Dead Headmen: Histories and Communities in the Southeast Asian Hinterland

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The aim of this paper is to point to ways in which politics among upland minority populations in mainland Southeast Asia are played out in contending definitions of history and community.[1] Histories and communities, as I approach them here, are manifestations of dynamics and debates within a particular political culture. I argue against the notion that the cultural and social formations of particular minority groups in the hinterlands of Thailand and Cambodia are any less socially constructed than those of the nation states in their vicinity. Ben Anderson's definition of the nation as an imagined community alludes to the notion that certain small-scale societies may be less imagined (and in this sense more real) than nation states.

> In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (1991: 6)

My concern is with the so-called primordial villages, and the styles in which they are imagined.

The idea of these so-called primordial villages fits within a Western framework of indigenous communities and may be seen as a last outpost of a tradition which is being slowly eroded by the various forces of modernity. I main-

tain that this notion of primordiality is illusory, and that the dichotomy of tradition and modernity is highly problematic. But such notions are firmly grounded in ethnographic approaches to non-western societies, and show up in rather formulaic accounts of how well-integrated 'local' communities are eroded by outside forces. James Clifford identifies such intellectual practice as "[p]astoral allegories of culture loss and textual rescue" (1986:115). Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Clifford sees modern allegory arising from

a sense of the world as transient and fragmentary. 'History' is grasped as a process, not of inventive life but of 'irresistible decay.' The material analog of allegory is thus the 'ruin' [...] an always disappearing structure that invites imaginative reconstruction. Benjamin observes that "appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to redeem them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory. (*ibid.*:119)

One way in which such allegorical structures are reproduced is by means of case studies of 'traditional' villages that exemplify assumed 'problems in change' (McKinnon and Vienne 1989). Another way notions of suffering get written into accounts of hinterland populations is by framing them as always having been minorities, whereas minority-status is a product of modern nation states and thus not directly applicable to the pre-colonial period.

At the core of [Hmong] culture is the idea that [they] have been oppressed and exploited over many generations by the Chinese. The visualization of space itself places the Hmong in a small community of people who cooperate among themselves, but who are surrounded by the overwhelming power of the state. (Radley 1986:78)

Radley portrays Hmong culture in terms of community and egalitarianism, and their society as centered on lineages and extended patrilineal households, and relates how these units are breaking down as a result of ideological and economic forces coming from the outside (Radley 1986:449, 465). 'History', then, consists of oppression by the state on the one hand, and on the erosion of their society via state-promoted economic and ideological forces on the other. In this framework, the idea of history attaches to the state, and it concerns oppression and social transformation.

Such analyses perpetuate the stereotypical Eurocentric view of the non-western world as 'out of time', prior to colonial or other 'modern' contact (Thomas 1989). Such imaginings define a script for various narratives about so-called traditional people, 'entering' time, and the destructive results of that move. Clifford's analysis of allegories in modern ethnography does not assume that there is a way

surgically [to] separate the factual from the allegorical in cultural accounts [The 'impulse' Benjamin identifies] is to be resisted, not by abandoning allegory – an impossible aim – but by opening ourselves to different histories. (1986:119)

an immediate problem in dealing with local imaginings among the hinterland

populations of mainland Southeast Asia is their historical reference, which is clear for instance in the mismatch between the imaginings of the 1990s and those that appear in earlier ethnographic accounts. Anthropological studies conducted in the 1960s among the upland groups of Cambodia and Thailand suggest that social and cultural dynamics were centered in village life (for north-eastern Cambodia, see Matras-Troubetzkoy 1983; for the Mien in Thailand, see Hubert 1985; Kandre 1967; 1991; Miles 1974; 1990). From reading these accounts, I was led to expect a certain attachment to this previous period of relative autonomy from the lowland states. What I found, however, was that people did not long for the 'old days' as that was a period of 'no progress', of no roads to markets/towns, no electricity, no schools, etc.

To some extent, the markers of 'progress' now provide uplanders with ways of ranking villages in the hinterland, which is to say that symbolic capital among minority populations draws on links to national structures rather than reinforcing a political separation from lowland domains as it did previously. This shift in symbolic capital, indicating a shift in political culture, has generated a revision of histories in the hinterland. One example comes from a Krung man in north-eastern Cambodia.

In the old days, the minorities knew nothing of the outside world, only villages and fields. They were isolated. My father spoke only Krung, he could not speak Khmer or Lao. In those days, people didn't even know how to ride a bicycle. Now people go to commune, district, and province (centres), and they can go to school. Education has value (in contrast to farming). These are good days now, the minorities are no longer living isolated lives. (Jonsson 1996a)

Damrong Tayanin, who grew up in a Khmu village in northern Laos, provides a similar statement.

A long time ago there was darkness. That there was darkness means that the Kammu people could not read, could not write; they were like a blind person who cannot see the world. There was also silence, which meant that the Kammu people who lived in the forest could not hear any news. There was no radio, of course, no newspapers, and there was no way to learn about the world. (1994:38)

These statements imply the move out of the forest as a move from backwardness to progress, from ignorance to knowledge, darkness to light, etc., the 'transformers' being electricity, bicycles, radio, newspapers, and so on. The narratives also assume that a transformation has occurred. The people have been released from the ignorance and isolation of life in the forest.

People have inhabited the forests and hinterlands of Southeast Asia for centuries, and even millennia. Some accounts suggest that hinterland populations were pushed into their habitat by more powerful others (Wiens 1967) and thus would have preferred to live in the lowlands. This is not a simple issue, as the ethnographic record indicates strong ideological pressures toward upland village life and away from the lowlands prior to recent processes. The recent concern with markers of progress is in many ways conversion-like. In so

far as people act on, and reflect upon, the world in terms of their knowledge/ideas about it, their sense of it cannot be discounted as trivial.

