Territorial Imperatives: Akha Ethnic Identity and Thailand's National Integration

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Cultural identity implies, and fundamentally presupposes, a sense of territoriality.

--Remo Guidieri and Francesco Pellizzi (1980)

In the modern conception, state sovereignty is fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimetre of legally demarcated territory.

-- Benedict Anderson (1983)

With the emergence of modern nation-states in peninsular South-East Asia in the post-colonial era, the structure of the hill/valley conjuncture altered fundamentally. The territorially bounded states in the Western mode that emerged through the colonial encounter replaced the centre-oriented "galactic polities" of traditional Indianized principalities whose "borders were porous and indistinct" (Tambiah 1976; Anderson 1983:26). Today, these new nations challenge the legitimacy of highlanders' cultural *cum* territorial existence in a way unknown under the older order.

Anthropological research among both hill-dwellers and valley-dwellers in Burma and, to a greater extent, Thailand has focused on processes of ethnic differentiation and identification

since the publication of Leach's iconoclastic-turned-classic monograph, ***Political Systems of Highland Burma.*** Drawing mainly upon this now substantial literature, I attempt to formulate an analytical approach towards ethnic identity that I hope will illuminate the current confrontation of mountain minorities and the consolidating nation-states of continental South-East Asia. Ethnic identity here designates explicit self-definition which is cultural but not coterminous with culture. Applying this approach to the case of Tibeto-Burman-speaking Akha in the hills of northern Thailand, I argue that Akha identity is based upon common clanship and shared "customs," and presupposes a duplex concept of territory not shared by the lowland Thai majority. In the concluding section, prospects for Akha and other highlanders are considered in light of efforts by the central government of Thailand to integrate "hill tribes" into a territorially bounded nation.

Ethnic Identity in the Mainland South-East Asian Context

Ethnographic fieldwork, by its very nature, impels questions of ethnic likeness and difference to the fore (Moerman 1968:165-66); not only does each observer seek a monograph-sized sociocultural entity, but observer and observed encounter one another as strangers. Yet the emphasis on ethnicity in anthropological accounts of mainland South-East Asia cannot be written off as a true reflection of the anthropologist's interests and methods and a distorted image of the anthropological object. In the South-East Asian context, concerns of anthropologists and natives coincide. Most, if not all, researchers who have worked in upland South-East Asia would, I believe, echo Moerman (1968:165) in claiming that "ethnic identifications...have high priority to the people I studied." Stories and myths often include characters from other ethnic groups and frequently explain social and cultural differences between groups. For example, Akha, Chin, Karen, and Lahu all relate tales that account for their lack of writing and its presence among neighbouring cultures in the valley.

To students of South-East Asian sociocultural systems, Leach bequeathed a structural model of group definition through opposition, which demands that social groups be viewed relationally rather than as stable isolates. By demonstrating that Kachin speak mutually unintelligible languages and display significant cultural differences, by documenting that individual hill-dwelling Kachin become valley-dwelling Shan and vice versa, and by establishing the interdependence of Shan and Kachin political systems, Leach (1954:281) challenged "conventions as to what consitutes *a* culture or *a* tribe" shared by colonial administrators and social scientists alike. In ***Political Systems of Highland Burma***,Leach (1954:43) simultaneously undermined the evolutionist/biological view that "race" is "a synonym for language" and that the inhabitants of British Burma are representatives of successive waves of migrations of diverse races, as well as the structural-functionalist conception of a tribe as a discrete, homogeneous social unit in equilibrium.

Beginning with Lehman's (1963) study of Chin as a "sub-nuclear" tribal people adapted to Burman civilization, students of the hill/valley conjuncture have built upon Leach's lead. Whereas Leach's aim is to show *that* valley neighbours influence hill sociocultural systems, Lehman's aim is to show *in what ways* they do so. Two recent works expand and refine Lehman's focus on the moulding of highlander cultures through opposition to dominant lowlanders: Alting von Geusau (1983) examines dialectical oppositions such as upslope versus downslope developed in Akha oral tradition in response to the presence of stronger valley-dwellers, and Radley (1986) investigates Mong (Hmong) tiger myths as embodiments of attitudes toward the powerful Chinese. In a complex dialectical process, patterns of social interaction and adaptation shape cultural traditions and definitions of identity among hill and valley neighbours, which in turn influence patterns of social interaction and adaptation.

Uplanders are well aware of both the material advantages and the greater political power of lowlanders, but they also

demonstrate deep respect for the traditions handed down by their ancestors. Commentators since Lehman (1963) have drawn attention to the double ambivalence displayed by mountain people. Attitudes toward valley civilization combine admiration with distrust; attitudes toward their own customs combine pride with feelings of inferiority. Distrust toward valley-dwellers can be interpreted, following Hinton (1979:85-86), as a consequence of longstanding oppression, and feelings of inferiority can be viewed not simply as reactions to the obvious inequality in material resources between hill and valley, but also as the internalization of opinions of those politically and economically dominant.

It should be pointed out that hill/valley is always a significant axis for self-definition among highlanders, but it is not the only one, and, furthermore, that self-definitions may recognize similarity as well as contrast with others. For example, Karen, whose perceived place within the sphere of the valley state is an essential ingredient in their self-identification, consider Lua to be different but nonetheless akin on the basis of their common residence between plains and mountain tops and their similar positions vis-a-vis traditional valley principalities, at the same time that they feel no affinity with hillmen of the higher slopes (Kunstadter 1967, 1969, 1979; Marlowe 1969, 1979). Karen, and by analogy Lua, represent the "'hills' as an extension of the 'sown'" whereas the true highlanders such as the Akha, Hmong, and Lisu represent the "'hills' qua 'hills'" (Marlowe 1979:196). These hill-dwellers distinguish themselves one from the other, yet recognize more affinity among themselves than with inhabitants of the valleys below: Akha acknowledge a basic likeness among "mountain people," and the Mien creation myth recounts the emergence of "hill people" and "plains people" (Kandre 1967:621). Content and consequences of ambivalence as well as axes of contrast and affinity must be established through research and cannot be assumed to be stable through time.

