

**At the margins of a “development darling”: civil society, territory, and
development in Karen State, Myanmar**

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Abstract

This thesis explains development actors' role in making territory in the postcolonial world. From the vantage point of Karen State, Myanmar, where civil war has been a feature of everyday life for seventy years, I examine how partnerships between development actors and civil society actors transform socio-spatial relations. Here, civil society actors navigate the confluence of three processes that came to a head in the past decade: the adoption of civil society partnerships as development orthodoxy, an influx of development assistance into Myanmar, and contestations between state and rebel authorities in post-ceasefire Karen State. My approach is ethnographic, relational, and comparative, hinging on participant observation with two civil society organisations in Karen State, which I use to examine civil society actors in state/mixed-authority areas and rebel-controlled areas.

I argue that the potential of civil society actors to transform power relations is the contingent effect of relations between civil society actors, rebel and state authorities, and development actors in each locality. In Hpa-An, a state/mixed-authority area, civil society actors are caught in a power configuration I call *locked-in localism*. Their ability to articulate alternatives to the status quo is constrained by relations between place and power mapped by the state, which are reinforced by development actors. In contrast, in rebel areas, civil society actors are embedded in a configuration I call *transformative localism*, through which they exhibit the potential to remake relations between rebel authorities and war-affected civilians, by leveraging place-based relationships with development actors and rebel officials. Throughout, I understand Karen State as a product of its postcolonial history; as an ethnicised, contested area, marginal to historical processes of decolonisation and nation-building. These localities in Karen State, where war conditions everyday social processes, provide a foil to existing studies of civil society and development, which presume the existence of relatively coherent state-society relations. This thesis is thus an in-depth study of civil society on the margins of the postcolonial world, where state-society relations are fraught.

Furthermore, this thesis proposes a postcolonial approach to territory, that has thus far been underexplored in political geography. Political geographers recognise the European origins of the modern concept of territory, and how this spatial template has been imposed on postcolonial states to

ABSTRACT

disastrous effect. However, they underplay the existence of persistent conflicts between the Westphalian concept of territory and other forms of spatial ordering, and the role of non-state actors in this process. Using ethnographic material, I argue for conceiving of territory as the product of unequal encounters between state and non-state actors, colonisers and the colonised, which trigger new, hybrid configurations of power. Moreover, I contend that development is a central process by which territory is made in the postcolonial world. I see development as a process that creates solidarities, tensions, and contradictions between a range of disparate actors. In particular, I draw attention to civil society actors, who can use their positioning in the international development regime to assert their ambivalence towards dominant ideas of territory. Finally, a postcolonial approach also sheds light on the salience of “non-Westphalian” forces in making territory, particularly ethnicisation and rebellion. A relational approach to space, attuned to both conflictual and cooperative relations between actors, is crucial to understanding territory in this way.

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List of abbreviations

ARSA	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
BGF	Border Guard Force
BSCA	Bright Stars Community Academy
CUREC	Central University Research Ethics Committee
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organisation
EU	European Union
GAD	General Administration Department
GN32	Green November 32
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFI	International Financial Institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
KED	Karen Education Department
KESAN	Karen Environmental and Social Action Network
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KNA	Karen National Association
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
KORD	Karen Organisation for Relief and Development
KPC	KNU/KNLA Peace Council
KPSN	Karen Peace Support Network
KRW	Karen Rivers Watch
KSNG	Karen Student Network Group
KWO	Karen Women's Organisation
KYO	Karen Youth Organisation
MCRB	Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business
MIMU	Myanmar Information Management Unit
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSF	Peace Support Fund/Paung Sie Facility
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SPPSC	Salween Peace Park Steering Committee
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UEC	Union Election Commission
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WWII	World War Two

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Setting the scene: civil society, life histories, and change

The first day I met Saw Tun Aung,¹ Hpa-An was in the thick of the rainy season. The town was flooded. I waded, sheepish and wet from the waist down, into the Bright Stars Community Academy (BSCA, a pseudonym), a community school for young people between 18 and 25. Tun Aung told me that the monsoon rains were particularly bad this year. Both the boys' and girls' dormitories—built for the majority of BSCA's students who live in remote areas in Karen State and beyond—were inundated. Tun Aung is the current principal and co-founder of the school. When he drives me back to my guesthouse, I ask if he likes his job. 'Like? Weird question,' he says, 'it's very difficult, but it is also my dream' (fieldnotes, 20 Aug 2018). Over the next four months, I sense Tun Aung's passion for his work, but also a deep frustration. By 2018, four cohorts of students had graduated from BSCA's two-year programme. Tun Aung tells me that he is disappointed that many students do not go on to 'community-serving' roles; many end up in the offices of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), not in the field. He was sympathetic—he knew students had to support their families—yet he hoped that students would chart their own path instead of becoming a cog in the machinery of international development, which has expanded across Myanmar over the past decade. BSCA itself is funded largely by grants from INGOs. When donors ask, Tun Aung is at pains to demonstrate his independence from both the Myanmar² state and the Karen National Union (KNU), to perform the impartiality that they expect of a "civil society" organisation. The KNU is a rebel actor representing the Karen ethnic group, which has been at war with Myanmar's central government since 1949.

Civil society actors in Karen State navigate a fragmented set of socio-spatial arrangements bequeathed by civil war. Since the 2012 ceasefire between the state and the KNU, Karen State is often categorised into state-controlled areas, KNU-controlled areas, and mixed-authority areas, where

¹ Pseudonyms are used for all my interlocutors. However, I retained their original honorifics, and the original language of their name, be it English, Burmese, or one of the two Karen languages (Sgaw or Pwo). For example, I use "Nan" (the female Pwo honorific) and a Burmese pseudonym for a Pwo Karen woman with a Burmese name. Even so, many go by names in two languages.

² In 1989, the military junta changed the name of the country from the colonial-era name "Burma" to "Myanmar." I use "Burma" to refer to the state pre-1989, and "Myanmar" to indicate the period thereafter.

authority is negotiated between the state, the KNU, and smaller armed groups (Jolliffe 2016; Karen Human Rights Group [KHRG] 2014; McCartan and Jolliffe 2016). Hpa-An city is state-controlled, but most of Karen State is under mixed-authority, including the natal villages of most of BSCA’s students. When I ask Tun Aung about his relationship with authorities, Tun Aung jokes that he says ‘yes, *Sayar*, yes’ to the state, and ‘yes, *Thera*, yes’ to the KNU, but that his true intent is to empower the people of Karen State themselves (fieldnotes, 26 Oct 2018). *Sayar* means “teacher” or “respected person” in Burmese, and *Thera* is its Sgaw Karen equivalent. To Tun Aung, civil society had to perform a delicate dance; appeasing both authorities to earn the latitude to serve communities who did not associate with either. Karen State’s population largely identifies as Karen, although there are also villagers who identify with other ethnic groups, including Mon, Bamar, and Shan. No official numbers exist for the number of Karen people in Myanmar, and estimates vary widely, ranging from 3 million to 10 million (J. M. Ferguson 2015; Thawngmung and Cho 2013).

Hence, Karen State is a marginal area heavily shaped by processes of ethnicisation and war. From this standpoint, I examine the extent to which civil society actors can transform power relations in postcolonial contexts, where ‘multiple and segmented sovereignties’ are a lived experience for many (Hansen and Stepputat 2006, 305). Over the past ten years, an unprecedented influx of development aid into Myanmar has caused the number of civil society organisations in state and mixed-authority areas of Karen State to rise tremendously, resulting in the formation of organisations such as BSCA. Yet, most literature debates the extent to which civil society organisations legitimise state rule, failing to account for how civil society leaders like Tun Aung find themselves straddling the worlds of international development and contested authority. This thesis therefore asks about the extent to which donor-funded civil society organisations can transform the fraught territorial arrangements characteristic of postcolonial states.

This thesis also juxtaposes Tun Aung’s experiences of civil society “inside” state/mixed-authority areas against the experiences of civil society actors on the “border”, who are active mainly in

KNU-controlled areas. In the context of Karen State, border organisations refer to organisations that work with communities in Karen State from logistics and management bases across Myanmar's 5,400km-long border with Thailand (Décobert 2016). The Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) fits this bill: from Thailand,³ the organisation supports war-affected communities in Mutraw, the largest contiguous KNU-controlled area, where tens of thousands of people have never been governed by a state (Falla 1991; Jolliffe 2016). Despite the 2012 ceasefire, clashes between the *Tatmadaw* (the Myanmar military) and the KNU's armed wing have displaced more than 2,000 of Mutraw's inhabitants since 2016 (see Karen Rivers Watch [KRW] 2016; Karen Peace Support Network [KPSN] 2018b; Karen News 2020). In this closed and militarised context, KESAN employs approximately thirty staff and dozens more volunteers who are deeply embedded in local communities. These networks offer KESAN the opportunity to transform power dynamics in an ordinarily inaccessible area. The existence of KESAN provides a counterpoint to the assumption, held by scholars, that associational life is impossible in the context of war (Korf 2005).

Hence, BSCA and KESAN serve as case studies for civil society in state/mixed-authority areas and rebel areas respectively. Through the use of participant observation at each organisation, this thesis asks how social relations particular to each locality shape the transformative potential of civil society. An ethnographic approach militates against simplistic readings of these social relations. Just as Saw Tun Aung struggled to communicate with donors, so too KESAN staff did not move seamlessly between 'aidland' (Mosse 2011) and the lifeworlds of Mutraw's communities. Since the 2012 ceasefire, donors have shunned border organisations for being rebel sympathisers (Décobert 2020). By contrast, KESAN staff argue that working with the KNU is necessary for access to war-affected communities. Even so, they say their job is to keep the KNU in check, not to be sycophants. Ethnographic research sheds light on these points of conflict between development actors, authorities, and civil society actors.

³ For security reasons, I will not disclose the exact location of these border organisations. KESAN is not a pseudonym, as I have the organisation's consent to use their name in this thesis.

Furthermore, ethnographic research also throws up questions about how relationships between border organisations and war-affected communities are made possible by their location on the Thai-Myanmar border. When I first met Saw Hti Klo at KESAN's office in Thailand, his familiarity with foreign researchers was clear. Hti Klo spoke eloquently about KESAN's desire to engage with indigenous movements elsewhere (fieldnotes, 6 Aug 2018). Several months later, in Mutraw, I watched Hti Klo address more than a hundred people in Sgaw Karen, gathered to discuss the direction of a large-scale peacebuilding and natural resource governance initiative (fieldnotes, 3 Apr 2019). My colleagues were translators and travellers. They spent weeks in KNU areas, moving between villages, working with local collaborators, before returning to the office to translate what they had learned into a format palatable to donors.

Another key theme of this thesis is the extent to which civil society actors on the “border” and on the “inside” engage in struggles over what it means to be Karen. There are few formal links between civil society organisations on the “inside” and on the “border”, although both conduct activities in Karen State. When I asked a Karen friend, who works in a border organisation, what she thought of civil society on the “inside”, she said: ‘we have the same goals, but we have different sufferings’ (fieldnotes, 4 March 2019). Her words have stayed with me ever since. I heard both Saw Hti Klo and Saw Tun Aung speak passionately about their desire for peace, justice, and community in Karen State. Both Karen men have aspirations incompatible with the assumption, widely held by development actors, that civil society actors should be impartial towards state and rebel actors. Yet their experiences of “suffering” differ. Hti Klo, who grew up inside KNU areas, was displaced several times during the Karen civil war. Hti Klo speaks Sgaw Karen, but not Burmese. In contrast, Tun Aung grew up in a state-controlled Hpa-An, speaking Pwo Karen at home. In state schools, he learned to suppress his Karen identity and fear the KNU. Their experiences are testament to the multidimensionality of war: Hti Klo speaks about the civil war in terms of encounters with violence; Tun Aung emphasises the suppression of his ethnic identity, his agency, and his dreams. Their different “sufferings” are also

testament to the internal diversity of a group of people who today consider themselves Karen; a category formed, hardened, and struggled over since colonial times. As leaders of civil society organisations and recipients of development aid, Hti Klo and Tun Aung have—at least in theory—the resources to challenge the primordialist ethnic scripts utilised by the KNU and the Myanmar state. This raises questions about the extent to which these challenges can materialise within the relations that each civil society actor is embedded in.

This thesis is about people like Saw Hti Klo and Saw Tun Aung, who are part of civil society in Karen State, or who at least have been assigned this role by the development actors they receive funding from. It is about the dilemmas they face in their daily lives, and the extent to which these are produced by tensions and ambivalences characteristic of the postcolonial world. The rest of this chapter shows how these opening vignettes—about Tun Aung and Hti Klo; BSCA and KESAN; the “border” and the “inside”—provide a window into larger issues. The next section lays out the contributions that this thesis makes to studies of territory, civil society, and war. Then, I explain the impetus for this thesis: the influx of development aid into Myanmar over the last decade. Border organisations were the only donor-funded organisations operating in Karen State for decades, until Myanmar’s status as a “development darling” created a new civil society landscape in state/mixed-authority areas. Yet the socio-spatial relations created by this aid influx remain understudied. The introduction concludes with an outline of subsequent chapters.

1.2 Aims and research questions

My research examines the extent to which civil society actors transform socio-spatial dynamics in war-affected areas, through partnerships with development actors, and in relation to state and rebel authorities. By development actors, I refer to donor agencies, international financial institutions (IFIs), and INGOs united in their role in regulating the flow of development assistance, from programming done by donor governments, down to the level of project implementation.⁴ Using ethnographic methods, I explore how civil society actors situate themselves within fragmented political arrangements, while paying attention to the ambivalences that inhere in their relationships with others. On the premise that Karen State emblematises the fraught state-society relations that characterise postcolonial contexts (Baruah 2007; Gupta 1995; Hansen and Stepputat 2001b; 2006), this thesis seeks a postcolonial approach to the concept of territory. I respond to calls for scholars to question hegemonic conceptualisations of space inherited from geography’s disciplinary history (Hart 2018; Jazeel 2014; Radcliffe 2017), as well as more specific injunctions to excavate understandings of territory that are ‘made visible once the spatial autonomy of the national form is itself provincialised’ (Jazeel and Legg 2019, 21; Halvorsen 2018).

Political geographers recognise the European origins of the modern concept of territory, its parochiality, and how this spatial template has been imposed on postcolonial nation-states to disastrous effect (e.g. Agrawal and Kumar 2017; Gregory 2004; Simpson 2019). However, they underplay the existence of conflicts between the Eurocentric concept of territory and other forms of spatial ordering, and the role of non-state actors (including civil society) in these conflicts, particularly outside the Western world. At the same time, literature in anthropology and area studies draws attention to non-state actors’ role in configuring the spatial extent of power, under the rubric of territorialisation. This

⁴ I recognise that Karen State receives aid flows from non-OECD donors, such as China, India, and Thailand (see Carr 2018) and a growing academic interest in “non-traditional” donors (e.g. Mawdsley 2012; Tan-Mullins et al. 2010). However, I focus on Western donors for two reasons. Firstly, non-OECD donors often bypass civil society in their implementation of projects. Secondly, information about non-OECD donors is scarce.

literature shows how state actors' attempts at claiming and reordering marginal spaces are met by counter-territorial forces, that render state-drawn maps incomplete and hollow (e.g. Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Isager and Ivarsson 2002). This thesis builds on the idea that territorial and counter-territorial forces coexist in continual, irreducible tension. In so doing, it uses the territorialisation literature and my own ethnographic engagements to reread the concept of territory itself.

This thesis contributes to existing literature in political geography by proposing a postcolonial conceptualisation of territory. I propose conceptualizing territory as inherently conflictual; assembled through agonistic relations between various actors. Firstly, I contend that, in much of the postcolonial world, territory-making has been a conflictual process, from colonial times to the present day. In Karen State, frictions between the British colonial government, Bamar nationalists, and the Karen elite set the stage for the Karen civil war, and the subsequent organisation of space into areas controlled by the state, the KNU, and areas of mixed authority. Secondly, I argue that development is a central process by which territory is made in the postcolonial world today. Development assembles a range of actors with competing agendas, including civil society actors, state actors, and donors, thereby producing tensions between them. This is clear in Karen State, where an unprecedented influx of development aid into state- and mixed-authority areas over the past decade has led to the emergence of civil society actors. These civil society actors engage with existing state and rebel authorities to varying degrees, while seeking remake sociospatial relations on their own terms. Thirdly, this thesis contends that attempts to impose a Westphalian conception of territory are continually met by countervailing forces. I focus on the process of ethnicisation—or the means by which Karen ethnicity is constructed, performed, and struggled over—and its implications for territory-making. While ethnicisation is rarely accounted for in existing accounts of territory, which tend to assume liberal state-society relations, states, rebels, and civil society actors in Karen State continually struggle over what it means to be Karen. Overall, this thesis portrays territory-making in the postcolonial world as an ongoing, incomplete process; the contingent product of conflictual relations between actors convened in the pursuit of development.

At the same time, this thesis also advances a postcolonial perspective on civil society. Civil society can be a nebulous term, encompassing a range of actors that mediate between the state, market, and family. Here, I am specifically interested in civil society actors integrated into the international regime as local partners. A focus on partnerships reflects the emergence of the good governance agenda among donors in the 1990s. Donors spurred on the growth of so-called civil society organisations (often NGOs) in recipient countries, where donors transposed this model of associational life onto postcolonial contexts (Bebbington 1997; Frewer 2013; Mercer 2002; Mohan 2002). At the same time, I am less interested in debating the mismatch between “original” meanings of civil society in Western political thought and other, non-Western forms of associational life, than I am in the social relations that unfold when subjects position themselves as civil society actors in the postcolonial world. How do individuals like Saw Tun Aung and Saw Hti Klo begin to understand themselves as part of civil society, and how do their relationships with state authorities, rebel authorities, and local communities shift as a result?

This is an account of civil society that takes the contested nature of postcolonial statehood seriously. Scholars tend to explore the extent to which civil society manufactures consent for the state (e.g. Amoore and Langley 2004; Buttigieg 1995; Mitlin et al. 2007), while overlooking relations between civil society and non-state actors that challenge the state’s authority, such as rebel groups (Arjona 2015; 2016; Mampilly 2011). This relates to a broader, mistaken tendency to see war as solely violent, extinguishing all other forms of social life, and stripping away the agency of those who experience it. By conceiving of war as a socio-spatial condition, that transforms but does not eliminate various forms of associational life (Lubkemann 2008; Thiranagama 2011), this thesis hopes to arrive at a fuller understanding of civil society in postcolonial areas where conflictual state-society relations are the norm. And by drawing attention to how civil society actors interpret abiding processes of ethnicisation, this thesis explores the workings of civil society in contexts where one’s relationship with the state is refracted through ethnic identities that have been struggled over since colonial times (Daley 2006; McDuire-Ra 2011; Wouters 2020).

An anti-essentialist conception of space, that sees space as the product of power-laden interrelations between actors, is central to this endeavour (Massey 2005). I see development, war, and ethnicisation as converging processes that create varying configurations of power across Karen State. The term “Karen State” itself deserves elaboration. On one hand, Karen State could refer to the administrative subdivision of Myanmar drawn by the state (or “Kayin State”); on the other, it could refer to the territory claimed by the KNU (or “Kawthoolei”). This thesis explains these contested definitions in **Chapter 4**, although throughout, I continue to use “Karen State” to refer to venues where Karen ethnicity and territory are co-constituted in the Myanmar context. Karen State, however defined, is hardly a uniform area. Rather, the layered and inherently contradictory processes of war and development produce different effects in each locality; that is, spaces where social processes and lived experiences intersect, to produce particularity, contingency, and difference (Appadurai 1996; Massey 1994; Mosse 1997).

This thesis discusses two localities in Karen State using a methodological strategy I call “translocal ethnography” (**Chapter 3**). These localities—Hpa-An, a state/mixed-authority area, and Mutraw, a rebel-authority area exclusively governed by the KNU—were selected to convey the diversity of socio-spatial relations that emerged out of the Karen civil war. An ethnographic approach allows me to supplement my analysis of state and rebel territory in **Chapter 4** with detailed explorations of civil society actors’ attempts to reformat territory in **Chapter 5** and **Chapter 6**, corresponding to Hpa-An and Mutraw respectively. Civil society actors in both localities navigate the overlapping agendas of development actors, state authorities, and rebel authorities, albeit in different ways, and with different outcomes. In **Chapter 7**, I defamiliarise the disparate paths that civil society has taken in each locality, by asking: how did the divide between civil society on the “inside” and on the “border” emerge? What are the implications of the border/inside divide for ethnicisation, state-making, and war? The following questions guide my thesis as a whole:

- (1) How do civil society actors in Karen State engage with the state authorities, rebel authorities, and development actors active in the locality?
- (2) How do civil society actors challenge or conform to existing conceptions of territory held by these dominant actors?
- (3) To what extent can civil society actors challenge dominant socio-spatial relations in a war-affected context?

Above all, I seek to disassemble territory into its constituent relations between actors, including civil society actors, state actors, rebel actors, development actors, and local communities. Such relations can be cooperative, but they can also be highly conflictual, particularly from the standpoint of the civil society actors whose ambivalence towards existing structures of power takes centre stage in this thesis. The next section elaborates on the influx of aid into Myanmar over the last decade. I query overly optimistic and monolithic accounts of the aid influx, that fail to account for how the social relations traversed by international development interact with war-affected localities.

1.3 Myanmar as “development darling”

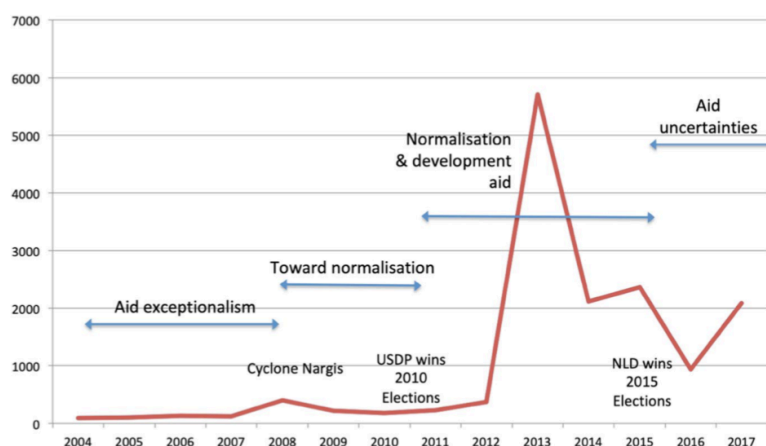


Figure 1. Development Assistance Committee (DAC) country aid commitments to Myanmar 2004-2017, USD 2016 (millions). Source: Décobert and Wells (2020, 301).

In the mid-2010s, various commentators called Myanmar the world’s newest “development darling”, due to an unprecedented inflow of aid into the country (Patteran 2014; Strefford 2015; see **Figure 1**). By then, Myanmar had been isolated from the international community for four decades. Between 1948, when Burma became an independent parliamentary democracy, and its 1962 military coup, Burma received substantial amounts of development assistance from Britain, Japan, China, and the United Nations (UN). However, in 1962, General Ne Win’s junta ceased most external engagements. In the 1970s and 1980s, in an attempt to confront the failure of Ne Win’s economic policies, Burma again began to accept sporadic forms of assistance (Holliday and Zaw Htet 2018). However, this attempt to shirk “pariah” status was short-lived. In 1988, when the Tatmadaw violently suppressed the “8888” democracy uprising, the Western world and multilateral institutions pushed Burma back into isolation. By the late 2000s, Myanmar received the least amount of development assistance of any of the UN-designated “least developed countries” (Ware 2012). All this while, the central state was fighting a

multi-fronted civil war against numerous rebel actors, including the KNU, many of which had amassed supporters and troops over decades.⁵

However, in 2010, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) was elected into power and began to pursue cautious economic and political reforms. As a result, donors once again began to consider Myanmar a worthy recipient of development aid. This sentiment was cemented by the 2012 ceasefire between the Myanmar state and the KNU; then considered the country's most belligerent rebel actor (D. Brenner 2019). The US Agency for International Development (USAID), for instance, reopened its mission in Myanmar in 2012, in support of the country's 'historic transition' from junta rule to democracy; civil war to ceasefires; state-led socialism to market capitalism (USAID 2020). Similarly, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) declared that Myanmar was at a 'decisive moment' in the same, threefold transition (DFID 2020). Many other OECD donors followed suit, using optimistic readings of recent events as reasons to channel development aid into the country (Décobert and Wells 2020; Loong 2019b).

Therefore, from 2012 onwards, Myanmar experienced marked increases in aid inflows from bilateral donors—besides the US and the UK, other OECD donors included Australia, Canada, Japan, Norway, and the European Union—and multilateral donors, including the UN and the World Bank. Compared to the \$355 million pledged to Myanmar in 2010, in 2016 alone Myanmar received \$1.53 billion in aid (World Bank 2018). This quantitative increase in the volume of aid was accompanied by a qualitative shift in the relationship between donors and the Myanmar government, which became increasingly willing to cooperate with one another since the 2015 election of the National League for Democracy (NLD) (Asia Foundation 2017). New offices were set up for aid agencies, international

⁵ Today, most of Myanmar's rebel actors are affiliated with an ethnic group. This includes the KNU, as well as the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP). However, until the 1980s, there were rebel actors that were not organised along ethnic lines, such as the Communist Party of Burma, which disbanded in 1988.

organisations, and INGOs that were making inroads into the country, many of which were on the lookout for local civil society partners.

1.3.1 The polarised politics of development aid

Even before the aid influx, the international community's attitudes to Myanmar were highly polarised. Metro (2011) refers to academics and activists who reject the legitimacy of the central government as "Burmaphiles", in opposition to "Myanmarites", who advocate engaging with the central government. Décobert (2016) applies the same dualism to development actors, even if most development actors in Myanmar share an interest in poverty reduction and democratisation. Burmaphiles are donors that fund border organisations and advocate sanctions as a critique of the Myanmar state. In contrast, Myanmarites hope to support the central government's efforts at reforms by engaging with it and expanding its legitimacy. They see the Burmaphile perspective as narrow-minded, stubborn, and anachronistic at best, and as empowering insurgents and detrimental to the unity of the Myanmar state at worst. The balance between these perspectives has tilted considerably over the years.

The Burmaphile perspective dominated among donors between 1962 and 2011, when Myanmar was an 'aid orphan' (Duffield 2008, 6). Western donors maintained aid sanctions to pressure the junta to cede power, according to the view that 'progress in economic, social, cultural, minority or other arenas is not possible without prior political resolution' (Steinberg 2007, 228). At the same time, many Western donors supported civil society organisations in exile, clustered in Thai border towns such as Mae Sot. These organisations, established in the early 1990s, were led by non-Bamar groups protesting the ongoing civil war, and democracy activists who had fled to the border after the 8888 uprising. A significant humanitarian economy supporting refugees, activists, and diasporic groups became an outlet for donors who held a "Burmaphilic" perspective on political change. In turn, this led to the 'emergence of a pioneer civil society' centred around a desire to change Burmese politics, albeit based on the border, rather than in Myanmar itself (Horstmann 2015, 38).

The lively civil society scene on the border stood in stark contrast to a stranglehold on political life in central Burma/Myanmar (Fink 2001; Prasse-Freeman 2012; Skidmore 2004; Wiles 2015). Whereas the junta suppressed expressions of non-Bamar ethnic identity, expressions of non-Bamar ethnicity flourished in Thai border towns and the refugee camps. Although there are border organisations associated with other non-Bamar ethnic groups—such as the Shan and the Kachin—expressions of Karen ethnicity were among the most visible, as Karen populations dominated near the Thai-Myanmar border.⁶ According to the historian Martin Smith (1999, 391), travellers could see an ‘alternative vision of Karen society’ along the border in the 1990s, where the ‘flame of the Karen rebellion was kept alive.’ Karen migrant and refugee children attended schools teaching history from an ethnonationalist perspective, and border organisations disseminated reports documenting the ill-effects of war on Karen populations to the wider world.

However, the balance between Burmaphile and Myanmarite perspectives began to tilt in the late 2000s. In 2008, Cyclone Nargis resulted in a death toll of 138,000 in the Irrawaddy Delta, precipitating an increase in development assistance. Aid to Myanmar increased from US\$196 million to US\$355 million between 2007 and 2010.⁷ However, this tentative increase was dwarfed by a much larger spike in aid commitments between 2011 and 2015. Between 2010 and 2015, the Myanmar government managed a total of US\$13.7 billion in aid; a nine-fold increase from the previous five-year period (Carr 2018, 6-7). Why the sea-change since 2010? That year, the USDP assumed power in Myanmar first general election in twenty years,⁸ pursuing reforms that put the Tatmadaw in a ‘caretaking’ rather than a coercive role, on the country’s supposed path to democracy (Egreteau 2016). In 2015, the election of the NLD further positioned Myanmar as a legitimate recipient country.

⁶ Delang (2003) estimates that there are about 500,000 people living in Thailand that identify as Karen (see also Rajah 2008; Walker 2001), however the Thai Karen (as they are often known) are not the focus of this thesis.

⁷ Many consider Cyclone Nargis to be a turning point in Myanmar’s aid landscape (Dale and Samuel-Nakka 2018; Holliday and Zaw Htet 2018; Selth 2008). However, development assistance in this period was directed towards the Irrawaddy Delta, rather than to the ethnic states. In this light, I see changes since 2010 as more significant.

⁸ Although the NLD government won the 1990 election, the military junta refused to accept these results. The 1990 election was the country’s first multi-party election since 1960. The NLD boycotted the 2010 elections.

Moreover, the trajectory of Myanmar's protracted civil war also appeared to change course. The 2012 KNU ceasefire was followed by Myanmar's first multilateral ceasefire, the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), in 2015. For the first time, the KNU committed to participating in nationwide peace talks. Donors embraced a confluence of changes—moves towards democratisation within the central state apparatus, and the cessation of ethnic violence in peripheral areas—causing the Myanmarite perspective to predominate in the 2010s.

1.3.2 Civil society, ethnicity and war

Ceasefires and reforms not only shored up celebratory narratives about Myanmar's political transition; they also introduced a new form of associational life to state-controlled areas: civil society. Associational life flourished during the colonial and post-independence years, and indeed many organisations contributed to mobilising for Burma's independence (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007). However, freedoms of expression and association were curtailed after the 1962 coup. In a well-known statement, Steinberg (1997) wrote that not only did civil society die under the military junta, 'more accurately, it was murdered.' The tide began to turn in the early 2010s. In 2011, the USDP introduced the Law Relating to Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession, permitting peaceful assemblies for the first time in decades under the condition that participants apply for approval from the township police. The law was amended in 2014 to oblige authorities to grant permission unless there were 'valid reasons' to deny it (Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business [MCRB] 2014). In 2014, the USDP developed the Association Registration Law in consultation with existing civil society organisations, which made the registration of associations voluntary (Christian Aid 2017).

Therefore, the same 2011 reforms that triggered an aid influx to Myanmar were accompanied by loosened laws on civic freedoms, stimulating the growth of civil society organisations in state/mixed-authority areas structured around agendas familiar to development actors, such as good governance, gender, livelihoods, and health. The magnitude and scope of civil society activity grew in areas where

the state had previously suppressed many overt forms of association. Fink's (2001, 187-9) ethnographic account of Myanmar under military rule portrays teashops and bathrooms as spaces where students could conduct political discussions under the cover of ordinary sociality. My own research, two decades later, was conducted in very different spaces. I conducted interviews in offices in Yangon and Hpa-An, with signs on the door proclaiming the presence of this or that organisation. These offices were often littered with paraphernalia (often in both English and Burmese) printed with donors' logos, declaring civil society actors' adherence to aspirations for peace and democracy, that were once expressed only in private.

The civil society boom in Myanmar is evident in the sheer amount of grey literature that exists on the issue. In the 2010s, development actors produced reports that documented the growth of civil society and typologised civil society organisations, for the purpose of guiding donors towards suitable partnership arrangements (Christian Aid 2017; Kramer 2011; MCRB 2014; Nilar Myine 2017; Petrie and South 2013). However, these reports often take a national scale approach, although they sometimes note that civil society groups associated with non-Bamar groups tend not to engage with civil society groups working with Bamar communities (Petrie and South 2013, 19). This approach does not give due attention to civil society dynamics specific to war-affected areas, and tends to give short shrift to civil society organisations operating outside the state's remit. Recall that in Karen State, civil society is not a new phenomenon, insofar as border organisations have channelled donor funds to war-affected communities since the 1990s; what is new is the emergence of civil society organisations in areas where state power previously consigned associations to secrecy. Hence, Myanmar's recent aid influx precipitated a dual civil society landscape in Karen State; one on the "border" and one on the "inside."

At first glance, it is possible to discern three features that distinguish civil society on the "border" and civil society on the "inside". Firstly, civil society organisations on the "inside" conduct activities in state/mixed-authority areas, whereas border organisations conduct their activities mainly in KNU areas. Secondly, there is the seemingly self-evident fact that civil society on the "inside"

operates in state space, whereas border organisations are located *on the border*. Border organisations are often unregistered in Thailand, where they are based, and negotiate access to war-affected areas with the KNU. Their relationship to state power is the obverse of that of civil society organisations operating within the Myanmar state’s remit. Finally, as the “Myanmarite” perspective gains traction over the “Burmaphile” perspective, civil society organisations on the “inside” appear to be growing at a much faster rate than border organisations. The Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), a UN-backed information repository for the development sector in Myanmar, has documented this change. In 2015, MIMU reported the existence of 61 organisations with active projects in state-defined Kayah State, including INGOs, NGOs, and UN organisations. 15 of these were border organisations. In 2017, MIMU reported 98 organisations altogether, of which 14 were border-based. In just two years, the number of organisations receiving development funding—including civil society organisations—grew by a third, while the number of border organisations remained nearly the same (MIMU 2015; 2017).⁹ In essence, the aid influx appears to privilege civil society actors on the “inside” over those on the “border”. One wonders how this affects overarching processes of ethnicisation and war that have shaped the lived experiences of the area’s inhabitants for decades. This thesis takes on this task, which remains as yet understudied.

⁹ Due to the nature of MIMU’s relationship with the Myanmar government, MIMU may not have full information about the border organisations. Nonetheless this finding broadly corroborates with my observations. Few, if any, border organisations that have been set up since 2011, whereas nearly all civil society organisations in state/mixed-authority areas are less than a decade old.

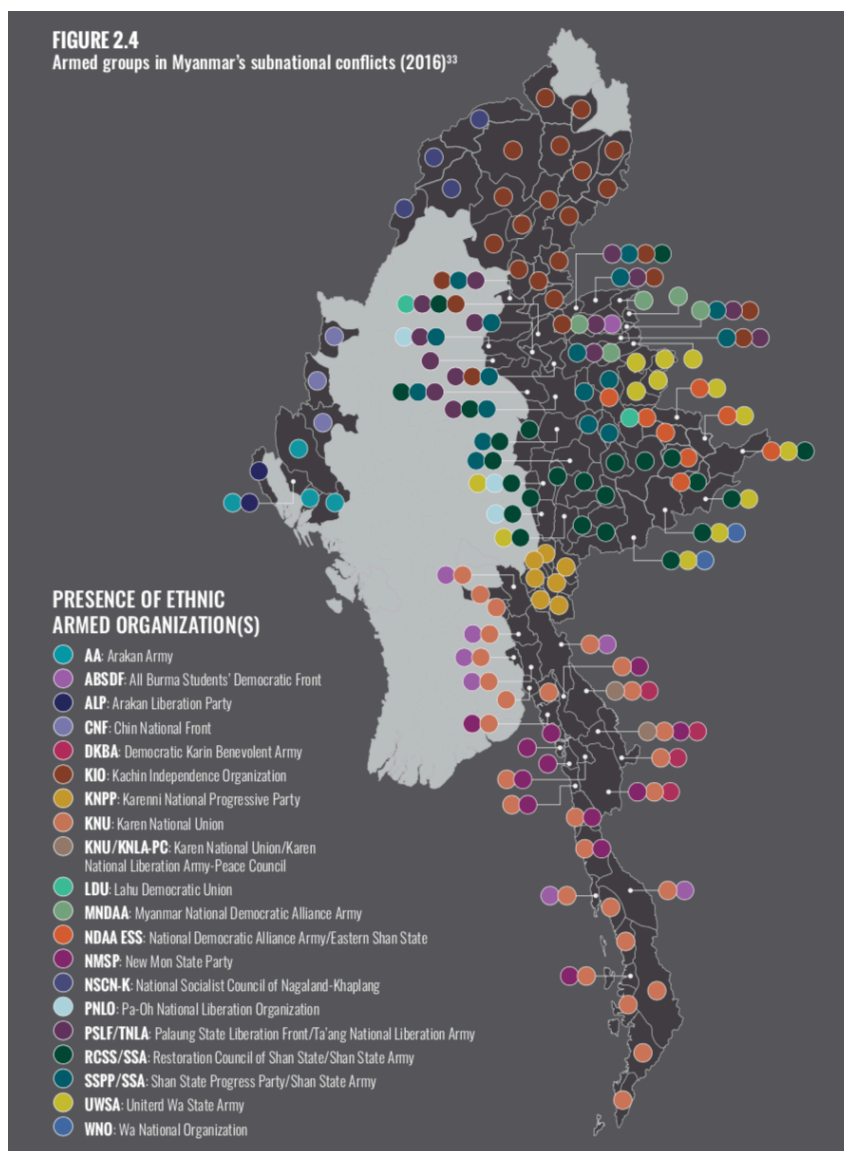


Figure 2. Presence of ethnic armed organisations in Myanmar. Source: Burke et al. (2017, 14)

Indeed, donors' declarations that Myanmar was ready to 'defy [the] weight of [its] history' (Hookway 2016) seem dubious from the perspective of Myanmar's war-affected areas. Despite the 2012 KNU ceasefire and the 2015 NCA, war continues to be a facet of everyday life for Karen State's inhabitants. The Karen ceasefires have been marred by recurring clashes, including significant episodes of armed violence in 2016, 2018, and 2020 that displaced more than 2,000 people (Karen Rivers Watch [KRW] 2016; Karen Peace Support Network [KPSN] 2018; Karen News 2020). Whereas Karen

villagers expected the withdrawal of Tatmadaw forces after the ceasefires, most have instead witnessed the reinforcement of Tatmadaw bases, heightening their sense of insecurity (KHRG 2017). I use “war-affected” rather than “post-war” or “post-conflict” to recognise the ongoing effects of war on non-Bamar people. This includes Karen people, as well as many others who encounter a litany of rebel actors in their day-to-day life (**Figure 2**). Furthermore, I recognise that conflict is an inherent feature of social relations; hence, there is no such thing as a “post-conflict” period (see also Barkawi 2016). The question is the extent to which this irreducible conflict can be transformed into agonistic relations, that offer opportunities for peace and reconciliation (Askins and Mason 2015; Björkdahl and Selimovic 2016; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Still, I caution against an uncritical acceptance of the “Burmaphile” perspective, which portrays Myanmar government reforms as mere window dressing. Thawngmung (2012) points out that the KNU and border organisations have had an outsized influence on scholarly understandings of Karen ethnicity. The growth of civil society organisations in state/mixed-authority areas allows many “other” Karen—Thawngmung’s term for Karen people who are somewhat removed from the KNU’s brand of ethnonationalism—to acquire resources and assume positions of power. Thawngmung’s work also cautions against an either-or perspective on rebellion. Just as this thesis explores an uneasy relationship between civil society actors on the “inside”, the state, and the KNU, might nuance be extended to an analysis of civil society actors in KNU areas who are assumed to side with the rebels? Might an attention to ambivalence and nuance allow for an alternative conception of ethnicity that lends itself to solidarity and peace, rather than war? With peace talks stalled and donors’ hopes for Myanmar faltering (Décobert and Wells 2020), these are salient and urgent questions in the Myanmar context.

Furthermore, by putting ethnicisation and war at the heart of this thesis, I hope to use Karen State as a window into other postcolonial contexts where struggles over development occur along similar fault lines. These are contexts in which the social relations generated by international development cannot be isolated from processes of ethnicisation and rebellion, which are themselves

legacies of colonialism. From this standpoint, this thesis builds towards a postcolonial approach to the study of civil society and territory.

1.4 Thesis outline

This thesis comprises eight chapters: an introduction, a conceptual framework and literature review, a review of methodology, a historical survey, three empirical chapters, and a conclusion. **Chapter 1**, the introduction, has set out the aims of this thesis and how an influx of development aid into Myanmar motivates my research.

Chapter 2, ‘*Conceptualising development, civil society, and territory amid war*,’ establishes the contributions of this thesis to scholarly debates. I first argue that whereas poststructuralist-oriented postdevelopment approaches illuminate the need for development to be understood as a question of power, they underplay the complexity of power relations traversed by international development. Instead, I argue for a relational approach to development attuned to the ambivalent position of civil society actors within current development orthodoxies (Hart 2001; 2002; 2010). Then, I explain that a relational approach to post-war development requires transcending existing understandings of war in development studies. Existing literature, which largely understands war and development as opposing forces, overlooks forms of associational life in war-affected areas. Drawing on the anthropologists Lubkemann (2008) and Thiranagama (2011; 2013), and the geographer Korf (2005, 2006), I argue for understanding war as a socio-spatial condition. Finally, I consider how the notion of territory illuminates the manner in which development, civil society, and war intersect. I argue that scholars have often held apart political geographic approaches to territory (e.g. Brighenti 2010; Elden 2013) and anthropological approaches to territorialisation (e.g. Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Isager and Ivarsson 2002), yet bringing these approaches together provides for a fuller understanding of territory in the postcolonial world. I also situate my research within scholars’ calls for a postcolonial approach to various spatial concepts, such as territory (Jazeel and Legg 2019; Kumar and Roy 2019).

Chapter 3, *‘Methodology: a relational comparison of development’s territories,’* shows how my research design reflects a relational approach to development. I explain how this thesis hinges on a relational comparison (Hart 2006; 2018) of two war-affected localities in Karen State: Hpa-An and the Thai border/Mutraw. To provide a detailed picture of the power relations within and across these localities, I use a methodological practice that I term “translocal ethnography.” This methodology is related to—but distinct from—existing calls for global and multi-sited ethnography. In the second half of this chapter, I walk the reader through ten months of fieldwork between August 2018 and May 2019, much of which was spent as a volunteer-researcher in two civil society organisations. I explain the issues of positionality, access, and ethics I encountered while conducting participant observation and interviews, paying particular attention how the comparative, translocal context of my fieldwork complicated my relationships with research participants.

Chapter 4, *‘Making localities: the socio-spatial constitution of ethnicity and war in Karen State,’* provides an analysis of historical and anthropological literature on Karen ethnicity and the Burmese nation-state, from which I make three arguments. Firstly, I contend that in this context, ethnicisation and war have been set in an interlocking relationship from colonial times to the present day. Secondly, I demonstrate the manner in which ambivalences and internal contradictions within Karen identity are colonial legacies. I show that Karen identity is less homogenous than often presumed, and that intra-ethnic struggles over what it means to be Karen are part of a broader processes of ethnicisation. Finally, I consider the manner in which Karen identity has been territorialised through the making of “Kayin State” (according to the Burma/Myanmar state) and “Kawthoolei” (according to the KNU). This sets the stage for asking: how do civil society actors negotiate these dominant territorial templates?

Henceforth, Chapter 5 and 6 offer two portraits of development’s territories in the present day, drawing from my fieldwork in Hpa-An and Mutraw respectively. **Chapter 5**, *‘Locked-in localism: civil society in the context of mixed-authority’*, is about civil society in state/mixed-authority areas of Karen

State. Drawing on the life histories of BSCA students, I begin by explaining how young people feel marginalised by both the state and the KNU. In this context, I argue that the nascent civil society landscape in Hpa-An offers young people the chance to convert their experiences of dual marginalisation into aspirations for change, in a manner that was not possible within other, preexisting formats for associational life. Then, I show how these aspirations materialise through an analysis of the day-to-day activities of students and staff at BSCA. I draw particular attention to how the word “community” (an emic term) is mobilised by these actors, to signal an affinity with villagers living under conditions of mixed-authority, who have been neglected by the state and the KNU. However, I then I explore how the formats for political action proscribed by development actors and the state prevent civil society actors from articulating their aspirations. In state/mixed-authority areas, I argue that civil society actors are trapped in a power configuration that I call *locked-in localism*. This term indicates that civil society actors remain trapped within the unequal relations between civilians and other dominant actors fomented over years of civil war.

Chapter 6, *‘Transformative localism: civil society in the context of rebel authority’* provides a parallel snapshot of civil society activity in Mutraw, a KNU area, where border organisations operate outside the confines of a state. The chapter begins with a historical discussion, to reflect how current relations between civil society actors, development actors, and the KNU are an artefact of the evolution of the Karen civil war. Although the KNU leadership marginalised civil society for decades, a crisis in the KNU’s legitimacy resulted in the emergence of the border organisations. With the support of development actors and the approval of the KNU, border organisations formed close, trusting relationships with war-affected communities in KNU areas. However, a second crisis in legitimacy, precipitated by the KNU ceasefires, resulted in the border organisations distancing themselves from the KNU leadership. Many border organisations felt that the ceasefires made clear that the KNU leadership did not, after all, value the voices of civilians and civil society. This sets the stage for the present-day relations between civil society actors, development actors, and the KNU. Through an analysis of the

Salween Peace Park, a peacebuilding and natural resource governance initiative spanning more than 5,400km², implemented with the involvement of six border organisations, local KNU officials, and representatives from every village tract in the area, I show how border organisations are attempting to institute a form of ‘non-dominating power’ (Pearce 2013). In so doing, border organisations harness the localised relations they are embedded in to transform the power relations that drive civil war; a power configuration that I term *transformative localism*.

The previous two chapters show how development assistance created a dual civil society landscape, comprised of border organisations that built extensive networks since the 1990s, largely (but not exclusively) in KNU areas, and nascent civil society organisations on the “inside”, with a stronger reach in state/mixed-authority areas. In **Chapter 7**, ‘*The “border” and the “inside”: ethnicity, war, and the borderworld*’, I put these portrayals of civil society activity into conversation, to ask: why do these landscapes of civil society activity—on the “border” and on the “inside”—remain separate, and how does the border/inside divide influence Karen ethnicisation? Using the concept of the ‘borderworld’ (Sadan 2013), I explain why, in spite of a rush to fund civil society actors in Myanmar, border organisations remain staunchly based across the Thai-Myanmar border. I argue that by harnessing relations with rebel authorities and development actors outside the purview of the Myanmar state, border organisations can broach “sensitive” issues (another emic term) that cut to the heart of the state’s ethnocentrism. At the same time, I argue that while actors on both sides of the border/inside divide understand their counterparts as differing in their access to resources, risks, and opportunities, they also understand them as co-ethnics, whose circumstances they wish to understand better. Yet, my research shows that development actors tend to diminish prospects for co-ethnic solidarity across the border/inside divide. Development actors’ relative naïveté regarding intra-ethnic dynamics, the salience of ethnic identity to Karen populations, and the ethnocentrism of the Myanmar state, cause them to produce an *ethnocentric power complex* that reinforces the border/inside divide.

Chapter 8, '*Conclusion: development's territories*' sums up the contributions of this thesis. I begin by reflecting on events relevant to the Karen civil war since the conclusion of my fieldwork: Myanmar's first election since the NLD's landmark victory, the shifting stance of the KNU towards party politics, and uncertainties over the future of development assistance to Myanmar. Then, I take stock of how this thesis answers its driving question: to what extent can civil society transform the socio-spatial relations that drive civil war? The third section conceptualises *development's territories* according to my findings in previous chapters. I show how, in much of the postcolonial world, territory is the product of conflicts between state and non-state actors, assembled in the service of international development. Finally, I close with the contributions of this thesis to postcolonial perspectives on development, civil society, and war.

Chapter 2 – Conceptualising development, civil society, and territory amid war

2.1 Introduction

This thesis seeks to understand how partnerships between civil society and development actors can transform the socio-spatial relations in war-affected areas, using ongoing transformations in Karen State as a vantage point. This chapter sets out the conceptual stakes of this discussion. It positions my thesis within literature on development, war, and territory, in human geography and critical development studies. Throughout, I consider how my understanding of Karen State—as emblematic of postcolonial statehood—sits against predominant (if implicit) assumptions about state-society relations in existing literature. There are three sections in this chapter, which address development and civil society, war, and territory respectively. In each, I review literature that informs this thesis, while building up to a conceptual framework that will be mobilised throughout: an investigation of *development's territories*.

The first section discusses existing literature on the political geography of development. Research increasingly understands development as a relational process. Although international development was initially conceived of as something “done” by one state to another, the rise of multilateral institutions, local and international NGOs, and private interests within international development has favoured approaches that situate development within a field of power relations. Such an approach draws on poststructuralist, postcolonial, and neo-Marxist approaches to conceptualise the state as part of—rather than presiding over—ongoing power relations. Furthermore, whereas literature in the early 1990s tended to romanticise civil society involvement in development, scholars increasingly argue for understanding civil society as part of a dynamic relationship between state and society. A normative, liberal, and idealistic understanding of civil society has been challenged by a perspective that shows how civil society is circumscribed by wider social, economic, and political processes. Myanmar barely features in this literature, because of the country’s history of being a ‘aid orphan’ (Duffield 2008, 6), however the recent influx of development aid into the country begs the question: to what extent are these insights applicable to Karen State?

The next section shows that few theorists have brought a relational understanding of space to bear on development in war-affected contexts. I argue that this oversight is the result of two presumptions implicit in the development literature, albeit with significant exceptions. Firstly, existing literature presumes that war and development are oppositional, counterposed forces. As a result, the development literature does not seriously consider war-affected contexts in which state authority challenged by rebel actors. Even so, literature on rebel governance provides fodder for understanding how development can intersect with the fragmented, contested, and hybrid political orders that characterise civil war. Secondly, existing literature presumes that war precludes the growth of civil society. However this rests on a limited understanding of war as violence. Instead, I argue for understanding war as social-spatial condition that alters—but does not cancel out—“normal” processes of social reproduction. I therefore set war, civil society, and development in a dynamic, open, and spatialised relationship.

The final section argues that a geographically grounded exploration of the dynamic relations between civil society, development actors, and state/rebel actors requires a reinterpretation of territory. I argue that existing literature on territory in political geography—which I classify into “governmental” and “globalisation” approaches—tends to emphasise the European origins of territory and its centrality to the modern nation-state. I compare this literature to literature on territorialisation, from area studies and anthropology, which focuses on the frayed ends of the state’s spatial reach. I show how literature on territorialisation can inform the concept of territory itself. This is where development comes in: I see development as a dynamic contact zone between the North and the South, and between state and non-state actors, including civil society actors and rebel groups. An analysis of *development’s territories* allows for understanding territory as it is made and unmade in the postcolonial world; as constituted by numerous points of friction between the Westphalian state and its constitutive outside.

2.2 A relational approach to development

A discussion about “development” must distinguish between the general sense of the word—loosely associated with change, progress, and improvement—and its specific meaning as a geopolitical and economic disposition towards the world, first articulated by Western states after World War II. Gillian Hart (2001; 2010) distinguishes “big D” Development, which refers to purposeful projects of intervention initiated after World War II, and “little d” development, which refers to the uneven, interconnected, and crisis-prone process of capital accumulation (e.g. Smith 2008). Hart argues that it is not just that the former is intentional and the latter immanent (cf. Cowen and Shenton 1996), but that “big D” Development and “little d” development are dialectically related, insofar as Development ameliorates the destruction wrought by capital accumulation. For clarity’s sake, this thesis uses D/development interchangeably, to refer to a system of symbols and material flows through which “developed” states intervene in the affairs of their “underdeveloped” counterparts, enacted through a loose configuration of actors, including policy-makers, development workers, social scientists, private companies, beneficiaries of aid, united by their role in mediating the flow of development aid (in Hart’s terms, this is “big D” development). However, with Hart, I understand development as inseparable from its broader political economy. Development is simultaneously ideological and material; it is propelled forward by a geographical and teleological vision of the world divided into areas that have achieved development and others that are putatively in need of it, inasmuch as it unleashes interventions in the lives of people and communities that are meant to rectify this divide.

Hart is part of a growing chorus of voices that understands development relationally. Her work shows how development practice evolves in successive moments of crises, including the Asian financial crisis, 9/11, and the 2008 financial meltdown (Hart 2001; 2002; 2010). Various authors point out that development evolves vis-à-vis other processes too, including indigenous movements (Briggs and Sharp 2004), women’s movements (Doshi and Casolo 2013), and global geopolitics (Mawdsley 2012). This section explains the emergence of relational thinking as a critique of preceding approaches to

development within human geography and critical development studies, and a response to changes in the practice of international development. I evoke postdevelopment as a foil for relational approaches, not because this is the only other critique of development that exists (cf. Frank 1969; Wallerstein 1974), but because of its widespread uptake within human geography (Lawson 2007). Compared with the postdevelopment approach, I argue that relational thinking is most apt to this study, as it allows for a fuller understanding of the ambivalence place of civil society partnerships in development.

2.2.1 The origins of international development

How and when did international development become ‘natural’ and ‘self-evidently necessary’ as an ‘interpretive grid through which the impoverished regions of the world are known’? (J. Ferguson 1990, xiii) Several authors surmise that development’s ideological dimensions originate in a long trajectory of European thought. For one, development is based on a faith in the ability of markets to improve the lives of people (Arndt 1987). This belief in capitalism as a benevolent force is often traced to Adam Smith’s (1776/2008) work advocating the self-interest of economic agents, and recurs in Keynes’ (1981/2008) thought, which culminated in the formation of the Bretton Woods institutions. Concomitantly, economic growth is valorised to the extent that the total remodelling of societies and spaces is considered worthwhile at the expense of the upheaval of vernacular social structures. In this sense, Marx’s (1853/2008) thought has been influential in development thinking, despite his critique of the capitalist mode of production. Just as Marx argued that for England to have ‘broken down the entire framework of Indian society’ would allow for India’s re-emergence as a secular, modern society (Marx 1853/2008, 66), so too development interventions in the post-war world advocated the disruption of social structures to establish a modernised economy (Latham 2000). Finally, development is undergirded by a spatial division of the world that sees areas inhabited by non-Western “races” as backward and inferior (Slater 1993; 1994; McEwan 2009; Ó Tuathail 1993; Wolf 2010). Colonial powers produced and reinforced this dualistic imaginative geography. It is no coincidence that

development acquired its transitive verb form during colonisation: whereas previously societies “developed” over time, colonial powers set out *to* develop other countries (Arndt 1987). Together, these antecedents demonstrate Western elites’ overwhelming hand in defining development as it was originally envisioned, even if development was later put to work almost exclusively in the non-Western world.¹⁰

Both the Cold War and decolonisation movements provided contexts within which Western states could combine these ideas into a single theory of human improvement, and adopt them at the centres of political power (Hart 2001; Power 2003). Between 1945 and 1960, decolonisation processes resulted in the rapid creation of new nation-states that were previously under European rule. Yet from the viewpoint of West, these states appeared to be ‘juridical more than empirical entities’; they were poor, politically unstable, and seemingly lacking a capacity for governance (Jackson 1991, 5). At the same time, the Cold War created an acute sense of ideological polarisation, within which the United States asserted itself as the leader of the “free world.” Perceived as being perilously impoverished and unstable, and hence susceptible to the spread of communism, the United States sought to herald newly formed states into the capitalist fold. Development served this function particularly well. In the words of Rostow (1981, cited in Latham 2000, 16), a key architect of development interventions within American policy circles, development was to establish a ‘new post-colonial relationship between the northern and southern halves of the Free World’ (see also Arndt 1987; Escobar 1995). In his analysis of American foreign policy during this period, Latham argues that development initiatives were designed to show how capitalism could offer a ‘promise of progress’ to the Third World that communism could not (Latham 2000, 215; see also Engerman et al., 2003; Essex 2013; Reynolds 2008). Hence, foreign aid was originally defined as the official development assistance (ODA) disbursed by First World countries allied with the United States.

¹⁰ Notably, Arndt’s (1987) *Economic Development: The History of an Idea* provides a comprehensive history of development thinkers, but hardly features any non-Western intellectuals.

This brief history illuminates two aspects of international development relevant to this study. Firstly, development is premised on an uneven power relation between the West and the rest; donors and recipients. This is a key continuity between development as conceived of during the Cold War, and earlier paradigms about the relationship between colonies and metropolises. The figure of the expert sustained these uneven power relations, becoming an embodiment of Western power and knowledge, enforced on recipient states from the top down (Latham 2000). Secondly, development and the nation-state are closely linked. This is the key difference between colonisation and international development: in the former, colonial powers largely did not recognise the autonomy of the people or the political systems under their rule; in the latter, donor states recognise the legitimacy of governments that receive development assistance. Aid was disbursed to these governments on the basis of strengthening putatively weak and fragile nation-states, rather than to other social institutions. However, both these aspects of international development—its Western dominance and its state-centrism—came under increasing scrutiny in subsequent decades.

2.2.2 Postdevelopment as a response to development’s crises

By turn of the century, critical social scientists often concurred that development was a ‘deeply problematic concept which had lost much of its initial promise’ (Briggs and Sharp 2004, 662). These critiques were the result of the failure of development to improve material conditions in the “Third World” over the past three decades. The structural adjustment policies pursued by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in the 1980s, which offered aid on the condition of neoliberal reform, were particularly damning, resulting in a ‘lost decade for development’ (Chari and Corbridge 2008; De Haan 2009, 75). Some scholars explained these failings under the broad banner of “postdevelopment”. I use postdevelopment as a shorthand for a set of critiques of development thinking that emerged in the 1990s, inspired by poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist thought. While

postdevelopment thinking has certain limitations for understanding ongoing transformations in Karen State, it is an important backdrop for the relational approach to development that I outline later on.

