

Chapter 3

Isan and Rural Thai Peasant Family Economies

Many details relevant to the Isan family economy have been recorded in village studies. While each study holds approaches that may lead to analytical biases, many scholars were meticulous in providing empirical details that could be subject to future re-interpretation. The literature includes discussions on the organization of the family unit of production, including land husbandry, craft production, and wage work. Discussions describing social relations of production within the society, as well as the loose but certain economic relationship of peasant families to the state are also abundant. In aggregate, the literature presents an empirically based picture of a peasant family as the fundamental economic unit of production.

The Isan Family Unit

The term family derives from the Latin *familia*, which refers to all members living or working in the household. Historically, Latin households included the conjugal family, as well as servants and slaves (Zonabend, 1996: 9). When compared with other archetypical Asian family units, such as the Chinese

extended family, the rural Isan family finds more in common with the Latin. Firstly, the rural Isan family is conjugal, or nuclear. It only appears otherwise; its extensions are for the most part temporal. Secondly, common production and consumption define the family. Latin families included their slaves and servants because their work contributed to the household's production activities, and their consumption derived from it.

The Thai Nuclear Peasant Family

Most Thai village scholars agree that the rural, peasant family is nuclear, within the context of a Thai system. Suthep writes that "no matter how the family is composed, its purpose and function is similar to that of the nuclear family" (1963: 181). Kemp found that 65% of households in Hua Kok consist "solely of a couple and at least some of their children (1992: 85). Kamol's study of 13 villages in the commune of Saraphi in Nakorn Rachasima drew similar conclusions. He found that 78% of families surveyed were nuclear families, while the 22% classified as extended were nuclear in outlook because their extensions were temporary. Kamol explains:

[The 22%] are not true extended families, as seen in...India or China for, while they may appear to be so in composition, their outlook remains definitely of the nuclear type. The main reason why married children still live with the parents (and structurally transform the originally nuclear family

into an extended one) is that they need time before they can accumulate enough capital to start an independent family of their own. Thus the extended arrangements are generally of a transitory nature and are a matter of temporary convenience or economic necessity. (1968: 17)

Hanks focused on this transitory and temporal element, arguing that the label "family" was in appropriate to use for Thailand's peasants. The term family refers to a "limited and fairly stable group of people" (1972: 81). Hanks, in addition to Kemp, Suthep, and Kamol, saw otherwise.

A look at the literature on property distribution and a re-evaluation of the "nascent" period prior to division of households, for example, when adult children marry and begin their own nuclear settlements (referred to by Kamol above), reveals not a clear-cut temporary unit which forms and decomposes unlimitedly. Granted the family is nuclear. However, family ties and obligations within the natal household carry on into advanced, post-natal household stages of the children's productive lives.

Suthep writes that this nascent period offers free board and lodging, and unlimited facilities and productive resources from the parental household. The point of helping adult children after marriage is to ensure they will be able to produce enough for their new

nuclear families (1963: 182). One of Hanks' informants from Bang Chan describes the extent of the assistance:

My son and his wife lived here three years and did not move out until the younger children were old enough to help farm. They then lived in a little house nearby which I built for him. All the rice money came to me, but if my son were short of cash, he'd ask for it. I'd buy him clothes and vegetables. (1956: 2)

Families were close enough to maintain tight relations, and while the unit did not stretch into a Chinese-style extended unit, concern and responsibility of production capabilities with consanguineal kin was material. In addition to allowing new unions to work as part of the parental household, families also offered their adult children land resources. Kemp explains the property distribution process [*Italics Original*]:

It forms part of the system of devolution of property whereby a child is usufruct of a plot of land. There is no formal agreement by which a specified rent has to be paid to the senior household but, in practice, part of the crop is usually expected and given. Once the parents have given away all their rights in the plot then the recipient couple no longer has to share the crop though children should help aging and infirm parents unable to support themselves. Finally, the section of the parents' compound on which a child builds a house usually does not become his or her property until the death of both parents when the names on land certificates, if they exist, are changed. (1992: 83)

Families offered land to both sons and daughters. While Mizuno and Wijeyewardene argue that families

tended to distribute more of their land to their daughters, giving their sons goods and money for bride prices, and buffaloes towards their production activities (and expecting their sons to come into new land via marriage, a feature of the matrilocal residence patterns in rural Thailand) (Mizuno, 1971: 87; Wijeyewardene, 1967: 79)), Mizuno concedes that half of the 92 families he surveyed said they felt land should be equally divided among all of their children (1971: 87). The point is that families were concerned about the productive futures of their children, even once their children had broken into new households. Those offering land and production resources like draft animals, to their children including their sons expressed in this way their concern despite productive returns to them (sons would reside matrilocally with their wives' families, and in consequence contribute more to his wife's parent's household than his own).

The Thai Peasant Family Unit of Production and Consumption

The Isan family was united by common production and consumption. Much as family members in ancient Europe (as indicated by the Latin definition of familia), which included parents, their children, and slaves, produced

for the household and derived their consumption from it, Isan family members did the same. Taking the term literally, Hanks and Smith both define the Thai word for family to mean "the cover of a hearth" (Ibid; Smith, 1978: 21) referring to a cooking hearth. Chatthip elaborates, stating it to mean "a group of people who eat from the same rice pot" (1997: Personal Communication). Family members both produced the rice (and either produced or traded for the pot as a use-value) together and consumed it together, without the delineation of entitlements based on productive inputs.

Likewise, historical records and descriptions of the rural Thai family economy reveals a unit which is similar in form and function to that of Chayanov's turn of the century Russian family farm. A practically self-sufficient cell, it relied not on communalism but individual household, or family, labor (Suthep, 1963: 43; Kaufman, 1960: 21). Families occasionally rented or borrowed tools, land, and draft animals, but the family unit itself, through a cooperative complex of labor division along gender lines and age grades enabled the family to manage the bulk of its production tasks (1960: 21). Tanabe outlines the rural Thai peasant family economy:

The basic unit of production is a peasant family farm, cultivating a relatively small area of owned or rented land, mobilising basically domestic labour, supplemented at certain farming stages by outside resources such as co-operative labour and wage labour. The capital investment is relatively low, utilising a set of traditional tools and equipment, though industrial inputs have become popular during the past few decades (1981: 25).

Social Relations in Production

This sufficiency was not achieved in complete labor isolation (Suthep, 1963: 43). Tanabe argues that Isan peasants interacted with each other to achieve higher levels of subsistence (1981: 45). Families were connected along consanguineal and affinal terms (by marriage), and through geographic proximity. While Kemp, relies on Potter's delineations in distinguishing certain groups of consanguines and kin as kindred, and neighborhood friends and other groups of kin as nonkindred, Smith writes that a family's kindred could potentially include members or families from all of these (Kemp, 1988: 15; Smith, 1978: 26). According to Kaufman, Thailand's peasants can be broken into three extra-conjugal family groups, namely the spatially extended family, the remotely extended family, and the fictional family (1960: 21). Smith's delineation of the kindred as a group which includes members from all three family groups, who on the basis of friendship, kin feelings, and

in some cases geographic proximity, contribute significantly to production related processes of individual family units. (Smith, 1978: 26). This explanation of the term kindred makes more sense than the narrowly-defined and unsubstantiated Potter-based argument offered by Kemp (Kemp, 1988: 15).

