

CHAPTER II

THE ECOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF KACHIN SOCIETY

Before proceeding further it is necessary to give some general indication of the kind of economic life that is led by Kachins and their Shan neighbours.

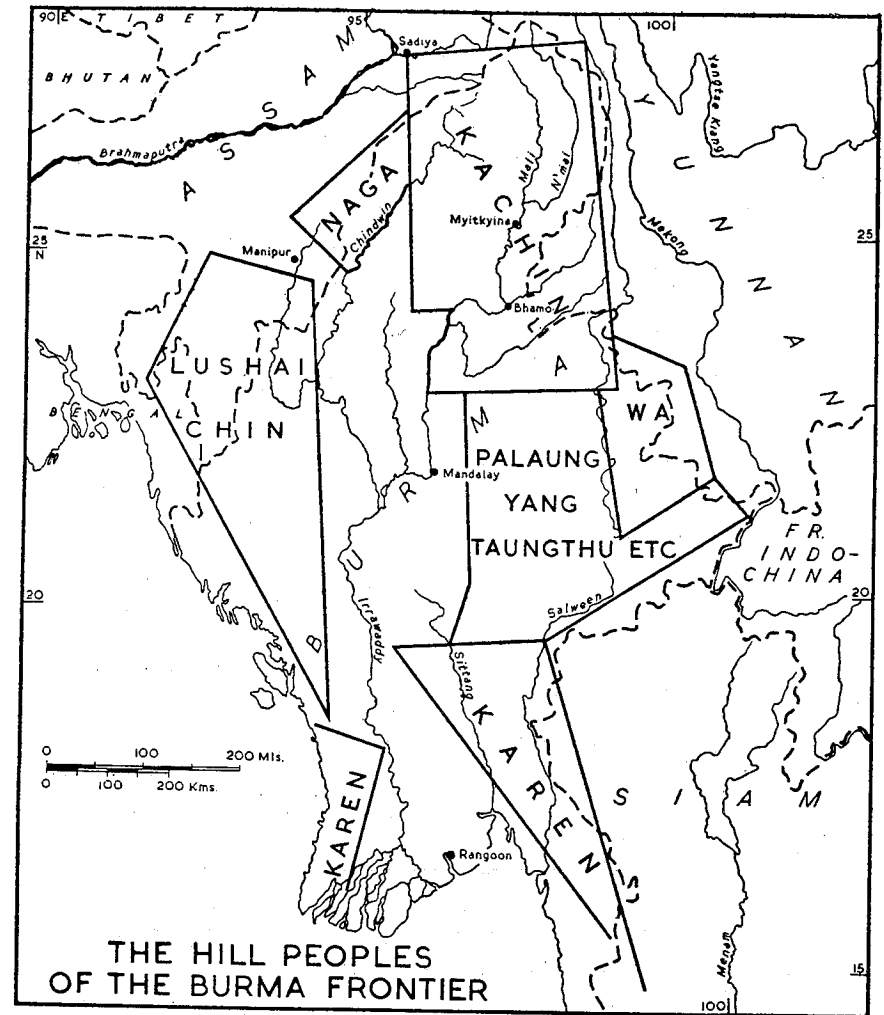
Map 1, which shows the general location of the Kachin Hills Area, shows also the geographical position of the other major categories among the Hill Tribes of Burma,¹ namely the Karens, the Chins, the Nagas, the Palaungs, the Wa. In essence Burma comprises the drainage area of the Irrawaddy and the Lower Salween. The immediate neighbourhood of these great rivers and of their principal tributaries is low lying, flat and fertile; away from the rivers the country is generally mountainous, often precipitous. In the areas of heavy rainfall the normal vegetation cover is a dense semi-tropical monsoon forest; in the drier zones we find scrub, grassland and pine forest.²

An important distinction here is that in the rainbelts a dense secondary growth of jungle quickly replaces any abandoned clearings. In the drier zones on the other hand virgin forest, once cleared, tends to revert to grass or coarse scrub. In the absence of stock animals or systematic manuring, the continuing fertility of the land is thus much higher in the rainbelts than in the dry zones.

Along the river valleys irrigated rice cultivation is easy and cart tracks are readily constructed, but in the mountains which separate the valleys the construction of either roads or rice terraces is a feat of major engineering. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the technical and economic organisation of the hill-dwelling peoples is very different from that of the peoples of the valleys, nor is it very surprising that the hill peoples in different parts of Burma all resort to much the same kind of technical device to overcome the difficulties of their environment.

