EDUCATION AMID RENUNCIATION

The Movement of Young Ta'ang Girls from Conflict Areas to Mandalay's Nunneries

Zin Mar Oo

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International Development Research Centre
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The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD),
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University
239 Huay Kaew Road, Tambon Suthep, Amphur Muang,
Chiang Mai 50200 Thailand

Telephone: 66 (0) 5394 3595/6
Fascimile: 66 (0) 5389 3279
Email: rcsd@cmu.ac.th
Website: rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th

Foreword

Since 2012, the Understanding Myanmar's Development (UMD) series, supported by the International Development and Research Center (IDRC), Canada, has sought to enhance knowledge of Myanmar's development processes, strengthen the capacity of Burmese researchers, and encourage them to actively engage the study of development policy and practice. In this first phase of the series, fellowships were given to midcareer researchers to support their work and publication in their respective areas of expertise. In the second phase, though we are continuing to publish under the UMD series banner, the research outputs have emerged directly from a long-term capacity building initiative held at the University of Mandalay, still under the support of IDRC.

This research provides an interesting look at how young nuns from remote Ta'ang villages in Shan State travel to stay in nunneries in urban Mandalay, where they fully renunciate into the tradition led by their elder nuns and undertake their general education in monastic schools. Despite obvious limitations in the extent to which the work is able to engage deeply with the context in Ta'ang ethnic areas, the author, Zin Mar Oo, has provided some strong accounts of the factors driving girls and their parents to make the decision to bring them to the city and the networks which facilitate their movement, which involve lay people, charismatic monks, nuns and the girls themselves. She also gives some insight into how the girls attempt to adapt to their new lives. Zin Mar Oo faced the challenge of being a devout Buddhist woman from Mandalay studying the lives of girls who were often difficult to communicate with, but it is credit to her commitment to undertake this work

that she was able to engage other actors to make up this shortfall in her understanding. We are likewise pleased that, despite the challenges of Covid-19 and the Myanmar coup, she was still able to finish this research working with us online. I hope this monograph provides some useful perspective on the decision making, networks and lives of these young Ta'ang nuns which may be a small but useful contribution to knowledge on this phenomenon in contemporary Myanmar.

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, PhD
Director, RCSD

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In addition, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Edgard Rodriguez from IDRC for placing trust in us to conduct research for improving knowledge for democracy in our country, and IDRC and Canada for supporting this. I would like to thank Kanchana Kulpisithicharoen and RCSD at Chiang Mai University of essential support to be a research fellow in this program. Dr Thida Htwe Win, Head of Department of Anthropology, University of

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Of most importance, I would like to give thanks to the all the head nuns and young nuns who participated in this study, especially Sayagyi Daw Saranasingi and Daw Zayyawadi, who allowed me to meet the young nuns and their parents. They gave me essential information and access to these nun communities.

About the Series

Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar

Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar is a five-year partnership that nurtures a new generation of young actors to promote inclusion, gender equality, respect for diversity, and prosperity for all in Myanmar.

Capacity Building in Knowledge Production

Since 2018, RCSD at Chiang Mai University has coordinated an intensive research and teaching capacity building project with the University of Mandalay. The project was conceived as part of IDRC's larger Knowledge For Democracy Myanmar initiative, and our goal is to support the long-term professional development of researchers at the university through regular critical engagement. We have provided exposure to ideas, methods and research processes in the social sciences, and given them practical tools and opportunities to put learning into action. The project has successfully emerged from a foundation of shared experience and knowledge between the participants and our diverse team of mentors and support staff affiliated with RCSD. It has also been built on the legacy of Ajarn Chayan's long and continuing commitment to empowering young Myanmar researchers, providing a strong case for potential benefits of academic collaboration across the 'global south'.

The first phase of the project focused on the building blocks of qualitative research, with workshops introducing selected concepts in the social sciences which are applicable to the changing

development context of Myanmar and Southeast Asia. We then worked on improving their ability to build towards conducting research by targeting capacity in fundamental skills in research design and methods. This was achieved through specific workshops on several tools, such as writing a literature review and conducting ethnography in the field. RCSD invited this larger group of participants to submit research proposals by harnessing their growth in these research tools. Eight projects were then chosen by a committee to receive research grants and intensive academic support through the second phase of the programme.

These eight projects involve seventeen researchers from a range of academic backgrounds and disciplines, all of whom are women. Throughout 2019 and 2020 the researchers were closely mentored through their data collection and analysis, with RCSD's team in frequent contact to help shape their skills and approach as they worked, including visits to their field sites, workshops in Mandalay and Chiang Mai, and regular online engagement.

Their research covers a range of important academic endeavors across urban and rural settings—from the dry zone to highland ethnic areas—seeking to give thorough accounts of local people's and communities' experiences amid Myanmar's social, economic and environmental challenges. While the program will produce tangible outputs in the form of eight research reports published in the Understanding Myanmar's Development series, we are more proud of the growth we have seen in the research skills of our irrepressible group of committed *sayama*, and the small contribution we have made to restoring Myanmar's university research culture.

In 2021, in spite of the dual challenges of Covid-19 and the tyranny of the Myanmar coup, we have continued to work closely to finish putting together these monographs. RCSD remains committed to continued engagement and collaboration with our colleagues in Myanmar's universities, civil society, and beyond.

Abstract

Over the past decade there has been a large increase in the number of Ta'ang girls moving to Myanmar's lowland cities where they renunciate as nuns and learn monastic life, while also gaining a full education and a safe place to stay. These young nuns come from Ta'ang areas of Shan State. Decades old conflict has only worsened, leading the economic devastation of the tea industry, outward migration, constant insecurity including the threat of conscription, rampant underdevelopment, and the destruction of much educational access. In this context the girls come to the city seeking better opportunity in the nunneries, and education in monastic schools. This research is based in two nunneries in Mandalay, both of which are *parahita* institutions – meaning they exist to educate and provide welfare as opposed to simply supporting monastic intentions and Buddhist teaching. Though the nunneries present stark differences in size and one of them is designated as *bhaka*, meaning they directly teach the girls primary education, the experiences of the girls are found to be broadly similar in; the motivations that brought them to Mandalay, the networks which facilitate their movement, and their processes of adaptation in these new spaces as non-Burmese speaking girls who arrive unfamiliar with monastic life try to integrate into these new settings. In tracing these dynamics, insight is gained into both the phenomenon itself and what this suggests about the role of often invisible, underrecognized nuns in Myanmar amid the failure of the state to provide essential welfare and education as *Tatmadaw* brutality continues in the hills.

Keywords: renunciation, welfare, monasticism, nuns, youth migration, Ta'ang, Mandalay

စာတမ်းအကျဉ်းချုပ်

သာသနာ့ဘောင် အတွင်းမှ ပညာရေး၊ တအောင်းမိန်းကလေးများ၏ စစ်ဘေးသင့် ဒေသများမှ မန္တလေးရှိ သီလရှင်ကျောင်းများသို့ ရွှေ့ပြောင်းနေထိုင်မှု

ပြီးခဲ့သည့် ဆယ်စုနှစ်ကာလအတွင်းတွင် သီလရှင်ဝတ်ပြီး မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ မြေပြန့်ဒေသများသို့ သာသနာ့ဘောင်ဝင်ရင်း ကျောင်းပညာရေးဆည်းပူးရန် သော်လည်းကောင်း၊ လုံခြုံသောနေရာတွင် နေထိုင်နိုင်ရန်သော်လည်းကောင်း ပြောင်းရွှေ့လာကြသော တအောင်းမိန်းကလေးအရေအတွက်သည် ပိုမို များပြားလာခဲ့ပါသည်။ ထိုတအောင်းမိန်းကလေးများသည် ရှမ်းပြည်နယ်၏ နေရာအသီးသီးမှ ရောက်ရှိလာကြပါသည်။ အချိန်ကာလကြာမြင့်စွာ သက်ဆိုးရှည်နေသော ပြည်တွင်းစစ်သည် လက်ဖက်လုပ်ငန်းများအပေါ် စီးပွားရေးအရ ထိခိုက်ပျက်စီးစေခြင်း၊ တခြားဒေသများသို့ ပြောင်းရွှေ့ နေထိုင်ခြင်း၊ အဓမ္မတပ်သားစုဆောင်းခြင်းကဲ့သို့သော လုံခြုံရေး ချိန်ခြောက်ခြင်း၊ ဖွံ့ဖြိုးတိုးတက်မှု နှောင့်နှေးစေခြင်း နှင့် ပညာရေးအခွင့်အလမ်းများ ဆုံးရှုံးရခြင်း စသည့် အကျိုးဆက်များ ဖြစ်ပေါ်စေလျက်ရှိပါသည်။ ဤအခြေအနေတွင် တအောင်းမိန်းကလေးများသည် ပိုမိုကောင်းမွန်သော အခွင့်အလမ်းများ နှင့် ဘုန်းတော်ကြီးသင်စာသင်ကျောင်း (ဘက) များတွင် ပညာဆည်းပူနိုင်ရန် အလို့ငှာ မြို့ပေါ်သို့ ပြောင်းရွှေ့လေ့ရှိကြသည်။ ဤသုသေတနသည် ဗုဒ္ဓစာပေသင်ကြားမှုနှင့် ဘက ပညာရေးတို့ အား အထောက်အကူပြုပြီး သီလရှင်လေးများ၏ ပညာရေးနှင့် နေထိုင်စားသောက်ရေး အဆင်ပြေရန် ထောက်ပံ့ပေးနေသော မန္တလေးမြို့ရှိ ပရဟိတ

သီလရှင်ကျောင်း နှစ်ကျောင်း အပေါ် အခြေခံ၍ လေ့လာတင်ပြထားပါသည်။

သီလရှင်ကျောင်း နှစ်ကျောင်းအနက် တစ်ကျောင်းမှာ ဘက ဖြစ်ပြီး အရွယ်အစားအားဖြင့် အလွန်ကွာခြားသော်လည်း နှစ်ကျောင်းလုံးရှိ တအောင်းသီလရှင်များ၏ အတွေ့အကြုံများမှာ ကွာခြားခြင်း မရှိသည်ကို တွေ့ရှိရပါသည်။ မန္တလေးမြို့သို့ ပြောင်းရွှေ့နေထိုင်လိုစိတ် ဖြစ်ပေါ်စေခြင်း၊ မိန်းကလေးများပြောင်းရွှေ့နေရာတွင် ကွန်ယက်တစ်ခုသဖွယ် ထောက်ပံ့ပေးခြင်း၊ မရင်းနှီးသော သာသနာ့ဘောင်တွင် ကြိုးစားရှင်သန်ရသော ဗမာစကားမပြောသော မိန်းကလေးများ၏ နေရာအသစ်တွင် လိုက်လျောညီထွေမှုရှိစေရန် နေထိုင်ရသောဖြစ်စဉ်များ စသည့် အတွေ့အကြုံများသည် အဆိုပါ သီလရှင်ကျောင်း နှစ်ကျောင်းလုံးတွင် တွေ့ရှိရပါသည်။ ဤအကြောင်းအရာများအား လေ့လာခြင်းအားဖြင့် ဖြစ်စဉ်အား ပိုမိုနားလည်စေရုံ သာမက တောင်တန်းဒေသများတွင် တပ်မတော်၏ ရက်စက်ကြမ်းကြုတ်သော လုပ်ရပ်များကြောင့် သင့်တော်သော လူနေမှု သက်သာချောင်ချိရေး နှင့် ပညာရေးအတွက် မပေးစွမ်းနိုင်သော နိုင်ငံတော်၏ အားနည်းချက်များ အကြား မေ့လျော့ခံ တအောင်းသီလရှင်များ အကြောင်းကိုပါ ပေါ်လွင်စေပါသည်။

Keywords သာသနာ့ဘောင်အတွင်း နေထိုင်ခြင်း၊ အဆင်ပြေသက်သာချောင်ချိရေး၊ သာသနာ့ဘောင် ဘဝ၊ သီလရှင်များ၊ လူငယ်များ ရွှေ့ပြောင်းသွားလာမှု၊ တအောင်း၊ မန္တလေး

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1

INTRODUCTION

Before pre-sabbath day and on pre-sabbath day itself, I have regularly volunteered at donation places which offer Shan noodles and meals to young nuns as they set off to collect rice donations. Among the nuns who came to eat the noodles, I often encountered very young girls who were conversing among themselves in an ethnic language which was unfamiliar to me. This regularly piqued my curiosity, and one time I decided to ask where they were from. They said they came from Shan State and were mostly of the Ta'ang (also referred to as Palaung)[1] ethnic group, and that there was also smaller numbers of Shan and Pa-O. The girls were speaking Ta'ang language even as they went about their lives in urban Mandalay. They allowed me to follow them back to their nunnery, which I came to realize exclusively housed Ta'ang girls who had come down from small villages in the hills.

Over time I became more immersed in their lives and got to know the girls and the nuns well. These encounters led to me, a middle-class Burmese women teaching at Mandalay University, wanting to know why they were here, how they got here and how they navigated this new life in Burmese nunneries. This small nunnery, called Aungzayya Theikdhi, was home to two Bamar head nuns

1. While most English language literature uses the term Palaung, most communities and local sources prefer the term Ta'ang. For further justification for the preferred use of this term, see the work of Ta'ang researcher Nyein Han Tun (2019), who also gave some advice to this research.

and just 13 Ta'ang girls, resembling more of a large household rather than a religious institution.

Prior to this encounter, I was only familiar with the well-known nunneries located at the foot of Mandalay Hill. However, I also noticed that there are some nunneries located in Pyi Gyi Takon Township in Mandalay City, many of which were much bigger than Aungzayya Theikdhi. I began to familiarize myself, as a friend and donor, with the head nuns at one of these places called Maniratana nunnery. This nunnery was home to around 80 young girls from as young as three years old. As a mother myself, I struggled to comprehend how these Bamar women could care for so many little girls who would arrive with very limited Myanmar language skills, and yet fulfill their basic needs.

In addition to the drastic size difference between these two places of which I was becoming more involved with, the other major difference was that the larger Maniratana served as a *bhaka* school - meaning they had government permission to teach basic primary education to the girls who lived with them, whereas even the younger girls in Aungzayya Theikdhi went to school outside. These differences aside, the nunneries are both *parahita* institutions, which meant they served a purpose beyond pure religious devotion and service through renunciation, by providing essential care and education to the nuns, and are in local understanding broadly distinguished from *pariyatti* nunneries. And I found that across both nunneries the girls followed broadly similar journeys and were all part of a larger phenomenon of young nuns moving from unstable situations in upper Myanmar to these relative safe havens in the big cities.

