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Syphilis and the Kachin Regeneration Campaign, 1937–38

This paper discusses the introduction of a policy known as the Kachin Regeneration Campaign in the Kachin Hills from 1937 to 1938. Initiated by a belief that the Kachin people were on the verge of dying out because of an epidemic of syphilis, the campaign reveals much about the realities of Kachin dissociation from the late colonial regime, contrasting sharply with the conventional historical narrative of Kachin compliance with imperial control. A significant part of the Regeneration Campaign's agenda was a less publicly acknowledged awareness that former Kachin soldiers were becoming a potentially volatile interest group and that there was increasing discontent across the Kachin Hills with regard to the administration, the military and the missions. The paper uses the concept of a sick role to describe the approach of the Regeneration Campaign to Kachin society and discusses how the rhetoric of the campaign became embedded in the sermons of the local Christian missions, justifying changes to women's roles and more recently impacting upon early responses to the spread of HIV/AIDS in the region.

It is the general belief of all who are acquainted with the Kachin Hills, that the Kachins are a dying race doomed shortly to disappear unless specific measures are taken to save them. Syphilis is rife, and owing to the freedom of pre-marital intercourse, is rapidly communicated. Opium, which is regarded as a specific for Malaria and Hill Dysentery, is taken by all as a medicine and grows to be a vice with many. Education is, over wide areas, unknown. Cultivations [sic] such as there is, is primitive and wasteful. Domestic animals are kept, not for use but for sacrifice. The manufacture and consumption of potent liquor is widely indulged in by both sexes of all ages. Houses are mean: clothing is filthy, and the bare necessities of life, let alone its most ordinary comforts, are hard to come by. Where Christian Missions have inculcated habits of continence, thrift, sobriety, the change is said to be very marked, but they have found a formidable obstacle in the apathy of the people themselves who are used to their misery and seem incapable of any sustained effort to escape from it.

This apathy is in part at least the product of the conditions which it now perpetuates. With outside assistance there is no reason why the Kachins should not be roused to make some effort towards their own regeneration.¹

Thus began the Introductory to “Proposals for Regeneration Work Among the Kachins,” a document compiled by R. M. MacDougall, Commissioner of Sagaing, dated July 10, 1937. The “Regeneration Campaign” that it described was intended to provide for the moral and physical improvement of the peoples of the Kachin Hills of northern Burma as a whole, and it hoped to achieve this goal comprehensively by the setting up of a number of model centers at which efforts at regeneration (and redemption) were to be concentrated. The campaign was to be under the general direction of the Assistant Superintendent, H. Noel C. Stevenson, but the agents of the campaign were to be non-official, principally Christian missionaries, who would receive small grants for their work. The sub-categories into which the introductory document was divided indicate the main concerns that some local administrators and Christian missionaries had at this time, which prompted the campaign: Agriculture; The Functions of Ex-Soldiers; The Problem of Venereal Disease; The Problem of Opium; Curative and Preventive Medicine; Education. According to the agenda of the Introductory, the above social spheres had to be subject to vigorous intervention by agents in

¹ British Library, India Office Records [IOR] M/5/14, Kachin Regeneration Campaign: “Proposals for Regeneration Work Among the Kachins,” R. M. MacDougall, Commissioner of Sagaing, dated July 10, 1937, 3–4.

collaboration with the colonial state to save the Kachin people from themselves: regenerate or die out was the dictum.

This article will describe aspects of the Regeneration Campaign that were most closely related to its medical interventions, specifically those related to inhibiting the spread of syphilis. The available documentation directly detailing this campaign is relatively scant, concentrated mainly within the body of material archived in the India Office Records in the British Library, heavily weeded and amounting to some eighty pages.² However, the wider discourses that the campaign reflects go to the heart of the political dilemma of government over the areas of British Burma excluded from Ministerial Burma at the end of the 1930s: how these areas should be managed; how they would be able to participate in the governance of an independent Burma; their sociological, political, economic and ethnographic relationships with the modern Burmese state. Stevenson, the official at the heart of the Regeneration Campaign, was also at the heart of these debates relating to Burma's "Hill Peoples."³ In this sense, the interpretive framework that one may apply to this thin range of documents is much broader than the sum of their parts.

² Ibid.

³ Robert Anderson, "The Biographical Origins of Political Systems of Highland Burma," in *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia: Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma* by E. R. Leach, ed. François Robinne and Mandy Sadan (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 9.

There are good reasons for interpreting some of the varied local and vernacular responses to such schemes of “improvement,” bundled together in the 1930s in a discourse of “decline,” as evidence of resistance to a host of controlling practices emerging from a variety of centers of authority in Burma and the Kachin Hills at this time. If one rejects the notion that the Kachin peoples are or were a necessarily homogeneous, monolithic entity, and that the Kachin Hills region is or was a uniform environment, the social landscape becomes a much more complex and varied contact zone. Multiple networks of language, trade, kinship, and so forth, both enlivened and complicated this space for colonial officials as they sought to define what the category “Kachin” should mean in a modern political context. The Regeneration Campaign reveals something of that variety, and hints at some of the deep-rooted tensions and conflicts that were being played out locally between competing Kachin groups at this time, as well as among various civil and military officials and mission representatives.

One of the most significant outcomes of those parts of the campaign relating to the spread of syphilis was the cognitive transformation of the term “Kachin.” This arose particularly through the re-encoding of the Kachin (Jinghpaw) semantic domain of sexuality, which was reconfigured aggressively by some local church organizations within a framework of Christian conversion. One can argue that this position was now more aggressive because there seemed finally to be a conflation of civic and religious interventions in Kachin social

organization – a situation that previously was not directly encouraged by government officials; the relationship between missions and colonial administrators was more ambiguous than is sometimes argued or assumed in relation to Burma's majority-Christian minority ethnicities. The potential for this convergence was only latent in the original intentions of the campaign, but became more significant through the lack of other institutional agents who would be able to implement its directives, especially given its financial constraints. The implications of this relationship within the campaign will be discussed below, but its significance goes beyond the historical. While the immediate impact of the campaign seems to have been relatively minor, its various small-scale initiatives suffering from Stevenson's unexpected departure from Burma, the discourse it engendered that seemed to legitimate new levels of intervention by Christian missions into Kachin society has had a long-term impact.⁴ There is also a contemporary strand to these discourses, which reveals their ongoing significance, particularly in relation to the local reception of early campaigns to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS initiated in the 1990s, especially those that promoted condom usage as a primary form of infection control.

