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Fish Caught in Clear Water: Encompassed State-Making in Southeast Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

This article explores processes of state-making by the New Mon State Party (NMSP), an ethnic armed organisation (EAO) that claims to represent the Mon people in Southeast Myanmar, and which has fought the Myanmar military to pursue self-representation for the past 50 years. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, the paper focuses on a specific area that is encompassed by three states in the making: the NMSP, the official Myanmar state and another EAO, the Karen National Union (KNU). The article shows that NMSP state-making happens neither in parallel to, nor through a simple separation from the Myanmar government and the KNU, but through different forms of encompassment. I introduce the concept of 'encompassed state-making' to capture the simultaneous mimicry and opposition of the NMSP's state-making practices in relation to the other two states. A core argument is that Mon villagers – albeit deeply loyal towards the NMSP and considering them the legitimate authority – constantly have to take into account the ongoing political transformation in the country and therefore critically have to engage in managing their lives in this encompassed state in formation.

INTRODUCTION

Substantial areas of Myanmar are not under official state control. This is the result of seven decades of armed resistance by various ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), which have fought the Myanmar military in pursuit of self-determination in their claimed ethnic territories. Despite

current ceasefire agreements, these territories today remain contested with conflicting claims to, and competition for, governance and resource extraction. In this article, I explore state-making practices and everyday life in one of these contested areas in Southeast Myanmar, which I call Bee Kharl[1] district. Visiting Bee Kharl involves effectively leaving behind the Myanmar state-controlled area and enter one of the so-called 'ceasefire zones', where fighting has been put on hold, but where no definitive political solution has been found. The Bee Kharl district headquarters of the principal ethnic armed organisation the New Mon State Party (NMSP), which claims to represent the Mon ethnic minority, is situated in Poip Soli Township. To reach Bee Kharl, you can either drive through a network of poor dirt roads that are slippery and muddy following rain and completely flooded in the rainy season, or cross a river on a raft to the opposite shore where the roads are slightly better. This is also the first checkpoint of the Karen National Union (KNU), which is the main EAO that claims to represent the Karen ethnic minority. The next stop is mandatory for an outside visitor. It is the NMSP Poip Soli Township checkpoint, indicating that you have now entered a third-state layer, that of the NMSP. Driving to Bee Kharl is like peeling through a set of layers of governing actors, from Myanmar through the KNU to the NMSP-controlled area: a state-within- a state- within a state. At the core of this structure of encompassment is another micro cosmos state: the headquarter area of the NMSP. It is a compound comprised of the NMSP's administrative building, the quarters of their armed forces, a small clinic, a prison that doubles as a rehabilitation facility, and various other buildings used for meetings, cooking, staff housing, weapons-storage and investigating local justice cases. In the middle of the compound there is an NMSP flag, before which soldiers perform a ritual every morning while singing the NMSP national anthem.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1: View from inside the NMSP district headquarter

Based on fieldwork undertaken in 2016-17 this article explores the overlapping and contested processes of state-making in this entirely encompassed site. I engage with debates about state-making (Mitchell 1991, Abrams 1988, Hansen and Stepputat 2001) that go beyond a view of states as confined to officially recognized and territorially well-defined entities. Instead, state-making is explored as a set of practices that can be performed by a multiplicity of actors and organizations. This implies an empirically grounded approach to state-making, which in addition explores not only the technical sides of state-making but also the imaginative and discursive construction of states (Hansen and Stepputat 2001, Lund 2006, Mampilly 2015). By looking at the NMSP's use of 'languages of stateness' (Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 5), I argue that the NMSP-governed Bee Kharl district empirically can be viewed as a state, even though it is not recognised as such by the Myanmar state nor by the international community. In Bee Kharl, stateness is performed on a daily basis, and I propose that a language of stateness bound to ethnicity is central to the performative state-making of the NMSP. Drawing on recent debates on sovereignty and territory (Stepputat 2015, Shneiderman 2013, McConnell 2009, Jones 2012, Eilenberg 2012, Cons 2016) I argue that NMSP state-making is not (merely) bound to territory, but equally about ethnicity. NMSP state-making takes place in ways that are defined in opposition to the Myanmar state, but the practices and languages that are employed considerably mimic those of the Myanmar state, which are tainted by an ethnocentric nationalistic ideology.

Secondly, I explore what it means to be a citizen in this area of overlapping state-makers. I contend that ordinary Mon villagers pledge allegiance to the NMSP, but that they also strategically and

pragmatically practice 'encompassed state-living' by engaging the Myanmar state and the KNU. I introduce the concept of 'encompassed state-making' to capture the particular forms of overlapping state-making which involve a dialectic relationship between mimicry and opposition. With Louis Dumont (1980) I explain this paradoxical relationship. What sets the case of the Bee Kharl district apart from other debates on contested statehood (Mampilly 2011, Cons 2016, Bobick 2017, Hoffmann et al 2016) is how state formation and governing processes by the NMSP are happening while being encompassed by other states, which they oppose but simultaneously mimic. Insights obtained through fieldwork illuminate how state-making is constituted in practice. The insights of this article are drawn from qualitative interviews, informal conversations and participant observation.[2] The findings were triangulated with a quantitative survey of forty respondents, which focused on people's preferences for justice providers and types of remedies.[3] Qualitative interviews were conducted with NMSP officials, village leaders and elders, Buddhist monks, female leaders, and ordinary villagers.[4] Fieldwork was done with the assistance of a Mon translator, whose connections with the NMSP proved essential to access and trust building. The article is based on unique empirical material from an area where access is limited. While providing new insights, the constraints related to the limited time-periods for fieldwork consequently restricted the depth of data collection. In addition, the findings cannot necessarily be generalized to all NMSP areas, as governance arrangements vary across districts.

In this article, I begin by introducing the scholarly debates about state-making and sovereignty, as part of this the concept of 'encompassed state-making' will be outlined. Following this is an overview of the conflict history and contested state-making efforts of the NMSP. I then go on to examine the actual state-making practices by the NMSP followed by an exploration on agency at

the village level. In the conclusion, I return to theoretical reflections about encompassed state-making.

ENCOMPASSED STATE-MAKING: INHERENT DYNAMICS OF MIMICRY AND OPPOSITION

A body of literature sets out to challenge the ontological fixity or naturalness of the state in various ways (Abrams 1988, Migdal, Kohli, and Shue 1994, Hansen and Stepputat 2001, Das and Poole 2004). Here the state appears not only as a set of practices and institutions, but also as a discourse, an ideological formation, an imagination with affective qualities. Following this, we can separate our analysis into the state-system, defined as practice and institutional structure centred in government as well as the state-idea, an illusion of a fixed natural entity (Abrams 1988, 58, Das and Poole 2004). Central to Abrams' (1988) argument is how the idea of the state is mobilized in diverse contexts, and how it is imbricated and reproduced in state institutions and practices. Following a Marxist logic, the 'state idea' is constitutional in both shaping and disguising political domination, meaning that the state idea functions as an ideological power over populations. Essentially, Abrams proposes to 'recognize that cogency of the idea of the state as an ideological power and treat that as a compelling object of analysis' (Abrams 1988, 78-79).

