cover: Pots of drinking water on the upper floor, with those for animals and other uses on the ground floor of a house in Ban Moh, Muang District, Mahasarakham Province.

[This photo was taken by Plueng Pliansaisueb, Professor, Faculty of Decorative Arts, Silpakorn University (University of Arts), Bangkok.]
Thai Village Life
Culture and Transition in the Northeast

Seri Phongphit
with
Kevin Hewison
NORTHEASTERN THAILAND

BASIC DATA

Area : 105 Million rai (170,000 sq.km.)

Population : 1987 18.6 million (1.9 million urban)
1990 (est.) 19.5 million (2.2 million urban)
Density - 114 persons/sq.km.
Growth - 2.7%

Education : 80% have completed less than 6 years of formal education.

Political Structure : 17 provinces. Each Changwat (province) is divided into a number of Amphur (district), which are themselves made up of Tambon (sub-districts). Each Tambon comprises a number of Mooban (villages).

The provincial governor is appointed from the Ministry of Interior.

Climate : Rainfall - 1100-1650 mm per year, with almost all falling in the wet season.
Humidity - high
Sunshine - average of 6-9 hours per day.
Temperature - average maximum 31 °C
- average minimum 21 °C
Seasons - Cool - November to February
- Hot - March to Mid-May
- Wet - Mid-May to October
Physical Features: 80% of the Northeast lies between 150 and 500 metres above sea-level. Most of this area is made up of the Korat Plateau and Sakol Nakhon Basin.

Economy: 1985 GDP per capita was 8,124 baht, which was 43% of the whole country average of 20,236 baht. In 1975 the NE figure was 45% of the whole country average.

Land use:
- Forest: 15%
- Upland crops: 11%
- Paddy: 35%
- Other agriculture: 5%
- Other: 34%

Production (1986):
- Rice: 7.5 million tonnes (70% glutinous)
- Cassava: 8.8 million tonnes
- Sugarcane: 3.2 million tonnes
- Maize: 1.3 million tonnes
- Fruit & Vegetables: 0.8 million tonnes
- Kenaf: 0.2 million tonnes

Average farm size: 28 rai (4.5 ha); 85% of farms are 30 rai or smaller.

Livestock (1986):
- 4.4 million buffalo
- 2.0 million cattle
- 1.1 million pigs
THE AUTHORS

SERI PHONGPHIT was born in Sakol Nakhon in the Northeast of Thailand. His Ph.D. was in Philosophy, from Munich University. He lectured at Thammasat University for ten years, and also acted as the Deputy Director of the Thai Khadi Research Institute. With more than a decade’s experience working with non-governmental organisations in rural development, he established the Thai Institute for Rural Development in January 1988, and is its Director. His publications include Back to the Roots, Religion in a Changing Society, and Turning Point of Thai Farmers (edited with Robert Bennoun), and many books, pamphlets and articles on development issues.

KEVIN HEWISON completed a Ph.D. at Australia’s Murdoch University, and has held appointments at universities in Australia, Thailand and Papua New Guinea. From 1986 to 1989 he was a consultant sociologist on a rural development project in Northeastern Thailand, and is currently a Visiting Professor at Mahidol University. His publications include Southeast Asia in the 1980s, Politics and Power in Thailand, and Bankers and Bureaucrats, together with numerous articles and reports on politics and development.
There have been many studies of Thai villages. Academics have attempted to understand the history of villages, the structure of villages in all regions of the country, and have applied many and various theories in explaining village life. For the general reader, however, even when the dense language of such studies can be understood, the result can be a confusing range of village pictures. To name just a few, we have big and little traditions, loosely structured villages, cluster villages, passive peasants, villages as hydraulic societies, and villages which are not "real" villages.

This book is not an attempt to comment on these academic studies or to judge any of them. Nor has it been an exercise designed to accept or reject theories or to build a model. Indeed, the information presented here did not grow out of any carefully designed study of village culture, with hypotheses to accept or reject. While we have drawn on many of these academic writings -- the works of Charles Keyes, Chatthip Nartsupha and Phya Anuman Rajadhon, to name just three -- ours is not an academic analysis.
This book is concerned with what we call popular wisdom, and the search for identity in the Northeast of Thailand, and reflects on the on-going process of development in the region. It is not intended to merely discuss popular wisdom as recorded in the literature or as told by villagers. Rather, we consider popular wisdom in the context of the dynamics of daily village life, the villagers’ special occasions, their religious and cultural rites, rituals, festivities and celebrations, their work and entertainment, and their moments of happiness and grief.

At the most basic level it is hoped that the general reader will be able to read and enjoy this book, to gain some insight into what life was like in the Northeast and how it is changing. This is important as the Northeast has again become a focus of government attention as the gateway to Indochina, resulting in even more rapid change. In addition, increasing numbers of Thai and foreign tourists are visiting the area. We hope this book produces a clearer picture of a the changing world of the Northeast and a better understanding of the area.

The data used in this study has been assembled during development programmes by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and various people’s organisations, in conversations with wise persons, monks, village leaders, village resource persons, healers, shamans, ordinary villagers, and through participation in their many special occasions. This book is, then, a synthesis of learning experiences. What we set out in the pages which follow will not reflect the whole regional situation for the Northeast has many different cultural groups, but the popular wisdom collected and reported here represents an important part of the reality, especially the principal characteristics and the cultural identity of the region. In a sense we "average" real experiences to present a general picture, and every village will be different.

The Northeast, or Isan in the Central Thai Language, is a diverse area. Its people, living in 17 provinces, are mostly of Lao ethnic and cultural origin, but there are significant groups of Khmer, Chinese and Vietnamese and many other minority groups. We have tended, however, to concentrate on the Lao majority. No doubt many will criticise this approach, but we felt it was time a
general picture was drawn and preserved. And general the picture is -- part history, part anthropology, part politics, but in total, none of these -- it is popular wisdom revealed in the way that it was gained by outsiders. That is, development workers trying to understand the culture of the villages where they work, their history, development, the people's beliefs, fears, ceremonies, festivals, and their desires and hopes for the future. Only by understanding this can the serious rural development worker begin to play a part in supporting villagers in moving toward self-reliant development. Some of these experiences, of both the NGO workers and of individual villages, have been presented in other publications by THIRD (Seri Phongphit, ed. Back to the Roots, 1986 and Seri Phongphit and Robert Bennoun, eds. Turning Point of Thai Farmers, 1989).

By its nature, this study can only have resulted from the cooperation of many individuals, groups, and organisations working in villages and those engaged in rural development, both directly and indirectly; it would thus be an injustice to many to mention only a few of these collaborators. Two persons, however, deserve special thanks: Surachet Vetchaphitak and Vichit Nantasuwan, Seri Phongphit's two assistants, for their companionship along the path of development -- our own and that of the villagers. They have our gratitude, as does everyone who helped. We also wish to express our most sincere gratitude to the villagers who have taken the time to teach us about popular wisdom. They know only too well that we have not always been able to penetrate, conceptualise, and understand the full meaning of this wisdom but, at the very least, a great deal has been learnt about the magnificent cultural heritage of the Northeast. For the principal author, this has also been a voyage of personal discovery, and he has learnt much about his own roots.

For their support and assistance, the principal author is grateful to the Toyota Foundation. Without their support in 1987 and 1988, he would not have been able to complete this study.

A word regarding Kevin Hewison's collaboration is also in order. Dr. Hewison, about to complete three years work on a bilateral rural development project, was asked to read and edit
the original report. He did far more, editing the manuscript many times, while maintaining the original flavour of the work. In addition, he questioned many points and added, from his experience, to the final product. His efforts are justly recognised on the cover. Both authors are responsible for any errors, misinterpretations, or other shortcomings which readers will certainly find.

Readers will notice that we have used many non-English words, with a glossary appearing at the end of the book. Most of these are Thaj words, with some Lao and religious terms, and are italicised in the text.

The research presented here has substantially contributed to activities being implemented by Thai Institute for Rural Development (THIRD) and a number of other projects in the Northeast. It has thus been a practical exercise, with real outcomes for development work. Should any merit derive from this study, it should go to the villagers with whom THIRD is working, for their development, based on their cultural values, a process of reaffirming their identity as a way to self-reliance.

We hope readers will enjoy this book, learn from it, and be challenged or encouraged to seek an even better understanding of the society and cultures of the Northeast of Thailand.

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CHAPTER 1

BUILDING A COMMUNITY
"My parents moved here from a village near Amnart Chareon, Ubol Ratchathani, about 90 years ago. I was told that the reason for their migration was a serious disease: men and animals died, and the village was devastated. Everybody who survived moved to other places."

"We came from Wapipathum, Mahasarakham, about 70 years ago. There we suffered from drought for three consecutive years, we had no more rice, and could not grow anything. In the end, we had no money to pay our taxes. Additionally, there were too many thieves in that area, and our cattle were stolen. There was no peace and no security."

"We moved from Mahachanachai, in what is now Yasothon, about 50 years ago. There the annual flood from the Chi River damaged all our crops, and we could not grow anything."

"We came to this place about 65 years ago, from another sub-district about ten kilometres from here. Back there, the number of families grew, and there was not enough land for everybody. We
were persuaded by some of our relatives, who had come before us, to move here where there is more land and water."

"We moved from Don Tarn, in what is now Mukdaharn, about 45 years ago, during the dispute between Thailand and France. There was a law that prohibited the planting of rice, so our village suffered from a shortage. We would go to other villages, taking fish we caught in the Mekong River, to exchange for rice. As this became more difficult, we had to move to this place, where we could grow rice."

Recounted in similar ways by elderly people in many villages, these tales show that the Isan of the past was not a paradise. Migration and new settlement seem to have been normal over at least the past 100 years. As mentioned in these tales, based on stories passed on by parents, grandparents, relatives, and participants in the moves, the reasons for migration were usually disease, pressure from the state, drought, and other natural disasters.

A traditional cart pulled by cattle
(Photo by Plueng Pliansaisueb)
Once settled at a new site, it did not necessarily mean that a peaceful new home had been found. For example, the migrants still had to find money to pay taxes. If there was no money, then they had to put up their cattle or buffaloes for sale, or they had to cut trees in order to earn the four baht needed to pay their taxes, or they could work off the tax. It was not often easy to find buyers for village products for roads or more often, tracks, were only suitable for carts; and villages were often inaccessible during the rainy season. Exemption from paying tax was only possible if villagers moved to some remote place, but this meant they had to be prepared to live an isolated existence.

Having moved to their new home they still risked diseases, drought, flood, thieves and bandits, and wild animals such as elephants, tigers and other dangerous creatures. Indeed, many people died from diseases or were killed by bandits and wild animals, and while there was usually no record of such events, they were very much a part of life.

In talking with villagers it is noticeable that none said anything about starvation or death from lack of food. We know, however, that these things did occur from time to time. Nevertheless, nature was still bountiful, and its exploitation was still reasonably balanced with the needs of the local people, with natural disasters seldom striking all of Isan at the same time.
In 1937, forest covered sixty percent of the Isan region, or about ten million hectares. Such forest cover meant that communication between villages was difficult, and usually by cart, horse, or on foot. Thus migration was not a decision taken lightly. The people of Isan were not a wandering, hunting and gathering people, and migration therefore required a fundamental decision, and the reasons for a move were serious.

When people did decide to migrate, it was rarely undertaken independently. Usually a small group was involved, with relatives or friends, led by elders or, sometimes, by Buddhist monks. They brought with them their necessary belongings, such as mats, pillows, blankets, cooking utensils, and rice for the journey. If they had no rice, they often took items which could be traded: chickens, other small animals, handicrafts, cotton or silk cloth, fruits, or chillies; they could exchange these with other villagers for rice during their journey, or when establishing their new settlement. Earthenware pots were used to store drinking water, while bamboo buckets, were used to fetch water from wells or natural water resources.
The preparations for migration took many forms. Sometimes someone from the group went to survey prospective places and returned to discuss it with others. Or someone who was already at the new place came to see their relatives or friends and persuaded them to join. Alternatively, the villagers might have heard about the place from others, such as villagers or itinerant traders. Exceptionally, some people just packed up and moved without knowing exactly where to settle. Ordinarily, however, prior to any move, the elders would be consulted and, on occasions, would make the decision themselves.

Before leaving the old village, a food offering ceremony was performed to inform the phii (or spirits) of the village, through a cham, the mediator between humans and phii. Sometimes the spirits were asked to accompany the migrants to the new location. Those people not leaving would see the migrants off, wishing them well, binding their wrists with cotton strings in a ceremony called baisri sukwan, symbolising the unity of life of an individual in spirit and body, and the unity of community members.

The migrants usually moved in a caravan, with the aged people, children and women riding on carts, and the men and older boys walking alongside. Once they had arrived, the spirits of the old community would be invited to return home, and the migrants will discover new spirits, which are the "owners" of the new place, and called chao thii or pu-ta. The first thing they would do was choose a place at the entrance to or at the fringe of the village site to build a spirit shrine, or san pu-ta. The place had to be surrounded by big trees, with shadows, and a peaceful atmosphere. Once the spirit house was built, a ceremony was performed, as a rite of submission to the pu-ta, with the recently arrived migrants calling themselves the pu-ta's children, and asking for its protection and blessing.

The place chosen as a new village site was usually characterised by four elements: water resources, lowland, upland, and forest.
Water resources

An examination of a good map of the Northeast shows that there are many natural water resources in the region. There are the three major rivers, the Mekong, the Chi, and the Mun; there are innumerable smaller rivers and streams (huay); and there are natural water reservoirs called nong and bueng (lakes and swamps). Nevertheless, in many places, the problem of drought, either within a year, or over consecutive years, occurred, and still does, with monotonous regularity. Another serious problem was poor soil quality and soils, which would not retain water. In addition, in many areas, salinity was a problem as salty groundwater percolated through the soil to the surface.

The main reason villagers chose to settle close to a natural water resource was not because of a need for agricultural water. Rather, it was for consumption by the villagers, their cattle, and animals, and for the provision of food such as fish, crabs, shrimp, plants and vegetables.

If they could not settle on the edge of river, huay, nong or bueng, then the settlers would look for a place in the near vicinity, so that they could travel to the water resource, and back, within a day. Once a week or once a month the villagers who lived away from these natural water resources would go to fish and find food, usually travelling in a group; this would give them enough food for a long period. During the dry season they might even go in a caravan to large rivers, huay, nong or bueng, and stay there for days or weeks to collect food. Fish were dried or preserved with salt and rice husks. This kind of fish is called pla-rah. Alternatively, they would prepare pla-som, with salt and rice to make salty and sour fish, that could be eaten over a long period. Some of this preserved fish might also be used to barter for rice and other family necessities.

The reason water resources were not essential for agriculture was that rice growing and other cropping relied almost entirely on rain. Very few permanent dams for irrigation were constructed by villagers, and state activities in this area only began in the 1960s, with some small dams on small streams, and larger
water reservoirs in the 1970s. However, during the rice growing season, villagers would build numerous temporary structures to control the flow of water through their fields.

Villagers usually only dug wells for drinking water and for community consumption. Chillies, onions, and other local vegetables necessary for everyday consumption and cooking would be grown in a small garden or in pots or boxes up in the house, out of the way of chickens and other domestic animals. Villages might also dig a community pond in order to have more water for animals and for growing vegetables throughout the year.

Rainwater began to be used for drinking only with the introduction of metal roofing about fifty years ago, and has become common amongst villagers only over the past thirty years, but even then few could afford it. Ordinarily, a villager’s house had a roof made of leaves, grass or wood tiles. In the latter case, the owners also stored rainwater for drinking, but only in small clay jars, but not in tanks, ceramic jars, or large cement jars, all of which were introduced relatively recently.

Lowland

It was not always easy to find lowland without too many trees, that was good for growing rice, situated in the vicinity of water resources, fertile, and large enough for a new settlement. Sometimes the newly-arrived migrants had to work hard to cut out most of the trees, transforming the forest into paddy land. The land had to be relatively low as in the rainy season, water for rice growing would flow from the higher ground to the paddy areas, called na-lum. The lower the na-lum, the longer they would hold water during the growing season. Upland rice fields were called na-don. Villagers preferred to have access to both na-lum and na-don so that in those years when there is too much rain, the na-don would yield more, while the na-lum crop would be damaged, while the reverse will be true in those years with less rain.

In the Northeast, land titles began to be issued officially only
after the political change from the absolute monarchy to a constitutional form in 1932. Prior to this the only legal land holders were the royal family, the titled aristocrats and officials. In theory, migrants had to ask for permission from the state to occupy new land, but, in practice, they rarely did so, usually just settling down where they thought appropriate, especially in remote areas.

The new settlers did not need much land for cultivation, as within a subsistence economy, needs were limited. Large families or villagers with long-term plans often did occupy more land than was necessary for immediate needs, but planned to expand or give away or, occasionally, sell land to newcomers.

Upland

The new settlement needed upland on which to build houses, and also for na-don fields. During the rainy season this site had to be dry, not too humid, and above all, not subject to flooding. This land also had to be large enough for the further expansion of families, for the construction of a temple, and a school. In other words, the village was invariably established on higher land. The villagers built their houses close together, with large villages being divided into small groups called khum. On the small areas of land around their houses, each family would grow fruit trees such as bananas, mangos, and tamarind and would also plant a small garden for vegetables (coriander, onions, garlic, phak-itu, phak-pheo, phak-homhaw, and the like). Upland areas were also needed to grow cotton, mulberries, and jute. These were all plants used for basic necessities such as clothing and rope.

Houses were usually about five to six metres high, with the ground level left for cattle, buffalo, chickens, ducks, and other domestic animals, with the family living in the upstairs area. Close to the house would be a small barn in which rice would be stored. There was no toilet, however, as the villagers' "toilet" was in the fields or behind bushes.
Forest

Forest was essential to the new settlement, and usually villagers reserved some forest behind the village. The elders knew what kind of forest was good for the village: some forests were known for having dangerous diseases, mosquitoes, wild beasts, or phii, the owners of the forest, which did not like to have people close by; these forests were to be avoided. Forests chosen were usually those which not only had big trees, but all kinds of plants, thus indicating their fertility. The villagers were thus sure of having a good "market" where they could easily find food, such as small animals, vegetables, fruit, and wood for family use.

Regrettably, forests near villages have rapidly disappeared over the past thirty years. Family expansion has been one reason for this, but the major factor has been the introduction of a new mode of production, where villagers were encouraged to grow commercial crops. In the first instance, rice was produced on a larger scale; jute followed; and then, and principally, cassava were introduced as cash crops, and determined the new direction for villages.

Part of the new direction has thus meant that the villagers have sold their "market". They have also lost a source of income as forest products were collected for sale to itinerant traders or were carried out to nearby towns for sale. Trees were cut down by outsiders, by villagers hired by traders and merchants, or by the villagers themselves. Now, the forests are gone.
Building Houses

Usually village settlements were headed by one or more village elders. In some areas they are called *chao-kote*, and represent the ancestors of the family or families who established the settlement. Sometimes, the migration was led by monks. Whatever the case, it would be the most respected person who would to divide the land for building houses and for agriculture where migration was by a group.

After the *san pu-ta* (shrine of the community spirit) was set, the monk’s residence was built. The villagers stayed in temporary housing, with little more than a thatched roof, for a period of time. Then they would build their permanent houses, one after another. The delay was because the villagers had to seek their daily food, prepare new rice fields, cut trees, and begin growing plants such as bamboo and fruit trees. Besides, building a house was not simply a matter of cutting trees and setting up the house; it was, and still is, an important event that, like others, is related to beliefs and cultural values.
The preparations for building a house began with the search for wood. Going into the forest for this purpose was not done at any time or by any person, for the time had to be "given" by a respected elder. The "right" time had to be carefully determined, and usually only between the first and fourth lunar months (approximately December to March and corresponding to the dry season) were trees allowed to be cut. During all other months, cutting was forbidden as it was believed that during these months the trees were "ordained", just as a young man is ordained during the lenten period.

In building a house, trees would be cut from only one forest, so that the forest guardians would not quarrel. Permission to cut had to be gained from the spirits, through a simple ceremony of offering food. The selection of trees was done according to tradition, where some varieties of trees were not to be cut, being considered unsuitable for housing. The external qualities of trees, which particular one should be used as the main post, which ones would be used for the minor posts, which for the

Pu-ta shrine or village spirit house
(Photo by Plueng Pliansaisueb)
floor and the roof, which way trees should fall when cut down, and many other details, were all transmitted through tradition. The elders advised villagers to strictly adhere to these details, so that the house would be a peaceful place in which to live. Should they neglect any of these traditions, a number of strange or unlucky events might afflict those who lived in the new house.

The "right" time to begin construction also had to be identified by an elder, aided by the horoscope of the house owner. The good days for building a house were considered to be Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, while Saturdays were forbidden. In addition to other details, the lunar calendar also had to be considered.

Prior to construction, the elders would "survey" (doo-thii) the location. This ceremony was necessary as the house had to be built in the correct place. Elderly villagers would tell the owner whether the soil was good or bad, cool or warm, or whether there are any bad elements lying underground: there should be no dead logs, parts of trees, animals, stones, or mysterious things in the soil. The ordinary way to choose the appropriate place in the village was to prepare and offer food to the spirit which "owned" the land, leaving it overnight with a demand for the spirit to reveal details about the location. If, on the following morning, the signs were positive, then that place was considered appropriate.

House construction begins by digging the hole for the main upright, considered the most important post, being the "centre" of the house, linking that house to the "centre" of the universe. Before digging the hole, another ceremony is performed, this time for the naga, a mythological animal believed to lie underground. The placing of the first post is accompanied by prayers of the Brahman (or phram in the Lao language, the man who performs the ceremony according to Brahmanism or Hinduism). The top of the first post is tied up with flowers and colourful cloth, which correspond to the colour of the day or the star of the owner of the house.

After the first post had been erected, the one which follows is
also important. But then villagers join in, completing construction over a day or two, at least to a stage where it is good enough to live in. The rest is done by the owners and their close relatives.

The details of house building vary from place to place, but once the house is finished, the owners will usually again consult an elder for the correct time for an "official" inauguration. In many cases in the past, as the house was built within a day, the inauguration was held on that same day, as villagers had already gathered. These days, however, building a new house may require weeks or months, depending on the size of the house and the status of the owners.

Villagers believe that humans are part of the universe and nature. Nature has its own laws and humans have to follow these laws, in the same way as all other living things in the universe, and live in harmony with nature. The elements of space and time are clearly expressed in the ceremony of building a new house. To be linked to the centre of the universe (space), and linked at the same moment to eternity (time) expresses a submission, harmony, and balance. This appears fatalistic or deterministic, but at the same time humans are still free, and are responsible for their own actions. There is room for an individual human's freedom in the universe. But, humans are not the masters, only parts of the whole.

Working for Basic Needs

As land was divided or occupied, a family would usually only work a piece of land which was considered to be sufficient for family consumption. This consumption was not only for the nourishment of the family, but also for ceremonies, merit making, for relatives, or others in need, and to exchange with others for what the family did not have or was insufficient. In addition, an allowance would be made for the coming year, if there was a drought, and for animals such as hens, chickens, ducks, cattle and buffaloes.

If the land was on a plain, the work required to bring the
land into production was less. The villagers needed only to clear the land and establish the *khanna* (paddy bunds) to divide the land into smaller portions. The *khanna* were necessary for conserving and delivering water to all fields. Not all trees on the plain would be cut down and nor would all small bushes and ant hills be destroyed. The reason for this was that these were the places where birds and animals made their homes, and nature was kept in balance.

The upland required more work as the soil was harder, and there would usually be more trees to be cleared. Usually the upland would be close to village houses, and sometimes was even a part of the housing site, which were themselves on higher land.

In addition to the plants that were necessary for everyday life, such as for producing cloth and rope, every villager would also immediately begin to grow banana trees. This was because

*Traditional weaving*
bananas could be considered as the most important "fruit" for villagers. They are not only a fruit to eat after meals, but at any time of the day, when one was hungry. Bananas were used as a kind of dessert, wrapped in banana leaves with rice, and then boiled, to make *khao-tom-mad*. This dessert was a part of all family and community events. Banana leaves also had many uses, from wrapping food for cooking, to preparations for all religious ceremonies, rites and rituals. In addition, villagers would also plant mangoes, tamarind, coconut palms and sugarcane.

Plants used for cooking included the young leaves and fruits of tamarind, coconut, sugar cane, chillies, lemon grass, jasmine, *phak i-tu*, onions, and garlic. Vegetables collected from the forest were both for cooking and to eat with food. The rainy season was the best time to collect such vegetables as mushrooms, bamboo (*noh-mai*), and rattan (*yod-wai*). During periods of rice shortage, the villagers replaced rice with taro roots which were easily found in the forest. Many old villagers still vividly remember the period of the War, when it was prohibited to transport rice. Rice shortages were so critical that the villagers had to eat taro roots and other kinds of forest fruits for a long period.

From May to December the villager's main work was, and still is, in the fields, for this is the rice growing season. However, the really hard work is not continuous. Once the rains start, in May, the villagers prepare the soil with a first ploughing. When the rains intensify, and water is banking up in the fields, the villagers begin to prepare seeds, sowing them in one of the well-prepared seedbeds. Once these seeds sprout and grow, they will be translated to other fields, which are ploughed for a second and third time. If the rains are regular, all of this work is finished around the month of August, and the growing season extends to November or December, at the latest, when the harvest begins.

The rainy season, of course, is also the season when most other plants are grown. When the villagers have time free from their rice fields, they would tend these other plants and vegetables, which also need water during their first months, but once rooted, withstand the dry season that follows. Otherwise, the villagers had to water them with water from wells or other nearby
After harvesting, when the rice was taken to barns, the villagers had more time for religious and cultural events. Yet, work was still on everyone's daily agenda. Women would weave cloth or silk, while the men spent time on handicrafts and preparing farming implements for the following season. Children would tend the cattle and buffalo, and fetch water for the family. This latter work could also be arduous, especially if the water source happened to be far from home. The young men, women and children would go early in the morning and again in the evening. In the morning one would also hear the sounds of tam-khao from many houses, as the young ones and women husked the rice. Meanwhile, their fathers might go fishing or hunting in the forest while their mothers would either go to the forest or to the fields to collect vegetables and other food, including small animals and edible insects.
This pattern was referred to as *hedyou-hedkin* and a *hachakinkham* way of life; these expressions are difficult to translate, and perhaps the best is as: "to work in order to have, to live, and to eat" and "to search in the morning, to eat in the evening." This clearly states a lifestyle based on seeking subsistence within a natural environment.

Social Organisation

With the social reforms implemented during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, villages were required to have a headman, elected by villagers, and approved for the position by the state. The first village head was officially appointed in the central region, in Ayudhya province, in 1892. However, it was decades before this system was introduced to all villages in the Northeast.

Before this state imposition, villages had their own "natural" leaders. It was noted earlier that a new settlement had a *chao kote* (or head of family), who was an elder, much respected by villagers. Moral integrity was the main criteria for the position, and such a leader was expected to give advice to villagers, preside over ceremonies, and solve conflicts, quarrels, and other problems in the village. The decision of this elder was taken as final, and there would seldom be further discussion.

Even when the new administrative system was introduced into villages the elders were still respected, and even today they tend to function much as before. Villagers usually do not go to the police or to court when they have problems, as they know that both parties will have to waste time and money, and that their conflict could be maintained so that there would be no peace between the parties. On the other hand, if they go to see the elders, the case would be solved and a reconciliation achieved.

For example, if a village dog kills a fighting cock, the owner of the cock might request 200 *baht* compensation from the dog's owner. Should the latter refuse, but is willing to pay just 50 *baht*, and no agreement can be reached, then they will go to see a
respected elder. The elder would listen attentively to the whole story, ask some questions, and could decide that the dog's owner should pay 100 baht, as the bird was not an ordinary one, but a prize fighting cock. The problem is solved not just with this decision, but with a "sermon" from the elder, who would repeatedly urge villagers to remain united and to be kind to one another. With these words of wisdom, the villagers would return home happily. The dog's owner gives the cock's owner 100 baht, and they then go to the latter's house for a good meal (prepared with the cock!). In addition, the 100 baht is used to buy local "whiskey", and all eat and drink happily together.

This hypothetical case is a realistic example of how conflicts were solved in the villages of old. There are, however, still many similar cases in villages today. But, not many villages are fortunate enough to have a head who is, at the same time, a "natural" leader, respected by all. This was far more common up to about thirty years ago, but today, even though most village heads are not natural leaders, they still seek the advice of the elders as they know that without their blessing, it would be hard to get villagers' participation in village activities.

Such village organisation might appear to be rather "loose", as there are few organisational structures. For a village of twenty to forty households, where almost everyone was related, situated far from towns, and with the slow communications of the day, there was no real need for formal structures. But, it was the kinship relations which were themselves a form of organisation and a social force. These relations could be further reinforced or expanded when two persons decided to enter a special relationship with a phuk-siao ceremony (siao means "very close friend"), where the two became more than mere friends, becoming "blood sisters or brothers" witnessed by the community, the elders, and the sacred powers. They had to drink at the point water where the tip of a knife had entered a bowl of water, vowing to become friends, and that any betrayal would be punished by the universal sacred power.

