Village Life

Culture and Transition in Thailand's Northeast

Seri Phongphit & Kevin Hewison
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is not a new book. We have maintained much of the original work, published in 1990 as *Thai Village Life: Culture and Transition in the Northeast*. We have spent a considerable time editing the original text and refining our observations. We have also attempted to indicate, especially in the Introduction and the Epilogue, how things have changed. Our aim for the original book has not changed for this edition. We have attempted to present an accessible and readable book about village life in Thailand's Northeast, and we say more about this in the Introduction.

The experience we draw on owes much to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), their workers and individual villagers, especially those associated with the Village Foundation and associated NGOs. Some of this has been presented in the publications of Thai Institute for Rural Development (THIRD) in the 1980s. These included, in English, Seri Phongphit (ed.), *Back to the Roots*, published in 1986, and Seri Phongphit and Robert Bennoun (eds.), *Turning Point of Thai Farmers*, published in 1989. Our debt to these publications, associated debates, and the people associated with the Village Foundation are significant.

By its nature, a study such as that presented here can only have resulted from the co-operation of many individuals, groups, and organisations working in villages and those engaged in rural development. It seems unfair to mention only a few of these many collaborators. Two persons, however, deserve special thanks: Surachet Vetchaphitak and Vichit Nantasuwan, Seri Phongphit's two assistants in the late 1980s, for their companionship
along the path of development — our own and that of the villagers. They have our deepest gratitude, as does everyone who helped. We also wish to express our most sincere thanks to the villagers who have taken the time to teach us about development and 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 remarkable cultural heritage of the Northeast. For Seri Phongphit this has also been a voyage of personal discovery, and he has learnt much about his own roots.

For their support and assistance, Seri Phongphit is grateful to the Toyota Foundation. Without their support in 1987 and 1988, this study could not have been completed. Kevin Hewison wishes to acknowledge the support of the Thai-Australia Northeast Village Water Resources Project, Mahidol University and City University of Hong Kong.

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 Thai words, with some Lao and religious terms, and are italicised in the text.

The research presented here contributed substantially to the development activities implemented by THIRD in the 1980s. It was thus a practical exercise, with real outcomes for development work. If any merit has derived from this study, then it belongs to the villagers with whom THIRD worked.

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. We are responsible for any errors, misinterpretations or other shortcomings readers will certainly identify.

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Kevin Hewison
City University of Hong Kong

April 2001
NORTHEASTERN THAILAND
BASIC DATA

Area 168,855 sq. km.
Population
1987 18.6 million (1.9 million urban)
2000 20.8 million (3.5 million urban)
Density 122.9 per sq. km
Growth rate 0.87%
Education 68% have completed less than 7 years of formal education
Political Structure 19 provinces (changwat). Each is divided into a number of districts (amphur), which are themselves made up of sub-districts (tambon) composed of roughly 10-12 villages (mooban).
The Ministry of Interior appoints the provincial governor.
Climate
Rainfall 1,100-1,650 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
Topography 80% 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 1998 GDP per capita was 26,407 baht, which was 35% of the national average of 75,749 baht. In 1975 the NE figure was 45% of the national average, and in 1985 was 43% of the national average.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Land use (1999)</strong></th>
<th>Forest: 12.6%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Farm holding land: 54.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unclassified land: 32.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Production (1999)</strong></td>
<td>Rice: 9 million tonnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cassava: 8.9 million tonnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sugarcane: 17.4 million tonnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maize: 1.0 million tonnes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average farm size (1999)</strong></td>
<td>25.4 <em>rai</em> (4.06 ha)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Livestock (1999)</strong></td>
<td>2.7 million cattle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.4 million buffalo (down almost 50% since 1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3 million pigs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.0 million ducks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39.5 million chickens</td>
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Data in this table is drawn from the websites of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, National Economic and Social Development Board, and National Statistical Office.
Thailand's Northeastern Provinces
INTRODUCTION

The Northeast, or Isan in the Central Thai language, is a large area. It is the most populous region of Thailand. Despite its ever-closer integration with the centralised Thai state since the early 19th Century, the region retains a distinctiveness. Its people, living in 19 provinces, are mostly of Lao ethnic and cultural origin. However, the Northeast is nothing if not diverse. The Khmer influence is especially noticeable, reflecting the influence of the Khmer Empire in earlier times. Many people of Khmer ethnicity live in the southern Northeast. There are also significant groups of Chinese and Vietnamese migrants, and many other minority groups.

When we wrote the first edition of this book in the late 1980s Thailand seemed to be changing very rapidly. We felt the need to write about villages in the country’s Northeast because the changes taking place there seemed especially challenging. There had been many village studies, but we were concerned that these were by academics, writing for academics. These analysts had attempted to understand the history, structure and culture of villages in all regions of Thailand, and had applied various theories for understanding the dynamics of village life. There is nothing wrong with this. Indeed, careful academic research and debate contributes much to society.

For the general reader, however, even when the sometimes dense language of such academic studies could be understood, the result was sometimes a confusing range of village pictures and descriptions. To name a few, there were big and little traditions, loosely structured villages, cluster villages, passive peasants, villages as hydraulic societies, and villages which were not ‘real’ villages.
At the time, we felt that much of the most interesting work about village communities was being completed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Like the academic investigations, the NGO studies were based on careful, community-based research, but they were different. As well as attempting to provide ‘socially useful’ information, many NGO researchers were attempting to come to grips with a changing approach to development. No longer were ‘outsiders’, ‘experts’ or NGO development workers the central players in development. The community was becoming central. This might seem odd. After all, weren’t the villagers supposed to be the beneficiaries of development? The fact was that villagers and their communities were often peripheral to the development aims of government and other development agencies. We felt that the new approaches developing in NGO activities were presenting an interesting picture of how the villagers of the Northeast had lived and how they were facing the challenges of the present and future.

The first edition of this book did not attempt to comment on previous academic studies or to judge them. Nor did we attempt to prove a theory or build a model. The information we presented did not grow out of any carefully designed study of village culture, with hypotheses to accept or reject. We simply drew on a range of information, some of it from academic works, much of it growing out of NGO development activities.

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 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. Rather, there were 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.
Of course we have not ignored the knowledge presented in academic studies. We are particularly indebted to the works of well-known academics, including Professor Charles Keyes, Professor Chatthip Nartsupha and Phya Anuman Rajadhon. However, we did not want to produce an analysis that was primarily academic. Equally, we did not wish to produce a book that presented detailed analysis of the development activities implemented by government, international agencies or royal projects.

Rather this book was and is concerned with what we call 'popular wisdom' and the search for identity in the Northeast of Thailand. To understand these aspects of community life, we necessarily reflect on development in the region. We consider popular wisdom in the context of the dynamics of daily village life, the villagers' special occasions, their religious and cultural rites, rituals, festivals and celebrations, their work and entertainment, and their moments of happiness and grief. In this revised edition, these elements remain our central concern. It is for this reason that we have retained the structure of the original edition, while attempting to indicate that things have changed.

NGOs have not been the only source of the information we have used in this book. Much of it has been assembled by people's organisations, in conversations with many knowledgeable and wise persons including monks, village leaders, village resource persons, healers, shamans and ordinary villagers. Our information was also gained through participation in the many special occasions and celebrations that punctuate village life. This book is, then, a synthesis of learning experiences. What we set out in the pages that follow will not reflect the whole regional situation for the Northeast. The peoples of the region have different historical experiences, come from many cultural and ethnic groups, work with different resource bases, and the processes of change have not been uniform. However, the popular wisdom collected and reported here represents an important part of the totality, especially the principal characteristics and the cultural identity of the region. In a sense we 'average' real experiences to present a general picture. But, every community will be different.
We have tended to concentrate on the Lao majority. No doubt some will be critical of this approach, but in the late 1980s 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. Serious rural development work must begin by acknowledging these aspects of the community if villagers are to be supported in moving toward self-reliant development.

In completing the first edition we hoped the general reader would 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. In the late 1980s the Northeast was a focus of political attention, as a developing gateway to Indochina, an important region of government development efforts, and a centre of political competition. This was promoting ever more rapid change. The Northeast was also receiving increasing numbers of Thai and foreign visitors. We hoped that our book would provide a clearer picture and a better understanding of the changing world of the Northeast.

This remains our aim. At the same time, in the almost 15 years since we began our first edition, much has happened and the processes of change have advanced even more rapidly than we imagined they would. Political and economic change has been especially rapid, and has been significant for the communities of the Northeast.

When we originally worked on this project we could not have imagined the changes that would occur in the following decade and a half. When we began the book Thailand was two to three years into what would be a decade long economic boom. Thailand’s economy became the darling of international investors, journalists and economists, achieving double-digit growth. The boom brought increasingly rapid change. Confidence brimmed, employment opportunities grew, absolute poverty declined, and magnates were created overnight.
The rapidity of change caused many political leaders and public intellectuals to argue that the forces of globalisation were unstoppable, and would sweep aside all that was anachronistic. Some predicted that the economic boom had come to stay, and that Thailand would quickly climb the ladder of economic development. By the mid-1990s, Thailand had become an industrially oriented capitalist economy.

Industrialisation brought substantial change, as a once predominantly rural society became more urban. Agricultural employment decreased markedly as people sought employment in other sectors of the economy. In urban areas, rural recruits, and especially young women, streamed into factories. Meanwhile, a wealthy, brash and exultant middle class displayed their modernity through technology and consumption. In rural areas, farmers diversified their crops, engaged in contract farming, borrowed more, and turned to mechanisation. In these confident boom times, government forged ahead with liberalisation and reforms that enhanced the power of business. The 1997 Asian economic crisis was the end of the boom and a phase of economic growth that had begun in the 1950s. In all, this period wrought fundamental, historic changes, with no part of society was left untouched.

Of course, change is seldom a conflict-free process. Thailand's capitalist development has been both aggressive and voracious. While it has brought benefits for many, its outcomes have been inequitable. While fewer rural people live in absolute poverty, inequality is greater. While they are healthier and better educated, life remains a precarious existence. While rural people have more cash and consumer goods, their resource base has dwindled. While their production and lives are increasingly subject to globalisation, they seem increasingly marginalised.

Opposition to some of these developments has been evident for a long time. In the 1980s and 1990s there was increasing resistance to developments such as dams, forest clearance and eucalyptus plantations.

Our observation of these transformations was one of the original motivations for this book. It was not nostalgia for the past or a rejection of change that was at the heart of our observations. Rather, as mentioned
above, it was the work of NGOs. The groups that most influenced us were those that were utilising an approach to development called watthanatham chumchon or the cultural development perspective. As our book shows, this approach placed considerable emphasis on understanding the cultural stock of the community. It seeks to harness aspects of the community and its acquired wisdom for development. This is not the way of government development programmes. Where the government has tended to see community and the values, knowledge, religion, and beliefs as inhibiting development, the watthanatham chumchon approach sees these as potential strengths.

Interestingly, when the crisis struck, there was a surge of interest in community development approach. Many of those who had enthusiastically embraced ‘globalisation’ when Thailand was economically successful suddenly realised that the global expansion of capital had some negative consequences. As Thailand’s currency and businesses collapsed, the ‘village’ was seen as a potential saviour. There was the view that displaced workers could return to the village. Agriculture could allow people to subsist during the crisis, cushioning its impact. Even globalisers like the World Bank saw this potential.

But the ‘village’ had a deeper ideological resonance. When, in late 1997, King Bhumibol Adulyadej made a speech that included references to self-reliance, a search for ‘alternatives’ gained momentum. For many, the alternatives were in the ‘village’, where the ‘real’ Thailand and its most significant values, was to be found.

The initial nationalist response, seen in a desire to ‘save’ the country and its businesses from foreign control, was quickly linked to NGO debates. During the glory days of economic expansion many NGOs and their intellectual supporters had continued to oppose to the unfettered expansion of capitalism. While the boom made them feel increasingly marginalised, some had warned of environmental consequences. Others had pointed to continued poverty and exclusion from the ‘economic miracle’.
The cultural development perspective had argued that development should not be built by looking out (export orientation, globalisation and the like). Rather, this perspective directed attention to the strengths of rural communities. As the crisis bit, this approach seemed more coherent in developing and sustaining an alternative vision of Thailand. The intellectuals who supported this alternative saw it as a logical opposition to globalisation, offering localisation as an alternative development strategy.

We do not want to recount this discussion here, or to engage the debates that surround it. However, it may be useful for readers to know something of this context. Significantly, the localism debate, drawing on much NGO-derived analysis, pointed to perceived weaknesses in the country's social and political make-up. This was seen to emanate from the very nature of Thailand's development strategies emphasising growth, urbanisation and industrialisation. In opposition, the localists emphasised self-sufficiency, self-reliance, the significance of culture and community, and the centrality of rural life and agriculture. They rejected consumerism and industrialism.

By advocating rural self-sufficiency in food, health care, housing and clothing and production for family and community consumption, farmers would not be so reliant on the market. If this was the basis of production, the nation could also avoid the vagaries of domestic or international markets. This is seen as an antidote to the 'lust for consumption' that dominated in the boom years. Consumption was equated with greed, and Buddhist ideas of sharing were often invoked in opposition to the desire for personal wealth and consumption. Rural society is seen to have been sharing, generous and compassionate. This means that when the word 'community' is used, it also carries ideas of solidarity and equality. It was suggested that these ideas and values needed to be rediscovered in a return to basics.

While this approach was not entirely congruent with the community development perspective of the 1980s and early 1990s, it did tap into this perspective. So how does this book relate to the recent discussions of self-reliance and development? Our answer is mixed.
We originally wrote this book to reflect on the phenomenon that we have called popular wisdom. One of our objectives was to support development activities that based their actions on an understanding of cultural values. We were reflecting on processes of development implemented by villagers, promoted by their own organisations and by some NGOs. We were hopeful that our outline of popular wisdom, of the way things were, and how they are changing, would be of interest to a wider readership. While our efforts may have promoted the community development perspective, our attention was to change and the village. We saw self-reliance as a means to solve one's own problems and the capacity to help oneself as much as possible. This was not an ideologically driven strategy for village or national development. It was a simple call for a more village-based approach to development.

When the economic crisis struck there was a wider intellectual adoption of the community development perspective. The perspective, taken up within a wider debate about development, populism and nationalism, has gone much further and become more dogmatic than many of the field-level NGOs might have imagined possible. Nonetheless, many of them were caught up in the enthusiasm for self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Some must have felt that their work was being vindicated.

However, while the community development perspective was built on strong village foundations, this has not always been clear in the new localist perspective. The impact of intellectuals on the localist discourse has been significant, with the economic crisis prompting many intellectuals to take up the localism cause. The problem is that they tend to alienate it from its roots in village-level development practice, re-establishing it in a context where it offers populist solution to Thailand's economic problems. As an intellectual discourse, removed from its grassroots, it may do little more than promote backward-looking strategies.

The story we tell in this book can be read in different ways. It may offer comfort for those who look to the past for inspiration. At the same time, it also cautions against development strategies that are elitist and do not
seek to comprehend the ways in which the past is dynamic for the present. It also shows that people make the present. There are winners and losers, but even the ‘losers’ have much to offer, and much may be learned from their past and the wisdom that has grown from their experience. In the end, though, we hope that the book contributes to understanding, and that readers use the story as it best suits their circumstances. If this results in any further thinking, discussion, or debate, we will be pleased. If a reader simply enjoys knowing more about Thailand’s Northeast, we are equally satisfied.
CHAPTER 1

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

SETTLEMENT

My parents moved here from a village near Amnart Charoen about 90-100 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 70-80 years ago. There we suffered from drought for three consecutive years; we had no more rice, and couldn’t grow anything. In the end, we had no money to pay our taxes. Also, 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 Yasothorn, about 50-60 years ago. The flooding of the Chi River damaged our crops, and we couldn’t grow anything.

We came to this place about 60-70 years ago, from another sub-district about ten kilometres from here. Back there, the number of families grew, and there was not enough
Seri Phongphit & Kevin Hewison

land for everybody. We were persuaded by some of our relatives, who had come before us, to move here where there was more land and water.

We moved from Don Tarn, in what is now Mukdaharn, 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 villagers, these tales show that the Northeast was not a paradise for the villagers of the past. Migration and new settlement seem to have been normal over at least the past century and more. These tales, based on stories passed on by parents, grandparents, relatives and participants in the moves, indicate that the reasons for migration were usually disease, pressure from the state, drought and natural disasters.

Once settled at a new site it did not always mean that a peaceful new home had been found. For example, the migrants still had to find money to pay taxes. If they had no cash, then they had to put their cattle or buffaloes up for sale or they could cut trees in order to earn enough money to pay taxes. Alternatively, they might work off the tax. It was not always easy to find buyers for village products as there were few roads, and existing tracks were only suitable for carts. Villages were often inaccessible for long periods during the rainy season. Exemption from paying tax was only possible if villagers moved to some remote place, but this meant being prepared to live an isolated existence.

Having moved to their new home they still faced risks posed by disease, drought, flood, thieves and bandits, and wild animals such as elephants and tigers. Indeed, many people died from diseases or were killed by bandits and wild animals. Such events were very much a part of village life.
Building a Community

In talking with villagers few mention starvation. We know, however, that there were food shortages due to drought and floods from time to time. Nevertheless, nature was still bountiful, and its exploitation was still reasonably balanced with the needs of the local people. Natural disasters seldom struck the entire region at the same time.

MIGRATION

In 1937, forest covered sixty percent of the Northeast. This forest meant that communication between villages was difficult, and usually by cart, horse or on foot. This meant that migration was not a decision taken lightly. Migration required a fundamental and sometimes courageous decision, and the reasons for a move were usually 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 took 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, including chickens, other small animals, handicrafts, cotton, silk, fruits, and 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 wax-sealed bamboo buckets were used to fetch water from wells or natural water resources.

