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POLITICAL SYSTEMS OF HIGHLAND BURMA

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A STUDY OF
KACHIN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

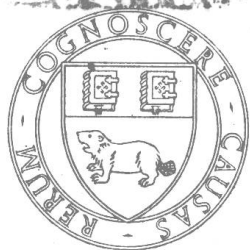
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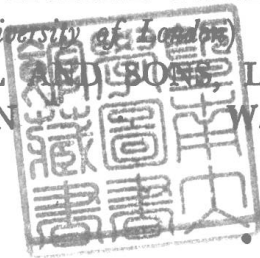
WITH A FOREWORD BY
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THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

(University of London)

G. BELL AND BONS, LTD
LONDON W.C.2



First published 1954

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

POLITICAL SYSTEMS OF
HIGHLAND BURMA

FOREWORD

To have been asked by Dr. Leach to write a foreword to this book is a tribute to an old friendship and academic association.

It is generally expected of a foreword that it will introduce the book either to a wider public than knows its author, or that it will make manifest some hidden virtue which the book contains. Neither of these objectives is sought here. The author is already known not only to his British colleagues, but also internationally, as a leading social anthropologist. He is also by the force and clarity of his thought fully capable of presenting the merits of his own work. What then can this foreword do? By our ordinary conventions the writer of a foreword is presumably restrained from reviewing the book when it appears. He cannot compensate by reviewing it in his introduction. But what he may do is to give some notice in advance of some of the themes which he sees as being of major significance in any discussion of its merits.

'Dynamic' is an overworked word. But if one says that the primary feature in Dr. Leach's analysis is its attempt to provide the elements of a dynamic theory for social anthropology, the point will be generally understood. What is meant is an analysis of forces in movement or principles in action. Much of social anthropology nowadays is concerned with institutions in change. But the treatment is usually mainly descriptive, or where it becomes abstract the concepts are apt to become over-elaborate, highly artificial, and out of relation to the real world of observed human actions in specific societies. What Dr. Leach is attempting to do is to handle dynamic theory at a higher level of abstraction than has been done heretofore in social anthropology while still using the materials from empirical social observation among named groups.

He works forcibly and elegantly. To do this he makes certain assumptions. These involve the notion of descriptions of social systems as models of a social reality. There is a growing tendency in social anthropology, and rather a slipshod one, to call any set of assumptions or abstractions used as a

basis for discussion, a model. At times the notion serves as an excuse for an evasion of reality, by emphasising the personal character of the construct. But with the author a model is clearly a representation of a structure with the parts articulated or related in such manner that manipulation of them is possible for the illustration of further relations. Dr. Leach has already demonstrated his skill in such manipulation in his article on Jinghpaw Kinship Terminology,¹ which he described as 'an experiment in ethnographic algebra'. The essential feature of this analysis was the demonstration that by taking a limited set of assumptions about kinship structure, and by relating them in operation in the simplest possible manner, a behaviour scheme was found adequate to provide an explanation in terms of ideal rules for the noted events in a real society.

A consequence of Dr. Leach's analysis was to stress again the distinction drawn by Malinowski and others between 'ideal' and 'real' (or 'normal') patterns of behaviour. But in Dr. Leach's hands this distinction assumes a new importance. To him it is the ideal patterns—the social relations which are regarded as 'correct'—which are expressed in the model which gives the structural description of a social system. The necessary equilibrium of the model as a construct means that essentially it is debarred from providing in itself a dynamic analysis. The difficulty lies not so much in introducing time abstractly as a factor into the model as in getting into it a true expression of what is really relevant in actual conditions. Application must therefore be made to the observation of what people actually do in their normal everyday life to give a basis for a dynamic consideration, a consideration of structural change. The situation here is analogous to that in economic theory. But the social anthropologist has an advantage over the economist in that from the beginnings of the science, it has been the 'real world' that he has studied at first hand. The anthropologist is already familiar with the raw stuff of social change.

In actual life individuals are continually faced by choices between alternatives for action. When they make these choices Dr. Leach believes their decisions are made commonly to gain power—that is, access to office or to esteem which will lead to

¹ *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. LXXV, 1945, pp. 59–72.

office. The development of this argument is pursued with a wealth of detail and subtlety of interpretation that must command the admiration of every careful reader. His challenges to accepted views may not please everyone, but the reader will gain much by the way from the author's direct presentation, his complete intellectual honesty, and the freshness of his approach. Some of us, for example, have not hesitated to tell our students in private that ethnographic facts may be irrelevant—that it does not matter so much if they get the facts wrong so long as they can argue the theories logically. But few of us would be prepared to say in print, as Dr. Leach has done, that he is usually bored by the facts which his anthropological colleagues present. And who of us also usually feels inclined to state so bluntly at a point in his argument that his interpretation is completely at variance with almost everything that has previously been published on the subject? This is refreshing candour; it awakes the reader's expectations and he will not be disappointed.

