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TRANSETHNIC SOCIAL SPACE OF CLANS AND LINEAGES
A DISCUSSION OF LEACH'S CONCEPT OF COMMON
RITUAL LANGUAGE

François Robinne

PRIMACY OF CLANS AND LINEAGES OVER ETHNIC CATEGORIES

Leach starts the analysis in his classic study *Political Systems of Highland Burma* by considering the concept of 'ritual language'. Stéphane Gros (this volume) previously synthesized the notion of ritual language with its social implications in the account he gave of debt among the Drung, whose representatives in Burma are integrated within various subgroups of the Kachin. This chapter acts as a complement to that of Gros in that it, too, is focused on the same notion of common ritual language. However, in this chapter I will extend the analysis to reflect on the *mayu-dama* kinship system, which I consider as a transethnic space in which the Kachin subgroups of Kachin State in Burma interact.

Refuting the dichotomous approach of sacred/profane developed by Durkheim, Leach defines the notion of 'ritual language' as 'meaningful things', whether or not they imply any supernatural or metaphysical conceptualisation. According to that definition, the exogamous clans and lineages appear to be a common ritual language shared by the Kachin populations of Kachin State, where social organisation is based on the general exchange kinship system, or where that system has been more or less imposed. Unlike the shamanic traditions of ritual performance, which have almost disappeared, and the traditional political structures that have disintegrated, the matrimonial system of the Kachin has, in contrast, survived and accompanied the process of social change. Although still based on the *mayu-dama* system, this matrimonial social organisation is not a system fixed in time; it has metamorphosed both in space and time, and Leach denounces rightly the idea of a common ritual language when reduced to a fictive notion of stability applied to a global system.

In the precursory study by Marcel Granet (1939: 240) and quoted by both Lévi-Strauss (1947) and Leach (1954), it was demonstrated that there were more than five main Jinghpaw clans as described first

by Gilhodes (1922: 162), but none of these authors reconsidered the general hierarchy inherent in the general matrimonial exchange between these clans: the Marip give to the Lahtaw, who give to the Lahpai, who give to the Nhkum, who give back to the Marip. Based on this myth—a universal myth considering its surrealistic stability—the system is more theoretical than effective. However, because of the segmentation process, and also because of the centralisation that broke down the traditional, localised monolineage group inhabiting a long house, marriage may occur nowadays between partners of different lineages originating from the same clan.

Leach demonstrated the flexibility of the *mayu-dama* system. He showed that the local understanding of clans and lineages is subject to manipulations like any other social sphere. Among the numerous examples on which his demonstration is based, Leach (1972 [1954]: 110–111) describes the conflict between two lineage groups—the Maran Nmwe and the Nhkum Laga—where each one claims a supremacy over the other. Both refer to the hierarchy prevailing in the wife-giver wife-taker relationship, but the two groups interpret this kind of hierarchy according to their own interests: one side stands by the reality of the matrimonial exchanges, whilst the other has recourse to the mythical referent understood in the absolute. Generally speaking, the perennial nature of the clans and lineages from the colonial period up to now contrasts with the reification of ethnicity involved both in the process of Christianisation and in the contemporary pan-Kachin movement, at least indirectly, since it does not relate specifically to the activities of their respective representatives. To contract a marriage, a Church membership sometimes may consider redhibitory the alliance between a bride and a groom who belong to two different Christian congregations, whatever may be the social adequacy of their clan criteria. Despite its metamorphoses and instrumentalizations, the *mayu-dama* system has been partly preserved by the ascent of Christianity amongst the Kachin, and the various notions of Christianity that have resulted. Considered from this perspective, therefore, on the one hand the *mayu-dama* system helps to give sense to the Kachin ethnonym when it is understood as a multi-ethnic community; on the other hand, it also contributes to the modern ideology of pan-Kachin identity, which is defined mainly with regard to the central Burmese power.

