

# THE RELIGION AND BELIEFS OF THE BLACK TAI, AND A NOTE ON THE STUDY OF CULTURAL ORIGINS

by

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The Black Tai are a central upland Tai group residing in Sip Song Chao Thai (literally the "Twelve Tai" Cantons) in northwestern Viet Nam. They are found living in large numbers in territory lying between the Black River and the Red River. The nomenclature "Black Tai" ("*Thai Dam*") stems from the distinctive color of their dress, different from that of neighboring Tai groups who include the characteristically white-clad White Tai, and the Red Tai, who embellish the edges of their otherwise black blouses with red.

The Sip Song Chao Thai are known to be an old home of Black Tai and kindred groups prior even to the expansion of Vietnamese power southeast of Annam. The Tai peoples on the western side of Annam possess a long history of self-government up to the ascendancy of western Tai groups. Between the fourteenth and fifteenth century A.D. the Black Tai came under the protection of Luang Prabang.<sup>1</sup> Local government during that time, however, continued to function independently. Beginning with the Thon Buri and continuing through the Bangkok period, Siam gained power over the Kingdom of Lan Chang<sup>2</sup> and with it the Sip Song Chao Thai. In as much as Siam did not intervene in local government, the Black Tai remained under the mild suzerainty of Luang Prabang.<sup>3</sup>

The Sip Song Chao Thai were adjacent to Annam and, when Vietnamese territorial ambitions spread to include them, its inhabitants were obliged to send tribute to Viet Nam in order to maintain amicable relations. Luang Prabang was no exception to this. When Viet Nam fell to France, the Twelve Tai Cantons were included as a part of the Vietnamese colony. The French rationalization for this was that the Cantons had originally sent tribute to Viet Nam, hence France reckoned them as dependencies. This maneuver cost Siam the Twelve Tai Cantons and all six of the adjacent Hua Phan Districts in 1888.<sup>4</sup>

The Sip Song Chao Thai were composed of twelve *muang* or loosely federated states. Each *muang* comprised a principality ruled by the *tao*, or Black Tai nobility. In the traditional political system the *chao muang* (chief of the *muang*) held hereditary title to the land, with ownership passing from father to eldest son. Similarly the *chao muang* position itself was hereditary. In the event the eldest son was judged unworthy, another was chosen to ensure the continuation of the line. The Lo and Cam families furnished most *chao muang*. Although the French, following annexation of the Cantons, altered the land tenure system by granting title to individual

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1. Prince Damrong, *Chronicle Collection: Parts 7-11*, National Library Edition, vol. 4 (Bangkok: Progress Publication, 1964), p. 7.

2. D.G.E. Hall, *A History of South-east Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 3rd ed., p. 462.

3. Prince Damrong, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

4. D.G.E. Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 686.

cultivators, they left intact the hereditary monopoly of the Lo and Cam families over the position of *chao muang*.<sup>5</sup> Unchecked in their internal authority, the autonomous *chao muang* served as barriers to the formation of any more coherent organization for collective action in the Tai highlands of northwestern Viet Nam. On the other hand, they also constituted obstacles to the external domination of the Tai country.<sup>6</sup> Today the *chao muang* persist in their traditional religious roles and continue to govern their *muang* according to Black Tai customs. The daily way of life of the people has consequently changed very little.

Until the Viet Minh drove the French out of northern Viet Nam, following the battle of Dien Bien Phu (1953), the Twelve Tai Cantons were under French colonial rule. The agreement dividing Viet Nam in two at the seventeenth parallel placed the Twelve Tai Cantons, as a part of the North, under Viet Minh jurisdiction. Because some Tai groups helped the Viet Minh against the French, the Viet Minh promised the Tai a measure of home rule. Other Tai groups, however, having sided with the French, had to evacuate and find refuge in South Viet Nam and Laos, which remained under French rule for some time after.

This writer received an invitation to join the Ethnic Minority Research Project of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labor, Laos, in 1973. He took this opportunity to conduct a preliminary study of the Black Tai displaced by the current Indochinese war in Laos. Most of the Black Tai in Laos were at that time settled in hamlets around Vientiane; the remainder were scattered throughout different districts of Laos. Data concerning religion and beliefs of the Black Tai were taken from interviews with Black Tai religious practitioners (*mod* and *mo*) and many other knowledgeable refugees in Laos, as well as from local manuscripts and reports from other researchers.

