Generalized Exchange, Theocracy and the Opium Trade

Jonathan Friedman

_Critique of Anthropology_ 1987 7: 15
DOI: 10.1177/0308275X8700700103

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://coa.sagepub.com/content/7/1/15
After the publication of Nugent’s ‘Closed systems and contradiction: The Kachin in and out of history’ (Man 17, 1982) and the ensuing exchange between himself and Leach (1983), I felt that further discussion might only confuse the issues even more than Leach had proceeded to do by avoiding the main arguments. Since the reproduction of Nugent’s thesis in Wolf’s magnum opus (1982) with pretentions to a new approach with which I have myself been associated, I have changed my mind. Beyond the problems involved in the historical material itself, is what I feel is the inadmissible vulgarization to which the global approach is submitted and the consequently low theoretical level to which Nugent manages to plummet his analysis. I hope to correct this in the following sketch, not by means of Leachian slander, but by taking Nugent’s propositions seriously enough to warrant a principled critique.

Nugent appears to present his approach to Kachin material as an application, strangely implicit, of a world system perspective, or perhaps what is generally referred to in American Anthropology as a ‘political economy’ framework. This entails placing the Kachin in a larger geographic and historical perspective and considering the way in which Kachin economic relations to the larger regional and world economies has determined their particular history and even their political organization. I find it curious, to say the least, that he should suggest this as a new perspective when he had access to my book which in its introduction to the original thesis (1972) explicitly presents a ‘global systemic’ framework for an interpretation of the Kachin and Kachin type local systems. In my discussion (1979:10-15) I argue that the Kachin historically occupy a position in the larger system that I refer to as independent-expansionist or predatory. Unlike the usual peripheral zones of larger centers of civilization, predatory structures are independent insofar as the maintenance of their internal organization does not depend on their integration in a larger reproductive process.

‘Expansionist tribal structures – predatory structures. These are structures
containing internal cycles of accumulation and that expand against both center/periphery structures and dependent structures (specialist producers and trade specialists), exploiting the flow of wealth in the larger system by extortion. They often expand into small states, sometimes into larger ‘barbarian’ empires – especially in periods of decline of the centers on whom they feed. Examples of such structures are found in Northern Southeast Asia, Yunnan, Central Asia etc. Such structures tend to become dependent on their ability to exploit other sectors of the system when they expand into states and empires insofar as they must maintain increasingly elaborate military machines, political alliances and a greatly elaborated court life.’ (Friedman 1979:13)

In contrast to such internally reproductive structures, peripheral structures are those whose internal reproductive organization is directly integrated into larger regional cycles, thus whose very existence depends on their external relations. Thus, the Tai ‘feudal’ statelets, tributary to Angkor, appear to have been organized as prestige-good systems where chiefly or princely position depended upon the monopoly of export/import and whose particular kinship structure might be understood as a product of the flows of people and valuables that are derivative of such monopolistic relations (Condominas 1976).

I also argued quite explicitly that predatory structures might become transformed into peripheral structures in changing conditions in the larger field of the global system and that the reverse process might also be a possibility (1979:14). In the body of the book itself I refer to and discuss the way that some groups had become specialized in particular kinds of production or control over trade routes (nothing new of course) and how this specialization could be related to the maintenance of gumsa type of organization and even to its transformation into Buddhist based state forms – i.e. no longer gumsa nor even traditional Kachin (a problem that Nugent entirely overlooks).

Nugent’s presentation, thus, represents nothing new to me, nor, I suppose to Leach. But in his pretensions to a world systemic historical understanding it is quite extraordinary that he does not refer to my own theoretical perspective which clearly aims to articulate local and global processes. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, in spite of claims to the contrary, Nugent’s perspective on the Kachin is both a-theoretical and a-structural. It is because of this that his ‘explanation’ of the emergence of the category gumlao seems such an inadequate substitute for any of the already existing discussions.

**HISTORICAL CORRELATION VERSUS STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS**

Nugent’s argument is quite simply that the existence of Kachin chiefdoms (gumsa) was a function of the regional trade system linking Upper Burma
and China in which the Kachin participated as producers of opium and jade, and as 'protectors' of trade routes. Opium production is singled out as the most important factor in the *gumsa* economy. The increasing instability of the area beginning with the Panthay rebellion in the 1850’s led to a virtual breakdown in the trade, undermining the basis of chiefly authority, and precipitating, finally, a series of *gumlao* revolts and the establishment of a *gumlao*-egalitarian polity, which had *never* existed previously. This political decline was reinforced by British intervention and annexation, which prevented the Kachin from engaging in their usual trading and opium producing activities. Thus, in the Triangle region, north of the administered area until the 1920’s, *gumsa* hierarchy began to appear soon after the re-establishment of peace, a development that was hindered by the British presence further south.