The tendency for the Kachin lineages to become clans is a further factor helping to explain the survival and renewal of the *mayu-dama* principle in Kachin society. However, as stated, this is not without adaptation. For example, following the near disappearance of non-Christian

public ritual performance, the processes of centralisation and the wave of Burmanisation that have threatened to overwhelm other aspects of 'Kachin' social organization, a closed intra-clanic marriage is no more considered an incestuous marriage among the younger generations of Kachin. New conditions of education are partly responsible for this, as they have tended to obliterate the unimaginable transgression of the basic matrimonial rule, according to which, after having taken, we cannot give before a minimum of three generations have passed.¹

It should be stated that, in all the cases observed above, the *mayu-dama* system appears to be instrumentalized according to local circumstances. Leach, too, denounced any structural stability (1972: 30, 318). In the same way, we can say that the notion of a common ritual language applied to the *mayu-dama* system is an artefact inherent in the process of social construction and reconstruction. Subsequently, the notion of 'contradiction' should not be opposed to the notion of 'coherency' and 'coherency' does not imply 'stability'. It is from this perspective that we can understand how the *mayu-dama* system contributes significantly to the social coherency of the so-called Kachin subgroups. The present-day official meaning of 'Kachin' is asserted through the union of six ethnic groups, and this union is supposed to be symbolised by the monumental *manau* ceremony [see Sadan 2000a, 2005]. This ritual was traditionally performed around a set of sacrificial posts that have in the contemporary situation metamorphosed into Christian symbols through which the traditional village unity has been extended to a pan-Kachin unity. Behind this representation of an ideal, and beyond the official assertions, the problem remains to extract from the colourful folklore the social depth contained today in the word Kachin.

Quoting Leach (1972 [1954]: 98): 'the kinship networks extend the linguistic frontiers'. Fifty years after Leach's analysis, my aim here is to show that the agnatic system of filiation can be defined as a common ritual language. This is not only because each ethnic subgroup has its own exogamous clans, but also, and mostly, because the different clans and lineages intrinsically extend the social sphere from the artificially considered delimitations of ethnic categories to the dynamics of their intrinsic relationships. In other words, the approach developed here reconsiders the traditional acceptance of the 'ethnic' (both as discrete

¹ Concerning the possibility of a symmetric dynamic within the asymmetric cycle involved in the generalised exchange, see Maran La Raw's development about the *hkau wang* system in this volume, and Robinne 2007.

entity as well as sets of communities) and the corollary idea of universal and a-temporal cultural markers. To support this hypothesis, I will focus the analysis on the confusion between the use of terms of ethnic category *versus* references to clans/lineages and its implications.

ETHNIC AND CLANIC CATEGORIES: ERROR AND CONFUSION

A confusion recurred among the colonial administrators and the missionaries who first wrote on the Kachin. Quoting each other, most of them assimilated ethnic categories—or “tribes” according to the terminology—and clan/lineage categories.

For example, we read in the first volume of the monumental *Gazetteer of Upper Burma* published in 1900 the name of ‘five Chinghpaw tribes’ associated with the five main clans generally mentioned in the mythology: “The five parent tribes are thus 1) Marips, 2) Lahtawngs, 3) Lepais, 4) ‘Nhkums, 5) Marans” (Scott and Hardiman, 1900: 373). In his *Kachin-English Dictionary*, Hanson (1954 [1906]: 172, 359), characterizes the Nhkum clan as a tribe and the Labang lineage as a clan; the Gauri are defined as a clan of the Lahpai tribe.

In the same way, Grierson, author of the *Linguistic Survey of India* (1927, Vol III, Part II: 500) describes the Kachin as five tribes whose names correspond to the five main Jinghpaw clans: “The Kachins themselves are divided into five tribes, which all claim to be descended from the grandson of the first ancestor. These tribes are the Marips, Lahtawngs, Lepais, ‘Nhkums, and Marans”.

A similar confusion was made by Hertz (1960: 81) among others. A noteworthy exception (albeit contradicted later on by the same author) was Enriquez (1933: 56) who wrote: “The divisions of the Kachin, loosely spoken as “tribes”, are, in fact, nothing more than clans. The five main divisions (Marip, Lahtaw, Lahpai, N’Hkum and Maran) are really five aristocratic clans descended from the five eldest sons of Wahkyet Wa, the reputed Father of the Kachin race”.

