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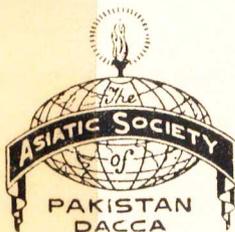
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A NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF THE MARMA CHIEFS
OF BANDERBAN

Lorenz G. Löffler

In his most remarkable book "Les Paysans Arakanais du Pakistan Oriental", Lucien Bernot gives the fullest account of the Marma Chiefs of Banderban hitherto published. For his account Bernot had mainly to rely on the oral traditions of the people, since the archives of the Banderban dynasty are said to have been lost. When J. P. Mills during his tour in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1926 wanted to see them, he was told that the archives had been destroyed by fire. Again, when L. Bernot asked for them in 1952, he was informed that they had been stolen some years ago from the Chittagong station. Ought we to suggest that somebody may have been interested in the disappearance of these documents ?

Informal oral tradition tends to recast the events of history into stories, and Bernot mentions flowery tales which embellish the tradition of the early chiefs of Banderban. From an ethno-psychological point of view it may be regretted that Bernot did not record the different versions his informants gave him. From a historical point of view Bernot's attempt to again reduce these tales to reliable history is, without doubt, a genuine scientific endeavour as well, and it is with this same intention that I approach the necessity of revising some of his data. At the same time, however, by comparison of the two versions, I perceive an opportunity to have a closer look at some of the factors which might cause oral traditions to rearrange the facts of history.

above. }” Rs. 731 in 1790, and Rs. 703 in 1791. More than *1/2* Rs. 3000 were collected from other small chiefs north of the Karnaphuli (Ricketts 1847 : 79). From the fact that Sa Taing Phru made the contract it does not necessarily follow that it was also he who was the Bohmong (as the Marma Chiefs of Banderban are called), and we may doubt Mackenzie's conclusion (1884 : 333) that “from 1790 to 1840 the Phru family, which ruled from the Karnaphuli to the Naaf, had been under one hand, Satung Phru.” The settlement reports of 1804 and thereafter style him as “son of Kumla Phroo, Poangree”, i. e., son of the Bohmong-kri, the big chief. The same report gives Sunker Nindee (is this *Sangu nadi* ?) as Kong Hla Phru's place of residence.

In the years following 1804 “at times Satung Phroo, the eldest son of Kumla Phroo, has alone engaged for the whole Mehal (South of the Chittagong river) and at times all the brothers have entered into engagements together, the assessment gradually increasing, till in 1827 it became Rupees 4,564-1-8, since when it has been stationary. So long as his strength lasted, Satung Phroo was chief manager of the Mehal, but some time previous to his death, which took place in 1840, becoming very infirm, he made over the management to his brother, Om Phroo. Up to this period all lived together at Bindabun”, i.e. Banderban (Ricketts 1847 : 81-82). Sa Taing Phru died at an age of 77, and he left no issue. *1/2*

Correspondingly, we read in Hutchinson (1909 ; 29) : “A settlement was made with Sathanfru by which he paid Rs. 4,600 annually as revenue for the Kapas mahal. Bohmong Sathanfru died childless in 1840, and there was a dispute between his three younger brothers Momfru, Thoilafru, and Satafru, finally necessitating the interference of Mr. Henry Ricketts, the Commissioner of Chittagong,” Although this statement seems to indicate that Hutchinson knew of the latter's report, we may doubt that he really read it. According to Ricketts (1847 : 81) only “Thoyla” (i. e. Thwi Hla Phru) was actually Sa Taing Phru's brother, while Mong Phru (Hutchinson's Momfru and Rickett's Mun Phroo)

The primary events which we are concerned with happened a little more than 120 years ago, i. e., between 1840 and 1847. These years were a period of some consequence for the Marma Chiefs, and the repercussions are to be felt, as Bernot has demonstrated, still today. 1840 was the last year of a chief whose name is variously given as Sa Taing Phru (Bernot 1967) Sathanfru (Hutchinson 1909), Satung Phru (Mackenzie 1884), Satung Phroo (Ricketts 1847), and Taktangphyoo (Phayre 1841). He was the second of those chiefs whose authenticity can be confirmed by English sources, the first being Kong Hla Phru.

