO, 2018).

of the UNDRIP (Niezen, 2003). Over the following years, Chin representatives actively contributed to the drafting process of the declaration, which was finally adopted in 2007 (Sui Khar, 2008). On a regional level, CHRO established contact with indigenous peoples networks such as the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP). From the late 2000s until recently, Chin representatives have been active in the AIPP in leading positions, including as chairpersons (Int. 17, Chin intellectual/CNF representative, Yangon, October 2016). According to a senior CNF member, the global discourse of indigenous peoples rights was very suitable, since it included some of the core demands, such as the right to self-determination, which they had been fighting for through their armed resistance:

> That is exactly what the armed groups are demanding for, when you talk about federalism that is in another term for de-centralization, and when it comes to de-centralization it means to share, self-determinate some part of the mandate to the subnational government, that they put in the political word self-determination. So, when it comes to political dimension, we like to have our own government, we like to have our own electoral system, we like to have our own ways and means of financing that the government function; all these things are incorporated in the UNDRIP. When it comes to for example to economic development, you need two things: material and non-material. Non-material means that you have the right to choose the priority you should have the right to develop your own strategy for economic development; and when it comes to material, the most important one is of course the human resources and natural resources, that is also mentioned in the UNDRIP, so what else you need? Indigenous people have the right to own, control, and develop their land and resources. . . This is what we are talking about in federalism as well, you like to control it, you like to own it, you like to develop it in whatever way it suits your situation. And when it comes to social, for example, education, health, media they are also already incorporated in the UNDRIP, and also cultural dimensions, customary law, your way of environmental conservation, all these things. Even military activity is regulated in UNDRIP in indigenous territory, without their free prior informed consent, that is exactly what we

are talking about.[229] (Int. 19, Chin intellectual/CNF representative, Yangon, October 2016)

Indigenous peoples rights became a welcome platform for Chin ethnic activists to advocate for their demands based on internationally accepted legal norms (Int. 48, Chin Human rights activist, Hakha, November, 2016). Even though the Myanmar government denied the existence of indigenous peoples in the country, claiming that that all citizens of Myanmar would qualify as 'indigenous peoples', it nevertheless ratified the UNDRIP in 2007 (Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar/Burma, 2015). This was however based on the understanding "that such rights referred to activities which did not impair the territorial integrity or political unity of States" ("General Assembly Adopts Declaration", 2007). The argument of the non-existence of indigenous peoples in Myanmar or the reverse conclusion that all citizens are indigenous is not limited to Myanmar but also widespread in Asia, where it has become known as the "salt water theory" (Baird, 2011).[230] According to this theory, given the lack of remaining colonial settlers from overseas in contemporary post-colonial states in Asia, the concept of indigenous people does not apply (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, 2016). Rather, in these states, most citizens are regarded as 'original' inhabitants or 'indigenous'.

Nevertheless, advocates of indigenous peoples rights, such as the CHRO in Myanmar and others claim that there is indeed a difference between 'original' or 'autochthone' inhabitants and 'indigenous peoples' in the sense of the UNDRIP. While most European colonizers or settlers might have left the country after 1948 (or at the latest in 1962), the colonial institutions and system of repression are still present in Myanmar, as in many other post-colonial states. As one leading Chin indigenous rights activist expressed it: "I mean in terms of settlers they may not be there, but in terms of the institutions everything is still there" (Int. 19, Chin intellectual/CNF representative, Yangon, October 2016). Accordingly, a form of 'internal colonialization' with similar effects has replaced foreign colonization (Hechter, 1975). Foreign settlers have been replaced by domestic ethnic majority populations in post-colonial states (such as the Burman in the case of Burma), who took over colonial institutions and started a state-building project based on ethnic homogenization and assimilation.

[229] According to article 3 of the UNDRIP: "Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development (United Nations, 2008, p. 4).

[230] It is also known as the "blue water theory" according to which only groups which are separated from their colonizers by an ocean would qualify as indigenous (Minde, 2008).

Concerning the definition of 'indigenous peoples', local activists insist on the right to self-identify as indigenous. Therefore, the government as the dominating power is not in a position to define who is indigenous or not. Yet of course, the government does try to impose its own understanding of the 'meaning' of indigeneity. While indigenous activists generally reject strict definitions of indigenous peoples, a crucial criterion mentioned in interviews by many research partners is the position of non-dominance (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, 2016) and the experience of marginalization, following Martínez-Cobo's classic definition (1986):

> Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems. (p. 29)

Chin indigenous activists point to the dominance of the Burman ethnic majority and the systematic discrimination of non-Burman ethnic minorities (for instance, regarding education, economic opportunities, career paths, freedom of religion etc.) to argue that this qualifies them as 'non-dominant' according to Martínez-Cobo's definition. Walton (2013), who calls the privileged identity of the majority Burman population "Burman-ness", explains it "as a form of institutionalized dominance similar to Whiteness" (p. 1). Even though also the Burman majority had their basic rights restricted and suffered under the military regime, the suffering and degree of oppression, which non-Burman were facing, was significantly greater, with most military interventions taking place in the ethnic border areas (Walton, 2013).

Consequently, similar to other ethnic groups in different national contexts, Chin activists began to "reframe their long-term collective identities based on criteria such as ethnicity or livelihood to embrace a new identity as 'indigenous'" (Hodgson, 2002, p. 1040). Indigeneity as a concept entered a political field that was already strongly shaped by ethnic politics. By adopting indigeneity, Chin activists added another dimension to their repertoire of 'political

resources' ("University of Cologne Forum", 2015), in which ethnicity plays, and continues to play, a predominant role. However, with the adoption of indigeneity and their participation in the transnational indigenous peoples movement, the Chin ethnic leaders did not abandon their ethnic nationalist project, which was the foundation for the struggle for self-determination, at least since the 1960s. Chin ethnic nationalism is still very much alive and even currently experiencing a revival through regular ceremonies, celebrations and holidays such as the *Chin National Day* (Murugasu, 2017) or the CNF's *Chin Revolution Day* celebrations (see Figure 30 and Figure 31). Under the former military regime, the official celebrations of the Chin National Day and other ethnic festivities were restricted as an unwanted expression of 'separatist' ethnic nationalism, going against the 'Union spirit' (Pum Za Mang, 2018). Following the ceasefire between the CNF and the government in 2012, the Union government officially recognized it as public holiday, as stipulated in the ceasefire agreement ("CNF-Government Ceasefire Agreement", 2012).[231] The relaxing of restrictions has arguably led to a resurgence of public expressions of ethnic nationalism and ethnic identities. Thereby public celebrations of ethnic nationalism have been increasingly accompanied by expressions of 'indigenous culture' as a 'new' form of ethnic identity (see also Baird, 2011; Swift, 2013). The revival of Chin indigenous culture has been reflected in countless activities and festivities ranging from local celebrations such as *Khua-do* (new year) celebrations (Ei Ei Thu, 2016), local festivals celebrating particular indigenous 'clan' identities or language sub-groups (such as Thadou, Zomi, etc.) to cultural performances as part of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples (see below).

[231] It was part of the 2012 Union Level Ceasefire agreement to "strive towards official re-recognition of February 20 as the Chin National Day ("CNF-Government Ceasefire Agreement", 2012, p. 4).

Figure 30: Celebration of 69th Chin National Day in Hakha 2017 (Source: Goldberg, 2017)

Figure 31: Photo of CNF 29th Anniversary of Chin Revolution Day on 21 March 2017 (source: Chin National Army, n.d.)

Conceptual differences

While the concepts *ethnicity* (ethnic nationalism) and *indigeneity* are closely related, there are nevertheless significant conceptual differences. *Ethnicity* has been used and defined in various ways in the social sciences to describe either characteristics of sub-groups of

populations or specific traits, abilities, or attitudes of individuals that are associated with a certain group. Given the multiple disciplinary perspectives on ethnicity "the pursuit of a single overarching definition of ethnicity is futile" (van de Vijver, 2017, p. 1). However, according to Antweiler (2015), at "the core of ethnicity is the consciousness and feeling of individuals that they are members of a 'We'-group, and their behavioral actions in light of this feeling". The main shared traits are common traditions, history, religion, language and more. Smith (2002) uses the term *ethnie* for a community that shares myths of its origin, memories, a common culture, including the attachment to a specific territory. *Essentialist* and *primordial* conceptions of ethnicity highlight genealogy and 'blood ties', including racial elements, and the attachment to a particular locality as the key components. It sees ethnicity as something fixed and immutable. While the association of race and ethnicity is rejected in the Western European academic context, in other regions the concept of race is still in use (van de Vijver, 2017). On the other end of the conceptual spectrum are *constructivist* or *instrumentalist* approaches, which consider ethnicity as socially constructed and fulfilling a political or economic function (Antweiler, 2015; Becker, 2015; Michaud & Forsyth, 2011). A classic conception of ethnicity by Barth (1969) focus on the interconnectedness of ethnic identities and the mutual boundary making processes it involves. According to this understanding of ethnicity, boundaries are dynamic and membership is not fixed but fluid. "Despite the functional importance of cultural boundaries, members of respective collectives can move to another collective" (Antweiler, 2015, p. 28). The making of ethnic boundaries is shaped by permanent interaction between different ethnic groups and processes of inclusion and exclusion. As mentioned earlier, *ethnic nationalism* has as its basis an ethnic group or *ethnie.* But according to Smith (2002) "the type of the *ethnie* is broader, looser and closer to felt kinship ties" while the *nation* "also incorporates territorial, legal and public elements lacking in ethnies" (p. 16, emphasis added)

In contrast, *indigeneity* can be regarded as a particular form of ethnic identity. Similar to ethnicity, it is also a relational concept, marking the positionality relative to other groups defined as 'non-indigenous' (Merlan, 2007). In addition, as mentioned above, it highlights the power relation between (marginalized and dominant) ethnic groups. According to Li (2000):

> A group's self-identification as tribal or indigenous is not natural or inevitable, but neither is it simply invented, adopted, or imposed. It is, rather, a positioning which draws upon historically sedimented practices,

> landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle. The conjunctures at which (some) people come to identify themselves as indigenous, realigning the ways they connect to the nation, the government, and their own, unique tribal place, are the contingent, products of agency and the cultural and political work of articulation. (p. 151)

An important feature of indigeneity, which also distinguishes it from other ethnic groups, according to Li (2010), "is the permanent attachment . . . to a fixed area of land in a way that marks them as culturally distinct" (p. 385). While ethnic groups can be detached from their original 'homeland' (for instance migrant groups), the dimension of place and territory plays an important role in the construction of indigenous identities (Becker, 2015; Castree, 2004). Of particular importance is the anteriority (priority) and autonomy of indigenous peoples. This means that, in contrast to other ethnic groups, indigenous peoples claim to have settled prior to other groups within their territories and have lived autonomous from the political influence of pre-colonial states. Thus, they deduce their right for autonomy and self-determination (Erni, 2008). It is noteworthy that in the case of Chin State, as in many other regional cases, indigenous rights discourses emerged first in relation to contestations over land and access to resources as will be shown below.

For Gurr (1994), one main difference between ethno-nationalist movements and those driven by indigenous peoples rights, concerns their political objectives. While (militant) ethno-nationalism often proactively pursues an 'exit' strategy, meaning an independent state or extensive regional autonomy, indigenism restricts itself to forms of "'autonomy' sought as a means for the protection of their lands, resources, and culture from the inroads of state-builders and developers" (p. 354). Similarly, Zenker (2011), distinguishes the concepts 'indigeneity' and 'nationalism' by their political relation to the state they address: "Indigeneity refers to cases of autochthony that, in compensation for past discriminations by dominant late-comers aligned with the state, demand special entitlements *from this state*, whereas nationalism denotes cases of autochthony that aim for the very entitlement *of the state itself*" (p. 65). Thus, indigeneity presents a strategy of negotiation that seeks a certain level of incorporation into a federal state while ethnic nationalism presents a more exclusive political position.

Different from ethnic-nationalism, indigenism is also part of a *global social movement* that implies a shared global identity (Niezen, 2003, Pelican, 2015). While it is about particular local struggles, at the same time it is rooted in trans-local solidarity as exemplified by the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, AIPP and other transnational networks. This is unlike ethno-nationalism, which is usually not as internationalist, according to Castree (2004):

> Though comprised of numerous specific indigenous groups with territorially particular histories and aspirations, it is also a 'community without propinquity' or what Radcliffe (1999) calls a ''non-diasporic transnational collective''. People laying claim to the title 'indigenous' have, as Castells (1997) argues, created a 'resistance identity' that is avowedly international in compass. It is at once territorially rooted . . . and yet a prime instance of translocal solidarity. It is thus about 'roots' and 'wings'. (p. 136)

Therefore, indigeneity also provides an *umbrella identity* for different political movements which share similar experiences and often have a hard time finding a common ground in their political struggles. In addition, given its conceptual flexibility, indigeneity "multiplies potential oppositional alliances, linking the indigenous to the class-based left as well as to environmentalists, feminists, anarchists, nationalists, and others" (Jung, 2008, p. 9). Besides its close link with nationalist movements, it has been linked in particular with the global environmental movement and the global movement to combat climate change, which adds further moral authority to their claims (Anthias & Radcliffe, 2015; Nakashima, Krupnik, & Rubis, 2018). Often indigenous peoples are regarded as 'guardians' of their natural environment, retaining indigenous practices that persevere biodiversity and potentially provide alternative 'indigenous' solutions to destructive capitalist forms of 'mainstream' development. Indeed, Chin indigenous activists have been active to enhance the position of indigenous peoples in fighting global climate change under the umbrella of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (as will be shown below). Yet on the national and local level, at least in Chin State, this argumentation is less visible.

"From the perspective of international law, indigenous peoples are accorded with broader and more robust protections than ethnic nationalities" (Nationalities Youth Forum & Students Youth Congress of Burma, 2012, p. 23). Since indigeneity is based on a normative

international legal framework (in particular the UNDRIP and ILO Convention 169) backed by UN institutions, it has an empowering effect for ethnic nationalities or ethnic minorities who experience outright repression or at least discrimination and marginalization by the mainstream society in their daily life. Thus, the ethnic heritage and minority status can be turned from a liability to an asset when framing it in terms of 'indigeneity' (see also Swift, 2013). Indigeneity and membership in a powerful global indigenous peoples movement can be a new source of pride. As one indigenous Chin activist stressed in an interview: "We are not a minority; we are indigenous people." (Int. 4, local pastor/environmental activist, Hakha, April 2015). Hence, he was signaling that he no longer wants to be seen and addressed as member of an 'ethnic minority' being at the mercy of a paternalist government but recognized as 'indigenous' person with particular rights (especially concerning land rights and cultural rights). In other contexts, it has been observed that members of ethnic minorities who had already assimilated into the mainstream society out of a sense of shame and due to outside pressure, switched back to claim indigenous identities once it was regarded as politically advantageous (Swift, 2013). Another legal aspect of indigenous peoples rights – as the name already implies – is that it grants special rights not to individuals but to a collective of indigenous peoples. This is different from other human rights frameworks that are based on individual rights.

Having briefly outlined the main conceptual differences between indigeneity and ethnicity, it becomes clear that indigeneity is not the 'natural state' of ethnic groups in peripheral areas. As Li (2000) has observed among ethnic groups in Indonesia, not all equally fit the category of indigeneity (or "tribal slot" as she calls it) or seek to articulate themselves within this particular framework (Li, 2000). Rather, as Jung (2008) points out, "indigenous identity is a political achievement; it is not an accident of birth" (p. 11). The following sections will further explore the emergence of the indigeneity among Chin groups at the local and national level. It will provide a limited number of examples, of how indigeneity is articulated and performed among Chin groups and how they draw on international indigenous peoples rights frameworks. Thereby, they occasionally seem to contradict the 'conventional wisdom' about indigenous peoples while often conforming to stereotypical conceptions.

6.3. Emergence of Indigeneity at the Local Level

Discourses of indigeneity and indigenous peoples rights have been steadily on the rise in Chin State as well as on the Union level in general since 2012, following the political

transition. This is partly due to increasing activity of local civil society groups, including new NGOs and networks, as well as faith-based groups, which still play an important role in the region (Thawng Tha Lian, 2019). In many interviews with local civil society representatives, activists, or individuals affected by land conflicts, the notion of 'indigeneity' was either articulated explicitly or implicitly. Many saw the promotion of indigenous peoples rights and an increased awareness of the issue as a potentially useful approach to defend their access to customary (communal) land versus government or competing private interests. While initially in most cases it was smaller organizations and individuals educated abroad who engaged in awareness raising activities, since 2016 there is evidence of an increasing institutionalization of indigenous peoples movements at the local and state level.

