

CONTINUITIES IN HIGHLAND AND LOWLAND RELIGIONS OF THAILAND

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I. Introduction

Kirsch (1973) argues that upland mainland Southeast Asian societies express variations on the same theme of potency. Durrenberger (1981b) shows that variations in political form result from differences in local ecological and economic environments (see also Maran 1967, Lehman 1963). This structural unity cuts across major ethnic and linguistic boundaries. Central aspects of the complex are power/potency, productivity, how one achieves it, and the necessity to publicly validate it through feasts and generosity.

Many see in Theravada Buddhism a similar underlying structural unity in lowland societies. Both inside and outside observers identify these people as Buddhist and state that these societies must be understood in Buddhist terms. Anthropologists tend to view lowland societies through Theravada Buddhist lenses (Kirsch 1977, 1982, 1985; Keyes 1984; Van Esterik 1982). This obscures the fundamental structure of these societies, making it difficult to ask questions about continuities in upland and lowland societies or the nature of the relationship among religion, world view, and political economic form (Tannenbaum n.d.a., n.d.b., n.d.c.).

We argue that the religious structure shared by lowland societies is similar to that of the upland societies and that differences are a consequence of their radically different political and economic forms.

II. Lisu Highlanders

Lisu are Tibeto-Burman people who live in the highlands of North Thailand, Southwestern China, and Burma (Dessaint 1971). In Thailand, they live in autonomous villages scattered among those of other highlanders such as Akha, Lahu, Hmong,

Yao, and Karen where they produce corn, rice, and opium in their swidden fields.

Lisu live in a world of beings of differential power (*du*), only some of whom are visible as people. Those which are not visible, spirits (*ni*), have the same characteristics as human beings, but more or less power. As their part of contractual relationships with people, some of these, such as lineage spirits and the village guardian spirit, take care of people and keep them from harm. People make annual offerings to these spirits to renew the contractual relationships.

Power is derived from proper comportment and generosity. Generosity rests on wealth. Therefore there are two components to power: wealth and proper conduct. People and spirits accrue power in the same way, by the production of wealth, carrying out their contractual responsibilities, and meeting the expectations of others, being honorable. People produce wealth by working in their fields. Spirits get wealth from the offerings of their descendants. "*Honor*" and "*power*" are the same.

While some spirits help and protect people in contractual relationships, any powerful spirit can be offended and hurt people. Like people, their recourse is negotiation and self help if that fails. Since people cannot see spirits, and do not know what is offensive to them, they do not initiate apologies when they have offended spirits. Spirits then have recourse to self help and do some damage to the person, his household members, his livestock, or crops. To remedy the misfortune one must make restitution just as one would for a person.

Fate is a measure of one's innate abilities and invulnerabilities—it can be good, bad, or indifferent. For Lisu fate is unknowable. There is no *a priori* way to discover what a person's fate holds for him. It is an innate characteristic. Its quality determines one's ability to gain honor/power (*du*) and can be discovered only by the course of events in life. The



A Lisu gathering. Photograph by Luca Invernizzi Tettoni.

converse of power is "shame" (*sa tua*). Shame results in a loss of honor. Power is the ability to honor one's claims and others' legitimate expectations. Even spirits, if they do not do what people can legitimately expect them to do, can lose honor and be shamed (Durrenberger 1976a).

Wealth is central for a person's being able to meet the demands and expectations of others—to be able to offer hospitality, pay fines of household members should they be necessary (see Durrenberger 1976b), and to provide bride price for sons. Wealth (*fou chi*) is the tangible manifestation of intangible blessing (*gh swi*). Lisu often appeal to spirits to give them blessing.

When a person makes a ceremony, he generally gives offerings to spirits, so they speak well of the person and give him blessing. When one kills a pig for guests to eat or builds a rest house, bridge, or path-side bench for public use as part of such a ceremony, a wider public benefits. Good speech results in blessing, and is the result of offerings given to spirits, and food and structures given to people.

If someone has wealth, he can give things to people and spirits, who feel generously disposed toward that person, speak well of him, and give blessing, the fulfillment of which is wealth.