### Belief in spirits

Religious beliefs of Black Tai are mainly centered on *phi* (spirits), *khwan* (life essences) and cosmology. Man is felt to be under the power of many spirits, both malevolent and beneficent. They are ranked in order of importance as follows.

(a) *Spirits of the Sky* (*taen* or *phi fa*) are gods or angels who live in heaven (the sky). In their omnipotence the *taen* control events both good and bad that befall all creatures living on earth. Man must conform his behavior to the wishes of the *taen* in order to be deserving of his mercy and to enjoy a happy life; to displease the *taen* is to invite misfortune. Tai life is thus totally circumscribed by the wishes of *taen*. A partial listing of the *taen* pantheon includes the following individuals, each with his individual duties and power.

*Taen Luang* is chief *taen* and overseer to all other *taen*. As supreme judge in controversies affecting the *taen*, he sees that justice is done all around.

5. Frank M. Lebar *et al.*, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1964), p. 222.

6. John T. McAlister, "Mountain minorities and the Viet Minh: a key to the Indochina war", in Peter Kunstadter, ed., *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), vol. 2, p. 781.

7. William J. Gedney, "White, Black and Red Tai", *The Social Science Review*, Special Number, 1-24, 1964.

*Taen Pua Ka La Vi* is responsible for men's prosperity or lack thereof. He regulates the sky, weather and seasonal rainfall.

*Taen Chad* is responsible for sending men to be born on earth, and for determining their fate.

*Taen Naen* is responsible for giving the *khwan* and controlling the lifespan of men.

*Taen Boon* is responsible for giving wealth and prosperity to men.

*Taen Kor* is responsible for health, particularly children's health.

*Taen Sing* are the patron of the Black Tai lineage and ensure good fortune for every member.

*Taen Sad* is responsible for regulating men's conduct: catching wrongdoers, meting out punishment, and protecting good men from evil.

*Taen Hung Khao* is responsible for light, and making people beautiful.

(b) *Spirits of the Village and Muang (phi ban and phi muang)*. Every village and *muang* has some kind of spirit(s) which protects the village or the *muang* and ensures peace and prosperity. The *phi ban* or spirit of the village has a small house in which to live. Usually the *phi muang* is a royal spirit (*phi chao*) which might dwell in the forest, a hill or a tree. Some *muang* keep a shrine for them to live in the area of the *lak muang* ("city pillar"), which is regarded as a taboo area. This area is only used for the religious rite called Sen Muang. A feast must be given to both *phi ban* and *phi muang* every year. If there is a disaster or inauspicious event then another feast must be offered.

(c) *Ancestor Spirits*. When a parent or the male heir dies, a part of his *khwan* and *phi* is invited to live in the house of the eldest surviving son. A special altar called *hong hong* is constructed. The Ancestor Spirit receives a feast and ceremony at least once every year, although well-to-do families might have more frequent commemorations. If members of the family do not conduct a ceremony and a feast for the spirit, it is believed that the spirit causes bad health to afflict the family. These ceremonies and feasts, if performed often, bring good fortune to the family.

(d) *Spirit of the Forest, Spirit of the Soil, and Others*. Spirits also dwell in the forest, soil, hills, rivers and the other natural elements. If one of them is displeased it brings misfortune. When there is a sudden sickness in the family, a member of the family must invite a *mod* or sorcerer to come over and determine what kind of spirit brought sickness to the family. The spirit then receives the feast or offering that the *mod* thinks is proper to alleviate the misfortune.

### **Belief in *khwan***

Black Tai believe that the *taen* create men to be born on earth. *Taen Naen* is responsible for supervising the creation and giving *khwan* to individuals. He sees to it that the shaping of human form is in accordance with the form of the Black Tai male and female archetypes,

Pu Chang Lo Po Chang Ti and Mae Bao Mae Naen. When the bodies are finished they are handed over to Taen Chad who determines their lifespan and dispatches them to earth.

The human body is composed of 32 *khwan* found in 32 important organs of the body. These *khwan* are invisible but they endow bodies with the infinite qualities of life. During normal times these *khwan* remain in man; and only if all the *khwan* are present in one's body does one feel normal and enjoy good health. If something upsets one of the *khwan* then the owner feels sick or unhappy. The *khwan* are very sensitive beings and may readily depart from one's body, especially if one becomes frightened or sick. As a result Black Tai, when sick, perform a ceremony to recall the owner's missing *khwan*.

