

IMPRESSIONS OF DOI PULANKA
AND THE MIAOS' NEW YEAR

From the Camera and Notebook of an Agriculturist

By

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Some years ago on a cross country trip between Chiangrai and Nan for the study of the soil and of other agricultural resources, we were able to learn from the Thai in the valleys almost nothing about the people or the agriculture upon the higher mountains we were passing. We became more and more eager to be actually up among the higher peaks to see for ourselves what we could of the mountain peoples and of their agriculture.

It was late in December that our party left Chiangkam on horseback for the ascent of Doi Pulanka which stands on the boundary between Nan and Chiangrai Provinces. After a day of travelling thru lowland valleys, and up the lower slopes of the mountain, we camped near the highest and last Thai village on the trail. Then came another half day on horseback, thru the uninhabited mid-slopes of the mountain. There is so little intercourse between the lowlands and the peoples of the mountain tops, and the climatic preferences of the two groups of peoples are so different that this middle zone is almost a no man's land. By noon, however, we came out into clearings high up on the slopes and finally we came to a Miao village---Ban Pulanka Miao.

Crossing a small clearing near the village, we surprised a group of young people playing some sort of game with a cloth ball about the size of an indoor baseball. Amid shouts and squeals of excitement the whole group fled into the forest. We were as surprised as they, and so short had been our glimpse of them that we had no clear idea of the elaborate costume of the young women

and girls. We later learned that it was the tribe's New Year day, and the young people were celebrating in their festival dress. While some of the boys play with tops, the girls play some sort of a ball game.

Arriving at the village, the Miao headman invited us into his house and told us something of the crops grown by the Miao in that region, and how they grow them and how their livestock is reared. Afterward when he took us outside to listen while he played on a special musical instrument, we saw the young people coming shyly back into the village to see more of their strange visitors.

Thinking the young folks were not watching, I reached for my camera, but even before I could get the case open, they were in full flight. What a swinging of skirts there was, for these garments are pleated and of many meters of stiff hemp cloth!

Finally one of the braver Miaos was coaxed to look down into the focussing hood of the camera. He gave a shout and called his companions to come see, too. Once they saw their friends in the colored scene on the ground glass, there were whoops of excitement. All fear was forgotten, and soon there was such a crowd wanting to look into the camera that it was only with difficulty that photographs could be taken at all. One extreme had given way to the other. Finally, the young folks were persuaded to line up and be photographed, in an all too orderly fashion.

The time we had to spend in this village was much too short. This was because the site selected for our camp for the night was in a Yao village some distance farther on, beyond some rather rugged peaks and the deep canyon of Huey Ka creek. Pushing on there, thru the secluded valley, we traversed much country which the Miaos and the Yaos had almost completely deforested in order that they might use the land for the raising of opium and maize. We saw a number of plots of poppies, nearly ready for tapping. By contrast with the poppy gardens I had seen in India and in Mongolia the stand and size of plants on these slopes seemed miserable indeed. And well these poppies might seem poor, for though the soil was good, steep hill slopes such as these could neither be manured nor irrigated.

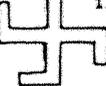
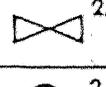
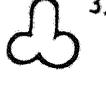
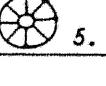
It was late when we arrived at our camp, at the lower edge of Ban Pulanka Yao. Chief Phyakiri was expecting us at his house for tea. His house was a well built frame building, simply furnished with tables and chairs. We were sorry his radio was temporarily out of order for we had been without news for many days.

The chief explained to us the simple opium production methods employed in these mountains. And the next day we were taken out into some typical localities. The land is cleared each year first by burning the brush and weeds after which, during the rains, maize is planted without any tilling of the soil. After the maize is harvested the soil each year is dug deeply, a seed bed is made, and the poppy seeds are broadcast. The same clearing produces maize each summer and each October is sown to poppies. This continues on the same plot for six or eight years in succession. Even though the yields are low, the hill tribes continue to raise opium and maize this way, for under no circumstances will they live in the valleys. They must use such soils as they have, and such methods as can be applied. Of course, mountain top seclusion and thus a measure of protection against discovery by law enforcement officers, combined with the desirability of a location not too far from an international boundary have also been important considerations in the Miaos' and Yaos' selection of sites for their settlements in Siam.

The maize is mainly used for food for the hogs which are bred in considerable numbers by the hill tribes. Hardy and active, these animals are allowed to forage for part to their food. Many of the young pigs are sold in the valleys to the northern Thais who find them good stock for raising hogs for market.