First "Indigenous Farmers Union" conference in Hakha (December 2016)

In December 2016, I was invited to attend the first conference of the *Indigenous Farmers Union* held in Hakha, Chin State. While the official English translation of the conference was "*Indigenous Farmers Union*" the Burmese title was တိုင်းရင်းသားတောင်သူလယ်သမားသမဂ္ဂ (see Figure 32). The literal translation therefore would be "Ethnic farmers union". Yet the term ဌာနေတိုင်းရင်းသားများ ("indigenous peoples") was repeatedly used throughout the conference. The conference itself was organized by local civil society activists and intellectuals, some of whom were also involved in the protests concerning the Hakha city expansion the following year (see chapter 5).[232] I had met the main organizer by chance while trying to gather information about land conflicts in the Hakha area. When I inquired about local initiatives regarding land rights, he mentioned the plan for an upcoming conference. He was a former senior staff of a local NGO (for rural development) who had obtained his PhD at a University in the Philippines (specializing on sustainable development and environment) funded by a Christian fellowship program. According to the organizers, they had little direct contact with Yangon based NGOs and no external funding sources for the conference. The conference itself was taking place in a newly built community house made of wood and iron sheets in new Hakha, a few kilometers

[232] One of the main organizers had obtained a PhD from a university in the Philippines and was since working in local non-governmental organizations upon his return to Chin State. Another supporter was an elderly Chin man who had been a newspaper editor in Yangon before the military coup of 1962 and was fluent in English and Burmese.

outside the city center. The participants included about 30 farmers from several townships in Chin State (Hakha, Tedim, Paletwa, Kanpetlet, Matupi) as well as farmers from Rakhine State, Kayin State, Kayah State and the Ayeyawaddy Region. Due to the diversity of languages and dialects spoken, Burmese was adopted as the main medium of communication during the conference. I was the only foreigner attending the event (together with a local translator). As if to emphasize the ethnic/indigenous character of the event, some participants attended the conference in traditional ethnic dresses, including feathered headdress. Other participants from Hakha wore jackets made from traditional Chin textiles. Among the participants were only two women, reflecting the patriarchal context (see also below).

The main purpose of the two-day conference was to discuss customary land use practices, the present legal framework regarding land use, as well as the draft of a *Chin National Land Use Policy* prepared by the organizing committee with the support of other Chin intellectuals. As a sign of 'goodwill' from the new Chin State government, the Chin State minister for agriculture (an NLD member) also attended the conference opening. In his opening remarks, he expressed his general support for the agenda of the indigenous/ethnic farmers. The minister agreed that the current land laws and the related legal framework was not appropriate for Chin State, since customary law was not recognized by the Union. Yet he also stressed that for municipal areas, customary law was not acceptable (see previous chapter). While the minister endorsed customary practices and indigenous rights in principle, he nevertheless asked to be cautious with the official use of the term "indigenous". For the Chin minister, who was stressing the unity of all ethnic groups in his comments, the Burman were also an ethnic group 'indigenous' to Myanmar, following the official government position towards indigenous peoples.

Figure 32: Poster and official logo of the Indigenous Farmers Union (conference), Hakha, December 2016 (Photo by author).

After the welcome speech from the state minister, the farmers' representatives provided an overview over customary agricultural practices, which differed in some respects between Southern and Northern Chin State. They acknowledged the opportunity to discuss the issues with the State minister, a novelty for them, only possible since the establishing of a regional government following the 2010 election. In their statements, the farmers urged the government to respect agricultural practices and customary law in Chin State, which according to their perception was still valid as established in the Chin Special Division Act of 1948. They criticized that this act was not respected by the government and in need of an update. In the state's courts, claims of customary land ownership were usually rejected due to the lack of registration documents. Another point of criticism raised by the farmers, amongst several others, was the government's aversion to shifting cultivation as well as accusations of causing deforestation and hindering agricultural development. In the opinion of the farmer representatives, this was mainly due to a lack of understanding and prejudices on the part of the government. In conclusion, the indigenous farmer representatives at the conference demanded the opportunity to manage their customary lands for themselves according to the principles of federalism and self-determination. In order to reach this goal, they placed some hope in the vice-president (Henry Van Thio) who originated from Chin State and assumed office in March 2016 together with (former) president Htin Kyaw.

Chin National Land Use Policy

An important part of the conference on the second day was the discussion of the *Chin National Land Use Policy* draft, which had been prepared prior to the conference by a core group of members of the organizing committee. The first section of the 21-page policy draft includes a background of the historical developments in Chin State since the mid-14th century, when Chin groups are believed to have migrated into the hills east of the Chindwin valley. It also refers to the introduction of the Chin Hills Regulation in 1896 during colonial times as an important watershed moment in the history of the region (Indigenous Farmers Union, 2016, pp.1-2).[233] According to chapter one, the main objectives of the policy draft are, amongst others, 1) to ensure the recognition and protection of "customary land tenure rights and procedures of the ethnic nationalities", 2) to "develop a transparent, fair affordable and independent resolution mechanism in accordance with the rule of law" and 3) to "develop the agricultural system" (p. 5).

The policy (chapter two) is based on the principles that "people of Chin State or the Chin State government is the ultimate owner of all natural resources" in the state. Thus, it challenges the 2008 constitution, which considers the Union as ultimate owner of all land (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008).[234] It envisions "decentralized decision making" and "equal opportunities for men and women over land resources, tenure rights and participatory decision making". Furthermore, it aims to prioritize the interest of the public citizens over the private companies in land decision-making (Indigenous Farmers Union, 2016, pp. 5-6).[235] Other chapters of the draft policy include sections on "land use

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[233] The author obtained a copy of the Chin National Land Use Policy and permission by the conference organizers to translate the document from Burmese into English.

[234] According to the constitution (2008) paragraph 37, the Union is "is the ultimate owner of all lands and all natural resources above and below the ground, above and beneath the water and in the atmosphere in the Union" (p. 10).

[235] The full list of the "basic principles of the National Land Use Policy" is as follows: "1. People of Chin State are the ultimate owner of all natural resources of all land, water and air; 2. To ensure equal opportunities for women and men over tenure rights and other property); 3. Freehold land owners according to Chin culture shall have the right to support the landless freely and affordably during the years stated by the customs; 4 Original seeds from national projects shall only be accepted if they are compatible with the soil type, climate and security of the region; 5. Seeds imported from foreign places shall be checked by the respective department and only the seeds approved by the Chin government shall be accepted; 6. Loan which will not be repaid shall not be allowed; 7. Suggestions from the villagers shall get serious consideration in managing land use, revenue and products; 8. To develop and implement fair procedures relating to land acquisition, compensation, relocation, rehabilitation, restitution, and reclaiming land tenure and housing rights of internal displaced persons and returning refugees caused by civil war, land confiscation, natural disasters and other causes; 9. To prioritize the interest of public citizens over private companies in land use decision making; 10. To ensure equal opportunities for men and women over land resources, tenure rights and participatory decision-making; 11. To permit freedom of crop selection and adoption of cultivation technologies in a way that will not

administration" and the formation of a *National Land Use Council* which shall be responsible for the "implementation of the National Land Use Policy and related laws, and determine its roles and responsibilities" (Indigenous Farmers Union, 2016, pp. 6-7).[236] The policy also aims to "amend the existing land types and classifications" and establish a correct and transparent *Land Management Information System* that also records "legitimate land tenure rights recognized by the local communities", including individual, household, collective and communal land tenure, "whether or not they have been registered" (pp. 8-9). Other chapters of the policy explicitly refer to the "right of using the land for ethnic farmers" and to "gender equality and human rights" as cornerstones of the policy draft.

According to the conference organizers, the policy draft was a compilation of different policies taken from international best practices and legal frameworks (including the UNDRIP). Following the conference, the policy was to be further revised and promoted with the Chin State government as a policy paper. It is most likely the first such policy draft related specifically to land use in Chin State. Earlier policy documents drafted by Chin civil society groups such as the *Chinland Constitution* neither directly referred to land use issues, nor indigenous rights (The Chin Forum, 2008). In contrast to other ethnic states, such as Karen State, where the Karen National Union (KNU) adopted a Land Policy decades ago (in 1974, last updated in 2015 [Office of the Supreme Headquarters Karen National Union, 2015]) the *Chin National Land Use Policy* was not drafted by a non-state armed group. One reason for this may be because, unlike the KNU (with its "liberated zones"), the CNF never had the military strength to bring larger areas under its territorial control and therefore was not directly concerned with land governance issues (Callahan, 2007; Jolliffe, 2015). However, even though there was no (known) direct involvement of the CNF in the drafting of the land use policy, attempts were underway, according to several interviewees, to prepare a separate policy paper on the state level management of land and resources in Chin State (Int. 33, CNF liaison officer, Hakha, November 2016). Even though the Indigenous Farmers Union conference was rather small in scale and did not attract much media attention, it is nevertheless a sign of indigenous politics gaining ground locally, even without the direct involvement of international NGOs or other advocacy groups. It remains to be seen however,

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negatively affect the environment; 12.To develop law and procedures for addressing the issues of landlessness and affordable housing; 13. To decentralize decision making related to land; 14.To strictly and transparently enforce contracts related to land incompliance to the law; 15. To address the impacts of climate change and natural disasters" (Indigenous Farmers Union, 2016, pp. 5-6).

[236] The policy plans to establish Land Use Committees at all levels from the State, to the district, township and village level.

whether the group will continue to exist as an organization and if it will be able to advance the policy dialogue on state level land governance and build alliances with the national indigenous peoples networks (see below).

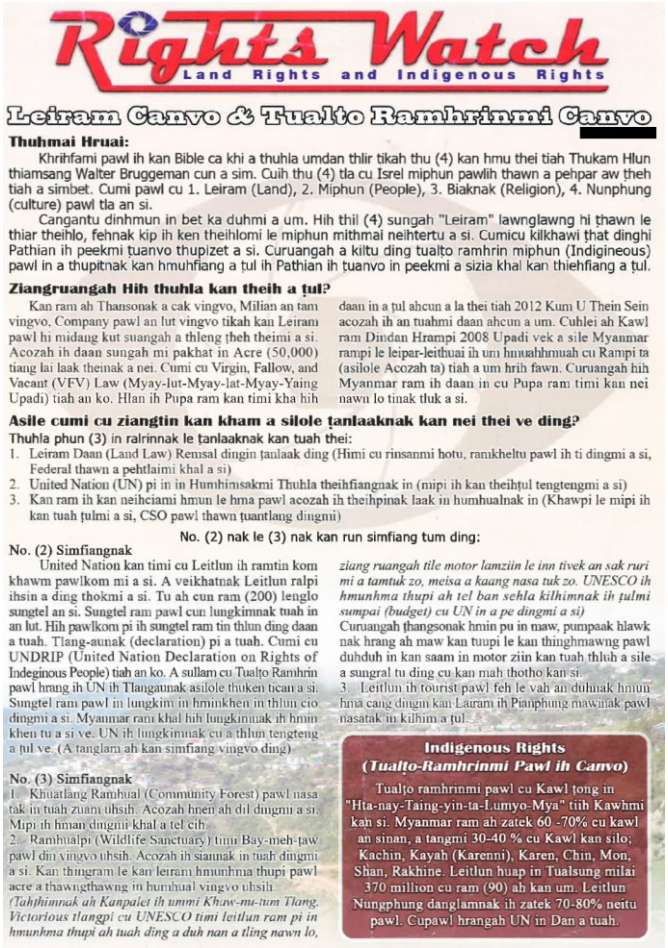
Church based initiatives and indigenous peoples rights

Indigenous peoples rights discourses in Chin State did not only emerge among farmers groups, land rights activists and (former) NGO workers. In addition, perhaps not surprising in the context of Chin State, church-based organizations and church leaders have been among the first to adopt the idea of 'indigenous peoples rights' in recent years as part of their social activities. According to interviews with local pastors who were also members of a church-based local environmental network, the group started awareness raising workshops in over 30 communities in Kanpetlet, Falam, Tedim, and Paletwa under the topic of "protecting land rights and the rights of indigenous communities" in 2013 (Int. 4, local pastor/environmental activist, Hakha, April 2015; Int. 56, Chin pastor/CSO representative, Falam, December 2017). For a pastor in Hakha, there was no question that people in Chin State qualify as 'indigenous peoples', entitled to specific rights.

> My personal perspective is that we (Chin people) are an indigenous people; we have our own land since our forefather's time . . . I accept myself as indigenous people and we should know or rights and responsibilities that's why we are concerned about the indigenous peoples rights; and these indigenous peoples rights are directly related to natural resources, how to protect our natural resources how to use our natural resources and how to protect our environments. (Int. 4, local pastor/environmental activist, Hakha, April 2015)

The pastor had previously obtained a master's degree in environmental policy at an international University in Bangkok where he was introduced to the concept of indigenous peoples rights. Likewise, another pastor from Falam Township, a member of the same church-based environmental network, engaged in promoting indigenous peoples rights in several villages, which were facing problems due to the planned extension of the Falam city area (see chapter 5). He had also established a local school, as part of the church social engagement program, teaching basic social science skills and English to local youths (given

the absence of opportunities to study social sciences in the region).[237] In 2016, as part of his advocacy activities, the pastor produced a "Rights Watch" pamphlet on "Land Rights and Indigenous Rights" in local (Falam) dialect. (translated as *Leiram Canvo & Tualto Ramhrinmi Canvo*) ("Rights Watch", n.d.; see Figure 33).



Rights Watch

Land Rights and Indigenous Rights

Leiram Canvo & Tualto Ramhrinmi Canvo

Thuhmai Hruai:

Khrihfami pawl ih kan Bible ca khi a thuhla umdan thlir tikah thu (4) kan hmu thei tiah Thukam Hlun thiamsang Walter Bruggeman cun a sim. Cuih thu (4) tla cu Isrel miphun pawlih thawn a pehpar aw theh tiah a simbet. Cumi pawl cu 1. Leiram (Land), 2. Miphun (People), 3. Biaknak (Religion), 4. Nunphung (culture) pawl tla an si.

Cangantu dinhmun in bet ka duhmi a um. Hih thil (4) sungah "Leiram" lawnglawng hi ṭhawn le thiar theihlo, fehnak kip ih ken theihlomi le miphun mithmai neihtertu a si. Cumicu kilkhawi ṭhat dinghi Pathian ih peekmi ṭuanvo thupizet a si. Curuangah a kiltu ding tualṭo ramhrin miphun (Indigineous) pawl in a thupitnak kan hmuhfiang a ṭul ih Pathian ih ṭuanvo in peekmi a sizia khal kan thiehfiang a ṭul.

Ziangruangah Hih thuhla kan theih a ṭul?

Kan ram ah Thansonak a cak vingvo, Milian an tam vingvo, Company pawl an lut vingvo tikah kan Leiram pawl hi midang kut suangah a thleng ṭheh theimi a si. Acozah ih daan sungah mi pakhat in Acre (50,000) tiang lai laak theinak a nei. Cumi cu Virgin, Fallow, and Vacant (VFV) Law (Myay-lut-Myay-lat-Myay-Yaing Upadi) tiah an ko. Hlan ih Pupa ram kan timi kha hih daan in a ṭul ahcun a la thei tiah 2012 Kum U Thein Sein acozah ih an tuahmi daan ahcun a um. Cuhlei ah Kawl ram Dindan Hrampi 2008 Upadi vek a sile Myanmar rampi le leipar-leithuai ih um hmuahhmuah cu Rampi ta (asilole Acozah ta) tiah a um hrih fawn. Curuangah hih Myanmar ram ih daan in cu Pupa ram timi kan nei nawn lo tinak tluk a si.

Asile cumi cu ziangtin kan kham a silole ṭanlaaknak kan nei thei ve ding?

