

THE SO PEOPLE OF KUSUMAN, NORTHEASTERN THAILAND

by

RAYMOND S. KANIA AND SIRIPHAN HATUWONG KANIA

Foreword

This ethnographical account of the So people of Thailand embodies material collected primarily in interviews with my wife, Siriphan Hatuwong Kania, a So who was born in Kusuman, Sakon Nakhon Province in 1951, and who lived there until August 1973 except for a period of employment in Bangkok from about 1966 to 1970.

Some of the material is based on observations which I made during the almost two years I spent in northeastern Thailand, which included several visits to the village of Kusuman. The information presented here describes the So and their activities at that time, except as noted otherwise. With regard to recent changes in Kusuman, I have suggested probable causes, based on material supplied by Siriphan.

The report is divided into sections describing the physical setting of the So in Kusuman, subsistence patterns and technology, the So life cycle, the family and relations with others, religious practices, and language, with a synopsis of So folktales. The concluding section speculates on the forces influencing the gradual disintegration of So cultural identity. I have appended a key to pronunciation of the So spoken language, with a tentative phonology based on the International Phonetic Alphabet; with my wife's help, I hope to produce a So-English dictionary in the near future. Finally, my wife and I have added our sketches of a representative selection of So musical instruments and basketry, together with brief notes explaining their particular construction and uses.

I was stationed at the Royal Thai Air Force Base near the provincial capital of Nakhon Phanom, from April 1972 until February 1974, as a member of the United States Air Force Security Service. Nakhon Phanom is a town of about 35,000 people located in northeastern Thailand by the Mekong River, which separates Thailand from Laos. I was an interpreter/translator for a South Vietnamese army unit attached to our squadron. I spent some of my free time studying the Thai language at the University of Maryland branch located on base. I met Siriphan about one year after I arrived at Nakhon Phanom. Sompit, a young Thai man who took care of our quarters, introduced us. Siriphan was a good friend of Sompit's wife. After a brief courtship we were married, and subsequently left Thailand for California where I received my discharge from the US Air Force in August 1974.

While in California I decided to research information on the So people because of my interest in Asian cultures. I discovered that very little was known about them. The only material I was able to locate consisted of a few pages written by a Thai official some 55 to 60 years ago, translated into English by Maj. Erik Seidenfaden about 20 years later (see footnote 2). That report concerned the So who lived in Kuchinarai District, Kalasin Province. As far as I can determine, no work has been done with the So living in Kusuman District or the village of Kusuman. Since the So of that area are being assimilated at an ever faster pace into the Thai culture, my wife and I decided to set down as much information about them as we could.

The preparation of this report was assisted by Dr. Allyn Stearman, an anthropologist at Florida Technological University in Orlando, Florida. Under her direction I completed an independent studies course during the summer of 1977, which has made it possible for me to bring the material together in its present form. A much more detailed report could have been presented if I had spent a year or two in Kusuman recording firsthand observations in situ, and if I had been trained in anthropological research. However, I believe that I have been able to assemble, with much assistance from Siriphan, an accurate picture of the So people of Kusuman.

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The physical setting

Land and climate

The So village of Kusuman is located in the northeastern part of Thailand, in Kusuman District of Sakhon Nakhon Province, approximately equidistant (35 kilometers) between the two provincial capitals of Sakhon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom. Nakhon Phanom, to the southeast of Kusuman, is situated on the west bank of the Mekong River directly opposite Thakek, Laos. Kusuman lies on the Khorat Plateau, a fairly flat region with a few hilly areas in its eastern parts. There are large areas of trees, but without the thick undergrowth that one finds in jungle areas. The soil is of a sandy loam type, lacking in the nutrients necessary for high crop yields.

There are two distinct seasons: a dry season which begins around the latter part of September and lasts until the first part of May, and the wet, or monsoon, season which lasts from May through September. During the dry season, the area may experience as many as eight months without a single drop of rain. The land becomes dry

and cracked and villagers must walk many miles just to obtain drinking water. During the winter months (December and January) the temperature has dropped as low as 29°F as the result of a cold air mass moving down from China. During the month of February, however, it may reach 105°F. The summer southwest monsoon may produce as much as 150 inches of rain in a four-month period, or an amount far below this total. The poor soil conditions and an uncertain rainy season make the northeast part of Thailand the most economically deprived area of the country.

The region where Kusuman is located is fairly level, with evergreen forests and grass cover. The trees are not large for the most part, but there are old trees of rather large diameter to be found in Kusuman and the surrounding villages. Bamboo and various small plants and bushes can also be found here. Some low areas experience a healthy increase in vegetation during the rainy season. Several seasonal streams are found on either side of Kusuman, which cross the highway that runs from Nakhon Phanom southwest to Sakon Nakhon. During the summer monsoon villagers with nets and various basket traps try to extract as many fish and prawns as possible.

The people

Not much is known about the history of the So people (or Trɔ as the So call themselves) for they have no written language. The little that is remembered has been handed down by word of mouth. As for the So in Kusuman and nearby villages, they are believed to be "immigrants who crossed the Mekong from the mountains of Laos"¹ at some indefinite period in the past.

Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom Provinces are the two areas in Thailand where So can be found in significant numbers. Although no census data are available, probably about 5,000 to 7,000 people who use So as their first language reside in these provinces. One of the largest concentrations of So can be found in the village of Kusuman.

Possibly because of external influences brought about by the existence of the highway which runs through Kusuman, there are some variations in behavior of the people who live here and those who reside in some of the more isolated villages. A dirt road runs through most of these villages, but traffic consists mostly of an occasional pickup truck which makes up the taxi system. Siriphan, who has relatives in some of these villages, says that the people in these areas, with the exception of Na Piang village, speak a "pure" So dialect, and that they speak in a rough and impolite manner. Those So who live in Na Piang speak a mixture of So, Dtree, and Laotian. According to Siriphan, the So in these outlying villages are also poor housekeepers, with items scattered throughout a dirty interior in no particular order. Similar observations about

1. Frank J. Moore, *Thailand* (New Haven, HRAF Press, 1974), p. 73.

the So who lived in Kuchinarai District were noted some 60 years ago, and later translated by Major E. Seidenfaden.²

Another difference between Kusuman and the other villages is the style of dress. Practically all of the women in Kusuman presently cover their breasts with a shirt, bra, or a full-length, wrap-around dress (jikat). But the married women in the smaller, more isolated villages, who have previously nursed babies, go about uncovered. The turban (pře gían plA) also tends to be worn more often by married men and women of the smaller villages.

So women wear black-colored cotton material (usually homemade) that is wrapped around the body, with the excess tucked in at the top. This wrap-around garment, the jikat, is worn from the waist to just above the ankles. For taking showers it is worn from just under the armpits to somewhere above the knees. Today the women in Kusuman wear a shirt (silók?) with it, but occasionally one may see an older woman without the top. Most women in Kusuman have several everyday jikat and silók?, and at least one outfit for ceremonies and parties.

So men have several pair of long pants (soŋ ləŋ gut^mi) or short pants (soŋ ləŋ ^ukae), and several shirts (silok?) for work, and at least one good pair of pants and a shirt for special occasions. The adult men in Kusuman wear mostly old-style, home-made shirts and short pants made of cotton and dyed black by their wives. Some of the younger ones like to buy shirts and long pants made in factories in a variety of colors. If the knees wear out on a pair of long pants, a So will cut the legs off at that point and continue to wear them. Pants and shirts will be patched and worn until they disintegrate. A few farmers still wear the wrap-around sarong called a jiláy. It reaches from the waist to just above the knees, but a farmer will often wrap it a foot or more above the knees when working in the fields.

All the clothes made by So women are made from cotton. Every step, from growing the cotton through dying the material, is done by women using machines made by So men out of wood and bamboo construction materials. This process is described under the section "Subsistence patterns and technology". For footwear, So men and women go barefoot or use rubber sandals imported from Japan.

Today very little jewelry is worn by women because of attacks by thieves from non-So villages. But before 1960 the older women would wear large, round earrings and bracelets made from white gold, and the buttons on their shirts were made from Thai coins.

Although a chewing-tobacco mixture called ña is enjoyed by adults in Kusuman, it is more popular in the outlying areas, chewed by people of all ages. The ña is

2. Erik Seidenfaden, tr., "Regarding the customs, manners, economics and languages of the Kha (So) and Phutai living in Amphoe Kuchinarai, Changwat Kalasindhu, Monton Roi Et", *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 34 pt. 2 (1943), pp. 145-181.

actually a mixture of six ingredients. It consists of betel leaves (silá palú), areca nut (panán), bark from the jisiát tree (ⁿtók_mjisiát), the interior of the qun tree (gaen qun), lime (a púf), and tobacco. The procedure for chewing is as follows. First, a small piece of gaen qun is placed in the mouth and chewed a while. The ⁿtók_mjisiát is then added. The lime is then placed on the betel leaf and added to the mixture. The areca nut (panán) is chewed next. Only the inside can be used on the older nuts, but the outside and inside of young green nuts can be used. Finally a small amount of tobacco is placed between the upper lip and teeth and rotated from side to side with the fingers and then left there while chewing the rest of the mixture. This whole process results in a red juice that must be expectorated from time to time. The older people who no longer have teeth use a mortar and pestle to grind up the ingredients before chewing. Ña and cigarettes made from tobacco wrapped in banana leaves are served at social functions in all So-speaking areas. In Kusuman this includes the wedding reception, the ja a tí_m and ja a tí_moŋ ceremonies, and at exorcisms conducted by the mo yáo.

Because of marriage between the So of Kusuman and members of different ethnic groups, a variety of physical types can be found here. However, the average So has physical characteristics very similar to the Lao, and it is difficult to distinguish between them. A Thai has certain features which sets him apart, such as a more prominent nose and a narrow, elongated (longer) face. The Yaw, another people living in this area, are larger than the So and have fair skin. Many So are dark-skinned (dark brown to reddish brown) with coarse black hair, although some reddish-brown hair can be found. A few So have naturally curly hair. The women seem to average about five feet in height, while the men are a few inches over five feet. Both men and women are of slender build. They have round faces with short, flat noses, prominent cheekbones, dark eyes, and rather thick lips.

Variations can be found. Siriphan's uncles, aunts, and grandparents on her mother's side are all considerably taller, some of the men reaching six feet in height. Their skin is fair and they have rather large, regularly shaped noses like some of the ethnic groups living in the Chiang Mai area. In fact, her grandmother speaks a Laotian dialect found near Chiang Mai. Siriphan stands five feet tall with yellowish skin, almond eyes, prominent cheekbones, coarse black hair, and a small, flat nose. She is quite often mistaken by Vietnamese for one of their own.

The So in Kusuman bathe regularly. Water is obtained from rains or is carried several miles from a community well. They shower by dipping water from large pottery storage containers with a bowl, and pouring it over themselves. Their shampoo is made from sticky-rice water. The So prepare sticky rice by placing the desired amount of rice in a bowl filled with water and stirring thoroughly. They then let it sit for approximately six hours. All the water is drained off at this time. The rice water is

used as we would use a shampoo. It is applied liberally and then rinsed off with plain water, two or three times. Sometimes a grapefruit rind is added to the rice water. It is allowed to sit until the preparation takes on the odor of grapefruit.

Housing

The houses in Kusuman are built on wooden poles, some five or six feet off the ground, as are most houses in Thailand. Each So house also has a fence which encloses the yard, and a gate in front. While individual houses vary in size, they are generally small. They are of frame construction with board sidings and gabled roofs. The roofs are made from wood shingles, each shingle being about three feet in length. A few houses have recently been built with tin roofs. A large porch runs the length of one side of the house with an accompanying overhang to provide shade. Two doors are located on the porch side, one at each end of the house. Windows with shutters are placed on the two end walls or on all three remaining sides.

The average So house has only one room. A small section of this room is partitioned as a home for the ancestral spirits and as the sleeping quarters of the mother and father. Other areas may also be partitioned off to accommodate other members of the family. Each sleeping area is just large enough to lie down in. Other than a few articles of clothing, essential items such as pots, bowls, sleeping mats, and personal possessions, the house stands bare of furniture and adornments. There are no toilets in So houses. The So relieve themselves wherever nature calls. Sometimes, during a cold night, a large crack in the floor may suffice, instead of a trip outside.

Some So have kitchens located to the rear of the house and separated from it. A raised wooden walkway runs from the porch to the kitchen. The kitchen itself is constructed out of lumber. Typically it is approximately six by six feet in area, and four feet high. There is only one small opening in which to enter. Pots, pans, and other cooking utensils are kept here. Those without kitchens store utensils in the house as well as cook there. Whether cooking in the house or in the kitchen, breathing becomes a bit of a problem due to a lack of adequate ventilation.

Subsistence patterns and technology

Rice is the basis of the So diet as well as a source of income. For these reasons rice is used in many of their religious ceremonies such as the *ja a tí don*, the ceremony for retrieving lost spirits, the wedding ceremony, and the funeral ceremony. There are also several ceremonies to the various spirits involved in the rice-growing process (explained under "Religion"). Other than for food and religious purposes, rice is also used in making rice wine and shampoo. The most popular type grown here and throughout northeast Thailand is a glutinous rice. Surpluses are sold and the rest is consumed by the grower's household over the remainder of the year.

The So begin planting rice sometime in May, the start of the rainy season. Rice for planting is stored in bamboo baskets (gá^m aplú). The baskets of rice are allowed to soak in water for two days and nights. The rice basket is then placed in the sun for one day to induce sprouting. Meanwhile, the planting area is being plowed and broken up into fine particles. After the field is leveled off, rice is broadcast over the area. About one month later the rice seedlings are thinned out. Some of them are transferred to other fields.

Sometime during October or November the rice is harvested and the grain separated from the stalk. The harvest is stored in a barn; any surplus is usually sold to a dealer. About the time rice is planted, or a little earlier, the So women also plant vegetables and cotton in small plots beside the ricefields. Some of the vegetables grown include Chinese long beans, corn, tomatoes, cantaloupe, okra, potatoes, eggplants, gourds, and peppers.

During the rainy season when the ricefields are flooded, women and children can be seen fishing with large nets. Each net is comprised of a long wooden pole and two crossed bamboo poles, each about 4.5 feet in length attached to the end of the long pole, and a net which is fixed to each end of the crossed poles. Held like a flagstaff, the pole is lowered into the canals and raised again, hopefully filled with prawns and small fish, a favorite food of the So. The So also use several kinds of fish-trap baskets constructed of bamboo. These are often used in combination with bamboo weirs placed across small areas of a stream.