The phuk-siao ceremony would be presided over by one or more of the elders, in the presence of relatives and community
members. Usually the two persons involved were from different villages. The ceremony began with a bowl of water on the floor. An elder pours some chilli and salt into the water, and candles and joss sticks are lit. The master of ceremonies would call forth the gods and a sacred power. Then the tip of a knife is placed in the water. While doing this the elder will ask the two persons whether they want to become siao. As they confirm, the elders will explain the meaning of the ceremony: that the chillies will conserve the "hotness", meaning courage and bravery, while the salt represents sustainability, durability, and consistency. These two elements are to conserve the friendship between the two. Water means life, purity, and strength; as the friendship should be.

Usually the phuk-siao ceremony was between young men, but it could also be between women and elderly people. The new relationship had an impact on whole families and community as the ceremony meant that the relatives of both parties also formed a relationship, and it was common for many people to have siao in various places. The commitment toward a siao is as towards one's own family members; in times of need, they will not forget each other. Even when they die, their children will feel a commitment to maintaining the mutual relationship. This was an important way of structuring social relations.

The Temple

The centre of life for most village communities was and is the temple. At first settlement, not all communities had monks with them, but even without them, villagers would think about setting up at least a temple hall, which could also be used as a meeting hall, for merit-making, and to listen to the preaching of monks. In addition, the hall might be used as a temporary shelter for monks.

Villagers would build a house for monks when they decided to have them come to stay in the community permanently. Often the structure would be a simple, even tiny, building, which later might be enlarged and rebuilt by the resident abbot and monks. Villagers would search for monks to come and stay in the temple, for at least the lenten period (about three months, during
the rainy season). During this time some of the young male villagers would be ordained as novices or monks.

A temple is made up of a set of houses for monks, a hall, and the ubosot which is the sacred place where Buddha statues are kept, monks pray, and all important ceremonies take place. This latter structure is the most important part, indeed the heart of the temple. However, not all villages could afford to have an ubosot, as it requires materials, time, and skilled builder to construct one. Villagers are, however, very proud of having one in their temple.

The temple grounds would generally be extensive, and might cover several hectares. Part of the ground is cleared of most of its trees, with just one or two big ones being left to provide shade. This cleared ground is used for cultural events and other entertainment for villagers. In many temple grounds villagers take their cattle and buffalo to eat the grass in these areas.

Monks staying in village temples usually did not go out to receive food from villagers in the mornings. Rather, they remain in the temple and the villagers bring them food at around seven o'clock in the morning, and again at pei or about eleven o'clock in the morning. The temple’s pei drum will tell the community that it is time for the monk’s "lunch". In many villages, people will take it in turns to deliver food to the temple. During Buddhist holy days (four a month, according to lunar calendar) many villagers will go to the temple for merit making (tham bun), offering food and other materials to the monks and temple. They will often take a handful of cooked sticky rice with them and stick it to trees in the temple grounds and on their route home: this is yet another form of merit making, offering rice to the guardian spirits of trees.

Up to about forty years ago, the temple was, in most villages, the centre of community education. The children and young men learned and practiced not only Buddhist doctrine, but also writing, reading, calculation, and other subjects the abbot or monks could teach. Buad rian was a term used to refer to someone who was an ordained monk; buad means to be ordained as a monk or
novice, while rian means to learn. This education function was one reason why having a temple and monks was considered a necessity. Indeed, most traditional values were transmitted through the temple.

With land, water resources and forest available, the new migrants would then build houses, while also working for their subsistence. Once established, often with a temple, the villagers would then seek to establish a full agenda of social and cultural activities as they also built their community.
CHAPTER 2

VILLAGE CULTURAL LIFE
THE YEARLY CYCLE

For villagers, their yearly cycle begins with Songkran. In the past, villagers did not celebrate their birthdays, but Songkran, which can be viewed as a community "birthday". This event normally fell on the 15th full moon, in the fifth month of lunar calendar. Songkran was later fixed as the 13th of April, by the government of Prime Minister Plaek Phibulsongkram, after the Second World War. With New Year’s Day also officially designated as the first day of January, Songkran became a local celebration, until its promotion in recent years. In what follows, however, we have chosen to refer to the months according to the Western calendar.

April is the hottest month of the year, but it seems that once the heat has reached its maximum, rain falls. Usually, the first heavy rains come with the Songkran festival, or soon after, and it is considered the beginning of a new cycle of life -- an eternity renewed on this day. On the designated day, the villagers will go to the temple to make merit in the morning, while in the afternoon, at about three o'clock, the monks would beat the drum calling villagers to gather at the temple. The villagers go there
with locally made scents, water, flowers, joss sticks and candles. At the temple the rite of pouring water on Buddha statues, which had been cleaned by the monks, is performed. This ceremony is referred to as rod nam dam hua, and is characterised not only by the pouring of water on Buddha images but also on the hands of monks and elders, asking to be pardoned for past misdeeds and evils and for their blessing for the new year. Following this, villagers would often offer robes to the monks and clothes to the elders.

Around May, the sixth month ceremony of *bun bang fai*, today known as the "rocket festival" is celebrated. It is another occasion when villagers are anxious for rain. They prepare a rocket with bamboo poles, take it on a procession to the temple one afternoon, and then ignite it and shoot it up into the sky. If the village is large, there could be more than one *bang fai*, or the ceremony might have participation from other, nearby villages. A sort of competition would often be organised, with the *bang fai* shooting the highest being rewarded, while those failing to leave the ground or travelling only a short distance up into the sky resulting in the owner being painted with mud as a punishment.

During the procession of the *bang fai* along village roads and paths, villagers sing and dance, with the leading singer being the one who knows the traditional verses, which are recited and adapted to the situation of the village. The content of the verses revolves around requests for rain from the heavens. These days, some "modern", urban people consider them "rude", since the verses are usually risqué and relate to sexual matters. But, for the villagers this is a part of the fun, with the jokes and verses providing a respite from the heat and the drought. More significantly, and traditionally, villagers believe that rain comes from a sexual relationship between the gods, and the verses are meant to tempt the god and goddess to come together.

There is another very similar ceremony in some villages: the procession of a cat in a basket through the village. The villagers will pour water on the dancers and singers and give them alcohol and food, listening to their chants which are also ribald. Some villagers say they believe that the cat, an animal that does not like
water, is the cause of the drought, but it seems that nobody can really explain why it is the cat and not some other animal.

The sixth month also has another important ceremony: the celebration of the pu-ta. Villagers gather at the shrine of the pu-ta with food, desserts, fruits, candles, flowers, and coconut leaves knotted to symbolise the members of each family, and the number of cattle, buffaloes, and animals they have. The cham will perform the ceremony, offering the pu-ta all that the villagers bring, while a nang lam (or dancer, usually a woman) will dance as an offering to the pu-ta. The cham enters a trance, and is believed to have been entered and possessed by the pu-ta. The cham will talk as if he or she was the pu-ta, and will preach, warn and advise the villagers about the future of the community, predict what agricultural yields will be, and whether there will be any troubles in the village.

During this period, should it rains sufficiently to allow villagers to complete the first ploughing a ceremony for the ta haek, the

Bun-ban, a ritual in honour of village spirit before the beginning of the rice growing season
phii of the field, has to be conducted, prior to any ploughing. Villagers prepare food, especially boiled chicken, and offer it to the ta haek at a corner of the field, where the khanna are high, and water supply is good. Six bamboo posts are put around a two-by-two metre area, and this place is considered to be the home of the ta haek. Only when the ceremony is finished will each farmer start the first ploughing called the haek na ceremony. The timing and method of ploughing also has rules which need to be followed. Usually, Thursday is considered the best day as it is the day of khru, the master’s day. Similarly, a traditional precept was followed where, the first ploughing was done in a circle in the field.

The full moon of the sixth month is Visakhapuja day, and is the commemoration of the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, which are all believed to have occurred on the same day. Villagers consider this to be the most important day of all Buddhist celebrations. They go to the temple in the morning, to make merit, giving food and other offerings to the monks and temple, and listen to the monk’s preaching. In the evening, they go again, with candles and flowers, for a procession around the ubosoth, or if there is no ubosoth, a procession of three circles, as determined by the monks.

The beginning of Buddhist Lent is celebrated on the first day of the eight waning moon (around July), and lasts for three months. At this time, the monks will remain in the temple, studying, praying and meditating. They can go out to visit the people, but spend nights at their own temple. Newly ordained novices and monks take this opportunity to learn and practice the Dhamma (the Buddha’s doctrine), as many of them will disrobe at the end of the Lenten period. The villagers gather at the temple for merit-making and, in addition to food, they will also offer the monks robes and other items which might be needed during Lent.

The ninth month is when the khao pradab din ceremony for dead relatives is performed. In this merit making ceremony, rice is prepared in small lots, and wrapped in banana leaves. Food and the rice is then arranged into four parts: the first is for the
family; the second for relatives and friends in the village; the third for the dead; and the fourth for the monks. In offering food for the dead, the practice is to place it under a tree in the temple grounds or, as performed by some villagers, under one of the trees near their house. It is believed that the dead will come to receive the merit there. The food for the monks is usually offered in the morning, after which the monks will preach, particularly on the themes of relationships with the dead and the virtue of showing gratitude to ancestors.

In the tenth month, another merit making ceremony, similar to khao pradab din is performed. This rite of khao-saak is based on Buddhist mythology and the teachings of Buddha regarding reconciliation, solidarity, and mutual assistance. It involves a sharing of one’s food, not only with the monks, one’s relatives, and other villagers, but also with the spirits, which are all believed to be related to human life.

The orkphansa ceremony occurs on the full moon of the eleventh month, and marks the end of the Lenten period. Buddhists consider the month after Lent to be a time for merit-making. Monks can leave the temple to visit their parents and relatives and for preaching, meaning that they bless the people. Villagers offer food to the monks, and a procession is held through the village to the temple, and proceeds around the temple three times. During the procession, villagers place their offerings in a miniature castle, fashioned from wax.

The eleventh month (around October and November) is also the month when there is most water, with rivers often being flooded. It is at this time that villagers living close to the rivers will organise long-boat racing competitions.

This period also sees the loi krathong ceremony being organised, involving the floating of candles and flowers, together with each person’s wishes, on a body of water. However, this was more of an urban celebration than one for villagers, for loi krathong celebrates that concept of “mother river”, and this Hindu tradition has less influence on villagers. Their relationship with water, including rivers, streams, nong, and bueng, is more with the
specific spirits inhabiting these water resources.

During the twelfth month the *kathin* ceremony is held. During the whole month following the end of Lent, villagers organise merit-making, offering robes for monks, together with food and other necessities. Some villages may organise a *kathin* for another village, where a temple is seen to be in need. This ceremony has gradually evolved to include the offering of money and resources for building temple houses, halls, and *ubosoth*.

During the months of October and November there are many cultural and religious events, as this is the time when villagers are waiting for the crop to mature prior to harvesting or, in some cases, gradually harvesting their fields, dividing their time between work and the celebrations.

The first month’s major ceremony is *khao-kam*, a period of six days and nights when there is an intensive practice of the Dhamma. This is a time when villagers, and especially the elderly people, dress in white and may stay in small huts built temporarily in the temple grounds, or stay overnight at home, but spend the day at the temple, where huts are also provided for monks. This is a period of purification, for both monks and lay people. As *khao-kam* ceremonies could not be held in all villages, groups of villages would organise it together, and sometimes each of the villages would take a turn at hosting the ceremony. Considerable arrangement was required, so a number of villagers would have to find some free days, where they could be away from their daily work. Once a very significant event, *khao-kam* is much less frequently practiced today, as villagers seem to have far less spare time in which to make the necessary arrangements.

The second month sees the ceremony of *khoon-lan*, or *bun kum-khao yai*. This ceremony involves the collection of harvested rice, which is taken to a prepared place in the fields, to be threshed. Once the rice is collected in the place where it will be threshed, the ceremony of *sukwankhao* is performed by a *phram* with, sometimes, monks being invited to pour perfumed water on rice. A *dai saisin* (a blessed cotton cord) is hung around that area, as a sign that no bad spirit may enter. The owner of the
Sukwan ceremony for rice after harvest, performed by a Brahman priest, sitting on a rice pile.

Sukwan ceremony for buffalo after harvest.

Sukwan ceremony for carts and buffaloes.
rice prepares boiled eggs, flowers, and candles to offer to the mae phosop (the rice spirit), thanking her for being there, and asking to be pardoned for threshing the rice. After that, food is offered to villagers who have joined the ceremony.

Following this, most of the rice is taken to a village rice barn, while some is taken to the temple as an offering. This whole process is a rite related to "mother rice" (or mae phosop), which refers to a story told during the Buddha’s time.

In some villages, after the rice had been taken to the barn, the housewife would be the first to open the barn, early in the morning, to collect an amount of rice to take to the temple. On opening the barn, the woman greets mae phosop, asking permission to take the rice for the temple. She would then go directly to the temple without stopping anywhere. When the rice reaches the temple grounds, villagers gather, and the monk recounts the story of mae phosop, chants and preaches, and then sprinkles holy water on the rice. Villagers follow suit, and the ceremony ends with the villagers each taking a handful of rice home with them. These "holy" seeds will be used during the next planting season.

Khao-chi, a rite during which villagers offer roasted rice to monks takes place in the third month. This tradition appears to derive from the story of a woman offering roasted rice to the Lord Buddha and his disciples, thinking that he would not like it, since it was so simple, but to her surprise, he liked it. Villagers traditionally prepared their roasted sticky rice at home, adding some sugar, salt, or eggs to the rice, to make it tastier. They would then take it to the temple to offer to the monks, with the remainder being eaten by the villagers themselves. This rite coincides with Makhapuja (the commemoration of the day that 1,250 monks gathered to listen to the Buddha’s preaching). Some villages will combine the two celebrations on the full-moon of the third lunar month.

In the fourth month, Buddhist mythological origins are essential to the Phra wase celebration. One of Buddha’s former lives was as a man called Vessandara, who had so much kindness for
others that he gave up even his children and wife to those who
wanted them. In celebrating Phra wase, the preaching of monks in
the evening focuses on the retelling of this tale, and this may last
from afternoon into late evening. The monks who tell this long
story are usually those who are well-known for their skilled
chanting.

Villagers commemorate this mythological event not only by
listening to the monks’ preachings, but also by working together to
prepare 1,000 small lumps of sticky rice. A procession begins very
early in the morning and passes three times around the temple
hall, followed by prayers and the blessing of the rice by monks.
The villagers then return home, sticking the rice on trees in the
temple grounds and around the village, "sharing" rice with the phi
and other guardians spirits of the area. The Phra wase ceremony
is considered very important by villagers as Vessandara is
considered a model of kindness and sharing, which are considered
important values, and crucial for keeping a village community
together.
Birth, death and marriage are considered three of the most significant life events. Each involves important beliefs and values associated with village culture.

Birth

Birth in the villages of Northeastern Thailand, as in most agricultural societies, is an event which usually occurs more than just once or twice for each woman, as having many children is considered a sign of fertility, and the large family is blessed. This potential for a large family was one of the reasons why new migrants to an area would occupy more land than they needed or could work with their own labour; the extra area was for the children they expected to have. Birth was, therefore, a significant event, involving important cultural practices.

Prior to the birth of a child, there are a number of customary observances, for husband, wife, and relatives. While pregnant, the woman has to have good food which is not too hot or too salty;
she should not visit sick persons, nor a house where there was a death, or where a woman was giving birth; she was not to kill animals; weave or sew with a needle; and she was not to cheat. These, amongst others, were the taboos a woman had to observe in order to complete a trouble-free pregnancy and produce a healthy baby.

The husband, on the other hand, had to prepare wood, usually during the eighth month of pregnancy. This wood was to be used after the birth, when the woman had to lay by a fire. Once cut, this wood had to be covered by branches to prevent evil phii having a bad influence on the wood, and perhaps being the cause of the woman suffering problems during the recovery period. Villagers are deeply afraid that an event such as birth renders a woman and the newborn vulnerable to evil spirits which thrive on the entrails of the woman, if given the slightest opportunity.

When a woman is about to give birth, the midwife comes, and opens all windows, cupboards, and anything else which is of the form of a box. Nobody should sit on the stairs, any knots have to be released, and the woman must turn her face to the East or the North. All of this eases the birthing process. However, should the delivery be difficult, "holy water" will be used, sprinkling or massaging it on to the woman.

Following birth, the woman will normally lie on a bamboo bed, which is placed above a small fire. This fire has to be purified of all poisons and any influences from bad phii. Then an offering is made to the spirit of the fire, asking for its pardon and blessings.

The place the woman lies should be up inside the house rather than on a lower floor, and any holes in the floor have to be closed. Dai saisin is strung around the house and a variety of leaves, which are believed to frighten phii, are put on the door and at the stairs. Also, a bamboo sign is erected as a notification that a woman has given birth in that house, showing that she is not to be disturbed, and to indicate that no villager should say unlucky things while passing the house.

Villagers believed that, for the first three days of life, the child
belongs to the phiī, meaning the gods, goddesses and angels, and it is they who have given the child life. The parents have to "buy" the child from the phiī, by making offerings of food, fruits, flowers, and candles. Because of this belief, villagers must also find ways to prevent the phiī from returning to take the child back. For example, if the child is healthy and beautiful, greetings from anyone should be to the contrary, for saying that the child is beautiful may attract the phiī, which could well take the child back again. By stating that the child is ugly or sickly, the phiī can be deceived.

Once the child of a phiī becomes the child of its parents, the ceremony of baisri sukwan is performed to welcome the new "guest". In addition to food, fruits, flowers, and candles for the chao thii, the parents also prepare an aromatic powder, water, a bowl of rice, and a saisin with which they will bind the wrist of the child. Usually another village mother, who will be known as something of an expert in child-raising, is asked to join the ceremony, believing that her presence will mean that child-rearing in the newborn’s family will be made easier and more successful.

A month later another sukwan ceremony is performed, and this time the child will have its hair cut off, leaving only a patch at the centre of the head. The cut hair will be put on a banana leave and will be floated out in a river or other natural water resource or may be placed in the garden. The parents and relatives will again bind the child’s wrist with sacred cotton cord, and food is offered to the phiī of the house, family and ancestors. The child will also receive gifts from parents and relatives. Usually the gifts would be metal rings to be used as anklets. This ceremony marks the time when the child becomes of full member of its family, having passed through an unsafe period for the newborn.

These ceremonies are always presided over, performed, or guided by a village elder or a group of elders. In the case of a first child, the elders will give greater attention and provide more advice, while warning the new parents to strictly adhere to their prescriptions.
Death

Villagers believe that deceased persons become *phii*; that the soul leaves the body and travels to places according to the past deeds of the deceased during his or her lifetime. This belief in *karma* presents a cause and effect pattern that is at the essence of popular beliefs. *Sin bun*, or the end of merit, means "to die", signifying the end of this particular life which had been lived according to deeds of the former life. After this death a person will be reborn, according to deeds performed from birth to death. The ceremonies associated with death tend to reflect these beliefs.

When there is a death under normal circumstances the corpse will be bathed and dressed and put at the centre of the house. The position, direction, and other details concerning the corpse are laid down by the elders. One belief known to every villager is that the corpse's head has to be turned to the West, contrary to that for living persons. Somebody must watch over the body at all times, especially to prevent any cat from jumping over it, for should this happen, it is believed that the corpse will rise up.

The dead person should be well dressed, with new clothes, as it is believed that he or she will go to see the gods. Flowers and candles are placed in his or her hands, reposing on the breast. Food, water and the things the dead person liked are put aside three times a day.

The corpse would usually be kept at the house for a few days -- the tradition of taking the corpse to the temple hall is largely a town custom, but is becoming increasingly common in today's villages. At night villagers gather and stay awake, keeping the dead person company. It is common for villagers to play games to keep themselves awake, and this sometimes includes gambling.

In removing the corpse from the house it may not pass through the ordinary door, and so a temporary exit has to be opened at one side or the rear of the house. This is not, however, always practical these days, as houses are more solidly constructed. Before leaving the village a temporary "gate" is set up for the corpse to pass through. After that, the gate will be
removed and destroyed, as it is believed that should the soul return, it will not be able to find the "gate" and therefore will not re-enter the village. Along the way, husked and uncooked rice and salt are spread along the way, as a wish that the dead person will indeed depart and not be tempted to return. This procession should not stop while making its way to the place where the corpse will be cremated.

The time of cremation is important, and the elders must nominate an appropriate time. No cremation would normally be held on Thursdays, Fridays or holy days. Monks are invited to pray at home and to accompany the procession to the cremation. In the past, most cremations were performed in the fields.

Following the cremation, relatives will collect the remaining ashes and bones and keep them in a container at home or in the temple, or for those who could afford it, in a thatu (a kind of tomb).

Marriage

In the past, the young men and women of the village would marry early, with the usual age for men being about twenty years, while women were aged about sixteen. Marriage would normally take place between relatives in the same village or with others from nearby villages. Premarital relationships were prohibited but, if they did occur, then the man had to request a pardon from the phii of the house and from the ancestral spirits by offering food. They also had to seek forgiveness from the family elders, and the parents of the girl would usually require that a fine be levied. Most of these cases would, however, often end with a marriage taking place soon after the transgression occurred.

In most cases, a young man would show his interest in a particular girl by going to see her following the evening meal. Len sao means the act of going to chat (len means "to play") with a young girl (sao) at her house. While the word "love" (hak) exists in the Northeastern vocabulary, it is but rarely stated by a young
man to the girl he wants to marry. Nevertheless, the couple would each manage to express their desire for marriage. Then the young couple would ask their parents to arrange the *sukaw* ceremony where the girl's parents are asked to allow the marriage. The young man's parents will send *phu-tao* (elders) to the girl's family, who will also have *phu-tao* present. The elders on both sides will discuss the matter, but mostly by way of traditional proverbs and sayings which indirectly convey the messages they want known: "What do you come for?" may be the first question, while the answer could be: "We have learnt that the land is black (meaning fertile), and the water is rich here, so we have come in search of fertility." As for the value of engagement (the bride price, called *sin-sod*), the representative of the young man might say, "How loud will the thunder be?". The response would usually be the sum of money the girl's parents want, such as "Ten thousand?". This would lead to bargaining from the other side: "Our land is dry. The thunder should not be so loud. Too much rain and we'll have a flood, and the rice field will be damaged. Please, not too loud...". Once everything is agreed, the elders of both sides would usually chew betel or areca nuts. This is considered the day of engagement, and the elders of the young man's side will have to provide up to a half of the *sin-sod*, while agreeing that if one side fails to keep the engagement, he or she will be fined.

The preparations on the part of the young man include the search for an auspicious wedding date, by consulting a *maw do* (a fortune teller or seer). The appropriate months are those with even numbers and new moons. The time for the ceremony depends on the day and the *maw*’s selection. Most often it will be early in the morning or late in the evening, but might occasionally be during the day. Villagers do not get married during the rainy season as this is the time when they have to work in the fields. Also, this is the time of Lent, and they believe that getting married during Lent could have a negative impact on children from the marriage. A child of *wan phra* (holy day) is considered a bad child, an appellation which is also meant for its parents. Holy days are also not for marriage as villagers will usually keep the eight precepts, one of which is to avoid any sexual relations on holy days.
As for the wife-to-be, she will prepare offerings, gifts for parents, relatives, *phii*, and the elders of the village. These are usually pillows, cushions, and cloth that require time and effort to produce. Other offerings will be made a day prior to the wedding ceremony.

On the day the bridegroom’s wedding procession is directed to the house of the bride, where the groom and his relatives will "bargain" his entry with the girl’s relatives. On arrival, he will have his feet washed, by the girl, on a stone covered with a banana leaf. Once inside the house, the bride and bridegroom will sit close together and the *sukwan* ceremony begins, with the elders, parents, relatives, and friends sitting around them. The *sukwan* ceremony for a wedding is a rather special one. As the auspicious moment arrives, the *maw sukwan* tells the young man to lay his hand on the bride’s, and the ceremony is then taken over by an elder, usually the *chao kote*, who will give the couple instructions, in the form of traditional values to be followed. These are all ethical precepts in form of verses of *phaya*. Following this, the *sukwan* proceeds and eventually the congregation will bind the couple’s wrists.

The ceremony also include the introduction of the couple to their bedroom, accompanied by witnesses and friends. Then, the party begins, with much eating and drinking.

Buddhist monks are invited to the wedding, in the morning or evening, to pray and receive offerings from the couple, but not all families can afford the added expense of having the monks, and this is not essential for the wedding. What is essential is the *sukwan* ceremony with the *maw* and the congregation of the village community.

There is no honeymoon for villagers. Right after the wedding day they may go to work as usual. In the evenings, they will go to pay their respects to relatives and the elders of the village, with the gifts they have already prepared. This is the time when they will receive further blessings and more instructions on achieving a good life.
These ceremonies, then, mark important life transitions for individuals, but they also mark a renewal of cultural values. Each time one of these ceremonies is performed the community comes together to have its values reinforced.
CHAPTER 3

TRADITIONAL LEARNING
In the past the wat (temple) was the centre of community life, and as noted in previous chapters, many village ceremonies involved the temple and its monks. It was also the centre of village education for boys and young men in their status as *dek wat* (boys and youths who serve monks and temple), novices (*samanera*), and monks (*phra phiksu*).

Although social reform began at the end of last century in most of Thailand, it only began to have an impact in *Isan* from the 1920s, but even then, only in the major towns. Villages were really only affected following the Second World War. Even so, many village schools were still housed in the temple grounds, using the temple hall as school rooms, with one teacher for all four elementary classes.

A family with many children might offer one son as a *dek wat* to the temple, where he would live while serving the monks, learning the Buddhist way of life and the religion's doctrines. Additionally, the boy would learn to write and read. *Dek wat* are different from novices by the fact that they are freer, being able
to come and go and to help their parents on occasions. The ages of the *dek wat* and novice may be similar, but most *dek wat* would be under twelve years, with some still attending school (where there was an elementary school). Novices would usually be aged from twelve to twenty years, often being ordained as monks from about the age oftwenty.

It was, and still is, common for families who could not afford to send their sons to school, to send them to live in the temple. They are cared for by the monks for the whole period of their education. These days some will even pursue higher education, perhaps to the university level, by attending the monks’ universities in Bangkok, or they might continue in other, secular, higher educational institutions.

Prior to the Second World War, most remote villages still did not have a school, and the boys of the village were educated at the temple, automatically becoming *dek wat*, and taking part in all temple activities. They would learn by doing, cleaning the temple grounds, looking after trees, plants, and the temple’s goods, washing robes for the monks, and bringing water from the community well: quite different from schooling in the modern system.

Besides learning by doing and by assisting in all ceremonies performed in the temple, the *dek wat* learned to read and write Tham and Thai Noi scriptures. The Tham script is akin to Shan and a sub-group of Mon, whereas Thai Noi is very close to the Lao written script. These two script are far removed from Khmer, and may indicate that the Northeast, though under the political influence of the Khmer for some period, resisted Khmer influence in many aspects of everyday life.

The word "Tham" means Dhamma, or more precisely, the script of Dhamma. Tham is used solely for Buddhist religious writing, which includes not only the Buddha’s doctrine, but also local stories, related to popular belief. These local stories assume a mythological structure, placing them in the category of "Buddhist mythology", like other *Chadok* which are in the official *Tripitaka* while these stories are not to be found in the *Tripitaka*,

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Isan people claim to have their own Tripitaka, which is close to the official one. Tham script is used for the sacred formula (khatha), prayers, and recitals that monks have to know. Shorter versions are recorded on palm leaves and carried in the monk's bag, to be used in ceremonies outside the temple. Thai Noi is used for local literature, stories, sayings, and phya. These vary in length, depending on the region or temple, but most are recorded on long palm leaves.

The dek wat and novices learned to read and write the Tham language, as taught by their abbot or monks. The texts they studied were Buddhist doctrine and chants, learnt by heart, so that they could be used in ceremonies. Another part of learning was the practice of preaching. This is not simply the a giving of a speech concerning Buddhist doctrine, but a chant recited melodically. One had to have a sort of musical skill and good intonation to be able to give pleasing sermons.

While in the temple, novices would spend most of their time memorising chants. These chants are many in number, with some being used for the monks' daily prayers (tham wat-suaq mon), while some, called suad patimokka, are used fortnightly. Others are used for various occasions during the many ceremonies. The majority of Pali words are learnt by novices within a few weeks, as they recite all the words and verses with a rhythm and a certain tune, making it easier to memorise.

Giving a sermon is a duty not only of monks but also for qualified novices. The main qualification is the capacity to provide a good reading with acceptable intonation. The texts were originally written in Tham, and later, in Thai, on palm leaves, but most usually in the dialect of the Northeast. The novices did not need to learn all of them by heart, but had to be able to master the text and recite it without errors. The content and length of sermons varied between the various occasions and ceremonies, with the most important sermon being that delivered during the Pra wase celebration, performed after the harvest. The importance of this sermon lies in the fact that all the stories told in it are closely related to the villager's daily life. On other occasions, the content of the sermons might be tales, stories, and mythologies,
which may not be religious, but were like fables, concluding with "lessons to be learnt". These were the most popular and were often requested by villagers, who would spell out their preference or desire for a particular sermon.