Hansen and Stepputat (2001) as well as Mitchell (1991) make a distinction between the idea of the state as a fixed, centralized, natural entity, and the state as a set of diffuse, de-centred practices as it is theorized by Foucault. Hansen and Stepputat take seriously the *idea* of the state as something being actively produced, the effect of practices and symbols, the origins and

meanings of which Foucault did not engage actively with (2001, 4). Mitchell notes that the idea of the state is not merely a subjective belief incorporated into the thoughts and actions of individuals, but is represented and reproduced in visible, everyday forms, such as the language of legal practice, the architecture of public buildings, the wearing of military uniforms, or the marking out and policing of frontiers (1991, 81). Hansen and Stepputat similarly suggest an analysis that pays attention to the performative qualities of the state, by observing both 'practical and symbolic languages of statenes' (2001, 5). Those languages need to be situated, carry local meanings, genealogies and trajectories and thus enable a disaggregated and less essentializing study of states (ibid, 9). Applying this analytical lens in the study of Bee Kharl gives way to open of for emic and vernacular notions of governance which I theorize as encompassed state-making.

The article contends that the NMSP constitutes the de facto sovereign authority vis-à-vis its Mon communities, adding to an emerging literature focusing on insurgent organisations as sovereign formations with complex and interactive relationships with civilian populations. This literature argues that insurgents do not just exert control and carry out extraction, but also perform governance and engage in state-making (Mampilly 2011, Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015). In order to understand sovereignty in a setting of territorial overlap and encompassment, I consult recent bodies of literature that discuss community making in the borderlands (Cons 2016, Shneiderman 2013, Jones 2012). Accordingly sovereignty is not bound by territory and sovereignty can both be 'displaced' (McConnell 2009) or thought of as varying 'formations of sovereignty' (Stepputat 2015). Both notions help us to acknowledge that claims to sovereignty are manifold and go beyond claims centred on territory alone.

In understanding state-making in an encompassed setting, I turn to Dumont's classical work on understanding the dimensions of a hierarchical relation. In his seminal work on the Indian

caste system, Dumont (1980) challenges what he considers to be an erroneous structuralist conception about binary categorical opposition. The core argument is that in India political power is encompassed by and subordinated to religious status. Dumont's definition of hierarchy contains an inherent contradiction, and he illustrates his point through the Biblical myth of Adam and Eve. Adam is created first and as the only human, he is an undifferentiated *man*, the prototype of *mankind*. Eve, the woman, is extracted from Adam and thus comes to be the prototype of the *female* gender. With the emergence of Eve, Adam is no longer undifferentiated but comes to be the *male* gender prototype. He is now two things at once: the representative of the species *mankind* and the prototype of the male individual of this species. There are two set of relational levels between Adam and Eve. On one level, they are identical as they are both humans, on the other level they are opposites in gender. These two relations, the encompassing of the contrary, is what defines the hierarchical relation (Dumont 1980, 239-40). In more general terms, this relation is that between a whole (or a set) and an element of that whole. The element is of the same essence or identical to the set in that it forms part of it, but on the other hand there is a difference. Dumont writes: 'This double relation is a logical scandal, which is both an explanation for the disfavour it finds and a reason for the interest it deserved: every relation between an element and the set of which it is part introduces hierarchy and is logically inadmissible.' (Dumont 1986, 227). Dumont's idea about encompassment engages hierarchical conceptions and thus offers a way to understand Bee Kharl District: Encompassment allows for the encompassed part to be both in opposition but also part of the whole. The NMSP Bee Kharl District is fully encompassed by the State of Myanmar, thus at the level of the whole, there is a shared essence in Dumont's terms. The NMSP is both antithetical to the State of Myanmar, but in so many ways mirrors the State of Myanmar in its structures, logics, and discourse. The elements belong to the set or whole that make up the

encompassing state, and the Bee Kharl District together with the KNU District are geographically part of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. However at the level of the element there is a contrariety, because the Myanmar state, the KNU and the NMSP are situated in opposition to one-another, and different in terms of histories and the ethnic composition of their citizens. I discuss how a factory owner whose exploitation of Burmese workers is sanctioned by the NMSP government and mimics ethno- centric practices of the Myanmar State. Applying Dumont this practice of simultaneous mimicry and opposition is not a logical scandal after all: all are part of the same whole and share the same essence. Encompassed state-making carries with it inherent dynamics of mimicry and opposition.

Following this perception, for my analysis I make use of Dumont to understand how simultaneous opposition and mimicry of the encompasser by the encompassed, are not inconsistent.[5] In the article I offer examples of mimicry through the acquisition of state paraphernalia and instruments, the purposeful universal languages of state (Hansen and Stepputat 2001). To discuss the logic of this I turn to Homi Bhabha (1994) and Paul Stoller (1995). Bhabha and Stoller explain mimicry in the case of colonialized subjects with both the idea of gaining some of the quality or power of the subject of mimicry. Here mimicry entails simultaneous mockery and menace in the attempts of the colonised subjects to become like their colonisers (Bhabha 1994, 86). To Bhabha, mimicry is a strategy, which appropriates the other as it visualises power. Similarly, Stoller's interpretation of mimicry also implies an ulterior motive, as the mimicry becomes purposeful in deliberately pursuing a certain goal (1995, 88-90). While the object of desire is whiteness as a source of power for Stoller's Hauka people, it similarly is recognition or survival that is at stake in my cases. While Stoller interprets mimicry as colonial critique, in my case I interpret the mimicry as a form of complicity, as a way of partaking in governing strategies

and co-opting the superior position that one's opponent possesses, for example political power. The mimicry of one's opposition is rather a pragmatic application of 'languages of stateness' in efforts of legitimisation (Mampilly 2011) and a survival strategy, as well as, I claim, an embedded way of state-making that is characteristic for this area.

Languages of Stateness and Sovereignty

While my focus lies with the NMSP it is a presupposition for my exploration to consider, empirically, all three governing actors in Bee Kharl – the NMSP, the KNU and the Myanmar government – as states in the making. This means that they are considered to be in a continuous process of constructing themselves as states, a construction that happens 'through invocation of a bundle of widespread and globalized registers of governance and authority' – what Hansen and Stepputat (2011: 5) have termed 'languages of stateness'.

