

CHAPTER 8

POLITICAL ORGANISATION

Moreover, affability towards Inferiors, Easiness of access or going before them, do pass for weakness in the Indies.
Simon de la Loubère 1693: 57.

In this chapter the primary focus of attention shifts to include Wang Phom and that part of Wang Ya Nang which with Hua Kok constitute Village No.7 in *tambon* Wang Thong. The relative insignificance of the village as a means of structuring and expressing social relations has already been referred to. Villages are administrative divisions imposed from above and their boundaries do not necessarily coincide with those of other spheres of social organisation in the area. Nevertheless, the village is of some importance because it is the institutional complex primarily concerned with the management of relations between government and people. Moreover, one can argue that it is becoming more important as the government's concern with the countryside increases. In the past the whole ideological basis of its relations with the rural population was very different. Unless taxes and labour services were not forthcoming or there was public disorder, life in the countryside was allowed to continue without direct interference from the authorities. Similarly, there was little to be gained and even disadvantages to be incurred by villagers invoking the attention of officials. A law of the reign of King Rama III (1824-1851) imposed fines on those of a neighbourhood who failed to capture a thief and on the victim of the robbery for not being sufficiently careful (Quaritch Wales 1934: 196). In these circumstances it seems likely that resort to the formal legal system took place only on special occasions and that local settlement of disputes was the norm.

The traditional exploitative ideology of government was officially changed in the administrative reforms introduced by Prince Damrong. Villagers "were to be positive participants in the effort to achieve peace, order, increased productivity and better revenue collection" (Siffin 1966: 73).

However, the actual changes have been less radical than Siffin's synopsis of the new policy might suggest. One may cite Jacob's conclusions that both the reforms of 1892 and the more recent increased involvement of government in rural affairs are to be viewed as the progressive implementation of policies reflecting traditional patterns of political relations (1971: 71-2). [1]

This state of affairs is reflected in the literature on central Thailand if only by omission. Most of the available material on local administration and politics is focussed on other regions which are the recipients of special attention from the government because of the perceived threat of subversion. Much of it supports the generally held view that active village involvement in formal political and administrative affairs remains limited though that does not necessarily imply that villagers are apolitical. Morell has recently shown how villagers in the northeast used their parliamentary representative to bring a pressure that was beyond their own resources to bear on the local district administration (Morell 1972). Even those authors who discuss the democratic innovations in local government in certain areas and who cite examples of village initiative in approaching and demanding services and resources from the government, do not claim that all or even the majority of villagers are involved in these changes. As suggested by Neher, one result of the special measures taken in Chiang Mai province, the establishment of commune councils (*saphā tambon*), sanitation districts (*sukhāphibān*), farmers' groups, and irrigation associations, may be to increase "factional cleavage at the village level" due to the benefits accruing to the village minority who participate in these new institutions (1970: 23).

Even though evidence is sparse it is apparent that the general tendency towards non-involvement is neither adequately explained by the centre-orientated perspective adopted by Jacobs nor by the idea that the bureaucracy constitutes the polity of Thai society (cf. Riggs 1966). Considerable variations in village government exist which can only be satisfactorily analysed by reference to *local* systems of social organisation. It is primarily because of the importance of these local features that the most stimulating discussion and analysis of village government so far published, Moerman's *A Thai Village Headman as a Synaptic Leader* (1969), is not more generally applicable to the situation in Village No.7 than it is.

District, Commune and Village

The district (*amphōe*) is the smallest unit of local government staffed by full-time career officials. It is the location from which much of the increasing involvement of government in the countryside is directed. The major ministries all have representatives stationed at the district headquarters who

are under the direct authority of the District Officer (*nāi amphōe*) and their provincial superiors. Other than clerical staff who are appointed locally these officials are recruited nationally by the Thai Civil Service and are subject to transfer to any part of the country. Sometimes, of course, they are able to arrange to stay in one post for an extended period. The District Officer spent sixteen years in Wang Thong before being transferred for a year, after which he returned to his former post.

To villagers, these officials form a socially distant elite however long they remain in the area and develop local ties; they are part of urban, Bangkok-oriented culture and society. In this respect they differ markedly from the part-time, locally elected village and commune headmen. Many of these, especially the younger men, have had a better education than most of their contemporaries or the experience of living outside the village but they nonetheless remain part of the 'village world'.

The headman of *tambon* Wang Thong lives in Bang Saphan where he is also headman of Village No. 4 comprising Bang Saphan and Wang Khut. The present incumbent is a quite extraordinary individual. He has held office for about thirty years and remains extremely active for a man in his seventies. He is a respected but very familiar figure to those who attend the temple at Bang Saphan. His chief *tambon* duties are to register births and deaths, and to hear disputes which village headmen forward to him when unable to obtain the agreement of the parties concerned. For this he receives two hundred and fifty baht per month compared with the seventy-five to one hundred and fifty paid to village headmen.