As yet Dr. Leach's dynamic theory is still largely a special, not a general, one. This is so for two reasons. The first is that it is intended as yet primarily to refer to, and to explain, the behaviour of people in North Burma. It is true that examples from remote fields are cited. Yet while in boundary terms many 'tribes' must be ethnographic fictions, this is not so everywhere. The notions of 'becoming something else' in this situation, as Kachins become Shans, or *gumsa* people become *gumlao*, are specific ethnographic phenomena that may have only a restricted analogy. They are indeed almost an 'ideal type' of the phenomenon of becoming another social being.

Secondly, some of Dr. Leach's concepts are of a special order. I do not refer here to his redefinitions of myth and of ritual, which in their novelty offer a stimulating way of considering social relationships. Nor do I refer to his use of the terms 'social structure' and 'social organisation', for which each of us has his personal idiom. But I refer to his thesis that seeking for power is the basis of social choice. The Italian Renaissance and our own recent history have good examples to support him. And his contention is in line with many trends of modern thought. Yet the concentration of power and status on the

quest for esteem as leading to office, suggests either an undue restriction of the field of motivation or a re-interpretation of the power notion in terms so wide as to include almost any social action. I would, from my own Tikopia material, give support to Dr. Leach's views both as regards the role of myth and the cardinal importance of power notions for group action. I would think that the study of other Polynesian people, such as the Samoans or the Maori, would corroborate this too. And yet one feels that there is some speciousness in such a monolithic explanation. For the operation of social affairs in Polynesian communities to seem explicable, allowance must be made empirically for notions of loyalty and obligation which cut across the narrow confines of group power interests. And in other ethnographic fields it would seem that valuations of a moral and religious order enter and jostle the power and status-seeking elements.

All this is to indicate that the stimulation of Dr. Leach's theories is wider than the ethnographic province with which he has primarily dealt. The book will appeal to those who are interested in problems of government in undeveloped territories as well as to those who wish to have a really good first-hand study of one of the more primitive types of South-East Asian society. But to me its prime importance is as a major contribution to the theory of social systems. The book is a superb piece of craftsmanship done to an exciting design ; the best tribute one can pay to it is to hope that before too long the author will have the opportunity to repeat the design, with modifications to suit another material of as interesting quality.

RAYMOND FIRTH

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the following individuals for assistance in connection with the preparation of this book:—Mr. G. E. Harvey, Mr. R. S. Wilkie and Mr. J. L. Leyden for making available documents which would not otherwise have been accessible; Col. J. H. Green and the Librarian of the Haddon Library, Cambridge, for permission to print the material given in Appendix III; the Editor of the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute for permission to reprint part of the material given in Appendix IV; Professor I. Schapera for invaluable assistance in proof reading and many helpful comments; Professor Raymond Firth for writing the Foreword and for teaching me most of what I know about anthropology.

E. R. L.

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PART I

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This book is concerned with the Kachin and Shan population of North-East Burma, but it is also intended to provide a contribution to anthropological theory. It is not intended as an ethnographic description. Most of the ethnographic facts to which I refer have been previously recorded in print. Any originality is not therefore to be found in the facts with which I deal, but in the interpretation of the facts.

The population with which we are concerned is that which occupies the area marked KACHIN on Map 1 and shown in large scale on Map 2. This population speaks a number of different languages and dialects and there are wide differences of culture between one part of the area and another. Nevertheless, it is usual to refer to the whole of this population under the two heads Shan and Kachin. In this book I shall refer to the whole region as the *Kachin Hills Area*.

At a crude level of generalisation Shans occupy the river valleys where they cultivate rice in irrigated fields; they are a relatively sophisticated people with a culture somewhat resembling that of the Burmese. The Kachins on the other hand occupy the hills where they cultivate rice mainly by the slash and burn techniques of shifting cultivation. The literature throughout the past century has almost always treated these Kachins as if they were primitive and warlike savages, so far removed from the Shans in appearance, language and general culture that they must be regarded as of quite different racial origin.¹

That being so, it is quite within the normal conventions of anthropology that monographs about Kachins should ignore

¹ e.g. Malcom (1837); Eickstedt (1944).

the Shans and monographs about Shans should ignore the Kachins. Nevertheless Kachins and Shans are almost everywhere close neighbours and in the ordinary affairs of life they are much mixed up together.

