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**Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia.  
Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma by  
E.R. Leach. Preface**

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► **To cite this version:**

François Robinne, Mandy Sadan. Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia. Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma by E.R. Leach. Preface. François Robinne and Mandy Sadan. Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia. Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma by E.R. Leach, Brill, pp.IX-XV, 2007, 978-90-47-42062-0. halshs-01866821

**HAL Id: halshs-01866821**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01866821>**

Submitted on 5 Sep 2018

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## PREFACE

*François Robinne and Mandy Sadan*

This volume originated from a panel held to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Edmund Leach's classic study *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (1954), which was organised for the EUROSEAS Conference held at the Sorbonne University, Paris, in September 2004. The fiftieth anniversary, in combination with the location of the conference in France, presented a timely opportunity both to reconsider the significance of Leach's seminal text as well as to continue his original scheme of making the work an engagement between Anglophone and Francophone anthropology (which, in Leach's case, meant an engagement with Lévi-Strauss in particular). However, we are delighted that we have been able to include contributions in this volume that succeed in breaking down those limiting parameters of discourse and which incorporate other spatial, relational, discursive and cognitive models of 'Kachin' than Leach was able to present. All of the papers presented at the conference have been included in this volume, with two additional contributions from Vanina Bouté and Guido Sprenger. The Introduction by U Chit Hlaing (Professor F. K. Lehman) has been developed from comments that were made on the day in the key role that he played as Discussant. For ease of reference, Leach's work is referred to as *Political Systems* throughout.

The fieldwork underpinning *Political Systems* was begun as World War II approached, and was continued in its midst. The post-war environment in the Kachin region of northern Burma, however, was not amenable to the pursuit of academic research by Western anthropologists and, after publication, Edmund Leach was largely forced to divert his interests to other places and anthropological subjects (Anderson, this volume). Nonetheless, Leach's name was established by the publication of *Political Systems* and its impact and implications extended far beyond the Kachin case-study at its core. Indeed, the theoretical perspectives of the work have proved to be significant in the development of Social Anthropology in the longer term, not least through Leach's analysis of social change considered through the articulation of structural variation and relational dynamics. The contributions that Leach's work has made

to Southeast Asian Studies, to Social Anthropology, and to theories of the relationship between Anthropology, History and Ethnicity have been extensive. Indeed, it is hard to think of other, similar texts that might warrant such an intensive reconsideration in the form of conference panels and published volumes after fifty years. The fact that such an exercise has proved to be so useful after such a time attests to the ongoing significance of Leach's work.

However, the value of this reconsideration arises from the fact that, whilst the text remains a standard of university reading lists and academic bibliographies to this day, some of the more contentious aspects of *Political Systems* (which are detailed fully in the chapters to follow) are as well known as its groundbreaking ideas on relational identities. Indeed, two generations of students can attest to the fact that *Political Systems* is a perennially difficult work to critique. Up to now, most criticism of *Political Systems* has been conducted at an abstracted theoretical level in the absence of empirical fieldwork data from the Kachin region. Fifty years after publication, however, new research has been conducted in a number of settings related directly to the Kachin social environment, as well as with other 'highland' communities in Southeast Asia, the findings of which are of pertinence to some of Leach's central ideas. These developments make a reconsideration of *Political Systems* at this time a relevant and useful exercise, of benefit to our understanding of Historical Anthropology in general and Southeast Asian Studies in particular. It is intended that this volume will assist the process of opening up Leach's text to important new readings on issues such as social dynamics and identity, postcolonial studies, the politics and ethics of fieldwork and of community representation, amongst others.

In writing *Political Systems* Leach hoped to challenge a number of theoretical approaches that were then current in British Social Anthropology. He hoped to contrast his work with the essentialist approach still prevailing in much academic writing originating from the colonial sphere; he also established a critical distance from Durkheim and Malinowski and ideas of the duality of the sacred and the profane. Most significantly, however, he hoped to challenge the claims of structuralism as a universal and a-temporal model by positioning *Political Systems* theoretically around the concept of "unstable equilibrium". Yet, paradoxically, the strength of this conceptual approach appears also to be its greatest weakness and has resulted in a highly ambiguous book in which the data and the theory seem especially ill at ease with each other. Indeed, one might with justification accuse Leach of reducing

the Kachin sphere to a kind of intellectual laboratory without any expression in reality because of the way in which he moulded his case study to a theory, rather than the other way round. Furthermore, the large degree of difference evidenced between Leach and local analysis of 'Kachin' social practices goes beyond the simple manifestation of a 'disagreement', suggesting that something more essential and substantive in the politics of representation is at play in local objections to the work and the basis of its underlying construction (Maran La Raw, this volume).