 Practical languages of stateness are concerned with practical governance, discipline and productive bio-political governance (ibid, 8). The NMSP have permanent township bases operated by armed military personnel from the armed wing MNLA, as well as guarded checkpoints and a headquarter which is a fenced and guarded compound. The NMSP has institutionalised law and legal discourse and has developed an elaborate three-tiered justice system involving links to and a referral system from the village level. This justice system is recognised as the natural recourse for local dispute resolution (Harrisson and Kyed 2019). Within the Bee Kharl district, the NMSP is the de facto sovereign actor vis-à-vis its citizens through an elaborate justice system and the ability to kill, punish and discipline with impunity lies with them.

According to Hansen and Stepputat we can only speak of an existing state when these languages of governance and authority combine and co-exist one way or the other (2001, 8). Bee Kharl presents a case study where such languages of stateness are continuously employed by a state that in juridical, international and political terms does not exist. The languages of stateness serve a clear purpose for the 'citizens' of this 'state in the making', allowing people to recognize the NMSP as a proper state, that dictates the organization of their lives, irrespective of the NMSP's international recognition. In addition, the NMSP propose a language of stateness that is related to ethnic belonging and common heritage, positioning the leaders of the organization as the rightful governors to a wide extent based on ethnicity. This language of stateness co-exists and overlaps with the others, infusing and supporting other languages, but emerges as particularly important in determining sovereignty and legitimacy when several actors make claims to the same territorial area.

The article contends that the NMSP constitutes the de facto sovereign authority vis-à-vis its Mon communities, adding to an emerging literature focusing on insurgent organisations as sovereign formations with complex and interactive relationships with civilian populations. This literature argues that insurgents do not just exert control and carry out extraction, but also govern and engage in state-making (Mampilly 2011, Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015).

THE CONTESTED HISTORY OF MON PEOPLE IN MYANMAR

The history of the Mon people in Myanmar illustrates how pushing back other ethnic groups has been a dominant feature of the contested state-making by the Myanmar state. State-

making is closely tied to ethnicity, which is an aspect permeating the other languages of stateness, as I will discuss below.

The British colonised Lower Burma from 1826 to 1949, except from a short period of Japanese occupation from 1942-45. The creation of a modern, standardised and bureaucratic state that came with the British governors caused drastic changes for the people in the region (Taylor 2009, 99). One consequence of the occupation was that Lower Burma experienced a great influx of ethnic Bamar[6] in search for new business and agriculture opportunities. Lower Burma had for centuries been populated mainly by the Mon, one of the largest and most influential populations in the area. The Mon civilization is credited with the spread of Theravada Buddhism in the region as well as many cultural sites. This past is still of great significance for the self-understanding of the Mon people today, in particular for the nationalist elite (South 2007, 151). The erosion of Mon language and culture was so forceful that in the last colonial census of 1931, only 3% of the population of the then Amherst district (which corresponds to Central Mon State today) was classified as Mon. After the third Anglo-Burmese war in 1885, the British divided the colony into the central lowlands (Burma Proper) and the frontier areas on the margins of the state. Burmese was designated the official language of the state, and as a result Mon communities became further assimilated into the Burmese community. Today, a little more than one million Mon-speaking people live in Southeast Myanmar and in neighbouring Thailand (South 2007, 151-153).

Prior to colonisation, ethnicity does not seem to have been a particularly important identity marker. Rather, in the precolonial period, identity was more closely related to one's place in a tributary hierarchy (Gravers, 2007: 10-11). Ethno-linguistic identities did exist in this period, but they were mixed with other forms of identity and belonging and did not themselves embody a homogeneous political cultural identity (South 2007, 152). Ethnic distinctions were fluid, as illustrated by

Edmund Leach in his seminal work on political systems in highland Burma (Leach and Firth 1964). In the colonial era, British administrators employed a system of ethnic (racial) classifications to map cultural differences and boundaries geographically, meaning that fluid ethnicities became linked to fixed geographic boundaries (Gravers 2007, 13). In the colonial period, the development of consciously distinct ethnic minority groups, identified in opposition to the majority Bamar (characterised as the common enemy), was encouraged (South 2008, 12). After colonization, ethnicity became politicised as part of the ongoing state-building project implemented by the Myanmar state, which is greatly opposed by ethnic armed organisations.

Since independence, Burma's history has been influenced by insurgency, which has primarily been about the right to self-determination for the ethnic minorities of the country who make up more than one third of Burma's population. The Tatmadaw, the Burmese armed forces, have historically considered political claims based on ethnicity as a major challenge for the stability of the country, while the ethnic minority groups have considered the lack of ethnic rights and democracy as the main problem (Gravers 2007, vii, Walton 2008, Taylor 2009, Smith 1993). In sum, distinctions between ethnic groups became much more consequential and more relevant. Ethnic identities either were constructed or given new meaning and new weight in the colonial period, which in entailed that people became much more conscious of ethnic differences. This influenced the development of post-colonial insurgency, which in turn led to a context of overlapping states – ethnic homelands, insurgent territories, and the overarching, encompassing Burmese state. Pre-colonial identities, colonial discourses, and post-colonial state-making processes have encouraged the formation of governing actors at various levels, and have influenced the overlapped and contested nature of sovereignty in Bee Kharl.

Mon Armed Opposition against the Myanmar State

The New Mon State Party (NMSP) was formed in 1956 by different Mon revolutionaries who had been fighting against the Bamar nationalists since the late 1940s, in close cooperation with the Karen National Union (KNU). The armed branch of the NMSP, the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), was established in 1971. Over the next 40 years, the NMSP headed the Mon armed struggle to achieve an independent 'Monland' (*Doi Dtine Mon*), although secessionist claims were replaced in the 1990s with a call for self-determination within a federal system. Apart from the armed struggle against the Myanmar military, centred on territorial control and defence of Mon villagers, the NMSP also embarked on various state-making efforts in the areas under their control. The NMSP established a justice system and an administration system in Bee Kharl. In the mid-1960s, the NMSP introduced a school system in its territory, which has been successful in terms of providing education accepted by Mon villagers. The success of the education system has been instrumental in bolstering the NMSP's legitimacy in the local communities. For this reason, the Tatmadaw and government officials have been keen to close down Mon national schools (South 2008, 195-197). By the 1970s, the rebellion had become institutionalized and, in many ways, life in the areas under NMSP control was similar to a top-down tributary political system as the insurgent leaders exploited both peasants and natural resources to fund their rebellion. NMSP's focus on unity, just like the military regime, resulted in the oppression of opposition and criticism from among the Mon people. South describes how insurgents in Burma, generally have promoted homogenizing ideas about ethnicity (South 2008, 32), through what I have referred to as mimicry.