People might not fully comprehend their world and they definitely do not exercise full control over it, but in carrying out the process of their social life they make it familiar, intelligible and accountable. Otherwise it could not be their world and they could not live in it. (Holy and Stuchlik 1983:108)

In the following I shall address local histories as a way to get at what uplanders themselves imagine about their communities and in part to read beyond the post-conversion discourse. This discussion provides material for an examination of political culture, both to address the peculiarity of the 'progressive' framework and to suggest dimensions of what went on before.

The Village Society

Village organization and agricultural adaptation systems provide one point of entry to the different political cultures in the uplands. Kunstadter & Kunstadter (1992) offer the following descriptions of Lua' and Hmong.

[Lua'] traditional cultivation system involved the annual cutting of a block of secondary forest within which the swiddens of all village households would be made [...] Overall management of the rotation system was in the hands of village elders, who determined whether a swidden site was ready for recultivation, organized communal sacrifices to the spirits of the forest which was being cut [...] settled disputes which might arise [...] and organized the villagers to control the spread of fires [...] Households were the land-using units and use rights were transmitted through the male line. Households paid tribute to the chief priest (samang), whose lineage they traced back to one of the ancient Lua' princes of the last Lua' king, King Luang Wilanka, who formerly ruled in Chiang Mai. In general only the descendants of village-founder households could use village owned swidden land, but under special circumstances a chief might accept tribute and allow a new household to join the village. (1992:23)

Traditional Hmong villages were impermanent collections of households which gathered around fertile field sites. The size and composition of a Hmong village depends on the local availability of land, rather than on descent from a common set of founding families. (ibid.:28)

This description assumes an ethnically unified form of village organization and agricultural adaptation, that is somehow 'traditional'. Yet Kauffmann's (1972) research suggests that the centrality of village chiefs among Lua' was not as firm as Kunstadter (1967; 1983) indicates.

The statement that villages can do without a big samang is inconsistent with Kunstadter's repeatedly uttered assertion that the Lawa feel 'if we didn't have a samang, we would have to live like apes and monkeys in the jungle'. [M]any villages can do very well without a samang. (Kauffmann 1972:266)

Taking this at face value, the Lua' situation may parallel that described by Leach (1954) for the Kachin in Burma, specifically that there was no overarching political structure to the various villages, but an ongoing debate as to what kinds of local politics there were, whether or not individual communities had chiefs, and, if so, who was entitled to that position. Reviewing Kunstadter's account in such a perspective suggests that he relied upon one of several voices in local affairs as the the true, or authentic one. His account of village organization and access to land is nevertheless couched in terms of a long history, which results in shifting this particular version of the local reality beyond contention.

History is clearly connected to local social arrangements, but how this is or made to be so is another matter. Leach (1954) argued that all Kachin histories were myths used for arguing about the present, and gave the example of sagatellers who would relate the past according to who hired them to do so. The case of the Lisu is equally instructive. According to Durrenberger (1983),

[e]ach Lisu village is independent of the others. The lineages are not ranked; there is no greater status attached to one lineage than to others. There are no headmen to make decisions for the villagers, and Lisu loath assertive and autocratic headmen. Dessaint [...] reports that assertiveness of headmen may be a reason for some households to leave and settle in other areas, and that '... stories Lisu tell of murdered headmen are legion'. I heard many accounts of headmen who became assertive and were assassinated by their own villagers. (1983:217-18)

In this case, there is no long history, and what history there is concerns killing assertive headmen. This description of Lisu villages corresponds to Kunstadter & Kunstadter's (1992:28) sense of Hmong villages as 'impermanent collections of households which gathered around fertile field sites,' in that there was no lasting order to any one village, and no village chief grounded firmly in place. How traditional these arrangements were is another matter. Thirty years earlier, the Lisu in this area had been hierarchically organized under a leader who had a lowland title and rights to collect tribute (Hanks & Hanks 1978:11-12). Shifts such as these are not unique to Lisu (Jonsson 1996b, n.d.).

Apart from arguing that all histories among the Kachin were myths, constantly manipulated in local conflicts, Leach (1954) maintained there was no match between ethnic identity and social structure. Instead, the various populations in the Kachin Hills went through repeated shifts among three ideal models; democratic (gumlao), autocratic (gumsa) and stratified. These social oscillations resulted from an on-going competition among individuals for power. It is possible therefore to posit, following Leach, that the variation in the Lua' and Lisu cases are manifestations of shifts between egalitarian and hierarchic forms of organization. Leach's analysis proceeds without assuming that an ethnic group 'has' such things as 'political organization' and 'agricultural adaptation.' His account of political, ethnic, and other shifts in the Kachin hills assumed there were 'individuals' in a largely unbounded social setting, and that the social shifts resulted from an ongoing competition among the various indi-

viduals over power (e.g. 1954:10).

Kirsch (1973) proposed a cultural reading of social oscillation in the uplands, and expanded it to include a number of upland groups outside the Kachin area, shifting the analytical focus from the 'political' to the 'religious,' Such a shift in analytical focus is justified in terms of the ethnography, in that both agricultural practices and political standing relate in one way or another to spirits through offerings. In Hinton's (1973) description of a cluster of Karen villages in Mae Sariang in northwestern Thailand, there was tension among older villages and their more recent satellites over ritual status. Spirits bring well-being and prosperity, and leaders of the older villages insisted that the welfare of the satellites was dependent on rituals conducted in the mother village. In the cases Hinton described, there was nothing preventing the autonomy of the satellites as separate villages, but the issue of relative ritual prominence parallels that among Lua'.

