

Headhunting, Planting and Governmentality
The Wa in Burma and China
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First Year Seminar #41 - Mountain People in China
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I. Introduction

This paper examines the Wa people, an indigenous group straddling both sides of the China-Burma border. Historically, the Wa were a remote ethnic group well-known as headhunters, who used the prize of a severed head in fertility rituals for the upcoming planting season. I will show that since the 1950s, government policy has impacted Wa livelihoods on both sides of the border, albeit in different ways. The Chinese government, as part of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), destroyed many Wa artifacts associated with headhunting and traditional fertility rituals. They also instituted a new naming system, gradually eroding the connections between Wa and their lands, which had been embedded in culturally-significant naming practices. In the pursuit of modernity, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has also encouraged the Wa to shift from traditional swidden (shifting cultivation) farming practices to mono-cropping, which has proved detrimental to rural environments in China's uplands. On the Burma side, a 1989 treaty allowed the Wa more autonomy, and the chance at something resembling self-government. This governing body, known as the Wa Authority, however, has been plagued with corruption and inexperience at self-government on a large scale. Forcing the relocation of indigenous peoples from their traditional mountain homes to the lowlands, the Wa Authority has placed much of their indigenous population in lowland areas where the swidden farming skills they knew from their upland roots are utterly useless. Lacking the necessary skill set in this new environment, they are often unable to farm themselves or take jobs on commercial rubber plantations, and thus plunged into poverty.

II. Significance

This research shows the effects of governmentality (the manner in which a government governs, or implements policy) in both Burma and China among indigenous Wa populations. Its significance lies in understanding how government policy on both sides of the border have varyingly impacted the material and spiritual livelihoods of Wa people. This is a case study about the relation between governing bodies and an indigenous people, and how actions intended to be in the government's, and ostensibly the people's, best interest, have often borne negative results and contributed to poverty, or loss of identity and cultural traditions. A thorough understanding of the issues which routinely plague indigenous peoples around the world can lead to better modes of governance and more inclusive policies, that incorporate valuable indigenous knowledge into policy-making. To this end, I will show the impact of government-induced modernization upon the traditional upland environments of the Wa, and how the loss of indigenous knowledge of sustainable practices has proved detrimental to the environment.

III. Review of Literature

Sources consulted for this paper include articles from the *Journal of Burma Studies*, by scholars Magnus Fiskesjö (2006, 2009, 2013), Bernard Formoso (2013) and Ronald Renard (2013), which examined in great detail various social and religious constructs and the ways in which recent government policy has affected them. Formoso's article "To Be at One With Drums," discussed headhunting rituals and their historical role as well as the lingering memory of those rituals in Wa society today. Renard, who wrote "The Wa Authority and Good Governance," had valuable first-hand experience as a NGO-worker and anthropologist among the Burmese Wa, and he

blended both an anthropological perspective with an intimate knowledge of the inner gears of governance among the Wa authority, which could only be gained from extensive experience working with that body. I found a valuable reference guide to Yunnan swidden farming by Yin Shaoting (2001), an anthropology professor at Yunnan University, which was translated into English by Fiskesjö. Yin analyzed Wa society at the individual village level, and drew on a great number of historical documents and recent agricultural statistics, which showed the active transition of Wa livelihoods from a period of relative independence to rule by the PRC beginning in the 1950s. Janet Sturgeon's (2005) *Border Landscapes* offered an excellent account of swidden farming practices in the Sino-Southeast Asian uplands. The article by Xu, et. al. (2005) "Integrating Sacred Knowledge for Conservation," was extremely useful in identifying general patterns characteristic of relations between PRC development plans, the loss of indigenous knowledge and resulting impacts on the environment.

