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MATRILINEAL DESCENT GROUPS AND SPIRIT CULTS OF THE THAI-YUAN IN NORTHERN THAILAND

by

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In this article I present a system of matrilineal descent groups and associated cults found in a Thai-Yuan community in a province of Northern Thailand.¹ The presentation starts at a low level of interpretation with a description of observed behaviour and of meanings consciously held by members of the community. As the analysis develops I attempt to explain the phenomena in terms of various manifest and latent social functions and to demonstrate that this requires a detailed structural analysis not only of the system of descent groups and descent group cults but also of their relations with other institutions, especially other jural systems and other cults, and of their historical context. The general problem is to explain the importance and persistence of these matrilineal descent groups and their ancestor-type cults, which viewed as parts of a larger political and religious system, in particular the traditional kingdom of Chiangmai, would seem at first to occupy a relatively subordinate position; for most Thai societies have been characterized by well developed state systems, by adherence to Buddhist religion, and by the predominance of cognatic kinship principles. This is in marked contrast with, say, the well-known case of the Tallensi of West Africa whose cosmological and political systems are dominated by ancestor cults and unilineal descent principles. Moreover, though this article cannot take up comparative problems, matrilineal descent groups would not be predictable on the basis of the correlations between types of matrilineal groups and other social and ecological factors established from cross cultural comparison by Schneider and Gough.²

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2) D. Schneider and K. Gough (Eds): *Matrilineal Kinship*, 1961.

I had expected to find neither unilineal descent groups nor ancestor cults. They are not found in village society elsewhere in Thailand nor had they been reported by anthropologists who had worked in Northern Thailand.³ My attention was first drawn to the phenomena by a statement made by the headman of a village I lived in, of which the gist is as follows:

"Even within the memory of my mother (an old lady of 87 whom I was later able to interview) there were no officials, no law (*kodmaaj*), not even a village headman, no single leader, only the old men... then *phiipuuja* (a term I gloss for the time being as 'lineage spirits') was the law... though not really law, it was mutual respect," (*pen saggara' nabthyy kan*, a term which would be an approximate Thai gloss for *pietas*.)

I shall be arguing that it is indeed the jural, and symbolic, functions of the descent group cult that are of greatest significance, either in the absence of or in opposition to other jural and political institutions. But this is only necessarily or plausibly so in recent historical situations. We should bear in mind in attempting an explanation that the structure and significance of these matrilineal descent groups at, say, the end of the 19th century are unlikely to correspond to the economic system which first shaped them. Moreover there have been some shifts in meaning, even a decline in overall relative significance, over the last few decades, but it is of interest that we are dealing with an ongoing system which is still of importance to these Thai-Yuan villagers in spite of considerable changes in their external social reality.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF DESCENT GROUPS

I studied most intensively in a village cluster comprising some 3,000 people grouped in three administrative villages. Within this area I conducted a census of 180 households (approx. mean size 5 persons) in three contiguous, named village sections or hamlets, all part of one administrative village. The members of the 180 households were also

3) There is some useful but inadequate data in a recently revised work "*prapheeni thaj phaagnya*" (1969) by the dedicated folklorist of Northern Thailand Khun Sanguan Chotsukkarat. See especially pp. 71-91. There is a briefer, and I think incorrect, reference in "*prapheeni bedtaed*" (1965) by Phya Anuman Rajadhon. See pp. 94-102.

members of 67 separate descent groups of which 33 had their ritual focus within the census area. These 33 groups contained 136 of the 180 households plus 64 other households within the village cluster, and only 16 others outside the cluster of which all but two were within the small irrigated valley enclosed by mountains. The total number of groups appears rather large, but in fact about half the population of the census area belonged to only 9 groups. The median size was 4 member households in a range 1-24. While 7 of the 33 groups had over 10 member households, in only two of these were there more than 10 locally clustered households, that is within the same village section. This figure of 10 or thereabouts appears critical. The recent history of fission of 11 groups, which within the last 20 years had been only 4 groups, indicates that there is a tendency to fission after a group has reached a localized size of about 10 households and is not maintained at that size or reduced by demographic decrease. Indeed this may at one time have been a fairly constant modal size of local settlements or hamlets, in view of the fact that when an embryonic village headman system was introduced to this area about 70 years ago the headmen were called heads of ten households (*keehuasib*).⁴

A number of groups have an even more localized core of contiguous households within their village section. In two of the three village sections the largest of such cores (of 15 and 8 households) belonged to the longest established groups in those sections. There is some correlation between size, length of establishment and wealth of groups. Two groups alone contained between them nearly half (27 out of 61) of the top third richest families in the census area. 13 of the 33 groups thought that the core of their group had always been in its present site, or were ignorant of its origins. In 11 cases it was known that "the spirits had been brought there" from another village, mostly from outside the valley by a remembered deceased kinswoman. The remaining 9 cases had originated as the result of local fission, mostly within living memory. No groups were more than 6 generations in depth, with a modal depth of 4 with 3 living generations. The largest group contained 5 living generations. In almost no cases is a single apical ancestor remembered,

4) Nowadays the headman typically has between 100-200 households.

but a set of sisters only. There are no written, or other permanent records of genealogy, although literacy and papermaking technology have been a part of village culture for many centuries. Princely patriline, of which there were none in the valley community (*myan*), extending many hundreds of years are recorded however.

The essential components of any group are ideally arranged as follows: there is a spirit lodged in a shrine which is located in a house site containing a house known as the 'original' or 'stem' house (*hyan kao*) in which lives a female member of the senior generation who is both lineage head and ritual officiant; focussed on this person, spirit, and these structures is a localized group of matrilineally related households, a core of which is topographically contiguous, who say of themselves that they are "of the same spirit" (*phii diaw kan*). This ideal configuration is the actual case in 10 out of the 33 cases. The variations and their meanings will be discussed below.

DESCENT GROUP MEMBERSHIP

All people necessarily belong to one of these shallow matrilineages. Women are members by virtue of matrilineal descent and never belong to more than one group. There are two circumstances in which a woman may "buy entry". A woman marrying locally who does not "have a spirit", i.e. membership in a group, usually as the result of long distance migration or provenance from another ethnic group, must buy entry into her husband's mother's group on marriage, after which descent is reckoned through her as if she were a daughter. Secondly a female domestic servant, whether adopted, fostered, hired or bought outright must on marriage, if she continues to reside locally, buy entry into her employer's wife's group, whether or not she previously had membership in her own mother's group. As far as I can see the second case was likely to coincide with the first; or if not would not lead to double membership: the choice of residence indicating the membership option.

The incorporation of men is more complicated. Male children are members of their mother's group by right of filiation and may remain members all their lives, but children will not, except in rare circumstances, have right of membership in their father's mother's group. The basic

ideology is simple: at marriage a man buys entry into his wife's descent group (this exchange is in fact the only essential marriage ritual) and is thereby lost to his mother's group. Statistically however nearly all groups contain some member households linked through married sons and brothers. These never form a majority of member households in any one group however, nor do they account for more than half the total number of married sons and brothers. Moreover, of these only about half again count *themselves* as members, the others being included by their mothers and sisters, maternal aunts and their daughters.

The incorporation of affinal males is problematic and ambiguous despite the simple ideology. In the limiting case of most complete incorporation a man may permanently sever his connections with his maternal group on marriage; remain living uxori locally; attend annual sacrifices; work his wife's father's fields; become head of household in the stem house on the death of his wife's parents; become ritual officiant of his wife's group; and even, on the death of his wife and perhaps her elder siblings, be referred to as lineage elder. In this extreme case the ritual position of the man is comparable to that of the woman in the traditional South East Chinese patrilineage,⁵ at least in the domestic cult of the ancestors: he controls (though not exclusively) the cult of his wife's lineage spirit which is wholly benign towards him; as we shall see the spirit has jurisdiction only over consanguineal members of the group. The most extreme case illustrating incorporation but with continuing ambivalence is reached when a man having ritual status in his wife's group, exasperated by the severity of his wife's lineage spirit (against say his wife and children) takes revenge by burning the shrine, possibly firing gunshots into it, and ordering the spirit to leave. Neither he nor anyone else can kill a spirit however, and there is a strong possibility the spirit will return. The limiting case of minimal incorporation is when, after the marriage ceremony the son-in-law fulfills his minimum obligation to provide raw meat, cook it and offer it to his wife's lineage spirit and lineage elder (without eating of it himself, though he may do so); thereafter reside uxori locally for a token week or two,⁶ during which

5) M. Freedman: *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*, 1958.

6) In 160 recorded cases of first marriage, the husband had spent less than 3 months residing in his wife's parents' house immediately after marriage in only 13 cases. In 98 cases he had spent one year or more. In only 3 cases did the couple live with the husbands' parents: in these as in nearly all the 29 cases where the couple set up their own household immediately on marriage, the wife's parents had already died.

he will at most rebuild a house fence (which as a "work buffalo" he is said to have broken down by his original sexual trespass); but not do agricultural work; then reside neolocally, returning to sacrifice with and perhaps work with his mother's group.