There was, and still is, a system of education in the temple, with examinations and formal recognition. The novices and monks who learn in the temple aim at passing examinations to become a naktham (one who is an expert in Dhamma). There are three grades of naktham: third grade is the lowest, ranging up to the first grade. The preparation for the naktham examinations were most intensive during Lent, but some would continue after that, pursuing an upper grade. The requisites included the capacity to master the reading and writing of the Tham and Thai-Noi languages (today this has been replaced by Thai), a knowledge of the Buddha's life and important doctrines and the 227 rules for monks (Vinaya), and the Navakowad, a kind of admonition given to new monks about the Vinaya. The latter is also an interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. The naktham examinations did not include the Pali language, which is for another system of education and recognition called Prayoke, where there are seven

Training of young novice on environmental issues
grades, beginning at Prayoke 3 and moving up to Prayoke 9. The ninth is the highest grade, and achieved by only a few, and is roughly equivalent to the Ph.D. degree in the secular system. It was not easy to find an abbot who had qualified with a Prayoke degree to teach Pali in village temples. Only in the towns could one attend a "Pali school", and the examinations could only be taken in Bangkok. Nor, even, did all village novices and monks have naktham degrees, but this reflected not their ignorance but more a lack of opportunity to take the examinations which were conducted far from the village.

As the state school system was introduced to the Northeast, village temples began replacing Tham and Thai Noi with Central Thai. However, it was only after the Second World War that some monks could begin to teach their students Thai language. This was a time when state schools had not yet been built in many villages, or the temple was designated to be a temporary school, with the abbot and monks as teachers. Elderly monks tell of resistance by some temples during this transition period, as they felt that change was being imposed by the central government and Sangha. Particularly resented by some was the pressure to learn the Central Thai language and to use it for communicating with villagers. Indeed, this was virtually impossible at the beginning as so few villagers had ever heard Central Thai; most villagers still did not even have a radio. However, Central Thai was gradually introduced with the expansion of the state school system, together with teachers and government officers from outside, and with the need for village heads (phuyaiban) to go to the district (amphur) office for meetings and to receive orders. All of this has happened only over the past forty years, however, and even today the Northeastern dialect is the language learnt and spoken at home.

Besides the main religious content in the learning activities at the temple, some abbots or monks would teach their dek wat and novices other folk arts, called Vija. These are the "magic" arts of self-defence and the curing of illnesses. The magic formulae, mostly related to Buddhist chants and sacred verses, are taught and practised, and in many cases learning the Vija was related to the practice of concentration called Sati and Samadhi. At certain
levels, the person who learns these subjects can perform miraculous acts, such as walking so fast (even if externally still walking normally) that nobody can follow or reach them, they can control objects without using physical energy, and can influence others to do what they want. Much of the Vīja are concerned with being invulnerable, and thus being able to escape danger.

Various abbots and elderly monks often had other expertise and skills, and would also transmit these to their students. Some were carpenters, craftsmen, and inventors of agricultural implements. But, the best thing a monk could give to his disciples were the khattha and lai-sak (body tattooing with black ink). An elderly villager who had been ordained as a monk some forty years ago showed the lai-sak covering his body. He had one on his leg, another on his arm, and others on his chest. The tattoo on his leg was completed by his monk-master, and was to ward off dogs, as he had often been bitten by them. He said that since having the lai-sak on his leg, he had never been bitten. The one on his arm was meant to make him diligent, and today he is known to be hard working. Monks often accompanied their teaching by providing khattha and tattooing their disciples.

Temple education in the past did not only mean "literacy", although this was important in providing access to religious texts and local literature. More than anything else, temple education meant the education of a whole man, and this was what was meant by sending a son to the temple. He was expected to become a person of virtue, wisdom, maturity, and integrity -- in addition to the great merit gained for parents and family by entering the wat. If one was to later disrobe, he was still recognised by villagers as being someone who had buad rian, and this was considered a good qualification when selecting or electing an official village head. Informally, a former monk might be recognised as a natural village leader. Interestingly, as will be shown in Chapter 5, most "rebels" in Isan history were ex-monks, probably due to the fact that their education meant that they could acquire knowledge and attract followers who respected them. In particular fields such as traditional medicine and health care, many practitioners would be ex-monks, as were many maw tham, other maw, and various skilled men within the village.
Once the basic ingredients for being a complete man were obtained in the temple, one who disrobed might begin the search for other expertise for his and his family's livelihood. To become someone in a village, a person needed a khru and time to learn and practise; there was no other way.

Usually it would be during the dry season that one would leave the village in search of a master, one who may have been contacted previously, but might not even be known at the time the search began. The trip, often undertaken by a group of two or three, was also supposed to be an adventure for the young men. In cases where the master had already been contacted, the young men would go to the master's house with a set of offerings (flowers, joss sticks, candles, and a sum of money), and, kneeling or sitting before the master, would vow to become a disciple. The master then took the offerings, as the sign that the disciple had been accepted not only as a "student" who was there to learn, but as a member of the master's family, as a son. In fact, the word given to disciples, luk sit, gives that meaning, with luk meaning son. In many cases, however, this ceremony would not
be performed immediately following the arrival of the young men, as some khru required a period of time to assess the men and to decide if they were worthy of admission. The offerings prepared by the disciple were not meant to be for the particular master, but for all khru who had practiced and transmitted this Vija through the generations, reflecting a veneration for the value of tradition itself, personified in the khru.

The young disciple would behave himself as if he was a part of his khru's family, and would take at least a bag of rice as a contribution to the family. The period of learning ranged from a few days to a number of months, depending on the complexity of the Vija and the style of the master. Healing, for example, required a long training period, for the disciple did not learn only the sacred formulae, but had to observe many treatments provided by the master. In the case of herbal medicine, the disciple had to go with the master in search of herbs in forests or in the mountains. To learn to lam (traditional singing and dancing) or to play musical instruments also required a long period of training.

Many elderly people in the lower Northeast often say they spent months or even years, travelling the upper Northeast and even to Laos to learn Vija. Such trips involved learning from a master but were also a journey of discovery, with much experience being gained from the many places visited and people met along the way. Some people in the Khmer language and cultural region of Surin, Buriram and Sisaket would go to Cambodia on similar journeys. At the time it was difficult to identify any border between Thailand, Cambodia and Laos and, in any case, the people were seldom interested in such technicalities, preferring cultural identity to "nationality".

One of the prizes young men would search for during their travels were amulets and other sacred and magical objects with miraculous powers. Together with the Vija, amulets were given to disciples by their masters or by wandering monks. They would show the amulets to others upon their return and tell them of their adventures, their new knowledge, and their experiences. These were exciting moments for a village, with someone returning from a long trip and with wondrous stories to tell. The girls of
the village would, in fact, be keen to marry a young man with such worldly experience.

Going out into the world was not usual, however, and nor was it a possibility for every young man. Most would remain in the village, being content to learn with their village elders or from those in nearby villages, without having to leave the family. In this way, many village men could also develop their skills and also become someone in the community or even a master.
In the past, most young men in villages had one thing in common: they all searched for a sacred power. Such powers might be gained through sacred objects, amulets, spells, *khatha*, or tattoos. The people who could give them these sacred powers were the masters, whom the young men had to seek out. This field might be called "magic" as it involves the art of the manipulation of secret powers.

In the Northeast, as elsewhere, the magical arts can be divided into two categories: black and white magic. Black magic is the *Vija* learned and performed in order to harm other persons. For example, *ya-sang* ("ordered medicine") is a kind of poison made of various herbs and other substances (even poisonous chemicals are added these days). When put in water or food, the victim will suffer or many even die. Usually, these take effect some hours or even days after consumption, so that no-one is known as the source of the black magic.

Similarly, objects, consecrated with sacred formula, become small and enter the victim’s body. These can include nails, dry
leather, hairs, bones, and fresh meat, amongst others. The victim will suffer and die, if he or she is not cured by a good healer. Other ways to harm somebody using magic include making a figurine of the victim using straw or bamboo and then cutting it with a knife. The real victim will be wounded or die. There are also oils and other objects which can cause the victim to go mad, as if possessed by a phii.

If a person suspected that they were the object of black magic, they would immediately contact a healer, who might be a monk, maw tham, maw nam mon, or a special healer for such cases called a maw teng kae. Even maw song (diviners) may be consulted in such cases. Some healers are experts in "correcting" things and bringing the patient back to normality, while some use herbal medicine or holy water to cure the problem. The common factor, however, is that all have a special sacred formula for eliminating the evil effects of the magic power.

Even today, villagers who suspect that they are victims of black magic will never go to see modern medical doctors, for they believe that only traditional healers can deal with such evil powers. Treatment may mean visiting the healers many times over weeks or even months, as it is said that the evil influence remains inside, and it requires time to completely eliminate it.

Each healer would have their own methods of healing, with the goal being to get objects out of the body. There are two ways to do this. First, the patient takes herbal medicine or drinks holy water and then vomits the object out. A second method is for the healer to use a boiled egg or other object, rolling it on the skin or that part of the body believed to hold the object. Once the egg breaks, the object is considered located, and may then be brought out in miniature form, eventually becoming its normal size.

Masters of black magic often explain that they learned this Vija from their masters for self-defence, when it was necessary, and were instructed not to misuse it. However, they admit that it is very difficult to make sure that their disciples do not misuse their powers: envy, quarreling, and revenge are common motives
for the misuse of the powers. Black magic has become one means of getting rid of enemies. Those who have such magic powers will not reveal the components of their methods, objects, and sacred formula except to their luk-sit.

White magic consists of all those Vija that are not harmful, or are in fact beneficial to the person who has it, and others. These include clothes with sacred words and paint on them, herbs, stones, body tattoos, and sacred formulae.

Sacred formulae are essential to all magical objects and deeds, and there is one Vija which uses only sacred formulae: the sador. Sador means to detach, remove or unlock something, such as opening a door a lock or a chain, or to assist the birth of a child. Some villagers relate that even today some people in their village have powers of release, but not doors or locks, and are known as maw pao or maw nam mon, and use their sacred formula to help in healing patients, such those who have a fish bone in their throat.

The most common quality ascribed to sacred objects is the invulnerability they give to their owner. If a person possesses a cloth (usually red in colour) with sacred words and images painted on it, that person will not suffer a knife cut, a bullet wound, or injury from any other weapons.

Tattooing the body was very common among young village men as it was a sign of manhood, and of a brave and strong man. Most of the tattoo masters were, and still seem to be, monks. Every year disciples, who are those who have been tattooed or wish to become tattooed, would gather at the master’s temple. The monk would chant, asking for the presence of the gods, angels, and all the sacred powers of the universe, including the khrn. Some of the disciples go into a trance and would start to behave in the manner of the tattooed creature on their bodies, as tigers, monkeys (Hanuman, the monkey chief in the Ramayana), or Narai (a Hindu God). After that the monk would call the disciples, one by one, to be tattooed. Some came for new tattoos, while others came to complete their tattoos which had been started previously. Tattooing is done with a sharp pointed pen and
black ink which is tapped into the skin. The process is painful, so much so that many could not complete the image in one session, and had to ask to come another time. Tattooing the body is therefore also considered a brave act, and anyone who can withstand the pain and have an image completed in one session is considered very brave indeed.

Each tattoo master has his own design: a tiger, Narai, Hanuman, a bird (Salika), a lizard, a swan, a dragon, a lion, or sacred words and signs. Each of these has a similar purpose: the granting of invulnerability. But each also has its own particular meaning. For example, the Salika and the lizard means to have a nice "tongue": being able to use appropriate words in talking with superiors, with buyers (in the case of traders), and with the opposite sex. There are also tattoos where the design is for beauty, and may be added to the main design as further decoration. These may take the form of flowers, a butterfly, a cross, or a heart.

In tattooing, the most important part of the ceremony is the praying associated with the khattha of the tattoo master. The disciples have to concentrate fully, so that the "power" may enter them, making the tattoo efficient. However, most masters explain that the power does not lie in the tattoo alone. Rather, it depends on the behaviour of the tattooed person, who must strictly adhere to the master's prescriptions and maintain moral integrity.

One prescription is that the newly tattooed person should not take a bath or shower with soap for three days. Others are similar to the five Siila (Buddhist rules for lay people), with the added injunction not to eat leftover food or particular vegetables and fruits, and not to walk under stairs, bridges or clothes lines.

Monks who are masters say that to tattoo the body is merely a means to assist some people in keeping the Siila, and is not an end in itself. The power of the tattoo derives from the tattooed person's good conduct -- if they follow the Buddha's doctrine, then they will be saved from any danger. In practice, however, most people who have tattoos believe that the tattoo has power,
provided through the master's sacred formula. It is difficult to maintain all prescriptions, and it is therefore usual for disciples to go to see the master after a period of time in order to request that he again say the sacred formula over the tattoo, renewing its sacred power, which may become less powerful over time.

Sacred objects have a very long tradition in the Northeast. These are taken from nature, and include sedges, mysterious metals, stones, jewels, the teeth of animals, horns, bones, and some kinds of plants and wood. These are then carved in various forms. A popular charm, usually carved from wood, is the *palad kik*, a penis shape which traditionally symbolises fertility. It is believed that the objects themselves have some power, but that they will have far more if consecrated with a sacred formula by a well-known master. It is also believed that these objects can be so powerful that they grant invulnerability to their owners. Some, however, are merely for decoration or are considered attractive or for the appreciation of others.

The most common sacred object related to Buddhism are the tiny statues of the Buddha or of some well-known monk, made of clay, that villagers (and, nowadays, urban people) hang around their necks. These are called *Phra kruang*. It is believed that the holy masters have empowered the object with their spirit and power, and that they provide good protection in situations of danger. This tradition has its origin in the central and the northern regions of Thailand, and especially town temples, but later spread to the countryside. A man feels secure, proud, and brave if he has many *Phra kruang* around his neck. Gold necklaces were not common in villages, but silver chains were, and a young man with a silver necklace and *Phra kruang* was showing his wealth and power. This was important in attracting the young girls of the village.

In the past men needed all of these sacred objects as they faced many dangers. Often the first occasion when many were exposed to dangers was on trips away from the village. Then, they risked being ambushed by bandits or attacked by wild beasts or their enemies. If they had to serve in the army, then they needed still more protection, especially if they were sent to the
battlefield. Some elders claim that there can be no military without sacred objects or at least tattooing of the body.
Popular wisdom is an integral part of tradition. The transmission of tradition was both oral and scriptural. As novices and monks were virtually the only group of villagers who were privileged by being literate, the oral tradition was the major form of transmission, especially to the villagers.

Because the oral tradition consists mostly of sayings, stories and the like, they vary from place to place and from generation to generation. The oral tradition is therefore dynamic although through the many versions the core of meanings remain identical, with differences being in detail rather than in essence.

There are three groups of people who, on three respective occasions, play important roles transmitting the oral tradition and its heritage. These are: monks, elders, and maw lam, who are the khrn who teach and perform the ceremonies or entertain the people.

The oral tradition is dynamic. It has living elements which incorporate the content and are adapted, renewed, and lived in
every act of transmission. The song a mother sings to lull her child to sleep is not merely a song, for it is also a tradition but, more than this, it is her life given to her child. She transmits traditions to her child, and is at one with them.

The process of oral transmission has a mythological element, as the dynamics of tradition are incarnated once again in the present situation. The event that happened once upon a time or long, long ago, happens again, in its full reality. Tradition therefore has a power because it is not a matter of "things" transmitted but, rather, of "the spirit" of the ancestors who have lived it and handed it to their children, generation after generation. Paradoxically, the content of the oral tradition is therefore always the same, but never exactly the same. An analogy is the child who grows up, becomes a young person and then an adult, and remains the same person; at the same time, however, it is not the same person in adulthood as at childhood.

The oral tradition represents a whole community life, being the daily communication between all villagers and between parents and children. It is the core of teachings, sayings, proverbs, phaya, tales, stories, lam, songs, each mother's lullaby, the sacred formulae in all their particular situations, festivities, rites, rituals and celebrations.

The scriptural tradition is mainly represented by palm leaf inscriptions although some are also found as stone inscriptions. There are two types of palm leaves: long and short versions. The long palm leaves record, in both the Tham and Thai-Noi languages, doctrinal texts, stories, mythologies, and sayings. The short palm leaves are written in Tham characters and record important sacred formulae, prayers, and the important core of Buddhist doctrine. The process of identification and dating of these is difficult as most do not have recorded dates and there are thousands of palm leaves throughout the Northeast, mostly kept in temples, although some are today kept in museums or the libraries of universities and colleges.

It is the monks who learn religious texts, khattha, nithan, tamnan and phya and some are also healers. The elders play
their roles as the various maw or as respected elders who have been monks and know many stories of the past. They preside over or perform many of the ceremonies and festivities in the village. Maw lam are those who are known for their skills of singing, dancing, and entertaining in lam style. Lam texts are based on nihan, tamnan, and sometimes new stories invented for a special occasion. Besides these three important groups of people, parents also transmit the tradition.

The scriptural traditions of the Northeast, as mentioned above, have two versions, the ordinary language written in Tham characters for monks, and verses in Thai Noi characters for lay people. Parts of nihan and stories are taken from stories in the Tripitaka. The stories are mostly from the five hundred former lives of the Buddha, and each of them have particular moral lessons, such as the Vessandon Chadok, which is the content of the sermon for the Pra wase celebration. There are said to be more than 560 of these stories, some of which are not to be found in the Tripitaka. These are the local stories made to be Chadok by local people, secular stories made religious.

Besides religious mythology and stories, there is a literature which consists of moral teachings which are told and retold by grandfathers to grandchildren, mothers to children, fathers to sons and daughters, husband to wife. These include stories of historically important persons who founded towns, important temples, and other constructions, and records of important historically-based events. While they are not "made Chadok" for they remain "secular", and yet they still have important meanings.

The scriptural tradition was considered an essential element in community life in the past. Scholars confirm that every year, in the principal temples, especially in towns, a day was fixed for celebrating the palm leaves scriptures. "Educated" people, mostly former monks, together with the monks, would gather to copy texts from old palm leaves onto new ones, and as the act was considered meritorious and a sacrifice, nobody wrote their name on the leaves. This prescription had been handed down from the past, as there was nobody, not even the original authors of the stories and verses who claimed authorship. To write one's name
on palm leaves was considered a *kilesa*, and one would not receive any merit by so doing. This tradition of omitting names has, over the past fifty years, been eroded. Those who make merit these days often wish to have their name declared to the public, so today one sees many names on temple buildings, houses, walls and gates.

Since social and educational reforms began around 1917, the Tham and Thai Noi scripts have been suppressed. Indeed, some palm leaf scriptures were even burned, while those that were hidden were sometimes damaged by rodents and ants. Today, only some elderly monks who were ordained in their youth, and a few elderly villagers, who were once monks, can read and write Tham and Thai Noi.

It can be seen, then, that the traditional pattern of learning and of education were powerful mediums for the transmission of cultural and social values. In spite of many forces working to weaken these traditional patterns, much remains. Many of the beliefs associated with traditional social and cultural values remain strong.
CHAPTER 4

THE POWER OF BELIEFS
Villagers believe in rebirth. This is essentially related to the concept of *kham* (Karma in Sanskrit). A religious determinism is the basis of this belief that the present life is determined by the former life, and the future one, in turn, will be determined by the present life. *Dhukka* (suffering) is considered the logical consequence of the misdeeds one has committed in a former life or in the present one. Thus, the benefits or sufferings of life may be seen as a "recompense" or as a "punishment". In the latter case one undertakes penance in order to purify oneself.

Popular Buddhism has an important role in this belief, with the teachings of monks emphasising Buddhist mythologies, stories of the Buddha’s 500 lives and his teachings. As noted in the previous chapter, these are stories taken from the original *Tripitaka* or are local stories integrated into the holy scriptures, and emphasise the virtues of kindness, sacrifice and detachment.

Merit and sin are clearly related concepts in popular thought. *Barb* (sin) in popular Buddhism is not, however, something one can confess and then be forgiven. A sin is a *kham* (Karma, an
action, a deed) committed, and the person will receive its logical consequences. Good deeds do not cancel misdeeds, but they will have good consequences. In villages, when one says "thank you", one will usually qualify this with other wishes. One might hope that the person being thanked will have good health, fortune, prosperity and happiness, that they are reborn in a higher heaven, richer and happier. In another form: "If you sleep, I wish you to have 10,000 [baht], if you are awake, to have 100,000 [baht]." 

Good deeds are "virtues" to be practiced in everyday life, yet the highlight is to tham bun. Merit is objectified in popular thinking. One accumulates merits like having rice in the barn, being for this life and the next. Tham bun is the essence of all ceremonies, rites, and rituals performed during the yearly cycle, and of special occasions, such as the twelve ceremonies (heed sipsong), birth, death, sickness, marriage, and ordination. Participation in these ceremonies is considered a merit. It is also a sharing of one's merit, which is then repaid by multiplied merits. The words villagers address to the mae phosop when taking some rice from the barn for merit making are to inform her of what one is doing and to ask for her blessing so that the rice may be multiplied: "I take out one [bucket] please return two. I take two, please give four". Villagers would never participate in a ceremony without taking rice and other items to share with others.

Besides special festivities, villagers would make merit every Buddhist holy day, bringing food and alms to monks in the temple for their morning and midday meals. The monks will pray before and after their meal, with the after meal prayer blessing the villagers for the food they have brought. In the secular world this might be seen as an act of thanking someone, but in the Buddhist view it is the villagers who should thank the monks, because it is they who offer the villagers an opportunity to make and receive merit. In the same way, one has to think of monks going out in the village (or the streets of a town) not as begging, but as a "blessing" for the people, for the monks are providing an opportunity to make merit. Following their meal the monks may say a prayer as a "blessing", asking the gods, Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha to repay the villager's good deeds. Some monks may
also preach on holy days, especially in the afternoon, but this is not necessarily a normal practice in all villages.

Listening to the preaching of monks on any occasion is to receive merit. Intellectually, this may be explained as an act of "purification" for one's mind in order to practise *Sila*, *Samadhi*, and *Panya*. The five *Sila* (precepts) for lay people are remembered and strengthened; *Samadhi* (concentration) grows; and the *Panya* (or wisdom) is raised, as is the ability to distinguish between good and bad and the strength to do that which is right.

Merit making is an essential part of village life and every household will have, at some time, made merit by taking food and gifts to monks and the temple. Some will even bring food for the monks every day, but most of these will be the monk's relatives, especially during Buddhist Lent, when sons or other male relatives are ordained as monks. Others who regularly do this are the older women who have the rice, food, and time to devote to making merit. Most villagers, however, will offer food to
monks on holy days and during festivals and ceremonies. On these
days many villagers will observe the eight precepts which were
given by the Buddha to Ubasok and Ubasika who are lay people
who devote themselves to serve monks and the temple, and who
practice more than the usual five precepts. Others will observe the
five precepts more strictly -- this is the reason why there is no
meat in the markets on Buddhist holy days. Even in towns and
Bangkok there is no killing of animals on holy days. This pattern
is repeated over a longer period during Lent, but few villagers
can afford to do it for the entire three months.

The highest merit a man can obtain for himself and his family
is to be ordained as a monk. As most merit accrues to his
parents, every good son will try to enter the monkhood for at
least one Lenten period. The main purpose of this is to show
gratitude to one's parents, and so some will pay virtually any price
to organise the celebration for this event. Many even fall into debt
because of the ordination and its associated ceremony, but explain
that as ordination, like death, occurs only once, why not pay the
price. Villagers say that once a son has been ordained his parents
will have the yellow robe as a means of ascending to heaven. If a
son has not been ordained while his parents are alive he will do
so the day one of them dies, so that there will be enough bun to
go to heaven or for the next, better life.

In the case of women who have no children or aged persons
who can afford it, they will become the Yome Upathak or
"sponsor" of one or more monks. The Yome is usually the mother
or father of the monk, while the Yome Upathak is one who
sponsors the ordination and meets the expenses of a monk during
his period in the order is believed to make great merit. Thus
those without children may sponsor an ordination in order to gain
merit. In a similar way, to contribute money for the construction
of a temple, or some part of it, is to gain great merit.

As merit making is such an important part of villagers' life, it
naturally has an impact on the mode of production. Villagers
produce rice not only for family consumption, but also consider
the need to *tham bun* at the temple and in the community for all
occasions, and to share with relatives and those in need. Thus,
when going to fish or find food in the forest, they consider their children, themselves, monks at the temple, *phii*, relatives, and friends. Today, this is almost impossible, as it has become more and more difficult to find even enough food for one’s own family. The environment is changing, as is life.
It would be exceptional to meet a Thai or Lao who is not afraid of *phii*. *Phii* are a part of life. In the Northeast, *phii* are present in the family, in the community, in the rice field, in the forests, rivers, streams, and in the trees; in fact, everywhere in nature. Dead persons are not supposed to remain in the village, but they may sometimes come back to visit their relatives, and once or twice a year family members will make offerings to these *phii* of dead relatives.

*Phii* belong to the "unseen" world, but they have their place in community life. *Phii* belong both to the past and the present, accompanying the community in the eternal cycle of life.

*Pu-ta*, which resides in a shrine at the fringe of a village, is the most common *phii*, and is recognised in most villages. Another *phii* common to many villages is usually called *mahesak lak ban* (*mahesak* means "great power" and *lak ban* is the fundamental village post), the "centre" of the village. This powerful *phii* is believed to be the spirit of the person who founded the village. In
fact, there are few differences between the mahesak and pu-ta, and a village with a mahesak lak ban will not have a pu-ta: both are the phi of the village community. However, the perception of both varies. Mahesak are known for their strictness, and villagers believe that they are the spirits of people who were brave or cruel. Pu-ta, however, are seen as deriving from aged and kindly persons who cared for their "children".

In the village there is usually a person who plays the role of intermediary between the community and the pu-ta or mahesak. This man or woman is referred to as a cham, and represents the pu-ta or mahesak. Twice a year the community will gather to pay respect to them, once in the third lunar month and again in the sixth month. During these events, the nang lam will dance in honour of pu-ta or mahasak lak ban, while the cham will be the voice of the spirit, having entered a trance.

The spirits are always consulted before all important village occasions, with the villagers asking for the phi's permission, a

Pu-ta shrine or village spirit house  
(Photo by Plueng Pliansaisueb)
blessing, or for protection. Such events include birth, death, marriage, departures on and arrivals from long trips, sickness and recovery, and problems in the community. They are an essential element of community life.

The phii represent, for the community, the social rules and values transmitted through the generations, and villagers believe that these are given by ancestors, who are now phii. Failing to observe such rules or an intentional transgression is an act against the phii and is referred to as phid phii, where phid means "to offend"). Phid phii is a term much used in relationships between men and women. For example, a man who touches an unmarried woman or, more seriously, engages in a sexual relationship with her, is said to be phid phii, and will receive some form of punishment. Another expression commonly heard is: "People may not see an evil deed perpetrated, but the phii do". This is a warning to all villagers that they must observe traditional prescriptions, rules and values.

In the villages of the Northeast phii may be classified into two categories: good and bad phii. Good phii are phii fa (heavenly

"Spirit shrine in front of a house"

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gods), phiī of the community (pu-ta, mahesak), and phiī of nature, such as phiī pa (forest), phiī na (rice field), phiī nam (water), phiī ban (family). Phiī fa are all good gods (deva, thevada), the creator (then), and Hindu gods, while the others are the guardians (thepharak) of the community and nature.

Bad phiī are malevolent and harmful to people. Most of them abide in nature. If there are troubles in the village, then the villagers will organise a ceremony, usually presided over by a monk, to chase the evil phiī from the village. The evil deeds of these bad phiī are identified by cases of illnesses, for these phiī require nourishment, and will seek this in the body of human beings. The offerings of food are an alternative for the phiī, so that they will not have to seek it by entering people.

In the past, and in different places, evil phiī were identified by names such as phiī krasue, phiī phong, phiī phrai, phiī pret, and phiī ha, but these are seldom used today. Generally, the contemporary term is the inclusive phiī rai (evil or dangerous phiī). In case of epidemics, however, villagers will still refer to phiī fa, especially when dealing with animal diseases.

One phiī well known to all villagers is the phiī pob. Phiī pob is different from other phiī by the fact that it is "produced" or "born" of people, or inherited from parents or relatives. It is believed that persons who possess Vija (sacred or magical formula and objects) and fail to observe the prescriptions can become phiī pob. This phiī pob will go into someone's body to devour their entrails, and resulting in the person falling ill. Once discovered by a maw (in this case, an exorcist or shaman), the possessed person is forced to reveal the name of the phiī pob. If the maw is powerful the phiī pob will have to leave the person's body, but even if the maw is not so powerful, once the phiī's name is known, villagers will go to the house of the identified person armed with stones, wood, and weapons to force them to withdraw the phiī pob from the afflicted person and then to leave the village.

