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# Communal Geographies and Peasant Insurgency in Colonial Myanmar

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## ABSTRACT

This article makes two arguments, one theoretical and the other empirical. The first is that Ranajit Guha's classic text, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, contains generative but overlooked spatial concepts for uncovering communal geographies. The second is that the Hsaya San peasant rebellion, which rocked British authority in Myanmar from late 1930 until 1932, fostered a new communal geography. These two arguments come together through my elaboration and utilisation of Guha's ideas to interpret rebel violence against Chin villages.

## KEYWORDS

Communal geography;  
ethnic violence; Hsaya San;  
Myanmar; peasant rebellion

## Subaltern studies and Burmese history

While Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* cannot be considered an overlooked book, its canonisation as a classic of postcolonial theory has been accompanied by a caricaturing of its content.<sup>1</sup> It is ubiquitously cited as a foundational text for writing histories of colonialism from below. More specifically, it has most often been deployed as a methodological footnote to indicate familiarity with his 'reading against the grain' approach to analysing imperial documents. Nevertheless, there has been markedly less close engagement with some of the specifics of the arguments that Guha makes regarding insurgencies: notably—given this special issue's focus on communal geographies—those outlining the interplay between ethnicity, topography and revolt within nineteenth century peasant communities in India. In short, the book has been reduced to its methodology despite the fact that Guha dedicates very few pages to an explicit discussion of his approach.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Its iconic status has also obscured some of Guha's earlier work: Mukul Kumar and Ananya Roy, 'Before Subaltern Studies: The Epistemology of Property', in *Subaltern Geographies*, ed. Tariq Jazeel and Stephen Legg (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019): 58–73.
2. A detailed elaboration of his methods is instead to be found in his essay: Ranajit Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', in *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983): 1–42.

This reductive reading notwithstanding, *Elementary Aspects* is a book undergoing something of a critical reappraisal as it enters its fifth decade of publication. In this vein, Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his recent reminiscences on the work of the Subaltern studies collective, frames the book as a product of its time whilst identifying what he sees as its generative failures.<sup>3</sup> I pick up on some of the productive problems Chakrabarty identifies with Guha's arguments to revisit the history of the Hsaya San rebellion, which raged across colonial Myanmar from late December 1930 until it was finally quelled in the early months of 1932. More precisely, I use Guha's arguments to explore the violence committed by rebels against Chin peasant villages during the insurgency. In bringing the arguments of *Elementary Aspects* into dialogue with these episodes of ethnic violence during this peasant revolt, I show that Guha's conception of the spatial dynamics of peasant insurgencies can help us to understand colonial Myanmar's communal geographies. These spatial dynamics are starting to be acknowledged more explicitly. In the introduction to their 2019 edited collection, Stephen Legg and Tariq Jazeel have drawn attention to the centrality of spatial concepts in Guha's understanding of peasant revolts. They consider them foundational to analyses of what they call 'subaltern geographies', referring to subordinated spatialities of such radical alterity that they resist straightforward representation.<sup>4</sup> Building on this work, I argue that adapting Guha's approach to render it more attentive to how ethnic identities were made and remade during peasant revolts enables us to reveal peasant insurgents' spatial understandings of communal belonging.<sup>5</sup>

Despite being one of the largest peasant revolts to threaten the British Raj since the 1857 uprising, the Hsaya San rebellion has not been interpreted through a Subaltern studies-influenced history from below. This might be the result of the engrained geographic frameworks for scholarly work on the region, which became entrenched in a Cold War-era division between South Asian studies and Southeast Asian studies, a division that has anachronistically imposed a boundary where historically there was not one.<sup>6</sup> The result has been something of a reflexive exclusion of Myanmar from the geographic ambit of South Asian history, an exclusion apparent in the output of the Subaltern studies collective. Scholarship has begun to question this separation. Recent borderland histories have revealed the dense networks and patterns of movement that have long tied together what is today Bangladesh, Northeast India, Myanmar and southwest China.<sup>7</sup> A further growing body of

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3. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Subaltern Studies in Retrospect and Reminiscence', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2015): 10–18.

4. Stephen Legg and Tariq Jazeel, 'Subaltern Studies, Space, and the Geographical Imagination', in *Subaltern Geographies*, ed. Tariq Jazeel and Stephen Legg (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019): 1–35.

5. For more on the overlaps between ethnicity and communalism, as well as the utility of keeping them distinct, see Dipankar Gupta, *Learning to Forget: The Anti-Memoirs of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 182–85.

6. Donald K. Emmerson, "'Southeast Asia': What's in a Name?", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (1984): 1–21; Vicente L. Rafael, 'The Cultures of Area Studies in the United States', *Social Text*, no. 41 (1994): 91–111; a notable exception to this is Willem van Schendel, *Three Deltas: Accumulation and Poverty in Rural Burma, Bengal and South India*, Indo-Dutch Studies on Development Alternatives 8 (New Delhi & Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991).

7. Willem van Schendel, 'Southeast Asia: An Idea Whose Time Is Past?', *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 168, no. 4 (2012): 497–510; Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Devleena Ghosh, 'Burma–Bengal Crossings: Intercolonial Connections

literature is beginning to reveal the contingent nature of late-colonial and independence-era border-making in the region.<sup>8</sup> In the light of this new work, taking methodologies developed for South Asian pasts and applying them to Myanmar could prove revealing.<sup>9</sup>

From the Burma/Myanmar studies side, the lack of engagement with Subaltern studies might be explained by postcolonial regimes' public celebrations of the peasantry's role in the anti-colonial struggle, a narrative in which the Hsaya San rebellion held a prominent position.<sup>10</sup> This is a historiographic situation analogous to the fate of Subaltern studies approaches in China. A subaltern approach has less immediate appeal as a radical subversion of political authority in contexts where peasants have been publicly lauded by an authoritarian state.<sup>11</sup> This absence notwithstanding, scholarship on Myanmar's colonial past, including the Hsaya San rebellion, published since 2010—when democratic reforms made the country more inviting to international researchers—has drawn inspiration from the later works of Subaltern studies theorists. This has taken the form of historicising the construction of colonial knowledge and its effects, as well as deconstructing nationalist frameworks.<sup>12</sup> The earlier works of the collective, and their initial focus on recovering the agency of peasants and workers in anti-colonial struggles, has not been a source of inspiration. Put another way, the historiography on colonial Myanmar has come to Subaltern studies after the focus of the project shifted away from the subalterns themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Even with these disciplinary disconnects, on the surface, that the Hsaya San rebellion has not attracted more attention from social historians working in the tradition of Subaltern studies might appear to be a surprising historiographic gap. After all, it was a revolt of a near unparalleled scale. It spread across half the districts of the geographically largest province of British India, required the deployment of over 7,000

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in Pre-Independence India', *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 2 (2016): 156–72; Pum Khan Pau, 'Transborder People, Connected History: Border and Relationships in the Indo-Burma Borderlands', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35, no. 4 (2018): 619–39.