The absence of any specific inclusion of a man in his maternal group after marriage may be due to geographical distance, since men are more likely to move further on marriage, or social distance created by conflict within the group. But specific inclusion may occur as the result of various economic, political or ritual strategies or exigences. In these cases it represents an overdetermination of existing relationships which already have economic and ritual content; in the extreme case a man may become ritual officiant of his maternal group. Specific inclusion occurs most importantly in the following situations :

- when a man's wife has no spirit of her own;
- when a man marries a woman of his maternal group;
- when there are no daughters in one generation of a lineage, or section of one, or when an only daughter has had to reside virilocally as a result of marrying a high status man. In such cases descent may be reckoned through a male, the descent principle jumping a gap so to speak.
- Inclusion, especially of a prestigious man, may be a political statement either by full members of the group, as to the prestige of that group in contradistinction from all other groups; or by an individual male in contradistinction from his wife's group for instance when that group is not local, or of a markedly smaller size or prestige, or where there is some specific hostility between a man and his affines.
- When a married man's sickness is divined as being caused by his maternal spirit; in which case he must return to sacrifice to it. This may conceivably be a conscious political manoeuvre and may lead to permanent reincorporation.
- At divorce a man is likely to revert to his maternal group until remarriage. If a man remains in a divorced or widowed state for some years before remarriage this may reinforce his or his matrikin's claims to continued membership after eventual remarriage.

- A young widowed man ceases to be a member of his deceased wife's group; his children by that wife may retain membership or join their step-mother's group.
- An older widower usually remains with his children in his deceased wife's house and continues to be counted a member of the deceased wife's group.
- A resident male domestic servant, hired hand or slave, must on marriage "buy the spirit" of his employer's wife as well as those of his bride.

Thus a married man may change his descent group membership several times during his lifetime. He may also belong to two groups, with varying degrees of incorporation. I came across only one case of a man being counted a member of three groups; this was due to his maternal group having been recently split by his two surviving sisters, each of whom then claimed their relatively prestigious brother as a member.

DESCENT GROUP ELDER AND RITUAL OFFICIANT

In the 28 groups for which I have the relevant data, the "stem" or "root" person (*khon kao*, also *kao phii*),⁷ a term I gloss as lineage elder, is a woman of the senior generation in 22 cases (married 16, widowed 6). There were two cases of husbands succeeding wives as elders. In one of these this was one of the oldest men in the village who had already been ritual officiant and resident in the stem house before his wife's death. In the other case the wife, who died young, was the only remaining female member of a very shallow lineage; a possible option would have been to dispose of the shrine together with the corpse of the woman, but there was a surviving daughter of nearly marriageable age. There were two cases of sons succeeding mothers, the only daughters available being unmarriageable because of mental or physical infirmity. Finally there were two cases of brothers succeeding sisters, having already been ritual officiants before their sisters' deaths and there being no surviving female members of the senior generation. The position is unlikely to be filled by a man for more than one generation; it is a holding operation to ensure

7) The word *kao* in Thai-Yuan means base, tree stump or tree, and is used as the qualifier for tree; it may also be used to mean leader, headman or chief,

continuity and to avoid upsetting existing authority relations. Normally the position passes from a woman to a daughter, or to a sister, or sister's daughter.

There is a problem here in that, depending on the stage of the domestic cycle reached, the stem house and therewith the role of lineage elder are likely to be inherited by a youngest sister, since after marriage the youngest daughter remains with her husband in the parental home. Thus the lineage 'elder' may have surviving elder sisters or cousins (e.g. mother's elder sister's daughter) seniors in age if not generation, and for as long as there are surviving seniors this poses at least logically a problem of authority. If this is combined with a circumstantial problem it is likely to lead to fission and indeed in about half the cases recorded a senior section breaks from a junior.

Another way of resolving this problem is for the ritual component of the role to devolve on another person in some way senior to the lineage elder, e.g. an elder sibling (4 cases), elder sister's husband (1), or mother's elder sister's son (1). We find that only half of the 22 female elders are also ritual officiants. The office may also be filled by a husband (3 cases), son (1) or resident daughter's husband (1). Since these alternative ritual officiants are nearly all male, this also resolves another potential problem: that of women holding authority over men; and at the same time the more practical problem that by training and experience women are less likely to be able to perform the albeit fairly minimal ritual tasks. Of greater significance a means of further incorporating selected affines is provided. While only 2 of the 28 lineage elders are affines, 7 of the 28 ritual officiants are affines (out of 15 male ritual officiants).

DESCENT GROUP FISSION

Some of the causes and implications of fission have already been referred to. The principal predisposing cause is increase in the size of the descent group, whether leading to greater genealogical depth or disproportionate size of one section. The chief precipitating factors are recognized to be geographical dispersion and conflicts among members. It is possible for members to disperse without seceding, though if they

move out of the valley they almost invariably secede. Within the valley they may continue to attend annual and even *ad hoc* sacrifices or send contributions, or their matrikin will include token offerings on their behalf. A dispersed individual or section may lapse without seceding and subsequently ask for reinstatement when divination reveals continued activity by the lineage spirit.

The dyadic relationships most affected by the severance are likely to be sibling or first cousin relationships: just those that are properly most solidary. The seceding unit takes the initiative, that is they are never expelled. This unit, whether senior or junior, is most likely to be an individual household breaking with a larger group, but in one case the stem section of the lineage as it were, found itself a rump of one household, that of the lineage elder, a particularly bitter and ferocious woman as it happened. There is said to be a strong ritual sanction exercised by the lineage spirit on the person seceding; also elders will try to prevent fission. When the sharing is made however, in an inverted rite of communion, it is done without display of acrimony, and is of course recognized as an ultimate means of conflict resolution. The word used for splitting is that also used for dividing and sharing (*bey*) which has highly positive connotations in other contexts. Normally there is a strong diffuse sanction against not dividing or sharing between kinsmen, i.e. meanness, but in this case it is laudable not to divide or share out between close kinsmen. This paradox was recognized in a joke made by a third party (non-kin) when I asked another if the group had split recently: "They're too mean for that, they're afraid of wasting it", i.e. the spirit, though in theory the spirits are, as we shall see, infinitely divisible without loss of virtue.

Once seceded the new descent group, however small, has its own spirit, shrine, officiant, and its members are no longer "of the same spirit" as those of the original group. To reinforce this exclusiveness the new group must hold its annual sacrifice on the same day as the original group so that no overlap or double attendance is possible. There are no nesting, hierarchical, or segmentary structures, nor any superordinate genealogical structures. There is however a slight element of what one could call structural inertia in that lineage elders of 5 groups still regarded the stem

house of the group from which they had all quite recently seceded (within the previous 15 years or so) as the "real stem house". This was not the case in 7 other groups where rather less recent fission was known to have taken place. Interestingly 3 of the 5, and 2 of the 7 cases were known to be cases where conflict had led to fission. Although I would not attach great importance to this variation, I would ascribe it to an optional statement of the degree of residual acrimony between the groups rather than to random looseness of usage. I would also expect this structural inertia effect to last no longer than the generation of the original parties to the conflict.

RITUAL EVENTS IN THE DESCENT GROUP

The most important annual event for the group is a sacrifice made soon after ploughing has begun. This is a time of year when demands on the labour of close kinsmen in the agricultural production process will be made; it is also the time of year when the health of the villagers tends to be at its lowest ebb, since maximum demands on physical strength are made when rice is in short supply and the beginning of the wet season gives rise to various fevers. Hence kin group solidarity is at a premium since conflicts may lead to sickness (punishment by lineage spirits) and failure to cooperate. The sacrifice is made in the stem house and is attended by all women of the group and some or all of their unmarried children of both sexes. Affines and married consanguineal males may attend but seldom do. Each member household contributes a chicken, rice, and the basic ritual offering, common to nearly all types of sacrifice, of a small banana leaf cone containing flowers, popped rice, candles and possibly incense.⁸ The food is cooked, offered by the ritual officiant to the spirit and then eaten by those present. If a member household cannot be represented at the sacrifice a small parcel of the cooked food will be sent to it afterwards. When the shrine is located outside the house it is a miniature house about three feet high of simple

8) Alcohol, which is included in offerings to many other spirits, would have been considered improper for lineage spirits. It is however reported by Sanguan Chotsukkarat (op. cit.).

but enduring construction (*həəphii* or *kaophii*)⁹ It is situated in the north east corner of the house site which is ritually "above" the head of the male head of household who sleeps closest to the north east corner of the bedroom with his head to the east. Inside it are placed a mat, square cushion, water pot and betel set as for any distinguished lay guest, and the sacrificial food. During the whole event, which starts soon after dawn and lasts about two hours, the house and housesite are ritually closed by means of a white cotton thread, the closing of gates and shutters, and the placing of a small bamboo taboo indicator (*taaleew*) of the kind sometimes also placed at unguarded swiddens, likewise to keep out unauthorized people and spirits: "for fear other people will wrong us, and for fear of wronging the lineage spirit".¹⁰

In addition to the annual sacrifice the ritual officiant makes a smaller offering of rice cakes, flowers and candles, to "inform" the spirit of the coming of New Year and the beginning and end of Buddhist Lent; also

9) Approximately half the spirit shrines are such structures, the others are shelves (*hing*) situated high up on the north wall of the bedroom, which is in the NE corner of the house. Of those situated outside the house the majority belong to longer established groups, of those inside the house the proportion as between longer and more recently established groups is fairly equal. The statistical evidence is slight and informants' statements tended to indicate that the choice was idiosyncratic, but a possibility remains that the shrines of "junior" or more recently seceded groups, even of immigrant groups, properly belong in the house, and those of the original or older groups, in outside shrines. This interpretation is further complicated by the fact that when, as is rarely possible, a house contains two shrines (say for example that of a resident daughter-in-law, or husband) one will be situated inside, one outside the house. If one shrine is owned by or was originally brought there by a male householder it will be situated outside, in which cases it seems to indicate inferiority and separation from the house itself with its matrilineal connotations. Sanguan Chotsukkarat (op. cit.) records both options but gives no reasons for the selection of either. Anuman Rajadhon (op. cit.) implies that there are no outside shrines, and that each household has an inside shrine, which is the same as or doubles with that of *phii hyan* or house spirits. I am inclined to doubt the validity of his data on this point, at least for Northern Thailand.