The discourses that developed out of the anti-syphilis activities of the Christian missions in the 1930s have become embedded in present-day accounts

⁴ Ibid.

of a national “Kachin” history by Kachin people themselves.⁵ It is not possible in Burma today to publish such a volume legally: historical accounts of Burma’s ethnic groups have to be approved by government censors and are restricted to clan and lineage histories, and alternative narrations of the idea of nation are prohibited. The main sphere in which such accounts are related, therefore, resides still with the oral sermons of the Kachin nationalist churches, principally those of the Baptist church, which has strong associations with the mainstream wing of the Kachin political organization, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO).⁶ The prospect that the Kachin people were close to extinction were it not for the redemptive work of social and moral uplift (centered upon the Christian churches) is recounted today in nationalist Church sermons, this time juxtaposed with the threat of HIV/AIDS among Kachin youth: the control of one’s sexual behavior being promoted more readily than the use of condoms as a means not only of inhibiting the spread of the disease but also to resist the sociological and demographic weakening of the Kachin peoples to the detriment of their (rhetorically unified) military and political objectives with the Burmese state.

⁵ The former term is encased in quotes to indicate that this use of the term Kachin pertains to a modern ethno-nationalist reinterpretation of traditional identity relationships.

⁶ The Kachin Independence Army is its military wing. In reality Kachin political and military structures are more fragmented than the concentration on these two organisations suggests, but they have in recent decades been able to dominate the public national and international discourse about the identity “Kachin.”

In this context, the notion of historical Kachin “promiscuity,” which is also frequently cited by non-Kachin people in Burma as a stereotype of the category “Kachin,” enters a domain of characterization close to that identified by Michael Herzfeld as cultural intimacy: “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality.”⁷ The discourse of syphilis and decline in this way gives a sense of coherency to contemporary notions of moral recovery and the endeavor of a “Kachin nation” in relation to the development of the Burmese state—independently organized and self-supporting through the local church missions such that, in this vector of identity formation, an homogenized notion of “Christian” morality provides a *modus vivendi* for the moral underpinnings of political resistance to the Burmese state, by virtue of having saved a people from “extinction.”

Negative associations for the term “Kachin” in Burman or Shan models did not necessarily result in the internalization or interiorization of negative meanings within the respective communities themselves, but were rather a part of a complex interplay of mimicry and alterity in the relation of cross-cultural signs and symbols. The social poetics of sexual practices as part of a discourse of Kachin identity undoubtedly changed further through the authoritarian control of

⁷ Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3. I am grateful to Professor Mikael Gravers for his comments in relation to this work.

Kachin Christian nationalism in the post-Second World War period. As will be shown, lost by then were many of the vernacular contexts in which so-called promiscuity functioned previously as a potential site of resistance to the normalizing models of colonial, Christian mission and, latterly, Kachin nationalist identity formation. The campaign generated a discourse that has long historical reach. This article will consider the sometimes complex interactions through which discourses about syphilis were to become embedded as an iconic feature of nationalist Kachin history and identity.

Background to the Kachin Regeneration Campaign, 1937–38

As indicated earlier, the Kachin Regeneration Campaign brings into view one of the most intriguing, complex and intellectually independent of colonial officials, H. Noel C. Stevenson. Stevenson was a keen advocate of the rights of so-called hill peoples in Burma, especially the protection of their political autonomy in the debates leading up to Burma's independence. He wrote an influential and sophisticated work on the Chin Hills, while in other articles and books he described in undeniably populist and essentializing terms the social characteristics of various of Burma's "races," his goal evidently to increase awareness of the distinctiveness of these communities from the Burman center.⁸ However, he was

⁸ H. Noel C. Stevenson, *The Economics of the Central Chin Tribes* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1943).

also highly critically of the lack of applied sociological and anthropological research relating to the hill peoples, and the failure of government policy as a result. As independence approached, Stevenson found himself in an increasingly uncomfortable position in relation to both the colonial administration and the central political movement of nationalist Burma. He eventually resigned in 1946 in frustration at the government's failing approach to the increasingly difficult and unresolved issues surrounding the status of Burma's ethnic minorities in the new state.⁹

After the First World War, there was a fair amount of eulogizing about the contribution that Kachin recruits had made to the Indian Army's war effort, notably in Mesopotamia. However, this tended to conceal the fact that there had been a good deal of resistance to the spread of British colonial authority in the Kachin region. Indeed, there was never, it seems, a time when the civil and military officers or missionaries in the Kachin Hills felt that their work was uniformly accepted by local people. The documentation of the Regeneration Campaign itself reveals some of these tensions when it makes an implied reference that the "decline" in social behavior, particularly relating to sexual promiscuity, occurred during the period of colonial rule. Quoting extensively from the work of Major Henry Felix Hertz in *A Practical Handbook of the Kachin*

⁹ Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991), 74–77.

or *Chingpaw Language*, an historical moral gold standard, which he felt described pre-colonial social practices to which all Kachin should seek to reclaim.¹⁰ By the 1930s, both civil and military officers were privately acknowledging that they could discern significant undercurrents of discontent within many Kachin communities.¹¹ Such concerns at a general level helped Stevenson to initiate the Kachin Regeneration Campaign in 1937. Implicated in this developing discourse were the Kachin recruits who had been so highly praised just years before.

However, given that Burma was officially administratively separated from India in 1937, during which the Kachin Hills were designated an Excluded Area, a year that also saw the beginnings of financial retrenchment, few funds were available to support this scheme. Stevenson was able to persuade Governor Archibald Cochrane to permit the campaign to take place, and he then obtained a small amount of funding from ministerial Burma coffers in Bhamo.¹² These funds were then used to make grants for the implementation of model reforms in the Sinlumkaba Subdivision from May 1937 to April 1938, and in the Myitkyina District from October 1937 to November 1938. As the financial constraints tightened their grip there was no funding for broader, regional schemes, and

¹⁰ Henry Felix Hertz, *Handbook of the Kachin or Chingpaw Language: Containing the Grammatical Principles and Peculiarities of the Language, Colloquial Exercises and a Vocabulary* (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1895), 11.

¹¹ IOR: M/5/14 Kachin Regeneration Scheme.

¹² Anderson, "Biographical Origins," 9.

without proper studies to verify the nature of the problems to be tackled, the campaign developed a rhetorical aspect, which relied upon stereotypes of the Kachin ethnic category for delineating the social, economic and political developmental prospects of the Kachin peoples within the campaign's orbit and beyond. This rhetoric was expressed particularly via the medium of Christian sermons and other oral public discourse. The construction laid the blame for present difficulties squarely at the door of traditional Kachin society itself, rather than that of the grand colonial project.

