CHAPTER 10

ORGANISATION, PROCESS AND CONTROL

An easiness of living consists in the reasonable price of things
necessary for life, and as good manners are more easily preserved
in a moderate easiness, than in a Poverty attended with too much
labour, or in an over-abundant Idleness, it may be affirm'd that the
Siameses are good men.
Simon de la Loubère 1693: 73.

In the preceding chapters I have outlined in some detail the main types of
social interaction associated with familial, economic, political and ritual
affairs as they are experienced by the residents of Hua Kok and neighbour-
ing settlements. In this final chapter I intend to discuss further the relation of
the parts to one another and the processes by which the continuity and stabil-
ity of life in hamlets like Hua Kok are maintained.

A common stereotype of the peasant community is the high degree of
overlap between those involved in the various sets of activities described
earlier as spheres of action. People living in a common settlement work
together, pray together, marry one another, form a common political unit and
so forth to the extent that there is an important and well defined social boun-
dary separating them from other similar communities. Such communities
convey to the observer a very strong impression of 'concreteness' and
exclusivity even though there may well be major divisions and marked com-
petition between members. [1] This community need not be a single settle-
ment; the study of rural organisation in pre-revolutionary China, for exam-
ple, lends itself to an analysis of standard marketing areas each consisting of
a marketplace surrounded by approximately eighteen settlements (Skinner
1964: 206). [2]

In most of Central Thailand one looks in vain for signs of such well
developed peasant communities either as individual settlements or larger
marketing areas. [3] This absence has in itself played a part in the selection

of the evidence cited in support of that notorious conceptual chimera, the "loosely structured social system". Elsewhere in Thailand the situation is often markedly different in certain important respects. It does not cast any aspersions on the achievement of Michael Moerman to note in passing that by far the best account, both descriptively and analytically, of a rural settlement in Thailand is about Ban Ping, a village of Thai Lue, where there is a high degree of overlap in the boundaries of the main social activities. Consequently the villagers exhibit a well developed communal identity which is reinforced by ethnic distinctions. [4]

In contrast to Bang Ping the hamlet of Hua Kok exhibits many of the features of diffuseness and intangibility which characterise the so-called communities of Bangkhuad and Bangchan though to an admittedly lesser degree than those two places. [5] Clearly though, Hua Kok has greater affinities with the latter settlements than with Ban Ping or other places outside the central region such as Ku Daeng in Chiang Mai (Kingshill 1965). On the other hand the methodology used in this study, that is, selection of the *location* of Hua Kok as the starting point for a description and analysis of different types of social interaction, reveals that while there may not be a clear cut community evidence of the existence of a communal order and of the working of the processes of social control is not lacking. To its inhabitants Hua Kok is more than just a location. There is neither the normlessness nor the high degree of individualism, assumptions of which constitute an integral part of the 'loose structure' approach to Thai society.

Given the varied distribution of the boundaries of the major spheres of interaction in which residents participate and failure of these social boundaries to reinforce the physical limits of the settlement, one may ask why Hua Kok retains its importance for those who live there. Part of the answer lies in the combination of locality and kinship. The first is readily noted: people in the daily course of events will see and often converse with one another even if they do go to separate temples, work fields alongside those from different hamlets and have other divergent interests. The significance of kinship is less obvious and requires some further discussion if the importance of its combination with the principle of locality is to be properly appreciated.

A primary characteristic of central Thai kinship is the absence of corporate groups whether they be genuine descent groups or corporations based upon two or more structuring principles. The *bilek* household group among the Iban of Sarawak is a good example of the latter in being based upon the facts of kinship, marriage and co-residence (Freeman 1958). A great emphasis has been traditionally placed on the jural aspect in kinship studies.

To be a *pater* is to have certain jurally sanctioned and enforceable rights and obligations with respect to one's child. To address another man with the terms used for one's father where there are patrilineal descent groups is to make a statement about mutual, jurally enforceable rights in people and property. In Thailand the contrast with this type of system is very marked indeed. As outlined in Chapter 3, in the absence of corporate kin groups the jural aspects of kinship are relatively unimportant and a consequence is the liberal way in which kin terms are used. The fact that they are employed in such circumstances draws attention to their importance in respects other than signifying jural claims.