Postdevelopment scholars seek to deconstruct the epistemological categories, hierarchies, and assumptions that underpin international development (Green 2009; Sidaway 2007). Ferguson's (1990, xv) landmark study of a rural development project in Lesotho is premised on the contention that 'development institutions generate their own form of discourse, and this discourse simultaneously constructs Lesotho as a particular kind of object of knowledge.' Ferguson explains how a 1975 World Bank report portrays poverty in Lesotho as a result of its backward, agricultural, and "unpenetrated" economy, to justify development projects designed to increase rural areas' connectedness to the national and global economy. By contrast, because development planners concealed the structural causes of poverty in the knowledge they produced about Lesotho, these issues remained unaddressed in development planning, resulting in the project's failure to meet targets. Ferguson's study was pioneering because it explained development's failures according to the manner in which development actors understood Lesotho, rather than in terms of what they were doing. Furthermore, Ferguson demonstrates that even when development projects fail, they still result in the expansion and depoliticisation of state power. 'By uncompromisingly reducing poverty to a technical problem,' he argues, "'development" is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politicised,' and through which the state extends its reach into marginal areas (J. Ferguson 1990, 256). Ferguson saw development not only as an economic question—in the manner of modernisation theorists—but as discursive project complicit in the encroachment of state power.

Ferguson did not consider himself a postdevelopment theorist; however his emphasis on the production of knowledge was a precursor to Escobar's (1995) work, which inaugurated the term postdevelopment. Escobar (1995, 214) sees 'development discourse' as the 'central and most ubiquitous operator of the politics of representation in much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the post-World War II period.' His work goes beyond Ferguson's intensive analysis on the discourses produced about

a single site, to show the extensiveness of development as a regime of representation. More so than Ferguson, Escobar argues for a rejection of development itself, which he understands as a grand narrative that subjugates places and people outside the West. ‘Understanding the history of the investment of the Third World by Western forms of knowledge and power,’ he argues, is necessary to undo the damage wrought by development (Escobar 1995, 53). Together, Ferguson and Escobar’s work reveal three interrelated relations of dominance that constitute the target of postdevelopment critiques. Firstly, Ferguson’s contention that development reinforces the dominance of the central state over marginal areas and peoples continues to be taken up in diverse development contexts, where state power is partial or incomplete (e.g. Li 2007; Murton et al. 2016; Rasmussen and Lund 2018). Secondly, scholars incorporating postcolonial theory into development studies argue that development furthers colonial relations of dominance (e.g. McEwan 2009; Power 2003); an argument that can be traced to Escobar’s thoroughgoing critique of development as a Western way of knowing. Thirdly, just as both Escobar and Ferguson criticise development for upholding technical solutions to structural problems, scholars have shown how the privileged place of professionals, experts, and technocrats in development planning sidelines other ways of knowing about the world (e.g. Kothari 2005; Scott 1998; Wilson 2006).

The production of discourse is certainly relevant to ongoing transformations in Karen State. The influx of development aid into Myanmar, introduced in **Chapter 1**, was accompanied by triumphant narratives of Myanmar’s entry into the global economy after years of economic isolation, circulated in documents produced by bilateral and multilateral donors (Décobert 2020; Imamura 2015; Loong 2019b). However, reading Karen State primarily through the lens of the relations of dominance—between state and society; West and the rest; expert and non-expert—provides a reductionist view of the social relations traversed by international development. For one, this view ignores that Myanmar was once an outlier in the international development regime. Before 2011, Myanmar was largely excluded from the (post)development literature. A sparse number of academic texts referencing development in Burma/Myanmar commiserated over the country’s *failure* to develop.

Perry (2007, 4) describes Myanmar as a ‘tragedy of lost opportunity’ due to its high poverty levels despite its immense resource potential, while Mya Maung (1998) bemoans Burmese citizens’ lack of access to education, health, and welfare. These authors trace Myanmar’s failure to develop to three factors that set Myanmar apart from other recipient states: the mismanagement of the country’s resources by its military government, Myanmar’s status as a “pariah state” subject to Western sanctions, and ethnic and communist insurgencies (see also Steinberg 1981). These analyses paid little heed to the discursive construction of development, presumably because postdevelopment’s focus on development as an all-consuming ‘interpretive grid’ (J. Ferguson 1990, xiii) sidelined contexts in which the usual rules of development seemed not to apply.

2.2.3 Civil society and the limits of postdevelopment

By the time Myanmar was integrated into the development regime in the 2010s, development scholars had begun to criticise postdevelopment for its inability to grapple with more recent transformations in development practice. For one, there were new goals: donors began to disburse aid in the pursuit of “good governance”, rather than focusing on poverty reduction and economic modernisation alone (De Haan 2009). Instead of enforcing neoliberal conditionalities that minimised the state’s hand in development, donors sought to hold recipient governments up to standards of accountability, transparency, and democracy (Weiss 2000). Secondly, there were new methods: donors replaced quick-fix, expert-led, technical solutions—the target of Ferguson’s critique—with partnership techniques designed to include and empower recipients in development planning (see Abrahamsen 2004; R. Chambers 1994; 1997; Green 2009; 2010; Kapoor 2002; McKinnon 2007). Finally, the widespread adoption of governance targets and partnership techniques paved the way for new actors in development planning: non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Observers described the Global South as in the midst of an “associational revolution”: NGOs were set up to absorb donor funds, given a stake in national-level debates on poverty reduction, and functioned as intermediaries between target

populations and donors (Bebbington 1997; Clarke 1998; Fisher 1997; Igoe 2003; Mercer 1999). The rise of NGOs in development planning hinged on the assumption that NGOs were coterminous with civil society, which donors assumed to be an integral component of a well-governed society (Mercer 2002; Mohan 2002). Together, this trifecta of transformations can be understood as a New Policy Agenda (Edwards and Hulme 1995). To my reading, the emergence of the New Policy Agenda was a response to the failure of high-handed, top-down, Western-led, development interventions to meet targets. Development policymakers seemed to acknowledge the postdevelopment critique: instead of structuring development according to us/them, dominator/dominated binaries, they pluralised the number of actors involved in the implementation of development projects, to include recipient governments and NGOs.

Still, critical scholars' focus on discourse and power remains urgent. Scholars concur that the discursive construction of NGOs-as-civil-society obscures the more nefarious effects of development, including accumulation by dispossession and the reinforcement of hierarchical patron-client relations (e.g. Frewer 2013; Mercer 2003; Pieck and Moog 2009). However, the postdevelopment approach is ill-suited to understanding other questions thrown up during the post-Cold War era. Whereas the New Policy Agenda demonstrates the evolving character of international development, postdevelopment critiques take a relatively static approach to development discourse. Instead of consigning the rise of NGOs to "more of the same," it is crucial to ask why development actors are latching on to a new language of participation, empowerment, and governance. In-depth studies of leading development organisations such as the World Bank (Goldman 2005) and USAID (Essex 2013) document several attempts to reinvent them from the inside. Goldman, for instance, shows how the Bank is developing alliances with activists, grassroots organisations, and NGOs that were unthinkable before the end of the Cold War. Taking these internal transformations seriously entails asking new questions: who drives these changes, and to what end? How might we square the transformation of these organisations, with the durability of development as an organising principle for relations between the Global North and the

Global South? What theoretical tools do we need to understand development as somehow both static and dynamic, at the same time?

Secondly, taking a discourse-driven approach to development over-emphasises normative ideals of what NGOs should be, to the neglect of how NGOs actually function in the context that they are embedded in. Mercer (2002, 9) argues that even scholars who are critical of NGOs exhibit an ‘allegiance to the normative ideal that civil society and NGOs are inherently “good things”’, by documenting the ways in which NGOs deviate from the civil society roles they are cast into. She argues that rather than measure NGOs against ideals held by development actors, critique should focus on how NGOs operate within extant power relations. After all, the ideals that development actors attach to civil society—which originate in a long trajectory of Western political thought¹¹—hardly ever carry across to non-Anglophone contexts. In China, Kang and Han (2008) catalogue the range of relationships that social organisations can have with the state. They challenge the assumption held by development actors that civil society organisations are independent from the state, and can therefore act as a check on state power. Kang and Han therefore propose that scholars studying state-society relations in China dispense with the notion of civil society altogether. In India, Chatterjee’s (2004) argument that the domain of civil society excludes most of the population, who are not considered full, rights-bearing citizens by the state, has precipitated vigorous debates over the applicability of civil society to postcolonial contexts.

While Chatterjee (2004, 39, original emphasis) recognises that ‘civil society as an *ideal* continues to energise an interventionist political project,’ various authors reject the notion that civil society is an ideal applicable to India altogether. In her historical analysis of civil rights groups in India, Pandey (2018) proposes that these groups should be understood neither as civil society nor as social movements, but as a unique political form—“movement allies”—in recognition of their specific

¹¹ The origins of civil society are often traced to Western liberalism, as conceptualised by thinkers such as Toqueville and Habermas. These thinkers were popularised by “social capital” approaches within development institutions (Stokke and Mohan 2001). A liberal approach to civil society is distinct from a Gramscian, or neo-Marxist, perspective on civil society (Gramsci 1971; Buttigeig 1995).

location in Indian society, as an intermediary between party politics, the middle classes, and marginalised groups (see also Arnold 2017; Mannathukkaren 2010; Whitehead 2015). In Myanmar, Aung’s (2018, 195) study of protests against a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) shows how civil society and political society cannot be isolated; instead, these constitute two trajectories that interpenetrate, to form a ‘heterogenous political terrain.’ An over-focus on the discursive construction of NGOs-as-civil-society obscures the variety of associational forms that exist in non-Western contexts, consigning them all to deviations from Western norms, rather than understanding them as dynamic organisations that renegotiate their relationship with the state and the market (see also Kleibl and Munck 2017; Volpi 2011).

Does this mean that the concept of civil society should be abandoned? Earlier, I argued that the New Policy Agenda can be regarded as a significant shift in the manner that development is practised, rather than subsumed under “more of the same.” Hence, development actors’ drive to include civil society in development programming should be given weight in critical development scholarship, although it should not be taken as a benchmark against which associational forms in recipient countries are measured against. My question is not: to what extent do NGOs live up to civil society ideals? Rather, I ask: why, and by whom, are civil society ideals imposed on NGOs and other associations? When donors assign NGOs and other associations the role of “civil society,” how does this template shape their relations with the state, their beneficiaries, and donors themselves? Do civil society actors themselves embrace and appropriate development actors’ ideas of “civil society”, and how are these decisions shaped by their life histories and aspirations? Answering these questions entails regarding the power relations formed through development as productive of new social relations, rather than as a constraint on local agency. Green and Mercer (2013) explain the specific practices that civil society actors in Tanzania engage in to present themselves as part of the good governance agenda pursued by donors. Besides mastering donor-mandated skills to do with obtaining funds, demonstrating accountability, and meeting targets, they demonstrate that civil society actors forge relations with local communities in various, context-specific ways. To local communities, for instance, civil society

constructs itself as a virtuous actor, sympathetic to the rural poor, in opposition to local government officials, who are perceived as corrupt and self-interested. Hence, civil society inclusion in development programming brings a contextual configuration of social relations into being, that cannot be reduced to binaristic relations of dominance (see Green 2010; 2012; Roberts 2014; Rossi 2004).

This view of power, as a continually negotiated, evolving field, is also kinder to the agency of civil society actors themselves. Just because actors claim civil society labels, to access particular resources or relations, does not automatically mean that their interests align with those of development actors. In this vein, civil society inclusion in development programming must be seen as an arena of tension, not concordance. Brosius' (1999, 49) account of Indigenous environmentalists in Malaysia—operating in the guise of NGOs—reveals a continual tension between the 'moral/political domain' that they occupy, against the 'domain of governmentality, managerialism, and bureaucratisation' inhabited by Northern environmentalists, scientists, and the Malaysian government. These tensions—which have been remarked in other postcolonial contexts too (e.g. Dressler 2019; Igoe 2003; Isager and Ivarsson 2002)—must be accounted for, not shunted aside as a battle lost to the hegemony of development discourse.

2.2.4 A relational approach to civil society partnerships

As an extension of the discourse-heavy approach favoured by postdevelopment scholars, this thesis advances a relational approach to civil society in development programming. Rather than understand civil society as a normative ideal or a freestanding domain separate from the state and the market, I propose that in postcolonial contexts, civil society must be studied *in relation to development*. As I noted above, as a concept that originated in Western political theory, civil society rarely has an equivalent in non-Western languages (Frewer 2013).¹² Moreover civil society organisations are often

¹² “Civil society” is often used as an English loanword, including in Myanmar. I address this in **Chapter 5**. Where vernacular equivalents for the term exist, these often draw from words within a colonial lexicon, as Frewer (2013) notes in the Cambodian context.

set up in recipient countries specifically to absorb donor funds (Mercer and Green 2013). Hence, the extent to which development impinges on civil society cannot be understated. I use “partnerships” to describe the ideal relationship between civil society actors and donors, as framed by the New Policy Agenda, even as the term obscures the unequal power relations that drive development (Mercer 2003). I also use “civil society” rather than “NGO” because the term “NGO” foregrounds service delivery functions, and sidelines the political goals of these organisations.

A relational approach means, firstly, taking account of the ongoing dynamic between international development and wider political economic issues. What were the conditions for the emergence of civil society on the development stage, and in Karen State in particular? Hart (2001; 2002; 2010) uses Karl Polanyi’s writings on the “double movement” of capital to explain how the market orthodoxies of the Cold War period transformed into the New Policy Agenda in the 1990s. Polanyi (1944/2001) maintains that the destructive tendencies of capitalism generate ameliorative countertendencies that are contained within capitalism itself, rather than as an opposing force external to it. Hart argues that development’s embrace of civil society exemplifies one such countertendency, pursued by powerful actors in order to mitigate against the fallout of development projects that generate ever more unequal social relations between state/society, West/rest, and experts/non-experts. This approach to civil society in development mitigates against the relative ahistoricism of postdevelopment work, which focuses on the dominance of development discourse, at the expense of transformations internal to development itself. For a study of civil society in Karen State, this means paying attention to the juncture when civil society emerged as a distinct institutional form. A historicised analysis, based on how civil society actors narrate the origins of their civil society involvement relative to ongoing socio-political transformations, is thus central to my analysis. These transformations encompass capital accumulation and its contradictions—as highlighted by Hart (2010)—but also other processes significant to my interlocutors, such as the Karen civil war and ethnicisation in Myanmar.

Besides taking into account the views of civil society actors themselves, it is also critical to understand how other development actors speak about civil society. An emergent genre of literature on “aidland” is instructive in this respect. The term, popularised by Mosse (2011), contests the notion that there is a simple causal relationship between development models and development outcomes. Whereas postdevelopment scholars tend to presume that development operates as a de-peopled machine, Mosse argues for an ethnographic approach concentrated on the networks formed between aid staff, volunteers, and development professionals, and the norms that traverse these relationships (see also Fechter and Hindman 2011; Mosse 2004; Mosse and Lewis 2005; for a critical take, see Harrison 2013). The aidland approach aims to ‘reinstat[e] the complex agency of actors in development at every level’ (Mosse 2004, 6). Thus, my focus is not only how civil society actors articulate the emergence of this institutional form, but how other actors in the development world—donors, INGOs, and other members of the ‘nongovernmental aid chain’ (Bebbington 2005)—narrate the same story.

Secondly, a relational approach is spatially situated. Hart’s (2001) relational approach to development is explicitly situated in geographical debates about how to understand space.¹³ In the 1990s, geographers denounced arguments that globalisation would allow people to “overcome” space, arguing instead that space is—and has always been—the product of power-laden interactions. Massey (1994, 154), whose research initiated widespread debates over the relational constitution of space, argued that places earn their specificity because they are ‘constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus’ (see also Massey 2005). Her work has since been taken up in various geographical subdisciplines, with geographers investigating how cities, neighbourhoods, and resource frontiers emerge from a particular constellation of social relations (for some examples, see Darling 2009; Kenney-Lazar 2019; Pierce et al. 2011; Ward 2010).¹⁴

¹³ Hart (2010) draws from Lefebvre’s ideas about the production of space, and how they have energised ongoing debates in human geography.

¹⁴ The literature on scale is vast, diverse, and characterised by ‘conceptual confusion’ (Moore 2008, 206; for diverse definitions of scale, see e.g. Jonas 2015; Marston 2000; Marston et al. 2005; MacKinnon 2010). My interviewees often saw their activities as nested within Kawthoolei and Kayin State (**Chapter 4**), but I find that the contested and overlapping nature of these spatial imaginaries cannot be encompassed by the concept of scale.

However, there are two reasons why this relational lens has not yet been applied to civil society. On one hand, Bebbington (2004) criticises the literature on NGOs for being overly case study-based. This literature focuses on the context-specific networks that NGOs are embedded in, overlooking broader social processes that shape civil society (e.g. Bebbington 1997; Kleibl and Munck 2017; Mohan 2002; Perreault 2003). On the other, development scholars often draw from Gramsci's (1971) understanding of civil society, as an arena that manufactures consent for the hegemonic power of the state (also Amoore and Langley 2004; Buttigieg 1995; Mitlin et al. 2007). This approach sidelines social forces that range above and below the nation-state, such as social movements, gender relations, and nature-society relations (Doshi and Casolo 2013; McFarlane 2009; McIlwaine 2007), as well as the manner in which the nation-state is contextually constituted. Gramsci was, after all, specifically discussing the bourgeois-liberal state (Buttigieg 1995). However, the state cannot be taken for granted, particularly in contexts where it does not conform to the Westphalian ideal. Indeed, I see Karen State as emblematic of numerous contexts in the postcolonial world, where Westphalian ideals are incompletely applied and/or actively contested. What fraught state-society relations mean for civil society will be addressed in the next section, which deals with war.

The final aspect of a relational approach to civil society partnerships is a sensitivity to the conflicts and tensions that inhere in social relations. Existing literature on civil society—again inflected by Gramsci—tends towards explaining how civil society upholds consent to the status quo. Scholars have shown how the rise of NGOs allows development actors, conservation actors, and the state to maintain market-oriented policies (e.g. Goldman 2005; Laurie et al. 2005; Levine 2002). This aligns with literature that views participation as a means of forcing consensus out of conflict. Kapoor's (2002) cutting analysis of participatory methodologies reveals how these conceptualise power as coercive and repressive; something to be eliminated. Yet by seeking to stamp out power, participatory methodologies have the opposite effect of stabilizing hegemonic power relations (see also Cooke and Kothari 2001; Walker et al. 2007). Korf (2010, 709) elaborates on the spatiality of this process: he argues that

participatory workshops create a ‘time-space container’ that dislocates development from politics. These ‘islands’ of participation, wherein the normal power relation that structure development appear to be suspended, ultimately recapitulate the process—à la Ferguson (1990)—by which development depoliticises existing projects of rule.

My approach does not deny the role of civil society in generating consent, but turns attention to the conflictual relations that exist in and outside the ‘small islands’ of participation that Korf (2010, 718) describes. Both Hart’s (2010, 136) relational approach to development, and relational accounts of space more broadly, foreground how social processes are ‘shot through with tensions and contradictions.’ One such account, for instance, sees development interventions as a struggle between “thinkable” interventions, that uphold dominant systems of knowledge production, and “unthinkable” politics, that refuse existing social orders (Elwood and Lawson 2018). For analyses of civil society, this perspective entails understanding how civil society actors embody tensions between development agendas and their constitutive outside; they inhabit both the ‘time-space containers’ sanctioned by development policies (Korf 2010, 709), and also the realm of society more broadly, within which they relate to the state and other authorities on terms shaped by their individual life histories. Civil society, to rephrase Jeffrey, Staeheli and Marshall (2018, 112), occupies a liminal space ‘between political life and actually existing practices of the political.’ Thus, it is crucial to investigate how civil society actors navigate their embeddedness in both the worlds of development and in the unfolding dynamics of the Karen civil war.

2.3 Development and war

A relational approach to civil society partnerships sees context as ‘constructions out of the intersections and interactions of concrete social relations and social processes in a situation of co-presence’ (Massey 1994, 138). One such social process is development, which was the focus of the previous section. Another social process, which cropped up continuously in my interviews and observations, was civil

war. In Massey’s (1994, 139) words, the co-presence of social processes—in this case, development and war—can be understood as ‘an open question which will not have an empirically generalisable answer.’ She calls us to investigate the interaction between co-present processes, as they come into contact within a locality, without presuming a particular outcome. In order to understand the intermeshing processes that civil society actors in Karen State navigate on a daily basis, this section surveys literature on development, civil society, and war. I argue that whereas development actors tend to see war as an aberration from the normal state of affairs, this view of war has limited explanatory power in Karen State, where my interlocutors saw war as a socio-spatial condition tightly interwoven with their everyday lives. Furthermore, whereas development actors presume that civil society cannot flourish under conditions of war, my interlocutors viewed civil society as a platform from which they could navigate—and potentially change—the dynamics of the Karen civil war. Hence, I show how war is better understood as a socio-spatial condition, that produces localities that shape my interlocutors’ worldviews and their potential to challenge the structures that constrain them.

2.3.1 War and development: opposing forces?

International development has been linked to war since its inception. In colonial times, rulers often used development programmes to pacify insurgencies (Barkawi 2016). The 1947 Truman Doctrine, widely held to lay the foundations of international development, positions American aid as key to preserving the Western way of life amid the Cold War (Slater 1993). However, development policymakers became more explicitly preoccupied with “security” throughout the 1990s, and particularly after 9/11. Therefore, in the same period when civil society was becoming the ‘favoured child’ of international development (Edwards and Hulme 1995, 849), Western donors began to direct development assistance to war-affected areas within postcolonial and post-Soviet states, on the presumption that underdevelopment drives conflict (De Haan 2009; Hettne 2010; Hout 2010). Essex (2013), for instance, shows how successive policy documents produced by USAID during this period constructed war as

evidence of state failure; a problem to be redressed by donor dollars. The agency thus developed increasingly refined criteria for disbursing aid to states beleaguered by war (see also Roberts et al. 2003; Sparke 2007). Buzzwords marrying development and war in various configurations proliferated after 9/11, including: the security-development nexus, post-conflict development, and complex political emergencies (e.g. Duffield 2001a; Jensen 2010; Jones and Rodgers 2011).

At least two factors account for development actors' heightened preoccupation with war at this time. Firstly, as intrastate conflict began to outstrip interstate conflict, development actors feared that civil wars might threaten the collapse of recipient states.¹⁵ They presumed that state failure would breed terrorist activities and criminal networks, threatening the security of donor states (Jeffrey 2009; Klingebiel 2006). Whereas donor states portrayed war as noble and just (Holland 2011; Megoran 2008), civil wars in the post-Cold War era were framed as problems to be fixed with an infusion of aid to “failed”, “fragile” or “rogue” states where security threats took root (Barkawi 2018; Call 2008; Hyndman 2009; Zürcher 2019). Underdevelopment began to be framed as dangerous, not just undesirable (Duffield 2001a). Secondly, as previously discussed, development was being redefined during this period. Development actors were diversifying the top-down, market-oriented approach that characterised the 1980s, to encompass good governance as a policy objective. A redefinition of development in more holistic terms, as the ‘total transformation’ of recipient states (Essex 2013, 115), dovetailed with (neo)liberal peacebuilding orthodoxies gaining traction at the time, which advocated for similar institutional reforms in the name of pursuing peace (Richmond 2005; Stokke 2009). Together, these lines of thinking insinuate that war and development act in opposition, albeit in the same areas; the impoverished regions of the Global South.¹⁶ Development actors often presumed that

¹⁵ Development policymakers often cited academic arguments proving the changing nature of conflict in the post-Cold War era (Duffield 2001a). For instance, Kaldor's (1999, 2013) defines “new wars” according to their distinct actors, goals, methods, and forms of finance (for a critical perspective on this distinction, see Kalyvas 2001).

¹⁶ Barkawi (2016; 2018) points out the dichotomous North/South spatiality of war: whereas interstate wars in the Western world are imagined as just and righteous, the “small wars” mapped to postcolonial states are often constructed as illegitimate, threatening, and thus a problem to be solved by development money. “Small wars” are also often labelled using derivative categories, such as insurgency, uprisings, or something other than war proper. In recognition of this, I use “war” to refer to all forms of armed conflict.

postcolonial states were beset with underdevelopment, and vice versa. Moreover, whereas development actors positioned development as a means of strengthening state institutions, they saw war as a sign of state collapse. I do not doubt that destruction of lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure resulting from war hampers a country's ability to meet poverty targets and other development goals. However, from the perspective that development unfolds in relation to other social processes—such as war—it is necessary to ask: how does the dominant view, of war and development as a zero-sum game, occlude other possible relationships between war and development?

Scholars writing from positivist, neo-Marxist, and poststructuralist perspectives have roundly debunked the notion that development aid can “solve” war. Firstly, Zürcher (2019) proves that aid does not stabilise war-affected regions, and indeed often exacerbates conflict unless there are minimal levels of security already in place. The ineffectiveness of aid in consolidating peace has been documented by several other scholars deploying statistical analyses too (see Goodhand 2002; Narang 2015; Weintraub 2016). Secondly, neo-Marxist scholars show how development policies that connect war and underdevelopment play into the hands of powerful actors. Duffield (2001a) explains that the post-Cold War convergence between development and security denotes a shift from an inclusionary capitalist world system, to an exclusionary one. He argues that when Northern states increasingly intervene in the security affairs of Southern states, they simultaneously exclude Southern states from thickening relations of capital accumulation across the Global North. The outcome is that rather than seeing war and development as counterposed, it is possible to see them as mutually transformative forces: war shapes the manner in which development is done. Finally, Fluri and Lehr (2017) represent a third, poststructuralist line of critique. The authors examine American engagement with Afghanistan after 9/11 through the prism of development aid. They show how motifs of the suffering “Afghan woman” were used to aggrandise the United States' role as external saviour or protector in Afghanistan, while obscuring the means by which American foreign policy has contributed to political instability in the country (see also Fluri 2009).

Poststructuralist and neo-Marxist scholars show that war and development are not locked into a static, zero-sum game, as development policymakers presume, but actively transform one another, in relation to other political economic processes. Furthermore, these authors imply a spatiality to how development actors construe war and development as opposing forces: development actors construct war as internal to “fragile states”, whereas development is constructed as an external force for good. As Barkawi (2018) points out, whereas Western states frame the interstate wars they wage as just and righteous, these states often construct the “small wars” mapped onto postcolonial states as illegitimate, threatening, and a problem to be solved by development money. This is consistent with the argument, made often by political geographers, that Western states act as though postcolonial states are inherently deviant or lacking, when many of their so-called dysfunctions are legacies of colonisation and a product of ongoing imperialisms (Corbridge et al. 2005; Hansen et al. 2001b). This argument is applicable to Karen State, but must also be contextualised. Power dynamics in Karen State are situated at the intersection of two overlapping imperialisms: between Myanmar and other, more powerful states seeking influence over the country; and between the central Bamar-dominated state and its war-affected, non-Bamar peripheries (Callahan 2007; L. Jones 2014b).

Moreover, as yet, neither the development policymakers nor scholars mentioned account for the role of civil society. This is not to say that “post-war” development is solely a matter of states. Duffield (2001b; 2007) shows how the links that development policymakers draw between war and development corral new actors into the international development regime, creating public-private linkages between NGOs, militaries, and private companies. NGOs ‘expanded on the basis of emergency’ became proxies for exporting liberal ideals into war-affected areas in the Global South (Duffield 2007, 46; Jeffrey 2007). Fluri and Lehr (2017) discuss how Afghan-run NGOs navigate the gendered representations of Afghanistan produced by American policymakers and the American mainstream media, thus attending to the agency of actors that might be considered part of civil society (see also Fluri 2009). However neither pay much attention to the simultaneous emergence of

development actors' preoccupations with civil society and war in 1990s and 2000s. More broadly, this scholarship also tends to neglect the power dynamics that shape war at scales below the nation-state. There is a tendency to take war as coterminous with violence across a state's territory, which thus shapes development actors' engagement with the state *as a whole*. The means by which war creates differentiated localities comprised of various 'emerging political complexes' (Callahan 2007, 5) recedes from view. Experiences of war depend greatly on one's social and geographical location.

2.3.2 Understanding war as socio-spatial condition

Why might scholarship on war/development overlook civil society? In this regard, scholars reflect the zero-sum relationship between war and development presumed by development policymakers; they often assume that civil society partnerships cannot occur during war, which is the inverse of development. Yet this is not necessarily coherent with reality: in attempts to "resolve" war, development actors do seek civil society inclusion in planning and implementation. A growing body of academic and policy-oriented literature on civil society's role in peacebuilding is testament to this phenomena, much of which assesses the extent to which foreign funding for NGOs influences the outcome of peace negotiations (e.g. Belloni 2001; Orjuela 2003; Paffenholz 2015). In Karen State, civil society organisations have offered social services and documented the adverse effects of war for three decades (Malseed 2009; Décobert, 2016). In addition, scholars show how community-based organisations allow war-affected populations to maintain social ties and stable identities amid war, including Karen and Karenni refugees (Dudley 2010; McConnachie 2014). These literatures show that associational life is possible in wartime; it simply has not been addressed by the development literature.

Korf's (2005; 2006) research, an exception to development scholars' inattention to war at scales below the nation-state, seeks to understand how participatory approaches—rather than development in general—transformed social relations during the Sri Lankan civil war. Korf (2005) examines two participatory development projects in Sri Lanka: one in a rebel-controlled area, and another in a

“patchwork” area, where control is contested between state and rebel forces. Whereas rebel actors tended to disrupt participatory development programmes in state-controlled areas, they were relatively welcoming towards participatory approaches in areas that they were contesting. This was because participatory workshops ‘created a legitimizing resource for the rebels, as development projects in the cleared areas potentially did for the government’ (Korf 2006, 58). Korf is also cognisant of the manner in which people become participatory subjects. He recognises that people were keen to ‘explore the possibility of a conflict-free life’ offered by development projects (Korf 2005, 66), but also that rebel actors sometimes force peoples’ participation in these projects in order to demonstrate their success. Although Korf does not write about civil society directly, what emerges is a complex picture of the relationships between war-affected populations, development actors, rebel actors, and the state, that is more sensitive to local power relations than the research reviewed previously. Another study, while not seeking to analyse local power dynamics in the ethnographic detail as Korf, concedes that civil society actors do exist in Sri Lanka’s war zones, according to the extent of rebel control in each area (Orjuela 2005).

From the preceding discussion, I discern three approaches to war and development. Development policymakers tend to see war and development as *oppositional forces*, set in a zero-sum game. Development scholars debunk this notion; they argue that under current conditions war and development operate as *mutually transformative forces* that reinforce the subordination of people living in war-affected areas. Both tend to gloss over or flatten out the interactions between war-affected peoples and the many actors present in a warzone—soldiers, officials, rebels, volunteers, women, children, religious leaders—and how they change over time. A third approach to war and development, implied by Korf (2005; 2006), argues that war is not a wide-ranging, de-peopled “force” at all, but *socio-spatial condition* produced by relations between actors at several scales. Here, I combine Lubkemann’s (2008, 13) argument that war is a social condition that interacts with ‘many complex and

multidimensional social struggles and concerns,' with a relational understanding of space.¹⁷ I see war as actively producing localities, that can be loosely categorised as state-controlled, rebel-controlled, or mixed. Within these localities, civilians interact with development actors in a manner that ensures their security and furthers their interests in a highly volatile context. This approach is closest to Massey's (2005, 31) account of space as 'the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny.' Seeing war in this way leaves breathing room for the analysis of civil society. While some war-affected localities may not be conducive to civil society partnerships, others might be, just as how Korf (2005) shows that war produces specific localities amenable to participatory development, depending on the relations between states, rebel actors, and civilians in each. It is also more consistent with the approach to development I mapped out earlier, in **section 2.2.4**, which argues for seeing development as historicised, situated, and contested. Finally, an understanding of war as a socio-spatial condition aligned with accounts of war as it is experienced.

Where war is a 'normal negotiated everyday,' Thiranagama (2013, 23) argues; it provides people 'a horizon of meaning by which lives were understood.' War transforms the 'physical, emotional, and social landscapes' of civilians attempting to live through it' (Thiranagama 2011, 8). Like Korf, Thiranagama writes about the Sri Lankan civil war; unlike Korf, her focus is not on development but on war itself. Thiranagama fled the civil war as a young refugee, and her scholarly research focuses on understanding how life projects, selves, and biographies unfold within warzones. What is remarkable about her writing is that it highlights the ambivalence of those who inhabit warzones; how people can detach themselves from the patterns of social life enforced by belligerent actors. This is combined with a sensitivity to the localised dimensions of war: she writes about a young Tamil woman who feels alienated in school and in public life in a rebel-occupied area, as she cannot identify with the notions of ethnicity and militancy propagated by the rebel group. Thiranagama's

¹⁷ Lubkemann (2008) uses the term "warscape". While this could denote a spatial understanding of war, to my reading Lubkemann (an anthropologist) does not engage with the geographical baggage of the "-scape" suffix.

account demonstrates how war is a socio-spatial condition, from the standpoint of those who experience it, rather than an abstract force. Similarly, Wouters’ (2018) ethnography of the Naga insurgency shows that insurgency casts a translucent ‘shadow’ over society, insofar as it influences kinship networks, social bonds, and tribal identities without eclipsing them (see also Shah 2013). These accounts illuminate the curious absence of rebel actors from most existing accounts of war and development, even though civilians’ experiences of war often crystallise through interactions with rebel actors.

Despite widespread interest in civil wars since the end of the Cold War, rebel actors tend to be caricatured as violence-making warlords. Yet rebel actors—or non-state groups who claim territory within the confines of a nation-state—often provide security, health, education, and livelihoods for the populations they control (Mampilly 2011).¹⁸ Civilians may live in localities where rebels enforce strict controls over civilian affairs, or in areas where rebels leave local affairs up to civilians, leaving room for civilians to organise collectively (Arjona 2016). Civilians’ attitudes towards rebels also vary, and ‘could not be reduced to a simple love/hate, support/reject attitude towards the movement’ (Shah 2013, 494; Sundar 2012). In Karen State, Brenner’s (2019) study of rebel governance arrangements incorporates these features of rebel governance and more. Through a comparison of two localities—one mostly state-controlled, the other rebel-controlled—Brenner argues that the KNU’s legitimacy varies depending on its ability to embed itself within existing social relations, and provide positive social identities for its constituents. Overall, studies of rebel governance show that rebel actors are a crucial component of wartime spatial orders. These are not isolated examples of particularly powerful or “state-like” rebel actors; the case studies these authors draw from span war-affected areas in Colombia, Sri Lanka, the DRC, Sudan, India, and Myanmar. Hence, rebel actors should be given visibility within any study grounded in war as a socio-spatial condition.

¹⁸ I use “rebel” rather than “insurgent” because, as Brenner (2019, 7) points out, the Burmese-language word for “insurgent” is associated with violence rather than with political goals.

These studies illustrate that while rebel-society relations are as complex as state-society relations, the development literature has not treated them as such.¹⁹ Even though scholars catalogue a variety of relations between state and civil society—among them engagement, co-option, and resistance—these tend to presume that state sovereignty is somewhat stable. Scholars also tend to question the legitimacy of civil society, not the state. The existence of rebel actors challenges this fundamental assumption. It is not only the state that operates as the ‘great enframer’ of lives (Hansen and Stepputat 2001a, 37); rebel actors can compete for this role too. During war, civil society actors ‘have to relate to and organise independently from not only the state but also violent actors challenging the state’ (Orjuela 2005, 122). This multiplies the number of ways that civil society might position itself vis-à-vis authorities. Civil society actors may leverage the power of rebel actors to contest the state, or vice versa. This is one possible outcrop of Arjona’s (2016) assertion that civilians can twist rebel authority to their advantage. Or civil society actors may carefully negotiate their independence from both state and rebel actors. After all, as Thiranagama (2011) observes, civilians are often ambivalent towards both authorities. In the postcolonial world, where state authority is routinely challenged, scholars must see civil society within a ‘twilight zone of multiple, indeterminate configurations of power and authority’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2006, 302).

¹⁹ However, rebels are not reducible to “quasi-state” actors. Mampilly (2011, 43-44) argues that viewing rebel groups as replicas of the modern state simplifies the manner in which they navigate between *de facto* (which they possess) and *de jure* sovereignty (which they do not).

2.4 Territory

By now, it should be clear that this is a thoroughly spatial argument. Previously sections circle back to localities as points where social processes—such as development and war—intersect and reconfigure ongoing power relations (Massey 1994; 2005). Yet, while the locality is a helpful point of departure, it is not a satisfactory spatial motif for explaining ongoing transformations in Karen State. After all, Mohan and Stokke (2000) warn that by conceiving of the local as a site of counterhegemony, resistance, and autonomy, analysts downplay the complex relations between civil society and state authorities. Similar criticisms have been waged against studies of civil society participation in peacebuilding that abstract the local from broader social struggles (Bräuchler and Naucke, 2017; Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Mac Ginty 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Roepstorff 2020). Indeed none of the actors mentioned above—states, rebels, development actors, and indeed civil society actors—act only on single localities. Civil wars produce localities, but they are not fought over them; rather, states and rebel actors struggle over territories that are imbued with meanings, inhabited by certain populations, and grounds for particular relations between nature and society. In Myanmar, the state claims Kayin State as part of a larger Union of Myanmar, while the KNU claims Kawthoolei, a historic “Karen homeland” (these are explained in **Chapter 4**). Development actors likewise act across localities. Projects are planned, coordinated, and implemented with several sites in mind, often as part of a larger programme. Via development partnerships, civil society actors can become part of this process of territorial contestation too. One prominent civil society network in Karen State, for instance, is vocal about how dam-building is a ‘tool used by the Burma Army to occupy our territory’ (Karen Rivers Watch 2019). Hence, while civil society actors negotiate social processes that converge on the locality, they also seek to reconfigure wider territorial templates.

This section explores literature on *territory*, and in so doing, frames this study’s contributions to literature in political geography. I argue that while literature on territory in political geography can be categorised into “governmental” and “globalisation” approaches, they share a common tendency to

sideline postcolonial contexts where the state’s authority is challenged. Then, I show how literature on territorialisation from area studies and anthropology provides a useful corrective to the aforementioned Western-centrism. Finally, by combining “territory” and “territorialisation” approaches, I seek to arrive at a conceptualisation of territory as the outcome of struggles between Westphalian and non-Westphalian conceptions of space. This argument has import not only for studies of civil society in war-affected areas, but for studies of territory-making in many postcolonial contexts where state-society relations are fraught.

2.4.1 Territory in political geography

Elden (2010) argues that scholars often discuss manifestations of territory, such as territorial disputes, they have generally not subjected territory to sufficient theoretical reflection. Instead, scholars derive territory from two traditions: one, a biological tradition in which territory is seen as a vital, ethological instinct (e.g. Malmberg 1980; Soja 1971); and two, a social tradition, through which territory is viewed as a geopolitical strategy (e.g. Sack 1986). The notion of territory that emerges from these traditions is largely vague and lacking in historical specificity. By contrast, through a detailed genealogy of territory that sweeps across Ancient Greece to 17th century Europe, Elden (2013b) argues that territory must be understood as a political technology that denotes a historically specific relation between place and power. While rulers, scientists, and clergymen had long dabbled with other forms of spatial ordering, the Peace of Westphalia inaugurated an ‘important moment in the assertion of exclusive control within these geographically determined areas’ (Elden 2013b, 314). Westphalia thus gave rise to the notion of territory, which can be understood as derived from contemporaneous notions of land (an economic asset) and terrain (a strategic asset), and enforced by legal codes and cartographic techniques. ‘The idea of a territory as a bounded space under the control of a group of people’ was subsequently used to order large swaths of the Earth as the modern state became the dominant form of political organisation (Elden 2013b, 322). To Elden, territory ‘can therefore be thought of as *the extension of the state’s power*’

(Elden 2013, 322, original emphasis). Elsewhere, Elden calls territory a ‘precondition for statehood’; a demarcated area in which the state (following Weber’s famous definition) monopolises the use of violence (Elden 2009, xxvi; also Foucault 2007).

Elden (2010; 2013) exemplifies what I refer to as a governmental approach to territory. Drawing heavily from Foucault (2007), Elden explains how territory is ‘owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered, and controlled’ (Elden 2007, 578; Elden 2013a). In a similar vein, the legal sociologist Brighenti (2010a; 2010b) distinguishes territory from space because territory is active; it ‘is not defined by space, rather it defines space through patterns of relations’ (Brighenti 2010b, 57). An actor does not extend its power over territory, but creates it through power relations; and attempts at creating territory can fail when actors are unable to obtain internal or external recognition for them. Territory operates as an ‘interaction device’ that stimulates relations between the actors that inhabit it, and actors who are excluded from it (Brighenti 2010a, 224). In regards to the latter, boundaries are key: Brighenti (2010b, 60) clarifies that fundamentally, ‘territory exists as a bounded activity,’ and the act of boundary-drawing creates relations between inside and the outside (Brighenti 2010b, 60). Hence, Brighenti (2010a, 220) calls scholars to examine processes of boundary-drawing—who is drawing boundaries, how they are being drawn, and why these processes are taking place—while noting that the state is a ‘territorialising device’. A governmental approach, undertaken by Elden and Brighenti, thus shows how territory is assembled from various historically specific parts—such as boundaries and maps—that, together, allow for a state to govern its population. In recent years, political geographers have refined this approach to territory, showing how states use territorial techniques to reconfigure nature-society relations (Boelens et al. 2016; De Rosa 2018; Ojalammi and Blomley 2015; Usher 2019), reinforce gender relations (Fall 2020), legitimise violence (Elden 2007; Tynen 2020a; 2020b), and produce other forms of spatial ordering, like property (Blomley 2016). Nonetheless, the state and its varied relations with other actors and actants remains the centrepiece of governmental approaches to territory.

A second approach to territory seeks to reconcile Westphalian approaches to territory with a “globalising” world. Antonsich (2009) argues that territory deserves to be further investigated in the light of the rescaling of the nation-state (see also N. Brenner et al. 2003). Even as transnational flows, hybrid identities, cosmopolitan discourses herald a looser relationship between “nation” and “state”, Antonsich (2009, 800) calls for scholars to understand how ‘territory as a politico-institutional bounded space remains an important factor in society-building.’ Elsewhere, Antonsich (2011, 423) challenges the rigidity of Elden’s (2010) conceptualisation of territory, arguing that a wider focus on ‘bounded political spaces’ might better serve the present day. Likewise, Murphy (2013, 1213) argues that, even today, ‘the territorial norms of the modern state system continue to exert a powerful hold on the identities, ideologies, and geopolitical aspirations of peoples.’ Self-determination struggles continue hinge on this conception of territory, even as postnationalist thought is on the rise. Relatedly, Painter (2010) questions the extent to which scholars consider “territories” and “networks” incommensurable. He argues that while ‘territory has been intimately associated with the spatiality of the state,’ the state also seeks to effectuate networks in order to augment its power, as in the case of regional economic policies in England (Painter 2010, 1094). Territory is a work-in-progress, Painter concludes, inaugurated by the state but also a ‘promise the state cannot fulfil’ (Painter 2010, 1094).

Antonsich, Murphy, and Painter position the state as the primary territorial actor, even as both authors are conscious of the limits to state sovereignty posed by globalisation. They assert that even though territory should be conceptualised as more unstable and more dynamic than previously forethought, territory continues primarily associated with the state (see also Agnew and Corbridge 1995; Bialasiewicz et al. 2005; Hudson 2000; Ó Tuathail 1999; 2000; Pugh et al. 2007). Finally, Sassen (2006; 2013) argues for unbundling territory from the nation-state, since a state-centric idea of territory cannot explain the emergence of non-national jurisdictions created by international law, and bordered spaces that cut across interstate borders. Yet, even as she argues for giving non-state actors greater analytical visibility, she does not necessarily question the extent to which territory originated from the

modern state. In all, “globalisation” approaches grapple with the salience of territory to the contemporary world. They assert that the state is still the main territorial actor, even if they recognise that the state’s authority is being reconfigured or called into question.

Hence, the Westphalian state remains central to both “governmental” and “globalisation” approaches to territory, albeit to varying extents. Although the counterexamples that Sassen (2013) provides—international jurisdictions and cross-border zones—prove that territory-making need not be contiguous with state territory, state actors are still key to the legitimacy of both. However, as my discussion on war demonstrates, I am keen to see state sovereignty as less stable, particularly from the perspective of the postcolonial world. Furthermore, most of the authors mentioned above draw from the experiences of Western states and the Western-dominated international arena to theorise territory. As a result, neither the genealogical nor the globalisation approach give due attention to how conditions of colonialism shape territory. They do not consider forces, such as ethnicisation, war, and colonial capitalism, that cause territory to deviate from the Westphalian ideal.

2.4.2 Territorialisation and counter-territorialisation

This oversight is particularly curious since literature exists that explores “territorialisation” in the Global South, largely within the remit of anthropology and area studies, although it is rarely cited in the literature on territory outlined earlier. The term territorialisation was inaugurated by Vandergeest and Peluso (1995), who argue that state formation in Thailand occurred through a rapid process by which resource rights were classified, communicated, and enforced in according to a Cartesian grid (see also Thongchai 1988). In pre-national states in Southeast Asia, local people organised their access to resources through ‘webs of rights among individuals linked by kin relations’, over which rulers exercised indirect power (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 394). The edges of states featured ‘frontiers, not borders,’ where the authority of multiple rulers overlapped (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 393). It was only under European influence that rulers began to survey land, create written titles, and register

resource rights. Siamese authorities were initially resistant, but were persuaded to begin internal territorialisation in the late 19th century. They converted principalities into centrally-managed districts, demarcated boundaries with neighbouring states, began a territory-wide process of land registration, and designated “unpopulated” areas as forests under the jurisdiction of the state. Crucially, ‘in Thailand, as elsewhere, territorial models have failed as often as they have succeeded’ as local people refuse to comply or openly resist the paper boundaries drawn by the state (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 415). This has generated successive stages of territorialisation, through which the state reclassifies space, yet these too are incomplete.

Numerous authors have taken up Vandergeest and Peluso’s work since, showing how non-state actors can extend state control over contested areas, including paramilitaries (Ballvé 2012; Grajales 2011), NGOs (Bluwstein and Lund 2018; Corson 2011; Holmes 2014; Woods 2019a; Woods and Naimark 2020), and private actors (Côte and Korf 2018; Peluso 2009; Peluso and Lund 2011). In contrast to the idea that territory is something that the state achieves (however incompletely), Byrne, Nightingale, and Korf (2016, 1289) argue that territory is a ‘co-production’ that emerges from the disparate projects enacted by multiple actors, including forest users and local governments. In so doing, they acknowledge the multiple, overlapping forms of rule that characterise marginal areas in much of the postcolonial world (see Baruah 2007; Cons 2016; Eilenberg 2012). The authors conclude that ‘territorialisation is more than a state project, and at the same time effectuates a state “effect”’ (Byrne et al. 2016, 1289). Furthermore, writing about conservation projects in Tanintharyi, Myanmar, Woods and Naimark (2020) show that international conservation organisations can legitimise the dispossession of Karen villagers. National parks, planned on the basis of maps that do not reflect the wartime displacement of villagers, mark the Karen as forest destroyers and criminals in their own homes. Woods and Naimark thus show how territorialisation can expulse certain populations according to the racialised logics of the postcolonial state. Unlike in the “territory” literature, the state does not figure as an institution that governs its population on equal terms, but as an institution complicit in violence against

particular ethnic groups (Mamdani 1996; Mbembe 2019). The authors cited in this paragraph thus evoke a portrayal of the state that approximates the contested, incomplete nature of statehood in the postcolonial world. Most draw from Vandergeest and Peluso’s formulation of “territorialisation”, bypassing political geographers’ conceptions of “territory” itself.

In addition, scholars also foreground how territorialisation is routinely challenged by competing spatial templates, under the mantle of “counter-territorialisation”. Counter-territorialisation refers to how subaltern actors recognise that territory is ‘a common meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterised by domination’ (Isager and Ivarsson 2002, 414). They thus subvert dominant actors’ uses of territorialisation for their own ends. Examples of counter-territorialisation include tree ordination ceremonies (Isager and Ivarsson 2002), villagers’ evasion of state regulations (Lestrelin 2011), the mapping of customary land (Peluso 1995), and the documentation of local ecological knowledge (Yong 2020). Many of these are ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985) that seek not to assert sovereignty over a new territory, but to enable marginalised populations to exert their agency within ongoing territorial strategies. Many also emerge from an interstitial space between modern strategies of state territorialisation and other templates for the ordering of place and power. The tree ordination ceremonies mentioned above, for instance, are a means by which ethnic minority villagers assert their desire to remain on land gazetted as conservation forests, while using symbols associated with Buddhism and the Thai monarchy to signal their commitment to being “good Thai citizens” (Isager and Ivarsson 2002). Indeed, as Shneiderman’s (2017) study of Himalayan communities demonstrates, “territory” itself becomes inflected with regional, ethnic, and linguistic-specific meanings when transplanted into non-Western contexts. Even so, counter-territorialisation is an ambivalent endeavour. Just as scholars theorizing territorialisation are keenly aware of the gap between bureaucratic ideal and messy reality, so too scholars theorizing counter-territorialisation are cautious not to overstate the oppositional force that these strategies wield. Counter-territorialisation can be suppressed, co-opted, or integrated into state territories (Agnew and Oslender

2013). It can also produce contradictory effects: for instance, in India’s northeast, Wouters (2020) shows how, under threat from the state, ethnic groups can harden territorial and ethnic boundaries, thereby contributing to conditions for communal violence.

Unlike political geographers’ engagements with “territory”, both territorialisation and counter-territorialisation have been studied throughout the postcolonial world: the aforementioned literature traverses contested areas in Colombia, Tanzania, India, Madagascar, Nepal, Laos, and Myanmar. Scholars also conceive of these processes as overlapping and dynamic; an ongoing push-and-pull between state domination and local resistance, both of which can only ever achieve temporary wins. Finally, territorialisation and counter-territorialisation are construed of as ambivalent, contradictory, and contested processes, embedded within the fraught relations between state and society that characterise the postcolonial world. By bringing the “territorialisation” literature in conversation with “territory”, I hope to arrive at a postcolonial conception of territory, that falls in line with postcolonial approaches to war (Barkawi 2016), development (Radcliffe 2005; Sharp and Briggs 2006; Simon 2006), and the “local” (Legg 2009). Such an approach will decentre Westphalian ideals of what the state “should be”, while foregrounding the experiences of subaltern groups (Jazeel and Legg 2019). Indeed, as Guha (1983) remarks in his foundational text, it is possible to think of territoriality in a way that takes non-dominant groups’ ‘awareness of his own world [sic] and his [sic] will to change it as our point of departure.’ In what follows, I also point out some scholars who have already made significant contributions to this task.

2.4.3 Between “territory” and “territorialisation”: a postcolonial approach

If, as Elden (2013) surmises, territory originated in 17th century Europe and was dispersed across the globe through colonisation, then the territorialisation literature describes how this movement met resistance every step of the way. Although literature on territory sees it as ‘a process, made and remade’ (Elden 2013, 16), it often underplays the depth and scope of resistance waged against this process in

the postcolonial world, even today. It is not just that territory is maintained through the repetitive performances of political actors, or that it emerges from an unstable ensemble of thought about science, space, and government, but that it is actively rendered incomplete by an irrepressible gap between the hegemony achieved on paper, and the spatial tactics of postcolonial subjects. Conversely, the literature on territory elucidates some oversights in the territorialisation literature too. For one, literature on territorialisation tends to focus on weapons of the weak at the expense of more overt, organised, and indeed “territorial” forms of resistance, such as protest camps (Ince 2012), peasant occupations (Halvorsen et al. 2019; Macaspac 2019), and indigenous struggles (Anthias 2020; Laing 2020; Wainwright and Bryan 2009). These strategies seek not only to assert marginalised groups’ belonging within readymade territories, but also to create new territories that challenge existing power structures. Secondly, the territorialisation literature stops short of conceptualising territory itself, perhaps due to its focus on epistemic communities within area studies and agrarian studies. Following injunctions by numerous postcolonial scholars to theorise from the Global South (Jazeel and McFarlane 2010; Robinson 2003; Roy 2009), this thesis seeks to show how literature on territorialisation can inform the concept of territory itself. In so doing, I hope to develop an interdisciplinary conversation between human geography, anthropology, and area studies.

Some scholars have made crucial advances in this direction. Hsing (2006; 2010, 6), for instance, shows how urban expansion in China can be understood as a ‘territorial project of local state building.’ Her work provides a nuanced portrayal of the state. For one, Hsing foregrounds the agency of *local* state officials in land-use planning, taxation, and zoning. Instead of conceiving of the state as a unitary actor, she shows how various levels of government compete to produce territory. Secondly, Hsing emphasises not only the extent to which territorialisation is incomplete, but also the myriad ways in which territory triggers contestation. She identifies three means by which ‘societal actors use territorial strategies for self-protection’ to varying degrees of success (Hsing 2010, 15): in the inner-city, long-term residents protest against redevelopment projects; on the urban fringe, villagers tend to bargain with

urban governments; and on the rural fringe, collective organisation tends to disintegrate. Hsing’s work, while not situated in the context of European colonisation, provides inroads for understanding territory as detached from the Westphalian state. She is careful to contextualise the Chinese state—referring often to the devolution of state functions to local governments and to evolution of Chinese socialism—and sensitive to the struggles waged by subaltern actors. With Hsing, I maintain that statehood is not a monolith, but must be contextualised. Territory-making in Karen State is conditioned by colonial legacies, the ethnocentric tendencies of the state, and the struggles of rebel actors (**Chapter 4**).

In addition, Halvorsen (2019) makes a call for a decolonial approach to territory. He argues for interrogating the concept of territory outside the European context, lest scholars ignore the means by which territory is structured by violent—and specifically colonial—power relations. By building on the work of Latin American geographers, who have informed and explained grassroots struggles against the state, Halvorsen defines territory as ‘the appropriation of space in pursuit of political projects’ (Halvorsen 2019, 791; see also Halvorsen et al. 2019; Jazeel and Legg 2019). Specifically, Halvorsen’s (2019) work is a rejoinder to Elden’s (2010) conception of territory as comprised of the political-economic relations of private property, and the political-strategic relations of state sovereignty. He argues that in Latin America, territory is much more than the sum of these; it includes spiritual, historical, and emotional relations between communities and the land they inhabit. I build on Halvorsen’s call to decolonise territory, by turning to the role of development and civil society in the postcolonial world. If, as I claimed at the beginning of this chapter, development is the dominant ‘interpretive grid through which the impoverished regions of the world are known’ (J. Ferguson 1990, xiii), then development can be thought of as the process through which an idealised notion of territory, consolidated at Westphalia, comes into active tension with the fraught relations between the state and numerous other actors in the postcolonial world.

Whereas Halvorsen (2019; Halvorsen et al. 2019) focuses on the alternative, resistive modes of territory mobilised during grassroots struggles, I focus instead on understanding territory as inherently

conflictual; generated at the precise, frictional points where contesting claims over space are generated by the overarching process of development. This extends Halvorsen's excellent work beyond the context of Latin America's robust history of socioterritorial movements, to the postcolonial world more generally, and is consistent with the relational understanding of development and war set out earlier. From this perspective, it is also possible to see civil society partnerships in Karen State as emblematic of how *development's territories* are made in other postcolonial contexts, where the existence of multiple authorities confounds Westphalian ideals of statehood. Subsequent chapters build on the backs of scholars reviewed in this chapter, who pave the way for understanding development, war, and territory in the postcolonial world. I return to development's territories in **Chapter 8**, when I reread political geographers' understandings of territory in the light of my ethnographic research.

Chapter 3 – Research design and methods

3.1 Introduction: doing relational geographies

Chapter 2 argued for a relational approach to how civil society actors transform socio-spatial dynamics in war-affected areas. This chapter explains how this can be put into practice. Although geographers increasingly conceive of ‘space as the product of interrelations’ (Massey 2005, 31), there has been less discussion about what a relational conception of space means for methodological practice. In particular, conceptualising territory as produced across multiple sites throws up some dilemmas for qualitative researchers who seek in-depth ethnographic engagement. How, for instance, can geographers reconcile a desire to embed themselves in the everyday lives of their interlocutors (Herbert 2000; Megoran 2017), with a wish to engage the networks, flows, and connections that stretch beyond the locality? The context of Karen State poses additional methodological challenges. I was aware that research in Myanmar’s ethnic states would require a ‘long-term investment of time to build trust... that first has to be proved’ (Dean 2010, 229). Yet, since state, mixed-authority, and KNU areas coexist in Karen State, I was concerned that I would not develop a broad understanding of the area through a single field site. I wondered: how might I adapt my research to the copresence of several configurations of state and rebel authority, while building sustained and ethical field relationships?

To navigate these tensions, I structured my research around ethnographic research in two sites—Hpa-An (corresponding to state/mixed-authority areas) and the Thai border/Mutraw (corresponding to KNU areas)—where I was a volunteer-researcher in a local civil society organisation. I also interviewed actors that were engaged in post-war development in and across these localities. This research design allowed me to be sensitive to power relations at various scales, the ethical considerations arising from doing field-based qualitative research, and the specific challenges of doing research in Karen State. I begin this chapter by explaining my research design, which is anchored in relational comparison. Originally conceptualised by Gillian Hart (2006, 2018), relational comparison provides an epistemology well-suited to conceiving of space as an outcome of relations. Next, I explain translocal ethnography; a term I use to recognise that my fieldwork design relates to—but is distinct from—multi-sited ethnography, which tends to privilege the “global” and “nation-state” scales. I then

discuss how I used participant observation and interviews in a war-affected area, where I relied on gatekeepers and encountered barriers to access. Throughout, I consider how my positionality in the field—as a young, female, volunteer-researcher—enabled and disabled certain kinds of research encounters.