The preparations for migration could take many forms. Often 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 other 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.
Before leaving the old village a food offering ceremony was performed. This was to inform the phii (or spirits) of the village, through a cham, the mediator between humans and phii of the proposed move. 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 aged people, children and women riding on carts pulled by oxen, and the men and older boys walking alongside. Once they had arrived, the spirits of the old community would be invited to return home. The migrants would then seek new spirits, the ‘owners’ of the new place, called chao thii or pu-ta. The first thing the villagers would do was choosing 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 shade, 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 the protection and blessing of the pu-ta.

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

**Water resources**

Any 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, drought, either within a year, or over consecutive years, occurred, and still does, with monotonous regularity. In addition, poor soil quality and soils with
poor water retention add to water problems. 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, however, 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 sources would go to fish and find food, usually travelling in a group. This would give them enough food for the week. During the dry season they might even go in a caravan to large rivers and lakes, and stay 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. These could be kept and eaten over a long period. Some of this preserved fish might also be used to exchange for rice and other family necessities.

Water resources were not entirely essential for agriculture as rice growing and other cropping was almost entirely rain-fed. Villagers constructed very few permanent dams for irrigation, and state activities in this area only began in the 1960s, with some small dams on streams, and larger water reservoirs from the 1970s. In the past, while villagers did not use permanent dams and weirs during the rice-growing season, they would often build 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 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 regularly used for drinking only with the introduction of metal roofing about fifty years ago. But such roofing was not common amongst villagers until the last thirty years, but few could afford it until relatively recently. Ordinarily, a villager’s house had a roof made of leaves, grass or wood tiles. In the latter case, rainwater might be stored for drinking, collected in small clay jars, but not in tanks, ceramic jars or the large cement jars that are now seen throughout the region. All were introduced relatively recently, with the cement jars becoming common from the mid-1980s.

**Lowland**

It was not always easy to find lowland areas that were suitable for rice growing. Such land needed to be without too many trees, situated in the vicinity of water resources, fertile, and large enough for a new settlement. The newly arrived migrants had to work hard to cut out most of the trees, transforming the forest into paddy land. The land also 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 was too much rain, the *na don* would yield more, while the *na lum* crop would be damaged, while the reverse would be true in those years with less rain.

In the Northeast, land titles began to be issued only after the political change from the absolute monarchy to a constitutional government in 1932. Prior to this the only legal landholders were the royal family, nobles, aristocrats and officials. In theory, migrants had to ask for permission from the state to occupy new land. In practice, however, they rarely did so, usually settling 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
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long-term plans often did occupy more land than was necessary for immediate needs, but planned to expand, 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 and for the construction of a temple. In other words, the village was invariably established on higher land, even if this was only a metre or two above the fields. 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, mango, 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. The family would live in the upstairs area. Close to the house would be a small barn in which rice could be stored. There were no toilets or bathrooms. Bathing was usually completed near a water source (lake, well, river), while defecation was in the fields or behind nearby bushes, in areas reserved for this.

Forest

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

Regrettably, forests near villages have 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 cassava were all introduced as cash crops, and determined the new direction for village production.

Part of the new direction has thus meant that the villagers have lost their forest and its resources. 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.

ORGANISATION

Building Houses

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

After the san pu-ta (shrine of the community spirit) was completed, 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. This process usually saw
delays as the villagers also had to seek their daily food, prepare new rice fields, cut trees, grow rice, and begin growing plants such as bamboo and fruit trees. At the same time, building a house was not simply a matter of cutting trees and beginning construction; it was, and still is, an important event that is related to beliefs and cultural values.

The preparations for building began with the search for wood. Going into the forest for this purpose was not done at any time or by any person. An appropriate 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) was tree cutting allowed. 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's guardian spirits 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 would be used for the minor posts, which for the 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, it was believed that a number of strange or unlucky events might afflict those who lived in the new house.

The auspicious 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’ the location (doo thii). This ceremony was necessary as the house needed 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, evil or negative elements lying underground. There should be no dead logs, parts of trees, animals, stones or mysterious items 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 request for the spirit to reveal details about the location. If, 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. Prayers of the Brahman (or phram, the man who performs the ceremony according to Brahmanism or Hinduism) accompany the placing of the first post. The top of the first post is adorned with flowers and colourful cloth, which correspond to the colour of the day or the star of the owner of the land and house.

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

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 inauguration ceremony. 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, 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 can appear fatalistic or deterministic, but at the same time people remain independent and responsible for their actions. There is room for an individual’s freedom, but humans are not the masters of the universe, only parts of the whole.

**Work and subsistence**

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

If the land was on a plain, the work required to bring the land into production was substantial but not exceptionally demanding. Villagers needed only to clear the land and establish the *khan na* (paddy bunds) to divide the land into smaller portions. The *khan na* 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 anthills be destroyed. The reason was that these were the places where birds and animals made their homes, and there was a desire to keep some balance in nature.

Upland land required more intense and harder work. The soil was harder and there were often more trees to be cleared. Usually the upland would be close to village houses, and would sometimes be a part of the village site, for houses themselves were sited on higher land.

In addition to the plants that were necessary for producing cloth and rope, villagers would also begin to grow banana trees. This was because
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Bananas were considered the most important fruit. They were not simply 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. Villagers would also plant mango, tamarind, coconut palms and sugarcane.

Plants used for cooking included the young leaves and fruits of tamarind, coconut, sugarcane, chillies, lemon grass, jasmine, *phak itu*, onions, and garlic. Vegetables collected from the forest were both for cooking and to eat fresh with food. The rainy season was the best time to collect mushrooms, bamboo shoots (*noh mai*) and rattan (*yod wai*). During periods of rice shortage, the villagers replaced rice with taro roots, which were found in the forest. Many old villagers remember vividly the period of the Second World War, when it was prohibited to transport rice. Rice shortages were so critical that villagers were forced 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 come, in May, the villagers prepare the soil with a first ploughing, using buffalo and wooden plough. 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 transplanted 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, when the harvest begins.

The rainy season is also the season when most other plants and vegetables are grown. When the villagers have time free from their rice fields, they tend these other plants, which also need water during their first months, but once rooted, withstand the dry season that follows. If the rains fail or
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are intermittent, then the villagers would water them from wells or other nearby water sources.

After harvesting, when the rice was taken to small 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 help the women fetch water. This latter work could also be arduous, especially if the water source happened to be far from home. Usually young men, women and children would collect water early in the morning and again in the evening. In the morning one would also hear the sounds of *tam khao* from many houses. Children and women would be husking rice using heavy wooden implements. Meanwhile, their fathers might be fishing or hunting in the forest. Older women would collect vegetables and other food, including small animals and edible insects from the forest and fields.

This pattern of subsistence was called *hed you hed kin* and a *ha chao kin kham* way of life. These expressions mean ‘to work in order to have, to live, and to eat’ and ‘to seek food in the morning, to eat in the evening.’ These expressions indicate a subsistence lifestyle, making use of the natural environment while not exploiting it.

Social Organisation

With the social reforms implemented during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), villages were required to have a state-approved head, elected by villagers. The first village head was officially appointed in the central province of Ayudhya 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 and much respected by villagers. Moral integrity was the main criteria for the position. A leader was expected to give advice to villagers, preside over ceremonies, and solve conflicts, quarrels,
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and other problems in the village. The decision of this elder was final, and there would seldom be further discussion.

Even after the new administrative system was introduced the elders remained highly respected. Even today, after so much change, some communities have heads and elders who tend to function much as they did in the past. So it is that villagers usually do not go to the police or the courts when they have problems. They know that this will be an expensive and time-consuming process for both parties, and may not lead to a resolution of the problem. On the other hand, if they go to the elders, the case would usually be solved and reconciliation achieved.

As an example, consider a case where a village dog kills a fighting cock. The owner of the cock demands 200 baht compensation from the dog's owner. The latter refuses, but is willing to pay 50 baht. No agreement can be reached, so they consult a respected elder. The elder listens attentively to both sides of the story, asks some questions, and decides that the dog's owner should pay 100 baht, for the bird was no ordinary one, but a prize fighting cock. The problem is solved not just with this decision, but with words from the elder, who would repeatedly urge that villagers remain united and to be kind to one another. With such words of wisdom, the villagers would return home. The dog's owner gives the cock's owner 100 baht. But often this is not the end of the matter, for the dog's owner might then provide a meal (prepared with the cock!). It is likely that the cock's owner might use the 100 baht to buy alcohol, and all eat and drink together. Such a resolution tends to ease hurt feelings and reinforce relationships.

This is a realistic example of how conflicts were often solved in the villages of the recent past. There remain some similar cases in villages today. But, few villages are fortunate enough to have a head who is also a 'natural' leader, respected by all and thus having considerable moral power. This was far more common up to about three or four decades ago. Even so, most village heads still seek the advice of the elders; they know that without their blessing it would be difficult to get villagers' participation in community activities.
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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. Rather, it was kinship that provided a form of organisation and a social force and order. Such 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’). In this the two became more than friends, becoming blood sisters or brothers, witnessed by the community, the elders, and the sacred powers. They had to drink at the point where the tip of a knife had entered a bowl of water, vowing to become friends. 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 chillies 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 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.

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 com-
mitment 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 the temple. At first settlement not all communities had monks with them, but even without them, villagers would at least think about establishing a temple hall, which could also be used as a meeting hall. Merit making and the preaching of monks were important to their cultural life. Such a hall might be used as a temporary shelter for monks who might travel through their area or who might come to develop a temple.

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, often small, building, which later might be enlarged and re-built 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 builders. Villagers are, however, proud if they have one in their temple.

The temple grounds would generally be extensive, and could cover several hectares. Part of the ground would be cleared of most of its trees, with just one or two of the bigger trees being left to provide shade. This cleared ground is 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
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villagers bring them food at around seven o'clock in the morning, and again at pel or about eleven o'clock in the morning. The temple's pel drum tells the community that it is time for the monks' late morning meal. Villagers will often take it in turns to deliver food to the temple. During Buddhist holy days (four a month, according to the 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.

Until about four or five decades ago the temple was, in most villages, the centre of community education. The children and young men learned and practised 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

CULTURAL LIFE

THE YEARLY CYCLE

The yearly cultural cycle begins with Songkran. In the past, villagers did not celebrate their birthdays, but Songkran. In effect, this was the community’s birthday. This event normally fell on the 15th full moon, in the fifth month of lunar calendar. Prior to the Second World War, however, the government of Prime Minister Plaek Phibulsongkram fixed Songkran as the 13th of April. It also designated New Year’s Day as January 1st, making Songkran an essentially local celebration, until its promotion as a tourist event in recent years. In the discussion that follows we refer to the months according to the Western calendar.

April is the hottest month of the year, but it always 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 usually 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 and take it in procession to the temple. It is then ignited and shot into the sky. If the village is large, there could be more than one *bang fai*, or the ceremony might have participation from nearby villages. A sort of competition would be organised, with the *bang fai* shot the highest being rewarded, while those failing to leave the ground or travelling only a short distance might result in the owner being painted with mud as punishment.

During the procession of the *bang fai* 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 contents of the verses revolve around requests for rain from the heavens. The verses are usually risqué and sexual, and for the villagers this is a part of the fun, with the jokes and verses providing a respite from the heat and drought. More significantly, villagers traditionally believe that rain originated from a sexual relationship between the gods, and the verses are meant to tempt the god and goddess to come together. This is another village ceremony that has come to be promoted for tourism, especially in Yasothorn province.

There is a similar rainmaking ceremony in some other villages. This involves 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 ribald chants. Some say they believe that the cat, as an animal that does not like water, is the cause of the drought, but it seems that nobody can really explain why the cat is used for this ceremony.

The sixth month has another important ceremony. The celebration of the *pu-ta* requires that 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, buffalo, and ani­
mals they have. The cham will perform the ceremony, offering the pu-ta all that the villagers bring, while a nang lam (a 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, predicting agricultural yields and future troubles in the village.

During this period, if the rains have been sufficient to allow villagers to plough, a ceremony for the ta haek, the 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 bunds are high and water supply 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. The timing and method of ploughing also has rules. Usually, Thursday is considered the best day to begin as it is the day of khru, the master’s day. Similarly, a traditional precept is followed where the first ploughing is in a circle.

The full moon of the sixth month is visakha puja 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 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 ubosot, or if there is no ubosot, a procession of three circles, determined by the monks.

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

The ninth month is when the khao pradab din merit-making ceremony for dead relatives is performed. 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 under one of the trees near the 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 a merit-making ceremony similar to khao pradab din, rite of khao saak is performed in the tenth month. Based on Buddhist mythology and the teachings of the Buddha regarding reconciliation, solidarity, and mutual assistance, it involves a sharing of one’s food, not only with the monks, relatives and other villagers, but also with the spirits, believed to be related to human life.

The ork phansa 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 villagers. They offer food to the monks, and a procession moves to the temple, circling it 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 longboat-racing competitions.
This period also sees the *loy krathong* ceremony. *Loy krathong* involves the floating of candles and flowers, together with each person’s wishes, on a body of water. This was more of an urban celebration than one for villagers, for *loy 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. *Loy krathong* is generally a recently introduced ceremony for villages.

During the twelfth month the *kathin* ceremony is held. For 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, halls, and *ubosot*.

The months of October and November witness 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 ceremonies.

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, 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. 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 practised today, as villagers seem to have far less spare time.

The second month sees the ceremony of *khoon lan* or *bun kun 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 *sukwan khao* is per-
formed by a *phram* with, sometimes, monks being invited to pour per-
fumed water on rice. A *dai saisin* (a blessed cotton thread) is hung around
that area, as a sign that no bad spirit may enter. The owner of the 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 the ceremony, most of the rice is taken to a vil-
lage 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*), that refers to a
story told during the Buddha’s time.

In some villages, the woman who first to opens the barn, early in the
morning, to get rice to take to the temple will greet *mae phosop*. She will
ask permission to take 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 hand-
ful 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, think-
ing 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 *makha puja*
(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' preaching, 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, as kindness and sharing are significant values for villagers. Such values are crucial for keeping a village community together.

RITES AND RITUALS OF BIRTH, DEATH, AND MARRIAGE

Birth, death and marriage are three of the most significant life events. Each involves important beliefs and values associated with village culture.

Birth

Giving birth in the villages of Northeastern Thailand, as in most agricultural societies, was an event that occurred more than just once or twice for most women. Having many children was a sign of fertility and the large family was blessed. This potential for a large family was one of the reasons why new migrants to an area would occupy more land than they could work with their own labour; the extra area was for the children they expected to
have. Birth, such a significant event, involved important cultural practices. Of course, times have changed, but the patterns of the past have altered only over the last two or three decades.

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 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 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 lie by a fire. Once cut, this wood had to be covered by branches to prevent evil phi having a bad influence on it, 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. Such spirits 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 in 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 phi. 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 believe that, for the first three days of life, the child belongs to the phii, 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 phii, by making offerings of food, fruits, flowers, and candles. Because of this belief, villagers must also find ways to prevent the phii 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 phii, which could well take the child back. By stating that the child is ugly or sickly the phii can be deceived.

Once the child of a phii becomes the child of its parent, the baisri sukwan ceremony 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 an expert in child-raising, is asked to join the ceremony, believing that her presence will mean that child-rearing in the new-born’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, leaving only a patch at the centre of the head. The cut hair will be put on a banana leaf 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 thread, and food is offered to the phii 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 a full member of its family, having passed through an unsafe period for the new-born.
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 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 ‘normal’ death the corpse will be bathed and dressed and put at the centre of the house. The elders lay down the position, direction, and other details concerning the corpse. 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. Someone 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, preferably 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 deceased’s favourite things 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 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 involves 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. Today they are conducted at temples.

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

Marriage

In the past, the young men and women of the village would marry early. 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 phi of the house and from the ancestral spirits by offering food. The man also had to seek forgiveness from the family elders, and the parents of the girl would usually require that a fine be
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levied. Most of these cases would, however, often end with a marriage taking place soon after the transgression had 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 used by a young man to the girl he wants to marry. Nevertheless, the couple would each manage to express their desire for marriage. 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 elders present.

The elders on both sides will discuss the matter. They will often do this by way of traditional proverbs and sayings that 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, who might suggest, ‘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 chew betel together, symbolising the agreement. 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, that side 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. 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 that 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.

The wife-to-be will prepare offerings, gifts for parents, relatives, *phii*, and the elders of the village. These are usually pillows, cushions, and cloth, all requiring time and effort to produce. Other offerings will be made a day prior to the wedding ceremony.

On the wedding 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 bride, 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 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 ethical precepts in form of verses of *phaya*. Following this, the *sukwan* proceeds and eventually the congregation will bind the couple's wrists with *saisin*.

The ceremony also involves 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. 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

LEARNING

In the past the wat (temple) was the centre of community life. As we have explained, 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 (boy and youths who serve monks and temple), novices (samanera; naen), and monks (phra phiks).

Although social reform began at the end of last century in most of Thailand, the impact in Isan only really became noticeable from the 1920s. Even then this was limited to the major towns. Villages were really only affected following the Second World War. Until the 1950s and 1960s, many village schools continued to be housed in the temple grounds, using the temple hall as schoolrooms, with one teacher for all four elementary classes.

A family with many children might offer a son as a dek wat for the temple. He would live there while serving the monks, learning the Buddhist way of life and the religion’s doctrines. Additionally, the boy would learn to read and write. 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. 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 of twenty.
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It was common – and still is – 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 village boys 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. This is quite a different experience 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 written Lao. These two scripts are far removed from Khmer, and may indicate that the Northeast, though under the political influence of the Khmer for a considerable period, maintained its own traditions in some aspects of everyday life.