Such relationships, among people in villages and village clusters, and among people and spirits, are accounted for by local histories. The Lua' stories ground the ritual monopoly of village-founder lineages in their descent from one of the princes of the region prior to the Tai take-over in the 13th century. Lisu stories, in contrast, deny history except as it takes to the killings of assertive headmen. As extremes of the range of remembrance, such stories indicate that some groups 'have' long histories and others short. These stories, I maintain, are central to the social and political imaginings of uplanders.

There is, for example, a fundamental difference between the ways in which the Lua' and the Lisu gain access to spirits and fields. Among the Lua', this access is at the village level, through founder-lineages, while among the Lisu it is at the level of individual households. This difference between the two groups corresponds to differences in the ways they relate local histories. While the two cases cannot be presented as generalizations about 'ethnic' groups in terms of histories and village organization, they point to an important aspect of political culture in the upland areas: variation in the subject of action. Lisu stories of murdered headmen assume the primacy of the household, while the dominant Lua' accounts assume the primacy of the village. Though both make statements about dead headmen, the difference is that Lua' imagine a line of them extending back to a period before Thai domination of the area, while Lisu state that whenever assertive headmen emerged, they were killed.

I contend that Leach's emphasis on the individual as a fundamental unit is descriptively inadequate, for much evidence from the uplands lends support to Rousseau's (1995:290) argument that "within and across societies, there are different kinds of acting subjects, not discrete individuals who don various roles." A focus on trans-individual subjects is part and parcel of a focus on action, which is almost always social action. If we are interested in discourse, we are studying socially established activities, and we cannot go very far by focusing on the activity of individuals outside of their social context. Neither is the other extreme any more satisfactory. We cannot assume that a 'society', a

'tribe', or a 'culture' have a common view of the world or a common activity, nor can we limit ourselves to the somewhat subtler thesis that each society is divided in sectors (e.g. classes) each with an internal consistency (Rousseau 1995:297).

Establishing what the relevant trans-individual subjects are in each case is an empirical issue. Lisu and Lua' histories are examples of an ongoing debate in the uplands as to what the units of farming and feasting are and how they relate. The Karen case revealed two perspectives on the same debate. How the relevant units are formed and how they relate internally is quite varied. An account of upland villages in Rattanakiri Province, Cambodia, should serve to remove any doubt that upland villages are just as imagined as other communities, and provide an instructive comparative case for an account of the Mien in Thailand that follows – both in order to establish that commonalities in the uplands are not imposed by analytical frameworks.

Grounding Spirits in Cambodian Hinterlands

A bird's eye view of Rattanakiri upland villages suggests several gradients between the extremes of household autonomy and village-lineage monopoly in local affairs. Furthest to the east are Jarai communities, where longhouses are the only structures, while Brao/Krung villages to the west have many small structures including individual households, and small huts on posts where marriageable young women and young men sleep. Some villages also erect little huts for aged people who are thought to be about to die, and for women about to give birth. Once the birth, or death, has occurred the person moves (or is moved) to a more permanent residence and the hut is burned (Matras-Troubetzkoy 1983). In between the Jarai and Brao/Krung villages, are Tampuan villages, most often with two or three families living in each household structure, with these being organized in a circle around a community house.

The Brao, Krung, and Kravet have much in common with the various Loven groups of the Boloven Plateau in nearby Laos. In what follows, I refer to Brao and Krung somewhat interchangeably and inconsistently, which also reflects local usage. Many Krung villages have a community house, and one cannot always tell Krung and Tampuan villages apart. Some Jarai villages are 'Tampuan-style', but without a community house, and there are several 'Lao' villages with wet-rice fields where the population is all Tampuan. When I asked people about ethnic differences, they usually mentioned language. Follow-up questions often revealed people spoke each other's languages, and that there were inter-ethnic marriages. Similar ambiguity about ethnic labelling has been observed by Peter Vail (Vail n.d.; Jonsson and Vail 1992).

In a sense, house-structures are containers for soul-stuff. When Tampuan build a new house, they invite ancestor spirits to come to ensure prosperity for the inhabitants of the house. When I passed abandoned houses in the company

of local people, they would invariably comment that there had been too much illness and death, and people had moved elsewhere. Once I was invited to a feast at a new house in the village of Kamaen where I was staying. This was a triple household, and when I asked about the reasons for the move, people said there had been too much illness and death in the old house. In twelve years, thirteen people had died and this in spite of offerings totaling six buffaloes and more than 30 pigs.

Spirits cling to houses, and when a person is buried, a miniature house is built over the grave to reorient the spirit in order that it will not return as a ghost to its previous home. Once I was asked for pills against illness that was caused by the ghost of a man who was reiterating his request for something to eat – the people said they had already offered a pig, so they wanted to try other means to see if the illness would go away. Prosperity and well-being of household members are indicators of the relative blessing they derive from the spirits of that household. If the spirits are not actively benevolent, people will relocate and take on another set of spirits.

Marriage contracts provide another example. Among the Tampuan with whom I stayed, and who were not far from town, two years of bride service was the usual pattern of marriage contracts. During the two years, the couple is expected to have one child, presumably drawing on the spirits of that household. Subsequently they will set up their own household. But there are variations on this scheme of spirits through households. One local man, in his early thirties, said he and his wife had had four children during the eight years they lived with his parents. Then, following the death of two of the children, one of whom died in a hunting accident at six years of age, they moved in with his wife's parents. As she had not become pregnant after two years there, they decided to build their own house.

In matters of houses and soul-stuff then, the Tampuan case, which displays many variations, falls between the extremes of individual autonomy evident in the case of the Brao and the incorporation of lineage-organized longhouses in the Jarai case. Leach (1954) argues that ritual is a way to say things about social relations, and while one can extract indications of statements about the ideal social order from household rituals, there are also rituals relating to village and field spirits which variously reaffirm or complicate the household-level statements.