The ‘theory’ behind this periodization of Kachin history is simply (quite simply indeed) that trade causes political hierarchy, its disappearance the collapse of hierarchy. No attempt is made to even suggest what the relation might be between trade and social structure: Who might control the trade, or the production of trade goods; how the goods might circulate internally. If, for example, chiefs are known to possess opium producing slaves, this does not account for the existence of chiefs in the first place, nor for the fact that intensive trading and opium growing are primarily associated not with *gumsa* but with *gumlao* Kachin (Maran La Raw 1967:138-9).

Now to begin with, it is generally acknowledged that the Kachin of the Eastern Hills (Sinlum and Sadon areas) were engaged in trade and especially ‘protection’ upon which I have argued, the maintenance of *gumsa* organization depended in the 19th century. The disruption of the Burma-China trade certainly affected the domains along the southern routes through Sadon and Sinlum but it is arguable that the real blow to the political system was the British prevention of Kachin taxation of the trade. My argument was that the revenues of trade could be invested in the heavy demands for feasting and inflated costs of circulation required to uphold *gumsa* hierarchy in an area that was so depleted agriculturally as to be inadequate to such purposes. In other words, a *previously established* chiefly polity could be maintained by a kind of petty imperialism. There is, however, no evidence that *gumsa* structures ever developed on the basis of exclusive lineage rights to opium producing land. While opium cash cropping has apparently increased significantly in this century, associated in fact with the spread of *gumlao* organization, the nineteenth century *gumsa* domains were primarily dependent on their military control over the trade routes.

If there is evidence of large scale opium cultivation among the Kachin (Singpho) of Assam in the 1830’s, something that cannot be clearly ascertained, as demonstrated by the exchange between Leach and Nugent, this still absolutely begs the whole question of the relation between chiefly structure and opium production. Nugent refers to Bayfield (1873) in his
argument for the existence of large scale opium production in the Hukawng Valley (no reference is made to the Singpho-Kachin semi-states further west in Assam). This officer describes the generalized production of opium in ‘carefully fenced in’ village plantations. It is clear that there is opium here, but it does not seem likely that the scale of ‘plantation’ suggested by Nugent would be ‘carefully fenced in’. More curious is the fact that another early report (Hannay 1837) makes no reference to the so-called opium trade adduced by Nugent.

‘The only traffic of any consequence carried on in this valley is with the amber which the Singphos sell to a few Chinese, Chinese Shans and Chinese Singphos, who find their way here annually.’ (Pemberton in Hannay 1837:271)

It would appear that opium was among the commodities purchased in exchange, and only one commodity among others:

‘The Chinese sometimes pay in silver for the amber, but they also bring them warm jackets, carpets, straw hats, copper pots and opium which they give in exchange for it.’ (Hannay 1837:271)

To claim, as Nugent does in reference to Kachin purchase of opium from the Chinese, that this is a mere question of seasonality seems patently ridiculous. After all, his one source from the period in question, Bayfield, was there in the same ‘off-season’ as Hannay. It seems, furthermore, quite absurd that a reconnaissance expedition of the type undertaken by Hannay should have been so casual as to have been entirely ignorant of so important a cash crop for British interests, especially if it were grown on a significant scale.

Some of the most stratified of the Singpho inhabited the plains area of Assam northwest of the Hukawng Valley. Nugent does not discuss these groups with reference to the opium economy. We know from the earliest reports that these Kachin had thousands of Assamese slaves later freed by the British for their tea plantations. The economy of the Ahom state of Assam, to which the Singpho were vassal, was quite developed and there was a great deal of trade. Nowhere is it stated that opium was the mainstay of the region, although it is surely the case that opium was produced in the 18th and 19th centuries. What can be said is that after the British had crippled the Kachin political economy in Assam there are reports of ‘immoderate addiction to opium’ (Butler 1847 in Elwin 1959:399) in the midst of widespread political decadence and increasing impoverishment.