This research provides a window into the journey of these girls from conflict and economically besieged Palaung areas by first tracing the situation in their home villages which have forced parents, and in some cases entire communities, to look for better education opportunities for their children. The girls come through now well-established networks linking parents with charismatic Ta'ang monks and travelling nuns who facilitate their movement, share information, and assure Ta'ang villagers that the girls are safer in the city. Beyond the attempt to understand these important

dynamics of intersecting conflict, underdevelopment, gender and mobility, this research provides some scope to analyze the nature of these *parahita* institutions and the role they serve as a form of welfare to girls who otherwise would have almost no access to education, and what this may help reveal about the problematic neglect of what should be essential state-run services like the education and basic welfare for vulnerable young girls.

Literature review

On the specific issue studied here there are limited academic sources, but the journalist Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint (2018) provided an interesting account of how Ta'ang communities are sending children to the nunnery schools in Yangon due to similar conflict dynamics in parts of Shan State, including the ongoing threat of conscription into ethnic armed groups. These groups often recruit young females to be medics and they must learn about medical education inside the armed camps before serving for five years. Some poor families are required to give their children to the armed groups to avoid paying local taxation, while there is also forced recruitment of local people, both young and adult, and male and female, as labor to support the armed groups. The dynamics of conflict, including the threat of landmines and its impact on access to education as a driver of migration, is discussed in chapter two.

There is also a relative scarcity in the academic literature on the female monastic order in Myanmar more generally, and even less has been written on the lives of young nuns in the country and how this may represent broader shifts in Myanmar. It is important, therefore, that this work builds on the existing, albeit limited, work on Myanmar nuns by accounting for this phenomenon in the context of political and economic change. Kawanami (2013) provides the most thorough account of the both the individual lives of Myanmar nuns and the monastic institutions housing them. Her seminal book argues that Myanmar woman move from "that world" (household life) to the "other world" (monastic life) as they become nuns, situating themselves in a sort of nexus between these two spaces of gendered expectation. Many women enter monastic life to escape from suffering, some seeking an

opportunity to fulfill spiritual aspirations as younger generations of nuns increasingly seem to become educated in the scripture.

The nun community across Myanmar focuses the majority of their work on improving educational standards and access, and enhancing provisions to support their community, working tirelessly towards these aims in spite of the fact that it does not bring them high status individually - certainly in relation to more esteemed monks. Relevant to this study, Kawanami (2013) notes that close to 80 percent of nuns come from rural villages or semi-rural towns, and that many young girls said they wanted to become educated and travel like the older nuns, and so the girls are joining the monastic order at a younger age. According to a survey conducted by Me Me Khine (1999), children were recruited by monks traveling to remote border regions in ethnic states, and were sent to large monasteries or nunnery schools in Yangon, Mandalay or Sagaing, after completing monastic education. Many returned to their native villages to set up schools to disseminate Buddhism. She found that 75 percent of nuns had relatives or kin network connections within the monastic community who played a role in bringing them here.

Kawanami (2013) further found that many nuns listed the loss of a close figure or emotional trauma as a prominent factor in their decision to renunciate, and she also witnessed on many occasions the resolve of a young child who, of her own accord, insisted on becoming a nun. Her work is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork tracing women's lives after entering the nunnery right until their return to the laity. But this research focuses on young girls, understood as "that world" who enter the nunhood, referred to as the "other world", and the changes which are involved during this stage of their lives, rather than their decision to leave the nunhood and their lives after coming back into "this world", which is a prominent focus of Kawanami (2013). In short, this focus on the journey and motivations of girls coming into nunneries at such a young age is worthy of further enquiry, particularly due to the now-widespread nature of this phenomenon and how this potentially suggests something about the function of the *parahita* as not only a form of education, but of essential welfare to girls escaping the myriad impacts of conflict-torn areas.

To help understand the journeys taken by these young girls, Ball and Moselle's (2016) work among migrant children living in the Myanmar-Thailand border region is helpful as they show the process of children adapting to their new lives despite exclusion from systems and their inability to continue to communicate with their families, communities, and cultures of origin. They use the concept of liminality to refer to the condition of living without permanent, official documentation identity or forms of social protection in the uncertain place of the Myanmar-Thailand Border. The author explains how they perceive their childhood life; how the migrant children try to form a sense of place meaningfully, and cope with everyday life challenges through learning new skills in their new environment, and she traces the impact of migration on their ethnic identity. While there are some differences in the institutional and social contexts to this study, it is helpful to compare the experiences and adaptive capacities of young ethnic people moving to spaces with varying degrees of permanence and cultural knowledge.

For broader context, Carbonnel (2009) provides an account of the position of nuns in Myanmar relative to their monk counterparts, providing a gendered approach to the study of institutional life and its positioning in modernizing Myanmar. Monks are required to be at the heart of every religious ceremony, but nuns do not officiate, although they may actively participate. Monks collect the alms every morning and the donations from four to five households are enough for monks, but nuns are allowed to do so only during the two days before the sabbath. The work argues that while the religious scale in Myanmar based on renunciation implies a more complete relationship network, including monks, nuns and lay people, nuns remain under monks' authority. As is seen here, the nuns are living on religious land that still belongs to the monks and only the monks are authorized to teach the upper grade of the nun's religious education. Young girls who enter the nunnery not only receive donation as nuns, but they act as donors to monks and experience a giving and deferential relationship with the senior nuns.

Chapter four of this research includes the case study of rice collection as an example of how young nuns must adapt to their

environment and the expectations around them, which closely reflects the positioning of junior nuns within contemporary Myanmar which Carbonnel (2009) refers to. The nuns collect alms in a row as a way of reinforcing their social identity and protects them from getting separated, but which also clearly positions them in a particular relational dynamic to those around them, including young monks. Group collection serves as a device to obtain donations and to forge a monastic identity through interaction, but it is also quite revealing about these broader dynamics.

More recently, Mo Mo Thant (2020) has contributed to this emerging field a study of the social and religious capital of nuns in the modern Myanmar context by studying two nunneries in lower Myanmar, one of which is *pariyatti* and the other includes a *bhaka* school. The involvement of nuns in social welfare initiatives in recent decades, moving beyond only fulfilling their traditional role in teaching Buddhist scripture and supporting the monastic journey of women, has enhanced their social and religious capital – particularly as these activities are thought to bring religious merit. This piece of work resonates strongly with the focus of this monograph as the senior nuns role in providing more general education as well as essential care to young girls has led to them building strong networks across the monastic and lay community.

This research therefore hopefully has something to contribute to the knowledge on the educational context in Myanmar amid periods of conflict, on the role and function of nunneries as essential providers beyond their traditional focus of Buddhist teaching, and the adaptation of the girls to this environment, on motivations of the girls and their families to pursue this course of action, and the networks between monastic and lay communities which facilitate their movement. Though this research has been compiled by a Bamar woman who is a devout Buddhist and regular donor to nunneries - and so there may be some inherent forms of bias throughout - this research is not intended to glorify the role of these nunneries in any way. It simply intends to provide an account of the experiences of these young girls and the urban and rural contexts which they are situated between. It is apparent that these institutions are filling a role due to the failure of the state to provide sufficiently for its people, and due to the brutality of the

Tatmadaw and the tragedy of protracted conflict which has again reared itself in 2021.[2] The presence of such support systems should not distract from the broader need for education and welfare reform across Myanmar.

Research questions

- What are the forms of motivation and the push/pull factors which encourage young girls to migrate from Ta'ang areas to nunneries in Mandalay, and how do networks involving monks, nuns, parents, and laypeople, between the city and the villages, build trust and facilitate the movement of the girls?
- In this context, how do the girls adapt to their new lives in the city, and what do these forms of security and adaptation in the nunnery reveal about female monasticism, parahita nunneries and the current context of education and support systems – vis a vis the state - in contemporary Myanmar?

Research method and field sites

The field research was conducted sporadically over a period of around 18 months using a range of qualitative methods. This included key informant interviews, participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus group interviews. I also collected official and unofficial records to understand the broader context of ethnic monasticism, monastic education, and the increasingly scale of the young nun movement from Ta'ang areas.

There are several key informants that formed a crucial basis of information related to this study. The first are the five elder nuns at the two nunneries, who discuss their role in bringing the girls to Mandalay and their perspective on the learning processes after the

2. The fieldwork for this study was completed entirely before the military coup of February 1st, 2021, and so therefore makes no reference to the more recent political, social, and military upheaval. However, much of the turmoil in Ta'ang areas and Tatmadaw violence predates the coup and saw an uptick in the years previous.

girls arrive. The monks who facilitate this process of migration also formed a crucial source of understanding, as some of the parents who live their native village in northern Shan State make the decision to send the girls to the nunneries.

Secondly, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 young nuns from across the two nunneries. Five of these nuns are from the primary level (around nine years old), five from middle school level (around 12 years), and five from high school level (around 15 years old). This enables a reasonable sample of the different ages and perspectives from the young girls across the nunneries. Interviewing children as young as nine was obviously challenging, but through building up trust over a decent period, I was able to gain some of their young perspectives, which was useful for understanding the social processes taking place. I spent many mornings and evening in these two nunneries, observing their way of life and the interactions and forms of social adaptation taking place. I also spent considerable time moving with the girls around the city as they collected donations.

In doing research, the young nuns willingly shared their difficult experiences, but their fear could be clearly observed on their face. To overcome this challenge, participant observation was used by staying with them, building up friendships for building trust among us. Prior to beginning the research, I made several visits to these sites, giving alms and donations and building rapport with the elder nuns. Another great challenge was the language barrier as I had some difficulty in asking questions to those young Ta'ang nuns whose mother tongue is Ta'ang language. Although they seemed to understand Myanmar language, some of them cannot speak Myanmar language confidently. Therefore, interpreters were needed to conduct interviews with them. Another challenge was the permission I needed to ask for approval from the Township Level General Administrative Department to gain data the exact number of Ta'ang nuns who came to live in the nunneries in Mandalay and study in the monastic education school for the safety of their lives and education. Regrettably, the surge in conflict in Ta'ang areas in 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic meant I was unable to travel to the girls' hometowns myself, and relied on telephone interviews with key actors who I had managed to connect with.

The two nunneries are shown on the map here, both located within quite central areas towards the south of Mandalay city:

Figure 1.1 The two nunneries which were selected as main field sites

2

CONFLICT, LIVELIHOODS AND EDUCATION IN UPLAND TA'ANG COMMUNITIES

Behind the movement of young Ta'ang girls to Mandalay's nunneries, there is a recent history through which Ta'ang communities in Shan State have had their livelihoods and communities impacted by both economic problems and the protracted nature of ethnic conflict and Tatmadaw violence. This chapter will explore the overall context behind the proliferation of girls in urban nunneries, which will then inform the exploration in the following chapter of the motivations, paths, and networks through which the girls arrive in Mandalay.

First, the chapter will explore economic life in Ta'ang communities, which in some cases relies almost entirely on tea production, and elsewhere features rice cultivation, other crop production and forms of livelihoods. The chapter will then look at the ubiquitous nature of Buddhist life in the communities and the religious structures and spaces that intersect with different aspects of life in these upland villages and are connected with Buddhist networks elsewhere. It is then necessary to look at the historical conflict in these parts, where local insurgent groups have a long history of fighting with the Tatmadaw and Shan armed groups, which since 2011 has seen an uptick in the degree of militarism. The increased presence of conflict has impacted human security in different forms, chief among which are greater livelihood insecurity, underdevelopment and instability in local schooling.

It is clear that economic challenges, notably the fall in the tea price, intersects to varying degrees with the impacts of conflict and leads to the movement of people out of Ta'ang communities - which includes the need to send girls to urban nunneries. The function of these nunneries is also closely connected to the evolving role of monastic education in supporting disadvantaged children. While establishing the groundwork for the primary research that follows, this chapter can engage with the somewhat symbiotic relationship between livelihood challenges and conflict as drivers of outward migration.

Upland tea production and rice cultivation

Ta'ang communities have for generations primarily relied on the tea industry as their main form of livelihood. However in recent times conflict and economic headwinds have greatly affected the viability of the industry as the main household income stream. The majority of the Ta'ang tea producing population live in small villages scattered throughout parts of Northern Shan State, primarily in the townships of Namhsan, Mongtong, Namtu, Kyautmae, Hsipaw, Namkham and Kutkhai, with smaller numbers in Southern Shan State. According to the Ta'ang Working Group (2011) there are approximately 600,000 Ta'ang people who depend on the tea industry for their primary source of income.

The most important time for the industry is the period of tea cultivation which spans from March to May, requiring significant labor including Burmese migrants from the lowlands. Before the cultivation season, the tea gardens need to be prepared through burning. According to So Pyay Thar (2016), when the baby tea leaves appear, workers need to pluck the leaves at the right time as the quality is diminished if it is left too long. Any delay also affects the ability of the tea to re-sprout. These baby tea leaves, called *shwe pi* among the Ta'ang community, are thought to be of ideal quality. As quick and efficient cultivation is needed during this season, large numbers of pickers are needed, which leads to many people from lowland Myanmar traveling to Ta'ang areas to work in the tea gardens. U Sein Win, from Pannin village, Namhsan, says of his life working in the industry:

> In our region, we depend only on the tea industry. It is our main asset. At 7:00am in the picking season, we go to the tea gardens for cultivation. At 11:00 am, we take a break for lunch before recommencing in the afternoon. In the evening at 5:00pm we return home with big bags of raw tea leaves. When we arrive home we steam the leaves. Sometimes we must sleep at the tea gardens. We have to work every day so that we can earn enough income from it during the tea season. For food we sometimes need to ask for payment in advance from the tea traders or tea factories before paying them back after the main harvest.

Some tea gardens are half a mile away from the community residential area, with some as far as three miles away from villages. Some villagers must walk about three hours from their houses to the tea gardens. After the tea cultivation season, the community has to clean up the wild grasses and weeds which usually grow around the tea trees.

The tea industry has in recent decades faced significant challenges to maintain its competitive advantage in Myanmar. Since the Chinese dried tea leaf entered the market around 2003, business struggled as many consumers throughout Myanmar preferred certain qualities in their tea that were associated with the imported Chinese product. This led to many farmers switching to making wet tea leaf for use in salads.

