

## 3.2

### Social memory and cultural performance 1:

### Constructing the material boundaries of the *Wunpawng/Kachin manau* festival



**Figure 1** A photograph taken of the *manau* dance at a 1920s *manau* in Northern Shan State [top] and the 2001 *manau* held in Myitkyina [bottom]. [Top] James Henry Green Collection of Photographs (0253) ;[bottom] Photograph by Zau Ring. Photographs courtesy of the Green Centre for World Art, Brighton Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove

In his recent work *The Festive State*, David M. Guss discusses some of the most significant recent developments in the analysis of cultural performance in state contexts.<sup>1</sup> He argues that a significant limitation of previous research into these forms is the lack of historical depth within which interpretative frameworks exist. Guss contends that the impact of this lack of time depth is that cultural performances tend to be presented as "the manifestation of a set of transcendental values" whereas they should rather be approached via "the way meaning was produced through individual performance".<sup>2</sup> According to Guss:

The same form, therefore, may be used to articulate a number of different ideas and over time can easily oscillate between religious devotion, ethnic solidarity, political resistance, national identity, and even commercial spectacle<sup>3</sup>

This is the position that will be adopted in this chapter. Each of the events discussed operated in a quite specific context that defies the simplistic reification of its meanings as a transcendental value.

Guss gives a useful fourfold definition of how cultural performances are constituted over time. First, he states that "the performances are clearly framed events set off from what might be considered normative, every-day reality", although he recognises the porous boundaries that may exist.<sup>4</sup> Second, he states that they are "important dramatizations that enable participants to understand, criticize, and even change the worlds in which they live".<sup>5</sup> Third, cultural performance is:

[A] profoundly discursive form of behaviour. Actors use these events to argue and debate, to challenge and negotiate. Thus, rather than thinking of cultural performances as simply 'texts', to be read and interpreted, a discursive approach recognises that they are dialogical and even polyphonic. ... This discursiveness has only

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<sup>1</sup> Guss, David M., *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism as Cultural Performance*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

increased as local forms become more entangled within national and global debates<sup>6</sup>

Finally, he states that cultural performances should be:

[R]ecognized as sites of social action where identities and relations are continually being reconfigured. Often this process is imperceptible, with the event appearing as a mere affirmation of the relations that already exist. At other moments, however, groups will use a festive form to shift the way in which history is told, to rethink the boundaries of a community, or to reconsider issues of race and ethnicity, or ... sexuality<sup>7</sup>

This chapter will draw upon all these elements in the definition of cultural performance to show how the *manau* has been a significant discursive site relating to 'Kachin' identity in the colonial and post-colonial setting.

Guss also suggests an analytical model for the consideration of popular culture, of which this kind of cultural performance is one kind. Referring to the work of Garcia Canclini, he proposes the contradictions arising from the historical and contemporary structural systems within which popular cultural forms are embedded are best studied via the concept of a "system of production".<sup>8</sup> The system of production consists of production, circulation and consumption.<sup>9</sup> This useful analytical tool will be used to structure this chapter.

First, the systems of production for the *manau* cultural performance will be considered in 'animist' Kachin society and the ways in which these traditional systems have been challenged by integration into a national political system and a global religion.<sup>10</sup> Second, the circulation of *manau* cultural performance will be considered and its appropriation by national political structures and local military organizations, which have both attempted to redefine the ethnic meanings and boundaries of the performance. Thirdly, the changing historical consumption, including the aestheticization of the *manau*, will be considered.

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Guss 2000, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 1 for a fuller discussion of use of the term 'animist' in this thesis

This also reflects the integration of the performance into changing national and global frameworks. Finally, two particular contexts for the discursive aspects of the cultural performance of the *manau* will be considered. The first will discuss the processes by which certain traditions become canonized in contemporary performance contexts, the examples cited being outside the dominant Jinghpaw discourse. The second will consider the discursivity of the 2001 *manau*, at which significant local debates were held on the definition of the term 'Kachin' and its ethnic boundaries.

## Background

The *manau* festival as it is commonly presented today in the Burmese state is a one-day, secular, community dance performed around a set of painted wooden posts in a dancing circle. This kind of one-day festival, most commonly represented by the government-sponsored festival held each year on Kachin State Day in January, has become the pre-eminent symbol of the Kachin peoples of Burma and the *manau* posts, or *manau shadung*, have become their emblem. However, in December 2001 a large, eight-day long, locally initiated, non-state sponsored event, challenged this conventional contemporary representation, but the underlying notion that it is a secular community festival principally performed around a set of decorated posts still holds true.

When this research began on the *manau* in 1996, it was inspired by a particularly intriguing historical representation of the *manau* posts in the Green Collection of photographs [see Figure 28; 1920s]. When this was shown first to theological students at the Institute of Theology, Yangon [Rangoon], the response was intriguing. Although all of the Kachin students who looked at the image could identify the structure as being *manau* posts, none of them could give any information as to the performance and social context that was specifically depicted in this historical image. Some ventured that the historical representation was an 'error' because there were significant differences between it and the contemporary form with which they were familiar and which (social memory determined) was in fact *the* authentic 'traditional' form.

Subsequently a visit to Myitkyina in 1997 revealed that a large-scale local construction project was underway to build massive concrete posts in a performance site just outside the town centre. It became clear that this form of cultural performance was locally at the

centre of significant local discourses about notions of Kachin ethnic category and its claims to 'historic-ness' [see comment, Maran La Raw Chapter 1.4]. Over the next two and a half years I was fortunate to be able to engage in conversations with many of the key participants in this discourse and the principal Literature and Culture Committees who contested and asserted their own narratives for these events. Furthermore, in 1997 and 1998 I was fortunate to be able to attend two '*manau*' performances organised by the Lawngwaw and Lachik Culture Committees in Lashio and Myitkyina respectively. These were the first occasions at which these communities had been able to convene such gatherings in the post-independence period. Most importantly, however, I was privileged to be able to spend some months studying video and photographic footage of a unique, animist *manau* festival that had been held in the Triangle region of Kachin State in 1992 [see Introduction]. This was the only such event to have been held in this region for more than forty years. The insights gained from this were invaluable in helping to interpret and deconstruct the discourses on *manau* that currently prevail in nationalist social memory.

### **The production of cultural performance in animist Kachin society: ritual and social meanings of Jinghpaw animist *manau***

It seems that the *manau* festival has long occupied an iconic position as a cultural marker in Kachin society, at least for Jinghpaw people. This view is supported by the extent to which the *manau* is embedded in the oral culture, folklore and traditions of this community as a whole. Because the full rituals associated with the festival actually extended for a period of two years or more, which included the clearing of the dancing circle where the dance took place and the ritual dismantling of the posts, the festival provides the perfect dramatic backdrop for all the most popular Jinghpaw stories: plans hatched over many years reach their denouement at these events, truths are manifested, and concealed identities uncovered. Although some state that *manau* performances should be held every three years, in reality it seems that they were more infrequent than this for most communities because of their cost. The intervals between these intermittent *manau* performances, therefore, heighten the dramatic effect of the traditional narratives as folk heroes wait for years for their destinies to be fulfilled at these events.

It also seems that *manau* had an iconic status in historical periodisation. It was via the medium of *manau* performance that lineages marked the moments at which they splintered into segments, or at which disparate communities came together to celebrate their kinship. It is clear from this broader narrative significance attached to the *manau* festival in Jinghpaw society that the symbol has been deeply evocative culturally for an extended historical period, and certainly before the time that the British military administration made contact with the region. The earliest reference found to date in colonial archives is that of Lt Col Neufville, who in his article published in 1828 refers to worship of a particular spirit called *Medeoghta*.<sup>11</sup> This could be a conflation of the Bengali or Hindi term *deoghta*, used in reference to a wide range of spirits, and the name *Madai*, the spirit to whom *manau* festivals are dedicated.