Nugent uses the material from this area to argue that the ‘repudiation of gumsa obligations’ was a function of British intervention and not part of an internally generated cycle. No one, to be sure, denies the course of events here. But the decline of the Assamese Kachin polities has nothing to do with a gumlao revolt. Not only is there not a single reference to such a revolt, but the later descriptions of the area continue to describe a stratified society, albeit in a state of dissolution. Leach’s early argument (1946:481) was that the Kachin of this area were well on their way to state formation
before the British liberated the enslaved basis of their development. I used the same material to demonstrate the capacity of the Kachin system to develop in the direction of a theocratic state-class organization in favorable conditions of expansion. I even suggested that the Assamese Kachin had deviated significantly from the traditional gumsa model (Friedman 1979:262). All of this militates against Nugent’s interpretation. The fact that no gumlao revolt occurred in this area is, furthermore, directly contradictory to Nugent’s simple no trade = no chiefs thesis.

The entirety of the historical material upon which Nugent’s thesis is based comes from two periods in two areas; the first from the Hukawng-Assam border area in the 1830’s and 40’s and the second from the Eastern Hills region in the 1880’s and onward. Virtually no reference is made to the classical homeland of the Kachin chiefdom, the famous Triangle region between the Mali Hka and Nmai Hka rivers. Evidence of neither commercial opium production nor the control of trade routes is to be found for this region. Its great gumchying gumsa domains were very hierarchical and possessed a great many slaves. They also experienced a classical gumlao movement in the nineteenth century and were by all accounts on their way back to a gumsa structure early in this century.

Nugent attempts, but only by implication, to argue that the Triangle Kachin were opium cash croppers. His argument is based on references to Yunnan in general in the nineteenth century. He thus feels safe in stating that this famous gumlao revolt resulted from the breakdown in the China-Burma trade and that the revival of gumsa was possible because the Triangle Kachin, beyond the bounds of British administration, ‘continued to collect tolls from trading caravans’ (Nugent 1982:523). This argument is doubly false! The singular reason is simply that the Triangle Kachin do not appear to have had any direct access to the trade routes in question, all of which were in the hands of the Eastern Kachin, the Gauri and Atsi clans. This would imply that neither the disruption of the trade routes nor their reinstatement could affect the gumchying polities in a direct way. No one, of course, is denying that the Triangle Kachin had access to opium, especially in the late 19th century, but its presumed centrality to the local political economy is simply contradicted by the facts. In his scramble to summon evidence for large scale opium production in the Triangle, Nugent makes use of MacGregor and Sandeman who refer to the use of opium as money. MacGregor, who visited Hkamti Long, which is, moreover, northwest of the Triangle, in 1886, also describes the Kachin relation to opium as a clear case of buying and not of selling:

‘The Hkamtsis said that sometimes a trading party went to China, that the journey took them one month and eight days, that they had to cross in boats two big rivers... The traders bought opium in China at the rate of 10s6d a pound, but they said it was not so good as the Assam opium, which they could obtain after a journey which only took them half the time it did to go to China. The opium of Assam cost them, however, about 30s a pound.’ (MacGregor, Maj. C. 1887:34)
The very fact that opium was used as a means of circulation would seem to imply that it was relatively scarce and not, as suggested by Nugent, a major product. In any case the Kachin and Shan of Hkamti Long ought not to be lumped together with the chiefly domains of the Triangle. Now it is, of course, probable that the Triangle chiefs received tradegoods from the East in exchange for titles, since it is known that the trading chiefs of the Gauri and Atsi attached themselves to the Triangle Shadan Tu lineage (Friedman 1979:112; Leach 1946:565). But in the absence of any sign of major opium production in the area, the Kachin of the Triangle can only be considered as counter-evidence for Nugent's argument.

Finally, even the Eastern Hills region bordering on China, which was the most heavily and increasingly involved region in opium production from the middle of the 19th century, does not appear to have operated on a scale like that implied by Nugent. Walker (1892) places opium production in the following perspective.

'A good deal of opium is grown locally, nearly every village having its little patch of poppy cultivation; but the local output does not nearly meet the demand, and a great deal if not the bulk of the opium is bought sometimes from passing Chinese traders, but more frequently the Kachins make a little trip across the frontier and purchase the article for themselves at one of the Chinese outlying villages.' (Walker 1892:168)

More generally, the overall picture for the region associates a progressively widening opium production throughout the latter nineteenth and twentieth centuries to a situation exactly opposite to that suggested by Nugent. Those areas that have come to rely almost exclusively on opium have tended to become or maintain a gumlao or at least a gumrawng gumsa organization; a kind of gumsa system that,

'Acknowledges no hereditary paramount chief, and where a claim to chieftainship must be justified ritually as well as in terms of capable leadership... whose chiefs generally become powerless figureheads.' (Maran La Raw 1967:139)

This contrast between more or less 'democratic' opium growers in a heavy trading zone and 'autocratic' or perhaps theocratic agriculturalists without such connections is completely contrary to Nugent’s entire model. But then, the group usually singled out as the most illustrious of opium specialists in the region in the early part of this century are the 'egalitarian' headhunting Wa of the Burma-China border.