¹ cf. Stevenson (1944).

² Stamp (1924) (a) and (b).



MAP 1

The contrast between the highlanders and the lowlanders is thus in the first place ecological. Even if the two categories of population spoke the same language one might well expect to find marked cultural differences between the two groups and, on analogy with countries such as Scotland and Northern Italy, one might also anticipate a jealous and mutual contempt between the rival parties. And such is the case. The only peculiarity about Burma is that the cultural contrast between the highlanders and the lowlanders is so very marked. The two groups do not share a common language and they share few traits of material culture. In matters of household and technical equipment, almost the only objects which are common to both groups in the Kachin Hills Area are such things as iron cooking-pans and tripods which both parties purchase from the Chinese. Yet this is understandable enough, for technological equipment is necessarily adjusted to the conditions of life, and the highland and lowland mode of living is sharply contrasted. When one comes to the aspects of culture which are of 'ritual' rather than 'technical' significance matters are rather different. The dress of the highland males for example, is nearly everywhere a scruffy imitation of that of the local lowlander males, but women's dress is sharply contrasted as between highlanders and lowlanders and shows many regional variations among both groups. This sex difference is not without its sociological significance. It is one aspect of a theme that recurs throughout this book, namely that the highlander Kachins are constantly subject to contradictory pressures both to imitate and to oppose their valley dwelling neighbours. Incidentally much of the ethnography of Burma has been written by people who have assumed that differences of dress denotes differences of 'race'! On this basis members of more than a dozen 'races' turn up at Namhkam market in the Northern Shan States every five days.

But in this chapter we are concerned with ecology, not with politics or race. Briefly the technological situation can be summarised as follows:

The valley-dwelling peoples, that is the 'Burmese' and the 'Shans', mostly practise wet rice cultivation with moderate though adequate efficiency. This permits a system of continuous cultivation and continuous settlement even in areas

where the annual rainfall is relatively slight. Nearly all these valley peoples make use of animals for cultivation and transport. Except in the central 'Dry Zone' of Burma, the mean density of population is nearly everywhere so low that land resources are ample. Under normal conditions—that is in the absence of war and epidemics and similar disasters—the valley peoples can always easily raise more rice than is immediately required for the consumption of the actual cultivators. This secure economic basis permits the development of trade and small scale urbanisation and a moderate degree of general cultural sophistication. As a broad generalisation it may be said that the valley peoples constitute a semi-literate peasantry. In an economic sense they live at a considerably 'higher' level of organisation than their neighbours in the surrounding mountains.

In contrast, the normal shifting cultivation techniques practised by the hill peoples can only be expected to yield a surplus under exceptional conditions of low population density and specially favourable terrain. Wherever this technique proves inadequate, the hill peoples are forced into expedients of various kinds. Some groups, such as the Central Chins, have developed quite elaborate schemes of crop rotation;³ others, notably the Angami Nagas⁴ and certain Kachin groups, have gone in for the construction of irrigated rice terraces cut out of the mountainside; others again have found a solution to their difficulties by achieving some form of political and economic alliance with their more prosperous neighbours of the plains. This latter kind of symbiosis has assumed a variety of forms at different times in different places. For example, the mountaineers are sometimes regarded as the political overlords of the valley, so that the valley people pay a feudal rent to the hill chieftains;⁵ sometimes the hill peoples merely exploit the fact that they control the cross-country communications between the valleys and levy a toll on passing caravans;⁶ sometimes the valley peoples have been willing to pay 'blackmail' provided the hillmen agreed not to raid the valley crops;⁷

³ Stevenson (1943).

⁴ Hutton (1921) (a).

⁵ e.g. the Shan/Kachin relationship in the Hukawng Valley prior to 1926. See p. 242.

⁶ e.g. the position of the Gauri chiefs throughout the 19th century. See p. 224 f.

⁷ e.g. the Assam *posa* system, see Butler (1846), pp. 213-17. Hamilton, A. (1912), pp. 36-9.

sometimes the valley chieftains have engaged the hillmen as mercenaries on a large scale.⁸

All such transactions are related to the fact that as a general rule the valley peoples are producers of rice surplus to their own requirements, while equally, as a general rule, the hill peoples suffer from a rice deficiency which must somehow be made good from outside. This crucial economic fact is of the utmost importance for the understanding of all long term social developments throughout the Burma area. It applies with particular force to the zone I am calling the Kachin Hills Area.