Kaufman's extra-family group classifications summarize the bulk of all significant relationships that made up the community (1960: 21). Spatially extended family groups included adult siblings with their affines. These could include siblings who live far apart, as well as those who lived within the same compound. They "assisted each other by working the fields, sharing food and equipment, helping with chores and celebrating special occasions together" (Hanks, 1956: 4). Kaufman cites two occasions in particular when spatially extended families behaved as members of a common household. The first was during particular rites of passage, such as ordinations, or during large merit making ceremonies in honor or memory of a family member. The second occasion was during times of disruption. Economic resources were more freely shared amongst adult siblings than other groups within the village. These members took active interests in the production potential

of each other's family units. Children were sometimes sent to live with and become temporary members of a spatially extended family member's household, for example for educational purposes. Spatially extended family groups also made each other privy to information about new contract labor and other wage opportunities (Ibid: 23).

These relationships are maintained so long as the households involved are satisfied with the rapport. Hanks quotes an informant who describes his such relations with an adult sister's conjugal household:

Toom and I are the younger brothers of Weg's wife. Weg's children and mine give food back and forth, and we are like fathers to each others children. Weg's three children love me dearly because I am always giving them cakes and if anything should happen to Weg, Toom, or I would always care for his children. (1956: 4)

Kaufman's second and third family groups, the remotely extended family and fictional family, made up the remaining significant social relations in peasant village communities. Remotely extended family members included wide circles of relatives extending beyond first cousins. In this level of relations, families are linked to numerous groups from all parts of the village, and in other villages. As a rule, however, they do not actively contribute to each other's production activities, nor are

they intimate elements in social rites of passage. Fictional families, who include families that consanguineal and affinal bonds but are in fact not related, are closely involved in family production and social activities. It is with this respect that they claim familial relations, which strengthens unity between these family groups and fosters an "in-group feeling" (Kaufman, 1960: 25).

These extra-nuclear family groups called upon each other, to varying degrees, to assist in production and non production activities. Hanks writes that spatially extended, remotely extended, and fictional families assisted each other with social rites such as delivering births, preparing for and performing ordinations, and general activities, like cutting hair and offering incantations and herbs to the sick. Each group had someone who was a midwife; each group had someone who could repair plows and boats. Likewise, these groups also called on each other to help with the cultivation process.

The Thai term "long kaek", generally defined as family ties or kindred ties, refers to a complex of labor exchanges and work groups (Hanks, 1984: 25). There was no proscribed consanguineal obligation to participate in

these. For example, when assistance was required for any phase of subsistence production, labor was recruited first within a geographic proximity to the homestead and to the worksite, regardless of family ties. The reality was, however, that closely related family members tended to occupy contiguous areas of land to be worked, and as such often turned out to be the first to be asked. In these cases, Kaufman argues that the requests for help are based less on family affinity and more on proximity to the work site (1960: 30).

Labor was exchanged through various forms of reciprocity, the extent of which was not always clear-cut. Requests for labor with the promise of a labor return in the near future was the most common, employed by kindred with similar production needs. Requests for labor without the promise of labor return was also used. Among kindred, it left all sides with very good feelings, despite the appearance of negative reciprocity. In the case of one wealthy patron enlisting the gently coerced assistant of clients, the reciprocity is still felt on both sides, through kind loans, low land rental fees, and continued leniency with other obligations (Ibid).

Hanks writes, however, that all relationships within and between families was in some sense patron-client

(though the degree of which may be significant) (1956:

2). Hanks reveals:

As the liaison grows, one may distinguish only with difficulty the benefits from the services in the flow of mutual aid, but every case is reducible, if one presses the question, to benefits of an older or richer or stronger for the services of a younger, poorer, or weaker. This includes parent and child, sibling and sibling, or husband and wife, and all kinship relations are reducible to these terms. (1956: 2)

Status indicators were an important part of personal relations. However, many early scholars argued that this central feature did not contribute to the formation of class. (Wijeyewardene, 1967: 74). Mizuno explains that in the Thai patron-client system, juniors are compelled to respect seniors, but seniors must love juniors. The product is a relationship of love and respect, not domination and subordination (1971: 94).

Wijeyewardene writes that this mutually beneficial aspect prevents internal stratification. Status comes on the basis of age, education, occupation, and wealth, yet no permanent group existed in these village communities that could continuously exert control over other groups (1967: 74).

Land Husbandry: Rice

Isan peasant families practiced rice cultivation as their primary subsistence pattern and chief socio-

economic concern. Suwit writes that farmers in Ban Khwao, Chaiyaphum, were rice farmers long before arriving in Chaiyaphum (1986: 51). Kaufman's work in Bangkhud, Minburi, found that it was the population's main occupation "as far back as there are records" (1960: 5). Zimmerman adds in his rural economic survey of 1931 that "the people in Siam have been growing rice for many hundreds of years" (1932: 5).

Evidence of Isan's deeply rooted rice cultivation pattern can be found in Tai chronicles, legends, and histories. The bulk of the people of Isan are descended from the Tai, a parent population that has diverged into diverse places like Assam, India (Tai Ahom), Shan State, Myanmar (Shan), Dehong, China (Tai Neue), China and Laos (Tai Lue), etc. (Chatthip, 1998: 7). Chatthip summarizes the proliferation of Tai rice growing societies throughout the region:

In early times, they grew rice on high ground but later gradually moved more and more to the valleys. In the north of Thailand and in the mountainous Shan States, Tais planted rice in the valleys between the hills. Tai communities in Assam, India, planted rice in the valleys in the same way, that is, along the banks of the Mekong River in Sipsongpanna and the Brahmaputra River in Assam. The Chiang Rung Chronicles record: "Wherever there is water, there are the Tai." This fact was confirmed by Dodd...[who] wrote: "Wherever there is water for their rice fields the Tai live..." (1998: 1)

American missionary, Curtis, wrote in 1903 her observations of the significance of rice among the Tai-Lao in Present-day Lampang:

The Lao are the most emphatically pastoral people. It is in the tilling of the soil, the sowing and the reaping, that they find their chief delight. As rice is the chief article of food, great quantities of it must be raised, and about its cultivation would naturally center much of the life of the land. (1998: 164)

Tai oral legends describe an animist spirit called Mae Phosop, goddess of the rice fields and mistress of the paddy (Kaufman, 1960: 204). This legend can be found among several dozens of Tai groups and is believed to be hundreds of years old. This legend exists among the people in Isan, connecting the history of their rice cultivation pattern to that of the other Tai groups. Hanks explains the Mae Phosop legend of rural Thailand:

In many parts of Thailand today rice is deemed animate, and so grows like other animate creatures. The rice mother, Mae Phosop, becomes pregnant when the rice flowers bloom, and as the grain grows, she like any pregnant woman, delights in scented powder and bitter-tasting fruit. Her offspring, the rice, has its (soul) like other animate beings. (1972: 21)

These chronicles and oral legends found in Isan connect the population to the traditions of their Tai ancestors. They imply a lengthy historical legacy of the population now in Isan, of the traditional cultivation of

rain fed rice, and the propitiation of animist spirits living in the fields.

