

# **Colonial Administrators and their Tribal Preferences. A North Burma Case Study 1945-8. Bias, Beneficial Policy, Inevitability of Divisions or Divide and Rule**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This is a study of the intermingled tribes in one administrative district in the Northern Shan States of Burma, now Myanmar, covering the Mongmit and Tawngpeng States and the Kodaung Hill Tracts gleaned from the surviving monthly reports of the British administrator to the Resident, Northern Shan States at Lashio in the two years prior to Burmese political independence (Bristol Museum Records).

It endeavours to show that the most influential factors in this political scene was the history of the Burmese relationships with the frontier peoples antedating the British occupation accompanied by the Shan accommodation to and use of Kachin bellicosity, the British partial misunderstanding of these inter-tribal relationships and how these balances were upset by the Japanese invasion. The phrase 'divide and rule' would seem to be a facile explanation of a situation better rephrased as 'we want to be divided under your rule'.

In the final period of British suzerainty, the British administrator was possibly a tolerated pawn in Kachin thinking rather than a tool of non-existent British post-Imperial designs.

## **COLONIAL POLICY FOR THE FRONTIER AREAS**

When the British gained control over northern Burma, it seemed both sensible and pragmatic to have the frontier areas administered separately to Burma proper from which they were geographically, politically and culturally separate. This legal separation remained in force until Burma gained Independence in 1948.

While there may have been major issues constraining individual colonial governments which were laid out by the home government, the domestic policies of the Burma Government were always constrained by the absolute necessity of

balancing the budget.

The Government of Burma whatever its views may have been as to the policies and changes which it should have considered for the Frontier Areas, the main consideration was that of cost. It could not draw on the finances of the Government of India prior to 1935 except for such emergencies as the suppression of the Saya San rebellion in 1930 or on the home government after 1935 when Burma ceased to be a province of India.

Even if the Burma Government had considered the possibility of radical changes in the Frontier Areas administration and development, it was not a fiscal possibility and the administration for the mountainous arch round the north and east of Burma proper remained minimalist under the forty or so administrators of the Burma Frontier Service (Smith, 1997: 106).

As a province of India up to 1935, Burma was in practice outside its interests except for the importation of rice into India proper and in the protection of the rights of the Indian minority there who were regularly the subject of Burmese hostility for their dominance in the rice trade and their land ownership from defaulting debtors. A factor for *laissez-faire* on the frontier may have been a wish not to provide any opportunity for Chinese interest to be provoked by antagonising tribes bridging the border as there were Kachin villages and Shan chiefdoms in Yunnan.

Of course the Burma Government realised that the Shan States in the frontier area were administered indirectly through the Shan Sawbwas and loosely administered elsewhere in the hinterlands of Myitkyina, Putao and Bhamo through individual headmen. However to bring in a form of closer administration paralleling Burma proper would have been extremely costly without any increase in revenue and would involve the use of Burmese civil servants rather than people from the tribes about to be more closely governed. Such a process would seem to be upsetting a

seemingly stable situation almost certain to increase their political worries alongside the rise of Burmese nationalism.

So the political and fiscal costs went against change. The Joint Committee on Indian Constitutional Reform (1933: 9) recorded 'it is the absence of common outlook and aspirations which is perhaps the main factor militating against the assimilation of the backward tracts in the hills in the political institutions of the plains. The history of the relations between the backward tracts and the plains is one of opposition and hostility...The inhabitants of the backward tracts are still devoid of any real sense of community, political or otherwise with the plains'.

Thus the matter remained until the latent antagonism to the Burmese was made worse by the events of World War II. It is hard to see in this any deliberate policy of divide and rule but rather an acceptance of existing long-standing divisions and a material inability to change the political, social and economic structures of the frontier peoples. We now come to the possibility of bias.

#### **THE BRITISH APPROACH TO BACKWARD TRIBES**

It has been suggested with some truth that colonialism not so much created tribalism which has been at the back of much contemporary violence, but made it inevitable as an accident resulting from bureaucratic imperatives. Administration required boundaries so that responsibilities could be defined for both rulers and the ruled.