In this zone we have already seen that, at first approximation, the linguistic and territorial category Shan corresponds to 'valley dwellers and wet rice cultivators', while the vague category Kachin denotes the highlanders.

The mountain dwelling Kachins, however, do not all support themselves in the same way and we need to consider the different techniques employed and the different kinds of economy that result.

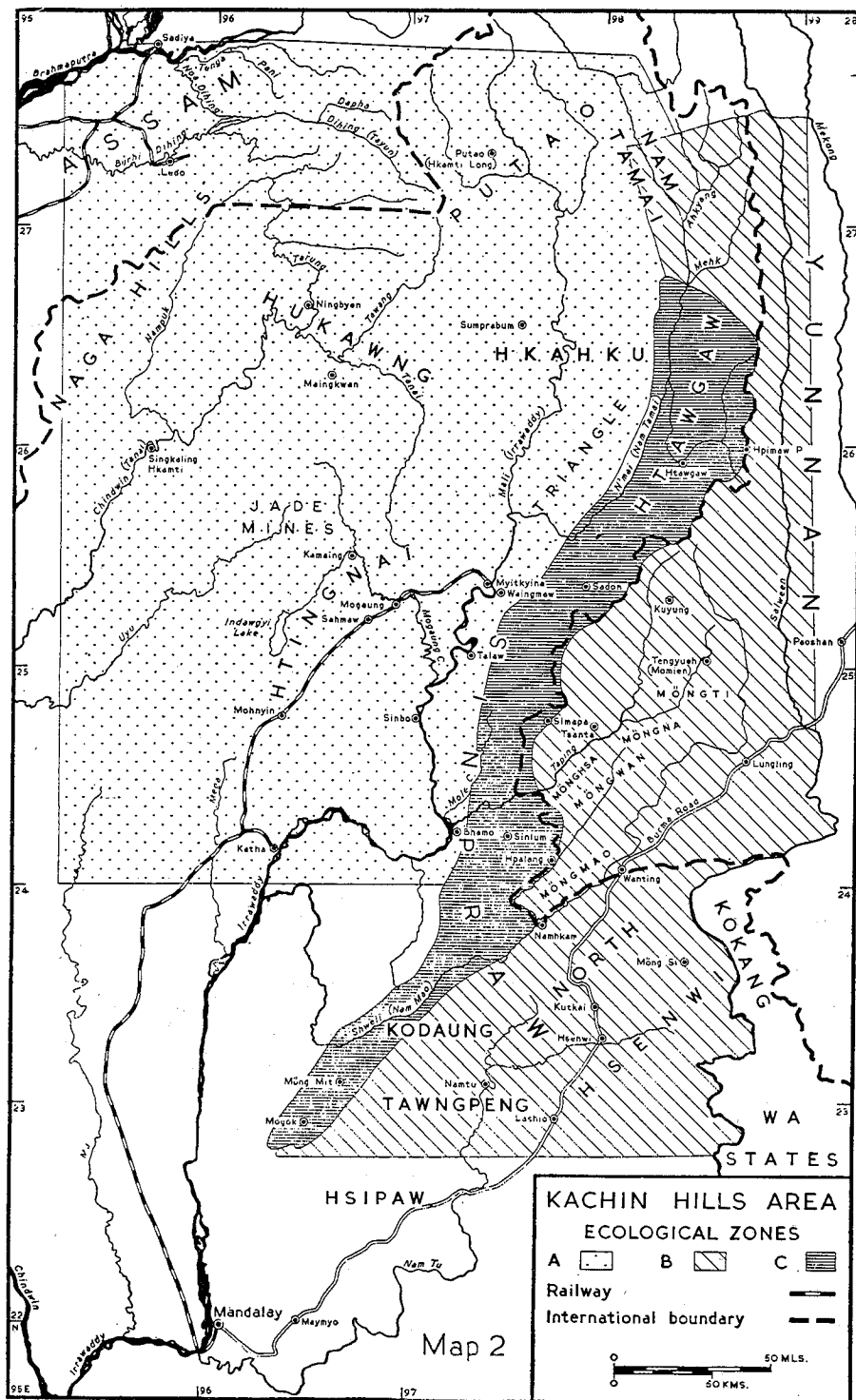
I propose to distinguish three types of hill agriculture which I shall call (a) monsoon *taungya*, (b) grassland *taungya*, (c) irrigated hill terraces. The merits and limitations of these different techniques are very relevant to our discussion.

