

NOTES

ON THE STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THAI PEASANT VILLAGES

A Critique and A Recommendation

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In his article of 1950¹, and doubtless partly motivated by the desire to give greater depth to his Japanese data, John F. Embree characterised the Thai social system as being 'loosely structured'. The way in which he derived this concept about Thai society was rather impressionistic: he found his data in the existing pre-systematic literature about Thai society (sources with an upper-class and urban bias) which he compared in an *ad hoc* fashion with data on China, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore and even the United States.

What he meant with his formulation 'loosely structured' as an independent and univocal concept is neither clear from the article itself nor from his definition. His purpose was 'to make some observations on certain characteristics of Thai culture, which concerned the question of relative integration of a culture in terms of a loosely as against a closely woven social structure; loosely integrated (or loosely structured) signifying a culture in which considerable variation of individual behaviour is sanctioned'. Now if 'considerable variation of *individual* behavior' is to be the criterion of 'loose structure', then, for a sociologist, little has been clarified about social structure, while equally little has been said about Thai culture.*

Yet it strikes the student of the literature about Thailand that the anthropologists, who worked under the auspices of the Cornell Southeast Asia Program, and who, after 1950, did serious social

1) Embree, J.F., 'Thailand: A Loosely Structured Social System' *American Anthropologist* vol 52/2, 1950.

* Editor's note: See Wijeyewardene, G., 'A Note on Irrigation and Agriculture in a North Thai Village; *Felicitation Volumes of Southeast-Asian Studies*' vol 2, 1965 pp. 255-59.

research in Thailand, tended to accept Embree's typification (a hypothetical 'ideal type' of Thai culture) as a serious analysis of Thai social structure, without even trying to find alternative criteria by which Thai social structure might be better understood.

In the preliminary study on Bang Chan², the admittedly unrepresentative village studied by the Cornell group, we read: 'The exceptionally amorphous, relatively unstructured character of all [sic] Thai society is clearly reflected in the undifferentiated social organisation of Bang Chan'. And that is where it stands for the members of the Cornell group. 'Loose structure' (lack of *formal* social organisation) and 'individualism' (basic human need for privacy and isolation) became the dogmas, which would lead to a kind of metaphysical understanding of Thai social dynamics: 'In the village of Bang Chan all social interaction is set within a framework of cosmic unpredictability'.³

It is not the purpose of this article to investigate whether the concept of a 'loosely structured society' can rightfully be maintained and defended⁴. There is not such a thing as *the* social structure, knowledge about which would offer the all-embracing key to understanding and explanation of more complex societies. The social structure that is perceived and described is relative to the structural point-of-view of the observer-investigator.

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- 2) Sharp, L., et al, *Siamese Rice Village : A Preliminary Study of Bang Chan 1948-1949* Bangkok 1953.
 - 3) Hanks L.M. cited by Phillips, H.P., *Thai Peasant Personality; the Patterning of Interpersonal Behavior in the Village of Bang Chan* Berkeley and Los Angeles 1965, p. 80. Another dogma, *viz.* the great social mobility that would be characteristic for Thai society, fits within this interpretative framework. For criticism, see: Evers, H.D., 'The Formation of a Social Class Structure: Urbanisation, Bureaucratization and Social Mobility in Thailand', *American Review* vol 31 no 4, 1966 and Mulder, J.A.N., 'Een Evaluatie van de naoorlogse sociaal-wetenschappelijke Literatuur over Thailand', *Sociologische Gids* forthcoming 1967. For criticism on the 'cosmological interpretations', *Sociological* see Mulder, J.A.N., 'Sociology and Religion in Thailand : A Critique' *Journal of the Siam Society* Jan 1967.
 - 4) An interesting discussion (in English) about this concept is presented in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* vol 166, 1960 by J. Pouwer, pp. 109-118 and pp. 365-372 and A.C. van der Leeden, pp. 119-149. Also Nash's comments are clarifying, in Nash, Manning, *The Golden Road to Modernity; Village Life in Contemporary Burma* New York 1965, pp. 72-73.

It makes no sense to call a bilateral kinship system, or a relative lack of formal organisation, a loose structure. Of course, in any society, there is a structure in terms of basic, culturewide principles, that, in various combinations, form the groupings, the relationships and the definitions of roles and persons; also in Thai villages, and also in Thai society as a whole.