Thuhla phun (3) in ralrinnak le ṭanlaaknak kan tuah thei:

1. Leiram Daan (Land Law) Remsal dingin ṭanlaak ding (Himi cu rinsanmi hotu, ramkheltu pawl ih ti dingmi a si, Federal thawn a pehtlaimi khal a si)
2. United Nation (UN) pi in in Humhimsakmi Thuhla theihfiangnak in (mipi ih kan theihṭul tengtengmi a si)
3. Kan ram ih kan neihciami hmun le hma pawl acozah ih theihpinak laak in humhualnak in (Khawpi le mipi ih kan tuah ṭulmi a si, CSO pawl thawn ṭuantlang dingmi)

No. (2) nak le (3) nak kan run simfiang tum ding:

No. (2) Simfiangnak

United Nation kan timi cu Leitlun ih ramtin kom khawm pawlkom mi a si. A veikhatnak Leitlun ralpi ihsin a ding thokmi a si. Tu ah cun ram (200) lenglo sungtel an si. Sungtel ram pawl cun lungkimnak tuah in an lut. Hih pawlkom pi ih sungtel ram tin thlun ding daan a tuah. Tlang-aunak (declaration) pi a tuah. Cumi cu UNDRIP (United Nation Declaration on Rights of Indeginous People) tiah an ko. A sullam cu Tualṭo Ramhrin pawl hrang ih UN ih Tlangaunak asilole thuken tican a si. Sungtel ram pawl in lungkim in hminkhen in thlun cio dingmi a si. Myanmar ram khal hih lungkimnak ih hmin khen tu a si ve. UN ih lungkimnak cu a thlun tengteng a ṭul ve. (A tanglam ah kan simfiang vingvo ding).

No. (3) Simfiangnak

1. Khuatlang Ramhual (Community Forest) pawl nasa tak in tuah zuam uhsih. Acozah hnen ah dil dingmi a si. Mipi ih hman dingmi khal a tel cih.
2. Ramhualpi (Wildlife Sanctuary) timi Bay-meh-ṭaw pawl din vingvo uhsih. Acozah ih siannak in tuah dingmi a si. Kan thingram le kan leiram hmunhma thupi pawl acre a thawngthawng in humhual vingvo uhsih.

(Tahthimnak ah Kanpalet ih ummi Khaw-mu-tum Tlang, Victorious tlangpi cu UNESCO timi leitlun ram pi in hmunhma thupi ah tuah ding a duh nan a tling nawn lo, ziang ruangah tile motor lamziin le inn tivek an sak ruri mi a tamtuk zo, meisa a kaang nasa tuk zo. UNESCO ih hmunhma thupi ah tel ban sehla kilhimnak ih ṭulmi sumpai (budget) cu UN in a pe dingmi a si)

Curuangah ṭhangsonak hmin pu in maw, pumpaak hlawk nak hrang ah maw kan tuupi le kan thinghmawng pawl duhduh in kan saam in motor ziin kan tuah thluh a sile a sungral tu ding cu kan mah thotho kan si.

3. Leitlun ih tourist pawl feh le vah an duhnak hmun hma cang dingin kan Lauram ih Pianphung mawinak pawl nasatak in kilhim a ṭul.

Indigenous Rights
(Tualṭo-Ramhrinmi Pawl ih Canvo)

Tualṭo ramhrinmi pawl cu Kawl ṭong in "Hta-nay-Taing-yin-ta-Lumyo-Mya" tiih Kawhmi kah si. Myanmar ram ah zatek 60 -70% cu kawl an sinan, a tangmi 30-40 % cu Kawl kan silo; Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Karen, Chin, Mon, Shan, Rakhine. Leitlun huap in Tualsung milai 370 million cu ram (90) ah kan um. Leitlun Nungphung danglamnak ih zatek 70-80% neitu pawl. Cupawl hrangah UN in Dan a tuah.

Figure 33: Pamphlet on Land Rights and Indigenous Rights in Falam dialect (photo by author)

The pamphlet targeted the local population with the aim of raising awareness and directly refers to the UNDRIP and the Myanmar land laws, in addition to theological narratives of the "duty to take care of the god given land". It argues that it is relevant to know about UNDRIP in the context of present-day Chin State in order to protect ancestral land from "occupation by companies from outside":

[237] Volunteer teachers from abroad with a social science degree also support the school teaching English and basic academic skills to a selected group of students from the region over several months per year. The program is for free and students receive a small stipend per month.

> Our country has started to develop, and there are more and more rich people and companies coming and our land can be occupied by other people. According to one of the government's laws, one person can own 50,000 acres. This law is known as the Virgin, Fallow, and Vacant Land Law. Our ancestor's land can also be taken over in need, according to the law, which was made in 2012 by the U Thein Sein Government. ("Rights Watch", n.d., p. 1)

The document refers, in particular, to the right for *Free, Prior, Informed Consent* (FPIC) as part of the "right for self-determination" and gives advice to communities on how to protect their land in case they are confronted with development projects. While the pamphlet calls for a change to the existing land laws, it nevertheless provides a guideline for farmers on how to formally register their land, according to the 2012 land laws, in order to protect it from alienation. In addition, it suggests community forests as one possible option to maintain control over communal forests (see also below). The Falam-based pastor, being influenced by a 'Theology of Ecology', understands himself as a reformer within the local church structures (often considered as conservative) and is convinced that the church must engage more in environmental and social activities in order to stay relevant for Chin society in the current transformation. He sees many parallels between biblical stories and the 'meaning' of land in Chin tradition:

> In the Bible there are many passages referring to nature and land, there is also a theology of land in the Bible . . . It needs a re-interpretation of the bible, the exploitation of nature is based on a misinterpretation; It's about dominion, not domination, Adam was made to take care of the garden Eden; . . . Chin people are customarily keen on land and land has a great meaning in Chin tradition. (Int. 56, Chin pastor/CSO representative, Falam, December 2017)

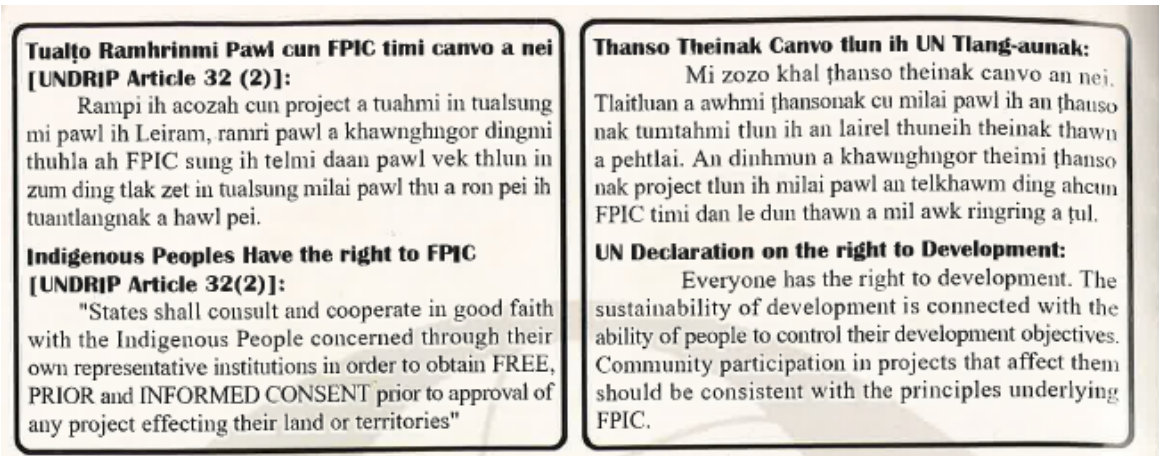
Yet not all church leaders share the pastor's interest for protecting indigenous peoples rights or customary land tenure. The 'progressive' church fraction organized in the environmental network seems to be rather marginal within the wider church institutions. In interviews, other pastors rejected customary practices, in particular shifting cultivation. They agree to the government's criticism of shifting cultivation as destructive and favor conventional modernization discourses. As one pastor originating from Hakha said in an interview in

Yangon: "It is necessary to shift to permanent farming, but the farmers have no idea of modern technology, they do what they want" (Int. 18, Chin Church leader, Yangon, October 2016). For them, the key to a brighter future and rural development in Chin State is the introduction of intensive farming and cash crops, such as Elephant Foot Yam, coffee or grapes, together with technological innovations (in particular for irrigation). One example is a Christian theology institute in Falam, which set up an organic model farm near Falam town for demonstrating permanent cash crop farming to local farmers. The 100 acres model farm has also been supported by foreign donors since 2005 and has experimented with winegrowing and fish farming (Int. 57, Chin Pastor, Falam, December 2016; "Lailun Projekt: Landwirtschaft stärken," n.d.). While the church-run model farm is aiming for sustainable and organic farming practices, it is not concerned with indigenous agricultural practices or customary land tenure.

6.4. Indigenous Claims and the UNDRIP

As already indicated above, in numerous local awareness-raising activities and related publications in Chin State, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) is directly referred to as an important framework that has gained prominence since its adoption in 2007. During the Indigenous Farmers Union conference in Hakha, a Burmese translation of the UNDRIP (translated by CHRO) was an important reference document for the drafting committee of the Chin National Land Use Policy. In addition, the pamphlet produced by the Falam-based pastor on "Land Rights and Indigenous Rights" translates Article 32 of the UNDRIP into the local Falam dialect (interestingly together with the UN declaration on the Right to Development) (see Figure 34). This article refers to the right to "free and informed consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources" (United Nations, 2008, p. 12).[238]

[238] In this context, according to an Oxfam guidebook on FPIC, this means "Free from force, intimidation, manipulation, coercion or pressure by any government or company. Prior to government allocating land for particular land uses and prior to approval of specific projects. You must be given enough time to consider all the information and make a decision. Informed, you must be given all the relevant information to make your decision about whether to agree to the project or not" (Oxfam, 2010).



Tualṭo Ramhrinmi Pawl cun FPIC timi canvo a nei [UNDRIP Article 32 (2)]:

Rampi ih acozah cun project a tuahmi in tualsung mi pawl ih Leiram, ramri pawl a khawnghngor dingmi thuhla ah FPIC sung ih telmi daan pawl vek thlun in zum ding tlak zet in tualsung milai pawl thu a ron pei ih tuantlangnak a hawl pei.

Indigenous Peoples Have the right to FPIC [UNDRIP Article 32(2)]:

"States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the Indigenous People concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain FREE, PRIOR and INFORMED CONSENT prior to approval of any project effecting their land or territories"

Thanso Theinak Canvo tlun ih UN Tlang-aunak:

Mi zozo khal ṭhanso theinak canvo an nei. Tlaitluan a awhmi ṭhansonak cu milai pawl ih an ṭhanso nak tumtahmi tlun ih an lairel thuneih theinak thawn a pehtlai. An dinhmun a khawnghngor theimi ṭhanso nak project tlun ih milai pawl an telkhawm ding ahcun FPIC timi dan le dun thawn a mil awk ringring a ṭul.

UN Declaration on the right to Development:

Everyone has the right to development. The sustainability of development is connected with the ability of people to control their development objectives. Community participation in projects that affect them should be consistent with the principles underlying FPIC.

Figure 34: Extract of Pamphlet on Land Rights and Indigenous Rights in Falam dialect (photo by author)

The principle of *Free, Prior, and Informed Consent* (FPIC) is central to many communities affected by development projects in the state, such as in the case of the Mwetaung mining project (see previous chapter 5). In this instance, the communities were initially afraid to withhold consent to the government, having experienced decades of repression under the military regime. Consequently, a Kalay-based civil society/activist group organized a poster exhibition about the UNDRIP and FPIC as one of the first activities of their awareness raising campaign (see Figure 35). The banners, donated by a local NGO, explained the UNDRIP, and the concept of FPIC as one of its core principles, in Burmese language. A main point of criticism regarding the proposed mining project in the Mwetaung area had been the lack of complete prior information and transparency. Neither the local government nor the mining investor NMIC had informed the residents in advance about their plans, despite long running preparations. No official project documents were disclosed to the public, even though all necessary project reports were produced and submitted by NMIC to the respective ministries. Instead, villagers were pressured to provide their consent ad-hoc without any clear and detailed information, being provided only some vague pamphlets. Having been sensitized to their rights as stated in the UNDRIP and emboldened by the support from local civil society, the communities subsequently demanded detailed information on the project plans from the state government and company. However, the company as well as the regional and union government declined to provide full transparency (Einzenberger, 2018).

Figure 35: Poster exhibition on the FPIC and UNDRIP in the Mwetaung area in January 2013 (photo by CNRWG)

The mobilization of civil society against the Mwetaung (Gullu Mual) mining project, partly based on claims of indigenous peoples rights, was not only limited to the local and state level. As described in the introduction of this thesis, in August 2013, several exile groups in major cities in the United States, Norway, India and Australia, gathered on the streets outside the respective Chinese embassies (see Figure 36). Identifying themselves as 'indigenous Zomi', they voiced their objection against the planned mining project in their "indigenous land". Yet it remains unclear to what extent the transnational 'indigenous Zomi' campaigns were also linked to the local civil society activities inside Myanmar.[239] In Washington, D.C., representatives of the *World Zomi Congress* publicly opposed the "confiscation of land" and exploitation of natural resources and called for an end to the planned mining project (Khaipi, 2013). Rather than referring to 'Chin State' on their banners, they referred to *Zogam* ('Zo-Land'). In their public statement, they also directly referred to the UNDRIP and claimed ownership over their "indigenous land":

> We are here today as Zomi National Indigenous People from Burma who are oppressed by our government. The reason we are here today is that the

[239] According to representatives of the CNRWG, there was only limited contact with groups overseas (Einzenberger, 2018).

> Chinese North Mining Company and the Chinese government and the Burmese government are mining in our land, our indigenous, own land . . . As the indigenous people in Myanmar, we have the right to claim according to UNDRIP article 25 and 27. That is why the Gullu Mual Nickel project . . . is our own property and we are here to stop it today. Therefore, until the Burmese government has changed our constitutional law which will give us the right to own our land, we will stop this project. (WZC Channel, 2013 [transcript of YouTube video, min. 8:45-11:16])

Figure 36: Protest of 'indigenous Zomi' against Gullu Mual Nickel project in front of Chinese embassy in Washington (Source: WZC Channel, 2013; screenshot of YouTube video)

The UNDRIP articles which the indigenous Zomi protestors were referring to, state that:

> *Article 25* Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.
>
> *Article 27* States shall establish and implement, in conjunction with indigenous peoples concerned, a fair, independent, impartial, open and transparent process, giving due recognition to indigenous peoples' laws, traditions, customs and land tenure systems, to recognize and adjudicate the rights of indigenous peoples pertaining to their lands, territories and

> resources, including those which were traditionally owned or otherwise occupied or used. Indigenous peoples shall have the right to participate in this process. (United Nations, 2008, p. 10)

Despite the overwhelming objection of local communities against the Mwetaung (Gullu Mual) mining project, other communities in Northern Chin State were confronted with yet another potential mining case in 2017. This time an Indian based company in cooperation with a local company targeted extensive areas in villages in the Tedim and Tonzang Township for mining explorations (see also previous chapter 5) (Int. 53, Chin land rights activist, Kalay, November 2017). The company which had acquired the land even before any prior information was provided to the affected villages, claimed that they had already received permission from the Union and State government for the exploration. In March 2017, representatives of the company visited several villages in the area together with officials of the forestry department. They pressured the villagers to consent to the project, threatening them with forced relocation, since the village was officially located on forest land ("Objection letter by the local", 2017). After concerned villagers had called for Chin land rights groups from Kalay-town for help, workshops were held in several villages in the vicinity of the project area. During the workshop, the UNDRIP and the principle of FPIC were presented and discussed with the villagers who strongly objected the plans for mining operations in their area. They were afraid to lose their agricultural land, which they used for paddy production, tea plantations as well as pastures. According to the activist who conducted the awareness raising workshops:

> Villagers are very much interested in indigenous peoples rights and the UNDRIP even though they have never heard of it; But they see it as a chance to get their rights since Myanmar was one of the signatories [of the UNDRIP]. It encourages the villagers to refer to it when they address the government and their voice is heard. (Int. 53, Chin land rights activist, Kalay, November 2017)

Following the information and awareness raising workshops on indigenous peoples rights, the villagers collected signatures for an 'objection letter' to the local authorities (GAD) and the state government. The protest letter, which was signed by hundreds of residents from the area, directly referred to the UNDRIP and FPIC, claiming that the project was violating their rights as indigenous peoples ("Objection letter by the local," 2017).

