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Agricultural Modernization and Change in Kinship Organization in Rural Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this work is to explain the changes that have taken place in Thai peasant kinship institutions and the relationship between those economic changes and the society in which they occur. The author researches into the consequences of capitalist development on the family and highlights the general problem of relating the peasant's social situation to changing economic conditions. What the author suggests is that the web of kindred relations has traditionally provided the peasant with stable alliances which had been the main support for the condition of the peasant's existence.

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menerangkan perubahan-perubahan yang telah berlaku kepada institusi-institusi kekeluargaan masyarakat Thai, dan perhubungan antara perubahan-perubahan ekonomi dengan masyarakat dalam konteks di mana perubahan itu berlaku. Penulis telah menyelidik kesan-kesan dari pembangunan kapitalis ke atas institusi keluarga dan juga mengemukakan masalah umum mengenai keadaan sosial kaum tani. Penulis mengemukakan bahawa semenjak dahulu lagi hubungan kekeluargaan telah membantu dan menguatkan kedudukan sosial golongan petani.

INTRODUCTION

This paper surveys the processes by which commercialization of agriculture has transformed the nature and functions of Thai peasant kinship institutions. It deals specifically with family and bilateral kindred which are the bases of Thai village life. The paper relies on ethnographic works as its main source of data. It first discusses characteristics of Thai family and kindred, and describes the changes that have occured to these institutions as a result of changes in the economic system. Finally the author makes some remarks about the directions for changes that may be anticipated. It should be noted from the outset that literature on this subject is scarce and Piber (1975) is the only one which deals with this problem directly. How-

ever, the author hopes that this preliminary survey will highlight some of the problems and trends which need to be researched upon in the future.

Despite regional variations the kinship system of Thai peasantry as well of Thai society at large, is bilateral in structure with a matrilocal emphasis indicated by such customs as those of holding the wedding ceremony at the bride's parents, of the couple temporarily residing matrilocally after marriage, of the wife's parents and their sons-in-law farming jointly, of the youngest daughter taking care of the parents in old age, and so on. The family and the bilateral kindred are considered to be the most important units of Thai peasant kinship system.

In this paper the term family will be used to refer to a group of kinsmen residing in one dwelling, sharing one kitchen, and adjusting their finances mutually to a large extent. The family is the minimal unit of everyday village life. Every family can own and work on a piece of land. The nature of the Thai family, however, remains an issue under debate.

PATTERNS OF RESIDENCE AND FAMILY STRUCTURE

Potter's (1979 : 154 – 8) contention that the nuclear family (consisting of parents and unmarried children) and neolocal residence are the ideals in Thai society is erroneous. In his view, the extended-stem family (three generational family consisting of a parent or parents, at least one in-marrying child, and the child's children), based on a preferential rule of matrilocal residence is the basic family form of the rural Thai. The nuclear family is the only one temporary phase in the developmental cycle of the family. Potter refers to various works to support his proposition.

However, a different view maintains the prevalence of nuclear family. Kemp (1970) based on an earlier work by Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1954) reports that in rural Thailand a young couple is almost invariably expected to reside initially in the household of the bride's parents and then after a period varying in length, but usually lasting several years, to reside in a house near the bride's family, often in the same courtyard. Kemp cites the works of Charles Madge (1957 : 42) and Thomas Lux (1966 : 5) for the northeast; Wijewardene (1967 : 69), and John de Young (1955 : 23 and 64 – 65) for the north; and his own work in Hua Kok village in the north central Thailand to support his position.

Phya Anuman (1954), Kemp (1970) claim that preferential matrilocal residence is not only a statistical norm but also the ideal for rural Thailand. This has been confirmed by later ethnographic reports: for the north by Turton (1972), Sulamith Heins Potter (1975); for the northeast by Mizuno (1971), and Keyes (1975) and Piber (1975) for the central plain. Piber shows that a strong tradition of matrilocal residence exists in Ban Qi, a village located five miles from Ayutthaya. Marriage in Ban Qi is village-exogamous and the prevalent rule and practice are matrilocal.

