



# TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN TA'ANG TEA CULTIVATION

Gendered Forms of Knowledge, Ecology,  
Migration and Practice in Kyushaw Village

Lei Shwe Sin Myint and Sandar Aung



Understanding  
Myanmar's  
Development

RESEARCH  
REPORT  
No. 26



IDRC • CRDI

Canada



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Copyeditor: Elliot Lodge

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Design and Layout: Jeff Moynihan

Published in October 2021 by:

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## Foreword

Since 2012, the Understanding Myanmar's Development (UMD) series, supported by the International Development and Research Centre (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 monograph concerns the subject of tea, which for anyone coming to Myanmar always stands out as a strong part of the country's social and cultural life and sparks a lot of questions around its history and the economy surrounding it. In this research we encouraged our two fellows to use their anthropological skills to study one of the Ta'ang communities where the tea in central Myanmar comes from. In selecting Kyushaw village, the researchers quickly became interested in the gender dimension of tea production and cultivation, and how traditional expectations placed on women were being increasingly questioned by the younger generation. They found how gender not only dominated the production process, but governed other aspects relating to tea such as traditional spirituality and ecological understandings. We are impressed with their ability to spend significant time with Ta'ang women, understanding their production process and

household life, and also their perspectives on tradition amid their increasingly connected village.

This research therefore provides an interesting contribution not only to the literature on tea and upland Ta'ang production, but gives further insight into how women in a previously remote upland village grapple with modernity and seek to assert their agency in this changing context. The research certainly has its limitations, notably in both its minimal conceptual engagement with the literature and some difficulties relating to data collection conducted by Bamar women researchers in a relatively unfamiliar context. But Lei Shwe Sin Myint and Sandar Aung have both worked hard to produce a study which is nonetheless grounded in its study of community life and engaged with the perspectives of Ta'ang women.

*Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, PhD*  
*Director, RCSD*

## Acknowledgements

We wish to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, Director of the Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, for his enthusiasm for this study, his encouragement, his valuable comments, advice, and suggestions throughout.

We would also like to extend our greatest thanks to everyone involved in the capacity building project, particularly Joe Rotheray, Dr. Peter Vail, Dr. Malee Sitthikriengkrai, Dr. Kanokwan Somsirivarangkool (Ploy), and Daniel Hayward, for their valuable suggestions and discussions in every workshop at the University of Mandalay and Chiang Mai University.

In addition, we would like to give thanks to Dr. Edgard Rodriguez from IDRC for placing trust in us to research for improving knowledge for democracy in our country, and IDRC and Canada for supporting this great project. Dr. Thida Htwe Win, Head of the Department of Anthropology, University of Mandalay, further gave us the motivation to participate in this research team. Kanchana Kulpisithicharoen and the team at RCSD also provided essential practical support to us throughout.

We would also be deeply grateful to Elliot Lodge, the coordinator of the capacity-building project, for his help with all parts of this study, and without his support, it would not have been a successful job. Stephen Lahpai was also of great help as a research assistant and translator on occasssion, and giving some editorial support to the publication of the research.

Especially heartfelt thanks are extended to Ashin TaikKha Nya Na (Ta'ang Monk) and the local people in Kyushaw village who took part in this study, sharing their lives to help us answer our research questions in our fieldwork and providing us with valuable data.

## 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

Kyushaw village, a small Ta'ang community in Northern Shan State, has for generations been dominated by household tea cultivation and production. Unlike the majority of the modern Myanmar tea industry, in Kyushaw tea is produced through labor-intensive manual processes: growing, picking, drying, steaming, rolling, fermenting and packing. This traditional production is gendered, with women mainly tasked with picking and men engaged in more physical labor, such as clearing and preparing the fields. These gender dynamics are part of a broader set of cultural expectations, where conservative norms dominate family life, economy, ecology and spirituality. This research seeks to situate the production and trade of Ta'ang tea in the broader context of Myanmar, where edible fermented tea and tea drinking are an ubiquitous part of the history, society and culture. It explores these traditional gendered forms of production and social life in Kyushaw, which present a community forged through shared economy and practice. These dynamics are rapidly changing, with broad economic headwinds coinciding with the tragedy of continued conflict, as well as changing generational networks, perceptions and ideals. The research seeks to delve deeply into the dynamics of change in Kyushaw, both in terms of new irreconcilable economic forces as well as the changing perspectives of women – both locals migrating out in search of opportunity and agency beyond their traditional village, as well as Bamar women continuing to seasonally migrate to the village to pick tea. This aspect of the research reveals both gendered and generational divides with respect to the relative value of “tradition” and community life.

## စာတမ်းအကျဉ်းချုပ်

**တအာန်း လက်ဖက်စိုက်ပျိုးရေးတွင်းရှိ ရိုးရာ နှင့်**

**ခေတ်ပေါ်မှုများ၊ ကြူရှောရွာရှိ ပညာဗဟုတုသများ၊**

**ဂေဟဗေဒ၊ ပြောင်းရွှေ့နေထိုင်မှုများနှင့် ကျင့်မှုများ။**

ကြူရှောသည် အိမ်တွင်း လက်ဖက်စိုက်ပျိုးရေးနှင့် ထုတ်လုပ်ရေးလုပ်ငန်းများကို မျိုးရိုးစဉ်ဆက် လုပ်ဆောင်လာခဲ့သော၊ ရှမ်းပြည်မြောက်ပိုင်းရှိ တအာန်းကျေးရွာတစ်ရွာဖြစ်ပါသည်။ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရှိ လက်ဖက်လုပ်ငန်းအများစုကဲ့သို့ ခေတ်မှီနည်းပညာများ အသုံးပြုခြင်းမရှိပဲ လုပ်အားအခြေစိုက် ထုတ်လုပ်မှုနည်းပညာများကို ဆက်လက်အသုံးပြုနေရလည်း ဖြစ်ပါသည်။ ၎င်းရိုးရာလက်ဖက်ထုတ်လုပ်မှုသည် ဓလေ့ထုံးတမ်းအရ ကျားမအလိုက်လုပ်ငန်းတာဝန်များခွဲခြား သတ်မှတ်မှုများရှိနေပြီး ထိုကဲ့သို့ လုပ်ငန်းခွင်တွင် တွေ့ရှိရသော ကျားမအလိုက်ပိုင်းခြားမှုများသည် ပိုမိုကျယ်ပျံ့သော ယဉ်ကျေးမှုအရ သတ်မှတ်ထားပြီး မိသားစု၊ နေ့စဉ်ဘဝ၊ စီးပွားရေး၊ ဂေဟစနစ် နှင့် ကိုးကွယ်ယုံကြည်မှု များတွင်ပါလွှမ်းမိုးနေသော ရှေးရိုးလိုက်မှုစနစ်ကိုဖော်ပြနေပါသည်။ ရှေးဦးစွာ ဤသုတေသနသည် ပိုမိုကျယ်ပျံ့သော မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ လက်ဖက်စားသောက်မှုသမိုင်း၊ ယဉ်ကျေးမှု နှင့် လူမှုရေးအခန်းကဏ္ဍတို့တွင် တအာန်းလူမျိုးတို့၏ လက်ဖက်စိုက်ပျိုးထုတ်လုပ်မှု၏ အရေးပါဝင်နေမှုကိုရှာဖွေဖော်ထုတ်ထားပါသည်။

ထို့နောက်၊ ကြူရှောကျေးရွာရှိ ကျားမအလိုက် ရိုးရာလုပ်ငန်းတာဝန်များနှင့် လူမှုဘဝတို့ကို ဖော်ညွှန်းလျက် ကိုယ်ထူကိုယ်ထ၊ အများစီးပွားနှင့် အကျိုး



အတွက် စုပေါင်းရန်ကန်ကာ မွေးဖွားလာသော ကြူရှောကျေးရွာ လူထု အသိုင်းဝိုင်း အကြောင်းကို လှပစွာပြသနေပါသည်။ သို့ပေသည့်၊ တအာန်း လူမျိုးများနေထိုင်ရာဒေသများ တွင်အဆက်မပြတ် ဖြစ်ပေါ်နေသော တိုက်ပွဲ များနှင့်တကွ စီးပွားရေးအခြေနေ ပြောင်းလဲမှုများ၊ မျိုးဆက်အလိုက် ပြောင်းလဲလာသော လူမှုကွန်ယက်များ၊ အမြင်သဘောထားများနှင့် တန်ဖိုး ထားမှုများကြောင့် ဤရိုးရာသဘောထားနှင့် အသွင်ပြင်များ ပျောက်ကွယ်လု နီးပါဖြစ်နေသည်။

ထို့ကြောင့် ဤသုသေသနသည် ကြူရှောကျေးရွာရှိပြောင်းလဲမှုများကို ထဲဝင်စွာ ဝင်ရောက်လေ့လာကာ ပိုမိုခက်ခဲလာသော စီးပွားရေးပြောင်းလဲမှုများနှင့် တကွ အမျိုးသမီးများ၏ ပြောင်းလဲလာသော အမြင်သဘောထားများကို သိသာထင်ရှားစေရန်၊ မိမိရိုးရာနှင့်ဇာတိ ပြင်ပသို့ အသစ်သစ်သော အခွင့် လမ်းနှင့် လွတ်လပ်မှုများအတွက် ရွှေ့ပြောင်းလုပ်ကိုင်လာသော ဒေသခံ တအာန်းအမျိုးသမီးများအကြောင်းနှင့် ကြူရှောကျေးရွာသို့ ရာသီအလိုက် လက်ဖက်ခူးလုပ်ငန်း လာရောက်လုပ်ကိုင်သော ဗမာအမျိုးသမီးများ အကြောင်း ပူးတွဲဖော်ထုတ်ထားပါသည်။ ထို့သို့လေ့လာတင်ပြခြင်းအားဖြင့် ဤသုတေသနသည် ရိုးရာဓလေ့ထုံးတမ်းများအားတန်ဖိုးထားမှုနှင့် ပတ်သက်၍ ကျားမနှင့် မျိုးဆက်အလိုက် ခံယူမှုနှင့်လိုက်နာမှုဆိုင်ရာ ကွဲလွဲ လာမှုများကို ဖော်ညွှန်းလျက်ရှိနေပါသည်။

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Ta'ang people, widely known in Burmese also as “Palaung”, mostly live in the highlands of Shan State. For generations tea cultivation has been their means of livelihood with tea products their primary source of income. They are credited as being the first tea cultivators in Myanmar, as evidenced by a common saying, which translates; “slowly climb up the Palaung’s hill if you want to have good quality tea”. In Kyushaw village – a small Ta'ang settlement in Kyaukme Township, Northern Shan State, which is the focus of this study – family-run household tea production continues to dominate the community despite a broader trend towards large-scale factory production, with painstaking manual processes largely still used both in the cultivation and preparation of fermented tea for eating and dried black tea for drinking.

The community of Kyushaw, who make their living by growing tea leaves and producing both dry and fermented tea products, tend to hold onto certain traditional cultural values and follow cultural norms which create tightly defined roles for women. Brought up in a conservative culture, village men and women for the most part closely follow these norms. It is the norm for Ta'ang men to be the head of the household and work to provide financial support to the women. As for Ta'ang women, it is expected that they be the housekeepers of the family while also taking care of the children. The villagers of Kyu Shaw have for a long time lived and acted within the boundaries of these traditionally accepted gender roles.

Participation in the tea industry is inherently gendered too, with men and women each expected to play a particular part in variously taking care of the tea fields, and growing, picking, drying, steaming, rolling, fermenting and packing the tea for sale to primarily domestic markets. Women, for example, are the main pickers in the community, with girls starting from a young age learning techniques passed down from generations before them. Meanwhile, men take on what are seen as more physically-demanding roles in the tea production chain. Gender roles also dominate other parts of life, livelihood, and ecology relating to tea in Kyushaw. Rules governing community forestry in Kyushaw, while playing a role in protecting villagers rights to customary land, inherently give access to men more than woman. Established systems on the inheritance of tea trees themselves favour first born sons over daughters. And systems of Buddhist spiritual practice around tea gives prominence to men, notably the role of the *Pantagar* lay figure in ceremonial and organizational life. While these traditional systems and structures are fascinating to observe as a window into the past, it is hard to escape the reality in how women are expected to remain in their particular place.

However, Kyushaw village has been undergoing significant changes brought about by both external economic pressures, technological changes in the tea industry, the ongoing presence of conflict in the area, and the exposure of young women to more modern ideas, influences and social networks. The rise of imported Chinese tea products has placed great pressure on the viability of labour-intensive Ta'ang tea products even within the domestic Myanmar market. In 2009, a color dye scandal rocked the industry further as many tea samples were found to contain some amount of added dye. As the results were widely publicized in newspapers locally and abroad, there was huge reputational damage which led to a further decline in the tea price (So Pyay Thar, 2016). Further, since the uptick in ethnic conflict involving the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) around 2011, parts of the tea industry have struggled amid widespread insecurity, with seasonal migrant workers increasingly afraid to partake in the difficult tea picking work, which has further increased the costs of production (Ann Wang, 2016) and local owners of tea plantations also forced to move to larger towns to escape the threat of violence in their villages.



While many Ta'ang areas are dominated by factory production, some in Kyushaw have adapted to these challenges by seeking more modern approaches to cultivation using new mechanized technologies, and others are starting to shift their focus to niche production, such as organic green tea for export. However, the majority of tea households have struggled on, with the older generation clinging to traditional methods in the face of these strong headwinds, but the viability and sustainability of their generations-old household industry is increasingly fraught.

And as this monograph explains, the gendered expectations placed on young Kyushaw women in an age of increased access to external information is combining with the reality of an industry in decline to leave Ta'ang women looking for opportunities elsewhere. The desire to migrate and work in other places in order to improve one's financial situation is especially strong amongst Ta'ang females who often quote a saying which translates to; "unless one moves to another village, it is hard to become a person of significance". For them, migrating for work is seen as a means to carry their families out of financial difficulty: changing their lives while improving their family members' lives as well. By letting go of their ancestral culture and traditions, and quitting their tea businesses, they are changing their livelihood outlook. The ways in which these Ta'ang females move out of their traditional boundaries and change their customs can be seen in the new changes that have transformed the overall cultural community in Kyu Shaw. On the other hand, despite the challenge in attracting migrant labour, the household industry is still reliant on young Burmese women supporting the picking season – a group who themselves come with their own experiences and perspectives which are explored here.