Ever since Moerman (1965) posed the question "Who are the Lue?," anthropological attention has focused on native

definitions of group affiliation. As an ideological formulation, ethnic identity is cultural, but it is not coterminous with culture. To my knowledge, no ethnographic case has yet been reported in which the set of attributes included within a culture's definition of ethnic identity is coincident with the total culture of people claiming that identity, nor should such a case be expected. I would argue that isomorphism between ethnic identity and culture is impossible because ethnic identity is explicit and self-conscious whereas much of culture is implicit and unconscious. Accordingly, in the perspective adopted here not all sociocultural change entails change in ethnic identity. Ethnic change is here understood as either a claim to membership in a different group (e.g., Lua becomes Karen or Northern Thai [Kunstadter 1983a: 151]) or as an alteration in self-definitional criteria for membership in a particular group (e.g., Lua remains Lua but differently defined [Kunstadter 1983a:151])

Since criteria for group self-identification are not uniform or universal, "it therefore becomes the ethnographer's task to discover, in each instance, which features are locally significant for purposes of assigning ethnic labels" (Moerman 1965:1220).

To understand the degree of resilience or vulnerability of ethnic identity in the context of shifting patterns of intergroups relations, it is necessary not only to determine the content of ethnic self-identification but also its configuration. Besides differing in content, ethnic identities exhibit greater or lesser degrees of systematicity and complexity. For instance, the cultural features Thai Lue consider markers of their identity include the female sarong, a recessed fireplace, a village spirit house, and a style of folk songs (Moerman 1968:156-58). On the other hand, Mien define themselves as Mien on the basis of adherence to a named "socio-economic-ritual system" (Kandre 1967:584-85).

> The ethnospecific cultural subsystem is called by native informants "The Custom" *(lēi nyèi),* which

> corresponds to the Chinese concept of *Li* [good customs, rites and ceremonies...] (Kandre 1976:172, brackets in the original).

Some self-definitions, like that of Mien, take the form of interlocking networks of cultural attributes. Others, like that of Thai Lue, are loose sets of traits akin to anthropological trait lists of a bygone era. Definitional sets may also be implicational or hierarchical with traits logically ranked one with respect to another. For example, there appears to be an implicational relationship among the criteria of Karen-ness cited by Kunstadter (1979:125) in that knowledge of the Karen language is a prerequisite for knowledge of Karen folk tales. Indeed, Kunstadter isolates language as the most important criterion. In the case of loose sets, it is possible that one element might be dropped or replaced without threatening the viability of the definition. In the case of implicational or hierarchical sets, perhaps an element of lesser rank might be abandoned without the definition collapsing. Self-definitions, like that of Mien, which isolate a specific cultural subsystem rather than an inventory of traits as distinctive of group membership, appear to be more fragile by virtue of greater internal coherence; however, the presumption of fragility rests upon the questionable assumption that ideas and practices belonging within a named cultural domain, for instance "The Custom" of Mien, are themselves immutable. A label may be retained while that to which it is applied alters considerably. The amount and kind of change a specific cultural subsystem can absorb is a subject for research in each particular ethnographic case.

Beyond looking at the content and configuration of self-conscious definitions of group membership, it is also important to explore connections between identity and other explicit and implicit aspects of culture. If a self-definition does not incorporate all the conditions necessary to meet standards of group membership, identity can be threatened by change affecting those conditions that are presupposed by the self-definition but not

directly included within it. To give one illustration, although the Mien language is not included in definitions of Mien-ness, one cannot follow "The Custom" without knowing the Mien language (Kandre 1976:173). For Mien, then, a loss of language would entail a loss of identity (as presently defined), despite the fact that language is not an explicit element in self-identification. Thus self-conscious bases of identity need not coincide with the effective bases of identity.

The first epigraph at the beginning of this paper proclaims that "cultural identity...presupposes a sense of territoriality" Although "a sense of territoriality" is often an explicit element in ethnic identification, either tangibly as a particular parcel in possession (an occupied homeland) or intangibly as a memory (a former or mythic homeland), it need not always be self-consciously incorporated into ethnic identity. If not explicit, a conception of territory is in many, and perhaps all cases, implicit. What is at issue here is not territory as tract but territory as idea. I hasten to add that this does not mean that territory as tract is of no consequence to the fate of ethnic minorities. Territory as idea cannot be tilled. Since nation-states in the modern mode themselves presuppose a single conception of territorial legitimacy that, as the second epigraph indicates, admits no alternatives, I believe that it is important to unravel the explicit or implicit "sense of territoriality" in highlander identities in order to understand the current minority-majority conjuncture in the nations of peninsular South-East Asia.

An argument made in connection with language can, I believe, be applied to ethnic identity to help account for differential kinds and rates of ethnic change. Hymes (1971:116) contends that "the role of language may differ from community to community." Transposing his argument to the question of ethnic identity, I contend that the role of ethnic identity may differ from community to community. Whereas one community may show little tendency toward ethnic change whether from one label to another or in the content ascribed to a continuing

label, another community may change readily either by adopting a new label and all that it entails or by altering the definitional criteria of the label retained.

Since Leach (1954) first drew anthropological attention to the phenomenon, shifts in claims to group membership have concerned students of mainland South-East Asia. As Dentan (1976:78) observes,

> multi-culturation in Southeast Asia provides many people with a series of identities which they can don and doff as particular interactions dictate. Goffmanesque models of self-presentation and interaction ritual are adequate to describe this behavior, often with only tangential reference to notions of ethnicity.

In keeping with Dentan's own emphasis on the potential dangers of scholarly research and writing on ethnicity in South-East Asia given the existence of real ethnic tensions, I would like to draw attention to a potential danger of the recurrent stress in the anthropological literature on the "donning" and "doffing" of identities. It is one thing for a person to choose to alter her/his behaviour to suit the situation (as perceived by that actor), and it is an entirely different thing for alteration to be demanded by another person (or government) to suit the situation (as perceived by that other person [or government]). Willingness to adapt one's behaviour to a particular context should not be interpreted as absence of attachment to an identity not then in play.

Andrianoff (1979:77), Hinton (1969:4-5), and Kunstadter (1983b:38) observe that not all ethnic groups in Thailand are assimilators to the same degree. As Hinton (1969:4) notes,

> it is probably significant that researchers who have been preoccupied with changing cultural identity have

> been students of the ... Karen, Lua', Thai Lue and Shan peoples. The identity of some other groups seems to be rather more rigidly defined.

