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## **Cords and Connections: Ritual and Spatial Integration in the Jinghpaw Cultural Zone**

**Mandy Sadan**

### **Introduction: Relations and Relativity<sup>1</sup>**

The Jinghpaw peoples residing in what is today northern Burma/Myanmar, under their multi-group exonym Kachin, have long been considered an ethnographic exemplar of fluid identities and malleable, constructed ethnic affiliations. E. R. Leach's well known and sometimes controversial monograph on Kachin 'Political Systems' (1954), alongside his less well known but equally important article on the 'Frontiers of Burma' (1960), established a benchmark against which the relational dimension of Kachin ethnicity was proclaimed its key ontological feature. Following Leach, in the case of the Kachin this concentration on the relational has usually focused on their juxtaposition with the Shan people, itself a heterogeneous social grouping when viewed across the full geographical range of Shan historical habitation from North East India to the deep Mekong sub-region. The usual model by which this relationship is delineated is that the more powerful, developed socio-political entity (Shan) exerted an impressive pull factor upon those ambitious and seemingly eagerly impressionable Kachin chiefs in contact with them, who apparently aped the Shan polity as an ideal and readily abandoned their 'Kachin-ness', along with all the diverse trans-regional advantages which that identity might offer, as they did so. In contrast to the perceived stability of Shan political and social formations, the chaotic maelstrom of competing push and pull in the Kachin socio-political environment, epitomised by the terms *gumlao* and *gumsa* in Leach's analysis, created a confusing level of disorder which was resolved primarily through the notion that one was, or was not, Shan. It is not possible to use an enduring anthropological present to describe the relationship that Leach identified, as the political systems of both Kachin and Shan communities have been transformed in recent decades. But the Kachin-Shan model and the notion of ethnic relativity and identity shift in an 'open system' still holds powerful sway (Kuper 1986), and in particular influences our concerns about the imperfection of ethnic claims in the modern world, especially when these claims take militarised form as they have done in Burma for so many decades.

Although this truncated summary of Leach's complex and important argument does not do it justice, the point here is that the interior features of Tibeto-Burman language ritual practices, and the ways in which Kachin identities were negotiated through them, are usually seen as subsidiary to the Kachin-Shan dynamic, which is assumed to be the primary ethnographic

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<sup>1</sup> A large number of people in the Kachin region have assisted me with this research over many years but I am particularly grateful to Pungga Ja Li and members of the Yup Uplift Committee for their support, and especially for allowing me to work with them on their archive of ritual practices, from which many of the findings of this paper have been derived. All errors of interpretation are my own.

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fact. It is perhaps long overdue that clearer distinctions be made between the relational and the purely relative in these debates. These two terms are sometimes erroneously elided, and in the latter case may be used to dismiss the relevance of ethnicity at all. This paper will attempt to re-focus attention on *internal* relational identities within the Jinghpaw ('Kachin') cultural sphere, and in this respect the issue of Tibeto-Burman language ritual practices is very significant. The principal ritual and colloquial languages of the Shan, unlike the Kachin, are not Tibeto-Burman but of Tai-Kadai classification. Whilst Jinghpaw ritual language performance contains many Shan terms, and the impression should certainly not be created that Tibeto-Burman and Tai-Kadai linguistic classifications are functionally rigid boundaries, it is clear that Jinghpaw ritual practice draws upon particular codes and speech acts that are not endlessly transmutable in relation to other languages; these are embedded in Jinghpaw systems of euphony, linguistic creativity derived from its monosyllabic structure and, in particular, the Jinghpaw kinship and naming system.

The term Kachin is an etic, quantitatively-driven notion through which an ethno-demographic constituency has been produced within the national system of ethnic structuring in Burma/Myanmar. However, underpinning the claims of 'Kachin-ness' lie emic, qualitative elements. Relational identities are very important in these internal understandings of self and community, but they do not depend solely on contact with a Shan ritual- political environment to produce them. One of the contemporary roles that myths of origin and migration narratives in the Kachin region have today is to try to make critical points of connection between these two constructs.

However, the functions of these narratives are typically misunderstood in discourses about modernity, nationalism, indigeneity, ethnicity and autonomy, as we see discussed many times in this volume. Accusations of artificiality abound, both of the narratives themselves and then, by implication, of the ethnic identities and the claims that appear to be based upon them. Yet one of the main reasons why these narratives are prone to such criticism today is that they are typically dissociated from their original ritual idiom. In the Jinghpaw case inside Burma they are also removed from their original locus in indigenous spirit practices because of the widespread conversion to Christianity. In their modern, colloquial form they are typically considered merely attempts at constructing pseudo-history, not as processual cultural artefacts. When considered in their ritual idiom, however, the detailed, technical complexity, and non-arbitrary evolution of such narratives becomes apparent, which is entirely missed when considering only their colloquial renditions.

This paper will explore how contemporary versions of origin myths and migrations have been produced in a setting where there has been widespread religious conversion, long-term conflict reducing the human and material resources to maintain knowledge of these forms as rituals or as derived texts, and aggressive state censorship that delimits the parameters of their reproduction and circulation. After establishing this contemporary context, consideration will then be given to the evidence that we have of the performance of origin and migration narratives in their ritual idiom and what these reveal of the intentions of these performances as a 'traditional' genre. Before exploring this further, therefore, it is first necessary to identify what pressures may have been exerted upon these 'traditional' idioms in recent decades within Burma to better appreciate their historical status.

