These people now numbering some 1.5 million have travelled and the distribution of material items and blood groups has shown a continual mixing of traits.

Of course, there may have been socially and demographically isolated communities of which possibly Easter Island in the southern Pacific Ocean may have been the only one to have survived in such isolation for some four centuries. Even the inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar islands in the Bay of Bengal cannot fail to have been intermittently influenced by occasional and deliberate sea-borne outsiders, if only to develop a social pattern of avoidance.

For all practical purposes there aren’t, and probably never have been, isolated social systems, as humans have always travelled and the distribution of material items and blood groups has shown a continual mixing of traits.

Anthropology has long created tribes without much thought to the definitions involved, with large numbers of such tribal studies made on which the foundations of Indian anthropology have been so fruitfully laid.

It is the characteristic of social sciences trying to become an accepted part of the scientific establishment to take on a framework of thinking that both defines and delimits the groups of people which are studied. It is proposed to examine these two terms in the context of the Kachins of highland Myanmar and the Sukuma of north-western Tanzania.

The Kachins as a tribe

These people now numbering some 1.5 million have long been regarded as a separate tribe by the pre-colonial Burmese, the British and the contemporary government. In the present federation there is a Kachin State covering the hinterlands of Bhamo and Myitkyina administrative and trading centres. There are also substantial Kachin communities over the border in the Chinese province of Yunnan. It could be said that the tribal title Kachin has been a colonial one kept on by the Burmese for different but similar political reasons. These people divide themselves into Jinghpaw, Maru and other tribes, which they themselves see as distinct. (Mawng 1944).

Does this political unit signify any concentration of Kachins for which there could be said to be a heartland? The answer is clearly no, since there are Kachin communities well outside these sub-states, with southern boundaries in Mongmit, Hsenwi and Tawnpang sub-divisions.

Second, their environmental style of living in small communities of extended family with long houses on hilltops cultivating dry rice on a slash-and-burn cycle contrasts with the Shans, who live in the valleys between them in permanent villages of single-family houses cultivating wet rice in permanent fields.

Third, this valley and hilltop dichotomy is a short-term illusion because, over the centuries, the Kachins have always been trying to move downhill through the processes of threat, violence and marriage. On the other hand, the Shans have similarly been in the process of moving uphill by marriage and the advantages of having in-laws as their more aggressive and permanent neighbours. (Leach 1954).

The British, who preferred the Kachins, with their more extroverted lifestyle, to the more sophisticated Shans even before their anti-Japanese guerrilla work, and who were unaware of this symbiosis, were trying right up to the time of independence to find some socio-political way that would combine hopes of development and separate the Kachins as a tribe from their neighbours.

The Kachins as a culture

If there is a Kachin culture, it is certainly that it has no finite boundaries — now or in the past. Theoretically, the centre of a culture must have a concentration of characteristics and, almost by definition; this is likely to be in some out of the way isolated community who are hard to reach. However, the Kachins want to move to find fresh areas to cultivate and to get employment as well as to trade in opium and jade in return for money, silver, ornaments and steel.

This isolation has always been relative, and Kachin women have always decorated themselves with Chinese and Indian silver coins and woven their own tribal costumes.

Tribal culture is a phrase that has a familiar and perhaps even a nostalgic understanding of its meaning. The word ‘tribe’, in both its historical and modern usages, implies a known and identifiably separate community with finite boundaries not only in the eyes of its members but also in the bureaucratic practices of the dominating surrounding society and in the analyses of social science specialists who have worked with them. On the other hand, ‘culture’ has the connotations of an assortment of widely known and used social ingredients, which are recognised as specific to a particular society as part of its separate or separating identity, but which in a non-tribal context has an elitist backing for its use and understanding.

Anthropology has examined these two terms in the context of the Kachins of the groups of people which are studied. It is proposed to present to outsiders and the outside world interested in the incredulities of such diverse social systems.

Email: restanner@kutkai.fsnet.co.uk

R.E.S. Tanner is Former Lecturer in Comparative Religion at University of London and Former Chairman of East African Institute of Social Research, United Kingdom.
The Kachin system of government had village headmen presiding over expanding and contracting areas, combining inherited positions and personal charisma along with an animist and local religion. No centralising institutions existed at all other than costume and personal appearance.

