

## REFLECTIONS ON BAN AKHA MAE SALONG\*

by

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Since our initial visit to the hills of Chiengrai Province north of the Mae Kok river in 1964, we have seen rich and poor, small and large, vigorous and apathetic Akha villages, but never one like Ban Akha Mae Salong. The five little huts, each perhaps no more than three meters square, were easily identified as Akha from the shape of the thatch roofs which sloped in four directions, while those of the other upland inhabitants, the Yao, Lisu, and Lahu, have but two sloping faces. Between the huts a few children played, but there were no dogs, pigs or even chickens. Through a doorway one could see within the scattering of baskets, rags, and tools on the family sleeping platform, which severely cramped the sheltered space on the ground for a fire and cooking. Of course, we had seen temporary quarters like these, where newcomers to a village must spend a few weeks while they gather posts, bamboo, and grass for a permanent house, but here this was not the case. The lean and ragged young Akha, who broke off his cutting of firewood into uniform lengths, said he had been living here for more than a year. He had come with his wife and two children from a nearby village, yet unlike most Akha villages, his present neighbors had not come with him. Ordinarily a group of kinsmen, perhaps only three or four houses, move together to establish a new village. This family, however, had scarcely known the other householders before meeting on this hillside, a kilometer or two from the nearby Chinese market village of Ban Mae Salong. No one headed the village, no village priest had selected the spot or built gates, and none sought to lead village ceremonies. Each household came to settle on its own, remain, or move, as it might decide. Since the village had no name, we just identified it for our records as Ban Akha Mae Salong.

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\* This essay seeks to formulate the essence rather than the precise content of a lecture by the writers at the Siam Society on 4 June 1974.

In 1964 we had begun the Bennington-Cornell Survey of Hill Tribes in Thailand. We limited ourselves necessarily to a particular region, this one about 1,300 square kilometers in area, bounded on the north and west by the Burma border, and on the east, generally speaking, by the highway from Chiengrai to Mae Sai. At that time little was known about these uplands. The Border Patrol Police manned four or more outposts in our region, but smugglers and bandits occupied most of their time. Though the Department of Public Welfare had made studies of scattered villages in northern Thailand and established welfare stations in three provinces, work on the new station in the Mae Kok region had barely begun. Few district officials or lowland headmen made any claim to having visited the outlying villages in their jurisdictions. Hence many agencies of the Thai government welcomed our offer to locate villages on the map, count their populations, and ascertain their modes of making a living, as well as their general welfare. So with the help of various cooks and guides plus the indispensable San Ching tse Phan, our Yao interpreter for upland languages, we hiked the maze of upland trails to 131 scattered villages, mainly of the Akha, Yao, Lisu, and Lahu tribes, not only to obtain the foregoing information but also something of the customs of various ethnic groups, their history, and their relations to the Thai population of the valley. In 1969 and again in 1974 we repeated our survey in order to trace the changes that were occurring. Among them the appearance of Ban Akha Mae Salong was one of the most striking met in 1974.

Asking about the rice crop in Ban Akha Mae Salong, we discovered that in the present year our informant had not planted any at all, nor did he expect to plant one during the coming year. He had no time for it. Each day he went to the forest on the steep slope below the village to cut a tree or two and with a Chinese partner saw it into lumber. Then the Akha or his wife carried a few boards on their shoulders up the trail for sale to some merchant or householder in the Chinese market. On a good day he could make from sale of lumber or firewood as much as fifty baht, more often twenty or less. To provide a bare minimum of food for his household and opium for himself, he needed twenty baht per day. No

one in the market would advance him a few baht for tomorrow's lumber. Were he to eat, clothe his family, and replace his worn tools, he must work every day. He kept no track of the days in the traditional Akha week, let alone the sabbaths when all should stop working. No one respectfully kept the sacred container of fermented rice which furnishes the avenue to the ancestors who protect against the demons of forest and stream. Only on the few occasions when he went hunting and brought back a wild boar or a deer, did he follow the Akha custom of sleeping for a few nights apart from his wife.

On the whole these people were living outside Akha culture. The women that we saw were still wearing Akha dress, but would they continue once the silver coins on their hats had vanished, reduced one by one, in order to feed the children in time of sickness? Everyone spoke Akha in the village, yet here even the women had Lahu as a second language and could muster enough Chinese to buy and sell in the market. Only the mechanical reflexes of the tradition remained; the joys of village participation, the pride in Akha achievement, the reassuring safety of Akha ritual, all this had been abandoned.

