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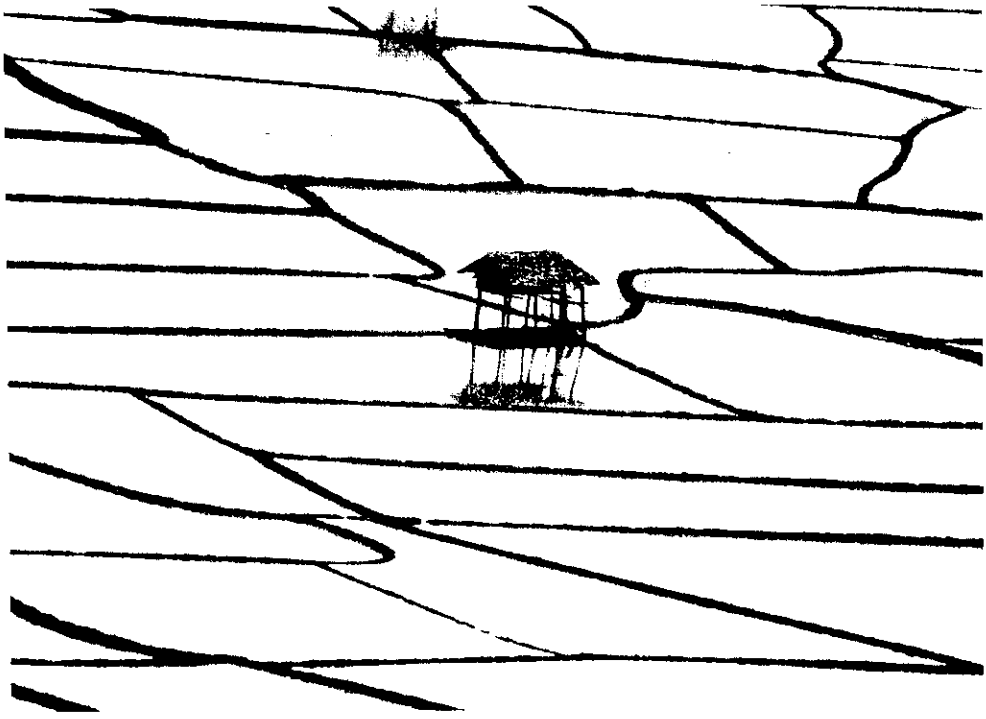

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INTERNAL INFLATIONARY PRESSURES IN THE PRESTIGE ECONOMY OF THE FEAST OF MERIT COMPLEX: THE CHIN AND KACHIN CASES FROM UPPER BURMA

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The Chin peoples, who inhabit the mountains of westernmost Burma bordering India, and the Kachin (Jinghpaw), who live in Burma's northernmost mountain and adjacent regions of Yunnan and Assam (China and India, respectively), have been prominent in a good deal of anthropological discussion of such topics as asymmetrical alliance marriage systems, systematic oscillations between so-called autocratic and non-autocratic village political organization, and the importance, especially in upland South Eastern Asia, of the long-term interdependency between them and their civilized plains neighbors (the Burmese in the case of the Chin, the Shan, Burmese, Chinese and Ahom, in the case of the Kachins) for the general structure of their cultures and societies. A central consideration in all such discussions has been the association between their systems of differential social ranking and the institution of sacrificial feasting—called the feast of merit complex in that part of the world (see, for example, Fürer-Haimendorf 1953, Loeffler 1954, Stevenson 1943, Leach 1954, Lehman 1963).

I shall argue that the jural ambiguities of status/rank in these societies are a built-in source of inflationary pressures that can, when external economic conditions are appropriate, lead to substantial changes in the overall social-political order.

Consider the Central Chin (Lehman 1963). There were, and indeed are, three traditional ranks or general statuses: *bawi*, that is, aristocrats or lords, *chia*, or commoners, literally ritually imperfect, and *sal*, slaves. It is not necessary to go into all the ramifications of meaning of these classes, and in fact only the first two need be considered seriously here. I have described them all in the work cited above.

