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Performing Rebellion: Karaoke as a Lens into Political Violence

In explaining political violence, Conflict and Security Studies commonly focuses on the rational decision-making of elites. In contrast, this article considers the everyday aspirations of rebel grassroots. Understanding their lifeworlds is important as their interaction with rebel elites shapes the collective trajectories of revolutionary movements and, thus, wider dynamics of war and peace. This article analyzes the social practice of revolutionary karaoke music in Myanmar's Kachin rebellion as a window into these hidden social dynamics of political violence. It does so by merging a relational reading of rebel figurations with a visual ethnographic methodology that moves beyond the textual study of propaganda lyrics. Instead, it analyzes the audio-visual aesthetics and social practices of revolutionary karaoke. This critical mode of enquiry reveals the emotional dimension of rebellion, i.e. its appeal to affect rather than reason. It also suggests that revolutionary cultural artefacts can be more than just instrumental propaganda vehicles for instilling elite ideologies into un-agential masses. Indeed, the article shows that many young Kachin are not just passive consumers of propaganda. In karaoke bars and music studios, they actively perform rebellion. In so doing, they co-produce their own rebel subjectivities and rebel political culture at large.

Keywords: Political Violence, Revolutionary Art, Visual International Politics, Rebel Governance, Myanmar/Burma

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Introduction

“Wow, wow, yeah. Our nation, our suffering, shall be recognized among the nations in the world,” raps a young man in the uniform of the rebel Kachin Independence Army (KIA). He is swaying his Kalashnikov to the relaxed reggae rhythm of a band playing on a green riverbank in a music video on Laiza TV. The television station broadcasts from the small KIA-held town of Laiza in northern Myanmar’s restive Kachin State. With thousands of followers worldwide, the station’s Facebook page draws a global audience. Besides screening news on the ongoing armed conflict between the Myanmar’s armed forces and the ethnonational KIA, music videos are a staple on Laiza TV. Many of them feature the lyrics as running subtitles to help with singing along. This is convenient for a favorite pastime among young Kachin people: karaoke.

This article analyzes karaoke as a window into political violence by looking at the lifeworlds and aspirations of non-elite rebel supporters in order to recalibrate the elite-centric and rationalist gaze of Conflict and Security Studies. This is important for developing a better understanding of the ways in which grassroots supporters shape the collective trajectories of revolutionary movements. The article seeks to do so through a relational lens that appreciates how social interdependencies develop a momentum of their own in driving political violence. In order to uncover these hidden social dynamics of political violence, this article moves beyond a textual analysis of revolutionary karaoke lyrics. Merging audio-visual methodology with findings from ethnographic fieldwork, it focuses instead on the audio-visual aesthetics of revolutionary music and the social practice of karaoke, which is popular among many young Kachin in Myanmar. This critical mode of enquiry reveals the emotional dimension of rebellion, i.e. its appeal to affect rather than reason. It also demonstrates that revolutionary music can be more than an instrumental propaganda vehicle for instilling elite ideologies into un-agential masses. Instead, I argue that many young Kachin actively co-produce their own subjectivities and rebel political culture by performing rebellion in karaoke bars and independently producing music videos. This, in turn, shapes the wider trajectory of political violence.

To develop these arguments, the article proceeds as follows: It first draws on the recent literature on rebel governance and introduces the sociology of Norbert Elias to propose a relational understanding of rebellion. It then suggests a conversation between Visual International Politics and ethnographic methodology to study rebel karaoke as a window into the social dynamics of political violence. Based on that, the article will discuss the performance of revolutionary identities in karaoke bars and the coproduction of rebel political culture in music studios of war-torn northern Myanmar.

Rebellion as Social Figuration

Ranajit Guha analyzed how generations of historians inferred the motivations and dynamics of peasant uprisings in colonial India from the “prose of counter-insurgency” (Guha 1988, 84): primary sources produced, processed and archived by the British Raj. Because an alternative first-hand account by the rebels themselves is missing, the logic of rebellion can only be interpreted through the lens of counterinsurgency (Guha 1988, 70). Guha writes that the historiographic discourse produced on rebellion in colonial India, therefore:

“amounts to an act of appropriation which excludes the rebel as the conscious subject of his own history and incorporates the latter as only a contingent element in another history with another subject [...]. And since the discourse is, in this particular instance, one about properties of the minds – about attitudes, beliefs, ideas, etc. rather than about externalities which are easier to identify and describe, the task of representation is made even more complicated than usual.” (Guha 1988, 77)

Much academic knowledge produced on past and present rebellion suffers from the same problem. While rebels are central actors in civil wars, their own accounts and social lifeworlds are rarely captured in the field of Conflict and Security Studies. This seems to be the case for two reasons. First, it might often not be feasible or convenient to listen to the first-hand accounts of rebel members and affiliates. Second, scholars view rebels as particularly untruthful sources of information. According to Paul Collier, for instance, asking rebels about their own motivations is pointless since their

own accounts are little more than propaganda. In order “to discover the truth” one needed to employ formal modelling on the basis of statistical data (Collier 1999, 1–2). Collier’s binary intellectual construct between “greed” and “grievances” has long been refuted on empirical, theoretical, methodological and normative grounds (e.g. Cramer 2002; Malešević 2008). Its underlying methodological individualism remains, however, deeply engrained in the study of political violence. In fact, large parts of Security Studies rely on presumably objective sources, such as the formal modelling of statistical data, to infer the motivations of rebels (e.g. Fearon 2004, Seymour 2014).