The *kamman* is elected by the village headmen of the *tambon* to be its leader. The position of the *tambon* in between the district and village is somewhat anomalous. In practice the role of the *kamman* is very limited; he has neither the authority nor resources at his disposal to justify the existence of the *tambon* as an administrative unit. Other than in the person of the *kamnan* Wang Thong *tambon* has no readily discernible identity: it consists of the market area with its commercial, administrative and educational institutions and an arbitrary number of rural villages, almost all totally agricultural in outlook. Attempts to increase the significance of the *tambon* by establishing councils (*saphā tambon*) and the *tambon* administrative organisation composed of the council and the *tambon* committee (*krommakān tambon*) in 1956 had not had a great impact (Yotapibal 1970: 62-5). Only fifty-nine organisations were initially established and although many more have been set up under the amended regulations promulgated in 1966 some observers remain sceptical about the ability of the *tambon* administrative organisation to perform its designated roles (cf. von der Mehden, 1970: 15-16). As for

tambon Wang Thong, being outside the areas in which these varied innovations were being attempted, nothing has happened to give it any importance. [2]

The extent to which the village forms a social unit led by the *phū yāi bān* varies considerably, both between and within regions. Moerman writing of the Thai Lue village of Ban Ping observes that to understand the present system of local government one must examine the office of headman in the light of its relations to two otherwise largely separate spheres of action. The village headman is expected to operate in both: in Moerman's terminology he is the synaptor. Consequently the headman's actual behaviour is considerably affected by the type and degree of the pressures exerted by one sphere to act on its behalf with respect to the other.

One of the most important ways in which Village No.7 differs from Ban Ping is in the perception of leadership roles. The Lue have a tradition of strong local leadership due to a combination of factors which include; the internal community structure; a distinctive Lue ethnic identity in a predominantly Thai Yuan area; and the high degree of autonomy from central government regulations and control retained until quite recently. The Lue headman is thus in the difficult position of being caught between an expanding Thai administration and a coherent, closely-knit local community. It is in this respect that the differences between Ban Ping and Village No.7 became most marked. They centre around such matters as the extent to which a headman is able to lead or command the village, his susceptibility to pressure from villagers and the likelihood of the village being mobilised to exert such influence; the ability to represent village interests vis á vis officials and other villages; and finally, the ability to withstand the administrative pressures that may be brought to bear on him.

Even in Hua Kok, which is populated by people of central Thai culture, the gulf separating the rural world from that of government administration and the administrator is a wide one. To be fair, this is something of which officials are themselves aware though their explanations tend to differ from those of villagers; one was that people used to be frightened of *bandāsak*, conferred nobility, i.e. officials, and that they had not yet overcome this fear. Other than those who pay their taxes at the district headquarters there is minimal contact with the administration area in Wang Thong. Officials behave in a similar fashion and go out to the villagers only on special occasions. During fieldwork the only visits by local government officials were by the Deputy District Officer who came in connection with improvements to the track between Hua Kok and Wang Phom, and by police searching for illicit liquor. Other visits by officials included those by a land survey team,

malaria eradication team which sprays the houses with DDT twice a year and the bank representative administering the agricultural credit scheme discussed in the previous chapter. One might assume that this social distance would aid the development of community solidarity in opposition to officialdom, but for reasons which are already apparent, this has not happened in Village No.7.

The Village Headman

Elections

The headman lives in Hua Kok; he was elected in about 1955 when his predecessor, now dead, was deposed by the district authorities. No specific reasons were discovered but informants did indicate that he had been a drunkard and cheat who had sometimes struck villagers. A list of suitable candidates was prepared and submitted to the District Officer for his approval prior to holding the election (*kān lūaktang*).

According to informants, six candidates stood in the election organised by the *nāi amphōe* at *wat* Wang Phom. Voters were given a ballot paper which was then placed in a box; these were counted by the District Officer and Teng won by a single vote, twenty-one to twenty. Despite the number of candidates the majority of adults in the village, which even then must have consisted of at least one hundred and fifty households, did not bother to vote. The three men with most votes had all experienced life outside the village and had done army service at one time or another. Teng had been a policeman before joining the army in 1941 during the war with the French in Cambodia. He then returned to serve in the police for several years and was stationed in Phitsanulok during the Japanese occupation. It is also important to note that in addition to being prosperous by village standards he is related to a great number of people both in Hua Kok and in Wang Phom where an elder brother lives, as does a sister who was the senior wife of the former headman. Nonetheless, neither of his two wives voted for him because they did not want to be troubled with the extra work entailed.

lang (house 26) was also a candidate although he professed that he had no wish to win. However, in villagers' eyes he was wealthy with a reputation for honesty and for being a devout Buddhist, the two latter characteristics being generally cited as criteria for being a good headman. Even so he received only a couple of votes, the suggested reasons being that he was not accustomed to officials (*mai khāi khun chao nāi*), that he was shy and afraid of them, and that he could hardly communicate because he spoke only village Thai and not with the *lin ān*, soft tongue, of polite speech: all of which suggested that he would not have stood up to them in favour of the villagers.

Ruang, who lives in Wang Ya Nang, was the only candidate who publicly admitted his wish to become headman. He reportedly attempted to obtain support by buying drinks for people and even promising to give ten baht per vote cast in his favour. Though he did get a number of votes many villagers were said to have feared that he wanted the position because of the opportunities it affords to make money. Finally, it was mentioned that the former headman stood again but received few votes.

