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NAGA ETHNOGRAPHY AND LEACH'S OSCILLATORY MODEL OF *GUMSA* AND *GUMLAO*

Pascal Bouchery

In *Political Systems of Highland Burma* Edmund Leach interpreted the concepts of *gumlao* 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 *gumlao* 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's went further than this by equating the political organization of the Sema with the *gumsa* model, while considering Angami political organization to be a *gumlao*-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 J. Butler, and then by 'administrator ethnographers', like J. H. Hutton and J. P. Mills.[2] As

1 1972 [1954] : 232.

2 The two authors wrote monographs on the majority of groups living in present-day Nagaland.

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, Tangkhhul, Zemi, Lyangmai, 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 cse 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, 1939, 1969), and Leach himself entirely relied on it in *Political Systems*. Not surprisingly, however, it does not correspond to the Naga conception of power, which is deeply embedded in religious beliefs and does not make a distinction between political and religious spheres. Different means of gaining social respectability and influence based on individual qualities are socially valued among the Nagas : charisma, success in hunting, headhunting or war, and social ascent through the accomplishment of a codified series of Feasts of Merit, for example. However, in many cases individual success is ultimately related to luck, and luck itself is generally derived from connection to some magical source of power, be it through the possession of luck-stones (micrometeorites) or by the invocation of

3 For the Angami, Lhota, Rengma, Ao, Sangtam : Hutton, 1921a : 353 ; Mills, 1922 : XXIII ; for the Tangkhul : Brown, 1874 ; Watt, 1887, in Elwin (ed.), 1959 : 456, 469 ; Mills, 1922 : XXXIII ; for the Zemi, Lyangmei and Rongmei (formerly Kacha Nagas) : Mills, 1926 : 28 ; for the Mao and Maram : Hutton, 1921a : 353 ; for the Konyak (Tenkoh group) : Mills, 1926 : 28.

4 Mills, 1922 : XXXIII.

deities through ritual action. Therefore, in traditional society, the most respected form of authority is conceded to those people who can manifest by the efficiency of their ritual action that they are favoured by the gods (especially those controlling cosmological elements) and who, as such, stand as mediators for the benefit of their own communities.

If we take into consideration the religious basis underlying such basic political concepts as 'influence', 'merit' and 'renown', I suggest that me may also consider them valuable tools in the interpretation of Naga political systems. By doing so, we observe that the institution of village-based, hereditary chieftainship, which can tentatively be called 'ritual hereditary chieftainship', has existed everywhere in the Naga Hills, the chiefs holding their title by virtue of direct descent from founding ancestors, and their political power being backed by supernatural sanctions.[5] The following can also be seen to be true of all chiefs of this kind.

1) As representative of the village's founder's kin, the chief (Angami *Tevo* ir *Kemovo*, Lhota *Ekyung*, Tangkhul *Avunga*, Zemi *Kadepeo*, Kabui or Rongmei *Matai*) is considered as the sole 'owner' of the village territory. Ownerhip here is not to be taken in the Western sense. Rather, it means that he and his lineage or clan hold exclusive territorial rights because their ancestor, at the time of the foundation of the village, set up an alliance with the true 'owner' or 'master' of the area, some *genius loci*, who accepted human settlement in exchange for an annual cult. This does not give the chief the right to dispose of the land at will, although he may sometimes intervene in its distribution, for instance by relocating cultivable land to landless villagers.

2) The chief's function and title are transmitted along the patrilineage, most often from father to eldest son.

3) The chief, together with the village's council, which consists of representatives from each clan of the village (often the heads of the eldest families), handles the overall affairs of his community. He and the village council constitute the village court, and all disputes pertaining to land, theft, divorce, inheritance, fornication, adultery, murder, etc., are heard and tried in it. The chief may or may not be the most influential person in that assembly, but he usually presides over it.