Further, during 2008 and 2009, pickled tea from Myanmar was banned in Singapore due to what was known as the color dye scandal. In 2009, a total of 458 samples of pickled tea were tested from a local wholesale market in Yangon and Mandalay, with 253 samples found to contain some amount of colored dye added. These results were widely publicized in newspapers locally and abroad, and the contaminated products were destroyed by the township food and drug supervisory committees. The reputational damage was a key factor in the decline of the tea leaf price (So Pyay Thar, 2016). In the years that followed, the Myanmar tea industry once again damaged its reputation when harmful dyes were again found to be used in production (Htin Lynn Aung,

2019). In 2010, 116 out of 128 green tea manufacturing factories closed due to the color dye scandal.

U Tun Oo, secretary for the Palaung (Ta'ang) Tea Association in Kyaukme Township, told the Myanmar Times that the organization has been trying to move towards increased organic production since 2013, sensing fresh opportunity in the market. Myanmar tea has been exported to Germany since 2017 and sales have expanded into the US, Singapore and China although this remains a relatively small part of the industry (Khin Su Wai, 2018).

Since the outbreak of conflict in March 2011 between the Shan armies and the Tatmadaw, parts of the tea industry have suffered further, with seasonal migrant workers increasingly unwilling to risk partaking in difficult tea picking work, which has further increased the cost of production (Ann Wang, 2016). Additionally, in many conflict areas local owners of tea plantations were also forced to move to larger towns to escape the threat of violence in their villages. Some Ta'ang people moved to the townships and rent the land to engage in maize plantations, while others moved to work in Kyaukme, Hsipaw, Naungcho and other towns. Often these people will return to their native lands when the tea cultivation season approaches, before retreating to their new places of residence at other times of the year.

The family of U Sein Win was greatly affected by the struggles of the tea industry:

> After 2011, the tea price gradually declined, particularly in our village where the price was so low. The economy was not good for us and all the tea owners have since suffered. Now, we don't live in our village anymore as we had to move to Kyaukme town and rent a house. One of my sons left to work in China and the other works in Thailand. I send my two daughters to the nunnery school in Mandalay.

In Northern Shan State, tea is not the only form of agriculture as rice cultivation is also undertaken in some parts. In Namkham region, most people work in both tea production and rice cultivation. Some households also supplement their income by

cutting down trees to produce charcoal. They produce rice, grain and vegetables by using rotational farming methods. Some livelihood patterns are divided along the lines of Ta'ang ethnic subgroupings. The Rumai, for instance, often live at particularly high elevation and cultivate little besides tea. They have a monopoly on pickled tea, which they trade for items such as rice, salt, and dried fish. The Silver Ta'ang groups living at lower elevations grow more rice than tea. There are some terraced, irrigated rice fields in their areas, but most farmers still use traditional rotational methods of cultivation

In the past, some people tried to bring in paddy rice plantation systems, but in the cooler upland climate the paddy could not grow well. Through the improved knowledge and technologies brought about by involvement in the German organic project, ginger and cassava are also increasingly planted in these areas. This more diversified livelihood model sustains Ta'ang in these areas. A young nun from Mang Aung village said:

> In my village, we mostly grow tea but most houses also plant paddy rice and work in the charcoal business. We bring the charcoal and rice to Namkham to sell at the market to local trading companies. Every house also plants vegetables and we sell our vegetables in the village.

The decline in tea industry is therefore rather inherently connected to issues of protracted conflict and underdevelopment and given the traditional dominance of the industry in Ta'ang communities, this decline is also connected to the migration of young girls to nunneries in Mandalay.

Ta'ang Buddhism

In Northern Shan state, Ta'ang communities largely follow two Buddhist denominations, the *Yuan*-sect and *Thudhamma* sect. According to a Ta'ang university teacher, the *Yuan* sect is more present in isolated rural areas, while villages near large towns areas mainly follow the *Thudhamma* sect, a part of the Theravada

Buddhist tradition. Most of the young nuns who come to Mandalay emerge from villages in which this tradition forms an integral part of the community. In areas featuring large populations of the *Thudhamma sect*, such as Nahmsang, each area has a head of the institution, the *Sayadaw*, two second-in-line monks known as *U Zin,* and novices known as *Koyin*. In village monasteries each community generally has a head monk, a second in line, and other monks and novices.

The monastic order forms a core part of all aspects of community life. According to local leaders, for example, when there are donation ceremonies or funeral events in the village, their leaders must discuss everything first before seeking approval from the monks. It is clear that Ta'ang people place much faith in Buddhist spirituality and are taught to respect and place their elders first. In Ta'ang villages, the older generation always practices the eight precepts on Buddhist Sabbath days as a significant aspect of their religious life. On the night before, they go to the monastery to practice and follow the eight precepts and they sleep at the monastery at night. On the Sabbath day, they observe the eight precepts, and the next morning they worship the Buddha before returning home.

In the *Tathinkyuat* light festival, according to ancient tradition which is still practiced to this day, villages form groups of seven, including both lay people and monks, and they travel together to pay their respects to the monks from other monasteries. The monasteries provide food and so the congregations of pilgrims eat and celebrate together. In religious festivals, married males cook the rice, and the married females cook curries to eat together, while the young boys and girls help prepare the setting for their elders. Likewise, on full moon days, all the villagers have to congregate at the local monastery. Generally, in Ta'ang villages most monasteries are situated in the hills or in higher settings in the villages.

Ta'ang Buddhist communities also follow traditional *nat* spirits which they believe protect the village. The *nat* shrines are located outside the villages and are often worshipped by tea workers who visit the shrines regularly. One time a year, the local people invite the monks from the monastery to preach and recite *payeik* - the word of Buddha. Often the monks also recite *metta,* the prayer of

loving-kindness, at the *nat* shrine, while local people often bring banana leaves in devotion to each nat.

The intersection of Ta'ang Buddhism with conflict is also notable in these communities. Ma Tay Za Wa Ti, a nun from Mang Aung village, said that the head of the village monastery often met with the armed groups to ask them to stop fighting, noting that the reverence people held the monks in meant they were often listened to and respected by the soldiers.

Ta'ang monks have also come to live in lowland Myanmar in order to study *pariyatti* literature and tradition, and many of them travel to study Buddhism in Sri Lanka. According to the head monk of Mandalay's largest Ta'ang monastery, currently there are twenty-four Ta'ang monasteries and over three hundred households across Mandalay where Ta'ang people have established Ta'ang literature and cultural committees, focusing on Ta'ang language books and the development of Ta'ang Buddhist scripture. Whereas the Ta'ang nunneries are still run by Burmese nuns following Burmese monastic tradition, these monasteries are led by Ta'ang monks themselves and therefore place an increased emphasis on their own monastic life, language and culture. The Pathan religious ceremony, which involves one week reciting the important *pathan* doctrine, provides an opportunity for the Ta'ang monk network to come together. The head monk notes that by forming a Palaung (Ta'ang) Sangha association, monks from Mandalay and upland villages can discuss other social challenges facing their communities.

Localized conflict and insecurity in northern Shan State

The surge of outward migration from Ta'ang communities by those seeking an education but also a more secure livelihood, is closely connected to the recurrence of widespread violence over the past decade. This conflict has its historical roots in post-independence Burma, but in many ways the dynamics have intensified in recent years, even before the military coup of 2021. To contextualize this, it is necessary to discuss these broader historical developments along with the impact of the recent uptick in insurgencies and counter-insurgencies. Later chapter three will

delve deeper into the localized impact of this on family decision-making to send their young girls to nunneries, but first this section will establish the general impacts of the conflict.

In a familiar tale of post-colonial state-building, the promises of the Panglong peace agreement between the Myanmar State and ethnic groups have been left unfulfilled. The assassination of Myanmar's independence leader General Aung San in 1959 led to the Ta'ang's Tawngpeng chiefly king, Sao Khun Pan Sein, having to also cede his power. Under Myanmar's dictator General Ne Win, ethnic people lost their political power as the Burmese state sought total control and hegemonic influence. Across the country, ethnic armed liberation movements and insurgencies were sparked in response to the attempt at 'Burmanization'.

The first Ta'ang resistance group, the Palaung (Ta'ang) National Font (PNF), was formed in 1963, but later merged with the Shan State Army (SSA). In 1976, the Ta'ang set up a new group, the Palaung (Ta'ang) State Liberation Organization (PSLO) with the Palaung (Ta'ang) State Liberation Army (PSLA) forming the military force, which aimed to continue struggling for self-determination for the Ta'ang people. Throughout this period, the armed group had several sporadic bouts of conflict with the Burmese military, centered around the towns of Namhsan, Mongtong and Kyaukme. During the civil war many Ta'ang become internally displaced and fled in desperation to remote areas in the hills. Some fled to take refuge on the Chinese borderlands and others crossed into the northern border areas in Thailand. They reached a ceasefire agreement in 1991, however in the years following both sides continued to hold arms. (The Palaung (Ta'ang) Women's Organization, 2016)

From 2009, the Ta'ang armed group re-embarked on military operations against the overbearing Myanmar army, with the desire for increased autonomy. This led to the resumption of armed conflict - mainly in the Ta'ang regions of Namhsan, Kyaukme, Mongtong and Namkham region, which continues today (Nyein Han Tun, 2019). Throughout 2010, the Tatmadaw responded with attacks on the PSLA, and by the following year a new army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) was founded under the

PSLF with the stated aim of protecting the Ta'ang people. In March 2011, pro-government militias in Montong were given weaponry by the Burmese to fight the TNLA as part of a divide and rule strategy designed to increase internal conflict among the Ta'ang people. As fighting and allegations of abuse of local communities increased, local people fled, leading to a rise in the numbers of internally displaced and those who crossed the northern border into China. The fighting also deterred migrant workers from central Burma who would normally come in April for the first tea leaf harvest, as valuable tea was left untouched (Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization, 2010).

By 2012, sporadic fighting had resumed between the two armed groups. Despite negotiations between SSA/SSPP and the new representatives of Thein Sein government producing a new bilateral ceasefire agreement, fighting continued over the following years throughout many Ta'ang areas (Institute for Security & Development Policy, 2018). In 2018, much of the fighting between government forces and the SSA continued around Namtu township, a region rich in natural resources, and in 2019 hostilities continued as forces aligned to the SSA carried out coordinated attacks on military targets and civilian structures in Lashio, Naungcho, and Pyin Oo Lwin, near Mandalay. The Myanmar military quickly counterattacked, with heavy fighting taking place near the Chinese border. The conflict has spread across the main Lashio-Muse highway and is affecting civilians in Lashio, Hseni, Kutkai, Kyaukme, Naungcho, and Muse townships (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In 2021, following the military coup there was a surge in fighting between the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and the TNLA in northern Shan State. Villagers were displaced in what is seen as a continuation of territorial disputes which have flared up since 2016 (The Irrawaddy, 2021).

When small sections of the Burmese enter land controlled by Ta'ang groups, small bouts of violence are often sparked - generally in remote areas but also along crucial trade routes. A local informant said that in the past, there was a boundary with a space separating the two sides. This space remains littered with landmines which have also been set up beside the road. According to several informants, this period of intensive violence led to a general fear of

violence that persists to this day and is a key contributor to decisions to send young girls to lowland nunneries. One particular incident that received local attention was when a tea worker was killed after stepping on a landmine in a tea plantation, leading to fear among household owners and migrant workers. This was just one of a series of incidents involving landmines.

According to a local head monk, villagers who live near large towns are less afraid of the Myanmar army partly because the insurgent armed groups do not collect tax from those villages, and so they are less frequently targeted. Villagers who live in more remote areas are afraid of both the government army and the insurgent armed groups. When soldiers come to the villages they have to run away from their homes, with the monk describing how they frantically need to grab as many rice and vegetables from the village as they can and flee into the forest. He also noted that villagers worry when the insurgents come to collect tax from the village, as it increases the risk of the Myanmar army accusing them of being informants for the insurgent groups.

A knowledgeable informant on the conflict describes how government forces are generally based near larger towns, while insurgent groups stay around remote areas and forests. The government forces must clear the forest as they are commanded by their leaders, leading to skirmishes with insurgent groups when they meet in the forest. The armed conflicts previously often broke out two or three miles away from the towns, but conflict now often takes place right beside roads where landmines are set up. A villager said that they all worry when they have to travel from their villages to larger towns to buy food and trade in tea. When the people see strange mounds or suspicious soil, they have to avoid it completely. The uncertainty of conflict and the continued presence of landmines and soldiers has created an overwhelming climate of fear and insecurity, particularly in rural areas.

Conflict and under-resourced Ta'ang schools

The conflict has significantly influenced education in Ta'ang communities by stifling any possibility for development in the

schooling system and even disrupting the daily ability of children to be able to get to school. According to Daw Nan Htwe, a local Ta'ang women who is now a university lecturer in Mandalay, since the conflict began in 1963 it remained relatively confined to remote upland forests, so therefore did not directly impact many local communities. During this period, villagers near the more populated township areas could still access a decent standard of education, but those who lived far from the main rural centers often couldn't attend school at all. Some students living in remote areas often had to walk for more than an hour every day to get to school.

One informant said that students often worried about the danger of confronting wild animals, and they would often have to clamber through a deep stream in the heavy part of the wet season. Even when armed conflict broke out near the village, students were still pressured to go to school, leading to many parents withdrawing their children entirely. Since the turn of the century as the local economy faced quite a steep decline with many families forced into having their children work in the household tea business, increasing numbers of families withdrew their children from schooling altogether at a young age.

Even in Ta'ang communities, all schools are under the authority and administration of the central Ministry of Education, and the schoolteachers are generally from lowland parts of Myanmar and are unable to speak Ta'ang language. It has generally been acknowledged that with the limited Burmese language use among young learners, the language barrier means that Ta'ang students often struggle to understand the curriculum sufficiently well. These days there are an increasing number of Ta'ang speaking teachers working in Ta'ang schools, but a local teacher said that it is easier to teach the students who live near large towns, but it is more difficult to teach students who live in remote areas in Ta'ang regions due to their limited exposure to Burmese.

Ma Jar Taung, a women who experienced the impact of the conflict on Ta'ang education, told of how in the recent era of increased intensity in the conflict, many schools have closed down due to the reluctance of parents to send their children to schools in remote areas with the threat of them coming into harm's way. More generally too, as people fled to internal displacement camps,

or to China for work, little girls are often left with their grandparents who don't regularly send them to school. Teachers have also increasingly been reluctant to continue working in remote areas. An informant remembers one case where parents rushed to the school to collect their students during class as conflict threatened the immediate vicinity of the community.