The emphasis on the value of experience outside the village is especially interesting for several reasons. Villagers in their self-characterisation as speaking *lin khaeng*, with a hard tongue, demonstrate that they are very aware of the gulf separating them from the official world. This is manifest in both a fairly mild dislike of the way in which officials behave and a sense of inferiority when dealing with them. Specifically, one who cannot speak well is seen as being at a disadvantage. The usual school education of villagers is not enough to overcome this though school children are taught the correct forms of polite speech. [3] It is experience outside the village which brings one into regular contact with officialdom and urban society that results in this linguistic facility. The headman who won the award (a revolver) for being the best headman in the province in 1966 was very unusual in having been to an engineering school in Bangkok; the usual means of achieving this wider experience is by service in the police or army. Understandably, officials in conversation about the disproportionate number of village and *tambon* headmen who had been in one of the two services expressed some doubt about the benefits of having ex-policemen in these positions. They suggested that such individuals would know too much and were likely to be crooked whereas that was not so with those having army experience.

Headman roles

There are readily observable contradictions in the expectations held by the administration and villagers about what a headman can or should do. Both tend to be unrealistic in their conceptualisation of the headman's role. A simplification of this would be to say that villagers look for someone they think able to cope with officials and represent village interests. On the other hand, district officials look for an honest agent to perform certain clerical tasks as well as for one who will be an effective channel for the dissemination of information and instructions, and consequently lead his village along the prescribed path of development.

The administrative view of the headman, which was frequently expressed in conversations with officials, is particularly manifest at the monthly meeting of village and *tambon* headmen at the district headquarters

in Wang Thong. This gathering is held in an open sided pavilion (*sālā*) at the side of the main offices; village and *tambon* headmen sit at desks facing the Chairman - the *nāi amphōe* - with the *kannan* tending to occupy the front row. The District Officer, who had been in Wang Thong for about sixteen years before being (temporarily as it happened) posted elsewhere, treated them in a way which seemed analogous to the relationship of an old-fashioned, rather paternalistic, school-master with his favourite class. Business was managed with good humour and answers were courteously given to questions which were proportionately more frequently asked by the *tambon* headmen. However, the flow of information was nearly all downwards, from full-time to part-time officials. Indeed, many of the older village headmen sat passively looking either as if they were bored or found it all somewhat incomprehensible.

The downward flow of information is also facilitated by distributing to the headmen envelopes containing such things as bulletins on government affairs and development together with anti-communist propaganda posters to be displayed in the villages. The effectiveness of information distributed in this way is minimal in Village No.7. Some of the posters are put up but government literature other than on the prices of agricultural commodities is rarely looked at by visitors to the headman's house.

The headman is also supposed to hold village meetings after the monthly visit to the district headquarters in order to pass on the information given by officials but few headmen do so. The only observed occasions when Teng beat the bamboo gong, the *kalā*, [4] to summon meetings were in connection with improvements to the route to Wang Phom and a theft of oxen. On the first occasion, after summoning villagers with a slowly repeated single beat about fifteen people appeared, including women and children. Business began informally with the headman announcing that work would commence the day after next and that the rate of pay would be three baht per cubic metre (*lā*) of earth moved. Discussion centred on the fact that there were no baskets (*pung kī*) available for shifting the earth and one of those present offered to make them. The meeting lasted for about half an hour, some then left immediately but the others remained to chat for a while.

When the theft of oxen was reported and a meeting summoned, only about ten people came because it was midday and many were busy. Although the sound of the *kalā* can be heard in at least the northern part of Wang Phom on no occasion did anyone from that settlement come. Whenever it is necessary to publicise some matter Teng usually makes an announcement at the end of the *wan phra*, holy day, service at Wang Phom temple or visits friends and kin in Wang Phom to tell them. He makes

practically no use of the two men he appointed to be assistant headmen, one in Wang Phom, the other in Hua Kok (Sa, house 4).

In addition to his roles as village representative and as a channel of communication for the dissemination of government information and directives, the headman acts as an agent of government in a variety of tasks. These include informing people when their land taxes are due and collecting the money from all except the few who prefer to go directly to the district office. He also gathers various sets of statistics on agricultural matters but their value as accurate indices of farm size and yields, for example, is, to say the least, highly suspect. In 1966-67 a villager from Wang Phom who informally helps the headman because he writes well, collected data on the area of paddy being farmed. A couple of months later the headman personally visited households he knew cultivated rice, collecting agricultural information which included data on the area farmed and yields. There were considerable differences in the names on the two lists and figures for the area of paddy cultivated varied by up to one third. Another duty concerned with farming is the issue of certificates of ownership for draft animals. When an animal is born the owner should inform the headman. Then, at the age of six years for elephants and four for buffaloes and cattle they are registered at the district headquarters. Registration for each species is arranged for a specific day when owners go with their village headman to the district office. Each owner is issued with a certificate bearing a drawing of the animal upon which individual identifying marks are entered.

Finally, one must note the duty of the headman to listen to disputes and, where possible, arrange settlements. However, he performs this role more as a villager than as an agent of government. He has no authority to impose verdicts, the only sanction at his command is that if the affair is not settled within the village he can send the disputants to the police at the district headquarters.