People who are phiī pob and their families would often be newcomers to a village and as strangers were already suspected.
Many found themselves having to move from one village to the next as they became identified as or having been phii pob. Today, there are at least two villages in Sakol Nakhon province where people labelled phii pob live together after having wandered to many villages, and then being driven out.

In the case of a people identified as phii pob but where the community wants to help, they will be taken to some well-known master, usually a monk, to be cured. Then they may be welcomed back to the village. It is, however, difficult to resume a normal life, and in many cases these people will leave the village to find a new settlement.

To comprehend this Northeastern belief in phii one has to understand that the logic of villagers is quite different from that of the modern, educated, urban person. Villagers believe that phii exist, even if they have not seen them: "Phii exist because they have meaning", and not "Phii exist because they can be scientifically proven". The meaning of phii is essential to individual, family, and community life; they are like human beings, and an integral part of nature and the universe. People have to relate themselves to phii in an appropriate way for, like humans, can be both good and evil. They require care, worship, and offerings, and people have to make merit during this life in order to be reborn as good phii, or as a human again, and not as a bad phii, wandering around and causing trouble wherever they go.
The word *kwan* designates one of the most important elements of Thai and Lao culture. Each culture is unique and thus it is not possible to translate the word *kwan* into any other language. However, we may consider it close to the terms "spirit or essence of life" and "principle of life". *Kwan* is not only used with reference to humans, for all things have *kwan*: buffaloes, cattle, animals, rice and even the humble cart have *kwan*. In general the concept of *kwan* is not very different in the various regions of the country but it is in the Northeast and North that the tradition is maintained today, much as it was in the past.

The ceremony concerning *kwan* is called *sukwan*. This ceremony, as we explained when discussing ceremonies associated with rice growing, is performed for all important life events, with the exception of death. Pregnancy, marriage, the inauguration of a new house, leaving on a trip, the beginning of Lent (for monks), arrival from a trip (even from jail), during a long illness, recovery from illness, and welcoming or farewelling relatives, friends, or visitors to the family or village are all celebrated in a fashion which varies only in detail from place to place.
Villagers believe that the *kwan* stays with a person when he or she is in good health, and has a good life. Once a person is "not well", sick, frightened, or sad -- that is, in a negative state, it is believed that the *kwan* leaves that person. The terms *kwan hai* (*kwan* is lost), *kwan nee* (*kwan* flees) are common words to describe states where a person is frightened or scared.

The *sukwan* ceremony is performed in a more or less similar manner on most occasions, with a *phram* performing the ceremony with a set of offerings called "*phaa-kwan*". This is a tiered, conical structure built on a tray with banana leaves, and on it are placed a boiled egg, bananas, flowers, and a lump of sticky rice. The *phram* sits in front of the *phaa-kwan*, while the person to receive the *sukwan* sits on the opposite side, and all others sit around them. A cotton cord is attached to the *phaa-kwan* and passed first through the hands of the person who is to receive the *kwan*, and then all other participants. A candle is lit, and the *phram* chants as invitation to the gods to be present. This is followed by a long chant calling the *kwan*, a call which is joined by the whole congregation. The ceremony ends with the binding

*Sukwan ceremony for elders on Songkran day*
of the wrist of the first person with cord, binding the kwan to that person.

The sukwan is performed not only because a person's kwan is feared to have been lost or to have fled but also to strengthen the person so that their kwan will remain at one with them and be strong. There is, however, another dimension to the kwan, which is often neglected by scholars of Thai culture: a social dimension. Sukwan not only emphasises a unity of kwan and being, but also a unity with others, with the community, and with the whole of nature. In the case of a marriage, sukwan means not only a wish that the couple be strong and ready to face the new life, but also that their kwan will be united, becoming one: to be at one with each other, with the community, and the whole congregation present at the ceremony. The sukwan ceremony for a person about to depart on a long and important trip means also that the kwan of that person and of the community remain united, even though a long distance may be between them. Similarly, the sukwan ceremony performed after someone's long absence from the village, means a reintegration and reunification of that person with the community. And, a sukwan for a sick person is an act of solidarity, a means of telling the sick person: "We are with you and our spirit is with yours". Kwan is thus a symbol of unity and solidarity in a traditional community.

"Togetherness" is a word which well explains the sukwan ceremony: the gods, the angels, the guardians, the phii of ancestors, and the community. The person who receives the sukwan is at the centre, to once again be "tuned" to the right place and the right time.
All sicknesses in villages has an explanation and if the cause is not natural, then it is supernatural. Generally, villagers have the commonsense to distinguish what is an ordinary fever, headache, or stomach-ache, and do not seek the assistance of exorcists or shamans for these. However, an enduring sickness is often suspected as being caused by phiï. In such cases, the patient has to be diagnosed by a maw song (song means "to look through"). Most maw song are known to have a phiï, and he or she will ask that phiï to come forth and reveal the cause of the sickness.

Some maw song are involved in diagnosis exclusively, but most are also healers. In the past there were healers in most villages, each known for their special expertise: some excelled in herbal medicine; others used oil from animal bones or plants; and some were exorcists or shamans. All were maw (healers or doctors) and khru, and their healing was always accompanied by rituals.

Khru is an essential concept in traditional village culture. As noted previously, a khru is not only a person who has passed knowledge to his disciples, but personifies the whole process of
the passing of wisdom, knowledge and skills through the generations. Before performing any important act, villagers will remind themselves of their khru in an act of recognition, of gratitude, and a declaration of faith in the values received. The khru symbolises the line of life and the spirit of tradition. People who are khru not only "teach", in the modern sense of the word, telling, advising and explaining to their disciple, and providing know-how, but also disseminating a "spirit", a knowledge incorporating values and spirit, life, energy, and other forces; in fact, everything that the khru has and is, is given to the disciple. One might say that khru give their "life" to their student followers.

Thus it is an essential requirement for healers to begin any ceremony by remembering their khru, and for the sick person to offer flowers, joss-sticks, candles, and a small sum of money as a sign of recognition for the khru. The sum of money is small, only a few baht, and is determined by the khru. The disciples should follow their master's prescriptions strictly, and will not request their patients to pay more than that specified by their khru. Should the sick person recover, he or she may offer a gift, a small amount of money, or a payment-in-kind. This is done freely as a sign of appreciation and gratitude by the patients.

The causes of illness may be phiī, but, as we noted above, may also be unknown magical powers manipulated by various people. People subject to acts of black magic will be subjected to various treatments, for should one treatment prove unsuccessful, then the suspected cause is considered more complicated. It may also be decided that there are also other "internal" diseases, which might benefit by "modern" treatment. However, if the cause is a very powerful phiī, then a more skilled maw is required, and the maw treating the patient will advise their relatives to find another maw.

Traditional diagnosis has many methods. The maw song, who claims to have a thep or deva (god, angel, good phiī), will enter into a trance and then define the cause of the sickness. Others will recite holy incantations (khatha). Still others will use a method involving a small wooden rod. The maw will set the cause of sickness in his or her mind, and then begins breaking the rod and counting the pieces, with this process demonstrating if
the cause of the illness had the maw had in mind is correct. Most of the causes are considered to be due to phid phi (offending a phi).

Healers who are not maw song diagnose illnesses by asking questions directed at defining actions that may have offended phi: "Did you go to cut wood in the forest? What did you do there? How did you cut the tree? What tree was it? Did you ask permission from the phi? Did you do anything in the area of the pu-ta? Did you turn your back to the pu-ta or say anything offensive, disturbing the pu-ta?" The questions may, if necessary, also examine personal activities: "Did you have any relationship with your boyfriend (or girlfriend) or with other persons? And, did that relationship go too far?" If the sick person returns home from a trip, the maw may ask, "Have you informed the pu-ta that you are back? Did you tell the pu-ta before you left?" If black magic is suspected, the maw will direct his questions to that matter also: "Did you have any conflict with anyone in the village or elsewhere? Did they threaten to do you any harm? Is your

Traditional healing, with a woman as healer

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enemy known to have any magic objects or a sacred formula?"

Experienced maw can usually discern the cause of sickness immediately, especially in case of phii. A patient's eyes and physical appearance can indicate the cause. For example, a patient possessed by a phii phob, is said to never look into the maw's eyes, or will talk nonsense, suffer a seizure or become aggressive.

In many parts of the Northeast various maw are known, or will declare themselves, as the host of an important phii. Their explanation usually refers to a sickness that they had which lasted for a long time, and could not be cured either by traditional or modern doctors. They found that an important phii wanted to reside in them or with them, and once they accepted them, they recovered from their illness. They then became healers by being able to find out whether smaller phii wanted to reside in or with their patients, or required only a food offering, or a particular merit, to be satisfied. If a patient followed the prescribed treatment, and either accept the phii, or offer food or do make merit for the phii, then the patient will recover, and become a "child" of the maw (that is, of the important phii, taken as the head of all phii in that area). Once a year, all the "children" will gather at the house of the "father" for three days to pay homage to the phii. They offer food, fruits, dessert, alcohol, and soft drinks to the phii, and the ceremony will often involve trances and dancing.

The most popular maw in the Northeast are maw tham. The reason for the term derives from the fact that the person in question is known to be a good Buddhist who practises the Dhamma. Most have been ordained monks and know the monks' chants, holy formulae, and ceremonies. For most people, though they believe in phii and have a mixed belief system of phii, Brahmanism, and Buddhism, the latter is taken as the absolute and ultimate Truth and life goal. The Buddha is worshipped and taken to be higher than any phii, and the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha (or the Three Holy Jewels or Refuges) are considered to be the highest and most powerful of all. Maw tham are therefore considered to represent the power of Buddhism over all the other supernatural powers represented by phii.
In most villages of the Northeast there are still maw tham but today few are under thirty years of age, while most are over fifty. They have learnt their healing skills while ordained as monks, from relatives or from khru. To learn the khatha requires a certain discipline: rules and prescriptions must be strictly observed, not only for the maw tham's own life and behaviour, but also for the details of various treatments and the actions required from patients. Negligence may cause trouble for the maw tham themselves, and the treatment will be unsuccessful.

Prescriptions to be followed by maw tham are akin to those for most other maw: they should not sit on stairs, should not walk through the houses of others or walk under clothes lines, they should not go under banana trees, and must not eat snake, dog, elephant, horse, or cat meat. While performing healing ceremonies, no-one in the house should drink alcohol, clean rice prior to cooking, distribute things, or shout from the house to someone outside.

The maw tham is known to villagers as one with moral integrity, who is generous, and will make personal sacrifices for the community, at any time of the day or night. They do this not for money, but because they feel it is their duty and responsibility. They are, therefore, well respected by villagers, and when they get old, they become thao kae (older people who preside over rites and rituals) and chao kote, and are thus important supports for the community.

A healing ceremony with maw tham generally begins with an offering of a set of five pairs of flowers and joss-sticks, candles, a bowl of water, a piece of cloth and a sum of money, called khan ha (khan means a bowl and ha means five). A variation is called khan paed (bowl-eight) which means eight pairs of flowers, joss-sticks, and candles. Then the maw tham begins chanting khatha, showing adoration for the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and a pledge to cure the patient. Then the gods will be invited to be present and assist.

Maw tham are known as healers of sicknesses caused by phii, but their treatments vary. Some will use only their sacred formula,
while others blow on the sick, some use water, blowing it from
the mouth or using a leaf or small branch to sprinkle water on to
the sick, while some will use herbal medicines or oils.

*Maw nam mon* (sacred water healers) are another important
group of healers. *Nam mon* is water consecrated by monks or by
Brahman, or by the person who performs the ceremony. The
water is believed to become sacred as it is blessed by the gods,
and especially by the power of Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.
Water means life for villagers. It provides coolness, purity,
happiness, and life in nature and for all living beings. Sacred
water will purify people from all evils, cool them down from an
abnormal situation, bring them back to life, and return a person's
life balance. A sick person may drink this water, or use it to
wash, or may be anointed or have it sprinkled on them by the
*maw*.

To be made sacred, a bowl of clean water, usually rain water,
is required, together with a pair of candles and joss-sticks, a pair
of flowers, and one baht or a sum prescribed by the *maw*.
The *maw nam mon* lights a candle, chanting *khatha*, and lets the
candle wax fall into the water. This water is used by the *maw*
cure not only persons disturbed by *phii* but also natural illnesses.

*Maw nam mon* who gain wide recognition from villagers are
known to be healers of all sicknesses and some are even known
to heal broken bones. Villagers believe that these *maw* possess
special powers. *Maw nam mon* have different characteristics,
according to the style of their masters. The *Vija* they receive
consist principally of *khatha*. These can only be known if one is
accepted as a disciple and wishes to have that *Vija*. Not many
people have enough courage to learn and receive this art of
healing, as there are many prescriptions, which again vary from
master to master. Generally *maw nam mon* cannot eat various
kinds of plants, vegetables and fruits, nor the meat of tigers,
elephants, snakes, dogs, and cats, or some parts of the entrails of
cows and buffaloes. Food from houses where there is a dead body
may not be consumed and they may not walk under stairs,
bridges, clothes lines, and so on. And finally the *maw nam mon*
must not reveal their *khatha* except to disciples who intend to
become maw nam mon themselves. Maw nam mon may also be maw tham, and the differences between various maw may be quite minor. Nevertheless, each maw recognises these subtle differences.

Maw nam man differ from maw nam mon only by the fact that they use oil (nam man) made from plants, herbs, or the bones of wild animals rather than water. Maw nam man are principally known for their healing of broken bones, and for easing aching or swollen limbs. The most important element is not the oil, but the maw's khatha. If it was the oil, then the maw could easily sell it to anyone who needed it, or leave it to the patient to use it themselves. They do not do this, however, and the maw treats the patients directly. Like other healers, patients of a maw nam man must perform a ceremony, in which a set of offerings is prepared for the khru (candles, flowers, white cloth, etc.).

Maw nam man begin their healing with the chanting of their khatha and the placing of the fractured bones in place prior to oiling them. Lengths of bamboo are then used as splints around the fracture. Maw nam man, like other healers, have many prescriptions, with only the details differing.

Another maw, well known in the Northeast, is the maw lam phii fa. Here lam means singing verses in the traditional Northeastern way, while phii fa means "heavenly gods". Usually this maw is a woman and is accompanied by a musician who plays the kaen, a local musical instrument made of bamboo pipes and sounding rather like an organ. Besides the musician, she needs assistant dancers, varying in number from a few to a dozen.

The maw lam phii fa will be invited to cure a sick person in cases where the cause is not precisely known. She is the person who invites the gods, the phii of ancestors, and all powerful phii to come and help the sick person recover. Singing and dancing together with her assistants, she invites the patient to sit up, then to stand up, and to dance with her. At the same time she will shout loudly in order to chase evil phii away. In many cases the patient does follow her invitation, or at least claims to feel better and recovers soon after.

Before such a ceremony the patient's relatives have to prepare
a set of offerings similar to that for treatment by other maw. This treatment may be repeated several times, and can take a month or more. In most cases, though, relatives do not wish to prolong such treatment, and a patient may be taken to a hospital or to another maw if a recovery seems slow.

Another well-known group of maw are those who use herbal medicines. Maw ya samunphrai (ya means medicine and samunphrai means herbs) are each known for having particular expertise, originally learnt from masters, and then practiced the skills themselves. Traditionally they are supposed to receive only the usual set of offerings, including a sum of money, as prescribed by their masters, but like other maw, they often receive a little extra, as sign of appreciation from the patient’s relatives, especially if treatment has been successful.

Treatment by maw samunphrai is different to that of the other maw discussed above, as the efficacy of herbs in the treatment process is more important. Relatives of the patient may keep some of the herbs and give them to the patient, as prescribed by the maw. This does not, however, lessen the importance of the cultural aspects in their healing. The whole process, from going to collect herbs, preparing them, and administering them, are all accompanied by khatha learned from the masters. These khatha relate the disciples to the masters, and, thus, the present to the past.

It is important to note that the traditional paradigm of healing is different from the modern one. The three principal theories of healing are Hindu, Thai, and Northeastern (the latter being a mixture of the first two and local Northeastern practices). Each have important common characteristics, common to other Asian healing practices, particularly in considering the cause of sicknesses not as diseases, but rather as symptoms of a lack of balance and harmony inside a person and in relation to nature, including other humans. Humans are not divided into body and soul (or spirit), for each person has visible and non-visible elements, parallel to nature, which consists of both kinds of beings and powers. The four fundamental elements of humans and nature are earth, water, air, and fire. This balance is disturbed when the
four elements are no longer in harmony, caused by food, the environment, weakness, age, and other factors.

Northeasterners considers the *kwan* as one of the most important elements of their lives, symbolising the heart of human life. If a *kwan* is disturbed it will fly away, and the person will become "sick", because there is no more unity in that person. It is therefore usual that the *sukwan* ceremony is performed after a recovery from sickness. *Sukwan* in this case is performed to welcome back the *kwan*, and to urge it to remain with that person.

Faith in the healer is essential; not only faith in the healer, but also in their *khru*, as the power of the spirit transmitted through the healer. *Khatha*, ceremonies, and sacred elements are essential components of the act of healing which becomes a ritual. Faith gives hope, courage, and energy, and the healers themselves have to have "power" so that they may communicate with patients by way of their "spirit".

The abbot of one district temple in Kalasin province, well known as a healer of fractured bones, explains that although he uses oil to anoint and massage the patient, it is his psychic powers which are central. He has to concentrate his mind and transmit the power he has to the patient. Even when his patients go home, he has to think of them every day and wish them well. This abbot is a smiling monk, and a patient who sees him is already cheered and feels better. There is no fear displayed by the patient as the monk chats with relatives while taking up the fractured part of the body. Surprisingly, the patient does not seem to feel any pain, even when the monk puts the fractured bones in place.

This abbot is only one of many healers who not only heal, but transmit a vital power to their patients. This is supported by the presence and assistance of relatives and friends, so that a patient is never isolated. Relatives, friends, and villagers keep on visiting and are present during the healing ritual, and share their vital power with the patient, and will do anything to assist recovery. They are an integral part of the treatment.
CHAPTER 5

VILLAGE, STATE, AND CHANGE
During the 19th century, and especially during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), the Northeast was subjected to considerable change. Prior to this administration had been organised into *muang* (meaning "town", but in this case, a town and its domain), with local "lords" (both Lao and Khmer) as *Chao muang* (*Chao* means "ruler" or "lord"). The *Chao muang* had to pay tribute to the central Siamese court in money, silver, gold, and local products. There were, however, few other demands placed on the *Chao muang* and local people by the Siamese. However, the administrative changes of the fifth reign saw *Isan* divided into three administrative *monthon* (regions): *Monthon Isan* (Ubol), *Monthon Udorn*, and *Monthon Nakorn Ratchasima*, and the local, relatively autonomous administration was gradually altered to become a more centralised bureaucratic system. There developed a dependency on the central government (the Siamese court) as the changes ushered in a new historical era.

The Northeast was culturally, socially, and economically closely related to the kingdoms in Laos and Cambodia, which had also paid tribute to the Siamese court. The Lao of *Isan* did not feel
different from the Lao of "Laos", and there was no real cultural
difference between the peoples on the two sides of the Mekong
River. Similarly, the Khmer peoples of the lower Northeast were
as one with those in "Cambodia".

In 1867 the Siamese court was forced by the French, who
were expanding their rule in Vietnam, to relinquish their tributary
relationship with Cambodia and Laos. Soon after ascending to
the throne in 1868, King Chulalongkorn began the administrative
reform of provincial towns in the periphery. High Commissioners
(Kha luang yai) were sent to the various monthon in Isan to
represent the central government and to take control of the
administration, especially taxation, which had previously been
under the control of the Chao muang. In 1893, after battles
against France in an area which is today in Southern Laos, and
near Bangkok when the French sent gun boats up the Chao Phya
River, Thailand had to give up all the left bank of Mekong River
to the French. The French continued to intervene in the
administration of the Northeast, and disputes between the French
consuls in the Northeastern monthon and the Siamese authorities
were common.

In 1894, an official administrative reform of the Northeast
started. Not all muang were recognised by the new system as
changwat (provinces). They were to be amphur (districts) or even
tambon (sub-districts), subordinate to the administrative centres --
the changwat. The reforms had a great impact on local rulers,
especially the chao and other local officials, many of whom were
not promoted or were "demoted" in the new administration.

Taxation became a major issue, as taxes were raised from 3.50
to four baht. In Ubol, the High Commissioner required all large
animals, including cattle, buffaloes, horses, and elephants to be
sold in the presence of officials. The reason for this was as a
measure against theft and banditry, but it was also a great
imposition on villagers. Paying tax was a burden for villagers, and
they could not easily avoid it, except by escaping into the jungle
and mountainous areas which were inaccessible to outsiders.
However, this meant isolation, as men could not travel without tax
certification; if they did, they risked two months of hard labour or
The sum of four baht may not appear large today, but for villagers, not acquainted with monetary transactions, it became one of the largest cash burdens in their life. This amount of money was often more than most villagers would use for all cash expenditures during a whole year. During years of drought, villagers could find themselves in serious difficulty as they would have few ways of finding the money. They had sometimes to forfeit some of their property, such as cattle and buffaloes, or had to find herbs and fruits in the forest or cut and sell timber, if they could find buyers in town. Some even had to leave their village to find employment in public works or jobs in nearby towns. For example the construction of the railway from Bangkok to Nakorn Ratchasima (1890 to 1895), from there to Buriram, Surin, and then to Ubol, at the beginning of this century, was one such opportunity for villagers to earn money.

The feeling of being "Thai" came much later in the history of the Northeast. Most Northeastern people called themselves "Lao", and still do. Khon Isan (people of Isan) came into common use only a few decades ago. When somebody went to the central region, they said they were, "going to Thai". In the old days it was not easy to travel to Bangkok and the central region, especially as the first road in the Northeast was only built at the beginning of this century, and then only along the Mekong River between Nakorn Phanom and Mukdaharn. The second road constructed is today called the Friendship (or Mitraphab) Road, linking Nongkhai on the Mekong to Bangkok.

Before the construction of roads and railways, a journey from the lower Northeast to the Central area involved a boat trip along the Mun River from the Mekong at Champasak, down to Tha Chang in the Chakkarat district of Nakorn Ratchasima. From there, travel was on foot across mountains and through jungles to the Pasak River and down to Ayudhya, and from there on to Bangkok on the Chao Phya River. From the upper Northeast, people had to go by ox-cart, horse, or simply walk. A trip "to Thai" took weeks or even months, depending on the starting point, and danger was ever-present. Wild beasts, mosquitoes, malaria and
bandits were great obstacles, and discouraged many potential travellers. The mountainous jungle areas lying between Nakorn Ratchasima and Saraburi divided the Korat Plateau and the central region, and was considered the most dangerous part of the trip. It was well known for tigers and snakes, and especially malaria, and was known as *dong phya fai* (the jungle of the Lord of Fire, signifying danger). The name has since been changed to *dong phya yen*, to be luckier (*yen* meaning cool).

The main reason the people went "to Thai" was for trade. The traders of *Isan* were called *Nai Hoi*, and were local people who travelled around the region exchanging goods. Most trade was in cattle, buffaloes, chillies, salt, pots, knives, and clothes. The *Nai Hoi*’s trade system was different from that of the Chinese traders, who gradually moved into the area, in that the value of goods was not strictly measured, and personal relationships, friendships, and perceived hardship were variables in price setting. Coming back from "Thai", the traders brought with them goods that were needed in the Northeast. Most of these traders were eventually forced out by competition from Chinese traders who had more access to capital and had strong links with the all-powerful Chinese merchants in Bangkok.
REBELLION

History records many rebellions in the Northeast from the 17th century. A rebellion is defined here as an attempt to seize power from rulers or, more broadly, as an effort to undermine their power. In general, this can be understood as resistance to the dominance of the "Siamese Thai" over the Isan people. It indicates, on the one hand, the significant autonomy and local identity of the people in the region and, on the other, solidarity between the Lao of the whole region, which was felt strongly by the people of the Northeast, especially as they shared the same historical and cultural roots.

At least eight historical uprisings shook local powers and the central power of the Siamese. We will outline each of these.

The Bunkwang Rebellion of 1699 This uprising occurred towards the end of the reign of King Narai of Ayudhya, during a period of political confusion in the court, with King Narai’s brother on one side and the French army on the other. Bunkwang was an ordinary person, with a temple education who organised a group of peasants and seized Nakorn Ratchasima, which was considered
the front door to the Siamese kingdom. Then, with some 4,000 peasants, 84 elephants and 100 horses, he marched through the mountains to Lopburi, and advanced to within sixty kilometres of Ayudhya. The Ayudhyan troops, however, succeeded in dispersing the rebels and killed Bunkwang.

Bunkwang, recognised by Northeasters as an educated person, was able to use his religious knowledge to persuade peasants to join his rebellion. He claimed that he was attempting to liberate the Northeast from the Siamese kingdom, and to return it to an autonomous position -- which apparently also meant a link with the Lao kingdom.

The Chiangkeo Rebellion of 1791 Only a few years after the foundation of Bangkok as the capital of Siam (1782), some of the tributary states challenged the new power. This challenge was related to the actions of some local minority groups, presumably encouraged and supported by other local rebel groups. Chiangkeo came from the Eastern region of the Mekong (Sarawan in Laos), which belonged to Champasak. The minority ethnic group involved were referred to as the Kha. The Kha rebellion almost succeeded occupying Champasak, when it was defeated by the troops of various towns, including Nakorn Ratchasima, and arrested the Kha and made them slaves. The Kha were to remain slaves for generations.

The Sa-Kiad-Ngong Rebellion of 1820 The leader of this rebellion was named Sa, while Kiad-Ngong was the name of a mountain on the Eastern side of the Mekong River, a part of Champasak. Sa’s mother was a Lao from Vientiane, and Sa himself had been ordained as a monk for a period. Like other rebels, Sa used his religious education to convince people that he was a phu-wiset (a man with extraordinary power) and a phu-mibun (a person with great merit), who could perform miraculous deeds. He also claimed to be Thao Chuang, a meritorious hero in local literature, reborn to save the Kha people who were oppressed by local authorities. He established a temple, becoming the master, and then gathered together some 6,000 people, mostly Kha, and marched on and burned Champasak. King Rama II of Bangkok ordered Chao Anu of Vientiane to get rid of this rebel,
and eventually Sa and the Kha surrendered, and were brought to Bangkok. Sa was jailed for life while the Kha were again enslaved, with their descendents settling on the Eastern side of the Chao Phya River.

The Sa-Kiad-Ngong rebellion was one of the major uprisings of the Northeast, requiring an army from Vientiane to suppress it. It was said that the Kha population at that time was more than 300,000, and many thousands must have been killed during the rebellion, and after. However, the root cause of the rebellion -- Siamese overlordship -- was not overcome, and the uprising was repeated on several occasions.

The Battle of Sambok in 1895 A small but significant event occurred in reaction to the new taxation system introduced by the Siamese court, which raised taxes to four baht per year. Some former monks of Sa-ad village (in Namphong district of today's Khon Kaen province) persuaded villagers not to pay tax. To pay they had to make a long trip to Nakhon Ratchasima. They explained that if a tax had to be paid, it should be to Vientiane, not Bangkok, and for three years the villagers refused to pay. Villagers were trained to face the officials, being given sacred objects by their leaders so that they could fight with courage and without fear of being wounded or killed. The result, however, when troops arrived, was that three of the village leaders were killed and the villagers dispersed.

The Phu-mi-bun Rebellion of 1901-1902 The Phu-mi-bun Rebellion refers to a series events which were widely dispersed throughout the North and Northeastern regions of modern Thailand and parts of Laos. This series of uprisings can be considered as amongst the most significant historical events shaking the power of the Siamese court in the region. Rebellions took place in today's Kalasin, Khon Kaen, Chaiyaphum, Loei, Nakorn Phanom, Sakol Nakhon, Nongkhai, Udon, Roi-et, Mahasarakham, Buriram, Sisaket, Surin, and Ubon, as well as many parts of Laos.

These events manifested themselves through groups of troubador maw lam who travelled around the region, reciting a
similar message. They told of an imminent and dramatic catastrophe, and this corresponded with a message given by phu-wiset, emerging at that time, throughout the region. The message can be compared to the Bible's Apocalypse. Some preserved records state:

"On Sunday, the day of the full moon in the 4th month of the year of the Ox, third of the decade, Chulasakarat (era) 1263 (23 March 1902), a windstorm so powerful that it can blow people about will begin and it will be dark for 7 days and 7 nights. One should burn the wood of the Oroxyllum indicum (Lao, mai linfa; Thai, mai pheka) for light and plant lemon grass at stairways to houses. During the windstorm, if one seizes a handful of lemon grass, one will not be burned away."[1]

The message predicted many miraculous events during this dramatic period: stones would become gold and silver, while gold and silver would become stones, lead or iron; gourds and pumpkins would become elephants and horses; pigs and buffaloes would become giants, and would eat people; the fibres from the roots of trees along the Mekong River would become silk. Then, the saviour would appear, called Thao (Lord) Thammikarat (righteous ruler), as the phu-mi-bun.

