

SOJOURN Symposium

***Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma.* By Mandy Sadan. Oxford: Oxford University Press and the British Academy, 2013.**

Review essays by Nicholas Farrelly and La Raw Maran, with a response from Mandy Sadan.

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Review Essay I: Nicholas Farrelly

“What if *they* just change the name to ‘Northern Region’?” The question, when put to me, hangs awkwardly in the steamy tropical air. The subtext, a plea for recognition and status, is one that I have heard before. It is born of trepidation about the future of the Kachin, and their Kachin State, in Myanmar’s new politics. Names are powerful. In 2014 the notion that Kachin State makes a natural contribution to the world’s geopolitical imaginary is facing one of its most serious threats. The fear is that Myanmar’s 2008 Constitution could, under certain circumstances, be used to “re-name” Kachin State. For many Kachin, this is a direct rebuke to the multi-ethnic foundations of Myanmar’s union. Yet any nascent plan to neutralize the widely understood ethnic nomenclature carries its own potent message about the multi-ethnic character of Myanmar as a whole, and of Kachin State as a place where the Kachin live side by side with Shan, Bamar, Chinese and so many others. But that perspective receives scant respect from those who have fought for the right to be Kachin. They live in a society dominated by a government in

distant Naypyitaw, a society in which they are forced to learn the language of those they consider colonizers and made to accept a subordinate position in the national culture. The least that they ask is to keep the name of their state.

It is the historical treatment of such matters — practical, political and personal — that makes Mandy Sadan's study of the Kachin, and the adjacent Singpho and Jingpo societies, so timely and important. As the foremost historian of these borderlands, it is fitting that her *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* is bold and exciting scholarship, straddling the mountainous, dishevelled terrain between India, China and Myanmar. Her work skillfully integrates stories of complex historical forces to explain the ways that local, regional, national and global logics of affiliation have become part of everyday lived experiences. Sadan, it must be said, takes full advantage of the "borderworld [as] a complex, uneven social and political construct" (p. 6). She ranges, ethnographically and historically, from west to east, and in a roughly chronological order, to take in the colonial experience of Assam, the challenges of the twentieth century in northern Burma, and the imperial dynamics in today's Chinese borderlands. The analysis draws heavily on vernacular and what Sadan calls "indigenous" sources (p. 459). The book ends with an account of the unravelling of colonial and postcolonial enterprises in northern Myanmar, and in the wider borderlands where the Kachin, as a people and a concept, are fused to an array of trans-frontier society-building projects. In wondrously effective style, it reconfigures our understanding of the colonial period, presenting Kachin ethno-nationalism in all its historical richness, before ending on the need for contemporary negotiation, in so many far-reaching ways (p. 468).

The thoroughness of this treatment means that many pages are defined by their footnotes. These mini-essays range across topics such as India's village *panchayat* system, the concept of the "lost book" (*Shanhpyi Laika*), and the Jinghpaw term *Hkaku* — an ambiguous notion referring to groups "upriver". Many of these lengthy footnotes also reproduce otherwise difficult to locate source

material. An aside about the “Bolshevik threat on the North East Frontier” (pp. 204–5), dating from 1926, is one such fragment. Technical discussions proliferate, with a surprising number of the details of nineteenth- and twentieth-century history having previously eluded this reviewer. For specialist readers these materials offer access to Sadan’s meticulously developed understanding of ritual, culture, history and politics among the scattered peoples of these borderlands. In the years ahead, mining these details, like a Hpakant digger with a chisel and shovel, will be an immensely rewarding task, a task that will justify many long hours of patient excavation. Happily, Sadan has presented such “ephemera” in novel and enticing ways. Each nugget deserves our full attention.

For now, and in this brief review, my interrogation of *Being and Becoming Kachin* seeks to identify veins that may merit scholarly attention in the future. This approach is calibrated to examine the contemporary sociopolitical implications of Sadan’s book. These veins are explained here as somewhat independent areas of study and debate, although I judge that the overlaps may prove most profitable of all. My goal is to focus on what I judge three areas where general lessons can be drawn: identity formation, ethnic plurality and national integration.

