

Structural Categories in Kachin Gumsa Society

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DESCRIPTION

This paper was written by British Anthropologist Sir Edmund Leach. One of the interesting things in this paper is related to the structural categories of the Kachin Gumsa society. In this paper, Leach explains the elements related to ritual actions and the meanings attached to the Kachin people.

The Kachin Hpalang people understand each other's arguments well; the language they express is the language of ritual and mythology. All Kachin Hpalang people whether they speak Jingphaw, Atsi or Maru consider themselves as members of the Gumsa system. They believe that the leader (duwa) of Hpalang must have the right and title as a Gumsa chief and everyone in the community must fit into the leadership hierarchy.

Leach understands the fundamental principles of the Kachin people's ritual expression which is the "grammar" of ritual actions and also about how to agree in the Gumsa system. The functionalist of British Anthropology argues that it is impossible to analyze these principal forms without first explaining in detail "The Whole of Kachin culture".

There is, of course, a great variety of different forms of cultural activity of ritual significance and it would be ideal to describe and analyze them as a whole. In the case of the Kachin, there are not many basic elements of ritual expression, which can be explained without much difficulty. From a cultural perspective, the language variation of the Kachin is very different; the integration of society is at the political level, not the cultural level. The Hpalang communities such as the Jingphaw, Atsi, Maru, Lisu and Chinese, have special forms of customary behaviour.

Another Kachin-related paper by Kawlu Ma Nawng, History of the Kachin's of the Hukawng Valley, explains the cultural differences between the Kachin people of the Hukawng Valley and the Kawlu Ma Nawng. According to him, despite cultural and geographical variations, the Kachin people throughout the Kachin Hills area essentially share the same ritual symbols, which anthropologists call structural relationships.

In this paper, Leach explains the essential difference between "the ritual description of structural relations" and

"anthropologist's scientific description". An anthropologist attempts to adopt normal scientific procedures in finding special terms in language such as exogamy, patrilineage, status, role, etc. that have no meaning to other people in the culture being studied. As a result, the structural systems described by anthropologists are always related to static systems. Anthropologists usually understand social structure as a system of formal relationships that exist between individuals and groups in a social system.

Leach also explains the principles of organization in Kachin society and the basis of Kachin values, especially related to ownership, status/rank and religious beliefs. The concepts offered by the author are several topics such as: Territorial division, grouping of persons, affinal relationship, property and land tenure, rank and social class, belief in the supernatural, and political and religious office. In explaining the language expressions of the Kachin people, the author does not fully use local languages such as Kampung (kahtawng) and Kluster Kampung (mare). Instead, he uses the English words "village" and "village cluster."

Regarding concepts of territorial division, Leach explains that in some circumstances, the Kachin people distinguish verbally between the dwelling-house of ordinary people and the dwelling-house of a chief. The fundamental difference between the two is not in some form of house design but in the fact that the leader's house has a special compartment called the madai-dap (shrine) dedicated to the madai-nat, the leader of the sky spirits (mu nat) who is shown above as a kinship of one of the remote ancestral leaders.

The majority of Kachin people live in small, uncomfortable houses for more than one family. If they can afford to build a larger house it is part of the prestige they get. In simple terms, the ancestral spirits are known as masha nat (human spirits) or gumgun nat (protecting spirits) who receive offerings quite often in cases of misfortune, illness or minor ailment.

Regarding concepts concerning aggregates of persons, according to Leach 'when writing about family, what the writer means is the biological family of husband, wife and children, while the

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extended family can be a group of unmarried men and women who live in a village.'

The Kachin people call their family nta masha ("people of the house"). While the extended family is called by several words nu wa (mother) and ni nau (father). The Kachin people usually talk

about local groups in the kinship of their lineage rather than from the aspect of their family. People who have the same family name have the same lineage. Leach sees the generalization of gumsa and gumlao as balanced in Kachin society.