This combination of the historical under-resourcing of schools, more recent concerns about the dangers of conflict, along with the challenges of parents migrating and economic stagnation, all provide context for the phenomena being investigated here. As monks and nuns from the villages move to study in the cities, forging increased connections with monasteries, nunneries and *parahita* schools, the opportunity for young girls to follow became increasingly discussed with parents in the villages. Ta'ang families of relative wealth generally send their children to the larger centres of Lashio, Namhsan, Namkham and Kyaukme township in Shan State, but lowland nunneries have emerged as an option for Ta'ang farming families of more modest means.

Figure 2.1 Ta'ang nuns on a rice collection route in Mandalay

Figure 2.2 The head nun teaches girls at a *bhaka* nunnery, which can provide schooling to the girls.

3

TA'ANG NUN MIGRATION: NETWORKS BETWEEN CONFLICT AND EDUCATION

Local impacts of conflict and young girls' decision to migrate

As the complex context of upland Ta'ang communities suggests, it is difficult to formulate a simplistic mode of causality to attribute the rise in migration. While the escalation in conflict is the most ever-present factor, in almost all cases it intersects with economic decline, general outward migration patterns, underdevelopment and poor educational infrastructure, and a multitude of more domestic challenges within families. This section describes these various experiences of the girls and their families in their own words, and while avoiding coming to a neatly defined list of factors at play, it contends that the deep impact of conflict primarily manifests itself in three quite loosely defined categories. Firstly, there are the more direct impacts of conflict and army conscription – fear of involvement in violence being the chief motivating factor. Secondly, conflict and economic challenges including the decline of the tea industry, have led to forced migration, problems in the home and the breakdown of family structures. Lastly, conflict has contributed to the long-term inability of Ta'ang schools to be run without disruption or be properly resourced. This final point leads neatly to the ensuing discussion of how the young girls move to lowland nunneries which are comparatively better positioned to provide them with an education.

Direct impact of conflict and the threat of army conscription

Over the past decade, as outlined in the previous chapter, the nature of conflict in Ta'ang areas became increasingly intense and localized. Communities that could previously remain relatively isolated were now surrounded by violence and had to regularly contend with its consequences. This led to a pervasive sense of fear of civilians being pulled into the conflict through forced conscription and direct involvement.

As the conflict spread across Ta'ang areas, with schools increasingly becoming deserted and the tea industry struggling, ethnic armed groups came to small villages to recruit new members and soldiers to combat incursions of the Tatmadaw, often with the help of the village administrator. According to a local man from Namhsan, they would take not only adult boys but also adult girls against their will, in accordance with household lists which were provided to them. If a family had two boys in a house, one boy would be taken, and the same approach applied to recruiting girls. If the children were not home, they would take their father. Even if the father ran away, they would take the mother so they would have to exchange their father or mother with one of the sons or daughters, he said. Though this local man was no longer a child, he reflected how he still had to avoid being detected as a local villager to risk conscription:

> I came to Mandalay around 1989, together with tea leaf traders, and now I am working at a tea leaf warehouse. As I am still a member of our family household according to the village, my parents wanted me to get away. As soon as the armed group gets information that I am back home in the village, they could come to take me according to our family's household list. So whenever I return to my village I cannot stay long. The armed group always comes to the village at night to recruit both men and women. Even young children of schooling age, just 13, 14 or 15 years old are also taken.

U Zaw Lwin from Pan-Hnin village first moved to Thibaw with his family to escape the threats of conflict and army recruitment, where

he could then send his children to monasteries and nunneries in the lowland which could guarantee their safety. His two daughters entered the nunnery and the boys become monks. He told of how his whole family changed their way of life to protect themselves:

> My family and I moved from our village because we fear soldier recruitment. I have seven children and I do not want any of them to be taken into the war. So, I sent my two daughters and three sons to the monastery and nunnery in Mandalay. There, they can be safe with accommodation, free meals, and clothes. Moreover, they can also get education. One of my two elder sons married a Burmese girl and now lives in Monywa and the other son is working as an assistant for a bus company. My wife and I moved to Thibaw and rented a house, and we are cultivating sweet corn. We just had to leave our house at the village so we could keep our children safe.

The armed groups will not take young monks or nuns to serve in the army, so monasteries and nunneries can serve as something of a safe haven for children seeking to avoid being caught up in the conflict. In the village too, religious figures can help protect the community. The venerable Kontinya, a monk from Manaung village in Namkham Township said that in his experience, when there is fighting near the village, village monks would negotiate with them to avoid the village and dissuade them from conscripting local children.

Ma Aye Theingi, from Saing Taung village in Namkham Township, described the increased insecurity in her village as the conflict and forced army enrollment led to an environment of desperation and fear. She first remembers hearing about fighting when she was eleven years old. When there was fighting, the school would close for usually around five days for each bout of conflict. The children would have to stay home and they couldn't go outside to work or play. She similarly described that in her experience, if there was only one child in the family they were not asked to join the armed group, but if there were two children in a family then one would have to join. If not, the parents had to join. Some could not bear

the fighting anymore, so they ran away to China, never coming back to the village. If they didn't come willingly, she said, the children would be grabbed and put in the car by force. They then had to attend training for two months, and only after one year could they visit their village. Only wealthier families were sometimes able to negotiate to give money to the army in lieu of their children being forced to sign-up.

A young nun who left the village to find safety in a Mandalay nunnery, Ma Aye Yi, reflected on her experience:

> There is so much fighting around my village. I am so sad and scared when there is fighting. The soldiers took my father to the army, and then sent him back when he got ill. If my father could no longer join, my mother had to go. Sometimes the fighting occurs right in the village. My aunt even fainted and fell down because she was so scared of what was happening. We had to build hiding bunkers under our houses to protect us from bombing.

Some villagers described how, even though the Ta'ang army were feared by many of their own people, they still largely had the support of the community. Though local people often died in the conflict, the villagers expressed that they didn't hate the army and supported them against the Tatmadaw. Some girls, for instance, were able to learn nursing skills through the army, which they used to support their communities. When there were sick villagers, the army would come to distribute medicine. When the villages invited the Ta'ang army to the village, the girls who were already in the army would perform dances with them. Only after ten years of service were these conscripted girls allowed to go back to the village.

While the threat of conscription was a direct factor for many families, the general sense of fear caused by the conflict (the dynamics of which are discussed in the previous chapter) was also a factor. The conflict in recent years even spread to some of the more remote Ta'ang villages in these impacted townships, leading to insecurity and forced migration, including decisions to send daughters to the nunneries in Mandalay. U Sein Win from Pan

Hnin village, whose daughters were also sent to a nunnery, said that whenever there is a fight near his village and bombs are buried underground, village people would not dare go to the tea fields and work. In his village there were once over 300 households, but now only 100 households remain because of the struggling economy and fear of the Ta'ang army's recruitment.

Ma Teyzawati, from Manaung village in Nankham Township told how the conflict was disrupting her ability to regularly attend school, leading to her parents' decision to send her to the nunnery in Mandalay:

> While the armed groups were fighting, the teachers asked the parents to come and take their children. The fighting came closer to the village every time. On the orders of the monks, sometimes the soldiers would stop fighting for a day, but the fights still happened around five times per month. If the fight lasts only one day, we still went to school, but if it lasts three or four days, we wouldn't go to school. Therefore my parents sent me to Mandalay to study. I had no way to attend school regularly in the village because of the fighting.

Another young nun, Ma Aye Phyu from Pan Hnin village, also reflected; "I came to the nunnery because of the fighting near my village which was very scary. My parents told me not to cry and just to study well in the nunnery"

Conflict and underdevelopment leading to family separation, migration, and problems in the home

Conflict and the decline of the tea industry also in many cases led to the breakdown of traditional Ta'ang family units and support systems. Girls and their parents told of how breakdowns in the family often made them unable to safely raise their daughters in the village, with the migration of parents, death, separation, and drug addiction all cited as factors leading to the increased prevalence of insecure families. These factors are undoubtedly interconnected with the broader trends of livelihood challenges and the localized impacts of conflict.

In many cases, parents of young girls were forced to migrate to find improved work opportunities as the tea industry struggled and was increasingly unsafe. Many parents went to China as a couple, first leaving their children with grandparents and sending back remittances. Single parents also followed the same practice. While with their grandparents it was often difficult to regularly attend school due to limited access coupled with safety concerns. Laboring jobs outside the tea industry made it impossible for parents to take their children with them. Daw Aye Nan from Kyaukme sent her daughter to the nunnery in Mandalay when she was just four years old. Her husband works as a mason in China, and she moved from the village to Kyaukme town and rented a house where she could work for a Chinese paper making company. Her husband stays in China the whole year and can't even come back once a year. She said she couldn't take care of her daughter while she goes to work, so the only option was the nunnery in Mandalay.

Other parents abandoned the tea industry in favor of crops that they could grow away from violent areas, which also forced them to leave the village. Ma Nandari, a young nun from Panhnin village, now in Mandalay, recalled that:

> Now my parents have moved to Hsipaw and rented a house and land to grow corn. My parents didn't want to live in the village because they feared the Ta'ang army taking the children and the tea industry was not good. So they just left the house and abandoned it. When we first came to Mandalay to study, there was no fighting around our village. I came to study but my parents couldn't afford to send me to a private school.

For single parents, whose partners had either passed away or left them in situations often connected to conflict and economic challenges, nunneries and monasteries became a safer option to give their children a better future. Daw Aye Nu's husband passed away, leaving her to care for three daughters and two sons. One of her daughters is 18 years old and is completing the matriculation exam in Maniratana nunnery, and the other is 17 and is now picking tea leaves with her mother. The eldest son is 15 years old and in Grade 4. He attended kindergarten at the village, but at the

age of 10, he was sent to the monastery in Sagaing for two years and then to the monastery in Yangon for a further two years. Now at the age of 15, he is attending Grade 4 in Pyinnyar Yarma monastery. Her youngest son is 9 years old and in kindergarten and she also has a much younger daughter. She said that she wanted them all to have a proper education and that the conflict for so many years has impacted the family tea business.

Daw Aye Pone is a grandmother from Pan Nhin village who was sad that her family had become 'broken' over these recent years. Her son got married to another woman and lived in Pan Hnin village, which impacted the lives of her granddaughters. She then took her daughter in law and the children and moved to Hsipaw to try to give them a better opportunity, before deciding that it was best for their education if they went to study in the nunneries in Mandalay.

Ma Ukkawati, a young nun in Mandalay, was left alone as her family life deteriorated. First her mother passed away, and then her father got remarried to another woman and moved to another town. So she then tried to live with her grandmother, but in the village she couldn't study well and her grandma was too poor to take care of her. Her grandmother then sent her to the nunnery where she could get food and a better education was available.

Drug addiction, regularly intertwined with conflict and the decline of the tea industry, has also become a problem that has often led to the breakdown of families. The head nun of Maniratana nunnery told the sad story of a father of three kids who became addicted to drugs. He would "get crazy and beat the children while the mother worked earning the family's sole income" she said. The mother eventually asked her neighbor to take the children to the nunnery on her behalf. The nun said this was a common situation in recent years, with mothers often sending the children to Mandalay to escape the threat of violence from their own drug-addicted fathers.

Ma Thudhamma, another young nun from Maniratana nunnery, told of her father's addiction and her challenging family situation:

> My father is a drug addict and at night he gets crazy and does what he wants. My mother and became so scared that we moved to Mandalay and stayed at our

> relative's house. My mother does masonry work in Mandalay and earns 5,000 ks per day. She sends some money to grandma who takes care of my brother and sister. My Grandpa got married to another woman too. After I passed Grade 6, I moved to Maniratana nunnery and became a nun as I can get support here.

From drug abuse to forced migration for employment, to separation, it is of course difficult to directly attribute the cause of these domestic issues to any one cause. However, it is reasonable to conclude that, at the very least, the lengthy and debilitating conflict has given rise to increased pressures on the traditional nuclear family life in some Ta'ang communities. Such widespread instability in the home is closely linked with the need to send young girls to Mandalay's nunneries.

Conflict and falling standards, resources and infrastructure in Ta'ang schools

Lastly, the effectiveness and basic functionality of Ta'ang schools as educational institutions have been impacted for several reasons, which are similarly connected to ongoing security issues. These issues were regularly cited as a primary motivation for young girls to seek better, more stable, options in Mandalay's nunneries.

Many girls and families mentioned that Ta'ang schools had only a few resident teachers, with most of the teachers coming from the lowland areas, lacking in long term commitment, and burdened with duties. Most importantly, they could not speak the local language, making it difficult to communicate with ethnic children. Though the nunneries in Mandalay also taught in Myanmar language, the girls were fully immersed in it and could learn from their older friends (see chapter four), whereas in the village schools the disconnect was stark. Their parents also cannot speak Burmese language and therefore could not fully prioritize or support their children's education. The result was that even after passing Grade 4, there were a lot of students who still could not read or write.

Several girls were very honest about the poor standards of village schooling, which often seemed to have a significant role in themselves making the decision to move. One girl identified the

limitations of Ta'ang language as being a big problem in her village school. While she could follow the lesson in the classroom quite well by using both Ta'ang and Burmese language, she and her classmates struggled when it came to the government exams which were set entirely in Burmese. Another young nun, Ma Tayzawati from Mann Aung Village, Nankham Township said:

> Most of the children are leaving the village and going to the cities. Only a few are left. I moved to Mandalay because my village education is not good enough. The children don't get a good education because the teacher doesn't teach properly or give us enough time. I wouldn't stay in my village even if my parents insisted.

The grandfather of one of the girls from Sai Taung village also felt that the standards were poor in the village, with language and cultural difference a big part of why:

> In the village we can't see any improvements and there is no Burmese speaking among Ta'ang people. That is why I take them here, so that they can speak Burmese and gain a more modern education and reach a higher level…we have a high school in the village, but the teachers are from different parts of the country - they are Kachin, Kayin, Kayar, and Bamar and there is no use in sending them to these schools.

