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The People That Dwell on the Heights: The Pantaron Highlands of Southern Mindanao from the Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries

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This study reconstructs life in the southern Mindanao highlands from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century from historical accounts and contemporary ethnographic observations. It explores the evolving relationships among highland groups, referred to as "atas," "ata-as," or "ataas," and other communities in the region. Such terms, later recognized officially as "Ata," were used by non-highlanders to denote highland communities based on their geographical location, while they self-identified according to upland river configurations.

This study reveals that various named groups inhabited a three-tier highland/inland-to-lowland/coastal axis, engaging in both cooperative and adversarial interactions, such as trading and slave-raiding. By the time Spanish authorities established the Davao pueblo, the highlands were already a dynamic, inhabited space, independent of colonial influence. The Pantaron highlands emerged because of long-term, cumulative decisions by these communities, reflecting a complex history that predates colonial dynamics. The findings challenge colonial-centric narratives and emphasize highlander agency in shaping their social and geographical landscape.

Keywords: highlands, colonialism, slavery, Ata, Pantaron Manobo, Davao (Mindanao), indigenous peoples, ethnohistory

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Introduction

"We have always been in the Pantaron," is the oft-repeated answer of Manobo elders to questions about the old days. As far as they can remember, they, their parents, their parents' parents, and so forth have lived on the mountain range. Prior to the implementation of formalized education, younger generations gained historical knowledge through epics and stories of heroes venturing across these highlands. Although the Manobo also have origin stories, or accounts of the creation of the world, these highland-focused narratives more intensely capture their excitement and imagination; everyday conversations are peppered with references to characters and places from them. During our year-long ethnographic fieldwork (from 2018 to 2019) with Manobo seeking shelter at the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) Haran evacuation center in Davao City, they expressed the desire to return to their highland homes daily.

Home, and the ancestral domain, of our Manobo collaborators is the southern Pantaron Mountain Range in southern Mindanao, Philippines. Their communities are oriented toward the headwaters of the Talomo and Simong rivers (tributaries of the Libuganon River in Talaingod town, Davao del Norte Province), the upstream Kapalong and Libuganon rivers, and the Salug River (the upstream portion of what is called Davao River downstream, in the Paquibato area). Both the Libuganon and Davao rivers flow toward and empty into the Davao Gulf. While today "Ata-Manobo" is the official, state-recognized ethnonym of indigenous peoples in these upland areas, because they self-identify as Manobo from the Pantaron Range, we use "Pantaron Manobo" to refer to them instead.[1)]

This paper presents a historical reconstruction of the formation of the highland communities to which our collaborators belong. Like other Austronesian language-speaking groups in Maritime Southeast Asia and beyond, their distant ancestors must have first arrived, and lived, in coastal areas (Solheim *et al.* 1979). Their lexicon reflects this past: Manobo epics refer to a *balangoy*, certainly related to the central Philippine *balangay* described as a large, sea-going, edge-pegged boat (Scott 1994). But while the term and its broad meaning have been retained, elders today cannot fully describe the *balangoy*, saying only that it is "something that you can ride."

Thus, our study explores the historical cogency of our elderly interlocutors' claim that their people have always been in the Pantaron highlands. What has been the status of the highlands as both a dwelling place and identity marker throughout history? How did the different groups of people who lived in the southern Pantaron and contiguous Davao areas construe one another? What relationships did they have,

and what transformations—if any—did these undergo? These questions direct us to a central query that has yet to be comprehensively investigated by studies on southern Mindanao: is highland dwelling across the Pantaron Range a reaction to colonization in the Davao region, or does it predate colonial presence in the area?[2)]

Challenges and Sources

Previous attempts to write a history of the southern Mindanao highlands are limited. Gloria and Magpayo (1997) and Bajo (2004) simply list the occurrences of "Ata," "Atas," and other related terms in the historical record, barely interrogating the category and its usages through time. Industan's (1993) unpublished dissertation makes some progress in this regard, but his unpacking of "Ata" is largely confined to his study's ethnographic present. Tiu's work (2005, 48–52) explicitly problematizes the origins of "Ata," but is bogged down by outdated approaches that use racialized, phenotypic impressions and blood quantum descriptors (103, 111).

A significant weakness of simply listing "Ata," "Atas," and other related terms in the historical record is that some of these communities do not fully embrace the term "Ata" as self-referential (see Bajo 2004, 26 and Masinaring 2014, 1–2 for similar observations). Such listing also overlooks the meaning of "Ata" and how its usage has changed through time. Indeed, the term itself has varied: during the nineteenth century, different spellings ("atas," "ata-as" or "ataas") were used, while usage as formal appellation (such as "the Atas" or "the Ata") only began in the more ethnographically inclined literature of the early twentieth century.

The label of "Ata" (and other associated terms)[3)] is therefore not the narrow object of this study, but it is carefully analyzed to track the historicization of the people to whom it has been applied, to better understand their dynamics with differently named groups, and to forward insights about possible implications to present-day cultural and identity distinctions.

We also examine the place names associated with the Pantaron Manobo, such as the once-pueblo and now-city of Davao and the names of the rivers that flow from the uplands to the coast. This is important because 1) place names are directly related to the status and character of the highlands as a lived space, and 2) these names (and the geographical areas to which they refer) are more consistent through time.

This study draws from the same sources utilized by Industan (1993), Gloria and Magpayo (1997), Bajo (2004), and Tiu (2005). It is a small pool due to the relatively late establishment of a secure colonial foothold in southern Mindanao compared to other areas in the Philippines. The Davao area was not established as a pueblo with a consistent Spanish presence until after 1848, when Jose Cruz de Oyanguren's coloniz-

ing expedition defeated the Moro chieftain Datu Bago, who controlled the mouth of the Davao River.[4] This was more than two hundred years after most of the country—including north and northeastern Mindanao—had already been brought under colonial rule. Thus, while the mid-1800s onwards would be considered "late colonial" for the rest of the country, the integration of this part of Mindanao into the colonial order had only just begun. Therefore, sustained observations and systematic documentation in the Davao area were available only for the last 170 years or so.

The earliest body of work that can productively be used for historical reconstruction is the collected letters of the Jesuit order (Lynch 1956), first published from 1877 to 1895 as the *Cartas de los Padres de la Compania de Jesus de la Mision de Filipinas*. The *Cartas* were later translated by Arcilla (1998) into the six-volume *Jesuit Missionary Letters from Mindanao*; Volume 3 on Davao has been maximized for this study.[5]

Establishing Davao as a Spanish settlement allowed European explorers to launch scientific expeditions from the pueblo; mountain ranges like the Pantaron and the country's highest peak, Mt. Apo, attracted such endeavors (Bernad 2004). The published reports of the expeditions of French naturalist Joseph Montano and Davao governor Joaquin Rajal y Larre are notable. The transition from Spanish to American colonial rule at the turn of the twentieth century spurred another wave of Western exploration in the Davao Gulf area by writers with some degree of formal training in anthropology, namely, Fay-Cooper Cole, Laura Watson Benedict, and John Garvan.

The *Reports of the Philippine Commission*, or RPCs (published from 1900 to 1916), are a useful corpus with their preoccupation with cataloguing and classifying people, flora and fauna, and natural resources. While this reflected the interests of a newly reigning colonial authority, it also gives us a baseline from which to compare how these classified entities changed through time as the US consolidated its control over the Philippines. The RPCs also detail policies on "non-Christian tribes," providing a view of the changing approaches of colonial management and their impacts on local groups.

Although these sources are associated with colonial bureaucracy and objectives, they can nevertheless be used with circumspection. William Henry Scott (1978, 174) likened such usage to looking through "cracks in the parchment curtain" to catch "fleeting glimpses of Filipinos and their reactions to [colonial] dominion." With this approach, using such sources is not uncritically accepting what they convey. Rather, they are reevaluated using what Scott (1978, 182) calls "the principle of 'incidental intelligence,'" recognizing that "unintentional and merely incidental" references to Filipinos "may be of greater historical revelation than what the authors wanted to say" (174, 181). In other words, tangential but important details may be productively

gleaned from these sources for historical reconstruction.

Historical interpretation of these "fleeting glimpses" may be enriched in two additional ways. First is to pay attention not just to explicit instances wherein the highlanders are clearly referenced, but also to when they disappear. Absence can provide clues to actions, motivations, and overall conditions. Second is to reexamine the sources in light of insights derived from ethnographic collaborations with these highland communities. These collaborations include genealogical reconstruction and documentation of oral and ritual traditions, as well as conversations about highland space, their life in it, and how highlanders imagine their communities at varying scales. This is not just to remedy the colonial "taint" of historical (written) sources, but also to generate readings of highland historical experiences that are more resonant with Pantaron realities and our interlocutors' understandings of their durable heritage. First, though, we review what has been recorded about the southern Mindanao highlands.

1 A Historical Reconstruction of the Highlands

1.1 *"A Race of Infidels": The Highlands in the Nineteenth Century*

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, inhabitants of the Davao region highlands were referred to as "de los atas," "grupo de atas," "los ata-as," and "grupo de ataas," terms used by Visayan lowlanders to mean "those who live on the heights"[6] (Rajal 1891, 123). According to Montano (1885, 170), "atas" and "ataas" were variations of the adjective *dessus*, or "above" in Malay and other Mindanao languages. Thus, in the Visayan usage at least, the term may have been first used as a simple description of where these groups resided and not an ethnonym.

The earliest written mention of Atas was in 1877 in a letter by the Jesuit Quirico Moré, who wrote "The tributary Libaganun [now the Libuganon], sufficiently deep, is inhabited, according to the Mandaya chief with whom I spoke, by 900 Mandayas, more than 4,000 Atas and as many Manguangas" (Arcilla 1998, 9). Four years later in 1881, Mateo Gisbert reported that "The Atas are plentiful along the tributaries of Tuganay [river]" and "the Mandaya settlement by Tuganay should serve as the door through which to extend the mission to the Atas" (Arcilla 1998, 43, 44).

These early references to Atas mark their close association with rivers. Both rivers mentioned here flow parallel to each other in what is now Tagum City (at that time a *visita* of Davao pueblo under the Jesuits), and empty into the Davao Gulf. The headwaters of both are in the Pantaron and, as Moré and Gisbert note, Atas and

Mandaya communities live along them. It appears that some Mandaya villages were close enough to the lowlands that Gisbert was optimistic that they could mediate access to Atas areas farther upriver.

In an 1885 letter, the Jesuit Quirico Moré described what the Davao region was like at the time of Spanish conquest in 1848: "When Oyangúren came, the Moros . . . dominated the Mandayas, and collected tribute from all of them even from those [upriver] of Caraga, and were engaged in continual war with the Bilanes, Manobos and Atas"[7] (Moré [1885] 1906, 197). This letter indicates the variety of distinct "tribes" present in and around Davao pueblo, and notes that several of them had antagonistic relations with the so-called Moro.

The expeditions of Joseph Montano and Joaquin Rajal y Larre in the 1880s yield more substantial information about the Atas. Their accounts are important because they document what the two men personally witnessed and observed. Thus, although they are still the products of the colonial milieu, helpful details for historical reconstruction can still be gleaned from them. For example, upon arriving at Davao pueblo in April 1880, Montano (1886, 202–203) classified the population he encountered into 1) "Bisaya Indians" (or Christian converts), 2) "Malay or Mohammedan Moros," 3) "Chinese," and 4) "*infieles*," including "all the natives, of diverse races . . . occupying the interior of the island." He identifies one group of *infieles* as the Atas, whom he describes this way:

> The Bisayas designate at the same time, under the name of Atas, the Negritos whom I have met here only as slaves, and other tribes who live to the north-west of the Apo. These last belong to a high type; they have a fairly advanced social state; they are the only ones who do not fear to measure themselves with the Moros, to whom they have committed a hereditary hatred; their daring is often successful. (Montano 1886, 221)

In an earlier report, he gives a similar definition of Atas:

> This name, which in the Philippines designates populations of such diverse races, is given, in southern Mindanao, to the Negritos who exist (or existed only a short time ago) in the interior, in the northwest of the gulf of Davao, and to some tribes of Indonesian race which inhabit the slope of the Apo volcano, in the same direction.
>
> The Indonesian Atas present a superior type, especially the chiefs; these have aquiline noses, profuse beards, and tall stature.
>
> These Atas tribes enjoy a well-deserved reputation for bravery; they are the only ones who are not afraid to pit themselves against the Moros, although they do not have more firearms than

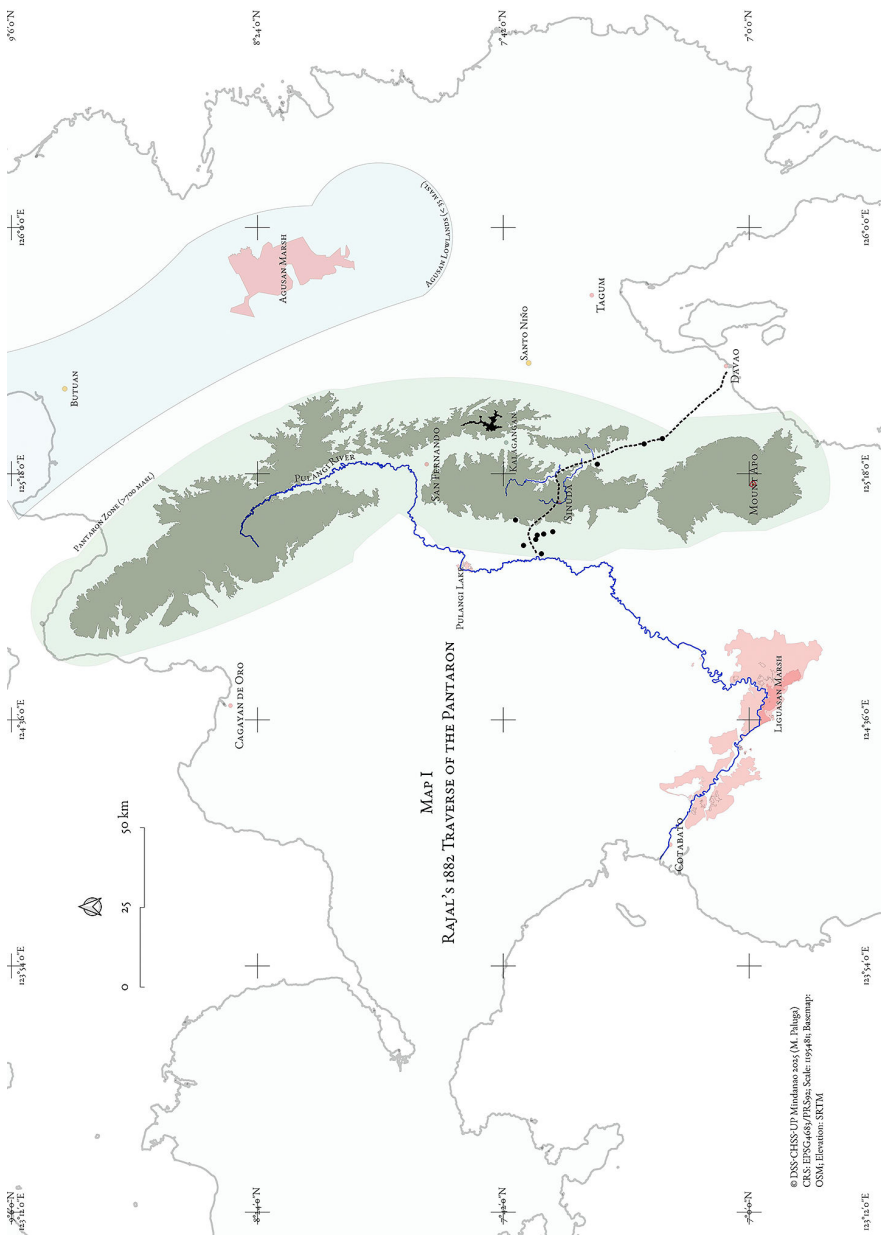
the others, and success often crowned their value. (Montano 1885, 77)

From these excerpts we learn that first, Atas was a term that Christianized Visayans used; this accords with our interlocutors' assertion that it is not self-referential. Second, Atas was not applied to a single "race," which, at that time, was often used to mean a physically distinguishable and mutually exclusive homogenous group. According to Montano, Atas applied to what he saw as both physically and socially distinct "Negritos" and "Indonesians," the latter being "a superior type" with an "advanced social state" (presumably relative to the former "Negritos"). This "superiority" was marked by their courage to fight their traditional enemies, the Moros. Although Montano provides more information about the Atas than had been previously available, he does not elaborate the sources of this information. It is possible he learned from Christianized Visayans who explicitly used the term "Atas," or from Bagobo and Mandaya people, with whom he interacted more.

Rajal, on the other hand, was able to visit Atas villages. Intent on finding a route connecting Davao pueblo to Misamis District in northern Mindanao, Rajal traversed the highlands once in mid-1881 and again in early 1882. In his *Exploración del Territorio de Davao (Filipinas)* (published in 1891), he narrates the first voyage in detail (including interactions with upland peoples) and provides a day-to-day itinerary of the second trip such that his passage can be plotted on a map (Map 1).

Rajal's account is important for two reasons. First, as far as we know, his observations of the highland interior are the first to be published. This does not mean, however, that the interior was unknown. Indeed, Rajal was encouraged to find this northward route precisely because he was told that local people traversed it. His main guide was the son of a Visayan named Francisco Belmonte, who had, decades before, told Oyanguren that the crossing was possible. Belmonte described how "he had reached the nearby mountains inhabited by the so-called Atas" by hopping "from *ranchería* to *ranchería*, crossing the island by one of its greatest diameters . . ." (Rajal 1891, 117). Rajal's account details various groups interacting and consciously living in a multi-cultural space; his guides were well-versed in the locations of named villages and the names of some of their leaders. In this "*la cordillera central*," Rajal (1891, 10, 132, 142) notes that "it always turned out that internal communication could take place" (118).

The expedition's first sign of Atas was a killing of a young girl belonging to the Giangan tribe. The dead girl's father told Rajal that the killing had just been committed by *manga-yaoa*[8] warriors, who launched sneak attacks either to capture slaves or to exact revenge against perpetrators of slave raids.[9] *Manga-yaoa* killings were said



Map 1 Rajal's 1882 Traverse of the Pantaron Mountain Range with Elevations (Black circles mark current villages along Rajal's party's path.)

to be done by all the "infidel" tribes (including the Giangan); it was alleged that this particular killing was committed by two Atas men who subsequently escaped inland. Rajal, diverting his route to pursue the killers, reaches what he records as two Atas villages, resulting in a very early description by a Westerner of such settlements.

The first village was "at the foot of the gigantic mountains that are close to the source of the Taumo [Talomo[10)]] river" (Rajal 1891, 122). On top of a hill was what he describes as a *choza-palacio*, or "palace-hut":

> The palace-hut was located in the center of an extensive *caiñguin* [swidden field] planted with rice and corn. In its vicinity, under a small shed, there were two grotesque wooden figures, crudely carved and dressed in rags, representing a man and a woman; they were the tutelary gods of that family, and they were also the first material representation of the divinity that was offered to our sight in those regions. At their feet were plates containing fruits and rice, offerings of piety dedicated to them with the first of the fruits that they daily collected for their sustenance. We wanted to inquire about their origin, their name, and the beneficial influence attributed to them, and from their imperfect explanations we deduced the age of their cult, which according to them represented a marriage from heaven called Diuata, to whom they attributed all happy or unfortunate events. (Rajal 1891, 123–124)

Two days later, Rajal and his party arrive at the second Atas village, Sua-uan, where the suspects supposedly lived. They find it abandoned and are told that the inhabitants likely fled. They stay in "a house located on the top of a bare mountain, from where a picturesque panorama was offered," which Rajal describes like this:

> A multitude of more or less high and conical mountains, whose ensemble resembled a tray full of sorbets, surrounded us, making out others of greater height in the distance. On its cusps and on some slopes, some groups of houses were scattered, and in the same way some clearings in the forest, which were just as many fields for planting. (Rajal 1891, 131)

The second significance of Rajal's account is how it makes both *moving upward* into higher elevations and *moving through* the lived space of the highlands phenomenologically palpable. The route he took was made possible by countless other previous journeys by locals, and it is a route that remains relevant today. For example, the route Rajal took from Tamugan to Sinuda via the Davao River is one that Pantaron Manobo are still very familiar with; the modern Bukidnon-Davao highway also approximates this route. In Rajal's time, this route was dotted with villages identified as settlements of "Giangas," "Manguangas," and Atas. At the farthest point up/inland

reached by the 1882 expedition, where the Sita River (a Davao River tributary) and the Pulangi River flow closest to each other, Rajal (1891, 141) notes no less than five Atas villages in proximity to each other: Mantavi, Matunda, Dal-laon, Sebugay, and Linabo (Map 2). Rajal was able to index on to the party's (colonial) mapping the individual significance of, and links between, the Pulangi and Davao rivers (from which Maguindanao and Davao, respectively, are easily accessible)—which is palpable only at the high elevations of the Pantaron.

Learning from Rajal's expeditions, by May 1884 Mateo Gisbert confidently reported to the Mission Superior a comprehensive listing of Davao non-Christian groups for conversion and resettlement, with Atas occupying the vast upland territory of southern and central Mindanao: "With the expedition dispatched from Davao to Misamis, Mr. Rajal proved an inland route can be easily opened to facilitate the relocation of unbaptized tribes. Even if only the Atas are converted, the government will have won a new province in Mindanao" (Arcilla 1998, 87).

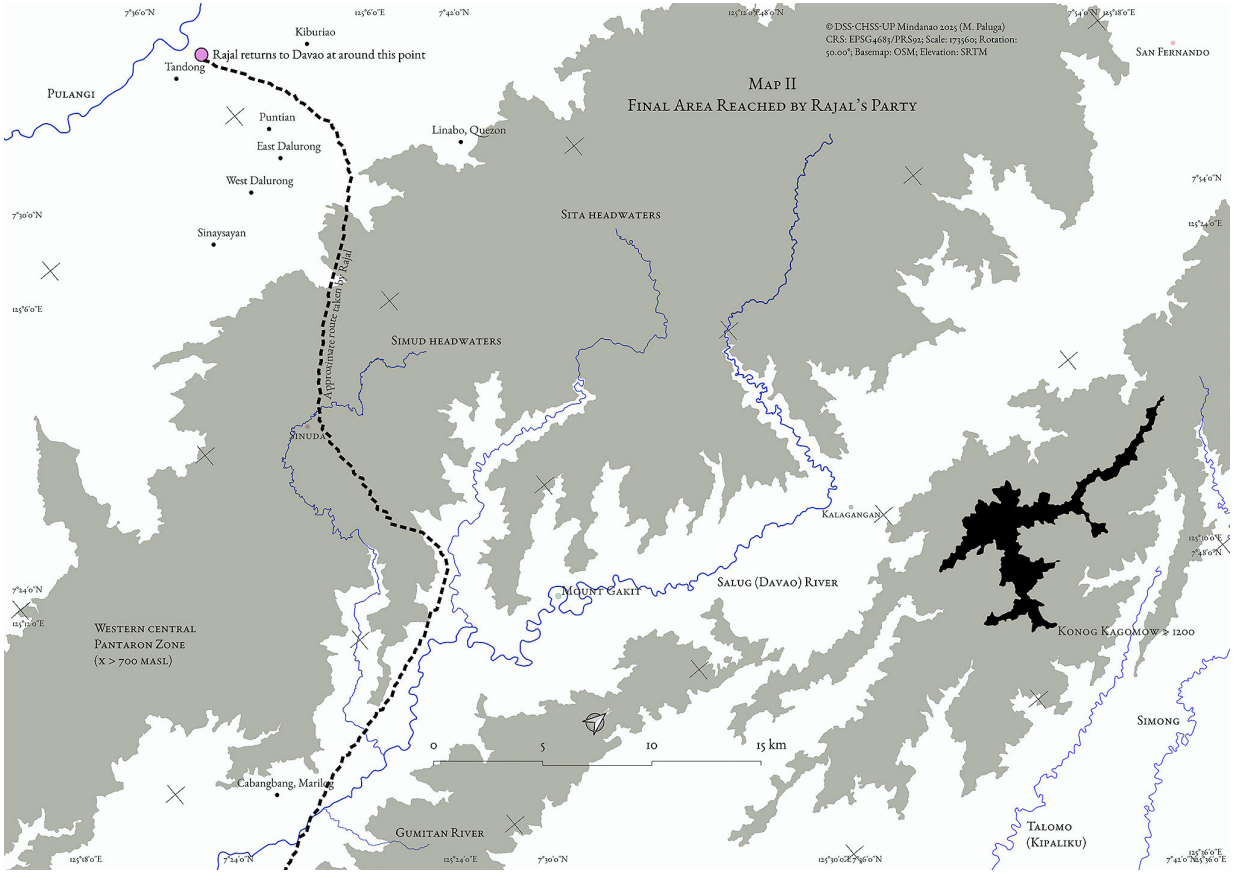
However, two years later, missionary work remained slow. In February 1886, Gisbert ([1886] 1906, 242–243) repeats that "The Atás are another race of wild and savage heathens who live in the interior . . . It is the least known race, but it is believed with foundation, to be the most numerous, aggregating not less than twenty-five thousand souls." Nevertheless, by this time Gisbert had been to visit a village himself:

> Only the *rancheria* of Dato Lasiá, which is the nearest, has been visited as yet. They speak their own tongue. I have baptized a few Atás, by making myself understood in Visayan or Bagobo. On that day that the Atás hear a father missionary speak their language, I have no doubt their conversion. (Gisbert [1886] 1906, 242–243)

Gisbert's reference to "their own tongue" perhaps indicates distinct groupings better than any impressionistic criteria. He also noted that while the Atas language is distinct from Visayan and Bagobo, the Atas could understand both. Montano's *Rapport* (1885) provides a word list that includes some Atas terms, as distinguished from Malay, Bisaya, Bagobo, and five other Mindanao languages.

How well the persons being baptized understood the rite's meaning however, is an entirely different question. Neither Dato Lasiá nor his *rancheria* are mentioned again in the Davao *Cartas*. Two years later in 1888, Gisbert reports that the people were as "wild" as ever:

> Unbaptized Atas, Bagobos, Bilaans, Giangas, Mandayas, Manobos, and Tagakaolos with their numerous progeny fill the entire district [of Davao] and have known hardly any other civilization



Map 2 Final Area Reached by Rajal's Party, between the Pulangi and Sita Rivers, Where Five Atas Villages (including Linabo) Were Recorded (Other current villages also indicated.)

> than that of the Chinese and the other retailers who have gone to their ranches and generally are usually more immoral and godless than the mountaineers themselves. (Arcilla 1998, 173)

1.2 *"Steeped in Slavery": The Impacts of Slave-raiding*

An oft-repeated proof that Mindanao's inhabitants were "wild" was the practice of slavery and its associated cycle of violence. Specific highland groups, including Atas, were targeted by Mandaya raiders who, occupying the intermediate ground between highland and lowland elevations, were able to raid the upland interiors and pass their captives to Moro slave traders on the coast. These captives were then sold to people living in Davao, including Christian Visayans and Chinese tradespeople (Montano 1886, 216 and Bernad 2004, 238–239). The flow of slaves was always from highland to lowland, not the other way around.

In an 1892 letter, the Jesuit Saturnino Urios describes a slavery supply-chain from the highlands and to the lowlands:

> What trouble gathering these Mandayas is! They come armed to the teeth, fearful of the Atas with whom they are in constant warfare.
>
> [But] the Mandayas have no reason to complain about the harm done by the Atas. These, as their name signifies, are upland people, gentle, picking up arms only to defend themselves and avenge the injuries caused them by the Mandayas. The latter are quite shrewd. Through the years, they have had much contact with Moros and old Christians. They are the ones who, instigated by the Moros, supply slaves to whoever asks for them. The system is, those from Davao order slaves from the Moros; who egg the Mandayas on to procure them. This they do by killing and kidnapping the Atas. This is the cause of the state of chronic warfare between the two groups. The former provoke the latter, who naturally must avenge the wrongs unjustly done them. They will not allow themselves to be killed with impunity, for one protects one's own life.
>
> Fr. Superior, this region of Davao is so steeped in slavery, one's heart breaks over the manner by which the unbaptized natives are treated . . . The supply line starts from the unbaptized Tagakaolos, Atas, Mangulangas of Salug and Libaganon; the Manobos of the Kulaman coast and the opposite shore of the gulf until Pundagitan; and the Bilaans dwelling on the peaks of the southwestern range down to Glan. (Arcilla 1998, 283–285)

According to the *Cartas*, slavery had been pervasive for at least as long as Spanish presence in the Davao area (recall Moré's description of Moro dominance at the time of Oyanguren's arrival in 1848). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the heightened vigilance of Spanish forces against the raiding of Christianized communities in Luzon and the Visayas resulted in the intensification of slave-sourcing from the

interior of Mindanao (Ileto 2007, 38–42), transforming nearby Sarangani Bay into a major slave market (Hayase 2007, 140). This period also coincided with the latter stage of Iranun and Samal Balangingi dominance in slaving operations (Warren 1981; 2003). In Davao pueblo itself there was a brisk demand for slaves. As Urios complained, "Poor or rich, old and new Christians from Davao and the other settlements own slaves purchased or as payment for the marriage of others. One finds slaves in the farms, in the houses, everywhere" (Arcilla 1998, 284).

The "other settlements" Urios writes about were of so-called pagan tribes, who also procured slaves for human sacrifice. Montano (1886, 216, italics in original) similarly observed:

> A few rare settlers, Indian Bisayas . . . it is sad to report, have taken the manners [of the *infieles*]; like them they have slaves and seem very surprised at our observations on this subject. "But señor," said one of them, "all our neighbors have slaves; if I did not have one, I would no longer be respected, and soon I would be captured myself, exchanged for some *platos* [Chinese porcelain] and taken to all the devils beyond the [Mount] Apo."

The "devils beyond Apo" here refer to the same "pagan" tribes in the vicinity of Mount Apo, who ritually killed enslaved people. Slaves could therefore also be acquired at various points along the highland-to-lowland supply chain. In these raiding dynamics, membership in named groups designated who were the main slave raiders and who were most vulnerable to these raids, and where they were located. Mandaya raiders did not capture and enslave fellow Mandaya, for example. Also, as far as can be inferred, retaliatory attacks by Atas were only directed towards non-Atas. Slave-raiding may thus have contributed both to the consolidation of previously existing groupings into named entities, and to how external observers (like missionaries) perceived them. For example, the highland Atas were considered pitiful victims, but at the same time, warlike and ready to defend themselves.

Violent incidents attributed to slave raiding were documented throughout the 1880s up to the 1890s. But in this later decade, Jesuit missionaries and tribal representatives steadily held more joint meetings wherein they discussed protection from attacks and resettlement (including the 1892 meeting that Urios writes about). The Jesuits seized this opportunity. In November of 1895, they reported the first baptisms of people identified as Atas, in the lowland settlements of Astorga and Malalag, trumpeting it as a breakthrough. Father Jaime Estrada wrote that "In God's mercy, the fruit went beyond expectations. There were about 500 baptisms of Tagakaolos, Kalagans, and a majority of Bagobos, not excluding a number of Atas, till now the most marginal-

ized and closed race" (Arcilla 1998, 475).

Interestingly, the highlanders had been deemed uncontactable until March of that same year, when Urios wrote:

> The upper slopes of the Mount Apo mountain range and the other side are full of pagans who, since they live there, are called "Atas." Wild and recalcitrant in the face of civilization, they prefer being deprived of the conveniences and benefits of trade and contact with others to leaving their hideouts. (Arcilla 1998, 432)

But the increasing frequency of tribal conferences must have given Urios hope, because he continues: "I say we are closer to them [Atas] than before" (Arcilla 1998, 432). Subsequent events seemed to prove Urios correct, because soon after the baptisms in Astorga and Malalag, the Jesuits report—for the first time—the establishment of a settlement that included people identified as Atas. In January 1896, Urios writes: "A new resettlement of Atas and Giangas is forming above Belen [along the Davao River]" (Arcilla 1998, 489). The following month, more people identified as Atas were baptized and re-settled. In May, Father Juan Llopart wrote that "a commission of [Atas]" in Mati, east of Davao, were "desirous of forming a settlement" (Arcilla 1998, 503).

This movement towards lowland settlements of highland inhabitants opting into the Jesuit offer of protection continued until 1896. But the Philippine Revolution against Spain breaks out in August of that year, and the Jesuits are eventually recalled to Manila in 1899. This halted their work just when their mission seemed to be reaching highlanders, some of whom agreed to resettlement alongside Giangan converts. Recall that the Giangan were vulnerable to Ata attacks (as Rajal documented); a community integrating both may have been considered a positive step towards peace and order by the Jesuits. However, the transition to American colonial rule stopped these developments.

1.3 *"An Entirely Unknown Tribe": From Ethnographic Entity to Outlaws*

After successfully occupying the Philippines, American authorities and scholars produced the Philippine Commission reports (RPCs) and various academic monographs. The former body of work was meant to facilitate colonial rule and was thus more focused on bureaucratic policies, while the latter group of works—though still suffering from the scientific limitations of the time—documented ethnographic observations and addressed anthropological questions about cultural change and colonial impacts. These works heavily referenced publications of the previous century, specifically the

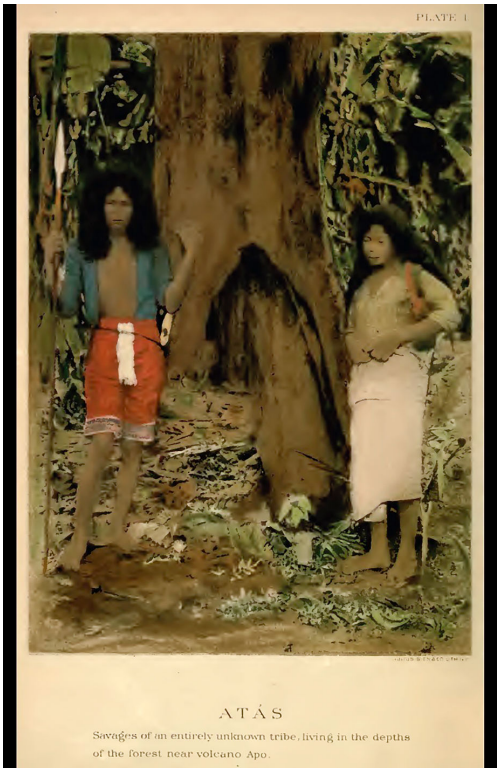


Fig. 1 Frontispiece of Volume III of the 1901 Report of the Philippine Commission describing "Atás" as "Savages of an Entirely Unknown Tribe"

Cartas, Montano, and Rajal, and adopted views deemed useful in naming, describing, and classifying the local inhabitants of the Philippines.

In the case of those living in the Davao highlands, the term "Atas" was retained while "ataas" and "ata-as" were not. In the more classification-focused documentation of American authorities, "Atas" began to shift from a label describing upland habitation to a more formalized ethnonym and tribal classification, as evidenced by Volume III of the RPC from 1901 (see Fig. 1). The latest iteration of the term Atas as a tribal ethnonym (and the photo in Fig. 1) can also be considered emblematic of the perceived diversity of tribal groups in the Philippines, which the American colonial administration was preparing itself to govern. There was renewed interest in Montano's discussions about the "race" of Atas (Philippine Commission 1900, 13–14), and the inability to classify the Atas into a neatly defined "racial category" was touted as raising "one of the most interesting problems in ethnology" (Philippine Commission 1903, 680).

American authorities were preoccupied with neatly defining the population into groups to better manage people through the establishment of Tribal Wards. On paper, the Tribal Wards were supposed to consist of "a single race or a homogenous division thereof" with a government-assigned headman who was a member and recognized leader of that group (Philippine Commission 1907a, 369). However, this did not always work in practice (Hayase 2007, 172–174). A single Ward could include members from different named groups, and the headman may be an American. The Wards were formed primarily to integrate the locals into the American capitalist economy by imposing taxes and turning them into wage laborers on American-run plantations. The colonial government considered wage work and permanent settlement, not maintaining or supporting local customs or leadership formations, essential to civilizing the local population.

The Philippine Commission report on the year 1905 stated that the four wards of "Bagobo," "Giangas," "Mandaya," and "Moro" had been established, with mention of Atas as "unorganized" under the Ward system (Philippine Commission 1906, 347–348). The report did list thirty Ata inhabitants in its population census of Davao pueblo, but without further elaboration.

Although Ata and Tagacaolo were added to the list of established Tribal Wards in 1906 (Philippine Commission 1907a, 369), even the RPCs could not gloss over the policy's poor implementation, acknowledging that most (including the Ata Tribal Ward) were "practically wards only in name" (Philippine Commission 1907a, 384). Just one year later (in 1907), the Ata Tribal Ward disappears from the list of seven Tribal Wards for Davao and the Ata revert to an entity shrouded in mystery, a group whose "exact number" and "exact whereabouts" in the "lofty mountain ranges" is "unknown" (Philippine Commission 1908, 386–387). The Ata seem to be slipping away from the colonial authorities' information-gathering and governing grasp.

From 1908 onwards, there are no more substantive mentions of the group called Ata in the RPCs (which were published until 1916). A factor that could have led to this was a change in American policy towards plantation labor. By 1909, the colonial government had shifted from harnessing local labor from the Tribal Wards to recruiting external laborers from other provinces (particularly Christianized areas). The experiment to "civilize" local tribes via the plantations was largely a failure: as Hayase (1985; 2007) notes, only Bagobo communities were relatively successfully integrated into the plantation economy. The Tribal Ward system officially ended with the establishment of the US Department of Mindanao and Sulu in 1914 (Hayase 2007, 152).

The last two specific mentions of persons identified as Ata in the RPCs are from reports of the Philippine Constabulary (the American-established, anti-insurgency

police force). In 1908, an Ata individual was arrested in a skirmish in "Tugaya" (possibly Tudaya in what is now Davao del Sur Province) and an Ata individual escaped constabulary custody (it is unclear from the report if these were separate incidents) (Philippine Commission 1909, 373). Finally, the last mention of Atas in the RPCs was in 1915, which noted that "a small band of about 20 Atas living on the upper Davao and Lasanga [Lasang] Rivers [has] caused some trouble from time to time" (Philippine Commission 1916, 136).

The term "Atas" and "Ata" in the RPCs thus begins as the marker of an ethnographic entity and a delineated tribal group to be organized into a Tribal Ward, but when this attempt fails and the plantations are up and running, documenting recalcitrant highlanders no longer appears to be worthwhile for the colonial authorities. As the Philippine Commission winds down, the Atas are finally mentioned merely as interior-dwelling, troublesome bands that are more the concern of law enforcement than of benevolent governance.

1.4 *"Wild Tribes": Highlanders in Early Ethnographic Accounts*

Moving into the 1910s, while the Ata highlanders gradually recede from the view of official colonial government documentation, there are indicators of their continued presence and interaction with other local groups, which seem little disturbed by the shifts of the previous decade.

As discussed above, an important phenomenon connecting the lowlands and highlands was slave raiding and revenge killings. Reverberations of this were still apparent during the colonial transition. American anthropologist Laura Benedict's pioneering study of Bagobo society (published in 1916 but based upon fieldwork in 1906) includes a description of a customary dance called *Bulayan* that is supposed "to express fear of the Atas" (Benedict 1916, 86). This is likely a throwback to the revenge raids of the past: recall that Bagobo people had participated in slave-raiding both as raiders and as people who ritually sacrificed enslaved persons. They thus may have been targets of revenge killings in the same way that (as the Jesuits noted) Mandaya and Ata people were embroiled in revenge-driven conflicts.

Being fearful of Atas notwithstanding, when a young man named Uan explained Bagobo deities to Benedict, he said, "Diwata are good manobo who live in the sky. They protect Bagobo, Americans, Kulaman, Tagakaola, Kalagan, Ata—not the Moro; Moro are bad people" (Benedict 1916, 29). Although Benedict does not mention it, the explicit exclusion of Moro people (and perhaps the implicit exclusion of the Mandaya middlemen) as "bad" and not under the protection of the *Diwata*[11] could be additional proof of highlander enmity towards the main instigators of the slave trade, who lived

closer to the coast.

Although Bagobo communities raided for and sacrificed slaves, this did not diminish the shared highland enmity towards the Moro. As mentioned above, slavery may have contributed to the consolidation of named groups in the Davao region according to the raiders and the raided. It should also be noted that the Bagobo term for deity, *Diwata*, is the same as the *Diuata* Rajal noted decades before. While not ironclad, this commonality in invoked spiritual figures also may have been a factor (at this historical point) in facilitating a sense of familiarity among these groups, further distinguishing them from the Islamized Moro.

Benign interactions between Ata and other groups also persisted. For example, Benedict (1916, 265, parentheses in original) notes that an "Ubu (Ata)" tattoo practitioner was active in Bagobo communities. There was also trade. Edward C. Bolton, the American governor of the Davao district from 1903 to 1906, told Fay-Cooper Cole (1913, 163) that he once met a group of people who called themselves "Tugauanum," spoke an "Ata" language, and carried "knives and hemp cloth" that must have come from "the west side of the Davao gulf region," an area traditionally part of the Bagobo domain well-known for abaca (hemp) cloth weaving.

Cole also notes what he perceived were "close alliances" between Ata and other local but non-Ata groups. In particular, he writes: "in the region adjoining the Guianga they [the Ata] have intermarried with that people and have adopted many of their customs as well as dress" (Cole 1913, 162). Recall that just before the abrupt end of their missions, one of the last permanent settlements that the Jesuits established (in 1896) was one of Ata and Giangan along the Davao River. Could the people Cole encountered in the Guianga area (where the Davao River also flows through) be the highlanders who had settled closer to the pueblo to avoid being embroiled in slavery-related violence and had since adopted semi-lowland life? This reflects another possible historical development that has impacted highland-lowland dynamics in the Davao region: the permanent settlement of highlanders to the lowlands.

Settlement at lower elevations seemed to create new cultural cleavages in the Davao region. Dean C. Worcester notes how, among people identified as Agusan Manobo in eastern Mindanao, there were "really wild Manobos," distinct from "Christianized Manobos" whom, he said, "seem a rather supine and spiritless lot" (Philippine Commission 1910, 125). Similar distinctions may remain salient in more recent times; in a 2011 interview with this paper's second author, Datu Guibang Apoga, the well-known Pantaron leader and elder, observed that there were *Manobo no na-Bisaja-on*, or Visayan-like Manobo "who no longer do things the Manobo way." Such observations reveal that the connectedness and mobility of people residing in this region con-

tinue to enable settlement choices and facilitate culture change in ways that echo the patterns of the early twentieth century.

Another case is significant for its possible direct connection to the contemporary communities of our interlocutors. A report from Misamis Province in the 1906 RPC details a request from a group of "Tigwahanos" (that is, people from the Tigwa River) regarding how they were governed:

> These people are tree dwellers, tattooed with the design of a leaf, peaceful if well treated, and will assist rather than hinder any expeditions or explorations. These mountain people some time ago applied for some form of government among themselves, and that they be not subject to the government of Misamis Province. A recommendation was made to that effect, and that they be placed under the rules and laws of the Moro Province and an American stationed among them as a tribal ward chief. I understand, however, that they have been attached to Misamis Province. (Philippine Commission 1907b, 308)

The Tigwa people are included here because the Tigwa River headwaters are in the Pantaron Range. Moreover, a prominent extended family to which many of our long-time collaborators belong recalls ancestors from the Tigwa River who, some generations ago, crossed from the western side of the Pantaron to the east and then moved south, closer to Davao, finally stopping at the headwaters of the Talomo River, where they have stayed since. The timing of this movement, remembered by our interlocutors, generally corresponds to the excerpt above. Therefore, if colonial authorities saw fit to transfer their jurisdiction from Misamis to Moro Province (of which Davao was part), there may have been an associated southward movement by some members of the Tigwa community, although no Tigwa Tribal Ward seems to have ever been formed. What must be noted here is how such a group tried to initiate closer relations with non-local entities but ultimately remained in the highlands.

Highlanders were thus not averse to moving to or accessing the lowland, potentially subjecting themselves to new challenges and influences, and reassessing their options from there—it had happened before with the Jesuit-established settlements of 1896. Cole (1913, 164) confirms this flexibility and adaptability of the Atas: "They have been *free borrowers* from their neighbors in all respects, and hence we find them occupying all the steps from the nomad condition of the pygmy blacks to the highly specialized life of the Guianga" (emphasis added). Either as "nomadic" "pygmy blacks" or as adapters of the "specialized life of the Guianga," the Ata eventually slipped under the radar of colonial monitoring: first, as they drew away and remained in the highlands, and second, as they integrated into life closer to the colonial center.

1.5 *An Early Chronology of the Southern Mindanao Highlands*

A chronology of highlanders (as Atas or other associated names) based upon the available sources is proposed here to summarize the historical data presented above. In the mid-1800s, Western observers such as missionaries were only able to track highlanders to the extent of generally noting names, settlement locations, and population estimates. This begins to change after 1) expeditions produce the first written eyewitness documentation of highland villages and peoples, and 2) slave-raiding-associated violence intensifies and some highlanders accept the Jesuit offer of protection by settling closer to Davao pueblo. At this point, the Atas become more trackable by Western actors.

The abrupt end to the Jesuit mission and the transition of the Philippines to a new colonial authority from 1899 to 1900 resets the information-gathering on the Atas. The Atas again become an "entirely unknown tribe," suggesting a withdrawal from the inroads and overtures of the missions of the past century. The American colonial government tries to institute the Tribal Ward system, which is unsuccessful and is not revisited for the remainder of its rule.

The explicitly anthropological orientation of studies produced during the American colonial period prioritized classifying people to better manage them and were generally remiss in historicization. This had the effect of reifying Atas (and others) as a discrete and homogenous ethnic group, which has left its mark in the academic, civic, and popular imagination until today.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the Atas again slip under the radar of colonial monitoring. In the 1910s, nothing is heard of them (in the written record) beyond some reported run-ins with the law. In the decades that follow and into the post-colonial era, their presence in official accounts remains elusive. In the comprehensive volume by the Human Relations Area Files (Lebar 1975), contributor Aram Yengoyan can only present an entry of about 600 words for the "Ata," barely half of Cole's three-page description published in 1913.

This gap in knowledge persists today, as reflected in the brevity of the information provided by the official website of the Philippine National Commission on Indigenous Peoples on the "Ata," which is short enough to be quoted in full: "The Ata-Manobo of Davao del Norte, aboriginally called Ata, believed that they originated from Paquibato, Davao City. The Ancestral Domain of the Ata-Manobo covers portions of the Municipalities of Kapalong, san [sic] Isidro, Sto. Tomas and Talaingod" (NCIP 2020).

2 Towards a View of Highland Life Beyond Written Documents

The following discussion synthesizes the above gleanings, adding insights from ethnographic collaborations[12] to respond to the limitations of Western historical sources to forward a comprehensive historical look at the southern Mindanao highlands and the Pantaron groups who call it home.

2.1 *Named Groups along a Three-tiered Highland/Inland-Lowland/Coastal Axis*

A variety of named groups existed in the Davao area at the advent of sustained written documentation, including the Mandaya, Bagobo, Giangan, Tagakaolo, and others. Western documenters did not invent these names, they were already in circulation by the time documentation began. While Western sources tended to lump these groups together under broad terms such as "*infieles*," they still could not deny the ethnographic reality of these diverse named groups because the names proved useful in their daily operations and interactions with locals.

While discussing the origins of these names and the groups they represent is beyond this study's scope, some inferences may be made as to what distinguished these groups from each other. One factor was language: Montano's (1885) vocabulary tables present differences in dozens of lexical terms of various Mindanao groups (named as "Atas," "Bilaan," "Bagobo," "Manobo," "Samal," and "Tagakaolo").

Another factor was settlement patterns. The named groups were associated with corresponding named villages that locals could readily identify (as Rajal observed). These settlements, in turn, were distributed along a highland/inland-to-lowland/coastal axis. There were roughly three tiers along this axis, as reflected in early expeditions that mapped movement from lowland/coastal towards highland/inland areas. Davao pueblo, dominated by Christianized Visayan-language speakers, was at the lowest (coastal) elevation. Along the coast but outside Davao pueblo there were also Moro settlements. Meanwhile, groups referred to as Mandaya, Bagobo, Giangan settled a bit further inland and at middle elevations.

Those living at the highest elevations were designated as "Atas," and this settlement pattern was consistently used to distinguish them from other peoples in the area. American anthropologist John Garvan succinctly summed up the description, originally from Montano, that the "Atás" were:

> . . . a tribe of a superior type, of advanced culture, and of great reputation as warriors. They dwell on the northwestern slope of Mount Apo, hence their name Atás, *hatáas*, or *atáas*, being a very common word in Mindanao for "high." They are, therefore, the people that dwell on the

heights. (Garvan 1931, 5)

Western observers could not readily reach these "heights" without traversing middle elevations and interacting with the groups that occupied the intermediate space; indeed, the Jesuits recognized that such groups could help facilitate access farther into the interior. Those who occupied this middle range may have also served as buffer between coastal dwellers and those living at higher elevations.

