This article describes the conceptions of governmental power held by Burmese villagers in Upper Burma, and the degree to which their conceptions correspond to the behavior of government officials at the township and district levels. The ethnographic present is Burma prior to the 1962 military coup. (Burmese villages, political power, government officials)

Some years ago Nash (1965:76-79, 271-72) observed that Burmese society is best understood by means of three concepts, or (as they might be called) organizing principles: goun, hpoun, and awza. The first can be glossed as prestige, the second as charisma, the third as authority. Although Nash is correct, in my view these three concepts must be augmented by a fourth: power (ana). Since, however, power and authority, in Burma and elsewhere, sustain a reciprocal relationship—sometimes power is a function of authority, sometimes authority is a function of power—the Burmese most frequently speak of awza-ana when referring to political power.

Having elsewhere discussed the social and cultural relevance of prestige (Spiro 1966, 1996) and charisma (Spiro 1982:396-404) in Burmese village society, in this article I discuss power, specifically political power. Before doing so, however, it is perhaps useful to explain the critical terms in the title.

First, “ethnographic” signals that the discussion of political power is not based on such currently fashionable abstract concepts as (Foucaultian) “structures of power” or (Gramscian) “hegemonic structures” that have come to pervade contemporary social science discussions of power. Rather, this discussion is based on concrete expressions of political (governmental) power, and the actors’ conceptions of such power, as the former were observed and the latter elicited in the course of anthropological fieldwork in the Upper Burma village that I call Yeigyi.

Second, “notes” signals that this article neither derives from nor attempts to develop a unified theory of power relations. Nonetheless, since many of the ethnographic observations recorded here have been replicated pari passu in many other peasant societies, their implications for the development of such a theory are self-evident.

Finally, the expression “prior to the 1962 military coup” indicates that the fifteen months of fieldwork on which this article is based occurred immediately before the present military government seized power, when I (together with other foreign scholars) was forced to leave the country. Hence, it is that period that represents this article’s ethnographic present. Because it has not been possible to conduct fieldwork there since then, the oppressive political record of this illegal government (which,
VILLAGERS’ CONCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENTAL POWER

In some important respects villagers’ conceptions of governmental power are informed by traditional political values regnant during the Burmese monarchy. (For descriptions of the monarchy and its complex administrative system see Crawfurd 1834; Foucar 1946; Harvey 1925; Koenig 1990; Lieberman 1984; Mya Sein 1938; Nisbet 1901.) According to these values, the authority and legitimacy of the monarchy rested on the following four foundations: first, the Indian concept of royalty associated with the Code of Manu, with its emphasis on the magical power of the court regalia; second, the Hindu-derived cosmological significance of the capital, according to which the royal palace symbolized the center of the universe and its inhabitants were accorded divine status; third, the conception of the king as the Protector of the Faith and (in some cases) his claim to being a Future Buddha (bodhisatta) and universal emperor (cakkavatti); and fourth, the Buddhist doctrine of karma (kamma), which provided religious sanction for the regime. (For detailed discussions see Cady 1958:ch. 1; Heine-Geldern 1956; Koenig 1990:ch. 3; Lieberman 1984:ch. 2.) Although the first two foundations were rendered obsolete by the British conquest of Upper Burma, and subsequently by the system of parliamentary democracy instituted following independence in 1948, the third and fourth retained much of their salience even during the period of my study, at least in the villages.

As for the third foundation, U Nu, the last democratically elected prime minister, was viewed by many villagers as the Protector of the Faith (especially after he had introduced the bill making Buddhism the state religion), and many also believed that he viewed himself as a Future Buddha. Much more salient, however, was the fourth traditional foundation, the Buddhist doctrine of karma. According to this doctrine, one’s position and status in any incarnation are the consequences of the merit and demerit acquired by one’s moral and immoral actions committed in previous incarnations. This holds for groups as well as for individuals, and for rulers as well as for ruled. That being so, even if rulers are cruel, despotic, and oppressive (as was certainly the case with many Burmese kings3) their laws are to be accepted and rebellion is unjustified because their accession to power constitutes karmic reward for their meritorious action in previous incarnations. (This belief, incidentally, was one, but not the only reason offered by villagers for their acceptance of the military coup in 1962, and it is also one of the reasons that Burmese friends, during my brief visit to Rangoon in 1972, offered for their continuing acquiescence in what by then had proven to be a ruthless and despotic dictatorship.)