The other groups to which he refers are Hmong and Mien, speakers of related Austro-Thai languages (Matisoff 1983:65), and the three Tibeto-Burman-speaking groups, Lahu, Lisu, and Akha. Andrianoff (1979) and Geddes (1967:568) support his view concerning Hmong, Kandre's (1967, 1976) work echoes him on Mien, and my ethnographic experience certainly corroborates him on Akha. Conrad (this volume) provides data on shifts between Lisu and Lahu identity. Partly on this basis, he rejects Hinton's notion that there are "rigidly defined" groups. Interestingly enough, Conrad's data, which include no examples of shifts from Lisu to Thai identity, tend to support the view that members of some groups are less willing than those of others to assimilate to the dominant lowlanders. It seems then that Hinton is correct in asserting that among the first set of peoples loyalty to identity is not as strong a cultural value as among the second. I hasten to add that it is not my intention to indicate that the cultural evaluation of ethnic identity is the sole variable in determining the speed and direction of ethnic change, or to convey the impression that this evaluation is independent of historical circumstances. The cultural weighting ascribed to group identity is but one factor among many to be considered in the study of ethnic change, but it is a factor that should not be ignored.

The content, configuration, and evaluation of ethnic identity are products of history, which in turn pattern perceptions of change and channel change itself. Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Lisu, and Akha are all groups to which Alting von Geusau's (1983) characterization "perennial minority" applies; all are marginalized people who have historically withdrawn from and/or resisted pressure posed by dominant valley-dwellers (Radley 1986). Though their ethnic identities differ as do the cultures of which they are part, members of these groups appear

to share a positive evaluation of allegiance to ethnic identity. All live in highland villages interspersed with those of other ethnic groups, and none has a tradition of stable, patterned political connections with powerful lowlanders. They define themselves in relation to valley neighbours, but, unlike more ready assimilators such as Karen and Lua, (former) dependence upon a (former) valley-principality is not internalized into self-identification.

The mountain minorities have for centuries, even millennia, been in contact with more powerful valley-dwellers. Consciousness of their relative weakness is not new; it is part of tradition itself. It may well be that self-definition through opposition is a feature of all cultural systems and that autonomous cultural systems are a myth of the tribe of anthropologists.

> Membership in a group, incorporation within it, is dependent upon a category of the excluded, a sense of otherness....The Outside, then, is necessary to the Inside (Murphy 1964:848).

For highlanders in mainland South-East Asia, the dominant other is an age-old counterpart. Yet during this century a fundamental transformation is evident: traditional ethnic self-consciousness has in some cases metamorphosed into political ethnic self-consciousness. Assertive, politicized ethnic self-consciousness seems to incorporate aspects of the Western notion of the bounded territorial nation-state. While Weber (1978) and Keyes (1976,1981) suggest that ethnic self-consciousness can be considered a form of "descent," I suggest that politicized ethnic self-consciousness can be considered a form of dissent. Whereas the first claims to differ, the second differs to claim.

The general approach to ethnic identity presented here demands that in each ethnographic case the content as well as the configuration of the self-definition of group membership be investigated. Unraveling links between the self-conscious bases

of identity and other explicit as well as implicit aspects of culture exposes sources of resilience and vulnerability, and of flexibility and rigidity, in the face of changing intergroup relations and politico-economic circumstances. Of particular importance in the context of today's world of nation-states is the "sense of territoriality" either explicit or implicit within definitions of ethnic identity. Finally, a culture's evaluation of allegiance to group membership provides a clue to differential rates and kinds of ethnic change. Applying this approach to a particular ethnographic case, the bases of ethnic identity among Akha in northern Thailand are examined, and the confrontation between Akha as well as other highlanders and the national government is explored.

Akha Ethnic Identity

Akha as an ethnic group are here distinguished not on the basis of any objective criteria, but rather as the people who identify themselves as Akha. Population statistics for mountain minorities in South-West China and South-East Asia are notoriously unreliable. Suffice to say that there are between three and five hundred thousand Akha residing in Yunnan and in the highlands of South-East Asia stretching from Burma's eastern Shan States through northern Thailand and western Laos, apparently into the north-west corner of Vietnam. The first Akha settlement in northern Thailand was founded just after the turn of the century (Alting von Geusau 1983:246). Through both natural growth and immigration from Thailand's politically troubled neighbouring states, the population of Akha and other highlanders has increased substantially since the 1960s. In 1964 there were under 7,000 Akha (L. Hanks, J. Hanks, and Sharp 1964:facing p.5); in 1986 there were more than 33,000 (Appendix I). Most reside in Chiang Rai, the northernmost province; the remainder reside in Chiang Mai, Kamphaeng Phet, Lampang, Phrae, and Tak, other northern provinces (Appendix I).

In the ethnic mosaic of the highlands, autonomous Akha villages are scattered among those of other ethnic groups. Like

other hill-dwellers, Akha cultivate swiddens in a belt of land surrounding their community. Dry rice is the main subsistence crop and the focus of required calendrical rituals. Every traditional settlement must have a village founder-leader *(dzoema),* who is responsible for leading community-based ceremonies. The position is restricted to men and is often hereditary, but the village founder-leader is in no sense a ruler. Disputes are settled through discussions among male household heads, and fines are paid at the village founder-leader's house. Descent is patrilineal and residence patrivirilocal. The effective unit in the regulation of marriage is the exogamous, unnamed sub-lineage, rather than the named patrilineage. A woman joins the household and lineage of her husband at marriage. Although there is no indigenous supralocal political organization, Akha in geographically dispersed communities are bound by ramifying ties of consanguinity and affinity.

The ethnographic research (1979-81) from which data are drawn was conducted in Chiang Rai Province among self-designated *Jeug'oe* Akha traditionalists. With Alting von Geusau (1983:246) and Lewis (1968:viii) and contra Feingold (1976:91-92), I consider *Jeug'oe* to be a native classification corresponding to a dialect group. Based upon the comparability of Lewis's findings in Burma and both Alting von Geusau's and my own findings in Thailand, I believe it likely that the ethnographic information presented here is of general applicability to those *Jeug'oe* speakers who have not abandoned their inherited "customs" in favour of Christianity. They recognize that members of other subgroups are also Akha, and they can detail variations in practices between subgroups. My suspicion is that comparative work among other subgroups will reveal that various sorts of Akha define themselves as Akha in a similar manner. After all, the mode of self-identification described below acknowledges likeness and allows for differences among Akha.