2.2 *Rivers, Naming, and Identity*

Many places and geographical features in the highlands were also named and Westerners documented the contemporary names of rivers and mountains as they did with appellations of groups of people. But since rivers were indispensable for purposes of navigation,[13] expeditions more consistently recorded river names than those of mountains or other features. Among the documented river names are "Libaganon," "Taumo," "Tamugan," and "Tuganay," which are known today as Libuganon, Talomo, Tamugan, and Tuganay, respectively. These names were recorded by missionaries, who mapped local groups for conversion (like the earliest mention of Atas by Moré in 1877), and by expeditions like Rajal's (1891, 122), which first encountered the edges of an Ata village "at the foot of the gigantic mountains that are next to the source of the Taumo river." Note that while Rajal records the name of the river, he does not name the "gigantic mountains."[14]

The names of rivers often served as identifiers of people, such as the "Tigwahanos" who requested self-governance in 1906. Another example is the trading "Tugauanum" whom Bolton met, about whom Garvan (1931, 4)—spelling it as "Tugawanon"—writes were "a people that lived at the headwaters of the River Libaganon on a tributary called Tugawan" and who speak "an Atas dialect." We know that these upper Libuganon "Atas" of "Tugawan" were involved in slave-raiding activities because, as Garvan reports, "the Mandayas of Kati'il [Cateel] and Karaga [Caraga]" bought "Negrito slaves" from them. Garvan also reports that, according to persons he calls "Salug authorities," "Libaganon" Manobos capture "Negrito" to sell to the "Debabaon" (Garvan 1931, 15, footnote 15). The "Salug" most probably refers to the present Saug River (in the New Corella and Asuncion areas), which links into the lower Libuganon River, near Tagum City.

Considering the candid manner by which these names were gathered, they are likely self-appellations. In a colonialism-centered study, Paredes (2013, 25) stresses that it was the "colonial-era observers [who] wished to be more precise" who used "a more specific locative label . . . based on the name of the closest identifiable . . . set-

Fig. 2 A Pantaron Manobo Village along a Ridgetop in 2008 (Photo by MD Paluga)

tlement or river tributary" in naming various groups the "Agusanon, Pulangion, Tagoloanon," and others. But aside from noting that the capacity for fine-grained naming is shared by both colonizers and colonized, what should not be missed is the locally-rooted nature of these names: they are derived from specific tributaries, conjugated in accordance with pan-Manobo grammar (adding the affixes *–on* or *–non*), and appear in local epics, such as the character named *Bato to Umayamon* or "Young Man from Umayam River." It is outsiders like Bolton and Garvan who insist that the highlanders be classified as "Atas." Indeed, learning that the Tugawanons were "speaking an Atas dialect," Garvan (1931, 4) concludes that "[p]erhaps the term Tugawanon is only a local name for a branch of the Atas tribe."

This construal of the highlands remains relevant today because existing settlement organization and self-appellations are tied to rivers, with village structures built on the ridgetops that follow the river course (Fig. 2). This orientation towards rivers has generated a river-focused identity that links and distinguishes villages according to specific waterways. For example, our collaborators come from different villages along the Talomo, Salug, Simong, and Kapalong rivers. Depending on where they primarily reside, they readily call themselves (at present) Matigtalomo, Matigsalug, Matigsimong, and Matigkapalong respectively, with the prefix "Matig-" meaning "from." Amongst themselves, "from-a-named-river" is a widely understood way of introducing oneself. In terms of scale, this river-oriented identity falls between family

and village membership, and identity as "Manobo indigenous people" within the Philippine nation-state.

That river systems, settlement, and identity are related to each other is plain enough to see in any research with various ethnolinguistic groups in Mindanao (see for example Paredes 2016, 335). But rather than surmise, as Paredes (2016, 339–340) does, that this relationship is metaphoric and expresses the sprawl and fluidity of identity, what should be stressed instead is the salience of its geographic-spatial tangibility. In other words, explicit river-based self-appellations substantiate these groups' status as highlanders. The names Talomo, Salug, Tigwa, Kapalong, and even Garvan's "Tugawan" refer specifically to tributaries at higher elevations that feed into bigger rivers, which, in the lowlands where they empty to the Davao Gulf, are named differently. The Talomo and Kapalong are tributaries of the Libuganon River and the Salug is the upstream name of the Davao River. Tigwa is a tributary of the Pulangi River, which flows west into Maguindanao Province. Self-identification that uses the names of highland tributaries and *not* the names of lower elevation rivers to which these tributaries connect is evidence that it is precisely the highland geographical space that is significant both as a dwelling place and a group name-marker.

This significance was apparent also to lowlanders like Christianized Visayans or Western observers, even if their interpretation of it was coarse-grained (i.e., the use of the singular term Atas to encompass varied highland communities). The ethnographic map in the *Atlas of the Philippine Islands* (Algue and The U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey 1900, 29), based upon maps prepared in 1899 by the Jesuit-run Manila Observatory, identifies three points in the interior as "Atas" areas (Fig. 3). These points correspond to the headwaters of three highland tributaries (the Tigwa, Salug, and Arakan) that have lent their names to a significant portion of Manobo-identifying people (the Tigwahano, Matigsalug, and Arakan Manobo) who still inhabit the area and who all consider the Pantaron as their ancestral domain. Since this map dates to 1899, this settlement configuration has thus prevailed for at least one hundred years, and likely longer than that, since these conditions were already established at the time of the earliest available records.

2.3 *Interconnections*

While these waterways served to name and geographically orient communities, they also threaded together various distinctly named groups along the described highland-lowland axis. The Jesuits recognized this early on (even if implicitly) as they built their communication networks via these rivers. The highlands that Rajal explored were also well-connected to coastal settlements via rivers: the area between the

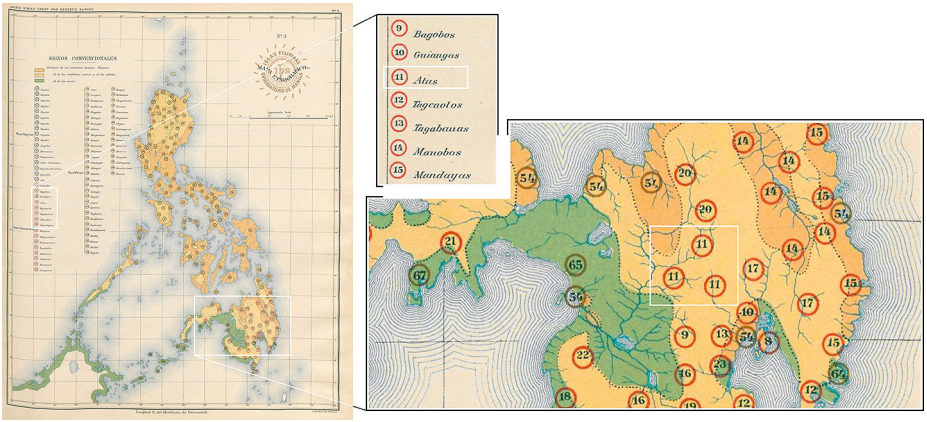


Fig. 3 *Mapa Etnográfico* (Ethnographic Map) from the *Atlas of the Philippine Islands* (The "Atas" areas in Central Mindanao are marked by the number 11.)

Pulangi and the Davao rivers dotted with Ata settlements may have been attractive partly because of its ease of access both to Maguindanao and Davao. Rivers connected, playing a significant role in the trading, raiding, and communicating that were well-established by the advent of consistent written documentation in southern Mindanao.

Small details in these writings reflect linkages with other groups, such as Rajal's observation of corn—introduced by Spaniards to the Philippines—planted alongside rice in Ata villages, or the deity *Diwata*/*Diuata* commonly revered by Ata, Bagobo, and other local groups in the Davao area. Today, corn remains an important crop for Pantaron communities and *Diwata* is still invoked as a deity.

Reaching highland Ata communities may have been very difficult for the Jesuits, but Gisbert's offhand remark in 1888 that the Atas were familiar with "Chinese and the other retailers" (Arcilla 1998, 173) reveals that the uplands were quite accessible to other sections of the Davao population, especially for activities like trading, which highlanders may have deemed more beneficial than religious conversion. Bolton's encounter with Tugauanum traders is another example.

Finally, Urios records in 1895 that after what he thought was a successful mission campaign, much to his surprise:

> . . . the whole world went back to the mountains at dawn the following day, burning crops, devastating plains, Moros mixing it up with Mandayas, Mandayas with Atas, then with everyone else —war with Spain! (Arcilla 1998, 409)

This may have foreshadowed the revolutionary unrest that would erupt the following year. What it suggests is that in times of turbulence, various people could run to the mountains, perhaps to avoid Spanish authority or to demonstrate defiance to it.

It must be made clear that movement went both ways: from the lowlands to the highlands (such as slave-raiders from lower elevations) and from the highlands to the lowlands (such as Ata tattoo practitioners in Bagobo communities). People traded. In 1896, the final Jesuit-established villages helped settle highlanders on the coast. In the case of the Tigwahanos petitioners in 1906, if the speculation that this group is related to our interlocutors (who remember no other way of life than in the upper Pantaron) is correct, then there were also movements toward the lowlands (to register a petition) and then back up again, to finally settle in the highlands.

These movements and activities facilitated the generation and dissemination of knowledge such that people who self-identified as from distinct tribes were well-aware of the existence and locations of others. From Moré's "Mandaya chief" to Garvan's "Salug authorities," Western researchers maximized local informants' knowledge of settlement names and locations. The Jesuits, Rajal, and Montano benefitted greatly from such information as they ventured into areas unknown to them. This knowledge may have been locally circulating as early as the conquest-expedition of Oyanguren in the mid-1800s, when Francisco Belmonte informed him that a north-south highland traverse of Mindanao was possible, prompting Rajal's (1891, 118) simple observation that: "[I]t always turned out that internal communication could take place." It is almost expected for any historic-ethnographic study to aver that spaces and communities are never isolated, but what is important is to show what comprised these connections. This study fills that gap for the Pantaron highlands.

2.4 *The Pantaron Highlands via Epics and Genealogy*

A historical reconstruction of the formation and transformation of the Pantaron highlands based primarily on ethnographic data deserves a study of its own (for an indicative example, see Claver [1973]). Here we discuss some ethnographic insights (based on genealogical reconstructions and epic-and-ritual-based practices) that have a direct bearing on the historical data above and community members' claim of long, continuous dwelling in the Pantaron highlands.

First, we relate an indicative genealogy of Moyra,[15] a close interlocutor and epic chanter who lives along the upper Talomo River in what is now Davao del Norte Province. This genealogy, reconstructed through working with her and her family, spans to the 1860s (using a 30-year per generation estimator, see Map 3). Note that the genealogy immediately links four major rivers (including their tributaries) in the

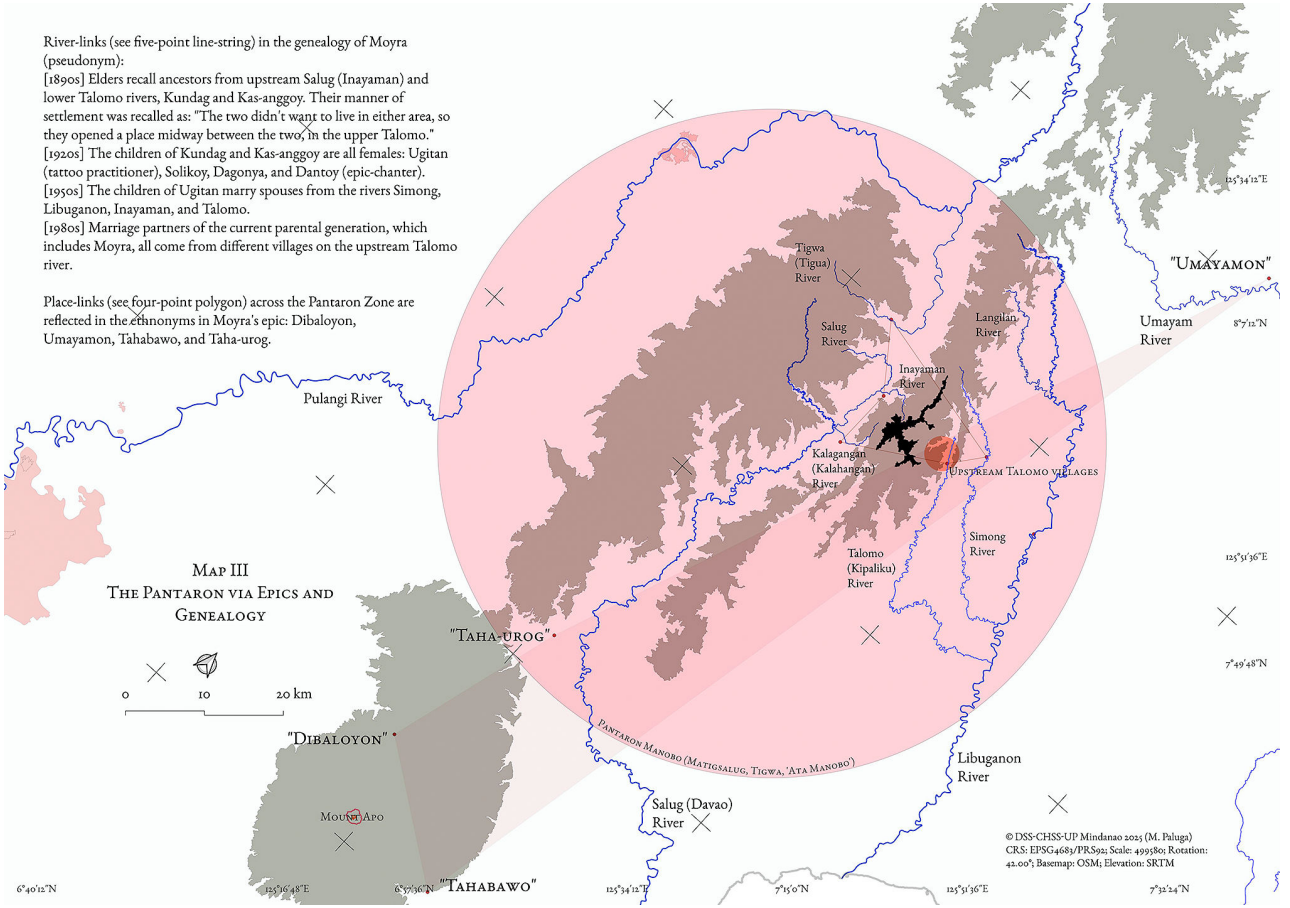
upper portions of the Pantaron: the Talomo, the upper Salug (and its tributaries, the Inayaman and Kalahangan), the Tigwa, and the upper Libuganon, which are plotted on Map 3. Comparing this plotting to Rajal's journey (Maps 1 and 2), Moyra's genealogy pushes the extent of related highland territory farther east, corresponding closely to the "Atas" areas of the 1900 Mapa Etnografico (Fig. 3).

Moyra's family's genealogy is only one among multiple branches of our genealogical reconstruction. Other branches not detailed here further encompass the wider upper areas of other rivers, such as the Pulangi, Langilan, and Simong. Taken together, these family linkages stretch far beyond what has been tracked in Western expeditions and mapping; Rajal's encounters with Atas villages west of these rivers may have only brushed up against the outer edges of the highland Pantaron zone demarcated in this study.

Returning to the case of a group of Tigwa people who petitioned for self-governance in 1906, note that the generation of Moyra's paternal grandfather Piagol (also known as Pialan) is from the Tigwa River. Could Piagol and/or his family members be part of the Tigwa group that moved south, closer to the Talomo? They are never mentioned again after that 1906 petition; they most likely remained in the highlands. Piagol's marriage to Ugitan suggests the option they took: to forge kinship links, settle in the highlands, and cultivate their lifeways. Ugitan was a tattoo practitioner (Ragragio and Paluga 2019), and her sister Dantoy was an epic chanter who taught Moyra this practice (Paluga and Ragragio 2021).

The epic chanting passed on in Moyra's family expresses—at the collective, imaginary level—such historical links, which, unsurprisingly, foregrounds river systems both as actual places and as identity anchors. For example, Pantaron epics repeatedly feature (male) characters identified according to the river from which they come, such as the "Young Man from Umayam" (*Bato to Umayamon*).[16] This not only presents, in condensed form, river-oriented identity, but also further expands the sense of relatable and familiarized space beyond what actual kinship or interpersonal links can encompass (Map 3). As one interlocutor expressed, as a child, he *knew of* the Umayam River because of the character in the epic, but he had never actually been there. Years later, in the midst of an indigenous peoples political campaign, when he finally meets a person from Umayam, he immediately recalls the epic. It is reasonable to think that this prior familiarity (via memories of listening to epics) could have helped foster a sense of solidarity apart from pressing political imperatives.

After all, while epics often focus on combat and adventure, the relevant social unit is usually a group of focal siblings and cousins (such as Tolalang, Agyu, Man-oloron, and others who are the narratives' "heroes"). These patterns of journeying (under



Map 3 Pantaron Zone Links in the Genealogy of an Epic Chanter from Basalon Village and the World Depicted in Her Man-oloron Epic

the ambit of the term *panow*, see Ragragio and Paluga [2023]) across a landscape, when plotted, show the scale and breadth of spatial links in the epic imagination. One epic chanted by Moyra dramatically concludes with the gathering of all Man-oloron's kin, who are scattered across "five rivers," to journey together towards the "Land With No Death."

2.5 *Beginnings of the Highlands?*

The conventional view of Mindanao history holds that indigenous highland peoples were initially coastal dwellers who were pushed to the higher interiors around the beginning of Western colonization and as a response to the incursions of colonial (and post-colonial) outsiders (Gaspar 2000; Rodil 2003; 2021; TRICOM 1998). However, at least in the Davao area, it can be gleaned that highland communities were already established by the time Spanish authorities definitively took over in the mid-nineteenth century. The formation of such communities therefore took place earlier than colonial actions, such as the founding of Davao pueblo and the sustained Jesuit missions. The sources reviewed here say little about the beginnings of these highland communities. The limited retention of the term *balangoy* (as explained in the introduction) in Pantaron Manobo oral history could suggest that significant time has passed between the point when these objects functioned as they were intended (such as for sea voyaging) and now.

One catalyst of mobility in the highlands may have been slave-raiding (discussed above). Could this have spurred intensified movement into the highlands? If so, then it is reasonable to expect this historical circumstance to have left its mark in various ways. For example, our collaborators still recount stories of enemies called *Ikugan* (literally, "creatures with tails") who attacked villages and captured people. Another such "mark" is the observation that:

> The tattoo is especially widespread among the tribes which surround the Gulf of Davao; it is practiced on children from 5 to 6 years old by the mother, in order to impose an indelible mark on them and to be able to recognize them when they are removed by ruse or violence, excessively frequent cases. (Montano 1885, 74)

This insight is repeated in Garvan's manuscript (1931, 56) a few decades later: "[i]t was customary to change the name of a captive, and as he was sold and resold, the only way to identify him was by his tattoo marks." Garvan's account makes it seem that captives were tattooed to mark them as slaves. However, Montano clearly states that Davao tribes practiced tattooing among themselves as protection in the event of

being kidnapped and as a means of identification if they were. Community members who practice customary tattooing today do not associate this practice with slavery or captivity (Ragragio and Paluga 2019). Montano's passage alerts us to how a shift to highland life (spurred by raiding) may have affected certain practices. Speculatively, the practice of tattooing may have originated from the context of slave raids, or—if tattooing existed beforehand (also possible)—it was further reinforced and given new meanings. The emergence of highland life did not only involve shifting location and occupying a new ecological niche but also innovating new practices and/or applying old ones in novel ways. This study foregrounds such developments as shaping highland life, instead of the more oft-cited tropes of an overwhelming "resistance to" and "rejection of" the lowlands.

Conclusion

Combining insights from ethnographic collaborations with Pantaron Manobo and rereading historical documents have cast new light on old sources, questions, and views about the highlands.

The earliest recorded usage of the term Atas (and "ata-as" and "ataas") was by lowlanders from Davao pueblo to refer to people living at the highest inhabited elevations of the Pantaron in southern Mindanao. They shared a language—or a clinal chain of languages—distinct enough to be discernible to outsiders. "Ata" was formalized as an ethnonym at the turn of the twentieth century, but self-referentially, these communities use names derived from rivers, towards which their settlements were oriented. That many of these river-based names refer to tributaries at upper elevations affirm the importance of the highlands as actual lived space and for establishing identities. That such names were in common use by the time of colonial consolidation in southern Mindanao also strongly suggests that highland habitation and self-identification predate colonial incursions, challenging the conventional view of highland movement and settlement as a response to those incursions.

The Pantaron highlands were an open, multi-cultural space accessible to various people. Its inhabitants were vigorous participants in assorted activities and relationships along the highland-lowland axis, open to a range of outside influences even as their own practices (like tattooing) spread across southern Mindanao.

The first imaginings of the highlands as an inhospitable place inhabited only by people who were forced to live there may be traced to the harbingers of colonialism, whose unfamiliarity with the terrain and whose failure to conquer it would have been

a source of significant frustration. But the supposition of the highlands as a tough, undesirable place to live in must be reevaluated (Reid 1998; Mcdonald 2011). Highland living could very well be exceedingly viable; it could be consciously preferred for reasons other than duress. Our collaborators emphasize the sheer beauty and freedom of living in the open highlands. Adopting a "hard, highland living" view unwittingly centers colonialism—and its thematic cognates of resistance or accommodation/negotiation—as the overriding historical circumstance that determined people's choices; it would do well today to reconsider repeatedly asserting this view.

Foregrounding highlander choices as agentive moves during specific historical circumstances offers more promise for accurate and empowering historicizing. The proposed chronology notes how highland inhabitants alternately appear and drop out of the historical sources. What if moments of high visibility were reconsidered as occasions when they actively assessed potential lowland benefits, and moments when they recede from record as occasions of intentionally choosing highland life? Consider the option of Moyra's grandparents Piagol and Ugitan, who occupied themselves with practices other than dealing with (or even frequently thinking about) the lowlands. Through varied historical vicissitudes, agents could determine whether to link or delink at any time, an option afforded by highland life.

By adopting this view, we can appreciate the highlands as an inhabited space that was, and continues to be, a recognizable, palpable entity from both within and without. Taken together, Rajal's phenomenologically vivid account of climbing the highlands, the self-appellations derived from elevated tributaries, and the dense upper river connections of Pantaron communities formed through kinship and epic imaginaries convey a broad-scaled dynamic that has yet to be captured in other ethnohistoric studies on Mindanao, such as Paredes (2013). Instead, Paredes (2013, 31–36; 2016, 335) repeatedly emphasizes the loaded nature of "mountain people," a term used to denigrate indigenous groups. But by distancing from this connotation to avoid reinforcing it, her studies end up eliding the question of the nature of the highlands *as such*, thus foreclosing the possibility that the highlands—and the way of life it fosters—can be a productive object of study and reflection.

We argue that not only are highlanders a recognizable entity, but that throughout history, they have been active, inquiring, and decisive whenever they needed to be. Moreover, their decisions would have been taken with a conscious understanding of a highland collectivity that gradually coalesced, if needed, in distinction from lowland "Moro" or "Christian" or "Visayan" peoples. If the settlement of the southern (and possibly central) Mindanao highlands has indeed been longer than previously assumed, then there would have been ample time for highlanders to design a distinct

way of life and to develop the highlands into a genuinely vibrant landscape.

Our study draws attention to the historical underpinnings for what has been termed a "tradition of change" (Lundström-Burghoorn 1981, 47), or the conditions under which a community can robustly retain their identity and integrity whilst dealing with various other groups, being receptive to influences, and dynamically experimenting with those influences according to a design of living, which, in the case of the Pantaron Manobo, has been forming and enduring for more than a century-and-a-half.

Pantaron highlanders have been "free borrowers" (Cole 1913, 164) in a milieu where "it always turned out that internal communication could take place" (Rajal 1891, 118); they have been a people who "have caused some trouble from time to time" (Philippine Commission 1916, 136), but were also "of advanced culture, and of great reputation as warriors" (Garvan 1931, 5). Our interlocutors affirm they "have always been in the Pantaron," which is their way of saying that they are indeed "the people that dwell on the heights."

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Notes

1) Our collaborators do not fully embrace the appellation "Ata-Manobo" and "Pantaron Manobo" was arrived at in consultation with them (see Ragragio and Paluga 2019, 263–264) by using a similar approach adopted by Tsing (1990, 429) with Meratus Dayak collaborators.
2) Acabado and Martin (2022) tackle this question for the Northern Luzon Cordillera and claim that highland dwelling is the consequence of expanding colonization.
3) "Manobo" is a label closely associated with indigenous Davao inhabitants (including those from the Pantaron), but because the word simply means "person" or "human being" across widely distributed Mindanao languages, it may be too broad to be useful. Additionally, the earliest uses (by Western recorders) of the term "Manobo" refer to Manobo-identifying people located in eastern Mindanao, as these areas came under colonial control much earlier. Garvan's (1931) *The Manóbos of Mindanáo* is exemplar in that it discusses Manobo-identifying people living farther east of the Pantaron, specifically in the Agusan Valley. While our interlocutors know that the current residents of the Agusan Valley are indigenous like them and use the term Manobo, they say they have little else in common. These limitations notwithstanding, "Manobo" is still used on occasions when the term is useful either directly or comparatively regarding the southern Mindanao highlands.
4) The conquest of Davao has been well-covered by Gloria (1987), Corcino (1998), Lizada (2002), Tiu (2003; 2005), and Rivera-Ford (2010).
5) Arcilla's translation erroneously replaced "atas," "ataas," or "ata-as" with "Agtas" (this was verified by examining digitized copies of original Spanish-language *Cartas* and early translations of

Blair and Robertson [1903–07]). Therefore, when directly quoting from Arcilla's translation, "Agtas" has been replaced with "Atas."

6) Except for translations by Arcilla (1998) and Blair and Robertson (1903–07), all translations into English are by the authors.
7) Direct quotes retain the original spelling of names of people and places, even if they no longer accord with current, standardized spellings.
8) Rajal (1891, 119) proposes that the term's root is *yawa*, a common Bisaya term for "evil spirit." However, it may more correctly be rooted in *mangayow*, the Manobo word defined as "to raid, to band together in mass to kill and attack people" (Hartung 2016, 14).
9) See Rajal (1891, 120) for his description of *manga-yaoa* killings.
10) This Taumo/Talomo River flows from Mount Apo to Davao City and is different from the Taumo/Talomo River whose headwaters are in the Pantaron and flows to the Libuganon River.
11) The inclusion of the "Americans" in the list of people protected by Diwata was possibly a courtesy extended to Benedict by her interlocutor.
12) From the late 2000s to today, with the most recent extended fieldwork from 2018 to 2019 in Davao City (see Ragragio and Paluga 2020).
13) Wayfinding by following rivers remains a tried-and-true practice for our interlocutors today. For example, years ago, the renowned Pantaron Manobo woman leader Bai Bibiaon Bigkay (Ragragio 2015) was staying at Davao City for an extended political campaign. Like many Manobo elders, she did not feel too at ease in urban settings and insisted to organizers that she wanted to return to her village along the Salug River. One of the organizers tried to persuade her to stay a little longer to finish the campaign. Bai Bibiaon retorted that if they would not facilitate her travel immediately, all she had to do was follow the Davao River upwards and she would eventually arrive home. The Salug River connects to the Davao River and this route would have been doable for someone familiar with navigating via rivers.
14) This does not mean that mountains peaks are not named; many such features in our interlocutors' domain are named.
15) The names of collaborators who are still alive and villages in Map 3 are pseudonyms.
16) Like other southern Mindanao epics collected and analyzed by Manuel (1958; 1975).

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Women in Thai-Lao Manuscript Culture: Alternative Worship of Text(iles) in Support of Monkhood

Saowakon Sukrak* and Silpsupa Jaengsawang**

Possessing inferior religious status to males, who could be ordained as monks, females played a comparatively minor role in Theravāda Buddhism. Females were generally allowed to be involved in creating items to be donated to the Sangha, except for writing religious manuscripts, which required literacy in the Dhamma script; that skill lay with monks and novices, since the script was taught at monasteries. To compensate for their inability to obtain monkhood status, women wove textiles for wrapping religious books or donated their hair for binding palm-leaf manuscripts. Cloth-weaving skills compensated for their lack of literacy in the Dhamma script, while the donation of hair compensated for their lack of masculinity or monkhood. Women could also invest in tools, sponsorship, and financial support for commissioning religious manuscripts. Thus, although they were not allowed to be directly involved in the production of religious manuscripts, they were able to engage in ancillary activities.

Keywords: women, Buddhism, manuscript culture, textiles, hair, Thai-Lao

1 Introduction: Women in Theravāda Buddhism[1)]

The earliest reference to the emergence of human beings and male-female gender in Theravāda Buddhism is found in the *Aggaññasutta*, a *sutta*[2)] in the Dīghanikāya division of the *Suttanta Piṭaka*[3)] in the Theravāda Buddhist canon (*Tipiṭaka*),[4)] which is characterized as a myth of the universe.[5)] In the *Aggaññasutta*, asexual luminous beings descended from the *Ābhassarā* level[6)] of the Form-Sphere (*Rūpabhava*)[7)] to the human world and ate soil, which they found pleasant tasting. Having consumed the

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soil, the *Ābhassarabrahma* beings lost their radiance and were unable to ascend back to their Form-Sphere home. Their asexual bodies physically turned into male and female genders, creating the very first generation of worldly human beings.

The myth of early human generations mentioned in the *Aggaññasutta* theoretically claims gender indiscrimination in Theravāda Buddhism. According to this, our first ancestors descended from a higher level and were genderless until they consumed the tasty soil; the implication is that sexual intercourse was irrelevant to the origin of human beings, and that no human beings had disadvantageous sexual features that prevented them from attaining enlightenment or *nibbāna*. During and after the Buddha's lifetime, as evidenced in canonical as well as non-canonical sources, women played various roles in Buddhism and supported the religion in accordance with their sociocultural status. In early Buddhism, females were not prohibited from being ordained. The first Buddhist nun was Pajāpatī, the aunt of Gotama Buddha, who with the help of Venerable Ānanda successfully requested permission for women to be ordained.[8] Below are some examples of female monks mentioned in canonical texts and other religious sources.

After the Buddha's passing (*parinibbāna*), there were conflicts between Venerable Kassapa and Buddhist nuns. Venerable Kassapa disagreed with admitting women to the order, and the nuns—due to Venerable Kassapa's Brahman rather than Buddhist background—doubted his ability to understand the Buddhist Dhamma. Venerable Ānanda asked Venerable Kassapa for forgiveness on the nuns' behalf (Kabilsingh 1998, 30–31). In *Mahāvacchagotasutta* (*Paribbājakavagga*, *Majjhimapaṇṇāsaka*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Suttanta Piṭaka*), five hundred female monks attained enlightenment; and in *Therīgathā* (*Khuddaka Nikāya*, *Suttanta Piṭaka*), thirty female monks gained enlightenment (Anālayo 2009, 137). Through his lifetime Gotama Buddha encountered several prominent Buddhist women, and he praised 13 female monks whom he recognized as most outstanding.[9] Among these, Kundalakesī Theri[10] was praised for her sudden attainment of Arahantship (freedom from obsessions), showing the ability of women to attain enlightenment.

Originating in India, where society—like in other parts of Asia—is predominantly patriarchal, the Buddhist religion is observed and practiced with rules that treat males and females differently. In order to prevent sensual desire among monks and distractions caused by sexual intimacy, monastic prohibitions were instituted by the Buddha to keep monks away from women. At some point, this brought about gender inequality or gender discrimination. In the Theravāda Buddhist canon there are *sutta* that regard women as a distraction preventing men from attaining *nibbāna*, as representing danger, and as being unable to occupy certain positions: *Cātumasutta* (in *Bhikkhuvagga*,

Majjhimapaṇṇāsaka, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Suttanta Piṭaka*) and *Bhayasutta* (in *Bālavagga*, *Paṭhamapaṇṇāsaka*, *Tikanipāta*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, *Suttanta Piṭaka*),[11] *Sappasutta* (in *Dīghacārikavagga*, *Pañcamapaññāsaka*, *Pañcakanipāta*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, *Suttanta Piṭaka*),[12] and *Bahudhātukasutta* (Pāli discourse) (in *Anupadavagga*, *Uparipaṇṇāsaka*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Suttanta Piṭaka*).[13]

Hinduism considers menstruation to be a sign of impurity and contamination. With Thailand and Laos having been influenced by Hinduism, many Buddhist or sacred places there are out of bounds for menstruating women; it is believed that this period of impurity can weaken spiritual power. In addition, female visitors in general are not allowed to enter certain spaces, such as stages for preaching monks, even when there are no monks or laymen nearby. The exclusion of women from such spaces is a strategy to shield monks from laywomen; laymen, on the other hand, can freely visit and enter any place. Such regulations lead to gender discrimination and to women being relegated to an inferior social status.

Due to the Buddhahood being limited to males, Bodhisattas in *jātaka* stories are generally male. In the last ten great births of Gotama Buddha, women are supportive, creatively resourceful, and active heroines in their own right. The few negative portrayals involve minor characters, and they do little to counteract the wealth of positive examples (Appleton and Shaw 2015, 21). A rare case of a female Bodhisatta's birth in Buddhist texts is found in *Padīpadāna Jātaka* in the *Paññāsa Jātaka*, a set of fifty apocryphal *jātaka*s[14] attributed to monks from Chiang Mai (Northern Thailand) during 1457–1657 CE. The story is set during the period of Dīpaṅkara Buddha,[15] whose sister was a princess. In one of her previous rebirths, she was born as a man and committed *Aparāpariyavedanīyakamma* (a kind of sin whose effects recur in one's subsequent lives) with a daughter of his younger sister, causing his new rebirth as a female in the period of Dīpaṅkara Buddha. The princess offered lamp oil to the Buddha—her brother—making a wish to become a future Buddha named Siddhattha, whose Buddhist era is in the present. This *jātaka* story shows the potential of females to reach *nibbāna* and eventually become a Buddha with their sufficiently accumulated merit.

Theoretically, in the Theravāda canonical source (*Tipiṭaka*), women and men emerged from shared celestial ancestors; but in reality females had an inferior social status and played relatively minor roles in religious practices and norms. This gender inequality had an influence on manuscript cultures.[16] This paper aims to investigate the roles of women in manuscript cultures in order to answer the questions of how women, in an effort to compensate for their inferiority in religious practices, found ways to participate in the production of religious manuscripts (all—if not most—of whose scribes are male); the meaning of the alternative objects that women donated

to monasteries to compensate for their exclusion from monkhood opportunities; to what extent the writing of religious manuscripts and the donation of objects to support religious manuscript production are different; and whether the alternative objects offered by women can replace the writing of religious manuscripts. The paper will discuss general information on women in Thai-Lao Theravāda Buddhist society and in manuscript cultures, followed by the donation of hair, wrapping cloth, and other objects for manuscript production. The paper will end with a comparison between texts and textiles.

2 Women in Thai-Lao Theravāda Buddhist Society: Social and Cultural Context

There are four possible assemblies of Buddhists (*buddhaparisā*): monks (*bhikkhu*), Buddhist nuns (*bhikkhuṇī*), laymen (*upāsaka*), and laywomen (*upāsikā*). Except for Buddhist nuns, Thailand and Laos have the three remaining assemblies. Despite the existence of Buddhist nuns in the Buddha's lifetime, these days there are next to none—probably because there are barely any left to organize ordination ceremonies.[17] Buddhist nuns observe a set of 311 precepts known as *Gurudhamma*, more than the 227 precepts for monks. Women ordained in Thailand and Laos are not Buddhist nuns but female novices (*sikkhamānā* or *sāmaṇerī*)[18] who observe only six precepts and undergo a probationary course of two years before receiving higher ordination (Payutto 2015, 354). The ordination ceremony for a nun requires at least five nuns (Kabilsingh 1998, 14) to be present in addition to a number of monks. But since there are no longer any legitimately ordained nuns within the Theravāda tradition, the ordination of a nun is simply not possible.

Unlike the current Sangha rules, before *bhikkhuṇī* came from India in the third century BCE, male monks were allowed to ordain women (Li 2000, 183, cited in Tomalin 2006, 387). Only three countries were home to *bhikkhuṇī*—Sri Lanka, India, and Burma—though *bhikkhuṇī* had disappeared from Theravāda Buddhism by the eleventh century CE. However, the *bhikkhuṇī* order of the Mahāyāna tradition still exists to this day. An estimated eight hundred Sri Lankan nuns have received *bhikkhuṇī* ordination, setting an important precedent for nuns in other Theravāda societies (Tomalin 2006, 386; Tsomo 2010, 90, 100). Sri Lankan and Chinese *bhikkhuṇī* share the same lineage, because a group of *bhikkhuṇī* from Sri Lanka introduced *bhikkhuṇī* ordination in China in 433 CE (Kabilsingh 1991, 31; Wijayasundara 2000, 82, cited in Tomalin 2006, 387).

Compared to Lao white-robed laywomen (*maekhao*), Thai white-robed laywomen (*maechi*) are better educated and are becoming more numerous, visible, and influential in society. However, white-robed laywomen in Laos seem to be slightly better off. *Maekhao* have an identification card that establishes them as Buddhist nuns and gives them certain privileges. *Maechi*, however, are not given such a card, which means they pay full price for things like public transport but, like monks, are not allowed to vote (Seeger 2006, 173; Tsomo 2010, 89, 103).

In Laos, *maekhao* and monks are interdependent and cooperate in a friendly manner with each other. Monks share extra food and donated commodities with *maekhao*, who in turn assist monks with goods and services. This is similar to the interactions between monks and Buddhist women in Myanmar. The women cook for monks, and monks express their gratitude to the laity by teaching them, which shows a female presence in temples (Tsomo 2010, 88, 95; Saruya 2022, 11). Lao *maekhao* believe in accumulating merit by means of serving and assisting monks, through which they expect to reach *nibbāna*. Despite their shaved heads, they are considered pious women rather than full members of the Sangha order and are relegated to a lower position than monks. In spite of their lack of material goods and shelter, *maekhao* are quite satisfied with their lot and do not aspire to elevate their status. Not all Theravāda nuns in Laos are willing to formally receive the 311 *bhikkhuṇī* precepts, especially those over a certain age for whom the additional precepts might pose a hardship (Tsomo 2010, 102). *Maekhao* live in their comfort zone, and becoming a *maekhao* is usually not a consequence of a miserable personal life or career failure.

By contrast, *maechi* in Thailand have made attempts to increase gender equality in the Sangha order. There is no evidence to suggest that there were ever Theravāda nuns in Thai society. The first attempt to establish a *bhikkhuṇī* order in Thailand was undertaken in 1927 by the former government official and engaged lay-Buddhist Narin Prasit. He had his two daughters ordained as *sāmaṇerī*, an act that was later criticized heavily by both the government and the clergy. A monk suspected of having ordained the two sisters was asked by his superior to leave the monkhood (Seeger 2006, 159). As a result of this incident, the 1928 Sangha Act prohibited monks from ordaining women as *bhikkhuṇī*, *sāmaṇerī*, and *sikkhamānā* (novice trainees). This regulation, however, contradicts the Thai constitution, which guarantees equality to men and women and the freedom to practice any religion (Seeger 2006, 160; Litalien 2018, 573). Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was ordained as a *bhikkhuṇī* in Sri Lanka in 2003 and is now known as Dhammananda. Since 2003 a further twenty or so women have been ordained as *sāmaṇerī* or novices. Kabilsingh's ordination was supported by Buddhists in Sri Lanka and a global network of supporters of a certain *bhikkhuṇī* order in

Theravāda Buddhism (Tomalin 2006, 392; Litalien 2018, 595). In 2013 the very first full Theravāda *bhikkhuṇī* ordination in the history of the Kingdom of Thailand occurred in Phayao Province, followed by the second and third in 2014 and 2015 (Litalien 2018, 596). There are communities of Mahāyāna *bhikkhuṇī* in Thailand, but *maechi* have a negative reputation—for instance, they are believed to have been unsuccessful in love, homeless, or deprived of alternative opportunities (Seeger 2006, 173). In short, there is still gender inequality in Thailand, which spills over into the Thai Sangha. The latter's structure resembles that of the state bureaucracy, which is dominated by males. On the other hand, *maechi* and *bhikkhuṇī* are able to provide services to the community, as they are regarded as being outside of the Sangha (Litalien 2018, 589).

Southeast Asia is dominated by a patriarchal culture, with men generally leading organizations and societies in a direction that benefits themselves more than women. Even though Buddhist women continue with their devotions and alms-offering to monks, in most Asian Buddhist societies religious and social institutions reflect a tacit assumption of the moral superiority of males, discriminatory or patronizing attitudes, and the exclusion of women (Tsomo 2010, 87–89). Women are barred from access to institutional avenues of social mobility (Seeger 2006, 171). The Thai *bhikkhuṇī* movement is a local strategy to address and bring attention to gender inequality by religious Buddhist feminists in Thailand. It is the result of attempts to establish social discourses that consider religious and cultural factors in parallel with economic development (Tomalin 2006, 386; Litalien 2018, 578).

In Myanmar, however, in the past Buddhist women were able to gain access to meditation and study, and an increasing number even taught profound Dhamma topics such as Abhidhamma. Laywomen could even participate in *padaythabin* processions, which were part of the Pongyibyan festival.[19] During the colonial period laywomen created a demand for learning Buddhist doctrines, while monks created the supply, resulting in an increased transmission of Buddhist texts. Textual transmission was enhanced by the introduction of new printing technologies in Myanmar in the 1800s. Studies of Myanmar history show that educated nuns during the reign of King Mindong (1853–78) taught the ladies of the court. Some lay girls may have received a basic education in monasteries up to a certain age. During the colonial era, female education in general became more acceptable (Saruya 2022, 1–3).

Women in Thailand and Laos are expected to accept or comply with certain prohibitions and even taboos. Those who fail to follow social norms are cautioned or socially punished. Laywomen are expected to behave a certain way in terms of walking, speaking, prostrating, looking at a monk, etc. They also have to maintain a

respectful distance from monks and dress appropriately. Hence, women are limited by rules and norms when interacting with monks and novices; they are subject to gender and even social-hierarchical discrimination. This is the intrinsic inferiority of women reinforced within the structure of everyday public Buddhist practices and customs (Tomalin 2006, 389).

Certain areas or places are reserved for monks and out of bounds for laywomen. In the ordination hall (*sim*) of monasteries, for instance, there is an elevated stage set against an inner wall to seat chanting monks. Book cabinets, seating cushions, and other ritual utensils are placed there. Laywomen are not allowed to enter the stage even when there are no monks around:

> In Theravāda monasteries, nuns, even those who have been ordained for decades, typically sit on a mat on the floor, while monks, even those who have just been ordained, sit on a raised platform above them. The seating arrangement of nuns below or behind the monks is symbolic of the subordinate position nuns hold in the religious hierarchy, a position that has rarely been questioned. (Tsomo 2010, 91)[20]

This norm is not intended simply to maintain a distance between monks/novices and laywomen but to discriminate against females. The rule prohibiting females from entering monk's abodes (*kuṭi*), however, makes sense and is not surprising—comparable to dormitory regulations in schools and certain mansions—for preventing monks and laywomen from getting close.

Aside from certain areas that females cannot enter under any circumstances, there are some religious places—usually not in Northern Thailand—where laywomen may be permitted depending upon their physical condition. For instance, only menstruating women are prohibited from entering certain areas in Buddha relic pagodas since it is believed that their impurity may contaminate the sacred power of the relics. In Northern Thailand several temples do not allow women at all:

> Many temples in Thailand, seen particularly often in the north, do not allow women to circumambulate the stupas. The monks usually explain that the relics of the Buddha are placed in the centre of the stupas at the time they built it. If women are allowed to circumambulate the stupas, they would be walking at the level higher than the relics and hence might desacralize them. (Kabilsingh 1998, 46–47)

Katherine Bowie (2011, cited in Chladek 2017, 130–131) notes that Northern Thai people forbid women from entering areas of temples that hold sacred relics and

argues that this practice is uniquely part of northern Buddhism and cultural practice. Kabilsingh (1998) explains that many Hindu practices are accepted under the name of Buddhism. During the Ayutthaya period Buddhist monks and magic masters prohibited women from touching or walking across consecrated items in order to maintain the items' magical power (women were considered impure because they menstruated).

In addition to the aforementioned prohibitions for women regarding certain areas of a temple, the maintenance of an appropriate distance between monks/novices and women is also a crucial concern in Buddhism. The distance must be such that neither can reach out their arms to the other, let alone touch. Meetings between monks and laywomen must be held within sight of other people. In the case of indoor visits, a monk and a laywoman may not meet each other alone; there must be at least one other male present. Laywomen meeting a monk have to wear outfits that cover their upper bodies and reach at least below their knees. It is believed that such regulations can prevent sexual affairs and thus protect the Sangha community from scandals.

In order to conform with the rules for associating with monks, laywomen in Luang Prabang always wear a sheet of cloth known as *pha biang* (Lao: ຜ້າບ່ຽງ) diagonally across their chests to keep the collar close to the neck and the upper part of their bodies invisible when prostrating on the ground. The cloth also functions as a small carpet when there is a group of ritual participants. In an ordination ceremony that Silpsupa Jaengsawang joined in 2017 at the monastery of Vat Manorom, female participants placed their *pha biang* together on the floor of the ordination hall, welcoming senior and newly ordained monks to walk by (see Fig. 1). Outfits with a *pha biang* are standard dress for laywomen, but no *pha biang* is required for laymen. This implies that sexual affairs are dependent upon females' dressing habits—or are even the responsibility of females—rather than the monks' self-discipline.

Similarly, when a female donor offers gifts to a monk, a sheet of cloth is placed between the donor and recipient. The laywoman sets the offerings on the cloth and pulls back her hands; the monk takes the gifts from the cloth and gives his blessings. Thus, offerings are not made hand to hand; monks and laywomen cannot hand things directly to each other, so as to avoid the unintentional touching of hands. Laymen, however, can simply hand objects directly to monks and novices.

The Dhamma script, used for writing manuscripts, was taught only to monks and novices in monasteries; females were implicitly excluded from gaining this knowledge. In order to compensate for this lack, laywomen found ways to participate in the production and donation of religious manuscripts with the expectation of gaining similar merit to those who were literate in the Dhamma script. This matter is discussed further below.

Fig. 1 Laywomen's *Pha Biang* Placed on the Floor to Welcome Monks at an Ordination Ceremony (photo by Silpsupa Jaengsawang, March 18, 2017)

3 Women in Thai-Lao Manuscript Cultures

Like other ways of making merit, copying and donating religious manuscripts were believed to bring great merit to donors and scribes. The writing of manuscripts required a huge effort, since palm leaves—the earliest and most durable form of writing support—needed a great deal of preparation. In addition, inscribing texts in a palm-leaf manuscript took knowledge, time, and energy. Although mulberry paper and industrial paper replaced palm leaves in some areas, the task of writing or copying texts in a manuscript was still a major undertaking. In order to gain merit, which was incalculable yet beneficial to ensure a better rebirth, people were willing to invest their time and energy on this task. Hence, manuscripts mostly contain religious texts because the investment of time, energy, and money is made with the expectation of magnificent merit and a better rebirth. However, as mentioned above, the Dhamma script was the only tool for textual transmission.

Silpsupa made two research trips to Laos, in February–March 2017 and August–

September 2022. She visited both Luang Prabang, the ancient capital, and Vientiane, the current capital. In Luang Prabang, since most monasteries are walking distance from—or even adjacent to—one another within the villages, local people are profoundly engaged in Buddhism and participate enthusiastically in annual religious ceremonies as well as regular Holy Days. Women in Luang Prabang are interested in Buddhist studies. Some of them are self-taught in Buddhist knowledge and prayers; they copy religious texts for Buddhist ceremonies—in the Lao rather than Dhamma script—and pray on their own. Silpsupa even interviewed a laywoman who was a ritual expert leading lay participants to pray in Pāli at a Buddhist event (Bunyong; mentioned below). Women's basic education is provided by the government. Most of the laywomen engaged in Buddhist religious ceremonies are of retirement age. They have enough free time, without the responsibility of taking care of children and grandchildren who are adults or working in different districts. Laywomen have networks that allow them to actively participate and collaborate in Buddhist ceremonies. Silpsupa found a few nuns or *maekhao* who simply attended religious ceremonies as participants, while laywomen connected with both local laypeople and monks. It seemed that certain laywomen communicated with local laypeople to announce upcoming Buddhist events, gather lay participants, and lead preparations, while monks communicated with other monks and novices to organize the events. In Luang Prabang, leaders who take care of secular practices are women, while those who take care of monastic practices are monks, except for some tasks that traditionally belong to laymen, such as preparation for monkhood ordination.

Unlike Luang Prabang, in Vientiane monasteries are located far from one another. During Silpsupa's visit to Vientiane, participants in Buddhist ceremonies came from different provinces or communities, and not all of them knew one another. Laywomen did not appear to play an important role in religious events, unlike the case of Luang Prabang. Monks seemed to play a crucial role. For instance, Silpsupa had the opportunity to join a Buddha image consecration ceremony and Mahachat festival in 2017. Monks and novices led different tasks and were followed by laypeople. Laymen and laywomen were general participants, and none of them seemed to be assisting the monks.

To compare the situations in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, it is important to compare their lay and monastic populations. In Luang Prabang, several sons are ordained as monks/novices or work in other districts or even different countries. Unemployed or retirement-aged laywomen are left behind in large numbers. They therefore have more time to spend on Buddhist activities. In contrast, in Vientiane there is a monastic school called Vat Ong Tü with a large number of monks and novices who can help in Buddhist ceremonies; thus, laywomen are not required for

ceremonies.