A second karmic reason for the acceptance of governmental power, however despotic, relates to the karma not of the ruler, but the ruled. Thus, just as the ruler’s accession to power represents the karmic consequence of his previous meritorious
actions, so also his subjects' suffering represents the karmic consequence of their previous demeritorious actions. Hence, even prior to the 1962 coup, villagers explained that the many economic and political problems that plagued post-independence Burma constituted karmic punishment for the demeritorious act of \textit{“rebellion against teachers.”} That is, since the British had been their \textit{“teachers,”} and since the teacher (together with the Buddha, monks, and parents) is one of the \textit{“Five Objects of Worship”} (and is therefore sacrosanct), the Burmese are now suffering, the villagers said, for having rebelled against them.\footnote{4}

Given this belief in the karmically based legitimacy of any government, villagers held that in principle all citizens had a minimum set of responsibilities to the regnant regime, which might be summarized as follows. Regulations must be upheld, taxes must be paid, public works must be performed, defense of the country must be undertaken, and honest testimony must be given in court. Although adhered to in principle, villagers in fact violated all of these putative responsibilities whenever the opportunity arose. Laws were disobeyed if it was to an actor's advantage to do so; taxes were evaded whenever possible; public works were performed only under the threat of punishment; collaboration with insurgents for personal gain (including the selling of arms to them by army conscriptees) took precedence over defense of the country; and false testimony in court was common whenever the actor's interests, or those of kinsmen, were at stake.

These discrepancies between practice and principle can be explained in part by the villagers' view that since governmental power can be used either on behalf of their interests or in opposition to them, it is only in the former case that it is necessary to comply with its dictates. Mostly, they believed, governmental power is used in opposition to their interests, and often they supported this belief by quoting the well-known proverb that the king (government), together with thieves, fire, water, and foes, is one of the \textit{“Five Enemies.”}

As villagers see it, the power of government (whether for good or ill) is virtually limitless; there is almost nothing that government cannot do if it only wishes to. Although this view, in my judgment, has deep-seated psychological roots, here I am only concerned to point out its historical roots in the absolute despotism of the monarchy, whose extraordinary power (both of the king and his officials) was believed to hold sway not only over the human world, but over the natural and supernatural world as well.

As regards the natural world, people believed it was because of the king's ritual activities in the palace and his performance of the annual plowing ceremony that the universe maintained its orderly course (Shway Yoe 1896:ch. 4). Similarly, when natural disasters threatened, it was believed that the king had the power to avert them. Thus, when the waters of the Irrawaddy threatened to inundate the countryside, King Bodapaya, in an elaborate ceremony, commanded the river to remain within its banks (Foucar 1946:74). Again, when a fire ravaged a suburb of Mandalay, King Mindon (Bodapaya's great-grandson) signed a decree which, read aloud in the Hall of Audience, ordered the fire to cease. Although in fact the fire had already run its
course, the "lower classes" believed that it was the king who, "by virtue of his power," had stopped the conflagration (Foucar 1946:75).

Power over the forces of nature is believed to have been a prerogative not only of the Burmese government, but also of the British colonial government that succeeded it. I was told by a high Burmese official that the colonial government would "punish" teak trees that did not grow straight by "imprisoning" them (i.e., by erecting a fence around them), a practice that also served as a warning, he said, to the other trees. Moreover, he continued, "it worked. Whenever a crooked tree was imprisoned, the other trees in the same forest would grow straight."

As for government's power over the supernatural world, it was believed the king or his delegated official could command evil spirits (nat) to cease their malevolent activities on penalty of banishment from the realm, a belief that has continued to the present. For example, in my presence, a township officer (T. O.) posted outside a village a written decree stamped with his official seal, commanding a particularly malevolent spirit to desist from harming the villagers. Similarly, I was told by another T. O. that having "lost patience with all the spirits" (because one of them had possessed his friend and refused to leave his body), he had decided to "drive them all from my township." Again, a subdivisional officer (S. D. O.), an official superordinate to a T. O., told how he had invited a villager who had been harassed by a certain spirit to live with him because no spirit would dare to harm anyone residing in the home of a government official.

I cite these cases because the villagers' belief in government's power over the natural and supernatural worlds reinforces their belief that it has extraordinary power over the human world as well. Consequently, if anything goes wrong in the human world that government does not correct, it is not because of its impotence. If, for example, inflation is high, consumer goods are in short supply, insurgency is rife, crime is rampant, roads are in disrepair, and if government does not right these wrongs, then as the villagers see it, it is not because government lacks the power, but because it lacks the will. That government might not be able or might not have the resources to deal with these problems are possibilities that people seldom entertain. Thus when the village of Yeigyi was faced with an agricultural crisis, the consensus reached at a public meeting was that government be asked to clear the surrounding jungle, give the villagers more paddy land, and provide them with tractors. Not one person, including the village headman and village elders, suggested that the village try to solve the problem by its own efforts or in consort with other villages.