Nonetheless, not in all cases do affected farmers or communities directly refer to indigenous peoples rights or the UNDRIP since most are not (yet) aware of this concept. In many instances, claims over legitimate land ownership is framed in historical terms reflecting the understanding of historical continuity and anteriority of the 'Chin people' in their indigenous 'homeland', a core aspect of indigeneity (see above). Thereby, the claim of pre-colonial Chin historical settlements and land use in the area is not doubted by the central government or local authorities, unlike the claims made by the Rohingya in Rakhine State for instance. In several interviews, respondents would talk about the historical sovereignty and the absence of any Burman government influence even long after independence. This is exemplified in a statement by a Chin politician on a case of forced-resettlement of a Chin community from a government forest reserve:

> We say that this is the local people; they want to live here; this our Chin state and this is our Chin people and this is our land and they have the right to live here; before there is a law there is a land and there is human, and we live there before the existing law, the Burman or British law, whatever the law; before that we already live here . . . so if it is against the law, the law has to be amended or the law has to try to accommodate this village within the law. (Int. 13, Chin political party representative, Yangon, October 2016)

Community forests

In order to secure their customary land tenure against future threats of dispossession, communities in the Mwetaung mining area started to register parts of their land under the *community forest scheme* (Einzenberger, 2017). The community forest scheme is a model that has been already successfully practiced in many parts of the world for decades to improve local governance and tenure rights of communities living in or close to forests (Larson, Barry, Dahal, & Pierce Colfer, 2010). In Myanmar, the community forests scheme was officially introduced by the Forest Department in 1995, in order to improve forest conservation, including the replanting of degraded areas, given the rapidly declining forests in the country (Kyaw Tint, Springate-Baginski, O., Macqueen, D., & Mehm Ko Ko Gyi, 2014; Promotion of Indigenous and Nature Together, 2018). The *Community Forest Instruction* (CFI) provides a legal basis for communities (so-called Forest User Groups) to obtain official permission from the Forest Department to use a demarcated forest area for up

to 30 years (with the possibility of extension). The members of the *Forest User Groups* have the right to use the forest for their livelihood, as well as commercially to some extent, according to a predetermined management plan. The forest department provides basic support for the reforestation of harvested forests. The hope of a Kalay-based land rights activist who supports the community along the registration process is that "if we reserve the land under the law we can own it and other people cannot grab it" (Int. 26, Chin land rights activist, Mwetaung, November 2016). Other communities in Chin State already successfully applied for *Community Forest Certificates* and are allowed to legally extract timber and non-timber forest products from their forests (Int. 45, Chin pastor/CSO representative, Hakha, November 2016). Yet, legally, the CFI can only grant use rights and not property rights, which remains with the central state. After the permission expires, the use rights could return to the forest department. Whereas, in its original version, the CFI was not in line with customary practices of forest use, the 2016 updated version marks a considerable improvement according to Erni (2018). It does not explicitly ban shifting cultivation anymore as mentioned in the 1995 version and allows for agroforestry use. The new version also focuses on local user groups and considers local customs and norms (Erni, 2018). However, the Community Forest area under the management of Forest User Groups is still very limited, in particular in Chin State. Currently, there have been few Community Forest initiatives in Chin State, due to the relatively complicated administrative procedure, in particular concerning the lower levels of public administration, and lack of support (Einzenberger, 2017). If the Community Forests will be a feasible solution to improve tenure security among indigenous communities in the long run, it remains to be seen. However, in other regions it could be shown, that when indigenous communities were in charge of forests, the deforestation rates were considerably lower as compared to state owned forests (Ceddia, Gunter, & Corriveau-Bourque, 2015; Larson, Barry, Dahal, & Pierce Colfer, 2010).

Community mapping

More recently, indigenous communities in Chin State and other parts of Myanmar conduct *community mapping* with the help of local and national NGOs, to defend their customary access to land. There has been a global trend of mapping indigenous peoples lands beginning in North America, which spread to the global south with the availability of affordable GIS (Geographic Information Systems) mapping and remote sensing technology (Chapin, Lamb, & Threlkeld, 2005; Roth, 2009). The aim of the community mapping is to demarcate and document the village boundaries and land use patterns and make them visible and legible on

a map (and GIS system), which can be then presented to local authorities in case of land conflicts or competing ownership claims. Since most villages in Chin State have little or no officially registered land and no cadaster exists in the uplands, the majority of village land has never been surveyed (Ewers Andersen, 2014, 2016). Although, as part of an agricultural expansion program of the SLRD, private paddy land is increasingly registered, it represents only a small part of agricultural land. According to local custom, boundaries between villages and plots are verbally agreed upon and may change over time.[240] Maps produced in a pilot project of a village in Hakha Township with the support of the NGO consortium Land Core Group documented lopils (shifting cultivation plots), private farms, village areas, as well as (protected) community forests (see Figure 37).

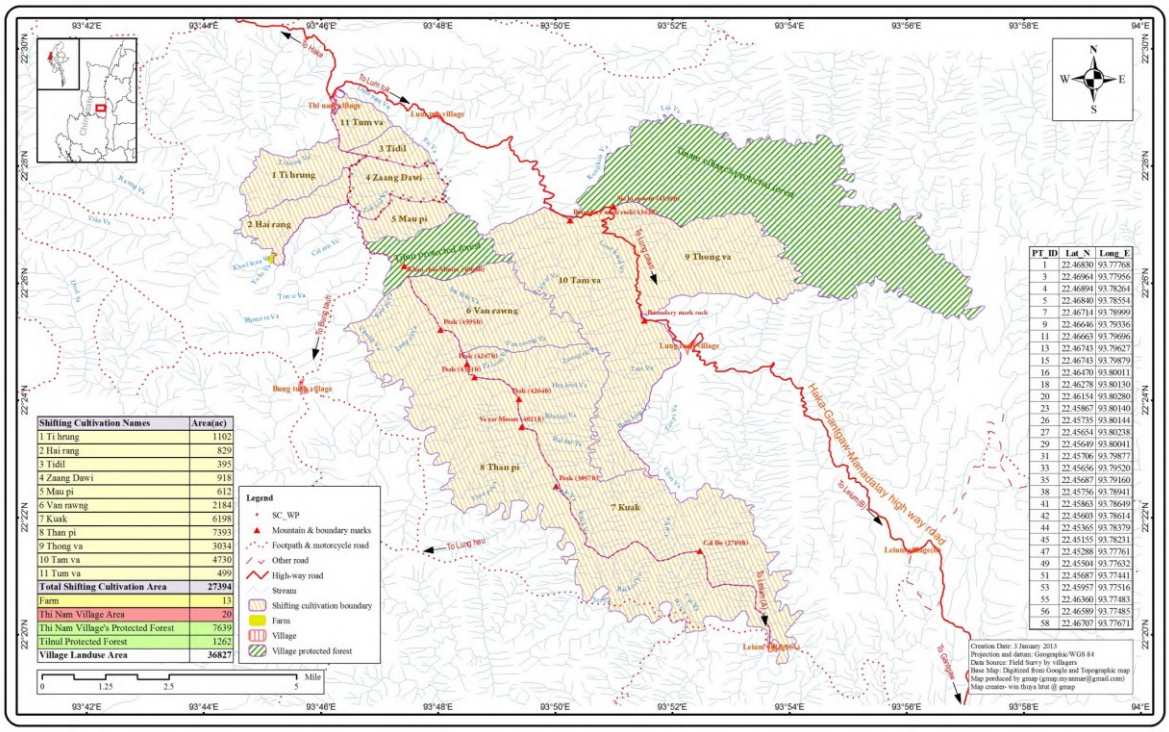


Figure 37: Community map of village in Hakha Township (Source, Ewers Andersen, 2016)

Except for the purpose of mapping, another objective of the pilot project was to register lopils as 'customary communal land' plots with the SLRD once they were surveyed. The community itself reportedly demanded the registration since it was interested in maintaining communal land tenure according to Ewers Andersen (2016). Given the lack of options for

[240] Where village boundaries have been delineated by the British colonial government, written records are held by the GAD but usually not maps.

communal land titling under the existing legal framework, the idea was to form a 'village association' as a legal entity (under the 2014 Association Law) and register the communal land under the association according to the Farmland law (2012). As of 2018 however, no registration of communal land could be completed, to the knowledge of the author.

The mapping of communal land and lopils turned out to be a challenging task since the physical boundaries of lopils are not always permanent but might change after lengthy fallow periods. In addition, land ownership is not fixed, but instead a mixture of communal and private property that shifts depending on season and social relations. Furthermore, the huge areas of land necessary for shifting cultivation and the steep terrain make mapping a challenging and time-consuming task.[241] Throughout the pilot project, there was also an ongoing debate about what kinds of land use categories should be mapped and included in communal plots (for instance, terraces). This demonstrates the difficulties of turning complex and dynamic indigenous land tenure systems, which are embedded in complex social relations into abstract categories and maps, which hardly do justice to the local realities (Roth, 2009). In addition, community mapping can bring new conflicts and other unintended impacts to communities when questions over exact boundaries might not be easily answered or mapping reveals a gross unequal distribution of land (Dewi, 2016; Roth, 2009).[242] This also poses the question of what exactly is understood as 'community' and whether the idea of the community and the particular legal entity of the village coincide or not (Hodgson & Schroeder, 2002).

A less ambitious approach to mapping, which somehow runs counter to the idea of 'community' mapping has been pursued by a small NGO in Southern Chin State. It helps individuals to survey and map their individual land plots using GPS compatible mobile phones. Land rights activists in Matupi documented land ownership of villagers who were affected by urban expansion plans. The final documents (maps) with the GPS coordinates of the surveyed land plots are available online and forwarded to the local authorities in order to

[241] The author himself did a walk along a village boundary along steep mountains and deep ravines. After the village guides lost their way in thick forest it took several hours of tiresome climb to return to the village.

[242] According to Ewers Andersen (2016), not all villages which initially took part in the pilot were interested in mapping and registering the village are, in particular in villages in the south where ownership of land was very unequal.

avoid land grabbing. This is done with an open access application for smartphone and tablets which became widely available in the region in recent years:[243]

> We try [the app] Open Tenure software for people who do not have any documents for their land. We use the tablet and record the document for the land owners. When they face some officials they can say, 'this is my land'. . . The paper is not official, but they can show the officer, because the civil servant they did not want to go very far to measure the land [themselves]" (Int. 13, Local NGO representative (working in Chin State), Yangon, October 2016).

The recent emergence of mapping practices in the uplands, including Chin State, follows the "boom in counter mapping" observed by Roth (2009) as a result of the expansion of capitalist state spaces into the domains of indigenous peoples

> Indeed, the emergence of map-making stems from the creation of 'new forms of property relations necessitated by the extension of capitalism' and the need for a tool to aid in nation-state formation. Maps are socially produced entities that do not merely represent territory but actually produce it. Abstract space, then, is not a neutral entity at all but is produced in relation to capitalist and imperialist relations of power, and is enrolled in the creation of bounded territories for such purposes. (Roth, 2009, p. 209)

Both strategies briefly discussed above, that is *community forests* and *community mapping,* are two examples of how indigenous communities in contemporary Chin State (with the support of local and national civil society actors) take matters into their own hands in trying to avert the risk of being dispossessed of their unregistered customary lands. Both strategies attempt to work within the state's logic and legal framework, although community maps as such do not produce any legal titles. The community forestry approach takes up a program pursued by the central governments Forest Department since 1995, although with little

[243] Open Tenure (OT) was "developed as a tool for communities to assess and clarify their tenure regimes so to protect the individual and collective rights of their members. Mobile devices provide for in-the-field capture of legitimate tenure rights with boundary mapping. Data are then uploaded to a web-based community server. OT has been successfully adapted to allow for formal recording of customary and informal rights where recognized by law" (FAO, 2016).

enthusiasm and limited success. Community mapping also follows the state's logic of producing abstract space through modern mapping technologies hitherto reserved for the central state (Winichakul, 1994).[244] Maps are a representation of state territory and an important state technology to produce the abstract space necessary to exercise territorial power (Escolar, 1997). States used to incorporate spaces in the frontier by drawing maps of these spaces. This was not only limited to British colonial forces who introduced modern mapping in Burma. As Scott (2009) writes, "the Chinese seventeenth-century euphemism for incorporation into state space was 'to enter the map'" (p. 78). By producing their own maps before 'being mapped' themselves, indigenous communities (and individuals) in Chin State therefore counter the states incorporation of customary land via the expansion of township areas, land concessions, forest reserves (see previous chapter 5). Yet, paradoxically, this means following the logic of the state "in order to keep the state at arm's length", to quote Scott (2009) once again.

6.5. Customary Practices and Unequal Access to Land

While indigenous rights activists call for the recognition of customary practices – including customary land tenure – criticism against customary institutions is not only coming from the government and local elites subscribing to modernist visions of local development. In addition, some Chin women groups criticize the customary law from a feminist perspective for its unequal treatment of women and men (Int. 60, Chin women's rights activist, Yangon, December 2017). According to Chin women's rights activists, Chin society is a patriarchal society, "closely linked to a clan system, in which only men are allowed to carry and pass the clan to the next generations" (Ninu, 2018, p. 17). In this system, men make laws and women are largely excluded from decision-making processes and relegated into subordinate positions. This has arguably not changed much with Christianization, since it was again men, who dominated church institutions (with most Baptist pastors being male) and clan leaders transforming into religious leaders, even though some women could obtain important positions in church institutions.[245] In 2015/16 a group of Chin women conducted the first extensive research among several Chin communities regarding the situation of women under

[244] Winichakul (1994) for instance showed the importance of mapping technologies introduced by western colonial powers in producing the "geo-body" of the modern Thai nation state.

[245] In many church communities there are 'women's groups' and in boards of church institutions women are presented. However, more research is needed to investigate the role of women in church institutions.

current customary laws and practices.[246] The special focus of the research was on marriage, divorce, inheritance and violence against women. Even though land ownership and access to land was not the focus of the research, the report revealed that customary institutions, in many ways, also excluded women from access to land. In particular, inheritance practices excluded women from inheriting land or houses. According to customary law, "the oldest or youngest son inherits the land, house and other important property. If there is no son, a male relative of the deceased man will inherit. Daughters can inherit their mothers' traditional dresses and accessories" (Ninu, 2018, p. 21).[247] This practice was explained with the particular kinship system in Chin society in which women after marriage move to their husband's clan and village. Therefore, daughters are also sometimes referred to as 'guests' in their families who will leave the household once married to stay with the family of her husband, after the payment of a bride price (Ninu, 2018). Without own property in land, house or other substantial means, the wife depends on her husband, father or brothers throughout her life. The inheritance is also regulated in the *Chin Special Division Act* (amendment 1957) in section 15A, which stipulates (Ninu, 2018, p. 174):[248]

> The inheritors for predecessor's property of the deceased person shall be as follows:
>
> (a) According to the respective traditions, direct succeeding inheritors for such property such as son, grandson, and great grandson of the deceased person;
>
> (b) If there is none of them, the father of the deceased person

[246] The research conducted by an organization called Ninu (Women in Action Group). Ninu was formed in 2013 by Chin women activists in Yangon. The mission is to empower women and bring gender equality and social justice to Chin communities in Myanmar. The research was supported by the Chin Women Development Organization (Kanpetlet), Chin Women Organization (Hakha), Chin Women Organization (Paletwa), Daidimpar Women Group (Falam), K'Cho Chin Women Organization (Mindat), Mara Women Organization and Matupi Women Organization. Overall, about 300 persons were interviewed (Ninu, 2018).

[247] The report further quotes an elderly man from Falam saying: "No woman asked a question like this before. As I told you, my grandfather divided all his land with his three sons and none of my aunts asked, 'Why didn't you give anything to us, your daughters?' It's the same when my father gave all the land to me; my sisters didn't raise any question. For them, this is just what is supposed to happen." (Ninu, 2018, p. 120).

[248] According to the law, only if there is no male heir in any line can the property be given to a female heir.

