

# Spatial Struggles and the Politics of Peace: The Aung San Statue as a Site for Post-War Conflict in Myanmar's Kayah State

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## Abstract

This article explores processes of place-making and space-making around the erection of the Aung San statue in Kayah state in Myanmar and draws out the competing visions of peace that are articulated through them. The raising of the statue unleashed widespread public protest, which was largely met by repression by the Myanmar authorities. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, and documentary sources, we argue that the statue constitutes an attempt to establish a post-war political order centred on the reassertion of government authority in ethnic minority areas and the creation of unity through the imposition of one national identity. However, the statue has also been appropriated as a key site for the articulation of alternative visions of peace and development. The conflict around the statue thereby makes visible ongoing struggles over the meaning of peace and shows how these post-war struggles are fought on and through space and place.

## Keywords

post-war, peace, space, place, monuments, peacebuilding, Kayah/Karenni state, Myanmar

**Author:** Are there some groups [...] that currently have peace in Karenni state, would you say? In your opinion?

**Respondent:** No. Of course not. The Aung San statue, the current conflict . . . there is no peace, of course.<sup>1</sup>

Since 2011, political reforms and renewed peace efforts have significantly reduced violence in many of Myanmar's conflict-affected regions. In Kayah (Karenni) state, along the Thai border in Eastern Myanmar, ceasefires between the main armed insurgent groups and the government have held since 2012, and the number of battle-related deaths have been close to zero (Uppsala Conflict Data Program,

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2019).<sup>2</sup> According to conventional definitions, Kayah state is no longer a scene of war. However, for local ethnic minority communities, the end of war does not necessarily mean there is peace. This is illustrated in the quote above, where a representative of an ethnic armed organisation is adamant in arguing that the current situation does not, despite the end of armed fighting, constitute peace. This claim is made with reference to a statue depicting the late General Aung San, widely credited with establishing the Myanmar Armed Forces and securing independence from the British. What is it about this statue that makes it so significant as an indicator of the state of peace?

In this article, we draw on interviews, focus group discussions, and news media to explore how the Aung San statue, erected in the state capital of Loikaw in January 2019, became a key site for ongoing struggles over political order, post-war development priorities, and the meaning of peace. As noted by Kappler (2017), monuments, such as statues, constitute “important platforms on which different versions of peace and social justice are implicitly narrated and discussed” (p. 130). In Kayah state, the statue became a platform for the contestation of the sociopolitical ordering of post-war Myanmar. For supporters of the statue, it represented an effort to establish peace through uniting Myanmar’s many ethnic groups under a single national identity and historical narrative. But for many people from ethnic minority groups, the statue came to symbolise enforced ethnic majority domination and denial of minority histories and identities. This activated long-standing local grievances over a lack of political equality for and recognition of ethnic minorities that had been at the heart of decades of armed conflict.

We argue that the statue case provides an opportunity for exploring the clash between competing visions of peace that often give rise to new conflicts after war (Klem, 2018). Critical peace research scholarship argues that conflicts over peace are a key feature of the post-war period and demonstrates how notions of peace, due to their wide normative appeal, can be mobilised to legitimise political orders that reproduce inequality and repression (Gusic, 2020; Klem, 2018; Regilme, 2020; Shinko, 2008). Exploring how competing visions of peace are articulated and deployed advances theoretical and empirical knowledge about the complex and conflictual dynamics of post-war transitions. In this

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article, we demonstrate how analytical tools drawn from the spatial turn in peace research enriches this research agenda. The conflict around the statue illustrates the inherently spatial nature of peacebuilding and post-war transformation, where efforts to claim and mark physical places and give them meaning as particular types of political

spaces are central (Björkdahl & Kappler, 2017). Bringing together recent insights on the post-war politics of peace with contributions from the spatial turn, we argue that spatial processes and sites offer a prism for analytically capturing the clash between competing visions of peace in post-war societies. The Aung San statue became a site where competing visions of peace were brought into open confrontation in an unusually tangible and visible way, rendering them observable and ripe for analysis. Approaching the statue as a prism that highlights post-war conflicts over peace provides new insights into the politics of peace and into how these struggles are fought on and through space and place.