IV. Wa Livelihoods and Governmentality

At present, the Wa population hovers around one million people, straddling the China-Burma border, with approximately two-thirds of that number living in Burma, and the other third dwelling in the Yunnan province, in southwest China. For centuries past, the Wa had made their homes in mountainous regions, where they practiced swidden farming throughout the steep terrain (Fiskesjö 2009, 151-152). Swidden farming signifies a great variety of crops grown within a relatively small, often sloping field. Indigenous groups living in the mountains of Southeast Asia who practice swidden agriculture are noted for their intricate knowledge and careful management of "complex" and "malleable" landscapes. Different varieties of rice,

vegetables and other foods must be grown at very specific elevations, and it is only through their intimate familiarity with these farming practices that upland peoples, such as the Wa, have been able to survive in their mountainous villages as self-sustaining agriculturalists. (Sturgeon 2005, 33-40).

The Wa call fields used for swidden agriculture *ma le*, and further classify them into *ma wu*, fields at higher altitudes and colder climes, and *ma qui*, fields at lower altitudes with warmer temperatures. In early Wa history, land was owned by clans, but by the late nineteenth century land ownership shifted into the hands of private individuals. Villages still retained some commonly owned land. Irrigated rice is the staple crop of the Wa, and is not only eaten but also fermented to make rice beer. Consumption of rice beer plays an important social function, and is the universal drink of courtesy for friendly conversations and a form of respect shown towards visitors. Hence the Wa saying, “Without drink there is no etiquette.” (Yin 2001, 180-185).

Wa villagers have religious beliefs and rituals that unsurprisingly are centered around the planting season. Their rituals, the technology of their religion, center around the relationship between headhunting and crop fertility. Headhunting, the term now almost archaic, was a form of ritual in which Wa men ambushed neighboring villages, and sought to take the head of another and return triumphantly to their home village. There, the arrival of a fresh head was cause for celebration. Large, decorated drums, made of hollowed-out tree trunks, were brought out, rice beer was poured, all to the backdrop of women and children dancing. These painted drums served as a means of communication to the supreme god of the Wa pantheon, Muhidajae. The head was then placed in a basket with rice and alcohol, an offering to the guardian spirit who looked over the house of the man who had claimed the head. After a period of three days, the

head was moved from one house to another, each time with another ritual ceremony, emphasizing the power of fertility brought by the severed head. If the proper offerings were made, Muhidjae would in return protect the village against bad spirits and foster good crops. (Formoso 2013, 126-138).

Headhunting was an integral part of Wa religious and agricultural livelihoods. Everything involved in the rituals carried significance, including the designs painted on the drums. For example, one such drum, painted black, featured inlays of red and white-painted geometric designs. Headhunting occurred only between February and June, when the wet season began and rice planting commenced. Due to the militant-like nature of headhunting, Wa villages were heavily militarized, often coming together to form alliances with neighboring villages and erecting an array of fortifications at the village limits. Wa village leaders were known as *wolang*, and drew their power by virtue of noble descent. Heads were found from warring Wa villages as well as from individuals involved with trading caravans passing through the remote region (Yin 2001, 178-179).

The formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 brought an end to the state of relative autonomy under which the Wa had lived for centuries. Chinese forces, government planners and government-employed anthropologists and linguists moved into Yunnan province. They were quick to ban headhunting, and Chinese Red Guards (student-age supporters of PRC leader Mao Zedong) also sought out the very drums which had sounded out each successful headhunting, destroying them. (Formoso 2013, 121-127). Thus, the very fabric of Wa society was shattered. With the ban on headhunting, the *wolang* gradually dwindled in influence, as did the drums, animal sacrifices and other ritual expressions of Wa spiritual culture. Access to land

was fundamentally changed; and the days of private land ownership were replaced by socialist reforms, introducing the system of collective production and state-controlled distribution (Yin 2001, 181).

In the years since, the Chinese government has shifted indigenous land ownership back to a system resembling private land ownership, although the government ultimately still retains title to the land. The government's presence, moreover, is still felt. With the rapidly increasing tides of modernization, Chinese state planners have been eager to shift indigenous groups throughout rural Yunnan away from traditional swidden farming methods to more regimented, mono-cropping operations. This approach has proved by and large detrimental to upland environments, and in the process of modernization, state planners have often been quick to discard indigenous knowledge of practices which have maintained the ecological landscape for generations of Wa farmers. Indigenous knowledge among groups like the Wa is centered around the conservation and careful use of natural resources such as rivers, water catchments and forests. Thus, indigenous knowledge has been and remains essential to environmental and agricultural sustainability. Indigenous groups enforce this knowledge through traditional religious and cultural rituals, hunting taboos and the protection of sites designated as sacred. (Xu et al. 2005, 1-25).

