

THE ENIGMATIC CLANS OF THE PALAUNG:  
KINSHIP CLUSTERS AND CONTINUITY IN UPPER BURMA

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**Abstract**

This essay tries to bring some clarity to the notion of ‘clan’ as employed by early British ethnographers and administrators of Upper Burma, especially with regard to the Palaung population of the Shan States. Several aspects of the ethnographic records of a hundred years ago are examined and discussed. It is suggested that in terms of positivist sociological morphology the actual inconsistent social formations existing at that time remain very elusive. It is suggested that they may be better understood as being formed in processes in which a common, ‘inward-looking’, cultural template as to social continuity was, when socially realized, influenced pragmatically by varying discourses and changing realities. The social clusters that resulted showed significant diversity, while still modally honouring the template.

**Key words:** Palaung, Upper Burma, clanship, symbology, modal analysis

**Introduction**

In this study in the genre of historical anthropology, I wish to draw attention to some features of social morphology that characterized the Palaung people in the ethnically pluralistic tracts known as Upper Burma. The study offers a close reading of existing ethnography assembled about a hundred years ago. It will be argued that in order to understand Palaung social clusters as they appeared in the terrain at that time, we have to get the drift of how cultural templates were affected by conventional social discourses that handled the real and social worlds, and also by factually changing circumstances. I will suggest that pragmatic complexities and complications distorted their cultural meanings as the templates were translated into social reality.

Cultural imperative templates can be seen as cognitive strategies that are intuited as exhortations as to what should be done in conventionalized phases of social life. Such impulses contribute to a continuing relative conformity in social life over time and result in recognized morals and ‘traditions’. However, in a realist world circumstances change, and so

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the stream of life will seek adjustments. Traditions are adjusted in local situations of stress and change and come out differently. This broad base-line will provide analytical possibilities helpful in gaining some understandings of the character of Palaung ways of forming their society.

The focus in this essay is thus on a constellation of people known as the Palaung, who were, and still are, widely distributed over Upper Burma. Around 1900 they were scattered over all of this vast expanse, but with concentrations in the areas of Tawngpeng, Hsipaw, Hsenwi (in the Northern Shan States) and Kodaung (in the Ruby Mines District). In the contemporary political situation many Palaung have moved into Thailand. The Palaungs have long been regarded as great wanderers, and small settlements were also scattered over all parts of the Southern Shan States, where they were found on the higher ranges in the landscape (Scott 1900: 439). For instance, it was reported that in the late nineteenth century there were also a few Palaung villages in Kengtung State, and these were then known to have been there for many years. These settlers believed their forefathers came from Tawngpeng (Scott 1900: 493, citing notes taken by G.C.B. Stirling). There is also a Palaung minority in Yunnan, China, where they are known as De'ang.

'Palaung' is a classification of Burmese origin, their own ethnic designation formerly being Rumai, and today Ta-ang. In this text I shall use the first label, Palaung, thus following an old anthropological tradition.<sup>2</sup> The term 'Rumai' has an uncertain status, as we also learn that those so designated constituted a large and important 'clan' scattered through the various Shan States (Milne 1924: 2). In the enumeration of the *Census Report* of 1901, the total number of Palaung at that time was returned as 56,866 (Lowis 1906: 126). The 1921 census gave the corresponding population of the Northern Shan States as 105,325 (Bennison 1933: 182), indicating mass immigration from China in these years.

As already indicated, they have been known for their tradition of situating their villages at a considerable elevation, and this remoteness in location is certainly a reason why the early ethnography of these settlements is somewhat less rich than those referring to many of their neighbours. In their research endeavours, the earliest ethnographers, British administrators of remarkable anthropological and linguistic leanings, were much engaged in tracing the history of the movements of peoples from southern China into Burmese territory. Much of this historical reconstruction work was informed by comparative study of the various languages spoken by the peoples of the area and their possible connections, which formed hypothetical

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed tracing of the shifting names and labels of the various ethnic groups that are subsumed under the designation 'Palaung', see Deepadung 2011.

families whose members were more similar. This early involvement with ethnic history and the search for language connections will not be addressed further in the present essay.

As to appearance, we learn from the early accounts that Palaung men invariably wore the dress used by the dominant lowland male Shan population. The women, however, were said to have had picturesque costumes consisting of a hood and coat, together with a skirt and leggings of cloth (Lowis 1906: 126). The patterns of female dress varied with location and may have served the polyethnic scene as an index to tell whence they and their wearers originated. The ethnography provides detailed descriptions.

### **Divisions and Palaung Identity**

Among the majority Burmese population, the Palaung ‘tribes’ were commonly divided into two classes, the ‘true’ Palaung and the Palè. This line of demarcation, however, was not always admitted as socially accurate by the locals of some areas, and we learn that in Kodaung District people actually stated that any such distinction would be fanciful and incorrect. In other areas the difference seems to have actually existed, being recognized and seemingly going deep. Broadly speaking, it has been argued that the Palaung proper lived on the higher hills and cultivated little but tea, while the Palè settled lower down and often grew more rice than tea (Scott 1900: 486). We also learn that the Palaung affected to look down upon the Palè. However, we are also told that, apart from monetary considerations, there seems to have been no real ground for this assumption of Palaung superiority. It was thought almost certain that the ‘proper’ Palaung, though possibly descendants of what once was a ruling class, were ‘by no means such pure-blooded [descendants]... as the poorer and more backward clans who they profess to despise’ (Lowis 1906: 17).

We are informed that in the Kingdom of Tawngpeng there was a constellation of people known as Pato Ru, who claimed to be the Palaung proper, and that their village of Tawngma, south of Namhsan, the capital of this traditional Shan-type realm, claimed to be the oldest in the State. It was asserted that this ‘clan’ originally consisted entirely of relatives of the ruling house, who kept up a jealous exclusiveness and did not marry out of their own clan. It could be added that the King (or Chief) of Tawngpeng belonged to the Tawngma kinship cluster (Milne 1924: 20).