Settlement

When infinite populations of Lao arrived into Isan during the early part of the 1800's, the region was still covered in "virgin forest, crossed only by a handful of minor rivers and by the tracks of the caravan trade" (Pasuk and Baker, 1995:49). Zimmerman described the topography in 1931 as a "dry jungle" (1937: 387), which was still 60% forest cover as recently as 1937 (Platenius, 1963: 12). Travel was difficult and dangerous, with numerous hazards, as described by Hanks:

...Snakes "as big around as an arm" slithered in the thickets; occasional crocodiles lurked near permanent ponds. However these creatures were not as fearsome as the elephant herds that might charge and kill the man who surprised them. In the proper season, deer ranged searching for tender shoots near water holes, and following them the tiger. (1972: 72)

The place was a jungle: a thick, hard to habit, forested Jungle. And yet many populations since the late 1700's came from the former Lan Xang kingdom (present-day Lao) to settle the area. These scores did not come because of economic aspirations. The Siamese state was brutalizing all three former Lan Xang states, and so many fled for their lives. Others were actually brought over by the Siamese, as war captives (Srisaka, 1996: 298-299).

Srisaka provides the historical antecedents to the conflict:

Subsequent to the restoration of the Thai Kingdom by the king of Thon Buri [shortly after the Burmese destruction of the Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya], Luang Pra Bang allied itself with the Tai, Wiang Chan with the Burmese, and a breakaway group from the Wiang Chan court set up a third, independent Lao state at Nakhon Champassak...The Thai government found Wiang Chan's alliance with the Burmese enemy intolerable and in 1778 subdued the central Laotian state...This only encouraged further disunity [sic] among the three Lao states which in the early Ratanakosin (Bangkok) period were persuaded to accept vassalage under Bangkok. (Ibid: 295)

Rogers offers a more descriptive account, writing that "the Siamese army proceeded systematically to destroy the kingdom". Pasuk and Baker describe Siam's role in the mobilization of Lao populations into Isan:

In their first half century, the Bangkok rulers... increased the population with new immigrants and war captives...Until this period, [Isan] was very empty of people. From the late 18th century, settlers trickled across the Mekong to force the trade flow down to Bangkok. They raided the settler communities for corvee recruits and slaves. In the 1820's...Bangkok...sacked [Wiang Chan], and moved large numbers of [Wiang Chan's] subjects across the Mekong to start populating and exploiting the region in earnest... (1995: 214)

Populations arrived in family groups. While they were in aggregate performing a mass exodus during a time of military danger, they tended to know where they were headed. Friends and relatives from village communities would return and spread the word about high quality

destinations, that were free, safe, and workable in terms of subsistence production (Chatthip, 1996: 69). These families were moving into Isan not as forest dwellers, but sedentary agriculturalists. They had to sure there was enough area to successfully produce their subsistence.

Their first challenge upon arrival was to transform patches of dense wilderness into cultivation area. Pasuk and Baker write that they used simple tools and muscle labor to accomplish this, citing that settlers "welcomed as a son-in-law a lad who came with only a big knife" (1995: 51). As indicated in the quote, social relations between families and cooperative family labor, in this fundamental aspect of the production process, were continued from traditions in their former Lan Xang villages. Hanks' interview with a second-generation settler to the outskirts of Thailand's central region brought this description:

My father came here when the region was uncut. Others did not want to come for fear of elephants. He had no buffaloes, and so he cleared the land for a rice patch with his long knife. (1956:1)

Of the various settlement types in rural Thailand, Zimmerman is able to identify four. The first type is the village settled around a water source, like a river or canal, which dominated Hanks' Bang Chan settlement.

Another is the village scattered among fruit farms. A third is a village with housing settlements clustered together, surrounded by rice fields to the outside. The final, and rarest kind, is of the isolated family farm (1931: 15). Chaiyaphum Village, the primary site of this thesis, was established as one with the housing settlements clustered in the center with rice fields beyond. Zimmerman provides specifics of this settlement type:

In some sections there is a type of aggregated village of houses in close contact surrounded by areas of rice fields. These villages with their groves of trees form little forests in a great rice plain. They are close to each other in the richer soils and farther away in the soils of less fertility. However, each little forest of houses and trees do not constitute a village administratively. On the contrary, it may be a half dozen, depending on the number of families and their relationships with each other. (Ibid: 16)

Land Abundance and Scarcity

As indicated, land was in abundance. And worthlessly so, according to Hanks, who writes that the use of official titles was not important (1956: 1). Chatthip speculates that this abundance provided villagers with a cornucopia of natural resources, which no doubt allowed villagers to reproduce their institutions (1996: 73). One empirical consequence noted by Hanks was that early families could plant rice on

unused fields belonging to other families without conflict or controversy (1956: 7).

The abundance was rooted in small population sizes in large land areas (Wijewardene, 1967: 75). The region covers 66,250 square miles (170,226 square kilometers), and yet its 1850 population was under two million people (roughly 1,716,000 people) (Sompop, 1989: 36).

Land was so available that losing the family plot simply meant going out and getting a new plot (Ibid). Zimmerman writes that Isan families held onto an average of 5.83 rai of agricultural lands in 1931 (1931: 25-28), though this figure has been questioned by Wijewardene (1967: 77). By 1963, the agricultural census reported average regional holdings per household as 21.6 rai, with Chaiyaphum bringing in an average of 19.7 rai over an area of 1,328,596 rai (Ibid: 76).

Land was always claimed by households, not individuals or communal groups. Families could extend their cultivation areas to meet increased needs. The process of claiming land was a simple one. Families laid wooden stakes at the corners of a piece of forest. Is established to other villagers "full rights of ownership of land" (1992: 119). Kemp explains:

The traditional local view is that by marking out and clearing previously unused forest one establishes basically the same rights of ownership as one may possess in cattle or other goods. An owner...has the right to alienate the property at will and the absence of any formal legal right to do so does not appear to have impinged upon village perceptions of the sanction. Most, if not all, land in the area has been claimed and cleared in the traditional manner. Nobody seems to have bothered to obtain written permission from the district headquarters for them to clear and commence cultivation. (Ibid: 120)

Land scarcity was not a problem for over a century. Kemp writes that new land for paddy farming in the HuaKok area did not become scarce until the 1950's (1992: 120), while Chatthip suggests that land among Thailand's peasants in other areas became scarce initially during the 1930's and became full-fledged problems resulting in large segments of landlessness and rural proletarianism by the the 1960's and 1970's to (1996: 73).

While land was still available, good land wasn't. The forest resources that Chatthip heralds as so critical and in abundance during the late 1800's and early 1900's, went into major decline, the immediate results of which were a decrease in watershed absorbency, in general soil fertility, and in the numbers of available forest products. Isan's other resources were few (Platenius, 1963: 18). The number of areas with adequate cultivation

resources (good soil and land elevations, abundant water potential) was few.

Farmers responded to this by crowding into these "good land" areas, and overexploiting its existing resources (and thereby diminishing the quality and quantity of its returns) (Ibid). Keyes summarizes the situation:

A population density for the whole northeastern region in 1960 of 53 persons per square kilometer does not seem high in comparison with a national average density of 51 persons per sq. km. or a density of 80 in the Central Region. However, when the population is looked at in reference to the relative poor resources available, it can be seen that in some areas of the Northeast, population size is reaching levels which cannot be supported by traditional means. (1966: 37)

Keyes further states that provinces in Isan with higher population densities had lower average yields per paddy field, suggesting that the "population-resource relationship has already passed optimal levels" (Ibid: 38). In 1960, Muang Chaiyaphum, the district with Chaiyaphum Village (primary research site of this thesis), had a population density of 50-74 persons per square kilometer, though the figure also reflects the density of the population within the capital city which may in fact be higher than in the villages (Platenius, 1963: 18). The provincial growth rate in Chaiyaphum in 1970 was 2.8%, which was roughly equal to the national

rate (Cornelius, 1970: 2). The provincial paddy yield per planted area, was 243 kilograms per rai (Platenius, 1963: 19).