Among the Tampuan, an annual sacrifice of a buffalo and two pigs has to be made to the village spirit in the community house. That is the assumed lower limit. The assumed upper limit is three buffaloes and four pigs; to go beyond that would "violate prosperity." For this sacrifice, each adult who has ever married is asked to contribute an equal amount toward the purchase of the animals. This ritual statement 'constructs' the village as a unit of all-equal adult feast-givers, male and female, and contrasts with some other village systems where a chief is in charge and channels the blessing generated. Tampuan offerings to field spirits, in contrast, are household affairs, usually involving a jar of rice-beer

and the killing of a chicken.

There were some indications that the Tampuan feasting system had once been more stratified. All households possessed a few jars in which they made the rice-beer consumed at feasts, but some households also had large heirloom-jars which had acquired the souls of sacrificed buffaloes. Four sacrificed buffaloes make the jar worth one live buffalo. These jars were used only when buffaloes were sacrificed. Some parallels exist between this practice and the fixing of rank among Tampuan and the Mnong Gar. Condominas (1977) described how Mnong Gar men, in 1948-49, would engage in competitive buffalo feasts, and acquire a buffalo soul after sacrificing twelve buffaloes. These men were then seen to be closer to spirits than the rest of the population, and they used their privileged position to influence behavior patterns among villagers, especially to 'enforce customs' in the village.

In some of the Krung villages I visited, people said they made a small annual sacrifice (one pig) to the village spirit but they pooled resources for the annual ox for the field spirit. In these cases, villagers would cultivate a single parcel of the forest in segments. This contrasts with the Tampuan practice, where fields were scattered and the responsibility lay with individual households or clusters of households. To some extent, the Tampuan and Krung cases familiar to me suggest that the former place emphasis on village feasting success and individual agricultural success, while the latter emphasize village agricultural success and individual feasting success. Among the Jarai, evidence of blessing and repute, and of feasting success, is manifested in the existence of large kin groups.

In these varied cases, political culture, as the framework for power relations within and between communities, is premised on notions of prosperity derived from relations with spirits. The outcome in each particular case can be read from how such relations are grounded in individual household units and multiple households, kin groups, villages, and how these conceived units relate to agricultural land. Political action, then, concerns which structures are activated through the mobilization of people and resources. During my research, one commune-level headman mobilized all 1,700 members of his commune for a feast for their prosperity, and among the spirits he called on was that of King Sihanouk. While some villagers dismissed the event as unimportant, it is significant in proposing the commune as a relevant structure for action in the same manner as people ritually seek to activate spirits through villages and households.

In the context of recent processes of national integration, the event can be accounted for as the penetration of state structures into the local life in a remote province, but the initiative, as I was able to observe it, appeared to be local. The notion of a commune as a relevant social unit draws on national administrative organization, but the resort to the rhetoric of a supra-village unit as relevant for local prosperity and well-being has much in common with segmentary lineage organization.

None of these structures are, 'naturally' the subject of action, each is contingent on particular organizational conventions. These structures are always in

history, in the sense of drawing their reality partly from a broader historical context. When explorers passed through these uplands more than a hundred years ago, villages were much larger, and fortified. In the context of the slave-trade for lowland domains, the structures people activated were informed by conditions of on-going warfare. Subsequently, more peaceful conditions have shifted the focus of organizational life from warfare and defense to agricultural success and feasting, though not with any uniformity regarding the relevant units of prosperity and competition for honour. The old heirloom jars that some households own indicate previous markers of achievement. Funerals provided another means of marking feasting success, of converting temporary prosperity into permanent markers of achievement. Funerals provided another means of marking feasting success, of converting temporary prosperity into permanent markers of achievement. Some people saw the difference among villages in terms of how much gold lay in the village graveyard. Gold was not used in offerings for any of the funerals I witnessed, but history can be stretched backwards, in arguments about repute, just as it can be denied. Political debates about organizational structures, individual households, extended households, villages, and communes, are worked out by stretching histories and communities in particular directions. In this sense, there is no single, or singular, imagined community, but an ongoing debate about which structure is the most relevant.

History, as we understand it, is important in these debates, and dead leaders are brought into current contexts in a variety of ways – among the Lua' as a reference for the unequal rank of kin-groups and their access to honour and land; among the Tampuan by the gold in their graves and as a way to rank villages; and, among the Lisu, as a statement regarding the structural primacy of nuclear households and as a warning to those with chiefly ambitions not to override that structure.

From what I have related, there is no essentially ethnic dimension to this structuring of the social landscape, and ethnicity may be relevant only in the same ways as dead headmen – in the sense that it is brought into debates about social life in support of particular perspectives when constitutional consensus is lacking and during disputes about which perspective is dominant in local affairs and in what structures it is grounded. To explore further the ways histories and communities interact in imaginings in the uplands, I will now move to the issue of Mien, among whom the flow of events is continually edited into histories.

Mien Society Through Ritual and Remembrance

Mien assumed continuity in the histories they told me, although there was no particular consensus among the histories they related. The 'remembered' history among the Mien consisted of three periods; one having to do with the migration from Kwangxi, which began most likely in the 1860s and ended with the settlement in Nan in the 1880s; the post-migration period, which spans the last 110 years; and the earliest, pre-migration period, which was not part of the

lived experience of any Mien I met, but was not singled out from more recent periods as being different in kind. Thus, I treat it as belonging to 'history' in the same way as more recent events.

Pre-migration events of the kind which were related to me are often regarded as 'mythology' and contrasted to 'history' (e.g. Lemoine 1983), but in view of the 'mythical' aspect of much of 'history' (cf. White 1978), there is good reason for avoiding such a distinction and for viewing the two as a continuum of remembrance that needs to be examined for what it says. Among the pre-migration events described to me were creation stories which accounted for the difference of uplanders and lowlanders, for Yao as a particular group of people, and for relations with particular spirits. This remembrance attaches to an unspecified or general period prior to the migration, but forms part of every-day discourse and is as much a part of the lived world as events personally experienced.