Dhamma is literally defined as the "teachings of the Buddha"; the Dhamma script is thus the script used for the Buddha's teachings. Buddhist texts were transmitted in the Dhamma script, literacy in which was limited to monks and novices. As Buddhism and religious texts were studied at monasteries by monks, laywomen were not encouraged to participate in the classes so as to avoid any scandals. Women consequently lacked the opportunity to gain Dhamma script literacy and were unable to inscribe manuscripts. Emma Tomalin's (2006, 389) interviewees in Thailand suggested the creation of a respected and recognized community of female ordinands that could enable the institutionalization of girls' education in the temples. To gain knowledge of Buddhism or the Dhamma script, women needed to seek opportunities on their own[21] or do self-study. For instance, Maekhao Mi, a nun whom Tsomo met in the village of Sebangfai in Laos, was interested in learning languages and even kept palm-leaf manuscripts in her *kuṭi* for learning the Dhamma script.[22]

Since manuscripts consist not only of texts but also of objects, in order to compensate for their lack of opportunities and skills women could offer material and/or financial support to sponsor manuscript production. Colophons record a number of women as sponsors of Thai-Lao manuscripts, mentioning their responsibilities for certain objects (see Tipitaka [DTP] 2017, 43; Silpsupa 2022, 222, 300). Fig. 2 shows the colophon of a palm-leaf manuscript from Luang Prabang, written in 1963 CE and mentioning the tasks of a female sponsor. The colophon mentions Ms. Khamin and her family from Mün Na village, who donated this manuscript to a monastery in 1963. Ms. Khamin dedicated the merit to her deceased parents, all beings, those with whom she had been negatively involved in her previous lives, and enlightenment.

Besides providing objects, laywomen supported manuscript production in other ways. The two most frequent alternatives were donating hair and wrapping cloth. The first represented or "replaced" monkhood ordination, while the second replaced Dhamma script literacy. In other words, monks wrote texts in manuscripts while women donated textiles for the production of manuscripts.

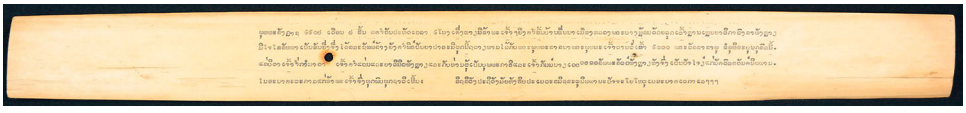

Fig. 2 Colophon of a Palm-Leaf Manuscript that Mentions a Female Sponsor. *Panya Palami* (Rewards Derived from Following The Thirty Perfections)

Source: Buddhist Archive of Photography (BAP), code: BAD-13-1-0760, Vat Saen Sukharam, Luang Prabang, 1963 CE

3.1 *Donation of Hair: Compensation for Monkhood Ordination (Masculinity)*

In the ashrama[23]—the Hindu philosophy of four life stages—the last stage, *sannyasa* (asceticism), is defined by the renunciation of all forms of material desire and settling into an ascetic life. *Sannyasa* practitioners (known as *sannyasin*) shave their heads (*mundana*) to symbolize their detachment from worldly beauty or physical appearance and spend their time on prayer and meditation. In the Hindu tradition, the hair one is born with is regarded as an undesirable remnant of past lives. In the *mundan* (Hindu hair-removal ceremony), the child's head is shaved to signify freedom from the past and a move forward to the future. It is also believed that shaving a child's head will stimulate the growth of the brain and nerves, while a tuft at the crown of the head will protect one's memories (Trüeb 2017, 2). Shaving the head is sometimes associated with asceticism and was practiced also by Prince Siddhattha.

In contrast, according to *Manusmṛiti* (Laws of Manu), the text containing Hindu codes of conduct, uncut hair is considered to render so much prestige that those who snatch and drag someone by the hair are punished by having both their hands cut off (Trüeb 2017, 2). Hair thus signifies one's social status. As the head sits at the top of one's body, the head and hair are in some cases regarded as taboo areas that can be touched only with permission. In India hairdressers and clinical trichologists are considered to have a special prerogative (Trüeb 2017, 2). In Thailand and Laos people believe in *khwan* or spirits that reside in one's head.[24] The house of *khwan* is characterized by a swirling or whorl-shaped cluster of hair at the top of one's head. Touching someone's head with disrespect is regarded as an improper act that can drive the *khwan* out of that person. Another widespread belief regarding the head is about one's guardian pagoda, known as Chu That (ชุธาตุ). According to a traditional Northern Thai belief, before a spirit gets a new rebirth it stays in a certain pagoda (Th: *chu that* ชุธาตุ), led by the animal of the year (Th: *tua poeng* ตั๋วเบี้ง). Then it moves to the head of the newborn's father for seven days, after which it enters the mother's pregnancy. The 12 animal years are associated with the 12 holy guardian pagodas in the northern and northeastern regions of Thailand as well as some other countries.

According to Ralph Trüeb (2017, 3), offering hair to the gods is a symbolic gesture of surrendering one's ego and expressing thanks for one's blessings. A well-known scene from the Buddha's life story *Paṭhamasambodhi* (1844–45), in which Gotama Buddha reunites with his family members in Kapila city, represents this idea. Bimbā, the wife of Prince Siddhattha or Gotama Buddha, unties her hair before respectfully cleaning his feet with it. Although Bimbā's hair is not cut as an offering, the cleaning of Gotama Buddha's feet in this way illustrates the hair being used as a means to clean. Offering the topmost physical organ of one's body to the bottom part

Fig. 3 Sandstone Bas-Relief Showing the Scene of Bimbā Wiping the Buddha's Feet with Her Hair (photo by Silpsupa Jaengsawang, August 23, 2024)

of someone else's, or letting one's highest organ touch someone else's lowest organ, represents the utmost respect and surrender. At the National Museum in Khon Kaen Province, Thailand, there is a sandstone bas-relief (c. 857–957 CE) portraying this famous scene (see Fig. 3). Following is a description of the scene from *Bimbābilāpaparivatta* (Bimbā's sorrow), the 18th episode in *Paṭhamasambodhi*, describing the sad Bimbā who prostrates herself and lays her head on the Buddha's feet:

> เมื่อมีพระเสาวนีย์ตรัสปริภาษอัสสุชลธาราดังนี้ ก็ค่อยดำรงพระสติอดกลั้นเสียซึ่งความโศก เสด็จคลานออกมาโดยพลัน จากครรภ์ทวารสถานที่สิริไสยาสน์ พระกรกอดเอาข้อพระบาทชบพระเศียรลงถวายนมัสการลงพลางพิลาปกราบทูลสารว่า [. . .] เมื่อพระพิมพาเทวีบรรยายปริเทวนกถา โดยนัยพรรณนาฉะนี้แล้วก็กลิ้งเกลือกพระอุตตมางคโมลีเหนือหลังพระบาทพระศาสดาโศกาพิลาป
>
> After she (Bimbā) sadly complained to the Buddha with tears, she collected herself, left her sleeping chamber, walked on her knees, held his feet with her hands, laid her head on his feet to

> pay respects, and said . . . when she expressed her sadness, she rolled her head on his feet. (His Supreme Patriarch Prince Paramanujitjinorot 1970, 275–276).

Beliefs about the head and hair, the highest physical organs, being venerated and properly treated are associated with the Buddhist religion in Northern Thailand and Laos, where women have traditionally had long hair. This influenced the manuscript culture in these areas—for instance, women removing their hair to make book-binding thread for manuscripts.

3.1.1 Use of Women's Hair in Other Areas: China

Historical evidence from other Buddhist-influenced areas shows laywomen dedicating their hair to pay respects to the religion. In China, for instance, there was a tradition of hair being used for hair embroidery (髮繡 *faxiu*)—the use of human hair as thread for stitching images on textiles. Hair embroidery was associated with success and prosperity, and during the Ming and Qing periods it was something that pious women did as a Buddhist devotional practice. According to Sun Peilan (1994), hair embroidery started in the Wu area during the Song period. There is a record of a young woman named Zhou Zhenguan from the Song Dynasty pricking her tongue and copying seventy thousand characters of the *Lotus Sutra* with her blood (Sun 1994, 31; Li 2012, 138). She then removed hairs from her head and used them to stitch every character. She started at the age of 13 and finished after 23 years. After finally completing the piece, she passed away while sitting cross-legged. Through the literature, at the very least one can be assured that the head was regarded as the highest organ, a dome of sacredness and intimacy.

Buddhist embroidery during the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1276) valued each stitch as a Buddha. Embroidery, a labor-intensive activity, is based on the accumulation of one stitch after another, and it is the accumulated labor that is cherished in the embroidering of Buddhist imagery. Hair offering was thus regarded as a bodily organ being externalized as a gift or spiritual exchange in the name of Buddhism. When hair was used as thread and transformed into images of divine figures, it became a gift or *bushi* (布施) (Li 2012, 133, 141, 153). From the fifteenth century onward, more and more women combined their skills and talents with resources they found in their bodies. They used their hair as thread to stitch images of Buddhist deities as a way of emulating practices such as writing scriptures in blood. Such physical sacrifice can be compared to the sacrifices of Vairocana Buddha, who used various parts of his body as mediums to convey the Dhamma (he peeled off his skin and used it as paper, broke off his bones and used them as pens, used his blood as ink, etc.). He

used parts of his body as substitutes for secular tools, such as a pen, paper, and ink (Li 2012, 142). The Buddhist doctrines of detaching from worldly desires to reach *nibbāna*, laywomen having long hair, and having pure intention to join in the production of religious manuscripts drew women to eventually find ways to compensate for their inferior status by donating parts of their physical bodies instead.

3.1.2 Use of Hair for Manuscripts

Laywomen's contributions to manuscripts came in the form of objects such as writing support, writing tools, writing substances, wooden covers, bookbinding thread, and wrapping cloth. Women could make bookbinding thread out of their hair and wrapping cloth with their skill of weaving. With respect to hair donation, long-haired women braided their hair into *sai sanòng* (สายสนอง), a book-binding thread for palm-leaf manuscripts that runs through the holes of the folios of a fascicle (see Fig. 4 below). There is no reliable documentation regarding the period in which this tradition became widespread. Traditionally, *sai sanòng* were made of materials such as cotton, silk, and jute. To pay homage to the Buddha's teachings in religious manuscripts, women could offer their hair by making a wish with every hair they removed, grouping the hair, and braiding it into a thread. By offering the highest and most precious part of their body and their effort of weaving the hair into durable bookbinding thread, the women were able to demonstrate their ardent Buddhist faith. The authors were not able to meet any women who had donated their hair for manuscript production.

Donating one's hair at the altar of religion also represents the renouncement of worldly desires. At his ordination ceremony a monk candidate has his head and eyebrows shaved. In addition to following Gotama Buddha's cutting of hair to show his renunciation of kingship, hair removal signifies detachment and a reduction of worldly

Fig. 4 Bookbinding Thread Made of Hair (year unknown) (photo by Porpon Suksai, January 15, 2020)
Petavatthu (Ghost stories), Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University

pleasure over physical appearance, which is also defined as defilement (*kilesa*) that likely distracts monks from self-practice and meditation. This practice would obviously resonate with the community performing ordination rituals in nineteenth-century Myanmar, reminding them that shaving their heads and taking vows was following in the footsteps of the Buddha. The cutting of hair is the most symbolic monastic renunciation of worldly life (Kaloyanides 2023, 240fn121). Buddhist disciples therefore have regularly scheduled Shaving Days four times a month, corresponding with the eve of a Buddhist Holy Day.[25] In this sense, hair donation by women for the making of religious manuscripts symbolized a faithful resolution to detach from all kinds of worldly desires and escape the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*) to attain enlightenment (*nibbāna*).

In early Buddhist texts, the ways prescribed for women to dedicate their bodies to their faith were probably limited to the natural resources of their bodies—for instance, long hair could be offered in exchange for merit. There is also evidence of the nails of the dead being offered for the production of religious manuscripts, in the form of a knot attached to a bookbinding thread. Although there is hardly any reliable evidence on the gender of nail donors, the donation of nails for use as knots for bookbinding thread is another example of organ sacrifice in veneration of the teachings of the Buddha. This organ sacrifice is similar to the self-sacrifice of the Bodhisatta (someone on the path to Buddhahood) for the sake of religion in his several previous births. His sacrifice was part of the Perfection of Generosity (*Dānapāramī*) and eventually led to his very last birth as Gotama Buddha.

> The gift of body or self-sacrifice is the ultimate level of the perfection of generosity in the system of the 30 perfections. It seems that the Buddhavaṃsa is the first text in the Pāli canon in which the 30 perfections are mentioned. (Arthid 2008, 780)

The practices of weaving one's hair into bookbinding thread and weaving textile into wrapping cloth are similar: strands of hair were braided into bookbinding thread, while strands of fabric (silk, cotton, jute) were woven into wrapping cloth. Textiles compensated for religious texts being conventionally inscribed or "woven" by monks. The donation of wrapping cloth was thus another representation of the Buddhist religious faith.

3.2 *Donation of Wrapping Cloth: Compensation for Dhamma Script Literacy (Skills)*

In ancient times, although women shared some household tasks with men, such as harvesting, taking care of livestock, product exchange, and trading to earn a living,

certain tasks were reserved for women: these included textile weaving and embroidery. Clothes and other household linens—pillows, curtains, bedsheets, etc.—were woven by female members of the family. From older female family members, women learned to make textiles with weaving looms and embellish them with embroidery; weaving and embroidery were thus passed down the generations within households. Knowledge of textile production was wholly "owned" by women, as opposed to knowledge of rice farming, which was shared by men and women. Women became the original givers of domestically produced textiles (Lefferts 2003, 90–91). Weaving was a sign that a young woman was reaching adulthood by gaining the ability to provide for the textile requirements of a household (Lefferts, n.d., 44). Since knowledge of weaving and embroidery was transmitted orally within families, no manuscripts on this have been discovered in the region.

In addition to general textile products used in everyday life, those for special occasions, especially religious events, were also the responsibility of females. Women took pride in their individual decorative styles. Certain materials, such as yarn and cotton (Wattana 2012, 49), and colors were related to traditional practices: for instance, white cloth was used for triple-tailed banners at funerals (Surapol 1999, 227–228). Vertical banners made of small pieces of cloth sewn together were hung on the wall of an ordination hall during the Mahachat festival[26] (see Fig. 5). In Myanmar women traditionally weave monk robes in a special robe-weaving contest at the

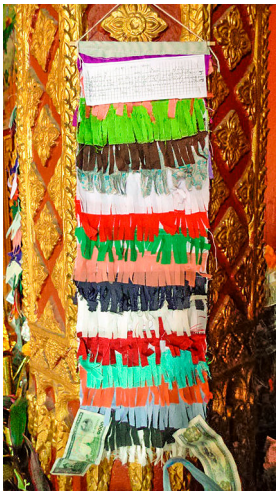

Fig. 5 Decorative Banners at the Mahachat Festival in Luang Prabang, March 17–19, 2017 (photo by Silpsupa Jaengsawang)

Shwedagon Pagoda on the occasion of Kathin.[27] Hand towels and handkerchiefs for monks, with or without decorations, are made by women. Tablecloths for monks' breakfast are another example. Weaving textiles for religious reasons was regarded as a channel for women to participate in meritorious activities. The most pride-filled weaving task is for women to make monk robes for their sons. Although monk robes are available in the market, they are still traditionally given by mothers to their sons (Lefferts, n.d., 45). With a deep-rooted belief in shared merit derived from monkhood ordination, mothers and/or other female family members weave cloth and dye it yellow for monk robes, expecting glorious merit that will lead them to the heavens and eventual *nibbāna*. The religious belief of depending on the merit derived from the ordination of one's own sons is reflected also in the well-known Thai phrase "holding the edge of a yellow robe [to reach up to heaven] (เกาะชายผ้าเหลือง *kò chai pha lüang*)." In Laos young monks explained that they had chosen this path for the sake of their parents, especially their mothers, to whom they could transfer the merit they made (Lefferts, n.d., 44). Thus, although women may not be ordained as monks, they can gain merit through their sons by means of making monk robes for them.

For ordination and other Buddhist ceremonies, the wrapping cloth for religious manuscripts was made by women. Buddhist teachings were orally transmitted by Gotama Buddha during his lifetime, and over the centuries they were revised (classified and systematized) by successive teachers in order to facilitate memorization (U Ko Lay 1984, 18). The Buddhist canon or *Tipiṭaka* was divided into three sections, or baskets (*piṭaka*), during the third revision in 235 BE in India. During the reign of King Vaṭṭhagāmaṇīabhaya of Sri Lanka, around 450 years after Gotama Buddha's *parinibbāna*, the Buddhist canon was first put down in writing, in palm-leaf manuscripts. As the Pāli language did not have its own script, transmission was done using local scripts that were aurally similar to Pāli pronunciation: the Dhamma, Lao Buhan, Lik Tai Nüa, Khom, Central Thai, and Tai Dam scripts. These scripts can be traced to South Indian writing systems, which were adapted for writing Pali and vernacular languages in Southeast Asia (CrossAsia, n.d.). Hence, the tradition of donating wrapping cloth for religious manuscripts began long after the Buddha's lifetime. Manuscripts mentioning the practice of donating wrapping cloth were written a couple of centuries ago: *Sòng Pha Phan Nangsü* (Rewards derived from the donation of manuscript wrapping cloth) (1850) (Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts, code: 06011406012-16) and *Salòng Hò Pha* (Rewards derived from the donation of manuscript wrapping cloth) (1967) (Buddhist Archive of Photography, code: BAD-22-1-0934); both are found in Luang Prabang.

Women were responsible for all decisions on the material, weaving styles, sizes,

colors, patterns, and decorations of manuscript wrapping cloth. In Northeastern Thailand the cloth was usually a vertical sheet, sometimes drawn or painted with the story of *Vessantara Jātaka*. The cloth could be decoratively displayed when not in use for wrapping manuscripts (Wattana 2012, 49). Before the development of wall paint, textiles were often used to beautify venues. Colorfully patterned door curtains shielded certain rooms from inquiring glances (Lefferts, n.d., 44).

Wrapping cloths could be offered to a monastery together with a particular manuscript or separately. The names of the weavers were not necessarily written on the cloth unless it was donated separately; otherwise, the names of all commissioning agents were often mentioned in the colophon. Wrapping cloths that were separately donated were collected and kept for future manuscripts that were donated without an accompanying cloth.

Since wrapping cloths were created by hand, they contained clues about the maker's weaving skills, social status, wealth, and attitude. The better the quality of the threads, the higher was the social status of the weavers, because not everybody could source good-quality materials. Imported materials, in particular, could be accessed mostly by high-ranking people.[28)] Weaving patterns and embroidery styles displayed the weaver's skills as well as aesthetic taste. Thus, wrapping cloths were a medium that represented the personal identity, taste, skills, endeavor, social status, and roles of weavers in their cultural contexts (Ciraphòn 2009, 56–57).

Weaving and donating wrapping cloth was regarded as a form of participation in the textual transmission of the Buddha's teachings—the study of the Dhamma—which lay on the path to enlightenment. Through monkhood, men had the opportunity to gain a Buddhist monastic education so as to eventually reach *nibbāna*, which was the ultimate goal, as reflected in (Pāli) phrases at the end of colophons. Women, however, were unable to become monks, which was regarded as an essential step for reaching *nibbāna*. To compensate for this lack of opportunity, women created wrapping cloth—although the tradition of weaving and donating cloth developed originally to protect manuscripts from insects and humidity, to keep them in well-organized bundles, and to venerate the Buddha's teachings (see Fig. 6).

Monks and novices studied canonical and other religious texts from palm-leaf manuscripts that were—whether in Pāli or in the vernacular—written entirely in the Dhamma script. Thus, they came to learn the Dhamma script and the Pāli language by reading, writing, memorizing, and transmitting religious texts. For women, on the other hand, the only path to *nibbāna* appeared to be through participating in the production of religious manuscripts. Accordingly, manuscripts written by males and wrapping cloth made by females represented reciprocal merit-making by Buddhists of both

Fig. 6 Bundle of Palm-Leaf Manuscripts with Wrapping Cloth (photo by Silpsupa Jaengsawang)

genders with the common goal of sustaining and protecting the teachings of the Buddha. According to the Buddha's prophecy of the Five Disappearances (*Pañca-antaradhāna*),[29] the teachings of the Buddha will fade out (*Pariyatti-antaradhāna*) over the course of time until the Buddhist Era's five-thousandth year, followed by the other four disappearances.[30] The collaboration between men and women for transmitting and protecting religious texts was done in an effort to prevent the Buddha's teachings from dying out.

3.3 *Other Alternatives*

Other choices that women made to gain merit from manuscript production and preservation varied depending on their individual skills and available materials. For instance, there is a cloth manuscript embroidered by Lady Bualai Thepphawong, the wife of the last ruler of Phrae, Lord Phiriya Thepphawong (1836–1912), whose expertise in embroidery was well known. Written in Pāli with the Dhamma script and embroidered with gold-colored thread, the manuscript is titled *Kammavācā*[31] and was displayed in a vertical showcase at the museum of Wat Phra Bat Ming Müang, Phrae Province, Northern Thailand (see Fig. 7). It has since been moved to another building.

The following paper manuscripts, surveyed by Silpsupa Jaengsawang in August 2022, were written by a senior laywoman named Bunyong, a ritual expert in Ban Saen village in Luang Prabang. With her remarkable ability to memorize Pāli prayers and ritual processes, as in some ethnic groups of Tai Dam where a woman functions as the leader of the *su khwan* (consolation) ceremony (Tsomo 2010, 90), Bunyong led villagers in reciting Pāli prayers and interacted with monks at religious ceremonies. She made two copies—one for herself and the other for a friend—of a ceremony manual composed of various Pāli prayers derived from printed books and suggestions for acts. The manuscripts were written in blank notebooks in the modern Lao script with ink pen (see Fig. 8).

Another female scribe was Mae Thao (grandmother) Saengcòi, who wrote texts

Fig. 7 Embroidered Cloth Manuscript by Lady Bualai Thepphawong in the Main Monastic Hall of Wat Phra Bat Ming Müang (photo by Silpsupa Jaengsawang, 2018)

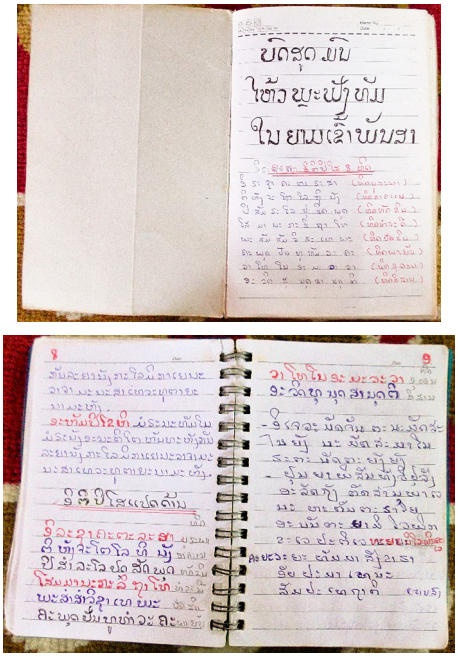

Fig. 8 Two Paper Manuscripts Made from Blank Notebooks by Ms. Bunyong from Luang Prabang (photo by Silpsupa Jaengsawang)

Fig. 9 Colophon of a Palm-Leaf Manuscript Mentioning a Female Sponsor
Sòng Sapphathung (Rewards Derived from the Donation of All Kinds of Religious Banners)
Source: Buddhist Archive of Photography (BAP), code: BAD-11-1-0060, Vat Suvanna Khili, Luang Prabang, 1926 CE

in the Lik script. She learned the script from her family and copied several mulberry paper manuscripts in the Thai Nüa manuscript culture, located in northwestern Laos, southwestern China (Yunnan), and northern and eastern Myanmar (Kachin State and Shan State, bordering northwestern Laos). She died in 1998 at the age of 81 (Wharton 2017, 43) and seems to have been among the last female scribes from the region.

In addition to providing materials and tools for manuscript production, females are recorded in some manuscript colophons as offering financial support and facilities. Some females were even engaged in commissioning manuscripts. In the case of *anisong* manuscripts,[32] for instance, there are similar numbers of lay sponsors and Sangha sponsors mentioned. Most of the lay sponsors were female. Harald Hundius (1990) calls the sponsors initial, or leading, lay monastic supporters of manuscript production. A large number of laypersons certainly sponsored manuscripts kept in Vat Si Bun Hüang, Luang Prabang. Khamvone Boulyaphonh and Volker Grabowsky (2017, 32) explain that in the catalogue of manuscripts discovered at the temple, laypeople formed the large majority of manuscript sponsors and donors: four-fifths were laypersons and only one-fifth members of the Sangha. Fig. 9 shows an excerpt from a palm-leaf manuscript from Luang Prabang written in 1926. The colophon mentions that the manuscript was donated in 1926 CE by Ms. Kòngsi from Kang village for a merit dedication to Ms. Sin.

Today, with people becoming increasingly interested in the preservation of local heritage, senior laywomen spend their free time volunteering and assisting in monastic libraries where ancient manuscripts are maintained and exhibited. As their library responsibilities are unrelated to discursive tasks, most of the volunteers are not able to read the manuscripts. They take care of them as cultural heritage objects and to prevent them from being stolen and damaged. Occasionally, they clean and rewrap manuscripts, rearrange manuscripts on a shelf, repair the wrapping cloth, or even make new wrapping cloth and donate it to the library.

4 Texts and Textiles in Compensation

As mentioned earlier, the production of religious manuscripts required monkhood status and Dhamma script literacy. To compensate for their lack of both these opportunities, women donated their hair and wove textiles to bind and wrap religious manuscripts. Donated hair compensated for the women's lack of masculinity and thus monkhood, while textile-weaving skills compensated for their lack of literacy in the Dhamma script. Thus, although women were excluded from the creation of manuscript texts, they compensated by donating textile products and other objects.

Why did women choose to make up for their physical disadvantage by donating hair? It could be because heads were revered as the place where holy spirits resided. Cleaning someone's feet with one's hair thus symbolized the greatest respect, and donating one's hair for making bookbinding thread implied a deep religious faith. In a sense, women's long hair could be viewed as compensating for monks' shaved heads. Hence, hair donation could represent both great respect for Buddhism and a solution to the female physical condition.

Why did women weave textiles to compensate for their lack of Dhamma script literacy? This can be regarded as a cultural phenomenon. The writing of manuscripts and weaving of textiles share a common feature: proficiency in a skill. Men had the opportunity to learn the Dhamma script, while women had the opportunity to learn textile weaving. The transmission of such forms of knowledge was specifically tied to gender: the Dhamma script was taught to monks in order to sustain and propagate the Buddha's teachings, while textile weaving was taught to women so they could contribute to the household economy. While men used their Dhamma script literacy to produce religious manuscripts, women used their textile weaving ability to participate in the production of these manuscripts. Although men could only write the manuscripts while women could only participate in their production, both derived shared merit from the commissioning of a manuscript.

Manuscript writing and textile weaving had another feature in common: the creation of a new composition using diverse elements. When writing a manuscript, scribes or copyists inscribed alphabets (consonants, vowels, numerals, symbols, etc.) with writing tools and writing substances. The letters were interwoven to compose a certain text. When weaving textiles, weavers or craftsmen connected strands of thread (cotton, silk,[33] jute, etc.) to create a new sheet of cloth. According to Ñāṇodaya, "every single letter of the Buddha's teaching has the same value as a single Buddha image" (Seeger 2006, 157). In this sense, combining alphabets into text and combining strands of thread into a sheet of cloth can both be described as a weav-

ing craft that requires special skills, and one alphabet can have the same value as one strand of thread. Manuscripts woven with alphabets and wrapping cloths woven with strands of thread are both the result of special abilities that are used to demonstrate a faith in Buddhism. Texts and textiles thus share the common character of being compositions of interwoven elements. Hence, writing and textile weaving are both activities that combine elements according to certain guidelines into a structured outcome:

> Literary works must be composed somehow. It is part of their nature to be woven, constructed, fabricated, collected together out of disparate elements. Most of these meanings are implied by the Latin *textere*, from which the English word "text" is derived. (Griffiths 1999, 22)

5 Conclusion

The donations of hair and manuscript wrapping cloth were a result of laywomen's struggles to partake in merit derived from producing and dedicating religious manuscripts. They did not believe that this merit should be limited to males, and they finally found ways to participate in gaining something that they considered precious. Their long hair being braided into bookbinding thread and their expertise in weaving and embroidering wrapping cloth were acknowledged as valuable in replacing monkhood status and Dhamma script literacy. Hair donation was a physical sacrifice to compensate for the lack of monkhood status, and the donation of wrapping cloth was an object sacrifice to compensate for the lack of ordination opportunities that led to Dhamma script literacy.

The eventual manuscript thus benefited from collaboration between both genders: men wrote texts for manuscript production, while women wove textiles for manuscript protection. The phenomenon reflects the gaining of shared merit by people of both genders in Thai-Lao Theravāda Buddhist society, where women are socially inferior. The collaborative merit-making implies that gender discrimination was not too strong: it was acceptable for women to participate in meritorious practices. Their hair was acceptable, and their textile weaving ability was also appreciated and included in the process of manuscript donation and thus merit making.

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Notes

1) Notes on Romanization of Thai and Lao
   The Romanization in this paper follows the regional pronunciation of the Thai and Lao languages by means of the Romanization system devised for conveying Thai syllables at the Asia-Africa Institute of Universität Hamburg. This system largely follows the system of Romanization stipulated by the Royal Thai Academy (Royal Institute 1941), with slight modifications. For example, there are two additional symbols (ü, ò) (for representing อือ and ออ). This simplified Romanization of Thai (and Lao) terms does not indicate vowel lengths or tones. With respect to the names of specific temples in Laos, the consonant /ວ/ is usually transcribed as "v" by scholars of Lao studies; thus, the term "temple-monastery" in proper names is spelled as "vat" in Lao instead of "wat." Yet, when referring to a Thai temple-monastery in general, "wat" is used.
2) *Sutta* or *Suttanta Piṭaka* is a compilation of the word of the Buddha in discourses—i.e., his sermons, lectures, and explanations of Dhamma that were delivered to suit particular individuals and occasions—along with compositions, narratives, and stories that originated in early Buddhism (Payutto 2002, 36).
3) There are five divisions in *Suttanta Piṭaka*: *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Saṁyutta Nikāya*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, and *Khuddaka Nikāya*.
4) *Tipiṭaka* literally means "three baskets," representing the three collections of the Buddhist canon: *Vinaya Piṭaka* (Collection of rules for monks and nuns), *Suttanta Piṭaka* (Collection of sermons, histories, stories, and accounts), and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (Collection of teachings and explanations in purely academic terms).
5) Myths are a form of folktales. According to Stith Thompson (1977), there are 11 categories of folktales: fairy tales, novellas, hero tales, sagas, explanatory tales, myths, animal tales, jests, formula tales, religious tales, and ghost tales.
6) The *Ābhassarā* realm is the realm of Brahmas with radiant lustre. Gunapala Piyasena Malalasekera (2009, 512) gives details on the *Ābhassarā* realm in terms of realm beings being reborn on Earth: "The idea of a return to an original purity could be found in relation to the development of deeper states of concentration. According to Buddhist cosmology, when the world-system goes through a period of contraction beings are reborn in the *Ābhassarā* realm (D. I, 17; D. III, 84), from which they eventually depart to be reborn on earth once the world-system has re-expanded. The *Ābhassarā* realm is the cosmological counterpart to the attainment of the second *jhāna*. Hence one who in the human realm succeeds in attaining this level of concentration could indeed be reckoned to be returning to an original purity of the mind, a degree of purity experienced a long time ago when living in the *Ābhassarā* realm during a time when this world-system had contracted."
7) There are 16 Form-Spheres (*Rūpabhava*, Fine-Material Sphere): *Brahmapārisajjā* (Realm of great Brahmas' attendants), *Brahmapurohitā* (Realm of great Brahmas' ministers), *Mahābrahmā* (Realm of great Brahma), *Parittābhā* (Realm of Brahmas with limited luster), *Appamāṇābhā* (Realm of Brahmas with infinite luster), *Ābhassarā* (Realm of Brahmas with radiant luster), *Parittasubhā* (Realm of Brahmas with limited aura), *Appamāṇasubhā* (Realm of Brahmas with in-

finite aura), *Subhakiṇhā* (Realm of Brahmas with steady aura), *Vehapphalā* (Realm of Brahmas with abundant rewards), *Asaññīsattā* (Realm of non-percipient beings), *Avihā* (Realm of Brahmas who do not fall from prosperity), *Atappā* (Realm of Brahmas who are serene), *Sudassā* (Realm of Brahmas who are beautiful), *Sudassī* (Realm of Brahmas who are clear-sighted), *Akaniṭṭhā* (Realm of the highest or supreme Brahmas). There are four Formless Spheres (*Arūpabhava*, immaterial states): *Ākāsānañcāyatana* (Sphere of infinity of space), *Viññāṇañcāyatana* (Sphere of infinity of consciousness), *Ākiñcaññāyatana* (Sphere of nothingness), and *Nevasaññānāsaññāyatana* (Sphere of neither perception nor non-perception) (Payutto 2015, 271–272).

8) "Motivated by the wish to live a celibate life dedicated to progress to awakening, the Buddha's fostermother Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī/Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī requests permission for women to go forth. The Buddha refuses. Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī and her followers nevertheless shave off their hair, put on robes, and follow the Buddha on his travels. The Buddha's attendant Ānanda intervenes on their behalf, raising the argument that women are in principle able to reach awakening. The Buddha gives permission for women to join the order" (Anālayo 2019, 40).
9) These 13 are Pajāpatī (praised for her long standing as the first nun), Khemā (praised for her great intellect), Upalavaṇṇā (praised for her divine miracles), Paṭācārā (praised for her good memory of the *Vinaya*), Dhammadinnā (praised for her homiletic expertise), Nandā (praised for her meditation), Soṇā (praised for her endeavor), Sakulā (praised for her divine sights), Bhaddā-Kuṇḍalakesī (praised for her sudden enlightenment), Bhaddāpilānī (praised for her ability to remember past lives), Bhaddākaccānā (praised for her success in attaining great *apiññā*), Kīsāgotamī (praised for her habit of wearing coarse robes), and Sigālamātā (praised for her renunciation of defilements with her faith) (Samer 1981, 37–38).
10) Her name was Bhaddā, but she was known as Kuṇḍalakesā for her curly hair (Bhaddā-Kuṇḍalakesā). She became an ascetic after being almost killed by her husband in a trick. She lost a debate to Venerable Sariputta and became a Buddhist nun. Her brilliant attainment of Arahantship was praised as being the fastest among all the nuns: "Just as the wanderer Bahiya was foremost amongst monks who attained arahantship faster than anyone else, she was foremost amongst nuns with the same quality" (Hecker 1994, 25).
11) The texts define the menace of lust caused by seeing women wearing their clothes improperly or carelessly, unintentionally letting parts of their bodies show. Regardless of women's intention of physical—or even sexual—exposure, the sight of private parts of female bodies is considered a menace.
12) Women are metaphorically compared to the five kinds of danger of a cobra: anger, revenge, venom (lust), forked tongue (instigation), and ingratitude (unfaithfulness).
13) Five statuses are never attainable for females: a Buddha, a wheel-turning king (*cakkavatti*), a heavenly king (God Sakka), Lord Māra, and a being in the Form-Sphere (*rūpabhava*) and Formless Sphere (*arūpabhava*). Although one can achieve the five statuses by accumulating merit no matter what one's gender, in the end one will be reborn in the five statuses only as a male. Gender does not matter in the process of accumulating merit to gain status, but actually being in the status is another matter. This gender discrimination can be found also in the case of the Tusitā heaven, which is inhabited only by male beings. Women who have accumulated sufficient merit and can eventually attain rebirth in the Tusitā level are born male in order to reside there.
14) In general there are two types of *jātaka*: canonical *jātaka* and non-canonical *jātaka*. Canonical *jātaka* (547 stories) are found in the Buddhist Pāli canon (*Tipiṭaka*). The well-known set of non-canonical *jātaka* in Thailand is *Paññāsa Jātaka* or *Bāhira Jātaka*. The term defines *jātaka* that are absent in the canonical 547 *jātaka* in *Khuddaka Nikāya*, the Buddhist canon, as *bāhira* (Pāli) means "external," "foreign," "outside" (U Ko Lay 1984). The Northern Thai *Piṭakamālā* calls the *Paññāsa Jātaka* "the fifty births outside the *saṅgāyanā*" (Skilling 2006, 130). It has been

found in Siam, Laos, Cambodia, Lan Na, and Myanmar. For the Pali National Library collection, Prince Damrong proposed the date 1457–1657 CE. The *Paññāsa Jātaka* of the Lan Na collection is supposed to have been composed by monks from Chiang Mai. Invented or apocryphal *Paññāsa Jātaka* stories are derived from Pāli/Sanskrit Buddhist texts, local folktales, India, and *Paññāsa Jātaka* themselves and have been transmitted in different languages and scripts, from local Pāli to *nissaya*. Individual stories included in *Paññāsa Jātaka*, not the set as a whole, had an enormous influence on Siamese literature. Classical Siamese literature does not treat the stories as extracts from the set of fifty; each story exists in its own right (Lamun 1995, 79; Skilling 2006, 134, 146, 148). In Thailand manuscripts were compiled by different persons and monasteries: King Anantawòrarit who had ten manuscript bundles copied in 1861/62 and 1863/64; a complete manuscript version (1834–36) kept at Wat Sung Men, Phrae Province; and other vernacular collections including that of Verenable Thip Chutithammo, the abbot of Wat Min, Chiang Tung (Skilling 2006, 148–149, 151).

15) Dīpaṅkara Buddha was the fourth Buddha and is mentioned in several *jātaka*. He prophesied that Sumedhatāpasa (later Prince Siddhattha), who devoted his body to be a bridge for Dīpaṅkara Buddha to walk on, would become a Buddha. Dīpaṅkara Buddha was from Amaravati city and the son of King Sudeva and Queen Sumedhā. There were three more Buddhas who lived in the same *kappa* (eon; world-eon; world-age) as Dīpaṅkara Buddha: Taṇhaṅkara Buddha, Medhaṅkara Buddha, and Saraṇaṅkara Buddha (Chollada 2013, 83).
16) The Dhamma script cultural domain includes Shan areas in Myanmar, southwestern China (Sipsòng Panna), Northern Thailand, Northeastern Thailand, Laos, and northern Vietnam.
17) Samer Boonma (1981, 41–50) gives five reasons for the decrease in the number of Buddhist nuns: (1) complicated ordination procedures, (2) disciplinary strictness, (3) female physical condition, (4) decline of Buddhism, and (5) lack of support.
18) *Sikkhamānā* or *sāmaṇerī* have to observe six precepts for two years and have to be re-ordained if a precept is broken (Samer 1981, 41–42).
19) Ralph Isaacs (2009, 121) clearly describes the Pongyibyan festival in Myanmar and mentions the roles of laywomen: generous donors earned more merit by contributing gifts for surviving monks of the monastery. The gifts were carried in a procession of *padaythabin*, tree-like stands of bamboo, each mounted on a bamboo platform and carried by two or four men or women.
20) During a research trip to Luang Prabang 2022, Silpsupa visited a monastery. She entered the elevated stage, set against a wall of the main monastic hall, and started looking at the books and other items there. A local layman entered the hall and spotted the author on the stage. He warned her to climb down and never go up there again. As the author was not local, the man let her off with a warning.
21) "Maekhaos (nuns) learn Buddhism informally from individual monks and by attending periodic meditation courses. Several nuns told us that they eavesdropped when a monk explained Buddhism to lay people; some stayed in the background and memorized every word the monk said. Occasionally, a nun will cross into neighbouring Thailand and enroll at a Buddhist institute there in order to learn more" (Tsomo 2010, 87).
22) "Her little *kuti* showed evidence of her studies, with an array of beginning English books as well as palm leaf Buddhist manuscripts. Maekhao My was teaching herself both English and Lao Tham, an ancient sacred script" (Tsomo 2010, 99).
23) The four ashramas are *Brahmacharya* (bachelor student), *Grihastha* (householder), *Vanaprastha* (forest dweller, retired), and *Sannyasa* (ascetic).
24) The term *khwan* is a word of pre-Buddhist Tai origin that was used in Tai, Indian (Assam), and Burmese (Shan State) regions before the Buddhist religion was propagated. In the Three Seals Law (กฎหมายตราสามดวง) the term *khwan* in spelled ขวัน, not ขวัญ. Together with one's physical elements, *khwan* is a spiritual element that remains in the human body and belongs to living

humans, whereas *winyan* (*viññāṇa*) is the spirit of the dead. Therefore, recitations and prayers for any *khwan*-related rituals are in the vernacular—so that living hosts and attendants can understand the meanings—while recitations and prayers for rituals related to the dead (e.g., funerals, commemorative rituals) are in Pāli due to its sacredness and ritual significance. Although it is believed that there are 32 individual *khwan* residing in all 32 of the body's organs, there are no rituals related to individual *khwan*. It is believed that every *khwan* of a human resides in and protects every organ. *Khwan* is believed to escape the body when a person is sick and remain in the body when the person is happy. When a human dies, it is believed that their *khwan* tries to return to the home and family within seven days. The meaning of *khwan* is generally understood as "courage" (Suwanna and Nuangnoi 1994, 76–86).

25) There are four Buddhist Holy days per month: the eighth waxing-moon day of the lunar month, the 15th waxing-moon day of the lunar month, the eighth waning-moon day of the lunar month, and the 15th (or 14th) waning-moon day of the lunar month.
26) The Mahachat, or Bun Phawet, or Tang Tham Luang festival is held for three days during February to March in Laos and Northeastern Thailand and in October to November in Central and Northern Thailand. In the festival all 13 episodes of *Vessantara Jātaka* are rhythmically recited by monks. According to the story of Venerable Malaya, those who listen to all 13 episodes within one day will be reborn in the period of Metteyya Buddha, the next forthcoming Buddha.
27) "These *kathina* robes are distributed to monks who have observed the Lenten retreat. At the Shwedagon a special robe-weaving contest is held at this time; looms are set up to weave fresh sets of robes called *matho thingan* (Myanmar) for the four central Buddha images housed in the pagodas's main sanctuaries. Teams of women representing various lay associations work the looms in shifts, cheered on by spectators, to complete the robes on time with the winning teams receiving a prize" (Pranke 2015, 31).
28) "Additionally, we know that foreign cloth was a significant factor used by élite groups to adorn and set themselves apart from the other members of the local populations. Sumptuary rules were never simply a matter of better dress; foreign cloth denotes power, prestige and access to non-native resources, and other-worldly attainment that ordinary folk could not command and that reinforced the rights and privileges of élites" (Lefferts 2003, 91).
29) The Five Disappearances (*Pañca-antaradhāna*) of the Buddhist order are the Buddha's teachings (*Pariyatti-antaradhāna*); Buddhist practices (*Paṭipati-antaradhāna*); enlightenment (*Paṭivedha-antaradhāna*); disciplined monks (*Liṅga-antaradhāna*); and relics, pagodas, and temples (*Dhātu-antaradhāna*).
30) "In the commentary on the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, it states that Buddhism will decline over time; therefore, the knowledge of the scriptures will eventually disappear. The first text to disappear would be the *Paṭṭhāna*, the last volume in the Abhidhamma, a text considered the most difficult to understand" (Saruya 2022, 3).
31) The formal words of an act. The text is used in ordination ceremonies.
32) Liturgical manuscripts that contain sermonic texts and explain meritorious rewards gained from several kinds of merit-making activities.
33) Donating wrapping cloth made of silk was also regarded as a form of compensation for the killing of thousands of silkworms. The sinful deed of killing was thus believed—or expected—to be forgiven, and the killed silkworms could also gain merit (Ubon Ratchathani University 2019).

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Marriage Migration in Tan Loc (Vietnam): Transformations and Considerations

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There has been abundant research on marriage migration from the perspective of the receiving side, but research from the perspective of sending countries is limited. This paper investigates transformations in the sending community of Tan Loc, Vietnam, an island greatly affected by international marriage migration over the last three decades. The results of an analysis of empirical data collected from field surveys in 2019, 2020, and 2022 reveal transformations in Tan Loc, such as economic improvement, changes in social values, new pathways of labor migration, and issues related to returned marriage migrants. The mechanism of marriage migration in Tan Loc today is different from the way it was from the 1980s to the 2000s. This may be the case in other sending communities as well. Thus, such transformations on both sending and receiving sides need to be addressed in scientific research.

Keywords: marriage migration, transformation, sending community, Tan Loc, Vietnam

1 Introduction

In contemporary Asia, the increasing number of female migrants is closely related to the need for foreign wives in developed countries. Some of the source countries are the Philippines, China, Thailand, and Vietnam. The receiving countries are usually Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. Due to a "bride shortage" in the latter countries, many rural men are forced to wed foreign wives via brokers. Thus, international marriage migration is most common between men and women of low socioeconomic status (Wang and Chang 2002; Kamiya and Lee 2009; Kawaguchi and Lee 2012; Pham *et al.* 2013).

Female migration for marriage, or "marriage migration," has become an important research issue in destination countries due to resultant problems involving the settlement, adaptation, contribution, and integration of foreign wives and their mixed

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children. In order to maintain socioeconomic stability, receiving states devote great efforts toward helping foreign wives with the settling-in process. Various relevant campaigns and projects have been launched in Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. Meanwhile, issues caused by marriage migration in countries of origin have received little attention.

From the perspective of the receiving side, abundant studies have been carried out to find ways of supporting foreign wives, clarifying their reality after migration (Pham *et al.* 2013), helping multicultural families, maintaining social stability while integrating the role of foreign wives (Piper 2003; Kim 2011; Yang 2011), investigating the challenges of getting citizenship (Tuen and Yeoh 2021), comparing the adaptation of different groups of foreign wives, explaining the connection between countries of origin and destination (Vu and Lee 2012), investigating the inclusion/exclusion of foreign wives and their mixed children (Kim 2011), exploring the role of ethnicity in international couples (Ahsan and Chattoraj 2023), etc.

Migrant wives (whether they return to their home countries or settle down in the destination) become a link between the origin and receiving sides. They play an important role in developing and maintaining social networks between the two sides. They also influence local attitudes toward international marriage migration. Therefore, analysis from the view of the sending side helps to clarify the linkages as well as the push and pull factors of ongoing marriage migration flows. Without such analysis, inflows to specific destinations cannot be fully explained and views on international marriage migration at the macro level would be incomprehensive. This gap needs to be filled by doing more empirical research in sending communities to clarify the mechanism of international marriage migration globally. This paper tries to fill the void in the literature on marriage migration studies by answering the following research question: What transformations are caused by outmigration from Tan Loc?

This study investigates social changes resulting from international marriage migration within a specific geographical and national boundary—the mechanism of the push and pull factors of the first phase (via brokers, or marriage-led migration) and the second phase (via social networks, including marriage-led mobilization and migration-led mobilization). The push and pull theory is applied to analyze transformations in the sending community and ongoing migration from the community. Such international outflows are explained and viewed from a geographical perspective.

2 Outmigration for International Marriage in Vietnam

International marriages are nothing new in Vietnam. However, marriages via brokers

and motivated by economic reasons began and increased rapidly after Doi Moi, or the country's opening up in 1986. The phenomenon was first observed in the Mekong Delta region and soon became popular in rural areas around the country. Due to Vietnam's close socioeconomic relationship with Taiwan in the 1980s and the idolization of Korean men via Korean film stars, most of the international marriages were between Vietnamese women and Taiwanese and Korean men. The first wave of marriage migration was to Taiwan, from 1986 to the late 2000s. After that, the migration flow shifted largely to Korea: from 2005 to 2019 there was a sharp increase in the number of Vietnamese women marrying Korean men. By 2019 the number of Vietnamese brides in Korea was about 180,000, accounting for 38.5 percent of foreign brides and the largest foreign brides' group in the country. According to the Vietnam Ministry of Justice (2019), between 1995 and 2019 a total of 393,570 Vietnamese women were married to foreigners; 90 percent of them were from rural areas, and 83 percent were married via brokers. Their main destinations included Korea, Taiwan, the United States, China, Singapore, and Malaysia.

In general, marriage outmigration of Vietnamese women can be explained by the following reasons: the influence of Vietnam's "open policy," the operation of marriage brokers, and economic motives (Pham *et al.* 2013). Today Vietnam is one of the major sources of marriage migrants in Asia, just after China and the Philippines.

The primary motivation for most Vietnamese female marriage migrants is to send remittances back their natal families. Bélanger and Tran (2011) concluded that altruism theory could explain why some Vietnamese women chose to marry foreigners —to show gratitude and alleviate their family's poverty. And after migration, most of them remitted funds to their natal families (Park *et al.* 2012). Their remittances motivated young girls in the sending communities to do the same thing, which created momentum for a wave of migration in rural Vietnam. The first and biggest source of marriage migrants in Vietnam is the Mekong Delta region, particularly Can Tho (Nguyen and Tran 2010). In fact, Tan Loc island (part of Can Tho city) was called the Taiwanese island and then the Korean island because of the great number of women from here who got married to Taiwanese and Korean nationals.

The Mekong Delta is one of the three regions in Vietnam with the lowest levels of education and literacy. In economically disadvantaged rural areas of this region, families often have many children. They marry off the daughters as soon as they can, allowing the sons to continue with their education. With low education and limited understanding, these girls easily accept both domestic arranged marriages as well as international marriages via brokers.

The wave of migration for marriage via brokers in the Mekong Delta from the

1980s to 2000s has attracted public and scientific attention. In contrast, marriage outflows via social networks (such as relatives and friends) have attracted less notice. Previous studies viewed Vietnamese marriage migrants as poor, uneducated girls migrating for money (marriage-led migration). That may have been true in the past, but it is not necessarily the case today. Modern girls are proactive in taking charge of their future and actively plan for marriage (migration-led marriage). This change needs to be reflected in research.