Their language is particular to them but as much as any used in any community would become a distinct dialect. The tongue has become more uniform as a result of its commitment to writing with Roman lettering and the spread of literacy, while being surrounded by Burmese speakers with their distinctive script with which many men are conversant.

Thus, Kachin culture is distinct enough to fit into the ethnographic idea of a tribal culture but seemingly for the individual, always transitional. In some ways Kachin culture has been made more prominent by its political needs and the state’s need to stress cultural unity in diversity, while being weakened in other aspects by economic necessity and Burmese military dominance. Its geographical expression seems to be marked by altitude rather than any sense of occupying an area in a way that the idea of cultural and tribal boundaries would seem to be a categorical imposition.

The Sukuma as a tribe

The Sukuma of Tanzania now number some five million and have had a tribal identity attributed to them from as far back as the early 19th century, when they were collectively referred to as the people to the north by those travelling along the major caravan routes between the Indian Ocean coast and the Great Lakes. This collective identity seems to have evolved from the boundary delimitations and bureaucratic requirements of the Germans and then confirmed by the British as part of the necessary requirements for rational administration. There were no centralised or centralising structures above that of chieftdoms that greatly varied in size. What are the shared characteristics that make them tribally distinct apart from their shared tonal Bantu language? They have no villages and live in well dispersed single households, which are loosely grouped into various grades of chieftainship responsible for arbitration of disputes and religious welfare of each area. This chieftainship had little in common since some were matrilineal and others patrilineal, while some were colonial appointees in newly settled areas as they migrated outwards. Their religion varies between family ancestral cults and individual relationships with spirits, with no corporate religious activities except for the necessities of rain making in an area with irregular and sporadic wet seasons.

There is a simple form of age grading distinguishing younger men from older ones but there are a number of social groupings crossing social boundaries mixing cult and social activities with economic benefits. They do not look different and have no distinctive styles of clothing or hair arrangements.

Here we have an enormous number of people who now see themselves as distinct without much that is distinct other than language. Where can this tribalism be observed most clearly?

First, there is a distinction in the ‘wet’ Sukuma living along Lake Victoria and the very ‘dry’ majority living inland on the cultivation steppe that correlates to different types of dominating spirits. To the west, they are pushing into largely unoccupied areas belonging to the Bantu Zinza and to the south; they merge into the Bantu Nyamwezi whose language they largely share. Only to the east is there a boundary clash between them and the Nilo-Hamitic cattle-keeping Maasai, with whom there have been centuries of expansionist and violent raiding clashes.

So, it is only along this eastern fringe that it is possible to see an end to one tribe and the beginning of another but not a boundary as such. Everywhere else it would seem to be a matter of choice whether an individual...
regards himself as a Sukuma or not, according to the advantages of tracing patrilineal, matrilineal or affinal connections or just inventing an ancestral one.

These people do not appear to have any concept of home other than a vague sense of ancestral neighbourhood because they have regularly moved to cope with field fertility and the needs of their cattle as well as the sensible pattern of dispersing their herds and rotating their crops.

In the 1950s, a Sukuma customary law manual was produced (Cory 1953) which showed that they had a sense of tribal identity but in practice such a book created a system of law rather than Sukuma custom through which each case was settled according to particular local circumstances

The Sukuma culture

This has none of the obvious material elements that contribute so much to tribal identifications such as that of the Kachins and many other rich Asian cultures. They do not look different nor make any efforts to do so and the small facial markings that used to denote social group affiliations such as the Bugika and Bugaru are no longer made. They have no material art and the zigzag markings on their woven baskets are probably now only to be seen in ethnographic collections. They claim no tribal connection with the crude rock painting and lithographic designs that are to be seen on many rock faces.

What is perhaps extraordinary is that if one can set aside that they are an East African people, their social characteristics and culture are remarkably similar to that of contemporary Europeans. Their attention to kinship is minimal as most families are well dispersed and their social life is confined to neighbourhoods and networks of reciprocities. Indeed, they mistrust any form of authority that is not subject to reciprocal controls and they have yet to see any value in macro-democratic systems of voting.