**INTERNAL CYCLES AND EXTERNAL DETERMINANTS**

Let me try and place the previous discussion in perspective. Nugent argues, sometimes explicitly, sometimes covertly, that there is no such thing as a gumsa/gumlao cycle and, on the contrary, that gumlao is the historical
product of a nineteenth century breakdown of a Burma-China trade featuring opium that was previously organized in a stable system. Even if Nugent's general argument made sense, his understanding of the history of Burma-China relations ought to have convinced him that the northeast border area has been a constant scene of turbulence and instability and that for centuries before the 1850 Panthay rebellion, armies from both the Burmese and Chinese sides traversed the Kachin Hills. Such turbulence ought to be argument enough for the probable oscillation between gumlao and gumsa forms of organization in the past. Thus, even if one were to accept Nugent's argument concerning the relation between trade and hierarchy, the history of the Kachin might still be argued to be cyclical. For more serious reasons, however, Nugent's propositions must be rejected. Because there is no demonstrable connection, theoretically or otherwise, between trade and/or opium production and gumsa in the first half of the nineteenth century, because opium cash cropping and even increasing trade intensity are tendentially associated with declining gumsa and because the one area, the Triangle, where both access to trade routes and cash cropping are at a minimum, is designated as the traditional home of gumchying gumsa polity; because of all this and more, Nugent's 'model' must be discarded. In the absence of a theoretical analysis of the relation between trade, opium and chiefly power, and in the presence of empirical correlations that positively falsify his assumptions, the only support that can be mustered for this barest of hypotheses is the several statements confirming the existence of Kachin owned slaves (presumably chiefly) that produced opium. But in the absence of any theory to the contrary, it is logical assume that monopolizing trade routes and producing opium for sale, just as producing jade and amber, were the things that already established chiefs did in the proper circumstances. In so far as these activities enabled them to further increase their prestige and status within the defined structure of the Kachin system they clearly maintained and even promoted the expansion of gumsa relations, no more no less. Nowhere is there the slightest indication that such activities were the foundation of the emergence of gumsa polity.

Finally the cycles purported by most, to exist for the Kachin are also present among a number of other groups such as the Naga and Chin who occupy very different geo-political positions in the larger region. The advantage of the model of internal cycles of autocracy and democracy is that it is independent of the specific historical phenomena to which Nugent is entirely bound. The existence of such political cycles over a wide region, with and without trade, is evidence enough against an external factor argument. It should also be reiterated, since Nugent is clearly unaware of the existence of structural differences, that many of the so-called gumsa Kachin may have been organized more like Shan states, or, as I argued for Assam, like theocratic or 'asiatic' states. This would imply that the concept
gumsa cannot properly be applied to them, as both their internal structure and dynamic properties are significantly different.

In sum, the argument against Nugent is that:

1. Opium production and other forms of commerce, may have helped to maintain even in some cases expand gumsa organization where it already existed, but there is absolutely no evidence that such organization ever originated on such a base.

2. On the contrary, the available evidence indicates that opium production and high levels of trade intensity are related not to a development but a decline in gumsa hierarchy.

3. The Triangle region, which is the home of the traditional paramount chiefs of the gumchying gumsa domains, is the area least associated (if at all) with border trade and opium production.

4. Many of the Kachin cited as gumsa by Nugent, such as the Singpho of Assam, the Jade Mine district Kachin, etc. appear to have been organized in more state-like forms, or, as in the case of the Jade Mine chiefs, on the lines of a family company, so that the category gumsa may not even be applicable. In fact, it might be argued that, in some cases, the specialization in a trade good could be responsible for the transformation of gumsa domains into small states entirely reproduced via the larger market. It is significant that those areas where gumsa had been transformed into other kinds of state or class structures did not experience gumlao revolt in the nineteenth century. All these phenomena militate against Nugent’s interpretation.

5. The cyclical phenomenon that Nugent has tried to explain away is not limited to the Kachin but occurs over a very wide area among groups faced with external conditions that are incommensurable with those assumed to exist for the Kachin.

As an alternative to simple minded correlations we shall, in the following, sketch a reconstruction of the relations between the internal dynamic of the Kachin system and the larger regional processes within which it was contained.