The migration of the ancestors of the Mien in Pangkha, from Kwangxi to Nan, is socially constitutive; it made and makes this group of people a social unit. Remembrance of the migration assumes that the descendants of the migrant group are a continuation of that group. I learned of the migration from offerings made to the King's Spirit, and from talking to a few of the older people in the village. From the spirit medium, as well as from a woman in her eighties and her son, I learned of two attacks the group had faced. One was by a group of *can khae'* (Chinese), and the other by *can pa-e* (Tai). The group had learned in advance of the imminent attack by the Chinese, so the Mien leader, Tang Tsan Khwoen' made an offering to the spirit of the king of the domain for assistance. During the battle, "the Chinese would aim their guns at him, and he would instantly disappear to somewhere else. They re-aimed, and the same thing happened." The Mien won the battle, or at least warded off the attackers, and this makes the migration and the King's Spirit mutually constitutive.

The King's Spirit is unique to this migration. "If it had not been for the King's Spirit, we would never have made it," said my informant in Pangkha. In this way, the welfare of the group is tied to the contact with this spirit, which is personal, through the leader, Tsan Khwoen'. As an event, the successful fending off of the attack not only maintained the group, but reinforced the prominence of its leader. To the extent that the social unity of the migration is reproduced, it is so through offerings to the King's Spirit, by or through its leader's fourth-generation descendant. When I asked Mien of Phale Village about this spirit, they were baffled, for they had never heard of it.[2]

Mien and other uplanders organize in groups of ritual and feasting units; the contact with the King's Spirit establishes the unity of a group in the same way as the contact with ancestor spirits through offerings brings about the household as a unit in ritual and feasting. Mien social life is never separate from relations with spirits. People's well-being, whether it relates to health, house-

2 Kandre (1967) and Chob (1983) report that Mien from this village arrived in a separate and later migration.

holding, or farming, draws on the results of their on-going relations with spirits, and this again feeds into their feasting and other relations of exchange. The mutuality of spirits and humans is taken for granted, and chants and blessings typically include the phrase 'harmony in the spirit world, peace in the human world'.

Again, these relations are always particular, and individual units of ritual may grow or decline, combine or dissolve. The King's Spirit is a modification of a general scheme, a particularization that makes this migration a social unit. The list of domains that the migration went through, which appears only in the chant to the King's Spirit, acknowledges the ruler-spirits with which this group has had relations. Any relations prior to the migration are ignored, presumably because the migration is an active construction of a social group. A migration not only constructs the group socially, it sets up some of the spirits its members call upon. Social life is about ritual and its results. This, again, feeds into everyday decisions and evaluations of situations, and into long-term and short-term goals. It is also fundamental to the way people experience their history. This conceptual scheme edits the world for them, but the scheme gets variously re-affirmed, modified, or transformed as people engage it in their actions.

The second attack on the group during their migration occurred in Muang La. Relations with the Tai there had been strained, one informant said because a Tai man was after a Mien woman who would have none of his attention. Another said the Tai ruler disliked the uplanders. Both of these informants, as well as a third, said that what happened next was that the Tai placed a dead man up against the door of a Mien house, and then accused the Mien of having killed him. Several people told me that the dead body had then fallen into the house – 'in those days, the door would open inward, but since this happened we make them open outward' – and that this was likely to cause the wrath of the ancestors of the household. The Mien conducted an offering to ask the ancestor spirits what they could do to cancel the offense (how great a sacrifice, how much spirit money, etc.), but the spirits indicated that nothing would do, that the people had to leave the area immediately. The Tai were attacking the Mien, and the accounts I heard variously stated that the Tai 'destroyed much' or 'destroyed everything'.

The Mien left, and next stayed in Muang Hun. From Muang Hun they went to Nan, where their leader asked permission from the ruler to cross the Mekong River. Initially the Nan ruler denied them permission to enter his domain, but then he allowed it, some say after a payment in silver, other say in rhinoceros' horns and elephants' tusks. The Nan king gave the leader of the migration the rank of Phaya and presented him with spears, a sword, and two gongs. He also made him the leader and tribute collector of all the uplanders in his domain. One account states that early on, the Nan ruler wanted to throw the Mien leader in jail for not paying tribute, but that when the officials came to get him he took to the forest and hid from them for a week without either food or drink. Then, the account goes, it was obvious to them how powerful he was, so they let him be

and the ruler pardoned him. A part of the contract with the Nan ruler was that the uplanders had to fight for him if he needed them – some say they did once, against 'Burmese' (can maan), which might refer to Shan in the 1901-02 uprisings; others say they never did.

Attacks were related in terms of contact with spirits, people being in an ongoing relationship with spirits. In the King's Spirit episode the result is the rescue of the group. Similarly, in the Ancestor Spirit episode, the ancestors tell the people to leave that domain since what had taken place was too great an offense. The Tai destroyed everything, and presumably they would have killed all the Mien had the latter not been advised by their ancestors to take off.

Uplander Worldview

Uplander relations with lowland rulers have many structural parallels with their relations to spirits. Mien engage with spirits for prosperity and protection. There is an important spatial distinction between domestic and extra-domestic spirits. If people are not, in their own estimation, well taken care of, they make a sacrifice, and if that does not have the desired result, they may come to the conclusion that 'wild' (hia) spirits have entered. These are then summoned and sent away, under threat of violence should they dare to re-enter. But if the cause for a lack of prosperity is not wild spirits, then people discern that their guardian spirits are not taking good care of them. In that case the common reaction is to relocate, to another household if the cause is ancestor spirits, to another village if it is a cadastral (village owner's) spirit, and so on. With spirits, one strikes a beneficial contract, except for wild spirits, who do not belong anywhere and need to be driven off if they enter. The same applies to lowlanders, I would suggest, for if they cause trouble in the uplands people will drive them off, but only if they are non-local ('wild'). Otherwise uplanders will relocate and either stay out of the reach of lowland rulers or enter a more beneficial contract. This accounts for the two different responses – the fight with the Chinese and the escape from the Tai – that are illuminating of uplander ways of relating their history. They do not, for instance, say they left Kwangxi or China and entered Thailand, but that when they move they move from one lowland domain to another, while confining themselves to the uplands. The lowlands, as they are related in stories of the migration, are a series of domains that differ by how uplanders fare within their orbits.

