

## MUANG MATRIFOCALEITY

by

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The rural Muang (Yuan, Northern Thai), who inhabit the lowland areas of the northernmost provinces of Thailand and number over three million people, exhibit a social structure dominated by female ties. The two salient features of this social structure are a mandatory initial period of matrilocal residence, and matriclan organization. Both of these principles are reflected in the structure of the typical Muang dwelling.

The most important component of a Muang house, and the part most hedged with taboos regarding its use, construction and location, is that part called the *huan* (hɛ̃n). The *huan* area of the house comprises the sleeping area, plus an open chamber called the *tern* (tɛ̃n) which serves as a reception area for guests in the daytime and evenings and as the sleeping quarters for unmarried males at night. The sleeping area of most present-day houses is composed of two chambers delimited by the position of the houseposts. The household head and his wife and small children sleep in the chamber nearest the *tern*. The other chamber is for unmarried daughters or a married daughter and son-in-law. In former times the sleeping area was larger, containing more chambers to house several married daughters and their husbands.

The invisible bipartition of the enclosed part of the *huan* into two chambers, one for the household head and his wife and one for their married daughter and son-in-law, mirrors an important and distinctive feature of the Muang residence pattern. In rural Nan there is an obligatory initial period of matrilocal residence, which usually lasts a year or more. In less tradition-minded parts of Northern Thailand this practice may be waning. Wijeyewardene (forthcoming) reports that adherence to the initial matrilocal residence rule is lax in South Village, Chiang Mai. Elsewhere in Thailand and in Laos there appears to be a statistical tendency towards initial matrilocality, but no hard-and-fast rule (DeYoung 1963: 64, Kemp 1970: 75; Condominas 1970: 13, Ayabe n.d.: 14).

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In Landing (bāan taa), a village in Sa District, Nan, there were 43 households in 1972. Of these, 28 consisted of nuclear families and widowed parents with their unmarried children. Ten households included couples living with one or both parents of the wife, and two contained couples living with one or both parents of the husband. Two additional families were patrilocally situated to the extent that two couples were residing in houses within the compounds of the husbands' parents and were working the husbands' parental land on a tenant basis. The remaining household comprised the children of a widower who was living temporarily in the house of his second wife.

Of the 41 married couples in the village, fourteen occupied residential land they had bought or claimed themselves. Fifteen couples were living on land belonging to or bought, inherited or received as a gift from the parents of the wife, and eleven on residential land belonging to or in some way transmitted from the parents of the husband. One couple occupied land inherited from the husband's deceased first wife.

The high incidence of nuclear families in Landing evidences a strong tendency to establish independent households, and the predominance of matrilocally situated couples over those living with the parents of the husband suggests a matrilocal bias. Household surveys reveal little about the dynamics of residence as a developmental cycle, however, and more light is thrown on the Muang pattern of residence as a development through time by examining the histories of seventeen marriages which occurred in Landing and which lasted fifteen years or longer before dissolution by death or separation.

**Residential history of 17 marriages  
over a period of 15 years**

	Wedding night	6 mos.	2 yrs.	8 yrs.	15 yrs.
uxorilocal	17	14	13	13	12
virilocal	0	1	1	1	1
neolocal	0	2	3	3	4



All seventeen couples are found at the wife's home on their wedding night, where most of them remained. A smaller number established their own households, while only one chose to shift residence to the parental home of the husband.

In rural Nan, marriage always entails an initial period of matrilocal residence. The length of this period varies, typically lasting a year or more. It is especially brief if the husband's labor is needed at his own home, or if he has previously married and has children in his own or his former wife's house. If a wife has no unmarried sisters, she and her husband will in all likelihood remain in her parental home. If she has unmarried sisters, she and her husband will move into a separate house when the next sister marries, if they have not already done so.