The article is organised as follows: Next, we expand on our analytical approach, focusing on space-making and place-making as processes that elicit, and are shaped by, competing visions of peace and post-war development. We then introduce the context of Kayah state and describe the materials and methods that we build on. The analysis then follows, where we explore processes of place-making and space-making around the Aung San statue in Kayah state and draw out the competing visions of peace that are articulated through them. Through this, our analysis empirically illustrates how post-war conflicts over peace are intertwined with spatial processes of peacebuilding and

state-building. In conclusion, we discuss the implications of our analysis with regards to how post-war peace is conceptualised and explored.

## Place-Making, Space-Making, and the Post-War Politics of Peace

Post-war political order is often characterised by what Gusic (2020) calls continuities of war in peace; the persistence of forms of violence, inequality and grievances of the war, albeit sometimes manifested in new ways. The post-war can be conceptualised as a period where the sociopolitical ordering of society remains contested between formerly warring parties and along dividing lines familiar from the war (Gusic, 2019, p. 49). Post-war societies are characterised by ongoing struggles to establish an unchallenged political order. Competing notions of what a peaceful society ought to be are at the heart of these struggles. As Keen (2007) puts it, “[t]he existence of peace begs a number of questions: whose peace are we talking

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about? Peace on what terms? Peace in whose interest?” (p. 18). This points to the importance of exploring how competing visions of peace are articulated and deployed in post-war struggles to establish and contest political order. This means analytically approaching peace as an aspiration, rather than an empirically observable condition, as Bart Klem

(2018) suggests. As expressed by Regilme (2020), “peace is a flexible discursive tool that political actors use to rally and to mobilise support for a particular policy strategy” (p. 3). Notions of peace are significant due to their strong moral and political appeal, which makes them powerful tools that can lend legitimacy to political actions and agendas. Thereby peace can become “just another tactic for reinscribing hegemonic structures of domination, exclusion, and marginalisation” (Shinko, 2008, p. 488). Paying analytical attention to peace as idea, vision, or aspiration opens up for critical analysis how particular conceptions of peace may benefit some actors and agendas, whilst precluding alternative forms of post-war transformations (Jarstad et al., 2019; Olivius & Strandh, 2020).

Whilst theoretical arguments that emphasise the contested, conflictual politics of peace have become commonplace in critical peace research, careful empirical studies of how these dynamics play out in post-war contexts are less common. We argue that insights and analytical tools from the spatial turn in peace and conflict research provide a fruitful analytical direction for how the post-war politics of peace can be empirically observed. As scholars exploring the spatiality of peace and conflict point out, war and peacebuilding are inherently spatial phenomena. Control over territory; the representation of spaces as “ours” or “theirs,” safe, or dangerous; and post-war development and reconstruction of infrastructure, homes, and buildings are all fundamentally spatial processes (Björkdahl & Buckley-Zistel, 2016; Björkdahl & Kappler, 2017). War and peace always take place somewhere, but the meaning of particular physical places is also always in a process of being reified, modified, or transformed. Physical places, like the bridge in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, or war memorials like museums and statues, become significant sites for the contestation of the history of war, the existing post-war order, and visions for a peaceful future (Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic, 2016; Clark, 2013; Inglis & Brazier, 2008; Kappler, 2017). Indeed, the academic literature on the political utility and function of war memorials for state-building purposes, including for establishing a particular version of history as the foundation and identity of the state, has a history going back to the World Wars in Europe (see, e.g., Barber, 1949).

In Myanmar, government strategies for peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas, such as Kayah state, have centred on ceasefire agreements seeking to pacify ethnic minority insurgents through economic incentives whilst expanding state territorial and economic control in minority areas. The other key feature of state strategies has been top-down, large-scale economic development projects focusing on energy, infrastructure, and agribusiness, frequently implemented through confiscation of communal land and increased

militarisation to provide security for investors (Hedström & Olivius, 2020; McCarthy and Farrelly 2020). Control over territory as well as meaning-making around who belongs to and can inhabit spaces and places are clearly central here but have frequently been left implicit in scholarly analyses. Accounts of these post-war processes as illiberal peacebuilding (McCarthy and Farrelly 2020); a predatory form of “ceasefire capitalism” that constitutes “war by other means” (Woods, 2016); and as the deployment of economic development as counterinsurgency (Brenner, 2017); or state territorialisation (Jones, 2014) clearly invoke spatial themes but have rarely made these explicit in the analysis. We add to these studies by demonstrating how these processes are material, spatial expressions of government attempts to establish its particular vision of peace and order as hegemonic.