It is not time to discuss here the final terms used in the quotation, but they reveal that Enriquez was caught up in the same stereotypes of the colonial period about ‘the Kachin’ as others. What we can say, however, is that this confusion between ethnic category and clan/lineage names is generally in marked contrast to the quality of the observations otherwise made by these same authors. The propensity to make clans and ethnic categories analogous is significant, however, for the ethnic

reification of which authors of the colonial period, followed later on by researchers of the immediate postcolonial time as demonstrated by Aung Thwin (1998), were guilty. Caught in their own universe they were unable to consider fully the transethnic space that lay before them. In fact, this tendency seems to have been a confusion rather than an error *stricto sensu*: the investigator would ask his question according to the perceived environment and the people investigated would answer according to the terms used in the question and, often, in line with the wishes of the interlocutor.

During my numerous periods of fieldwork in Burma, which started in 1983, I have often been confronted with this crucial problematic of methodology. A few years ago, while working on interethnic relationships in the Southern Shan State, I adopted a comparative approach to the question of kinship terminologies. Because of the ethno-linguistic complexity in this area, combined with my linguistic incompetence, I was not able to speak any other language than Burmese and its closed dialects with my informants. Among the Pa-O, I did not understand at first that they were reproducing for me the Burmese terminology, which I quoted as Pa-O terms. Unbeknownst to me, I was caught up in the dominant Burmese universe, as was Hackett some fifty years before in the same area. More recently, while working in Kachin State, I understood that the confusion made by the British of the colonial period is, in fact, significant of the secondary value that informants themselves attribute to ethnic categories. My investigations showed that, to the question "To which ethnic group do you belong?", the spontaneous answer would invariably be the name of the clan and its lineage subdivisions.

This means that, at least in an agnatic system such as among the Kachins, in its plural form, the lineage referent goes beyond the criterion of ethnic belonging. This postulation was developed in ways outlined below following extensive fieldwork in Kachin State which started in December 1999.

HOMONYMOUS CLANS AMONG THE KACHIN SUBGROUPS

After Marcel Granet, Leach showed that the Kachin (more accurately the Jinghpaw) clans numbered seven or eight, but it was generally recognized that there are five main clans among the Jinghpaw Kachin sub-group: the Maran, the Marip, the Nhkum, the Lahpai and the

Lahtaw. Only these five clans are generally enumerated by occidental observers. However, according to my recent fieldwork investigations, as well as some previous occidental sources, it appears that these five clans are not the social attributes of only the Jinghpaw: they are also common to other Kachin sub-groups.

In some cases terminological homonyms are attested, which means that the same clan names are used by different ethnic groups. Some of my Atsi informants (otherwise known as Zaiwa) in Myitkyina, Mandalay and Yangon say, for instance, that their clans have the same names as those of the Jinghpaw. Leach (1972: 80 [1979: 53-54]) made the same remark concerning the Gauri (Jinghpaw) and the Atsi (Zaiwa). Despite some orthographic variants, due mainly to irregularities in transcription, their lineages are homonymous. The fact is important enough to justify quoting the passage in its entirety:

Atsi chiefs consider themselves to be all members of one lineage, namely Lahpai-Shadan-Aura. The Laphai-Shadan lineage of which Aura is a segment includes large numbers of very influential Jinghpaw-speaking chiefs. The Aura lineage itself includes the Gauri chiefs. Consequently, the Gauri chiefs, who speak a dialect of Jinghpaw, and the Atsi, who speak a variant of Maru, are always regarded as close lineage brothers.

Leach adds about the commoners (*ibid.*: [1979: 54]):

Many of the commoner lineages also are 'the same' in both language groups, thus:

<i>Gauri lineage name</i>	<i>Atsi lineage name</i>
Dashi	Dawshi
Jangma	Jangmaw
Mahka	Mahkaw
Sumnut	Sumlut, etc. etc.

This identity is socially recognised. Dashi are lineage brothers to Dawshi. A Gauri Dashi might properly marry an Atsi Jangmaw but not an Atsi Dawshi.

COMMON CLANS WITH DIFFERENT NAMES

The correspondences mentioned above are actually a list of terminological equivalences: different names for the same clans, or at least for exogamous clans.

