Like many debates in anthropology that have proved to be fertile over the decades, the one on Leach’s seminal tome (1977 [1954]) offers a plethora of perspectives. In order to open a window enabling comparison and critique, it is advisable to focus on specific issues and reduce the complexities of Kachin ethnography to basic questions. In this article, I refer to the discussion concerning systemic imbalance vs. historical contingency, using data from the Rmeet (Lamet) in Northern Laos. However, the subject does not stop short of discussions on ethnographic detail and interpretation, but expands to a more theoretical question: are changes in societies determined by the contradictions structuring local value systems, or by material forces that can be described in universally applicable terms of economics and power?

This point was raised by a number of critical reevaluations of Leach’s book. John Donohue (1984) and David Nugent (1982) argued that the transformation of Kachin social organization could be explained by economic and political factors external to Kachin society. Victor T. King (1983) has pointed out that such an approach has two major disadvantages: first, a systemic analysis enables comparison, while explanation by historical contingency isolates the Kachin case from a possible comparison of social structure and process; second, the empiricism of
the “contingency” approach tends to veil some rather naïve theoretical assumptions of a mostly materialist type.

Leach himself did not at all diminish the importance of external influence, but debated its explanatory power: “The ultimate ‘causes’ of social change are, in my view, nearly always to be found in changes in the external political and economic environment; but the form which any change takes is largely determined by the existing internal structure of a given system” (1977 [1954]: 212). Seen from this point of view, it is not simply the structural imbalance of the hierarchized *gumsa* and the egalitarian *gumlao* systems that triggers the transformation of one into the other. Rather, shifts in economic and political conditions enable the acquisition of one model by the other. Yet, the models remain firmly local; thus, Leach describes the shifts in terms of the internal workings of Kachin social organization. He highlights the cultural and ideological conditions of the changes, an approach that a number of later authors confused with the denial of external influence and the reduction of the social process to internal imbalances that produce determinable results. But this is not at all what Leach wrote.

I largely follow Leach’s formulation quoted above in my interpretation of Rmeet (Lamet) data, although with some qualifications: Leach can be read here as making a difference between the “form of changes” and their essence, supposedly represented by “causes”; this corresponds with a distinction of politico-economic vs. ideological features of society, with ideology always following or veiling power relations. This interpretation is consistent with Leach’s general approach, characterized by Kuper as seeing “the people’s model [as] a sort of screen behind which the actual competitive relations of community life are worked out” (Kuper 1983: 160; see also Leach 1977 [1954]: 16–17).

But I argue that, the types of sociality of inside and outside used to determine the value of an act or a relationship, differ more sharply than Leach’s formulation suggests. He implies that external changes are cloaked with internal values and ideas in order to effect change, but I suggest that external elements acquire new meanings in the internal meaning system, while retaining some features that originally distin-

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2 I cannot, though, go into a detailed comparison of my approach to that of Kirsch (1973). Kirsch had included Izikowitz’ Lamet data (Izikowitz 1979 [1951]) into his scheme for interpreting degrees of hierarchization and ritual feasting across the Southeast Asian mainland, but stressed somewhat different factors to determine the position of the Lamet than I do.