Apparently this Pato Ru community claimed at one time a variety of privileges and distinctions. They alone of the Palaung men wore colours in their dress, all men of the other clans were being restricted to plain black and white. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, an ethnographer noted that these differences had vanished (Scott 1900: 486). What

we seem to encounter in this backward-looking description is a projection and thus a reflection of a dominant Shan-type social order with a sprawling ‘aristocratic’ class, as contrasted to the commoners of the realm. Mary Milne (1924: 24) mentions a ‘royal family’, people descended from the seven sons of an ‘early chief’ (K’un Mao), who considered themselves of better birth and higher standing than the rest of the people, that is, those clans that could claim no royal ancestors. Milne certainly refers to Namhsan, the capital of Tawnpeng, where her fieldwork was based. It seems certain that her observations here refer to the group known to others as Pato Ru.

In the capital of Namhsan there were also other constellations of people with similar claims to high rank, for instance, the Hpawng-myo, who were a branch of the Sam-long kinship cluster and mostly of the ruling class (Scott 1900: 484). Furthermore, the ethnographer stresses that of, the various Palaung kinship clusters, the Katurr was the most conspicuous. It was probably the wealthiest in the State of Tawngpeng, and the family of the *Sawbwa* or ‘King’ of Tawngpeng belonged to it. This information thus contrasts with Milne’s note that the royal family were from a place called Tawngma, dominated by the constellation Patu Ru. Perhaps these latter clansmen formed a subdivision of the Katurr, maybe an inner core group. Again, it was perhaps just a matter of double naming.<sup>3</sup>

The township of Namhsan, the *Sawbwa*’s capital, above which towered its wooden whitewashed *haw* or palace, was a Katurr centre, as was also Saram (or Zeyan), a flourishing village a few miles to the north-west of Namhsan and, on the same central mountain ridge, across the deep wooded valley to the west, Kyaukpyu. The Katurr cluster numbered probably about three thousand members, who were all collected into a very compact area in the immediate neighbourhood of the capital. It was quite exceptional to find a Katurr living in a non-Katurr village (Lowis 1906: 22).

What is of importance here is that, among the Palaung in general, the main social distinctions observed and applied seem to have given rise to clusters known in the anthropological jargon of a hundred years ago as ‘clans’. Clan belonging was also reflected in village settlements. In many areas, each locality and the main clan residing there were, in turn, associated with one or other of the basic categories Palaung or Palè. The differences and relationships between these two broad classes of the population are not obvious. In an

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<sup>3</sup> Here there is a confusion in the sources that cannot be sorted out. Tawngma is both a name of an old village with two important pagodas and a clan — that is, with reference to those residents who lived there (Lowis 1906: 26-7). The very same clan also appeared under the names of Katurr and Patu Ru.

unknown early history, one of them may have been pristine settlers, the other being late-comers in the ongoing migration from southern China into Burma.

### **Kinship Clusters known as Clans**

The early ethnography, written by observant scholarly inclined British administrators, describes Palaung settlements in terms of clans. However, may we ask what was actually meant by a 'clan' — and this is not so evident. It is said that

The unit to which analysis carries us back is the originally endogamous clan, known by a distinctive name, wearing a distinctive dress and confined in the first instance to a particular locality. ... Each clan is distributed over several villages, sometimes adjoining one another, sometimes, in the case of the Palés [sic!] far apart, but even where the separation is wide ... there seems to be an unmistakeable feeling of clannishness which will prompt the residents of a village which has little or no intercourse with a neighbouring village of another clan to go a two or three days' journey over the hills to attend a function of some distant clan village. Beyond this point, however the spirit of cohesion does not appear to extend. Even in Tawnpeng, here the conditions are especially favourable to union, the clans are separate unions with hardly anything in common and the administration is carried out largely on their own account by the minor village officials who are chosen by their own villagers and are to a great extent independent of, and have comparatively little recourse to, the central authority at Namhsan. (Lowis 1906: 20-1)

The first proposition found in this text is thus that Palaung social clusters of relatives were clans. What made these communities distinctive? Apparently the presence of clans characterized a society which was rather different from that of the Shan population that dominated the area. In general, the latter were not particularly keen on linear ancestry as a principle of social organization, apart from the lines of descent pertaining to aristocratic and royal families. To the Shan, rice land and rice cultivation were essential to notions of basic belonging. In Shan local organization, it was the land-holding itself that formed the element of structural continuity. The land-owning group was conceived as all the descendants of the first owner, who usually acquired his tenancy either by squatting or by being granted it by the ruling king in return for services rendered. The Shan had an open bilateral kinship system. There were many ways of being related. In practice, the ownership and control of land were confined to those descendants of the original owner who continued to reside that land on and draw a livelihood from it. Strictly speaking, rights in land could not be sold. The residents in a rural settlement were related to each other through their similar relationships to the land they cultivated (Bird 1897: 22; Woodthorpe 1897: 13-28; Leach 1954: 1, 30, 32, 213).

On the other hand, we know that the neighbouring hill-dwellers, the Kachin, gave much thought to linear kin relationships stretching back in time when defining their social

belonging. In his famous research among the Kachin in Upper Burma, Edmund Leach found that a Kachin clan was a patrilineage which was not thought of as being a segment of any other patrilineage of greater depth or span (Leach 1954: 128). Leach uses the word 'clan' to denote a lineage of maximal scale. The Kachins considered their total society to be composed of some seven or eight groupings of this type. Was Palaung social organization, described by the early British ethnographers as a conglomerate of clans, something reminiscent of the organization of Kachin society?

The sources are not very explicit concerning the structure of the Palaung kinship clusters. We can glean, though, that the patriline was a carrying principle in consociation. We learn that at birth children of either sex were welcomed, but 'males are preferred, as they are said to continue the family'. When a child was born the father was always near by, but no other men were present. The presence of the father seems to have expressed the agnatic<sup>4</sup> link, the father being in the process of taking possession of his new child. Again, we learn that in the village of Manton in Kedaung District only male children inherit (Cameron 1912: xxi; Milne 1924: 25). In general, in Palaung marriages, future residence for the newly wed was patrilocal for the husband and virilocal for the wife (Cameron 1912: xx, xiii, xvi, xxi; Lowis 1906: 11; Milne 1924: 25). Such observations certainly indicate a customary inclination among the members of a kinship cluster to reckon their belonging in terms of chains of fatherhood. It seems certain that in Palaung 'aristocratic' circles agnatic kinship was used as a mark of distinction, but then an agnatic leaning in the reckoning of kinship was also shared with commoners and their own organization of social continuity. So, from what little we know, the Palaung seem in certain respects to have favoured a superficially Kachin-like kinship system, but perhaps with a strong influence of Shan aristocratic thinking in certain circles. The kingdom of Tawngpeng seems to have been organized along Shan political lines, while the *saopaw* king was recognized as being of the prominent Palaung Katurr/Tawngma clan.<sup>5</sup>