If a person does not feel generous in situations where he should, he loses honor and is shamed. If one has wealth, he can not only feel generous but be generous and fulfill general expectations having to do with dispensing wealth and therefore gain honor. Finally, one's fate is only known by his wealth.

Since inheritance is limited to ornamental jewelry which is not alienable, wealth must be the result of an individual's own productive efforts in a household production unit. Households are the units of production, consumption, honor, power, and self-help (Durrenberger 1976b, 1976c).

Everyone has equal opportunity to work the same lands; all have access to the same technology. Thus wealth is directly related to household productivity. Honor is a direct consequence of wealth because one can fulfill general and specific expectations only to the extent of one's resources. Wealth is a consequence of productivity. Honor is therefore a measure of productivity. One cannot infer a person's or household's honor-power from position, lineage, filiation, name or any other such indicator except wealth, which is a result of household productivity.

The basic assumptions are: power flows from wealth; wealth is the result of productivity; power can be lost; and

power can be reinstated by presentations of wealth. This underlies the logic of offense, retribution, and apology for people and spirits alike (Durrenberger 1980a).

Among Lisu, sponsoring feasts is a means of showing that one is an honorable person, someone who can meet his obligations, including reciprocating feasts which members of his household have attended in the past. The number of pigs a household keeps is a readily observable measure of its ability to meet such obligations. Other readily visible measures are attire and household furnishings, general measures of wealth or potency, in Kirsch's (1973) terms.

Mainly because of the opium trade and nearby Thai markets, wealth is available to all Lisu households equally. All can participate equally and gain recognition as honorable in terms of the ideology of honor which, in these circumstances, recognizes only productivity. Most Lisu villages are not more than a day or two's walk from a lowland Thai town with a market, so there is access to markets as well as money (Durrenberger 1974, 1976b).

Each household desires to engage in the reciprocity to the same extent as all others, regardless of the availability of labor from the household. Since the ability to engage in reciprocity is gauged by consumer goods, each household also purchases consumer goods without reference to the ratio of workers to consumers. The households with many consumers per worker can only do this by incrementing their own labor by hiring labor from outside the village (Durrenberger 1974, 1976b).

Spirits are mappings of productivity onto occult beings. Productivity is power. Wealth gives one the wherewithal to be generous, generosity causes others to speak well of one, that confers blessing, the realization of which is wealth. Honor and power are the same thing. One gains it by generosity, hence from wealth, and by meeting other obligations. Power is the result of participation in society. Generosity is an obligation and feasts are reciprocal.

This ideology has no ethical dimension, except in the most rudimentary sense in which ethics retains its meaning as the customary. Ethics, custom, religion, law are all one. It is an ideology of power, and how to acquire it. There is no ethical dimension which concerns the uses of power except that one uses it to defend oneself against other powerful beings, all of which are of the same kind whether they be visible or not, dead or not.

Throughout highland Southeast Asia, where there are possibilities of trade and accruing wealth there are egalitarian political forms based on reciprocal exchanges. Where there is no means by which everyone can accrue wealth to use for social goals such as enhancing prestige, there are hierarchic social and political forms (Durrenberger 1976c).

In order to gauge another's innate qualities, one must examine the exterior indicator of wealth. In hierarchic organizations, some person claims superiority, and others recognize

it. Since money and markets are remote, goods are distributed by means of exchanges among lineages and by heredity as Lehman describes for Northern China (1963). Possession of them implies superior innate characteristics. Wealth implies honor and power, and the superior quality of one's fate. Just as a person's honor is attributed to his productivity in an egalitarian situation, in a hierarchic one his honor is attributed to the source of his goods, his position in the round of exchange and heredity. The qualitative aspects of a person's fate can be predicted if the source of his wealth is known. If the source of wealth is the wealth of his parents, then it follows that innate qualities are heritable, but those who inherit rank must validate it in practice.

These concepts involved in the ideology of honor are central to the operation of social relations in both the hierarchic and egalitarian conditions, but with rather different consequences for action. In the hierarchic situations they allow one to assume that someone has better fate, more honor/power/potency than oneself on the basis of given information such as parentage. In the egalitarian situation, one must prove constantly that one has as much honor as anyone else. Thus, one would expect something of a work ethic and consumerism among non-hierarchic systems, as Kirsch (1973) suggests. The ideology of honor, the elements of the world view which concern qualities of people and their implications are the same in either case since wealth implies honor regardless of the origin of the wealth.