Stevenson subsequently cited the failure to establish successful local development projects as being partly due to the failure of the state to respond to ethnic minority needs or even to understand them. As James Scott has suggested, the illegibility of "Kachin" society to the state was critical to both the oversimplification of such schemes of reform, the development of a visual aestheticization of the modernity that they attempted to initiate (particularly in the domains of architecture and agriculture), and the increasing control of state interventions by those with claims to knowledge and their own agendas to follow.¹³ Whether Stevenson should be considered a high-modernist at all, be it of a paternalistic nineteenth century type or a welfare colonialist such as typically

¹³ James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 77–78.

emerged as the end of empire drew near, is not clear.¹⁴ However, the highland-lowland categorization of peoples with which the campaign documentation is peppered, the repeated comments that Kachin civil society was prostrate and moribund, indeed that this was the root cause of Kachin difficulties, seems evocative of high-modernist ideology: in particular, through its use of utilitarian, documentary, static, aggregate and standardized simplifications of “the facts” of “Kachin” society.¹⁵

Two particular concerns seem to have prompted the administration’s acceptance of the need for a Regeneration Campaign. The first was the feeling, put abroad in the administration in general, that Kachin people were becoming disengaged from the conduct of local affairs: the failure to comply with demands to meet communal responsibilities such as road maintenance, and so on, was cited as evidence of this. The second problem related to the army: it was becoming harder to enlist Kachin recruits and it was the subject of a general whisper among officers and officials that those who did try to enlist were of lesser quality than were the Kachin soldiers of old. These issues could also be related to concerns about the politicization of two key Kachin interest groups: the ex-soldiers and Kachin youth. These issues were conflated into the notion that there was a general malaise among the “Kachin Race,” that there was a physical deterioration of this

¹⁴ Ibid. 97.

¹⁵ Ibid. 77.

once hospitable “martial hill tribe” and that if this decline continued, the Kachin people would soon die out. This argument was taken up by the Christian missions, which flagged certain aspects of traditional Kachin society as directly responsible for this demise, related to the amoral behaviors of animist (i.e. non-Christian) society.

This general line of discourse was tested at a private meeting of military officers, local officials and church leaders with the most extensive experience of contact with the Kachin peoples, held at Maymyo in October 1937. The opening question of the conference was “whether there was in fact deterioration of the Kachin race or not.”¹⁶ One after the other, administrators, military officers and church leaders either denied or qualified the statement in relation to particular areas, the Sinlumkaba subdistrict in particular. This was the area that had been the site of the earliest recruitment campaigns to enlist Kachin troops into the Burma Rifles.¹⁷ By the mid-1920s it was already evident to officers that there had been serious over-recruitment in this locality, prompting the extension of recruitment

¹⁶ IOR: M/5/14, “Report of Proceedings of a conference held in Maymyo on October the 23rd, 25th and 26th to consider the question of the alleged deterioration of the Kachin race and measures to be taken to arrest it,” 2.

¹⁷ C. M. Enriquez, “Kachin Recruiting Lecture 1” in *Races of Burma: A Note on the Races and Recruiting Areas of Burma*, undated lecture notes, Green Centre Archive, Green Centre for World Art, Brighton Pavilion & Museums. MANDY: PLEASE ADD A FIRST NAME.

into un-administered territory in the far north.¹⁸ The conclusion reached at the meeting was as follows:

[Paragraph 11] The conclusion reached as a result of the discussion was that, where deterioration amongst Kachins existed at present, it was due to the change in conditions of living in the plains, interference with tribal customs, disease such as venereal disease, malaria and goiter and in certain cases malnutrition. Deterioration existed only in certain areas in the Kachin hills. Elsewhere the race was as virile as ever.¹⁹

Local political disengagement, some of those attending the meeting contended, was the result of a history of inept local development projects, and recruits were only of a lesser quality because the recruitment methods themselves were lacking. Problems could certainly be identified relating to the lack of educational infrastructure, but nothing could be done about this in the light of present retrenchment.²⁰

However, the army officers identified two problems—relating specifically to the army—that they thought should be addressed. First, there was concern about the spread of syphilis among Kachin troops, although this was a well-publicized issue relating to the Indian Army as a whole at this time; second, it was becoming increasingly difficult to persuade former soldiers to return to their

¹⁸ Elizabeth Dell, ed. *Burma Frontier Photographs: 1918–1935* (London: Merrell Publishers, 2000).

¹⁹ IOR: M/5/14, 3 – “Report of Proceedings of a conference held in Maymyo on October the 23rd, 25th and 26th to consider the question of the alleged deterioration of the Kachin race and measures to be taken to arrest it.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

villages in the hills upon being discharged. Many chose instead to settle near their former barracks and close to the night bazaars near the China border. It was always hoped by the colonial officers that upon being discharged soldiers would disperse back to their villages to provide moral and practical leadership. In the present situation they were providing neither and were a potentially volatile interest group. As far as the spread of venereal disease was concerned, “The Commissioner, Sagaing Division, suggested that, in the first place, venereal disease was not a subject which could effectively be tackled by curative methods owing to the expense of the treatment. Propaganda against the evils of this disease was all that could be expected.”²¹

The groups that would propagate the message of the campaign were the Christian churches, particularly the Catholic Church in the Bhamo region around Sinlumkaba, some local Kachin chiefs residing close to the border with China who had converted to Christianity, and government officers. Thus, when the campaign was instituted in 1937 the specific military concerns cited above were transformed into a very different discourse. Anecdotal accounts of specific local health issues, such as the prevalence of goiter caused by lack of iodized salt in some areas, local clusters of exceptionally high infant mortality and high rates of venereal disease in certain areas were used to justify a scientifically unverified description of generalized, widespread decline. It was stated that a general and

²¹ Ibid, 6.

unbridled promiscuity among young people had in turn led to the endemic spread of syphilis through all branches of Kachin society. The epitome of this decline was that the Kachin could no longer even provide healthy soldiers for the army, once a symbol of pride. In fact, most young men who failed to join the army on health grounds seem to have done so because of enlarged spleens, most likely a sign of malaria and not of syphilis and the possibility that syphilitic symptoms might also be evidence of yaws, and not syphilis, was also not recognized.²²

Furthermore, the political disengagement that had become so obvious was not to be considered a form of protest; rather it was a product of laziness and other generic Kachin personality flaws which were embedded in the Kachin type and ethos. In this way, the discourse that emerged around the causes and extent of syphilis within the region were markedly at odds with the expert conclusions reached in the first meeting held to discuss this issue referenced previously.