In other words, in the process of forming a united opposition towards an oppressive regime, the Mon mimicked some of those very characteristics they opposed and publicly denounced:

Suppression of civil society and domination through force. This historical insight is very important for understanding current forms of state-making, in particular those pertaining to a shared ethnic community, which I discuss further below.

In the late 1980s, the Tatmadaw increased the strength and number of military offensives, which weakened the EAOs in Southeast Myanmar, and during the course of the following years thousands of Mon villagers were forced to flee their homes. The daunting human security situation of the Mon refugees paired with war fatigue among insurgency leaders and civilians, and the supremacy of the Tatmadaw forces were all factors that made the NMSP leadership agree to a ceasefire with the military government in 1995. For the NMSP, the ceasefire agreement entailed that the organisation could continue to administer twelve cantonments where the MNLA could station armed troops (South 2003, 195-231).

The NMSP's ceasefire remained more or less in place until 2010 when tensions rose with the Myanmar state, since the NMSP refused to convert their troops into border guard forces under the Tatmadaw. In 2012, a new ceasefire was signed with the new civilian-military government, which declared peace with the EAOs as one of its top priorities. Hereafter, the NMSP was involved in multilateral negotiations with the Myanmar state about a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), but unlike the KNU it did not sign the NCA in 2015 (Jolliffe 2016, 21). The current development is that the NMSP was compelled to sign the agreement in February 2018 several external pressures, among which were fear of conflict with the KNU as well as harassments by the Tatmadaw (Weng 2017, Mon 2018). Despite the turmoil and tensions, as well as internal splits, the NMSP has been able to engage in state-making and govern the ceasefire areas that it was granted in 1995. Bee Kharl is one of these areas.

STATE-MAKING PRACTICES OF THE NMSP

Various languages of stateness – symbolic, administrative and territorial – are infused with a language of ethnic belonging and common heritage. This is nurtured by a history of rebellion and state repression, positioning the NMSP leaders as the de facto state authorities, the rightful governors of the NMSP territory whose legitimacy is largely based on ethnicity. Ethnic belonging and common heritage emerged as particularly important in determining sovereignty and legitimacy when several actors make claims to the same territorial area. This is particularly the case in Myanmar, and in Bee Kharl especially, as identity is closely tied to ethnolinguistic affiliations.

In this section, I explore the state-making efforts of the NMSP by looking at governance and territory, service provision and administration in Bee Kharl before discussing the precariousness of encompassed state-making. In the second part of the article, I will turn my focus on how Pop Htaw villagers 'do' encompassed state-living, and finally I will discuss the dynamics of simultaneous mimicking and encompassment.

Governing Bodies and Governing Territory

The first permanent base of the NMSP was set up in the area of the Bee Kharl district, other permanent bases followed after the ceasefire agreement in 1995. The Bee Kharl district is encompassed by what has been designated Karen State by the Myanmar state, and it is surrounded by KNU territory. In 1989, the NMSP and the KNU agreed on joint administration for the area, which consists of both Karen and (a majority of) Mon villages. The intention was to renegotiate the terms and set up clear territorial boundaries after five years, but this still has not happened.

This precarious situation leaves the Mon leaders with the feeling of having to be sensitive around the arrangements, and not to provoke the militarily superior KNU.

NMSP governance extends beyond territorial control as it is concerned with the governing of Mon bodies and perpetuation of a people's cultural and ethnic heritage. Territories matter in everyday governance practices, and are obviously central to political claims, aspirations and clashes, but in addition to control over territories, the *governing of people* is immensely important. Kim Jolliffe also explored this in a report from 2014 on service provision by EAOs. He argues that claims to service provision are important in explaining ethnic conflicts in the region, because they chiefly are centred on prerogatives to governance of populations. Claims over territory and resources are also imperative but secondary (Jolliffe 2014, 5). Social service provision (such as education, security, health and development) is central to state-making as it follows a historical tradition of service delivery that demonstrates powers, authority and legitimacy, thus being closely related to the ethno-nationalist struggle (Jolliffe 2014, 7).

In order to understand sovereignty in this setting of territorial overlaps and encompassment, it is necessary to go beyond a definition that is mainly fixed on territory. Comparative literature shows how territorial control varies spatially and temporally, depending on the conflict itself (Mampilly 2011, 59). Mampilly argues that territorial control is not the only concern of rebels, but also governance driven by an effort to gain legitimacy by the population, which involves providing services. Claims to sovereignty in Bee Kharl can best be understood as 'formations of sovereignty' which are relational and overlapping (Stepputat 2015). Recent studies promote a more flexible, context specific conceptualization sovereignty (Sidaway 2003, McConnell 2009). Fiona McConnell finds that sovereignty does not depend on a bounded territory, using "displaced sovereignties" like the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, as an example (McConnell 2009, 348). The

notion of displaced sovereignty allows us to think about sovereignty as being made up in "multiple geographies, some material and others imagined" (Ibid, 349). This alternative understanding of sovereignty may have different geographies and may not necessarily be territorially framed. Similarly, I propose considering claims to sovereignty *based on ethnicity,* which makes references to a shared ethnic heritage another symbolic language of stateness.

FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2: A soldier carries a tattoo of the Golden Sheldrake, an ancient symbol of the Mon people

This alternative statehood is made apparent in several ways. Inmates at the district headquarters are taught about Mon cultural history and their rebel cause six evenings a week. Ancestor shrines are found in various places in the area, marking spaces of belonging and origination of the villagers and their ancestors, and thus grounding histories in a space. The shared community, landscape and cultural practices serve as another symbolic language of stateness (Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 8). This is the land of the Mon, and by definition not the land of the Burmese, and thus to be legitimately inhabited by ethnic Mon citizens, who the NMSP claim to represent. The NMSP state is materialised in permanent signs and rituals, including buildings, monuments, letterheads, uniform road signs and fences. This is what is on display at the Bee Kharl district headquarters, the 'capital' of the NMSP in this area, with the Mon flag flapping throughout the compound, nationalistic morning ceremonies, the use of receipts for tax collection, area maps and pictures from the Mon Revolution Day and of former NMSP leaders on the walls. Performances and

marches displaying the NMSP flag – an iconic golden sheldrake on a red background – including letting civilians wear uniforms and guns for the Mon National Day and Mon Revolution Day parades, are rehearsed and prepared weeks ahead in the entire area.