Given their belief in the extraordinary power of government, it is understandable that individuals and groups attempt to harness that power by establishing a patron-client relationship with government officials, directly or indirectly. As an example, when the leaders of two of the parliamentary parties represented in Yeigyi heard that I was planning a trip to Rangoon, each requested that I approach a high governmental official on his behalf. One requested that I petition the prime minister to provide financial assistance to his old and blind father who, during the Japanese occupation in World War II, had assisted his escape from the Mandalay fort. The
other requested that I ask the American ambassador for a testimonial letter saying that he (the party leader) was a friend of the Americans; such a letter, he explained, would be helpful in his anticipated campaign for a seat in parliament. That these men were not unsophisticated about the larger world, were in frequent contact with party leaders, and were sometimes brought to Mandalay for political consultation renders all the more remarkable their belief in my access to, let alone influence at, the highest levels of government.\(^5\)

Although villagers typically view government as bad (as one of the Five Enemies), nonetheless they express three different attitudes to the regime in power. One attitude, which may be characterized as "all regimes are equally bad," is associated with a mood of resignation and political quiescence. Since all politicians are viewed as autocratic, self-serving, and incompetent, it makes little difference, villagers say, which regime is in power, and the expectation that a new regime will be better is an illusion. Hence, the best thing is to shun government altogether; the less you have to do with it, the better. Those who held this attitude (they were the majority in Yeigyi) reacted to the military coup with indifference; everything, they predicted, would be just as before.

A second attitude to the regime in power is that any change could only be for the better, for while all government is bad, none can be as bad as the present one. Hence, with any luck a new regime might be better, and if it is not, then what will have been lost? Those who held this attitude welcomed the military coup, some saying that democracy was good in theory, but in practice the Burmese people were not ready for it. Others said that while democracy was good, the politicians were bad, and since they had let things slide into chaos, the military regime would at least bring discipline and order.

A third attitude to the regime in power is that the previous regime was better. When I began my fieldwork, the previous regime was that of the British colonial government, and many villagers (mostly the less educated and those over 40; in short, those who had lived under the colonial government) viewed the latter as greatly preferable to the Burmese government that succeeded it. Although this pro-British sentiment was not shared by the better-educated villagers and those under 40, it still deserves some comment.\(^6\)

The colonial government, older villagers claimed, was preferable in three respects. First, people were able to travel throughout the country without fear, and the villages were secure from thieves and dacoits (armed robbers). With the departure of the British, travel had become unsafe, the country was plagued by turmoil and strife, and the villages were at the mercy of rebel gangs and insurgent armies. Second, consumer goods were both plentiful and affordable, farmers received fair prices for their paddy, and they lived comfortably and well. With the coming of independence the cost of living went up, incomes went down, and villagers were confronted with real poverty. Finally, the colonial (in contrast to the Burmese) government attended to the needs of the villages: cart roads were maintained,
Irrigations canals were kept in good repair, civil servants were honest and courteous, and corruption was unknown.

For all these reasons, many older villagers expressed the wish that the British return and, prior to my trip to Rangoon, some of them asked me to inform the British ambassador of their wish. When I remonstrated with them, pointing to the many disadvantages of foreign rule, they said that all governments view villagers as a group to be pushed around, and it is no more desirable to be pushed around by Burmese officials than by foreign ones.7

Whatever their attitudes to the then-reigning Burmese government, most villagers were either indifferent to or cynical about politics. Hence, although all three parties represented in parliament had branches in Yeigy, the political alignments and voting behavior of the typical villager were mostly governed by nonideological, particularistic considerations. These included devotion and commitment to a political leader, friendship with or kin ties to a politically active villager, influence of a spouse or a kinsman, promises or expectations of privilege or power, flattery at being invited to meet with a prestigious leader, revenge against a personal enemy, and fear of recriminations for supporting one rather than another party.8

Having summarized the villagers’ conceptions of governmental power, I turn now to assess the degree to which these correspond to the actual behavior of government. Because of space requirements I shall focus on only two of their conceptions: government is autocratic and it is corrupt.

As villagers virtually never encounter government at the higher (the subdivisional and divisional) levels, and only a few have dealings with the district court and the land registry and tax departments in Mandalay, they typically encounter government, if indeed they encounter it at all, only at the township level. (The township, myo, which is comprised of several villages, is the smallest unit of the civil administration.) Hence, the following assessment is pretty much restricted to the behavior of the township officer, the chief administrator of the township, and his staff.

In anticipation of our findings it may be noted that there is a high degree of correspondence between the villagers’ conceptions of government as autocratic and corrupt and its actual behavior. It is perhaps even more important to note that in regard to these two characteristics the behavior of government, as I observed it in the second half of this century, is little different from governmental behavior reported by the earliest European observers of Burma. However, in order not to clutter the text with historical materials, these parallels have been placed in the endnotes.

**GOVERNMENTAL BEHAVIOR TOWARD VILLAGERS**

*Autocracy*

As the civil administration at the time of my fieldwork (1961-62) was governed by the norms and regulations of a democratic and liberal constitution, the officials whose behavior I observed employed their power with only some of the autocracy
(and virtually none of the brutality or cruelty) that characterized officialdom during the monarchy. To better understand the autocratic dimension of their use of power, it is perhaps useful to comment on the curious ambivalence that characterizes the Burmese view of power.