The Kachin sick role

There is a large and increasing literature on the role that western medical knowledge played in the expansion and maintenance of empire, its function as a system of power and control, but also, increasingly, its role as a site of significant failure. In addition, there is also a literature on the iconography of syphilis and the

²² Ibid, 2. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this article for pointing out this connection.

way in which the disease has historically been evoked to inscribe degeneracy upon those individuals and societies afflicted or deemed to be its source of origin.²³ Susan Sontag has also highlighted the conflation of syphilis with military metaphors and its genealogy of association with AIDS.²⁴

Some medical anthropologists attach significance to the development of what are called “sick roles” in effecting modes of behavior during illness. These can be behaviors that the sick person adopts, as well as forms of behavior that others expect of them because they are sick.²⁵ The concept of a sick role is a useful interpretive model by which to describe the approach of the Regeneration Campaign to Kachin society, as it ascribed a sick role to the Kachin people as a whole. The sick role model is as follows. First, the sick person is excused from their failure to meet their social responsibilities because of their illness. Second, the sick person is expected to assist in his or her own recovery by engaging in behaviors to aid this. Third, any attempt to extend the illness beyond a reasonable

²³ Sander L. Gilman, “AIDS and Syphilis: The Iconography of Disease,” *October*, 43, (Winter 1987): 87-107 MANDY: IS THE JOURNAL NAMED “OCTOBER”? PLEASE CLARIFY; Eric B. Ross, “Syphilis, Misogyny, and Witchcraft in 16th-Century Europe,” *Current Anthropology*, 36, no. 2 (April 1995): 333-337.

²⁴ Susan Sontag, *Illness as metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* London: Penguin, 1991).

²⁵ Marc Augé, and Claudine Herzlich, *The meaning of illness: anthropology, history and sociology*. Australia & United Kingdom: MANDY: I NEED YOU TO GET THE OFFICIAL CITY OF PUBLICATION, FROM GOOGLEBOOKS IT LOOKS LIKE IT MAY BE IN LUXEMBOURG OR SWITZERLAND, BUT ELSEWHERE THE PUBLISHER IS LISTED AS ROUTLEDGE WHICH WOULD MEAN IT IS NEW YORK. Harwood Academic, 1995.

timeframe transforms the illness into an abnormal sick role. Such a model accords with statements made throughout the documentation of the campaign, but especially in the introduction to the “Report on Kachin Regeneration in the Myitkyina District from October 1937 to November 1938,” which argued that the “essential need is to encourage the people to help themselves.”²⁶

By adopting the rhetoric of health to drive parts of the scheme forward, the following sick role could be deemed to frame the relationship between Kachin society and the campaign. Local disengagement from the administration was a by-product of an endemic social disease, which made people unable rather than unwilling to participate in the social demands of the state. This in turn negated any interpretation of disengagement as a form of political protest. Cure was thus to be effected by the introduction of a self-help strategy, made necessary because of financial retrenchment as well as being morally desirable. Furthermore, if this self-help strategy did not work, the administration would be absolved from any moral responsibility for the difficulties of the Kachin Hills. Finally, those who had already assumed abnormal sick roles through behaviors such as opium addiction and alcoholism, both of which were perceived to be on the increase, were considered beyond help and no efforts should be made to provide extra expenditure for their welfare. Medical psychologists often interpret abnormal sick

²⁶ IOR: M/5/14, The Kachin Regeneration Campaign, “Report on Kachin Regeneration in the Myitkyina District from October 1937 to November 1938,” 74.

roles of this type to be symptomatic of social and political disengagement, but this did not enter the frame of reference of the campaign.

The opacity of Kachin society had served many Kachin elites well in their role as intermediaries with colonial apparatus; the interventionist agenda promoted by the Baptist and Catholic churches in particular served to threaten the social poetics of that opacity.²⁷ There is evidence in the documentation of the campaign that there were spheres deemed to be beyond the reach of official intervention, and which were considered “zones of autonomy,” interference in which prompted resistance: evidence, indeed, that Kachin civil society at this time was not moribund.²⁸ One of these zones, the *nla dap*, will be discussed further below.

Militarization and Venereal Disease

Susan Sontag has highlighted the use of military metaphors in describing the occurrence, spread and “defeat” of syphilis. However, military structures and militarization provide more than just a metaphorical context for the spread of venereal disease in the Kachin region. It is not possible to say exactly how widespread the occurrence of syphilis was before (or, indeed, after) the Second World War. What was clear, however, was that the perception of the widespread

²⁷ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 77.

²⁸ IOR: M/5/14, 5 and 101.

occurrence of the disease went well beyond Burma's borders.²⁹ Medical officers in Lhasa in the 1930s stated that their work was almost entirely with cases of venereal disease in the clinic that was opened there.³⁰ Syphilis was also felt to be a scourge of troops in India more generally and it was also considered by Chinese authorities to be widespread in China, too, in the early twentieth century.³¹ As with AIDS, the search for origins could either be expressed through the racial stereotyping of peoples (it was called "the French disease" in England for example) or of particular social groups who were stigmatized. The "Proposals for Regeneration Work Among the Kachins" states of "The Problem of Venereal Disease:"

The two most active causes of racial degeneration in the Kachin Hills are undoubtedly Venereal Disease and Opium addiction. The Kachins themselves blamed the sepoy of the Army and of the Military Police for the introduction of Venereal, but this can hardly be correct. Accounts of conditions in the Triangle suggest that Syphilis was rife long before the troops penetrated there, and could hardly have travelled so extensively and virulently from the Administered Areas to produce the present conditions. There appears to be little doubt however, that non-Kachins, taking advantage of the social customs of the Kachins have helped to

²⁹ Robert Anderson mentions the joint campaign that was launched against syphilis after the Second World War in east India and Burma, and concern spread even further than this to be an endemic interest of the military. Anderson, "Biographical Origins," 17.

³⁰ Alex McKay, *Tibet and the British Raj: The frontier cadre 1904-1947*, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997).

³¹ Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

spread the disease, and introduced it to places where it was previously unknown³²

The social customs of the Kachins to which the report refers, especially the perception that young people were free before marriage to engage in sexual intercourse with whomsoever they please, seems to suppose an intimate level of knowledge by the state of a society that was in other ways an enigma to them. That statements could be made on these matters, despite the absence of interventions by female researchers in the region, suggests also the skewed context from which such statements were often derived.³³ Colonel James Henry Green, one of the attendees at the meeting, discussed the so-called social ethos of sexual promiscuity for many of the groups in his dissertation for Cambridge University in 1934, “The Tribes of Upper Burma North of 24° Latitude and Their Classification.”³⁴ Green travelled extensively on recruitment campaigns and

³² IOR: M/5/14, 10 [8].