The message of the uprising was essentially religious, requiring conversion and penance from those who had committed evil deeds, with some of the messages warning:

"If one has performed various evil deeds, then in order to become a pure person one should perform the ritual of tat kam wang wen, whereby one arranges to invite monks to come and sprinkle sacralized water."[2]

In some villages the people set up bowls of water and bathed


[2] Ibid.
feet as an act of purification from "sins". Those known to be sinners were washed more than those considered good. They were preparing for the great event, the destruction of their old world, to be rebuilt by the saviour, who would alleviate the suffering of the just and right and punish the wicked.

The *phu-mi-bun* events did not necessarily have an aggressive and rebellious nature and the *phu-mi-bun* and their followers did not organise themselves to seize state power. The leaders would teach spells and give their followers amulets for self-protection. However, some groups began to use weapons, to defend themselves against local authorities who considered them subversive. There were also other groups which seem to have used these events to fuel their conflicts with declining local powers, especially in the lower Northeast and Ubol and in the southern Lao region, some of them being related to the earlier Kha rebels. About 2,500 of these people, under the guidance of leaders named Man and Lek, attacked Muang Khemarat, burned and looted the town, and moved on Ubol town, before being defeated by that town's forces.

With the exception of this group, the objective of most others was not to seize state power, and their leader's messages remained messianic, being to establish a kingdom which was neither Siamese nor French. For these two powers, however, this was a direct threat to state power.

The socio-political confusion which developed in the Northeast during the first years of this century were considered, by the Siamese court, as attempt of remove the Northeast from the central authority of the Siamese. This was closely related to the threat from an expansionary France which had success on the Laos side of the Mekong. In fact, as the patrols of the Siamese authorities followed the rebels into French Laos, they were warned by the French Consul in Ubol, and the negotiations which followed persuaded the French not to send their troops marching across the border.

The movement was gradually suppressed in the Northeast and in French Laos by the central and local authorities, with many
leaders being killed or jailed and their followers dispersed.

The Nong Makkeo Rebellion of 1924 This occurred in a village in Loei province, beginning with the arrival, from another province, of three monks and a novice. After the monks demonstrated their healing powers and had performed miraculous acts, the villagers honoured them as phu-mi-bun and followed their teachings. In the beginning the moral conduct of the villagers was emphasised, but then focused on Phra Sri-ariyametrai, the future Buddha, who would come to save the world from suffering. It was said that this saviour would be born in Nong Makkeo, which then changed its name from Wiangkeo. The villagers gathered at the temple every day to be taught about the kingdom which would soon arise. They were also told that Vientiane would soon regain its prestige.

On 23 May 1924 about fifty armed villagers, guided by their leaders, who had disrobed, attacked the district administration office at Wangsaphung, chasing away the head of the district. They believed that there would be no need of any authority in the new kingdom. However, the police countered quickly, and arrested the leaders together with about 100 villagers. They were jailed for three years.

The Maw Lam Noi-Chada Rebellion of 1936 Noi was a maw lam from a village near Mahasarakham town, whose real name was Khamsa Sumangkhaket. He claimed himself to be a phu-wiset, wandering to many places to sing a message of conversion, requesting villagers to dress in white as sign of purification. He predicted the imminent coming of Phra Sri-ariyametrai, and claimed to be one of the leaders of the phu-mi-bun events of 1901-1902, reborn to teach the people. Hundreds of unarmed villagers gathered for two to three months at maw lam Noi's centre, awaiting the coming of the Sri-ariyametrai. Maw lam Noi was arrested and sentenced to four years jail. Some of his followers continued his activities, but were also arrested.

The Sila Wongsin Rebellion of 1959 The most recent event included in the category of rebellion by the peasants of the Northeast occurred when Sila, a man who was trained as a monk
at a temple in Ubol, disrobed and became a healer. He had many followers, and claimed to be Phra Sri-ariyametrai. He persuaded about 150 villagers in Warinchamrab district to migrate with him to establish a new settlement in the Chockchai district of Nakorn Ratchasima, claiming themselves to be the community of those elected for salvation. They had their own rules and prescriptions, and invented new ceremonies to worship gods and idols discovered in the area. Many local villagers also joined Sila and his followers. The local authorities finally arrested Sila, but were attacked by his followers, and the dramatic fighting between the two sides resulted in death of the head of the district and another four officials on the first day. The following day a police patrol took action and killed twelve people, including women and children, and arresting another 44 villagers. Sila and some of his followers had, however, escaped the night before. The then dictator of Thailand, Marshal Sarit Thanarat, was incensed, claiming that Sila and his followers were more dangerous than communists. Sila was eventually arrested while trying to cross the border to Laos, and was sentenced to death.

These Northeastern uprisings have been officially recorded as rebellions aimed at undermining the state’s power. The causes were variously given as strange beliefs or an exploitation or manipulation of Buddhist doctrine or, for the more serious cases, as attempts to actually seize state power. However, there is also evidence to suggest that economic crises may have been major contributing factors:

"The populace is impoverished because they lack economic progress. If they have good yields, there is no market. If they cannot [farm], they must starve.... They trade in beasts of burden is difficult in several respects. Buyers and sellers exist, but they lack the legal papers. When elephants and horses which have gone astray are caught and taken to administrative offices [sala klang], they are confiscated for the crown....It is impossible for the populace to find work [for wages] in their own land. The cost of labor is cheap to a degree.....Since [the populace] lives far away from the commissioners [khaluang], there are crooked people who collect head taxes before the government is able to do so. Because [those who have been
cheated] have nothing left, they are ruined. [If they bring the crooks to court], they have no evidence and are defeated."[3]

The Siamese government seems to have recognised that poverty was one of the reasons for these uprisings, as some measures to alleviate the situation were initiated in the following years. For example, the construction of the railway from Nakorn Ratchasima to Surin, and the construction of the first road along the Mekong River. However, this was the only infrastructure provided, and there were no real economic reforms which improved the economic condition of the villagers, who still had to pay the four baht tax and which remained their main burden. For their family and community needs, they could manage, and they could deal with banditry. But, as the new social order and administrative arrangements were issued from the central government, and there was no cooperation with local powers, villagers were left to face their destiny by themselves.

It was, therefore, not only economic issues which were the cause of the uprisings. Rather, it was the exploitation by the central government of local powers on the one hand and the attacks on the social and cultural identity and local autonomy on the other. Each of the cases outlined above clearly indicate that there were these concerns.

This was also recognised by the central government, and the reform of the education system was one measure introduced to alleviate the situation, with schooling being expanded and standardised through the country. In the beginning, temple schools were used, with monks as teachers, together with some educated lay people. However, they had to use the central Thai (Siamese) language, and ignore the Tham and Thai Noi languages of local temple-based education.

Local administration was also changed. Phuyaiban and kamnan (head of a tambon) were selected by the people and officially appointed by local authorities (the governor of the province).

[3] Ibid., p. 295
While "elected" by the people, these men were, in fact, selected as representatives of the state, and not as representatives of the villagers. They had to go to the district administration office every month to receive their orders, and then transmit these to the villagers. The positions of phuyaiban and kamnan, then, did not amount to elected representation for the people or the beginnings of democracy but, rather, the extension of state influence.

These measures have, with time, succeeded in weakening the power of local culture. The villager's resistance has been largely passive, being expressed in language, nihtham, songs, phaya, and folk entertainment. Popular Buddhism strengthened their belief in the Karma of the former life, and they tended to accept their actual suffering because they believed they had not done enough to gain merit in their former life. In this life, then, they would try to make merit so that they could enjoy a happier and more prosperous life after the next rebirth. But this is not to argue that villages are naturally passive. Rather, the defeat of their uprisings, together with the regular "defeats" they suffer in their dealings with the state and with traders, encourages a passive face to their politics. Nevertheless, the Northeast was also a stronghold of the Communist Party of Thailand. Even in modern parliamentary politics the villagers of the Northeast are beginning to see that their numbers alone can carry some influence.
Trade

Generally, Isan villages were slow to enter the new era. As was noted above it was only after the Second World War that major change came, and then to areas close to railway lines and roads. The main factor in this was trade, with trains and trucks bringing goods to and from Nakorn Ratchasima and Bangkok and then to towns and districts along the rail line and roads. Labour was also a factor, with workers becoming involved in seasonal migration to Bangkok once the railway had been built and extended.

Up to the late 1950s roads were built only to link the large towns, and most roads remained dirt tracks for carts, and were impassable in the rainy season. Nevertheless, many larger villages, reasonably accessible, saw the arrival of Chinese traders, some of whom settled. These Chinese traders gradually replaced the local Nai Hoi, bringing agricultural implements, sweets, clothes, matches, gasoline, paper, pencils, materials for school, and a range of other basic consumer goods. At the same time they purchased
agricultural products from the villagers to sell in the towns, where they picked up their wholesale goods. Even where the Chinese traders did not penetrate some villagers took their rice, and that which they bought from other villagers, to sell to mills in district towns. Often this would involve a small caravan of carts. They also bought necessary items for themselves and other villagers, for the return trip.

Even though the modern road system expanded and, with it, Chinese traders in villages and contacts between villagers and district towns, the traditional methods of exchange persisted. The major difference between the *Nai Hoi* and Chinese traders was that villagers considered the *Nai Hoi* as local people who, while trading, still belonged to the local culture. The way of the *Nai Hoi* was not to exchange goods in the manner of villagers, but nor was it like the Chinese traders; it was more a middle way between the two systems: sympathy and other cultural values made the difference.

In 1939 the villager's taxation burden was lightened somewhat when a land (rice field) tax was introduced. Tax collection was still not well organised, and as villagers rarely had land title certificates, it was not easy to estimate the tax one had to pay. In sum, villagers found the new system better than before. Now, they had only to focus on the production of rice and some other crops if they wanted to earn some money, and it was no longer so difficult to sell their products. And, neither was it difficult to spend their money.

The modern world was arriving. The year 1932 saw the end of Absolute Monarchy and the beginning of the Constitutional period, as a democratic state was proclaimed in Bangkok, for Thailand. The new administration was centralised, although local administration was entrusted to governors, as heads of the provinces, and through them to *Nai Amphur* as heads of districts, *kamnan* as heads of sub-districts, and *phuyaiban* as heads of villages. *Kamnan* and *phuyaiban* did not have much real power but, as noted previously, represented the authorities in villages, providing the link for the state. Government officials were still not numerous and seldom went into the villages, especially the remote
ones -- villagers report that in some years no government officials would visit. Generally, then, when problems arose villagers tended to resort to their means of solving them. They say: "We were afraid of government officials; they might put us in jail or fine us; it was better to solve the problems ourselves."

The orders given to the kamnan and phuyaiban by the Nai Amphur usually related to ridding their areas of thieves and bandits. In particularly dangerous cases the Nai Amphur and district officials might be requested to intervene, and this then became a reason for their presence in villages. Generally though, up to the late 1960s, economic and social development were not on the agenda unless the villages were considered susceptible to insurgency.

By the 1950s many villages had shops in place, selling many of the consumer goods which were becoming daily necessities. Some of the shop owners were outsiders, while others were villagers who had learned to trade. These shop owners, who were considered well-off, were often the ones to introduce radio to the villages, and thus increased contact with the outside. Besides news, villagers listened to music and maw lam programmes, which were sponsored by various enterprises, but especially companies selling medicines. The example of medicine shows how trading worked to change many aspects of village life.

Villagers became acquainted with modern medicine through radio commercials and then through traders and shopkeepers who sold these medicines. The major impact on the use of modern medicines was, however, the coming of "medicine trucks" (rot khai ya). These trucks came during the dry season with a mobile cinema, choosing large villages in which to show movies and sell their products. Villagers, especially children, found the arrival of the rot khai ya a great event, and most villagers saw their first movie through these travelling shows. However, because these shows belonged to big pharmaceutical companies in Bangkok and were a commercial enterprise, the villagers had to wait till late at night to see the movie, as the commercials continued until a certain volume of the product had been sold. Often villagers would buy medicine just because they wanted to
see the movie. At least once or twice during the dry season villagers welcomed these mobile cinemas into their village to show movies and sell medicines.

Medicine was not the only product brought into villages in this way. Torch batteries, soaps, beauty products, and other household goods were also brought by mobile "shops". Today, there are very few trucks or cars of this kind, as they have been replaced by television and mobile cinemas where villagers have to buy tickets. Even mobile discos have been established.

Up until the late 1970s, hospitals were to be found only in provincial towns or, exceptionally, in larger district towns, while in most district towns and larger sub-districts the government set up health care centres with officials trained in basic health care. While these centres could not provide for significant improvements in villager's health, due to their budgetary and administrative constraints, they did offer a choice to villagers who could not afford to travel to a hospital in town or to buy expensive medicines from pharmacies. The villagers were already becoming well acquainted with modern treatment, and they would go to hospitals in cases of serious or long illness, where traditional healers could not manage. They came to believe that medical doctors were learned people who could often do better than traditional healers: medical degrees, uniforms, status, and the high technology of hospitals gave the villagers a good impression. And, the new schooling system reinforced these impressions.

Education

Although the reform of the school system began at the start of this century most villages in the Northeast did not have a school until after the Second World War. Even then schools were usually in temples, and it was only in the 1960s that government schools began to make an impact. At first there were schools only in sub-districts or, exceptionally, in some larger village communities. Children often had to travel long distances to school and while the lucky ones had bicycles, most had to walk. In many schools
there was only one teacher who had to take care of the four compulsory elementary classes. This lack of trained teachers was a serious problem for the government, and it increased the number teacher’s colleges from a few to 36 throughout the country. Ironically, by 1980, thousands of students had graduated from these colleges and other pedagogical faculties but were jobless. Today, there are too many applicants and too few vacant positions for teachers, even in the most remote village schools.

Schools showed children that education meant being able to write, read, and calculate, but also taught them many things they would seldom or never need in their daily life. Schooling also meant state discipline. For example, children had to have a school uniform even if many of their parents could ill-afford them. Similarly, this education meant regular attendance at school. But, many children missed classes, especially during the rainy season, when they joined with their parents, working in the fields, or looked after their younger brothers and sisters at home while their parents worked. Others had to tend the cattle and buffalo or search for food for the family. However, one of the main reasons why children missed school was that they had no uniform or had to alternate with their brothers or sisters if they only had one uniform. Similarly, if it rained or they had to wash their uniform, they would not be dry the following morning, so the children had to stay away from school.

Often villagers did not see much sense to all of this but they had to send their children as it was an obligation demanded by the state. With the exception of a few well-off families, not many could consider sending their children for study beyond the compulsory primary school level. Secondary schooling, in towns, was out of the question.

School teachers insisted on the necessity of schooling, repeatedly telling children that they had to come to school to be "educated" so as not to remain "stupid". Many children came to believe that those who did not attend school were all "stupid", and this included their parents and grandparents, most of whom did not have any state education. Villagers themselves also came to accept this, finding that they did not know much about the things
their children were learning in school or what was happening in the wider world, as conveyed to them by teachers, traders, government officials and the radio.

Those few parents who did want to send their children for further study soon realised they could not afford it. Or, they found that their children were not so good at school, as standards in rural schools were often poor. Some dreamed of their children becoming government officials which, for them, meant being chao khon, nai khon (a master of others). This impression was continually reinforced by officials who tended to behave as if they were "masters", and not civil "servants". They also tended to regard and treat villagers as if they are stupid, reinforcing these perceptions.

The four years of compulsory schooling were expanded to six in the 1970s, by which time many villages had their own school. But the schooling system did not change greatly, with most teachers living in towns and travelling to the school by motorcycle. They were not much interested in the on-going activities of the village, with most being young and inexperienced teachers who had to take these rural positions because the better ones, in towns, were unavailable. Thus, many of them were just waiting for their chance to move to urban schools. The teachers, then, contributed little to the villages, but, more importantly, learnt little themselves about the villages and their culture.

The standard of education did begin to improve during the 1970s however. Before then, many children could neither read nor write, even after four years at school. This changed, but even so, after four, and later, six years of schooling, most children continued to work with their parents, at least until they were old enough to join the migrant workers.

Official Development and Change

In terms of relations with the state, the 1960s marked a change in the village situation. 1961 was the beginning of the years of development (pattana), introduced with the first National
Economic Development Plan. Far more government officials, from various ministries, began entering villages and proposing new plans for official development. Traders cooperated, providing materials for activities promoted by the government. The first new crop promoted during this period was kenaf, with villagers being told that they could earn a lot of money if they grew it, as it was much in demand by factories being set up in various urban centres around the Northeast and especially in Nakorn Ratchasima. These factories were to be provided with the product through this network of traders and government officials from Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives.

Villagers, of course, were keen to earn more. They began to grow kenaf on the free land around the rice fields or shared a part of their field with this new crop. In the first years the yield was good, as was the price. In the years that followed, however, the price dropped, and some farmers became reluctant to plant kenaf, while others continued by expanding the area of land under cultivation. This expansion was often into public land and forest in the vicinity of their village, cutting down the forest. Chinese traders encouraged this process by offering credits to villagers who repaid with rice or kenaf.

In reality, this was the first time in the history of Isan that large numbers of villagers entered into the market-oriented mode of production. Although they did not totally rely on the market it began to change their lifestyle. It also changed the environment as forests gradually disappeared and streams and reservoirs became polluted by, for example, the retting of kenaf. In some places fish also disappeared as villagers often unconsciously destroyed these natural resources where previously they could easily find food of all kinds.

Around this time the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives also introduced new varieties of rice, telling villagers that the new varieties would yield far more than the traditional ones. Villagers who followed their recommendations were given the new seeds and the resulting yields were indeed much higher. The major drawback, however, was that the villagers had to buy fertiliser, and while they could sell more rice and earn more money, they also
had to spend more money. Moreover, insects tended to attack the new varieties, and so villagers also had to buy insecticides. Officials assured them that even though they had to buy chemicals they still made more money by growing the new varieties. Many remained unsure about new varieties but it was often too late to return to traditional varieties as the environment was changing, and they had to continue to use fertilisers and insecticides. Insects came not only because of the new rice, but also because the forest was disappearing. This process did not occur in everywhere, as officials could not enter all villages. In addition, many villagers could not afford the transition to a new crop, especially as they had heard from the others what had happened when they used the new varieties. Today, there remain but a few villages using traditional rice varieties.

The late sixties and early seventies saw yet another new crop introduced: cassava. Cassava was first grown in the Central and Eastern regions of the country, but it was soon seen that it could also be a valuable crop for Isan. The Northeast was dry, but cassava was hardy, there was ample land available, the crop was considered reasonably easy to grow, and the technology was not high-level. Villagers needed only to plough the land, plant pieces of the cassava plant, and wait for the harvest eight months later. Tending the crop was not time-consuming as all that had to be done was weeding. Cassava became popular, with the government and traders providing villagers with planting stock. At first this occurred mainly in villages close to towns and where land was available. But, as with kenaf, the yields and prices were high at first, but then fell away.

Traders and officials continued to be encourage villagers to plant cassava, especially as loans became available from a new government bank, the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC). The conditions for these loans were very attractive, with much lower interest rates than that given by private creditors and commercial banks. Nor did farmers have to mortgage their property to guarantee their loan, as they could be supported by other villagers, or by members of a farmers’ group they were encouraged to set up. Many villagers received a loan without knowing what to do with it; some paid off debts they
already had with private creditors; others invested in chemical fertilisers and agricultural implements; while some just used the money for their family's consumption. A family's needs tended to increase with the expansion of the market, with more advertising and with goods being offered right at their doorstep by travelling salespersons arriving by truck or motorcycle, selling at the village stores or in town markets.

These debts meant that villagers were "forced" to continue growing cassava in order to service their loans and to expand the land under cultivation in order to increase their product and income. As prices seldom saw large upward trends, an expansion of cropping was the best way to expand incomes. This did not stop at areas near villages, as some people began moving to develop new fields in public forests and on crown land. Many areas of the Northeast have been settled and cleared exclusively for the cultivation of cassava. Areas like Kornburi in Nakorn Ratchasima were once forests but are now forests of cassava. This kind of monocultural farming meant that in many of the new "villages" there was little time to take part in the other things villagers used to do in the past, such as growing vegetables, preparing fishing equipment, weaving, other handicrafts, or even for growing rice. What happened was that villagers devoted all of their time to a cash crop such as rice, kenaf, cassava, maize, soya beans, tobacco, and so on, depending on the area in which they had land. As villagers had less time for traditional work, they had to buy most of what they needed for daily life, including clothes, farming equipment, vegetables, fish and even basic foodstuffs including rice.

There is no longer a richness in nature as before, and the villagers have largely destroyed this themselves because they wanted money. They did this under pressure from traders who wanted their products for export, and by the government which needed exports to support economic "development": export policies determined villager's actions.

At the village level, a vicious cycle of debt was created. As their credit term (usually only six months to two years) expired, many villagers found themselves without the money required to
repay the BAAC. Some were advised (some by officials of the BAAC) to get loans from private creditors in order to repay the BAAC, so that the villagers retained their good credit rating, and therefore would be able to get a new loan. Villagers sometimes followed this advice, and once their debt was paid to the BAAC they then applied for a new loan. When granted, they would then use that money to repay the private creditor. However, as it took some months to get the money from the BAAC, villagers were, for some months, tied into private high interest rates, sometimes up to ten percent per month. Villagers thus had to work harder in order to earn the money to repay the BAAC. If they could not, then they had to repeat the same process. In many cases the debt increased so much that they had to sell their property, land, house and cattle to pay the debt. They would then move to a new place and occupy some public land in remote jungle or hill areas and clear it. The cycle was complete.

Another popular way to earn money to pay debts was to work in Bangkok or some nearby urban centre. Alternatively, villagers might travel to the agro-industry areas of the Central provinces or even to the Southern region.

As noted above, debt problems really started with the BAAC and the promotion of new crops. Before that, villagers often had debt, but usually they borrowed from relatives and friends, often without interest, and seldom borrowed more than 1,000 baht. Even loans from private creditors were usually small, as villagers would not dare to take a large sum. The BAAC, however, convinced them that even if they took 5,000 baht or more, they would be able to pay it back. Thus, many villagers took 5,000, 10,000 or even 20,000 baht. The more cunning amongst them would then use this money to make loans, at higher interest rates, to other villagers!

Migration to Bangkok, in search of cash, having begun after the railways went through, expanded in the 1950s. The goal, however, was not necessarily to find money to pay debts but to earn money or even to experience the outside world. While these motives still exist, years of debt have forced many villagers to migrate. Villagers say that in the 1950s there was, in some areas
of Khon Kaen, Roi-et, Mahasarakham, Buriram, and Nakorn Ratchasima, seven years of drought, and that many had no other way out other than to go to Bangkok. Many were already in the modern world and could no longer rely on food and resources from nature as they had in the past. As reasonably easy communication was already possible, especially by rail, many went to Bangkok. Some said that they earned a few hundred baht over a period of months, and this assisted in solving immediate problems, such as rice shortages. In some cases, debt problems might also be solved.

Going to Bangkok became an increasingly important method of making money, allowing villagers to improve their situation. In the beginning it was an adventure, but soon became a necessity for many. Some parents say that they were happy for their sons and daughters to go to Bangkok because they sent money home and, when they themselves came home, they looked much better, neater, cleaner, and could easily find someone to marry in the village. Sometimes, also, they organised a pha-pa to the village temple, which greatly assisted the temple and made merit.

This process has, however, meant a changing of focus from the village to the outside world. Some villagers explain that the habit of travelling to other villages in hard times and asking their support is now not nearly so common. The tendency, now, is to go to work in Bangkok or other urban areas.

With the first National Economic Development Plan, the state focused on Isan as one of the main regions to be developed. This was not only because Prime Minister Sarit came from the region, but because it was a state strategy to defeat the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which had developed a strong base in the Northeast. Relative poverty and the lack of infrastructure, especially roads and water, were identified as giving the CPT conditions for expansion.

The first aspect of infrastructural development emphasised in the development of the Northeast was the construction of roads, linking most districts and sub-districts to towns. The state, on US advice, created a new organisation for this purpose, the Office for
Accelerated Rural Development (ARD). While ARD met strong opposition from the CPT during construction activities, especially in Nakorn Phanom, Sakol Nakhon, Kalasin, and Nongkhai, they succeeded in opening the most remote villages to the outside world. This marked the official end of isolation for most villages. Many of the new roads linking villages and towns were accessible by car, even in the rainy season.

The roads brought outsiders into villages and took villagers to the outside world. Village agricultural and food products, both produced by villagers and collected from the forest, rivers and streams were collected and taken to market almost every day. Anything in nature that could be sold was not spared. Forest vegetables were no longer given enough time to grow, but were collected and sold, while lakes and streams were fished out: everything went to market. Villagers needed money, and would go by truck to the morning market in the nearest town to sell their products and return in the late morning with goods purchased at market.

Electricity came to most tambon and some large villages in the late 1960s, as large hydroelectric dams were constructed. Ten years later, one could easily find villages with electricity, and by the 1980s there were very few villages without electricity. By 1992 it is planned that all villages should have state-supplied electricity.

Since the 1960s, even in those villages which were not within the state grid, many houses had electricity, using batteries charged in nearby villages or towns within the grid. Villagers did not want electricity only for lighting, but especially for television, for some programmes could not be missed! The most popular programmes were movies or plays based on traditional and local stories, mythology, and tales, all of which were well-known to the villagers. But, it was new for them to see the stories in the movie form, being used to maw lam moo (large travelling troupes of maw lam).

Electricity in villages also allows the purchase of electrical products such as refrigerators, fans, radios and televisions. It became a fashion to demonstrate one's economic status having all
of these facilities: some families who had refrigerators only used them to cool water, while some of those who had modern furniture left it unused.

Going to Bangkok was not easy for everybody. Many adults, married persons who did not want to leave home for a long period, preferred, up to mid-1970s, to ride samlors (hired tricycles) in nearby towns; they could easily go home when necessary. Others would work in small rural industries requiring manual labour, including carrying bagged rice or working in transport industries, all of which were available close to home. They could earn some money and go home with some goods from town.

Together with the National Plan the development of American military bases in the Northeast, from the beginning of the sixties, had a big impact on the people of the region. The major US bases were in Nakorn Ratchasima, Ubol Ratchathani, Udornthani, and Nakorn Phanom, and they attracted villagers from all over the Northeast. In these developing urban centres the villagers did any job they could to earn money, and many made their fortune. This was also the period when large numbers of village girls came to learn of jobs in bars, night clubs, and as mia chao (hired wives).

The Americans, under pressure from the student-led democratic movement and the urging of the Thai Government, left Thailand in 1976. At this time many people who had work at the bases, found themselves in a confusing situation, and it was not easy to work for low wages when one was used to receiving good money at the bases. Some returned to their homes and re-adapted themselves to ordinary village life. However, many of these people did not have to suffer this situation for too long as job opportunities developed in the Middle East. Thousands of villagers, many of them former American base workers, but others as well, were ready to embark on a new adventure, far from home. Although they had to pay from 10,000 to 30,000 baht commission to intermediaries, they were willing to take out loans with private creditors or from commercial banks, guaranteed with their property. Many even had to sell part of their rice fields,
hoping to rebuy it once they had made their fortune in faraway lands.

Many succeeded in earning large amounts of money, but there were also many who failed. Some lost their land on leaving the village, while others lost their wives on their return. Families were broken when wives at home, receiving large amounts of money sent by their husbands, began to change their lifestyle. At this time wages for Thai labour in the Middle East were still high, and at the beginning of the 1980s there were some 400,000 Thai workers in the Middle East. Most came home once a year while others stayed away for longer periods, but all sent thousands of baht home. The majority, however, could not cope with the work and being away from home and family for more than three or four years. If they had made enough most did not wish to return to the Middle East even though they could earn a lot of money, seeing the village as home, and finding work during the dry season in Bangkok.

By the mid-seventies seasonal migration from villages in the Northeast had become normal for young people and some adults. In response, the government of Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj embarked on a new project called the Job Creation Programme in Rural Areas, with a budget allocation of about 2,000 billion baht (about $US100 million at that time) in 1975. This was to be divided between provinces, with the Northeast being a special target area. The idea was to hire villagers to work for the development of their community. This was an important project and had a major impact on village values. The reason for this was that villagers were hired to undertake work that they previously did themselves, without pay, usually as a community effort. Most of the projects concerned infrastructural development, such as building roads to link villages, rehabilitating water reservoirs and streams, and digging ponds for public use. One of the goals was to provide employment opportunities in villages so that people did not have to migrate to urban centres during the dry season. This goal was not entirely successful, however, mainly because the dry season period promised thousands of baht in potential earnings for migrant workers, money they could not have earned if they had stayed in the village, relying on the Job Creation project. In
recent years, the revised Job Creation project seems to have recognised this and often the works are completed by local contractors using machinery.