Ethnic group as clan. From the Akha point of view, their ethnic group is what is called a clan in anthropological parlance.

Akha believe themselves to be lineal descendants of a single apical ancestor, "Main Sky, Middle Sky" *(Mmamg'ah)* below whom there were nine generations of spirits before the first man, *Smmio,* appeared. The various named, unranked patrilineages to which all Akha belong segment below *Smmio.* The Akha genealogical system is described as "universalistic" by Feingold (1976:88) because a person can add his name below that of a specified ancestor and thereby become an Akha. Although it is true that non-Akha may become Akha in this way, the genealogical system is not universal in the sense of embracing all people. As descendants of *Smmio,* Akha are set apart from non-Akha. The system is universal in that it encompasses all Akha; "it pronounces that all Akha are brothers" (J. Hanks 1974:126).

A child becomes a member of its father's patrilineage not at birth but shortly thereafter at the naming ceremony. The genealogical name given at this ceremony follows the Tibeto-Burman pattern of patronymic linkage in which the last one or two syllables of a father's name become the first one or two syllables of his child's name (Lo Ch'ang-p'ei 1945). Thus, for example Liba's child might be named Bado. Through her/his genealogical name a person is linked to the chain of patrilineal ancestors stretching back sixty or more generations to the apical ancestor. Every Akha has both an everyday name and a genealogical name. Use of the latter is restricted to contexts that are included within the domain of "customs." During curing rituals the patient is addressed by that name and thereby identified to ancestors whose aid is sought. The recitation of the deceased's genealogy is central to the funeral ceremony (J. Hanks 1974; Hansson 1983:280-81). A woman who dies before marriage is buried following the recitation of her father's lineage; a woman who dies after marriage is buried following the recitation of her husband's lineage. Akha say that every man should be able to recite his genealogy. Some men have neither the gift nor the inclination to commit the sixty plus names to memory, but at least one older man in each sub-lineage must know it. Reciters *(phima),* ritual specialists whose grasp of the branching genealogical system is particularly extensive, as well as other knowledgea-

ble elders can readily identify the critical point of segmentation not only of their own lineage but also of others.

Ethnic identity as customs. In addition to defining themselves as descendants of a single apical ancestor, Akha also define themselves on the basis of their adherence to a specific set of "customs" *(zah)*. To be an Akha is to uphold the prescriptions and proscriptions for action which constitute Akha customs (Lewis 1969-70:24). According to Akha traditions, long ago the various peoples were differentiated at the bestowal of customs. In Bradley's (1983:52) phraseology, "the source of ethnic distinctions is cosmologized" in the myth which relates that Northern Thai, Chinese, Lahu, Akha, etc. were called together and given customs. The Northern Thai, Chinese, and Lahu all went carrying loosely woven baskets. In some tellings, not only were these baskets woven with wide spaces between the bamboo strips, they were also broken and torn. Unlike the others, the Akha went to fetch customs carrying a tightly woven sack, the kind in which rice is brought back from the fields so that not one precious grain is lost. The Northern Thai, Chinese, and Lahu put customs into their baskets and returned home. On the way customs fell through the holes and were lost. The Akha, on the other hand, placed customs inside the sack and on the way home not one piece fell out. This is the reason that the customs of others are few while those of Akha are many. The story permits the addition or deletion of other groups depending on both current and past intergroup relations, and on the inclinations of the teller. Akha in northern Thailand do not live near Shan, but many older Akha who used to live near them in Burma include Shan when recounting this story.

Not only do Northern Thai, Chinese, Lahu, Akha, etc. all have their own customs, so too do different sorts of Akha. A particular ritual may be performed differently by members of one named lineage than by members of another. For example, all Akha coffins are made from hollowed tree trunks, but deceased members of the *Anyi* lineage are placed with their feet

towards the base of the trunk, whereas deceased members of other lineages are placed with their heads towards it. A common expression is "Everyone has their own customs," which may be said with reference to groups such as Northern Thai and Lahu or with reference to individual Akha belonging to different lineages. Akha accept and are tolerant of variations in customs at either the ethnic or the intra-ethnic level, since Akha assume that customs at all levels are legitimated in the same manner, that is, by being handed down from the ancestors.

Akha customs include the plethora of rituals crowding Akha life: calendrical ceremonies, life cycle rites, curing ceremonies, rituals concerning rice cultivation, and corrective rites of numerous sorts. In addition, customs encompass much that anthropologists generally label kinship, such as rules concerning lineage segmentation, permissible marriages, and affinal responsiblities. Also included in customs is patterned behaviour not part of ritual performances or kinship relations, for instance, activities permitted and not permitted on various days of the Akha week. Many customary injunctions concerning everyday behaviour are the obverse of ritual injunctions. To give one example, hanging washing out to dry on the porch as sunset approaches is normally prohibited because during a funeral a blanket belonging to the deceased must be hung out to dry there late in the afternoon following burial. An action permitted, indeed required, in its appropriate ritual frame is prohibited on any other day. As a system of rules, customs stipulate not only actions, actors, recitations, and ritual paraphernalia for all ceremonies, but also proper and improper behaviour in many non-ritual contexts.

The well-known highlander self-reflexive ambivalence is evident in two often quoted sayings: "Akha customs are many" and "Akha customs are difficult." These two are pronounced with self-deprecation, with pride, or with both. On one occasion, an Akha man was prompted by his long description of the proper procedures for a short segment of the elaborate funeral ceremony

to recount the story of receiving customs. He concluded by declaring that the Akha who fetched customs in a sack was stupid. Another time, after an old man finished the tale, a young woman turned to me and only half-jokingly said, "Go ahead and tell him that the Akha was stupid." However, Akha also proclaim their customs to be many and difficult when their importance is being stressed. The old learning which has been handed down from the ancestors must not not be allowed to disappear. As a fragment of ceremonial song emphasizes, "in father's footsteps on the earth, a son should walk; in mother's footsteps on the earth, a daughter should walk."

The many customs are difficult in being both complex and costly. Minutely specified procedures must be followed precisely; an offering incorrectly performed must be repeated. To enact annual rituals, curing rites, and ceremonies of the life cycle each household must sacrifice a great number of animals. In Thailand today customs are becoming more difficult because many Akha are increasingly hard pressed to raise or to acquire the necessary sacrificial animals. Highlanders are numerous and hill land is scarce; lowlanders, themselves impoverished, cut swiddens on mountains slopes; and government reforestation programmes reduce upland farmland by planting trees while, at the same time, licensed and illegal logging removes trees. Akha who convert to Christianity often do so because they can no longer afford to make the sacrifices demanded by the many and difficult customs of their forebears.