First, in the context of borderlands identities, such as Kachin, there are obvious questions about the different processes that bring them to life. Sadan has offered a lucid and complex explanation for the processes that have made, and that re-make, the Kachin, across time and space. I wonder, for the present, to what extent does the specific process of identity formation matter to those who become Kachin? Or Shan? Or Wa? Today, in Myanmar, a National Races Channel broadcasts in eleven of the country’s non-Burmese languages. There is, for example, Skaw Karen, Asho Chin, Shan and Jinghpaw programming. The offerings tilt from serious news bulletins drawing on the resources of the state-run networks, to music performances, cultural tutorials and profile interviews. These ethnic products, fuelled by the dominant stratum of ethnic cultural politics, are given high status in a political system where the universalizing story of “union

spirit” requires a multi-ethnic and ostentatiously “diverse” set of cultural practices. But what does the official maintenance of these identities, inevitably excluding some, teach us about the creation of, for instance, the Kachin? Does the Myanmar government’s formal investment in so few of its minority languages prescribe the demise of the others? The processes that Sadan explores have not ended. Determining the influence of new technologies for ethnic reproduction is clearly one area ripe for future academic enquiry.

Second, how can the sophisticated understanding of ethnicity drawn from Sadan’s work be fused to the plural character of ethnicity in the borderlands today? The discreteness — to recycle a Leachian usage — of Sadan’s Jingpo, Singpho and Kachin is not as clear as it might be. I wonder, for instance, whether we can learn something of “unbecoming” Kachin, or other identities. The allegedly imminent “extinction” of the Tarong of far northern Myanmar is one part of any such discussion. Yet in other cases there are those who abandon certain categories of affiliation. They may switch them strategically, or perhaps sometimes by force of bureaucracy. In Myanmar this is especially fraught: a national identity card can include up to five different ethnic categories. One cardholder may be Tayoke [Chinese] — Lisu — Tayoke — Shan — Bamar. Such a muddle of different ethnic markers and affiliations is based on certain ways of entangling, and disentangling, ethnic affiliation. But the bearer of such a formal identity may not speak Chinese, or live in any proximity to a Shan community. His or her everyday linguistic and cultural repertoires, perhaps defined by residence in a Lisu village and Myanmar government employment, are shaped by a distinctive set of historical conditions. In the context of Myanmar’s 2014 census, where ethnic categorizations have already been heavily disputed, there is disquiet over the requirement to belong to one of the 135 official ethnic classifications. This requirement has immediate consequences for those who are “being and becoming” Rohingya, but also for the many Myanmar residents who do not clearly fit *any* single cohort. And, in these and other cases, the official paperwork may not match the lived realities. What are we to make of this process of uneven

ethnogenesis? Clearly, after the census, researchers will need to ask hard questions about the spaces available for alternative impressions of identity and belonging.

Third, and most importantly, what lessons can be drawn from Sadan's work to illuminate the challenges facing the status of the "national races" in Myanmar? On this point, she offers astute judgements about the role of religion in ethnicity formation. As Sadan tells us, "Kachin insistence on their [Christian] faith as a key determinant of their modernity is now one of the main ideological distinctions between the Kachin of Burma, the Singpho of Assam and the Jingpo of China" (p. 360). Sadan then devotes Chapter Eight, on "Virtue", to the analysis of these issues. In Myanmar, the conflation of ethnic and religious identities is looming as the next big challenge to "national unity". The Theravada Buddhist heritage, with its claim to unanimous Bamar support, has generated chauvinistic and politically aggressive factions. Kachin Christianity has, Sadan shows, proved instrumental to the maintenance of one powerful interpretation of Kachin-ness. But such questions of religion are not matters of mere academic interest, and today's policy and political calculations are likely to determine outcomes for years, perhaps decades, to come. My reading of Sadan and her scrupulous attention to ambiguity, overlap and incommensurability suggests a clear need to think differently about ethnicity and religion if a society such as Myanmar's is to create pathways towards peace.