The term *taungya* (hill field) is a Burmese term which describes a technique resembling that described as *jhum* in the literature of Assam and as *ladang* in the literature of Malaya. It has been the subject of much learned abuse but not much careful observation. A geographer has recently described the procedure as follows:

In *taungya* cultivation the larger trees are felled and the jungle burnt over. The resultant clearing is cultivated with such crops as dry hill rice, maize, millets, buckwheat and opium poppy. When the original fertility and that contributed by the wood ash are exhausted (say in one to four years) the clearing is abandoned and reverts to tangled scrub and bracken. As it is easier to clear fresh forest than the regrowth long abandoned *taungya* is rarely returned to and villages often shift bodily when the suitable land in their neighbourhood is exhausted. Naturally these practices are attended with serious deforestation and soil erosion.⁹

⁸ e.g. at all known times the hill peoples have provided a major element in the Burma Army, and in armies of Shan chiefs. See pp. 186, 240.

⁹ Spate (1945), p. 527.



This decidedly prejudiced account distorts the reality. Map 2 shows the Kachin Hills Area subdivided on a climatic basis.

Zone A is typical monsoon forest country. Here the temperatures and rainfall are such that abandoned forest clearings, unless grossly abused, will very rapidly become covered with a strong growth of secondary jungle. Throughout this area the Kachins have a clearly formulated theory of how *taungya* ought to be cultivated. I call this procedure monsoon *taungya*. The first requirement is that it should be cleared for one year only and then abandoned; the second that a piece of land which has been cleared once should not be cleared again for about 12 or 15 years.¹⁰ If this procedure is followed, then there is no deforestation and negligible soil loss. In such conditions dry hill rice can be made to produce regular yields approaching those obtained from irrigated wet rice.¹¹

Such a procedure implies that every piece of land as it goes out of cultivation is fallowed for at least 12 years. Each unit of population therefore requires a formidably large total area of farmland, and anything in the way of a large permanent closely packed village community will find itself many miles from some of its outlying property. To avoid this, Kachin communities very frequently consist of a cluster of small villages or hamlets widely scattered over the total community property.

There is a conflict here between the interests of military security, which call for large settlements enclosed within some kind of fortification, and the interests of economic convenience which call for small fragmented settlements situated close to the land used for cultivation. British Administrators frequently complained at the Kachins' fondness for splitting up their settlements into smaller and smaller villages, and it is probably the case that the establishment of an enforced Pax Britannica did encourage the further fragmentation of Kachin settlement. Groups, which formerly would have lived together for mutual protection within a common stockade,

¹⁰ Kachins do not normally count the years of the fallow period; they merely judge when land is fit for re-use by the state of the secondary growth. Competent agriculturalists have, however, shown that the necessary fallow period under North Burma monsoon conditions is about 12-15 years. With a shorter period there are too many weeds; with a longer period the trunks and roots of the secondary trees are inconveniently large.

¹¹ This is the case, for example, in parts of the North Triangle area near Htingnan. (Map 4, p. 33.)

preferred, under the British, to hive off and live on their own lands. However, the few records we have concerning the size of pre-British stockaded Kachin villages do not suggest that the settlement pattern then was very different from what it is now.¹²

However, this is the point. Although the average density of the population over the whole region is very low, and although there would be quite enough land to go round if this population were evenly distributed, the population is not in fact evenly distributed. There are local concentrations of population living at relatively high density. These concentrations are the result of past political events, such as local wars or external administrative interference; but, whatever their origin, they have the present-day consequence that there are a great many localities, even within the potentially fertile Zone A, where *taungya* is practised on a rotation cycle of substantially less than 12 years and in which crops are grown on the same land for more than one season at a time. In such circumstances, *taungya* methods do definitely lead in the long run to erosion and declining fertility. The Kachins themselves are well aware of this; they do not misuse their land by choice, they only reduce the fallow period of their cultivation cycle when local land scarcity makes it inevitable that they should do so.