These are symbolic processes, bolstering a shared Mon identity as well as the rightful position and legitimacy of the leadership. Grooming of a particular kind of citizen is discussed in Michael Bobick's analyses of sovereignty in contested spaces. Bobick claims that a monopoly on violence alone is not enough to achieve sovereignty; sovereignty requires a distinct form of peoplehood and recognition (2017). Internal forms of recognition are crucial to the processes through which sovereignty is exercised and remade at the local level. The internal performative sovereignty (by both people and state) is especially important in states that are not externally recognised. A particular 'form of peoplehood' serves as the basis for sovereignty (Bobick 2017, 159). For the Mon, this form of peoplehood is constructed around difference from other ethnicities. A particular quality of being Mon lies in what one is not: being ethnic Mon is being 'non-Bamar'. Distinguishing oneself from the Bamar majority, claiming the right to a separate cultural and linguistic heritage, also recently surfaced in wide protests elsewhere in Mon State after the government voted to name a bridge after Bamar national hero General Aung San. Residents wanted the bridge to be given a name more closely associated with Mon identity which was defined as separate from that of the Bamar (Slow 2018). Showcasing *monness* through common cultural heritage and cause for the survival of the Mon people is another language of stateness based on ethnicity. Symbolic languages of stateness are also informed by the practices of other state-structures. For example, the 'immigration papers' one has to sign upon entering the Mon areas are copied from the Burmese papers. Likewise, the Mon army was originally modelled after the armed forces of the Karen National Union.

Administration and Service Provision

In the Bee Kharl district, the village leaders autonomously note information about the villagers, information that the Myanmar government does not have access to as it was barred from collecting information for the national census. The NMSP manages the 16 schools in the Poip Soli township and has collected information on schoolchildren and families in the area on a more central level. These schools provide Mon-language and multilingual education, using a Mon-language primary curriculum that is mostly translated from the Myanmar government school system syllabus. In middle and secondary school, teaching is based entirely on the Myanmar-language curriculum, maintaining Mon as a language of instruction (Jolliffe 2016). In this sense, NMSP leaders are mimicking the opposition as well as a universal language of state-making by providing education for their population.

The NMSP collects taxes from businesses and rubber plantations, road tolls and donations both inside and outside the area. This has led to frictions with the Myanmar government, who demands that the NMSP stop taxing locals, acting as law enforcement and recruiting locals in 'government-controlled, areas. The NMSP maintains the necessity of their actions in that the Myanmar government has failed their responsibility to maintain law and order and deal with the increasing drug problem (Weng 2016).

The NMSP educates teachers and medics as well as other personnel, feeds administrative staff and soldiers, and contributes to teachers' salaries and in some cases development projects. The NMSP depends on its legitimacy as a governing body to justify its physical presence and taxation as well as its political cause to secure Mon culture and language. Township general Nai Jai Rai explains the difference: 'The Myanmar government has power, but it doesn't govern through people's

hearts. For 70 years we have governed through the support of our people'. An old village woman agrees: 'I respect the chairman [of the NMSP district], they are my government. We don't like the Myanmar military state, they don't understand us and they don't do any *favours.'* [7]

The idea of favour here, of mutual reciprocity and of social agreement and understanding leads to the conception of a relationship similar to that between a patron and a client – a personal bond. Another villager explained that the Myanmar state is like a stepfather and the NMSP government like a father to the Mon people. 'And who would not prefer to be under the leadership of their real father?'[8] he asked me. The NMSP state is more like a paternal governing institution, whereas the Myanmar state does not act in favour of the citizens and is not looked upon by the Mon population in the same way as the NMSP. This sentiment is also evident in Kim Jolliffe's study on social service provision, as he finds that the provision of social services has been central to EAO's governance practices and makes up a core element of their relations with their communities. He found that EAO leaders expressed the provision of support to 'their people' as a key responsibility (Jolliffe 2014, 6). Taking a closer look at how local agency and authority are co-constituted by states and citizens (Shneiderman 2013, Jones 2012) allows for a more nuanced understanding of how states and local communities are engage and embedded in everyday processes of state making (Eilenberg 2012, 291).

The territorial precariousness of Bee Kharl is similar to that of Dahagram at the India-Bangladesh border, discussed by Jason Cons. Cons suggests the analytic 'sensitive space' to 'examine the anxieties, uncertainties, and ambiguities that lie beneath territorial rule' (Cons 2016, 7). While the term is mainly descriptive, it opens up an interesting debate about rule and citizenship in an encompassed setting. Though the nested territorial situation can be

likened to that of Bee Kharl, the difference is that in Cons' case both states are externally recognized as such. Cons' point about post-colonial state-making, imaginations of nationhood and territory resonates deeply with the NMSP case. Cons argues that the territorial enclaves 'trouble Indian and Bangladeshi nationalist imaginations of contiguous territory, of the border as neatly dividing inside from outside, and of identity and belonging. They unsettle the notion, particularly prevalent in postcolonial state formation in South Asia that nationality and territory must align' (Cons 2016, 7). Instead, administration and service provision emerge as imperative aspects of encompassed state-making.

PRECARIOUS OVERLAPPING AND ENCOMPASSED STATES

The NMSP's state-making efforts are continuously challenged by the encompassed nature of multiple state-making, which is reflected in the competition for taxation, justice provision, education and other public goods. As discussed above, the NMSP performs these state tasks inside its designated ceasefire zone, but also outside or on the blurred border with the two other states. Similarly, the Myanmar state operates in the NMSP ceasefire zone. On several occasions, the Myanmar state has attempted to issue Myanmar government ID cards for people living in Bee Kharl, offering ID cards for a small administration fee. This differs from the regular procedure where a person who wants to obtain an ID card has to go to the responsible Myanmar government office (*LaWaGa*). Here they can expect some waiting time, or they may need to pay a bribe, which can be significant depending on ethnicity and religion, if not being denied an ID card all together. Essentially, the Myanmar state has taken steps to make it easier for the Mon villagers to gain ID cards, as service provision serves as a way of gaining allegiance and including the villagers in the overall population, as well as ID cards being symbolic of state-membership themselves.

In Bee Kharl, governance and loyalty are bound to the ethnic group, making ethnicity a central language of stateness. The importance of ethnicity in justice provision becomes evident when disputes arise on the fringes of the ceasefire zone belonging to the NMSP, where the ethnicity of the people involved, rather than the exact location of the quarrel, determines which 'state' will deal with the dispute. This is a highly sensitive practice, as the NMSP will occasionally arrest and imprison a person of another ethnicity, and often exchanges of prisoners take place between Mon and Karen villages to avoid conflict. Formations of sovereignty can be fluctuating, overlapping and interwoven and concern either ethnicity or territory or both (Stepputat 2015). While Mon villagers recognise the NMSP as the legitimate sovereign even outside of the designated ceasefire zones, the Mon state government on the Myanmar side has heavily criticised the NMSP for extortion, narcotic arrests, military recruitment training and justice-related projects inside Myanmar government areas (Paing 2016). Thus, there is no one sovereign state on the fringes of the ceasefire zones between the NMSP and the KNU and the Myanmar government, respectively. Rather, there is an 'encompassed state' that is the result of competing states-making efforts and overlaps between state-structures.