1. Kachin political forms cannot simply be divided into the opposed types, gumsa/gumlao. Nor are these two polar types equivalent to chiefly versus egalitarian society. To begin with, there are, according to Maran La Raw (1967b), three distinct kinds of Kachin chiefship. Gumchying gumsa, to which we have referred, occurs exclusively in the Triangle region. This is the ‘traditional’ theocratic organization based on fixed inheritance of office. Gumrawng gumsa, the ‘proud and free’ chiefship, occurs mainly in the Eastern Hills region and is associated with the Burma-China trade route area. Gumrawng chiefs are characterized as ‘anti-hereditary’ insofar as they do not accept the legitimacy of hereditary claims to office, which must be ritually demonstrated by every claimant. Gumrawng chiefs are associated with the rejection of subordination to chiefs of ‘higher’ status,
i.e. the \textit{gumchying} chiefs of the Triangle to whom they may have been attached in the past. They are, then, \textit{gumsa} but not hereditary, and they seem to fit into the more or less fragmentary picture of the Eastern Hills domains in the latter part of the nineteenth century. \textit{Gumlao} chiefs are a rather special case since they are not anti-hereditary, but simply non-hereditary, and owe their positions to an act of subordination to other \textit{gumsa} chiefs. This is also a phenomenon localized to the Eastern Hills area, preponderant in opium growing zones where commercial wealth might be used in an attempt to build local followings via political alliance-subordination to 'real' chiefs. The existence of such chiefs might appear to be a contradiction in terms. The ambivalence of their position is captured in the translation 'republican chiefs'. \textit{Gumlao} chiefs are doubly dependent, first on the sponsorship of a \textit{gumsa} chief and second on the recognition of a local population that may at any time have them removed. True \textit{gumlao} is, by definition, a community without any alliance relation to a \textit{gumsa} polity. A truly independent \textit{gumlao} community is, thus, necessarily chiefless, since \textit{gumlao} chiefship is no more than a function of such a dependency relation.

Finally, there are \textit{gumsa} polities settled in larger Shan domains that are not to be considered thoroughly Kachin in terms of their internal structure insofar as their chiefly positions are fixed by administrative fiat and are not the result of any internal process of differentiation. \textit{Gumsa} chiefs in the Shan States are part of a larger administrative organization and not an emergent institution at the local level.

These political types are, furthermore, as we have argued (1979), transformationally related to one another. \textit{Gumchying} can become \textit{gumrawng}, \textit{gumlao} can become \textit{gumsa}, \textit{gumrawng} might even conceivably become \textit{gumchying}. In no case can we accept the oversimplified dichotomization suggested by Nugent since it overlooks some of the most essential structural variations observable in the historical and ethnographic material.

Another important point, referred to above, is that the nineteenth century Tsasen chiefdoms of the Hukawng Valley and Assam were probably not, as Nugent assumes, examples of typical \textit{gumsa} organization. On the contrary, it would appear that these chiefdoms were significantly transformed in the direction of state-class formation (Friedman 1979:260-262; Leach 1946:481-482). The significant decline of the major chiefly redistributive ritual (of the \textit{madai nat}), in conditions where the resource base had shifted to intensive agriculture and/or mining, indicates the emergence of an altered process of social reproduction in these areas. But then, I argued for a number of variant developments from trade-route imperialism to specialized production within a larger regional economy, that might have important transformative effects upon the internal \textit{gumsa} dynamic, effects that might account for the Shan-state-like character of certain Kachin domains (1979:191-195; 257-260).
2. The nomenclature of the gumsa/gumlao cycle might well be considered incorrect insofar as gumlao concerns the question of legitimacy and not of hierarchy as such. In this sense, Nugent’s proposal that gumsa is traditional while gumlao (in the sense of egalitarian) is a recent historical product is contradicted by the clear evidence of political oscillation, not only among the nineteenth and twentieth century Kachin but among the Naga and Chin who appear to have comparable cycles of expansion and contraction.

Nugent criticizes Leach’s evidence for the Hukawng Valley in the last century to the effect that:

‘The Singphos have no acknowledged chief. Each Tsanbwa is the independent head of his own village.’ (Bayfield 1873:222)