Thus, we approach the Aung San statue as an intervention in, and a site for, post-war struggles over the meaning of peace and the establishment of uncontested political order. The statue constitutes an act of political marking, a process whereby a space is produced “as ‘ours’ by using material objects to signal ‘ownership’” (Gusic, 2019, p. 51). However, the meaning of places and sites such as monuments is inherently ambiguous and can be appropriated as a platform for articulating other discourses and visions of peace and political order (Kappler, 2017). Spaces and places then become sites for the contestation of “meaning and memory” through which communities engage in political claims-making, highlighting the relationship between peace, place, and space (Michael et al., 2016, p. 21). In this way, we argue, spatial processes and sites help us capture the clash between competing visions of peace in post-war societies. As these ideas are rendered material and visible through the construction of monuments, the naming of infrastructure, or the choice of where and what to rebuild after war, they are exposed to critical analysis. In addition, these processes are likely to elicit reactions and critique, making these spaces and places key sites for the articulation of resistance and alternative visions of peace. In this way, space is relational—it is produced by the political and social dynamics and power relations in post-war societies but also “speak back” and in turn shape political and social processes (Gusic, 2019; Massey, 2005). Post-war conflicts over the meaning of peace, we argue, are fought on and through, and are shaped by, space and place.

Dominant discourses and visions of peace informs the construction of physical place after war, rendering ideas into material form. This is what Björkdahl and Kappler (2017) term place-making—the ability “to give physical presence to an ideational space” (p. 25). This ability, they argue, is an expression of agency and reflects the power relations of the post-war society. However, the meanings ascribed to such places are bound to be challenged by other narratives and ideas that are subsequently projected onto them. Physical places, and the ideational spaces associated with them, can be appropriated and inhabited in multiple ways. This is why physical places in post-war landscapes can provide an analytical entry point into ideational contestations around peace and post-war order. The ability to inhabit physical place and turn it into an ideational, discursive political space in a new way, giving it new meaning, is termed space-making. Space-making processes make physical places relevant and useful for social and political processes (Björkdahl, & Kappler, 2017, p. 25).

Whilst both place-making and space-making are conceptualised by Björkdahl and Kappler as expressions of agency, we find it important to add that they require access to different forms of power and

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resources. The ability to translate ideas into the construction of physical places and material structures requires a position of institutional political power as well as funding. In such processes of post-war material reconstruction, actors such as state governments and international donors and peacebuilders

can be expected to be key actors. However, as famously theorised by Michel Foucault (1990), the potential for resistance and subversive agency is inherent in the exercise of power, and resistance is

exercised on the very terrain laid down by dominant power relations (p. 95). This claim resonates quite literally with our understanding of place-making and space-making. Whilst the construction of physical place expresses dominant power relations and political visions, these very places then become available as sites for mobilisation where their meaning can be contested and changed. Space-making, then, is a form of agency deployed “from below,” more readily available to actors such as local communities and civil society organisations.

In our analysis, we employ place-making and space-making to provide a detailed empirical account of how competing visions of peace have shaped, and been mobilised in, the conflict around the Aung San statue in Myanmar’s Kayah state. This analytical approach allows us to capture how material, physical structures, like the statue, are intertwined with competing visions of peace and political order and generate new insights into how post-war struggles over peace are fought on and through space and place. Next, we describe the empirical context of Kayah state and the methods and materials we use to analyse our case.

### **Context, Methods, and Material**

Most of independent Myanmar’s history has been marked by military dictatorship, civil war, and ethnic conflict (Cheesman & Farrelly, 2016). However, the inauguration of a semi-civilian government led by General Thein Sein in 2011 came to mark the start of an ambitious reform agenda that has unleashed far-reaching processes of change in the country. Beginning in 2011, economic and political liberalisation and a renewed peace process have fundamentally reshaped the political landscape in Myanmar as well as its international relations. Peace efforts have brought the government and 10 ethnic armed organisations together as signatories of a National Ceasefire Agreement (Simpson & Farrelly, 2020; Thawngmung, 2017). Whilst these are promising developments, discrimination and armed violence in ethnic minority areas have not ceased; indeed, conflict in Northern Myanmar has intensified in recent years, and persecution of ethnic Rohingyas in Western Myanmar has escalated to the point of alleged genocide (International Court of Justice, 2019; Sadan, 2016). Indeed, in conflict-affected, ethnic minority populated areas of the country, significant changes since 2011 co-exist with persistent continuities and legacies of war. This is clear in the area in focus for our analysis, Kayah state.