The author tends to agree with Potter's argument that the extended-stem family is the basic feature of Thai rural households and the nuclear form is but one temporary stage in the structural cycle of the family. Potter's description about an ideal-type domestic cycle in a Chiengmai village also applies to Thai villages as a whole. The cycle, according to Potter (1975 : 121 – 123), begins with the marriage of a young couple and the subsequent births of their children, which forms a new nuclear family. As the children grow up, the sons marry out of the family and go to live with the families of their wives, whereas the daughters and their husbands live in their parents' house for a period of time which varies from a few months to several years. Two married daughters are not commonly expected to live in their parents' house at the same time. If there is more than one daughter in a family, the first married daughter and her family usually move into a seperate house in the same courtyard nearby when the second daughter marries and brings her husband to live in their parents' house. The older married daughter and her family still remain under the domination of the parental house, since the father-in-law controls their labour. They attempt to gain independence as soon as they can while the parents like to retain their control as long as possible. The process by which a dependent household gains independence is usually long-drawn-out, and sometimes ends only with the death of the woman's parents, when formal title to a share of the land is handed over to them. The youngest daughter and her husband live with parents in an extended-stem household throughout their marriage lives. They take over formal control when the parents retire. When the parents die, this couple inherits the house and farm equipment plus at least an equal share of the farmland and sometimes an extra share which has been retained by the aged parents.

Households of the married daughters of a matrilocal extended family and their husbands and children who live near the wife's parents' household usually form a compound group. Kaufman (1960 : 21) calls these groups a "household", Wejewardene (1967 : 66) calls them a "compound group", Mizuno calls them "multi-household compounds" (1968 & 1971 : 95, 242); Keyes (1975 : 287) calls them "Uxori-parenti-local extended families" or "domestic groups"; Potter (1979 : 157) terms them "extended family compound"; and Sharp et al. (1953 : 79) describes them as "limited families who are closely related" — the families of brothers and sisters, for example — (who) may live close to each other, even in the same compound. All these writers are referring to the same thing although the terms and descriptions used differ. This group is a matrilocal extended family which includes several households. Given the rule of uxorilocal residence, it will eventually include the grandparents, their youngest married daughter and her husband, plus their unmarried grandchildren".

Jack M. Potter (1979 : 158) asserts that this feature, a cluster of families forming a compound, is an important structural unit in the north-

east, in the north, and it is also present in the central plain. Its functions are similar to those of the kindred, although the structure is somewhat different. As Sulamith Heins Potter (1975) points out, the group of cooperating men are affines related only through their ties to a line of women. It operates as a labour team in rice agriculture and cooperates politically, religiously, and in other ways too. Jack M. Potter and Sulaimith Heins Potter believe that this compound has the characteristics of corporate group. Kemp (1970: 2 – 3) however, has strongly denied an existence of corporate group on the basis that bilateral kinship link alone is insufficient for the recruitment of corporate groups. He points out that in such systems links are reckoned through both males and females, the number of possible ancestral figures doubling in each generation, two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, etc. Thus a group as such can have no clearly-defined boundary. No two individuals, unless they be full siblings, share exactly the same kin. The total set of these ego-based kin is the "kindred". This significant feature of Thai kinship and social organization has been noted by several authors.

KINDRED

The kindred is the largest kin unit. Potter (1979 : 158 – 9) who studied a Chiangmai village in the north says that, for Thai villagers, the most important kin group outside the extended family is the kindred. He defines this group as "the descendants of one's uncles and aunts and their children (one's first cousins) through both one's father and mother, on both sides of the family". In Bang Chan, a village around Bangkok, a kindred is referred to by Sharp et al., (1953 : 80) as "cousin group", and consists of "the brothers and sisters of an individual's parents, together with the children of these uncles and aunts". Kaufman (1960 : 23 – 24) uses the term "spatially extended family" to refer to it, and he defines the group as "members of a family who shared a common household during their youth and who have moved away because of marriage or employment and are living in widely separated households, perhaps in different communities". The limit of this group in Bangkhaud, according to Kaufman, extends as far as first cousinship. Mizuno (1971 : 100 – 1) describes a kin group in Don Daeng village in the northeast, which he calls a bilateral kindred, and which he says "generally consists of all descendants of the four grandparents and their siblings". According to Mizuno, the bilateral kindred normally extends as far as second cousinship and often seems to include the spouses of consanguineal kins.