The legitimacy of customs rests, as noted above, on the authority of the ancestors. Since customs were originally received, they have been passed down from one generation to the next; however, it would be a mistake to assume that they are static. Customs can and do change. The following example is chosen because it is relevant to the discussion in the next section of the "sense of territoriality" implicit within Akha ethnic identity. Besides the village founder-leader who is responsible for internal village affairs, there is a second official who is responsible for

matters concerning hill/valley relations. This man is the village headman (called *phuujajbaan* in Thailand), who is appointed or confirmed by valley political authorities. According to customs, men who have held this position are the only Akha eligible to receive a horse at their funerals. Not so many years ago, in order to offer a horse, more than one buffalo also had to be sacrificed. Buffalo are expensive and it is now difficult for a family to provide even a single buffalo for a funeral; therefore, the procedure for a horse funeral was recently changed by male elders after discussions among themselves. Now the sacrifice of one buffalo suffices to permit the offering of a horse at a village headman's funeral. Customs, then, can be altered in response to changing circumstances, including the deteriorating economic situation of mountain minorities. Newer practices share with older practices the same stamp of legitimacy. By virtue of being labelled customs, inherited traditions and innovations are invested with the authority of the ancestors. The adaptability of customs has been and continues to be crucial to the survival of Akha as an ethnic group; yet the limits of adaptability of customs as a coherent, cosmologically-grounded cultural subsystem could well be reached in the not so distant future.

Implicit duplex "sense of territoriality." Each Akha community is identically structured according to the dictates of customs. The boundary between a community and the surrounding forest is demarcated by two village gateways renewed annually at a ceremony presided over by the village founder-leader. No fence encloses the community, but the dividing line separating the domain of people within the settlement from the domain of spirits in the encircling forest is no less real for being intangible. Portions of many rituals, especially curing rites, must be enacted at a village gate; it is not necessary, however, to go to one or the other gateway. Although there are only two gates with wooden uprights and crossbeams, a certain point on every path leading away from the residential compounds is labelled by the same term applied to these two gates. From any such point, the wandering soul of a sick person may be called back from

the forest, the domain of spirits. In the ordered Akha universe, people, ancestors, rice, and domesticated animals belong to the village realm, while spirits and wild animals belong to the forest realm.

One of the many segments of ritual text recited during three nights of chanting at an elaborate funeral as well as during various other rites is called "Descent of the Dwelling Places". This text recounts the Akha journey southwards over lands and rivers from China to Thailand. Akha deem their past and present dwelling places to be tokens of a single type, replicas of a single cosmologically-grounded model. Villages are united through their shared structure despite being geographically separated. Not only are living Akha, wherever they reside, linked by common community order, so too are the living and the dead. Ancestors reside in a village structured like villages of the living. Just as the first house to be built in a new settlement is that of the village founder-leader, so the first grave to be dug in a community burial ground is that of the village founder-leader of the ancestor's village. The apparent emphasis in the Akha conceptualization of the historical branching of villages in the descent from China is not on a social genealogy, with one village the parent of the next, but upon the structural identity of each village as a microcosm.

Akha villages are identical islands surrounded not only by forest, but also by hills, valleys, and rivers as well as by villages inhabited by members of other ethnic groups (Plates 9 & 10). Among *Jeug'oe* Akha in Burma and Thailand, the "Offering to Lords of Land and Water" follows the renewal of the village gateways in the annual ritual cycle. Lewis (1969-70:256-57) reports that Akha in Burma acknowledge that this rite was borrowed from Shan some two generations ago. The recitation is done is Shan, in a combination of Shan and Akha, or in Akha alone. Features of the ceremony are similar to two Shan rituals described by Durrenberger (1980:51-54): the rite for spirits of valleys and hill fields and the rite for the ruler of the country. Elements of the

Offering to Lords of Land and Water such as popped rice, burning candles, and white umbrellas are clearly Shan (-Buddhist) and do not appear in other ceremonies belonging to Akha customs. At the required time each year, a procession of men headed by the village founder-leader goes to an altar in the woods beyond the confines of the community. There two chickens and a pig are sacrificed while the village founder-leader or another knowledgeable male elder begs the "owners" of nearby mountains and rivers and the "Lords of Land and Water" for abundant harvests and for healthy people and domesticated animals (Plate 33). According to Alting von Geusau (1983:251), the dominant valley-dwellers' control over the land is acknowledged in the performance of the Offering to Lords of Land and Water. I would argue that it is not the political order of the dominant valley-dwellers which is acknowledged so much as it is the special relationship between the dominant group and the spirits of the land in the region.

Customs, then, presuppose a duplex conception of territory: every village as an identical moveable microcosm and each village as situated within a specific geographical sphere that includes more powerful ethnic groups. Correspondingly, the Akha polity has a dual nature: within a community the village founder-leader represents the ordinating principle of the village as microcosm, while the village headman links the village to the dominant political authorities in the region. These orientations of polity, like both conceptions of territoriality, are implicit within customs. The village founder-leader, who is indispensable to the enactment of customs, is mentioned frequently in the ancient ritual texts of the oral tradition. Although the village headman is not mentioned in these texts, customs decree that he alone is entitled to a horse offering at his funeral. Since both the practice of Offering to Lords of Land and Water and the position of village headman are fairly recent innovations, it may well be that Akha conceptions of territory and of polity were each simplex rather than duplex a few generations ago. But the duplex "sense of territoriality" and the duplex orientation of

polity are important implicit aspects of the ethnic identity of Akha in Thailand today.