Many students of Burma (e.g., Hanks 1949; Mendelson 1960; Sein Tu 1964) have stressed the importance of power-seeking as a trait of Burmese character, and while the importance of this trait can be overemphasized, its motivational salience can hardly be denied. Husbands aspire to power over wives, wives over husbands, monks over laymen, magical adepts over novices, teachers over students, etc. In the last relationship, a teacher, according to informants, is motivated as much by the desire for power over his students as by the desire to impart his knowledge to them. Similarly, a magical adept never imparts all his knowledge to his pupil, lest the latter, by knowing as much as the adept, acquire as much power. As in China (D. Jordan, pers. comm.), the master withholds something from the pupil so that the latter always regards him as his master.

Despite the motivational importance of power, Burmese villagers are ambivalent about its pursuit and attainment. It is striking that while all the males I interviewed in Yeigyi volunteered that they wanted prestige, none volunteered that they wanted power, and when queried, they denied wanting it. “I have no interest in power” or “power means nothing to me” were the typical responses to my queries. Indeed, the very same men who would freely boast of their extensive knowledge, their deep piety, or their widespread respect, would only reluctantly admit that they possessed power, and this was true of the village headman (thugyi) as well.9

Thus, when this headman, U Youn, said that 25 men had “volunteered” to plow his sesame field, I asked, admittedly disingenuously, whether there were other instances of such co-operation in the village. When he said (as I knew to be the case) that this was the only instance, I suggested that perhaps this was because, as headman, he was a powerful person. U Youn, however, strongly denied this, saying that the men had helped him because they “loved” him. U Youn knew (and he knew that I knew) that they had volunteered to plow his fields because he had hinted that their help would be appreciated, and since as headman he had power to both benefit and harm them, they had taken the hint. Still, it was important for him to believe (or at least to say) that the men had been motivated not by his power over them, but by their love for him.

The headman’s insistence on underplaying the relevance of power in his relations with his villagers was characteristic of township officers as well. Although possessing considerable power (more de facto than de jure), they uniformly insisted that they had entered upon their careers not from a desire for power, but from a desire to do good, to serve the country, to help the villages. They worked for the villagers, they said, because of their love (myitta) for them; and this sentiment, one T. O. said, was reciprocated by the villagers, who carried out his orders not because they feared his power but because they loved him.
As a measure of the villagers’ love, the T. O. pointed to the numerous “presents” that villagers had bestowed on him. The pen with which he wrote, the watch on his wrist, the sandals on his feet, and the sarong he was wearing were given to him by villagers as expressions, he said, of their love, as were the baskets of tomatoes, cucumbers, and rice that filled the cupboards in his home. It was from the same sentiment, the T. O. continued, that his landlord refused to accept rent from him.

Discourse, however, is not to be confused with praxis, and while these officials preferred to speak of love rather than power, they did not deny that they possessed power, nor were they reluctant to display it. This same T. O. told me that when the local leaders of two political parties, both village headmen, attempted to usurp his power, he informed their respective parties’ headquarters in Mandalay that as long as these men were their representatives, these parties would enjoy no victories in his township. Both men were removed from their posts within a week. In explaining this incident, the T. O. said he had “absolute power” in his township, and should anyone attempt to interfere with its exercise, then “the best, and easiest, thing is to get rid of them.”

In this case, however, the T. O. was not content merely to get rid of them. A group of us were seated with the T. O. in his garden when one of the erstwhile leaders arrived and asked if he might speak with him. The T. O. replied that he was too busy to speak with him. Their colloquy then continued, in part, as follows.

Leader: Can I see you any time today? It's rather urgent.
T. O.: No, I'm busy all day.
L: Well, can I meet with you for only one minute?
T. O.: No. I can't spare even one minute for you.
L: But can I meet with you at all?
T. O.: Apparently you don't understand Burmese! I've told you in every possible way that I won't see you, and still you will not get the point. I guess you're even more stupid than I thought.

At this, the hapless villager walked off with a beaten look, while the T. O., with a triumphant smile, turned to us and resumed his conversation. While such a public defeat would perhaps have been humiliating anywhere, in a society in which face is so important, it is doubly so.

Similar humiliating behavior was displayed by the T. O. whose jurisdiction included Yeigyi. Several of us, including five village headmen, were seated in the courtyard of his house when U Youn (the headman of Yeigyi) approached. As the latter was about to greet us, the T. O. angrily exclaimed:

If it weren't for you, this case [a bitter dispute that had been brought to him for adjudication] would have been settled yesterday. But because you took bribes the whole thing has been prolonged. And another thing! During the headman election [in Yeigyi] 40 villagers requested that I disqualify you because of your many immoral actions, but I did not do so, hoping that you would turn from your evil ways. It was because of me that you were elected [in fact U Youn had won by a landslide], but now I see that I made a mistake. If I weren't being transferred next month, I would start proceedings to remove you from office.
Visibly stunned, as we all were, by this unexpected tirade, U Youn abjectly told the T. O. that it was not true that he had taken bribes, that his enemies had spread false stories about him, and that he had not had an opportunity to tell his own story. At this, the T. O. shouted: “Be quiet. You have already said enough. I don’t want to hear your voice anymore.” The T. O.’s assault on U Youn was humiliating not only because it occurred in a public context, but especially because the public included other headmen, some of whom were his political rivals. Since the T. O. knew this, his behavior can only have been a calculated strategy.