Headman and village

The relationship between villagers and the headman transcends the obvious characteristics of specific personalities and reflects a number of more general, organisationally very important, features of rural social structure. Village No.7 consists of three separate areas of settlement, each with its own name and social identity. The absence of economic, religious or other social factors which may have led to its consolidation as the primary communal unit for its members must be emphasised. It is not surprising, therefore, that with this particular social configuration the headman does not play the role of active leader. He is head of a fragmented unit which exists solely as an act

of external administrators.

Consequently, the closest to communal action that villagers approach takes place in relation to certain religious activities in Wang Phom or at the behest of government instructions. The main work of digging the new track to Wang Phom was paid for by the district authorities: nominally all households were responsible for providing labour but in practice it was done by those wishing to make money and the headman's supervisory role was minimal. He marked out the 10 *lā* sections theoretically assigned to each household but then those (mainly young people) wishing to earn the 3 baht per *lā* took over the actual digging which was arranged to suit the convenience of those doing it. Later, he played a more active part in arranging for a work group (*khā rāeng*) to construct a simple bridge out of the trunks of four sugar-palm trees across a dike just behind the temple in Wang Phom. Nevertheless, any of the men who turned up to help could, and did, shout orders or make exhortations to the others; Teng's voice was just one among many. [5]

Discussion of the headman's position has so far been limited to the way the formal aspects of the job as defined by the government are actually performed, villagers' expectations and his potential effectiveness in representing their interests. That the contradictions in the village and official conceptualisations of headmanship are not more apparent and do not appear to be of great consequence is in part due to two factors. Firstly, the village itself is not a cohesive unit which thereby limits the effectiveness of any expression of village expectations. Secondly, the degree of separation between rural and administrative spheres of action reduces the likelihood of locally perceived contradictions and conflict.

It is in respect to a lack of cohesion that Village No.7 differs most markedly from Ban Ping whose headman is subject to the pressures that can be exerted by a well-integrated, self-conscious community. In Hua Kok the absence of village foci for the articulation of local demands on the headman leaves him with greater freedom of action than his counterpart in Ban Ping. On the other hand his ability to act effectively is limited because the headman of Village No.7 is neither the leader of a coherent group nor its representative. One result of this weakness in village organisation is that there are aspects of the headman's role that are poorly understood or supervised which leave him with considerable scope for personal interpretation to his own advantage. There are certainly occasions when his actions do not concur with villagers' perceptions of headmanship. Nevertheless, one must recognise the headman's membership of the farming community and the precedence this takes on certain important occasions over his formal obligations

to officialdom.

Teng and his wives sometimes complain of the social and economic disadvantages of his being village headman. He is *chao nathi*, the one exercising authority in the village: he therefore has to receive and feed visitors and failure to do so would spoil his name (*sia chū phū yai*). Villagers are also the *lūk bān*, children of the house or settlement of the headman and so can claim his help. Consequently, in addition to time spent on his duties he is obliged to provide food for any visiting officials, something which normally involves the slaughter of at least one of the household's chickens and a trip to the market to buy vegetables and other ingredients for a curry. Villagers short of food may also be allowed to pick some vegetables grown on the houseplot or perhaps borrow a little rice. Inevitably the headman is expected by the District Officer and villagers to contribute freely to various charitable appeals and merit-making ceremonies.

From the headman's point of view the official payment of a monthly stipend of one hundred baht is scant compensation. On the other hand, there are certain advantages such as the prestige attached to the post and the services that can be claimed from the village in return for his work as headman. There are, in addition, various small gifts, services and occasionally substantial payments from individual villagers given in recognition of his help or in an attempt to influence his actions. The latter are generally kept secret as are the odd sums which might be received as 'hush money' or in return for taking business to a lawyer when villagers are involved in court actions (cf. Ch. 7: Marketing). Teng claimed that it was the headman's duty to help villagers even at the risk of ignoring or acting contrary to his formal obligations. However, in the most striking cases in which he had not co-operated with the authorities in informing against supposed offenders, the ones so protected also happened to be related to him either directly or through marriage. Consequently the situation is difficult to evaluate, all the more so as one is dealing with little more than hearsay instead of hard evidence about certain events and those involved.

The following case as recounted by the headman and his wives reveals something of the way in which roles are perceived. Two young men (*num*) from Wang Khut and Wang Phom stole a buffalo near Wang Thong and took it to Wang Phom where they slaughtered it. They entered into an arrangement with four others to sell the meat (*tok fut kan*), one of the participants in the deal being a son-in-law of an elder sister of the headman. Teng heard of the case when a Wang Phom man who had lost his own buffalo found the rotting head and reported to the headman who went to inspect it. The owner of the Wang Thong animal heard of this about a week later and

came to Teng requesting him to *ao ri'ang*, handle the case. Teng refused because the head was rotten and the skin missing so that there was no real evidence and thus no case for him to take up. In fact Teng knew about the affair and had been offered some of the salted meat, but he *chūai lūk bān*, helped his villagers, and so saved both the thieves and those who bought shares in the carcass from imprisonment. Although kin and affines were involved what was emphasised was that those protected were *lūk bān*. It was also said that if the headman had taken the case and it had gone to court Teng would have lost face (*sia nā phū yai*).