The chief diet of the Yao and the Miao tribes is starchy rice. This and some maize they raise on clearings (rai) usually some kilometres down the slopes of the mountains below their villages, because rice does not thrive at the higher elevations. Inasmuch as new clearings are usually made for each year's planting of upland

Plate III

	S.	M.	I.	S.	M.	I.
a	 1.	 1.	 1.  2.	 17.	 10.	 21.  22.
b	 2.	 2.	 3.	 18.		 23.  24.
c	 3.	 3.		 19.		 25.
d	 4.  5.	 4.  5.	 4.  5.  6.	 20.		 26.
e	 6.		 7.  8.	 21.  22.  23.	 11.	 27.  28.
f	 7.  8.	 6.	 9.  10.			 29.
g	 9.  10.	 7.	 11.	 24.  25.	 12.	 30.
h	 11.  12.	 8.  9.	 12.  13.	 26.  27.		 31.  32.
i	 13.		 14.  15.	 28.	 13.  14.	 33.  34.
k	 14.		 16.  17.	 29.		 35.
l	 15.  16.		 18.  19.  20.			

Key to Plate III.

The drawings reproduced on this Plate have been reproduced partly from the books mentioned at the end of the essay, partly from coins in my possession. Their reproduction is not perfect. I would ask the reader to take the fact into consideration that the marks and symbols on actual coins are very small and in many cases mutilated.

The vertical columns show Siamese (S.), Mohenjo-Daro (M.) and symbols on the old Indian punch-marked coins (I.) side by side.

The symbols in column "M." and "I" have been taken from Durgā Prasād's book (1), to which I refer the reader.

I do not think it necessary to explain each particular symbol again, since most of them have been referred to in the text of this essay.

The Plate will show the similarity of many symbols, although there is no proof that similar symbols have had the same meaning and significance during the various periods.

The significance of many symbols remains doubtful and further researches are required to bring more light into the matter, and I claim no infallibility for my suggestions and conclusions.

Each vertical column is provided with running numbers and the horizontal numbers with running letters, in order to facilitate future references.

rice, and inasmuch as the regrowth forest on these clearings will not usually again be ready for clearing in less than five years, for it usually takes that long to eradicate the weeds, the total destruction of forest is serious. This forest destruction has caused justified complaints from the lowlands of Chiangrai and of Nan Provinces that the irrigation water for their padis is being adversely affected.

By travelling along the higher ranges these hill tribes maintain contact with the homes of their ancestors farther north way beyond the Siamese borders. On these travels the Yaos, especially, use very fine mules bred in the Shan States. The Yao chief who was our host for the several nights we were on the mountain sent his sons to a Chinese school in Lampang, because the Yao language is written in Chinese characters. The Miao, by contrast, are illiterate and have no written language. To meet this lack Christian missionaries have recently evolved a system of writing and have translated a part of the Bible into Miao.

Chief Phyakiri appeared to be the absolute master of this entire mountain-top region. Most evidently his word was law, and I didn't wonder after I saw his messenger start out on the trail to convey an order! This messenger carried in a silver scabbard what appeared to be a very sharp and efficient sword.

The dress of the Yao women is strikingly different from that of the Miao. Trousers elaborately cross stitched with colored thread, and bright red pompom edgings on the long collars of the coats are conspicuous. Hanging from the back of the collar of the coat of the number one wife of the chief was a most elaborate decoration of intricately wrought silver chains and ornaments.

Our camp was comfortable, and everything possible was done to make our stay pleasant. There seemed no need at all for the elaborate precautions taken by the Siamese authorities to assure our personal safety. In fact, we were sorry to think of having to return to the plains after only a couple of days on the mountain. Views off across the hills were fascinating. In the early mornings fog could be seen lying in the lower valleys. We had just begun

to get an insight into the life of wholly different peoples and into their methods of gaining a livelihood from the soil. We could not tarry longer on the mountain, however, because the direct trail to Nan was not passable. We had to take a very roundabout route involving two days horseback riding, one day on a logging railway, one day of hiking and trucking to Lampang, thence by State railway to Denjai, and finally by truck to Prae and on to Nan.

Coming down from the mountain we realized that high up on those mountains are important potentialities of people and of resources. We also felt that the conditions prevailing on the mountains and in the plains are so very different that wise and skilful direction and control are necessary in order to conserve for Siam the important soil, forest, water-supply and human resources of her northern mountains.