‘Fieldwork is mediated and messy,’ Hyndman (2001b, 4, 8) writes, and leaves ‘intentional and unintentional impacts on the people and places that constitute subjects of study.’ In the final section, I consider ethical issues that emerged from my research. In line with my focus on social relations between actors, I consider fieldwork ethics as enacted within the dynamic relationship between researcher and participant, by encouraging participants to dialogue about and talk back to my research design.

3.2 Research design

My interest in the politics of development in Myanmar piqued in 2016, when I lived in Mae Sot, a Thai border town adjacent to Karen State, for several months. Many of my companions there were humanitarian workers that bemoaned how funding for Karen refugee camps was being redirected to inside Myanmar. At the time, I was not familiar with this issue—I was in Mae Sot to study undocumented migration, not the civil war—which ultimately inspired my DPhil research. My initial idea was to “follow the aid” (following Marcus 1995); to understand whether aid inflows into Myanmar were consolidating state control in contested areas. However, as I embarked on desk research and preliminary fieldwork activities, I felt uneasy with my original research questions. Firstly, this approach did not accommodate the complex power dynamics at work in Karen State. What would I make of mixed-authority areas, where state power was present, but not consolidated? Secondly, I had overlooked civil society organisations, although they were key targets of development funding. Thirdly, this framework left no room for nuance in the relations between civil society actors and state/rebel authorities. I found that actors that rejected the KNU’s authority did not necessarily welcome the state either. In short, my initial research questions failed to apprehend how each locality was constituted by

relations between development actors, state/rebel authorities, and civil society actors. Instead, the topic called for a relational conception of space, that would be the process of doing fieldwork itself.

3.2.1 Relational comparison in Karen State

Gillian Hart (2006, 2018) conceptualises relational comparison as an epistemological approach that incorporates a relational understanding of space. Emergent debates on relational geographies in the 1990s (e.g. Sayer 1991; Massey 1994) allowed Hart to see her field-sites—two former white towns in South Africa—as points where key processes came together, such as racialised dispossession and an influx of Taiwanese capital. Hart studied these towns neither as bounded units, nor as variants of an overarching process, but as ‘sites in the production of global processes in specific spatio-historical conjunctures’ (Hart 2018, 373). Moreover, relational comparison also juxtaposes multiple sites, in the hopes of pointing out ‘new connections, claims, and re-articulations’ (Hart 2006, 996). Relational comparison thus has implications for every part of the research process. This includes one’s choice of field-sites, which are selected because they appear, at least initially, to be sites at which ongoing processes converge; one’s activities within each field-site, which should be directed towards teasing out relationships between and within each locality; and one’s interpretation of findings, which should be grounded by an understanding that spaces, things, and structures do not exist prior to the process and relations that sustain them.

I was drawn to relational comparison because I saw multiple processes converging on Karen State. These include, but are not limited to, the aid influx into Myanmar, the civil war, and Karen ethnicisation. To be sure, comparisons have long been practiced in development studies and cognate disciplines, in a manner that sees individual cases as parts of a pre-existing whole, or as stages in a teleological process (see McMichael 1990; Robinson 2016; Ward 2010). For instance, comparisons informed by modernisation theory saw “pre-modern” societies as backwards and incomplete relative to “modern” societies. However, following recent research that applies relational comparison to

development, I see comparison as a means to understand how development practices and norms intersect with other social relations. For instance, Doshi and Casolo (2013) conceptualise bodies (women's, ethnic, indigenous) as constitutive of political mobilisations that transform development practices in two sites. Brooks and Herrick (2019) take the comparisons between “here” and “there” made by British health volunteers in Sierra Leone as an object of study. They show how volunteers' interpretations of Sierra Leone's healthcare system, as dysfunctional and corrupt, feed into uneven development. To these researchers, relational comparison can reveal how the outcomes of any development project exist only as mediated by other social processes.

In this vein, I chose Hpa-An and the Thai border/Mutraw as field-sites in the hopes of understanding how civil society negotiates development aid in contested areas. Hpa-An city is the locus of state control in Karen State. It is surrounded by mixed-authority villages, where local inhabitants encounter the state, the KNU, and smaller armed groups. Mutraw is largest territory controlled exclusively by the KNU, although most civil society organisations that implement activities there are based on the Thai border. Hpa-An and the Thai border/Mutraw thus represent seemingly oppositional relationships with state/rebel authorities, even if power dynamics in both localities are an outcrop of the Karen civil war. This choice of field-sites is also timely from the perspective of Burma/Myanmar studies, which has historically been divided between studies of “central Myanmar” and “borderland Myanmar.” Before the 2012 KNU ceasefires, a small number of researchers, journalists, and other visitors accessed KNU-controlled areas with the cooperation of the KNU and other non-state groups (e.g. Dudley 2010; McConnachie 2014). Access to central Myanmar was more restricted, due to the junta's isolationist policies. Foreign researchers who accessed state-controlled areas did so under conditions of extreme fear and surveillance (e.g. Skidmore 2004; Fink 2001; Thawngmung 2003), and travel outside Yangon—to state-controlled areas of Karen State—was nearly impossible. Indeed I do not know of any non-Burmese researchers who accessed Hpa-An before 2012 (contra Thawngmung

2019). Hence, I saw my research as a way of drawing connections that were previously foreclosed, between state- and rebel-controlled areas of Karen State.

3.2.2 Translocal ethnography: putting relational comparison to work

The authors mentioned earlier, who used relational comparison to explore political mobilisations (Doshi and Casolo 2013) and development volunteering (Brooke and Herrick 2019), found that new forms of subjectivity could emerge from particular, site-specific configurations of relations, that did not cohere with dominant discourses about development. Similarly, I was interested in how civil society actors might contest development interventions and state/rebel authority. This is consistent with a relational conception of space, which recognises that localities can provide distinct opportunities for reimagining broader power relations (Darling 2010; McFarlane 2009). However, I was also aware of the pressures that development funding places on civil society organisations, that are required to adhere to standardised organisational structures and donor priorities (Green 2012; Mercer and Green 2013). In my research, I hoped to be open to the ambivalence that civil society actors might express towards donors, which may not be reflected in project descriptions and donor-funded activities. This entailed an in-depth, fine-grained understanding of their lifeworlds, and that they invest a significant degree of trust in my research. However, although relational comparison provides an epistemological approach apt for this study, it has less to offer by way of methodology. Gillian Hart (2006, 982) uses the term critical ethnography, to suggest that ‘an explicit deployment of critical conceptions of spatiality can extend and enrich global ethnography’ (see also Hart 2004), but does not spell out what this means in practical terms. Instead, I use a *translocal ethnographic approach* to describe my research design. This indicates a methodology that juxtaposes two localities according to a relational comparative framework, that is related to—but distinct from—global and multi-sited ethnography.

Relational comparison shares an interest in emphasizing processes traversing the locality and larger scales with global ethnography and multi-sited ethnography. Both these methodological

strategies seek to reconcile ethnography’s time-intensive, seemingly singular, focus on a field-site, with observations of an increasingly networked world. Global ethnography, as conceptualised by Burawoy (2000, 4) sees the ethnographer’s ‘grounding’ in field-sites as a way to ‘spiral outwards and explore changes in globalisation’ (see also Chong 2007; Hendry 2003). However, Anderson (2012) critiques Burawoy, along with prominent anthropologists, for taking the global scale for granted. He criticises Tsing (2005), for instance, for positing Kalimantan as a site of friction between local interests and “global” connection, and Ong (2006) for presuming that state governance is responding to “global” capital flows. Anderson argues that ethnography requires a more careful interrogation of what constitutes the “global” (see also Bell 2013; Davies 2009; Katz 2001; Pratt and Yeoh 2003).

Similarly, the anthropologist George Marcus (1995) proposes multi-sited ethnography as a means of understanding the circulation of meanings, objects, and identities across the capitalist world system. Doing an ethnography of several sites, Marcus argues, allows ‘traditional ethnographic concerns with agency, symbols, and everyday practices... to be expressed on a differently configured spatial canvas’ (Marcus 1995, 98). Hence, multi-sited ethnography has been used to explore migrants’ care practices (Boccagni 2016; Hage 2005), activist networks (Jokela-Pansini 2019), the circulation of discourses (Benton et al. 2017), and illicit economies (Scheper-Hughes 2003). Compared with Burawoy, Marcus is more conscious that the global is an ‘emergent dimension of arguing about the connection among sites’ rather than a presumed frame of reference (Marcus 1995, 99). However, his work risks over-emphasizing transnational processes instead. Nearly all the studies mentioned above are based on field sites in multiple countries. However, migration scholars—among whom multi-sited ethnography has gained particular traction—have expressed a growing scepticism towards research that takes the nation-state scale for granted (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002).

This thesis takes on the idea that ethnography can be compatible with examining development as a process that enrolls ‘NGO employees, consultants, expatriate aid staff, volunteers, and globally networked aid professionals’ across multiple sites (Mosse 2013, 235). However, I seek a more flexible,

open, and unbounded conception of space than global or multi-sited ethnography, as subjects in Karen State interact with development actors in a manner that is specific to each locality. Hence, I frame my ethnography as “translocal,” rather than as global or multi-sited. The concept of translocality emerges from migration scholars who draw attention to mobilities that do not necessarily cross national boundaries (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). A translocal perspective foregrounds processes that span localities, and the situatedness of these processes in the ‘material, embodied, and corporeal qualities of the local’ (Brickell and Datta 2011, 4). I apply a translocal lens to ethnographic research in three ways. Firstly, I take the locality as a starting point, rather than a global or transnational frame of reference; designing my research to prioritise civil society actors’ everyday experiences (thus giving primacy to the local), rather than the effects of development funding on civil society (which foregrounds transnational funding flows). In practice, I prioritise participant observation, a method considered the cornerstone of ethnographic research (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007; Herbert 2000; Watson and Till 2010). By conducting four months of participant observation at a civil society organisation in both my field-sites—Hpa-An and the Thai border/Mutraw—I gleaned insights that were too mundane, unremarked, or subtle to arise in settings set up for research purposes (Reeves 2011).

Secondly, translocality (as conceptual lens) and ethnography (as methodological approach) together can illuminate relations within and between sites. Translocality has been used to understand how activists facilitate the exchange of knowledge, practices, and resources that disrupt dominant power relations (Baird 2015; Banerjee 2011; McFarlane 2009). These scholars foreground connections that are significant in the minds of their research participants, rather than those presumed by researchers. Participant observation likewise offers the opportunity to understand the emic relations that constitute each field-site. Through a stint at each civil society organisation, I gained insight into their day-to-day workings, and observed them building relationships. For example, although Hpa-An is primarily state-controlled, participant observation allowed me to accompany civil society actors to mixed-authority villages, where they were implementing activities. These visits deepened my understanding of how my

participants related to local inhabitants and state/rebel authorities. The field-site, as Peck and Theodore (2012) observe, emerges as ‘distended’ when adopting a relational conception of space. Participant observation allowed me to follow the relations that civil society organisations forge across sites and scales, without retreating into pre-defined spatial categories.

Finally, a translocal lens allows me to compare emic connections between spaces and spatial imaginaries developed by powerful actors. Although state-society relations vary according in different localities, states also seek an appearance of centralised control (Sharma and Gupta 2006). Mosse (2004) makes a parallel argument about development: that while ethnographers often observe the frayed ends of project implementation, it is equally important to investigate how projects seem coherent from the perspectives of donor states and INGOs (see also Mosse and Lewis 2005). In my research, I avoid taking the “nation-state,” “development,” or similar categories as all-consuming frames of reference; however I also sought to recognise that these operate as categories of practice with real effects (Moore 2008). To do this, I supplemented participant observation with interviews with development actors, authorities, and civil society actors. When these interviews were set against my findings from participant observation, they provided a fuller understanding of the ‘power-laden processes of constitution, connection, and disconnection, along with slippages, openings, and contradictions’ that traversed my field sites (Hart 2006, 982).

3.3 Research methods and field experiences

Participant observation and interviews were thus the building blocks of my time in the field. In this section, I walk the reader through ten months of fieldwork between August 2018 and May 2019 (see **Table 1**). I write from the standpoint that knowledge is constructed intersubjectively; a product of ongoing negotiations between the ‘researcher and researched, insider and outsider, self and other, body and environment, and field and home’ (Bondi 2003; Lobo 2010; Watson and Till 2010, 4), although I concede that my account of these relationships is partial in itself (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015; Moser 2008; Rose 1997). This section also adopts feminist and postcolonial critiques that debunk the neutral gaze of the researcher, by positioning myself as situated within existing power relations (e.g. Billo and Hiemstra 2013; Staeheli and Nagar 2002). The need for openness about how one accesses information is particularly relevant to the context of Karen State, where a paucity of field research and practical barriers to travel mean that one’s knowledge of the field is highly dependent on gatekeepers (Brooten and Metro 2014; Lertchavalitsakul 2014; Vogler 2007).

Anne Décobert (2016), whose work on cross-border humanitarianism on the Thai-Myanmar border is closely related to mine, thus also conducted her research by volunteering with a local organisation, during which she felt compelled to “take sides” in a polarised and emotionally charged debate about the legitimacy of cross-border aid. Décobert (2014) describes her research as a “positioned interpretation” that emerges at the intersection of her roles as foreign volunteer, sympathetic insider, and ethnographic researcher. In the hopes of providing my own positioned interpretation, this chapter incorporates subjective reflections on the relationships I formed in the field, which I wrote about in my field diary and coded after returning (Sanjek 1990; Punch 2012). The comparative design of my research also complicated my positioning in the field. In each field site, I repositioned myself in relation to my role as a volunteer, my interlocutors’ familiarity with foreign researchers, and the responses of people I met. I sometimes felt that my connections in Hpa-An inflected how people responded to me on the Thai border, and vice versa. Not only did this provide insight into power dynamics in Karen State, it

also made it all the more important that I reflect on this in a field diary. To attenuate the self-indulgent dimensions of reflexivity (Kobayashi 2003), I have elected to foreground instances where others responded to me, rather than contemplate my own positionality as separate from these field encounters (Nagar 2002; Sultana 2007).

Table 1. Fieldwork design.

Fieldwork design		
Time	Location	Methods
August – September 2018	Yangon, Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Interviews</i> with representatives of donors, international organisations, INGOs, and civil society actors
September – December 2018	Hpa-An, Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Participant observation</i> at Bright Stars Community Academy (BSCA), documented using daily field-notes. • <i>Interviews</i> with representatives of Hpa-An-based civil society actors, INGO sub-offices, and KNU • <i>Interviews</i> with BSCA students and alumni
December 2018 (5 days)	Mae Sot, Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Interviews</i> with representatives of Mae-Sot based civil society actors and KNU
January – April 2019	Thai border, and Mutraw, Kawthoolei	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Participant observation</i> at the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), including travel to the Salween Peace Park in KNU-controlled Mutraw District, documented using daily field-notes • <i>Interviews</i> with representatives of border-based civil society actors, and INGO sub-offices • Presentation of preliminary findings to KESAN
April – May 2019	Hpa-An and Yangon, Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Interviews</i> with representatives of donors, international organisations, INGOs, and civil society actors • Follow-up with previous contacts in Hpa-An • Presentation of preliminary findings to interviewees

3.3.1 Participant observation: Hpa-An

Through contacts from my previous research, a Yangon-based NGO put me in touch with the Bright Stars Community Academy (BSCA, a pseudonym). BSCA is one of several dozen “post-secondary” schools on the Thai-Myanmar border and Myanmar’s ethnic states. These are full-time, donor-funded education programmes, where young adults—largely from non-Bamar ethnic groups—are taught subjects such as civic education, social science, leadership and management, and English language, that are not covered in state schools (see Maber 2016). Since 2012, BSCA has admitted 36 students a year for its two-year programme, most of whom are Karen. Many stay on the school compound during the school term, as they come from remote villages across Karen State and further afield. Tuition fees are 10,000 kyat (USD6.25) per month, but half the students are on partial or full needs-based scholarships.

I volunteered at BSCA between September and December 2018. My main task was to teach daily social science classes, together with one of BSCA’s full-time teachers. I taught in English, although my co-teacher would sometimes help me to translate difficult concepts into Burmese. I also participated in the school’s social life, eating with students and staff, celebrating birthdays and accompanying them on service-learning trips, football matches, and fundraising events in their home villages. In this way, I learned about BSCA’s relationship with mixed-authority areas of Karen State, and was able to circumvent restrictions on foreigners’ travel into contested areas of Myanmar (see Lertchavalitsakul 2014). At the beginning, I gravitated more towards students and staff comfortable speaking in English, but many friendships deepened as the weeks wore on. Language learning contributed significantly to my rapport with colleagues. Watson (2004) explains how language learning in the field helped her to build personal relationships, particularly in the instances when she made mistakes and laughed about them. Although I regret my inability to speak fluent Burmese, I practised speaking Burmese with my colleagues, and found that they were delighted to hear me conversing in Burmese in settings we attended together, such as civil society trainings.

What did I learn from participant observation in Hpa-An? For one, being part of the daily routines of a civil society organisation taught me about the relationships between BSCA, authorities, and development actors. I witnessed the frequency at which BSCA staff were attending capacity-building workshops, from which I learned how BSCA was embedded in emerging relations between development actors and civil society organisations. The classes I taught also gave me a sense of my students' priorities, and a backdrop for interviews I conducted with them. Once, a student sought me out, vexed after a class about national identity. 'I feel like I am Karen,' the 19-year-old Sein Lwin said, 'I don't feel like I am Burmese' (fieldnotes, 1 Nov 2018). After this encounter, I dug into national and ethnic identity in interviews. Moreover, "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998) also allowed themes to surface that I had overlooked. That many of my colleagues and students mentioned how they were the first in their family or village to graduate from high school, encouraged me to explore generational change. Hanging out also surfaced themes that were perhaps uncomfortable to speak about. Chief among these was the relationship between the Pwo and Sgaw Karen ethnolinguistic groups. Although scholars have pointed out that the Karen are hardly a homogenous ethnic group (Cheesman 2002; Walker 2001), I naively glossed over these differences. However, after a Pwo-speaking colleague brought up how his linguistic affiliation contributed to his disillusionment with the KNU, I began to delve into intra-ethnic dynamics. Participant observation helped to decentre my own perspective, so that I could better accommodate the priorities of my participants.

Jordan and Moser (2020, 3) suggest that being a volunteer-researcher places one in a 'culturally definable' role, through which one can establish a legitimate presence in the field (also Goerisch 2017). Yet, although my role as volunteer teacher (*Sayama* in Burmese) enabled my access into Hpa-An's civil society landscape, my role as a "researcher" was less straightforwardly received. BSCA's principal and I spoke about my thesis prior to my arrival, and introduced me as a PhD researcher to my colleagues and students. However, I was the first PhD student to teach at BSCA and most other teachers were not familiar with PhD research. When spending time with my students and colleagues, I found it awkward

to excuse myself to write fieldnotes or conduct interviews. This situation was compounded by a parallel ambiguity over the extent to which I was “foreign.” My colleagues were surprised that I did not seem fazed by the food, the heat, or the mosquitoes. As I had experience teaching in similar settings, I was also told that I could speak English in a manner that was “acceptable”, whereas other foreign volunteers had tended to speak too fast or use excessively complex words. I could pass as Burmese, so long as conversations remained simple enough for me to follow. Yet some incidents played up my outsider status too. When the US Embassy visited, the principal asked me to explain my research in our office, a small room that I shared with five other teachers. I felt uncomfortable, dishonest, and exposed, speaking about my research in a different accent and through the use of academic jargon, when the other teachers had not been introduced. Like Décobert (2014), I became a broker between the Anglophone world of international development and my interlocutors.

Ultimately, although the volunteer-researcher role afforded me advantages in the field, it was not immediately identifiable. I chalked this up to context: the nascency of the civil society and development landscape in Hpa-An meant that my interlocutors were unfamiliar with foreign researchers. As such, I often looked for when I could clarify my research in private. I wanted to alleviate anxieties incurred by trying to fit me within existing categories—such as a volunteer teacher or a distant and inaccessible foreigner—so that my interlocutors would feel comfortable with me. Moreover, whereas research participants sometimes speculate about what researchers want to know, providing oft-repeated commentaries on key themes, I had the opposite problem in Hpa-An: I learned a lot, but it was difficult to narrow it down. I did not feel that my interviewees were rehashing a “standard story”, as the standard story did not exist (contra Matelski 2014). For this reason, I did more interviews in Hpa-An than on the Thai border, where I detected a greater consensus over civil society’s role vis-à-vis development actors and authorities, and where I could access more grey literature pertaining to civil society actors, including annual reports, research reports, and the like.

3.3.2 Participant observation: Thai border

As with BSCA, I used contacts from my previous research to get in touch with the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), who agreed that could I volunteer at their main office on the Thai border between January and April 2019.²⁰ KESAN is a border organisation, that works on indigenous rights and livelihoods projects with war-affected communities in Karen State. Compared to BSCA, KESAN is larger and more established. The tasks I was assigned at KESAN reflected their familiarity with my dual role as “volunteer” and “researcher.” I was asked to write reports, develop project proposals, and write a research manual. In April 2019, I travelled to KNU areas with my colleagues, to observe KESAN’s role in establishing the Salween Peace Park. The Salween Peace Park is an initiative spanning more than 5,000km² of KNU territory, that aims to create more equitable relations between local KNU officials, civil society organisations, and local inhabitants. The Peace Park is the culmination of the work that KESAN, and other border organisations, have done in KNU areas for decades. KESAN’s cooperation was crucial to my access to KNU areas, where their staff also helped me to interpret from Sgaw Karen.

As with BSCA, I observed the relationship between civil society, development actors, and authorities while at KESAN. I sat in on internal meetings and meetings with prospective donors, and was privy to staff members’ frustrations. As KESAN had non-Karen staff, these meetings were conducted in English. A key concern that emerged was just how ‘laborious’ (in the words of a colleague) it was to maintain donor relations. In KESAN’s context, this referred not only to the tedium of keeping receipts and reports, but also to working against donors’ presumptions that civil society organisations in rebel areas were aggravating conflict. Similarly, I learned about the nuances of the relationship between border organisations and the KNU. While working on a project proposal with a KESAN staff member, I learned about the delicate line the organisation sought to tread between implementing activities independently from the KNU (as is the norm in the peacebuilding literature) and a need for

²⁰ KESAN is not a pseudonym, as I have the organisation’s consent to use their name here.

the KNU to recognise these activities (as the context demands). Finally, my work at KESAN involved collaborations with other border organisations, which led me to explore these ties in greater detail.

On my first day at KESAN, when I explained my PhD research on “Karen State”, a Karen staff member asked me point-blank: ‘are you looking at Mergui-Tavoy?’ I knew what this question meant: Mergui-Tavoy is an area claimed by the KNU, but it is not part of Kayin State as defined by the Myanmar government. In essence, he was asking me whose definition of Karen areas I was using. I stumbled over my answer that day, struggling to explain that I was doing a comparative study of Hpa-An and the Thai border within the constraints of access, and that I did not take any definition of Karen State for granted (fieldnotes, 7 Jan 2019). This incident illustrates how, having spent four months in Hpa-An, my time on the Thai border felt as though I was crossing between worlds. Terminology differs: in Hpa-An, “Mergui-Tavoy” is known as “Tanintharyi”, as designated by the Myanmar government. This tension was productive, if uneasy to navigate. My stint at KESAN also shed light on my understanding of state/mixed-authority areas. Using my experience with research methodologies, KESAN asked me to write a research manual for their volunteers and staff members in KNU areas, that would be translated into Sgaw Karen. My colleague explained that the manual should position local communities as ‘knowledge-holders’ (fieldnotes, 14 Feb 2019). Not only did this task help me to understand KESAN’s attitude towards local communities, it also illuminated what I did *not* observe in Hpa-An. Although BSCA’s staff recognised the need to learn from local communities, most civil society organisations there did not prioritise conducting their own research. Participant observation created a productive tension between my two field-sites, from which I explored relations between civil society, development actors, and authorities.

Finally, my role as a foreign volunteer-researcher was more “culturally definable” at KESAN than at BSCA (c.f. Jordan and Moser 2020). I was often referred to as one of the “*kawlahwah*” (Sgaw Karen: white/Western) students, although I did not see myself as “white”. For decades, *kawlahwah* researchers have worked with border organisations to access Myanmar’s conflict areas, resulting in

some research fatigue (see Pascucci 2019). KESAN staff members had been disappointed by scholars who wrote research that disempowered them or local communities, or who revealed details in published work that threatened their security (see Décobert 2014). Thus, I knew trust and access would have to be negotiated, rather than taken for granted (Campbell et al. 2006). Knowing that four months was not a long time, I tried to commit myself fully to supporting the organisation. This meant spending nearly every weekday at the office, and electing not to do interviews with staff members until my final weeks there. I had much less time to do interviews than in Hpa-An, when my time was more unstructured, but it was worthwhile given the quality of what I learned from participant observation. In addition, I presented some preliminary findings to KESAN staff on my final day. I hoped that this would help quell their concerns about my research, and allow them to challenge anything they found disingenuous. That day, some KESAN staff took issue with how I spoke about my research as a comparison between “government areas” and “KNU areas,” pointing out that many in KNU areas considered the KNU to be their government. I have therefore framed my thesis according to “state” versus “rebel” authorities.

3.3.3 Interviews

This thesis also uses semi-structured interviews to explore themes emerging from participant observation in greater depth. As many of my interviewees were people I had encountered in these settings, I used interviews to delve into their motivations, sentiments, and aspirations (see Rubin and Rubin 2002). I sought to create a space where they could voice concerns that they might not be able to express in public. At the same time, I used interviews to learn how individual actors were situated within wider power relations. In total, I conducted 78 interviews in four categories (see **Table 2; Appendix A**). These interviews encompassed 86 individuals, as some were interviewed in pairs.

Firstly, I interviewed development actors active in Karen State, comprising representatives from donors, international organisations, and INGOs, who make key decisions that regulate the flow of development assistance into Karen State. I interviewed INGOs at the head office level, in Yangon, and the sub-office level, paying attention to how these actors perceived civil society. Secondly, I interviewed civil society representatives in both state/mixed-authority and KNU areas about their interactions with authorities, development actors, and beneficiaries, including BSCA and KESAN representatives. Thirdly, I interviewed KNU officials from social service departments that were receiving development assistance. I did not conduct any interviews with Myanmar state officials. And finally, I interviewed alumni and students at BSCA, as means of understanding how civil society had shaped their life histories and relationships with other actors. All my interviews were conducted in English, except for five civil society interviews in Hpa-An, done through a Burmese interpreter. English proficiency was fairly common among my interviewees, since they were in regular contact with international donors. That said, my basic grasp of Thai and Burmese was handy in establishing a rapport with interviewees, and wherever possible, I looked out for where English loanwords took on an altered meaning in the local context.

Table 2. Breakdown of interviewees.

Breakdown of interviewees			
Type of interview		Number of interviews	Remarks
Development actors	Donors	3	
	International organisations	5	
	INGOs (Yangon)	8	Representatives of INGO head offices, based in Yangon, which have projects in Karen State.
	INGOs (sub-offices in Karen State or Thai-Myanmar border)	10	Representatives of INGO sub-offices in Karen State, usually in Hpa-An.
Civil society in state/mixed-authority areas	Civil society actors in Yangon	3	Organisations active in Yangon and Myanmar's ethnic states.
	Civil society actors in Hpa-An	18	Organisations mostly active only in Karen State, in state/mixed authority areas.
	BSCA students and alumni	14	Life history interviews with BSCA students and alumni in Hpa-An.
Civil society in KNU areas	Civil society actors	12	Organisations based on the Thai border, although some have sub-offices inside Myanmar. Includes interviews with KESAN.
Authorities	KNU	5	Conducted on the Thai border, with officials representing social service departments.
Total		78	

3.3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews with civil society, development actors, and authorities

I used interviews with civil society representatives, development actors, and authorities to understand the networks and relations traversed by the flow of development aid into Karen State. I contacted development and civil society actors in Karen State through the Myanmar Information Management Unit's (MIMU) online contact list, which collates donors, INGOs, and NGOs registered in Myanmar. I also interviewed actors in the civil society organisations I was working with. I then snowballed from these sources and from previous contacts on the Thai border, to set up interviews with KNU representatives, and civil society organisations, including those operating covertly. Volunteering went a long way in establishing access and trust with the latter. These interviews afforded me a wider understanding of how BSCA and KESAN were embedded in the civil society landscapes on the border and in Hpa-An, and an understanding of the routes taken by development funding. In some cases, I interviewed donors and subgranting I/NGOs that were directing funding to civil society organisations I had encountered. Sometimes, my interviewees also invited me to observe events, such as trainings and networking sessions organised by INGOs. My interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 120 minutes in length. Audio recordings, where taken, were transcribed after each interview, and coded using the qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose (see **section 3.4.1** on the ethics of note-taking and audio recording).

Small (2009) argues that when explaining processes unknown before the start of the study, the goal of interviews is not generalisability, but to use each interview to refine one's understanding of emergent phenomena. I adopted Small's strategy of "sequential interviewing", which meant that although I began with an interview guide, I refined it with each successive interview, with reference to what else I wanted to find out. Moreover, I saw interviews as opportunities to create a dynamic dialogue, both between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bondi 2003; Grace 2013), and "between" sites under comparison (Peck and Theodore 2012). I paid particular attention to the ensuring that interviewees could speak to me openly, particularly when they knew me from my associations with BSCA or

KESAN. Where possible, I met them outside of my workplace, in the hopes of exchanging ideas as individuals, rather than as representatives of these organisations (see Sin 2003). Where relevant, I also asked interviewees to respond to my own emergent findings, in the hopes of acknowledging their expertise, and establishing transparency in regards to my research. Representatives of border organisations, for instance, sometimes responded to my experiences in Hpa-An by explaining their views on the state’s restrictions on civil society. It is in this sense that I saw interviews as an opportunity for a dialogue “between” sites.

3.3.3.2 Life history interviews with students

Besides the aforementioned interviews, I also conducted sixteen life history interviews with BSCA students and alumni in Hpa-An. I conducted these interviews because of the paucity of literature on state/mixed-authority areas in Karen State. I could not travel extensively in these areas myself, so my students’ narrations of growing up in these areas were crucial to my understanding of broader territorial dynamics. Although memories—particularly memories of violence and conflict—are inevitably distorted, I see them as valuable not because of their accuracy or truthfulness, but because they situate the speaker’s state of mind, aspirations, and desires, within the wider context (Fujii 2010; Hedström 2019). Furthermore, I understood my students’ two years at BSCA as a “vital conjuncture”, or a crucial life event upon which students’ futures pivot (following Johnson-Hanks 2002). For many students, BSCA was the first time they had come into contact with civil society. I asked about their impressions of state authorities, rebel authorities, and development actors, and how their perceptions of these had changed during their time at BSCA.

Because my students viewed me as an authority figure, I was careful to set up interviews so that they could share their opinions with relative freedom. Although the BSCA principal introduced my research to all his students, I only recruited those that I felt comfortable with, and assured them that everything they shared would be kept private, even from BSCA staff. During the interview, I deployed

two tactics intended to destabilise the hierarchical relationship between us. Firstly, inspired by graphic elicitation and diagramming methods, I drew a timeline of their lives as they spoke, encouraging them to correct me and fill in details (see e.g. Bagnoli 2009; Kesby 2000; Jackson 2012). I hoped that working on this together, with them assuming the role of the teacher, would help them understand that I was interested in their lives outside the classroom, and relieve the pressure of giving me the “right answer.” Secondly, at the end of the interview, I encouraged my students to ask about my life. They often asked about growing up in Singapore, my studies in the UK, and my thoughts on Myanmar. Sometimes, they sought my advice on problems they were facing at home or in school. These conversations lasted up to an hour after the “official” end of my interview, and allowed me to place my research within the broader context of my students’ lives. Shifting the power dynamics between myself and my students also enriched participant observation, as they began to offer their interpretations of everyday events that they thought I would be interested in.

3.3.3.3 Limits to access: language and positionality

There were, however, several limitations of interviews. Firstly, all my interviews were done English, except for five interviews with civil society representatives in Hpa-An. I conducted these with the help of a Burmese translator, Nan Thazin, who was a friend and BSCA alumnus. Thazin was organised, careful, and personable. However, I found these interviews difficult to integrate into my research. For one, it was much more difficult to achieve a two-way dialogue about my findings, as I described earlier, with a translator present. Conversations took on a stop-start quality instead. I also felt that being unable to share my research with these participants made for an uncomfortably extractive relationship. Secondly, the use of honorifics and polite particles in Burmese created a much more hierarchical relationship between ourselves and our interviewees. My interviewees would refer to us both as “little sister” (Burmese: *nyimalay*) during these interviews, although I was never referred to like this during the interviews I conducted myself. Finally, somewhat ironically, Thazin was not familiar with the

development jargon that punctuated these interviews. When acronyms like “WASH” or “UNDP” cropped up, Thazin would ask me to “translate” them for her. These encounters cemented my sense that development is a cross-cultural field, where language is constitutive of highly unequal power relations. I decided to focus on English-speaking interviewees, since many interviewees that were in direct contact with development actors were fluent in English. However, my volunteer stints and conversations with Thazin helped me to refine the manner in which I spoke English, so I consciously used certain words and common understandings to put my interviewees at ease.

Finally, my age, gender, and ethnicity seemed fairly inconsequential during participant observation, overshadowed by my identity as a volunteer-researcher. Indeed because I “looked Burmese,” I slipped into meetings without turning heads and could follow my students to villages after dark. However, when pursuing interviews, these factors delimited who I could speak to. Early on in Hpa-An, I met a Saw Sam, a young, English-speaking Karen man working at my guesthouse, who had contacts in several civil society organisations. When he offered to show me around, I presumed this was the norm for visitors to the guesthouse, and was delighted at the prospect of expanding my social circle. However, things soon became uncomfortable. Sam asked repeatedly about my marital status and told me that ‘people will think we are boyfriend and girlfriend, because you have a Sgaw Karen face.’ He bought me a beer at the night market, which I turned down. However, when a BSCA student saw me, she told me that she was surprised because ‘most teachers cannot drink with students’ (fieldnotes, 18 Aug 2018). I moved to another guesthouse shortly after, but felt dejected: I thought that by “hanging out” I had been a good ethnographer, but instead I had become a bad volunteer and put my safety at risk. Theidon (2014), a researcher and a woman, notes that research in conflict settings often demands performing masculine bravado. Yet, I found that even striving to become “one of the guys” was impossible because I was being held up to shifting moral codes and social expectations. While it was generally accepted that foreign women could “hang out” with men, I was hardly ever invited to “grab a beer” with male participants. Even some of my young female friends in Hpa-An were initially hesitant

to drink around me, a young Asian woman, as they presumed that alcohol was a taboo for me too. Since these informal settings were largely inaccessible to me, I trained my attention on interviewing people I already knew, and building safe, reciprocal relationships with them.

3.4 Ethical considerations in translocal research

Besides inspiring a turn towards qualitative methods, postcolonial and feminist scholarship within geography also paves the way for reconceptualising research ethics beyond institutional approval and informed consent. This entails recognising how research among marginalised communities has historically resulted in extractive relationships, and seeking to redress these before, during, and after fieldwork (Griffiths 2017; Hyndman 2001b; Scheyvens and Leslie 2000). Ethics, from this perspective, is about being attuned to, and continually challenging the unequal power relations that emerge in the research process (Cloke et al. 2000; Nagar 2002; Sultana 2007). Besides being a foreign researcher, two aspects of my research design augment the ethical stakes of my research. Firstly, doing research in war-affected areas complicates that the ethical injunction to “do no harm” (Brooten and Metro 2014; Metro 2014; Wood 2006). How could I “give back” to participants who had already experienced immense violence? Secondly, when doing research on more than one site, ‘one finds oneself with all sorts of cross cutting and contradictory personal commitments’ that must be negotiated (Marcus 1995, 113). Likewise, my research design—its comparative setup and its inclusion of participants from various rungs of the development hierarchy—shaped the ethical dilemmas I faced. I wanted to be open about who I was meeting, while protecting the information that each actor shared with me, even if others were curious about it.

Hence, I acquired institutional approval from the University of Oxford’s Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) before starting my fieldwork, but also sought to go beyond. I understood ethics as making ‘situated judgments’ through which I enacted care and responsibility for those involved in my research, in accordance to what I understood about the context (Darling 2014,

211; Ferdinand et al. 2017). I saw ethics as relational, rather than a purely functional aspect of doing research (Cahill et al. 2007); a way of extending my relational ontology of space into the practice of doing research itself. This section therefore explains three principles that guided my research—trust, reciprocity, and dialogue—and how I enacted them in the relationships I formed in the field.

3.4.1 Trust

At the most fundamental level, I hoped that my participants would trust me enough to share their lifeworlds with me, without feeling concerned that this knowledge might be used against them. Prior to starting fieldwork, CUREC approved my requests to obtain written and verbal consent from my participants, depending on the situation. During fieldwork, I used written consent forms for most representatives of donors and INGOs, and verbal consent for other interviewees, where I judged that participants may not be familiar with written English or where participants might have had negative experiences with contract-like documents. In each case, I explained that what they told me would be confidential, that they could stop the interview at any time, and that this research was done for the purpose of my thesis and scholarly publications. I recorded interviews only with my interviewees' consent, and in the minority of cases when I felt that our discussion might be especially sensitive, I asked to take notes instead. During participant observation, I introduced myself as a PhD researcher to both BSCA and KESAN from the outset, and told them that I was volunteering to conduct research on development and civil society in Karen State. BSCA is a pseudonym, but KESAN is not; this reflects conversations I had with each organisation about the risks and benefits of using their names. In this thesis, I use pseudonyms for names and organisations (except KESAN), and have eliminated other identifying information to the best of my ability.

Ethnographers note that taking on multiple identities on the field, through which a researcher wavers along the insider/outsider spectrum, can engender variable relations of trust and distrust (Aberese-Ako 2016). Earlier, I discussed how my participants were sometimes unfamiliar with

academic research. Ambiguity over my identity was accentuated by how it shifted according to the localities I travelled to: I was variously a teacher, a volunteer, a friend, and a researcher. Besides the standard informed consent procedures mentioned earlier, I sought to minimise distrust resulting from multiple identities by explaining to all my participants that my research entailed volunteering on “both sides” of the Thai-Myanmar border. By disclosing my existing relationships, I hoped that they could make more informed decisions about what to share with me. Hence, I sought to engender trust through a dual commitment to the confidentiality of my participants, and to transparency about my research agenda.

3.4.2 Reciprocity

Reciprocity—or “giving back”—was another principle through which I navigated ethical dilemmas. Like others who have used integrated volunteering into their methodology, I saw this as a way of directly contributing to those involved in my research, and a recognition that academic research itself often fails to make tangible impacts (Goerisch 2017; Halvorsen 2018; Mason et al. 2013). However, I also recognise that besides the “immediate” reciprocity enacted in direct, give-and-take relationships, researchers should also strive for “general reciprocity,” or a desire to produce mutual benefits throughout the relational world that one creates throughout the research process (Blazek and Askins 2019; Cahill et al. 2007). Outside the tasks I was set as a volunteer, I tried to pinpoint areas where I could contribute because of the relationships I had built in the field. The connections I had made across civil society organisations on the “border” and the “inside” were helpful in this respect: people I spoke to in one field-site were sometimes curious about the other, but felt hamstrung by issues of access, security, and a lack of personal contacts. Whenever my interlocutors brought this up, and with mutual consent, I sought to make personal introductions that would increase mutual understanding. A similar dynamic occurred with development actors I interviewed, who were curious about border organisations. In this case, I pointed them to resources that would help them understand the situation from their

perspective, and tried to create a space where they could ask me questions about the Karen civil war without judgment. However, I mostly elected not to offer personal introductions as I understood the concerns of border organisations too.

Nagar (2002, 185) calls researchers to consider ‘how we can serve as useful channels of communication between scholars and activists... who are not as mobile as we are.’ As one of the “footloose” researchers that Nagar describes, I produced commentaries on my research findings on online, open-access channels; one on BSCA’s position within Myanmar’s community education landscape, together with an NGO worker who had experiences with programmes besides BSCA (Loong and Rinehart 2019), and another about KESAN’s approach to peacebuilding (Loong 2019a). Both articles were published after being reviewed by representatives of the respective organisation; the latter was subsequently developed into a book chapter with two colleagues from KESAN (Loong et al. forthcoming). These outputs served three functions. Firstly, they gave my participants a glimpse the kinds of written work I might produce. Secondly, by raising the public profile of these organisations and dispelling certain myths about them, I hoped to directly benefit them. And finally, I saw these commentaries as resources that my participants could use in their own struggles. They could pass the commentaries on to actors that might benefit their work, if they liked. I recognise that the strategies I used could not reverse the immense violence that many of my participants faced, but I hope that they could, in some way, augment their ability to challenge dominant power structures on their own terms.

3.4.3 Dialogue

Finally, in recognition of the extractive, one-way relationship that has historically characterised research, I hoped to build dialogue—or opportunities for “speaking back”—into the research process (following Cahill et al. 2007). I used the interview setting as an opening for my participants to raise concerns with me in private. If I was interviewing someone that I was working with, I used this setting to ask if there was anything I could do better, or if they wanted to know more about my research. I also

assured interviewees that they could ask me any questions they liked at the end of our conversation. Sometimes these questions forced me to confront my own agenda and my positioning vis-à-vis multiple field-sites. Once, a civil society representative asked: ‘are you doing this to approach governments, or change governments, and which governments will they be? Will you use this [research] politically?’ (interview, Robert, 26 Mar 2019). I felt torn. I empathised with calls for researchers to be politically engaged, but was hesitant to lay out a strategy there and then, since I had not yet sounded out others that might hold different views. I explained that my baseline commitment was first to learn, listen, and understand the views of people I spoke to, and then to use these to challenge the power inequalities I witnessed. I felt that, in the thick of fieldwork, making conclusive statements about my research would contradict my desire to truly listen.

I saw sharing preliminary findings with participants as means of continuing a dialogue between myself and my participants too. I have already mentioned how I presented my research at KESAN, during which staff members questioned the terminology I used. I was not able to conduct a similar presentation with BSCA staff, as it was too early in my fieldwork. However, I visited Hpa-An after four months on the border, and was able to speak with some BSCA staff and other interviewees one-to-one. This dialogue will continue after thesis submission, when a copy of my thesis and a shorter, five-page summary will be disseminated to my participants wherever possible. Finally, given that ethical research is about the ‘recognition of people’s strengths and frailties (including our own)’ (Blazek and Askins 2019, 4), I recognise that I will have failed to live up to my own ethical principles in some respects. This might be due to the way that a PhD or the academy is structured—for instance, no matter my attempts to involve participants in the process, my thesis is ultimately a single-authored endeavour—or because of my own blind spots (see Harrowell et al. 2018). Nonetheless I hope that by building on relationships with my participants, even after my PhD, I can continue to pursue a dialogue about my research findings and about what it means to be an ethical researcher in this context, no matter how inadequately I have fulfilled these goals.

Chapter 4 – Placing “Karen” within the territory of Myanmar

4.1 Introduction

This and subsequent chapters explore how civil society partnerships are transforming territory in postcolonial states. Although sovereignty is an ‘unattainable ideal’ for states everywhere, it is ‘particularly tenuous in many postcolonial states where sovereign power is historically fragmented and distributed among many... forms of local authority’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2006, 297). This observation is very much applicable to Myanmar, where state power is refracted through processes of ethnicisation that came to a head during British colonisation. The British annexed Burma in three stages, between 1824 and 1885, after which British rule lasted until 1948. Over a century of colonisation, the British instituted a categorical approach to ethnicity that continues to shape politics in Myanmar today. Scholars have observed that whereas ethnicity was one among many categories that organised social life in precolonial times (Cho 2017; J. M. Ferguson 2015), colonial rule enshrined ethnicity as the predominant axis for the distribution of political power (Taylor 2007). Furthermore, by creating an administrative distinction between Burma Proper, inhabited largely by Bamar people, and the Frontier Areas, where non-Bamar people lived in relative autonomy, the British reified a particular relationship between ethnicity and space. The Karen civil war, which began in 1949, can be read as a response to these inherited spatial templates and the manner in which Karen ethnicity had been politicised thus far.

At the same time, the ethnic category “Karen” is marked by ambiguities and ambivalences. Scholars concede that prior to British colonisation in the 19th century, the people today classified as Karen did not recognise a common identity. The Karen comprise diverse linguistic, regional, religious, and cultural characteristics, spanning two main language groups—Sgaw and Pwo, which comprise 80-85% of the Karen-speaking population—even though counts of more than twenty linguistic subgroups exist (Cho 2017; Harriden 2002; Gravers 2007a; Walker 2001; Thawngmung 2008). In an article entitled ‘Seeing “Karen” in the Union of Myanmar’, Cheesman (2002, 203) attributes the emergence of a common pan-Karen identity (*dawkalu*, or Sgaw Karen for “entire race”) to the ‘combined colonial-missionary enterprise’. Through an analysis of two colonial-era authors, he contends that an emergent Sgaw elite drew from their encounters with missionaries and colonial functionaries to construct the

Karen as oppressed, uneducated, and virtuous. This version of Karen-ness was then mobilised in the KNU’s ethnonationalist struggle.

This chapter places “Karen” in the territory of Myanmar by tracing the historical processes through which the state and the KNU forged a particular relationship between ethnicity and state space. I reread historical and anthropological literature on the Karen against the grain, to identify the manner in which state and rebel actors *spatialised* Karen ethnicity, and their overall effects on ethnicisation and war. With this riff on Cheesman’s words, I push his argument further to convey that ethnicisation is not only historically constituted, but also actively spatialised. I use ethnicisation to refer to the processes by which ethnic categories become taken-for-granted aspects of the lived experiences of both in-groups and out-groups, and through which ethnic differences become central to the distribution of resources and power (Andaya 2008; Escobar 2008; Restrepo 2004; Scott 2009). Given that ethnicisation occurs as part of a ‘dialectical interaction between local, national, and cosmopolitan discourses’ (Harrell 2001, 12), the processes of war and development at the heart of this thesis can also be seen as vectors through which Karen ethnicity is spatialised. I use “ethnicity” rather than “race” to draw attention towards the constructed nature of social categories, and away from the genetic and phenotypical differences that underlie the latter term (Hiebert 2009).²¹ Even so, as I will show, muddled colonial attempts to identify phenotypical distinctions within the population of British Burma continue to shape contemporary ethnic designations.

This chapter sets the stage for my thesis in three ways. Firstly, it positions my thesis within a wider literature about postcolonial state-making, which suggests that state power is not evenly distributed over rights-bearing political subjects, but is unevenly experienced according to ethnic hierarchies set in motion during colonisation (e.g. Daley 2006; Mamdani 1996; 2012). In Myanmar,

²¹ Pulido (2018) argues that geography’s inherited whiteness has caused it to fixate on white/non-white binaries, and overlook ethnic identifications in all their plurality. Indeed geographers have made helpful contributions towards the study of racism and “diversity” in Western societies (e.g. Bonds 2019; Price 2014), but have tended to engage less with anthropological ideas of ethnicity, which take a more fluid approach.

ethnicity structures one’s relationship to the state, to the extent that ‘national races *surpass* citizenship’ in demarcating political belonging (Cheesman 2017, 470, emphasis added). This reveals that the present-day civil war—or the “ethnic conflict” in the words of some commentators—is the result of a particular relationship between ethnicity and violence sedimented during colonial times. Hence, the Karen civil war must not be understood as a singularity or as an exception, but as the result of a conjunctural encounter between connected histories of colonisation (Potter and Saha 2015), the specific nature of colonial administration in British Burma, and the particularities of the “Karen question.”

Secondly, this chapter showcases the value of putting geographical literature in conversation with literature from area studies, anthropology, and history (Jazeel 2006; Robinson 2003). Informed by my first-hand research, which helped me identify the aspects of identity and statehood most resonant with the lived experiences of my research participants, this chapter draws from scholarly work about Karen ethnicity and the Burmese nation-state outside the geographical canon. In the process, I apply a geographical lens to these literatures, parsing them for how they conceive of the locality and territory. No doubt, the socio-*spatial* constitution of ethnicity and war is crucial to understanding civil society partnerships in Karen State today.

Thirdly, I prefigure the themes of agonism and ambivalence that recur throughout subsequent chapters. I lean on authors like Getachew (2019), Noor (2016; 2020), and Walker (2020), who show that throughout the 19th century, processes of consolidating categories now designated as colonial in origin—such as “Southeast Asia” and “ethnicity”—were unstable and met with resistance. Even today, through the use of arms and administration, the KNU and several other rebel actors limit the state’s authority within Myanmar. And even then, as I will show, the territorial templates drawn by states and rebels are continually struggled over by civil society actors. Furthermore, Karen ethnicity is itself not a stable category, but one that is riddled with internal contradictions and ambivalences. This does not make Karen ethnicity any less “real”, but it does demand that scholars recognise that the social category “Karen”, the socio-spatial category “Karen State”, and the ongoing event we call the “Karen civil war”

were hardly preordained. Rather, these categories are the result of partial knowledges sedimented over centuries, from the precolonial era, Burma’s colonial administration within British India, the emergence and governance of the Burmese nation-state, to the present day. I see writing about this as an exercise in buttressing my focus on present-day contestations, tensions, and relations, with a similar view of the past, so as to set the localities I investigate—Hpa-An and Mutraw—into the shifting grids of power that constitute present-day Karen State. Henceforth I use scholars who explain that the ‘tradition of oppression and exploitation’ inherited by postcolonial societies is ‘only as pervasive as the counter-tradition of defiance and revolt’ (Guha 1983, 335), to lay the grounds for understanding territory ‘from the positionality of struggle’ (Halvorsen 2019, 804).

This chapter proceeds in four parts, organised loosely in chronological order. Firstly, I compare the relative unimportance of ethnicity to socio-spatial organisation in precolonial times, to its salience in the present day, to set the stage for seeing ethnicisation as a dynamic process. Secondly, I discuss ethnicity in British Burma between the 1800s and 1948, the dawn of Burmese independence. I show that while Karen demands are seen as synonymous with “war” and “rebellion” today, it is vital to separate the political aspirations of the Karen from the trajectory that these demands ultimately took. Thus, it is possible to see the actions of civil society actors as part of a wider process through which Karen-ness is politicised and struggled over. Thirdly, I discuss how ethnicity was territorialised in Myanmar between 1949 and 2012; between the start of the Karen civil war and the first KNU ceasefire. I consider how both state and rebel actors attempted to map ethnicity onto space, through drawings of Kayin State (according to the Myanmar state) and Kawthoolei (according to the KNU). At the same time, I argue that neither of these abstract spatial templates encapsulates the diversity of spatial arrangements created throughout the Karen civil war. The final section discusses key struggles over Karen ethnicity, from 2012 to the present day.

4.2 Ethnicisation in Burma/Myanmar: past and present

Ethnicity is central to the distribution of power in Myanmar today (Campbell and Prasse-Freeman forthcoming; Smith 1999; Taylor 1982; Tin Maung Maung Than 2005; Walton 2008). For one, Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law ascribes citizenship according to the country’s eight *taingyintha* (Burmese: “national races”); presumed to be the original inhabitants of the land prior to British colonisation (Cheesman 2017; Holliday 2014).²² Yet, although the law states that both Bamar and Karen qualify as *taingyintha*, in colloquial discourse *taingyintha* refers to non-Bamar groups—hence, to be “ethnic” or *taingyintha* is itself a minoritizing designation. Furthermore, non-Bamar groups continue to be subject to “Burmanising” policies that treat the languages, cultures, and histories of non-Bamar groups as second-tier to that of the Bamar (Walton 2013). Hence, ethnic categorisation is a crucial means by which the state establishes belonging to the nation-state, even as belonging is unevenly allocated between Bamar and non-Bamar groups.

At the same time, ethnicity in Myanmar is associated with war. Since Myanmar’s independence in 1948, several ethnic armed organisations have rebelled against the central state. Besides the KNU, other ethnonationalist actors including the Kachin Independence Organisation, the Restoration Council of Shan State, and the Karenni National People’s Party have been participants in a multi-fronted, protracted civil war waged ostensibly along ethnic lines. Whereas the Bamar have been largely spared from the effects of the civil war (Walton 2013), war has shaped the life trajectories of many non-Bamar people, who comprise rebel leaders, food soldiers, and the majority of war-affected subjects. Finally, ethnicity is an inflammatory issue. Data on ethnicity from Myanmar’s 2014 census, the first in more than two decades, was never released amid controversy over the effects of these findings on national unity (J. M. Ferguson 2015). Thus, ethnicity in Myanmar is at once a ubiquitous means of organizing state-society relations, an axis of difference that puts non-Bamar groups at greater risk of violence and

²² This has been a key stumbling block for Rohingya claims to citizenship, as the Myanmar government considers the Rohingya to be immigrants who arrived when Burma was part of British India, and hence not as *taingyintha* (Cheesman 2017).

dispossession, and a matter that lends itself to obfuscation due to a lack of transparency about the ethnic makeup of the country.

In this context, any study to do with the Karen in Myanmar must critically unpack essentialised conceptions of Karen ethnicity. Moreover, the close-knit ties between ethnicity and antagonistic politics in Myanmar mean that it is important to query the elevated status of ethnicity as a means of social ordering altogether. This stands in stark contrast to how, by several accounts, ethnicity was not the main marker of difference in Burma/Myanmar’s precolonial period. The historian Thant Myint-U (2001, 83) traces the emergence of a valley-wide *myanma* identity to the late 18th century, consolidated around the Burmese language, Buddhism, and the monarchy. By the mid-19th century, the monarchy had begun to refer to its kingdom almost exclusively as *myanma naing-ngan* (Burmese: “Burmese kingdom”).²³ However, other social categories were more pertinent in lived experience: whether one was an aristocrat or a commoner; a landowner or landless; or one’s place of origin (Candier 2020; Cho 2017; Gravers 2007b).²⁴

Moreover, prior to colonisation, a spatial order was central to one’s position in the social order, albeit not in the abstract terms of the contemporary nation-state (Winichakul 1994). Gravers (2007b, 10, 12) argues that people living far from the royal centre were incorporated into the monarchic order through the ‘flow of manpower, services, money, products, and tributes from distant allied chiefs in exchange for patronage and protection’; they were ‘mobile, distant, and not easy to control, but not isolated or outside the system’ (see also Gravers 2010; Laungaramsri, 2003). This observation nuances James Scott’s (2009) thesis about hill-valley relations in Southeast Asia. In her analysis of Kachin ethnicity across the China-Myanmar borderworld, Sadan (2013) critiques Scott for underplaying the interdependencies between “state” and “non-state” spaces (see **Chapter 7**; for critiques of Scott outside

²³ Today, *myanma naing-ngan* is still used to refer to the “Burmese country.” Metro (2011) discusses how the term is used by nationalist historians to reinterpret Myanmar’s classical past.

²⁴ For example, the court took censuses to facilitate military recruitment and taxation, but did not consider one’s status as Mon, Shan, or Bamar worth counting (Ferguson 2015). Cities were multiethnic, and rebellions against the monarchy often amassed followers across ethnic lines (Thant Myint-U 2001).

the Myanmar context, see Brass 2012; Karlsson 2013). She argues that hill peoples must be seen as actively negotiating and appropriating the forms of modernity enforced by the lowland state. Likewise, I see ethnicity in Myanmar as evolving in relation to other social categories and spaces, rather than in opposition to these.

Differences between precolonial and colonial notions of ethnicity are even starker in regards to specific notions of “Karen-ness”. Historians of Burma hardly discuss the Karen in the precolonial era, likely because Burman court chronicles considered the Karen unimportant. While the court was aware of the Karens’ existence, they were considered uncivilised, wild, and peripheral to politics at the court centre (Renard 1987). Furthermore, it is possible that the court did not subsume “the Karen” (unlike the Mon and the Shan) under a singular name. The origins of the word “Karen” are unclear, although it is likely an anglicisation of the Burmese “Kayin,” which referred to non-Buddhist groups or to “aboriginals” (Cheesman 2002, 202). Hence, even scholars seeking to read court chronicles against the grain face enormous difficulties. ‘With neither a written record nor a continuous tradition of oral history,’ historians seeking to record the past of a “Karen” people who ‘would have disavowed such a name’ have little to rely on (Renard 2003, 5). At the same time, early 20th-century accounts of Karen history, written in Sgaw by Western-educated Karen authors, argue that over thousands of years, the Karen migrated southwards from Inner/Southern Mongolia to what is now Burma/Myanmar. These texts have been adopted by the KNU, who uses this version of history in KNU-controlled schools to assert that the Karen have ‘all the essential qualities of a nation’ (KNU, n.d.b; quoted in Rajah 2003, 522). Yet Anglophone scholars are skeptical of the credibility of these Sgaw language histories, which are based on speculations held by missionaries, that Karen history resembles Old Testament tales (Renard 2003).

This short discussion reveals that despite the centrality of ethnic categories to lived experiences, state-society relations, and power inequalities in present-day Myanmar, this was not always the case. Today, ethnicity delineates one’s ability to participate as a political subject vis-à-vis the Myanmar state,

and belonging to an ethnic category is a prerequisite for citizenship. Yet, in the precolonial period, ethnicity was more flexible and less important to the distribution of power. Ethnicity was also not associated with divisive, violent, and antagonistic politics. A comparison between the present and the past thus demonstrates the need to understand why and in what manner ethnicisation has become a paramount social force in contemporary Myanmar. At the same time, competing accounts of Karen history and the Myanmar state’s reluctance to release demographic data on ethnicity reveal how ethnicisation and the politics of knowledge are entangled. There is a need to engage ethnicisation as a continuous social process, that is entangled with power dynamics along other axes. There is also a need to write about ethnicisation in a way that criticises essentialism, reification, and antagonism. In my attempt to do so, I hope to open up ways of thinking otherwise.