> (c) If the father of the deceased person does not exist, male person directly descended from the father of the deceased person, who is inheritor of such property according to the respective tradition;

Despite the demand to "leave behind" the past practices (Ninu, 2018), the Chin women's group does not call for a complete abolishment of customary rule, since resistance from Chin communities, would likely be too strong, according to one of the women activists. Rather, they advocate for a reform to align customary practices with principles of Universal Human Rights and Gender Equality:

> It would be very difficult [note: to replace customary law with statutory law] and meet strong opposition, in particular from Chin because people are worried of being swallowed by the Burmese. The customary practices is the way to preserve the Chin identity. Mostly people don't trust the court. Very few cases come to the court. Even many rape cases are not brought to court, because the procedures are very long, people have to bribe. . . Also there are very few reports to village authorities; mostly it will stay between the two families, the male elders. I don't think it will work to apply the same law. If we want to see change in the community, we have to advocate with the decision makers in the community to introduce human rights concept, gender concept, so that they could consider not only chin tradition for decision making. (Int. 60, Chin women's rights activist, Yangon, December 2017)

Some Chin leaders acknowledge the need to reform customary practices while at the same time defending them against the central government (Int. 17, Chin intellectual/CNF representative, Yangon, October 2016). A debate to reform and further codify Chin customary law emerged after the 2010 elections and the inauguration of the first Chin State parliament (Ninu, 2018). A parliamentary committee was formed to review the Chin Special Division Act, which produced a report proposing amendments to certain sections of the act concerned with inheritance, marriage and divorce. According to Chin women's organizations, however, the proposed amendments were not in line with their demands and "did not reflect women's rights as stated in the CEDAW" (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) (Ninu, 2018, p. 139). The increasing discussions about reform and codification clearly indicates a renewed interest among Chin

groups in customary rules and practices during times of political transition. Customary practices are seen by many as an integral part of 'Chin identity', which is currently being re-negotiated after years of political marginalization. Some groups (including farmers) and civil society organizations closely link questions of customary rule to indigenous peoples rights discourses, calling for the recognition and strengthening of customary practices, particularly in connection with agricultural practices. Ethnic women's groups such as Ninu, on the other hand, call for a reform of customary practices in some respects. They seem to rely less on notions of 'indigeneity' but call for the adoption of women's rights and international conventions, such as CEDAW.[249]

6.6. National and Transnational Advocacy

While Chin ethnic activists in exile had already engaged in the transnational indigenous peoples movement since the mid-1990s, inside Myanmar, discourses of indigeneity and indigenous peoples rights emerged only following the 2010 elections. According to a young Chin human rights activist:

> Before 2010 or 2012 we never used 'Chin indigenous', but 'ethnic nationalities; . . . I don't know very much; I asked X [senior colleague of the organization] why we call ourselves 'indigenous', . . .'you can just take it as one platform to advocate for rights', he said: But what I can say is that we are different from Burmese people in many ways; the way how we practice our traditional things, yeah, different. (Int. 48, Chin human rights activist, Hakha, November 2016)

In particular, ethnic rights organizations returning from exile to Myanmar during the recent period of political liberalization, intellectuals, and activists who had studied overseas brought with them an array of international rights discourses and rights-based approaches. Prior to 2010 human rights were a 'no-go' issue for local civil society in the country due to the massive political restrictions. Human rights related public activities could be organized only under different names or 'under the radar' of the local authorities (Mahidol University, n.d.).

[249] The English language report by Ninu (2018) does not once refer to "indigenous women" but uses the term "Chin women".

National advocacy

A case in point is the Chin Human Rights Organization after returning to Myanmar following two decades in exile. Back in the country, it started to pursue a "two-pronged approach" both domestically and transnationally, to make use of "wherever a sphere of influence" was available (Int. 21, national NGO representative, Yangon, October 2016). Like many other former human rights NGOs in exile, it had to adapt itself to the new political context in the country with donor funding and international attention gradually shifting from exile groups at the border (in particular located around Mae Sot) to Yangon and Naypyidaw (Maber, 2016). The promotion of indigenous peoples rights soon became one of the main thematic focus areas for CHRO's engagement inside the country.

Together with other ethnic rights organizations they lobbied the new semi-civilian government for a *Law Safeguarding the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (also referred to as the *Ethnic Rights Protection Law*) which was finally adopted in 2015 (Myanmar Indigenous Peoples/Ethnic Nationalities Network [MIPENN], 2015). Ethnic NGO representatives were directly involved in drafting certain paragraphs and 'feeding-in' information (Int. 21, national NGO representative, Yangon, October 2016). The law – while in its official translation not directly referring to 'indigenous peoples' (but 'ethnic groups') (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2015) – is seen by CHRO as a step forward in realizing the demands of indigenous peoples in Myanmar. It includes the recognition of cultural rights for 'ethnic nationalities', as well as provisions that "prior to implementing development projects and major plans . . . local ethnic inhabitants are to be informed and be explained in detail about these plans and projects to achieve mutual cooperation" (MIPENN, 2015, p. 35). While falling short of the FPIC principle as included in the UNDRIP, which also requires *consent* by local stakeholders, it is nevertheless seen as a possible tool to avoid development related conflicts (see previous chapter 5). The law also included the plan for a *Union Ministry for Ethnic Affairs*, which was finally established by the NLD-led government in 2016 (Karen Information Center, 2017).

For CHRO, the new Ethnic Affairs Ministry is an important channel for furthering the promotion of indigenous peoples rights with the Union government and local governments. Some senior Chin leaders, however, doubt the political relevance of this ministry "which does not have any power" (Int. 65, Chin historian, activist, December 2018, online). The ethnic affairs ministers represent major ethnic groups in areas where they do not form a demographic majority. There are also ministers for Burman ethnic affairs, for instance, in all

ethnic states but Chin State, reflecting the governments understanding that Burman are also one of the 'ethnic groups' in the country (Myanmar President Office, 2016). CHRO organized several workshops in 2016 and 2017 in the capital Naypyidaw, including a *National Policy Dialogue on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar* to raise awareness of indigenous peoples rights among the newly appointed ethnic affairs ministers. State counselor Aung San Suu Kyi herself and other high-ranking government officials, as well as military representatives, attended the workshops. While indigenous peoples rights are not yet deeply rooted in government policies, according to a representative of CHRO:

> It's [indigenous peoples rights] part of the government policy now you can say, because the speech delivered by the ethnic minister is a kind of policy statement, right? So at the inauguration of this workshop last week [2016] he spoke about how relevant the UNDRIP is and that we should implement it nationally. So it's also a recognition of this government that there are such people as indigenous peoples in this country. That also is a deviation from past administration. (Int. 21, national NGO representative, Yangon, October 2016)

Another ministry, which has been engaging with CHRO and other local NGOs on indigenous peoples rights issues is the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC) under the framework of the UN REDD+ program.[250] The basic idea of REDD+ (*Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation*), as the name indicates, is that developing countries which reduce greenhouse gas emissions from forests degradation or deforestation will qualify to receive compensation payments (so called 'results-based payments') from the international community for not destroying their forests (REDD+ Myanmar, n.d.).[251] MONREC collaborated together with CHRO, another newly founded indigenous peoples rights organization named *Promoting Indigenous and Nature Together*

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[250] "REDD+ is a mechanism proposed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to achieve significant reductions in anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases, basically through avoiding deforestation and forest degradation, thus contributing to international efforts to mitigate the negative effects of climate change. During the period 2016-2020, the focus of the UN-REDD Programme is 'to support countries in meeting their commitments under the UNFCCC, and developing the elements of the Warsaw Framework.' The ultimate aim of the programme is to support countries moving into implementation that would enable them to receive results based incentives. . . Myanmar began preparing for REDD+ in 2012 with the formulation of a 'REDD+ readiness roadmap', developed with broad stakeholder consultation. Currently, especially with support from the UN-REDD Programme, the roadmap is being implemented. By early 2018, it is expected that Myanmar will have two of the four elements of the Warsaw Framework in place – a National REDD+ Strategy and a Forest Reference Level" (REDD+ Myanmar, n.d.).

[251] Myanmar is a signatory to both the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol.

(POINT), international organizations, and UN organizations to prepare for the implementation of the REDD+ program in Myanmar. [252] The understanding of the responsible UN agencies is that, most of the world's remaining forests are located in areas inhabited by ethnic or indigenous peoples. As such, they need to be stakeholders in implementing the program and be protected from potential negative impacts. Accordingly, the REDD+ official safeguard standards emphasize the "respect for the knowledge and rights of indigenous peoples" and explicitly refers to the UNDRIP ("REDD+ Safeguards", n.d). The Myanmar national REDD+ safeguards were drafted by multiple stakeholders, including indigenous activists, ensuring that indigenous peoples rights are observed in the national framework. The draft safeguards, which repeatedly refer to "indigenous peoples", include provisions regarding the customary rights to land and resources (Erni, 2018; MIPENN, 2015). Indigenous activists in Myanmar seem to regard the REDD+ program as a welcome platform to lobby for the rights of indigenous peoples and their customary land use practices (including shifting cultivation). Research projects and pilot projects have been financed and implemented to further study customary land tenure and agricultural practices, which directly feed into the REDD+ process (Erni, 2018). In addition, the funds available through the program are a welcome financial source for indigenous activists. Yet, this is despite the fundamental criticism of the program voiced by academics and indigenous activists in other countries and regions, who regard it as ineffective or outright "dangerous" due to the threat of 'green grabbing' (Carbon Trade Watch, 2013; Eilenberg, 2015; Kühne, n.d).[253]

While the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs and MONREC have been involved in activities promoting indigenous peoples rights on the Union level, not all ministries have been keen to engage on this issue. For instance, the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation has

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[252] The organization POINT was founded in 2012 by a Karen indigenous rights activist who had studied development studies abroad and others. Reportedly, it "started as a response to the lack of organization led by "Indigenous Peoples" working for Indigenous Peoples' issues in Myanmar (POINT, n.d.). POINT works on Indigenous rights issues going beyond Karen State and employs staff coming from different ethnic groups. On its website, POINT publishes a number of online reports and resources on indigenous peoples in Myanmar.

[253] They point to the threat of 'green grabbing' and appropriation of forests by local elites given the particular political economy in many participating countries (Eilenberg, 2015, Kühne, n.d.). Kühne (n.d) warns that: "forest peoples are among the least influential and powerful groups in many countries. If money is to be made with their forests (which they may not even 'legally' possess), who will be there to defend their rights 'to destroy the forest' (i.e. to live in it and with it) against the national government, corporate elites or foreign 'conservationists'?". A more fundamental problem of carbon offsetting through REDD+ is that it is not solving the problem at its root: "Because REDD+ is embedded in the logic that environmental destruction can be 'compensated' for somewhere else it acts to reinforce the underlying drivers of deforestation and climate change. It also gives forest destroyers a way to legitimize their actions as environmentally 'friendly' or 'carbon neutral'. Far from positioning itself as an ally to the many local groups that have preserved forested lands most strongly, REDD+ tends to silence debates about the unjust realities surrounding corporate pressures on land tenure regimes" (Carbon Trade Watch, 2013, p. 3).

little interest in extending forest areas through REDD+, which would curtail their area of influence. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, responsible for engaging on the international level, such as the UN, has also been reportedly reluctant to accept indigenous peoples rights, eying the activities of indigenous activists at the UN in Geneva with some suspicion.

However, CHRO not only engaged in the promotion of indigenous peoples rights as an individual organization. Together with POINT and other local NGOs, it formed the first civil society network exclusively dedicated to the promotion of indigenous peoples rights in Myanmar: The *Myanmar Indigenous Peoples/Ethnic Nationalities Network (MIPENN)* (see Figure 38). MIPENN was founded in April 2014 and is "the only of its kind on indigenous peoples rights in Myanmar" (Int. 21, national NGO representative, Yangon, October 2016).[254]

Figure 38: MIPENN Logo (source: facebook.com/mipenn)

It emerged out of a conference of over 120 indigenous representatives from all over the country a few weeks prior to its official inauguration. Meetings with indigenous delegates from other ASEAN countries during the *ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum* (ACSC/APF) in Yangon in March 2014 had inspired the formation of MIPENN. The goal of the network is to "enable meaningful participation of indigenous peoples in the nation

[254] Besides MIPENN there are other networks founded around the same time focusing on indigenous rights, such as for instance the Conservation Alliance of Tanawthari (CAT) (2018) which aims to "promote conservation of biodiversity together with people, and protect the rights of indigenous communities" (p. 2).

building process with equal rights and opportunities for all indigenous peoples" ("About the Myanmar Indigenous Peoples/Ethnic Nationalities Network", n.d.).[255]

The use of both 'labels' "indigenous peoples" as well as "ethnic nationalities" in the name of the network demonstrates the strategic synonymous use of the terms, as well as the reluctance to rely only on "indigenous peoples" only as a still relatively unfamiliar term in the Myanmar context. The activities of MIPENN in its first years has been focusing on advocacy and awareness raising. In 2015, MIPENN published a resource book with collected articles on indigenous people's rights, in English and Burmese language (MIPENN, 2015). The collection includes an introduction to the concept of "indigenous peoples" with different definitions used for instance by the Cobo report (1986), the translation of the UNDRIP, ILO Convention No. 169, World Bank and Asian Development Bank Safeguards and other national and international legal documents (see Figure 39).

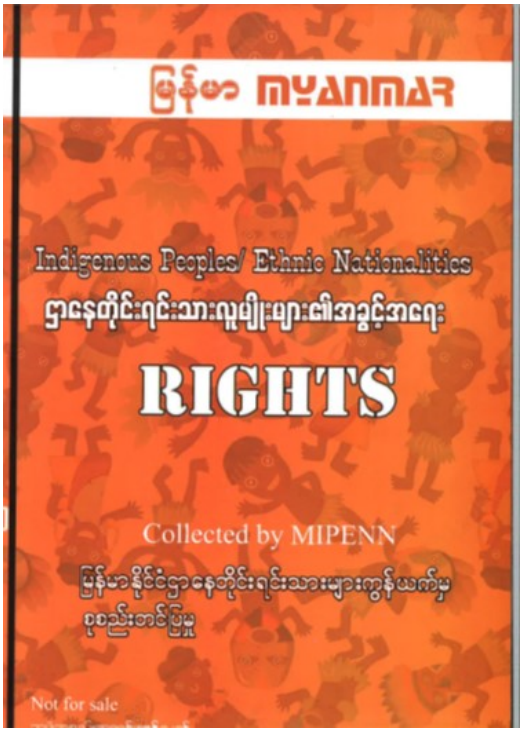

Figure 39: Cover of MIPENN resource book in IP/EN Rights (MIPENN, 2015)

[255] According to an introduction video, the objectives of the network are 1. To make IP aware of their rights and opportunities; 2. to identify the common problems facing IPs and to address them through collective efforts and 3. to promote indigenous peoples issues towards greater recognition at the national and international levels ("About The Myanmar Indigenous Peoples/Ethnic Nationalities Network", n.d.).

The network also took the initiative to organize the first public celebration in Myanmar of the *International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples* on 9 August 2014, to lobby for the rights of indigenous peoples in the country. Since then, indigenous activists and government officials have celebrated this event annually, with public performances of cultural dances in 'national dresses', and speeches (see Figure 40 and Figure 41). The dance performances seem to follow a pattern of folklorization of indigenous expressions.[256] The self-representations thereby play with exoticism and stereotyping of 'indigeneity' and the expectations of the non-indigenous audience (Bigenho, 2007; see also Figure 39). In addition to the cultural shows, indigenous peoples delegates from different parts of the country meet every year for a national consultation and to issue a public statement. The 2017 statement celebrates the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the UNDRIP and Myanmar's ratification and acknowledges the steps taken by the government, while calling for further reforms:

> We welcome the initiatives taken by the Union Ministry of Ethnic Affairs in developing a bylaw that will operationalize the provisions of the Ethnic Rights Protection Law of 2015 and the functions of the Ministry. We deeply appreciate the degree of openness and inclusion . . . We reiterate our call for the Government of Myanmar to address the continuing violations of our collective rights as indigenous peoples, particularly our rights to our lands, territories and resources. To this end, we urge the government to enact a pertinent law giving full legal recognition of the rights to traditional land use and land tenure system of indigenous peoples. (MIPENN, 2017)

The public event is widely covered in national media and television, aiming at sensitizing the Myanmar public to the topic of indigenous peoples ("International Day of the World's Indigenous", 2018; Nyein Ei Ei Htwe, 2016).

[256] Bigenho (2007) understands folklorization as "the multilayered process whereby groups consciously choreograph, compose, and perform for themselves and others, what they want to represent as distinct about their identity local, regional, national), and how this performance is also filtered through a set of audience expectations about the Other. The debated middle ground in folklorization of indigeneity is between performers' desires, audience' expectations, and the different meanings that folklore performances acquire as they move between international, national, and local contexts" (pp. 248-249).