Power dynamics fluctuate in this encompassed state. Karen, Mon and Myanmar governing actors operate in the 'grey zones', the overlaps where geography itself does not mark the internal or external areas of each state, and where boundaries are blurred. Precautions in relation to dealing with other actors often come at the cost of protecting the borders and through judicial compromises. For example, the district chairman explains that the Karen villages are controlled by the Karen administration, which is mostly under the KNU. If there is a conflict *between* a Mon and a Karen village, the NMSP *can* take action, for instance if drugs are carried on the road between a Mon and a Karen village, but this may instigate skirmishes with the KNU. Nonetheless,

the MNLA frequently patrols outside of its territories to target drug dealers; the KNU attempts to collect taxes in NMSP areas, and a recent development has led the Burmese army to enter the Bee Kharl district for a show of force in retaliation for an armed parade that the NMSP held in celebration of the Mon Revolution Day earlier this year.[9]

The porous, flexible borders make it possible for other states to penetrate, engage with citizens and offer ID cards or education. Multiple state-making efforts are encompassed; they are similar but in opposition. How do the Mon villagers in Pop Htaw navigate this encompassed state in the making? I address this question next by presenting a number of cases related to justice, land registration, taxation and medical care.

MANOEUVRING IN AN ENCOMPASSED STATE

The village of Pop Htaw is one of 24 villages that are administratively placed under the Poip Soli township in the NMSP governed Bee Kharl district. It is situated in an area between two rivers, and residents take advantage of the opportunities for subsistence fishing and fertile rice paddies. Pop Htaw is a small village with only 107 households and a few small shops, a snooker bar, an NMSP run elementary school, an ice factory and a brick manufacturer. Villagers recognise NMSP as *the* state, but also engage with the KNU and the Myanmar State in pragmatic ways in connection with, for instance, dispute resolution, taxation, land registration and medical treatment.

Like a Fish in Clear Water

The village headman, Nai Weng Mon, lives with his wife and their youngest son in a house across from the village school and near to the monastery. He is the chairperson of the village administration group consisting of five members. The village administration group also functions as a justice committee, and they deal with local-level issues and disputes. The committee is institutionally linked to the NMSP justice system, comprising a three-tiered structure of justice committees at township, district and central level.[10] The preferred method of conflict resolution is to make the opposing parties agree through negotiation. However, they are also able to issue punishments, including community work (for example road construction, cutting trees or crushing rocks into rubble) and the use of the *Aran Manouk*, a pillory or foot lock.

FIGURE 3 HERE

Figure 3: The pillory in Pop Htaw village

The pillory in Pop Htaw village fits three people and is centrally located in an open area between the monastery, the village school and the house of the village headman. This form of public shaming as punishment was introduced by the British during colonial rule, and while it has been more or less abandoned in Myanmar since, the practice of punishing sinners in public is still very much alive in Bee Kharl.[11] The upholding and policing of order in the area is considered a joint responsibility of the community, and this is supported by the MNLA. The five-member village

administration and justice committee also functions as the village's security group, which has been authorised by the NMSP to make arrests. Arrested people are brought to the NMSP township level office. Patrols are not conducted every day, but only when there are special risks, such as roaming robber groups and strangers coming to the village. The strangers are notably non-Mon, and threats emanate directly from or are closely associated with the Myanmar state according to the villagers. From many Mon members, including Nai Weng Mon, I have heard the rumour that the *yaba* (amphetamine) pills that are in circulation in Mon State have been brought into circulation by the Tatmadaw in order to harm the ethnic minority groups. Nai Weng Mon has seen that there are two letters printed on the pills: *WY*. His theory is that this is a code for Myanmar, disguised by the M being turned around to resemble a W. It is typical behaviour by the Myanmar military government to be deceitful in this way. He says, 'The fish has already been caught in the water, but the water is clear and there are no shadows[12].' The fish does not know that it is caught and does not see the enemy.

The situation of an encompassed state becomes significant when disputes or crimes involve non-Mon persons. In such situations, the village leaders try to avoid involving the higher level NMSP and other authorities. For instance, in cases that involve a Karen and a Mon villager, the village leaders try as far as possible to handle matters between village leaders. A member of the Village Tract Justice Committee explained to me:

> 'Conflicts that involve other [ethnic] people we always try very hard to solve here at village level, because it will be more difficult higher up in the system because we are two different [ethnic] groups. The Mon village leaders know well the Karen administrative village people, so it is easy to contact them, but it gets complicated at

higher levels where they are dealing with the armed groups. At village level, they already know each other and have a relationship'[13]

The village leaders take into account that they are in an encompassed situation, and take it upon themselves to downplay and avoid inter-state conflicts when possible. It is deliberate and tacit handling of justice disputes.

Double Land Certificates from NMSP and Myanmar State

Nai Rot Jit is a member of the village administration group and a close friend of Nai Weng Mon. He often comes by the house to drink tea and chat. One day he wants to show me a new house that he is building, and we walk the short distance to his small rubber plantation at the outskirts of Pop Htaw. The house is set in the middle of the plantation, surrounded by rubber trees, with a view of the mountains and the small lake to the west of the village. It is a brick building, and he is putting his entire life's savings into it. The land belongs to Nai Rot Jit, and he has a land certificate from the NMSP to prove it. The certificate cost him 1,000 kyat (roughly 1 USD) per acre, and he assures me that he was happy to pay it because it goes into the land development committee funds of the NMSP. To my astonishment, he tells me that he also wants to register his land with the Myanmar government, and that the village administration group has contacted the closest government office in Kyain Seikgyi to submit their request. The civil servants have agreed to come to the area and measure up the plots before the rain season begins in May, and have assured the villagers that no fees will be charged. Nai Rot Jit explains that he believes that the NMSP should control their area, and that they do not approve of the Burmese, however:

'I have seen on the TV how the Myanmar state takes land from ethnic minorities and we want to make sure that this doesn't happen here. We do not know if in the future our land will be in the hands of the Myanmar state. Who knows what will happen in the future with all the changes happening in the country, so we just make sure that the land is registered with both offices. We don't have any feeling about it'[14]

When I ask Nai Weng Mon, he adds that he also worries about the KNU and the relation between the KNU and the Myanmar state, because the KNU (unlike the NMSP) signed the National Ceasefire Agreement in 2015[15]:

'Because this is Karen State, we worry that the Karen may start a conflict and claim that our land is illegal. To have two certificates, one from our ethnic leaders and one from the Burmese, will make it safer. I am worried about my son and his generation; that they will end up with no proof for their land. We are thinking about the future, and more villages want to do the same. It is not disrespectful to our ethnic leaders. But as an ordinary villager, it is important to have a clear ownership. The Mon say this is their land. The Karen say it is their land. And the Burmese say the whole country is their land!'[16]

This case illustrates how people in Bee Kharl – instead of dealing with oppositions, with one state against another, or an inside/outside of state jurisdictions – are taking into consideration and making bids to the authorities of three different states at the same time. I understand this as a kind of encompassed state-living, because it entails not dealing with *either or*, but with one *and* the other, and sometimes a third state. The NMSP is considered the legitimate ruler, but still the KNU

has to be appeased and the Myanmar state (even though considered unrightful) is asked for land certificates.