³³ Green, the first recruitment officer to travel close to the border with Tibet, wrote privately to his soon-to-be wife that: “There is plenty of original work for a woman anthropologist, for so many important things cannot be investigated by a man.” He wrote in his dissertation, “Culturally the women have been much more conservative than the men, and it is particularly in their realm that we shall discover much of interest,” acknowledging this limitations of his own framework of encounter with Kachin women. Cited in: Dell, *Burma Frontier Photographs*, 18.

³⁴ James Henry Green, “The Tribes of Upper Burma North of 24° Latitude and Their Classification,” unpublished Diploma thesis for Cambridge University, 1934. MANDY: WAS THIS AN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE? BA? MA? PHD? “DISSERTATION” IS USUALLY RESERVED FOR PHDS IN THE STATES. WE NEED TO KNOW WHAT KIND OF DEGREE IT IS TO KNOW HOW TO CITE IT.

while his dissertation contains many comments concerning the willingness or otherwise of young women to form liaisons with officers, this “research” was officially sanctioned as part of his military duties: the “findings” would be used to determine the availability of what were euphemistically referred to as camp followers when columns of soldiers were on the move. The sexualization of the domain of contact with Kachin women was thus embedded in the imperial military experience and arguably framed most of its interpretive model of women’s behavior.

Yet, his account also indicates that there was in fact wide variation in the social boundaries of sexual behaviors and attitudes within different communities across the Kachin Hills and from this we can get a sense of the diversity of the cultural intimacy of sexuality and of sexual humor. We also get a sense of the subtle ways that accounts were refigured for a colonial audience according to personal prejudice. For example, of the Nung communities in the far north, whom Green wrote about fondly, he states:

They are not prurient minded. My attempts to collect tales were generally received with giggles and with the reply that they were shy and did not know any respectable ones. Young men delighted in scratching *pudendas* on the path when girls were following or in giving a girl a leaf which smelt like an emission of wind. This always resulted in slaps, screams and a chase through the jungle or around the houses³⁵

³⁵ Ibid. 182–3.

He refers more harshly to the Hkahku in the Triangle region, whom he did not take to and who also, by his own account, did not take to him.

They are not prurient minded but dirty-minded. The young men, after a fill of *sharu*—rice beer—delight in making filthy remarks and insinuations to embarrass the ladies present.³⁶

Yet the real target for the accusation that venereal disease was spread as the result of “Kachin” social practices was the institution of the *nla dap*.

Despite the fact that syphilis was a widespread military concern, the prevalence of which could be blamed to a large extent on military behaviors and structures, the military hierarchy found it difficult to introduce novel measures to deal with the problem. There was an institutional (financial) opposition to the provision of domestic facilities to enable soldiers to live with their families close to barracks.³⁷ Just as important was the public opposition in the UK to the introduction of measures such as the legalization and regulation of brothels. Shortly after the First World War a campaign was initiated in the UK to demand the end of the regulation of brothels for cantonments. Petitioners included the Leeds Women’s Liberal Association, The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, Yorkshire Women’s Liberal Federation, Kensington Society for Equal Citizenship, and so on, many of which referred to reports of sexual licentiousness

³⁶ Ibid 69.

³⁷ IOR: M/5/14, 3.

around cantonments in Burma.³⁸ Genuinely constructive anti-syphilis measures thus rendered too problematic on the home front, the campaign adopted a different approach focusing on a number of targets.

Syphilis and the Visual Aestheticization of Modernity

The campaign never intended to introduce curative medicine into the Kachin Hills to deal with syphilis and those who already had the disease were to be subject increasingly to punitive measures such as making it a notifiable disease (for which punishment was mooted) and that sufferers should be excluded from society.³⁹

The propaganda campaign was to concentrate on encouraging a public attitude of abstinence and self-control, with the transmission of the disease possibly to be made an offence. Information was to be produced in instructional pamphlets to be translated into “Kachin” (Jinghpaw) and published in the *Burma Rifles Journal*. The missions and schools would be given an important role, but it was recognized that they should be tutored in the standards to which instructional propaganda should comply.

Within the framework of the sick role described, the military concern, which focused on the spread of syphilis among the troops and very particular issues relating to the control of cantonments, was transformed into a different

³⁸ IOR: L/Mil/7/13899 – Contagious Diseases and Cantonment Regulations.

³⁹ IOR: M/ 5/14,12 [10].

kind of discourse, which attacked particular Kachin social institutions, even its domestic architecture and attempted to transform traditional gender roles. Of most significance was the decision to try to abolish what was known colloquial in colonial circles as the “Maidens’ Chamber” in Kachin houses—the *nla dap*.

In Jinghpaw society the *nla dap* was the one youth sphere that lay beyond the control of the administration and the missions, a zone of autonomy. The *nla dap* was a special space centered round a fireplace (*dap*) in a Jinghpaw house that functioned as a gathering place for young, unmarried people.⁴⁰ There they would sing, play instruments and tell tales; the degree to which they would also use it to form sexual liaisons is a contested matter. Elders would occasionally be invited to tell them stories of their favorite heroes and it was, therefore, an important sphere for the transmission of vernacular oral culture cross-generationally. As this was an institution structured into every Kachin house of size (albeit not uniformly across all the sub-groups across the region) and had important cultural and social functions, it was a difficult environment for the administration and the churches to target.

There were concerns by the 1930s that not only former soldiers, but also Kachin youth were becoming a potentially volatile political force. Green’s comments on the younger generation in the Bhamo region indicate the level of

⁴⁰ *Dap* also incorporates a notion of lineage, indicating the significance of such architectural features in reproducing social constructs in Jinghpaw society.

this concern: “[A] revolution of the younger generation against the old regime is in progress and unless the movement is carefully watched will, I fear, lead to disintegration, or absorption by the Burmese.”⁴¹ Here and elsewhere in his dissertation, Green attributes this change to the influence of the colonial structures of military recruitment, education, and the concomitant influence of Christianity.

The marriage system in Jinghpaw society is relatively strict and defined by triangulated kinship relationships. However, one aspect of this that is often overlooked is the pattern of cross-gendered friendship-building that becomes possible between those who cannot marry. These cross-gender friendship patterns are very different especially to those of Burman society and can sometimes be misinterpreted by other communities in prurient ways. Similarly, the fact that Kachin women would regularly drink alcohol was culturally misinterpreted and misrepresented. The missionaries and the colonial officials in the Bhamo-Sinlunkaba region seem to have taken such an approach in order to assert their control over this youth sphere.