### **Jinghpaw 'Kachin' Origin Myths and their Contemporary Political Contexts**

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Any discussion of Origin Myths in relation to the Kachin peoples can only progress if from the outset some of the political issues that have produced this identifier within the modern Burmese state are understood. The contemporary understanding of the identity Kachin in Burma/Myanmar is that the Kachin are one of the officially recognised National Races of the Burmese state. This identification was enshrined in the first constitution of modern Burma implemented at the time of independence from Britain in 1948. The story of independence, and the constitutional arrangements by which that independence was effected, is one that brings little glory to the final days of empire. For many of the ethnic minority communities that found themselves bound to the Burmese state in structured political arrangements, in many cases for the first time, agreement to enter into the new constitutional framework was something of a leap of faith. Many prefaced their agreement with reservations about the kind of autonomy that they anticipated would be implemented in their respective areas, and some, notably the representatives of the Karenni and Shan States, enshrined these reservations in the constitutionally approved caveat that they could withdraw from the Union of Burma after ten years if it failed to fulfil their expectations.

Indigeneity and nationhood were inextricably combined in these constitutional arrangements. This was influenced to a great extent by both the perception and reality of large scale Indian and Chinese immigration into Burma during the period of British colonial rule. The need to define national indigeneity through the anti-colonial, which was equated with the historically pre-colonial, was readily established in the structures of the new state. Indigenous races of the new Burma were those who were deemed to have been settled in the country prior to 1823, i.e.: just prior to the first Anglo-Burmese war and the beginnings of formal British colonial expansion in the region. This was notwithstanding the fact that 'Burma' did not exist as a border-regulated, territorially delineated space at this time in many of the regions that the modern state now claimed as its own. The explicit nature of the proofs by which indigeneity was to be confirmed, however, was not clearly delineated. As independent Burma entered its long slide into military rule, during which time Constitutions were progressively reinvented as blueprints for the consolidation of centralised power in the face of opposition, decisions about national indigeneity became the preserve of the Council of State, which could decide whether or not any ethnic group was deemed to be 'national'.

In a country in which significance was attached to the localisation of an historical moment as a watershed by which the right to citizenship for all subsequent generations was predetermined, new importance would be attached to the ability of minority ethnic groups to substantiate their own historical knowledge. A pressure was exerted upon localised ethno-histories to resituate themselves to become readable by the conventions of a statist history, both to establish their historical presence as recognisable communities as well as to counteract the national narrative during a time of intense conflict. For many communities, which lacked extensive own-language historical documentation, this meant repositioning knowledge expressed in more 'traditional' oral and ritual forms in new ways, so that they could both interact with and intervene against the constructions being made by new national histories. In this context, new meanings undoubtedly assimilated to narratives of origin and migration.

The principal ethnic groups around whose identities modern South East Asian states and nations have developed (the Burmans, the T(h)ai, the Khmer, the Viêt etc.) were those who traced their origins to other, distant places from which they migrated to their present sites of

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permanent settlement. The idea of origins and subsequent migration was deemed by the narratives of these new nations to have had a distant historical function as a starting point for the trajectory of modern state development. The value of migration as an on-going, contemporary discourse is negated by this notion of national development, and is even deemed to stand in opposition to the notion of settled civilization. In creating a constitutionally demarcated historical marker of settlement for all 'National Races' in Burma/Myanmar, migration was relegated to being a historically transient or pre-national feature, a characteristic that ceased to be relevant nationally even before the advent of British rule. For communities such as the Jinghpaw, however, for whom the notion and reality of migration was a critical aspect of their (ongoing) social formulation evolving over time and space, this interpretation of the 'value' of migration created an ontological difficulty in relation to their own community histories. The need to reconfigure the meanings of migration, to give it a 'real time' historical validity by which the actual origins of the 'Kachin' peoples could be traced to a specific place and time, were undoubtedly significant. Migration stories needed ideally to be rendered comparable and compatible with the migration narratives of national majorities in the modern (colonial and postcolonial) nation state. This led to the development of features into myths of origin that were and are still intended to function as interventions against the discourse of the modern nation, an entity which both incorporated and peripheralised them.

In the case of Kachin myths and narratives (although it can be seen in many other communities too) one of the most significant impacts of the emergence of the modern ethno-state has been the need to determine the common origins of all the principal sub-groups of the modern Kachin National Race, and to fix this as a linear narrative. The Kachin sub-groups today are the Jinghpaw, the Lawngwaw (Maru, Lhaovo), the Zaiwa (Atzi, Atsi), the Lisu (Yawyin, Li-su), the Nung-Rawang (Nung, Rawang), Lachik (Lashi, Lacid). All of these communities as they are currently defined are complex entities and their distinct languages (whilst recognising that polyglottism is the norm in this region) come from different branches of the Tibeto-Burman language family. At the level of ritual practice and social integration, this is significant, as will be discussed below. Most accounts of origins of the Kachin in Burma/Myanmar iterate as an essential component the common ancestry of the different sub-groups. These are deemed to have separated from each other at various points along ancestral migration paths, reconnecting sometimes only in very recent history. For example, recently the discourse about the integration of the Lisu into the wider Kachin category has focused on 1963 and the coming together of Lisu groups in a large dance festival, or *manau*, at the outset of the Kachin civil war against the central government, this marking the return of the lost Lisu brother to the Kachin fold. This coincided with the widespread migration of Lisu communities from China entering the Kachin region as a result of conflict across the border. As with many other communities, as related throughout this volume, these transformations of local understandings of identity within new national systems that both privileged and marginalized non-national ethnicities, also led to attempts to identify in a literal sense the site of common human origins, the geographical location of the mythic place *Majoi Shingra Bum*, for example, from where the migration of all human beings commenced in Jinghpaw myth. Other attempts to find historical connectivities with archaeological sites in Tibet and Yunnan are also current and ongoing in the effort to trace routes of migration and to justify distinctive, indigenously produced historical frameworks that can counterbalance the discourse of 'the nation'. Clearly these interpretations correlate with the interpretation of

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migration in conventional representations as a process undertaken by soon-to-be national groups and imply (erroneously) the large scale movement of peoples from one settled point to another.