During the winter and spring the So become hunter-gatherers. The women and older children gather most of the plants, grasses, and insects at this time, and as time permits, throughout the rest of the year. The men hunt what animals that can be found, such as rabbits, birds, and lizards. But even these are becoming scarce. A wide variety of wild game used to roam this part of Thailand. Around the first part of this century the quantity was enough to meet the needs of the people. They included deer, bear, pigs, and game birds. However, unrestricted hunting has wiped out every popular species. There is no need for game laws here since there is nothing left to protect.

The So hunter has several weapons at his disposal. Some of these he makes himself, like the bow and arrow, crossbow, and a blowgun made from bamboo, which fires a bamboo dart. A few also use rifles and slingshots. For frogs and crabs a long pole (ga nol) is used. It is very slender with a small hook on the end. When a hole is found, the pole is pushed in and withdrawn. If moisture is on the pole there is a good chance a frog is inside, so the hunter will try to hook the frog and pull it out. Crabs are taken in the same way. Frogs are also taken with a specially constructed bamboo basket trap (tom). A good hunter can tell what kind of prey is in the hole. This is a valuable skill because quite often cobras are found in these places. A few So kill cobras and make soup from them.

Because of the scarcity of game the So have turned to other items to supplement their diet. It can be said that the So will try anything as a food source. In addition to the frog and cobra, they also eat other varieties of snake, the red ant, grasshopper, praying mantis, spider, rat, dog, cat, various bugs, cooked chicken blood, and raw cow blood.

The So also keep some animals. Buffalo are used for work, such as plowing or pulling carts. A few also raise buffaloes for sale at home and in the more productive rice-growing areas of Thailand. Other animals which are raised for food include chickens, ducks, geese, and hogs.

Some So families do their own logging. They fell trees using two-man saws, and then make boards and shingles with other special saws. Men and women and, in rare cases, children as young as seven, help perform these tasks. A few men skilled in carpentry construct houses for others. Since the demand for this service is very limited, no one engages in this line of work as a full-time occupation.

Making bulls sterile

When a bull is to be made sterile, he is led by a rope to an open area. There his front legs are tied together, and also his hind legs. After the bull falls over, a large wooden pole is inserted between his hind legs. This pole is extended over the bull's shoulder and outward for several feet, and two or three men apply leverage in order to keep the bull from thrashing about too much during the operation.

After the bull has thus been secured, two narrow rectangular boards, each about 18 inches long with a hole in the middle, are placed on his testicles, one on a side with each hole over a testicle. The boards are placed as close to his body as possible, and tied tightly. A man then places a wooded chisel above the visible testicle where the vas deferens is located. He strikes the chisel with a hammer in order to break the vessel.

This striking continues for 20-30 minutes. The boards are removed and a black dye is applied to the injured area. Some dye is also applied to his legs after the ropes have been removed, in order to prevent the rope burns from becoming infected. The bull is thus effectively sterilized.

From bartering to selling

Bartering was the primary means of commerce for the So and other people of this area until the late 1950s. A gradual change began taking place until today practically all transactions involve cash. This change might be attributed partly to the influence of the Vietnamese, who came to Kusuman in the early 1950s as refugees from the French-Indochinese war. They started out with very little, but being shrewd businessmen, it wasn't long before they became Kusuman's wealthiest citizens. Whereas the So would trade his rice for products he wanted, and sometimes even gave away rice if he had a surplus, the Vietnamese would obtain rice from the So by trading, and sell it to a dealer, making a nice profit. Practically all the shops in Kusuman used to be run by Vietnamese and a few Chinese.

The Vietnamese considered the So culturally inferior to themselves. A Vietnamese would speak to a So as a master would speak to his servant.

The success of the Vietnamese could have provided the spark for some of the more enterprising So to try their hand at selling rice. Today rice-dealing provides the primary source of cash income for the So. As for the Vietnamese, the Thai Government moved all of them out of Kusuman in the early 1960s to Nakhon Phanom and other northeastern border cities as part of preparations for sending the entire refugee population in Thailand back to northern Viet Nam. This repatriation policy was the result of the Rangoon Accord of 1959, signed by representatives of North Viet Nam and Thailand.

In addition to the Vietnamese influence in the 1950s and early 1960s, the completion of a modern highway a few years later between Bangkok and Nakhon Phanom by way of Kusuman certainly had to stimulate business activities. Several competing bus lines provide relatively inexpensive service between large marketplaces. The So can sell their agricultural products and handicrafts in these markets, or sell them to visitors in the local market at Kusuman.

Income from selling rice surplus and other products is really a part-time effort to bring in a little money to buy some products they cannot make at home, and for other miscellaneous purposes. The So people can survive without money and often do. They are independent and have the ability to exist with very limited resources.

The cloth-making process

There is no rigid division of labor between the sexes in Kusuman. One sex predominates in an area because of a greater interest or an acquired ability to do the job better. Men are recognized as being adept at hunting and in basket-making. Women are skilled in making cloth, a long and tedious process involving many separate steps. So women grow their own cotton, remove the seeds, make it into yarn and then into cloth, and dye it with color made from local plants. All the machinery used in the process is made by local craftsmen from bamboo and wood.

Briefly described, the cotton seeds are removed by a system of wooden rollers called an *fo*. This flattened cotton is then placed in a bamboo basket (*ji piat*) where it is fluffed with the aid of a curved piece of bamboo with a string attached across the bottom that resembles a hacksaw. The cotton is then spun into thread on a spinning wheel, called a *la*. Then the thread goes through several other steps before being dipped in hot rice-water in order to give it strength and make it easier to work. After drying and additional processing the thread is wound on a *pua*, a rectangular wooden device with small spikes around the edges. Different colored threads are added at this time if a *yikat* is being made, and designs are planned for it. The assembly is then transferred to a foot-operated loom (*plim*), and the weaving begins.

After the cloth is finished, the women dye it black or leave it undyed. They make the black dye from the leaves of the indigo plant, which is grown here. Other ingredients are added to the dye water to aid the process and to keep the color from running when washed. A month may pass from the time the seeds are removed from the cotton until the dyed cloth is hung up to dry in its final stage of production.

Handicrafts

So men do most of the basket-making. Baskets are produced in all sizes and shapes and are woven from bamboo strips. They have many uses, from storing rice to catching frogs. Drawings and a description of each type of basket can be found in figures 2 to 20. Basket-making is declining in popularity because of the availability of more durable, mass-produced metal and pottery containers. Another reason for the decline is a shortage of a sap mixture made from the gəŋ and luŋ trees. Large baskets that are sealed on the outside and inside with this mixture can be used to store and transport water. This sap is also used to make candles to light the house. A thick coating applied to a bamboo stick makes a good trap for cicadas, which are crushed and cooked to produce a pungent sauce.

Musical Instruments

So people like to listen to and play music. A person who can play an instrument is very much in demand at social functions, from which he may earn some extra money. Some So men are quite skilled at making instruments. Stringed instruments include the *tuj tuj* and the *drúa*. The *tuj tuj* (figure 21) is a banjo-like instrument less than two feet long and made from wood. It has four strings and the base is shaped like a valentine. The *drúa* (figure 22) is about the size of a violin. It has a bamboo neck and a coconut shell for a base, and either two or three strings. The bow is made from wood and hair from a horse's tail. Some kind of skin, usually catskin, is stretched over the coconut. The instrument is set on its base and played or placed on the shoulder and played like a violin. Among the wind instruments are the *qen*, *galók*, and *pi*. The *qen* (figure 23) was acquired from the Laotians, and varies in size from about one to over five feet in height. It is made from bamboo, consisting of a cylindrical section that is blown into. This cylinder has five holes on each side. Two rows of five reed stacks are attached perpendicular to it. Each of the last three stacks is smaller than the preceding one. The *galók* is a bamboo flute about eighteen inches long. The *pi* is a smaller flute with a more limited range of notes. Drums include the *ǰigaŋ* (figure 24), *ǰigaŋ a tǰ*, *gaŋ tum* and *gaŋ haŋ*. These drums are made from tree-trunks and covered with buffalo skin. They differ in their size, shape, and sound.

Three of the instruments mentioned; the *gaŋ tum*, *qen*, and *pi* are used to accompany the *mə yǎo* during exorcisms.

The So life cycle

Childbirth

When a So mother goes into labor, a rope is tied to the ceiling of the house. The prospective mother assumes an upright position, with her weight resting on her knees and lower legs, and her legs spread slightly. Both hands hold on to the rope. When contractions occur she pulls with all her might. The So believe this helps the stomach muscles to force the baby out. In the meantime her husband or a midwife helps to support her back.

As soon as the baby is born on the floor of the house, the cord is cut and tied with a rag, and the baby is cleaned. The afterbirth is taken outside and buried underneath the bottom of the entrance ladder, and a small fire is burned over the place. The So believe that this act will insure that when a child grows up and wanders off, he will always return home.

After the baby is born, a dirt mound is made inside the house. It is several inches high and as long as the mother. Hot coals are placed on top of this mound. Then a bamboo bed with a clearance of about two feet is placed over the coals. The mother will lie on this warm bed during her recovery period of ten days. The mother also heats up leaves in the charcoal and makes a little cushion out of them on her bed. As she sits on these leaves most of the day, it is believed that the heat radiating out promotes healing of body tissues torn during childbirth.

The mother also drinks plenty of hot herbal tea during this period. Siriphan could only supply two of the ingredients. They are ^mtanam madáen, which is the bark from this tree, and raháo pud, the root from a water plant. In addition rice, fish, chicken, and frogs make up her diet.

If problems develop, the midwife must use her hands to pull the baby out. If the baby dies at birth, it remains with the mother until the next day. The So believe if they bury the baby immediately, the spirit of the dead child will return and claim the mother. If the mother dies while giving birth, she is buried that same day.

Childhood

A So baby is usually breastfed for 12 to 14 months. Food is started two days after birth, and is served with water from the mother's hand. The food consists of ground-up, cooked sticky rice which is put in banana leaves and reheated in ashes from a charcoal fire.

A diaper (jílú) made from cotton is worn by So babies. Girls' diapers are made from the dyed skirts (jikát) of So women. But boys' diapers are made from white cotton material only. The explanation is that boys must not wear diapers made from women's clothes since women have lower status than men, and boys are expected eventually to become Buddhist monks for at least three months to make merit (t^ma⁷bón).

The diapers are square, and are wrapped around the baby's stomach with the top above the navel. The navel is exposed with about three inches of cord still attached. This navel is treated with the ashes from old clothes that have been rolled into a rope and burned. A little bit of material is burned for each treatment. The ashes are applied to the navel with the finger. After a week or so the cord will fall off.

The diaper covers the buttocks only, and the front of the baby is left exposed. The diaper is tied above the navel by making a knot. This only provides protection against defecation when the baby is sleeping. So babies sleep on their back because it forms a flat head in back which they consider attractive. During the day infants sleep in a basket (u ranâem) made from wood or bamboo and hung from the porch ceiling by ropes so that the baby can be rocked. At night the baby sleeps with the mother. After about three months when the baby starts crawling, the diapers are no longer used.

During the rice-planting season, babies are taken to the fields and secured in little shaded resthouses. Adults also use these houses for meal breaks. A resthouse is on the average about eight feet square. The floor is on stilts about five feet off the ground. It has no walls, only a fragile roof designed to keep out the sun.

So children are introduced to work at an early age. Many times a shortage of male help in a family forces every member to lend a hand. Children as young as four years old may be taught to plant rice, or to tend buffaloes in order to keep them from venturing where they are not wanted. As they get older, boys and girls accompany adults into the woods to hunt for plants and insects.

One So girl, when she was seven years old, was forced to stay with her uncle for a while owing to family problems. Her uncle had her operate one end of a two-man saw when he went logging in the woods. She also learned to use other saws to form boards and shingles for constructing houses. On the farm she plowed the ricefields. Being short, she had to reach up to grab the plow handle. Any farmer who has had to walk behind a plow can understand the punishment this kind of work entails. This was an unusual case, however. Most So children do not have to work this hard or to do the kind of work she did at her age. They have some time to play, varying according to each family's situation.

So children start school around seven years of age. Every child must wear a blue and white uniform. Children in Kusuman attend a Government school for four years, at which time the majority drop out. From the fifth grade up, the school charges fees which most So families simply cannot afford. An exceptional student, though, will have his or her education provided free through college by the Thai Government.

As So girls become older, they begin to learn skills they need to have in order to become successful wives, such as cooking and cloth-making. During their adolescent years, So girls spend their free time in groups and do not start courting until age 17 or 18.

So boys assist their fathers in the fields during the rice-planting and harvesting months. The school is always closed at that time of year. During the dry season (November through April) they learn to hunt; cut trees, make boards and roof shingles, make baskets, and repair dikes in the ricefields. So boys start courting in their late teens. They also make merit for their parents after they reach their twentieth birthday. This requires an initiation ceremony at the *wat*, or Buddhist temple, with family and friends in attendance. The young man must spend at least three months there as a monk. This merit-making is intended to benefit the parents after they die. It also is 'repayment for mother's milk', that is, all the effort a mother has made raising her son. The youth is not supposed to marry before he makes merit. If he does, his mother will carry a great sadness with her the rest of her life. Such a marriage is believed to start on a shaky foundation, and most likely will end in divorce. The reason for this is that the mother will have to share the results of her son's merit-making with her daughter-in-law.

Courtship and marriage

So boys and girls usually start courting around 16 or 17 years of age. The boys go around in a group in the evenings, paying visits to different girls' houses. Before they start out on a walk, they decide among themselves which girls they would like to spend the evening with. As the group reaches a house, they call out the name of the girl who lives there. She comes out to meet the boys. If she likes a particular young man who shows an interest in her, she will spend the evening there talking with him, while the remainder proceed to other houses. Sometimes the boys come to the girls' houses singing and playing music on flutes made from bamboo reeds.

Young people also get together at local fairs. They arrive in groups composed of members of their own sex. Once there, they pair off and spend the rest of the day together, talking and enjoying each other's company. Once the relationship becomes serious, the young man comes to the girl's house alone. If they intend to wed, he brings money for her to buy cloth to make clothes and items for their home.

When they decide to marry, the boy informs the girl's mother, who informs the father. A day or two later the boy brings his parents over to the girl's house, and they ask the girl if she really wants to marry the young man. If she convinces them, they then decide on a wedding date. It must take place in the fourth, sixth, or twelfth month of the year. Those three months are considered lucky for the So. A couple married during one of those months has the prospect, it is firmly believed, of a long and happy life together.

The father of the groom, or sometimes the bride, goes to the village headman to find out an appropriate time for the wedding. If the couple chooses, say, the fourth month, the headman goes to the 'Big Tree' (discussed in detail in the section "Religion") to ask the spirit of the tree for an auspicious day for the wedding. He also asks for the proper time of day for the bride to leave her house and arrive at the groom's house, and the proper time for the wrist-tying ceremony which unites the couple.