Madge (1957 : 6) describes the bilateral kindred that is the effective kin group in the villages of the northeast in the following terms:

> Immediate family bonds are strong, between parents and children; between grandparents and grandchildren, between uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, between brothers and sisters,

and between first cousins. Beyond this degree of relationship there is little to distinguish one's behaviour to a relative from one's behaviour to a neighbour, or indeed, to a stranger.

The composition of the bilateral kindred appears to vary from region to region; the variability in part being real and in part being due to differential perceptions and emphasis adopted by the ethnographers. These ethnographers have not made a clear distinction between the kindred as a cognatic category and the kindred-based action groups formed from time to time for specific purposes, which ordinarily contain only a proportion of the total kindred, and also, on occasion, nonkindred in the shape of affines and friends. For the proper understanding of the nature and functions of bilateral kindred it is important that this distinction be made. Kindred as a category of kin should refer only to cognates and never extended to include affines. The range of a kindred which is the extent to which an individual can precisely trace bilaterally his or her biological relationships, also varies. It indicates the total set of a particular Ego's links and in itself implies no joint activities or common interest. What occurs though is that for certain tasks in hand individuals within the appropriate category of kin are recruited on the ground of their links with Ego. The economic and other factors resulted from this variation is an interesting problem that cannot be answered here due to the lack of data.

Whereas most anthropologists working in Thailand refer to kindred as a group of kins, Piber (1975 : 305 – 6), on the other hand, points out that

kindred are non-corporate, impermanent arrangements, seldom persisting for more than two generations; that for Ego at least some kin of the requisite genealogical degree will not be kindred comembers (that is, there are no hard and fast criteria for kindred comembership, and frequently siblings are not kindred comembers; and that the *sine qua non* of kindred durability, such as it may be, is the regular exchange of resources and services, particularly in association with the performance of agriculture.

The kindred as described by Piber is therefore a kindred-based action group which is maintained by a regular exchange of resources and services. Not every kin is automatically treated as kindred comembers, membership is restricted to those who participated actively in a regular exchange of resources and services.

FUNCTIONS OF KINDRED

The bilateral kindred, as shown in various ethnographic studies appears to be a prevalent feature of Thai village society and of great importance in villagers' lives. Sharp et al., (1953 : 80) describes the importance of this kin group, referred to as a kind of "extended family", in the following terms:

Brothers and sisters and their children, if they do not live too far apart, are likely to work together in cooperative planting and harvest groups, establishing among themselves rather than with others the reciprocal obligations involved. The extended family contributes richly of its financial and ordination or cremation of one of its members. Even when some members of the extended family have migrated to other parts of the realm, contacts is usually

maintained and occasional visits are exchanged. Members of an extended family will look out for opportunities for economic or other advancement for their relatives. Movements from Bang Chan into Bangkok or from Bangkok to Bang Chan will frequently be facilitated by members of the extended family.

The functions of the bilateral kindred in Don Daeng described by Mizuno are similar to those described by Sharp et al. Mizuno describes the significance of kindred in the following terms:

This bilateral group of kin is the individual's main source of cooperation and assistance. But rather than a corporate group, it is the social circle of relatives who are invited on such various occations of the life cycle as ordinations, weddings, and memorial services, and who can be relied on for assistance in transplanting and harvesting rice, at times of emergency and trouble, and financial assistance. Yet the same set of people are not always called upon for a particular activity; rather each villager calls the necessary number of people from his or her bilateral kindred according to their circumstances. In selecting the persons villagers always consider the degree of familiarity, the proximity of residence, and the state of personal relationship (1971 : 101 – 102).