Interviews carried out in Myitkyina with Maru (or Lawngwaw) speakers have contributed to showing that there are clanic correspondences with the Jinghpaw, a fact corroborated by Wawn Awng (s.d.: 65), a Jinghpaw writer. According to this research, the Lawngwaw share in common with the Jinghpaw the Marip and Lahpai clans. The correspondences may vary between the informants; this is due to the fact that the clanic equivalences between the ethnic groups are generally reduced to the effective matrimonial alliances within their own patrilineage, rather than to the normative possibilities inherent in the generalized exchange system. For this reason the following table is not complete:

JINGHPAW	LAWNGWAW
Marip	Lanin
Maran	Je nin
Nhkum	Yao nin
Lahpai	Cao dung <i>and</i> Lao nin
Lahtaw	Banin
Jasen	Jein Phang
Tangbau	Xao puy <i>or</i> Zawbuk

Labau Sau Nu, a Baptist professor at the Myitkyina College of Education, is a Lachid of the clan called La Nnan. He considers his own clan to be the equivalent of the Jinghpaw clan Marip. He adds that the clan Mading—fragmented into three exogamous lineages—corresponds to the clan Lahtaw, the clan Mang Shang to the clan Maran, and the clan Langawi to the clan Labang. According to him, a Lachid man cannot take a wife from his equivalent Jinghpaw clan. Furthermore, the account of Wawn Awng shows that the Lachid and the Lawngwaw have in common the Tangbau clan, and that the Jinghpaw and the Marip have in common the clan Lahtaw.

A Rawang informer living in Mandalay says that his clan name, Agu Di, is equivalent to the Jinghpaw clan Marip. Garu Min, adept of the congregation of the Churches of Christ in Myitkyina, says that the Nung Lungmi—a Rawang sub-group or else ancestors of the Rawang according to the informants—also established some clanic correspondences with the Jinghpaw. The clanic correspondences are generally kept at the level of an assertion, and most of the informants have some difficulty in establishing a list of equivalences beyond their personal cases. Nevertheless, the following correspondences have been recorded:

JINGHPAW	RAWANG AND NUNG LUNGMI
Marip	Rawang
Maran	Yintang et Magawng
Nhkum	Sangtung
Lahpai	Garu
Lahtaw	?

Enriquez (1993: 56) clearly pointed out the confusion between clans and ethnic categories: “Lazum, for instance, are sometimes counted as Gauris [a Jinghpaw southern sub-group], sometimes as Marips [a Jinghpaw clan]”. But it is Green (1934: 254, quoted by M. Sadan; see Sadan 2007), who first detailed the correspondences between the clans of the different ethnic groups:

There are many clans which are generally named after the valleys in which they live. Local groups are generally clans, although some local groups containing two or three clans are found [...] Some of the clans compare themselves to the main Hkakhku clans as:

The Nanhku claim to be Maran,
 The Sandong claim to be Lahtaw,
 The Tingkan claim to be Lahpai,
 The Yintangse claim to be Marip,
 The Kumring claim to be Nhkum.

THE LISU CASE

The most striking correspondences are those made with the Lisu established in Kachin State. Contrary to the Jinghpaw and to the other sub-groups considered to be Kachin, the basis of Lisu social organisation is not the *mayu-dama* general exchange system. It is possible for a male to take a female in any lineage except its own patrilineage: from Putao to Myitkyina, Lisu informants agreed in saying that they could take a wife from the mother’s side, but not from the father’s side. Some of them, interviewed downriver from Myitkyina at Waingmaw, explained that marriage with the bilateral cross-cousin is recommended: they call it *fu shasha*, which means, word by word, “to give in marriage + to cross two times”. Nonetheless, despite the Lisu kinship structure, and despite also the interferences caused by belief in Christianity and membership of such and such a religious congregation, which can affect the choice of a spouse, part of the *mayu-dama* structure is seen to be incorporated by the Lisu as soon as they have committed themselves in a matrimonial alliance with their Kachin partners. A Lisu man having taken a

wife from a Jinghpaw clan becomes, tacitly, a *dama*—which means a “taker”—of the clan of his wife, which in turn automatically becomes his clan’s *mayu*—which means a “giver”. According to this, the Lisu man and his siblings, real or classificatory—by extension all the *kahpu kanau* defined by Leach (1979 [1954]: 73–74) as “lineages which are treated as being of the same as clan as Ego”—are integrated in a matrimonial system in which one can continue to take wives from the other clan, but, on the contrary, one cannot give a wife to them in return.

