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Dominance in a Traditional State

The Kingdom of Kengtung

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Abstract. – This article in historical anthropology concerns a traditional kingdom in the Shan States of upper Burma. It discusses the nature of Shan kingship in relation to cultural grammars of political articulation. The problem addressed is how a ruler of foreign extraction who has usurped power can exercise a dominance that is acceptable on moral grounds, an acceptance we refer to as authority. The conciliation between power and authority lay in the writing of a series of political contracts. In Kengtung these contracts have been given the shape of a historical chronicle of early events in the development of the country. In Kengtung, as in so many other polities in the region, the king's ability stems from his superiority of descent, his ancestry being linked with the gods of the higher sphere of existence. What he can do on earth depends on what contracts and agreements he can enter with spiritual forces that emanate from the terrain and underground. Iconic grammars organise instrumental idioms from an array of social relations, which are not givens but need symbolic construction. The ultimate political contract in the Shan States is Buddhism. *[Burma, Shan States, symbolism, sacred kingship, authority, political contract]*

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Introduction

This essay concerns a traditional kingdom in continental Southeast Asia. Upper Burma once harboured a set of independent or semi-independent Tai-speaking states (the Shan States), each under the rule of charismatic kings. These states now belong to the past, having been dissolved by the central Burmese military regime and replaced by a single republican "Shan State." My focus here will be on the former State of Kengtung[1] on the eastern side of the Salween, which was abolished in 1962. The ethnographic material available is not overwhelmingly rich, rather the opposite. In order to discuss the fragmentary evidence available for Kengtung's past, I have occasionally introduced descriptive ethnographic notes from other Shan States whenever I felt this was called for. This is no doubt methodologically imperfect, but for my present purposes

1 This name is spelled in a number of ways; romanisation varies according to the various conventions and the more or less idiosyncratic usages prevailing in the texts: Keng Tung, Jengtung, Xiang Toung, etc. Here I have opted for the convention "Kengtung." This situation also applies to other terms being given differently by different authors. I have not attempted to unify the rendering of names and terms, but have simplified matters by just retaining what is in the various texts. When diacritical signs occur, I remove them, no doubt to the linguist's chagrin. The spelling of names and terms in this essay can thus only be regarded as indicative approximations of their real pronunciation and their correct spelling in romanised Shan and Hkun. I am sure the specialist will be able to identify these terms as I use them, while for the non-specialist this is probably of minimal importance.

I hope it will appear justified, as a broader perspective might provide some illumination of what we know only fragmentarily, or not at all, about Kengtung. However, the origin of the data is always made clear.

In anthropology, the classic account of the dynamics of social life pertaining to this area is Edmund R. Leach's celebrated "Political Systems of Highland Burma" (1954), which, among other things, presents a general synthesised account of Shan society. This present essay aims to shed further light on the nature of Shan kingship in a tentative discussion of cultural grammars of political articulation.

Situation of Kengtung

The polity of Kengtung was the largest of the Shan States, with a total area of some 32,000 sq. kilometres. Situated east of the Salween, its territory faced Laos, Yunnan, Thailand, and some other smaller Shan States. Its population in the 1920s was 200,344 (White 1923: 215). The 1901 "Gazetteer" estimated the Shan population of Kengtung at about 100,000 (Scott and Hardiman 1901: 416). Descriptions tell us that Kengtung is situated in a plain, surrounded by mountains rising some 900 meters above the agricultural fields of the lowlands. This plain is about 17 kilometres long and varies in width, on average being about 8 kilometres wide. As a whole, the state is extremely well watered. The rice lands of the valleys are highly fertile, and the annual yield is large.

Kengtung conforms to the general picture that the Shan populations of Burma and China occupy the river valleys and plains, where they cultivate rice, especially glutinous varieties, in irrigated fields. Rice land and rice cultivation are thus essential to notions of basic belonging, and rice appears prominently in mythology.[2] The majority of the population in Kengtung speak a version of Tai. They are often referred to as Hkun. There is also a substantial population of Wa (or Lawa), who speak a Mon-Khmer language. Many other "tribal groups" dwell in the Kengtung hill and mountain tracts. There was also a Chinese community in the state, Kengtung being a great thoroughfare and hub for Chinese trading caravans from Yunnan (MacLeod 1837: 993 f.; Younghusband 1888: 72–74).

2 See Bird (1897: 22); Woodthorpe (1897: 14, 17). The texts by Bird and Woodthorpe, appearing in print at about the same time, are often exactly the same. Why this is so, I do not know. See further Scott and Hardiman (1901: 379, 413); Leach (1954: 1, 30, 32, 213); Mangrai (2002: 216, 280).

Some Notes on History

The ancient history of this kingdom is rather obscure, and part of it is clearly mythological. The ruling lineage of Kengtung is supposed to have originated in Chiang Mai and migrated into the area in the thirteenth century, where it founded a new dominion. Roughly speaking, both Lao and Hkun chronicles state that the Kengtung valley was conquered from the "wild Wa" by the son of a nobleman accompanied by a Chiang Mai monk. It is said that these persons took with them their Buddhist religion, built monasteries, and introduced Lao versions of religious literature.

We shall return to the legends of the foundation of the state later on. More recent archaeological research indicates that Buddhism may have already been present in the trans-Salween area in the Bronze Age and Iron Age (Moore 2007). An official history of the development and events of the Kengtung state has been kept for ages (Énriquéz 1918: 79; Mangrai 2002).

More recently, we find that, after some turbulence in the early 1800s, when Kengtung was directly dominated by the Burmese court of Ava, the dynastic continuity of the Hkun kings was restored in 1813 (MacLeod 1837: 995 f.; Garnier 1873: 485). In the early part of the nineteenth century, Siamese troops were repeatedly engaged in a long drawn-out conflict.[3] Kengtung was for a long time nominally tributary to the king of Burma, and tribute, in the shape of ivory, gold, and ponies, was sent annually until 1879, when diplomatic relations with the court of Mandalay were dramatically broken off. In 1882, Burmese authority over Kengtung ceased. Kengtung made formal submission to the British Crown in 1890 and so became a separate state annexed to British India.[4]

Township

The modern town of Kengtung is said to have been founded only some two hundred years ago and to have been rebuilt at some time in the nineteenth century. The site, however, is an old one. According to historical tradition, where the king's *haw* or palace stood was originally a Wa settlement (Énriquéz 1918: 79).

Kengtung around 1900 was a clean and well-built town, consisting of some three hundred houses, and

3 Garnier (1873: 485 f.); Scott (1924: 286); Bird (1897: 11).

4 Younghusband (1888: 46 f., 57, 72); Scott and Hardiman (1901: 410); Scott (1924: 348).

the community was said to have a prosperous air. Another account has it that there were from 1,500 to 2,000 houses inside the walls. Be that as it may, all agree that these town houses were substantially built, some with brick or stone basements, the upper walls consisting of wooden planks or bamboo matting, while the sidewalls of the upper storey were sometimes also of brick. Some were constructed on piles, while others rested on the ground. They were roofed with small tiles. In contrast to these later descriptions, we find that in 1836 T. E. MacLeod (1837: 993 f.) thought the town "a poor and thinly populated place." One observer states that the appearance of the town was quite Chinese in character. Even so, the prevailing architecture was neither Chinese nor Siamese, but rather a mixture of the two styles (Collis 1938: 270 f.).

The king's palace stood close by a lake, surrounded by its own brick wall. There was also a courthouse, a large wooden building on very high piles, and a jail had been built opposite the palace.[5] Outside the walls were many large and populous villages with well-built and comfortable houses. We may assume that the architecture of these places varied a great deal in type of construction and pattern of grouping. Settlements were permanent. We learn that the Shan almost always surrounded their villages with bamboo, or fruit and flowering trees, giving them an appearance of comfort and beauty.[6]

Buddhism in Kengtung

For all Shans, a most important criterion of ethnic identity is that they are Theravada Buddhists. The religious environment in the Shan States was intensely Buddhist and has been so as long as they have existed. The monks in the Eastern Shan States were generally less orthodox than those in the Western Shan States and Burma. The eastern monks travelled about in great state, wore yellow caps, and carried arms. Many allowed their hair to grow; some even cultivated moustaches and side-whiskers.[7]

There were twenty-one monasteries and pagodas (*tat*) in Kengtung. The Ho Khong temple at Kengtung is described as a fine, teak-roofed building, the interior pillars of which were handsomely decorated with gold. There was also an important pagoda one kilometre to the east of the town (Tat Chom Sai), which was held in great veneration. It was regarded as having been founded by King Ashoka, the "founding emperor" of Buddhism (273–232 B.C.) and eager builder of Buddhist temples (Garnier 1873: 394).