Mountain Minority Identity and Thailand's National Integration

The ethnic identity of Akha in northern Thailand is based upon shared lineal descent from an apical ancestor and adherence to common customs inherited from the ancestors. The Akha ethnic group as clan has persisted for generations and appears likely to continue for generations to come. The shared "socio-economic-ritual system," here glossed as customs, is a strikingly intricate and complex cultural subsystem. Structured relations between living and dead, between humans and spirits, and between wife-givers and wife-takers that are encoded in customs generate and maintain order within the Akha world. Though adaptable, customs are not infinitely flexible. A central axis of customs is rice, which is the focus of special calendrical ceremonies and annual ancestor offerings. Having reached the end of the mountain ranges extending southwards from China, Akha are well aware that, given their present technology, expanding highland population, and increasing competition from valley farmers and loggers for scarce hill land, their economic situation will continue to deteriorate. They are eager to adopt agricultural innovations provided these do not jeopardize their subsistence base. Any development schemes which ignore rice cultivation in favour of cash crops will not only endanger the subsistence base, but will also threaten the core of Akha customs and thereby threaten Akha ethnic identity. Akha in the mountains of northern Thailand see their southward journey at an end and consider Thailand to be their home. Their duplex conceptions of territoriality and polity permit them to respect their inherited traditions at the same time that they participate in the Thai nation-state.

Of all the nations in mainland South-East Asia, Thailand may well have entered the post-colonial era with the brightest prospects for successful national integration. Whereas in Burma the Burman majority resides in a minority of the land and in Laos the Lao majority is the numerical minority, in Thailand

the highland region is a bare one fifth of the national territory, and the highland population is perhaps one percent of the national total. Unlike Burma and other neighbouring countries, Thailand has no legacy of the direct colonial rule that accentuated divisions between hill-dwellers and valley-dwellers (Kyaw Thet 1956:161). Thailand also has no legacy of politicized ethnic self-consciousness like that which has fractured the Union of Burma. Furthermore, Thailand's kings skillfully withstood colonial pressure, and the traditional monarchy has remained in constitutionalized form to serve as a symbolico-political center for majority and minorities alike. I would, however, argue that the sources of Thailand's potential success in fostering the integration of lowlanders and highlanders may prove instead to be the seeds of its failure.

Akha are one of the so-called "six tribes" of Thailand, that is, one of the six major mountain minorities. Five of these, including Akha, have already been characterized as reluctant assimilators. These five--Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Lisu, and Akha--are relatively recent immigrants into the territory now constituting Thailand. Only members of the sixth and by far the largest highland minority, the Karen, were in the area prior to the colonial era. Traditional relations between Karen and northern principalities, like those between Lua and these principalities, were severed early this century with the commencement of the bureaucratic and symbolico-religious integration of the northern region into the emerging Thai nation-state (Keyes 1971; Tambiah 1976). As the periphery was consolidated into the centralized Thai kingdom, in large measure in response to jockeying by colonial powers, "the gulf between the hill people and the representatives of lowland authority" widened (Walker 1979-80:428; see also Keyes 1979b:53). Not until the 1950s did the central government begin to fill the vacuum which resulted from its very creation.

Present and prospective relations between the national government and highlanders in Thailand can be approached with the aid of an analysis concerning the transformation of the

Burmans' relations with peripheral peoples in the post-colonial era. According to Lehman (1967:103),

> Throughout the pre-colonial period of history the Burmans had a reasonably correct tacit understanding of the nature of their relations with bordering peoples, tribal and non-tribal. That Burma seems to have lost this understanding today is almost certainly directly attributable to the importation of very explicit European ideas about nations, societies, and cultures, and the kinds of phenomena that they are taken to be.

Hinton (1983:167), who has done field research among Karen, contends that in Thailand an appropriate "tacit understanding" remains. That I take exception to his conclusion is, I believe, directly attributable to the fact that I worked among Akha, one of the more recently arrived groups.

Among officials in Thailand, Karen (and Lua) society is apparently taken to be significantly different from the societies of the remaining five "hill tribes". According to a publication of the Tribal Research Centre (now Institute) (1967:6) of the Department of Public Welfare,

> The Yao [Mien], Meo [Hmong], Lisu, Akha and Lahu are all shifting cultivators who farm land above 3,000 feet. Rice and corn are their main subsistence crops, with opium poppy, miscellaneous vegetables and jungle products being chief sources of cash income. Because shifting agriculture dictates periodic change of residence, all...tend to be widely distributed through the hills. The numerous Karen, and similar groups such as Lawa [Lua]...and [Thai] Lue have more or less sedentary agricultural economies, cultivating terrace or lowland rice fields. Consequently, they tend to be concentrated in particular regions.

The first five groups mentioned are lumped together not only as residents of higher elevations, but also as the "opium-growing tribes" (Patya Saihoo 1963:37) even though many among them live below 3,000 feet and many cultivate no opium.

As recent arrivals, Hmong, Mien, Lisu, Lahu, and Akha are considered immigrants with no historical or legal claim to the land. All the land upon which highlanders reside is government property (McKinnon and Wanat Bhruksasri 1983:xii). The Land Code, which prohibits damaging land in the hills by fire, essentially outlaws their traditional slash-and-burn agriculture (Sophon Ratanakhon 1978:18-49). Although their illegal method of cultivation is generally tolerated by officials, it is widely regarded by Thai both within and outside government as destructive to forests and watersheds, and floods in the lowlands are attibuted to swidden practices in the highlands (**Bangkok World** 1970:3). Swiddening practiced properly with sufficiently long fallow periods is, in fact, the most productive system of cultivation in upland forested areas and is not destructive to the land (Race 1974:89n.6). The problem in the mountains of northern Thailand is not slash-and-burn agriculture itself, but the limited size of land relative to the population to be supported by this mode of agriculture. Many farmers in the hills swidden improperly not through ignorance or preference, but because they must eat. In contrast to the five recently arrived mountain minorities, Karen are taken to be more benign: their agricultural methods are familiar, their settlements reassuringly stable, and their crops comfortingly legal. Furthermore, recognition of the historical depth of their presence in Thailand provides them with a legitimacy denied the other "hill tribes."

Mountain minorities of the higher slopes are alien and intrusive in the eyes of government representatives, while the Karen, though "hill tribe," are nonetheless akin and indigenous. Not all Karen are descendants of residents; some are recent immigrants from turbulent Burma. Nevertheless, the history of some bestows an aura of legitimacy on others. Thai authorities

have consistently underestimated the length of residence of members of the five remaining major mountain minorities. Akha, for example, had been in Thailand almost seventy years when it was declared that they had arrived "no longer than 30-50 years" ago (Tribal Research Centre 1967:6). Such underestimates are not surprising given the vacuum that existed between the turn of the century and the reestablishment of official contact in the 1950s. These underestimates are, however, unfortunate because they inhibit the extension of the type of "tacit understanding" which continues to be operative in Karen-Thai relations to relations between the so-called "opium-growing tribes" and the Thai. Instead, understandings derived from "very explicit European ideas about nations" determined the nature of initial contacts with these highlanders in the 1950s and have profoundly influenced government policies and programmes concerning hill-dwellers since then.