On the appointed day, the groom and members of his family accompany the headman to the bride's house. The headman brings a sum of money to the bride's mother, which the groom's father has previously agreed on as a price for the marriage. The headman carries the money in a silver dish that also contains ten flowers and ten candles. Siriphan, unfortunately, does not know the significance of this action. The contents are given to the bride's mother, and the dish is returned to the groom's mother. The wedding party then proceeds to the groom's house where everyone assembles inside. No fancy preparations are made. The house is merely cleaned up, and rice wine (*nya*) and cigarettes are provided for guests. Sometimes flowers are arranged in the house.

A simple ceremony is presided over by a respected elder of the town, who has been married for a long time to the same woman. He sits on one side of the room, directly in front of the couple to be married. The rest of the people are behind the couple. The elder gives the bride and groom a little talk on the importance of a good marriage. He advises them to always treat each other with respect. After the vows are made, he places a small amount of sticky rice and sugar in their mouths, and then ties yarn around the wrists of the bride and the groom. He then serves the couple rice wine, and the wedding ceremony has ended.

The groom's mother then takes the bride to what used to be her room, a small area partitioned off from the rest of the house, but which she now gives to the bride and groom. The groom's mother and father then move out to the main area.

Sometime after the ceremony, a week or two, or longer, when funds become available, a reception (*yae don*) is held. If guests have to travel a long way, a reception of some kind will take place on the day of the wedding. On the day of the reception men and women come over early in the morning to prepare the food. Some animal, a cow or pig, is often killed for the occasion.

The food served at the reception is very spicy and hot. The meat (cow or pig) is boiled. Other ingredients are chopped and ground up with the meat, such as boiled cow intestines, parsley, onions, red peppers, toasted brown rice, lemon, and animal blood. This mushy concoction is served in a bowl and each person dips out what he wants with a lettuce leaf or a small ball of sticky rice. Some of the people prefer to cook all the ingredients using the stir-fry method, while others make a good soup.

The guests come around sometime after daybreak, talking, enjoying the food, and perhaps getting drunk on the rice wine. Most of the guests depart by mid-morning.

This account describes the usual chain of events surrounding a So marriage, but it is by no means invariably followed. Variations do occur, depending on the economic situation of the parties involved. If the groom is financially well-off, he may build his own house to live in. If the groom and his family are very poor, the young man may go talk to his girlfriend's mother and explain the situation to her. If she is convinced of his sincerity, she will simply let the youth move in with her daughter, putting off the

marriage ceremony until his financial situation improves. At any rate the young couple will live with the parents until they have enough funds to build their own house. It may be with the bride's parents or the groom's depending on the economic situation of the families involved, and also which family has more room to spare. The groom's father may also give his son some land to farm.

Polygamy is generally not practised by the So. One reason may be that three or even two wives are too expensive to support, but another could be the attitude of So women in Kusuman who, according to Siriphan, are very hostile to the idea. Indeed, though So women accept the subservient role accorded them by society, they would prefer to be treated as equals with men. When marital pressure becomes too great, a So wife will take a stand against her husband and argue for her position. Her husband will discuss the problem with her, or argue the problem with her. Failure to reach an agreement sometimes leads to divorce. Persons married in the traditional So way may reach agreement among themselves about the division of property. If not, they can go before the headman and a group of elders and take the 'water test' or the 'betel leaf test'. These tests are also used to settle other disputes, including wills (see the section "The family and relations with others").

In the water test each person involved in the dispute stands before the elder, and swears to the universal spirit (yǐán) that what he is going to say is the truth. Each participant then drinks a glass of water and tells his side of the story. Siriphan never attended one of these meetings, and so could not tell me more about the procedure or how a decision is reached. It would seem that a spirit (yǐán) is involved in the decision, though, possibly arbitrating by communicating to the headman, who has the power to communicate with the spirit world. He is the intermediary between the So people and the Big Tree (t_m anám aluwân).

In the betel leaf test, some kind of metal is melted down by fire. Each participant then places a betel leaf in his hand. The metal is then poured on the leaf. If the metal runs up the arm, that person is lying or is not in good standing with the spirit world, and so the decision is given to the other party.

A couple may also take their divorce case to the local Thai court. Siriphan states that it is widely believed among the local populace that these courts are thoroughly corrupt, and a substantial bribe is all that is needed to win your case. To avoid legal problems, the Thai Government encourages people to have their marriage recorded, but many of the So continue in their customary ways.

Parents' influence on marriage partners

In times past parents had more influence with their children concerning choice of marriage partner, and would even try to arrange marriages on economic grounds. An event took place around 1966, however, that changed the parent-child relationship concerning the choice of a spouse. This event was the suicide of a pretty young So

girl named Nu. The girl and her family lived on a small farm outside of Kusuman. Her father had a reputation among his neighbors as being hard to get along with. It seems the girl had a boyfriend whom she loved very much and wanted to marry. Her mother consented but her father refused because the boy's family was very poor, and he wanted his daughter to marry someone with more to offer in the way of land and buffaloes.

On 'Wan Dek', or Children's Day, a day in which the Thai honor their children with ceremonies and athletic contests, she made her decision to end her life. She finished her household chores and said that she was going out to collect firewood. A few hours later a woman and her children were out hunting plants to use for the evening meal when they saw the girl standing under a tree. As they came up to her and realized she had hanged herself, they all became quite hysterical and screamed uncontrollably. The father, already unpopular with the rest of the town, further agitated them by breaking tradition and burying her on the second day rather than that same day, according to Buddhist teaching.

A local Buddhist monk went to her grave one night to communicate with her spirit and find out why she did this thing. The monk said she told him that this life was not worth living, that her father beat her and would not let her marry. He also said that she had been pregnant, which the boyfriend denied.

This tragedy is still talked about in Kusuman whenever a disagreement of this kind occurs between parents and children. Quite often the elder members of the family remind the parents to be more lenient with their children if they want to avoid a similar tragedy. Today in Kusuman, parents as a rule no longer try to force their choice of a mate on their children.

Burial customs

When a So person dies, the body normally lies in state at his or her house for three nights. During this time the body is prepared for burial. Makeup is applied to the face to give it a life-like appearance. One or more coins are placed in the mouth so that the deceased will start the next life financially sound. Buddhist monks (four or more) make nightly visits to recite chants, for which they are fed and receive compensation in the form of donations. Neighbors come to visit; they usually stay up all night with the family, talking and playing games in order to relieve their suffering. Besides food, alcoholic beverages (*nya*) and homemade cigarettes must be provided by the family of the deceased. Gambling is illegal, thus the family must ask the authorities for permission to play cards for money during the three-day mourning period, and the police grant it. Since the So like to gamble, they undoubtedly want to take advantage of this opportunity whenever possible. In fact, the police can often be found at the house of a deceased person in Kusuman participating in an all-night card game.

On such occasions young people form groups and play their own games. One game the So play is called "Short wood, long wood". One person holds four matches in his or her hand (three long and one short), so they all appear to be the same length. The opponent picks one match. If he picks the short one, he wins and gets to hit him on the knee with his knuckles. If he picks a long one, the other person gets to do the same to him.

The burial ceremony starts shortly after noon on the fourth day. Children less than ten years old, mothers who die during childbirth, or anyone who is healthy and meets death by accident are buried, not cremated. Women and those who have accidents are buried as soon as possible, usually the same day. The So believe the spirits of these people are too strongly attached to the earth, remaining here to frighten mortals if they are burned.

All ceremonies, whether by fire or burial, take place in the woods outside of town. Members of each family are all buried next to each other or, if cremated, the ceremony takes place in the family plot.

The body to be cremated is placed in a wooden coffin inside the house. Later the coffin is placed on a platform outside, made from six bamboo poles tied together in two groups of three perpendicular to each other. A tall spirit-house is put together in sections and placed over the body inside the house of the deceased. When the procession to the cemetery starts, the house is taken down and reassembled outside over the body, which has been placed on the bamboo poles. Some of the older members of the family of the deceased wash down the inside of the house as a sanitary measure.

Just before the body is taken outside for the procession to the cemetery, a ritual is performed around it. Usually four or six men (neighbors) form at one end of the casket, an equal number on each side. Each man has a large metal bowl which he places on his head, upside down. Some hold another metal bowl in one hand and a stick in the other. Or a stick in both hands might be preferred. The men begin a slow rhythmic dance around the casket, half of them on either side. They walk backwards, chanting ("hey-hey-hey") and striking the pot or bringing the two sticks together. Just before the two lead men meet at the other end of the casket, the whole group reverses direction, and proceeds toward the starting point, still chanting. They continue for about 20 or 30 minutes. The significance of this ritual is unclear, but it has something to do with the spirit of the deceased, for the So believe spirits walk backwards.

After this ceremony, the body is taken outside, and a procession is formed around the spirit-house for the march to the cemetery. At the head of the group walks a man carrying a large bowl filled with puffed rice. On the way to the cemetery he scatters rice on the road so that the spirit of the deceased can find its way home, perhaps to stay awhile before moving on. A group of monks follow him. If the man has any grandchildren, they fall in behind the monks, boys first. The grandchildren

hold on to a large string attached to the front of the spirit house. The boys shave their heads and wear saffron robes, while the girls wear white. After the ceremony the grandchildren may spend seven days at a *wat* (Buddhist temple) meditating and praying, if they were particularly fond of the deceased. Two more monks sit on a bench at the front of the funeral litter. As the group walks to the cemetery, they chant verses from books they carry with them. Behind the litter are the rest of the family and friends. Many volunteers are needed to carry the heavy litter on their shoulders. When it reaches the cemetery, the two monks descend, and it is placed on a pile of logs about four feet high, stacked so as to form a square. Inside the square are twigs and dry leaves, which burn easily. Everyone sits down on the ground and the monks chant for a few minutes. Then the monk in charge lights the fire, after which everyone joins in the lighting with sticks brought from home.

Before returning to their respective homes, each person passes by the house of the deceased, where, from the elevated porch of the house, a man, usually an elder member of the deceased's family, sprinkles water on everyone. As he does this he says, "*man yun, man yun*", which means have a long and healthy life. The water has been mixed with a sweet-smelling substance and the ground-up root of the *kamin* plant, which gives the water a yellow tint.

Seven days after the body has been thus cremated, the family returns late in the evening to pick up the bones. The bones are separated from the dirt, placed on a white cloth which is folded around the bones and tied in a bundle. A small stick with the name of the deceased is placed upright in a mound of dirt where the cremation took place. The bundle is then put in a jar and taken to the *wat*. The jar is put into a hole in the wall which surrounds the *wat*. There are many other holes such as this to provide for other members of the community. The next morning a ceremony is held, either at home or at the *wat*. A simple ceremony takes place with the monks presiding. Afterward food is served. Later on, some members of the family return to the *wat* and seal the bones in the wall with cement.

The family and relations with others

As mentioned in the life cycle today the choice of a spouse is left up to the individual, but parents would prefer that their son or daughter marry someone who has money or property, which is the only real measure of status or success in Kusuman. The So are exogamic, that is they do not marry relatives, except possibly in a few cases of marriage between distant cousins from different villages.

Marriages occur between people of different So villages as well as between So people and people of different ethnic groups, such as Thai, Lao, Yaw, etc. So girls, in Kusuman, seek to marry Thai and Lao boys because of the better chance they will have for a materially good life, since being married to a So is almost synonymous with a life of hard work in the ricefields. This effort to marry out of their ethnic group was not

always the case, but can be attributed to the major highway that was completed in the mid-1960s, running from Nakhon Phanom through Kusuman and southward to Bangkok. This highway is now served with several bus lines which enable villagers, mostly younger ones, to become acquainted with other areas.

The wife plays an important role in running the household, bringing up the children, working in the fields, and making most of the daily decisions that must be made. In addition, her husband consults her on important decisions that will affect the family, such as whether they should purchase more land for rice cultivation. The husband, however, has the final word on any matter affecting the family, no matter how unimportant. This, says Siriphan, is probably the greatest reason for divorce in Kusuman. Women accept their role in society for the most part, but they do not accept it without question. The role of men and women in their society is a fairly common topic whenever women get together. Occasionally a rebel can be found. Siriphan says that her aunt has been married five or six times. Some of her husbands were from other ethnic groups. Whenever a husband became too dominant to suit her, she would simply divorce him and look for someone else.

If a couple shares a house with in-laws, the bride will continue to take care of her husband and any children they may have. In addition, she does the cooking for both families. Nevertheless, both the bride and her mother-in-law will continue to have their separate household responsibilities as they relate to their separate families. In Kusuman the family unit consists of the biological family of mother, father, and children living under one roof. It may also include grandparents unable to care for themselves, and a married son or daughter on a temporary basis, along with his or her spouse and children.

In Amphur Kusuman (Kusuman District) there are, besides So villages, quite a few villages that contain different ethnic groups, each with its own distinctive social patterns. Bartering existed between Kusuman and these villages in the recent past--today, however, most of the people carry their products to the market to sell, either in Kusuman or the larger cities of Nakhon Phanom to the east, or Sakon Nakhon to the west. Relations between the So men in Kusuman and men of different cultural backgrounds can be described as cool. It seems that national holidays are celebrated with a fair in Kusuman for all the villages in that part of the District. People bring food and trinkets to sell, while music and dancing last well into the night. According to Siriphan, some of the men from non-So villages come to stir up trouble. Fights and sometimes murder result. In the opinion of the So, those noted for their short tempers and crude behavior include the Lao, Yaw, and particularly the Pu Thai, a people living to the southwest of Kusuman, near Sakhon Nakhon. Because of the resulting violence the So have become less enthusiastic about hosting these festivities.

Government in Kusuman

Siriphan does not have much knowledge about the role of the So people of Kusuman in local government. The national Government controls all civil functions in Kusuman, and it appears that the local So have very little influence in national affairs. Civil government in Kusuman is controlled by civil service officers appointed from Bangkok. They handle the postal service, public works, tax collecting, civil courts, and law and order. Most of the workers are Thai or Lao, together with a few So.

Tambon Kusuman, the administrative unit of Commune containing the village of Kusuman, is the headquarters for Government services to a part of Amphur Kusuman, and contains many Mu Ban, or village units. Kusuman was evidently chosen as a communal centre because of its central location.

According to Siriphan, the people of Kusuman do not readily identify with the national Government. In fact, she says, the villagers tend to have a negative attitude toward Bangkok as a result of the way Government representatives in Kusuman are carrying out national policy to assimilate the So into the Thai culture. Such policy, implemented through the universal education program among others, affects all minority groups, but in particular those living in northeastern Thailand.

Siriphan explains that the problem in Kusuman is (a) the attitude of the Thai officials towards the local population, and (b) the way governmental programs are carried out. The Thai officials, and the Thai people in general, she says, tend to regard the So people as inferior, socially and culturally. That is the impression the So receive in their contact with the Thai.