Buddhism in the Shan States was socially stratified according to the prevailing caste-like class system, and this was reflected in the practice of receiving young boys into the monasteries. The transition from childhood to adolescence was formal for a Shan and marked by an obligatory period of residence in a Buddhist monastery in the status of monk novitiate. The sons of the nobility, traders, silversmiths, and agriculturalists were educated by monks of the Mengkyaw or Naling orders; the sons of fishermen, butchers, alcohol traders, and pig-keepers would be sent to a less strict monastery, probably to the Poikyaung, if there were any of these monks in the district.[8]

Nobility and Political Organisation

The aristocratic class may not have been very well defined. In Shan society the nobility should in theory include anyone who can trace any kind of genealogical connection with the ruling king. In view of the general social grammar of "bilateral descent," the total number of people who might have been able to claim such a kinship connection was large. The nobility was, it appears, thought of as a hereditary caste. For an aristocrat, patrilineal connection was more important than matrilineal. Wealth was also an important factor in the maintenance of noble status. The king had a court of appointed officials, many of whom were likely to have been relatives of the king and, therefore, of the aristocracy, but commoners too might rise to high office and through suitable marriages ensure nobility for their descendants (Leach 1954: 214 f., 251). The whole legislative and magisterial government of Kengtung lay in the hands of four councillors or magistrates (*amat*), all of whom had to be blood relations of the king. More generally, it has been said that such officials received no salary but made a lucrative living from the perquisites of office. Practical matters were for underlings; the king himself was expected to live apart in his palace surrounded by his numerous wives and concubines (Younghusband 1888: 53 f., Leach 1954: 188 f., 215 f.).

The Shan polity was known as a *möng*. The term had the very definite connotation of a centralised

5 Garnier (1873: 394); Younghusband (1888: 62); Bird (1897: 22); Woodthorpe (1897: 17 f.); Énriquéz (1918: 29, 82).

6 MacLeod (1837: 994); Bird (1897: 23); Woodthorpe (1897: 19); Shakespeare (1914: 170); Leach (1954: 213).

7 Bird (1897: 23); Leach (1954: 30); Mangrai (2002: 7).

8 Milne (1910: 50 f., 54, 66, 134); Énriquéz (1918: 68); Leach (1954: 215).

political entity; the *möng* was the domain of one particular king or kinglet, who was overlord of all the other titleholders within that territory (Leach 1954: 124). The general Shan system of government is said to have resembled a feudal hierarchy (Leach 1954: 8). Under the king or *saohpa* were many grades of native officials; some were locally styled "*saohpa*" by the people, although they had no current right to the title. When this was the case, their ancestors were probably ruling kinglets, who in former times had been conquered and made subject to more powerful kings, but were permitted to continue governing their domains on payment of a yearly tribute (Milne 1910: 186).

The Shan type of political dominion has been seen as intrinsically stable. Given their wide dispersal and scattered form of settlement, Shan communities were astonishingly uniform. Edmund Leach has argued that this uniformity of Shan culture was correlated with a uniformity of Shan political organization that was in turn largely determined by special economic factors, especially wet rice cultivation (Leach 1954: 40).

The Symbolic Dominion: The Palace

As mentioned earlier, the king's *haw* or palace was thought to have been originally a Wa settlement (Énriquéz 1918: 33). I return to this matter below. The descriptions of the royal residence vary. The earliest account available is that of Francis Garnier (1873: 394) from the late 1860s, which tells us that the residence of the king was built of wood and covered with tiles. It was supported by strong columns and characterised by fine ornamental woodwork. Some twenty years later, Younghusband (1888: 63) described the same palace as "a wretched shanty." About the same time, the very same complex of buildings was described by both George Bird (1897: 22) and R. G. Woodthorpe (1897: 18) as a fine collection of teak buildings, well and solidly constructed, and surrounded by a brick wall.

We learn further that Kengtung's last royal palace was built after the British annexation, in 1905. It has been said that this new *haw* was a great rambling building of Indian design. It was considered clumsily built, and was regarded as unlikely to endure the little earthquake shocks that frequently occur (Énriquéz 1918: 43). However, it seems to have survived up to 1991, when it was torn down by the Burmese military regime. We may infer, then, that there was once an old palace, possibly rebuilt and redecorated many times, its later versions showing both Chinese and Siamese influences. Subsequently a new modern building was built architecturally reflecting new political horizons.

We have an account of the old *haw*'s interior and its designs. After passing a broad outer veranda, the visitor arrived in the audience chamber, about "thirty feet square malled." Here the king would appear through a curtained door. The furniture and ornaments were a very mixed collection, some very valuable and "others very trumpery things." Large vessels of solid gold and silver stood about amongst "rubbish." A few spears and guns and an English naval officer's sword were found on one side of the door, and a field officer's sword on the other. A gilt couch with room for two, with a curtain, which could be dropped from the ceiling to hide it, stood in the corner by the door, and in front of it were a mattress and some carpets, on which the king would sit (Younghusband 1888: 63 f.).

In the modern palace there was a vast expanse of floor in the audience hall. This opened on to a closet, where the king usually received guests. The glittering glass throne faced south, like the rest of the building. This was unusual in the Shan States, as the south was regarded as inauspicious. This difference is assumed to be the result of Chinese influence (Énriquéz 1918: 43).

The throne in the palace of the State of Mong Mit was placed at the bottom of the hall and situated within a "magical figure" described as consisting of two triangles symbolising fire and water respectively. The upper triangle rested on its apex in such a way that it was inserted into the apex of the other triangle, which faced upwards. The base of one triangle rested on the floor, and on the base of the other triangle the king sat as the ruler over fire and water, destruction and regeneration. The throne, on which the king sat cross-legged on ceremonial occasions, was reached through a doorway in the wall behind it. Around the throne was a set of white umbrellas (Collis 1938: 205 f.; Mangrai 2002: 280).

In Kengtung the king had his own Ho Khong pagoda. There was another temple called the Hpa Kyau in a corner of the palace grounds. On certain days, the king went to the Ho Khong pagoda in procession. Sometimes he was joined by the royal women, all of whom placed candles on the altar. Leaving the temple again, a small procession passed out of the pagoda, and the king entered his royal rickshaw. The Umbrella of State was hoisted over him, and the Royal Cigar-Box followed behind. A line of swordsmen knelt in the road till all was ready. Then they moved off to the palace (Énriquéz 1918: 67 f.).

From a wider Shan perspective, it appears that the *haw* palace was something like a "super-house."

Sometimes the term *haw* seems to have included not only the residence of the royal family and entourage, but also other separate buildings where the king's brothers and other relatives lived (Collis 1938: 75). Most of the objects contained in a royal residence were ostentatious in character; for instance, there were spittoons of solid gold (Milne 1910: 118).[9] Symbolically the *haw* was different from ordinary houses, not only in that it was a residence for royalty, but also, even more significantly, that it was part of a universe that was different from everyday realities. In Shan imagery the walled palace was a model of the sacred Mount Meru, and thus the king, when in residence, was part of a possible world implying a congregation of divine beings connected with this mythological mountain. It also seems that one set of the titles used by a Shan king referred directly to his palace: *haw hkam* and *haw seng*, meaning respectively "Palace of Gold" and "Palace of Precious Stone" (Leach 1954: 112 f.).[10]

It has been said that "in old times" it was a custom in the Shan States – as it was in Burma – to bury a man or woman alive under the palace (or the gates of a new city) so that, in guarding the place from human enemies, the spirits of the dead should also keep evil spirits, who bring sickness, at bay (Milne 1910: 155, 178 f.). Whether this was actually the case in any state is difficult to judge, and caution is in order. But the story was there to be told.

Ordinary houses also had a most important place in the symbolism of Shan cultural imagery. The construction of a new house was symbolically linked to a key factor in Shan society – rice. We are told in a general way that the builder went to the designated site late at night. He took with him five older men, each of whom carried one grain of uncooked rice. When they arrived at the spot where they intended the future house to be built, with great care they placed these grains of rice on the ground in the form of a diamond, with one grain in the middle. These grains were covered with an earthenware pot or a piece of the hollow stem of bamboo, a stone was placed on the top, and cloth enveloped the whole. In due time, the centre post of the new house would be rammed into the earth exactly where the grains of rice were placed (Milne 1910: 98, 100). To build a house was seemingly a special way of planting rice. At least in theory, then, when a palace was founded, a man or woman was killed and "planted" in the ground, and when a common person – someone not divine in nature – founded a house, rice was planted. Again, when an individual was born, he or she was attached to the house of the parents through a similar act of "symbolic planting." We know that after a delivery the husband of the new mother took the placenta and umbilical cord to bury beneath the steps of the family house (Milne 1910: 182).

The Symbolic Dominion: The Institution of *saohpa* as a Symbolic Topos

The government of the dominion of Kengtung was thus carried on by a hereditary king. The ruler was known as the *saohpa*. The general idea about kingship current in Shan society was that the successful, economically powerful leader should himself disdain to take an active part in day-to-day administrative affairs. Conceptually this *saohpa* was a divine king, an absolute monarch (Leach 1954: 215). The word *saohpa* is derived from *sao* (a lord) and *hpa* (heaven), thus meaning literally the "Lord of Heaven." In Kengtung, the *saohpa* himself discarded his other titles in favour of *Maha Ratana*, or "Great Jewel" (Énriquéz 1918: 22; see also Mangrai 2002: 5 f., 204 f.). In the Shan States, if a king was mentioned in conversation, he was spoken of by his title and never by his name. If it was absolutely necessary to name him, one's voice was lowered to a whisper as a token of respect (Milne 1910: 108).