10) As an outsider I was not permitted to attend the first such annual sacrifice after being resident in the village for five months. I was able to attend the following year in the stem house of one of the groups I was most intimate with. I was never ritually incorporated into any descent group.

of certain domestic rituals: those for the birth of a child, for a new house, for ordinations, and the "follow-up" sacrifice for recently dead kin. It is not informed however of the death of a member at the time of death or funeral. On these occasions there is no obligation to contribute or attend. No other offerings need be made provided that no other breaches of normal order occur, and all members live in harmony, health and reasonable prosperity. Problematic breaches of good order within the descent group are said to have occurred when quarrels between members are revealed, and when sexual trespass on a woman of the lineage is discovered, whether or not leading to marriage. The breach is normally revealed when a case of sickness of a member is divined as having been caused by the lineage spirit. In the case of sexual trespass the breach may be disclosed, without divination, by members of the group, or by the offending male himself in cases where marriage is intended.

DESCENT GROUPS AND RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION

Descent groups are typically associated with corporate control over land, labour or other economic resources; it is therefore appropriate to begin an attempt at an interpretation of the social functions of the Thai-Yuan descent group by considering it in the context of ecological conditions and the social relations of production. This involves the invidious task of historical reconstruction and conjecture in an area where little research has been done and which I am not qualified to make. However some attempt must be made even if only to establish hypotheses which can later be tested. On the whole the conclusions which can be reached about the relations between this system of matrilineal descent groups and the political and economic conditions under which it may have developed, are rather negative, but certain insights can be gained the relevance of which will become apparent as the interpretation advances.

Over the last 800 years or so the area experienced endemic warfare both among Thai princes and between Thai princes and outsiders from "Burma" and "Yunnan", nor was the situation completely changed by the appointment of the first Siamese High Commissioner in Chiangmai nearly 100 years ago. There has also been considerable movement and

some intermingling of ethnic groups. In the 19th century we can say that prevailing conditions were almost the inverse of those in South East China where population was dense, land scarce and lineages, or some of them, had important links with the state government. Until about 50 years ago the area had a very small population, fluctuating according to the ravages of malaria, epidemics, warfare and wild animals. The type of economy would seem to coincide with Marx's definitions of the "Asiatic mode of production": characterized by "the self sustaining unity of manufactures and agriculture" within villages which therefore contained within themselves, if left in relative peace and safety, the conditions for reproduction and surplus production. Towns might rise and fall, and the smaller political centres resembled "princely camp (s) superimposed on the real economic structure".¹¹ Except perhaps in a much earlier expansionist phase the ordinary people, if left to themselves, would not need to organize for warfare; local communities might band together to repel small bands of marauders, but if faced with a superior force would probably submit or flee. The wars for which the princes recruited, usually for control of population rather than territorial aggrandizement, were probably seldom in the people's interest. This is indicated already by the people's attitude to the role of warrior. About 40 years ago it was possible for a villager to hire a person to fulfil his short term military obligations, but at a cost of 100 Indian rupees, then the cost of purchasing a domestic servant outright or about one third to one half the cost of a work elephant. Nowadays, with the bureaucratization of recruitment the cost of buying illegal remission has decreased; though it is still substantial. Military service is by and large still greatly feared, and magical protection which itself can be expensive, and the antiquity of whose formulae indicates the deeprootedness of these attitudes, is still used before the annual recruitment exercise.

Irrigable rice land was abundant; the prime scarce resource was labour, especially male labour for breaking new fields, ploughing, maintaining the irrigation system, and defending against wild animals. And for this labour the villagers were to some extent in competition with those who had feudal type rights to demand labour for military service

11) Karl Marx: *Precapitalist Economic Formations*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm 1964.

or economic *corvée*. (In a later section I shall be arguing that this and other oppositions between these levels of society may be reflected in the symbolic structure of descent group ritual seen as part of a system of related cults). Thus at the least the continued presence in the village of men, or of particular men, was unreliable, owing to their absence or greater mobility, whether engaged in feudal services or hunting, which involved also abnormal dangers and could lead to the death or non-return of the men. In such a situation, it might be argued, some flexible form of matrilineal organization would have certain advantages, at least over the bilateral form of organization found in more settled parts of Thailand. Irrigated rice land, essential for survival in a way no other productive resources are, could remain in or revert to the control of the more settled group of women and elders, with husbands on marriage residing uxorilocally, as they do now, and having the immediate right and obligation to work and use the land. On divorce, which is frequent, the husband moves away, or if settled neolocally the wife returns to her mother's household taking with her any land worked by her husband that was apportioned on a usufruct basis at marriage. To some extent any adult male will do; a son may be able to live matrilocally or neolocally close to his parents and work his parents' fields. We have already observed the flexibility with regard to the incorporation of affinal, and married consanguineal males. There remains the problem of finding husbands for daughters, but the group is not exogamous.

But whatever the situation may formerly have been, the matrilineal descent group is not now a landowning corporation. It might also be argued that it is not a diminished form but one that never developed in this direction. It might be argued too that the absence or uncertain presence of men was not extreme or prolonged, or only intermittently so over longish periods, and taking place chiefly during the five months or so dry season between harvest and commencing work on the irrigation system, though these months are by no means unproductive. In the present situation the joint estates of extended families within the descent group are at most temporary entities; land is inherited bilaterally with equal shares to sons and daughters. The youngest daughter may receive a slightly larger share for her part in looking after the parents, and since men are more likely to move further on marriage they may take their

inheritance in the form of moveable assets leaving sisters who are also more likely to live close together with adjacent fields which can be worked jointly. There is still a tendency however, for households at least, to maximize efforts to obtain and retain male labour. But in any case, as Kathleen Gough suggested,¹² descent groups tend to decrease in importance when land and labour enter a total market system. Land is now becoming scarce in this area, and because of larger, more settled communities there is a more predictable pool of labour for cooperative exchange of labour and, as the number of landless villagers increases, for wage labour, though in the fieldwork area this last was a very recent feature.

The absence of any conclusive evidence on the relation between descent groups and the economic system does not thereby reduce the ritual and jural significance of the descent group and its cult. Indeed their persistence in the face of political and economic change may indicate their relative independence of the economic system, and also perhaps indicate that political change has not been so great. It is to these jural and ritual aspects that I now turn.

DESCENT GROUPS AND THE REGULATION OF MARRIAGE

The descent group is not an exogamous unit. Marriages are recognized as creating desirable alliances between households, villages, even descent groups, but these are largely incidental bonuses. Formerly, when local communities were smaller and farther apart, there was a strong tendency for men to marry and reside outside their natal hamlet. This tendency is now less marked, but men are still likely to move farther on marriage than women.¹³ The most preferred marriage, of a man with a parent's younger sibling's daughter or grandparent's younger sibling's granddaughter is not statistically very frequent; there is no preference for matrilineal cousins which would consolidate the matrilineage. In general marriage has marked cognatic features: rather high turnover of

12) D. Schneider and K. Gough, *op. cit.*

13) Well under half the married male householders were living in their natal hamlet compared with well over two-thirds of married female householders. There were three times as many married men as women born outside the valley.

spouses,¹⁴ small marriage payment by the man's parents, and minimal ritual. I shall return later to the question of marriage rules.

Any form of sexual trespass is said to wrong the lineage spirit of the woman, and sacrifice must be made, in this as in other cases of problematic breach of lineage order, of a more expensive pig's head, not chickens. In case of marriage a sum of money, formerly fairly static at 3 rupees, now a minimum of 12 *baht*, is provided by the man's parents. The only essential ceremonial actions are a brief discussion between two or three male elders from either side, who are most likely to be of the same descent group as the groom and bridegroom respectively, during which the payment is made and a token return gift made, followed by a small meal. The sacrifice takes place the following day with only the groom from among the new affines present. If marriage is not agreed the man must pay twice the sum required for marriage unless there are aggravating circumstances when a larger sum may be called a fine, not a ritual settlement; this is a very recent development however.