The matrilocal coloring of Muang residence is echoed in two noteworthy prescriptions concerning Northern Thai birth rites. The mother's postparturient recovery period follows the universal Southeast Asian pattern of "lying by the fire" (*juu fáj*). According to traditional Muang practice this period should last 29 days after the birth of a son and 30 days or more after the birth of a daughter. The disparity in prescribed time length according to the sex of the child is significant. It is believed that if the recovery period were longer than 29 days in the case of a male birth, the son would not be able to wander abroad when he matured. A period shorter than 30 days after the birth of a daughter would make her reluctant to remain at home when she reached a marriageable age. The Siamese, who do not have a strong matrilocal ideology, only require that the recuperant mother lie by the fire an odd number of days, regardless of the sex of the child (Kaufman 1960 : 143, Sathian Koses 1962 : 62-63). In sharp contrast to Muang tradition, during the birth rites described in a Siamese village a male neonate is entreated never to leave his parental home (J. Hanks 1963 : 48).

Phraya Anuman (1968 : 255-56) conjectures that matrilocality may have been the only form of residence permissible among the Siamese until comparatively recent times. One suspects the same may have been true in Northern Thailand. The contrast between the present-day Muang *huan* and the old-fashioned *huan* with its chambers for several married daughters suggests a general weakening of mother-daughter ties.



Muang matrilineal ideology is closely linked to a matrilineal mode of descent. The Northern Thai are organized into matriclans (*kōk phji*), and they appear to be the only Tai people thus organized. In urban and commercially developed areas clan ideology is fast declining, since it is buttressed only by periodic ritual performances and does not overlap into economic or other domains of social activity. Clan rites are often considered backward and oldfashioned by more sophisticated Muang, and it is no surprise to find one informed observer reporting that "The rural northern Thai have no . . . . . clans, no lineages," nor even a matrilineal ideology (Wijeyewardene 1968 : 90, 1970 : 254).

A clan consists of all the matrilineal descendants of a founding ancestress, whose identity has usually been forgotten. Clan activities center around a shrine or set of shrines dedicated to spirits associated with the founding ancestress. Typically, a minor sacrificial rite is held at the shrine once annually at a prescribed date, and a major rite once every three years. The date on which these rites are performed varies from clan to clan. Most are held from the sixth through the ninth Northern lunar month, most often on the thirteenth day of the waxing phase. The annual and triennial rites are attended by all members of the clan who live within walking distance of the shrine, unless a clan spirit has formally permitted a group of clan members to establish their own shrine at another location.

A sacrifice can also be made to the clan spirits at any time (except during the *vassa* season) in return for their having cured an ailing clan member. A few days after the commencement of the solar year in April, a rite of "asking forgiveness and paying respects" (*sōmmāa káalāwā*) is performed at the clan shrine to absolve the clan of any offenses committed against the spirits. All these rites are usually performed by male members of the clan.

In addition to the above performances, the clan spirits must be given offerings of flowers and jossticks by any clan member living in a distant area who is visiting the village where the spirits are enshrined. The clan spirits are also presented flowers and jossticks to secure their approval of a clan member's marriage. In the case of an interclan marriage, these offerings are made to the spirits of both clans in a rite



called "crisscrossing the spirits" (khwəj phji). If the couple are of the same clan only the bride's family makes this presentation to the spirits. There appears to be some tendency to clan exogamy, and I have discovered only four cases of intraclan marriage in the genealogies of Landing.

If a group of persons belonging to the same clan should move to a distant location, they will build a new shrine at the home of the elder female of the group. Most likely this will not occur until some member of the group falls ill and a sacrifice is conducted to cure him. The house at which the shrine is built is called the "original house" (híən kàw). The new cult thus created and their matrilineal kin from whom they have separated are said to be "of the same clan" (kōk dīəwkən) or "of the same spirits" (phji dīəwkən), but for all intents and purposes they form separate clans, since each possesses its own shrine and performs its own rites. Matriclans are thus in a sense territorial, and when clan fission occurs it is along territorial rather than lineage lines.

Two matriclans are based in Landing; that is, there are two sets of shrines in the village. Together they comprise 107 Landing residents, or about 40 percent of the community membership. The larger of the two altogether comprises about 160 individuals living in eight villages, and its genealogy extends through eight generations.