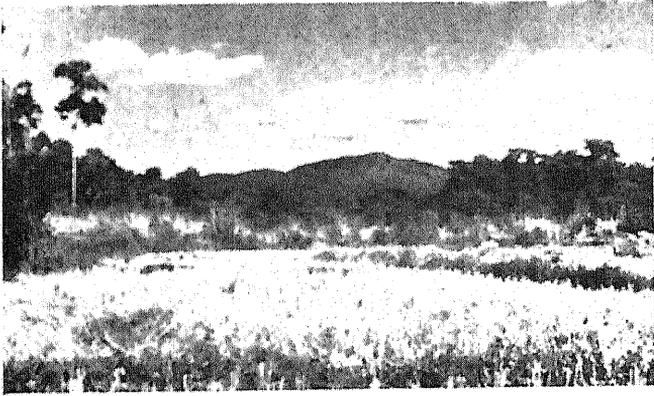


Fig. 1 Doi Pulanka from the southwest.



Fig. 2 Watching others get their pictures taken, these Miao women were entirely unaware that they were in range.



Fig. 3 These Miao women were eager to look thru the camera. The solid silver jewelry is conspicuous. Ban Pulanka Miao.



Fig. 4 Miao in New Year attire at Ban Huey Ka.

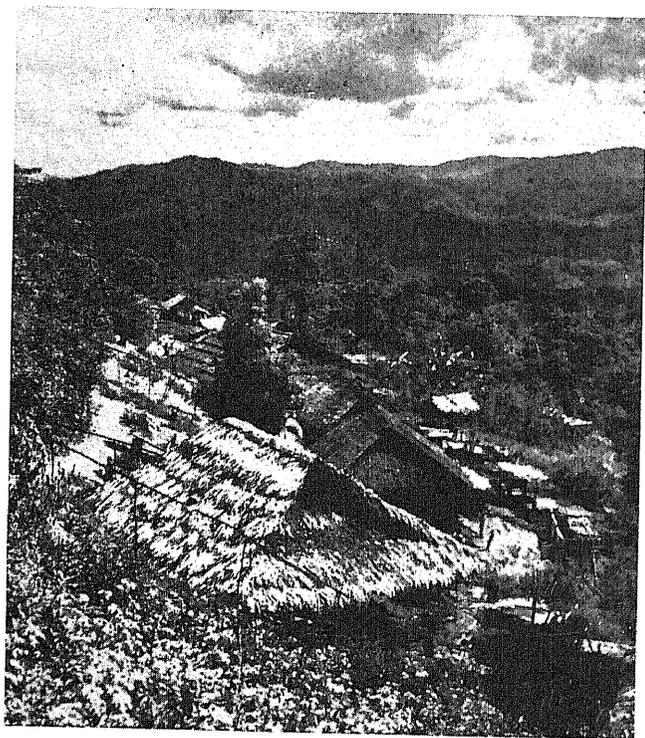


Fig. 5 The Yao village of Pulanka nestles on the southern slope of one of the higher peaks. In the distance, just touching the clouds, is the Wao region, of Nan Province, once noted for the vast areas of poppy cultivation.



Fig. 6 Carrying the very sharp knife and the silver scabbard, which are the badge of his office, the messenger of the Yao chief, sets out for Ban Pulanka Miao village.

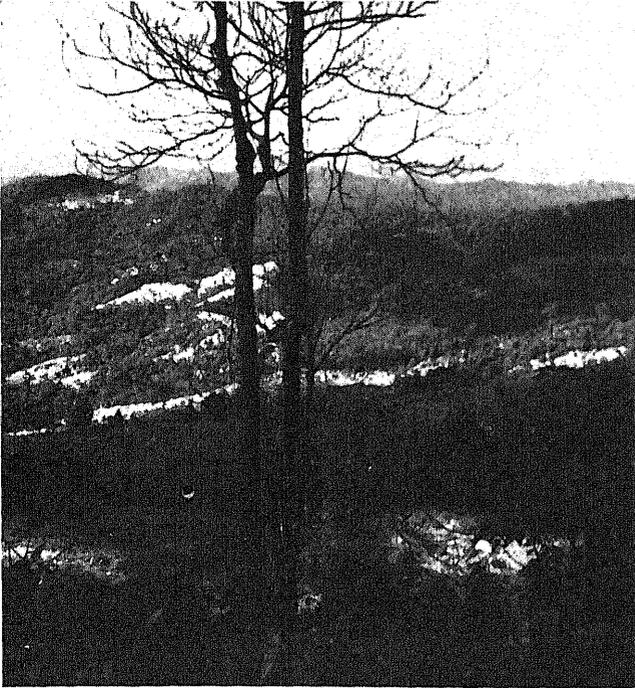


Fig. 7 From certain vantage points it was possible to see the clearings, far below in the valley, where the Yaos had grown their hill rice. Many old clearings have grown up to wild grass and weeds.