Technical sexual trespass includes a man stepping over the threshold of a girl's family bedroom or touching any part of her body, even by sitting on the same mat. A girl will roll a cigarette for her suitor but offer it holding the extreme tip. (No woman may ever touch or hand anything directly to an ordained monk or novice, an absolutely unmarriageable category of men). These rules are waived in the case of unmarried men of the group but stop short of copulation. In practice probably very few girls are virgins at marriage; they may have had several love affairs, and not a few had abortions.¹⁵ However the lineage spirit is said to be a witness for the lineage elders, observing illicit affairs in the fields and forest. Formerly sanctions were more severe and frequent; cases of sickness were more likely to be divined as the

14) The incidence of divorce among the 180 heads of households and their spouses was as follows:

	MEN	WOMEN
One divorce	58	47
Two or more divorces	18	9

Most divorces were followed by remarriage.

15) The modal age ranges at first marriage of all married householders were:

Men: 19-26; Women: 17-21.

result of the anger of the lineage spirit at the misbehaviour of the young. In such cases all the unmarried nubile girls of the lineage had to undergo a ritual ordeal conducted by a diviner who might be of the group or not. Each had to produce a chicken's egg; these the diviner broke open, declaring the owner of the first one opened and found to be fertilized as the guilty party. Girls were said greatly to have feared this ordeal and to have used protective magic which involved spells and rubbing the egg on the genitalia, a belief also held to explain failure to detect women known to have offended. In addition to the cost of the sacrifice, there is admonition by elders, some unwelcome publicity and temporary opprobrium, but no further punishment.

DESCENT GROUPS AND JURAL AUTHORITY

All lineage spirits are said to be capable of punishing members of the group for certain wrongs, either interpersonal: e.g. quarrelling, illicit sexual relations, splitting up the group; or ritual shortcomings: failure to sacrifice, improper sacrifice, disrespectful treatment of shrine. Total abandonment is said to lead to the transformation of the spirit into *phiika*, a kind of spirit of witchcraft, also inherited matrilineally, whose owners may be expelled from or refused admission to a village. The word used for to neglect or abandon (*la*) is also that used of people, and occurs frequently in discussions of filial obligations to parents. About one third of all lineage spirits were reported as having been active in the last year or so; two had possessed their victim and three were considered particularly "fierce" (*suag*) though not unjust or capricious. One man joked: "If they were fierce, we'd chase them out of the house". The commonest attitude is that they are protective and benevolent, if not benign; useful disciplinarians according to the elders, if rather strict ones in the eyes of the young. They are of only positive value unless lineage members offend them. They punish with sickness but not death. Even though sickness may lead to death this is not ascribed to the lineage spirit. Lineage spirits may get other less benevolent spirits, such as forest spirits and spirits of people dying bad deaths, to punish for them in order to save their own reputation. This double causation is sometimes a specific diagnosis; it is also possible, though I failed to confirm this, that when other spirits are divined singly as the cause of sickness the superordinate authority of lineage spirits is brought to mind.

Given the importance of the connection between the authority of the spirits and sickness we should consider some aspects of the medical culture, diagnosis and treatment. Cases of sickness and disease are very frequent. 95 households, over half, reported a total of 132 cases of sickness, woundings etc., other than very minor, in approximately the one year period before the survey. Malaria control, antiseptics, immunology and the availability of other modern medical services have begun to achieve certain, still limited improvement. In this respect it is interesting to note that while modern developments, medical, demographic, ideological and technical, have reduced the importance of many kinds of spirit, the lineage spirits seem to persist more strongly than most. Modern 'scientific' explanations are also beginning to have a place with traditional aetiologies of disease. Musing on the increasing disregard for certain marriage proscriptions an older learned man made the revealing transition: "nowadays the hospital is the big thing" and his wife added: "if you don't fall sick (i.e. after a breach of a rule) it doesn't matter". The frequency and amount of ritual treatment was still marked, including the doubling up of methods, often ritual methods with hospital visits. Treatment of all kinds is performed both simultaneously and serially until signs of improvement are shown. Of the ritual methods, predominantly exorcistic, there were 55 cases where sacrifices were made to one or more spirits of various kinds (a total of 117) by 48 households, i.e. more than a quarter of all households in one year. At least half of this total of 117 were to forest spirits, mostly in cases of male patients, the forest being more a sphere of male activity; their wounds and fevers are known to originate there. 22 cases were to lineage spirits, involving 15 women, 7 men and no children who had not reached puberty, already an indication of the jurisdiction of the lineage spirit. The survey revealed that sacrifices to spirits of all kinds tend to coincide with more serious cases and are more likely to be performed later in the series of ritual treatment. In those cases involving lineage spirits this would tend to reinforce the idea of the gravity of offending them, and since the last method of treatment before a visible diminution of symptoms is likely to be held responsible for the eventual cure, this would reinforce the idea of the efficacy of sacrificing to lineage spirits.

The lineage spirits punish only consanguineal members of the group and have a preference for women, especially marriageable girls. Their jural authority extends to women who have moved away from their natal hamlet and so are less under the authority of lineage elders; thus the solidarity of the women of the group is reinforced. The fact that consanguineal males, even after marriage, may still be the victims of their maternal lineage spirits, but less frequently than women, indicates the more optional nature of the incorporation of males with their sisters and other consanguineal members of their maternal lineage. This variability needs to be seen in the light of the tenuous nature of the marriage bond as indicated by the immunity of men from the jural authority of their wives' lineage spirits. When a lineage spirit is divined as the cause of any trouble the group must sacrifice collectively, and ask for forgiveness, even if in the case of pregnancy before marriage it is not possible to identify a man to pay the cash penalty. To this extent then the group is a jural corporation. Magic is said not to be used against consanguineal kin of the same descent group; affines might conceivably use it. Yet this corporation does not seem to have acted as a single unit in response to offences by outsiders—except in the case of sexual trespass, and perhaps also in hue and cry, and in an advisory capacity. The contrast between methods used for dealing with internal and external conflicts and offences is revealing. Within the group the offender will probably be known to all, even if not explicitly named; the offence is brought into the open; apologies are made to the lineage spirit; and solidarity is expressed in the communion of sacrifice. Severe conflicts between members and outsiders are typically dyadic, and are dealt secretly with destructive, aggressive magic. Once magic is used there are no means of reconciliation or open prosecution of users of magic, only counter-magic, and counter-counter-magic. This principle still holds today although recently physical destruction of property and revenge killings and woundings have become more frequent, and the village headman provides a new institution for litigation and conciliation.

THE IDENTITY OF THE LINEAGE SPIRITS

In order to take the analysis a stage beyond what can be derived from the actions and explanations of the actors themselves I now need to attempt a more detailed structural analysis of the meanings of the

descent group cult and its relations with other sets or systems of ideas, principally other systems of authority and other cults of the dead. First I must give an explanation, rather overdue, of the identity of the lineage spirit. The northern Thai term is *phii* (spirit) *puu jaa*. *Puu* and *jaa* are kinship categories. Their meaning in contemporary local usage is: *puu*, parents' elder brother, and *jaa*, parents' elder sister, also their spouses. Occasionally the terms may be used for grandparents' elder siblings, who may also be called "great grandparents"; in fact all "elder siblings", of one's own, parents' or grandparents' generations may be assimilated both categorically and in practice to the next higher generation.¹⁶

I have referred so far to a single lineage spirit. We now see that the term includes two categories. Some villagers recognize this as a

- 16) Here I must stress that I am referring to the Northern Thai usage I recorded. Gehan Wijeyewardene, in his article "Address, abuse and animal categories in northern Thailand" (in *MAN N.S.* Vol. 3, No. 1, March 1968 p. 76) states: "As distinct from Central Thai, in Northern Thai, *puu* and *njaa* are used only for collaterals of the *second* ascending generation." (my emphasis) In Central Thai *puu* and *jaa* mean paternal grandfather and paternal grandmother respectively. In Central Thai usage there is a term (*phii*) *puu yaataa jaaj* (*taa*: maternal grandfather; *jaaj*: maternal grandmother) which is usually translated as "ancestors" or "forefathers" and which according to Phya Anuman Rajadhon (op. cit.) may refer to house, household, or collective community spirits but do not correspond to a descent group. They may be interchangeable with, or have been supplanted by, a community locality spirit or *caotii*. Anuman Rajadhon states that in North Thailand these are called *phii puu jaa*; in the North-East: *phii puataa*; in the South, *phii taajaaj* and from this evidence he infers varying lineal bias in these regional cultures. Sanguan Chotsukkarat (op. cit.) recognizes what he regards as a paradox that there should be "spirits of paternal grandparents" in Northern Thailand when *puu* and *jaa* are not used in Northern Thai for paternal grandparents. He does not mention that *puu* and *jaa* have a different meaning in Northern Thai, nor recognize what would be a more problematic paradox, that spirits inherited matrilineally should be spirits of a category of patrilineal ancestors. Some problems still remain however: one does occasionally hear a Northern Thai speaker referring to *phii puu jaataa n (j) aaj* but I strongly suspect this is a neologism adopted possibly in the knowledge of the increasingly dominant Central Thai kinship terminology (taught in schools for instance) and possibly for euphony. In addition *puu* and *jaa* may refer of course to both patrilineal and matrilineal kin, but at least it is not contradictory to speak of the *puu* and *jaan* of a matrilineally related set of kinsmen.

puzzle: "two people but only one spirit and female at that" to quote the most explicit esoteric comment. In practice the problem is hardly ever raised. They are however thought of as if they were the spirits of people; also in popular Buddhist theology and eschatology the term *phii* connotes primarily a dead person or at least a spirit capable of having once been, or one day becoming a person. The lineage spirits are never the spirits of particular people. They are almost infinitely divisible; are unnamed;¹⁷ are invisible; do not necessarily live in their shrines but probably in the sky, attending only when invited to receive a sacrifice.