Kayah state is located along Myanmar’s southeastern border with Thailand and has been a scene of armed conflict since the late 1940s. Prior to British colonisation, this area was never governed as a part of the Burmese kingdoms. Claims to self-determination based on this history have been at the heart of the armed conflict after independence from the British (Khu Oo Reh, 2017). The main ethnic insurgent group, still active in the state, is the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), formed in 1957. Over time, splits and breakaway factions have led to the establishment of numerous smaller armed groups, creating a complex conflict landscape, with many active armed actors.

Armed conflict was most intense during periods in the 1970s and 1990s, during which civilians across the state were targeted by large-scale human rights abuses and forced displacement (Kramer et al., 2018). For example, state-led campaigns to quell local resistance in the late 1990s included the forced relocation of around 30,000 civilians to army-led displacement camps, accompanied by an increase in *Tatmadaw* presence across contested areas in the state (Amnesty International, 1999), leading to widespread trauma and insecurity (Cardozo et al., 2004; Agatha Ma and Kusakabe 2015). Whilst several of the smaller armed groups agreed to ceasefires with the government in the 1990s, the KNPP did not conclude a ceasefire deal until 2012, and, although a participant in the transitional government’s peace talks, has not signed the National Ceasefire Agreement.<sup>3</sup> Since the start of the transitional period, armed violence has decreased, but the

situation is fragile, poverty is widespread, and tensions around state-led initiatives for economic development and reconstruction of the state are prominent (Hedström & Olivius, 2020; Karenni Social Development Center, 2016).

Our analysis builds on qualitative data collected in Kayah state in 2019 by one of the authors (Hedström) and a research assistant (Zin Mar Phy). Employing an interactive methodology aimed at gauging experiences and perceptions of peace and conflict, we undertook focus group interviews and semi-structured individual interviews with a total of 46 women and men living in, or originating from, Kayah state. Our interviews focused on three broad categories of respondents: inhabitants from a variety of rural and urban location across Kayah state, people active in civil society organisations, and representatives from political organisations including ethnic armed groups and political parties. Taken together, our interviews capture the perspectives of a diversity of local actors, allowing us to trace patterns in how peace is experienced and envisioned. We do not assume these diverse local actors to be a homogenous group but argue that tracing patterns in how peace and post-war politics is experienced provides important insights into how key conflict dynamics in Myanmar have evolved after the end of armed violence.

We used life history diagrams (Söderström et al., 2020) with all participants. These interviews aimed at identifying different understandings of and needs for peace, levels of peace across time, and the relationship between local experiences of peace to ceasefire agreements and other shifts in the dynamics of armed conflict. Using these diagrams as a visual methodological strategy to identify specific events or circumstances shaping changes in the peace were helpful for stimulating discussion about the interviewees own experience and perception of peace and conflict in Myanmar. We structured the diagrams using a horizontal timeline (from 1988 to 2019) and asked the participants to track the level of peace in their lives and communities. In focus groups, we also used an exercise where participants were asked to discuss and rank a number of terms (such as security, trust, or democracy, etc.) in order of their importance for peace. Together, these interactive exercises, which can broadly be described as visual methodologies (Prosser, 2012; Söderström et al., 2020), helped elicit discussion about how participants understood the meaning of peace; the level, presence, or absence of peace in their areas; the nature of relationships between key actors and groups; and change over time. In these discussions, the Aung San statue frequently emerged as a recent negative turning point with regards to the level and quality of peace as depicted on life history diagrams. In discussions about the significance of different potential dimensions or features of peace, the statue was often cited as an example that demonstrated the absence of features of peace that participants ranked highly, such as equality and recognition. In this way, whilst our interviews focused on broader themes, discussion of diagrams and peace signs elicited narratives about the statue and its meaning in relation to peace. In our analysis, we focused on narratives about the statue drawn from interviews and focus groups, whilst also carefully considering them in the context of expressed critique against current government strategies for post-war peacebuilding and reform, and articulations of alternative visions of what peace ought to mean.