Land Allocation through Rental or Sale

While the majority of land was transferred through family inheritance, significant transferred also occurred through land rentals and sales. Kemp writes that most contracts were held between true kin and affines (consanguineal and affinal kin only). This reflects less any prohibitions of the populations in renting and selling to outsiders, but more the ease in advertisement and publicity of unused tracts of land. The majority of land rental contracts were between what Kemp refers to as true kin and affines (1992: 124-125).

Land rental agreements tended to be short term, generally on a seasonal or yearly basis (Ibid: 123). Rent was up until quite recently paid in kind, generally between 1/5 to 1/3 of the crop, with rates varying with 1) land quality, 2) water availability, and 3) kin relations between parties involved in the contract. Occasionally, cultivators would rent lands from their creditors, using rental fees as their payment for their outstanding debts (Ibid). During sales, price did not reflect kin relationships except in the case of very

close kin or friends (Ibid: 126-127). In general, however, land prices in sales reflected what cultivators deemed was its fair cultivation oriented price.

Production

Production activities centered on rice cultivation. There were three methods of rice production: 1) dry, upland cultivation sown with dibble stick, 2) paddy land cultivation sown by broadcast, and 3) paddy land cultivation sown by transplant. Hanks writes that upland cultivation was good for scattered populations that needed an abundance of land to continuously clear, while broadcasting worked well during the beginnings of populations pressure and transplanting during land scarcity (Hanks, 1972: 68; Kaufman, 1960: 5). In all three methods, the technology used was simple. Labor was organized and fulfilled by the family unit, generally into age grades and along gender lines, while during peak production periods, families would recruit the assistance of other families into work groups ("long kaek").

The first type of cultivation employed in Isan was the dibble stick, used in dry farming. Hanks, reporting on his research in Bang Chan, claims these years to have been between 1850-1890, with 1850 as the approximate

origin date of the community (1972: 72). The method was particularly suited to environments which enabled continuous forest clearing, because of low shelf life of highly concentrated nutrients left in the soil after clearing. Within a few years, the soil would be spent, highly infertile and unable to survive in low rainfall areas, without nutrients produced naturally in forests (Ibid: 30).

According to Hanks, cultivators would abandon previously farmed tracts to clear new forest, once the top soils decrease in fertility. Top layers of tropical soil tend to be sterile, and only plants with deep roots can penetrate these layers to reach nourishment at the deeper levels. Rice plants have shallow roots, and are thus unable to provide top yields year after year, in the face of diminishing soil quality from lack of natural fertilizers like tree leaves and branches, and from animal wastes from those living in the forest (Ibid).

The process of clearing the site is also described by Hanks:

Having selected a site, the...cultivator fells the vegetation early in the dry season and allows it to dessicate in the mounting heat until, ideally, the debris is at a tinderlike state of dryness. Then fire is set, roaring across the field. Properly done, this saves enormous work in clearing, destroys many seeds that might compete with the crop, and

leaves behind in the ashes phosphates and potassium that help the growing plants. (1972: 29-30)

The next stage in the dry rice cultivation process was sowing. Seeds were planted using a dibble stick, which was dipped into the ground to make a hole. Seeds were dropped into these holes, during the first year of a clearing immediately before the first rains (Ibid: 30). Nai Sin Saensug, as translated by Hanks writes (brackets original):

The way they grew rice [formerly] was very primitive. They had no buffaloes and no tools such as sickles and windmills. They used a mattock to loosen the soil. They used a stick to make holes in which they put five or six grains of rice and covered the holes with soil. They did this in the sixth month [probably June] until their fields were fully sowed. When it rained, the rice sprouted. During this time they had to kill weeds very often until the sprouts grew into clumps which the weeds could not overcome...If they had buffaloes, they plowed their dry land and sowed seeds and waited for rain. When it rained, rice and weeds both grew. So farmers had to kill weeds nearly everyday. (Ibid: 70)

Initially, the soils (rich in nutrients from the previously residing forest crops and animals) would reap high yields. Soil fertility would inevitably decline, to the point of forcing farmers to shift their cultivation to new lands while the old lands were left fallow for some seasons (Ibid: 31).

Kaufman's study of Wiang Chan dry rice cultivators found that families would leave these areas fallow for between three to five years, and then cut over and burn the site while adjacent areas were then left fallow. Hanks visited Northern Thai sites where families kept odd fields fallow for between five to six years (Kaufman, 1958: 4-5; Hanks, 1972: 30). This mode of cultivation was difficult to sustain, because it constantly required the clearing of new forest areas because of diminishing returns due to declining soil fertility.

Once families acquired new tools, such as buffaloes and plows, they immediately devised new methods of cultivation that would allow them to reuse previously cleared tracts for high numbers of consecutive years. They cleared new plots of land, in low-lying areas and began sowing seeds by broadcast and transplant (Hanks, 1972: 35). Suwit notes that in the case of Ban Khwao, Chaiyaphum, families settled with the technology and impetus to practice paddy farming from the beginning (1986: 51), while they were the second and third methods developed in Bang Chan was the second to be developed in Bang Chan (Hanks, 1972: 35).

In broadcast farming, seeds were scattered onto the fields, as opposed to the dibble stick approach of

planting them into the ground. Transplanting required the preparation of seedbeds, initial sowing, and then transplanting of rice sprouts. In both cases, fields were low-lying rather than upland, and were kept undyked to allow natural rainwater to flood them (flooded waters would constantly nourish the paddy crop) (Hanks 1972: 35).

While paddy farmers could reuse tracts of land over and over, these low-lying areas still had to be cleared, at least initially. Hanks quotes an informant who describes the process during 1905-1910:

At those times we used to plow and irrigate. It took strength. It was hard to plow. First we had to cut the woods with a long knife or burn them. (1956: 5)

To take advantage of the nourishment from the first rains, broadcast cultivators would plow the fields and plant rice seeds before they arrived (Hanks, 1972: 35). Seed varieties were selected on the basis of function. The proper seed in flooded fields was what Hanks called "floating" rice, which was heavy and took a long time to mature (Ibid: 32).

Rice varieties in general fell along three weight grades: light rice, which matured in 90 days and brought an average of 20-30 tang of rice per rai, medium rice,

which ripened in 120 days, yielding between 30-40 tang, and heavy rice, which took a whole 150 days to produce 40 to 50 tang of rice (Kaufman, 1960: 41; Suwit, 1986: 51; Chatthip, 1998: 6). Suwit writes that in Ban Khwao, Chaiyaphum, light rice was ready to harvest between early and mid November. Medium rice was cut from mid November to early December, while heavy rice was collected from late December onwards. While heavier rice required the most nourishment (being constantly supplied with water) and took the longest to produce, it reaped higher yields.