The waves of international marriage had a great impact on sending communities of the Mekong Delta—especially Can Tho city, since this has had the region's largest number of marriage migrants over the last three decades. Thus, I carried out field surveys in 2019, 2020, and 2022 in Tan Loc commune (which is on Tan Loc island, Thot Not District, Can Tho city) to collect empirical data on economic changes, social transformations, new forms of labor migration, emerging issues of returned migrants and their mixed children, etc. By investigating a case study in Tan Loc, this paper calls attention to continual outmigration from developing to developed countries, focusing on the relationship between marriage migration and transformations in sending communities.

3 Research Site: Tan Loc Island

The research site for this study was Tan Loc island (Fig. 1). This island, with an area of 32.68 km^2 and a population of around 30,595, is part of Thot Not District in Can Tho city. It is located on the Hau River, one of the two main branches of the Mekong River. Tan Loc can be reached only by ferry or boat, and most of its residents depend on farming for a livelihood.

The trend of migrating for marriage started in Tan Loc in the 1990s. About 80 percent of families on the island have daughters married to foreigners—mainly to Taiwanese before 2005 and Korean men after that. The living conditions of migrant families have improved, partly thanks to remittances from migrant daughters. Most of the marriage migrants are young, with a low education level, and from poor families.

In Tan Loc, the percentage of women married to Taiwanese men decreased from around 80 percent in the 1990s to 50 percent in the 2000s and 20 percent in the 2010s. In contrast, the percentage of women married to Korean nationals increased from around 40 percent in the 2000s to 70 percent in the 2010s. Table 1 shows that marriages to Korean men peaked in 2010, partly due to the ease of legal procedures and Korean men paying large sums of money for marriage tours.

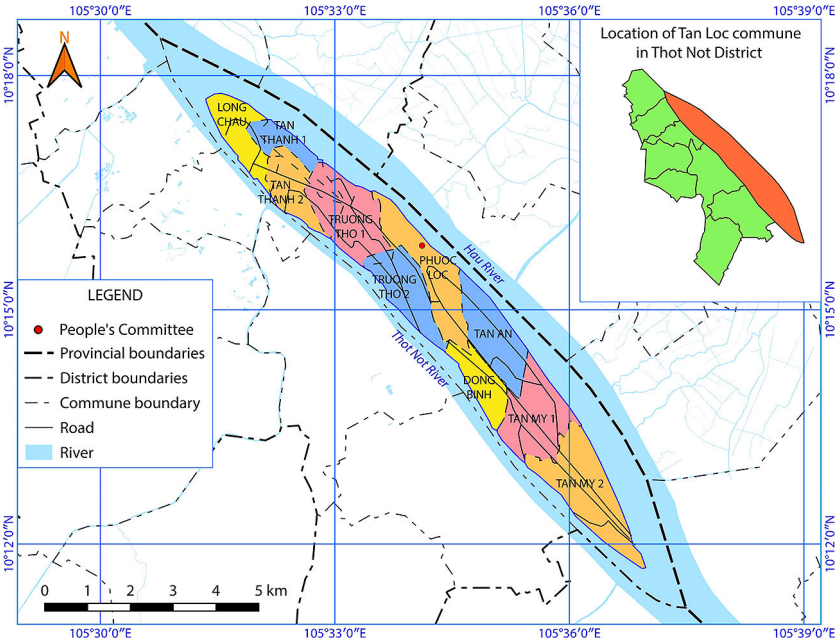

Fig. 1 Administrative Map of Tan Loc Commune, Thot Not District, Can Tho City
Source: Phạm Thị Binh

Table 1 Number of Migrants Due to Marriage to Korean Nationals

Year	Vietnam	Can Tho	Tan Loc
2004	560	34	0
2005	1,030	379	60
2006	7,853	700	250
2010	8,425	635	157
2011	6,957	732	135
2012	6,343	856	112
2013	6,066	943	98
2014	4,374	658	78
2015	4,158	616	57
2016	1,492	212	38

Source: Vietnam Ministry of Justice (2019)

4 Data and Methodology

To collect empirical data, in-depth interviews and convenience sampling were used.

Table 2 Details of Samples

Group 1		
Year	Details	Number of Subjects
2019	1 family	3 migrants
	1 family	2 migrants
	7 families	1 migrant per family
Total		12 migrant women
Group 2		
2020	10 families	20 young girls
2022	8 families	15 young girls
Total		35 young girls

Source: Surveys by Phạm Thị Binh (2019, 2020, 2022)

Thus, small sample size and sampling bias are limitations of this study. In December 2019 in-depth interviews were carried out with nine families whose daughters had migrated for marriage. Because one family had three daughters married to Taiwanese and Korean men and one family had two daughters married to Taiwanese and Korean men, the total number of marriage migrants was 12. This group is hereafter called Group 1. In order to obtain more recent information on the trend of marrying foreign men on Tan Loc island, I returned to interview 35 young and unmarried girls in March 2020 (20 interviewees) and May 2022 (15 interviewees). This group is hereafter called Group 2. The samples are documented in Table 2.

5 Results

5.1 *Characteristics of Marriage Migrants in Group 1*

Table 3 summarizes the general characteristics of the 12 marriage migrants in Group 1. In general, the migrants in this group are young, have a low education level (below junior high school), and worked poorly paid and unstable jobs in Vietnam. After migration, most of them are in a better economic situation (based on their own assessment).

After marriage, half the Vietnamese marriage migrants are housewives. Most of them have children and still live in the destination countries. About 75 percent of them believe that their economic situation has improved. However, only 67 percent

Table 3 Profiles of Vietnamese Marriage Migrants in Group 1 (n = 12)

Criterion		No./%
Education	Primary	3 (25%)
	Junior	7 (58%)
	Senior	2 (17%)
Marriage Age	17–19	7 (58%)
	20–24	3 (25%)
	25–29	2 (17%)
Occupation Before Migration	Maidservant	5 (42%)
	Worker	3 (25%)
	Farmer	1 (8%)
	Selling*	1 (8%)
	Others	2 (17%)
Occupation After Migration	Housewife	6 (50%)
	Worker	3 (25%)
	Farmer	2 (17%)
	Other	1 (8%)
Number of Children	0	2 (17%)
	1	4 (33%)
	2	6 (50%)
Present Residence	Taiwan	6 (50%)
	Korea	4 (33%)
	Vietnam	2 (17%)
Economic Situation After Marriage (Self-assessment)	Higher	9 (75%)
	Unchanged	2 (17%)
	Lower	1 (8%)
Send Remittances	Yes	8 (67%)
	Not much/No	4 (33%)
Family Attitude	Supportive	12 (100%)

Source: Survey by Phạm Thị Bình (2019)
Notes: * Selling lottery tickets or peddling small items on the street.

remit funds to their natal families. To some extent, this figure corroborates the findings of previous studies that most natal families' economic condition is improved thanks to the daughters' remittances.

We now analyze the information collected via in-depth interviews with parents of cases 2, 3, and 4 (three migrants from the same family), cases 6 and 7 (two migrants from the same family), and case 8. The parents of cases 2, 3, and 4 (Group 1) were pleased and eager to share information on their daughters. The father said:

> I am very happy and proud of my three daughters. They have money and can support us. They have bought everything in this house. We no longer have to work hard. The remittances from my daughters are more than we expected. I think we are lucky to have daughters. Especially my two daughters in Taiwan can remit money and visit us regularly, about twice a year. If I had one more daughter, I would suggest that she marry a foreign man.

The father expressed satisfaction and pride in his daughters. He supported his daughters in migrating for marriage. He considered himself lucky to have daughters. With the support of his three daughters, his only son was able to start a business producing cartons and open a coffee shop:

> My family was so poor, we did not have enough rice for raising four children [three girls and a boy]. But now, we have everything. Next year I will buy a car for my son. He is now running a small carton factory and a coffee shop in Tan Loc.

The father noted that the attitudes of local residents toward his daughters' migration were changing and becoming more positive. He was no longer accused of selling his daughters for money:

> At first, we were accused of selling my daughters for money. But now many parents have followed us. They changed and thought about it openly. You see, there are girls marrying Vietnamese men, but they're unhappy and so poor. My daughters are all lucky. So I feel comfortable now.

The parents of cases 6 and 7 (Group 1) said:

> I wish I had more than two daughters. My two sons in Vietnam cannot help. My older daughter (living in a suburb of Taipei) works on her big farm, planting vegetables and fruit. My younger daughter married a Korean. She works in a factory (in Kyeongnam). They sometimes visit us. Their children are too small, and they are busy with farmwork as well as taking care of their parents-in-law. Farmwork in Taiwan is not as hard as in Vietnam. My daughter has to hire people to work on her big farm.

The father's wish to have more daughters represents the shifting roles of children in his family, closely related to economic factors.

The parents of case 8 were pleased that the mother had a chance to work in Korea as a result of the daughter's migration. The father said:

> Things are much better since my daughter married a Korean man. I do not have to work hard. I just stay home to take care of my second daughter, who is 12 years old. My wife has the chance to work in Korea. She earns a lot of money. She often stays there six months for work. Next week she will go to Korea again. I will take care of the house.

The mother added:

> First, I came to Korea to take care of my daughter's baby. Then I took up a part-time job because I had free time. Now my husband encourages me to go to Korea for work again, like many other parents from here. My daughter can give a guarantee for my visa. I am happy. So, I am ready to go.

The parents of case 8 also demonstrate a new, safe, and free-of-charge pathway to migration for work via the connection of marriage migrants.

5.2 *Potential Marriage Migrants in Group 2*

Interview data show that the economic improvement of marriage migrant families inspires many young girls in Tan Loc to find their own ways of supporting their parents via international marriage—but differently. They have active plans for migration, as shown in the analysis below.

Table 4 presents the profiles of 35 young, unmarried girls hoping to migrate for marriage. The data was collected through in-depth interviews in 2020 and 2022.

Table 4 shows that more than half the young girls expect to migrate for marriage. They are relatively well educated: more than half of them (51.5 percent) have a high school and tertiary education, 20 percent have completed only primary school, and almost half the respondents were students at the time of the survey.

Fig. 2 shows the differences between the two groups in terms of age, education level, and occupation. Migrants in Group 1 are younger (83 percent under 25 years old), they are less educated (83 percent secondary school and lower), and none of them are students. In contrast, the Group 2 girls are a little older (77 percent under 25 years old) but better educated (about 50 percent secondary school and lower). And nearly half of them were students in universities in the Mekong Delta region at the time of the surveys.

Table 4 Profiles of Potential Marriage Migrants, Group 2 (n = 35)

Criterion		No./%
Education	Primary	7 (20%)
	Junior	10 (28.5%)
	Senior	15 (42.9%)
	Tertiary	3 (8.6%)
Age	17–19	21 (60%)
	20–24	6 (17%)
	25–29	8 (23%)
Occupation	Maidservant	7 (20%)
	Worker	10 (28.5%)
	Farmer	3 (8.6%)
	Student	15 (42.9%)
Expectation to Migrate for Marriage	Expect	19 (54.3%)
	Hesitate	16 (45.7%)

Source: Surveys by Phạm Thị Binh (2020, 2022)

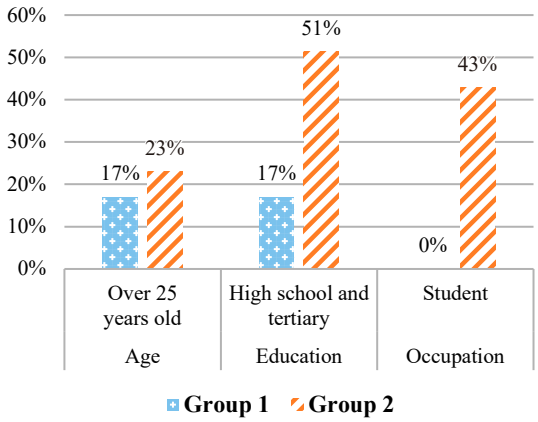

Fig. 2 Comparison of the Two Groups
Source: Surveys by Phạm Thị Binh (2019, 2020, 2022)

One of the girls, Ngan (Group 2), said:

I will get a Korean certificate (aim for Topik 3) after finishing high school. Then I will have a good chance of marrying a Korean man, like my two cousins. They have a good life in Korea, much better than in Vietnam. They can even bring their mum, dad, and siblings to Korea for work. That sounds great. I hope to do the same.

Upon being asked why she had not chosen Taiwan, Ngan replied:

> There are two reasons. The first is the language; it is more difficult to learn. The second is the fear of Taiwanese men. Near my home there are two returned cases who were married to Taiwanese men in 2000. After five years, they returned to Vietnam. One migrant returned alone. She soon got remarried to a Korean. The other migrant was accompanied by her two-year-old daughter. She faced a lot of difficulties. People looked down on her. She left her daughter in Vietnam and moved to Korea after remarrying a Korean man. Last year she brought her daughter (19 years old) to Korea, also for marriage.

Another girl, Ba (Group 2), expressed her own thinking:

> My aim is to go to Korea. I am learning Korean now. To me, Korea is better than Taiwan. I have seen that migrants in Korea can remit much more to their parents than those in Taiwan. More important, it is easier to take relatives to Korea for work with a higher salary.

Ba seems to be actively making her own plans for migration. When asked how she obtained information on Korea, Ba replied:

> I chat with my close friend regularly via Facebook, and I know that her life in Korea is good and safe. She advised me to finish high school and study Korean. People with a low education level and who are poor at Korean like her (secondary) cannot quickly get citizenship, and it is not easy to get a job or higher education in Korea.

Ba mentioned her parents' support:

> They support me, like many other parents here. You see, most parents who receive money from their migrant daughters do not want to work hard like before. Their land is on rent, and they go to Korea for work. Isn't that much better?

Ut Em, one of the girls in Group 2 who hesitated to migrate for marriage, said:

> I sometimes want to migrate to Korea through marriage. However, I also think of migrating to Korea for studying, like one of my friends. So, I am learning Korean. I hope to get my Topik 4 certificate this year. One of my friends went to Korea to study, and after some time she got married to a Korean man. She works as a nurse in a hospital. Her husband is a doctor. To me, they are so rich.

Table 5 Differences between the Two Groups

	Group 1	Group 2
Age	Younger	Older
Education	Lower	Much higher
Aim	Money	Better service, better employment, economic betterment
Preparation	Passive (limited information)	Active (better language, higher education, connection with friends/relatives in the destination, more information)
Marriage Pathway	Via broker	Via social networks (friends, relatives)

Source: Surveys by Phạm Thị Binh (2019, 2020, 2022)

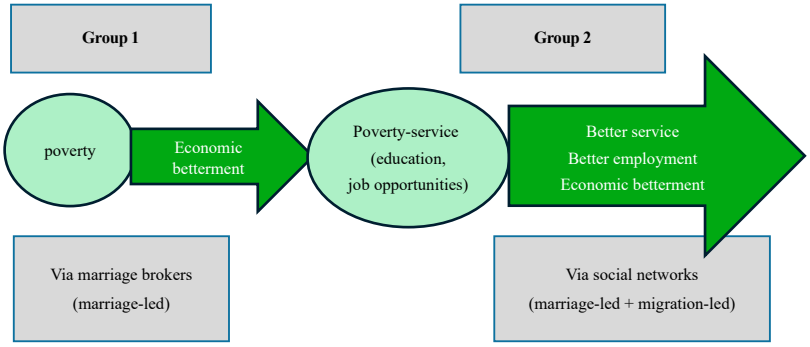

Fig. 3 Push-Pull Factors for Outmigration of Both Groups on Tan Loc Island
Source: Surveys by Phạm Thị Binh (2019, 2020, 2022)

The above cases indicate that there may soon be a tendency toward migration-led marriage in Tan Loc as well as other sending places.

Table 5 shows the differences between the two groups. Unlike Group 1, the young girls in Group 2 have a variety of aims and make active preparations before migrating. This not only represents their greater control over the future but also implies a change in the migration trend, from marriage-led mobility to migration-led mobility.

The push and pull factors for marriage outmigration among the two groups in Tan Loc are different, as discussed below (Fig. 3). The Group 2 subjects have more aims, and they make active preparations and take control of their migration strategy. This reflects a change from marriage-led to migration-led mobility.

6 Discussion

Data collected from the interviews show the following socioeconomic transformations in Tan Loc: economic improvement of natal families, changing attitudes of local people, the development of migration networks, a new form of labor migration, changing social values, and emerging issues involving returned marriage migrants and their mixed children. The mechanism of these transformations is heavily impacted by economic factors, both directly and indirectly.

6.1 *Improvement of Economic Conditions*

The 12 cases in Group 1 agree that marriage migration is one way to reduce poverty in rural areas of Vietnam, as concluded by Nguyen and Tran (2010), Le *et al.* (2012), and Pham *et al.* (2013). This also explains why in economically disadvantaged rural areas the number of women marrying foreign men continues to increase (Nguyen and Tran 2010; Hoang 2013; Pham *et al.* 2013). And the economic improvement of certain families in Tan Loc not only changes local people's attitude and behavior but also encourages young girls to make their own plans to migrate for marriage.

6.2 *Changing Attitudes and Behavior*

Changes in the Tan Loc community include changes in attitudes and behavior (Table 6).

Local attitudes toward international marriage migration have changed. In the past, parents marrying off their daughters to unknown men in foreign countries via brokers were accused of selling their daughters for money, leaving the future to

Table 6 Contrasts in Attitude and Behavior

	Parties	In the Past	At Present
Attitude	Migrant women, prospective migrants	Passive, unrealistic ideas	Active, realistic
	Family members	Expect, urge	Encourage
	Communities	Criticize	Accept and praise
Behavior	Migrant women, prospective migrants	No preparation	Make their own decisions with careful preparation and strategy
	Family members	Actively support	Agree
	Communities	Accuse parents	No longer accuse parents

Source: Surveys by Phạm Thị Bình (2019, 2020, 2022)

chance. Gradually, as the phenomenon became more familiar and people saw the improved economic condition of migrants' natal families, local people stopped criticizing the parents. Some parents of marriage migrants even became role models to emulate.

Formerly, one factor attracting Vietnamese migrants to Korea was the idolization of Korean film stars (Hoang 2013). However, this study's survey results show that young girls have become more realistic. They do not have any illusions about foreign men and life overseas. Through their social networks they seek information from various sources. Many young girls still expect to migrate for marriage, but they do so with greater intention. They pursue higher education and work toward language proficiency so they can avoid the discomforts experienced by returnees and other cases. Their expectations derive from successful cases of marriage migrants in Tan Loc.

Sixteen-year-old Ngan is actively strategizing to follow her two cousins who married Korean nationals. This is different from what Nguyen and Tran (2010) found, that many young girls in the Mekong Delta region in the 2000s ended their schooling before the age of 16 and sought opportunities to become foreign wives. Today, young girls tend to aim for more education before marriage. Some make careful plans to study in Korea and later look for opportunities to get married.

6.3 *Transformation of Social Values*

There has been a transformation of gender roles within the family in Vietnam as a result of marriage migration. Daughters were generally viewed less favorably than sons: they were often uneducated and married off as soon as possible, after which they were expected to devote themselves to their husband's family. But this has been changing. As Bélanger and Tran (2011) concluded, the motivation of migrant daughters was to send remittances to their parents to show their gratitude. All parents of migrants expected to receive remittances. The parents of cases 2, 3, and 4 expressed happiness and pride over their three daughters' remittances. They emphasized the important role of their daughters in improving the family's economic condition.

The parents of cases 6 and 7 demonstrated that parents in Tan Loc were gradually changing their minds about gender preference: the role and position of daughters had become more important, since daughters were able to support their natal family. These parents preferred daughters to sons. Such widespread thinking among local people could in the long term lead to gender imbalance at birth and adverse consequences in family and social relations. The results of the interviews (Group 2) also show the changing attitude toward children's duties by gender among the young girls themselves, who expect to take on the role of supporting their parents in different ways after migration. For example, Ba expects to bring her relatives to Korea for

work in addition to sending remittances.

6.4 *Development of a Migration Network*

An analysis of the 35 cases in Group 2 reveals that the prospect of remitting funds to natal families attracts young girls in Tan Loc to dream of a new and better life in foreign countries through marriage. However, the young girls are more active and realistic than girls of the past. After connecting with their relatives and friends in Korea, they make their own plans, decisions, and preparations. For example, instead of aiming just to send remittances, some young girls prepare for a long-term journey that involves getting dual citizenship after migration to guarantee their relatives the opportunity of working in the destination country. This is a safer strategy—migration-led rather than marriage-led. Thus, social networks play an important role in marriage migration in Tan Loc today, unlike the past mechanism of brokered marriages investigated by Wang and Chang (2002). Parents today seem more concerned about the quality of their daughters' lives. They do not expect remittances immediately after migration, in contrast to the days of brokered marriages when parents were not bothered about the quality of their daughters' post-migration lives and were interested only in remittances.

6.5 *Development of a New Pathway for Labor Migration*

Marriage migrants become a link between sending and receiving communities to promote the labor migration network. As mentioned with reference to case 8 (Group 1), the mother (in her 40s) migrates to Korea to work every six months to a year, depending on her visa status. In the beginning, case 8 used to send money back to Vietnam. However, after bringing her mother to Korea for work, she no longer needs to remit funds. The mother has been to Korea five times and can earn much more money there than in Vietnam. The family has built a new, big, and well-appointed villa-like house in Tan Loc.

Case 8 shows that marriage migrants can guarantee visas for their relatives (a long-term multiple-entry F-1-5 visa in the case of Korea) to enter destination countries and work. This new pathway is becoming more popular in families with marriage-migrant daughters. For parents or siblings of migrants, it is a legal, secure, and reliable option to get jobs in foreign countries without paying fees to agents or brokers and much better than labor migration. This is a new pathway of labor movement from sending to receiving countries, though it is not very visible or acknowledged in the literature on marriage migration.

6.6 *Emerging Issues with Regard to Returned Migrants and Their Mixed Children*

As shared by Ngan, the sending side is often faced with problems related to the return of female marriage migrants. Some returnees find a way to remigrate for marriage to Korea, leaving their mixed children in Vietnam. Before a daughter migrates for marriage, many families are criticized for selling the dignity of Vietnamese women, etc. Thus, returned marriage migrants find it difficult to settle back in the community. Community members look down on them and consider them to be failures. It is hard —perhaps impossible—for them to remarry a Vietnamese man. Their situation is even worse if they return with mixed children. Such mixed children could do with more support from local governments and communities. Future research needs to be done to devise solutions for supporting Vietnamese returnees and their mixed children, as mentioned by Kim *et al.* (2017).

7 Conclusion

The results of this study show various transformations in Tan Loc brought about through marriage migration: economic upliftment, changing social values and attitudes, the development of migration networks, new forms of labor migration, emerging issues concerning returnees, etc. Such changes in other sending communities are worth researching. The internet has made it easy for marriage migrants and people in source countries to connect via Facebook, Zalo, etc. It is necessary to apply migration network theory (focusing on both online and offline networks) to investigate the linkage between migrants' social networks and outflows to destination countries. Moreover, there are issues faced by the sending side, such as problems with returnees and their mixed children, a new pathway of labor migration, etc. The contribution of receiving countries is needed to help with resolving such issues. This study provides a preliminary empirical investigation of the phenomenon. Further research is necessary to gain a comprehensive view of marriage migration, analyzing the phenomenon from both sides in order to understand international flows and the relationships between push and pull factors globally as well as regionally.

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Peatland Management and Restoration in Central Kalimantan and Riau: The Role of Local Community Participation

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Over the years peatlands in Indonesia have suffered considerable damage, becoming vulnerable to hazards such as fires. The destruction of peatland is due to both legal and illegal logging, along with land conversion for agriculture, mining, and industrial forestry—including the planting of oil palm, paddy rice, and Industrial Forest Plantations (Hutan Tanaman Industri)—all of which lead to forest fires, deforestation, and forest degradation. This article addresses two points: first, the contributions of private companies to forest fires; and second, how local people in Riau and Central Kalimantan Provinces actively participate in sustainable peat swamp forest management and restoration. Building on various participation approaches as a theoretical framework for the analysis of peatland management and restoration, this study uses both political ecology, which emphasizes the roles of stakeholders (government, private companies, nongovernmental organizations, academics, local people), and the actor-oriented approach to development. The findings of the study indicate that the private sector contributes significantly to the deterioration of peatlands in Indonesia. Conversely, government policy plays a crucial role in driving and supporting restoration efforts according to the 3R (rewetting, revegetation, and revitalization) model. Furthermore, a key finding across all research locations is the significant role played by village-level actors, such as the village head, who can draw on various types of capital in shaping the effectiveness of peat restoration programs. Actors at the village level are not necessarily homogeneous; there is a complex mix of actors with unique contexts and interaction dynamics in each research location.

Keywords: peatland, restoration, participation, private company, local people

1 Introduction

Tropical peatlands around the world are important ecosystems, covering around 40 million hectares and storing around 17–19 percent of the world's carbon (Sakuntaladewi *et al.* 2021; Ulya *et al.* 2021). However, they are being degraded in many regions as a result of land clearance, drainage, fire, and climate change (Parish *et al.* 2008; Merten *et al.* 2021; Atkinson and Alibašić 2023). About 21 million hectares, or 10.8 percent, of Indonesia's land area is registered as peatland, which places Indonesia as the country with the fourth largest expanse of peatland (Mujiono 2017). Peatland serves various strategic ecosystem purposes for Indonesia and globally, including the maintenance of biodiversity, carbon storage, and water regulation (Sakuntaladewi *et al.* 2022; Yeny *et al.* 2022). Such roles provide the rationale for efforts to save the peatland ecosystem. Peatland management must be based on prudence and careful planning, as peatland is difficult and costly to restore if damaged (Hidayat 2016).

Peatland's vulnerability to fire results in emissions that contribute to global environmental problems (Cisneros *et al.* 2021; Numata *et al.* 2022; Erwiningsih 2023; Mutawalli *et al.* 2023). Indeed, in Indonesia there has been a significant amount of conversion of peat areas for the establishment of monoculture crops or plantations, such as oil palm plantations, which has resulted in a significant increase in the frequency of fires (Dohong 2016; Prastyaningsih *et al.* 2019; Winarno *et al.* 2020; Arifin and Setyawan 2022; Rozaki *et al.* 2022; Hidayat *et al.* 2023; Ramdani and Mustalahti 2023). The impact of Indonesia's fires and resultant thick smoke was felt in neighboring countries such as Malaysia and Singapore in 1997, 2015, and 2019 (Bonn *et al.* 2016; Greenpeace 2021; Kiely *et al.* 2021; Hein *et al.* 2022). In 2015 there were forest fires in Indonesia over two million hectares, which caused an estimated loss of around IDR 220 trillion (equivalent to USD 15 billion) in terms of timber and non-timber products, agricultural products, biodiversity, and other resources (Setkab RI 2017; Laia *et al.* 2021; Rotinsulu *et al.* 2022; Yuwati and Pratiwi 2022; Azni *et al.* 2023; Kompas 2023). The 2015 peatland fires resulted in emissions of approximately 1.3–1.91 GtCO2 and exposed 43 million individuals to haze; this caused an estimated 500,000 cases of acute respiratory infection (Rotinsulu *et al.* 2022; Purnomo *et al.* 2024). Land fires, including those in the peatlands, also had an adverse impact on the welfare of rural communities. For instance, 56% of farmers' agricultural land in several villages and sub-districts in Central Kalimantan and South Kalimantan was burned due to peatland fires (Rozaki *et al.* 2022). Estimated losses due to fires sometimes do not account for the concomitant decline in biodiversity.

In an effort to bring about the sustainable use of peatland through good governance, the Indonesian government initiated a number of measures. In the 2016–20 five-year plan it established the Peat and Mangrove Restoration Agency (Badan Restorasi Gambut dan Mangrove; BRGM) and set up collaborations with other stakeholders, including private companies, NGOs, academics, and representatives of local communities, to restore two million hectares of peatland (Badan Restorasi Gambut 2016).

In addition to government initiatives, the role of the community is important in sustainable peatland management (Yuwati and Pratiwi 2022; Tan *et al.* 2023; Choi *et al.* 2024; Juniyanti *et al.* 2024). Local communities already have granular knowledge of small-scale traditional ecology (Siburian 2020; Hidayat *et al.* 2023). They can also protect natural resources and their diversity, thus contributing to the sustainability of local and ultimately global development (Donovan and Puri 2004; Tan *et al.* 2023; Choi *et al.* 2024). Local communities can help to achieve a balance between development and environmental conservation (Magni 2017; Kato *et al.* 2021, Ch. 4). In addition, community involvement in peatland restoration activities can help people affected by

detrimental activities to understand their impact. It can also help people find alternative sources of income to replace income obtained from the destructive use of peatlands (Antriyandarti *et al.* 2019; Salminah *et al.* 2021). Community involvement in restoration activities is aimed at minimizing impacts on the community from such activities (Syahza *et al.* 2020; Gunawan *et al.* 2021, Ch. 28; Laia *et al.* 2021). This strategy has proven effective, for instance, in Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province (Tan *et al.* 2023).

The BRGM identified three measures and associated techniques to facilitate peatland restoration, known as the 3Rs in the Indonesian context: rewetting (R1) the peatlands to raise the water level; revegetating (R2) by planting native peat wood species; and revitalizing (R3) the local economy through initiatives targeting land-based, water-based, and environmental service-based livelihoods (Dohong 2017). Although efforts have been made to incorporate local knowledge in these initiatives, in reality community participation in restoration activities is insufficient, especially when it comes to "independent" participation from local communities at the site level (Siburian *et al.* 2019). Government interventions are based on the assumption that the community is dependent on the government (Colfer *et al.* 2022; Tanaka and Takashina 2023), particularly for funding. In addition, the further assumption on the part of people living around peatlands that they do not have any agency hinders optimization of peat restoration activities that require increasing community participation at the site level in accordance with social engineering models.

This paper aims to examine the actual and potential roles of local community members in tropical peatland conservation and restoration. Community involvement is necessary to ensure the success of restoration activities carried out by the Indonesian government through the 3Rs approach.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 *Study Sites*

Field research for this article was carried out in June and August 2019 in two provinces: Riau, Sumatra Island; and Central Kalimantan, Borneo Island. These two provinces were chosen because they have the largest amount of peatland in Indonesia. Riau has 5.1 million hectares and Central Kalimantan 4.5 million hectares (Badan Restorasi Gambut 2016). The selection of three villages in each province was based on information obtained from a key informant, with the additional consideration that these villages have a high fire rate and a high level of intervention from the central

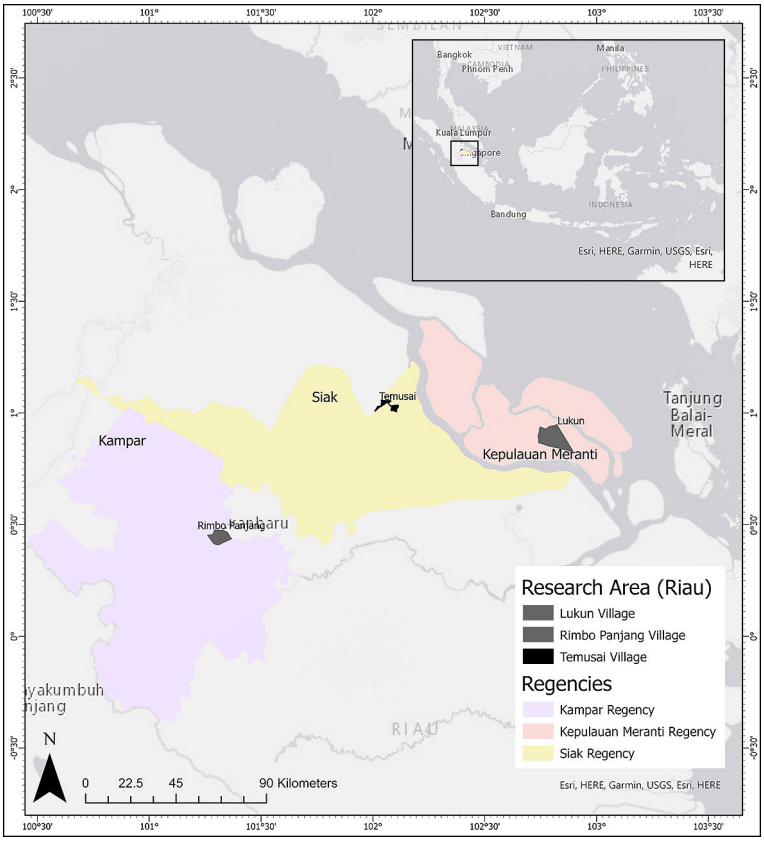

Fig. 1 Location of Fieldwork in Riau Province
Source: D. Kusumaningrum via ArcGIS application (2024)

government (e.g., the BRGM) and local government. These villages were chosen also because their residents actively participated in the restoration and conservation of peatland.

2.2 *Specific Study Sites*

The three selected villages in Riau Province were Rimbo Panjang Village, Kampar Regency; Temusai Village, Siak Regency; and Lukun Village, Meranti Islands Regency (Fig. 1). The three selected villages in Central Kalimantan Province are all in Pulang Pisau Regency: Sidodadi Village, Simpur Village, and Tumbang Nusa Village (Fig. 2). Additional information on these villages can be found in Appendix 1.

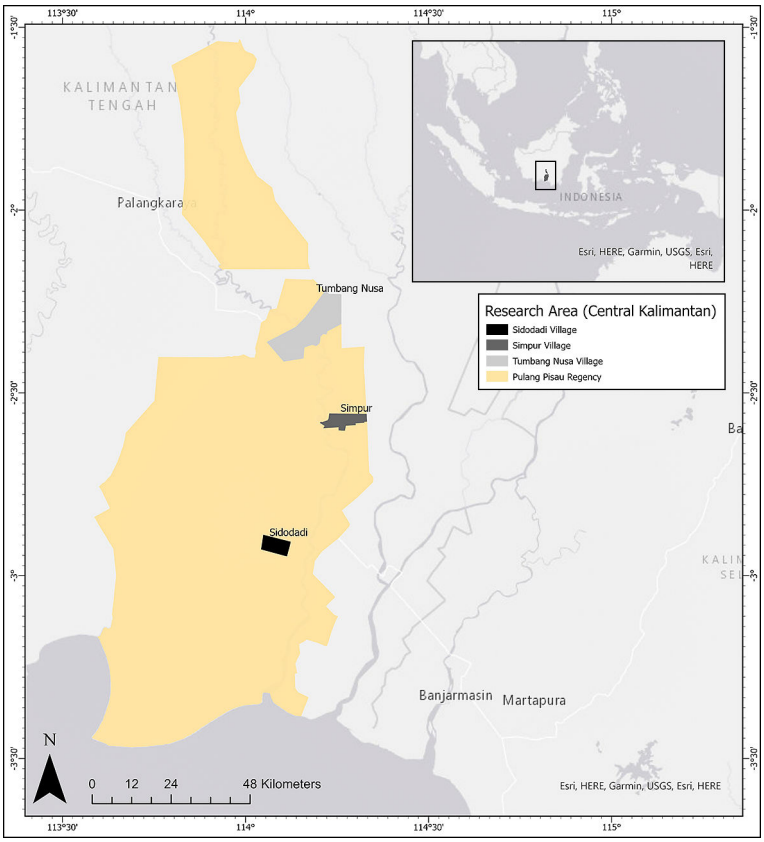

Fig. 2 Location of Fieldwork in Central Kalimantan
Source: D. Kusumaningrum via ArcGIS application (2025)

2.3 *Methods and Analysis*

This study utilized qualitative methodology, with data collection carried out through in-depth interviews, field observation, and focus group discussions. The utilization of a qualitative approach was intended to facilitate comprehension of the intricate nuances inherent in the domain of natural resource management, which is often characterized by the involvement of numerous actors (Creswell 2009; Sardjono and Inoue 2017; Asmin *et al.* 2019). Using purposive sampling, we interviewed 39 informants who were familiar with or directly involved in the 3R program. Details of the key informants are shown in Table 1.

The analytical focus of this study derives from a synthesis of two theoretical frameworks. First, it draws upon political ecology (Bryant and Bailey 1997; Hidayat 2016; Peterson 2000),[1)] which emphasizes combining ecological concerns—such as

Table 1 List of Key Informants

Key Informant Category	Institution/Affiliation	Number of Informants
Central Government	BRGM	3
Local Government	Regional Peat Restoration Team (Tim Restorasi Gambut Daerah)	2
	Local Environment Agency	2
	Regional Disaster Management Agency (Badan Penanggulangan Bencana Daerah)	2
Nongovernmental Organizations	Partnership (Central Kalimantan)	2
	Save Our Borneo (Central Kalimantan)	2
	AMAN (Central Kalimantan)	1
	World Wild Fund (Central Kalimantan)	1
	Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Riau) (Wahana Lingkungan Hidup [Riau])	2
Village Context	Heads of villages	6
	Village council agency	6
	Heads of Fire Awareness Brigades	6
	Head of 3R revitalization program	4
	Total	39

Source: Interviews with key informants by the research team (2019)

peatland protection and restoration, natural forest conservation, and local forest rights —with the types of unequal social relations foregrounded by the political economy in such institutional contexts as oil palm plantations, rubber estates, and industrial timber plantations. This approach considers the often-competing interests and tensions among government agencies, private companies, local community members, and other parties, as well as the sometimes-conflicting priorities of preserving natural ecology and addressing human needs. Political ecology treats these phenomena across multiple levels, from the local and individual to the regional, national, and transnational. Complementing this theoretical orientation, the article also draws upon Norman Long's actor-oriented perspective in developmental sociology. Highlighting the agency of local actors and institutions, this approach ethnographically foregrounds the "situated social practices of these actors, and the ways in which social relationships, technologies and other resources (such as discourses and texts) are deployed" (Hebinck *et al.* 2001). In keeping with the complementary foci of these two theoretical

perspectives, the article first presents institutional initiatives in peatland restoration across the study sites and then considers in detail how key local actors in each setting used their social networks, cultural status and capabilities, and political positions to participate in—and sometimes even lead—peatland restoration initiatives and how they might exercise their potential in future interventions.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 *Contribution of Private Companies to Forest Fires and Peatland Restoration*

Peatlands in Indonesia have undergone significant degradation as a consequence of their conversion to industrial timber estates and oil palm plantations since the 1990s (Jewitt *et al.* 2014; Wildayana 2017; Purnomo *et al.* 2021; Van der Meer *et al.* 2021). It is estimated that approximately 5.8 million hectares of Indonesian peatland has been converted into industrial oil palm plantations (Budiman *et al.* 2020). Opened-up peat swamp area eventually becomes dry land (Suryadiputra *et al.* 2005; Fadillah *et al.* 2020), which is vulnerable to forest fires. In 2017, around 22,930 hectares affected by forest fires were located in Industrial Forest Plantations (Hutan Tanaman Industri; HTI) (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan 2017). Satellite recordings from August 2014 to September 2019 revealed that hotspot fires occurred in land concessions belonging to more than three hundred private companies (Maruti 2019). Researchers at the Meteorology, Climatology, and Geophysical Agency (Badan Meteorologi, Klimatologi, dan Geofisika; BMKG) confirmed that more than 80 percent of forest fires occurred in big private holdings (Maruti 2019). The above data indicate that HTI areas in the concessions owned by private companies in peatlands need to go undergo "restoration" in order to prevent any repeat of the forest fires.

In 2015 extensive forest and peatland fires occurred mostly in areas belonging to large companies, especially HTI areas, which lost around 4.63 million hectares of forest (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan 2017). However, oil palm plantations grew to 3.5 million hectares from 1990 to 2020 (Numata *et al.* 2022). In response to this situation, the Indonesian government issued Presidential Instruction No. 11 of 2015 on the Improvement of Forest and Land Fire Control. This directive mobilized government agencies, particularly law enforcement officers, to actively prevent or mitigate land fires. However, the deployment of security forces caused concern and fear among farmers as those suspected of burning land were threatened with ten years' imprisonment (Merten *et al.* 2021). With respect to the corporate sector, the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Environment and Forestry

(Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan; KLHK) imposed sanctions on 63 companies that were involved in peatland fires in 2019 (Hidayat *et al.* 2020).

The extensive forest and peatland fires have had negative impacts in economic, social, ecological, and even transportation terms and have drawn criticism from neighboring countries—Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and others—over Indonesia's capacity to sustainably manage peatlands and forest areas. These countries accuse Indonesia of being among the top five offenders[2)] contributing to greenhouse gas emissions because of the smoke from peatland fires. In addition, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change along with developed countries in every Conference of the Parties meeting have issued warnings to developing countries with peatlands, including Indonesia, to manage their peatlands through restoration programs so as to prevent fires.

Peatland Restoration

The Indonesian government's commitment to peatland restoration is evident in the establishment of the BRGM through Presidential Decree (Kepres) No. 1 of 2016. The government set the ambitious target of restoring two million hectares of peatland over a five-year period (2016–20) (Badan Restorasi Gambut 2016). Even though the BRGM did not meet its target, the government set a new target of 1.2 million hectares for the period 2021–24 (BRGM 2021).

Ecological restoration is defined as the process of assisting in the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed so that ecological functions can be better performed. Among other functions, the hydrological function of peat swamp land is the long-term storage of water in order to keep the land wet so that it does not burn easily and thus keeps down the level of carbon dioxide emissions. According to Martin Schumann and Hans Joosten (2008), at least three questions must be answered in order for restoration to be successful: (1) What is desired for a return to functionality? (2) Is it possible for the desired object to be returned to functionality? (3) What should be done to restore the lost state? In the case of peatlands, the answer to these questions revolves around wetness restoration. Peat loses its water-holding (i.e., storage) capacity if it experiences "dryness" for four to five weeks (Widyati 2011). In this condition the peat is no longer able to absorb nutrients, so it changes its character and becomes like charcoal, which is prone to burning during the dry season. Peat in this condition also sinks due to its very low bulk density.

As a result of the assessment that Indonesia's peat swamp ecosystem had been damaged, KLHK focused on finding the reasons for the dryness of the land. It turned out that there was a network of long canals in peat swamp land, which lowered water

tables and dried out peat soil, increasing the rate of decomposition (Dadap *et al.* 2021). The Indonesian government, in line with its restoration ambitions, is trying to return the water level to no more than 40 centimeters below the peatland surface, a level that is assumed to keep the peat sufficiently wet.

The BRGM's main task is to coordinate and carry out peat swamp land restoration programs in various provinces where there is the potential for healthy peatlands. Article 2 of the Presidential Decree in 2016 mandated restoration by the BRGM of two million hectares from 2016 to 2020. This was considered the world's largest peatland restoration program (Wetlands International and Tropenbos International 2016). Despite the existence of an explicitly declared government policy to maintain the moratorium from 2011 to prevent the conversion of peat swamp land into HTI and oil palm plantations, this moratorium has been violated repeatedly (Nugroho *et al.* 2013). For example, the private palm oil company Globalindo Agung Lestari, part of the Malaysian company Genting Plantations Berhad, converted peatland to an oil palm plantation in Mantangai District, Kapuas Regency, Central Kalimantan (Syahrul 2021). This shows a lack of supervision and law enforcement commitment from government officials to maintain the moratorium on licensing for private companies so that forest and peatland fire disasters are minimized.

The urgency of peatland restoration is related to the strategic function of peatlands for carbon sequestration as an antidote to greenhouse gas emissions, thus countering global climate change (Joosten and Clarke 2002), maintaining biodiversity, avoiding land fires through the maintenance of hydrological functions, enabling fish breeding, as well as facilitating other ecological functions. The peatland restoration that has been accomplished since 2016 by the BRGM, with the support of local communities, NGOs, and academics, has been a positive step for the needs of present and future generations. Such efforts complement peatland restoration programs that were carried out by European countries in the 1970s, the United States in the 1980s, and Japan in the 1990s.

As part of the BRGM program in Pulang Pisau Regency, revegetation has been carried out on burnt areas, both in peatlands and in community cultivation areas. The initial restoration activity involved the creation of a tree nursery project in two villages: Pilang and Garung, Jabiren Raya District (Pokker 2016). Meanwhile, the construction of canal blocks is intended to hold water in ditches or canals at a certain height, stopping peat water from flowing into rivers or other places so that the wetness of the ecosystem can be maintained (Suryadiputra *et al.* 2005). Maintaining wetness in peatlands—a primary goal of the restoration program—requires reorganizing the hydrological function of the peat dome as a long-term water storage repository. Several

techniques can enable hydrological management: total canal closure, damming of creeks that pass through conservation areas with peatlands, building of blockages in the canal, using water pumps for wetting and watering peat in the dry season, and making dams/pools for water reserves in case of land fires (Ministry of Environment and Forestry 2015, 2). In addition, economic revitalization is aimed at empowering communities in and around the peatlands so that they no longer depend on peat resources in their local livelihood activities, since ongoing restoration has a negative impact on agricultural activities. In order that the wetting of land does not harm the community, resulting in reduced income, livelihood activities must be proactively diverted to other places.

3.2 *Population Distribution, Landownership Distribution, and Fire Awareness Brigades in the Study Villages*

This section details the population distribution, Fire Awareness Brigades (Masyarakat Peduli Api; MPA), and landowner identification among residents of Rimbo Panjang, Temusai, and Lukun Villages in Riau Province and Tumbang Nusa, Simpur, and Sidodadi Villages in Central Kalimantan Province.

Rimbo Panjang Village

The original inhabitants of Rimbo Panjang Village came from Pariaman in West Sumatra and are primarily of Minangkabau ethnicity. Other villagers are of Batak, Javanese, Banjar, and Malay ethnicity. About 25 percent of village land is occupied by Minangkabau villagers, while approximately 75 percent is held by private companies, such as Surya Dumai, or individuals of other ethnicities. There are three MPAs in this village, each with ten people, making a total of thirty members. When forest fires occur, these three fire brigades are activated. The head of the village (Hr)[3)] provides a salary from the village fund (*dana desa*) for MPA members, and personnel are covered by insurance for accidental injury or death.

Temusai Village

The original inhabitants of Temusai Village are Malay, but landownership is dominated by Javanese transmigrants. Javanese own 60 percent of the land, Malays 35 percent, and Batak, Sundanese, Banjarese, and Chinese the remaining 5 percent. The village has four MPAs, each with six persons, yielding a total of 24 MPA members.

Lukun Village

The original Malay inhabitants of Lukun Village constitute 80 percent of the village

population, while the remaining 20 percent of inhabitants are Javanese, Buginese, Banjarese, and from Lombok. Malays own 70 percent of the land, Javanese 20 percent, and Chinese and Banjarese the remaining 10 percent. The village's MPAs have a total of 18 registered persons.

Tumbang Nusa Village

About 90 percent of Tumbang Nusa Village's inhabitants are Dayak Kahayan, while the remaining 10 percent are Javanese, Banjarese, Sundanese, and Batak. Dayak own 80 percent of the land, and the other ethnic groups mentioned above own the remaining 20 percent. There are three MPAs, with a total of 18 registered persons.

Simpur Village

The original inhabitants of Simpur Village are Dayak Ngaju, constituting 95 percent of the village population and the village's landowners. The remaining 5 percent of villagers are Javanese and Sundanese. The village has three MPAs, with a total of 18 registered persons.

Sidodadi Village

In contrast to Tumbang Nusa and Simpur Villages, Sidodadi Village is inhabited mostly by ethnic Javanese and Sundanese: these two communities account for approximately 95 percent of the population and landholding in the village. The remaining 5 percent of land is owned by Batak, Banjarese, and Dayak. Thus, Javanese and Sundanese are the dominant economic and social actors in Sidodadi Village. The village's four MPAs have 26 registered persons, whose salaries derive from the village fund as determined by the head of the village and the Village Consultative Council (Badan Permusyawaratan Desa; BPD).

4 Local People's Participation

According to Sherry Arnstein's (1969) model of levels of "participation," the ideal form of community participation in restoration activities is citizen control. Public participation in governance entails the direct and indirect involvement of stakeholders (including local community members) in making decisions about policies, plans, or programs in which they have an interest (Quick and Bryson 2016). Through public participation, stakeholders may interact with government agencies, political leaders, nonprofit organizations, and business organizations that create and implement public

policies and programs. In this sense, in order to reach a level at which the village cares for peat, as an expression of citizen control, the community must already have the capacity and knowledge to implement peat restoration. In addition, the community should know the benefits and negative impacts of peatland destruction—not only at the local level but also at the national and global levels. For example, one benefit is that the local community is able to plant various agricultural and horticultural plants as well as local species of trees. On the other hand, dry peatland is vulnerable to fires. Also, damage to peatlands results in the release of carbon dioxide into the air, which contributes to an increase in Earth's temperature, which produces such effects as the melting of icecaps at the poles. When the conditions for citizen control are fulfilled, the community can independently play a role in leading peatland restoration, identifying damaged areas and implementing restoration measures.

The success of a development program is not based solely on the capacity for government intervention; rather, it depends upon the agency of other stakeholders, especially the participation of community members in carrying out ongoing development programs (Susetiawan *et al.* 2018). In this regard, it is important to analyze how community members have been involved in the peat restoration process in designated Indonesian sites and their potential for enacting further interventions. The following section analyzes the actual and potential roles of significant community members in each of the study villages in Riau and Central Kalimantan.

4.1 *Riau Province*

Rimbo Panjang Village

Rimbo Panjang Village is classified as one of the large villages in Tambang District, Kampar Regency. It has an area of 3 km by 12 km, extending from the border between Pekanbaru Municipality and Tambang District.

Previously, there were village-supported efforts to increase economic empowerment through the cultivation of rubber, pineapple, and catfish. These efforts were made prior to the 2015 fires, and unfortunately due to the fires they did not yield any results. This is why the village head, Hr, and his team, including the community in Rimbo Panjang Village, are passionate about managing fire disasters in line with the peatland restoration program. Hr and his team have demonstrated good teamwork in helping to restore the peatlands. To carry out the rewetting (R1) program, he and members of the MPA built dozens of borewells to prepare water reserves that could be pumped with a machine pump to extinguish forest and field fires.