A 'traditional' animist *manau* festival functioned within a specific sphere of local power relations. The cultural performance was associated most strongly with Jinghpaw communities headed by chiefs and was one of the main ways by which chiefs of high status could ritually consolidate their socio-political position. Animist *manau* festivals took place over a period of four, and sometimes eight days, and dancing in the *manau* arena, the *naura*, took place for many hours on each of those days. However, the dance itself was not the key ritual act of an animist festival; rather it was the complex structure of recitations and offerings to spirits that defined the animist *manau's* purpose, of which the dance was just one element. The most important of these recitations was performed by the spirit priest, *joiwa*, and is referred to sometimes as the Jinghpaw 'Creation Story', in which the genealogy of the host was recounted by detailing the names of ancestors who had also held *manau* festivals before him.<sup>12</sup> The recitation thus confirmed the right of the host to hold the festival and for the family line to benefit from the blessings that accrued as a result. This personalisation was important and it was emphasised in all the festival's key rituals. The most important recitations took place inside the host's house, to which the *manau* posts and the *naura* had to be aligned, and all the dances would begin and end within the house. Most significantly, the offering of the *Madai* buffalo itself, the

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<sup>11</sup> Neufville Lt. J. B, 'On the Geography and Population of Asam' Asiatick Researches, XVI, Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1828.

<sup>12</sup> Npawt La, 'Naura Majai', Yup Uplift Committee, 1992, unpublished typescript.

highest ritual offering of the performance, would be completed within the house at the specially constructed altar [Figure 40].



**Figure 2 The Madai buffalo offering attached to the specially constructed altar erected during the *manau*. Mali Nmai Walawng, Kachin State, 1992. Courtesy of the Yup Uplift Committee**

Carrapiett gives the most detailed description of this event. He states:

A male bamboo, with its green surface scraped off, is placed with one end against the altar and the other on the plantain leaves. There are ten notches on the bamboo. Through the nose of the buffalo is the nose string, the loose end of which is tied to the lowest notch.

The Jaiwa ... sits near the carcass and, gently tapping it with the sticks, urges the buffalo to advance notch by notch up the bamboo and enjoins it, when it reaches the tenth notch and therefore the Madai country, to multiply in that country and to also multiply on the earth so as to swell the cattle pen of the chief to overflowing. After this, the flesh is taken away and distributed to friends and visitors, but the bamboo, head of the buffalo, and the nose rope

remain in situ till the following year when the shading posts are removed at the same time<sup>13</sup>

The Jinghpaw claimed the *manau* as the right only of certain chiefs, although there were contexts in which a chief could obtain this right. *Manau*-holding chiefs claimed an exclusive relationship with *Madai*, a spirit of great wealth who could bestow *sut* (wealth and fertility) on those who made offerings. Offerings did not have to be accompanied by a *manau* but, as *Madai* loved to dance, this spirit would be more generous when entertained in such fashion. The obligation to hold a *manau* festival was conceived as part of kinship obligations because one of the chiefs' mythological ancestors had married a daughter of *Madai*. The duty of the bride-taking family, the *dauma*, included paying its respects regularly to the bride-giving family, the *mayu*, who in return would grant their blessings. The kinship obligations between chief and spirit mirrored those of human relationships, and a *manau* was also an opportunity for the chief's closest human kin groups to fulfil their obligations to him, as well as to benefit from certain rituals at the festival reserved for them alone.

An animist *manau* was in fact one of a number of major rituals, such as weddings and funerals, to which kin groups would be invited from considerable distances and in large numbers and at which kinship bonds were affirmed through the fulfilment of ritual obligations between families. What helped to distinguish the *manau* from other rituals, however, and which has been used to give pertinence to the principle of broadly defined community participation today, is that greater blessings of *sut* were bestowed by *Madai* when many stepped or danced in the dancing circle for his entertainment. *Nau ai*, from which the term *manau* is derived, means to step and stepping together was used in the language of the spirit priests as a metaphor of prosperity and social development.<sup>14</sup> In *manau* oral traditions, moments of unity stood in juxtaposition to the fragmented migratory patterns of family lines; unity brought prosperity, whilst separation brought hardship.<sup>15</sup> Today, the 'closed' or lineage-specific rituals of the festival have been discarded and it is this broader connotation of kinship affiliation, writ large to extend to

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<sup>13</sup> Carrapiett W. J. S., *The Kachin Tribes of Burma*, Rangoon: Government Printing, 1929, pp.65-66.

<sup>14</sup> Pungga Ja Li (with Chyakyi Brang), *Shanhpyi Laika: Lanyi*, Yangon: A Z Offset, 1999 p.24.

<sup>15</sup> Dureng Labau Komiti, *Dureng Labau*, Myitkyina, 1994, unpublished typescript.



all six groups defined as 'Kachin', that has been incorporated into secular understandings of the modern event and has become the modern *manau* festival's defining characteristic. The most extensive historical descriptions of the *manau* are to be found in *The Kachin Tribes of Burma* by W. J. S. Carrapiett and *The Kachins: Their Customs & Traditions* by Ola Hanson.<sup>16</sup> *The Kachins, Their Religion and Customs* by C. Gilhodes presents an account of an oral tradition recited at a *manau*, although this narrative relates quite specifically to that of the *Hkauri* community amongst whom Gilhodes worked as a missionary.<sup>17</sup> These texts recount the still prevalent myths concerning the origins of the festival, yet in all cases these have become disconnected from their place in ritual oral culture and are usually presented as a dissociated form of folklore. The most commonly related myth tells how the dance was learned from a flock of birds celebrating at a banyan tree bearing an abundance of fruit. Some of the older printed versions of the story portray this tree as being a site of competition between different birds, some of whom wanted to keep their discovery secret. However, contemporary narratives emphasise the common unity of all the birds dancing in celebration together.<sup>18</sup> The hornbill's head typically seen carved on the horizontal cross-beam of the *manau* posts is today interpreted as a reference to this birds' *manau* as a symbol of unity. It was also commonly held that the hornbill was a symbol of the chief himself, who kept all the disparate segments of his lineage united and in order, just as the hornbill keeps the upright posts in position on the *manau shadung*. This kind of imagery was also used in relation to the hornbill-headed beam which some chiefs had at the entrance to their house and which served to distinguish it from others in the village. In this case it kept all the bamboo flooring neat and controlled, as a metaphor for the chief's position in relation to his lineage. The upright *manau* posts are explained thus: an ancestor of the chiefs married a dragon lady who became homesick. Therefore posts were painted for her depicting the swirling waters of the river so that she could look upon them whenever she missed her parents. For this reason, the uprights were distinguished as male and female by their convex and concave tips and the curvilinear designs represented the river, the latter replicated also in

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<sup>16</sup> Carrapiett W. J. S., 1929 op cit.; Hanson O., *The Kachins: Their Customs & Traditions*, Rangoon: American Baptist Mission, 1913.

<sup>17</sup> Gilhodes C., *The Kachins, Their Religion and Customs*, Calcutta: Catholic Orphan Press, 1922.

<sup>18</sup> Carrapiett W. J. S., 1929, op cit. pp.56-57.

the dance; the geometric patterns often seen paired with this design represent the folded leaves that women dancers used to fan themselves. These curvilinear and geometric designs are today promoted as the two distinctive elements constituting a standard Kachin *manau* post design.



**Figure 3 A model representing idealised *manau* posts designed by the Myitkyina Manau Committee, 1997. Photograph by the author**

All of these elements have animist meanings but current political and social concerns inhibit attempts to relocate them within their ritual performance context for purposes of research aside from the performance documented in 1992, referred to in this thesis. In this case, the local KIA Brigade commander had a personal sympathy with the aims of the research group and facilitated the performance for archival purposes as well as to raise morale and nationalist feeling locally.

Research into other aspects of ritual material culture, however, suggest that there were connections between these designs and other structures implanted in the ground for the fertility of the land, and of *laban* posts which were used to mark the main path leading into a village and the boundaries of its ritually defined, protected space.