Although the kindred based group provides Thai villagers with the main source of mutual assistance of different kinds, its existence and durability, as indicated by Piber (1975 : 305 – 6, 319) depends largely upon the regular exchange of resources and services, particularly in rice production. The commercialization of rice agriculture and the intrusion of market economy in rural Thailand after the signing of the Bowring Treaty with Britain in 1855 have produced profound changes in Thai rural society. The transformation from a subsistence economy to a market-oriented economy has great impact on rice producers. The need for capital investment has increased and many small holders have been forced into debt, into tenancy and many finally dispossessed of their land.

The commercialization of agriculture and population growth are the prime factors that led to an increase in farm size, number of small holdings, and complete landlessness. The national agricultural census conducted in 1963 (Thailand 1967 – 69) indicates that in that year rice land holdings over 45 *rai* (1 acre = approximately 2.5 *rai*) (12.4 percent of all holdings) accounted for 33 percent of the total planted area, and all rice holdings over 15 *rai* (57 percent of all holdings) accounted for about 83 percent of total planted area. Landless peasants are more numerous (see Turton 1976 : 275; Bruneau 1980; Piber 1975; etc.). However, it should be noted that the inheritance practices, involving the splitting up of inherited rice land, accelerated the process of fragmentation of rice land and contribute to the increase in the number of small holdings and peasants.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS OF EFFECTS ON KINSHIP AND FAMILY

The process described above has significant impacts on family and kinship relations in the countryside. In the traditional setting, a major criterion for

anyone to join a kindred group, in its capacity as a productive unit, is the ownership of a plot of rice land. The commercialization of rice product and the expansion of market economy did not leave some landed peasant families alone, but deprived them of an ability to join a kindred-based group as well.

According to Piber (1975 : 312 – 315), during the 1960's, seventeen of fifty families in the village of Ban Qi belonged to no kindred and fourteen of these seventeen families were non-landed while only three were landed; thirteen fell in the lower half of the income scale and only four in the upper half. By contrast, of the thirty-three families who belonged to kindreds, twenty-one were landed and twenty-three fell in the upper half of the income scale. Landless families no longer possess material support-that is, a viable farming enterprise replete with draft animals, equipment, rice-filled granary and substantial income to undertake the kind of reciprocal arrangements with others which have been traditionally the major source of assistance in times of need. The income of landless families derives almost completely from individual wage labour or less often, craft works. Cooperative or reciprocal labour arrangements are virtually meaningless under these circumstances.

The landless villagers who belong to no kindred are still members of an active family. But adult members of a landless and poor family tend to fend for themselves individually even though they may continue to share one dwelling. Therefore they frequently try to cultivate a second type of alliance by becoming clients of rich, usually landed, neighbours. According to Piber (1975 : 317), patron-client relationships of this sort almost never arise between close or active kins. The benefits that flow from such clientship when established include opportunity for recurrent employment, an enhanced possibility for low interest loans or, rarely, outright gifts of cash or rice in time of need, and sometimes informal permission to hang around and occasionally eat, drink, and take casual recreation with the patron family. The patron family, on the other hand also benefit from their clients who perform numerous services, ostensibly without payment, and often provide congenial company. Rich families may have a number of clients and poorer villagers often attempt to cultivate more than one patron.

The types of social relationships entailed by subsistence as nonland-owners are different from the social relationships entailed by subsistence as landowners. The social relationships undertaken by villagers in pursuit of subsistence, as interpreted by Piber (1975 : 314), were cast in the kinship idiom involving the following four ingredients, that is, reliability and durability, diffuseness, reciprocity, and hierarchy. There exist critical differences on each of these four dimensions between the landed and the landless (usually kindredless) villagers. In most cases the latter revolve

around employment rather than around kin group membership. The differences which are pointed out by Piber (1975 : 315 – 16) are as follows:-

Reliability and durability Kinship provides the most stable alliances to which the landed villager have access. For the landless villagers, employer-employee relationships, of which agricultural wage labour is the most important and characteristic, are highly impermanent and are usually undertaken on a year-by-year basis.