Kong Hla Phru is reported to have lived from 1827 to 1811 (Bernot 1965 : 88). In 1774, according to Hutchinson (1909 ; 28), "owing to oppression from the Arakan court, he fled with his followers to the Chittagong District, which had been ceded to the British, and established himself at Ramu, Edghar, and on the Matamuri river, finally settling at Maxikhal on the Sangu river in 1804. Bohmong Konglafu died in 1819 and was succeeded by his eldest son Sathanfru who in 1822 removed his residence to Bandarban." Hutchinson's "Maxikhal" may stand for Maiskhal on the mouth of the Matamuri ; the first residence on the Sangu was Bajalia (Bernot 1967 87). And it was probably already prior to 1804 that they settled there ; MacRae mentions Kong Hla Phru in 1801 as "a *Mug* chief, commonly known by the name of the *Comlahpore Raja*, who is settled among the hills in the southern parts of this district" (MacRae 1801 : 196) He seems to have been first mentioned in the revenue papers of 1789, and "it would appear that previous to that date the revenue paid by the Rajas and others was received in cotton through a contractor, who enjoyed a monopoly of the produce" (Ricketts 1847 : 79).

In 1789 the Office of the Contractor for Hill Cotton was abolished, and Government asked the Collector to "fix a moderate jumma payable in money by the Joomeeas or zemindars for their respective Districts." In the statements for 1790 and 1791 Jan Baksh Khan, the Chakma Chief, is assessed Rs. 1851 and "Satung Phroo (son of Kumla Phroo, the Chief mentioned

above.)” Rs. 731 in 1790, and Rs. 703 in 1791. More than Rs. 3000 were collected from other small chiefs north of the Karnaphuli (Ricketts 1847 : 79). From the fact that Sa Taing Phru made the contract it does not necessarily follow that it was also he who was the Bohmong (as the Marma Chiefs of Banderban are called), and we may doubt Mackenzie's conclusion (1884 : 333) that “from 1790 to 1840 the Phru family, which ruled from the Karnaphuli to the Naaf, had been under one hand, Satung Phru.” The settlement reports of 1804 and thereafter style him as “son of Kumla Phroo, Poangree”, i. e., son of the Bohmong-kri, the big chief. The same report gives Sunker Nindee (is this *Sangu nadi*?) as Kong Hla Phru's place of residence. 1/21

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was the son of another brother (whose name is given as Charee by Ricketts), and the same may be true for "Satafru" in case we may identify him with Ricketts' "Satungnia."

A rather different version of what happened after Sa Taing Phru's death is given by Bernot (1967 : 90-91). According to his informants, it was Gong Ba who was proposed by his brothers and parallel cousins for the chieftainship. In the genealogical chart drawn by Bernot (1967 : 96), Sa Taing Phru's younger brothers (Thwi Hla Phru, Ong Phru, etc.), although no names are given, are put one generation below him and appear as his (only) younger brother's sons. Gong Ba is the son of the eldest of these "nephews." Among Gong Ba's parallel cousins Bernot gives the names of Kong Hla Ngyo, Mong Phru, and Mong Ngyo. They are said to have made Gong Ba pay heavily for the honour they ceded to him by claiming about Rs. 800 each annually, and the designated Bohmong had to spend on them his part of the tax he collected. When in 1847 the British decided that in his stead Kong Hla Ngyo should be the representative, disputes became even/acrid. The followers of Gong Ba finally emigrated from Banderban to the Matamuri side, while those of Kong Hla Ngyo left for the Karnaphuli side.