Figure 40: International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples Celebration in Yangon, 2018 (source:www.facebook.com/mipenn)

Figure 41: International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples Celebration in Yangon, 2018 (source: www.facebook.com/mipenn)

Transnational advocacy

As previously mentioned, CHRO had been already engaging with the transnational indigenous peoples movement soon after its foundation in the mid-1990s, long before it was active in promoting the indigenous peoples agenda on the national scale. Since the formation of the wider indigenous peoples coalition, MIPENN, in 2014, the network has been able to position itself as an active player within Myanmar, as well as on the transnational level. In 2015, MIPENN and several other ethnic organizations sent a joint submission under the name of *Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar/Burma* (2015) to the *UN Universal*

Periodic Review for the 23rd Session of the *Universal Periodic Review Working Group of the Human Rights Council* in Geneva.[257] A delegation of the coalition traveled from Myanmar to Geneva to present the report and engage with other indigenous peoples delegations as well as the Myanmar foreign mission. According to the delegates, issues of indigenous rights and LGBTI were prominent new issues in the preparation towards the UPR (Int. 12, National NGO representative, Yangon, October 2016). The report summarized the situation of indigenous peoples in Myanmar as well as violations of indigenous peoples rights. Apart from language and cultural rights, a major part of the report concerned issues over land, natural resources and development projects. Not only cases in Chin State were cited in the report, such as the *Gullu Mual* case, *Kaladan Project* or *Laymyo* dam (see previous chapter 5), but also cases from Rakhine State, Karen State and Mon State. Notable is the absence of Kachin groups in the coalition and the lack of coverage of Kachin State in the report.

Members of MIPENN, have also engaged in other UN level institutions such as the *UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, which was established in July 2000 as an advisory body on indigenous issues to the Economic and Social Council and meets annually (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, n.d).[258] In addition, representatives of MIPENN regularly attend international Climate Change conferences, such as the *UNFCCC Convention of Parties* (CoP) to push for the acknowledgement of indigenous peoples rights and the role they can play in reducing carbon emissions. In order to enhance their role in the UNFCCC process, the *Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform* (LCIPP) was established, which aims "to strengthen the knowledge, technologies, practices, and efforts of local communities and indigenous peoples related to addressing and responding to climate

[257] Apart from MIPENN, POINT and CHRO, the coalition included the All Arakan Students' Youths' Congress (AASYC), Arakan Rivers Network (ARN), Bago Yoma Care, Karen Environmental and Social Network (KESAN), Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), Karen Lawyer Network (KLN), KMSS-Loikaw, Karen River Watch (KRW), Lisu Youth Development Organization, Myay Latt Community Forestry (Magwe Region), Mon Multi-media Institute (M3I), Mro Youth Action Group (MYAG), Mon Youth Forum (MYF), Mrauk U Environmental Conservation Association, Naga Students and Youth Federation-Myanmar (NSYF-M), Naga Students and Youth Federation-Yangon(NSYF-M), Pantanaw Karen Literature and Culture Committee, Pantanaw Karen Youth (PKY), SHANAH, Youth Circle (YC), Won-Lark Rural Development Foundation (Arakan).

[258] "The Permanent Forum has a mandate to: Provide expert advice and recommendations on indigenous issues to the Council, as well as to programmes, funds and agencies of the United Nations, through the Council; Raise awareness and promote the integration and coordination of activities related to indigenous issues within the UN system; Prepare and disseminate information on indigenous issues" (United Nations – Indigenous Peoples, n.d.).

change, to facilitate the exchange of experience and the sharing of best practices and lessons related to mitigation and adaptation" (UNFCC, 2018, p 22).

By engaging on a transnational political scale, indigenous activists from Myanmar hope to achieve a kind of "boomerang effect", influencing the the Myanmar government indirectly through international pressure (Swift, 2015). They hope that their engagement over time will lead to a translation of international indigenous rights frameworks, and in particular the principles of the UNDRIP into national legislation. While the transnational scale no longer remains the only viable venue for indigenous activists from Myanmar (since the 'scaling down' of indigenous politics is increasingly possible and taking place as demonstrated above), it remains an important political arena.

6.7. Limits to Indigenous Politics

Despite the increasing advocacy efforts on several political scales – from the local to the national and transnational – indigenous peoples in Myanmar are still struggling to achieve official recognition. As mentioned earlier, indigenous peoples, rights as enshrined in the UNDRIP, are not (yet) translated into national law, despite Myanmar being a signatory. As of 2018, apart from a few policy papers and guidelines – such as the REDD+ national safeguards draft – no legal documents officially refer to 'indigenous peoples' (mostly 'ethnic nationalities'). Neither does the 2008 constitution refer to indigenous peoples but instead to 'national races' (Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business, Institute for Human Rights and Business, & The Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2016). Changes to the constitution currently do not appear to be on the agenda of the NLD-led government, despite earlier promises of constitutional reform (Roughneen, 2015). Even if the civilian government would be ready to grant further concessions, the Tatmadaw's resistance to constitutional changes still seems too strong. In addition, as Myanmar is further drawn into the political orbit of its powerful neighbor China, the prospect remains, that Myanmar will follow Chinas approach regarding indigenous peoples. While China is trying to accommodate certain national "ethnic minorities" (officially recognizing 55 ethnic groups) through different forms of autonomy (as defined in the "Law on Regional Autonomy"), it rejects the concept of indigenous peoples and consequently any related special collective rights (Erni, 2008, pp.

357-361).[259] According to Morton (2017a), China "(mis)read the global Indigenous Peoples' movement as a broader effort to undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states" (p. 7).

In addition, not all ethnic groups in Myanmar are currently embracing indigenous peoples rights (Nationalities Youth Forum & Students Youth Congress of Burma, 2012). Some groups, such as Kachin State, refrain (for now) from membership in one of the national and international indigenous people networks (Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar/Burma, 2015).[260] They seem to prefer to continue their political struggle on the platform of ethnic nationalism (including ethnic armed resistance), obviously seeing no benefit in joining the indigenous peoples movement. Even among Chin groups, some political representatives doubt the value of the concept of indigeneity. They worry that promotion of particularistic indigenous identities could break up the imagined collective of the Chin ethnic group into smaller 'tribal units' according to language groups. This woule effectively undermine the Chin nationalist project they have been fighting for decades (see above) (Int. 65, Chin historian, activist, December 2018, online). A study conducetd by several ethnic youth organisations on "Burma's ethnic nationalities" argues in the same way that "opting to choose indigenous status in this context can threaten fragile legal and political advantages". It concludes that "using the term ethnic nationality is the most strategic as it affords them the most amount of rights under national law" (Nationalities Youth Forum & Students Youth Congress of Burma, 2012, p. 24).

Another criticism the essentialist notions which indigeneity sometimes assumes, often accompanied by biological essentialism and narratives of 'blood and soil'. As Kuper (2003) argues, the indigenous movement can be at times reminiscent of right-wing populism, with their nativist, anti-immigration agenda that has been on the rise in many countries in Europe and the United States in recent years (Hochschild, 2016; Mudde, 2009; Rooduijn, 2015). This can potentially lead to further divisions and fuel conflict between self-identifying indigenous groups and other (ethnic) groups not recognized as indigenous (Kuper, 2003; Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, 2016). One prominent example of 'indigenous violence', often cited in the literature has been the episodes of violence between 'indigenous' Dayak

[259] Erni (2008) quotes a Chinese official as saying: „In China there are no indigenous people and therefore no indigenous issues".

[260] No Kachin was part of the Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar/Burma. However according to informants, the KIA is discussing the concept of indigenous peoples rights already within their education programs.

in Borneo and 'non-indigenous' Madurese settlers (Baird, 2011; Li, 2002). Between 1997 and 1999, hundreds of settlers were killed and tens of thousands displaced. Interestingly, the violence also occurred in a 'frontier area' in a time of political transition (*reformasi*) following the end of the New Order era under General Suharto (Tanasaldy, 2012). [261]

In Myanmar, there is also a tendency to essentialize indigenous identities, as has been the case with ethnic national identities (Gravers, 2007). In interviews, some indigenous activists in Myanmar, indeed acknowledged that there is widespread understanding of ethnicity/indigeneity based on ideas of 'blood and birth' among network members (Int. 12, National NGO representative, Yangon, October 2016). Many seem to be oblivious to the scientific fact that there is no biological base for socially constructed groups (c.f. Flam, 2016; Jobling, Rasteiro, & Wetton, 2016; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; White, 2014). This is, of course, not specific to indigenous activists and follows a general pattern of racialized discourses of belonging that is prevalent in the country. In particular, since Ne Wins military regime, state sponsored racism was a fundamental part of the state ideology (Cheesman, 2017; Lintner, 2017; Maung Zarni, 2012, 2013). With its obsession to prove the supremacy of the Burman 'master race', the military regime even went so far (against all scientific rationality) as to claim that human race and culture originates from Burma (Houtman, 1999). Following the political transition post-2011, racist discourses turned even more radical in the face of increasing ultra-nationalism, culminating in its most radical form in anti-Rohingya violence, resulting in mass displacement and mass killings (Maung Zarni, 2013; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018).[262] While the mass evictions seem to have been long planned and orchestrated by the states' security forces (Fortify Rights, 2018), violence was also fueled by the anger of 'indigenous' Rakhine people against so-called 'illegal Bengali immigrants'. According to Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung (2016), "the resurgence in communal violence between Rakhine Buddhist and Rohingya Muslim" is also

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[261] The conflict reportedly began among youth groups following a pop-concert, with Dayaks accusing Madurese boys of molesting a Dayak girl. Weeks later, the fight escalated into widespread violent clashes based on false rumors. Tensions had been building up over a long time and had been simmering under the surface but were held down by an authoritarian regime. The grievances by the Dayak were also related to land conflicts (Tanasaldy, 2012, pp. 209).

[262] According to Maung Zarni (2013) "Over the course of the past few years an extremely potent and dangerous strain of racism has emerged among Burma's Theravada Buddhists, who have participated in the destruction and expulsion of the entire population of Rohingya Muslims". He sees the current resurgence of racism as "a direct result of a half century of despotic military rule. The careful construction of an iron cage—a monolithic constellation of values, an ad hoc ethos—locks in and naturalizes a singular view of what constitutes Burma's national culture. The dominant population remains potently ethnonationalist, essentializing Buddhism as the core of an authentic Burmese national identity".

the result of "an unresolved and ongoing dispute over the legitimacy of the Rohingya claim as an ethnic nationality (*taing-yin-thar*)" (p. 528). Yet while she claims that the issue was about whether Rohingya qualify as 'indigenous' to Myanmar or not, it was less about *indigeneity* – as understood in international legal norms – than about the status of being an *ethnic nationality*, as a precondition for enjoying Myanmar citizenship (Cheesman, 2017). Thus she also equates ethnic nationalities with indigenous peoples.[263]

This raises some serious questions for indigenous peoples rights activists in Myanmar, which they need to address if they want to avoid pursuing the same line of a racist politics of exclusion as the military regime. Indeed, indigenous peoples networks in Myanmar (such as the MIPENN) are controversially debating whom to accept as 'indigenous' and whom to exclude from their network. For instance, while groups from Rakhine (Arakan) State have been participating in indigenous networks and rights violations against Rakhine 'indigenous peoples have been documented in related reports, Rohingya groups on the other hand have been notably absent (Coalition of Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar/Burma, 2015). While it is not known whether Rohingya groups were actively seeking membership in the indigenous peoples movement, it is well known that Rohingyas are not recognized as an ethnic nationality by the government and the mainstream population in Myanmar (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, 2016). Even the name 'Rohingya' is outright rejected as expression of an illegitimate ethnicity identity. This is despite the fact that all other ethnic and national identities in the country are similarly a historical and social construct. Yet, repeatedly government officials have denied the existence of the name Rohingya, thus also denying the very existence of any such ethnic community. As mentioned earlier, a "collective proper name" (Smith, 2002) is the precondition for any ethnic community. Therefore, it becomes a symbolic battleground in the case of the Rohingy in particular, but not only, as ahown by the earlier example of Zomi/Chin. However, the question remains if Rohingya, who claim a long-history of residence in the area of what is today Northern Rakhine State (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, 2016),[264] would effectively be accepted as 'indigenous' (in the eyes of the

[263] Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung (2016, p. 534) also uses the terms taingyinthar ("sons/offsprings of the geographical division" or "ethnic nationality" and htar nay-taingyinthar ("indigenous peoples" more or less synonymously, although she mentions that the latter is used to highlight the position of non-dominance). Yet Rohingya are not claiming (to the knowledge of the author) to be indigenous in the sense of the UNDRIP but ethnic nationalities in the meaning of "taingyintar" which is a precondition to be eligible for Myanmar citizenship (Cheesman, 2017).

[264] While some Rohingya groups claim that their ancestral roots go back to the first millennium A.D, Rakhine nationalists regard them as immigrants coming to Burma only during colonial times (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, 2016) and Chin historians trace their settlement in what is today Myanmar to around the 11th

indigenous activists), should they ever decide to self-identify as 'indigenous'.[265] Since the status of *ethnic nationality* seems to be also a precondition for the status as *indigenous peoples* (or an 'original' ethnic nationality in the sense of *tar-nay tahingyintha*), the chances are small for Rohingya groups to be accepted. Similar questions could be arguably raised about other groups, with Chinese or Indian origin, who have resided in what is today the official territory of Myanmar for centuries (Myint Myint Kyu, 2016; Wang, 2017).[266]

To come back to the original question of customary land rights for indigenous peoples: To grant land rights to indigenous communities in the context of Chin State would probably cause relatively little conflict, except maybe between communities of similar status, since there are still relatively few settlers from outside the state.[267] However, in ethnic states with a less homogenous population (for instance Shan State or Kachin State), this could pose serious problems between different ethnic communities, as is also the case in other countries where indigenous and non-indigenous people are living side by side. A challenging step towards titling 'indigenous land' can be "the identification of who is and who is not 'indigenous'", as pointed out by Steinebach and Kunz (2017, p. 47) in their study on Indonesia.

While the objective of this thesis is not to argue against or in favor of indigenous politics in Myanmar, it is nevertheless important to critically question the concepts used and point out the potential pitfalls and challenges. Nevertheless, in spite of the concerns raised above, one should remember that indigeneity, as much as the recent resurgence of ethnicity, evolved *in response* to an ethnocratic Burman dominated state-building process pushed forward by a repressive military regime. Thus, it would be one-sided to blame ethnic or indigenous minorities for playing the ethnic card. Rather as Cheesman (2017) argues, since ethnic nationality became the dominant category and pre-condition for citizenship, "people seeking

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century. "The Pagan inscriptions dating from the eleventh century onward refer to the Chin of the Chindwin Valley" (Lian Sakhong, 2003, p. 11).

[265] Rohingya political activists would arguably claim to fulfil all criteria according to the Cobo (1986) definition: They claim a historical continuity, consider themselves culturally distinct (claiming a distinct language), are part of a non-dominant sector of society, and are determined to preserve their ethnic identity.

[266] For instance, a group with Chinese ancestry, which is officially recognized as citizens, is the Kokang, which share similarities with Chinese communities across the border. Yet while Rohingya are not recognized as citizens, the Kokang are at least in many cases: A newspaper report quotes an academic: "According to the law, the Kokang people are indigenous people of Myanmar and have the right to full citizenship; on the other hand, the Burmese Chinese are foreigners" (Wang, 2017).