This research is therefore a study of the tension between tradition and modernity in a remote upland community. We are interested in understanding traditional culture, practice and labour as it relates to tea production, because with so many forms of insecurity it is hard to predict the future of this declining Ta'ang industry. But we cannot escape the reality of how modern influences, particularly the changing views of young women who seek the freedom to forge their own lives beyond Ta'ang's conservative traditions, is also transforming the nature of the community and the tea business.

This introductory part has been kept intentionally brief to avoid repetition, as all the points of context referred to here are explored in much greater depth throughout this monograph. In the chapter that follows, we attempt to delve into the nature of tea culture as an integral part of Myanmar's cultural history from the time of kings, through colonialism and into the present, particularly what it reveals about economic and social relations between lowland Bamar and upland Ta'ang tea producers. Chapter three explores gendered forms of tradition in Kyushaw, providing local perspectives on the centrality of tea to ecology, spirituality and social structure and how women traditionally remain excluded from any form of prominence. Chapter four then goes into depth on practices in the industry itself, describing in close detail the seasonality of tea and divisions of labour across different parts of the year, before attempting to account for the experiences of women and their decision making – both as inward and outward migrants – amid the changing landscape of tea production and the increased openness of Kyushaw to social and economic networks.

### **Research questions**

- How has tea production and culture in an upland Ta'ang village been forged through traditional custom, culture and ecology?
- How have people in Kyushaw village and the tea trade used adaptive strategies to support their tea economy and culture amid forces of change and various challenges to the industry over recent decades ?
- Amid these changes, how has the participation of local and migrant women evolved with aspects of this industry, and how does this reflect their increased agency?

### **Research methods and field site**

The main research site is Kyushaw, located about seven miles from Kyaukme Town. There is a total of 96 households and a population of 300 (Myanmar Population and Housing Census, 2019). The



and interviewing members of the tea trade and Ta'ang economic networks in Kyaukme and Mandalay city, where we also closely studied various cultural aspects of tea in lowland Myanmar life.

This research was conducted sporadically between 2018 and 2020. In order to examine the way in which the Ta'ang females have changed their cultures and migrated to other places for work, in-depth interviews, participant observation, informal and formal interviews were used. Extensive ethnographic observation was engaged in during the study period despite the limited duration of the research caused by the ongoing civil war in the area. Participant observation involved the researcher participating in tea picking tasks with locals in the hills. In-depth interviews were conducted with Ta'ang females. These females had experience in migrating to other areas for work. Semi-structured interviews were used during interviews with other Ta'ang females sharing their migration and working experiences in other areas, and in interviews with three Burmese women who were working in the village as tea pickers.

# 2

## THE TEA LEAF IN MYANMAR HISTORY, CULTURE, AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS

### **Myanmar oral histories of tea, its significant meanings, and colonial influences**

An oral history has emerged, primarily in the Burmese perspective, of how the Ta'ang hill-dwellers came to be the major tea growers in the region. The story is told that when the Burman King Alaungsithu traveled across his new Kingdom around the 5th or 6<sup>th</sup> century, he found Ta'ang people at Loi Sai Mountain in Northern Shan State, which is elevated at 5500 meters above sea level. When he found them to be poor and struggling, he gave them tea tree seeds, believing it would help them find the money for their families (Thinkhar, 1966). The Ta'ang farmer who first received the seed took it with a single outstretched hand. “*Lat-ta-phet*”, which translates from Burmese to mean “with one hand”, has since evolved to *la phet* as the most common word across the country to refer to tea. At the top of the Loi Sai Mountain in Namhsan Township, a Ta'ang-dominated part of Northern Shan State, there is now a statue that has become a symbol of the myth of the seed and the foundation of tea culture. It represents the gifting of the seed by the king and the acceptance of it with one hand.

In the centuries that followed, Burmese mythology variously espouses how tea came to be grown in large quantities as an essential source of income for Ta'ang farmers, and as something

enjoyed in different forms by various Myanmar Kings, from the Inwa and Taungoo dynasties through to the last monarchs in the Kounghoung era, before it became a popular food and drink enjoyed by everyone in modern-day Myanmar. Tea drinking has evolved from being a custom reserved for royalty and the elite, to become a national pastime which is ubiquitous across the country. Tea shops and tea circles are a central part of Myanmar's everyday cultural dynamic. Tea has been central to the construction of cultural identity across Myanmar's central and ethnic areas. It is consumed in two forms: dried and fermented. Both forms possess unique origins and histories which will be further discussed in the following two sections.

### **The emergence of tea drinking culture in Myanmar – from the Konbaung palace to the tea circle**

Although the earliest myths of tea cultivation can be found in records that date back to the reign of King Alaungsithu, evidence of green tea consumption only begins to appear 900 years later in the Konbaung Era. There are records from that period (1752-1885) mentioning official tea servers, the "*lahpet-yay-daw kine*", who held a prestigious and influential role in the palace. At the same time, highly decorative teacups, pots, and bowls were common gifts exchanged between members of royal courts. During the reign of King Mindon (1853-1878), he gifted a teapot to his younger brother which was decorated with twelve mosaic mirrors and three rows of rubies. In the year 900 AD, King Shwe Htee (1530-1550) marched on Yodaya (Thai). The returning warlord, King Bayaintnaung Kyaw Htin Naw Yatha (1550-1581), was exalted with a four-faced ruby-embroidered bowl and cup, and a teapot decorated with ruby (Aung Chein Bwar, 2014).

In the early Konbaung Era, a poet named U Pone Nya was the head of the green tea bearers in the palace - *lahpet-yay-daw-kine ayarshi*. As the head, he oversaw all green tea bearers – known as *lahpet-yay-oh-kine*. They were responsible for preparing, presenting, and storing the King's green tea. In royal events, they prepared green tea for King Mindon and the royal family. Green tea was an important part of royal occasions such as childbirth ceremonies, naming ceremonies, marriage, and religious ceremonies. Being responsible

for such an essential aspect of palace life and owing to his poetic talents, U Pone Nya was an influential figure in the palace. During the reign of King Mindon, U Pone Nya wrote “*Laphet Mittarsa*”, a key source of understanding early tea culture. His letter, written to express his love of tea, discussed its medicinal values, benefits, and the taste that it provides. Upon reading this letter, King Mindon supposedly decreed that tea be made accessible to the whole population. From then on, green tea became the everyday drink of the whole Konbaung kingdom, from the common farmer to the king himself.

The culture of black tea drinking, however, likely has much of its origins in the early British colonial forays. In 1855, during the era of King Mindon (the penultimate King of Burma before the British annexation), the English Commissioner of India Division sent Arthur Pharyre as head of a delegation to the Myanmar palace. There, they presented gifts including a silver teapot and other silverware for drinking tea (Aung Chein Bwar, 2014). This supposedly brought about the drinking of black tea into the royal court. Over the following decades, as colonial officers and Indian officials moved into administrative positions, the tea culture of the English and the Indians inevitably spread. The addition of milk and lots of sugar to black tea likely resembles the consumption of Masala tea and sweetened tea that came over from Burma’s western border.

The first places which may somewhat resemble the modern Myanmar tea shop - which have become a ubiquitous social space and institution throughout the country - probably emerged in lower Myanmar following the annexation of then-called ‘Lower Burma’. Owned by Indian migrants, these tea shops introduced sweetened milk tea to the public and served as a gateway for Indian influence in Myanmar’s food culture (Ohnmar Shar, 2011). In these urban tea shops, the rural plain tea-drinking culture which had already proliferated through the state met its perfect match. In time, these two cultures merged. While plain tea conversation culture (tea-drinking circle) is still a common phenomenon that continues at home and events, it can also be seen in tea shops (rural and urban) where free flow black tea is enjoyed along with snacks and sweetened milk tea. Modern tea shops today serve both plain black tea and sweetened milk tea

along with a hodgepodge of Burmese breakfast foods of different cultural influences, such as *mohinga*, *samosa*, *parata*, and Chinese donuts. Although coffee is available, most customers prefer to sip tea as they socialize with their friends, discuss and joke about their own lives and the context around them. Interestingly, it is thought that in tea shops discussions of resistance and movement against colonial rulers, and later military regimes, began to circulate (Ohnmar Shar, 2011). Through the ages, tea shops have played an important role as a relatively safe platform for political discourse, necessarily submerged under the constant hum of pleasantries, loud waiters, and the clinking of china cups.

The traditional green tea drinking circle or *laphet yay gyan wine* and the more recent tea shop sitting pastime or *laphet yay sine tine* are both synonymous with conversation as much as with drinking tea. Where the *laphet yay gyan wine* is considered a gender-neutral custom, the tea shop has historically tended to be considered a male-dominated space. No law has ever been written prohibiting women from tea shops, but they have been seen as less-frequented spaces for women, and instead as a place for men to meet outside of the home away from their families. However, this culture appears to be changing, with many women now accompanying their male partners and friends, and even sitting alone or in groups in tea shops. Yet even though everyone drinks tea in Myanmar society, whether they are young or old, male, or female, tea shops are still generally set up to cater to a predominantly male clientele.

The poem written by Saya Bamaw Nyo Nwe entitled *Laphet-yay-gyan-wine*, meaning tea-drinking circle, is an interesting source for analyzing the mythology of tea drinking as a popular social activity in Burma since ancient times. Elucidating its centrality, the poem goes “with the help of green tea, they built a new village and created a new barn.” The poem describes how, while having tea in the tea-drinking circle, friends would discuss their sons and daughters. People became acquainted with each other through tea drinking, community discussions were held, business was agreed upon, and people relaxed. In some ways the tea drinking circle reflects the creation of a distinct national character, predicated on the notion of cohesion and unity through shared cultural practice, whether real or constructed.



## The prominence of fermented tea eating

Myanmar is one of the few countries in the world where tea is regularly consumed as an edible delicacy in fermented form. It is made by first steaming the fresh tea leaves, before grinding them between rollers and packing them into bags for an extended period while they ferment. The tea leaves are not mixed with any other additives or products. This form of fermented tea is an integral part of Myanmar people's daily lives, used during *nat* worship, festivals, events, and during auspicious ceremonies and donations. The culture of eating fermented tea likely didn't become widespread until much later than its proliferation in the form of drinking. It is suggested that fermented tea was first consumed by the Shan people in the 14th century. A reference to edible tea was found in 16th-century inscriptions in the Nigenda Monastery, written by Ashin Agga Samadhi in the *Nay-mi-bone-kha*, a form of poem or folktale. Therefore, it is estimated that the tea eating and tea drinking traditions of the Burmese people became prominent around that era but it was likely more widely consumed towards the end of the Konbaung dynasty, by which time storage boxes and special bowls for fermented tea were found in households across both urban and rural areas.

In modern times it is referred to ubiquitously as *laphet*, and local people view it as a signature product eaten by all people in the country, regardless of race or religion, at get-togethers in family homes, in monasteries, and traditional celebrations. The original taste of tea leaves is bitter, but Myanmar people think the bitterness is reduced after the fermentation process. The remnant of the bitterness is partially removed by rinsing the *laphet* with warm water once or twice, depending on the desired taste. It is served as either a side dish or as the main snack. It is used by people in ritual traditions, as gifts at weddings, and across everyday life. At times it is presented with more ingredients in the more elaborate form of a salad, *laphet thoke*. The leaves are mixed with salt and lemon juice and soaked in oil. It is then combined with sesame seeds and often thinly sliced tomatoes in tea leaves. Alternatively, it is mixed with dried prawns, green chilies, and lemon juice soaked in oil, sesame, and onion.

Myanmar literature is full of descriptions of the importance of tea-eating cultures. A famous Myanmar writer, Ohnmar Shar (2011), described that there is something wonderful about eating *laphet thoke*, drinking hot tea, and catching up on gossip. The book details the customary way of eating it with guests at home by slowly snacking on it with a little bit of fried bean, sometimes taking small bites of raw garlic and green chili. Another writer, U Ba Than (2003), described the essentiality of *laphet* in Myanmar culture in his book, saying that no Burmese no party nor feast, nor even a formal festivity, is complete in Burma without *laphet thoke*.

## **Tea in different forms in Burmese ritual and practice**

### **Tea in symbolic dispute settling practices**

*Laphet* has historically been used in various social, cultural, and religious rituals as a way of showing respect and gratitude in different settings. One interesting aspect of this was its function in settling disputes during periods of conflict under Burma's ruling royal factions. In giving *laphet*, cases were often forgiven and settled by those perceived to have done wrong. At court, before the judges, the victim and the accused would supposedly be asked to eat *laphet* while sitting face to face (Aung Chein Bwar, 2014). This was known as *laphet latt lan sar*, meaning the two sides have an agreement and peace regarding the issue. After eating the *laphet*, the two sides had no argument, and the case was finished forever. In Shan, Burmese, Chin, Kachin, and Kayin cultures, the *laphet latt lan sar* method was a significant part of dispute settling in the local justice systems. A 60-year-old Ta'ang man recalled that he was told that in the past *laphet* would be used as a form of exchange to solve problems or disputes, particularly around debt and inheritance, that happened in Ta'ang villages situated in northern and southern Shan State. He believed the culture emerged during the kingdom periods and continued for many generations where cases were forgiven after the exchange took place. *Laphet* has therefore emerged as a symbol of peace, as not only crucial in understanding Myanmar's cultural history, but also an essential symbol in peace negotiation events in the various eras of the

Myanmar kings. When two kingdoms had a battle, they would supposedly bring *laphet* if they wanted to begin peace negotiations. If one of the kings received the *laphet* and ate it, it was deemed an omen that peace was coming (Aung Chein Bwar, 2014).

While settling of such formal matters is obviously less widespread in modern Myanmar, the cultural connection of *laphet* to ideas of peace and dispute settlement continues throughout parts of society. One common saying in Burmese translates to “when people don’t know what to do, they bring out the tea,” which indicates that *laphet* is served when serious matters need further discussion or negotiation. Even today, tea is generally served during discussions concerning legal matters, marital disputes, and financial issues. In this way, *laphet* helps pave the way for smooth conversation. Another local saying tells much of this story; “a spoonful of *la phet* is worth a hundred words”.

