

***Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma.* By Mandy Sadan. Oxford: Oxford University Press (*British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship Monograph*), 2013. Hardcover: 49pp (including Bibliography, plus front and end material).**

This is one of the most important books on the history, anthropology and politics of Burma/Myanmar to be published in recent years.¹ Mandy Sadan traces the emergence and transformation of the Kachin ethno-national identity over two centuries, from the precolonial period through to the present, in northeast India, southwest China, and northern Myanmar.

Sadan's account is based on archival material, particularly from the British ex-colonies, combined with profound cultural and linguistic insights derived from fieldwork among the Kachin. She mobilizes “outsider” and “insider” sources — including texts, photographs and material culture, and many first-hand primary interviews — to sustain a critical interrogation of what it has meant and means to be (and be perceived as) Kachin, in different historical and geopolitical contexts (including at the broadest level, which is covered in Chapter 5 “Southeast Asia in the Cold War”). A wide range of theoretical approaches are mobilized, without losing sight of the Kachin peoples' particular lived experiences. The critical interrogation of implied and explicit positions in relation to identities and interests is balanced by a deep sympathy for her subject. Some scholars of ethnic politics in Myanmar (e.g. Robert Taylor *passim*) have suggested that, because categories of ethnic identity (e.g. “Kachin”) can be shown historically to be arbitrary constructions but are often treated in discourse as “natural” and essentialized, such self-identifications are somehow inauthentic or at best anachronistic. While carefully exploring the positions and interests involved in the emergence of Kachin identity, Sadan never belittles her subject, but seeks to unpack these dynamics in a manner which is fundamentally sympathetic to this complex and multifaceted society. This is evident in her treatment of how the “Kachin” ethnonym is claimed by (or for) non-dominant subgroups. As with other ethnic nationalities in Myanmar, defining elements of Kachin identity tend to be derived from the characteristics of a particular subgroup — in this case the Jingphaw. While elites from other subgroups (e.g. Lisu and Rawang) have sometimes preferred to use more locally specific designations and markers, the identification of Jingphaw as characteristic of a Kachin pan-national identity seems to be quite widely accepted.

The analysis here is deeply empirical rather than theoretically driven. Sadan explores formative literatures on the Kachin, including Edmund Leach's hugely influential (but not unproblematic) *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954) and the work of Jonathan Friedman. She is critical of scholars (including James Scott) who have devised macro-theoretical anthropological-political frameworks on the basis of Kachin case studies, and often seem more interested in the resulting theoretical superstructure than in grounding their insights in the lived realities of Kachin communities.

The closest Sadan comes to meta-theorizing is her argument that Kachin socio-political constructions can be regarded as "fractile". The fractile metaphor illustrates how Kachin and other local polities and societies reproduce at the micro-level elements of macro-level (e.g. courtly) structures, for example, regarding patron-client networks, and the symbolism of power. This theme is accompanied by insights regarding how (Kachin) local actors have sometimes been able to "game" such systems, gaining the upper-hand in material and symbolic relations with ostensibly more powerful actors (precolonial Burmese kings, British colonial actors and, more problematically, the post-independence state of Burma/Myanmar). She contrasts the fractile metaphor with a common trope of Southeast Asian studies: the "Mandala", as developed by Oliver Walters and propagated by scholars such as Benedict Anderson. The dialogue between these two models emerges at various points in the text, but might have benefited from a more sustained comparative study. Sadan criticizes the Mandala metaphor as, among other things, not reflecting local understandings of socio-political dynamics. However, it might be asked whether her preferred fractile imagery is any more likely to explicitly articulated as a mode by local people. In this reviewer's opinion, the Mandala metaphor remains a useful lens through which to view changing relationships between different centres (and epicentres) of power, in a context where many communities in Myanmar remain subject to multiple and often competing authorities.

Sadan's critique of the assumptions structuring commonsense understandings of the Kachin extends to the formative role of Christianity. She observes that the propagation of a pan-Kachin (or *Wunpawng*) identity largely pre-dates the mass conversion of Kachin peoples to Christianity in the post-independence period (Chapter 8). Therefore, while the Christian faith (particularly the Baptist Church) has played a key role in the development and spread of a pan-Kachin national identity, important early constructions of

this ethnonym, and the associated ethno-nationalist movement, derive more from the experiences of different communities in relation to the British colonial state (and particularly its military recruiting technologies), than to the influence of Christianity (Chapters 4 and 5). This is a significant observation, given the emphasis often placed on faith-based explanations for the emergence of armed conflict in Kachin areas in 1961, shortly before the 1962 military coup which launched half a century of military rule in Burma/Myanmar.

Sadan makes important contributions to understanding the emergence of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) — the main Kachin insurgent bodies — including how these Christian ethno-nationalists interact with and have mobilized elements of the pre-Christian Kachin tradition. She addresses the KIO ceasefire with the then-military Myanmar government from 1994 to 2011, and the tragic resumption of armed conflict over the past four years. However, the book is not a blow-by-blow account of the Kachin conflict and ceasefire. Rather, Sadan offers a deeper analysis, which resists “the impetus to talk about undifferentiated categories of people” (p. 458), preferring an “effort of listening and engagement [with the ethnic nationality periphery] of the kind that the Burmese centre has yet to experience” (p. 469). As she concludes, only when such histories and identities beyond the state receive due recognition, will Myanmar be on course towards national reconciliation.

Note

1. Declaration of interest: this reviewer is included in the Acknowledgements.

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