Meyer Fortes has received a certain acclaim for his insistence on the moral aspect of kinship at a time when such a view was unfashionable in the face of the 'jural role' approach (cf. Bloch 1973; Pitt-Rivers 1973). The significance of this moral aspect was stressed in the discussion of kin terms in Hua Kok (cf. Chapter 3). However, kin terms have an important dimension in addition to their being a means by which an underlying kinship ideology is expressed. They place people within the moral community of kinsmen where, at least ideally, there is affection, trust, and a willingness to provide help that goes beyond the limits of balanced reciprocity. At the same time, however, the Thai terminology expresses a quite distinct set of ideas signifying distance or proximity based upon the twin principles of genealogical connection and age. It is the latter which is of great importance in Hua Kok in its use to establish an appropriate context for social relations and, as noted earlier, this sometimes occurs at the expense of genealogical accuracy.

The importance of kinship in Thai society is to a considerable extent dependent on the absence of descent groups and the poorly developed jural domain, two features of central significance in the older approaches to kinship. Yet it is precisely this absence of groups and unimportance of the jural aspect which makes possible the freer use of kin terms and expression of other facets of the ideology of kinship in social interaction. To note this is not to imply that there is any confusion between those who are 'real' kin and those who are not. One does not, nor should one, behave to one's own sibling as to a friend of similar age who is addressed and referred to by sibling terms. The point I wish to stress is that in Hua Kok the application of kin terms is as general and important as it is because the terminology expresses both the moral values of kinship and inequalities of age. It is thus uniquely suited to consolidating contractual relations as well as to adjusting cases where the facts of genealogical connection do not accord with the realities of physical age. It constitutes a means of structuring inter-personal relations in terms of the language of biological connection where such connection itself is not a necessary condition. Hence the realisation that kinship is a

conventional system of classification with certain social values attached to it and not a thing in itself (cf. Needham 1971: 3-5) is especially relevant to an analysis of the Thai material and its place in social organisation.

Recognition by residents that nearly all households in Hua Kok are related to one another by kinship and marriage thus establishes a context for social interaction. Proximity consequently favours these ties at the expense of those elsewhere and people not so linked can have their relations with neighbours in the settlement consolidated by incorporation into this moral community of kin. Hence one may argue that because of the density of kin links, the way in which kinship can be used and extended, and because of the proximity to one another of those living in Hua Kok, the principles of kinship and locality consolidate the local social identity of Hua Kok and make it more of a moral community than any other larger social unit. [6]

Whether or not this common identity of those living in Hua Kok develops further in future or declines remains to be seen. A number of conflicting tendencies can be observed. One which has already been noted is that whereby, through the working of the inheritance system and market, a band of land around the settlement which is owned and worked by residents shows signs of developing. One might also speculate that as the hamlet grows so one day it might build its own *wat*, notwithstanding government regulations restricting the erection of a new *bōt* within four kilometres of existing ones. One might also expect that in time development of the social identity of the settlement might be reflected in, and further strengthened by, the hamlet becoming a village in its own right. Both Hua Kok and Wang Phom are already well above the minimum number of households required for the establishment of separate new villages.

On the other hand it does seem that present trends in rural economic organisation are likely to counter any such tendency towards further evolution of community within Hua Kok. At the time of fieldwork there was still a considerable amount of labour exchange between households in the cultivation of rice. Even so, its occurrence appears to be declining and many farmers are in favour of wage-labour which they claim is both more efficient and without the sometimes odious obligation to return help whenever so requested. It is also clear that the old unity of common experience due largely to the relative lack of inequality between households is being steadily eroded. A distinct category of wage-labourers appears to be emerging; in time a greater proportion of farmers will be tenants with little likelihood of ever successfully achieving ownership of their farms and one farmer has already deliberately invested in land in order to rent it to others. In other words, many of the same processes are at work in Hua Kok as have resulted

in the separation of households from one another in Bangchan (cf. Hanks 1972). There, during the last phase of Bangchan's existence as a rice-growing community the household was a unit *isolated* from its neighbours by its involvement in the commercial rice economy. [7]