Administrators came to the frontier areas of north-east Burma with its system of traditional politics in which boundaries were fluid and political positions and power structures were not overburdened with literate constitutionalism; who an individual considered himself to be and to whom he owed loyalty was circumstantial rather than following any fixed customary system; a man could claim descent from either his father or mother as the occasion demanded and hypergamous marriages were an ideal commonly practised.

The British saw tribes as demographic and social boxes into which everyone could be placed and these boxes would then have fixed boundaries which would have legal and fiscal obligations for those within them. Even up to the end of British rule, it was always hoped to be able to organise administratively tribally exclusive

areas based on the majority support of those involved.

What they failed to see perhaps because they did not want to see it, was that almost every frontier area except perhaps for the Chins to the west were tribally mixed. The Kodaung Hill tracts in Mongmit State which the Kachins considered to be theirs, may have had a small majority of Kachins. However within easy reach of Kachin hill-top villages practising shifting cultivation and aspiring to own more wet rice valley fields were the villages of Palaungs and Shans who were wet rice cultivators as well as odd communities of Shan Tayoks and Gurkhas.

This was an historically based situation in which these tribal communities differentiated by language and costume, had worked out their own neighbourhood political balances in which direct violence rather than the threat of it was self-defeating and political manoeuvring in and around marriage more profitable in the long run. Whatever went on historically seems to have been a very fluid system within which varying influences were not cartographically predefined. Written records show that villages were often changing their identity so that Shans became Kachins and vice versa (Leach, 1954). A perceptive administrator struggling to find some evidence of at least the foundations for a British style social and political stability would have found none.

#### **THE BRITISH BIAS TOWARDS TRIBAL PEOPLES**

The British rather than the French colonial administrator with their concept of the *evolué*, certainly preferred tribal to urban peoples. This was due to a combination of factors particularly relevant to the tribal peoples of the Burmese frontier areas.

There was a general confusion in the minds of British administrators allying material simplicity and non-literacy to an assumed social and cognitive simplicity as well as some sort of moral superiority. There was little recognition of the complexity of their societies of which their marriage systems were an example. The assumption that their languages were less complicated than English and the Burmese language which all administrators were required to learn and thus there was a failure to recognise the correlation between their complex languages and cultural understandings.

Most administrators had a personal preference for rural life styles as showing a more moral way of living as opposed to an assumed urban decline in personal behaviour and communal cohesion, which could be avoided by paying administrative attention to rural life.

Finally the reciprocal bias of tribal elders for this type of attention until democratic voting made this less valuable; they were usually adapt at flattering visiting administrators and ostensibly agreeing to what was proposed to them knowing full well that the betting was against any consistent follow up.

Whether in fact tribes existed in this narrow almost bureaucratic sense seems doubtful. In the 1930s it was written ' there is a common misconception among Europeans with regard to the existence of Kachin tribes. There is as a matter of fact, hardly any tribal feeling amongst the Kachins except in connection with property and boundaries, and the reason for this is that they consider themselves divided into families rather than tribes (Enriquez, 1933: 26-7).

Overall the British administrator though perhaps not his wife, preferred rural work of which frontier touring on foot or by riding was an extreme example as opposed to locally born ones who preferred the reverse.

#### **THE PROFESSIONAL BIAS OF FRONTIER ADMINISTRATORS**

Since the administrators of the frontier tribal peoples were members of a separate service, the Burma Frontier Service with conditions of pay and training as well as recruitment qualifications different to that of the Burma Civil Service, it could be said that they were required to be professionally biased and to be obliged to represent the special conditions relating to these frontier peoples.

In the circumstances relating to these frontier peoples between the two world wars, this professional bias or perhaps it could be called obligation was consistently overruled or ignored by both the Burma Government and the British home Government for reasons of cost and the fear of stirring up an otherwise quiescent area. These administrators wanted development for the frontier peoples so that their economic, educational and social status would elide them into a Burmese nation.

In this the bias shown was in conformity with their professional obligations as they then saw it

and could not be described as reprehensible, however much it may retrospectively be seen as short sighted. There is thus the question of how far these frontier administrators, who realised that this separation of the frontier areas from Burma proper was unwise and could not be sustained, could impose on the people with whom they were involved, views which they disliked and which they would actively oppose if they should be asked their opinions officially.