When a person dies all *khwan* will depart from the body in groups for different destinations. *Khwan* of the body (*khwan kok* or *khwan ton*), for example, will return to Muang Fa (heaven), while *khwan* of the head (*khwan hua*) will return to the place prepared for the *khwan* of ancestors by his children. When there is no son, the *khwan* will go to a small shrine (*tup*) of the daughter erected near her house, but is forbidden, however, to enter the son-in-law's house. The *khwan plai* or shadow go to Lam Loi, as explained in the section below on Black Tai cosmology.

Those *khwan* that leave the body must be sent to different places by *mo*, *mod* or *koi kok* (the eldest son-in-law). When a person dies his eldest son-in-law, who has already left the house, will be the person to deliver the deceased's *khwan* to destinations in Muang Fa appropriate to his position in life. According to the Black Tai belief the final dwelling place of a *khwan* in Muang Fa is related to its owner's original standing in the world. Those of high standing in the society, such as chiefs and noble men, are sent to Luen Phan, a heaven-like place for Black Tai. Lam Loi is a less exalted destination in Muang Fa than Luen Phan; and it is thus where the *khwan* of common people are destined to go.

### Religious practitioners

Black Tai employ *mo* (priests) and *mod* (sorcerers) as their religious practitioners. *Mo* are considered educated and knowledgeable in the rules and customs of their people. They serve as advisors, and perform sacred ceremonies. When there is a misfortune affecting the people or the *muang*, the *mo* will be called upon for advice by the *chao muang*. He will base his advice on chronicle and records of their *muang*. Prerequisite to becoming a *mo* is membership in the Loung family. Monastic candidates must learn about astrology, and customs of the Black Tai, as well as detailed ceremonial praxis. Historically these positions and attendant discipline were transmitted down from father to son within the Loung family. The phrase "*Loung hed mo Lo hed tao*" means that the Loung family functions as priest while the Lo family acts as the Lords or chiefs of the cantons. Later people from other families such as Ka and Koung who were interested in learning those arcanae were accepted as priests. Today 'mo-hood' is no longer the exclusive province of the Loung family.

The *chao muang* usually designates a wise, educated priest to be head priest, *ong mo*, in the *muang*. All important books and records of the country are kept by the *ong mo*. He also serves as final interpreter of rules and customs of the country. Two helpers assist the *ong mo*

in all capacities such as the Sen Muang ceremony: *ong chang* and *ong ngae*.

Sen Muang is one of the most important of these ceremonies, believed by the Black Tai to ensure peace, stability, prosperity, and freedom from disease and other misfortunes. Because of its significance the ceremony must be carried out with grandeur in keeping with high station of the *taen* and the *muang* spirits it honors. The *ong mo* and his aides divide the work of preparing the feast. When the *ong mo* finally sets up the date and time for the feast the *chao muang* gives the *ong mo* all responsibility. Normally the *ong mo* permits *ong chang* to prepare ceremonial objects to be used, while the *ong ngae* supervises the cooking, butchering, drinks and sweets. When every thing is in order, the *ong mo* initiates the ceremony by bringing over the important scriptures of the *muang*, called "Pub Soe Mo" ("Book of Priests") to be read. Sometimes the *ong chang* or the *ong ngae* are asked to read. Then the *taen* and the spirits of the *muang* are invited to come down and take part in the feast. The invitation is first sent to the most important *taen*, then on down according to significance and rank of the *taen* and the spirits. Taen Luang is the first to receive the meal, followed by lesser *taen* and spirits. In this ceremony Nang Mod Muang (the female sorcerer of the *muang*) will come to sing and beg the spirits to protect the *muang* and its people from all misfortune and to make its dwellers prosperous and peaceful. When the ceremony is finished the Black Tai will enjoy the feast themselves with food, drink and fun.

When there is sickness Black Tai use local medicine such as herbs and plants as their first treatment. If the condition of the patient does not improve then they believe that it is the work of certain spirits. To cure this a *mod* is employed.

*Mod* can be of both sexes, but a *mod* must come from the *mod* lineage where his father or relative has been a *mod*. The candidate is first possessed by the *mod* spirit informing him that he is chosen to be a *mod*. After finally deciding himself, the candidate will be trained in astrology, ways of performing ceremonies, curing the sick, and contacting different spirits. These are taught by a senior *mod*.