Insofar as scholarship is interested in the rebel perspective, it mostly focuses on the rational calculus of rebel leaders (e.g. Pearlman 2009, Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012). Rank-and-file rebels have hitherto received little attention. In order to account for the collective trajectories of rebel movements, understanding the perspectives of non-elite rebels, however, seems pivotal. While the grassroots of a movement does not consciously direct or intend to direct the conduct of the collective, elites’ dependencies on their support makes them an important part of the rebel power equation (Staniland 2014; Brenner 2017). As per James Scott, “doing justice to radical movements requires not only the analysis of the ideas and activities of radical elites but also the recovery of the popular aspirations which made them possible” (Scott 1979, 98). This is not least because the gap between popular ideas amongst a movement’s base and the strategizing calculus of its higher echelons can result in struggles over power and authority within armed groups (Scott 1979; Brenner 2017).

To be sure, understanding “why men rebel” has been a central concern of Conflict and Security Studies since Tedd Gurr’s elaboration on the concept of relative deprivation (Gurr 1971). Similar to the study of rebel elites, the bulk of this scholarship, however, remains rooted in an understanding of human beings as strategizing and self-propelled agents that base their presumably rational decisions on the careful weighing of costs and benefits. This ignores the workings of power structures and reiterates the reductionist binaries of earlier aggregate studies, for instance by classifying non-state combatants as either loot-seeking criminals or justice-seeking true believers (e.g. Weinstein 2006; Oppenheim et al. 2015). What gets lost in the commitment to

methodological individualism is the social context within which political violence takes place (for good critiques see Cramer 2002; Reno 2009).

In contrast, this article contends that rebel groups do not emerge in a social vacuum. Neither do rebels act in one. In so doing, the following analysis builds on and contributes to recent analyses of war-time political orders (Mampilly 2011; Staniland 2012; Arjona 2014). While civil wars have often been viewed as a breakdown of order, this burgeoning corpus of literature convincingly argues that armed conflict gives rise to alternative forms of political and social orders. Studies on rebel governance, for instance, show that revolutionary groups often commit considerable resources to govern civilians living in the areas under their control (e.g. Mampilly 2011; Arjona et al. 2015). They do so to address a key challenge that rebels face in their competition against the state: how to build stable support networks within wider society. To meet this challenge, pure coercion is not sufficient. Far from it, successful revolutionary movements rely on legitimate authority relations with local communities. In other words, they need to create a willingness amongst civilians to obey and submit themselves to rebel rule (cf. also Kalyvas 2006, 115).

In order to build and maintain legitimacy, rebel groups thus engage in the provision of public services, including security, health, education and food (Mampilly 2011; Arjona et al. 2015). In the Syrian civil war, for instance, warring factions have engaged in subsidized bread distribution to garner support from local communities (Martinez and Eng 2017). That said, rebel governance entails more than mere material exchanges. In fact, rebel groups deploy symbolic performances - including anthems, flags, uniforms or parades – in a mimicry of statehood and sovereignty (Mampilly 2015; Martinez and Eng 2017). In doing so, they decrease the need to use violence and coercion. This is because the iterative symbolic enactment of alternative political orders in everyday settings can increase mass identification with revolutionary movements in the same fashion as symbolic performances can create feelings of belonging to nation-states (cf. also Wedeen 2009; Förster 2012). In both settings - state and non-state - symbolic repertoires are key to the making of political subjects.

While political scientists have highlighted how rebels deploy symbolic repertoires as a means to gain hegemony within the public discourse, the ways in

which such symbolic performances create rebel subjectivities and rebel political culture remain underexplored. Sociological approaches to rebel governance are particularly helpful for uncovering such intersubjective processes that connect the individual to the collective (Förster 2012, 2013; Hoffmann 2015; Brenner 2017). A sociological understanding focuses on analyzing how rebel governance interacts with pre-existing social orders, including values, beliefs, and practices. In doing so, it highlights that political narratives deployed by rebel groups are not only propaganda-style smokescreens meant to manipulate the civilian audience. Revolutionary discourse can in fact become part and parcel of the social imaginary within which communal identities and everyday life play out, including the normative expectations of how people should live together (Förster 2012, 5). In turn, sociological analyses help to uncover how the interaction between rebels and society at large also creates pressures on rebel groups to the extent that it forms a moral economy - i.e. regulatory power structures surrounding socio-political values and beliefs – which constraints the actions of rebels and their leaders (Hoffmann 2015, 160-161).

Analyzing the co-production of war-time political orders from a sociological perspective, thus, highlights the agency of non-elites vis-à-vis elite actors. In some cases, this can even take the form of civil resistance against rebel rule. This is particularly likely when armed groups attempt to enforce intrusive social interventions that collide with preexisting social institutions (Staniland 2014; Arjona 2015; Hoffmann 2015). In his 2014 film *Timbuktu*, Abderrahmane Sissako suggests that this is precisely what happened in 2012 when a foreign jihadist movement captured the titular ancient Malian city and imposed Sharia law. Appalled by the destruction of cultural heritage and oppression of diverse local customs, the citizens of Timbuktu engaged in everyday acts of resistance, including the then-forbidden act of playing music. It thus seems that in order to build legitimate and stable forms of governance, non-state armed groups need to work with the social grain and incorporate local institutions, including their underlying values, beliefs and practices. In other words, a sociological understanding of war-time political orders highlights the reciprocity of power between rebel groups and local communities. While conflict-affected societies

can be shaped by revolutionary discourse, social forces can shape rebel movements in return.

Building on these insights, this article shows that the grassroots of rebellion, including rank-and-file soldiers and civilian supporters such as local youth, cannot be conceptualized as un-agential masses. It argues that understanding their aspirations and actions is indeed key for analyzing dynamics of political violence because they drive the collective trajectories of rebel movements by shaping revolutionary discourse. Because popular aspirations themselves are rooted within everyday social contexts, revolutionary discourse cannot be separated from wider society. Structure and agency both matter in the study rebellion. To appreciate this ontological embeddedness of rebel groups within particular socio-temporal contexts, relational sociology is particularly useful (cf. Schlichte 2009). Importantly, a relational understanding helps to conceptualize the ways in which non-elite members and supporters of rebellion drive collective processes. This is primarily because self-contained non-social actors, whose interests emerge from within themselves, do not exist in relational thinking. Borrowing from Norbert Elias, individual rebels, commanders, foot soldiers, and supporters within wider society alike “exist, one might venture to say only as pluralities, only in figurations” (Elias 1994, 213–14).