The MPA plays a significant role in the front line for patrolling, preventing, and fighting forest and field fires. Such fires can be frequent and intense, as evidenced by

the forest fires around Rimbo Panjang Village in August–September 2015 and August–September 2019, which contributed to a series of haze crises in the wider region that were labelled by Indonesia's Meteorology, Climatology, and Geophysics Agency as a "crime against humanity of extraordinary proportions" (Jaramillo 2015). In relation to the strategic role of MPAs in dealing with such catastrophes, Hr, who was also the former chairman of the MPA, declared, "The MPA is in a leading position, feels a direct threat, and acts to extinguish forest and field fires that threaten people's lives, plants and housing" (interview with Hr, village head, August 7, 2019). In 2017 there were thirty MPA members in Rimbo Panjang Village, of whom ten were required to be on standby every day to patrol and act when needed, especially during the dry season. MPA members are appointed by the village head via a decree (*surat keputusan*) signed by him.

Although previously MPA members were volunteers, under the new management regime based upon the village head's decree and support from the BRGM, efforts are being made for them to receive a fixed salary—or at least an honorarium when tasked with patrolling and firefighting. According to Hr, two steps are being taken to improve conditions for MPA members. First, the village head in the draft deliberation work program has sought to gain the regent's agreement to issue a Regent's Regulation (Peraturan Bupati) that would grant access to a certain account code allowing the village fund under the authority of the Ministry of Disadvantaged Villages to make monetary disbursements for urgent and emergency fire prevention and firefighting. The second step is trying to increase the willingness of MPA members to dedicate their energy toward extinguishing peatland fires after receiving the funds.

According to MPA members, there should be accessible tactical funds in the village office treasury amounting to around IDR 15–20 million for the estimated operational cost of dealing with a three-hectare fire. Of course, the release of such village funds must be based on an agreement between the village head and the chairperson of the BPD, who represents community members. A forest fire lasting just three hours can burn two to three hectares of land. Usually, extinguishing a one-hectare fire requires nine MPA members for the left wing and nine for the right wing. Two or three Rubin or Honda pump engines that are ready to be carried and can operate nonstop for four to six hours are required, as well as ten hoses, each 250–350 meters long, to connect the borehole and the engine to the fire area.

The R2 and R3 programs are yet to be implemented in this community, thus hindering the achievement of the economic and social aims of the project. The intervention strategy still requires support from the Regional Peat Restoration Team (Tim

Restorasi Gambut Daerah; TRGD), other institutions such as universities, and NGOs to facilitate the provision of local tree and fruit seeds and other economic revitalization facilities, including those necessary for cultivating local catfish and other fish and for breeding goats and cows to develop the community's economy and social life.

Temusai Village

The total population of Temusai Village is 1,400. The village head, Mrk, is a potential actor in transforming peatland restoration in all three aspects—rewetting, revegetation, and revitalization of local livelihoods—due to his ability to deploy social, financial, and political capital. His ability to encourage community participation in peatland restoration is strengthened by his village being categorized as a peat care village (Desa Peduli Gambut; DPG). Mrk particularly supports the first peatland restoration measure (R1), accomplished mainly through canal blocking, and revitalization (R3). The R1 program in this region was supported and facilitated by the TRGD at the provincial level and NGOs such as Walhi and World Wife Fund (WWF) during 2016–19. Mrk also supports the creation of a reservoir from village funds to provide water stock that can be used to extinguish forest and field fires caused by residents burning areas for palm oil plantations (interview with Mrk, village head, August 14, 2019).

As part of his plan to develop the village, Mrk launched a social movement to collect two palm oil fruit bunches from each family head in each neighborhood association (Rukun Tetangga, a community organization to serve community needs) (Desa Dukuh Badag 2025). As a result of this collection, the village treasury has millions of rupiah in cash to support various social initiatives, including paying for the education of orphans and health treatment costs for family members who cannot afford it, as well as providing assistance for building a prayer hall (*musholla*) and mosque facilities. Mrk has also drawn on his social networks to promote economic revitalization, engaging in frequent visits to government officials—such as the heads of local government agencies with mandates in agriculture, environment, public works, and housing and cooperatives—members of the Siak Regency parliament (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah), and NGOs seeking contributions for agriculture, irrigation, seed planting, and training in socialization and education to catalyze an understanding of peat restoration and community economic revitalization.

Another key actor in implementing the economic revitalization program is the goat-raising group, consisting of 12 members and chaired by Kst. The BRGM provided 64 Jampnapari goats (48 females and 16 males)[4)] to the Temusai community in 2018 in an effort to revitalize the local economy. In a communal rotation of labor, the 12 members of the group take turns looking for grass feed and providing other food.

The grass is used as goat feed, then the goat manure is collected and dried in a manure-processing machine. The machine creates compost that can be used for plants such as chilies, onions, and vegetables as well as fruit trees such as durian, jackfruit, breadfruit, and rambutan. Based on their expectation that the goats will remain healthy and continue to breed, the group hope that the BRGM will approve their proposal for the provision of a bigger machine for processing goat manure into compost. Compost products, apart from being consumed by farmers in Temusai Village, can also be sold outside the village to provide additional income for livestock keepers (interview with B, August 15, 2019).

Another emergent actor in peatland restoration in the village is Khd, one of the leaders of the Malay community whose members live together in the midst of the settlement of transmigrants from Java. As well as manifesting charisma, he is classified as a potential actor because he has considerable social and financial capital that he can call on to encourage community participation in peatland restoration. As one of the Malay community leaders descended from the Siak Kingdom, Khd has not only symbolic capital but also social capital that gives him access to other descendants of the Siak Kingdom who occupy positions of influence in government offices, as well as the head of the Siak regency office. Khd has the potential to use his social relations to promote education for understanding peat restoration and community economic empowerment in Temusai Village.

Lukun Village

The village head of Lukun Village, Lkm, possesses the social networks (social capital), official position (political capital), and economic standing (financial capital) to emerge as an actor in encouraging the collaboration of the Lukun Village community for carrying out peat restoration. Lkm is also committed to advancing the village as a DPG. He is willing to open a space for collaboration with other stakeholders in disseminating to the community understanding and program actions related to all three peat restoration measures mandated by the BRG and TRGD in collaboration with the Research and Community Service Institute (Lembaga Penelitian dan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat) at the University of Riau, CSEAS-Kyoto University, Gadjah Mada University, and various NGOs. In rewetting (R1) operations, Lkm was assisted by other members of the village community to design—drawing on local understandings—and jointly carry out the construction of canal blockages requiring both donation of land to make the blocks and provision of high-quality wood as raw material from the community's timber stands. Lkm and his colleagues emphasized the importance of blocking canals in order to re-base the peatlands around community gardens and protect the village from

potential fires, especially in the dry season.

Amr serves as chairman of the local MPA, composed of 18 firefighters, of whom ten are active. This brigade has been provided by the BRGM with fire-extinguishing equipment, including water suction machines and hoses, and uniforms. The BRGM's assistance in preventing forest and field fires has facilitated the construction of nine canal blockage units for canal wetting, so that they function to supply water in the event of a fire and also provide fertilizer for community lands around the canal. Amr's commitment to advancing Lukun Village as a DPG has been effective in supporting peat restoration. This success is related to Amr's social capital—he was a lecturer on peat restoration at various symposia and workshops on peatland restoration, including in Pekanbaru, the capital of Riau Province, in July 2016 and in Martapura, South Kalimantan Province, in August 2018.

In implementing the R2 measures of the program, Lkm and Amr invited community participants to construct local tree nurseries from conservation forests and to plant local trees, including gerunggang (*Cratoxylon arborescens*), rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*), simpur paye (*Dillenia indica*), leban (*Vitex pinnata*), and sago palm (*Metroxylon sagu*). Amr also serves as chairman of the timber nursery for Community Carers for Peat (Masyarakat Peduli Gambut), whose secretariat office is in the city of Selat Panjang, Kepulauan Meranti Regency. To obtain various species of wood typical of the Meranti Islands, Amr and his community members searched for wood seeds from natural forests. Nearly a thousand species of wood seedlings from the natural forest were collected in a tree nursery project. As many as ten seeds were distributed to each family head (*kepala keluarga*) to be planted in their respective community gardens as an activity within the revegetation program. Amr also collects seeds of fruit plants such as matoa (*Pometia pinnata*), guava (*Psidium guajava*), longan (*Dimocarpus longan*), mangosteen (*Mangifera indica*), rambutan (*Nephelium lappaceum*), durian (*Durio*), *petai* (twisted bean, or *Parkia speciosa*), *jengkol* (dog fruit, or *Archidendron pauciflorum*), and others. These fruit plant species, once planted in community gardens, are planned to be included in the village's Medium-Term Development Plan with a budget from the village fund. The project is also included as an activity in the Community Economic Institute (Lembaga Ekonomi Masyarakat) program, which was originally an initiative of the Agriculture Service of Meranti Islands Regency as well as other regencies in Riau Province and is aimed at improving the economic and social development of local communities. However, youth leaders have criticized the initiative of planting fruit seeds in community gardens on the grounds that the target area for planting these seeds is too small. Rather, they feel that the village head should use a village meeting (*musyawarah desa*) to transform the initiative into a superior fruit

commodity program, an option listed in the village Medium-Term Development Plan as a flagship program by the Regency Environment Service (interview with Her, youth leader, August 3, 2019).

To achieve the R3 goal, Lkm encourages community members to plant more sago and rubber to meet basic needs. He gives the example of planting sago trees next to his house and garden for economic and investment purposes. In addition, in the context of the R2 program, the planting of sago and rubber can be seen as a contribution to the peat restoration program. Lkm's support for economic revitalization in fish cultivation programs includes motivating each fish-farming group to cultivate such fish as catfish (*Clariidae*) and *tuakang* (giant snakehead, or *Channa micropeltes*). Unfortunately, fish farming has not been successful, due to such problems as difficulty obtaining sustainable fish feed, lack of adequate electric power for heating seedlings in nurseries, and fatal viruses (interview with Z, August 5, 2019). Due to shortcomings in peat restoration management, not all communities are invited to participate in all phases, and the practice of illegal logging has not been eradicated. As a result, the Lukun Village forest, covering 2,466 hectares, is still vulnerable to tree felling and other depredations by people from other villages, making it prone to forest fires in the dry season.

4.2 *Central Kalimantan*

Tumbang Nusa Village

In Tumbang Nusa Village, Udn—the village secretary and chairman of the MPA—plays a strategic role. Udn's understanding of peat restoration and his involvement in implementing R1, R2, and R3 programs as well as his social, political, and financial capital led to his being classified as a potential actor who could mobilize community participation in peat restoration. As evidence of his social capital, Udn has communicated with several heads of provincial and district offices to bring in such assistance as cattle from the provincial Peat Restoration Team, fruit tree seeds, and local trees for planting—including gelam (*Melaleuca cajuputi*), gerunggang (*Cratoxylum arborescens*), and rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*). The village has an area of four hectares for planting tree seedlings and cultivating various types of plants for the purpose of increasing carbon sinks and conserving biodiversity now and in the future. In addition, once production has been initiated, the stock of wood plants can be used for the construction of houses, thus reducing building costs.

However, Udn has not elicited widespread participation in implementing all aspects of the peat restoration project; in particular, he has not been able to gain the involvement of many local groups, especially the Dayak people who live in settle-

ments near the Kahayan River. As in the cases of Hr and Uln, villagers have accused the village government apparatus and people who work for the MPA of nepotism: many members of their own families have been involved in making dozens of drilled wells to prepare water reserves, as well as in other aspects of the R1, R2, and R3 programs. Most of the community has not been involved in peat restoration initiatives (interview with Z, July 11, 2019).

The dispute led by Chd, a local leader of farmer communities in Tumbang Nusa Village, demonstrates how the local government needs to implement an intervention strategy. Chd called for legal protections to prevent or reverse the seizure of former conservation areas by government research institutions. He appealed for ownership of this land to be returned to a group of farmers. As a result, landownership was changed to the farmers, with every farming household receiving two hectares of land for carrying out agricultural activities. Were ownership of this land to be returned to research institutions, it would give the institutions access for conducting research activities that could provide economic, social, and ecological benefits. Such measures would counter Chd's land-claiming behavior, taking away his capacity to distribute land to members of farmer groups, which increased public sympathy for him and brought him political and economic benefits in the long term.

Simpur Village

Located in Jabiren Raya District, Pulang Pisau Regency, Simpur is occupied predominantly by Dayak Ngaju. As the chairman of the BPD, Frr has been an active participant in peat restoration measures of all three types—rewetting, revegetation, and livelihood revitalization—and thus can be classified as a potential actor in this field, especially as he has sufficient social and political capital to be able to mobilize communities and farmer groups to participate in peat restoration. As chairman of the BPD, he has communicated skillfully in discussions on the management of peat restoration with partners, including the TRGD, the deputy for the BRGM, local governments, and local and international NGOs. Through his networks he has contributed to the development of village forests, community forests, partnership forests, ecotourism, carbon sinks, and forest fire training, with assistance from representatives of the World Bank and the Badan Penanggulangan Bencana Daerah (Regional Disaster Management Agency) (interview with T, July 16, 2019).

Despite Frr's achievements and skills, the farmer groups and communities with which he works have not fully carried out revegetation practices, specifically with regard to peatland restoration, although the Ministry of Environment and Forestry granted a village forest area of six thousand hectares—the former area of Forest

Concession Rights (Hak Pengusahaan Hutan) of the Jayanti Jaya company—to be managed as a partnership forest and protected forest by the community and the Provincial Forestry Service. The farmer group has planted sengon (*Albizia chinensis*) seedlings over an area of five hectares—a total of 5,200 stems—with the help of IDR 100 million granted in 2018 by the TRGD, channeled through the provincial Environmental Service. However, Frr and his colleagues have been unable to control forest and field fires, which occur almost every year in and around Simpur Village. As a result, peatland restoration has yet to be fully realized.

Considering the shortcomings and strengths of Frr and his team, intervention strategies based upon an actor-oriented approach must involve the TRGD and related agencies in the region as well as NGOs in facilitating the R2 and R3 restoration programs, so that the target of economic empowerment is realized. Frr can contribute to such efforts by socializing the restoration program to the community and targeting political and economic goals as the reelected BPD chairman or village head in the future.

Another actor with a strategic position in peatland restoration is Ats, who was the head of Simpur Village in 2011–17, a traditional leader, and head of the MPA. Ats's ability to develop social, political, and financial capital can mobilize community participation in implementing peat restoration measures of all three varieties, although he has mostly used R1 and R3 initiatives to promote his family's economic and social interests, so that they rarely involve the village community at large. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the intervention strategy approach, facilitation by the TRGD and relevant government agencies in peat restoration programs can contribute to achieving the economic and social interests of the Simpur Village community by making use of local actors such as Ats. He has the intellectual and social capacity to mobilize his social capital for establishing cooperation with private palm oil companies, the Kahayan Watershed Management Agency (Badan Pengelolaan Daerah Aliran Sungai), the TRGD, and local and international NGOs. Such cooperation could result in training to increase human resources for understanding peat restoration, especially the revegetation program for planting sengon (*Albizia chinensis*), rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*), and gelam (*Melaleuca cajuputi*), whose fast growth can improve forest ecosystems and provide economic and social empowerment to the community (interview with X, July 21, 2019).

Sidodadi Village

The key to the assessment of actors in Sidodadi Village is their high potential for collaboration and cooperation. This potential can be a strong point in fostering the forma-

Fig. 3 Different Forms of Canal Blocking Before (left) and After (right) BRGM Intervention (photos by Herman Hidayat, Greg Acciaiolli, Massa Djafar, Laely Nur Hidayah, Robert Siburian, Osamu Kozan, and Dicky Rachmawan, July 2019)

tion of a DPG because restoring peat requires cooperation from all elements of society and is not just the work of individuals. The three main actors with high potential in Sidodadi Village are Aln as the village head; Ryt as the head of the MPA, the village working group Kelompok Kerja/Pokja, and the community group Kelompok Masyarakat/Pokmas; and Stn, the chairman of the BPD and also principal of the elementary school. Their positions reveal how village officials directly involved in peatland restoration activities must have access to information and knowledge to support achievements by members of the peat care village community in sustainable peat ecosystem management.

Aln's strength is that he is supportive of all aspects of peat restoration: R1, R2, and R3. With respect to R1, he has supported the construction of several drilled wells. He has also supported canal blocking to increase the availability of water in reservoirs for use during the dry season for bathing and washing as well as extinguishing forest and field fires.

As of this writing, the revegetation program had not yet been implemented in Sidodadi Village, as village forest had not yet been allocated for the planting of endemic trees. Among other revitalization activities, fifty cows had been provided by the provincial Agricultural Agency and a fertilizer-making machine by the BRGM through the TRGD. The village head welcomed the TRGD's official representative and submitted his recommendation to the agricultural community group (Pokmas Pertanian), most of whose members are also members of the MPA. If assistance with cattle and fertilizer-making machines can be managed properly in this village, not only will the village produce the desired socioeconomic results but it can be an example for farmer groups in other villages.

Ryt is the head of the MPA and a cattle group as well as coordinator of a manure and organic milling business. With respect to R1, he has been involved in drilling wells and blocking canals using strong local wood. He has also used his position as the head of the Sumber Rejeki farmer group to promote R2. This group operates an organic fertilizer milling machine, developing and selling organic fertilizer products to the wider community. The organic fertilizer business has successfully marketed its products at the request of farmer groups from other villages, and 10 percent of the profits have been allocated for MPA activities in an effort to prevent forest and land fires (interview with G, July 24, 2019).

Stn holds an important position as the chairman of the BPD and a permanent salaried teacher in the elementary school. Drawing on his extensive social and political capital, he has supported all aspects of the peatland restoration program by communicating with various stakeholders to mobilize community participation (interview with Y, July 24, 2019). As the head of the BPD, he encouraged and provided space for collaboration with various government agencies, including the TRGD and agencies dealing with agriculture, livestock, forestry, cooperatives, and other sectors. For example, in part due to Stn's ability to develop social networks, amass social capital, and exploit power relations through networking, the provincial Agriculture Office provided fifty cows for the economic empowerment of local rural communities. Stn also played a major role in supporting infrastructure development projects with the provincial and regency Public Works Offices for the construction of intra-village and inter-village roads as well as canal blocking to stem water losses, so that water is always available in the canals for the R1 and R2 phases of the peat restoration program.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Peatland management at the national level in Indonesia presents two seemingly contradictory approaches. On the one hand, the government has consistently given permission for peat areas to be converted into monoculture plantations, officially termed Industrial Forest Plantations (Hutan Tanaman Industri), due to strong pressure from business interests in the private sector. This increases the vulnerability of these areas to fire. Conversely, peatland management also includes restoration, as evidenced by the introduction of relevant government policies. The issuance of regulations and the establishment of the BRGM have played a pivotal role in spearheading the government's commitment to restoring and enhancing the condition of increasingly degraded peatlands. The peatland restoration program has also been transformed into a forum

for community participation as well as the participation of stakeholders such as local governments and nongovernmental institutions.

This study, based on six villages used as case studies in examining community participation in managing and restoring peat areas, confirms the finding of previous studies that communities have an important role in peatland management. As evidenced by the enthusiasm of the community in Rimbo Panjang Village to be involved in the peat restoration program, there is a clear alignment between this initiative and the villagers' objective of developing their livelihoods, which has been adversely affected by fires since 2015. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that communities play an active role in engaging and interacting with other stakeholders to support the peat restoration program. This was most clearly evidenced by the case studies of Tamusai Village in Riau Province and Simpur and Sidodadi Villages in Central Kalimantan Province. A key finding across all research locations is the significant role played by village-level actors in shaping the effectiveness of the peat restoration program. This is particularly evident in the case of actors who possess significant social, economic, and political capital, such as the village head. Actors at the village level are not necessarily homogeneous: there is a complex mix of actors with unique contexts and interaction dynamics in each research location. Variations among villages is what accounts for the lack of uniformity in the achievements of the peat restoration program.

Upon examination of the uneven implementation of the 3R-based peat restoration model, it may be observed that the rewetting program (R1) has been most frequently implemented in four villages: Rimbo Panjang Village, Tamusai Village, Lukun Village, and Sidodadi Village. This is attributable largely to the active involvement of key stakeholders, particularly the TRGD and NGOs, which have played a pivotal role in reducing the risk of fire. The revitalization program (R3) has been implemented with notable efficacy in four villages: Tamusai Village, Lukun Village, Simpur Village, and Sidodadi Village. It is unfortunate that the implementation of the R3 program has not necessarily had a highly positive economic impact; this program continues to face obstacles in the field and represents a potential area for further research. The revegetation program (R2) is the least implemented of the three, having been carried out only in Lukun Village and Tumbang Nusa Village, and even then only because it aligns with the objective of economic development or improving livelihoods.

The reduction of peatland fires depends greatly on integrating government policy and regulations to ban the extension of production forests for HTI and holders of palm oil concessions. It is reliant as well on the effectiveness of synergetic cooperation between the BRGM and other stakeholders, especially local people invited to participate in its programs. Thus, law enforcement agencies must be committed to imposing

tough sanctions on those who break the law, without any favor given to parties that transgress regulations regarding the use of peatland by the private sector.

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No Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this article.

Notes

1) Other analysts use the term "environmental politics" to describe a similar frame for understanding the complex interrelationships in situating local ecosystems within national and global political economies (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987).
2) Indonesia was ranked third among five countries (the United States, China, Indonesia, India, and the European Union), as its greenhouse gas emissions reached 3.01 billion tons in the 2000s, much of it derived from forest and peatland fires (Lubis 2017).
3) All individuals in this paper are designated by pseudonyms consisting of two or three letters in order to maintain anonymity.
4) This type of goat is known locally as *kambing etawah* or *kambing otawa*. It was first imported to Indonesia from the Etawah District of Uttar Pradesh in India and is bred for both milk and meat. In East Java it has even been crossbred with a local Indonesian variety of goat (*kacang*) to produce the Indonesian Etawah crossbred goat (*Capra aegagrus hircus*) (Winaya *et al.* 2017).

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Appendix 1 Ethnic Groups, Main Livelihoods, Number of MPAs,* Percentage of Landowners (Villagers and Non-villagers) in Various Villages

No.	Villages/Groups	Livelihoods	Number of MPAs	Landowners/ Villagers	Non-villagers
Riau Province					
1.	Rimbo Panjang, Kampar Regency • Population: 3,495 • 98% Minang Pariaman • 2% other ethnic groups (Batak, Java, Malay, Banjar)	• Farmers: Rubber, pineapple, vegetables • Merchants: Material shop owners, Padang Restaurant owner, washing machines for cars and motorcycles	• 3 MPAs, each with 10 members, making a total of 30 persons	• 25% of the landowners are Minangkabau.	• 75% of the land is occupied by private companies (e.g., Surya Dumai) and individuals (Batak, Javanese, Malay, Banjarese).
2.	Temusai, Siak Regency • Population: 1,320 • 60% Javanese transmigrants (from East and Central Java) • 35% Malays • 5% other ethnic groups (Batak, Sundanese, Minangkabau, Banjarese, Chinese)	• Farmers: - Oil palm, rubber, vegetables (chilies, beans, etc.). - Fruits (rambutan, durian, *sukun*) - Animal breeding (goats, cows, chickens, etc.).	• 4 MPAs, each with 6 members, making a total of 24 persons	• 60% of the landowners are Javanese transmigrants. • 35% of the landowners are Malays.	• 5% of the landowners are Batak, Sundanese, Banjarese, Chinese.
3.	Lukun, Meranti Regency • Population: 1,685 • 80% Malays • 20% Javanese, Banjarese, Buginese, people from Lombok	• Farmers: - Rubber, wood seedlings, in situ local wood, vegetables, fruits, sago plants, etc. • Merchants: - Grocery stores - Collection of latex (rubber raw materials), etc.	• 3 MPAs, each with 6 members, making a total of 18 persons	• 70% of the landowners are Malays. • 20% of the landowners are Javanese transmigrants.	• 10% of the landowners are Chinese and Banjarese.

Appendix 1 Ethnic Groups, Main Livelihoods, Number of MPAs,* Percentage of Landowners (Villagers and Non-villagers) in Various Villages (continued)

No.	Villages/Groups	Livelihoods	Number of MPAs	Landowners/ Villagers	Non-villagers
Central Kalimantan Province					
1.	Tumbang Nusa, Pulang Pisau Regency • Population: 2,935 • 90% Dayak Kahayan • 10% Javanese, Banjarese, Sundanese, Batak	• Farmers: - Fruits (pineapple), paddy rice, vegetables, local woods (blangitan, gemer, gelam, gerunggang, etc.), purun (grass for making mats, hats, bags) - Fishing in Lukah pools for ikan lele, gabus, puyu, kapar, etc.	• 3 MPAs with a total of 18 members - They have made 10 borewells to provide water for firefighting. - They have made 14 canal blocks to regulate water flow for fighting forest fires.	• 80% of the landowners are Dayak Kahayan.	• 20% of the landowners are Batak, Javanese, Sundanese, Banjarese.
2.	Simpur, Pulang Pisau Regency • Population: 689 • 95% Dayak Ngaju • 5% Javanese and Sundanese	• Farmers: - In situ rubber, local woods (gelam, gerunggang, meranti kuning, morah, dahirang, etc.), sengon (10 ha), fruits (durian, rambutan), vegetables (chilies, beans, kangkong, bayam, etc.), sago palm	• 3 MPAs with a total of 18 members - They have made 10 borewells to provide water for fighting fires during the dry season.	• 95% of the landowners are Dayak Ngaju.	• 5% of the landowners are Javanese and Sundanese.
3.	Sidodadi, Pulang Pisau Regency • Population: 2,231 • 95% Javanese and Sundanese transmigrants • 5% Dayak, Banjarese, Batak	• Farmers: - Oil palm (100 ha), sengon (20,000 trees, 25 ha), local trees - Cow breeding: farmers own 35 cows and make fertilizer (*pupuk*) out of cow waste to sell to other farmers.	• 4 MPAs with a total of 24 members - They have made 71 borewells to provide water for fighting forest fires. - They have made 43 canal blocks to regulate water flow in their lands.	• 95% percent of the landowners are Javanese and Sundanese.	• 5% of the landowners are Batak, Banjarese, Dayak.

Source: Data based on fieldwork and interviews with informants in June–August 2019.
Note: * MPA = Masyarakat Peduli Api (Fire Awareness Brigade)

Appendix 2 Interview Questions

Appendix 2a Interview Questions for Central Government Agency Badan Restorasi Gambut dan Mangrove (BRGM)

No.	Question
1.	How is BRGM implementing the 3R (rewetting, revegetation, revitalization) model?
2.	Who is the operating agency for implementing (financially) the 3R program at the provincial level?
3.	Who are the NGO partners in the implementation of BRGM's program at the local level?
4.	What are the constraints and challenges of implementing the 3R program in the field?
5.	What is the 3R program's impact socially, economically, and ecologically on local communities?

Appendix 2b Interview Questions for Local Government Agency Tim Restorasi Gambut Daerah (TRGD) and Local Environment Agency Badan Penanggulangan Bencana Daerah (BPBD)

No.	Question
1.	What is the role of local government (provincial and district-level) agencies in the implementation of the 3R program?
2.	Is there any partnership between the central government (BRGM) and local communities in community revitalization programs (for instance, providing fertilizer, technology, livestock)?
3.	What are the challenges with BRGM's partnerships in the field?
4.	What are some solutions to overcome the challenges?
5.	What are the benefits of the 3R program?

Appendix 2c Interview Questions for Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs)

No.	Question
1.	What is the role of NGOs in the implementation of the 3R program?
2.	What are the benefits of partnering with other stakeholders (BRGM, local government)?
3.	What should be an NGOs' strategy to effectively implement the 3R program?
4.	Do NGOs work effectively with local people in implementing the 3R program?
5.	What are the challenges and solutions faced by NGOS?

Appendix 2d Interview Questions for Village Leaders in Local Communities (Village Heads, Heads of Village Council Agencies, Heads of Fire Awareness Communities [MPA], Heads of Revitalization Groups from 3R Program)

No.	Question
1.	What is the local community's response to the 3R program?
2.	What is the role of village organizations (organizations mentioned in Appendix 2d) on the implementation the 3R program?
3.	What are the challenges and benefits for village organizations from the 3R program?
4.	What is the socioeconomic impact of the 3R program on the local community?
5.	How can the challenges of the 3R program be overcome by village organizations?

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The House Is Not a Home for the Buddha: The Tai Zawti *Dhamma* Altar in Myanmar

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This paper investigates the 350-year-old Tai Zawti Theravada tradition and its distinct lay practice of keeping Buddhist texts, rather than Buddha images, on a *dhamma* altar inside the home. Drawing on Zawti-authored texts as well as interviews with Tai Zawti monks and laity, it examines the rationale for the altar, its function and position in the home, the nature of the texts kept on the altar, and how this marker of distinction is blurred by new challenges. While the Zawti tradition offers important insights into the nature of pre-reform Burmese Buddhism and premodern Theravada more broadly, by focusing on the nature of the *lik long* texts kept on the Zawti *dhamma* altar, the paper demonstrates how the Tai Zawti are firmly situated within the wider Tai cultural context.

Keywords: Theravada Buddhism, Tai (Shan), Tai Buddhism, Tai Literature, Tai Zawti, *lik long*

1 Introduction

Images of the Buddha are ubiquitous throughout Theravada Southeast Asia and certainly among the Tai (Shan) communities of Myanmar. The Tai constitute the ethnic majority of Shan State, the largest of the country's seven states, where upwards of 81 percent of the population self-identify as Buddhists (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Department of Population 2016, 3). Buddha images seem to be everywhere one turns in the State, from the walls of teashops to the dashboards of vehicles. It came as a surprise to me, then, when I visited the home of a Tai elder in rural southern Shan State and noticed that he did not have any images of the Buddha in his home. An altar stood in the center of his main room, complete with the offerings of fresh flowers and small cups of water that one would expect to find on a typical Tai Buddhist altar. But the offerings were not made to an image of the Buddha in either picture or statue form; instead, they were made to texts housed on the altar. This was a *dhamma* altar,

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dedicated to Buddhist *lik long*, or traditional Tai poetic texts composed in verse and meter.

The elder I visited was a member of the Tai Zawti Theravada Buddhist tradition (hereafter Tai Zawti or Zawti). The Zawti trace their origins to Varajoti, the monk who founded the tradition in the late-seventeenth century.[1)] Today, they comprise a very small monastic community and a sparse but widespread group of dedicated lay followers who live throughout Myanmar and in Dehong Prefecture of Yunnan, China. Little is known about the Zawti tradition outside the group itself. Despite sharing an ethnic identity and cultural practices with the Tai, the Zawti are not well known among the wider Tai community; among the Burmese, they are practically invisible. One finds only enigmatic and at times erroneous mentions of the Zawti in Western scholarship since the nineteenth century, first by missionaries to Burma and then by colonial scholars, anthropologists, and political scientists of the region (Porter 2023). This relative obscurity is related to Zawti interactions with authority over the course of their near 350-year history.

The early Zawti monastic community clashed several times with authority over divergent views towards merit-making and the treatment of pagodas. When Venerable Nandamāla, the abbot who succeeded Varajoti after his death in 1744, preached that building a monastery from silver and gold is akin to the gathering of timber (Khing Kān Kham Sāng Sām 1997, 14), a regional governor expelled the Zawti monks from Upper Burma. This marked the beginning of the Zawti migration into the Shan States, where the monks moved around frequently during the mid-eighteenth century, establishing small lay communities wherever they settled.[2)] The Zawti monastic and lay community thus became closely associated with the Tai ethnic group and this association remains representative of the contemporary tradition.

Even after their retreat from Upper Burma, the Zawti were targeted by several Royal Orders during the reign of both King Hsinbyushin (r. 1763–76) and King Bodawhpaya (r. 1782–1819). In instituting his Thudhamma reforms, which cemented the Theravada hegemony that has shaped modern Burmese monasticism, King Bodawhpaya purged monastic sects that did not conform to the regulations (Schober 2008; 2011). As part of the purge, in 1783 Bodawhpaya targeted the Zawti laity specifically, ordering that any detained Zawti follower must publicly renounce their faith to be freed (Than Tun 1986, 25). On September 8, 1783, a punishment was announced for royal guards who had allowed members of the Zawti sect in the Sinbyugyun area of central Burma to escape after being detained: the silver that the guards had accepted as bribes was to be melted and poured down their throats (Than Tun 1986, 31). Bodawhpaya's targeting of Zawti laity rather than the monks, who were the subject of

the reform measures, suggests that he saw the Zawti monastic influence on the laity as a threat to his authority over his subjects.

During this period, the Zawti monastic community settled in Loi Lek, in Tse Phāng (pinyin: Zhēfàng) in present-day Mangshi, China, where they remained from 1777–1861, on the peripheries of both Burmese and Chinese authority.[3] The Zawti monks had little communication with outsiders during this period and staying on the China side of the border allowed them to bypass Bodawhpaya's Thudhamma reforms. This meant that the Zawti retained some features of monastic practice that were lost to the Thudhamma reform of the eighteenth century and to numerous subsequent reforms of the Burmese Sangha. The Zawti tradition therefore offers us important insights into the nature of pre-reform Burmese Buddhism and premodern Theravada more broadly.[4]

The Zawti community took advantage of the obscurity that isolation afforded them, continuing to migrate throughout the Tai peripheries until the twentieth century. In the 1960s, the Zawti established their monastic headquarters at Paññālaṅkāra Monastery in Kachin State, where it remains today.[5] In the 1980s, the Zawti officially integrated into the Burmese Sangha when they were absorbed into the Thudhamma *gaing* during Ne Win's Sangha reforms.[6] Yet even after this absorption, the Zawti maintained their distinctive monastic and lay practices, and their own distinct identity as members of the Tai Zawti tradition (Porter 2023, 90–99).

While the Zawti remained relatively unknown to those outside of their community, they were—and remain—active in disseminating traditional Tai poetic literature called *lik long*. Thus, among the wider Tai community, scholar monks and lay ritual practitioners called *zare*, who compose and recite *lik long* literature in various religious and cultural settings, are likely to have some awareness of the Tai Zawti even if they have never met a Zawti monk or lay person. This is because Paññālaṅkāra Monastery (the Tai Zawti headquarters in Kachin State), is renowned among the Tai scholarly community for its production of highly skilled *zare*s, who undertake rigorous *lik long* training while ordained as novices there. Remember that it was these *lik long* texts, rather than images of the Buddha, that were kept on the home altar of the Zawti elder in southern Shan State.

When I entered the Zawti elder's home, I had been immediately struck by the absence of Buddha images on an altar that would not look out of place in almost any Tai home. As an outsider to the tradition, this to me was an obvious marker of distinction that set Zawti lay practice apart from mainstream Tai Theravada practice, and it became a topic that I brought up with many of the Zawti lay people that I met while conducting my doctoral research. This paper draws on that ethnographic fieldwork,

conducted with Zawti communities in Myanmar from 2019–20, follow-up interviews conducted with Zawti lay people, and textual analysis of Zawti authored sources I acquired during fieldwork. I examine the unique Zawti lay practice of paying reverence to texts rather than Buddha images inside the home and how this practice acts as a shibboleth, a marker of difference recognized by those both inside and outside of the community.[7)] In doing so, I aim to situate the Zawti within the broader context of Tai Theravada as well as to highlight the diversity of Tai Theravada and its place in the development of contemporary Theravada in Southeast Asia. I highlight how Zawti lay practice represents an expression of lay austerity that predates the lay reform movements that were characterized by a renewed fervor and commitment to lay morality and ethics and that emerged throughout Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia in response to the pressures of colonialism.

2 The *Dhamma* Altar/Shelf

According to Zawti-authored texts and the numerous Zawti lay people I have spoken with, the Zawti laity have traditionally kept *dhamma* shelves—altars that house Buddhist texts rather than Buddha images—inside the home.[8)] Several terms are used to refer to these altars, including: *kheng trā* (ၶိင်ႇတြါး or *dhamma* shelf, but with the sense of "*dhamma* shrine" or "*dhamma* altar") and *toek trā* (တိုၵ်ႈတြါး or *dhamma* depository/box). *Kheng phrā* (ၶိင်ႇၽြါး or Buddha altar/shelf) is the term used by the wider Tai community to describe home altars that house Buddha images. While the Zawti traditionally do not keep Buddha images on their altars, some within the community still refer to the altar as a *kheng phrā*, since the texts on the altar are religious in nature and relate to the Buddha and his teachings.

Within both the Zawti and the wider Tai Buddhist communities, there is also the tradition of keeping a *kyong phrā* (ၵျင်းၽြါး or Buddha shrine/temple) just outside the home as either an attached or unattached structure. One Zawti informant, a young *zare* from northern Shan State, remarked that keeping a *kyong phrā* outside the home is an old Tai tradition. One or two people can fit inside the structure, which houses Buddha images and Buddhist texts, and it is used for worship and meditation. In the book *Long Khoe Zawti le Phing Phāsā*, which explores the customs and traditions of the Zawti laity, lay elder Khing Kān Kham Sāng Sām (1997, 74) notes that the laity are allowed to keep Buddha images in a *kyong phrā*, which must be kept "on the corner of your veranda." Yet, while *kyong phrā* structures are permissible, they are not common among the Zawti laity.[9)] The young *zare* from northern Shan State described how usu-

ally only wealthy Zawti families keep *kyong phrā* because they are costly to build. Instead, he said, most Zawti families have a *dhamma* altar inside the home and visit the local *kyong tai* (ၵျွင်းတႆး or Tai temple) to worship Buddha images.[10)]

In the Zawti context, *kyong tai* refers specifically to the small village temples where both Buddha images *and* texts are housed. In the absence of Zawti monks, all of whom reside in the monastic headquarters in Kachin State, the Zawti laity congregate at these *kyong tai* temples to participate in community rituals led by *zare*s.[11)] The geography of Zawti *kyong tai* throughout Myanmar and across the border in the Dehong region in China is extensive and reflects the history of the Zawti monks' migration and the subsequent network of lay settlements. In the past, each Zawti village or cluster of villages had its own *kyong tai* as the place where the laity went to worship Buddha images. This accessibility of Buddha images at the *kyong tai* made their presence in the home less necessary for the Zawti laity.

Now, let us return to the Zawti *dhamma* altar within the home. Khing Kān Kham Sāng Sām (1997, 74) describes the *dhamma* shelf (he uses the term ၶဵင်ႇတြႃး *kheng trā*) as "the place where you pay respect" and specifies that "only books on the

Fig. 1 Image of the *Dhamma* Altar inside the Home of a Zawti Elder in Southern Shan State (taken by the author on December 6, 2019)

dhamma, *dhamma* scrolls or *dhamma* treatise can be kept on the *dhamma* shelf, nothing else, even Buddha statues." It is also prohibited to keep images of deities and teachers as well as traditional Tai hangings used for protection or luck on the *dhamma* shelf (Khing Kān Kham Sāng Sām 1997, 74). This is a response to the very common practice across Southeast Asia of keeping photos or statues of deities and venerated monks or ascetics on the home altar, along with Buddha images. The prohibition against Tai hangings used for protection or luck reflects the Zawti rejection of superstitious beliefs associated with pre-Buddhist Tai customs, which are commonplace among the wider Tai community.[12] For the Zawti, only *dhamma* texts must be kept on the *dhamma* altar because it is the *dhamma* that is the object of worship; the Buddha and his qualities are evoked through the *dhamma* texts. This reflects the Zawti's centering of and strict adherence to the *dhamma* texts, examined in detail below.

The Zawti are not aniconistic, the tradition is not absent of Buddha images, and it is not considered inappropriate to create and worship such images. Why, then, are Buddha images prohibited from home altars? The concern here is the location *inside the house*—a place of mundane worldly affairs, family arguments and various other types of false speech (in Pali, *musāvādā*), sexual intercourse, and countless other potential breeches of the five precepts. In other words, the house is a profane, not sacred, space and is therefore not an appropriate place to keep Buddha images. In his fieldwork among Tai communities in Ruili, China in the mid- 2000s, Kojima Takahiro (2012, 408) observed that every house in TL Village (pseudonym) had a shelf for Buddhist texts, flowers, and paintings of the Buddha, but there were no Buddha statues. He was told that Buddha statues should be kept in the monastery, since inappropriate deeds such as sexual intercourse are carried out in laypeople's homes. While the understanding of the home as a profane place is shared, one key difference between the Zawti communities I met in Myanmar and Kojima's informants in China is that while those in Myanmar prohibit photos, paintings, and statues, those on the China side of the border prohibit only three-dimensional statues.

A Zawti elder in southern Shan State noted another reason why one's house is not an appropriate place for Buddha images. He explained that the floor of a traditional Tai house (a wooden structure built on stilts) shakes when the residents walk through the rooms. It would be disrespectful and improper to cause Buddha images to shake in such a way, and therefore it is considered inappropriate to keep Buddha images inside the home.[13] As modern homes have more structural integrity and the shaking is no longer a concern, some Zawti lay people now keep Buddha images inside their homes. Others continue to observe the practice as per tradition regardless of the structural integrity of their home.

The Zawti interpretation of the *Tipiṭaka*, or Pali Canon (the authoritative texts of Theravada Buddhism), is also pertinent to the practice of keeping a *dhamma* shelf. One senior Zawti *zare* from northern Shan State explained that in the *Tipiṭaka* there are no examples of the Buddha sleeping inside the home of a lay person once he attained Buddhahood. If he travelled, he would sleep in a monastery, a temple, or under a tree. As there is no textual example of the Buddha sleeping inside a home and the Zawti monastic and lay community aim to follow the path of the Buddha during his lifetime, it is not suitable to keep images of the Buddha inside the home.

There are two interpretive components at play here. First is the strict textual adherence of the Zawti: as there no textual reference of the Buddha staying inside a lay person's home, no Buddha images should be kept inside a Zawti person's home. The lack of textual reference also explains the absence of any other objects of veneration on the Zawti *dhamma* altar. Other monks, teachers, and superstitious practices are not detailed in the canonical material and as such, they also have no place on the Zawti *dhamma* altar. This layer of interpretation distinguishes the Zawti tradition. Indeed, Zawti monasticism is markedly austere compared to mainstream Tai and Burmese monasticism due to its strict interpretation of and adherence to the 227 rules of the *Pāṭimokkha*, as recorded in the *Vinaya* (Porter 2023, 160–184). This strict adherence is also reflected in Zawti lay interpretation of the five precepts (*pañcasīla*), which manifests in many rules and regulations that are far stricter than those of mainstream Theravada lay practice (Porter 2023, 243–280). Thus, distinctive Zawti monastic and lay practices are often rooted in a close reading of the canonical material.

Variations in textual interpretation that manifest in noticeable differences in practice are usually associated with *monastic* conduct. Within the Burmese Sangha, for example, interpretation of canonical material varies somewhat among the nine *gaing*, which manifests in different monastic conduct and comportment, with the Shwegyin group known for their strict adherence to the *Vinaya* and the Thudhamma known to be more lax. To see variation rooted in the interpretation of canonical material among *lay practice*, however, is unusual.

The second interpretive component relates to the Zawti world view. For the Zawti, the Buddha image is not just a visual or symbolic representation of the power associated with the Buddha, but also a representation of the historical figure of the Buddha and the moral behavior of the Buddha as described in the *Tipiṭaka*. Therefore, the Buddha image must behave as the Buddha behaved. This coalescence of the Buddha image and the Buddha himself is recognized by the veneration and devotional services offered to Buddha images in other Buddhist contexts. Kyaw and Crosby (2013, 271), for example, assert that the daily and elaborate face-washing and teeth-cleaning

rituals performed for the Mahāmuni Buddha image in Mandalay can be interpreted as treating the image of the Buddha as a living double of the Buddha.

The young Zawti *zare* from northern Shan State noted that when the laity worship the texts placed on the *dhamma* altar, they have the Buddha in their minds and therefore it is not necessary to keep a physical image of the Buddha. This corresponds with the mental processes involved in Buddha worship detailed in the teachings of the *Abhidhamma*. When one worships the Buddha, the Buddha is the object of the worshipper's mind, whether he is present, dead, represented by an image or a statue, or illusory. The worshipper's mind may be conscious of the historical Buddha, the living Buddha represented through images or statues, or the qualities of the Buddha. The *Abhidhamma* teaches that the mental object of worship can be from the past, present, or future and it does not need to be physically present. The mental object of worship is not confined to temporal or spatial boundaries, and therefore, one can worship the Buddha anywhere, even if there is no physical image of the Buddha present (Kyaw and Crosby 2013, 264–265).

Here we come to realize that while the absence of Buddha images in a traditional Zawti home may appear to signify that such images play a less important role in Zawti worship than in the worship of other Theravada Buddhists, on the contrary, this tradition reflects a great respect for Buddha images and careful attention to canonical detail. The Buddha image is treated as an embodiment of the Buddha *as he is depicted in the canonical literature*—as a renouncer of lay life who should be kept pure from it. The *dhamma* texts, on the other hand, are the embodiment of the Buddha's *teachings* and the Zawti practice of placing them on the home altar aligns with the centrality of texts to the Zawti tradition. At the same time, the Zawti lay practice of keeping a *dhamma* altar identifies the laity with the Zawti monastic lineage and its distinctive practices, which are rooted in strict interpretation of the texts. This contrasts with the wider Tai and Burmese Buddhist communities, who identify simply as "Buddhist," rather than with any monastic *gaing* (such as Thudhamma or Shwegin) associated with the monasteries they may visit or monks they may venerate.

In examining the Zawti *dhamma* shelf and the reasons why Buddha images are absent from it, a picture emerges of Zawti lay practice as an example of lay austerity rooted in a strict adherence to the canonical literature. Such lay austerity is representative of the Buddhist lay reform movements of the nineteenth century, which emerged throughout Southeast Asia in response to the pressures of colonialism. Yet, the Zawti, and their position outside the mainstream, predate colonialism in Myanmar. The Zawti tradition, then, offers us a window into the nature of pre-reform Theravada and practices that have been preserved amidst various reforms (Porter 2023, 278–

280). Indeed, the Zawti may be one of the most austere Buddhist lay communities in Southeast Asia.

2.1 *The Positioning and Function of the Zawti* Dhamma *Altar*

Let us turn to the positioning and function of the Zawti *dhamma* altar within the home. The Zawti elder in southern Shan State said that he prayed in front of the *dhamma* altar daily and presented offerings to it on specific days. (His offerings of flowers and small glasses of water are visible in the photo of Fig. 1.) This accords with Khing Kān Kham Sāng Sām (1997, 74), who notes that "you [the Zawti] should keep three pots of flowers at the front of the altar, and you should change the flowers four times a month [on *uposatha* days] and on the *wan sin* days [*uposatha* days during *vassa*]."[14] Another informant, who grew up with her Zawti grandparents in northern Shan State, described how her grandparents prayed at their *dhamma* altar each morning and evening and offered flowers, incense, and candles.[15]

The function of the traditional Zawti *dhamma altar* as the site of daily religious activity within the home is in many ways the same as that of a Buddha altar in a traditional (non-Zawti) Tai home, where Buddhist texts *and* Buddha images are displayed as objects of worship. In her examination of a Tai Buddhist community in northern Thailand, Nancy Eberhardt (2006, 105–197) details how the household Buddha altar plays a central part in the daily routines of Tai people: a woman of the household spoons freshly cooked rice and curries into small offering cups and takes the food and fresh glasses of water to the Buddha altar first thing in the morning; she then sits on the floor with her legs folded to one side and raises each cup to the level of her head and recites a short prayer before placing them on the altar. Eberhardt notes that this two-minute offering and prayer establishes the household as one that accepts the teachings and preeminence of the Buddha while simultaneously laying claim to the power and protection implied by this status. In the evening, lay people light candles and incense to place on the altar and pray again. Evening prayers seek protection from illness and malevolent forces that come out at night (Eberhardt 2006, 105–197). The ritual function of the *dhamma* altar in the daily religious activity of the Zawti laity is the same as that of a traditional Tai altar that houses images of the Buddha. Both types of altars are used to pay homage to the Buddha and the *dhamma* and are where the laity perform religious offerings within their homes. Eberhardt's description of the function of the Buddha altar and the daily rituals associated with it is framed in terms of worship, but also in terms of power and protection, specifically protection from illness and malevolent forces. The only difference is that for the Zawti, it is the teachings of the Buddha (which are composed in the texts housed in the *dhamma*

altar), rather than physical images of the Buddha, that are imbued with this protection.

The position of the Zawti *dhamma* altar in the house also reflects its function as the site of religious worship inside the home and as a repository of sacred objects imbued with a power that offers protection. Traditional Tai homes are divided into: 1) the *na hern* (the front part), where guests are received; 2) the *kaang hern* (the middle part), a shared space for the family where cooking and socializing takes place; and 3) the *nai hern* (the inner part), where family members sleep. In Tai homes, the *keng phra* (Buddha shrine) is kept in the *kaang hern* (the middle part of the house) and faces east, the direction associated with the Buddha's enlightenment. Although separated from the *kaang hern*, the *nai hern*, or sleeping quarters, orient east-west to align with the Buddha shrine (Oranratmanee 2018, 112). The Buddha shrine therefore is integral to the spatial arrangement of traditional Tai homes, which are divided into sacred and profane spaces that center around the Buddha shrine. The same holds for the *dhamma* altar in a Tai Zawti home. The Zawti elder in southern Shan State also kept his *dhamma* shelf in the *kaang hern*, the main room where families socialize and host guests.

