

Suicide among the Mla Bri Hunter-Gatherers of Northern Thailand

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ABSTRACT—The Mla Bri are a small group of nomadic hunter-gatherers (about 400) living in northern Thailand who since the 1990s have begun to settle in semi-permanent villages. Eugene and Mary Long are missionaries who have lived near the Mla Bri since 1982. Between 2005 and 2008, there were five fatal suicides in this group, including four males and one female. This is apparently a new phenomenon; suicide was virtually unknown among the Mla Bri before more permanent settlements were established.

Suicides and suicide attempts were usually—though not exclusively—by drinking poison, and involved married males. Explanations given by the Mla Bri for the suicides, and suicide attempts, emphasize the role of “*paluh*” which functions as a form of censure. The incidents of *paluh* leading to suicides were often in the context of sexual jealousy, and triggered by extra-marital affairs and alcohol abuse. This article discusses the “epidemic” of suicide in the context of life among the Mla Bri during the last thirty years as they were confronted with the world of modern Thailand. From a broader context, the article concludes that the 2005-2008 suicides are associated with the rapid social change the group has experienced during the transition from nomadic hunter-gatherers to semi-settled status.

Introduction

The Mla Bri of northern Thailand

The Mla Bri people live in northern Thailand and in 2012 included about 400 people. There were four settlements in Phrae and Nan provinces then. There is an unknown but smaller number in Laos. The Mla Bri speak a Mon-Khmer language.

The Mla Bri are well-known in anthropological literature because, until recently, they engaged extensively in foraging, gathering, and hunting as the primary means of subsistence, and as such are an outlier in a region traditionally dominated socially, ecologically, and politically by people tied to lowland and highland rice cultivation. Indeed, the Mla Bri were so unusual in Southeast Asia that the Siam

Society sponsored special expeditions to “find” them in 1962-1963, and published an issue of the *Journal of the Siam Society* in 1963 about their scientific findings (Siam Society 1963). Mla Bri subsistence, they found, was focused on the hunting and gathering of forest products; and most importantly, unlike other groups, the Mla Bri were not tied to the agricultural cycle, although they did occasionally hire themselves out as laborers to agricultural people. They were nomadic, too, typically shifting campsites every few weeks. As is described below, this mode of subsistence was practiced until recently, and indeed continues at some level today.

Typical Mla Bri hunting tools include spears, traps, catapult sling shots, and occasionally a muzzle loading gun. Typical game include small mammals, reptiles, and grubs. The Mla Bri also collect various products including honey, roots, fruits, bamboo shoots, and other seasonal forest products. They occasionally trade forest products to lowland farmers. They have no traditions of either sedentary horticulture or animal husbandry when living in the jungle (see Rischel 1995: 21-40; Bernatzik 1938 [1958], Nimmanhaemin 1963, and Trier 2008 for general ethnographic descriptions). They are very skilled in the ways of the forest, and traditionally had animistic spiritual beliefs. As with other such foraging groups, the Mla Bri had apparently managed contact with agrarian societies in the past (see Fortier 2009: 107).

A propensity of Mla Bri to suddenly disappear (at least from the perspective of the northern Thai and Hmong with whom they had contact) earned the Mla Bri the name “Spirits of the Yellow Leaves (*Phi Thong Leuang*) among the few northern Thai with whom they interacted. This name referred to the Mla Bri tradition of living in shelters made of green banana leaves, which were abandoned when the leaves turned yellow after a week or two. The Mla Bri object to being called “spirits.”

Until about 1993, the Mla Bri remained nomadic, moving between sources of food, grouping and regrouping as dispersed bands depending on food availability and personal relationships. The Mla Bri, though, speak a Mon-Khmer language most closely related to Htin (Rischel 1995 and 2000). There was a strong emphasis on endogamy, despite the fact that there has long been casual contact between the mountain-dwelling Mla Bri, and remote groups of northern Thai, Hmong, Mien, Htin and other nearby farmers (see e.g. Bernatzik 1938, Nimmenhaemin 1963, Rischel 1995, and Trier 2008).

The concept of Paluh

Paluh [/pa.luh/] might be translated as “scold” or “curse” though neither is really adequate. *Paluh* reflects an important Mla Bri concept which is not only important for understanding the suicide epidemic among the Mla Bri described in this paper, but for understanding inter-personal relationships between Mla Bri in general. It is a word which reflects the Mla Bri aversion to inter-personal conflict; indeed, conversations in Mla Bri often begin with the statement “I’m not *paluhing*

you, I am talking nicely.” In other words, *paluh* reflects something deep within the Mla Bri cosmology and refers to both inter-personal conflict, and super-natural power. However *paluh* is not the same as “cursing” which the Mla Bri cosmology does recognize as a skill carried only by a person with special knowledge and power. *Paluh* contrasts with “curse” [poojy/]. Anyone can *paluh*; only certain skilled people can curse. The Mla Bri do not believe that any living Mla Bri has the necessary power [ma.phaap/] effectually to curse another person; the last Mla Bri person who was believed to have this ability died several years ago. Outsiders, however, are often reputed to be able to curse Mla Bri. Unlike curses, *paluh* is not intended to cause death or others misfortune; while such outcomes are certainly a potential result of *paluh*, they are not intended as such by the person initiating the incident. The net result though is that potentially deleterious results probably help keep *paluhing* to a minimum, since one never knows when her/ his *paluhing* will have serious repercussions.

Paluh also applies to inter-ethnic relations. Much inter-ethnic contact between Mla Bri and others was in the context of exploitative, short-term labor “contracts” in which the Mla Bri exchanged work in fields for food and perhaps clothing. These contracts were often enforced with threats of violence and conflict; the Mla Bri, who are often the victims in such confrontations, respond by disappearing into the forest. Indeed, Mla Bri describe such conflict as being “*paluhed*,” a concept which reflects the Mla Bri need to avoid conflict and confrontation. Broadly speaking, *paluh* is verbal abuse and covers a range of meanings including “to scold,” “to criticize,” “to question,” “to accuse” and “to be angry with.” On occasion, it is tantamount to “to curse,” though without magical overtones. Normally, Mla Bri use *paluh* as the equivalent to an English verb, but depending on the context it can also be translated as an English infinitive, gerund, or noun. In this paper, we use the Mla Bri form to indicate the concept, and add appropriate English glosses.