Even though there is a difficulty in evaluating the headman's role in this and similar disputes, the value of the protection that the headman is thought capable of providing may well explain the actions of two men who frequently present small gifts to the headman's household or perform personal services. *Wi*, the Chinese, (house 49) often sends fruit or vegetables, reputedly because he is afraid of officials on account of being an alien. *Plang* (house 34) who is a recent immigrant to *Hua Kok* also occasionally brings gifts or performs services like collecting goods from *Wang Thong* for the shop. Another way in which he has attempted to consolidate his position is by the adoption of kin terms in addressing the headman though his claims to be related are doubted by the latter (cf. Ch. 3: n. 13).

Disputes

The causes of disputes brought before the headman during fieldwork ranged from malicious gossip to marital quarrels and theft. Teng never takes the initiative but waits until the matter is brought to his attention by one of the parties involved. He then normally acts upon the request and calls the other disputants to a hearing. Sometimes, however, all he is requested to do is to note the complaint in case the plaintiff finds it necessary to take action at some later stage. Occasionally the affair is such that he attempts to dissuade a would-be plaintiff from pursuing the matter.

This atmosphere of the hearings is never formal: the usual procedure is for the disputants, often accompanied by friends and kin, to discuss the matter while Teng sits casually, seemingly not paying much attention. His only interventions at this stage are to ask the occasional question or make some critical comment or even a joke. Once discussion has progressed to the point where compensation or damages are demanded his role changes to either prompting acceptance or trying to modify the plaintiff's initial claims in order to achieve a compromise settlement. If the matter is successfully concluded he should then write a brief report of the affair and the decision reached which is signed by both parties. In practice this is sometimes

overlooked and no record kept.

Should there be no sign that agreement is about to be reached any further discussion is terminated and the headman writes to the *kamnan* requesting that he deal with the matter. Sometimes, if agreement appears impossible, he by-passes the *kamnan* and refers the disputants directly to the police in Wang Thong. Should the matter not be settled there an indictment is prepared and a court hearing arranged. However, when disputes involve members of the same village people are generally reluctant to see the disagreement persist to the point where the headman decides that conciliation is unlikely. If the dispute does reach the third stage of the judicial process a failure to reach a settlement may result in formal prosecution and imprisonment. Interestingly, there were no cases observed where it was obviously the intention of the plaintiff to see the defendant imprisoned though threats to do so were sometimes uttered.

Most actions are brought to the headman as a means of obtaining compensation for some financial loss or damages for an insult or slander. The possible consequences of taking a dispute beyond this stage in the judicial process, the attendant publicity, involvement with police officials and formal sanctions, are sometimes effective in enforcing local settlements in situations in which conciliation would not otherwise occur. For example, the senior wife of a man from Wang Phom struck her co-wife on the head and then refused to make any compensatory payment. Teng consequently decided that they had best go to Wang Thong whereupon the husband of the two women intervened. Rather than have the quarrel taken beyond the confines of the village he agreed on behalf of the senior wife to pay the sum demanded by the junior who wished to spend it on a *tham khwan* rite. [6]

Hearings at the headman's house are held on the back porch. Discussion is public; anyone who wishes may come along to listen and perhaps join in. Often a high proportion of this audience consists of children and the experience is probably significant in their education in Thai values and law. The forcefulness with which people express themselves on these occasions is a salutary warning against too ready an acceptance of the popular view that the Thai always try to avoid the overt expression of conflict. [7] When a dispute occurs there may be some initial shouting or cursing but then the affair is quickly brought to the attention of the headman. Before him, heated, face to face arguments can and do occur. Apart from the shouting and occasional weeping, the use of the rudest pronominal forms (*mung*, you and *kũ*, I) attest to the utter informality of these confrontations which, to onlookers at least, have a certain entertainment value. As indicated earlier, throughout this phase of the proceedings the headman plays no active part other than

perhaps attempting to cool the situation by joking and appearing calm and uninterested. On one occasion, for example, he sat with his back to the woman who had brought the case. Indeed, he gave the impression of being far more interested in a water buffalo grazing in an adjoining field than in her angry accusations.

The following cases give some impression of the range of disputes and the way these matters are handled. Some of the hearings lasted less than half an hour while others necessitated several meetings over a period of days. Sometimes there was clearly an issue to be resolved whereas on other occasions the particular incidents being discussed were symptomatic of a broader, long-term state of dissension.

Case 1

Peb's dog killed three geese belonging to her brother Ruang in Wang Ya Nang. Although they lived in adjacent houses brother and sister did not normally speak to one another. When Ruang complained to his sister about the incident she reportedly pointed out that as it was the dog who was responsible Ruang had better seek compensation from that animal. Ruang then brought the bodies of the geese to the headman who arranged for a meeting. At the hearing which was attended by Ruang's brother-in-law, a settlement was quickly reached. Ruang, who had paid thirty baht for the birds requested twenty baht per goose, which the brother-in-law promptly paid, the headman's junior wife acting as a witness.

Case 2

One afternoon a woman from Wang Phom named Suai came with her young daughter to the headman's house to tell him that Phum had taken the gold charm worn by her daughter. Teng immediately wrote a note summoning Phum that evening which Suai agreed to deliver. At about five o'clock Phum, Suai and a number of others arrived. Since Teng was still out the two women battled it out between themselves for about an hour. They sat looking very angry and using the vulgar pronouns *mung* and *kū* when addressing each other. Eventually Teng returned and sat between the disputants looking out at the fields behind the house. At this point the behaviour of the two women changed a little. Although still showing their anger they spoke less loudly and the language employed was less rude.