4) The chief's main functions are ritual. The ritual action of the chief, expressed through the performance of collective ceremonies, is mainly devoted to village welfare, but also to village safety by ensuring that it is protected from headhunting raids. The ritual action of the chief is seen as the perpetuation of the actions of his ancestors, who made human settlement possible through the alliance first established with protective deities. This is the condition *sine qua non* for the community's survival and perpetuation. Through the supposed efficiency of his ritual action, the

5 For the Angami ; Fürer-Haimendorf & Mills, 1936 ; for the Mao (Memi) : Watt, 1889, in Elwin (ed.), 1959 : 461 ; for the Zemi, Lyangmei and Rongmei : Soppitt, 1885 : 9 ; Bower, 1951 : 79 ; for the Tangkhul : Horam, 1977 ; for the Lhota : Mills, 1922 : 96 ; for the Konyak : Mills, 1926 : 28 ; Fürer-Haimendorf, 1969 : 62-63 ; Hutton, 1965 : 23.

village founder's kin is responsible for village welfare and he is perceived, therefore, as also holding the village's destiny in his hands. For this reason, the chief himself is also frequently assimilated to a principle of fertility, such as *Tevo* amongst the Eastern Angami, and, as such, subject to all kinds of prohibitions in order to preserve his integrity and ritual efficacy.[6]
5) As a token of gratitude and respect for his benevolence and status, the villagers help to rebuild and repair the chief's house and cultivate this fields. He also receives as an exclusive privilege the thigh or foreleg of any four-footed animal that is killed.

The set of principles upon which the institution is based is remarkably uniform throughout the Naga Hills, but the perception of it by Western researchers has been biased by the disproportionate importance attached to the performance of political power by colonial administrators. While the institution has been very stable over time, the secular power or influence actually attained by Naga chiefs has fluctuated much more. As a result, contradictory reports are common in the colonial sources. For example, military officers of the nineteenth century reported that Lhota, Rengma and Kacha hereditary chiefs exerted considerable political power ; little of this remained at the beginning of the twentieth century when the ethnographies of the three groups were written, and at which time their political organization was classified as 'democratic'. Furthermore, prior to the Second World War the Sema and the Chang were considered to be 'autocratic' groups because some of their villages were run by powerful chiefs. Yet, at the same time, their biggest communities were organized, as in other groups, in a way that was considered by ethnographers to be 'democratic'.
Naga ethnography is very rich and extends over approximately one and a half centuries, which allows for some historical perspective. Interestingly, colonial sources point to a general correlation between the secular power of chiefs and the process of territorial expansion. This is well documented for the Sema and the Chang. They were the last of the Naga groups to colonize vast areas of uninhabited land in the central part of the Patkai Range bordering Burma, thus unabling the process of colonization to be observed by British administrators.[7] In pioneering areas where newly founded villages were most numerous, the representative of the village's founder kin, or the village founder himself, acted as an undisputed leader, while the principle of ultimogeniture ruled the transmission of chieftainship. As in the Kachin context, elder brothers had to choose between remaining subordinate to the youngest brother in their village or becoming themselves chiefs by founding a new colony, which, by that time,

6 Fürer-Haimendorf & Mills, 1936.

7 Hutton, 1921b: 3, 4, 8. The process of territorial expansion among the Nagas has been documented by hartwig (1970) from a Marxist perspective. The author estimates that 'land territorial and economical appropriation' (*Territorialökonomischen Erschlissung des Landes*) was mostly completed in what constitutes present-day Nagaland around the beginning of the nineteenth century, but occurred later in the highest and less exploitable zones of the Naga Hills, where the Sema the Chang now live (1970: 44-46, 222).