From this perspective, the social orders of non-state armed groups are made up of intertwined structures and processes, encompassing interdependent and interacting actors whose identity, cognition, and behaviour are mutually contingent (Elias 1978, 103). As in society more generally, these interdependencies stem from “everyone’s fundamental directedness to other people” (Elias 1978, 136). Similar to other social figurations, including families or nation-states, figuration interdependencies in rebel settings then stabilise armed social orders despite suboptimal outcomes for some or even most members. This does not, however, preclude change. On the contrary, the change of one actor’s position entails multiple changes in other parts of a figuration along chains of interdependencies, which ultimately change the whole figuration (Elias 1978, 133–44). Following Elias, this explains the frequently observable disconnect between human intentions and the wider trajectory of society:

“From the interweaving of countless individual interests and intentions – whether tending in the same direction or in divergent and hostile directions - something comes into being that was planned and intended by none of these individuals, yet has emerged nevertheless from their intentions and actions.” (Elias 1994, 389)

In other words, social interactions between differently situated rebels and their social environment enfold a multiplicity of simultaneous but interlaced processes without clear causal primacies. They create a momentum of their own in driving wider processes of political violence. This figurational understanding of rebellion does not only argue against parsimonious theorizing of causal processes. At the same time, it also helps to redirect our gaze towards the social interdependencies that propel collective outcomes. Importantly, it highlights the reciprocal quality of power, suggesting that even in the case of non-state armed groups - where military hierarchies create stark power imbalances, power is not the sole property of elites. Insurgencies are, thus, better understood as sites of ongoing contestation between differently situated and empowered actors. In order to illuminate these contestations, we now turn to the aspirations and lifeworlds of ethnic minority youth in Myanmar’s rebellious borderlands by looking at a favorite pastime in war-torn Kachin State: karaoke.

Karaoke as “Data”

Rebel movements around the world utilize various art forms for political communication and mobilization. In the anti-colonial struggle of Mozambique, for instance, revolutionaries used poetry to forge a common identity and communicate a vision of what it is to be a Mozambican before the nation came into material existence (Honwana 1969). Similarly, the Taliban have drawn on Afghanistan’s rich culture of poetry to celebrate the country’s history of resistance to foreign occupation. Reflecting the everyday dreams and desires of young Taliban, their poems not only speak of nationalism, religion and bravery on the battlefield, but also about love and friendship (Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012). The Maoists in Nepal used songs, dances and drama to mobilize the peasantry. Based on the understanding that changing Nepal’s caste-based feudal structures necessitates a cultural revolution, the Maoist cultural program was indeed central to the movement (Mottin 2010). In order to glimpse into

the aspirations of grassroots rebels and supporters of rebellion, analyzing revolutionary arts and performances seems particularly helpful.

This is not only because little formal data exists on the grassroots level of clandestine rebel organizations. More importantly, revolutionary cultural artefacts present a treasure trove of “data” themselves. Echoing the growing interest in audio-visual artefacts in International Relations, the following analysis shifts the focus consciously away from traditional sources of data, such as official documents and statistics, in order to scrutinize their “epistemological certainties” (Callahan 2015, 898; cf. also Bleiker 2001; Danchev and Lisle 2009; Hansen 2011). In fact, *Visual International Politics* points to what political ethnographer Cédric Jourde called the “limited repertoire of political objects” that students of politics and international relations normally engage with (Jourde 2009, 202). Following Jourde this can lead to cases where scholarship gropes in the dark without noticing, which is when “political scientists walk on their path, not realizing that they are surrounded by UPOs [unidentified political objects] that could be, and often are, politically significant for the actors involved in them, if not more significant than the political objects researchers have already ‘identified’” (Jourde 2009, 203).

Visual International Politics helps to uncover these UPOs by analyzing audio-visual political artefacts - such as visual arts, movies or photography. Focusing on their aesthetics allows for exploring politics beyond the evaluation of mere truth-claims. A post-positivist visual methodology as promulgated by Gillian Rose, indeed, disputes that there is an “essential truth lurking in each image awaiting discovery. [...] Interpreting images is just that, interpretation” (Rose 2012, xviii). This, however, can open up new avenues of enquiry. William Callahan shows that critical interpretation of visual material can delve into an often overlooked emotional space that highlights the role of affect in the production of politics. In his words, a critical aesthetic methodology

“seeks to shift critical focus from facts to feelings, from stable individual identity to multiple flows of encounter, from texts to nonlinear, nonlinguistic and nonrepresentational genres, and from abstract rational knowledge to embodied forms of knowledge. [...] The critical aesthetic mode here is not about what symbols mean but

embodies what experiences ‘do’, and thus moves from ideology to affect.” (Callahan 2015, 898)

For the meaningful interpretation of karaoke videos, this article follows Rose’s advice to ground “interpretations of visual materials in careful empirical research of the social circumstances in which they are embedded” (Rose 2012, xviii). It does so by combining visual enquiry with findings from ethnographically-informed field work in order to situate the analysis in the social context of the Kachin rebellion. The following engagement with the politics of karaoke argues that this critical mode of enquiry can challenge received wisdom about rebel propaganda, recruitment, and support as well as political violence more generally. In contrast to more conventional methods, an audio-visual ethnography looks beyond the ways in which rebels deploy symbolic repertoires as propaganda or the conditions of civilian acceptance or rejection of rebel propaganda. Instead it allows for analyzing intersubjective processes in which revolutionary aesthetics are performed and experienced. In doing so, it sheds light on the making of rebel political subjects and the ways in which they themselves coproduce rebel political culture, which in turn exerts figurational pressures on rebel movements by shaping revolutionary discourse.