The Chinese linguists who came to Yunnan were baffled by the Wa naming system. They attempted to write down phonetic interpretations of the Wa names being spoken to them, with little success. Instead, they settled upon assigning Chinese names to the Wa. What this did not take into account was the cultural relevance embedded in traditional Wa naming practices. The Wa recognized their history through long genealogies, which were memorized and recited. These

genealogies remembered heroic ancestors, roles they played and places that were important in their lives. A Wa name, therefore, is not merely a memory of an ancestor, but of a place, a time, an action or an historic event. These names include a myriad of hidden and often ambivalent meanings, linking the person named to a unique genealogy, parcel of land, or a significant event occurring at the time of their birth.

A longtime scholar of the Wa people, Cornell's Magnus Fiskesjö, has concluded that the naming policies of the PRC have had the tendency to stifle or limit some indigenous practices related to the way people think of and view their traditional lands. To combat this, some Wa have attempted to live by two identities—one a name given them by the Chinese government, and another, their traditional Wa name. Whether these Wa, who have attempted to preserve a part of their indigenous knowledge through keeping their Wa names, can effectively pass this on to the next generation remains to be seen. (Fiskesjö 2009, 154-163). The overall effect of central government policies, however, has been to detach the Wa people from their traditional name-embedded connections to their land and livelihood.

To the south, in Burma, the Wa people were given a greater degree of autonomy in a 1989 treaty with the Burmese government, creating the Wa Authority, which effectively allowed the Wa a right to self-government. However, Wa villagers, dispersed as they were, did not share a common language, speaking a variety of Wa dialects that were often mutually unintelligible. The Wa Authority adopted Chinese as its official language, despite the fact that most of its population was illiterate and not fluent in Chinese. (Renard 2013, 142.)

The Wa were not accustomed to models of modern governance, and quickly the Wa Authority, consisting of elite Wa families, became tainted with corruption and inexperience.

Beginning in the 1990s, vast logging projects were undertaken without villagers' consent, which deprived locals of the natural resources which the forest had historically offered them. These included aromatic wood, orchids, rattan and medicinal plants and herbs, all elements in Wa indigenous knowledge that had been central parts of their livelihoods for generations.

Perhaps the most devastating example of bad governance is the Wa Authority's land allocation policies. The Wa Authority inherited a land system from the Burmese Communist Party which automatically defined all land as property of the state. Thus, the Burmese government retains the right to reallocate land for commercial purposes, which was done in the case of rubber plantations. Even in upland valleys, acreage which was already in use for swidden farming was appropriated by investors and influential Wa families for the placement of commercial rubber plantations, usually run by migrant Han Chinese. (Renard 2013, 144-156.) These policies displaced Wa swidden farmers from their traditional upland homes, and rendered the indigenous knowledge they held of upland living utterly useless.

More Wa were displaced by a 2005 ban on opium cultivation. In both Burma and Yunnan, opium was by and large cultivated at the highest altitudes. Production gained steam in the late nineteenth century, and peaked in the 1920s and 30s. Mostly grown for trade, opium was a major source of wealth to the remote and rural Wa farmers, who were greeted by anxious merchants who travelled to their upland villages every year at the time of the opium harvest. They brought with them varieties of livestock, cloth, salt and other outside goods to trade for opium. These enticing commodities induced nearly every Wa household to undertake at least some poppy cultivation, and in one Yunnan village opium accounted for approximately 32% of a household's total agricultural income (Yin 2001, 183-184).

In Yunnan, the PRC brought opium production to a halt in the early 1960s. (Yin, 184). However, across the border in Burma, opium production continued into the early 2000s. There, the Wa Authority believed that in order to stamp out its cultivation, farmers would need to have alternatives, and from the perspective of the Wa authority that meant bringing rural farmers down from the remote uplands and into the fold of more commercial, infrastructure-based farming, where they would also be more easily within the reach of state officials. Beginning in the late 1990s, villagers in Burma were resettled in the lowlands, where they had to build everything anew. In the process of forced relocation, many lost seed, livestock and household items. Much like those who had been forced to move to make way for rubber plantations, the relocated Wa also lost any usefulness that might come from their indigenous knowledge of how to farm in their traditional upland homes.