The royal regalia were kept in the *haw*. A visitor to the modern palace in Kengtung in 1938 was shown the "crown of victory," the "victorious sword," the whisk of yak's tail, the white umbrella, and the golden slippers. These five items were the most important of the royal insignia, being made of gold and covered with rubies. In the palace were kept other things that related to various state rituals – a golden box for betel, a number of swords with handles of carved ivory and golden scabbards, caparisons and bells for horses and elephants, banners embroidered with dragons and magical circles, gilt umbrellas "like mandarins' hats," a grand belt covered with jewels, and a pair of massive earrings. The coronation robes were also kept in the palace (Anderson 1918: 381; Collis 1938: 277 f.).

Succession to the throne was governed by patrilineal descent, so that for royalty and royalty alone, agnatic lineage became important. The "royal houses" of the different Shan States were named patri-

9 The ethnographer Milne, who recorded this, was a resident first of Hsipaw for six months and then of Namkham, capital of the State of Hsenwi, for fifteen months. She arrived in 1906. Her primary ambition was a study of the language of Palaung. Her generalised account of Shan traditions is drawn from her field experience of the northern Shan States.

10 This Shan use of royal titles is very reminiscent of the designation of the Lao king in his metamorphosis of a ferocious lion in a Luang Prabang myth and ritual (Archaimbault 1961: 197 f.; Aijmer 1979: 744).

lineages with "totemic titles." However, changes of the occupant of the throne were often occasions of dispute. Kengtung history is full of the murders of reigning kings.

The Shan ideal of a *saohpa* prescribed that the monarch should live apart from the world in his sacred palace, where he lived a life of luxury and indolence surrounded by a vast harem of wives and concubines. Practical affairs of state were delegated to a council of ministers. The exaggerated polygyny practised by the ruler was an important part of the system. Generally speaking, the size of the palace and the number of the king's wives was more or less proportional to the political influence of the ruler (Leach 1954: 216).

The surrounding paddy fields were cultivated by men whose ancestors had received certain rights from former kings. In Shan local organisation, it was the landholding itself that provided the element of structural continuity (Leach 1954: 214). The *saohpa* was the real owner of all the land over which he ruled, and there were certain hereditary rights over paddy lands, which were respected as long as the yearly taxes were paid, lands being held by the same family from one generation to another (Milne 1910: 98).

In the early years of the last century in Kengtung, the attitude of the *saohpa* towards the people was, we learn, that of a "fatherly country squire." He was said to be very near to the people. He knew many of them by name or by sight, and apparently they were free to wander in and out of the palace as they pleased. The king was described as an indulgent master and a shrewd, practical businessman. This *saohpa* had a motorcycle that he rode very slowly. Several attendants accompanied him on bicycle on his expeditions (Énriquéz 1918: 25). The respective reputations of the many kings of the Shan States regarding good governance varied a great deal: some were regarded as monsters of cruelty, while others were seen as models of good government (Milne 1910: 148 f.). The *saohpa* and the court not only lived from taxation but also engaged actively in trade. In Kengtung the king and his principal ministers invested their money in opium, which was considered the most lucrative article of trade. Gambling was universal in the Shan States and thrived on market days. Public gambling in Kengtung was in the interests of the court as a portion of all wins was set apart to provide pin money for the queen and princesses (Bird 1897: 24 f.; Woodthorpe 1897: 21).

The title of *myo-sa* seems to have referred to a position which could be translated as "kinglet." The perquisites of the office of *myo-sa* were in the gift of the king. Thus in pre-British Burma the *myo-sa* (the eater of the township) enjoyed the fruits of taxation at the king's pleasure, though he did not necessarily have sovereignty over the territory in question (Leach 1954: 34, 142).

The *saohpa* was an extraordinary person of superhuman qualities. His difference from what was common was constantly expressed emblematically as part of the symbolic articulation of the flows of power and authority in the symbolic dominion. The very appearance of the Kengtung king at receptions in his palace was apparently a remarkable sight. In 1872 Francis Garnier (1873: 394) noted that

> Dans ces entrevues, le roi et sa femme étaillaient un grand luxe de bijoux ; à chaque nouvelle visite, ils avaient de nouvelles bagues et de nouvelles boucles d'oreilles d'or, où brillaient des diamants et des émerades d'une valeur considérable. Le roi était décoré de l'ordre d'Ava, à quinze chainettes et à quatre plaques d'or ornées de rubis, qu'il portait en écharpe de gauche à droite.

A later report notes that on occasions, when the *saohpa* of Kengtung appeared in public officially, it was always with his royal umbrella and a large gold cigar box (Énriquéz 1918: 25).

The Symbolic Dominion: The Construction of a King

We learn that a Shan mother of a ruling family was not permitted to give birth in a palace. A room was prepared for her under the palace or in a neighbouring building (Milne 1910: 34). The royal child was thus not self-evidently an addition to the royal household. A royal childhood was integrated with a Buddhist education. How it worked in Kengtung is beyond detailed knowledge, but we know that the young sons of the *saohpa* took the monks' saffron yellow robe for about a year (Énriquéz 1918: 68).

In 1887, the king of Kengtung was a child only twelve years old, who succeeded his father at the beginning of that year. When Younghusband was in Kengtung in March, the king had not yet been crowned, the ceremony being postponed till after the cremation of his father, which could not take place till six months after his death. It is reported that at that time the child was a mere puppet in the hands of the four councillors, though they prostrated themselves before him in public and never approached him except in that "grovelling position peculiar to Indo-Chinese nations" (1888: 53). A few years later the same ruler was described as a youthful *saohpa*, a young man of somewhat violent temper, who was more feared than loved by his people. His amours were said to be numerous. He was, how-

ever, said to be straightforward. He gave his ministers an audience every fifth day, when they made verbal reports of their proceedings; these he confirmed, or modified if necessary, also verbally (Bird 1897: 26).

The marriage ceremony among the Kengtung Shans in general appears to have been very simple; after the preliminaries had been settled and the guests for the marriage feast assembled, the bride threw a cake of rice at the bridegroom, whereupon they became one (Younghusband 1888: 58). The marriage did not seem to have involved any Buddhist connotations, and no monks participated in its celebration (Milne 1910: 81). Royal weddings were presumably somewhat more elaborate, but little about them is known. It was customary for kings to take as their chief wife one of their stepsisters by the same father, but by a different mother. This half-sister wife was the chief queen but not necessarily the mother of the next heir. However, genealogies do not support the view that this was general royal Shan practice.[11] The wives of Shan royalty can be classed as of three kinds. One set consisted of women who were of royal status equal to that of the husband and who were married in order to cement a political alliance with a neighbouring royal house. Another set of women were of commoner status and were received as a form of tribute from political subordinates. Wives also included commoner women who were purchased as concubines (Leach 1954: 218 f.).

We have only fragmentary information about the coronation. We know that special clothes were worn for the ceremony. We are also told that the liturgy followed the pattern set by the Burmese court at Mandalay (Collis 1938: 278). One peculiar coronation custom observed in Kengtung concerned the Wa population. When a *saohpa* of Kengtung succeeded to the throne, two Wa were invited to his palace and there feasted. Subsequently they were driven out with violence. One interpretation of this that has been offered is that this is a reference to the expulsion of the Wa from the plains by the Hkun Shans (Énriquéz 1918: 33). Another version of this coronation custom is that two Wa from the town of Bangham – to the northeast of Kengtung Town – would come to the coronation bringing their own food packets to eat in the palace. However, before they could finish their meal, an official would come and drive them away. Only after this would the prince be crowned. The last time the chiefs of Bangham were invited to participate in the coronation ceremony was in 1897. It is interesting that the "coronation" is described as the king being "consecrated as lord of earth" (Mangrai 2002: 3, 201, 284, also 230). It seems that, through this abruptly interrupted meal, the king took control of local, terrestrial spiritual forces. Only then could he enter a kingship where this newly acquired power was matched by his own, indigenous natural control of what was celestial. This will be discussed later.

The Hkun Shans of Kengtung, unlike the neighbouring Lao, for instance, bury their dead as a rule, and only cremate very exalted personages. One suggestion here might be that China is close and Chinese aesthetic/ethical grammars for symbolic constructs also prevailed in Kengtung. As we shall see, there is more to this, which will be discussed later on.

When a Shan king died, his face was gilded with pure leaf-gold before he was placed in a coffin (Milne 1910: 90). The kings of Kengtung were cremated and their ashes placed in ornamental monumental tombs. We learn that in the "old days" deceased kings were cremated at Kadtung or Tunga Market. The ashes were placed in urns, entombed in brick-and-mortar structures on plinths, and topped with "lotus buds" (Mangrai 2002: 189 f.). Unlike other ordinary Hkun, their kings could not be buried in the ground and so become part of the territory.

The Symbolic Dominion: The Royal Presence in Some Festivals of the Calendar

The Tabaung festival falls at the full moon in March. On this occasion the Kengtung *saohpa*, and all the townspeople, went out and camped in the dry paddy fields for a few days. Paper pagodas, or *pyathat*, were also carried out. Rockets were fired, the usual gambling indulged in for a space of four or five days, a great picnic was held in town (Énriquéz 1918: 25). Clearly the king took the lead in this celebration of rice, which seems to have been some sort of preparation for the agricultural season to come. This was an outdoor festival bringing the king and Buddhist paraphernalia to the fields, which had not yet been irrigated and ploughed. This invasion of Buddhism and royalty into the sphere of practical rice production shows the king by his mere presence giving blessings to the state's agriculture through the medium of Buddhism.