On the one hand, the *bawi/chia* distinction is deemed hereditary. There are a number of clans that are *bawi phun* ('clan'), and there are many more that are *chia phun*. Slaves are either those persons that have submitted themselves to this status for reasons of protection from enemies or captives taken in raiding and warfare. While I shall have next to nothing to say about slaves in this paper, it is worth mentioning at this juncture that this rank, like the other two, is full of ambiguity. The status is more or less hereditary; at least the children of female slaves are born slaves. But, of course, there can be no slave clans, and slaves are, however declassé, members of the clans of their respective owners. Now, the marriage price of any women is roughly a function of her rank or status, so that, in particular, the marriage price for a female slave may be substantially higher than that for many a female commoner, on the

grounds that, after all, she is a member of a *bawi* clan (or—see below on the equivocal character of *bawi* rank—at any rate of a *bawi* lineage), and the marriage price for any such woman has got to reflect *phun thawh* (the value of the 'clan'—it is, otherwise a rate of compensation payable to a person by anyone found guilty of having defamed the accuser's ritual or social purity or rank).

Turn now to the *mi-chia* (*mi*, 'people'). Quite generally, such people try to deny that they belong to any clan on the grounds that clan is only important for aristocrats; but that excuse is insufficient for explaining this patently false claim of clanlessness. What is, in fact, at issue is that, on the one hand, commoners without practical hope, or ambition, of competing in matters of status rivalry claim, at least, to have no great stake in the matter, with, perhaps, the added consideration of wishing to minimize, symbolically, the significance of their lower standing. But, on the other hand, there are commoners, by clan at least, who have practical or effective ambitions in this rivalry, and, for them, of course, the thing is to discount the idea that status/rank (the *bawi/chia* clan distinction itself, ultimately) is rigidly hereditary. Thereby hangs my tale.

There is a legal principle that conflicts with the principle that rank is hereditary; it is the principle that rank may be won and lost through the conversion of economic-political success into ritual accomplishment, for example, through the feast-of-merit hierarchy.

This is no room to go into the considerable intricacies of this system of feasting, which I have described elsewhere (see also Bareigts 1980). But one must at least understand that rank, *bawi* rank in particular, requires to be validated by the giving, by the householder, of a graded series of rituals-cum-feasts. These feasts of merit, which most directly transform practical attainments into social and ritual standing, come in two interleaved series: feasts having to do with the activities of the house/household (chiefly having to do with the building of ever more elaborate and symbolically decorated houses and compound fences) and feasts having to do with a man's achievement in the wider world of hunting and warfare. And so, indeed, one of the requirements of building even a very modest independent house is the giving of at least small-scale feasts, and the occasional person without even these minimal resources may lose even *chia* standing and, in order to have a physical as well as social position in the community, be forced to seek the position of a slave to a householder of high aristocracy. He cannot validate his own standing; therefore, it must be derivative of that of his master.

In any case, this situation has got to mean that the only thing actually hereditary about rank is the right to try and maintain the position of one's father. Succession here is only presumptive not automatic (as usual, the Lintonian distinction between achieved and ascribed status simply does not work). Clearly, given the well-attested fragility of the general economy in this region of isolated and generally poor swidden-

farming country, and the even more general vagaries of differential demographic success and of individual fortunes and abilities, there is a not inconsiderable likelihood that any given person born to a *bawi* household may not be able to maintain that position ritually. Moreover, given the fact that inheritance is, depending upon clan tradition, either by primogeniture or ultimogeniture, the chances are good that a non-inheriting son may fail to live up to his father's position. This condition is well understood in Chin folk sociology, and the figure of such a son, most saliently a non-inheriting son of a chief, as a *mi-hrawk hrolh*, a disillusioned, socially alienated, rather unreliable and devil-may-care sort of individual, is a common cliché.

Bawi rank then is definitely something that can be lost, but this potential loss is ambiguous; for, effectually, such a person is still of *bawi phun* (clan), though the lineage or lineage segment (lineage and segment are shown in Lehman [1963] to be a relative, not absolute distinction) descending from him is not of *bawi* standing. His *phun thawh* is certainly less than that of the true aristocrats in his clan, though it may, at least for a time, say a generation or so, continue better than that of the out and out commoner. If he or his descendants recoup their fortunes, then full *bawi* standing may readily be resumed in the usual way. If not, their claim to *bawi* clan standing becomes increasingly an embarrassment to all parties, and the result is undoubtedly that such a lineage comes to be held unreservedly a commoner *(chia)* lineage, and, once again, the question of its clan is allowed to rest in decent obscurity.