4.3 Being Karen in British Burma: antagonism and ambivalence (1800s–1948)

The British annexation of Burma proceeded in three stages, over three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824–1826, 1852–1853, and 1885), throughout which the area claimed today by the Myanmar state was incrementally incorporated as a province of British India. Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin (2013, 33) describe the colonial era as “order without meaning,” because ‘it had little or no meaning for the majority of the people,’ due to the uncritical imposition of the bureaucratic architecture that the British had established in India onto Burma (Callahan 2002). Convinced that Burmese royals were uniquely incompetent (Noor 2016; 2020), the British decided not to rule through indigenous institutions, as they did in Malaya and in the Indian princely states. Instead, they abolished the monarchy, leaving the *sangha* (Burmese: “Buddhist monastic order”) bereft of any overarching authority (Taylor 2007).²⁵

The British also elevated ethnicity to a paramount social category (see Darwin 2010). In their attempts to enumerate Burma’s population, the British found that caste—the overarching marker of difference in the rest of British India—was inapplicable in Burma. They turned instead to race as a means of classification, using religion and language as proxies for race in the absence of any obvious phenotypical variations (McAuliffe 2017). Hence, through colonisation, the Burmese word *lu-myo* (Burmese: “type of person”) came to refer to European ideas of race and nationhood (Candier 2019). And even though court censuses of *myanma naing-ngan*, beginning in the 17th century, did not consider race or ethnicity something worth counting, the ethnic makeup of British Burma began to be counted in colonial censuses, taken every decade between 1881 and 1941 (J. M. Ferguson 2015). These censuses grouped Sgaw, Pwo, and other linguistic groups were as “Karen-Karenni”, and later as “Karen” (Cheesman 2002, 203). Throughout, enumerators commented on the non-coincidence between the

²⁵ The *sangha* originated in the first millennium AD (Thant Myint-U 2001). After the abolition of the monarchy, the *sangha*’s lack of internal disciplining mechanisms set the stage for its interventions in the Saffron Revolution in 2007, and the revival of ultranationalist, anti-Rohingya sentiment in the 2010s. Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin (2013) estimate that the *sangha* comprises 400,000 monks and novices, outnumbering the Tatmadaw at 280,000.

categories they used, and the lived realities of the populations they sought to map (Webb 1912, 250, quoted in J. M. Ferguson 2015, 8). Still, through census-taking and policies built on its back, a categorical approach to ethnicity took root within the administrative architecture of colonial Burma.

Yet colonial officers did not take a uniform approach to the *lu-myo* of British Burma. They granted preferential treatment to the Karen and non-Bamar groups, while bequeathing them with an antagonistic relationship towards the Bamar. In addition, Karen ethnicisation was shaped by contact with American missionaries, who also had a hand in reifying ethnic identity. American missionary writers, such as Cross (1854) and Marshall (1922), wrote lengthy treatises about the physiological and cultural characteristics of the Karen. Marshall, along with the colonial administrator Smeaton (1887), also wrote that the Karen had experienced ‘oppression practised by the Burmese for generations’ (see also Keyes 1979). This view of the Karen, as a homogenous, distinct, and exclusive group, set in an antagonistic relationship towards their lowland oppressors, likely lent credence to colonial administrators’ insistence on seeing them as distinct from their Burman counterparts.

Colonial officers further entrenched an antagonistic relationship between Bamar and non-Bamar groups through the administrative structures they established. The British hired Indian and British subjects in top civil service positions rather than Bamar subjects (Taylor 2007, 80), and admitted only recruits classified as Karen, Kachin, and Chin into the Burmese Army (Dunford 2019). Hence, the Bamar were both denied access to the colonial bureaucracy and perceived that the British were granting preferential treatment to non-Bamar groups. Eventually, this resulted in inter-ethnic violence. In 1931, when Karen policemen participated in quashing the anticolonial Hsaya San uprising (Gravers 2007a), colonial officers painted the rebellion according to Burmans’ desire for a return to the monarchic order (Aung-Thwin 2008). The quashing of the uprising and subsequent interpretations thus followed along the tracks of reified interethnic antagonisms. A decade later, during World War II, Japanese-aligned Burmese nationalists fought against non-Burman groups, who were part of the British Army (Smith

1999). Not only did British colonisation entrench ethnic antagonisms; the colonial security apparatus in Burma also set precedents for armed violence along ethnic lines.

Although Karen ethnicity was imposed from the outside, it was not mere fabrication. Over a century since British contact, hundreds of thousands were classified as Karen.²⁶ This designation structured the everyday lives of successive generations, including their incorporation into the colonial security apparatus and their relationships within and outside this ethnic group. Ethnic designations were also appropriated by Karen elites to advance their interests in the context of the missionary-colonial enterprise. In 1881, a handful of Sgaw elite founded the Karen National Association (KNA), the precursor to the KNU, as an entity through which the Karen could collectively negotiate with the colonial government. The Sgaw name of the KNA includes the word *dawkalu*, which means the “whole” (*daw*) of a “kind” (*kalu*), and which is used in a fashion akin to European notions of nationhood. *Dawkalu* does not appear in historical texts prior to the 1880s. Its use by the KNA evinces the manner in which the Sgaw elite appropriated colonial ideas to enhance their opportunities in British Burma (Fujimura forthcoming).

At the same time, many founders of the KNA were operating from a position of ambivalence. Even as they appropriated European ideas, they were beneficiaries of missionary contact, which granted them access to Anglophone schooling, a familiarity with Western knowledge, and the skills necessary to organise across villages (Harriden 2002; Rajah 2003). There is also a claim, albeit disputed, that missionaries introduced a literate tradition to the Karen (Cho 2017; Fujimura 2014; South 2007).²⁷ Therefore, for the Karen, colonisation was a mixed bag. Although discriminatory policies set the Karen in an antagonistic relationship with the Bamar, the Karen were also granted preferential treatment in this setup. And although missionaries and colonial functionaries reified Karen ethnicity, Karen elites

²⁶ In 1881, the British classified 518,294 subjects as Karen (Fujimura forthcoming).

²⁷ There seems to be a general consensus that Jonathan Wade, an American missionary, created the Sgaw Karen alphabet using the Burmese script in 1830. However, Buddhist Karen scholars and Burmese scholars claim that the Pwo alphabet predates Wade by several hundred years. Womack (2005) documents at least eleven different systems of writing Pwo and Sgaw in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

also appropriated this ethnic category for their own purposes. The preceding discussion also shows that in contradistinction to the categorical notion of ethnicity that suffused British bureaucracy, ethnicity was in fact fluid, emergent, and dynamic; evolving in response to the colonial socio-spatial order.

Besides shaping the relationships between the Karen and other groups, colonialism also had an effect on tensions internal to the Karen. Indeed, ethnicisation proceeds not just in relation to inter-group dynamics, but also according to conflicts and/or consensus within the group (see Karlsson 2011; McDuire-Ra 2007; Wouters 2020). This reveals another ambivalence associated with Karen ethnicisation; namely that, inasmuch as the Karen were able to organise as a “nation” during colonial times, these claims to nationhood effaced—and potentially exacerbated—tensions within the Karen population. Religion has been a dividing line within the Karen population since the 1840s, when Buddhist Karens contesting colonial rule burned books, chapels, and villages (Gravers 2007a). Interreligious friction heightened over the subsequent century of colonial rule, when Christian Karen benefitted from the missionary education and job opportunities mentioned above, while many Buddhist Karen were edged out of the nascent Karen elite, even as Buddhist and Bamar identity became ever more interwoven. These tensions were replicated in the KNA, which was dominated by Christian Karens (Harriden 2002, 97-8). The KNA made little effort to reach out to Buddhist and animist Karens in remote areas far from the centres of power. This was no small oversight: in the 1931 census, 75% of Karens were classified as Buddhist (Harriden 2002, 93). Hence, in spite of its claims to represent the “whole” (*daw*) Karen population, the KNA has been critiqued for its very inability to represent the diverse groups labelled as “Karen” (Fujimura forthcoming). In-group distinctions—between Pwo, Sgaw, and other subgroups, and along religious lines—continue to feature in lived experiences, and were negotiated alongside categorical notions of ethnicity imposed during colonisation.

Therefore, the relationship between colonisation and Karen ethnicity is ambivalent on two counts. Firstly, even as imperial institutions categorised ethnic groups to dire effect, the British treatment of the Karen allowed them to access opportunities denied to their Bamar counterparts, which

fed into their ability to organise as an ethnic nationality. Secondly, even as an emergent Karen elite used these tools to construct a pan-Karen identity, this sidelined those among the Karen who were Pwo, Buddhist, or otherwise lower in the social hierarchy. Thawngmung's (2012) call for understanding the “other” Karen, or the majority of Karen people today who feel detached from the KNU's claims to represent the Karen, therefore originates in this period. Thus colonialism constituted Karen ethnicity as an axis of antagonism, between an in-group and its constitutive outside, and a site of ambivalence, as the Karen were pulled into contradictory forces for domination and resistance. Moving forward, it was only after Burma's independence in 1948 and the beginning of the Karen rebellion in 1949, that colonial precedents for the relationship between ethnicity and statehood would find their full spatial expression, in the Myanmar state's delineation of “Karen State” and in the KNU's delineation of *Kawthoolei* (Sgaw Karen, “land without evil”, or the Karen homeland).

4.4 Karen State and *Kawthoolei*: mapping Myanmar along ethnic lines (1949–2012)



Figure 3. Map of Burma, 1946. Source: Gravers (2007b, 15)



Figure 4. States and Regions in Myanmar. Source: The Border Consortium (2012, viii)

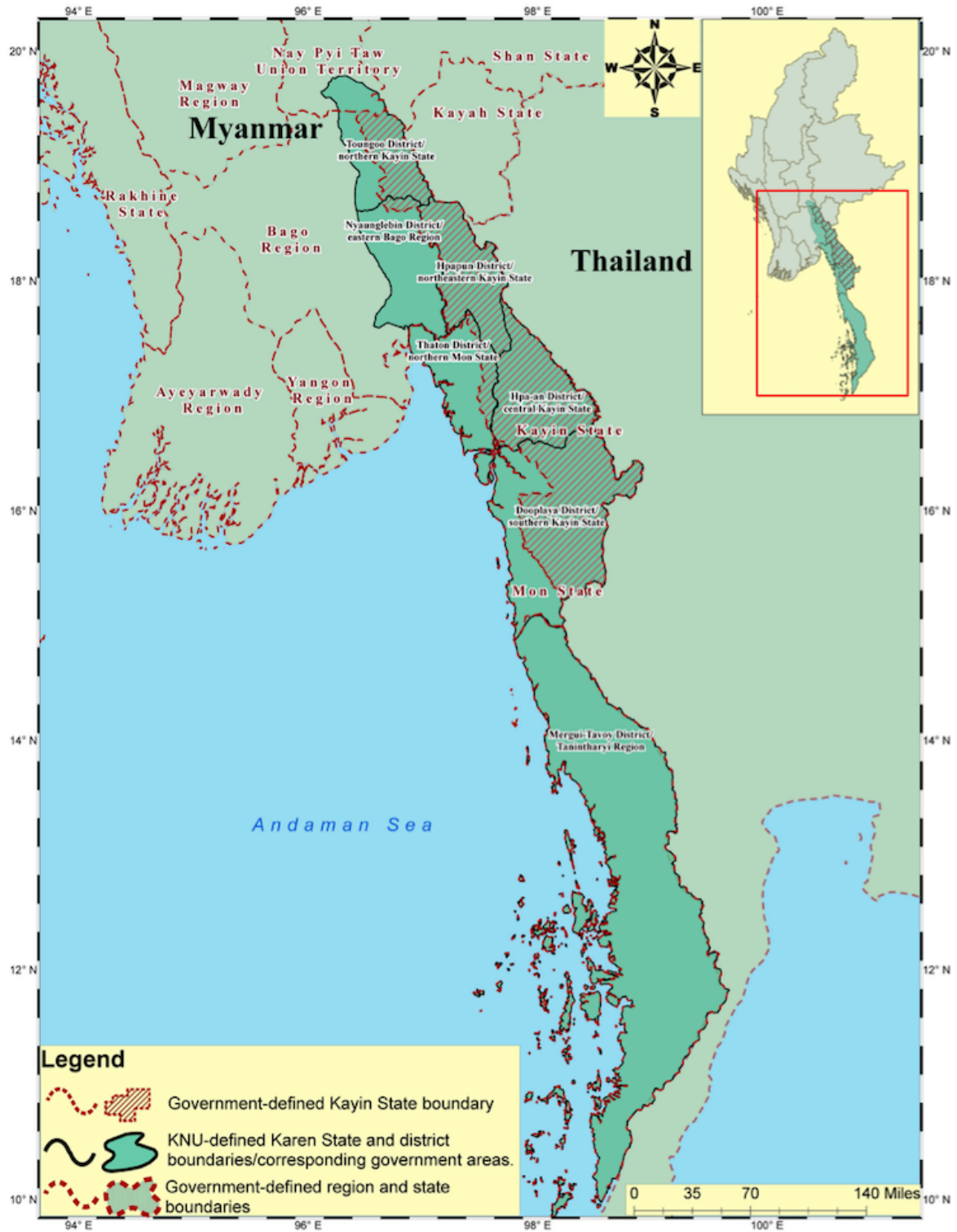


Figure 5. State-defined Kayin State and KNU-defined Kawthoolei. Source: KHRG (2018, 7)

Besides categorising its subjects, the British also categorised the areas they administered. By marking both the external boundaries of British Burma and internal boundaries between “Ministerial Burma” (lowland areas with a Bamar majority) and the “Excluded Areas” (highland areas populated largely by non-Bamar groups), and governing these spaces differently, the British set the stage for the geographical division of Burma after independence (**Figure 3**). Myanmar today is subdivided into seven Regions and seven States.²⁸ Regions correspond to areas with a Bamar majority, while States are named after the ethnic group that is presumed to predominate in each (**Figure 4**). Kayin State, for instance, has a Karen (Burmese: *Kayin*) majority. The areas encompassed by these ethnic States correspond loosely to the Excluded Areas mapped by the British. As I will demonstrate, the top-down spatialisation of ethnicity—first by the colonial government and then by the Burmese postcolonial state—remains a key force through which Burmese subjects negotiate their relationship with the nation-state.

The KNU engaged in an analogous process of mapping in the early years of its rebellion, during which they claimed a “Karen homeland” (*Kawthoolei*) encompassing Kayin State, as well as adjacent parts of Mon State, Tanintharyi Region, and Bago Region, which have a significant Karen population (**Figure 5**). This section examines the construction of state-defined Kayin State and rebel-defined Kawthoolei. While both these abstract delineations of Karen space factor into how Karen ethnicity is lived and negotiated, they are based on a reductionistic understanding of ethnicity and space. Karen people continue to reside outside of both state- and KNU-defined Karen State, while Karen people in Karen State have variable interpretations of Karen ethnicity. This thesis uses “Kayin State” to refer to the Myanmar state’s administrative subdivision and “Kawthoolei” to refer to the KNU’s definition of the areas it claims. I use “Karen State” more broadly, to refer to venues where Karen ethnicity and territory are co-constituted in the Myanmar context.

²⁸ The Regions were known as Divisions prior to 2010. In 1989, the military junta also changed the British names of several States and Regions into names more concordant with the Burmese language. For instance, “Karen” was changed to “Kayin”, “Tenasserim” was changed to “Tanintharyi”, and “Arakan” was changed to “Rakhine”.

4.4.1 The Karen and state space: precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial spatialities

As with ethnic categories, border lines were unfamiliar to the inhabitants of British Burma prior to colonisation. The British did not “divide Burma,” Heikkila-Horn (2009, 145) writes, but ‘divided an area, which later was to be known as the Union of Burma.’ The boundary between Siam and British Burma—including what is now Karen State—was demarcated in the late 19th century, after the Third Anglo-Burmese War, amid lengthy miscommunications between the Siamese court and the British (Winichakul 1994, 107-109). Whereas the British understood boundaries as lines, the Siamese court understood the limits of its kingdom as zones of overlapping authority (Winichakul 1994, 71-74). British colonial officers’ failure to recognise alternative conceptions of space also had a profound effect on the internal subdivision of colonial Burma. Rather than acknowledge the manner in which remote areas were incorporated into the court system through patronage or kinship networks, the British presumed that the Burmese court did not exert control over its frontiers (Gravers 2007b). These areas were classified as Excluded Areas (also known as Frontier Areas), encompassing 40-45% of the territory classified by the British as Burma.²⁹

Whereas the British dismantled the monarchic system in lowland Ministerial Burma, it ruled these Excluded Areas indirectly, retaining indigenous chiefs such as the Kachin *duwas* and the Shan *saophas*, giving greater autonomy to leaders in highland areas. Migration and travel between Ministerial Burma and the hilly Excluded Areas were restricted after 1896, stymying possibilities for inter-ethnic exchange (Gravers 2015, 44). During this time, the Karen were not mapped onto a particular area in name, unlike the Kachin Hills and the Shan States. Although the Karen were known to dominate the Salween District, many were also classified as Karen in the Delta area and in the colonial capital of Rangoon. Evocative portraits of such dispersion are littered throughout the literature, even though it is

²⁹ Karenni State, or the “native state” in **Figure 3**, was declared beyond the control of the Burmese kingdom in an 1875 treaty between Burma and Britain, although the Burmese kingdom considered eastern Kayah to be a tributary state (Gravers 2007b).

difficult to quantify. Taylor (2007) observes that members of the “Karen Club” in Rangoon would have had little in common with poor swidden farmers in the hills. And ‘even today,’ Smith (1999, 144) writes, the term ‘Sgaw Karen’ could apply equally to a Burmese-speaking Rangoon University graduate, born and brought up in Bassein in the Delta, or an illiterate, Animist hill-tribesman in the Dawna Range who has never even met an ethnic Burman.’ The geographic dispersion of the Karen would be a key sticking point in later attempts to unify the Karen along ethnonationalist lines.

Upon independence, the incipient Burmese state inherited this map of Burma. Burma became a self-governing colony in 1937, separate from British India, and an independent nation-state in 1948. Negotiations for independence occurred mainly between the British and Bamar anticolonial nationalists, who switched allegiance from the Japanese to the British in the final months of WWII (Smith 1997, 60-68). Meanwhile, the British sent non-Bamar groups mixed messages; many, including the KNA, believed that despite being bypassed in independence negotiations, they still possessed the right to self-determination (Smith 1997, 72-73). The confused place of non-Bamar groups in the incipient nation-state was especially stark at the Panglong Conference, held the year prior to independence to determine the future of the Frontier Areas. While the Panglong Agreement granted the right of secession to representatives of the Shan States and the Kachin Hills, the Karen were not signatory to the agreement and were present at the conference only as observers. Walton (2008) observes that the Mon and the Arakanese were not invited to Panglong, as they were considered inhabitants of Ministerial Burma rather than of the Frontier Areas. The Karen, who did not occupy any area in name, were in a ‘difficult negotiating position’ because they were split between Ministerial Burma and the Frontier Areas (Walton 2008, 901). Walton’s observations reveal the salience of the reified relationship formed between ethnicity and space during colonial times. The difficulties of creating a one-to-one map between Karen ethnicity and a particular area contributed in part to the marginalisation of their political claims during Burma’s independence negotiations.

Following the Panglong Agreement, Burma’s 1947 Constitution allowed for authority to be decentralised through the newly formed Shan State, Kachin State, and Karenni State (later renamed Kayah State) (Jolliffe 2015). Notably, a Karen State was not created at this time. In hindsight, Smith (1997, 80) states that ‘the most glaring of all the 1947 Constitution’s many failings was its muddle attempt to resolve the Karen question.’ The Myanmar government did not create a separate Karen State until 1952, out of a combination of the British-defined Salween District and adjacent townships (Smith 1999, 145-147). However, this did not satisfy the grievances of the KNA and other Karen groups. It was too little, too late: the KNU was formed in 1947, out of the KNA and six other Karen associations, and initiated the Karen rebellion two years later. In subsequent years, other ethnonationalist organisations—representing groups such as the Shan, Kachin, and Mon—initiated armed revolts against the central government too, while the 1962 military coup abolished state-level governments that provided the Shan, Kachin, Kayah, and Karen some room to manoeuvre within a Bamar-dominated governance structure. In 1974, a new constitution introduced the current administrative subdivision of Burma, comprising seven Regions and seven States, with the formation of Mon State and Arakan State (now Rakhine State) and the subdivision of Burma’s lowland areas (Jolliffe 2015).

The KNU’s responses to these attempts to demarcate Karen areas will be discussed subsequently. For now, it is necessary to take stock of what this brief historical sweep says about how the colonial state and the independence government conceived of space. Precolonial and colonial/postcolonial spatialities of power differ in three ways. Firstly, the spatial extent of political authority became defined by zero-width boundaries, rather than by zones of mixed sovereignty. Political geographers have long considered boundaries like these to be the defining characteristic of state territory, even if the idea of a bounded area within which the state exerts complete sovereignty rarely ever coheres with state power (Painter 2006). Secondly, state interiors were mapped and subdivided. This is done through technical and legal practices, through which lived spaces become defined as discrete units, abstracted into grids, and defined according to external referents (e.g. degrees latitude

and longitude) (Elden 2013b; Scott 1998). Through this process, the space designated as Karen State becomes nested within larger abstract spaces: both within the territory claimed by the Burma/Myanmar government, and within similarly abstract representations of the region and the globe (Vanderveest and Peluso 1995, 388).

These two spatial practices—which pertain to the external and internal ordering of Myanmar state territory—are arguably applicable to most nation-states in the world. The production of abstract space is often implicated in colonial claims over territory and resources (Simpson 2019). However, the third and final manner in which precolonial and colonial/postcolonial spatialities of power differ in Myanmar is less remarked in the literature. That is, both the colonial government and the incipient nation-state used the aforementioned tactics to affix *ethnicity* to abstract space. In this case, the objective of mapping is not to create state subjects that are uniformly governable (cf. Scott 1998), but to enforce reified notions of ethnic identity, with ethnic groups set in a hierarchical relationship with one another, even as they are allotted particular subdivisions of state territory.

Authors have noted the co-constitution of ethnicity and space in other postcolonial contexts, such as Latin America and South Asia, where state-defined “tribal areas” or “indigenous lands” pave the way for the distribution of resources along ethnic lines, and set the stage for particular kinds of subaltern struggles (Anthias 2018; Wouters 2020). Likewise, the demarcation of Karen State and the broader context of postcolonial statebuilding has had at least two implications for Karen ethnicisation. For one, the delimitation of Karen-ness to a particular space effaced more fluid, networked, and spatially extensive dimensions of Karen ethnicity. Indeed, the KNU was frustrated by the Myanmar government’s creation of Karen State in 1952. The 30,000km² area designated as Karen State was a ‘backwater’, comprised of sparsely populated mountains and forests, without access to the sea (Smith 1997, 147). At 580,000 inhabitants in 1956, Karen State did not comprise even a quarter of the total Karen population in Burma (Smith 1997). Hence rather than an attempt to accord legitimacy to Karen ethnicity, this spatial solution to the political grievances of the Karen can be understood as continuous

with the colonial strategy of divide and rule; a means of disregarding the experiences of those Karen who live in other areas of Karen State; who share cities, neighbourhoods, and villages with Bamar and other non-Bamar groups.

Secondly, the abstract spatial templates through which Karen ethnicity was spatialised also constrained the means by which the KNU could strive for political legitimacy. It is crucial, as several historians have argued, to separate the wide-ranging aspirations of ethnonationalist groups, from the pathways through which they sought recognition, which were constrained by the manner in which the nation-state had become the ascendent vessel for sovereignty by the 1950s and 1960s (Getachew 2019; Walker 2019; 2020). The next section, therefore, considers the KNU’s struggle for recognition and how they too mobilised abstract space and reified ethnicity in pursuit of their goals.

4.4.2 The Karen and rebel space: the Karen homeland in a postcolonial world

Brubaker (2004) argues that observers tend to characterise ethnicity as the determining factor in civil war more as a result of after-the-fact interpretations, than from a nuanced appraisal of how people involved in the conflict parse their own experiences. Gravers (2015, 33) argues that this insight is pertinent in the Karen context, calling scholars to excavate the heterogenous set of ‘objective conditions and inter-subjective intentions’ through which civil war in Burma has become “ethnic”. As with the previous section, I will continue to show how processes of ethnicisation are at stake in the Karen civil war. It was not only the British nor the Burmese government that had a hand in this process; the KNU has also been criticised for essentialising Karen ethnicity. While I am hardly alone in suggesting this (see Cheesman 2002), I take a distinctively geographical approach to this problem. Hence the manner in which Karen ethnicity is mapped onto space, through maps of *Kawthoolei* (“Karen homeland”), must be historicised. In the process, I hope to show that the Karen civil war was hardly predetermined. As mentioned above, the KNA was founded in 1881 to articulate Karen claims to nationhood during the colonial period. And in 1947, the KNU was formed out of seven Karen associations, including the

KNA. The KNU commenced its armed struggle in January 1949. What happened between 1881 and 1949? How did the KNA (and later the KNU) transform from peaceful claimants to an ethnic nationality, to the initiators of an armed struggle? During this period, much had changed about the context within the Karen were struggling: the KNA and other Karen associations went from negotiating their place in colonial Burma, to anxieties about being sidelined by Bamar-led anticolonial movements, and then within an independent Burmese state.

Jolliffe (2016, 10) contends that ‘a binary choice between secession or unification [with central Burma]’ did not exist when the KNU was formed. While the KNU and its predecessors made demands for political recognition between 1881 and 1949, these were couched within a larger political unit that included central Burma, where many Karen people were living. After 1945, these demands were also shaped by the end of WWII and an efflorescence of anticolonial independence movements worldwide. In 1946, Karen representatives sent a goodwill mission to London, in the hopes of claiming a state as a reward for their loyalty to the British throughout WWII. At this stage, the Karen did not preclude being part of a larger federation, and indeed some speculated that the Excluded Areas would form an entity separate from independent Burma (Gravers 2015, 49-50). However, the Karen delegation never received a reply. Subsequently, the KNU’s first statement in 1947 called for increased Karen representation in the armed forces, civil service, and the legislature (Jolliffe 2016, 10).

Only in the KNU’s second statement, in October 1947, did the KNU’s claims become more ambitious and explicitly territorial. This statement claimed an ‘independent Karen State’ that is more expansive than present-day Karen State, including much of today’s Ayeyarwaddy Delta and Bago Region, as part of the “Autonomous National States of Burma” (Jolliffe 2016, 10-11). In 1948, after Burman nationalists had successfully negotiated independence with the British, the KNU’s proposal for a joint Mon-Karen State was rejected by the new Burmese government, following which the KNU considered appealing to the United Nations (Garbagni and Walton 2019). 1945 to 1949 also featured increasing communal violence between Karens and Bamars. Inter-ethnic violence began during WWII,

when Karens in the British Army fought against Bamars allied with the Japanese, resulting in a world war that ‘had been fought along largely racial lines’ (Smith 1999, 64). Communal violence resumed after the war, culminating in attacks on Karen civilians on Christmas Eve in 1948 (Smith 1999, 115). Due to increasing inter-ethnic hostility and repeatedly stalled negotiations about the Karen question, KNU leaders began to consider civil war inevitable (Gravers 2015, 51).

The territory initially claimed by the KNU was far larger than present-day Kawthoolei, which is larger than state-defined Kayin State. The KNU’s early military successes were close to Rangoon and in the Delta area, hundreds of kilometres from its strongholds near the Thai border today. However, between the 1950s and 1970s, the KNU was forced to retreat from these positions. They regrouped near the Thai border, amid conflicts within the organisation and successive military defeats (Jolliffe 2016). In 1974, a new KNU constitution established the seven KNU districts comprising Kawthoolei, which are still in use today (**Figure 5**). In this area, the KNU established schools, clinics, a judiciary and a police, and many other services. Here, Smith (1999, 391) writes, ‘in the “liberated” mini-state of Kawthoolei... travellers could see an alternative vision of Karen society’ propped up by an ‘impressive network’ of KNU bureaucrats and administrative institutions (see also Falla 1991). Throughout Kawthoolei, the KNU also propagated reified forms of ethnic identity in service of its ethnonationalist claims. Textbooks disseminated by the Karen Education Department (KED), for instance, told of a “golden” Karen past disrupted by the incursions of the Bamar and Mon kingdoms (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012). The KNU maintained this quasi-state system until the late 1980s, when the Tatmadaw initiated increasingly belligerent counterinsurgency operations (Tangseefa 2006). In 1995, the Tatmadaw overran the KNU’s main headquarters, sending thousands of Karen refugees across the Thai border, and allowing state authority to expand in areas previously governed by the KNU. Today, the KNU still provides social services and promotes Karen nationalism throughout the seven districts of Kawthoolei to varying degrees, although the area governed exclusively by the KNU has been whittled

down significantly. The mountainous Mutraw (Hpapun) district remains the largest contiguous area exclusively governed by the KNU, at more than 5,000km².

Chapter 6 provides a more comprehensive account of KNU-civilian relations in this period. For now, I recognise the means by which the KNU spatialised its claims, and their effects on Karen ethnicisation. Firstly, this account shows how civil war along ethnic lines was not predetermined. Getachew (2019) argues that many anticolonial thinkers who became statesmen did not in fact see the nation-state as a telos. Instead, they experimented with a variety of political forms in pursuit of a ‘domination-free and egalitarian international order,’ even if they eventually became renowned as nation-builders (Getachew 2019, 2). Similarly, it is possible to detach the aspirations of the Karen elite at this time from the ultimate form that their struggle took—that is, armed rebellion. The years since 1881 have been a time of experimentation for the KNA, the KNU, and other Karen organisations. Having inherited conceptions of Karen ethnicity and nationhood from the British, the Karen elite were continually searching for means by which they could reconcile their desires for autonomy with the socio-political context in which they were expressing these claims. Conceptions of self-determination circulating within the postcolonial world at the time are likely to have informed Karen claims, and indeed to this day, the KNU still strives to ‘establish a Karen State with a just and fair territory and self-determination’ (KNU 2019). The KNU began to see armed struggle as inevitable only in 1948, when other routes to political legitimacy had been cut short, including appeals to both the British and Burmese governments.³⁰

Secondly, it is possible to understand the mapping of Kawthoolei in a similar fashion; as arrived at through a process of repeated construction and compromise, occurring in dialogue with a changing socio-political context. At the end of the colonial period, people who identified as Karen populated not

³⁰ In 1928, for instance, San C. Po articulated a vision of self-determination that was lodged within the colonial order. ‘The present-day ideal,’ he wrote (1928), ‘is self-determination; but the Karen, in their desire for self-determination, realise that self-determination in their case must be determined according to the method and mode mapped out by experienced British officers with whom they have fought, with whom they have worked, and with whom they would ever co-operate.’

only Burma’s southeastern borderlands, but were also well integrated into Rangoon and the Delta area, where they lived among other ethnic groups. This geography was facilitated by colonial networks, which brought well-educated Karen pastors, students, and monks into large cities. Karens’ coexistence with other ethnic groups was well-known, hence their claims to nationhood were not territorialised until it became politically necessary, when Bamar anticolonialism hit a fever pitch after WWII. Garbagni and Walton (2020) state that San C. Po, a Sgaw Karen from the Delta area who was then the KNA president, was the first to connect Karen ethnonationalism with a defined territory, to mirror Bamar nationalists’ success at articulating their own territorial demands. ‘The Burmans have the whole country to themselves,’ San C. Po (1928) wrote, ‘where have the Karens a place they can call their own?’ He suggested that “Karen country” be located in Tenasserim Division (corresponding to today’s state-defined Tanintharyi Region, Mon State, and southern Karen State). However, an official attempt to map the borders of a hypothetical Karen State occurred only in 1945, by a group of Karen organisations including the KNA, in a memorial sent to the Governor of Burma. The British saw this proposal, which included enclaves in the Delta and a seaport, as exceedingly ambitious (Garbagni and Walton 2020). Finally, in 1974, when present-day Kawthoolei was mapped and subdivided, the KNU was coming to terms with the protracted nature of the Karen civil war. As one KNU representative told Smith (1999, 141), ‘we thought we would win within two or three years. We never thought we would be in the jungle forty years later.’ For Karen elites, their territorial proposals were the outcome of a compromise between various factors: internal disagreements, the diffuse geographical distribution of the ethnic group, and their desire to use territory as a bargaining chip as independence negotiations ramped up. Of course, the Karen were largely unsuccessful on this front. Colonisation ultimately bequeathed them with an ethnicity, but not a state. Correspondingly, the map of “Karen country” they had drawn did not materialise as a state, but came to mark the geographical extents of the Karen civil war.

Notably, both the KNU and its predecessors and the Myanmar nation-state expressed their territorial claims by way of abstract space. State-defined Kayin State (demarcated and subdivided in

1952) and KNU-defined Kawthoolei (demarcated and subdivided in 1974) illustrate space in a manner that is mappable, measurable, and strictly bounded. The key differences are that Kawthoolei covers a much larger area, and reflects KNU’s longstanding desire for access to a seaport (Smith 1999). Political geographers note how non-state organisations, such as indigenous groups, have used spatial abstractions towards subversive ends. However, they also reveal how these attempts are beset by ambivalence: counter-mapping, for instance, can reinforce reductionistic, territorially-bound conceptions of identity, and fail to address the structural causes of marginalisation (Anthias 2020; Wainright and Bryan 2009; Tilley 2020).

Indeed, the KNU’s desire to use abstract space as a ‘language of stateness’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 8) to demonstrate its legitimacy cost the KNU dearly. The KNU’s map of Kawthoolei—and the social services they implemented accordingly—did not only reflect pre-existing differences within the Karen population but actively produced them; as a result of the production of abstract space, the divergent lifestyles of those Karen in rural, mountainous areas, living among their own ethnic group, and those Karen living in large, lowland cities, who intermingled with other groups, became all the more distinct. Put differently, the KNU’s need to territorialise its claims to counter Bamar dominance has glossed over differences within the Karen, while excluding certain Karen subjects, because they were left out of Kawthoolei. While the KNU is not solely to blame—military defeat, among several other factors, had pushed the organisation out of the lowlands—it is important to recognise that spatial strategies can prise open intra-ethnic differences, and thus transform processes of ethnicisation. Today, these spatial strategies include the maps used by development actors, which I deal with in **Chapter 7**. Furthermore, none of these maps are congruent with the lived experiences of the Karen. The Karen who live in Kawthoolei today have highly varied understandings of the legitimacy of the KNU and of their sense of belonging within the ethnic group. These variations became particularly stark in the post-ceasefire period, which I discuss in the next section.

4.4 Post-ceasefire localities in Karen State: ethnicised, marginal, contested (2012–present)

In 2012, the KNU signed a momentous ceasefire with the Myanmar government. The ceasefire earned the Myanmar government international praise, as the KNU was at that point considered the most uncompromising armed group in the country (D. Brenner 2019, 47). Subsequently, the KNU became one of eight rebel groups party to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015. As discussed in **Chapter 6**, these ceasefires were controversial, even within the KNU. Indeed, the word “nationwide” is a misnomer. The KNU was the only sizeable armed group to sign the NCA, and even after two additional armed groups acceded to the NCA in 2018, NCA signatories encompassed only one-fifth of the total number of non-state fighters in Myanmar (Anderson 2018; Lintner 2018). Myanmar is still a country at war. Furthermore, the extent to which the ceasefires have allowed for meaningful political gains is debatable. Armed violence and displacement in Karen State have been significantly reduced, but hardly eliminated (see **Chapter 1**; KHRG 2014; 2017). The KNU has become increasingly frustrated at the state of peace talks; as the KNU general-secretary puts it, ‘the current dialogues... are just for show and so we are deadlocked’ (Saw Ta Doh Moo, quoted in Naw Betty Han 2020).

The current period is often understood as a precarious “interim” period, characterised by the presence of ceasefires but the lack of a comprehensive peace settlement, during which both the state and rebel groups are seeking to expand their authority in war-affected areas (Harrison and Kyed 2019; Kramer 2020). Although the state and the KNU have agreed on the end of combat, they have yet to come to a *territorial* agreement about where and how each actor can accrue authority. Both authorities continue to administer social services according to the overlapping maps discussed in the previous section. At the same time, in practice, local inhabitants do not experience authority as an either-or question. In Karen State (however defined), there are people who live in KNU areas, concerned about the encroachment of the Myanmar state, people who pay taxes to both the KNU and the state, and people who generally receive services offered by the state, but who are aware of an ongoing “civil war”

in the vicinity. Hence, the common heuristic division of Karen State into state-controlled, KNU-controlled, and mixed-controlled areas (e.g. Jolliffe 2016, Saferworld and KPSN 2019).

Various authors have discussed what the KNU ceasefires mean for the organisation’s ability to offer social services and accrue legitimacy among its Karen constituents (D. Brenner 2019; Harrison and Kyed 2019; Jolliffe 2016; McCartan and Jolliffe 2016). However, the ceasefires’ ability to reshape peoples’ ability to understand themselves as Karen has thus far gone unremarked. I argue that ethnicisation must be understood as a spatialised process that occurs in relation to the territorial templates created by the state and the KNU, yet exceeds these, as a result of the *de facto* division of Karen State into zones of contested authority. Many authors have noted how lived experience is never reducible to abstract space, and indeed that territory is ‘a co-production’ that is an ‘effect of the socio-political relations of multiple claimants’ (Byrne et al. 2016, 1286; Anthias 2018; Dean 2010; Novak 2011). In Karen State, this “co-production” of territory must be understood as a process that varies according to the types of authority active in each authority. Thus, I argue that a fine-grained, locality-based understanding must be the entry point for this study (see **section 1.2**), rather than the abstract spaces mapped by the KNU or the state.

While neither of these abstract spaces encompasses a state territory per se, when applied to academic research they nonetheless replicate the pitfalls of the “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994) or of “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), insofar as they purport a framework for research that is incongruous with how the phenomena under study are actually lived. The next two chapters of this thesis focus on localities in Karen State—Hpa-An (corresponding to state/mixed-authority areas, **Chapter 5**) and Mutraw (corresponding to KNU areas, **Chapter 6**)—while the chapter thereafter considers processes of ethnicisation that range over them (**Chapter 7**). Hopefully, earlier sections of this chapter have set out the salience of understanding ethnicisation in the Myanmar context. Ethnicity in Myanmar is not just another axis of identity, but one that conditions one’s ability to claim

recognition and rights. Hence it is crucial to understand ethnicity as it is lived, rather than as a derivative of states’ and rebels’ claims to space.

A focus on the locality also allows for a more nuanced conceptualisation of ethnicisation. For one, by turning away from state- and rebel-drawn spaces, I draw attention to how actors other than states and rebels influence processes of ethnicisation. For decades, research on the Karen has foregrounded state and rebel actors due to the ongoing civil war, which foreclosed access into Karen State for non-state actors, including most NGOs and researchers. In particular, an influx of development assistance into Karen State has created and/or reshaped civil society actors in Karen State, who negotiate the spatial templates imposed by the state and the KNU. To be sure, spatial abstractions and the lived experience of ethnicity and war have never cohered (Dean 2005; Thiranagama 2011). However, the post-ceasefire period makes it both possible and increasingly urgent to investigate these, given the increasing number of non-state actors who are reshaping the ‘set of flexible and adaptive networks that link state and other political authorities’ in Karen areas (Callahan 2007, xiv).

As I have argued, both the Myanmar state and the KNU tend to reify Karen ethnicity through their articulations in space, albeit from opposing vantage points. Both actors gloss over the variations and contradictions within processes of Karen ethnicisation. By contrast, a focus on the locality provides a standpoint sensitive to the dialectical interaction between exogenous and endogenous aspects of ethnicisation. Exogenous factors, such as Myanmar’s political climate and the actions of development actors, certainly shape how ethnicity is practiced and performed. Nevertheless, equally important are endogenous factors, or internal dynamics within the ethnic group. Intra-ethnic differences have long existed within the Karen along language/sub-group (Sgaw/Pwo/etc.) and religious (Buddhist/Christian/animist) lines (Gravers 2007b; Thawngmung 2012). My task is to understand these dynamics and how they are being transformed by development assistance (see McDuire-Ra 2007), contra both states’ and rebels’ claims to essentialised ethnicity. The locality provides a vantage point

into these dynamics and may reveal how variegated spaces of political authority themselves produce intra-ethnic difference; a contention I explore in **Chapter 7**.

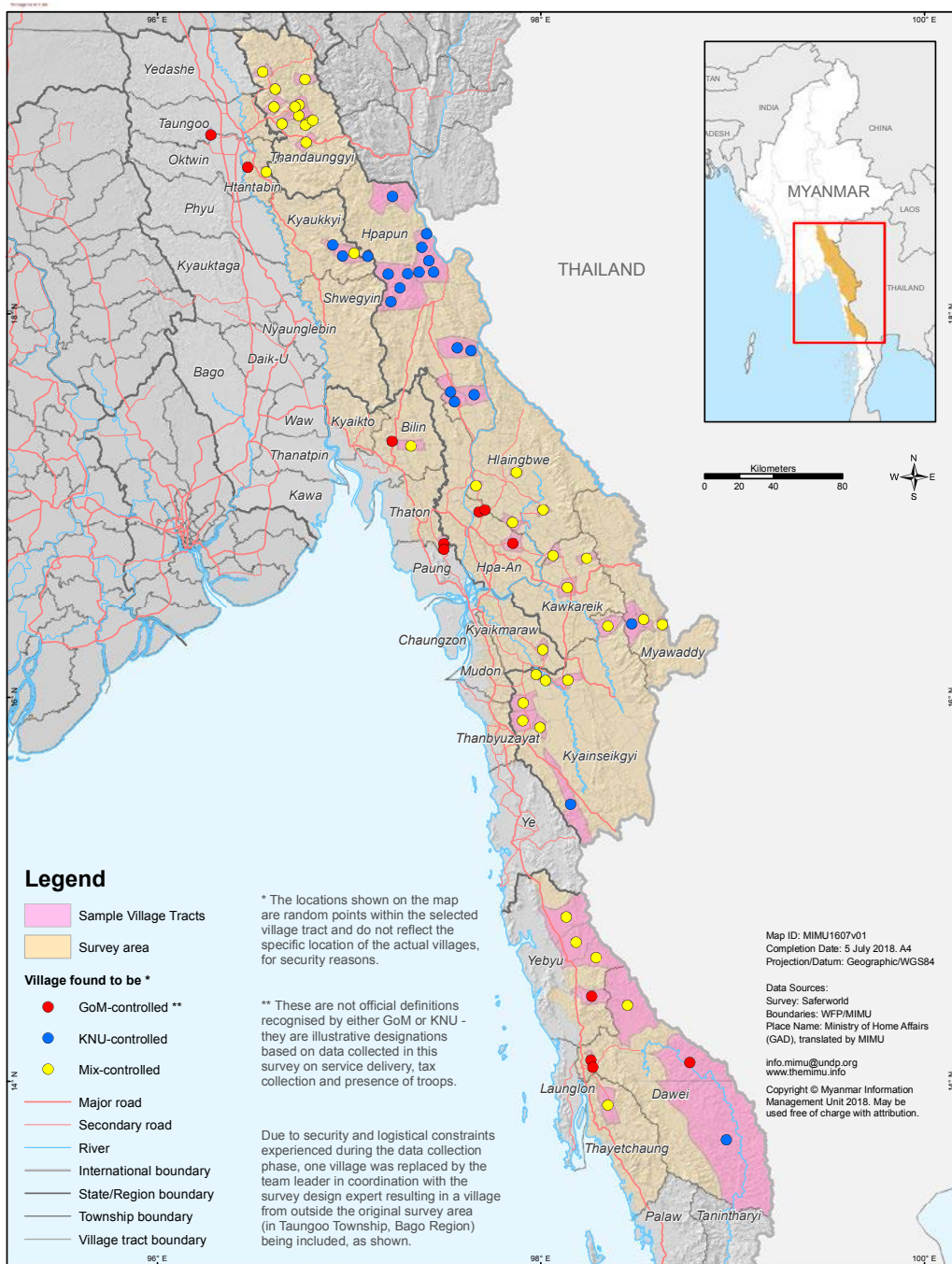
Finally, a locality-based approach situates my study of Karen State within existing literature on postcolonial statehood. Many political dynamics in Karen State today, I have argued, are antecedents from British colonisation. The colonial period elevated ethnicity to the predominant axis of social difference, created a spatial divide between Bamar-dominated and “ethnic” areas, and laid grounds for inter-ethnic violence. The spatialisation of ethnicity was a particular stumbling block for attempts to organise among the Karen, who lived in both Ministerial Burma and in the Frontier Areas. Since Burma’s independence, both the Myanmar state and the KNU have struggled for legitimacy along tracks laid during colonial times. Ethnicity retained its staunch place as a marker of difference, and also became an axis of violent contestation during the Karen civil war, which began after several failed attempts to reconcile Karen elites’ desire for recognition and the format for statehood pursued by Bamar anticolonial nationalists.

From this fraught history, I argue that power relations in Karen State are emblematic of the postcolonial world on three counts. Firstly, political belonging must be understood as ethnicised; accessible in part according to one’s ethnicity and not just according to claims to citizenship (see Cheesman 2017; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Karlsson 2013). Secondly, the state is engaged in the constant production of marginal areas, where state power remains an unfinished project, particularly over bodies and spaces that are excluded by virtue of their ethnic associations (see Cons and Sanyal 2013; Korf and Raeymaekers 2013; Tsing 1993). And finally, the state is actively contested. The presence of the KNU as well as other non-state actors in Karen State continually assert the incompleteness of state sovereignty, as they develop and enforce their own political projects from the marginal spaces they inhabit (see Agnew and Oslender 2013; Kenney-Lazar 2019; Rasmussen and Lund 2018). As with many postcolonial contexts, state-making in Myanmar must be understood as ethnicised,

marginal, and contested. From this basis, a postcolonial theory of territory becomes possible through an ethnographic investigation of localities in Karen State.

Chapter 5 – Locked-in localism: civil society and territories of state/mixed-authority

5.1 Introduction: state/mixed-authority in Karen State



Disclaimer: The names shown and the boundaries used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Figure 6. Governance dynamics in southeast Myanmar. Source: Saferworld and KPSN (2019, viii)

Civil society, as **Chapter 2** sets out, is central to conceptions of development imposed by donors across much of the postcolonial world. At the same time, I have argued that civil society actors must be understood as ambivalently positioned. The people who populate civil society organisations grapple with the disjuncture between the agendas of development actors, the interests of authorities, the expectations of local communities, and their own aspirations for change, particularly when the concept of “civil society” is often foreign to the contexts on which it is imposed. Civil society must thus be understood relationally; as a specific form of associational life lodged within cooperative and conflictual power relations. This and the subsequent chapter provide portraits of civil society in two localities in Karen State. These localities—Hpa-An and Mutraw—which correspond loosely to conditions of state/mixed-authority and rebel authority respectively, were selected to convey the diversity of civil society arrangements in Karen State. In each portrait, I explore the extent to which civil society actors can contest dominant power relations in a postcolonial context.

This chapter discusses civil society actors that navigate conditions of state/mixed-authority. Myanmar’s 2014 census states that the population of Karen State is 1.5 million people.³¹ The locus of state control in Karen State is Hpa-An city, which has a population of approximately 75,000, and houses most Myanmar government functions at the Kayin State level, such as the state-level *hluttaw* (parliament). However, a 2019 survey conducted in 72 randomly selected villages across southeast Myanmar found that only 19% and 20% of respondents lived in Myanmar state and KNU-controlled areas respectively, whereas 61% lived in mixed-authority areas (Saferworld and KPSN 2019; see **Figure 6**).³² Mixed-authority thus predominates outside of Hpa-An and other major towns, where villagers navigate between states and rebels. These rebel actors include the KNU and at least six smaller

³¹ This number excludes those living in KNU areas, which government enumerators could not access. Furthermore, as data on ethnicity was never released, we do not know the number of Karen people in Karen State.

³² The percentage of villages under state control is likely to be lower in Kayin State, since most state-controlled villages in the survey are in Bago Region and Tanintharyi Region, which are outside the scope of this study.

armed groups that operate on the level of tens to hundreds of villages (see Jolliffe 2016, 6-7).³³ I focus on the KNU in this chapter—and throughout this thesis—as the KNU has the longest history, the greatest influence on Karen ethnicisation, and the most spatially extensive presence. Furthermore, the KNU has by far the most extensive administrative system, through which it taxes civilians, offers healthcare and education, registers land titles, and provides a basic justice system. As neither the 2012 KNU ceasefire nor the 2015 NCA delineated boundaries between state and KNU territories (South et al. 2018), the KNU’s administrative system overlaps with that of the state.

The struggle to delineate boundaries between these authorities often plays out in relation to development. For instance, the state has used development assistance to triple the number of state-affiliated teachers in schools established by the KNU, to the chagrin of some KNU officials (Jolliffe 2016, 52-58; Lenkova 2015; Michaels 2014). Hence, state authority in Karen State must be perceived as negotiated in relation to development actors and the KNU. What are civilians’ experiences of mixed-authority? The aforementioned survey found that those in mixed-authority areas were ambivalent towards the state: only 16% of respondents wanted the state to govern their area, whereas 41% of respondents preferred the KNU, and 38% said “I don’t know” or “none” (Saferworld and KPSN 2019, 17; see also Harrison and Kyed 2019). However, research has yet to be done that asks how civil society shapes these relationships. In state/mixed-authority areas, civil society partnerships were largely non-existent until 2011. Not only was the Myanmar state foreclosed from development assistance, restrictions on civic freedoms inhibited the ability of locals to organise. However, the aid influx was accompanied by loosened laws on freedoms of expression and association, allowing for unprecedented partnerships between civil society and development actors in areas of state/mixed-authority.

³³ Other armed actors include splinter groups that have emerged from the KNU, such as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC), and Border Guard Forces (BGFs) allied with the Tatmadaw.

This chapter thus seeks to understand the shifting power relations between development actors and authorities from the perspectives of those who populate the fledgling ‘islands of participation’ (Korf 2010) created by donor-funded civil society organisations. It draws from fieldwork in Hpa-An, where I conducted participant observation at the Bright Stars Community Academy (BSCA), a civil society-led education programme funded by development actors. I sought to understand BSCA through my role as a volunteer-researcher, and through life history interviews with BSCA students and alumni (**Chapter 3**). As many BSCA alumni work at civil society organisations in state/mixed-authority areas after graduation, BSCA is well-connected to the wider civil society landscape in Karen State. I supplemented my research at BSCA with interviews with other civil society actors and the development actors that were funding or otherwise supporting them.

Given that civil society actors exist both within and outside the relations circumscribed by the development regime, this chapter begins by exploring how young people growing up in mixed-authority areas express a sense of dual marginalisation from both the state and the KNU. The next section then explains how young people saw civil society organisations as a means to establish local peoples’ autonomy from either authority, while using development assistance as a resource to accomplish this goal. However, I argue that development actors often impose frameworks on civil society actors that do not accommodate these aspirations. Using Li’s (2000) work on the “indigenous slot”, I distinguish young people’s aspirations with their ability to successfully articulate them. The final section explains the impasse that civil society actors find themselves in according, by using the term *locked-in localism*. This term encapsulates civil society actors’ sense of being constrained by the relations they form with development actors and authorities. I end the chapter with some preliminary contributions to the study of civil society in war-affected areas.

5.2 How young people understand mixed-authority in Karen State

The seventy-year Karen civil war bequeathed Karen State with overlapping projects of rule. Rather than seeing mixed-authority areas as ‘troublesome remainders’ of state territorialisation, I see state and rebel authorities as embedded within society (Cons 2016, 157; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Shah 2013; Sharma and Gupta 2006). However, research that maps the relations between local inhabitants and authorities in mixed-authority areas of Karen State is scarce. This is because mixed-authority areas are caught between research on state repression in Bamar-dominated areas of Myanmar, and research on the civil war that focuses on rebel-controlled areas. To fill this gap, this section draws from young peoples’ narrations of what it is like to grow up under conditions of mixed-authority.

I use “young people” to recognise that my interlocutors in Hpa-An ranged primarily from 18-year-old BSCA students, to civil society leaders in their mid-thirties. Many were self-conscious about their youth: they distinguished their worldviews from that of older family members who experienced extensive armed violence in Karen State in the 1990s. Moreover, my interlocutors’ relative youth reflects the nascency of civil society partnerships in the area. Besides being young, my interlocutors were largely also migrants: most had moved from villages, several hours or days’ away, to Hpa-An city, where most civil society organisations in Hpa-An are based. This can be read as a movement from remote, marginal areas of mixed-authority towards the centres of state power, facilitated by their participation in civil society (see Dyson 2019; Jeffrey and Dyson 2014).³⁴ They spoke about this movement reflexively too, as a resource for making sense of the path they were charting within Hpa-An’s civil society landscape. Young peoples’ life histories thus became an extremely important vantage

³⁴ Dyson and Jeffrey’s research in north India shows that rural-urban migration causes young people to rethink the socio-political conditions they inherit from previous generations (Dyson 2019; Dyson and Jeffrey 2018; Jeffrey and Dyson 2014). Hence, migration facilitates “fresh contact” (Mannheim 1970); a process by which successive generations develop a distinct perspective on ongoing societal change, that motivates new forms of political engagement.

point from which I could understand how present-day conditions of mixed-authority inform the relationship between civil society, development actors, and authorities.

I also rely heavily on young peoples' narrations because I could not access many mixed-authority villages myself. Although I accompanied BSCA students to mixed-authority areas, I never stayed overnight, nor did I travel more than two hours out of Hpa-An city, as I could not acquire state-sanctioned authorisation to travel beyond Hpa-An. I recognise that the young peoples' narratives I draw from are partial; prone to embellishment and occlusion, intended or not. However, inasmuch as researchers studying conflict and violence show that fear, distress, and anxiety warp participants' narratives, they also recognise that emotive narrations of memory are valuable because they contain truths about how the past relates to the present (Fujii 2010; Hedström 2019; Hochschild 2016). Therefore, the point is not to make claims about the reality of life in mixed-authority areas, but to note how subjective experiences of mixed-authority shape present-day engagements in civil society. This section is split into three parts. The first discusses young peoples' impressions of the state, as framed by fear and neglect. The second part then explores how their relationship with the KNU was marked by disillusionment and dis-identification. Finally, I demonstrate how a profound sense of marginalisation from both authorities was pervasive among civil society representatives in Hpa-An.



Figure 7. BSCA students travel to villages in Karen State to offer flood relief, conduct surveys, and collect donations for the school, September to December 2018. Source: author's own.

5.2.1 State-civilian relations: fear and neglect

Rare accounts of life under junta rule frame state-society relations in Myanmar according to fear. These studies attest to the widespread perception that the Tatmadaw and its intelligence services could ‘penetrate every sanctuary space,’ including teashops, households, and classrooms (Skidmore 2004, 59; Fink 2001). Experiences of fear were particularly acute for villagers in war-affected areas, who could be suspected of links with non-state armed groups. Since Myanmar’s independence, Myanmar’s Unlawful Associations Act (Section 17/1, 1908) (known to my participants as “17-slash-1”) has been used to mete out imprisonment and fines for civilians in communication with blacklisted rebel groups. Hence, villagers in mixed-authority areas feared not only the state, but also the consequences of associating with groups like the KNU. For instance, a village leader interviewed by Jolliffe (2016, 38) spoke about travelling to KNU village tract congresses in secret, letting only his deputy village head know, lest he face retaliation from another Tatmadaw-allied armed group. Village leadership positions were considered highly undesirable because villagers feared communicating with multiple authorities in fierce competition with one another. However, after the KNU signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, the state removed the KNU from its list of “illegal organisations.” The Myanmar state has—at least in theory—also signalled their renunciation of fear-generating tactics, such as through the high-profile release of political prisoners over the past decade (Egreteau 2016).

How did young people portray fear in the context of these recent changes? At 18 to 23 years old, most BSCA students I interviewed had spent their adolescence in the post-2011 era. Even so, fear was a recurring motif in their accounts of growing up in areas of mixed-authority.

Saw Kyaw Kyaw: We were afraid because they always look for our actions [watched us carefully]. We cannot wear Karen traditional clothes. We could not keep the Karen flag. If we keep the Karen flag, and if the Burmese Army sees, they will catch us.... If we talk about politics, it is very dangerous... I never spoke out about my opinion, about politics, I was always afraid... I feel more free [now, in BSCA]. (interview, 6 Nov 2018)

Saw Sein Lwin: I learnt a lot [in BSCA]. Because they are afraid to understand politics in the village, you know? They are afraid. They just want to stay away. It is dangerous if you are involved in politics. And also my parents do not want me to trust in politics. I told them a little

bit about what I learnt in school but they are not interested in it, and also sometimes they told me that they don't want me to understand more. (interview, 7 Oct 2018)

Nan Htwe Htwe: [People in my village] talk about the government but they do not dare to talk a lot... Now, after I finished one year in BSCA, I think I can talk. But before this I was worried that if I say something, there are people watching, or some punishment for me... My mum told me that armed groups are not good for us... and if you meet some people from armed groups, do not communicate with them. She is worried for me. (interview, 25 Nov 2018)

Sein Lwin and Htwe Htwe are from villages an hour by motorbike from Hpa-An city, while Kyaw Kyaw is from Kawkareik township, four hours from Hpa-An. Their narratives demonstrate, firstly, that they perceive fear as an outcrop of civil war. Kyaw Kyaw's memories of being unable to wear Karen clothes or fly the Karen flag reveal an ethnic cast to fear (see also KHRG 2020c). Secondly, these narratives frame fear as an inherited condition. They spoke about parents telling them to avoid communication with armed groups (Htwe Htwe) and to avoid engaging in 'politics' (Sein Lwin). "Politics" (Burmese: *nain-ngan ye*), in the Burmese context, connotes self-centredness, division, and conflict, as opposed to working towards unity and consensus (Walton 2015; 2016). In both cases, members of an older generation were asking young people to remain fearful of challenges to the existing social order. Finally, these students indicate their desire to challenge this inherited condition: they contrast their newfound ability to talk 'politics' in BSCA with growing up in a context where these conversations were suppressed. Following political geographers' calls to treat fear as an experience that grounds (geo)politics in everyday life (Pain and Smith 2008), I argue that fear sheds light on the ongoing legacies of civil war: in mixed-authority areas, highly hierarchical relations between the state and civilians persist, these relations manifest in villagers' fears of being cast as rebels or spoilers of national unity. Yet young peoples' experiences in Hpa-An's civil society landscape also enable them to question the power relations underpinning their fears.