Once again, we owe to Green (1934: 254, quoted by M. Sadan see 2007) the oldest account describing the spread of this clanic correspondence among the Lisu. Because of variant forms of transcription, it has proved sometimes difficult to trace the equivalences in my own notes. Despite this difficulty, it appears that the accounts obtained sixty years apart from each other establish the veracity of such correspondences, whether or not the terms are homonymous:

JINGHPAW	LISU (GREEN)	LISU (ROBINNE)
Marip	Ngaw Hpa	Ngau hpa <i>or</i> Nga
Maran		Zi hpa
Nhkum	Lair Mair	Wa hpa
Lahpai	(Myitkyina)	La hpa
Lahtaw	Gu hpa <i>and</i> Waw hpa	Li hpa <i>and</i> Nu
Lasang	Zaw Kya	
	Lair Mair (Bhamo)	
Tawn Kya	Mitung	

CHINESE AND OTHER CASES OF CLANIC CORRESPONDENCE

A detailed analysis of such matters in recent publications in vernacular languages indicates that the same pattern holds true for other cases of Kachin and non-Kachin clanic correspondence. Recalling the story of his own clan, Matsaw Nhkum Tu Yau (s.d.: 25) associates the Nhkum with the Rawang, the Maru, the Lisu, the Lachid, the Zaiwa, the Sam (Shan), the Miwa (Chinese), as well as with the Jinghpaw.

Moreover, it seems that the sub-groups of Jingpo established in China also integrate themselves within this inter-ethnic clan dynamic. This dynamic is not only due to the classic phenomenon of pluriethnicity, it also involves the claiming of two or more ethnic identities by an individual, as demonstrated by Leach in a Kachin context and by Conrad in a Lisu context. Speaking about the Jingpo domains, Wang Zhuseng (1997: 93) (1997: 314, note 12) remarks that:

Puguan, the formal name of Dazhai, is also the name of a principal clan that lives in Dazhai and its immediate vicinity. It is said that Puguan was one of the lineage segments of the Maran clan [...] Like all other Jingpo names, Puguan has a corresponding Han Chinese name, Li.

And the same author also enumerates a corresponding list of Han Chinese names with some of the Jingpo clans (Lahpai = Pai; Lahpang = Wang; N'kum = Kong, Li Yue; Marip = Sha, Shang, Ma), as well as with the different Kachin sub-groups: eight clanic correspondences between Zaiwa and Han Chinese names, ten between the Lachi and Han Chinese names, four between Langwo [Lawngwaw] and Han Chinese names (*ibid.*: 315–316, note 3).² While not focused on that question, Wang Zhuseng's analysis is sprinkled with these kind of correspondences, for example: "It was commonly recognized that the Zaiwa chief clans were from Jingpo's Lahpai" (*ibid.*: 314, note 12).

The different Kachin sub-groups of Burma, including the Lisu, give numerous examples of such clanic correspondences with the Han Chinese. The practice refers back to the networks that operated between different populations, and insofar as we may wish to understand the operation of some of these networks in both space and time, the study of matrimonial exchanges can contribute greatly in revealing to us some of their dynamics. Some differences appear between the Wang Zusheng informants on the China side and my informants on the Burma side. The people questioned at Myitkyina (where the Chinese community is important) state that equivalences between Kachin and Han Chinese clans are the following: Li Ja in Chinese is given as the equivalent of Marip in Jinghpaw, Tcho as Lachyawng, Tuang as Lahpai, Yang as Maran. The equivalent clans given are exogamous; according to my informants, a wedding between a male Jinghpaw Maran and a female Chinese Yang is quite impossible.