The other half of the problem concerns Government services, i.e. their implementation. According to Siriphan, So people who use the free health clinic are pressured into making donations to the attending nurse for her own use. The police may arrest local villagers with or without cause—in either case, a So may obtain his freedom with the payment of a bribe to the arresting officer, to a lawyer, or to the judge. Civil action in court may also be influenced by a payment to the judge, according to Siriphan.

The only political activity that the So carry on independently of Bangkok involves the headman and in some instances respected elders of the village. Besides being an intermediary with the communal 'Big Tree' (see "Religion") and performing at social functions, the headman and chosen assistants preside at a sort of civil court when villagers request it, if they do not desire to go to the Government court. This court can be utilized to solve civil disputes such as divorces and contested wills, as noted in "The So life cycle" section. Siriphan has never witnessed one of these meetings, so the only information she has is secondhand, coming from persons who have taken part. From these accounts it seems that a decision made by the *yián* may

not be known until sometime in the future. The persons involved participate in rituals, such as the water ritual, in which they swear to tell the truth. The person who lied will receive an appropriate punishment, including death, at a later undetermined time by *yíán*. In some disputes, the presiding officer (*t'aô kae*), who could be the headman or some other elder, might make a decision after consulting with his assistants, consisting of other elder members of the village.

Though this local court system probably was more active and influential in the past, the national Government is now the real political authority in Kusuman. Today if a So is unhappy with a decision made by the local court, he can and does take his case to the Government court, which might indicate which court he regards as wielding more authority.

The So kinship system

In Kusuman, the term a person uses to address another person depends on factors such as the sex of the people involved, their ages, and the relationship between them. The example of Siriphan as a young girl provides a reference which reveals the system of terminology used for relatives in Kusuman.

In her biological family Siriphan differentiates between older and younger brother, and older and younger sister. An older brother is called *ay* and his name. A younger brother is called *saem* and his name. For an older sister the term is *áí* and her name, and for a younger sister *saem gamuŕ* and her name. Quite often children call their sisters and brothers by their name only. She would call her father *ˈpiá* and her mother *ˈpe'*.

Cousins on the mother's side and on the father's side would be treated as her brothers and sisters. That is, the same terms used to refer to her older and younger brothers and sisters would be used for her older and younger cousins. Normally, cousins call each other by name.

Aunts and uncles on both mother and father's side are referred to by the same terms with one exception. The mother's brothers are differentiated from the father's brothers. Siriphan, our point of reference, would call her mother's older brother either *ájæ*, *ájæ t_m* and his name, or *ájæ t_m* and the name of his oldest child. She would call her mother's younger brother *nua?* and his name or *nua?* and the name of his oldest child.

She would call her father's brothers and all remaining uncles on both sides of the family by the same terms. She would refer to her father's older brother as *ájæ*, *ájæ* and his name, or *ájæ* and the name of his oldest child. Her father's younger brother would be called *añi*, *añi* and his name, or *añi* and the name of his oldest child.

All of her aunts on both sides would be called by the same terms. She would call an aunt *ájæ kŋ* if unmarried. An older married aunt would be called *ájæ*, *ájæ* and her name, or *ájæ* and her oldest child's name.

A younger aunt would be called *aviá*, *aviá* and her name, or *aviá* and the name of her oldest child.

Finally, grandparents terms on the mother's side are different from those on the father's side. Siriphan would call her mother's father *ᵐpiá niáy* and her mother's mother *ᵐpé niáy*. She would call her father's father *ᵐpiá ɔʔ* and her father's mother *ᵐpeʔ ɔʔ*.

These examples show us that the So people of Kusuman have a bifurcate-merging kinship system in which some of the family members are given separate terms or names, while other members are included under a common term. In the So system all cousins are considered as sisters and brothers, and are called the same. However, Siriphan calls her uncles, the brothers of her mother, by terms different from those of her father's brothers. Her grandparents on her mother's side are called by terms different from her grandparents on her father's side. Also in evidence in the So system is the use of teknonymy where a person is addressed by reference to another individual.

Religion

The most important aspect of So religion is animism. Ancestor worship can be ranked next, followed by Buddhism.

The So recognize a universal earth spirit (*ýiáŋ*) which is found everywhere: in rocks, houses, plants, trees, etc. However, its power is not concentrated equally in all things. In the vicinity of Kusuman, the most powerful occurrence of *ýiáŋ* can be found in the largest tree there. It is known as *tanam aluwán pud*, the 'Big Tree'. The Big Tree can be spotted easily from the edge of Kusuman, some two miles away. A major tangible symbol of So identity, this tree must be consulted before any important event takes place, such as a wedding, festival, etc. If not, the results could be disastrous. The village headman (*niáy ýiáŋ*) acts as intermediary between the tree and the people of Kusuman. The *ýiáŋ*, speaking through the headman, declares the right day and the right time of day for the event to take place. No one is exempt. Even government officials conform to these local beliefs. If the people of Kusuman worship this tree properly, the tree will in turn look out for the people. The So of Kusuman feel strongly about the Big Tree; it unites them and gives them an identity.

Sometimes other aspects of this universal spirit will enter a human and cause sickness or death. Then a specialist, either a *mɔ yáo* or a *mɔ ploŋ* must be summoned to exorcise the spirit. As the *mɔ* drives the spirit out, its identity becomes known and the *mɔ* must follow the spirit to its habitat and pay homage. The *mɔ* will promise to perform some task for the spirit if it will promise not to cause further trouble.

The So also honor and care for the spirits of their ancestors. Living space is provided for them in the house along with food. They constantly talk to the spirits of deceased relatives, seeking their help when problems arise. In the So mind, spirits,

both good and evil, determine whether one is to have good fortune, health, and happiness in one's mortal life. This belief in spirits is often incorporated into Buddhist ceremonies.

The So practise Theravada Buddhism, which is the type practised throughout Thailand. They are nominal Buddhists, however. A So observes the important holidays, makes merit, and follows many of the codes of conduct which the Buddhist religion calls for. He believes in reincarnation and hopes to be born again in this world under better conditions. He does not consider reaching Nirvana, which to him means extinction. His credo is to enjoy life—to do what can be done with what he has and not to worry about what is out of reach. To quote a villager, "A So only wants to lead a peaceful, uncomplicated life, to have friends, enough food, a place to stay, and to make enough merit so that his next life will be better."

The following passages present a brief study of So religious beliefs and practices, including animist ceremonies, exorcism rituals, merit-making, and superstitions. The So practise Buddhism in preparation for the next life. But a So's daily life is influenced by his belief in spirits.

Ĵa at_m í ceremony

The Ĵa a t_m í or wrist-tying ceremony is the one that holds the most importance for the village of Kusuman. It takes place every year in January or February next to the Big Tree. The purpose is to celebrate the New Year and, by conducting a ceremony in honor of the spirit of the Big Tree, seek to obtain its blessing on the people throughout the year. Members of the village prepare food for themselves and the tree spirit. They leave early in the morning on the day of the ceremony and assemble at a spirit house next to the Big Tree. Food is laid on the ground for the people to eat later on. Food is also placed in the spirit-house along with the cleaned head of a cow or pig. Siriphan, however, could not tell me the significance of this act. Candles are placed inside the spirit-house and lit. The village chief looks at the house and speaks to the spirit in a special language known only to him and the spirit (a sort of 'speaking in tongues'). He asks for health and prosperity for the village during the New Year. As the spirit descends on the house to partake of the food; the flame on the candles is reported to grow dim, and return to normal only when the spirit leaves.

After the spirit has departed, the chief ties a piece of yarn around one wrist of every person present for a prosperous year. Most of the people who attend these ceremonies are the older members of the village. The people then can eat, bringing an end to the Ĵa a t_m í ceremony.

Ĵa at_m í doṅ ceremony

This is a ceremony performed in the house, also in January or February. It takes place in the morning, the exact date being decided by the headman for each household. He does this after conferring with the Big Tree.

ǰa atí doŋ means literally "house wrist-tying" (ǰa = to tie, atí = wrist, and doŋ = house). This ceremony celebrates the New Year and asks for health and good luck for the family members for the coming year.

Early in the morning (7:00 or 8:00 a.m.) everybody assembles in the house. The older members of the family sit close to the section of the house where the family spirits reside.

A So house usually contains only one room. A part of the room is marked off as a habitation for the family spirits (ancestors). Only the immediate family members can walk in this part of the house. Non-kin and in-laws are excluded. The younger members and neighbors then fill in around the rest of the house. A large container (about eight inches in diameter and two feet high, made from mud) is placed next to the elders. It is filled with rice wine or an appropriate substitute. Long bamboo straws are used for drinking. The eldest male starts by greeting the family spirits and telling them this ceremony is in their honor. He asks them for good luck and health for the coming year. After this, the elders finish off the jar of wine. Then the wrist-tying ceremony can begin.

In the middle of the room is a small brass pedestal with a flat tabletop, also of brass. A brass bowl stands in the middle of the table. Inside the bowl is placed a towel and an article of clean clothing from the father or mother of the family. Pieces of yarn, a whole boiled chicken, a boiled egg, and a handful of sticky rice are on the flat tabletop.

The eldest male of the family performs the ǰa atí ceremony on everyone present, starting with the family members first, following with their friends. As a person approaches the table, the chicken, egg, and sticky rice are placed in the individual's hand. The elder ties a piece of yarn around the wrist on the same hand and says the words "man yun, man yun" ("have a healthy and prosperous New Year"). As soon as these words are spoken, the chicken, egg, and sticky rice are taken back to be used for the next person. This is one of the happiest moments for a So, always giving him a spiritual lift and a feeling of contentment.

Rice ceremony

A good rice crop is extremely important to a So: it is the base of his diet and his major source of income. He believes his prospects for a good crop depend on the spirit of his fields. For this reason, before planting, each farmer performs a ceremony early in the morning in honor of the spirit of his field.

On the plot next to the field the farmer takes earth to erect a circular wall about three inches high and two feet in diameter. Seven rice plants, one for every day of the week, are planted in the circle. A small spirit-house is in the center resting on a stake about four feet high. From the house hang carved bamboo figures of shrimp and fish. Offerings of tobacco, betel leaves, and dirt are placed inside the house, and a prayer is said.

When the crop is ready to be harvested, the rice stalks around the spirit-houses are cut first and hung from it with yarn. The house is then moved to the flat area set aside for separating the rice grain from the stalk. The rice is next transported to a storage barn by cart. Before storing the rice, the spirit-house is taken from the field and placed inside the barn. The farmer asks the spirit of the barn to protect his rice from such pests as rats or insects, and from fire.

Exorcism among the So

When a So person becomes ill or sometimes, even when injured, a *mō* will be sent for. The *mō* performs rituals which tell him or her if the problem is a result of spirit possession. If a spirit is the culprit, other rituals are performed to drive it out. In some cases, rituals and chants are used in combination with medicinal herbs to cure injuries, such as a broken leg. *Mō* are of two kinds, *mō yáo* and *mō ploṅ*. Most *mō ploṅ* are men, while a large number of *mō yáo* are women. It is held that women lack the self-discipline to undergo the long period of training and to follow the strict life-style required to be a *mō ploṅ*, hence men tend to make up that latter type.

Methods of exorcism differ between the two types. A *mō ploṅ* has a simpler ritual and thus is usually less expensive. A *mō yáo* requires food, drink, and musical accompaniment at her performance. Also many guests, or witnesses are invited. In addition, each *mō* seems to have special powers in certain areas. For example, the *mō ploṅ* seems to be the exclusive agent for exorcising the deadly spirit *maná*.

A *mō ploṅ* achieves his powers after much study and practice but a *mō yáo* is an especially sensitive person or someone who belongs to a certain family and who receives his or her power from a sudden possession by a spirit. Such persons have been known to receive this spirit while attending an exorcism conducted by a *mō yáo*. When the spirit seized them, it was reported to have knocked them to the floor, causing them to shout incoherently and thrash about uncontrollably as if epileptic.

A case of exorcism by a mō ploṅ

Most *mō ploṅ* are men owing to the greater hardships involved in becoming one. Also, a master usually passes the knowledge on to his son or a good friend, almost always a male. A *mō ploṅ* must be a model citizen, an example to others. He cannot drink alcohol, or use profane or crude language. He is not allowed to eat snake or rat meat. He cannot eat or have raw meat in the house, the only exception being chicken meat.

The *mō ploṅ* who treated the woman described in the following passages was also a model Buddhist. Although married, he behaved like a monk, observing all the ceremonies and meditating. The case cited here took place in Kusuman sometime in the late 1950s. A young married woman, for no apparent reason, became irrational and quite angry. All knives had to be hidden from her because she sometimes tried

to kill whomever came near her. She also suffered from epileptic-like seizures. Her family believed a spirit had invaded her brain so they made arrangements to take her to a mɔ who specialized in that kind of exorcism. The woman and her family stayed at the mɔ's house for about a month, during which time she received daily treatments. Total cost of the treatment was 12 baht (60 US cents), with free room and meals.

The treatments involved at least two ceremonies per day, one early in the morning and one late in the afternoon. The patient sat cross-legged in the middle of the room, while the mɔ sat directly in front of her. Her family and members of the mɔ's family sat around her, in case she became violent. At such times her hands were tied behind her to a pole. The So believe the alien spirit reacts against the exorcism ritual and gives superhuman powers to the person affected. The mɔ began by chewing *ñā*. He recited some secret formulas, took a lighted candle, placed it in his mouth, and quickly withdrew it. He then blew on the patient, starting from the top of her head down to her feet, in one long breath. He repeated this process three times.

Another ceremony was performed occasionally, in the morning after the previously described ceremony. Sometimes the mɔ prescribed it, and sometimes the patient asked him to perform it when she began to suffer from head pains. The mɔ would ask her to go to the well and bring back two pails of water. These he placed on the edge of the raised porch. She stood on the ground beneath the porch. The mɔ began by chewing *ñā* as before. He recited the formulas and placed the lighted candle in his mouth, took it out, and blew out again, but this time on the water in both pails. After doing this three times he held the candle alternately over both pails, letting the hot candle wax drop in the water to form little 'flowers'. The mɔ then took a dipper and filled it with the water from one pail, recited a formula, and poured the water over the woman's head. He continued this procedure until both pails were empty.

The woman received treatment for about one month. The mɔ, after observing her behavior and finding her to be normal, declared her cured and sent her home. Since that treatment she has behaved in a normal manner.

Exorcising the spirit called maná

Another kind of spirit which the mɔ plon must deal with is called *maná*. This spirit is different from the ordinary kinds which afflict the So people. This evil and deadly spirit causes great fear among the population because of the great suffering its victim endures. In order for the *maná* to exist in the earthly realm, it first must secure a specially chosen person as a place of habitation. This person also becomes known as *maná*. From time to time the spirit must leave its home and enter other bodies, staying only long enough to devour that person's insides, or until it is exorcised.