Yet these narratives were not recited with these intentions in the past, as will be demonstrated, and the result of the attempt to streamline them into linear projections of history have not surprisingly largely failed to reduce divergences in detail across different versions. This apparent uncertainty has led to the assumption that, at best, these accounts are confused or, at worst, they are nothing less than products of modern political artifice intended to mobilize Kachin nationalist feeling. To counter the latter possibility, writers within the Burmese establishment have tried to 'prove' that, for example, the Lawngwaw or the Rawang were variously 'descendants of the Pyu' (considered by some to be progenitors of later Burmese society) or were 'White Burmans', thus splintering the Kachin nationalist discourse of common descent, repositioning these Kachin sub-groups as branches of the *Bamar*. Rather than being a tangential debate to more pressing political and socio-economic concerns, such discourses are important because the outcome of such arguments politically is that they could reduce the demographic claims of Kachin nationalism. This obviously impacts on the validity of Kachin claims for autonomous political structures in the Kachin region, especially as today the Kachin State retains hardly a Kachin majority demographic at all as a result of population transfer and movement, especially from lower Burma. When framed in this way, such features of ethnic politics in contemporary Myanmar no longer seem trivial or a diversion from more pressing needs and realities. Rather, they reflect the longstanding need to resist the cultural prejudices of the national majority against (especially) the non-traditionally literate languages and histories of many minorities. This is deemed by many minority elites, particularly of the elder generations, as an essential prerequisite for establishing fair systems of governance in the future, as well as consolidating in the present a strong body of evidence justifying National Minority claims for political rights.

As conversion to Christianity and long-term conflict and dislocation have severely reduced the extent of ritual performance in the Kachin region of Burma, the ways in which these local-language accounts of origins and migrations enter the public sphere in themselves reveal much about the contemporary political contexts that influence them. Although the Burmese state recognises certain identities as Indigenous categories (the Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine and Shan) and has a complex list of some 135 'National Races' and/or linguistic subgroups arranged through thirteen 'ethnic families' (Gravers 2007; Smith 2002:15), this privilege has not in recent years extended to the right to publish what might be termed ethno-histories of these groups. One could not, and indeed officially still cannot, publish a work that expresses itself explicitly to be a 'Kachin History'. However, within this there are some important caveats creating a malleable gray area, especially when publishing in minority languages, with which the censor board as a whole seems rather poor at dealing. This overt, and rigidly enforced restriction pertains to what might be considered 'factual' history, the stuff of dates and 'real' events and places, and which would therefore ultimately lead into a discussion, explicit or implicit, of the origins of the post-colonial nationalist movement in the Kachin region and its opposition to the central regime. Where the censor is less concerned, apparently, is the domain of 'family history', which can be published with little intervention from the censor board, as can religious works. In this, the traditional narratives have an advantage in that they can place themselves within this latter

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framework, being the narratives of lineages and family groups. This has been an important route by which these forms have retained a discursive presence in the Jinghpaw language public sphere in Burma. There are two main genre for 'mythic' histories and these, in Jinghpaw, have come to be known under the headings *Labau*, which equates in modern parlance to something equivalent to 'Old Story', and the more traditional couplet phrase *Ginru Ginsa*, which equates broadly to 'Origins and Migrations'. Many of these accounts are derivations of traditional recitations that would have been performed at various rituals but which have been removed from this context and stripped down to make them accessible as colloquialised, non-ritual texts. The poor level of knowledge about local languages within the official censorship boards also to some extent assists the development of Jinghpaw language narratives, as they simply have to be summarised in Burmese, not translated in full, enabling some writers to push the boundaries of political comment (albeit often by implication rather than directly) in ways beyond what might be achievable if publishing in the Burmese language.

Prior to the ceasefire between the Kachin Independence Army and the central regime in 1994, a number of publications were printed in the Kachin region using these terms of mythic genre in their titles. Some were produced by the officially-sanctioned but locally-organised Cultural Committees under the Burma Socialist Programme Party. The BSPP ran the country from 1962, when General Ne Win took power, until 1988 when it was dissolved in the political turmoil following the democracy uprisings. The BSPP era contributed to an environment in which divergent accounts on any social issue had to be 'standardised', in keeping with the prevailing ideological mindset of the ruling regime, and this mindset, being so entrenched within the social and educational environment of Burma for so long, has inevitably had a significant impact. Yet, whilst the Kachin region was embroiled in conflict during much of this time, the main administrative area of Myitkyina and those parts of southern Kachin state under government control still employed Kachin men and women as government servants. Kachin families in these areas frequently had family members involved in both poles of the military-political establishment: a parent, perhaps, working as a government servant to gain income, whilst a son or daughter might be living around the borders as a KIA soldier, as all Kachin families were expected to have one child enter the militarised nationalist movement. These educated ethnic-Kachin government servants, many of whom had historical and cultural interests as there were few other outlets for individuated expression in the darkest days of the civil war, often determined to write down what they knew of their lineage specific origin myths and migration narratives for fear that knowledge of them would rapidly disappear. This was a particular concern for those who saw the impact of the Burmese state extend its reach into Kachin society, as well as the impact of the rapidly evolving context of Christian conversion, which picked up apace from the mid-1970s onwards. Critically, their positions in public administration meant they had access to manual typewriters and gestetner printers. It is no coincidence that during the period of conflict many small, hand-produced booklets circulated detailing personal interpretations of various aspects of *Wunpawng Labau* (Wunpawng being the term that is used as an indigenised equivalent of Kachin). These were usually produced on a very small scale but would be circulated across the region through various kinship and other networks. They had to be carefully framed within the genre of family (clan, lineage) history, which lay outside the domain of the censor.