*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. While these stories are not found in the Tripitaka, 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* (stories invoking wisdom). These vary in length, depending on the region or temple, but most are recorded in long palm leaf books.
The *dek wat* and novices learned to read and write the Tham language. The texts they studied were Buddhist doctrines, with chants learned by heart, so that they could be used in ceremonies. Another part of learning was the practice of preaching. This is not simply the 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 suad mon*), while some, called *suad patimokka*, are used fortnightly. Others are used for various occasions during the many ceremonies monks must attend. 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 ceremonies, with the most important sermon being the delivered during the *phra wase* celebration, performed after the harvest. The importance of this sermon lies in the fact that all the stories told 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 to pass examinations to become a *nak tham* (one who is an
expert in Dhamma). There are three grades of nak tham: third grade is the lowest, ranging up to the first grade. The preparation for the nak tham 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 nak tham examinations did not include the Pali language, which is for another system of education and recognition called Prayoke, where there are seven 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 did all village novices and monks have nak tham degrees, but this reflected not their ignorance but more a lack of opportunity to take the examinations, which were all 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 the central government and Sangha were imposing change. 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 even heard Central Thai; most still did not have a radio. However, Central Thai was gradually
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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 or fifty years. Today the Northeastern dialect continues to be the language learnt and spoken at home, but the pressure to learn and use Central Thai is strong.

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. 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 is regarded as being able to perform miraculous acts. These include, walking so fast (even if externally still walking normally) that nobody can follow or reach them, controlling objects without using physical energy, and influencing others to do what they want. Much of the vija 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 khatha and lai sak (body tattooing with black ink). One elderly villager who had been ordained as a monk some fifty years ago had 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, to ward off dogs, as they had often bitten him. 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 khatha 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 having 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.

LEARNING PROCESSES
Once a man had become ‘complete’ through the knowledge obtained in the temple, one who disrobed might begin a search for other expertise for his and his family’s livelihood. To become significant in a village, a person needed a khru and the time to learn and practise; there was no other way.

Usually it was during the dry season that one would leave the village in search of a master. This master may have been contacted previously, or might not have been 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
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meaning, with luk meaning child. 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 practised and transmitted this vija through the generations, reflecting 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 not only learnt 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 elders 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 Srisaket 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 legalities, understanding cultural identity rather than 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 experiences, adventures, and new knowledge.
These were exiting moments for a village, when someone returned from a long trip with wondrous stories to relate. 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 unusual, 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 of significance in the community or a master.

SACRED POWER

In the past, most young men in villages all searched for a sacred power. Such powers might be gained through sacred objects, amulets, spells, khattha or tattoos. The people who could give them these sacred powers were the masters, whom the young men had to seek out. This might be called ‘magic’ as it involves the art of the manipulation of secret and sacred powers.

In the Northeast, as elsewhere, the magical arts could be divided into two categories of ‘black’ and ‘white’ magic. Black magic is the vija learned and performed in order to harm other persons. For example, ya sang is a kind of poison made of herbs and other substances (even chemical poisons are added these days). When put in water or food, the victim suffers or may 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 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 that can cause the victim to go mad, as if possessed by a phii.
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If a person suspected that they were the subject of black magic, they would immediately contact a healer, who might be a monk, *maw tham*, *maw nam mon* (sacred water healers) or a special healer for such cases called a *maw teng kae*. Even *maw song* (diviners) might be consulted. Some healers were experts in ‘correcting’ things and bringing the patient back to normality, while some used herbal medicine or holy water to cure the problem. The common factor, however, was that all had a special sacred formula for eliminating the evil effects of the magic.

Even today, villagers who believe they are the victims of black magic will never go to see modern medical doctors. 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. It is said that an evil influence can remain inside a person, and it requires time to completely eliminate it.

Each healer would have their own methods, 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.

Black magic masters 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 difficult to make sure that their disciples do not misuse their powers. Envy, quarrelling, and revenge are common motives for the misuse of these powers. Black magic has become a 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 disciples (*luk sit*).

White magic consists of all those *Vija* that are not harmful or are beneficial to the person who has it, and to 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 that 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 as 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. For example, 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 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 khru. Some of the disciples would go into a trance and start to behave in the manner of the tattooed creature on their bodies, as tigers, monkeys (Hamuman, 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 or needle 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, Hamuman, bird (salika), a lizard, swan, dragon, lion or sacred words and signs. Each of these has the purpose of granting 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.

The most important part of the tattooing ceremony is the praying associated with the khatha of the tattoo master. The disciples have to concentrate fully, so that the ‘power’ may enter them, making the tattoo efficient. 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 sila (Buddhist rules for lay people), with added injunctions not to eat leftover food or particular vegetables and fruits, and not to walk under stairs, bridges or clotheslines.

Monks who are masters say that to tattoo the body is merely a means to assist some people in keeping the sila, 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 of those tattooed believe that the tattoo has power, provided through the master’s sacred formula. It is difficult to maintain all prescriptions, and so disciples will visit the master after a period of time in order to request that he again say the sacred formula over the tattoo, renewing its power.

Sacred objects have a long tradition in the Northeast. These are taken from nature, and include metals, stones, jewels, the teeth of animals, horns, bones, and some plants and wood. These are then carved in various forms. A popular charm, usually carved from wood, is the palad kik, a penis shape that traditionally symbolises fertility. It is believed that the objects themselves have some power, but that they will have far more if conse-
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crafted 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 and for the appreciation of others.

The most common sacred objects 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 protection. 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 for attracting young village girls.

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. They risked being ambushed by bandits or attacked by wild beasts or 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 tattooing of the body.

WISDOM AND TRADITION

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 villagers.

Because the oral tradition consists of sayings, stories and the like, they vary from place to place and from generation to generation. The oral tradi-
Learning

tion is dynamic. Although the core of meanings remains identical, differences are in the detail of the oral versions.

There are three groups of people who, for different occasions, play important roles transmitting the oral tradition and its heritage. These are monks, elders, and maw lam. They are the khru who teach and perform the ceremonies or entertain the people.

The oral tradition also has living elements that incorporate the content of wisdom 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. The event that happened once upon a time 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 so. 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, this is not the same person in adulthood as in 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.

Palm leaf inscriptions mainly represent the scriptural tradition although some are also found as stone inscriptions. The palm leaves can be either long or 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
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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 in museums or the libraries of universities and colleges.

It is the monks who learn religious texts, khatha, nithan (fables), tamnan (myths), and phaya. Some of these monks 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 nithan, tamnan and sometimes-new stories invented for a special occasion. Besides these three important groups of people, parents also transmit the tradition.

As mentioned above, the Northeastern scriptural traditions have two versions. The ordinary language written in Tham characters for monks, and verses in Thai Noi characters for lay people. Parts of nithan and stories are taken from 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 phra 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; they are secular stories made religious.

Besides religious mythology and stories, there is knowledge consisting of moral teachings, which are told and retold by grandfathers to grandchildren, mothers to children, fathers to sons and daughters. These include stories of historically important persons who founded towns, important temples and other constructions, and records of important historically based events. These are not made chadok for they remain secular, and yet they still have important meanings and are significant elements of popular wisdom.
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 leaf 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 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. Over the past half-century this tradition of omitting names has been eroded. Those who make merit these days often wish to have their name declared to the public, so 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 rodents and ants sometimes damaged those that were hidden. Today only some elderly monks who were ordained in their youth, and a few elderly villagers, who were once monks, can read or write Tham and Thai Noi.

It can be seen that the traditional patterns of learning and 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. But much has also been lost or changed.
Villagers believe in rebirth. This is essentially related to the concept of kham (karma in Sanskrit). This belief involves an understanding that one's 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 recompense or as a punishment. In the latter situation 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 something one can confess and then expect forgiveness. A sin is a kham (karma, an action, a deed) committed, and the person will receive its 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 would have good health, fortune, prosperity, happiness, and 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 practised in everyday life, yet the highlight is to make merit or tham bun. Merit is objectified in popular thinking. A person accumulates merit much as if one has rice in the barn, but it is for both 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 items to share with others.

Besides special festivities, villagers would make merit on Buddhist holy days, 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. They ask the gods, Buddha, Dhamma and sangha to repay the villager’s deeds. In the secular world this might be seen as an act of thanks, but in the Buddhist view it is, in fact, the villagers who should thank the monks. This is because it is the monks 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 not as ‘begging’, but as a blessing for the people, for the monks are providing an opportunity to make merit. Some monks may also preach during the afternoon on holy days, but this is not the 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, so as to practise sila, samadhi and panya. The five sila (precepts)
Making Merit

for lay people are remembered and strengthened. *Samadhi* (concentration) grows and the *panya* (or wisdom) is raised. Further, the ability to distinguish between good and bad, and the strength to do that which is right, are enhanced.

Making merit is an essential part of village life and every household will have made merit by taking food and gifts to monks and the temple. Some will bring food for the monks each day, especially during Buddhist Lent, but most of these will be the monk’s relatives. Others who regularly do this are the older women who have the rice, food and time to devote to making merit. Most villagers will offer food to monks on holy days and during festivals and ceremonies. On these days villagers will observe the eight precepts which were given by the Buddha to *ubasok* and *ubasika* (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 why there is usually no meat in the markets on holy days. Even in large towns and Bangkok there is no killing of animals on these 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 fall into debt because of the ordination and its associated ceremony, but explain that as ordination, like death, occurs only once, they are prepared to 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 and 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* (sponsor) of one or more
monks. The *yome* is usually the mother of father of the monk, while the *yome upatthak* is one who sponsors the ordination and meets the expenses of a monk during his period in the order and is believed to make great merit. Even 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. 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 increasingly difficult to find even enough food for one’s own family. The environment is changing, as is life.

**SPIRITS**

It would be exceptional to meet a Thai or Lao who does not harbour a fear of *phii*. *Phii* are a part of life. In the Northeast, *phii* are present in the family, in the community, in the rice field, the forests, rivers, streams, and in the trees. In fact, they are 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 the *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.

Residing in a shrine at the fringe of a village, is the most common *phii*, the *pu-ta*. This spirit is recognised in virtually all villages. Another commonly recognised *phii* 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
Making Merit

mahesak and pu-ta, and a village with a mahesak lak ban will not have a pu-ta; both are the phii of the village community. However, the perception of each 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 mahesak lak ban, while the cham will be the voice of the spirit, having entered a trance.

The spirits are always consulted before important village occasions, with the villagers asking for the phii's permission, a blessing or for protection. Such events include birth, death, marriage, departures and arrivals from trips, sickness and recovery, and problems in the community. They are an essential element of community life.

For the community, phii represent 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 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.

Northeastern villages classify phii in two categories, good and evil phii. Good phii are phii fa (heavenly gods), phii of the community (pu-ta, mahesak), and phii of nature, such as phii pa (forest), phii na (rice field),
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*phi*ii *nam* (water), and *phi*ii *ban* (family). *Phi*ii *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.

Evil *phi*ii are malevolent and harmful to people. Most 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 *phi*ii from the village. The evil deeds of these *phi*ii are identified by cases of illnesses, for these *phi*ii require nourishment, and will seek this in the body of humans. The offerings of food are an alternative for the *phi*ii, so that they will not have to seek it by entering people. In the past, and in different places, evil *phi*ii were identified by names such as *phi*ii *k*rasue, *phi*ii *phong,* *phi*ii *phrai,* *phi*ii *pret* and *phi*ii *ha,* but these are seldom used today. Generally, the contemporary term is the inclusive *phi*ii *rai* (evil or dangerous *phi*ii). In case of epidemics, however, villagers will still refer to *phi*ii *fa,* especially when dealing with animal diseases.

One evil *phi*ii well known to villagers is the *phi*ii *pob.* *Phi*ii *pob* is different from other *phi*ii 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 of magical formula and objects) and fail to observe the related prescriptions can become *phi*ii *pob.* This *phi*ii *pob* will go into someone’s body to devour their entrails, and the person will fall ill. Once discovered by a *maw* (in this case, an exorcist or shaman), the possessed person is forced to reveal the name of the *phi*ii *pob.* If the *maw* is powerful the *phi*ii *pob* will have to leave the person’s body. But even if the *maw* is not so powerful, once the *phi*ii’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 *phi*ii *pob* from the afflicted person and then to leave the village.

People who are *phi*ii *pob* and their families would often be newcomers to a village and, as strangers, were already suspect. Many found themselves having to move from one village to the next as they became identified as being or having been *phi*ii *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, only to be driven out.

In the case of 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 make a new beginning.

To comprehend this Northeastern belief in *phii* one has to understand the logic of villagers. While many urban Thais still believe in *phii*, there is an increasing rejection of *phii* as simply a superstition. Rationalist Buddhists and some modern, educated, urban persons tend to take this view. But villagers believe that *phii* exist, even if they have not seen them. They will say that, ‘*Phii* exist because they have meaning’, rather than ‘*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, causing trouble wherever they go.

**KWAN**

The word *kwan* designates one of the most important elements of Thai and Lao culture. It is also one of the most difficult to define. Cultures are bundles of attributes and beliefs put together in unique ways, and thus it is not easy to translate the word *kwan*. However, we may consider it close to ‘spirit’ or ‘essence of life.’ *Kwan* is not only used with reference to humans, for all things have *kwan*. This includes buffalo, cattle, animals, rice, and even the humble cart and Bangkok taxi (usually driven by a northeasterner). In general the concept of *kwan* is not very different in the various regions.
of Thailand but it is in the Northeast and North that the tradition is most evidently maintained, much as it was in the past.

The ceremony concerning *kwan* is *sukwan*. This ceremony is performed for all important life events, with the exception of death. Pregnancy, marriage, the inauguration of a new house, leaving on trip, the beginning of Lent (for monks), arrival from a trip (even from jail), during a long illness, recovery from illness must all be celebrated. So too must relatives, friends or visitors to the family or village be welcomed with a *sukwan* ceremony. Such rites will vary 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* (the *kwan* is lost), *kwan nee* (the *kwan* flees) are common phrases 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 is 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 thread is attached to the *phaa kwan* and passed first through the hands of the person who is 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 that is joined by the whole congregation. The ceremony ends with the binding of the wrist of the first person with thread, 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*, often neglected by scholars, its social aspects.
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. The couple will 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, togetherness, and solidarity in a traditional community. The gods, angels, guardians, the phi of ancestors, and the community are unified.

HEALING POWERS

All sicknesses in villages have an explanation. If the cause is not natural, then it is supernatural. Generally, villagers can 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 of being caused by phi. 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 phi, and he or she will ask that phi to come forth and reveal the cause of the illness.

While some maw song are involved exclusively in diagnosis, 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 and khru, and rituals always accompanied their healing.
Khru is an essential concept in traditional village culture. As mentioned earlier, a khru is not simply a person who has passed knowledge to his disciples. Rather, a khru personifies the whole process of the passing of wisdom, knowledge and skills though the generations. Before performing any important act, villagers will remind themselves of their khru in an act of recognition and gratitude, and with 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 disseminate 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 acolytes.

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 must 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 cases of illness may be phi, but as we noted above, may also be unknown magical powers manipulated by various people. People subject to acts of black magic will receive various treatments, for should one treatment prove unsuccessful, then the cause is considered to be 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 powerful phi, then a more skilled maw is required. The maw treating the patient will usually provide advice on how to find another maw.

Traditional diagnosis has many methods. The maw song, who claims to possess a thep or deva (god, angel, good phi), will enter a trance and
define the cause of the illness. 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 begin breaking the rod and counting the pieces, with this process demonstrating if the cause of the presumed cause of the illness is correct. Most illnesses are considered to be due to offending a phi (phid phi).

Healers who are not maw song diagnose illnesses by asking questions directed at defining actions that are likely to have offended phi. The maw will ask, '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 or disturbing the pu-ta?' The questions may, if necessary, also examine personal activities. The maw will ask, '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 questions to that matter also, asking, 'Did you have any conflict with anyone in the village or elsewhere? Did they threaten to do you any harm? Is your 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 phi. A patient's eyes and physical appearance are important. For example, a patient possessed by a phi pob is said never to 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 phi. They will explain this by reference to a long illness that they had, and could not be cured either by traditional or modern doctors. They found that a significant phi needed to reside in them or with them, and once they accepted the phi, they recovered from their illness. They then became healers by being able to find out
whether less significant phii wanted to reside with their patients, required only a food offering or a particular merit to be satisfied. If a patient followed the prescribed treatment, 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 an 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 involved will often include trances and dancing.

The most popular healers in the Northeast are maw tham. This kind of healer is known to be a Buddhist who practises the Dhamma. Most have been ordained monks and know the monks’ chants, tham, holy formula and ceremonies. Most northeasterners, though they believe in phii, also have mixed beliefs that encompass Brahmanism and Buddhism, with the latter taken as the ultimate truth and life goal. The Buddha is worshipped and taken to be higher than any phii, and the Buddha, Dhamma, and sangha (or Triple Gems) 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 the phii.

In most Northeastern villages maw tham remain, but few are under sixty years of age these days. They have learnt their healing skills while ordained as monks, from relatives or from khru. To learn the khatha requires 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 of patients. Negligence may cause trouble for the maw tham themselves and treatment may be unsuccessful.

Prescriptions to be followed by maw tham are akin to those for other maw. They should not sit on stairs nor walk through the houses of others. They must not walk under a clothes line or go under banana trees, and they are forbidden to 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.
Villagers know maw tham have moral integrity, are generous, and will make personal sacrifices for the community. They do not do this for money, but because they feel it is their duty and responsibility. Because of this they are respected by villagers, and when they get old, they become thao kae (older people who preside over rites and rituals) and chao kote. Maw tham 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. 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 phi, but their treatments vary. Some will use only their sacred formula, while others blow on the sick. Still others will use water, blowing it from the mouth or using a leaf or small branch to sprinkle water on to the sick. There are also those who use herbal medicines or oils.