This ideology allows for the development of political systems similar to those described for Northern China or highland hierarchic Kachin if there are few opportunities to acquire goods or money. Where there is easy access to both goods and money, the non-hierarchic variant results.

III. Shan

Shan live in the mountain valleys of Southern China, the Shan States, and in Maehongson and Chiang Mai Provinces in Thailand. Like the other lowlanders, Shan have a long history of state organization (Moerman 1965; Mangrai 1981). While Shan, Burmans, Northern Thai, Lao, Central Thai, and Cambodians practice slightly different forms of Theravada Buddhism with slightly different festivals, religious scripts, and ordination lines, they all identify themselves as Buddhist and recognize the others as coreligionists.

Maehongson Shan are peasant farmers. Most make their livings by growing irrigated rice supplemented by swidden rice for subsistence, and sesame, soybeans and garlic as cash crops (Durrenberger 1981a, Durrenberger and Tannenbaum 1983, n.d.; Tannenbaum 1982, 1984). In communities with access to hill fields, few people are available to do wage work because even the poorest households are able to grow rice for their own consumption. In larger communities without access to hill fields, poor households must depend on wage work to augment



A Shan boy of Maehongson. Photograph by Luca Invernizzi Tettoni.

their incomes from gardening and collecting and selling forest products

For Shan, power is a basic, unquestioned part of the universe: it simply exists. It is not equally distributed—some beings have greater power than others. All beings are ranked in terms of their relative power. Spirits, as Kirsch (1973) suggests for upland societies, form one part of this continuum. In the lowlands, beings gain access to power either through withdrawal and restraint or through taking refuge in more powerful others. Paradoxically, those most withdrawn from the world have the greatest power over worldly things.

Power implies protection. If one has access to power one is protected; if one is protected one has the power or freedom to do as one chooses. Hanks (1957) discusses Central Thai concepts of power and freedom in similar terms. Power/protection takes the form of barriers which ward off misfortune. Tattoos which protect from gunshot and knife wounds surround the bearer's body with a protective barrier. The annual "repairing the village," *mae* (repair) *waan* (village), ceremony closes off the village, drives dangerous beings out, and creates a barrier against their entering the village (Tannenbaum n.d.a; Durrenberger 1980b).

Power/protection passively prevents bad things; it does not cause good things. The essence of power is its ability to ward

off the consequences of behavior. Men with powerful anti-bullet and anti-knife tattoos are protected from retaliatory violence and are free to steal or kill without fear of the consequences.

Powerful beings do not need to worry about the consequences of their actions. To the extent they are powerful, beings are dangerous because they do not fear the consequences of their actions. They are free to behave as they choose and can easily be offended and cause harm. Villagers know this as part of their existential reality. Offended spirits cause illnesses; offended government officials create real problems for villages. Because these powerful and unpredictable beings exist, people need to enter into relationships with more powerful beings to protect themselves.

Beings with power/protection have the potential to withhold it, leaving one exposed to dangers from other beings. Consequently, powerful beings need to be treated circumspectly; the greater the beings' power/protection, the greater the restraint in interaction. People deal with this power differential by limiting their interaction with powerful beings or interacting with powerful others through intermediaries.

Power is automatically derived from the practice of austerities. The process is mechanical and the practitioner's morality or intentions do not affect the process. This is contrary to the standard Buddhist conception that people's intentions (Shan, *tsetana*) determine results. In Theravada Buddhist countries, practicing withdrawal and austerities, following Buddhist precepts (Shan *sin*; Pali *sila*), is considered equivalent to morality. Practicing morality, keeping precepts, is one way to gain merit. Precept keeping automatically confers power; the more precepts one keeps, the greater one's power.

Precept keeping can be interpreted as either morality or power seeking. The ambiguity lies not in the consequences of precept keeping which automatically convey power but in people's motivations to do so. One can strive to keep precepts to aid in the escape from the cycle of rebirths, the approved motive, or one can do so to achieve magical power. Claiming mystical powers which one has not achieved is one of the four causes of expulsion from the monastic order. (The other three are: killing or urging someone to kill another human, engaging in sexual intercourse, and stealing.)