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The KIA also produced a text book for use in schools in areas that it controlled which clearly established the common heritage of the wider Kachin category, specifically the common ancestry of the six sub-groups (H. Naw Awn, 1986). Most important, though, was the reinvention of the public space of the *manau* performance in the Kachin region in the early 1990s, a large public performance derived from a feast-of-merit type ritual, which also provided a forum that seems to have spurred these local writers to produce these booklets on local, poor quality paper, as there were good opportunities for selling and distributing the books to the thousands who gathered from all across the Kachin region. A Jinghpaw language bookshop in Myitkyina, *Laika Naura*, also flourished and encouraged this steady stream of self-published works. However, from the mid-1990s onwards, following the KIA ceasefire with the government in 1994, and particularly after 1997 when preparations were well underway for an anticipated tourist 'influx' with 'Visit Myanmar Year' and Myanmar's admission into ASEAN, there was a quite sudden and rapid extension of the availability of reprographic and then computer equipment in the main urban areas across the country (although personal ownership of computers remained officially illegal at this time). A demand for computer courses accompanied this, which helped fill the academic void in which many educated young people found themselves following their exclusion from formal education as a result of the continued closure of the universities following demonstrations in 1996. Very rapidly, therefore, in the late 1990s a fairly large constituency of educated, computer literate young people emerged in Burma and the paramouncy of the Gestetner copier was brought to an end. There seems to have been a squeezing-out of the many manually typed, hand-duplicated accounts, which elders could operate themselves, as the preference for better quality, offset-type publications gained ground, which was the technical preserve of the new generation of educated, and aspirational, young men and women (L. Zau Mun 1995, 1997). This latter field of publication was inevitably youth-dominated because of its technical aspects. Quite rapidly, therefore, there was a discernible shift despite an early florescence of works by local elders towards local-language publications that engaged with 'modern' concepts of 'Kachin' culture and contemporary social issues. Again, space was cleverly found within, below and beyond the censor's radar, by publishing texts as 'Drafts', or as intended for private distribution, or as religious or family discourses. However, whilst this enabled the continued presence of colloquial accounts of origins and migration in the public sphere, engagement with the deeper societal contexts of myths of origins and migration, specifically relating to indigenous spirit practices in particular, was discouraged within the Kachin urban educated elite community, especially among youth groups, and this constrained discourse about these forms in ways that were as profound and limiting in some respects as of the censor.

The reasons for this are complex. Many young people found the 'histories' within these narratives fell far short of what they would expect of a 'good' history, and there was sometimes confusion as to the response one should have concerning the appearance of elements such as the tale of the flood in the narratives. The indigenisation of Christian faith in the Kachin region meant that conversion was through cultural incorporation to a large extent and the parallelism of theologies. This has resulted in some very idiosyncratic interpretative accounts of myths of origin, but the resistance towards criticising this process within the nationalist Kachin Christian environment has been very strong until recently. Others dismiss elements such as the tale of the flood as rendering the whole form questionable and inauthentic. The suspicion that political artifice is embedded in these contemporary texts has

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also been intensified by the continued work of various Culture Committees and other groups since the ceasefire. Committees have determined to standardise accounts, many of their members being from an older, socialist-controlled generation, and thus wanted to minimise the appearance of difference that surfaced in the self-published, hand-duplicated texts; Kachin nationalism also has insisted on such covering of discursive cracks for fear of splintering the opposition movement. The resultant representations of origins and migrations are therefore often composites derived from a number of different oral models related as a homogenised whole. By emphasising *manau* sites, funeral sites, village foundation sites, and so forth, the committees try to totalise the ritual geographic claims of the respective lineages and to emphasise their connectivity with the ritual space of what is now Kachin State. The composite nature of these accounts in particular seems to implicate their lack of 'authenticity', whilst their removal from ritual practice means that the wider understanding of these forms, their processual significance in particular, remains under-developed. Thus, again, the tendency is to dismiss their wider relevance in the dispute between the surface artificiality of categories like 'Kachin' and the desire to prove that such identities are unproblematic, unmediated vectors of historical identity, and that origin myths have the capacities to 'prove' claims of discrete histories, autonomy and rights within the modern state. However, undoubtedly the greater objection against the fuller discussion of origin myths other than in the colloquialised renderings described is that such engagement would necessitate a repositioning of the current value framework around indigenous spirit practices displaced by Christianity. Discussion of the migration narratives and myths of origin has therefore remained somewhat static at the point established by the urban elites described.

### **Movement, Migration and Origins – Jinghpaw Concepts.**

The need must be, therefore, to understand how these composites produced by various Committees have been constructed (Duleng Labau Komiti 1994; Jinghpaw Wunpawng Htunghking the Laili Laika Hpung Ginjaw, undated), as well as how the individuated accounts presented by keen amateur cultural historians in the past related to these. Despite the difficulties inherent in such work, some efforts have fortunately been made to make recordings of the indigenous spirit practices in which other understandings of 'migration' and 'origins' were once embedded. These recordings, undertaken by local researchers especially in the early to mid nineties took various forms, and were indeed initially part of the nationalist agenda that has been described above. However, the great advantage in them is that multiple renditions of similar types of performance were made. This is a fortuitous methodological circumstance, although its potential outcomes were perhaps unforeseen at the time, which represents a considerable advance on the tendency towards singular recordings that of necessity form the research staple of lone, time and money-strapped linguists working in marginalised Tibeto-Burman communities. During the period 1996-9, I was privileged to be able to engage with this kind of material, to study the ritual language of the *dumsa* 'spirit priests' and to compare multiple recordings of rituals conducted across the Kachin region in Jinghpaw. It is as a result of this study that it is possible to make the following comments.