They have no regular religious rituals other than the wearing of amulets and a variety of personal taboos. Despite the presence of Muslim traders and Christian missionaries for well over a century, only small numbers have joined these faiths. They have no tribal initiation rituals but their cross-community associations do let them demonstrate their exclusivities. The costume of men is almost entirely of western design while their women combine the former with dual lengths of highly coloured cloth of Swahili origin from the coast.

They do not wish to live near anyone else if it can be avoided, although they did once live in close communities as a defence against Maasai raiding. Their lives are very much based on quite accurate profit and loss balances in which it is sensible to live near their fields. They do not see any particular value to living in towns where food has to be paid for and prefer to come and go from their rural homes.

This is not to suggest that they do not have a cultural identity, which is now more prominent than it was in colonial times. Their tribal museum and cultural centre at Bujora near Mwanza is a matter of pride. It is hard to see in what ways there is a Sukuma culture since so much is shared with surrounding tribal communities except possibly in their language with its complicated tenses and its song and poetic forms. In the historic past, there may not have been any corporate tribal identity but it has been created, without overmuch tension, by the makers of administrative boundaries and by the rituals of voting. At the crudely material level, they are no different to millions of others in eastern Africa.

Some reflections on the nature of tribal cultures

Modern governments of large states like tribal cultures while being hostile to tribalism. Tribal costumes are to be seen worn by contingents in Myanmar and Indian national day parades, and representatives wear their tribal costumes in meetings of the national assembly of the Chinese Communist Party. The British Queen’s recent jubilee celebrations showed many forms of British and Commonwealth tribal cultures in their modernised forms. Tribal costumes frequently appear on national stamps and in musical groups. To some extent, the Indonesian government subsidises and supports the flamboyant public celebrations of Balinese Hinduism that brings in much tourist money. At the same time, governments suppress demands for tribal independence in West Irian and Assam. So, tribal cultures testify to the range of national citizenship and liberalism; they are a modern, political ‘good’ and thus are often subsidised unless they go too far and claim separation.
Obviously, there is a conjunction between the concepts of tribe and culture but there is a ‘them and us’ element in their modern use which is both strident and new. The increasing pluralism of modern societies may well be made more obvious as voting creates permanent minorities and, historically, the absence of formal boundaries may have made social adjustments easier, as in the Rajput community, which once had both Hindu and Muslim personal names. This type of status ambiguity would now no longer be possible.

It is suggested that to use both these terms in any restricted and definitional sense is to impose on human behaviour forms of being and thought which are not present in fact, however much it is stated to be so by those both inside and outside such communities. It is in line with Western post-Enlightenment thinking and quite alien to Asian philosophical thought.

From the Kachin and Sukuma examples given, it would seem that membership of this or that tribe is often negotiable and thus at any one time a person would be socially more or less what he was when he last considered the issue of identity. Tribal commitment is not like the legal status of citizenship.

Thus, individual commitment to a tribe and its culture, not forgetting that a high proportion of people migrate in and out of their natal communities perhaps several times in their lives and often use their natal cultures only for rites of passage, is often as much a combination of circumstances as inheritance.

In looking towards any future understandings of tribal cultures, the Islamic concept of ‘tawhid’ or wholeness (Davies 1988) is a useful one to explore whether or not it has its origins in the sanctity of the Koran. This holds that there are no predefined divisions between and within communities and that they should be seen in their wholeness, within which there are inevitable variations. In the enormously varied Islamic community, there is no ‘us’ and ‘them’.

The borders of Mishmi or Muria tribal cultures are porous, through which an enormous range of behaviour ebbs and flows, some of which can be held on to as quite specifically belonging to those people. On the other hand, much of the ideas that come from literacy and the surrounding dominant Hindu society may have been watered down or reinterpreted as part of their traditional culture. Sukuma contemporary dancing, which they claim is traditional, includes colours and designs that have never been seen before. A porous and imaginative understanding and sympathy for the dimensions of contemporary evolving tribalism rather than one rooted in historical contrasts might be worth considering.

**References**