In broadcast farming, plowing and sowing were completed before the first rains to take advantage of the nourishment. Hanks describes the process:

Cultivators must have the seeds ready to grow when the first drop of moisture reaches them. As the fullness of the grains depends on the duration of the growing season, each household seeks to stretch the growth to its ultimate. So while the sun still beats down on the cracked earth, the plowman begins driving his buffalo or oxen to pulverize the crust, then breaks the clods with his harrow. When seeds are scattered and lightly covered with dust he may await the rains. (Hanks, 1972: 35)

This method was less productive per area than the dibble method, however the ease of sowing the seeds made it easier to plant a larger acreage of land, thereby increasing yields if enough land area was available (Ibid: 70). The amount of land could not be increased exponentially, however, because while sowing was easier,

plowing, harrowing, and harvesting still required intensive labor inputs. Hanks quotes an informant who describes broadcast production activities in his area during the early 1900's:

At most people worked 10 rai by broadcasting...The yield was good because the soil was fertile. One [rai] raised about 40 tang of paddy. Some we sold but always kept about 200 tang for the seven adults and three children in our household...There was not enough strength (man power) for more than this. The land was full of weeds; that made it harder... (1956: 5)

Lack of labor power encouraged broadcast cultivators to seek another paddy method of cultivation. They came up with the transplant method, which would allow them to cultivate more intensively a smaller area of land. This new method worked well with increases in population density, and reaped higher harvests than the other two methods. (Kaufman, 1960:43). A crucial prerequisite to transplant farming, which required propagation of seedlings prior to transplantation into growing fields, was that these fields had to be soft enough to plant sprouted rice crops. Curtis recorded the following observation in 1903:

At the close of the dry season the rice plains lie baked hard and dry with cracks and fissures running across them. Nothing could look more uninviting to vegetable life. But the rains commence and the fields drink in the daily downpour until the streams rise sufficiently to help flood them, covering them with a coating of rich silt. (1998: 165)

Draft Animals

Draft animals such as water buffaloes and oxen (used in other regions) were used in all three methods, though only mandatory for paddy cultivation. In Isan, the water buffalo was preferred because of its extensive endurance, performing heavy labor in plowing, harrowing, threshing, and hauling. Buffaloes suffered much in the process, many dying from the hard labor of plowing in particular. In threshing, they suffered not from hard work but pain. The rice kernels left deep cuts and slices in their hocks while they were forced to continue trampling until the crop was loosened from the stalks (Suthep, 1963: 11).

Rural Thai families found their water buffaloes indispensable, with most owning at least (Suthep 1963: 8; Kaufman 1960: 42). Suthep notes their high value as a form of capital, as well:

In the traditional Thai economy, animals have never been raised because of their value in terms of meat or milk. They are chiefly cherished as draft animals...and as such have acquired value as a form of capital. In prosperous times peasants invest in animals as much as they do land, and in depression, animals are the easier to liquidate. (1963: 7)

The primary task assigned to buffaloes is plowing and harrowing, which are the two heaviest tasks. Certain areas in the southern region used buffaloes to plow the fields even before plows were invented. Chatthip

describes the "wian khwai" (buffalo round), where family members would chase buffalo herds around their fields in order to trample the ground:

On plots of 20 - 30 rai, the trampling took around 10 days. In that period...nobody yet had a plow to use. At Tambon Mai Fat [Amphur Si Kao, Trang], the plow came into use only in 1903. (1998: 5)

When plows were used, they were made of hardwood, handcrafted by either the family unit or specialists, often in their kindred. Though the hardwood plows broke easily, steel ones remained exorbitantly priced and were too heavy to drag along the muddy fields (Suthep, 1963: 8). According to Curtis' observations, buffaloes plowed the paddy fields after they were softened by the first rains (in contrast in Hank's insistence that they often did so before the rains):

The slow plodding buffalo is ankle-deep in water as he draws the rude plow along. (1998: 165)

Plowing was considered one of the toughest tasks. Men, as in all tasks requiring excessive strength, would do all of the plowing. Each man would plow his own farmland, leaving work group efforts for tasks such as transplanting, harvesting, threshing, and winnowing. Children were a resource, taking watch over and feeding the water buffaloes. Families without buffaloes could borrow from their kind (Hanks, 1956: 7). Women, during

the plowing process, would take care of the home, prepare food and deliver it to the fields (Suthep, 1963: 11). Women also prepared the seedbeds while the men plowed and harrowed the fields. This generally fell in late June and early July (Kaufman, 1960: 43).

To prepare the seeds, a wooden square frame, lined with banana leaves, was placed on either the ground or on wooden boards. Paddy seeds were first soaked in water for 24 hours, then poured into the frame four inches deep, where it was leveled off, covered with straw and watered everyday. The seeds would sprout into seedlings within three days. They would then be dispersed (broadcasted) once the fields are harrowed over to remove grasses and weeds. Within four to six weeks, the crop took root and awaited transplantation (Kaufman 1960: 43).

At 15 inches in height, the large bunches of rice sprouts were pulled out, and "with a wide, arc-like motion", was "skillfully smacked" against the shin or calf of a raised leg, in order to dislodge the mud (Ibid: 43-44). Kaufman claims this process was performed only by men, because it was socially improper for women to raise their legs in public (Ibid).

The sprout tops were then trimmed, much like hair is trimmed, to facilitate stronger growth. Before

transplanting, the spirit of the rice goddess, Mae Phosop, would be propitiated on an auspicious day, calling for the goddess to bring in large, bountiful harvests (Ibid: 205). During the following day, the crop was transplanted as cultivators thumbed open the muddy ground, inserting the sprouts (Ibid: 44).

Rainfall

The success of the season's harvest was heavily dependent on natural resources, such as fertile soil and good quality rice seeds. A final consequential natural resource was rainwater. Chatthip estimates that in the Isan province of Nakorn Rachasima during the Fifth Reign (1850-1910), 90% of cultivators used rain water, with the remaining 10% taking water from streams (1998: 6).

This dependence posed potential problems for rice cultivators. Based on a study of government statistics, Keyes finds that Isan, Zimmerman's "dry jungle", when compared to the nation's other regions, had both less rainfall as well as less consistently on the number of days with rain. The rainy period, from May to September, was also shorter than other regions, notably the central plains, because the rains in the northeast originate from cyclones in the South China Sea, rather than from the monsoons which affect the central region (1966: 30). In

the commune of Saraphi, in Nakorn Rachasima, Kamol reports that the average annual rainfall was only 1,052 millimeters, which was "inadequate for standard tropical crop production" (1967:51). Keyes adds that in areas of particularly low rainfall, water is sometimes inadequate for even a single rice crop (1966: 33). Muang Chaiyaphum's (the district with Chaiyaphum Village) total rainfall in 1969 was 1544.2 millimeters.

While farmers who lived far from alternative water sources suffered, particularly during drought years, those living too close to water sources were often deluged. Areas within 25 to 30 kilometers from the the Mun and Chi Rivers often became so flooded to inundate the entire crop (Ibid). Platenius remarks, "Long periods of drought in low rainfall areas and floods in the lower river basins are the principle hazards to agriculture" (1963: 9).

Problems with inadequate rainfall attracted the attention of a World Bank mission, which wrote the following recommendations in 1958 (as quoted in Keyes):

[The Northeast] has [its] rainfall concentrated in a short rainy season, a feature that does not correspond well with the requirements of wet rice - now the principle crop. And given the characteristics of the soil, the water resources and topography of the region, the possibilities for satisfactory irrigation of wet rice are limited. The Northeast requires a major shift in its cropping

pattern, with less emphasis on rice and more on its favorable potential for rainfed cultivation of upland crops and pasturage for livestock. (Keyes 1966: 34)

During years when droughts or floods destroyed some of the season's harvest (i.e. struck some families but not others), family units turned to their kindred for assistance (Hanks, 1956: 6). Hanks writes:

He who suffered individual loss of crop borrowed freely from his more fortunate kinsman neighbors: [Quoting an informant] There was no trouble. If there were no food, one could go to his neighbor's house to eat with them...You could ask neighbors for food, in fact stay with them two or three days and eat chicken... (Ibid: 7)

The Harvest Period

Within 90 to 150 days after planting, depending on the variety of rice used, cultivators would turn to their next intensive phase of production: harvesting the crop. Armed with hand-held sickles, family farmers would cut the rice stalks, leaving a considerable amount of culm attached to the rice sheaves (Kaufman, 1960: 44).