Paluh and conflict avoidance

The legends of past Mla Bri who dealt with *paluh* are passed on and remain a current form of social control. A brief review of how *paluh* functions in Mla Bri society provides an indication of why this concept is so important to this discussion of suicide.

Paluh enforces norms for sharing and equality among the Mla Bri; they share food and other resources with one another in order to avoid being *paluhed*. They are very careful not to offend outsiders who would *paluh* them. *Paluh* provides a mechanism whereby those who work too hard, or not hard enough, can be made to conform—they wish to avoid *paluh*.

Paluh also helps regulate domestic relationships. Adultery is often censured by threat of *paluh*; this may be one reason why the offended husband is the one to leave the group when his wife commits adultery – he is *paluhing* the wife and her lover.

Babies are said to *paluh* with their eyes or by crying. Adults *paluh* by yelling at and/or hitting family members, often other than the person with whom they are angry. Wives may also *paluh* drunk husbands who, in turn, hit their wives. Traditionally, either those who were *paluhed* or those who *paluhed* would be expected to leave the small group to join another group, or even wander in the forest from which they could, for a time at least, get sustenance.

As for *paluh*, while not strictly equivalent to *murder*, it is viewed as dangerous by the Mla Bri; many misfortunes have been understood to be a result of someone's having been *paluhed*. Anyone who would cause death by *paluhing* would certainly be seen as a bad person in Mla Bri society. So, even though a person who attempts/commits suicide is assumed to be guilty of the offense for which s/he was *paluhed*, the blame is shifted from suicide victim to the one who *paluhed* in the first place. In effect, as will be explained below, suicide in a modern context, is the ultimate vindication of a person who has been *paluhed*, i.e. the suicide victim.

As for intentional killing, we have heard no records or stories of killing within Mlabri groups except for one legend of a Mla Bri woman who killed her husband by feeding him a poison tuber. The legend indicates that she murdered him so that she could marry a different man. Certainly, though, there are many stories of outsiders killing Mla Bri (see below).

The human ecology of Phrae and Nan

The human ecology of mountainous northern Thailand varies in terms of economy and society. The river valleys are densely populated, and are used for intensive wet-rice cultivation. These farming populations today speak variations of the northern dialect of Thai, and traditionally were subject to the princes of Phrae or Nan, and eventually to Bangkok.

The Mla Bri may predate both the Thai and other horticultural groups in the region, as do the Htin, and Khmu, who are also perhaps relict populations of Mon Khmer speaking groups, from whom the modern Mla Bri are probably descended (Rischel 1995: 41-54). Indeed, both linguistic and genetic analysis indicate that modern Mla Bri are most closely related to Htin, a small remote group of highland farmers living in Nan province, from whom it is assumed that Mla Bri split off in the remote past (see also Rischel 2000, and for discussions of Mla Bri genetics Oota *et al* 2005, Waters 2005, Xu *et al* 2010).

As the rural horticultural populations of northern Thai, Hmong, and others in Phrae and Nan provinces increased rapidly during the 19th and 20th centuries, the game and plants on which the Mla Bri depended became more difficult to find. As this happened, individual Mla Bri apparently began to enter into exploitative labor arrangements with Hmong and northern Thai for whom they tended fields in exchange for rice and clothing. Such contracts were often enforced with threats of violence on the part of the "employers," and since the Mla Bri were outside the Thai

justice system, they resisted such pressure by escaping deeper into the forest to avoid *paluh* from the outsiders.

In this context, day labor became more important for the survival of the Mla Bri, as traditional food sources disappeared along with the forest cover which was cut with machetes and axes by northern Thai, Hmong and others growing upland rice and other crops. Increased contact with horticultural people also meant that the diseases of higher population density areas of Thailand probably became more common.

Since about 1993, most Mla Bri semi-permanently settled in at first three, and later four settlements, two in Nan province, and two in Phrae province, at the behest of the Thai government, which was concerned about the most peripheral areas and populations in the kingdom, and protection of forest reserves. Settlement of the Mla Bri by the Thai government was focused on the building of schools, establishment of health clinics, malaria eradication, electrification, and the establishment of roads, i.e. the means of modern state-building (see e.g. Scott 2009). Settlement also meant extending Thai citizenship to the Mla Bri, a move which gave them standing in the Thai courts and the formal social welfare system. By the late 1990s, mortality rates had declined in response to improved nutrition, malaria eradication, improved housing, and other public health measures associated with the extension/intrusion of the modern state into the world of the Mla Bri. The Mla Bri changed from being migratory hunter gatherers with no permanent dwelling, to living in semi-permanent villages made of cinder blocks, wood, bamboo, and iron sheets.

Thus, by the early 2000s, Mla Bri children were routinely becoming literate, and the better students were being sent to secondary schools. Increased opportunities for wage labor in the cash market also meant that most Mla Bri families built semi-permanent houses, and purchased radios and televisions. Ironically, this occurred at a time after the rapid rural expansion of the Thai and Hmong population slowed, and rural to urban migration in the region accelerated.

Although small in numbers and still scattered, the Mla Bri continue to maintain their own identity, language, and culture. Children learn the Mla Bri language as their home language, and adults use Mla Bri as the default language when interacting with fellow Mla Bri. To date, marriage within the group is still preferred, and enforced with threats of *paluh*. Indeed a video “Mla Bri” made by Danish film-makers does an excellent job of showing how important endogamy was to a group of young men seeking wives in 2006 (Jansen and Sorenson 2006).

