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The first use of the word 'anthropology' in English was recorded in 1593, but its modern use to indicate the study and science of humanity became current in the late nineteenth century. At that time a separate discipline had begun to evolve from many component strands (including history, archaeology, linguistics, biology and anatomy), and the study of so-called 'primitive' peoples was given impetus not only by the reports of individual explorers but also by the need of colonial powers to define and classify the unfamiliar populations which they governed. From the ethnographic writings of early explorers to the 1898 Cambridge expedition to the Torres Straits, often regarded as the first truly 'anthropological' field research, these books provide eye-witness information on often vanished peoples and ways of life, as well as evidence for the development of a new scientific discipline.

The Kachins

Ola Hanson (1864–1927) was a Swedish-American missionary from Minnesota, posted to northern Burma in 1890. He lived with the Kachin people and became fluent in their language, compiling a word-list and eventually producing a Kachin–English dictionary. Their own culture and complex belief system were orally transmitted: Hanson therefore devised an alphabetical transcription for his translation of the Bible into Kachin, and this writing system later became widespread in Burma. First published in 1913, this book was written after Hanson had lived with the Kachins for over twenty years, and offers a unique insight into their culture at this time. It outlines their origins, dialects, law and weapons, as well as the details of Kachin religious beliefs and ceremonies for births, marriage and death. This book is valuable as both an ethnography of the Kachin people and as an example of the perspective of an early twentieth-century missionary.

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978-1-108-04609-1 - The Kachins: Their Customs and Traditions
Ola Hanson
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The Kachins

Their Customs and Traditions

OLA HANSON



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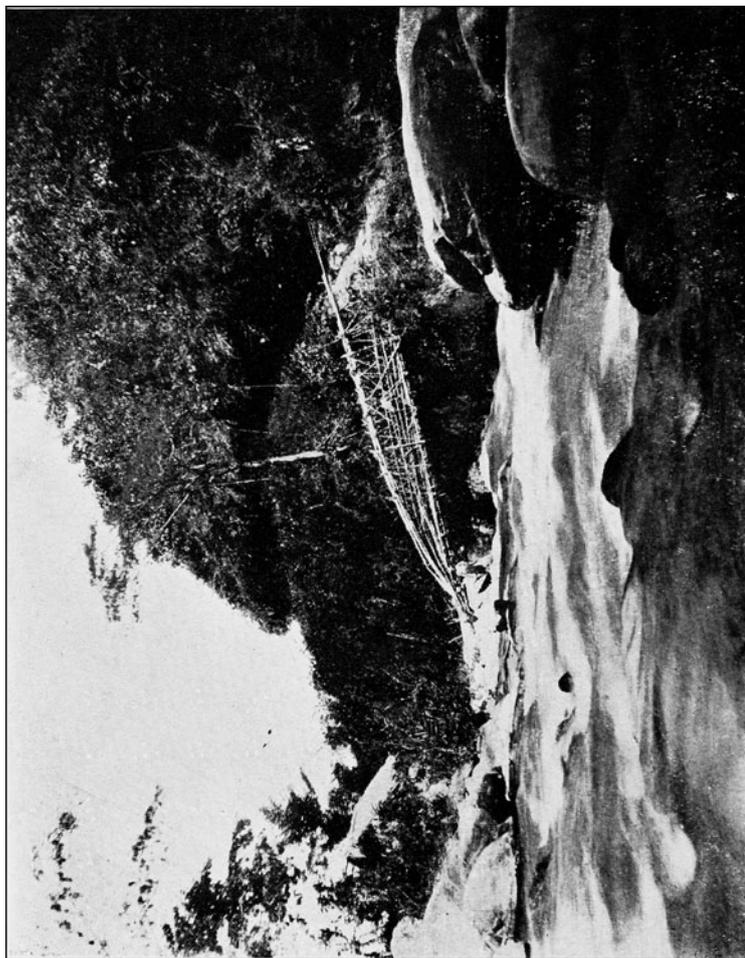
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Bridge over the Paknoi Hka boundary between Burma and China.

Illustrations from photos by Rev. G. J. Geis.

Frontispiece.

THE KACHINS

THEIR CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

BY
REV. O. HANSON, Litt. D.

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INTRODUCTION.