If rank can be lost, it can be gained, but this is not as straightforward an idea as it may seem; it is not simply a matter of illicit inference on the part of these people. Rather, it is the consequence of a sort of conspiracy between commoners, of one sort or another, who have acquired practical fortune and means, on the one hand, and aristocrats trying to reverse a decline—or trying to increase their *bawi* standing and political importance (for instance, by amassing an entourage of obligated clients), on the other hand. Let me examine this conspiracy a bit.

It takes resources to raise or maintain one's *bawi* standing, of course. Moreover, if one is to increase one's standing, there is no better way than to ensure that the marriage price for one's sisters and daughters is as high as can be got. In this matter, an interesting principle surfaces; whatever price one manages to extract from suitors becomes, by customary law, the 'traditional' marriage price for women of that whole particular lineage or segment.

Understandably, of course, there is pressure from others to restrict anyone's trying to raise such 'traditional' prices, as this sort of thing tends to throw the whole system of prices and of relative standings out of equilibrium and, furthermore, generally tends towards forcing costs upward towards the point where increasingly many people will be unable to meet them, thus endangering the system as a whole. The principle of

trying thus to maintain system prices applies beyond the domain of the prestige economy in fact. For instance, consider the cost of hiring porters from village to village—a common expense in this mountainous region largely without roads. When official persons travel through the area, if they have enough money, they will try to attract enough carriers by offering higher than standardized rates, and this action is sufficiently resented so that the inhabitants of the region have attempted recurrently to get the government to enforce fixed maximum rates for this sort of service. But enforcement is at best lax, since many of the offenders are government servants. In any event, the complaint is that such an enlarged payment will, by local custom, at once become the standard rate, so that, sooner or later, local people needing carriers will be unable to afford hiring them—a genuine hardship.

It is, therefore, somewhat difficult to raise the asking price for one's women in marriage. In fact, other *bawi* of good standing will simply refuse to pay such prices initially, and this can threaten the asker's *bawi* standing, since that standing depends, in considerable measure, upon his ability to marry his women off to *bawi* of political and ritual and economic standing not better than his own. Wife-givers take precedence over wife-takers, and a good alliance marriage is a marriage in which one pays, so to speak, both for the ritual recognition of importance by those superior and for whatever political protection or potential economic assistance such wife-givers may afford the individual. Who then amongst *bawi* of generally good standing will pay inflated prices for women from lineages of no great standing, even if such lineages have recently acquired relative wealth? Not *bawi* of better standing or greater wealth, surely, and not even *bawi* of solid ritual standing but not such great resources, because they, too, can do better elsewhere!

However, we have already seen that there exist within the system lineages of quite doubtful *bawi* standing: either lineages within *bawi* clans trying to recoup their lost position, or lineages of out and out commoners 'on the make.' Such lineages, if they can marshall the resources, will always, within limits of course, be willing to 'pay extra' for the privilege of marrying a genuine *bawi* woman. The reason, again, is quite simple: a related jural principle inherent in asymmetrical alliance marriage systems generally. That is, that the standing of the issue of any given marriage is a partial function of the standing of the wife who bears them, just in case, of course, that it is a ritually full marriage, guaranteed by the payment of the highest price the wife's lineages can successfully ask—viz., its 'traditional' price for its own female issue of its own major wives. For, it is only a major wife, that is, one acquired at full price in the sense mentioned above, whose children can succeed to their father's ritual standing (or to a claim of such standing), and who may participate with her husband in his ritual performances in the feast of merit cycle—a participation that is essential in any such ritual.

So, in spite of all pressures to restrict such marriage price raising, de facto limitations upon this practice amount simply to the availability of someone somewhere in the community or region of commoners (one way or another) who is willing and able to meet any given asking price. Ordinarily, even the best *bawi* lineages will not try to raise resources by this means, for their need to maintain good relations with other 'good' *bawi* lineages will motivate them to submit to the general pressure against such a practice. But, when those of less exalted standing than they have put the prices up, they, too, in order to maintain their relative position, will have to do so, and hence an inflationary cycle cannot be avoided within the system as a whole.