**Figure 4 Kachin laban. /The Laban outside a Kachin village. James Green Collection of Photographs. Kachin State 1920s. Courtesy of the Green Centre for World Art, Brighton Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove, UK. [0280]**

Associations might also have existed between the curvilinear design and the acquisition of *sut* or the journeying towards the spiritual land of *Madai* possibly suggested by both the geometric design and by the imagery of the hornbill cited previously. It is significant that these designs were also found on other structures in and around the houses of chiefs. The posts themselves, when removed from the *naura*, would be placed in the porch of the chief's house; the entrance stairway to the chief's house might also have *manau* post-type structures lining the entrance.



**Figure 5** The entrance to a former chief's house, which has small *manau* posts at the entrance. Mali Nmai Walawng, Kachin State, 1992. Courtesy of the Yup Uplift Committee

Significantly also, the *numjang* funeral structure [see Figure 23] would be decorated in similar way to *manau* posts, although significantly the curvilinear designs seem not to have been used, at least according to the present state of research. The dance, too, was deemed to have its equivalent in elite chief's funerals, although as with other funerary imagery, the symbolic vocabulary would usually be inverted from that of non-funerary performance to highlight that this was being done to honour a departed spirit. The fact that a chief had held a *manau* would also entitle him to further honorific cultural performances at the time of sending his spirit away to the land of the ancestors, such as a particular style of dance at the *karo*i site, which would mark the point of departure from the human realm on the journey to the land of the ancestors. The *manau*, therefore, was part of a deeply significant ritual system around which many aspects of socio-cultural and political structure cohered.

There is also evidence of clan, group or regional differences in *manau* performance and in the design of its structural symbolism. A great deal of research, therefore, still needs to be carried out into these diverse forms but this is difficult due to the changed systems of production surrounding this cultural performance since the colonial period, especially the integration of the *manau* into Christian nationalist discourse on boundaries of identity. However, for this integration to take place, changed patterns of circulation were necessary so that the shift of the cultural performance into another semiotic framework could take place. How this transformation in patterns of circulation occurred over the course of the colonial period will now be considered.

### **Changes in the circulation of manau cultural performance: The British administration and the Jinghpaw manau**

The most significant change in the colonial consumption of the *manau* ritual seems to have taken place after the First World War. The British administration succeeded in assimilating the cultural performance of the *manau* to the national discourse on ethnicity. Between the First and Second World Wars the Jinghpaw *manau* festival seems to have emerged conspicuously as the key act of gathering together the administratively defined ethno-political community known as 'Kachin'. While the development of the festival in

this period was not entirely an invention of the British administration, being a discursive encounter between British and 'native' administrators with Kachin chiefs and elders, the power relations of the colonial situation in which this cultural dialogue took place were inevitably unequal.

After the First World War the nature of imperial responsibilities throughout India was in question, and administrative policy towards potentially turbulent 'frontier' communities was under revision. For example, there had been an extensive Kachin uprising during 1914-1915. It was believed that the cause of this was an impression created by the withdrawal of Gurhka troops from the Kachin hills that British military strength had declined, and that a British withdrawal from Burma was imminent.<sup>19</sup> The report into the uprising considered that this belief had arisen because government policy had not been clearly explained locally. Clearly new modes of administrative contact with Kachin communities were needed and the cross-border clan kinship relationships that could be called upon when a *manau* was held made the festival perfect for administrative purposes as the forum for an officer's durbar because of the large number of people that would be gathered together from a wide area. Other community rituals did not provide the same opportunities. For example, one of the highest ritual prerogatives of chiefs was that associated with the fertility of cultivation sites, yet as this ritual was followed by a four day period in which all villagers had to remain quietly inside their homes, it failed to excite much attention from British officials because of its unsuitability as a durbar opportunity.

Durbars had originally been part of the ritual of the Mughal court in India and were gatherings at which gifts were exchanged, and political hierarchies and loyalties between ruler and subordinates confirmed. In adapted form the durbar proved a useful tool for the Government of India when, towards the end of the nineteenth century, it sought to present itself as the just and rightful heir of the Mughal imperial entity. The definitive British imperial durbar was that of the Imperial Assemblage held at Delhi in January 1877. This celebrated the assumption of the title of Empress of India by Queen Victoria and brought together heads of state and local dignitaries from all over the Indian subcontinent who

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<sup>19</sup> [IOR]: L/PS/11/87, Burma-China Frontier – Kachin raids , pp.8-9.

were invited to participate in the grand imperial vision. From this point, the durbar was used as a ritual of government whenever it was deemed desirable to mark key narrative moments appropriate to the myth of empire, such as the accession of a new monarch. However, at the peripheries of empire, such as at the margins of administered territory in Burma, a durbar gathering in miniature held under the auspices of significant local officials was seen as a forum at which government policy statements could be made and local allegiances affirmed.

Although it is not clear exactly when British officers started to hold *manau* festivals rather than just attend them, the annual Administration Reports on the North Eastern Frontier begin to mention this from 1917 onwards. For example, there is a reference in the *Administration Report on the North Eastern Frontier* for the year ended 30th June 1917 that a durbar was held at Wawang "strictly according to Kachin custom".<sup>20</sup> It is not clear whether the 'custom' adhered to was in fact that of a *manau* but as the report states that over 300 Kachins were present, it is possibly the case. It is notable, however, that no *manau* appears to have been held to commemorate the visit of the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, to Myitkyina and Bhamo in 1917, suggesting that such large-scale festivities under the auspices of major officials were introduced by the Government after this date. One of the first government-sponsored *manau* seems to have been held in 1918 at Shaduzup, at the extreme edge of administered territory in the Hukawng Valley, under the auspices of Mr C. W. King, the Assistant Superintendent and Subdivisional Officer at Kamaing.<sup>21</sup> This event seems to have confirmed to the government the potential this forum had for resolving local cross-border disputes, for enforcing boundary policies, and for consolidating good relations with trans-frontier Kachin chiefs and headmen.<sup>22</sup>

Typically on such occasions a local chief would assist with making the arrangements for the *manau*, demonstrating its discursive aspect. This could add to a chief's local prestige and certain chiefs were selected above others for this role as a means of consolidating a local hierarchy in line with British administrative needs. An officer's durbar would be held on just one of the days of the festival, frequently at some distance from the main site

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<sup>20</sup> IOR:V/10/530, North Eastern Frontier, p.15.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

of the *manau* itself, and the officer himself might thus not have been perceived as a particularly intrusive figure in the production of the performance. Initially at least, the British authorities tried to maintain the animist integrity of the festival, but there were also early signs of administrative manipulation when this was deemed opportune. In particular there were early attempts to adhere to the ritual of removing the *manau shadung* from the *naura* one year after the festival, but this seems to have been taken as an opportunity for enforcing administrative goals such as revising village boundaries by planting banyan trees in the newly delineated entrances to villages.<sup>23</sup> These trees were iconic markers of well-established village boundaries and we may recall the earlier myth that stated that the origin of the *manau* itself was related to birds flying around an abundant banyan.

Yet Kachin communities had long been perceived as having shifting loyalties, and there soon developed awareness amongst administrators that these large gatherings could act as forums for opposition movements or for subversive activities. There were concerns that, for example, those opium cultivators from beyond British borders were making use of such gatherings to pay tribute to Kachin chiefs inside British territory. These chiefs in turn, it was believed, granted to these cultivators permission to grow opium inside British borders on land over which the chiefs claimed authority.<sup>24</sup> This was in direct opposition to stated government policy, which prohibited opium production.