The origin of the *maná* is uncertain. One common story tells of a group of people who many years ago united to form a club for the practice of magic. By observing

certain rituals and rules, a member could achieve certain personal goals such as wealth, beauty, popularity, etc. They were required to live moral lives and observe restricted diets. But, through lack of willpower, some members strayed and did not faithfully carry out the rules of the order. Such an unworthy person became possessed by an evil spirit called *maná* and as mentioned, also became known as *maná*. Present-day *maná* inherited the condition from their parents, who in turn inherited it from theirs, going on back to the original group. It is passed on after the possessed person dies.

Most *maná* are devoured by this evil spirit when the spirit can no longer find a suitable victim. A suitable victim is someone in a weakened condition, such as a woman who has just given birth, or persons of less than good health. After the insides of a *maná* (the mortal whose body is occupied by the spirit) have been eaten by this spirit, he (the mortal) is dead and cannot move, although he appears to be alive to observers. When a *maná*'s child passes close to him, the corpse spits into the child's face, and the spirit is transferred to him or her. These evil spirits go out at night in search of victims. They can allegedly be spotted by the white light between their eyes which illuminates their faces. They also have the ability to take the form of animals. When a woman gives birth, someone must stand guard at night in order to watch for these spirits. Porch ladders are turned upside-down so the spirits become confused and cannot enter the house.

All is not hopeless for those So who are being devoured by the *maná*. A *mɔ ploŋ* can be called. A *mɔ ploŋ* is the only one who has the ability to exorcise certain spirits from the body, including *maná*. First the *mɔ ploŋ* must locate what part of the body the spirit is in, and then during exorcism determine what kind of spirit is causing the problem. One common method is by egg examination. The doctor takes a fresh chicken egg and touches it to the patient's body, usually the head and upper body, while reciting a secret formula to himself. After doing this, he breaks the egg open and examines it. The result of the procedure reveals illness hidden in the body. A *mɔ ploŋ* may check both sides of the yolk before he can make a decision as to what part of the body is afflicted. Siriphan is not absolutely certain at what time identification of the type of spirit takes place—it is believed to be during exorcism, but possibly during the egg examination as well.

The spirit can be exorcised through rituals like the candle ceremony. In this ceremony, the *mɔ ploŋ* recites formulas, places a lighted candle in his mouth, takes it out, and blows on the victim. The *mɔ ploŋ* asks the kind of spirit that is the troublemaker, i.e. tree spirit, house spirit, or *maná*. If *maná*, he also asks the identity of the person (home base) who harbors the spirit. If he does not receive an answer, the doctor locks the spirit into the victim by the use of green betel leaves (*balú*). He recites something, blows on the leaves and places them on the body. This is repeated three times. The third time he holds them on the body while he beats the victim with a wooden rod. He continues questioning until the victim shouts out the identity of the *maná*. Sometimes the *mɔ ploŋ* becomes angry if he has had to treat a number of victims

as a result of the same culprit, so he will continue beating the poor victim in order to punish the evil spirit which is causing all the suffering. Finally, he allows the maná to leave the body. The victim is not supposed to feel any pain as a result of the beating.

Nowadays the So tolerate maná, but do not associate with them. This was not always the case. Many years ago, people believed to be possessed by maná were sometimes killed by the villagers. Others fled to Thare, where a Roman Catholic church and orphanage is located today. It is said that here some maná developed the power to hide their faces, so that a mɔ ploŋ could not identify them during his examinations. Today So try to avoid these people. But when an unusually large number of people die, and a person who harbors the maná is identified, the villagers will go to that house at night and stone it, trying to get that person to leave.

The following case happened in Kusuman in the late 1950s or early 1960s. It seems a mɔ ploŋ accused a woman of being a maná, and took her to court to prove his charges. The two opponents were neighbors. The mɔ ploŋ had discovered this during the course of treating some recent patients. Each patient had identified the woman as maná while the spirit was being exorcised. At each exorcism there were many witnesses present. During the court proceedings the poor woman denied she was a maná of course, but the evidence and the 'expert' testimony were overwhelming. The woman was found to be a maná by the court. However, no penalty was given. An announcement was proclaimed to the public, advising that the woman was a maná, a danger to the public, and should be avoided.

Merit-making at the wat

The So, being Buddhists are always interested in making merit (t_ma⁹bón), that is, performing good deeds so that their next life here on earth will be a better one. One way of making merit is by raising money for the local *wat*. Some of the citizens band together and construct a life-sized statue of Buddha out of bamboo. His face is painted and two holes are made about a foot apart, one in the center of his chest and the other directly below. A rope is run through one hole, up to a tree limb in the courtyard of the *wat*, around a pulley, back through the other hole and around another pulley attached to a pole six or seven feet off the ground. The rope is in one continuous loop. The Buddha image is attached to one rope. The image is dressed in a saffron robe, and raised to its maximum height in the tree. A monk usually sits nearby. When a crowd of sufficient size gathers, the image is lowered with the announcement "here comes the Prahmalai". When the descending statue is arrested near the ground, people drop coins in a receptacle attached to it, and make silent requests. By contributing money, the people believe they will be rewarded with good luck, health, etc., either in this life or the next. After the crowd leaves, the image is raised again, where it will remain until another group gathers.

Retrieving lost spirits

After a child has lived a few years and has developed his co-ordination, accidents which cause him to lose his balance and fall are considered to be fateful occurrences. There is no set age limit, but generally girls and boys around ten years of age or older are in this category.

When someone falls, as from the raised porch of a So house, or as the result of tripping over a tree root while walking in the woods, the So believe the person's spirit falls with him and becomes separated from the body on impact. For example, a young girl is out gathering food in the woods, and she trips and falls. Upon returning home she informs her parents or other members of her family. They would thereupon launch a search for the fallen spirit. The only time allowed for retrieving it is early the following morning, before sunrise. The reason for this is unclear. On that morning, before the expedition starts, ingredients are gathered to insure the success of the mission. An egg is boiled, and a ball of sticky rice is prepared. A bamboo pole with a net attached (used for catching small fish) is to be used to catch the spirit. Into the net an article of clothing is placed belonging to the girl who lost her spirit. On top of this go a piece of yarn, the boiled egg, and the ball of sticky sweet rice as used in *ja a tí* and *ja a tí don* ceremonies. The rescue party proceeds to the area where the spirit and person became separated. The person with the net holds it out front. The people exhort the spirit to return with these words: "Get up and come home, stay with your family, father, mother, sister and live a long life."

They repeatedly attempt to convince the spirit of the happiness it will enjoy if it returns, and the miseries of staying in this place unattached. The net is swung three times in a dipping motion and the spirit is retrieved. On the way home, the person with the net makes unusually high, deliberate steps so as not to fall and lose the spirit again. After the group enters the house, the net is held out over the center of the room. The girl who lost her spirit places her hand in the net. The egg and rice are placed in it and the yarn is tied around her wrist. The same words are repeated and her spirit is reunited with her. After this ceremony, friends and relatives gather around and talk with her.

It is a source of great comfort to know that friends will go to such trouble to help one out. To know that other people care what happens makes one glad to be a So.

Lunar eclipse

Another interesting So superstition concerns the lunar eclipse, which they believe to occur when a frog tries to eat the moon. They try to prevent this by beating on objects to chase away the frog. When the eclipse is over and the spirit has been chased away, the beating stops. The So are careful in choosing something to beat on, because they believe the moon will reward them for their help by replacing that object with a new one.

Language and folktales

Some characteristics of So pronunciation

The So language is a non-tonal, unwritten language belonging to the Mon-Khmer group of languages. It is spoken by probably less than 10,000 people in Thailand, with the majority of them living in villages located in Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom Provinces. The So in the more isolated villages speak a 'purer' dialect than those living in the village of Kusuman, which is exposed to relatively more Thai and Laotian influences. Most of the acquired words are for things and ideas new to the So people. All of the acquired words are modified, some by sound, and all of them dispense with varying tones found in the Thai and Laotian languages. So words are usually of one or two syllables, but there are some with three. While stress can be on any syllable, it appears to be more common on the last. In order to transcribe the So language as accurately as possible, I have used International Phonetic Alphabet symbols. At the present time, it appears that the language has approximately 40 phonemes (26 consonants and 14 vowels; see annexes for general pronunciation guide).

One peculiarity of So is the rather common occurrence of the trilled "r" (r) in words. The "r" can be found in the initial, middle, or final position in a word. Note these examples: řanât ("pineapple"), yur ("wet") and pařa ("gold").

Another feature of So is the glottal stop. An example is the shortened "e" in the word for "mother" ("pe"). This word is also an example of another fairly common occurrence in So, that of the nasalized "m" or "n" sound before the initial consonant in a word. It is a sound that is barely audible. The sound is heard just before the initial consonant is pronounced. It actually leads into the consonant, and just as the nasalized sound becomes audible, the consonant is pronounced. The nasalized "m" sound is found before words beginning with the labials "b", "p", and "m". The initial "n" sound is found before words beginning with the dental alveolars and uvulars "d", "k", "q", "g", "n", and "t". Besides the word for "mother", "pe", other "m" words include ^mbiá ("absent"), and ^mpi ("pepper"). Some "n" words include ⁿgař ("skin"), ⁿgum yuř ("toe"), and ⁿtoř doř ("door"). When speaking such So words, the nasalized sound must be pronounced, otherwise their meanings are lost.

Sentence structure and grammar

The basic sentence structure in So consists of subject and verb. If an object is included, it follows the verb. For example the sentence: "I see the bird."

^go hãm řãm.
I [female] see bird.

^gwa hãm řãm.
I [male] see bird.

There are no articles in So. The same noun is used for one or many. There are no singular or plural forms. A clarifying word is added either before or after the noun to further describe it as to number, size, color, shape, etc.

A verb has only one form, regardless of whether the subject is singular or plural, and whether the action is past, present, or future. Tense is shown by additional words, by the context of the sentence, or sometimes by the use of a different verb. For example, the word ču ("go") is used when the person has not gone yet. For someone in the process of going the word pa is used.

ⁿgwa ču doŋ. [thinking of going but not yet gone]
I go home.
ⁿgwa pa doŋ. [in the process of going]
I go home.

The context of the sentence can also indicate tense. Note the English sentence "I will buy fish tomorrow." One way of saying this in So would be:

ⁿgwa pa j^haj s^ha? paⁿa.
I go buy fish tomorrow.

Another way would be to include a future indicator called "i".

ⁿgwa i pa j^haj s^ha? paⁿa.
I will go buy fish tomorrow.

Past tenses are formed in a similar manner. For example, an English-speaking person would say "I went". A So frequently uses a past indicator called "j^ha."

ⁿgwa pa j^ha.
I go already.

The context of the sentence could also indicate past tense.

I went yesterday.
ⁿgwa pa mah^hay. ["I go yesterday."]

Many interrogatives are formed by the use of the question particle "ha?" at the end of a question. The question particle is a part of many Asian languages. In English we use a change in tone and sentence construction to indicate a question such as "Are you going home?" In So the interrogative is formed as follows:

at^hao may ču doŋ ha?
(you) go home (question particle)

If the question is asked expecting an affirmative answer, then the particle "min ha?" is used. It can be translated as "aren't you", "isn't that right", etc.

You are going home, aren't you?
at^hao may ču doŋ min ha? ["(You) go home, right?"]

While there are no conjugations of verbs or tone marks in the So language, it is by no means an easy language to learn. There are a number of difficult sounds which must be pronounced correctly if a speaker is to be understood.

So folktales

So folktales are a part of an oral tradition handed down within the family. These stories are told from parents or grandparents to the children in the family, either as entertainment or as bedtime stories. So children go to bed shortly after dark, but like almost all children have an excess amount of energy that needs to be diffused. Each story has a certain theme, with variations evolving as the result of each storyteller's creative ability.

These stories contribute to the enculturation of the So child. They learn patterns of social behavior that are expected of adults. These tales show how to deal with difficult situations, like the tale of "The frog and the lion". A So story can also explain things, as in "The legend of King Aygok", which tells why the So have no written language.

"The lion and the frog"

One day a lion was walking in the woods and couldn't find anything to eat. He came across a frog and said, "I'm going to eat you up if you don't run away."

The frog said, "You think you're pretty strong, don't you? I'll tell you what. If you can pick up more than me, you can eat me. But if I can lift more than you I get to ride on your back."

The lion agreed, knowing the frog was no match for him. The frog said, "See that old log over there? Pick that up if you're so strong."

The lion tried, but the log was much too heavy. The frog said, "Watch me." There was a little curve in the underside of the log. The frog crawled under the log and then stood up under the curve as though he were lifting it up.

The lion looked down and when he saw the frog seemingly lift the log, he said, somewhat embarrassed, "Well, I guess you win. Okay, get on my back."

So the lion went off through the jungle, with the frog on his back. After a while they came to a river. The lion was very hungry now and had a plan to make a meal of the frog. He said to the frog, "Get off, you've ridden long enough."

The frog replied, "That was much too short a ride. Let me ride a little further."

"I'll tell you what," said the lion. "If you can swim across the river faster than me, I'll let you ride me for the rest of the day."

"Fair enough," replied the frog.

"But," said the lion, "if I beat you across the river, then I get to eat you."

"O.K., let's go," shouted the frog. And they both jumped in. The lion stroked furiously, but when he reached the other side, the frog was already there, for everyone knows a frog is at home in the water.

"Well, it looks like you beat me again," said the lion. "Okay, get on my back." So the lion let the frog ride on his back. Now that the lion was aware of the frog's intelligence and ability, his respect for the frog grew, and from that day on they remained the best of friends.

"The man and the basket"

One day a man decided to make a basket in order to store rice. So he went out and chopped down some bamboo and cut it into strips. He worked all day on the basket, building it up around him. He built it so high that when he was finished he couldn't get out. Too embarrassed to let anyone know what a stupid thing he had done he remained in there another day. Some children came out to play near the basket and the foolish man, hungry and tired, decided to talk with one of them, hoping to find a solution to his problem, without asking for help.

"Boy," he said, "see this basket I built around me? I'll bet you don't know how I'm going to get out."

"Sure," said the boy, "you just lean against the side and tip it over. Then you can crawl out."

"Exactly right," the man said, "you're a smart young man."

Following the boy's advice, the man tipped the basket over and crawled out.

"The man and the fish trap"

Early one morning a villager sat down outside his house and began making a fish trap. Nearby a woman was milling rice with the use of a foot-operated device.

A fish trap is a cylinder woven from bamboo, usually about 24 inches long, with a hole in the side. During the rainy season, these traps are placed in canals. Small fishes then swim in the hole.