This is where much of the heralded "long kaek" work groups takes place. Families with over ten rai, particularly those with too few productive members, would recruit assistance because if they waited too long, the grains of rice could dry out and break during the milling process (Suthep, 1963: 53). The family requesting

assistance would provide food and rice wine for the work group.

Harvesters in work groups would work from between six and seven AM until eleven AM, and then continue working from one PM until five or six PM (1960: 140). Participating farmers brought their own sickles, while the household head calling for the assistance provided long bamboo poles which were pushed against rows of rice to bend them for the harvesters (1960:44). Each person was required to harvest a quarter of one rai of land (Suthep, 1963: 53). The sheaves were then bundled and transported by cart or sled (dragged by water buffaloes and oxen) to the threshing site, a cleared ground cemented with hardened buffalo dung, and located either near the fields or the homestead (Chatthip, 1998: 6; Kaufman, 1960: 44; Suthep, 1963: 12).

The bundles were then spread out on the floor. In some places, the indispensable buffalo was called on to trample to rice grains off the sheaves. In other places, cultivators would trample the sheaves, rather than the buffaloes. Once the process was complete, the sheaves were cleared, and the kernels scooped and collected.

The threshing process would not remove dirt and chaff from the kernels, so families would then winnow the

rice kernels. They were tossed into the air, and then blown away by huge hand held fans, which were usually held by men and produced giant artificial gusts of wind (Kaufman, 1960: 46; Suthep, 1963: 12; Curtis, 1998: 166).

Wealthy households (those with substantial rice surpluses) would ask for considerable assistance during the threshing and winnowing processes. Kaufman offers the example of one wealthy farmer in Bangkhaud, with 82 acres, who required assistance from forty workers. Many participants were those indebted to the farmer, and thus socially required to come. On the scheduled day to thresh, the sponsor provided two ten gallon jugs filled with rice wine for the stackers of the sheaves. Women in this household spent the entire day preparing the evening meal to feed the workers (Kaufman, 1960: 45).

Threshing work groups were often socially spirited occasions, whereby participants made the most out of an arduous production activity. Hanks quotes one elderly woman who recalled her experiences during such threshing parties:

Young men and women from neighboring houses all came dressed in bright colors. It was a time for summoning strength...We would thresh at night and be fed by the house owner. There was food and liquor. Then it was fun; there was no quarreling...While working we sang songs; young people met and had many things to talk about. We had these work parties to put the paddy in the bin and also for pounding and

winnowing the paddy...They were all relatives in the group, and the occasion was for the young people. If there were no grown son or daughter then the father or mother joined in. They did not mind helping each other. (1956: 7)

Once the threshing process was complete, rice only had to be milled to remove the grain from its husk. Rice was milled in home mills, Kaufman estimating that ten tangs of rice could be home milled into 5.5 tang of polished rice (1960: 45). He described the implements as "push and pull swivels", while glutinous rice was milled in large wooden mortar and pestle sets, often by young girls (Ibid). Curtis describes an adaptation found in Lampang, of the hand mortar and pestle sets:

The women were beating out rice from the paddy, but unlike the Siamese who use a hand mortar and pestle, they have a very convenient arrangement of mortar and long hammer-like pestle which can be worked with the foot. (1998: 64)

The rice production process, from beginning to end, was one of intensive labor inputs, family organization, and during peak periods, kindred cooperation. Families relied on family owned resources (land, labor, tools), to produce subsistence crops for family consumption.

Other Production Activities

Peasant households in Isan engaged in many other production activities in order to maintain their minimum standard of consumption. Many grew things, found things,

sold things, and hired out their labor for wages, in order to compensate for inadequate harvest yields. As one of Hank's informants told him:

The poor often did not have enough to eat. They had to add water plants or sweet potatoes to extend their rice...Often birds would eat up the rice completely. (1956: 6)

Despite the necessity of these activities, they were always secondary to the task of rice production (Suthep, 1963: 6). Families centered their activities around rice production and saw these extra opportunities as supplements to their first socio-economic concern. Extra production activities included: fishing, gathering forest products, growing other crops, and producing household items by hand, including cloth and silk.

Fish was the staple protein in the Isan diet (Chatthip, 1998: 7). Family members caught fish living in rivers, lakes, burrow pits, canals and rice fields (Suthep, 1963: 5) using innumerable methods. Chatthip cites scoops, spears, traps, holes dug into dried river beds, nets, and hooks, to name but a half dozen (1998: 7). According to Chatthip, fish in the past were so plentiful that farmers were always assured of a satisfactory catch. Chatthip writes:

To illustrate how plentiful fish were, villagers said they would boil the rice and pound the curry paste before going out to fish, or even simply catch

the fish by hand...Snake-head fish and soft-flesh fish were the easiest to catch. They were used to make dried fish and salted fish, or fermented fish in the northeast. (Ibid)

Suthep writes, however, that while fish was often in great abundance, it depended on the season and fish cycle. Certain times of year left farmers without enough fish to feed their families (1963: 6). Farmers would supplement their rice then with protein sources found in the forest, including squirrels, lizards, and monitor lizards. They also collected forest crops, natural fungi and shoots that would collect under tree stumps. Morning glories grew naturally at the perimeters of their rice fields, while wild bamboo and other roots were also collected for food (Chatthip, 1998: 7).

To supplement their hunting and gathering, cultivators tilled their land to plant beans, egg plant, sesame, chili, musk melon, water melon, and maize. Near their homes, they would plant fruit trees and vegetables such as onions, and spices like ginger, galangal, and lemon grass (Ibid).

In 1906, Prince Damrong visited peasant families in Monthons Udorn Thani and Isan. As quoted in Chatthip, He describes the produce to be found growing outside most peasant homes:

...In the yard of the house, they plant chili, eggplant, galangal, and lemongrass for making curry. Outside the house they have a garden for fruits such as banana, sugarcane, betel and coconut...Villagers around here make all of their own food and scarcely have to buy a single thing. (Ibid: 38)

Hanks notes that Bang Chan peasants grew herbs such as peppermint and sweet basil, and produced their own household products, such as rope from bamboo and jute (later offered for sale), fish sauce, sleeping mats from grasses in the fields, and clothing (1956: 6).

Traditionally, all Lao populations in Isan produced their own clothing. Women cultivated and wove their own cotton and silk cloths, which they would sew together for their families. Cotton was grown in elevated areas. Ripe cotton bolls were beat into cotton wool, and then spun into yarn, which was later woven into cloth (Chatthip, 1998: 8). Curtis observed cotton activities during her travels:

Under a house near by was a loom, at which sat a Laos woman. Beside her a young girl was spinning, and within touch of her crouched an old woman seeding cotton by means of a tiny hand gin. It consisted chiefly of two rollers which were turned by a crank; these caught the lint and tore it from the seed, which was left behind. It looked very much like a crude clothes-wringer. On a scaffold in the sun, cotton was drying, and near by it was packed into large hampers for spinning. In the yard were dye pots and from a rattan rope hung many hanks of yarn newly dyed in bright orange, blue, purple, and brown... (1998: 65)

Isan peasants also manufactured numerous household products, such as bamboo woven containers (used in winnowing, storing rice, and keeping food, fish, and other products), making nets and fish traps, tools, and boats. They built their own homes, with timber from the forests, and helped their friends build their homes (Chatthip, 1998: 8). Chatthip further points out another subsistence-oriented essential usually taken for granted by researchers studying peasant production activities:

Firewood for cooking could be found easily from the forest. To light a fire, at first they rubbed sticks to create a spark. Later they used stone and metal, and blew the flames to ignite small branches. Later still they used sap or latex mixed with wood scraps to make a bar...which would burn for a long time, and was used to provide light at night-time. (Ibid)

These additional production activities occupied much of the family's time both between intensive periods of the rice season and after the harvest. Many activities were done with the assistance and companionship of other families. Families were able to use natural resources and intensive human labor to produce enough to supplement their rice and ensure the reproduction of their activities in the future.