As the discussion progressed Phum tried to get a young child she had brought with her to say that Suai had scolded her for taking the trinket. The child quietly confirmed this but then refused to repeat herself to Teng. Suai denied the accusation claiming that her child went to Phum's house and that

the trinket had disappeared. After this the young witness refused to say anything in reply to Teng's questions who, as he was feeling hungry, told everyone to come back the following morning.

The next day Suai, her daughter and a number of others arrived at about a quarter past nine, Phum was late. At about ten o'clock Teng decided he would eat and invited all there to join him but they refused having eaten earlier. When Phum arrived at about half past ten she was immediately asked by Teng what she had to say after having had a night to think about it. Her response was to deny taking the trinket and to say that the children had been playing around. In the ensuing discussion Suai asked her daughter who took the gold and the child immediately replied "Phum". Phum's mother-in-law [8] who had accompanied Suai then joined in saying that when asked earlier the child had also cited Phum.

Suddenly, probably because she could see that opinion was against her, Phum began to cry though other than showing very slight signs of embarrassment no-one took any notice. The debate then wandered off the subject with the mother-in-law talking about Phum's adultery with a man in Nai Dong. Phum started crying again exclaiming that she had not stolen the gold and wishing she would die. Meanwhile conversation continued with people saying that Phum had been seen going to her house (when Suai's child was there) and commenting to the effect that Phum should pay rather than go to the police and be put in prison.

At this point Teng joined in with the others in saying they believed the child more than they did Phum at which Phum became histrionic, rocking her body, moaning, shaking her head up and down and protesting her innocence. Her mother who had come with her sat stoically through this performance. Eventually Phum again repeated her innocence but said she would give Suai the price of the gold. Suai said the trinket weighed about 2 salyng and a general discussion followed on the cost of gold, the current price being agreed to be 120 baht per salyng. Suai eventually agreed that she would take 100 baht and the hearing ended with Phum continuing to cry. The headman's wife then turned to Phum and told her that she did not have to cry and waste her tears. Soon after this the headman wandered off on some other business and the two women began shouting again only to be told by the others that the affair was closed. Phum returned that evening and gave the hundred baht which she had borrowed from her elder brother to the headman's wife for her to pass it on to Suai.

Case 3

Chek, a man living in Wang Phom discovered that Loi had cut down one of his trees with the intention of making charcoal. Loi claimed that he thought Chek would not mind but the latter came to see Teng who called a hearing two days later. Chek came alone and Loi brought his father-in-law. Chek requested half of the charcoal that Loi intended to make, saying that he wished to give it to the temple, hence his request for only half. The hearing was peaceful, hardly a quarrel, but it was evident that the two men had not tried to discuss the matter beforehand; they had waited for the hearing in the headman's presence.

Case 4

One morning an elderly man, Yim, came calling for Teng. He was visibly upset and agitated but after an initial refusal was persuaded by Teng and his wife to eat with them. He was the father of Mian, an alcoholic who in one of his bouts of drunkenness had struck out at his wife and father. A little earlier it seems he had even tried to cut his father's throat. The present bout of quarrelling and fighting had broken out because money from the sale of a rai of land had all been spent on liquor and Mian wanted his mother to sell another plot. Although the old man requested that Teng intervene he refused and advised Yim to go to the police station in Wang Thong. As he explained later, Teng suggested this line of action because he thought that if he went to scold (*wā*) Mian as Yim wanted, Mian would not really believe him and there would be more trouble in the future. Teng accordingly offered to accompany Yim to Wang Thong but the latter refused and returned home.

The next morning Yim returned, crying. At the time Teng was squatting outside the house and what was striking about his response to Yim and the onlookers was the way he continued to sit and not look at Yim while the latter explained what had happened and begged him to go and see Mian. This he again refused to do even though Yim's elbow was bleeding from a knife wound. Instead, he repeated his suggestion of a visit to the police station. Yim eventually agreed but then changed his mind while Teng was getting ready. He finally went home saying that he would wait until his son had attacked him three times before going to the police.

The initial reason given by Teng for refusing to go to Mian's house was that he was lazy. However, he later expanded this commonly cited reason for inaction by saying that if he had gone as requested it would have provoked more trouble. Had he brought Mian to a hearing then the father might have felt badly about it when he went home or, after having Teng make an arrest, Yim might refuse to let him take Mian to the police station so that there

would be a lot of trouble to no avail.

As it happened the problems persisted the next day but then quietened down. Mian threw a radio out of the house and his mother came to find Teng who had gone to Wang Thong. She said she would go and find him there but actually went home. Another two rai of land were sold and members of the family temporarily leaving the village to earn money took the household's draft animals lest Mian attempt to sell them in order to buy more liquor.

Case 5

When plans were made for the new road to Wang Phom, Teng designated the line it was to follow, that of an older footpath. Over one section this meant that four people would lose land due to the widening of the path and digging of a ditch where soil would be removed to raise its level. Iang, the richest man in Hua Kok, was designated to lose a little more than the others and so opposed the plans telling Teng that he would give none of his land. Teng then attempted to change the line so that it avoided Iang's property and went entirely over that of the other three. They in turn reacted strongly and so went with Teng to the Deputy District Officer who was in charge of the project to ask him for a decision. He inspected the site and then ordered the line to be drawn so that all four would lose some land for the road.

