

CHIN AND BURMESE LANDSCAPES IN THE KABAW VALLEY OF NORTHWEST BURMA

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A number of years ago I was travelling in a valley in northwestern Burma, following a trail clearly marked on the Hind Series Map of 1894, when I suddenly realized I was lost. As I fixed my location on the ground, I found that I was somewhat to the west of the trail that I believed I was on, and further, the village I had just stopped in was not typically Burmese. In fact, it was what I had expected to see far off the beaten track in the hills. This incident really piqued my interest and sharpened my senses to the surrounding landscape.

Sometimes landscape clues can lead to interesting detective work. The Kabaw Valley where I was travelling had cultural features that were not readily explained, and the subsequent investigation, as set forth in this paper, reveals how a culturally diverse landscape evolved in a single valley due to strong historical forces; forces from both within and outside the valley.

The Kabaw Valley was largely uninhabited prior to the middle of the eighteenth century; thus, its cultural patterns are easily identifiable, having been etched in a relatively virgin settlement area. Although the cultural landscapes to be discussed are not unique to northwest Burma, their proximity to one another accentuates their differences.

The area under consideration is the southern half of the Kabaw Valley, which is marked at its northern extent by the village of Tamu (Figure 1). In this locale, cultural landscapes include two dominant groups: Burmese, as evidenced by Buddhist stupas and villages, and Chin, as indicated by Christian churches, dress and language. There are a few less visible cultures such as the Indian Manipur group, with its temple at Tamu, and the Shan group, which is evident in the more remote villages. Even the name of the valley, *Kabaw*, a Manipur word for Shan, reflects the presence of different cultures.¹

¹G.E.R. Grant Brown, *Upper Chindwin District*, Burma Gazetteer, vol. A (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationary, 1911; new impression 1960), p. 5.