Distribution

The Kindred

In order to maintain social relations within the greater community (essential for the reproduction of successive filiations), families would directly distribute some portion of production yields. Like relations in production, which were masked in ceremony, ritual, and social communion, relations in distribution were in general rooted in social rites and religious traditions. Through these occasions, some products of family labor would be distributed to their kindred and other members of their communities. Two examples of such occasions include 1) bride prices, the amount given to the bride's family by the groom, 2) and merit making ceremonies (potential leveling mechanism).

Bride prices were monetary and in kind amounts given to the bride's family by the groom's family. While the money and in kind products (land, production resources, gold) belonged technically to the parents, it was often used to both to offset some of the wedding costs and to assist the new couple in the establishment of their own household.

Kemp writes:

The negotiated cash payment...should eventually be used in enabling the newlyweds to establish their

own household. Ideally it is handed over to the bride's father in trust but in practice he exercises full rights over it and does as he pleases. The whole sum, or that part of it not spent on the wedding feast, is often returned straight away after the wedding rites or kept until the couple are about to move to their own home when it may be given to them both either as cash or in the form of household and farm equipment...For some the size of the payment is a matter of prestige... (1992: 64)

In Hua Kok, Pitsanulok, Kemp noted three components to bride prices, the first two holding set economic values. The first component acknowledges the milk from the mother, and in some way belongs to the mother. The second part is a tribute for the costs of rearing their daughter. The third element is any additional amount asked for by the bride's family (Ibid).

Kemp further notes that because the bride's family was at no formal commitment to contribute as much as the groom's parents to the wedding ceremony (though his own kindred may help provide sweets and liquor for the party) (Ibid). The act of providing a bride price allows a socially sanctioned design transfer economic resources from one family to another.

Production proceeds were also commonly distributed to kindred and other community members through merit making ceremonies, services, and festivals. Isan's peasants believed that in order to live a good life and achieve a higher rebirth in the next, people must

accumulate merit. Merit making ceremonies were conducted throughout the year, during social rites of passage, such as births, marriages, and ordinations. Providing food for monks, either at the temple, or while on their daily alms rounds, as well as propitiating spirits such as the rice goddess, Mae Phosop, also constitutes merit making (Seri and Hewison, 1990: 63).

In the past, merit making ceremonies offered peasants an opportunity to distribute their resources with their kindred, other community members, and members of the Buddhist order. Participating family members brought rice and selections of food, to share with other family members attending the ceremonies (Ibid). Seri and Hewison note the economic contribution of such resource distribution on the overall family production process:

As merit making is such an important part of villagers' life, it naturally has an impact on the mode of production. Villagers produce rice not only for family consumption, but also consider the need to [make merit] at the temple and in the community for all occasions, and to share with relatives and those in need. Thus when going to fish or find food in the forest, they consider their children, themselves, monks at the temple, [spirits], relatives, and friends. (Ibid: 65-66)

Families had to give away some of their production yields to meet their socially-based economic obligations. Their children had to marry children from other families in order to ensure continued survival of the family unit,

so thus parents with sons were hard-pressed into coming up with bride prices. Likewise were families entreated by deeply felt religious beliefs to accumulate merit. Daily alms giving, the occasional spirit propitiation (not too occasionally), as well as large scale private ceremonies, such as weddings, ordinations, cremations, and memorials, also took away from production outputs (often calling for sharp increases in production, too).

The Sakdina System

Production yields were also distributed to the Thai state. Prior to the early 20th century, politics and economics of the Thai (Siamese) state was loosely based on the Sakdina system. The system was started during the reign of King Borommatrailokanat of Ayutthaya and later of Phitsanulok (1448-1488 C.E.), to create a wide-scale "hierarchy and functional delineation" (Wyatt, 1984: 73). Wyatt discusses the origins of the system:

The laws assigned everyone a number of sakdi na, literally "field power". Although at first this may have at least symbolically represented actual measured rice fields, expressed in terms of rai (2½ rai = 1 acre), by the fifteenth century it did not carry this meaning...Ordinary peasant freemen were given a sakdi na of 25...In the exhaustive laws of Trailok's reign, which read like a directory of the entire society, every possible position and status is ranked and assigned a designation of sakdi na, thus specifying everyone's relative position. (Ibid)

The system continued among the successive Thai populations and was officially abolished in 1908. In practice, the system was not strong. The state was the notional owner of the rice fields, but in practice did little to exert ownership of them. The main mechanism of the system was extraction of surpluses and corvee labor, in the form of tributes, from member communities (Supha, 1996: 66). Chatthip describes the need for these tributes, as well as the peasant apperception of them:

The state needed corvee labour to build forts, camps, palaces, temples, roads, granaries and crematoria; to dig canals and construct other public works; to make warships and weapons; to work as soldiers and boatmen; to transport nobles and their baggage; and much besides. But the villagers feared corvee more than anything else. They had to leave their village and family behind; they had to take along their own food; often they were starved and had to live on shoots; they were scolded and whipped. If they had to transport nobles and baggage through the forest and mountains, they seriously risked death from fever...Corvee was found in every region of Siam... (1998: 14)

For peasant families subjected to it, corvee obligations were excessively burdensome. Production capabilities within the family unit suffered tremendously when members were called away on corvee duty.

Despite this, Chatthip argues that the system was one of "only external domination" (Chatthip, 1998: 4). The greatest significance of the sakdina system was that with regards to the production activities within peasant

communities, it wasn't very significant at all. Its impact on local peasant communities was minimal. (Chatthip, 1996: 70)

The Thai sakdina system had no distinct landowner class and feudal class (Kemp, 1990: 119). There was no indigenous bourgeoisie to encourage the state to take charge of the geographically remote peasant communities. Peasant families were parts of relatively cohesive communities, integrated through closely-knit social relations of production. They continued their way of life as a mostly separate entity to the sakdina state system (Chatthip, 1996: 70). The state's claims of "omnipotence...to be the sole owner of land, life, ritual and foreign trade" (Ibid), was in reality no more than an exploitative institution, otherwise irrelevant to the peasant communities.

Other than surplus and corvee labor extractions, the state did not interfere any further with the economic processes (Ibid). In general, the entire sakdina system "signified a claim by a political entity for a tributary relationship over the existing peasant producing units" (Chatthip 1996:71).

The Market

Isan peasants were isolated from most markets until after the turn of the century. They had neither the access to any nor the need for them. By the end of the fifth reign, however, a universal poll tax stating that all taxes must be paid in currency (as opposed to in kind) forced peasants to come up with that commodity only received in capital market exchanges (Chatthip, 1998: 36).