Mixed-authority areas have also experienced an expansion of state administration in recent times, as the state expands social services in areas once under KNU control. Local administration is coordinated by the General Administration Department (GAD), which manages village leaders, village

tract administrators, and township administrators (Kyi Pyar Chit Saw and Arnold 2014). Through the GAD, local administrators can access funds for village improvement initiatives, made possible by increased state spending on rural livelihoods since 2011 (McCarthy 2019a). Given the state's extensive presence at the local level, I was curious about the extent to which young people perceived the state's ability to provide for their needs. However, BSCA students often evoked a sense of state neglect instead:

Saw Sein Lwin comes from a village just outside Hpa-An. He tells me about his distant and abusive father, and speaks about 'alcohol', 'drug problems' and a lack of opportunities for young people in his village. Sein Lwin feels strongly about being Karen. 'I want for [Karen people] to maintain the language and the culture... if the culture is strong, then the people will be strong too.' However the government 'doesn't care ... In our country, if you want to negotiate with the government, you need to have weapons. You cannot negotiate. The government cannot be trusted.' He later states that the government thinks that non-Bamar populations are 'rebels, or bad people. There are no opportunities for us [Karen people].' (interview, 7 Oct 2018, emphasis added)

Nan Ni Ni is nineteen. She is from a village in Kawkareik township, three hours from Hpa-An. She describes her father as an 'alcoholic and a drunk' and her mother as a habitual gambler. Ni Ni tells me she 'does not know about the government,' but that she is frustrated with the state because 'other villages get water, transportation, roads, and electricity, but we don't have that.' She dreams that '[she] would be born from another country, because [she wants] opportunities' that the Myanmar state has denied her.' (interview, 24 Oct 2018)

Naw Sandra is eighteen. She emphasises the remoteness of her home village, which is thirteen hours from Hpa-An, in Thanddaungyi township. She recalls her childhood as being punctuated by armed violence; 'I remember the gun sounds,' she says. Sandra tells me that the state sends teachers from other parts of Myanmar to schools near her village, but has done little else. Later on, Sandra tells me that the state's inability to provide meaningful education is causing youths to 'use drugs and drink.' Sandra aspires to 'make more networks' for her village, which seems disconnected from networks of opportunity, resulting in substance abuse among young people. (interview, 18 Nov 2018)

BSCA students' awareness of state authority was ubiquitous. They were all graduates from government high schools and aware that village leaders were in contact with the state. Yet, their experiences of state neglect were universal. Like many other students, Sein Lwin, Ni Ni, and Sandra saw substance problems (drugs and alcohol), a lack of opportunities for social mobility, and an inability to access a fulfilling education as proxies for a deeper sense of neglect by state authorities. Although some students mentioned state-led improvements to their villages, these were almost always infrastructural; to do with

roads, water, and electricity. They continued to bemoan a lack of opportunities for themselves and other young people, which fed the widespread use of drugs, alcohol, and served as drivers for out-migration.

I cannot assess the extent to which students' narratives reflect what the state has or has not "actually" done, but these narratives were remarkable in their ubiquity, and significant in what they say about students' relationships with the state. That is, young people from mixed-authority areas were keen to question the hierarchical state-society relations they inherited from previous generations; however, their experiences of neglect also told them that their aspirations for change could not be fulfilled within the state's frameworks. Some who felt neglected by the state also expressed a strong affiliation with the Karen ethnic group. For instance, Sein Lwin (quoted above), told me that he aspires to 'maintain the language and culture' of Karen people. I therefore wondered how they felt about the KNU.

5.2.2 Rebel-civilian relations: disillusionment and indifference

However, almost none of my interviewees in mixed-authority areas felt that the KNU spoke for them either. Civil society leaders in their early thirties were particularly disillusioned. These civil society actors told me that they had sought a relationship with the KNU when they were younger, because they felt marginalised by the Myanmar state. However, this relationship was often left wanting. Many (but not all) civil society leaders in Hpa-An are Pwo Karen-speaking Buddhists, whereas the KNU leadership is dominated by Sgaw Karen-speaking Christians (D. Brenner 2019; Cheesman 2002). Civil society leaders felt marginalised within the KNU because of their linguistic and religious affiliation, and disillusioned by the KNU's claims to represent "all" Karen people.

Saw Tun Aung, one of BSCA's founders, illustrates this. Tun Aung, who grew up in the outskirts of Hpa-An during junta rule, received a scholarship to do his undergraduate degree in Bangkok in 2009. There, he became involved with a Karen students' association that taught night classes to Karen refugees and migrants.

Tun Aung: Before I went to [Thailand] I did not know about the [Karen] refugees and migrant workers... I think that was the time that I realised my community needs me: an educated person, who has a passion for them ... This opened my eyes. I started to give back to the community more and more.

Shona: What does community mean to you?

Tun Aung: The Karen. When I say ‘Karen’, I mean every Karen: Pwo, Sgaw; every Karen person. (interview, 27 Nov 2018)

In Bangkok, Tun Aung did not feel the need to suppress his Karen identity for fear of state retaliation. He realised that he wanted to “give back” to his co-ethnics, and that his education had given him means to do so that were inaccessible to most people from mixed-authority areas. At the time, it made sense that Tun Aung would seek to improve the lives of Karen people through the KNU’s frameworks. This was before 2011, when political activities were suppressed by the junta in mixed-authority areas, and when development funding was inaccessible from inside Myanmar. Tun Aung had had no contact with the KNU, having grown up fearing reprisal from the junta for colluding with rebel groups. However, when the KNU invited Karen students in Bangkok to a meeting, Tun Aung left disillusioned. He recounted this incident in an informal conversation:

[Tun Aung] refers to ‘the most painful experience’ attending [a meeting] at a KNU base while he was a student in Bangkok. ‘I wanted to go because it was Karen people’ [he said], drawing on a sense of empowerment he had achieved in Bangkok, but he was disappointed when everyone there was speaking Sgaw. He tried to speak in Sgaw... but it was clear that his was broken. ‘Three times I asked them to speak in English or Burmese, because they all can speak English, but they refused. After that I didn’t want anything to do with the KNU.’ (fieldnotes, 26 Oct 2018)

Among the Karen diaspora, Tun Aung felt a sense of ethnic affiliation that was denied to him in areas where the junta suppressed ethnic identity. However, he felt that the KNU denied him the opportunity to partake in their movement, because he could not speak Sgaw. Several other civil society representatives that grew up in similar circumstances shared these views, telling me about their personal backgrounds in a manner that asserted their distance from the KNU. ‘My father and mother are simple, they’re teachers,’ a Pwo Karen civil society representative told me, ‘so I stand in an impartial role because my relatives’ families are not linked with the KNU, or the government’ (interview, Nan Hnin

Moe, 11 Oct 2018). Another civil society representative said, ‘I’m Pwo. My family is not religious. We don’t have friends in those [KNU] networks.’ (interview, Nan Kyi Kyi, 24 Nov 2018).

BSCA students did not express the same perceived exclusion from the KNU’s inner circles. They expressed indifference towards the KNU, rather than disillusionment. There are two possible reasons for this. Firstly, whereas civil society representatives hoped the KNU would sympathise with their aspirations for Karen people, BSCA students perceived the KNU as an authority that collected taxes, carried guns, and provided occasional social services. They accepted this as a feature of life under mixed-authority, and did not pin hopes on the KNU in the same way. Tun Aung professed to know of the KNU as a child, but he did not feel strongly about KNU until he felt that the KNU had dashed his hopes to ‘give back’ to the Karen people via the ethnonationalist movement (interview, 27 Oct 2018). In contrast, some BSCA students struggled to distinguish the KNU from other non-state groups in Karen State. They spoke verbatim about the presence or absence of “armed groups” in their village, without distinguishing them. Others were unclear about what exactly the KNU did. One student put it this way:

I think that as a member of the Karen people, I have no leader. Because the Karen people have many organisations, and sometimes people are confused. How do they work for us? Do they work for the community? Do they make their own conflict? I do not know. (interview, Saw Sein Lwin, 7 Oct 2018).

As with other marginal, postcolonial contexts, civilians perceive local authority as confounding (Cons 2016). Secondly, civil society organisations provide a source of group identity to BSCA students that was unavailable to slightly older civil society leaders. BSCA exemplifies this. I interviewed five of the organisation’s “founders,” including Tun Aung, who concurred that when BSCA was founded in 2012 when there were hardly any other civil society-led education programmes in the city. Today, there are at least four more besides BSCA, along with dozens more civil society organisations operating across Karen State. BSCA’s students do not need to reach out to the KNU to achieve the sense of group identity that their founders desired; they can do so within Hpa-An’s burgeoning civil society landscape. Overall, young people in Karen State—encompassing civil society representatives and BSCA students—did not

feel a sense of affiliation towards the KNU, although they mostly identified as Karen. Yet as non-Bamar people, they felt a parallel sense of exclusion from the Myanmar nation-state. This sense of dual marginalisation drives their participation in civil society today.

Hence, young people participating in civil society aspired to transform conditions of mixed-authority, which they perceived as oppressive and overbearing. These aspirations are premised on a sense of dual marginalisation from both the Myanmar nation-state and the KNU. Valentine and Sporton (2009) discuss how young Somali refugees in the UK disavow “black” identity, even though others often ascribed this label to them. This process of disidentification (identifying as “different from” or “other than”) reveals a gap between the identity positions that subjects are asked to inhabit, and the identities that subjects claim. In the same way, young people in mixed-authority areas reject the identities ascribed to them by the Myanmar state and the KNU. They felt that although they could access social services provided by the Myanmar state, the state continued to typecast them as ‘rebels’ or ‘bad people’ because they identified as Karen (interview, Saw Sein Lwin, 7 Oct 2018). However, they also disidentified with the KNU. Some felt excluded from the ethnonationalist movement because of their linguistic or religious affiliation; others did not see participating in the KNU-led movement as relevant to their aspirations. Either way, they doubted the KNU’s claims to represent them, even in instances where they identified strongly as Karen.

At the same time, margins can be generative; a ‘site of resistance’ (hooks 1990, 342), or a ‘condition of possibility’ (Shields 1991, 277). Likewise, young peoples’ narratives reveal the role of civil society in building a community around experiences of dual marginalisation. Although everyone possesses the ability to wish, want, and plan, a subject’s capacity to aspire is dependent on their access to mental maps that connect one’s present reality to desired outcomes (Appadurai 2004). After 2011, these maps became far more widely available to inhabitants of mixed-authority areas, through Hpa-An’s nascent civil society landscape. By participating in civil society, young peoples’ dissatisfactions with the state and the KNU crystallised into aspirations for change. Civil society offers an alternative,

“third” venue for collective identification, for young people that see themselves as “too Karen” to belong to the Myanmar nation-state, yet not “Karen” in a way that fits easily with the KNU.

5.3 Civil society between state and rebel authority

Like Chatterjee (2004), who saw civil society as an outcrop of Western modernity imposed on Indian society, most of my interlocutors saw “civil society” as a foreign import. The English-language term “civil society” only gained traction in Karen State after 2011, due to the confluence of three factors: the loosening of state laws on freedom of association and expression, the Karen ceasefires, and an infusion of development aid into the country. My interviewees used the English loanword when speaking in other languages, because the term has no equivalent in Burmese, Sgaw, or Pwo (Kramer 2011). By “civil society”, they referred to organisations conducting activities funded—at least in part—by development actors that adhered to the grant cycles, reporting standards, and terms of reference set by funders. Civil society in Karen State therefore must be seen as part of the international development regime, and divorced from other, more quixotic connotations of the term that idealise civil society as an arena apart from the state and the market. Anyone who described themselves as part of civil society, as my interviewees did, was in some kind of contact with development actors. This is not to say that other forms of associational life did not exist in Karen State. Indeed, as the next section will show, people organised in many ways even prior to the 2011 reforms.

This section begins by explaining why, amid widespread experiences of dual marginalisation, young people turned to civil society organisation to express their aspirations for change. What did this form of associational life—with its inextricable links to the international development regime—offer to young people, that existing forms of associational life did not? My argument is that the growth of civil society organisations allowed young people to aspire for *change* in a way that they could not do previously, as other forms of associational life were often directed towards *coping*. However, thereafter, I argue that young peoples’ emergent aspirations for change were often blocked by current

circumstances. Although civil society actors were emphatic in their doubts about the state and the KNU, they did not have an alternative vocabulary with which to express their aspirations for autonomy. Drawing on existing literature, we might say that their *aspirations* for change did not portend their ability to *articulate* them. I make this point by comparing how the emic English-language term “community” is deployed by BSCA students and staff, and how “community” is understood by the development actors that fund the organisation. By examining the polyvalence of “community”, I unpack the struggles of civil society actors in state/mixed-authority areas. Contra scholars that see civil society as exclusionary or as irrelevant to most of the postcolonial world, I argue that civil society must be seen as a social fact: a nascent form of associational life that embeds marginal actors within a particular configuration of power relations.

5.3.1. Coping and change in associational life

Associational life in Karen State is hardly restricted to “civil society.”³⁵ One study, for instance, found that 44% of villages in state-controlled areas of Myanmar’s southeast (comprising Kayin State, Mon State, and Tanintharyi Region) reported the presence of village-level social organisations concerned with health, welfare, and education (Griffiths 2019, 614). Another study shows how participation in *parahita* organisations, organised around Buddhist notions of “loving-kindness”, allowed people to participate in community life while shirking the negative connotations of “politics” (Walton 2016). Similarly, in descriptions of their home villages, all BSCA students spoke about participating in self-help organisations that organised festivities, emergency funds, and local development initiatives, and/or faith-based groups, based in churches and monasteries. ‘One of the benefits of my village is that we

³⁵ The sparse number of studies on pre-2011 civil society in Myanmar are Yangon- and/or Bamar-focused. Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007, 144) shows that religious organisations, student organisations, and political parties flourished before 1962. However, his research does not mention how ethnicity and geography intersect with civil society. Alan Saw U (2007) argues that Yangon-based Karen groups were instrumental in persuading the KNU to pursue peace negotiations in the early 2000s. However, he does not make reference to civil society in Karen State.

have unity,’ Nan Moe Moe said, ‘we support each other even when we face accidents’ (interview, 5 Nov 2018). Another student, Nan Nwe Nwe, told me proudly that ‘our village tried to get electricity by themselves. They collected money, they did by themselves to get electricity, without the government.’ (interview, 1 Dec 2018).

The existence of these groups corresponds with the prevalence of ‘systems of social protection and notions of moral community beyond the state’ throughout Myanmar (McCarthy 2020, 1). In the absence of state protections, authors note how associational life is organised around localised notions of virtue that prioritise collective harmony over self-interest, such as unity (Burmese: *nyi nyut ye*) and faithfulness (Pwo Karen: *thout kyar*) (J. Chambers 2019; McCarthy 2020; Walton 2015; 2016). Chambers’ (2019) research provides a rare glimpse into associational life in a Pwo Karen village, in an area controlled by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)—a KNU splinter group allied with the Tatmadaw. She shows how an ex-DKBA officer, with a reputation for profiteering from conflict, drugs, and moneylending, maintains his moral authority by participating in Buddhist rituals and community events (J. Chambers 2019, 277). Chambers implies that associational life reinforces the inequality between armed actors and civilians: her interlocutor’s participation in communal rites allowed him to be seen as a Pwo Karen committed to the collective good of the village, despite his renown for extortionate business practices. From this view, associational life does not only occur in the spaces vacated by states and rebel groups; they also maintain a status quo that subordinates villagers to state and rebel authorities. In other words, existing forms of associational life are directed towards coping with the harsh conditions of military rule (see also Thawngmung 2019).

Unlike existing forms of associational life, the model of civil society introduced by development actors is geared towards *change* rather than *coping*. For one, this is a matter of scale. Whereas village associations operate locally, development actors see civil society organisations as a means to achieve social transformation throughout Karen State, or across several village tracts and townships. In addition, where village associations tend to maintain existing power structures,

development actors promote civil society as a mechanism for reconfiguring power. Young people did not speak about trying to transform their village through self-help groups, churches, and monasteries, no matter how dissatisfied they were. Nan Ni Ni, a BSCA student, was ‘angry’ at her village for shunning her family because of their reputation for alcoholism, gambling, and poverty. When I asked if she participated in self-help organisations, Ni Ni explained her ostracisation from her village:

Some students in [BSCA] help a lot in their village... but in my village no one even knows that I am attending [BSCA]... My family is very poor compared to everyone else in the village. In the village, there are so many rich people. They only care about each other... And the head of the village keeps their eyes on me, looks down on me, because of my mother. (interview, 24 Oct 2018)

Ni Ni was unhappy with her village but felt ill-equipped to change it. Although Ni Ni is very outspoken, she described herself as docile and withdrawn at home. Likewise, although students identified substance abuse and a lack of “opportunities” in their village, they never mentioned confronting these issues through village associations.³⁶ Hence, young people hoped that an influx of development funding into Hpa-An would expand pathways to local agency. They hoped that through civil society, people originating from mixed-authority areas might spearhead change, rather than state or rebel authorities. Several BSCA students spoke about “going home” to set up their own civil society organisation that was distinct from existing village organisations. They often used BSCA itself as a reference point for the changes they wanted to make:

Nan Thu Zar: I want to become a teacher, and build my own school, like [BSCA]. (15 Oct 2018)

Nan Moe Moe: When I applied to [BSCA], I hoped for my community... I will be a volunteer [with self-help organisations] for 2 or 3 years after [BSCA]. After that, I will go back to my village and open my own learning centre. I will support people. I will open a library. (5 Nov 2018)

³⁶ During my interviews with BSCA students, they would often sound out ideas they had for their village with me. For instance, one of my students asked me for “suggestions” on the drug abuse problems in her village (Nan Moe Moe, 5 Nov 2018). I was wildly underqualified for answering a question like this. However this dynamic is evidence of, firstly, students’ intent to address existing issues in their villages; and secondly, the manner in which they saw civil society (including my position as a volunteer teacher) as a means for accessing change.

Nan Ni Ni: I will go back one day... I really want to change my village... I plan to go back to my village and, with my friend, to open a programme that is similar to [BSCA]. I would like to train the students and also see them get further education. (24 Oct 2018)

Nan Htwe Htwe: The people in my village, when they see me, they think I don't have much knowledge or skills and effort to help them.... [When I graduate] I really want to go back to my village. They have a lot of things that I want to do. We have some plans, me and [a friend], to do something for our village. (25 Nov 2018)

For these students, civil society offers an alluring and unprecedented prospect for the transformation of social relations. 'There are a lot more civil society organisations than before,' one civil society representative said, 'so if [young people] don't want to join the government and don't trust the KNU, there is another way' (interview, Saw Lah Phoe, 3 May 2019). In this context, while civil society is inextricable from the international development regime, this model of associational life provides individuals with a potential avenue to act on their marginalisation from existing authorities in an unprecedented way. In what follows, I consider the extent to which civil society provides young people with the opportunity to actually articulate the changes they wish to see, using BSCA as a case study.

5.3.2. How civil society actors grasp for “community”: aspiring versus articulating

BSCA is a two-year, full-time educational programme that provides young adult students with a diploma in “community development and leadership” (**Chapter 3**). It is part of a larger set of education programmes in Myanmar that are not accredited by the state, although diplomas from these programmes are recognised by development actors and civil society programmes, where many BSCA students go to work after graduation (Loong and Rinehart 2019). From its establishment in 2012, BSCA has been subject to development actors' model of civil society. The organisation was founded with a start-up grant disbursed by an INGO and continues to receive most of its funding from development actors. For the purposes of communicating with donors, its leaders' aspirations are distilled into a Logical Framework (or “logframe”), a project management tool common in the world of international development, that conveys the “goals,” “outcomes,” “outputs,” and “activities” to be pursued by an

organisation, so that donors can evaluate projects based on measurable outputs. The organisation's nine staff members are also familiar with the procedures driven by development actors, as they work to submit quarterly and yearly reports, and attend trainings hosted by INGOs.

Suspecting that these demands were taking a toll on BSCA, I asked a staff member if he felt that donors expected too much. To my surprise, Saw Tun Aung said, '[development actors] don't expect too much from our school. We expect too much from our school. Our vision is so much more [than the logframe]' (Saw Tun Aung, 27 Nov 2018). Tun Aung told me that BSCA's logframe presents the organisation as a provider of "quality education" in Karen State ('I don't know what their opinion is on quality,' he says), even though BSCA's staff and students see it as much more than an education provider. He suggests that his aspirations for BSCA far exceed what development actors can accommodate within their model of civil society.

To what extent do civil society organisations counter young peoples' experiences of dual marginalisation with an alternative, coherent model for transforming local power relations? And to what extent do development actors that fund these organisations share these goals? What did Tun Aung mean when he said that he expected more from the school than the actors funding them? I argue that many of the tensions and ambivalences that underlie young peoples' participation in civil society are embodied in struggles over the English-language term "community." "Community" is an emic term that is often used by both development actors and BSCA's students, teachers, and leaders, although they use the term in subtly different ways. I tease out these subtle differences to explain the mismatch between what development actors and their beneficiaries expect out of civil society. Earlier, I argued that civil society offered young people the capacity to aspire. Compared to other forms of associational life, geared towards coping with repressive and poorly implemented state policies (see Thawngmung 2019), civil society offered young people a platform upon which they could imagine changing the unequal power relations between civilians and authorities. Following from this point, this section focuses on the extent to which young civil society actors' *aspirations* for change translate into their ability to *articulate* these

changes to actors who matter, through an ethnographic investigation of how students and staff in BSCA deploy the emic term “community.”

I use “articulation” following the anthropologist Tania Li’s (2000) reworking of Stuart Hall. Hall (1980/2019, 213) counters an ahistorical, universal conception of racism, with the argument that racism must be understood as articulated within ‘specific historical conditions’ comprising a ‘set of economic, political, and ideological practices.’ Likewise, through a study of the Lindu—a group opposing dam construction in Lake Lindu, Sulawesi—Li argues that one’s ability to enunciate one’s collective identity and have it recognised by outsiders is provisional. By articulating themselves as “tribal” or “indigenous” in a manner recognizable to powerful actors, the Lindu were able to successfully stall hydropower plans. Li shows how the Lindus’ self-positioning within the “tribal slot” was made possible because a series of historical conjunctures provided them with the discursive resources to do so: Lake Lindu’s customary institutions were sustained during colonial times, and local communities acquired experience marking boundaries between themselves and outsiders, due to immigration over the past century. Hence, the Lindus’ expression of their indigenous identity was ‘a story for which the conceptual frame or “place of recognition” already exists’ (Li 2000, 163). ‘Every articulation is a creative act,’ Li writes, ‘yet it is never creation *ex nihilo* but rather a selection and rearticulation of elements structured through previous engagements’ (Li 2000, 169, original emphasis).

Other scholars have since used Li’s work to show how local communities creatively utilise their histories and struggles to position themselves in categories that accrue meaning on the national or global scale, hence anthropologists’ conceptualisations of the “smallholder slot” and the “victim slot” (Hughes 2013; Peluso 2017; see also Choy 2005; Devine 2018; Harris 2020). Yet while such follow-up research focuses on communities’ ability to articulate, less attention has been paid to instances where communities are unable to “slot” themselves into identity categories. In fact, Li’s (2000, 163) research compares the Lindu to the Lauje; another Indonesian community for whom ‘there has been no conjuncture, no context, site, event, or encounter’ through which they might position themselves as

indigenous. In what follows, I explore the potential gap between civil society actors' desire to enunciate collective aspirations, and their (in)ability to articulate these—that is, to make their aspirations legible to outsiders—by examining my observations at a flood relief trip conducted by students, and interviews with BSCA staff. I also build on the idea that articulation is made possible through space, or through the specific power relations that constitute a particular locality. Conditions of mixed-authority specific to Hpa-An, I argue, constrain civil society actors' ability to transform aspiration into articulation. Hence, the anthropological concept of the “tribal slot” is of interest to geographers.

5.3.2.1 “Community” as aspiration within BSCA

“Community” is the central concept around which BSCA is organised. Whereas formal education encourages belonging to the nation-state and the KNU's education system promotes Karen ethnonationalism (Lall and South 2014), BSCA students pledge to be ‘guiding stars of the community.’ These are words from BSCA's school song, in Pwo, which students sing in unison every Monday. ‘Students know that this school is for community,’ one student said while contemplating this, ‘so if anyone applies for this school they need to do the best for their village and for their community’ (Nan Ni Ni, 24 Oct 2018). The school's English-language mission also states that students are to become ‘agents of positive change throughout their communities.’ Moreover, the notion of “community” is embedded in the day-to-day life of students and staff. Every weekday, all 68 students in BSCA take classes in English language, social science, IT, and community development.

Besides the school's curriculum, students also engage in various activities meant to put “community” into practice: they complete a three-month internship at a civil society organisation or INGO at the end of their second year, implement community service projects, and travel across Karen State to conduct research or collect donations. Many activities are conducted in students' natal villages, which can be several hours' travel from Hpa-An. Hence throughout the two-year programme, BSCA students stay on the school compound most of the time, but may spend days or weeks travelling to their

home village or to other students' villages, as representatives of BSCA.' These are referred to as "community visits." During one such trip, in September 2018, students offered flood relief to two villages several hours from Hpa-An. By recounting this community visit, I unpack how the emic term "community" encapsulates the aspirations that BSCA students and staff pinned onto civil society.

The flood relief trip was instigated by severe monsoonal flooding across Karen State that displaced thousands (Naw Betty Han 2018). Two student leaders took charge of the community visit: contacting village heads for permission to distribute aid, conducting a survey to determine villagers' needs, buying rice, oil, salt, and onions to hand out, and transporting all 36 students there on trucks and motorbikes. At the first village, the day's leaders thanked villagers for their hospitality and told them about BSCA (**Figure 8**). While there, a student told me that she was surprised at how "poor" the village was: there was no electricity, so villagers used candles at night and buffalo to plough fields. While students interviewed villagers about the floods, another student told me he felt 'sorry' because he is Sgaw Karen, and so could not understand what the rest were saying in Pwo. The villagers were not fluent in Burmese. Our visit to the second village was disrupted by heavy rain, so the students left relief materials in an agreed-upon location instead. Upon return, BSCA's teacher for community development gathered students to discuss the trip. Students reflected on how villagers described the adverse effects of the floods (e.g. food insecurity, fears for safety upon being displaced), and their coping mechanisms (e.g. plans to build larger boats through village associations). They also discussed how they felt about the trip. These ranged from positive feelings ('happy', 'proud', 'empathy') to negative ones ('helpless', 'sad'). Sgaw Karen students brought up a sense of exclusion because of their inability to speak Pwo. The community development teacher urged them to not be afraid of speaking broken Pwo, and all students to be bolder when speaking to villagers (fieldnotes, 28 September 2018).



Figure 8. BSCA students (in red) distribute flood relief supplies, September 2018. Source: author's own.

What does flood relief say about BSCA's approach to community? Firstly, although every student belongs to a "community," community service trips like this extend students' sense of "their" community to other villages. Although students noticed differences between the villages they visited and their own—for instance, that a village was especially "poor", "remote", or exclusively Pwo-speaking—they left with an overall sense of connectedness and responsibility for the people they met. That students felt "sorry" that they did not speak Pwo indicates their awareness of their failure to connect with people they were otherwise meant to feel an affinity for. That BSCA's teacher urged students to be bolder when speaking to villagers and to overcome their fear of speaking broken Pwo, indicates the school's hand in widening students' circle of concern to other villages in Karen State, regardless of whether one speaks Sgaw or Pwo. Community therefore connotes a sense of affinity with others in Karen State, regardless of linguistic affiliation. Furthermore, BSCA's community service trips build on a shared sense of dual marginalisation. Using an interview guide prepared by a BSCA teacher, BSCA students asked if any authorities had offered flood relief to the village. They learned that the Myanmar state's efforts were inadequate. For instance, the state provided seeds to villagers in response to food shortages after the floods, but the seeds were not suited to local soil conditions. Conversely, the

KNU had not reached out to provide flood relief at all. These findings resonated with students' own experiences of mixed authority.

Secondly, in the absence of support from state and rebel authorities, BSCA emphasises students' agency in assisting others. Students took the reins during the trip, coordinating with village heads, buying supplies, and speaking in front of beneficiaries. Indeed, BSCA selects new student leaders for every weekly community service trip. For students accustomed to being subordinate to older, largely male, leadership figures, this incited new anxieties. 'I would like to lead other people... but I feel I don't have enough confidence,' one student admitted (Nan Htwe Htwe, 25 Nov 2018). Others told me they were proud of their newfound leadership abilities: 'friends from my village; they notice...' "In the past you don't dare to talk to strangers, and now you communicate with other people so easily!" (Nan Poe Poe, 21 Oct 2018) BSCA's "community" focus nurtures new subjectivities; students acquire an agency to effect change that they did not have before.

Saw Tun Aung, one of BSCA's founders, explains that this agency is based on mutual respect between students and villagers:

Students' thinking, perspectives, and opinions of the village changes over the two years [they spend at BSCA]... Whatever the community needs, small or big, they want to provide... [After attending BSCA] villagers ask their opinions and suggestions, their guidance. They have more respect. I think that people, especially the youths and young people, believe and trust them. (interview, Saw Tun Aung, 27 Nov 2018)

Tun Aung emphasises that students must be attentive to 'community needs.' Students do so by completing needs assessments before distributing aid and listening to villagers' concerns through on-site interviews. The 'respect' and 'trust' that BSCA students accrue through this process distinguishes them from authorities that implement policies that are out-of-step with villagers' everyday realities. Thus, BSCA uses the term "community" as a shorthand for a sense of affinity and agency, both are qualities that the school aspires to impart in its students in spite of their marginalisation from the state and the KNU. Yet, while BSCA students implement their aspirations for "community" with relative

ease, BSCA staff struggle to articulate these aspirations to their funders. In other words, BSCA's vision for "community" is aspirational, but not yet articulated. Next, I examine why this might be the case.

5.3.2.3. Articulating "community" amid state and rebel authorities

BSCA staff distinguished their vision for building "community" from existing frameworks that depend on recognition propagated by the state and by the KNU. The BSCA staff emphasised that "community" was an inclusive concept, in contradistinction to both Burman and Karen nationalism, which they perceived as exclusionary. This theme came up most frequently during my interview with Nan Kyi Kyi, a founder and former principal of BSCA. Kyi Kyi was born on the Thai border, but moved to a village near to Hpa-An when she was young. Kyi Kyi explained that:

Everyone in Karen State. That is my community... We are working in Karen State, [so some critics] said, it should be Karen people. I said, everyone in Karen State should be our community. We cannot leave out anyone. (interview, 24 Nov 2018)

Kyi Kyi defined her community as 'Karen State' rather than Karen people. She emphasised that although Karen people had been systematically marginalised by the state, she was uncomfortable with a conception of community that excluded non-Karen people living in Karen State, whom she had grown up with. 'We wanted to see Karen people develop,' she said, 'but those who are a minority [in Karen State], should have opportunities too. It is about passion, motivation for the community' (interview, 24 Nov 2018). Furthermore, she is worried about replicating the exclusionary, ethnically-defined *modus operandi* of the KNU and the Myanmar state. As a Pwo Karen with Christian parents, Kyi Kyi felt that she did not fall neatly into either constituency. She also felt that an important function of education was to inculcate a respect for diversity among students, in order to move past Karen State's history of civil war. Hence, Kyi Kyi's focus on "Karen State" was a way of acknowledging the marginalisation of people living in the area who lived at the fringes of both state and rebel authority, without retreating into ethnocentrism.

However, Kyi Kyi then explained the opposition she faced when trying to implement her conception of “community.” One way in which BSCA accrues respect and trust among villagers across Karen State is through a board of “community leaders” that steers the school. The board consists of approximately ten individuals, appointed because of their status as respected people across Karen State. This is a heterogeneous group, comprising INGO representatives, people affiliated with KNU and state departments, monks, and students’ parents. The board meets quarterly to provide suggestions to BSCA. However, Kyi Kyi told me that her vision of community—which spans the whole of Karen State—was a regular point of friction between herself and one or two committee members, who insisted that community be defined in ethnic terms. For instance, they were unhappy with BSCA’s admission criteria, which attempts to ensure that at least one to two non-Karen ethnic groups are represented in each batch of students. ‘I wanted the students to be more diverse, but for them diversity was not as important,’ she said, ‘they wanted to make [BSCA] focus on Karen people.’ Kyi Kyi explained this in terms of generations:

Older people have experience with fighting and the civil war. But later, after the 1990s, we do not have those experiences. The way [older people] see community is different... My parents had experience with the civil war when they were young [too]. They are afraid of the Tatmadaw and the armed groups, but for us, we are not so afraid. (interview, 24 Nov 2018)

Earlier in this chapter, I explained how young people in Karen State developed a distinctive perspective on mixed-authority areas that distinguished themselves from older generations. Like their predecessors, young people felt marginalised by both states and rebels; however, through civil society, they discovered the shared nature of these sentiments, and aspired to change them. However, Kyi Kyi’s narrative demonstrates that in the course of pursuing these aspirations, young people continue to contend with “older” perceptions that community should be defined in ethnic terms.

Whereas BSCA’s founders sought to engender credibility for their concept of “community” by building relations between BSCA and other dominant actors in the locality, these relations also introduced friction over the extent to which community should be defined by existing categories of

difference. Struggles over the definition of community demonstrate that the pursuit of change through civil society is a fraught process. BSCA's focus on "community" is a political stance that asserts young peoples' desire to transcend existing frameworks of belonging scripted by the KNU and the Myanmar state, which they deem ethnocentric and exclusionary. However, BSCA's ability to implement this notion of community is hampered by state and rebel actors who are beholden to existing frameworks for belonging. Civil society actors' aspirations for change could not be articulated under conditions of mixed-authority. The question now is how development actors play into this impasse.

5.4 Locked-in localism: civil society and development actors under mixed-authority

The opposition that civil society actors face from powerful actors in Karen State testifies to the importance of conditions for articulation, which refer to the particular social, historical conjunctures that allow a social group's demands to become intelligible (Li 2000). BSCA leaders' disagreements with existing authorities in Karen State shows that these actors cannot provide a 'surface' on which they might articulate their aspirations (Setyowati 2020). However, the aid influx into Myanmar has resulted in development actors becoming increasingly prominent actors. One wonders if development actors might assist civil society in their struggles against inherited frameworks for recognition. Might the partnerships they form with development actors lend BSCA leaders added weight in their struggles against more ethnocentric and exclusionary notions of "community"? Might development actors provide BSCA leaders with conditions for articulation unavailable before the aid influx?

This section argues that although development actors provide material support to projects implemented by individual civil society organisations, they inhibit civil society actors' ability to reconfigure power relations in state/mixed-authority areas. Development actors in state/mixed-authority areas largely do not create space for civil society actors to articulate their own agendas, as they too

remain beholden to existing frameworks for recognition. I reflect, firstly, on the incongruences between development actors' conception of "community" and the ways in which BSCA staff and students envisioned it. Whereas BSCA staff and students used "community" to express their separateness from existing authorities, development actors presumed that civil society organisations were building community within the frameworks of either state or rebel authorities. Then, I reflect on how conditions of mixed-authority themselves inhibit the ability of civil society actors to articulate their aspirations. On the whole, I use the phrase *locked-in localism* to describe the ongoing relation between development actors and civil society actors in mixed-authority areas, which results in civil society actors being unable to articulate their aspirations.

5.4.1 How development actors understand "community"

The word "community" is deeply embedded in the architecture of international development in Kayin State. It is used not only by civil society actors, as described above, but also by donors and INGOs. One of the most prominent development projects in Kayin State is a USAID-funded project entitled Advancing Community Empowerment, a 48 million USD project involving four INGOs over five years (2017–2022), while one of the INGO representatives I interviewed held the title "community empowerment expert". The use of "community" in international development has been critically interrogated elsewhere (e.g. Bulley 2014; Coombes 2017; Muggah 2005). However, here I am particularly interested in how development actors interpret "community" under conditions of mixed-authority, and the extent to which these interpretations diverge from those of civil society actors.³⁷

Whereas civil society actors saw community as an aspiration—an ideal yet to be achieved—development actors saw community as a pre-given unit of social life. Ko Andrew Aung, an INGO representative, explained that his organisation casts actors into "supply-side" and "demand-side" roles

³⁷ This critique is directed not at interviewees themselves, but at the effects of the positions they take, which are often themselves shaped by the constraints put on their work by the organisations they work for.

(interview, 17 Nov 2018). Whereas in the past, donors focused more on “supply-side” actors, such as governments, rebel actors, and local organisations, his project was seeking out “demand-side” actors, which he defines as ‘the community, who demands services.’ Andrew hoped to disburse funds ‘in line with upgrading communities... so that they are able to manage themselves, to access essential services along the project duration.’ He sees the community as a social fact; a pre-existing group of people who can ‘manage themselves’ and put forth particular demands for services. Contrast this to BSCA’s vision for community, which is being actively created through community service trips, classes, and negotiations with local leaders. BSCA does not see community as an a priori fact, but as an emergent configuration of relationships among local people, and between locals and the authorities from whom they desire autonomy. Moreover, whereas Andrew sees communities as “demand-side” actors and local organisations as “supply-side” actors, BSCA sees themselves as embedded in the community itself. Later on, Andrew’s colleague, Ma Khin Myo, explained that she sees communities in mixed-authority areas as ‘most vulnerable’ (interview, 12 Dec 2018). By understanding the state and rebel authorities active in each target community, she hoped that her project would be able to provide critical services for populations falling through the cracks. While Khin Myo did not see the state as the only authority in the area, she continued to position each community as pre-given recipients.

A similar interpretation of “community” was offered by Jonathan, who represents an INGO that funds civil society-led education programmes, such as BSCA, across Myanmar’s ethnic states. He describes ‘community appreciation’ as the worldview he hopes to instil:

Before these schools [like BSCA]... You would have youths in the community that might have dreams for education, or they might want to get a job. All those opportunities were away. They were remote. You had to leave your area... The idea of being engaged with the people around you, of having an education that is relevant and useful where you are, applicable to where you are, helping you to get a job where you are, helping to create new jobs where you are, this is much more of an idea of community appreciation. (interview, 9 May 2019)

Jonathan’s description of community appreciation meshes with the views of BSCA representatives on some counts. Just as civil society representatives emphasised belonging to communities, so too Jonathan

‘being engaged with the people around you’ and being ‘relevant and useful where you are.’ And just as civil society representatives sought the agency to act on their own terms, so too Jonathan hopes that graduates from schools like BSCA can create ‘industry, jobs, and an education.’ However, like Andrew and Khin Myo, he also sees “community” as a social fact or as a place of origin, as evident in the phrase ‘youths in the community.’ His description of “community appreciation” also did not make reference to the relationship between BSCA students and leaders, state authorities, and rebel authorities.

It is not that Jonathan was unaware of mixed-authority. Indeed, Jonathan saw BSCA as distinct from the KNU schools that were ‘teaching Karen history or history from a Karen standpoint.’ He criticises these schools for promoting an uncompromising form of Karen ethnonationalism, that ‘hasn’t worked’ because the Karen are ‘not any closer now to a peaceful, long-term solution than they were ten years ago.’ In contrast, he sees that

Schools like [BSCA] have come about as an alternative to KNU rule to an extent... In, say, [BSCA] the Karen-ness is of a more acceptable nature than the Karen schools in the refugee camps. They will need far less adjustments in terms of being *acceptable to authorities*. (interview, 9 May 2019, emphasis added)

He argues that BSCA promotes an education that is ‘digestible’ and ‘acceptable’ to state authority. This is where his point of view diverges from BSCA representatives, who insist not on acquiescence to Myanmar’s authorities, but on social transformation that occurs outside the state’s and the KNU’s frameworks. Jonathan’s words imply an either-or framework applied to civil society organisations: civil society is seen as either politically neutral and compliant with state authority, or as rebel sympathisers. This binary leaves little room for civil society actors to articulate their ambivalence towards both authorities, and their aspirations for a “third way” that is separate from existing frameworks. The changes that Jonathan’s organisation hopes to accomplish through civil society—about being ‘relevant,’ ‘useful,’ and ‘engaged’ to a predetermined and taken-for-granted notion of “community”—seem at odds with BSCA leaders’ hopes for reinventing the meaning of community itself.

The development actors mentioned in this section thus tend to presume that community is an immutable social fact, used somewhat interchangeably with “villagers” or “local people” in Kayin State. In mixed-authority areas, development actors recognise that communities are often caught between multiple authorities, and that they require more ‘services’ or more ‘opportunities’ as a result. However, they do not necessarily encourage civil society actors—or communities themselves—the resources to challenge this state of affairs.

5.4.2 The constraints of mixed-authority

Why is it so hard for civil society actors to push back against the frameworks imposed on them by donors? Some civil society actors traced this back to power dynamics in the locality themselves. While I taught at BSCA, my students demonstrated a striking familiarity with the local context. ‘My cousin was raped by her boss,’ one of my students said during a class on migration, referring to a relative who was a domestic worker in Thailand. Another student told me that migration ‘is okay when things are good, but when they are seriously ill and cannot speak the language, it is a problem.’ Issues that were not readily apparent to students elsewhere—the precariousness associated with migration, the risk of sexual violence for live-in domestic workers—were lived realities for BSCA students (field-notes, 16 Oct 2018). However, when I recounted this to Tun Aung, the BSCA principal, he commented that BSCA students find it difficult to connect ‘life experience’ with ‘big theory.’ Tun Aung said he faced the same issue with development actors. ‘Sometimes when I listen to international experts, we think that actually they’re telling us things that we already know,’ Tun Aung, told me. ‘We have big ideas, but only small words’ (field-notes, 20 Oct 2018). Months later, Nan Shwe Yi, a former BSCA teacher, expressed a similar sentiment. She said that both BSCA students and civil society actors in Hpa-An ‘don’t see the whole picture... because it is a [Myanmar] government-controlled area... They don’t know how to say much, and they find it hard to connect the dots’ (interview, 26 April 2019).

The disjuncture between ‘big ideas’ and ‘small words’ is a poignant way of expressing the gap between aspiration and articulation. These interviewees also suggest that conditions of mixed-authority themselves lock ‘big ideas’ into ‘small words’ in two ways. First, civil society actors lack the vocabulary to paint a full picture of their aspirations, in a context where identity is framed in either ethnic or nationalistic terms. Even “community” is not an all-encompassing political theory. Instead, “community” represents a loose consensus among civil society actors in Hpa-An, who are responding to a shared sense of dual marginalisation, insisting on embracing diversity amid marginalisation, and striving to seek out change on the terms of those who have not had the chance to do so. And second, even as development actors provide funding for schools such as BSCA, they did not recognise civil society leaders’ experiences of dual marginalisation. Thus, development actors did not offer civil society actors opportunities to develop a vocabulary for their aspirations. Partnerships between development actors and civil society actors often involved trainings that allowed civil society representatives to acquire the necessary skills to navigate the development world, such as budgeting, reporting, and organisational management. Yet, these trainings rarely gave civil society actors the tools to challenge the either-state-or-rebels framework that development actors imposed on them. Within this ‘knowledge economy of capacity-building’ (Phillips and Ilcan 2004, 397), civil society actors direct their time and resources toward breaking down their aspirations into the logframes and financial reports, rather than building up their own experiences into a coherent, large-scale approach to social transformation.

Hence, civil society actors in state/mixed-authority areas were locked into the power relations they sought to contest. I argue that this is not a result of a failure of imagination on the part of civil society actors. Indeed, civil society actors have been creatively imagining “community” and developing relations with other actors in the locality in order to put their aspirations into practice. However, their aspirations for change were constrained by the very relations they were embedded in. Although development actors provided young people with the resources to establish and run civil society

organisations, young people found it difficult to challenge power structures within this domain. This is due to development actors' insistence on seeing civil society as either politically neutral, or as rebel sympathisers, without providing civil society actors the resources to imagine alternatives to the current political order. Civil society actors' efforts were *localised*, insofar as they were subordinated to existing relations between state/rebel authorities and civilians in the locality. Just as civil war is framed as a competition between states versus the rebels, without much room for civilians to assert their independence from both, so too, do development actors working in this context inadvertently edge out civil society actors that aspire for change on their own, independent terms. Civil society therefore remains locked in by the power relations established over decades of civil war.

5.5 Conclusion

Therefore, power relations between development actors, state actors, and rebel authorities can constrain civil society actors' ability to transform socio-spatial relations. I use *locked-in localism* to describe this particular power configuration; a term which may apply to other contexts in which relations between states and rebels straightjacket civil society actors' abilities to turn aspiration into articulation. These findings make the following contributions to literature on civil society in postcolonial contexts, where civil society is often a foreign import; a form of associational life introduced by donors.

Firstly, I argue that in these contexts, it is crucial to examine civil society as it is embedded in the power relations that constitute a locality, rather than dismissing civil society as irrelevant or an impossibility. This entails comparing civil society and existing forms of associational life. I have discussed how civil society is distinct from existing village associations in Karen State. Unlike these associations, which were directed at coping with harsh circumstances, civil society offered young people the opportunity to craft aspirations for change. At the same time, scholars should examine the extent to which a wider field of power relations nurture or stymie civil society. The dyads employed in this chapter—*coping* versus *change*, and *aspiring* versus *articulating*—offer tools for accomplishing

this task. Secondly, I have shown that in spite of scholars' relative neglect of associational life in the midst of war, civil society can exist, even if civil society actors face significant challenges. To give civil society actors in postcolonial contexts due attention, scholars should examine not only civil society's relations with the state, but factor in the presence of rebel actors and other local authorities. Finally, I have shown the purchase of life history interviews and participant observation for the study of civil society. An ethnographic approach lies at the heart of this chapter, through which I uncovered struggles over the emic term "community". Life history interviews also made up for a paucity of literature on mixed-authority areas in Myanmar, and are a useful tool for understanding how young people saw civil society participation as a 'vital conjuncture' in their lives (Johnson-Hanks 2002), at which they negotiate possible futures vis-à-vis the wider socio-political context.

Whereas BSCA's attempts to reinvent "community" came undone, the next chapter discusses an instance in which civil society actors have successfully reorganised power relations within the locality. I explore relations between civil society, rebel authorities, and development actors in Mutraw, an area governed exclusively by the KNU, where civil society actors are transforming existing power relations under the banner of the Salween Peace Park. Like this chapter, **Chapter 6** insists on a relational approach to civil society and on seeing territory as a terrain of struggle. Yet, it shows that the outcome of these struggles can differ depending on power relations within the locality. Whereas this chapter builds towards the notion of *locked-in localism*, I use *transformative localism* to describe what relations organised through the Peace Park have been able to accomplish. By comparing **Chapter 5** and **Chapter 6**, I advance an understanding of territory as made through the agonistic relations assembled in the pursuit of development. I weave this theoretical argument together in **Chapter 8**.

Chapter 6 – Transformative localism: civil society and rebel territory

6.1 Introduction: rebel authority in Karen State

The previous chapter examined the production of development's territories in state/mixed-authority areas, from the perspective of actors in Hpa-An. This chapter applies a similar lens to Mutraw, where the role of civil society in making territory is predominantly negotiated according to civil society's relations with the Karen National Union (KNU), outside the confines of the Myanmar state. This chapter builds on scholarly efforts to understand how rebel authorities relate to their constituents, by providing social services and managing social relations within their territories (Arjona 2016; D. Brenner 2019; Mampilly 2011). However, by focusing on the social contract between military elites and civilians, this literature underplays associational life—or relations formed between civilians—in rebel territories. Building on the idea that territory, rebel-held or not, is constituted by multiple social relations, this chapter discusses the extent to which civil society actors in rebel areas can transform the power hierarchies that structure war, since civil society organisations can form relationships with development actors and local communities that rebel authorities cannot.

Today, of the 800,000 people that interact with the KNU in southeast Myanmar, 100,000 reside in areas under exclusive KNU control, of which 70,000 reside in Mutraw District (Jolliffe 2016). Hence Mutraw is the largest and most significant swath of KNU-controlled territory (D. Brenner 2019; Paul 2018). Most of Mutraw's inhabitants are Sgaw-speaking, and identify as Christians or animists; unlike in state/mixed-authority areas, fluency in Burmese and (to a lesser extent) Pwo is rare. Mutraw is sparsely populated; it is characterised by densely forested, mountainous terrain, and limited contact with the central Myanmar state, due to its inaccessibility from colonial times to the present day. Travel in the area involves long hikes or boat rides; villagers communicate by radio or satellite phones; and electricity is provided sporadically (D. Brenner 2019). Although Mutraw does not appear to have been directly governed by a lowland state, the area has a protracted history of large-scale military violence, including significant clashes after the Karen ceasefires (KPSN 2018b; KHRG 2020a). Mutraw borders Thailand to the east, where many of its inhabitants have fled, forming "border organisations" that are

based in Thailand but that channel development funds into war-affected areas. For thirty years, border organisations have challenged pre-existing relations between the KNU and Mutraw’s inhabitants, in relation to the shifting dynamics of the Karen civil war.

My understanding of civil society in rebel areas is informed by four months volunteering with a border organisation, the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN). I begin with a historical discussion, to reflect that the current status of border organisations is part of a longer history of relations between rebel authorities and civilians. I explain that although KNU leadership marginalised civil society for decades, a crisis in the legitimacy of the KNU in the 1990s resulted in the emergence of border organisations and their relations with development actors (1949-2012). Then, I explain how the 2012 Karen ceasefire precipitated another crisis of the legitimacy for the KNU, which allowed border organisations to challenge pre-existing relations between the KNU and its constituents in a more overt manner (2012-2018). Thereafter, I move from a historical discussion into an analysis of how civil society’s relations with rebel authorities and development actors culminate in the Salween Peace Park (2018-present). The Peace Park can be read as a “socio-territorial movement” (Halvorsen et al. 2019) or an expression of “alter-territoriality” (Courtheyn 2018) that gestures towards civil society’s potential to transform power relations in Mutraw. In other words, the Peace Park is evidence of *transformative localism*, or a power configuration through which civil society actors can challenge existing power relations. Therefore, this chapter seeks to show that in spite of scholars’ strident critiques of civil society, civil society can transform inequitable social relations, if particular relations between rebel actors, local inhabitants, and development actors are amenable to the task.

6.2 Civil society within civil war: the emergence of border organisations, 1949-2012

The Karen civil war, and rebel movements more broadly, must be understood not as attempts by monolithic armed actors to maximise power, but as a process of transforming authority-civilian relations vis-à-vis an antagonistic state, and larger political, economic and social forces (D. Brenner 2019, 6; Hedström 2020). This section likewise foregrounds the role of border organisations and development actors in shaping authority-civilian relations in KNU areas over the course of the Karen civil war. Whereas existing literature on the history of the Karen rebellion tends to focus on rebel elites, I conceptualise the dynamics of the civil war in Kawthoolei as delicately negotiated between rebel authorities, civil society, and local inhabitants, filling gaps between the lines of existing literature on the issue with the insights, memories, and interpretations of my research participants.

6.2.1. 1949-1988: the KNU governs Kawthoolei within the template of civil war

In 1947, several Karen groups founded the KNU. Their demands had gone unheard by the colonial government, but they hoped to satisfy them within a federated Burmese state (Smith 1999, 72-83; **Chapter 4**). However, amid increasing tensions with the Burmese government, the KNU began its armed struggle in 1949 with a siege in Insein, a Karen-majority suburb of Rangoon (Yangon), that lasted nearly four months (Smith 1999, 110-118). A month after relenting, the KNU announced the formation of a government to administer its territory, named Kawthoolei, or “the land without evil” (Smith, 1999, 141-6; Jolliffe 2016, 11-12). Kawthoolei initially encompassed expansive lowland areas containing both Karen and Burman populations; however, military losses forced the KNU to regroup along the Thai border in the 1950s. There, Karen populations had minimal contact with their Bamar counterparts, and lived in ‘chronically underdeveloped’ terrain with few roads, schools, and hospitals (Smith 1999, 152). This territory corresponds loosely to present-day Karen State.

Here, the KNU operated as a *de facto* government with consistent success until the 1980s. In 1962, a military coup shut Burma off from the world economy. The black market that developed along the Thai border was extremely lucrative for the KNU, who imposed a 5% levy on the value of goods crossing the border, peaking at 500 million kyat per year (£50m at the official exchange rate) in 1983 (Smith 1999, 283). This border trade funded the KNU's armed struggle and the social services that it offered throughout Kawthoolei, including healthcare and Sgaw language education (Smith 1999, 391). At the KNU's Ninth Congress in 1974, the KNU formalised the external boundaries of Kawthoolei, which envelops Myanmar's official definition of Kayin State, and internal boundaries between its seven districts. Since then, the KNU has administered Kawthoolei through elected representatives at each administrative level, as well as fourteen line departments (e.g. education, forestry, health and welfare). Elections are held at the village level up; however, elections at the village level are poorly attended, and little is known about the extent to which the KNU is representative of its constituents on the ground (Jolliffe 2016, 5). Each district is also associated with a KNLA brigade (Jolliffe 2016). Hence, throughout first four decades of the Karen civil war, the KNU consolidated itself as the main administrative actor throughout Kawthoolei, even as it staved off the Tatmadaw's dry-season military campaigns. The KNU exemplified the ability of 'a rebel political authority to regulate life within a defined territory' (Mampilly 2011, 4).

During this period, few actors challenged the KNU's dominance over social relations. There is—to my knowledge—no record of civil society organisations active during this time, even though cooperation on a household and village level was the norm. Many of Kawthoolei's inhabitants lacked access to other authorities, while the KNU's top leader, Bo Mya, ruled autocratically between 1964 to 2000 (see Jolliffe 2016, 15). The KNU did not face much competition from the state in providing social services and welfare in these areas, nor were development actors involved in this task, as the KNU's administrative structure was funded by largely by its border trade with Thailand. However, successive

military losses in the 1990s altered the power relations between the KNU and its constituents, allowing for the emergence of civil society.

6.2.2. 1988-1995: civil society's hesitant emergence in Kawthoolei

Civil society emerged in KNU territory after the 1990s, due to several factors that destabilised the KNU's authority over Kawthoolei. Firstly, the Tatmadaw intensified its counterinsurgency campaign, resulting in devastating losses for the KNU. Karen villagers were displaced *en masse* because of heavy offensives in civilian areas and the wholesale destruction of villages (see Smith 1999, 159-160; KHRG 2000), fragmenting the population governed by the KNU. In 1995, the KNU's headquarters at Manerplaw fell, in part due to internal fragmentation within the organisation. By then, two-thirds of the KNU leadership comprised Christian Karen, whereas Buddhist Karen, who comprised 80% of new recruits and frontline troops, felt marginalised within the movement (Rogers 2004; Gravers 2007a). Their frustrations were aggravated by Tatmadaw propaganda and the KNU's failure to provide political education to its constituents, who 'didn't even properly understand what the KNU was fighting for; instead, they only knew they had to give rice to KNU forces, their sons to the KNU Army, and see their villages burned' (KHRG 1995b). Buddhist soldiers defected to form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), supplied by the Tatmadaw in exchange for guiding them to Manerplaw (Smith 1999, 446-449; Gravers 2018). In a matter of months after the fall of Manerplaw, the Tatmadaw captured most of the KNU's bases on the Thai border (BurmaNet 1995; KHRG 1995a). Thus, by the end of the 1990s, military losses diminished the KNU's authority over Kawthoolei. Its leadership was exiled to Thailand, disembedded from its constituents. After relinquishing control of the customs gates on the Thai border, it could not self-sustain its administrative functions. The KNU's administrative cogs juddered, creating room for civil society to assist in the task.

Secondly, Kawthoolei's inhabitants became increasingly cognisant of the KNU's limited ability to protect Karen livelihoods, culture, and nature. In 1988, Burma's military government began to pursue

the export of primary commodities to Thailand. Many logging concessions that Thailand bought from the Burmese junta were in KNU areas, where forests remained intact over decades of warfare (Smith 1999, 12-19, 408-409; Bryant 1994; Hyndman 2001a; Woods 2019b). Kawthoolei's inhabitants observed massive deforestation as a result. Saw Hti Klo, who now leads a border organisation, was a child at the time. He recounts the disillusionment he felt when he observed this:

I grew up surrounded by good forests, the environment, lots of fish and trees. Logging was the first environmental issue I saw... We saw big floods. You could see the Salween River full of mud and tree branches, floating down the river. A big disaster. Along the river you could see piles of logs... Logging weakened the KNU, people got corrupted in the process, and logging roads brought in the [Burmese] army and spies... *[We were] not just losing territory and resources, but also culture and livelihoods* (interview, 28 Mar 2019, emphasis added)

Years later, deforestation was widely documented in Karen State, where approximately 85% of forest cover has been destroyed (EarthRights International and KESAN 2003; Pan Kachin Development Society and KESAN 2004). However Saw Hti Klo's observations are notable not only for their veracity, but because he interprets environmental degradation as evidence of the KNU's incapacity to apprehend the importance of forests to its constituents. The KNU had managed forests as sources of revenue or guerrilla hideouts (Bryant 1997); this utilitarian view did not account for civilians' lived experiences of forests as repositories for livelihoods, identity, and meaning.