This article emerged as part of a more extensive project on the social dynamics of ethnonational rebellion in Myanmar. Research entailed extensive field work in the borderlands between Myanmar, China and Thailand, during which I lived and travelled with differently situated elite and non-elite members and supporters of the Kachin and Karen insurgencies for about nine months in 2013 and 2014; and shorter follow-up field work in 2017. I gained access to both movements as a researcher who was interested (and sympathetic) to their cause. Upon my interlocutors’ requests, I also conveyed multiple seminars on issues surrounding international politics and research methods for low-ranking rebel officers and members of activist groups and humanitarian organizations. During my time with both movements I conducted more than 80 interviews with rebel leaders, rank-and-file members, activists, local authorities and businessmen. While these interviews were helpful in inquiring about the perspectives of a variety of actors, much of my understanding of the social dynamics and contexts of political violence is based on informal conversations and

observations rather than structured interviews. Regular karaoke evenings allowed for a particularly intimate insight into the aspirations and lifeworlds of young supporters of the Kachin rebellion.

Performing the Kachin Rebellion

The Kachin rebellion is one of the oldest and strongest rebel movements in Asia. Founded as the Independence Organization (KIO) in 1961, it demands greater autonomy from the central state and ethnic minority rights under a federal constitution. At the time of writing, its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), fields about 10,000 active troops and another 10,000 reservists (Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2017). The movement emerged as a result of militarized and violent identity formation during the colonial period and the Second World War in opposition to an ethnocratic post-independence state, which failed to guarantee autonomy rights for ethnic minorities. Decades of armed conflict and violence have entrenched ethnic divides and grievances since.²

Revolutionary songs have been instrumental for mobilizing the Kachin rebellion since its inception. In fact, KIO singers have toured through villages to communicate their revolutionary program surrounding a Kachin homeland to local communities since the 1960s.³ More recently, old and new revolutionary Kachin songs have been produced as karaoke music videos. Similar to elsewhere in eastern Asia, karaoke is immensely popular in northern Myanmar's Kachin State. Young people in particular visit karaoke bars in the evenings as a form of popular entertainment. Some of these bars feature an open stage where singers perform in front of a crowd. More commonly, however, a group of friends book a private room in which they sing for and with each other. The lyrics are projected onto the screen below the music video. In practice, however, the songs are usually well-known to both the singer and the audience and are often rehearsed at home before. In a light-hearted and often alcohol-

² For more background on the Kachin rebellion and Myanmar's civil war see Smith (1999, pp. 27-100), Sadan (2013) and Brenner (2015).

³ Interview with elderly Kachin singer in Myitkyina, January 2017.

infused climate, one or more singers volunteer to perform a song and seek to impress the others with their performance skills.

Karaoke bars in Kachin State fulfil a variety of purposes, one of which, perhaps, is to provide a temporary escape from a rather conservative society. In karaoke bars young Kachin can, for instance, flirt in a playful way without the usual constraints imposed by the informal norms and practices of a matrilineal cross-cousin marriage-based society that stringently regulates romantic relationships in everyday life.⁴ While this might be particularly striking in Kachin karaoke bars, it resembles the practice of karaoke in more liberal societies. As most popular music around the world first and foremost celebrates love and romance, “the connection between karaoke and romance is perhaps inevitable” (Brown 2014, 76). To be sure, karaoke bars in rebel-held towns of Kachin State play a large variety of generic popular love songs from various places, including Kachin State, other parts of Myanmar, and China. They also feature revolutionary titles of the Kachin rebellion. These do not necessarily need to be unromantic. Yet, singing rebel karaoke is more than just an act of romance.

In fact, karaoke music videos have been instrumental in revitalizing the Kachin rebellion after years of organizational decay, which the movement experienced during a 17 years-long ceasefire which broke down in 2011. Against the odds, young KIA officers managed to remobilize the movement by recruiting a new generation of rebels from Kachin State’s disillusioned youth. Instrumental to their endeavor was the establishment of a youth wing, the so-called Education and Economic Development for Youth (EEDY). This organization was first set up in 2002 and started operating on a large scale in the mid-2000s. Its main mission was to recruit youth across Kachin State, particularly in government-controlled areas by targeting students in colleges and universities. Since then hundreds of youth travelled to KIA-controlled areas to participate in 45-day-long workshops, in which they learned about the ethnonational political agenda of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), the political wing

⁴ To be precise, this applies to many young Kachin in urban settings. However, karaoke bars are also frowned upon as sites of sin, involving prostitution and drugs. Many young women in particular refrain from singing in karaoke bars to avoid stigmatization. For more information on Kachin matrilineal cross-cousin lineage see Leach (1951).

and parent organization of the KIA, and receive basic training in guerrilla warfare (Brenner 2015).⁵

To organize this, the young KIA officers sought help from various professionals. One of the EEDY co-founders was originally approached for his media expertise as a journalist. Willing to help, he took the lead in modernizing the movement's media and propaganda efforts behind rebel-held lines and established the aforementioned rebel-operated Laiza TV station. In their effort to reach out to Kachin youth in government-held areas of Kachin State, the modernized department set out to remake old revolutionary songs into karaoke-style music clips, featuring scrolling subtitles that help viewers to sing along. While the songs maintained their decades-old lyrics, their visuals and audio came to resemble contemporary Asian music videos popular in China, Japan, and South Korea.