Nugent’s answer to this is simply that gumsa, by definition, refers to the existence of chiefs and not to the size of their domains. But, in terms of our enumeration and discussion of Kachin political types, such an argument misses the point. First, chiefship is not identical to gumsa. There are gumlao chiefs. Second, the existence of single village chiefs is a strong indication of the political fragmentation typical of gumlao or at least gumrawng organization. If our aim is to characterize the various states of Kachin society, large unified domains versus fragmented village organization, paramount chieflaincies versus democratic or ‘republican’ elected headmen, then whether or not people refer to one another as gumlao may not be entirely relevant. That is, if gumlao refers to a mid-nineteenth century movement against the inheritance of chiefly title (Maran La Raw, personal communication), then it need not have any direct bearing on the essentially different process of the cyclical expansion and collapse of chiefly hierarchy. It is certainly conceivable that the word gumlao might well have altered its meaning over time. Neufville (1828) claims that the word refers to Kachin slaves and it might be argued that the original meaning of the term was similar to the notion of communities dependent upon powerful chiefly neighbors who become their wife-givers. This, in any case, would be congruent with Maran La Raw’s definition of gumlao chiefship. If the internal mechanisms of exchange and accumulation of status which we posit to be general for Kachin society are accepted, then the social differentiation that must occur in gumlao society in combination with the external alliance-submission to more powerful gumsa chiefs ought logically to lead to the establishment of gumlao chiefship. Now it is conceivable that the kind of gumlao movement suggested by Maran La Raw consists in the repudiation of the dependency upon gumsa chiefs that may have characterized an increasingly wealthy gumlao chiefly class. Such an argument may be partially correct, but it can only become intelligible in light of the argument that I shall present below.

3. Our model of gumsa development envisages the conversion of agricultural surpluses via feasts, into prestige, affinal rank and finally
segmentary rank, all of which is dependent upon a rapid accumulation of slaves and a process of agricultural intensification in conditions unsuitable to such intensification. The outcome is periodic crisis and a breakdown of the process of accumulation, i.e. 'gumlao' revolts. In my argument, this essentially internal accumulation cycle was variously articulated with larger regional processes. In the Eastern Hills, the Kachin chiefs became dependent upon control over the trade routes in order to maintain their gumsa organization. Consequently, any disturbance in the trade ought to have led to a more gumlao situation, i.e. political fragmentation, since the local economy had no resources to fall back upon in order to maintain the gumsa requirements of feasting and exchange.

According, again, to Maran La Raw, the origins of the gumlao movement are related not to the decline but to the increase in trade in the Eastern Hills. The key to understanding this phenomenon lies at the intersection of the internally driven expansion of gumsa domains and the regional economy. The basic means of domain extension is the emigration of elder sons (non-inheriting) with a segment of the local population to clear new areas. The process is ritually rather complicated (see below) and requires that the son first forfeit his chiefly status and then give a series of large scale feasts over a seven year period, pay an enormous brideprice, greater than any in ‘living memory’, all under the sponsorship of an established gumchying chief. At the end of the period, the ‘candidate’ gives a great feast to which the sponsor is invited. He is finally granted full title as a gumchying gumsa chief. This process implies both territorial expansion and an extraordinarily high rate of inflation, both of which are indicated in the model that I have suggested (1975: 79). It also reveals the locus of contradiction in the expansion process itself. A gumyu pretender to chiefship can only maintain himself in such a position so long as he has the resource base to continue feasting throughout the period of his candidature. If domains expand into areas where such resources are not easily obtainable, there are bound to be conflicts. In such cases a situation where there is a high ratio of gumyu to gumchying chiefs can easily become a gumlao crisis. There is reason to believe that this may have been the case in the Duleng area of the northern Triangle (Friedman 1979:178-179). This is the kind of process that I took to be the classical model of Kachin cyclical expansion. The high ratio referred above would presumable be the result of the difficulty encountered by pretenders in completing their candidacies. A similarly skewed ratio would tend to emerge in the Eastern Hills, but this time for opposite reasons. From the structure of the alliances and genealogies it can be ascertained that the Eastern Kachin were subordinate elder son or dama lineages to the great gumchying chiefs of the Triangle. Here the large and easily accessible wealth of the trade routes must have created the conditions for intensive decentralized competition among a growing number of potential chiefs and put heavy inflationary pressure on the entire system. Now, gumlao philosophy is based on the
repudiation of the legitimacy of *gumchying* imposed ratifications of chiefly status, in other words a repudiation of the tributary links to the Triangle.