Post-war concerns also led to the fear that an incipient 'Bolshevism' might find a willing ear in the Kachin '*gumlau*' villages, which were perceived as potentially revolutionary.<sup>25</sup> *Gumlau*, as stated, is a Jinghpaw term most frequently translated as the overthrow of despotic authority. Since the 1870s there seemed to have been a steady increase in the occurrence of *gumlau* activity, particularly among the Lahpai lineages around Bhamo and in the lower part of 'The Triangle' region. By the 1920s some British officers interpreted the term *gumlau* as an expression of revolutionary inclinations. The historical closeness of these communities to China and the involvement of many of them in the 1914-1915 uprising seemed to add weight to their fears. However, there seems to have been a

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p.15-17.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>25</sup> OIOC [Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library]: Mss Eur/F116/83 - *Slave Releasing Operations in the Triangle during the Season 1926-27*, Mr J. T. O. Barnard, Deputy Commissioner, p.1.

continued local performance context in some of these communities where the chiefs could still be made prosperous by their economic proximity to trade routes. However, there is also evidence that any large gatherings within these communities were monitored to ensure that opposition activities did not arise directly from them.<sup>26</sup>

The administration was greatly assisted in its desire to control the occurrence of large festivals such as *manau* and to direct those that did take place in its own interests by the apparently deteriorating economic situation of Jinghpaw chiefs at this time. The oral histories of families such as the Maran clan chiefs of Namhkyek are revealing in this respect. This family resided in northern Shan State and was one of those favoured by the British throughout the 1920s for the co-operation they afforded the British civil and military authorities. They were a family of considerable wealth and standing but the Namhkyek family today recounts that the last private *manau* that the family held was in the early 1920s, and this may well be the event documented by Colonel Green and now visible in the Green Collection of photographs. Evidence of an increasingly difficult economic situation is provided by many of the government reports of the period, including the Administration Reports on the North Eastern Frontier and *Report on the Hukong Valley and Upper Namkong Basin* by H. N. Thompson, Assistant Conservator of Forests, June 1896.<sup>27</sup> This refers in particular to the difficulties of Kachin people maintaining their trade in rubber following the restriction on rubber tapping in newly constituted government forest reserves. Economic pressures such as this would have inhibited many from hosting these costly events without government sponsorship and thus probably rendered a more overt control by government unnecessary. That the *manau* should be increasingly focused on the government sponsored events as its main forum was no doubt a fortuitous convergence for the administration of both circumstance and desire.

From the mid to late 1920s the government-sponsored *manau* was defined on a broader stage, being used primarily to announce key policies amongst the collective of communities now administratively and militarily defined as 'Kachin'. It was now principally the higher-ranking officials, such as the Commissioner and District

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<sup>26</sup> IOR: V/10/530, p.18.

<sup>27</sup> OIOC: Mss Eur/ F116/82 – Papers of Sir Harcourt Butler.



Commissioner, who appended such festivities to the large durbar meetings that they held annually. This change reflected administrative alterations heralded by the creation of the Burma Frontier Service in 1922. These sought to raise the status of the four newly constituted positions for 'superior officers' (including those of District Commissioner in Myitkyina and Bhamo), and to distinguish them from the thirty-five 'inferior appointments'. These lower ranking officers, such as Assistant Superintendent and Subdivisional Officer, were the figures who had previously taken it upon themselves to host *manau* performances without intervening excessively in its symbolic boundaries.<sup>28</sup>

With the changes made to the Frontier Service and the increasing difficulties that local chiefs seem to have had in calling independent *manau*, the large-scale administration-sponsored *manau* festivals became the main sites of circulation for the performance. The two deemed most significant historically were those held in the presence of the Governor Sir Harcourt Butler in Maingkwang at the edge of the Hukawng Valley in January 1925 and in Myitkyina in January 1927. Both of these events were used to make policy announcements of significance to local people. The first was used to announce the commencement of slave release campaigns in the Hukawng Valley, the latter the same in 'The Triangle'.<sup>29</sup> Just as the great imperial assemblages held at Delhi were intended to mark new phases of authority in India, so too were these events intended to be epoch-marking events for Kachin people (and also for Naga communities within the Jinghpaw sphere of influence). The rhetoric adopted by officials was that these performances were to be historically dated, defining moments for Kachin people. Life before and life after them were to be remembered as different eras of moral progress and social development, epitomised by the suppression of slavery within their midst.

This concept of the *manau* had been promoted by officers such as Mr T. P. Dewar, the Subdivisional Officer at Mogoung, who seems to have had some responsibility for researching the festival for the information of the government. Mr Dewar considered the

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<sup>28</sup> IOR: L/PS/10/73 - Letter from the Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma to the Political Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign and Political Department, 5th August 1920. The obvious exception to this must be Mr Dewar's sponsored *manau* held in Maingkwang in 1927 (see below), but the intention of this was expressly to create a link with the Governor's statements on head-hunting etc. and to create continuities with the event at which the Governor Sir Harcourt Butler had attended.

<sup>29</sup> IOR: RL89 - *History of the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi*, J. Talboys Wheeler, London, 1878, p.44ff; IOR:10817 b 35 - *Lord Curzon in India 1898-1903*, H Caldwell Lipsett, London 1903, p.125ff.

*manau* to be an epoch-marking event that could be held only once in a chief's lifetime, even though there was in fact no such ritual constraint. His conclusion probably reflects the increasingly intermittent circulation of *manau* performance in an independent context.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the pretensions towards animist authenticity, there was no doubt an increasing discontinuity between the obligations of animist ritual and the administrative purposes of the accompanying durbar, and this discordance could not be negotiated entirely discursively. Previously the systems of production between the independent events and those sponsored by the administration seem to have converged and indeed collaborated. This seems now to have changed. As a result, the resulting systems of circulation for the ritual seem also to have changed in favour of the administration-sponsored activities.

The convergence and then divergence of the systems of production are perhaps best demonstrated by examining the performance of the *manau* at an event sponsored by Mr T. P. Dewar in Shingbuiyang in 1927. The rituals of the *manau* could be remarkably accommodating of change, requiring only that precautionary recitations be made to the spirits to explain any proposed novelties which would counteract any possibility of negative effects from the spirits' anger.<sup>31</sup> For the government to attach itself to a traditionally constituted *manau*, which would involve the principal offering to the *Madai* spirit to take place, it was vital that a chief, or a *joiwa* who was also a chief, would allow his personal *manau* genealogy to be attached to the festival. Generally most would have been more than happy to associate their own *manau* genealogy with a government event, secure in the knowledge that both temporal and spiritual blessings and prestige would accrue to them as a result. However, any unforeseen errors in the conduct of the ritual were a serious matter and it was believed that they could be potentially devastating not only for the chief himself, but also for many future generations of his family line. The danger, therefore, came from those administrative adaptations that were unexpected and thus unguarded against.

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<sup>30</sup> OIOC: Mss Eur/ F116/82:pp.29-31 – 'Notes on the Kachin Manau', T. P Dewar.

<sup>31</sup> Npawt La *Naura Majai*, Mali Hkrang, 1992, unpublished typescript, Yup Uplift Committee archive.

The worst error of this kind was probably that which was made by Mr Dewar in April 1927. Mr Dewar hoped to persuade Naga headmen from the Shingbuiyang area, who paid allegiance to the Jinghpaw chiefs of Shingbuiyang and Ningmoi, to abandon their ritual of human sacrifice. This was part of a global concern with the abolition of head-hunting and slavery that was being taken up within the League of Nations. Mr Dewar proposed that a *manau*-style buffalo sacrifice should replace that of headhunting and this would be demonstrated at an event he would sponsor. The production of the performance would be placed under the ritual authority of the Jinghpaw chief of Shingbuiyang. As Mr Clague, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma wrote to the Foreign Secretary on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1927, concerning this matter:

The substitution of the sacrifice of *Mithun* (*Bos frontalis*) for the sacrifice of humans, which Mr Dewar initiated at the Durbar held by him at Shingbuiyang Ga, and in which the Nagas joined with due ceremony and apparently with delight, shows clearly that the end of human sacrifice is in sight.<sup>32</sup>

From Mr Dewar's description of this event, it seems that a number of adaptations were necessary in the production of the ritual to effect this administrative goal. Most of these adaptations, however, seem to have been accommodated through the traditional discursive apparatus of negotiation. Dewar reported that on the first day of the festival:

The Tumsa Wa (praying priest) and his assistants entered the manao hut and went into retreat to propitiate the *nats* and supplicate them regarding the change of procedure which was to be adopted as to the holding of this their most important *nat* ceremony.<sup>33</sup>

Not least of these changes of procedure seems to have been the need to compress the Jinghpaw animist *manau* rituals and dance into one day in order to accommodate the performance of other rituals by the Naga people attending the festival.