### **Tea in religious and ceremonial custom**

In Burmese religious ceremonies, devotees commonly prepare *ka taw pwe*, which is a large offering of fruits in a bowl. It is thought to be essential that this includes three specific kinds of fruit, and three types of leaves, including the tea leaf. In the Buddhist context, the word *laphet* has a significant meaning; the word *la* represents 4, and *phet* represents 5, meaning together these two words signify the number 9. The 9 number is seen to reflect dominance in Burmese culture, signifying strength and success, also symbolizing iron, bronze, and weaponry. Thus, the *laphet* has strong connotations, which is why Burmese people mainly use it at religious and *nat* spirit festivals, and social festivals. Dagon Natshin (2012) notes the common belief that *laphet* brings love, faithfulness, and blessings. People believe that when they consume *laphet* it brings love in the hearts of those sharing the *laphet*, which can overwhelm forces of hate. When we have love in our life, they say, blessings will follow.

Historically, at ceremonies people supposedly used a golden bowl to eat *laphet*, and its significance in these ceremonies continues to be practiced. In the royal wedding ceremony, the wedding attendants would bring *laphet* as a special gift. Then, before the

ceremony, the laphet was mixed with a natural cleanser and holy water in a silver cup for washing the head and the hair of the bride and groom (Thinkhar, 2017).

This belief in the auspiciousness of the tea leaf is also lived out in the marriage customs of regular people today. When the man formally asks for the hand of a girl in marriage, he resembles the ancient custom by gifting a parcel of tea leaves when inviting guests to the wedding. During the engagement celebration, the groom's family offers coconut, banana, and fermented tea leaves on a tray to the nat spirit of the bride's family home, which is then served at merit sharing ceremonies and in the wedding (Thazin Han & Kyaw Nyein Aye, 2015).

Moreover, in Burmese culture today, tea leaves are commonly used as invitations for joyous events of *Mingala* (derived from the Pali term *Mangala*; meaning source of prosperity, blessing or auspiciousness), social events, and ceremonies such as child naming ceremonies and ear-piercing ceremonies. Used in place of formal invitation letters, these packets of tea leaves are prepared and sent to friends and family by the hosts. Those who wish to confirm their attendance accept the tea packet while those who cannot attend are obliged to refuse the tea packet. In contrast, tea leaves play no formal role in traditional funerals and burials (events void of *Mingala* or *A-mingala*.) but is still served to guests in funerals in the form of plain black tea and tea salad along with cigarettes and roasted sunflower seeds throughout the whole seven days of mourning (Thazin Han & Kyaw Nyein Aye, 2015).

In recent times, a leaf called *piya* tea has gained an expensive and rather curious following as a niche product, particularly among soldiers, due to its supposed association with health benefits and other mythicizing. A 40-year-old woman who trades in the industry shed light on this interesting product. The tea is supposedly picked by a virgin maiden and kept in her bosom for the time while she is tea picking. When she returns home in the evening, she processes the tea using the traditional tea drying process. She must do this alone, without the help of others. It is believed by buyers of the product that the powers of "virginity itself can empower the tea". They purchase the product at a high

price because of its association with favorable health and physical strength, as well as improved libido. The product has a rare place on the market which has contributed to its mythology and is thought to be consumed by high-ranking military officers.

## **The emergence of the modern tea economy in northern and southern Shan State**

### **The tea economy from pre-colonial to post-colonial times**

Tea production in Myanmar is mostly found in Northern and Southern Shan State, with Ta'ang communities comprising a significant part of the industry and relying on many of the same methods which were developed over generations. The elevated, relatively cool climate in these parts is widely seen as conducive to tea production. Evidence suggests some form of tea trade began under the reign of Bodawpaya in the Konbaung era, likely towards the end of the 18th century. The tea economy emerged through the towns of Myit Nge and Zaw Gyi and utilized trading routes down the Panglong river, beginning in what is now known as Southern Shan State.

The traders from the lowlands traded products such as *ngapi* (fish paste) and dried fish, and the traders from Shan State commonly exchanged products such as fermented tea, dry tea, and beeswax. Through the pre-colonial period, the traders from central Myanmar largely had control over the market, which prompted the King to release a statement ordering that the tea trade be centralized in four locations between Shan State and Central Myanmar: Kalaw in the east, Kyun-Taw-Yin in the west, Palate in the south, and Minte in the north. There, the traders from Shan State would be closer to home, and the king could still oversee the markets to ensure fair trade (Aung Chein Bwar, 2014). The measurement system that was used for buying products, known as *tin*, referred to the amount of cargo that a cow could carry, which was around 60 viss - the modern-day Myanmar system of measurement. During that period there was a total of 18000 *tin* of tea traded each year, indicating the rapid rise of the industry.

By the time of the reign of King Thibaw, the tea trade was fully controlled by the king. Only tea traders who had the official permission of the king were allowed to buy and sell tea from the Shan State highlands. The trade was well guarded by town and village leaders and the King regulated the trade through royal decrees that were sent to all tea trading locations to keep prices at a set rate. According to edicts from the king, tea that came from the north of *Kani* township was to be sold in the upper region, while the tea from *Thit Saint* township and the south was to be sold in the lower region. These laws controlled and divided the tea market into two distinct regions. This seemed to ensure that the price of the tea was relatively stable as the market grew (Aung Chein Bwar, 2014).

In 1885, King Thibaw was dethroned and exiled by the British. This was followed by a period of political unrest and economic instability during which the British were forming new trade routes and administrative systems. As the trade routes were unsafe during this time, trade with Shan State was difficult and tea imports from the highlands fell for a period. However, exports from Shan State tea increased again after 1890 as the British removed all taxation from tea. According to Aung Chein Bwar (2014), The tea trade was moved again to four new trading centers: two within the former capital near Mandalay, and two in Shan State under the control of Thibaw Sawbwa (the chieftain of Thibaw, bearing no relation to King Thibaw). The two trading centers near Mandalay were in the north and the south, with one near the *Ayeik-ma-htwet* Pagoda and the other near *Mahar-myat-muni* Pagoda. In Shan State, Thibaw Sawbwa had two trading centers placed in the southern and northern regions of Shan State. However, Shan traders still had to pay taxes to access the large cities and trading areas, as Shan *sawbwas* (chieftains) ruling along the trade routes demanded payment. Upon arrival, traders also had to pay entry fees, while trade outside of these tea centers was prohibited and those who were caught trading outside were fined double the amount of the entry fees.

As much as tea trade was widespread and extensive in the colonial era, there are very few documents recording the economic trajectory of tea during this period. However, it is understood that the tea

trade enjoyed substantial growth in this era due to the absence of official taxation and British dominance, relative to other industries. The British colonized Myanmar expecting to profit off teak and gems but found that the profit from agribusinesses such as rice and tea trading was actually often more lucrative. The British therefore later shifted its focus, bringing many workers from India (known locally as *chittees*) to work in rice cultivation and other industries. Further, the British constituted many agribusiness laws that adversely affected much of the local population. While the most punitive aspects of colonial rule devastated local agriculture and industry in the lowlands, the tea economy in Shan State largely remained unaffected and profitable.

The British did, however, make some forays into the tea industry beyond importing the culture of drinking black tea with milk and sugar. Most notably, the Namsan Tea Factory was established by the Bombay-Burma Company to source and export tons of Myanmar black tea from Australia and England (Thinkhar, 1966). Since the colonial period, the culture of tea drinking has risen gradually, and following independence, the tea trade largely thrived even during the most oppressive eras of military rule. However, the regime was determined to take control of certain relics of colonial tea production. Seeing a supposed foreign monopoly on black tea production and sales, the Revolutionary Council of 1964 seized the factory ‘in the name of the people,’ with no compensation given.

### **Conflict in Shan State and the decline of the industry in the modern era**

In recent times, however, the tea industry has faced numerous headwinds, even as the broader economy has been somewhat liberalized following political and economic reform. Since the Chinese dried tea leaf entered the market around 2003, businesses struggled as many consumers throughout Myanmar preferred certain qualities in their tea that were associated with the imported Chinese product. 85% of Myanmar’s pure black tea market is dominated by imported tea from China, which was cheaper than local product. On average in recent years, 1000 tons of tea is imported from China per year. As a result, black tea produced in

Myanmar has declined in sales and many tea producers switched to producing ready-made tea mixes.

The economy has also continued to face arbitrary market restrictions which have harmed its competitiveness. Part of this is due to the control of the tea market by the Tatmadaw and their associated merchants. Prices of tea produced by local planters are partly dictated by the Namhsan factory, which entered the market and was renamed the Tatmadaw Dried Black Tea factory. Every year during the tea harvesting and manufacturing season, officials from the factory would call on local tea producers and set the selling price for them. Private buyers are also required to buy local tea for the same prices as the Tatmadaw. Most tea merchants in the Namsan area buy tea from local producers and resell them to the Tatmadaw Dried Tea factory. Currently, 93% of all black tea produced is used as rations for the whole army (Thinkhar, 1966).

Further, during 2008-2009, fermented tea from Myanmar was banned in Singapore due to the color dye scandal. 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 reason behind the steep decline in the tea 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 (Aung, 2019). In 2010, 116 out of 128 green tea manufacturing factories closed due to the color dye scandal (Khin Su Wai, 2018).

Many tea traders are now reluctant to reinvest in tea businesses and there are fewer workers in tea farms. With decreasing prices and fewer sales, tea companies are struggling to produce quality tea with the little investment they have. Since the outbreak of conflict in March 2011 involving the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Shan armies and the Tatmadaw, parts of the tea industry have suffered further, with seasonal migrant workers increasingly afraid to partake in the difficult tea picking work, which has further



increased the costs 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. According to local sources, some Ta'ang people moved to the townships and rent the land to engage in maize plantations, while others moved and work in Kyaukme, Hsipaw, Naungcho and other towns, with large numbers, also moving across the border to work in neighboring China and Thailand. Some of 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, while others are looking for improved livelihoods altogether away from the industry.

In response to these issues, tea traders, producers and businesses gathered to form the Myanmar Tea Association in 2013, which aims to ensure international-standard quality in the production of dried tea and fermented tea, and improve the lives of tea farmers. To get a quality finished product, tea manufacturing takes from eight to ten months. The Tea Association says the hilly region will develop if the government provides the tea manufacturers with what they need. Tea plants are perennial plants, and if they are cultivated and produced systematically, the cultivators will gain more profit than ever, they claim. The Myanmar Tea Association is now helping the tea cultivators to manufacture more value-added products with the help of international experts from GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft for International Zusammenarbeit). If support is provided, they claim it will increase long-term employment prospects for Shan and Ta'ang people and Myanmar migrant laborers.



# 3

## GENDERED FORMS OF TRADITION IN KYUSHAW VILLAGE: CUSTOM, ECOLOGY, AND PANDAGAR SPIRITUALITY

### **History of tea cultivation in Kyaukme and the changing nature of the industry**

Kyushaw village is in Kyaukme township, Northern Shan State. Situated in a flat valley area surrounded by mountains and hills, the township capital is 2,506 feet above sea level. Being in the temperate zone, the average annual highest temperature is 27.80°C and the average lowest is 10.01°C. Vegetation consists of mixed forests with dry mountains and prairies. Tea cultivation and production is the main form of livelihood for most local people across the township. Kyaukme Township is well-connected with roads and train tracks and is located along the Lashio-Mandalay National Highway. The main exports of the township more broadly are field corn and tea which are exported to large cities such as Mandalay and Yangon. Tea cultivation and production remains the most profitable and sustainable industries for Kyaukme township. There are a total of 13,357 acres of tea plantations in Kyaukme township =according to 2019 records, producing a total of 237,624 viss of tea (General Administration Department of Kyaukme Township, 2019).

Kyaukme Township is a place where tea cultivation has been carried out for centuries using the same traditional methods. This changed in 2009 when the Ministry of Health released a report stating the dangers of the consumption of a list of fermented tea products (including those produced in Kyaukme) as they contained hazardous chemicals and removed them off the market. In the years following this incident, storages of fermented tea owned by the tea cultivating Ta'ang people in Kyaukme township were confiscated and destroyed. With the removal of many fermented tea products, tea companies struggled and their tea suppliers, the Ta'ang tea cultivators, lost valuable clients. With the fermented tea market damaged and no tea buyers at all, tea cultivators fell deeper into debt. As a result, many tea cultivators chose to abandon fermented tea production and transitioned to producing dried tea. This mass shift to dried tea production caused oversupply and deflation of dried tea prices. Overall, the 2009 incident caused many difficulties for Ta'ang tea cultivators and it soon became evident that Kyaukme's local highland tea farmers would need assistance to overcome these challenges.

Many believed that it was necessary to form a stakeholder's association of tea traders and cultivators. Such an association would ensure product quality and fair prices while promoting the interests of tea cultivators. Thus in 2013, led by a Ta'ang (Palaung) founder, the Palaung Tea Growers & Sellers Association was established in Yangon to protect the livelihoods of Ta'ang tea cultivators. Members included tea producers, cultivators, and traders. The association mainly focused on fermented tea-related issues. The association collaborated with the German NGO, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), and held forums and meetings concerning tea. With the help of GIZ, tea forums were held in Yangon with many representatives from foreign tea companies and tea experts in attendance. Later, in collaboration with GIZ, the Palaung Tea association introduced tea planting workshops to Ta'ang tea cultivators to help them produce green tea. Representatives from many Ta'ang villages within Kyaukme Township attended the training. Owing to the success of these workshops, many villages in Kyaukme township were able to transition to green tea cultivation. This helped them to partially recover from the losses caused by the 2009 fermented tea incident.

The study area, Kyushaw Village is a 200-year-old village in the township, which during the time this study was conducted had 96 households and a population of around 400 people. The village is situated at a much higher elevation than the township capital, at around 4,500 ft. The village is a tea cultivating village and most of its residents spend their days caring for their tea trees, harvesting tea leaves, drying them, and selling them to tea leaf traders from Kyaukme, and a large portion of land surrounding the village is utilized as tea tree groves. These tea tree groves are passed down along male lineage. The importance of tea trees can be seen in the way they view land ownership and measurement. Villagers prefer to count the number of tea trees they have in their groves rather than measure their plots in terms of area. According to locals, the village has a 200-year-old history of tea cultivation and production. The village's traditional methods of tea planting and fermented tea production are a living legacy to this age-old history.

New tea trees are only planted when old ones are damaged or dead. In such cases, saplings grown from seeds in nurseries are transplanted in their place. The traditional tea fermentation process which can be seen in Kyushaw village begins with the handpicking of tea leaves. This is done by tea pickers who go about picking without any gloves, staining their hands black in the process. The picked tea leaves are put in a basket hanging over their shoulders. Once the tea leaves have been picked, they are steamed in earthen pots and then taken out to be rolled by hand. After rolling, the curled tea leaves are left to ferment in a bamboo container called *war-kway* which is buried underground. After six months of fermentation, the tea leaves are ready to be sold. The seasonality of the industry and its continuing use of these traditional processes form the basis of chapter four.