Maw nam mon (sacred water healers) are an important group of healers. Nam mon is water consecrated by monks, Brahman or 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 the Buddha, Dhamma, and sangha. Water means life for villagers. It provides coolness, purity and happiness. It is also a source of life. Villagers believe that 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, use it to wash or may be anointed or have it sprinkled on them by the maw.

To make water 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 a small sum of money as 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 to cure persons disturbed by phii and those suffering natural illnesses.

Maw nam mon who gain wide recognition from villagers are known to be healers of all sicknesses, with some known to heal broken bones. 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 buffalo. 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. While differences between various maw may be quite subtle, each maw will recognise these.

Maw namman differ from maw nam mon only by the fact that they use oil (namman) made from plants, herbs or the bones of wild animals rather than water. Maw namman are principally known for healing of broken bones and 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 patients to use it themselves. They do not do this, however, and the maw treats the patients directly. As with other healers, patients of a maw namman must perform a ceremony in which a set of offerings is prepared for the khru (candles, flowers, white cloth, etc.)

Maw namman 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 namman, like other healers, have many prescriptions, with only the details differing.

Another well-known healer is the maw lam phii fa. Here lam means singing verses in the traditional Northeastern way, while phii fa means ‘heavenly spirits.’ 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 producing an organ-like sound. 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 ancestor, 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 healers 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 practised the skills themselves. Traditionally they are supposed to receive only a 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 from the 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. However, this does not lessen the importance of the cultural aspects in their healing. The whole process, from going to collect herbs, preparing and administering them, is all accompanied by khatha learned from the masters. These khatha relate the disciples to their masters and 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 consist of beings and powers. The four fundamental elements of humans and nature are earth, water, air and fire. The balance is disturbed when the four elements are no longer in harmony. Food, the environment, weakness, age and a range of other factors cause this.

Northeasterners consider the kwan as one of the most important elements of their lives, symbolising the heart of human life. If the kwan is disturbed it will fly away, and the person will become ‘sick.’ This is why the sukwan ceremony is usually performed after a recovery from illness. The sukwan ceremony is performed to welcome back the kwan, and to urge it to remain with the person.

Faith in the healer is essential. More than this, there must also be faith in the healer’s 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 that 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, always smiling, cheers his patients with his approach, and this alone often makes them feel 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 also transmit a vital power to their patients. The presence and assistance of relatives and friends support this, so that a patient is never isolated. Relatives, friends and fellow villagers keep visiting the patient, are present during the healing ritual, and share their vital power with the patient. They will do everything they can to assist recovery. They are an integral part of the treatment.
CHAPTER 5

VILLAGE AND STATE

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’ (including 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 historically, culturally, socially and economically more closely related to the kingdoms in Laos and Cambodia than to the Siamese kingdom in Bangkok. The Lao of Isan inhabited a region that had been claimed by various Siamese, Lao and Khmer kingdoms, and local chao had paid tribute to the Siamese court, as had the Khmer and Lao rulers. The Lao of Isan did not feel different from the Lao of ‘Laos.’ Indeed, in
the 19th and early 20th centuries the cultural coherence between the peoples on the two sides of the Mekong River owed much to the fact that the Siamese resettled thousands of Lao in the Northeast after they destroyed Vientiane in 1827. Similarly, the Khmer peoples of the lower Northeast were as one with those in Cambodia.

The Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1867 meant that the Siamese court was forced to relinquish its claim to tributary relationships with Cambodia and Laos. The French, who were expanding their rule through the Indochina region, were given rights to navigation on the Mekong River, and their protectorate in Cambodia was acknowledged. Soon after ascending to the throne in 1868, King Chulalongkorn began the administrative reform of towns in the periphery. High Commissioners 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 relinquished all the left bank of Mekong 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 began. 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 even demoted in the new administrative arrangements.

Taxation became a major issue. Taxes were raised from 3½ to four baht. In Ubol, the High Commissioner required all large animals, including cattle, buffalo, 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 an imposition on villagers. Paying tax was a burden for villagers, and they
Village, State, and Change

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 imprisonment.

The sum of four baht may not appear large today, but for villagers, barely linked with the cash economy and 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 expenditures over 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 might forfeit some of their property, such as cattle and buffalo, or collect 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 the 20th century, and then only along the Mekong River between Nakorn Phanom and Mukdaharn. The second road constructed is today called the Friendship (or Mitraphab) Highway, 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 and dangerous animals, 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 called 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 to 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, buffalo, 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 and other traders who had better access to capital and had strong links with the Bangkok ruling class with powerful Chinese and European merchants.

REBELLION

History records numerous uprisings and rebellions in the Northeast from at least the 17th century. Such events were attempts to seize power from rulers or to undermine their power. In general, this can be understood as resistance to the dominance of the ‘Siamese Thai’ over the Lao of the Northeast. 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 region, which was felt by the people of the Northeast, especially as they shared the same historical and cultural roots. A number of historical uprisings shook local powers and the power of the Siamese. These are outlined below.

**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 on the other. Bunkwang, a commoner with a temple education, organised a group of peasants and seized Nakorn Ratchasima. This *muang* was considered the front door to the Siamese kingdom of Ayudhya. Then, with some 4,000 peasants, 84 elephants and 100 horses, he marched on Ayudhya. His army moved through the mountains to Lopburi, and advanced to within sixty kilometres of the Siamese capital. The Ayudhyan troops, however, succeeded in dispersing the rebels and killed Bunkwang.

Bunkwang had been recognised by Northeasterners as an educated leader. He 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 Thai king at Ayudhya. He wanted to establish the Northeast as an autonomous region, which apparently also meant some kind of link with the Lao kingdom.

**The Chiangkeo Rebellion of 1791**

Only a few years after Bangkok was established as the new capital of Siam in 1782, some of the areas considered tributary states challenged the new power. A few local minority groups, presumably encouraged and supported by other local dissidents, rebelled. Chiangkeo came from the eastern region of the Mekong (Saravan in modern Laos), which belonged to the Champasak kingdom. The ethnic group involved was referred to as
Kha. The Kha rebellion almost succeeded in occupying Champasak, when it was defeated by the troops of various towns, including Nakorn Ratchasima. These forces arrested the Kha and made them slaves, a position they could not escape 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 east side of the Mekong, 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 mi bun (a person with great merit), who could perform miraculous feats. He also claimed to be Thao Chuang, a meritorious hero in local literature, reborn to save the Kha who were oppressed by local authorities. He established a temple, and 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 put down the rebellion. Eventually Sa and the Kha surrendered, with Sa being brought to Bangkok, where he was jailed for life. The Kha were again enslaved, with their descendants settling on the eastern bank 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 1895 Battle of Sambok

A small but significant reaction to the new taxation system introduced by the Siamese court took place in 1895. Some former monks of Sa-ad village (Namphong district in today’s Khon Kaen province) persuaded villagers
not to pay the tax, which required them to make a long trip to Nakhon Ratchasima. They argued that if a tax had to be paid, it should be to Vientiane, not Bangkok. For three years the villagers refused to be taxed. 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

In these years a series of widely dispersed rebellions occurred throughout the North and Northeastern regions of modern Thailand and parts of Laos. Historians consider these uprisings as some of the most significant events shaking the power of the Siamese court in this period. In the Northeast, uprisings took place in today’s Kalasin, Khon Kaen, Chaiyaphum, Loei, Nakorn Phanom, Sakol Nakhon, Nongkhai, Udorn, Roi-et, Mahasarakham, Buriram, Srisaket, Surin and Ubon, as well as in many parts of Laos.

These events manifested themselves through groups of troubadour 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. One record from Roi-et states,

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 blown away.1
The message predicted miraculous events during this dramatic period. Small stones would be transformed into gold and silver, while gold and silver would be turned to stone, lead or iron. Many things would be miraculously changed, and people would be threatened by demons created of pigs and buffalo. 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 that,

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 sacrament water.2

In some villages the people set up bowls of water and bathed feet as an act of purification. Those known to be sinners were washed more than those considered good. They were preparing for the destruction of their world, to be rebuilt by the saviour, who would alleviate the suffering of the just and right and punish the wicked. Of course, those who followed the saviour would prosper.

The phu mi bun events did not necessarily have an aggressive and rebellious nature and the phu mi bun and their followers did not set out to seize state power despite their association with rapid social, political, and economic change in the region. 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, some of them being related to the earlier Kha rebels, which seem to have used these events to fuel their conflicts with declining local powers. This was especially the case in the lower Northeast, Ubol and in the southern Lao region. Some 2,500 of these people, under the guidance of leaders named Man and Lek, attacked Khemarat, burned and looted the town, and moved on Ubol, before being defeated by that town’s forces.
It is clear that, by design or through pressure, the objective of most other groups came to include the establishment of a kingdom that was neither Siamese nor French. Their leader’s messages were messianic. For these two powers this was a threat to their power. There was considerable socio-political confusion in the Northeast during the first years of the 20th century. The Siamese court considered that there was an attempt to remove the Northeast from its authority. This was closely related to the threat from an expansionary France, which had success on the Lao 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 that followed persuaded the French not to march their troops across the border. The movement was gradually suppressed in the Northeast and in French Laos but many leaders were killed or jailed, and their followers dispersed.

The Nong Makkeo Rebellion of 1924

This uprising began in Wiangkeo village in Loei 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 it 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, so Wiangkeo changed its name. The villagers gathered at the temple every day to be taught about the kingdom that 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 for any authority in the new kingdom. However, the police countered quickly, and arrested the leaders together with about a hundred 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 Noi's centre, awaiting the coming of the *Sri-ariyametrai*. Noi was eventually arrested and sentenced to four years jail. Some of his followers continued his activities, but were also harrassed and arrested.

The 1959 Sila Wongsin Rebellion

In 1959 there was yet another *phu mi bun* rebellion by the peasants of the Northeast. It 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 Warinchamrap district to migrate with him to establish a new settlement in the Chokchai 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. Local villagers also joined Sila's group. The 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 look action and killed twelve people, including women and children, and arresting 44 villagers. Sila and some of his followers had, however, escaped the night before. The then dictator, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, was incensed, claiming that Sila and his followers were more dangerous than communists were. Sila was eventually arrested while trying to cross the border to Laos, and was sentenced to death.

These uprisings have been officially recorded as aimed at undermining the state's power. The causes were variously given as strange beliefs, a
manipulation of Buddhist doctrine or, for the more serious cases, as attempts to actually seize state power. However, it also seems that economic crises may have been contributing factors. A monk, writing before the 1901-2 events, explained,

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. ... The 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 recognised that poverty was one reason for these uprisings, and limited measures to address such problems – and to assist security – were initiated following some of these events. For example, after 1901-2 the construction of the railway from Nakorn Ratchasima to Surin and the first road along the Mekong River were completed. However, this was the only infrastructure provided, and there were few economic reforms that improved the situation of the villagers. They still had to pay the four baht tax and this remained their main cash burden. For their family and community needs, they could manage, and they could deal with banditry. However, as the new social order and administrative arrangements were issued from the central government, and there was no co-operation with local powers, villagers were left to face these changes by themselves.
It was, therefore, not only economic issues that 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 indicates that these were concerns.

This was also recognised by the government and the reform of the education system was one measure introduced to address these issues. The government wanted to make all people ‘Thai.’ Schooling was expanded and standardised throughout 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 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, but more carefully vetted and officially appointed by the provincial governor. This meant that while ‘elected’, these leaders were, in fact, representatives of the state. They were required to attend 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 villagers’ resistance has been largely passive, being expressed in language, nithan, 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 villagers are naturally passive. Rather, the defeat of their uprisings, together with the regular ‘defeats’ they suffered in their dealings with the state and with traders, encouraged villagers to project a passive face in their politics.
Nevertheless, the Northeast was also a stronghold of the Communist Party of Thailand. In modern parliamentary politics the villagers of the Northeast are aware that their numbers can carry some influence. And, as their rights have been extended and protected, protests have become more common political tools.

Notes
2. Cited in Keyes, p.296.
CHAPTER 6

CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

Isan villages entered the new era of industry and capitalism rather late. As noted above, it was only after the Second World War that the pace of change accelerated. Even then it was limited to areas close to railway lines and the few 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 involved, as workers entered into seasonal migration to Bangkok, especially once the railway had been built and extended.

Trade

Up to the late 1950s roads were built principally to link large towns. Most roads remained dirt tracks for carts, and were often impassable in the rainy season. Chinese traders had moved through the towns of the Northeast along roads, railways and rivers. As transport links expanded, so some of the larger villages saw the arrival of Chinese traders, a number 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 rice to sell to Chinese-
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owned mills in district towns. Often this would involve a small caravan of carts. On these trips the traders would buy items for themselves and other villagers for the return trip.

Even though the modern road system expanded, Chinese traders moved through the 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 locals 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 exactly like the Chinese traders. The difference was that they were felt to understand locals and so traded with sympathy and a knowledge of cultural values.

In 1939 the villager's taxation burden was lightened somewhat when a land 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. But, in sum, villagers found the new system preferable. 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. Neither was it difficult to spend their money.

The modern world was arriving. The year 1932 had seen the end of Absolute Monarchy and the beginning of the Constitutional period, as a democratic state was proclaimed. 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 solve them on their own initiative. They say, ‘We were afraid
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of government officials; they might put us in jail or fine us; it was better to solve problems ourselves.'

The orders given to the kamnan and phuyaiban by the Nai Amphur usually related to ridding their areas of thieves and other 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 was not on the agenda unless the villages were considered susceptible to communist insurgency.

But even by the 1950s many villages had shops in place, selling the consumer goods that 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. Expanded trading worked to change aspects of village life. Medicine is a good example.

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. The dry season would see one or more visits by these mobile cinemas, to show movies and sell medicine.
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Medicine was not the only product brought into villages in this manner. Torch batteries, soaps, beauty products, and other household goods were also brought by mobile 'shops.' Today there are very few trucks of this kind. They have been replaced by television and by mobile cinemas requiring villagers to buy tickets. More recently mobile discos have been established.

Up until the late 1970s hospitals were only found in provincial towns or, exceptionally, in larger district towns. In most district towns and larger sub-districts the government established health care centres with officials trained in basic health care. These centres had significant budgetary and administrative constraints, but did offer a choice to villagers who could not afford to travel to a hospital in town or to buy expensive medicines from pharmacies. 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 favourable impressions. And, the new schooling system reinforced these.

Education
The reform of the school system began early in the 20th century. However, most villages in the Northeast did not have a school until well after the Second World War. Even then schools were usually in temples, and it was only in the 1960s that government schools began to have an impact. At first there were schools only in sub-districts or, exceptionally, in some larger villages. 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, taking care of the four compulsory elementary classes. This lack of trained teachers was a serious problem for the government, and it significantly increased the number of teacher's colleges.
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throughout the country. Ironically, by the 1980s, thousands of students were graduating from such colleges but were jobless.

Schools showed children that education meant being able to write, read and calculate, but also taught them many things they would seldom 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 such luxuries. Education also 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 help in collecting food for the family. However, one of the main reasons children missed school was that they had no uniform or had to alternate with their brothers or sisters if they only had one uniform.

Often villagers did not see much sense to the state push for education, 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 would consider sending their children for study beyond the compulsory primary school level. Secondary schooling in towns was usually out of the question. It was too far and cost too much.

Schoolteachers 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 had not attended government 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 primary 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 were stupid, reinforcing these perceptions. Having a child in the police or military was seen as a way to a comfortable life for the whole family.

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. Many teachers found that better roads meant that they could live in towns and travel to 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. Many were waiting for their chance to move to urban schools. Such teachers contributed little to the villages, but, more importantly, learnt little 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**

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. Increasingly, government officials, from various ministries, began entering villages and proposing development activities. Traders co-operated, providing materials for activities promoted by the government. The first
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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 the Ministry for Agriculture and Co-operatives.

Of course villagers 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.

This was the first time in the history of Isan that large numbers of villagers entered into a market-oriented mode of production. Although they did not rely totally 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 natural resources where previously they could find food of all kinds.

Around this time the Ministry of Agriculture also introduced new varieties of rice, telling villagers that these 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 better. 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 would still earn more money
by growing new varieties. Many remained unsure, 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 everywhere, as officials did not have easy access to 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 growing 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 a valuable crop in Isan as well. The Northeast is dry, but cassava is hardy, there was ample land available, the crop was considered reasonably easy to grow, and the technology was not sophisticated. 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. As with kenaf, the yields and prices were high at first.

As prices declined, traders and officials continued to encourage villagers to plant cassava, especially as loans became available from a new government bank, the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives (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. Other villagers could support them or the members of recently established farmers’ group (encouraged by the government). 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; some just used the money for their
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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 effectively 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 to develop new fields in public forests and on crown or common 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 lush forests but are now forests of cassava.

This kind of monocultural farming meant that in many of the new areas there was little time to take part in the other things villagers did 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, sometimes 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 and the market came to determine villager's action.

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 (even by BAAC officials) to get loans from private creditors in order to repay the BAAC, so that the villagers retained their good credit
rating and access to new loans. Villagers who followed this advice would repay their BAAC debt. They would then seek a new loan and use the money to repay the private creditor. As it took some months to get the money from the BAAC, villagers were tied into private loans at high interest rates, often as high as ten percent or more a month. They 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 land, house or cattle to pay the debt. They would then move to a more remote place, occupy public land, and clear it. The cycle was complete. The problem is, however, that the cycle inevitably began again.