Mien recognize the power of lowland rulers and attempt to domesticate it for their own purposes. This surfaces for instance in relation to cadastral spirits. When Mien 'open the forest' to establish a new village, they ask around – if the area is new to them – about who the most powerful ruler in the nearest domain might be, and then proceed to make an offering so to establish contract with his spirit, constituting it as the guardian spirit of the village. With only one exception, as far as I am aware, all Mien villages in Thailand have a lowland ruler for a cadastral spirit. Use of the King's Spirit amounts to the domestication

of lowland royal power for Mien purposes (cf. the Tampuan leader's use of King Sihanouk's spirit), but there is an important difference of scale. For a settled village, a local ruler is adequate, but with a migration in trouble, only a royal spirit will do. Underlying relations with lowland rulers, socially or ritually, is the notion that the uplands belong to the uplanders, and that uplanders are free to move about in uplands in their search for a favourable situation. Moving about is simply a means to an end, and this end was, in the most general Mien terms, to 'live well'.

Once he knew of the imminent attack by the Chinese, Tang Tsan Khwoen' made an offering to the King's Spirit. Since the spirit fulfilled his side of the bargain, Tsan Khwoen' was obliged to honour the spirit with annual offerings from then on. This scheme contains the same structure as some Mien 'origin stories,' like the story of the crossing of the ocean (cf. Lemoine 1982), not because one is borrowed from the other, but because this scheme of contracts and obligations between the human world and the spirit world is fundamental in Mien worldview. The applications vary in their social dimensions and according to level within the spirit world. Migration groups interact with royal spirits, villages with the spirits of local rulers, and households with a lineage of ancestors.

Tang Tsan Khwoen' was prepared to lead a migration to a new area. Before he took off he purchased a copy of the booklet *kia shen pong*, 'to go to a new land', as is written on the back of it. *Kia shen pong* dates from the distant imperial past in China, and relates the origins of Yao to the union of the dog Pien Hung with the emperor's daughter. It defines the position of the Yao as free to farm in the forested mountains, grants them freedom to migrate in search of new land to expand, and exempts them from corvée and other duties toward rulers, as long as they stay in the wilderness and do not cause disturbances (Jonsson 1996b). By converting wealth into a copy of *kia shen pong*, Tang Tsan Khwoen' validated his position as someone who can lead a migration to a new domain. According to his grandson, he had already gained a reputation as a skilled fighter before the migration took off, and the migration both reinforces it and adds to it. Tsan Khwoen' also had *ca-tze* ('rank'), and he owned a copy of spirit paintings. His leadership is both constructed and validated by his reputation as a fighter, his ritual rank, his ownership of both spirit paintings and a copy of *kia shen pong*, and his success in leading a migration to a new domain. The last of these assets reinforced both his leadership and the unity of his followers in his successful relations with the King's Spirit.

I have already remarked that the relationship with the King's Spirit is socially constitutive, and that in that sense, stories of the migration can be seen to belong to a genre of origin-stories. But remembrance of events during the migration is not general among the descendants of the people, but clustered mostly among the descendants of their leader, Tang Tsan' Khwoen', known also as Phaya Khiri, the title he received in Nan. One possibility is that this group of Mien 'has' a history, but that the majority of the population is 'ignorant' of it.

Another possibility is that 'history' is as imagined as 'community'. Memory cannot be strictly individual, inasmuch as it is symbolic and hence intersubjective. Nor can it be literally collective, since it is not superorganic but embodied. The conundrum disappears as soon as we remember that what we are trying to understand is not really a relation between body and group via culture. What we are faced with – what we are living – is the constitution of both group 'membership' and individual 'identity' out of a dynamically chosen selection of memories, and the constant shaping, reinvention, and reinforcement of those memories as members contest and create the boundaries and links among themselves (Boyarin 1994:26).

Entering a Mien village one sees, simply, a collection of houses. How these add up, to what extent 'the household economy is mobilized in a larger social cause' is another matter (Sahlins 1972:130). A household is a unit in production and in ritual, and there is an assumed direct relationship between offerings and success in farming. Through feasts, the household engages in reciprocities with other households, and on an abstract level each household is in competition with all the others. As constituents of a village, all the households cooperate in maintaining relations with the cadastral spirit. In between these extremes there are lineage rituals, which define a house of one lineage member as central and the others as peripheral; ritual ordinations and merit making ceremonies, which separate the households of a settlement on the basis of their reach into the spirit world which draws upon the unequal wealth of the separate households; and wedding ceremonies, where the members of the two sides interact as if they were two households. The household is central to these imaginations of society, but variously unique (as in rituals to ancestors), or a collectivity collapsed into one of either two households (as in wedding ceremonies), or one of a collectivity of equals (as in rituals to the cadastral spirit), or one of a collectivity of graded unequals (as in lineage rituals). Rituals to the King's Spirit construct the assembly of households that derive from the migration over a hundred years ago into subordinates of either of the two households where this spirit can be contacted. In all these rituals, except the one to the cadastral spirit which collapses the various households into a collectivity, there is a fundamental distinction between hosts and guests, and the two sides exchange blessings.