**Figure 3.1** War-kway, the large bamboo basket for fermenting tea.

### **Traditional method and changes in the industry**

Such was the significance of the traditional method of fermented tea making that many of Kyushaw's villagers continue to partake in the industry in the same way to this day. Although many of them would prefer to resiliently hold on to these traditional tea-producing methods, several recent challenges spiraling out from the 2009 yellow dye scandal have forced villagers to begin to seek alternatives. Like many other tea-producing areas of Shan State, they were greatly affected by the scandal. Their yearly tea planting and harvesting costs were formerly covered by loans from tea traders who bought their fermented tea. As consumers and consequently tea manufacturing companies lost interest in fermented tea following the scandal, traders found it too risky to loan money to Kyushaw villagers without increasing interest rates.

On its own, the traditional method of fermented tea making requires large amounts of firewood, time, and money for manual labor. In addition to these high production costs, low production rates, lack of quality assurance methods, and the decline of market demand for

fermented tea, Kyushaw villagers are forced to sell their fermented tea at less-profitable prices. Thus, while the modern tea market presents new costs and challenges for tea cultivators, the returns remain the same. To make matters worse, prices of necessities such as rice, oil, and salt have risen and in their current situation, even such that basic food supplies must be bought with credit. Thus, Kyushaw villagers who continue to rely on traditional methods of fermented tea making face severe financial difficulties. With all these obstacles, interest in traditional methods of tea cultivation and production is declining among the people of Kyushaw. Thus, an increasing number of tea planting and producing households have begun to abandon traditional fermented tea-making methods in favor of more modernized methods and equipment.

By 2016-2017, nearly 20 households had done so. They replaced their earthen steam pots with large steel boiler pots and began using mechanized tea rolling tables in place of their traditional hand rolling methods. Such use of new techniques and equipment can be attributed to the influence of the Palaung Tea Growers and Sellers Association in the Kyaukme area. Thus, despite the village's long history of using traditional fermented tea-making methods, locals have begun to adapt in the wake of new, modern challenges. Despite the financial difficulties it poses and the costs in time, energy, and fuel consumption, most tea cultivators/producers in Kyushaw village continue to use traditional tea fermenting methods. For them, adopting new methods and techniques represents new financial risks and an intimidating learning curve. However, despite these fears, new cultivation methods are slowly making their way into the village. This transformation is visible in the way in which villagers are now producing green tea in addition to fermented tea. This started in 2018-2019 when the green tea producing method was brought to the village by a village youth who was a member of the Palaung Tea Growers and Sellers Association. From initially 6 households, the number of green tea producers in the village is increasing. With the support of the association, villagers are also currently working towards increasing their tea exports.

Regardless of these new initiatives to expand and diversify tea planting and production, Kyushaw is still falling behind compared

to other villages as it is relatively cut off from outside aid. The presence of insurgent groups in the area discourages outsiders, such as officers from the Forestry Department, the Myanmar Tea Association, and civil servants, from traveling to the area. In comparison, tea cultivators and producers in Pintaya township (Southern Shan State) are receiving aid in the production sector from the Myanmar Tea Association. They receive equipment such as hats, gloves, and tea drying shelves to ensure food safety and hygiene. The Myanmar Tea Association also helps tea planters in Pintaya township export their products and ensure that the tea remains organic. Tea planters in peaceful areas have adopted hygienic planting and harvesting equipment and are using modernized production methods.

But for isolated Kyushaw, the tea planting, harvesting, and production remain mostly traditional, although labor mobility is very much present. This isolation has also meant that conservative social practices have continued to prevail, with women expected to fulfill roles in tea-producing households. However, the struggles in the tea industry in Kyushaw, as well as a desire for young women to be a part of the modern world, have led to large numbers of young women seeking opportunities to migrate for work elsewhere. Many of these young women migrated to urban areas within the country such as Kyaukse, Mandalay, and Yangon and abroad in countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and China. Large numbers of women from other parts of Myanmar also continue to inwardly migrate to the village during the tea-picking season. These inward and outward migration trends of women amid the changing tea industry and society are explored later in this research. For tea planters in Kyushaw village who plant tea traditionally, the tea plants require much care. Forests are cleared for firewood and to expose tea plants to more sunshine. Tea plantations are increasing in size, and as these plantations are in hill regions, they are near areas reserved for forestry. Therefore, to maintain a balance between forests and tea plantations, the local community has created a careful coexistence with the forest, as will be discussed in the next section.





**Figure 3.2** Tea tree plots on the hills of Kyushaw

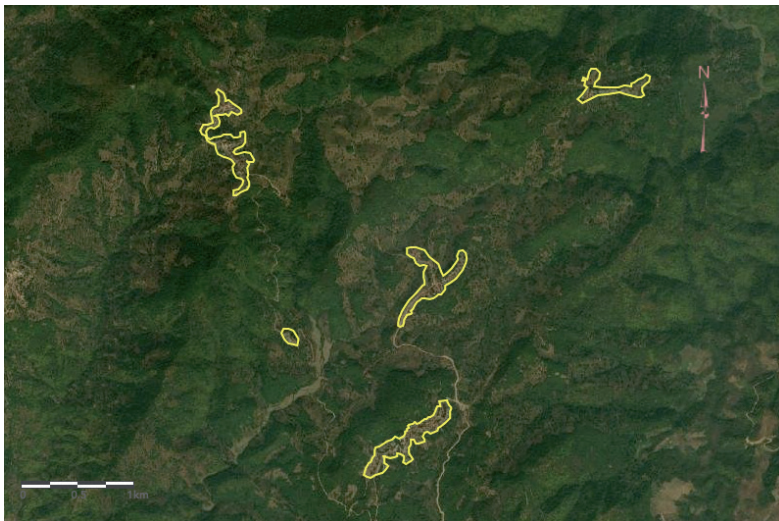
### **Upland ecological context: community forestry, land use and ownership**

Community forestry (CF) is an agroforestry operation that is currently implemented in many parts of Myanmar. The CF practice involves planting and utilizing forest products. It is a successful policy around the world in protecting and managing the forests for livelihood benefits (Tint, 2011). Since 1995, CFs have been conducted in Myanmar for agroforestry (AF) and Natural Forests (NF) types with the objectives of fulfilling the basic needs of the local people including firewood, housing, and agricultural material, and stabilizing the environment (Inoue, M. & Ei Ei Shwe Hlaing, 2013). According to local oral history, Kyushaw village was founded over 200 years ago with many of the village's tea trees being as old as the village itself. A 58-year-old monk from the village explained;

Kyushaw village is a very old village and many of the villagers' ancestors have lived here. According to our

elders, our ancestors established this village 200 years ago. We can confirm this because when our monastery was built, like any monastery, the founding year was inscribed on the monastery bell. From there, we can confirm that the monastery is over 200 years old and since monasteries are the first things built soon after the founding of a village, we can assume that the village is at least 200-years-old.

Kyushaw village is surrounded by Shan and other Ta'ang villages. It is adjacent to the Shan villages of Painsauk and Naungpad in the east and west respectively and another Ta'ang village, Kongthar is to its north. South of Kyushaw is the satellite village of South Kyushaw (Taung Kyushaw) which is inhabited by both Shan and Ta'ang people. Politically, Kyushaw village is a part of a village tract including South Kyushaw, North Kyushaw, and Kongthar. Each of these three villages takes turns hosting the village tract's administrative office for two years at a time. In terms of forest ownership, a communal forest is co-owned by the three villages.



**Figure 3.3** Map of Kyushaw (center) and three surrounding villages

The area of the CF stretches across North Kyushaw and Naungpad in the west, Padponlon to the east, Painsauk and Hinpu in the north and south towards Mongtin. Apart from the three villages of

Kyushaw Tract, other villages are not allowed access this communal forest. However, if they wish to cut down trees, they may do so after paying a fee to the Kyushaw Tract Administrative Office. As a CF, individuals are prohibited from claiming private land ownership within its boundaries. Neither are they allowed to build residences on it. Similarly, each village within Kyushaw tract has their own village commons. These lands can be used by everyone. They are owned by no one and are shared by all. Thus, villagers have the right to settle and use the land for agriculture and livelihood development. However, they cannot purchase or sell the land. Concerning Kyushaw's village commons, an officer from the Forest Department in Kyaukse said that owing to the village's age, the land around the village is not designated as national forestland. He also said that:

Kyushaw village has its own set of traditional practices for forest conservation. They use forest wood for firewood and building houses. They also find food from it such as bamboo shoots, vegetables, and fruits. The people of Kyushaw have relied on the forest and the surrounding tea trees for a long time. Thus, it is difficult to demarcate the exact territory of the village. That is why we don't incorporate the Kyushaw commons into the national forest. For their sake, we, the Forest Department, don't control the forests around Kyushaw.

Each household in Kyushaw owns plots of the surrounding forest as their ancestral forest land. One local man who inherited three plots of forest land from his grandparents explained,

I have my own forest plots. I depend on them for firewood for my tea production. These forest plots have been used since I was young. I know my forest area and its boundaries. In our village, we have had our own forests since we were young. Thus, we don't need to set up physical markers to show our territory and there are no disputes regarding forest ownership. We cut down the trees in the forest two times a year. We know the right time for cutting down the trees

and only do so when necessary. We don't cut down trees indiscriminately. We leave enough trees needed for the forest to regrow on its own.

In Kyushaw village, out of a total of 87 houses, 48 of them own tea plantations. On average, a family in Kyushaw owns about 4 acres of tea tree plots, and there are a total of 336 acres of tea plots in the village. In terms of forestland, one household owns about 3 acres of ancestral forestland. There are a total of 252 acres of ancestral forestland around the village. For the land used in tea cultivation, the villagers of Kyushaw pay an annual tax to the Land Department of Kyaukse Township. This tax has been in place since the time of the Sawbwas (Chieftans) and is known as “Kaimuyin ” tax. For every 100 tea trees, a 35 pya (0.35 kyat) tax is collected annually (a miniscule amount). In addition, as the ancestral forestlands and tea tree plots surrounding Kyushaw village are not considered as “Kyat-tine” land or taxable land, Kyushaw villagers are exempt from paying property tax on them.

Further, due to its remote location, the Land and Forest Departments have not been able to officially demarcate the forest and tea cultivation lands of Kyushaw. Thus, villagers do not possess any legal documents of ownership for their land. All things considered, the villagers of Kyushaw who have depended on the forests as sources of wood and sustenance and the tea tree plots as a means of making a living, are the owners of the land. Moreover, newcomers who do not own any ancestral lands cannot buy land to build houses as no one in the village has official ownership entitlement to the lands. Similarly, tea cultivators of the village who have been living and working on these tea tree plots for generations can neither sell nor exchange their residential land or tea tree plots. However, as they uphold the tea tree in great reverence as a centuries-old source of income and sustenance, they faithfully pay the government the “Kaimuyin” tax just as their ancestors did in the past.

### **Inheritance rights and land ownership**

The Ta'ang are one of the earliest peoples to settle in Myanmar. Linguistically, the Ta'ang people are a Mon-Khmer language

cluster. They live all around the country but mostly dwell in the southern and northern parts of Shan State. There are at least 32 different tribes within the Ta'ang ethnic group. Living in different regions, each of these tribes have developed their own cultural particularities and distinct dialect but all share a common writing system. The Ta'ang villagers of Kyushaw belong to the Ru-mei tribe. It may be that their remote location and distance from others has made the people of Kyushaw conservative in terms of marriage customs and traditions.

For example, traditionally the Ru-mei Ta'ang of Kyushaw village discourage marriage with outsiders whether it is with a man or woman of another tribe, ethnic group, or nationality. This is something which continues to be espoused by older generations who were interviewed. Those who do marry outside of their tribe are not permitted to continue to live in the village. Thus, the villagers are expected to seek marriage partners within their tribe. Kyushaw village is one of the villages where such customs are preserved alongside the practice of monogamy. It is also tradition that the newlywed couple moves into the groom's parental home. Should the groom wish to live separately, it is his father's duty to build him a new house and give him tea tree plots as inheritance. If they do not want to live separately, they may live in the groom's parental home as part of the extended family. As an ethnic group that follows the patrilineal kinship system, it is the groom's father's male relatives and their families who gather to collaborate and celebrate traditional customs and yearly festivals.

In terms of Ta'ang customs of inheritance in Kyushaw village, men and women do not have equal rights. Tea tree plots are passed down to sons, and daughters are eligible to inherit them only when the family has no sons. Apart from this exception, women mainly receive inheritance in the form of heirlooms from their mother who divides them between her daughters. These include gold jewelry, gold accessories and traditional costumes. These heirlooms are usually given to the daughter before she marries and moves out to live with her groom in his parental home. As mentioned before, sons may live with their parents after marriage or move into a separate house built for him and his wife by his parents. The parents' tea leaf plots are divided and given to the

sons of the family. However, the last son to marry has the duty to remain in his parents' house and take care of them. As the caretaker of his parents, he is usually the one who receives the most inheritance. Thus, he may decide to divide and share his inheritance with his siblings further equally. The current (2019) chairman of Kyushaw village, U Tun Aye (45-years-old) shared his family's inheritance history.

Inheritance traditions have been observed in our village since many generations. As for me, I have 6 siblings. Two passed away when I was young. There are four of us left now. I am the eldest son. We have two younger sisters who are married now. The younger sister married a Shan man from Naung-pyit village so she had to leave the village. The second younger sister married a man from the village and lives in a separate house with him and their family. When my younger sisters got married, our mother gave them her heirlooms such as her gold accessories and her expensive traditional costumes. Our father passed away in February 2019. As I lived with my parents and took care of my father till he passed away I received a lot of inheritance from them. I inherited our parental home and 4 tea tree plots. According to tradition, I can share some of these inheritances with my younger brother if I wish-which I did. I gave him one of the tea trees plots and a cow as his business is struggling.