Of course, we asked our informant the reason for moving from the village of his parents and brothers, but he seemed to have little facility in explanation. Besides, why should he confide in a stranger who had just approached him a few minutes before, and reveal his personal hopes and frustrations? He simply said that his crop had failed; his pigs and chickens had died. In his village it had been impossible to support his wife and children, not to mention his craving for opium. A man told him about the advantages of living near the Chinese market, and he had decided to come. No word was spoken of his hesitations at leaving the village protected by his ancestral spirits, of anguish at leaving behind his kinsmen, nor of hostilities that may have driven him away. Scores of uplanders, representing all local ethnic groups, were coming daily to the Chinese market heavily laden with wares for sale, but they took their earnings and purchases back to their villages where they continued to live. Why this Akha preferred to carry his burdens a shorter distance and forego the sociability of his village, he never explained.

If our informant were more desperate, individualistic, or misanthropic than other Akha, he and his neighbors were not unique. Within a few hours we discovered four other such clusters of Akha huts, all on the outskirts of the Mae Salong market. There they repeated much the same tale. In the months that followed we found equally abject villages in the neighborhoods of other markets. In these places collective life within the Akha tradition had shrunk near a minimum while hungry householders struggled to find something to eat. Certainly Yao, Lisu and Lahu villages were equally impoverished, but none of them were leaderless aggregates of people living outside their own cultures. Though the inhabitants also looked bleakly ahead to months of hunger, their cooperative hunting, social and ceremonial observances seemed to remain intact. The old forms persisted at a lower level of enthusiasm.

### Reflections

Let us continue by asking what may be the significance of this and other nameless "Ban Akha Mae Salongs" for the hills north of the Mae Kok. Some might consider them a passing phenomenon, the refugees from a disaster who will return to continue their customary life when threats have ebbed. However, these villages seem to show symptoms of a more profound and irreversible transformation of the entire uplands in this region. Let us first examine the economic basis of upland living and later turn to matters which may be loosely called "cultural".

**The Economic Contribution :** In 1974 most of the 200 or so villages that we visited reaped and threshed only about one third of the life-giving rice which ordinarily sustains them until the new harvest. A few had a small surplus to sell, though they were outweighed by others where only one household had enough for the year but was duty-bound to share with less fortunate neighbors until the supply was exhausted. While certain villages had resources enough to buy sacks of polished rice from the lowland mills, the majority looked forward to many lean months. Some people blamed the heavy rains and tempestuous winds that spottily flattened the standing grain; others said their rice flowers failed to mature

into something more than empty husks, or spoke of blight or worms in the soil that consumed the roots. Whatever the cause, the result was empty or nearly empty rice bins.

Shortages are nothing new to the uplands where fear of hunger is chronic. Many old men could remember mice hordes that ate the rice crop before it could be harvested or conflagrations of villages that left charred inedible grain. Then neighbors of many years standing sometimes broke apart, each household fleeing to more fortunate neighbors in other spots. Usually, however, the village remained in place, borrowing what could be spared from kinsmen or gathering less appetizing roots and berries from the forest. A single year of shortages is ordinarily tolerable, but in the present instance, the crop failure was preceded by one only somewhat less severe because the 1972 rains were inadequate. No one could remember such persistent and broadly spread troubles.

Ten years ago the land was still covered in major part by forest. Today, however, three fourths of the region has been cut over, and the population has increased from about eight persons per square kilometer in 1964 to more than thirty in 1974. Uplanders recalled the abundance when their village first moved in from Burma to settle in an untouched forest, but all knew that only bamboo rises after a forest has been cut. To regrow a semblance of the original trees takes decades. Here and there an elder who spent his life on a certain mountain remembered that, when he was a young man, a bucket of seed rice produced fifty or sixty buckets of paddy at harvest and acknowledged wryly that today he could get but twenty in a good year. So fewer and fewer people of this region expected to find a fertile, forested hillside, untroubled by newly arrived neighbors whose fields threatened trespass on their lands.

Villages with will and energy to prolong the days of subsistence agriculture have been departing from the Mae Kok region in search of forest elsewhere. Many were reported to be settling on lands as far south as Ngao on the edge of Lampang province, but we, determined to study the life of this region, did not follow them to record their successes. In the main those with less grasp of what was happening to their surroundings

or more faith in their ability to cope were striving to continue subsistence agriculture of the old style. They were perpetuating their ways a little longer by more frequent moves and by dissolving larger villages into smaller ones.