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<sup>32</sup> OIOC: Mss Eur/ F116/82 - *Confidential Report on the Naga Hills (Burma) Expedition for the abolition of Human Sacrifice, Season 1926-27*, T. P. Dewar, Government Printing, 1927, p.2.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p.28.

Crucially, it was Mr Dewar's intention that the Naga chiefs should hand over at this durbar the relics of human skulls and bones in their possession as a sign of their compliance with the government's policy to abolish practices of human sacrifice and headhunting. It seems, however, that neither the Jinghpaw chief of Shingbuiyang, nor the *joiwa*, nor any of the Kachin people that attended, were aware of this prior to the festival. Mr Dewar informs us that all the Kachin chiefs had deliberately absented themselves whenever the issue of headhunting or human sacrifice had been raised, finding the subject too discomforting. The adaptations to the performance would clearly not, therefore, have been announced to the relevant spirits. Dewar states:

Although the Kachins regard the sacrifice of humans with pity and abhorrence neither of these families [Shingbuiyang and Ningmoi] in the past have made any efforts whatever to stop the practice. The only marks of displeasure they appear to have shown were not to attend a human sacrifice or discuss details with the Nagas regarding such practices. That their seeming indifference was not due to lack of human feeling was abundantly exemplified during the season when the Kachin chiefs with the expedition invariably endeavoured to be absent when details regarding the practice were being recorded by the civil officer.<sup>34</sup>

On the third day of the gathering, 18 human bones and 102 skulls were handed over in the midst of the durbar arena where the *manau* dance had also been held. Although the dance had taken place two days previously, the ritual space of the *manau*, which extended to a ritually purified area surrounding the village as a whole, was deemed auspicious for a full year after the erection of the posts, not just for the duration of the dance itself. Thus the *manau* arena and the protected space of the village would have been violated in Jinghpaw eyes by this presentation of human remains. Jinghpaw people associated such human relics with the dreaded *Sawa* spirits, which were created when people died in violent circumstances. Offerings to these spirits would typically be made at the beginning of any festival such as this and ensures that the event would not be blighted by their presence and negative influence. As a consequence of Mr Dewar's adaptation, a most

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p.21.

serious cosmological contravention occurred, with potentially devastating implications for the chief of Shingbwiayang and his extended kinfolk. Mr Dewar clearly misunderstood the cultural implications of the surrender of the bones in this location. News of this disastrous event would have spread quickly throughout the Hukawng Valley and the Kachin hills, so great was the potential calamity for the chief of Shingbwiayang and his family line.

We get some idea of the reaction of the Kachin onlookers to this sight when Mr Dewar informs us in his report that:

On the third day the skulls were surrendered in the presence of a large gathering of Nagas and Kachins. The latter on seeing the skulls were overcome by their feelings, and passed remarks which were overheard by the Nagas, some of whom were so affected that they turned round to the Civil Officer and said, 'Chief, we too will be good from this day'.<sup>35</sup>

Occurrences such as this would, no doubt, have contributed to the process by which a distinct identity was to emerge for the sponsored festivals by their reconfiguration in a different system of production and consumption. It is important to note, however, that these important transformations in the production and performance of the *manau* were not a result of engagement with Christianity but rather with changing national economic and political networks and integration into the state political system. Economic constraints on the performance of these expensive rituals worked to the detriment of one kind of production system, which was independent of government sponsorship, and enabled the other, which depended upon it, increasingly to determine the circulation of the performance. By the late 1920s, private *manau* festivals seem to have more or less vanished from the scene and, as government became less generous with its sponsorship, the main forum for this event became the annual festival of the District Commissioner.

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p.29.

## Changes in the consumption of cultural performance - the *manau* and Kachin nationalism

According to García Canclini's paradigm of popular culture defined by the triumvirate of production, circulation and consumption, "changes in any one of these three elements may lead to a significant shift in both reception and meaning".<sup>36</sup> David Guss elaborates:

The brilliance of García Canclini's analysis is that it undermines the Western preoccupation with issues of authenticity and tradition, preferring instead to see them as part of a continually changing interplay of political, economic, and historical forces. While traditional forms characteristically find themselves in an asymmetrical relation to the new structures of power created by these changes, their expressive importance is not necessarily diminished. ... Nevertheless, the more that special corporate and political interests dominate the means of cultural production, the more that popular forms will be relied upon to express what otherwise has no outlet. And yet, the very popularity of these forms - the fact that they mobilize so many potential voters, consumers and protesters - makes them too valuable to be left to the people alone. They will become increasingly contested

As has been shown, there was clearly a transformative shift in the production and circulation of the *manau* festival as the colonial state established itself more rigorously in Upper Burma and subsequently in the Kachin hills itself. Critically also for a more nuanced understanding of these developments, we can see that they did not arise as a result of the Christian missions but because of the increasing engagement with national networks of political authority. The festivals hosted by British officials came to have a distinct identity as a one-day gathering focused upon a community dance around a set of posts as a forum for a durbar. Indeed, the kind of festival that had emerged by the end of the 1920s appears to have been the forerunner of all government-sponsored *manau* festivals held since. The Government of Burma continued to provide financial provision for the holding of an annual Kachin State Day *manau* in Myitkyina until 1958, where it was held at the special *manau* ground reserved for the purpose since the British era.

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<sup>36</sup> Guss D., op cit., 2000, p.6.

During the recent conflict the government held *manau* festivals intermittently, notably on Union Day rather than Kachin State Day and in the grounds of the government's headquarters, not in the *manau* ground. Since the cease-fire the government 'tradition' of holding *manau* festivals on Kachin State Day has been revived, although the site remains that of the administration headquarters. These sponsored festivals were produced without the ritual authority of a chief's genealogy and circulated according to a different system of status. These changes effected changes in the consumption of the *manau* by Kachin people themselves as they persisted in their definition that government-sponsored festivals and their own were different in kind. The new consumption of the festival, focused now primarily on the circulation of government-sponsored events was to enhance the multi-group nationalist meanings of the performance. It is the consumption of the nationalist meanings of the *manau* and *manau shadung* that will now be considered.

From the earliest days of discourse between the British administration and local chiefs on the production of *manau* festivals, a shift in consumption was evident. This was first expressed markedly and explicitly at the government *Padang* or Victory *manau* held at Sinlum Kaba in December 1918 to celebrate the return of Kachin troops from Mesopotamia after the First World War.<sup>37</sup> Such events were significant in British attempts to structure ethnic groups as political communities at this time, the term 'Kachin' itself being both defined and emphasised on such occasions. This event, however, seems to have been initiated with the support of local Kachin chiefs and elders, not simply 'imposed' from above. Kachin elders passed resolutions on this occasion, which they presented to the District Officer, Mr Walter Scott, requesting that a Kachin school should be set up and that a distinct Kachin Regiment should be created within the Indian Army.<sup>38</sup>

1920 saw an even larger Victory *manau* held at Sinlum Kaba attended by the Commissioner of Mandalay Division, Mr Cabell, and 2,800 Kachins from the surrounding Hill Tracts.<sup>39</sup> This time the 'Victory' was deemed to be the suppression of an abortive conspiracy in the Bhamo-Katha region by Chinese Shans under the nominal

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<sup>37</sup> Enriquez C. M., *A Burmese Arcady*, London: Seely, Service & Co., 1920, pp.120-126.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* & IOR: V/10/530, p.22.