The Myanmar state has to be dealt with and can even be useful, but it has to be encountered with a measured amount of caution and preparation. Thus, a request for a land certificate that emanates from the villagers themselves leaves them with control over the situation. The certificate is supposed to protect them from the presumed predatory behaviour of the Tatmadaw or even the KNU.

Christian Lund (2016) discusses the close connections between state power and property. He argues that it is the ability "to entitle and disenfranchise people with regard to property, to establish the conditions under which they hold that property—together with the ability to define who belongs and who does not, and to establish and uphold rank, privilege and social servitude in its many forms—is constitutive of state power" (Lund 2016, 1200). Thus, the development that Mon villagers, within NMSP recognised territory, have begun to register land with the Myanmar state is challenging the authority of the NMSP. However, by understanding this as state encompassment, such a challenge to authority does not imply a zero-sum conception of power where the NMSP loses its popular legitimacy as a ruler. Instead, it is a pragmatic engagement with several states at the same time. In other words, Mon citizens manoeuvre within encompassed state-building projects, ideologically pledging allegiance to one state, while at the same time cautiously and pragmatically engaging with others, because it may be to their advantage. The case of simultaneous land registration shows that the NMSP state-making efforts have to be flexible, as mutual dependence between citizens and multiple states is a precondition.

Revisiting Jason Cons' work on the Bangladeshi enclave of Dahagram, 'these imaginations – and the projects they portend – are reworked by its residents, who shape their own visions of belonging to community, nation, and state and who navigate projects of territorial rule for their own ends, but not under conditions of their own choosing' (Cons 2016, 7). This is a description of life in what Cons calls a 'sensitive space', which is also characterised by surveillance, regulation and instability for the residents here. While everyday life in Bee Kharl is also characterised by a certain degree of instability – an unavoidable condition in a space that is encompassed by three states – there is a different feel to it. The strong state control in Dahagram has negative connotations, such as a palpable sense of surveillance and a regulation of space that opens up corrosion and exploitation of the community (Cons 2016, 125). In Bee Kharl, the NMSP's governance efforts, I argue, are considered by villagers as more enabling than disabling, while the KNU and the Myanmar state are pragmatically dealt with. This also becomes clear in the next case regarding taxation.

Triple Taxation Efforts

Nai Shwe, a Mon brick factory owner in the village, pays 50,000 kyat per year in tax to the NMSP, which then provides security for his factory. Because the NMSP are Mon ethnic leaders, Nai Shwe follows the rules that they have set up, and he also trusts them not to make problems for him. Once, people from the Burmese government came here to collect taxes, but the NMSP had told Nai Shwe not to pay any other parties, so he refused. 'How much did they want to charge you?', I asked. Nai Shwe answered: 'They asked me: How much do the NMSP take? When I told them 50,000 kyat[17], they said that they also charge 50,000 kyat'. Nai Shwe decided that he did not want to pay them, as he thought that they did not do anything for him and did not even protect the

area. On another occasion, the Karen (KNU) also came by the factory to collect taxes. They told Nai Shwe to go to one of their checkpoints to pay, but he has not yet done so. As he explained: 'The NMSP I *want* to pay. They resolve the difficulties and problems. I pay every year.' However, from the Karen and Myanmar authorities Nai Shwe felt he got nothing in return.

Taxation is a constitutive element for sovereignty in particular in contexts of contested statehood. As taxation entangles people in a web of reciprocity based on mutual obligations, it incarnates the relation between state and citizen (Hoffmann, Vlassenroot, and Marchais 2016, Mampilly 2011). This case illustrates how villagers are subject to state-making attempts by three different actors. They have to navigate this context skilfully – risk assessing and strategizing. Nai Shwe considers the Mon as the legitimate authority, and feels that they best fulfil his requirements for security provision. That 'he wants to pay the NMSP' also underlines that the decision is made based on ideas about rightful and legitimate governance. NMSP governance and the relationship between state and people are thus essentially different from the Myanmar state[18]. The fundamental difference is that there exists a social contract in the NMSP area, which entails a sense of mutual dependence and common heritage and belonging. This social contract is lacking in the Myanmar state controlled areas, resulting in a reluctance to pay tax in these areas (McCarthy 2016). However, this does not mean that the two states are entirely disparate: They are different in semantics and affective content, but similar in their form or state grammar.

ENCOMPASSMENT: MIMICKING THE OPPOSITION

As I have argued throughout this article, the languages of stateness of the Mon are infused with ethnicity and belonging. As the next case will show, this also works to suppress and exclude

other ethnicities, as it mimics the Myanmar nation-state building in its ethnocentric nationalistic ideology and governance efforts.

Nai Shwe, the brick factory owner who only pays taxes to the NMSP, is also engaged in employing a group of poor Bamar labour migrants from the so-called dry zones of the country, which are known for poor employment possibilities. The brick factory workers live in small, simple bamboo huts in a separated compound in the outskirts of the village. This is also where the brick making happens; it is a bare spot of red dirt land. Bricks are piled in the middle of the compound with a fire burning at the centre of the brick pile to harden the material. Work at the brick factory is physically exhausting, under the sun and close to the heat from the burning bricks. Other people are not allowed to enter the compound, and the workers live here secluded from the surrounding community.

Ma Wa, a woman in her twenties, has lived here for ten years. She is unhappy, and tells about how they (the Bamar migrants) are looked down upon by the Mon. However, the workers are not free to leave, because they are indebted to the factory owner. Ma Wa is an ethnic Bamar and had problems finding work in her native area. She moved here with her entire family, like so many others have done. There are eight families here. When they first arrived, they took a loan from the factory owner to set up their hut and buy food and other necessities to start the household. Their salary is only calculated and paid out by the end of the working season, so throughout that time they borrow money every time they need cash. At the end of the first season, Ma Wa and her family had borrowed more money than they had earned, and during rainy season when the production of bricks was paused, they had to borrow additional funds. Nai Shwe, the brick factory owner, is responsible for ensuring that the Burmese behave and follow village rules. Towards the NMSP, he has put his property at stake as a guarantee for their behaviour. The Bamar workers are

left outside of the NMSP justice system, as they have to solve conflicts or disputes internally and are entirely under the control of their boss. When a new family arrives to work for Nai Shwe, they are given an advance payment and need to sign a document stating that they are obliged to stay for a given period to pay off the advance payment (and its interest rates). In a recent case, a family wanted to leave before they were free of their debt. The factory owner contacted the village leaders and asked them for help to prevent the family from running away. They arrested the family and told them that they were not allowed to leave before the debt was paid off. For Nai Shwe, the preferred rulers are therefore also those who provide the support and security that the factory owner needs to manipulate his workers.

