ON THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF E. R. LEACH’S
POLITICAL SYSTEMS OF HIGHLAND BURMA
TO KACHIN STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

A brief overview

Sir Edmund Leach’s study of Kachin social structure appeared as Political Systems of Highland Burma in 1954, and proceeded to have substantial influence over the study of human society and culture. There are indications that it may well have been one of the most widely read works among published anthropological literature during the second half of the twentieth century (see Anderson, this volume). The reception the book drew from Kachin readers was no less profound, and it is the purpose of this chapter to give an overview of that reaction, spanning the last fifty years.¹

We begin this review of Kachin reaction with the observation that by 1960, Kachin concerns had gelled into a coherent set of issues to address, and that out of that consensus grew a research agenda that has been maintained, to the extent possible, since then. At a later point in this chapter I will explain the basis of this statement. The second observation that must be made early in this chapter is that it will be written from the perspective of a person who has been part of the Leach-Kachin story since 1954. I want to discuss briefly below the issues that underlie these two observations.

¹ Acknowledgements: I owe a debt of gratitude to Pungga Ja Li and Maran Ja Gun, my long-time, trusted research colleagues on Kachin culture and history. Through long talks in cramped quarters in obscure places we have kept up with the agenda of 1960. To follow us, there are youthful Kachin students of anthropology now. I also want to thank my wife Kit, aka NHkum Ja Mun, for her unfailing support and editing skills, and my daughter Mina for showing strong interest. Finally, I want to thank Mandy Sadan for getting me involved in this volume, and for the editorial help. This paper and the ones to follow are dedicated to the memory of my mother, Hpauyam Mahkun and my Uncle C. Htang Wa; in 1960, they shaped the course I have followed. And special thanks to the memory the Rev. Duwa Zau Tu of Pangmu-Sinlum; what great interviews he gave!
The beginning of concerted Kachin-Leach interaction in 1954

There are four important reasons why Kachin reception of *Political Systems* in 1954 was enthusiastic but, at the same time, neither haphazard nor lacking in focus and direction.

First, in 1948 Burma gained independence from Britain and the Government of Kachin State came into being. At the highest level of Kachin State Government in Myitkyina, and the Ministry of Kachin State in Rangoon, sat Kachin administrators who had been in the British colonial administration at significant levels. From the standpoint of high-level administrators in the colonial and immediate post-colonial regimes, there was substantial dovetailing. To a man, they knew Edmund Leach as a British anthropologist who spent the years 1939–45 among the Kachin people. One of them was the language assistant that Leach felt obliged to use for only three months. The point here is that, among some highly influential Kachins were those in positions of responsibility who felt the need for an assessment of *Political Systems* as early as possible.

Second, the post-colonial era started with a form of parliamentary democracy. By 1954, Kachin political leaders realized that they probably would not get what they stipulated in a meeting with General Aung San at the Panglung Conference in 1947. At Panglung, Kachin delegates stipulated that they wanted a federal system with a politically autonomous Kachin State in exchange for agreeing to co-found the Union of Burma. By 1954 they were convinced that constitutional reform was necessary. The unexpected pressure to assess the relevance of *Political Systems* quickly, especially in matters relating to the frontiers of Kachin State, came from this angle. Leach was, after all, a colonial era British anthropologist and it was not insignificant that Kachin delegates at Panglung were, for the most part, *gumsa* chiefs. This characteristic of Kachin political leadership continued through 1962, when Burma’s armed forces overthrew the elected government.

Third, there has been a tradition of private individuals collecting information about Kachin culture and history, and producing self-published monographs and books in Jinghpaw Kachin. These reports gave detailed descriptions of social systems and their historical backgrounds at the local level. Kawlu Ma Nawng’s (1942) work on the *gumlau* Kachins

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2 This is the preferred spelling in Jinghpaw today of the town that in Robert Anderson’s chapter, and elsewhere in historical colonial records, is spelt Panglong.