Nobody knows how many Isan people are in Bangkok today, especially during the dry season, but everybody knows that in all low-wage sectors most workers are Northeasterners. They are usually young people working as maids, boys in petrol and gas stations, restaurants, building sites, shopping centres, hotels, car repair shops, and retail shops; they are taxi drivers, workers in factories, stevedores, and labourers. In fact, in all kinds of enterprise requiring cheap but conscientious labour, one finds the youth of Isan. Outside of the towns they cut sugarcane, work in rubber plantations, work on fishing boats, and labour in all fields of agriculture in the Eastern and Southern regions of the country. One of the more curious jobs for the young men and women of Isan is in Bangkok, where they play in Chinese opera and theatre (Ngui), performed almost every day somewhere in Bangkok's Chinatown. They do not know any Chinese languages but learn their roles by heart.

There are three categories of Isan migrants. The first are those who go to work for short periods during the dry and pre-harvest seasons, staying at home for most of the year. The second group are those who migrate, alone or with their family, to work for most of the year, returning home only once or twice a year. This group may, however, return to the village after a number of years away. The third group is made up of those who migrate to live in slums and other cheap housing and work in Bangkok, other urban areas, or plantations. Many of these people may go home on visits, but most remain away permanently. This group is in a minority, as Isan people prefer to die at home, and those who stay away for long periods or permanently are often young people who find a good job, get married and set up a new home. However, these people will still return home for special occasions and ceremonies.

Today, the ordinary dry season picture in many villages is of older women looking after babies and children, while fathers and the village youth are away, working in Bangkok or other towns.
Mothers may be away working also or they may be out searching for food or working somewhere around the village. Most striking is that there are very few young people to be seen. Sometimes big trucks will go into villages and leave with over forty men and women on board, heading for the sugar plantations of the Central region. They will usually return just prior to Songkran or, at the latest, in May, when the rains arrive and the rice growing season begins anew.

Paradoxically, most villagers who work in urban centres or in other, wealthier regions still return to their own poor villages. This fact can only be understood against the cultural context of Isan: there are things more precious than wealth that these people value.

The necessity to go to work increases year by year, fueled by debt, the poor conditions of village life, and the depleted environment. Debt increases as villagers cannot repay, with some being caught in the vicious cycle, and others taking out new loans. These people now need money to buy food and those everyday

*A village woman working silk from silkworms*
items they once produced themselves; and they need to make greater investments in farming. For example, they are offered loans by the BAAC to purchase all kinds of agricultural machines, such as the "iron buffalo" or "walking tractor", and they only need to sign and they receive this tractor almost immediately. Or they may agree to a new loan in order to receive needed chemicals, fertilisers, and the like.

The direct sale of technology and goods has increased, and today these are offered right at the farmer's doorstep. They need only a small deposit (sometimes, not even this), while the monthly repayments will be collected from them at home. Goods offered by these travelling salespersons range from clothes, mosquito nets, and fishing nets to agricultural implements and electrical goods. They also include foodstuffs sold by marketing trucks which, almost every day, go into villages. The villagers may well find that these goods are more expensive than buying directly in town, but they are brought directly to them, credit is offered, and it saves a trip into town.
Villages are changing and today there is hardly a village in the Northeast that is not accessible. The picture presented above is of the generalised situation. We should note, however, that the general picture can mask some important aspects of village life. For example, it is true that in most villages the majority of people remain at home, and do not migrate to work elsewhere, even during the dry season; the Isan people love their village and will seldom leave unless it is necessary. While there may sometimes be travel for adventure, more often, it is now a necessity. However, most will return home to live and work. They dream of being released from debt and of being able to stay at home, working their land. In many villages there are those who remain at home because they have certain skills which enable them to earn some money. These villagers are skilled in handicrafts, growing mulberries and raising silkworms, and in weaving silk and cotton. Some villagers who have been away and gained skills and experience may return to their village and establish workshops. For example, in jewellery, small village workshops take pieces from Bangkok, work them, and send them back to the traders and dealers. This has also occurred with clothing, artificial flowers,
and a range of other products. But by far the most important factor encouraging villagers to return home, and keeping them in the villages, is basic agriculture, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

What can be said here is that villagers are seeking a solution to their problems which is not necessarily being promoted by the government or by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Rather, it is their everyday situation that is forcing them into a seemingly bleak future; they seem lost. Nobody can provide a simple solution for them; so they have to find their own path.

The past thirty years have seen great changes in the villages of Isan. They have not, however, uprooted the fundamental structures. Culturally, villages remain Isan and the mode of production has not been totally changed from its subsistence orientation. The villages retain their traditional structure, even if it is only a shadow of its former glory.

A villager vendor at morning market in a Northeastern town
(Photo by Plueng Pliansaisueb)
What is left after all these changes in the villages? Economic and social change are important but there is also the cultural aspect to be considered. In considering the impact of change culture is an essential element, for while economic and social factors have been directly affected by external factors, cultural values have not been manipulated and exploited to the same extent. Changes to crops and varieties of rice, in the sphere of exchange, and in village administration have all occurred with great rapidity, introduced and imposed by the dominant classes in the society. But cultural values and religious beliefs and practices have not yet been subjected to any systematic or radical change. It is true that the changes to the schooling system and the abolition of traditional learning of Tham and Thai Noi languages have interrupted the tradition and the transmission of popular wisdom through the traditional scriptures recorded in these two languages, but there has been no serious religious persecution. There have been efforts to get rid of occultism and spirit beliefs in form of magic, and to centralise control of the religious hierarchy, but, these have not amounted to concerted attacks on religious and cultural values. True, the Christian religion was brought to the Northeast, first to Ubol, in 1880 by French missionaries, gaining some converts, especially among the Kha, other minority groups, and Vietnamese migrants. However, the Christian community represented a very small part of the total population and had little impact on the Buddhist population.

Cultural change has, of course, been taking place, but often in very subtle ways, and relatively slowly: a process of change that is barely noticeable. Yet, there is evidence of change: rites, rituals, celebrations, ceremonies, and festivals are reduced in number and, in many cases, are simplified and modified. The number of young men entering the monkhood is reduced, and young people know little about local phaya, tamnan, and nithan. Elderly people are often ignored and their wisdom is neither transmitted nor appreciated.

While these changes are significant they have not altered the structure of the belief system, and traditional practices remain. Villagers still believe in making merit and bring food to the monks every day; they still join religious festivities, showing respect.
and faith; they still have their phi, cham, and nang tiam; they still respect the pu-ta and pay appropriate homage; they have maw tham and other kinds of maw who are still consulted in appropriate situations; traditional healing, especially where phi are concerned, still exists, and no psycho-therapeutic hospital can replace it. Villagers may take patients to hospitals, to modern medical doctors, and to mental hospitals, but they do not reject their traditional beliefs, and seem not to find any conflict or contradiction between their two modes of action. The coexistence of modern and traditional cultural elements in villages appears normal and "peaceful" to the people. In fact, they have lived with similar situations for generations: for example, what we call popular Buddhism is a mixture of spirit beliefs, Brahmanism, and Buddhism; why not, then, a fourth element, modern technology and science?

The role of traditional healers has been much reduced. There are many reasons for this. First, modern medicine for simple illnesses can now be acquired in almost all village shops, in towns, and at health care centres. Second, it is now easy to visit medical doctors in clinics or hospitals in nearby towns. Villagers generally believe that for common illnesses modern medical doctors are far better than traditional healers. However, villagers do not see any contradiction in consulting both traditional healers and medical doctors.

Traditional healers, especially those who use herbal medicines and oils, now find it increasingly difficult to get their ingredients. They now have less time to go to collect herbs from far away mountains or forests (which are themselves decreasing). Many have no time to continue this traditional service, only being "paid" a few baht, as prescribed by their khru. Some overcome this by not requiring a fee in excess of that prescribed, but a more substantial payment may be expected or requested later. In many cases, if the patient recovers, the healer may be well rewarded or compensated by patients and their relatives.

There are not, however, too many traditional healers who can still compete with medical doctors. Nevertheless, as the following example indicates, the traditional beliefs are difficult to displace.
One villager related that he came to Bangkok to see doctors in a well-known hospital after having spent time and money in vain in provincial and district hospitals. He said that he had also asked a maw tham to see what was wrong. The maw tham performed a ceremony in which he went to trance and identified the illness as the result of an offence against the phi na, but did not say what disease it was. Neither could the medical doctors he consulted. His last hope was to visit the famous hospital, even though he had to spend a lot of money. After some weeks of waiting and diagnosis, it was found that he had a type of typhoid, from which he recovered in a few days. However, prior to going to Bangkok he had already organised a ceremony asking for forgiveness from the phi na, offering boiled chicken, whiskey, and other food. He now believed that the phi na had been placated and he had received forgiveness.

The economic situation has also had an impact, and some villagers explain that they have to be satisfied with traditional village healers because they cannot afford to travel to town to consult medical doctors. Others explain that they send their children to be ordained as novices and monk because it is the only way their children can complete higher education with great expense. In fact, statistics show that most student monks from the two Buddhist universities in Bangkok disrobe soon after graduation, having reached their goal. Today, many families can no longer afford to have their sons ordained for the three months of Lent. Often, too, the sons themselves do not want to leave their work and income for three months. With debt at home, some find the yellow robe too "hot" and will find no real peace in the temple.

The heed sibsong are still celebrated today in many villages, but very often this is not for more than ten months. The sixth month is the most critical for farmers as by this time many have no more rice to eat, and it is also the beginning of the new rice growing season. Many must go away in search of work. Sometimes the bun Phra wase of the fifth month are postponed to be combined with the Visakha Puja of the sixth month, and the bun bant (paying homage to pu-ta) is sometimes postponed until the seventh month. Two or three rites are often combined to save
time and money.

Generally speaking, the belief in phiïi has not been reduced, even among the youth, but its forms are changing. In some villages, people begin to question phiïi, especially the pu-ta, asking whether it really cares for the villagers, and there are cases where villagers have replaced the pu-ta with the uppakut (a mythological figure related to Buddhism -- symbolising fertility). They have found that there are many problems in the village -- many years of drought, catastrophes and illnesses. The villagers say that they had paid homage to the pu-ta and done everything to please it, but feel it neglected its duties, and should therefore be replaced by another they can rely on, the uppakut.

In other cases, some villagers have scorned the pu-ta and lost respect for it, passing the shrine without the fear or respect they had in the past. This is a clear indication that change is taking place. Villagers say that phiïi are like human beings and, although they have power, there must be others with more power. These villagers believe that if they would like to have another, better, protector or patron, then they can eventually find one.

These events are important because the pu-ta is considered the central point of belief in phiïi, the reference for social order, and a refuge in times of troubles, and protection against all dangers. Villagers used to justify problems, troubles, shortages of rice, drought, and illnesses as punishment from the pu-ta for their misdeeds. But in some villages people could not understand why there were still problems even when everybody behaved themselves, and the pu-ta was then accused of being responsible for these troubles. This can be considered as a kind of revolt against the phiïi, and this the most respected one.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that villagers have released themselves from the influence of phiïi. It is not uncommon to see youths coming back from Bangkok, dressed in jeans and t-shirts, with sunglasses and other signs of being modern, joining ceremonies in front of the pu-ta's shrine, and other ceremonies for phiïi in the village, or even when they are in Bangkok. Villagers working in Bangkok (as well as other people
in the city), still believe in *phii*, especially the *chao thii*: shrines for *phii* and gods are to be seen everywhere. Young students pay respect to the shrine of a god or the *chao thii* at the front gate of their college or university and so do the young women before entering the massage parlour or bar where they work. No Thai would question a taxi driver who buys a garland of flowers and puts it on his rear-vision mirror, for everyone knows it is not for beauty, as he carefully places it, *wais* as a sign of respect, and runs his hands on his hair from front to back. This is a gesture of asking for blessing from the spirits, from the universal sacred powers that also exist in the taxi -- the vehicle that links the driver to the universe. When asked of whom they thought of while doing this the driver would usually answer his parents, relatives, ancestors, *khru*, and all universal sacred powers, and some might add: the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha. It should also be understood that these taxi drivers are often from villages in Isan. They are acquainted with the performance of the *sukwan* ceremony for their buffaloes and carts, so they do the same for their taxi. This *sukwan* ceremony for buffaloes and carts does not mean that these have spirits but, rather, they are related to the universal power and spirits. This is a relationship between all beings and things in the universe, and can be best understood if one thinks of artists who feel so united with their art that they feel themselves at one with their work, feeling "life" -- their life -- in a particular piece. It is also a question of intuition, a dimension modern people may lack, but which villagers still experience, being closer to the spirit of their tradition. While this may vary in degree, and may be different from that of their ancestors, it is still there.

Kinship has also been affected by change. Family members who were once gathered in one village or nearby villages are now dispersed over great distances: some family members have married and settled in other provinces or in other regions; migration of one or two members of a family to work temporarily in towns or in Bangkok creates problems and gaps between them, their family, and in the village community. These people come back with new values and new habits, some of which are easily accepted and integrated into community life. Others, however, are considered alien and shock many villagers. The migrants return
with a different language and a changed form of life and sometimes communication becomes difficult. Quarrels and divorces seem to occur, based on these strains.

Social life is also changing. Traditional cooperation, called long khaek (helping one another on special occasions), has disappeared in most villages. Villagers used to help one another during some stages of rice growing, especially in transplanting, harvesting and threshing. These days, however, most have to rely on their family members and hired labour. Exceptions can be found, especially in cases where the paddy field belongs to the temple and the abbot asks villagers to lend a hand. For the common good it seems that villagers are still willing to work together.

In some places, villagers exchange their labour instead of hiring. If one person has gone to work for two days in someone else's fields, then that person will "repay" with an equal period of work. The traditional long khaek was different, as it never had this strict measure or an expectation of being "repaid" for the labour contributed to someone else. It was taken for granted that for any important event or work in the community, villagers would be there to assist one another. In addition they knew that mutual assistance did not consist only of helping their neighbour on one or two particular occasions (for example, rice growing or building a house), but meant caring for one another on all possible occasions, during times of sickness, trouble, and in everyday life. It was a sharing of both happiness and suffering, but was more than just spiritual. For instance, if a large fish was caught, it would be shared with others. If one group discovered a place in the forest with plenty of vegetables or fruit, they did not collect it all, but would come back to the village and tell others about their find.

An elder in a village once asked a young man: "If you got a big fish, what would you do in order to have that one fish provide for the whole year?" The young man gave many answers such as making salted fish, drying it, or selling it to get money to buy food, and so on. The elder then gave his answer, "You should share it with your neighbours, so that when they have fish, they will share it with you." But this lesson is increasingly ignored.

Money has become an essential element of village life. With
monetarisation, the systems of trade, bargaining and profit benefit. Money has become a power, and has gradually replaced the traditional "power" which was based on virtue or moral integrity. Leadership is now increasingly in the hands of those who have money and wealth. Candidates for nomination as village and tambon leaders spend relatively large amounts of money for their campaigns, usually as an ostentatious party. It is well known that "to become a village head you have to spend 10,000 baht; head of a tambon requires 100,000; and to be a member of parliament, 1,000,000 baht." Sometimes the "good" person is cynically regarded as being "stupid", as that person does not take full "advantage" of others. However, there are still many who do not like to contradict the Buddhist teaching that says "to do a good deed, one will get good in return, but to commit a bad deed, one will get the bad." This is often stated in discouraging situations or to justify one's bad deeds. But villagers still believe in the law of Karma: good deeds or bad deeds may not produce a result today or tomorrow but at some time in the future or even in the next rebirth.

Villagers also retain some values and forget others. Traders and politicians know this only too well. For example, in the Northeast it is known that votes are gained by paying villagers, who are made to promise to vote for the one who gave them money. Many villagers are afraid that if they get money from someone and do not do as promised then they would be punished, not by that person, but by the universal sacred powers, according to the law of Karma.

Village heads usually represent a particular candidate in elections, even though it is illegal to do so, but the benefits are attractive both for the head personally, and for the community. Promises are made by the candidates to assist the community. In the recent past, most promises have concerned the building of or improving roads, water resources, and "information towers" (public address systems consisting of loud speakers, microphone and generator). It is said that villagers like this "village radio" (hor krachai khao) and listen to news, music, and some radio programmes. The phuyaiban also uses it to inform the villagers of orders, requests and news from the amphur office.
Hor krachai khao have also had a negative impact on village life. Meetings which used to be held in the evening at the phuyaiban's house or at the temple, become less frequent, as everybody can be told by using the microphone. Cooperation becomes less common. Some phuyaiban recognise the change and explain that they used to gather people together and discuss issues, ceremonies and the like, and then representatives of the meeting or village council members would go back and tell villagers. This was considered more efficient as it was person-to-person communication. If a villager says "Yes", then he or she will participate as agreed, but when a head tells everybody through the loud speakers the villagers do not have to give a personal response and therefore do not feel obligated to do as requested. The result is that many do not join or cooperate on many occasions.

Change has been rapid indeed, but it has not been all-embracing. In the next chapter we discuss how this situation of change but with cultural "preservation" is being used to build a different future.
THE EXISTING SITUATION

A general phenomenon in the rural areas of Thailand today is the debt problem. While there are no summary statistics for all villages it is estimated that there is not less than 100 billion baht owed in rural debt. The sources of this debt range from relatives, friends, and private creditors, to cooperatives, farmer’s groups, government and commercial banks, and private enterprises. Many farmers find it impossible to repay the debts they have accumulated as a result of high interest rates. Many do not even know exactly how much they owe and are advised by their creditors to pay only their interest, without knowing when the original loan will eventually be repaid.

As noted in previous chapters, many people move to towns to find jobs and earn some money to service their debts. Others sell their property to pay the debt, and then move to a new settlement, often on public reserved land in remote areas. In general, most find themselves at a dead end. They are no longer self-reliant as individuals, as families, or as communities, and a better future, without debt, is their dream. The underground lottery is seen as one way to satisfy this dream, and there is
probably no village that does not play this game, with everyone hoping to have a big win.

Desperate as the situation often is, not all villagers have surrendered. They have also reached a dead end but they do not wait for a way out. Instead, they turn to their old ways, and go back to their roots in search of a way out.

Inspiration for this has come from so-called exceptional cases of individuals who have never been caught up in the current of debt and other problems. They have been living a relatively simple life, self-reliant and without debt. They are not rich but are happy. Most are older people who have been maintaining a more traditional way, with adaptations, in agriculture. They grow various plants, fruit trees, vegetables, raise fish, chickens and other livestock, which together provide them with enough to live on and even, in some cases, to send their children on to higher education. They were laughed at by villagers who thought that they were crazy and did not know how to earn money like others, but today many of them have become resource persons. Their farming sites have become learning centres for people from nearby villages, provinces, and even from other regions.

This marks a turning point for farmers. Instead of only dreaming of becoming rich, as promised by the advertising of modern society, they begin to rethink their situation, which is increasingly unrealistic, and look back to their past and to what their ancestors have done and taught them in their search for a solution to their predicament. This process got started during the past decade, and has shown itself to be neither romantic nor unrealistic. It is not merely a process of going back to the past. Rather, it is a process of reproduction, a rethinking of the traditional value of self-reliance, and finding an appropriate way of changing the current situation: it is looking back in order to go forward.

The essence of this turning point for farmers consists of a critical attitude towards agro-industrial mono-cropping, which is market and export oriented and, at the same time, a turn towards more traditional methods of production. These farmers
first think of production for family consumption and then the sale of any surplus. This sale is, however, not the goal, as it is in the modern system. By growing a range of crops and raising animals, after a few years, farmers have enough food for consumption, and no longer need to buy their basic necessities at the market. They may also have a surplus which they may sell in order to get some money for the purchase of other necessary items for their families. However, they no longer depend on the market or on traders. If they cannot sell their produce at a satisfactory price, then they may wait, or in the case of fruit, vegetables and fish, they can process it in other ways.

These farmers learn again the processes of nature. There is more water as they have fish ponds in their fields and there are more trees as the incentive to remove them no longer exists. They cannot recreate the environment they have lost, but they can, to some extent, replace that which they have lost with a sounder environment. A wise man in Khon Kaen who has experienced this

*Integrated agriculture: a fish pond, vegetable gardening, trees, and animal rearing.*
(renewed) self-reliance stated: "If every household digs fish ponds and grows trees on their land, and we put in the fish ponds one after another, we will have a new small river. If we put all newly grown trees together, we may have a new forest." This is the kind of popular wisdom that has encouraged many villagers to follow in his footsteps.

Another old village leader in Buriram told visitors who went to learn of his village's "new experience" of the reasoning behind basic or integrated agriculture: 'I recalled the songs my mother sang when I was still small. She said, 'When I go to the farm I will bring you bird's eggs. When I go to the field I will bring you fish eggs'. I then thought that in the past nature must have been very rich and fertile. I asked myself, and the villagers, 'Why are we now so poor, why do we have so little to eat today, and why don't we help one another to recreate the richness of nature?' We started some years ago, and today have enough to eat, and enough to share with our visitors.'

Villagers who are aware of their potential and are conscious of this solution have been working mainly with their own labour. One farmer in Mahasarakham, who dug his fish ponds during the nights under moonlight, explained: "It is cooler in the night...I prefer to work at night and rest during the day. I can do it much better and it is faster."

When farmers start to dig fish ponds, traders, private creditors and bankers will often offer to bring in earthmovers to dig the ponds; all the farmers need to do is sign for new debt. Farmers who understand the new ways will refuse; they explain that: "Instead of hiring a tractor or somebody else to dig the pond, we do it ourselves with our family's labour. We know that by so doing we earn the money that we would otherwise have to pay if we hired a tractor." This is basic, popular wisdom at work.

The option of basic agriculture is not simple. It does not mean just digging a fish pond, growing vegetables, planting trees, or raising animals. It is, in fact, a new way of life, requiring fundamental decisions. Farmers have to decide to live a simple life, reducing their expenditure, for not buying already means an
earning. They buy only that which is absolutely necessary, and produce most of what they need. In addition, they need a firm religious background and moral integrity in order to resist the temptations of the modern world.

To live this new way of life means to live more closely with nature. Farmers observe how things in nature are mutually supportive, and beginning with the various plants in their gardens or fields, they start growing plants for various purposes: for example, fruit trees give shade, their roots can assist in increasing soil fertility, as their leaves fall and become a natural fertiliser. Small plants retain moisture and cover the ground. Further, if small birds and animals have food and shelter, they will stay near the fields, and eat insects and pests that harm the plants. Farmers also collect the dung of cattle and buffaloes for their field or to feed to fish. Above the fish ponds pigs are raised and their dung is also good for the fish. The pigs are fed with vegetables, while during the rice growing season, fish are also raised in the rice fields, where farmers dig long canals. When it rains heavily, the

*Traditional cattle raising, taking the cattle to public fields or forest areas in the morning, and returning home in the evening*
fields flood, and water overflows these canals, and the fish will move out into the fields proper, where they will feed on insects, while their waste also acts as a natural fertiliser for the rice. Farming and by extension, life, becomes a renewable cycle.

It is not a simple matter to return fertility to the soil after years of exploitation and the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. However, these farmers do their best, with some returning to traditional rice varieties, which are known to be more resistant to disease, although yields are less than for the modern varieties. A few may still have to use small amounts of chemicals. However, as they are no longer growing rice primarily for sale, but for consumption, so the overall use of paid labour and chemical fertilisers and insecticides is greatly reduced. Many farmers have seen that their yields may not be much different from before but, in fact, they earn more, as they invest less.

A lot of these farmers have now repaid their debts, and are continuing to expand production by digging more ponds, and growing more trees and vegetables. They can do this as they use their own labour and do not need any other investments. Often, if they cannot sell surplus produce, they will distribute it to their neighbours, or if they can afford it, they may even sell at a low price without the fear they once had of taking a loss, for they have taken everything from nature and worked with their own labour.

In some villages new cooperatives are being formed. In contrast to state-established cooperatives, these are genuine cooperatives as they are founded by villagers, based on their situation and needs. These cooperatives become a simple forum where farmers put their produce together for common management, to increase their bargaining power. Thus they no longer depend on the market, as they did previously. No longer are they forced, by their debt situation, to sell their rice even when it is still in the field, prior to harvesting. While these cooperatives are still few in number, they are expanding.

The strength of this turning point does not come from individual initiatives but from groups of villagers supported by
strong and wise leaders. They do not think only of producing food but also of other aspects of life for family and community, organising various village activities to provide mutual assistance and welfare. The village fund is one example of this.

Since the early eighties various ministries have promoted village development funds. These usually take the form of savings groups, cooperative stores, drug banks and funds, and many others, according to the nature of the village sub-groups organised. More recently the government has ordered that these small funds be combined into one big village development fund. Whatever form they take, however, each is basically the same, throughout the country. The results in the Northeast have been least encouraging. Officials explain that these villagers are often too poor to have any savings and therefore the funds are too small and the projects fail. However, the real reason for these failures is not poverty, because many villages do have money available. Rather, the failure is due to the fact that these funds are outside initiatives which do not take local culture and the villager's lifestyle into account. Those set up by the villagers themselves are more sustainable because they are more appropriate to their situation, and many villages have successfully adapted the government's model to be their own.

Village funds based on the villager's own models are an example of how people can manage their resources, in spite of poverty and other limitations. They have adapted traditional festivities so as to collect funds for the welfare and development of their villages. Rice rituals are one example. After the harvest, villagers contribute part of their yield to the temple, and agree with the abbot that the rice collected will be used partly for the temple and partly for a rice bank. This is one way of solving the problem of rice shortages, for people who are short of rice can borrow from this "bank" and return it with a small "interest" payment when they next harvest. Usually a villager will return eleven or twelve buckets of rice for each ten buckets borrowed, compared to fifteen or twenty buckets when they borrow from private creditors. In other cases this rice might be sold to raise money for a village development project. For example, in 1969, a village in Buriram built their own school with money earned from
selling rice collected during the previous five years. They have maintained the tradition of collecting rice for community development and have also repaired the village temple and built a child care centre, as well as giving loans to villagers for them to begin integrated agriculture, and for other initiatives and urgent needs.

While the government has been promoting medicine banks, some villagers in parts of the Northeast, notably Kalasin, Mahasarakham, Khon Kaen, Surin, Buriram, and Yasothon, have been promoting traditional healers. These healers are well recognised in their villages, and as they regain respect, their expertise and sacrifice for the common good is appreciated. They distinguish themselves from those who practice in a manner similar to modern medical doctors by not requesting large amounts of money for their medicine and skills. As noted previously, a real traditional doctor does not request compensation, even though they are almost always "paid" in some way, especially in cases of recovery. When the patient is poor and cannot pay for treatment, the healers will still treat them, as prescribed by their khru. These are the kind of healers who are now coming together, to exchange their experience, learn from one another, and to try to transmit their knowledge to the younger generation.

NGOs are playing an important role in assisting the initial organisation of these groups, taking a catalytic role. Some modern medical doctors who have a sympathetic and supportive attitude, and can accept the role of these healers, are also brought to meet with them. They exchange their respective experiences and search for complementarities in their work. Traditional healers learn of new scientific knowledge from these doctors and are trained about hygiene, recording, monitoring, and modern medical systems, while the medical doctors learn more about traditional ways of thinking about illnesses, disease, medicine and treatment.

These meetings are assisted by NGO workers and other sympathisers who act as intermediaries or facilitators in particular situations. Equal membership for traditional healers as well as medical doctors, NGO workers, and other professionals is now
reasonably common in herbal medicine groups. The Yasothon herbal medicine forum is a model, being one of the first set up by medical doctors, health care workers, and NGOs, together with traditional healers from villages and towns in the province. The aim of this forum is the promotion of self-help health care through the use of herbal medicines. The Kudchum District Hospital has been the catalyst, with its doctors, together with NGOs, promoting basic health care with the active participation of village leaders, traditional healers, and other resource persons. In addition, traditional diagnosis, health care and healing have also been introduced at the district hospital, with some patients being treated by traditional methods administered by trained nurses and doctors. Herbal and modern medicines are both given to patients. This has been going on since the early 1980s.

Today, it is no longer uncommon to see village gardens covered by plants used for herbal medicine. These are not only good for human use, but also for animals. For example, it was discovered, in Khon Kaen, that a herbal medicine could prevent disease in chickens, and this treatment has spread throughout the region. These herbs can be grown everywhere, but are apparently more effective than modern vaccines.
Traditions are being revived and traditional skills are clearly important, but behind it all is a traditional wisdom which is regaining a place after being almost totally submerged by modernisation. This wisdom, expressed in the old rites, rituals, festivals, ceremonies, celebrations, and the ways of everyday life, is not, however, being kept as a static heritage. Rather, it is being lived with new meaning, in a changing society, and being adapted and changed. The villagers are selective and, as a result, not all of the traditional aspects are practiced these days. Let us look at some.
Pha-pa is one of the most important ceremonies expressing solidarity in community welfare and development. Pha-pa is a religious ceremony consisting of offerings prepared by villagers for monks and the temple. These offerings include robes and other daily necessities, as well as money for the construction, renovation or repair of the temple. Today, villagers who work in towns, and especially in Bangkok, will organise a pha-pa at least once a year to their home village, collecting money from colleagues, employers and friends. They will travel in buses to the village, together with some of the contributors, to make the offering and, at the same time, to show these to their village. Villagers going to work in Bangkok will feel guilty if, once they are in Bangkok, they do not organise a pha-pa. It has become a matter of prestige for the initiators of, and participants in, this ceremony.