The automatic acquisition of mystical power is a recognized consequence of practicing restraint and withdrawal but it is deemphasized in scriptural Buddhism. The Buddha warns his followers not to be distracted from their goal of escaping the cycle of rebirths by the acquisition of mystical power. Regardless of a man's intent when he becomes a monk, keeping the monastic precepts gives him great power and people interact with monks in the same way as with other powerful beings.

Buddhas exemplify the peak of power: they have abandoned all worldly pleasures and demonstrate the power which can be achieved by such withdrawal. Monks keeping 227 precepts exemplify the most powerful beings that ordinary villagers interact with. Forest monks who practice additional

austerities have greater power and the amulets they make have great power. Ordinary men and women attempt to keep five precepts: to refrain from killing, stealing, improper sexual conduct, lying, and intoxication. However, they recognize that this level of restraint is difficult to achieve and only undertake to keep these on holy days.

Acquisition of power is not inherently connected with morality. Precept keeping is often glossed as the practice of morality (Spiro 1967, 1980). Examining precept keeping in a broader context illuminates its essentially amoral nature. A person who receives powerful tattoos is required to keep at all times one of the five everyday precepts lest the tattoo not work and the person become physically or mentally ill. Typically the person takes the precept to refrain from improper sexual behavior, usually interpreted as refraining from adultery. By keeping this precept, a man with tattoos that protect from gunshot wounds or knife cuts can rob and kill with impunity. Keeping this one precept does not imply any commitment to morality or right behavior; often, in fact, it suggests a commitment to a life of crime.

A person making powerful tattoos and amulets must practice withdrawal and restraint or his tattoos and amulets would not be effective. The more precepts a person keeps, the greater his power and the better able he is to draw on power from other sources. However, the recipient of the amulet or tattoos is not committed to restraint beyond keeping one precept.

If one limits "Buddhist" objects to Buddhist interpretations, one is either forced like Spiro (1967, 1980) to develop separate analyses for animism and Buddhism or to dismiss the magical usages with the statement that they have scriptural support. Calling these "elements in a religious field" (Tambiah 1970) does nothing more than recognize the coexistence of both magical and scriptural Buddhist practices (see Durrenberger 1983). Such approaches make it impossible to explain the magical usages in local terms.

It is the underlying axiom of power, its existence, and how one acquires it which accounts for many practices which are labelled Buddhist. Anthropologists writing about Theravada Buddhism remark on the goal of every male to spend some time as a novice or a monk, even if the reality does not match this ideal. The importance of power and the need for men to acquire power accounts for both the ideal of ordination and its frequency (Tannenbaum n.d.c.).

Two facts make this account appear Buddhist. First, tattoos and amulets draw on the power of the Buddhas and their teachings and second, people acquire power through keeping Buddhist precepts. These actions only make sense in the context of the axiom of amoral power and how one acquires it. The quintessential element of Buddhism, the law of *karma*—the inevitable consequences of actions, both good and bad—with its moral implications, is simply irrelevant.

Merit-making through generosity is the most striking aspect of Theravada Buddhist ceremonies, yet it is unimportant

in this account of power. Generosity is the means to validate and display one's power, rather than a means to acquire it. Powerful people stage merit-making ceremonies as evidence of their power and ability to organize the necessary resources. Through offerings to monks, they also assert their legitimate claim to power. Through their gifts, they accumulate merit which serves to legitimize and reinforce their present powerful positions. The ability to be generous is justified in terms of the law of *karma*.

Because *karma* is unknowable (Hanks 1962), people who make claims to legitimate power must validate them through public displays; because its beneficial aspects can be depleted, people need to continually restock their store of merit. Public displays of generosity to monks serves both of these purposes.

IV. Cosmology and Power in the Uplands and Lowlands

Power is a central axiom in both upland and lowland world views. In both systems power is crucial for defining the status of human and other beings. Claims to power must be validated through public generosity. The use of wealth to validate claims to power through generosity returns blessing which is productive of more wealth.