First, myths of origin were most importantly recounted through a series of oral recitations performed at *manau* festivals. The *manau* was the most prestigious rite of a Jinghpaw chief and the right to hold the festival was itself derived at a mythic level from the claims of a chief, as part of a particular lineage, to have had an ancestral kinship relationship with spirits in the upper levels of the Jinghpaw pantheon (what might be termed 'sky' spirits). The



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complexities of this are manifold, both in terms of the cosmological complications and the socio-political dimensions. Because of the nature of the ritual, in particular its intention to consolidate the mythic socio-ritual claims of particular lineages and the claims of particular individuals to lay claim to these privileges, the main thrust of the narrative of origins is to explain the origin of the festival and its linear progression through many generations to the current, very particular site of local performance. This is perhaps best understood by considering one element of this ritual, the *naura majai*, which would be the ritual to purify and confirm the circular dancing arena (*naura*) where the accumulation of *sut* (fecundity, prosperity) would be accumulated through the coming together of different kinship groups, in various relations with that of the chief, to dance/'step' together. In the centre of the circle would be a set of posts, the *shadung*, which were embedded in the ground and were a receptacle for these 'blessings' from the spirits. These would be connected by strips of cane to the front roof post of the chief's house, which in turn would be connected with another receptacle for the receipt of *sut* at the central ritual fireplace, which was inside the house and which was the sole preserve of the chief. Large manau festivals took place only rarely, but the presence of the *madai dap* (Madai fireplace, the Madai spirit being the main spirit being honoured through the festival) was a permanent ritual feature which confirmed the chief's right to hold the festival. When individuals wished to acquire the right to hold manau (which was possible in certain circumstances), what they in fact obtained was the right to have a Madai fireplace. At the end of the manau, the various strings and cords would be symbolically cut above a special, close-woven basket with a tight-fitting lid so that the ends dipped inside, and as they did so, all the *sut* that had accumulated would be packed up in the basket and stored above the Madai fireplace. This represented the accumulated prosperity and fecundity of the chief's line both in the present and for future use.

The purification of the *naura* reveals much about the purpose of origin stories in the Jinghpaw cultural sphere. The recitation would take the form of an account of the origins of the earth, the spirits and then human beings as a means of explaining the origins of the festival. The narrative would inevitably slip into what we could consider a migration narrative in that its purpose was to legitimise the particular claims of the current host in hosting the ritual. This had to be established along a genealogical route so that the ritual and cosmological authenticity of the current performance could not be brought into question. The form that this genealogy took, however, was not a rigid generation to generation family tree; the genealogy was through the line of those in the same spiritual and ritual position as the current host in the family, i.e.: the line of those who had previously held manau festivals; generations would be omitted where no festival had been held. Its purpose, therefore, was to consolidate contemporary claims as much as to give an (incomplete) account of the lineage. Origins in this context were not intended to answer the question 'Where are we from?', rather they were intended to answer the question 'How are my rights to hold this significant ritual derived and legitimated?' Furthermore, movement ('migration') is related not as a generation-by-generation linkage through all sites of residence (although it would be hoped that this would be the case as it would indicate that each generation of a line had sufficient prosperity to maintain their ritual obligations through the performance of manau), but rather the spatial points at which these ritual obligations between humans and higher spirits were maintained and consolidated.

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The critical aspect of the narratives of origin relating to the Jinghpaw cultural sphere is that when human beings separated from spirits, there developed a particular kind of cultural development and this cultural origin defined how the continued links between spirits and humans were to be expressed. The markers of movement towards this cultural development are concepts known as 'Majoi', as referenced also in the term Majoi Shingra Bum. Two in particular are given significant cultural status and they relate to geographical sites rooted in the northern Kachin region: Chyai Hku Majoi and Hkrang Hku Majoi, the watersheds of the Chyai and Hkrang rivers. At each of these sites a specifically Jinghpaw cultural evolution is deemed to have taken place, for example, the development of the mayu-dauma marriage system, the development of the manau, and so on. These specific cultural developments are deemed important because they are what determine how connections are maintained between both humans and spirits in a large and potentially expanding environment in which there was constant pressure to move and relocate. The important issue, therefore, is not the fact of movement *per se*, but the links and connections that give that movement meaning and maintain its integration into a social and ritual system. The mapping of distant paths was not the question that was being answered; rather the matter addressed by these recitations was how the Jinghpaw cultural sphere was created and maintained itself in a context of continual migratory flow and interaction.

Another ritual in which myths of origin were described was that which took place at marriage, when two kin groups would affirm their relationship with each other through the giving and taking of brides. After the bride had entered the new home, it was common for a ritual called the *Lanyi* to be performed for the daughters of chiefs or the wealthy. This was a truncated version of the creation story told at the manau festival (which reflected the fact that the chiefly lineages were bride-takers or *dauma* of the upper-level spirits). However, the purpose in this case was to educate the bride about her role and the mythic origins of her various duties and responsibilities. In this rendition of the origins of all things, the legitimation took the form of ancestral couplings: the origin of all flora and fauna was demonstrated through the pairing of particular plants and animals, and the origins of cultural artefacts such as pots, textiles and so forth were explained. The origin story was adapted to meet the particular circumstances that it was being asked to address, not simply to answer a narrow question of 'Where are we from?' When a married woman hosted other rituals in which some genealogical verification of her right to sponsor the ritual was required, this would be done in a similar way as described for the manau, the main difference being that her lineage would be related through a similar ritual-cosmological position to herself, i.e: the wives of those who had married into her husband's lineage, as her genealogy could not be related directly through the husband's line. Each individual symbolically encapsulated the genealogical status of those who were situated in similar social positions through time through a form of collective individuation.