8. Noriyuki Osada, 'An Embryonic Border: Racial Discourses and Compulsory Vaccination for Indian Immigrants at Ports in Colonial Burma, 1870–1937', *Moussons*, no. 17 (2011): n.p.; Jonathan Saha, 'Milk to Mandalay: Dairy Consumption, Animal History and the Political Geography of Colonial Burma', *Journal of Historical Geography* 54 (2016): 1–12; Rajashree Mazumder, 'Illegal Border Crossers and Unruly Citizens: Burma-Pakistan-Indian Borderlands from the Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Centuries', *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 4 (2019): 1144–82; Bérénice Guyot-Réard, 'Tangled Lands: Burma and India's Unfinished Separation, 1937–1948', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 2 (2021): 293–315.
9. Jonathan Saha, 'Is It in India? Colonial Burma as a "Problem" in South Asian History', *South Asian History and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2016): 23–29; Christoph Emmrich et al., 'Towards a Burma-Inclusive South Asian Studies: A Roundtable', *Modern Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (2023): 283–320.
10. Mairii Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King: History, Law, and Rebellion in Colonial Burma* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011): 216–26.
11. Gail Hershatter, 'The Subaltern Talks Back: Reflections on Subaltern Theory and Chinese History', *Positions: Asia Critique* 1, no. 1 (1993): 103–30; Peter H. Hansen, 'Why Is There No Subaltern Studies for Tibet?', *The Tibet Journal* 28, no. 4 (2003): 7–22.
12. Aung-Thwin, *Return of the Galon King*, 76–159; Alicia Turner, 'Narratives of Nation, Questions of Community: Examining Burmese Sources without the Lens of Nation', *Journal of Burma Studies* 15, no. 2 (2011): 263–82; Jonathan Saha, 'Madness and the Making of a Colonial Order in Burma', *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2013): 406–35; Jane M. Ferguson, 'Who's Counting? Ethnicity, Belonging, and the National Census in Burma/Myanmar', *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 171, no. 1 (2015): 1–28.
13. Here I am building on Sumit Sarkar's critique of the direction of the collective: see Sumit Sarkar, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies', in *Writing Social History*, ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997): 82–108.

troops before it was crushed, and lasted for around 18 months. Compounding the impact of the revolt was its timing. It broke out hard on the heels of a bloody inter-communal riot in the colonial capital of Yangon that left hundreds dead, predominantly Indian workers, as well as the Chittagong Armory Raid led by Bengali revolutionaries at the borders of the colony. It also coincided with the two waves of Civil Disobedience that engulfed much of India. The rebellion could easily be incorporated into an analysis of the wider patterns of anti-colonial resistance in British India during the inter-War years, such as those studied by Subaltern studies historians. However, the revolt was at the heart of a different set of fraught theoretical debates about the nature of peasant revolts throughout the 1970s.

James C. Scott used the revolt as one of two case studies in his monograph, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, a text that, like *Elementary Aspects*, has cast a long shadow.<sup>14</sup> Scott argued that the peasantry prioritised subsistence. For him, this meant that their expectations of social relations and economic justice were shaped by the imperative of securing their material needs. The impact of the more rigid and bureaucratic methods by which the state extracted revenue from peasants in the colonial period undermined older systems of reciprocity that were meant to protect cultivators during hard times. At the same time, dependence on the world market introduced greater levels of risk into peasant livelihoods. The Great Depression saw, in Scott's interpretation, the perfect storm whereby Burmese rice-producing peasants saw the value of their produce fall suddenly and dramatically while the state continued to demand taxation from them, triggering a revolt.<sup>15</sup> This conceptual framework for understanding the Hsaya San revolt has shaped much of the subsequent debate over the revolt, although later studies of the rebellion have also been preoccupied by a discussion regarding the extent to which it can be considered an expression of traditional forms of resistance or the result of modern nationalist organising.<sup>16</sup> It is worth highlighting for the purposes of this study, however, that Scott's approach lacks a discussion of ethnicity. This occlusion holds for much of the historiography, with the exception of some attention paid to the violence directed towards Chettiar money-lenders, and Indian migratory labourers, most of whom were Dalit Telugu-speaking

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14. Michael Adas, "'Moral Economy' or 'Contest State'? Elite Demands and the Origins of Peasant Protest in Southeast Asia', *Journal of Social History* 13, no. 4 (1980): 521–46; Pierre Brocheux, 'Moral Economy or Political Economy? The Peasants Are Always Rational', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (1983): 791–803; Jane Haggis et al., 'By the Teeth: A Critical Examination of James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*', *World Development* 14, no. 12 (1986): 1435–55; Shaila Seshia Galvin, 'Peasant Studies: Subsistence, Justice, and Precarity', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 2 (2021): 391–97.
  15. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).
  16. Manuel Sarkisyanz, 'Messianic Folk-Buddhism as Ideology of Peasant Revolts in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Burma', *Review of Religious Research* 10, no. 1 (1968): 32–38; Robert L. Solomon, 'Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion', *Modern Asian Studies* 3, no. 3 (1969): 209–23; U. Maung Maung, *Nationalist Movements in Burma, 1920–1940: Changing Patterns of Leadership, from Sangha to Laity* (Canberra: M.A., The Australian National University, 1976); Patricia M. Herbert, *The Hsaya San Rebellion, 1930–1932, Reappraised* (Melbourne: Monash University, 1982); Ian Brown, 'Tax Remission and Tax Burden in Rural Lower Burma during the Economic Crisis of the Early 1930s', *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (1999): 383–403; Ian Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis: Burma's Rice Delta and the World Depression of the 1930s*, RoutledgeCurzon Studies in the Modern History of Asia 28 (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005); for an excellent overview of the shape of the field, see Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 'Structuring Revolt: Communities of Interpretation in the Historiography of the Saya San Rebellion', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2008): 297–317.

men.<sup>17</sup> It is here that a contrast with Guha's work is especially productive, as in *Elementary Aspects*, ethnicity plays a formative role in peasant revolts.