Moreover, for this analysis, our interview data were complemented with secondary sources, including reports and news material, on events around the erection of and protests against the Aung San statue. These secondary sources were all gathered online and were used to capture the timeline of events around the statue. In addition, as government representatives were less well represented in our interview material, secondary sources were used to identify government statements about the statue. Together these materials and methods allows us to trace processes of place-making and space-making around the statue and explore the competing visions of peace and post-war political order that are articulated in these processes.

## The Aung San Statue and the Contestation of Post-War Political Order

In the following analysis, we explore processes of place-making and space-making around the Aung San statue in Kayah state and draw out the competing visions of peace that are articulated through them.

First, we outline the chronology of events around the raising of the statue and the protests this gave rise to. We examine the planning and construction of the statue as place-making practices where the Myanmar government has been able to give physical presence to a vision of peace centred on the reassertion of state authority in ethnic minority areas, and the creation of unity through the imposition of one national identity, of which General Aung San is elevated as symbol. Thereafter, we demonstrate how the statue has also been appropriated as a key site for resistance that has been made useful for the articulation of alternative visions of peace. Contesting the government's illiberal conception of peace as order, stability, and regime control, local actors ground their resistance against the statue in a conception of peace where political equality, respect, and recognition are key features. Thus, local protests constitute space-making practices that ascribe new meanings to the statue and make it useful as a space for other political agendas than those of the Myanmar state.

### *The Statue as a Symbol of "Union Spirit"*

In early 2018, government plans to erect a statue of the late General (*Bogyoke*) Aung San in the Kayah state capital of Loikaw were announced. General Aung San, the father of current State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, is widely regarded as the founder of the Myanmar Armed Forces and revered amongst the Bamar majority population in the country as the independence hero of Myanmar. Amongst ethnic minority communities, he is primarily respected for the 1947 Panglong Agreement, where a road map towards federalism was outlined, with some ethnic minority states given the option to secede from the Union. That these promises remain unfulfilled is considered by many ethnic minority communities as symptomatic of subsequent regime attempts to suppress diversity in the country. After the transition from military rule in 2011, statues of General Aung San have been erected in numerous cities and towns, many of which are located in ethnic minority-dominated, conflict-affected areas. Statues in Kachin state and Chin state have given rise to similar protest movements as in Kayah state. In Mon state, a major new bridge was named after the General despite widespread protests (Al Jazeera, 2019; Myanmar Times, 2019; Irrawaddy, 2017). The building of monuments and infrastructure in the name of General Aung San is, by the supporters of this strategy, seen as an important way of countering the silencing of Aung San's legacy by previous military juntas. As expressed by a spokesperson for the ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), in early 2019, "[i]n these more open times, the appearance of many Bogyoke [Aung San] statues in many parts of the country makes up for the suppression of the past" (Al Jazeera, 2019).

Memorials to the general and acts of naming physical structures after him can be seen as acts of place-making enforced by the NLD government, giving material presence to a new narrative of the Myanmar state that, in their view, was suppressed under military rule. However, the meanings attached to these acts are not limited to signalling a break with the past of military rule. The narrative of Aung San expressed in relation to the building of statues and structures in his name also carry strong prescriptive messages regarding national identity and political order in the wake of armed struggles for ethnic minority autonomy. In July 2018, a press conference on the plans for the statue was held in Loikaw by the Kayah state chief minister U L Phaung Sho, the highest local government representative. During the press conference, the chief state minister illustrated how the statue is tied to the promotion of a certain version of Myanmar history and to prescriptions for appropriate citizen subjectivities and behaviours. The chief minister explained that:

[T]he statue of Bogyoke Aung San was set up as there was no statue of Bogyoke Aung San in Kayah State and for future generations to emulate Bogyoke, the benefactor of 135 ethnic nationals in Myanmar, architect of the country's independence, his union spirit and his selfless act for independence (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2019).