Rapid social change and the Mla Bri in Phrae and Nan, Thailand, 1980-2010

From 1980 to 2010, many changes occurred in the world of the Mla Bri, bringing both new opportunities, as well as the formidable challenge of settling into permanent dwellings with all that that entails.

In the early 1980s, before the suicide epidemic described here, typical causes of mortality among the Mla Bri included accidents, infectious diseases (malaria,

dysentery, etc.), and violence (see also Bernatzik 1938: 132-134). There were no known suicides before the period (2005-2008) discussed in this paper, although there were occasional threats, particularly in recent years. Indeed, Bernatzik (1938: 129) reported after interviewing Mla Bri and their neighbors in 1936-1937 that suicide was unknown, and indeed “unthinkable.” The subject is not mentioned in other ethnographic writing about the Mla Bri by Rischel (1995 and 2000) and Trier (2008), even though both writers emphasize the role of disease, malnutrition, accidents, and violence in Mla Bri life. Violent deaths were typically the result of attacks by outsiders, or accidents both in the earlier periods, as well as during the periods discussed here.¹

Traditionally, so far as we can ascertain, there has been very little intra-group violence among the Mla Bri, though they were often subject to attacks and violence from outsiders. Intra-group violence did not seem to be common among the Mla Bri, and was traditionally avoided by disappearing into the forest in response to *paluh*. But, in recent years, as alcohol use / abuse has become more common, so has violence. Examples are men fighting physically when they are drunk, physical abuse of wives by drunk husbands, and wives fighting back.

Alcohol abuse plays a major role in the suicide incidents described here. Several victims were drunk when they attempted suicide, and most had a history of alcohol abuse. Alcohol was introduced by the Northern Thai and the Hmong, and became widely available to the Mla Bri only during the last thirty years. When the Longs first met the Mla Bri in the early 1980s, there were no alcoholics and there was only occasional drinking, a condition similar to that reported by Bernatzik (1938: 140) in the 1930s. There is no history of the Mla Bri making their own alcohol, and even today women drink only on the rarest occasions even though alcohol has become widely available since the 1990s. The Mla Bri, however, do have a word for alcohol [*/jn.raaʔ/*] that does not appear to be a loanword from another language.

Mobility and settlement and the Mla Bri yesterday and today

Prior to 1993, there were no permanent Mla Bri settlements; until that time, the Mla Bri lived in small family groups in between the forests where they hunted and foraged, and the fields where they sometimes worked for Hmong and other highland farmers. As described above, they moved frequently in order to flee debts, interpersonal relationship conflicts, death within the group, obligations to

¹ Most recently, the Longs have heard of two Mla Bri who were killed by land mines near the Thai-Lao border. They also recorded two incidents where Mla Bri children playing with guns shot and killed other Mla Bri children. Some other known accidental deaths include an incident where two Mla Bri were killed by a tree falling on their shelter. One Mla Bri fell from a moving bus and died from his injuries. The Longs have recorded one incident, the details of which are a little murky, when a sister stabbed her brother when he was drunk and disorderly. However, it is not clear if this was an accident while trying to disarm the brother, or an intentional attack against him. He survived the wound.

help relatives with their debts / work, and other situations which threatened *paluh*. Government relocation of the Hmong villages with which the Mla Bri were nominally attached is also occasionally a reason for Mla Bri mobility.

2001 was an important year for the Mla Bri because not only were the first settlements legally established, but they were also granted legal status as Thai citizens. This status as Thai citizens included the issuance of the Thai identity cards which gave the Mla Bri ready access to health care, schooling, and other modern government services.

The Mla Bri in 2012 lived in four small settlements, one each in Rong Kwang and Song Districts of Phrae Province, and one in Wiang Sa District of Nan Province. In 2009, the fourth settlement was established under Royal Patronage of HRH Princess Sirindhorn in Bo Klua District of Nan Province.

Marriage and family among the Mla Bri

Marriage among the Mla Bri is, from an outside perspective, informal—there is no formal ceremony or registry. But, to the Mla Bri, marriages are highly valued and respected. There is a strong emphasis on marrying within the Mla Bri group itself, and incest taboos against marrying full siblings or birth parents are important—violating the incest or endogamy taboo is believed to be hazardous, and invites *paluh* from other Mla Bri. Such restrictions make searching for a suitable spouse difficult, since potential partners are few in such a small population. Polygyny is also normative, and occasionally practiced. Coupled with a high divorce rate, this means that many of the Mla Bri share multiple kin relationships with each other. Nevertheless, marriage with the Hmong or northern Thai is strongly discouraged, and it is believed any such illegitimate relationship risks bringing ill fortune to the Mla Bri cosmos.

Mla Bri marry as teenagers by sharing a shelter with the new spouse with the permission of the families concerned. Widowhood, divorce, and remarriage are also common among the Mla Bri, and are negotiated in the context of family relationships. Bride price and the exchange of wealth or labor service are not typically involved.

Suicide, anomie, and rapid social change: A survey of remote groups

Mortality studies have been done of active horticultural foragers like the Ache of Paraguay (see Hill and Hurtado 1996), Hiwi Hunter-Gatherers in Venezuela (Hill, Hurtado and Walker 2006), and hunter-gatherers like the Dobe !Kung (see e.g. Howell 1979 and Lee 1984). Such retrospective studies indicate that suicide is apparently rare in such groups, though rates of violent death emerging from feuding can be very high (see also Waters 2007a: 23-66).