To appreciate the importance of ethnicity in *Elementary Aspects*, it is necessary to reacquaint ourselves with the overarching structure of the book. It is a remarkable publication for many reasons, but an easily overlooked innovation of the text—one that stands quite apart from its methodological originality—is that it is a historical study largely indifferent to narrative. Instead, the book works through what Guha identified as the eponymous 'elementary aspects' through a series of revolts that are analysed both in comparison and in synthesis.<sup>18</sup> Each chapter is devoted to one of these aspects, and in them he uses evidence from a wide range of peasant revolts in nineteenth century India. These aspects are, in order of appearance: negation, ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission and territoriality. It is not organised by chronology or through case studies, but he uses the chapters to discretely isolate and evidence the most fundamental, recurring elements of peasant revolts. There is no need to elaborate on each of the elementary aspects he identifies here, save to note the extent to which a tension between ethnicity and class identifications is interwoven through the chapters and is especially central to his conceptions of peasant solidarity, the transmission of insurrectionism and the insurgents' sense of territoriality. Guha refers to this tension as the 'duplex character' of peasant consciousness. It was duplex as it was at once informed by ethnic identifications (for Guha, encompassing race, religion and caste) and by class interests.<sup>19</sup> Through his near-encyclopaedic marshalling of details from across a range of different revolts, Guha shows how one or the other half of this duplex consciousness might come to predominate peasant actions in contingent circumstances. Through this he contends that whether it was ethnicity or class that was most salient at any particular moment, the proximate relations between class and ethnicity were nevertheless a fundamental feature to both the solidarities expressed in revolt and the routes through which insurgency was transmitted.<sup>20</sup>

Where this argument becomes especially useful to the study of communal geographies is in the role that ethnicity plays in the territoriality of revolt. Peasant insurgents, he argues, were motivated by a sense of belonging that operated through their conceptions of 'ethnic space' and 'physical space'.<sup>21</sup> Crucially, though, these two conceptions were not quite coextensive with one another. The domain of the revolt was identified through a sense of shared ancestry and through the labelling of the enemies

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17. Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852–1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974); Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); Raman Mahadevan, 'Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Colonial Burma—An Exploratory Study of the Role of Nattukottai Chettiars of Tamil Nadu, 1880–1930', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 15, no. 3 (1978): 329–58; Satyanarayana Adapa, 'Globalization and the Telugu (South Indian) Diaspora in Southeast Asia, 1871–1964', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 67 (2006): 845–58; Sean Turnell and Alison Vicary, 'Parching the Land? The Chettiars in Burma', *Australian Economic History Review* 48, no. 1 (2008): 1–25; Jonathan Saha, 'Racial Capitalism and Peasant Insurgency in Colonial Myanmar', *History Workshop Journal* 94 (2022): 42–60.

18. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983): 1–17.

19. *Ibid.*, 171.

20. *Ibid.*, 167–277.

21. *Ibid.*, 280–81.

of the revolt as ‘outsiders’. However, the imagined topographies of these domains were not always clearly defined, nor did they correspond entirely to where the rebels or their kin resided. It was this gap between ethnic space and physical space that gave a geographic impetus to peasant insurgencies, in Guha’s analysis. It provided a territorial ambit to revolts, but it also placed spatial limits on the extent of the revolt—a localism that Guha identifies as a frequent frustration of communist revolutionaries.<sup>22</sup>

Guha’s spatial arguments can elucidate the events of the Hsaya San rebellion, as I show below, but only after some adaptations to the local context—adaptations that I will argue in the conclusion are suggestive of the possibilities for a broader recovery of his work. In the case of Myanmar, there are compelling empirical reasons to reject Guha’s rigid conception of peasant ethnicity as a primordial identity. Whereas, for Guha, Indian peasant rebellions were structured through a negation of feudalism,<sup>23</sup> in colonial Myanmar’s rice-producing regions, where the revolt took root, there was no comparable stable elite authority against which the insurgents defined themselves. Indeed, it has been persuasively argued through reciprocal comparisons with other deltaic regions of British India that the Burmese rice boom in the delta of the Ayeyarwady River was facilitated precisely by the relative weakness of class structures in pre-colonial Myanmar, where there was no landholding gentry. Peasants migrated from upper Myanmar, escaping poverty and the extractive tributary demands of local elites, to begin cultivating unclaimed land in the south.<sup>24</sup> In addition to the comparative laxity of feudal authority, ethnic identification in Myanmar during the nineteenth century was marked by fluidity. While cultural and linguistic differences were apparent in pre-colonial Myanmar and did correspond to particular ethnonyms, these identities were fluid and porous, albeit becoming gradually more tied to the exercise of political power.<sup>25</sup> While these identifications may have ossified, this was a slow, incremental process. The nineteenth century was a period of change during which Burmese notions of human difference began to go from being ordered through Buddhist cosmology and proximity to courtly power, to converging with Euro-American conceptions of race and nation.<sup>26</sup> But that earlier fluidity has been argued to have lasted well into the colonial period, even through to the mid to late twentieth century. The relatively haphazard and lackadaisical nature of governmentality in the colony did not have the effect of reifying and

22. *Ibid.*, 278–332; 330.

23. ‘Feudalism’, a term that until recently was nearly as unpalatable to historians as structuralism, is once again the subject of discussion as a meaningful category, and so is perhaps less of an obstacle to appreciating Guha’s approach: Chris Wickham, ‘How Did the Feudal Economy Work? The Economic Logic of Medieval Societies’, *Past & Present* 251, no. 1 (2021): 3–40; Shami Ghosh, ‘Chris Wickham on “The Economic Logic of Medieval Societies”: A Response’, *Past & Present* 260, no. 1 (2023): 269–86; Chris Wickham, ‘A Reply to Shami Ghosh’, *Past & Present* 260, no. 1 (2023): 287–96.

24. Willem Van Schendel, ‘Origins of the Burma Rice Boom, 1850–1880’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 17, no. 4 (1987): 456–72.

25. Victor B. Lieberman, ‘Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma’, *Modern Asian Studies* 12, no. 3 (1978): 455–82; Victor Lieberman, ‘Ethnic Hatred and Universal Benevolence: Ethnicity and Loyalty in Precolonial Myanmar, and Britain’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63, no. 2 (2021): 310–38.