Diffuseness Kin-group members normally interact with and support each other in a range of situations far broader than mere economic reciprocity would require, although perceived breakdown of the latter is a sufficient condition for kin-group dissolution. Since agricultural wage labourers usually reside with their employers and are accepted as family members, albeit junior ones, the relationship during this period is diffuse. However, between periods of employment comparatively little in the way of mutual involvement is thought to obtain between farmer employer and employee. Such relationships are not normally undertaken between close or active kins.

Reciprocity The exchange patterns among kindred comembers thoroughgoing reciprocity is ultimately tied to a role reversal which requires most of the life cycle for its accomplishment: offsprings are to reciprocate the care and maternal support provided by their parents in childhood by allowing the latter in old age to become dependent on them. Wage labour is distinguished from the kinship reciprocity by the permanence of the asymmetry. The landowner does not return in his old age, or under any other even remotely likely circumstances, to his former labourer care and material support.

Hierarchy Kinship has a hierarchical dimension. Within the family the hierarchical gradient is that between parents and children, and the specifics of parent-child relationships revolve in large part around the disposition of family resources. Analogous conditions prevail among members of a kindred for at least part of their duration. In addition, in both kindred and family the client at one moment may confidently expect to become patron of his former benefactor some time in the future. Traditionally therefore involvement in kinship institutions for most villagers provides experiences with both components patron-client relationships.

Although employer-employee relationships are definitely hierachical, a landless villager has little prospect of ever assuming a patron role vis-a-vis his one time employer. Of more importance, his ability to adopt in full the patron position towards his own children is seriously impaired. Because he is relatively poor and landless, he will not be able to provide them with access, via either inheritance or bride price, in the traditional agri-

cultural manner, nor will he be able to provide them with urban education so useful for laundring a nontraditional career. In his view, his inability to be full patron to his children jeopardizes the role-fulfillment that results in dependence upon one's own children in one's old age.

The patron-client relationship linking the non-landed to the landed villagers described here is different from the patron-client relationship which has traditionally been ubiquitious at all levels of Thai society in that the former are non-kin-based and independent of bondage. It is, in Piber's words (1975 : 318)," a form of precapitalist social relations representing a part of the early and spontaneous strivings to adapt of a newly emerging social class, namely a rural proletariat."

Landlessness, as indicated by Piber, is the major cause of the dissolution of kindred-based action group, the durability of which depends largely upon economic exchange. Nevertheless, relations between kindred are governed by a special morality arising from the recognition of common descent. It is usual for kindred to admit a special obligation towards one another-an obligation to give help and support in culturally determined ways. It is interesting to find out whether, despite the breakdown of economic reciprocity due to landless, other kinds of moral obligation are still retained between the landed and non-landed who are cognatically linked. This question cannot be answered here due to the lack of relevant data.

Landlessness also affects the family structure of the rural Thai, although to a lesser extent than it affects the bilateral kindred. Since data on changes affecting the family structure of Thai villagers are very limited the following discussion will be partly based on the author's own idea and observtions.

Landownership and the size of landholdings are important factors which determine the family composition, the pattern of residence, and the inheritance pattern of Thai villagers. It is reasonable to expect that the matrilocal extended-stem family (three generational family consisting of parent or parents, at least one married child, spouse and their children which, as indicated by Potter, is the basic family form of rural Thai society, will have a tendency to disappear among landless or land-poor villagers. Living in a large family is no longer meaningful to poor villagers who have no land to work on. Therefore it is expected that nuclear families may become prevalent among landless rural population and in more advanced capitalist areas of the central plain. In the less market-oriented areas of the northeast it is assumed that extended-stem families and compounds are found relatively more frequently. In the north it is expected that extended family and compound are still dominant as in the northeast but the size may be smaller because farm land in the northern region is relatively more limited and the rate of out-migration is lower that in the northeast.