The Tagoo-festival followed a month later in April, just when the long drought ends with the first showers of the rains. The "Tagoo" was a "Water Festival." The Kengtung *saohpa* always held a *gadaw*, or ceremony of obeisance, at this season, which is reported to have been a solemn business.

11 Milne (1910: 78, 85); Leach (1954: 216 f.). See further the discussion in Evans (2010).

The king sat cross-legged on his throne, motionless as an image, utterly unresponsive to *shikos*, that is ceremonial greetings, or to the interminable singsong speeches of his *hpaya*s, or ministers. He was splendidly dressed in a royal Burmese costume and wore a winged crown on his head. Presently he delivered a blessing in Pali. The doors behind his throne then opened, and he vanished through them. As soon as he had left, the solemn assembly rose up and fled from the palace in utter disorder (Énriquéz 1918: 26).

At the "Tagoo" the king apparently demonstrated his essentially divine nature, sitting immobile on his throne for hours, probably meditating and sunk into himself. Sitting there, he received the adoration of his ministers and monks. Those present saw him in full ceremonial dress of an extraordinarily luminous character. The king's presence was a manifestation of divinity among ordinary men. However, the assembly abruptly ended by being turned into chaos. "Tagoo" was and is the Burmese New Year. The water festival is widespread in continental Southeast Asia.

Once a year, in January, the king went out to bathe in hot sulphurous springs in a bog a couple of miles to the south of the town. It was said that one of his ancestors recovered from leprosy with the help of these waters. As they rose in a dangerous marsh, they could only be approached in safety when a pier was built out into them for the *saohpa*'s use (Énriquéz 1918: 41 f.). It seems that this bathing arrangement was for the sole use of the king.

The king's return from the springs was made the occasion of a State Reception. Villagers came in and lined the roads, each carrying a rifle or a *dhar* (a curved knife). The *saohpa* was preceded in the procession by his *hpaya*s or ministers, each riding under an umbrella. Last of all came the king on an elephant, so much surrounded with umbrellas that the general effect was, according to the observer, that of a large balloon (Énriquéz 1918: 42).

The royal bath in the sulphurous springs seems to have implied that the king sought the blessings of the underworld that were manifested in these special waters. The ritual was like a visit to a realm that was not really his, a realm where he was a foreigner. His bath was a way of appropriating the forces of the underground. The mission having been completed, the king was "restored" as the Kengtung *saohpa*, his ceremonial return in a solemn procession into town providing assurance that he truly remained a celestially endowed king even after this expedition to the underworld and its waters.

Mythological Text as Local Tradition

I regard "myth" as ritual in verbal disguise, mythical propositions being translations from iconic visions into sequences of words and phrases. In this hybrid phenomenon, the grammar of the iconic code lingers, continuing to play a part in the production of mythical messages. The mythical articulation takes on forms that we as anthropological outsiders would recognise as local traditions, proverbial sayings, names and terms, cosmological narrations and historical accounts.

Some local traditions involving Shan kingship and particular "royal objects" have been recorded. Of interest here is a ruined pagoda near Namkham – capital of the State of Hsen Wi – which was built towards the end of the seventeenth century. The Namkham Shans told the following story of its building:

> Once there lived a young Shan girl who was very beautiful. War broke out in the country, so her parents hid her for safety in an empty paddy hole. They gave her food and water, and she remained in the hole until the danger was over. She afterwards became the wife of a king, and built the pagoda above the paddy-hole as a thankoffering to it because it had sheltered and saved her life (Milne 1910: 153).

This piece of discursive exordium seems to imply an iconic catastasis expressing the idea that a female spiritual (beautiful) person is put into a cavity in the earth (is sown/transplanted), surviving there on food and water. The cavity is a paddy-hole. Coming out of the hole, later she marries the king and a pagoda is built over the place. The girl seems a sort of rice deity that, on one hand, survives in a paddy-hole beneath the surface of the earth, and then comes out of it (sprouts). She marries the king, who can appropriate rice by marrying the rice deity, through which he achieves legitimate control of local vegetative power and the production of rice. The *saohpa* – by his nature celestial and associated with Mount Meru – allies himself with terrestrial und chthonic spiritual powers. The rice field from which the girl emerges is sanctified and marked by a pagoda. The pagoda is Buddhist, and the symbolic combination of rice field and pagoda becomes a monumental expression of the marriage between royal blessing and terrestrial productivity. Contract-like links are being established here between the king and rice, and the link is in the nature of marriage.

This exploration of a local tradition may serve as an analytical pointer with regard to Kengtung too, although we have no real corresponding data from this state.

Mythological Articulation: The Exordium of History

It was mentioned above that the State of Kengtung was created by colonists from abroad. There is a richly embroidered past in the records that invites anthropological exploration. Kengtung's early history is a story full of strange and irrational happenings. It may be legendary and thus better understood as a mythical text than a true historical account of events and their factual consequences. One source for the present examination of this narrative is the inclusion of the "Kengtung State Chronicle" in the "Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States" (Scott and Hardiman 1901: 371–450). This is a somewhat condensed version in an anonymous translation, though certainly achieved with the help of G. C. Beresford Stirling, whose comments are also included.[12] Richer in its fascinating detail is the complete scholarly translation of the "Jengtung State Chronicle" by Sao Saimöng Mangrai (2002).[13] As both versions exist in print, in this article I will provide only a brief synopsis of the sequence of the early episodes and use these as the basis for a tentative anthropological discussion of the nature of Kengtung kingship. Many things that are left out here may also be significant, but for the purposes of the present article what follows must do. The synopsis is drawn from both the "Gazetteer" version and Mangrai's "Chronicle" account, and this is how they will be referred to in what follows.

The First Episode: The King of the Forest

The chronicle starts with a situation in which a man, Ko Pala, herds cattle. The cattle are in the forest, where there is also a people called Hka. Although Ko Pala is poor, he is inclined to share whatever he has with the Hka. A second version has it that he shares his food with the crows. Ko Pala is a supplier of food, and as such he acquires legitimacy as a leader, and the Hka (or crows) decide to make him king. The forest men/crows undertake to make Ko Pala king if he will promise always to give them as much meat as they can eat. Ko Pala accepts. There is, with no specification, a nebulous community of Kengtung inhabitants, and their king has just died without issue. The Hka/crows carry/fly Ko Pala in a basket to the town at night when the people are sleeping after the funeral of the late king. He enters the palace, goes inside, dresses in the late king's clothes, and seats himself on the throne. He is discovered next morning and claims that he has been elected the new king by the Hkas. In the "Chronicle" version he claims that he has been chosen by the powerful *deva* gods, headed by Indra. All the people, men and women, agree to have Ko Pala as their king.

Ko Pala fulfils the promise of feeding the Hka/crows with meat. After a time the supply of cattle begins to decline, and the daily ration of meat is reduced to a portion given once every few days. The Hkas/crows claim that Ko Pala has broken his promise and plan to get rid of him. They persuade him into the big basket, saying they will take him to a much better country, but actually bring him to a small islet in the ocean, where they leave him. Ko Pala sustains himself for a short time on grass and roots, and then dies. In Kengtung seven days of torrential rains inundate the country.

The imagery depicts a social life where the people of the forest live off meat and the king's power is a result of his redistribution of victuals. The basis of his legitimacy is the people (or crows) of the jungle. The township people are a rather formless lot at this point in history, and there is nothing to indicate that their eating habits are much different from those of the Hka. But there is clearly a centre and a periphery, and the storyline is that the periphery invades the centre and usurps the legitimate authority that goes with the place (the palace). When Ko Pala becomes king he cheats, telling the people that he has been selected and sent by the gods. Becoming royal, he alienates himself from the authority based on distribution and sharing, instead seeking the legitimacy of a throne without having a proper endowment. His career ends in failure and the destruction of the king. His punishment is rough vegetarian food and, ultimately, lowly rebirth as a gigantic crab. This part of the story is as follows.

After sundry transmigrations Ko Pala's soul returns to Kengtung and finds the whole country under water because of the torrential rains. There was not one living creature to enter to allow it to be born again.[14] At last it enters a crab and is reborn as an immensely large crab living in the lake, and it becomes recognised as the King of Crabs. Ko Pala's former realm has been turned into an underwater territory. When at a later point in time the land is drained again, he dies in a deep hole in the ground on the

12 George Claudius Beresford Stirling (1861–1921) was British Superintendent of the Northern Shan States in 1900–1905, and had the same position in the Southern Shan States between 1910 and 1925.

13 Sao Saimöng Mangrai (1913–1987) was himself a member of the Kengtung royal family and a scholar of Theravada Buddhism, the Hkun-Tai language, and Southeast Asian history.

14 Inundation is a recurring mythological theme among Tai-speaking peoples. See, e.g., Archaimbault (1959a, 1959b).

north side. Alternatively, the crab burrows into the foot of a mountain by the river and becomes a protective guardian spirit of the tail end of the state.

Episode Two: A Kingdom Rises from Water

The state chronicle contains a historical type of discourse with episode following upon episode, forming a linear account of befores and afters. The earliest happenings, which we have just discussed, are followed by another set of events that explain anew the emergence of the kingdom of Kengtung. We now turn our attention to this second episode.