As can be seen, tea tree plots are traditionally passed down to sons. However, if the family does not have sons, the example of how they may be passed down to daughters is explained by Daw Shwe Eain, who is a 60-year-old woman of the village;

I currently own 6 tea tree plots. In my family, there were only two daughters: me and my younger sister. When my mother passed away five years after I got married, my father wanted me and my husband to move in with him to take care of the family tea trees. So, we moved in with him and my sister did as well. When my father and my younger sister passed away,

I inherited all five of my family's tea tree plots. When my husband died, I also received his share of his family inheritance which was another tea tree plot. So, I have 6 tea tree plots in total which I leave in the care of my sons. When they get married, I will divide the tea tree plots among them.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the villagers of Kyushaw lack any legal documentation to show for their tea plots despite having worked on them for generations. This is due to a combination of local preference towards trust-based oral agreements and the reluctance of land department workers to travel to Kyushaw. Interaction between the village and the Department of Land Records in Kyaukme is very minimal. And when they do interact, it is the villagers who must travel to Kyaukme. One example is the collection of the annual *Kaimuyin* (locally known as Myay-sar) tax. This procedure is carried out by the chairman of Kyushaw village tract, who requests the representatives of the three villages to collect the tax amongst the villagers. Once it is collected, the chairman sends it to the Department of Land Records. Another instance is in the tea cultivation meetings held twice every month. The representatives of the village travel to Kyaukme to relay any land-related issues to the Department of Land Records.

### **The significance of spirit worship, belief systems and the *pandagar* in tea production and local practice**

The majority of Ta'ang are Buddhists and are known for their large and grand monasteries. They are built two stories high, and the upper floor is used as the main hall which is filled with Buddha images. Ornamented victory columns known as "*Tagundaing*" in Burmese are erected within the monastery grounds. In addition to being devout Buddhists, the Ta'ang like many other people in Myanmar also worship local village guardian *nat* spirits. The Ta'ang villagers of Kyushaw are no exception and hold both Buddhism and spirit worship in reverence. There are two *nat* shrines in the village. The altar of Kyushaw's guardian spirit is located on the west side of the village.



The second shrine is the village's middle shrine. Here, the occasional ceremonies promoting the common health, business and social wellbeing of the whole village are held. In addition, monks or devotees often chant prayers for the prosperity and wellbeing of the village from this shrine.



**Figure 3.4** Altar of Kyushaw's guardian spirit

Offering ceremonies are held in the middle shrine twice every year, once in the Myanmar lunar month of *Nadaw* (late December to early January) and once in *Kasone* (late April to early May). The first offering ceremony is held on a selected auspicious day in *Nadaw* (late December to early January). On this day, the villagers pray for protection from hazards in the coming days as they collect firewood for their tea leaf steamers. As they carry guns and knives to protect themselves while they collect firewood in the forests, they make these offerings in the hope of protecting themselves from any accidents. In Kyushaw village, the second offering ceremony is held on another auspicious day in *Kasone* (late April to early May) which is selected by the *Pandagar* and the head



monk of the village monastery. On this day, offerings are presented, and prayers are made for the health, plentiful tea harvests and profits of the whole village. The offering items presented on the ceremony day include tea leaves and items such as shampoo. With *Kasone* being one of the hottest months, offerings of cool water are also made to the Buddha. Tea leaves are offered to pray for plentiful tea harvests and profits. Shampoo and cool water are offered to pray for the washing away of all impurities. Other materials they bring to offer are presented in the hope of being able to make more offerings again in the coming years.

After the villagers place the offerings on the middle shrine, the village head monk consults the Ta'ang calendar to calculate the year's four cardinal directions and then the inauspicious or unlucky direction. After these five directions are calculated four animal symbols are placed on each cardinal direction. Depending on the year, these four cardinal directions are represented by 4 different animals out of a total of 5 in rotation. They are the frog, dragon, buffalo, lion and the galon (a mythical golden winged bird). After the animal symbols are placed at the foot of the middle shrine in their corresponding cardinal points, the *Paritta* (safeguard) prayers and merit sharing recitals begin. While the *Pandagar* recites these prayers he holds the clothes of villagers unable to attend. As it is the duty of every villager to attend, those absent send their clothes to the ceremony in their stead. When the ceremony is over, the clothes are sent back to them. The villagers believe that these clothes have protective powers and can ensure a smooth worklife if they wear them.



**Figure 3.5** An offering ceremony at Kyushaw's central shrine.

In addition to the Buddha and *Nats*, bicentennial tea trees are held in great reverence in Kyushaw society as benefactors, and are worshipped by Kyushaw villagers. As sacred trees, the leaves of these old trees are never plucked. Every year on the full-moon day of the month of Tabaung (late February to early March), around the time of the first tea leaf harvests, the owner of the land where the bicentennial tea tree stands dresses it in “golden robes” i.e., they gild the tea tree in gold leaves using ripe bananas as glue. Concerning this, one 90-year-old villager who has a bicentennial tea tree explained,

We Ta'ang depend on tea for our living, so we never forget to express our gratitude toward it. The tea tree is our benefactor. Every year, I pay my respects and present offerings to the bicentennial tea tree. In my house shrine, I make offerings of joss sticks, candles and tea leaves from my first harvest to the Buddha and pray for profitable tea sales.



**Figure 3.6** A miniature altar honoring the centennial tea tree

Apart from the owner, other villagers may also come to the bicentennial tea tree and gild it in gold and place offerings of rice, curry, joss sticks, candles, and boiled tea. For the Ta'ang of Kyushaw, the bicentennial tea tree is also a sacred part of their religious beliefs. The Buddha, the bicentennial tea trees and elders of the village are all benefactors in their tradition and are worthy of worship and offerings. The villagers of Kyushaw also have a tradition of making household Buddha images out of centennial tea tree wood. This custom is highly favored by the Ta'ang. It is done as an expression of gratitude towards Buddha for the blessings they receive through tea. According to a 60-year-old local woman, these Buddha images are always offered with the first harvested *shwe phi* tea leaves alongside cool water and flowers. Along with the offerings, prayers are made for an abundant tea harvest and profitable tea sales. Packs of dried tea are also placed year-round as offerings to these household Buddha images. Most locals in Kyushaw village have these centennial tea tree Buddha images in their household shrines.



**Figure 3.7** A Buddha image made of centennial tea wood.

*Pandagar* is the title given to a lay leader who leads the village during religious events. The person taking up this position must be male and be seen as having extensive knowledge about social functions, religious events, Ta'ang tradition and customs, and he must be a good public speaker. Additionally, he must be one who works for the village's social affairs and interests every time and everywhere. Moreover, he must have spent at least three years in the monkhood. As the one who leads during village social events and activities, the *Pandagar* has as much power as the head monk or village headman. The position of *Pandagar* cannot be held by a woman. This is because the rule that during religious events, women may not sit on the same level or elevation as monks, which prevents them from being able to work closely with monks. Usually, the monks are seated in the highest position, men in the second and women in the third. The *Pandagar* position is yet another aspect of traditional Ta'ang life in Kyushaw which is dominated by gendered assumptions and gendered practices.

Many of these social and religious functions which involve tea are led by the *Pandagar* who uses tea as a symbolic tool for settling

social disputes and the conducting of religious events. In one case, the role of tea in settling a social dispute between the acting Pandagar and the former Pandagar was observed. When the acting Pandagar's father passed away while he was travelling, the former Pandagar took his place and took care of the planning and organizing of the funeral. Upon returning to find that the former Pandagar had taken the role of the religious and social leader in his father's funeral, the acting Pandagar became upset and invited all the villagers to a meeting at the village monastery. There, in front of the monks, the former Pandagar and the whole village, the acting Pandagar placed a pack of green tea leaves he brought on a small tray and presented it to the monk. After that, he proceeded to explain his complaint to the head monk. Upon accepting the tea and hearing the complaint, the monk and the villagers ask the acting Pandagar how he wishes to settle this case. To this he answered that he would be satisfied if the former Pandagar would apologize to him. After hearing this, the former Pandagar responds by saying that he only resumed the role of Pandagar since the acting Pandagar was travelling and because he wished to show gratitude towards the acting Pandagar's father who was a close relative of his. After this, he expressed his apologies further by presenting the acting Pandagar with tea leaves piled on a small tray.

The tea, whether presented in packs or on a small tray, is a symbol of respect for the other party. As can be seen in this example, it is also used during apologies, and in such instances the tea is wrapped in Taung-zun leaves. In other cases, where it is used for household social and religious purposes such as conducting *yadaya-chay* rituals (rituals to allay ill fortunes), it is packed in banana leaves. As tea has such high value in Kyushaw's social, economic, and religious life, the villagers avoid using tea trees as firewood. Together with chewing tobacco, tea leaves are the irreplaceable staples in all events be it social or religious, funerals or weddings. Whatever the event may be, invitations are sent in the form of betel quid (chopped betel nuts, tobacco and slaked lime wrapped in a betel leaf). It is also common to see tea packs of apology be presented together with betel quid. The shared value of tea and chewing tobacco is evident in the way it is widely used for different purposes (both social and religious). This might be the reason why the Ta'ang saying goes, "a tray of tobacco is worth

more than a million in gold”. As the next chapter explains, the Pantagar also has a significant role in helping tea owners select their harvest dates and ensure the process is auspicious.



**Figure 3.8** The current Pandagar (in gray) and former Pandagar (white, middle) seated before the head monk. Male villagers are seated around the monk and the two Pandagar.



# 4

## TEA PRODUCTION, MIGRATION AND ECONOMIC CHANGE: GENDERED PARTICIPATION AMID TRADITION AND MODERNITY

In Kyushaw, tea picking is traditionally a woman's job, and in current times it is done primarily by female migrant workers, local middle-aged women, and their young daughters. Men on the other hand are involved in the more physically demanding tasks of tea production and tea plot maintenance. This chapter traces the gendered nature of tea picking and the production process, which is closely linked to the gendered cultural forms discussed in the previous chapter, but which also require precise technique, skill and knowledge. However, these dynamics are undergoing some notable shifts as forces of modernity become more prominent, particularly the integration of the area into global economic and labour markets, and the exposure of young people to different forms of culture. Amid this backdrop, young Ta'ang women having been looking for other opportunities further afield, rejecting many of the traditional cultural expectations imposed on them. To fill the labour gap, a village like Kyushaw relies heavily on mainly Bamar female migrant labour during the intensive tea-picking season. This chapter thus further discusses the intersection of the gendered tea industry with the livelihoods and perspectives of women migrating in and out of the village at various points in time.

### Seasonal tea production in Kyushaw Village

The typical starting age for a tea picker depends on the number of able working hands in each family. If there are not enough tea pickers, girls start tea picking from as young as 8 years old. Even if her family has enough working hands, she is most likely to join her family during tea picking as there is no one left at home to take care of them. Tea picking isn't directly taught, but girls learn the ins and outs of tea picking by accompanying and observing the method from their mothers. Concerning this, a 30-year-old tea picker shared her childhood memories and how she learned to pick tea:

Today, I will be picking tea with my daughter. She will learn how to pick tea in the same way I learned from my mother. She will walk along with me as I go on my tea picking hike. Like me, she will follow her mother and observe which tea leaves can be picked and which cannot. The mother shows and the daughter will learn. That is how we learn how to pick tea here in Kyushaw.



**Figure 4.1** A young Kyushaw girl learning how to pick tea





**Figure 4.2** A mother and daughter on their way to pick tea

When picking tea leaves, pickers play close attention to the number of leaves that are growing from a single stem. If there are five, two leaves and one sprout are picked, as seen in the image below. The remaining three leaves are left intact to allow more growth from the plant. If more than two tea leaves are picked from a single stem, the sprouts are left to encourage leaf growth.



**Figure 4.3** A freshly picked tea with two leaves and one sprout

In larger tea fields, tea leaves are picked every day. The pickers browse through the tea trees and pick tea leaves that have the best size and color. The ideal, pickable tea leaf has one or two sprouts growing with it. This is a surefire sign that more sprouts will grow in its place. The time window in which tea leaves can be picked is narrow. This is because if tea leaves are not picked right after they sprout, they will be too mature and stiff for production. Thus, larger tea plots require large groups of tea pickers who must constantly monitor and actively pick tea leaves while they are young. If the tea tree is tall, the leaves at the base of the tree are picked first. If it is short, the picker may start picking leaves from any level. Concerning this, an owner of three tea plots said;

During the tea picking season, if we fail to pick the leaves while they are young and tender, they turn mature and stiff. The tea leaves that sprout afterwards will also be stiff. Because of the nature of tea plants, we must pick the young leaves as soon as we can with many people. If we are fast enough, new sprouts may emerge after we pick the young leaves. When new

sprouts emerge, we can leave them for only 2 or 3 days. If they are not picked within 4 or 5 days after sprouting, the leaves will mature and turn stiff. These leaves are not good for selling. They are not as good-looking as young leaves and are less profitable. So, the faster all the tea leaves can be picked, the better. If we cannot pick the leaves on time, it results in dried or roasted tea that is puffy and less valuable. However, if the tea leaves are young and tender it ensures that the processed tea leaves become tight and stiff with good taste and better value.

Tea pickers mainly use their thumb and index fingers, which are stained black from the repeated exposure to tannin from the tea leaves. To avoid this, the pickers now use gloves. For storing the picked tea leaves, tea pickers mostly use wicker baskets called *paline* in Burmese. After the *paline* are filled with tea leaves, they are brought back down from the tea hills on a shoulder yoke. Tea picking starts from sunrise and continues through until sunset.



**Figure 4.4** Tea picker with a bamboo wicker basket



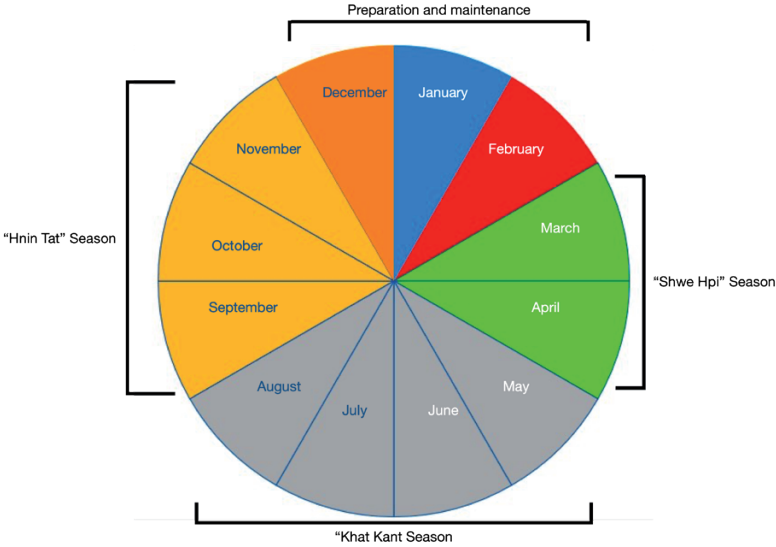
**Figure 4.5** Tea picker carrying back two wicker baskets on shoulder yoke

When placing freshly picked tea leaves in the basket, the pickers take care not to compress the tea leaves. If the tea leaves are compressed, they prematurely release the tannins which are vital for both tea fermentation and drying processes. Loss of tannins leads to a darker tea leaf which cannot be properly fermented or a much less fragrant dried tea. To avoid this, the tea pickers gently place the tea leaves evenly on top of each other and takes care not to overload the basket. During tea picking, tea blossoms are left intact. When these blossoms pollinate and grow fruits in Thadingyut and Tazaungmone (October and November), the villagers pick their fruits for the tea seeds. These capsule-like fruits are egg-shaped and turn slightly brown when ripe. Inside the fruits are 2 or 3 seed pods which contain 2 or 3 seeds each. After picking the seeds from the ripe tea seed capsules, the villagers will either plant them directly in their tea plots or in nurseries for next season. Sometimes, tea blossoms and fruits are picked to be added to dried tea leaves to enhance their fragrance. Tea leaf fruits cost around 3000-4000 kyats per viss.