Neither the traditional Tai Buddha altar nor the Zawti *dhamma* shelf are ever kept in the sleeping quarters of the house. The bedroom is associated with the ritual pollution of sexual intercourse, and it is therefore not an appropriate place for housing images or texts that are imbued with the symbolic power of the Buddha. On the placement of *dhamma* texts in the sleeping quarters, one informant whose father and entire paternal family was Zawti remarked that Zawti women should never sleep in the presence of a *lik long* text or a Buddha image. This is noteworthy in that the object of the prohibition is the female sex rather than exposure to sexual activity.

3 The Nature of the *Dhamma* Texts

The texts housed in Zawti *dhamma* altar are *lik long* texts. *Lik long* is a genre that covers topics ranging from local history and folklore to astrology and traditional medicine. *Lik long* of a religious nature is called *lik trā langkā long*, or "texts of great *dhamma* (*trā*) poetry" and it is these texts that are housed in the Zawti *dhamma* altar. The oral recitation of *lik trā langkā long* at community events plays a central role in disseminating Buddhism among the Tai, especially among those who are not literate. Thus, the Zawti and the wider Shan Theravada Buddhist community share a mutual appreciation of and common interest in *lik long* literature and the Zawti are known for their mastery of *lik long* among the Tai monastic community.

Lik long is recited by lay ritual practitioners called *zare*s. The Tai term *zare* (ဇဝရး) is derived from the Burmese *cāre* (စာရေး or clerk) and was originally used to refer to the secretary, or clerk, of the *saopha*, the Tai princely rulers who ruled the Tai polities known as the Shan States during the British colonial period until the twentieth century (Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010, 2). Among the older generations in northern Shan State and across the border in Dehong, China, these practitioners are called *ho lu* (ၶၢၼ်းလူ, or leader of offerings). One senior *zare* from Muse (in northern Shan State) explained to me that in the border area, where there is less exposure to the Burmese language, fewer loan words have been adopted. The term *zare*, with its Burmese origin, is therefore not familiar to them, and they exclusively use the Tai term *ho lu*. He commented that although he preferred the term *ho lu*, he was now accustomed to *zare*, which is widely used throughout Shan State.

*Zare*s compose, transcribe, and recite *lik long*. The texts are composed in a combination of Tai, Burmese, and Pali, and written in multiple Tai scripts, which correlate to the period they were composed and the background of the composer. Zawti *zare*s from communities now located in Dehong, China, traditionally used the *tho ngong* script (in Shan, ထွင်ၵ်ငင်း or the "bean sprout" script) and their compositions tend to contain some Chinese loan words. Among the Zawti living on the Myanmar side of the border, the *lik tai long* (great Tai or central Tai script) and the modern Tai script are used, which tends to contain more Burmese loan words (Crosby and Khur-Yearn 2010, 2–3; Khur-Yearn 2012, 46–49). The Zawti *zare*s learn to compose Tai *lik long* in the modern Tai script while ordained at the Zawti monastic headquarters in Kachin State.

Unlike the wider Tai community, the Zawti only keep *lik long* texts that are derived from the *Tipiṭaka* on their home altar. Popular texts include the *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination), *sotāpanna* (stream-entry), and the six *ārammaṇa*s (the six sense objects). In contrast, the wider Tai community engages with *lik long* material that is not strictly based on the Canon, reciting such texts at religious events and keeping them on traditional home altars along with images of the Buddha. According to Khur-Yearn (2012, 40), while some Tai *lik long* compositions (of a religious nature) are based on Pali commentaries, the majority of Tai *lik long* contains non-canonical texts and he proposes that such compositions may in fact be unique to Tai Buddhism. This assertion is based on the popularity of apocryphal Jātakas among the Tai. The Jātakas are the stories found in the *Khuddaka Nikaya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka* that detail the meritorious acts of the Buddha in his previous lives (which led to his rebirth as a Buddha). Key Buddhist concepts such as karma (in Pali, *kamma*) and merit (in Pali, *puñña*) are taught to Buddhist lay people through Jātaka

recitations. While there are Tai *lik long* compositions of canonical Jātakas, apocryphal Jātakas are popular among the wider Tai community, and are composed by *zare*s and recited to lay audiences in the same way as canonical Jātakas (Khur-Yearn 2012, 40).[16)]

One of the tasks of the *zare* as a lay poet and textual expert is to transcribe *lik long*. The *zare* makes copies of existing *lik long* manuscripts that can be stored in the home, at the temple, or in a monastery. Skilled *zare*s are also able to compose their own *lik long* material, meaning that they create new poetic texts that conform to the literary conventions of *lik long* poetry. My *zare* informant from northern Shan State remarked that some contemporary *zare* also compose Jātakas for the purpose of pure entertainment rather than any moral teaching. But he emphasized that the Zawti would never keep such compositions on their home *dhamma* altar. This contrasts with mainstream Tai Buddhists, who do not distinguish between canonical and apocryphal Jātakas and may keep both types on their home altar.

Khur-Yearn (2012, 30) identifies six classical poets associated with the composition of the most famous Tai *lik long* texts: Zao Thammatinna (1541–1640), Zao Kang Suea (1787–1881), Zao Kawli (1847–1910), Nang Kham Ku (1853–1918), Zao Amat Long (1854–1905), and Zao Naw Kham (1856–95) (Khur Yearn 2012, 30). Their compositions, the earliest of which are attributed to the sixteenth century, continue to be copied, transcribed, and disseminated among contemporary Tai Buddhist communities, including the Tai Zawti (Khur-Yearn 2012, 30). The *lik long* texts kept on the Zawti *dhamma* altar are often copies of texts composed by these six poets. Although none of the six, as far as I am aware, belonged to the Zawti tradition, the Zawti community holds them in extremely high regard and considers their compositions authoritative.[17)]

In keeping *lik long* texts composed and transcribed by non-Zawti *zare*s on their home altar, the Zawti laity demonstrates that it is the content of the text, which must be canonical or from the accepted commentaries, that is important, rather than the specific affiliation of the *zare*. The shared *lik long* tradition and admiration for the six classical poets and their compositions situates the Zawti within the wider Tai Buddhist context: despite their own monastic lineage and distinct practices, the Zawti share a cultural identity with their wider Tai kin.

Indeed, even during prolonged periods of geographic and social isolation from the eighteenth century into the twentieth century, the Zawi retained a key line of communication with the wider Tai community, that of religious texts (*lik long*). But while *lik long* unifies the Zawti with the wider Tai community, it also obscures the Zawti as a distinct tradition. Whether or not this obfuscation was advantageous to the Zawti, par-

ticularly during periods when the Zawti were targeted for their distinctive practices, is not clear. The ways in which this shared admiration for Tai *lik long* relates to Tai Zawti identity, and how the Zawti are understood by the wider Tai community are questions for future research.

3.1 *The Question of Consecration*

A Buddha image only becomes an object of worship, whether in the home, temple, or monastery, when it has been consecrated in an *abhiseka*, or *Buddhābhiseka*, ritual ceremony (in Burmese, အဘိသေက).[18] The Zawti perform the ceremony when consecrating Buddha images to be housed in Zawti temples (*kyong tai*) and at the Zawti monastery. In contrast, *lik long* texts kept on the home *dhamma* altar are not consecrated.[19] Why do *lik long* texts, which are canonical in nature and are venerated by the Zawti in the same way as a Buddha image, not require consecration? I propose that this is because there are no examples of textual consecration in the *Tipiṭaka*.

According to the Pali commentaries, there are three types of Buddha relics: pieces of the Buddha's body, objects used by the Buddha, and objects that remind one of the Buddha (Gombrich 1966, 25). *Lik long* texts are not considered relics (in Pali, *dhatu*, or "essence"). Buddha images, namely statues, remind one of the Buddha and their status is enhanced by placing relics of the Buddha's body inside them (such as a hair or a tooth). Richard Gombrich (1966, 25) describes how Buddhaghosa, the great fifth-century commentator of the Pali Canon, identified the tradition of enhancing a Buddha image with a relic of the Buddha's body as the rationale for worshipping a Buddha image at all. Following Buddhaghosa's line of argument, since a Buddha relic cannot be placed inside a text, it cannot be the object of a consecration ritual or any associated enhancement rituals. Therefore, despite being an object of worship, it is not necessary to consecrate the *lik long* text before placing it on the Zawti *dhamma* altar.

Although *lik long* texts kept on the Zawti home *dhamma* altar are not consecrated, they are treated with the same reverence, and function in the same way (in everyday religious ritual), as a Buddha image kept on a non-Zawti home altar. This is because the texts represent the teaching of the Buddha and, as the young *zare* from northern Shan State remarked, the Zawti have the Buddha in their minds when they worship and present offerings to the texts at the *dhamma* altar. In his exploration of Buddha image consecration in Northern Thailand, Swearer (1995, 263–280) details how the omnipresence of the Buddha image in virtually all ritual settings provides a common referent to the Buddha as the focus. The Buddha image acts as a reminder of the Buddha and re-presents his life, teachings, powers of lifetimes of moral perfections (*pārami*), and extraordinary states of consciousness (*ñāna*). For the Zawti, the

physical presence of the *lik long dhamma* texts evokes this same re-presentation of the Buddha.

4 A Marker of Distinction, Obscured by New Challenges

I have explored the Zawti custom of keeping *lik long dhamma* texts rather than Buddha images on the home altar, how the Zawti *dhamma* altar functions in the religious lives of Zawti lay people, and the nature of the *lik long* texts kept on the altar. I now want to turn attention to how this practice is understood as a marker of distinction both by the Zawti laity and by outsiders to the tradition. I shall also explore how and why some Zawti lay people have begun to keep Buddha images inside their home and some of the external pressures that have impacted such changes.

Both the Zawti and outsiders to the Zawti tradition acknowledge the lack of Buddha images in the home as a marker of distinction. When I interviewed a group of Zawti *khing*s (male community elders) in Laihka in November 2019, they confirmed that the Zawti practice differed from that of mainstream Tai and Burmese Buddhists. Images of the Buddha on the home altar are so common, one *khing* recalled, that when a non-Zawti neighbor came to visit him, he noticed the absence and asked him if he was a Christian (Porter 2023, 226). Although this *khing* recounted the story as a humorous anecdote, comments and enquiries from outsiders are not always friendly.

My young *zare* informant from northern Shan State was born in a village close to the Zawti monastery in Kachin State. He explained that when his family lived near the monastery, they did not keep Buddha images in their home. But, when they moved to a city in northern Shan State, they broke from tradition and kept Buddha images on their altar so as not to stand out. He noted that he would prefer to keep only texts on the family *dhamma* altar, but if they did, then non-Zawti visitors would ask too many questions. He added that he prefers very simple Buddha statues over ornate images of the Buddha wearing a crown or plated in gold. Thus, the Zawti are conscious of their "outsider" status, even among the Tai community. This case also demonstrates the willingness of the Zawti laity to adapt to their cultural surroundings, something that is perhaps reflective of their experience of being singled out and suppressed by outsider authorities. This adaptation helps us understand how the Tai Zawti community have remained relatively unknown for so long.

The young *zare*'s experience is not uncommon among Zawti who, after moving outside their community, become aware that their religious practices differ from the mainstream. Indeed, moving from a traditional Zawti village setting to urban environ-

ments is an important factor in the decision of contemporary Zawti lay persons to keep Buddha images on their *dhamma* altar in addition to *lik long* texts. One middle-aged woman from a Zawti village in Kachin State remarked that her family never kept Buddha images in the home, and that it was only after she left her community that she realized that this was not the norm. When she settled in Yangon and married a Bamar Burmese man, she decided to keep a small Buddha image in her home.

Examples thus far have only considered the voluntary migration of families moving for work opportunities or other personal reasons. But, as we know, the Zawti have been forced to migrate frequently over the centuries due to conflict, war, and falling out of favor with authority. Political instability and conflict have been part of Zawti history since its inception, with Shan State in a state of armed conflict for the past several decades.[20] Since 2021, Northern Shan State, where many Zawti lay communities live, has been the site of intense fighting between the Myanmar military and multiple armed ethnic groups; this and repeated air bombardments by the Myanmar military have forced tens of thousands to flee.[21] In the past, the Zawti have self-imposed social and geographic isolation, which helped preserve their tradition, and adapted to crises to ensure its survival. However, new waves of military attacks and political instability are adding to existing pressures, increasingly impacting the Zawti laity.

Migration, both voluntary and involuntary, as well as increased communication with non-Zawti outsiders, has resulted in changes to Zawti religious practice. In escaping persecution and fleeing instability, the laity has had to adapt to new social and cultural environments. Zawti lay leaders have reacted pragmatically to such shifts, acknowledging that some aspects of traditional Zawti practice may have to adapt to accommodate the conditions of contemporary lay life. They have provided reassurance that change is permissible, since the tradition of not keeping Buddha images in the home is "a guide, not a rule" (personal communication with Zawti *zare*s). This marks a change in attitude from what was published some twenty-seven years ago in *Long Khoe Zawti*, which frames the discussion of keeping *dhamma* texts on the altar rather than images of the Buddha in terms of proscriptions and prohibitions. The questions that remain are: what other changes have the Zawti laity made to adapt and assimilate to the cultural surroundings? Are there practices that have already been lost? How might the current political crisis in Myanmar accelerate such changes?

5 Conclusion

This paper has investigated the Tai Zawti Theravada tradition and its distinct lay prac-

tice of keeping Buddhist texts, rather than Buddha images, on a *dhamma* altar inside the home. According to accounts from Zawti lay people and Zawti-authored texts, the explanation for the absence of Buddha images ranges from the inadequate structural makeup of traditional Tai houses and the inappropriateness of the profane space of the house to the absence of canonical mention of the Buddha staying in a lay person's home. Therefore, far from disregarding their importance, the Zawti tradition considers Buddha images as representative of—and therefore deserving of the same treatment as—the Buddha.

While the Zawti strict adherence to *dhamma* texts indicates a great respect and close reading of canonical details, it manifests in practices that appear divergent or even unorthodox to outsiders. We have examined how although the absence of Buddha images inside the Zawti home acts as a marker of distinction, the presence of traditional Tai *lik long* texts on the Zawti *dhamma* altar situates the Zawti firmly within the wider Tai cultural context. *Lik long* acts as a mediator, representative of the commonality between the Zawti and their wider Tai kin as adherents of Tai Theravada Buddhism and members of the same Tai ethnic culture. How this distinctive yet overlapping identity is perceived by the Zawti and by non-Zawti outsiders is something I wish to pursue in future research.

The Zawti have preserved aspects of lay Theravada practice that are not found elsewhere, and therefore the tradition offers us a window into the nature of pre-reform Theravada and insights that can enrich our understanding of the development of contemporary Theravada. Examination of the Zawti also draws attention to Tai Theravada more broadly, a tradition that has received little attention in comparison to its Burmese and Thai counterparts. This investigation is timely when we consider how the Zawti laity has adapted its practices given contemporary challenges and contexts, which have caused some Zawti lay people to change their practices and thus blurred their distinction. How new generations of Zawti laity, monks, and leaders decide which aspects of Zawti religious practice must be protected and maintained and which can be adapted will shape the future of the Tai Zawti tradition and the diversity of Tai Theravada Buddhism.

Notes

1) The Zawti community are named after their founder, Varajoti. The monastic name Varajoti is a compound of the Pali words *vara* (excellent, noble) and *joti* (light, radiance). "Zawti" is transliterated from the Tai rendering of *joti*, which is: ၸေႃးတီ.
2) During this period in the eighteenth century, the Tai principalities spanned the Burma-China border and were ruled by *saopha* chieftains. The areas were referred to as the "Shan States" and

the "Chinese Shan States" by the British, who administered the Shan States from 1885–1948. When Burma gained independence in 1948, the areas under British jurisdiction became Shan State. I use the term "Shan States" when writing about the colonial era and "Shan State" when referring to the post-colonial era.

3) Known as Tse Phāng (ၸေးၽၢင်) in Tai. Zhefang is now a town in Mangshi city, in Dehong Dai and Jingpho Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province in southwestern China.
4) I examine distinctive aspects of Zawti monasticism that have been preserved by the Zawti monks but lost elsewhere, e.g. their *udakukkhepa-sīmā* consecration practice, in detail in my PhD thesis (2023, 150–156).
5) Kachin State is associated with the Kachin peoples, a confederation of ethnic groups who refer to themselves as Jingpho and live in the Kachin Hills. However, people of various ethnic groups live in Kachin State, including the Bamar and Tai. The Zawti monastic headquarters is surrounded by Tai villages, some of which are inhabited wholly by followers of the Zawti tradition. So, while the Zawti monastery is in Kachin State, there is no association with the Kachin/ Jingpho language or culture.
6) *Gaing* is a Burmese term derived from the Pali *gaṇa* meaning "chapter" or "collection" and sometimes translated as "sect" (Carbine 2011, 76). In the Burmese monastic context, it refers to the nine monastic groups officially recognized by the Buddhist Sangha in Burma. See Porter (2023, 91–96) for an in-depth discussion of the Zawti and their *gaing* affiliation.
7) I conducted fieldwork with Zawti communities in Shan State and Kachin State during multiple research trips to Myanmar from August 2019 to February 2020. Originally, I had planned to write a doctoral thesis on lay ritual practitioners (*zare*) and the literary texts that they disseminate (*lik long*), and when I first arrived in Taunggyi, to base myself at a monastic university there, this was my focus. When I went to visit a village in southern Shan State, about an hour's drive away from Taunggyi, to attend a *lik long* recitation on a *wan sin* day, an *uposatha* day during vassa, I wound up in a smaller village that happened to be a Zawti village. This initiated my investigation of the Zawti, which became the focus of my doctoral research. The monks at the monastic university were able to draw on their monastic networks to put me in contact with Zawti communities in Shan State, and from there I was able to establish connections with Zawti communities in Yangon and Kachin State. I returned to the UK in February 2020, just before the pandemic hit and one year before the military coup in 2021. Travel back to Myanmar became impossible and so I turned to the Zawti authored texts I had collected while in Myanmar and online communication with the Zawti lay people I had met. I draw on these conversations and translations of these texts in this paper.
8) The Zawti-authored texts used for this study are *Long Khoe Zawti le Phing Phāsā* (Khing Kān Kham Sāng Sām 1997) and *Pī Kon Kham: Kyong Loi Tai Zawti: Weng Mong Yang* (Paññālaṅkāra Tai Zawti Monastery 2016).
9) I did not come across a *kyong phrā* in any of my visits to Zawti lay communities in southern Shan State and I am therefore not able to comment on them in any meaningful detail. However, I hope to explore the history and usage of the *kyong phrā* and how it relates to the historical and contemporary treatment of Buddha images among the wider Tai community in future research.
10) Please note, I refer to the *kyong tai* as the *tai wat* in my PhD thesis, but I have since learned that *kyong tai* is the more accurate term. I plan to write on the *kyong tai* in more detail in a future paper.
11) All Zawti monks are ordained and reside at the Zawti monastic headquarters in Kachin State, a distinctive feature of the Zawti monastic tradition that I write about at length in my PhD thesis. The need for the *kyong tai* is in part related to the inaccessibility of the Zawti monks, since the majority of the Zawti laity live far away from the monastery. This raises important questions regarding the lay orientation of the Zawti tradition and in particular, the role of the *zare*, which I

have written about elsewhere.

12) While traditional Tai hangings used for protection or luck are not kept on the Zawti *dhamma* altar, decorative hangings are kept on the altar, as seen in Fig. 1.
13) The positioning of Buddha images is paramount in Theravada Buddhist societies. Kyaw and Crosby (2013, 263) describe the negative effects of a Buddha image placed in a disrespectful position within the home in the Burmese Buddhist context. They provide the example of a Buddhist nun (*thilashin*) called to perform protective chanting (*paritta*) at a devotee's home because the main Buddha image in the shrine room kept tilting despite efforts to straighten it. The head nun identified the tilting as a reaction to the construction of a house extension that was higher than the shrine room, thus positioning the Buddha image lower than the residential area. The tilting was a reaction to the transgression of the Buddha being placed lower than people.
14) The *dhamma* altar in Fig. 1 has more than three pots of flowers; the number of pots is likely a matter of personal preference.
15) I met this informant in the UK years after conducting fieldwork in Shan State. She does not identify as Zawti, but her maternal grandparents were devout Zawti lay people. While her grandparents did keep a small Buddha image on their altar, the point here is that the function of the altar, with or without images, as a site of daily worship is the same in both the Zawti and Tai Theravada traditions.
16) The most famous Tai apocryphal text is *Sutta Nibbāna*, also known as *Sutta Maun Tham*, or "The Essence of the Discourses," composed by Zao Thammatinna and usually offered at funerals. The Tai *Sutta Nibbāna* differs from the canonical *Nibbāna Sutta* found in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. See Khur-Yearn (2012).
17) The *lik long* texts composed by these famous Tai poets are commonly known in the wider Tai community and their *lik long* may also be kept on Tai home altars in addition to Buddha images and other (apocryphal) texts.
18) Buddhist ritual consecration is also referred to as *akkhipūjā* in Pali and *nētra pratiṣṭhānaya utsavaya* ("festival of setting the eyes") in Sanskritic Sinhala (Gombrich 1966, 24).
19) Non-Zawti Tais also do not consecrate *lik long* texts kept on their home altar.
20) See Porter (2023, 37–100) for an overview of the historical development of the Zawti and their encounters with authority and conflict.
21) The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that as of November 9, 2023, almost 50,000 people in northern Shan State had been forced into displacement (OCHA Flash Update, November 9, 2023) and at the time of publication, conflict and displacement continue.

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The Rise of Fear in Vietnam during the Coronavirus Pandemic: Causes from Different Perspectives

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Vietnam is considered to have been one of the most successful countries in implementing preventive measures against the Covid-19 virus. There were many forces that contributed to this achievement, including the fear of infectious diseases that has a long history in the country. This fear led people to maximize preventive measures to ensure their safety, even though in some cases it came with an economic cost or curtailment of individual freedoms. This paper proposes that fear also played a large role in people's willingness to accept the government's pandemic prevention policies and thus contributed to the success of Vietnam's battle against the pandemic. This paper looks at contemporary challenges as significant causes of this fear. The paper aims to explore the core causes of fear, the forces that reinforced the fear, and the most affected social groups. It is based on a review of publications, news on mass media, prevention policies applied during the Covid-19 pandemic, and especially individual interviews with people from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Keywords: Covid-19, Vietnam, pandemic prevention, social stigma of disease, fear of disease

Introduction

In Vietnam, the first two cases of Covid-19 infection were identified in Cho Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City on January 23, 2020. By July 4, 2023, according to the Ministry of Health (MOH), there were 11,620,769 cases across the country, placing Vietnam in the 13th position by number of cases worldwide. The first wave was from January 23 to July 24, 2020, with 415 cases; the second wave was from July 25, 2020, to January 27, 2021, with 1,136 cases; the third wave was from January 28 to April 26, 2021, with 1,301 cases; and the fourth wave began on April 24, 2021, ending with 11,617,917 cases. Vietnam ranked 120th among 231 countries and territories in infec-

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tion rate per million people (117,437 cases per million). The total number of deaths as of July 2023 was 43,206, accounting for 0.4 percent of total cases and placing Vietnam 26th in the world. The death rate per million was in the 141st position (Bộ y tế 2023).

Vietnam was viewed as one of the most successful countries in preventing the large-scale spread of Covid-19, at least in 2020 and early 2021. There have been a number of studies exploring the forces that contributed to Vietnam's success. The state's policies are seen as one of the most important. At the beginning of the pandemic, detailed instructions for transmission-reducing behaviors along with new policies for social distancing and other related measures were introduced at both the national and local levels; these were key to the country's success in mitigating the spread of the virus (Earl 2020; Le *et al.* 2021). The pandemic prevention policies were quite flexible: various regions had different social distancing policies given the social diversity, economic dynamics, and nature of the pandemic at different periods and in different places (Le *et al.* 2021). Many policies also assimilated individual health directly into the health of the body politic so that optimal resources could be used (Lincoln 2021).

The other significant force was the immediate and authentic cooperation between the government, civil society, and individuals. Based on a state-centric analysis, Bill Hayton and Tro Ly Ngheo (2020) suggested that the one-party system helped the Vietnamese government to easily make use of massive public institutions to implement policies and impose control on the population. Other factors that helped in the fight against the pandemic were the state's appeal to nationalism and heroism; top-down approach of policy implementation; cooperation between the public and private sectors, civil society, and individuals; and extensive public health preparation (Earl 2020; Le *et al.* 2020; Hartley *et al.* 2021). Efforts by the government and the collective spirit in Vietnamese culture are believed to have been key forces that kept the country relatively safe in the first year of the pandemic (Dinh and Ho 2020). Luong Van Hy (2022) provided various arguments to support the above explanations. He emphasized the cultural and historical background of Vietnamese society, including its recent experience with war and the mask-wearing habit among residents. He also pointed to "the fear-driven situational variation in norm compliance and in the tolerance for norm violation, a variation that the aforementioned cultural analyses of the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam and elsewhere tend to overlook" (Luong 2022, 761).

What Luong mentioned about fear (*sự sợ hãi*) was suggested also in a previous study by Nguyen Cong Thao (2020), who proposed that fear of disease was rooted in Vietnam's long history of social stigma against infectious diseases such as leprosy, tuberculosis, and HIV: this was believed to play a role in the public's increasing fear and willingness to take precautions. Nguyen observed that the willingness of Hanoi

residents to accept the government's pandemic prevention policies, including staying indoors, also had cultural implications:

> From a cultural perspective, it is important to recognize that these afflictions are not only understood as diseases in the medical sense but are also commonly understood by people as signs of death that are entangled with ideas about morality and fate. (Nguyen 2020, 3)

This way of seeing Covid-19 stoked people's fear, a fear that was reinforced by the government's policies and communication slogans. In 2020 and 2021 the pandemic was widely referred to in mass media and political speeches as an enemy (*giặc*), and this approach was reinforced by the government through the slogan "Chống dịch như chống giặc!" (Fighting the pandemic is like fighting the enemy). The city of Hanoi seemed as though "it was organized for a time of war, with sirens from ambulances and police cars sounding throughout day and night. All these elements made people stay alert and intensify their precautionary measures against the pandemic" (Nguyen 2020, 10). According to Luong, fear of Covid-19 was a driving force that also led to discrimination and interpersonal tensions in Vietnam.

This paper proposes that fear played a significant role in people's willingness to accept the government's prevention policies and thus partly contributed to the success of the battle against the pandemic. However, it shall provide additional explanations about the causes of fear discussed in previous studies. "Fear" in this paper is related to the risk of negative impacts from the pandemic on areas such as income, job opportunities, health care, and social prestige. Rather than focusing on broad historical, cultural, and political risks, the analysis of fear in this paper also explores the social and economic aspects. It proposes that the public's fear during the Covid-19 pandemic was rooted in potential risks such as loss of income, insecure health care, or losing face.

The higher the risk related to income, health, and social prestige, the more fearful people feel; and people from different social groups may experience different forms of fear as they have different risks to cope with. I propose that such risks are strongly dependent on the following three factors: (i) poor condition of the health care system, (ii) inconsistent and rigid policies, and (iii) violations of privacy related to mass media. Following are some of the key questions that will be explored in this paper: How did the three factors intensify the fear among the public in Vietnam during the Covid-19 pandemic? How did the fear affect people's attitude toward preventive policies? And who was often the most fearful during the pandemic? Analyses in the paper are drawn from reviews of past publications, pandemic prevention policies, discussions on social media, government reports, field observations, and random individual interviews with

people from different social groups in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in November and December 2023.

While agreeing with many other previous studies indicating that state policies contributed greatly to pandemic prevention in Vietnam, the analysis in this paper focuses on the unexpected consequences of specific policies that increased fear among the public. It discusses how the health care system and mass media in the country sometimes made people anxious even though these two systems were basically owned by the state. This paper starts with an overview of the fear of disease in history and how the fear emerged worldwide during the Covid-19 pandemic. Following that, we look at what happened in Vietnam. The central part of the paper will focus on analyzing the three above-mentioned contemporary causes of fear and then identifying which social groups were most fearful during the pandemic.

1 Fear of Disease around the World

1.1 *Historical Backgroun*

Diseases impact people not only physically but also mentally. While medical science provides services related to physical health care, social sciences pay more attention to the social effects that patients have to cope with. From a social perspective, stigma generates fear, which often discourages individuals from disclosing potential diseases due to concerns about negative repercussions in the workplace (Corrigan 2014). Social and emotional isolation are sometimes more harmful than medical or physical isolation as the effects of the former persist even after patients have recovered, and it is often not only the patients but also their family members who end up suffering (Markel 1992). Fear of disease is manifested differently in various societies, and it sometimes even leads to human rights violations (Jones and Corrigan 2014). Patients living with HIV or tuberculosis are often stigmatized in addition to suffering economic loss and psychological trauma (Sherman 2007). Africa and South Asia are examples of regions where there is a great fear of disease—partly due to a limited understanding of the nature of various diseases, poor health care, and religion or the caste system (Dijkstra *et al.* 2017).

Fear of infectious diseases is not a new phenomenon; it has a long history in human society. Leprosy was regarded as dirty in Europe during ancient times. Leprosy patients had to be isolated, and their sickness was believed to be punishment for their sins (Try 2006). Such an attitude is still found in rural India, even when patients are completely recovered (Barrett 2005). The stigma spreads also to family members who

are not carrying the disease (Raju and Reddy 1995). In parts of Europe and the United States, cholera or jaundice patients in the past were discriminated against and believed to have an "unclean" lifestyle, even believed to be immoral (Sherman 2007). Moral and cultural judgments of disease are seen also with HIV patients, and this deters many patients from going to hospital for timely care or leads them to try and hide their disease (Herek 1999). Though many forms of cancer are curable, the disease is still strongly associated with death. Lung cancer patients are viewed as paying for their smoking, though smoking is not the only cause of lung cancer. Muslim women in Pakistan worry that a cancer diagnosis will harm their marital prospects. And some Canadian women are afraid that their husbands will seek a divorce if they get diagnosed with breast cancer (Penner *et al.* 2018). Though obesity is often the result of a digestive disorder, it is commonly seen as a consequence of overeating and a lazy lifestyle and leads to reduced employment opportunities. Some people believe that epilepsy can be transmitted through saliva or is the result of a magician's curse (Baskind and Birbeck 2005).

Fear of disease not only exists among patients and their relatives but is also associated with larger communities or even ethnic groups, and this fear often makes outsiders afraid of or hostile toward infected people. For instance, Jews were accused of being responsible for the Black Death pandemic in Europe, which killed about 50 percent of the continent's population in the fourteenth century (Goffman 1963). Many mentally ill patients were seen as dangerous, responsible for their disease, or incurably sick. They were considered useless and highly dependent (Fiest *et al.* 2014). A study on depression and schizophrenia in 16 countries indicated that there was a popular fear among the public that people living with these two diseases were completely unable to take care of children, to get married, or to control themselves (Pescosolido *et al.* 2013). Mental illness was often associated with race and sex: for instance, Caribbean and Black American people were believed to have a higher chance of developing mental disorders (Williams *et al.* 2007), and men were perceived as suffering more than women (Boysen *et al.* 2014).

1.2 *Fear during the Covid-19 Pandemic*

According to the World Health Organization, Covid-19 created fear in many communities around the world. This was due to the following reasons: (i) this was a new virus of which there was little knowledge; (ii) humans have a natural fear of disease; and (iii) it was a publicly shared fear (World Health Organization 2020). The fear created difficulties not only for patients but also for their family members and medical doctors. Some visiting doctors in Nepal had problems buying food and renting rooms as they

were discriminated against by hotel staff (Poudel 2020). Some restaurants refused to serve them even though they were not infected. Their neighbors refused to talk to them and tried to stay far from them. Such an attitude extended even to psychologists and psychiatrists, some of whom refused to treat Covid-19 patients (Tandon 2020). Thus, doctors faced massive societal pressures; this was seen especially in places like China (Xiong and Peng 2020) and Qatar (Tandon 2020), where the death rate increased rapidly. Doctors were even assaulted in India, the United States, Australia (Withnall 2020), and other places. In Mexico, Malawi, and India doctors and nurses had to bike to work as they were not welcome on public transportation. Some were asked by landlords to pay off the rent and vacate their premises (Bruns *et al.* 2020).

Fear of Covid-19 even affected recovered patients: stigma and discrimination excluded them from community activities even after they tested negative World Health Organization 2020; Singh and Subedi 2020). One woman was abandoned by her family after giving birth at a hospital in Maharashtra (India) that had Covid-19 patients. Some people in Zimbabwe were surprised to see that people were not crossing the road in front of their houses anymore, and the road was renamed "Corona Road" (Bagcchi 2020). The discrimination extended to social and racial groups, such as Asians being blamed for bringing the virus to many Western countries, especially the United States (Roberto *et al.* 2020). In New York, by the end of April 2020 there were 248 cases of Covid-19. More than 50 percent of the cases were Asian, and they were assaulted and discriminated against because they were blamed for the pandemic (Noble 2020).

2 Fear of Disease In Vietnam

2.1 *Historical Background*

In popular Vietnamese belief, disease is associated with evil or ghosts. A man is believed to have two components—body and soul—and when one is sick, it is not only the body but also the soul that has something wrong with it (Trần 1995). This explains why Vietnamese people often seek a shaman (*thầy cúng*) when they are unwell. The shaman calls for the evil force—or ghost—to leave the body, or for the soul to return to the body. This belief is still popular in Vietnam today, especially when it comes to certain mental diseases or issues related to sexuality. There are often misinterpretations or even negative attitudes associated with some diseases. People living with a disability are believed to be paying for the sins committed by them or their family members in previous lives, and from birth to death they face iso-

lation and discrimination (Burr 2015). There is evidence that disabled students do not receive an equal education, and without any supporting evidence they are labeled as having weaker mental health than others. Despite outstanding achievements in HIV research and treatment over the last 25 years, HIV patients are still accused of having unsafe sex or using drugs. They are isolated not only because of their disease but also due to their "moral infection" (Hà and Bùi 2013). In a study in Ho Chi Minh City, 42 percent of informants believed that using the same toilet or lying beside an HIV patient could lead to infection (Võ 2018). It is not only patients but also their family members who are isolated by the community (Lưu 2010). In this context, children with HIV are the most vulnerable as they do not have equal access to education, social integration, or all-round development, and they may suffer the psychological effects of this their whole life (Hà and Bùi 2013). People who are afraid of disease might even stigmatize others who have been cured with no chance of reinfection. Leprosy is an example. After taking medication the rate of transmission is almost zero, but leprosy patients are still isolated from community activities because of a fear of infection (Lưu 2010). There are still some who believe that cancer is a form of retribution for past sins. There are even many who believe that surgery fosters the development of cancer, and this explains their hesitation to be operated upon (Bộ Y tế 2021b). Stigma against tuberculosis is directed not only at patients but also at medical doctors.

Discrimination is common even in the case of some disorders that are not infectious. According to Đậu and Vu (2015), autistic children in Vietnam are classified as persons of "low intellectual development"—an inappropriate label as scientists have shown that 25 percent of such children have normal intellectual capacity and 3–5 percent of them are even very smart. Many of them are capable of working, and some are well integrated socially. Sexual orientation is another reason for discrimination: homosexual people are seen as abnormal in Vietnam (Phạm 2017). They face denigration, isolation, and violence not only from outsiders but also from their own relatives. Such an attitude explains why some stigmatized people see their lives as a dead end and even try to commit suicide (Đồng and Phạm 2015; Lương and Phạm 2015).

2.2 *Fear of Covid-19 in Vietnam*

With the number of Covid-19 cases rapidly increasing, on April 1, 2020, the Vietnamese government initiated nationwide social distancing for 15 days. Like many other cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh became quiet, and their streets became empty as if it were the first morning of the first day in the new lunar year (Nguyen 2020). Figures on infections and deaths around the world as well as in the country were updated every

day in the newspapers and on Vietnam Television. People started stocking up on food, face masks, hand sanitizer, medicine, and other supplies. Fear was rampant across the country, including Hanoi, and fake news proliferated online. According to the Ministry of Information and Communication, just in 2020 more than a thousand persons spreading fake news were fined (Bộ Khoa học và công nghệ 2021). The pandemic was seen as "the enemy," a discourse that was expressed and propagated primarily by the government. This metaphor was not new: it had been used in the past, for instance in 1945, when hunger and illiteracy were seen as the enemy under the Ho Chi Minh government. When something is labeled an "enemy," it often indicates an issue that is receiving serious attention from the government and usually involves massive interventions from the central to the local level (Luong 2022). In such cases, the government seizes the authority to make use of whatever resources and means it deems necessary, even if the interventions might not be widely accepted by the people (Hayton and Tro 2020).

In early March 2020 the Ministry of Health (MOH) promulgated Decision 879/QD-BYT, which provided detailed guidelines for quarantining people who had had contact with Covid-19 patients (F0). These included persons having direct contact with F0 (F1), persons having direct contact with F1 (F2), and so on (for more details, see Luong 2022). According to this decision, all F1 would have to be either hospitalized or quarantined in designated premises for at least 14 days, while all F2 were subjected to supervised home isolation with close surveillance by camera or local authorities. This quarantine policy instantly sent thousands of F1 in Hanoi to hospitals or designated facilities. One national-level academic institution in the city had to shut down for six days after an F0 case was found, forcing hundreds of people to work online and hundreds of F1 and F2 to be quarantined in hospitals or at home.

The number of F1 and F2 increased rapidly in the following months in Hanoi and neighboring provinces, which made people extremely nervous. After the Hanoi government announced new F0s on June 6, 2020, people started stocking up on food and other supplies. Supermarkets ran out of meat, vegetables, eggs, and instant noodles (Thu 2020). People began tracking information related to F0, F1, and F2 to ensure that they—and their areas—were still safe. The following statement from an interview with a middle-aged woman in Hanoi describes the situation in the city in mid-2020:

> I could hardly do anything. I checked my phone every hour, visited websites and social networks to get updates on the numbers of F0 and F1—who they were and where they lived. My mind was filled with the figures of new Covid-19 patients and fear of infection, and so were those of my friends.

Many people created a fortress out of their accommodations, receiving no guests and keeping their doors closed at all times, even when there were no F0 yet in their area (Nguyen 2020). A middle-aged man from Hanoi recalled, "Our building became quiet, and people acted as if the virus was at their door." Everyone started to act as a health inspector, viewing others with great caution, especially if they coughed. The following statement from a woman in District 5, Ho Chi Minh City, shows not only her own fear but also the fear of others in her area: "I saw people run back and forth between their homes and the market. They tried to buy whatever food and drinks they could, as if doomsday was arriving. People did not care about the price anymore."

Besides stockpiling food, many people wore face masks even while doing their early-morning exercises alone in areas where no F0 had been found yet (Long 2020). By the end of March 2020, Hanoi government offices were asked to avoid unnecessary meetings or events with more than twenty participants and to allow staff to work online at home. By the end of March the fear had spread nationwide even though there were fewer than two hundred F0s in the whole country.

2.3 *Health Care System in Vietnam*

Overall, the health care infrastructure in Vietnam is still in poor condition, even though the government has increased investment in the public health care sector. The number of doctors per 1,000 persons in Vietnam was 0.8 in 2016 and had increased to 0.98 by 2020—still rather low compared with the average international rate. However, this figure is even lower in rural and upland areas such as the Central Highlands (0.72) and the Mekong Delta (0.76). By 2022 there were 34 national hospitals, which accounted for 9.4 percent of the total number of beds in the country. In 2021 there were 3.1 hospital beds per 1,000 people, which was lower than the average international rate (4.4). The time taken to travel from local hospitals to national-level hospitals was usually about four to five hours by car—and even 10–11 hours in some remote areas (Tổng cục thống kê 2021b). Medicine and other medical supplies were insufficient in many hospitals both before and after the pandemic (Bộ Y tế 2022), forcing some patients to buy medicine from private pharmacies at a premium. In addition, before the pandemic it required a lot of paperwork for patients to receive reimbursement from insurance companies (An 2015). According to Le Quynh Ngoc *et al*. (2020), Vietnamese had to pay 43 percent of their own health care expenses, which was much higher than in developed countries (14 percent) or the recommended rate of the World Health Organization (20 percent).

Before the pandemic, the shortage of hospital beds meant two, three, or even four patients sometimes had to share a bed—some patients slept on the floor or even

under the bed in many big hospitals. It was normal to see patients' companions sleeping outside in the corridor or even outdoors on a chair in the hospital yard (Liên 2016). One worker in Hanoi recalled that in 2017 his son was sick and had to stay in hospital for five days. His son shared a bed with two other children, while he himself slept under the bed. This experience made him rather nervous during the pandemic because he believed the situation in hospitals would now be even worse. He decided to have his children stay home instead of going to school. He bought ten liters of gas as he was afraid the electricity would go off, and he stocked up on instant noodles. Such an attitude was not observed among doctors or teachers. In the interviews, people from these two groups were calmer. They believed the pandemic was just like previous pandemics and would soon be brought under control.

Another indicator related to quality of health care is the population of medical staff. On average, a doctor at a big hospital in Vietnam in 2010–18 had to examine about eighty patients a day (Tổng cục thống kê 2021b)—a much higher number than for doctors in developed countries: for instance, in the United States during 2012–18, doctors had to examine fewer than twenty patients per day (Yang 2025). Thus, each patient in Vietnam had an average of only four minutes for their medical examination (Hà *et al.* 2018). According to international standards, each medical examination should be around 15 minutes. To make matters worse, many patients had to wait several hours for just a few minutes with the doctor. Some had to reach the hospital at 5 a.m. to ensure they would be able to see a doctor in the morning (Nhóm khảo sát 2016). Poor medical infrastructure is not the only problem with health care in Vietnam. Personal connections play an important role, and sometimes patients also need to bribe doctors for better and faster service (Tùng 2022). This informal "protocol" is taken for granted. People have become used to paying doctors "additional money" in an envelope; in fact, *phong bi* (envelope) has become a metaphor for a bribe.

Nguyen Cong Thao noted, "Unlike people in many other developed countries, people in Vietnam including Hanoi are generally afraid of going to the hospital" (Nguyen 2020). The situation was even worse in 2020–21. Like in many other countries, there was a shortage of ventilators, especially with the number of infections increasing rapidly. The government had to request aid from other countries and to seek donations from the private sector in order to obtain machines for hospitals nationwide. In August 2020 there were just six thousand ventilators in the whole of Vietnam (Bộ Y tế 2021a). This was believed to be an inadequate number even under normal circumstances. There was also a serious shortage of face masks, protective clothing, and gloves at several hospitals. Many doctors had to wear protective clothing when taking a nap or having a meal as they would have had to put on a new set if

they took theirs off. Some were unable to bathe daily due to the shortage of protective clothing (PV 2020).

Accessibility to vaccines was limited in 2021 as Vietnam was dependent on outside suppliers. In June 2021 Vietnam signed a contract with Pfizer for about 31 million doses; it would take months for that amount to be delivered. The delay in vaccine delivery explained why by September 2021 most of the vaccines being administered in Vietnam were donations from Japan or China. Very few doses were purchased through commercial channels. Meanwhile, there were few cold storage facilities nationwide, and most of them belonged to the private sector (HNV 2021). Vietnam thus had to request USAID for 77 cold storage units at the end of August 2021 (Minh 2021).

The shortage of medical supplies increased people's anxiety, especially since face masks and hand sanitizer were touted to offer effective protection from the virus. The fear of not being able to buy face masks or other medical supplies was especially intense among ordinary people, as revealed through my interviews in Hanoi and Ho Chin Minh City. Since face masks were not easily available at pharmacies, many people were compelled to wear ordinary (non-medical grade) masks or even wear the same mask for several days. The shortage led to massive hoarding of medical face masks and hand sanitizer in big cities, especially Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Trần 2024). From February to March 7, 2020, three thousand cases of medical supply hoarding were discovered and fined by the government around the country (Nghĩa 2020). Prices for these products increased up to ten times, and there was even a black market for them (Thiên 2020). Many people had to use their personal connections with doctors or nurses to buy face masks. Some pharmacies refused to sell more than one box per customer. The market for face masks as well as medical gloves and hand sanitizer suddenly became very active both offline and online (Nghĩa 2020). The situation was particularly obvious in Hanoi in early 2020, even when the number of infections was still low. Many pharmacies in the biggest medical supply market in Hanoi announced that they did not have face masks or hand sanitizer, but market investigators found that this was not the case—those pharmacies were looking to sell to dealers at higher prices (Thiên 2020).

As mentioned earlier, the poor health care infrastructure and shortage of medical supplies made ordinary people fearful. The following statement by an interviewee in Hanoi shows the general strategy followed by many people in the city in 2020:

> Not only I but many friends of mine had to ask friends who worked at hospitals for help with buying face masks—but even they could not help. Their hospitals were also in great need of masks. Some people sold masks online at a premium, up to fifty times the pre-pandemic price. I

> don't know how they came to have such large numbers of masks, as they just sold in bulk. Every day in our office we used to talk about how to buy face masks and other crucial medical supplies.

The fear was particularly acute among people who were poor or who did not have relationships with medical doctors. Findings from the interviews indicate that people were afraid about whether they would be sent to a good hospital, treated by good doctors, or receive good medicine. The following statement from a woman in Ho Chi Minh City shows the general concern of such people—though it may have been over-anxiety on their part as all costs for Covid-19 treatment were subsidized by the government:

> We had no influential contacts and no money. We were afraid that priority would be given to those who could pay more or those whose relatives or friends worked in the hospital. We are just the voiceless, so our care would come last. The rich or those with high social status would receive the best.

On the other hand, fear was detected also among medical staff in public hospitals. This was indicated by the increased number of medical staff who decided to quit their jobs. From January 2021 to June 2022 a total of 9,668 medical personnel resigned from public health care centers: 3,094 doctors, 2,874 nurses, 593 pharmacists, 551 technicians, 276 midwives, and 2,280 others (Bộ Y tế 2022). This became a serious problem as many hospitals did not have sufficient staff to take care of patients (Bộ Y tế 2022). Many staff members were fearful because they were often held responsible for the deaths of patients even though they had done their best. This attitude flooded online social networks, as one interviewed doctor in Hanoi recalled. There were also scandals about government officials or relatives of medical staff receiving vaccinations out of turn, which led to public resentment. This was reported in various newspapers in 2023 and early 2024. Additionally, the scandal of the Viet A test kit[1)] followed by the prosecution of hundreds of medical managers from the local to the national level—including one vice minister, the head of the MOH, and other members of the national government—created public anger and reinforced the fear among medical staff.

Our interviews with doctors at Hung Vuong Hospital, one of the biggest hospitals in Ho Chi Minh City, revealed the many pressures they had to deal with during the pandemic. Some doctors even cried when recalling their experiences in early 2020. They admitted that without a love for the career, many of them would have given up; they were exhausted with endless days of work, insufficient supplies, and criticism

from the public for the increasing deaths. They were not surprised when many of their colleagues quit their jobs in public hospitals and moved to private ones. However, their fear was different from that of ordinary people, as revealed in the following statement from a male doctor at Hung Vuong Hospital:

> We were not fearful about having to care for too many patients during the pandemic. That was our job. However, we were fearful of the pressure from the public. Everyone expected us to work harder and be present all the time. We received so little appreciation but so much criticism, even though we tried our best. We are just human; we could not do everything.

The interviews show that the poor condition of the health care system created different forms of fear among medical staff and ordinary people. While fear in the former was rooted in social pressures and overexpectations, fear in the latter came from apprehensions over whether they would be treated well if they became infected. Fear among the medical staff was related to accusations regarding their professional ethics, while fear among ordinary people, especially the poor, related to safety concerns.

2.4 *Pandemic Prevention Policies*

The Vietnamese government issued and implemented a number of policies in order to cope with Covid-19. Though these policies worked well in the early days of the pandemic, they also created some problems that stoked fear and even eroded confidence among the public (Tough 2021). In March 2020, when there were just about two hundred cases in twenty of the country's 63 provinces, the prime minister signed Directive 16, which mandated social isolation for 15 days nationwide beginning on April 1. This directive was followed by the shutdown of all public transportation, including deliveries via online platforms such as Grab, MyGo, and Fastgo. All delivery services were to be provided by either post offices or supermarkets. This decision led to service delays: people had to wait a long time to receive their purchases, since the designated delivery providers did not have enough staff (Công 2021). In August 2021 the pandemic became extremely serious in Ho Chi Minh City, with about two hundred thousand cases. To enforce a strict lockdown in the city, the military was called in to deliver food and other essentials. This was not an effective solution as the military staff did not have relevant experience and their service was rather slow. Meanwhile, social distancing regulations were not well followed in some areas, and this created anger among the public—for example, when they saw people from rich areas still exercising outdoors (Pham 2020).

Lockdown policies also made thousands of people jobless. Street vendors and

migrant workers were the hardest hit as most of them did not have sufficient savings. According to the General Statistics Office, just in the second quarter of 2021, more than 500,000 people lost their jobs, 4.1 million temporarily became jobless, and 4.3 million had to reduce their work hours; 8.5 million people's income was affected (Nguyễn and Lê 2021). In Ho Chi Minh City, the first lockdown in 2021 lasted about three weeks; people could not go out even to buy food. There were at least an estimated seventy thousand people whose income relied on "street business"—lottery ticket sellers, street vendors, shoe polishing boys, etc.—and their income suffered greatly (PV 2020). In big cities like Hanoi, Binh Duong, and Ho Chi Minh City many migrant workers had to return to their hometowns. It was estimated that more than two million left Ho Chi Minh City alone in the last quarter of 2021. The workers returned to their hometowns without support from either the departure or the arrival government (Hồng 2022). Vietnam's harsh quarantine policy received a lot of criticism from the public. In 2020, 14 days' quarantine was compulsory for every F2 and 21 days for F1. People were sent to isolation facilities with subpar living conditions. It was even reported that many people were quarantined when they were not supposed to be, since quarantine decisions were not always scientifically based. The measures cost money and damaged people's lives in addition to creating the problem of a high risk of infection within quarantine locations. The following statement is from an F1 man who spent 14 days in a hospital in Gia Lam, on the outskirts of Hanoi:

> I felt I was in jail, and people looked on me as a criminal. When the ambulance came and picked me up, I could sense the eyes of my neighbors behind windows. I got the impression that the neighbors were afraid of me, though I felt fine. In the hospital there were dozens of people sharing a room without air conditioning as doctors were afraid of the virus spreading through the vents. I was very nervous since I did not know whether any of my roommates were infected.