Furthermore, let there be an infusion of wealth into the region as a whole from outside—say on account of new recourse to education or economic opportunities arising in the plains and valleys of Burma proper available to persons irrespective of their standing in the local society, and the inflationary cycle may be carried to almost any degree. In such circumstances, clearly, it is not surprising to learn that opinion favoring the abolition or evasion of the whole system of marriage prices (on the part of the poorer segment of the population increasingly unable to afford what are now traditional prices inflated at all ranks and levels) arises and grows. And in this connection, people try more and more to opt out of the attendant religious/ritual system that motivates the system of marriage payments, and to convert to foreign religions (Christianity in the north and center, Buddhism in the southern Chin hills). Even for the converts, however, whose motivations for conversion, of course, are far more varied and complicated than just the matter I have here attended to, general considerations of prestige and invidious distinction also work against such abolition. Nor is it surprising to learn that opinion is also marshalled towards at least restricting the scale of marriage prices—this by traditionalists and converts, both.

All the foregoing is not, however, the whole story; for not only the system of marriage prices but also the system of feasting itself become subject to these same inflationary pressures, and with much the same destructive results for this, too.

Consider now the fact that giving a feast requires that one be formally accepted as a feast-giver. True, an uncontrovertible *bawi* householder (supposing he has already given one or more of the feasts of lower grade prerequisite to the one he now offers) will easily be able (again, providing he can afford it all) to get the proposed feast accepted as such, since he will easily persuade others to attend as guests and witnesses. But remember the idea that giving, if it is to achieve merit, requires that the relevant public accept the act as such (Lehman, 1987).

Who, in this case, is the 'relevant' public? In the first place, they are the other *bawi* of the community and region who have given feasts of grade at least as high as the one now proposed. Secondly, perhaps more

particularly, there are those particular *bawi* households that are one's matrimonial allies: one's *bawi* wife-givers and wife-takers. Without at least some of all these categories in formal attendance, the whole affair will fail and be held to be null and void. But even in the kind of case mentioned, the matter is not all that automatic; for, as is also the case on any formal ritual occasion, such as, say, a marriage ceremony, the persons who absolutely have to attend must be persuaded to do so by means of a formal set of categories of payment: the price for travelling, the price for crossing the compound threshold, the price (paid to a bride's mother) for having suckled her, for having carried her on the back in a blanket, and so on, seemingly without end. But, of course, in the case in hand, provided only that the feast-giver has maintained reasonably good relations with these other persons and households and lineages, these can be considered only ceremonial persuasions. And if some amongst any of the relevant categories refuse to come, it is all right as long as some others in each agree to attend.

What, now, of the aspiring commoner wanting to become *bawi*, as it were, by giving a series of these feasts? In the first place, obviously, he has got to get *bawi* marriage allies. We have already provided him with *bawi* wife-givers, of course, but his wife-takers, surely, are not yet of *bawi* rank. What *bawi* would pay a *bawi*-type of marriage price for a woman from such a lineage? Only, perhaps, a very declassé *bawi* intent upon riding his wife-giver's coat tails back into full *bawi* standing; or else yet another aspiring commoner persuaded he can do the same thing through such a marriage, namely, persuaded that his new wife-giver will succeed in the feast-giving game. For, if our man at issue does indeed succeed in becoming, however reluctantly and ambiguously accepted, a *bawi*-through-feasting, then, at law, his wife-takers, in case they have paid a full price for our man's daughter or sister in marriage, will be accepted at least in so far as their capacity to fulfill the requirement of attendance at his feast is concerned. In effect, then, it depends upon his *bawi* wife-givers and upon other *bawi* of equal or greater feasting rank.

Now, it ought to be plain that our aspiring feast-giver is going to have to pay a lot more to persuade these people to come to his feast than has hitherto been 'customary.' And so, we see the same inflationary cycle operating once more. For his new payments, providing he can find relevant people to accept the higher payments out of need or avarice or political advisability, will at once become the going rate. Furthermore, he will have to make the feast bigger, thus more expensive to give, in yet another way. For any given level of feast he will have to kill more animals, both sacrificial and merely gustatory, if he is to persuade the public to take the necessary interest; and while this is not a ritual consideration and does not set a formal and mandatory standard, it does make future feast-givers feel that they have to compare their efforts with the example he has now

set in order to make themselves a name in the public eye as important feast-givers and important *bawi* generally.