The *mod lao* (male sorcerer) performs and cures the sick who are in a very critical condition. He is able to do this because he knows all the prayers and possesses sacred objects to be used against the evil spirits. Besides this knowledge, *mod lao* has the power to call *mod* spirits and their subordinates from the *mod* country to come and fight for the lost *khwan* of the patient in the event that the spirit is stubborn and does not want to return the *khwan*. The ceremony of *mod lao* is usually accompanied by trumpet or flute playing throughout. In cures by the *mod lao*, the *mo phi* or flutist is the one who arranges the offerings, called *kai*, which are composed of rice, egg, cotton, clothes of the patient, alcoholic drinks, chicken, betel nut with leaves, fruits, and other food. The *mod lao* proceeds first by accusing the spirit which he believes has caused the illness. Verification follows, by pouring rice grains over an egg. The *mod* predicts whether, if his hypothesis is correct, an even or odd number of rice grains will remain on the egg. If the test initially fails (i.e. refuting his guess), the *mod* selects another spirit and in the same fashion subject his new choice to the rice grain test. If this time the spirit tests positively, the *mod* will seek a repetition of his success. Only a succession of successes at this gives him definite

proof or assurance of which spirit actually caused the illness. After that the *mod* tries to communicate with that spirit by anticipating his wants, asking why he caused the illness, how should the patient ask for pardon, and what sort of food or feast would please the spirit most. When it is known what is desired, the appropriate items are prepared and offered to the spirit. After that the *mod* implores the spirit to return the patient's *khwan*. Whether the spirit does or does not want to return the *khwan* to its owner is ascertained once more by guess. If the spirit is still unresponsive the *mod lao* calls the *mod* spirits and their subjects, e.g. elephant, horse and swan, to come and compel the recalcitrant spirit to release the *khwan*. Different kinds of magic are used to force that spirit until he gives up. When the struggle is won, the *mod* invites the *khwan* to return, bathes it, and bids it to dwell in the patient's body. In some ceremonies such as Sen Muang, the *mod lao* usually uses a very frightening method, such as sacrificing a live sheep by sword.

The *mod ying* (female sorcerer) are usually invited to come and cure patients who are not critically ill. *Mod ying* usually cure by merely entreating the spirit and giving a feast. Generally they do not have the power to force the spirit. There is no playing of trumpet or flute when *mod ying* perform.

Only if the illness is caused by *taen*, is the begging ceremony, asking sympathy from *taen*, performed. It is forbidden to compel *taen* because the Black Tai believe that the *taen* have power over the *mod*. Therefore most Black Tai prefer *mod ying* in ceremonies pertaining to *taen* such as Sen Muang and the ceremony for prolonging life. In cases when the female *mod* is able to practise magic, she may be able to perform the work of the male *mod*. A *mod ying* who can chant beautifully is usually chosen as Nang Mod Muang for the Sen Muang ceremony.

### Black Tai cosmology

"Khwam Toe Muang" ("History of the Muang") relates that in the beginning Earth ("Din") and Heaven ("Muang Fa") were joined by a mushroom-shaped structure, the bottom part of which was Earth, the top Heaven. The top was for *taen*, the bottom for mankind. The two were so close originally that many conflicts broke out between men and *taen*. This caused inconvenience to man's ancestor, Pu Chao, who cut the connection between Earth and Heaven so that the sky floated far above Earth, almost out of sight.

Animals at this time were able to talk. This caused noise that could be heard even in Heaven. Angered, *taen* dispatched a drought to kill both men and animals. Concerned about the drought, Pu Chao performed a ceremony asking for rain. With such abundance was his request granted that a great deluge ensued, taking many lives. Saddened, a sympathetic *taen* placed men, animals and all their belongings on the great floating pumpkins, or bottle-gourds, so that they would not perish in the flood. After the floodwaters had receded *taen* let Tao Soung and Tao Ngern again return to Earth. Tao Soung and Tao Ngern then took wives, becoming the progenitors of mankind. Further stories relating the migrations of men spanning time from antiquity to present fill out the historical manuscript.

When a person dies Black Tai gather and read the "Khwam Toe Muang" as a way to direct

the *khwan* of the dead back to their ancestors and Heaven according to prescription. If this is not done the *khwan* might lose their way. "Khwan Toe Muang" is, therefore, very important in the study of the history and concepts of the Black Tai world. It used to be transmitted orally from generation to generation from ancient times, and was recorded in the Black Tai script several centuries ago.

The original place where Heaven and Earth were connected is believed by Black Tai to be the region of the Tat Pi Fai Waterfall in Muang La (or Son La) of the Twelve Tai Cantons. While this waterfall is a jumping-off place for human *khwan* on their heavenward journey, it is the point of termination for those of animals, for they are unable to accompany their human owners aloft.