was rather common. In such cases, the leader or *Akekao*, who was the actual founder of the colony, was regarded as owner of the land and, thus, received the noble part of big game and benefited from free labour on his lands from the other villagers.[8] He had a final word in the village council and can be considered as taking decisions in the fullest sense of the word, assuming military responsibilities in case of conflict with enemies. His relation to other villagers was seen as between father and adopted sons (they called him *apu*, 'father'; he called them *mughemi*, 'orphans'). However, when all available land had been divided between communities in a given neighbourhood, the political situation appeared quite different. First, elder sons started to contest the undivided rights to the youngest, claiming their share of land and trying to be recognized as legitimate successors. Each of them had his own faction of followers or 'adopted sons' who called him 'father'. This process was also accompanied, according to Hutton, by a gradual change in the rules of transmission of chieftainship from ultimogeniture to primogeniture.[9] Later on, other influential people who were not of the chief's kin could in turn enter into an *apu/mughemi* relation with some villagers. As Mills remarked: "The result is a splitting up of rights to the point of extinction, and a general levelling up all around."[10]

By the turn of the twentieth century the 'true' autocratic pattern existed only east of the Tizu river, where Sema were still migrating in numbers at that time. In areas of older occupancy, such as the Dayang and Kileki valleys, the political influence of chiefs was largely tempered by other people of the community who merited such respect (warriors, donors of Feasts of Merit, charismatic personalities), and Mills provided the following outline in 1926: "There are no real chiefs at all, and the tendency is for the villages to be run by such people as have wealth and influence, and can shout loudly."[11]

The situation was very much the same among the Chang. Around 1936, only in two newly founded villages, Yamrup and Yonyimti, did chiefs exert real political power, while factionalism prevailed in older ones.[12] Elsewhere in the Naga Hills, this process seems to have occurred earlier, and could still be remembered among some 'democratic' groups such as Zemi, Rengma and Lhota When the British first encountered them, the Lhota has powerful village chiefs, or *Ekyung*, whose function was always transmitted along the patriclan. They organized warfare, managed overall village affairs with the village council, and usually received, among other privileges, the biggest share of loot acquired from raids. However, little of this remained some fifty years later when J. P. Mills wrote a monograph on this group, published in 1922. By this time, the chieftainship institution had vanished to such a point that the name itself, *Ekyung*, was hardly heard. In some

8 Hutton, 1969 [1921b] : 147-148.
9 *Ibid.* : 148-149.
10 Hutton, 1926: 28.
11 *Ibid.*
12 For the Zemi, or Kacha Nagas: Soppitt, 1885: 9-10; Bower, 1951: 71. For the Chang, Hutton, 1965: 23; Mills, 1926: 28.

villages, people still remembered that in the past it was customary for the chief to receive free labour service from his co-villagers on his lands, but affirmed that this right had ceased to be asserted several generations ago.[13] Cases of the complete disappearance of such chiefly privileges had been reported among the Sema over one or two generations.[14]

GUMSA OR *GUMLAO*?

So defined, Naga village-based political organization appears to have been neither *gumlao* nor *gumsa*. The so-called 'democratic' system of ritual hereditary chieftainship found in most Naga groups cannot be equated with the *gumlao* model since, according to Leach, the absence of hereditary chieftainship is an essential characteristic of this model. Similarly, the Sema organization that Leach assimilates to the *gumsa* model is not based on a sharp distinction between aristocratic and non-aristocratic lineages, but on the relationship between one chiefly individual and his followers and which does not give rise to any durable stratification of lineages. It also remains a village-based structure, for, while several communities are linked for defensive purposes by bonds of mutual assistance, the chief of the protecting community is in no way considered the 'owner' of a territory that would encompass the totality of allied village lands, as would the Kachin paramount chief.

It is true that both models are ambivalent to some extent. A *gumsa* community need not be hierarchical, and the *gumsa* chief need not be autocratic. What set the chief and aristocrats apart among the Kachins, as well as among the northern and central Chins, were symbols of social position, not material advantages. Nonetheless, the essential distinction between two social strata based on lineage affiliation remained, and these have classically been named in the literature 'aristocrats' and 'commoners'. Furthermore, *gumsa* organization comprised not only a village-based, but also a territorial-based unit, including a cluster of neighbouring villages organized into a pyramidal structure: every village had its own chief or headman, but the chief of one of them would also be considered the paramount chief of a politico-territorial domain (*mung*) comprising the lands and people of all allied villages. In other words, *gumsa* organization included two distinctive attributes of what anthropologists call a chiefdom.