The territory is all flooded and forms a vast lake. A company of forty-nine *rohan*s – monks or holy men – arrive here under the leadership of the Lord Buddha, and from a hill by the shore of the lake they observe and discuss the geese that flock on the water, seeing them as an omen for the future of the place. They arrive at the understanding that a future hermit will appear from the north to conduct the water away and so make the area habitable. The colours of the geese reveal that the future residents will be of three kinds. There will be a category of "uncivilised people," which seemingly implies that they will lack organised religion and conventional institutions. This predicted category seems to approximate to Shan ideas about "tribal peoples" inhabiting hills and forests. In the prediction there would also be a category of "agnostic people," which presumably means that they will be characterised by a life outside organised religion. A third category of predicted inhabitants consists of people who are religious – which must imply that they not only confessed Buddhism, but had learnt about the true path to salvation. The prediction of the forty-nine *rohan*s seems to indicate a history of civilisation, where what is primitive will coexist with more advanced types of society. All sorts of people – tribesmen, peasants and monks – will find a place in the future country.

Seven rice grains from Lord Buddha's alms bowl are thrown into the lake.

From the interpretation of omens, the chronicle now goes on to discuss the realisation of these predictions. From a vision of how an expanse of water will be drained and made habitable, the story line turns to tracing how the prediction is translated into a discursive veracity. The authority of this vision of the future lies in the fact that it emanates from the greatest of sources, the Lord Buddha himself, who, being omniscient, provides the land of the lakes with a given destiny. The rice grains from his alms bowl destine the lake to become rice fields.

Episode Three: The Chinese Angle

In the north there is a monarch, Wong Ti Fang, of immense power, innumerable wives, and countless sons. The myth here introduces a realist component, as the ruler referred to is the emperor of China, although this figure is abstract and generalised, removed from any real historical framework, and adapted to a mythological context. The Chinese imperial realm is not that far away, and Chinese influences are evident in architecture, trade, and political struggle. Among the emperor's one thousand and four sons, four stand out as different and, in contrast with the others, they cultivate transcendental interests and – much to their imperial father's chagrin – become hermits. They are entrusted to act as scouts on their wanderings and to report to their father should they encounter land suitable for the founding of a new state. They stick together as they ramble through many countries in a southerly direction.

The imperial brothers/hermits arrive at the vast lake that covers the area that is to become Kengtung. One of the brothers digs a small channel with his staff to conduct the water in a southerly direction. The four of them then continue their ramblings towards the south, but in due time they return to the Kengtung area and the lake, which remains much as before. Two other of the brothers dig new channels leading to the north, but to little avail. The fourth brother then approaches the problem of the flooded country in an entirely different way. He plants grains of rice, which grow into seedlings under the water. In a sense he is turning the lake with its regulating channels into a paddy field. He thus creates an irrigated stretch of rice-producing land that will be able to support a population.

The importance of rice is obvious. We must remember that the cultivation of rice has been the basis of Hkun and other Tai societies from ancient times. In Kengtung the plain is covered with rice fields, intersected by irrigation channels. Rice land and rice cultivation are essential to notions of basic belonging. Although the ethnography is irritatingly patchy, we know that in Hsen Wi the construction of a new house was symbolically linked to rice. To build a house in Shan society was seemingly a special way of planting rice. At a Shan marriage the bride threw a cake of rice at the bridegroom, whereupon they became one. Among the many agricultural rituals, we find that an offering of rice was made to the spirit of the White Tiger, a fabulous ancestor of the Shan, at the opening of the agricultural season (Milne 1910: 150). We have also discussed the case of a Shan king achieving control of rice through his mythical marriage to the female deity of the rice

land. In the Kengtung chronicle, rice brings civilisation and civilised control, together with a livelihood and the basis for Buddhism.

A female *naga* snake is bewildered by what is going on; presumably she is an inhabitant of the lake. She is told about the plans the brothers harbour and is asked to remain in the area to become the guardian spirit for those who are to live there. It seems that the *naga* is thus converted from being part of the wilderness and uncontrolled water to becoming a patroness of ordered and "civilised" human life. However, the power basis of the *naga* remains the force of Nature and the animated local terrain.

Episode Four: The Chinese Planters of Rice

Fulfilling their promise to their father, the emperor of China, the four hermit sons return to him to report on the new country they have discovered. Wong Ti Fang, the emperor, dispatches five hundred families as colonists to found the new state. As they take possession of the new territory, they plant rice and do so for three successive years; but while the rice plants grow tall, they do not yield any grain. According to the "Chronicle" version the settlers provide sacrifices of pigs and chicken to the spirits. After three years the settlers are in despair.

At this point the protective *naga* appears on the scene informing the colonists that "it was not intended" that this land should be settled by Chinese and that they should return whence they came. The alternative story line is that the spirits spoke to the people through a medium, telling them that "We do not like the Chinese and are opposed to the construction of the city by them; we shall construct one ourselves in the future." In both cases the message is quite clear. The Chinese flee from the place. We can see here that the local spirits (including the protective *naga*) drive away powerful forces which emanate from the outside. They are truly protective and will only bless what comes from within – ruling and controlling can only be exercised by someone endowed with their authority.

This episode thus leaves Kengtung deserted.

Episode Five: How Kengtung Becomes Populated

The story of Kengtung starts all over again with a new narrative of the founding of the state from scratch. Although the local world seems empty of people, at the same time the story introduces a widespread Southeast Asian mythical motif of a gourd as a creative agent (e.g., Archaimbault 1959a, 1959b). In this case, the striped gourd ripens and falls to the ground, and out come the seeds. Where they fall are tracks of several kinds of wild animals, all inhabitants of the forest. There is no mention of the gourd being planted, so it seems also to be a wild variety. From the seeds growing in the animal tracks sprang people, human beings with an affinity with the forest and its wild inhabitants, whether animals or spiritual beings. These newly sprouted local people are identified as Wa (or Lawa). They spread over many settlements. A beautiful man among them called Mang Yoi becomes the first chief of the Wa, and he founds the Wa capital of Veng Kuo.

The Kengtung area has now acquired its own population, which springs from the local energy of the territory and, we may assume, maintains good relations with the local spirits.

Episode Six: The Emergence of a Celestial Dynasty

At this point the story line resumes yet again, and the scene moves to some undefined area, though it is not Kengtung. Again there is a point of reference implying the Chinese empire. It is noted that Wong Ti Fang is a monarch revered in all parts of the world, but with one exception. The chief of the gods, Indra (according to the Hindu worldview, in Hkun called Sakya), observes this separation and descends to Earth to enquire about the matter. The inhabitants of this anonymous country claim that they have no king and so are all equal and uncontrollable. No one would obey a Yun.[15] How could an anarchist society like this pay respect to a foreign monarch?

Indra comes up with a solution and instructs the people to look for someone who was born without a father or a mother, and advises them to select this person to rule their land.

The "Chronicle" tells that Lord Indra departs to his celestial abode on Mount Meru, where he summons a *devata* and a *devaputta* – two minor gods, one male and one female – and instructs them to descend to earth to become the rulers of these anarchists. Following Indra's command, they end up by a jujube tree, where they are found. It is established that they have neither father nor mother, and so they

15 The Yun are a Tai-speaking people, a branch of the Lao, living in what is now northern Thailand. This indicates that the unidentified country is situated somewhere there, which would tally with later developments.

are chosen to be lords and are brought to the palace in a state chariot drawn by four royal horses.[16] Their beauty makes it apparent that they are of divine nature. The couple are placed on a gem-studded throne, and from now on, they rule the country with glory and power.

The narrative of the myth tells us how divine order is brought to the Earth; it descends in a vacuum of power to start something entirely new that tends to expand and organise. A grand and complex kingdom emerges. When a realm of ten thousand paddy fields has been created, all its ministers and officials come together and perform a "consecration" (or coronation) and marriage ceremonies. The two royals are placed on a mound of gems.

The country expands to one million paddy fields in fifty-seven provinces. However, it is not said how this realm relates to the emperor of China, something that, as we have seen, triggers off the whole process of a royal descent from heaven.

The more elaborate "Chronicle" version of the mythic history clearly relates that these rulers – king and queen – are of divine descent and that this, their extraordinary nature, continues to be reflected on Earth in their physical beauty and their jewel-studded environment, which has a luminosity reminiscent of their original celestial abode.

The queen gives birth to a son of supernatural qualities, as strong as ten elephants and of excellent judgement. The text has it that "even the *deva*s rained down popped rice in worship of him." His name is Mang Rai. Mang Rai is appointed to the governorship of Chiang Rai, and by marriage he also secures control over Chiang Mai. The story is, therefore, now anchored geographically. The legendary history goes on to account for events that take place in the Chiang Mai region, which I leave aside here.

Episode Seven: The Royal Line Proliferates

Mang Rai's biography is explored in the "Chronicle," and we learn that he acquires one son by a bear. This son in turn, at some later point in time, marries a *naga* lady, who bears him a son. The son of the *naga* is given some magical utensils by his maternal grandfather, the king of the *naga*s. Mang Rai's grandson, who was born from a serpent's egg, also has male sons, and the divine line of royalty, enforced by natural and spiritual powers, continues down the generations.

