PART ONE

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF E. R. LEACH’S FIELDWORK
Edmund Leach spent his longest period of anthropological fieldwork anywhere, in Burma. From that experience, undertaken between 1939 and 1945, he wrote a PhD dissertation in 1947 and published his celebrated book on the political systems of the Kachin in highland Burma in 1954. Of course, this was not typical fieldwork at all. His time in Burma was punctuated by preparations for war, followed by three years fighting in northern Burma, where more than five nations had sent troops. Not only did Leach never return to Burma, he also discouraged readers and researchers from learning about the intellectual and experiential origins of his book, at least for twenty years after its publication. Even his preface to the book was cryptic about its origins. These origins, however, are important for the history of the social sciences because the book had such a wide impact.

Working in war conditions had a particularly intense impact on Leach’s thinking. Inevitably, his understandings of Kachin-Shan political life in northern Burma would have been shaped by the tensions he witnessed in those communities and the conflicts generated by the war. This chapter is part of a larger project that I am undertaking to explore