In Burma, Wa have shown a clear dislike for working as rubber plantation employees, in part because many do not have the skills associated with high-paying positions. The Wa who do go to work at the rubber plantations are given the lowest-wage jobs, while higher-paying jobs go to Chinese migrant workers. As scholar and anthropologist Ronald Renard notes, the practical effects of this government policy “threatens to turn the local people into an underclass of ‘coolie’ laborers, [and] disrupts their traditional ways and ritual activities, impeding improvement of their lives” (Renard 2013, 164).

Against this onslaught of social change, the Wa have shown resilience and in many cases a desire to retain what of their traditional culture that they can still salvage. The tree trunk drums, which had formed a salient part of Wa ritual life, and were a means of communication to the supreme god, Muhidajae, have not been forgotten. When the drums were destroyed, Wa villagers

began weaving the geometric painted patterns which had adorned them onto bags which they carry every day, conjuring the spirit of past rituals and connecting them to their ancestral homes and traditions. (Formoso 2013, 7, 19).

V. Conclusions

In China's Yunnan, government policy since the 1950s had aimed at bringing the Wa people more into the fold of mainstream China. Early efforts to do just this resulted in the destruction of artifacts of Wa heritage and culture. Although the PRC is now more tolerant of indigenous belief systems, the social fabric of the Wa—predicated on the power and sway of the *wolang*, headhunting, fertility rituals, naming system and private land ownership—has all but vanished from the Yunnan countryside. The Wa of Yunnan are still grappling with making modern livings amidst state planners and tourism-driven interest in their headhunting past. Pressure from the centralized state to move away from swidden agriculture towards mono-cropping threatens to further erode traditional Wa cultural practices and indigenous knowledge, and prove detrimental towards the sustainability of upland ecosystems. Coupled with the naming policies of the PRC, the Wa of Yunnan are on hanging dangerously on the precipice of losing much of their cultural heritage forever. Whether the efforts of Wa who continue to live by both a Chinese name and a traditional meaning-laden Wa name will be successful remains to be seen.

Across the border in Burma, the Wa Authority has deprived villagers there of once-abundant local resources, such as forests, through egregious logging policies, which have since been rescinded, but not before substantial damage to the local environments in Wa areas. The Wa Authority has also adopted the policy of state ownership over all land, and has used this power to

reallocate land and forcibly relocate Wa people from their upland homes to new villages in the lowlands. In addition to the material and spiritual loss of their traditional homes, relocated Wa have no experience farming in the lowlands, and the indigenous knowledge which allowed them to fashion their complex livelihoods in the remote uplands is rendered useless. The Wa Authority has also reallocated large tracts of indigenous land to commercial rubber plantations, run by Han Chinese migrants. As traditional upland peoples, the Wa by and large lack the technical skills required for high-paying commercial jobs, and are relegated, when they take them, to the lowest-wage jobs on these plantations, effectively cordoning off the Wa in those areas as a separate and distinct, lower economic and social class.

While government policy has brought the Wa many hardships, it is important to note that in both Yunnan and Burma, Wa populations generally have better roads leading to and from their remote villages, as well as more access to healthcare services, modern commodities and education. These changes are a result of a governmentality, embraced by both the PRC and the Wa Authority, which has strived to bring indigenous peoples more closely into the body politic. It would be impossible to say here whether these benefits compensate for the loss of traditional culture which has coincided with them. However, what is clear is that both the PRC and the Wa Authority have enacted policies that have fundamentally, and negatively, affected Wa livelihoods and the upland environments in which they live. Removal from their upland homes, a disrupted social order and forced competition for plantation jobs have all been a result of government policy pursued without due respect to the value and importance of indigenous livelihoods, and the indigenous knowledge which has sustained the Wa for generations.

VI. Bibliography

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