A final example of autocratic T. O. behavior will suffice. While driving on a country road, the previously mentioned T. O. expressed great annoyance when a bus he wished to pass did not immediately move to the side. When he succeeded in passing, the T. O. flagged down the bus and, informing the driver of his identity, told him that he wished to inspect the bus. Examining the steering wheel, the T. O. told the driver that it was loose, and a menace to public safety. He then examined the lights, and told him that they were too dim. Pressing on the brake pedal, he said that the brakes were weak, and that they too were a public menace. He then asked the passengers to get down from the bus and ordered them to rock it back and forth, following which he informed the driver that the springs were in such bad condition that the bus could easily tip over. All in all, the T. O. told the driver, he was guilty of seven technical violations, enough to have his license revoked, and consequently he would have to file a complaint against him in court. With that, we drove off.

A few weeks later, the T. O. informed me that two days following this incident the bus driver, together with the owner of the bus company, came to his office and pleaded with him to withdraw his complaint. Prostrating themselves before him, they promised they would make the necessary repairs to the bus, and they assured him that henceforth the driver would be sure to allow other vehicles to pass him. In consequence, the T. O. agreed to withdraw his complaint.

These examples of governmental autocracy indicate why villagers believed it prudent to avoid government whenever possible. Still, the autocratic behavior of these officials of the civil administration was rather mild compared to that of military officers, whose behavior (even prior to the coup, hence during the civilian regime) evoked much fear in the villagers, as the following incident shows.

One evening in Yeigyi I was informed of a “serious crisis” that had been precipitated by the visit of a junior officer from the nearby army garrison. It seemed that this officer had summoned the headman and village elders and ordered them to repair the road to a neighboring village (a distance of about half a mile) because, he said, in two days an “important visitor” would be arriving in a “sedan automobile,” and in its present condition the road was negotiable only by jeep. Moreover, for good measure he also ordered them to repair the thorny fence that surrounded the village, to station three guards at the village gate at night, to fashion spears for use against dacoits, and to improve village sanitation. The officer, the visibly shaken village elders told me, had been “extremely arrogant” and had threatened “dire” punishment if the repairs were not completed when he returned on the following day. When
asked what might happen if they did not comply with the officer’s orders, they said he would put them in the stockade.

That night the headman called a meeting of the entire village to deal with the “crisis.” After only a brief discussion, everyone agreed that the officer’s order had to be obeyed, and it was decided that all able-bodied men should be drafted to repair the road the very next day. The village elders tried to place a positive construction on this decision by saying that the road had long needed repairs anyway, and that if the men performed the repairs with good “intention” (seidana), they would acquire merit (kuthou).

I, however, was outraged by the officer’s orders, for I was quite certain that the military had no jurisdiction over a civilian road in peacetime, and in any event that it could not order villagers to work without compensation. When I asked the headman if the officer had written authorization, he said he had asked the officer to show his orders, but that the latter had replied that since this was an emergency he was acting on his own authority. When I asked why they should comply with an unauthorized order, the headman and elders became defensive. An elder said that it was only rational to obey those with power, for if they did not they would be made to suffer. The headman added that it had always been his policy to harmonize the demands of the authorities with the welfare of the village, and this policy had protected the villagers from much suffering.

The following day I went to see the T. O. concerning the officer’s behavior. Although confirming my belief that the army had no authority to give orders to the village, the T. O. said the villagers had made the correct decision; had they disobeyed his order, the officer would most likely have had them beaten.

Corruption

The villagers’ conception of the corruption of government (like their conception of its autocracy) proved to be correct. From everything I was able to learn, it was evident that business with government offices in Burma, as is the case everywhere in Southeast Asia (Wertheim 1963), required the payment of bribes. Although from their own experience villagers knew that bribery was extensive at the lower levels of government, it was just as extensive at the very highest levels as well. Thus, in his speech introducing an anticorruption bill in parliament, Prime Minister U Nu explicitly mentioned cabinet ministers, permanent secretaries, directors of departments, chairmen of government boards and corporations, and other senior officials as recipients of bribes (Maung Maung 1959:141). The following cases of bribery are only at the lower levels, however, not only because these are the levels that were known to me personally, but because they are the ones with which villagers (the concern of this paper) have relations.

Much of the bribery found in government offices continues a traditional practice extending back to the Burmese monarchy (Koenig 1990:157) known as myet-hna pya (something to show the face). Although many and influential voices, including (as we
have seen) that of the prime minister, were frequently raised against bribery or, as they called it, “corruption,” the latter term (while an appropriate characterization of the behavior of the officials who accept bribes) is an inappropriate characterization of the behavior of the villagers who offer them, for often bribery is their only effective means of ensuring that government will attend to their needs.