Chiefdom organizations do exist among some Naga tribes, but, very surprisingly, they were ignored by Leach in his attempt to extend the *gumsa-gumlao* dichotomy to neighbouring societies. The Konyak, Wancho, Nocte and Tangsa groups, who occupy the northernmost part of the Naga Hills, have both stratified lineages and paramount chiefs (*Ang*, *Lowang* respectively), whose authority extends over a territorial domain consisting of a group of allied villages, and often behave like true autocrats. In

13 Mills, 1922: 96.

14 Mills, 1926: 28; Hutton, 1965: 23-25.

striking contrast with other groups, their political power is in no way related to a process of territorial expansion, as it was in the Sema or Chang cases. Neither is the chief in these groups seen as the representative of the village's founder kin: wherever the latter is found, he most often acts as an advisor of the chief, remaining subordinated to his authority.[15]
Parallels with the Kachin *gumsa* organization described by Leach (1954) and the chieftainship organization of northern and central Chins as reported by Lehman (1963) are evident. For example, a major distinction separates chiefly clans (called *Wangham* among the Konyak Thendu) from commoner clans (*Wangpen*). Marriages of men of commoner status with women belonging to *Wangham* lineages or clans are prohibited, while men of chiefly clans can take wives of the commoner stratum as secondary spouses. Such unions are responsible for the existence of several minor aristocratic clans (*Wangsu*, *Wangsa* among the Konyak Thendu). Village headmen are invariably members of aristocratic lineages and clans (major or minor), while paramount chiefs are recruited from chiefly families of the *Wangham* stratum only. Such a political structure is, as in the Kachin *gumsa* case, a chiefdom in line with the model conceptualized by Sahlins as a 'conical lineage chiefdom', that is, one in which rank is determined by genealogical distance from the chiefdom founder or ruler. As among the Kachins and Chins, in daily life the basic distinction between aristocrats and commoners is a matter of symbolic privilege more than economic advantage, and headmen are not necessarily the most influential men in their communities. Even the authority of paramount chiefs can be tempered by the village council, or effected only in their own ward of clan, as in the village of Wakching studied by Fürer-Haimendorf.[16] Economic goods are accumulated but largely redistributed through collective ceremonies.

Oral traditions collected so far among northern Naga groups unanimously attribute an external origin to the chiefs' families, and, thus, by extension to the social stratification as it exists today. Most local legends recount a process by which a chief was acquired from another village, either by submission or what is often more advantageously presented as an 'invitation'. As to its ultimate origin, the Nocte are quite explicit in connecting their chiefs' genealogies with Taï invaders from Burma:

> The first chief came from the Hukong valley of Burma. His name was Khunbao. With a few attendants he crossed the Patkai hills and followed a very difficult route to a place called Sajuok, near the present Laptang village. The inhabitants of Sajuok, whom he subdued, accepted him as their Chief. He had two sons Khunlung and Khunhai. They were succeeded by Tangthok and Tankam. The present chiefs of Namsang, Borduria and Laptang claim descent from Khunbao.[17]

15 Dutta, 1978: 92, 195, 206-207.
16 1969: 63.
17 Dutta 1978: 190.

This story clearly refers to the origin of the Ahom State whose founder Sukapha, a Shan prince coming from Mong Mao in Upper Burma, succeeded in establishing a small kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley by defeating the Chutiyas in 1228. Khunbao is a Shan title for 'Prince ' that primarily applies to the ruler of a realm or princedom (*möng*). Historically, the lands of the Konyak, Wancho and Nocte were situated in the immediate vicinity of the three successive capitals of the kingdom, Abhaipur, Choraideo and Garghaon, and the Nocte of the lower area traditionally exploited salt mines, which were of strategic interest to the Ahoms. Not surprisingly, the Ahoms claimed control over the Naga salt. When they set up their capital at Garghaon in 1253, there were several clashes with the Nagas over the collection of salt from the salt licks, as these happened to lie in Naga territory. However, the Nagas were finally subdued and the Ahoms established their political domination over the foothills, this first took the shape of a tax imposed on the villages exploiting the salt mines.[18]