Leach himself vindicated such a distance by a self-professed indifference towards 'the facts', commencing Chapter VIII of *Political Systems*, 'The Evidence from Kachin History', with the statements that anthropologists always faced problems as to "what to do with the facts" and that facts "frequently bored" him; a problematic position to say the least given the intrinsic (and thus uneasy) relationship between History and Anthropology maintained throughout the book. Some fifty years later, this volume explicitly attempts to test 'the facts' presented in *Political Systems*. However, our purpose is not to prove or disprove 'facts' alone in support or otherwise of Leach's arguments. Neither do we reject the significance of the critiques of Leach made by those such as Lévi-Strauss, Friedman and Nugent, amongst others, whose theoretical insights highlighted important issues relating to *Political Systems* over the course of three decades following its publication. Rather, the aim here is to reassert the theoretical and empirical importance of any 'facts' by considering in detail throughout the volume how Leach's notion of structural oscillation 'fits' across both space and time, in Kachin society and beyond, and to raise both theoretical and empirical questions in places where that fit is not seen. The perspective adopted is not that facts and theory should be placed in a hierarchical opposition with each other, but that they should be intertwined in any representational discourse. The chapters presented here do this in a way that is unique in relation to Leach's work, demonstrating a considered blending of theory and empirical data. Such a critique, however, does not mean rupture; this is not simply a work of deconstruction, an attempt to list the mistakes that sprinkle Leach's demonstration. It consists, on the contrary, of an attempt to reflect on the perspectives that *Political Systems* continues to offer, and to locate those in an appropriate historical timeframe, cognizant of the gap of fifty years and the local and regional transformations that have taken place during that time. Thus, we inscribe ourselves in terms of metamorphoses, rather than in terms

of rupture *stricto sensu*. Our ability to lay claim to this is in no small measure due to the support and insights of U Chit Hlaing (Professor E. K. Lehman), to whom we express here our sincere gratitude, and who, by agreeing to comment on our papers during the conference and to reformulating those comments for our Introduction, has helped to create a more direct connection between ourselves and Leach than might otherwise have been possible, and which was surely necessary. Many thanks are also due to Professor Maran La Raw for his personal insights into Leach's relationships with Kachin people, and his encouragement of the preparation of this collective volume.

Because of its location at the crossroads of China, India and South-east Asia, the Indo-Chinese massif, of which the Kachin region is a part, is the site of a complex intersection of populations. These varied societies even today display exceptional linguistic diversity and organise a wide range of socio-political systems and religious practices—a diversity that was possibly even more finely drawn in Leach's day. Communication between these different social spheres, combined with the dynamics of economic, matrimonial and commercial networks, produced those very social and cultural differences that seemed to confirm to Leach that the region and its people existed in a state of “unstable equilibrium”. The historical strategic importance of this area and its resultant entanglement in decades of local, regional and global political and military conflict resulted in the transformation of this “unstable” region into a ‘restricted area’ for most of the twentieth century. Only in the 1990's was a slight loosening of this restrictiveness seen, and it is as a result of this that some researchers were able to breach previously narrow boundaries of contact and to extend considerably the range of investigation possible in relation to historical and anthropological studies of ‘the Kachin’ and related communities. This renewed direct encounter informs many of the chapters in this volume and enables the theoretical and empirical engagement with *Political Systems* to go some way beyond that which was possible in previous critiques.

In order to understand the ambiguity that characterizes *Political Systems* we have tried in this volume to explore Leach's text in the context of the intellectual and political environments in which Leach found himself. For example, Leach's idiosyncratic representation of historical context is given much attention. In *Political Systems* historical contingency is reduced to the presentation of structural variables within Kachin society; these then underpinned the transformation of Leach's Kachin case-study from being a local demonstration to being a work of general

theoretical importance, as was Leach's aim. As will be discussed in the chapters to follow, Leach's 'distance' from the historical facts, however, also led to some distance being created between Leach's analysis of other important aspects of Kachin society, particularly the diversified nature of economic exchanges and the importance of networks underlying any expression of 'social oscillation'. Furthermore, whilst Leach attested that the Kachin borrowed their hierarchical system, he did not clearly demonstrate the process involved; in particular, he did not identify the nature of the relationship between highlands and lowlands, despite his description of the ecological context of the Kachin region at the beginning of the book. All of these issues require greater historical penetration than Leach was prepared to accept was necessary when *Political Systems* was published. The historical context in this volume is considered initially by reflecting on the extraneous and personal intellectual limitations placed on Leach's vision before and at the time of writing *Political Systems* (Anderson), Leach's understanding of Kachin notions of historical discourse and his desire to give an historical frame to his anthropological theories (Sadan), and the contemporary acknowledgement given by the Kachin themselves to Leach's published work (Maran La Raw). Many of the later chapters also give much attention to historical context, blending this with anthropological analysis in a way that demonstrates the development of the inter-relationship between these two disciplines since Leach's first (largely unsuccessful) attempt to bridge the divide.