These structures never act, but are activated by people for particular purposes, in terms of particular imaginations regarding society. Such social imaginations are only real to the extent that they are acted out, and the resulting structures draw on the accumulated outcomes of the means and motivations of any particular collectivity of people in terms of the options and constraints of a wider system. I would argue that there is no consensus on the social order, that the tensions between the levels of household, kin-group, village, migration, and sub-district are ongoing. That is, there is no single structure to local social formations, and the cultural schemes that inform local motivations and actions can be activated on a number of levels, with resulting tensions and fluidity of social

arrangements (Kirsch 1973; Leach 1954).

Mien accounts of the migration and of the prowess of their leader are grounded in actual events, but the way events come together draws on cultural schemes as much as politics (Sahlins 1985). Whenever the migration occurred, it draws significance from the active forgetting of any events before it, from accounts of the prominence of the leader and the markers of his privileged connections with spirits, most centrally, his ritual rank, the copy of *kia shen pong*, and the King's Spirit episode. The migration is actively remembered through stories and rituals, and these place the direct descendants of the leader in positions of prominence on the contemporary social landscape. Looking at historical records, it turns out that there were three leaders for this migration, each of whom received the rank of Phaya from the king of Nan (which is now Nan Province in northern Thailand). Two of the three are forgotten, and the principal reason for this uneven remembrance is that only one man's son was subsequently given a title by the king of Nan. Aside from receiving titles, the Phaya and his titled son were important middlemen in the opium trade, which was then a royal monopoly. The son was made a sub-district headman as national administration entered the hinterlands, and his grandson now holds that position. That man and his relatives, fourth-generation descendants of the migration leader, are the ones actively maintaining the history of the migration and mapping it onto the contemporary setting.

Other people's ignorance of this history can now be put in perspective. The migration took place, but its memory is socially constitutive, as was the migration. Such moves reconstitute social alignments and relations with spirits, and this reflects back on the significance of Hmong and Lisu villages as ad hoc collections of households that fragment rather easily, there being no overall coherence in village organization. Such arrangements deny the validity of structures beyond the household level, either in terms of social prominence or relations with spirits. There was considerable migration in the Mien area after the group settled in Nan, and the clustering and stability of the founder's descendants are the inverse side of the frequent migrations of others, and these are paralleled in divided remembrance.

The migration took place in a period of warfare in the region, and drew some of its coherence from the military prowess of its leader(s). With more settled conditions in Nan, there was a shift to an emphasis on success in farming, feasting, and trade, which on the one hand provided options for household clusters to take off on their own, and on the other extended the prominence of the founder group through official privileges of the descendants of the leader. While the continuing official privileges of the descendants of the leader contribute to the active remembrance of an edited history, alternative edited versions still surface. These are evident in the active ignorance of these events, as well as in stories told only in private and characterizing the grandfather of the current sub-district headman as 'dead-cruel'; if there was anyone he didn't

like, he had them severely beaten.' The current headman had told me that his grandfather kept law and order in the area, which made it very peaceful and safe, and the only people his underlings were ordered to flog were itinerant lowlanders who would come to steal chickens or pigs in the hills. So while he had people beaten, there is no consensus on whom and for what. In an attempt to explore further these contradictory accounts, I asked some old people, who were alive when the events took place, and rather than being provided with an answer that settled the issue, I was presented with a still different version, notably that Thao La – for that was his title – was neither actively good nor bad. One person told me, he basically sat around in his house, and would mediate disputes that people brought to him.

Political Culture and the Subject of Action/Knowledge

The styles in which uplanders imagine their communities are quite varied, and do not correspond in any straightforward way to ethnic distinctions. This has a direct bearing on the issue of political culture in the uplands, since memories and identities are mutually constitutive. The preceding account of rituals among contemporary Mien reveals many formulations of what the basic units of society are and how they relate to each other. Each ritual maps the social landscape in a particular way, and each assumes a particular subject of action/ knowledge. The same is true for the various upland accounts of history. They map social space, and their length is in some ways determined by the chosen subject of action, ranging from the denial of history which is apparent in the Lisu assertion of the primacy of nuclear households, to the 100 years involved in the mapping of the Mien migration onto the present, and to the last 600 years implied in the positioning of village-founder lineages among Lua'.

It is not that Lisu and the majority of Mien are ignorant of history and that the founder-groups among Lua' and Mien are very knowledgeable of it. All history in one way or another maps the social landscape and sets up what kinds of politics there are. The variations in historical awareness are parallel to the variations in ritual; each form of ritual assumes a particular subject of action, ranging from nucleated households over extended households, kin groups, and villages, to migrations. Assuming one version to be the true, one also implies that one version of society is the true one.

Anderson's (1983) analysis of nationalism shows how national identity, once formed, becomes fundamental to people's relation to history and their imagining of community. In the upland cases I have discussed, there is no such agreement on the scope of history or community. Among uplanders, there has been an ongoing debate about the subject of action/knowledge, about which units provide access to such fundamentals as fields and spirits.

Having laid out how histories and rituals constitute a debate about the social landscape, and thereby about political culture, it is time to address the in-

creasingly common upland sense of the world being centered around notions of progress and thereby located outside their long-time habitat of the forested mountains.

> Their [the hill tribes'] society is firmly attached to their customs. They have not been willing to change in any way along the lines of the wider society. Because of this, many problems arise, for example forest destruction, problems of [national] security, and a drug problem. (Saimuang 1986:48, my transl.)