Yeigyi villagers had offered bribes to one or another official in the following government offices: the police, the judiciary, the land distribution board, the land registry office, the board of education, the licensing department, and the township office. Space limitations permit dealing only with the township office, concerning which two categories of villagers found it expedient to offer bribes: litigants to a dispute (the T. O. is the township magistrate) and village headmen.

In the case of litigation, it is standard procedure for both parties to the dispute to offer a present to the presiding magistrate (or, in the case of a higher court, the judge), and often to other relevant officials as well. In one dispute known to me, I was informed by the T. O. that “everyone” involved in the case—the chief constable, the police, the witnesses, and the clerk—had taken bribes;\textsuperscript{11} and although he did not include himself in the category of “everyone,” when pressed he admitted that he also had done so. While costly, this procedure is usually an effective means for achieving even-handed justice, for unless there is a marked discrepancy in the presents of the two litigants, the magistrate (or judge), his own interests having been satisfied, usually renders a verdict based on the evidence presented before him.

Sometimes, however, the magistrate (or judge), or more typically an agent acting on his behalf, rather than waiting for the litigants to offer a present, may instead actively solicit one, and it is only the latter procedure that villagers regard as corruption. The following case, which was described to me by the presiding T. O., is an example, admittedly extreme, of such a procedure.

Two villagers, unable to resolve their conflicting claims to the ownership of a coconut tree, brought their dispute to the T. O. for adjudication. Unknown to the T. O. (or so at least he claimed), the chief constable informed each litigant that were he to offer a “present” of K5000 both to the constable and the T. O., the latter would rule in his favor. Both agreed to this proposal. (Why anyone would offer a bribe of K5000 for the possession of a tree whose value was K30 is a question that need not detain us here. See, however, Spiro 1996.) When the constable informed the T. O. of what he had done, the latter was shaken: how could he possibly honor the same commitment to both litigants? The constable, however, told him not to worry; he would take care of the problem. The night before the hearing, he offered K100 to an assistant to cut down the disputed tree, so that when the litigants arrived in court, the T. O. dismissed the case because there was nothing to litigate. (In the meantime, however, the two officials had reaped a harvest of K5000 each.)

Unlike litigants, village headmen who offer presents to the T. O. are motivated by the wish to curry favor. Thus, shortly after the government had begun a campaign to induce villagers to cultivate cotton, one T. O. informed me that some headmen had offered him a present of land for his cotton cultivation. Their present, he said, was
especially welcome because, with a wife and five children, he was finding it difficult to manage on his meager salary. He agreed that it was illegal for a government official to have a second business, but he had no fear of recriminations from his superiors because “if any of them should point one finger at me, they know that I can point three at them.”

Usually, individual headmen or candidates for the headmanship offer presents to the T. O. before a village election in the belief that they can thereby get him to influence the election on their behalf. I do not know whether their belief is well founded, but I do know that T. O’s expected such a present. For example, the T. O. whose jurisdiction included Yeigy once informed me that he was very annoyed with its headman for having done an “evil thing.” It had come to his notice that the headman, U Youn, was going about the township telling candidates for the headmanship of their respective villages that if they offered him K300, he would then persuade the T. O. to favor them. Since such behavior, the T. O. said, was “very bad,” he had appointed two other headmen to investigate this allegation.

Thinking that he was concerned about corruption, I asked the T. O. whether other headmen had also engaged in this practice. “Of course,” he said, “many do,” including U Pain and U Thwe (the very headmen he had appointed to investigate the charges against U Youn). Seeing my bewilderment, the T. O. explained: “The difference,” he said with a straight face, “is that U Youn will keep the money for himself, but U Pain and U Thwe will turn the money over to me so that I can pay for the repairs on my car.”

Headmen offer presents to the T. O. not only when (as in the case of litigants) they need his assistance, but also when he indicates that he needs theirs. One T. O. told me that he has only to “grumble” about his financial straits in the presence of headmen, and their presents are soon forthcoming. I witnessed this process when, while conversing with a group of headmen, the T. O. told them that his expenses had been unusually heavy, and since his salary would not arrive for two weeks, he did not know how he would manage. The following day, the T. O., whose monthly salary was K300, received a present of K1000 from the headmen.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Because the picture of the behavior of Burmese government officials that is sketched in this article is more than a little negative, it is important to emphasize that the full picture also contains positive features. That I have not included the latter features in this sketch is a function of the two purposes of this article. One purpose is to convey the attitudes of Burmese villagers to government. Since in discussing government officials they most often stress the negative features, these are the ones that are depicted here. The other purpose is to suggest some of the cultural, institutional, and social variables that motivate the villagers’ fear, distrust, and avoidance of governmental power, and this entailed that I focus on the characteristics of government officials that contribute to these attitudes and behavior.
Finally, it is important to emphasize that this negative picture of the behavior of Burmese government officials is not uniquely, or even especially, characteristic of Burma. As Scott (1972) has shown, political corruption is found throughout much of the world, premodern and modern, non-Western and Western. Inasmuch as the concern of this article has not been comparative or theoretical but ethnographic, I have not called attention to these virtually universal parallels.