The alternative, as Sadan intimates, is the resurgence of war and the further diminution of appetites for multi-ethnic coexistence. The muscular resistance of the Kachin Independence Army in the war that reignited in June 2011 makes possible fresh appreciation for the horrors and dislocation of revolutionary battle. Yet the history that Sadan has presented gives extra reason to worry about the forces that such wars unleash. Right at the start of her book, indeed in its first five pages, Sadan introduces the disrupted destinies of the Kachin children sent, for safety's sake, to northeast India at the height of the first Kachin war (1961–93). She gives the example of a young man, raised by Naga Christians, who upon discovering his Jinghpaw

heritage sought out educational opportunities that reshaped him as a Kachin man. When Sadan meets him, this man has returned to northeast India to teach the Jinghpaw language among the Singpho of this region. I have myself heard other stories, some of which do not have a happy ending, of Kachin children who have lost their Christianity and their language, to be subsumed by the Buddhist or Hindu cultures of northeast India. Families have been torn asunder. These stories, whatever their outcome, are part of the distressing calculus that confronted countless Kachin families during the long years of war. It is these stories — stories with an overwhelmingly human dimension — that make Sadan's work so readable and enlightening.

In the study of Asian borderlands there is arguably no more discussed and criticized subject matter than the social organization, and reorganization, of the Kachin. In this tremendously valuable work, Sadan has offered a study of historical experiences that helps to draw the Kachin into a new generation of historical and social theory. Her treatments of the classic works by Edmund Leach (1954), Jonathan Friedman (1979) and the others give a new starting point for those venerable debates. But the other debates that Sadan will motivate, among those who are seeking a grounded awareness of the cultural histories of the borderlands, will shake fixed categories to their foundations, obliterating the normality ascribed to different ways of imagining the self and restarting the perpetual conflict between those who want fixed models and those prepared to explore more fluid social landscapes. As a study of the Kachin imaginary, shaped by generations of scholarship and by the contested conditions on the ground, this book offers potential for further study and critique. The time is right: Myanmar is digesting the problems and potential of its current constitutional arrangements, and the guns have fallen (mostly) quiet in Kachin lands. We hope that the next battle will be fought with words and ideas about living peaceably in Myanmar's federal union. In those circumstances, future scholars will ask hard questions of the state. Well may they want to know: what is Myanmar without the Kachin?

Review Essay II: La Raw Maran

Mandy Sadan's *Being and Becoming Kachin* is a welcome but challenging work. While it offers unprecedented opportunity for fresh insights into Kachin studies, it also exposes the still extant nagging questions, although these are perhaps a little clearer now. The purpose of this review is to point out some of the defining features of this new perspective on the Kachin borderworld, which has apparently gained coherence as well as a more proper footing in the scholarship devoted to knowledge about borderworlds. Sadan breaks from the conventional and fixed perspective of the centre/periphery matrix and takes up Kachin society as an organic system capable of adapting and growing. Her unique contribution is her ability to track the development of Kachin social and political systems as a function both of coping with the impact of external events and of success in preventing haphazard change from occurring within Kachin society itself. Although the title proclaims Kachin and Burma, in fact the highest-level expression of ethno-nationalistic sentiments today depends on integration with the Singpho of India and the Jingpo of China as the other pivots. In any reference to the dynamic of Kachin ethno-nationalism — whether social, political or both, and whether within this composite world or in relation to the external world — these three borderworlds are implicitly linked in constituting the sense of being “Kachin”, the zeitgeist over and above regional versions: this is the scope of Dr Sadan's pioneering work.

In global perspective the Kachin borderworld is characterized by opacity in the centre/periphery political context and by its multilevel complexity to observers of ethno-nationalism. The Burma government has, without any insight, considered Kachin dynamism a rebellion since 1962, while to research scholars an intractable enigma has always hampered vision. This has meant that the Kachin borderworld is not integral to the historical understanding of the political spheres with which it has been actively interacting throughout history. Any mention of Kachin political activism is usually not accompanied

by an insightful accounting of the processes that underpin that dynamism.

This bottleneck may be less hazardous to negotiate now. Sadan has now shown, persuasively to this reviewer, that the Kachin *zeitgeist* is neither happenstance nor impenetrable. If until now the Kachin past has not been integrated into state-oriented histories, it is because conventional conceptualization views the borderworld “through the notion of a singular centre and its periphery, or through the dynamics of a single borderline” (p. 12). Sadan reminds us further that border peoples are not homogeneous socially, culturally or politically and that to gain understanding there is hence no alternative to studying the actual Kachin political culture and memory.