Another popular way to earn money to pay debts was to leave the village to find paid work. Bangkok and other urban centres were the most popular destinations. Alternatively, villagers might travel to various Central provinces or to the Southern region where agricultural work was readily available.

As noted above, debt problems really began with the BAAC and the promotion of new crops. Prior to this villagers often had debt, but usually with relatives and friends, often without interest, and they seldom borrowed large amounts. Even loans from private creditors were usually small, as villagers did not dare to take a large sum. BAAC officials, however, convinced them that even if they took 5,000 baht or more, they would be able to pay it back. Many villagers began taking larger loans. 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 was not necessarily to find money for settling debts. Earning cash was important, but so was experiencing 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, meaning that many had
no choice but to go to Bangkok seeking work. Some were already very much integrated into the modern world and could no longer rely on their own production. As reasonably easy transport was already possible, especially by rail, many chose to go to Bangkok. They earned a few hundred baht over several months, and this assisted in solving immediate problems, such as rice shortages and indebtedness.

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. Some parents say that they were happy for their sons and daughters to go to Bangkok because they sent money home and on their return they looked healthier, neater and cleaner. More importantly, they were often better able to 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 considerable merit.

This process meant a change 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 in the early sixties, the state focused on Isan as one of the main target regions for development. One reason for this was because the authoritarian Prime Minister, Sarit Thanarat, came from the region. Another was that the region became a centre of Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) activity. Poverty and the lack of infrastructure, especially roads and water, were identified as giving the CPT conditions for expansion, and the state wanted to establish its presence.

Infrastructure development initially emphasised the construction of roads, linking districts and sub-districts to towns. Following US advice, the government 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 many remote villages to the outside world, ending their relative isolation. The new roads were often accessible by car, even in the wet season.

The roads brought outsiders into villages and carried villagers out. Agricultural and food products, both grown by villagers and taken from the forest, and fish from rivers and streams were collected and taken to market almost every day. Nothing in nature that could be sold was 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 with goods they had purchased.

Electricity came to most tambon and some large villages in the late 1960s. Large hydroelectric dams were constructed at this time, so electricity had become available for distribution. Ten years later, electricity was remarkably widespread. By the 1980s there were few villages without electricity. Even in villages not part of the state grid, electricity could be supplied using batteries charged in nearby villages or towns. Villagers wanted lighting, but especially television. The most popular programmes were movies or plays, based on traditional and local stories, and mythology. All were known to the villagers, but it was new for them to see the stories in the movie form, being accustomed to maw lam moo (large travelling troupes of maw lam).

Electricity in villages also allowed the purchase of electrical products such as refrigerators, fans, radios and televisions. It became fashionable to demonstrate economic status by having all such amenities. That these were status symbols was indicated by the fact that some families with refrigerators only used them to cool water, while some of those who had modern furniture left it plastic-wrapped and unused for years.

Going to Bangkok was not always as simple as packing a few things, taking a bus or train, and finding work. Many married men did not want to
leave home for long periods. They often preferred to ride samlors (hired tricycles) in nearby towns. This meant that they could easily get 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 goods from town.

Together with the National Plan, the development of American military bases in the Northeast, from the beginning of the sixties, had an impact on the people of the region. The major US bases were in Nakorn Ratchasima, Ubol Ratchathani, Udornthani, and Nakorn Phanom. They proved a magnet for villagers from all over the Northeast (and from other regions). 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 and women came to learn of jobs in bars, nightclubs 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 people who had been working at the bases, found themselves unemployed. It was not easy for such people, used to high wages, to return to low paying jobs once the bases had closed. Some returned to their homes and re-adapted themselves to 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 men, many of them former American base workers, 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 sold some of their rice fields, hoping to repurchase them once they had made their fortune in faraway lands.

Some succeeded in earning their fortune, but there were many who failed. Some lost their land on leaving the village. Some men lost their wives. Families were broken when wives at home, receiving large amounts of
money sent by their husbands, began to change their lifestyle. Some of the men did not return to the village and their family. At the time, wages for Thai workers in the Middle East was high, and at the beginning of the 1980s there were some 400,000 in the Middle East, many from the Northeast. Most came home once a year while others stayed away for longer periods. 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. Those who had made enough often did not wish to return to the Middle East, despite the lure of good wages. The village was home, and finding work in Bangkok during the dry season was sufficient.

By the mid-seventies seasonal migration had become normal for young people and some adults. In response, in 1975 the government of Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj embarked on a Job Creation Programme in Rural areas, with a budget of about two billion baht (US$100 million at the time). 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.

The Job Creation Programme was important for it had a significant impact on village values. This was because the Programme hired villagers to undertake work they had often done themselves in the past, without pay, and usually as a community effort. Most were infrastructure projects such as building village roads, rehabilitating water reservoirs and streams, and digging community ponds. One of the goals was to provide employment opportunities in villages so that people did not have to migrate to urban centres in the dry season. This was not entirely successful. Dry season work promised thousands of baht in potential earnings for migrant workers, money that could not have been earned by staying in the village, even if the Job Creation project did offer limited opportunities. More recent village infrastructure projects have recognised this, and local contractors using machinery usually complete these minor works.

Nobody knows how many Isan people are in Bangkok today. Certainly the 1997 economic crisis saw many return home, although this was usu-
ally a temporary return. The fact is that in all low-wage sectors most workers are Northeasterners. They are found working as maids, in petrol stations, restaurants, building sites, shopping centres, hotels, car repair workshops, and a myriad of small shops. They are also taxi drivers, factory workers, stevedores, and labourers. In fact, in all kinds of enterprise requiring cheap but conscientious labour, one finds the people of Isan. In rural areas they cut sugarcane, work in rubber plantations and on fishing boats, and they labour in all fields of agriculture in the Eastern and Southern regions. 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 (ngiu), performed almost every day somewhere in Bangkok's Chinatown. They don't know any Chinese language but learn their roles by heart. Many of the younger women of Isan are working in the factories of Bangkok and surrounding areas. They are found in the service sector, with more than a few in the large sex industry.

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 return to the village after a number of years. 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. These people may go home on visits, but most remain away permanently. This group is still 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, they will return to the village for special occasions and ceremonies.

Today the 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 as well 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 trucks or buses will arrive in the villages and leave with men and women on board, heading for the sugar plantations of the Central region or for short-term work elsewhere. 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, many villagers who work in urban centres or in other, wealthier regions still return to their poor villages. This fact can only be understood against the cultural context of Isan, where community has been considered more precious than wealth.

However, the necessity to go away to work increases year by year, fuelled by a variety of factors, including debt, the poor condition of village life, and the depleted environment. Debt increases, with some villagers caught in a vicious cycle, and others taking out new loans. These people need money to buy food and those everyday items they once produced themselves, and they need to make greater investments in farming. Loans are taken out for machinery, chemicals, fertilisers, and the like.

The direct sale of technology and goods has increased, especially as these items are now offered for sale 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 to them, credit is offered, and it saves a trip into town.

SHAKEN ROOTS

Villages are undergoing ever more rapid change. Today there is no village in the Northeast that is not accessible. The picture presented so far is generalised. We should note, however, that such a picture obscures
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important aspects of village life. For example, large numbers of people seldom migrate to work elsewhere, even during the dry season. While there may sometimes be travel for adventure, more often it is now a necessity. However, most will return to the village to live and work, dreaming of release from debt and being able to stay at home, working their land. In many villages there are those who remain 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. Others who have been away and gained skills and experience may return 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. The 1997 economic crisis accelerated this process for a time. 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.

It is important to recognise that villagers are seeking their own solutions to the problems they face. These are not necessarily promoted by either the state or non-governmental organisation (NGOs). Rather, facing tough everyday situations that offer little more than an increasingly bleak future, they must seek their own solutions. There are no simple or easy ways out, so they must find their own path.

The past thirty and forty years have seen great changes in Isan villages. These have not, however, totally uprooted their fundamental structures. Culturally, villages remain Isan and the mode of production has not been entirely transformed from its former subsistence orientation. The skills and experience of the past are, by and large, retained. Villages have maintained a structure that includes traditional elements, even if only as a shadow of their former glory.

What is left after so much change? Economic and social change is important but so too are the cultural aspects of change. While economic and social factors have been directly affected by external factors, cultural values have not been so easily manipulated and exploited. 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 state and dominant classes in society. But cultural values and religious beliefs and practices have not yet been subjected to the same degree of 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 transmission of popular wisdom through the traditional scriptures, but there has been no serious religious persecution. There have been efforts to get rid of magic and spirit beliefs, and to centralise control of the religious hierarchy, but these have not amounted to concerted attacks on religious and cultural values. There was a challenge from the introduction of Christianity, brought to the Northeast, first to Ubol, by French missionaries in 1880. While it gained some converts, especially among minority groups and Vietnamese migrants, the Christian community represented a very small part of the total population, and had little impact on Buddhists or Buddhism.

Often cultural change has appeared to be quite subtle. This is seen, for example, in a reduction in the number of rites, rituals, celebrations, ceremonies and festivals, as well as their simplification and modification. The number of young men entering the monkhood is much reduced, and young people know little about local \textit{phaya, tamnan}, and \textit{nithan}. Village elders are often ignored and their wisdom is neither transmitted nor appreciated.

While these examples signal change, it seems that the structure of the belief system remains, and that this is associated with traditional practices. Villages still believe in making merit and continue to bring food to the monks every day. They continue to join religious festivities, showing respect and faith. They still have their \textit{phiit, cham}, and \textit{nang tiam}, and continue to respect the \textit{pu-ta} and pay appropriate homage. Villages have \textit{maw tham} and other kinds of \textit{maw} who are still consulted in some situations, and traditional healing, especially where \textit{phiit} are concerned, contin-
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Villagers may take patients to hospitals, to medical doctors, and to mental hospitals, but they do not reject their traditional beliefs, and seem not to find any contradiction between their two modes of belief and action. The co-existence of modern and traditional cultural elements in villages appears normal to people. In fact, they have lived with similar situations for generations. For example, popular Buddhism is a mixture of spirit beliefs, Brahmanism, and Buddhism. It is only reasonable that a fourth element, modern technology and science, should be added.

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, towns and 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, they do not see any contradiction in consulting both traditional healers and modern medical doctors.

Traditional healers themselves are also the subjects of change. For example, those who use herbal medicines and oils, now find it increasingly difficult to get their ingredients. They now have less time 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. They 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 few traditional healers who can compete with the modern medical doctor. Nevertheless, 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 diagnose his illness. The maw tham performed a ceremony in which he went
into a trance and identified the illness as the result of an offence against the *phii na*, but did not say what disease it was. Neither could the medical doctors he consulted. His last hope was to visit the hospital, even though he had to spend a lot of money. After some weeks of diagnosis and waiting, it was found that he had a type of typhoid, from which he recovered in a short time after treatment began. However, prior to going to Bangkok he had already organised a ceremony asking for forgiveness from the *phii na*, offering boiled chicken, whiskey, and other food. He believed that the *phii na* had been placated and he had received forgiveness. So it is that the traditional and modern can co-exist.

Economic change has also had an impact. Some villagers explain that they have to be satisfied with healers because they cannot afford to travel to town to consult medical doctors. Others say that they send their children to be ordained as novices and monk because it is the only way their children can complete higher education without great expense. In fact, statistics show that most student monks from the 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 Buddhist 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 sipsong* are still celebrated in many villages, but 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 rice to eat, and it is also the beginning of the rice growing season. Many must go away in search of work. Sometimes the *bun phra wase* of the fifth month is postponed to be combined with the *visakha puja* of the sixth month, and the *bun ban* (paying homage to *pu-ta*) is sometimes not held until the seventh month. Two or three rites are often combined to save both time and money.

The belief in *phii* has not been reduced, even among the youth, but its forms are changing. In many villages, people begin to question *phii*, espe-
cially 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). When villagers face many problems – such as years of drought, illnesses and other catastrophes – they may come to believe that after paying homage to the *pu-ta* and doing everything to please it, the *pu-ta* has neglected its duties. They therefore seek to replace it by another they feel they can rely on, such as the *uppakut*.

Other 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 of change. Villagers say that *phi* are like humans and, although they have power, there must be others with more power. They believe that a better protector or patron can eventually be found.

Events such as these are meaningful because the *pu-ta* is considered the central point of belief in *phi*, the reference for social order, a refuge in times of troubles and protection against dangers. Villagers used to justify problems, troubles, shortages of rice, drought and illnesses as punishment from the *pu-ta* for their misdeeds. But some could not understand why there were still problems even when everybody behaved themselves. The *pu-ta* was held responsible for the troubles. The result has been a revolt against the *phi*, and even the most respected one, the *pu-ta*.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that villagers have released themselves from the influence of *phi*. It is not uncommon to see youths coming back from Bangkok, dressed in fashionable clothes, sunglasses and other signs of being modern, joining ceremonies in front of the *pu-ta*’s shrine, and other ceremonies for *phi* in the village, or even when they are in Bangkok.

Many of those working in Bangkok (as well as many other city-based people) still believe in *phi*, especially the *chao thii*, and shrines for *phi* 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 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 passes his hands over his hair from front to back. This gesture is asking for a blessing from the spirits, from the universal sacred powers that also exist in the taxi—the vehicle that links the driver to the universe. While performing this ritual the driver would usually think of his parents, relatives, ancestors, khru, and all universal sacred powers. Some might include the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha to their devotions. These taxi drivers are often from Isan villages and are acquainted with the performance of the sukwan ceremony for their buffalo and carts, so they do the same for their taxi. The ceremony for buffalo 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 consider 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 the experience of their ancestors, it remains.

Kinship has also changed. Family members who were once gathered together in one village or nearby are now dispersed over great distances. Some family members have married and settled in other provinces or in other regions. Others have migrated to work in towns or in Bangkok, creating problems and gaps between them, their family, and the community. These people come back with new values and 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 lifestyle and sometimes communication becomes difficult. Quarrels and divorces seem to occur based on these strains.

Social life is also changing. Traditional co-operation, called long khaek, where villagers helped one another on special occasions, has disappeared.
Changes and Challenges

in most villages. Villagers used to assist each other during various stages of rice growing, especially in transplanting, harvesting, and threshing. These days most have to rely on their family and hired labour. Exceptions can be found. Where the paddy field belongs to the temple and the abbot asks villagers to lend a hand, they are still willing to work together for the common good. But this is the exception rather than the norm.

In cases where villagers continue to exchange labour, more careful calculations are involved than was previously the norm. If a 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, during times of sickness, trouble and in everyday life. It was a sharing of both happiness and suffering. For instance, if a large fish were 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 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.’ Such a simple 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 almost
always in the hands of those who have wealth. Candidates for nomination as village and tambon leaders spend large amounts of money for their campaigns, usually at an ostentatious party. In the 1980s and early 1990s it was said 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.’ The amounts have increased, but the story remains the same. Money politics is the root of many problems in contemporary Thai society. 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.’ Villagers still believe in the law of karma, that good or evil deeds may not produce a result today or tomorrow, but that such deeds will have their result at some time in the future or in the next rebirth.

Villagers retain some values and forget others. Traders and politicians know this only too well. For example, it is known that votes are gained by paying villagers for them. The villagers 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 necessarily by that person, but by the universal sacred powers, according to the law of karma.

Village heads nowadays will usually represent a particular candidate in elections. Even though it is illegal to do so, the benefits are attractive, both for the head personally and for the community. Candidates promise 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 thought 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.
Changes and Challenges

Hor krachai khao have also had a negative impact on village life. Meetings that used to be held in the evening at the phuyaiban’s house or the temple, become less frequent, as everybody can be told by using the microphone. Co-operation 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 loudspeakers, villagers do not have to give a personal response and therefore do not feel obligated. The result is that co-operation is not so readily achieved.

Change has been rapid indeed, but it has not been all embracing. In the next chapter we discuss how change with cultural ‘preservation’ is being used to build an alternative future.
1. A house made of bamboo, with papaya trees around the house

2. Cattle and cart, hard to see today
3. Migration to urban centres: driving a tricycle is one of the occupations

4. Cassava plantation and deterioration of the environment
5. Salinity: one of the major problems of soils in the Northeast

6. Fish pond, fruit trees, vegetable and other crops in integrated farming
7. Working on cloth production in the traditional way

8. Bamboo handicrafts
9. Baskets for fishing

10. Baskets for sticky rice
11. Children preparing materials to weave sleeping mats

12. Traditional massage
13-14. Ceremonies and a procession performed once a year to pay respect to the village spirit (*phii*)
15. Preparations for the ordination of a novice

16. Ordination of the Lord of Trees as a symbol of the ordination of the entire forest
17-18. Offering rice to the temple to be used for the temple and the community's poor
19-20. *Baisri sukwan* ceremony
21. Building a house together

22. A meeting of the village volunteers to conduct community action research
23. A community learning centre set up by a community-based organization in Kham Takla District, Sakol Nakhon

24. A meeting of Inpeng, a new people's movement in Sakol Nakhon
Debt is a significant problem in Thailand's rural areas. In the late 1980s it was estimated that about 100 billion baht was owed in rural debt. By the time the economic crisis struck in 1997, some estimates suggested that this figure had doubled or even tripled. The sources of debt include relatives, friends, private creditors, co-operatives, farmer's groups, government and commercial banks, and private businesses. Many farmers find it impossible to repay the debts they have accumulated, often inflated as a result of high interest rates. Many do not even know how much they owe and are advised by their creditors to pay only their interest, without knowing if the original loan will ever be repaid.