Mang Rai is himself of pure divine nature, both his parents being deities, their marriage even having an aspect of an incestuous union. This mythical narrative may be related to the royal practice in the Shan States of the king marrying a half sister. The royal line called in by Indra to bring an end to anarchy is further endowed with the force of wild nature by the begetting of a son, the mother being a speaking and meritorious bear – an inhabitant of the forest. So divine blood is here mixed with ursine blood carrying the force of sylvan energy. In turn, the *devata*/bear son marries a *naga* serpent who bears him a son in his turn, a carrier not only of natural and divine powers, but in addition of the force of water and the underground. Water is connected with the rice fields, and with rivers and lakes, around which much of Shan society is organised. The royal lineage becomes well endowed with powers emanating from the animated surroundings.

Episode Eight: Mang Rai Conquers Kengtung

In Kengtung the Chinese intruders had failed and been succeeded by people who had spilled out of gourds – people of local origin. They are described as lowly and are Wa. The "Chronicle" says that the *devata*s, or gods, wished to spread Buddhism to Kengtung, part of their scheme being to lure Mang Rai to go hunting. He follows a golden stag and pursues it for seven days. The flight of the stag brings the hunters to Kengtung, where the animal disappears. Mang Rai sees a beautiful plain inhabited by Wa. The discovery of Kengtung by a descendant of the divine royal line is thus part of a celestial plan.

Returning to Chiang Mai, he tells an assembly of officials of the fine country he had seen while out hunting. He expresses a wish to colonise this land. Mang Rai's two sons, Khun Gong and Khun Lang, are provided with five thousand men to launch a campaign against the Kengtung Wa. After many delays and because of fraternal competition, the two are in the end defeated by the Wa. The Chiang Mai troops are under celestially inspired command, but Mang Yoi has the advantage of being part of his territory and endowed with legitimate authority and, thereby, moral superiority, which allows him to defeat the intruders.

Mang Rai now recruits two spies of Wa descent and sends them into the Wa country. The Wa chief Mang Yoi receives the two spies in a friendly way, they pretending to be refugees. The secret agents try to mobilise the local people against their chief

16 Catastatical logic does not always agree with the tenets of discursive narration. One would not have expected a state chariot, royal horses, and a palace in a country of utter anarchism and a lack of leadership.

by false rumours, and after three years of subversive activity the conspirators send a message back to Mang Rai that the time is ripe for an attack. The Chiang Mai army marches north. Mang Yoi is captured and forced to accept terms from his conqueror. An agreement is made that Mang Rai shall have the country to found a state, and that Mang Yoi and his tribe are to be removed to the hills. Mang Rai is at last successful as a conqueror of Kengtung, although his stratagem is immoral. But having now gained power, he still lacks authority. In the native perspective Mang Yoi is still of Nature and the local terrain; Mang Rai remains a foreign usurper.

Episode Nine: Mang Rai Establishes a Theocracy

After his conquest, Mang Rai and his forces leave the Kengtung plain, and as the Wa have been moved to the hills, the open country is left deserted. A new phase of creation is ahead.

With the help of astrologers, Mang Rai decides to build a city at the place that was the former dwelling of Mang Yoi. It is regarded as a very auspicious place in all respects for years to come. Worship is offered to the *naga* lady who had earlier been installed as guardian of the state. A city is founded accordingly.

Still, there are problems. Princes sent out to rule all die early, and there is no stability. Mang Rai decides that, because the state was originally a lake that had been drained by holy men, it should be a state of the *sangha*, the monkhood of Buddhism. He sends another son, Namthum, to govern the new kingdom. The latter arrives accompanied by two Buddhist monks. They plant three images of Gautama in the town and also drop one into the water. Kengtung is brought under Buddhist control, becoming a kind of theocratic state run by monks. The king builds a new residence on the site for the Wa chief's palace.

As a first measure of his rule, King Namthum invites Wa chiefs to a meal on the gem-studded throne in the palace. While they are eating, they are suddenly interrupted and driven out of the palace by armed men. In this way the Shan king establishes his power and usurps the authority endowed in the throne. His own sources of authority are those of Buddhism and "religion," which are now imposed, providing superior ethical and aesthetical principles to control the local spirits.

This phase of physical replacement, and its implied transfer of authority, is actually made manifest at every coronation in Kengtung, as we have seen above. In these coronation rituals, we meet a theme that will recur time after time. Each new king has to establish his own sovereignty, and in this, he has a problem – he and his lineage are usurpers. As newcomers to the territory, they have no ready-made control over the local spiritual forces. Those who retain this authority are the Wa chiefs. The Wa must first take possession of the new palace and so bring the spirits there to order into some sort of mutual agreement, only to be replaced by the Shan king. We know that through this ritual the king becomes "Lord of Earth." The Wa control the local spirits, while the king controls the Wa and thus the ritual protection achieved through them. The king can now control his conquered territory.

Episode Ten: The Colonization of Kengtung – Again

All is now well, and yet something is still amiss. In terms of the mythical narrative, the country should now be quite empty of ordinary people. There is an implication in the story line that the inhabitants of Kengtung are now Buddhist monks. The story acknowledges that there are other people there too, but the logic of myth often differs from that of everyday discourse.

Monks and astrologers examine the horoscope of the kingdom and find that the state belongs to the mental formation of *nan*, but the monastic population who have now settled in the area are originally derived from the Yun people of Chiang Mai. This fact gives rise to instability. The Yun are of the mental figuration *rahn*. The Yun monks have brought along "religion," here to be understood as the active presence of transcendental powers, in which the king also forms a part. But evidently this does not suffice for him to take full possession of the country. Again, the settlers, whether monks or not, are intruders and usurpers, being of a foreign background that is directly reflected in how the astrologers fail to reconcile the *nam* of the place with the *rahn* mental formation which characterises the Yun.

To meet the difficulties of the situation, the leading monks invite a group of "Great Hkuns" who have settled to the south. They are asked to move into Kengtung to become the founders of its future population. The rather nebulous local people of Kengtung are encouraged to switch from Yun to Hkun dress and manners. The originally invited Hkun number sixty-nine. They are associated with the *nan* mental figuration.

What is told in this episode is how the state has been taken over by the *sangha*, an establishment

of monks, and apparently also by a number of accompanying laymen, but, as before, they are all outsiders of Yun ethnic affiliation. The Hkun are also outsiders but, unlike the Yun, their mental configuration is correct. The Hkun, despite being foreign, can equal the Wa in their approach to the forces that control water, earth, and terrain, including various protective spirits. They are invited to become citizens of the realm by the king.

Episode Eleven: The China Connection

Some time after these events, word reaches the emperor of China that Kengtung has become settled with yet another people. As the vast lake that formerly covered the area of this state had been drained by a son of his, the emperor sends a delegation to ask the Kengtung settlers for tribute – rice, elephant tusks, elephants, and silver. *Saohpa* Namthum, the son of Mang Rai, refuses in arrogant terms. The report of this makes the emperor furious, and the Chinese descend on the state in force. The chronicle goes on to describe the Chinese attack and their plans for conquest, including the blocking of the drainage system in order to submerge the whole valley under the original lake. With the help of the gods and the guardian spirit of the state the Chinese are forced to retire.

The Chinese are now definitely out of the local picture. The China war proves that the kings of Kengtung now have the authority as well as the power to rule the state. But at this juncture the mythological history of Kengtung takes a new and somewhat unexpected turn.

One night Mang Rai dreams that the moon falls into his hands and that he hands it to his wife to keep.[17] Mang Rai is advised that the dream signifies that he will have a son who will be greatly renowned. In due course Hsing is born. Later he is appointed king of the State of Nonyang.

The "Gazetteer" has it that, when Hsing grows to be a young man, he goes one day to the forest with four other youths. The "Chronicle" version tells only of three village boys roaming about. They see a hornets' nest and determine to take it. It is agreed that each should try in turn and that, if any of them should fail in his attempt, he will be killed by the others. Two of the youths try in turn, but they are driven back by the stings of the hornets and fall to the ground. A third succeeds in reaching the nest and takes from it a jewel, known as the Hseng Taw. He then kills the two who have failed. The man is afterwards also known as Hseng Taw. Hseng Taw is adopted by Hsing as his own son and is entrusted with military operations.

Sometime after this, Emperor Wong Ti Fang sends a new Chinese force against Kengtung. Mang Rai despatches his son Hsing to organise its defence, in which he is accompanied by Hseng Taw. The Chinese are repulsed, and Hsing and Hseng Taw pursue them back to China. On the point of battle, the whole place is filled with attacking hornets, sent by Hseng Taw by virtue of the jewel he has obtained from the hornets' nest.

Wong Ti Fang is compelled to make peace and gives his daughter in marriage to Hsing (in the alternative version to Hseng Taw). They become friends, and Hsing continues to live in China. The alternative version has it that Hseng Taw becomes the ruler of China. Three sons are born. He (Hsing/Hseng Taw) makes plans for his sons' futures and starts conquering areas that are to become their realms. He orders them to defend and assist each other. Then he sets out to conquer the State of Men Ta Tawk and is successful in this. However, Hsing dies in a defenders' trap – a collapsing bridge – and is killed by the elephant he is riding. His wife sends his sons to the areas that have been assigned to them. The third son comes to rule the kingdom of the Hkuns.