Later, political relations became much more intricate, although this was apparently to mutual advantage. The salt mines were under the indirect control of the Ahoms, and the salt manufactured in the low hills continued to be shared between the State and the exploiting village until at least 1819. The Nagas owing allegiance to the Ahom Kings were claimed as subjects of the State, and, as such, benefited from military protection. In this way, the Ahoms managed to secure a buffer zone and prevent raids on their capitals by uncontrolled Naga groups. Economically speaking, submission led to some substantial advantages for the Naga groups: several of the chiefs received grants of irrigated lands (*khat*, reported in the Royal Court Chronicles, the *Buranji*, as *Nagakhat*) and of fishing waters (*bheel*) on the plain. Not only did the Ahom kings renounce their right to collect taxes from them, but they also allowed the Naga chiefs to levy taxes for their own benefit. This constituted an important source of income, and special administrative agents (*kataki*) were appointed for the purpose.[19]

Politically speaking, these Naga chiefs were treated not only as tributary allies, but were also conceded privileges and titles of the Ahom aristocracy. Furthermore, those having received grants of lands also enjoyed assignment corvee labour (*paik*) like the ordinary Assamese nobility.[20] The *Buranji* mention at least one occurrence of an Ahom princess being married to a Naga chief, reflecting a common way of contracting political alliances with other princedom courts or States in a Taï-Shan context.[21]

18 According to Elwin (1969) taxes claimed by the Ahom kings from their Naga 'subjects' consisted of slaves and elephant tusks.

19 The right conceded to some tribal communities to receive payments from specified villages in the foothills, provided the payment of annual tribute to the Ahom king, is known as *posa*, and was applied elsewhere in the foothills surrounding the Brahmaputra valley, for instance in areas inhabited by the Nyishis.

20 Mackenzie, 2001: 91.

21 Bhuyan, 1933: XXX; Condominas, 1980: 269; Leach, 1972 [1954]: 253. For instance, political relations between the Ahoms and the Manipuris were tied up with matrimonial relations and princess exchanges.

Also reported in the Royal Chronicles in reference to the Nagas is the King's habit of going hunting with 'allied *Khunbaos*', which is a clear indication that honorific titles normally restricted to the ruling aristocracy were conceded by the Ahoms to some Naga chiefs and were used by them in official documents.[22]

The result of this is very similar to which Leach reported for the Kachins: an emulation of the Shan princes by Naga chiefs. When first encountered by British officers, all Nocte chiefs designated themselves as *Khunbao* or *Sofa* (= *tsao pha*, a political title of Tai origin normally applying to the ruler of a *möng*).[23] Their chiefly genealogies were all ultimately connected to Ahom sovereigns, and the legends associated with the foundations of their lineages incorporated cultural elements borrowed from the Ahoms, such as the king's title (*Swargadeo*) and the figure of the ruler descending on earth by a silver or golden ladder.[24] Among other cultural elements pointing to Taï origin are the use of thrones as specific privileges of chiefs, common in all northern groups but unknown elsewhere in the Naga Hills (most elaborate ones, decorated with umbrellas, are found among the Nocte, who claim there use is a legacy from the Ahom kings), as well as cock fights as part of the chief's installation rituals.[25]