<sup>39</sup> IOR: V/10/530, p.59.

leadership of Mintha Saw Yan Baing, a member of the Burmese royal family.<sup>40</sup> The Kachin people attending this *manau* were lauded for their refusal to collaborate with such a conspiracy, their cultural and political distinctiveness being emphasised by the administration through the symbol of a politicised 'ethnic' ritual. Following this we also read that a swampy pool near the District Officer's quarters at Sinlum Kaba was cleared to provide a communal recreation ground, which strongly suggests an area was being prepared so that these events might become a regular occurrence. A similar process took place at Myitkyina where a specific site came to be used whenever a *manau* was held. By the time of the 1927 Governor's *manau* in Myitkyina, which brought together 120 Kachin leaders from 'The Triangle', the chiefs and headmen were able to put forward a strong public appeal to the Governor Sir Harcourt Butler for non-interference with their traditional customs, notably that of 'slave' ownership. *Duwa* Nga Lang La, one of the most important of 'The Triangle' chiefs, demanded that a vote should be taken on such matters, but the Governor ignored this request.<sup>41</sup> A photograph of this event was published in *The Tatler* on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1927, titled 'All Abroad!'<sup>42</sup> *Duwa* Nga Lang La can be seen seated on the floor next to one of the Governor's dogs. This fact is always referenced with some shock by Kachin people viewing this image and may go some way to explaining the highly assertive posture that the *duwa* adopted in the now iconic photograph in the Green collection [Figure 27].

Clearly these festivals were becoming significant to a modern Kachin political identity within the emerging Burmese state. Two other colonial period *manau* festivals are deemed historically significant in nationalist social memory. The first was that which celebrated victory in the Second World War; the second celebrated the creation of Kachin State as Burma gained independence. Significantly, at both of these events, animist elders made attempts to reassert their rights to retain the meanings of the cultural performance, but there was now an opposition to this from numbers of Christian elders. Still, however, Christianity was but one vector of discourse surrounding these events, and not necessarily the dominant one. It should, of course, be remembered that the first Head of Kachin state,

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>41</sup> OIOC: Mss Eur/F116/81c – 'Sir Harcourt Butler's Diary of events from the 5th - 10th January, 1927'.

<sup>42</sup> A copy may also be viewed in the Harcourt Butler archive OIOC: Mss Eur F/116/84.



*duwa* Sinwa Naw, was a Buddhist-animist and such beliefs did not preclude a political inclination towards nationalism.

Modern nationalist *manau* folklore today focuses primarily on the event held to mark the outbreak of armed hostilities with the Burmese government in 1961. Significantly this event is deemed to mark a significant shift in the production and circulation of the cultural performance as well as its consumption. This event, held three years after the Burmese government had ceased to support the annual Kachin State Day *manau* festival, is deemed to have heralded a fully developed expression of modern nationalist unity.

This *manau* is considered distinct for a number of reasons. First, as the leadership of the main nationalist opposition movement, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), abolished the authority of the chiefs around this time, this *manau* is considered neither a private festival nor a government-sponsored forum. It therefore represents in social memory a significant shift in the production of the festival. Second, participants at the *manau* included many Lisu people who had crossed into Burma as a result of political upheavals in China. Although these communities did not associate themselves with the local 'Kachin' affiliation, their support was required to ensure the maximum moral and numerical strength for a united military opposition to the government. It is popularly believed that the Lisu alone had no tradition of holding *manau* festivals. Kachin nationalist leaders have subsequently mythologised this event as the return of the lost Lisu brother when the Lisu people also learned how to dance the *manau*. This argument centres upon a nationalistic interpretation of Kachin kinship which extends clan and family affiliations across the six groups identifying themselves today as 'Kachin'. In practice this construct is extremely complex, but its mythic justification is derived from the idea that all six groups are descended from six original brothers. The social memory of this *manau*, therefore, marks a shift in the circulation of the performance as it became extended to groups that otherwise did not perform it, as well as a shift in the consumption of the performance. Its meaning in social memory is that here a six-fold Kachin cultural unity was being expressed, and the *manau* is a symbol of the united armed struggle to follow, a decidedly modern symbol, a festival at which a pan-Kachin, or *Wunpawng*, ethno-political identity is made explicit.

The nationalist consumption of the *manau* as a secular expression of kinship has been important during the recent years of conflict. However, the independence-era hostilities also made it effectively impossible to hold independent events inside Burma itself during this time, not only for lack of resources but also because of the vulnerability of the participants at any such large outdoor gathering. This again transformed the production of the festival and altered its mode of consumption. In the absence of both private and sponsored *manau* festivals, the nationalist concepts of the *manau* seem to have been expressed principally through the emblem of the posts as elements of graphic design as the *manau* became aestheticized. The posts themselves do not previously seem to have been considered in this way, it being the curvilinear and geometric designs that were of most significance. These patterns, abstracted from the posts, were to be found on a number of ritual and domestic architectural elements associated with the system of hereditary chiefs, as we have seen previously, such as on the *Madai* fireplace in the chief's house.



**Figure 6** The temporary altar constructed by the *Madai* fireplace in the house of the *manau* host. Mali Nmai Walawng, Kachin State, 1992. Courtesy of the Yup Uplift Committee

However, with the abolition of the chiefs' authority and the widespread destruction in the region during World War Two, such usage seems largely to have disappeared. The

patterns had also been used as borders on women's skirt cloths but this usage was also prohibited by the KIA during the 1970s. The designs would lose their effectiveness as a symbol of strength and unity, it was said, by association with women's clothing, a perception of the lower status of women's skirt cloths also prevalent elsewhere in Burma. Significantly, in recent years these patterns have re-appeared on the long coats worn by Lachik men. The Lachik peoples reside in an area that is active in the support of the NDA-K (New Democracy Army–Kachin), which has proved to be the most significant group challenging the authority of the dominant KIA grouping. This reveals how such symbolism is still being refigured in local contestations of dominant identity discourses internally within the Kachin nexus.

Today the structure of the posts is deemed as significant as the designs themselves and the posts have become strongly linked to a martial interpretation, the convex and concave tips being deemed to resemble spears and distinctive Kachin swords. It is difficult to assess whether this interpretation is wholly contemporary but it prevails as the current understanding of the significance of the shape of the posts. The graphic design *manau* posts, with their nationalist and martial associations, have become extremely effective as contemporary ethno-political emblems.

By the time it was possible to perform large-scale *manau* festivals inside Burma again following the ceasefire of 1994, account had to be taken of the fact that significant changes had taken place in the socio-religious structure of Kachin communities since the 1960s. Local oral histories strongly suggest that by the 1970s expressions of Christian faith had become significant in the way many ordinary Kachin people inside Burma expressed their nationalism. This corresponded with a renewed missionary effort by both the locally established Catholic and Baptist Kachin churches at that time. For many of these Christian converts there was and still is unease at the *manau* festival's animist origins. To consume the performance as a purely secular entity was not enough to satisfy their concerns. It thus became important that the production, circulation and consumption of the performance should engage with new notions of Christian nationalism. This had already been achieved to some extent in the 1970s when both the Catholic and Baptist Kachin churches began to engage positively with the nationalist discourse of *manau* cultural performance. In the post-ceasefire situation the shift in production and circulation

has been effected by the fact that both these large denominations have used the *manau* to celebrate significant moments in their local histories. The consumption of the *manau* has also been affected, as there have been attempts to reinterpret the dance patterns in the *naura* with Christian meanings.<sup>43</sup> Dance leaders may carry crucifixes, festivals may be opened with the saying of Christian prayers, new local churches might hold a *manau* as part of the consecration festivities, and on occasion a crucifix might be incorporated into the designs on the posts. The process of 'Christianisation' is criticised by some, especially in the evangelical and house church movements. However, such developments within the two largest Kachin religious constituencies have undoubtedly added to the *manau*'s viability as a popular, highly successful contemporary symbol evoking an evolving social memory of what it means to be Kachin in the state of Burma, as well as contributing to a commodification of the form that can be consumed outside traditional networks.