On March 8, 2021, the first Covid-19 vaccination campaign started in Vietnam. The earliest people to be vaccinated were medical staff of the hospitals for tropical diseases in Hai Duong, Hanoi, and Ho Chi Minh City. In the beginning, the government planned to provide vaccinations for all Vietnamese by the end of 2021 in order to achieve herd immunity. However, because of a vaccine shortage, priority was given to doctors, medical staff, and others actively involved in pandemic prevention or social services such as policemen, military personnel, teachers, and government officers. The elderly and people with underlying medical conditions were not the most prioritized group but the fifth (according to Decision 1467 issued by the MOH in March 2021), even though WHO recommended that they be vaccinated first. Also, people

with high blood pressure were not eligible for vaccinations in early 2021, which excluded many seniors over 65 years old.

Vaccinations were administered in crowded hospitals, which in itself carried a high risk of infection. In some provinces the local authorities decided to reserve Pfizer vaccines for their staff while providing an inferior type of vaccine to others. It was reported that some government officers abused their power to provide early and better vaccinations to their relatives though they were not in the prioritized groups. The inefficiency of vaccination policies until the first half of 2021 was believed to be the key reason for the death rate in Vietnam being higher than the world average (Bộ Y tế 2021b).

Various online programs were used by ministries—including the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Information and Communication—to stay updated on the number of infections. Because these programs were not integrated into a single national database, it was difficult to keep close track of the identities and numbers of F0, F1, and F2, and people were inconvenienced by having to declare their status several times. From August to October 2021 the Hanoi government made five changes to its policy on allowing people out of the house, and some of the guidelines were contradictory. For example, people could go out only if they had a paper permit from the local authorities—but in order to obtain that permit, they had to submit a request at a local office. The situation was strongly criticized on national mass media.

At the local level many provincial authorities implemented their own policies that were sometimes contradictory to the guidelines from the central government. For example, while the central government allowed people to go out to buy essential goods during the isolation period, in Nha Trang a man who stepped out to buy bread was stopped and his vehicle confiscated as local enforcers did not consider bread to be an essential good. Similarly, trucks delivering sanitary napkins and diapers were stopped in Ho Chi Minh City and other provinces in the south. According to MOH regulations, truck drivers could take an antigen test, which yielded quick results and was valid for 72 hours (it also cost only one-third of a PCR test). If the result was negative, they could drive across provinces. However, some provinces requested the result of a PCR test that had been taken within the past 48 hours. This forced many drivers to take the PCR test at provincial checkpoints and wait up to four hours for the result (Luong 2022). This obviously cost money and time and delayed deliveries. The inconsistencies between policies at the central and local levels, and also among provinces, created not only fear but also anger among the public.

2.5 *Mass Media*

Mass media platforms include not only newspapers and television channels but also online networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Zalo. S.P. Giri and A.K. Maurya (2021) found that in India negative news about Covid-19 significantly decreased positive emotions and resilience, while positive news significantly reduced negative emotions. In Vietnam, mass media was very busy and noisy in 2020, the first year of the pandemic. Vietnam Television (VTV) had a special program for national and international news updates on the pandemic every four hours. People watched television, read newspapers, and searched online for updates not only on infection figures and hotspots but also on the pandemic situation in general and the progress of vaccine production. The rapid spread of the pandemic and the increased death rates were reported on television several times a day along with images of ambulances, medical doctors, overcrowded hospital rooms, and details about the shortage of medical equipment/supplies, medicine, and staff.

Unfortunately, there were several instances in which individuals' right to privacy was infringed upon by local Centers for Disease Control or local authorities, with no penalties imposed. These violations had adverse effects on individuals, their families, and their friends. In the first half of 2020, lists of infected people and their F1, F2, or even F3 were shared on online platforms among individuals and social groups. Personal information—including names, addresses, occupations, photographs, names of relatives, and other identity markers—was circulated widely online without individuals' consent. Negative messages were spread with the aim of demeaning infected persons. This discourse was conveyed in public and reinforced by local authorities who viewed all infected persons as undisciplined or not respectful to their surrounding communities (Nguyen 2020). Patients A and B are examples. After getting infected during an overseas trip, patient A was not only criticized for spreading the virus but also accused of being undisciplined. There were implications that her wealthy background was associated with corrupt relatives. She was criticized on Facebook and other platforms as being heartless, selfish, and arrogant. There was a hunger to know details of her past history. Meanwhile, in the public imagination patient B suddenly had a child through his affair with a junior. He was condemned on moral as well as legal grounds, and without any evidence he was accused of corruption. Suddenly the public became the judge, the infected became the defendant, and online platforms became a court without a jury or lawyer. From being victims, these two cases turned into the accused.

News and images of infected people, as well as numbers on Covid-related deaths, were updated several times a day on mass media, making people feel they were in a

"real war" where the "enemy" was invisible and undefeatable (Nguyen 2020). The influence of mass media, especially online social networks, put significant pressure on affluent individuals, public figures, government officials, and residents of urban apartments, as noted in other studies (see, for example, Bagcchi 2020).

Under such circumstances, the local Centers for Disease Control and local authorities had to take responsibility for leaks of personal information even though the intention was simply disease prevention. Lists of those affected, including F1, F2, and F3 individuals, were widely disseminated on the street as well as in villages and apartments. Fake lists were published on online platforms such as Facebook and Zalo, leading to many people facing criticism even though they had not had contact with any infected people. According to the Ministry of Public Security, by the end of March 2020 there were 654 instances of fake news published and shared online and 164 culprits had been fined (Danh 2020). The situation was particularly unfortunate when there was fake news about a restaurant or café, as nobody would care to visit and their business would die down. Following is a statement by a coffee shop owner in Hanoi:

> I did not realize that I was an F1 until I received calls from my friend. My name may have been confused with someone else's, or someone just made it up. Unfortunately, not only my name but also the name and address of my coffee shop were shared online. I could explain the mistake to my friends but not to everyone. That was a terrible experience as I lost about 60 percent of my customers during the month after that fake news came out.

Public fear was fostered by documentary films and news programs showing tragic images and videos of the pandemic, including the hardships experienced by patients and doctors. The fear was accompanied by anger, as shown in the following story.

In September 2021 a film titled *Ranh Gioi* (Crossing line) was broadcast on VTV1, the most popular news channel in Vietnam. It showed close-ups of patients and medical staff at Hung Vuong maternity hospital in Ho Chi Minh City in July 2021. The fifty-minute film brought tears to many people's eyes as they saw the hardships that patients and doctors had to cope with in their race against death. How could viewers hold back their tears when they heard the cries of innocent infants isolated from their virus-positive mothers right after birth? How could they keep their hearts from sinking when they saw mothers dying before setting eyes on their own newborn? There was no day or night in the hospital: doctors and nurses had to work until their eyes could not stay open. They had just a few minutes to take a nap before getting back to the race. Never had the line between death and life become so blurred. The film crew

were seen as heroes as they were brave enough to spend hours in the hospital with thousands of Covid-19 patients. At that time everybody had not been vaccinated, and fear of the virus led to three months' lockdown in the whole of Ho Chi Minh City. However, the movie was also criticized as it revealed the names and faces of people. The film team were accused of lacking professional ethics and violating privacy. They were blamed for being insensitive to the pain that patients were facing. There were heated arguments in newspapers and online between those who supported the movie and those who were against.

3 Who Were Most Fearful?

As described above, the poor condition of the health care system, inconsistencies in pandemic prevention policies, and mass media were the key forces that increased fear among the public in Vietnam, especially in the first year of the pandemic. However, not every person experienced the same fear—the pandemic affected people differently depending on various factors such as health, income, social prestige, political and socioeconomic background, and occupation (Bagcchi 2020). Thus, it is necessary to locate fear within the context of particular social groups.

3.1 *People with Health Problems*

Social distancing and vaccination were two of the most significant policies that the Vietnamese government implemented to fight the pandemic (Tough 2021). According to the MOH, elderly people and those with chronic diseases were the most vulnerable groups as they faced a higher risk of death if infected. There were about five million people living with diabetes by the end of 2022 (Bộ Y tế 2023). And about 25 percent of the population had a cardiac problem or high blood pressure (Vương 2020). These figures indicate that a large proportion of the country's population was at serious risk, especially given the poor health care system.

As mentioned above, the first nationwide vaccination campaign in March 2021 did not prioritize the elderly or those living with chronic conditions. This created insecurity as more people in their area became F1 or F2. The fear also affected their children, who were apprehensive about taking care of the elderly parents if they became infected. The nervousness among those not prioritized for vaccination in early 2021 was prevalent in Ho Chi Minh City (Giang *et al.* 2021) as well as other places around the world (Ciotti *et al.* 2020). The following statement is from an interview in 2023 with a seventy-year-old man from Ho Chi Minh City recalling the situation in 2021:

> My wife and I stayed indoors for almost a month, just indoors. We had a problem with our lungs, and we knew we faced the highest chance of death if we became infected. We spent most of the time in our room and limited our contacts to people in the family.

The fear was reinforced by the fact that the corpses of Covid-19 victims were sent directly from the hospital to the crematorium without the opportunity for any public death rites, as recalled by all the interviewees in District 5 in Ho Chi Minh City. The victims' relatives did not even get to see their loved ones for the last time. According to Vietnamese cosmology, beliefs, and norms, without a public funeral the dead are not able to rest in peace, especially if they have not died at home. This is not a happy ending and might affect the dead person's reincarnation, since the soul needs to have a ceremony to aid it in "walking across" to the other world before being born again. Thus, death and an unhappy life ending were the significant forces that nurtured fear among the elderly and those living with chronic diseases. The fear was particularly intense for those living in poverty and their children. Following is a story from a man whose father and wife died in 2021 in Ho Chi Minh City:

> My father died in September 2021, and just one week later my wife left us forever. However, we could not receive the ashes of our relatives until two months after their deaths. There were so many people who died during that period, and it took time to have their corpses cremated and the ashes delivered to the relatives. It was a terrible time during those two months. We could not organize any ceremonies for them, and they were homeless until their ashes were delivered to us.

3.2 *People with Unstable Income*

People who worked either in the service sector—including transportation, tourism, entertainment—or outdoors, such as street vendors, were particularly impacted economically by the pandemic (Trần 2024). From 2020 to September 2021 the country was closed to international tourists, and because of the various pandemic waves domestic tourism was almost dead. The transportation sector experienced massive trauma, with a 90 percent decrease in business. In 2020 hotels and restaurants in Hanoi were closed almost all the time (except for some hotels that were used as quarantine facilities). Truck and taxi drivers were significantly impacted by the pandemic prevention policies in 2020 and early 2021 due to the social lockdowns, social distancing, and people's hesitation to use public transportation. Drivers had to take Covid-19 tests if they traveled across provinces, which cost not just money but also time. This made many drivers fearful about being tested (Luong 2022). Some female street vendors

selling breakfast admitted they lost 30 percent of their customers and had to establish new relationships with customers, shop owners, and other sellers (Pham *et al.* 2021).

The unemployment rate in 2020 was rather high—it was 3.91 percent in Ho Chi Minh City, while the national rate was 2.48 percent (Tổng cục thống kê 2021a). In the third quarter of 2021, the unemployment rate in Ho Chi Minh City was 8.5 percent. Without a monthly income, many workers were unable to afford their living costs. This explained the return home of millions of workers from urban areas, especially Binh Duong and Ho Chi Minh City (Luong 2022). The poor were obviously one of the most economically vulnerable groups during the pandemic, because they had almost no savings. They also did not have sufficient resources to recover physically and financially if they became infected, especially in 2020 and early 2021, when vaccinations were not yet widely implemented. This explains why they—as well as their relatives who were responsible for them—were nervous when news about the shortage of ventilators and medicine was repeated daily. A young man in Hanoi remarked in 2021:

> I am scared of getting infected, but not only for myself. I know I am still young and healthy, while the virus is just a kind of flu. If I am infected, it will not be very serious. It is more dangerous for the elderly, like my parents, especially since we cannot afford to pay for international or private hospitals. Public hospitals are too crowded and not good. I will not be able to stay in hospital all day to take care of them because I have to work. I am the main income earner in my family.

People from economically disadvantaged groups were thus more fearful than wealthier groups, as they did not have sufficient savings and often lived hand to mouth. This was obvious in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. My interviews with people on the two different sides of a street in District 5 in Ho Chi Minh City provided evidence for this contrast. People on the right side were not very nervous or fearful, with many believing that sooner or later the pandemic would be over. They thought those living on the left side were too panicky and accused their neighbors of asking for too much food and support from the local authorities. However, those living on the left side explained that they had to live in small apartments, while those on the right side lived in houses with several rooms. The following statement was made by a middle-aged woman who lived in a compact apartment and owned a small store in District 5:

> They were rich. They could afford to buy good food online and pay more for food deliveries. Everything was delivered to their doors. They just stayed indoors and received everything, so staying at home for two weeks was not a big deal for them. However, we were fearful because we had nothing to eat when we stopped working.

The poor also imagined that they could die if they were hospitalized as they could not afford the best services (Nguyen 2020). The fear was heightened by the feeling that many policies did not prioritize them: the best vaccines were reserved for the rich and powerful, while the less effective vaccines were kept for them, as pointed out by many interviewees in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

3.3 *The Rich and Those with High Social Status*

In Vietnam, "face" (*thể diện*) refers to social prestige, and it extends beyond the individual to their family or community. Accordingly, if one violates a rule, agreement, or moral or social norms, all the family members are held responsible and thus subjected to moral and social sanctions (Nguyen 2020). This explains Vietnamese people's fear of losing face (*mất thể diện*, *mất mặt*); besides harming one's reputation and social position or status, this loss can also affect their sense of belonging and that of their community.

During the pandemic, rich individuals or those with high social status were criticized more severely than ordinary people if they contracted Covid-19, even if it was through no fault of theirs. They were expected to set an example to the rest of the community in all respects. The criticism affected not only their own reputation or career prospects but also that of all their family members. The following statement was made in December 2023 by a man in Ho Chi Minh City about his rich neighbor who lived across the street in District 5. The man's resentment was clear even though the incident had occurred two years prior:

> The rich received too much. During the lockdown in 2021, they ordered food deliveries every day. They did not care for the food provided by the local government as they were used to fresh and high-quality food. They were very selfish. They should have taken more responsibility during the pandemic. We should not have suffered while they just earned.

The following story about a wealthy woman in Hanoi who became an F0 in March 2020 also provides an example of how the rich were treated.

Patient A was found positive on March 5 after returning from overseas on March 2, following some weeks of European travel. After returning to Hanoi, she experienced Covid-19 symptoms but did not inform health officials for a few days. Meanwhile, she continued interacting with others, including some high-ranking government officials who had been on the same flight. Some of those officials also tested positive several days later. The woman was quickly and widely criticized for putting her self-interest

above public safety; the criticism took on a moral tone as she was blamed for being irresponsible and lacking a spirit of citizenship. After she tested positive, the entire street where she lived was placed under lockdown. Thousands of people—not only in Hanoi but also in other provinces—were isolated as they were her F1 or F2. A lot of the woman's personal information—including her name, details of her career, photos of her, and addresses of her and her family members—were shared online, resulting in privacy violations for her family members who had nothing to do with her case.

Like rich people, the elites could easily become victims of public accusation. The hostility toward government personnel was partly due to the "Blazing Furnace" anti-corruption campaign, initiated by the Vietnamese Communist Party in 2013. Thousands of officers from the central to the local level were arrested and imprisoned for Covid-related crimes. Many of them used to appear in public delivering lectures on being a good citizen or sacrificing for the country. When one of them was found to be infected, it angered and disappointed the public. This forced the better-off and those with high social status to be more cautious about "keeping face," as public anger could mean the start of a political investigation. The following case was quite well known in Hanoi. Officials would be penalized if they did not follow the pandemic prevention policies.

Patient B was on the same flight as patient A. He was a high-ranking official who had several interactions with others, including playing golf, after returning to Hanoi. His positive test result was followed by a temporary shutdown of his office, where thousands of people were working, and several hundred people in his office became either F1 or F2. He quickly became one of the most searched people on Google in Vietnam and featured prominently on various social networks. Not only was he criticized as irresponsible and undisciplined, but many other negative rumors began circulating, including whispers of his affairs, luxurious lifestyle, and corruption. Though these were just rumors with no evidence, much of the man's personal information was dug up and widely circulated online. Several metaphors became popular to describe the lives of rich people like him: for example, playing golf (*đánh gôn*) became a metaphor for seeking extramarital sex.

Unlike other social groups, the wealthy and the elites were fearful during the pandemic—but not because of economic reasons. Rather, their fear was related to their reputation and potential public criticism. They were afraid that their family history, their business dealings, and other details of their lives would be dug up if they

contracted Covid-19. This was what patient A and patient B experienced. Politically powerful people were particularly fearful because they could be criticized also by their political opponents, who would not waste an opportunity to put them down. Patient B was penalized by the central government, and some of his subordinates who accompanied him to golf or parties were demoted. A retired man in Hanoi said:

> It would not have been a big problem if they played golf or partied during working hours under normal circumstances. They were just unlucky because of the pandemic. Nobody would have known about it if it was not during the pandemic, and many others did the same.

4 Conclusion

Vietnam was viewed as a successful example in terms of Covid-19 prevention in 2020 and early 2021. Social distancing and quarantine policies were widely followed by the public, whether willingly or reluctantly. This partly contributed to the low infection and death rates in the first year of the pandemic. Arguing that fear was one of the main reasons for the wide acceptance of the government's pandemic prevention policies, and thus the success of the country's Covid-19 prevention strategy, this paper provides further insights into the causes of the fear. It finds that the fear stemmed mainly from potential risks related to income, health, and social prestige. However, people from different groups perceived different risks depending on their socio-economic and health background.

This paper proposes that the three groups that experienced the most fear were those with health problems, those with unstable income, and the rich or those with high social and political status. People with health problems were fearful because they were the most vulnerable and faced a higher risk of death if infected. Those whose work was delayed or shut down during the pandemic were fearful because of the loss of income. They could die of hunger before they died of the virus as they had no savings. Meanwhile, those with high social and political status were afraid of losing face as they would be severely criticized by the public if they became infected. Their infection carried moral implications and could affect their position and even the positions of their family members.

Such fears did not emerge during the pandemic but have existed for decades; many Vietnamese have had a relationship with infectious diseases over the years. However, the fears were revived and intensified during the pandemic due to the poor health care system, inconsistent pandemic prevention policies, and mass media. These

reasons may help to explain why many Vietnamese agreed to stay indoors, took the vaccine whenever possible, and made economic sacrifices for the sake of safety.

The findings of this paper raise several questions for future study, especially since we are unsure whether such a pandemic will recur: How do inconsistent intervention policies lead to social conflicts during a pandemic? What are the necessary measures to optimize social unity and social resources to fight a pandemic? What actions should be implemented to mitigate the negative influences of public pressure on a particular social group? Of course, there is no single answer to the above questions since differences always exist between communities and nations.

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Notes

1) In February 2020 the Ministry of Science and Technology approved a special national-level research grant worth over USD 830,000 for a pilot project to produce Covid-19 test kits initiated by the Vietnam Military Medical University and Viet A Technology Corporation. The project was praised as a great success as it was completed within just a month. Shortly after that, in March 2020, the MOH approved the kit's commercialization for nationwide use at the high price of USD 20.57 per kit. The Ministry of Science and Technology went further by making a public announcement in April 2020 that Viet A's test kit had been accepted by the World Health Organization—though this statement was incorrect. The Viet A test kit was distributed to almost all Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and medical facilities nationwide. The company collected USD 175 million in revenue from selling overpriced Covid-19 test kits across Vietnam, which led to suspicions of collusion between the government and the private company. This resulted in the conviction of a hundred people from various national and local governments in 2023.

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Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương. *Almost Futures: Sovereignty and Refuge at World's End*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Quan Tue Tran*

As the unsettling affairs of our world unfold in the second quarter of the 21st century, *Almost Futures: Sovereignty and Refuge at World's End* offers timely and invaluable insights. In this simultaneously expansive, complex, and intimate work, Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương meditates on the continual paradoxes and injustices that shape and connect local and global lives. While it centers primarily Vietnamese and diasporic Vietnamese contexts, this unique work also transcends boundaries and links stories beyond Vietnam and the Vietnamese refugee diaspora to reveal the relationality between "people who were barred from humanist sovereignty while subjected to its violence" across epochs and continents (p. 24). Focusing on exploited workers, refugees, and others subjected to different forms of colonial, revolutionary, and state violence and global capitalist dispossession, the book bears witness to the lives, deaths, grief, resistance, and silence of those "who paid the highest price for living in the catastrophes of our modern world" (p. 4). Yet, as Nguyễn-võ also reminds us, "Even while held down to a less-than-human status, the people I follow in this book impossibly marched, grieved, struck, organized, spoke, painted, wrote, remembered or forgot, and sometimes stayed silent" (p. 4). Attending to how they insisted on their humanity, dignity, creativity, relationships, and even silence—however fleeting, opaque, fragmented, illegible—yields critical lessons for how to confront the hauntings, uncertainties, contradictions, and violence of our own time and place.

Almost Futures is an unparalleled text in breadth and depth that intricately layers and weaves together rich theoretical insights from critical refugee studies, political economy theories, Vietnamese studies, and feminist, Black, Queer, disability, and Indigenous studies as well as the extraordinary experiences of ordinary people to address various marginalized and intersecting human conditions. The book exposes the inherent violence and limits of humanist sovereignty and insists on poetic, allegorical, iterant, haunted, and untimely ways of knowing that refuse the linear, redemptive, and progressive march toward the future promised by the

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Enlightenment's universalist ideas of the human, sovereignty, and freedom. Nguyễn-võ underscores, "The history of universalist attainment has thus far been borne by conquest, slavery, dispossession, and mass murder," resulting in the oppression and untimely deaths of many the world over (p. 28). Such patterns of violence make it possible to recognize potential kinship among the global oppressed. To foster such recognition, one must turn to alternative methods of knowing that transcend temporal and geographical boundaries and develop sensibilities that are beholden neither to the false promises of humanist sovereignty nor the trap of false equivalencies. Nguyễn-võ notes the following:

> This book, then, attends to those who are from but not of the human, who require alternative ontologies of the human in the ruins of humanist time, and whose acts beside sovereignty require an epistemological openness that allows for slippage in reading that can elude the duality of an identity-based approach to humanity and history, however dialectical. (p. 20)

Throughout the book, Nguyễn-võ models this "epistemological openness" through her sensitive and reflexive engagement with a wide range of stories. In one chapter, she examines Vietnamese responses to land repossessions and evictions in late-socialist Vietnam. She situates this contemporary state-sponsored land-grabbing practice—fueled by speculative capitalism, justified by industrialization, modernization, and development discourses, and made possible through policy and legal maneuvers—as a continuation of the "waves of dispossessions" that enabled Vietnamese polities across many centuries to expand territorially and assert state sovereignty. In their wake, places, communities, and people "experience the end of home, livelihood, loved ones, or an entire social world as they know it, as whole neighborhoods and districts are grazed [*sic*]" (p. 34). However, refusing to relegate the dispossessed to the past, Nguyễn-võ *re*-presents their stories by focusing on what she calls "white marches"—sporadic, fleeting, and haunting instances when small groups of individuals, or *dân oan*, who experienced land dispossession or eviction staged modest protests near sites of power, wearing white attire to mourn their losses and confront the injustices they faced. Viewing the color white as "a particular iconography of absence and grief," Nguyễn-võ shows how these marchers refused to fall in line with the state's and investors' linear temporality of speculative capitalist accumulation. Rather, their resistances disrupted the myth of unified progress, revealing the violence and dispossessions that made such progress possible in the first place. She further notes that the white marchers

> produce this poetic knowledge of grief that links violent processes to things that are there and not there, things that are known to things that are felt. They also signal to what was and could be. It is only through this poetic process that these marches constitute a form of collective action. (p. 40)

In another chapter, the author highlights the plight of Vietnamese women factory workers and interrogates how global capitalist modes of production in post-economic renovation Vietnam have reduced these workers' bodies to disposable fragments in order to extract their labor. Nguyễn-võ shows that the workers' predicaments resonate with those of Vietnamese refugees who resettled in the United States between the late 1970s and the 1990s. Due to their transnational displacement as well as their racialized and gendered positions in the United States, these refugees were entrapped in the low-wage garment and electronic assembly works that fueled the American capitalist economy before the latter moved production overseas in search of even cheaper labor. The global restructuring of manufacturing, socialist Vietnam's pivot toward the market economy, land dispossession in the countryside, and the financialization of capitalism in Vietnam converged to generate a surplus and vulnerable labor force. Vietnamese state repression of dissent, labor organizing crackdowns, and state-sanctioned unions' abandonment further limit the platforms for workers to seek recourse and voice their grievances. Yet, through her allegorical reading of Phạm Thị Hoài's short story "The Saigon Tailor Shop," Nguyễn-võ urges us to view young Vietnamese female factory workers as more than just disposable and abject figures, to recognize that amid state and global capitalist fragmentation and dismembering, these young women also contest the devaluation of their bodies. She observes that they "try to reassemble themselves into new incarnations as they undress and dress, open and close their thighs, modeling each other's latest urban middle-class fashion imitations" (p. 75). Here, Nguyễn-võ treats "bodily remainders as emblematic and allegorical, not of the human, but of parts and potentials thereof" (p. 82). This reading refuses the redemptive impulse, recognizing that the workers offer "no epistemological guarantee, they show us not how to be human, but fragments thereof in possible assemblages of the now- and the yet-to-be-known" (p. 85).

Throughout *Almost Futures*, an open-ended interpretive lens allows Nguyễn-võ to render visible ghostly matters and hauntings that sovereign states seek to disavow and erase. Inviting us to further linger on seemingly irrational ways of knowing, which disrupt the neat, rational, and linear statist history of humanist sovereignty, she turns to the writings of several Vietnamese refugees and the ways in which Vietnamese refugees must "self-bear" their own history, mourning, and memory:

> The death of the South [the Republic of Vietnam] becomes the catastrophic horizon from which emerge the hauntings in the South Vietnamese and refugee texts examined here. What this haunted writing offers are alternative temporalities and modes of existence therein as South Vietnamese and refugees confront the end of their nation and racist exclusion in their place of refuge. (p. 126)

Indeed, it is through their acts of writing, mourning, memorializing, and telling that Vietnamese refugees eke out alternative and emergent sites where they can attend to their ghosts and assert claims to (un)belonging. However, even in these potential spaces of refuge, "the dangers of constraining our political imaginings in an assimilation of others into ourselves" also lurk (p. 180).

Almost Futures is a capacious and generative book. It carves out alternative spaces and temporalities for us to accompany those who are condemned to the margins and/or death by sovereignty. It learns from the latter—in their own words, actions, and creations—lessons on how to navigate and negotiate catastrophic circumstances amid the enormity and violence of the external structures and systems that seek to other, alienate, and destroy them in the name of humanist progress. Nguyễn-võ's inclusion of her own personal stories and struggles as a witness to the many events that she narrates further grounds this deeply empathetic text. Through her sensibility as a Vietnamese refugee, a Vietnamese American, a scholar, a writer, a translator, a mother, and a daughter, Nguyễn-võ invites us to think, see, feel, and imagine with her and her interlocutors what it means to seek refuge at the many worlds' ends and what it means to bear witness. Looking "not at but from the threshold of catastrophes," *Almost Futures* is a hopeful book despite the hopeless conditions that it examines. The hope that the book offers is not the "cruel hope" that blindly sees linear progress as the road to liberation, but one that quietly lingers with and sustains the many possible futures that have not yet been accounted for, even if only in memory. Like the book's cover image, a map that helped a Vietnamese boat refugee chart his escape from Vietnam, *Almost Futures* provides an essential navigation tool as we must constantly reorient and recalibrate ourselves amid shifting and pending futures.

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Edward Aspinall and Amalinda Savirani, eds. *Governing Urban Indonesia*. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024.

Reviewed by Freek Colombijn*

One of the consistent changes in Indonesia since the country's independence has been urbanization. If in 1945 only 12.5 percent of the people lived in cities and towns, in 2011 the urban population of Indonesia reached the landmark of making up more than half of the total population. The collective volume *Governing Urban Indonesia*, the outcome of the fortieth annual Indonesia Update conference held at the Australian National University in September 2023, covers contemporary processes of urban governance. Combined, the overviews and case studies offer a broad panorama of political, social, and administrative changes taking place in Indonesia.

In the opening chapter the editors, Edward Aspinall and Amalinda Savirani, argue that it is no longer appropriate to imagine Indonesia as a predominantly rural society. Not only do the majority of people live in urban settlements, but the national culture is increasingly a middle-class, urban culture with important religious movements and lifestyle trends emanating from cities.

Cities in Indonesia, and the megacity of Jakarta in particular, face serious governance challenges: air pollution, traffic congestion, lack of piped water, shortage of affordable housing, periodic flooding, and so forth. The main point made by the editors is that

> Indonesia's urban problems are fundamentally political problems because resolving them requires city governments to develop the independence, and to muster the political will, to challenge the powerful vested interests that undermine urban planning and effective implementation of regulations designed to enhance city life. (p. 9)

A new type of managerial political leader has emerged, and some of these leaders have become

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famous at a supra-local level: Joko Widodo (or Jokowi, as mayor of Solo and governor of Jakarta), Ridwan Kamil (mayor of Bandung), Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (or Ahok, governor of Jakarta), and Tri Rismaharini (or Bu Risma, mayor of Surabaya). However, these politicians could not have become successful without the backing of an active local civil society.

In the first chapter after the introduction, Abidin Kusno sketches changes and continuities in urban governance since colonial times. In colonial times the authorities planned built-up areas but left people living in *kampung* (unplanned neighborhoods with often a lower-income population) to house themselves ("me-rumah-kan sendiri," in the words of the Indonesian architect and urban planner Johan Silas, cited p. 33). During the New Order regime of President Suharto, the development of the national capital, Jakarta, was in the hands of the national government, the city government, and business partners of the presidential family. Whether today urban governments have become less corrupt and more efficient should be studied empirically, Kusno argues. A new development is the increasing number of "self-evictions" (p. 41) of *kampung* dwellers selling off their land.

Meirina Ayumi Malamassam and Luh Kitty Katherina present detailed figures for urbanization trends since 2000. They warn that urbanization does not come about only from rural-urban migration but more from natural population increases and the reclassification of rural areas as urban areas. They find the binary urban-rural divide too simplistic and propose a more refined classification. An important point, left implicit in the rest of the volume, is that only in Java-Bali has the urbanization process passed the 50 percent tipping point.

Different from the demographic approach of Malamassam and Katherina, Sonia Roitman states that "three structural conditions have significantly affected the growth of Indonesian cities, namely, poverty, informality and the growth of the middle class" (p. 75). According to Roitman, urban planning mechanisms developed in the Global North are inadequate to address Southern urbanism. During the time of Suharto, planning regulations, still based on Northern practices, were frequently circumvented by a handful of powerful real estate developers. Nowadays, participatory planning involving ordinary people is crucial to make Indonesian urban planning an example of successful Southern planning.

Erman Rahman, Ihsan Haerudin, and Ronaldo Octaviano point out that fiscal policies and the allocation of local budgets in Indonesia do not distinguish between urban (*kotamadya*) and non-urban (*kabupaten*) districts. In reality, however, per capita fiscal revenues and spending—hence also service delivery—can vary considerably. The contributors argue that a rural-urban dichotomy, or in their study the difference between *kotamadya* and *kabupaten*, is too simplistic and for their own analysis classify regional areas into seven categories with different degrees of urbanization.

A puzzling question throughout this book is why some local governments have demonstrated an ability to tackle urban issues while others have not. Two approaches to this question

can be discerned. One analytical lens focuses on the destructive role of corrupt elites, who withdraw resources (development funds, building land, etc.) from local development. The second focuses on the role played by competent leaders. Mochamad Mustafa brings these two perspectives together by highlighting the critical role played by civil society (NGOs, media, academics, and social organizations). Such civil society actors pressure inert political leaders to act, or become allies of effectual leaders to support them against obstructive claims of predatory elites. On the basis of three case studies (Surabaya, Bogor, and South Tangerang), Mustafa argues that "the presence or absence of a robust local civil society constitutes a critical determinant of whether local politics drives effective reform or ineffective and corrupt governance" (p. 130).

Corry Elyda discusses the political impact of the growth of gated communities in South Tangerang. South Tangerang is characterized by an infrastructural gap between the many housing estates and the remaining *kampung* in the municipality. The infrastructural gap corresponds with a social and political gap. Whereas political scientists generally see the middle class as potential drivers of political change, this is not the case in South Tangerang. There, middle-class residents have withdrawn into their bubbles with good facilities, and many told Elyda that "they do not even consider themselves to be citizens of South Tangerang" (p. 165). As a consequence, a powerful political dynasty has had free reign to rule the area for its own benefit, without solving social and infrastructural problems.

Clara Siagian analyzes how people are doing when they are evicted from demolished *kampung* and moved into rental social housing (*rusunawa*, *rumah susun sederhana sewa*). Stripped of their social network and livelihood base in the *kampung*, residents are trapped in a downward spiral of debt. Civil servants blame the residents for arrears in payments: "'They are all lazy'" (p. 185). Rental social housing thus serves more "to ameliorate unease among middle-class people about the harshness of *kampung* evictions" (p. 176) than to help residents with their transition to a new livelihood.

Yogi Setya Permana raises the question of why cities operating in the same national context perform quite differently when it comes to flood control. The answer is found in the willingness of local governments to enforce their own regulations that can ameliorate or even prevent floods. A necessary condition for such active government is an active civil society that "co-produces" the enforcement of state regulations. "In such settings," Permana argues, "members of the government apparatus cannot easily collude with companies that violate drainage regulations" (p. 199).

Nur Azizah discusses the management of household waste in Surabaya, a city that is more advanced in waste collection and landfill management than most others. The city has Indonesia's first waste-to-electricity plant at its landfill and is further characterized by important community participation, for instance in the form of volunteers—mostly women—who disseminate infor-

mation about waste separation at home and composting organic waste in neighborhoods. Strong political leadership and broad participation from the community, NGOs, and private companies have been keys to its success.

Muhammad Halley Yudhistira and Andhika Putra Pratama offer a rather technical analysis of Jakarta's notorious traffic congestion. They consider the development of the railway network as the most promising solution and advocate the establishment of a Jakarta Metropolitan Authority that can coordinate policies at the supra-municipal level.

Rita Padawangi distinguishes between three types of public space. The first is public places managed by the local government, such as squares and parks, while the second is public space provided by private capital, for example in shopping malls and housing estates. Padawangi urges readers to look critically at the way "managerial city leadership" and companies have created "neat" public places by excluding "unruly" citizens, who may harm the tidy image of the public spaces. The third type of public space is the small but vibrant public spaces in *kampung*, which come closest to the old ideal of public spaces as places where strangers meet. Citizens often take collective decisions on how to use such spaces—for instance, for a funeral or wedding or to ban the driving of motorcycles.

Ian Wilson describes the perplexing variety of security services offered in Jakarta by state forces, private companies, social organizations, vigilantes, and neighborhood patrols, which often cooperate and overlap. Constructed "notions of security and risk are also central to how cities are planned, built, governed" (p. 287). In the extremely competitive security market, private companies emphasize their alleged professionalism and reliance on high-tech surveillance to persuade clients to hire them.

The final chapter is a fascinating reflection by Bima Arya Sugiarto. His background as political analyst, activist, and scholar beautifully intersects with his inside experience as former mayor of Bogor. As he notes, "Leading a city takes more than ideas, courage, and even formal political power. It takes, above all, a clear understanding of the complex local political map, a strategic sense and an ability to pick priorities" (p. 309). However, freedom of maneuver can already become compromised during election campaigns, when candidates get intimately entangled with financiers.

This excellent book demonstrates an admirable coherence for a collective volume. Its central tenet is that a robust civil society is an essential condition for political leaders to become effective. The many cross-references between the chapters help to strengthen the unity of the volume. Many of the chapters are based on detailed research and extensively referenced; the very recent findings—the last interview was conducted on September 14, 2024 (p. 141)—bring readers fully up to date with urban developments and governance issues in Indonesia.

The coherence of the core message and the rosy images of civil society and professional managerial politicians stems partly from the affiliation of many authors with either the state or

civil society organizations. The role and ideals of, among others, religious organizations or the private sector (unless in mostly negative ways) seem therefore downplayed. For instance, in the otherwise excellent chapter by Azizah on waste management in Surabaya, waste pickers are mentioned as an afterthought and their role in reducing the volume of deposited household waste is overlooked. It is excellent that explanations of the differences in performance between cities are sought. It is a pity, in this respect, that there are practically no case studies from outside Java, which makes the word "Indonesia" in the book title almost inappropriate. Finally, I would have loved to read more about ways in which actors (politicians, civil society, and entrepreneurs) in different cities learn from one another, including the enigmatic study visits of civil servants to other places. These minor points of criticism should not obscure the fact that the volume's relevance goes beyond cities: "Discussing how urban Indonesia is governed, and will be governed in the future, means discussing the future of Indonesia itself" (p. 4).

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Kai Chen. *Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the Borderlands of Myanmar: 2021 and Beyond*. Singapore: Springer, 2024.

Reviewed by William Plowright*

Kai Chen's monograph *Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the Borderlands of Myanmar: 2021 and Beyond* adopts an empirical and policy approach to understanding the current status of children affected by armed conflict in the region.

Myanmar's history is deeply scarred by decades of internal conflict that have been raging —in one form or another—since the country's independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. These struggles have persisted since the nation's independence, with ongoing clashes between the military and an alphabet soup of armed groups representing many ethnic or political minorities (Kramer 2015; Cheesman and Farrelly 2016; Anwary 2020). This turmoil has had a devastating impact on Myanmar's children, especially among ethnic minorities living in the regions outside the *de facto* control of the Burman-dominated regime and its security services. Children are subjected to immense risks, including forced displacement, constant exposure to brutal violence, and the breakdown of essential services like education and health care. Tragically, many children are killed or suffer life-altering injuries from land mines and air strikes. Furthermore, the conflicts have led to a surge in child soldier recruitment and widespread malnutrition, leaving an entire generation traumatized and robbed of their fundamental rights.

This book seeks to shed light on recent trends in these conflicts. It looks at the case of the borderland regions of Myanmar, focusing specifically on changes since the February 2021 regime change. At that time, the Tatmadaw (Armed Forces of Myanmar) seized power, overthrowing the democratically elected government and reversing a period of democratic progress. The event plunged Myanmar into widespread civil unrest, armed conflict, and a severe humanitarian crisis, devastating the country's economy and displacing hundreds of thousands of people. As with any instance of political turmoil, the impacts were felt most deeply by the most vulnerable groups, of which children were no exception.

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While the literature on children and conflict has blossomed in the 2000s (see, for example, Singer 2005; Honwana 2011; Drumbl 2012), recent literature has taken more nuanced turns, analyzing more specific dynamics (see, for instance, Haer 2019; Plowright 2022) or containing empirical studies, such as Chen's previous work on child soldiers on the China-Myanmar border (2014) and children on the Thai side of the border (2021). This book fits well into the broader literature on child soldiers as well as studies specifically looking at the issue within Myanmar. It will be of great use to scholars and practitioners working on the political dynamics of Myanmar as well as those interested in border studies. Researchers on children and conflict will also gain from the empirical insight within the pages.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The introductory chapter provides background on recent events in Myanmar, especially the regime change in 2021. It also details the methodology used in this study: the primary methodological approach was document analysis, conducted externally to the region under study. This was due primarily to security concerns, and the risks that would fall on both interviewers and interviewees were such research to be conducted within the conflict areas or in the Tatmadaw-controlled parts of the country. It further provides discussion and definition of key concepts under analysis in the chapters to follow.

The following three chapters discuss three different regions in Myanmar, and the specific status of children and armed conflict within each of them. Chapter 2 looks at children in the western borderlands, paying particular attention to Rakhine and Chin States and Sagaing Region. Chapter 3 focuses on the situation on the Myanmar-Thai border, with special attention to Kayin State and Kayah State. The following chapter analyzes areas along the northern Chinese border, specifically Shan State and Kachin State.

Attention is then turned in the fifth chapter to the situation of children and insecurity in the remainder of Myanmar, including the Yangon capital region and other Burman-dominated regions, including Mandalay, Ayeyarwaddy, Bago, and Magway Regions. Particular attention is paid to bombings and assassinations that have fuelled conflict. The sixth chapter looks at the situation of Burmese children displaced to the neighboring countries of Bangladesh, India, and Thailand.

The remainder of the book is taken up by analysis of policy. Chapter 7 aims to analyze the main initiatives taken by stakeholders in their attempts to protect children affected by armed conflict in Myanmar. This chapter looks at international, state, and interstate organizations, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the United Nations and its various agencies (including UNICEF, UNHCR, FAO, ILO, and WHO). It also discusses the efforts of international humanitarian nongovernmental organizations, including Médecins Sans Frontières and Save the Children. It then focuses on local community-based organizations and civil society organizations before turning to the National Unity Government and the State Administration Council. Chapter 8 deals with the obstacles facing stakeholders, which include the lack of con-

sensus among various actors and also the limited funding available for humanitarian responses addressing the needs of children in armed conflict. The chapter points out the challenges of working with or alongside the Tatmadaw. As the author observes, a lack of consensus among local and international stakeholders—including the regime in power—makes addressing the issues affecting children particularly difficult to resolve.

Chapter 9 discusses Chen's proposal for a humanitarian ceasefire as a policy option, which, the book argues, could be the most feasible solution to protect children from armed conflict. As the war has long reached a stalemate, in which no side can gain an advantage that would end the war, the conflict is unlikely to end anytime soon. Components of Chen's plan include the immediate provision of humanitarian assistance to victims of armed conflict in Myanmar—especially vulnerable groups such as children. Further, the author points to the need for safe passage of civilians, both out of and into the regions affected by conflict. He notes the need to address the large numbers of prisoners and detainees held by the state, which could be as high as twenty thousand. These include members of ethnic minorities and armed groups, but also journalists, scholars, and human rights activists.

Chapter 10 summarizes the book's research. It acknowledges the shortcoming of the author's inability to visit the conflict-affected areas to speak directly to those impacted. The chapter also points to future avenues of research and policy development. Specifically, the author notes one important area in which more research is needed: "the extent to which Myanmar will be militarized in the future" (p. 83).

This book is useful in providing an empirical overview of the key issues facing children and the armed conflicts in different regions of Myanmar—from that involving Rohingya in the west to those involving broader alliances of ethnic groups in the north and east. The major shortcoming of the book is one the author acknowledges several times: that it is not the product of firsthand research on the ground but is instead a survey of what was available online on the relevant topics at hand. A secondary issue, however, is that it also does not use sources in local languages from either the state or the constellation of ethnic or political groups which oppose it. It is reliant on English-language news sources, which naturally are not able to provide a full picture of events in Myanmar, especially those directly relevant to children. These news sources, in turn, are reliant on reports by international organizations and nongovernmental organizations, which have limited access in the country and may themselves lack local knowledge.

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Chua Beng Huat. *Public Subsidy / Private Accumulation: The Political Economy of Singapore's Public Housing*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Nabekura Satoshi*

More than eighty percent of Singapore's residents live in public housing flats owned by the country's public housing authority, the Housing and Development Board (HDB). This high percentage is due to the limited housing options available, which are: 1) to purchase a 99-year lease for a HDB flat to live there; 2) to meet very strict conditions to live in one of a limited number of public *rental* flats (i.e., do not purchase a lease); or 3) to purchase a more expensive private condominium or a much more expensive landed house. In Singapore, most people can afford to purchase the 99-year lease on the relatively cheap HDB flats and are entitled to most of the rights of ownership. This system distinguishes Singapore from most other countries, where government withdraws from public housing provision as much as possible.

Given this distinction, and its overwhelming usage by the citizenry, the public housing program holds special importance and meanings. It therefore provides rich ground for research. The Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat draws on more than forty years of such research to situate the program in its historical context from the colonial era to the latest trends in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The book compares the program to global counterparts and discusses it as "a property-owning procedural democracy."

Wherever one turns in Singapore, there are success stories of the HDB flats, and these stories are always connected with the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government. The prevailing narrative is one of people being able to live in very nice, clean, and beautiful flats, which they own. Like most Singapore citizens who must live in the HDB flats, most academics who study Singapore's public housing system must also reiterate this narrative (e.g., Nabekura 2011). This book can be said to belong to the exception, which, in the Singapore context, needless to say, is extremely valuable. The author keeps his distance from the customary stories, analyzes the mechanism which has made it possible for so many residents to "buy" their flats, and reveals the fundamental contradictions of the public housing program.

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Chua identifies three factors that are essential for Singapore's public housing program: "land, development funding, and the mortgage system." The government acquired nearly all lands in Singapore through the powerful Land Acquisition Act of 1966. The Central Provident Fund (CPF), the compulsory monthly social security savings meant for retirement, enables the development funding and mortgage system. The CPF creates a mutual benefit. On the one hand, Singapore citizens can use CPF money before retirement to "buy" their housing flats and thus virtually do not need cash to secure housing. On the other hand, the government also need not face financial problems in securing funds to develop the housing estates.

Chua notes, however, that "after 60 years of expansion and periodic changes in policy details in response to contextual contingencies, the system has accumulated systemically generated contradictions and problems" (p. 56). These contradictions and problems are revealed when the public housing flats are transformed from necessary accommodation to a market commodity. The author examines this transformation and its meanings as follows. Singapore has a two-tiered pricing system for its public housing: that is, the price of new flats and the price of "resale" flats. The former is cheaper than the latter, not only because the former are subsidized by the government, but also because the latter are in better locations, enjoy full social amenities, and have shorter buyer wait times. This creates a significant price gap that virtually incentivizes citizens to buy two new flats sequentially, rather than one, so they can make money through the "buy/resale/repurchase cycle."

The problem originates with the resale circuit. The price of resale flats must be higher than new flats to stay competitive. To keep the price of aging flats competitive and thus make them saleable and raise funds, the government is obligated to implement upgrades. This creates another problem, that is, it elevates the price of new flats such that affordability, especially for young, new entrants to the housing market, comes into question. As the result, a generational inequality emerges, as well as an inequality between the relatively rich residents, who can take advantage of the cycle, and the relatively poor residents, who can not.

This has important political and social implications, as Chua observes: "With all but the wealthy dependent on the HDB for their housing, the PAP government has been able to use the citizens' total dependency to impose social, cultural, and political controls, and in turn, extract compliance or acquiescence" (p. 105). While usage of the housing system by the government for its own benefit is not a novel finding, at the same time, Chua notes, "[t]he total dependency of Singaporeans on the government/HDB for their housing is clearly double-edged. It gives the PAP government a high degree of political legitimacy, but it can also be 'weaponized' by the electorate to extract its housing needs from the government" (p. 114).

Chua's exploration of this "double-edged" nature of Singapore's public housing system throughout the book is what makes it a unique contribution to the scholarship. As he rightly notes, the government's monopolization of the provision of housing that is the key to Singapore

empowers not only the government, but also the people. Precisely because the government is obligated to provide housing, if it fails, it will face serious consequences in the elections. The author sees the possibility of "a property-owning procedural democracy" in this balance of powers.

The most serious problem that the book investigates is the expiration of public housing leases. In Singapore, the buyers of public housing flats are merely leaseholders, not owners. When there is enough time remaining on the lease period, this distinction between leaseholder and owner is not a problem. Indeed, the leaseholder is entitled to most of the rights of ownership in the control, use, and disposal of the flat. But as the first flats leased under the scheme approach the halfway point of their lease period, it is not difficult to imagine the rising concern and anxiety of the leaseholders. What will happen as the lease nears expiration? The value of the flat—and its price—will decline and eventually reach zero. If the government can not guarantee the price, its legitimacy may be harmed, precipitating serious outcomes at the elections and potentially causing conflicts and contradictions to explode.

After Chua's book was reviewed, with the author's comment, in the local press, several letters from readers flooded into the forum pages (*The Straits Times*, July 14, 19, 22, 23 and 30, 2024). Such a reaction to a book launch is unusual in Singapore. One of the readers wrote, "we should not allow the 99-year lease issue to remain unresolved." Another wrote, "[t]hese seismic social changes in Singapore ought to be considered in determining anew the length of HDB flat leases. For instance, extending the leases of HDB flats to, say, 150 years may help allay some of these concerns." Another dispensed advise, writing that "[p]rospective buyers and owners should make sound decisions based on their age vis-a-vis the remaining lease on their property, and not expect any assistance when the value of their property drops with the decaying lease."

These reactions reflect the serious concerns and divided opinions of Singaporeans. Pandora's box may have been opened. But one thing is certain: Chua Beng Huat's book has opened up space in Singapore for more discussion about its public housing system.

Singapore's public housing system is a unique case that offers useful lessons for other societies. But it is important that the Singaporean case is not treated simply as a success. Its contradictions and potential to create conflicts must also be examined. *Public Subsidy / Private Accumulation* sets an example in this regard. Future studies based on local fieldwork and document investigations will be critical to build on Chua's work.