Reestablishment of offical contact with peripheral peoples in the north was the consequence of efforts by the newly founded Border Patrol Police (BPP) to secure and safeguard the national frontiers. Not long thereafter, the BPP programme expanded to include social welfare projects in highland villages, notably Thai-language schools. It is interesting and perhaps significant in the overall development of modern highlander-government relations that the BPP mandate did not extend to the Karen (Moseley 1967:406). Since 1959 the National Tribal Welfare Committee, headed by the Minister of the Interior and composed of representatives from the Department of Public Welfare and the Ministries of Agriculture, Education, and Public Health, or its 1974 successor, the National Tribal Committee, have been responsible for overseeing the many government agencies and programmes concerned with the approximately 500,000 hill people in the nation's north. The objectives of the central government in its relations with highlanders were summarized at a 1967 symposium at the recently established Tribal Research Centre (Suwan Ruenyote 1969:13).

1. To prevent the destruction of forest and sources

of natural streams by encouraging stabilised agriculture to replace the destructive shifting cultivation...

2. to end poppy growing, by promoting other means of livelihood;
3. to develop the economic and social conditions of hill tribes...
4. to induce the hill tribes to accept the important role of helping to maintain the security of national frontiers, by instilling in them a sense of belonging and national loyalty.

Each year Thailand's government, with aid from numerous international agencies and foreign governments (especially the US),has spent ever-increasing sums on ever-mushrooming programmes to realize these objectives. The so-called "hill tribe problem" was originally defined, as numerous commentators have noted, in terms of national interests and needs rather than in terms of the interests and needs of highlanders. Despite humanistic attitudes towards highlanders on the part of the present monarch King Phumiphol, and other members of the royal family as well as of some representatives of the national government, this original emphasis continues to predominate. Indeed, the four objectives listed above were tellingly reduced to three with the deletion of the third by one high official interviewed in the mid-1970s (Bo Gua 1975:76). This same official equated the maintenance of the security of the national frontiers (objective 4 above) with "combating communist terrorism among the hill tribes" (Bo Gua 1975:76).

I believe the image of the highlander as insurgent that is pervasive among government officials, rather than the small number of highlanders who have resisted or might resist government pressure by force, is the most dangerous element in the present hill/valley conjuncture. This dangerous image of largely imaginary danger results from the application of the "Red Meo" model to highlanders generally. A brief look at the origins of this model is revealing. The first armed clashes between high-

landers and the government in 1967 did not involve the few Hmong (Meo) communist ("Red") cadres. Rather, they arose "in response to extortion by Thai officials for so-called 'illegal' agricultural activities [i.e., slash-and-burn cultivation]" of Hmong villagers (Turton 1974:339; see also Bo Gua 1975:71; Cooper 1979:326; Race 1974;98-99). Nowadays any highlander who so much as questions government corruption or policies is liable to be labelled a communist. Many government officials are so preoccupied with suppressing communism that they ignore economic and social conditions. Rather than asking whether highland villagers have enough rice, they ask whether there are any communists in the area.

Although Geddes (1967:556), an Australian anthropologist who served as the initial foreign advisor to the Tribal Research Centre, advocated a policy of "open-ended integration" to the Royal Thai Government, the thrust of numerous programmes is obviously assimilationist. For example, schools established in the highlands are taught exclusively in the Thai language, and the Public Welfare Department supports an extensive programme under which missionary monks propagate Buddhism among highlanders (Keyes 1971; Tambiah 1976:434-54). The philosophy underlying the resettlement programme initiated in the late 1960s was "accelerated integration," and the aim was to transform "former hilltribe villages" into a "normal Thai village" (Krachang Bhanthumnavin 1972:23, 31). This programme was operated by the Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC), which has since been renamed the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). It was initiated in response to the massive refugee population created by the Royal Thai Army's bombing and napalming of suspected insurgent strongholds, particularly in Nan Province, and developed into an evacuation programme aimed at removing highlanders from areas of suspected communist influence (Thomson 1968). (See Hearn 1974 for a critical study of this programme).

Not all Thai supported this resettlement policy. For example, in an article entitled "The Hilltribes: Who Should Do the Moving?" which appeared in the English-language newspaper the **Bangkok Post,** Suthichai Yoon (1970) urged that "instead of moving them to the officials, the latter should move closer to the hilltribesmen both physically and psychologically." Yet the policy of evacuating highlanders to the lowlands was abandoned not because their right to remain in the hills was recognized, but because it was feared that additional highlanders from neighbouring Laos and Burma would simply move in and fill the void. The wisdom of the position advocated by Suthichai Yoon has been recognized by the Department of Public Welfare, which now concentrates of delivering agricultural, educational, and medical aid to hill people through a system of selected core and satellite villages rather than by continuing to follow its original programme of creating "'settlement areas' *(nikhom)*" in the highlands and "encouraging tribes to migrate to these settlement areas" (Manndorff 1967:531-32).

It is both ironic and significant that the resettlement programme was touted as "the first time officials have faithfully carried out government policy in treating the tribesmen as full Thai citizens" (Krachang Bhanthumnavin 1972:23). The irony is that most highlanders today remain non-citizens. The government, it is argued,

> cannot ease regulations [concerning conditions for registering as a citizen]too much or quicken registration, for fear that this would serve to further encourage already substantial immigration (McKinnon and Wanat Bhruksasri 1983:xii).

The significance is that a full citizen is envisaged as indistinguishable from an ethnic Thai. Some officials see national integration not as the incorporation of distinctive parts into a united whole but as the homogenization of disparate parts into

a uniform whole. What such officials seek is not the identification of mountain minorities with the nation but their identity with the national majority.