The description of this phase in Kengtung history is somewhat different from the earlier historical accounts, and yet in essence the account of the episode is not so different from those of the earlier phases of development. The divergence lies in the circumstance that here the royal lineage of Kengtung not only boosts local authority by seeking out local forces of spiritual control, but also looks for legitimacy for its power by means of a connection to the all-important emperor of China. The relationship with China has two aspects: first military victory, partly achieved through invoking local Kengtung spiritual forces (hornets); and, secondly, through friendship and marriage, which introduces stabilising components into the symbolic heritage of the lineage. The Chinese imperial lineage becomes an allied supporter of the kingdom of Kengtung, and its king becomes an affinal relative of the emperor.

The Many Faces of Political Contract

Clearly, the various early episodes in the Kengtung chronicle are not proper historical accounts. The character of each episode is that of self-con-

17 Milne (1910: 79) says that it is extremely fortunate to dream one is holding the moon in one's hands. And yet, she suggests (78 f.) that among the Shan it is thought unlucky to dream of the moon.

tainment and a lack of progress; each tells its own story about the *saohpa* of Kengtung and the nature of its kingdom. The true history in a realist sense is not part of my concern in this essay. Let us explore these episodes again, but now looking for structural and systemic relationships between them, rather than sequential and causal ones.

The first Kengtung to be mentioned is a state usurped by a low-ranking man who, through distributive acts, achieves authority among the people of the forest. He takes possession of the throne by pretending to be a divine ruler. His distributive acts come to an end, and he is dethroned.[18]

This episode seems to express and give shape to a contract regulating forces of dominance, a contract based on distribution. The contract specifies a kingship based on egalitarian sharing, reflecting the tenets of the forest population. This contractual model is foreign to the people of the town, who expect a rank-based legitimacy implying discrimination. Their expectations of a king refer to a world of sanctity and immortal gods. The story seems to imply that this mock king shifts from sylvan principles of merit (linked to meat and its distribution) to an ill-founded claim to sanctity. The episode shows that the first type of contract cannot work at the centre, and the second cannot be fulfilled by the expectations of the periphery. The fake sanctity of the upstart usurper is reduced to a kingship of crabs and an underground spiritual power. The two forms of authority are incompatible.

Episode Two is somewhat different, in form being a divinely inspired prognosis as to the future of the land, which is now covered by an expanse of water. It adds an authenticity beyond argument. The episode spells out the frame for future political contracts. There is a difference also between the first two episodes in that the former only stipulates two categories of people while the second includes a third, the *sangha* or Buddhist monkhood, as an elite class.

The third episode tells us how imperial princes of China turned into religiously meritorious hermits, converted the great lake into rice fields and recruited a local guardian spirit in the form of a female *naga*. It concerns the economic foundation of the future kingdom. Somewhat paradoxically, the agricultural foundation of the kingdom and of Hkun ethnic identity is a gift from China, and thus something to which the future *saohpa* cannot claim a "natural" right of possession nor can the hill tribes. However, the *sangha* seems to have an intimate and rightful association with the growing of rice. Monks are the managers of death and future lives, in parallel to the farmers's sowing of grain. We recall that seven rice grains fell out into the water from the Lord Buddha's alms bowl on his visit to the pristine lake, thus stipulating the links water ↔ rice ↔ Buddhism as an imperative and basic grammar for the construction and management of symbolic imagery in Kengtung. The latter point is also reflected in agricultural rituals. We have seen how a string of annual festivals connected with the rice cycle involve the king and Buddhist monks and monasteries. In Kengtung the death of a monk provoked a ritual – a sort of tug-of-war – in the rice fields (Milne 1910: 150–153; Telford 1937: 131).

The Chinese colonists, who arrive to cultivate the earth and to form a state, are not successful. For three years, they plant rice and yet they do not obtain any grain. It does not help that they sacrifice meat to the local spirits. One may discern one implication in this. The rice fields at Kengtung have been endowed with their vegetative power by the Lord Buddha, while the drainage of the lake has been achieved, it is true, by Chinese imperial princes, but princes who have renounced their background and become hermits. Their status approaches the achievement by Prince Siddhartha when he was transformed into the Lord Buddha. They have turned from princes into wandering monks of exceptional gifts. The new Kengtung settlers are not so endowed and do not know Buddhism. They are pointed out as unsuitable to cultivate rice – which then falls within the privilege of the *sangha*. The colonists offer sacrifices to the spirits, providing meat, which is not a Buddhist offering. The local spirits control a great deal, like water and the underworld, but belonging to other spheres, they cannot guarantee the successful growth of rice.

In the fourth episode, which provides another new start for the Kengtung realm, the chronicle introduces a regionally common mythical motif, an image of human or human-like beings as emerging from gourds. In the Kengtung case the seeds of Cucurbitaceae fall into and grow in the tracks left by animals; they grow in a synthetic process of life-giving, combining the two biological spheres of the jungle into the one kind of human beings. These people, described as Wa or Lawa, have a close affinity with forests and hills, and they are almost of a kind with local spirits. They are the rightful inhabitants under their own chief. They are not supernatural, but profoundly natural. Being at this stage a monolithic ethnic realm, the political contract regulating this

18 What the text tells us seems rather similar to what happens in Kachin society when a *gumsa* type of organisation tries to convert itself into a Shan polity, and the attempt fails. See Leach (1954: ch. VII).

polity is implicit and marked by a common origin. The leader is elected on grounds of beauty, aesthetics, and ethics obviously being the same.

Episode Five moves the perspective out of Kengtung to a foreign land that could be identified as Yun country, situated in modern northern Thailand, the areas around Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. Also this story starts in a condition of chaos and is about the introduction of order – that is, the writing of a commonly recognised political contract. The land here is not empty, but inhabited by anarchists. It is acknowledged that the entire world pays tribute to the emperor of China, apart, that is, from the land of these Yun anarchists. This fact worries the gods of the Hindu heaven, who apparently not only like structural conformity, but also the emperor of China, who here appears as a sort of Chakravartin world ruler. Indra, the chief of the gods, enquires into the matter and finds the lack of leadership among the Yun to be the root of their failure to pay tribute to China. This can be remedied by the new and extraordinary device of sacred kingship. Two minor gods are recruited and instructed to descend to Earth, there to found a Yun royal dynasty.

Now the Yun country prospers and expands. It is not mentioned whether the Yun actually provide tribute to China, but order is definitely brought about in terms of a grammar of indisputable inequality, the opposite of earlier anarchism. It seems, though, as if the expansion of this reorganised realm invites some novel problems that go along with new areas being incorporated. Political contracts must be written for the new parts of the realm.

The sixth episode has it that the son of the two descended gods becomes *saohpa* and in turn begets children to continue the dynasty. Under mysterious circumstances he inseminates a bear, which later gives birth to a son. Now a branch of the royal line contains a component from the wild life of the forest. The myth here presents us with a political contract similar to that of tributary marriages in actual interstate politics. There is a nuptial link here between Nature and the royal house, which allows the king command over natural forces from which he was formerly alienated, being then of pure divine blood.

The son that resulted from the bear-prince union marries in his turn a *naga* serpent, daughter of the king of the *naga*s. This marriage produces another boy child, the dynastic founder's great grandson. In this nuptial combination we may discern another contract, which this time provides the royal line with potential influence over not only sylvan energy but also aquatic domains and chthonian powers.

There is a new focus on Kengtung in the seventh episode. The royal lineage of the Yun is prompted to expand its domain to include Kengtung. The Wa and their chief defend themselves with success, but are ultimately tricked into defeat. After this, yet another political contract is written for the newly formed state, also expressed in the imagery of a state ritual. Reflecting the text's sequence of events, at every new royal coronation there is a demonstration of the fact that especially the palace, as the centre of the dominion, really belongs to the Wa, but it is also shown that they must hand over the throne to the usurper, the Yun king.[19]

In episode eight, the rightfulness of the Yun overlords continues to be discussed. It is reported that a succession of princes are all short-lived. It is implied that the forces of Nature influencing the new Kengtung state do not agree with the collective aura of the invading Yun. A remedy for this is Buddhist religion being introduced into Kengtung, and the country becomes populated with monks, one of whom is also entrusted to run the country in the name of the king. This theocratic state achieves a new status through the religious endowment of its new inhabitants, improving the condition of the Yun population.

What is said is that the characteristics of the Yun population do not fit with the existing local symbolic conditions – they are the wrong kind of people to settle here in Kengtung. Buddhist dominion negotiates the difference, providing a platform and a framework for royal power. Buddhism can now control the social construction of fate and also successfully manage some local energies, including the cultivation of rice. There are still some unconquered dimensions of reality. Despite Buddhism being a mediating device, it remains impossible to completely reconcile celestial authority with chthonian authority. Therefore, ruling princes die early.

The solution is radical and is achieved by the introduction of Hkun settlers as another sort of mediating category. They are, like the Yun, from the outside and yet of a symbolic configuration that guarantees a harmonious settlement here. The Yun convert themselves into Hkun by changing their dress. Apparently, the Hkun are Buddhists and are prepared to recognise the king. They are also to some extent "animists" and chose to be buried in the ground to become part of the territory, rather than, like the Yun and other Tai peoples (also the Burmese; but see Nash 1965: 151–156), to opt for

19 The process is reminiscent of the inauguration of a new palace in the Lao kingdom of Luang Prabang, where only local aboriginal people are allowed to take possession of the new building initially, and having achieved control over this space, they are in turn removed by the king, who attacks them with royally charged rice balls (Archaimbault 1964: 65 f.; Aijmer 1979: 735).

cremation, which connects the deceased with both the terrestrial and the celestial spheres (e.g. Tambiah 1970: 183–187; Archaimbault 1963).