The trap is woven while holding it against the chest. Now this man wanted to make a really long trap, but when he got so far along his arms couldn't reach the end of the trap. Instead of sliding the near end under his arm, the simpleton continued his futile efforts to reach the unfinished end of the trap.

Now the woman was watching the man out of the corner of her eye. At the same time, a rooster came near and began eating some of the milled rice. Seeing an opportunity to help the man, she said to the rooster, "Sir, if you eat some of the unmilled rice, you won't become stupid like a man who makes a long fishtrap and doesn't know enough to place it under his arm so he can reach the other end".

When the man heard her say this, his face turned red and he immediately slid the trap under one arm, acting as though he knew what he was doing all the time.

"The man whose arm got stuck in the window"

Early one morning in the village there was a party at one of the houses for a couple who had just gotten married.

One of the party-goers was a man who was not noted for his powers of reason. As was the custom, the men would gather on one side of the house to drink and talk. Well, it seems this man found a place near a narrow window. He leaned against the window and placed his arm on the sill, flat, elbow on one side and fist against the other.

The women finished cooking and brought the food to the table in the middle of the room. All the men gathered around and helped themselves to the food. Except the man at the window. He couldn't budge his arm.

A friend asked, "Hey, why don't you eat? Everything's delicious."

"No," he replied. "Thanks, but I'm really not very hungry."

So the man stayed at the window and everyone ate and had a good time. By midmorning the guests had left and the man was still at the window. He remained there for seven or eight hours. He didn't know what to do and he was too embarrassed to ask anyone to help. As he looked out the window around five o'clock, he could see the buffaloes returning from grazing.

One by one they squeezed through the narrow gate that led into the yard. He noticed an albino buffalo with extremely long horns and wondered how it would be able to get through the gate. Sure enough, when the albino reached the gate, his horns caught on both posts.

"I was right," the man thought. But then the buffalo simply turned his head to one side, making his horns parallel to the posts and he entered without any problem.

"Say, that gives me an idea. I can do the same thing with my arm."

And sure enough, lifting his fist with the free hand, he was able to remove his arm from the window. He went straight home and never mentioned a word to anyone about what happened. And all he had to eat that night was a cold plate of rice.

He didn't want people to think he was a buffalo, but it took a buffalo to show him the way out of his predicament.

"Grandma and the bear"

ay jipíak anyáé

One time a grandmother made a garden in the woods a long way from her home. She planted bananas, watermelon, long beans, cantaloupes, and corn.

A few months later she went to pick the ripe bananas. She started back home with two bunches of bananas, one in front and one in back, hanging from a bamboo pole on her shoulder. About halfway home, a bear came from out of the woods, and noticing the struggling woman, said, "Grandma, can I help you?"

Grandma said, "Fine," and she gave him the pole and told him to walk in front. He said he couldn't do that because it would be lighter if he walked in back. So he did.

Grandma chatted with him on the way home, she in the lead and the bear following. As he walked along he opened the bananas at one end, squeezed them out and ate them, leaving the skins intact.

When they arrived home, Grandma asked him to leave the bananas at the door. The bear told her that the bananas were too heavy for her and he would be glad to put them inside wherever she wanted them. So he took them inside and put them down. Grandma asked him to rest awhile. The bear said that he would like to, but he had to get back to the woods and so he left.

Shortly afterward some of her grandchildren came to visit and asked her for some bananas to take home. Grandma went into the room to get some and found all the fruit had been eaten. She told her grandchildren there were not enough bananas for everyone this time. Embarrassed and extremely angry at herself for being so foolish, she vowed never to trust anyone so blindly again.

"The legend of King Aygok"

This is a story passed down among the So which is used to explain why they don't have a written language.

It seems a long time ago the So people had a king named Aygok. He was a man of considerable intelligence and one day he decided to develop an alphabet for the So language. After a period of time he finished his project and wrote the results on a buffaloskin. The king wanted to teach his people to read and write using the new alphabet, but before he could begin, war broke out with a neighboring kingdom, and he went to lead his army into battle.

During the fight, King Aygok was killed. Meanwhile, at home, more misfortune struck. A dog had entered the king's house, grabbed the buffaloskin and had eaten it, thus destroying the alphabet.

Since the king was the only person who knew the alphabet, no one was able to reproduce it. And that is why today the So have no written language.

From these tales we can see that the So try to teach their children to think for themselves when they become adults. If not, they won't be very successful in this world. The So have a hard life and subsist with limited resources by their hard work and ingenuity. They are independent people and do not expect help from other sources, such as the Government. Folktales are one way of implanting these values in their children.

The future for the So

The extinction of the So people as a distinct cultural and linguistic group is a certainty, as with other ethnic minorities in Thailand. The only question is how long before the process is complete. Significant changes have occurred in the last 20 years as a result of the influence of the Vietnamese refugees-entrepreneurs during their brief stay in Kusuman, completion of a major highway linking northeast Thailand with Bangkok, and the governmental policy of assimilating ethnic groups into the Thai culture. The So during this period have changed from a mostly barter system to a cash economy. Because of this and the increasing availability of markets, the So are losing skills such as basketry and cloth-weaving, preferring instead to buy readymade goods. The younger generation, educated in Thai schools, are losing interest in the So religion, and are rarely found at ceremonies such as the *ja a tí*. In addition, opportunities in the large cities tend to lure the young away from the hard life that would face them as rice farmers.

There is another factor that seems sure to affect the So people in the very near future. This is the growing Communist activity in northeast Thailand. Numbering about 10,000 as of 1975, the Thai and Laotian insurgents have been trained and sometimes led by Vietnamese cadres. The problem has become quite serious in the last few years, since the Communist victories in Indochina. For the So and the other people of this part of Thailand, an increase in guerrilla warfare is certain to have deleterious consequences for them. In any event, the variety of external forces will work their way into the So culture, which in all likelihood will gradually mutate to a virtually unrecognizable state.

ANNEX

Key to pronouncing So words

Consonants

b	— as in “bat”
č	— as in “chalk”
d	— as in “dog”
g	— close to “g” in get
h	— as in “ha”
j	— as in “just”
k'	— as in “kill”
k	— retroflexive: as in “luck”
l	— as in “light” (initial consonant)
ḷ	— retroflexive: as in “full”
m	— as in “man”
n	— as in “no”
ñ	— as in Spanish “señor”
ŋ	— “ng”, as retroflexively in “sing”; in initial position, more difficult to pronounce; no equivalent in English
p	— as in “lip”
p'	— as in “push”
q	— velar stop
ř	— trilled “r” similar to Spanish “perro”
s	— as in “sit”
t	— as in “tan”
t'	— aspirated “t”
t>	— alveolar modification of “t”
ṭ	— dental “t”, in which tip of tongue is flattened against front teeth
v	— similar to “vine”
w	— as in “woman”
ỹ	— lateral aspirant variations of “z”
ž	— similar to the “s” in “pleasure”

Vowels

a	— “ah” sound as in “father”	ĩ	— as in “soot”
ae	— “a” sound as in “bat”	o	— as in “boat”
ay	— as in “tie”	ɔ	— as in “bought”
aô	— as in “cow”	u	— as in “boot”
e	— as in “bait”	ü	— close to German “ü”
i	— as in “beat”	u	— as in “book”
l	— as in “bit”	ʌ	— as in “but”

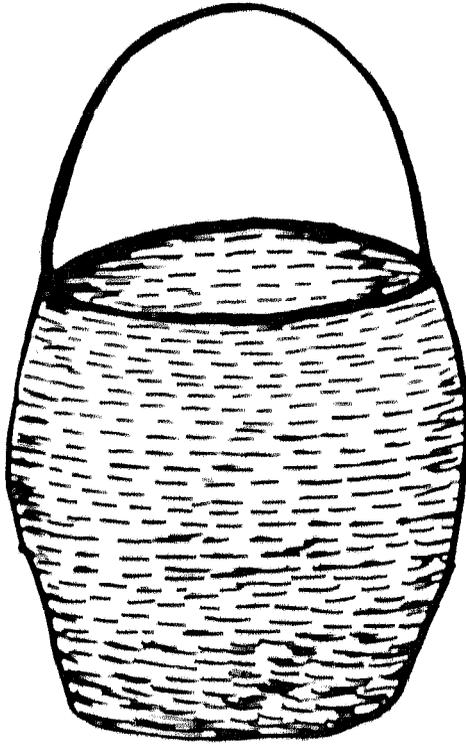
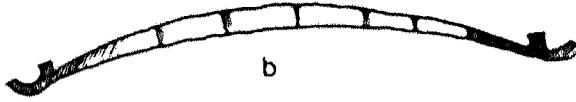


Figure 1. (a) g̃ru aluw̃arj: bamboo with wooden handles, sealed with sticky substance (d luwac) obtained from trees; holds about three gallons. Purpose: to transport water; one basket hangs from each end of a bamboo pole. (b) gian^mb̃fek, resting across a person's shoulders.

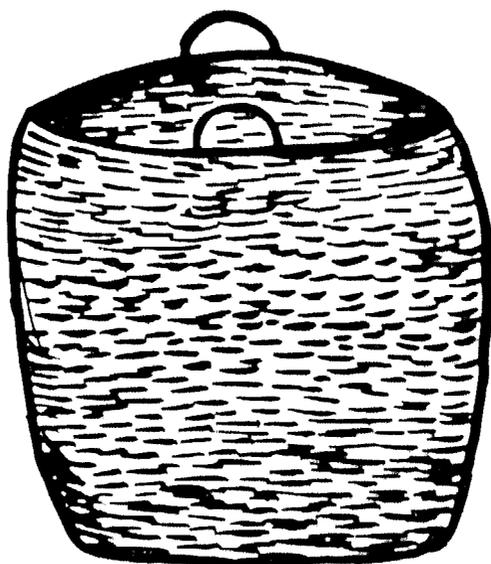


Figure 2. ga_mtá: bamboo with two wooden handles; rope attached and carried on shoulders; various sizes. Purpose: to transport food, similar to a lunch bag.

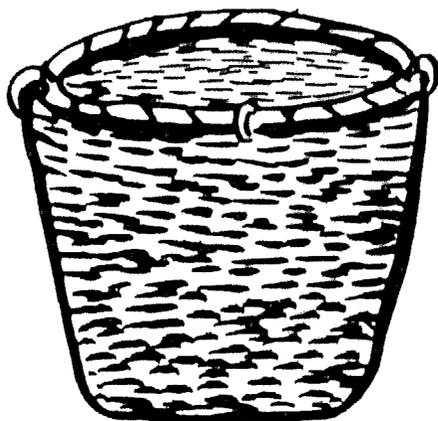


Figure 3. ayân: bamboo with three wooden loops or handles; rope attached to two loops and worn on shoulder; third loop attached to belt. Purpose: to transport food or keep fish or shrimp temporarily while fishing.

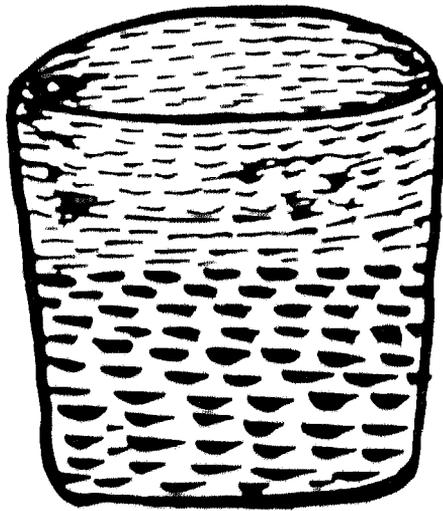
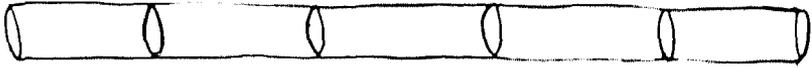
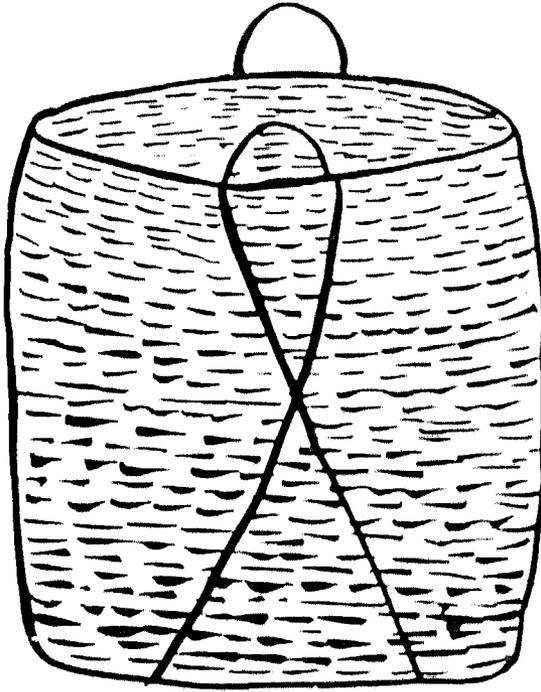


Figure 4. bun'9: bamboo; varying sizes, usually two or more feet in diameter, and 1.5 feet or more in height. Purpose: to store rice for cooking.



b



a

Figure 5. (a) u gañaj tra : bamboo with sealer made from lake mud mixed with buffalo manure; (b) bamboo pole (giãn u) placed through handles and carried by one person on each side; about four feet high and 3.5 feet in diameter. Purpose: carried around field during harvest; freshly cut rice with stalks is placed inside to prevent loss of grain. Not used much in Kusuman today because of new, faster procedures, but grain loss has increased.

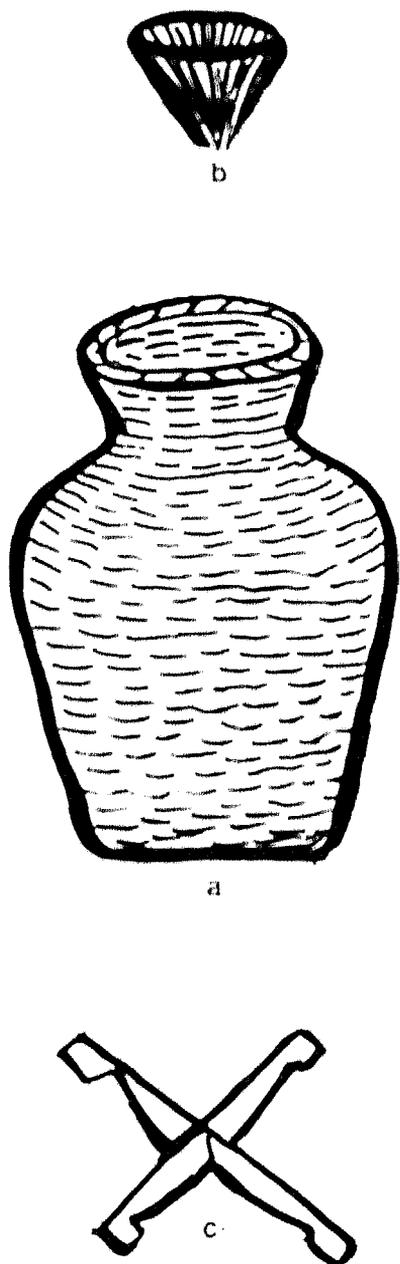


Figure 6. (a) k''an; bamboo with top (b) siman k''an also of bamboo; small wooden platform (c) ŷuŷ k''an serves as a base; various sizes. Purpose: to store fish.