One well-known revolutionary classic that the KIA refurbished is called "Shanglawt Sumtsaw Ga Leh" - which means "The Love for the Revolution".⁶ Its lyrics (written in the 1970s) are about courageous KIA soldiers calling on beautiful young Kachin women to marry them after graduating from high schools and colleges. According to the song, this provides a way for everyone to support the revolution. Moreover, the verses promise economic safety, physical security and comradeship, upon joining the revolution or marrying into it. One verse, for instance, sings about the commanding officer who will share his soldier's food rations with the soldiers' wives as well. While the lyrics are somewhat outdated in the 21st century, the visual depictions appeal to the desires among many of today's Kachin urban youth. Besides featuring Kachin nationalist and revolutionary symbols - including dashing uniforms, minority costumes, and a traditional *Manau* ceremonial ground - large parts of the video call to mind modern pop/rock clips that feature Asian boybands. The KIA soldiers are portrayed as handsome and well-off young men, pictured leaning against an expensive car, and singing and playing their guitars dressed in modern jeans, shirts

⁵ The EEDY has ceased to exist since it was upgraded to a two year "national service" in 2016.

⁶ +3Plusthree: "Shanglawt Sumtsaw Ga Leh", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRpUq8ozgcw>, last accessed 07 July 2017.

and sunglasses. The girls in the video wear make-up and fashionable clothes whilst gazing longingly from the balcony of a luxurious building.

The idyllic modernity and heroic lyrics of the video stand in stark contrast to the depressed reality of urban Kachin youth, which is often characterized by rampant drug abuse and widespread disillusionment about the dire state of the local economy. Young Kachin grew up after the 1994 ceasefire and have not experienced previous round of war. Given their scarcity of options it seems predictable that they were susceptible to the promise of an end to injustice, improved security, and better economic opportunities through revolution. Against this background, it might seem as if rebel karaoke simply constitutes an instrumental recruitment tool that brainwashes desperate youth into rebel soldiers. Indeed, rebel leaders have employed karaoke music videos strategically to recruit new members to the rebellion. Although leaders have attempted to use karaoke in this way, the following discussion will show that many young Kachin are not simply passive propaganda consumers who are brainwashed into becoming revolutionaries. In fact, they actively engage with this medium in ways that not only shape their own rebel identities but also coproduce rebel political culture.

Rebel Subjectivities

During fieldwork in Laiza, the capital of the Kachin rebellion at the Chinese-Myanmar border, I befriended a group of young Kachin. Some of them were working in community-based organizations, which provided humanitarian aid in the camps for the tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs). Some were activists, journalists, teachers, or nurses. While most were not part of the “rebellion-proper”, they can be located within the wider social figuration of the Kachin rebellion. Others were working in the administrative departments of the rebel quasi-state built by the KIO in their “liberated” pockets of territory. None of these young women and men matched the archetypal gun-toting rebel of the Western imaginary.

The group was very sociable and often invited me to join them for dinner, picnics along the river banks and birthday parties. One evening we went to celebrate in one of the town’s karaoke bars. We booked ourselves a small room and ordered two crates of Chinese “Snow” beer. The room was lit by a spinning mirror ball and

absorbed by an oversized flat-screen TV, two pink sofas and a large computer terminal: the karaoke machine. One of my friends, Naw, booted the machine. He was a stocky young man in his late 20s who worked as a secretary for the Economics Department of the KIO and spoke fluent Chinese. He was an intelligent, quiet and somewhat shy person. In the Karaoke room he confidently grabbed the microphone and chose a Chinese love song from the seemingly endless list of foreign and domestic tracks. With the onset of the catchy pop-rock tunes, he looked firmly into the expectant eyes of his audience and started to sing passionately while shaking his body to the beat. In an instant, secretary Naw transformed into a rock star.

Next on stage was Za Mi, who coordinated the outreach work of a local environmental organization and was known for her retro-styled electric scooter whose paintwork featured a large Union Jack. In her early thirties, Za Mi was a gifted and well-trained singer. Performing several songs by Celine Dion, Rihanna and Lady Gaga, she stunned her audience not only with her skilled vocals but also by changing from one character into another. As the evening progressed, Chinese and American music videos were gradually over-taken by local productions. In place of the glossy depictions of the world's metropolises and professional dance crews, the karaoke TV now screened green Kachin hills, the Mali and N'Mai river banks, traditional *Manau* festival grounds, popular coffee shops in the government-held provincial capital of Myitkyina, and young Kachin couples holding hands.

While some of these videos celebrated love, romance, and belonging, many others would cut away from the idyllic scenes to clips of violence, war and suffering. Kachin karaoke videos include shots of military training in rebel camps, clashes with government forces, Kachin civilians fleeing their homes, and their suffering in IDP camps. Some were documentary recordings, while others were scripted stories. The latter involved staged battles where Kachin actors, dressed up as government soldiers, pillaged and destroyed Kachin villages. Some combined this with a screen-play surrounding patriotic young men braving the harsh conditions of war while dreaming of their loved ones at home.⁷ My friends, who had just performed to popular music

⁷ Cf. for instance Aurali: "Sak Jaw Salum", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWNHkGcST2w>, last accessed 7 July 2017.

from around the world, visibly changed their posture. While there were still one or two lead performers per song holding the microphones, the whole group joined into the songs with fierce passion. Despite their display of revolutionary rigor, their performance – by now infused with a good amount of the diminishing supply of beer, nevertheless, remained both playful and cheerful. In this night, my friends taught me how to sport an air guitar while chanting revolutionary slogans.

Despite their own first-hand experiences of armed conflict, the everyday life of young Kachin in Laiza is rather removed from the experiences of Kachin rebel soldiers that are dug into muddy trenches of strategic hilltop positions. Singing revolutionary songs in the karaoke bar, however, provides urban youth for a way to perform rebellion and revolutionary identities. While my friends sang popular America and Chinese songs with great enthusiasm in one moment, they transformed into rebel soldiers when singing revolutionary songs in another. Enacting the suffering and bravery as depicted on the karaoke screen in a colorfully-lit room with pink sofas might not seem like the most authentic representation of the experiences of frontline soldiers. This notwithstanding, the performance of revolutionary songs in karaoke bars provides intimate insights into the formation of rebel identities among many young Kachin precisely because of its performative aspect. As per Judith Butler, this is because subjectivities are foremost created by way of reiterated acting, a process that produces stable identity categories that override inherent inconsistencies (Butler 1993). Importantly, however, Butler's work on performativity also reminds us that identity-creating performances are not simply the expression of freely wielded agency. In contrast to scholarship on performativity that highlights intentionality on the part of the performer (e.g. Goffman 1959; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011), Butler emphasizes that performances always work within powerful discursive structures (Butler 1993, 2010; cf. Häkli et al. 2017). From her perspective, performativity is at least as much about regulatory power and habitual practices that reaffirm ascribed identities and societal norms as it is about conscious attempts to challenge them.