This example illustrates two points: (i) justice and security are not tied to space or territory alone, but rather (ii) to bodies or maybe even rightful citizens of that particular state - people of the same ethnic group. State-making here takes place in ways that mirror the Myanmar state system to a considerable degree: In all its opposition to the Myanmar state – and despite the attempt to distance themselves from it – the Mon people here have adopted what they resent in the Myanmar state. It has been argued that it can be necessary for rebel governments to copy the forms and structures of the incumbent nation-state in order to deal with their counterinsurgent strategies (Mampilly 2011, 60). The kind of mimicking that becomes evident here goes beyond applying nation state forms, structures and symbols as illustrated throughout this article – it is also linked to ideology. Thus, the (state) system supporting the brick workers and similar businesses where Burmese are held in slave-like conditions is a copy of the very ethnocentric nationalistic ideology and governance that it opposes.

CONCLUSION: POCKETS OF AUTONOMY IN THE ENCOMPASSED STATE

This article revealed how NMSP state-making ensues neither in parallel to nor through a simple separation from the Myanmar government and the KNU, but through different forms of encompassment. The article illustrated how villagers in the Bee Kharl district are deeply loyal to the NMSP who are considered the legitimate authority, while at the same time dealing with ongoing political transformation in the country and taking into account state-making practices of other states. Through a number of cases, the article focused on recognising civilian agency and visibility in states in the making and argued that villagers in Bee Kharl prefer the intimate, paternal governance system of the NMSP to that of the Myanmar state. However, the paternal state also mimics, and thus is similar to, the Myanmar state, which it opposes. In light of this I have shown that the languages of stateness applied by the NMSP are permeated by an ethno-nationalist ideology as one of the central registers applied by the NMSP to underline their position as rightful sovereign governors. Through the examples from the local level I have showed a more embedded, almost subconscious, mimicry as it illustrates how village governance, in all its opposition to the Myanmar state, is similar to this state, simultaneously opposing and mimicking the encompasser.

This dialectic relationship between mimicry and opposition is a distinctive characteristic of what the article coined as encompassed state-making, precisely because of its overlapping and affective qualities.

What may be immediately thought of as ironic, namely that the despised adversary, the opposition, is what is being mimicked, is explained with Dumont's ideas about holism and the hierarchical relation (Dumont 1986).

One argument that can be derived from this article is that the encompassed, the NMSP, allows for more flexibility and security, at least for 'proper' Mon citizens, than the encompassing Myanmar state. The NMSP state and its villagers are like 'fish in the clear water', as recounted in the case study above: they are fully encompassed by the Myanmar state even though it is not always readily observable. Continuing with this metaphor, this has the inherent meaning that the Myanmar state is present but not visible to the naked eye. This constellation may sound overpowering and confirm what has been written on how the competing state systems in Myanmar's ethnic minority states leave their populations with limited strategies for survival or improvement, and as the most disenfranchised in Myanmar (Callahan 2007). I argue that this is not necessarily the case and that villagers in Bee Kharl quite on the contrary have an advantage in both that paternalistic governance system that they prefer as well as the opportunity to engage with other state-makers. The flexibility in choosing options from multiple state-makers in close proximity creates a greater room for agency and freedom to tailor one's needs.

I conclude that the encompassed state is able to provide room for manoeuvring between different state-makers, and that the villagers in general identify with and are deeply loyal towards the NMSP state. This leads to a dilemma: How is it possible to enjoy freedom and security in a state that is encompassed by a (more or less) authoritarian state while the oppressing languages of stateness are copied? The answer entails that authoritarian states in an encompassed version are able to provide pockets of freedom, even when the oppressive languages of stateness - the signs, symbols, methods, and instruments – are being mimicked.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Endnotes

[1] Due to the sensitive nature of the field site, and out of concern for the safety and integrity of informants and communities, all place and person names have been consistently anonymized.

[2] Three trips comprising a total of fifteen days of fieldwork were conducted between 28 March 2016 and 5 February 2017. The author was able to live at both the NMSP district headquarters as well as with a family in the village. The shorter-term stays are not ideal for anthropological research but were necessary due to the limited accessibility to the EAO areas, which requires the renegotiation of permissions from higher-ranking EAO members each time. The case study area was chosen based on accessibility criteria, including security concerns. The research within the NMSP governed area was complemented with interviews with NMSP representatives and various villagers in the Mawlamyine NMSP Liaison office, a place the author was able to visit frequently during the course of 6 months.

³ Like the qualitative data collection, the survey was done with the permission of the NMSP, but conducted independently by research assistants.

⁴ The distribution of interviews was as follows: NMSP administration and the MNLA at district level (10 persons), NMSP administration and the MNLA at township level (three persons), village elites (such as various committee members, leaders, monks) (10 persons), ordinary villagers (23 persons, of these seven were male and 16 female). In addition, three villagers, two NMSP Central Executive Committee leaders and three Mon Community Service Organizations were interviewed in Mawlamyine.

⁵As this is beyond the scope and relevance for this article I will not engage with Dumont's discussion about egalitarian versus hierarchic societies, nor will I go more into the West / Rest dichotomy that his work has raised. I am thus mainly concerned with Dumont's theory about holism, which I have found fruitful in analysing and making sense of my material. Dumont has been extensively critiqued for what have been perceived as insensitive accounts of caste practices, orientalism and totalizing discourse. See also Appadurai (1986) and Gledhill (1994, 47-69).

⁶ The majority ethnic group in Myanmar

⁷ Translated from the word *Gol Phyul* in Mon. Interview 02.06.2016

⁸ Interview 05.02.2017

⁹ For an intricate analysis of how the Myanmar military state has bolstered its presence and authority in contested areas in Northern Myanmar through local, strong, armed men and Chinese cross-border investments, see Woods 2018.

¹⁰ See also Harrisson and Kyed 2019, McCartan 2016

¹¹ http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/spring03/branks.cfm

¹² Interview 02.02.2017

¹³ Interviews with village tract justice committee member, 30.03.2016

¹⁴ Interview 04.02.2017

¹⁵ The NMSP has since signed the NCA in 2018.

¹⁶ Interview 05.02.2017

¹⁷ Approximately 35 USD

¹⁸ See also Harrisson (2020)