Here, Aung San is represented as a symbol of national independence and unity. He is also represented as the benefactor of an ethnically inclusive nation. This apparent concession towards ethnic minority demands is shallow, however. Just moments later in his speech, the state minister continued to reprimand those who use names on places or groups of people that are not codified in the constitution. In particular, to speak of Karenni state or Karenni people was called out as divisive and disruptive behaviour, in contrast to the "union spirit" the statue was hoped to arouse. "[A]ccording to the Constitution, there only exists Kayah State [ . . . ] Any word usage that disintegrates the Union and creates disunity amongst ethnic nationals should be avoided" (*Global New Light of Myanmar*, 2019).

Further, to ethnic minority populations, the representation of Aung San as a champion of ethnic inclusivity conceals the reality of Bamar domination and repression against minorities that have characterised Myanmar since shortly after independence. This vision of unity under one national identity closely resembles policies and processes of "Bamarisation," the forced imposition of ethnic majority Bamar culture and identity, of past decades (Holmes, 1967; Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2019). Further, the trope of national unity has a long history of legitimating violence in Myanmar. The military has historically perceived of their counterinsurgency operations targeting ethnic armed groups as well as civilian communities as necessary measures to guard against chaos and state disintegration. Thus, a vision of peace as stability and order within a unitary Myanmar state has been central in legitimating armed violence against challengers (Callahan, 2003; Fink, 2008). In this context, the plans for an Aung San statue in Loikaw are widely received as a symbol of central state expansion, ethnic Bamar domination, and non-recognition of ethnic minority experiences and identities.

As a result, news about the planned statue was followed by a letter-writing campaign in 2018, where protesters demanded the realisation of Aung San's Panglong promises of federalism and autonomy instead of the statue. Local government responded to the letter campaign with lawsuits for defamation and incitement against the state. This was followed by demonstrations on the site of the planned statue, which were met by police violence and arrests of protesters. In response, the government attempted to shift responsibility for the statue to a local group of "statue supporters" and promised local consultations. However, the bronze statue of General Aung San on horseback was, despite significant local protest and without the promised local consultation, erected on January 28, 2019 (Transnational Institute, 2019a). Following this, new demonstrations were held, culminating with a violent crackdown on protesters on Union Day, February 12. The police violence, including use of rubber bullets, batons, and water cannons, were quickly condemned by Yanghee Lee, the then UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation for Human Rights in Myanmar (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019). Numerous protesters were injured or arrested.

After the Union Day demonstrations, the government offered to negotiate with representatives of the protesters, and an agreement to halt demonstrations and initiate further consultations for 1 month was reached. If they could not reach a solution during this time, the government agreed to be responsible for moving the statue. This did not happen, and demonstrations and subsequent arrests of protesters continued throughout summer 2019. Since then, court hearings against protesters have taken place, whilst public demonstrations against the statue have abated (Transnational Institute, 2019a). As our interviews in 2019 made clear, the statue still sparks anger and resentment and was perceived as a key obstacle to peace by the majority of the people we interviewed in Kayah state. Commenting on the Aung San statue case, an activist argued that despite the end of armed conflict and the democratic



election of a new government in 2015, the continuity of political repression against minority populations makes security, and therefore peace, elusive:

In the current situation the government . . . instead of supporting and representing the people, what they are doing is trying to arrest those who [are] against them. It is a limitation for the younger generation to speak the truth, for freedom of expression. So that's why security is the most needed. Instead of protecting the people, they are the ones who are chasing the people who are against them, to arrest them.<sup>4</sup>

A villager similarly cited the government response to the statue as a cause of insecurity and fear:

The current General Aung San statue, the youth from our village, they protest. Many people reject the General Aung San statue, and they went to protest in the city, then the police shoot with rubber bullets. We worry for our people.<sup>5</sup>

The vision of peace that is articulated through the statue seeks to instil “union spirit,” loyalty to the Myanmar central state, and unity under one national identity. In addition, the repressive government

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response to the protests against the statue demonstrates that challenges to this vision of peace, and this conception of the Myanmar state, are not tolerated. The planning and funding of this statue is not an isolated act by the Myanmar government but is part of a larger strategy of post-war state-building, where the re-assertion of territorial and economic

control over ethnic minority areas is central. The statue is a public, visual manifestation of state presence, marking the territory as “ours” (Gusic, 2019).