Case 6

Paen, the daughter of Roen (house 22) and a friend from Phitsanulok were caught by Kho (house 4) after having cut down a banana plant. The two girls had done this to obtain feed for Paen's four pigs. Kho brought the plant to Teng's house and then returned that evening to tell Teng personally about the theft and the girls having sworn (*tā*) at her. Teng then arranged for a hearing at 7.30 the next morning.

Everyone arrived on time. Paen who was about fifteen years old, her friend, her mother Roen and her mother's co-wife came together. Kho brought Nian, a son-in-law who had seen the two thieves when he was ploughing his fields. For once Teng sat at a table on the covered platform of his house. Paen's friend did most of the talking, admitting their guilt and confessing that they had not expected to meet Kho. Paen remained quiet. Kho then asked for fifty baht but this was countered by Roen offering twenty. This was refused and Roen wandered off leaving the others. Teng then wrote a note for Kho to take to the *kamnan*. When the case came before him he apparently threatened Roen by pointing out that if she did not pay the affair would go to the police and then to the provincial court and that the daughter would be imprisoned for three months. Faced with this Roen

capitulated and was given seven days to hand the money over to Teng.

Villagers and Officials

The history of local government since the reforms of Prince Damrong in 1892 is of the progressive attempt to impose and develop control over rural areas. Jacobs has interpreted this as a conservative process, the implementation of policies reflecting traditional patterns (Jacobs 1971: 71-2). There are a number of indications that in at least certain respects this is so. Prince Damrong's reformulation of the aims of local government notwithstanding (cf. Ch.2: Changes in Government and Administration), rural-official relationships continue to be marked by officials' paternalistic attitudes and traditional notions of social hierarchy on both sides.

Certainly a great social distance separates officials in the district headquarters from the villagers for whose control and development they are responsible. Officials are often reluctant to go out into the countryside, a characteristic which may be urban rather than specifically official [9] but which nonetheless affects relations with villagers. No regular tours of inspection by the District Officer or any other official took place in the settlements along the Wang Tong river. The only times that the District Officer and Rice Officer (*krommakān khāo*) visited Village No.7 were in helping me with arrangements prior to the commencement of fieldwork. The Deputy District Officer did come to the headman's house on a couple of occasions when the proposed line of the track to Wang Phom was challenged (cf. above, Case 5) and later to make payments to those who had shifted earth to raise the level of the track. Otherwise no official from the district headquarters appeared in the village throughout the period of fieldwork.

The lack of formal contact and the infrequency of informal exchanges between officials and villagers is a reflection of the inward-looking nature of the Thai administrative bureaucracy. In so far as the bureaucracy forms the polity of Thai society, officials are subject to little pressure from those they administer to respond to rural demands. Conversation with local officials tended to confirm the impression that they see themselves as playing a tutorial role in directing ignorant country folk towards a better future.

Villagers' perceptions of their relations with officials are understandably different. Officials are frequently referred to as *chao nāi*, a word Haas translates colloquially as 'boss' but which in Hua Kok at least carried with it additional critical connotations of lording it over one's inferiors. [10] Villagers expect officials to be arrogant and to assert their superiority and villagers' traditional perceptions of their own inferiority continued to be maintained. One woman used the term *sakdi nā tam*, low rank, in referring to

ordinary people and their relations with the district officials. Furthermore, officials also appear somewhat unreliable to villagers. For example, a land survey team was brought out to measure paddy fields about to be divided but its head then refused to do the survey because recent rains had flooded the fields. The man working for the Bangkok Bank credit scheme did not appear on an appointed day and told a messenger dispatched by the headman that he was too busy and would come a fortnight later. He did, but he was a couple of hours later than he had said and everyone else had arrived fairly promptly. The latter case is interesting in that although this man was not a civil servant he was treated and seemingly viewed as if he was. This happened even though he did not define himself that way and consciously attempted to break down the usual barriers of social distance between himself and villagers.

Relations with officials are not as problematic as might be inferred from the above but that this is so is at least partly because of the lack of contact. Villagers do not have much to do with officials and have few expectations. A result of the increasing emphasis being placed on development may therefore be to raise people's expectations of the local administration without ensuring that these will not inevitably be disappointed.

For several years a large diesel water pump was sent from Bangkok to Wang Thong in September where it was used to pump water from the river into the fields on the west bank of the river. Normally it was located for about ten days each in Wang Thong, Bang Saphan, Wang Khut and Hua Kok. In 1967 when the autumn rains failed it did not appear because, according to villagers, the local official responsible for the arrangements had not requested it as he should have done. Similarly, fertilisers were marketed through the farmers' co-operative but then supplies proved inadequate.

Such experiences, while reflecting the government's increasing concern with the countryside, do nothing to improve relationships with it. So far the increase in contact with officialdom has brought benefits even though such contacts are sometimes an inconvenient nuisance. The bank representative, for example, had to be fed and kept people waiting, but brought the opportunity of obtaining cheap credit. The road to Wang Phom was finally constructed albeit not to the standard it should have been; eventually fields will be surveyed and registration completed. The present situation, however, could easily deteriorate as the traditional separation disappears and villagers come to depend more on the services performed by the administration.