A new relationship to the land has, nevertheless, begun, and this may lead to a modicum of prosperity. A few villages on their own have been able to divert a brook into canals, level a plot of land into terraces, and master successfully the techniques of growing irrigated rice; thereby they halted the ebbing fertility of the land. In addition, the Thai government, working with a whole valley as a drainage system, has begun irrigation programs in some valley bottoms to stabilize food supplies and to return the forest to the steeper slopes, thus restoring a lost source of wood, fuel, fruits, and game. Though limited land is still available in certain parts of the Mae Kok region for development in this manner, the vast majority of uplanders lives where valleys are seen as too narrow and precipitous to permit terracing. There stability of food supply from rain-fed fields requires learning to conserve and increase fertility. Already the means exist, for one or two villages have learned to hoe out the weeds in a single plot two or three times per year and to apply manure. Then one field suffices indefinitely for a household, in contrast to the slash-and-burn practices that require a new field each year. With adequate labor to utilize the newer technique and appropriate crops for the setting, villages can make a good living.

The foregoing programs imply continuation of self-sufficient villages across the land, more prosperous because they produce more abundantly. Though both necessary and desirable, these programs tend to underemphasize a further dimension, familiar enough in our own commerce and trade: i.e. one locality produces in order to supply other localities and receives from them needed commodities. This system of distribution rests on a change where the subsistence farmer achieves a new outlook: he becomes an entrepreneur seeking to produce, not just enough for his own consumption but more than he can possibly use, so as to have something to exchange. His attention expands, as he reckons his successes, from a single-minded pride in the size of his crop to include calculations of income and profit from sales. Such a change to commerce

can have benign effects on the environment, for each village can take better advantage of the temperature, light and soil of its particular hillside location. These variations in natural setting reinforce effort, and the whole, which includes both uplands and lowlands, rests on securer foundations in nature.

A slender commerce has long existed, as when the uplands sent raw cotton and opium to the lowlands in return for silver, iron and salt. In 1964 the villages of lower altitude were also selling soy beans, peppers, and rice to the valley markets and buying mainly cloth, cooking utensils and iron. Here and there a headman returned from the market with extra tins of kerosene, salt and other items for resale, as a convenience to his village rather than for his own profit. Entrepreneurs were few. Besides the itinerant Chinese vendors, some Yao with their ponies conducted a transport service during the dry season, going to remoter villages where they delivered previously ordered wares and thus earned a few hundred baht. In 1974 many more uplanders had become at least part-time entrepreneurs. An Akha village on the Burma border had gained renown as an entrepot for dozens of lowland and upland traders in livestock. An industrious Lahu set up a diesel rice mill in his village, operated a boat on the Mae Kok river, and dealt in agricultural produce. Another Lahu transported tea grown in Yao villages on Doi Chomphu to the market towns. One Akha became partner in a taxi service that was successful enough to consider the purchase of a second automobile. Little stores appeared in many villages and sold sweet crackers, cigarettes, and flashlight batteries to the locality. Indeed, a delicious bowl of noodle soup in a "restaurant" awaits the hardy traveller who can walk three days from the valley to a Lisu village at the headwaters of the Mae Kham river.

Still more striking was the advent of three new market centers in the hills. Since 1969, when the U.S. Seabees bulldozed a hazardous road in to the hills, Chinese have been setting up stores with a variety of wares which peddlers with their trains of horses could not equal. Except during the most torrential rains, steel-nerved truck drivers supplied fresh merchandise every day. These markets have grown, Ban Mae Salong

among them, to a street lined with stores where uplanders from the surrounding areas preferred to buy and sell rather than make the long trip to the valley towns.

While we might extend the catalogue of entrepreneurial activities, more important were the over-all influences of these markets. The well-dressed uplander was wearing a shirt from some valley store and often a beret. To honored guests he no longer served tea in native bamboo but in glasses. Spinning and weaving disappeared in all but a handful of villages. Indeed, many a village moved from splendid isolation on a hillside to closer quarters with its neighbors to have easier access to some market. In this light the move of Ban Akha Mae Salong residents to the outskirts of that market represents not only a succoring flight from hunger but an entrance into commerce, however risky we may consider it. Yet our Akha informant might have remained in his village, sacrificing some of this succoring and from there carried on his new occupation. Can we detect that tribal cultures are losing their vitality?