Agnatic kinship does not seem to have been articulated in terms of ancestral veneration. The Palaung had been Buddhists for a considerable time, and their eschatology considered death in an entirely different mode of thinking. Perhaps, at a distant period in time, they had a more pronounced idea of lineal kinship ties leading into the past, embracing the dead. Be that

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<sup>4</sup> We learn that Palaung myth has it that 'a long time ago' the men and not the women bore the children (Milne 1924: 284). This myth may be indexical in this context, but the point seems too vague to be further elaborated on here.

<sup>5</sup> There is no occasion here for a discussion of political organization within the space of this article. In Tawngpeng it was much the same as that of a Shan state, but the administration at village level differed in important respects from that of the Shan model (Leach 1954: 56-57).

as it may, at the time of the ethnographic records we learn that ancestor worship, as practised by the Chinese, for instance, was unknown among the Palaungs.

However, it is said that sometimes prayers were directed to the spirits of dead parents in case they had not eaten of the fruit of forgetfulness, a reference to an idea which was one of their Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation (Milne 1924: 356). The circumstance that Palaung residential houses had a shrine on their front verandas that not only displayed a small image of the Buddha, but was also regarded as a place for the worship of the 'house-spirits' (Milne 1924: 183), suggests the possibility that these house spirits were deceased earlier inhabitants of the house. Here we must pre-empt what will follow below. It will be argued that basic Palaung belonging was focused on residences. Being a house-based society, their notions of ancestry would be likely to have been directed towards former residents of their own houses, rather than being explicitly defined by ascending kinship. There is no direct evidence for this, however.

### **Endogamy and Clans**

In his account, Lowis suggests that Palaung clans were 'originally endogamous'. The evidence for this statement seems somewhat elusive.

We have already mentioned the important Pato Ru kin cluster dominating the capital township of Namhsan in Tawngpeng, whose inhabitants claimed to be the most genuine Palaung. The Pato Ru were also the masters of their own village of Tawngma, south of the state capital. They seem to have conformed with Lowis' general proposition on endogamy. However, there was a political aspect to this. It was asserted that this kinship cluster originally consisted entirely of relatives of the ruling house, who kept up a jealous exclusiveness and did not marry out of their own circle (Scott 1900: 486).

Some other notes are of interest here. In the village of Manpun (in the Kodaung Hill Tracts), wives were obtained from the village of Yabon, but not from any other clans (Cameron 1912: xviii). Obviously, Manpun was inhabited by a single clan, as was Yabon. They were not endogamous.

In the Palaung village of Manlon (in the Shan State of Momeik) we do find a sort of endogamy. It is reported that here marriage with women from other clans was not countenanced. If a young man persisted, he was told to go and live with his wife, as the *nat* spirits of Manlon did not look with favour on such unions. Men from other clans might take women from Manlon as wives, but in that case they had to come and live in Manlon and live properly with their wives, otherwise the Hso mong *nat* (or Sö-mong, the local guardian spirit,

worshipped in villages in the District of Kodaung) would soon drive them away. It appears that actual residence, in combination with a notion of ‘continuous inside female generative power’, were the driving forces here.

It must be understood that, as has already been mentioned above, the prevailing custom was that that brides took up a virilocal residence after marriage in all Palaung settlements (Cameron 1912: xvi, xviii; Lowis 1906: 10-11, Milne 1924: 349). In Manlon it therefore seems that if need be agnatic descent, should that be of importance, could also be traced through daughters.

Yet another early ethnographer claims that the evidence seems to indicate that at one time endogamy prevailed. In the late nineteenth century, survivals of an endogamous tendency were still to be seen in villages like Saram in Tawngpeng, where as a rule the young men declined to look outside the limits of the village for their spouses. However, this ‘as a rule’ was a statement that must be modified immediately. We learn of the pragmatic fact that following the rule was the exception and that, generally speaking, all restrictions with regard to marriage appeared to have broken down already around the turn of the century. This was supposed to be the result of the levelling influences of Buddhism. In these days of early reporting, members of different clans were found living together in the same village in conditions which showed that there had been intermarriage. Palaung men, from the Tawngpeng *Sawbua* downwards, frequently took not only females from other clans but also Shan women as consorts (Lowis 1906: 10-11). However, the latter circumstance seems to be referring to court circles, as generally marriages were monogamous and not transethnic.

There is yet another note on endogamy saying that there were no such restrictions, and members of all clans intermarried so freely that the old (assumed) distinctions had seemingly vanished (Scott 1900: 486). A further, much later source says about the Palaung that, ‘unlike other groups, endogamy is not practised.’ The latter observation refers, it seems, to the township of Namhsan, where we may expect great changes to have occurred in the last hundred years (Simms 2017: 177).

### **Some Further Observations Regarding Marriage**

Palaung historical ethnography offers annotations on marriage conventions that might throw some light on the nature of this people’s evasive clans. As noted earlier, the agnatic line mattered in both the reckoning of kinship and the arrangement of marriages. Paternal affiliation was a dominant structural principle in society, and this norm came to influence certain rules as to who could marry whom. While a man could wed a MoBroDa, he could not



marry a FaSiDa. This normative avoidance of possible incest indicates the intimate unity between brothers and sisters, that is, the children of a common father, each of them being equally regarded as part of an integrated siblingship unit. If you as a man married a FaSiDa, you would in effect be marrying your own sister. Your mother, conversely, came from a different kinship background and formed a unit with her own outsider brothers and sisters. Accordingly their daughters would be available on the marriage market, despite their being cousins. It is not said whether this last arrangement — marriage with MoBroDa — was actually preferred more systematically.

It seems to follow that FaBroDa was not available, although this is not explicitly stated in the ethnography.