Comprehension of the present position of Hua Kok as a social unit is further aided if one views it from a wider perspective than that of present day patterns of interaction within the immediate locality. It is far too easy to think even today of 'traditional Thai society' once one leaves Bangkok and the major towns of central Thailand at the expense of the many changes which have occurred. Places like Hua Kok, Bangchan and Bangkhuad, are all part of the Thai response to the West which followed the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855. Before that date Thailand had a low population which was concentrated along the rivers of the kingdom. One may speculate that at this point in time the people were gathered into well-established closely knit communities. Certainly in the years following the successful rejection of the Burmese conquest central Siam experienced generally stable conditions. This population was also to a great extent self-sufficient, internal trade was minimal and royal monopolies controlled the sale and distribution of major commodities.

The Bowring Treaty changed this pattern of development with its slow increase in population and area cultivated by terminating the royal monopolies and opening Siam to the world market in rice and other commodities. Later on in the course of the nineteenth century the abolition of slavery and commutation of corvée obligations resulted in an explosion of the population outwards into the vast hitherto unpopulated and unclaimed areas. The result may be seen in figures cited by Ingram: between 1855 and the 1930s the population approximately doubled but in the same period rice exports increased twenty-five times (Ingram 1971: 37, 40). In other words, the expansion of farming (specifically rice monoculture), which was concentrated at this stage in central Thailand, was not part of the continuation of a traditional subsistence economy but an aspect of a major economic transformation.

As part of the response to the new economic opportunities and loosening of traditional social bonds vast parts of Thailand became a 'frontier society'. People moved from the old centres into the grassy plains and forests and later the writ of government caught up with them. Later too the settlers managed to build temples and support monks and in their way attempt to re-create the organisation of the older settlements from whence they came. It is my contention, then, that much of the evidence for the loose structure approach is not based on traditional modes of organisation. Instead,

it is taken from material documenting the major transformation of Thai rural society from a primarily subsistence economy to one based on cash cropping with rice, the staple, also being the major market and export commodity. Sixty years ago Hua Kok was part of this expanding frontier; now it is experiencing the problems of long established settlements in terms of its growing population and increasing scarcity of land resources. The fairly recent change from an abundance of land to scarcity, while obvious and of great importance for the structuring of social relations, is but one consequence of the general, insufficiently emphasised, change to a market economy after 1855.

An awareness of the extended time scale over which rural Thailand has experienced major socio-economic change thus provides a somewhat different perspective to that of most anthropologists of Central Thai society. Many of the signs of the so-called looseness of structure can be interpreted, at least in part, as a reflection of two types of change. The first derives from the movement of peoples away from old centres and the formation of new settlements on the frontier; the second consists of the more fundamental changes occurring in the economic system itself over the past hundred years. This being so, the evidence which has been interpreted as justifying the recognition of a distinct subtype of social structure is little more than a manifestation of the consequences of social change.

A crucial aspect of the frontier situation is existence of a real choice of whether to stay or eventually move on to a newly opened up area. Local troubles, problematic social relations, disputes over property rights and the like, can all be resolved by migration. The basically favourable ecological situation and consequent ease of making a living also play a part in facilitating this movement by reducing the necessity of commitment to others. It is this openness, the existence of opportunities for real choice, which has been a problem for those attempting to understand and analyse rural organisation in Thailand. The reason why this should have been a problem lies outside the Thai ethnography itself. Instead it is to be found in the development of structural analysis and the formation of its central concepts with reference to a very different type of social organisation.

In her dissertation on the debate on loose structure, Burr concludes that it is a conceptual problem (1969: 239). She also comments that the approach adopted by Phillips, one of the major exponents and supporters of loose structure, must be set against his conception of structural analysis which is phrased in terms of "the conventional Radcliffe-Brown Theory" (ibid: 236). [8] Kirsch in his own very critical contribution to the debate has usefully drawn attention to the fact that John Embree was himself a student

of Radcliffe-Brown at Chicago in the 1930s and that this is duly reflected in *Suye Mura* (1939), his famous village study in Japan to which Radcliffe-Brown wrote the introduction (Kirsch 1969: 44).