As Howell (1979: 61) reports, suicide threats did occur among the !Kung San

observed by anthropologists from 1963-1973, though she believed that no threats were carried out. She writes that the !Kung San believe that suicide comes to the mind of a person who is in a state of shame (*dokum*), and most of the threats / attempts she reported were by women. Such studies are, of course, inherently difficult, requiring as they do intimate knowledge of private behavior in nomadic populations. Nevertheless, the book-length studies of mortality and fertility among the Ache and Dobe !Kung do not mention suicide as a significant cause of death. On the other hand, Hill, Hurtado, and Walker (2006: 448) reported two pre-contact, and one post-contact suicide by men in early adulthood among the Hiwi, and one pre-contact female suicide.²

Studies of groups which have changed rapidly from a lifestyle rooted in settled farming to the modern world have often demonstrated elevated rates of suicide. Indeed, the classic sociological work *Suicide* by Emile Durkheim was published in 1900, and identified clearly the correlation between the rapid movement of northern Europe's rural peasant masses into the industrializing cities, and elevated suicide rate. Durkheim emphasized that this happened because the weakening of the social bonds caused by such dislocation led to feelings of disconnectedness or "normlessness" which he called *anomie*. This anomie, he wrote, reflected the breakdown of society itself, with one result being elevated rates of suicide.

Since Durkheim wrote, thousands (or more) studies have been written describing the role of anomie in accelerating such problems as alcoholism, family break-up, juvenile delinquency, mental illness, illicit sexual relationships, and the general breakdown of society which can emerge at the same time as material conditions are improving (For earlier descriptions of such a phenomenon, see also Znaniecki and Thomas 1918). More current discussions of this phenomenon involve those of groups like the Native Americans (Alcantara and Gone 2007, Kirmayer 1994), Inuit, Australian Aborigines (Cantor and Neulinger 2000), native peoples of Siberia, and many others.

Perhaps of most relevance to this study, Hmong who have moved to the United States from refugee camps in Thailand since the 1980s have also reported elevated rates of suicide (Xiong and Jesilow 2007). Notably, Hmong suicides often involve alcohol abuse (similar to the Mla Bri), though unlike the Mla Bri, adolescents are often the victims. In sum, the relationship between anomie and suicide among marginalized groups who, like this small group of Mla Bri, have a sudden confrontation with the modern world is obvious.³

² In terms of percentages this included 3 percent of the deaths of early adult males for which they had data, and 9 percent of the late adult pre-contact mortality. They did not indicate how the individuals killed themselves, or how the Hiwi explained the suicides. Post contact, the total percent was 4 percent of late adult mortality. The total Hiwi population was about 800. Similar demographic studies have not been done of the smaller population of Mla Bri.

³ As for Thailand itself, national suicide rates have ranged from 6.3 per hundred thousand to 7.1 per hundred thousand between 1988 and 2003. The most common technique among Thai suicide is

Methods

Mary and Eugene Long are missionaries who moved to Ban Huay Ooy in Phrae Province in 1982 to live near the then-nomadic Mla Bri. There they studied the Mla Bri language, treated minor medical conditions, advocated for Mla Bri citizenship rights in Thailand, and evangelized. They also lived briefly in Nan Province near Mla Bri settlements there in 1997-1998.

The Longs became proficient in the Mla Bri language, and also are fluent in the northern and central Thai dialects. They do not use translators with the Mla Bri. Mary Long in particular kept records about individual Mla Bri, collected folk tales, and other ethnographic data. The data with respect to suicide described here was collected by her.

In short, the data in this paper reflects the decades of participant observation undertaken by Mary and Eugene Long in northern Thailand. In order to provide context for the fatal suicides which all occurred between 2005 and 2008, a number of earlier suicide attempts are also described.

Table 1. Summary of the suicides and suicide attempts observed by the Longs between 1984 and 2012 among the Mla Bri.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Age at time</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>
mid 1980s	Saay	M	Attempt	Poison	early 20s		Married
Feb 8, 1999	Kai	M	Attempt	Gun	27	Drunk	Married
Aug 6, 2000	Jam	F	Threat	Poison	early 30s		Married
Jan 14, 2001	Khit	M	Attempt	Gun	23	Drunk	Single-divorced
Feb 12, 2001	Pui	M	Attempt	Gun	21		Married
July 9, 2001	Tom	M	Threat		23		Married
July 14, 2001	Kai	M	Threat	Poison	29		Married
June 20, 2004	Oat	M	Attempt	Poison	20s	Drunk	Married
July 19, 2004	Mouse	M	Attempt	Poison	47	Drunk	Married
Dec 12, 2005	Jim	M	Fatal	Poison	37		Widow
Oct 6, 2006	Ploi	F	Fatal	Poison	32		Married
Oct 19, 2006	Pat	M	Fatal	Poison	24	Drunk	Married
Sept 27, 2007	Dan	M	Fatal	Poison	18	Drunk	Married
Apr 18, 2008	Lek	M	Fatal	Poison	30s		Married
Feb 4, 2012	Mam	F	Attempt	Shampoo	42		Married

hanging; over half of all suicides in Thailand are in this manner (Lotrakul 2006: 91).

Results: Mla Bri suicide case histories, 1984-2012

Organization of the cases

In this section, the 15 cases of suicide threats, attempts, and fatalities in Mary Long's notes are described. The results are summarized in Table 1. This is followed by narrative details about each case history. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of suicide victims and their families. Two further incidents which describe Mla Bri legends about self-destruction are also included.

The cases

Case History 1: Attempt

In 1984 or 1985, Mary was told that Saay (a married male aged approximately 23) had eaten ant poison from the Long's chicken coop. No motive was ever determined for his action. Mary induced vomiting. Saay didn't show any adverse symptoms. His wife was very concerned that he not die lest Saay's mother *paluh* her. Saay and his wife had several children, but he eventually divorced this wife and remarried, though he did not have any more children with his new wife. He is a high status person in the Mla Bri village in Wiang Sa District today, in spite of a problem with alcohol abuse.