**Figure 4.6** Tea fruits and blossoms

Tea cultivation and production in Kyushaw village follows a four-stage yearly cycle. From December to February, the villagers tend their tea plots. In the second stage, which is from March to April, they harvest and produce a type of dried tea called the *shwe hpi* variant. The third stage is the 4-month fermented tea making season from May to August. The type of tea harvested and fermented in this season is called *khat kant* tea. The last stage is the *hnin tat* dried tea season from September to November.



**Figure 4.7** Kyushaw’s seasonal tea cultivation calendar

According to local beliefs, the first day of the first tea harvest in the month April must be determined by consulting astrology experts including the *Pandagar*, monks, and elders, who calculate the best date according to the birthday of the tea plot owner. As tea is the most important source of income for Kyushaw villagers and the local belief in astrology is strong, the beginning of the first tea picking season (*Shwe Hpi*) during April and May is the high season for *Pandagar*, monks and elders who help Kyushaw’s tea plot owners determine the best date to start picking. An owner of 6 tea plots explained the importance of astrology in tea harvests and production;

I depend on tea because nothing else is possible here. For me, Shwe Hpi season is the most important. So, to have a plentiful Shwe Hpi tea leaf harvest and high profit, I request the *Pandagar*, monks and elders to help me select the luckiest day for me. I believe in their knowledge as we have been consulting them ever since my mother was a child. I follow her footsteps. When I start my tea harvest on the chosen lucky day, I notice that the tea is less damaged, and I get more profit.

For Kyushaw villagers, and all tea growers in Myanmar, *Shwe Hpi* tea is the first and most important tea of the year. It is picked and dried just before the wet season, resulting in the most fragrant dried tea. The *Shwe Hpi* tea picking season lasts for two months, April and May. During the harvest, everyone works together: men and women alike. Of all three types of tea produced in Myanmar, *Shwe Hpi* tea is generally seen as the best. It has held the title of Myanmar's favorite tea as early as the Konbaung Dynasty - in U Poné Nya's *Laphet Mittarsa*, the affection Burmese kings had for it is evident;

When the Kings of Thayekhattaya dined, Shwe Phi tea that blossoms gracefully as the Badonmar lotus with curving leaves unfolding as an elegant gown, is placed on a golden tray adorned with the nine gems - a royal delicacy served always for the kings of the Golden Land.

It was loved so much that the tea leaf was praised as “*Nat ywet*” or the leaf of the celestials. After harvesting the **Shwe Hpi (dried) tea** or *Nat Ywet* as ordained by kings, the tea leaves go through a three-stage drying process which utilizes the warm sunlight of the hot season alongside earthen pots, a boiler, a steamer, a stove, tea withering shelves and bamboo mats. The process is as follows. First, they are spread out on bamboo mats to dry in the sun.





**Figure 4.8** Sun drying Shwe Hpi tea



**Figure 4.9** Traditional earthen tea steamer

After the tea leaves are dried or withered, they put them over an earthen steamer fueled with firewood. After ten minutes, the leaves turn yellowish and are taken out and placed on withering shelves where men and women work together to roll the hot tea leaves.





**Figure 4.10** Locals hand-rolling steamed Shwe Hpi tea at night

Usually, the men operate the steamers. About 30 to 50 viss of tea is rolled per night. After that, the tea is left to cool overnight. The next morning, they are brought out to dry on bamboo mats in the sun.



**Figure 4.11** Sun-drying steamed Shwe Hpi tea

After a day of sun drying, the tea leaves are sorted into hard and soft leaves. Hard leaves are suitable for sale while the soft leaves

are less valuable. After they are sorted and placed in separate bags, they are sold to merchants who pay 2000 kyats per viss of soft Shwe Hpi tea and 6000 for hard Shwe Hpi tea.

The second tea variant harvested is Khat Kant (fermented) tea, with a season that lasts from May to August. It is known as Khat Kant tea, meaning the tea picked in the rainy season.



**Figure 4.12** Khat Kant tea picking in the rainy season

Without ample sunlight for making dried tea, most of the Khat Kant tea harvested is used to make fermented tea. Unlike the Shwe Hpi tea season, men and women have separate roles during the Khat Kant harvest. While the women are harvesting tea, the men take responsibility for removing old tea trees that become infected with mold during the rains, and they plant new tea trees. After digging out the old plants, the men dig new holes that are about 4 to 5 feet apart and plant tea saplings. These tea saplings come from local nurseries that the tea plot owners take care of themselves. One nursery has between 500-1000 tea saplings. Tea sapling transplanting may not take place every year. Depending on their tea tree's health,

some locals replant once every year while others only once in 4-5 years. While the men are engaged in clearing tea plots of grass and weeds, removing old tea trees and transplanting tea saplings, the women are busy harvesting tea and making fermented tea.

Compared to Shwe Hpi season, Khat Kant season yields less tea leaves. On average, 4 to 10 viss of Khat Kant tea is harvested per day. Fermented tea is made from Khat Kant tea from May to September. The process involves putting the harvested tea leaves in the earthen steamer, rolling them, and spreading them out to cool. After they are cooled, they are washed thoroughly in water and stored in a large, round bamboo basket for 6 months where they ferment. Some villagers prefer to ferment their tea in earthen jars instead. After selling off most of the Khat Kant fermented tea, villagers store a portion of the fermented tea in bamboo baskets sealed air-tight into underground storage holes. It is usually the men who seal the fermented tea into the underground storage.

The final tea picking season of the year for Kyushaw villagers is the Hnin Tat Season which lasts from September to November during the cold season. According to “The Burmese Encyclopedia”, Hnin Tat tea is translated as “the tea which sprouts when the mist sets”, as seen in the image below:



**Figure 4.13** The mists of Hnin Tat season

As a more recent variant of tea leaf, Hnin Tat tea is less well-known compared to Shwe Hpi and Khat Kant tea. Hnin Tat tea leaves are thin, small in structure, and have tiny thorns. As a cold season variant, tea leaf yield is low during the Hnin Tat season. Thus, like Khat Kant the women are solely responsible for the harvest and production of tea during the Hnin Tat season. Depending on the weather conditions, Hnin Tat tea is used to make either dried tea or fermented tea. Another consequence of the low yield during Hnin Tat season is low income. As a result, most men in Kyushaw are outside of the village, finding work in nearby villages such as picking corn, cutting sugarcane stalks or taking up other manual labor jobs. The average daily income for men during the Hnin Tat season is 4000 kyats.

Traditionally, the villagers of Kyushaw only made fermented tea with the Hnin Tat tea harvest. This changed around 2016 when the green tea making (dry roast) method was introduced by a villager who learned it from a workshop organized by the Palaung Tea Leaf Organization in collaboration with GIZ. Most of the tea harvested during the Hnin Tat season is made into green tea which is dry roasted. He explained:

I am the representative for Kyushaw village in the Palaung Tea Leaf Association. After a one-week course on green tea production, I tried to introduce it in Kyushaw because I believe our village can benefit from the versatility and profitability it brings. Currently, there are only 6 families who have adopted green tea production as a part of their yearly tea cultivation and production cycle. Some women are unwilling to adopt it because the investment cost is high although it is profitable. Men are more interested in it. But I think that if we can show them how to operate smoothly, they will be interested in it. Prices for traditionally sun-dried tea and fermented tea aren't improving. So, I think the profitability of green tea will make us happier in the long run.

To make green tea, the producer uses a dry roasting process which involves putting around 3 to 5 viss of tea into a large wok slanting at a 38° angle for 45 minutes, then the tea is roasted over a carefully monitored wood fire. The leaves are constantly stirred to avoid burning. After the leaves are roasted, they are spread out on shelves to cool. After they are cooled, they are rolled and straightened out. This is the most difficult and time-consuming stage of dry roasting as the delicate tea leaves may be damaged if over pressured. Next, the straightened leaves are gently placed in baskets overnight to prevent them from drying up. The next morning, they are placed on shelves to be dried in the sun for a day or two depending on the weather. After drying, they are sorted and packaged in penang sacks. Currently there are only six men who are using this method and producing green tea in Kyushaw. Concerning the difficulty of the green tea making process and its benefits, one 40-year-old green tea merchant from the Palaung Tea Leaf Association said,



Manufacturing green tea is very exhaustive, systematic and time consuming. But once a good batch of green tea is brewed up, you can reuse it five times. Good quality green tea is amber colored. If green tea is free from dirt and amber in color, it can sell for 15000 kyats per viss. The price of inferior quality green tea is 12000/ 13000 kyats per viss. The better the quality, the higher the price.



**Figure 4.14** Green tea roasting in the large slanted woks

When the Hnin Tat season ends in November, the villagers of Kyushaw have a three month break from tea cultivation and production during the coldest months of the year (December to February). During the break, the villagers spend their time collectively preparing for the next season by collecting firewood for their tea steamers and pruning and weeding their tea plots. Tea trees that are between 7-8 years old or 5-6 inches in circumference are pruned. Younger and smaller tea plants are not pruned except for once when they are 3-4 years old. Overall, pruning is done to support branch and leaf growth. If tea trees are left unpruned, the branches and leaves become stiff. This makes them hard to pick and results in an end product of lesser quality.

Tea plot maintenance and firewood collecting tasks during the 3-month off-season are carried out by local communal work groups. Unlike the combined volunteer groups during festivals, these groups are formed by relatives and neighbors of the same gender. Each group has around 10 members, and as a group, they help each member complete various manual tasks on their tea plots.



**Figure 4.15** Local woman carrying firewood on her shoulder



**Figure 4.16** Collecting firewood

Although the host member is not required to pay wages to the other members for their work, he or she is obliged to serve snacks and refreshments to the helpers. For meals, each member brings a cup of rice and one or two curries. Drinking water is provided by the host. Female communal work groups usually work from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. Around 7:30 AM, the members leave their homes and gather at the home of the host member. Once there, they swap their *htamain* (sarong worn by women) for trousers. Married women are expected not to wear trousers outside of the workplace. After changing, they tie a small bamboo basket holding a knife on their waist and place a cloth over their shoulders. After placing their slinged bamboo baskets filled with food and supplies in the shade, they begin work.





**Figure 4.17** Women working together on tea plots

After a quick 30-minute break at 10:30 AM, they continue to collect firewood around the forest and prune the branches of tea trees. If a male communal group already pruned the tea plot, the women collect the cut branches and place them in the woodpile. Lunch break begins around 1pm, and lasts for an hour.



**Figure 4.18** Lunch break for the woman's communal work group

work until 5pm. When the day's communal work is over, they place their equipment and collected vegetables and fruits in their slinging basket and return home.

As for the male communal work groups, there are currently 3 of them in the village. Each group has around 10 to 15 members. Like their counterparts, they work from 8am to 5pm. Their main tasks include cutting down trees in the forest for the upcoming year's tea production firewood supply, pruning the tea trees and burning the excess leaves and twigs. If the host member's plot has large trees, the communal group will cut it down for firewood. If not, they find a large tree to fall in the forest. After falling the tree and chopping it down, they pile the firewood up to be ready for the women to collect.

If there is time to spare, they also work together to prune tea trees and weed the tea plots. During their breaks, they enjoy playing cards. In both male and female communal work groups, the amount of work required for each member's tea plots varies. Some members may own 2 tea plots while others 3. Thus, for larger tea plots, the owner must compensate in cash to his fellow members

for the extra work they do for him. In such cases, women are paid 3000 kyats while men are paid 3500 kyats per day.



**Figure 4.19** Firewood cutting

The members of these work groups take turns helping each other's tea plots and other required tasks. During the time of the study, there were 4 female reciprocal work groups and 3 male reciprocal work groups. In the past, there were 10-15 such groups but only 7 such groups are left now. This is because since 2019, an increasing number of men and women began to spend the 3 months break outside of the village in towns and cities where manual labor jobs are available. Many teenage girls have also left the village to work in China. This may relate to the recent decrease in profitability of tea production. Concerning this, a 32-year-old tea plot owner said,

The income we make from tea in this village is not good, so we have to go to other countries and work like slaves. If only tea was profitable, we would continue to live and work in the village. The tea yield is high but unfortunately, tea prices are low.

### **Changing perspectives and participation of young Ta'ang women and men**

For generations, the Ta'ang of Kyushaw village have been steadfast in the practice of traditional beliefs and customs. However, for younger generations these are playing a lesser role in their lives. Looking at certain aspects of these traditions it becomes visible why young men and women may choose to let go at least some parts of their traditional way of life. For example, traditional Ta'ang gender norms dictate that men are the breadwinners of the family. They are expected to work to financially support women and children while the women take care of household and look after the children. As women informants within the village have expressed, this lacks equality and fairness for them. Girls are expected to develop skills in domestic work such as cooking and washing clothes and serving her husband. Nothing more is expected from women. It is assumed that if she possesses these skills, she will have a smooth and happy marriage. As for the men they are viewed competent if he can support his family through sufficient income.