At the village, or peasant level, Thai society obviously misses the ascriptive structural principles that are so obvious in Indian caste society or African unilateral societies, hence the repeated emphasis on the reciprocal character of social relationships in the literature about Thai peasant society. But there may be a host of non-ascriptive structural principles operating at the same level. Moerman⁵, for instance, delineated a social structure of a Thai village, taking its temple as its structural center; concentrating on the organisation of agricultural activities, Amyot⁶ found cooperating groups of in-laws as a structuring principle (very similar to Leach's findings in Pul Eliya, Ceylon); and the structuring principle of land and property relations, as Leach found them in Ceylon⁷ may very well be operating in Thai peasant society as well.

Yet it cannot be denied that the Thai individual is allowed a considerable amount of variation and alternative in his behaviour. Hence the greater need for statistical data in Thai society than in societies that are clearly structured by ascriptive principles⁸.

Since Kroeber wrote about peasant societies as part-societies with part-cultures, and especially since Redfield published his *Peasant Society and Culture*⁹, we have come to recognize that the peasant

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- 5) Moerman, M., 'Ban Ping's Temple: The Center of a "Loosely Structured" Society', in Manning Nash (ed), *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism* New Haven, Yale U.P. 1966.
 - 6) Amyot, J., *Intensive Village Study Project, April-May 1964, Ban Nonlan, Preliminary Report* Bangkok, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University 1964; typescript.
 - 7) Leach, E.R., *Pul Eliya, A Village in Ceylon; A Study of Landtenure and Kinship* Cambridge U.P. 1961, pp. 118-19.
 - 8) Leach stresses the need also for these latter societies to be analysed in statistical terms *op. cit.* pp. 296-306.
 - 9) Redfield, R., *Peasant Society and Culture; An Anthropological Approach to Civilisation* University of Chicago Press 1956.

village, related as it is to people and institutions outside of it, may in itself be so incomplete a system that it cannot well be described as social structure.

Thai peasant villages are certainly outside of the range of tribal societies, and should, therefore, not be analysed in terms adequate for such societies. Thai peasant villages should be analysed as part-societies and part-cultures of the Thai nation.

Thai peasantry shows many of the characteristics that made Redfield recognize peasantry as a social type. At a higher level of sophistication Fitchen¹⁰ offered 'the common and distinctive features of peasant social structure' as opposed to tribal societies and modern, urbanised states. She recognized, *i.a.*, that peasant societies are structured to a large extent by non-inherited volitional affiliation, following quite closely the organisation of economic activities; the same point has been emphasized by Leach.

Fitchen also stressed the importance and self-sufficiency of the kin-based household unit, while the analysis of the organisation of the societal contacts outside the nuclear family was offered in the same year by Foster in his now famous article on the 'dyadic contract',¹¹ about which he remarked:

The implicit dyadic contract accounts for people's behaviour to the satisfaction of the anthropologist: it provides him with a model of social structure abstracted from observed behaviour. This model also nearly coincides with the villager's understanding of how his personal world is organised. These contractual ties are the glue that holds his society together and the grease that smooths its running.

Foster derived his concept from Mexican data, but it was, for instance, successfully applied by Friedl¹² in her analysis of the structure of a Greek peasant village, and also Manning Nash (see

10) Fitchen, Janet M., 'Peasantry as a Social Type', in V.E. Garfield (ed), *Symposium: Patterns of Land Utilisation and other Papers, Proceedings of the 1961 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society* pp. 114-19.

11) Foster, G.M., 'The Dyadic Contract: A Model for the Social Structure of a Mexican Peasant Village', *American Anthropologist* vol 63, 1961 pp. 1173-92.

12) Friedl, Ernestine, *Vasilika; a Village in Modern Greece* New York 1964 p. 74.

footnote 4) found it to be a clarifying concept in his analysis of Burmese peasant society. In his structural description of a Thai peasant village, Moerman concluded that Ban Ping was comfortably within the range of peasant societies according to Fitchen, and he agreed with Leach's view that the regular patterns of social life were more statistical than jural. He concluded his article with the observation that the concept of 'loose structure' has little value for depicting Thai society.

And indeed so. What structural criteria will have to be selected, and what dynamic principles will operate in Thai peasant society, cannot here be foresaid, but an analysis of Thai rural society in terms of concepts like 'dyadic contract', 'part society', statistical analysis of patterns of interaction, especially of economic activities, and so forth, will certainly lead to a more understandable and more realistic picture of the Thai peasantry and Thai society as a whole than the 'loosely structured system of social relationships set within a framework of cosmic unpredictabilities' with which students of Thai society have had to content themselves for so long a time.