Case History 2: Attempt

Kai, his wife Kung, and their son moved from Wiang Sa District in Nan to the Mla Bri village in Rong Kwang District in January 1997. Kai was approximately 25, his wife 45, and their son six.⁴

This was his first marriage, and her second marriage. She had four children from her earlier marriage; the details of her first husband's death are vague, but violence has been hinted at. In August that same year, the family moved to a newly established Mla Bri village in Nan Province, Ban Phee where the Longs also briefly moved. The Longs left this village in response to local opposition and withdrawal of government backing in August 1998. Kai and his family followed them to the village in Rong Kwang District of Phrae Province. Six months later, Kai attempted suicide.

On February 8, 1999, late at night, Kai shot himself in the stomach, below his navel and above his pubic bone, while drunk. Another Mla Bri man, named Pui, notified Eugene. Eugene took Kai to the hospital where emergency surgery was performed, saving Kai's life. Kai was in the ICU for five days and was then

⁴ It is not uncommon for the Mla Bri to exhibit these age differences between husband and wife, and is probably symptomatic of the difficulty this couple had finding spouses: For Kung, because of her age and for Kai presumably because of a scarcity of young, single Mla Bri women.

moved to a ward. He requested that his mother's half-brother stay with him and help with his care.

The day following the shooting, a Mla Bri woman told Mary that a dead person's ghost had entered Kai's heart, and made him shoot himself. The Mla Bri woman said it was like the Mla Bri boy who would not obey and always went into the jungle, and a tree fell and killed him. She seemed to be inferring that Kai had done wrong and that the self-inflicted shooting was his punishment.

Another man also assured Mary that the shooting was self inflicted; no other Mla Bri had shot Kai. The man said he had never seen anything like this. He told Eugene and Mary not to let this incident upset them.

Kai's wife, Kung, said the shooting occurred because others were drinking and having altercations ("*paluh*"). She also mentioned that Kai didn't give his mother any money. Again, there is an element of *paluh* involved in the Mla Bri interpretation of events.

Five days after the incident, Kung told Mary that other women were accusing her of shooting her husband. She said they "*paluhed*" her.

Case History 3: Threat

On August 6, 2000, Jam, who was in her 30s and lived in Rong Kwang District, told Mary that she would kill herself with poison she had at her house. Other Mla Bri had "*paluhed*" her, she explained, for not sharing fish. The Hmong also had "*paluhed*" her about a debt she had with them. Finally, a Mla Bri baby not directly related to Jam had died recently in the hospital and this had upset her.

Jam was always on the fringe of Mla Bri society and was not generally well liked. One of her five children is by her first husband and one more is by her current husband. The other three are considered extra-marital and she was looked down on for this.

Case History 4: Attempt

On January 14, 2001, Khit, 23 years old, shot himself in the upper arm below the bone with a muzzle loader. He was hospitalized and recovered.

The Longs first met Khit when he was around 5 years old in 1983. At that time, they heard that Khit's father had been fatally shot by a Thai several years before, possibly before Khit was born.

The Longs saw Khit over the years, living with relatives or immediate family, coming and going as they foraged, and worked for Hmong or Thai farmers. As a young adult, Khit lived in a Hmong village without other Mla Bri for a while, and became proficient in the Hmong language.

Khit settled in the village in Rong Kwang District in March 1996, and married a girl named Bow. Khit and Bow had a mutual grandfather. Despite the close relationship, which was not considered incestuous, the marriage to Bow was well

accepted by the other Mla Bri. Indeed, she was considered a desirable choice for a wife. But in March 2000, Khit and Bow were told by their common grandfather to separate temporarily because he was sick, implying that their marriage was causing the sickness.

Nevertheless, during the separation, Bow became interested in another Mla Bri man, named Pat, and married him the following month. Bow did not get pregnant during either marriage. Nine months later, Khit shot himself. The day of the shooting people said that Khit was drunk and shot himself because he was upset about his former wife. They said that he wanted to “*paluh*” his former wife. No one had told him to do this. Some were afraid the police would come and take all the men away. The following day, one of Khit’s older half sisters (same father), told Mary that Khit shot himself because he wants Bow. Bow’s new husband said Khit could have her.

“None of us told Khit to shoot himself. If you’re upset, don’t shoot yourself,” one said.

One of Khit’s nieces (older than Khit) told Mary that none of them had told him to shoot himself.

Another woman, Kung (Case History 2) whose husband had shot himself said, “It’s like my husband; he did it himself.”

The day after that, Khit’s mother was at Mary’s house. She noticed a couple of teen girls there and turned away from them, but raised her voice and talked about her son. The mother explained that Khit had told her that he had dreamed about his dead father (i.e. the one who was killed) the night before the shooting. The next morning he went to a Thai village and a Mla Bri fellow bought some whiskey which they drank. They claimed that he did not drink very much.

She said that Khit went into his house by himself and his dead father shot him, apparently a reference to the consequences of an earlier *paluh*. She claimed that Khit had not “*paluhed*” about his former wife and people shouldn’t talk. The mother said she threw the gun away and she will stay home until her son gets out of the hospital.

Khit recovered from his wounds and married a divorced woman in May 2000. This lasted two months, until her previous husband came from another settlement to reclaim her. Then, in February 2001, Khit married another divorced woman and they are still married at this time (2012).

Case History 5: Attempt

The Longs first met Pui when he was about two years old in 1983. As with other Mla Bri, his childhood was spent moving from area to area with his parents or other relatives working in fields for tribal or Thai people. He was clever and independent and began to move about with other Mla Bri males while in his teens, i.e. until his marriage at about 17 years of age in 1997. Pui and his family were working for the Hmong in Wiang Sa. His wife’s family also lived and worked there. Pui’s parents and some siblings lived in the Rong Kwang village after 1993.

On February 12, 2001, Mla Bri from Rong Kwang went to the village in Wiang Sa District to visit Pui, whom they heard had shot himself. The next day, Mary heard Pui's mother tell another lady that there had been jealousy and fighting (*paluh*) among Mla Bri people living in Wiang Sa, provoking Pui to shoot himself.