In addition, the prosperity of certain parts of Zone A has been greatly affected in the past by the vicissitudes of the trade in special local products. Thus amber and salt and india-rubber were, even within recent times, of major importance for the Hukawng Valley, though they signify little at the present time. Similarly, the jade trade has been outstandingly erratic, while the iron and silver deposits of the Hkamti Long area, which were once of major local significance, are no longer considered worth exploiting at all. Such natural resources are elements in the ecological situation but their significance, at

¹² Wilcox (1832) and Bayfield (1873) between them mention the size of about a dozen Kachin villages: none of these contain more than 20 houses. The village of the Daipha Gam, who was virtually paramount chief of the Hukawng Valley, consisted in 1837 of two stockades (i.e. two separate hamlets) of 15 and 6 houses respectively. Bayfield assumes that each household averages 9-10 persons, whereas modern households average 4-5, but Bayfield may have been guessing. Michell (1883), pp. 132 f., gives a detailed inventory of 30 Singpho villages. The largest contained 40 houses; the average is estimated at 12 houses and 7 persons per house.

any particular time, is determined by economic and political factors which are external to the local environment.

Zone B is more or less outside the monsoon area. Temperatures and rainfall here are much lower. Pine and scrub and grass replace the wet forest. Here a clearing once made and abandoned recovers to jungle only very slowly if at all. *Taungya* in this kind of country is really a kind of crop rotation. The cultivation of dry hill rice is usually more or less impractical, either the rainfall is too unreliable or the altitudes are too high and the summer temperatures too low. Nevertheless, rice nearly always remains the preferred crop wherever local conditions permit its cultivation. In Zone B as a whole, the main cereal crops (apart from irrigated rice in the valleys) are maize, buckwheat, millet, wheat and barley. Beans are often grown as a first crop on newly opened grassland, but then several crops of one sort or another may be taken in succession before the land is finally allowed to revert to fallow grass again. It is unusual to find such crop rotations fully systematised as is apparently the case with the Central Chins in West Burma.¹³ In Zone B, since cereal crops are normally poor and unrewarding; there is an incentive to resort to a cash crop economy. Crops such as tea, poppy and *hwang lien*¹⁴ are often grown for trade purposes in preference to foodstuffs and sometimes with considerable success. The Palaung of Tawngpeng, for example, though a hill people, manage to maintain Shan standards of life by means of their long established trade in tea.¹⁵ Tea, of course, is a plantation crop and does not involve *taungya* practice.

In general, grassland *taungya* of the ordinary Zone B type probably deserves much of the condemnation implied in my quotation from Spate. A village which relies exclusively on such *taungya* can seldom be self-sufficient in foodstuffs. There is consequently a much more marked tendency in Zone B than in Zone A for the hill villages and the valley villages to be interlocked in some sort of more or less permanent economic and political interdependence.

¹³ Stevenson (1943). For details of grassland *taungya* see Scott and Hardiman (1901), Part I, Vol. II, pp. 355-6.

¹⁴ *Hwang lien*—the plant *coptis teeta* used as a medicine by the Chinese; a major crop in the Nam Tamai, Ahkyang, Tarong area where it is called *numrin*.

¹⁵ Milne (1924); cf. Scott and Hardiman, op. cit., p. 356 f.

In terms of climate and ecology, Zone C is intermediate between Zones A and B, as the following description of the Hpimaw district clearly shows:

North slopes are forested, south slopes are grass clad, so that looking north one sees all the south-facing slopes at once and the mountains appear somewhat bare, but looking south mainly north-facing slopes are exposed and they appear well timbered.¹⁶

The Kachins of this area practise both monsoon and grassland *taungya*, but, in addition, in a number of widely separated localities one finds elaborate systems of irrigated terracing used for the cultivation of wet-rice.

Such terrace systems are common enough in many parts of China, but when encountered among a so-called 'primitive' people, they invariably evoke the astonished admiration of ethnographers. The fact that the Angami Nagas and the Philippine Igorot both construct terraces of this type has been used by ethnologists to support the most fanciful theories concerning remote prehistoric migrations.¹⁷

British Administrators were equally impressed. It seemed only natural to suppose that people capable of such triumphs of engineering must be far more efficient farmers than those of their immediate neighbours who rely exclusively on *taungya* cultivation. In the belief that terracing was the only answer to the menace of the erosion which must result from the continued practice of *taungya*, the British constantly urged the Kachins to extend their areas of terraced cultivation. This propaganda was notably unsuccessful. Though government subsidy resulted in the construction of new terraces in one or two unlikely places, there is considerable evidence that fewer terraces were in use in 1940 than in 1870.