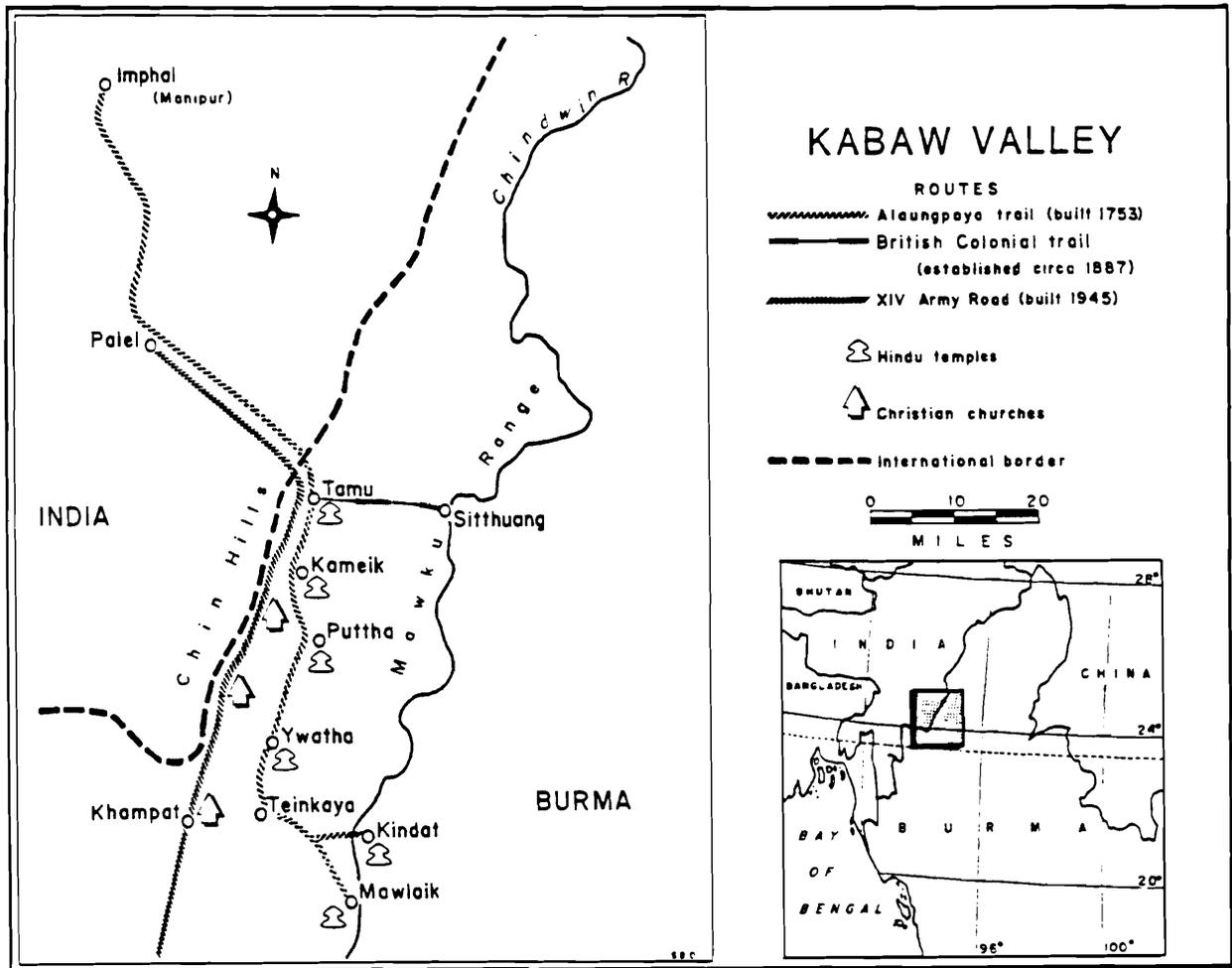


Figure 1: The Study Area

This paper is concerned with the persistence of cultural groups; the Burmese and Chin, which exist side-by-side in this small valley yet neither is indigenous to it. Information is necessary about cultures living in close proximity in order to understand the rich cultural heritage and rural geography of Southeast Asia. This study is based on my field notes, historical and current maps of the area, and the writings of a handful of other scholars who have had the opportunity to visit the valley.

THE KABAW VALLEY

The valley, about sixty miles long and ten to fifteen miles wide, is located along the Burma-Indian border some forty miles southwest of Imphal, India (Figure 1). The Chin Hills, a northern extension of the Arakan Yoma of western Burma, mark its western edge. The eastern margin is formed by the Mawku Range,² sometimes called the Ungoching Hills³ or Atwin Yoma.⁴ The Kale Valley, which lies immediately south of the Kabaw Valley, was settled first because it has better soils. The divide separating the two depressions is hardly discernable to travellers, but the northern border of latter is marked by a junction of the Chin Hills and Mawku Range.

The isolation of the Kabaw Valley from India is promoted by the Chin Hills, a system of ridges and valleys, consisting of a seemingly endless series of steep sided, heavily wooded, north-south ridges. The Mawku Range, somewhat lower and less extensive, is as steep and heavily wooded as the Chin Hills. There is a pass connecting Tamu and Palel, on the plains of Imphal, which begins at the foot of the Chin Hills about midway north and south in the valley. As a lowland connection between Burma and India, this pass gives strategic importance to the valley.

The drainage system of the Kabaw Valley is formed by the Yu River and its tributaries. From its headwaters, in the hills to the east of Imphal, the Yu flows down the valley to Puttha, where it bends east, cutting its way through a narrow gorge in the Mawku Range and then to its confluence with the Chindwin River, itself the major tributary of the Irrawaddy. Numerous small swamps, called *lwins*,⁵ dot the valley floor and impede traffic during the wet season. The prevalence of malaria in the valley has

²R.B. Pemberton, "Journey from Manipoor to Ava, and from thence across the Yooma Mountains to Cirracan (14 July-1 October 1830)," D.G.E. Hall, ed., *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 153, pt. 2 (Rangoon: December 1960), p. 95.

³*Imphal and Mawlaik Sheet: 1:250,000* (U.S. Army, Series U502, 1960).

⁴Prasad Bishashwar, *Reconquest of Burma*, Armed Forces in World War II, vol. 2 (Bombay, Orient Longmans, 1958), p. 160.

⁵J.H. Williams, *Elephant Bill* (Hammondshire, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1956), p. 185.

given it a false reputation of being almost uninhabitable.⁶

The original vegetation of the valley floor, which consisted of thick forest of hardwoods, has been reduced by farmers and loggers to small, scattered stands of kanyin (*Dipterocarpus*) and teak (*Tectona grandis*) in paddy fields.⁷ Most of the teak of commercial lumbering size has long since been cut and floated downriver to Rangoon.

The monsoon climate of the valley floor is moderated by elevation; extremes in temperatures are rare. Tamu, in a monsoonal regime, receives about ninety inches of rainfall annually.⁸ Although the climate is almost ideal for rice culture, poor drainage and related insect-borne health problems were so severe that paddy culture did not develop until after a malarial eradication program was instituted.

CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS

The settlement history of the Kabaw Valley is so filled with a mixture of fact and legend that sometimes separation of the two is all but impossible.⁹ However, the arrival of the Shan people during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is well-documented.¹⁰ The Shan held quasi-control over the valley, which was subjected to strong raiding parties from bases in both Burma and Manipur (the adjoining province in India), until 1752-1753 when the Burmese king Alaungpaya finally seized control.¹¹ Alaungpaya oversaw the building of a trail and a series of Burmese pagodas and villages along the

⁶The reputation of being heavily infested with malaria, is mentioned by Pemberton (op. cit., footnote 2), Brown (op. cit., footnote 1). According to General Slim soldiers from the Seventeenth Indian Division nicknamed it the "Valley of Death" (*Defeat Into Victory*, see footnote number 15, p. 83). Slim stated that he sent the East African Division along this route with proper precautions to disprove the long-standing bad reputation, yet malaria took its toll (p. 300). Williams (op. cit., footnote 5, p. 38) wrote that the malaria was bad but no worse than in other isolated valleys in the region. In more recent years, the World Health Organization has been active and partially successful in eradicating malaria in the valley.

⁷Brown, op. cit., footnote 1, p. 38.

⁸Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁹Ibid., pp. 31-32.

¹⁰D.G.E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia* (London: MacMillan and Co. Ltd., 1960), p. 133; Brown, op. cit., footnote 1, p. 10.

¹¹D.P. Singhal, *The Annexation of Upper Burma* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1960), pp. 11-13.

length of the valley, which left a strong Burmese imprint that has lasted to the present (Figure 1).¹²

As a result of its strategic importance, the Kabaw Valley was under nearly constant dispute between Burma and British India until the conclusion of the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885. The valley at that time came under the nominal control of the British, whose tutelage lasted until Burma's independence. Evidence of British presence on the landscape is reflected in the architecture of a small rest house at Tamu and a trail on the Chindwin River between Tamu and Sitthaung (Figure 1). Although the trail never carried more than horses and elephants before World War II, it did serve as the sole British transport link with the rest of Burma.¹³

The British and Alaungpaya trails were used as avenues of retreat by the British and countless refugees from Burma to India in 1942.¹⁴ This exodus left no visible imprint on the landscape; however, the return of the XIV Allied Army in 1945 left a lasting mark in the form of a motor road along the length of the valley (Figure 1). The road, straight and well-bridged, served as a supply route for the British during their reconquest of upper Burma.¹⁵ It was built to the west of Alaungpaya's trail, along the foothills of the Chin Hills. It bypasses the earlier established towns in the valley and runs from Tamu straight south through the Kabaw and Kale Valleys.

Most of the landscape changes mentioned above were precipitated by outside forces. Although the patterns resulting from these events developed over a period of several hundred years, their distinctive appearance has been preserved by the isolation of the region and physical attractiveness of the valley. The distinctiveness of the Burmese and Chin cultures is particularly evident today.

¹²*Amended List of Ancient Monuments in Burma* (Rangoon: Superintendent of Government Printing and Stationary, 1960), Sagaing District, Part I, p. 20. It is of interest to note that Hall (op. cit., footnote 10) and others give the year of 1758 as the date of the conquest and return; whereas, this Burmese source dates the conquest in 1753.

¹³Brown, op. cit., footnote 1, p. 15.

¹⁴Presad Bisheshwar, *The Retreat from India: Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939-1945* (Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1954), p. 346

¹⁵Field Marshall Sir William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1961), pp. 302-303.

THE BURMESE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The culture established along the route of advance of Alaungpaya's army in 1752-1753 is typically rural Burmese. The route leaves the Chindwin at Mawlaik and crosses the Mawku Range to Teinkaya at the southern end of the Kabaw Valley (Figure 1). Here it veers northward towards Tamu and the mountain pass to India, running along the slightly higher western bank of the Yu River. The only stupa-shaped Burmese Buddhist pagodas found in the southern end of the Kabaw Valley lie along this route. They are *Yedan Shwegu* and *Theyiteik-mo* in and near Tamu, respectively, and *Thanu-dun-baw* and *Teinkaya*, which are located south of Tamu. Two more pagodas, *Non-u-shin-boutha* at Kindat and *Paungcaw* at Mawlaik, were built by Alaungpaya where his road leaves the Mawku Range and crosses the Chindwin River east of the valley.¹⁶ These white and gold leafed structures, symbolic of Buddhism in the valley, are historical milestones that mark the path of Alaungpaya's army.