Some clan spirits are served by mediums (tīnəŋ), whom they possess at clan rites and during Buddhist ordination rites. Mediums can be either male or female, although the possessing spirit is always male. Clan spirits accustomed to possessing mediums are called *phi mot* (phji mōt). A clan spirit whose rites have been neglected or abandoned are called *phi ka* (phji ká'). All the members of such a clan are considered to be hosts of the *phi ka*. The host of a *phi ka* is known as a "bright-eyed beast" (mæəŋ tæa cæəŋ). Any individual who shares a hundred meals with the host of a *phi ka* himself in turn becomes a "bright-eyed beast." The *phi ka* is thus transmitted not only through the matriline but through the affines of a *ka* clan.

A *phi ka* is greatly feared because of its proclivity for attacking and possessing people outside of the *ka* clan. A *phi ka* only attacks females, and once possession takes place an exorcist must be appealed to to drive the spirit out of the body of the victim. The exorcist, always a male,

often beats the victim mercilessly until the spirit leaves her. Although the host of a malevolent *phi ka* can be either male or female, the generally female nature of the afflicting spirit is evidenced by the belief that a highly effective apotropaic device against *phi ka* is the dried penis of a mad dog.

Given the vicious nature of *phi ka* and the fear which they inspire, *ka* clans tend to be highly endogamous. No-one in Landing has ever married the host of a *phi ka*, even though there is a large community of hosts in a nearby village. A "bright-eyed beast" is not welcome to move into a village in which there are no *phi ka* hosts already resident. He would in fact be prevented from doing so, and if this were unsuccessful he may be forcibly evicted from the village or at least made so uncomfortable that he would have to move out. A person who marries a *phi ka* host is usually discouraged from participating in the rites of his own clan, effectively denying him clan membership.

A clan spirit is fragmented in the form of house spirits among all the households in which the elder female is a clan member. House spirits (*phji hien*) are also known as "spirits of the ancestors" (*phji puu n̄aa*). The Siamese cognate of the term *puu n̄aa* denotes patrilineal grandparents. Phraya Anuman (1954: 174-75, 1962: 151) has remarked that the labels given ancestral domestic spirits in various parts of Thailand reflect different modes of reckoning ancestry: bilateral in central Thailand, matrilineal in the South, male in the Northeast and patrilineal in the North. The Northern term *puu n̄aa* refers, however, to elder people generally and specifically to the younger male and female siblings of any grandparent, and not to the grandparents of either particular line. Since both house and clan spirits are addressed as *puu n̄aa*, they would seem to be manifestations of the same spiritual essence.

Unlike the clan spirit, the specific name and identity of the house spirit is not known to its votaries. The house and clan spirits are not the reincarnations or the free-floating souls of specific ancestors. They are only ancestral to the extent that they have been inherited from the matrilineal ancestors who once served and controlled them.



In addition to being hypostatic fragmentations of clan spirits, house spirits are at the same time considered to be individual tutelary beings under the control and service of the eldest woman of the house. House spirits served by women of the same clan are considered to be matrilineal kin in the same way that their votaries are.

House spirits are particularly jealous of the domains of their tutelage. They are especially angered if any resident female should have sex relations inside the house with a man to whom she is not married. Unless the transgressing male pays an indemnity to the house spirit, usually in the form of whisky and a pig's head, some member of the girl's clan is likely to fall ill. Here again the identities of the house and clan spirits seem to be fused into the same spiritual being.

The house spirit resides in the enclosed sleeping quarters within the *huan*, in the northeast corner if the house faces South and in the southeast corner if it faces North. House spirits in Nan do not have shrines or shelves set apart for them. In Chiang Mai the house spirit occupies a shelf on the wall to which the sleeper's head points (Sanguan 1966: 175, Wijeyewardene 1970: 253). No male can enter the enclosed part of the *huan* unless he is a member of the same clan as the elder woman of the house or has received her permission to go inside. In the case of a resident son-in-law, permission has to be solicited from the house spirit in order for him to move into this part of the house.