When it is only the incredibly wealthy (or profligate and ambitious) man who can give feasts in these circumstances, the system of feast-giving and everything tightly connected with it in the general system of ritual ranking and associated native politics, begin to give ground, become rare, and go out of fashion. It may not disappear very quickly, but feasts become rare, plans for giving them get postponed longer and longer, because it takes longer to accumulate the wherewithal, and eventually postponed indefinitely. They are now given infrequently, often merely as a sort of nostalgic example for a public who either long for former entertainments and symbols of cultural identity or have never seen such a thing and are merely curious about ancient customs. The religious-cosmological meanings and values informing the system of feasts and so on tend to lose more and more in competition with new religions from outside that have more and wider political, economic, and general cultural saliency in more modern conditions. Inflation has, once again, blown the system up!

And yet, the old system, the old 'prestige economy,' to use Stevenson's (1943) felicitous term, may not be wholly dead in certain circumstances. Take away, or otherwise reduce, the effectual flow from outside that fuels this inflation, and the system, to a certain extent at least, comes back to life. Thus, during the period starting with the 1962 socialist revolution in Burma and extending more or less up to the present, the real value of the kyat (Burma's unit of currency) fell drastically. The official economy was able to import rather little in the way of the vast quantity of goods people needed or had got used to having that come from outside the country, including some basic commodities. Only the so-called black market was able to provide these things, through the smuggling trade, and this trade, based chiefly upon bartering in kind, made little use of the kyat. Its purchasing power thus reduced, the economic and exchange structure based upon it came to have far less superior attraction over the traditional local arrangements than had earlier been the case. It became, once again, of paramount importance to invest, so to speak, in one's fellow villagers and in the traditional organization of mutual dependencies and assistance, even for ordinary survival.

In a sort of Gresham's Law effect, the less inflated economy tended to drive out the more inflated, and it was of use to start again, on a very limited basis, however, investing one's labor and one's productive output in such things as feast giving, which, therefore, has witnessed a certain upswing in these latter years. But, so much for the Chin example. More exactly, regarding reference to Gresham's Law, it now becomes sensible to expend one's greatly devalued kyat in flavor of accumulating the 'currency' of greater (exchange) value, that is, the exchange counters and

relations of the old, traditional prestige economy. Quite literally, the bad 'currency' drives out the good.

Let us turn our attention now, briefly, to the Kachin, so well-known on account of Leach's classic work on them (1954). But let us look at certain corrections that have been made to his facts and his analysis by the anthropologist LaRaw Maran (1967), himself a Kachin.

Leach discounts as mythic historicism the idea that the *gumlao* version of the traditional Kachin political order has, as Kachins universally insist, a fairly recent historical source. Maran has argued (see also Friedman 1979), however, that this source can be approximately pinpointed between the end of the 18th century and, roughly, the middle of the 19th century. Approximately, of course, because it was not a single event but a cumulative movement or development from assignable sources. I shall not recapitulate his historical evidence, but I shall make use of what he has to tell us. It is another example of a built-in inflationary source within the Kachin version of the feast-of-merit prestige economy being fueled from outside to the point where the system undergoes structural alterations.

The traditional Kachin (that is, Jinghpaw) political system involves hereditary chieftainship and the attendant stratification of clans into aristocratic and commoner sets. The heartland of this system is in the northwestern part of the Kachin territories. Here, we find the *gumchying gumtsa* chiefs, the classic 'thigh-eating' chiefs of the literature. In the areas where the valleys were more fully taken up by the Shans and their principalities (though the Jinghpaw even in their heartland had 'always' had some western Shan [and/or Ahom] principalities close by and had long been clients of these), an outlet had been found, for all one knows, deliberately sought, for the ambitions of the non-inheriting sons of chiefs. Here, in the new hill lands, they could carve out for themselves new domains as thigh-eating chiefs. This was, of course, supported by the bigger chiefs back home, so to say, not only because it gave them a safety valve for ever-simmering discontent, but also for another reason.

The home chiefs, in the *gumchying gumtsa* system, controlled access to the ritual underpinnings of chiefly status, because they controlled the hereditary priests or ritual officiants who are essential for the performance of the feast-of-merit-like ceremonies by which such a chief may, alone, achieve and raise his rank—therewith, also, the kinds of dues he may demand of the common folk and lesser aristocrats in his domain. For such an aspirant to achieve chiefly standing, he had to have the services of such a priest, and, effectually at least, he could get this service reliably only by applying to some greater chief, to whom, then, the aspirant became a client, and usually a wife-taker—for these, too, are a people practicing asymmetrical alliance marriage. This condition naturally meant for the superior chief-patron that he would get both a

large addition to his wealth in the way of gifts, payments, and followers obliged to serve him in war and so on.