NOTES

1. I wish to acknowledge the helpful comments of Josef Silverstein and David K. Jordan.
2. In Burma, as elsewhere, the concept of power is not confined to the political domain. As a consequence of their hpoun, Buddhist monks are believed to possess great spiritual power, just as the adepts of various esoteric sects are believed to possess special occult power. (For the former see Spiro 1982:chs. 12 and 17; for the latter, see ch. 7).
3. A few examples of the despotism and cruelty prevalent under the monarchy will perhaps suffice. Consider, for example, the comments of one eighteenth-century observer, a longtime resident of Burma, regarding the king.

I suppose that there is not in the whole world a monarch so despotical as the Burmese emperor. He is considered by himself and others absolute lord of the lives, properties, and personal services of his subjects; he exalts and depresses, confers and takes away honor and rank; and, without any process of law, can put to death not only criminals guilty of capital offenses, but any individual who happens to incur his displeasure. It is here a perilous thing for a person to become distinguished for wealth or possessions; for the day may easily come when he will be charged with some supposed crime, and so put to death, in order that his property be confiscated. Every subject is the Emperor's born slave. (Sangermano 1893:73)

This despotical power of the monarch, from which no one was immune, was often expressed in a brutal form. Thus, even Bagyidaw, who was viewed as a kindly king, ordered the following punishment for an army commander who, after acknowledging defeat in the field, had requested reinforcements. Without being permitted to speak in his defense, the commander

was dashed face downwards on the pavement of the palace, men tamped and spat upon him, dragged him two miles by the hair tormenting him with spears, tore out his vitals, and flung him, still conscious, to the elephants. (Harvey 1925:360)

Most Burmese, to be sure, had no contact with the king himself, but they did have contact with his officials in the districts, whose rapacity, cruelty, and capricious imprisonment of their subjects were commented upon by many contemporary observers (e.g., Shway Yoe 1896:507-08).

It might finally be noted that more than one observer of the present despotical military regime has remarked upon its resemblance to the despotism of the monarchy. Indeed, one scholar, an apologist for the present regime, has justified its record of political repression and brutality on the grounds that it is merely reviving older Burmese political traditions.

4. The doctrine of karma, as it relates to political legitimacy, is a double-edged sword. For while on the one hand it can justify acquiescence to the current regime, on the other hand it can also justify opposition to and rebellion against it. Since it is impossible to know the karmically determined trajectory of anyone's life, political rebellion can be—and in Burmese history it often has been—justified by the rebel's claim, if not belief, that the ruler's karmic good fortune has come to an end, and that his own has come into ascendancy. Of course, just as this claim is confirmed by a successful rebellion, so also
it is disproved if it fails. In any event, the belief in karma provides one (but only one) explanation for the frequent rise and fall of ruling dynasties throughout the history of the Burmese monarchy.

5. One consequence of the emphasis on clientship for harnessing governmental power in the service of one’s own interests deserves comment. Even though one’s patron may not effectively serve one’s interests, as long as he is in power one can hope that he will, and in any event since he might use his power against one’s interests, it is prudent to demonstrate one’s loyalty to him. By the same token, however, should the patron fall from power, it is folly to remain loyal to him. When Prime Minister U Nu was toppled by the military coup, none of his supporters in Yeigyi raised his voice on behalf of his fallen leader (and this also seems to have been the case in the cities). Since loyalty is an expression of appreciation for services either rendered or expected, power alone commands political loyalty, and with the loss of the leader’s power such reciprocity ceases to operate.

6. Although younger villagers did not necessarily accept the nationalist view (expressed in textbooks and repeated at Independence and Martyrs’ Day celebrations) that the British had oppressed the Burmese, plundered their natural resources, and kept the country in a backward state, neither did they share the rosy view of the British regime expressed by their elders. In their view the departure of the British was a good thing, and hatred toward them was rational, if not a national duty.

This view was shared by my Westernized Burmese friends in Mandalay. Whereas older villagers remembered British officials (the British with whom they had come into contact) as courteous and polite, my Mandalay friends remembered British businessmen and army officers (the British with whom they had come into contact) as arrogant and superior. Hence, whatever problems independence had brought in its wake were, for them, a fair price to pay for their newly acquired freedom and (especially) equality.

7. It might be noted that while villagers under 40 strongly supported the movement for independence, they (like those over 40) were mostly indifferent to the symbols and heroes of the nationalist and independence movements. Prior to the Martyrs’ Day celebration, when I asked 25 villagers to describe the event that it commemorated, only three could do so. Moreover, only these three knew that U Aung San (the most important of the martyrs) had been the critical figure of the independence movement, even though his photograph was prominently displayed in all government offices, and also in some homes.

It is not surprising, then, that only a handful of villagers from the entire township participated in the celebration of Martyrs’ Day that was held in the township seat. The T. O., disappointed by the small attendance, predicted that the Independence Day celebration would draw a large crowd, but his prediction failed to materialize. Although 2,000 people (by police estimates) witnessed the theatrical performance on Independence eve, only 75 participated in the patriotic commemorations on Independence Day.