As noted in previous chapters, many people move to towns to find jobs and earn money to service their debts. Others sell their property to pay the debt, and then move to a new settlement, often on public land in more remote areas. Many find themselves at a dead-end. They are no longer self-reliant as individuals, as families or as communities. For some of these people a debt-free future is little more than a dream. The underground lottery is 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 their situation may be not all villagers surrender. Having reached a dead-end, they seek a way out by returning to the old ways, looking to their roots in search of a solution. Inspiration for this has come
from 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 may not be rich, but they claim that they are happy. Most are older people who have been maintaining a more traditional way, with adaptations, in agriculture. They grow various plants, fruit trees and vegetables, raise fish, chickens and other livestock, which together provide them with enough to live on. In some cases, they may even be able to save enough money to send their children on to higher education. Other villagers once laughed at them. They thought them crazy and unable to earn money like others. Now, however, many of them have become significant resource persons for those seeking an alternative. Their farming sites have become learning centres for people from nearby villages and other provinces and regions.

Seeking an alternative marks a turning point for farmers. Instead of dreaming of becoming rich, as promised by the modern advertising industry, they begin to rethink their situation. Some see that their situation is increasingly unrealistic. They look to their past and to what their ancestors have done and taught them. This process got started in the 1980s, and has shown itself to be neither romantic nor unrealistic. 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 to the past in order to move forward.

The essential element of this turning point involves farmers taking a critical attitude towards agro-industrial mono-cropping and its market and export orientation. It means turning towards more traditional methods of production. These farmers first think of production for family consumption and only then of the sale of any surplus. In modern society it is exchange that is important. After a few years of growing a range of crops and raising animals, farmers have enough food for consumption, and no longer need to buy their basic necessities at the market. A surplus is sold to get cash in order to purchase other necessary items for their families. However, they no longer depend on the market or on traders. If they can-
not sell their produce at a satisfactory price, then they may wait, or in the case of fruit, vegetables and fish, they can process these in other ways.

These farmers learn again the processes of nature. There is more water as they have fishponds 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, creating a sounder environment. A wise man in Khon Kaen, who has experienced this renewed self-reliance, commented that ‘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 leader in Buriram told visitors of his village’s ‘new experience’, and explained 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 potential solution have been working mainly with their own labour. The work is often difficult and heavy. One farmer in Mahasarakham, who dug his fishponds 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 sometimes offer to provide earthmovers to dig the ponds; all the farmers need to do is sign up for more debt. Farmers who understand the new ways 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 popular wisdom at work.

Taking up the option of basic agriculture is not simple. It is more than digging a fishpond, growing vegetables, planting trees or raising animals. It is, in fact, a new way of life, requiring fundamental life 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 necessary and produce most of what they need. In addition, a firm religious background or moral integrity is necessary in order to resist the many 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 buffalo for their field or to feed the fish. Above the fishponds 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 fields flood, and water overflows these canals and the fish will move out into the fields proper, where they 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. Some return to traditional rice varieties, which are more resistant to disease, although yields are less than for the modern varieties. A few may still have to use small amounts of chemicals. How-
ever, as they no longer grow rice primarily for sale, but for consumption, so the use of paid labour and chemicals is reduced. These farmers have not seen that their yields vary greatly, but they earn more, as they invest less in production.

Many of these farmers have repaid their debts, and continue to expand production by digging ponds and growing more trees and vegetables. Because they do this with their own labour they require little other investment. 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.

In some villages new co-operatives are formed. In contrast with state-established co-operatives, these are genuine co-operatives, founded by villagers, based on their situation and needs. These co-operatives become a simple forum where farmers put their produce together for common management, to increase their bargaining power. This releases them from their dependence on the market. No longer are they forced by their debt situation to sell their rice even before it has been harvested. While these co-operatives were few in the 1980s, they are now 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 village activities to provide mutual assistance and welfare. The village fund is one example of this approach.

Since the early eighties various ministries have promoted village development funds. These usually take the form of savings groups, co-operative stores, drug banks and funds, and the like. The government soon decided that these small funds should be combined into one village development fund. Whatever form they take, however, each is basically the same. The results in the Northeast were not 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 failure is not poverty, because many villages do have money available.
Rather, the failure is because these funds are outside initiatives that neglect local culture and lifestyle. Those set up by the villagers themselves are more sustainable because they are more appropriate to their situation, and many villages have adapted the government’s model to make it their own.

These village funds 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 1989, 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 other initiatives or 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 Yasothorn 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 medical doctors by not requesting large amounts of money for their medicine and skills. As noted previously, a traditional doctor should 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 coming together to exchange their experience, learn from one another and to try to transmit their knowledge to the younger generation.

NGOs play an important role in assisting the initial organisation of these groups, taking a catalytic role. Some medical doctors, who have a sympathetic and supportive attitude and can accept these healers, are also brought to meet with them. They exchange their 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.

NGO workers and other sympathisers who act as intermediaries or facilitators assist these meetings. Equal membership for traditional healers as well as medical doctors, NGO workers and other professionals is reasonably common in herbal medicine groups. The Yasothorn 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 was 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. Some patients will be treated by traditional methods administered by trained nurses and doctors. Herbal and modern medicines are both given to patients. This has been taking place 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 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.

Traditions are being revived and traditional skills are clearly important, but behind it all is a traditional wisdom that is regaining a place after being 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 changing society, and being adapted and changed. The villagers are selective and, as a result, not all of the traditional aspects are practised these days.

CEREMONIES

The *pha pa* is one of the most important ceremonies expressing solidarity in community welfare and development. It 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 travel in buses to the village, together with some of the contributors, to make the offering and, at the same time, to display their village to the contributors. Villagers going to work in Bangkok will often feel guilty if they do not organise a *pha pa*. It has become a matter of prestige.

However, the *pha pa* has assumed at least one new form since 1980. From this time NGOs organised them, not only with the usual offerings, but also with rice. The idea was to establish a rice bank. One of the first of these was in a village in Chaiyaphum province, at the request of the abbot, who wanted external assistance in order to reduce 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 \textit{pha pa} has become popular and ranks as a ‘new tradition’, representing the beginning of an adaptation of religious ceremonies for community development. From this has now emerged medicine, buffalo, book, plant and other \textit{pha pa} all of which are for community development and demonstrate support from outsiders. Villagers now organise these \textit{pha pa} for villages in need.

The cases mentioned represent but a small part of the changes taking place in many villages and are not necessarily widespread, 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 a role.

\textbf{A DAY OF GRATITUDE}

Thai New Year is now officially set as the 13th of 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, friends, and relatives within the 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.

Over several decades some of the practices of this occasion have been lost. And some are practised devoid of real meaning. But these practices are being renewed in some places. An example is the paying of respect to village elders. In some villages, on the morning of \textit{Songkran}, 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 forgiveness for any misdeeds or disrespect towards the elders during the past year and then ask for their blessing. They offer their gifts to the elders and pour water on their hands. It is not uncommon to see tears from the old people, moved by this display from their children and grandchildren. They feel that they are not alone and forgotten, but cared for and respected, and that they still have a role and position in the community.

This is one of the most important moments in community life as the elders provide words of wisdom to their children and the community. For the elders this is the most precious thing they have to give. Some say it in verse, speaking of the virtues of solidarity, unity, kindness, sharing, truthfulness, sincerity, and other virtues. In some cases, a baisri sukwan ceremony is also performed. This is another moving moment for the community as the wrists of the elders are bound with white cotton thread, and then the rest of the community follows. Wishing each other a happy New Year, the whole community is symbolically bound together. 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.

The government and media have also promoted this New Year ceremony. Called wan katanyu or the 'Day of Gratitude', it is this notion of gratitude which is the most important value for the villagers. It has often been neglected, in some cases almost forgotten. Indeed, this notion 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. Elderly 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 aged parents.

The value of gratitude seems too old-fashioned for a modern society that 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 existence. Modern society stresses one’s rights – the right of being raised in a good family, having a good education, a good job and wage, welfare and social security. While responsibilities are also important, this often means little more than paying taxes and maintaining law and order. Gratitude towards teachers is not the same as it once was.

Previously teachers gave not only knowledge but also spirit, values and life to their disciples. Today’s teachers are paid for both their regular teaching duties and for extra hours of tutoring outside working hours. There is no room for the gratitude of bygone days as the teacher is already paid. Money values determine exchange, and human values that were traditionally provided through a spirit of gratitude, are now transformed into an exchange value.

The day of gratitude brings villagers back to their roots, to the spirit of their tradition and 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, such arrangements have been different from those with the elders of one’s own village.

For those who remain in the village, the day of gratitude is when 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, *puita*, and *mae phosop*. This also explains why thanksgiving rites like *sukwan* are performed for buffalo, carts, and other things related to a villager’s everyday life. Thanks are more than 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 by bringing flowers, candles, and presents for their parents. These are the symbols of gratitude used in all rites and rituals.
Gratitude may also be seen as a kind of submission. It is an expression of the view that one is but a small part of nature, a limited being who cannot live alone, who needs others, and who does not pretend to be more than this. People know that their being is not to be found in self, but in relationships with others and with nature. Without these relationships they would be nothing. Gratitude is, in fact, lived by villagers in everyday life, in all ceremonies, and monks, elders and parents teach it. It is represented in folk tales, stories, mythologies, proverbs, phaya, and words of wisdom. Just as gratitude is praised, so a lack of gratitude is condemned. Local stories tell of the punishments awaiting ingratitude. The heroes of stories are grateful persons. A grateful person is always recompensed by gods, masters, lords, parents, and respectful persons in all of these stories. The message is clear.

KINSHIP

Gratitude is also a part of family relationships. A community may be seen as a large family. Most Isan villages had only a few family names. While not everyone was related, they counted themselves relatives by the fact that they formed the same community. This means that the Isan family is based on kinship, both natural and ‘cultural.’ Respect is given to chao kote, who are the elders of the families in the village. These are not only the elders, but also the most respected. Chao kote may appear to be simple and ordinary people, without any important role in everyday life, but it is their intervention that 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’ are also institutions. They are to be respected, honoured, and supported, and most young people who 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
Hope 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 buffalo, and building new houses. Even those in positions that many might think are less respectable, such as prostitutes, will normally 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 may 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 Yasothorn 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 small amount of 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 Northeastern institution of the family, especially as young people go away to work and study. There are many families that are placed in difficult situations and may even split or fall apart in disputes about money. Some children who work for years to support their family come to resent constant demands made on them.

There are also many cases of reconciliation. 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 upset. Though his brothers, sisters and relatives tried to persuade him to show more gratitude towards his parents, he refused, and would not compro-
mise 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 declaring, 'I can rely on myself.' For several years he did not have much contact with his parents of 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 newborn, he went back to his parents with offerings to seek their forgiveness. He and his parents were reconciled. All were happy again, and he did not have to change either his career or wife.

This basic relationship comes under increasing pressure, but appears resilient. 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 drugs, sweatshops or prostitution.

The relationship is reinforced when the young migrants have to go home during Thai New Year, and when young men are ordained during Buddhist Lent. These are the expected expressions of gratitude towards parents.
CHAPTER 8

THE DYNAMICS OF POPULAR WISDOM

Popular wisdom is a set of values that has been the fundamental basis of people's lives through many generations. It consists of knowledge about life, its origin, meaning, and goals. It also consists of 'know-how.' That is, ways and means that are based on, related to, and expressions of, the knowledge of life. This indicates a complex web of knowledge, beliefs, and practices. It is complicated, so we simplify it somewhat in the following discussion.

WORLD-VIEW

The first characteristic of this set of traditional values is the 'balanced unity' achieved 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).

- beliefs
- mode of production
- social setting
The unity of these elements is achieved as a mutual reference and correspondence between them. It may be compared to a healthy body and mind, where thinking and actions correspond accordingly. Space and time relate humans to their universe, meaning that humans are a part of an 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. It may be called, in times of illness, in the sukwan ceremony, just as any other spirit might be. However, the Then has increasingly become a merely mythical figure for the majority of people, gradually giving ground to the Hindu-derived gods Brahma and Indra, and the Thevada, their guardians. The result is that today’s generation is less acquainted with the Then than its predecessors.

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

Another category of phi includes 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 phi still have an important place in the village. They are a constant part of cultural life. Family members make merit for them and they are believed to take care of 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 Bud-
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dha 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 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.

Belief in the supernatural, the unseen, and the spiritual side has been the basis of village life. It is 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, for 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 about being, but about social relationships. 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, who are the representatives of traditional values. The monks rank 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, and in the important events and ceremonies of community life.
Social relationships consist of living together as a community, with mutual respect, assistance, co-operation, sharing, and solidarity in everyday life. This is seen in work, 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 have first produced for their own family’s consumption, but they virtually never work alone or in isolation. They start working at the ‘right’ time, completing the fertility rights on the appropriate day, in relation to the appropriate spirits – the phii of heaven, pu-ta, ta haek, mae phosop -- and in the ‘right’ place for beginning work. The villagers would share labour, seeds, and the instruments of labour. And, they would share their product with others in times of shortage or need.

While production was for family consumption, villagers always considered that they were also producing for their family and merit making. This could amount to quite a large part of the total yield. Food for the monks, for example, can be an everyday ritual for some, four times on holy days. This provision for the rites, rituals, religious ceremonies, and celebrations is a sharing of produce with the ‘unseen’, as well as with neighbours. It is a part of life and of an individual’s ‘essence’ that was embedded in relationships with the supernatural and others in their community. Villagers also needed to provide a surplus in case of future shortages. Others might also have considered a surplus for sale, in order to earn some money to pay tax, and to buy necessary items for themselves, for others, and for merit making.

The subsistence economy embodied a set of values about the belief in the supernatural and relationships with others. 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 necessitated self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Villagers could have produced more, but did not. They could have cut more trees or collected more produce from forest for sale, but they did
not. They made sufficiency a virtue, and practised 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, generally without excess exploitation, at least while populations were low.

Another characteristic of traditional values is the unity between words and actions, theory and practice, and thinking and acting. The integrity of community 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 have particular knowledge and skills, were also crucial. Their knowledge is related to actual life, being practical. The wisdom of these respected groups 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 wholeness of people being at one with the words. They are, therefore, sacred, to be followed, and practised. Phii are believed real not because phii can be explained, with argument, experimentation or scientific methods, but because phii have real meaning in each villager’s everyday life.

Words of wisdom originate or relate to mythologies that have a sacred origin. They tell of the origins of humans, of events, and of life. They give meaning to life, 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 also the spirit of the tradition. When khru teach their disciples, they transmit what they have received from former khru. 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 form their *khru*, and must live and practice it. This is the tradition.

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, body and mind, natural and supernatural, past and present, concrete and abstract, parts and the whole, origins and goals, beginning and end and, in essence, the meaning of life. One 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 separate technical knowledge. Know-how and skill are arts rooted in tradition and the cultural context. To heal somebody is not a matter of skill and know-how accidentally acquired. The healer learned the art from a master and then has an obligation to assist others in times of illness. Healing was an art that 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 necessary rituals. The tradition was learnt.

Specific skills and knowledge such as healing, singing, and performing ceremonies were arts that were a part of community life. They were related to the world-view of villagers, 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.

In this context, the ideal, most respected person in the traditional community was one of virtue, with moral integrity, and 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, thus more learned 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 prac-
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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 common to most cultures. These are truthfulness, kindness, tolerance, patience, diligence, 'sufficiency' (as against greed), commitment to the community, and a willingness to make sacrifices for community welfare. Wise people are not expected to have specific skills, but if they do, they gain even more respect from villagers.

Another characteristic of 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 discipline 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 to be a 'loosely structured society' but the reality was quite different. From birth to death members of the community were subject to rules determining the direction, ways, means, and approaches to daily life. There was no birth without rituals and ceremonies, no child rearing was done just as a mother or father wanted, and no house was built in just any place, at any time, or in any manner. Rather, the phii represented social rules, and any abuse of these rules was considered an abuse of the phii, 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, saying, 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 the 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. Popular wisdom might appear to lose its dynamism and to have little power in the encounter with the 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. But the spirit remains. It is found in underlying cultural expressions, whereas the traditional social and economic aspects of life have been uprooted and assumed new forms. Market-oriented production and the centralised state administration have gradually overtaken the traditional in villages.

RENEWAL AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The pace of modernisation has been rapid. As we have suggested, the economic and social spheres have seen the most thoroughgoing change, while cultural values have seen a slower rhythm of change. Cultural forms retain their meaning for the older generation, but may lose some of their significance or are transformed for the younger generation. The village values that were prized in the past are no longer so widely held, and villagers realise this. However, a new set of values has not yet fully replaced traditional values. Old people left alone in villages during the dry season, long for the lost simplicity, autonomy, and self-reliance of the old world. They may romanticise the past, but the present sees them in debt and feeling utterly powerless. They feel manipulated by external forces and at the mercy of government officials, traders, and other outsiders who have ‘invaded’ their village and its cultural space.

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 that aim at an analysis of their village’s
actual situation. This analysis has raised the awareness of many, and has been a positive experience, for in gaining an understanding of their real situation, insights are sometimes gained towards a solution to the problems faced. They realise that they have not yet completely lost the power embedded in their cultures.

Experiences have been shared among village leaders. These may be official leaders appointed by local authorities or natural leaders, the wise people, and even younger leaders respected by the villagers. Many of them have begun new experiences in production, having returned to a form of integrated agriculture, that was practised in the past as ordinary, everyday agriculture. It means to grow not only rice, but also vegetables and fruit, and to raise fish, chickens, ducks, and other animals. Women grow mulberry trees, raise silkworms, weave, and sell silk. This may appear to be too simplistic an approach to solve the big problems facing many of Isan’s people. Indeed, it will not suit everyone, but the basic concept is not just to 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. It is the practice of self-sufficiency that has been promoted in recent years.

To adopt this way of life requires change not only in the mode of production, but a fundamental decision to choose a new and 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 as people 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.