The fact is that official enthusiasm for terracing was not in accord with the economic facts. In general, terracing is not an economic procedure. It only becomes economic when local population densities are great enough to create a serious shortage of land. Under Pax Britannica the Kachin population as a whole tended to be spread more evenly over the total area, with the result that a good deal of terrace land previously

¹⁶ Ward (1921), p. 106.

¹⁷ e.g. Smith (1925), p. 159.

considered profitable became marginal and went out of use. Hill terraces are costly to construct and difficult to maintain; they often give a very poor return for the time and energy expended. When *taungya* and hill terraces are both cultivated by the same community, as is often the case, the people concerned seem usually to regard *taungya* cultivation as the more rewarding.¹⁸ On the other hand, since terraces can be cultivated year after year with little or no fallow period, relatively dense local aggregates of population are possible. Hill terraces are thus usually found associated with unusually large communities on permanent sites.

The real advantage of hill terrace systems seems to be military and political rather than economic. It is probably significant that the most notable terrace systems in this area lie athwart, or close to, the principal east-west trade routes from Yunnan into Burma—i.e. near Hpimaw, Sadon and Sinlum.¹⁹ Military control of these trade routes was the original *raison d'être* for the relatively high concentrations of Kachin population found in these localities, and it was the profits of toll charges which originally made the construction of terrace systems worth while from the Kachin point of view.

Under the British, after the first few years, the Kachins were prohibited from levying toll charges on the trade caravans passing through their territory, and the original incentive for terracing largely disappeared. Once constructed, however, a terrace system represents a substantial investment of time and labour and is unlikely to be abandoned outright. The largest single village in the Kachin Hills (about 150 houses) is situated in the immediate vicinity of the Hpimaw Pass. Without terracing, the location would be almost uninhabitable, for most of the slopes are too steep for *taungya*. Simply as a place to live in, it is preposterous, but militarily speaking it is magnificent.

We must conclude, therefore, that while ecological factors have an important bearing upon the different modes of Kachin and Shan subsistence, political history has also had an important influence. The ecological situation is a limiting factor not a determinant of the social order.

I shall return to this theme in Chapter VIII.

¹⁸ This observation is confirmed by Hutton ((1921) (a), p. 72); cf. also Leach (1949).

¹⁹ See Map 2, p. 23.

CHAPTER III

THE CATEGORIES SHAN AND KACHIN AND THEIR SUBDIVISIONS

It must be apparent from what has already been said that a primary requirement for an understanding of the argument of this book is that the reader should be able to conceptualise for himself just what is meant by the categories Kachin and Shan and their various subdivisions, and also by the contrasted sub-categories *gumsa* Kachin and *gumlao* Kachin. The present chapter is an attempt to make these distinctions clear at the level of very superficial descriptive ethnography; the degree to which the categories can be distinguished at the level of social structure will only become apparent later on.

Shan

First let us consider the category Shan. The word in this form is derived from the Burmese. The English geographical expressions Assam and Siam are related terms. The Kachin (Jinghpaw) equivalent for Burmese *shan* is *sam*. The Burmese apply the term Shan fairly consistently to all the inhabitants of political Burma and of the Yunnan-Burma frontier area who call themselves Tai. In the west and south-west of Burma this involves some ambiguity since the Burmese distinguish Shans from Siamese, although both groups call themselves Tai. But for north-east Burma the definition is clear enough.

The Shans; so defined, are territorially scattered, but fairly uniform in culture. Dialect variations between different localities are considerable, but even so, apart from a few special exceptions, it can be said that all the Shans of North Burma and Western Yunnan speak one language, namely Tai. The exceptions are the Shans of Mōng Hsa (the Maingtha or A'chang), who speak what seems to be a dialect of Maru, the Shans of the Kubaw Valley, who now speak a corrupted form of Burmese, and miscellaneous small pockets of Shans in the Upper Chindwin and Hukawng Valley areas, whose speech today would appear to be mainly Jinghpaw with a heavy