Given the lack of precise historical data, I would suggest two possible interpretations of the *gumlao* phenomenon. According to Maran La Raw, *gumlao* is a direct product of the increase of attainable wealth in the Eastern Hills. The increasing density of trade entailed a more fragmented accumulation of wealth, more regional competition for status, more ‘chiefs’ and a destabilization of domain hierarchies – a generally *gumrawng* state of affairs. The *gumlao* movement, according to Maran La Raw, was a ‘philosophical’ rebellion against the claims of hereditary chiefship, not of chiefship in general. This would appear to be a logical outcome of the trade induced flood of *arrivistes*. But however much the increased commerce might have corroded the traditional chiefly hierarchy, the dislocation of the trade routes and the consequent disruption of accumulation would still have had drastic effects on whatever other process was underway. Thus, the violent overthrow of chiefly hierarchy referred to in the British reports is one where the existence of chiefs is simply not tolerated, and where egalitarianism would appear to be the norm. Now, if what anthropologists and colonial officers have called *gumlao* is not the same as Maran La Raw’s definition, this is probably due to the changing historical context:

*Gumlao 1*: increased political fragmentation due to access to trade routes and opium production for cash. *Gumlao* ‘chiefs’, *gumlao magam* (republican chiefs) are non-hereditary and regionally powerless, but they can be quite rich.

*Gumlao 2*: the collapse of accumulation processes in either agricultural or trade based zones; it is characterized by the absence of chiefs – the establishment of powerless headmen (*akyi*) in their place and the absence of a larger regional economy and polity.

The introduction of opium in a *gumlao 2* situation, and perhaps even a *gumlao 1* situation is bound to have ‘egalitarian’ effects. The reason is simply that there is a tendency for everyone to be able to cultivate this cash crop, to accumulate cash that is convertible into prestige, and thus to undermine the conditions of existence of hierarchy which is dependent on the increasing monopolization of the distributable wealth in society.

My earlier interpretation of Eastern Hills history was that the area was essentially *gumrawng* at the start of this century. The previous existence of a *gumlao* 1 or 2 movement notwithstanding, it would appear that this region where trade route imperialism was essential for *gumsa* organization was converted via British intervention into an increasingly *gumlao* opium based economy. While the British might have been able to prevent the Kachin from taxing trade routes, they could not prevent opium production.

‘Although the British made a number of efforts at abolishing opium cultivation
in the Shan States, geography, ethnography and politics ultimately defeated them.’ (McCoy & Adams 1972:70)

The reasons for this are pretty clear:

‘The British were hardly eager to spend vast sums of money administering these enormous territories, and so, in exchange for the right to build railways and control foreign policy, they recognized the sawbwa’s traditional powers and prerogatives... doomed their future efforts at the eradicating opium cultivation in northeastern Burma. The sawbwas received a considerable portion of the tribal opium harvest as tribute and opium exports to Thailand and Lower Burma represented an important part of their personal income.’ (McCoy & Adams 1972:71)

The unstable transition between the former trade route imperialism and the present opium dependency which occurred in the latter part of the past century corresponds to the emergence of gumrawng gumsa where many potential chiefs make largely unsuccessful claims to paramountcy.

Another correlation worth considering is that opium production occurs primarily in areas of high population density and relatively high levels of ecological depletion, i.e. in areas where cash cropping may have become a necessity for survival. The Eastern Kachin Hills and the Yunnan borderland as well as the Wa country are all severely overintensified zones.

The ‘egalitarian’ Wa as well as the gumlao Kachin are clearly associated with opium in precisely these regions. Whether opium is a significant source of wealth is unclear, but all reports indicate that the proceeds of opium sales are (or were) the monopoly of middleman traders. Opium, then, is not so much a resource for the establishment of hierarchy as a cash crop of last resort for increasingly impoverished and declining polities. As I stated for the egalitarian, head-hunting Wa, opium growers were invariably in debt to Shan middlemen, and wherever ecological conditions were somewhat better, there was a tendency to grow food crops instead of opium (Friedman 1979:249; Harvey 1933:92).