Phii puu jaa then are spirits of a category of kin. They are not "structurally significant ancestors" in the sense of forming an ideal hierarchy of remembered or memorialized dead kinsmen, nor are they "immediate jural superiors" in the sense of remembered, recently dead kinsmen who during their lifetime were the worshippers' jural superiors, nor yet are they a collectivity of elders; there are other terms for elders, and kinsmen other than *puu* and *jaa* may be elders. And yet the *phii puu jaa* share something of the characteristics of all three of these anthropological types of ancestor spirit.¹⁸ That is to say they are a category of jurally superior kinsmen with some structural significance. Their fairly minimal structural significance lies in the fact that despite the lack of

17) I heard of two instances in which a lineage spirit did reveal its name through a possessed patient, both times as a single female with a name not linked with that of any remembered kinswoman.

18) The anthropological literature on ancestor worship is large, and only further comparative research will reveal to what extent this Thai case is a novel type. In this context see especially:

R.E. Bradbury: "Fathers, Elders, and Ghosts in Edo Religion", in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (A.S.A. Monographs No. 3) ed. M. Banton 1966.

M. Fortes : *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi*, 1942. "Pietas in Ancestor Worship" in *Time and Social Structure and other essays*, 1970.

M. Freedman : *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*, 1958. *Chinese Lineage and Society*, 1966. "Ancestor Worship: Two facets of the Chinese Case" in *Social Organization*, ed. M. Freedman 1967.

J. Goody : *Death, Property and the Ancestors*, 1962.

J. Middleton : *Lugbara Religion*, 1960.

names or any segmentary structure each descent group's spirit is distinct from that of other groups and distinguishes the members of one group from another. I now have to show the significance of this category, and this takes us to the heart of the analysis.

The fundamental categorical distinction between people in Northern Thai culture is between older and younger, with the distinction between older and younger members of the same generation as important as that between senior and junior generations. Children are taught from the first to distinguish all members of their own generation as *phii* (falling tone—elder sibling) or *nong* (younger sibling) regardless of sex.¹⁹ The pair of terms connotes inequality and intimacy, deference and mutual obligation. The heinousness of inverting, i.e. of negating, this order, with its jural implications, ranks with that of inverting parent/child and sacred/lay relations; thus, killing an elder brother is said to be not only sinful (*baap*) but taboo (*khyd*); beating an elder sibling is sinful if not taboo, while an elder beating a younger is not *ipso facto* even sinful.

There is an ego-focussed set of kinsmen known as *luugphuuphiiphuunong*, children of people who were *phii* and *nong*, usually full siblings in the first and second ascending generations. It is in terms of this set of kinsmen that the basic marriage rules are formulated. A person calls all children of a parent's elder sibling, i.e. a *puu* or a *jaa*, *phii* regardless of age; similarly after marriage all those whom his spouse calls *phii*. The principle marriage proscription is that a man may not marry the daughter of a *puu* or *jaa*. The principle preferential rule is for a man to marry the daughter or granddaughter of a parent's or grandparent's younger sibling. A set of other marriage rules²⁰ reinforces this primary concept

- 19) From true siblings and members of one's own generation the semantic range fans out to include all kinsmen, and can include the meaning 'all human beings are *phiinong*', all men are brothers, (but unequal). Much of this is well known ethnographic fact and I have cut down the description accordingly.
- 20) E.g. a person may not marry the elder sibling of an elder sibling's spouse, nor a man the spouse of a deceased elder sibling; a man who is *nong* in his sibling set should not marry a woman who is more highly placed in her sibling set; polygynous marriage with a first wife's younger sister is permissible, but not with her elder sister. If a wife is older than her husband, as was the case in approximately one marriage in seven, the husband will not call his wife *phii*; indeed already in courtship a stage of increased intimacy may be signalled when a relatively older woman decides to call her younger lover *phii*.

so that one may say that for a man no woman who can be assimilated to the category *phii* is marriageable. This simple rule which is not made fully explicit in cultural formulations and which has not as far as I know been proposed elsewhere in the ethnographic literature, is I believe the most important element in the deep structure as it were of Northern Thai kinship grammar. The remaining logical problem is of course that this places a man's own younger full sisters in the marriageable category. This problem is expressed and symbolically resolved in various mythical and jural statements. For instance, the first two human beings, offspring of divine parents, were an elder brother and a younger sister who necessarily married; it is believed to be auspicious for twins to marry provided they are separated at birth; full sibling incest (probably the least frequent) incurs ritual sanctions over a minimal social range compared with improper sexual relations between parents and children, or worse, between monks and laity. The idea that sibling rivalry not only negates a fundamental value but may easily occur is expressed in the myth of the lunar eclipse, which is enacted at eclipses, is prominently portrayed in temple iconography, and is told as a cautionary tale. In the myth a classificatory younger sibling is reborn, as a punishment for striking an elder sibling, as a planetary monster that periodically attempts to eat the moon, the reincarnation of the elder sibling. The terrifying possibility of cosmic and social disorder is warded off by a once for all mythical intervention of the Buddha supported by *ad hoc* human intervention in the form of ritually created cacophony at eclipses. The story serves as a warning to uppish younger siblings and imperious elder siblings alike. The absence of descent group exogamy should be seen in the light of this primary marriage rule and rule of sibling subordination which the logic of the descent group cult reinforces.

But *puu* and *jaa* are not only elder siblings, they are parents' elder siblings; thus the principle of generational authority is also involved. Predictably all intergenerational marriages are taboo (*khyd*). The problematic case of say a parent's younger sibling younger than oneself, is expressed, and the sibling order within the parental generation reaffirmed, in the relationship of licensed joking and cursing between such categories of kin. A person *may* call virtually anyone, kinsman or not,

in any senior generation (there is no principle of alternation of generational authority) by a term with a basic meaning of "mother" or "father", even though he may be more likely to call some of them "aunt" or "uncle", or for instance by such terms as "holy father", "princely father", "father teacher", "father benefactor" etc. etc. . . . Filial piety, in its broadest sense, is expressed towards such "mother" and "father" figures in a small but important periodic act of obeisance (*dam hua*, lit. washing the head) in which a more or less token gift is offered with a request for forgiveness and a blessing. Even more importantly here all married adults should make this offering to their surviving parents, parents' older siblings (who are quite likely to be the oldest close kinsmen alive) and grandparents about once every three months (at New Year, the beginning and end of the rainy season retreat (*wassaa*), and at the harvest festival).

We need to look briefly at the economic, jural and ritual content of the parent-child relationship. The parent cares for the child until marriage (the word *lian*, meaning basically feed, also care for, entertain, is used in the expression for to sacrifice to lineage and other spirits). At marriage a man's parents provide the small marriage costs; he then ideally works for his wife's parents for a substantial period. Thereafter a man's strategies may diverge from those of his parents. The man typically wishes to set up his own household; break and work his own fields; and acquire access to and liens on as much of his parents' or wife's parents' land as possible. Parents try to retain at least one child living close or coresidentially; to retain control over their own fields and as much of the labour of their children as possible. After marriage a man may receive land, cattle or rice, either as a gift or more often as some kind of share, from either his own or wife's parents. Parents are loath however to relinquish rights over house and land even when widowed, and frequently express anxiety lest their children not look after them in old age.

It is in ritual that relations between generations are most clearly seen. First in the very striking rite of ordination of young men as novices in the Buddhist order of monkhood.²¹ In a ritual reversal young

21) Of the laymen over the age of 20 in the census approximately one in four had been ordained as a novice, and one in ten as a monk.

males who have not yet reached puberty are given a position of ritual superiority and the means of transition to the role of *naan*, former monk, the highest lay status in the village community. In return the elders, for all contribute although parents have a predominant share, assure themselves access to the benefits of spiritual merit and transition after death to the next life. Not only is the child, whose very birth might be said *a priori* to threaten his parents, subjected to a ritual death in this initiation ceremony (which involves isolation, head-shaving, celibacy and fasting) but he is entrusted with the obligation, which continues after the death of the parents, of contributing to their rebirth. But at death it is the responsibility of *all* kinsmen of junior generations (collectively known as *luuglaan*: children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces) among whom most especially those junior members of the dead person's own close kindred (*luugphuu phii phuunong*), to perform all funerary rites, including, ideally if rarely, temporary *voluntary* ordination. I shall discuss below other post-funerary obligations.