To gain traction in the quest for knowledge of the Kachin borderworld, Sadan has cast her net wide and combed for sources of social memory in the three regions where the related Singpho, Kachin and Jingpo reside along international borders. To her credit, she has managed to begin articulating Kachin historical knowledge, an achievement that in my judgment is already a signal contribution to the study of borderworlds, Kachin and beyond. Sadan provides the best reading ever offered of British colonial policy and practice and the impact that it had on Kachins. To extend this new frontier further is of critical importance now, and this brief review will be one early attempt.

Conceptually, this book can be summarized as a series of concentric circles of change around a non-passive Kachin social system at the core — with external factors acting upon it and internal changes occurring — along with an assessment of how the next stages take shape from these latter. The social system first studied is the Singpho of what is today Arunachal Pradesh and the second the Kachin areas of Burma; the Singpho nucleus is viewed with respect to British colonial attitudes and policy, and the Singpho-Kachin relationship seen as one occurring across the boundary. The second nucleus, the Kachin region, is also examined in relation to British attitudes and policy after the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty, China’s transition to a republican form of government, and interaction with Singpho kinsmen to the west and the Jingpo to the east. British colonial

and Chinese interests were oblivious to Kachin welfare and caused impacts in non-trivial ways. The Kachin were to effect changes on those interests in turn. These aspects are examined carefully and with sensitivity. The author demonstrates, for instance, Kachin awareness of changes in the Konbaung court. Her evidence lies in the meaning expressed through Kachin nat-spirit shrine symbolism.

In essence, the central concern of the study is to ask how Kachin society has coped with external factors bearing upon it, how stresses have caused changes and modifications within that society and how social organization has adapted and readjusted its institutions in order to be capable of continuing to function. These matters are comprehensively discussed, and the book's treatment of them draws upon a wide range of relevant data sources. There is strong emphasis throughout on British colonial policy and practice and the impact that they had on Kachin life.

A topic of particular interest, one that will surely invite comment, is the recurrent discussion of how colonial discourse might have determined to which groups "Kachin" would refer (p. 174). The author suggests that the colonial narrative might have been the original such use. This is understandable, since the term Kachin grew out of contact with outsiders to the west of the Irrawaddy River, but it acquired a more complex connotation later in the Burma-China border region. "Kachin" is not derived from a native identity label for any of the constituent communities to which it would refer later. Questions can be raised concerning what Kachins themselves felt about being called by a term of geographic reference, since terms for categories of people already existed in the native lexicon. Labels with reference to ethnicity and language community identity are established concepts in the local narrative, so what is the relationship between colonial terminology and native concepts regarding who is who in this Kachin composite? Should this matter be decided on the basis of the colonial narrative alone?

The next important topic discussed is political consensus-building (Chapter Five, especially pp. 282–86). Accounts among Kachin communities of the rapid spread of *gumlau* rebellion* earlier indicate that consensus was quickly achieved among the commoners and

triggered an avalanche that overwhelmed the hereditary chiefs to the south and east of the Mali (Irrawaddy) triangle. During 1946–47, a proposal for quick independence from Britain and political union with Burmans also achieved consensus rapidly. But, now for the first time, observer-participant accounts tell a story that clearly reveals that a cultural institution in fact exists for such dynamism. The Kachin movers and shakers behind this radical ideological shift had served the British empire as soldiers and policemen and as members of a youthful corps made up of the elite youth with modern education which had fought alongside British and American troops to defeat the Japanese. Political organizations quickly formed and a mass movement began spreading the message, but the actual decision-making was left to traditional role-players, the community leaders. Analytically the initial movement began as a bottom-up call for change, but concluded with top-down decision-making. Thus the process concluded in the traditional way, in the hands of community leaders. From western Myitkyina District, community leaders moved on to persuade other community leaders in the rest of Myitkyina District, and then in Bhamo District. Thus the second segment featured leaders-to-leaders consensus-building, a process indicative of a lack of threat or discord within the community and suggesting that change occurred according to the traditional paradigm. The third segment occurred in the northern Shan States in early January 1947, where active youth organizations had been building a groundswell of support, with the community leaders again making the decision for independence. Then came the moment to charge the collective leaders with a mission to be carried out on behalf of all Kachins. Here symbolism to that effect must be included, and it was. In a large gathering the properly attired community leaders were informed that they represented the hopes of all Kachin people. This was the moment of transformation from traditional community leadership to national delegates, a transition to negotiating independence from Britain. The process originating in western Myitkyina District must now proceed to Panglong, and a traditional cultural institution had served a new function well.