Similar equivalences, underlying the same logic of social transethnic space, are also attested not only at a clanic level but also at a lineage level, with lineages deemed common to many clans. The examples are numerous: the Kadung lineage is common to the clans Magawng, Lahpai and Nhkum; the Kaja lineage is common to the clans Marip, Nhkum and Magawng; the Bau lineage is common to the clans Nding, Lahtaw and Hkasha. In addition to these examples of one lineage

² Officially, the ethnonym Kachin gather six sub-groups known as Lisu, Jinghpaw, Rawang (including Nung Lungmi), Lawngwaw, Lachid and Zaiwa.

shared by three clans, I have also noted the name of a lineage among four clans: the Ndup lineage is common to the clans Lahtaw, Jasen, Hkasha and Marip.³

Past and present accounts of clanic correspondences between Kachin sub-groups are relatively rare. Nevertheless, they are significant in that they relate to a more global social system. Some of the reasons why the phenomenon remained widely unnoticed are suggested here: first, transethnic equivalence between clans was concealed by use of distinct vernacular terminologies; second, the pre-eminence of ethnic categories in determining our approach to the study of such phenomena has blinded us all, professional anthropologists and others alike, both within the said communities and without; third, and related to this, is that the dominant thought according to which the clans are understood as cultural markers of isolated ethnic groups has diverted our attentions. Clans and lineages are actually part of a larger generalized exchange system, part even of a cognitive process, without appreciation of which one may fail to understand the rise of the pan-Kachin movement. Caught myself in my own *a priori* assumptions—or in my own intellectual and political world as would say Aung Thwin (1998)—I experienced myself late on the interethnic and the transethnic dimension of the clans of the generalized kinship system to which they belong.

THE TRANSETHNIC TERMINOLOGY OF THE SYSTEM

Despite scattered information, the sources cited corroborate my own fieldwork observations that the *mayu-dama* system has an inclusive dynamic that imposes upon the groups that neighbour the Kachin in Kachin State. Recent developments in the system also show that current political concerns have led the logic to reach an extreme end, with the risk even that the kinship system could implode and, with it,

³ Of course, such clanic and lineage correspondences are not limited to the Kachin. According to Pascal Bouchery (1995: 27) in his study of the Hani, a Yunnanese Tibeto-Burmese population, some clanic correspondences are also attested with Chinese patronyms. The territorial conquests of the Han Chinese achieved by the end of the fourteenth century are cited by Bouchery as the origin of these correspondences: “The Chinese start to attribute Han patronymics to the local Tusi chiefs they administrated” [...] “At present time, [the Han patronyms] coexist with the traditional clanic names, but they are rarely supplanted, so that, most of the time, all patrilclans have also Hani names”. And Bouchery also enumerates a list of twelve Hani clanic names and their respective correspondences with the Chinese patronyms (*ibid.*: 47).

the principle of its exogamous clans. In the wake of the concomitant processes of Burmanisation, of nationalism, and of Christianisation, the tendency to substitute written tradition for oral tradition contributes highly to the obliteration of the collective memory that participates in the perennial construction of the generalised exchange system. After all, clanic correspondences still contribute to give coherency to the Kachin artefact and its predominant interethnic social dynamism.

The terminology used to describe the *mayu-dama* system is significant of the universality of the system, even among the ethnic groups like the Lisu whose social organisation is based upon an undifferentiated matrimonial system. The vernacular terms used to design the social partners—or kinship categories—bound in the *mayu-dama* system among the main “Kachin” sub-groups are as follows, without recourse to detailed technical terms that are not in use:

Jinghpaw	mayu dama	kahpu kanau	kashu kahkri
Lisu	<i>seqhpa mait</i>	<i>aiq nyiza</i>	<i>avi sza</i>
Zaiwa	<i>mung zumaw</i> (ou <i>zaw maw</i>)	<i>agu aman</i>	<i>da au</i>
Lawngwaw	<i>yauhpu zamaw</i>	?	?
Lachid	<i>mung zumaw</i>	<i>bik zaw</i>	<i>semaw zeni</i>
Nung Lungmi	<i>mayu dzemi</i>	<i>phèdung phèshè</i>	<i>pheli phela</i>

POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS AND EXAMPLES TO THE CONTRARY

Some possible conclusions drawn from what has been said can be proposed.

- 1) On the one hand, it appears that the five main primordial clans of the current Jinghpaw mythology are common to every Kachin sub-group, sharing, with some variants albeit principally terminological ones, the same mythical stock,⁴ i.e. the Lawngwaw, the Nung Lungmi, the Rawang, the Zaiwa and the Lachid.