The concepts of "structural oscillation" and "unstable equilibrium", centred upon a presentation of the *gumsa-gumlao* model in Kachin society, represent both the best and the worst aspects of *Political Systems*. Maran La Raw's chapter goes far beyond demonstrating the inadequacies of Leach's understanding of the vernacular Jinghpaw categories of *gumsa* and *gumlao* to give a fuller description, extending analysis to that of *khau wang magam*. This was an exchange system amongst the chiefly lineages according to which the wife-givers become the wife-takers, leading to the idiom that "each participant marries its granddaughter", and discussion of which significantly transforms our understanding of the generalized system of exchange in Kachin society. Other comparative perspectives presented in this volume also help us to qualify Leach's assertions about the *gumsa-gumlao* model. The analysis of social and political organisation amongst three societies in Assam (Ramirez), as well as the discussion of Naga political systems (Bouchery), point out the limitations of the model proposed by Leach beyond the Jinghpaw and Kachin sub-groups.

In the same way, the analysis of the acephalous political systems of the Khmu (Evrard) and of the Phunoy (Bouté) of Laos demonstrate that social change in these cases is not due to internal social structures but arises mainly for a range of exogenous reasons. In these chapters, it is in particular the increasing pressure from economic factors, such as trade and control of economic networks, migration and the movement of populations, together with the development of social mobility, land ownership and land pressure resulting in the “inequitable allocation of the lands”, that produces radically different social and political structures in neighbouring social landscapes.

A distinction between internal and external dynamics of social change is also at the centre of analysis focused on the circulation of wealth amongst the Jinghpaw of Yunnan (Ho Ts’ui-p’ing) and the Rmeet/Lamet of Laos (Sprenger). In both cases, the development of a market economy generates similar consequences, notably a process of individualization, which is then linked with the metamorphosis of goods that are circulated. In both chapters, one can observe change from a vertical system of ritual exchange and the sharing of gifts into a horizontal system based on social mobility through access to ownership. The demonstration focused on the Jinghpaw of Yunnan concentrates on the florescence of opium production amongst the Jinghpaw during British colonial rule and in times of political instability; the demonstration focused on the Rmeet/Lamet of Laos analyses the flow of bronze drums and colonial silver coins within Laos and in Rmeet society. In both cases, the internal and external interactions of society, respectively with political instabilities and commercial exchanges, are considered in detail.

Continuing from the analysis of these two chapters, which focus on the concomitant evolution of the circulation of wealth, wealth ownership and debt, the example from Drung society of northwest Yunnan (Gros) focuses on “what is exchanged” rather than the exchange strictly speaking. The notion of ritual language developed by Leach is correlated with Mauss’ concept of “total social fact”. The circulation of wealth proves to be a significant vector in the attribution of social positions, but its inclusive dynamic operates at different levels where individuals and communities, nature and supernature, appear bound by the same logic. In a complementary way, the transethnic dimension of generalised exchange is then considered, allied to the notion of ritual language (Robinne): beyond the hierarchy in which wife-givers and wife-takers are linked, and beyond the exogamous clan as well

as ethnic belongings which may be claimed, the generalised exchange system is seen to transcend the inner limits to which it is generally reduced by outside observers.

Following the intentions of Leach himself, the present volume extends the analysis to different communities and to different multi-ethnic contexts all along the Indo-Chinese massif. One of the main difficulties the editors had to face was to decide upon a conceptual or spatial configuration for the collective volume. This was particularly difficult given the significance of both internal and external dimensions of social change in the various demonstrations, which made both conceptual and spatial criteria in themselves unsatisfying. If spatial distribution finally prevailed in the volume, it is by no means a categorical choice: on the contrary, the three sections into which this volume are divided do not primarily gather together neighbouring groups but, rather, juxtapose some conceptual proximities developed by the authors. In the same manner, the postscript (Robinne & Sadan) suggests that we might consider the social in terms of village partnerships rather than in terms of interethnic relationships. By substituting the notion of sets of communities for spaces of dispersion, the notion of social change fits more closely to the dynamics that characterise the crossroads of Southeast Asia in general, and the Kachin region in particular, which was the focus of Leach's observations.

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