Karaoke performances offer a particularly revealing illustration of Butler's argument. This is because karaoke is inherently about role-playing. In fact, karaoke can be understood as the staging of certain imaginaries according to a screenplay. As

per Vincanne Adams, karaoke thus constitutes a “spectacle of *scripted simulation*” (Adams 1996, 510). Rather than delivering an authentic representation of the depicted world in a music video, the act of karaoke is a stage play mediated through the intersubjective interpretations of the performers and the audience. Exploring karaoke as an insight into the multi-cultural politics of modernity in Tibet’s capital of Lhasa, Adams, therefore, compares the practice to the idea of role-playing, writing that

“[K]araoke is not acting, per se. It is a simulation concealing not a more authentic or truthful act but the absence of a *real* act. Karaoke takes as its reality principle the idea of role-playing, but creates a site where role-playing is itself satirized, revealing the simulated character of acting. Karaoke cannot reproduce an original performance, for the original in most cases refers not to the performance of the song (or its recording in a studio) but to the memories of that song's popularity held by each viewer; it is indexed in a multitude of subjective experiences. No one thing is being replicated; karaoke is thus not a representation but a simulacrum of a fixed and singular authenticity. This does not mean the performance is not real. On the contrary, it means that the simulation is the reality.” (Adams 1996, 511)

Analogously, the performance of rebellion in karaoke bars should not be viewed as an authentic enactment but as a scripted simulation, mediated through subjective imaginaries. Despite the absence of a real act (in this case fighting as a rebel soldier), rebel karaoke, thus, provides a platform for Kachin youth to express their rebel identities, not as passive consumers of rebel propaganda but by way of role-playing a particular script. Echoing Elisabeth Wood’s findings from El Salvador, “insurgent identities” are tied to “pleasure in agency”, a positive affect linked to self-esteem. It is derived from the successful effectuation of intent aimed at “making history, and not just any history but a history [that is] perceived as more *just*” (Wood 2003, 235). Taking pleasure in asserting will and efficacy in the face of unjust political structures, indeed, seems to be a motivating factor in the case of many Kachin rebels and supporters of rebellion.

The practice of revolutionary karaoke, i.e. the scripted simulation of rebellion, reveals that such rebel identities are not only at work when joining the rebel army (which in the worst case might result in one’s own death on the battlefield). This

certainly differentiates karaoke rebels from genuine rebel soldiers. As per Brown, “performers of karaoke are not concerned with changing the face of history. Karaoke performances are about process, not product” (Brown 2014, 80). This said, the medium of rebel karaoke seems to be particularly powerful in forming rebel identities among urban Kachin youth precisely because of its “‘anyone can do it’ ethos” (ibid.). Concomitantly, it creates powerful discursive structures of its own within which identity formation takes place. This was exemplified by the ways in youth performed revolutionary songs with a mix of fierce passion and uniform repetition.

Importantly, however, the playful performance of rebellion in karaoke bars has highlighted that young Kachin are not simply the consumers of top-down rebel propaganda videos but actively engage with the medium. This can also be seen with more recent karaoke videos that are independently produced by young Kachin singers. By analyzing these, the following section suggests that the interaction of Kachin youth with rebel karaoke videos is not only forming their own rebel identities but also shapes the region’s rebel political culture at large.

Rebel Political Culture

Social lifeworlds in Myanmar’s borderlands are intrinsically tied to decades-long protracted armed conflict. In rebel-held areas of Kachin State, this has led to a situation where political violence is embodied to the extent that rebellion has become a “way of life” for local communities (Smith 1999, 88). The social context within which revolutionary music is produced and performed is, thus, characterized by a rebel political culture of its own. While political culture can be defined as “the set of attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about politics current in a nation at a given time”, the “rebel” qualifier hints towards a counter-culture, including the “pleasure in agency” concept as elaborated above (Almond and Powell 1978, 25). Rebel political culture, hence, surrounds “practices such as rituals and symbols, and beliefs concerning the feasibility of social change and the potential efficacy of the group’s collective efforts towards this change” (Wood 2003, 219).

While revolutionary elites strategically attempt to craft a rebel political culture, as seen, for instance, in the Maoist cultural programs of Nepal, a relational perspective

suggests that social practices and beliefs are coproduced in various nodes of the rebel figuration. The independent production of revolutionary songs by young Kachin musicians who are not members of the “rebellion proper” best illustrates this process. Their self-produced music videos can be found on Kachin social networks on the internet. At first glance, many seem similar to the propaganda videos of the KIO. Traditional and modern tunes are often accompanied by videos or photography of varying qualities depicting the suffering of Kachin civilians. Some of them are professional productions.