Pui was about 21 years old at the time of this incident. He had been married about four years and had two children.

Case History 6: Threat

On July 9, 2001, Tom and Maa were married. The Longs were told that Maa didn't want to marry him, but he threatened to kill himself so she married him. He was also married to Malee at that time. Both wives were in the same shelter with him, but slept at different ends.

Tom was 23 at that time. Maa and Malee were both 16.

Tom and Maa are still married. Malee moved out a month after the threat and eventually married Tom's older brother.

Case History 7: Threat

In July 2001, Kai took a second wife, June, who was 19 years old at that time. She is a half-sibling to Kung, his first wife (cf. Case History 2). Kung continued to live in the same house with Kai and his new wife.

A few days after the marriage, Kung told Mary that Kai only loved his new wife and didn't like her. She said he had told her this and if they didn't separate he (Kai) would eat poison.

They separated within a month.

Case History 8: Attempt

Oat's father was shot by Thai people (circa mid 1980s) when Oat was a child. When he was a teen, he traveled around with other Mla Bri young males and came to Rong Kwang where he stayed for some time.

In 1997, Oat moved to Nan to live at a newly established Mla Bri settlement there. He was married shortly after that move. He and his wife moved back to Rong Kwang in 1998 when the Longs left the settlement in Nan. A few years later, Oat started drinking and was frequently drunk.

On June 20, 2004, Oat attempted to kill himself by drinking herbicide. The Longs were alerted at midnight by his wife, her sister, and another Mla Bri lady. He was taken to the hospital and survived. His older brother and a cousin stayed with him.

The Longs were told that he had come home drunk and his wife had "*paluhed*" him.

Case History 9: Attempt

Mouse was approximately 47 years old at the time he drank poison in 2004 at the Mla Bri village in Rong Kwang District. Mouse's mother died in 1980 and

his father in 1997. Mouse worked fields and moved around most of his life. He was often drunk and displayed bold, aggressive behavior. He was abusive several times to his wife while drunk.

He and his wife were married in 1989 but had no children. She was his fifth wife. He had three children: two from marriages, and one outside of marriage.

On July 19, 2004, Mouse drank poison. He was taken to hospital and survived. One of his younger brothers, Cat (who according to the histories never attempted suicide) stayed with him.

The Longs were told that he was drunk and “*paluhed*” that his wife had gone to visit Mla Bri in Wiang Sa District of Nan Province.

One year after this incident, one of Mouse’s younger brothers committed suicide by drinking poison (Case History 10). Two years after this incident, Mouse’s wife and son both committed suicide by drinking poison (Case Histories 11 and 12).

Case History 10: Fatal

Jim was the first fatal suicide that we know of among the Mla Bri. This suicide occurred in 2005.

Jim was about 12 years old when the Longs met him in 1982. His mother had died a few years earlier. He lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle with the Mla Bri, foraging and moving from area to area working fields from a young age. Sometimes he was with his father: sometimes with other relatives. He had six full siblings and three half siblings. His father died in 1997 or 1998.

Jim was married to Yao in 1986 and they remained married until her death in 2003; they changed their names when they got married, as per Mla Bri custom.⁵ They had several children together, perhaps as many as seven. (Yao also had two children from other marriages.) They lived in a Mla Bri village in Nan and worked for the Hmong tribe in that area.

The Longs received word that Yao died on December 13, 2003. Stories varied on the circumstances surrounding her death, but included fire and sickness.

After Yao’s death, Jim came to the Mla Bri village in Rong Kwang on November 12, 2004, with three of his children. On February 2, 2005, he was said to be married to Yaa, a widow.

On February 11, 2005, Jim was admitted to the hospital for strange behavior. He was hearing voices and talking to people who were not there. The Longs had observed that Jim was often drunk, and understood that his hallucinations were alcohol-related.

On April 25, 2005, Jim returned to the Mla Bri village in Wiang Sa District

⁵ Mla Bri naming traditions include changing names some time after formal marriage. The prefix “Ta” is assigned to the husband, and “Ya” to the wife. The couple then selects a name which they share.

with his three children, the marriage with the widow having ended.

The Longs received word on December 12, 2005, that Jim had drunk poison and died.

A group of Mla Bri from Rong Kwang went to Wiang Sa on December 17. The next day, a lady told Mary that Jim had drunk poison because he was discouraged. Others (his older brother) had “*paluhed*” him about something and hit him.

Case History 11: Fatal

Ploi was approximately 15 years old when she married Mouse in 1989. He was approximately 32 years old at that time. As far as can be determined, this was her first marriage, but he had had at least four wives before her, and two children by two of those wives. The wife immediately prior to Ploi was Ploi’s older half-sister.

During the time Mouse and Ploi were married, Mouse was acknowledged to be the father of a girl by another one of Ploi’s older half sisters, and rumored to be the father of at least one other girl by that same mother. Ploi and Mouse remained married until her death by suicide in 2006. There were no children from their marriage. Mouse was an alcoholic during the later years of their marriage. Ploi was physically abused by him to the point that she needed medical attention as a result of the abuse incidents.

On October 6, 2006, Ploi drank herbicide. Her husband was drunk and had been “*paluhing*” her, accusing her of being involved with other men. She went to the hospital but was not admitted, since the Mla Bri had not made it clear to the medical staff that the cause of her “stomach ache” was poison. Her condition worsened and she was admitted to the Phrae Provincial Hospital where she died on October 17, 2006.

A few days before her death, two women who were related to the husband said that Ploi should not have taken the poison.

Ploi’s older half sister explained that it was Ploi’s husband’s fault that she drank the herbicide.

On the day of her death, Ploi’s mother blamed (*paluhed*) the husband as did another couple.

Another woman, Yim, (related to the husband) also said that Ploi’s mother had scolded her family saying that they had taught Ploi to do this.

Another woman (related to the husband) scolded (“*paluhed*”) the husband.