This act of place-making, and the local insecurity and resentment it has created, must be understood in relation to simultaneous, violent practices of state territorialisation through military expansion and land confiscation in ceasefire areas such as Kayah state (Burke et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 2018; McCarthy and Farrelly 2020; Woods, 2016). This pursuit of peace through territorial and economic regime control, carried out through spatial practices such as the construction of economic infrastructure as well as material symbols of authority, is an illiberal form of peacebuilding that prioritises order and stability without regard for human rights or liberties (de Oliveira, 2011; Lewis et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2020). However, the statue did not only succeed in making this illiberal vision of peace explicit but also made it a key site for contesting and articulating alternative visions peace in Kayah state. To this, we turn below.

### *The Statue as a Space for Resistance*

As demonstrated by the chronology of events outlined above, the Aung San statue set in motion large-scale popular protests that mobilised people from across Kayah state. Received as a manifestation of central state expansion and ethnic Bamar domination, the statue re-ignited long-standing ethnic minority grievances and became a key site for the mobilisation of new forms of resistance upon cessation of the armed struggle. As such, protests against the statue constituted a platform for the contestation of state-led peacebuilding and the articulation of alternative visions for what peace in Kayah state should look like. Dee De, a prominent youth activist in the protests against the statue, succinctly summarises how the meaning of the statue is perceived by the protesters:

Putting a statue in the centre of the state capital Loikaw meant that the government did not care about Karenni history and did not respect the opinion of the Karenni people. The state government did not discuss the issue nor have prior agreement beforehand, and it reacted with violence when protest voices were raised. (Transnational Institute, 2019b)

This critique of the statue captures key features in local visions of peace and legitimate post-war order. Here, the actions of the government are perceived as reflecting a lack of political equality and rights for ethnic minorities, as well as a lack of respect and recognition of their political aspirations, identities, and cultures. Further, the repressive response to protests, intimately familiar to Dee De who was repeatedly arrested and imprisoned as well as charged with defamation of the state, suggests that the lack of equal decision-making and recognition generates everyday insecurity and fear.

This critique, and the conception of peace that it reflects, featured prominently in our interviews. In a focus group interview, a civil society activist forcefully argued that the government's actions in the statue case are detrimental to peace because they demonstrate that the government does not listen to or recognise the voices of local actors and communities in Kayah state:

If they really analyzed the building of the General Aung San Statue . . . if they really analyzed and evaluated it, actually it had a really bad impact on peace and on building trust in this area. For example, building the General Aung San statue, it cost a lot of money. And there is no transparency in doing that and no involvement of the local people, indigenous people. Instead of that, they should support sectors like education and healthcare. They didn't care for that, but they only give attention to that [building the statue] without considering the people's voice and considering the bad impact on building trust with the indigenous people. So it really affected the peace process [ . . . ] In this situation they are trying to build General Aung San Statues, that's why it is really . . . you can imagine how we feel discriminated and ignored . . . the voices of the local people ignored [ . . . ] It's totally you know . . . doesn't relate with the background, the history of Karenni state. When we oppose the General Aung San statue . . . it doesn't mean that we don't respect General Aung San, but only that he is not related to our indigenous history.<sup>6</sup>

The statue case is seen as symptomatic of the government's failure to recognise ethnic minority identities and histories and of their refusal to include ethnic minorities in decision-making. One tangible effect of this is that local development needs remain unmet whilst government funds are invested in the statue. To the local people we interviewed, the statue vividly demonstrates that practices and attitudes of non-recognition and erasure of ethnic minority cultures, aspirations, and identities, pursued through armed violence during war, continue by other means in the post-war. The high value assigned to recognition as a core dimension of peace by our respondents resonates with recent theoretical advances in peace research, where conceptualisations of agonistic peace as well as relational peace situate recognition as foundational for peaceful interactions that may facilitate transformation of conflict issues and identities (Söderström et al., 2020; Strömbom, 2019). By contrast, our respondents argue, when there is "no recognition for the indigenous people . . . there is no peace."<sup>7</sup> In this context, mobilisation of protests against the statue claims it as a key political space for demanding recognition of the political aspirations, voices and identities of people in Kayah state. These space-making practices use the statue as a platform for resistance, articulating a vision of peace premised on mutual respect and recognition.