Hutchinson does not mention Gong Ba nor does Mills in his Report of 1926. This man, however, was known to Ricketts and it is from him that we learn that "Gumba died 4 years ago", i. e., in 1843. He had a brother, Kong Hla, whose age was given as 30, and their father was Thwi Hla Phru, aged 77 in 1847, the brother next in age to Sa Taing Phru. Next to Thwi Hla Phru came (after a brother "Keeja" who died many years ago leaving no child) Ong Phru, who managed the affairs after Sa Taing Phru's death from 1840 to 1846, when he himself died, aged 67, leaving his two sons Kong Hla Ngyo (45) and "Satungnia" (30). Next to Ong Phru came "Charee" who died in 1845 aged 62, leaving his sons Mong Phru (29) and "Saunugnia, alias Mangoo" (25), who, no doubt, is Bernot's Sa Na Yo commonly known as Mong Ngyo. The last of Kong

Hla Phru's sons, "Ram", though still alive in 1847, was dumb. He had one son, "Charung Phroo", aged 27.

This makes it sufficiently plain why neither Hutchinson nor Mills should mention Gong Ba : he died during the regency of Ong Phru while his father Thwi/Phru was still alive. About the rivalry of these two we learn from Ricketts (1847 : 82) that "Om Phroo was a harsh ill-tempered man ; Thoyla Phroo could not brook the treatment he received, and leaving Bindabun he established himself to the South in the forests Eastward of thanna Chakerrea, on the Meetamooree river." As to the sum of Rs. 800, which Gong Ba should have paid to his parallel cousins, it appears from the settlement statements that this was the sum paid, since 1809 and during the lifetime of Sa Taing Phru, by his younger brothers Thwi Hla and Ong Phru, who probably had taken charge of the Southern (Matamuri) and Northern (Karnaphuli) areas, because, according to the agreement of 1847, Mong Phru (son of "Charee") and Kong Hla (son of Thwi Hla) were "each to have the collection of the tax payable by certain tribes, as tehseeldars under the manager" (Ricketts 1847 : 88). Actually it was Thwi Hla Phru who still claimed his part of the tax, even though he was 77 years of age and very infirm, but his (after the death of Gong Ba) eldest son Kong Hla was so ill-tempered that "none would willingly submit to his taking a leading part in the management" (Ricketts 1847 : 82).

While Thwi Hla and his sons settled in Chakaria, after the death of Ong Phru in 1846, "the sons of Charee Phroo, bringing with them their dumb uncle Ram and his son Charung, established themselves on the Kuptai river", a branch of the Karnaphuli, leaving in Banderban only the two sons of Ong Phru, of whom the elder, Kong Hla Ngyo, claimed the chieftainship. According to Ricketts, Kong Hla Ngyo was "the person of the family most acquainted with business", while Mong Phru who had settled on the Kaptai river "the most civilised, and best educated among them" (Ricketts 1847 : 82). Finally, it was

the old man Thwi Hla Phru who by his vote prompted Ricketts to appoint Kong Hla Ngyo.

These notes may be sufficient to show that the version given by Bernot's informants disagrees with what actually happened. One point, however, can be fully confirmed, viz., that there was a bitter dispute about the distribution of the money collected as tax, and Ricketts remarked (1847 : 85) : "One thing is certain, that any system of sharing must be attended with interminable disputes. I have discussed every mode of sharing we could think of with the parties, and all were deemed objectionable." These quarrels, however, did not arise out of sheer greediness. They resulted from British policy, as did their counterpart, an increasing extortion to which the dependents of these sub-collectors of tax were subjected. People began to leave the Chittagong Hills for Arakan : "That emigration to Arracan has taken place no one doubts. That all the members of the family are in great distress now, there is no doubt either, for we have in order to the realization of last year's revenue, been obliged to attach and sell their personal property, and the question for individual responsibility for debts incurred by the family is one cause of the feud existing between them" (Ricketts 1847 : 86).