Although the schools extend all the way through high school, parents, girls and the lowland nuns were all in agreement that this didn't equate to a proper education in the village. The children can't read properly until they are in Grade 4 and Grade 5, and though they stay in school through Grade 8 and Grade 9, it was extremely difficult and rare for these students to pass the matriculation exam in Grade 10. For the majority who didn't pass, they were left to go to China for work or often forced to join the Ta'ang army. Though Ta'ang schools operate as government schools under the central ministry and look similar to those in the big cities, in some villages there are no middle or high schools, with students having to travel long distances to reach schools in larger towns.

Moreover, while transportation for teachers seems to have improved in recent years with the teacher/student ratio dropping to a more reasonable level, this hadn't translated into large improvements in schooling quality. Ma Pyinnyar Thiri, a young nun now in Maniratana Nunnery, reflected this sentiment:

> I want to be educated so my parents sent me to the nunnery. We have a school in our village but my mother told us that we will not get a good education there, so she told us to go to Mandalay to study. I can speak Burmese and I am now in middle school. When I was in my village, there were fights and we ran to Hsipaw. The army took the boys so we all ran away. My mother told me that the fight was between the Ta'ang and Myanmar army. My mother told me that there are fights in the village and so you should go and live in Burmese cities.

Her experience shows the intersection of conflict with poor educational systems in these areas, where parents were often motivated by the offer of better education in the nunneries which was generally a result of insecurity and poor infrastructure, and they were then driven to make the decision by the immediacy of violence around the school and the home.

The reality of the disruptive state of education in Ta'ang areas was also expressed in the words of a prominent head monk who has witnessed the migration of young boys as well as girls:

> The fights are happening all around their area, and they are even not afraid of it anymore. But the schools are closed during the fighting, so the children can't study properly. Some parents go to China to work and the kids have to stay with their grandparents. This means that when grandparents go to the tea-leaf plantations, the kids don't go to school, and they just play or do what they like. There is no structured learning are they aren't given enough attention, the result being they can't read or write well, or even speak Burmese. The parents want them to be able to

> study properly and speak Burmese as the ones who can speak well can gain higher positions in their area, so they send their kids to the cities.

Ma Sucari, a young nun now in Maniratana nunnery, who is from Panyoke village in Nankham Township, was very reflective on the different factors that impacted her decision-making. Even at a young age she saw the impact of war on the lack of education for her and her fellow classmates, saying her only desire was to have peace and not war as she believed that there would be economic development if there is peace. She described with sadness how her village was deeply affected by the conflict

> There were frequent armed conflicts in that area two or three times a month and each incident lasted for three to four days. During that time, schools were closed and people had to stop working until the armed conflicts were over. Some still had to work even though they knew it was dangerous. As the villagers are all very close to each other, if one family was without food, they would share rice and curries to those who did not have it. Her uncle told her that if there was war, not to run out of the house but to just stay in the home. If they were to die it would be unavoidable.

She further said that she came here to Mandalay to learn to a higher level and hopefully study until university level if she can pass the matriculation exam. For her, the pull of the nun life was also interesting. After graduating from university, she said she plans to continue learning the Pali texts and sit Buddhist exams. However, she still hopes to be able to help her Ta'ang community by becoming a teacher and helping other young people have opportunities.

U Soe Tun, a father from Sai Taung whose daughter is in Maniratana nunnery, explained his perspective that while the fighting worried him, it was the impact on his children's education that worried him the most. He said that fighting occurs quite often near his village, but they are not scared anymore. For him, education was the most important thing. He wanted his daughter to have the best opportunity to succeed and that could only happen with a structured Burmese

language education, not in the village where learning continued to be irregular and severely lacking in structure and resource.

Village monk and nun networks - connections to lowland Buddhist education

Having explored the forces that influenced this pattern of educational mobility, the second part of this chapter examines the other part of this equation; the prominence of lowland Buddhist networks in education and their increased focus as providers to children affected by conflict. The section first gives an overview of the emergence of nunneries and schools in Mandalay in particular. This educational context has enabled the recent trend of young Ta'ang nuns coming to study in the city. We then look at the Ta'ang Buddhist networks from the mountain villages to Mandalay which facilitate and sometimes instigate the movement of the girls, which is then followed by a grounded explanation of how groups of village monasteries forge connections with specific nunneries. In analyzing these religious networks, it is of particular interest how girls from certain Ta'ang areas eventually study in the same nunnery in Mandalay.

Opportunities in lowland nunneries and monastic schools

Since the early 1960s, monks from highland areas have come central Myanmar cities such as Mandalay and Sagaing to learn Buddhist literature. Generally, they would first study in large monasteries, and then return to undertake missionary work in their hometowns. Later, young girls also came to those cities to learn Buddhist literature as nuns. Often, they would continue staying in the city for many years and even further their studies in Sri Lanka. It hasn't been until the last decade, however, that the trickle of movement from the mountains to the lowlands has become much stronger, with networks established to link prominent monastic figures with monasteries and nunneries.

Presently, the number of sites of monastic education in Mandalay has swelled to 81. 76 of these are attached to monasteries and are known as *bhaka* schools, while the other five are in *parahita*

nunneries. In Mandalay, the number of *parahita* nunneries has increased up to 210, meaning the vast majority of nuns study externally, unlike monks who generally study inside the monastery where they are attached. Unless the nuns stay at in these five nunneries, they study in much larger monastic schools. In total, these schools provide primary and secondary education to over 43,000 children across the Mandalay Region, with most of their students, male and female, coming from ethnic groups from the northern part of the country.

Salay monastic school is known as the first monastic school (*bhaka*) in Mandalay, located in the central Chan Mya Tharzi Township. The head monk, known as the *sayadaw*, is Ven Vizaya. From 1962, the *sayadaw* ran classes from kindergarten to Grade 5, and these days he acts as the head of the monastic school system for the whole of Mandalay. From 1982 to 1991, all *bhaka* monastic schools across Mandalay were forced to suspend under orders from the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council. Over time, Salay school grew to provide education to a huge number of students, from kindergarten through to high school. The second other large monastic school is Phaung Daw Oo in Chan Aye Tharsan Township. Founded in 1993 by Sayadaw U Nayaka and his brother Sayadaw U Jotika, it was permitted to operate by the Ministry of Religion as a primary school for 450 students and 17 volunteer teachers. In 1994 it upgraded to a middle school, and by 2000 it became a large high school. Phaung Daw Oo views its singular mission as providing free tuition to students from impoverished backgrounds, orphans and abandoned children, and those otherwise unable to attend government schools.

Among the monastic schools in Mandalay, only Maharvizayaranthi Salay monastic school and Phaung Daw Oo monastic school have the permission to run high schools, while the other schools have permission just to cover primary school, post-primary school, and middle school ages. If the monastic schools have only primary classes the students have to connect with the post-primary monastic school and government night schools for their children's continued education. While students from Kindergarten to Grade 8, can sit exams in their monastery, Grade 9 students have to go to the particular monastic schools or the government night schools

to sit their exams. High school students must go to either Salay or Phaung Daw Oo, or a government night school, to sit their exams.

One of my study sites, Maniratana nunnery, is one of the seven nunneries in Mandalay which are permitted to operate a *bhaka* school. The head nun of Maniratana nunnery applied for permission in 2014 and obtained the right to open the nunnery as a *bhaka* school for students from kindergarten to Grade 5. For Grade 6 and above, the girls still have to attend classes at the Basic Education High School (BEHS-23) which is run by Ministry of Education with support from UNICEF. For the Grade 4 exam, the students take it at the nunnery, but the questions are provided by Phaung Daw Oo monastic school, while the exam papers for Grade 5 are taken from the state school. For Grade 8, 9 10 students, they have to take their exams at government schools.

The teachers at the nunnery school come from Bagan, Nyaung Oo and Mandalay and are generally Burmese so do not speak the native ethnic languages of most students. Only one of the five teachers is a nun and the others are lay teachers. During the school holidays, the teachers have to attend regular trainings at state schools and also at Phaung Daw Oo monastic school. With the minimal funds available, the teachers have to pay for stationary such as books, pens, pencils. The government supports the nunnery school by providing 36,000 kyats per month to each primary teacher, which needs to be supplemented by the head nun to take their salary to 70,000 kyats, which is a very low amount of money even by the modest standards of Myanmar government staff.

The other of my research sites is Aungzayya Theikdhi Nunnery, which is exclusively a nunnery rather than a school. The head nun expressed her desire for the young nuns to study 'lawkoutara', a Buddhist doctrine on how to 'escape from worldly desires and attachment', but the children want to pursue a regular education, so the nuns go to the nearby Mahar Pyinnyar Yarma *bhaka* monastery for their schooling up until Grade 8. To fulfill these religious obligations, the children have to attend Dhamma School on weekend mornings, while Grade 9 and 10 students have to arrange their own tuition and take their exams as they go to Salay monastic school.

At the monastic schools, as in the nunneries, classes are taught mainly in Burmese, although many students speak other languages at home. There are special programs, such as Fast Track, Bridging, Pre-College, and New Teacher Training, which are taught in English, and students are also encouraged to attend additional classes in life skills, leadership training, health, hygiene, gender, and citizenship. Sunday Dhamma School, which teaches basic Buddhism and ethics, is optional and open to all children in the neighborhood. When the nuns finish the matriculation and become adults, most of them quit the nunnery on their own accord. Thee head nuns expressed that they do not want them to return home, and so they focus on forms of vocational training which can support them if they fail the exam.

It is clear from observing these structures that, contrary to common assumption, young monks and nuns in the monasteries and nunneries generally attend as a path to further their education, rather than to fully ordain and fulfill religious obligations. *Parahitta* nunneries, much like the boys in monastic compounds, can therefore be seen to serve a crucial function of educational welfare, providing opportunities and stability where state schools in upland ethnic areas have failed. Their parents expressed gratitude to these institutions for providing a safe haven to the girls, while also allowing them access to Burmese language schooling. Many parents of the girls see monastic schools and nunnery schools as providing essential food and shelter, as well as improved education relative to that available around their villagers. Ma Sandarwaddy from Sai Taung village said that the teaching methods of the schools in big cities were much better than those of the schools around her village.

As many of these girls arrive as very young children, sometimes just three or four years old, they begin to attend kindergarten which helps them become familiar with Burmese teachers and skills in listening and communicating using Burmese language. While this may seem harmful to the hopes of indigenous language education, there is little option for these girls than to become proficient in the dominant language of the state. The young nuns are required to go around the town to collect the offerings only twice a week, which the nuns claim provides them additional knowledge about the broader environment outside the nunnery of

school. Even though some nunnery schools are just primary schools, the head nuns take care of them by sending them to nearby middle schools or high schools to continue learning, covering all the costs involved. This is in contrast to upland schools, where parents are burdened by the cost of transport and school supplies, in addition to fears of insecurity.

While the nuns would rather them continue to become senior, fully ordained members of the monastic order, the girls also express appreciation that their elders give flexibility for them and their parents to decide their own future without the pressure of remaining within the religious structure. As girls continue onto the senior years of high school, they are still financially supported to take the matriculation exam if they wish, with some of them continuing on to university after passing, with those that do not pass often looking for work opportunities back in parts of Shan state – equipped with a sound education and upbringing away from the conflict which dominated their childhood in Northern Myanmar.

Figure 3.1 A senior nun teaches very young nuns in the bhaka nunnery

Figure 3.2 The senior nuns are constantly interacting with the young girls to ensure their wellbeing

Ta'ang Buddhist networks in Mandalay and the role of Ta'ang monks in the early young migration network

The girls come to Mandalay through Buddhist networks which facilitate the decision making of their families and arrange the movement of girls from their villages into nunneries where they can feel comfortable around others from similar backgrounds. The head nuns in Mandalay now generally have their own established connections with Ta'ang villages and the parents often come to meet the nuns in the city, but in the past Ta'ang monks living in Mandalay played a critical role in establishing this contact and finding educational opportunities for the girls.

Ta'ang communities in Myanmar are often seen as being just as devout followers of Buddhist orthodoxy as most central Burmese people, and Ta'ang monks have a long history of moving to the cities to engage in their work. In recent times the monks have been eager to support development plans to help their own people, particularly expressing the need for Ta'ang school-age children to

gain a strong education. Ta'ang monks were therefore seen as critical in establishing the networks that allowed this annual migration of young girls to take place, reaching to cities including Mandalay, Yangon, Sagaing, Monywa and Pathein, encouraging nuns to convert their nunneries into safe spaces for these girls. As a result, over the past decades many nunnery schools which previously only taught Buddhist literature are now *parahita* nunneries, and the Burmese nuns have their own direct connections to Ta'ang communities. The monks still have some supporting role to play in these networks, but their main contribution was in the original forging of these networks.

Throughout the 20th century, there are records of Ta'ang monks coming to lowland cities in Myanmar to engage in *pariyatti*, the study of Buddhist literature. In Mandalay, Dhammikarama Namhsan monastery has been the main Ta'ang religious center for Ta'ang people since its founding in 1978. As the first and main Ta'ang monastery in Mandalay, Ta'ang Buddhists see this as an important communal place. When Ta'ang people visit Mandalay, they often come to stay in the monastery as a space where they feel comfortable, whether they are engaging in religious pilgrimage or meditation, education, or travel.

According to a prominent monk, as the number of Ta'ang monks in the city grew in number they formed the Palaung (Ta'ang) Sangha Association, which become a common network to support fellow monks to engage in their monastic life and study Buddhist texts, while also attempting to preserve some distinct Ta'ang Buddhist texts and practices. Over recent decades, several other Ta'ang monasteries have emerged throughout Mandalay, with just a few in Yangon. As the number of Ta'ang monks in the city grew, increasingly they began to provide support to people coming directly from their home area. Those from Nahmsan would visit the monastery of the monk and community from Nahmsan, while those from villages around Zayankyi would visit their own respective monastery.

The currents *sayadaw* (head monk) from Dhamikarama Namshan monastery is identified as a central actor in the Ta'ang socio-religious network. When interviewed, he recalled that he has recruited many novices and nuns from his village and other villages in Namhsan region, and he sends young Ta'ang novices and nuns to the major

monasteries and monastic schools in Mandalay, such as Paungdaw Oo, Naymin, Kantatkon, as well as helping girls come to *parahita* nunneries. He also sends young Ta'ang children to boarding schools in the cities of Kyuakse and Shwebo.

U Pannar Nanda, a monk from one of the Ta'ang monasteries in Mandalay, reflected on the switch in focus of these places over recent years, from religious obligation to education. The monastery was built in 1985, he said, under the leadership of a Ta'ang monk. It ran for many years as a *pariyatti* monastery, but changed to a *bhaka* monastery in 2018 to be able to give education to young monks who wanted to learn.