If I may elaborate, now we proceed to 2012–13, and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) is now the political leader and has been at war off and on with the Burman military government in Kachin State since 1962. In 2013, as a KIO delegation made its way to Myitkyina to explore the possibility of a ceasefire with concomitant political reform, the government schemed for quick consent by intimidation. The local Kachin Baptist churches had a different idea and brought out more than twelve thousand people in short order to intimidate the government instead. These days the KIO Central Committee holds regular meetings with community leaders and representatives two to three times each year in order to *receive advice and instruction* from Kachin people. In light of the contemporary situation, it is important to understand that consensus-building in support of political unity is alive and well in the Kachin culture today.

Author's Response: Mandy Sadan

It is with a deep sense of gratitude that I am responding to the insightful and thoughtful remarks of Nicholas Farrelly and La Raw Maran concerning their reviews of my recent book, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma*. This is a big (long), ambitious book that, as La Raw Maran comments, makes no apologies for being “challenging”. It is not a book that can be raced through in an afternoon with that habit of lateral speed reading that academics have had to hone as an art form today, exacerbated by the mountain of journals and papers that confront us on our never-ending “to-do” lists of things to read. That both reviewers have spent so much time reading the text carefully, working through its footnotes and then writing considered comments, is something that I do not take for granted, and I greatly appreciate their efforts.

The materiality of the book is significant. Its structure and length go somewhat against the current publishing grain, especially

as it pertains to first-time authors who are typically forced into a publication straitjacket in which minimizing word count becomes an end in itself. In addition, as Farrelly comments, the footnotes dominate some of the pages, even though many publishers view footnotes as an unwarranted intrusion upon the flow of the reader's eye, better placed discretely in the under-the-stairs cupboard known as "endnotes". Eyebrows were certainly raised about the impact of the footnotes on the layout of the book, but I was hugely fortunate to find in the British Academy people who were prepared to let me explore what the book could do at the boundaries of what might, to them, have been acceptable practice. A great deal of my research in the Kachin region has been based upon studies of the material, of photographs, of textiles, of the reconfiguration of oral performance as text and "documentation". My research began by considering the obliteration of the visual material past in the region through the blacking out locally of the photographic record; this reflected the sense of loss of material artefacts by which people could mark place and time and "substantiate" their own histories in the face of a prevailing nationalistic, Burmese-dominated model of "the nation". The power that interventions in this situation could have were also a significant part of my early research, conducted with the support of innovative and creative curators at the Brighton Pavilion and Museums World Art Collections, who continue to explore ways in which historical collections held in museums can be significant in the political claims of local "source" communities. The physical, the material, the visible in history has a tangible importance in the communities in which I research, which have until recently been largely overlooked as sites of serious historical exploration. Books themselves become part of the historical imaginary, as Farrelly astutely notes, but not just in their ideas but also in their physical materiality, and this book acknowledges that potential impact in spades.