However the second language of frontier administrators was Burmese in which they were required to be fluent after a probationary period in Burma proper so in no sense were they deliberately set apart and thus had to accept that they were overall involved with and integrated into Burma as a whole.

Even if a Frontier Service officer had been biased enough to learn a tribal language, it would have been uncertain whether he would be posted again to that area in which such a language might have been administratively useful. There would always have been the problem of learning Jinghpaw rather than Shan in a mixed district so that interpreters would still have to be used apart from the showing of possibly dangerous bias by knowing one language rather than another. Overall it was wiser to stick with Burmese of which most frontier people knew a little and to suffer the bias and slowing down of work through using interpreters.

#### **PERSONAL BIASES IN ADMINISTERING NAMHSAN DISTRICT**

Most administrators suffered from culture shock from their first posting in a colonial territory which as a first love syndrome remained with them through out their overseas careers whether it was served with Baluchis, Bengalis or Burmese tribal people. It seems likely that if they were not affected in this way, they would either resign or seek departmental specialisations where their administrative involvement would have been more with paper than with people.

The administrator in question at Namhsan still had an army rank and only a few months prior training in Kutkai, North Hsenwi State which had a similar multi-tribal composition and of course he had no anthropological or political knowledge of the frontier area; in fact he was a left-over from the British Military Administration.

His tours on foot presented three problems. Each village community saw his arrival as a return

to stable government but this was interpreted in different ways. Shans and Palaungs saw this stability as not so much a return to pre-war peacefulness but as protection from Kachin expansionism. The Kachins seeing the same administrator in terms of his army rank considered that they would have their immediate post-war behaviour which included murder, theft and arson ignored if not accepted by the Government as a reward for their anti-Japanese guerrilla support for the Allied cause.

The second problem was that the Shans and Palaungs received him and on occasions his wife with the same obsequious flattery that they would have provided for anyone in authority. The Kachins carried this far further expecting him and his wife to participate in their activities and festivals, even requiring them on one occasion to sing a duet in a victory commemoration. He often sat and drank rice beer with them round their fires in the evenings on tour.

A final problem was that the two local government officials in the Kodaung Hill Tracts, salaried by Mongmit State, were also Kachins and responsible both for all his tour arrangements and for biased or inadequate reports on what was going on to which he would react, had he not started touring on foot.

It was not surprising therefore that he preferred the Kachins who assumed some sort of identity with him as a British officer who had served in the Burma war to the Shans and Palaungs who had no such feelings and who were more sophisticated in their socio-political understandings.

Did this bias which was probably shared by other administrative officers in contact with Kachins affect his actions. There is a difference between liking Kachins ideologically as a group and dealing with individual groups of Kachins whom he had never met before who were involved in violence against their neighbouring Shans and Palaungs.

#### **THE WAR WITH JAPAN UPSETTING SOCIO-POLITICAL BALANCES**

The British needing all the help that they could get in reconquering Burma while they were poised on the Indo-Burma border after their expulsion by the Japanese Army in 1942. British administrators of the frontier peoples and the employees of the timber extraction firms were employed to raise guerrilla groups to provide

information and to harry the edges of the Japanese army wherever opportunity arose.

Thus the Kachins in the Northern Shan States and the Chins and Karens elsewhere came to know a number of British officers under conditions of shared hardship and functional equality which they would never have experienced in peace time. It would have been only human for them to have seen this in terms of a longer term political commitment with which these officers would certainly have agreed than was politically feasible.

A memorandum dated 16 April 1947, expressing the wishes of the Kachin peoples (Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry, 1947) after to the two Panglong meetings with Burmese politicians on which there was a Kodaung Kachin representative Saya Zau Ba, stated 'in both world wars the Kachins fought with the Allies against the enemies of the interests of the British Empire, the Kachins therefore can never think that the British Government would forget them who had thus defended their interests'.