**The Cultural Contribution :** While proud, old Akha villages seem to perch solidly on the shoulder of some hill, the inhabitants see themselves balanced precariously on the verge of calamitous attack by hostile spirits of the forest and streams. The site itself is chosen only after ritual test of its safety from malevolent influences; house sites are arranged to ensure internal harmony among villagers; gates are erected to protect the inhabitants from demons. On this premise a member's obligations toward his village are prescribed, and failure to comply threatens village foundations. In the Akha week of fourteen days come two regular sabbaths. Nine times per year are days of agricultural rites to insure growth of the crops. Add more days for appeasing hostile spirits, as well as for renewing contacts with the ancestral guardians. On each of these regular occasions a man may not leave the village to work. Still more exacting are the demands at funeral ceremonies on surviving kinsmen, for they must abstain from field work for thirty days, and should a village calamity occur, e.g. the birth of twins, these prohibitions on work outside a village apply to everyone. Clearly the continuous work demands of Ban Akha Mae Salong are incompatible with normal life.



Akha seem to presume a backlog of supplies in every household. Holidays signal feasting rather than fasting. To join in the culminating feast of almost every ceremonial occasion requires the ability to contribute an occasional pig and to entertain village elders within one's own household. Destitution limits participation, and poverty, if persistent, betokens a man unable or unworthy to assume responsibility. Unless miscreants enjoy some wealth in livestock or produce, village elders cannot effectively impose a fine, so that the poor stand unscathed by this form of discipline. Banishment from the village becomes the sole recourse. Such rejected households can find haven only in the most dispirited and impoverished villages. We suspect that many of the hapless inhabitants of the various Ban Akha Mae Salongs are the misfits of Akha society.

Yet we are concerned with more than individual failure, for Akha culture itself has become subject to criticism by its very bearers. After years of little-availing missionary effort to introduce Christianity, three villages of Akha Christians have come into being during the past two years. We have heard that some Akha have moved to join an existing Christian village in the Mae Sruaj district beyond the Mae Kok region and that other individuals wish to become Christians. We hasten to add that missionaries should in no way be accused of fomenting discontent, for most are properly concerned that a new religion shall disturb as little as possible the moral foundations of their converts. Nonetheless, many Akha in these new Christian villages explained their conversion saying, not that the ancestral spirits had been unable to protect them, but that the obligations of living in a traditional village were too heavy. For too many days they had had to stop work even though the grain in their bins was low, even when children cried for food.

Among the Yao, Lisu, and Lahu we often sensed a cultural ebbing too, though it was manifest in other ways. Unlike Akha, many headmen did not know the households that had joined or departed from the village during the past year. Unlike the cohesive Akha, ever following a headman, people moved on their own initiative, some households remaining behind while others took off in the direction of their choice. Even in

1964 we found the lone Lahu, Lisu or Yao household that voluntarily lived apart from any village or that joined a village of another ethnic background. Moreover, ceremonial occasions were less frequent and less focussed on the general welfare than among the Akha. New Year rites often constituted the sole village-wide celebration for the year, yet these rites were often abridged because of the absence of a village priest or a musician to lead the dances. Though all phrased these rites as renewing bonds with the protecting ancestors, joyous dancing about the traditional poles festooned with banners and bedecked with offerings often yielded to little more than feasting and exchange of cakes. Under these circumstances the man eager to work every day to feed his dependents may work as he pleases and remain a resident. There are no Ban Yao, Lisu or Lahu Mae Salongs, only Ban Akha. Here we do not imply that Akha alone drive their pariahs from the village, but Lahu, Lisu and Yao exiles do not congregate.

Though crop failure appears more disruptive of Akha than other upland cultures, two or even five such years of hardship offer insufficient basis for prophesying Akha demise. If one may judge by the forty or more generations recited in calling the ancestors, Akha have survived at least five hundred years and doubtless endured much severer tribulations. Rather than a denouement, we may be observing the strengthening of a culture by sloughing away the disheartened and reenforcing the stalwart. While prosperity draws people easily, in this region adversity alienates from a way of life. Thereby those who remain through affliction are confirmed in the tradition's validity. Today for the first time Akha are begging in the valley towns for food. Some of them will never return to their villages, for headmen are already turning away the poor and improvident. In these weakened villages as well as among the foot-loose, Christianity will doubtless find further converts, yet somewhere in the hills traditional Akha villages will continue.