8. The single exception to their nonideological orientation to politics was the villagers’ assessment of the parties’ attitudes to Buddhism. Many villagers said they voted for the ruling party because its leader, U Nu, was a devout Buddhist, because a high percentage of Buddhist monks were known to favor him, and because his party’s color (yellow) was the color of monks’ robes.

9. The office of village headman, which was elective during the brief interval between the achievement of independence in 1948 and the military coup in 1962, has been subject to important historical changes. In traditional Burma, the headmanship (where it existed) was a hereditary office, but following the conquest of Upper Burma in the late nineteenth century it was transformed by the British colonial government into an appointive office. Consequently, rather than representing the village to the government, the headman became the representative of the government to the village. As one contemporary observer put it,

He [the headman] was never an official, now he is so. He was never responsible for the village, but only its spokesman. Now he is held responsible for it. The people managed themselves through him, but now it is government who rules the community, and the headman is its officer. . . . He often
degenerates into a mere government hack, quite apart from the people he is supposed to represent. (Hall 1913:169-70)

With the passage of time, however, these structural flaws were somewhat ameliorated. Following the death of the first generation of British appointees, the headmanship once again became hereditary, with sons succeeding fathers. Moreover, although headmen continued to be officials of the government, enjoined to carry out government policy, as their legitimacy became increasingly guaranteed by the traditional norm of hereditary succession, they once again came to be viewed by villagers as their own spokesmen.

Although with the coming of independence the headmanship became an elective office, the tradition of hereditary succession retained much of its salience, so that in many villages the descendant of hereditary headmen ran unopposed in village elections, and even when he faced opposition, he was most frequently re-elected. In Yeigyi, the victor in the election that occurred during my stay was the descendant of hereditary headmen whom villagers could trace as far back as his great-grandfather (beyond which their memory failed).

10. One longtime student of the Burmese polity argued that political corruption in postcolonial Burma was a consequence, at least in part, of the British policy of permitting Europeans and Indians to monopolize the professions during the period of their colonial rule (Furnival 1948). In view, however, of the pervasive and richly documented political corruption found in precolonial Burma, both in the judiciary and administration, this argument is not very convincing.

Writing in the early nineteenth century, Crawfurd (1834:149) comments on the extensive use of bribes in Burmese courts.

From the constitution of the Burmese courts, as I have described them, the administration of justice must necessarily be both corrupt and vexatious. The judges take bribes from both sides, and the decree, unless in very palpable cases indeed, will be in favor of him who pays the highest. Both the judges and ministerial officers either subsist altogether, or gain a principal part of their emolument, from litigation, and therefore do all in their power to promote it.

Crawfurd’s observations are echoed a quarter-century later:

In fact, it may be said once and for all, that bribery is the mainspring by which all manner of business is moved throughout the country. Nothing could be done without it—few things fail to be accomplished by its aid. This is so well understood that the best cause is lost unless a Judge is primed. It is not only in litigation that bribery is practiced. No power of any sort can be obtained without it. (Gouger 1860:50-51)

As Gouger notes, corruption was widespread in the administration as well, including “village circle” headmen, governors, and various officials in the capital. All these officials, Mya Sein (1938) writes, were corrupt and thus, it is said, the government did not receive all the revenue that was in reality given by the people. The bribes and presents given to the Myothuigyi [village circle headman] was a common thing. Whenever a man began his work such as fisheries, cutting forests, etc., he had to inform the Myothuigyi with presents. It seems to be the Burmese custom to give presents especially eatable to a superior, especially if the person goes on some business of his own. It is called the Myethapaya, something to show your face, that is, to win the favor of the superior. (Mya Sein 1938:xi-xii)

Malcom (1839:212-13) adds still other dimensions to this picture of corruption.
Having no salary, every government-man regards his district, or office, as his field of gain; and hesitates at no measures to make it profitable. Most of the rulers keep spies and retainers, who discover who has money, and how it may be got. Accusations of all sorts are invented, and the accused has no way of escape, but by a present. Real criminals may almost invariably elude justice by a bribe, if it bears some proportion to the magnitude of the offense. Gangs of robbers frequently practice their trade by the connivance of a ruler who shares their gains.

Finally, let it be noted that corruption did not end with the end of the Burmese monarchy. In an official report issued in 1941, the colonial government detailed extensive corruption on the part of Burmese officials serving in the colonial regime (Anonymous 1941).

11. That a litigant might bribe a police officer or a T. O. is understandable, but what might he possibly gain from bribing the clerks? The answer, the T. O. explained, is simple. A clerk, at his discretion, can place a litigant’s file on the top or the bottom of the stack, or he can keep it in his desk, or he can forward it to the T. O. for action, and the one sure way to get it forwarded is to bribe the clerk. Seeing that a clerk’s monthly salary was K144, while his bribe income was estimated by the T. O. to be about K250, his incentive to accept bribes was not trivial.

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