The above view is very general in lowland Thai society. If only the hill tribes 'entered society', they certainly would not engage in swidden cultivation, grow opium, and have dubious or subversive political leanings. The way this is expressed, the fundamental issue is a matter of hill tribe ignorance, and problems can be alleviated only if the hill tribes open themselves to the knowledge which the wider (Thai) society contains. Schools have been a major factor in this transmission of knowledge, as have been various governmental and NGO projects, some domestic and others international, though force has also been a recurring theme. Among the less militant efforts was the distribution some years ago of T-shirts to upland children; the T-shirt sported a print of the Thai flag and bore the legend 'little-one loves Thailand' (*nu rak nnang thai*). To love, in this context, implies obedience, specifically that the 'little-one' loved, the 'mouse' (*nu*), will act in accordance with the wishes of the one loved, in this case, Thailand. While they were 'outside society', uplanders were largely indifferent to Thailand, which for them denoted either officials who would demand bribes and favours, or other lowlanders who would come to steal chickens. Getting uplanders to 'love Thailand' occurred at the time when the state was taking over the forests from uplanders, with the message in the T-shirts was that uplanders should be orderly and obedient about this.

This cultural scheme of things is recent, and contrasts sharply with the pre-nation-state notion of a division of space into the cleared and civilized lowlands on the one hand and the forested hinterlands of non-subject populations on the other. While views on this separation were radically different between the upland and the lowland perspective on it, both sides engaged in reproducing this 'structure of the long run' through their interactions, rituals, and histories (cf. Jonsson 1996b, c). The consolidation of nation-states in the region has redefined the political culture of space, leaving no areas within their borders beyond their reach (cf. Winichakul 1994). As development projects and other forms of national integration make upland livelihood increasingly dependent on external factors, the world uplanders inhabit is less and less confined to the forested hinterlands, with uplander notions of the social landscape being reshaped within this framework.

Among the examples of the reworking of imagined communities are efforts to frame histories in ethnic terms. During fieldwork I accompanied some Mien from the village on a trip to another province. They wanted to interview an old Mien man in that area who was said to possess information revealing that Mien had entered Thailand 140 years ago rather than 'merely' 100 years ago. An-

other example comes from an NGO-sponsored meeting on ethnic minorities, at which representatives from each group stated who they were. After the Khmu representatives had presented themselves, a Mien from 'my' village stood up and asked them, "How long have you Khmu lived in Thailand, and where did you come from?"

Both queries assume what Winichakul (1994) calls the geo-body of Thailand, within which the various ethnic groups can be ranked according to how long they have lived there. This kind of historical awareness is new among the uplanders, and it has been reinforced by frequent relocations of minorities who are regarded by the authorities as living 'illegally' in the forest. Similarly, the more established uplander notion that 'home is in the forest' was reinforced by state-culture, but by that of a pre-nation state that assumed the separation of uplanders and lowlanders. If we assume the political culture of uplanders to be 'traditional', then of course any changes in it will imply the erosion of that tradition. If we instead focus on the shifting subject of action/knowledge and pay attention to how such subjects in the uplands have been framed by cultural and political economic processes on a regional/global scale, the processes involved do not evoke ideas of 'culture loss and textual rescue'. The conceptual schemes of uplanders have always been framed by states and other regional factors. But local styles of imagining the political landscape, whether through histories, rituals, or other means, reveal how they draw on certain aspects of regional political culture at particular points in history.

Memories and identities are mutually constitutive, and in this paper I have tried to address local forms of history and community among upland minorities in Thailand and Cambodia as one angle on their political culture. Increasingly, uplanders relate their histories in terms of their now inevitable minority status within a modern nation-state. However, I have sought to avoid projecting such a minority status onto a past where it does not belong and also, to avoid projecting an assumed 'traditional' political culture onto upland communities along ethnic lines, a notion and method which reflects the modern nation-state conception of histories as grounded in ethnic or national distinctiveness.

Political culture in the hinterlands draws on regional structures, the spatial separation of the forested hinterlands in the pre-modern period and the incorporation of the present-day borderlands into national administrative structures in the contemporary period, but it cannot be reduced to a mere reflection of these structures. While there are significant commonalities in the upland region, the wide variety of ways in which people bring dead leaders to bear on current issues demonstrates the open-ended character of upland social formations and political debate. The dead headmen are an indication, also, of how rhetorics get reformulated as upland people engage with changing regional structures. Some of the descendants of the Mien migration leader, Phaya Khiri, are contemplating the making of a statue of their former leader in Phulangka, the village where Thao La, Phaya Khiri's son, moved with his followers in the 1920s, after his father's death. This past is now generalized as a Mien past

where one dead leader can take the place of another. The language of this statement is a national one with prominent individuals being grounded in local awareness with statues. If successful, Phaya Khiri will become a marker of a common Mien past at the same time as his statue places Mien within a framework of a national Thai history that can be added up from the various commemorated heroes.

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Karen Natural Resources Management and Relations to State Polity

Anders Baltzer Jørgensen

This paper deals with the recent history of the Karens, a minority people – or more precisely a group of ethnic minorities – living in the borderland between Burma and Thailand.[1] The Karens number three to five million in Burma and 320,000 or more in Thailand. Looking at the history of the Karens and their relations to the surrounding states, we note, firstly, that the Karens were virtually absent from historical sources in all the states until they appeared with full force in the 18th century, and, secondly, that early sources on the Karens are surprisingly contradictory.

I shall attempt to show that the apparent contradiction between the various sources of information on the Karens may be ascribed to a combination of the their structural position in the local polities, and their local organization and resource management. The events and processes of Karen history are to a large extent the outcome of certain Karen choices of historically specific adaptations to the policies of the surrounding states. These choices have been made within the framework of Karen political culture, in which notions of autonomy, egalitarianism and self-sufficiency are highly valued.

The Karens in the History of Southeast Asia

Very little attention was given to the Karens in early local sources. Thai, Burmese, and Shan chronicles rarely mention either the Karens or any other uplanders. In Burmese royal orders from 1598 to 1885 Karens are only mentioned seven times, the Kachin even less (Tan Tun 1983-90). Mon chronicles, although the chroniclers were probably aware of the existence of the Karens,