[267] Yet there have been a few cases of Burman businessmen trying to purchase parts of land in Chin State which has been contested by the local population (see chapter 5).

to participate in the political community 'Myanmar'" can hardly be blamed for making claims that they belong to an ethnic nationality:

> Given the pre-eminence of the taingyintha truth regime, the unpreparedness or unwillingness of intellectuals and political leaders to challenge its politics is hardly surprising. As these people are themselves subjugated by the politics of national races, even in their attempts to exert control over the idea they succeed in reproducing it, and in reinforcing the primacy of the state-building project innate to taingyintha. (Cheesman, 2017, p. 477)

Therefore, it was not primarily as Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung (2016) claims, the contentious nature of indigenous politics which lead to the Rohingya crisis. Rather, at the root of the problem is the master narrative of national races (Cheesman, 2017). When academics appeal to an end of identity politics in Myanmar, they tend to ignore the history of brutal repression and collective discrimination experienced by the population in the peripheral (upland) areas. To blame ethnic or indigenous peoples for demanding equal treatment and inclusion would ultimately mean to regard the collective resistance against ethnic discrimination as being the cause of ethnic discrimination itself (to paraphrase Susemichel & Kastner, 2018, p. 151).[268] It was, of course, the experience of collective discrimination and Burmanization, which originally prompted the identity projects of ethnic nationalism and indigeneity. As one NGO representative pointed out in an interview: "if they [ethnic groups] already enjoy basic rights maybe they would not care [about indigenous peoples rights]" (Int. 12, National NGO representative, Yangon, October 201). But as long as the master narrative of *taingyintha* and Burman superiority is not rooted out and replaced by another narrative and civil model of citizenship at the highest political levels, identity politics in Myanmar is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. The indigenous peoples movement in Myanmar however should be cautious to pursue a progressive and emancipatory form of identity politics and avoid being associated with right-wing identity politics. They have to walk a fine line between a strategic affirmative construction of ethnic/indigenous identities (strategic essentialism) (Pande, 2017)[269] and overly

[268] In their discussion of the criticism directed against identity politics, Susemichel and Kastner (2018) write that "ultimately it is argued that resistance against Racism is the cause of racism" (own translation) (p. 15).

[269] According to Pande (2017), "strategic essentialism advocates provisionally accepting essentialist foundations for identity categories as a strategy for collective representation in order to pursue chosen political ends" (p. 1).

essentialized and homogenized identities that emphasize exclusion. Right-wing identity politics aims at exclusion and maintaining a position of privilege. What sets apart progressive forms of identity politics are the fights against discrimination and the demands for equal participation. A good indicator to evaluate the progressiveness of an identity-based movement, according to Susemichel & Kastner (2018, p. 17), is to ask how open it is to criticism and how reflective it is of the fragile identity construction it is based upon.

6.8. Conclusion of Chapter 6

The aim of this chapter was to trace the recent emergence of *indigeneity* in Myanmar as a discourse and political practice from the transnational to the local level. This is one example of a variety of strategies of peoples in the frontier to shape the contested process of integration and changing center-periphery relations. It has been shown that, in particular actors from Chin State have already been engaging with the transnational indigenous peoples movement since the mid-1990s. The aim was to complement their ethnic-nationalist armed struggle for self-determination, which emerged in response to the military dictatorship, with transnational rights-based advocacy work. Ever since, Chin actors have been actively involved in shaping the global indigenous rights regime, including the drafting process of the UNDRIP. This declaration, to a large extent, enshrined their long-anticipated goal of self-determination under a federal system. In addition, Chin actors were instrumental in establishing regional indigenous peoples networks in Asia that have been continuously growing over the past decade.

On the national level, conditions for indigenous rights advocacy inside Myanmar turned more favorable during the so-called 'political transition' following the 2010 elections. The factors facilitating the rise of indigeneity, besides the necessary historical conditions, include, amongst others: ceasefire agreements, increasing economic integration (accompanied by processes of primitive accumulation and competition over land and resources), existing transnational indigenous networks, international (donor) support and increasing political associational space for civil society actors. However, indigeneity in Myanmar was not adopted in a political vacuum but greatly conditioned by the historical cultural and political context. The 'truth regime' of ethnic nationalities and national races established by the SLORC/SPDC regime (Cheesman, 2017) heavily structured the political field in which indigeneity was recently adopted. Therefore, the discourse of indigeneity largely stays within the hegemonic framework of *taingyinta* rather than questioning or

replacing it. While the government regards ethnic nationalities and indigenous peoples as more or less synonymous or even rejects the notion of a separate category of 'indigenous peoples', ethnic activists challenge this perspective. They emphasize the distinction between ethnic nationalities and indigenous peoples, conditioned by unequal power relations, exclusion and marginalization, while themselves remaining ambivalent about its use.

On the national scale the formation of indigenous peoples' advocacy networks, such as the MIPENN, which can be regarded as the Myanmar equivalent to the well-known *Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of the Archipelago* (AMAN) in Indonesia, became instrumental in lobbing for indigenous peoples rights.[270] Chin organizations, which were key in establishing the MIPENN, started to engage several Union ministries to raise awareness of indigenous peoples rights and push for the translation of indigenous rights into the national legal framework.

On the local level, indigenous rights discourses arrived with local elites and activists, who had been educated overseas and brought with them the concept of indigeneity. Yet, 'foreign organizations' or international advocacy groups, as is sometimes observed in other contexts (Pelican, 2015), did not impose it. Soon the concept spread to other local agents who proactively adopted it for their own cause. Thereby, indigeneity, given its conceptual flexibility, became re-interpreted, translated, and adjusted to the local needs, as shown by the example of pastor-activists who link indigeneity with theology of ecology. For many local activists and communities (including diaspora communities), it became a useful concept to defend their access to customary land, which became increasingly threatened by investment, land speculation and development projects (see previous chapter 5). In many cases, they referred directly to the right to FPIC and the protection of customary rights to land as enshrined in the UNDRIP. Self-declared 'indigenous farmers' in Chin State started discussions on a decentralized land use policy that recognizes customary institutions and meets the standards of 21st century rights frameworks. However, beyond mere discussions on indigenous peoples rights and public protests, concrete practices on the ground to territorialize indigenous lands included community mapping activities and the promotion of community forests.

[270] Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (*AMAN*).

However, indigeneity is also facing considerable challenges in the current political context of Myanmar. Not all ethnic groups find it useful to refer to indigenous rights in dealing with the central government, given the still limited receptiveness of the current administration. In particular, groups who did not reach ceasefires agreements (or were excluded from the peace process), such as the Kachin, are reluctant to join the indigenous peoples movement and pursue their ethnic-nationalist agenda. Even within Chin political circles, the additional value of the concept of indigeneity for their political cause of self-determination based on Chin ethnic nationalism is still questioned. Certain dangers, as highlighted in the last section of the chapter, need more attention and reflection among indigenous activists in the country. While a certain amount of strategic essentialism is a necessary element of indigenous politics, there is a certain risk of overly essentialized notions of indigenous identities which perpetuate exclusion and politics of marginalization. Homogenized indigenous identities that overlook intersectional dimensions such as gender and class differences also face considerable limitations, as has been briefly discussed in relation to ethnic feminist perspectives. Nevertheless, the concept of indigenous peoples has the potential to be more inclusive and form broader alliances than ethnic national identities (Morton, 2017a). In any case, a more critical debate is needed without vilifying the model of indigenism or rejecting it outright.

7. CONCLUSION

Myanmar's border regions have undergone fundamental changes over the past few decades due to the military-led economic reforms following the crisis of 1988. The transition from a nominally socialist centralized economy to a market-driven economy has again intensified since the presidency of Thein Sein (2011-2016), who introduced far-reaching economic and political reforms. This study examines the changing center-periphery relations and contemporary processes of incorporation of Myanmar's periphery in the context of the so-called political and economic "transition" or "metamorphosis". While the political developments in Myanmar, and in particular the question of democratic change, attracted much international attention, the dynamics in many border regions were of lesser concern. This study looks at the *responses to the increasing pressure of incorporation* from different actors in the periphery. The focus thereby is the *adoption of indigeneity and the genesis of an indigenous identity.* Chin State was selected as the case study area, since it is one of the few border regions accessible to foreign researchers with a relatively stable ceasefire since 2012. However, the security situation on its southern border declined in recent months, due to a 'spill-over' of the crisis in Rakhine State. For a long time, Chin State has been one of the least accessible areas in the country, lacking basic infrastructure, in particular, a functioning road network that is only now being built since the latest phase of the political transition under Thein Sein. Therefore, it is also one of the least studied areas in the whole of Myanmar, especially compared to the border areas adjacent to Thailand. Chin State is sometimes referred to as the 'last frontier' due to its low population density, isolated mountainous landscape, large forest areas and low economic productivity. Paradoxically, at the same time, it has arguably become one of the most 'globalized' states of the Union of Myanmar. Over the past two decades, a considerable part of its population has emigrated to different parts of the world, trying to escape chronic poverty, political instability, discrimination and violence. Today, there are large diaspora communities in Malaysia, Australia and the US amongst others. These diaspora communities did not completely turn their back on their impoverished but cherished homeland, in many cases remaining connected and engaged. This was evident in the case of the public protest against a Chinese mining project in Chin State (illustrated in the introduction chapter), which surfaced in 2013 following the ceasefire agreement with Chin State's sole ethnic armed group, the Chin National Front. The protest of the diaspora community – identifying themselves as 'indigenous Zomi' – claiming the right to their 'indigenous land' in front of the Chinese embassy in Washington was also one of the starting points of the research for this study.

Previously, few such reports had come out of Chin State, a region that was also little known for land or resource conflicts in comparison to other ethnic states, such as Kachin State or Karen State. Nevertheless, the protest was an indication that Chin State was probably facing similar challenges to other border regions in Myanmar.

In order to allow for a systematic analysis of the process of integration of the peripheral areas – with changing land relations as one of the most significant aspects – this study applies the theoretical framework of the *frontier* (cf. Cottyn, 2017; Barney, 2009; Geiger, 2009; Hall, 2002, 2012, 2013; Kelly & Peluso, 2015; Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013; Peluso & Lund, 2012; Tsing, 2003). Despite its controversial history, the *frontier* theory – extensively revised and expanded in recent years – is a powerful device to systematically trace the changes at the 'edges' of nation states. Indeed, review of relevant literature revealed that the frontier as a conceptual framework is currently experiencing something of a revival. Despite being generally associated with spaces outside the reach of states, frontiers are not completely isolated, but in the *process of incorporation* within an existing and expanding state structure. According to Hall (2012), "frontiers are where incorporation takes place" (p. 51). Thus, it is this *moment of incorporation* and not the characteristic of isolation or remoteness that is defining the frontier in the first place. The frontier is a *zone of transition* between different modes of production and (political) cultures. In the context of Myanmar's transition, it is in the frontier where the current changes become most evident, visible and, therefore, the best to explore. In order to operationalize the frontier concept, the present study adopts a new and innovative approach by Cottyn (2017). She links the frontier with *world-system theory*, emphasizing the central function of the frontier for the world-system at large. This approach looks at local developments within a global framework. Rather than being completely 'isolated', the frontier fulfills an important economic function as a resource base that has yet to be tapped and commodified by global capitalist forces. The opening of new frontiers provides new supply of cheap land, natural resources and labor in order to stabilize the crisis-riddled capital accumulation through spatial expansion and dispossession (Harvey, 2003). Particularly useful is Cottyn's (2017) differentiation of the frontier into three analytical categories: a historical process (*time*), the production of (capitalist) *space* and process of contestation and negotiation (*agency*). These categories also informed the overall structure of this study. While each of these aspects would merit its own in-depth research, nevertheless, the aim of this study was to include them in a holistic manner to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of their interrelations.

Frontier as historical process

This study argues that Chin State can be considered a frontier region of Myanmar, displaying many of the characteristics according to contemporary frontier theory. As discussed in chapter 4, the making of this frontier region was a long historical process that can be traced back at least to the end of the 19th century. At that juncture, for the first time in history, the Chin Hills where integrated into a world-system, then dominated by the British Empire. Being confronted by an all-powerful adversary had a dramatic impact on the society and political structure of the Chin Hills. In particular, the increasing influence of Christianity transformed subjectivities and provided a platform for a common ideology of a (national) 'Chin' identity. Yet the legitimacy of a unified national identity project is still contested from within as is indicated by the dispute around the name *Chin* versus *Zomi*. At the same time, the British colonial administration installed a differentiated mode of governance in the frontier areas, setting them apart from Burma Proper, with long-lasting consequences well into the post-colonial period. The colonial frontier was largely a *frontier of control,* trying to avert unrest, without, however, attempting to fully incorporate the remote hills into the system of direct administration for numerous reasons. Following independence, a shift within the frontier regime can be observed. The post-colonial frontier was marked by an increased attempt to incorporate the hills into the newly formed Union by assimilationist policies. This attempt largely failed as Burma started to isolate itself under the socialist regime of General Ne Win and removed itself from international markets. It also led to a contraction of the frontier zone and the increasing marginalization of the border areas as Myanmar's economy collapsed. The Union's grip on its periphery faded, with many areas de facto outside the control of the central state. Rather than advancing incorporation, the collapse of the domestic market led many in the border areas towards (illicit) trans-border trade in particular on the eastern borderlands. Following the countrywide uprising of 1988, a phase of militarization in the periphery began. The *military frontier* marked the beginning of an increased effort to bring the hills under control, this time through military means. Numerous military battalions were built in the Chin Hills, resulting in widespread confiscations of land and human rights violations. The latest and current frontier regime can be considered as *capitalist frontier* expansion.[271] It is characterized less by military involvement, but rather an extension of spatial control and an attempt to incorporate the region through state technologies (in particular, legal means and infrastructure). This phase

[271] In a 2018 paper (Einzenberger, 2018) I borrow the term *Frontier Capitalism* from Laungaramsri (2012).

coincides with a macro-economic re-orientation towards a China-centered world system at the beginning of the 21st century. This phase of frontier-making as part of China expanding its reach into its 'backyard' is not yet finalized. It is likely to continue over the next decades under the influence of the 'Great Game East', the continuing rivalry between China and India over 'their' frontier regions. Both Asian superpowers are eager to turn their former frontier regions into 'gateways' of cross-border trade and exchange. Above all, China is making great strides with its One Belt One Road project.

The frontier as spatial project

A central aspect examined in chapter 5 is the *spatial aspect* of the frontier making. The production of modern frontiers primarily entails the production of (capitalist) state spaces and transformation of spatial relations. Field research confirmed that the formalization of land ownership and changing property relations of land are well under way in Chin State, as in other frontier areas of Myanmar. This is in accordance with the definition of *land frontiers* by Peluso and Lund (2012) as "sites where authorities, sovereignties, and hegemonies of the recent past have been or are currently being challenged by new enclosures, territorializations, and property regimes" (p. 668). Customary land tenure, which is widespread in Chin State where few farmers hold legal land certificates, is gradually replaced by private land ownership. Communal land is enclosed and privatized often by local elites with military connections, who make use of the conditions of an emerging land market and their position for private profit. While the threat of land grabbing and extraction of natural resources by external actors (foreign corporations) is real, it is the 'every-day's process' of formalization and enclosure by local actors which seem to be more relevant overall. This is not unlike Li's (2014) findings in her case study of upland Indonesia, where "capitalist relations emerged by stealth. No rapacious agribusiness corporation grabbed land from highlanders" (p. 9). The Chin case is certainly different from other frontier regions such as Kachin State or Karen State where land conflicts related to corporate concessions are widespread. Nevertheless, the gradual closing of the land frontier, meaning the decreasing availability of 'free land' resources, will have serious consequences for those farmers who are losing out in the land speculation game. As Li (2014) puts it in her in her study of highland Indonesia: "Land's End is a devastating blow" (p. 179).

More surprising findings were cases of land conflicts caused by urbanization. This might sound odd for a region that is less known for busy towns than for its remoteness and

mountainous landscapes and forests. Nevertheless, there have been documented cases of expansion of municipal areas in the capital Hakha and other cities that threatened access to land of surrounding communities and even lead to evictions. While rural-urban migration within Chin State might be a factor for such urbanization, another factor seems to be land speculation by local urban elites. Many new land laws were introduced in 2012, which play a central role in the current spatial transformation. In particular, the 2012 Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law (VFV Land Law) and Farmland law provided the legal basis for the production of a 'spatial matrix' conducive to capital accumulation that disregards customary patterns of land governance. In the eyes of many local farmers and activists, this amounts to 'legal dispossession' of customary land. Even a 2018 update of the VFV Land law did not neutralize the threat of dispossession. It follows the same deep-rooted colonial logic, which regards the frontier as 'unproductive' or 'underutilized' landscape (in ignorance of its adaptive capacity) that needs to be gradually turned into 'productive landscapes'. It translates the imaginary of the 'underdeveloped' ethnic frontier into state law, prompting widespread resistance by local actors against the local and central governments.