The inadequacies of the structural approach adopted by Radcliffe-Brown and his followers do not require repetition in detail. It is sufficient to note that by rejecting the over-socialised notion of man and developing a structural framework which can encompass cyclical as well as more fundamental types of change, one destroys any justification for a distinctive sub-concept of social structure in the study of Thai society. Indeed, it is a primary hypothesis of this analysis of Hua Kok that a great deal of that which has been supposedly problematic for those interested in Thai social structure can be adequately discussed in an analysis of structure and organisation. People's behaviour, even in relatively open situations such as traditionally occur with respect to devolution, is clearly ordered by the norms and perceptions of the situation of those involved. However, norms themselves do not necessarily determine the order and regularity existing in society and there is no reason why they should. Norms are ideological statements, they express a set of ideas about what is to be done; their importance lies in the fact that through the processes of socialisation they structure the individual's perceptions. Acceptance by the participant of what, in the abstract, moral sense, is correct, is no guarantee of actual observance. The interesting area of analysis is thus the attempt to interpret what takes place in terms of the participant's perceptions of the norms and the situations in which he or she is operating. The failure to follow this type of approach is, in my opinion, the cause of much of the difficulty in understanding Thai society which led in turn to the formulation of loose structure.

It is perhaps stating the obvious to remark that the data collected during fieldwork can convey only a fragmented picture of the culture and social organisation of those living in Hua Kok. In this instance, however, I refer not to problems experienced by all fieldworkers in attempting to encompass the life of a community of several hundred or more people. Instead I am conscious of the limitations imposed by Hua Kok being part of a large, complex and changing society. One is faced with the arbitrariness of fieldwork in terms of the time at which it is carried out, the limited period of research, the locations worked in and the occurrence of opportunities to observe and discuss.

The unobserved past intrudes into the present in a variety of ways. The whole history of the formation and growth of Hua Kok is of a response to conditions no longer prevailing. Among those living in the hamlet at the time of fieldwork were individuals who had grown up in a society in many

respects quite different from that of the period of my limited residence. Naturally many of my older informants were very conscious of these changes, accounts of what it was like 'in the old days' were to be had in abundance. Yet these stories are quite clearly part of the present. Apart from existing as items of culture, however ephemeral until preserved in the ethnographer's notebook, they convey participants' models of the past rather than the 'reality' of that past.

This type of information presents some difficulties for the anthropologist. People's perceptions and actions are at least influenced if not determined by their experiences. The experiences of those in Hua Kok varied considerably not just in terms of gender or the length of time lived but in the types of situation met with and to a greater or lesser extent managed. One aspect of this is that certain values, for example, those connected with family organisation and the control of land, do not reflect the rapidly developing shortage of land and development of a cash economy. In other words, values and decisions taken in connection with the family and farmlands are likely to exhibit a far greater range of variation than they did in the past. It follows that the anthropologist's traditional assumption of there being a close fit between values and the exigencies of real situations is even more problematic and requires careful study.

Similar points to the foregoing might well be noted by any anthropologist working almost anywhere in the world today. Even so, certain features of Thai society make an awareness of the problem essential if questions about social continuity and social control are to be raised. Moreover, the issue has some direct bearing on the preceding discussion of loose structure in that the existence of social sanctions in Hua Kok by no means achieves the prominence it does in some other cultures. It is thus readily observable that in certain areas of life the individual is able to ignore the normative structure with impunity. Hence one must question how it is that the organisation of the various spheres of action discussed in earlier chapters make Hua Kok both unique and in many respects very similar to a great number of settlements distributed over a large part of Thailand.

Clearly, then, one must look to the sources of the stability that within the context of Hua Kok helped create and now maintain the existing social milieu, along with those forces which integrate the hamlet into a wider culture and society. In this context it seems significant that the structuring of the various spheres of interaction has clearly limited the isolation of Hua Kok. The hamlet developed within a wider social milieu which itself constituted an influence working towards the standardisation of forms despite the relative isolation of the area from the main stream of Thai culture. The low

degree of overlap in the various spheres of interaction has consequently limited the development of community organisation but facilitated interaction on a wider level. Underpinning these features, and of fundamental importance in its own right, is the dominance of rice cultivation and the various technical and organisational constraints imposed by this.