About a year later, the death was brought up again. A lady, Yim, (related to Mouse) said her son-in-law, Gem (related to Ploi) blamed her and her husband and her daughter (married to Gem) for killing Ploi. He said they had told her to drink the poison.

The death was referred to again a few years later. In October 2010, a lady told Mary she wanted to leave the village because other women were saying bad things about her and her husband (“*paluhing*”). She mentioned Ploi in this context. Ploi is the only fatal female suicide.

Case History 12: Fatal

Pat was born in December 1981 in the area of the present day Mla Bri village in Rong Kwang District. His father was Mouse and his mother was named Yao. He was their only child and they separated some months later with the mother taking Pat with her. She had another child with Joe, and then married Mouse's younger brother. They remained married until her death.

Pat was married to Bow in 2000 and separated the following year. They had no children. He then married to Dah and they had a daughter. He remained in this marriage until his death.

Pat's mother died in 2003 in Nan. His father was living in Rong Kwang and was married to Ploi at the time of the suicide described here.

Pat, Dah and their daughter moved to Rong Kwang in June 2006. Dah's mother and her husband, and their children moved to Rong Kwang the following month. Pat and his family lived with his father, Mouse, and his father's wife, Ploi.

As described above, Pat's father's wife Ploi drank poison on October 6, 2006, and died on October 17 (Case History 11).

Around October 12, 2006, Pat drank poison. He was admitted to the hospital. On October 19, he was told that he would die in the hospital. He said he wanted to go home and he died shortly after arriving at home.

Before he died, Jam, older half sister of Ploi, told Mary that others blamed ("*paluhed*") her for Pat drinking poison. Jam had one (or possibly more) children by Pat's father while he was married to Ploi.

Pat's mother-in-law told Mary that she had seen Pat drunk and had told him he should use his money for food but he went and drank poison. She defended herself for saying this, and denied *paluhing* him.

Case History 13: Fatal

On September 27, 2007, the Longs received word that Dan had died from drinking poison. He lived in Song District in northern Phrae Province, and worked for Thais doing field work. His mother, who was living in the Rong Kwang village at the time, went and confirmed the death. The story was vague – his wife had yelled at him ("*paluhed*" him) for being drunk.

Dan was about 18 years old at the time of his death. He was the oldest child of his parents and had four siblings from their marriage. His father died in 2003 and his mother remarried.

His mother, her husband, and their children moved to the Rong Kwang village in July 2006. Dan came a couple of times to visit but worked in Song District where he was in debt to Thai farmers.

Case History 14: Fatal

On April 18, 2008, the Longs heard that Lek had died from drinking poison.

He lived in the Wiang Sa village and worked for the Hmong doing field labor. He was about 30 years old.

Lek was married to Nid and they had four or five children. He had another daughter from a marriage with Nid's older sister. Both wives had their first child within a month of each other. Nid was the principal wife when the Longs met Lek in 1997. The older sister was married to another man in about 2000.

Lek was known to drink heavily.

Case History 15: Attempt

On February 4, 2012, a Mla Bri woman named Mam drank herbal shampoo. Mam's 16 year old daughter came to the Longs' house about 8 pm and reported the incident. She cupped her hand to show the amount of shampoo ingested. She also remarked that her mother's husband had accused her of being unfaithful, the probable motivation for the attempt at suicide.

Later that same evening, Mam came to the Longs' house. She was in great distress: coughing, heaving, and crying. She said her throat and stomach burned. She also said that the entire incident was of no account and should be forgotten.

Mam's daughter-in-law and several children, including several of her own children, were there watching Mam.

Mam was approximately 42 years old in 2012, and was in her second marriage. Her present husband is about 26 years old. They have one daughter together.

Mam's first husband, with whom she had six children, died from natural causes. She has told Mary that her first husband was better than her present one; she doesn't like this one as much, she has said, and indicated that her present husband has physically abused her.

Mam's oldest son committed suicide by drinking poison in 2007 (Case History 13). Her brother attempted suicide in 1984-85 by eating ant poison (Case History 1). Mam's mother is Mouse's older half sister.

Two legends in particular are well known among the Mla Bri and shed some light on their understanding of suicide.

Legend/ Story I

Two Mla Bri brothers were getting a type of honey in the jungle. For some reason they agreed to kill each other.

Their wives were digging tubers and found their dead husbands. They put scorpions and centipedes into their sarongs.

When they got back to the shelter, the wives died also.

Legend/ Story II

Lung Yaeng was an excellent reed pipe musician. It was unbelievable how well

he played this instrument, and his ability attracted women to him. Mla Bri women and outside women wanted him for a husband.

Lung Yaeng had a huge boil on his foot. He came home and went to bed.

The next day he climbed a tall tree to get some honey. His relative told him not to climb it. He didn't listen to her, but told her that people had scolded (*pahluhed*) him for not going out hunting.

He climbed the tall tree, but the boil broke open causing him to fall. The fall killed him. His body was terribly mutilated.

Some friends noticed that it was quiet and went looking for him. They saw his torn body and buried him.

Table 2. Familial relationships between suicide victims using Mouse as ego:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Case</i>	<i>Relationship to Ego</i>	<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Year and Place</i>
Mouse	9	Ego	Attempt	2004, Rong Kwang
Pat	12	Son	Fatal	2006, Rong Kwang
Jim	10	Full sibling	Fatal	2005, Wiang Sa
Kai	2,7	Half sister's son	Attempt, threat	1999, 2001, Rong Kwang
Dan	13	Half sister's daughter's son	Fatal	2007, Song
Saay	1	Half sister's son	Attempt	1984/1985, Rong Kwang
Mam	15	Half sister's daughter (sibling of Saay; mother of Dan; half-sister with Kai)	Attempt	2012, Rong Kwang

Using Ploi as ego:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Case</i>	<i>Relationship to Ego</i>	<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Year and Place</i>
Ploi	11	Ego	Fatal	2006, Rong Kwang
Pui	5	Full sibling	Attempt	2001, Wiang Sa
Jam	3	Half sibling	Threat	2000, Rong Kwang
Khit	4	Mother's half sibling	Attempt	2001, Rong Kwang
Oat	8	Father's brother's son	Attempt	2004, Rong Kwang

Summary of suicide threats, attempts, and fatalities

Table 1 (above) summarized the suicide incidents. As can be observed, suicides and threats of suicides predominantly involve married males in the community, and in recent years are typically done by using poison. The suicide epidemic began with threats in 1999, and resulted in fatalities between 2005 and 2008. One pair of fatal suicides (Case Histories 11 and 12) occurred within a few days of each other.