One good example is a video by Ah Tang, a young artist whom one Kachin friend referred to as the “guru” of singer-songwriters.⁸ One of his most popular songs goes by the title of “Share Shagan Nampan Lahkawng” [Two Heroic Flowers].⁹ It is dedicated to two female volunteer teachers who are widely believed to have been raped and murdered by government soldiers in Northern Shan State in January 2015. The incident sparked protests across Kachin State, not least because government investigators denied army responsibility (Weng 2015). Encapsulating this anger, Ah Tang’s music video went viral on social media platforms in the internet. It mostly features footage of the crowded funeral march/rally, which was organized by the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) in Myitkyina for the two young teachers. It merges the symbols of the Kachin rebellion with symbols of Christianity, both of which had significant influences on the construction of modern Kachin identity and the region’s rebel political culture (Sadan 2013, 35, 381-82). Wearing a cap with KIO insignia, Ah Tang appeals to the Kachin public to fight their repressors in revenge for the dead women. His song goes:

“It hurts a lot. Two heroic flowers who sacrificed their lives. Tears drop from everyone [...] the two flowers had no opportunity to blossom. We will claim blood debt. All the people who love their country and serve their duties. Forward!!! ...in harmonious manner... Fight, fight, fight!!! We will fight the enemy while holding up the winning flag... the unjust abusers will lose/fall...we will get

⁸ Online conversation on a social media platform with Kachin student, 15 January 2015.

⁹ Ah Tang: “Share Shagan Nampan Lahkawng”, <https://www.facebook.com/855007111176484/videos/1122100407800485/>, last accessed 10 July 2017.

rid of the enemies...there will be no footprints of them ...fight all the devils... we will win this unjust war. God is with us.”¹⁰

Many independently produced songs like the above dovetail with the ethnonationalist agenda of the KIO. This is not least evidenced by the fact that they are broadcasted by Laiza TV. Yet singers such as Ah Tang also lodge their own claims and shape the public discourse in Kachin State, often by merging everyday grievances with issues of social justice and Kachin nationalism.¹¹

In an interview with three independent Kachin rock stars, it was interesting to learn that none of them wanted to become a political singer to begin with. Similar to many other young Kachin, all three started to play and sing music as part of youth groups in local churches. To them, producing music is foremost an expression of feelings and emotions, including love, joy and anger. Their first songs were thus about everyday desires that would resonate with many young people in other parts of the world.¹² Due to their experiences of war and exploitation, their music soon became political. According to them, they can, in fact, not but be political in their music. One of them expressed this by reflecting on his band, stating that “we play political music not because we are interested in politics but because we want to express our feelings through songs.” In their opinion, their music’s appeal to emotions is also the reason why their political songs are popular among young and old Kachin. In the words of another rock star: “I express the feeling of Kachin people through music.”¹³ In doing so, the musicians are conscious about and proud of the mobilizing effect that their music has on wider Kachin society in general and young Kachin in particular. All three occasionally sing on KIO-organized concerts and on music DVDs that the movement produces to recruit youth.

In spite of their ideological proximity to the Kachin rebellion, they insist on being independent artists, driven by their own agenda. One musician explained this with reference to a music video in which he wears a KIO uniform, stressing that he

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ One of the most popular Kachin songs for instance is “Mali Hka” by Blast, which is an environmental protest song against the planned damming of the Irrawaddy river (Mali Hka in Kachin), cf. Blast: “Mali Hka”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9H4G99XSUA>, last accessed 10 July 2017.

¹² Interview with three Kachin musicians, January 2017.

¹³ Interview with three Kachin musicians, January 2017.

only performed to be a revolutionary: “You might think that the character in the video was from the KIO because of the KIO uniform. But that was only acting. We singers sometimes wear KIO uniforms and act the life of KIO soldiers.” In fact, Kachin vocalists do not only reproduce propaganda emerging from the KIO but co-produce rebel political culture themselves. Importantly, their songs reflect concerns in wider Kachin society surrounding themes such as humanitarian suffering, social justice and environmental degradation. One Kachin vocalist explains that ‘we use music videos to express our own feelings that are shared by the whole community.’ Music thus becomes a medium for articulating shared concerns and collective political attitudes and beliefs, i.e. political culture. As these songs are mediated through a Kachin nationalist framework, they echo the rebellion’s ideological line. That said, they also impact on the Kachin rebellion by shaping the socio-political discourse within which the rebellion operates.

Kachin songs have, for instance, been instrumental for merging environmentalism with Kachin ethno-nationalism. Many songs have not only reproduced a discursive nexus between imaginaries of pristine nature and the Kachin homeland, but also linked the struggle against environmental degradation with ethnic resistance. This environmental crisis indeed, is partially the result of the Kachin rebellion itself: during the Kachin ceasefire the KIO leadership was complicit in environmental destruction, as so-called “ceasefire capitalism” gave rise to the mutual exploitation of the region’s natural riches by Myanmar’s generals, Chinese businessmen and rebel elites (Woods 2011). Large-scale mineral mining and timber logging have since gravely impacted the livelihoods of local communities by contributing to soil degradation, land dispossession, and labor exploitation.

Upstream of the Kachin State capital of Myitkyina, a Chinese mega-dam project at the Myitsone confluence of the Mali and N’mai Rivers has become a particularly important focal point for mobilizing ethnonational resistance against environmental destruction. While the now-suspended hydro-power project drew criticism from across Myanmar and beyond for its potential environmental impact, the Kachin public has come to view the dam as an existential threat to the survival of the Kachin society and nation (Kiik 2016, 380-81). The band *Blast* encapsulated this

feeling in their rock song *Mali Hka* [Mali River]. Released in 2007 - at a time of mounting resistance against the Myitsone dam construction - the song worked as a major rallying cry of the Kachin public. Its lyrics merge nationalism and environmentalism by expressing the deep felt anger towards “foreign” “self-interests” that are destroying the river that is seen as the Kachin “life-line”. It also calls for resistance, urging: “patriotic people, let us protect our precious treasure with all our might!”¹⁴ Since 2007, it has become one of the most popular Kachin songs and now enjoys cult status among young and old Kachin.