The villages built around these shrines and other villages (Ywatha, Puttha, and Kameik) scattered along the route are Burmese in all respects. They act as correlative evidence of military invasion and subsequent settlement. The inhabitants celebrate Buddhist holidays, send their children to *phongi kyaungs*, which are schools taught by Buddhist priests, and as in the small Burmese villages throughout Burma, they use the pagoda as their social center. Shops, stalls, and markets cluster around the compass point entrances of the pagodas. Saffron-robed Buddhist priests walk the streets of the villages in the early morning, collecting their food in the same manner as priests throughout Burma. The dress of the villagers includes no tribal patterns in their *longyi* skirts; only the latest patterns are worn, which are dictated by the fashion of the time. The two-wheeled cart, as in greater Burma, pulled by cattle or occasionally a water buffalo, is the dominant form of transportation of both cargo and passengers. The walls and the floors of the thatched roofed houses are made of woven bamboo mats. The more substantial buildings are of hand-sawed lumber with corrugated iron roofs. The local economy relies heavily on the cultivation of paddy rice but some cash can still be generated from the cutting of teak and other hardwoods. The paddies are established and cultivated in the same manner as those in the

¹⁶*Amended List of Ancient Monuments in Burma*, op. cit., footnote 12.

Irrawaddy Valley. The Burmese hand-rolled *cheroot* and Burmese manufactured cigarettes are much in evidence; few pipes are used. Personal modesty in bathing at the village well is no different than in any village in Burma proper. The rare alcoholic beverage is usually rum, which is shipped from a Mandalay distillery. All aspects that I could observe along this route was classical Burmese.

THE CHIN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The second dominant landscape pattern lies along the road built by the engineers of the XIV Army during the Allied reoccupation of Burma in 1945. The culture is basically of the Chin hill tribes. The "valley" Chin have evolved a cultural pattern slightly modified through their contact with the people who travel the road. The Chin aspect of the culture manifests itself in many ways; the older houses are traditional Chin, built on stilts, with a roof of thatch and no walls. However, newer houses reflect the influence of the large number of Chin who served in the Burma Army during World War II. Many such homes have been enclosed with walls constructed of bamboo mats covered with a mud plaster. Christian churches in each of the villages replace Buddhist pagodas, which are typical of the rest of the valley. The common church is a small wooden building with a wooden cross mounted either over the door or at the peak of the roof.

Dress is typically Chin, bright blankets are worn by the young and shorter *longyis* are worn by the older people. Decorative designs on the blankets reflect the particular Chin tribe. The inevitable smoking implements is a wooden pipe and some are carved with exquisite designs. The Chin have harnessed water power, in one instance with a lever and balance powered hammer and in another with an undershot wheel powering no less than six cam-operated hammers. Other aspects of Chin culture are reflected in the methods by which people carry loads. The traditional Chin method of carved neck yokes and head bands attached to a single basket in the middle of the back replaces the Burmese (originally Chinese) two-basket balance pole carried across the shoulder or shoulders. The baskets themselves reflect a particular tribe; for example, the tapered basket with an external frame is used by the Lushai, whereas the more square basket is that of the Huka tribe. In the villages along this route festivals are held to celebrate events connected with animistic beliefs or with Christian holidays. One example of an

animist ceremony is celebrating the killing of a rather large python. This involves feasting on the serpent and washing it down with a beverage fermented in earthenware pots.

Technological differences from the traditional Chin culture are evident in the replacement of the slash and burn cultivation, typical of Chin hill people, by permanent, though crude, paddy fields. In addition, the traditional, rather scanty, dress of the natives has disappeared, either because of missionary influence or contacts with the more modest Burmese, although such modesty does not prevail when the Chin bath. The culture is distinctly Chin, modified somewhat by contacts with earlier and present-day Christian missionaries, westerners (principally British army and civil servants) and the Burmese.

CONCLUSIONS

The sequence of settlement and resulting differences in culture in the Kabaw Valley are obvious and easily explained, but the persistence of the differences, in such close proximity, appears at first glance to be a bit more difficult. As the paper suggests, there is little interaction socially, educationally, or economically between the Burmese and Chins in the Valley and there will be little change unless the Burma government initiates it. If change should occur it will be in the Chin villages as the government has made Buddhism the state religion. This outside influence is impeded by poor connections to and great distance from Rangoon. Thus the peoples of the Kabaw Valley will continue to live side-by-side, keeping their different identities for the foreseeable future and contributing to the rich cultural diversity of Southeast Asia.