26. Aurore Candier, ‘Mapping Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century Burma: When “Categories of People” (Lumyo) Became “Nations”’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50, no. 3 (2019): 347–64.



fixing colonial categories of rule in the ways that it has been argued occurred in other parts of British India.<sup>27</sup>

Guha's structuralist view of peasant mentalities simply does not fit the evidence of agrarian society in colonial Myanmar. Ethnicity was less fixed and embedded than he claims, and it was not a rigid marker of identity. Nevertheless, despite these empirical contrasts between the peasantry in Myanmar and India—at least in how the latter was viewed by Guha—a dynamic tension between ethnic and physical space is evident in the Hsaya San rebellion. This tension was apparent in the archival records on the revolt, particularly in cases of violence meted out by rebels, mostly recruited from Bamar majority villages, against Chin villages. It is a tension that appears in the trial records in very much the same way that it appeared in the primary evidence examined in such painstaking detail by Guha. Of course, we must be wary of this evidence. Serving both the muse of history, Clio, and the imperatives of counterinsurgency—to borrow Guha's own evocative phrase—this archive was not neutral in its ascription of cultural identities.<sup>28</sup> But, as we shall see, a close, critical reading shows an ambiguous insurgent sense of territoriality in the documents detailing these incidents. My explanation for why we can find this same dynamic is that rather than ethnicity being *a priori* to peasant rebellions *qua* Guha, ethnicity was being performatively enacted through violence.<sup>29</sup> In other words, communal geographies were being made anew during the revolt.

### Particles of a communal geography

In noting the litany of place-names compiled by imperial officials in the annals of peasant insurgencies, Guha describes them as 'particles of geography caught in the beam of history'.<sup>30</sup> Below, I shed light on the ethnic violence committed by peasant rebels in just three villages that became embroiled in the Hsaya San revolt in the second half of 1931: Gyogya, Paungsaba and Ngamyawgyi. All three were located in Paukkaung township to the west of the central Myanmar district of Prome, in the eco-tones where the heavily cultivated plains met the forested slopes of the Pegu Yoma mountain range. The time and place of these events are both essential to interpreting the communal geography of the revolt. The rebellion had its own contingent spatial and diachronic dynamics informed by the seasons, topography and the counter-insurgency campaign itself.<sup>31</sup> But, these specifics notwithstanding, a tension

27. Elliott Prasse-Freeman, 'Reassessing Reification: Ethnicity amidst "Failed" Governmentality in Burma and India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 65, no. 3 (2023): 670–701.

28. Guha, 'Prose of Counter-Insurgency'; Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 'Genealogy of a Rebellion Narrative: Law, Ethnology and Culture in Colonial Burma', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2003): 393–419; Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 'Healing, Rebellion, and the Law: Ethnologies of Medicine in Colonial Burma, 1928–1932', *Journal of Burma Studies* 14 (2010): 151–85.

29. By performative, I mean the way that iterative acts produce the effect that names them, rather than its increasingly common popular usage to refer to something theatrical and superficial: see Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31.

30. Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 305–06.

31. Lyndal Roper, 'Emotions and the German Peasants' War of 1524–6', *History Workshop Journal* 92 (2021): 51–81; Saha, 'Racial Capitalism'.



between physical and ethnic space is apparent in the recorded actions taken by the rebels.

The revolt began in the days leading up to Christmas 1930 in the district of Tharrawaddy, a region that bordered Prome and that already had a bad reputation for criminality among imperial officials.<sup>32</sup> It was apparently launched by a traditional healer and seasoned anti-colonial activist called Hsaya San. He had been active in campaigns against the capitation tax that had been orchestrated under the auspices of the main umbrella nationalist political movement, the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), and the grass-roots, rural, anti-colonial organising committees known as Wunthanu Athin ('Patriotic', or literally, 'loving one's race', Associations).<sup>33</sup> Hsaya San had been a member of the radical wing of the GCBA, but, allegedly with an eye to full-scale insurrection against the British government, he had begun to tour the countryside to set up new Galon Athin,<sup>34</sup> the *galon* being a mythical bird that was a recurring motif of the rebels. The nature of Hsaya San's role in instigating and then leading the rebellion is now an open question. There is no consensus as to whether he was a millenarian leader building on older notions of Buddhist kingship, or a self-styled nationalist president of revolutionary peasant associations, or even whether he was a meaningful figurehead for what was likely to have instead been a diffuse set of insurgent groups.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the ensuing insurrection was organised and widespread. In a pattern of revolt that was to be emulated across central and southern Myanmar in the first few months of 1931, the rebels attacked state outposts in their hundreds, seizing arms and murdering loyal village headmen as well as other representatives of the state that they came across. In spite of an ominous warning of brewing unrest in the nationalist press published earlier in the same week as the first outbreaks, the colonial government was taken by surprise.<sup>36</sup> More importantly, it was also overwhelmed.

By the summer of 1931, new legislation had been passed to allow for expedited special trials to be held to process the cases against the hundreds of captured rebels, as well as to enable the state to extend its powers of arrest and detention.<sup>37</sup> The Government of India had also deployed an additional 7,000 troops to help suppress the revolt. A reinvigorated counter-insurgency campaign, which destroyed villages but also offered amnesties to rebels not wanted for capital offences, now turned the tide of the revolt. Hsaya San himself sought support in the Shan States at the start of the summer, only to be captured, tried and executed before the year was out. With the coming of the monsoon rains, the mode of rebellion shifted away from large, collective, direct attacks on the state authority towards guerrilla-style battles with battalions of Indian troops. However, once the advantage provided to the rebels by the

32. Rangoon Report on the Rebellion in Burma up to 3rd May, 1931 (London: India Office, 1931); Rangoon, *The Origin and Causes of the Burma Rebellion (1930–32)* (Rangoon Government Printer, 1934).

33. Tharaphi Than, 'Nationalism, Religion, and Violence: Old and New Wunthanu Movements in Myanmar', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2015): 12–24.

34. U Chit Maung, 'The Real Origin and Causes of the Burma Rebellion (1930–32)', in Ma Ma Lay, *A Man Like Him: Portrait of the Burmese Journalist, Journal Kyaw U Chit Maung*, trans. Ma Thanegi (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008): 189–200; Maung, 'Nationalist Movements'; Herbert, *Hsaya San Rebellion*.