Another form of movement, a 'reverse' migration, was utilised and described when sending the spirit away after death. Again, lineage and geography both come into play as the spirit would be directed along a path, but not one that connected ancestral sites as the form of reverse genealogy is sometimes assumed to delineate, but rather a route outlining the most direct way back to the site where the main ancestor spirit of the clan is deemed to reside, for the most part avoiding human habitations. This last geographical marker, often a mountain top marking the point at which the lineage ancestor spirit descended to the human realm,

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marks the point of separation between the living and the spirit world. From this point the spirit is directed through a cosmic geography which in many cases involves the arrival at a junction of ten roads, the passing of ten houses and so on until the ancestral village is reached. Again, one needs to consider the nature of this 'reverse migration' to better understand its purpose. A spirit would have to be sent back to the land of the ancestors from no matter where the death occurred. For example, Kachin soldiers who died in the Mesopotamia conflict of the First World War had these rituals performed on their behalf. Their bags, which formed part of their military equipment in the Indian army, were taken back to their home villages and ensured that the spirit was present and could thence be separated, and full separation could only be achieved with the coming together of different kin groups to perform their specific tasks in the process. If this did not happen, there was great fear culturally about the potentially malevolent power of those spirits who had not been despatched, particularly those who had died violent deaths. For example, in a ceremony for the mother of one KIO officer held in China in 2000, a subsidiary ritual was incorporated for Maran Brang Seng, one of her kin group, who was leader of the KIA until he died in 1994. Because he was Christian, these rites had not been performed but some elders retained a superstitious fear about his potential as an unsatisfied spirit, which prompted the symbolic performance some years after the fact (Pungga Ja Li 2001). The purpose in this ritual was to send the spirit back to the ancestral homeland in a way that was likely to interfere as little as possible with the living, with whom it might become attached and thus refuse to depart, remaining indefinitely in the human realm as a malevolent force demanding constant supplication. The purpose of the route, therefore, was quick, secure despatch. The habitations of the living do not form any particular part of this route; rather it is tracked through rivers, mountain tops and other natural features, with the intention that the process could be completed without error and in good speed. Much of this geographical routing is developed by the spirit priest himself from his own knowledge of the local environment, although it can follow local conventions. Most significantly, the routes tend to become truncated at the point at which the knowledge of the spirit priest (whether real or acquired from listening to other performances) becomes thinner. In some cases, committed believers in indigenous spirit beliefs who are concerned that *dumsa* today have inadequate knowledge of the routes that should be followed by spirits of a particular lineage have been known to write them down on paper to avoid any mistakes being made in the route. Mistakes could result in the spirit being left to wander helplessly, never having reached the point of separation. The purpose is not just to track the geographical point of origin of particular groups but rather to achieve a speedy separation from the land of the living, which in the process incorporates a large amount of local environmental knowledge. But critically, however, the human migration history is cut short as a linear, temporal narrative by the desire to locate it as quickly as possible with a point of historical separation and to place it on a mythic trajectory. These points rarely extend beyond the borders of the Jinghpaw language cultural zone, in distinction to the kinds of historic migrations described by national groups, as discussed. A similar feature of directing spirits along clearly described and demarcated routes to minimise their potential for wandering off and causing trouble to the living can be found in other forms of recitation. Spirits invited to the *manau* are summoned to the site of the performance along routes; those that are not wanted are invited initially so that they can be placated and then sent away but this would always be done in such a way that their route should be constrained. However, these routes did not have to be very detailed; one spirit journey recited at a

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wedding empowered the spirits (benevolent ones, in fact assistants of the *dumsa* who were journeying to get him to come and recite) to take the train, even complimenting the guard on his careful work as they handed him their tickets (Pungga Ja Li & Chyahkyi Brang, 1999).

We should beware of trying to fix statements from any one particular recitation as a prescriptive geography without considering the way these features function across a range of different performance types. Many of the route narratives however, are very important for establishing an embedded societal knowledge of the spatiality of the Jinghpaw cultural zone beyond the site of immediate habitation, but their purpose is not to trace a geographical point of origin across continents as is the intention of discourse about national majorities in the modern nation state. Any detailed geographical account of routes can become truncated, and all of them seem to diminish in clarity when the outer limits of the Jinghpaw cultural zone are reached but this is because the narratives were never intended to map out routes in this way, providing a detailed, literal knowledge of, for example, where Majoi Shingra Bum, the origin place of humans, was beyond the Jinghpaw cultural sphere. They were not answering this question, because this was not a question that needed to be asked. From these descriptions it becomes easier to understand how these various forms of migration and origin narrative can be coalesced to form composites, the most significant of which recently has been undertaken by the main Jinghpaw Literature and Culture Committee in Kachin State (Jinghpaw Wunpawng Htunghking hte Laili Laika Hpung Ginjaw, undated but c. 2001). The determination to produce in the future many comparative renditions of routes and paths and other narratives presents considerable potential for generating a very detailed account of localised histories and historical models; however, the fulfilment of this cannot be achieved until current political fears over fragmentation and disintegration of the nationalist narrative can be overcome.

The notion of movement is embedded in all these narratives and forms part of their meaning, but movement in this case has a different ontological basis to that of migration as the historically-framed, large scale movement of peoples. In this latter understanding of 'migration', movement itself is the underlying concept, often as a form of permanent separation from a previous habitation. In Jinghpaw models in which origins and genealogical movement are described, other concepts come in to play and movement can be differentiated into that which is meaningful (i.e.: it contributes to the production of meaningful cultural space) and that which is not (i.e.: that which is unincorporated culturally).