### **Aestheticization and ideology - concrete *manau* posts**

Although the *manau* is consumed by Kachin people today as a nationalist cultural performance with increasingly persuasive Christian discursive connotations, the post-cease-fire situation has also reinstated the production of government-sponsored events. The meanings produced by this event stress the integration of the peoples of the Kachin region, Kachin and non-Kachin alike, as a constituent body of the nation state of the Union of Myanmar. It is performed on Kachin State Day at the beginning of January each year and is consumed largely by those in government service or in officially sanctioned committees, schoolchildren and the like who have a compulsory obligation to attend. These two traditions of cultural performance exist in parallel in contemporary Kachin State and have a discursive relationship. This is shown by the fact that the Kachin State day *manau* seem to have become longer events following the success of the independent festival in 2001; that held in 2005, for example, was five days long. Both of these traditions in the present have produced meaning through a high degree of aestheticization in performance. This has already been referred to in relation to the interpretation of dance patterns and *manau* post designs, but this discursive aspect will now be considered more fully to reveal the ways in which these two forms interact symbolically.

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<sup>43</sup> Lahpai Zau Nu, *Naushawng Hpaji*, Bhamo, undated, publisher unknown.

David Guss's analysis of South American cultural performance yet again is highly pertinent to this situation in the far north of Burma. The following interpretation of the significance of the aestheticization of cultural performance and the contribution it makes to the production of meaning is worth citing at some length:

Of course, the fact that this aestheticization is driven by the need to erase any signs of conflict, poverty or oppression (common elements of all popular forms) underscores the possibility of disconnecting the aesthetic from other issues of ideology. For at the heart of all traditionalizing processes is the desire to mask over real issues of power and domination. By classifying popular forms as 'traditions', they are effectively neutralized and removed from real time - or at least that is the hope of ruling élites who wish to manipulate them as part of a much larger legitimizing enterprise.<sup>44</sup>

Both the government and the Kachin nationalist organizations that produce these performances today can be understood according to the above model. The government seeks to mask the nature of their military-political engagement with the Kachin region and issues of power and domination. By supporting this cultural performance they can present themselves as upholders of 'traditional' Kachin culture within the Union of Myanmar. Kachin nationalist groups seek equally to mask the oppressive relationships that have sometimes underpinned the cohesiveness of the KIA's activities in many parts of Kachin State during the last forty years to give an image of integrated nationalist unity.

One of the discursive engagements between these two performance types relates to the spatial legitimation of the festival. Whilst the government is able to possess a piece of land as a 'permanent' home for the State Day *manau*, until recently there was nothing similar for independent production. The transformation of this issue reveals the complex relationships that these cultural performances now have in a national and regional setting. Following the cease-fire, it became possible for a prominent local jade dealer, Yup Zau Hkawng (who also funded the Yup Uplift Committee), to buy land on the outskirts of Myitkyina, which would be used as a permanent site for local independent cultural performance. This was tolerated, although the government was increasingly able to

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<sup>44</sup> Guss D., 2000, p.14.

manipulate Yup Zau Hkawng as they progressively gained control of the jade mines that were the source of his wealth and influence. The possession of this land and its subsequent development, however, soon became very significant in local discourse on the meanings of the ceasefire and the sincerity of the government in its pledge to uphold local rights. The difficulties surrounding the development of a National Convention with ethnic minority representatives in 2004-05 to discuss the writing of a Constitution for Myanmar have tended to increase the pressures on such figures to make public affiliations with the military regime, sometimes for political benefit but also, some would say, to preserve their threatened business interests. In April 2005, therefore, it was announced that Yup Zau Hkawng had agreed to allow the new *manau* ground to be used by the government to host the traditional Burmese Buddhist New Year, or *Thingyan*, festival in Myitkyina, much to the distaste of many Kachin Christians who object to this new re-possession of 'Kachin' space.<sup>45</sup> The area is being contested through the construction of ritual performance and the symbolic discourses that these reflect for all parties.

The legitimisation of this land also required that it should be seen as a permanent feature of Kachin spatial identity, especially as Myitkyina historically had not been a Kachin town and thus lacked few identifiable ethnic markers that showed its significance for Kachin people within the Burmese state. It was therefore decided that huge *manau* posts should be constructed on the site in concrete. Traditionally the wooden posts would have to be dismantled one year after the event, although they could later be re-used. The concrete posts were thus a discursive engagement with a number of sites of popular culture. First, they relate reflexively towards the prevalent dismantling of wooden sites of cultural performance throughout Burma.<sup>46</sup> Second, they engage directly with a development that seems to have been started in the Jingpo prefecture in Yunnan in the 1980s. These structures were seen quite widely on the ever-popular wall calendars that were imported into Kachin State from China. There was also a local precedent for such structures. The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), the civil wing of the KIA, built

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<sup>45</sup> Anonymous editorial, 'Manau hpe Hka the Kashin Nmai' in *The Kachin Post*, April 11<sup>th</sup> 2005, [www.kachinpost.com/editorial.html](http://www.kachinpost.com/editorial.html)

<sup>46</sup> Fraser Lu S., 'Problems and prospects for the preservation of wooden monasteries in Burma' in *Burma Art & Archaeology*, London: British Museum Press, Blurton T. R. & Green A. (eds) 2000, pp.107-118.

the first concrete posts inside Burma in Kachin State in 1994. They were built in the north of KIA controlled territory at Hkindu Yang, which is considered the site of the first overthrow of a despotic chief and has become mythologised as the birthplace of the Kachin struggle for freedom in nationalist historical writing.<sup>47</sup>

However, the discursive entanglement of these various productions of *manau* cultural performance seemed in 1995 incapable of masking the asymmetrical power relations between them. In 1995 concrete *manau* posts were erected by local Kachin church and culture organisations in the Burman cultural heartland of Mandalay, which today has a quite sizeable Kachin population. A *manau* was held there to commemorate the centenary of the Jinghpaw script developed by the Baptist missionary Dr Ola Hanson, and large concrete posts were built with a stylised crucifix painted at their tip. Shortly afterwards, the government ordered that these concrete posts be destroyed. *Manau* posts, they stated, had nothing to do with Christianity and were, therefore, inappropriate as a permanent memorial to the Kachin Christian mission. However, by destroying them, the government engendered a new folklore around *manau* posts, and poems, stories and highly popular nationalist songs were written about them.

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<sup>47</sup> H. Naw Awn, *Wunpawng Labau Ginshi*, publisher and place of publication unknown, 1986. This has functioned as an 'official' text book of Kachin nationalist history in recent years.



**Figure 7 Front cover of *Pahtau* magazine, produced by students at Yangon Theological Institute, Insein, depicting the *manau* posts destroyed in Mandalay**

The *manau* now had its own modern narrative moment. This event seems to have greatly increased support for the *manau* posts as an aestheticized emblem amongst young Kachin people, who have adopted them as a badge of contemporary identity with enthusiasm. Although many now feel the attempt to build concrete *manau* posts near the heart of Mandalay was naive, this event now exists as a historical sub-text to later attempts to build concrete posts in Myitkyina. This entangled discourse also indicated that for the Myitkyina venture to be successful, aesthetic references to Christianity should be sublimated.

The progressive government takeover of the Kachin jade trade as it introduced new trading authorities after the ceasefire meant that the posts were completed with some financial difficulty. They also seem to have been the focus of a number of negotiations over their meaning. This is most obvious in the aestheticization of the *manau* post designs. Because of the more permanent nature of the concrete *manau shadung* in



Myitkyina, the *Manau* Committee responsible for their construction wished to standardise the meanings of the posts so that they would reflect contemporary Kachin values and affirm a united, six-part Kachin identity.<sup>48</sup> In this case aestheticization was deliberately intended to reduce any appearance of discord or internal asymmetries of power between all the six-groups that were now deemed 'traditional' consumers of the *manau*. Figure 41 shows the design that was being favoured by some Committee members in 1997. The meanings that were attached to this design were as follows.<sup>49</sup> All the main elements, six colours, six uprights, six spirals and six repetitions of the geometric design, refer to the unity of the six groups. All the other elements emphasise the unity of the community. A star on the lowest beam is a sublimated reference to Christianity but principally refers to the triangulated kinship system; a gong refers to the calling together and gathering of peoples; and the hornbill-headed beam is interpreted as a metaphor for unity as it enables all the component parts to stand together equally. The colours have also been attached with meanings deemed desirable to the moral outlook of modern Kachin society: loyalty (blue), courage (red), the value of tradition (black), respect for the natural resources of Kachin State (green). These concrete posts were clearly being used as artistic canvasses to illustrate a newly defined relationship between the present and a cultural past. It engaged with contemporary concerns with unity and community development, and expressed the desire that all six groups would sustain the modern 'Kachin' identity in the present. Figure 39 [bottom] depicts the posts as they appeared ready for the inaugural *manau* held in 2001. Further fieldwork will reveal the most recent narrative changes in the design but they clearly indicate the negotiated character of the *manau* and the manner in which this negotiation continues actively to transform the production and consumption of this particular cultural performance.