Fortes has suggested the proposition that ancestor cults will not be found where there is gradual succession to jural autonomy and economic emancipation before the death of the father (or presumably whoever else holds the jural and economic powers). We have seen that some economic and jural authority may be transferred by parents to their children during their lifetime but that this is recognized to be problematic and undesirable. Moreover the younger generations continue to be ritually subordinate even after the death of their parents; and whatever may happen within a particular family, the younger generations remain in large part jurally and ritually subordinate to the elders as a whole. Fortes's hypothesis is to some extent validated in that a limited measure of gradual inheritance and succession correlates with the fact that the lineage spirits do not represent reincorporated recently dead kinsmen; nor are they excessively strict. But as during their lifetime the elders as a whole, and among them perhaps especially parents' elder siblings, received continued and considerable ritual and jural deference, so the category of senior kinsmen represented by the lineage spirits is the subject of an authoritative ancestor-type cult. At this stage in the analysis I think it is no longer of primary importance whether or

not we consider the lineage spirit cult as "ancestor worship" by conventional ethnographic analysis. I hope to have demonstrated both its distinctive features, and that it belongs to the same class of phenomena, fulfilling many comparable functions.

THE LINEAGE SPIRIT CULT AND OTHER SYSTEMS OF AUTHORITY

I now want to adduce as further explanation the argument that the jural significance of the cult is paramount because it constitutes a crucial intermediary structure in a system of logically related cognitive, jural and political structures, all deriving ultimately from historical relations of production. In simple figurative terms there are three principal interrelated structured spheres in this system: the natural world; the village sphere (the chief levels of which are: household, descent group, and local community); and thirdly the state. The existentially precarious and problematic relations between them are expressed in the systems of ideal relations. The typical village sphere (here I construct an ideal-type model to explain the pre-modern situation), the relatively safe, familiar, reliable, domesticated area of houses, gardens and irrigated fields, is quite literally surrounded by forest. The "princely camp" is several days' journey away through the forest and other, possibly unrelated villages. The forest sphere irrupts into the village sphere more often, and more dangerously than the princely sphere, but the villager is more dependent on it. To put it crudely: while the princes might depend on the people most of the time, the people could dispense with princes and their officials (*caonaaj*), even in symbolic terms as we shall see, at least for most of the time, during most of their history. Thus as one former headman put it: "the princes were feared more than tigers and bears".

In considering the system of jural authority within the village sphere we need to bear in mind the much smaller size of village settlements, and so smaller number of local descent groups, until quite recently. In the religious sphere there is the abbot, more often than not a young man, and the lay congregation leader, a male elder and former monk; in the sphere of production there is the irrigation association chief. But these are either supra-village roles or have only limited, functionally

specific jurisdiction. Apart from these roles there is a lack of centralized authority able to make and enforce extreme decisions (e.g. execution or expulsion of offenders), certainly not openly or directly. Even the institution of village headman has not yet uniformly or fundamentally altered this situation. Troubled relations within the descent group are settled in terms of the spirit cult; those with outsiders by avoidance or covert, dyadic means. Within the group punishment is inflicted by spirits which have a matrilinear, possibly even female connotation. The interpretation of their action, gossip and innuendo apart, is controlled largely by men: fathers and mothers' elder brothers, especially the older, literate ex-monks among them; hence some of the logical and existential problems generated by the ideal system are resolved. But it is not a single male who dominates, even if he be the ritual officiant; moreover the systems of divination are such that they cannot be said always to be consciously manipulated in the interests control.

Unlike other systems of explanation of evil, sin and suffering where individual wrongs are followed by individual punishment (as in the political sphere, or the private Buddhist moral sphere) or where human beings are the random victims of non-human forces (as in the natural sphere e.g. in certain astrological, and geological systems, and beliefs about forest spirits) in the lineage spirit cult individual wrongs (vaguely ascribed at times) are followed by a more generalized retribution within the group. The jural solution to the problem is not the dismembering, expulsion or death of a single offender, nor an exorcism, nor a diminution of personal merit, but a communion of all members in a sacrifice at which solidarity, forgiveness and positive values are affirmed and increased, at the loss of at most a little food, time, and personal 'face', none of which is in short supply. The theme of avoidance of individual or direct responsibility, which is found in the local community role structure in the absence of centralized authority, and also at times in the moral sphere, is found in the lineage spirit cult: first, in the ascription of responsibility by elders to the lineage spirit; secondly, in the habit of lineage spirits getting subordinate spirits to do their dirty work for them; and thirdly in that the victim is often, perhaps usually, an innocent person, suffering as the result of another's action.

From the data so far presented we could say that the village jural and political system is incomplete, inadequate.²² From one point of view it is a truncated system; it is part of a state, if not so highly centralized a state as traditional Siam. The King, usually resident in Chiangmai at the head of a hierarchy of princes and nobles was the "lord of life" (*cao ciwit*) as one of his principal titles can be translated. Ultimate jural authority, with the extreme sanction of the decapitation of an offender, lay with the King, also all supra-local political control, though this power may have been more ideal than actual for much of

- 22) I have already referred to the absence of superordinate lineage structure. It is tempting to speculate on the process of emergence of dominant lineages in the past, which through good fortune, a series of strategic marriages and successful clientage may have made themselves into local agents of ruling princes, and even become princes or nobles. The princes certainly distributed patronage in the form of titles on a small scale even to commoner villagers in remote areas, but the extent of the functions of the office, and its authority, which would seem to be slight, is a subject requiring further historical research. Here I only wish to record that in the census area, in fact in the village cluster as a whole, the largest descent group and one other, referred to earlier as containing between them nearly half the richest households, differ in interesting respects from other lineages. The larger, which contained the present and previous village headmen, and whose sons, brothers, affines and assimilated members include the local Chinese storekeeper and his wife, several teachers and other junior government officials and traders, both local and spread over the North of Thailand, has "as its *phii punjaa*" the spirit of a set of elephant catching equipment *phii chya gbaat* indicating previous wealth. Also the junior section of this six generation lineage is strategically connected by marriage to the senior section in the surviving fourth ascending generation. The other group has "as its lineage spirit" the chief locality spirit (*cao luay khamdee*) of whom more later) which also serves as the focus of a cult whose congregation is drawn from the whole village cluster. This five generation lineage is affinally linked to the previous one in its fourth ascending generation, and contains amongst others the lay leader of the village temple and the headman of another village in the cluster. Of greater structural interest, the role of ritual officiant for the descent group and locality cult has been inherited patrilineally by a man for three generations and looks as if it will continue so. The present incumbent explained that the original members were immigrants from Chiangmai (so closer to the political centre) who having no lineage spirit took the existing locality spirit as their own. He agreed to the plausibility at least of my suggestion of a link between his unexpected element of patrilineal ideology and the patrilineal genealogies of the aristocracy.

time and over much of the territory. The "lord of life" was also "lord of the surface of the earth" (*cao pheendin*) with ritual and legal title; the people had right of use in return for feudal obligations. But the earth beneath the surface and the flora and fauna above it have other occupants, owners and overseers: nagas (*naag*); the earth mother (*naang thoranii*); locality or site spirits (*cao tii*); forest and tree spirits (*phii paa*). This is not the place to elaborate the manifold relations between lineage spirits and other spirits, but I should like to consider one of these in order to illustrate further the negative relation between lineage spirits, land ownership and agricultural production; and also to illustrate the contradictory relations between state and local ideas about landownership.

Every piece of land, the things in it and on it, have a spiritual and/or political owner or guardian. Ordinary men have rights of use only and so the producer must continually negotiate with either spiritual or political owners, or both. In the story of the origin of lineage spirits, all spirits that were not bought by men as lineage spirits became forest spirits; now when forest is cut down, say to make a space for domestic use or cultivation, non-specific forest spirits become single specific locality spirits (*cao tii*). Every fenced-in house site has such a spirit, and it is interesting to compare this in its critical aspects with the lineage spirit.

The *cao tii* may be placed anywhere in the housesite, usually in a tree or post; lives there permanently and cannot be moved or disposed of, even if, say, the site were to revert to scrub; it has specific responsibility for domestic animals of the household, more generally for the flora and non-human fauna of its locality.

The lineage spirit must be placed in a fixed position ritually "above the head" of the male householder; whether in or out of the house it lives in a man-made structure; it can be moved from the site according to the movements of its collective owners; it has a specific responsibility for people, and not only those of the immediate locality.

At this lowest level the *caotii* corresponds to a lower order social structure than the lineage spirit and more specifically to territory rather than people. Above it are *caotii* of neighbourhoods, villages, village clusters, of principalities, and of the state itself; at the higher levels its meaning is augmented by such concepts as divine kingship and Sivaism.

Gardens and swiddens, which are rarely inherited, also have such locality spirits: irrigated rice fields do not. Yet neither do lineage spirits have jurisdiction over fields, for all that irrigated rice fields are the most important item of inheritable property. Moreover although the lineage ritual calendar is linked with the rice production cycle, it is less importantly involved than the village cluster locality spirit (*cao luay khamdeey*—see below and footnote 22); nor does it usually include a sacrifice at the harvest festival. I interpret this once again as emphasizing the jural control of the lineage spirit over people. Partly as I have said because alternative systems of authority at this level are lacking, also because at the village level, as at the state level, people and not land are the prime scarce resource.