This is the system called *gumyu*, about which Leach has something to say but very incompletely and, perhaps, somewhat misleadingly. A man would set himself up somewhere as a chief, but to be recognized, and certainly to be raised to a ritually more serious chiefly standing, he had to submit himself to a patron. This notion of submission-cum-temporary renunciation of one's standing is the exact meaning of the verb *yu*, where the prefix *gum* indicates that the action is taken by someone with proper pretension or claim to aristocracy. It is important to keep this last observation in mind, since the same thing is true of the prefix on the expression *gumlao*, where the root to which it is prefixed, *lao*, means simply to rebel, revolt, or opt out. And so, it certainly cannot be the case that *gumlao* is, as Leach wishes us to suppose, an anti-aristocratic movement in principle, or an egalitarian one. But more of this later. The aspirant had to renounce his position, at least ritually, whilst asking the patron-chief to sponsor a series of rituals. The net consequence of this act would be the reinstallation and confirmation of the aspirant as a true chief of rank under the patronage of the sponsoring chief, who then backed the client's claims to standing with the power and prestige of his own.

It is true that some chiefs in what we may call the new lands did, for just the reasons Leach adduces, put themselves forward as similar to Shan princes. In doing so they put themselves into a rather different system of politics, for they were not dependent upon the system of installation under classical chiefs and priests from the older territories. These were the *gumtsa* chiefs, and it is incorrect, as Maran has shown, to confuse them with the *gumchying gumtsa* chiefs, hence to see Kachin chieftainship in general as a drift toward Shan models. In fact, as Leach properly observes, these *gumtsa* chiefs, proportionally to their degree of assimilation to the status of Shan princes, risked alienating themselves from their fellow Kachins as their necessary infrastructure of power, and this condition served as a limitation upon the expansion of the *gumtsa* system. Moreover, insofar as these *gumtsa* chiefs based themselves, like Shan princes, upon wet-land cultivation, giving up a base in swidden cultivation, they also deprived themselves of the services of Kachin priests, because these ritual services depended upon the maintenance by a chief of swidden lands. So much did this add to such a claimant's alienation from his Kachin colleagues that there seems to have arisen a sort of compromise system known as *gumrawng gumtsa*, which, being semi-Shan/semi-Kachin, was especially unstable. I shall say nothing further about this system, save to point out that indeed it did tend to be involved in some kind of oscillation with *gumlao*. But this again is not the same thing as a fundamental oscillatory relationship between something called chiefly rule and something called egalitarian rule.

But back to the main argument, and to *gumyu*. For reasons that Friedman (1979) in particular has explicated nicely, during the period mentioned, beginning in the late 18th century, the Kachin leaders in what I have called the new lands came into some rather new and relatively non-traditional sources of wealth. It had mainly to do with the fact that a major Chinese caravan-trade route passed right through the new lands, between the two ecological zones Leach calls Zones B and C, respectively, in such a way that the hill folk of Zone C, intermediate between A (which includes the *gumchying gumtsa* heartlands) and Zone B, the region of *gumtsa* concentration, looked down onto these routes and could both levy tribute from the caravans (and the Shan principalities that needed the caravan trade) and produce and sell products. Caravan traders were, in any case, seeking to expand into the region, notably for opium trade. The controversy between Leach and others (such as, Nugent 1982, 1983; Leach 1983) about whether or not the Kachins, in those long ago years, grew or traded in opium concerned chiefly the more traditional Zone A and its extension into the Singhpo area of Assam, and is irrelevant to the point in hand. As Leach argues (1954: 26 ff.), opium was grown (in fact extended under the impetus of the caravan trade) in Zone B (and C, to some extent) during this period, and the sporadic irrigated terrace cultivation of C is to be understood as, more than anything else, an indication that this zone was something of a military zone requiring patches of cultivation defensible under siege.