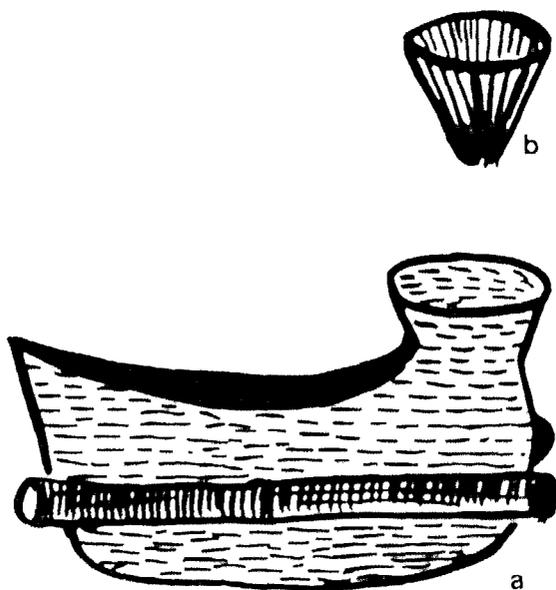


Figure 7. (a) k'an luáy: bamboo, with wooden floatation devices on either side; top (b) simán k'an luáy, also made of bamboo. Purpose: to store fish; basket floats alongside the fisherman as he wades through water.

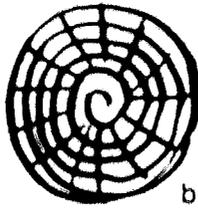
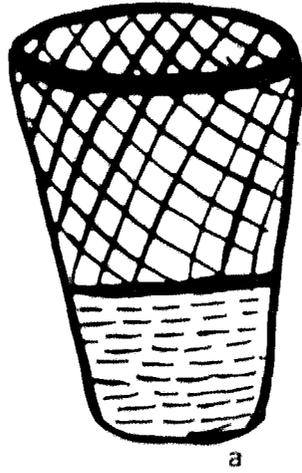


Figure 8. (a) *řay* : bamboo; (b) *řum řay* also of bamboo. Purpose : *řay* used for steaming rice; (b) is a flat, round piece of woven bamboo placed on hooks inside the *řay*. Rice for steaming is then placed on the *řum řay*. The *řay* is then placed over a pot of boiling water.

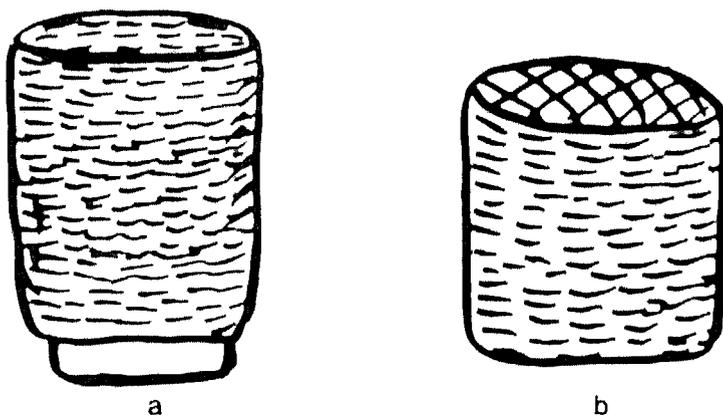


Figure 9. ^mtap avā: bamboo, consisting of two pieces, (a) which holds the steamed rice and (b) a cover which slides over (a). Purpose: to store steamed rice so that it does not lose its moisture.

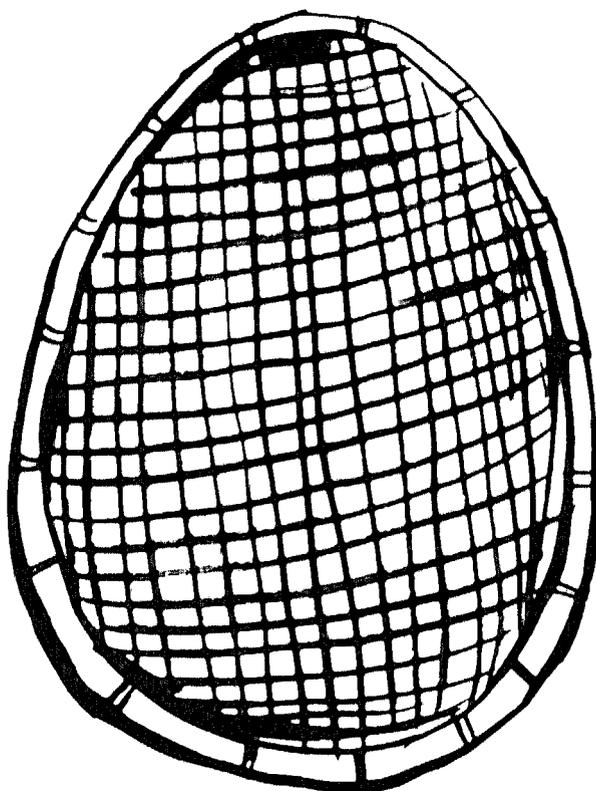


Figure 10. ^mtaviñ siúm asá: bamboo; a flat dish-shaped basket about two feet in diameter, with sides about 1.25 inches high. Purpose: used to separate husk from rice (trə), or to further clean husked rice (asá) by tossing rice into the air.

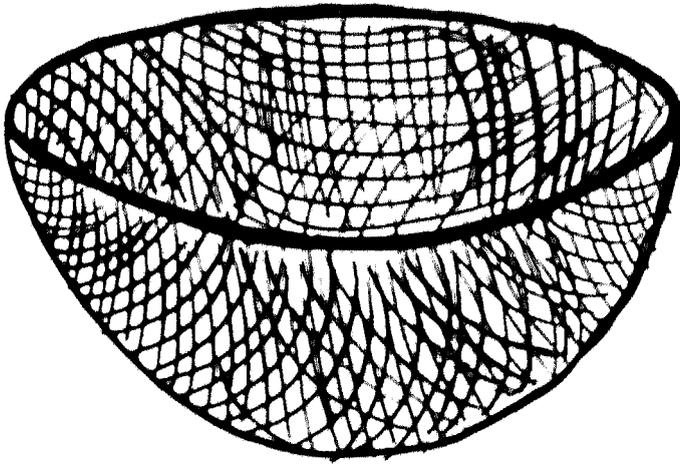


Figure 11. k'anj: bamboo. Purpose: during rainy season basket is placed in shallow water, held vertically with top of bowl facing person, who then stamps feet thereby chasing very small fish into basket.

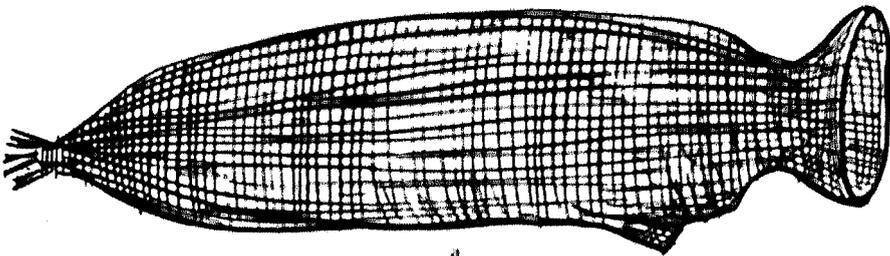


Figure 12. (a) ariám, (b) simánj ariám: bamboo; (a) is a bullet-shaped basket about four feet long and six inches or less in diameter. Purpose: to catch small fish the size of minnows. Basket is placed half-submerged in shallow paddy field water. Fish enter through small opening on one side but cannot exit. Ariám is removed and fish taken out by removing cover (b) from one end, and emptying contents.

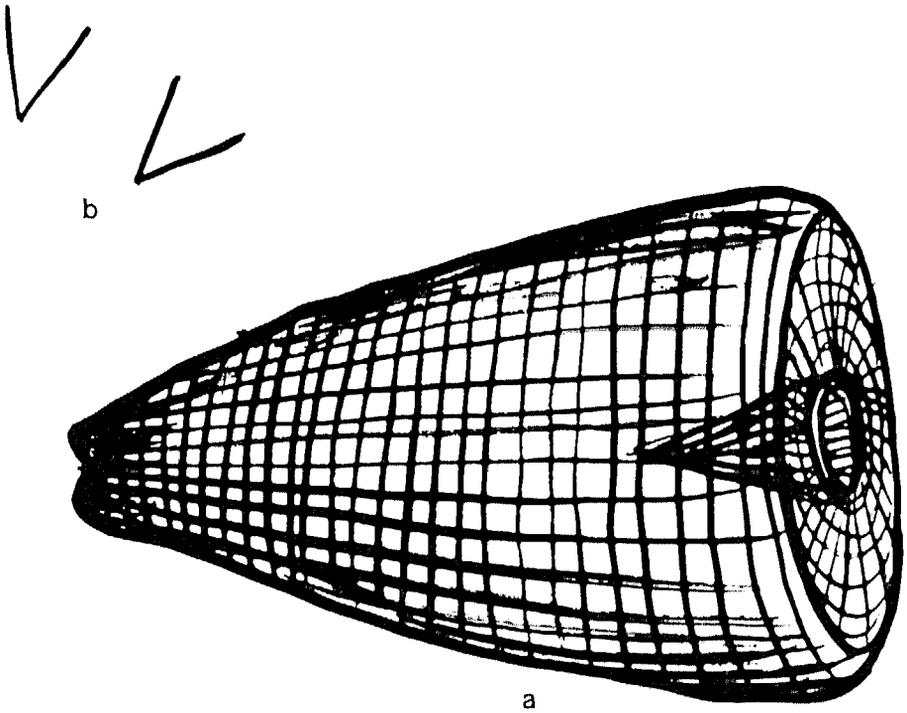


Figure 13. (a) tom_m , (b) $\text{aluwán kat } ^m\text{græt}^m$: bamboo. Purpose: to catch frogs. Bait is placed on inside of opening which allows frog to enter but not exit. Frog is removed from small end after bamboo plugs (b) are removed.

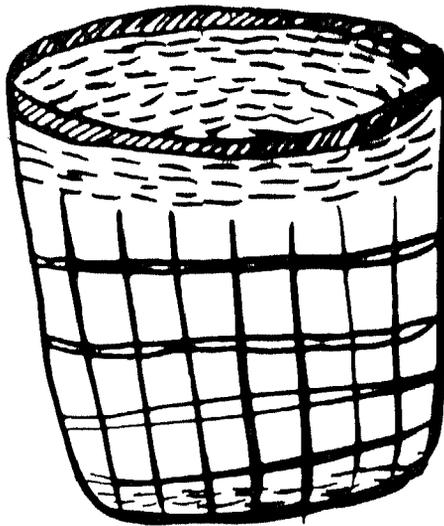


Figure 14. gatá aplú_m : bamboo; about two feet high and about the same diameter, lined with leaves. Purpose: to store seed rice.

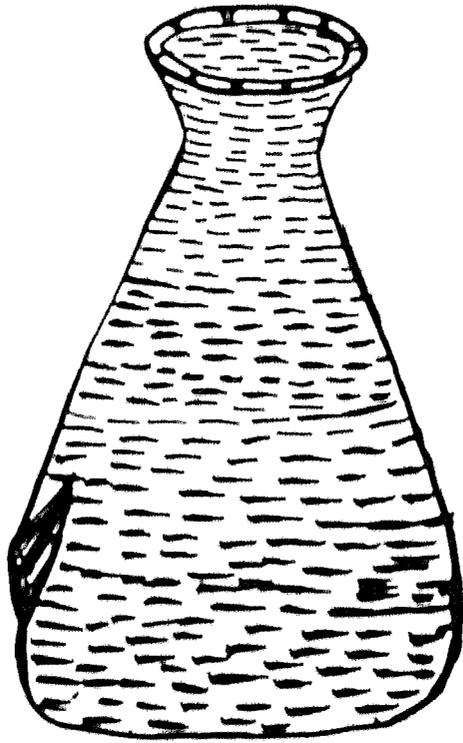


Figure 15. toj : bamboo, about 3.5 feet high and one foot in diameter at the bottom, with a small opening near the bottom. Purpose: to catch small fish about the size of smelt in streams. The toj is hung from a pole in the water with about half of the trap submerged. Bait inside the trap attracts fish which can enter but not leave.

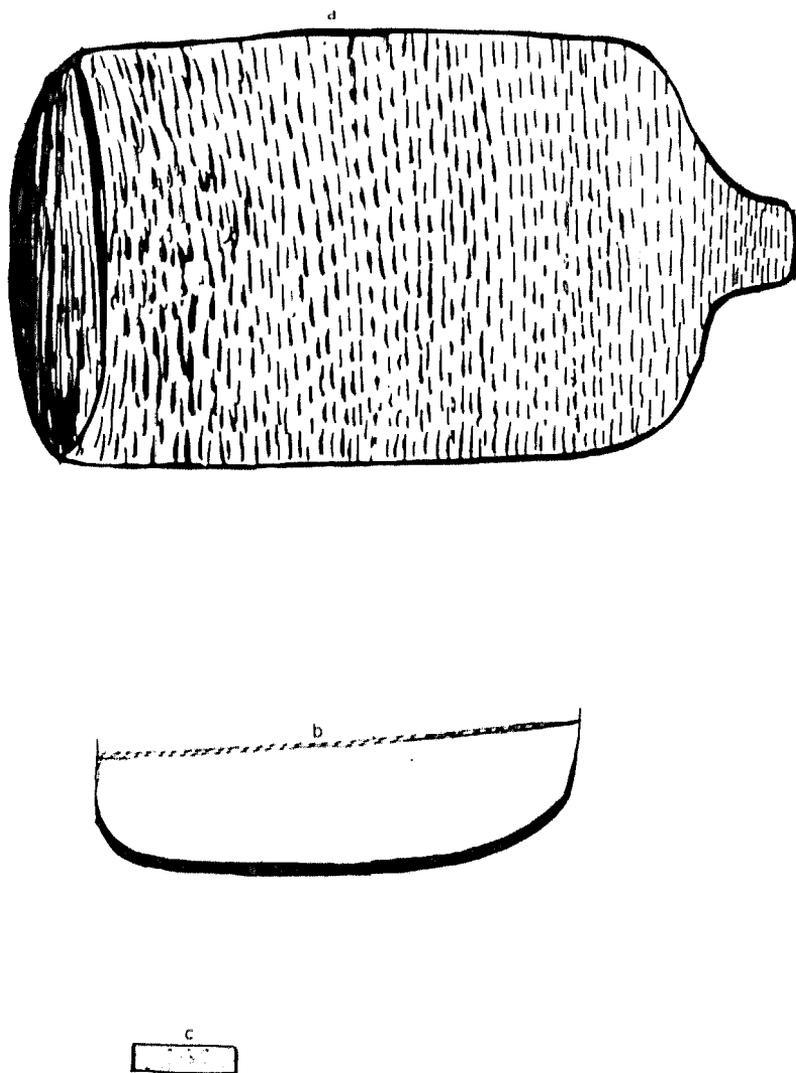


Figure 16. (a) $\check{y}i\ p\acute{r}i\lambda\alpha\tau$: bamboo; about three feet in diameter and five feet long. (b) $g\alpha\eta\ dit$: bamboo with string. (c) $g\alpha\ dit$: bamboo. Purpose: one step in the cotton process. A $g\alpha\eta\ dit$ is placed inside the $\check{y}i\ p\acute{r}i\lambda\alpha\tau$. The $g\alpha\ dit$ is used to vibrate the string on the $\check{y}i\ p\acute{r}i\lambda\alpha\tau$ like one would strum a guitar. This vibration, properly set off, causes the flat cotton inside the $\check{y}i\ p\acute{r}i\lambda\alpha\tau$ to fluff. When finished, this fluffy cotton is then collected on small cylinders to be used in making thread. The cotton becomes flattened due to the seed-removing process.