Agency: Indigeneity as 'new' frontier identity

Related to the spatial transformation at the frontier, chapter 6 focuses on the local responses to the increasing pressure of incorporation. It highlights the adoption and politicizing of *indigeneity* that emerged among actors in and from Chin State. Chin actors have been engaging with the indigenous peoples movement on a transnational level since at least the late 1990s and contributed to shape the agenda on international indigenous peoples rights. In the domestic political arena however, indigeneity was adopted only following the gradual political opening during the Thein Sein government as well as the 2012 ceasefire agreement. Accordingly, the politics of indigeneity have become rooted at the local level only in recent years as a response to the rapid changes of customary land tenure regimes and the threat of dispossession. In many documented cases, the politics of indigeneity was discursively linked to rights over access to 'ancestral' land, often referring to international indigenous rights declarations such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The emergence of indigeneity in such circumstances is not entirely surprising. It can be argued that – similar to other countries in the region – indigeneity was consciously adopted in times of transition at a particular political and economic conjuncture that provided an enabling environment. Some of the enabling factors were the historical conditions of differentiation and marginalization of ethnic groups in the frontier areas (as a legacy of

colonial frontier making), changing state-society relations following the ceasefire agreements, expanding political associational space, increasing economic pressure on land and existing networks with the transnational indigenous peoples movement.

This study argues that the recent emergence of indigenous identity constructions is an example of frontier agency. It is an attempt to proactively *negotiate* and shape the contested *process of incorporation* and the center-periphery relation during times of transition. Indigeneity is the latest in a series of identity constructions, with ethnic-nationalist discourses as the most important and still dominant ones. According to Hall (2011), the frontier is a place where ethnic identities are created and modified in particularly flexible ways. This flexibility is the main source of strength of the frontier, which allowed its peoples to respond to different phases of frontier expansion and contraction. The adoption of indigeneity in Myanmar and Chin State is based on these earlier ethnic-nationalist identity constructions. Yet at the same time, it also challenges these projects. Indigeneity can be interpreted as another political resource available to innovate the ideological repertoire of the frontier actors. In the words of Scott (2009):

> Hill people have, in a sense, seized whatever ideological materials were available to them to make their claims and take their distance from the lowland states. . . At different times, both socialism and nationalism have offered the same apparent promise. Today, "indigenism," backed by international declarations, treaties, and well-heeled NGOs, offers some of the same prospects for framing identities and claims. (p. 323)

In other words, indigeneity can be regarded as a 'new' (at least in the context of Myanmar) *frontier identity.* A discourse that is globally acknowledged and supported by an international legal framework that legitimizes the age-old struggle for self-determination of peoples in the border areas. As the completion of the "last great enclosure" is drawing near and the most marginal spaces are turned into profitable 'spaces of accumulation', for Scott (2009), the future lies "in the daunting task of taming Leviathan, not evading it". (p. 324). As ethnic-separatism seems dated and garners little international support, the adoption of indigeneity provides a suitable option of 'removing' oneself from the central-state, at least ideologically, while at the same time remaining within an acceptable political framework. Yet, since the politics of indigeneity in Myanmar is still at an early stage, it remains to be seen if this strategy will be successful in influencing the terms of incorporation. On the one

hand, it is contested from within by agents of the ethnic nationalist projects, who fear their decades long struggle for a unified 'Chin' or 'Zomi' nation being undermined by a renewed 'tribal politics' of indigenism. On the other hand, the central government is reluctant to accept the notion of a separate 'indigenous' identity that challenges their imaginary of a unified (homogenized) people inspired by a 'Union spirit'.

Implications and outlook

To summarize in a few words, this study showed how current socio-economic transformations in one of Myanmar's frontier areas and competition over limited land resources engendered the emergence of indigenous politics on different political scales. The present study was one of the first attempts to apply contemporary frontier theory to the case of Myanmar in order to trace the transformations at the 'edges' of Myanmar's nation building process. Even though the term *frontier* has been historically closely connected with the name *Burma* since colonial times, contemporary (post-colonial) frontier approaches have been rarely discussed in relation to its modern border regions (with few exceptions). It is argued here that the revised (post-colonial) frontier framework holds much potential for further research. One strength is its emphasis on the agency of frontier peoples, which has been neglected in earlier approaches. Furthermore, also beyond the 'frontier' as particular approach to center-periphery relations, there is still much work to do. A more systematic research on Myanmar's borderlands would be significant not least because – as has often been emphasized – center-periphery relations are of central importance for the political future of the country as a whole. Without a thorough understanding of the current problems and challenges and evidence-based policy decisions, there is little hope for the current transition to lead to a positive outcome.

In particular, the India-Burma border has been much neglected by researchers, practitioners and policy-makers alike. Already very cursory queries in academic databases reveal that publications on the "India-Myanmar border" amount to only a tiny fraction of the publications available on the "Thai-Burma border".[272] This research is one of the first attempts, however imcomplete, to draw a more comprehensive picture of the current changes unfolding in Chin State on the India-Myanmar border. Basic research on this part of

[272] For instance, a scholar.google search for "Thai-Myanmar border" yields over 4,200 results while a search for "India-Myanmar border" yields only 447 results. A search in the database of Vienna University library yields 1,149 results for "Thai-Burma border" and 57 for "India-Burma border", including all kinds of research such as medical research.

Myanmar is just at an early stage. However, it is encouraging to see an increasing number of young academics from the region (organized in networks such as the *Chin State Academic Research Network* (CSARN) starting to critically explore social, cultural and economic change in their home regions. This study aims to further stimulate interest and provide inspiration to the new generation of researches from Chin State and beyond.

Beyond the specific case of Myanmar, this study also aims to demonstrate that the frontier theory continues to be relevant and should have its place within the wider discipline of borders studies, not only in historical accounts. It provides a powerful analytical framework, integrating local specificities and dynamics with global developments on the level of the world-system that is worthwhile being further developed and refined. It also provides a useful framework for comparative research of border regions.

Finally, this study, starting in 2015, has been among the first to address the recent rise of indigenous politics in Myanmar and in particular Chin State (see Einzenberger, 2016).[273] It documents the influential role of Chin actors in shaping the discourse of indigeneity not only in Myanmar, but also on the transnational level. A main argument is also the necessary interplay of local conditions and transnational linkages that led to the emergence of indigeneity as a frontier identity. The present study points beyond an analysis of the specific situation in Chin State and in Myanmar. It is argued that the processes which can be captured by the concept of frontier identity play an important role in other areas and regions and increasingly so.

Since the indigenous peoples movement in Myanmar has only just begun, it is probably too early to predict how successful it will be. If the developments in other countries in the region are of any relevance for the case of Myanmar, it is to be expected that indigenous peoples will not disappear anytime soon from the political scene but gain political influence. Of course, this only applies if the country does not return to its pre-2010 authoritarian state, when any political space for articulation of indigenous aspirations was outright refused and armed resistance was the only viable option. Although unlikely, this scenario is not completely unthinkable. There is also much need for a self-critical conversation among indigenous leaders and actors to ensure that indigenous politics does not exacerbate ethnic conflicts but can, at least to a certain extent, overcome internal divisions.

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[273] Another briefing paper on the rise of indigeneity in Myanmar has been published by Morton in 2017.

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ANNEX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Interview	Interview Partner	Gender	Location	Date
First exploratory phase				
1	Local journalist	male	Hakha	April 2015
2	Local church representative	male	Hakha	April 2015
3	Local NGO (agricultural developent)	female	Hakha	April 2015
4	Local pastor/environmental activist	male	Hakha	April 2015
5	Local government (agriculture)	male	Hakha	April 2015
6	Local church representative	male	Mindat	April 2015
7	Chin business man	male	Yangon	May 2015
8	National NGO (working on Chin State)	male	Yangon	May 2015
9	International NGO (working on Chin State)	male/female	Yangon	May 2015
10	National NGO (working on Chin State)	male	Yangon	May 2015
11	Interview with Chin academic	male	Chiang Mai	May 2015
Second phase				
12	National NGO representative	female	Yangon	Oct 2016
13	Local NGO representative (working in Chin State)	male	Yangon	Oct 2016
14	Chin political party representative	male	Yangon	Oct 2016
15	Hakha resident & Chin CSO representative	male	Yangon	Oct 2016
16	Chin CSO representative	male	Yangon	Oct 2016
17	Chin intellectual/CNF representative	male	Yangon	Oct 2016
18	Chin church leader	male	Yangon	Oct 2016
19	Local NGO (working in Chin State disaster relief)	female	Yangon	Oct 2016
20	National NGO representative (land rights)	female	Yangon	Oct 2016
21	National NGO representative (working on Chin State)	male	Yangon	Oct 2016
22	National CSO representative	male	Yangon	Oct 2016
23	Chin political party	female	Yangon	Oct 2016
24	Chin CSO representative	male	Yangon	Nov 2016
25	Chin CSO representative	male	Kalay	Nov 2016
26	Chin land rights activist	male	Mwetaung	Nov 2016

27	Local villagers	male	Mwetaung	Nov 2016
28	Local NGO (land rights)	female	Kalay	Nov 2016
29	Chin CSO representative	male/female	Kalay	Nov 2016
30	Former member of local parliament	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
31	Chin CSO representative	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
32	Chin CSO representative	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
33	CNF Liaison officer	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
34	International NGO (working on Chin State)	female	Hakha	Nov 2016
35	Local NGO (agricultural developent)	female	Hakha	Nov 2016
36	Local NGO (agricultural developent)	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
37	Local NGO (agricultural developent)	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
38	National NGO (working on Chin State)	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
39	Local UN representative	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
40	International NGO (working on Chin State)	female	Hakha	Nov 2016
41	Local NGO (environment)	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
42	Hakha resident & Chin CSO representative	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
43	Local NGO (agricultural developent)	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
44	Chin CSO representative	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
45	Chin pastor/CSO representative	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
46	Local farmer	male	Hakha tsp.	Nov 2016
47	Local farmer	male	Hakha tsp.	Nov 2016
48	Chin human rights activist	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
49	Member of Chin government	male	Hakha	Nov 2016
50	Local famers	male	Thantlang tsp.	Dec 2016
51	International NGO (working on land rights)	male	Yangon	Dec 2016
third phase				
52	Chin CSO representative	male	Kalay	Nov 2017
53	Chin land rights activist	male	Kalay	Nov 2017
54	Chin legal network	male	Kalay	Nov 2017
55	Chin CSO network	male/female	Kalay	Nov 2017
56	Chin pastor/CSO representative	male	Falam	Dec 2017

57	Chin pastor	male	Falam	Dec 2017
58	International NGO (working on Chin State)	female	Hakha	Dec 2017
59	Chin CSO representative	male	Hakha	Dec 2017
60	Chin women's rights activist	female	Hakha	Dec 2017
61	Former repesentative of company in extractives sector	male	Yangon	Dec 2017
62	Representative of national NGO (environment)	male	Yangon	Dec 2017
63	Chin CSO representative	male	Yangon	Dec 2017
64	International NGO (land rights)	male	Yangon	Dec 2017
65	Chin historian, activist	male	online	Dec 2018

ANNEX 2: ABSTRACT

Myanmar's border regions have experienced fundamental changes over the past few decades, due to military-led reforms following the crisis of 1988. The transition from a nominally socialist centralized economy to a market-driven economy has again intensified since the general elections in 2010 and the presidency of Thein Sein (2011-2016) who introduced far-reaching economic and political reforms. This study examined the changing center-periphery relations and contemporary processes of incorporation of Myanmar's periphery in the context of the so-called political and economic "transition" or "metamorphosis". While the Thai-Myanmar border or China-Myanmar border have been subject to academic research, the India-Myanmar border – including Chin State – has been largely neglected. For this reason, Chin State was selected as case study area. A multi-sited field research was conducted over several months from 2015-2017 in Chin State, Sagaing Region and Yangon, focusing on conflicts over land and natural resources and local responses. The qualitative research adopted the theoretical framework of the *frontier*, emerging from the field of border studies, to analyze processes of incorporation and negotiation in peripheral upland areas. Thereby the study draws in particular on the theoretical contribution of Cottyn (2017) who proposed three analytical categories for the analysis of frontiers: a historical process (*time*), the production of capitalist *space*, and process of contestation and negotiation (*agency*). These categories informed the overall structure of this study. It argues that Chin State can be considered a post-colonial frontier region of Myanmar. The process of frontier-making in this region was a long historical process that can be traced back at least to the end of the 19th century when the Chin Hills became part of the British Empire. The latest phase of incorporation into a 'state-in-the-making' and the (inter)national market began in the early 1990s with the beginning of the "Burmese way to Capitalism". The production of modern frontiers entails primarily the production of capitalist spaces and transformation of spatial relations. It is argued, that Chin State is also experiencing land enclosures and dispossession, although to a lesser extent than other ethnic states (such as Kachin State). In response, local actors increasingly draw on indigenous peoples rights frameworks, insisting on the recognition of customary land tenure and autonomy concerning the governance of land and resources. This study argues that the recent emergence of indigenous identity constructions is an example of *frontier agency*. It is an attempt to proactively *negotiate* and shape the contested *process of incorporation* and the center-periphery relation during times of transition.

Zusammenfassung

Die Grenzregionen Myanmars haben in den letzten Jahrzehnten, aufgrund der vom Militär eingeführten Reformen nach der Krise von 1988, grundlegende Veränderungen erfahren. Der Übergang von einer nominal sozialistischen Zentralwirtschaft zu einer marktorientierten Wirtschaft hat sich seit den Wahlen von 2010 und der Präsidentschaft von Thein Sein (2011-2016), der weitreichende Reformen umsetzte, erneut intensiviert. Diese Studie untersuchte die sich verändernden Beziehungen zwischen Zentrum und Peripherie und die gegenwärtigen Prozesse der Eingliederung von Myanmars Peripherie vor dem Hintergrund der sogenannten politischen und wirtschaftlichen „Transition" oder „Metamorphose". Während die Grenzgebiete zwischen Thailand und Myanmar oder zwischen China und Myanmar bereits Gegenstand von Forschungsarbeiten waren, wurde die Grenze zwischen Indien und Myanmar – einschließlich Chin Staat – weitgehend vernachlässigt. Aus diesem Grund wurde der Chin-Staat als Gebiet für diese Fallstudie ausgewählt. Von 2015 bis 2017 wurden über mehrer Monate im Chin Staat, der Sagaing Region und Yangon Feldforschung an verschiedenen Orten durchgeführt, die sich auf Konflikte um Land und natürliche Ressourcen sowie lokale Reaktionen darauf konzentrierte. Als theoretischer Rahmen für die qualitative Forschung diente die *Frontier*-Theorie aus der Disziplin der *border studies* zur Analyse von Eingliederungs- und Verhandlungsprozessen in peripheren Hochlandgebieten. Dabei stützt sich die Studie vor allem auf den theoretischen Beitrag von Cottyn (2017), die drei analytische Kategorien für die Analyse von frontiers empfiehlt: den historischen Prozess (*Zeit*), die Produktion von kapitalistischem *Raum*, und einen Prozess der Auseinandersetzung und Aushandlung (*Agency*). Diese Kategorien schlagen sich auch in der Gesamtstruktur dieser Studie nieder. Es wird argumentiert, dass der Chin Staat als eine post-koloniale Frontier-Region von Myanmar angesehen werden kann. Dieser Prozess hat eine lange Geschichte und geht historisch mindestens auf das Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts zurück, als die Chin Berge Teil des britischen Empire wurden. Die jüngste Phase der Eingliederung in ein sich formierendes Staatsgebilde und einen (inter)nationalen Markt begann Anfang der neunziger Jahre mit dem Beginn des „birmanischen Weges zum Kapitalismus". Die Produktion moderner Frontiers beinhaltet in erster Linie die Produktion kapitalistischer Räume und die Transformation räumlicher Beziehungen. Es wird argumentiert, dass auch im Chin Staat, Einhegung von Land und Enteignungen stattfinden, wenn auch in geringerem Maße als in anderen ethnische Teil-Staaten (wie der Kachin Staat). Als Reaktion darauf beziehen sich die lokalen Akteure zunehmend auf die internationalen Rechte der indigenen Völker und bestehen auf der Anerkennung des gewohnheitsrechtlichen Landbesitzes und der

Autonomie in Bezug auf die Verwaltung von Land und Ressourcen. Diese Studie argumentiert, dass das jüngste Auftauchen indigener Identitätskonstruktionen ein Beispiel für *frontier agency* ist. Es ist ein Versuch, den umstrittenen Prozess der Eingliederung und das Verhältnis zwischen Zentrum und Peripherie in Zeiten des Übergangs proaktiv zu *verhandeln* und zu gestalten.