35. Aung-Thwin, 'Structuring Revolt'.

36. Maung, 'Nationalist Movements'; Herbert, *Hsaya San Rebellion*.

37. Aung-Thwin, *Return of the Galon King*, 76–105.

inclement conditions had passed, these peasant armies began dwindling in numbers due to a bitter war of attrition with the counter-insurgency forces who had been hounding them for months. While pockets of fighting continued into the winter months of 1931, nearly 3,000 rebels had surrendered by the anniversary of the first uprisings. By the time the rebellion had been crushed, an estimated 3,000 rebels had been killed and around 9,000 had been captured.<sup>38</sup>

The experience of the revolt in Prome district was more intense than in most other parts of the colony. After the initial uprisings began in the district during May 1931, the area became the heart of the rebellion but, consequently, it was also the focus for some of the harshest counter-insurgency measures. The most notorious of these violent encounters occurred at a village called Wetto, also in Paukkaung township, where in early June, following an ambush on Indian troops by what eyewitnesses claimed to be around 500 rebel fighters, an estimated 100–200 insurgents were killed, at the expense of nearly two dozen soldiers. After this uneven battle, the counter-insurgency forces returned and removed the heads of 16 fallen rebels, which were then taken from the scene and publicly displayed at the district police headquarters, although some of the evidence suggested that more than a hundred other corpses had also been beheaded. The macabre spectacle was photographed and printed in the nationalist press, leading to questions in the British parliament.<sup>39</sup> On the ground in Prome it was privately noted by high-ranking military officials that the ghoulis incident had resulted in a ‘tremendous moral effect’.<sup>40</sup> In the following weeks, around 2,000 rebels surrendered themselves in the district. This event may have also sparked the most fervent guerrilla activity of the revolt, as Prome became the location where two of the most sustained peasant bands were formed, calling themselves the Lion Army and the Tiger Army.<sup>41</sup> Gyogyia, Paungsaba and Ngamyawgyi were Chin villages located in Paukkaung, Prome, just tens of miles from the site of the mass decapitations. The rebel conflicts with the Chin residents of these villages occurred in September and October of 1931, when the rains were dissipating but with the memory of the bloody events at Wetto still fresh. These conflicts reveal a tension between ethnic and physical space—a tension that was generative of insurgent violence.

The violence at these three villages shared a similar pattern, one that largely conformed to the main modalities of peasant rebellions described by Guha, ‘*wrecking, burning, eating and looting*’.<sup>42</sup> These dynamics also reveal the ways in which the rebellion was enacted through and across space. In all three cases, the village was targeted for ‘extortion’, as the special court judges labelled the acts. They were then

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38. Ian Brown, ‘The Economic Crisis and Rebellion in Rural Burma in the Early 1930s’, in *Growth, Distribution and Political Change: Asia and the Wider World*, ed. Ryōshin Minami, Kwan S. Kim and Malcolm Falkus, Studies in the Economies of East and Southeast Asia (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1999): 143–57; Parimal Ghosh, *Brave Men of the Hills: Resistance and Rebellion in Burma, 1825–1932* (London: Hurst, 2000); Ian Brown, ‘Rebels, the Death Penalty, and Legal Process in the Late Colonial Burma’, *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 3 (2019): 813–32.

39. National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter, NAI), Home & Political Department, File no. 177, 1931: ‘Exposure at Prome of the Heads of 16 Rebels Killed in an Engagement with the Govt. Forces’, June 30, 1931: 28–39; Hansard, HC Deb., Vol. 253, June 8, 1931.

40. Edmund Bede Clipson, ‘Constructing an Intelligence State: The Colonial Security Services in Burma, 1930–1942’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2010): 68–72; IOR, L/MIL/5/862: ‘The War Diary of Rangoon Brigade Area, Burma, Vol. I’: 16–20.

41. The events in Prome are discussed at greater length and in more detail in Saha, ‘Racial Capitalism’.

42. Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, 136–37. Italics in original.

attacked and looted, and in the cases of Paungsaba and Ngamyawgyi, the houses of the headmen were razed to the ground. The public nature of these acts, which the imperial officials frequently referred to as wanton, was a sign of their political content. These were not mere opportunistic crimes but attempts to present a new order. This conspicuousness was most apparent at Paungsaba at the end of September. This was the first of the three villages to go through this ordeal. A group of 20 men were brought together by the leaders of a rebel association, Saya Khin Gyi and San Kun, in a jungle hideout from where they were directed to march to Paungsaba, allegedly because the village had not paid affiliation fees to the association. On route to the village, a further 29 men joined the group and, armed with guns and *dahs* (long knives common to Myanmar) and playing drums and cymbals, they arrived to find the place largely abandoned. They then ransacked the buildings and torched the village headman's house.<sup>43</sup> The march to Paungsaba brought rebels from different villages together and then quite literally gave direction to their collective action.

It was also apparent from these cases that the insurgents had knowledge of intimate and kinship ties between villages. The attack on Ngamyawgyi village just over a week later by a group led by Sabadwin Hla Maung appears in the trial records as less planned, but implicitly revealed the familiarity between rebels and their targets. A man from the village, called Tun E, was spotted visiting his fiancée at a neighbouring village and was captured by the group, who then wrote to his relatives demanding a ransom. When the payment delivered by his mother, brother-in-law and prospective father-in-law was deemed insufficient, the first two were also held captive while Tun E's fiancée's father was sent back with instructions to bring more money. When he did not return in the time frame given by the rebels, they raided Ngamyawgyi, shooting a villager in the neck, looting eight houses, burning down the headman's house and capturing the ten-house *gaung* (the village official appointed for surveillance duties).<sup>44</sup> They then murdered their captives, apparently decapitating Tun E.<sup>45</sup> The unfolding of this attack made it clear that the rebels were familiar with the village and its inhabitants: they had been able to recognise Tun E and identify the ten-house *gaung*. By implication, it suggests that the converse was also likely true and that at least some of the rebels were not attempting to hide their own identities; indeed, Sabadwin Hla Maung was described as notorious across the district by the local magistrate.<sup>46</sup> The rebels in this case appeared to be operating on the basis that the individuals belonged to specific villages and that those villages were responsible for them. In this way, the rebels seem to have treated villages as, to recall Guha's terminology, the elementary 'particles' that constituted community.

The spatial dynamics of the insurgents' mobilisation and raids on these villages—places which played a locative role in the rebels' conception of communal belonging—appears to have reinforced ethnic divisions. The legal documents

43. NAI, Home Department (Judicial), Progs., nos. 1115, 1932: 'Progs. of the Case of Aung Myo & Others Sentenced by the Special Judges, Prome'.

44. Lalita Hingkanonta, 'The Police in Colonial Burma' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2013): 162–63.