The two principles of agnation and sibling unity would also inform other marriage propositions. First cousins could then marry if they were not related on the father's side. Second and third cousins seems to have been able to marry freely, but different clans may have had somewhat divergent rules in this regard. The ethnography on consanguinity is somewhat difficult to read, but the general impression is that incest regulations were limited to a narrow circle (outside the immediate family) and that people from the same clan were fully eligible for marriage unless they were paternal first cousins. In some groups this limitation was projected on to the generation to follow, and in one case on to the two following generations (Cameron 1912: xviii-xix).

The records provide some exceptions. In the village of Manpat a man was actually allowed to marry FaSiDa — a note that is then somewhat mystifying. Here people apparently did not find too close a relationship between the children, or grandchildren, of a father and those of his sisters, and so marriage between them was permitted. This local convention could have been a device to intensify endogamy in a situation where Manpat people sought to improve their social rank by way of isolation. This bifurcating notion of availability could have emerged under Shan influence. In contrast, in the village of Yahon it was not possible to marry a third cousin, but fourth cousins would have been available in the search for a partner (Cameron 1912: xvi).

There are further ethnographic notes on marriage procedures taken by an early administrator, W.G. Wooster, and particularly by the linguist and ethnographer Mary Milne, both of which provide rich detail. Here is a very brief summary of some of the many features of the ceremonies. We learn that once a year a meeting of all the youths who were old enough to be married was held. They formed a group and went round to the houses of all the girls who were marriageable to 'pull them about with due regard to decency'. These romps were

carried on after the parents had gone to bed, but the group had to ensure that everything was strictly proper. After this the girls were said to be prepared for wooing, and three days later a meeting of the young men was held at which lots were drawn. The names of the youths and the maids were written on slips of paper, and they were drawn together in pairs. On the third day the youth sent a silk handkerchief and a betel-box with a looking glass on the cover to the girl whose name had been drawn with his. Three days later she sent him a tasselled cloth and a belt worked by herself. After this the young man was at liberty to press his suit in person, and he went to the girl's house at night. The pair sat on either sides of the fireplace and spoke to each other in pre-learned, totally conventional phrases.<sup>6</sup>

The young man thus allocated to the girl had no exclusive right to these nightly meetings. In fact, the fireplace was soon surrounded by many aspiring suitors. The girl was by no means bound to have the young man who had drawn her in the lottery. She might bond with whom she pleased and make her selection from among all those who came courting. In fact, the girls seem to have made their own (nearly) free selections from among the young men (Scott 1900: 489-90, Milne 1924: 60-95).

The lottery arrangement that brought individual boys and girls together in pairs certainly reflects a general cultural grammar prescribing endogamy. The names written on the tickets (in Shan writing) must have been the names of the available village youths. It seems that in this lottery we can see an exposition of the cultural notion and also the ritual achievement of endogamous marriage, and thereby inward social continuity. The lottery marriage took place in one of two available cultural modalities, parallel but different. One was centred on the notion of a localized agnatic kinship cluster as an endogamous and self-reproducing unit. The content of this modality was expressively acted out by bringing together the marriage couples by lottery into symbolic thought-of weddings, which then, in the real world, seeped out into nothingness.

The other modality was based on a pragmatic, discursive view in which young men exhibited themselves in front of the available young women and the latter made a choice. It seems that some of these suitors may have come from other villages and so from other clans. There may also have been several clans in the locality. This pragmatic marriage sphere was accomplished ritually by the girl eloping from her natal home. There were some possible restrictions — including parents' strong objections and economic considerations — but these

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<sup>6</sup> Lowis (1906: 10) suggests that the lottery was mainly carried out in the Namhsan area, so how widespread this ritual coupling of young people actually was remains somewhat uncertain. This possible limitation will not contradict my argument on this.

were generally negotiable, mostly to the young couple's advantage. Some money was also given to the bride's father. Whereas the former modality implied some sort of transcendental ordinance being made manifest in the ticket lottery, the latter modality sprang from personal preferences. It seems, though, that the latter discursive way of arranging social continuity for practical reasons often turned out to remain within an endogamous kinship community in the real world, although its borders were not so rigid. Some notes in our ethnographic corpus suggest that in some places clans intermarried rather frequently and, as mentioned earlier, even inter-ethnic marriages occurred occasionally, although apparently very rarely. The capital of Namhsan is mentioned in this context.

### **The Formation of Clans**

The ethnographic fragments on marriage that are found in our early sources indicate that Palaung clans were loosely structured agnatic clusters and that the emerging constellations of agnatic relatives were each localized to one or a few places. They tended to be endogamous, at least in principle, but generally not rigorously so. Exceptions could be made, but here Manpun stands out as an interesting case, Manpun people only taking wives from one other specified localized clan, the residents of Yabon. How this 'oddity' affected their ritual marriage conventions remains a mystery. What we do know is that Manpun and Yabon marriage ceremonials were somewhat different (Cameron 1912: xviii), but how this worked out under the circumstances of mandatory inter-village marriage seems beyond reconstruction. Nor do we know whether Manpun girls were married off exclusively to Yabon in a reciprocal way, or whether the former village delivered wives to yet another clan, or to several different such groupings. Still, it is clear that the Manpun clan was exogamous. A possible reading is that those in the Yabon cluster were the sole bride-givers, the *mayu ni* Kachin-style. Nor do we know whether, if so, there was a circulating system of at least three distinct clusters, A marrying B, B marrying C, and C marrying A. This would have corresponded to the Kachin *mayu-dama* system, which occurred only rarely among the Kachin, but was mostly a thought-of order implying socially and politically egalitarian relationships.<sup>7</sup>

The little we know about Palaung kinship organization points to a spread of clans in the landscape, clans being entities that among themselves were of equal status. Upper-class people were only to be found in the capital, surrounding the court of the *saopaw*. Clansmen of

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<sup>7</sup> See further, La Raw 2007, for a wider picture of the *mayu-dama* system among the Kachin.

different backgrounds were basically of similar rank. Genealogies tended to be shallow, but clans apparently sought support in fictitious narrations about common descent.