The *nla dap* was transformed by the rhetoric of the campaign into a den of iniquity with lurid accounts of the activities that were supposed to take place behind its walls. It was cited as the root cause of the spread of syphilis, rather than regional militarization. Kachin people were, from this point onwards, to be encouraged to build their houses without the *nla dap* and the most important

⁴¹ Green, “Classification,” 287.

youth social sphere was, thus, to be destroyed. The architecture of the Kachin longhouse was often criticized by colonial officials and missionaries for its dark interior, and the removal of the *nla dap* was allied to other interests in the visual aestheticization of modernity – such as building in brick and adding windows. Even the Christian Kachin chiefs tried to intervene against this arguing that any sexual misdemeanors arising from the *nla dap* would be dealt with, as usual, through customary law relating to sexual misconduct. The churches in particular, however, seem to have persisted with their definition. Furthermore, by translating *nla dap* into English as the “Maiden's Chamber,” it transposed the source of syphilis to the bodies of Kachin women not male soldiers. *Nla* can have a range of meanings depending on the tones applied and this translation of the term is not its only possible meaning despite being the only one that is used in the documentation of the Regeneration Campaign. By 1939–40, when Edmund Leach was conducting his anthropological fieldwork in Burma (indeed, initially his object was to consider the impact of the Kachin Regeneration Campaign), it seems that the *nla dap* had disappeared from the Sinlum region. Leach found that in Hpalang, the site of Leach's fieldwork, the institution had disappeared before the war arrived, an insight that set him on a new trajectory of Kachin involvement.

The compartment marked n-la dap (woman-man hearth) in Fig. 2 is the room of the unmarried girls of the nta [house] and they may here entertain their lovers without parental restraint; indeed they

are expected to do so. The granary may serve a similar social purpose. In Hpalang in 1940 in deference to mission criticism, the institution of the *n-la dap* had been suppressed, but so-called granaries, which were in fact sleeping quarters for the young people survived.⁴²

Further, Leach comments that, “The *n-la dap* institution implies that a girl conducts her love affairs with considerable publicity. This perhaps to some extent acts as a safeguard against incest between close siblings, but I have no real evidence on this point.”⁴³

Leaving aside for the moment issues concerning Leach’s erroneous translation of the term *n-la*, what is of interest is the way in which the rhetoric relating to this space has become, even by 1940, so deeply embedded in local accounts of it, and the way in which the transmission of those accounts, without evidence, acquire an unjustified authority.⁴⁴ It seems also clear from the reference to the granary is that this intervention initiated the granary as a site of resistance, a new zone of autonomy to contest these representations, which restored to some extent the desired level of social opacity. The granary was one of the most isolated of places from the visitor and thus beyond the interventionist gaze of visiting missionaries and officials.

⁴² Edmund R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London: The Athlone Press, 1977), 111.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 140.

⁴⁴ For detailed discussion of such matters, see Robinne & Sadan eds., *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia*.

The attempt to blame Kachin women for the spread of syphilis and the need, therefore, to control their behavior was also seen in the line of rhetoric related to the problems around the night bazaars near to the cantonments close to the border with China. In fact these problems were most likely related to changes to the sex industry in China from the 1920s onward.⁴⁵ However, as the regulation of brothels was opposed, it was the supposedly innate promiscuity of Kachin women that was targeted. An order was issued that all unescorted Kachin women who went to the night bazaars could be arrested as prostitutes. The market was an important social sphere for Kachin women and in the northern Shan State and Bhamo region of Sinlumkaba attendance at the rotating five day markets was a social highpoint. Market-going in a general sense was now implicated in a discourse on syphilis that re-engendered the disease and impacted on the economic mobility of Kachin women as part of a moralizing discourse. The interiorization of the domestic world of Kachin women was also suggested in relation to educational reforms promoted by the campaign.

There is urgent need to improve the lot of Kachin women, which was described to us as being virtual slavery throughout the Hills, particularly in the north. In former times, the women had to be kept at home for safety while the men went out to work, armed and ready to fight if need be. With the advent of peace in the Hills this is no longer necessary, and the women are sent out, while the men take their leisure at home. The collection of wood and water and the pounding of paddy in the early dawn which are heavy tasks in themselves are the prelude to a long day of labor in the fields

⁴⁵ Dikötter, "Modernity in China," 1995.

which is concluded by the cooking of the evening meal and other household tasks, apart from the task of bearing and rearing children. If the race is to make any progress at all, the burden must be readjusted and the women set free from heavy field work for other useful tasks more within their strength. Any proposals for the education of girls must bear this in mind.⁴⁶

Categories of Highland-lowland and Biological Adaptation

The awareness that former Kachin soldiers were becoming a potentially volatile interest group concerned both the civil and military administration of the Kachin region and formed a significant part of the Regeneration Campaign's agenda. By the 1920s Christian soldiers, therefore, seem to have emerged as a recognizable and influential socio-political constituency. Increasingly this group had the potential to challenge the traditional Kachin elders who largely adhered to their animist practices. However, this was a complex situation and there was not a simple relationship between the spread of Christianity and the development of an ethnic army. There was not in fact a policy of conversion in the army at all; superior officials tacitly accepted Christian proselytizing only as the private vocation of certain officers. Frequently great efforts were made to uphold animist practices as it was felt that these assisted with the expression of a group identity. A paradoxical situation developed for the administration, therefore, and by the 1920s and 1930s there was increasing awareness of the destabilizing influence

⁴⁶ IOR: M/5/14, 31 [6].

that conversion to Christianity was having in some communities, increasingly to becoming a point of internal social conflict.

The Kachin soldiers themselves were not a uniform political group; they were recruited from a large number of different communities. There was a diverse response to the experience of empire among the soldiers and their interpretation of what that experience meant for the development of the Kachin peoples, a complex and diverse ethnic category in the newly emerging Burmese state.