45. India Office Records, British Library, London (hereafter, IOR), L/P&J/2023: 'From the Secretary to the Government of Burma, Judicial Department, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department', October 17, 1932.

46. *Ibid.*

pertaining to these two cases make a point of noting that these villages were Chin, but the salience of the ethnic marker is not elaborated upon. Perhaps it was expected that their intended readers in the appeal courts would understand the pertinence of their ethnic composition without further elucidation. The case of Gyogyia village, however, inadvertently revealed more explicitly the ethnic tensions at work in the revolt. This attack occurred just a day after the murders at Ngamyawgyi and was led by San Kun, a leader of the attack on Paungsaba. Like the confrontation that he had led less than two weeks before, San Kun headed out to the village with a smaller group of rebels which grew en route, reaching 22 by the time they arrived. It is not stated whether they arrived with music and bearing arms as they had at Paungsaba, but when they arrived and entered Gyogyia, most villagers had already fled, except for Ma Shwe Pu, who had been left in her house with her children and baby, a young boy called Maung Hlaw, and Ma Kyin Me, a 17-year-old girl.

San Kun discovered Ma Shwe Pu, her family and Maung Hlaw. He then ordered the village to be vacated. Ma Kyin Me was taken from the village by an advanced group of the rebels as they left. As Ma Shwe Pu was taken from her home holding her infant, she was followed by her distraught six-year-old daughter. The child was slashed with a *dah* by a rebel, apparently under the orders of San Kun, who was irritated by the child's cries. She died immediately. Meanwhile, Ma Kyin Me had been released by the first group of rebels, but as she ran back to her home, she was cut down by a knife wielded by San Kun; she survived her injuries. San Kun, with two other rebels, then attempted to ransom Ma Shwe Pu and her baby back to the village, with Maung Hlaw as the go-between. The exchange was largely unsuccessful—apparently, San Kun only received 38 rupees having demanded 1,000—but the remaining captives were returned alive before the rebels left.<sup>47</sup> The gendering of the violence in this case, with either a targeting of women and girls or an opportunistic exploitation of their domestic vulnerability, might itself speak to the role of ethnic antagonism. However, it was misinformation about the perpetrators of this attack provided by some of the inhabitants of Gyogyia that revealed the communal tensions at work.

In the initial report made by some of the villagers from Gyogyia, it was not San Kun or any members of his rebel group who were identified as the culprits, but members of a group led by a man known as Chet Su that witnesses came forward to claim to have seen. It was only after 20 members of San Kun's group had been charged with the attack and the murders that these claims were withdrawn.<sup>48</sup> In the trial, these false statements were deemed immaterial to the case, which rested instead on approvers' testimonies and confessions, as did the cases on Paungsaba and Ngamyawgyi. This evidence—at least as it pertained to the roles played by individuals in the cases, if not the overarching events—was flawed. Most of the rebels later claimed in their appeals that their confessions were the result of beatings and torture at the hands of the police. The selection of approvers, already a questionable mode of generating evidence, was also less rigorous and more expedited than in other contexts

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47. IOR, L/P&J/2024: 'Proceedings of Nga Kywe alias Kyue Gyi and Others. Special Trial No. 13 of 1932 the Court of the Special Judge, Prome (Burma Rebellion Case)', September 22, 1932.

48. *Ibid.*

in British India.<sup>49</sup> The special courts established during the revolt did not give time for the defendants to see the evidence against them in advance or to prepare for cross-examinations. In the appeals, which, in capital cases, reached the secretary of state for India for scrutiny, most of these flaws were largely accepted due to the imperatives of the moment.<sup>50</sup> The false statements, however, opened the records to some self-reflection on the social context for the generation of evidence on rebel 'crimes'. Judge H.F. Dunkey, who presided over the special court in Prome, sought to explain the false statements:

One cannot have tried as many of these rebel cases as I have without being struck by the intense hatred which existed during the rebellion between the Chins and the Burmans. Chins were killed on sight by the rebels, and the Chins were ready to denounce any Burman of a crime committed by the rebels against them. At the time that this dacoity occurred, a gang of rebels under Chet Su was particularly active, and without doubt Chet Su and certain of his well-known followers were denounced for this reason.<sup>51</sup>

For Dunkey, a wider context of ethnic tension was informing both the revolt and the state's attempts to bring the rebels to justice. This claim, however, was itself generalising and rested on imperial assumptions about the fixed nature of ethnic groupings in the colony.<sup>52</sup> But it can be contextualised within the contingencies of this moment in the revolt and read against the ambiguities apparent in these Paukkaung cases. First the colonial use of the very ethnonym 'Chin' needs some unpacking.

Recently, Pum Khan Pau and Thang Sian Mung have completed some exhaustive work tracing the colonial ethnology on the 'fragmented tribes' of the Chin, Kuki and Lushai. They show how 'Chin' was one of a number of overlapping ethnyonyms uncovered by scholar-officials over more than a century of studies, one that was an exonym derived from Burmese. Carefully unpicking 'etic' and 'emic' approaches taken by imperial researchers, they argue that in spite of the varying and unstable nomenclature for the ethnic groups residing in the borderlands of modern-day Myanmar, India and Bangladesh, it is discernible that colonial representations related to a more or less stable upland group with the endonym Zo—the ethnonym now officially recognised in Mizoram, India, but not in Myanmar.<sup>53</sup> However, as Pum Khan Pau notes in other areas of his work, the word Zo relates not just to a people but to a place—the mountainous border-worlds in the west of Myanmar.<sup>54</sup> Here we have a tension in Zo understandings of territoriality akin to that identified by Guha between ethnic and physical space. The villages in Paukkaung were located far from these upland regions and networks of kinship, and they were interspersed among Bamar villages.

49. Shahid Amin, 'Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura', in *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987): 166–202.

50. Brown, 'Rebels'.

51. IOR, L/P&J/2024: 'Proceedings of Nga Kywe alias Kyue Gyi and Others, Special Trial no. 13 of 1932 the Court of the Special Judge, Prome (Burma Rebellion Case)', September 22, 1932.

52. This played out in the recruitment of Karen and Chin units to suppress the rebellion due to their assumed loyalty: see Michael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 1993): 38–39.

53. Pum Khan Pau and Thang Sian Mung, 'Fragmented Tribes of the India-Burma-Bangladesh Borderlands: Representation of the Zo (Kuki-Chin) People in Colonial Ethnography', *Asian Ethnicity* 23, no. 3 (2022): 608–29.