However, the pha-pa has assumed at least one new form since 1980, when some NGOs organised them, not only with the usual offerings, but with rice, with the idea of setting up a rice bank in a village in Chaiyaphum province. This was at the request of the abbot, who wanted external assistance in order to lessen
the problem of rice shortages in his mountainous area. He agreed that a rice *pha-pa* could serve the purpose, as it was not simply an act of someone or an organisation sending a cheque to the abbot, but a religious ceremony, showing solidarity between outsiders and villagers. The rice *pha-pa* has now become popular and ranks as a "new tradition", representing the beginning of an adaptation of religious ceremonies for community development purposes. From this has now emerged medicine, buffalo, book, plant and other *pha-pa*, all of which are for community development and demonstrate support from outsiders. Villagers themselves are now organising these *pha-pa* for other villages.

The cases mentioned above represent but a small part of the changes taking place in many villages today and may even be a minority, but anything that may give hope, while being realistic, will not be restricted to one place. In fact these practices are spreading throughout the region, due mostly to the work of traditional leaders who are, in some places, regaining their role.
DAY OF GRATITUDE

As we have noted the Thai New Year is now officially set as 13 April and is usually celebrated between the 12th and 15th of the month. Villagers consider this the most important event of the year and most migrants will return home for it. It is a time of celebration, and yet the meaning is far deeper, and more than just entertainment -- indeed, those who return to the village could easily have a better time in Bangkok or other towns. They return because this is an occasion of social and cultural reunification. They meet with their family, their friends and relatives within the village community. Together they celebrate the "birthday" of their community; the "eternal return", when the yearly cycle starts again; a new year and a new life that all want to begin together.

For several decades now some of the practices of this occasion have been lost, or practiced without much meaning, but these are now being renewed in some villages. An example is the paying of respect to village elders. In some villages, on the morning of 13 April, the elders will gather at the temple hall. All villagers, but especially the young, will come with offerings for the temple and gifts for the elders. They will pay their respects, asking for
forgiveness for any misdeeds or disrespect towards the elders during the past year and then ask for their blessing. They will then offer their gifts to the elders and pour water on their hands. It is not uncommon to see tears from the old people, who are moved by this display from their children and grandchildren. They feel that they are not alone and forgotten, but cared for and respected, and they feel that they still have a role and position in the community.

Here is one of the most important moments in community life in today's rapidly changing situation, as the elders provide words of wisdom to their children and the community. This is the most precious thing they have. Some say it in verse, speaking of the virtues of solidarity, unity, kindness, sharing, truthfulness, sincerity, and other such virtues. In some cases, a baisri sukwan ceremony is also performed. This is another moving moment for the whole community, with the binding of the wrists of the elders, and then of each other, with cotton, wishing each other a happy new year. These ceremonies link the present to the past and the new generation with the old. Tradition comes alive and the spirit of the ancestors is transmitted to their children in this special way.

This new year ceremony has also been promoted by the government and media in recent years and is called wan katan-yu or the "Day of Gratitude". It is this notion of gratitude which is the most important value of the villagers. It has often been neglected, in some cases almost forgotten and, indeed, does not fit well with modern society, where children often do not have time for aged parents and grandparents. More and more homes for the aged are springing up in towns, a sign of changing times, where the value of the aged is changing. Aged people often feel isolated and are left to themselves. They may even feel that they disturb their children and their family life and are a burden to them. These feelings are, in many cases, justified as their children have little tolerance for their aged parents.

The value of gratitude seems too old-fashioned for a modern society which emphasises rights more than duties. Gratitude emphasises the duty of children towards their parents, their khru, and others to whom they owe their life, skills and their existence.
Modern society stresses one's rights -- the right of being raised, having a good family, having a good education, a good job and wage, welfare and social security. While duties are also noted, this often translates as paying tax and maintaining law and order. Gratitude towards teachers is no longer the same as it was in the past. Previously teachers gave not only knowledge but the spirit, values and life, to their disciples. The teachers of today are paid for their teaching duties during working hours and extra hours of tutorship. There is no room for the gratitude of bygone days, as the teacher is already paid. Money values determine exchange and human values that traditionally have not been measured as material things, but by a spirit of gratitude, are now given an exchange value.

The day of gratitude brings villagers back to their roots, to the spirit of their tradition, to the source of values of the life of their ancestors. Those who work in towns know that once they go back to work they will be in quite a different situation. While it is true that many employers realise the value of gratitude, and use it in various ways to structure relationships with employees, these are different from those with the elders of one's own village.

For those who remain in the village, it is the day that they regain a life force that will drive them for the whole year. Their gratitude is not only for parents, elders, monks, and persons who have done good deeds for them, but also towards phii, ancestors, the spirits of nature, pu-ta, and mae phosop. This also explains thanksgiving rites like sukwan for buffaloes, carts, and other things related to a villager's everyday life. Thanks is not a word, it is the life of the people. It begins on new year's day, with thanks for the life that has been given. Some parents even teach their children to celebrate birthdays by paying respect to their parents, thanking them for birth, and bringing flowers, candles, and presents for their parents. Flowers, joss sticks, and candles are symbols of gratitude, used in all rites and rituals.

Gratitude may also be seen as a kind of submission, as an expression that one is but a tiny part of nature, a limited being who cannot live alone, who needs others, and who does not pretend to be more than what one is. People know that their
being is not to be found in self, but in relationships with others and to nature, without which they would be nothing. Gratitude is, in fact, lived by villagers in everyday life, in all ceremonies, and it is taught by monks, elders, and parents. It is represented in folk tales, stories, mythologies, proverbs, phaya and words of wisdom. Just as it is praised, so a lack of gratitude is condemned. Local stories tell the punishments awaiting an ungrateful person. The heroes of stories are grateful persons, while the bad ones are the ungrateful. A grateful person is always recompensed by gods, by masters, by lords, by parents and respectful persons in all of these stories. The message is clear.
Gratitude is also a part of family relationships. A village community may be seen as a large family, made up of many families. Most Isan villages had only a few family names, and while not everyone was related, they counted themselves relatives by the fact that they formed the same community. The Isan family is based on kinship, "natural" and "cultural". Respect is given to the same persons, called chao-kote, who are the elders of the families in the village. These are not only the oldest people, but also the most respected. While they may appear to be ordinary people, without any important role in everyday life, it is their intervention which is requested in all village ceremonies, rites and rituals, important events and, especially, in conflicts. They are considered the persons who represent the past, its traditions, and the important social and cultural precepts and rules.

"Father" and "mother" may also be considered as institutions. They are to be respected, honoured, and supported, and most young people who go away to work in Bangkok, the Middle East, or elsewhere, will send money home for their parents. They will continue to do this until at least the time they are married. Some
who become rich and famous, such as boxers (Isan boxers are renowned as the best in the country), send what they earn to their parents, buying more land, cattle and buffaloes, and building new houses. Even those in less respectable positions, such as prostitutes, will usually make substantial financial contributions to their family.

The young who send money to their parents are praised by the community as "the grateful ones". Gratitude is the first qualification of a "good person" in the village. The contrary is true for "bad ones". So even if one is doing something which is not considered respectable, one can still earn some respect by demonstrating gratitude. This perspective is reflected in a well-known story of the Northeast, Klong Khao Noi Kha Mae (Klong Khao Noi Kills His Mother). This is the story of a young man in Yasothon province who was working in his paddy field. It was already the late morning, and he was very hungry after hours of work. When his mother came with rice and food, he abused her for coming so late. And, when he saw that she had brought only a little food, he was so irritated that he hit his mother, and she was killed. A monument was raised in the province in memory of that event, to remind everybody of evil deeds, and to warn against ingratitude.

In the modern world, greater pressures are being brought to bear on the familial institution in the Northeast, especially as young people go away to work and study. A common story is repeated a thousand times over: a young man was educated abroad, returns home and chooses his own profession and wife. His parents had expected him to seek their advice, and, to take another career and they had a girl in mind as his future wife. He did not follow their advice, and his parents were very upset, and though his brothers, sisters and relatives tried to persuade him to show more gratitude towards his parents, he refused, and would not compromise either his career or the wife he had chosen. His parents and relatives, while not cutting him off completely, said, "Let's see how he can manage without parents and relatives". The young man, hearing this, reacted by saying, "I can rely on myself". For several years he did not have much contact with his parents or relatives, and lived in Bangkok with
his wife, unable to understand the thinking of his parents and relatives, especially as he knew modern ways. Things changed, however, when he and his wife had a child, and together with his wife and child, he went back to his parents with joss sticks, candles, and flowers to ask their forgiveness. He and his parents were reconciled and all were happy again and he did not have to change either his career or wife.

This basic relationship does not seem to change, and in times of trouble and illness, parents and relatives are there to assist. Many parents go to Bangkok to search for their children from whom they have had no news for a long time, concerned that they may have fallen prey to "closed factories", which are sweatshops, viciously exploiting cheap labour, especially children, or that they may have been forced into prostitution.

The young migrants have to go home during Thai New Year, and the young men have to be ordained for a period of Buddhist Lent, for at least a week or so. These are the expected expressions of their gratitude towards their parents.
CHAPTER 7

THE DYNAMICS OF POPULAR WISDOM
Popular wisdom is a set of values that has been the fundamental basis of people's lives through the generations. It consists of knowledge about life, its origin, meaning, and goals. It also consists of "know-how": ways and means that are based on, related to, and are expressions of, the knowledge of life. This indicates a complex web of knowledge, beliefs, and practices. It is complicated so let us attempt to simplify it somewhat.

The first characteristic of this set of traditional values is the "balanced unity" between beliefs (relationship of humans to the supernatural), social settings (relationship of humans to their society), and the mode of production (relationship of humans to nature).
The "balanced unity" here means a mutual reference and correspondence between these three aspects of life. It may be compared to a healthy body and mind, where thinking and actions correspond accordingly. "Space" and "time" relate humans to their "universe" and to their "eternity", meaning that humans are a part of the existing whole.

Traditionally, the people of Isan believe that the supreme spirit, the creator, is called Then. This god has its place in heaven and is referred to only in particular circumstances (such as fertility rites). This god is responsible for the rain that should come in time for rice cultivation, and may be called, in times of illness, in the sukwan ceremony, just as any other spirit might be. However, Then has increasingly become a merely mythological figure for the majority of people, gradually giving ground to the Hindu-derived gods of Brahma, Indra, and Thevada, the guardians. The result is that today's generation is less acquainted with Then than its predecessors.

Today Then is seen as merely one of the phi fa, which includes all spirits in heaven -- syncretically both those that belong to traditional spirit beliefs, and the newer ones drawn from Hindu tradition. These are the phiī that have mythological origins and are close to the other category of phiī with "natural" origins, being those phiī in nature, the forests, the water, the mountains and so on.

Another category of phiī is the spirits of the dead. These are the founders of towns, villages, and other communities, the heroes, important persons honoured while still living, ancestors, family members and relatives. These phiī still have an important place in the village, and are a constant part of cultural life. Family members make merit for them and they are believed to take care of their families in everyday life.

The belief in spirits is, simultaneously, a belief in the values associated with these spirits: virtues, good and bad, and merit-making. This is also the point where Buddhism is integrated into popular beliefs. On the one hand, the Buddha and the Arahat (the saints) are included in the category of spirits, while on the
other, they have the supreme place, with the Buddha at the highest point. This belief is expressed in the mythologies, stories and tales, with the most significant Isan folk stories assuming the character of "Buddhist mythology". Folk stories are integrated into the Chadok which relate to the former lives of the Buddha. Local heroes, as related in folk tales, are believed to be the Buddha in one of his former lives. The narrative form that relates these stories to the Chadok can be easily seen. They often begin with the events of the Buddha's life and times, followed with questions by one of his disciples, and with the Buddha then relating the a story.

Buddhism has been made the sacred origin of tradition, values, and "history", as Buddhist values are integrated within traditional values. This can be seen in most ceremonies and celebrations, including healing and cases of troubles, where the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are present in prayers as "omen" or in sacred formula or spells.

Beliefs in the supernatural, the unseen, and the spiritual side have been the basis of life in villages. They are expressed in acts of worship, rites and rituals, ceremonies and celebrations, and in everyday life. The distinguishing characteristic of this belief, its essence, is the social dimension. These beliefs are not individualised, as a belief in spirits means a relationship, with them, with the unseen, and with others. In effect, the essence of humans is not seen as being one's self, but of being in a relationship to others. The concept of humans is not, therefore, a philosophical explanation of the "beingness" of humans in themselves, but their relationships with others. In fact, all rites and rituals which express these beliefs are performed in the community, and form the basis of the social setting of the community, and the relationship of one village to others in the society -- the next village and the more remote ones.

People in the traditional village are linked by the supernatural, with the elders being the representatives of traditional values, with monks ranking as most important, the khru next, and then parents. These groups not only transmit their traditional wisdom through their words, but through the practices of everyday life, as well as
in the important events of community life.

Social relationships consist of living together as a community, with mutual respect, assistance, cooperation, sharing, and solidarity in everyday life, which itself consists of work, activities, entertainment, ceremonies and celebrations. The conceptual frame of space and time is reflected in all these events. Humans are intrinsically social beings, and their mode of production is to be seen in this light.

Traditionally, people first produce for their own consumption within the family, but they virtually never work alone or in isolation. They start working at the "right" time, completing the fertility rights on the appropriate day, and in relation to the appropriate spirits -- the phiit of heaven, pu-ta, ta-haek, mae phosop, and in the right place for beginning work. The villagers would share their labour, their seeds, and their instruments of labour. And, they would share their produce in times of shortage or need.

While production was for family consumption, villagers never thought of producing only for their own family. Their production was also seen to be for merit-making, and this represented quite a large part of the yield: food for the monks, for example, can be an everyday ritual for some, four times on holy days. They also made provision for the rites and rituals, and religious ceremonies and celebrations. This is a sharing of produce with the "unseen", as well as with neighbours, and is a part of life; their essence lies in their relationship to the supernatural and to others in their society. Villagers had also to provide a surplus in case of shortages in coming years, and some might also have considered a surplus for sale, in order to earn some money to pay tax, and to buy necessary things for themselves, for others, and for merit-making.

The subsistence economy corresponded to a set of values with respect to the belief in the supernatural and relationships with others in society. There was no need for competition in production. There was no need to fear the market and its prices, as villagers were not traders and their produce was not primarily
for the market.

The subsistence economy also corresponded to self-sufficiency and self-reliance of traditional men and women. Villagers could have produced more, but they did not; they could have cut more trees or collected more produce from forest for sale, but they did not. They considered "sufficiency" in terms of a virtue, and practiced it in their daily lives. Traditional values told them when, how, where, why, and how much they could cut from the forest or collect from nature without excess exploitation.

Another characteristic of this set of traditional values is the unity between words and actions, theory and practice, and thinking and acting. The integrity of life was expressed in the elders, who were honoured as representatives of traditions, fundamental knowledge, and values for individual and community life. The khru, who represented particular knowledge and skills, were also crucial, as their knowledge is also related to actual life, being practical, and not isolated from reality. The wisdom of these respected groups is not detached from everyday practice; it is lived, with the various rites and rituals relating people to the supernatural, to others, and to nature. At the same time, people are related to their roots, to their past and to their origins. Their wisdom has meaning because it is lived and believed, and is not only due to them being agreed and rationalised. The logic of the wisdom does not lie in reason alone but in their meaning, which requires not only reason, but the wholeness of people being at one with the words. They are, therefore, sacred, to be followed, and to be practiced. Phii are believed true and real not because phii can be explained, with argument or experimentation using scientific methods, but because phii have real meaning in each villager's everyday life.

Words of wisdom originate or relate to mythologies which have a sacred origin. They tell of the origins of humans, of events, and of the phenomena of life. They give meaning to life, giving it the right time and right place, relating it to the universe and eternity. In the various village rituals, mythologies are not only retold, they "actualise", repeating what once happened in primordial times. Mae phosop is there during the time of harvest, returning every
year to the rice field, the rice barns, and the present day of villager's life.

When the elders speak their words of wisdom, they recall not only the words, but the spirit of the whole tradition. When khru teach their knowledge and skills to their disciples, they transmit what they have received from former khru and a whole tradition. The words of the khru are sacred, and must be lived, not just recited. Any objects given by the khru are to be kept and treated with respect, and the disciples receive the spirit from their khru, and must live and practice it.

Wisdom as knowledge is not necessarily how we conceive and understand it today. We may understand it in the sense of the Socratic term: virtue is knowledge and knowledge is virtue. This provides an insight into the wholeness of life, the integration of the seen and unseen, the body and mind, the natural and supernatural, the past and present, that which is concrete and that which is abstract, the parts and the whole, origins and goals, the beginning and the end, and, in essence, the meaning of life. One

A village wise man, who is also a maw tham and cham
thing is always understood in relation to the whole, having its meaning in the context of the whole. This is the traditional meaning of know-how. It is not a technical knowledge that is separated from the "knowledge". Know-how and skill are arts which is rooted in tradition and the whole cultural context. To heal somebody is not just a matter of skill and know-how that is accidentally acquired. The healer learned the art from a master and then has an obligation to assist others in times of illness. Healing was thus an art which had to serve others and was not for one's own benefit. It required a long period of study with a khru, learning all of the rituals we discussed above. The tradition was learnt.

Specific skills and knowledge such as healing, singing, and performing ceremonies were arts that were not isolated: they were a part of community life, and were related to the whole world-view, and the relationship of people to the universe. Such knowledge and know-how are to preserve, readjust, or repair the balance of the human relationship to the whole, by reconciliation with the order of the universe or to prevent imbalances that might occur.

The ideal person, the most respected person, in the traditional community was therefore one of virtue, with moral integrity, and one who was a model and example to all. This person was, by consensus, considered the leader of the community. It was expected that those who had been ordained as monks and who thus had learned more than the ordinary villager, should be virtuous persons; they were also men. In Isan, those who had spent years in the temple and then disrobed, are called thid, which comes from banthit, meaning the "person who knows". Persons who have knowledge are expected to be "morally superior." This corresponds to Buddhist belief, which emphasises the practice of Dhamma, as opposed to learning without practice. Buddhism is an experience of life, with the Buddha being the one who knows.

The virtues that define popular wisdom and wise people are really common to most cultures: truthfulness, kindness, tolerance, patience, diligence, "sufficiency" (as against greed), and a
commitment to and willingness to make sacrifices for the welfare of the community. Wise people are not expected to have specific skills, but if they do, they gain even more respect from villagers.

Yet another characteristic of this set of values qualifying popular wisdom is the paradox of simplicity and complexity. Village life appears to have been simple, with few formal rules, and it seems that everything was taken for granted. Yet a closer examination would show that there were guidelines, directions, rules and disciplines existing for all aspects of life. These various rules were represented by the elders, and were reinforced in all aspects of everyday life.

The village community may have appeared as a "loosely structured society" but, in reality, it was not. From birth to death members of the community was subject to rules determining the direction, the ways, the means, and the approaches to daily life. There was no birth without rituals and ceremonies; no child rearing was done just as a mother or father wanted; no house was built in just any place, at any time, or in any manner. Rather, the phi represented social rules, and any abuse of these rules was considered an abuse of the phi, and any reconciliation had to be made with them.

The power of popular wisdom lies in the sacredness of its expressions. These are in various forms: sacred formula, prayers, stories, sayings, teachings, and social rules. Words alone cannot convey the whole meaning of this sacredness. It is the spirit that is felt, lived, and believed; it is this spirit that simplifies community life, and the spirit requires no formality, official status, or explicit expressions.

The spirit of tradition is not static, being a dynamic force behind all that is on-going and changing in village life. Conflicts happen when the forms of village life no longer correspond to the spirit. Today, the mode of production and social structure have experienced rapid change, but the set of values that has been fundamental to village life have tended to remain largely unchanged. Popular wisdom thus loses its dynamism and appears to have little power in the encounter with the new values
of modern society. The elders, more so than the younger generation, feel somehow lost, with their traditional role being usurped in the new social system, with traditional wisdom being replaced by modern knowledge obtained in schools. This is a crisis of identity and a crisis of transition. The spirit is still there, though, underlying cultural expressions, whereas the traditional social and economic aspects of life have been almost completely uprooted, and assumed new forms. Market-oriented production and the centralised state administration have gradually overtaken the traditional in villages.
The pace of modernisation has indeed been rapid, especially in the economic and social spheres. While cultural values have also changed, the rhythm of change has been much slower. Cultural forms retain their meaning for the older generation, but not so much for the younger ones. The traditional balanced unity of values is no longer of the same scale as before and villagers realise this. However, a new set of values has not yet fully replaced the traditional set, but many have been discipated. Old people, left alone in villages during the dry season, long for a lost simplicity, the autonomy, and self-reliance of the old world. They now have debt and many find themselves at a dead-end and feeling utterly powerless. They are manipulated by external forces and feel themselves at the mercy of government officials, traders and other outsiders who have "invaded" their village.

For many, the past, for all of its faults and hardships, has become a paradise lost. This situation is described over and over again by village leaders and elders during meetings which aim at an analysis of their village's actual situation. These analyses have raised the awareness of many and have been a positive experience,
not mere intellectual exercises, for in gaining an understanding of their actual situation, insights are sometimes gained towards a solution to their problems. They realise that they have not yet completely lost the power which is embedded in their culture.

Experiences have been shared among village leaders. These are both official leaders, appointed by local authorities, and the natural leaders, the wise people, and even the young ones respected by villagers. Many of them have begun new experiences in production, having returned to what is today called integrated agriculture, but was practiced in the past as ordinary, everyday agriculture. It means to grow not only rice, but vegetables and fruit, and to raise fish, chickens, ducks, and other animals. Women grow mulberry trees, raise silkworms, and weave or sell silk. This may appear to be too simplistic an approach to solve the big problems facing many people, but the basic concept is not to just grow many things at once, but to effect a partial return to a subsistence economy, laying down the fundamentals for life, before thinking about producing for sale.

To adopt this way of life requires change not only in the mode of production, but a fundamental decision to choose a new, simpler life. This means rejecting the search for material wealth and concentrating on meeting basic needs. It also means distinguishing between needs and wants and resisting the temptation of modern consumerist life and its offerings. Expenses must be reduced and people must produce as many of their basic needs as possible. They have to seek to be self-reliant in at least in three areas: housing, food, and medicine.

It is a crucial turning point in their life when people realise that this is the only way for them to survive and to live with dignity. Those who have already adopted this new way soon see that it is feasible, and one path to a happy life. They also see that it is still possible to be "free" and not dependent on the market, on traders, or on any current economic vagaries. They do not necessarily need chemical fertilisers or insecticides for their rice fields, vegetables and other crops, and nor do they need credit from private money lenders or banks.

This approach is not an exception; today, everywhere in Isan,
one can find villagers who have begun this new way of life. Those who started some years ago now have plenty of food, fish, vegetables, fruit, and other basic provisions, and many have liberated themselves from debt. Others are just beginning to move in this direction.

The villagers who take this approach cannot be considered romantic or unrealistic. Some academics have claimed that the approach is theoretically unsound and smacks of romanticism. However, it must be admitted that these villagers are not engaged in an academic debate, but have found a solution for the problems of their own lives, and it is a solution rooted in their traditions. Like their ancestors before them, they see the value of self-reliance and are again putting it into practice. But they also face a new reality. Nature has been exploited; there is very little forest left; streams and water resources have dried up or have little or no water during the dry season, or are polluted by the over-use of fertilisers and pesticides in cash-cropping; the soil has also lost its natural richness due to the use of these chemicals and over-cropping; and salinisation of the soil and water has reached tragic levels. Their situation is far more difficult than that of their ancestors, but it is not impossible.

Those villagers who have moved to self-reliance saw that no-one could solve their problems for them. Big government projects, many foreign-funded, and with many skilled staff and large budgets, have not achieved much for the average farmer. In contrast, those who have tried to regain their self-reliance now have enough food for their families, for their neighbours, and for making merit. They have learned from the experience of other villagers who began before them, and apply this knowledge in traditional ways, appropriate to their location and situation, remembering what their parents and grandparents did in the past. They have also learnt of these techniques through visit programmes organised and facilitated by NGO workers and village leaders, learning not only by listening to what others say, but by seeing and feeling what others have done. This means far more to them than lectures from government officials, and it is this direct experience that has encouraged them to embark on this new path. Some return to their homes and begin
immediately.

Very often these new beginnings have also involved a renewed interest in herbal medicine, traditional healing, and the role of traditional healers. Not every village has a traditional medical practitioner and villagers still have to visit hospitals in some cases, but what they do is renew the once traditional self-help health care system. Many start to learn about herbal medicines and even grow herbs in their own gardens. Through a network of forum, established and promoted by NGOs and some provincial and district medical doctors, there is now an exchange of experience and knowledge between traditional healers.

Shelter, food and medicine are being catered for or supplemented, but this renewal also involves village organisation and leadership.
LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATION

Social organisation in the village of today is a complex of groups and sub-groups proposed and imposed by government officers. It begins with the village head who is "voted" for and "elected" by the villagers and "appointed" by local authorities. In practice, however, the heads are those who are backed by local authorities, since they are supposed to represent the state in villages, transmitting and implementing state policy in their villages. These orders are from the Ministries of Interior, Education, Agriculture and Cooperatives, Industry and Public Health. The village head also has assistants, with various positions and roles in village administration. These people, together with others, make up the Village Committee (kammakan mooban), representing the various neighborhoods or khum in the village.

Other government-sponsored social sets include groups for housewives, youths, savings, various handicrafts, farmers, village defence, and so on. Members of one group are usually in other groups or sub-groups. The state is effectively bureaucratising villages, reinforced by the titles given to particular villages, as recognition of their support, or as models of particular state
projects. Today, villages may be, for example, "Dhamma Land, Golden Land" (phaendin tham phendin thong) villages, self-defence villages, model villages, progressive villages and so on.

In addition, many villages have a school, with its teachers representing the modern system of education, and a health care centre with officers to take care of local health needs, and some villagers are appointed to represent the various departments and ministries. The village becomes a "state" in miniature and villagers, with varying degrees of willingness, will implement the orders of government officers.

A more recent force affecting village social organisation is business influence. As commercialisation has expanded, so has the influence of business people, as they try to organise village production and life to suit their interests. In many cases, those who are made village heads and especially kamnan, are supported by influential local business people with good political connections. These people may also be the so-called "dark influences" or "godfathers" of their areas. Less sinister, however, are those who merely attempt to create village structures to facilitate their trade. Nevertheless, all work to weaken traditional structures or, in some cases, subvert them. For example, business people know that the temple is a powerful influence, and by making donations and currying favour with the abbot, they may manipulate this influence.

One may well ask whether there is still room for initiatives by villagers. The answer is an emphatic "Yes". Indeed, many villagers are taking the initiative, and making an effort to liberate themselves from the structures imposed by the state and outsiders. Of course, they have to say "Yes" to government officers, but often they do not necessarily follow or do what they are told. In some cases, villagers may even reject government policy, in their own way. Some, for instance, have refused to plant eucalyptus trees as proposed or ordered by local authorities believing, from experience, that eucalyptus are not good for other plants in the vicinity. In other cases, villagers have refused to prepare their village for model village competitions. They have learned that the work required to prepare themselves and the village for such competitions is time-consuming, expensive and tedious. In any
case, following these competitions, things return to normal and nothing changes much, for the competitions are artificial, and have little to do with the daily problems or life of the villagers.

It is not the way of Isan people to openly oppose or to be violent, and they tend to refuse orders passively, by not cooperating. This is the "passive resistance" of their ancestors. They turn to the elders and ask for their advice. If there are problems or conflicts in the village, they will not normally go to the police or the court in the first instance. They say that nobody profits from going to officials. Both sides in a dispute will lose, so the best way is to keep the problem in the village and solve it themselves, going to see the elders and asking for a solution or a reconciliation.

The role of village elders is being revived in the process of renewal, and they are happy to be regaining the respect of villagers. They are pleased to see villagers paying them respect in sukwan and water pouring ceremonies on Songkran; they are happy to recall past experiences, the way of life in the past and the way people used to solve their problems; and they are happy to teach the children and young ones what they know, by telling them stories, tales and folk wisdom.

Fortunate indeed are those villages where the phuyaiban is also a natural leader, for these people guide their community in the new direction. These leaders are not rebels, but they are often more autonomous in their decision-making, and have the ability to make compromises when dealing with local authorities and officials. They know how to remain true to themselves and their community while, at the same time, following the imposed rules. They can also make use of the various mechanisms and organisations introduced by the state, strengthening the groups, sub-groups, schools and health centres, and turning them into new forces for the new direction. In many cases the village leader succeeds in convincing some teachers and officials to follow their direction and cooperate with them in the development of their village.