It was, however, not this deplorable situation but raids on the villages in the "Kapas Mahal," as the Hill Tracts were called, which caused the British to interfere. Even though they admittedly had no knowledge of the country, they held these raids to be encroachments on their territory and they suspected that the quarrelling members of the "Phru" family might have instigated these forays on each other's subjects. Government officials tried to confirm their own view of the matter by maintaining that in the years following the agreement of 1847 no raids occurred, beginning anew only after Mr. Ricketts had left Chittagong (Mackenzie 1884 : 338, 340). In reality, these attacks nevertheless continued (Mackenzie 1884 : 335-36), the only difference being that since 1847 the raiders were identified as "Shindus," i. e., the Lakher and Poi of later ethnographical reports. In 1854 the Superintendent of Police "exonerated

both the Phru Chief and the Chakma Rani from all complicity", since "the whole of these forays were believed to be the work of the Shindus or tribes from the south" (Mackenzie 1884 : 338). Still, two years later, in 1856, Captain Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Arakan, again expressed his doubts whether all the raids could really be attributed to the Shindus, and, lacking further evidence, repeated the old suspicion that the members of the Bohmong's family or their subjects were more or less involved in these raids (Mackenzie 1884 : 532).

No notice was apparently taken of the fact that already Kong Hla Ngyo's "predecessors had established certain stockades in the south on the principal lines of route from Arracan... viz, Toba Cherra, Painsal Cherra, Purdah Cherra, and Capabtye Cherra" (Mackenzie 1884 : 334), to be identified with the eastern affluents of the Sangu : Prodak (Mauza No. 373) and Painsu (Mauza No. 350), and the southern affluent of Karnaphuli : Kaptai (Mauza No. 329). As to "Toba," I am not certain where to locate it. Owing to the heavy taxation imposed by the British, the Marma chiefs lacked the money to repair and man these forts any longer, and the forays before 1847 occurred exactly in the neighbourhood of these places (as may be seen from the map prepared by Ricketts). From the traditions collected by Spielman (1966) we know today that 1830-1840 were the years when the Bawm-Zo (the Bunjogi of former reports) consolidated themselves under their leader Liankung, and finally settled in the Noapatong area (Mauza No. 345). Liankung himself was a "Shindu" who, before entering the Hill Tracts, had attacked and looted a Khumi village in Arakan (Phayre 1841 : 708).

Some raids committed by the eastern tribes were doubtlessly instigated by disgruntled subjects of the Mahal Chiefs, who took refuge with these tribes and led their forces against their own countrymen (cf. Mackenzie 1884 : 343), while, after 1847, hitherto independent tribes and clans, on which the Bohmong previously had no hold, revolted against the imposition of tax (Bernot

1867 : 91). This again was a consequence of the British policy, since the "Phrus" had been the only "malguzars", i. e. assessed landholders, south of the Karnaphuli before 1847, and Ricketts, when alleviating their tax burden, at the same time explicitly acknowledged their rights as sole managers of the territory, thereby initiating the change from the old tribal to the modern territorial system of administration (Mills 1926). For the tribal leaders this decision meant that they had to accept the officially recognized supremacy of the Bohmong, reducing them to "tahsildars." A certain control over the tribes themselves, however, was not established until 1866, when the British replaced the Bohmong's frontier guards by their own police force.

At the same time they replaced Kong Hla Ngyo by his parallel cousin Mong Phru, whom we have already seen favourably mentioned by Ricketts. This well educated man from the Karnaphuli side, however, is less favourably characterized today. According to Bernot's informants he was a man of rather small capacity. After his death, in 1875, the quarrels started anew until the British appointed Sa Na Yo, commonly called Mong Ngyo, who was according to Bernot either Mong Phru's cross-cousin (1967 : 91) or his parallel cousin (1967 : 96). From Ricketts (1847 : 81), however, it appears that Mong Ngyo was the younger brother of his predecessor Mong Phru, and this relationship is also mentioned by Hutchinson (1909 : 29). From Bernot (1967 : 92) we learn that Mong Ngyo had the support of Ong Kyaw Phru, a son of Gong Ba, who resided in the Matamuri region and was wealthy enough to advance the revenue which Mong Ngyo had to pay in the first year of his Bohmongship. In exchange, for the years to come, Ong Kyaw Phru would retain a part of the taxes collected by him in the Matamuri region. This indicates that the role of the "tahsildars" attested already by the first settlement reports and confirmed by Ricketts, was still important. While in the Chakma Circle, Kalindi Rani had broken the power of her Dewans by multiplying their number, in Bohmong Circle a final check on the influence of the Chief's own relatives in their office as tahsildars