54. Pau, 'Transborder People'.

There were also particular cultural aspects to those who have been termed ‘plains Chin’ in imperial and early postcolonial literature. Their distinct dialect was cast in Burmese script, rather than Roman script as in the hills, and by the mid twentieth century, the influence of the Burmese and Arakanese languages was marked.<sup>55</sup> Colonial ethnography also indicated a high degree of shared cultural practices with their Bamar neighbours. The section on Prome district in the 1908 *Imperial Gazetteer* claimed that Chin peoples living ‘near Burmese villages [had] adopted Burmese dress and dropped their own language’.<sup>56</sup> The Chin villages of Paukkaung were then likely to have been liminal in their ethnic distinctiveness, a liminality that placed them at the crux of the rebels’ conceptions of the physical and ethnic domain of the revolt.

These quintessentially colonial documents can be read to reveal their own uncertainty over ethnic identifications. The ethnographic description of the 11,600-strong population of people categorised as Chin in Prome district (the second largest enumerated in a district found to be 93 percent Bamar) noted that the majority were practising Buddhists, even though the author was compelled to note in parentheses that this was not borne out in the census data.<sup>57</sup> This uncertainty notwithstanding, in the early postcolonial era, the majority of Zo peoples in Myanmar were not Christians—most were animist and a smaller group, Buddhist.<sup>58</sup> The apparent inaccuracy here emanates from the fact that these colonial and postcolonial ethnographies and censuses sought to count people within fixed categories that were then mapped onto inherently unstable and overlapping identities.<sup>59</sup> As the eminent anthropologist of Zo groups in Myanmar, F.K. Lehman, argued as early as the 1960s, ethnic identities in the country are better understood as ‘roles’, meaning that they were relational markers of identity and could only be indirect descriptors of social and cultural practices. As an example, he noted that Zo villages located away from Bamar villages tended to invest less in maintaining outward symbols of their identity in contrast to those living in close proximity to the majority Bamar ethnic group, for whom displaying their ethnic belonging had more impetus.<sup>60</sup> Situating this insight back into the history of the revolt, it might be argued that the expression of ethnic difference was also relational, in this case contingent on the local context of the revolt and its geographies.

This ethnographic detour is pertinent to the interpretation of the revolt to the extent that it shows that it was highly likely that the distinction between the Bamar and Chin populations would have been less than clear on the ground and not inherently salient to the dividing lines of the rebellion. In spite of colonial portrayals of Chin populations as loyal, the history of British colonial relations in the Chin Hills

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55. Theodore Stern, ‘Language Contact between Related Languages: Burmese Influences upon Plains Chin’, *Anthropological Linguistics* 4, no. 4 (1962): 1–28.

56. *Imperial Gazetteer of India: Provincial Series, Burma Vol. 1: The Province; Mountains, Rivers, Tribes; and the Arkan, Pegu, Irrawaddy, and Tenasserim Divisions* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1908): 294.

57. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*.

58. F.K. Lehman, ‘Ethnic Categories in Burma and the Theory of Social Systems’, in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations, Vol. 1*, ed. Peter Kunstadter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967): 93–124; 97.

59. Ferguson, ‘Who’s Counting?’; Erin L. McAuliffe, ‘Caste and the Quest for Racial Hierarchy in British Burma: An Analysis of Census Classifications from 1872–1931’, accessed January 10, 2024, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Caste-and-the-quest-for-racial-hierarchy-in-British-McAuliffe/ae9f77f1ba2285bf259e8e1b5ca3fdb4404704fa>.

60. Lehman, ‘Ethnic Categories’, 112–13.



was one of entrenched and perpetual resistance to imperial authority.<sup>61</sup> Chin villages in the plains, whose mostly rice-producing inhabitants would have experienced the same impact of the Great Depression on their economic security, were not inherently less likely to revolt. The trial records are silent on how the Chin populations of Paukkaung viewed British rule, aside from suggesting a reluctance to participate in the increasingly sporadic peasant resistance to it and a willingness to collaborate with the counter-insurgency forces in the second half of 1931, when the revolt was demonstrably faltering. However, the waves of surrenders in Prome following the atrocity at Wetto would indicate that these villages would not have been unusual in turning away from support for the revolt. Indeed, even some of the rebels involved in these raids against Chin villages sought to appeal their sentences by claiming that they had been coerced into the revolt. Po Aung, who was convicted and sentenced to ten years' rigorous imprisonment for his part in the attack on Paungsaba, asserted that he had been impressed into San Kun's growing band while tending his fields and that he was forced into paying affiliation fees, a portrayal of events that blurred the division between perpetrator and victim.<sup>62</sup>

On the side of the Bamar rebels, there are ambiguities in the trial records that enable us to read them against the grain and probe the extent to which these three villages were viewed as being outside of the domain of the rebellion in terms of Guha's conception of 'ethnic space'. While the records on the Gyogyia and Ngamyawgyi cases are silent on the rationale for the attacks or, at least the rebel's legitimating language for them, beyond monetary gain, the suggestion that the raid on Paungsaba was to realise 'affiliation fees' for a 'rebel association' is plausibly relevant to the other cases, given their proximity in space and time (and in the case of Gyogyia, San Kun's leading role in both attacks). The contrast with attacks in the same district on people identified as Indian is instructive, drawing out the ambiguity at work in these cases. The nature of rebel violence markedly changed in Prome in late 1931, with attacks on Indian labouring populations that indicated a growing ethnic chauvinism among rebels as the insurrection wore on. In those instances, apparently Indian individuals were separated from multi-ethnic groups and killed without any attempt to either forcibly enlist them or to extort them under the guise of support.

Evidently, there was a clearer alignment in the imagination of ethnic and physical space when it came to the exclusion of those thought to be Indian foreigners than there was with Chin populations. I posit elsewhere that this anti-Indian violence was due to a racialisation of the peasantry in colonial Myanmar that converged with their growing dependence on the market for social reproduction.<sup>63</sup> The differentiation of Bamar and Chin populations in the revolt—or perhaps made through the revolt—appears to have been something of a threshold for this racialisation. They shared the same physical space that made up the domain of the revolt, but their ethnic

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61. Pum Khan Pau, 'Disarmament and Resistance in Colonial Burma: A Case Study of the Chin Hills', *Journal of Burma Studies* 21, no. 2 (2017): 233–61; Pum Khan Pau, 'Small Wars as "Savage Warfare": Rethinking Colonial Counterinsurgency Operations in Northeast India and Northwest Burma (1826–1919)', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 34, no. 3 (2022): 571–96.