The military support of the Ahoms had considerable impact on traditional political life in that part of the Naga Hills, especially after the Ahoms were taught the use of gunpowder following the unsuccessful intrusion by the Mughals during the reign of Suhunmunga (1497-1539). Allied Naga villages were provided with firearms for defensive purposes, sometimes with heavy artillery as in the case of Borduria who received two cannons from the Ahoms.[26] Following this, the Nagas established in the foothills rapidly took control of the gun trafficking in the entire hill region. As reported in the *Buranji* for 1665, when allied chiefs called on military help from the royal army, it could result in the destruction by cannon of entire villages.[27] Most oral traditions of the northern Nagas in the lower region recount the arbitration of the Ahom king in conflictual successions to the role of chief, though no mention of such a direct intervention can be found in the *Buranji*.[28]

This backing by the Ahom Court of northern Naga hereditary chieftainship in the foothills rapidly turned to the advantage of a few small villages, such as Borduria, Namsang and Laptang, whose ruling families managed to take over the political control of the entire northern hilly area. Traditionally among the Nagas, the widespread institution of headhunting

22 Bhuyan, 1933: 195.
23 Butler, 1847: 155; Dalton, 1872: 41.
24 Dutta, 1978: 193-194, 283; Gait, 1926 [1906]: 286.
25 Dutta, 1978: 80, 197; Fürer-Haimendorf, 1969: 59; Srivastava, 1973: 12.
26 Dutta, 1978: 9.
27 Gait, 1926 [1906]: 156.
28 For instance Dutta, 1978: 205-206.

resulted in the constitution of small, political realms uniting several village for defensive purposes. Most often, a powerful and heavily populated village provided military protection while at the same time exercising a right of overlordship over tributary villages in the wider territory. However, and insofar as colonial sources may be considered reliable, the size of such political realms rarely exceeded fifteen or so communities. Nonetheless, Borduria and Namsang each comprised some sixty houses by the turn of the twentieth century, and extended their political control over thirty five and fifty or more villages respectively, some of them in Burma, all believed to have been subjugated by force.[29] It is doubtful that such a favourable situation could have taken place without any external help, as some of their subordinated villages, such as Laju, already comprised more than three hundred households by that time. More likely, the control of the firearms trade in the hands of Borduria and Namsang since the sixteenth century played a decisive role in what can be viewed as a process of political expansion. This process was consolidated in the political realms of northern Naga groups by the placement of an aristocrat at the head of each subjugated village. This man would act as chief and would be close kin of the paramount chief, related in most cases through a collateral branch (such as a paternal nephew or cousin), or of an inferior status (such as the son of one of his commoner spouses). This customary rule points to the probable origin of social stratification amongst the northern Nagas as being those families of chiefs appointed or backed by the Ahoms. In the case of the Nocte, at least, there is little doubt that the *Ang* aristocracy as we know it today spread from the villages of Laptang, Borduria and Namsang, whose ruling familiers controlled the salt extraction for the benefit of the Ahom kings.

CONCLUSION

The northern Naga system has many similarities with Kachin *gumsa* organization, as well as with the northern and central Chin chiefdom systems (Haka, Sukte, Kamhau, Sailo, Tashon, Zothung, Lautu and so on). It can be considered without hesitation a *gumsa*-like political model in the sense that it emerged historically from the attribution of special titles, functions and privileges by Taï (or, in the case of the Chins, Burmese) lowland centralized powers to some tribal chiefs, and attempts by the latter to emulate their rulers. Such an historical development seems to have been fairly common in continental Southeast Asia, especially in areas politically dominated by the Taï, as similar processes have been identified so far among the Achang, the Karen, the Lawa, the Muong, the Palaung and possibly others.[30]

29 Dutta 1978: 191-198.

30 Leach, 1972 [1954]: 85; Lemoine, 1978: 867-868; Marshall, 1922: 127-129; Steiman & Sanidh Rangsit, 1939; Robequain, 1948: xvi; Condominas, 1980: 264; Lowis, 1906: 21-22; Cameron, 1912: xxxiii-xxxiv.