was not effected until 1900, when Government began with the formation of the Mauza and the appointment of headmen. system

Bernot's informants maintained that Ong Kyaw Phru might have claimed the Bohmongship for himself, had he not married a Bengali wife. Apparently this claim could have been based on the principles of primogeniture. Lieutenant Gordon, however, who was ordered to collect the relevant informations, "reported that succession to the office of Bohmong was governed by fitness and age, and not by primogeniture. This finding was accepted both by Government and the Bohmong's family" (Mills 1826) and Mong Ngyo was invested. He lived up to an age of nearly 80 years and died in 1902. His successor, Cho Hla Phru, was his brother's son, perhaps Mong Phru's, the former Bohmong's son, but neither Hutchinson nor Bernot gives any name. The son of Mong Ngyo succeeded to his parallel cousin. His death, in 1923, left the "Karnaphuli line" without a suitable successor, and the Bohmongship reverted to Thwi Hla Phru's descendants, viz., to Kyaw Zen Phru, a zamindar of Garjania, who, according to Bernot's genealogical chart, was the son of Ong Kyaw Phru, the former tahsildar. 19

Kyaw Zen Phru's son of his first wife became Bohmong after him. When he died in 1959, his half-brother's claim was challenged by a descendant of Mong Ngyo's (Karnaphuli) line, who, however, had no success and was even defeated by a member of the Matamuri line during the last elections for the chairmanship of the Basic Democracies. Although the late Bohmong was anything but loved by his subjects, the recent events may be taken to show that, today at least, people are in favour of the representatives of the Matamuri line. And the modern version of the Bohmong's genealogy, as compiled by Bernot, when compared with the data to be found in Ricketts' report, may be seen to confirm this view. In favour of the Matamuri line, oral tradition has revised factual history in the following instances: 14

(1) The father of Gong Ba, Thwi Hla Phru, has been shifted from his position of a junior brother (who according to Marma

oral tradition in such a way as to provide for a more solid foundation of the ruling Chief's position that the mere facts would, in the eyes of his people, seem to warrant. Be it emphasized: in the eyes of his people. For anybody else the Chief's position is justified as it is, quite irrespective of whether the Marma themselves prefer this or that version of his genealogy. From a political point of view there is nothing objectionable in this deviation from historical facts. On the contrary, it will be perfectly acceptable as long as it serves to harmonize the people's relations with their chiefs.

It would be an anthropologically interesting task to pursue the development of new versions like these. Bernot has collected several of them, and since he could compare them with the data given by Hutchinson (Mills, unfortunately, indicates the relationship degrees only for the Bohmongs up to Sa Taing Phru), he probably discarded the most deviant accounts. They might, however, not only testify to the informant's relative ignorance in these matters, but also add to our understanding of the motivations which guide adjustments of this kind. Until now we have no confirmation that the chiefs themselves actively propagated or still propagate a new version which might, in the eyes of their people, give more weight to their claims. We recall the disappearance of the archives when Mills and Bernot made their enquiries, but, if these documents or copies of them had actually been preserved, we must also take into account a general reluctance to open one's archives, of whatever importance, to strangers whose intentions might seem dubious. At any rate, Ricketts' report contains the principal data necessary for the reconstruction of the genealogy.

Let me conclude by expressing a hope that this study may encourage sociologists to undertake a follow-up study in the field and to explore more closely the mechanisms at work in the process of changing the oral traditions of the past in order to legalize the moral conditions of the present.

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