It may also be hypothesised that demographic factors limited the development of state and family/kinship structures in that land was not scarce and did not require careful and effective supervision lest the life of the individual and state be threatened. What was controlled was the distribution of rights in people, and in the absence of kin-based corporations the development of contractual dyadic relations was of primary concern, especially to those in need of protection or seeking access to scarce resources. From this one may argue that although social sanctions may not be highly developed and so give rise to unbridled individualism, [9] the organisation of Thai society is such that the spread of dependency on others necessitates an effective level of standardisation in social relations. In other words, the emphasis on highly personalised contractual relations requires mutually acceptable expectations of satisfaction and so constitutes a conservative force. These expectations are in turn reinforced by gossip, the high incidence and pervasiveness of which in a relatively undifferentiated settlement like Hua Kok is important for the expression and teaching of norms as well as for the censure of those not conforming.

Put very simply the argument is as follows. A sufficient order which permits the development of social relations exists despite the absence of effective authority structures clearly and effectively backed by social sanctions. Consequently the voluntary aspect of these relations receives relatively great emphasis. This dependence on voluntary relations severely limits the scope for individualistic action in that it is only by conforming to culturally determined expectations that one can successfully negotiate such relationships. It is this which has led to the present contradictions and confusion about the supposed individualism of the Thai in an empirical context which is notable for the low level of innovation and high degree of cultural cohesion.

Such a model is clearly a gross simplification. Nonetheless one can use it to question the recent emphasis on the importance of the 'entourage' for Thai social organisation. The chains of hierarchic patron-client relations between individuals which constitute the entourage are obviously important but they do not constitute the "building block of social activity" (Hanks 1966: 56) or "Thailand's institutional base" (Van Roy and Cornehls 1969: 25). Such patron-client dyads and chains of dyads exist within a social

context and because of that context. Moreover, that context is not just cultur-
ally defined, it is also social in that one is concerned with the structuring of
social relations for the purposes of gaining and defending control over
resources be they people, material, or knowledge. It is clearly right that the
importance of the individual be recognised by those studying Thai society
(or for that matter any society) but not at the expense of the wider social
order in which he or she exists. What is now required is development of a
more comprehensive analysis of the structure and organisation of Thai
society than is possible with the present study of Hua Kok but which like-
wise places an emphasis on the individual's perceptions of, and reactions to,
social situations. Given the development of an adequate cognitive dimension
to Thai studies, assertions of the lack of order should happily become a thing
of the past.

Notes to Chapter 10

1. See, for example, Banfield's discussion of 'amoral familism'
(Banfield 1958).

2. In so far as the Chinese peasant can be said to live in a self-
contained world, that world is not the village but the standard mark-
eting community. The effective social field of the peasant, I will
argue, is delineated not by the narrow horizons of his village but
rather by the boundaries of his standard marketing area (Skinner
1964: 32).

3. Just why this should be so is beyond the scope of this discussion. One
might suggest, however, that the general absence of periodic marketing
in Thailand is linked to the low level of internal trade before the mid-
nineteenth century and the existence of royal monopolies in control of
the collection of commodities for export and international trade in gen-
eral.

4. Cf. Moerman (1968a, 1968b, 1969).

5. Fifteen years after the publication of the first Thai community study,
a venture with which he was closely associated, Hanks wrote of Bang
Chan as follows:

When our team of anthropologists from Cornell University entered
Bang Chan in Thailand, we expected to find an 'organized village'.
We searched many a month for its center, for its integrating struc-
ture - without success. Bang Chan had a name, but not even the
glimmering of a community. Individualism seemed to reign
supreme (1968: 32).

6. In this context it is relevant to note that in his study of a settlement in Chainat province, James Riley writes with reference to migrants entering the place within the last generation:

I was told that these people were kinsmen *by virtue of the fact that they were fellow villagers.* Curiously, although kinship is the idiom of address, relationships are rarely explained even on the few occasions when introductions are made: (1972:79).

7. The separation of households from one another within the settlement is countered by their active involvement in a far wider geographical and socially more differentiated area (cf. Hanks 1972: 129).

8. Cf. Phillips (1969: 26) to which Burr is apparently referring.

9. Indeed Angela Burr has commented:

Thus a study of Social Sanctions in Thai Society, because they are of minimal social significance, would logically lead the analyst, as it did Embree, to stress the autonomy of the individual will (1969: 243).