At the same time, markets were still difficult to reach for the average peasant family. The Dongphayayen railway was built from Bangkok to Korat in 1900, only helped those who lived along the railway. The rest of the trading activities, then, took place through traveling merchants:

As Isan has no important water transport, before the coming of the railway long-distance trade relied on carts and human portorage. The long-distance traders in early Isan were the Kula. They generally only brought goods out for sale, and purchased nothing for the return trip. Later, Chinese traders came to buy forest goods such as dried ox and buffalo hides, ox and buffalo bones, ivory, rattan, and castor seeds. They moved the goods by cart or portorage to Korat, and from there by portorage along the difficult passage over the Dongphayayen to Bangkok. (Ibid: 36)

Chatthip further adds:

Because there was little trade in Isan, poll tax collection created great difficulties for the villagers...The Bowring treaty [of 1855] and the

opening of the country to free trade had no effect on Isan. Isan had no export goods specific to the region equivalent to the teak in the north and the tin in the south. (Ibid)

Trade expanded exponentially after 1900, the year the Dongphayayen railway line was constructed through to Korat. Subsequent railway tracks were placed down to Burirum (1925), Surin (1926), and Ubon Ratchathani (Ibid: 37). The Chinese managed rice trade expanded in, and by 1925, rice exports from Isan equalled 102,816 tons, or seven percent of Thailand's total rice exports for that year. But the majority of this trade still centered in Korat and areas close to the railway line. Areas remote to these lines did not experience much change at all in terms of trade and commodity production (Ibid).

By the 1960s, after the completion of the 166 kilometer Saraburi-Korat Friendship Highway tract, with links to Bangkok, sharp increases in agricultural output of upland crops and vegetables, too, in areas served by the Highway (1966: 130). New highways and railways overall encouraged industries to expand, to benefit from potential markets at the other end (Ibid).

Chaiyaphum was not supplied with adequate infrastructure (highways, railways) until much later (Cornelius, 1970: 53). Many decades later, it was given rail links at Amphurs Chaturat and Bannet Narong, through

the Bangkok - Nongkhai line. Its roads prior to the Vietnam era were also marginal and inadequate for advanced marketing and trade purposes. So while new roads and railways opened the Isan region to other markets during the early to mid-20th century, creating sharp increases in agricultural output, Platenius's summary of the local peasant economy is perhaps more apropos for those in Chaiyaphum (1963: 69). He writes that the local peasant economy was one where subsistence farmers (the bulk of the total producers) sold limited quantities of surplus. Farmers sold these surpluses because it was their only source of money to pay for taxes and necessities which they could not produce (Ibid: 72). Platenius describes Isan peasant marketing procedures:

Some of the farmers take their surplus of paddy by oxcart to the nearest rice mill, where it is sold for cash, others sell it to local buyers who assemble truck loads in the village. Almost all kenaf is bought by agents who pick up the bundles in the village and take them to baling sheds which are located in all the towns and some of the larger villages of the kenaf growing areas... Vegetables, fruits, chickens, and even bundles of kenaf are taken to town on numerous buses which during the dry season manage to reach a large number of villages over poorly maintained rural roads. Buffalo and cattle are assembled in tambons and amphurs by local dealers who take charge of driving the animals to the Central Plain or Bangkok area in herds numbering as much as 1,000 heads. (Ibid: 69)

In 1967, the primary agricultural products in Chaiyaphum were rice (298,828 tons), kenaf (52,181 tons), corn (3,045 tons), coconut (3,556 tons), tapioca (3,465 tons), fruits (34,022 tons), and rotation crops, such as soy beans, mungbeans, and string beans (2,591 tons) (Cornelius, 1970: 1).

Migrant Wage Labor

In addition to expanding agriculture, new railways and roads created new wage labor opportunities. Porphant writes that in 1913, the Department of Railways offered laborers .75 baht per day (1998: 85). Other jobs were easier to reach with increased transportation facilities. However, prior to 1950, there was a limited labor demand in Bangkok, due to both slow local growth and global depression, so few rural laborers went (Ibid: 90).

Between 1959 - 1966, population pressures and the extension of transportation systems which linked remote populations to new markets, resulted in marked increases in the area under rice cultivation (Ibid: 95). Exhaustion of these resources caused rice yields to fall "among the lowest of the major rice-producing nations in the world", with Isan averaging only 140 kilograms per rai in 1957 and 1958 (Ibid). In Korat, the situation was

so severe that it became a rice importing province (Ibid: 96).

By 1962-1963, the World Bank estimated that 52% of Thailand's rural population and 28% of the urban population, were below the poverty line. 48% of this total included populations in Isan (with only 2% of the total in Bangkok) (Ibid: 94). This disparity increased with high rice premiums, which transferred income from the rural to urban sector (Ibid: 96). Bangkok, with its growth in manufacturing and service industries, became increasingly attractive as a destination for laborers unable to meet subsistence needs (Ibid: 98).

Textor reports that 65.8% of samlor drivers, in Bangkok (approximately 7,754 out of 11,784 men) during the late 1950's were from Isan, the bulk arriving between 1946 and 1953 (1961: 11). A disproportionately high number of Isan drivers arrived in 1954, a reflection of a particularly bad cultivation season. Nearly every samlor driver from Isan responded that he arrived because of depressed agricultural conditions (Ibid: 15). These drivers came as circular migrants, returning home after earning a sufficient wage, or to participate in production activities during peak periods of the cultivation season (Ibid: 11).

Porphant cites that factors such as Bangkok's stimulated economy, the growth of tourism, and the presence of US military personnel, effected an increase in wage labor demands in the capital during the 1960's (1998: 98). Prior to that time, momentum increased, but not to the levels of the 1960's, the period immediately after that concerned in this thesis.

Summary

The literature reveals that Isan's peasant production processes centered in the nuclear family unit. Families controlled nearly all production resources (land, labor, technology), and passed them along to subsequent generations as they fractioned into separate households.

The primary pattern of subsistence, and chief socio-economic concern for all peasant families, was the cultivation of rice. In addition to growing rice, families also engaged in other production activities, such as fishing, growing other crops, producing crafts and engaging in wage labor.

Family labor division was flexible, delineated along age grades and gender lines. However, this segregation, particularly in gender, were often blurred as members scrambled to assist each other to the fullest of their

potentials. Prevailingly, however, men were responsible for heavy tasks, of repairing tools, plowing the fields, and maintaining the housing structure. The women's sphere in production was to look over the seedbeds, while both men and women divided the remainder of the production tasks. The children began contributing to the household as soon as they were "strong enough to lift a stick" (Kaufman, 1960: 16). Older family members who were no longer able to contribute intensively to the production process still shared in household responsibilities, by cooking and cleaning, and child rearing.

When family labor was inadequate for production purposes, for example when there were too few working members in comparison to consumers, families recruited labor from their kindred. The kindred included kin, affines, as well as neighbors, whom contributed more significantly to individual family production activities.

The market system was approached through use values, as was common for subsistence farmers. Products were exchanged and sold not for profit but for the subsistence of value of items to which products were exchanged or sold (in the case of purchases with currency). While families relied on market exchanges to meet their total

family consumption needs (something they approached as a singular unit), for those outside of railway and other infrastructural lines, the market was not a significant part of their productive lives.

The state was also minimally integrated. For those living outside of areas affected by corvee labor recruiting, the state was no more than an exploitative agency extracting tributes in the form of productive outputs.

In general, the literature provides an empirical picture of a mostly self-sufficient, family centered unit of both production and consumption, with neither productive inputs nor consumptive outputs allocated on the basis of more than needs alone.

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