62. NAI, Home Department (Judicial), Progs., nos. 1115, 1932.

63. Saha, 'Racial Capitalism'.



proximity was marked by ambivalence, in spite of similar class interests. In the eyes of the rebels, the villagers of Paungsaba, Gyogya and Ngamyawgyi could have been—even should have been—comrades-in-arms. As they were not, they quickly became enemies.

## Conclusion

Reading Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* today necessitates historicising his approach to enable us to identify and abstract from the book arguments that might be salvageable for wider application. For Dipesh Chakrabarty, the fatal error of *Elementary Aspects* was its theoretical reliance on structuralism to understand peasants' worlds.<sup>64</sup> In other words, he diagnoses as a flaw Guha's conviction that long-standing feudal social relations forged fixed peasant mentalities over the course of several centuries, and that the resulting consciousness structured revolts and was latent in the resultant documentation.<sup>65</sup> This also formed a central part of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's close critique of the book in her reflections on the early years of the Subaltern studies project. Writing shortly after its publication, she drew attention to the tension between Guha's constructivist approach to understanding the encoding of peasants in archival records with his positivistic attempt to recover a peasant consciousness through those very same records, arguing that it led to essentialising arguments that hid the complicity between historians and their historical subjects. But structuralism, even when conceived of as a theoretical error, is integral to the book. Guha's commitment to structuralism enabled him to hold the two sides in this tension together. It provided an ontological basis for the existence of a peasant consciousness that was pre-formed and waiting to be uncovered through a critique of an imperial epistemology. But it was a conceptual adhesive that dissolved under Spivak's deconstructivist reading.<sup>66</sup>

As might now be apparent, both Chakrabarty, and Spivak before him, primarily critique Guha's theoretical apparatus rather than his empirical findings, although for both there were implications of the former for the latter. However, set in the context of the debates within radical history at the start of the 1980s, Guha's deployment of structuralist theory was a notable and unmatched success. English Marxist and New Left historians had been torn asunder by debates over structuralism in the late 1970s. Famously, E.P. Thompson railed against what he saw as the Stalinist intellectual absolutism of Althusserian thought and its stultifying effects on humanistic social histories. On the other side of the argument, Thompson was accused of valorising a form of empiricism that eschewed rigorously theorised conceptual frameworks that could reorientate Leftist historical research, at least by his

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64. The category 'peasant' may have also once dated Guha's work, but in recent years, it has had something of a recovery as a useful heuristic for relational, rather fixed economic and social positions: see John R. Owen, 'In Defence of the "Peasant"', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 35, no. 3 (2005): 368–85; Harriet Friedmann, 'The Awkward Class: A Foundation for Peasant Studies', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 5 (2019): 1096–1105.

65. Chakrabarty, 'Subaltern Studies'.

66. Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985): 333–63.

more engaged critics like Stuart Hall.<sup>67</sup> In *Elementary Aspects*, however, a synthesis between structuralism and humanism was arrived at with consummate ease. In this intellectual context, there was a political pragmatism to Guha's theoretical framework. It was structuralism that enabled Guha—an avid reader of Claude Lévi-Strauss and E.P. Thompson—to reveal the humanity, and revolutionary potential, of peasants as historical actors.<sup>68</sup> Structuralism only appears as a conceptual weakness of the book in retrospect and in contrast to the growing influence of post-structuralist thought.<sup>69</sup>

As a product of a particular historiographical moment, what does Guha's work have to offer to today's scholars studying South Asian communal geographies? In my reading, Guha's spatial arguments remain productive despite the now outmoded structuralist underpinnings—a theoretical engagement which is, in my reading at least, lightly worn in *Elementary Aspects*. The lack of contiguity between 'ethnic space' and 'physical space' remains a powerful insight for explaining the dynamics of peasant insurgencies. Returning briefly to Judge Dunkey's explanation for the villagers of Gyogy's false accusations, it is worth noting his claim that he was 'struck by the intense hatred which existed *during the rebellion* between the Chins and the Burmans'.<sup>70</sup> Whilst it may have only been a throwaway turn of phrase to capture his lack of prior knowledge, the surface implication is that this animus either emerged from the revolt or became more marked during the revolt. Considering the timing of these attacks in the arc of the revolt, as well as their location near to one of the worst and most notorious sites of counter-insurgency violence, gives credence to the interpretation that the rebels' violence against Chin villages was a product of the revolt. What we have seen through a micro-historical focus on specific incidents in the rebellion and a close, critical reading of the trial records is an emergent communal geography that separated Chin villages from Bamar villages. This was a communal geography animated by an elementary aspect of peasant insurgency that Guha's work successfully identifies: a sense of territoriality shaped by notions of ethnic and physical space that did not fully converge.

The implications of Guha's continuing analytical utility, hopefully apparent in my analysis of the Hsaya San revolt, are that the insights to be found in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* can be productively deployed without reproducing the weaknesses of the book taken *in toto*. More precisely, some of the elements that he identifies within peasant revolts may still be more or less generalisable across different contexts, a salient element being the tension between 'physical' and 'ethnic' space in rebels' conceptions of the domain of the revolt. Guha's treatment of ethnicity as an

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67. See the essays that play out this debate over 'culturalism' in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981): 375–407.

68. Prathama Banerjee, 'The Subaltern: Political Subject or Protagonist of History?', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2015): 39–49; David Featherstone, 'Reading Subaltern Studies Politically: Histories from Below, Spatial Relations and Subalternity', in *Subaltern Geographies*, ed. Tariq Jazeel and Stephen Legg (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019): 94–118; Bill Schwarz, 'Subaltern Histories', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 89 (2020): 90–108.

69. Gyan Prakash, 'Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 2 (1990): 383–408.

70. IOR, L/P&J/2024: 'Proceedings of Nga Kywe alias Kyue Gyi and Others. Special Trial no. 13 of 1932 the Court of the Special Judge, Prome (Burma Rebellion Case)', emphasis mine.

aspect of peasant consciousness that was largely fixed prior to peasant revolts does not fatally undermine the insight. Empirically, the insight holds when treating ethnicity as something contingent and fluid. Indeed, we might be able to discern something of a dialectical tension between physical and ethnic space in the Hsaya San revolt that contributed to the constitution of sharper communal geographies. In more general terms, though, Guha's work continues to enable us to identify the structures inherent to peasant revolts even while we reject his structuralism.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.