### **Divisions within a settlement**

As it appears, subgroups were not connected by any precise hierarchy. The ethnography tells us, however, that the roofs of some village houses had V-shaped projections above them, formed by extending the two outer rafters 'some feet' above the roof ridge or fixing boards to the rafters. These protusions were a mark of the authority of those who lived there. They were for the most part confined to the houses of the '*kin* stock' — *kin* here meaning 'clan chieftain' (Cameron 1912: xxxiii) — but with the *kin's* permission, village elders and headmen might have them too. However, they had to be neither so long, nor so ornamentally carved, as those of the original *kin* group, which were usually close to two metres in length. In some cases the original *kin* cluster's house was also distinguished by having two arms on one side and only one on the other. The origin of this custom was not remembered (Cameron 1912: xi). What seems to be said in this note is that in principle only those belonging to the chiefly kernel lineage of a somewhat pluralistic village were allowed these decorations on their houses. It seems probable that the kernel lineage of the chief existed alongside other collateral lines in the same village. The decorations may have had some iconic associations, but more straightforwardly they also signalled superiority.<sup>8</sup> How such distinctions affected ordinary everyday social life is not known.

It could also be that a multi-clan village ranked its inhabitants according to their respective clan belonging, depending on their settlement history, though it seems that, if this was the case, such discriminations were only valid within particular settlements. There is, however, no real evidence for this.

### **Kinship Cluster and Settlement**

As mentioned earlier, the early ethnography reports an unmistakable feeling of clannishness that would prompt the residents of a village which had little or no intercourse with the neighbouring villages of other clans to go on a two or three days' journey over the hills to attend a function at some distant village belonging to the same clan as themselves (Lowis 1906: 5, 21).

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<sup>8</sup> The iconic meanings of these protruding projections on houses may have understood as part of a bovine symbolism. I leave this aside in this article.

We have thus seen that in general clans were localized in particular villages, but it was also reported that some settlements were inhabited by several clans. In such cases it also seems that, among these blends of residents, one particular clan — the settlement's '*kin* [chief] stock' – was dominant, perhaps as a result of their being the first settlers. Another example of discrimination is that the King of Tawngpeng always belonged to the clan of Tawngma, with headquarters in a village not too far from the capital Namhsan. We learn that 'any Palaung belonging to this old royal family is considered of better birth, and has a higher standing than the rest of the people, who can claim no royal ancestors' (Milne 1924: 24).

Conventional names were given to localized clans. However, these names were not surnames used by individual members of the clan (Miller 1924: 30). Nine different clans and their names were listed in the hill-tracts of Momeik State (Cameron 1912: v), and for Tawngpeng State we find a list of five different clans, each inhabiting one or two places (Scott 1900: 486). It seems that, at the time these reports were written, there was an ongoing change, to formerly single-clan villages being now less exclusive in their residents. In former times, it is said, two places called Vhautaung and Manyawn were peopled by separate clans under their own *kins* or clan chieftains, this note implying a later period in which both villages harboured more than one clan (Cameron 1912: v).

### **Some Further Notes on Palaung Social Order**

We should pay some attention to a few other features of the more general social order in which the Palaung clans were embedded. A very brief survey<sup>9</sup> will suggest the following picture.

As mentioned earlier, the Palaung were mainly tea planters, and, as they were highlanders, the cultivation of the tea trees covered the mountain slopes where they lived. In some areas some Palaung pursued rice-farming, mainly of dry rice on swidden plantations. Rice-growing peasants were regarded as somewhat backward, and they often seem to have been classified as Palè. The tea-growers were said to be better off, even prosperous. Their production would not give them food directly, for which they were dependent on local markets. The tea-farming production groups, those who carried out the necessary work together among the trees, were basically family-oriented, men, women, girls and boys all participating in the seasonal leaf-picking. Hired hands were also used for this task, mainly

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<sup>9</sup> This survey of Palaung historical ethnography is a very preliminary synthesis and is given here only to provide a general sense of the organization of the social landscape. In the future closer examinations may well change this picture. The account here draws on Scott 1900, Lowis 1906 and Milne 1924.

seasonal male migrants of Chinese extraction. Buyers of tea were mostly Chinese entrepreneurs. When the tea reached the market, it came in two main categories — dry leaves and pickled leaves, the latter mainly for local and Burmese consumption.

Palaung houses were of the same general pattern as those of the Shan, being built of bamboo wattle, raised on posts about two metres off the ground and roofed with thatch. Very often several related families lived in the same house, which were therefore much longer than those of the Shan, sometimes as much as thirty metres long.<sup>10</sup> The houses were always divided transversely, and many of the rooms were of a very fair size. The space between the floor and the ground was sometimes used for storing paddy and tools, but more often perhaps as a stable or byre (Scott 1900: 487). It may be repeated here that, to the extent endogamy was practised within the clan settlement, resident men and women would both be members of the same clan and so to some extent share belonging through common descent.

In some areas houses could thus be quite extensive, but there were also single family houses. It seems that the residential group of people, those who slept together in an apartment in a longhouse, formed an ‘expanding’ family, a unit in the process of adding further additional segments to an original core couple. Each such residential group lived apart, but still within the walls of a shared building. There was a double belonging involved in this. It is reported that four primary families living in one longhouse was common. However, when younger sons married, situations might often have arisen that called for an entirely new building to be constructed, implying the start of a new residential cycle.<sup>11</sup> As a caution, one ethnographer mentions that it could not be ascertained whether the various families living under the same roof were relations or had connections, or whether the conjunction was merely one of convenience (Scott 1900: 487). However, the former seems the more likely in the light of later observations.

Longhouses were also significant for the neighbouring Kachin, where the length of a building seems to have expressed social prestige (Hanson 2012: 180, 133-6). There is nothing to suggest similar distinctions among the Palaung.

The ‘stove group’ consisted entirely of women who produced meals in a ‘cook room’ for their own meal-sharing ‘eating group’. Each segment of the house had its own stove. The inhabitants of the several house divisions ate separately in their own front rooms, by

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<sup>10</sup> On longhouses and their social correlations in Southeast Asia, see Loeb and Broek 1947.

<sup>11</sup> House plans from Kedaung are given by Cameron (1912: ix-xi), who maps and describes two-household, four-household and one-household buildings.

themselves, sitting on particular places around a fire. The head of the family always sat on the same seat, thus expressing his authority.