This approach calls for a remarkable transformation of thinking and practice. It is not easy for people to make this change. But it is a crucial turning point in their lives when people realise that this is a way for them to subsist and live with dignity. Those who have already adopted this way come to understand that it is feasible, and can be fulfilling. They also see that it
is possible to be ‘free’ and not dependent on the market, on traders or on the vagaries of the current economic system. 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.

There are villagers throughout the Isan region who have turned to this way of life. Many were doing this well before the 1997 economic crisis forced the government to promote similar models of development as a panacea for unemployment and the potential for urban conflict. Those who began some years ago now have food, fish, vegetables, fruit, and other basic provisions, and many have liberated themselves from debt. It remains to be seen if the recent spate of state-initiated self-reliance will be as fulfilling and achieve such results.

Villagers who take this approach cannot be considered romantic or unrealistic. Some academics have claimed that the approach is theoretically unsound and full of romantic idealism. 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. The old ways were ‘natural’, while they must create a self-reliant future. 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. Others 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. This generation’s situation is far more difficult than that of their ancestors, but it is not impossible.

Those villagers who moved to self-reliance saw that no one could solve their problems for them. The usual pattern of government agricultural projects, many foreign-funded, and with skilled staff and large budgets, were not able to achieve 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. They remember or re-learn what their parents and grandparents did in the past. They have 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 experiencing 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, 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, established and promoted by NGOs and some provincial and district medical doctors, there is an exchange of experience and knowledge between traditional healers.

This approach to rural self-reliance may not solve all of the problems facing Isan farmers. It may not be appropriate for all, but it is assisting many to provide or supplement shelter, food, and medicine. For this approach is to be successful village organisation and leadership have been shown to be important ingredients.

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANISATION

Social organisation in the modern village is a complex of groups and subgroups proposed and imposed by government officers. It begins with the village head who is ‘elected’ by the villagers and appointed by local authorities. In practice, however, the heads are usually 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. Their orders
are from the Ministries of Interior, Education, Agriculture and Co-operative,
Industry and Public Health. The 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 neighbourhoods or khum in the village.

Other government-sponsored groups include those for housewives, youth,
savings, various handicrafts, farmers, village defence, and so on. Members
of one group are usually in other groups or sub-groups. The state has
bureaucratised villages, reinforced by the titles given to particular vil-
lages, as recognition of their support, or as models of particular state
projects. Villages may be, for example, ‘Dhamma Land, Golden Land’
(phaendin than phaendin thong) villages, self-defence villages, model
villages, progressive villages or whatever policy or approach is currently
a part of a government campaign, including ‘self-reliant’ and ‘self-suffi-
ciency’ villages in recent years.

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 repre-
sent the various departments and ministries. The village becomes a ‘state’
in miniature and villagers, with varying degrees of willingness, will imple-
ment the orders of government officers.

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

This may leave little room for initiatives by villagers, but many are challenging these patterns, and making an effort to liberate themselves from the structures imposed by the state and outsiders. Of course, villagers have to be careful to follow the advice of government officers, but they do not always do what they are told. In some cases, villagers may even reject government policy, in their own way. Some, for instance, refused to plant eucalyptus trees when local authorities proposed this. These villagers believed, from experience, that eucalyptus are not good for other plants in the vicinity. In other cases, villagers have refused to prepare for model village competitions. They have learned that the work required preparing 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, for the competitions are artificial, and have little to do with the daily problems or life of the villagers.

As we noted previously, the people of Isan have learned that to openly and directly oppose or to be violent leads to repression. Their response is more likely to be to refuse orders passively, by not co-operating. 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 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
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are happy to teach the children and youths what they know, by telling them stories, tales and folk wisdom.

Fortunate are the villages where the phuyaiban is also a natural leader, for these people guide their community in new directions. 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 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 co-operate with them in the development of their village.

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

Some villagers are reorganising their resources for their own welfare. They 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, village funds exist in many villages, funded from various sources, including the pha pa. Other sources are collections from annual festivities, such as the popular rice festival (bun koon lan).

In addition, groups such as youth and women's groups campaign for funds for their community activities. Interestingly though, each village has its own way of dealing with their 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 some of these villages, the community spirit is returning. Villagers who opt for the new way of life, emphasising self-reliance, find it easier (and appropriate) to work together, sharing their labour. Indeed, the *long khaek* is being renewed in many places. Co-operation is not isolated. As communications are improved, neighbouring villages come together and networks are formed. The villages in these networks assist one another in the economic, social, and cultural aspects of life, and they may 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. They play an important role in the extension and promotion of self-reliance as a way of life, meeting to provide mutual assistance and support. Such networks exist in many regions. Examples include: the forum for 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 co-operative 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 are usually initiated and promoted by the villagers themselves, monks or NGOs. Villagers often find that the networks represent a new way of organising for their own objectives and they feel able to participate in their activities. The sharing of rice, through a 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 establishment 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 marks the solidarity of the network.

Development monks are those who may also work to re-orient cultural values to meet new situations. For example, some organise rice growing on temple or on privately owned lands. This rice growing is different from the usual process because villagers from various 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, and that these inevitably mean rice shortages. They also know that common 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 attending to rice and food shortages and in initiating development programmes.

The role of monks in the Northeast is becoming increasingly important in community development. Hundreds of them are actively engaged in such works. Many of them succeed in integrating economic and social aspects into the cultural and religious life of the community. They emphasise that the first thing to do in development is to have a clear mind and a pure spirit. They compare this with planting a field. To have a successful crop, the soil must be well prepared, ridding it of weeds, rocks, and other debris.

Many of these monks begin by asking themselves what they should do for the villagers who bring them food and support and assist them. Many want to be more than just spiritual leaders, arguing that, ‘We owe the villagers our life.’ 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 seems a fundamental aspect of
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the decision by some villagers as they choose to turn their backs on the market-oriented system of production. It is necessary for these people to rid themselves of greed and realise the meaning of sufficiency. They learn to be modest and to recognise their own limitations and to keep a balance between the spiritual and the material.

THE CREATIVENESS OF POPULAR WISDOM

Cultural heritage is often associated with museums. However, popular wisdom is an aspect of cultural heritage that is far more than the materials preserved in museums. As we have stated, popular wisdom is a spirit that is lived and expressed in daily life, and in 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 in Isan. Culture has come to a new stage in the history of these people. The crisis of the recent past leads inevitably to a new period. But this is a reality for only a minority of people in rural areas. The recent economic crisis has committed greater numbers to the path of self-reliance, but it remains a path followed by a minority.

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 be preserved. At the same time, it must be adapted, renewed, and created. This has been happening in Isan. A process of development and of learning by villagers is taking place as they 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, of living, by 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 blueprint or plan – it is an essential element of a villager’s life. We may summarise these processes of preservation, adaptation, renewal and innovation.
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Preservation

There are aspects of culture, which need to be preserved. Some of this will be material culture and art. There will also be 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. The expression of these values, through the arts, material culture, and in other forms need to be preserved in order to stand as an example and lesson for future generations. The preservation of such values must, however, be appropriate. These values have to be lived and practised in daily life if they are to continue to carry meaning. Material culture and art should be preserved in their place or in museums. As part of the preservation process, the awareness and appreciation of the values associated with material culture have to be raised, especially amongst those who today possess the values and artefacts.

Adaptation

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 maintained. Self-reliance, as a value, has to be adapted to a natural environment that is much deteriorated. 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 limited labour left in villages can be utilised most efficiently, and to include people who have moved 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 reflect on social change and adapt their message and language to new situations. Villagers, willingly or not, have already assumed many new values.
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Another path is for villagers to adapt new values to those that are traditional, and considered the essence and basis of life. Adaptation is a process of integration between traditional and new values, but it is villagers who must decide whether and how to use, for example, tractors instead of buffalo. In many villages there are circumstances providing ample reason for the use of tractors and villagers adapt their life to this new technology. Of course, their relationship with the tractor is not the same as they once had with their buffalo! 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 the dry season, but also because of the pollution of natural water resources. At the same time these facilities reflect new values, being seen as status symbols by some.

Adaptation is a continuous process. 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, but the fact that villagers tend to stick together can be seen as an effort to adapt to new situations. They must organise themselves if they are to live with the wisdom of their ancestors.

Renewal

Rapid social change has meant that many of the values of the village have been left behind, ignored or forgotten. However, the renewal of some of these values is beginning. The practices may not be the same as before, but the essence remains. 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’ is renewed by some village leaders as a means of convincing people in other villages of the benefits of
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integrated agriculture for self-reliance. These leaders say, 'To bind a person means to bind the whole village.' When one becomes a friend, the tendency is to follow the good example of one's friend, and friends 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. However, this does not mean that they can do nothing. They can, for example, follow the advice of an elder from Khon Kaen who observes that by digging fish ponds close together there can be a new river, and by planting trees together, there can be a new forest.

Innovation

Innovation is a critical aspect of popular wisdom and culture. In the past, when change was slow, wisdom was 'created' and recognised, but no one kept records of dates or persons involved in innovations. Modern communications make it possible to know everything about any innovation almost as soon as it happens. This means that modern values arrive rapidly and in multiple forms. No innovation, however, originates in a vacuum. All change come about through a process that pits old against new. 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 values coming from outside and provide a means to maintain traditional values. Knowledge and skill must, therefore, be sought from the experiences of villagers, although the influence of outsiders may also be important. Many academics, intellectuals, and others 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 innovation is an imposition or comes through cooperation with villagers. 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 world.
Villagers have the capacity to be innovative and learn new things based on their own experiences. New technologies are not always discovered and introduced by outsiders, as villagers sometimes come up with their own inventions. For example, herbal medicines used to cure diseases in fish have been found in Khon Kaen and Nakhon Ratchasima. 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 buffalo 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 produce rice for rice banks. This is an innovation that had not been necessary in the past.

In addition, monks' development organisations, development forums and networks are all relatively recent innovations. In the past there was no need for such inter-village social organisations. Government has introduced many development activities such as savings groups, village funds and co-operative stores. It has also begun to involve NGOs in some aspects of its development activities. Other innovations have been introduced by NGOS, monks and village leaders or have been devised by villagers themselves. Some interesting activities have emerged, for example, a co-operative 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 closely to the market. Cotton and silk 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 that opt for integrated agriculture and self-reliance, this kind of handicraft production will often be abandoned. What many villagers prefer to do is to 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 movement that is marching unimpeded 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 small-scale farmers.
EPILOGUE

In 1990, we concluded our book with the following paragraph:

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 ... 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.

In hindsight, this was an overly optimistic perspective. At the same time, though, we feel that we were also overly pessimistic. If this seems contradictory, then it is an accurate reflection of the reality of Thailand's boom and bust in the 1990s.

The economic bust produced some surprises. For instance, the significance accorded popular wisdom, self-reliance and alternative development has been far greater than we could have imagined a decade ago. The attention of some 'outsiders' to the potential and power of rural communities has certainly been remarkable. This interest grew directly from the impact of the economic crisis. Many, and most especially intellectuals and
NGO leaders, saw that the crisis reflected deep and long-standing problems in the pattern of Thailand’s development.

At the same time, it is not at all clear that the ‘dominant groups’ in the society have a more objective understanding of the potential, power and culture of rural Thailand. This was repeatedly demonstrated as the government led by Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai (1997-2001) was seen by many NGO leaders and villagers to be ignoring the plight of villagers. In one notable case, a state agency admitted arranging for gangs to attack villagers who were staging a long term protest against the Pak Mun dam in Ubon Province. Such apparently negative actions speak little of increased understanding.

More positively, since 1990, the various governments have gradually recognised the importance of local wisdom in some policy documents. For example, popular wisdom was included in recent official development plans. It has also been introduced into curricula of elementary and secondary schools. In November 1999, the Chuan’s cabinet endorsed the Policy to Promote Thai Wisdom and Education as submitted by the office of National Education Commission. In 1999 this office launched a project to promote wise teachers (khru phumpanya). It selected thirty wise people from all over the country and provided them with a small fund to transmit their wisdom to local people, especially children and youth.

So, a decade on, the picture is mixed. On the one hand, there is much more interest in local wisdom than there was ten years ago. It comes together with, for example, an enhanced awareness of health and the role of traditional medicine. However, the interest in traditional wisdom is still very much ‘in pieces.’

On the other hand, Thailand has faced the challenges posed by the explosion of HIV/AIDS since 1989 and by the economic meltdown that began in mid-1997. These events have shaken Thai society to its roots. But even in adversity there have been some interesting outcomes, and many have hoped that they can have eventually have positive outcomes. A feel-
Epilogue

ing has developed that people need to reconsider their ‘roots’, and this has led to some interesting ‘back to basics’ approaches as various groups redefine their goals and thinking about development.

Such crises are not just economic or health issues. Many see them as consequences of unbalanced and unhealthy development over four decades. While the voice of those who questioned Thailand’s development model during the boom was barely heard, the crisis saw the questioning reach a crescendo. Many asked if a simplistic definition of ‘development’, largely couched in terms of economic growth, was reasonable? Indeed, a number of intellectuals and NGO leaders have argued that the economic downturn and the HIV/AIDS crisis was evidence of the failure of a development model that relied on capitalist industrialisation, export-orientation, and globalisation.

Many people have suffered from the economic crisis. The people most badly affected have been the poor. While bankers and industrialists lost their companies, the fact is that there was still a transfer of wealth to the already rich during the crisis. For many rural communities, the economic crisis was hardly new. Government agencies repeatedly pointed out that poverty had been reduced by growth. True, but income inequalities had also grown. Relative deprivation meant that, for many rural people, the ‘crisis’ had begun decades earlier. Especially in poor and deprived areas, villagers often felt that they had little more to lose by the economic downturn. During the period of industrialisation, many left the village to seek a better life in urban areas. They worked in industry, construction, services and at myriad other jobs in the towns and cities. Their wages often kept families and farms going. The crisis, which hit industry and construction particularly hard, meant that many urban dreams collapsed.

Initially there was a move ‘back home’ to rural areas. Many urban workers were, in fact, relatively recent migrants, and there was a natural tendency to seek the support of families, relatives and friends. Life might be hard back on the farm, but government, NGOs and even the World Bank thought that Thailand was fortunate for it retained a ‘traditional social
safety net. Families could not let relatives suffer alone. In fact, the World Bank has shown that health and education outcomes saw no discernable declines during the crisis. However, it is clear that these outcomes were based entirely on the poor reducing their expenditures and using their meagre but hard-earned savings.¹

Many of the returnees did not stay in the village for long, and were soon in search of employment elsewhere. However, the economic crisis appears to have proved at least one thing: self reliance as a village-level development strategy remains important. It appears that those farmers who suffered least were those who had begun integrated farming before the crisis, established community-based organisations, and looked to be more self-sufficient. Barring natural disasters, they had rice in their fields, fish in their ponds, and chickens, ducks, vegetables, fruits and plants around the house. Many had solved their debt problems before the crisis hit, and so had the time to think about how to process the surplus product from their farm. As they tended to buy little, and saved most of their income from selling farm products, they have advanced to a position where they now have more bargaining power.

The movement to establish community-based organisations (CBOs) had already begun in the 1980s, but the economic and HIV/AIDS crises gave increased impetus for these to develop into networks. That is, CBOs began to develop links amongst themselves, sometimes facilitated by NGOs. Increasingly, however, even some government agencies were promoting networks. They link according to common interests, issues and problems. Examples included networks working on the environment, community forests, HIV/AIDS, integrated agriculture, health, savings, and integrated issues of community development.

A good example is Inpeng, a network of CBOs in the Northeast. It originally brought together CBOs from five districts in Sakon Nakhon province, one district in Udon Thani, and one in Kalasin, mostly grouped around the Phuphan Mountains. This network aims to establish economic self-sufficiency and to organise villagers to manage their local resources and
‘local capital’ efficiently. Inpeng works on integrated agriculture, environment, public health, savings, community industry and enterprise, and is establishing a community welfare system. However, the focus of Inpeng is its ‘process of learning.’ It is a forum or platform for community members to learn from experience. In the last few years, the network has expanded to include communities from more than 12 districts in these provinces. CBOs are now keen to join, realising that organisation is their strength.

The Pattana Chao Buriram Forum is a network that operates at the provincial level in Buriram. It also consists of twelve district networks. They are organised like the Inpeng network. District networks have a monthly meeting, and a provincial network meeting is held monthly, with representatives from all of the district networks. At these meetings, members share their experiences, and decide on community development programmes and projects that may be jointly implemented. They now have a savings group that operates at community, district and provincial levels, and a central revolving fund. Such activities bring community members together to learn from each other.

Such networks now operate in many parts of the Northeast, including Mahasarakham, Khon Kaen, Nakhon Ratchasima and Chaiyaphum. Some are now part of regional networks and also part of the national network Phumpanya Thai (Thai Wisdom), facilitated by the Village Foundation.

After the economic crisis hit, networks have entered a new phase of development. This actually began with a pararubber planters association in Nakhon Sithammarat, a Southern province. Leaders of the association decided to conduct their own research by collecting data both from government organisations, academic institutions, and from their own experiences to develop their own strategic plan. They aimed to draw lessons from their past to set a course for the future. They had come to understand that the government could not solve their problems as rubber growers. They realised that in almost 100 years of pararubber history in Thailand, policy had always been in the hands of government officials, politicians and traders. The planters had no say.
Their draft plan was taken to public hearings in six provinces, with a large number of planters attending. It was a great success. Unfortunately, the government did not accept their plan, arguing that it had already developed an official plan. Nevertheless, CBOs started to implement their plan, without approval or support from the government. The people's plan consisted of analysis of the past situation, problems, and proposal for solutions, with a number of alternatives.