⁴ The variants recorded during fieldwork and in recent publications in vernacular languages, mostly in Jinghpaw, show that they do not occur between ethnic categories. As for the clanic and lineage belongings, they interfere mostly at a clanic or individual level.

- 2) On the other hand, it appears that the kinship system of generalized exchange based on a hierarchy between wife-taking groups (*mayu*) and wife-giving groups (*dama*) prevails over and above any other consideration. According to this finding, the assertion of a common ancestor or not appears not to be decisive, rather than previous political structures or the relatively recent conversion to Christianity. Despite the structural and radical transformations effected by such developments, a new *mayu-dama* system is developed.
- 3) As for the Lisu, we know that their social, political and religious organisation, as well as other traditional cultural markers, contribute to distinguishing the Lisu community from the other Kachin subgroups. This demonstrates that the relationships between clans and lineages constitute, from a sociological point of view, a common ritual language between the different Kachin subgroups, justifying use of the label 'Kachin' and giving it coherency.
- 4) Finally, it can be added that the interethnic and transethnic dimensions of the clans and lineages contribute to reinforcing the concept of pluriethnicity, as developed by Leach and Conrad (1989 and 1992), i.e. the fluidity and plurality of ethnic belonging that a person may claim throughout life.

With regard to these tentative conclusions, two further reflections should be made. First, if the interethnic correspondences of the clans and lineages are a reality, at the same time the transethnic assumption needs to be qualified. Numerous clans in every Kachin sub-group do not produce correspondences, and a wife keeps her clanic belonging when she gets married. Notwithstanding that the transethnic dimension of clans and lineages cannot be entirely generalized as a result, the imagined ethno-linguistic frontiers do not inhibit the dynamics of economic, religious and political exchanges, nor do they hinder the dynamics of social exchanges. The clanic correspondences create a community by which integration is facilitated regardless of linguistic variation.

The second reflection is a return to the notion of 'common ritual language'. As developed by Leach, this implies on the one hand a multi-ethnic coherency, and yet, on the other hand, it appears to be in contradiction with an historical process. For this reason, therefore, I propose to substitute the notion of 'common ritual language' with

that of a common federative sphere *versus* a common operative sphere.⁵ By common federative sphere, I mean all political, religious, economic and social spheres of reference, more or less combined each other, more or less shared by different ethnic communities in contact. By common operative sphere I denote the process by which a community manipulates or instrumentalizes the federative sphere common to different communities in order to appropriate the social landscape, as is the case, for example, with the Jinghpaw over the Kachin subgroups, or, at a different level, of the Kachin in their relationships with the Burmese central power.

In our post-colonial and post-Christian times, these spheres have been shared by numerous ethnic groups of the so-called Kachin stock. The social changes caused by both colonialism and Christianity, and determined as well by the relationship with the Burmese central power, have contributed to accelerating distance between the present and ancestral consensual forms. Supposedly being common to some 90% of the Kachin, Christianity became the new transethnic vector of the Kachin ideal, with the risk, noted by Gravers (1999: 80), of assimilating nationalism and religion. In this light, Christianity could be considered the main ritual language among the Kachin subgroups, but it needs to be considered in its plurality: Catholics versus Protestants, and their numerous components, Baptists, the Church of Christ, the Engel Church, the Assembly of God, the Anglicans and so on, each one defined more or less after ethnic criteria, each one having its own reformists or fundamentalists "sitting outside the mainstream". Considered in its plurality, like shamanism, Christianity is certainly a common federator to the different subgroups; at the same time, members of the Churches generally claim to be of different religions, and Christianity still needs to overcome its intrinsic contradictions to become a common operator, artefact as such of a new Kachin coherency.

We arrive at a paradox among the Kachin. On the one hand, Christianity claims to be the operator of unity, but it fails to have federative support on that religious basis. On the other hand, the *mayudama* system remains a common federative sphere between the different sub-groups, but it cannot be defined as the vector of the pan-Kachin process. The articulation between the substance of the social federative

⁵ From the concept of "opérateur commun" as developed by Amselle (1999: 28).

sphere, common to the Kachin subgroups, and between the operator of unity is still to be found, and only then can we fully understand the sociological depth of the pan-Kachin movement.