Finally, in the 1980s and 1990s, civilians in Kawthoolei were exposed to external actors that allowed them to critique the KNU's authority; first in Manerplaw, then in the refugee camps. Manerplaw, the KNU headquarters until 1995, was also a cross-ethnic hub for collaboration between dissidents. In 1988, when the Tatmadaw violently suppressed mass uprisings across Burma's lowland cities, thousands of protesters fled to rebel-held areas. 5,000 were granted shelter in Kawthoolei (Smith 1999, 371-385). At Manerplaw, the arrival of exiled activists and the Western volunteers, journalists, and academics that supported them facilitated new forms of associational life.³⁸ The "Federal University

³⁸ Smith (1999, 442) describes Manerplaw and Rangoon as the 'two centres of politics in Burma' at the time. Besides being the KNU headquarters, Manerplaw was also the headquarters of the cross-ethnic alliance, the Democratic Alliance of Burma, and the precursor to Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD, the National Democratic Force.

of Kawthoolei” was one example: a centre for learning attended by Burman activists and KNU officials, and representatives from Chin, Shan, Kachin, Mon, and Arakanese groups. To my knowledge, the first group addressing environmental issues in Kawthoolei began there. Calling themselves “Green November 32” (GN32)—named for the time of year and the number of participants—the group included young KNU officials, but was suppressed by the KNU leadership, because KNU leaders were unwilling to concede the ill-effects of logging. Rob, a Western volunteer at Manerplaw at the time, recounts how GN32 was perceived as ‘taking away bright young minds from under the revolutionary chain of command’; the perception that young people could only serve the ethnonationalist cause by accepting the KNU’s approach to armed rebellion (interview, Rob, 26 Mar 2019).

Whereas GN23 did not gain traction, some civil society organisations emerged in Manerplaw to lasting effect, such as the Karen Organisation for Relief and Development (KORD), Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), Karen Youth Organisation (KYO), and the Karen Women’s Organisation (KWO). KORD provided relief to war-affected populations with the accompaniment of KNLA soldiers; the KHRG documented human rights abuses in war zones.³⁹ Both the KYO and KWO—representing youth and women in respectively—were formed decades earlier but lapsed into inactivity. At Manerplaw, the KYO and KWO were rekindled and began to report to the KNU (Brown 2012; Israelsen 2019; Thawngmung and Cho 2013).

Associational life in Manerplaw between 1988 and 1995 serves as a window into the KNU’s relationship with civil society at the time. Whereas KNU leaders were wary of GN23 for its ability to critique the KNU’s approach to governance, KORD, KHRG, KYO and KWO were welcome because they augmented the “revolutionary spirit” of the Karen rebellion. Despite the grievances of Kawthoolei’s inhabitants, spaces to organise outside the KNU’s remit remained constrained. Somewhat

³⁹ Today, KORD, KWO, and KYO have moved on to more ‘in-spirit supporting’ rather than being part of the KNU machinery, ‘being quite frank when something is wrong [with the KNU]’ (interview, Tony, 25 Mar 2019). The KNU Constitution mandates KWO and KYO representatives in every village, village tract, township, and district, but these organisations operate according to internally-decided mandates rather than according to the KNU (Jolliffe 2016, 5, 26).

counterintuitively, these spaces expanded after Manerplaw fell in 1995, when border organisations emerged to support displaced Karen civilians.

6.2.3. 1995-2012: displacement, empowerment, and encounters across the Thai border

Present-day inhabitants of KNU areas encounter civil society predominantly in the form of border organisations. In the context of Karen State, these refer to groups that access funding, acquire technical support, and establish management and logistics bases in Thailand, but provide services to communities across the border, that are often sustained by resources from development actors (Décobert 2016, 5). Border organisations emerged in the context of the Thai government’s attempts to consolidate refugees into large camps after 1995, in response to recurrent Tatmadaw/DKBA assaults on existing refugee settlements (Lang 2002; Lee 2014).⁴⁰ Among the displaced were leaders from the KWO, KYO, KORD, and KHRG, which transformed into border organisations: once based at Manerplaw, these organisations regrouped in Thailand, although they continued to work in war-affected Karen areas. New border organisations, such as KESAN, were also established in the Karen refugee camps.

Several authors understand border organisations as embodying tensions between humanitarian neutrality and the politicised nature of ethnonationalist struggle (Brown 2012; Décobert 2016; Horstmann 2011; 2015). While representatives of border organisations certainly navigate these tensions, I trace the specific relations between the border organisations and the KNU, rather than paint their associations with the KNU with a broad “ethnonationalist” brush. This is because civil society’s ability to transform the power relations that structure civil war is enacted within the specific relations between civil society and rebel authorities. These relations are complex, dynamic, and constantly

⁴⁰ An estimated 152 cross-border incursions occurred between January 1995 and April 1998. Particularly major attacks occurred in 1997, when the Tatmadaw/DKBA burned Huay Kaloke, Don Pa Kiang, and Mae La camps (Lang 2002). Displaced Karen people faced a grim choice: confine themselves to camps, unable to work, or live as undocumented migrants in Thai border towns, vulnerable to harassment and deportation (Lee 2007; Pongsawat 2007). This chapter focuses on Karen people in refugee camps, rather than those residing in border towns.

negotiated; they cannot be subsumed under the assumption that border organisations exhibit either neutrality or sympathy for the KNU’s cause.

6.2.3.1. Border organisations as the KNU’s sympathetic critics

By 2004, the civil war had resulted in 140,000 camp refugees and 700,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) across southeast Myanmar (Burmese Border Consortium 2004). All the Karen representatives of border organisations I interviewed recounted being displaced by war, often multiple times. Naw Poe Mu, for instance, was born in 1985 in a refugee camp. Her family was continually displaced as the Tatmadaw/DKBA destroyed the camps they were residing in. Eventually, Poe Mu was separated from her parents because of their association with the KNU. She recalls her parents telling her to eat quickly at meals, ‘because if you hear gunshots, you just have to run’ (interview, 2 Mar 2019). Saw Way Htoo likewise experienced recurrent displacement. Born in 1981 in Kawthoolei, his family fled to a camp in 1985. Shortly after returning to Kawthoolei, his father was killed during fighting, so they moved to a village close to Manerplaw. He returned to a camp when Manerplaw fell in 1995 (interview, 27 Mar 2019). Poe Mu and Way Htoo’s childhoods were shaped by a barefaced vulnerability to external forces: violence caused by the Tatmadaw, the KNU’s inability to protect them, and a reliance on humanitarian actors in the camps (see Decha 2006).

Yet densely populated camps also provided a space for war-affected youth from across Kawthoolei to commune with one another. Both Poe Mu and Way Htoo spoke about their formative experiences with the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG). KSNG is a student network operating across all ten refugee camps, founded in 1996.

Naw Poe Mu: ‘I learned a lot from KSNG because this is the foundation for the students to learn more about the situation, learn more to prepare to be a leader, and learn about politics, and social, economic issues... We had the chance to meet with [KNU] leaders to talk about the situation. The first time, I was so nervous, shaking, what can I do? Step by step, I had the confidence... KSNG was like my university.’ (interview, 22 Mar 2019)

Saw Way Htoo: ‘[KSNG] helped me a lot, because we learnt a lot about leadership and we learnt from each other, different students, about how to mobilise ourselves. This is very fundamental, the first step.’ (interview, 27 Mar 2019)

These excerpts struck me for, firstly, their emphasis on autonomy. The KSNG allowed displaced youths to (in Way Htoo’s words) learn ‘leadership,’ ‘mobilise ourselves’ and ‘learn from each other.’ The KSNG is constitutionally and operationally independent from the KNU, which worried some older KNU leaders at the time (Brown 2012, 170). Secondly, both Poe Mu and Way Htoo discuss ‘learning’ through the network, while Poe Mu refers to KSNG as the ‘university’ she was not able to attend. Besides learning “about” the situation, they learned “how”: to lead, to dialogue with KNU leaders, and to critique people in power.

As mentioned above, a factor in the fall of Manerplaw was the KNU’s failure to provide political education for its constituents, contributing to a mounting sense of disillusionment among its frontline troops (KHRG 1995b). A rare account of KNU education in the late 1980s concedes that few paths were available for students after high school, besides vocational training at the KNU headquarters (Rebecca Naw 1989). Through the KSNG, Poe Mu and Way Htoo pushed against the tight reins held on education by the KNU. They made sense of the socio-political forces that resulted in their vulnerability, and in dialogue with other students, found that these experiences were shared. The personal histories of young Karen people within border organisations were therefore shaped by dual forces: a deeply-felt familiarity with violence, and a timid but hopeful sense of one’s ability to organise in spite of it. Hence, border organisations became sympathetic critics of the KNU. They welcomed the KNU’s intent to counter the subjugation of the Karen people, having experienced immense violence themselves, but were intent on creating a space for civilians to mobilise, outside the KNU’s remit.

6.2.3.2. Growing cooperation between border organisations and development actors

Border organisations began to establish partnerships with development actors to assist in this task. After the fall of Manerplaw, some Western visitors—who had originally arrived to support Burmese activists in exile—set up small sub-granting NGOs, registered in Thailand, that encouraged INGOs and donor states to disburse funds to unregistered border organisations. In the same period, the KNU warmed

towards border organisations. Environmental threats to Kawthoolei accelerated throughout the 2000s, outstripping the KNU's ability to counter them by military means. Besides the ill-effects of logging, Thailand and Myanmar agreed to cooperate on the construction of large-scale hydropower dams on the Salween River, in areas contested by the KNU (Middleton et al., 2019; Saw John Bright 2019). However the KNU lacked the expertise to analyse these threats and communicate them. In the early 2000s, Western media outlets picked up a civil society report detailing gender violence as a 'weapon of war' in Shan State (Shan Women's Action Network 2002, 1; see Tong 2005). Journalists contacted Shan civil society organisations directly, bypassing the ethnic armed organisation representing them.⁴¹ According to Tony, who worked for a sub-granting organisation at the time, the Shan experience showed the KNU how civil society might draw international attention to the Karen struggle (interview, 25 Mar 2019).

In the 2000s, border organisations augmented their presence inside Kawthoolei, bolstered by growing ties with development actors that afforded them resources, expertise, and exposure. KESAN's origins demonstrate how border organisations related to Kawthoolei's inhabitants, the KNU, and development actors in this period. KESAN emerged from an informal environmental group, formed by Karen refugee youths who had attended training sessions by I/NGOs. In 2001, KESAN was founded to promote 'environmental and cultural protection' as a means of 'giving our people a voice, room to grow, and giving expression to our knowledge and experience' (KESAN 2005, 2). Some KNU leaders were supportive from the outset, concerned about hydropower plans brewing between Thailand and Myanmar. This contrasts with the experiences of GN32 at Manerplaw, where young Karen people struggled to voice their dissatisfactions with KNU governance. One of KESAN's first activities was a research report on biodiversity decline as a result of militarisation, funded by several European INGOs, and published in Sgaw and English (KESAN 2005). The final report documented not just environmental degradation, but also the ability of war-affected communities to maintain local forest management

⁴¹ That is, the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS).

practices. The report therefore conceptualises the ‘transmission of conservation-based knowledge’ as ‘an integral part of [Karen] culture’ undermined by civil war (KESAN 2005, 14). Whereas the KNU was criticised for its failure to listen to its constituents, particularly in the domain of nature-society relations, KESAN’s approach highlights local communities’ agency in enacting ground-up environmental governance strategies.

It was not only KESAN that was publishing research: in the same period, the KWO (2004) and KHRG (2000; 2006) published their first long-form analyses of field research in Kawthoolei in English and in Karen languages, highlighting local agency amid the civil war. In their biography of Naw Zipporah Sein, former general secretary of the KWO, Thawnghmung and Cho (2013) note how Zipporah’s hard-won proficiency in English was an asset to the Karen movement at this time, as the KNU’s coffers dried up and the collection of the KWO’s dues was disrupted by war and displacement. The networks that Zipporah formed between the KWO and development actors kept the KWO afloat. Hence, border organisations, backed by development actors, began to engage with civilians in a manner that the KNU had not paid much heed to before.

6.2.3.3. Shifting relations between border organisations and the KNU

Although border organisations were critical of the KNU, they also evinced a deep sympathy towards the KNU’s aims, hence the KNU’s erstwhile scepticism towards civil society began to abate. Saw Hti Klo saw KESAN’s biodiversity research as proof that that existing forest policies would undermine the Karen ethnonationalism. With the knowledge amassed from donor-funded research, KESAN representatives began to meet with KNU officials to ‘point out that out that extracting resources can be self-destruction, like what happened in the past. It is like destroying your own house.’ (Saw Hti Klo, interview, 28 Mar 2019) These meetings led to tangible changes within the KNU: in the mid- and late-2000s, KESAN and the KNU collaborated on the reformulation of the KNU forestry and land policies, to align them with KESAN’s research findings. For instance, reformed KNU policies codify the

communal use of land and forests by allowing for the registration of community forests, within which villagers have the rights to manage forest resources (Paul 2018, 108; KESAN 2018b; KNU 2015; for copies of KNU community forest titles, see Jolliffe 2016, 93-94). In 2017, again with KESAN's input, the KNU agreed to pilot the registration of *Kaw*, or customary lands collaboratively managed by ceremonial leaders, elders, and other local knowledge-holders (Lubanski 2019; Paul 2019).

Hence, by the 2000s, the KNU had little choice but to recognise that civil society could complement its authority. After successive military losses, the KNU was struggling to maintain its legitimacy to Kawthoolei's inhabitants by non-military means. Their inexperience in these matters was tempered by border organisations, whose experience and expertise, accumulated with the support of development actors, compensated for the KNU's shortcomings. The Karen people populating these organisations had experienced displacement and state violence, resulting in a sympathetic yet critical stance towards the KNU. Brian, who represents a border organisation, stated that by the late 2000s, border organisations and the KNU seemed to agree that 'the only real political solution [to civil war] is to make the KNU better' (interview, 9 April 2019). However, the 2012 and 2015 KNU ceasefires undermined border organisations' trust in the KNU, forcing border organisations to renegotiate their relations with the KNU and development actors.

6.2.4 Border organisations after the Karen ceasefires, 2012-present

The KNU signed its first ceasefire with the Myanmar state in January 2012, after more than sixty years of armed struggle.⁴² This ceasefire, along with the 2015 NCA, were key factors driving the influx of development aid that frames this thesis (**Chapter 1**). However, both Karen ceasefires were controversial within the KNU and among border organisations. Neither the KNU chairperson nor vice-chairperson were present when the 2012 ceasefire was signed, and former officials claimed that the KNU had been cornered into a *post hoc* acceptance of the agreement (D. Brenner 2019, 64-5; Keenan 2012). The pro-

⁴² Prior ceasefire negotiations, such as in 1994, 1997, and 2005, were aborted.

ceasefire faction of the KNU formally came into power during the organisation’s December 2012 elections, amid accusations that the voting process was rigged (D. Brenner 2019, 61). Many members of border organisations felt blindsided by the ceasefires. Along with diasporic Karen organisations, comprising Karen refugees resettled in Western countries, border organisations decried the KNU for ‘refus[ing] to heed the concerns and voices... of civil society organisations, of community groups and the local people whom they claim to represent’ (41 Karen Civil Society Organisations 2015). The KNU announced a hiatus from the official peace process in October 2018, to ‘seek enough time for the creation of the unified participation of the whole organisation’ (Nyein Nyein 2018). In effect, this acknowledges the KNU’s inability to reconstitute its legitimacy in the eyes of border organisations and “anti-ceasefire” officials, particularly after ceasefires collapses in Mutraw between March to May in the same year (KNLA 2018; KNU 2018).

To understand these shifting relations between rebel authorities, civil society, and civilians, it is necessary to discuss the modes of power enacted by the KNU and border organisations. Dominating power refers to ‘power which attempts to control or coerce others, impose its will upon others, or manipulate the consent of others,’ that engenders inequality and represses dissent (Sharp et al. 2000, 2). The Karen ceasefires exposed the KNU’s dominating power over civilians and civil society, by demonstrating the KNU’s ability to marginalise the voices of dissenters. Hence, after the Karen ceasefires, border organisations began to ask how they might articulate an alternative form of power. In her research with community activists in the England and peacebuilding efforts in Latin America, Pearce (2013) explains how her interlocutors challenged not only what their adversaries did, but also their understandings of power as domination. Her research identifies several features of “non-dominating power” that ‘nurtures cooperation and capacity to act, founded on ‘values of solidarity and companionship,’ in the face of domination (Pearce 2013, 641). In the same way, I argue that the mode of power enacted by border organisations in relation to Kawthoolei’s communities is qualitatively separate from the KNU’s will to rule; it is a “non-dominating” power that grows out of cooperation,

listening, and interaction with power-poor communities (Pearce 2012; 2013). Although border organisations already expressed non-dominating power through individual activities, the Karen ceasefires compelled border organisations to consolidate non-dominating power by other means.

6.2.4.1 Post-ceasefire relations between the KNU, border organisations and development actors

The ceasefire negotiations made two factions within the KNU visible, with its pro-ceasefire central leadership on one end, and the KNU's anti-ceasefire internal opposition on the other. David Brenner's monograph *Rebel Politics* (2019) explains this internal division according to the relationship between war-affected communities and local leaders. Leaders of the KNU's pro-ceasefire faction are associated with territories lost to the Tatmadaw since the 1990s, such as lowland areas around Hpa-An, where KNU officials' diminished capacity to govern results in their conciliatory stance towards the state. In contrast, Brenner explains that members of the KNU's anti-ceasefire faction tend to be associated with the KNU's northern upland districts, such as Mutraw, where KNU leaders retain territorial control and a strong social contract with the area's inhabitants. In these areas, local people continue to weather armed violence, including ceasefire collapses in 2016, 2018, and 2020 that have displaced several thousand villagers (KRW 2016; KPSN 2018b; KHRG 2020a).

Brenner's (2019) account of the Karen civil war is novel because it foregrounds relations between authorities and their constituents, rather than focusing on military elites. Yet, whereas Brenner focuses on the relationships between authorities and individual constituents, I draw attention to how horizontal organising between constituents, by way of civil society, allows them to bargain against the authority of rebel groups. As with the anti-ceasefire opposition within the KNU, border organisations' strongest networks are concentrated in Mutraw. Although some border organisations implement activities in state/mixed-authority areas, the scope of their work is limited as most border organisations

are not registered with the state.⁴³ Representatives of border organisations face significant risks when travelling through these areas. Saw Dah Nay, who represents a border organisation, told me about the challenges that he faced in these areas even after the ceasefires, including arrest (he had been detained thrice) and threats to Karen villagers that had offered him food and shelter while travelling (interview, 29 Nov 2018; for more on these risks, see **Chapter 7**). Dah Nay’s experiences speak to why border organisations’ activities remain concentrated in KNU-controlled Mutraw, even after the ceasefires. Furthermore, as I will explain, border organisations find common ground with Mutraw’s district leaders, who steer the anti-ceasefire faction within the KNU.

However, development actors began to criticise border organisations for remaining Thailand-based in spite of the Karen ceasefires. Alex, an INGO representative funding projects in state/mixed-authority areas, doubted border organisations’ sincere commitment to listening to their beneficiaries, asking: ‘how can you speak for Karen communities when you don’t live with them? ... [Border organisations are] comfortable with their Wi-Fi, and shopping malls [in Thailand]’ (interview, 12 Sep 2018). Development actors also read organisations’ reluctance to move “inside” Myanmar as proof that the ‘close association between several of the more prominent cross-border aid groups and the armed conflict actors... serves to legitimise the latter’ (South et al. 2010, 9). As these criticisms caused donors to withdraw funding from border organisations, border organisations struggled to manage an increasing number of small grants without a corresponding increase in manpower. However, I concur with Décobert (2016, 247) that viewing members of border organisations as KNU apologists is a disservice to how members of border organisations have continuously, reflexively, negotiated their relationship with the KNU throughout their 25-year history. The post-ceasefire period challenged border organisations to maintain trust with the KNU—to access KNU areas—even as they sought to contest the KNU’s dominating power.

⁴³ Under pressure from donors, some border organisations have set up offices in Yangon and Hpa-An, at times under a different name. However, most of their activities and their leadership remains concentrated in Thailand.

6.2.4.2. *Consolidating non-dominating power between border organisations*

Whereas collaboration and participation was long central to individual activities pursued by border organisations—such as KESAN’s work on community forests—the Karen ceasefires provided an impetus for border organisations to challenge the KNU’s dominating power in a more cohesive manner. The Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) formed after the first KNU ceasefire in 2012, comprising twenty-eight Karen civil society organisations, including most border organisations (KPSN 2014). The KPSN has sought to critique the normalisation of dominating power since the Karen ceasefires. Although the KPSN does not outrightly denounce the KNU, it is highly critical of how the official peace process has entrenched civilians’ disenfranchisement at the hands of authorities. The network openly criticises infrastructure and resource extraction projects initiated since the ceasefires for exacerbating land grabs, the loss of cultural identity, and armed violence (see KPSN 2014; 2018; 2019), although the KNU remains silent on these matters.

The formation of the KPSN marked a turning point in the relationship between border organisations and the KNU. Saw Lin Aung, representing a KPSN member organisation, reflected on the KPSN’s formation by saying that ‘I think all Karen people support the KNU policy but not the KNU leadership. We like our leaders to be *on the right path for the Karen people*.’ (interview, 11 Nov 2018, emphasis added). Lin Aung’s view that the KPSN brings the KNU onto ‘the right path for the Karen people’ deviates from border organisations’ earlier support for the KNU’s overall direction. The KNU’s missteps were chalked up to inexperience in matters of governance, and limited to specific issues such as forestry and land. By releasing in-depth critiques of the peace process, the KPSN exerts pressure on the KNU to rethink how it frames its relationship with its constituents—that is, according to dominating power. Even so, the extent to which border organisations could challenge dominating power with non-dominating power remained limited. While the KPSN exposed the pitfalls of the Karen ceasefires, they

did not fundamentally transform the power relations between the KNU and war-affected civilians, who were still subject to the dominating power of the KNU.

The next section discusses how border organisations are transforming the relations between authorities, border organisations, and civilians through the Salween Peace Park, thereby challenging the power relations reinforced by war. If ‘power that is non-dominating strengthens the capacity of oneself and others to act and impact upon the world’ (Pearce 2013, 650), the Peace Park is a vehicle through which border organisations attempt to achieve this by bringing war-affected civilians and the KNU into relations characterised by cooperation and solidarity.

6.3. The Salween Peace Park: non-dominating power in the post-ceasefire period

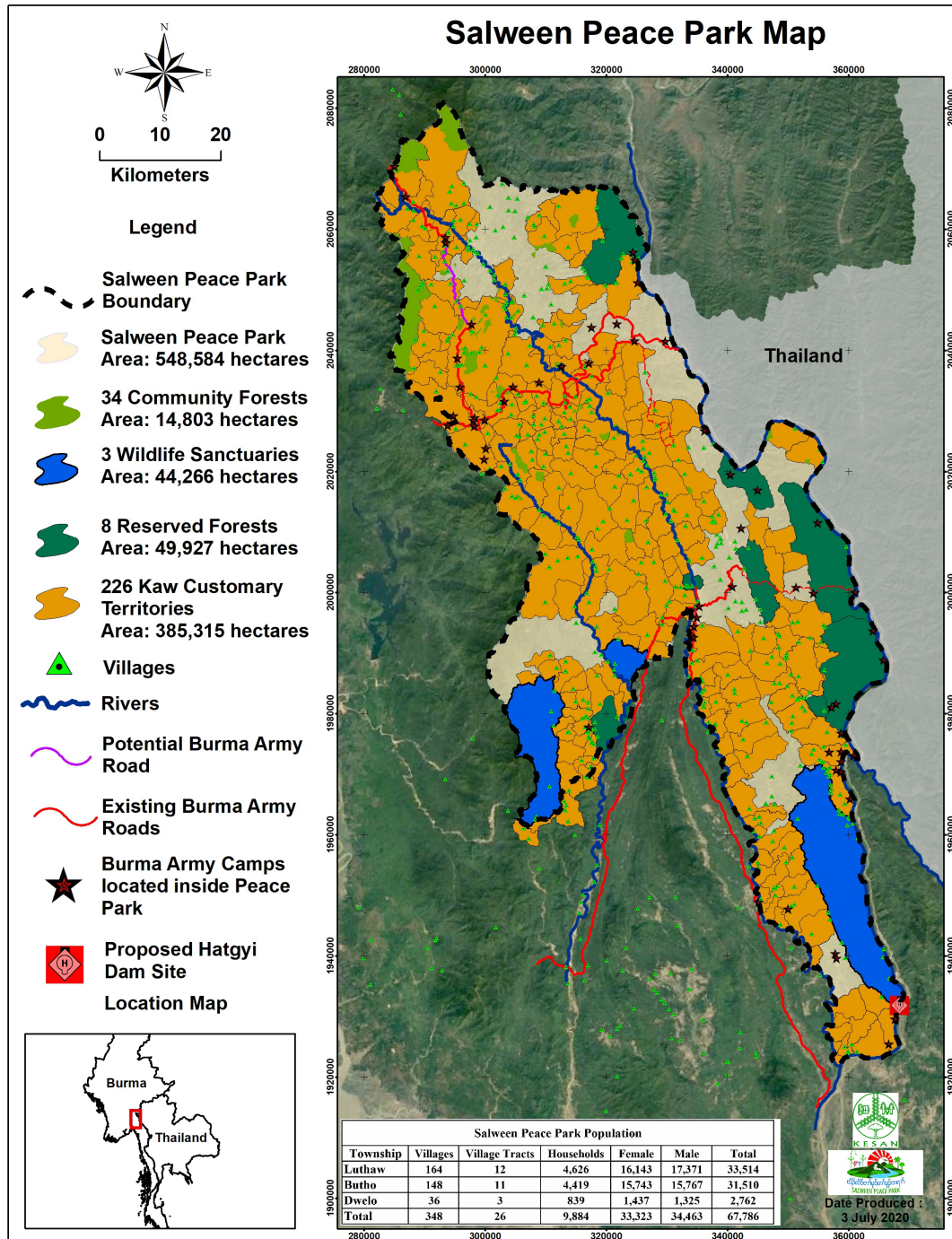


Figure 9. A map of the Salween Peace Park as of July 2020; the map will be updated as Kaw demarcation continues. Source: KESAN, personal communication.

On the Western side of the Salween River in southeast Burma, lies the mountainous Mutraw District... Throughout the decades of civil war and military dictatorship, the Karen people of Mutraw have maintained their traditional customs and beliefs... In the spirit of self-determination, the people of Mutraw have come together with the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karen Environmental and Social Network to establish the Salween Peace Park – a territory that will be governed on the basis of self-determination and inclusive democracy. (Salween Peace Park Steering Committee [SPPSC] and KNU 2018, 3)

Launched in December 2018, the Salween Peace Park spans 5,485km², encompassing 67,000 inhabitants and 348 villages across most of KNU-controlled Mutraw District (**Figure 9**). The Peace Park seeks to reverse the ill-effects of war through the co-management of land and forests, by bringing initiatives already implemented by border organisations in the area under a power-sharing mechanism that aims to reconfigure relations between rebel authorities, civilians, and civil society actors. This mechanism is the Salween Peace Park Charter, a document akin to a national constitution, that installs a tripartite governance structure—comprising border organisations, district-level KNU authorities, and community leaders—intended to supersede existing structures of authority over ‘territory, natural resources, and population’ (Article 3, Salween Peace Park Steering Committee [SPPSC] and KNU 2018). The Peace Park arises from a dissatisfaction with the Karen ceasefires’ inability to bring peace to local inhabitants, who have been subject to successive ceasefire collapses (see also Gotz and Middleton 2020; Suhardiman et al. 2017). Rather than a top-down conception of peace, as embodied in the official peace process, the initiative aims to build peace by transforming already-existing relations between authorities, border organisations, and inhabitants (Loong et al. forthcoming).

The Salween Peace Park is a territorial strategy, because it works through drawing boundaries, and the reorganisation of power relations specific to this bounded area. In this way, the Peace Park resonates with “socioterritorial movements” (Halvorsen et al. 2019) and “alter-territorialities” (Courtheyn 2018) conceptualised by political geographers (**Chapter 2**). Socioterritorial movements refer to social movements that appropriate space in support of a political project, such as protest camps and squatters’ movements. The term originates from Latin American geographers that sought to understand strategies through which indigenous and black communities’ demand state recognition.

Territory, as refracted through socioterritorial movements, refers not only to the spatial context in which social movements occur, but to how appropriated space produces subjectivities, allows for socialisation, and generates new institutions (Halvorsen et al. 2019; Laing 2020). These movements also often deploy counter-mapping techniques, through which appropriated space is made legible to the state (Anthias 2020; Wainwright and Bryan 2009). The Salween Peace Park likewise works through a bounded area and the social relations within it, but unlike many socioterritorial movements, recognition from the Myanmar state is not an objective of the Peace Park (see Simpson 2014). The Myanmar state has not commented on the Peace Park, even when contacted by international and national news outlets.

In this way, the Peace Park resonates with another geographical concept: alter-territorialities. Courtheyn (2018) conceptualises alter-territorialities based on a self-sufficient peace community in Colombia, encompassing 11 villages whose inhabitants refuse to engage with all state and non-state armed actors. As with the Peace Park, alter-territorialities comprise elements of autonomy, solidarity, and equitable nature-society relations. However, whereas alter-territorialities entail the rejection of all armed actors, the Peace Park works through inhabitants' relations between rebel authorities, while reorganizing these according to the terms of the Peace Park Charter. Moreover, neither socioterritorial movements nor alter-territorialities address the role of civil society and development actors, whereas border organisations are central to the Salween Peace Park. While development partnerships in areas of state/mixed-authority produce territory in a way that reinforces power hierarchies between authorities and civilians (**Chapter 5**), I use *transformative localism* to understand the power configuration embodied by the Salween Peace Park. The Peace Park offers a tentative break from the power relations that structure war, by transforming dominating power into non-dominating power; yet the Peace Park is also localised, occurring within the specific sociopolitical and ecological context of Mutraw.

This section first discusses the origins of the Peace Park idea, as articulated by members of border organisations who argued for the need to put territory at the heart of transforming power relations in Kawthoolei. I then discuss how Salween Peace Park Charter frames relations between authorities and

civil society within the Peace Park, before turning to these relations as practised, through an analysis of the first General Assembly of the Salween Peace Park. The General Assembly illustrates the difficulties of challenging dominating power; yet I argue that rather than imply the futility of non-dominating power, this shows how non-dominating power inheres in a process—however meandering and incremental—rather than a destination. Finally, I reflect on the role of civil society-development partnerships in instituting non-dominating power.

6.3.1 Territorialising non-dominating power

The previous section showed that border organisations, working under the banner of the KPSN, have criticised mega-projects initiated since the ceasefires, which put local inhabitants at risk of land grabbing and displacement. Yet, they felt that their concerns could not be addressed within the official peace process. Saw Hti Klo, who represents a border organisation involved in establishing the Salween Peace Park, explained that the idea originated from border organisations' concerns about the effects of the ceasefires on Karen people:

In 2012, the landscape started to change, and it opened up our areas... The scope and depth of the threats increased. So we said, how can we protect our people, our forest, our environment, and our culture? How can we *really fence off our territory*? (interview, 28 Mar 2019, emphasis added)

His words reflect both continuity and discontinuity with the trajectory of the Karen civil war. By “we,” Hti Klo refers to border organisations, who continue the task of ‘protect[ing] our people, our forest, our environment, and our culture’ that formed the basis of their engagement with the KNU. Yet Hti Klo also implies that border organisations were speaking in territorial terms for the first time, asking how they could ‘fence off our territory.’

Saw Hti Klo then described how border organisations found an ally in General Baw Kyaw Heh. As the Brigade commander in charge of Mutraw, the largest remaining swath of KNU territory, and a champion of the KNU's anti-ceasefire faction, Baw Kyaw Heh had come up with the idea of a Karen-managed protected area (Paul 2018). He ‘had the same concerns and worries about his area, his territory

and his people,' Hti Klo said. Yet, whereas Baw Kyaw Heh had originally envisioned a 'wilderness area,' Hti Klo was wary of fortress conservation. They eventually settled on the concept of a Peace Park after discussions with others. The Peace Park concept was therefore the result of the common aspirations of border organisations, and KNU officials in Mutraw district opposed to the ceasefires (thereafter, "Mutraw KNU"). The reciprocal relations between border organisations and the Mutraw KNU are evident in discussions over how to conceptualise the Peace Park. Baw Kyaw Heh was open to Saw Hti Klo's concerns that the idea of a 'wilderness area' would come at the cost of excluding local inhabitants. Whereas border organisations were frustrated by the KNU leadership's dismissive stance towards their concerns over the ceasefires, the Karen ceasefires also formed a platform for solidarity between the border organisations and the Mutraw KNU.

What do border organisations and the Mutraw KNU mean when they speak about the Peace Park as territory? For one, the Salween Peace Park is delineated by specific boundaries. These boundaries situate the Peace Park within Mutraw District, while marking it off from the wider area claimed by the KNU, including mixed-authority areas further afield. Brighenti (2010) argues that boundary-drawing constitutes territory, by defining a relationship between "inside" and the "outside." Likewise, by delineating the Peace Park in this way, progenitors of the Peace Park signal their hopes that social relations in this area will be demonstrably different from other areas where the KNU has a presence. Here, a strong social contract remains between the Mutraw KNU and its civilians, unlike other areas Kawthoolei where authority-civilian relations have eroded due to successive military losses (D. Brenner 2019). Moreover, besides signifying a relation between inside and outside, territories also imply 'ordered social relations' within a bounded area (Brighenti 2010, 67). In the Peace Park area, border organisations can trust that Mutraw KNU officials maintain close, accountable relations with local people. As a border organisation representative put it, '[Mutraw KNU officials] know they have power, but they also see themselves as from this or that village, part of these people, so people go to them' (interview, James, 19 Mar 2019). Border organisations themselves had also built up extensive

relationships with the area's inhabitants by the time of the Peace Park's launch. The long-term relationships between border organisations and civilians culminated in demarcation of 226 Kaw within the Peace Park, mapped by KESAN with the assistance of local communities.⁴⁴

The territory marked off as the Peace Park area therefore already featured close relations between district authorities (Mutraw KNU), civil society (border organisations) and local inhabitants that are unique to the area. The Peace Park seeks to reorganise these relations according to non-dominating power, as an analysis of the Salween Peace Park Charter will demonstrate.

6.3.2 The Salween Peace Park Charter: non-dominating power in theory

The Salween Peace Park Charter is presented in 118 Articles, which cover a range of issues including principles of land ownership, the management of forests, agriculture, and dispute resolution. A full overview of the Charter is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I focus on how the Charter reshapes relations between the Mutraw KNU, border organisations, and local inhabitants. The Charter was formulated and revised over 37 meetings between May 2016 and December 2017, involving 5,146 participants from all three townships and 26 village tracts in the Peace Park area (KESAN 2019). The meetings were led by an 18-member "steering committee," formed at the first meeting, that comprised representatives from border organisations, the Mutraw KNU, and village tract chairpersons. When a draft of the Charter was finalised in December 2017, the steering committee conducted a referendum in all 348 villages in the Peace Park. Ultimately, the Charter obtained the approval of 75.1% of Peace Park inhabitants who were older than 16 years old (29,251 of 38,986). Of those who did not indicate their support, some were not present in their village at the time; they were working in fields, visiting family or friends elsewhere, or had left as IDPs or refugees.

⁴⁴ In 2016, there were only 29 Kaw demarcated in the Peace Park area. In April 2018, 139 Kaw had been mapped. And finally, by July 2020, there were 226. KESAN continues to demarcate Kaw in collaboration with local communities.

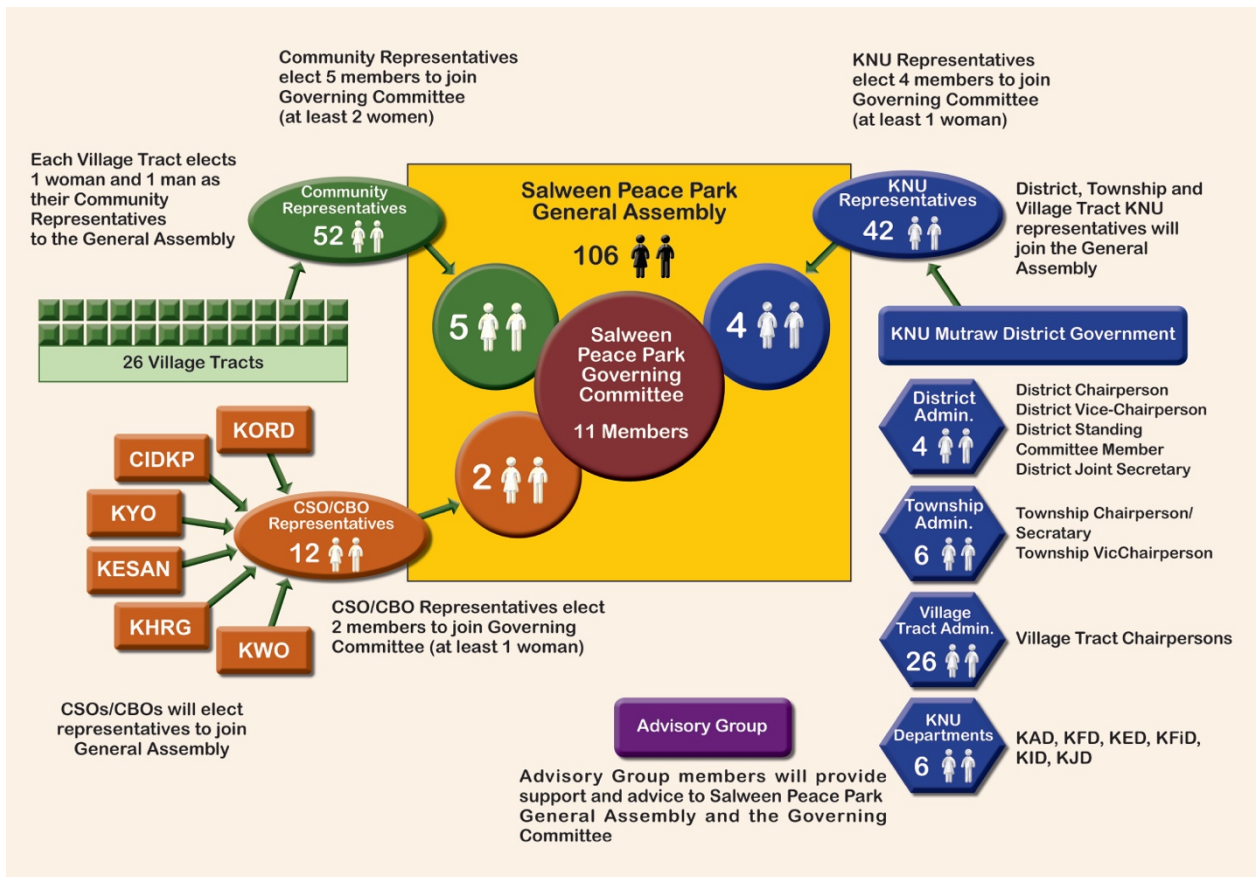


Figure 10. The Salween Peace Park governance structure. Source: SPPSC and KNU (2018)

The Charter was adopted at the launch of the Salween Peace Park in December 2018. This meant that authority over the direction of the initiative passed from the steering committee, to the Peace Park General Assembly (**Figure 10**). The Charter grants the General Assembly:

A long term mandate to act as a representative body to coordinate efforts among local communities, KNU Mutraw District government authorities, and other partners such as civil society and community-based organisations to work towards achieving the objectives of the Salween Peace Park. (Article 24, SPPSC and KNU 2018, 14).

The 106-member General Assembly balances power in the Peace Park between three types of actors: border organisations (12 members), Mutraw KNU (42 members), and community representatives (52 members), who are elected in each village tract. Membership in the General Assembly is renewed every three years.

The General Assembly represents a break from existing power relations for two reasons. Firstly, the community representatives category grants decision-making power to local inhabitants with no prior stake in the KNU, border organisations, or the steering committee. Since incumbent village tract chairpersons are counted within the KNU category, they cannot be re-elected as community representatives. Secondly, the Charter ensures that neither the KNU nor border organisations can dominate social relations within the Peace Park. Community representatives form the largest category within the General Assembly, comprising 52 of 106 members. Although they do not form a majority on their own, they can outvote the rest of the General Assembly together with at least one representative from another category.

The General Assembly therefore ensures that non-dominating power relations are not only produced, but institutionalised. When Pearce (2013) conceptualised non-dominating power according to the views of activists in “power-poor” communities, she doubted their ability to up-scale non-dominating power. ‘Activists are extending the boundaries of social action even if they are not directly challenging the powerful,’ Pearce (2013, 658-659) argued, ‘they grow non-dominating power, but not in ways that are effective far beyond “ripples”.’ The Peace Park provides a possible rejoinder to Pearce’s pessimism. The Charter demonstrates how non-dominating power can be enshrined within a stable arrangement with the cooperation of civil society, authorities, and local inhabitants. Territory is crucial to this endeavour: the already-existing relations between these actors within the area provide a foothold for establishing non-dominating power in a more formalised manner. However, the Charter alone does not determine the viability of non-dominating power in practice. The next section examines the first gathering of the Peace Park General Assembly in April 2019. I argue that although the General Assembly revealed challenges to power relations as imagined through Peace Park Charter, these are not fatal flaws of non-dominating power, inasmuch as they reveal how non-dominating power must be conceptualised as a contested, agonistic process, rather than a predetermined destination.

6.3.3 The first General Assembly: non-dominating power in practice

In April 2019, I travelled to Day Bu Noh village with KESAN to witness the Peace Park's inaugural General Assembly (**Figures 11-14**), a three-day meeting that will be convened every year according to the Charter. Nearly all 106 members of the General Assembly congregated in an open-air meeting hall, divided into three sections corresponding to the three types of actors within the General Assembly: KNU representatives (noticeably all men), border organisations, and community representatives (both with equal numbers of men and women). On the first day, attendees elected an 11-member Governing Committee out of all 106 participants. The next two days included speeches by the Peace Park's progenitors, an oath-taking ceremony, and discussions about issues pertinent to inhabitants. I took the General Assembly as an opportunity to examine how the "theory" of the Peace Park corresponds with power relations as practiced. After all, several authors have shown how actors that challenge dominating power can reproduce the hierarchical power relations they are meant to critique. For instance, indigenous movements that use counter-mapping strategies can create new hierarchies by narrowing participation in the movement to the few who have sufficient expertise to communicate with the lawyers, judges, and geographers involved in reading these maps (Peluso 1995; Wainwright and Bryan 2009). Thus, in what follows, I examine the General Assembly, by way of four themes that emerged from my fieldwork: solidarity, possibility, dissent, and encounter.



Figure 11. The meeting hall used for the General Assembly, April 2019. Source: author's own.



Figure 12. Community representatives read the Peace Park Charter before the General Assembly begins, April 2019. Source: author's own.



Figure 13. The General Assembly underway, April 2019. Source: author's own.



Figure 14. Members of the Peace Park General Assembly, April 2019. Source: author's own.

6.3.3.1. Solidarity

The effects of the Karen civil war were acutely felt during the General Assembly. The third day of the meeting marked the first anniversary of the death of Saw O Moo, a Karen community leader from Mutraw killed by Tatmadaw forces in the Peace Park area, on 5 April 2018 (KHRG 2018a; Watts 2018). Saw O Moo was familiar to KESAN and the Mutraw KNU, and part of the Peace Park Steering Committee (KESAN 2018a). His death weighed heavily on my companions, many of whom lamented that he would have been present that day; proud that the Peace Park idea had made it this far (fieldnotes, 3 April 2018). A memorial was conducted for Saw O Moo on the final day of the General Assembly. His wife gave a short speech, as did representatives from KESAN and the KNU. KESAN also showed a short documentary in remembrance.

As Fassin (2008, 315) has argued, memories, particularly of violence and oppression, act as a ‘living link between past and present’ and the connective tissue between the personal and the collective. Courtheyn (2016), writing about a peace community in Colombia, shows community memorials can transform memories of loss into solidarity among those who have experienced it. In the Peace Park context, commemorating Saw O Moo’s death allowed for solidarity among variously positioned actors within the General Assembly—including border organisations, Mutraw KNU, and local inhabitants—based on a common experience of the ill-effects of dominating power. Saw O Moo was not the last community leader killed by the Tatmadaw. On 31 March 2020, Saw Thet Mee was killed by the Tatmadaw in the Peace Park area. Saw Thet Mee was the member of a local community forest leader and an advocate for the Peace Park among Mutraw’s communities (KESAN 2020).

Yet it was not only negative memories that were mobilised in service of solidarity. When General Baw Kyaw Heh, the KNU official who first discussed the idea of a Peace Park, spoke during the General Assembly, he announced, ‘The Burmese have not planted a single tree in these areas. What claims to do they have?’ And, ‘all the durians we eat today were planted by our grandfathers; likewise

we need to maintain the forest for future generations’ (translated by a KESAN staff, fieldnotes, 4 April 2019). By doing so, he refers to a longstanding history of community-led forest management in these areas. Solidarity, he seemed to say, was built on local inhabitants’ resilience in spite of decades of civil war. His position as a KNU leader also implied that the KNU saw and was appreciative of these bottom-up efforts, which would be incorporated into the Peace Park’s emphasis on the equitable management of natural resources. The interplay between shared memories of loss and shared memories of resilience is also consistent with the centrality of Kaw revitalisation to the Peace Park.

On one hand, as myself and two KESAN colleagues demonstrate elsewhere, the Kaw represents the institutions, governance structures, and knowledge that Peace Park’s communities have maintained in spite of extreme adversity (Loong et al. forthcoming). On the other, the Kaw also represents the depth of violence that communities have weathered as a result of war. Most permanent structures—such the *Blaw* (ceremonial meeting houses)—within each Kaw no longer exist. This is testament not just to the capacity of war to destroy physical structures, but the damage it wreaks to the lifeworlds of Mutraw’s communities. Solidarity, as envisioned through the Peace Park, is premised on both adversity and tenacity.

6.3.3.2 Possibility

Even so, at times the General Assembly was a hesitant, uneasy affair, that seemed at odds with the grand claims made in the Peace Park Charter. I watched representatives from the KNU and border organisations greet one another—they were familiar with each other and the setup of large meetings—while community representatives took their seats in silence. They were from varied ages and backgrounds: there were teachers, pastors, and farmers; experienced leaders and young adults in their early 20s. Most, meeting for the first time, sat still, reading the copy of the Charter handed to them as they entered (fieldnotes, 3 April 2019). On the second day, an open discussion offered community representatives a chance to address the General Assembly. There was no predetermined agenda for the

discussion, as members were encouraged to raise any issue they found pertinent. However, community representatives seemed shy and reticent. Of the twenty people who stood up to speak, only five were community representatives, even though community representatives comprise nearly half the 106 members of the General Assembly. The five who spoke were experienced pastors and teachers already acquainted with public speaking, while the majority of community representatives watched from the back of the hall. I wrote in my field diary:

There seems to be a contrast between people who are practised speakers – at ease with politics, with negotiation – and people who shy to speak up, and extremely young... Everyone who spoke in the morning was—at my guess—at least 40 years old. General Baw Kyaw Heh embodies this; he is confident, engaging, animated. His speech [quoted above] was full of metaphors and pithy lines. (Fieldnotes, 4 April 2019)

General Baw Kyaw Heh's command of the room—developed over the two decades in which he has been Brigade commander in Mutraw—was a stark contrast to the relative silence of community representatives. The proceedings were punctuated by pauses, when the discussion came to a hesitant standstill, as participants waited to see if an unfamiliar voice would emerge. However, I read this as a sign that the Peace Park is introducing a balance of power that is genuinely unfamiliar, rather than as a failure of the Peace Park to destabilise power relations between authorities and civilians. Had the meeting hall been filled by experienced debaters, this attempt to create a new space for dialogue would have been pointless; the domination of authorities over civilians would have been replaced by the domination of charismatic elites.

According to McConnell (2018), instances where unwritten protocols are broken during international diplomatic forums indicate a subtle destabilisation of existing power relations. In the same way, the pauses and rough edges of the General Assembly indicate the emergence of dynamics that challenge relations of dominance sedimented throughout the Karen civil war. Moreover, during the General Assembly, non-dominating power emerges where it is possible for new subjects in the field of power to voice their opinions, rather than from the outcome of these discussions. Although the number of representatives in each category—border organisations, Mutraw KNU, and community representatives—are predetermined, the outcomes of this configuration are not. Instead, the General

Assembly focuses on creating immanent possibilities for these representatives to challenge existing power structures—even if these occur in hesitant, halting, and incremental steps.

6.3.3.3. *Dissent*

The General Assembly also showed that dissent is possible in this setting, as the minority of community representatives that did speak challenged the authority of the KNU during an ensuing discussion about hunting. A KNU official encouraged participants to uphold restrictions on hunting set by the KNU's Forestry Department. A woman from a border organisation pointed out that it was unfair to chastise villagers that hunt in response to extreme events such as rat infestations and food shortages. In response, the KNU official said that community members should share food with those in need, to which a female community representative said: 'people do not have enough rice to for themselves, how can they share it with others?' A male community representative added that as much as villagers were to blame, he had witnessed KNU officials flout these rules (fieldnotes, 4 April 2019). This exchange is testament to the space that the General Assembly provides for community representatives and border organisations to push against the authority of the Mutraw KNU, even if the discussion did not achieve a clear resolution to the issue of hunting regulations. Instead, the Salween Peace Park is structured such that individual issues will be resolved through working groups comprised of General Assembly members that have a stake in the topic, who are obliged to take into account the views aired during this forum.

The previous section argued that creating possibilities for new actors to voice their opinions within the General Assembly is more central to promoting non-dominating power than the outcome of these discussions. Similarly, the format of the General Assembly ensures that the space it provides for dissent is not foreclosed by the need to conclude discussions with a consensus. Non-dominating power is closely linked to agonism; the perspective that dissent should be structured in a way that produces productive relations of cooperation and care (Pearce 2017). Here, the views of community representatives are given equal weight as that of the KNU and border organisations; a contrast to the

past where authority to make district-wide decisions was vested largely in the latter two actors. Participants meet each other, regardless of status, as ‘someone whose ideas we will fight against, but whose right to defend those ideas are never questioned’ (M. Jones 2014a, 21). In so doing, the General Assembly provides a space for questioning the dominating power relations that underlie civil war, from a greater range of standpoints than was possible in the past.

6.3.3.4 Encounter

Finally, the silence of younger, less experienced community representatives at the General Assembly need not be read as inactivity. That the General Assembly allows community representatives to encounter the setting of a public forum is significant in itself, since many had never been privy to exchanges between authority figures in a public forum. Unlike speeches given by authorities, which communicate ready-made decisions, community representatives witnessed decision-making in process for the first time. I mentioned Naw Poe Mu earlier, who recalled learning to dialogue with authorities through a student network in the refugee camps. These encounters eventually inspired her participation in border organisations as an adult. Poe Mu reflected on how the Peace Park extends these opportunities beyond adolescents in a camp setting, to war-affected populations inside Mutraw:

They are very shy, Karen people, even if they suffer from a lot of pain, they talk to you and smile and laugh. It has become normal, to have silence... They are afraid of leaders, and people who have power... Many of us don't really understand initiatives like [the Peace Park]. Many Karen people just think, ‘we have to work for our lives. We have to be safe. And to be safe, we just have to run.’ (interview, 2 Mar 2019)

Poe Mu, thinking through her life history, perceived that a protracted history of civil war had consigned Karen people in war-affected areas to ‘have silence’ and to fear ‘people who have power.’ Following this train of thought, the literal silence of community representatives during the General Assembly could reflect a history of vulnerability to war, rather than their lack of buy-in to the Peace Park. Furthermore since, as Poe Mu says, the civil war has cornered Karen people into a position of reactivity—to ‘work for our lives’ and to ‘run’—the Peace Park provides opportunities for community representatives to expand their capacity to act. That said, it is important to note that since this is the first General

Assembly, the long-term effects of the Peace Park are yet to be established. Poe Mu told me later on that ‘it will take so many years, a long time’ for a community representatives to learn to speak up, just as she had spent several years in the refugee camps. Challenging dominating power will be a long-drawn process of successive, negotiated encounters between actors.

In all, I understand community representatives’ participation in the Peace Park according to four themes: solidarity, possibility, dissent, and encounter. These point towards three features of non-dominating power, as relational, processual, and territorial. They show, firstly, that non-dominating power is located in the relations between actors that have not previously been brought together in this configuration. Community representatives are given an unprecedented space to voice their concerns, that is not foreclosed by the need to uphold existing hierarchies structured according to dominating power. Secondly, the Peace Park construes the reconfiguration of power relations as the result of hesitant, halting, and incremental steps, rather than in terms of measurable “outcomes” emerging from a single meeting. This ensures that meetings are not co-opted by the resurgence of dominating power from more experienced actors. Finally, the territorial aspects of the Peace Park are crucial to its transformative potential. The Peace Park builds on solidarity between actors in Mutraw, who have experienced collective loss as a result of the Karen civil war, but who have maintained localised forest management practices in spite of it. By delineating the Peace Park as a bounded area within which these existing relations of solidarity are built on and transformed, the Peace Park provides a tentative break from the dominating power relations sedimented through civil war. Relations between actors, organised according to the Peace Park Charter, will continue in subsequent yearly iterations of the General Assembly. The 2020 General Assembly was held between 17 and 19 December 2020, after being postponed for several months due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notably, the *relational*, *processual*, and *territorial* features of non-dominating power were less evident in state/mixed-authority areas. For one, whereas the Peace Park instituted non-dominating power, based on solidarity and cooperation between communities, civil society actors, and KNU

officials, the civil society actors I interviewed in Hpa-An often felt hamstrung by the power relations they were embedded in. I have shown that their aspirations for redefining “community”—that is, for equalizing power relations between civilians and authorities—were often thwarted by their inability to articulate them, or to render them legible to important outsiders, including development actors (following Li 2000). Secondly, whereas the Peace Park located non-dominating power in the *process* of reconfiguring existing power relations, civil society actors in Hpa-An were often pressed to meet others’ expectations. These include development actors’ expectations that civil society actors offer a more “state-friendly” alternative to border organisations, who were perceived to varying degrees as rebel sympathisers. Finally, whereas non-dominating power in the Peace Park is enacted territorially, by building on localised nature-society relations distinct to Mutraw, civil society actors in Hpa-An are beholden to state-led ideas of territory. They are hamstrung by state actors’ definition of Kayin State and the dominance of state institutions over other forms of associational life. The kind of non-dominating power available to actors in Mutraw is thus unavailable to civil society actors in Hpa-An, who remain locked into rigid and hierarchical relationships between civilians and state/rebel authorities. In the next section, I discuss the role of border organisations—and their relations with development actors—in implementing non-dominating power.

6.4 Transformative localism: border organisations and development actors in the Peace Park

Hence, instead of locked-in localism, which I used to describe the power relations that constrain civil society actors in state/mixed-authority areas, I use *transformative localism* to describe the relationship between civil society, development actors, and (rebel) authorities in KNU areas. The Peace Park exhibits localism in that it builds on the particularities of localities in Mutraw, such as the existence of the Kaw as an institution that mediates relations between nature and society, as well as the familiarity between local inhabitants, the Mutraw KNU, and border organisations forged over decades. Here,

localism is *transformative*: by reconfiguring the relations between these actors according to non-dominating power, the Peace Park challenges power hierarchies. Community representatives in particular are developing an expanded capacity to act, through elections mandated by the Peace Park Charter and gatherings such as the General Assembly, that place them in meeting halls previously populated by those already in power. By ensuring that community representatives have a near-majority within the General Assembly, the Charter also safeguards against a resurgence of dominating power. Nonetheless, the first meeting of the General Assembly also showed that transforming power relations in this manner will be a slow, incremental process, in order to ensure that the Peace Park is not foreclosed by readymade decisions that reinforce existing hierarchies.

Border organisations are critical to the Peace Park's transformative potential. Not only did border organisations pursue the initiative from the start, border organisations also channel development assistance into the Peace Park. At present, the Peace Park is entirely funded by development actors, although plans for self-sufficiency are in the works. The initiative as a whole has only one funder; the rest of its budget comprised several other INGOs that contributed to particular initiatives in the area. For instance, one donor contributes to wildlife monitoring, another to Kaw demarcation, and a third to consultations with local communities; a reflection of development actors' varied priorities and their tendency to implement projects based on specific "issues." In this situation, border organisations act as an interface between the Peace Park initiative and the world of international development in three ways. Firstly, border organisations' foremost task is to initiate partnerships with development actors. As mentioned previously, border organisations have been funded by donors since the late 1990s; some donors that support activities in the Peace Park were simply continuing to fund activities that they had supported for several years. At the same time, border organisations sought out new partnerships, particularly after several donors decided to shift their funding streams away from border organisations and "into Myanmar" after the Karen ceasefires (Décobert 2018). KESAN, for instance, leveraged on a growing interest in supporting community- and indigenous-managed lands within international

conservation and development organisations, which aligns well with the Peace Park’s emphasis on the co-management of forests (see Dunford 2019; Laurie et al. 2005). To do so, the organisation drew on decades of experience with engaging with development actors, and international visitors—myself included.⁴⁵ As such, border organisations are crucial to the Peace Park because they possess the time and experience necessary for developing partnerships with development actors.