Cultivating rice – the economic backbone of the realm – needs cultivators who can draw on both earthly and aquatic forces, while they also need celestial blessings. Here we meet an entirely new political contract in which origins are denied and legitimacy found through social engineering. The pagan Wa are not part of this, but through a different contract they are brought to submission and a surrender of their ritual rights.

The celestial king manifests himself in royal celebrations on splendid occasions. From time to time he even shows himself in his divine shape as a god. The terrestrial Hkun are symbolically obvious in their cultivation of rice and their participation in the rituals of the Buddhist universe. They organise and visit temples, they seek merit, and their local belonging is made manifest in terms of death and the circulation of life. Buddhism connects ruler and peasant in life; in death, however, their destinies are separated. In Kengtung, Buddhism emerges as the final grandiose political contract that joins together the social categories of peasantry and overlords and lays down the distribution of authority and dominance in the state. The king is the guarantor of the Buddhist contract in which forces from beneath and above are joined into blissful political harmony.

The final ninth episode contains some rather unexpected information, and its story line has a somewhat different thrust. Again it involves China, and again it engages local spiritual forces. The latter take the shape of hornets nesting high up in a tree, where they keep a jewel. In deadly competition one young man successfully retrieves the jewel. This youth is adopted as a son of the king of Nou Yang, who is himself a son of Mang Rai, who is the child of two deities. In this tale we find another contractual scheme in which the royal house again comes into the possession and control of natural local forces. We find here a new sphere being opened up. The hornets' nest is neither on nor in the ground, nor is it celestial. It is something in between, the hornets being spiritual agents of the treetops, an intermediary mid-level category between Heaven and Earth. The conquest of this force implies violence and the sacrificial death of young men.

Again the Chinese emperor enters the scene, first in the shape of a substantial army with a mission to conquer what he regards as his, given that it was his sons who had drained the Kengtung plain. The time perspective on this is somewhat puzzling, but the story has it that the emperor is suffering defeat. Wong Ti Fang, the emperor of China, is compelled to make peace and gives his daughter in marriage to the Hkun prince, or in the alternative version to the prince's adopted son. In this second account, the situation is elaborated in that the latter comes to rule China. In the end, one son, sprung from this marriage, returns to rule over the kingdom of the Hkuns.

The royal house adds yet another symbolic link to boost its authority to rule. The political contract takes the form of a tributary marriage. This suggests rule over China. China as a source of infinite political power is symbolically tapped by the Kengtung king, one possibility here being that through this alliance he can fend off dangers emanating from his mighty neighbour.

The Symbolic Construction of the Political Contract

The basic problem addressed in this essay is how a ruler of foreign extraction who has usurped power can exercise a dominance that is acceptable on moral grounds, an acceptance we refer to as authority. It is certainly useless to define "power," but for our present discussion we may characterise the notion as control over productive resources; it is different from "authority," which springs from notions of righteousness and world order. Authority implies a redistribution of wealth and benign action, justifying and dressing up power as a moral force exercised by a benevolent and compassionate leader.

In Kengtung and other Shan States with a plural ethnic composition, power was not directly reconcilable with traditional authority, a circumstance reflecting the conquest of the terrain by Tai-speaking peoples some eight hundred years ago. The resolution found to this dissociation between power and authority, where integration was wanted, lay in the writing of a series of political contracts. In Kengtung these contracts have been given the shape of a historical chronicle of early events in the development of the country. They confer qualities emanating from local and recognised moral sources on an alien king. They are symbolic statements on the building of superiority and charisma. They should be understood in terms of a visionary, iconic reading of a text that is misleading as history. Rendering the imagery of power and authority as a historical account turns what is being said beyond argument. If history is factual and causal, it cannot be denied nor negotiated. Historical truth becomes an iconic presupposition in an archive of symbolic statements concerning royal dominion.

The early kings of Kengtung could not control the local forces of the terrain. The ruler's own

source of authority was divine destiny and celestial selection. The Hkun world of gods was akin to the universe of divinities in Shaivite Hinduism. Even so, the Buddhist view of the world predominated and prefixed the social discourse of the Shan States. Authority was built out of merit. In a way Kengtung was founded (predicted) by Lord Buddha himself, and one Kengtung monastery was supposedly founded by Ashoka.

Kengtung history was a constitution regulating the transfer of essential qualities to the king and his lineage. These relocations were described in terms of iconic grammars for the composition of an acceptable imagery of royal success. A leading rule is the imperative declaration of difference. Leadership among the dwellers of hills and forests is profoundly dissimilar to that of Tai-speaking communities. Through the former you cannot achieve inspired kingship. The divide must be bridged symbolically.

The position of the terrestrial forces is central to the mythical text. The true locals spring from Nature's energies and thus cannot be decisively alienated from this source, but rather, they continue to exercise their moral right to exist on the land. The king and his settlers of first Yun and later Hkun ethnic affiliation are all strangers and must find their means to have a share in the flow of local energies. These ways imply a good deal of violence, real and symbolic, but each conquest has to be concluded by some sort of deal, and the articulation of this in a visionary contract. The forms for this – mainly historical annals and political rituals – are of such a nature that they can only be challenged by comparing them with other images. A contract expressed in terms of the imaginary order may be more lasting than one contained in verbal discourse. And yet, dominance is never taken for granted, and authority has to be renegotiated intermittently. In this process, icons provide stability. The Shan *saohpa* constructed himself as a cosmic ruler by combining universal features with local powers. One expression of this is the throne of the State of Hsen Wi, which displayed a magical sign indicating that the king was the master of fire and water, destruction, and regeneration, his power being one of universal synthesis.

The grammar of authority and legitimacy building uses relationships of marriage and adoption to "tag" to the divine principle, spheres that are not divine but nonetheless spiritual and beyond divine influence.[20] Buddhism, which as a complex symbolic system handles life and death and the generation of life from death, acts through rules of subordination, the king making himself a dependant part of that cyclical system while he is still alive. In death, however, he steps out from this sphere, and by the instrument of cremation he returns to the celestial sphere, while ordinary human beings, being buried, continue to be part of the localised system of recycling life.

Kengtung as a Southeast Asian Kingdom

As an example of the traditional Southeast Asian kingdom, Kengtung shows a number of family resemblances to other traditional polities in the wider region. We find here yet another example of "pluralistic" statecraft in which dominance is exercised over various ethnic combinations, justified by the early transfers of indigenous authorities. In this the Hkun are similar to, for example, the Mahakam Kayan in central Borneo, and the kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Bassac.[21] In terms of iconic semantics, there is in the wider area a "concrete" basic proposition: the ultimate certainty of power as stemming from the transcendental control of life force and the transformation of death into blessings in the forging of social destiny. In Kengtung, as in so many other polities in the region, the king's ability stems from his superiority of descent, his ancestry being linked with the gods of the higher sphere of existence. What he can do on earth depends on what contracts and agreements he can enter with spiritual forces that emanate from the terrain and underground. Iconic grammars organise instrumental idioms from an array of social relations, which are not givens but need symbolic construction – like marriage, adoption, and monkhood. Under contract, local benign energies flow into the king, who can convert them into a mixture of blessings that benefit the cultivation of rice and the proliferation of human beings. The ultimate contract in the Shan States is Buddhism, which turns the cultivators of the ground into sanctioned citizens sharing a ritual apparatus with the king. However, in Kengtung there is a difference in that when ordinary Hkun die their life force is recycled through burial in the ground, whereas in death the king abandons his realm to rejoin his celestial ancestry. The royal graves, containing their ashes and bones, are above the ground, perhaps being too strong in energy for the chthonic realm. In the final analysis, the kings

20 Perhaps we find the other side's version of the same contract in the observation that the local "Wild Wa" claimed a connection with the king of Kengtung, presumably through relations of symbolic adoption or marriage (Énriquéz 1918: 33).

21 Archaimbault (1972); Aijmer (1979, 2010); Platenkamp (2008).

are aliens who are lent by Heaven to the state and reclaimed at death.

We must not expect Southeast Asian kingdoms to be all alike, as the Kengtung ethnography reminds us. Even so, we do find elements of symbolism turning up frequently, even if they are recurrently contextualised in dissimilar ways. It is my strong belief that, by comparative studies of the formations of these polities, in the longer perspective we will be in a better position to understand the cultural history of the subcontinent as a series of transformations of iconic propositions and drifting discursive exegeses. The anthropological writing of the "cultural history" of the Southeast Asian kingdoms would certainly look rather different from the classic historical accounts of, for instance, Georges Cœdès (1964). The best strategy to pursue in this more inclusive and speculative project is to employ a step-by-step ethnographic investigation in combination with experimental suggestions as to how we may, on a grander scale, synthesise the family resemblances that point towards cultural drift, robust grammars, and symbolic games as factors generating political dominions of considerable duration in the real world.

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