Anyhow, the consequence, from the present point of view, was that more and more aristocrats could amass both the wealth and the followers needed to think of attempting to attain chiefly rank. In turn, this had to mean that the competition for *gumyu* patronage went up significantly. Obviously, then, the costs of doing *gumyu* mounted considerably, too, and, at the same time, what we may conveniently call the 'waiting period' between the initial search for a patron and the final feast at which the latter 're-installed' the aspirant also became much longer than it had previously been when the ratio between aspirants and possible patrons was less. We also have to realize that, in rather the fashion I explained (1963) for the so-called 'democratic style' of rule at Tashon and Haka of the Chin area, the *nouveaux riches* here, though they were clearly of aristocratic birth and intent upon chiefly privileges (see my earlier remark about the aristocratic significance of the *gum* in *gumlao*), were, at least generally, trying to be 'chiefs' in quite a new way. It was now possible for more than one person in a given community to pursue a chiefly career, because wealth and a following no longer necessarily depended upon exclusive control of a definite and continuous tract of land. It could be based, instead, upon leadership in the trading-and-raiding game.

What seems in the end to have happened was that the waiting period became simply too long and the costs—which mounted, of course, proportionally to the period over which recurrent gifts had to be made—

intolerable. Moreover, the successful aspirant had somehow to become a traditional type tract-of-land chief in order to complete the *gumyu* process, and only very few, clearly, could even think of managing this. It also was not seen as particularly important in a region where one simply did not need a tract to control in order to attract a following. But without a proper domain, no aspirant could become a 'thigh-eating' chief, because the paying of dues in question, a hind quarter of each major animal killed in the hunt or at home, was motivated by the idea that the tract-chief owns these 'fruits of the land.'

Meanwhile, these Kachin, having come into more intimate contact than earlier on with the (Buddhist) Shan, came to learn something of Shan Buddhist ideas, amongst them the idea of *wipaka* (Pali for the 'fruits of merit or demerit' of one's actions) or *yupaka* (the bastardized Shan form from which Kachin borrowed the term—see Lehman 1977). Also, the question had arisen whether the game was any longer worth the cost, and debate seems to have raged over this issue. After all, the first stage in the process, which gives the whole process its name, *gumyu*, means to resign one's immediate claim-in-principle to true, thigh-eating chiefly privilege. The real question then became whether, having done this deed, which costs nothing, it was reasonable or necessary and proper, to try and get these privileges again and have them confirmed through a patronage that had less practical significance than before in the politics of the new economy.

Like most genuinely ethical debates, this one, of course, never managed to be resolved to everyone's ultimate satisfaction. One side, motivated surely in part by practical considerations of economy and immediate realities, argued, to some extent, if Maran is right, and basing their position upon Buddhist notions to the effect that everyone had equal right to try to obtain merit, that it made no sense to seek to have these paramount rights over others in the community. It is interesting, moreover, to observe that, when, later on, Kachins became subject to successful Christian missionary influence, Christian ideas of 'equality before God' and the like, were also called upon to justify permanent renunciation of chiefly privileges—privileges, not rank or responsibility for adjudicating disputes or, in general, preserving the jural order. These Kachin were the *gumlao*. Those persisting in the search for 'true' chiefdom remained *gumtsa*, or, rather, *gumchying gumtsa*, in principle.

It is, clearly, not astonishing that we find ever since that localities change from being the one to being the other. It all depends upon who can succeed by which means. As in all such ideological disputes, no party has unambiguous and unarguable right on its side. The *gumlao* position is, in terms of traditional Kachin ritual sanctions, at best chieftainship *manque*, whilst adhering to the other position is costly and risky, though the advantages from at long last succeeding may be very great—especially under a British colonial regime that prefers dealing with domain chiefs

anyhow (as Leach points out). But the 'oscillation' that Leach (also Kirsch 1973) tries to assign causes to, between domain chieftainship *(gumsta)* and a system in which a community is ruled by a council of 'chiefs' *(gumlao)* is clearly a consideration—economic in the first place, ethical and inherently a matter of possibly unending debate in the local system of ideas, on the other. It cannot be thought of with nothing more to go on than a concept of internal structural limitations (as Leach would have it) or the notion of the ritual search for cosmic power (according to Kirsch). Rather, we have seen at work—certainly together with what both Leach and Kirsch have spoken of (the work of searching for practical power and for its ritually and cosmologically defined sources)—a major internally generated source of inflation (the *gumyu* system), which, fueled from without, once again creates an inflationary pressure eventuating in basic systemic change.

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