Commerce and entrepreneurship are among the most immediate new features that confront uplanders. The Yao with their trading experience enjoy an initial readiness, shared by some Lisu and Lahu. Though many of these latter villages are bound to a subsistence style of

living, others prosper or strive to prosper under headmen trying their hands at commerce. As for the Akha, only two villages are at present engaged in apparently stable commerce, one the previously mentioned entrepot for water-buffalo traders on the Burma border, the other flourishing with its maize and cattle. The vast majority of seventy villages has not yet tried the new and is likely, when the time comes, to make all the mistakes of innocent and gullible late-comers. Yet in some of these villages will be living headmen of acumen and tenacity sufficient to guide their following into commerce. Indeed, Akha sense of obligation to the whole and skill in maintaining harmony within a group will serve their enterprise well.

If then we envision the Mae Kok region as it may become twenty years hence under a commercial economy, there appear stable entrepreneurial villages dominating the countryside. Irrigated terraces and rain-fed fields, now worked with new techniques, are producing a variety of temperate crops such as pyrethrum and Macedonian tobacco.\* Such crops move over a system of roads to market centers, while rice, no longer an upland product, moves hillward from the valley. Only a few upland villages are Yao, Lisu, or Lahu because most of their entrepreneurs led the people away to more favorable localities beyond the Mae Kok region. The majority of the villages are Akha, who have made their place in commerce through special crops, maybe even silk-making, that capitalize on their special capacity to coordinate people and jobs. Of course, all these entrepreneurs are the comfortably wealthy, but the poor, those Yao, Lisu and Lahu too impoverished to move with their kinsmen or too undisciplined to bear responsibility in village enterprise, these residual people continue to eke out a subsistence living in the back valleys. As for the poor Akha, they, no longer Akha, have disappeared. These people have become inhabitants of villages that simply call themselves Christian or dwellers in other spots that have woven a new ethnic standard out of varied ethnic strands.

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\* In 1973 the United Nations Program for Drug Abuse and Control began working in Chiangmai province to determine whether such crops as these may become commercially viable in the uplands.

Ban Akha Mae Salong is thus a byproduct of a culture slow to change. The inhabitants have adapted to living outside Akha culture; becoming Christian or Thai are other adaptations. The tightly knit conservatism of the old Akha villages, however, bodes well for the continuity of the tradition. Should some future traveller in the hills hope to savour something of the past, he will find much still surviving in these villages despite their economic transformation. To find the Yao, Lisu or Lahu traditions will be more difficult, but in some little cluster of houses hidden away will live a few conservative headmen still performing the old rituals. The rich, who reside more accessibly, will have only nominal semblance to their grandfathers of the subsistence era.

## Appendix

### Preliminary Count of Tribal Population in Mae Kok Region January to May, 1974

Amphoe (districts)	number of villages	Number of households	Population
Amphoe Myang Chiengrai <sup>1</sup>	38	654	3,999
Amphoe Mae Chan <sup>2</sup>	131	2,562	16,404
Amphoe Mae Sai	6	128	665
Amphoe Chieng Saen	3	81	378
Amphoe Mae Ai <sup>3</sup>	16	355	2,139
Total	194	3,780	23,585 <sup>4</sup>

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- 1) Amphoe Myang Chiengrai includes in the present count the following tambol (communes): Mae Yao, Huei Chomphu, Nang Lae, Ban Du and Raub Wieng.
  - 2) Amphoe Mae Chan includes in the present count the following tambol (communes): Mae Kham, Pasang, Pateng and Mae Chan.
  - 3) In Amphoe Mae Ai, Changwad Chiengmai and Tambol Huei Chomphu in Amphoe Myang Chiengrai, figures represent only the region under survey, not the total tribal population of those areas.
  - 4) This figure does not include Shan, Thai, Chinese, or military personnel living in the region under survey. We estimate their numbers at 10,000 people, giving an approximate total of 33,585.

**Appendix** (continued)

Preliminary count of population change, according to  
tribal group, over ten years (1964 to 1974)

Year of Census	Akha	Lahu	Lisu	Yao	Karen	Miao	Total
1964	6,196	2,736	1,037	1,085	967		12,021
1969	8,017	3,721	1,803	1,271	663 <sup>1</sup>		15,475
1974	10,547	6,460	2,847	1,787	1,602	342	23,585

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1) The Karen data for 1964 are incomplete and so do not represent a population decline.