Mla Bri themselves typically related each incident to *paluh* in some way. There is also a strong association with alcohol and sexual jealousy. Notably, the strong marriage

norms of the Mla Bri also provide an important context to the suicide attempts.

Table 2 describes the relationships between the individuals described in the text. When the couple Mouse and Ploi are used as ego, it can be seen that there are familial relationships connecting 10 of the 15 cases described.

Discussion and Analysis

Paluh in the context of foraging and mobility in northern Thailand

Living a settled lifestyle may have an effect on the handling of disputes among the Mla Bri, or what they call “*paluh*.” *Paluh* is a strong theme in the Mla Bri culture, and is used by the Mla Bri to explain the suicides and attempted suicides described here. It is believed that scolding / criticizing a person has very detrimental effects on both parties: the one who *paluhs* and the one who is *paluhed*. People who have been *paluhed* traditionally left the village as a way to make the person who “*pahluhed*” them look bad.

In days before the Mla Bri settled into villages, children, spouses, almost anyone, could leave a camping site (temporarily or long term) when offended, i.e. providing the context (or anticipation) of *paluh*. When it was not feasible to move far away, those living in a common temporary shelter would move out and live in another shelter of the same settlement, signaling quietly that some dispute had taken place. Dealing with *paluh* by physical avoidance in this fashion still happens, but it is more difficult as the Mla Bri settle into more permanent housing with electricity, schools, health clinic, and so forth. In addition, the fact the Royal Thai Government discourages the Mla Bri from returning to areas of the forest where they formerly lived and which are now forest reserves owned by the Royal Thai Government. Such enclosure can be viewed as either the expropriation of Mla Bri traditional rights, or the assertion of sovereignty rights by the distant Thai government (see discussions in Scott 2009, and Waters 2007b: 175-176; 191-193; 204). Irrespective of this, the capacity of the Mla Bri to flee in the event of *paluh* is restricted, which in turn puts pressure on inter-personal relationships.

Even in the context of restricted mobility, suicide is still not an ideal in the Mla Bri culture, but has come to function at least since settlement, as the ultimate answer to “*paluh*”. In a world of foraging, hunting, and gathering in which there was no investment in fields, permanent houses, or attachment to place, so such shifts quickly removed the possibility of inter-personal confrontation or potential for scolding a person who might have committed an offense. In this fashion, “*paluh*” was an effective form of social control in a society in which there were few ways to express overt displeasure. *Paluh* was a signal that parties needed to separate, without further confrontation, and was effective even if by the standards of the outside world the victim in an incident (e.g. the wronged spouse) was the one to leave. But this is not

possible in a world in which there are restrictions on movement from whatever source.

The centrality of *paluh* is an important concept informing social action among the Mla Bri, and although it is not restricted to suicide, we do think that suicide provides a good context for evaluating the concept. Again, ordinary Mla Bri conversation is often prefaced by the phrase, “I am not *paluh* you; I’m talking nicely.” This is particularly the case when the topic of conversation is such that it could be easily understood as a rebuke, disagreement or even correction. No one wants to be perceived as causing offense.

The Mouse-Ploi suicide cluster

So why were so many suicides, suicide threats, and suicide attempts focused around the couple of Mouse and Ploi? It is not possible to explicitly answer this question in a paper of this nature. However, the cluster is worth noting. Indeed, to a certain extent, the cluster is probably a reflection of how closely all Mla Bri people are related to one another in a world in which marital endogamy is highly valued, and exogamy subject to sanction.

Still, the cluster extends to all three of the post-1993 Mla Bri settlements discussed here. In other words, the cluster is not specific to one small settlement or the other; rather it extends to several areas of the broader Mla Bri society, albeit along a single kinship group.

It is perhaps worth noting that Mouse is one of seven male siblings, one of whom is a half-sibling and one of whom may be a half-sibling. Of these seven men, five are alcohol abusers (incorrigible drunks!), one is almost always sober, and one has not been seen for many years—the problem may not be with suicide as such, but the effects of chronic alcoholism and its side effects.

Conclusion: The problem of rapid social change and anomie

Ultimately, the most general explanation for the emergence of suicide among the Mla Bri is a classic one found in many societies. The rapid social change of the last thirty years as the Mla Bri stopped living in the remote forest, and took up semi-settled life of permanent housing, schooling, medical care, electricity, television, and the other accoutrements of modern life is deeply disorienting. As with other such groups encountering “civilization”, this contributed to material well-being and a healthier lifestyle, but at the same time led to a breakdown in the system of social norms, or what Durkheim called “anomie.” As with many other groups, the effects of this are probably elevated rates of alcoholism, marital dissolution, and the suicide problems observed by Mary and Eugene Long, and described here.

What this paper adds to the literature is a more intimate look at how a nomadic group like the Mla Bri has encountered the ways of the modern Thai world. The concept of *paluh* is apparently one which contributed to group dispersal, and the

re-creation of living groups in the forest. Avoidance strategies as a means to deal with *paluh* meant that overt intra-group conflict was rare, and the egalitarian nature of the community was preserved without resort to internal violence or further conflict. But fear of *paluh* also meant that the norms for conflict resolution are less likely to be developed.

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