For the most part, the villagers of Kyushaw have retained such localized gendered expectations. Despite this, many younger generations, expressing a continued struggle to transform their lives, have broken away from these traditions. Starting from 10 years ago, tea prices fell, and younger generations became less interested in continuing tea cultivation and production. Instead, they internally and externally migrated for more profitable work in towns and cities. In China, married men found work as masons and young women found work as mobile phone factory workers. Other found work as waiters and waitresses. As time passed, it became rare to find any young men and women in the village. The youths had left the village and the tea trees for the cities. As younger generations leave Kyushaw and homes, they have been able to provide better

financial support their families. With tea leaf prices never the same as before, household income is increasingly dependent on remittances from these migrant workers. In this new arrangement, families have become equally dependent on both male and female income as opposed to the traditional way where men were the sole providers for the family. Through economic instability, the new notion of young women working outside of the village for their families and themselves became possible. Reflecting this sentiment, a twenty-five-year-old woman said;

I go to work in China because I can easily earn money. Working in the hills and tea tree plots is hard and low paying. My mother couldn't afford to send my younger sisters to school. That's why I go to work in China. So, I can help my mother.

In addition to being more profitable, work in the cities is easier compared to the physically demanding tasks of hillside farming and tea cultivation and production. Thus, most young women in the village prefer to work abroad than in the traditional tea business. Once every year during Shwephi season (March and April) they return from the factories, restaurants, and sugarcane plantations to help their families with the tea harvest. One mother in Kyushaw who has five daughters shared her family's situation after two of her daughters chose to leave for work in China:

My two elder daughters work in China. The elder has been working for a long time. The second followed her just last month. Now, I don't have enough people to help my tea business. But since they are earning good money in China, they can send their three younger sisters to school. Our life is like a wheel. We're moving all the time. Tea businesses can only earn enough for food. In the past, we couldn't send the younger girls to school. But now, the youngest is at a boarding school in Kyaukme. She's in the 11th grade now (final year of high school). This year, we spent ten lakhs (700\$) on her tuition fees. It would have been impossible if it weren't for my two eldest daughters who save and send money to me. They are very helpful to me.



Beyond this economic reality, the changing perspective of young women in Kyushaw village is also closely linked to recent improvements in telecommunications. With access to the internet and social networks, they have gained information and insight on popular trends. Many of them are now inspired to change their lives in many ways. From mobile phones and fashion to new job opportunities in the city and abroad, the young women of Kyushaw are increasingly aware of the wider national and global networks around them. They are more open and enthusiastic to change than older generations. Combined with the urge to earn and save more money to overcome the financial difficulties brought about by the waning tea business, they are less attached to customary village norms and jobs that women are usually given. In addition, as they see more income opportunities outside of the village and so many have chosen to work in other places. Concerning his opinion on this, one 26-year-old male in the village said,

Many girls don't live in this village any longer. Most of the girls work in cities and other countries. They need many things in their lives. It is not like with us men. They can earn more money. So, they can spend their money. If they live in the village, they need to ask for money from their parents. That is why most of the young girls work in big cities and other countries. Girls who graduate in Burmese schools go on to work in Myanmar cities. Others go to China. However, they always come back to their village during the village festival. Some people return to the village during tea harvest, but some never return.

Since 2019, the autonomous Wa State has become another work destination for young women from Kyushaw. Compared to China and Thailand, it is much easier to travel to and find work in Wa State. Unlike cross-border migration and work that requires visas and passports, Wa State only requires travel documentation at the Wa State Communication Center. Most of the Kyushaw women who migrate to Wa State work in tobacco factories.

Today, Kyushaw's younger generation and women believe that the socio-economic development of the village is most important.

With the onsite assistance of Ta'ang monks in the village, Kyushaw's youth diaspora can donate money to projects to help make this come true. With so many villagers of the younger generation moving out of the village to seek ways to alleviate their personal and the village's financial difficulties, Kyushaw's population has significantly dropped. Many locals actually reflect a degree of optimism about recent changes brought about by the steady flow of remittances. For example, one villager said:

My village has developed so much now. You can see that there are so many modern brick houses. When I was young, we only had bamboo long-houses. That was thirty years ago. Now, some families even own cars. Our situation is completely different now. When I was young, the village was underdeveloped. Now, Kyushaw has developed a lot.



**Figure 4.20:** A more modern brick and wood house with tin roofing



**Figure 4.21** A traditional bamboo longhouse

Regarding the development of Kyushaw village, one village youth leader said:

Our village is developing because younger generations work outside of the village in big cities and other countries. Here in the village, we have a youth group. As a group, we are always there in any village event to help in any way possible. We also collect public funds so that we can buy anything necessary for these events. Currently, we have over 10 lakhs (700\$) in public funds. Youths working in big cities or abroad are the main contributors. For us youths living in the village, we do our part by showing up to volunteer during the events. So, youths outside of the village donate money while those in the village donate their time and effort to village events and development projects. For example, we recently built a football field in the village. When we collect public donations, many women are interested in donating. It wasn't always like that though. In the past, before they understood development, I had to explain it very carefully to them so they would be happy to donate. Some people don't get it but donate the money anyway.



Because of the increasing cross-cultural exposure due to migration, most of the young women in Kyushaw are not as ethnocentric as in the past and are more willing to buck tradition on marriage custom. Some of them are married to people from outside of Kyushaw, including non-Ta'ang people from other groups such as Shan, Kachin, and Chinese. Regarding Kyushaw's development, a twenty-five-year-old young man said that most of the youths back home worry for their friends who work in cities and other countries. The reason is that these young people often chose not to return to Kyushaw, with his perspective revealing something of a split in opinion over the extent to which young people have a duty to remain attached and contribute:

There is something I worry about. In hopes of developing the village, some young folks move out to study and work in the city. They become educated and don't want to return to the village anymore. I think they are a bit proud of themselves for being educated. Yeah, they might come back one or two times. But those who are not "educated" always return to the village and they are not so proud of themselves. They are simple people in a good way. The people who work in the big cities don't come back to the village anymore. I wish all youths would return to Kyushaw.

Educational development is highly prioritized in Kyushaw. So much so that a community-based educational development program has been formed. This program is operated by the youths and monks. Through this program, the Kyushaw community was able to build their primary school and later upgrade it into a high school with the help of the monks. Children in Kyushaw now have better education opportunities. This same program also provides free tuition, lodging and, food for three children from Monghsu Township, four children from Kongthar and, three children from Kyushaw Village.



**Figure 4.22** Students attending school at Kyushaw from nearby villages

Kyushaw's dreams and goals of development are not just about finding alternatives to tea production. Many hope that one day, the village has access to more modern tea production facilities. One informant said:

We want a big tea factory in Kyaukme. If there is a big factory, we don't need to go to China to look for jobs. Now, there is no job opportunity in Kyaukme. In our village, I can work as a tea cultivator and producer. In Kyaukme I can only find very low-paying jobs.

### **Inward and outward migration of female labor**

Tea production is a heavy burden on the Ta'ang people. To get the tea leaf to bloom more, one must clean up the grass which grew on the farm before the tea harvest period. Moreover, farmers must pick all the tea leaves on time, otherwise the tea will become mature, and this produces a lower quality tea, which in turn leads to a drop in the value of the tea and can delay when the tea comes into bloom the following season. Therefore, to avoid losing good quality tea, the farmers need a significant amount of labor to pick the tea leaves when the tea is in bloom. In the past, the tea pickers come from places in Central Myanmar such as Mandalay and Myingyan, as well as other places in the Ta'ang area such as Kuitkai

and Namtu townships (TSYO, PWO & PSLE, 2009). The political unrest and conflict in the area means that the villagers need to find new alternatives, an issue which is exacerbated by the growing number of young local women who choose not to return from their overseas work commitments to help in tea picking.

Traditionally, there are two types of migrant workers who come to work in the tea tree plots of Kyushaw village. There are Ta'ang women from nearby villages who come to work in Kyushaw village when their village's tea yield is low, giving them enough time to out-migrate from March to April. After working in Kyushaw for the March and April Shwe Hpi season, they return to tea cultivation in their own villages. Such forms of migration have been going on for quite a long time. Other migrant workers are Bamar women who come from the Central Myanmar region (mostly Myingyan and Nahtogyi Townships). From March to April, they come to Kyushaw to work as tea pickers. According to local accounts, they have been doing so for 50 years now. On average, around 300 Bamar women would come to pick tea in Kyushaw per year. Own Kyushaw resident who owns six tea tree plots shared his thoughts on the people who come to pick tea every year:

During the tea harvest season in March and April, Bamar women come to pick tea. They always come during this time, even when I was young. We are very happy when they come to pick tea for us. Back in my parents' time, we had more people in the village. When all the tea was picked, they would go back to Central Myanmar. They usually stay for around 45 days or two months. Some of them we have known for many years.

The owners of the tea plots do not have to pay the Bamar tea pickers in cash. Instead, they are given half of the tea leaf harvest. From the perspective of the Bamar tea pickers, a 50-year-old woman from Myingyan who spent around 10 years as a tea picker in Kyushaw was interviewed. She said:

For 10 years straight, I went to pick tea in Kyushaw. Usually, we stay for a month. Sometimes if the tea

harvest is big, we stay for 45 days. If it is small, maybe 25 days. For the growth of more tea leaves, picking the tea on time is as important as good weather. Also, if there is less rain, less tea leaves grow. Just like the farmers back at home, the production of crops depends on the weather. This year, we stayed for 25 days.

Nowadays, fewer Bamar women are coming to pick tea than before. According to a local resident, this can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, as economic activities in Central Myanmar are increasing, women are less motivated to travel far to Kyushaw. Secondly, the current political situation in Shan State means it is dangerous for people to travel to and from Kyushaw. As explained by one of the informants...

Only 50 people came to pick tea this year. I think it's because there are many more job opportunities in central Myanmar now. They aren't motivated to come to Kyushaw anymore. Now, the Kyaukme region is very unsafe but there was always war, even in our parents' time. I think their parents don't want their children to come to places where there is war. So, we now have much fewer Bamar tea pickers from the lowlands.

Yet, there remains a few Bamar women who come to help pick tea in Kyushaw Village. They are mostly from Myingyan and Nahtogyi. Additionally, political conflict and displacement lead to unexpected opportunities for extra labor. For instance, in 2019, two Ta'ang families (around 10 working hands) came to seek shelter in Kyushaw as their village became a battleground. Much to the relief of themselves and the tea tree owners who were struggling to find pickers, they found work in Kyushaw as tea pickers. Not all migrant workers stay for the same amount of time. Some work for only around 10 days or long enough to be paid enough tea for just their own household consumption. This form of short-term labor migration is facilitated by mobile phones. Within 2 or 3 days of getting in touch with tea tree plot owners, Bamar women arrive can arrive in the village to pick tea. During the Shwe Hpi tea season, some Bamar workers stay for nearly a month. Some of

them even choose to stay on for the next season in May and June.



**Figure 4.23** Bamar tea pickers working in Kyushaw



**Figure 4.24** Fermenting tea at night

As in the past, the Bamar women who come to work as tea pickers in Kyushaw are given half of their tea harvest as payment. They are also paid in fresh vegetables from their employer's gardens such as tomatoes and cauliflowers and sometimes in salt and firewood for nighttime lighting and cooking. For accommodation, they live in tea steaming huts. Typically, they bring their cooking

utensils and bedding from home. They also bring along basic cooking ingredients such as fishpaste, onions, garlic, cooking oil, fried peas, and dried tea leaves. As explained by a 52-year-old tea picker who comes from Khansatkone village in Nahtogyi Township, Central Myanmar,

Not all tea plot owners are the same. Some of them only provide accommodation and everything else must be brought from our villages. Others provide us with vegetables and peas from their gardens and firewood for cooking. Overall, back home, jobs are scarce during the hot season. The pay is bad, and the weather is hot. Only 3000 kyats pay per day if we grow pea or sesame for farmers. Here in Kyushaw, the weather is very nice and tea picking is a well-paying job, so we often come to work here in the hot season.

In the village, the Bamar tea pickers usually start their day at 4:30am. After cooking they spread out yesterday's tea harvest in the sun and then have breakfast. Taking their lunchboxes with them, they hike to the tea tree plots and begin picking tea around 8:00am. After four hours of tea picking, they have their lunch break at noon. Usually, the midday lunch break stretches out for 2 hours and usually it is the time to have a restful nap. However, most of the Bamar women choose to only take a brief rest till 1:00pm and continue on until 5:00pm, returning to the village just before sundown. When they get back to their lodgings, they unload the harvested tea leaves, making sure that they are placed away from areas of direct sunlight. After showering, some prepare dinner while they steam and roll the tea leaves. After dinner, they sort the harvested tea leaves according to size, prepare for the ingredients for tomorrow's breakfast and go to bed by 10:00pm. Bamar migrant workers tend to work longer than locals. At the end of the day, they divide their harvest into two shares, one for the owner and one for them. Usually, they can harvest over 10 viss (approx. 16 kg.) of tea leaves per day. If they wish to sell their share of the harvest, the owner can buy it from them for the current selling price. However, some tea pickers prefer to transport their harvested share back to their own regions and sell it there.

The relation between the Ta'ang tea growers and cultivators of Kyushaw and the Bamar migrant workers can be analyzed through different perspectives. For example, in terms of time, the migrant workers can seasonally migrate to work as tea pickers in Kyushaw since the first tea picking season (Shwephi season) starts 15 days after the Burmese New Year Festival (Thingyan). It has become integrated into their yearly mental calendar. Further, this seasonal migration of Bamar women to Kyushaw village is not only a time for them to utilize their free hot season holidays but an opportunity for them to bring and sell locally made tea picking tools in Kyaukme township. For example, some women from eastern Khansatkone village in Central Myanmar initially came to Kyushaw to trade or sell various local goods and buy dried tea leaves. It was through these preexisting trade networks that connected Ta'ang tea growers with potential tea pickers from central Myanmar.

The daily life interactions and trading systems that they have sustained is another point of consideration. According to a Bamar tea picker who lives in eastern Khansatkone village, Nahtogyi Township, the attitudes of local Kyushaw villagers towards Bamar tea pickers is evident:

We have been picking tea here for a long time. We have a strong relationship with the local tea plot owners and since we have known them for over 20 years, we are like family. They are good-natured. For example, the tea plot owner pays for our transportation costs for travel to and from Kyushaw or Kyaukme. If we get sick while working here, they pay for our treatment until we recover. I enjoy the weather here and like living here. The work isn't tiresome-during tea picking when a day's tea picking is done, we only have to carry a bamboo basket worth of tea and the rest is transported down the hills by the owner on a motorbike.