Consider, for example, the following piece of documentation. It is part of the verbatim record of the evidence of a witness at a confidential Court of Enquiry held in the Northern Shan States in 1930.²

'Name of witness: Hpaka Lung Hseng

Race: Lahtawng Kachin (Pawyam, Pseudo-Shan)

Age: 79

Religion: Zawti Buddhist

Lives at: Man Hkawng, Mong Hko

Born at: Pao Mo, Mong Hko

Occupation: Retired headman

Father: Ma La, sometime Duwa of Pao Mo

When I was a boy some 70 years ago, the (Shan) Regent Sao Hkam Hseng who then reigned in Mong Mao sent a relative of his, Nga Hkam by name, to negotiate an alliance with the Kachins of Mong Hko. After a while Nga Hkam settled down in Pao Mo and later he exchanged names with my ancestor Hko Tso Li and my grandfather Ma Naw, then Duwas of Pao Mo; after that we became Shans and Buddhists and prospered greatly and, as members of the Hkam clan, whenever we went to Mong Mao we stayed with the Regent, conversely in Mong Hko our house was theirs. . . .'

It appears that this witness considered that for the past 70 years or so all his family have been simultaneously Kachins and Shans. As a Kachin the witness was a member of the Pawyam lineage of the Lahtaw(ng) clan. As a Shan he was a Buddhist, and a member of the Hkam clan, the royal house of Möng Mao State.

Furthermore Möng Mao—the well-known Shan state of that name in Chinese territory—is treated here as being a political entity of the same kind and much the same status as Möng Hko, which in the eyes of British administrators of 1930 was no more than a Kachin administrative 'circle' in North Hsenwi State.

Data of this kind cannot readily be fitted into any ethno-

² Harvey and Barton (1930), p. 81.

graphic scheme which, on linguistic grounds, places Kachins and Shans in different 'racial' categories.

The problem, however, is not simply one of sorting out Kachins from Shans; there is also the difficulty of sorting out Kachins from one another. The literature discriminates between several varieties of Kachin. Some of these sub-categories are primarily linguistic, as when Jinghpaw-speaking Kachins are distinguished from Atsi, Maru, Lisu, Nung, etc.; others are mainly territorial, as when the Assam Singpho are distinguished from the Burma Jinghpaw, or the Hkahku of the Upper Mali Hka area (Triangle) from the Gauri, East of Bhamo. But the general tendency has been to minimise the significance of these distinctions and to argue that the essentials of Kachin culture are uniform throughout the Kachin Hills Area.³ Books with such titles as *The Kachin Tribes of Burma*; *The Kachins, their Religion and Mythology*; *The Kachins, their Customs and Traditions*; *Beitrag zur Ethnologie der Chingpaw (Kachin) von Ober-Burma*⁴ refer by implication to all Kachins wherever they may be found, that is to a population of some 300,000 persons thinly scattered over an area of some 50,000 square miles.⁵

It is not part of my immediate problem to consider how far such generalisations about the uniformity of Kachin culture are in fact justifiable; my interest lies rather in the problem of how far it can be maintained that a single type of social structure prevails throughout the Kachin area. Is it legitimate to think of Kachin society as being organised throughout according to one particular set of principles or does this rather vague category Kachin include a number of different forms of social organisation?

Before we can attempt to investigate this question we must first be quite clear as to what is meant by continuity and change with regard to social systems. Under what circumstances can we say of two neighbouring societies A and B that 'these two societies have fundamentally different social structures' while as between two other societies C and D we may argue that 'in these two societies the social structure is essentially the same'?

³ e.g. Hanson (1913), p. 13.

⁴ Carrapiett (1929); Gilhodes (1922); Hanson (1913); Wehrli (1904).

⁵ See Appendix V.

Throughout the remainder of this opening chapter my concern is to explain the theoretical standpoint from which I approach this fundamental issue.

The argument in brief is as follows. Social anthropologists who, following Radcliffe-Brown, use the concept of social structure as a category in terms of which to compare one society with another, in fact presuppose that the societies with which they deal exist throughout time in stable equilibrium. Is it then possible to describe at all, by means of ordinary sociological categories, societies which are *not* assumed to be in stable equilibrium?

My conclusion is that while conceptual models of society are necessarily models of equilibrium systems, real societies can never be in equilibrium. The discrepancy is related to the fact that when social structures are expressed in cultural form, the representation is imprecise compared with that given by the exact categories which the sociologist, *qua* scientist, would like to employ. I hold that these inconsistencies in the logic of ritual expression are always necessary for the proper functioning of any social system.