### **Discursive engagements - the selection and canonization of 'traditions'**

From the discussion thus far, the idea that each cultural performance should be considered as a unique historical cultural artefact rather than as a static representation of

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<sup>48</sup> Information obtained in conversations with the designer and members of the *manau* construction committee.

<sup>49</sup> My thanks to Bawmwang Ja Yaw for explaining the design to me.

type seems to be justified. Each of the *manau* performances that have been discussed seems to be highly context specific and denote a reflexive and discursive engagement with other performances. However, it is also true that the rhetorical social memory attached to these performances sees them primarily as part of a genre of 'tradition'. A significant impact of aestheticization of *manau* performance and the shift of its consumption locally to discourses of nationalism, however, is that there have been efforts by local élites to canonize certain traditions in the production of meanings for the event. A final quotation from David Guss helps to define the parameters of this activity:

[All] traditions are by their very nature selective and must be viewed as part of the hegemonic work of naturalizing asymmetric relations of power. ... Choices are guided, therefore, by the desire of certain dominant groups to impose specific versions of history and the past. ... Part of this is an economic strategy, as such valorization often leads to the procurement of government support and the attraction of tourists. But it is just as internalized in the way that competing village groups debate among themselves.<sup>50</sup>

These concrete posts are clearly derived from Jinghpaw models, although the elders who designed them genuinely hope they will be accepted as the standard for all the Kachin communities. This, however, leads us to one final discursive context of modern nationalist *manau*. This relates to contemporary negotiations about the degree to which the different sub-groups feel that they must subordinate themselves within the collective 'Kachin' identity to prevent them from being subsumed within the 'Burmese' or 'Myanmar' identity, and the degree to which a standardised structure may represent them all. It is the present cease-fire arrangements that have made these issues subject to an overt process of negotiation and discourse.

Two communities, the Lachik and the Lawngwaw communities recently held festivals to affirm their distinctiveness within the wider Kachin identity.<sup>51</sup> The Lawngwaw festival (*Zham Gow*) was held in Lashio in 1997, and the Lachik event (*Jhang: Kham: Zoem*

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<sup>50</sup> Guss D., 2000, p.15. Guss cites Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp.115-120 in this extract.

<sup>51</sup> Lachik is written *La:cid* in their own script, and Lawngwaw is written as *Lhaovo*:. The Lachik are sometimes called Lashi and the Lawngwaw are sometimes referred to as Maru by Jinghpaw people.

*Goo*”) was held in Myitkyina in 1998.<sup>52</sup> The posts in both cases were accomplished creative works by designers highly skilled in the allegorical and abstract representation of the community values that their generation would like to see passed on. A committee of elders at the festival had agreed upon the interpretation of the Lawngwaw posts and there was a similar concern at the Lachik festival that all interpretations should be approved by committee. In both cases, however, the matter of interpretation was clearly a current negotiation emerging around a complex debate, both within and between these groups as well as between generations and reflexively towards central political authority. At both festivals, part of the performance time was dedicated to community discussion of culture and ‘tradition’ as well as the meanings that should be attached to the posts created for these events. Both festivals sought to canonize certain traditions, which would act as the community standard at a time of acute political negotiation about the nature of the Kachin ethnic category itself.

The nature of these debates can be understood in relation to the production of meaning for the aestheticized posts. Following Guss, the aestheticization of the performance and its material boundaries reflects the attempt to neutralise asymmetric power relations between communities within the Kachin/*Wunpawng* umbrella, as well as the valorization of ‘traditions’ in the attempt to secure recognition from the main centres of power in the country. The Lawngwaw *Zham Gow* in Lashio in 1997 was the first such event for more than thirty years in the Shan States. This was reflected in the difficulties that were found in finding elders who were experienced enough to lead the opening dances of the festival, as well as creating some confusion concerning the correct order in which the posts should be erected. Finally, elders from Waingmaw, down river from Myitkyina and a centre of Lawngwaw cultural documentation in recent years, had to advise and supervise many of these activities.

Lawngwaw elders at the festival claimed that they were the originators of the ‘manau’ and that other groups had merely copied and adapted the original Lawngwaw forms. The *khyae dao* posts erected at the festival were replete with nature symbolism and an

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<sup>52</sup> Information obtained in conversations with the designers and members of the respective organising committees while the festivals were taking place and subsequently.

elaborate expository discourse around their meanings was recounted by those who had designed them.

In both the Lawngwaw and the Lachik cases the posts were significantly different in structure and design from the prevailing nationalist standard, although both groups claimed that they were their communities' traditional forms. It is difficult to interpret how the term 'traditional' was being used in a wider historical context given the absence of any known historical representations or descriptions of these festivals. At the very least, the notion of 'traditional' referred to oral culture and myth depicted on the posts. Animist references were deemed expressions of a distinct cultural past, not of a religious present, as the designers of these posts were Christians of varying denominations who had converted from animism.

Guss is correct, however, to see continuities between negotiated meaning frameworks for some cultural performances and that of local, 'village' practices. It would, therefore, be inappropriate to see in these modern, 'national' events a complete rupture with local models of ritual performance. Whilst the production, circulation and production of these forms has resulted in significant transformations, the cognitive cultural boundaries of the form are still in evidence although their present meaning frameworks are the subject of intense debate.

The aestheticization of performance has produced the same reduction in detail as was evident in the discussion of ritual language translation and can therefore be seen to be subject to similar processes and constraints. Individual knowledge is transcended in a homogenising discourse that is directed towards contemporary political circumstances. Similarly, the aestheticization of performance has been internalised as a historical statement in a situation where alternative forms cannot be visualised mimetically, only imagined. Yet all of these facets of social memory are open to re-negotiation as new political circumstances dictate. To consider any of these cultural performances as deviant from tradition, or marginal to national debates on the meaning of Kachin as an ethnic category, is to misrepresent both their historical and contemporary significance.

The discursive significance of this kind of cultural performance was also made explicit at the 2001 *manau* held in Myitkyina. This event inaugurated the concrete posts and the

newly completed *manau* ground. As part of the proceedings, time was set aside to discuss a variety of cultural issues, not least of which was whether or not the ethnonym *Wunpawng* should be used as a category label, or that of *Jinghpaw Wunpawng*. No conclusions could be reached but it was a demonstration of the processes by which the meanings of ethnic boundary are not abstract products of a state history, but real issues pertinent to the lived experience of individuals.

The *manau* and the *manau* posts are so dominant as symbols of Kachin identity today that Kachin culture appears to be focused only upon them. This process seems to have been initiated during the period of British rule after the First World War and was largely a product of integration into national political networks rather than religious conversion. At the time that the identity known as 'Kachin' was emerging as a modern political construct, the *manau* festival was objectified by the British administration; it appeared to be a community dance around a set of posts in a dancing circle. This touristic image of the Kachin peoples and their culture(s) prevails today in Burma and is perhaps best exemplified by the Burmese transliteration of the term Kachin as a people who 'love to dance'.

Nationalists have also sought to focus a pan-Kachin identity upon the *manau*, having developed an iconographic and mythological status for it and having successfully repositioned the symbol and re-articulated its meanings for the contemporary situation. For the community itself there is also an illustration through *manau* post designs of local debates on the modern meaning of Kachin identity, both within and across groups and between generations. These symbols are very far from being the expression simply of a people who 'love to dance' but continue to act as discursive tools in the negotiation and construction of ethnic identities within the state.