There was also the availability of modern weapons. Firstly in all wars dead and dying soldiers have their weapons with them to be picked up by passing tribesmen looking for just such opportunities. The 1942 retreat provided the first opportunity for this and then there was the first Wingate Expedition followed in 1944 by the British-Indian attack down the Shweli valley and the American Mars Task Force in North Hsenwi, both of which provided the Kachins with abandoned Japanese weapons. In addition to this arms were supplied to the Kachins as part of the guerrilla Force 136 and only some of these arms from the quantities known to have been supplied were handed in after the end of the war.

Arms supplied for the purposes of winning a war are distributed without regard for their subsequent use. In the immediate post-war period it seems likely that only the more law-abiding Kachins handed in such arms during the amnesties. To the west the Nagas in Manipur over the border in India used arms collected from the dead Japanese and also provided by the Allies for their own post-war purposes. In 1948 a Kenyah village was wiped out by its feuding partners with several hundred killed (Jacobs, 1990: 142).

Recent history is full of examples of the misuse of donor arms. The United States supplied the pro-Allied Kuomintang with arms of which only a small proportion were used against the Japanese. More recently arms sent to Afghan-

istan to fight the Russian occupation have been extensively used in inter-tribal fighting.

While the Kodaung Kachins were not so visibly armed as those across the border in North Hsenwi, it seems likely that they were armed and that the surrounding Shans and Palaungs knew that they were, even if the administrator did not know the extent of these holdings.

#### **THE ROLE OF THE NAMHSAN ADMINISTRATOR 1946-7**

The role of an administrator at all times and in all circumstances is to follow policy as laid down by his superiors, reporting to them the conditions of the areas for which he is responsible for which there was no work description and to react to situations with which he was confronted. What he in fact knows is what he is told by his subordinates or finds out for himself by touring on foot.

He is not in a position to initiate changes which he feels are necessary and it is certainly no part of his remit to stir up opposition on his own for actions which he feels as a personal necessity. What might be called a 'hobby' approach towards acting on any of the long range problems facing an administrator would have to be seen within the powers of existing government policy. The alternative was always to do nothing other than approach problems conversationally.

It is in nobody's interest to stir up situations for which he has either no remit from the Government or has not been asked for by the people themselves. The farewell to a British administrator in Burma was expressed in these terms 'We never saw your Honour except in court or has not been in business which was finished very quickly. For the most of the time your Honour might never have been here at all. That is indeed the officer we respect and regret' (Hall, 1906: 196).

The situation facing this administrator in 1946 involved the following facts. He had no funds beyond those for running his office and paying for tours. No staff beyond his office which he could use as a representative of the central Government. Two State local governments which saw in practical terms that there was nothing to be gained by local changes through an on-the-way-out British administration, when the power was shifting towards the politicians of Burma proper. The staff of the Kodaung Hill Tracts were all Kachins.

But there were two new factors limiting his

range of action. The presence of unsundered arms left in the hands of Kachins who had been part of the guerrilla 136 Force or abandoned on various battlefields in the hills and in the Shweli valley between 1942 and 1944. This administrator personally blew up some of these abandoned piles of ammunition. Secondly the Kachin erupting sense of superiority from their support for the Allies who they felt owed them support combined with a long history of mercenary aggression in the service of Shan Sawbwas.

#### **KACHIN SUPPORT FOR THE ALLIED CAUSE**

It is easy in retrospect to see the Kachin support for the Allies to have been opportunism which could have equally well have been utilised by the Shans. However the Kachins helped the British in 1942 when they were clearly losing (Clifford, 1979) and in 1943 over the first Wingate long range incursion when victory for the Allies was still seemingly marginal and they were warned that this was not the beginning of a British reoccupation and yet small groups of survivors were helped in the Kodaung (Ferguson, 1945) and in some cases they went to extraordinary lengths to protect abandoned wounded (MacHorton, 1958). Only in 1944-5 could the Kachins have clearly known that the Allies were winning, when the Burmese nationalists changed from their armed support of the Japanese to aiding the Allies. Opportunism in this last phase but providing dangerously brave support earlier.

At no time did the British officers in Force 136 in their months of close association with their Kachin guerrillas, suggest that winning the war would provide lead to political support for their quasi-separatist post-war aims vis-à-vis the Burmese who had clearly opposed the British until the last few months of the war.