The role of women as custodians of the house spirit cult is one aspect of a more general association between women and domestic spirits. Every woman possesses a certain mystic essence, sometimes called a spirit (*phji*) and sometimes a *devata*, which derives from her house and ultimately from her clan spirit. Two women of different clans who reside in the same house create a potentially dangerous situation in which two different spiritual essences are thrown into conflict. This is the stated reason for avoiding patrilocal residence. If a resident daughter-in-law is of a different clan from that of her husband's mother, the younger couple are not allowed to sleep in the *huan*, which is the private domain of the mother-in-law's spirit, but must sleep on the opposite side of the house. Even if a son and daughter-in-law are only briefly visiting the

son's parental home, they are not allowed to sleep inside the *huan* if the husband's mother or sister is living in the house. This formal resolution of potential conflict between female affines encourages the daughter-in-law to either set up an independent household or to live with her own mother.

There is thus a complementarity between male and female powers, one deriving from the arcane knowledge of ritual texts and the other from the tutelage of domestic spirits. J. Hanks (1963: 79) has astutely observed that since a man's power is threatened by female-associated objects, female power is ultimately ascendant over male. Wijeyewardene (1970: 254) suggests that the matrilineal domestic cult promotes territorial continuity among females and serves to defend them against the fragility of marriage and the high territorial mobility of males. I would prefer the formulation that the Muang are matrilineal *because* of their spirit beliefs, since Northern Thai matriliney is defined solely in terms of spirit cults, and that matriliney and male mobility must necessarily proceed hand-in-hand.

The structural asymmetry lent by Muang matriliney is mitigated to some degree by Northern Thai beliefs concerning conception and reincarnation. The conception of a human foetus results from the union of 33 *gūṇa* (kūn), which are the primal elements of the human body. 21 of these, consisting of hard parts and internal organs, derive from the father and are transmitted by his semen. Twelve, all fluids, derive from the mother. Sometime after conception, the celestial creators, named Thaens, fling the departed soul of a deceased ancestor into the body of the foetus. A reincarnate soul is always the soul of a deceased cognate, whose identity is determined by divination. The departed ancestor may be related to the neonate through either men or women, or both. The method of dividing the identity of a reincarnate soul used by the diviner in Landing gives prominence to matrilineal kin, and the majority of rebirths within his own family are in fact traceable through women. According to his formula, a circle should be drawn into three segments. The diviner counts around the circle until he reaches the number of days of the waxing or waning lunar phase on which he is consulted. If his



finger lands on the lowest segment, someone on the neonate's father's side has been reborn; if on either of the two upper thirds of the circle, a matrilinear ancestor has been reincarnated.

The outstanding features of Muang social structure, unique among Tai peoples, are its mutually reinforcing principles of matriliney and initial matrilinear residence. If the present-day Black, White and Red Tai peoples of Tonkin and Laos are any approximation of ancient Tai social organization, the matrilinear peculiarities of Muang social architecture must have been independent historical developments. As the Tais migrated from their northern heartland into the lowlands of what are now Laos and Thailand, their tightly-knit patrilineal clans may have begun to outlive their usefulness for mutual defense and cooperative labor. Patrilineality gave way to the ego-centered bilateral systems of the modern-day Lao and Siamese. More difficult to explain is how the Northern Thai have retained a unilineal system while reversing the sex of the dominant line.<sup>1</sup>

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1) This paper was submitted before the author had access to Andrew Turton's paper on "Matrilinear Descent Groups and Spirit Cults of the Thai-Yuan" (*JSS* 60, 2). Several important differences appear between the matrilinear ideologies of Nan and Turton's (unspecified) area. Among the most striking of these differences are the following:

A. In Turton's area of study, "at marriage a man buys entry into his wife's descent group . . . and is thereby lost to his mother's group" (p. 221). In Nan, a married man attends sacrifices only at his own—that is to say his mother's—clan, and not at his wife's.

B. Turton reports that the female head of the descent group acts as ritual officiant at clan rites (220). In Nan, all officiants at clan rites, other than some mediums, are male clan members.

C. In Turton's survey area, when a matrilineal clan undergoes fission, the seceding group is said to no longer be "of the same spirit" as the parent group (225). By contrast, groups which have left Lanang and are now living in Chiang Rai and Petchabun are considered to be of the same clan and "same spirits" as their parent group, and this solidarity is recognized by both sides.

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