Interestingly, this monk would also directly play a role in bringing young girls and boys to Mandalay:

> From around 2000 onwards, I regularly went back to my village of Kukhar to recruit young Ta'ang children to become novices and nuns. I was the main Buddhist missionary in that village, and some of them would come to my monastery, but I would send some to other Burmese monasteries and nunneries in Mandalay as well as other cities. Before sending the novices and nuns, I would closely check the situation and facilitate arrangements for the monasteries and nunneries, particularly regarding food, dormitories, healthcare, and education.

Monks in Mandalay recall this earlier influx of children into the monasteries and nunneries, describing how they convinced the kids and their parents that they would be safe there and guaranteed them a quality education. These monk networks were essential in establishing many of the relationships and structures which facilitated this movement of young boys and girls from the highlands to the cities. Still today, these monk networks continue to bring large numbers of boys to study in the large monasteries and in monastic schools. However, as nunneries have become more established in the city in recent times, the senior nuns now play the main role in the movement of young girls.

Nun and monk networks from the hills to the city

In establishing these lowland-highland nun networks, a senior nun recalled how in the early days Shan and Ta'ang young nuns came from the highland to learn Buddhist literature in Mandalay, learning together with nuns from the lowlands. After they finished their study, some would return to their native towns as Buddhist missionaries, founding the *pariyatti sarthinteik* in their villages and starting to teach Buddhist literature. Other nuns chose not to return, but to continue staying in the cities. Over time these nuns would cooperate to help bring young girls to study in the city. As with the monasteries, these networks began with a priority on spreading Buddhism, but over time came to emphasize the simple goal of providing education.

In the first of my study sites, Aungzayya Theikdhi Nunnery, this network was evident through the experiences of many of the girls. In 2013, the senior nun was invited to come and give teachings at a nunnery in Lashio, Shan State, by her friend who was the head nun. She taught the Shan and Ta'ang girls *pariyatti*, the teachings of the Buddha. After one year she had returned to Mandalay, before her friend asked whether she would accept children from the villages to come and study at her nunnery. While she constructed lodgings for the girls on a small plot of land given to them by the monks, she stayed with her sister in a temporary bamboo shelter. Three Ta'ang girls who were her former students, Daw Nyan Nay Thi from Sai Taung village, Namhkam township, Daw Thila Sari from Theinni town and Daw Khay Mar from Munaung village, came to stay with her in Mandalay and continue as students until now.

The head nun says that this initial movement led to many girls subsequently following through similar connections and word of mouth. The nun from Lashio further arranged for another group of girls to come, and the girls expressed great admiration to the head nun for the opportunities she had provided. Over the years since, this same highland/lowland nun connection has continued to arrange for girls to come, often working with a village monk to help make arrangements with their families.

Ma Nyan Nay Thi, one of the girls in the first batch of young migrant nuns, explained how the village nun brought them to Mandalay nunnery:

> My mother's friend, the village nun, took me to Aungzayya Theikdhi nunnery in Mandalay. She and the head nun (Sayargyi)became friends while they were studying together in Lashio. My grandma told me to go and study at Mandalay. So, four young girls, including me from the village were sent to the nunnery with the village nun. My mum didn't know that I became a nun because she went to China for work. My grandma told me that she cried when she came back home and I was not there.

In Maniratana nunnery these village-city networks are also active and influential in the migration process. For many years parents in one village, Pan Hnin, acted as small donors to support the study and ordination of a villager who learnt Buddhist literature in Yangon. By 2009, he had come back to the village to work, and on his way back on the train met the head nun of Maniratana nunnery. She had been taking Burmese nuns to Yangon to visit famous Pagados to celebrate them completing their final exams. Upon learning about her work supporting these girls, he asked if she was able to accept Ta'ang nuns from his village so they could study.

This chance meeting led to the monk bringing the first group of Ta'ang girls to Mandalay in 2010. Before bringing the girls, the monk travelled there twice to meet with the nuns and observe the space and the schooling while staying at a nearby monastery. While the monk instigated this connection, in the years since the parents and grandparents in the village shared their information and experiences among themselves and arranged the passage of the girls themselves in direct coordination with the nuns.

U Sein Win, one of the parents, explained how in 2011 he sent his kids to the nunnery through the contact of the parents;

> I didn't know the head nun before and I didn't know about her nunnery. But the parents who have sent their kids to this nunnery told us that we can also send our children. They said it was free not only for their education but also for food and accommodation. More importantly, it is also very safe there. That is why I trusted the nuns with looking after my girls.

In 2013, fighting started around Pan Hnin village and the village school closed temporarily. One impact was that villagers couldn't go to the tea-leaf plantation to pick the tea leaves and the village economy declined. For the children, there was a possibility that the Ta'ang army could take them at any time, and they couldn't study well. This period led to a further uptick in the numbers of parents deciding to send their girls and boys to the nunneries and monasteries in search of a safe haven. In 2014, around 50 boys and girls left this one small village. During this period, parents didn't have a direct connection with the monasteries, so they would first send their boys to the nunnery. After the boys could speak Burmese well, the head nun sent them to the other monasteries in Mandalay who she had contact with. The large surge in numbers from Pan Hnin and surrounding villages led to the head nun submitting the application to run the *bhaka* school in the nunnery.

Ma Hnin Nu from Pan Hnin village gives an example of how these networks spawned and grew amid this era of increased conflict in the uplands. In 2013, she arrived at the nunnery to attend Grade 9. She lived at the nunnery as a layperson and studied Grade 9 and 10 at a nearby school. Though she didn't pass the matriculation exam, the head nun asked her to be a teacher at the nunnery. The head nun also asked her to go back to places around her village and find children who needed further support in the at her nunnery. She spent time travelling around and talking to villagers in Kyauk Taw and Khae Twe, discussing the safety and education they could provide to young girls. Ma Hnin Nu said that as she was a villager herself she was able to gain the trust of parents and 10 girls came with her back down to Maniratana.

Ma Aye Thi was one of the girls who followed Ma Hnin Nu back to Mandalay:

> Hnin Nu gave us information that the nunnery in Mandalay accepts girls for study and provides us with safety and support. There was fighting in the village so my father asked me to be a nun and go study in Mandalay nunnery. My father sent me to the nunnery by bus when I was just 7 years old.

These networks have continued to grow through the increased

connectivity among the Ta'ang monastic order across Myanmar. Religious ceremonies, for example, provide opportunities for monks and nuns to share opportunities for young monks and nuns to study. The seven-day chanting ceremony, known as *patthan*, is one occasion where Ta'ang monks and nuns can discuss these issues which inevitably leads to more numbers of young Ta'ang being found in institutions across the country.

In the cases of both Aungzayya Theikdhi Nunnery and Maniratana Nunnery, these networks began through highland-lowland networks involving nuns and monks. As time went on, however, these networks seemed to become increasingly organic and less reliant on formal channels of communication, with parents placing increased trust in these small yet growing institutions to take care of their children amid the period of conflict and economic crisis.

Information sharing among Ta'ang villages – Nunnery networks evolving into direct village-nunnery connections

While these monastic networks continued to have a role in facilitating the movement of young girls to Mandalay, over time the sharing of information among villagers played a larger role. Parents and grandparents told each other of their experiences and the general sense of security and comfort they felt with their girls being with the nuns away from problems in the village. These information sharing networks meant that, over time, nunneries in Mandalay forged specific close ties with particular villagers, as one nunnery would come to comprise generally girls from only a handful of villages in a similar area. This phenomenon increased the communal feeling in the nunneries, with the girls becoming more familiar with the settings, while also helping embed these specific migratory networks within village social structures.

Several girls in the nunnery said that they had no knowledge of the nuns before they came, but instead trusted the parents of other girls in the village. In many cases where girls' parents worked far from the village, they would also travel down accompanied by the parents of other girls.

Ma Pyinnyar Thiri shared this experience:

> We didn't know the head nun, but my parents just got information about the nunnery from the other parents and so decided to send us here. We are from Pan Hnin village as are many of the other girls, so my parents decided to come down with the other parents to send us here.

Aye Bone, the grandmother of one of the girls from Pan Hnin village also said that she had long wanted to send her grandchildren to the lowland cities but didn't have any contact or information on how to do it before. She also didn't speak Burmese so didn't feel confident bringing them down to Mandalay herself. In 2019, a parent of another girl discussed the nunnery with her and soothed her concerns. She asked him to take her three grandchildren with him to the nunnery and now their girls all study there together.

Another young nun, Ma Rupasandar, shared how young girls from Khun Hout village also started coming to Maniratana nunnery;

> My grandpa lives in Hsipaw and my parents live in Khun Hout. When my parents visited grandpa in Hsipaw, he said that he could send us to low land cities for education if my parents wanted to. My parents then went back to the village and discussed it with other parents. Three of them first decided to send their children to Mandalay through my grandfather. Over time this made other parents feel more comfortable and they did the same.

Another common network which emerged was through the workplaces of the parents. While parents would often migrate to work outside the village and leave their children behind, when Ta'ang migrant workers came together from different villages, they shared information about the nunneries. One worker from a highland orange plantation was the cousin of a head nun at Maniratana, and after talking with other parents he was able to arrange for many of them to make the safe trip to Mandalay.

Further, technology has increased the ease at which information can be shared. The widespread level of phone and social media connectivity, even in remote highland areas, has allowed parents

to share information with each other about which nunneries are most suitable and safe for their girls. Technology has also allowed these parents to remain in contact with their daughters living after they make the move to the city.

While there is some sharing of knowledge which transcends village ties, it is clear that the dominant pattern has been an increased concentration of girls from particular villages or village-tracts connecting with specific nunneries in Mandalay. For instance, the Ta'ang head nun from another monastery in the city, Mhu Sal, said that at first the monk from a local monastery had sent a few girls to her. Once they accepted these girls, the parents from the same village continued to send them and her small nunnery continues to grow each year. "We cannot refuse to accept any of the girls because their parents have put much effort and trust into bringing them here", she said.

A significant reason for this concentration of girls from nearby villages is their familiarity with local language dialects. While all the girls coming to these nunneries are Ta'ang, their dialects vary widely between different areas. One of the senior nuns said that their integration into the nunnery is significantly eased when they join girls speaking the same dialect, which helps them understand how to go about their new lives.

However, one issue that is emerging is how this concentration of girls is placing increased pressure on these small nunneries to continue to accept the flow of girls from these same areas. In Aungzayya Theikdhi Nunnery, this has led to a straining of resources. While they are able to provide free education to the girls when they are young, when they enter high school they have to ask parents to contribute half the school fees. With the parents unable to pay, the village nun came had to arrange for them to move to a nunnery in Yangon where there is no need for payment.

Despite these challenges, in recent years these networks have continued to solidify the linkages between villages and nunneries. The map here visualizes how Aungzayya Theikdhi Nunnery and Maniratana Nunnery bring girls to the city from broadly the same part of Shan state and the girls stay among others from the same small cluster of villages. More broadly this reveals the extent to

which local networks still play a significant part in the continued movement of young girls from the remote Ta'ang highland to Myanmar's bustling cities.

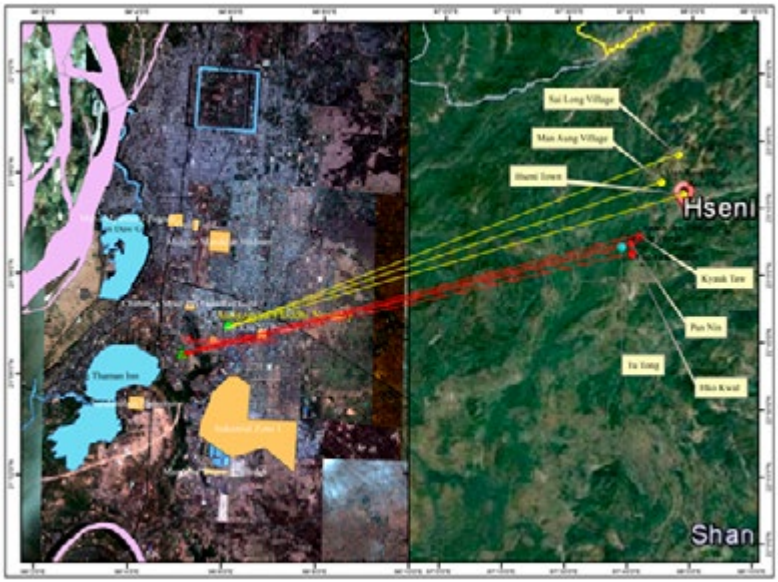

Figure 3.3 Clusters of Ta'ang villages connect with specific nunneries in Mandalay city.

4

ADAPTING TO LIFE IN THE NUNNERIES: LEARNING PROCESSES AND OBLIGATIONS AMID RENUNCIATION

Continuing along the theme of community support networks established in chapter three, some brief focus is paid here to structures and support systems inside the nunnery. Young nuns, while obviously more vulnerable and impressionable, are like other migrant populations in how they face varying social challenges in their host society. Integration may be difficult, and they need to learn new languages and adapt to new ways of living. As such, after moving to Mandalay there are many learning process and obligations that the Ta'ang girls need to engage with in order support their integration into these communities and the institutions which take them in. This chapter thus first explores the rather regimented nature of daily life in the two nunneries, and then compares the different social structures and hierarches in these institutions with a particular look at processes of learning and integration - one example being the practice rice collection from donors around urban Mandalay.

Daily life of the young girls in the nunneries

The Maniratana Thilashin Sartindaik nunnery, located in Pyi Gyi Tagon Township in an urban part of Mandalay city, at the time of research had 85 young nuns and three senior nuns. All the young nuns are ethnic Ta'ang and the three elder nuns are ethnic Bamar.

As the previous chapter explained, the certification of the *parahita* nunnery as a *bhaka* school means that the girls can study primary school inside the nunnery, but for middle school and high school they take night lessons in larger monastic schools outside while continuing to live in Maniratana nunnery.

The senior nuns - those who are studying in high school - divide tasks among themselves and have a system of rotation to fulfil the basic needs of the place. At 4:30am, the four senior nuns who have been assigned to cook rice for breakfast and lunch usually wake up to begin their work. They prepare simple food to eat with rice according to what the head nun has assigned. Stir-fried cabbage is common as cabbage is cheap and plentiful. The rest of the nuns also get up at 4:30am to partake in prayer, while the youngest nuns get up at 6:00am. All the nuns eat breakfast together once all the nuns, young and old, are up and about. Before beginning class the nuns of middle school age help the younger nuns take a bath. The junior nuns must take a bath one after another in a queue because the space of the bath is not wide enough for many girls to take a bath at the same time.

