In *Political Systems of Highland Burma* Edmund Leach interpreted the concepts of *gumla* and *gumsa* as political models in Kachin society. In this chapter, I will question Leach’s attempt to establish his oscillatory model as a general theory of social change applicable to segmentary societies in this part of Asia by comparing it with neighbouring societies of the Indo-Burmese border, especially the Nagas. I will argue here that, while some of the Naga systems can be viewed as *gumsa*-like organizations, a model such as Leach’s *gumla* as defined in *Political Systems* cannot be found anywhere in the Naga Hills, according to the ethnographic material collected to date. This assertion, which corroborates F. K. Lehman’s findings about the Chins of Burma (1963), casts some doubt on the validity of Leach’s oscillatory model.

Leach started the concise comparison he made of Kachin and Naga modes of governance in *Political Systems* by remarking that the Naga systems, like the Kachin’s, were characterized by the existence of two contrasting forms of village government. The Sema Nagas, for example, with their powerful hereditary chiefs, could easily be contrasted with the Angami Nagas, whose villages were described in early ethnographic reports as being run on a more ‘democratic’ basis. However, Leach went further than this by equating the political organization of the Semas with the *gumsa* model, while considering Angami political organization to be a *gumla*-like model.1

However, in so doing, the author of *Political Systems* seems to have been misguided by the colonial sources he was using. This can be demonstrated in a number of ways. First, and most obviously, at the time of British political expansion in the region, ‘autocracy’ and ‘democracy’ were western concepts applied to the Nagas and, as such, did not have equivalents in local languages. Second, ethnographic works carried out under the British regime in Assam were undertaken first

---

by ‘soldier ethnographers’, such as Colonel R. G. Woodthorpe and Captain John Butler, and then by ‘administrator ethnographers’, like J. H. Hutton and J. P. Mills.\(^2\) As government officers observing tribal modes of government, their attention naturally focused on the operation of secular power, particularly on local leaders who exerted political influence and were able to help the British Government as political intermediaries in the enforcement of colonial law. Groups in which such prominent figures could be found, such as the Sema and the Chang, were inevitably labelled ‘autocratic’, while the vast majority of tribes, such as the Angami, Lhota, Rengma, Ao, Sangtam, Tangkhul, Zemi, Kabui (Rongmei), Maram, Mao and Konyak of the Tenkoh group, were considered ‘democratic’.\(^3\)

A good example of this peculiar blend of ethnography and colonial administration is provided by Mills who, as Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Assam, wrote in 1922:

Turning to the polity of the village, different tribes have very different customs. Among the Semas a system of hereditary chiefs exists; (…). The Changs have a system of chiefs very like that of the Semas (...). The Konyaks too have hereditary chiefs in the Thendu section of the tribe, though not in the Tenkoh division (...). On the other hand, the Ao and the Tangkhul villages are governed by bodies of elders representing the principal kindreds in the village, while the Angami, Rengma and Lhota and apparently Sangtam villages are run on lines of democracy, a democracy so extreme in the case of the Angami that, in view of his peculiar independence of character, it is difficult to comprehend how his villages held together at all before they were subject to the British Government.\(^4\)

### Naga Political Systems—An Overview

Though mainly drawn for pragmatic reasons, this dichotomous approach towards supposedly ‘democratic’ or ‘autocratic’ systems has never been questioned, even by anthropologists such as Fürer-Haimendorf (1936, \(^2\) The two authors wrote monographs on the majority of groups living in present-day Nagaland.


\(^4\) Mills, 1922: XXXIII.