THE LINEAGE SPIRITS AND OTHER CULTS OF THE DEAD

Part of the set of propositions about ancestor worship developed by Fortes is that: 'ancesthood is fatherhood made immortal' and ancestor cults are "the ritualization of filial piety".²³ In order to consider Northern Thai culture in the light of these propositions and investigate further the relations between the lineage cult and authority, we need to look at other cults of the dead. I say "other" because as *puujaa* the lineage spirits represent a category of kinsmen, and as *phii*, a general term including all spirits of the dead, they constitute a category of dead kinsmen. Other spirits of the dead may be classified as: (a) the mythical, (b) the legendary, and (c) the actual or remembered dead.²⁴

(a) The principal mythical spirits are those of the first pair of human beings born on earth of Brahma and Indra; all four of whom are represented in village iconography. This married couple are elder brother and younger sister as mentioned earlier, and their title includes the kin terms *puu* and *jaa* (*puutheen jaatheen*). They are responsible for

23) M. Fortes: "Pietas in Ancestor Worship", op. cit.

24) I must emphasize that this classification and the following listing do not represent a comprehensive record or analysis of the phenomena. In an analytical monograph of this kind it is difficult to achieve a satisfactory balance between presentation of data at a low level of interpretation and more theoretical analysis. I have tried, if anything, to err on the side of "description" so that the analysis can be developed and criticized on the basis of data presented, since much of this is not well known.

deciding, to some extent in conjunction or competition with other agencies, certain important aspects of human fate according to year of birth in the twelve year cycle (e.g. age at death and manner of dying, number of children, wealth, and rank, certain moral and physical characteristics). The inevitability of their determinations may be mitigated by magical means through exorcism and by moral merit; they receive no regular sacrifice.²⁵

(b) Legendary spirits include most importantly the possibly historical culture hero *cao luang khamdeej* (the Golden King) who is regarded as having established or revived Theravada Buddhism in the North and having founded the first kingdom of Chiangmai. His cult is widespread throughout northern Thailand and is to be distinguished from regional "state-political" spirit cults, to which I return. The cult of the Golden King defines the nearest thing to a popularly generated supra-village political unit. He has a general responsibility for all aspects of material welfare, including interestingly magical protection against military conscription, a traditional princely scourge, which still constitutes an annual danger in village life administered sometime capriciously by officials who continue to be known by the generic title shared by the royal spirit himself: *caonaaj* "princely lord and master". Comparative structural analysis of this and the lineage cult reveals interesting distinctions. The ritual officiant is always male, though the spirit may additionally have a female medium. The offerings, publicly made, do not include meat; the spirit is treated as a prince not a kinsman (although he is "like a lineage spirit" for some of his cult members—see footnote 22). Princely status is indicated by a set of sumptuary and linguistic status cues. For instance the congregation are described as 'slaves' (*khaa*) while descent group members are the *luuglaan* of the lineage spirit. While monks and novices are never present at a lineage sacrifice, some of the food offered to the Golden King may be sent to the temple for consumption. The annual sacrifice, nowadays attended predominantly by women and children, formerly by both sexes, is the signal for a series of sacrifices: to lineage spirits, subordinate locality spirits, and irrigation

25) Of the 132 cases of sickness referred to earlier, 42 of the 104 cases treated ritually were so exorcized, always in conjunction with exorcism of other agencies.

spirits. Traditionally no ploughing would start until after this sacrifice had been made.

(c) The third class of spirits of the remembered dead may be further divided into: (i) spirits of teachers; (ii) spirits of those dying violent or other bad deaths; and (iii) spirits of dead parents and grandparents.

(i) Some spirits of dead teachers (*phūkhruu*) might also be classified as mythical or legendary, for instance those owned dyadically by some of the numerous male possessors of magical knowledge. The particular case that interests me here is the spirit of a much respected former abbot (*kuba*), of the village temple, who died about 40 years ago having been ordained for about 60 years. He had been the principal moral and magical instructor to the current generation of senior *naan* who lead the temple congregation in memorial sacrifices at his stone tomb just outside the temple under the *bo* tree on several occasions during the ritual calendar. This was the only such tomb for many villages around; the cult could be said therefore to be a redundant, if highly logical and functional, element of social structure. I return presently to elaborate its significance.

(ii) Spirits of those dying bad deaths (*phii taa j hong*) are of great interest. It is said that their material remains and continued ghostly presence may harm the living because their bad deaths, a punishment for moral wrongs, did not allow them to receive ritually proper funerals. The two most typical and also worst kinds of such spirits, for only a minority of such dead persons actually become harmful, are women dying in pregnancy, childbirth or the month after, and men who during their lives were generally antisocial, disorderly, violent or homicidal. One of the latter kind was particularly active and had received at least 10 sacrifices in one year (out of the 55 cases of sickness involving spirit sacrifice) nearly all doubled up with sacrifice to lineage spirits. Anthropological analysis indicates that the meanings and functions of these phenomena derive from their primary classification as negating fundamental social values. First with regard to age: children dying under the age of about ten are largely discounted; older men and women are unproblematically assimilated to the senior dead; they have adult *luuglaan* to perform

their funerary rites. Women dying in childbirth and men dying violently and accidentally are much more likely to be younger householders or unmarried adults. Secondly women dying in childbirth negate the values of female fertility and the mother-child relationship. The corpse is buried immediately without ceremony except for a post-mortem caesarean if necessary, and naked in order to shame the spirit. Despite these precautions physical matter from the corpse is believed to provide magic that can be used to cause the separation or death of living persons. In turn this double negative may be said positively to balance the relative jural and ritual inferiority of women and of the young, and to contribute to a system of magical vengeance for which other jural institutions are lacking. Thirdly those dying violent deaths, who may receive no burial at all if they are outsiders, are often men who in their lifetime were *nakleey* (lit. 'force expert') a type of half-admired, half-feared violent ruffian, who may be used (an apparently increasing tendency) by other, usually older men to carry out secret acts of physical vengeance including homicide, a task for which there may be a need, but no legitimate jural institution. Such men, both during their lives and after, negate the Buddhist moral value of non-violence and the principle of the subordination of younger to senior generations.

(iii) Thirdly there are spirits of parents and grandparents, who are among a person's most immediate jural superiors during their lifetime. Fortes cites a Sanskrit maxim that "a son is he who rescues a man from hell" and assures his attainment of *nirvana*. Our conventional logic (though not that of the Chinese it seems²⁶) would assume that a concept of reincarnation precluded the concept of ancestorhood, in the strict sense; and this is more or less what we find in this case. Those remembered persons who continue to be worshipped as individuals long after their death (e.g. the Golden King and the former abbot) are those whose lives might be said to have earned a long stay in heaven before rebirth. Hence one could posit a logical necessity as one reason among others for the *phiipuuja* being a category of dead kinsmen rather than remembered individuals. Ordinary people far from being concerned with

26) See M. Fortes : "Pietas in Ancestor Worship", op. cit.
 M. Freedman : "Ancestor Worship: two facets of the Chinese Case",
 op. cit.

freedom from rebirth are concerned to be reborn (remember that those dying badly may never be reborn into a human or higher existence) and despite prayers to be reborn in a heaven as an angel, are usually concerned for rebirth as soon as possible, for only in human life can one's *karma* be improved. The final transition to nirvana is made after all, as by the Buddha, from a human life, not by moving up through the heavens. Rebirth among one's own kinsmen is desired, though not necessarily in the descent group. It is even considered possible for a man to be reborn as his own grandson.

Thus it would be extremely problematic to have recently dead kinsmen as enduring ancestral spirits. But I have already referred to continuing ritual obligations for the surviving generations of kinsmen. A person's chances of rebirth are said to be determined largely by merit accumulated during that person's lifetime and over previous lives by moral actions and sacrificing; other people can help however. Part of the merit made at any communal sacrifice is dedicated, in a libation, to the collective spirits of the dead to improve their chances. Also I have already referred to the reciprocity involved in the ordination rite.²⁷ Interestingly a novice is said to make greater merit for his mother, a monk for his father, and as we saw only about one novice in three remains in the order to be ordained monk. Once again it is not the father-son relationship that predominates. Sons make merit for mother and father, daughters can too; more accurately a person expects all junior members of his close cognatic kindred to fulfil these ritual obligations, though the ordained male alone has the special power slowly to drain the waters of hell by dipping in his yellow robe to rescue his parents.

At death the soul stuff (*khwan*) disperses and the person (*khon*) becomes a spirit (*phii*)²⁸ which journeys to a vaguely defined land of spirits (*myan phii*) which the esoteric will structure after the Buddhist levels of heavens and hells, where unknowable punishments and rewards

27) This theme and many others relevant to my inquiry are discussed at length in S.J. Tambiah's important new study. "Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand", 1970.