Most of my book is a development of this theme. I hold that social structure in practical situations (as contrasted with the sociologist's abstract model) consists of a set of ideas about the distribution of power between persons and groups of persons. Individuals can and do hold contradictory and inconsistent ideas about this system. They are able to do this without embarrassment because of the form in which their ideas are expressed. The form is cultural form; the expression is ritual expression. The latter part of this introductory chapter is an elaboration of this portentous remark.

But first to get back to social structure and unit societies.

Social Structure

At one level of abstraction we may discuss social structure simply in terms of the principles of organisation that unite the component parts of the system. At this level the form of the structure can be considered quite independently of the cultural content.⁶ A knowledge of the form of society among the Gilyak hunters of Eastern Siberia⁷ and among the Nuer

⁶ cf. Fortes (1949), pp. 54-60.

⁷ Lévi-Strauss (1949), Chapter XVIII.

pastoralists of the Sudan⁸ helps me to understand the form of Kachin society despite the fact that the latter for the most part are shifting cultivators inhabiting dense monsoon rain forest.

At this level of abstraction it is not difficult to distinguish one formal pattern from another. The structures which the anthropologist describes are models which exist only as logical constructions in his own mind. What is much more difficult is to relate such abstraction to the data of empirical field work. How can we really be sure that one particular formal model fits the facts better than any other possible model?

Real societies exist in time and space. The demographic, ecological, economic and external political situation does not build up into a fixed environment, but into a constantly changing environment. Every real society is a process in time. The changes that result from this process may usefully be thought of under two heads.⁹ Firstly, there are those which are consistent with a continuity of the existing formal order. For example, when a chief dies and is replaced by his son, or when a lineage segments and we have two lineages where formerly there was only one, the changes are part of the process of continuity. There is no change in the formal structure. Secondly, there are changes which do reflect alterations in the formal structure. If, for example, it can be shown that in a particular locality, over a period of time; a political system composed of equalitarian lineage segments is replaced by a ranked hierarchy of feudal type, we can speak of a change in the formal social structure.

When, in this book, I refer to changes of social structure, I always mean changes of this latter kind.

Unit Societies

In the context of the Kachin Hills Area the concept of 'a society' presents many difficulties which will become increasingly apparent in the course of the next few chapters. For the time being I will follow Radcliffe-Brown's unsatisfactory advice and interpret 'a society' as meaning 'any convenient locality'.¹⁰

Alternatively, I accept Nadel's arguments. By 'a society' I really mean any self-contained political unit.¹¹

⁸ Evans-Pritchard (1940).

¹⁰ Radcliffe-Brown (1940).

⁹ cf. Fortes, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-5.

¹¹ cf. Nadel (1951), p. 187.

Political units in the Kachin Hills Area vary greatly in size and appear to be intrinsically unstable. At one end of the scale one may encounter a village of four households firmly asserting its right to be considered as a fully independent unit. At the other extreme we have the Shan state of Hsenwi which, prior to 1885, contained 49 sub-states (*möng*), some of which in turn contained over a hundred separate villages. Between these two extremes one may distinguish numerous other varieties of 'society'. These various types of political system differ from one another not only in scale but also in the formal principles in terms of which they are organised. It is here that the crux of our problem lies.

For certain parts of the Kachin Hills Area genuine historical records go back as far as the beginning of the 19th century. These show clearly that during the last 130 years the political organisation of the area has been very unstable. Small autonomous political units have often tended to aggregate into larger systems; large-scale feudal hierarchies have fragmented into smaller units. There have been violent and very rapid shifts in the overall distribution of political power. It is therefore methodologically unsound to treat the different varieties of political system which we now find in the area as independent types; they should clearly be thought of as part of a larger total system in flux. But the essence of my argument is that the process by which the small units grow into larger ones and the large units break down into smaller ones is not simply part of the process of structural continuity; it is not merely a process of segmentation and accretion, it is a process involving structural change. It is with the mechanism of this change process that we are mainly concerned.

There is no doubt that both the study and description of social change in ordinary anthropological contexts presents great difficulties. Field studies are of short duration, historical records seldom contain data of the right kind in adequate detail. Indeed, although anthropologists have frequently declared a special interest in the subject, their theoretical discussion of the problems of social change has so far merited little applause.¹²

Even so it seems to me that at least some of the difficulties

¹² e.g. Malinowski (1945); G. and M. Wilson (1945); Herskovits (1949).