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Hua Kok:
Social Organization
in North-Central Thailand

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Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing
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PREFACE

The experience of re-reading rather than just dipping into a text completed some seventeen years ago has been a curious one. Parts were extremely familiar while other sections had been largely forgotten. That is mainly because my interests have since tended to focus much more on specific issues but subsequent visits to Hua Kok and the greater immediacy of later impressions have also affected my memory and the way I view the place.

Today, Hua Kok certainly looks very different from the hamlet described here. Although its size has not changed much, electricity poles now line an excellent dirt road through the settlement which is served by a regular bus service. Furthermore, the whole layout has changed with more and more people moving their homes to border the road. At the same time the materials and style of house construction are very different and some would not look out of place in a Bangkok suburb. The changes are equally pronounced when one turns to the more sociological and cultural dimensions of life in Hua Kok. Cropping patterns are significantly different with an altered mix of crops and new farming methods which include a once unimaginable level of mechanisation involving the use of combine harvesters. Such changes are also associated with a growing trend for young people to leave the village.

Clearly, then, the following analysis of social organisation is about a place and way of life which no longer exist. However, to dismiss the data presented here as simply out of date is to miss the point that this is and for that matter was, even at the time of its completion, a historical document. First and foremost is the fact that the text as it stands is an account of social organisation in a particular context and at a specific point in time. As such it is irrelevant that the way people order their lives is now significantly different. The following account is part of the ethnographic record; it has a role to play in any attempt to understand and assess the extraordinary changes that have been taking place in the Thai countryside, certainly since the end of the Second World War.

The book is also historical in that it describes and analyses according to a set of ideas current in the late sixties and early seventies which are now out

of fashion. That said, while it is clearly within the structural-functional tradition of British social anthropology, it is by no means uncritical and is indeed an attempt to transcend some of the characteristics commonly said to typify this kind of approach. In particular, the analysis places considerable emphasis on individual decision making and attempts to deconstruct what are still conventional images of village and community as social wholes. Looking at it again there is much that I would do differently if beginning anew. That said, fieldwork and the attempt to capture the experience within the formal framework of a doctoral dissertation did articulate certain and, for me, important issues in anthropological theory to which I have returned over the years and that are still central to my work.

In practice it is difficult to separate out the two historical dimensions. The choice of data and the manner of its interpretation, even the framing of the research problem and the issues to be addressed, were all profoundly influenced not just by what I saw going on around me but by my previous training as a social anthropologist and familiarity with the existing literature on Thai villages. Few would today attempt such a community study, even one that does much to question the approach. Indeed, it is because of the interlocking of data and theory that I have let the text which was originally submitted as a Ph.D. dissertation ['Social Organization of a Hamlet in Phitsanulok Province, North-Central Thailand'. University of London, 1976.] stand with no alterations to the argument and only minor copy editing.

Beginning again, even with the same material, I would obviously approach some subjects quite differently. The discipline has moved and there is now a much larger literature on rural social organisation than was available at the time. Discussion of some of the shifts in theoretical perspectives, to which I hope I have contributed, are found in articles published since 1976. To note three; we are now in a far better position to analyse kinship in cognatic systems than was the case in the late 1960s when rather positivist views disproportionately based on unilineal descent still prevailed. Secondly, the move away from community studies to more macro-level analyses of the peasantry on the one hand and, on the other, to detailed discussion of household organisation resulted in significant areas of rural social life disappearing from view. Now things are changing again and there is a renewed interest in an analysis of rural social organisation that goes far beyond the limitations of the community study. Finally, one must note how the emphasis in a lot of ethnographic research is now much more focussed on social process than was possible at the time of writing. Though already a major concern it remained necessary for me at the time to frame the discussion with reference to still prevalent notions of social structure.

Despite its considerable limitations it seems to me that the account presented here still has something to offer. North-central Thailand has been rather poorly served by anthropologists who, after the early interest in the area round Bangkok, have tended to concentrate on the more distinctive and 'exotic' regions of the country. Making it more available thus helps to fill a gap in the ethnography of a major region of Thai society. More broadly, with its emphasis on social organisation rather than culture this study does give a somewhat different kind of account of village life to that found in much of the ethnography which is within a cultural anthropological tradition. Finally, it places considerable emphasis on the social contexts in which people operate and the circumstances of their decision making, an approach to which I would now give even greater emphasis. Nonetheless, the material contained here does much to redress the rather bland generalizations about village life and near total absence of any sense of people acting within socio-cultural contexts which remain characteristic of much of the existing ethnography.

Jeremy Kemp
November 1992

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- 1970 "Initial marriage residence in rural Thailand". In Tej Bunnag & M. Smithies (eds.) *In Memoriam Phya Anuman Rajadhon 73-85*. The Siam Society, Bangkok.
- 1981 "Legal and informal land tenures in Thailand" *Modern Asian Studies* 15: 1-23.
- 1982 "Kinship and locality in Hua Kok". *Journal of the Siam Society* 70:100-113.
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- Sociologisch Centrum, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam.
- 1988a *Community and State in Modern Thailand*. Working Paper No. 100, Sociology of Development Research Centre, Bielefeld University.
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- 1989 "Peasants and cities: the cultural and social image of the Thai peasant village community". In J. Kemp (ed.) *Peasants and Cities, Cities and Peasants: Rethinking Southeast Asian Models* 6-19. [Special Issue of *SOJOURN* 4(i)] Reissued 1990 by ACASEA, Overveen.
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- 1991b "The dialectics of village and state in modern Thailand." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22: 312-326.

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The Transliteration of Thai Words

The transliteration scheme employed is that of the Royal Institute of Thailand as adapted by the Library of Congress in April 1958, Bulletin No. 45. Certain practical adaptations for the typewriter have been made following Frances A. Bernath, (compiler) 1964 *Catalogue of Thai Language Holdings in the Cornell University Libraries Through 1964* Data Paper 54, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University.

The names of all individuals have been changed in order to preserve some degree of privacy. The anglicised versions of the pseudonyms employed are rough approximations to names used at different times in Hua Kok and the surrounding hamlets.