A local Kyushaw woman commented on the differences between the tea picking style of local Ta'ang pickers and migrant Bamar women. The migrants tend to pick as many leaves as they can. This can cause damage to the trees but since there are not enough local pickers, the tea plot owners are content with both methods.



There are two styles of tea leaf picking; Ta'ang style and Bamar style. The Ta'ang are careful to pick the younger tea sprouts without hard leaves. The Bamar tea picker often picks both soft and hard tea leaves. Although this is quicker, a lot of mature tea leaves are picked in the process. This results in differences in the final tea product's quality. Even before that, when the tea leaves are laid out in the sun, the more mature, harder tea leaves take longer to dry properly. This also damages the tea trees, but we can't harvest tea on time without engaging the Bamar women.

### **Modernizing tea supply chains from the village to the cities**

In the past, the villagers of Kyushaw had to go through many hardships to make their way to tea trade centers in Kyaukme. They would make the rugged journey from Kyushaw to Kyaukme on cow and horse-drawn carts, taking days to get there. On this, one 89-year-old tea grower said:

When we were young, we personally transported our tea to Kyaukme. We would begin our journey at night, using torchlight to navigate our path. Everyone packed food for the long trip. Those who didn't have beasts of burden would borrow a horse. Later, we began to travel together in caravans of cow carts. Now, it's nothing like that. It's so easy now.

With roads now connecting Kyushaw with the wider network of towns and cities, travel to tea trade centers is easier for tea growers. Cars and motorcycles have replaced cows and horses as the main mode of transportation to Kyaukme. Although some horses are still used by villagers to carry harvested tea down the tea tree-covered hills, only one family raises horses which are borrowed for 200 kyats per day during the cold season and rainy season tea harvests.

As increased accessibility has also allowed locals to travel to tea trade centers, it has also brought new people into the village. An example of this is the travelling tea brokers who arrive in the



village every harvest season. Coming to the village once every three days, they buy tea from the villagers for low prices and transport them by motorbike to towns and such as Kyaukme which is the center of tea trade for Northern Shan State and the go-to place for Kyushaw villagers to sell their tea. From tea trade centers in Kyaukme, tea is then sold and distributed to cities such as Mandalay and Yangon.

Travelling tea brokers who directly buy tea from tea producing villages like Kyushaw profit around 500 to 1000 kyats per viss of tea. Many of the tea growers and producers in Kyushaw depend on the tea brokers. Lacking transportation and familiarity with the cities and towns where the tea is sold, villagers often sell to tea brokers who are more market savvy and better connected in the urban areas. Although tea brokers can help local tea growers earn fair earnings from their produce, they have not done so. They have only worked to make profit out of tea growers by forcing them to sell their tea for low prices, and sometimes actively deceive the Ta'ang growers. According to one tea grower,

One time a tea broker came and bought our tea and told us that he would pay us back according to the Mandalay market price. He said that there would be lots of profit. He said he'd come back to pay me after 1 month. But he never came back.

During the tea season, tea brokers make daily visits to tea producing villages. Currently, two tea brokers, one Burmese and one Shan are doing business with Kyushaw villagers. These tea brokers are reported to pay local tea growers more fairly compared to previous brokers. Their tea buying prices are 500 kyats less than Kyaukme tea trade centers buying prices. However, in response to the poor prices offered by previous traveling tea brokers, many villagers have found ways to directly transport and sell their tea at Kyaukme's tea trade centers. This direct trading between the tea growers and producers of Kyushaw and the tea trading centers at Kyaukme has been going on for at least three generations. So much so that some tea trade centers are personally connected with Kyushaw. One Kyushaw villager who owns four tea plots said:

We have been working together for so long. Since the time of our father and grandfather. We only sell our tea products to Kyaukme. Back in our grandfather's day, he would trek to Kyaukme to sell his tea. Later, when he could afford to, he got a bullock cart. Now we go by motorbike which is quite convenient compared to that. At Kyaukme, we always sell at U Maung Naing's tea trading center. U Maung Naing and Kyushaw go a long way back. We are like family. Sometimes, when we are in need, he provides our loans with no interest. He waits as long as we need to give him the money back.

U Maung Naing is the third-generation owner of his tea trade center since 1997. He trades both dried and fermented tea. According to him, the relationship between Kyushaw and his family is strong:

Ever since my grandfather and father's time, people from Kyushaw have been coming to trade with us. They would stop by and sell their tea to me so that they would have money to shop for much-needed supplies. Sometimes, when they didn't have enough tea to sell to me but needed the money, I would prepay them and let them deliver the tea next time. If they need more prepay, I'm always willing to listen to their request and oblige. I don't ask them to repay me in cash because most of them can't. They always repay me in tea.

U Maung Naing's tea trade center is a welcome resting place for Kyushaw villagers who have made the long ride from Kyushaw to Kyaukme. They are given a place to rest for the night, a meal, and free-flow tea. With a generations-old relationship, the guarantee of financial aid, and hospitable owners, it is no wonder why most villagers in Kyushaw choose to sell their tea to U Maung Naing.



**Figure 4.25** Kyushaw villagers arriving at U Maung Naing's tea trade center in Kyaukme.

In the past, the tea growers of Kyushaw village transported and sold their products at tea trade centers in Kyaukme. The tea broker's sales centers at Kyaukme would then combine all the purchased tea and sell them at Namsan tea trade centers. From Namsan, the tea would then be transported to larger tea trade centers in Mandalay where it would be further distributed to other towns in different regions. 10 years ago, Namsan township was the center for tea in northern Shan State, with many dry tea processing factories in the town. Later, the majority of Namsan townsfolk relocated to Kyaukme and Mandalay due to the constant civil conflict. Therefore, Kyaukme became a meeting center for tea

traders and tea broker's sales centers. These tea broker's sales centers are owned by Burmese, Shan and Ta'ang people.

Most of these tea trade centers are passed down from generation to generation. As they have been passed down for many generations, they have formed long-lasting relationships with the Ta'ang tea growers that enable them to help each other in times of need. In the past, Kyushaw tea growers were dependent on these tea trade centers as transportation was hard. These tea broker's sales centers would buy and resell the tea that the highland tea growers brought to them. Tea growers who came to sell their tea at these centers had to put their trust in the brokers. If they still had enough money to buy necessities like rice, oil and salt, the tea growers agreed to be repaid by the tea brokers one year later when the tea selling season recommenced. With current improvements in transportation, highland areas are not the same as before. Information on tea market locations and price changes is more accessible. Tea growers are now actively engaging with their markets, searching for the best prices and tea trade centers in Mandalay and Kyaukme without the need for travelling tea brokers.

Kyaukme has become the main center for tea trade in Northern Shan State with over 40 centres. Furthermore, the direct tea trade between travelling tea brokers and local tea producers and tea trade centers and local tea producers indicates an intensification of tea trade. This is supported by the increasing availability of transportation in the form of motorcycles and cars and communication tools such as phones and the internet. Tea prices are now easily inquired through phone calls and tea growers can also easily inform brokers whenever they wish to sell their tea. Overall, Kyushaw has become better connected to tea trade centers in Kyaukme and tea sales are made faster and more efficiently than ever before. Methods of tea cultivation, production and trade have changed for the Ta'ang tea growers of Myanmar. For example, it formerly took 6 months to produced fermented tea. Now, it is made and sold within a day thanks to the introduction of new methods and telecommunication. As a price of this steady income flow, many local Ta'ang tea growers in hill-top villages such as Kyushaw have sacrificed their age-old tea cultivation and production methods.

Contemporary developments in tea businesses have altered regional traditions and ways of life. Apart from this, the tea growers in Kyushaw today mainly sell their tea products in Kyaukme. This is because Kyaukme and Kyushaw have become tea trading partners through the years, forming a trusting relationship between the tea grower and the trader. This close, economic producing relationship has allowed for the development of social capital. This in turn allows for economic capital to be continuously produced for generations as tea growers remain loyal to tea trade centers such as U Maung Naing. Although many tea trade centers in Mandalay are easily accessible and offer better prices for their tea, Kyushaw's tea growers are encouraged to continue to sell their tea in Kyaukme due to the significant social capital they possess there.

### **Associations of producers and modernizing projects**

#### *Myanmar Tea Association (MTA)*

Although currently not directly engaged with Kyushaw village, the Myanmar Tea Association remains one of the foremost and influential tea producer and trader organizations in the country. The Myanmar Tea Association was formed in 2013 and has over 20,000 members all around the country. The purpose of the Association of Myanmar is to help speed up the development of modern tea production methods. From 2013 to 2019, the association focused on helping local tea producers and plantations through the introduction of branching systems and natural fertilizers such as animal droppings. Throughout its operations, it has worked closely with both local associations such as the Co-operative College (Sagaing), HELVETAS Myanmar, and larger international tea organizations such as the ASEAN Tea Organization (of which it has been a member since 2019), and the GIZ from Germany. As a result, it has served as a bridge between local producers and international buyers. Following its formation and activities, local tea producers in Myanmar have been able to start producing and exporting organic tea products abroad to places such as China and Germany.

### *Palaung Tea Growers & Sellers Association Incorporated (PTGSA)*

Compared to the Myanmar Tea Association, the Palaung Tea Growers and Sellers Association has had more influence in more remote areas such as Kyushaw. It was founded in 2003 with the aim of helping in the development of Palaung (Ta'ang) people and their tea production and trade. In Kyaukme and elsewhere, it is affiliated with the MTA and works together to connect local tea growers and businesses to with bigger markets. Like the MTA, it works closely with GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit). Not long after its establishment, various education processes were initiated for tea growers. Simple but important methods and information were introduced such as pruning and general scientific knowledge about tea plants. In the beginning, 8 trainees from Koekant and Mailar regions were trained. They were given scholarships and were allowed to learn more about tea cultivation and production. The association would continue to give such training scholarships in the following years with an annually increasing intake. Kyushaw's first trainee finished his training in 2019. Through the training he received from the PTGSA and GIZ, he was able to introduce Kyushaw to new green tea production methods. There are currently 6 households that use these methods. Others remain hesitant to adopt this new method as it requires learning new techniques and relatively expensive equipment.

### *International Markets and Local Tea Production Transformations*

After the yellow dye (Auramine O) incident and the emergence of regional and national tea associations such as the MTA and the PTGSA, Myanmar's tea production and trade has taken a new path. Taking inspiration from the long history and traditions of organic tea making and consumption, current tea producers and sellers are now refocused on growing and manufacturing tea products that are organic. Combined with the bucolic allure of the highlands that are ideal climate conditions for tea growing, the freshness, naturalness and the uniqueness of Myanmar tea has become the main selling points of Myanmar's tea. According to an MTA representative, tea associations such as the MTA and the PTGSA are now providing "technical assistance, such as organic planting methods...so that tea farmers' products can match international standards."

This has led to a transformation in the Northern Shan State hills where tea is planted. As tea farmers aim to sell their tea in international markets, they are now striving to adapt to new organic tea production methods. They are also vigilant about chemical pollution. With new connections to the international market that values organic, chemical tea, many tea growers have learned to use organic methods to gain more profit for their products. One Danu tea grower from Pintaya said with joy, *“The market is now struggling because German companies are directly buying dried tea leaves from us”*. 2 years ago, with the help of the MTA, Kyaukme’s own local branch of PTGSA began international export of locally produced organic tea. *“It was the first time Myanmar exported organic green tea”*, said a member of the PTGSA. Kyaukme’s tea growers and sellers are now linked with Germany-based international shop chains that buys and sells their tea products such as green tea and fermented tea. This was arranged through the assistance of the Myanmar-Germany Private Sector Development arm of GIZ.

### **Examining women’s agency amid tradition and tea in Kyushaw**

This chapter reveals the dynamics of women involved in the tea industry, both Bamar migrants and Ta’ang locals from Kyushaw, and particularly how aspects of tradition continue to dominate to a certain extent, and yet the village finds itself in the midst of a period of economic and social disruption. This experience is not dissimilar to how traditional, gendered social and economic systems in rural parts of Southeast Asia have often faced change as young women seek as opportunity to forge a life for themselves beyond the confines of the household and industry. In spite of the myriad challenges facing women, both those migrating in and out are seen to possess forms of agency which may not have been as easily observable in the past. However, as the perspective of young men and older villagers remaining in the village shows, while some migrants continue to send remittances and support the development of the community, the severing of traditional family structures and traditional involvement in the tea industry is bringing profound changes in the minds of many.

In reflecting upon this research in its entirety, Kyushaw has presented an illuminating study of how a village is faring amid particularly dramatic forms of economic and social change. Many of these shifts may have been inevitable – across rural Myanmar such modernizing trends are inescapable – but the broader, protracted decline in the tea industry and the nature of continued conflict in Ta'ang areas has further accelerated the speed of disruption. Many of these traditional forms of life and livelihood persist to some extent, such as the division of manual labour in the tea production process and the defining role of the *Pantagar* figure, but it is difficult to determine for how long this is viable. As young women increasingly look to assert their independence, rejecting both conservative family roles and the dominant livelihood which they would be expected to partake in, there is further scope for research on both traditional forms of society, culture and economic life, and on the perspectives of these determined young woman.



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# TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN TA'ANG TEA CULTIVATION

## Gendered Forms of Knowledge, Ecology, Migration and Practice in Kyushaw Village

Kyushaw village, a small Ta'ang community in Northern Shan State, has for generations been dominated by household tea cultivation and production. Unlike the majority of the modern Myanmar tea industry, Kyushaw tea is produced through labor-intensive manual processes: growing, picking, drying, steaming, rolling, fermenting and packing. This traditional production is gendered, with women mainly picking and men more engaged in physical labor. These gender dynamics are part of a broader set of cultural expectations, where conservative norms dominate family life, economy, ecology and spirituality. This research seeks to situate the production and trade of Ta'ang tea in the broader context of Myanmar, where edible fermented tea and tea drinking are an ubiquitous part of history, society and culture. It explores these traditional gendered forms of production and social life in Kyushaw, which present a community forged through shared economy and practice. These dynamics are rapidly changing, with broad economic headwinds coinciding with the tragedy of continued conflict, as well as changing generational networks, perceptions and ideals. The research seeks to delve deeply into the dynamics of change in Kyushaw, both in terms of new irreconcilable economic forces as well as the changing perspectives of women – both locals migrating out in search of opportunity and agency beyond their traditional village, as well as Bamar women continuing to seasonally migrate to the village to pick tea. This aspect of the research reveals both gendered and generational divides with respect to the relative value of “tradition” and community life.



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REPORT  
No. 26