Figure 4.1 A nun studies while she cooks rice

Figure 4.2 A teacher and a senior nun prepare breakfast

During the time they are waiting for their queue, some nuns study or prepare for the day at school, while some senior nuns clean the toilets, fill the water pots, and sweep the floors. After having a bath, the elder nuns help their little sisters to dress in their robes and put on *thanaka*. In the time before school, girls of different ages have various duties and obligations. The young ones who finish early often sit together reciting the poems they have learned from school, while others play together. The Grade 6 students are asked to peel the onions and beans to cook for lunch, while Grade 4 students clean the head nun's room before they go to school. Grade 9 students must go to take tuition outside the nunnery at 6:30am and come back at 8am, and then they have to attend the class at the nunnery again. Grade 6 students must do school chores in the morning and attend the class in the afternoon. The one teacher has to teach both Grade 9 and Grade 6, meaning the two groups have to rotate between learning and other duties. Grade 10 students go to tuition from 7:00 to 11:00 in the morning and again from 1:00 to 6:00 in the afternoon. After having dinner, they must go again to study in the evenings given the importance placed on preparations for the matriculation exams.

Figure 4.3 Young nuns playing traditional games together

The elder nun explains how age is not always a factor in determining their duties.

> I can't assign them tasks according to their age. Although some are still in primary classes, they are of middle or high school age because they didn't have a chance to go to school when they were in the village. There are five senior nuns to cook breakfast and they have to get up at 4:30 am. The rest of the nuns also get up at 4:30 and say prayers/ pay homage to the Buddha at 5:00 am. They have to do odd jobs such as the cleaning the shrine and changing the flowers to offer to Buddha, filling the water pots and sweep the floor. The nuns who are attending Grade 10 are not assigned to do anything because they are too busy, and they don't need to join the group to go around the city to collect offered rice.

She continued…

> The very little nuns don't need to get up very early because there is nothing they can help with or do. The curries have always been prepared at night. In fact, we don't necessarily cook any special curry for breakfast. We usually prepare rice with boiled peas and beans, samosa nga-pi chat, and sometimes have onion, gourd, bean fritters. etc. If there is a donor, they usually donate *mohingar* and *mont ti* and we cook them at the nunnery.

For the young girls who stay in Maniratana to learn in the primary school, their school day essentially begins at 8am. As soon as they hear the bell, they go to the shrine room to say prayers, to practice loving kindness and to share merit, and this is followed by singing the national anthem, the Myanmar student song and *zartiman* (the national spirit song). The also try to do so exercise by listening to music of a more upbeat nature. The girls then greet the teachers by saying *pañcaguṇaṃ ahaṃ vandāmi* (greeting to teachers, paying respect to teachers) and go to their own classes. The daily lives of girls in the Maniratana nunnery therefore varies significantly depending on their level at school. For the young girls they are almost always contained inside the small spaces of the nunnery as it doubles as both their learning and living space. For the middle school girls they venture outside for class but still must spend a lot of time fulfilling duties inside the nunnery, while for the older high school girls their intense study workload means they spend most of their time studying externally.

Figure 4.4 A nun telling stories to nuns in kindergarten

The much smaller nunnery, Aungzayya Theikdhi, is also located in Pyi Gyi Tagon Township, but it has just 11 girls who are all Ta'ang, along with two Bamar elder nuns. For their whole schooling life from coming to Mandalay at the age of 7 until their graduation, the girls study at go to Mahar Pyin Nyar Yar Monastic School. The girls all get up and wash their face at 4:30 am and then say prayers at 5am. After that they all clean inside and outside of the nunnery compound, on the road and even up the railings of the stairs according to the tasks assigned to them by the elder nuns. Meanwhile, the head nun and her assistant nun cook breakfast together in the kitchen, and one young nun is assigned to help them with small tasks while cooking. They all eat breakfast around 6am, and by 8am the nuns leave the compound and travel around 15 minutes by foot to the school.

The school day starts at 8:30am with prayers before classes start around 9am. They have lunch at school as the monastery provides free lunch for the students, and they return to the nunnery at 4:15pm. After a long day at school they girls rest for a while and have a shower before doing their homework. But they generally will not eat dinner, with the head nun saying they don't really need extra food before sleeping, but they will just have fruit and perhaps some juice if they are hungry. The girls again recite prayers between 6pm to 7pm. When I observed their reciting, it was clear that all the girls were very comfortable and well-versed in reciting Buddhist scriptures, except one nun who had recently arrived. After prayers the nuns tend to take more rest, with some assigned the task of filling water pots. Before sleep the nuns all do their homework, aside from the Grade 9 students who go to Pyin Nyar Yar Ma monastery to join a night study group from until 10pm. Around 10pm, the elder nuns go to the monastery to bring home the girls to bed safely.

Figure 4.5 Nuns filling pure water into pots

Daily life and practice in these two nunneries therefore have some strong points of difference, largely attributed to size and their differing ability to directly offer schooling to the girls. In

Maniratana, the large nunnery which doubles of a Bhaka school providing primary education, the schedule is rigid, tasks are carefully assigned, and the atmosphere is more institutionalized as a result. Even for the older girls in Maniratana who study in the monastic system, they form part of a collective which runs on order and precise systems. Each group of girls has a role to play to ensure everything goes ahead efficiently despite the small under resourced space which houses them. In Aungzayya Theikdhi nunnery, however, life for the girls is slightly less systematized and the girls are largely free to cooperate with each other to make sure everything gets done to the head nun's liking. Age is less relevant as tasks are not so rigidly divided, giving more of a feeling of a small family where each one chips in to support the other. Such differences in the rhythms and patterns of daily life in the nunneries despite the inherent institutionalized nature of the spaces, warrants a further discussion on how the girls integrate amid structures of hierarchy and forms of practice.

Hierarchy, social integration, and communities of practice

Protection and teaching from the head nuns

In order to understand the forms of practice in these two communities, we first observed the forms of hierarchy and social interaction. The contrasting sizes of the nunneries largely explains their different forms of social relations, though the notion of seniority is a constant theme which is further emphasized by the language and cultural difficulties faced by Ta'ang girls coming to these particularly foreign spaces at a very young age. In Maniratana nunnery, all the nuns call refer to the the head nun by the term '*Lay Lay*', which is a sort of nickname playing off the common word 'lay' in Myanmar parlance. It seems to be preferred as a moniker for the head nun as it is respectful, somewhat affectionate, and easy for the girls to pronounce. The head nun is the most prominent figure in the nunnery and she is responsible for safeguarding all aspects of the space. In addition to supporting their education both in running the *bhaka* school and ensuring the older girls attend school regularly, the head nun also must take care of the girls health and the nunnery's financial management.

She provides the girls with traditional medicine at various times throughout the year to help prevent illness during seasonal shifts. If someone gets ill, the head nun usually brings medicine and asks another teacher to apply coconut oil on the girls whole body before they let her sleep. In the afternoon, she asks the girl to take medicine again along with noodle soup. In the evening, she says the kids usually feel better and can even eat a normal meal. But if the children get seriously ill the she asks the teachers to take them to the clinic. To ensure the nunnery is financially sound in that their expenses do not exceed the money donated, she accounts for all money coming in and out of the institution. In addition to food and daily necessities, the nunnery must provide books, pencils, and pens to the girls for their study, as well as school fees for Grade 9, 10 and 11.

Figure 4.6 Head nun and teacher giving traditional medicine to a sick nun

The senior nuns also have a strong role to play in protecting the safety of the older young nuns. Teacher Daw Khin Khin Mya said,

> Although we have rules preventing them from leaving without permission, the secondary school and high school students have to go to night school, and they have to go around the city for two days to collect the

> offered rice. Grade 9 and 10 students also must go to tuition. If they must go outside, we warn them that there are bad people who may harm them. We also must give them knowledge about sex to make sure that they know and do not make any mistakes. We tell them stories concerning sex abuse which is happening around the city. This is not to make them scared but just to let them know the danger. I also tell the stories of the girls that I have read from books and explain to them that this kind of mistake cannot be redeemed…

Despite the relative size of Maniratana, it is readily observable that a culture has manifested itself whereby the older girls should always give priority to the more vulnerable younger girls who they should always be wary of. This is particularly apparent during mealtimes, where the older girls are in charge of ensuring the young girls are given plentiful food to eat, particularly in the evenings after longs days at school, and they are likewise tasked with collecting the young girls dishes and washing up. This culture of care from old to young dominates the space and has been formed by the head nun. On one occasion an older girls grabbed a pencil from a little one, before the teacher quickly scolded her, saying "She is your little sister, isn't she? You have to take care of your little sister. Give the pencil back to her", and she gave it back right away.

Figure 4.7 Senior nuns washing dishes after lunch

Meanwhile, in the much smaller Aungzayya Theikdhi Nunnery, all the nuns call the head nun *ma zay* and the assistant nun *ma kay*, while the junior nuns call the senior nuns *ma ma*. The head nun and the assistant nun refer to each other by their name, as do the younger girls to their friends. Despite the small space, the head nun still commands considerable authority. One of the young girls, Ma Nyan Nay Thi, said,"If we fight with each other, Sayargyi scolds us and sometimes beats both of the girls who fight." The head nun herself said that fighting is rare but that it must be dealt with appropriately.

With only eleven nuns, the elder nun and her assistant nun, the forms of social interaction are less structured and not as carefully managed as in the larger nunneries. Beyond the need for respect to be afforded to the head nuns, the hierarchy is a bit more unspoken, and roles are largely understood only through regularity of practice than steadfast rule. The girls live with discipline under the head nuns rule, though and they must be very clean. When

she travels somewhere and if there are some guests at the nunnery, for example, the nuns treat them with all the food they have because she has set that expectation. The head nun has also shown them how to wash the dishes, how to clean the dining room, and wash their clothes.

Looking after so many young girls is not easy for the senior nuns either, with sayama Daw Khin Khin Mya explaining to me how sometimes must teach the little kids in a tough manner too:

> The little ones can't clean themselves when they go to toilet. My senior nuns have to help and sometimes I have to help clean them. At night, when they want to go to toilet, they are so sleepy that they cannot walk to the toilet and they just pee at the door of the room. If I know, I shout at them. And they walk to the toilet.

From religious practice to daily ritual

So while practice remains largely unspoken, the singular authority of the head nun permeates all aspects of the small nunnery. She teaches them to cook, one after another, on a daily basis. She also shows them how to make dishwashing detergent by themselves as it is cheaper than buying it outside. The head nun tells them how to do it and they all make it together. From these practices, we can learn the fact that the junior nuns usually learn from and respect to their seniors. Before the girls arrived, they could not say prayers or read the Buddhist scriptures by themselves, so the head nun would read them out loud and asked them to repeat after her. She also teaches them how to be respectful, how to send good wishes and loving kindness to the donors. Sometimes the girls have to memorize some prayers by themselves by copying down on their papers from the book, and this will only ever be taught by the head nun. During communal prayer, the newcomers listen silently and learning while others say their prayers. In time though they must become more self-sufficient, such as when their pillow covers or robes have holes, they are expected to mend them by themselves.

In both nunneries, the area of Buddhist practice is one where there is less room for flexibility and the seniority of the hed nun and

visiting monks is paramount. Although some of the girls have already been nuns since in their villagers, some of them only became nuns when they moved to the nunneries in the city. For those who have not been nuns, they must have their head shaven and strictly observe eight precepts from the monk to be properly ordained. The head nun teaches them how to wear the robes, how to say prayers and recite Buddhist teachings written in *Pali* and Burmese. For the newcomers who have just arrived at the nunnery who can't speak or understand Burmese language, they first listen to the senior nuns praying and reciting. After some time as they become used to the sounds and patterns, the head nun will more directly seek to impart the Buddhist teachings. While they are reciting prayers the head nun (Sayargyi) often listens to them closely. If they make any mistakes she readily corrects them, and if anything is mispronounced, they are asked to enunciate properly.

Sometimes in the evening the monk comes and leads them in prayer. When he arrives he asks the young nuns to sit in rows and join prayer in unison, repeating after him. When interviewed, the monk explained how he taught them to fulfill their role as nuns over time:

> At the beginning, they don't know how to pronounce words in the Buddhist scripture. So I ask them to repeat after me. After a few days, they can pronounce well and say prayers by themselves. I started teaching them last year. I taught them Buddhist scriptures like 'Dhammasatkya' and 'Payate Kyi'. This year I will teach them the characteristics of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sanga and how to share the merits they have gained with all beings. I explain to them that if they practice according to the Buddha's teachings, they will be free from the disaster of the old age, the suffering and the dead in both Pali and Myanmar language.

Figure 4.8 A monk leads young nuns in prayer

While these structures and forms of authority may slightly differ between the two nunneries studied here, the experiences of young nuns as a process of learning and integration from Ta'ang areas to Mandalay are observed to be broadly similar. This focus on perfection as it relates to religious practice is not as present in other parts of the girls lives but reflects a gradual learning process which could be called a community of practice, particularly in how the older girls step up to support their younger sisters. When the girls first come down to the nunnery, language presents a formidable challenge for the young girls who have had very limited exposure to Burmese language. If they are asked to wash their face they have no way of knowing what to do, and so the teachers and the senior nuns show them how to look after themselves, to wash their face, brush their teeth and cut their nails.

For those who cannot speak Burmese, the older girls help the head nun to communicate with them. According to the older girls, the little nuns often feel uncomfortable and want to go back home immediately when they first arrive at the nunnery because they must live and eat according to a fixed schedule at the nunnery, whereas they are completely free at home or their villages. However, there is no chance of going back due to the challenges

back in Ta'ang areas, so they need to learn from the head nun, senior nuns and the teachers how to go about their new lives. They say that the initial period of drastic adjustment to their new life takes around one month. When the nuns reach the age of puberty, they try to learn about their body and girlhood from the senior nuns. During the times of menstruation, the head nun takes care of them with food and she teaches them to stay clean and everything. In this way, the nuns are trying their best to be accustomed to the environment and learn new things living away from their parents.