In publishing this volume on the Kachins, I present the results of many years of study and contact with this interesting people. I have visited them in almost every part of Kachinland, from Assam, the Hukong Valley and the confluence of the Măli and N-Mai rivers, to the southernmost part of the Northern Shan States. Among the Kachins in Chinese territory very little original work has been done, but we are sure that in regard to life, customs and religion they are practically one with their kinsmen to the west.

The book makes no claim to be exhaustive, especially in regard to detailed accounts of religious customs and traditional lore. Two or three volumes of this size would not suffice if we should attempt minute details and a full collection of all their stories. Every community exhibits some peculiarities in regard to religious practices; they may have their own local "divinities" attending to their special needs, receiving honor in some particular way. There is no particular gain in following out all these details, as they after all bear the marks of what is recognized as the general religious customs and ceremonies. Stories and traditions have also local colourings and it is proverbial that priests and story-tellers do not agree among themselves. What we here attempt is to present the Kachin as he appears in his everyday life in his mountain home, and an account of his customs and religion as far as they are common and accepted by all.

Our principal source of information regarding the hill-tribes is the "Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States." This is an excellent work representing a vast amount of labour. I have not made it a point to criticize or correct the account of the Kachins there given. Only a few times have I quoted from its pages, where in so doing I am enabled to bring out my own view more clearly. I have preferred to tell my own story, as I have it from the life of the Kachins, and from a long observation of their village and homelife. Those particularly interested in the subject can easily find out where we differ or agree. Having followed this course, it does not mean that I do not heartily appreciate what has been done by others. The account as given in the Gazetteer is quite full, and remarkably exact for the time it was written; and the compilers, who generally had to depend on the assistance of interpreters, did their work wonderfully well.

The temptation has been strong to compare the Kachin customs and religion with the practices of related tribes such as the Karens, Chins, Nagas, Garos, Mishmis and Abors. The Assam Census Report of 1891 is particularly a great storehouse furnished with material for ethnological study, and most of the border tribes there described have a great deal in common. But in a work of this kind it is best to confine ourselves to the particular people under survey. When monographs of all the principal tribes and races are before us, someone will settle down to the inviting task of giving us a comprehensive view of the whole field.

The chapter on the Origin of the Kachins will probably seem too radical, as it goes contrary to many generally accepted ideas of the Kachin communal life. We are probably not ready to drop the word "tribes" when speaking of the five ruling families. But to show how this simplifies matters let me quote from the Gazetteer, page 402, Chap. VII. Speaking about family names the author says: "It is somewhat singular that all having the same surname,

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whether they belong to the same or different tribes, regard themselves of one blood and do not intermarry. Thus a Maran *Chumlut* cannot take a wife from the Szi *Chumlut*. This is interesting, because it suggests totemism, and because it shows that the family distinctions are older than the tribal." The author of these sentences came near stumbling on the true solution of the problem. A *Chamlut* is a *Chamlut* under whatever chief he may live, and cannot marry anyone with that name. The fact that he is the subject of a Măran or Lăhpai chief does not in the least interfere with his family relations. He is not a Măran or Lăhpai, simply a *Chamlut* who may at any time move and settle down in a village ruled by a Mărip, Nhkum or Lăhtaw chief. It is quite true that "family distinctions are older than the tribal." To the Kachin mind there is nothing but family distinctions, however involved they may seem to us. If we, for the sake of convenience, still use the word "tribe" to distinguish the ruling families in their capacities as chieftains, we should not forget that the family of a chief is no more a "tribe" than is the family of any other name. In this work, however, I have avoided the use of the word because of the confusion it has caused.

In tracing three different movements in the Kachin advance south I am relying on vague hints in their traditions, and on statements of a few old men whose opinions have seemed to me worthy of consideration. If my memory does not fail me, the first one who put me on this track was an old Gauri chief of Măhtim, one of the most intelligent Kachins I have ever seen.

In a supplement I have tried to elucidate the intricate question of Kachin relationship and family names. Those that wish to pursue these studies further will find some help from the Kachin Dictionary and Grammar. The original of many of the stories and traditions given in these pages will be found in the Kachin Spelling Book and First Reader.

Those who have come in contact with the Kachins

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will no doubt have in mind many particulars not mentioned in these pages. My aim has been to present the essential features that will interest the ethnologist and the student of language and comparative religion, and give a practical working knowledge of Kachin ways, habits and customs.

O. H.

*Namkham, Northern Shan States,
August, 1912.*