*What Have We Learnt? Looking in Two Directions*

The early British ethnography provides us with accounts of Palaung clans that are full of observed variation and inconsistencies, and yet the population are all uniformly described as being organized in clans. The term 'clan' here echoes the *Notes and Queries* period in social anthropology. We may ask whether there is a reasonable way to understand this old and sprawling ethnographic narrative, a line of thought that will make us discern some hint of a cultural pattern and, if so, what would have been the nature of such a pattern? Or, perhaps we are only dealing with a definitional problem?

It seems clear that Palaung society was a house-based society in that residential houses were continuously expanded by family additions, forming longhouses. These buildings were continuously inclusive, and more interior space was generally added to a dwelling to correspond to the predicted growth of the family group by way of marriage. New separate houses were constructed when practical circumstances limited the possibilities for further extensions. The physically inclusive longhouse harboured inside its outer walls independent groups who cooked, ate and slept separately from one another.

Palaung society was thus basically organized within and around a house, which tended to expand stage by stage by increases in its length, and ultimately this house proliferated, giving rise to new buildings in the close vicinity of the old one. Longhouses containing up to eight families were reported, but they were relatively rare (Lowis 1906: 5). The 'descent line' of residences in a neighbourhood led back to one main original building, sometimes, as we have seen, marked by gable decorations. The original house gave rise to a cluster of later secondary and tertiary houses, the result of the circumstance that longhouses could not be stretched out endlessly in the mountainous terrain or had to be kept within limits for some other practical reason. It seems, though on grounds that are not so clear, that this assembly of houses in one particular location exchanged their women in marriage among themselves. In this way clusters of endogamous communities will have emerged in the social landscape, clusters that recognized agnatic ascent and that, through repeated internarrriage, would have become tightly knit into 'endogamous clans'. Although endogamy may have emerged from isolation, this suggestion is less convincing. What seems clear is that this notion of the endogamous clan would have formed the basic Palaung idea of social belonging, referred to by Lowis (1906: 20).

To what extent clans, referred to as Palè, practiced endogamy is not clear. What we know is that they required a brideprice, as also among the regular Palaung, but that among the former these were more significant, highly negotiable and steep (Scott 1900: 490).

The Palaung population had emigrated from southern China into the Shan States at some early point in history, together with a host of other peoples. The Palaung have been classified as speakers of a Mon-Khmer language. According to Milne (1924: 14-15) they were the first settlers in the wider Tawngpeng area. This is not necessarily true, the evidence for it being rather weak. Who was actually the first in the area is not easy to decide, but certainly there was a series of powerful movements from the north into the Burmese uplands, a response to the aggression of the expanding Chinese empire, and the Palaung were among the first to settle in areas where they were still found living a hundred years ago. It is claimed that these settlements happened at 'an extremely remote period' and that the Palaung then occupied the lower valleys. Later, with the arrival of the Shan from China, the Palaung might have been pushed away from the low-lying country to resettle in the highlands, where with time they became a hill people well adjusted to mountainous conditions (Lowis 1906: 2). This is, however, uncertain. The main ethnographer of the Palaung, Mary Milne (1924: 18-19), notes that 'I found it quite impossible to arrive at any idea of the dates of the different events before those of the eighteenth century'. We still need a better chronology of the various ethnic movements throughout history in continental Southeast Asia, but that may well be a project going beyond what can actually be achieved.

We could ask questions as to what correspondence Palaung endogamy may have had to some other forms of endogamy found in the area, for instance, to the endogamy of the Kachin's circular asymmetric marriage arrangements between lineages (*gumlao*) that combined three or four lineages into an endogamous unit (Leach 1954; La Raw 2007: 41). One thought would be that endogamous lineage combinations have collapsed into unified clan-like endogamous groups, but it remains difficult to see what sort of situation might have provoked such a transformation. And, if there was a connection, it could also have worked in the other direction: that is, the existence of internal clan incest rules will have demarcated different sublines of ascent.

It is not clear how distant this social field of endogamy reached in the geographical terrain in practice, as, at the time of these ethnographic records, clans could actually encompass several different settlements claiming a common belonging. The locations of many of such villages were often quite remote from one another. There was, as mentioned, an observed and described sort of clanishness which made people visit other distant same-clan



villages on certain ritual occasions. It could possibly be argued, then, that there were at this time wider clan spans, networks of local clusters, but that the accompanying clan endogamy was relatively local. The courting practices young people engaged in could hardly have extended to faraway villages.

Somewhat contradicting this picture are the many reports of settlements where people actually behaved differently. What factors might have influenced Palaung settlers to transform their basic cultural prototype, while still maintaining their ethnicity and so defining social boundaries in a highly pluralistic environment? There might have been influences from neighbouring peoples, like the Kachin, who have well-defined lineages and who basically marry exogamously. There was very little inter-ethnic connubiality in Palaung society (Scott 1900: 463; Leach 1954: 57; Cameron 1912: xviii), with one apparent exception: the capital of Namhsan in Tawngpeng, where inter-ethnic marriages were said to be common (Cameron 1912: xviii).

In the sphere of production, it remains more uncertain if wider forms of co-operation were employed, tea leaves being picked in the first place by basic family groups, but also, especially in the wet season, with help of hired hands. The picking was done in periods between March/April and late October, in the heavy rains of the monsoon season (Milne 1924: 226-38). We may wonder what effects the introduction of tea-tree cultivation once had on the social organization of Palaung society. It is said that the Palaung recognized the fact that the introduction of tea to their country was comparatively modern (Milne 1924: 224). When and how this happened, however, seems to be beyond recovery. Before this change occurred, rice cultivation seems to have dominated the economy. There is nothing in the data surrounding the tea trade that suggests that its introduction caused a general upheaval in social organization, apart then from increasing differences in prosperity between those who remained rice farmers and the new tea planters. Even so, the new economy certainly meant a dramatic departure from many old conventions. For those who still cultivated rice we have but little information.

The neighbouring and politically dominant Shan population of the valleys had obviously influenced the Palaung in certain ways. All Palaung men sported Shan dress, while the women maintained their ethnically styled outfit in combination with local indexical clan patterns in the accompanying embroidery work. Again, could Shan marriages have influenced Palaung wedding practices? There are certain features, like the place of ritual elopment (Milne 1924: 75-85), that were shared, but looking at this in a broader light, there is little reason to assume that possible changes in marriage customs have occurred because of direct

foreign ethnic influences. Such alterations of habits should mainly have been in the form of additions.