The second task that border organisations accomplish in relation to development actors is to disaggregate the Peace Park—a comprehensive vision for expanding non-dominating power—into discrete “projects” and “activities” legible to development actors. These are expressed in spreadsheets and maps, through which border organisations translate their aspirations into several “annual expected results,” activities, and targets, each of which are assigned a monetary value. A comparison between the argument I have made about the Peace Park’s intent to transform power relations, and the “expected results” that border organisations articulate to development actors demonstrates the work that border organisations do to translate their ideas into a fundable project. In documents that border organisations use to communicate with donors, the General Assembly an activity intended to ‘strengthen governance capacity.’⁴⁶ This language brings the Peace Park in line with existing norms in development that emphasise “good governance” and “capacity-building” (Phillips and Ilcan 2004). Power does not feature in this narrative, which foregrounds collaboration between “stakeholders,” while deemphasizing existing power hierarchies that border organisations intended to confront, although these power relations were clear to the representatives of border organisations that I spoke to.

However, at the same time, border organisations are engaged in a third task: to aggregate these disparate activities back into a comprehensive attempt to transform nature-society relations in the Peace Park. Even as development actors—at least on paper—partitioned the Peace Park into discrete activities,

⁴⁵ Indeed border organisations more generally often have one or two long-term “international” staff or volunteers that assist them in typing up proposals that are worded so as to be amenable to prevailing international norms, yet border organisations are structured such that “international” visitors are not able to take up leading roles. At least one border organisation institutes a maximum three-year term for “international” staff.

⁴⁶ In the interests of confidentiality, I will not name donors or quote from documents.

border organisations were committed to seeing the Peace Park as an integrated whole that consists of several moving parts. Whereas “governance” and “land management” are—for instance—separate activities on budget sheets, the Peace Park Charter and the General Assembly address these issues as related to one another. ‘The Salween Peace Park,’ the Charter states, ‘is a grassroots, people-centred alternative to... ecologically destructive and socially inequitable development’ (SPPSC and KNU 2018, 4); insisting that land issues and social issues are inseparable. Likewise, as the earlier discussion demonstrates, the General Assembly is structured in the hopes that attendees will be able to raise any issues that are of relevance to their communities without being overpowered by others, including issues—such as hunting—that were previously the province of the KNU’s forestry department.

The dual processes of disaggregating and aggregating, between the compartmentalised structure of international development and the comprehensive aspirations of the Peace Park, are ongoing. They were a constant struggle for members of border organisations, tasked with synchronizing between several donors, each with their own funding cycles and reporting guidelines. Even so, it is important to recognise that border organisations’ particular relationship with the Mutraw KNU is critical to even imagining the Peace Park as a comprehensive endeavour. This chapter has traced relations between the KNU and civil society during the Karen civil war: although border organisations’ clout with the KNU grew over decades, the Karen ceasefires demonstrated that they were still subordinate to the KNU when it came to decision-making. The ceasefires allowed for a re-alignment between the Mutraw KNU and border organisations, who both saw a need to contest dominating power.

The Mutraw KNU’s support for the Peace Park allows border organisations to pursue it as a large-scale, territorial initiative, rather than split it into issue based “projects” according to the tendencies of development actors. Border organisations could also pitch their ideas to development actors as a comprehensive vision, knowing that activities would not be vetoed by the Mutraw KNU. Moreover, the Mutraw KNU consented to devolving power to community representatives during the General Assembly, allowing the General Assembly to provide an overarching challenge to existing

power relations. Hence, even as the Peace Park is currently funded by development dollars, development orthodoxies are not the main reason why the Peace Park has been able to transform the power relations that underlie war. Instead, it is the specific configuration of relations between civil society, authorities, and local inhabitants within the Peace Park context, that have allowed border organisations to channel development assistance towards the pursuit of non-dominating power.

6.5 Conclusion

Both this chapter and the previous chapter examine the role of civil society actors in making territory in Karen State. However, whereas civil society partnerships in state/mixed-authority areas turn actors away from contesting power relations (*locked-in localism*), civil society actors in KNU areas exhibit the potential to challenge the power relations that structure the lives of war-affected communities (*transformative localism*). This must be understood in relation to the history of border organisations, which established themselves according to an understanding of power as “non-dominating”, directed towards collaboration, listening, and augmenting the agency of others (Pearce 2013), amid several crises in the KNU’s legitimacy.

The relations between border organisations, development actors, and the KNU find their strongest expression in the Salween Peace Park, where non-dominating power is not only nurtured, but also actively territorialised. Territory must be conceptualised relationally: it is not the province of state or rebel actors alone, but an outcome of continuous struggles between civil society, development actors, authorities, and local inhabitants. Moreover, the mode of power exercised through these relations deserves investigation. In the Salween Peace Park, transformative localism was only possible once civil society organisations acquired the resources (from development actors) and the leverage (from district authorities) to implement relations of solidarity and trust. Even so, I emphasise the incremental and processual aspects of non-dominating power. The future of the Peace Park remains indeterminate; contingent on the continued support of donors and the clout accrued by the KNU’s anti-ceasefire

faction. Research could also be done with local communities over the long run—rather than with civil society actors alone—to understand whether non-dominating power might be sustained, and how the power relations enacted through the Peace Park intersect with other power hierarchies at play in Karen State. Even so, scholars should continue to explore the conflicts between the Peace Park’s vision of non-dominating power, and modes of dominating power in Karen State, rather than presuming that war-affected areas are ordered solely by violence and militarisation (Lubkemann 2008).

This chapter also demonstrates that while political geographers consider the state as the primary agent of territorialisation (e.g. Elden 2013; Painter 2010), they rarely consider the role of rebel actors, who compete with the state for legitimacy. In both Hpa-An and Mutraw, the Myanmar state’s understanding of territory is contested by the KNU, while civil society actors regularly navigate between state-drawn maps of Kayin State, and rebel-drawn maps of Kawthoolei (**Chapter 4**). While literature on territorialisation and counter-territorialisation advances a more expansive definition of territorial actors, drawing particular attention to the role of private interests and social movements (e.g. Peluso 2017; Wainwright and Bryan 2009), the role of civil society actors in making territory—and in navigating spatial boundaries marked by states and rebels—has hardly been remarked. These portraits of civil society in Hpa-An and Mutraw draw attention to the need to understand territory as struggled over by civil society actors, corralled into the workings of international development by prevailing good governance orthodoxies. At the same time, these chapters underscore the tensions at the heart of making territory. Territory-making is not a “smooth” endeavour, but one underlain by competing agendas and aspirations. This is a theme I return to in **Chapter 8**, when I lay out the conceptual contributions of my argument to literature on territory, civil society, and development.

Chapter 7 – The border/inside divide: civil society, ethnicisation, and the Thai-Myanmar borderworld

7.1 Introduction: civil society and war beyond the locality

Chapter 5 and **Chapter 6** examined relations between civil society actors, state authorities, rebel authorities, and development actors in two localities, providing portraits of the territories traversed by international development. These localities—Hpa-An and the Thai border/Mutraw—are often thought of as loci of state authority and rebel authority in Karen State respectively. Yet, although civil society actors are active participants in the power relations that constitute each, the ability of civil society actors to alter these power relations on their own terms differs. In Hpa-An, I describe the relations between civil society and other actors as locked-in localism. They feel that their aspirations are boxed in by development actors and local authorities' failure to recognise their desire to craft political designs of their own. Civil society actors feel “trapped” in the locality, unable to launch changes to wider processes. By contrast, in Mutraw, I use transformative localism to describe the relations that civil society actors are embedded in. Here, the locality is a potential platform from which civil society actors challenge the dominating power enacted by rebel authorities. This chapter transcends the analysis of a single locality, to ask: how might these singular portrayals of development's territories be put into conversation?

Rather than consider the “local” as ontologically given, geographers assert that scales are interlocked: the production of a social process as “local” bleeds into the manner in which other social processes are scaled (N. Brenner 1998; Lamb 2014; Legg 2009). Hence, I find it necessary to explore how these localised power relations may stabilise or alter power relations that transcend it. Throughout, I put concepts broached in previous chapters into conversation. These include: civil society and authority (**Chapter 5 and 6**), ethnicisation and war (**Chapter 4**), and an abiding concern with how these phenomena are spatialised. By situating the material explored in previous chapters within a larger story, I hope to take a gloss of novelty off narratives about Myanmar's political transition and the Karen ceasefires. I see these events not as the end of civil war in Myanmar, but as junctures through which ethnicity and war in Myanmar are transformed in relation to one another. Furthermore, by seeking to

understand war, development, and territory beyond the locality, this chapter hopes to realise the full potential of my methodological approach. In **Chapter 3**, I argued for a translocal ethnography, which foregrounds how relations between localities are interpreted by research participants themselves. This chapter thus foregrounds the emic connections that my participants drew between Hpa-An and Mutraw. After all, my participants were not just “local” civil society actors; when telling me about life histories and aspirations, they made reference to wider political projects, such as the Karen rebellion and the Myanmar state. Thus I hope this chapter gives credence to the intricate, creative, and persistent ways in which my interlocutors navigate multiply-scaled ‘power geometries’ (Massey 1994, 149).

Thus far, this thesis has been structured by a heuristic divide between civil society actors on the “border” and civil society actors on the “inside”. This chapter self-consciously interrogates the border/inside divide and interprets it through the voices of my research participants. I begin by showing how the influx of development assistance into Myanmar has politicised and reified the border/inside divide. Then, I argue for understanding border organisations as part of a dynamic “borderworld” (Sadan 2013); a non-state space they create in the interstices between Thailand and Myanmar, through which civil society actors circumvent the repressive tendencies of the state. Border organisations attempt to “stretch” the fluid space of the borderworld (Horstmann 2014), but development actors inadvertently “contract” it. The third and final section explains how the border/inside divide impinges on struggles over what it means to be Karen. I argue that development actors produce an *ethnocentric power complex* when they hold fast to liberal ideas of civil society, that are inapplicable in the Myanmar context. I conclude by showing how this chapter advances a postcolonial approach to development, civil society, and territory.

My aim is not, in making ethnicity an issue, to essentialise it. Nor is it my aim to deny the legitimacy of Karen claims to ethnicity by exploring intra-ethnic fragmentation. Instead, I see intra-ethnic dynamics as dialectically related to conceptions of Karen ethnicity as a whole. It is important to ask why and how intra-ethnic differences are politicised, rather than to turn a blind eye to differences

within the ethnic group. I see this approach as necessary for three reasons. Firstly, claims to a coherent ethnic identity are central to non-Bamar peoples' recognition as political subjects, yet intra-ethnic dynamics remain underexplored. Despite a significant set of literature on the constructed nature of Karen ethnicity (e.g. Cheesman 2002; Rajah 2002; Sharples 2017), scholars hardly examine power relations within the Karen (for some exceptions, see D. Brenner 2019; Gravers 2007a). Secondly, I reject notions of identity that see it as infinitely fluid, mutable, and "micro." There will always be exceptions to the claims I make. Yet to borrow what McDuié-Ra (2016, 411) writes about India's northeast, 'repeated claims for exceptions and ultra-relativism in analysing the region may not be what the region needs... to produce a more progressive politics on the ground.' By querying intra-ethnic dynamics, I hope to open up possibilities for thinking about Karen ethnicity in a manner that transcends exclusive and reified notions of ethnicity. Finally, I did not expect to study intra-ethnic dynamics. Yet, my interviewees—particularly those in mixed-authority areas—often described themselves as "Karen but in a different way." They stressed both their belonging to the ethnic group and their distance from existing conceptions of what it meant to be Karen. It would be a disservice to their views to gloss over these claims.

7.2 The border/inside divide as a category of practice

Already, this thesis has shown that although “civil society” has no equivalents in Burmese or the Karen languages, the term has acquired localised meanings that distinguish it from existing forms of associational life. However, one assumption remains unchallenged: that civil society on the “border” and civil society on the “inside” should be treated as distinct categories. Importantly, the border/inside divide is not purely an academic construct; it is also a category of practice used by development actors and civil society actors to make sense of the world (from Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Curtis and Spencer 2005). The term “category of practice” originates from Brubaker, who shows how “nation” and “identity” are ‘developed and deployed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysts’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 4; Brubaker 1996; Brubaker et al. 2004). My interviewees referred to the border/inside divide often, to speak about fractures within the civil society landscape, to describe their own experiences as civil society actors, or to explain decisions they had made about funding and partnerships. However, as with other categories of practice, it is necessary to examine the political work these categories do. Even though civil society actors on either end of this divide may know each other personally, why do these spheres remain institutionally distinct, with few opportunities for collaboration? What effects does this have on Karen ethnicisation? This is not to say that the border/inside divide is fictitious; as I will show, it has material effects on how development actors allocate resources. Yet by defamiliarising this category of practice, I hope to open up possibilities for thinking otherwise.

Indeed Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue that when scholars conflate categories of practice (used in everyday settings) and categories of analysis (used in academic analyses), they reify these terms. Hence, they call on scholars to unearth how categories of practice are ‘*emergent properties* of particular structural and conjunctural settings’ (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 28, original emphasis). They argue that categories such as “nation” and “identity” should not be seen as ontologically given, but as means by which social actors understand the world from a particular vantage point. Mosse (2013)

extends Brubaker's argument to the world of international development, calling scholars to unpack development's categories of practice, including the term "development" itself. He contends that instead of presuming that these categories are semiotically stable, scholars should investigate how development buzzwords become part of localised symbolic systems, accruing meanings in relation to localised understandings of, say, ethnicity, coloniality, and authority. Similarly, I unpack the border/inside divide in relation to the longstanding processes of ethnicisation explored in **Chapter 4**. Although actors across the border/inside divide operate in siloes, they also identify as Karen, or as co-ethnics who experience the ill-effects of ethnocentric state-building (Walton 2013; Campbell and Prasse-Freeman forthcoming). As Baruah (2007) points out in regards to India's northeast, the lived experience of ethnicity is not a passive reflection of demography but a function of power relations between state and non-state actors—including civil society.

How can we, in Brubaker and Cooper's words, 'explain the processes and mechanisms through which [categories of practice] can crystallise, *at certain moments*, as a powerful, compelling reality' (2000, 5, emphasis added)? Development actors have supported border organisations since the 1990s, but the border/inside divide emerged over the past decade, as the spoils of Myanmar's "development darling" status have been unevenly distributed. Prior to 2011, most Western donors channelled funds to border organisations, as a critique of the military's hand in politics (Décobert and Wells 2020). However, after the 2011 reforms, donors' attitudes towards the Myanmar government began to improve, and levels of development assistance rose steadily until 2015. This influx of development assistance was largely inaccessible to border organisations, who remained located on the Thai border and unwilling to register with the Myanmar government. Moreover, border organisations perceived that sources of funding they had relied on for more than a decade were drying up, as back donors switched tack to focus on in-country assistance, or that they were being attached to new conditionalities, such as the expectation that they collaborate more closely with state institutions. Many, including KESAN, felt

increasingly stretched, as they transitioned from having one to two core donors to having ten or more donors funding individual projects.

A prominent subgranting organisation for border organisations reported the withdrawal of funds from seven Western governments since 2012, most of whom have started Myanmar programmes that support in-country projects (interview, George, 4 September 2018). Hence, while the aid influx spurred on an increase in civil society actors “inside” Myanmar, border organisations were frustrated by the “flight” of funding from border to inside. A representative of the border organisation summed up this perspective:

Before, most of the funding organisations came to the borderline. Now, the donor funding organisations think that our country has democracy, so we don't need to pay from the borderline. [They want] to pay [civil society organisations] in front of the door. (interview, Saw Win, 18 September 2018)

Sentiments like these reveal how the influx of development aid has reinforced and politicised the border/inside divide, by intensifying a competition for resources and legitimacy between civil society actors on the “border” and those on the “inside”.

Importantly, there is no reason why the aid influx should have resulted in the border/inside divide. It is, in theory, possible for civil society to overcome these siloes. Yet, because of the uneven allocation of development aid, civil society actors began to understand the border/inside divide in zero-sum terms. Many development actors emphasised that they did not simply move money across the border. Cheryl, representing a donor, stated that they had not withdrawn funding for border organisations—simply re-routed it through subgranting organisations: ‘it wasn't that what was delivered was different, it was that different partners were doing it’ (interview, 13 September 2018)—after which border organisations chose to seek funding elsewhere. Alice, representing another donor, stated that her organisation went from being ‘border-heavy’ before 2012, to reducing funding for border organisations in recent years (Alice, interview, 25 April 2019). However, she clarified that this decrease was ‘not astronomical’, while her colleague wondered aloud about why their efforts to explain the decision to border organisations had been met with unhappiness (Melissa, interview, 25 April 2019).

These insights reveal that the border/inside divide is a taken-for-granted category of practice used by both civil society actors and development actors to manage aid and make sense of the aid influx. Although donors were keen to debunk the myth that they had abruptly abandoned border organisations—pointing to changes in implementing partners and attempts to explain funding cuts—they did not debunk the border/inside divide itself. Donors largely did not, for instance, prioritise funding platforms for civil society actors on either side to work together. Since 2011, the border/inside divide has thus referred to a dualistic interpretive framework, used primarily by development actors, to explain the funding decisions they have made in regards to civil society actors in Karen State.

Importantly, civil society actors on both sides of the border/inside divide see themselves as Karen, and as contributing, in some way, to reversing the ill-effects of civil war on Karen populations. The difference is that “inside” organisations operate primarily in state/mixed-authority areas, whereas border organisations work mainly in KNU areas. Yet, because of the border/inside divide, these Karen civil society actors are set in competition between one another over the spoils of Myanmar’s aid influx. Hence, through the border/inside divide, we can thus explore the effects of Myanmar’s aid influx on processes of Karen ethnicisation. Reconceptualising space is central to this endeavour. The border/inside divide is based on a partial conception of space: namely, the assumption that state space is a more legitimate arena for civil society activity than non-state space. This reflects liberal norms that civil society should mediate between state and society (Mercer 2002), to the neglect of local authorities that exist outside of this configuration. From this liberal perspective, actors like the KNU are largely seen as antithetical to the goals of civil society. Yet, as **Chapter 6** shows, civil society can indeed thrive in rebel-controlled areas.

Instead of this conception of space, I deploy a relational approach that sees civil society actors, state authorities, and rebel authorities as actively constitutive of the “border” and the “inside”. The next section advances a relational reading of the border/inside divide, through the concept of the ‘borderworld’ (Sadan 2013). The opportunities and risks afforded to border organisations by their

embeddedness in the Thai-Myanmar borderworld, relative to the opportunities and risks afforded by state space, explain why border organisations insist on staying on the Thai border even after 2011.

7.3. Civil society actors and the Thai-Myanmar borderworld

The fact of being on the border is central to the manner in which border organisations operate. Soe Lin Aung (2014, 28), writing about Burmese migrant workers in a Thai town adjacent to Karen State, argues that ‘the Thai-Burma border line... has come to be strategically manipulated to preserve this border area as a space of refuge.’ Just as Scott (2009) argues that upland areas (“Zomia”) provided refuge to state-evading peoples in precolonial times, Soe Lin Aung shows how undocumented migrant workers use informal border-crossings as a strategy for protecting themselves from the repressive and violent dimensions of state power in Myanmar and Thailand. For instance, migrant workers may choose undocumented migration as a strategy for evading the Burmese state, but may flee back across the border during factory raids, returning to Thailand only when the threat has passed. Hence, the border line provides a space equivalent to Scott’s (2009, 8) ‘shatter zones’ in an era in which the nation-state is central to the spatialisation of power (see also Horstmann 2014).

While Soe Lin Aung focuses on the zero-width line between Thailand and Myanmar, Sadan (2013) argues that an overemphasis on one’s proximity to geopolitical boundaries detracts from the manner in which relations that transcend the socio-spatial format of the nation-state emerge at a distance from these lines. Her detailed examination of Kachin ethnicity in the interstitial spaces between China, Myanmar, and other nation-states pivots on the term “borderworld” instead, defined as a ‘liminal or at least multi-layered geography that is different in many ways to the imaginary of the modern nation state’ that frames the ‘possibilities and constraints of being Kachin’ (Sadan 2013, 4-5). Sadan criticises Scott’s model of state evasion for being overly romanticised and ahistorical; instead, she argues that the Kachin have simultaneously developed relationships with lowland state centres and an identity in

counterposition to these nodes of power. In the terms of this thesis, we might say that Sadan advances a relational understanding of state space and its constitutive outside.

I extend Soe Lin Aung's argument about migrant communities to civil society, and Sadan's argument about Kachin to the Karen, to explore the 'counter-topographic' space produced by civil society actors, and the risks and opportunities associated with it (Soe Lin Aung 2014, 37-38). The term "borderworld" also invites engagement with literature about worldmaking. Getachew's (2019, 36) history of anticolonial worldmaking between the 1940s and the 1960s shows how intellectuals in postcolonial states were interested not in state-making per se, but in establishing that 'nondomination must be a central principle of a postimperial world order.' Getachew argues that these intellectuals did not only challenge colonial power relations, but sought to create something better in its wake, creating new symbolic systems and institutions to realise their vision of internationalism. More specifically, border studies scholars have conceptualised borders as worldmaking too; a means of creating new encounters, subjectivities, and 'fields of relation' specific to the liminal space between "inside" and "outside" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012, 60; Salter 2012). In the same way, I conceptualise the activities of civil society on the border as a mechanism for worldmaking, within the constraints and opportunities offered by the social relations that traverse the Thai-Myanmar border. Even so, worlds can be unmade. Bell (2013) shows how colonisation "takes" worlds, insofar as the material dispossession faced by indigenous peoples results in the disintegration of symbolic systems and the fragmentation of subjects' sense of self (see also Lear 2008). Hence, worldmaking is a precarious project that can be suppressed, remade, or contained at the behest of others. This prompts me to ask about the limits of the Thai-Myanmar borderworld: where does it end, and why?

This section unpacks the border/inside divide through the concept of the borderworld. I begin by exploring border organisations' reasons for remaining on the Thai-Myanmar border in spite of the aid influx into Myanmar. A relational conception of space—or of the borderworld—shows that within the borderworld, border organisations can nurture socio-spatial relations that are less tethered to the

ethnocentric tendencies of the Myanmar nation-state. These opportunities are unavailable “inside” Myanmar, where civil society actors risk significant state retaliation when exploring issues pertaining to the ethnicised relations between state and society. Then, drawing from literature that sees space as dynamic, evolving, and internally heterogeneous (Hart 2018; Massey 2005), I argue that the borderworld undergoes simultaneous processes of “stretching” and “contracting”. The border/inside divide is not stable, as development actors might suggest. Instead, civil society actors seek to “stretch” the borderworld, whereas development actors inadvertently “contract” it.

7.3.1. Borderworld opportunities, borderworld risks

Having argued that border organisations can transform socio-spatial relations in KNU areas (transformative localism, **Chapter 6**) whereas civil society actors on the “inside” struggle to transform socio-spatial relations in state/mixed-authority areas (locked-in localism, **Chapter 5**), I now demonstrate how the specific character of the borderworld explains the divergent abilities of civil society actors to transform social relations. The opportunities that border organisations can access are situated within the specific dynamics of a space that these organisations carve out beyond the remit of the nation-state. In particular, I draw attention to how my interviewees articulated two borderworld opportunities that were relatively inaccessible to civil society actors on the “inside”: civil society actors’ ability to put pressure on the state, and their ability to broach “sensitive” issues. At the same time, these opportunities are precarious. Borderworld risks coexist with borderworld opportunities; a corollary of creating a non-state space in a world where the nation-state remains a predominant template for the expression of power.

A spate of Karen activists have been arrested in Myanmar recently. In September 2019, three Karen community leaders, including the prominent activist Naw Ohn Hla, were arrested in Yangon for publicly commemorating Karen Martyrs’ Day after the state had denied them a permit to do so. The day marks the anniversary of the death of Saw Ba U Gyi, the founder of the KNU, at the hands of the

Tatmadaw in 1950. Authorities took issue with the word “martyr,” which they reserve for Bamar independence heroes (Naw Betty Han 2019; KHRG 2019).⁴⁷ In March 2020, the state police attempted to arrest Saw Tha Boe, a Karen environmental activist who organised a ‘prayer ceremony’ against a polluting cement factory in the Hpa-An area (KHRG 2020d).⁴⁸ And in August 2020, another three Karen activists were arrested for commemorating Karen Martyr’s Day in Yangon.⁴⁹ Border organisations such as the Karen Human Rights Group were outspoken critics of these arrests, decrying Myanmar’s peaceful assembly laws for being ‘applied with extreme prejudice against ethnic people’ (KHRG 2020b).

These arrests reveal the constraints that people face when seeking to challenge the state’s approach to “ethnic” issues from within Myanmar state territory. Interestingly, Saw Tha Boe escaped arrest because he was away from home at the time, ‘in an area along the border with Thailand... controlled by one of the country’s ethnic groups’ (Vanderklippe 2020). His story reveals how the Thai border and adjacent KNU-controlled areas provide a refuge for Karen people critical of the state, from which they can circumvent the risks that dissidents face in Myanmar. Furthermore, border organisations’ outspoken responses to these arrests—and the relative silence of civil society actors on the “inside”—further testify to the opportunities that the borderworld provides for amplifying critiques of the state. While Karen people inside Myanmar continue to face threats of arrest for commemorating “ethnic” martyrs, border organisations do not shy away from criticising the ethnocentrism of the state. The borderworld provides a space from which unequal and highly ethnicised power relations between state and society can be brought into the open.

⁴⁷ Naw Ohn Hla has been arrested eight times since 1989, and was formerly a member of the NLD. This is the first time she has been arrested under the NLD government (Naw Betty Han 2019). In an interview with the Karen Human Rights Group (2019), she states that she had been charged under sections 19 and 20 of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law, and under Section 505(b) and Section 296 of the Panel Code.

⁴⁸ Saw Tha Boe was charged with Section 505(b) of the Penal Code, which criminalises speech that is ‘likely to cause fear or alarm in public’ (Human Rights Watch 2019).

⁴⁹ It is not only Karen activists that have been arrested in recent years. Other arrests that have received high-profile attention include the April/May 2019 arrest of the Peacock Generation, a satirical poetry troupe, for criticising the Tatmadaw, and the arrest of 82 Karenni activists between February and July 2018 for protesting against a statue of General Aung San installed in Loikaw, the capital of Karenni State.

These power relations—and how they can be challenged from the vantage point of the borderworld—were brought into sharp relief when I spoke to Saw Dah Nay, a representative from a border organisation. Dah Nay recounted how his organisation challenged a land grab caused by Max Myanmar, a military-linked company, between 2011 and 2015, through the use of connections they had built between civil society actors, international actors, and villagers (interview, 29 Nov 2018; for more on “khaki capitalism” in Myanmar, see McCarthy 2019; Woods 2011). Over the past decade, land grabs have become increasingly common in state/mixed-authority areas of Karen State (KHRG 2018). When Dah Nay found out that Max Myanmar had confiscated 5,000 acres of land for a rubber plantation (Saw Yan Naing 2015), his organisation lobbied to place Max Myanmar on the US Treasury’s blacklist. Max Myanmar found out they were blacklisted when the company attempted to enter Singapore, so they compensated 90 villagers. At the same time, another border organisation alerted Dah Nay to accusations from Max Myanmar that border organisations had been spreading incorrect information about the rubber plantations. So Dah Nay accompanied a journalist to interview affected villagers about the land grab, assuring the villagers that they could trust the journalist. However, midway through an interview, another villager tipped Dah Nay off to some Tatmadaw soldiers nearby. Dah Nay promptly finished the interview and, together with the journalist, drove to a nearby town, where one of his contacts picked him up in a new car. They escaped to another town several hours away. Max Myanmar subsequently owned up to the adverse effects of the rubber plantation. Dah Nay emphasised the winding routes he had to take to demand compensation for the villagers, drawing circles on a piece of paper to prove his point. ‘There’s the US here, the [border organisation], the villagers, Max Myanmar, lawyers, and then journalists,’ he said, pointing at his makeshift diagram. Dah Nay also stresses that it was the trust he had built up with villagers that had allowed him to remain safe: ‘we escaped with the villagers’ help’ (interview, 29 Nov 2018).

I cite this narrative because it demonstrates an instance of a border organisation engaging with villagers in state/mixed-authority areas. Although border organisations work most extensively in KNU

areas, they engage with villagers “inside” Karen State in a manner that harnesses the specific opportunities and risks associated with the borderworld. An analysis of this interface brings these borderworld opportunities and borderworld risks into sight. Firstly, the manner in which Dah Nay strategises on behalf of dispossessed villagers hinges on social relations formed within the borderworld. Dah Nay’s organisation has recruited community researchers throughout Karen State since the 1990s. Over the years, this has resulted in trusting relations between villagers and civil society actors. As Dah Nay’s ‘escape’ from the Tatmadaw demonstrates, these relationships benefit him in risky situations. Notably, these civil society-villager relations are possible only through the relationship between Dah Nay’s organisation and KNU officials, as community researchers are trained covertly in KNU areas, to circumvent the purview of the state. Hence, a working relationship with the KNU is crucial to the manner in which Dah Nay’s organisation operates.

Moreover, these reciprocal relations of trust are the result of the three decades-long history of border organisations, over which villagers and representatives of Dah Nay’s organisation have become familiar with one another. These long-term relationships are not possible from “inside” state/mixed-authority areas, where civil society only emerged in the last decade, and where opportunities for interactions with the KNU have been curtailed by restrictive laws. The relationships with the outside world writ into Dah Nay’s account are characteristic of the Thai-Myanmar borderworld too. There is a striking international dimension to his account, which mentions American state actors and journalists, and demonstrates Dah Nay’s familiarity with the “boomerang” tactics used by activists around the world to amplify their own voices on an international stage in order to bypass unsympathetic state actors (see Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12-15). As scholars have noted, civil society actors on the Thai-Myanmar border are looped into transnational networks that were impossible to access from inside the country (Horstmann 2011; Olivius 2019; Sharples 2017). The relations between villagers, authorities, extra-local actors, and Dah Nay’s organisation lend credence to the importance of conceptualising the border as an expansive, outward-looking “world” rather than as a zero-width “line.”

Secondly, the issue of land grabs is significant in itself. Border organisations have documented the systematic confiscation of land in state/mixed-authority areas for army camps, dam construction, mining projects, and commercial agriculture (Ethnic Community Development Forum 2016; KHRG 2013; 2014, 87-96; KPSN 2018a), lobbied the KNU for a titling system that recognises the collective ownership of land (KESAN 2018), and mobilised villagers to challenge land grabs, as Dah Nay did. In contrast, among the sixteen civil society organisations I conducted interviews with on the “inside,” only one was working on land issues. Saw Min Thant, a civil society actor on the “inside”, has been implementing land rights trainings in state/mixed-authority areas of Karen State since April 2018, contracted as part of a donor-funded project designed to improve “rule of law” across Myanmar (interview, 7 Dec 2018). In Karen State, he implements awareness-raising sessions on the Myanmar state’s land policy in fifteen mixed-authority villages. Although some villagers he speaks to hold KNU land titles, he feels that he is only able to speak about the state’s land policies within the remit of this project.

Shona: Are you working in both [Myanmar] government and mixed-control areas?

Saw Min Thant: We include mixed-control areas [in our project], but we only give awareness about government-side rules and laws. KNU land laws are not included [in the awareness sessions]. Some villages are controlled by both. We asked, and they said they already have KNU land [titles]. Some also have Form 7 [government land registration]. They say it is good for them to have both. It is safe. But for us, we do not share about the KNU policy. Before this project, we asked permission from the state government. We got permission, so we speak about the government policy. (interview, 7 Dec 2018)

Research shows that legal pluralism—or the existence of overlapping land laws issued by state and rebel authorities—is an everyday reality for many in mixed-authority areas, and that holding multiple land titles could be villagers’ best protection against ceasefire capitalism in Myanmar (Suhardiman et al. 2019). From this perspective, Min Thant’s approach seems limited in efficacy. Although he recognises that villagers feel safer with multiple land titles, he cannot speak about the KNU’s land policies for fear that his organisation’s registration will be revoked. Moreover, Min Thant says that villagers tell him about land grabs caused by the Tatmadaw, but concedes that he can ‘only do awareness sessions’ within the project’s remit, and that in these cases, he refers villagers to a border organisation

specialising in legal aid (interview, 7 Dec 2018). Comparing Min Thant's account to Dah Nay's reveals how civil society actors on the "inside" lack the strategic networks that border organisations possess, and hence the ability to leverage against the Tatmadaw. By operating with the state's 'permission,' civil society actors' ability to redress the concerns of villagers remains limited within state space.

Land is one of several issues that my interviewees on both sides of the border/inside divide described using the English word "sensitive." Besides land, other "sensitive" issues include militarisation and landmines (interview, Michael, 18 Nov 2018; Nan Thazin, 30 Nov 2018; Saw Tun Naing, 17 Oct 2018), the ongoing peace process (interview, Ma Yin Yin Aye, 11 Sep 2018; Naw Moo, 8 Nov 2018; Saw Dah Nay, 29 Nov 2018), infrastructural mega-projects and resource extraction (interview, Robert, 26 Mar 2019; Saw Eh Htunt, 23 Oct 2018), narcotics production (interview, Saw Dah Nay, 29 Nov 2018), and forced displacement (interview, Naw Joy, 18 Sep 2019). What did my interviewees mean by "sensitive"? In his research on enclaves on the India-Bangladesh border, Cons (2016) uses "sensitive space" to describe areas in which overlapping projects of rule generate an air of instability, uncertainty, and anxiety. Similarly, my interviewees indicated that broaching each of these issues from "inside" Karen State would generate anxiety among civil society actors, who feared retaliation from the state. Retaliation could come in the form of arrests, the revocation of organisation registration, police intimidation during civil society activities, and/or the denial of permits to travel past checkpoints. Yet these issues also trigger anxiety from the state actors' point of view, as they mark the points at which the fiction of consensual state-society relations threatens to unravel (see Krishna 1994; Sioh 2010).

Thus, in Karen State, the emic term "sensitive" describes issues that pertain to the ethnicised power relations between the military and non-Bamar groups. Compare, say, the issue of land grabs ("sensitive") to the issue of democracy ("less sensitive"). The latter pertains to a nationwide political transition, whereas the former often refers to the specific frontier dynamics that drive primitive accumulation in war-affected areas, where non-Bamar groups are challenging state sovereignty

(Meehan 2015; Woods 2011).⁵⁰ The former is also more likely to be decried by “ethnic” organisations from across the border, as evidence of the state’s trenchant ethnocentrism. ‘Land tenure and resource access,’ the Karen Peace Support Network (2018a, 5) writes, ‘are at the centre of all ethnic groups’ longstanding struggles to secure equal rights and self-determination.’ Therefore, in this context, the notion of “sensitive” issues also marks a boundary between civil society actors on the “border” and the “inside.” My interviewees used the word “sensitive” to describe specific issues that border organisations were addressing, that would face sanctions inside Myanmar. Since the “sensitivity” of particular issues is generated by a particular relation between society and state, the ability to broach “sensitive” issues is displaced to the borderworld, where the state’s ability to retaliate against dissenters is diminished. As one of my interviewees from a border organisation put it, ‘no one from inside can work on land issues, naw? So we have to.’ (interview, Naw Joy, 18 Sep 2019) The division of issues between “border” and “inside” organisations must thus be read as a function of borderworld opportunities and borderworld risks; “sensitive” knowledge is borderworld knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, the border/inside divide is becoming increasingly politicised as a result of the influx of development assistance into Myanmar, which resulted in increasing pressure on border organisations to move their headquarters “inside” the country. This assessment of risks and opportunities shows that it is not possible for border organisations to simply “follow the funds” into Myanmar, without severely compromising their ability to leverage the relations they have formed with rebel authorities, villagers, and international actors. These relations are located squarely within the non-state space of the borderworld, and allow border organisations to circumvent the repressive tendencies of the Myanmar state. Hence, a relational understanding of the borderworld is crucial to understanding border organisations’ scepticism towards development actors choosing to work in state space.

⁵⁰ There is an extensive literature on frontier accumulation that cannot be summarised here. This literature conceptualises frontiers as ‘transitional, liminal spaces in which existing regimes of resource control are suspended’ (Rasmussen and Lund 2018, 388). The concept of the frontier has been used to examine state control over war-affected, non-Bamar groups in Myanmar, through the prism of the drug economy (Meehan 2011; 2015), resource concessions (Woods 2011), and conservation (Woods 2019a).

Furthermore, this discussion highlights the inadequacy of understanding civil society's position—however fraught—within state-society relations. Civil society actors can seek out and produce non-state spaces too, particularly in postcolonial contexts where borderland populations navigate between state and rebel authorities.

7.3.2. “Stretching” the borderworld: aspirations for co-ethnic solidarity

A relational understanding of space entails understanding the borderworld not only as constituted by power relations, but also as dynamic and evolving (Massey 1994). Hence, it is possible to think about the borderworld as a space that stretches and contracts. One scholar observes that border organisations “stretch” the border by creating dense networks of volunteers and beneficiaries between refugee camps and KNU areas, that extend far past the official international boundary (Horstmann 2014). Carrying this metaphor further, it is possible to conceive of the borderworld as “stretching” through instances where border organisations extend borderworld opportunities and borderworld risks to communities in state/mixed-authority areas, creating fragile pockets of ‘counter-topographic space’ (Soe Lin Aung 2014, 37-38). However, given that the borderworld is not endlessly expansive, I also find it necessary to recognise countervailing forces, or the manner in which the borderworld “contracts” as a result of the conflictual interplay between civil society actors, development actors, and state and rebel authorities. To understand which actors drive these countervailing forces and why, this section turns to civil society actors’ views of their counterparts across the border/inside divide. I identify their attempts to stretch the borderworld, and locate these attempts in a desire for co-ethnic solidarity. After all, actors on both sides of the border/inside divide identify as Karen. Thereafter, I draw attention to attempts to “contract” the borderworld, and their implications for Karen ethnicisation. Overall, I conceive of the borderworld as elastic; stretching and contracting according to the shifting power relations between actors.

Border organisations were sympathetic towards the challenges faced by civil society actors on the “inside”, even as they were frustrated at how development actors were bypassing them for funding. In **Chapter 1**, I mentioned Naw Poe Mu, a border organisation representative, who said that civil society actors on each side had ‘the same goals’ but ‘different sufferings’ (fieldnotes, 4 Mar 2019). She meant that whereas the people who populate border organisations tended to experience the civil war in terms of violence—indeed her own family had been displaced several times—those on the “inside” experienced the repression of their ethnic identity and political views. That is, Karen people in KNU areas bear the brunt of direct military campaigns, whereas those in state/mixed-authority areas experience more insidious forms of Bamarisation. As with Poe Mu, many representatives of border organisations were sympathetic towards the challenges faced by those on the “inside”, despite admitting that they did not often work with “inside” organisations in a professional capacity. They often blamed this on the state or development actors rather than on civil society actors themselves.

Saw Eh Htunt, from a border organisation, was a strong critic of civil society on the “inside”. He felt that civil society actors there were largely ineffectual; unable to substantially challenge state power. Yet Eh Htunt’s criticisms were directed at ‘people who are not from our area’; state actors or development actors who distorted the civil society landscape, who ‘do not understand *our* conflict... *our* context’ (interview, 23 Oct 2018, emphasis added). His critique is aimed not at civil society actors, but at the forces that depoliticise civil society and strain civil society actors’ relations with the people they seek to represent. At the same time, Eh Htunt emphasised his co-ethnic affinity with civil society actors on the “inside.” When I asked about his use of the word “our”, Eh Htunt said, ‘we understand our issues, our country, because *we are Karen people and we work with the community*’ (emphasis added). He felt that civil society actors lacked opportunities for working together. To truly challenge dominant civilian-authority relations across Karen State, Eh Htunt stated that ‘we need to have a more cohesive or constructive way of approaching the community’, across the border/inside divide.

I encountered a similar desire to reach across the border/inside divide among civil society actors on the “inside”. Because my research design bridged the border/inside divide, interviewees on the “inside” sometimes saw me as an opportunity to connect with people they would not have had the chance to speak with otherwise. When Saw Tun Aung, the principal of BSCA, heard that I was in touch with Dah Nay’s organisation, he asked if someone from the organisation might offer a lecture to BSCA students. Dah Nay was enthused by the prospect. He told me that people growing up in state/mixed-authority areas inside Karen State were often confused by the kinds of armed actors that are active in their village (this is what BSCA students told me too). Given the chance, Dah Nay said, he would help young people to understand the types of armed actors active in each locality, their history, and how to identify them (interview, 29 Nov 2018). More generally, Tun Aung hoped that his students would learn from actors who did not grow up under the same, repressive conditions. He had already invited some border organisations to the school himself.

Tun Aung is also seeking funding for a new school building, where he hopes to build a small room to house visiting teachers from outside Hpa-An. Yet, Tun Aung struggles to fund these efforts to “stretch” the borderworld. Hence, my research revealed a desire for collaboration across the border/inside divide, but a lack of institutional structures to support them. One possible outlier is “health systems convergence,” which is a Myanmar-wide attempt to align the healthcare provided by rebel groups, like the KNU, with state-provisioned healthcare. “Convergence” has been ongoing since 2012, and is funded by several INGOs and the Myanmar Ministry of Health. However, the main actors in this process are state and rebel authorities, rather than civil society actors (see Davis and Jolliffe 2016). “Convergence” does not make a significant dent in the ability of civil society organisations to transgress the border/inside divide.

Interestingly, civil society actors’ views towards one another are detached from their opinions of rebel authorities. Tun Aung’s, a Pwo Buddhist, feels excluded from the KNU’s inner circles, which are dominated by Sgaw Christians (I discussed this in **Chapter 5**). Despite feeling marginalised by the

KNU, Tun Aung held immense respect for border organisations. He read their research reports keenly, and hoped that they would speak with students at BSCA. Representatives of border organisations also separated their role from that of the KNU. Dah Nay, for instance, sees his organisation as checking the KNU's power; emphasising the need to speak out about corruption and malpractice among the KNU's ranks. He says that his job is to protect his 'community,' which 'means civilians, not armed soldiers in Karen State' (interview, 29 Nov 2018).

Hence, both "border" and "inside" actors are sceptical towards the KNU, albeit for different reasons and to different degrees. They are also similarly critical of the state, as previous chapters have established. Yet civil society actors see their counterparts on the other side through a frame of co-ethnicity, even if they do not always agree with their views on politics or civil society. They seek out opportunities to build contacts, or at least express a desire to do so. They hope to "stretch" the borderworld, to form closer relationships with actors on the other side, through which they might co-create spaces for challenging dominant civilian-authority relations. Why, then, do the "border" and the "inside" remain in siloes, in spite of a civil society actors' desires to extend borderworld opportunities to their counterparts in state space?

7.3.3 "Contracting" the borderworld: forces that keep civil society actors apart

In this section, I consider means by which the borderworld "contracts", cutting short civil society actors' desires for co-ethnic solidarity. The civil society actors I interviewed brought up three mechanisms for "contracting" the borderworld: firstly, the state's hand in distorting peoples' understandings of Karen ethnicity; secondly, peoples' inability to access non-state space; and thirdly, the strings attached to donor funding. Each of these was brought up by interviewees on both sides of the border/inside divide. I argue that a relational analysis of these mechanisms of borderworld "contraction" reveals the actors and processes that contribute to keeping civil society in Karen State in siloes.

A caveat is necessary before I continue: I have argued that civil society actors generally attempt to reach across the border/inside divide, but were largely unable to. This is not to say that civil society actors are homogenous or that there were no disagreements between “border” and “inside” organisations. As many scholars have noted, civil society landscapes are often fraught with ambivalences, tensions, and contradictions, that must be explained relationally rather than taken at face value (**Chapter 2**). Indeed, actors on the “inside” sometimes felt frustrated that border organisations had typecast them as pro-government or pro-Burman (interview, Nan Hnin Moe, 19 Nov 2018; Nan Phyu Phyu, 9 Dec 2018). Yet, even as border organisations were frustrated by “inside” organisations’ “pro-government” stance, they were continually, reflexively working out why this might be so, albeit with incomplete information. Because there were few orchestrated settings for civil society actors on either side to communicate meaningfully, they were only able to guess at the motives of others, and the extent to which they were warped by the wider political context. Indeed, mutual suspicions and contradictory sentiments grow in a space vacated by meaningful opportunities to negotiate what it means to be “Karen” across the border/inside divide.

Firstly, civil society actors on both sides highlighted that the state propagates mistrust towards border organisations, causing civil society actors on the “inside” to fear reaching out to border organisations. Nan Myat Moe, a 20-year-old BSCA alumnus, told me that she only began to refer to the KNU as *taw-hlan-ye* (Burmese: revolutionaries) rather than as *thu-pone* (Burmese: rebels) in the past year.⁵¹ Myat Moe said that her friends in BSCA helped her to question the partial view of history she had inherited from the state school system.

I just called them *thu-pone* because that is what we said... but I didn't have bad feelings about them. [My friend] asked me: 'why do you call them *thu-pone*? It should be *tawn-hlan-ye*.' I used to think that *thu-pone* is not good because they fight a lot... But *tawn-hlan-ye* should be the right word, because the soldiers—the Tatmadaw—when they come to the village, they ask boys to be porters. (interview, 1 Dec 2018)

⁵¹ The English translations are Nan Myat Moe's own.

Her words are reminiscent of what Saw Dah Nay said when I asked him about differences within the Karen. Dah Nay insisted that differences within the Karen had less to do with the Pwo/Sgaw divide (as I then assumed), and had more to do with how the state uses the education system to “Burmanise” the Karen in state/mixed-authority areas:

Anyone who goes to a government school will have difficulty [supporting the KNU], not only many Pwo Karen, but also Sgaw Karen, because they go to government schools, they try to teach you, you know, how good the government is, about Burmese history, and to hate the Karen rebel groups and the revolution. (interview, 28 Oct 2019)

Both Nan Myat Moe and Saw Dah Nay blame the state for vilifying the KNU and other Karen groups. They both recognise that it is common for those on the “inside” to be suspicious of the borderworld. In other words, they show how the border/inside divide is not pre-given, but related to the state’s attempts to generate mistrust between Karen people “inside” and ethnonationalist groups. Although the KNU has been criticised for vilifying the Myanmar government, propagating ‘photographic negatives of the picture of national identity’ portrayed by the state (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012, 69), civil society actors did not blame the KNU for propagating mistrust in the same way.

A second mechanism for “contracting” the borderworld is the heightened risks borne by those on the “inside” for challenging the state’s legitimacy. Civil society actors on the “inside” do not only confront overt sanctions by the state—as mentioned earlier—but also more invisible fears. Nan Lay Lay, who grew up in Hpa-An city, recently began implementing a border organisation’s projects in state/mixed-authority areas. Like Myat Moe, she grew up mistrusting the KNU. Two of her family members work for a Tatmadaw-allied paramilitary group. She does not tell her family about her work with a border organisation. ‘They will not like what I am doing,’ she said, ‘I only tell them that I am working at the office. That I give trainings, and I attend trainings.’ (interview, 20 April 2019). Lay Lay is worried that her family will not approve of her work; or worse, that they will be afraid on her behalf. We commiserate about how common it is for young people under repressive regimes, particularly women, to downplay the “political” nature of their work among concerned family members.

Lay Lay's experiences speak to how even though civil society actors on the border shoulder significant risks, these risks take a different shape for those from state/mixed-authority areas who wish to cross into the borderworld. They worry not just for themselves, but for their families, who they hope will be able to continue to live undisturbed in state/mixed-authority areas. Saw Dah Nay likewise recognises how civil society actors' experiences of risk are conditioned by the need to protect their families and their homes:

When I put my feet in their shoes [of organisations on the "inside"], I see that if the ceasefire breaks completely, these people need to keep living in government areas, like Hpa-An town, where the government is fully in control. So it's important for them to go within the government's scope. I understand that... that's why our relationship is not that good. (interview, 28 Oct 2018)

Dah Nay recognises that relationships condition one's experiences of risk. He himself felt that he has been less able to take risks since his child was born. Dah Nay saw his counterparts not only as civil society actors, but as Karen people emplaced within families and communities, which were themselves emplaced within other configurations of power. He understood that whereas his social world is emplaced within the borderworld, which—as I have established—can be understood as a space of refuge for dissidents, those on the "inside" could access this space of refuge in the same way. State power must be understood as relational, experienced in the form of risks that are folded into individuals' life histories.

Finally, interviewees felt that civil society actors on the "inside" were guided by the priorities of development actors, rather than a genuine understanding of the concerns of war-affected communities. This created disagreements between border organisations and civil society actors on the "inside", as the former were less willing to compromise on their desires for autonomy. Saw Eh Htunt, from a border organisation, juxtaposed border organisations' ability to 'stand for the people, empower the people, and sometimes criticise the [Myanmar] government' against what fledgling civil society organisations in Hpa-An could do within constraints set by the state and development actors.

They follow the money, or they follow the project... They always follow the policies. Policies set by the donor or the granter, and also this granting is under the government. Actually we want CSOs to be independent. Even if they have a budget, they can criticise the government

and they can criticise the KNU... But right now I see that it is not like that. Sometimes [civil society actors] go to events, saying that ‘we have a successful event because the [Myanmar] government also attended.’ This is not successful! Success is about who can talk freely, about freedom. (interview, 23 Oct 2018)

Saw Eh Htunt felt that development actors often pressured civil society on the “inside” to work with the Myanmar government. Whereas he felt that civil society should seek autonomy from both the state and rebel groups, civil society actors on the “inside” often took close relationships with the state as a sign of success instead. Nan Hnin Moe, a civil society actor on the “inside”, was likewise self-critical about the civil society landscape in state/mixed-authority areas:

Most civil society just wants to do project activities, like workshops in the issue they are interested in. But issues are linked with institutions and they are linked with the constitution and policies... Workshop, workshop, workshop... This is like an NGO market. (interview, 19 Nov 2018)

Nan Hnin Moe felt that development actors often provided ‘workshops’ for civil society actors, but did not help them to question wider issues of state power, to do with policies and the constitution. Her accusation that civil society on the “inside” is akin to an ‘NGO market’ is reminiscent of a common critique of development partnerships: that they turn civil society actors towards market-oriented solutions, rather than allowing them to launch wider attempts at structural transformation (Phillips and Ilcan 2004).⁵² Eh Htunt and Hnin Moe are, roughly speaking, on the same page in their critique of the symbiosis between development actors and the state, despite standing on opposite ends of the border/inside divide.

Hence, civil society actors point out three main mechanisms for maintaining a relatively impervious boundary between actors on the “border” and those on the “inside”. From their insights, I glean three points about the actors that “stretch” and “contract” the borderworld. Firstly, civil society actors tend to stretch the borderworld, not contract it. All three mechanisms of borderworld contraction highlighted by civil society actors were instigated not by civil society actors themselves, but by state

⁵² Border organisations face the opposite pressure from donors: the pressure to prove their autonomy from rebel authorities. However, as **Chapter 6** argued, they are better able to assert their own agendas in the face of donors’ priorities than organisations on the “inside”.

and development actors. Secondly, civil society actors tend to see the state as a threat to civil society activity. This contradicts the liberal assumption that a robust civil society landscape will strengthen the state's capacity to govern, by helping bureaucrats become more in touch with the concerns of its citizenry (Mohan and Stokke 2000). In Karen State, the state's repressive and ethnocentric tendencies injure its legitimacy in the eyes of civil society actors, across both sides of the border/inside divide. In spite of the aid influx and the subsequent growth of civil society in state/mixed-authority areas, Karen civil society actors themselves did not warm to the state. Hence, the task of understanding how ethnicity and war shape state-civil society relations remains as necessary as ever.

Finally, civil society actors highlight development actors' complicity in "contracting" the border. Whereas they blame the state for generating mistrust and fear between Karen actors, development actors' effects on the border/inside divide seem more inadvertent; more passive. Civil society actors did not accuse development actors of actively suppressing Karen ethnicity; rather, they accused development actors of pressuring civil society actors on the "inside" to form closer relationships with the state. In so doing, they tacitly legitimised state power and the border/inside divide. Yet, to borrow White's (2002, 408) remarks on racism in international development, development actors' silence on ethnicity is not innocuous; it is a 'determining silence that both masks and marks its centrality to the development project.' I delve deeper into civil society actors' suspicions in the next section, in which I examine development actors' views (or lack thereof) on Karen ethnicity and their implications for the border/inside divide. Even though state actors and development actors have different approaches to issue of ethnicity, I argue that in this instance, their divergent views converge to produce an *ethnocentric power complex*, with significant implications for co-ethnic solidarity among the Karen.

7.4. Development, civil society, and Karen ethnicisation

Critical scholarship on development tends to overlook ethnicisation. This is not to say that the literature overlooks ethnicity; several scholars show how development reinforces the marginalisation of particular ethnic groups. Tsing (1993), for instance, shows how development is complicit in the marginalisation of the Meratus in South Kalimantan. She shows how the Meratus conflate the Indonesian words for “development” and “buildings”, which to the Meratus, are also associated with historical attempts to subdue the population (Tsing 1993, 86). In a different context, Harrell (1995) explains how successive governments launched “civilising missions” in China’s peripheral areas. In each case, domination was a two-step process: the centre designated peripheral peoples as inferior, and then sought to help them attain ‘the superior culture, religious, and moral qualities characteristic of the center itself’ (Harrell 1995, 4). However, Harrell demonstrates that civilising missions often ironically sharpened the ethnic consciousness of peripheral peoples.

Whereas Tsing and Harrell write from an anthropological standpoint, Hettne (1993), an economic historian, provides the most far-reaching treatment of ethnicity in development studies. He argues that both modernisation and neo-Marxist approaches to development are concerned with “national economies”, hence they ‘preclude serious treatment of the ethnic factor’ in development (Hettne 1993, 124). Yet poorly planned projects generate conflict in multi-ethnic societies. As an alternative, Hettne (1993, 147) recommends ‘ethnodevelopment,’ a form of development where the ‘basic need of a cultural (ethnic) identity is seen as a fundamental right’ (also Clarke 2001). In all, these authors show how non-dominant ethnic groups often disproportionately experience the dark underbelly of international development. This is a phenomenon that has been remarked in various Asian postcolonial states, including in Vietnam, India, and Sri Lanka (Cao 2009). Furthermore, these authors also demonstrate that development actively produces ethnicised power relations between centre and periphery. In other words, development not only disadvantages particular groups; it also reproduces their marginalisation in other domains.

In the Karen context, it is certainly true that development schemes have resulted in the domination of the centre over the periphery. The state often presents the “Bamarisation” of marginal populations as ‘development efforts for border region national races’, and enacts this through the expansion of Burmese-medium education systems, infrastructure mega-projects, and the provision of social services (Walton 2013, 11). However, the aid influx has complicated relations between and within ethnic groups. Prior to 2011, Callahan (2007, 22) stated that ‘neither the [Myanmar] government nor most of the leaders of armed ceasefire groups appear committed to expanding community or individual participation in development and state-building enterprises’ in Myanmar’s marginal areas.’ This has certainly changed in recent years: as I have shown, the aid influx resulted in a boom in civil society actors inside Karen State, and a civil society landscape polarised between “border” and “inside”. Hence, literature that foregrounds centre-periphery relations is inadequate for the purposes of this study. For one, this literature overlooks civil society. The main line of argument seems to be that development actors reinforce problematic notions of ethnicity produced by the state; however, the role of civil society actors in implementing and contesting development remains under-remarked. Indeed, literature on indigenous movements suggests an ambivalent relationship between minority rights and development that deserves greater attention (e.g. Anthias 2018; Laurie et al. 2005).

Secondly, development actors’ views on ethnicity remain a black box. Scholars speculate on the outcomes of development on inter-ethnic relations, but the logics and mechanisms that underlie these phenomena remain opaque. Thirdly, literature on centre-periphery relations tends to overstate the homogeneity of the periphery; privileging inter-ethnic dynamics over intra-ethnic dynamics. Yet, scholars theorising development and marginality show how development transforms intragroup dynamics. Li (2014) demonstrates how the pursuit of capitalist development among the Lauje, a group of indigenous highlanders in Sulawesi, created unequal intragroup relations ‘governed by competition and profit’ (Li 2014, 178). Li (2014, 10) clarifies that the Lauje do not identify as an ethnic group, however her insights on the contradictory effects of development on marginal groups apply to theorising

ethnicisation too. Development can have ambivalent effects on an ethnic group; empowering some actors within the group, while diminishing possibilities for co-ethnic solidarity as a whole.

A small body of literature does address the evolution of intra-ethnic dynamics in relation to state-society relations (e.g. Onwuzuruigbo 2010; Ramírez and Chan 2018; Sengupta 2014; Siddiqi 2014). Most of this literature is published in ethnicity-focused journals, such as *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, and *Asian Ethnicity*. One wonders if this reveals a tendency for intra-ethnic dynamics to be sidelined among scholars interested in development and statebuilding. Of this literature, McDuire-Ra's (2007; 2011) research, which explores the intersections between ethnicity and development in India's northeast through the lens of social movements, is particularly apt. McDuire-Ra argues that by presuming that ethnic minorities take a "united front" against development projects, scholars create minority/majority and anti/pro-development binaries that 'cast ethnic minorities as homogenous wholes and lock our understanding of collective agency into predetermined roles' (McDuire-Ra 2011, 82). Instead, McDuire-Ra shows that a range of positions vis-à-vis development are possible among those who identify within a single ethnic group, and that development projects can reinforce or patch up intra-ethnic divides. This section builds on McDuire-Ra's work, by discussing how development actors participate in ethnicisation. As **Chapter 4** shows, internal tensions within an ethnic group interact with external factors, like war and postcolonial state-making. Similarly, it is necessary to consider the intersections between intra-ethnic dynamics and development.