As for the headman, as indicated earlier, he occupies a position in between the village and administrative spheres. The extent to which he is able to control and possibly stimulate change is dependent on the form of the

social unit constituting the village and on his ability to achieve a certain independence in his dealings with officials. In other words, his effectiveness as a headman is dependent on the extent to which he is able to represent his villagers to officials on the one hand and protect them from official interference on the other. However, to officials a good headman is the agent of government. Should the pattern of administrative development continue to be towards increasing the control exercised by government over headmen, as indicated by prizes and training courses, then the basis of the headman's position in his community will be progressively weakened.

The overall impression conveyed in this chapter with respect to village political activity is one of general passivity. Such a state of affairs, which was taken as the norm in the earlier work on village involvement, or rather lack of involvement, in politics has recently been questioned in two ways. Firstly Morell (1972) and Neher (1970) have shown for the northeast and north respectively, that villagers can and do co-operate with one another in order to exert pressure on district administrators or to exploit the possible advantages offered by various development schemes. Secondly, Van Roy has asserted the significance of informal patron-client networks in which peasant clients may receive economic, social and political benefits in various combinations (1970: 23). This would, it seems, indicate the existence of channels for the expression of aspirations despite their absence within the formal administrative structures.

At the time of fieldwork, the country was still under military rule and the constitution sanctioning the 1969 elections had not been promulgated. Consequently there was no formal political activity taking place in the area. The accompanying lack of informal action reflected both the organisation of the village, the lack of resources controlled by the elected village and *tambon* headmen, and the lack of any major development project offering opportunities to the ambitious. Neher has drawn a very interesting picture of the response of a minority of villagers in the area he studied but it would be a mistake to generalise on the basis of his data. Firstly, there were real and perceived opportunities to be exploited which, in the main, arose from specific attempts by the government to develop new institutionalised patterns of government-rural interaction as well as to increase the funds available for economic development. Secondly, northern, and for that matter northeastern villages tend to differ in their communal social organisation from villages in the central region in ways which may leave villages in the latter area potentially less able to respond to opportunities for political change and economic development should they occur. As for patron-client relations, while these may exist and be significant in at least certain parts of the northern region there is no evidence of their political importance in Hua

Kok and its neighbouring settlements.

It would thus appear that Village No.7 retains many of the so-called traditional features of Thai rural politico-administrative organisation. Such an assumption that this is really so is, however, misleading. Villages such as Village No.7 and the settlements comprising Bangchan and Bangkhuaed near Bangkok are not traditional in a very important sense. The three were all founded during a period of major social and economic change in the region in which these changes have been greatest. They are part of the response to the development of cash agriculture as a result of the Bowring treaty of 1855 and the transformation of the administrative system in the 'rice bowl' of the country, which is also the area in which government control has always been strongest. Just what the political order of the central Thai peasants was like in 1850 we shall never know for sure. However, it seems likely that the often noted amorphousness, lack of internal cohesion, absence of well-defined external boundaries and so forth, all of which affect relations with the present administration, are in part at least the result of these changes and the force of their impact in central Thailand.

Notes

1. The more recent interest in local government, perhaps ironically, may be interpreted as a further extension of this process of growing centralisation, in that it extends the orbit of political activity to areas remote from the center without in any way diminishing the center's initiative or control over that activity (Jacobs 1971: 71).
2. It must be emphasised that the above two paragraphs refer to the situation in 1966-8. In 1975 the *saphā tambon* system had been extended to Wang Thong and the new *kamnan* had been popularly elected, all adult villagers being eligible to vote.
3. Men in their thirties have sometimes completely lost the ability to write anything other than sign their name. Women seem less generally able, either because in the past they were not always sent to school or since leaving have not experienced the need to use the skill.
4. *Kalā* is the local name for the *krā*, which is a hollow segment of bamboo with a diameter of about five inches. This has cut into it a long slot about one inch wide across which it is struck with a stick.
5. Teng beat the *kalā* for a meeting to which five people came. He was not concerned though because he told many others about the project as he went to bathe in the evening. People were asked to help (*khā rāeng*) and Teng pointed out that the bridge would make it easier to go to the

temple in Wang Phom to *sai bāt* (cf. Chapter 9). Four days later twenty-one adults (twenty men, one woman) plus some children, went to the dike to help in hauling the logs across and shift earth. Both deputy headmen turned up but neither they nor Teng played any prominent role in the operation which was conducted with much shouting and laughter. Six people, including Teng's assistant headman came from Hua Kok, and the rest were from Wang Phom and Wang Ya Nang.

6. The *khwan* (cf. Rajadhon 1962) can easily become disassociated from the body as a result, for example, of being struck on the head. The *tham khwan* rite is designed to ensure the wellbeing of the person by ensuring the *khwan* does not flee.

7. For example, cf. Phillips (1965) on villagers' tendency to avoid dealing directly with people who annoy them (p.193) and on the high value of concealing one's feelings (p.170).

8. This was her second husband's mother. The couple were said to be still married though the husband was away at the time.

9. I was frequently asked by people in Phitsanulok whether I was afraid when travelling in the countryside.

10. The literal translation of *chao nāi* is 'royalty'.