The materiality of this book, therefore, is part of a much more totalizing vision of what history can do to reconfigure our understandings of regions such as the Kachin borderworlds. It also tries to take seriously our responsibilities in making these

representations. This region has not been served well in this regard in the past. Two iconic texts leap out in this respect: Edmund Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Leach 1954) is one, while James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (Scott 2009) is the other. The former was famously written following the loss of Leach's field notes and disdains the need for empirical historical data to inform the "more important" anthropological debate; the latter constructs an erudite and thought-provoking analysis, but lacks even a proper bibliography (see also Lieberman 2010). An entire imaginary of "Kachin" history has been constructed upon an absence of reference points that can be tested empirically, as Farrelly intimates in his review; indeed, in many cases these historical tests are deemed somewhat irrelevant. My own book is definitely a reaction to this kind of Kachin imaginary as much as it is fully alive to the contribution it makes to that genealogy of representations, as Farrelly acknowledges. This also influences my approach to the materiality of the book. It is important to me that my own imaginary can be tested and critiqued properly, that I locate as clearly as I can how the often merely intuited and intangible developments of my understanding that have emerged over an extended period of time can be brought back down again into cultural specifics, historical realities, difficult, complex and conflicting evidence. Construction of the intellectual framework of the book in the way in which I have attempted means that the claims that I make can be tested and developed; I do not make a claim for a higher knowledge than that which I can clearly demonstrate through tangible reference points. Indeed, so concerned am I that the book should help to develop critique and debate rather than appear to close it down that I have even developed a website (mandysadan.weebly.com) to push the boundaries of representing the development of my understanding even further. Those who feel that simply referencing an obscure artefact or document in a footnote is somewhat disingenuous when it comes to accessing them, may like to view this site. There I try to make available many of the images and other items that are referenced in the footnotes, including some of my raw research notes spanning more than a decade, a host of

translations of now almost-disappeared ritual recitations, photographs and other materials that together have helped me to refine what I think I know. This, to me, is as important as some of the detailed content and argument of the book. What the whole exercise is ultimately attempting to achieve is a recognition of the depth and complexity of the history of this space, from which we may also be able to reflect outwards into other similar spaces, places, environments and networks that seem also to have been written out of history to date. To do that, we need to open out the framework in which our own understanding has emerged to enable others to enter into it.

In this respect, I am heartened by the comments that the two reviewers make about what they see as possible lines of future research that the arguments of the book raise. Already they have framed the lessons of the book not in terms of what it contains as a delimited analytical model, but as one that seeks to prompt new questions and challenges, which may provoke more expansive, detailed research independently of its immediate concerns. La Raw Maran is correct to point out that there are many histories that are absent from this book. One of them is surely that of a detailed political history of the KIA/KIO. Whether or not this is an achievable target at this time is debatable; it will be so at some point in the future. However, I am pleased that La Raw feels that my book has provided a clearer focus for what those other histories might comprise; this, again, was one of my ambitions in writing the book, which was never intended to be a totalizing account but rather a reflection upon how historical boundaries could be pushed beyond their current limits.

Farrelly is perfectly correct to imply that at the heart of the argument is the need to think about ethnicity and identity and its relationship to social cohesion (or in-cohesion) in Burma in new ways. We have to understand what the conditions are that make communal identities sharp, and what makes them soft; what are the conditions that might allow these apparently rigidly defended political identities to disperse naturally into a more complex social space in which ambiguities can flourish and enrich the nation, rather than challenge it. The assumption that guides me is that that space

should also include a greater understanding of the significance of the social and political world views of those who are not part of the mainstream or part of the majority. As Farrelly so pertinently concludes in his review, what is Burma without the Kachin? The Kachin peoples in all their varied and contested configurations, as with all the other complex social and political communities of which the modern Burmese nation is comprised, were intimately connected into national, regional and global developments historically. They should not be peripheralized from debates around Burma's modern history or from involvement in its central political processes.

In sum, I am deeply grateful to both the editors of *SOJOURN* and to the two reviewers for seeing some wider potential in this book and for including it in the journal's new Symposium feature. With this book I was hoping to establish more solid foundations for some of the other historical enquiries that will hopefully be built upon it, by myself and others in the future. If it can enrich understandings of the complexities of some of the communities that feel themselves to be "without history" in Burma and beyond, then it will have achieved at least one of its goals. Clearly, there is still a great deal more to be written and understood.

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NOTE

- * The time period suggested for the *gumlau* rebellion is roughly 1830–60 (see Sadan 2013, p. 102; Leach 1954, p. 198). Kachins believe that the problem of emerging class stratification started a century and a half earlier.

Leach elaborated on this in his classic *gumlau-gumsa* analysis. This problem is discussed in Maran (2007).

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