Upon being discharged, recruits were expected by the military and the administrative hierarchy to return to their villages to act as role models. Some soldiers found this socially impossible while others, such as the highest-ranking Kachin soldier, Subedar Major Jinghpaw [Chingpaw] Gam, objected on political grounds. However, Lasang Gam, the highest-ranking Lisu recruit, did exactly as was expected. That his community was itself marginalized from mainstream Jinghpaw discourse about the future political development of the region may have been just as influential in this decision as deference to colonial military superiors. In many places, these soldiers themselves created a social tension, thus inhibiting their return. They could not automatically enter a village and assume a level of authority that might challenge the chief. Equally, setting up new villages was not only difficult because of land pressure in the Sinlum region by the 1930s, but it

would also be perceived as a challenge to local kinship structures.⁴⁷ The situation of soldiers returning to civil life was, therefore, socially and politically, complex. For these and other reasons relating to their newly acquired social and economic experiences, many felt that it was easier to re-settle in the plains. This potential socio-political site of protest and resistance underlies some of the comments repeated most forcefully during the Regeneration Campaign that living in the plains was inappropriate for Kachin people and was frequently related to the spread of venereal disease among them and their moral deterioration.

The socio-biological constraint of Kachin society to a highland environment was a particularly strong line of argument in the regeneration attempted in the Sinlumkaba Subdivision.⁴⁸ The Kachin Regeneration Campaign was introduced largely in response to a perception of increasing discontent across the Kachin Hills with regard to the administration, the military and the missions. During the 1920s and 1930s many voices were to be found that contested the model of “Kachin” that was being constructed by these institutions. Some of these belonged to traditional interest groups, such as animist chiefs, but there were also increasing numbers of soldiers who had had an intimate acquaintance with the *modus operandi* of empire, the role that ethnicity played within it, and who distrusted the political restructuring that was taking place.

⁴⁷ Green, “Classification,” 308.

⁴⁸ IOR: M/5/14 “Progress Report on the Rural Reconstruction in the Sinlumkaba Subdivision During May 1937 – April 1938.”

Key among these voices of dissent was that of the first regular Kachin soldier, Jinghpaw Gam.⁴⁹ When he retired in the late 1920s, he had reached the rank of Subedar Major and had considerable local standing. He was also increasingly critical of the prescriptive ethnographic model of Kachin society that the colonial institutions were advancing. More importantly, he was acutely aware of the way that this model was feeding into the political structure of the new state in the years leading up to Independence. In particular, it seems that he wanted to challenge the binary categories of highland-lowland by which the Kachin ethnic category was being defined and politically delineated. His judgment was astute. In 1937 this classification was used to debar the Kachin from participation at the political centre of the Burmese state by the designation of the Kachin Hills as an Excluded Area. In 1948 the new constitution delineated a political constituency, “The Kachin” (upland), as being distinct from other constituencies, “The Non-Kachin” (lowland), all of whom resided in the mixed geo-political region, “Kachin State” (upland and lowland). This latter fact both supported and confused the ethnic specificity of the term within the new state model.

Although apparently premised on local models of ethnic relations, the colonial model of upland-lowland was significantly distinct. Insofar as it related to a people, the status of the term “Kachin” as an upland ethnographic fact,

⁴⁹ IOR: M/3/563 – “Kachin tribes – proposed visit of G. A. J. Teasdale to Burma to study medical cause of the decline of the Kachins.”

distinguished permanently from the lowlands, was now something that Kachin society was expected to internalize as being “true” anthropologically, socially, politically, even biologically, in the same way that they were expected to internalize the morality discourses of the Kachin Regeneration Campaign. Indeed, these notions were inter-related.

In 1937 the health discourse of the Regeneration Campaign depicted the immutability of the Kachin highland ethnic category as due to physiology. Yet this rhetoric also had clear political objectives. It was intended to dissuade Kachin people, especially ex-soldiers, from settling in lowland areas, particularly along the railway corridor where there were increasing disputes between Kachin and Shan communities. It was also intended to persuade ex-soldiers to return to their home villages. The physiological reasons why Kachin people were supposed to be unsuited to plains life were never fully explained, but it took strength from the fact that many hill dwelling peoples have concerns about becoming ill after travelling to lowland areas. Kachin people, for example, have a term, *makkalaung*, for a sense of general malaise that often arises from visits to the plains and this same malady seems also to be used as a non-specific, cultural response to stress.⁵⁰ In animist society, illnesses wrought by foreign *nat* or spirits were distinguished from those of Kachin *nat*. This took on connotations of the upland-lowland dichotomy, as offerings made to placate foreign *nat* were placed

⁵⁰ *Makkalaung* was also a lowland village in the Hukawng valley region.

in Shan baskets and taken to the edge of the village where the spirits were asked to leave.

The principal problem, however, as has been mentioned with potential recruits, was the prevalence of endemic malaria in many lowland areas with which Kachin people had contact.⁵¹ This is, of course, was far from being a physiological or racial characteristic of the Kachin peoples. Nonetheless, the colonial administrators redefined the meanings of this in terms of physiology, pseudo-history and human geography in their political planning of the new state.

Jinghpaw Gam objected strongly to this physiological construction of Kachin ethnicity and he refused to make allowances for it, not least because he was aware of how it was being used to delineate the political future of the Kachin Hills. Upon his retirement, Jinghpaw Gam refused to return to his village in the hills and chose instead to settle on the plains. Furthermore, he tried to encourage as many ex-soldiers and others to join him, with the intention that, if Kachin people could become established as a plains-dwelling minority, they would then be able to claim the right to have an elected member in the House of Representatives in Lower Burma.⁵² The report on reconstruction work in Sinlumkaba stated “That this will entail virtual annihilation of his race does not

⁵¹ IOR: M/5/14 “Kachin Regeneration Campaign.”

⁵² *Ibid.*, 59–60.

seem to make any impression on him.”⁵³ When officials tried to call him to meetings with other elders in the hills, he refused to go, turning the racial model upside down by claiming that going to the hills made him feel unwell.⁵⁴

Jinghpaw Gam’s response reveals some of the tensions in interpretation of the term “Kachin” that had been engendered by the colonial development of the term. His response was to establish the first local development organization dedicated to the educational and social improvement of the Kachin peoples. In this, he endeavored to incorporate notions of modernity and development as constructed by the missions and the military, but also to repossess the definition of the term Kachin as a locally meaningful category. This meant indigenizing the term Kachin, not by reconstructing its folk etymology, but by repossessing the deep understandings of the social relationships that constituted its underpinnings through a local term that would act as its cognate. He named his organization *Pawng Yawng Hpung*. Jinghpaw Gam’s organization was the first in a genealogy of political and military nationalist Kachin organizations to use the term *Pawng Yawng*. By the 1960s usage of this term and its derivatives had become conventional in the self-presentation on the main Kachin nationalist organizations out of which the Kachin Independence Army was to develop.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion: Syphilis and Economies of Morality

One critical aspect of the Regeneration Campaign and its medical/biological discourse was the way in which it engendered a social memory of the “fact” that the Kachin peoples were facing extinction due to the spread of syphilis. This has become deeply embedded in contemporary local discourse about Kachin history and models of moral and social development, its most pragmatic outcome in recent years being an anti-condom message from the churches as the best means of controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS. The account just given of how this discourse was produced needs also to be related to the fact of its continuing circulation and consumption.