According to Kemp (1970) parental residence with an emphasis on the matrilocal pattern has been widely practiced among Thai villagers, albeit far less common now in Bangkok and among the middle and uperstrata of Thai society. He specified reasons for the continued practice of matrilocal residence in the rural areas in the following terms:

> Matrilocal is combined to form part of a fairly stable and integrated social system. Sons play a minor part in the running of the household and have traditionally been able to leave with comparative equanimity owing to the ease with which land could be found else where for cultivation. In contrast girls are useful about the house from an early age and are far steadier workers in the fields than young unmarried men. Retired from active farming and allocation of land to their heirs before death reduces the parent's authority in a household that was their own. In their old age parents become dependents and because of the sexual division of labor their needs are mainly served by women. The likelihood of domestic conflict is minimized if this dependency is focused upon a daughter rather than on a daughter-in-law (Kemp 1970 : 83).

Kemp further points out that apart from their value to aging parents, daughters pose a greater threat to their social standing than sons. Failure to abide by rules of good moral conduct is held to reflect more harshly upon the family name than do the misdemeanors of sons. Greater efforts are therefore made to keep daughters subject to the authority of their parents (Kemp 1970 : 84). Moreover, initial matrilocal, as suggested by Soonthernpasuch (1963 : 146 – 7), eases the transition of married life. This is because the groom is already well-acquainted with his wife's family by the time the marriage ceremony takes place, whereas social contact between the future bride and the groom's family are restricted until after the wedding (Kemp 1970 : 84).

Since matrilocal residence is an ideal as well as an economic necessity, it is sensible to speculate without adequate fieldwork data that initial matrilocal residence is still practiced by both landed and non-landed villagers. It is likely that this custom is more frequent among the non-landed because the poor economic condition does not allow the landless newly-wed couple to set up a separate household immediately after marriage. The period of parental residence tends to be shorter for the landless or land-poor. Therefore it is likely that landless villagers maintain the extended family for only a short time and cannot form a compound group found among the landed. Janlekha (1955 : 36) noted a link between the time spent in a parental household and command over economic resources. Couples from the poorer strata of Bang Chan, a village near Bangkok where Janlekha did his fieldwork, established their own households within a year of marriage, probably because an extra member was more of a drain on limited resources than an addition to the labour pool of a natal household. Among the more prosperous, independent residence tended to be delayed by difficulties in providing adequate resources for a new unit in an economic situation where land had become scarce. Kaufman (1960 : 29) associated a similar increase in the period of parental residence in Bangkhaud

from one to two or three years with the development of a land shortage and change from small subsistence to larger scale market farming.

CONCLUSION

The survey on changes affecting kinship institution in rural Thai society raises many questions that have to be left open until more ethnographic data are available. Changes in family composition and residential pattern described in this paper are based largely upon speculation and limited ethnographic data. Family composition and pattern of residence viewed as a mechanism which a social group used to adapt to its environments, are determined not only by economic nesessity but also by ideology and other factors. The limitation of ethnographic material does not allow us to discuss in detail about the process and the extent to which greater capitalist development leads to more nuclear families, nor about the impact or economic changes, land pressure and outmigration on the matrilocal residence which is an ideal and a prevalent practice among the rural Thai, particularly in the northeast.

There are many points concerning changes that affect the kindred which require further investigation. We know that kindred-based group has been weakened by commercialization of rice production and hired labour, and that poor peasants cannot join a kindred. But we do not know whether moral obligations still exist between poor and rich relatives; whether poor peasants, who no longer maintain a regular exchange of resources and services, will be invited to ceremonies; and whether kindred-based action groups still exist among rich relatives. The process that transformed kindred alliances to non-kin-based patron-client relationships has been discussed by Piber to a certain extent but it has not been dealt with in any other ethnographic works available. More studies should be made about this process and about the differential characteristics between kindred-based and patron-client relations, and between the latter and employer-employee relations. Finally it would be interesting to find out about kinship links between poor peasants who do not belong to a kindred-based action group.

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