We may also consider the impact of Buddhism on Palaung life. Buddhism has been present in the hill tracts of northern Burma since around 1700 AD, one tradition being that the first monks sent out to Tawngpeng by the King of Burma arrived in 1782 (Milne 1924: 312). Archaeological and textual evidence suggests, however, that Theravada Buddhism was known in the trans-Salween area and had spread into the Shan States and into China by the early to mid-first millennium AD (Skilling 1997; Moore 2007). Although relatively new to the Palaung, the Buddhist creed struck deep roots in their social life. Nonetheless, as a religion, Theravada Buddhism is highly focused on death and transmigration, and its influence on Palaung marriage patterns would probably have been minimal. Possible early ancestral cults, as part of the construction of agnatic belonging in times past, would have been lost, or transformed, and individual graves were largely forgotten.<sup>12</sup> Through Buddhism changing early notions about the nature of death and forms of conventional interaction with the dead, it could be that the realization of possible cultural templates into social morphology weakened, but that Buddhism could hardly have promoted, nor abolished, endogamy, for instance.

All this probing into a fragmentary ethnography of the past has led us to some perhaps provisional suggestions. The in many ways rich data that actually exist on the Palaung population from about a hundred years ago are not very transparent when it comes to the organization of kinship and marriage. All ethnographers of the time talk 'about clans' as something self-evident, but the texts imply some important variations in social clustering. What seems safe to say is that Palaung social organization was based on houses and agglomerations of related houses in the form of villages. Sometimes this included longhouses embracing 'sub-houses'. These agglomerations of residences were apparently framed by some discursive notion of conjunction in terms of shared descent.

The ethnographers insist that the ground pattern leading to the social construction of clan continuity was the celebration of endogamous marriages, while at the same time they list a number of contradictory findings. Here it is my belief that, to understand this historical ethnography, we need an approach which allows us to see morphological variations as 'distorted' implementations of the same basic cultural template. The intuitions provided by this

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<sup>12</sup> In certain kinds of magic, individual graves and their contents were searched to create *materia magica*. Thus it seems that some 'wise men' kept track of where certain known persons had been buried (Milne 1924: 110, 237). Otherwise cemeteries were largely neglected (Milne 1924: 294), being ritually uninteresting.

template would have been subject to the more superficial influences of varying social discourses and pragmatic and realist conditions.

In the Palaung case, the work of historical circumstances down the centuries has induced change, and yet endogamous marriage within a bounded kinship cluster has been kept alive as a dominant cultural template, as a collective intuition concerning the correct way to build social continuity. This endogamy, maintained within a community of inter-related house residents, was dressed up and articulated in terms of kinship — a process that would make each settlement to appear as a ‘clan’ all of whose members were somehow related ambilineally. This self-reproducing unit seems to have introduced a principle of agnatic preference, probably a strict lineality to sort out the possibility of relations of near incest. These endogamous agnatic clans, derived from residential agglomerations, did not live in a uniformly shaped world. When practical circumstances in the stream of life made different marriage arrangements more attractive, the notion of endogamy was still realized, but then only in the form of a ritual enactment.

Above we have pointed to the marriage lottery, conducted on a local and clan-orientated basis. In a game of drawing written lottery tickets, young boys and girls were paired off with one another, after which there was ceremonial courting at night. However, the latter gradually gave way to more serious courtship on a broader footing once the candidates had become somewhat older. It seems that it was the girls who had the most considerable power to choose.

The result was therefore that within the same cultural modality, largely articulated in iconic expressions, the young of a village/clan were paired together into a sort of courtship and a modal endogamous marriage, while in another, more realist-influenced modality the search for marriage partners had wider horizons. Still it seems that there was some tendency for girls to choose from within the clan, though certainly the outcome was often left open to wider inclusion. In hopeless cases of love, surprise elopement was a solution, this resembling a Shan practice (Milne 1924: 75-85).

As clans were agnatic in orientation, because of preferred endogamy, all resident members of a clan community, men and women, were (ideally) agnatic relatives. Agnatic ascent gave structure to an otherwise ambilineal cluster. This is a circumstance that poses one further consideration. Inside the clan there were a number of (locally differing) incest rules, which allowed the marriage of a man to his cousins and other relatives on his mother’s side, while the corresponding relatives on his father’s side were forbidden. This points to the possibility that with a clan there were sub-lines of agnatic descent and ascent, otherwise masked by a common clan discourse.

How clearly ascent lines were recognized in terms of the overarching clan ideology is not known, nor can we determine the genealogical depth to which the individual dead were traced. It may well be that the notion of a clan as a continuous structure was clearer before the introduction of Buddhism. Possibly what the early British ethnographers experienced were the remaining elements of a once more rigorous clan society, the participating elements of which having become disconnected and come adrift, to be handled circumstantially and so forming varying customs locally. Nor can we exclude the possibility that within the clan, the sublines of ascent actually intermarried in some more systematic fashion, perhaps in circles of continuous endogamous sub-alliances.

Finally, there is some reason to think again about the introduction of tea-planting as a major occupation, even though many villages in lower regions in the landscape continued to plant mainly dry rice. At some point the economy of Palaung society must have changed drastically to have become clearly market-oriented, and some prosperity was to follow. However, tea, and the planting of tea, was very little ritualized, mostly being seen as technical agricultural production.<sup>13</sup> But rice remained strongly endowed with special cultural meanings in all communities (Milne 1924: 224, 226). I cannot go into detail about this here, but in pristine times the Palaung and their endogamous clan order, when seen in a longer time perspective, was part of a rice-growing economic order. Their social and ritual arrangements will have emerged through history in agreement with the cultivation of rice, whether irrigated or on dry hill swiddens.