The first part establishes the relationship between the border/inside divide and Karen ethnicisation. By pointing out how the border/inside divide constrains possibilities for co-ethnic solidarity, I show that it is critical to consider the manner in which development actors influence ethnicisation. The second part uses an analysis of grey literature to demonstrate that development actors' conceptions of Karen ethnicity tend to efface the ethnocentric tendencies of the Myanmar state. And in the final third section, I argue that the wilful ethnic-blindness of development actors produces

an *ethnocentric power complex*; or a power configuration that amplifies the ethnocentrism of the Myanmar state. In postcolonial settings, where state-society relations are refracted through ethnicity, scholars must consider development actors' hand in transforming power relations between and within ethnic groups.

7.4.1 Ethnicisation and the stakes of the border/inside divide

In an earlier part of this chapter, I showed that the border/inside divide became particularly stark as a result of the aid influx into Myanmar. It is true that civil society on the “inside” has grown due to the aid influx, and that border organisations have struggled for funding in recent years. However, as I have argued, it is important to see the border/inside divide as a category of practice, and to investigate the political work it does, rather take it as a neutral reflection of reality.

My research finds that although interviewees on both sides understood their counterparts as *civil society actors* differentiated by their access to resources, risks, and opportunities, they also understood them as *co-ethnics*, whose circumstances they wished to understand better. From this perspective, it becomes possible to explore the implications of the border/inside divide on processes of Karen ethnicisation. I define ethnicisation as an ongoing, spatialised process, through which ethnic categories become taken-for-granted aspects of the lived experiences of both in-groups and out-groups, and through which ethnic differences become central to the distribution of resources and power (see e.g. Andaya 2008; Escobar 2008; Restrepo 2004; Scott 2009). I maintain that ethnicisation is not a backdrop; a process relegated to the past. Instead, ethnicity in Myanmar continues to be struggled over and politicised. Nor is ethnicisation solely the province of state or rebel actors; rather, civil society actors play an active role in the manner in which Karen ethnicity is made and remade. Moreover, as ethnicity has been central to the distribution of power in Myanmar since colonial times, struggles over ethnicity are critical to understanding power dynamics in Myanmar as a whole (e.g. Campbell and Prasse-Freeman forthcoming; Smith 1999; Tin Maung Maung Than 2005; Walton 2013).

The border/inside divide can be read in relation to two aspects of ethnicisation, highlighted earlier in this thesis. Firstly, ethnicity evolves dialectically; in relation to external forces and internal tensions. Existing literature reviewed in **Chapter 4** shows how, historically, claims to Karen unity have been riddled by dissenting voices from within. Gravers (2007a; 2018) argues that since the 19th century, differences along the lines of religion (Christian/Buddhist/animist), class, and education have been both politicised and concealed by actors who sought to construct a homogenous Karen identity; first, the colonial-missionary elite, and then, the KNU, the state, and other Karen organisations. He concludes that although the Karen nation is not illusory, it is an ‘entity with huge inner contradictions,’ and that the greatest suffering is borne by those with the least power to influence the direction of the civil war (Gravers 2007a, 257). Furthermore, Brenner (2018; 2019) shows how these internal contradictions have resulted in cycles of conflict and conciliation within the KNU.

Building on this literature, I argue that the border/inside divide could provide a new axis for conflict and conciliation within post-ceasefire Karen State. By enabling actors to position themselves as civil society actors in state/mixed-authority and KNU areas, development assistance creates opportunities for civilians to counterbalance the dominating power long held by state and rebel elites. At the same time, civil society actors are elites in their own way; actors who can access material and symbolic resources that others cannot. By bringing Brenner and Graver’s discussions of factionalism and fractures to bear outside the rebel elite, it becomes possible to think about forces that bring civil society actors together and rive them apart. The border/inside divide constitutes source of fracture among civil society actors who might otherwise find common ground over their shared ethnicity. Importantly, this fracture is not inevitable or pregiven, but the result of existing relations of power between development actors and state authorities.

Secondly, this thesis develops the idea that ethnicity is negotiated and developed through space. Thawngmung’s (2008; 2012) argues that literature on Karen ethnicity is biased towards the views of those living in the refugee camps and KNU areas; hence Thawngmung turns scholars’ attention toward

the existence of at least two million “other Karen”, who reside in state/mixed-authority of Karen State and in Bamar-dominated areas outside Karen State (Thawngmung 2012, xviii). These “other Karen” may seek to preserve Karen culture and identity, even as they are well-integrated into Burmese culture. They may also hold varied positions towards the KNU’s ethnonationalist struggle, ranging from ignorance and opposition, to tacit support.

Thawngmung’s work problematises ideas of a singular “Karen” identity or a cohesive “Karen” political stance by showing that the lived experience of Karen ethnicity can be highly geographically variable. However, she does not delve into why and how geography has become an axis of difference within the Karen. I offered one piece of this puzzle in **Chapter 4**, which traced the historical construction of state-drawn Kayin State and KNU-drawn Kawthoolei. Not only do constructions of Karen ethnicity influence these maps; these maps have recursive effects on Karen ethnicisation. The KNU’s territorial claims, contrived as a result of political conditions specific to Burma’s post-independence era, widened differences between the Karen living in rural, mountainous areas, among their own ethnic group, and those Karen living in large, lowland cities, among other ethnicities. Maps matter; not just to the construction of the nation-state, as scholars have noted (e.g. Krishna 1994; Thongchai 1994), but also for the construction of ethnicity. By deploying abstract space to articulate their territorial claims, states and rebels created divides within the Karen population, diminishing their ability to organise collectively.

In the post-ceasefire era, civil society actors provide a second piece to Thawngmung’s puzzle: the border/inside divide implies that geographical differences within the Karen are reinforced not just by state- and rebel-drawn maps, but also by how development actors conceive of space. After all, the border/inside divide is a *spatial* division; border organisations are most strongly associated with KNU areas, whereas “inside” organisations are most strongly associated with state strongholds. In the next section, I explore development actors’ (mis)understandings of the spatialisation of Karen ethnicity. By highlighting means by which tensions within the Karen are created, I hope to open up possibilities for

thinking about Karen ethnicity otherwise. What opportunities for co-ethnic solidarity are foreclosed, because of the polarised manner in which development money is disbursed? How might state-society relations in Myanmar look different if more Karen could access the borderworld, and the opportunities it offers for contesting the state's ethnocentrism?

7.4.2 Development actors and Karen ethnicity

How did development actors speak about ethnicity?⁵³ In short: most did not. Most donor and INGO representatives use a spatial rubric to explain their decisions: they see themselves as implementing projects in Kayin State, rather than with Karen people. Development actors often see Kayin State as a part a larger spatial category: “southeastern Myanmar”, which comprises Mon State, Kayin State, Kayah State, eastern and southern Shan State, Tanintharyi Region, and eastern Bago Region.

In 2016, the Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU) and the Peace Support Fund (PSF) published a report entitled *Situation Analysis of Southeastern Myanmar* (2016), supported by five donors: Australia, Canada, the EU, the UK, and Sweden. MIMU is a UN-supported information management service set up to support Myanmar's growing development sector, while the PSF is a multi-donor platform for supporting Myanmar's peace process.⁵⁴ The *Situation Analysis* compiles key issues areas of interest to development actors in the area, in view of harmonising development programming. Key findings of the report refer to ethnicity several times, albeit always as a matter of context or as an appendage to issues of “governance, justice, and land rights” and “peacebuilding”. For instance:

The area shares some common attributes including *ethnic diversity* and a history of tensions between local leaders and the Government of Myanmar...

⁵³ In this discussion, I refer exclusively to development actors forming partnerships with civil society actors on the “inside”, who do not fund border organisations. In other words, these development actors are the direct result of Myanmar's re-entry into the world of international development in the early 2010s. The views of development actors funding border organisations can be challenged too, but there is no space to do so within this chapter.

⁵⁴ The PSF is now known as the Paung Sie Facility.

Central authority is especially resented in *ethnic minority states*, contested conflict zones and some other areas of southeastern Myanmar...

Federalism is a pressing issue for *ethnic leaders* and local politicians...

Access to justice is limited by widespread mistrust within and across *ethnic groups*, as well as between [non-state actors] and the Government...

The remaining conflicts in southeastern parts of the country involve local groups, each of which are associated with an *ethnic minority* who seek recognition and self-determination...

(MIMU and PSF 2016, 8-12, emphases added)

Hence the *Situation Analysis* positions ethnicity as a feature of demography (“ethnic diversity” or “ethnic groups”), a geographical category (“ethnic minority states”), or a political positioning (“ethnic leaders”). Another report, by a coalition of 23 development actors known as the South-East Working Group, summarises the ‘interconnecting and unique humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding needs’ in the area (INGO Forum 2017, 2). Here, “ethnic armed organisations”, “ethnic health providers”, and “ethnic service providers” are discussed as key players in five domains: refugee return, health, de-mining, governance and infrastructure, and education. Once again, “ethnic” is reduced to a descriptor rather than a conceptual category.

An analysis of these documents sheds light on development actors’ views in the following ways. Firstly, ethnicity is not discussed as an issue—or ethnicisation as a process—worthy of attention per se. None of these reports, nor many of the development actors I interviewed, discussed intra-ethnic dynamics within the Karen. Although the *Situation Analysis* acknowledges that Karen subgroups exist in an effort to contextualise southeast Myanmar, the ‘fluid and unclear’ reality of ethnic identification does not feature elsewhere in the report (MIMU and PSF 2016, 34). Karen people are spoken about primarily as beneficiaries, who carry certain attitudes towards the state or other ethnic groups that would have to be taken into account into programme planning. Secondly, the reports discuss civil society as a generic group of stakeholders. Instead of distinguishing “border” and “inside”, civil society actors are discussed in uniform:

Some recent examples of civil society engagement reflect greater opening of political and public space as organisations have mobilised to contest Government, [non-state actor], and private-sector developments. (MIMU and PSF 2016, 70)

By effacing the heterogeneity within civil society, the *Situation Analysis* paradoxically reinforces the border/inside divide. Calls for ‘civil society strengthening’ automatically read as calls to strengthen civil society on the “inside” (MIMU and PSF 2016, 140). Moreover, although the report refers to the KPSN as a prominent critic of large-scale infrastructural development (MIMU and PSF 2016, 70), it does not recognise the KPSN as a coalition of border organisations. The *Situation Analysis* thus conceals the importance of the borderworld for challenging dominant state-society relations.

Finally, these reports write about Southeast Myanmar—including Kayin State—as a spatial container for certain cultures, languages, ethnic groups, and socio-political conditions. One prominent condition, highlighted time and again in the grey literature on Kayin State, is “conflict”. The *Situation Analysis* recommends that development actors adopt ‘conflict-sensitive’ approaches and learning from ‘other conflict environments’ (MIMU and PSF 2016, 16). Yet another report, prepared by a coalition of development actors, clarifies the meaning of “conflict sensitive” in the context of Southeast Myanmar (South-East Working Group 2017). While the paper advocates analyses of various stakeholder positions, including that of state departments, armed groups, the Tatmadaw and its paramilitary forces, and civil society, the paper barely mentions ethnicity, except by way of referring to “ethnic armed organisations”. This parallels how “ethnic conflict” is often mentioned in donor documents (e.g. AusAid 2013, 10; DFID 2018; 2020; World Bank Group 2015, 6). In these instances, whereas “conflict” is cursorily interrogated through recommendations for conflict sensitivity, the term “ethnic” itself is simply assumed to be a feature of Myanmar’s demography.

Overall, development actors portray Kayin State as an abstract, ahistorical space. When “ethnic diversity” or even “ethnic conflict” are portrayed as fairly matter-of-fact considerations for development programming, the ethnocentric nature of the state itself fades from view. This results in the effacement of the borderworld: after all, it is hard to see why civil society actors might seek out non-state spaces, if the state itself is not problematised.

7.4.3 The ethnocentric power complex

Development actors' tendency to overlook ethnicisation as a power-laden process has significant implications for the border/inside divide. Alex, from a Yangon-based INGO working with civil society actors in Karen State, questions the legitimacy of border organisations in this way:

[Border organisations] had never had a sense of engagement or a location inside of the country. From a community perspective, how can you really represent—how can you speak for the Karen communities when you don't actually live with them? ... They say that they represent communities they've never set foot in. (interview, 12 Sep 2018)

Alex sees himself as helping civil society actors to 'be better representatives' and for them to 'better understand their role in society with respect to service provision, advocacy, policy, and general awareness-raising' (interview, 12 Sep 2018). However, his INGO has built successful partnerships only with civil society actors on the "inside". Furthermore, as my research demonstrates, his assumptions about border organisations are at least in part incorrect: border organisations do 'set foot' in communities, albeit largely in KNU areas. Alex did not speak about how border organisations' location in the borderworld might allow them to be better representatives of war-affected communities. Another common refrain I heard from donors was a desire to move past ethnicity as a marker of difference.

Anne, from a Yangon-based international organisation, put it this way:

I have lived in many places in the world and with a lot of different people and if you, for instance, are university-educated, it doesn't matter so much where you come from, but where you've worked... [In Myanmar] all of this narrows to your ethnicity... I hope to see a Myanmar where your ethnicity doesn't really matter, where you'll have the same opportunities. Meaning that if you are a Karen ethnic, you can get schooling in your language, but you also learn the Burmese language so you are not closed from all civil servant positions. I don't think you can have two structures in a country. (interview, 9 Sep 2018)

Like Alex, Anne's organisation was involved in "strengthening" civil society organisations on the "inside", by holding trainings and networking sessions. Anne envisions a "post-ethnic" Myanmar where one's ethnicity does not determine one's access to schooling, resources, and jobs. She states that Myanmar cannot 'have two structures in a country,' and cannot envision an ideal scenario in which civil society on the "border" and civil society on the "inside" coexist.

Alex and Anne's views were typical of the development actors I interviewed in three ways. Firstly, whereas my interviewees on both sides of the border/inside divide see themselves as Karen civil society actors, neither Alex nor Anne deem ethnicity to be an important dimension of civil society activity. Instead, they tend to couch civil society activity as part of a governance or democratisation agenda, as is coherent with international development orthodoxies (e.g. Mercer 2002). However, such an approach is ill-fitted to Myanmar, where ethnicity is not only a feature of state-society relations, but a lived experience for many. Secondly, Alex and Anne portray border organisations as somewhat stubborn and anachronistic. Neither allude to how border organisations might be a response to the restrictions that civil society actors face in state space, or to how—as I have shown—civil society actors on the “inside” find it difficult to speak about certain issues that cut to the heart of non-Bamar groups' grievances towards the state. Thirdly, both Alex and Anne see the border/inside divide in either-or terms. None of the development actors I interviewed were interested in funding projects that brought together civil society actors across this divide. Few were supporting both border organisations and those on the “inside”. Hence, the border/inside divide remains firmly entrenched by development actors, who largely do not acknowledge the extent to which state space is hostile towards civil society actors seeking to question the ethnicised power relations in Myanmar today.

In this way, development actors and the state work in concert to produce an *ethnocentric power complex* that denies opportunities for co-ethnic solidarity across the border/inside divide. Callahan (2007, xiv) uses the term ‘emerging political complexes’ to describe the great variety of ‘flexible and adaptive networks that link state and other political authorities’ in Myanmar, which produce an uncertain political landscape that confounds the sovereign will of any single actor (drawing from Duffield 2001). In non-ceasefire areas, Callahan observes that many civilians have been stripped of basic protections, having been caught between armed actors, traditional leaders, and foreign business concerns. Today, in post-ceasefire Karen State, development actors and state actors approach ethnicity differently. Development actors often see themselves as benign, well-meaning, and progressive for

looking past ethnicity as a marker of difference and/or recognising existing ethnic tensions in Myanmar. However, because they do not plumb the depths of power relations in Karen State, they inadvertently reproduce state power. The ethnocentric power complex works by reinforcing the border/inside divide as a category of practice, constraining opportunities for co-ethnic solidarity among Karen civil society actors; across the borderworld and the “inside”.

This discussion also shows that the ethnocentric power complex is a spatial issue. Development actors’ stances towards ethnicity result in part from their use of abstract space, which is also a tool used by state actors and rebel actors (**Chapter 4**). Yet, I conceive of the ethnocentric power complex as dynamic, just as space itself is produced by various historical conjunctures (Hart 2001; Massey 2005). The “good governance” agenda adopted by development actors—which favours civil society partnerships as a means of achieving development targets—is key to the manner in which development actors influence ethnicisation in Myanmar today. Finally, I have shown how civil society actors see each other as co-ethnics, inasmuch as they stand on opposite sides of the border/inside divide. Alternatives to the border/inside divide are possible, and are indeed already forethought by civil society actors; the question is the extent to which alternatives are constrained by the ethnocentric power complex produced by the conjunctural agendas of state actors, rebel actors, and development actors. Correspondingly, we might also imagine alternative conceptions of ethnicity that could arise under a different configuration of power relations.

7.5. Conclusion

This chapter reads Myanmar’s aid influx through the lens of relational comparison. A dual focus on power relations and the manner in which they are constituted through space is threaded throughout. I see the border/inside divide as a category of practice, deployed by development actors to organise the manner in which they explain the uneven distribution of aid to civil society organisations in Karen State. However, taking the border/inside divide at face value obscures alternatives to the current state of

affairs; namely, the manner in which civil society actors might form relations of solidarity across these siloes. A relational analysis of the border/inside divide, using the concept of the ‘borderworld’ (Sadan 2013), reveals that border organisations are ‘stretching’ spaces where challenging the ethnocentric nature of the Myanmar state becomes possible (following Horstmann 2014). However, the borderworld “contracts” because development actors remain constrained by a liberal vision of civil society, within which there is little room for apprehending the state’s ethnocentrism and the existence of rebel authorities.

This reveals the need for an alternative understanding of civil society; one that sees it as embedded within power relations significant to the making of the postcolonial world. Such an understanding of civil society would, firstly, see civil society actors and development actors as agents of ethnicisation in their own right; a role normally consigned to state and rebel actors. By regulating the distribution of resources to actors in a context where ethnicity matters, development actors—in spite of their claims to be ethnic-blind—inevitably partake in struggles over what it means to be Karen. Secondly, civil society must be historicised; examined in relation to foregoing internal and external forces that transform ethnicity. The aid influx created room for civil society organisations to form on the “inside”, thereby transforming intra-ethnic relations in a manner that was not possible before the Karen ceasefires. In another context, historical conditions might foreground other non-state actors as agents of ethnicisation—such as private interests and customary institutions—that are given less attention in this thesis. Finally, whereas struggles between a marginalised ethnic group and its constitutive outside are the focus of development research, it is equally important to unpack the manner in which development might create intra-group tensions.

Underlying this chapter is also an argument about the nature of territory. By holding fast to Westphalian notions of statehood, development actors contribute to an ethnocentric power complex that results in the marginalisation of Karen people. Yet, civil society actors see themselves not only within the roles they are assigned by development actors, but as co-ethnics, who desire opportunities for

solidarity that are foreclosed by current power configurations. This shows how Westphalian notions of how state space “should be” are confounded by other spatial imaginaries, favoured by civil society actors themselves. Since the ethnocentric power complex is contingent and evolving, it can also be undone. Co-ethnic solidarity is only out of reach inasmuch as actors continue to reproduce the status quo. **Chapter 8** concludes this thesis, by conceptualising *development's territories* as the outcome of conflicts over Westphalian and non-Westphalian spatial imaginaries, convened via the machinery of international development.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion: development’s territories

8.1 Introduction: Karen State in 2020

Nearly a decade since Thein Sein’s reforms in 2011 triggered an aid influx into Myanmar, the country headed to the polls on 8 November 2020. I often heard friends and interviewees refer to this election as the “ethnic election”. Whereas the NLD won by a countrywide landslide in 2015,⁵⁵ many expected this to be the year when Bamar and non-Bamar peoples’ choices diverged at the polling booth. Along with several commentators (Lintner 2020; Matthieson 2020), my interviewees predicted that in the ethnic states, voters aggrieved by the stalled peace process would choose political parties representing their ethnic group over the NLD. However, the run-up to the elections was riddled with controversy. The Covid-19 pandemic hampered campaigning in many areas, and journalists (considered “non-essential”) were asked to stay home. Three weeks before the elections, the Union Election Commission (UEC) announced that elections would be cancelled in certain constituencies for security reasons. This has severely impacted Rakhine State, where 1.1 million people will be unable to vote. In Kayin State, elections were cancelled in 53 out of 188 village tracts (Kaung Hset Naing et al. 2020).

This is significantly less than in the 2015 election, when elections were not held in 94 constituencies. Even so, Karen political parties have argued against these cancellations, stating that armed violence is not a risk in many of the areas cited by the UEC (Thet Zin Soe 2020). Furthermore, these omissions entrench a sentiment long held by non-Bamar peoples; that their voices cannot be heard in the mainstays of democratic politics, such as elections, in parliament, and through the mainstream media. ‘The current election system is failing us,’ a Kachin commentator writes, ‘the playing field is not level as we seek representation as a means to achieve equality and peace’ (Lahpai Seng Raw 2020). Ultimately, election results in Kayin State were mixed: the NLD clinched 30 out of 36 seats, but the combined vote for Karen political parties exceeded the popular vote for the NLD.

⁵⁵ In 2015, the NLD secured all available seats in Kayin State, apart from five seats in Hpapun Township and one each in Thandaung and Kyainsekyi Townships (Saw Tun Lin 2020).

In the context of this thesis, the 2020 elections tell a familiar story. The elections represent yet another occasion on which what looks like a celebratory moment for Myanmar, takes on an insidious cast when viewed from the country’s margins. Moreover, the elections also show how marginalisation along ethnic lines, a stubborn feature of state-society relations since colonial times, subverts the democratic trope that all are equal at the ballot box. Likewise, this thesis has argued for the importance of understanding civil society as embedded in the power relations constitutive of the postcolonial state. Rather than assuming that civil society has ‘gone wrong in the developing world,’ it is important to investigate how this form of associational life transforms existing power relations, often in unexpected ways (Mercer 2002, 11). Indeed it is precisely because of non-Bamar peoples’ disillusionment towards parliamentary politics, that civil society might serve as an alternative arena upon which they might make themselves heard.

Moreover, the Karen State context is particularly compelling because it reveals not only the role of civil society in mediating state-society relations, but because it brings the contested nature of postcolonial statehood into sharp relief. The KNU’s extensive presence in the area reveals the ragged edges of the Myanmar state’s claims to sovereignty. Civil society actors navigate a complex political landscape, continually assessing the extent to which their relations with the state and the KNU allow them to pursue their own aspirations. This situation bears similarities with other postcolonial contexts, where state authority is contested by non-state actors, including rebel groups, customary authorities, and local leaders of various stripes (Hansen and Stepputat 2001). Among the literature cited in this thesis, I have flagged similarities between the nature of contested statehood in Karen State, and borderland areas in South Asia (Baruah 2020; Cons 2016; Karlsson 2011; Wouters 2020), indigenous lands in Latin America (Agnew and Oslender 2013; Courtheyn 2018; Halvorsen et al. 2019; Laing 2020), and rebel-governed spaces in Africa (Arjona 2016; Ballvé 2012; Mampilly 2011). In these contexts, civil society actors are embedded in power relations that cannot be encompassed by either liberal or Gramscian approaches to civil society (cf. Stokke and Mohan 2001).

Besides the 2020 elections, another issue that has arisen since I conducted my fieldwork in 2018–2019 is the KNU’s legitimacy. The KNU announced a hiatus from the peace process in late 2018, but has since reinstated its participation in peace talks. Prior to the 2020 elections, the KNU released a statement urging Karen people to ‘bravely vote for the Karens and Karen Political Parties (*sic*)... under the jurisdiction of the 2008 Constitution’ (KNU 2020). This statement was controversial too. The KNU has historically positioned itself as anathema to party politics, to justify its existence as a rebel actor. The 2008 Constitution is infamous for entrenching the military’s hold over key ministries and parliamentary proceedings (EgretEAU 2016). One wonders if these moves will cost current KNU leaders their seats on the organisation’s Central Executive Committee, which is due for re-election in early 2021. Internal transformations within the KNU provide a cautionary tale against binary readings of civil society actors. Civil society actors do not act “for” the state or “against” rebels—or vice versa—but are often instead positioned ambivalently towards these authorities. This ambivalence applies to both civil society actors on the “inside” and on the “border”, albeit in different ways. I have shown how border organisations carve out room to manoeuvre between the agendas of the KNU and their own goals, by virtue of their location within the Thai-Myanmar ‘borderworld’ (Sadan 2013) and their relationships with sympathetic KNU officials. No matter the future direction of the KNU, a spatial approach to civil society—that sees it as embedded within the power relations that constitute a particular locality—remains crucial.

A final issue at stake in 2020 is development actors’ attitudes towards Myanmar. I began this thesis by showing how optimistic narratives about ceasefires and reforms triggered a steady increase in development assistance to Myanmar. This triumphalism has since waned. Décobert and Wells (2020, 309) show how donors are finding it increasingly difficult to legitimise their support for the incumbent government. The primary reason for this is the commencement of the Tatmadaw’s “clearance operations” against the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in September 2017. The ensuing violence has since displaced more than 700,000 people (UNHCR 2019). Meanwhile, civil war has

intensified in Kachin and northern Shan States, since the breakdown of the Kachin Independence Army’s (KIA) ceasefire with the Myanmar government in 2011, while recurrent clashes mar the legitimacy of the KNU ceasefire. It is too early to tell if development assistance has declined in numerical terms,⁵⁶ however Décobert and Wells argue that donors are now more keen to work with non-state actors and reluctant to increase development spending on the country. Even so, the uncertainties facing development actors do not undermine the need to investigate development partnerships in Myanmar. Many of the civil society organisations created between 2011 and 2015, the heydays of development aid, will remain, although they may face uncertainty in regards to securing funding. The relations built between civil society actors, state authorities, rebel authorities, and local communities cannot be easily undone. Indeed, if development actors are turning away from the Myanmar state and towards non-state actors, it is possible that civil society actors will reap the benefits of this change.

This thesis proposes conceptual tools necessary for taking stock of these recent changes in Myanmar. The 2020 elections, the KNU’s shifting stance towards party politics, and ongoing uncertainties about the future of development assistance, heighten the importance of investigating the relations between civil society, state and rebel authorities, and development actors in the country. Through ethnographic research in 2018 and 2019, I have provided a snapshot of a pivotal moment in the country’s history, when optimism about civil society activity was at a high, that will inform future thinking about Myanmar and other postcolonial states. This conclusion takes stock of these conceptual tools. In the next section, I summarise my main arguments and answer the central question that drives this thesis: can civil society transform war? Then, I expand on the key concept threaded throughout this thesis: territory. I argue that investigating *development’s territories* brings to light an agenda for

⁵⁶ The OECD states that net ODA for Myanmar was USD1.54 billion in 2017, and USD1.69 billion in 2018 (OECD 2020). These numbers—which are the most up-to-date statistics available at this time—indicate a constant stream of ODA, without a significant increase or decrease. However, as Décobert and Wells (2020) note, there can be a significant lag in political changes in recipient countries, and donors’ responses.

thinking about territory in the postcolonial world. Finally, I demonstrate how conceptualising development’s territories contributes to literature in political geography and cognate fields.

8.2 Can civil society transform war?

This thesis set out to examine the extent to which civil society actors transform socio-spatial dynamics in war-affected areas, through partnerships with development actors, and in relation to state and rebel authorities. Using a translocal ethnographic approach (**Chapter 3**), I discuss civil society actors’ embeddedness in local configurations of power in two field sites, both of which were shaped by the Karen civil war, albeit in different ways. In Hpa-An, I argue that the relations between civil society actors, state and rebel actors, and development actors can be described as *locked-in localism* (**Chapter 5**). I show how under conditions of state/mixed-authority, civil society actors see the aid influx into Myanmar as a chance to challenge repressive power relations between civilians and authorities (both states and rebels). However, development actors tend to box civil society actors into preexisting frameworks for belonging. They see civil society actors as either neutral actors or as rebel sympathisers, leaving little room for civil society actors to articulate their ambivalence towards both authorities.

I juxtapose this against the power relations that civil society actors are embedded in in Mutraw, which I described as *transformative localism* (**Chapter 6**). Here, under KNU authority, border organisations challenge dominating power relations between the KNU and civilians, by instituting a form of ‘non-dominating power’ (Pearce 2013) characterised by solidarity, companionship, and shared experiences of trauma. I show how non-dominating power is enacted through the specific relations between civil society actors, development actors, rebel authorities, and local communities. Border organisations perform the delicate task of navigating between the compartmentalised priorities of development actors, and their comprehensive vision for recalibrating power relations in Mutraw. This task is made possible through an alignment in purpose between border organisations and district-level KNU officials, who consented to devolving power to local communities and civil society actors, and

border organisations’ embeddedness in local communities. By negotiating between these actors, civil society actors have been able to transform power relations between civilians and authorities in the area.

Transformative localism and locked-in localism thus describe two types of power configurations that civil society actors can be embedded in, whereby civil society actors have divergent capacities to enact change on their own terms. These concepts can be applied elsewhere; for instance, transformative localism may be evident in instances where development actors enable civil society actors to “invent” strategies to challenge the status quo, while locked-in localism may be more applicable to “invited” spaces, created on the terms of donors and other authorities (following Miraftab 2009). Regardless, these power configurations are dynamic, contingent, and contested phenomena. Transformative localism and locked-in localism also show that the effects of the aid influx into Myanmar vary based on where civil society actors are located within the fragmented geography of Karen State. More broadly, these terms suggest that the extent to which civil society actors can transform social relations depends on the locality, and that a relational approach to space is necessary for understanding civil society in this way.

I use the term locality to signal three layers of meaning. Firstly, the term gestures towards the specificity of power relations between civil society actors, development actors, and state and rebel authorities in each site. The mode of non-dominating power instituted by border organisations in Mutraw cannot be understood as a model, that can be transplanted onto Hpa-An or any other context. Instead, what non-dominating power looks like in Mutraw will differ from how it can be envisioned elsewhere, since the relatively long, thirty-year history of border organisations and their location within the borderworld distinguishes civil society actors from their counterparts in Hpa-An. Non-dominating power is not endlessly replicable, but must be pursued within the specific relations that constitute the locality. However, secondly, this specificity is borne out of ‘intersections and interactions of concrete social relations and social processes’ (Massey 1994, 138), such that each locality is the product of wide-ranging, translocal forces. This thesis has focused on three social processes in particular—development,

war, and ethnicisation—chosen for their salience in the minds of my interlocutors, although certainly innumerable other processes are remaking localities in Karen State. Localities and processes are in a recursive, co-constitutive relationship; besides thinking about how processes “impact” localities, it is also possible to think about how localities change the course of ongoing social processes. By using *transformative localism* to refer to the power relations wrought by border organisations, I wish to indicate not only their potential to transform the locality, but also how this might “spin out” into larger changes. Border organisations present a tentative alternative to Myanmar’s top-down peace process by demonstrating how peacebuilding might be based on non-dominating power. In so doing, they are transforming the course of the civil war itself.

Finally, I use the term locality in contradistinction to the territorial templates created by states and rebels. I have shown how both the Myanmar state and the KNU sought to consolidate their power by mapping Kayin State and Kawthoolei respectively (**Chapter 4**). However, these territorial templates must be distinguished from territory itself; how it is lived, contested, and remade in the wake of social processes that course through each site. A research design centred on the locality, rather than one that takes state- and rebel-drawn territorial templates as *a priori* facts, is crucial to reconceptualizing territory in this way. Furthermore, whereas the Myanmar state and the KNU present territory as a finished product, I have shown how the perspectives of civil society actors present a more ambivalent reading of territory, that accounts for the contradictions inherent in postcolonial statehood. Even as border organisations transform power relations within Mutraw, they remain, to an extent, trapped within Karen State’s stubbornly polarised civil society landscape. The border/inside divide remains staunchly in place, partly as a result of development actors’ views that they are “responding to” war and ethnic conflict, as though these are an inert backdrop to civil society activity (**Chapter 7**). This points towards a key contradiction embodied by development actors, who implement Westphalian notions—of civil society, the state, and territory—while working in contexts where longstanding processes of ethnicisation and war render such Westphalian ideals extremely fraught.

So, can civil society transform war? The answer to this question depends on the locality-based power relations that civil society actors are embedded in, and how civil society actors navigate their ambivalent relations with authorities, local communities, and development actors. This question also illuminates the role of development actors in producing territory in the postcolonial world; an issue I address in the next section.

8.3 Development’s territories

The intellectual historian Moyn (2013) argues that when seeking to explain the uptake of certain concepts in academic circles, concepts should not be treated as having a built-in propensity for universalisation, but that scholars should ask: why do particular concepts gain traction, at particular historical moments, and in particular contexts? He also asks: to what degree do we owe the “globalisation” of certain concepts to their re-appropriation by subaltern groups? When it comes to territory, one might wonder why territory is gaining such traction among Anglophone scholars today, although the concept has been debated for centuries (Elden 2013). The answer, following Moyn’s train of thought, has to do with the manner in which non-state actors are appropriating the term “territory” in their struggles over identity, resources, and power. As **Chapter 2** explains, scholars have noted how grassroots movements across the postcolonial world increasingly mobilise the language of territory, albeit in a manner that challenges the state-centric and Western-centric connotations of the term (e.g. Anthias 2020; Halvorsen et al. 2019; Ince 2012; Laing 2020). These movements give territory a salience outside of academia, and ask scholars to confront their own beliefs about what territory is and is not.

Halvorsen’s (2019, 794; Halvorsen et al. 2019) work on Latin American scholars’ and activists’ conceptions of territory, which sees territory as linked to broadly defined ‘political projects’ rather than to the state, is particularly relevant to this thesis. Likewise, one of my interviewees stated, quite candidly, that the Salween Peace Park is about ‘building a territorial administrative unit upon the customary traditions of a people’ in a way that is ‘weird and new’ (interview, James, 19 Mar 2019). His

point was that the Peace Park was linked to a political project—reorganizing the power relations experienced by war-affected communities—although it was not beholden to traditionally “territorial” actors, such as states and rebels. This thesis extends Halvorsen’s formulation by asserting that territory is made at the points at which statist and non-statist conceptions of space collide. After all, grassroots movements and subaltern groups do not exist in a vacuum, but continually rub up against the territorial designs of states and state-like actors, just as the Peace Park contends with state-drawn maps of Kayin State and rebel-drawn maps of Kawthoolei. Indeed, the postcolonial world is, by definition, constituted by unequal encounters between the colonisers and the colonised, which trigger new, hybrid configurations of power. This friction generates claims to space that are themselves unstable and contested.

This thesis argues that development is a central process by which territory is made in the postcolonial world. Development creates relations between state actors, rebel actors, civil society actors, and local communities, which generate tensions between Westphalian notions of statehood and other forms of political organisation. I use the term “Westphalian” as an—admittedly inadequate—shorthand for the notion of territory developed through Western political thought, which Elden (2013) has excavated in great depth. I recognise that the myth of the Treaty of Westphalia, which positions it as the moment at which the medieval Christian order gave way to the international state system, tends to gloss over the complex social and political conditions of the first half of the 17th century (Larkins 2010). However I use this term to signal the co-articulation and the folding together of several terms that are central to political geographic thought today: state, nation, territory, modernity, citizenship, rights, and so on. Besides, in this thesis, “Westphalian” serves a second function, when read against the grain: it signals the Western-centrism of commonplace political geographic concepts, which arose in the context of the European Renaissance and Reformation, the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, and the Enlightenment. Throughout these centuries, Western elites reckoned with ‘man’s understanding of

his being-in-space’, and used the outcomes of these philosophical debates to transform the distribution of power in the world as they knew it (Larkins 2010, 2).

This reckoning occurred long before colonial conquest exported these spatial templates to the rest of the world. By the time the British first invaded Burma in 1824, Europeans had already spent centuries grappling with the ‘mix of political, geographical, legal, technical, practical, and relational questions’ that informed Western notions of territory (Elden 2013, 16). This notion came into violent encounters with other spatial templates, with a similarly rich history, during colonial conquest (Thongchai 1994). In recent times, scholars have defended the salience of territory, not least in response to claims that the world is becoming more networked and increasingly “globalised” (Painter 2010; Raffestin 2012; Sassen 2006; 2013). They assert that territory is transformed, not abolished, by wide-ranging political, economic, and social transformations. My argument is that contemporary times have not overridden the need to see territory as an outcome of a violent encounter, as per colonial conquest. Terms like “assemblage” and “network”—that speak of territory as the outcome of constituent parts moving in relative unison—underplay the less-than-sanguine aspects of the term, and the existence of non-Westphalian, non-statist, and non-Western forms of political organisation. Westphalian notions of territory persist, as powerful actors continue to draw boundaries and produce Cartesian abstractions to assert their control over space, but these cannot be put to work in the world without coming into conflict with their constitutive outside.

Today, development is the terrain upon which competing spatial templates encounter one another. The “territorialisation” literature in anthropology and area studies draws attention to how state power extends throughout the postcolonial world through specific spatial techniques, such as boundary delineation, land registration, resource classification, and the production of cadastral maps (Vandergest and Peluso 1995; Peluso and Lund 2011; see **Chapter 2.4**). This literature also shows that territorialisation is often met by opposing forces, and that counter-territorial techniques can themselves be co-opted or produce ambivalent effects (Agnew and Oslender 2013; Isager and Ivarsson

2002). Hence, the territorialisation literature insists on the incompleteness of this process—and thus the incompleteness of Westphalian ideals. This thesis rereads political geographic understandings of territory from the perspective of the territorialisation literature, and with insights gleaned from the field.

I argue that an irreducible tension—between territorialisation and counter-territorialisation, and between Westphalian ideals and other conceptions of political life—is inescapable in the postcolonial world. In Karen State, colonial legacies have produced a protracted civil war along ethnic lines. The Karen civil war is stark evidence of how the postcolonial world confounds Weber’s well-known adage, that the state holds the ‘monopoly on the legitimate use of force in a given territorial area’ (Barkawi 2016, 207). The KNU challenges the state’s hold on sovereignty, and the existence of KNU and mixed-authority areas call into question the state’s exclusive control of territory. Crucially, these contestations over authority are not a thing of the past. I invite a reading of territory that accounts for the role of development actors and civil society actors in socio-spatial dynamics, that is true to present-day dynamics in Karen State.

Development actors often work with the spatial templates drawn by states, designating areas—such as “Kayin State”—as worthy of development assistance (**Chapter 7**). However, a relational approach reveals how development is not merely about the distribution of development aid across a flat, gridded landscape, but that development also produces the myriad social relations that constitute a locality (following Massey 1994). As a result of prevailing good governance orthodoxies in international development, development interpellates civil society actors, and embeds them in social relations between development actors, state and rebel authorities, and communities. Civil society actors themselves are often ambivalent towards donors and authorities, yet their ability to express this ambivalence depends on local power dynamics. This can produce divergent outcomes in different localities within the same field of power, as my conceptualisations of *locked-in localism* and *transformative localism* show.

What does this mean for political geographers studying territory? Firstly, I argue that, in the postcolonial world, territory should be investigated through the lens of “non-Westphalian” forces. The myth of Westphalia (or tellingly, the “Peace” of Westphalia) suggests that drawing boundaries between state territories and their outsides allows for a stable world order. My argument is that there is nothing stable about the world order, nor much peaceful about the drawing of boundaries (see also Krishna 1994). Indeed the lived experiences of many in the postcolonial world debunk a false separation between “mainstream” or Westphalian notions of territory and “alternative” or “insurgent” spaces, as state authorities are experienced in relation to rebel actors, local authorities, militias, and customary institutions (Baruah 2007; Callahan 2003). Therefore, forces that disrupt a smooth alignment between state and nation must be understood as constitutive of territory too. In the Karen context, ethnicisation and war serve this function. Nearly all the civil society actors in this research saw themselves as ethnic subjects, not just as state/rebel subjects. Their lives were testament to how in Myanmar, resources, power, and one’s exposure to violence are distributed unevenly, according to one’s ethnicity. They related to one another as co-ethnics, not just as civil society actors, even as opportunities for co-ethnic solidarity were denied by the Myanmar state. Future research might highlight how other forces that highlight the contested nature of statehood—such as gender, spirituality, class, and racial capitalism—are constitutive of territory too.

Secondly, political geographers should understand development as a process of territorialisation. Given the continuities between development and colonisation (Briggs and Sharp 2004; Radcliffe 2005; Raghuram and Madge 2006), the territorial dimensions of development should not come as a surprise. Furthermore, scholars concur that development accelerates resource extraction and primitive accumulation, thereby remaking frontier areas in the image of capital (Bluwstein and Lund 2018; Rasmussen and Lund 2018). Even so, by seeing development as a process of territorialisation, I do not mean that development actors “claim space” *ex nihilo* and reformat it on their terms. Instead, my thesis argues that development assembles numerous state and non-state actors, who clash over

conflicting agendas and aspirations. Territory emerges—and is reconfigured and remade—from this irreducible friction. This perspective understands development not just as a political technology (cf. Roy and Crane 2013), but as a contradictory process that regulates subjectivity even as it generates new forms of associational life. A vast literature on partnerships in international development (e.g. Abrahamsen 2004; Kapoor 2002; Mohan and Stokke 2000) shows that development has *both* predatory and participatory dimensions; hence it is not only the former that generates territory. Future research could draw more connections between development as resource extraction, and development as participation. “Predatory peace” (Lund 2018) and “ceasefire capitalism” (L. Jones 2014c; Woods 2011) can be investigated not only as new frontiers of state control, but also for their capacity to generate new forms of associational life at the nexus between nature and society.

Finally, the aforementioned points ask that territory-making be conceived of as inherently agonistic and conflictual. In Karen State, territory is a product of fraught relations between development actors, civil society actors, state and rebel authorities, which were precipitated by colonisation, and which have continued to transform since the aid influx into Myanmar. Emphasising the conflictual dimensions of territory reveals the partiality of both “governmental” and “globalisation” approaches to territory, set out in **Chapter 2.4**. Scholarship that sees territory as a technology of government illuminates how territory reorganises society (e.g. Brighenti 2010a; 2010b; Elden 2009; 2010; 2013; Foucault 2007). Yet this approach is limited because it is mired in Westphalian assumptions about state-society relations. Governmental approaches to territory will be incomplete unless they are combined with an ethnographic investigation of how political technologies confront countervailing forces produced by colonialism’s legacies. Moreover, scholarship that insists on the continued salience of territory in the face of globalisation is limited too. This literature argues that territorial units (often states) continue to mediate boundary-crossing flows of capital and people (e.g. Hudson 2000; Murphy 2013; Painter 2010), yet underplays the manner in which these boundary-crossing flows create new points of friction between statist conceptions of territory and non-statist modes of spatial organisation

(following Tsing 2005). Development is a case in point: while development is predicated on the flow of capital from donor states to recipient states, it also produces ‘struggle, acquiescence, negotiation, and contestation as active constitutive forces in multiple, interconnected arenas’ (Hart 2010, 132).

To be sure, a growing cohort of scholars have shown how territory can be produced by non-state groups seeking to resist state power (Halvorsen et al. 2019; Ince 2012; Macaspac 2019). My thesis owes much to these open-ended conceptions of territory and extends them by asking scholars to investigate the precise points at which statist and non-statist conceptions of territory collide. In so doing, I hope to return to Moyn’s (2013) point: territory—and indeed any other concept—owes its growing traction in scholarly and practitioner circles to the resistive actions of subaltern groups. I also hope to respond to calls to reinterpret spatial concepts from postcolonial perspectives (Jazeel and McFarlane 2010; Robinson 2003; Roy 2009). By delving into my participants’ situated engagements with international development, I hope to avoid theorising from an essentialised conception of “marginal spaces” or the “postcolonial world”, that abstracts them from their context. Instead, I see postcolonial geography as an intellectual practice emerging from an ethnographically-driven ‘conjunctural analysis’ (Hart 2018) of the power-laden processes of development, ethnicisation and war.

In sum, this thesis advances a postcolonial approach to territory that has thus far not been thoroughly explored in political geography. Whereas existing accounts of territory tend to be wedded to Westphalian conceptions of the state, I investigate territory from the standpoint of the postcolonial world, where state-society relations are fraught and contested by default. In particular, I see Karen State, where the sovereignty of the Myanmar state has long been challenged by the KNU, as emblematic of ongoing conflicts between state actors and rebel actors in many postcolonial contexts. I argue that the production of territory should be investigated from these margins, from which challenges to dominant understandings of territory become clear. A postcolonial perspective sees territory as constituted through conflictual relations between actors. This challenges existing understandings of territory as a political technology that is exported—if incompletely—from the centres of state power to a state’s

margins. Instead, I argue that margins feature encounters between Westphalian models of statehood and its constitutive outside, which generate new territorial forms. I have done so by explaining the agonistic relations between various actors in Karen State—including states, rebels, donors, and civil society actors—across several localities, from colonial times to the present day. Moreover, I place particular emphasis on development as a process that generates relations, tensions, and contradictions, which must be considered constitutive of territory. By imposing Westphalian notions—of civil society, the state, and territory—on contexts where longstanding processes of ethnicisation and rebellion render such ideals extremely fraught, development actors are complicit in generating conflictual social relations. Finally, I contend that “non-Westphalian” forces are central to the making of territory. Whereas Westphalian models of territory tend to foreground a state’s relations with its citizens, I show how ethnicisation and rebellion are central to territory-making in postcolonial contexts. In Karen State—and many other postcolonial contexts—one’s relationship with states and rebels is refracted through ethnic identities that have been struggled over since colonial times. Struggles over ethnicity cannot be ignored in a postcolonial approach to territory.

8.4 Contributions to development, civil society, and war

By conceptualising development’s territories, this thesis makes the following contributions to literature on development, civil society, and war, refracted through the contested dynamics of statehood characteristic of the postcolonial world. For one, this thesis pursues a relational approach to development (Hart 2010; 2018). I argue that while postdevelopment approaches are useful for their attunement to relations of dominance, the rise of civil society partnerships in development programming in the 1990s and 2000s necessitates an alternative mode of critique. A binary view of international development—geared towards identifying relations of dominance between state and society; West and the rest; expert and non-expert—cannot account for the ambivalent position of civil society actors towards development actors and authorities. This dovetails with geographers’ conceptions of space as

a ‘product of interrelations’ (Massey 2005, 31), yet—I argue—there has been less discussion of what a relational approach means for methodological practice in general, and for the study of civil society partnerships in development in particular.

In response, this thesis pursues a translocal ethnographic methodology (**Chapter 3**) that shows how relational approach to development can be done in practice. I argue that a relational approach should account for the ongoing dynamic between development and wider political economic issues—or, in Hart’s (2001) terms, “big D” Development and “little d” development. In the same way, my research understands social relations in Karen State as the product of the Karen civil war, an aid influx into Myanmar, and development’s New Policy Agenda. The interviews I did with a range of actors—with from donors and civil society actors to KNU officials—sought to identify the instances when individuals’ lives intersected with these issues (following Johnson-Hanks 2002). It is no mistake that these memories and narratives take centre stage in my accounts of civil society on the “border” and on the “inside”. A translocal ethnography, attuned to both the processes that span between localities, and their situatedness in specific ‘material, embodied, and corporeal qualities of the local’ (Brickell and Datta 2011, 4), provides scholars with a concrete way to enact a relational approach to development.

Secondly, this thesis contributes to literature on civil society. I argue for the importance of understanding civil society as “actually existing”, rather than as an idealised realm of associational life construed by donors and INGOs (Mercer 2002). This means seeing civil society as embedded in power relations that constitute a particular locality, rather than solely as a template for associational life imposed from without. Doing so opens up space for seeing how civil society actors might appropriate this label in pursuit of their own goals, even in a context where the liberal ideals fed into civil society confront non-liberal forces, such as ethnicisation and civil war. Besides this, I also argue that seeing civil society as “actually existing” entails problematizing Gramsci’s (1971) conception of civil society, which views civil society as an arena that manufactures consent for the state. This critique stems from

the perspective that state-society relations in the postcolonial world are complicated by the existence of other entities that challenge the state’s authority.

In this context, civil society may manufacture consent for the state, as I have shown in my portrayal of civil society in Hpa-An, where dominating relations between state and society prevail against the intentions of civil society actors. Yet civil society can also do the opposite: my portrayal of civil society in Mutraw shows how civil society actors can create non-dominating relations between authorities and civilians. Furthermore, I have shown how border organisations, more broadly, constantly navigate and reproduce the Thai-Myanmar borderworld; a space outside the grip of the nation-state, where civil society actors can challenge the ethnocentric tendencies of the Myanmar state. These findings again reveal the important of a translocal ethnography, this time in the context of understanding civil society. My side-by-side ethnographic investigations in Hpa-An and Mutraw show that even in the context of a single state, the relations that civil society is embedded in can be highly variable. Civil society can make a limited dent in state-society relations, albeit only under certain conditions, and in relation to other actors that challenge the state’s authority. Studying civil society in a development context—which often entails studying the encounter between development actors and beneficiaries in the postcolonial world—requires that scholars take the contested nature of postcolonial statehood seriously.

Finally, this thesis demonstrates the importance of studying associational life amid war. I argued that development practitioners often understand war and development as opposing forces, whereas in fact war and development actively transform one another. While some critical scholarship develops this point, most scholars continue to overlook the role of civil society in war. In so doing, they reinforce two problematic assumptions about the nature of war: firstly, that war is predominantly about violence; and secondly, that it produces homogenous, de-peopled spaces. In response to the former, I draw on scholars such as Thiranagama (2011; 2013) and Lubkemann (2008) to conceptualise war as a socio-spatial condition that frames the relationships that individual subjects can have with others. My

interviewees have shown how they navigate relationships with families, communities, and authorities in the midst of war; some, but hardly all, of these relationships are characterised by violence. In response to the latter, I deploy a research design that sees war as constitutive of numerous, variegated localities; that can be state-controlled, mixed-authority or rebel-controlled.

Scholarship on rebel governance has shown significant diversity in local communities’ relationships with rebel groups. These relationships have been described as intimate, dynamic, and complex—and yet, in all cases, as hardly de-peopled (Arjona 2016; D. Brenner 2019; Shah 2013). However my focus is not on rebels but on relations between civilians and development actors, which as Korf (2005; 2006) has argued, is significantly overlooked in the literature on post-war development. By creating ‘small islands’ of participation (Korf 2010, 718), development actors can temporarily suspend ongoing relations of dominance, which may spin out into larger transformations in the dynamics of civil war. If we are to transform the social relations that underpin war, the place of civil society actors in war-affected settings deserves greater attention. This thesis proposes some theoretical and methodological tools for doing so.

Appendix A – List of interviewees

Development actors

Name	Date	Location	Age range	Length of interview (mins)
Donors				
Alice and Melissa	25/4/2019	Yangon, café	40-49	80
Cheryl	12/9/2018	Yangon, café	40-49	90
Matthew	17/12/2018	Yangon, café	40-49	70
International organisations				
Anne	9/9/2018	Yangon, café	40-49	75
Emily	19/9/2018	Skype	30-39	60
Ma Hla Hla	18/9/2018	Yangon, office	40-49	60
Ma Zin Mar	11/10/2018	Hpa-An, café	40-49	70
Ma Zin Mar*	20/11/2018	Mawlamyine, café	30-39	120
INGOs (Yangon)				
Andrew	13/2/2019	Thai border, café	30-39	120
Gabriel	25/4/2019	Yangon, office	30-39	60
George	4/9/2018	Yangon, office	50-59	60
Jonathan	6/5/2019	Skype	30-39	80
Julian	11/9/2018	Yangon, office	30-39	75
Ko Thiha and Ko Sithu	29/10/2018	Yangon, office	30-39	80
Marie	23/3/2019	Yangon, café	30-39	90
Michael	18/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	30-39	110
INGOs (sub-offices in Karen State or Thai-Myanmar border)				
Ko Kyaw Lin	22/10/2018	Hpa-An, office	50-59	40
Ko Moe Min and Ma Chit Su	27/11/2018	Hpa-An, office	30-39	95
Ma Khin Khin	14/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	30-39	60
Ma Khin Myo	12/12/2018	Hpa-An, café	40-49	80
Ma Thinn Thinn	10/12/2018	Hpa-An, office	30-39	60

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Nan Thazin	30/11/2018	Hpa-An, office	30-39	60
Salai Kyaw Moe	17/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	30-39	85
Saw Kwe Kaw and Saw Myo Chit**	11/12/2018	Hpa-An, office	30-39	70
Saw Peter and Saw Benjamin	15/11/2018	Hpa-An, office	40-49	85
Saw Tun Naing	17/10/2018	Hpa-An, office	50-59	80

Civil society actors on the “inside”

Name	Date	Location	Age range	Length of interview (mins)
Civil society actors in Yangon				
Christine	17/9/2018	Yangon, café	30-39	60
Ma Yin Yin Aye	11/9/2018	Yangon, office	50-59	55
Saw Lah Phoe	3/5/2019	Yangon, office	40-49	60
Civil society actors in Hpa-An				
Ko Aung Aung**	28/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	40-49	120
Ko Stephen	16/11/2018	Hpa-An, office	40-49	80
Ma Myat Moe**	8/12/2018	Hpa-An, office	30-39	60
Ma Win Win**	9/12/2018	Hpa-An, home	40-49	80
Nan Hnin Moe Aye	19/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	30-39	120
Nan Kyi Kyi	24/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	30-39	90
Nan Yin Yin Lin	24/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	20-29	90
Naw Eh	14/11/2018	Kawkareik, office	40-49	65
Naw Moo	8/11/2018	Hpa-An, office	30-39	60
Naw Paw Paw	26/11/2018	Hpa-An, office	40-49	60
Naw Thaw Eh	5/11/2018	Hpa-An, cafe	30-39	60
Saw Dah Nay*	29/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	30-39	120
Saw Kyaw Lin	26/11/2018	Hpa-An, office	40-49	65
Saw Lin Aung	13/11/2018	Hpa-An, office	50-59	70
Saw Min Thant	7/12/2018	Hpa-An, office	40-49	75
Saw Tun Aung	27/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	30-39	120
Saw Win	23/10/2018	Hpa-An, café	30-39	120
Saw Win*	20/4/2019	Hpa-An, café	30-39	70

BSCA students (life history interviews)

Name	Date	Location	Age	Ethnicity (self-identified)	Natal village and distance from Hpa-An	Length of interview (mins)
Mg Zaw Min	24/10/2018	Hpa-An, café	23	Mon-Burmese	Hpa-An, 1.5 hours	70
Nan Htwe Htwe	25/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	20	Pa-O	Hpa-An, 1 hour	120
Nan Moe Moe	5/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	21	Pwo Karen	Hpa-An, 1 hour	60
Nan Myat Moe	22/10/2018	Hpa-An, café	20	Pwo Karen	Hpa-An, 1.5 hours	70
Nan Myat Moe	1/12/2018	Hpa-An, café	20	Pwo Karen	Hpa-An, 1.5 hours	60
Nan Ni Ni	24/10/2018	Hpa-An, café	19	Pwo Karen	Kawkareik, 3 hours	120
Nan Nwe Nwe	1/12/2018	Hpa-An, café	21	Pwo Karen	Hpa-An, 20 minutes	70
Nan Poe Poe	21/10/2018	Hpa-An, café	21	Pwo Karen	Ayeyarwaddy, 1 day	90
Nan Thu Zar	15/10/2018	Hpa-An, café	20	Pwo Karen	Tanintharyi, 1 day and 1 night	70
Naw Lay Lay	20/4/2019	Hpa-An, café	23	Pwo-Sgaw Karen	Hpa-An city	60
Naw Sandra	18/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	18	Sgaw Karen	Thandaunggyi, 11 hours	65
Saw Aung Lin	28/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	21	Rakhine-Sgaw Karen	Hpapun, 2 hours	80
Saw Kyaw Kyaw	6/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	19	Sgaw Karen	Kawkareik, 4 hours	60
Saw Sein Lwin	7/10/2018	Hpa-An, café	19	Pwo Karen	Hpa-An, 30 mins	120

Border organisations

Name	Date	Location	Age range	Length of interview (mins)
Brian	6/4/2019	Mutraw	40-49	70
James	19/3/2019	Thai border, office	30-39	80

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Nan Shwe Yi and Naw Hser Hser*	29/4/2019	Yangon, café	30-30	90
Naw Joy and Saw Htoo Htoo*	18/9/2018	Yangon, office	30-39	80
Naw Paw Say*	2/11/2018	Hpa-An, café	20-29	75
Naw Poe Mu	22/3/2019	Thai border, office	30-39	70
Robert	26/3/2019	Thai border, office	50-59	120
Sarah	18/3/2019	Thai border, café	30-39	80
Saw Eh Htunt*	23/10/2018	Hpa-An, café	30-39	80
Saw Hti Klo	28/3/2019	Thai border, office	30-39	85
Saw Way Htoo	27/3/2019	Thai border, office	30-39	80
Tony	25/3/2019	Thai border, café	40-49	90

Authorities

Name	Date	Location	Age range	Length of interview (mins)
KNU				
Ma Su Su and Ko Nay Lin	7/12/2018	Hpa-An, office	30-39	75
Saw Blut Htoo	26/11/2018	Hpa-An, office	60-69	70
Saw Kyoé Kwar	2/12/2018	Thai border, café	30-39	60
Saw Ler Htoo	22/10/2018	Hpa-An, office	60-69	85
Saw Nay Kaw and Saw Maw Heh	3/12/2018	Thai border, office	30-39	75

* Follow-up interview

** Conducted with a Burmese interpreter, Nan Thazin

*** Border organisation sub-office “inside” Myanmar, either in Yangon or Hpa-An

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