28) The concept "*winjaan*" is not commonly found in traditional, village-level Northern Thai culture.

are meted out before eventual rebirth. Surviving junior kinsmen have three principal obligations to the dead: to ensure the journey to the spirit world is made, to mitigate their sufferings in it, and to improve their chances of rebirth from it into the human world. These three obligations coincide approximately with three types of sacrifice. First the funeral itself, which can be fairly lavish, but the costs of which are borne to a large extent cooperatively by the whole community. Secondly, within about two years a follow-up sacrifice is made (*thaan haa phii taaj*) the scale of which is even more optional, which is rather less public, and the costs of which (often as much as an ordination) are met by the close kindred only. It is the only large domestic sacrifice in which the householder retains none of the contributions made by other households; all are donated to the temple for the merit of the dead person. Thirdly a male householder and his wife, perhaps accompanied by their children, may make *ad hoc* voluntaristic offerings of food *via* a monk, to named, remembered parents and grandparents. These resemble those rites of obeisance (*dam hua*) they received during their lifetime except that they are made *via* a monk. Note that deceased parents and grandparents can impose no sanctions on surviving *luuglaan*, which reinforces the distinction between them and *phiipuuja*. Moreover being made indirectly, to a monk, the offerings also confer merit on the sacrificers, in addition of course to ensuring that their children will do as much for them. The offering is voluntaristic, private, inconspicuous and sentimental; the food is selected and prepared according to their individual tastes, whereas offerings to lineage spirits are standardized. This sacrifice is therefore fundamentally different from those cults of immediate jural superiors described by Goody in which "one fears those ancestors most from whose death one benefited most".²⁹

THE LINEAGE CULT IN NORTHERN THAI SOCIETY—SYNTHESIS AND HYPOTHESIS

It is clear that those cults of the dead which most nearly approach types of ancestor cults far from merely "immortalize the father". I have discussed the continuing symbolic submission of children, male and female, to both parents, living and dead, and more particularly of

29) J. Goody, *op. cit.*

luuglaan to their seniors, most evident in mortuary ritual and the lineage cult, in which implicitly matrilateral *puu* and *jaa* are terms which connote an ideal type of authority at village level rather than denote particular persons. The Oedipal conflict appears to have been highly generalized: we have seen a multiplicity of father figures and categories of father figures. But we might still ask whether the conflict exists in a more singular form within the society as a whole; if so, how it is expressed and symbolically resolved; and how these phenomena relate to the lineage cult. To obtain a view of the whole range of the dominance hierarchy in the social system we need to move again to a wider political and religious perspective.

Together with his titles of lord of life and land the male head of state, the king, was also "father", to his people: titles and rights which were inherited with a patrilineal ideology. The king ruled over a set of principalities of various orders, which tended to coincide with formerly relatively self-contained ecological units, an enclosed irrigable valley or basin; the combined political and ecological unit is best denoted by the term *myaη*. Where there was a resident prince there would be a walled town (*wiaη*) distinct from other types of village settlement. It appears that the rather small valley I worked in had never had a resident prince, but there as elsewhere, the political presence of the ruler was symbolically represented by a wooden post (*lakmyaη*) said to represent the princes' patrilineal ancestors. This symbol shares many characteristics with a set of similar, historically related phenomena from the wooden posts of the dominant patrilineages among the non-Buddhist, non-centralized Thai of traditional northern Vietnam to the gold leaf covered stone post at which the King of Thailand still performs an annual rite in Bangkok. Once a year, possibly less frequently, the prince or an aristocratic delegate would perform a sacrifice at this wooden post. These sacrifices stopped about 60 years ago when the Siamese administrative system was introduced. I obtained a description of the sacrifice from an older man and former headman (*kamnan*). The elements of the sacrifice are in sharp contrast and opposition to those for either the Golden King or lineage spirit. The congregation, who do not initiate the sacrifice, receive their identity from the superordinate authority; they are neither a local com-

munity nor a kin-group. The implication is that they have been unwilling participants, or at best have held an ambivalent attitude to the sacrifice. The sacrificer, a villager charged with that role, wore a red costume worn for no other ceremony.³⁰ The sacrifice itself involved the killing of an adult buffalo at a time when villagers in this region killed neither buffalo nor cows whether for food or sacrifice. The description I obtained of the attendant behaviour of the 'prince', for all that it may be generalized or represent an extreme case, indicates how alien the princely presence was by normal village standards. The prince is accompanied by armed bodyguards; villagers have to sink to their knees to venerate him or risk being beaten by the guards; he rides his elephants over irrigation dykes; he demands to be carried over fields on the backs of their owners; his men shoot at the cattle, only the boldest owners receiving any recompense; he abducts girls for his harem; and forcibly seduces married women, using his bodyguard to surround the house and exclude the husband and householder.

The princely 'father' then is remote, alien, possesses extreme secular power based on an ambiguous authority, and is represented by a single shrine at which he initiates an annual or less frequent sacrifice. In strong contrast is the Buddha himself, in many ways a perfect father figure: the most powerful man, no longer a man, though represented more than life size in every temple, sometimes it is true in princely clothes; a man who achieved his power by renouncing economic power, political title and fatherhood (though by giving away not destroying his children), virility, life and even the possibility of rebirth. And yet this Buddha is resident within each village community and receives continual, voluntary offerings. The perfect immortal fatherhood of the Buddha is found refracted and diminished in the social role structure in the respected elder abbot, such as I referred to earlier, who belongs to no descent group, sacrifices to no lineage spirit; to whom as the villagers say with pride "even the (Siamese) District Officer came to make annual obeisance" (*dam hua*). And who after death may be the subject of a continuing cult.

30) Householders wear ordinary 'black' clothes for sacrifices to the lineage spirit and the Golden King. The Golden King's medium wears white. Monks and novices of course wear yellow.

The Buddha, in the form of a particular image owned by the congregation, may also be said to symbolize a local political unit. There had been only three occasions during the last 60 or 70 years when the villagers had banded together, armed, in defence of a common interest. All three times this was in defence of their principal Buddha image from theft or attempted theft by a government official. In addition to the temple congregation there is the Golden King cult, at the head of a small hierarchy of locality spirits, which defines a local community wider than the temple congregation, and in opposition to both like units and the political units of the princes; and this partly in spite of, partly by virtue of certain historical and ideal structural relations between the authority of the Golden King and the state. I have already referred to the role of this cult in providing magical protection from the princes. Again, structural analysis of the ritual shows marked contrasts, logical distinctions and oppositions, with the princely cult: no meat is offered; the congregation takes the initiative, regards the Golden King as a benefactor; he may also be taken as the spirit of a matrilineal group: offerings may be passed on to the temple for consumption. Formerly all newcomers to the locality had to sacrifice to this spirit, and members of *phii ka'* or 'witch' lineages and pregnant women were refused admission on his authority.

The historical origins, content and development of these oppositions tend to support the structural analysis. For instance, consideration of the origins and development of the *lakmyan* cult, and of Thai Buddhism itself reveals some of these oppositions. Each of these religious complexes contains what could be called an internal, locally and popularly derived element and an external element derived from outside and imposed from the political centre and summit. The *lakmyan* would appear to have very old meanings within Thai culture which antedate both Buddhism and the State (also perhaps in the megalithic culture of the autochthonous or prior Mon-Khmer Lawa (*Lua'*) with whom the Thai possibly shared their first kingdom in northern Thailand); it has also received an admixture of quite consciously borrowed and established beliefs about divine kingship. Buddhism appears to have been disseminated and developed both at a popular level with local cults and

variations, maintained by a voluntarily produced and shared local surplus; and also as part of more standardized state cults, receiving consciously decreed influences from the capital, where the surplus production of all the people was accumulated to build temples on a lavish scale, in part to glorify the semi-divine ruler. Perhaps for these reasons too, in addition to its moral content, 'Buddhism' could be used both to criticize as well as legitimate royal power; could serve as a focus of local identity and autonomy as well as of national unity.

This paper began with a description of a set of fairly discrete phenomena: some descent groups and their ritual, observed and recorded first-hand. To some extent this could be understood in terms of its own internal relations. I tried to demonstrate that a more comprehensive interpretation could be obtained by taking a broader and longer view. This involved trespassing on research areas in which I cannot claim competence and in which adequate information may be lacking. Inevitably the interpretation becomes increasingly hypothetical. We arrive at a conceptual model of a social system seen from the viewpoint of some of its principal component cults, of which the matrilineal descent group cult is one. Since this paper is concerned with explicating the meaning of this cult I shall not extend the analysis of the whole set of cults, some of which have been only briefly referred to. Of particular interest are the relations between the cults of the *lakmyan*, the Golden King, and the matrilineal descent group spirit. Of these three the central one, that of the cult of the Golden King, occupies an intermediary position, both in terms of actual, existential, jural and political functions, and in terms of symbolic functions. The structure of its ritual symbolism³¹ reveals a set of symbolic mediations between the elements of the two neighbouring cults, on the one hand that of a large, relatively unbounded political unit structured by social rank, and on the other hand that of a small, bounded local descent group structured by kinship relations; mediations which link all three in a single hierarchy; distinguish-

31) Critical elements, most of which I have already drawn attention to, include: cult membership; range and sphere of jurisdiction; sexual and descent connotations; rank (including such cues as residence and language of address); type of food offered (meat or no meat, kind of meat, cooked or raw); frequency of sacrifice; association with Buddhism.

shing between them; expressing oppositions between them; and providing symbolic means of comprehending these oppositions. These distinctions are not merely neutral logical devices in a static ideal system. As we have seen, descent group and local community may be quite defiantly exclusive; but the cultural distinctions become more substantially inimical oppositions, even antagonisms, where the social power divide is most marked: in relations between local community and the state. Clearly the data presented in this article do not permit a satisfactory proof of these broad hypotheses. Fundamental problems of relating historical, diachronic and structural analysis, and of causal explanation are raised. At least I hope to have produced enough new data to authorize the hypothesis, and to have shown how the structures revealed in this analysis may be logically, functionally and historically related.