On the other hand, a *gumlao* model, such as defined by Leach, does not exist among the Nagas, whose political institutions are always centered upon the prominent figure of a hereditary leader or chief, even in groups where lineage stratification is absent. Indeed, the *gumlao* model even appears atypical in the region for at least two reason. First, despite Leach's assessment, it remains historically isolated, being restricted to the Triangle Region in what is today northern Burma, and the Jingphaw and Atsi groups of the 'Kachin", and is said today to be virtually extinct.[31] Second, the *gumlao* model does not fit into the general framework on which chieftainship is based in both Naga and Kachin societies. Leach says that the thigh-eating chief must be a member of a lineage considered 'older' than any other, and is said to 'own' (*madu ai*) the village territory (*lamu ga*, literally 'sky and earth'). As such, he receives the thigh of all four-footed animals killed on hunts or during collective ceremonies, as well as free labour service from the villagers on his lands, including help to build or repair his house without reciprocal obligation. Most important among his privileges and attributes is the monopoly of the cult of the *Madai nat*, the guardian of village welfare, which is seen as a distant relative of the chief and whose shrine is kept in the chief's house. All of the above makes the Kachin *duwa* an equivalent to the Naga ritual chief, since the basis of chieftainship in both societies lies in the essential link between the representative of the village founder's lineage and the village guardian spirit, which provides the thigh-eating chief's legitimacy. This model of the chief as being not only owner and distributor of land, head of his community and commander in war, but also high priest, responsible for offering sacrifices to the territorially rooted guardian deities whose good will was believed to be necessary for prosperity, certainly applies for the Chins too, as seen, for instance, in *Khuahrum* cults.

In a *gumlao* community, according to Leach, the lineage heads collectively officiate in the cult of the *nat* associated with the foundation of the village, but never organize a sacrifice to the *Madai nat*. This system, which denies any individual, exclusive access to the tutelary deities, is quite coherent with their absolute rejection of any status differentiation between lineages. However, it should be noted, it is also somewhat aberrant in the regional context where at least a kind of ritual prominence is conceded to the descendant of the village founder to the detriment of other lineages, especially those of later immigrants. So, in a way, the *gumlao* model is indeed revolutionary, and that is precisely how the first British observers saw it: a localized, rebellious movement that had emerged as a reaction against the tyranny of some Kachin chiefs. Leach rejected this view, arguing that social change resulted from the structural instability of both egalitarian and hierarchical models, and suggested it must take place indefinitely in a cyclical, non-linear way. This interpretation of Kachin political dynamics is commonly known as the 'oscillatory model'.

31 La Raw, *passim*.

The Nagas and the oscillatory model

If we admit that there is no equivalent of Kachin *gumlao* organization among the Nagas in general, we must now turn our attention to the Konyak system, for, in the context of Kachin society, and following Leach analysis, the *gumlao* system can be seen as an evolutionary by-product of the *gumsa* model, which is structurally unstable. According to Leach, the very dynamics of traditional Kachin society lie in its tendency to oscillate between the 'aristocratic model', a form of organization under powerful chiefs which comes close to the Shan ideal of ruling princes, and a 'democratic model', a form of organization in which the claims of such dominance were rejected. Simply speaking, when people no longer saw advantage in the chiefly system, they revolted. Historically, the change from *gumsa* to *gumlao* is supposed to have occurred when a sufficient number of people withdrew support from the former system, especially when the chief began to behave like a prince.
Do we find something equivalent among the Nagas? At first sight, an opposition similar to that of the *gumsa-gumlao* system seems to exist among the Konyak Nagas studied by Fürer-Haimendorf (1939, 1969) through the distinction made by them between Thendu and Tenkoh groups. The two are easily distinguishable by their appearance and ornaments. While the Thendu group conform to the general model of chiefdom described so far among northern Nagas, in the Tenkoh group villages are more simply run by the village council. The *Ang* is only one of its members, and political powere is often fragmented between sections of the village, wards (Assamese *khel*) or bachelor's dormitories (Ass. *morung*), each of them being free to contract separate political alliances with allied *khel*, *morung* or villages.