In this conception of peace, recognition is closely related to political equality; respect and recognition entail being treated like an equal, which is represented as the indispensable foundation for a peaceful relationship. In our interviews, farmers, soldiers, and activists alike argued that to have peace, ethnic minority people must have equal rights and self-determination, and ethnic armed groups and other organisations must be recognised as equal counterparts to the government in local governance and

in peace negotiations. Therefore, a political order and political institutions that are built on and can safeguard ethnic equality are seen as key to addressing the core grievances of the conflict and as a necessary foundation for peace. In this context, demands for political equality are commonly translated into a commitment to a federal, democratic state, which would require fundamental constitutional and institutional changes. As noted by the respondent cited below, the pursuit of federalism as a political solution to ethnic inequality and discrimination has a history which goes back to the independence of Myanmar and cuts right to the heart of the conflict around the Aung San statue:

When we talk about peace, the background of Burma, the ethnic revolution . . . . In 1947, General Aung San gave the Panglong promises, but until now no promises have been delivered, or implemented. So this is one of the main reasons why the ethnic people have to stand for their rights. There is no equality among the ethnic groups and no federal democracy. That is the only . . . without that there will be no peace.<sup>8</sup>

In this context, the statue becomes a visual reminder of the denial of political equality and the failure to fulfil Aung San's Panglong promises of federalism and self-determination for ethnic minority peoples.

Whilst the statue can be read as a government act of place-making, seeking to render physical and visible one vision of peace as order and unity under the re-claimed authority of the central Myanmar state, we argue that it also elicits alternative practices and narratives about peace and post-war order. Our analysis of the protests against it and of local narratives where the statue case is discussed in relation to the meaning of peace demonstrates acts of space-making, where the physical place of the statue is appropriated and inhabited as a space for resistance. Specifically, the statue has become a focal point for local actors to articulate a vision of peace where political equality, respect, and recognition are intrinsic features and preconditions for everyday security and meaningful post-war development.

## Conclusion

In this article, we argue that spatial processes render visible post-war contestations of political order and struggles over the meaning of peace. Analysing the erection of and protests against the Aung San statue in Kayah state in Myanmar, we demonstrate how the statue constitutes a material expression of

***The statue became a key site for resistance and the articulation of alternative visions of peace where ethnic political equality, respect, and recognition are central features.***

government efforts to establish a post-war order premised on the reassertion of government authority and the imposition of national unity through the suppression of ethnic minority histories, cultures, and political aspirations. At the same time, the statue became a key site for resistance and the articulation of alternative visions of peace where ethnic

political equality, respect, and recognition are central features. The power of the government to give physical presence to its vision of post-war peace simultaneously laid the ground for the mass mobilisation of popular resistance, which is likely to continue to shape post-war transformations in Kayah state.

Demonstrating how the politics of peace is intertwined with material, spatial processes of post-war transformation and reconstruction, our analysis empirically illustrates how spatial processes elicit and are shaped by competing visions of peace. Anchoring the analysis of discursive contestations in specific places and spaces is a fruitful analytical approach, as it contributes to render the clash between competing visions of peace tangible and visible. This theoretical and methodological contribution can advance empirical exploration of the post-war politics of peace and the complex, conflictual dynamics of post-war transitions.

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## Notes

1. Interview, ethnic armed organisation representatives, March 29, 2019.
2. Karenni state became Kayah state in 1952, but the name Kayah has not been widely used by people active in civil society or armed or other resistance organisations, many of which still use the name Karenni to talk about the state and the collective of people living there. In this article, for reasons of simplicity, we use the name Kayah, except when quoting respondents using the name Karenni.
3. Karenni National Progressive Party did agree a brief ceasefire with the government in 1995, which broke down after 3 months and was followed by one of the most intense periods of violence (see Hedström & Olivius, 2020).
4. Focus group interview, civil society activists, March 27, 2019.
5. Life history interview, civilian, March 31, 2019.
6. Focus group interview, civil society activists, March 27, 2019.
7. Focus group interview, civilians, March 26, 2019.
8. Focus group interview, civilians, March 26, 2019.

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