Many survivors who had been helped by the Kachins. Senior British commanders and the officers who had been in Force 136 as well as most administrators felt that the British Government owed these frontier tribal people a debt of honour. This was impossible to fulfil without the agreement and long term political good will of the incoming government of an independent Burma whose politicians had no particular interest in these tribal peoples to whom with some justice they felt superior.

Thus this administrator had to explain to groups of Kachins that neither he nor the British



government would have any influence on their future and that political reality lay within the remit of Burmese politicians based in Rangoon. At that stage they accepted the situation but the two Kachin subordinate administrators asked for a farewell gift of rifles for their personal use.

#### **INTER-TRIBAL UNREST IN THE KODAUNG HILL TRACTS**

These monthly reports contain long series of Kachin initiated aggression to their non-Kachin neighbours. Almost all Sauram Shan villages were burnt by the Kachins and a number killed and their Buddhist monks told to become animists. They were told that they would have to pay compensation if they wanted the Kachins to remove the spirit shrines which had been erected in the Shan Buddhist monasteries. The Kachins said that they had done this because of the Shan support for the Japanese and that they had given away the whereabouts of some Wingate survivors.

In the Ngadaung area the Kachins had seized land which they had owned forty years previously and lost from indebtedness or forced Shans to give them rice fields as a gift and when the cases came before the administrator the Kachins stated that they expected favouritism and at least to be given half the land under dispute. In Kunkha they murdered the Palaung headman and seized bullocks, money and horses. In Tawngpeng State the Sawbwa had signed an agreement with the Kachins in 1944 that in exchange for their protection, they would be given an exclusive local government area after the war.

All these incidents and others were found by the administrator as result of touring. However in the Kodaung he had judicial powers but in the States he had no such powers but both States had refused to handle cases involving Kachins and asked the administrator to act on their behalf. In practice the Assistant Resident could only attempt arbitration in which the prestige of his unarmed position was his only power to bring about a temporary peaceful solution.

In attempting compromises rather than direct orders laying down rights and wrongs the Kachins were told that the seized fields belonged to Shans and Palaungs but they could rent them or in some cases purchase them with written contracts. At the same time all communities were encouraged to meet in councils and a Kachin

minister was appointed in the Mongmit State government.

While written agreements and records were important as making available decisions from many years ago carefully preserved in bamboo cylinders, they had disadvantages as to some extent preventing traditional accommodations reflecting local changes which allowed neighbours to continue to live together. A written ruling has no power in itself and its significance is rather similar to the movement of a pawn in a game of chess. Any attempt to establish absolute rights to property in the absence of any well-organised and effective system of law and order is nearly always a waste of time. In the circumstances such papers were seen by their holders as no more than negotiating assets.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

The suggestion that the British had a policy of divide and rule is not supported by the fact that the frontier people themselves would oppose unification as indeed they have for all the years after independence.

The British had a considered policy to rationalize the administration of the Shan States and to link them to a federated Burma, while undermining the authority of the Shan Sawbwas who were never given the status of hereditary rulers of sovereign states under British protection as had been the case with Indian rajjas (Taylor.1987,91-98).

The use of the same laws as in Burma proper, the use of Burmese rather than English for local government business and the commonsense realisation that anything more exclusive than federation was an impossibility, made a unitary government for Burma an inevitable development sooner or latter whether the British or the Burmese ran the government.

The whole trend was against divide and rule and of course in the end the British wanted to get out of Burma as soon as a reasonable constitutionally based nationalist government could take office. But in the areas covered by this paper the personal feelings of the administrator were of little relevance and the rational political aims of the Burmese as much as the British, were overtaken by popular anti-Burmese sentiments, World War Two and its enabling of Kachin aggressiveness which made this a practical impossibility.

**KEY WORDS** Tribe; cost; war; nationalism; ideology.

**ABSTRACT** Burma divided between the Burmese and the tribal peoples as an administrative necessity and the latter wished this difference to be maintained and the war directly supported this claim. British wishes and administrative practices were irrelevant to pre-Independence realities.

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