CORDS AND CONNECTIONS: RITUAL AND SPATIAL INTEGRATION IN THE JINGHPAW CULTURAL ZONE

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INTRODUCTION: RELATIONS AND RELATIVITY¹

The Jinghpaw peoples residing in what is today northern Burma/Myanmar, under their multi-group exonym Kachin, have long been considered an ethnographic exemplar of fluid identities and malleable, constructed ethnic affiliations. E.R. Leach’s well-known and sometimes controversial monograph on Kachin ‘Political Systems’ (1954), alongside his less well-known but equally important article on the ‘Frontiers of Burma’ (1960), established a benchmark against which the relational dimension of Kachin ethnicity was proclaimed its key ontological feature. Following Leach, this concentration on the relational has usually focused on the Kachin juxtaposition with the Shan people, themselves a heterogeneous social grouping when viewed across the full geographical range of Shan historical habitation from northeast India to the Mekong sub-region. One problematic aspect of Leach’s model of ethnic relativity is that the internal features of Tibeto-Burman ritual language practices, and the ways in which Kachin identities were negotiated through them, are usually seen as subsidiary to the Kachin-Shan dynamic, which is assumed to be the primary ethnographic fact. This paper will attempt to re-focus attention on internal relational identities within the Jinghpaw (‘Kachin’) cultural sphere, and in this respect Tibeto-Burman ritual language practices are significant.

The criticism could be levelled that the term Kachin is an etic, quantitatively-driven notion through which an ethno-demographic constituency has been produced within the national system of ethnic structuring in Burma/Myanmar. In this context, the functions of origin and migration narratives, through which claims to common ancestry of all the Kachin sub-groups are made, are typically misunderstood by their modern detractors. Accusations of artificiality abound, both of the

¹ A large number of people in the Kachin region have assisted me with this research over many years but I am particularly grateful to Pungga Ja Li and members of the Yup Uplift Committee for their support, and especially for allowing me to work with them on their archive of ritual practices, from which many of the findings of this paper have been derived. All errors of interpretation are my own.
narratives themselves and, by implication, of the ethnic identities and the claims that appear to be based upon them. One reason why these narratives are prone to such criticism today is that they are typically dissociated from their original ritual idiom and are circulated in colloquial prose form. This paper will attempt to elucidate some of the different understandings that can be developed when the context of ritual performance is restored. Unfortunately, however, indigenous spirit practices in Jinghpaw ritual dialects have almost disappeared inside Burma/Myanmar today because of the widespread conversion of Kachin groups to various forms of Christianity. On the other hand, however, local research groups have attempted to document these practices, and this paper draws on the access to these cultural artefacts that has been granted to me over a number of years. Before considering these further, the broader political environment in which all of these forms currently exist needs to be briefly outlined.

**JINGHPAW ‘KACHIN’ ORIGIN MYTHS AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CONTEXTS**

The contemporary understanding of the identity Kachin in Burma/Myanmar is that the Kachin are one of the officially recognised National Races of the Burmese state. This identification was enshrined in the first constitution of modern Burma implemented at the time of independence from Britain in 1948. The story of independence, and the constitutional arrangements by which that independence was effected, is one that brings little glory to the final days of empire. For many of the ethnic minority communities who found themselves bound to the Burmese state in structured political arrangements, in many cases for the first time, agreement to enter into the new constitutional framework was something of a leap of faith. Many prefaced their agreement with reservations about the kind of autonomy that they anticipated would be implemented in their respective areas, and some, notably the representatives of the Karenni and Shan States, enshrined these reservations in the constitutionally-approved caveat that they could withdraw from the Union of Burma after ten years if it failed to fulfil their expectations.

Indigeneity and nationhood were inextricably combined in these constitutional arrangements. This was influenced to a great extent by both

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2 Complex relationships between Buddhism, Christianity, state secularism and indigenous spirit practices also pertain in contiguous Jinghpaw regions in northeast India and Yunnan but will not be discussed in this paper.