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Amy H. Liu and Joel Sawat Selway, eds. *State Institutions, Civic Associations, and Identity Demands: Regional Movements in Greater Southeast Asia*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Jacques Bertrand*

In *State Institutions, Civic Associations, and Identity Demands*, Amy Liu and Joel Selway aim to cast a new perspective on the sources of ethnic and secessionist mobilization in Southeast Asia. The volume contains a collection of 12 essays by country specialists, bookended by the editors' tightly designed analytical framework in the introduction and conclusion. The last chapter, by Henry Hale, engages with the broad conceptual themes of the book and reflects on some of its empirical findings while offering insights on their generalizability to other similar regions.

Regions, rather than ethnic groups, are the main unit of analysis used to compare political mobilization. In their introduction, Liu and Selway argue that focusing on regions helps to better understand what causes mobilization. This approach allows a comparison of explanatory factors across cases where little mobilization occurs and cases where there are strong identity-based movements or other political actions. This makes it possible to overcome some of the selection bias that plagues the ethnic conflict literature, such as selecting groups on the basis of spurious assumptions regarding their political identity or selecting cases exclusively on the basis of their mobilization.

Two conditions, according to the editors, appear to be necessary for mobilization—particularly secessionism—to arise along regional lines: exclusion from state institutions is a strong driver for mobilization when combined with the presence of civic associations that unify a group along ethnic lines. The empirical chapters are organized according to these two main factors, while in the conclusion the editors weigh their relative effect and, when combined, how they help to understand various forms of mobilization.

The editors are to be commended for their highly organized, well-defined framework that guides the empirical chapters. All the chapters aim to engage with the shared conceptual

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framework, exploring how identity is both defined and politicized across different regions. They employ process tracing to examine the ways in which exclusion or inclusion in state institutions, along with the role of various civic associations, influenced (or failed to influence) the politicization of identities and the resulting mobilization (or lack thereof). The key insight is that in regions where groups face multiple cross-cutting cleavages, the structure of civic associations can hinder the consolidation of a single ethnic identity. This, in turn, affects regional mobilization, potentially influencing outcomes such as the rise of secessionist movements.

The chapters cover several countries and regions, with Taiwan as the sole East Asian case and more extensive coverage of Indonesia, Malaysia/Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, and to a lesser extent Myanmar. While these cases provide valuable geographic diversity and insight, they fall short of the editors' goal of systematically covering all Southeast Asian regions in a rigorous comparative analysis of regions with and without mobilization. Although this approach is mentioned multiple times, the case selection and regional coverage lack the systematic and controlled comparison implied. Nonetheless, the study successfully incorporates enough regional variation to avoid the limitations of focusing solely on politically mobilized ethnic groups.

Six chapters examine the role of state institutions. Two of these focus on Malaysia and Singapore, with Elvin Ong primarily addressing Singapore, where the successful mobilization of the ethnic Chinese majority in South Malaysia led to secession. Ong highlights the significance of the underrepresentation of Chinese in Singapore as a crucial factor that complements other explanations of the island's expulsion from Malaysia—explanations that often emphasize the ideological differences between Lee Kuan Yew and Tunku Abdul Rahman. However, the analysis presents a bit of a chicken-and-egg problem: the formation of Malaysia itself already reflected ethnic tensions and the rise of Malay nationalism, which contributed to the limited representation of the Chinese community, particularly in Singapore.

Mohamed Salihin Subhan and Kai Ostwald compare Northeast and East Malaysia to analyze the absence of secessionism. They offer insights such as the potential for a unified identity in the three Northeast provinces historically linked to Siam, and how the United Malays National Organisation's cooptation of the Islamist agenda prevented secessionist movements. However, this argument is built on the somewhat forced premise that centralization in Malaysia would have sparked sufficient grievances to drive secessionism, all else being equal. A similar logic applies to East Malaysia, where cooptation also played a key role in staving off strong mobilization, showing how the region's diversity complicated the creation of a unified identity for secession. Overall, while these cases provide useful reminders of the prerequisites for secessionist mobilization, the idea of a shared identity against which centralization should have triggered a response seems less crucial than other, more context-specific, factors.

Jacob Ricks argues that despite a strong Isan/Lao identity, there was no mobilization among the Isan/Lao people for secessionism. His survey shows a strong attachment to Isan

culture alongside a Thai identity. He attributes this to the Thai state's assimilationist policies, raising the question of why high assimilation leads to less mobilization, whereas the broader comparative premise suggests that state exclusion triggers politicization and mobilization. Risa Toha also offers an intriguing finding among "North Sumatrans," though the PRRI (Piagam Revolusioner Rakyat Indonesia) rebellion is framed mainly as driven by group and regional identity. However, the link to Permesta in Sulawesi and the role of military commanders suggest broader issues, including military centralization, corruption, and a larger contestation of the Indonesian state itself rather than a regionalist agenda. The inclusion of more Bataks in the cabinet, military, and other influential roles during the New Order highlights how inclusion can alleviate regional grievances. However, the Bataks' relatively low mobilization raises questions as to whether similar patterns occur in other provinces and regions in Indonesia, particularly islands with equally strong identities but less political inclusion.

Chun-Ying Wu and Amy Liu's chapter most clearly demonstrates the link between regional and demographic differences and how these differences shape identity-based mobilization. The authors highlight the contrast between northern and southern Taiwan, showing that the predominance of Hokkien speakers in the South spurred demands for distinct recognition and language rights, while the same group in the North joined others in pushing the KMT toward abandoning monolingualism. They also emphasize how democratization, assumed to promote greater inclusion, gave rise to such claims and successful state responses. Mary Anne Mendoza-Davé, in contrast, focuses less on state inclusion and more on identity formation through education. She argues that Muslims were less able to develop a strong identity than Christians due to colonial powers' less intensive education in the South compared to the North; in the North, more intensive colonial education and Catholic influence played a key role. While education did contribute to nationalism during colonial expansion in Southeast Asia, this argument seems secondary to the role of the Catholic Church and the high conversion rates. Additionally, the chapter overlooks the more complex ways in which identities and mobilization for rebellion were shaped, particularly the differences between the ilustrados' failed revolution and the Katipunan, which were grounded in distinct identities and cross-cutting cleavages.

The six chapters on civic associations highlight how societal organization shapes a group's ability to unify along ethnic lines and mobilize regionally. In regions where civic associations divide groups by factors like religion or class, the unity needed for secessionist or large-scale mobilization is often undermined. While I take issue with S.P. Harish's claim that the Timorese formed four social movements in 1975, I agree with his argument that the Catholic Church was key in solidifying Timorese ethnic unity and enabling resistance to Indonesian occupation.

Jessica Soedirgo and Alexandre Pelletier both show how cross-cutting cleavages hindered the regional ethnic unity necessary for secession. Soedirgo explains that the RMS (Republik Maluku Selatan) independence movement failed due to strong religious ties, which prevented

the Christian Ambonese from broadening their support to include Ambonese Muslims. However, her chapter downplays the internal divisions among Ambonese Christians, as the RMS involved mainly former KNIL (Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger) colonial soldiers and failed to gain broader Christian support.

Pelletier illustrates how the Kachin ethnic identity, while reinforced by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), faces challenges from subgroups like the Lisu and Rawang, who have stronger local organizations disconnected from the broader Kachin nationalist movement. While these divisions are a valuable corrective to simplistic views of ethnic unity, the KIO's continued mobilization demonstrates that cleavages can be layered rather than entirely undermining broader unity. With this chapter being the only one on Myanmar, it certainly begs the question of how best to understand such umbrella identities and whether in other cases, such as the Chin in the Northwest, we might see similar associations between degrees of organization and varied patterns of mobilization.

Ryan Tans's chapter on Bali makes an interesting argument regarding the ability to appeal to Balinese ethnic culture as a minimal winning coalition that could transcend diverse interests and create resistance to a reclamation project. However, it falls short of fully engaging with how the region of Bali coincides with the island as the site of the reproduction of Balinese Hindu identity over centuries.

Jeremy Menchik's chapter shows how the Minahasans, similar to the Bataks in Toha's chapter, adhered to Indonesian nationalism and benefited to some extent during colonial times as well as under the New Order regime. Their organization along religious lines, particularly with the Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa, consolidated their identity and prevented alliances with Muslims from Gorontalo, for instance, also located in North Sulawesi. Their brief alliance with the Permesta movement, which opposed Indonesian centralization, did not provide a basis for sustained mobilization, as their efforts were quickly truncated by various other forms of mobilization—whether international, local, or national.

As with other Indonesian cases, it is not clear what unit should be taken as a "region." All the chapters on Indonesia (Chapters 3, 7, 8, and 11) quickly defer to common ethnic group identities, focusing in the end on whether these groups have been included or co-opted within central state institutions, and whether their identities are compatible or even enthusiastically complementary to Indonesian nationalism. This is true also for the Lanna people in Selway's chapter, who have shown little nationalist mobilization despite a relatively strong identity—an identity that has been revived through tourism and capitalist interests. As with the Balinese, culturally based expressions of identity complement their broader attachment to Thai identity. While some cultural associations helped strengthen their regional identity, this did not translate into secessionist tendencies.

Overall, the analysis of regionally based identities—their politicization or interaction with

other cross-cutting cleavages, their relationship to state inclusion or exclusion, and the civic associations around which they organize—adds great value to our understanding of the mobilization of ethnic identity, territorially based secessionist movements, and the conditions that explain why some potential movements are never realized. At times, the regionally based analysis seems a bit forced, and there is some conceptual stretching around notions of state exclusion/inclusion as well as civic associations. Nevertheless, the book offers a solid contribution to the comparative effort to understand regionally based forms of identity mobilization and the numerous cases of dogs that do not bark. While methodologically prescribed, including such cases and applying them successfully to cases of mobilization is often difficult to achieve. The book provides an original way of rethinking how we can broaden our analytical lens to better reach these goals.

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Ryan Wolfson-Ford. *Forsaken Causes: Liberal Democracy and Anticommunism in Cold War Laos*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Martin Rathie*

Ryan Wolfson-Ford's research into multi-party democracy and anticommunist activities in the Kingdom of Laos is a pioneering study for its substantial use of Lao language sources and giving voice to the domestic figures in Lao politics who would have otherwise been forgotten. *Forsaken Causes* is based on the author's 2020 doctoral thesis entitled "Ideology in the Royal Lao Government-era (1945–1975): A thematic approach." At 308 pages, the absence of maps and portraits of key figures mentioned in the book is a disappointment. The book provides an important counterbalance to Western-dominated narratives of Laos's twentieth century history. For too long, most mainstream histories of Laos, with the exception of Grant Evans's *A Short History of Laos*, have been produced by writers lacking a working knowledge of the national language and little more than a superficial utilization of primary sources. Hence, they gave scant treatment to Lao intellectual thought and the ideological edification of domestic actors.

Wolfson-Ford begins his analysis by investigating the "Origins of Democracy" in Chapter One. His focus is directed at the figures who rose to fame in the Lao Issara movement, which emerged in 1945. While the analysis is significant, it overlooks the intellectual debt owed to social progressives in neighboring Thailand, Cambodia, and Nationalist China. The author does well to trace the colonial roots of a Lao race threatened with extinction by communist forces—exacerbated by American security propagandists who came to Laos in the 1950s—and describe its permutation for political benefits. But by choosing to focus on the ethnic Lao elite, which constituted a minority inside a minority, when laying out the evolutionary trajectory of Lao politics, he overlooks mentioning the collective voting practices of many ethnic groups in Laos and fails to question how inclusive was the ideology of the new nation.

Wolfson-Ford praises the Royal Lao Government (RLG) for its free press. However, like most of mainland Southeast Asia, the Lao media of the twentieth century was dominated by printing houses owned by political leaders who were aided by foreign advisors. Hence, the

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scope of free expression is more limited than thought. Furthermore, the repression applied by the RLG against the publications of the Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) showed that press freedoms were conditional.

Archival film footage from the 1950s portrays Lao elections as peaceful. The extent of violence and intimidation used by the RLG against the LPF in the 1958 election campaign is skipped over by Wolfson-Ford. The supporters of LPF candidates were killed extrajudicially and their relatives, mostly young women, were detained for questioning and threatened both physically and mentally. By April 24, 1960 we have security personnel patrolling polling stations, thus showing the sudden intrusion of the military into Lao politics. Moreover, the voting procedure lacked secrecy as it used photographic booklets which easily revealed the voter's choice.[1)] During the January 1, 1967 elections armed Royal Lao Army soldiers stood around voting booths in Vientiane, many of them located on the grounds of temples.[2)] Hence, this contrasts sharply with the safe, non-intimidatory image of Lao elections initially presented by the author.

In the second section Wolfson-Ford looks at "Democracy in Practice." He explains the concrete measures taken by Lao intellectuals to promote a national identity and to establish democratic institutions. However, the debt to the French in these processes is downplayed. The author explains his term "loyalist" which is used to describe Lao conservatives who preferred a gradual separation from French stewardship. Wolfson-Ford does well to point out that Pierre Somchine Nginn, a Francophile Lao-Khmer, became a key architect of modern Lao language and socio-political concepts (p. 47).

In Chapter Three Wolfson-Ford shifts his attention to the "Origins of Anticommunism," by putting forward the argument that Lao actors led the fight against communist interference. He traces this to a tract written by Katay Don Sasorith in 1948 (p. 62). The reviewer finds this standpoint hard to support when it was the French and the Americans who were pressuring the nations of Southeast Asia to be vigilant against Soviet expansionism. The role of Thai anticommunism also needs to be given more credit.

The fourth chapter of the book deals with "Universal Democracy" which by its very title sounds altruistic. This raises the question, "Were the RLG political leaders giving voice to universal values for domestic or foreign consumption?" The reviewer would argue that much of this rhetoric was lip service for foreign donors rather than grassroot supporters. Furthermore, it could be argued that many of these announcements were reactions to statements made by the LPF which always had a more progressive agenda. Wolfson-Ford details the formation of political parties following the 1949 amnesty given to followers of the Lao Issara and the loyalists' adoption of universal values promoted by the United Nations (pp. 81–82). He also brings attention to universal suffrage with the appointment of Mrs. Khampheng Boupha to the National Assembly in 1958 (p. 90).

In Chapter Five Wolfson-Ford combines "Anticommunism and Nationalism" as he seeks to

demonstrate that an aggressive posture towards communists and their sympathizers was perceived as behaving patriotically. This argument is only partly true as many Lao living inside RLG-controlled parts of Laos considered the Pathet Lao more loyal to the nation than politicians in Vientiane. The author traces the escalation of the border dispute between Laos and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1959, the cultivation of the Lao race myth by various intellectuals (p. 103), and the formation of conservative nationalist groups (p. 111). This section would have benefited from a parallel contrast with the LPF's multi-ethnic narrative of the Lao state.

The sixth chapter acknowledges the tragic lapse of "Democracy and Dictatorship" in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This topic is relevant to the present as we see democratic institutions under siege in various countries. In the case of the RLG, opportunists were exploiting the fear of communism to circumvent parliamentary procedures and generate huge personal profits. Wolfson-Ford follows the tragic course of Phoumi Nosavan and the growing entry of military figures into Lao politics (pp. 128–134).

In Chapter Seven Wolfson-Ford looks at "Anticommunism and Neutralism," a topic which has been touched upon by several academics. Neutralism stood up in the Lao public's thinking because it was linked to dynamic figures such as Bong Souvannavong, Kinim Pholsena and Kong Lae. The author focuses on the Kong Lae supporters who rallied to the RLG in 1963 and how Souvanna Phouma forged his own interpretation of neutralism to ensure his political survival. Special attention is given to Souvanna's decision to approve the bombing of communist forces, thus showing the war in Laos was not guided exclusively by the United States (p. 154).

The eighth section of the book is titled "Return to Democracy" which seems a flawed choice to the reviewer as the RLG never fully recovered from the lost opportunity of 1962's Second Coalition Government. Guided democracy would probably be a better description. The chapter describes efforts taken to redeem the RLG after the numerous coups of the 1960s. Wolfson-Ford points out how Souvanna maintained the semblance of liberal democracy by allowing the National Assembly to execute its powers more freely while cracking down against the Pathet Lao more brutally on the battlefield.

In the final chapter called "Death to Democracy" Wolfson-Ford briefly explains the collapse of the parliamentary system in Laos. He explains the rise of new political interest groups and the wind of change brought by enlightened students, mostly returned from Europe. This is a complex process as the Pathet Lao had a detailed, long-term program for the seizure of power which involved legal and armed means of persuasion. It did not rely heavily on the withdrawal of the United States from the region, and the fall of Saigon.

In his conclusion, titled the "Specter of Democracy," Wolfson-Ford points out the unique status of the RLG in the political geography of Asia. This is a natural logic but, unfortunately, we had to wait for *Forsaken Causes* to view its characteristics in suitable detail. The author is optimistic that elements of the RLG's democratic experience have some residual effect on Lao

political culture in the present.

The absence of maps and portraits of key figures mentioned in the book is a disappointment. The author's belief that the Vietnamese dominated and dictated to the Lao revolutionary movement is a weakness in this study. Lao of all political persuasions have been responsible for inviting various external influences. However, the Pathet Lao never traded Lao sovereignty and self-mastery off to the Vietnamese. They certainly made strategic agreements which gave the Vietnamese revolutionary forces privileged treatment. This should not be confused with the neocolonialism which was practiced by the US Embassy and the CIA. An important question to raise is why RLG figures of Lao-Viet parentage such as Katay Don Sasorith did not undergo the same racial vilification as Pathet Lao leaders?

Wolfson-Ford's study has opened the gate for research into the intellectual history of Laos. Early in the book the author declares his desire to skirt around the subject of patronage politics in Laos. However, to properly understand the dynamics driving these parties it is crucial to know their patrons and the historical baggage which they carried from the colonial and Lao Issara periods. The use of the term "flourished" to describe Lao democracy is too generous. Democracy was active in the provincial capitals located adjacent to the Mekong. For smaller towns and districts located upcountry democratic practices gave way to old-style clan politics. Given that there were ten coups carried out during the RLG period, it is naïve to say Laos had a stable democracy.[3)] The moderate approach of the Pathet Lao helped to maintain the parliamentary façade of the RLG when in reality regional military commanders functioned as warlords.

The main point that Wolfson-Ford wished to leave in the reader's mind was that the Lao people were agents of their destiny during the Cold War era while in partnership with various allies. I agree with the author's claim that the RLG leaders determined their own course more than has been accredited to them previously. However, the process of navigating various domestic hurdles has frequently relied on the council, military clout and finance of foreign powers. Wolfson-Ford and a new generation of scholars are making sure to promote Lao sources as a first step in better understanding the past and present of Laos. The good news is that there is a Lao National Archives in Vientiane which can be accessed by researchers, and thus there is great potential for more to be unearthed on this topic.[4)]

Notes

1) Jacques Nevard, "Laotian Election Appears Orderly," *New York Times*, April 25, 1960, page 11
2) Lao News Agency Photographic Archives – Series of pictures from 1967 election
3) 1 in 1959; 3 in 1960; 2 in 1964; 2 in 1965; 1 in 1966; and 1 in 1973
4) It contains audio-visual materials, books and documents from the colonial, Kingdom of Laos and LPDR periods. Unfortunately, most of them are not catalogued. Hence, scholars will have to be patient to access only a fraction of the collection.

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Philip Fountain. *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Sumanto Al Qurtuby*

Philip Fountain's *The Service of Faith* is an ethnographic study of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a transnational, faith-based nongovernmental organization associated with Mennonite and Brethren in Christ (as well as Amish) churches that focuses on relief, development, and peacebuilding (climate change has been added to the organization's core program). A worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, MCC is a renowned global service agency that has worked—in the name of Christ—for over a century to help with people's basic needs and building just peace.

Headquartered in North America (the United States and Canada), MCC, which was established in 1920, has offices in more than sixty countries worldwide, including Indonesia. Due to the organization's field-driven approach, MCC's programs and operations differ considerably from one country to another. This study focuses mainly on the works of MCC Indonesia, which began its activities (especially relief and medical programs) in Sumatra in 1948 after World War II, while exploring its foundational roots within North American Mennonite/Anabaptist communities. MCC is perhaps the first international service agency to have worked in Indonesia after World War II.

More specifically, this book, a product of almost two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia (18 months) and North America (four months), examines the historical dynamics, trajectories, changes, developments, and everyday activities of the MCC organization and Indonesian MCCers and, to some extent, Mennonite communities as the prime backbone and supporters of this "service agency." It also highlights the significant roles played by actors or agency (without neglecting organizational structures, systems, and discourses), particularly MCCers in Indonesia, in managing, brokering, translating, negotiating, and bridging MCC's various programs within Indonesia's diverse and shifting sociopolitical, cultural, and religious

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contexts.

The author analyzes negotiations conducted by Indonesia's MCC brokers and translators who were (and are) actively involved in assessing, designing, and implementing the organization's relief, development, and peacebuilding projects in the context of Indonesian social fields. Fountain also investigates the relations, connections, exchanges, communications, and interactions among Indonesian MCCers and between MCC actors and locals taking place in various cultural meetings by examining "the frictions, connectivities, and disjunctures that arise from attempts to bridge, or cross over, cultural gaps" (p. 7). Certainly, the introduction of Mennonite concepts, understandings, and theologies of service and peace into the varied social fields of Indonesia involved a multifaceted and continuous negotiation. Thus, this book is intended for readers to understand not only "what MCC is but how MCCing is done" (p. 236).

It is imperative to note that implementing MCC's general programs in an Indonesian setting is not an easy task, mainly because MCC's vision, mission, platforms, and programs are strongly rooted within the Anabaptist/Mennonite Christian tradition and the North American liberal democratic context, while Indonesian societies are dominated by Muslims and were ruled by a dictatorial regime (Suharto's New Order). Accordingly, interpreting, translating, and implementing North America's MCC projects on relief, development, and peacebuilding within the Indonesian state and society require strategic approaches, loose or flexible tactics, and skilled cultural translators and brokers. It is in this context that analyzing the creative works of Indonesian MCCers becomes significant and noteworthy.

This work deserves appreciation for some fundamental reasons. First, it examines—through the lens of ethnography—a subject that is rarely studied by anthropologists: faith-based NGOs. An ethnographic study of an NGO, either religious or secular, is challenging mainly because, as the author has noted, most NGOs are not open-minded, research access to such organizations is notoriously tough and restricted, and NGOs are highly protective of their public image (p. 27). Second, the book studies a theme that is infrequently researched by social scientists, particularly anthropologists—namely, religion and development or religion in development. For decades, perhaps due to the influences of classical secularization theories, religion was seriously neglected in much academic scholarship on development studies. By exploring how Mennonite theologies influence MCC's works, this book makes a crucial contribution to the recent debates about faith in development or religion-development connections.

The book is divided into seven chapters. It begins with a chapter on the historical relations between MCC and the Mennonite peoplehood in North America, especially the United States and Canada, by tracing how North American Mennonites gave birth to MCC and how this institution reshaped Anabaptist religious communities "by furnishing a vehicle through which Mennonites could assume a theological identity as a people of service" (p. 31). Fountain argues that comprehending the religious setting of North American Mennonites is imperative to

explore "the impulses, dispositions, theologies, and imaginations" that shape, impact, and influence MCC's works, activities, and programs in Indonesia (p. 33). Another reason for discussing the links between North American Mennonites and MCC is that "MCC can only be properly understood with reference to Mennonite communities in North America" (p. 32). Chapter 1 underscores MCC as a peoplehood movement, though the movement should be viewed as just one of the avenues through which this religious NGO is performed and conceptualized (p. 65).

Chapter 2 focuses on an analysis of how MCC—its objects, people, programs, and notions—traverses cultural gaps by emphasizing translation practices and intermediaries. The chapter underlines the significance of the concepts of translation, brokerage, and mediation as key analytical terms in an ethnography of development. In studying the practices of translation conducted by MCCers in Indonesia, the author focuses on the workings of ambivalence, agency, and rationality (p. 68). This chapter concludes that MCC Indonesia is defined not only by its role (for instance, as a mediator in a broad patchwork quilt) but also by "the value-laden, culturally, and theologically formed approaches that MCCers take in negotiating their relationships with those other sections of the quilt" (p. 102).

Chapter 3, titled "The Missions of Development," explores two aspects: first, MCC Indonesia's early history as it built relationships and interacted with the country's oldest Mennonite churches—Gereja Injili di Tanah Jawa (Java's Evangelical Church) and Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia (Muria Christian Church of Indonesia, which is affiliated with Indonesian Chinese Mennonites); and second, changes in MCC Indonesia's programs and approaches from the time the organization started its operations in 1948 until the heyday of Suharto's New Order in the 1980s and 1990s. The author points out that MCC Indonesia first focused on its Sumatran relief program, but that lasted only a few months before it changed its regional focus to Central Java in order to support Mennonite churches and communities in this region (pp. 107–113).

From the mid-1970s until the early 1990s, MCC again changed its programs and priorities. This time it primarily worked and collaborated with Suharto's authoritarian New Order government, particularly with the Ministry of Transmigration. Throughout this period, "MCCers were deployed as field scientists, agricultural extension workers, and project managers" to assist transmigrants in outer Java as well as to help with the Indonesian government's transmigration policy and national development project (pp. 113–120). The MCC-New Order collaboration is striking mainly because MCC has had a long-standing reluctance to work with USAID (or the American government) on the grounds of the latter's imperialist intentions. Furthermore, from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, MCC was also involved in "evangelistic programs" through initiating church-planting projects for Dayak indigenous communities in West Kalimantan (pp. 120–127). This shift is also interesting to analyze because MCC is not an evangelistic or mission agency and traditionally avoids proselytization and evangelism. Fountain argues that

the dramatic changes in MCC Indonesia's programs indicate "the flexibility with which MCCers adapted to changing political conditions and the impact of its field-driven approach to operations" (p. 130).

Chapter 4 analyzes the North American context of MCC's work to understand the ways MCC is positioned and framed to its main donor constituency (Mennonites and other Christian Anabaptist communities). The chapter also discusses the relationship between policy and politics in theological articulation, arguing that policy articulations are one of the main instruments through which development organizations like MCC enroll or recruit a constituency. By treating theological articulation as policy, the chapter explores "not what theology should be normatively articulated within the organization but, rather, how theological articulations (and disarticulations) work in practice" (p. 132).

Chapter 5 is devoted to scrutinizing MCC's new projects on peacebuilding and interfaith bridge building with a focus on Christian-Muslim relations, aimed at constructing bridges of mutual understanding and relationships through interreligious programs. The main factors driving this initiative were the 9/11 terrorist tragedy and its global impacts, including Islamophobia and worsening Christian-Muslim relations in the West. Fountain notes that MCC's post-9/11 peace programs aim "to translate vernacular Mennonite theologies of peace into practices of peacebuilding in Indonesia" (p. 156). MCC's involvement in peacebuilding projects emerged from the long tradition of North American Mennonite (Anabaptist) pacifism and nonviolent resistance.

Chapter 6 discusses the "politics" and normative myth of drinking tea with locals as a window or an entry point into exploring an "ideology [i.e., 'animating ideas' through which actions are made inhabitable and practicable] of guesthood that provides a distinctive imagining for MCCers for their work in Indonesia" (p. 183). The final chapter, Chapter 7, focuses on expatriate MCCers in Indonesia as they engage in services that are transformed by their living experiences. The book closes with a reflection on the theology of service, arguing that service in MCC is "simultaneously practical, embodied, ethical, and theological" (p. 237). Fountain argues that MCC's service is shaped, reshaped, and legitimated by vernacular Mennonite theologies and that "imaginations of Mennonite service as relational, quietist, activist, and peaceable arise out of the history of Mennonite approaches to faith" (p. 237).

No doubt, this book is noteworthy. It makes a significant contribution to both academic (e.g., university lecturers, students, and researchers) and nonacademic (e.g., practitioners, policymakers, activists, religious leaders, etc.) communities, especially in the fields or anthropological studies of development, Christianity (particularly Mennonites), peacebuilding, service, and religious NGOs. The book appears to be fair and balanced in analyzing the history and contemporary development of Mennonites, MCC, and MCC's work in Indonesia.

For me, the only problems with this book are the language, prose, structures, lines of

argument, narratives, and writing style, which could make the contents a bit difficult to comprehend, particularly for those who are not familiar with anthropological concepts or jargon and ethnographic narratives. Also, is it only Anabaptist theologies that shape and influence Mennonite/MCC practices in service and peacebuilding, or do Mennonites' rich experiences and practices in diverse fields also contribute to the modification, adaptation, and transformation of Mennonite and MCC's principal understandings and theologies of service and peace?

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Marina Welker. *Kretek Capitalism: Making, Marketing, and Consuming Clove Cigarettes in Indonesia*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir*

Mainstream scholarship, particularly within the field of economic science, has long refrained from using the concept of "capitalism," perceiving it as laden with ideological baggage that hinders an understanding of modern market economies (Block 2019, 1166). The term is often replaced with various others that denaturalize the exploitative relations of production, such as "the economy," "development," and "industrial society" (Harvey 2010; Harris and Delanty 2023, 325). The alternative terms are claimed to represent a more positive image of the capitalist system associated with progress. Hence, when Marina Welker states in *Kretek Capitalism* that the supervisor of Sampoerna, one of Indonesia's largest cigarette companies, rejected the capitalist label (p. 3), it mirrors a broader trend in the academic world—a trend that is not limited to Indonesia. It thus makes sense that, although the Communist narrative on anti-capitalism has been marginalized in Indonesia since 1965, "capitalism" remains "a jarring, dirty word, a slur reserved for enemies" and often evokes "negative connotations and asocial imperatives such as maximizing profits, exploiting labor, externalizing social and environmental costs, and taking license to reap private benefits from social suffering" (p. 3). However, through the case of Sampoerna, a subsidiary of Philip Morris International (PMI), Welker demystifies the natural process of capitalism. This is one of the most important contributions of her book.

Focusing on labor exploitation, the author discusses *kretek* (clove cigarettes) beyond the conventional health issue narrative. Specifically, she analyzes how Sampoerna "uses contracts, gamification, self-improvement logics, and class, gender, and age hierarchies to extract overtime, shift, seasonal, gig, and unpaid labor from workers, influencers, artists, students, retailers, and consumers" (p. 2). Welker frames Sampoerna as representing *kretek* capitalism, "understood as the accumulation of capital through the making, exchange, and consumption of clove cigarettes"

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(p. 2). For the company, *kretek* represents the Indonesian national identity. This view justifies *kretek* capitalism and thus the exploitation of farmers and workers in the field.

Importantly, as discussed in Chapter 1, the book provides a compelling account of how the rigid and hierarchical work involved in making, exchanging, and producing *kretek* "serves as a powerful tool of capitalist exploitation" (p. 30). *Kretek* manufacturers, for instance, keep clove prices low while importing substantial quantities of the spice. However, they also encourage clove farmers to protest against tobacco control and portray themselves as rural smallholders whose livelihoods are tied to price fluctuations of a single commodity. Tobacco farmers are also precariously positioned as they have to rely on debt "to cultivate a capital-intensive and risky non-food crop," while the laborers have limited choices aside from accepting low-paid seasonal work under unsafe working conditions (p. 30). PMI also engages in exploitation through a contract farming system while claiming to be more socially and environmentally friendly in controlling products. In reality, it more efficiently facilitates surplus labor extraction. The rest of the chapters substantiate how exploitation at the factory level, involving a female-dominated workforce, takes place and is justified by the narrative that *kretek* is part of Indonesian culture. However, as argued by Welker, *kretek* capitalism is integral to a global supply chain.

Thus, the book also contributes to deconstructing the cultural narrative, asserting that *kretek* is part of the Indonesian national heritage. The narrative states that *kretek* must be protected against global producers of "white cigarettes" (*rokok putih*), a term for non-clove cigarettes, and that the tobacco control movement is a "foreign, neo-colonial threat" (p. 2). The campaign of this narrative often involves communities, not only loyal consumers but also social groups such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia. In 2002, for example, NU partnered with the *kretek* company Bentoel to invest in a hand-rolled *kretek* factory (p. 15). The marketing focus of this company was to recruit NU smokers in order to "bolster both NU's economic fortunes and those of tobacco and clove farmers, many of whom are NU members" (p. 15). Another *kretek* company, Djarum, whose owner, Hartono, is one of the richest persons in the country, according to Welker, is "widely rumored" to be the primary funder of the *kretek* community (Komtek) founded in 2010 (p. 18). Welker does not explore this rumor further, but a study by Alamsyah (2011) has confirmed that Djarum funded several programs at the NU to support the campaign against tobacco control. The campaign included efforts to draft a tobacco bill that used a populist narrative, emphasizing the importance of *kretek* in the livelihoods of tobacco and clove farmers.

However, as the book suggests, the case of Sampoerna, one of the largest *kretek* producers, invalidates such narratives because this company has been a subsidiary of PMI since 2005. British American Tobacco (BAT) and Japan Tobacco International (JTI) also took over other Indonesian *kretek* producers, contributing to over 40 percent market share (p. 6). These foreign capitals play a pivotal role in sustaining the *kretek* industry. At the same time, their investments

are viewed as a threat given their commitment to harm reduction, which serves as a cornerstone of their public relations strategies in higher-income countries and aligns with the tobacco control narrative (p. 6). Nevertheless, as material interests are the main drivers of the capitalist logic, investments in the *kretek* industry are also to ensure the survival of foreign capital in response to dramatic decreases in smoking rates in developed countries that allow only "reduced risk" products (p. 18). Welker argues that "kretek capitalism thereby provides vital support to foreign tobacco firms and shareholders at the expense of ordinary Indonesians" (p. 18). This statement implies that it is irrelevant to differentiate between *kretek* and white cigarettes or domestic and foreign capitals. The intertwined link between domestic *kretek* manufacturers and foreign reduced-risk cigarette capitalists shows that they both support *kretek* capitalism in opposition to tobacco control policies. While this interplay can help to deconstruct the cultural narratives surrounding *kretek* capitalism, the book does not delve deeper into it. As an ethnographer, Welker is more interested in "the ordinary people who are involved in the kretek industry and the mundane labor they perform" (p. 5).

The book's failure to further explore other types of cigarette companies, especially with respect to their predatory practices in extracting surplus values, may result in its being viewed as merely producing another narrative that attacks the nationalist *kretek* movement. However, although focusing on just one aspect can be limiting, in an anthropological study it can also serve as a strength. Such an approach allows the author to look deeper into the labor exploitation involved in the vernacular practices of *kretek* capitalism.

At the same time, there is also a risk of overemphasizing details, something that is often seen in ethnographic writings and also reflected in Welker's work. Too much of a focus on the detailed operation of *kretek* capitalism has resulted in the book's lacking theoretical abstraction. To be fair, such abstraction may not be the objective of the book. Hence, readers should not expect to understand what *kretek* capitalism and its modes of exploitation contribute to the broader discussion of capitalism: What is new about the mechanism that we have found in the *kretek* industry to understand the exploitative economic system in the twenty-first century, other than simply applying a Marxist analytical tool? Specifically, how does the book respond to studies on the specificity of capitalist development in countries like Indonesia that many scholars (see Robison 1986; Sanyal 2007; Mudhoffir 2022; Chu and Kong 2024) have deemed as an illiberal, predatory, or Asiatic mode of production? These studies indicate that capitalism in certain developing countries continues to generate growth even though it is accompanied by corruption, cronyism, and other forms of disorder, unlike in developed countries. Although that may not be the focus of the book, engaging with these studies can help comprehend why Indonesia has not ratified the 2003 World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and why the government fiercely supports *kretek* capitalism and actively promotes the cultural narrative surrounding *kretek* while sidelining tobacco control arguments. It

may also help to further elucidate how contradictions between domestic and foreign capitals shape the works of capitalism and modes of exploitation in the country and how PMI, BAT, and JTI adapt to Indonesia's corrupt political and business environment. Apart from this limitation, Welker's book is an important work for understanding the intricate operation of *kretek* capitalism in Indonesia and is relevant to scholars, students, and policymakers.

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Rudolf Mrázek. *Amir Sjarifoeddin: Politics and Truth in Indonesia, 1907–1948*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2024.

Reviewed by Lin Hongxuan*

Amir Sjarifoeddin has long been overdue for a biography. Jacques Leclerc's (1981; 1993; 2011) work came close, but his oeuvre was distributed across several journal articles and book chapters, published in English, French, and Indonesian. A biography of Amir was especially necessary given his pivotal position as the Indonesian prime minister who signed the disastrous Renville Agreement of 1948, which made enormous concessions to the Dutch but was shortly voided by the Dutch military's Operation Kraai. These events broke the already tenuous unity of the republic's leaders and laid the foundation for the fratricidal violence—erupting most obviously at Madiun in 1948—that would plague the republic for decades to come.

Meandering and musing in style, Rudolf Mrázek's biography of Amir is a pleasure to read, much in the vein of his *Sjahrir* (1994) and *A Certain Age* (2010). It is a book to "pleasure through," as if on a river cruise, to use a metaphor often deployed by Mrázek himself. This is not the kind of book young scholars have the luxury of writing, with its many musing allusions to Kafka, Kant, and Homer, but that makes it all the more refreshing to read. With a proven author of such incisive yet lyrical books as *Engineers of Happy Land* (2002) and *The Complete Lives of Camp People* (2020), the editors have been perhaps more permissive. Much of the pleasure comes from anecdotes both touching and wrenching, but this biography's greatest strength is the sense it conveys of young people caught between worlds in the interwar years —between the world of the Indies, with its freewheeling cosmopolitan intelligentsia circles of all ethnicities, and the world of the as-yet-unborn Indonesian republic, in which the pluralistic and trans-ethnic ethos of Dutch imperial culture (at least for those privileged enough to access it) would have no room to exist. Amir was one such person, and his experiences may well have been totemic. He was certainly not the only politician so torn by the painful necessities of gov-

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erning a new and beleaguered republic. This painful negotiation between mutually exclusive worldviews, this sense of being torn between two poles, would permeate the postwar period, tormenting the republic's Dutch-educated leaders in their ill-fated negotiations with the Dutch and fragmenting its leadership over which compromises were truly necessary.[1)]

Chapter 11 stands out for its cogent yet dramatic, narratively tight but not terse, overview of the decisions and events that shaped the first crucial months of the Indonesian republic. This characteristic is especially evident in Mrázek's coverage of the early days of organizing the republic's armed forces (Amir's responsibility, as defence minister in Sjahrir's first cabinet) and the ebb and flow of key policy decisions surrounding the Battle of Surabaya. Amir's policy decisions, especially his commitment to relying on decentralized militias and training commissars to shape a Mao Zedong- or Tom Wintringham-inspired "people's army" fighting a "people's war," while also courting former KNIL cadets for the republican army's officer corps, proved to be immensely important for the republican war effort.[2)] To my knowledge, no other work has produced such a coherent and curated synthesis of the key decisions that were made during this period.

Enjoyable as the book is, it does contain some missed opportunities. For instance, in Chapter 10 the nature and strength of the bonds between Amir and his "followers"—Soedjatmoko, Soebadio, Soedarpo, Sitoroes, Aboe Bakar Loebis, among others (p. 130)—is never quite made clear. Mrázek uses the metaphor of metro trains passing each other, of *correspondence* (French) and *coincidence* (Italian), to describe the swirl of activity in the loose network of would-be activists around Amir from the 1930s on. While the metaphor is appealing, the connections need a stronger explanatory basis: did Amir's circle of followers/admirers emerge out of his time teaching at the *volksuniversiteit* (*sekolah rakjat*)? Did they know him from the underground lectures he gave during the first months of the Japanese occupation? Did they come from his nationalist party Gerindo, or were they perhaps attracted by his writings in the newspaper *Kebangoenan*? In any event, their organizational capacity, and therefore whether they could be reasonably construed as a concrete—as opposed to spectral—"underground," would also depend on how regular their communications arrangements and cellular structures were. These arrangements and structures, or lack thereof, deserve some sustained discussion. Similar problems plague the study of underground and semi-underground Indonesian organizations such as Partai Republik Indonesia and Pendidikan; what did it mean to lead, and what did it mean to follow? For example, Mrázek writes that Amir had "many connections with the communists and intellectual extremists" (p. 154) in the republican capital of Yogyakarta, but it is not clear from reading the preceding chapters how such ties were built and maintained. Rather, Mrázek's characterization of Amir tends to emphasize his general marginality and estrangement from radical politics.

Another missed opportunity is evident in relation to Amir's Dutch friends. Sympathizers

such as Johann Heinrich Adolf Logemann, Julius Schepper, Willem Frederik Wertheim, and other law school professors who mentored Amir at the Batavia Law School deserve more detailed analysis than Mrázek provides. The degree of these Dutch sympathizers' assistance and support for Amir and similar activists went far beyond *noblesse oblige* and seemed to indicate tacit support for Indonesian independence or at least devolution in the near future. That alone is remarkable and justifies a little more attention. The sympathizers' influence was clearly formative for Amir, after all, and several of them would play important roles in the torturous negotiations at Linggadjati and the USS *Renville*. It was, perhaps, the past influence of such mentors and their presence at and around the negotiating table that made Amir pliable, even when the terms presented to him were obviously politically unviable.

The most important contribution of this book lies in asking and answering some of the most thorny questions in scholarship on the Indonesian revolution: historically intriguing questions such as "How did the republican government sell, and Indonesians respond to, the painful concessions made to the Dutch in the Linggadjati and Renville Agreements?" or "Why did Amir Sjarifroeddin agree to the manifestly disadvantageous terms of the Renville Agreement?" find at least partial answers here. Other historians have considered such questions before, notably George Kahin, Benedict Anderson, and John Legge in their seminal works; more recent synoptic accounts such as David van Reybrouck's *Revolusi* (2024) rely on these classics. That said, none of them approach the level of detail and expanse that Mrázek can afford in this biography.

Similarly, Chapter 12 excels in offering an answer to why Amir drifted into Musso's orbit and sleepwalked into the fratricidal debacle at Madiun in 1948. The Madiun Affair remains a poorly understood episode of internecine violence among the republicans, smothered by the Indonesian state's continuing assertion that Indonesian Communists had been duped into betraying the revolution. Through painstaking and comprehensive analysis of Amir's intimates and observers, from Amir's children to the Vatican's representative in Indonesia, Mrázek reconstructs an unparalleled picture of an agitated and depressed leader, one who understood that his gambit on Dutch goodwill—expressed in signing the Renville Agreement—had failed miserably; it was this painful disenchantment that led him to wager his remaining political influence—and ultimately his life—on Musso's version of the Gottwald Plan at Madiun.

Earlier scholarship by Leclerc (1993), Ann Swift (1989), and Harry Poeze (2011) has speculated along similar lines, but Mrázek's attention to detail and stylistic flair paint a psychological portrait that is much richer and more compelling.

In sum, this biography is a fine work from an esteemed scholar who has already proven his deft hand with biography. In many ways, it serves as a necessary complement to Mrázek's earlier biography of Sutan Sjahrir (Mrázek 1994), Amir's contemporary intellectual, fellow nationalist activist, and (like Amir) erstwhile prime minister. Like Amir, he signed a deeply unpopular agreement with the Dutch, and his government fell because of it. Sjahrir's and Amir's differing

personalities and ideological trajectories are on full display here, and each biography serves as a foil to the other, helping readers understand the political calculations and emotional undercurrents that proved remarkably pivotal in Indonesia's early years. While thick, this book is never plodding; while its density may hamper its chances of appearing on graduate students' syllabi, no student of Indonesia's recent history can afford to ignore it.

Notes

1) The poles were an imperial past of ethical cooperation and occasional good faith, versus the republican present of barely restrained *élan* and uncompromising demands for freedom; on another axis, Indonesians were torn also between the two increasingly intransigent camps of the bipolar Cold War.
2) KNIL, or the Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army), was the pre-1942 colonial army stationed in the Netherlands East Indies.

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Michael Goldman, Nancy Lee Peluso, and Wendy Wolford, eds. *The Social Lives of Land*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Philip Hirsch*

We often think of land as timeless, inanimate and immovable. This collection of mainly case study-based essays seeks to reconsider the ontology of land. Land has a history. It has agency. In some cases, it is literally mobile, in other cases metaphorically so. In other words, land has lives of its own. These lives are not lived out in isolation, however. On the contrary, the lives of land are relational, contextual, and time bound. Hence the social dimension of land as a living entity: land is living in relation to histories of settlement and encounters between indigenous people and newcomers, in relation to assemblages that determine its control and mobility, and in relation to the myriad ways in which people seek to identify with it, live off it, profit from it, care for it, use it and abuse it.

The case studies in *Social Lives of Land* are organized around three main themes. The temporal emphasis of the first section reveals how, as newcomers settle territory, land is at the same time "unsettled" in the long sweep of history—through colonization, associated encounters between settlers and indigenous peoples, and through the reorganization of land along socialist and post-socialist lines. The geographical sweep of this and subsequent sections is similarly extensive, ranging from Clint Carroll's study of the contested Cherokee homelands of Oklahoma to Kati Álvarez, Ciara Wirth, Gabriela Valdivia, and Flora Lu's discussion of the very different meanings ascribed to land by settlers and indigenous people in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

The story is not one of a simple linear occupation of native lands by encroaching newcomers, however. Commodification of land and its products creates fundamental divisions within indigenous societies, such that land itself has agency. No chapter brings this agency out more emphatically than Katherine Verdery's "autobiography" of a Transylvanian block of land. Here, the voice resides in the land as it tells of the ways it has shaped people's lives under different political regimes in central Romania.

The second section of the book turns to the materiality and mobility of land. The case

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studies are drawn from a wide range of contexts. Laura Schoenberger recounts how land in the form of sand has physically been exported from Cambodia to Singapore; Andrew Ofstehage tells the story of American farmers seeking to make the Brazilian Cerrado more "productive" for soya; and Nancy Peluso turns to a different sort of mobility in her account of labor migration and its implications for land relations in East Java. Gregg Mitman and Emmanuel King Urey Yarkpawolo show how gendered land relations shape, but are also shaped by, land struggles in Liberia. Through the materiality of a particular crop, namely manioc, Wendy Wolford provides a lens through which visions for agricultural progress have been manifested in colonial and post-colonial Mozambique. This and several other chapters reveal some of the circularities and resonances of recent large scale land acquisitions with earlier colonial visions, uncovering the fissures in linear narratives of progressive commodification of land.

The third and final section of the book explores land as a speculative asset that shapes ongoing tensions between collective and individual social organization and between socially distributive and privately marketized values. In its place at the core of social debates and struggles, land is an instrument, rather than a mere recipient, in the organization of societies, whether that organization is more communitarian or neoliberal. Michael Goldman draws on the important theme of financialization to show how meanings of land change, as do the lives of those intimately bound up with their inherited fields, in the context of the urban expansion of one of India's most dynamic cities—Bengaluru. It is thus not only the cutting-edge IT sector that upends rural and peri-urban lives, but also the ontological shift of land as a source of identity and livelihood to its meaning as a speculative asset distanced from those who now control and profit from it.

Despite their utterly different geographical and historical frames of reference, two other chapters in this section provide—intentionally or otherwise—interesting parallels to the swings between collective and private control over land. Emmanuel Sulle and Richard Mbunda's account of the changing meanings of land in Tanzania draws from one of the early and most significant experiments in home-grown socialism, notably Julius Nyerere's program of *Ujamaa* villages and its ideals of an egalitarian post-colonial order, to illustrate the ongoing tensions involved in dealing with this legacy in a neo-liberalized order. Meanwhile, Kirsteen Shields gives an account of the significance of historical memory of displacement, notably the Scottish highland clearances, in providing the political impetus for land reform that grants crofting communities rights of communal purchase of land from large estates. One of the complicating aspects of this account is that many of the communities engaged in both voluntary and involuntary arrangements with neighboring estates are not solely or even mainly populated by "indigenous" locals.

Other than the book's introduction, only two chapters are not based on case studies. Robert Nichols introduces the first section by demonstrating how fundamental the making and remaking of land was to the project of colonialism, not only as an outcome of the colonial order,

but also in its very rationale. In the third section, Erik Swyngedouw and Callum Ward provide a highly readable political economic analysis of land as the center of accumulation, dispossession, and social conflict, again showing how land is constitutive rather than simply reflective of social relations.

While only two chapters in the collection draw specifically on Southeast Asia for case study material, namely those by Laura Schoenberger and Nancy Peluso, each chapter fundamentally resonates with the changing significance of land in this region. As a region with histories of marketization, individualized land titling, revolutionary socialism and post-socialist reform, and tensions between states and upland ethnic minorities, Southeast Asia has been shaped by most of the processes discussed throughout the book. Land has been central to the social, economic, political, and environmental histories of tension in the region. That said, this does not mean that the case material from other parts of the world is simply illustrative of universal themes and processes. Context matters. Each of the case studies had this reviewer thinking across context —that is, drawing comparative reference between examples from Africa, South America, India, North America, and even Scotland, on the one hand, and the voluminous study of land and agrarian transformations in Southeast Asia (e.g., Hart *et al.* 1989; Hall *et al.* 2011; Li and Semedi 2021; Hirsch *et al.* 2022).

If this volume is to be used as a teaching resource, it is likely to be at the post-graduate level. The level of detail in each of the case studies, the assumed theoretical knowledge required to grasp the main argument of each chapter, and perhaps most importantly, the ways in which each chapter contributes to the notion of land having a social life of its own, all mitigate against insertion of this volume into lists of required reading for undergraduate students of development and social change. This is by no means a critique of the volume, which would make for a highly valuable resource at the core of a semester-length postgraduate seminar series. For serious researchers on land, particularly for those who tend to treat land as a less than complicated object, the volume provides a great deal of food for thought on some of land's unchallenged or assumed meanings.

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