This monolithic notion of national identity held by some Thai officials as well as by some Thai not in government seems to represent the coupling of a European conception of a bounded territorial state with an older conception of Thai identity. Not only is just one "sense of territoriality" considered legitimate, so too just one sense of identity is considered legitimate. Both should be "fully, flatly, and evenly operative" over the entire nation (Anderson 1983:26). The pre-colonial "tacit understanding" of hill/valley relations permitted peripheral peoples to retain an identity different from those at the center. Now many Thai do not recognize the possiblity of dual identities or loyalties; the extreme position is that "To be Thai is to speak only Thai, to be Buddhist" (Keyes 1979a:19). As the overwhelming majority and as the residents of most of the land, Thai are not forced to realize that "bilaterality of integration" is required (Maran La Raw 1967:143). Not only must minorities adapt to the nation, the majority must accord them an equal place within it. Lacking assertive, politicized ethnic identity, mountain minorities have not persuaded the Thai government to redefine its objectives so that the highlanders' problems replace the highlanders themselves as the "hill tribe problem."

The highlanders' problems are likely to become more severe. Continued economic marginalization appears inevitable given an expanding population in a limited area dependant upon an agricultural technology predicated upon the availability of either sufficient land for swidden rotation or new land for settlement. Government programmes have paid little attention to stabilizing the subsistence rice economy, and none of the many cash crops such as coffee and decorative flowers initially introduced to replace opium poppies has had wide-spread success. More recently, crops like cabbages and tomatoes have been highly lucrative but have exacted a heavy toll from

the land, in the form of increased erosion, and from the people, in the form of side-effects from pesticides and fungicides. The subsistence economy is collapsing at the same time that its long-term companion, the cash crop economy, is not expanding rapidly enough to fill the gap. Highlanders are increasingly forced to join the wage-economy of the northern hills. A small but growing number of Akha, for example, live in leaderless hamlets on the outskirts of market towns. Hanks and Hanks (1975:75) found that in these abject, amorphous aggregates "collective life within the Akha tradition had shrunk near a minimum while hungry householders struggled to find something to eat".

Although all mountain minorities will face increasing economic hardship, Karen overall will probably experience less cultural disruption than others provided that Thai continue to grant them a legitimate place within the nation by virtue of their history and do not further assimilate them to the "hill tribe" model (Keyes 1979a, 1979b; Kunstadter 1979). Unlike Karen, members of the remaining five major highland groups--Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Lisu, and Akha--are not permitted to retain their traditional identity and to be Thai simultaneously. If members of these groups who are strongly attached to their respective ethnic identities are allowed to slip into Thai identity only by default,through gradually abandoning their inherited identities because poverty prevents them from fulfilling the demands of those identities, they will never gain the "sense of belonging and national loyalty" the government claims to desire for them. I do not share Bradley's (1983:54) confidence that "positive group identity" alone is sufficient in the context of modern nation-states for preserving ethnic identity, either as traditionally defined or as consciously refashioned by the people themselves to meet changing circumstances. As the economic situation continues to deteriorate, the role of those in government who recognize that dual identity and dual "sense of territoriality" are possible and who believe that it is imperative that national integration be forged within diversity will become increasingly crucial.

Since this paper was written (1983-84), it has become increasingly likely that the sources of Thailand's potential success in fostering the integration of lowlanders and highlanders will instead prove to be the seeds of its failure. There is growing evidence that rather than moving "closer to the hilltribesmen...psychologically," as Suthichai Yoon (1970) urged nearly twenty years ago, officials have moved away. In Thailand today the territorial imperative of the nation-state is clearly dominant. Now that the uplands are riddled with roads connecting them to the lowlands and all villages have been pulled into the orbit of the centralized bureaucracy, concern with incorporating the highlands and highlanders administratively has been eclipsed by concern with controlling the utilization of mountain land in what is perceived to be the national interest. And the highlanders themselves are seen to have no share in that national interest and indeed are deemed to be inimical to it.

It is not the image of highlander as insurgent that now pervades official thinking. Largely because of the collapse of the Communist Party of Thailand in part due to the government's amnesty programme initiated in the late 1970s, this image is no longer at the fore. In its stead is the image of highlander as destroyer of the nation's forests and watersheds through slash-and-burn agriculture and log poaching and as destroyer of the nation's international reputation through cultivating opium poppies and trafficking in illegal drugs. Recent statements by the deputy secretary-general of the National Security Council and by the commander and the chief-of-staff of the Third Army Region (covering the North) confirm the prevalence of these stereotypes (**Bangkok Post** 1987; Sinfah Tunsarawuth 1987; **The Nation** 1987a, 1987b).

A two-pronged policy has begun to be implemented to remove highlanders from mountain land. Involuntary resettlement is designed to relocate uplanders into more low-lying areas, and involuntary repatriation is aimed at driving illegal immigrants into either Burma or Laos. Given that resettlement

was abandoned as policy some two decades ago after being effectively challenged by Thai within and outside the government on both humanitarian and pragmatic grounds, its recent resurrection is particularly disheartening. Like resettlement, repatriation must be questioned on similar grounds. In late September of this year (1987), Akha and other highlanders expelled from thirteen villages in Chiang Rai Province were left at the Burma border with neither food nor shelter. Since many highlanders, even those born inside Thailand to parents who were themselves born inside Thailand, do not have citizenship papers, it is difficult to distinguish between legal residents and illegal immigrants. It is also hard to determine from official statements the basis upon which legal residence is determined. In fact "repatriation" is a misnomer because many highlanders are stateless persons who are not accorded citizenship either by Thailand or by its neighbours. Moreover, no provision is made for due process to allow those scheduled for expulsion to argue against the claim that Thailand is not actually the country of their birth or is not the country in which they have a right to citizenship. From a political perspective, forcible expulsions of the type carried out in September can only serve to create fear and antagonism towards the government on the part of those highlanders who can legitimately claim membership of the Thai nation.

While forest conservation and watershed preservation are important for all Thailand's peoples, highlanders and lowlanders alike, there is little scientific support for the view that the only way to achieve these aims is to remove highlanders from the hills. Development workers argue that agriculture can be practiced on steep slopes in a manner (for example, strip farming) that prevents erosion and soil depletion. In addition, recent projects in social forestry enlist the support of uplanders and lowlanders in the revitalization of overworked areas for their mutual benefit. Even in these critical days there is hope that policy-makers will heed those inside and outside government who see the current crisis in the mountains of northern Thailand not as "the hill tribe

problem" or even as the problems of the hill tribes but rather as the problems of the entire nation which can only be solved by highlanders and lowlanders in cooperation.

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