As in the Kachin *gumsa* system, there are several reasons why the power of the Great *Ang* is unstable:

1) the *Ang*'s domination is legitimated by the general belief that his ritual action in relation to tutelary spirits will ensure good crops, peace or success in war. However, being subordinated to the preservation of village welfare, the chief's action always remains at risk of being contested in case of a series of failures.
2) The *Ang*'s domination is based on an unequal distribution of cultivable land and the monopoly he can assert overt certain feasts (as in the case of the *manao* monopolized by the Kachin *duwa*). Such ceremonies strengthen the relationship between the chief and tutelary spirits and convert the surplus collected from tributes and collective labour into social prestige. However, this monopoly can always be questioned, as, for instance, in cases where a shortage of land or grain affects the redistribution process. Furthermore, as Leach has shown in the Kachin context, the *Ang* can also be challenged by the emergence of leaders of smaller sections (hamlets,

warts, bachelor's dormitories), who might not openly contest the chief's supremacy but may start themselves behaving as true chiefs, albeit on a smaller scale, receiving from their followers the noble part of game and presiding over religious rituals for the welfare of their section.

The recent history of many villages in the Tenkoh group provides several instances of either the decline of influence of chiefly lineages or the destitution of the chief. Some of them seem to have followed the fall of the Ahom kingdom and the subsequent Burmese invasion at the end of the eighteenth century. In Wakching, for example, a long lasting quarrel opposing aristocratic and commoner wards was finally settled by calling a chief from the powerful village of Chi. Nevertheless, the new chief never succeeded in imposing his authority beyond his own lineage over other *morung*, which remained virtually independent. In Wanching, the *Ang* was simply deprived of his rights and privileges for having had an incestuous relationship. He was replaced by a member of the same lineage, who was designated not by himself, but collectively by the villagers or their representatives.[32] Extreme circumstances may even have led to true rebellions, as in Chen, where the villagers massacred the *Ang* and part of his family.
Despite this, Naga ethnographic sources provide no indication of something resembling the shift from a *gumsa*-like system to a *gumlao*-like one in Leach's sense. For an essential difference with the Kachin context lies in the fact that both groups, Thendu and Tenkoh, distinguish between aristocrats and commoners on the basis of descent, even if the distinction in Tenkoh villages is of minor importance from a practical point of view. As Fürer-Haimendorf notes in the case of the Tenkoh village of Wakching:

> The status differences between aristocrats and commoners was never disputed by the commoners who form the majority of the people of Wakching (…). They conceded without hesitation the right of the members of chiefly clans to marry several wives, while accepting that monogamy was mandatory for commoners.[33]

In other words, rebellion, defined as an attempt within a society to disrupt the *status quo* and redistribute power and resources, does not imply structural change as the shift from *gumsa* to *gumlao* does, according to Leach. The northern Naga political systems rather parallel the situation prevailing among the northern Chins, among whom, due to the general recognition of status differences between lineages, Lehman could not identify a 'true' egalitarian model of the Kachin-*gumlao* type:

> Nowhere does anyone dispute the fact the bawi rank carries special privileges. People only question the basis for assigning rank, and even democratic

32 Fürer-Haimendorf, 1969: 57, 63.
33 1969: 63.

headmen are generally of bawi rank.[34]

In contrast, among the Kachin *gumlao*, many villages were not only run exclusively on a village basis by headmen and councils of elders, but were composed entirely of commoners.

Leach was absolutely right when stressing the intrinsic instability of the *gumsa*-like systems, and the fact that political units within Kachin society were in a continual state of flux. However, the *gumlao* model appears isolated, too in the history of this region, as structural shifts of the *gumsa-gumlao* type seem to be rare or absent in neighbouring societies, such as the Nagas and the Chins, who also possess *gumsa*-like political organizations. Thus, the exact role of *gumlao* organization in Kachin political dynamics remains to be evaluated.

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34 Lehman, 1963: 141.

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