The term *Ginru Ginsa*, the term used to refer to patterns relating to a notion of origins that we are describing in this volume, can best be translated as meaning 'old, established cords', and this term and the notion of cords is key in determining a long historical flow of meaningful movement. As has been noted in relation to the *manau*, the linking of the ritual structures at these events with cane strips is used to visualise in a literal way the cords that are deemed to connect humans within the kinship network which is ultimately the emic, ontological bearer of Jinghpaw (and latterly 'Kachin') identity. People within this indigenous network system are deemed to be intimately connected to each other and to spirits in benevolent communication with them, through invisible life cords. The umbilicus is planted at the base of the house post as a means of embedding this connectivity; illness is caused by malevolent spirits biting or pulling at the life strings; at significant rituals the wife-taking groups (*dauma*) frequently bring special spears made of a cane that is deemed to have far-reaching root systems as a means of confirming the ongoing connection between the kin

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groups; only at the final rituals when the spirit is sent away to the land of the ancestors does the wife-giving group (*mayu*) come with a special sword to make the final cut of separation, severing the life strings between the living and the dead. At the manau, the *sut* descends and is transmitted through cords, visualised in a literal way through those connecting the manau post, the house posts, and the manau fireplace and are deposited in the lineage when the cords are cut and the *sut* is allowed to flow into the basket. The language of the spirit priests is full of the language of connectivity, particularly through the symbol of cane root systems that cover wide areas; the umbilicus at the house post ensures a constant connectivity between those who are travelling away from the house to other places, until such occasion arises for separation. It is these cords and connectivities that are being confirmed in the process of reciting myths of origin and genealogical traditions. In this construct, movement without connection, movement which does not consolidate the connectivity in a new space, is not *ginru ginsa*, it is not part of a narrative of origins and migration. Indeed, such movement does not even have a name as it marks a point of separation from the Jinghpaw cultural sphere.

There are of course other forms of movement than these spatially and ritually significant forms, but these movements are only meaningful where they invoke the network of connectivities across this space, essentially through the kinship system. If one wants to learn about micro-patterns of movement (whether for trade, cultivation etc.) over the Jinghpaw cultural area, a different notion is brought into play, this time of networks, using the concept of *matut mahkai* which, rather than a cord, can be translated as links, as of in a chain. It is also a facilitator of meaningful interaction as one moves through space in the ordinary conduct of life but it does not involve the establishment of new demarcations of *ginru ginsa*.

These two terms, *ginru ginsa* and *matut mahkai* have symbolic form on many *manau shading* or posts, where curvilinear, intertwining cords represent the migration and origins of the various kin groups, and interconnected lines denote the indigenous network system by which movement leads to the consolidation of socio-cultural and ritual space across a diverse geographical span. These concepts of connection over space and time, through life strings and umbilical cords, through chains and links, are what underpinned Jinghpaw notions of cultural and ritual space. These notions have a geographical referent, which is not entirely an innovation derived from contact with the nation state, but we should not expect local narratives of origin and movement to be able to answer some of the bigger social science questions that we may have concerning the large scale movement of ethnicities over time and space. More importantly, if we anticipate that these narratives can provide us with such answers we set them pre-emptively as bound to fail, whilst perhaps missing some of the more important lessons that can be learned from them. In the 'Kachin' case, this could be the complexity of the social and cultural formulations that have been developed this region over an indeterminate but clearly extensive period of time to integrate migratory kin groups in a broader indigenous network system, which has proved capable in the modern world of evolving into a highly effective mobilizational tool in relation to other discourses on nationalism and the nation.

### **Ritual and the Tibeto-Burman boundaries of the Jinghpaw Cultural Sphere**

In this latter context, the value of these narratives to historians, as distinct from anthropologists and linguists who make up the main body of contributors to this volume, takes on a new light. By exploring processual dimensions of Jinghpaw ritual language and

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performance comparatively, rather than just as specific ethnographic and localised examples, one can address some of the ways in which multi-group identities are integrated internally, not as a system of artifice, but as a necessary means by which complex socio-political environments could be negotiated through an indigenised social process over time.

One of the features of this is the ways in which the Tibeto-Burman linguistic boundaries may have impact. As stated earlier, critical in this kind of analysis is the need to move away from colloquialised renderings of these forms to resituate them in their ritual context. When this is done, the significance of particular linguistic branches can be seen more clearly. For example, the Jinghpaw ritual idiom is conducted in a very elaborate, highly creative but ultimately prescriptive euphonic structure of couplet phrases. Where genealogies, and therefore names, are implicated in these rituals, the need to adhere to Jinghpaw naming patterns imposes a real constraint on the flexibility of the form. One might compare the traditional genealogical tradition of some groups whose primary languages (and their naming systems) are Lolo-Burman; in this case the Lawngwaw (Lhaovo or Maru) and the Lachik (Lashi, Lachid). It is common in these communities for names to incorporate part of the father's name from the previous generation, but in a way that shifts the syllable so that the last name becomes the first name in the next generation. This system of naming is distinctive and does not map well into Jinghpaw rituals. There are ways round this, but they involve giving the individual a Jinghpaw name. Furthermore, Lawngwaw ritual language is performed in triplet sentences, and cannot be simply re-encoded in a Jinghpaw form, which depends upon pairs. Clearly, when a community using Jinghpaw-language ritual speech codes is in contact with a community using primarily Lawngwaw speech codes, a good deal of negotiation must take place if the two groups are to engage in common ritual practices, which are a necessity in the establishment of meaningful affinal kin relationships and other forms, extending the contours of meaningful connectivities and connections across new geographical and socio-cultural space.