Village leaders are not only recognised as official leaders.
Others in the village who have wisdom and experience are also followed. Some are heads of the various groups in the village, such as a leader of a cooperative store, a savings group leader, or the head of a development project or integrated agriculture group. Some may even be traditional healers who practice their skills without exploiting the villagers.

Villagers are reorganising their resources for their own welfare. They now know how to make use of money offered to the temple during the pha-pa ceremonies organised by those who work in Bangkok and return home for this special occasion. For example, a village fund exists in many villages, funded from various sources, but a major one is the pha-pa. Other sources are collections from annual festivities, such as the popular rice festival of bun koon lan.

In addition, various groups such as youth and women’s groups campaign for funds for their community activities. Strikingly though, each village has its own way of dealing with their

*Sukwan ceremony for rice*
resources, and this may be considered as a characteristic of Isan. There is no ready-made model, but there is flexibility, compromise, adaptation, readjustment and integration.

In these kinds of villages, the community spirit is returning, and villagers who opt for the "new subsistence" way of life, emphasising self-reliance, find it easier (and appropriate) to work together, sharing their labour. Indeed, the long khaek tradition is being renewed in many places. Interestingly, cooperation is not occurring within each isolated village. As communications are much easier today, neighbouring villages come together, and networks are being formed. The villages in these networks assist one another in the economic, social, and cultural aspects of life, and they may now be seen in many areas of the Northeast.

Networks also spring up around persons of the same social status, including monks, teachers, village heads, kamnan, and traditional healers. These networks are composed of persons from different villages who come together to share their experiences and knowledge. These "cells" play an important role in the extension and promotion of self-reliance as a way of life, meeting every now and then to provide mutual assistance and support. These networks exist today in many regions. Examples are: the forum of village leaders, NGO workers, and persons from various professions in Ubol Ratchathani and Nakhon Ratchasima; the network of villagers leaders in integrated agriculture and self-reliance in Lamplaimart, Buriram; the network of cooperative stores and village funds in Kalasin and Roi-et; the network of cattle raising groups in Buriram and Khon Kaen; a network of traditional healers in Surin and in the Upper Northeast (Khon Kaen, Kalasin, and Mahasarakham); the networks of development-oriented monks in Surin (Sahatham group), and the in Nakhon Ratchasima (Sangha Pattana group); the forum of official village and leaders of Lamplaimart in Buriram, and in the Waengnoi district of Khon Kaen; and the networks of women's groups in various provinces of the Northeast.

Such networks were usually initiated and promoted by the villagers themselves, or by monks, or NGOs. Villagers often find that the networks represent a new way of organising for their
own objectives and they feel free to participate in their activities. The sharing of rice, through a rice ceremony after harvesting, is an example of one network’s way of assisting villagers to adjust old cultural ceremonies to the new situation. In this case, the result is the setting-up of rice banks with rice contributed by villagers from the network’s member villages. Every year there is a new rice bank established or, if one already exists, a substantial contribution is made to it. This is a clear sign of the solidarity of the network.

Development monks are those who also readjust cultural values to meet new situations. For example, some organise rice growing on temple land or on privately-owned land made available for this purpose. This rice growing is different from the usual process because villagers from many different communities participate, knowing that the yield will become a rice bank for a number of villages in the area. These monks know that there are droughts and floods, meaning rice shortages. They also know that common

An active monk who grows trees in 500 hectares of deteriorated public forest
work for the common good can lessen these problems. So these monks are not only spiritual leaders and teachers of meditation, but also lead villagers in solving rice and food shortages, and even initiate development programmes in their villages.

The role of monks in the Northeast is becoming increasingly important in community development, with hundreds of them actively engaged in community works. Many of them succeed in integrating economic and social aspects into the cultural and religious life of the community, emphasising that the first thing to do in development is to have a clear mind and a pure spirit. If you want to plant something in a field, you have to prepare the soil, ridding it of weeds and the like, and only then can you grow what you want.

Many of these monks begin by asking themselves what they should do for the villagers who bring them food, support them, and assist them, and they want to be more than just spiritual leaders: "We owe the villagers our life," said one leader of the Sahatham group. In many cases, the monks become community...
leaders in the full sense, while in others, they remain behind the scenes, giving moral support and advice by raising community development issues in their sermons and conversations with villagers.

Experience has proven that, in many villages, religion plays an important role in the process of renewal. Indeed, it is indispensable as people must make a fundamental decision to turn their backs on the market-oriented system of production, by first ridding themselves of the greed in their hearts and realise the meaning of sufficiency. They must also learn to be modest and to recognise their own limitations, and to keep a balance between the spiritual and the material, to have the spirit over the material, the mind over the body, and free will over the "obligations" of modern society.
THE CREATIVENESS OF POPULAR WISDOM

Popular wisdom is a cultural heritage that consists of far more than materials preserved in museums. As we have stated, it is a spirit that is lived and expressed in daily life, and on particular occasions, in all the rites, rituals, festivals and celebrations, and is transmitted from one generation to the next. It is the dynamic force of culture. Its evolution through history has been a dialectical process, as witnessed by the past three decades in Isan. Culture has come to a new stage in the history of a people, with the critical transition presenting itself as the antithesis of the immediate past, and creating a new synthesis between that past and the crisis of the past decades to lead to a new period. But this is not yet a triumph since it is a reality for only a minority of people living in rural areas. This is only the dawning of a new day, and a cloudy day at that, for while there is light, there is not yet total sunshine.

As the heart of culture, popular wisdom is dynamic and is subject to change and evolution. It must be seen in the total social, economic and political contexts of Isan and Thailand, and has to be preserved, but at the same time adapted, renewed, and
created. This is what is happening in Isan today, a process of development, a process of learning, by villagers who seek and reaffirm their cultural identity. This process must be emphasised as it is not a matter of research or study by outsiders, intellectuals or academics. Rather it is a question of life, a "to be or not to be" of the people who themselves are the "owners" of their culture. The process requires decision-making, commitment, discernment, and involvement. It is not a process of experimentation or of preparing a blue-print or plan for life -- it is an essential part of even villager's life. Let us summarise these processes of preservation, adaptation, renewal, and innovation.

Preservation

There are aspects of culture which need to be preserved. These embody values which can be considered universal or perennial, including self-reliance, kindness, sharing, honesty, truthfulness, respect for others, respect for nature and the environment, and respect for the family and the institutions of the community. Expressions of these values, through the arts, material culture, and in other forms, need to be preserved in order to stand as a monument and transmit this wisdom and these values to later generations. The preservation of such values must, however, be appropriate: the values have to be lived and practiced in daily life, while material culture and art should be preserved in their place or in museums. As part of the preservation process, the awareness and appreciation of these values has to be raised, especially amongst those who today possess these values and artifacts.

Adaptation

Times change and the general situation of society is never the same as it was before. Villages cannot be isolated from change. New values are introduced with each new aspect of life and so wisdom, as a traditional value, needs to adapt if it is to be "lived" today. Self-reliance, as a value, has to be adapted to the modern situation of a deteriorated environment. Villagers have to find ways to maintain their self-reliance, relying more on their creativity than on nature. Hence there is an emphasis on integrated
agriculture and other such activities. Similarly, labour-sharing has also to be adapted in a way that the little labour power left in villages can be utilised most efficiently, and to bring people who have migrated back to the village. Expressions of these values have to be adapted in order to be effective. For example, the language used by monks in their sermons and conversations cannot remain the same, as they have to follow the changes in society and adapt their message and language to new situations. Villagers, willingly or not, have already assumed many new values.

Another path is for villagers to adapt new values to the traditional ones they consider the essence and basis of their life. Adaptation is a process of integration between traditional and new values, but it is villagers who should decide whether and how to use, for example, tractors instead of buffaloes. In many villages there are circumstances providing ample reason for the use of tractors and villagers adapt their life to this new technology. Their relationship with the tractor is not, of course, the same as they once had with their buffaloes. Another example is the use of toilets. Instead of going to the fields or into the bushes as before, many villagers now use pour-flush latrines. The reason for this is not only because there is little bush left, but for hygiene and health reasons. Similarly, villagers have tanks and jars for storing rainwater for drinking and cooking, not only because of the lack of water during dry season, but also because of the pollution of natural water resources. Reflecting new values also, these facilities are seen as status symbols by some.

Adaptation is a continuous process, and villagers have to make efforts to analyse their situation in order to make appropriate decisions. Modern society tends to disaggregate community life and individualism prevails, and the fact that villagers stick together, as much as possible, can be seen as an effort at adaptation to this new situation. They must organise themselves if they are to live with the wisdom of their ancestors.

Renewal

The rapid changes of modern society have suppressed many
values of the village; they are left behind, ignored or forgotten, but, the renewal of these values is beginning. The practices may not be the same as before, but the essence remains the same. The ceremony of paying respect to the elders during Songkran is an example of renewal as is the phuk-siao ceremony of making friends with people from other villages. This latter ceremony, where two persons vow to be "friends" by drinking water from the same bowl, is renewed by some village leaders as a means of convincing people in other villages of the benefits of integrated agriculture for self-reliance. These leaders say, "To bind a person means to bind the whole village." Once one becomes a friend, the tendency is to follow the good example of one's friend, and they will give each other assistance in all aspects of life.

In the process of renewal, villagers may not be able to maintain the content and form of the past, but they can do much: they can follow the advice of an elder from Khon Kaen who states that by constructing fish ponds close together there can be a new river, and by planting trees together, there can be a new forest.

Innovation

This aspect is crucial for popular wisdom and culture as a whole. In the past change was slow. Wisdom was "created" and recognised throughout Isan's history, but there are few precise records of dates or persons involved in those innovations in wisdom and culture. Modern values come in different forms and more rapidly and modern communications make it possible to know everything about any innovation almost as soon as it happens. No innovation, however, originates from a vacuum; all come about through a dialectical process. Villagers come to realise this in their search for their identity.

Popular wisdom has not only to be renewed or reinvigorated, but must also be the subject of innovation. Something new must happen in order to counter-balance external values, and to provide a means to maintain traditional values such as self-reliance. Knowledge and skill must, therefore, be sought from the villagers.
own experiences, although the assistance of outsiders may also be important. Many academics, intellectuals, and persons from various professions, engaged in rural development, realise that they may play an important role in the process of innovation in the villages. What is crucial, however, is whether the introduced innovation is an imposition by outsiders or whether it comes by cooperation between the two parties. The validity, effectiveness, and impact of any innovation will depend on the participation of villagers in the whole process, so that they can make their own decisions, and choose to accept (or reject) an innovation as part of their lifestyle.

There are villagers who are innovative and learn new things based on their own experiences. New technologies are not always discovered and introduced by outsiders, as villagers are capable of making their own inventions. For example, herbal medicines, used to cure diseases in fish, have been found in Khon Kaen and Nakhon Ratchasima provinces. Turning temple grounds into a garden of trees and herbs is another innovation introduced by some monks. Temple grounds were often used for entertainment in the evenings and for grazing cattle and buffaloes during the day. These days, however, there are school grounds and other entertainment forms in the village and in nearby towns, so some monks find it more appropriate to make the temple a peaceful place, where villagers can come to meditate and rest. Another innovation by monks is organising villagers to work in common fields to have rice for the rice banks: this had not been necessary in the past.

In addition, monks' development organisations and development forums and networks are all recent innovations. In the past there was no need for such inter-village social organisations. Many development activities such as savings groups, village funds, and cooperative stores have been introduced by the government and by NGOs, while some have been devised by villagers themselves, and others by monks and village leaders. Some interesting innovations have emerged. For example, the cooperative store in Nonemuang, Nakhon Ratchasima Province has no seller, and buyers take the goods they want, leaving money in a box. Nor is there any dividend to return to "shareholders", as the concept of merit-
making is applied to this innovation.

In arts and handicrafts innovation has been on an even larger scale, but it has not always been appropriate to the village situation. This is because production has been geared to marketing. Cotton and silk cloth weaving are good examples, where villagers cannot always meet the expectations of outsiders, usually government officers and traders, who require a product of specific quality and quantity for the market. Not all villagers are ready to adapt themselves to this, and in the case of villages who opt for integrated agriculture and self-reliance, this kind of handicraft production will often be abandoned. What villagers prefer to do is feel free in their work, in consumption, and in the disposal of their surplus, and not to have their lives dictated by the demands of the market.

This movement to self-reliance and the preservation, renewal innovation and adaptation of popular wisdom is not, as we noted earlier, a full-blooded movement marching through the countryside. It is, nonetheless, a discernible feature of rural development in the Northeast. With support and encouragement it offers one path out of the modern malaise afflicting many farmers.
EPILOGUE
There have been a number of academic studies of the phenomenon we have chosen to call popular wisdom. This study is different from others in that one of its main objectives has been to support development activities which base their actions on cultural values. The contribution this study hopes to make in this regard is not so much as an analytical study, but rather as an account of popular wisdom, and as a reflection on the process of development implemented by the villagers, promoted by their own people's organisations and by some NGOs. As we noted at the outset, it was not intended to collect data, facts and figures, and engage in an intellectual exercise. Village people are the first group who should benefit most from this research. NGOs, government organisations, academics, and researchers may also find the result of our work useful for orientating further study and action. In addition, we are hopeful that our outline of popular wisdom, of the way things were, and how they are changing, will have been of interest to a wider readership. After all, there are very few available accounts of Northeastern life for the general reader.
The approach taken was participatory action research, with a focus on village leaders and NGO workers involved in the most important part of this study, namely common development activities. These groups have met to exchange their experiences, to analyse the situation, and to plan further action together, and it is these actions which have contributed to the awareness of popular wisdom, cultural identity and traditional values.

There has been no questionnaire. There were, however, personal meetings, conversations and participation in the events of village life. There were also formal and informal meetings of village leaders and NGO workers and seminars and workshops on particular issues. All of these had a focus on popular wisdom and the search for self-reliance.

Cultural identity and values are not things recorded and kept somewhere, but they can be known by observation and participation in village life. But a question remains: will such knowledge and understanding be used for the benefit of villagers or will it be used to further exploit them when in the hands of academics, officials, traders, and those who deal with villages? A knowledge of local culture could become a means for the further exploitation, oppression and manipulation of villagers. For example, candidates running for election know that if Isan villagers are given twenty baht they will vote for them, as once they give their word, they will stick to it, and be truthful. Millions of baht are given out in each election campaign. Cultural identity has also been manipulated by government agencies in order to attract tourists, with large religious and cultural celebrations being organised in towns as gimmicks to attract both Thai and foreign visitors. These celebrations are taken out of their cultural context, and lose their meaning for villagers. In a similar way many other cultural rituals, objects and forms are being manipulated in the name of economic development.

Isan people typically display the attitude of *kreng jai* (not wanting to hurt the feelings of others). They virtually never refuse anyone in a straightforward manner. Similarly, they are grateful to those who do something good for them, their family or community. Government officials and private traders realise this,
and villagers are often manipulated, using this value, to bring personal benefit to officials and traders. In this way corruption occurs easily and often in rural areas. It is also one of the reasons for the huge debts accumulated by people with private creditors, government banks and other organisations.

Nevertheless, popular wisdom is not yet fully recognised. Villagers are still looked down on and disregarded by outsiders, especially the dominant groups in society including officials, traders and academics. In being subject to manipulation through their values villagers are seen as stupid or ignorant. Judged from the outside, by modern and scientific standards, the village way is unscientific, unsystematic, undisciplined and uneducated. For example, most modern medical doctors have little knowledge of traditional healing methods and medicine, and continually say that herbal medicines have no value. They argue that it involves superstition and spirit beliefs or occultism, and confirm this with results from scientific experiments. It is true that many herbal medicines cannot be tested with positive results in the laboratory, but few scientists consider the limitations of their sciences. They cannot explain everything and their own methods provide only probabilities, not certainties. Everything is relative, but this is not always taken into consideration, especially when we talk of the social and cultural aspects of life.

While traditional wisdom, as expressed in traditional healing, examines a human in a holistic manner, modern medicine tends to objectify the sick person, trying to find the physical causes of the disease, by virus, bacteria and so on. Traditional medicine, however, looks at a "total relationship with the universe", with the cause of illness being found in this relationship: the relationship is unbalanced, so a person is ill. This relationship between the person and the universe corresponds to the relationship between components in the body, meaning an imbalance between elements. A knowledge of this view could assist modern doctors.

Similarly, the government usually judges villages as lacking adequate social organisation and as being ineffective in implementing development plans. But the government seldom recognises the traditional social structures and organisations that
have been maintaining the autonomy and self-reliance of the community for generations. They disregard popular wisdom and local leadership, and impose new social structures on the villages, not only in the Northeast, but over the whole country, with the same model being used without consideration of any social and cultural differences. It cannot be otherwise since everything is planned in Bangkok, and has to be applied throughout the administration, from the ministry level down to the provinces, *amphur, tambon*, and then on down to the villages.

This is the essence of national planning, where only the superficial similarities of villages throughout the country are considered. These similarities are brought together, explained by some sociological theory and applied, by technocrats, to national planning. This is top-down planning, the bird's eye view of the world. Nobody cares for the worm's eye view, looking from the bottom up. Such a view would, however, show the uniqueness of each village, each region, and each cultural group, showing both their similarities and differences. It is for more difficult to consider a village from this bottom-up view, and much more difficult for national planning, even if it is desirable and possible.

It is also difficult for academics and researchers to adopt this worm's eye view because it requires a total change in approach and methodology in researching village reality. They have to make efforts to become "one" with the villagers, in order to be able to "enter their heart" and look at things from the villager's perspective. In order to do so they have to change their way of thinking about villages, accepting and appreciating popular wisdom and the values of village life, and they must respect villagers. Their contacts with villagers must be without prejudice.

A view which considers uniqueness, character and cultural identity should be fundamental for developing new theories, be they economic, political, social or cultural. In fact, theories have been developed through this process, but the problem is that they are then applied universally, without consideration of local identity, uniqueness and differences. They are taken by academics and researchers as a conceptual framework in which all similar elements found in the villages are assimilated to fulfill and justify
this framework. This tells us little about the villages and their reality.

However, things are changing. There are academics and researchers who realise this situation. There are technocrats and officials who are taking this into serious consideration, with the failure of development plans in the past being good lessons. On the other hand, they realise that the people themselves are struggling and discovering their own way, looking for their own solution, and choosing self-reliance. Government officials, in turn, learn from the experiences of the villagers, and start to apply this in their policies and planning.

Integrated agriculture, fish raising in rice fields, forest agriculture, self-reliance, popular wisdom, and other key terms are to be found in the policy and planning documents of many government ministries and departments. The National Office for Culture has invited an NGO engaged in rural development, known for their socio-cultural approach, to participate in the preparation of the seventh National Economic and Social Development Plan. The planning framework of this Office reflects this new approach, and the term "popular wisdom" is to be seen in many parts of its draft documents. This NGO has also been invited by the National Office for Youth Affairs to do a similar thing. At the same time, a number of other government agencies have requested cooperation in their programmes. It remains to be seen, however, how these documents can be put into practice by officials at the local level.

This is the start of a new era. Nobody can guarantee that from now on villagers will be, or can become, self-reliant. No triumph can yet be celebrated. The only success to be proud of, so far, is attracting the attention of "outsiders", especially the dominant groups in the society, to a more objective understanding of the reality of villages, and to care more about popular wisdom, appreciating it, and respecting villagers. But even here, we are only seeing a beginning. There is the further hope that things will change. The power of the people lies in their culture. Their potential is to find the right and relevant conditions for a growth that can really be called development.
1. Background


2. NGOs and Development


Seri Phongphit. *Development Paradigm: Strategy, Activities*
3. Culture and Development


4. Village and Development


Seri Phongphit (ed.). *Back to the Roots*.


5. Religion and Development

Seri Phongphit. *Religion in a Changing Society: Buddhism, Reform and the Role of Monks in Community*


6. Rebellion


7. Culture of Thailand


Phya Anuman Rajadhon. Popular Buddhism in Siam and Other Essays on Thai Studies. Bangkok: Thai Inter-


8. Migration


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>amphur</td>
<td>district.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arahat</td>
<td>Buddhist Saints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baisri sukwan</td>
<td>a spirit ceremony to symbolise unity, involving the binding of wrists with strings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>banthit</td>
<td>one who is learned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barb</td>
<td>sin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baht</td>
<td>unit of Thai currency, made up of 100 satang.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buad rian</td>
<td>to be ordained as monk, implying being learned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bueng</td>
<td>swamp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bun ban</td>
<td>paying homage to the pu-ta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bun bung fai</td>
<td>the rocket festival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bun kun-khao yai</td>
<td>a threshing ceremony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chadok</td>
<td>stories from the Tripitaka.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cham</td>
<td>a spirit medium.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changwat</td>
<td>province.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chao khon nai khon</td>
<td>master of others; a term sometimes used to refer to officials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chao-kote</td>
<td>village elders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chao muang</td>
<td>ruler of a town or a domain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chao thii</td>
<td>spirit of a particular place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dai saisin</td>
<td>sacred chord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dek-wat</td>
<td>boys and youths who serve monks and the temple.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deva</td>
<td>gods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doo-thii</td>
<td>survey a location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dukkha</td>
<td>suffering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hachao-kinkham</td>
<td>working for daily subsistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>haek na</td>
<td>the ceremony of the first ploughing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hak</td>
<td>love.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
hedyou-hedkin - working for daily subsistence.
heed sipsong - the 12 ceremonies.
hor krachai khao - village public address system.
huay - a stream.
isan - the northeastern region of Thailand.
kaen - bamboo pipe musical instrument producing on organ-like sound.
kammakan mooban - village committee.
kamnan - head of a tambon.
karma - belief in rebirth according to merit.
kathin - twelfth month ceremony offering robes and necessities to monks.
kha luang yai - high commissioners.
kham - belief in rebirth according to merit.
khanna - paddy bunds.
khan ha - offerings for a healing ceremony (five pairs).
khan paed - offerings for a healing ceremony (eight pairs).
khao-chi - a ceremony offering roasted rice to monks and spirits.
khao-kham - a first month ceremony where there is intensive practice of the Dhamma - a period of purification.
kha pradab din - ceremony for dead relatives.
khao-saak - ceremony of sharing based on Buddhist teachings regarding reconciliation, solidarity and assistance.
khao-tom-mad - a dessert of boiled banana curd and rice wrapped in banana leaf.
khatha - sacred formula.
khoon-lan - a threshing ceremony.
khru - teacher; master.
khum - small groups of households within a larger community.
kilesa - a demerit.
kreng jai - not wishing to hurt another's feelings.
kwan - spirit or essence of life.
lai-sak - tattoos.
lam - traditional singing and dancing.
len sao - courting a young woman; flirting.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>long khaek</td>
<td>helping one another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loi krathong</td>
<td>candle-floating ceremony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>luk-sit</td>
<td>disciple.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mae phosop</td>
<td>the rice spirit; &quot;mother rice&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mahesak lak ban</td>
<td>spirit or great power of the village; the spirit of the founders of the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>makhapuja</td>
<td>a ceremony commemorating 1,250 monks gathering to hear the Buddha's preaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mak reo</td>
<td>a kind of fruit used as herbs by Chinese doctors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw do</td>
<td>fortune teller; seer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw lam moo</td>
<td>large travelling troupes of traditional singers and dancers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw lam phi fa</td>
<td>a healer who uses music and dance as part of their treatment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw namman</td>
<td>a healer like a maw nam mon, but using oils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw nam mon</td>
<td>healers who use sacred water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw-pao</td>
<td>healers who blow on sick persons to produce recovery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw song</td>
<td>diviner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw sukwan</td>
<td>the one who calls the spirits to a ceremony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw teng kae</td>
<td>the one who presides over a ceremony of reconciliation or asking pardon from spirits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw tham</td>
<td>healers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maw ya samunphrai</td>
<td>traditional healer using herbal medicine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monthon</td>
<td>administrative zone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mueng</td>
<td>town or town and its domain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nai amphur</td>
<td>district officer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nai hoi</td>
<td>local Northeastern traders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>naktham</td>
<td>learned in the Dhamma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nang lam</td>
<td>female dancer during spirit ceremony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>navakowad</td>
<td>a basic set of doctrine and discipline to be learned by new monks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>na-don</td>
<td>upland rice fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>na-lum</td>
<td>lowland paddy fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngiu</td>
<td>Chinese opera and theatre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nithan</td>
<td>fables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noh-mai</td>
<td>bamboo shoots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nong</td>
<td>lake.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chinese opera and theatre.
ork phansa - ceremony marking the end of Buddhist Lent.

palad kik - a penis shaped object, symbolising fertility.
panya - wisdom.
pattana - development.
pel - the 11 a.m. meal for monks.
pha-kwan - tiered, conical structure made of banana leaves used in the sukwan ceremony.
phak - vegetables (e.g. phak-itu, phak-pheo and phak-homhaw).
phaya - verses of wisdom.
pha-pa - religious ceremony where offerings are prepared for monks and temple.
phid phi - a transgression of social rules or values; "to offend the phi".
phi - spirits; ghosts.
phi-ban - spirits of the household.
phi-fa - heavenly gods.
phi ha - evil spirits.
phi krasue - evil spirits.
phi-nam - spirits of water.
phi-pa - spirits of the forest.
phi rai - generic term for evil spirits.
phii phong - evil spirits.
phii phrai - evil spirits.
phii pob - a vampire-like spirit born of humans.
phii pret - evil spirits.
phii rai - generic term for evil spirits.
phram - Brahman; a person who conducts ceremonies according to Brahman or Hindu derived traditions.
phra kruang - a celebration of selflessness, as demonstrated by the Buddha in one of his former lives.
phra phiksu - monk.
phuk-siao - a ceremony to bind people in close relationship.
phuyaiban - village head.
phu-mi-bun - people with extraordinary and/or religious
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>phu-tao</td>
<td>elders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phu-wiset</td>
<td>people with extraordinary and/or religious power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phya</td>
<td>Lord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pla-rah</td>
<td>fermented fish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pla-som</td>
<td>sour and salted fish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prayoke</td>
<td>an official grading system for monks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pu-ta</td>
<td>spirits of ancestors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rod nam dam hua</td>
<td>water-pouring ceremony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rot khai ya</td>
<td>travelling sales of medicines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sador</td>
<td>detach, remove, unlock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>samadhi</td>
<td>concentration; contemplation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>samanera</td>
<td>novice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>samlor</td>
<td>hired tricycles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>san pu-ta</td>
<td>spirit shrine or house for the community spirit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>satang</td>
<td>100 satang = 1 baht.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sati</td>
<td>mindfulness; attentiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>siao</td>
<td>very close friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sila</td>
<td>Buddhist rules for lay people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sin bun</td>
<td>the end of merit; death.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sin-sod</td>
<td>&quot;bride-price&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>songkran</td>
<td>Thai and Lao New Year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suad patimokka</td>
<td>fortnightly recitation of fundamental precepts of monks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sukaw</td>
<td>a ceremony seeking permission to marry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sukwan</td>
<td>see baisri sukwan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sukwan khao</td>
<td>calling the rice spirit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tambon</td>
<td>sub-districts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tamnan</td>
<td>mythology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tam-khao</td>
<td>husking of rice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ta haek</td>
<td>the spirit of the field.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tham bun</td>
<td>to make merit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tham wat-suad mon</td>
<td>the monk's daily prayers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thao kae</td>
<td>older persons who preside over rituals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thatu</td>
<td>a small tomb for cremation ashes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>then</td>
<td>the supreme spirit; the creator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thep</td>
<td>god; angel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thepharak</td>
<td>guardian spirits.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

189
tripitaka - Buddhist scriptures.
ubasika - Buddhist lay-women who devote themselves to the temple and practice the eight precepts or adhere to them more strictly.
ubosot - the temple building where the principal Buddha image is kept, and where monks fray and perform important rituals.
uppakut - a mythological figure related to Buddhism, symbolising fertility.
vija - folk arts; "magic" arts; knowledge.
vinaya - 227 rules for monks.
visakhapuja - ceremony of the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha.
wai - the traditional sign of respect, bringing hands to the head as if in prayer.
wan katanyu - day of gratitude.
wan phra - religions or holy day.
wat - temple.
yon-sang - medicine used to cause suffering or death in another; "magic" medicine.
yod-wai - rattan.
yome upathak - a sponsor of monks in ordination ceremonies.
Northeastern Thailand, long regarded as the poorest, driest and most barren part of the country, is changing. Much government money and effort, as well as considerable foreign aid, has been expended in the region, attempting to overcome poverty. Recently, these efforts have been renewed. For all of this, the Northeast, its people and culture remain unknown to most people.

Based on real development experiences, this book rectifies the situation. The traditional past is recreated, not as an academic treatise, but as villagers explain and remember it, based on their own experience, and that of their ancestors. Together, this knowledge and experience constitutes a popular wisdom. This book explains the culture of the people of the region, their beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, skills and their knowledge, in all its rich detail. Also described is the impact of rapid change, as Northeasterners seek to reorient their popular wisdom and culture to a rapidly changing reality.