On the day before they go around the city to collect rice offered by lay donors, the girls must shave their heads to be seen as presentable for a nun in public. To do this, young nuns all stand in a line and help the person next to them. The older girls go first and move down the line so the younger ones can see how it is done. In time, the nuns say, they become accustomed to their environment. According to the teachers, they know there is a need to show love to the girls so they can see it as their home, see the senior nuns as their mothers and the older girls like their big sisters. "Little by little, they all help each other and live together" said the head nun, "They learn from each other both good and bad."

Rice collection as an example of cultural adaptation

Rice collection is a fundamental part of the life of young nuns, both in terms of fulfilling the role expected of them as well as being a practical necessity. It requires some particular knowledge about how to partake in the practice, how to follow particular routes as well as forms of behavior, and so it presents an interesting case study for how the girls attempt to integrate in their new lives.

In Maniratana nunnery, the nuns go around the city to collect offerings on both the day before pre-sabbath day and on pre-sabbath day. The head nun forms around 10 groups of 4-6 nuns, combining senior and junior nuns in each group. These groups are fixed for the whole year. The senior nuns help the junior nuns to step on the bus, to cross the road, and teach them how to wish and send loving-kindness to the donors. The area of the city they go to on those two days is around a large Industrial Zone, which they

travel to by an express bus provided by a nearby meditation center. According to the girls this area is particularly fruitful for them as almost every house will donate something, and they have become familiar with the donors.

Figure 4.9 Senior nun leads young nuns in the city collecting rice donations

While they move from place to place, the girls recite their best wishes to the donors. Sometimes before they head out the head nun will reiterate to them how they must interact with the donors as they follow the senior nuns to collect the donated rice. Often the younger girls struggle to remember, so they will listen to the older girls and slowly follow them, carefully learning through practice. Sometimes donors come directly to the nunnery to donate snacks, meals and other necessities and they must also carefully follow the reciting of wishes to these often particularly generous donors.

Figure 4.10 Donors donate meals to nuns directly at the nunnery

On the days of rice collection the girls do not have breakfast at the nunnery, but instead visit the nearby Shan noodle shop where the owner donates noodles to all of them, which is a treat for the girls. After eating noodles, the girls start collecting offerings at 9:30 at the market in the industrial zone. The shop owners and people from the market donate vegetables, rice and sometimes money. For lunch, they go to the shops where they can also get free lunch, before they take a rest at the houses of the donors who are friendly with them or who they know. After that, they go around again to collect the offerings and return to the nunnery around 5pm by public bus. Some of the groups meet on the bus and go back together, and they have to pay 100 MMK per nun each ride.

Figure 4.11 Young nuns having breakfast at a Shan noodle shop

At around 6pm, they arrive back at the nunnery group by group. While going around the area, the girls are given so much rice that they cannot carry it any longer, so they sell rice to the people who usually buy from them on the way. Some households ask them if they want to sell rice as they pass. They usually receive 1,300 MMK for one *pyi* of rice (a unit of grain measure equivalent to 1/16 part of one large sack of rice). Each nun gives 6,000 MMK to the head nun when they get back to the nunnery from the money they got from selling rice, and they can share the rest of the money among themselves and keep all the snacks they received.

The importance of continuing to foster these relationships with regular donors is therefore a key part of rice collection and something the young nuns must quickly learn from the older girls. These familiar donors don't just give simple food, but also provide snacks and drinks and a space for girls to take a rest and seek respite from the hot sun. Some donors later come to the nunnery and strike a relationship with the head nun in which they will donate more significant items such as essential necessities, money

to run the place, and school fees for the girls every month. Some even come to volunteer their time cooking breakfast or lunch at the nunnery, while others come to wash the blankets, sheets, and robes for all the girls. Additionally, during the school holidays the girls sometimes go out to villages to collect offerings - mainly uncooked rice which can be stored the whole year round. Most of the villages are near Naypyitaw and have a close familiarity with the head nun.

Figure 4.12 A nun sells back rice she has collected

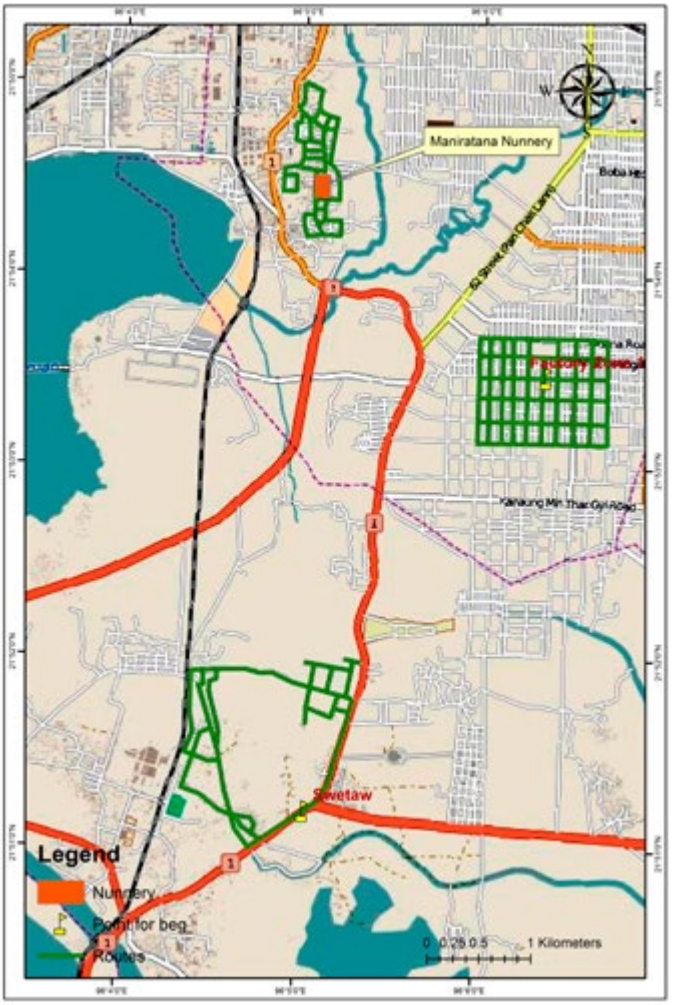

Figure 4.13 The map shows the routes the girls regularly take across the two days of collection

In Aungzayya Theikdhi nunnery, the girls go out for rice collection on the same auspicious days. On these busy days, the head nun gets up early to cook a particularly nutritious, energy-giving breakfast for them before waking the nuns up at 5am. They all get up, wash their face, say prayers, recite the 10 precepts and send loving kindness to all beings, before taking breakfast at 6am. Before they eat, they say they particularly ask for loving kindness

to be brought to the donors. At 6:30am, they leave to collect the offered rice in one full group which includes the assistant nun. In the morning, they move around the wards very close to the nunnery, and people around them also get up early and offer donations. Almost all the houses donate rice to the nuns, but for some houses they leave the baskets of rice in front of their houses. If no one emerges from the house to donate in person, the nuns distribute the rice among themselves.

Figure 4.14 Nuns from Aungzayya Theikdhi nunnery move around in a single file as they collect rice

Figure 4.15 The nuns line up to collect rice from a regular house along the main route

Figure 4.16 The two nearby routes followed by the girls each time

An example of a practice which the young nuns have to quickly pick up is distinguishing between high and low quality rice. Each nun carries one sack for each. They must look at the color of the rice and determine whether it is good or bad. If the rice is pure white they put it in the sack of high quality rice, but if the rice is mixed with dirt they put it in the other. Then they sell the bad quality rice on the way when they meet with the buyers, and bring only the good rice back to the nunnery. Each nun generally brings at least one *pyi* of good quality rice. As with Maniratana, the girls quickly become overwhelmed by the quantity of rice so offloading

some of it is a necessity . With the money they receive from selling the rice they must buy utensils and vegetables. On the same day the girls go around the market and sellers donate vegetables. The girls return to the nunnery around 11am and eat lunch. Each nun normally gets 2 *pyi* of rice in this morning round.

Figure 4.17 Two sacks used to distinguish donated rice by quality

At 12:30, they go to a ward around 3 miles away for the second round of collection. They collect rice around the ward and then circle the streets in this familiar area for several hours, not returning to the nunnery until 6pm. The girls tend to sleep early that evening after a long day. The following day they circle another ward which is around 45 minutes walk away from the nunnery. They go to that ward in the morning and come back at 11am to have lunch at the nunnery, and follow a similar pattern of morning and afternoon collection routes. According to the head nun, the additional funds which the girls can receive from selling rice and asking for money from donors is essential to keep the place running properly, and people also donate stationary and robes for the whole group which helps save on costs.

Despite the differing size of the nunneries, the practice of rice collection follows similar patterns and requires the girls to closely

follow established routes and forms of activity. In both cases, familiarity and respect to donors is seen as being of utmost importance, for a successful day of collection requires the donors to be expecting the girls at a pre-determined time as they circle the streets. The young nuns must therefore quickly learn from their seniors, memorizing not only the forms of prayer and the physical expressions of respect, but also the long-established routes which cover their particular parts of Mandalay. For these Ta'ang girls, rice collection is largely reflective of the types of challenges they face in coming to Mandalay, with little knowledge of language or what it means to renunciate in the city, and therefore requires them to be adaptive and willing to integrate quickly, following the path of both the elder nuns and the senior girls.

5

CONCLUSION

The study of *parahita* nunneries has the potential to be quite revealing about the state of many aspects of contemporary Myanmar urban and rural dynamics. The movement of young Ta'ang girls from their villages to large lowland cities is nothing particularly new, but the scale of movement over the past decade is indicative of broader shifts. These institutions, and the frankly overworked and underappreciated elder nuns who keep them going, are providing essential education and welfare to young girls who the state cannot provide for. The growth of *parahita* nunneries reflects the changing role of female monasticism in Myanmar, where their traditionally limited scope of supporting religious training for young girls has now broadened to a role where they form a core part of the education system and welfare for ethnic youth. This has the potential to make nuns more visible within the public sphere, more respected as providers and care workers, and afford them some form of social capital which they have long been deprived of.

While it may appear extreme and inherently problematic to be asking girls to leave their home at such as young age, this view doesn't do justice to their agency as well as the structural reality they face. While the girls may unfortunately lose the opportunity to grow up in their ethnic communities, this does not mean they lose touch with the language and culture. These communities of young nuns are so dominated by Ta'ang girls that they can continue to speak their language and remain connected to their home place. Very few of the girls enter these nunneries for strictly religious

reasons nor do many of them continue to be nuns after finishing their education, From the girl's perspective, they share a sense of pride in that - whether or not they passed their matriculation exams – they had completed their education and their time as nuns had given them the tools to be contributing members of society. While those who achieve academic success can go on to further study, for others they have learnt vocational skills which they can apply, they can head abroad in search of new opportunities, or return home to support their families. Life beyond the nunnery is by no means easy, particularly for those who are forced to again confront the reality of livelihood challenges back home, but the experience generally seems to bring them confidence and the ability to adapt. These outcomes give further evidence to the role the nuns are playing as an essential support infrastructure, bringing in young, vulnerable girls until they are ready to return as somewhat less vulnerable young women.

The networks which facilitate the movement of these young girls further evidences the increasingly active role of nuns as leaders and influencers. While roaming monks were often crucial in setting up these connections between villagers and the lowland institutions, nuns are now generally even more entrusted by Ta'ang villagers to take in their daughters. Increasingly these networks are organic too, with parents from particular villages and village tracts forging close, direct ties with specific nunneries in Mandalay, and online communications can keep the girls, the nuns and the parents closely connected.

And this research has contributed to an understanding of the complex macro level dynamics which influence the movement of young girls. Conflict is the overwhelming part of this story, but it is not the only part. The surges in conflict not only have the effect of directly making villagers vulnerable to violence itself, but the insecurity it causes has far-reaching impacts. The threat of conscription and landmines are among those. Conflict has also played its part in devastating the Ta'ang tea production industry, but other economic factors have also been present. This has led to a general trend in outward migration, the splitting of the nuclear family and many related domestic issues. Amid such insecurity, local schools are only opened on a sporadic basis and even when

they are, the girls struggle to engage with their Bamar teachers. In short, for most families it is a clear decision between constant insecurity, poverty and poor educational access in their upland villages, and relative security, regular schooling and plentiful food and shelter in the nunneries. Though the girls must adapt to new lives after renunciation, learn Burmese and become familiar with the rhythms both of the big city and institutionalized life, they tend to learn quickly and have genuine gratitude to their senior nuns for the role they play in giving them hope.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zin Mar Oo is a Professor in the Department of Oriental Studies, University of Mandalay. She received her bachelor's degree (BA Oriental Studies), her master's degree (MA Oriental Studies) and her Master of Research degree (Mres. Oriental Studies) from the University of Mandalay in 1996 and 2003 respectively. In 1998, she joined the faculty of Magway University. She has since also served at Yadanabon University, Myingyan University, Mohnyin University, Kalay University and Mandalay University. In 2011, she received her PhD in Oriental Studies from the University of Mandalay, with a dissertation on a study of the *Sotthataki.* From 2018, she participated in RCSD's research capacity building project at the University of Mandalay which formed the foundation for this research. She excelled in the capacity building program and expressed delight at learning new research approaches and developing new ideas alongside international colleagues. Zin Mar Oo has broad research interests in Buddhist studies, gender and migration, and she hopes to continue her research particularly among rural people on these themes.

EDUCATION AMID RENUNCIATION

The Movement of Young Ta'ang Girls from Conflict Areas to Mandalay's Nunneries

This research provides an look at the recent phenomenon of young nuns from remote Ta'ang villages in Shan State traveling to stay in nunneries in urban Mandalay, where they fully renunciate into the tradition led by their elder nuns and undertake their general education in monastic schools. The decades-old conflict has only worsened, devastating the tea industry and leading to outward migration, constant insecurity, threat of conscription, rampant underdevelopment, and the destruction of most educational access. In this context the Ta'ang girls come to the city seeking opportunity in the nunneries, and education in monastic schools. This research reflects the experiences of the girls, the motivations that brought them to Mandalay, the networks which facilitate their movement, and their processes of adaptation in these new spaces as non-Burmans and non-Burmese speakers who arrive unfamiliar with monastic life, the urban environment, or Myanmar popular culture. In tracing these dynamics, this research offers an insight into both the phenomenon itself and what this suggests about the role of the often invisible and underrecognized network of nuns in Myanmar amid the failure of the state to provide essential welfare and education as conflict continues in the hills.

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