Others soon took up this model. In 1998, representatives of provincial networks from 27 provinces met and developed a 'community strategic plan' that focussed on agriculture, environment, health, community enterprise, community industry, and community learning. In 1999, more than a hundred sub-districts in eight provinces used People's Research and Development methods (PR&D) to develop strategic plans. PR&D involves action research carried out principally by villagers, who start by identifying their own potential, their local resources, and their social strengths and organisational capacities. They then analyse constraints and problems before developing their strategies, development programmes, projects, and activities. PR&D has proved an effective tool for empowering communities and engendering community participation. As the methodology is extended to other sub-districts, and is taken up by government, there is a danger that it may become no more than a formal mechanism. However, there is a strong desire to maintain local control of the process.

The results can be surprising. For instance, a community in Buriram, while working on their plan and collecting data on local resources, found that the value of mushrooms in the 120 hectares of public forest amounted to about four million baht. As they calculated the whole product of this forest, they realised the true value of their 'supermarket.' Their awareness raised, they immediately set up a committee to take care of this forest. Nobody asked them to do so. They had become aware of the real value of the forest for their community.

Communities have learned that they have more than they had previously thought, and they can be more than they had imagined. They found that
they have far more potential than they were ‘told’ by the wider society. They also found that identifying their potential was more productive than beginning activities by attacking their problems. Problems acted to block out their potential, and they tended to wait for assistance from outsiders rather than being self-motivated.

Through activities such as these, CBOs and their networks have discovered their potential, resources and capital, and have gained confidence and esteem. Many of them have begun to re-establish their relationships with their natural environment. They have also reinvigorated relationships with other people through the establishment of community organisations and networks. They have also begun to manage their resources in new ways. Their resource base is today increasingly limited and more deteriorated, so they have to manage these resources differently, in ways that are likely to be more balanced and sustainable.

To establish new and re-discovered capacities, CBOs and networks need to engage in a process of learning. This is practical learning, by doing and sharing with others. It is especially important that this involve experienced peers. The goal is to become more self-reliant. Self-reliance means to be able to solve one’s own problems, and capable of helping oneself as much as possible. There are things that one can do completely by oneself, and there are things that require the assistance of others. Sometimes a community can look after itself, but equally there are times when a community needs help from another. Self-reliance involves depending on one another, mutual support and sharing. This may be in the economic, social or even political spheres. It may involve agriculture, processing, marketing, saving, health, environment and learning. Self-reliance is a balanced relationship; a partnership of equals.

The economic and HIV/AIDS crises are not the only events shaping Thai society. Even while the economic meltdown was causing so much suffering, Thailand’s political reforms continued to advance. With a new constitution in 1997, and a rapidly strengthening people’s movement, a transition to a more decentralised and transparent power structure is occurring.
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Democracy means more than just going to vote. It is a process of decision-making, policy development and implementation, in which increasing numbers of people participate. In this, CBOs and networks can have important roles. As farmers and other formerly powerless people regain a public place in society, they are increasingly assertive. They affirm their rights and roles in resource management at all levels. They demand, challenge, demonstrate and blockade, even on the roads around Government House. In these ways, they claim their right to be consulted and to share in management and decision-making.

Conflicts between the state and the poor will continue as long as the poor do not have a clear right to resources. But this conflict does not amount to anarchy by the poor. CBOs, networks and other people's organisations do not reject the state power; they simply want real and meaningful stake in decision-making.

Governments have often promised a better deal for the poor. In the past, while it is true that gains have been made by those in poverty, few governments have been seen to have delivered substantial benefits to the rural population. As we write this, in early 2001, another government has come into being, this time based on specific policies to alleviate the burden on the poor. It has offered much, and rural voters strongly supported the party in its unprecedented election victory. The Thai Rak Thai Party, led by one of the country's richest men, has pledged major economic and social reform. It remains to be seen how these promises will be implemented, and what the outcomes will be for the rural population.

Government policy is crucial for positive change of the society, especially in rural areas. However, no change will be sustained if it is not rooted in the reality of the communities it seeks to support. The communities themselves must recognise their potential and identify their local resources, and then turn these into 'capital', making the government's contribution that of an 'external counterpart.' What was once seen as a 'local contribution' is now central, while the 'external counterpart' is of reduced significance. The balance in development is changing. We see this in the
Northeast where community organisations and networks are expanding. They are increasingly confident that they can find strength in their communities. It seems clear that if communities are strengthened, society cannot be weakened.

Afterword

Some have suggested that we conclude this edition of our book by drawing lessons from the materials presented. We prefer not to do this. Readers may well draw ‘lessons’ from this book, but this has not been our task or aim. Rather, we want to do no more than present a picture of village life and popular wisdom, indicating the vitality that still exists in the rapidly changing countryside.

There are, of course, a number of academic studies of the phenomenon we have called popular wisdom. Bookshelves are filling with studies of self-reliance. This picture we have presented of village life and development activities based on a knowledge of cultural values, places an account of popular wisdom in its community context. In reflecting on the process of development implemented by the villagers, promoted by people’s organisations and by some NGOs, we hope to have shown that the communities of the Northeast retain considerable potential for developing useful and alternative approaches to rural development, defined in community terms.

As explained earlier, we did not intend to collect data, facts and figures, and engage in an intellectual exercise. Cultural identity and values are not things recorded and kept somewhere, but they can be known through observation and participation in village life. In the first edition, we suggested that village people should have been the first group to benefit from our work. We also hoped that NGOs, government organisations, academics, and researchers may have found our efforts useful for orientating further study and action. Above all, we were hopeful that our outline of popular wisdom, of the way things were, and how they were changing, would be
interesting for a wider readership. After all, there were few accounts of Northeastern life for the general reader.

These hopes for the earlier book remain valid for this edition. As we have explained, a decade later the situation is different. While there are still few general accounts of village life, the work of NGOs, networks, and other people’s organisations has advanced significantly. The trends we noted – in terms of change, development and organisation – have strengthened. These trends are both positive and negative.

Will a knowledge and understanding of popular wisdom and village life 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 potentially become a means for further exploitation, oppression, and manipulation. For example, candidates running for election know that if Northeastern villagers are given money they will usually 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 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 for the economic benefit of outsiders and locals alike.

Northeastern people typically display the attitude of kreng jai when dealing with others, meaning that they do all they can to avoid hurting feelings. They almost never refuse anyone in a straightforward manner. Similarly, they are grateful to those who do something good for them, their family, and community. Officials and private traders often realise this, and villagers are sometimes manipulated, using this value, to bring personal benefit to the officials and traders. In this way, corruption can occur easily and often in rural areas. It is also one of the reasons for the huge debts rural people have accumulated with private creditors, banks, and the like.
Nevertheless, we would still argue that popular wisdom remains a valuable asset for rural communities.

Villagers continue to be looked down upon and be poorly regarded by outsiders, especially the dominant groups in society, including officials, traders, employers and investors. In being subject to manipulation through their values, villagers are often characterised as ‘stupid’ or ‘ignorant’. Judged from the outside, by ‘modern’ standards, the village way is undoubtedly unscientific, unsystematic, undisciplined, and uneducated. For example, most modern medical doctors have little knowledge of traditional medicine. They often assert that it involves superstition, spirit beliefs or occultism. It is true that not all herbal medicines can be tested and have positive results in the laboratory, but few scientists consider the limitations of their methods. They seldom admit the significance of the social and cultural aspects of the traditional methods of healing.

While 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. 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 has long judged villagers as lacking adequate social organisation, and as being ineffective in implementing development plans. But the government seldom recognises the traditional social structures and organisation that have maintained communities for generations. They tend to disregard popular wisdom and local leadership, and impose new structures on the villages, and not just in the Northeast. Government has long implemented its developmental and administrative activities with little consideration of the social and cultural differences at work in various regions of the country. It can hardly be otherwise since
everything is planned in Bangkok, and has to be applied throughout the administration, from the ministry down to the provinces, *amphur, tambon,* and then on down to the villages. Despite recent democratic and decentralising developments in the political sphere, these observations remain essentially accurate.

This is the essence of national planning, where only the superficial similarities of villages are considered. These similarities are brought together, explained by some sociological or other theory and applied, by technocrats, to national planning. This is top-down planning, the bird’s eye view of the world. Relatively few care for the worm’s eye view, looking from the bottom up. Such a view would show the uniqueness of each village, each region, and each cultural group, identifying both similarities and differences. It is far more difficult to consider a village from this bottom-up view, and much more complicated for national planning. This means that even if such a culturally sensitive approach were desirable and possible, it would require major reforms and attitudinal change to be successful.

It is also difficult for academics and researchers to adopt this worm’s eye view. However, there have been significant advances in recent years. Despite problems of approach and methodology, significant groups of academics are supporting community development efforts through their research and activism. Increasingly, academics are sensitive and interested enough to be able to ‘enter the heart’ of the villager, and look at things from their perspective. In order to do so they have had to change their way of thinking about villages, accepting and appreciating popular wisdom and the values of village life, and developing a respect for villagers. Their contacts with villagers must be with equals, not with subjects.

A view that 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 difference. They are often 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. This tendency has certainly been evident in recent years as some academics and even a number of officials have pushed for self-reliance and self-sufficiency. These advocates have often given too little thought for how the generalisation of an approach to these initiatives can actually inhibit the specific development situation of communities.

Change is a difficult process. Since the economic crisis a number of academics, technocrats and officials have sought knowledge and solutions for the country’s economic problems by looking to the village and agriculture. Some have also sought personal enlightenment by being ‘connected’ to things rural. It is clear that these people need to realise that rural communities themselves are struggling and discovering their own development paths, looking for their own solutions, and that some are choosing an approach to self-reliance. There cannot be one ‘solution’ to fit all circumstances.

In a situation where economic, social and political circumstances are changing rapidly, the impact on rural communities, most especially in the Northeast, remains problematic. Not all changes will affect communities in the same ways, and there will be both negative and positive impacts. It remains apparent, however, that the over-riding concern of communities continues to be the quest for a better life for families and communities. Of course, ‘a better life’ can mean many things. By allowing rural communities to participate in the definition of their ‘better life’, the results will be varied, more interesting and, we suspect, more appropriate.

Note
GLOSSARY

amphur  district
arahat  Buddhist saints
baisri sukwan  a spirit ceremony to symbolise unity, involving the binding of wrists with strings
banthit  one who is learned
barb  sin
baht  unit of Thai currency, made up of 100 satang
buad rian  to be ordained as monk, implying being learned
bueng  swamp
bun ban  paying homage to the pu-ta
bun bung fai  rocket festival
bun kun khao yai  threshing ceremony
chadok  stories from the Tripitaka
cham  spirit medium
changwat  province
chao khon nai khon  master of others; a term sometimes used to refer to officials
chao kote  village elders
chao muang  ruler of a town or a domain
chao thii  spirit of a particular place
dai saisin  sacred thread
dek wat  boys and youths who serve monks and the temple
deva  gods
doo thii  survey a location
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thai词语</th>
<th>英语翻译</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dukkha</td>
<td>suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ha chao kin kham</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>
<tr>
<td>hed you hed kin</td>
<td>working for daily subsistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heed sipsong</td>
<td>the 12 ceremonies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hor krachai kho</td>
<td>village public address system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huay</td>
<td>stream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isan</td>
<td>the northeastern region of Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaen</td>
<td>bamboo pipe musical instrument producing on organ-like sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kammakan mooban</td>
<td>village committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kammnan</td>
<td>head of a tambon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karma</td>
<td>belief in rebirth according to merit — see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kham</td>
<td>belief in rebirth according to merit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kathin</td>
<td>twelfth month ceremony offering robes and necessities to monks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kha luang yai</td>
<td>high commissioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kham</td>
<td>belief in rebirth according to merit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khan na</td>
<td>paddy bunds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khan ha</td>
<td>offerings for a healing ceremony (five pairs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khan paed</td>
<td>offerings for a healing ceremony (eight pairs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khao chi</td>
<td>a ceremony offering roasted rice to monks and spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khao kham</td>
<td>a first month ceremony where there is intensive practice of the Dhamma — a period of purification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khao pradab din</td>
<td>ceremony for dead relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khao saak</td>
<td>ceremony of sharing based on Buddhist teachings regarding reconciliation, solidarity and assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khao tom mad</td>
<td>a dessert of boiled banana and rice wrapped in banana leaf</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Glossary

*khatha*  
sacred formula

*khoon lan*  
a threshing ceremony

*khru*  
teacher; master

*khru phumpanya*  
wise teacher

*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*  
tattoo

*lam*  
traditional singing and dancing

*len sao*  
courting a young woman; flirting

*long khaek*  
helping one another

*loy krathong*  
candle-floating ceremony

*luk sit*  
disciple

*mae phosop*  
the rice spirit; ‘mother rice’

*mahesak lak ban*  
spirit or great power of the village; the spirit of the founder of the community

*makhapuja*  
a ceremony commemorating 1,250 monks gathering to hear the Buddha’s first sermon

*mak reo*  
a fruit used by Chinese doctors

*maw do*  
fortune teller; seer

*maw lam moo*  
large travelling troupes of traditional singers and dancers

*maw lam phi fa*  
a healer who uses music and dance as part of the treatment

*maw nam mam*  
a healer like a *maw nam mon*, but using oils

*maw nam mon*  
healers who use sacred water

*maw pao*  
healers who blow on sick persons to produce recovery

*maw song*  
diviner

*maw sukwan*  
the one who calls the spirits to a ceremony
maw teng kae  the one who presides over a ceremony of reconciliation or asking pardon from spirits

maw tham  healers

maw ya samunphrai traditional healer using herbal medicine

monthon administrative zone

muang town or town and its domain

nai amphur district officer

nai hoi local Northeastern traders

naktham learned in the Dhamma

nang lam female dancer during spirit ceremony

navakowad a basic set of doctrines and disciplines to be learned by new monks

na don upland rice fields

na lum lowland paddy fields

ngiu Chinese opera and theatre

nihan fables

noh mai bamboo shoots

nong lake

ork phansa ceremony marking the end of Buddhist Lent

palad kik a penis shaped object, symbolising fertility

parya 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

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
Glossary

*phiifa*  
heavenly gods

*phiia*  
evil spirits

*phiia krasue*  
evil spirits

*phiia nam*  
spirits of water

*phiia pa*  
spirits of the forest

*phiia phong*  
evil spirits

*phiia phrai*  
evil spirits

*phiia pob*  
a vampire-like spirit born of humans

*phiia pret*  
evil spirits

*phiia rai*  
generic term for evil spirits

*phram*  
Brahman; a person who conducts ceremonies according to Brahman or Hindu derived traditions

*phra wase*  
a celebration of selflessness, as demonstrated by the Buddha in one of his former lives

*phra kruang*  
sacred object, usually a Buddha image, hung around the neck

*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 power

*phu tao*  
elders

*phu wiset*  
people with extraordinary and/or religious power

*phya*  
a lord during the period of the absolute monarchy

*pla rah*  
fermented fish

*pla som*  
sour and salted fish

*prayoke*  
an official grading system for monks

*pu-ta*  
spirits of ancestors

*rod nam dam hua*  
water-pouring ceremony
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rot khai ya</td>
<td>traveling 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>unit of money (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>‘bride-price’</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 spirits 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>
<tr>
<td>tripitaka</td>
<td>Buddhist scriptures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ubasika</td>
<td>Buddhist laywomen who devote themselves to the temple and practice the eight precepts or adhere to them more strictly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Glossary

**ubasok**  Buddhist laymen 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 pray and perform important rituals

**uppakut**  a mythological figure related to Buddhism, symbolising fertility

**vija**  folk arts; ‘magic’ arts; knowledge

**vinaya**  227 rules for monks

**visakha puja**  ceremony of the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha

**wai**  the traditional sign of respect, bringing the hands together as if in prayer, and raising them, usually to a level between the head and chest; also a sign of greeting

**wan katanyu**  day of gratitude

**wan phra**  religious or holy day

**wat**  temple

**ya sang**  medicine used to cause suffering or death in another; ‘magic’ medicine

**yod wai**  rattan

**yome upatthak**  a sponsor of monks in ordination ceremonies
FURTHER READING

(in English)

The selection of reading presented here is limited, and interested readers will find more in the bibliographies of the works listed below. As in common academic practice, Thai names are listed alphabetically by the author's first name.

Background reading


Seri Phongphit & Kevin Hewison


**NGOs and Development**


**Culture and Development**

Glossary


The publications *Thai Culture* (a journal distributed by the Chulalongkorn University Bookstore), *Watershed* and *Thai Development Newsletter* are useful English-language publications, although the latter has recently been discontinued.

**Village and Development**


Seri Phongphit & Kevin Hewison


**Religion and Development**


**Rebellion**


**Culture of Thailand**


**Migration**


Village Life: Culture and Transition in Thailand’s Northeast deals with Thailand’s Northeast – Isan. The region is a large and populous area that, despite ever-closer integration with the Thai nation and great cultural diversity, retains its distinctiveness. This book provides insights into village life in an accessible format and style. It explains the essence of village life in the Northeast, showing how this has changed under the pressures of centralisation and economic development. It does this by drawing on the extensive knowledge and experience of the authors in the region over many years. The focus is on popular wisdom as displayed in the dynamics of daily life, the villagers’ special occasions, their religious and cultural rites, rituals, festivals, and celebrations, their work and entertainment, and their moments of joy and grief. As the pace of change has accelerated, so the struggle for self-reliance has become more difficult. Village Life reflects on the remarkable changes that have taken place in the Northeast and shows how villagers are seeking ways forward.

Village Life will be of interest to a wide readership. General readers and travellers will find that it gives them fresh insights into the life of the northeastern villager. As the book is based on the activities of non-governmental organisations and local people, there will be much of interest to academics, professionals, and others involved in development work.

Front cover photograph: Traditional weaving
Back cover photograph: A farmer from Northeast Thailand