This is exactly what one finds taking place. Built into the Jinghpaw ritual practice is an intensive system of negotiation on the form and on practice. It is critical that before any ritual performance, local elders, the group hosting the event and the ritual practitioners meet together to decide upon correct practice and how to manage any amendments or adaptations that might be necessary. This is usually rationalised as a process that will ensure that no errors are made that might incur the wrath of the spirits, but its outcome is the constant social negotiation of status between groups and a management of the local political environment. This occurs as much between groups within the Jinghpaw kinship system as with groups from outside this network coming into contact with it; it also helps to explain many apparent incongruities in local areas. For example, the fact that the Zaiwa of Yunnan conduct their ritual practices in Jinghpaw and not in Zaiwa: it has historically been the case that Jinghpaw chiefs were able to dominate critical socio-ritual relations in this area and reveals much about local transformations of authority and power. Furthermore, when approached in this way, this system also helps to establish a clear delimiter of the Jinghpaw cultural sphere: where the local socio-political environment is such that negotiations cannot be made, or where the Jinghpaw form is displaced in favour of others, boundaries are established. In many cases, dual systems develop where groups retain distinctive practices performed in non-Jinghpaw languages, but add others that may blend the two. In these situations, cosmological parallels are established between lineages so that, for example, the elder line of a particular Lisu group

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may be made equivalent with that of a Jinghpaw kin group. This is particularly necessary when new affinal relations are being formed, but the parallels enable kinship relations to be established with any other group within the Jinghpaw sphere with whom they might in future come into contact.

The surface-level relativity of identities in this system exists to facilitate the homogenisation of difference in line with the local dynamics of power relations, but it also creates coherency where there are constant forms of migration and movement over historical time and space; indeed these rituals rationalise the historical experience of movement rather than seek to normalise the ideal of static settlement. In this they represent a different cognitive configuration of the meaning of space and movement through it over time to that expressed by traditionally 'lowland' polities, and thus embed a different meaning for the notion of 'origins'.

The production of myths of origin was a constantly rearticulated and negotiated process, which retained vitality because of the notion that at an epistemological level these temporary negotiations did not involve permanent displacements of meaning for local groups; they were tools by which value systems were correlated for the purposes of establishing effective communication, although that did not make the adaptations any less 'true' in a spiritual or cosmological sense. Leach commented more negatively on the great diversity he found in ritual practice and myth across the Kachin region. This was seen by him as a sign of the innate volatility of Kachin political life. The need constantly to re-negotiate meanings for each performance of a ritual was taken as a sign of fragmentation and weakness, of the potential disintegration of the Kachin social sphere; its obverse, the assertion of authoritarian 'classical' chiefly rule, was taken as the nemesis of consensus and thus equally damaging of social stability. Yet war-time Burma, and indeed the documented cases of such negotiations of meaning that can be found in the colonial archive throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, produced environments in which the negotiation of meaning was particularly hard fought but understanding this helps us again in the search to explore historical developments through documentation that is traditionally considered a-historical, if not avowedly a-historical.

What has been overlooked, or just inadequately appreciated, was the innate processual engagement with discourses of commonality that such rituals constantly reconfigured. In the post-colonial world, these processes have continued to underpin a good deal of Kachin symbolic interaction with the modern nation state. These negotiated artefacts demonstrate how internal models have been effective in integrating a common socio-cultural sphere as a Jinghpaw domain, delineated not by the Shan but by contact with other Tibeto-Burman speaking language groups with whom they come into contact and who share a similar need to rationalise the experience of constant movement and engagement with other migratory groups. The outcome in the Kachin case has in recent years been different to what we hear of in the Naga nexus, or that of the Chin, for example. Wettstein (this volume) describes persuasively how Naga usages of myths of origin have developed in the opposite direction, producing extreme levels of socio-cultural and political fragmentation. That there should be localised production of such different responses to somewhat common pressures produced by the emergence of modern states and forces of globalisation, requires deeper, comparative analysis, not just at the political level, but also at the societal and ritual level, and suggests

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new ways in which study of origin myths has relevance to our historical knowledge of minority ethnicities in national systems.

Thus, complexity and negotiation were essential tools of process in the rendering of myth and ritual, not extraneous difficulties; with their stripping down in contemporary narratives oriented towards the discourse of the modern state, these functions become invisible. As has been stated, the original question these myths were intended to address was probably not the literal one of 'Where, on the face of the world, are we from (and thus how did we get from there to here, our present settlement)?' but rather 'How do we explain and control the relations we have in the space in which we live and move with other groups that also live and move within it?' Re-orienting the question perhaps helps to explain why, in most of the accounts presented in this volume, the detail of geographical space and routes generally diminishes at points coinciding with the language-culture boundaries of the cultural sphere in which the dominant idiom of the ritual prevails, and certainly outside the Tibeto-Burman linguistic nexus: Jinghpaw narratives lack all clarity beyond the geographical delimitations of the space in which Jinghpaw exists as a primary medium of communication (which is not the same as national borders, although these clearly have had an impact). Origin myths were intended to detail the creation of meaningful social environments, not just linear trans-continental routes; migration narratives were intended to reinforce collectively individuated, indigenous network systems, not impersonal paths. Yet the by-comparison conceptually blunt tools of the static, bounded nation-state in constructing meaning frameworks for history has rendered the notion of 'origins' in its evolutionary, developmental sense as a new point of reference for communities, such as the Kachin, as they today have to prove their historical settlement within the Burmese state as a precursor to claims for contemporary citizenship. Only in this light can we better appreciate, too, some of the difficulties facing these communities in rendering traditional systems of knowledge within contemporary value systems, and thus better understand why local contemporary artefacts on these issues can seem so problematic and illegible to the conventions of our historical knowledge.