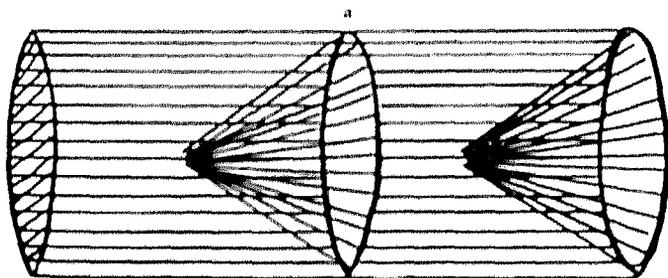
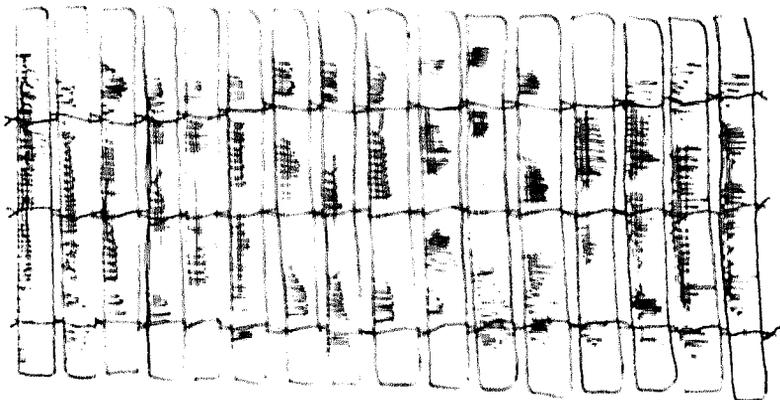


Figure 17. (a) luáp: bamboo, averages about four feet in length and two feet in diameter. (b) kaját: bamboo with binding twine. Purpose: to catch fish, usually the kind recently imported to Florida waters known as the "walking catfish". The kaját, or bamboo fence, is placed across a stream in pockets of water that remain after the dry season has started. The fish basket is placed on either side of the fence. Fish swim in the wide part of the canes and become trapped. A luáp is checked once a day.

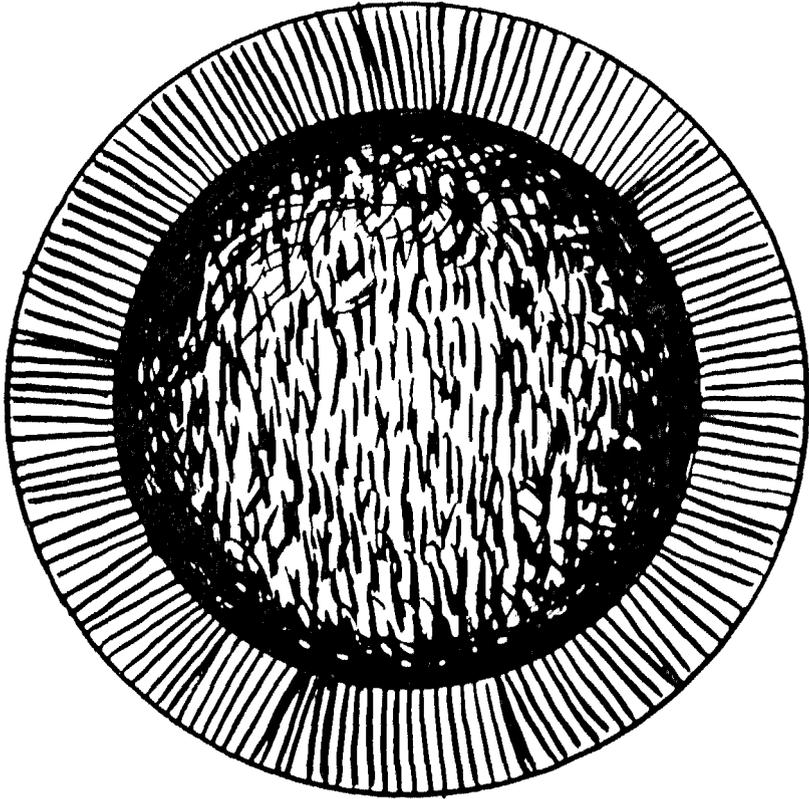


Figure 18. $\text{ka}^{\text{t}}\text{ok aluw}^{\text{a}}\eta$: woven bamboo with wooden base attached. The wood base has carved designs around the outside. It is about two feet in diameter and stands about eight inches high; bottom of basket is narrower than top. The bottom is open, while the top is solid. Purpose: a small table which is placed on the floor. Bowls of food and serving utensils are placed on this table and the family sits around it to have their meal. They are no longer used in Kusuman because they are difficult to clean and carry around; new brass ones are bought and used instead.

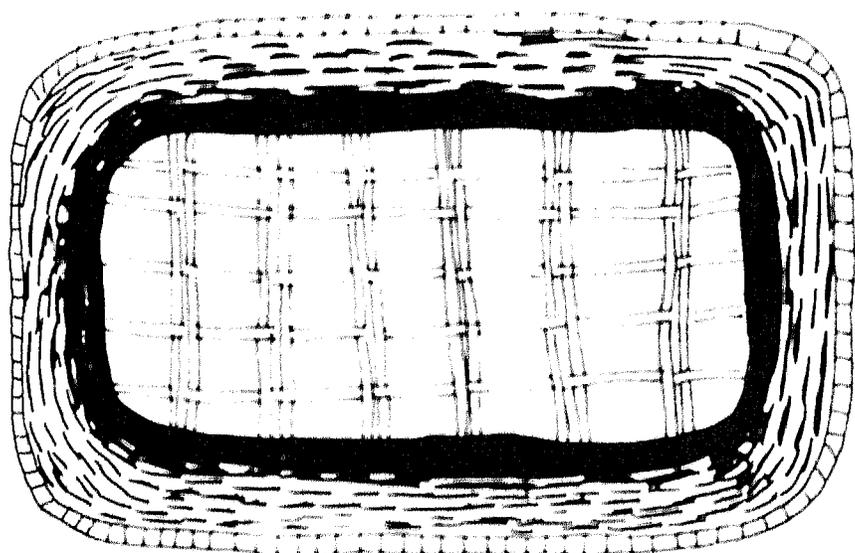


Figure 19. u'abič ran'ən (top view) bamboo. Purpose: cradle for a' baby; attached by ropes to the top of the porch roof, and the baby is rocked to sleep.

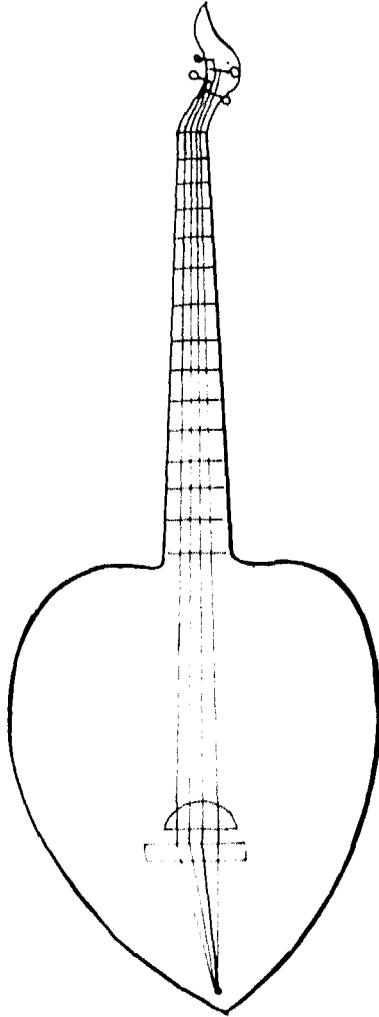


Figure 20. $\text{tuy}_{\text{m}} \text{tij}_{\text{m}}$: wood. It has four strings, and is less than two feet in length. It is played with the fingers. Purpose: entertainment.

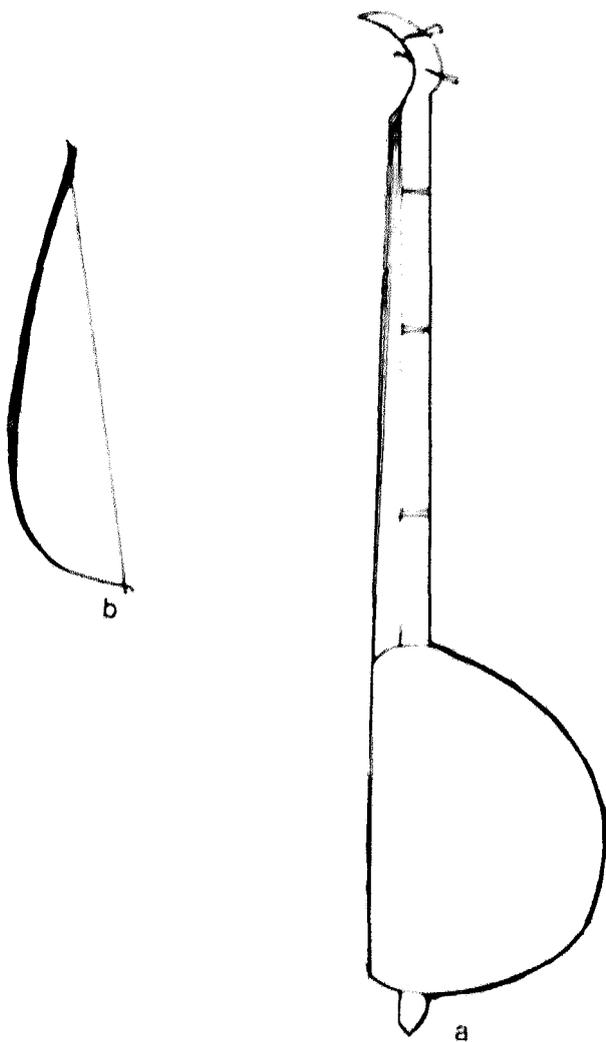


Figure 21. (a) *dfoä*: bamboo neck and coconut shell for base; it has two or three strings. (b) *aluwän abät dfoä*: bow, made from bamboo and strung with hair from a horse's tail. Catskin is used to cover the coconut base. Instrument is set on base and played like a viola, or placed on shoulder and played like a violin. Purpose: entertainment.

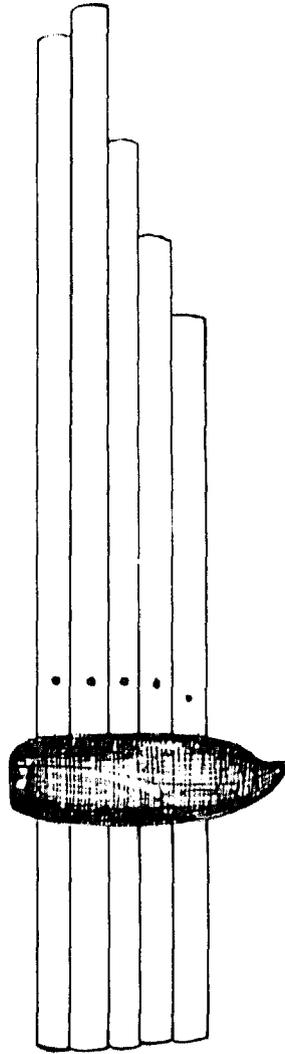


Figure 22. qen: bamboo; consists of a flute-like mouthpiece, with two rows of five reed stacks, each with a hole on the side. Reeds are attached perpendicular to the flute in decreasing length from the mouthpiece outward (except the first reed). A qen varies in size, from about one foot high to over five feet. Probably it was acquired from the Laotians. Purpose: one of the instruments used to accompany mo yao during exorcisms; also used for entertainment.

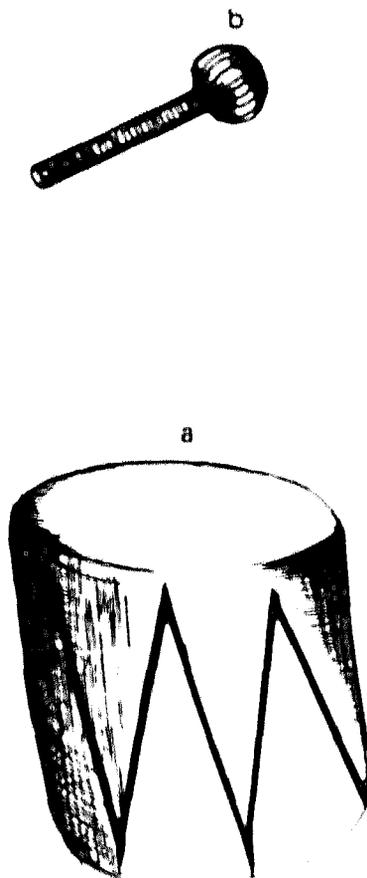


Figure 23. (a) *ji gar*: from a tree trunk, not very deep and of varying diameter; covered with buffalo or cowhide. (b) *aluwāj tæ n ji gur*: wooden cylinder with material shaped like a ball wrapped on one end. Purpose: the *ji gar* is used to accompany *mə yao*, as well as for entertainment. It accompanies a wind or string instrument at social functions.