CONCLUSION

I have tried here to raise the level of a previous exchange between Nugent and Leach to one more adequate to a journal of serious intellectual pretentions. Nuggets truly simple minded argument was never really answered in any way by Leach who merely scanned his old notes to find empirical counter-evidence for Nugent’s totally inadequate ‘model’ permitting the latter to do the same ad infinitum. Did they or did they not have large plantations in X in 1830? How shall we interpret the reports of X, Y and Z regarding the existence of gumlao in the early literature? Why did Leach write one thing in 1946 and the opposite thing in 1983? How can Leach be questioned about the history of the Kachin when he has read all the published and unpublished data and, like Baron Munchausen, vos dere
Charlie? While Leach’s list of ‘facts’ about opium does make sense it is altogether inadequate as a ‘demolition’, ‘formal’ or otherwise, of Nugent, since instead of presenting a counter-argument we are reduced in the end to comparing quotations. It is not difficult to demonstrate the inconsistency of Nugent’s argument with the commonly available empirical material. It can, as I have tried to show, be falsified. But Leach is not interested in the argument – which is beneath his contempt. He is only concerned to ridicule the lack of Nugent’s expertise. This, of course, is nothing new for Leach, who has always tended to argue by dismissal on general grounds (so-and-so never did fieldwork, so-and-so has no mathematical background, so-and-so is not an anthropologist). Thus, Lévi-Strauss is interesting but really doesn’t know the material. Maran La Raw (student of Chomsky) is a mere Kachin school teacher and not to be believed. The numerous missionaries who inhabited the Kachin Hills for most of their lives cannot be trusted since they had no anthropological training. Is this the same expert who presumably lost his field notes before writing his thesis, who has virtually totally contradicted himself with respect to the basic structures and mechanisms of Kachin society several times since his thesis (clearly his best work)? It would appear so. But then, this is the same Leach who has recently characterized Gluckman as an anthropologist whose South African ‘Russian-Jewish’ background led him to ‘an irrational devotion to stable systems in general’ (Leach 1984:20). It is Gluckman, of course, alone among the ‘functionalists’ who speaks of hypertrophy and of ‘steady change of magnitudes within and between institutions until there is a sudden and radical transformation of form’ (1968:232), the same anthropologist who brilliantly criticized Political Systems of Highland Burma for functionalizing history and turning contradictions into a model of equilibrium (oscillating), in a mysteriously unpublished review article! All of this inconsequence, self-contradiction, and admitted ‘arrogance and prejudice’ (Leach 1984:21), on the part of one of the anthropological knights of the Empire does not do much for the discipline. I, for one, have nothing against polemic, but there was a time when a certain amount of intellectual argument was an absolute requirement. Even Leach was an active participant and major contributor to such debate (Leach 1961).

I have tried to show in my discussion that Nugent’s hypothesis concerning variations in Kachin political structure is theoretically inadequate and clearly falsifiable if one makes use of the existing data in a systematic fashion. I have, further, tried to provide a more satisfactory model to account for the way in which the articulation between the Kachin system and larger global processes might account for the historical phenomena to which Nugent has addressed himself. In the introduction to Friedman (1979) I have even sketched a global model that might account for both the distribution and maintenance of Kachin type structures in larger systems.
I consider the emergence of a global framework in anthropology to be of utmost import (Ekholm & Friedman 1980) for the future of the field. But this requires a theoretical elaboration that is more structurally sensitive and sophisticated than the kinds of correlation that satisfy Nugent and other ‘political economists’ (Ekholm & Friedman 1984). If I have maintained a serious tone throughout this discussion it is because the previous rampage by Leach so obscured the problem as to render it unrecognizable.

REFERENCES

Bayfield, G.T.
1873 ‘Narrative of a Journey from Ava to the Frontiers of Assam and back, performed between December 1836 and May 1837, under the Orders of Lt. Col. Burney, Resident at Ava’. In: Selection of Papers, 134-244.

Butler, J.
1837 A Sketch of Assam with Some Account of the Hill Tribes, by an Officer. London.

Condominas, G.

Ekholm, K. & Friedman, J.

Elwin, V. (ed.)
1959 India’s North-East Frontier. London.

Friedman, J.

Gluckman, M.

Hannay, S.F.

Harvey, G.E.
1933 Wa Precis. Rangoon.

Leach, E.R.
Lévi-Strauss, C.
MacGregor, C.R.
Maran La Raw
McCoy, A.W.
Neufville, J.B.
Nugent, D.
1982 ‘Closed Systems and Contradiction: the Kachin in and out of History’. In: Man, 17.
1983 Reply to Leach. In: Man, 18.
Walker, J.
Wolf, E.
1982 Europe and the People Without History. Berkeley

Fall 1986 / Religion and Politics
JONES & SHEPPARD: Reagan and Armageddon
KOVEL: Revolution and the Spirit
UHL: Interview with Patrick Hughes
HUGHES: Moral Crisis & The Christian Right
SANDIN-FREMAINT: Politics and Liberation Theology
WILDMAN: Ethics for Exiles
BARSTOW: Women as Healers and Witches
MOSS: Hail Mary
WEST: On Kolakowsky's Religion
COPLAN: Bliss
ROWE: Private Conversations
BARANIK: Cuban Art

Old Westbury Review
Multidisciplinary, thematic explorations in issues of primary social concern. A voice of opinion in critique; criticism and the possible.

A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL OPINION
Subscription rates: one year $10 individuals; $20 institutions. Write to: OLD WESTBURY REVIEW, S.U.N.Y. College at Old Westbury, P.O. Box 210, Old Westbury, NY 11568

critique of anthropology, vol. 7, nr. 1