Directly above man's territory, the *khwan* of the deceased comes to the territory of the *mod*, a dwelling place for those who are well versed in magic. Like that of men, the *mod* country is wide and abundant with food. Lam Juong Klang comes next, a dwelling place for the *khwan* of common people and a meeting place of *khwan plai* or shadow. Here the *khwan* of the people have a place to stay, work and eat just as in the city of man. Next one reaches the bank of Ta Kai River, a frontier to yet a further level of Muang Fa where one meets a frontiersman named One Kuon Fan Long. For the fare of one duck plus two *bi* (unit of money) the boat man Nai Lo provides ferry service. Those with special power (such as the *mod*) cross this serpent-infested river by magical means. Arrival on the farther bank brings one to a cool and fertile place characterized by mulberry plots. Young people who die come here because there is a big park for amusement; the *khwan* of young people like to play games such as spindle toy, *saba*, and cock fighting. Kuang Lin is an area for playing games. Nearby is a place for those who died by accident such as drowning, falling from a tree or being bitten by wild animals. This area is called Muang Phi Wai. After this territory one reaches Lam Loi, the highest level for the *khwan* of ordinary people. The living conditions here are similar to those on earth: houses and fields are to be found and those who live here must earn their living and build their own houses. There is even a well called Bo Nam Kin Yen for *khwan* to quench their thirst. High mountains called Phukao Kum Kao Ngo Muang Fa surround this area, and lying behind these mountains is a crossroads called Sam Sip Kae. From this departure point there are many ways to proceed to the dwelling place of *taen* and *khwan* of the aristocracy and royalty.

The houses of Taen Luang, Taen Chad, Taen Ker, Taen Sing and other *taen* are located on the left side of the Sam Sip Kae crossroads. On the right side is the Taen Naen's factory for making human forms. Lying straight ahead is a place for the *khwan* of high-ranking people who are usually from the Lo and Cam families. Great chiefs live in an area called Luen Phan Loung, while minor chiefs and aristocracy live at Luen Phan Noi. Those who live at Luen Phan do not have to work hard; mere wishing secures them all that they require. Between Sam Sip Kae and Luen Phan and other points along the way of Muang Fa are many strange lands: near the Sam Sip Kae intersection mentally ill and other abnormal spirits of the sky live in a place called Nang Bid Nang Buen. Beyond this there is a river, called Nam Kieng, and a boat where *khwan* must pass to go to Luen Phan. The riverbank is wide and edged by a deep forest of mango and other trees. Some trees are so big that their leaves shade three mountains. The

cemetery of the Spirits of the Sky, called Pa Hei Muang Fa, is in this forest. Near the forest is the arid and barren land of Muang Kora which cannot be utilized for cultivation. In this area there is a city for young men and women who died before being married and had to leave their lovers behind on earth; in Muang Kora a sad and gloomy atmosphere pervades. A magnificent forest full of gold and silver trees is next reached. Prosperity is everywhere; overhead fly gold and silver birds picking various kinds of fruits from the trees. Next to the area of the silver and gold forest is Muang Taen, the community of the *taen*, which is the highest level in the universe of Black Tai.

From the foregoing cosmological outline we observe that the Black Tai accounts contain no depiction of hell or purgatory. No matter whether the doer's action is good or bad his *khwan* is destined to some level of Muang Fa; there is no going to hell for prolonged suffering. The writer thus infers that a concept of hell or damnation is not among the original Tai beliefs. Later some Tai groups might have picked up this from Indian religions or other cultural influences.