What is striking is that a sort of ‘incestuous’ self-reproducing clan endogamy was also found among other rice cultivators in Southeast Asia. An example of this was the Angami Naga from the past in Assam, who, in their discursively construed world, strongly favoured exogamous clans. Here exogamy — the avoidance of local incest — was absolutely necessary in the building of social continuity with reference to the begetting and birth of children. However, Angami rituals, in the realm of promoting the growth of rice, brought to the fore an entirely different cultural modality that was realized and made inspectable in grand ceremonies in which otherwise impossible clan endogamy was stressed. Clan endogamy, although temporary and passing, was beneficial for plant growth in the irrigated fields. On these ritual occasions, promoting a future in terms of crops of rice, the dead of the clan, seen then as remote forerunners to the (temporarily) incestuous endogamous unit of the present, were mobilized out of their passive existence in the grave to canalize the blessings of ‘inside

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<sup>13</sup> However, there were some rituals for the benefit of the tea plantations, like the bringing of rain ceremonies, which involved the force of a grave. Milne 1924: 237-8.

proliferation' to the rice fields. An otherwise forbidden world, in terms of a discursively construed cultural modality, generated an 'inside force' of agricultural blessings and fertility (Aijmer 2017).

The continuous birth of Angami children seems to have been secured in quite another way. Rice was connected with ancestral 'inside death', but — and this is presently only a hypothesis<sup>14</sup> — the emergence into the world of new members of the clan called for the appropriation of 'outside death', a generative deadly force that was realized and claimed by way of head-hunting. 'Inside' (local death, endogamy, rice) was contrasted with 'outside' (dead outsider's heads, exogamy, children) — both being essential to the building of the future.

This is somewhat similar to the symbolism of some slash-and-burn rice peasants of Central Borneo, the Kayan Dyaks. The Kayan formed localized ambilineal kinship clusters that lived together in longhouses situated on the banks of a river. With the exception of the chiefs they married endogamously. To ensure the growth of rice, they enlisted the help of the dead of their kinship community, and so they sought to appropriate the force of 'inside death' (Aijmer 2010). They too were head-hunters, and this way of appropriating 'outside death' suggests that here too this was part of the construction of a social future in terms of human progeny.

However, it is also obvious that these contrasting elements are part of a quintessential symbolic idiom that is found in Southeast Asia more widely. These elements float around in rice-producing societies and reappear in each, often in new combinations.<sup>15</sup> Outside/inside, exogamy/endogamy, ancestors/foreign heads and rice/children are symbolic contrasts that appear and reappear in the most complex amalgams, as, for instance, among the To Pamona of Sulawesi. Despite their drastic reversal of the imagery and cultural meanings contained in this cultural idiom, they seem in their own way to intuit the same deeper cultural grammar (Jacobsson 1991, 2005). In southern, rice-growing China, the appropriation of inside and outside deaths has taken on the form of splitting dead persons into two, into ancestors who are in their graves located in nature, and those who are associated with and have a place in the

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<sup>14</sup> At this time I cannot present a systematic demonstration of this hypothesis regarding Angami head-hunting. It is certainly a complex phenomenon. But the argument fits with a systemic understanding of Angami traditional society. The same applies to the similar suggestion regarding the Kayan in central Borneo. I hope to return to this at some future point in time, or to stimulate someone else's curiosity in the matter.

<sup>15</sup> I leave aside certain other symbolic idioms that are widespread in Southeast Asia, such as those focused on buffaloes and boats, but see Josselin de Jong 1977, Aijmer 2016 and Bishop 1938.

domestic ancestral tablets. Also here, and like the To Pamona, the Angami model is reversed in that, while outside death connects with and propels new crops of rice, inside death promotes new children (e.g. Aijmer 1968).

Head-hunting is also known from Upper Burma; for example, it occurred among the Wa (Scott 1900: 493-503, 512), where it was thought to bring blessings to the crops, including rice, but the neighbouring Palaung have always (up to now) been regarded as peaceful and harmless in their surroundings. Thus the Palaung may be understood as having practised a sort of reversal of the 'Angami case' in that in principle they denied 'outside' forces influencing their begetting of children. Instead they wished for 'inside' endogamy, the blessings of which ought, according to the paradigm, to have been reserved for rice.

Projecting from the Angami case, experimentally we could suggest that 'originally' Palaung endogamy truly had something to do with the cultivation of rice. However, in the course of history the cultural presupposition requiring vital blessings emerging from isolation was drastically widened to benefit not only rice, but also, and ungrammatically, the birth of children. Losing the cultivation of rice, it seems that the flow of blessings was transferred to embrace instead the birth of future children. If so, the ethnographic diversity may have been reflected in the fact that the cultivation of rice had become increasingly obsolete and, at the time of the different ethnographic accounts, had lost much of its former importance. This change was a result of the innovative and successful introduction of tea as a crop. Rice symbolism was, I suggest, transformed to become relevant instead as a source of social proliferation. Tea did not create its own ritual dramas.

It is also possible that the introduction and embracing of Buddhism was a force overwhelmingly stronger than any possible previous cultural inclination that included an active search for an 'outside death force' of some sort.

In our future endeavours, we must remember that endogamy, a process of exchange that is internal to society, of necessity must be a preferred contrast to a possible exchange with the outside, that is, exogamy. Endogamy achieves its force through a denial of the outside world (cf. Sprenger 2007: 163).

To conclude, it may be said that, in their 'pure' ideal form, the endogamous clans of the Palaung could be seen as the results of an iconic strategy implying 'incestuous' marriage: a self-reproducing union of people, including their dead forerunners, promotes the cultivation of rice. Their less endogamous derivative versions of clans were also an outcome of this basic iconic imagery. In these unorthodox cases the normative imagery lingered, but in various suppressed forms, being countered, or even denied, by pragmatic circumstances. Practical

considerations required attention to, and the inclusion of, more weighty environmental and discursive strategies that pursued other seemingly more important motives and benefits in the perceived social world.

Palaung clans defy definition in a positivist mode. They were the outcomes of a realization in the social world of an iconic template, itself possibly under slow transformation in the stream of pragmatic life, that generated considerable variation in social morphology under the insistent pressures of other forces in that world. The cultural template and its possible modifications were translated into living societies by passing through 'layers' of varying social discourses, including the idiom of kinship.

These remarks are, of course, very tentative and preliminary and may give rise to many scholarly misgivings. The aim here is only to point to some possible directions for future research into the cultural formation of the wider Southeast Asian scene, from southern China to beyond the hazy borders of Melanesia. This will be a long journey along winding paths, but the insights we may gain into the formative processes of these superficially very varying, yet similar societies will be very rewarding, including for the generalist.

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