There has always been a complex relationship between the spread of Christianity and the emergence of Kachin nationalist identity. During the period of the campaign, Christian faith was a minority in the Kachin Hills, with clear regional affiliations: the areas of Bhamo, Myitkyina and Sumprabum. There are today, and were significantly so during the colonial period, communities of Kachin people who resisted the spread of the missions and conversion to Christianity in its various forms. Even on the eve of independence in 1948, the religious orientation of the Kachin nationalist movement was still contested. There were committed animist elders, such as Htingnan Kumja from the Hkahku dominated region of the Mali-N’Mai Triangle region, who felt traditional Kachin religious practices were the only true expression of the Kachin spirit; there were

animist-Buddhists such as Sinwa Naw, the first political leader of Kachin State, and others who had been raised in the complex anthropological environment of predominantly Buddhist lowland and upland areas; and there were the Christian educated youth leaders and soldiers who expressed a different kind of vision of Kachin modernity and socio-political development, such as Jinghpaw Gam.

Following Independence, it was the large churches and the burgeoning Kachin military organizations that dominated the public sphere of Jinghpaw language discourse through their ability to organize and proselytize through an oral public domain that was relatively free of state censorship - the Jinghpaw language sermon. There then followed a progressive narrowing during decades of military and political conflict of the spheres in which issues of identity, nationalism and history could be discussed. Following independence, this narrowing occurred as a result also of the *de facto* censorship of militarized Kachin nationalist organizations, which were predominantly led by Christian (mainly Baptist) soldiers. In this regard, the cultural intimacy of the discourse on syphilis was very important for creating associations with redemption, nationalism and recovery through independent endeavor and Christian faith. This sphere also perpetuated much of the ethnographic rhetoric of the colonial period and continued to employ its texts in its discourse by privileging ethnographic works by missionaries such as Rev. Ola Hanson, Father Gilhodes and Christian officers such as C. M. Enriquez (“Theophilus”). Furthermore, the representation

of a uniform Kachin history arising from the church has long been a historicist exercise in exalting the success of religious conversion. This rhetoric dominated representations of Kachin history in most discourses and through its lack of subtlety does little to dispute the claims of the Burmese centre that the Kachin have been misled by colonial officials and foreign missions in their interpretation of their historical relationship to the Burmese state. As conflict became entrenched, it became harder to challenge, refute or renegotiate the constructions of traditional Kachin morality and society that policies such as the Regeneration Campaign had created. For this reason, the discourses that were engaged about the moral standing and developmental potential of the Kachin peoples as an ethnic community within the Burmese state have remained embedded as the primary historical discourses to which Kachin Christian nationalists adhere. By becoming internalized discourses, they have affected the cognitive boundaries of historical ethnic identity in significant ways and should, therefore, be distinguished from the social and symbolic discourses that pertained in non-colonial settings. Of significance, too, is the fact that they have proved so persuasive in the domain of social memory that, for many Kachin nationalist groups the effect of refuting these constructions would be to challenge the dominant rhetoric of Kachin Christian nationalism as a unifying and motivating force of ethnic unity itself.

It is clear that contexts of militarization played an important role in the production of the early discourse on syphilis and decline and have continued to

dominate in its continuing circulation and consumption. Likewise, the impending political transition from indirect rule to some other form of as yet undetermined political structure created a situation in which certain stakeholders could claim a prerogative of knowledge, which they used to advance their own interests. It is of note that the other main occasion when the issue of syphilis became significant historically was following the Second World War when, again, the presence of troops in a locality, this time especially in the Putao and Sumprabum districts, seems to have resulted in a local sexual health crisis. At this time, the question of finance once more framed the discourse. In 1947 the possibility was raised that funds might be made available from the Force 136 Memorial Fund, but this was rejected until constitutional issues relating to the Karen peoples were resolved.⁵⁵ It would seem, therefore, that discourses on the sexual health of the Kachin peoples historically have been produced and circulated principally at key moments of political transition in Burma: the establishment of the Kachin Hills as an Excluded Area in 1937; the lead up to independence from British rule following Second World War. On both occasions, the ethnographic model of the moral and social condition of the Kachin peoples entered central political discourse on whether the Kachins as an ethnic category were ready to participate in the central institutions of the state, or whether they could adequately govern themselves.

⁵⁵ Public Records Office [PRO]: FO643/77 – Confidential letter No. 251 GSO 47 from R. E. McGuire to Sir Gilbert Laithwaite, dated September 23, 1947.

The connections that can be made with contemporary discourses about HIV/AIDS in the Kachin region are obvious. Those working on this issue would do well to be cognizant of the historical context in which the image of syphilis has been presented to Kachin society and the impact that this has had on social memory and notions of historical progress – as well as its role as a unifying factor in the social poetics of Kachin nationalist accounts of a history of redemption. Not only does it impact upon the receptivity towards AIDS awareness campaigns in modern Kachin society, but also the nature of the discourse itself can impact the political debate of the relation of the minorities to the centre. Discussions of longstanding relationship between syphilis and militarization, both as metaphor and as fact, need also to reflect that prior targets in preventive propaganda were women in particular as vectors of infection and measures to reduce the spread of venereal diseases impacted upon their social roles and mobility. There is surely much to be learned from this campaign about the impact of such discourses, especially at times of political transition

Yet today, following some twelve years of ceasefire with the central regime, some within the Christian religious establishment recognize the difficulties engendered by this representation of the past and bemoan the fact that the Kachin people lack an adequately researched secular history. In part this reflects (as some opposed to the ceasefire would fear) a re-articulation of the fissures in “Kachin” society that were present but suppressed during years of

conflict. Yet it also reflects a genuine concern that the problems and issues facing the Kachin region require more substantive than rhetorical solutions. Discussions with some Baptist church elders and youth leaders in Myitkyina in 2002 suggested that there was a good deal of interest in exploring other ways of accounting for or understanding the impact of syphilis in the Kachin region historically, also with a view reflexively towards better appreciation of how AIDS discourses and propaganda campaigns could be most effective. This would involve working with nurses who were part of the post-Second World War anti-syphilis campaigns and in developing a related oral testimony program. That there is apparently now an inclination to do this suggests that the discourse might enter a new economy of circulation and consumption, which might ultimately lead to the production of a new kind of discourse.

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