There are three economic contexts for this ideology and its concomitant rituals: highland remote from markets, highland proximal to markets, and lowland. Where there is open access to wealth in the highlands this ideology informs and accompanies egalitarian social forms; where there is not, it informs and accompanies hierarchic social forms. Power is attributed to the source of wealth. If the source of wealth is personal productivity there is an egalitarian system. If one inherits claims to wealth, then power is also heritable in a hierarchic system. Power/honor is not related to morality, but to the concept of ethics which means following one's customs. Legitimacy is not an issue. Honor, power, productivity all mutually imply each other. If one were not honorable, able to live up to one's obligations, then one would not have power. Having power is indication that it is legitimate—that one has honor and productivity. In the highlands beings are compared with respect to power but in the lowlands these comparisons form a universal hierarchy into which all beings fit.

Lowlanders gain power either through the practice of austerities and/or through the reliance on more powerful others. More powerful others provide protection directly or else one draws on their power through amulets and tattoos. Powerful humans justify their power in terms of *karma* and legitimize their claims to it through generosity to their dependents, monasteries, and monks. Power is not related to productive ability but linked to the control of productive resources. This difference is the difference between power/potency residing in the *individual* or power residing in the *control* of productive resources.

The major difference between the upland and lowland systems is the different political and economic forms. The ideological consequence is the increased complexity and ambiguity in the lowland system. Access to power is through restraint and withdrawal *or* dependency on more powerful others, two radically different means with different consequences for behavior. Power frees people from the consequences of their actions and removes them from society and societal constraints. This contrasts with power in the uplands which derives from production and implies participation in society, not withdrawal from it. In the lowlands the consequences of gift giving become ambiguous; they depend on the status of both the giver and receiver. Leach (1954) focuses on just this difference in his analysis of Kachin becoming Shan. Buddhism heightens this ambiguity and complexity. The law of *karma* legitimates the distribution of wealth and power and provides a moral element to power. This element is similar to, but not identical with, the upland notion of power deriving from proper behavior and establishes a surface similarity between the two systems. This superficial similarity is strengthened by the importance of publicly validating claims through feasting and generosity. Finally, the operation of the lowland system in areas where everyone is equally poor, results in a similar egalitarian form within the community.

In the upland system, things are what they appear to be—power implies potency and the ability to meet obligations; there is only one possible interpretation. In the lowlands there is ambiguity and multiple interpretations are possible.

In the lowlands the realities of political systems and political power are so different that there are transformations of the ideology of power. Political power rests on the control of productive resources, which rests ultimately on coercion and force (Fried 1967). One has access to productive resources by virtue of social relationships to those who have sufficient coercive power to make good claims to ownership of resources. Thus any person's power is a consequence of social relationships with more powerful others. State systems which order social realities of stratified societies invariably develop rhetorics of justification for power relationships, often in religious terms.

The ideological system is subtly transformed in the state context. Personal power remains central, but how one gains power and its meaning shifts. In the upland egalitarian and hierarchic forms, power is based on productivity and confers prestige and respect. It is inseparable from honor and from being a proper member of the community. The scale of power is narrow; those with the most do not have much more than those with the least. People interact with spirits in an egalitarian way. In the state form, power becomes amoral; there are great differences between those with more and less power. Great power removes one from societal constraints. Buddhism is incorporated into the state system where it provides a justification for the distribution of power, both mystical and "real." It creates an alternative rhetoric for power and the motivations to achieve it and thus creates the ambiguity around power and what it means in the lowlands.

In lowland Southeast Asia, Buddhism has provided such a rhetoric for a variety of state systems. One can see an underlying unity among all mainland Southeast Asian ideological systems, based on concepts of personal power and its origin as they play out in different economic and political forms—highland and lowland, stratified and unstratified, hierarchic and egalitarian.

V. Conclusions

Our conclusions cut two ways. On the one hand, every similarity between highland and lowland religious practice and ideology need not be attributed to highland attempts to incorporate aspects of civilization, or simple borrowing for unexplained reasons. The similarities are due to shared structures of ideology, aspects of shared world views. On the other hand, it is not plausible to explain lowland behavior or ideology in terms of Buddhist ideology or doctrine. Rather, one can explain the aspects of Buddhist ideology which have been incorporated at various times and places in terms of the underlying world view which is, itself, not Buddhist.

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