#### **In conclusion: what characteristics reveal about cultural origins**

The religion of the Black Tai is one of animism, stressing the worship of *phi* and *khwan*. These beliefs in *phi fa* or *taen* and *khwan* prevail in all Tai groups. Such Tai groups as the Siamese (central Thailand), Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, Tai Lao, Tai Phuan, and Shan have had contact with other cultures for a long time. These groups have adopted some of the religious beliefs of India and mixed them with their own original beliefs. Some Tai groups have already lost most of their animistic beliefs. For example, the Tai Phuan of Ban Chiang of northeastern Thailand, who migrated from Chiang Khwang in northern Laos in the early eighteenth century, today practise Theravada Buddhism. This group still practises the *khwan* ceremony but the belief in and understanding of *taen* has almost completely lost its significance. *Taen* or *phi fa* are known vaguely to the Tai Phuan as angels or gods who live in the sky and have authority over men and the weather. But the people of Ban Chiang are ignorant of the original concept of the Black Tai universe and of the intricate classification of duties and authority appropriate to the different *taen*. Like many other Tai groups in northeastern Thailand, the people of Ban Chiang have been influenced less by Hinduism than by Buddhism. They know only vaguely about Hindu gods. Their life in a rural area prevents them from performing elaborate Brahmin ceremonies which mainly devolve around the royal court. However, they accept the Brahmin-like priest as a virtuous person similar to the Buddhist monk. In some places, people prefer to have the person who performs important ceremonies dressed in white like a Brahmin priest. The Siamese of central Thailand also have some knowledge of *khwan* ceremonies but the detail has been largely lost or combined with Brahmin elements; and the ceremonies have declined to some extent because the people have embraced Buddhism and hold important ceremonies according to Brahmin ritual. Nevertheless the Siamese have often heard and still use certain phrases which reflect their old beliefs about *khwan* such as *khwan ta* (*khwan* of the eye), *khwan jai* (*khwan* of the heart), *khwan hai* (lost *khwan*), and *khwan ni di fo* (*khwan* leaves one's body when he is frightened); but they do not know these concepts in much detail. Today it is very hard to find anybody in Bangkok who knows the significance of the word "*taen*".



When considering the religious beliefs of Black Tai, we observe that the characteristics of *taen* differ from those of Hindu gods or *deva*, important deities such as Brahma, Siva, Narai, among others. Moreover, the cosmology or concepts of the universe of Black Tai are quite different from those of Hinduism and Buddhism. Therefore, the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism is not reflected in the religious beliefs of Black Tai as it is in some other Tai groups. The influence of ancient Indian languages, such as Pali and Sanskrit, is absent from Black Tai speech.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, in the national language of Thailand (and, to a lesser extent, of Laos), Khmer, Pali and Sanskrit derivatives are found in abundance while many words that come from ancient Tai language have disappeared.

Not only do religious beliefs of Black Tai deviate from those of India, they fail also to coincide with Chinese religion. The general character of Black Tai religion and cosmology is not the same as that of the Chinese. There is, however, some similarity in respecting and worshipping Ancestor Spirits. Ancestor worship cults, however, are not uncommon to tribal people and certainly not unique to the Chinese. Such similarities might show reciprocal influence and then, again, might be purely coincidental. The culture of the Black Tai, particularly language, literature and government, does not reflect nearly as much Chinese influence as we can easily detect in such other ethnic southeast Asian groups such as the Vietnamese, Miao and Yao.

Because of the reasoning outlined above, we can surmise that the religious beliefs of Black Tai are relatively free from the Indian and Chinese influences which have spread throughout southeast Asia over a span of 2,000 years. This fact is contradictory to the ideas of some scholars concerning diffusion of Indian and Chinese cultures. Many people believe that the patterns of culture in southeast Asia are essentially combinations of those of the Chinese and Indians, or have cultural bases drawn from China and India. It is obvious that certain ethnic groups in this region have adopted some cultural traits of Chinese or Indian origin and mixed them with their own for so long a time that it is very difficult to differentiate the foreign traits from the indigenous ones. Yet there are several ethnic groups who still maintain much of their unique cultural identities.

The study of the religious beliefs of Black Tai thus helps us to define a new way to approach the cultures of southeast Asia. Each group should be treated individually, and previous generalizations pertaining to the diffusion of Indian and Chinese cultures questioned. These generalizations were made on the basis of limited ethnographic evidence. The data on the Black Tai give us some insight into the system of religious beliefs of ancient Tai civilizations prior to the adoption of Buddhist and Brahministic teachings, such as the very obscure pre-Sukhothai culture before the thirteenth century A.D. We have increasing evidence from Sukhothai and post-Sukhothai times when some Tai groups started to accept and integrate both Khmer and Indian influences into their existing cultures. In the long intervening period up to the present

many changes have taken place, and it is now difficult to identify what are original Tai cultural patterns, and what was the nature of the old Tai social system. If scholars direct more attention to the study of now-veiled aspects of ancient Tai groups, especially the non-Buddhist Tai, they can help in promoting understanding of the origins and past conditions of Tai culture and society. This would be of great benefit to the study of the history, anthropology, and language of the Tai, and permit a clearer understanding of the ongoing cultural evolution of these peoples.