My first encounter with the *Mali Hka* song was in a frontline camp of the KIA in 2014. A young officer played the song on his guitar on one of the long nights in the muddy trenches of a hill top position, defending the KIO capital of Laiza. According to him, it was only natural that the KIO mobilized against the Myitsone dam as the rebellion reflected the interests and concerns of the Kachin public.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, the KIO had silently condoned the construction of Chinese hydropower plants in Kachin State during most of the ceasefire years and even paid for the construction of two smaller dams. Nevertheless, against the background of mounting public pressure since 2007, the KIO started to oppose the Myitsone hydro-power project. Weeks before the Kachin ceasefire collapsed in 2011, KIO Chairman Lanyaw Zawng Hra wrote a public letter to China’s then-President Hu Jintao objecting the Myitsone project, warning that the KIO “would not be responsible for the Civil War if the War broke out because of this Hydro Power Plant Project” (KIO 2011).¹⁶

This is not to suggest that a Kachin protest song single-handedly changed KIO policy. A relational understanding of rebellion, in fact, eschews such mono-causal explanations and points to the ways in which the strategies of rebel groups are the outcomes of social interdependencies that require dialectic analysis of wider social processes. In this sense, many young Kachin do not only shape their own subjectivities

¹⁴ Blast: “Mali Hka”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9H4G99XSUA>, last accessed 30 October 2017.

¹⁵ Conversation with KIA officer, near Laiza, 20 March 2014. To remobilize the Kachin rebellion, young KIA officers have, in fact, established consultative councils since the mid-2000s. These councils enable representatives of local communities to voice their concerns directly to the KIO leadership (Brenner 2015; 2017).

¹⁶ While the letter was the first time that the KIO voiced its resistance against the Myitsone dam publicly, many young KIA officers started to oppose the project as early as 2007.

by performing revolutionary music in karaoke bars. At the same time, young Kachin musicians have become important co-producers of the very rebel political culture within which the rebellion proper is embedded. Their music both reflects and acts as a driver of socio-political discourse that impacts on the wider trajectory of rebellion. It also shows that power is not the sole attribute of rebel leaders but lies dispersed within a rebel figuration where interdependencies and pressures create a momentum of their own in driving political violence.

Conclusion

This article argued that Conflict and Security Studies needs to pay greater attention to the hidden social dynamics of rebellion in order to explain wider instances of conflict and peace. This is because collective trajectories of rebel movements cannot be inferred from the strategic decision-making of supposedly self-propelled rebel elites. The article, therefore, looked to the politics of karaoke in the Kachin rebellion of Myanmar to uncover everyday aspirations and social lifeworlds of rebel grassroots. By focusing on rebel karaoke as a social practice, my audio-visual ethnography uncovered how revolutionary music can be more than top-down propaganda that converts un-agential masses into gun-toting rebel soldiers. Instead of passively consuming revolutionary music, many young Kachin actively and creatively engage with the medium by performing rebellion in karaoke bars and self-producing music in independent studios.

These findings contributed to the study of rebel governance and the importance of symbolic repertoires in the interaction between rebel groups and their social environment. The article did so by shifting attention to the intersubjective processes behind the making of rebel identities and rebel political culture. Analyzing rebel subjectivities highlighted the performative aspect of social identity formation. In fact, revolutionary karaoke understood as the scripted simulation of rebellion offered a particularly revealing window into Butler's theory of performativity. On the one hand, playful performances of rebellion provide a powerful vessel for creating rebel social identities by enabling youth to escape the marginality of their everyday lives and to derive pleasure in exercising agency against unjust domination and discrimination. On the other hand, revolutionary songs and their reiterated performances take place

within their own set of discursive structures, including predefined notions of Kachin nationalism. While revolutionary songs thus challenge societal norms and practices of, for instance, the ethnocratic political order of the state, they serve to create their own disciplinary and regulatory constraints.

At the same time, analyzing the work of independent Kachin vocalists showed how many young Kachin actively engage with the socio-political underpinnings of ethnonational ideology themselves. In linking environmentalism with ethnonationalism, Kachin musicians have, for instance, not only mobilized social resistance against harmful mega-development projects. By giving voice to the concerns of ordinary Kachin, they also shaped the very discursive context within which the Kachin movement operates. This created pressures on rebel leaders to respond to calls for social justice, impacting the trajectory of rebellion itself. Revolutionary music, therefore, should not only be understood as a vehicle for creating social identities and mobilization. Equally important are the ways in which independent Kachin musicians coproduce rebel political culture. Karaoke and revolutionary music have, in fact, become important cultural sites of contestation themselves. From this perspective, revolutionary art forms can form an important part of a public sphere in contested and conflict-affected spaces. Understood as such, they offer a rare perspective into the popular aspirations underlying revolutionary movements and, thus, the little understood relationship between rebel elites and their own grassroots.

Exploring these social dynamics of political violence highlighted the benefits of relational sociology as theory and audio-visual ethnography as method for understanding rebellion as ontologically embedded within a broader social context. More specifically, relational analysis revealed social interdependencies and reciprocal power relations between rebellion and society at large. It also showed how figurational pressures can drive collective processes of political violence in unforeseen ways. This challenges the elite-centric and rationalist orthodoxy in Conflict and Security Studies by highlighting the reciprocal and dispersed nature of power. In doing so, this article contributed to recent scholarship on non-elite agency in civil wars by showing how rebel subjectivities are formed and how this process coproduces rebel political culture, which in turn shapes revolutionary discourse. In addition, the article contributed to

the development of critical methods that can capture such intersubjective and performative processes. While formal data and conventional methods seem of limited use for developing a deeper understanding of these hidden social dynamics, using rebel karaoke as “data” and audio-visual ethnography as method demonstrated that alternative epistemic objects and critical modes of enquiry merit greater attention in the study of political violence. By merging audio-visual analysis with ethnography, this article also contributed to the visual turn in International Relations. Not only did the article move beyond the textual interpretation of revolutionary music. It also demonstrated the importance of developing a greater understanding of the ways in which revolutionary aesthetics are being performed and experienced, which suggests the need for further research on the powerful emotional space of rebel politics.

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