

# ETHNIC IDENTITY OF THE MONS IN THAILAND

by

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This essay is a brief summary of general ethnographic data which I gathered during my recent field research among the Mons in Thailand.<sup>1</sup> In the light of the almost total lack of published literature on contemporary Mons, and of the relative inaccessibility of the little which exists, I have tried to present as much information as possible in this limited space. My hope is that the information will be useful to others who might contemplate further research among the Mon people.

I shall begin with a few words of orientation about the history, location, linguistic affinities, numbers, and economy of present day Mons. I shall then turn to a discussion of the origins and nature of traditional Mon society and culture in Thailand; this will serve as a point of reference for the discussion of the Mon society and culture of today, and of the meaning of an individual's being Mon. I shall conclude with a few suggestions on the sociological implications of the Mon case.

## I. ORIENTATION

The Mon people speak a language related to Cambodian and to the languages of a large number of hill tribes throughout Southeast Asia. They have an important place in the cultural and political history of Southeast Asia. Major Mon civilizations existed in Southern Burma and Thailand long before the rise of Thai and Burmese states.<sup>2</sup> Mons were the first Theravada Buddhists in Southeast Asia, and they taught the Burmese much of their civilization, including their writing system. Today

1) This essay is a revised version of a talk given to the Siam Society on December 8, 1971. Subsequently, parts of it have been incorporated into my doctoral dissertation. The field work on which the paper is based was carried out in Thailand from August 1970 through December 1971 under a grant from the Foreign Area Fellowship Program of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council. I should like to express my special thanks to Dr. Su-et Gajasen for his help while I was in Thailand.

2) G. Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter F. Vella, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1968); also "Les Mons de Dvaravati," *Essays Offered to G. H. Luce*, Vol. I, 1966.

there are Mon populations in both Burma and Thailand. The Mons from the old states of Dvaravati and Haripunchai, which were located in the area of present day Thailand, have long ago been assimilated, however, and the Mon people who live in Thailand today are descendents of political refugees and others who entered Thailand from their home in southern Burma.<sup>3</sup> They came over a long period extending from the sixteenth century until the present, and in fact, small numbers are still trickling in.<sup>4</sup>

No one knows how many Mons live in Thailand today, since they are all Thai citizens and are not distinguished legally from the Thais in any way. And since much assimilation has occurred, it would be difficult to decide who is Mon and who is not. Virtually all Mons would identify as Thais under some conditions; but if one could count those who would identify as Mon under at least some conditions other than genealogical, the number would probably not exceed 100,000. If one restricted the count to those who speak Mon fluently, the number would be much smaller; if one counted everyone with some Mon ancestry, the number would be many times larger.

Most of the main Mon settlements are near Bangkok. The largest extends along both banks of the Chao Phya River from Pakret district, which is in Nonthaburi province approximately opposite the airport, to the border of Ayuthia province. The second largest group is probably that in Ratburi province along the Mae Klong River in Ban Pong and Photharam districts. The best known group is no doubt that at Prapra-daeng, or Paklat, just south of Bangkok, which is well known for its colorful Songkran festival, which attracts many tourists every year. Other major groups are found in Samut Sakhorn, Lopburi, and Uthaihani. Smaller groups are found in many locations, including the provinces of Samut Songkhram, Phetburi, Phra Nakhorn, Chachoengsao, Ayuthia, Khorat, Lampang, Lamphun, Thonburi, and elsewhere. Many Mons have, of course, moved to Bangkok, but there are no major settlements within the city.

3) Robert Halliday, "Immigration of the Mons into Siam," JSS, X (1913), 1-14.

4) Peter Kunstadter, Introduction to Thailand Section, in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*, ed. Peter Kunstadter (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 373.

Most Mons are rice farmers, whose methods are indistinguishable from those of the Thais surrounding them. A substantial number have for a long time pursued several occupational specialties, however, and these deserve special mention. In Sam Khok district, which is in Pathumthani province and borders Ayuthia province, Mons make the small rather irregular red bricks that are used in most masonry construction in Bangkok and elsewhere in central Thailand. These are in fact called "Mon bricks". In the old days, the Mons seem to have monopolized the brick manufacture, which was done by farmers in the off season. Today many Thais have taken it up, and many Mons have quit to take up boating occupations.

In Pakret, a group of Mons makes a number of kinds of crude ceramics, including mortars, basins, and in the past, the large water jars used by peasants for storing rain water. The goods are distributed throughout central and northern Thailand. The ceramic industry is in an advanced state of decay today, however; and the last factory which made the big red water jars closed recently at the death of the owner. The main difficulty seems to be that the red jars, once the mainstay of the industry, have been displaced by the cheaper and prettier glazed jars made in Ratburi. In Pakret, over twenty Mon factories still remain, though, which produce mortars and basins.

A large and increasing number of Mons in Pathumthani are boatmen and have been for many years. Traditionally they sold the large Pakret water jars, along with cooking vessels and other ceramics, over central and northern Thailand. With the decline of the Pakret industry, they have taken over distribution of a large portion of the Ratburi jars. This occupation is still important, but many boatmen have now shifted to the more lucrative business of hauling sand, stone, cement, and other commodities in huge barges. A large portion of construction materials used in Bangkok arrives in Mon barges.

In Ayuthia there is an interesting, isolated little village of Mon boatmen who sell nipa thatch. With the reduced use of thatch, the village is literally wasting away as young people all leave to take up new occupations. It is now a fraction of its original size and made up largely of older people. Other thatch sellers, as well as growers and

manufacturers, live at Samut Sakhorn. As at the Ayuthia village, their economic condition is deteriorating, though it is not yet quite so desperate; and in addition the group is quite a bit larger. There are other people at Samut Sakhorn who sell salt, firewood, posts for building houses, and other goods. Other smaller specialized groups are found elsewhere.

When I speak later of specialized groups, I shall refer mainly to the groups in Pathumthani and Pakret, since that is where I did most of my work. My brief inquiries about the other areas indicate that they have similar sociological characteristics, but that the distinctions between farmer and specialist are less marked. I have emphasized these specialties because I think it is important that, as compared with Thais, such a disproportionate share of Mons have taken up these non-farming occupations. In recent times, these occupational differences have become important in maintaining Mon ethnicity; I will say more of this later.

## II. EARLY SOCIETY AND CULTURE

When the Mons settled in Thailand, they had much in common with their Thai hosts which made them potentially very assimilable by the Thais. This similarity also set the Mons off from other minorities such as the hill tribes, Malays, Chinese, or Indians. In particular, most Mons were, then as now, wet rice farmers and they were Theravada Buddhists.<sup>5</sup> But while these factors made the Mons potentially assimilable, in the early period there were many features of the society which socially and even geographically isolated the Mon villages from their Thai surroundings, thus pretty effectively preventing the interaction necessary for cultural assimilation. In the early socio-economic organization, then, we find many keys to understanding the present ethnic status of the Mons; so before turning to the discussion of the ethnic identity of the Mons today, we shall briefly examine the old social organization and some of its implications. At the same time we shall briefly look at the cultural characteristics that most sharply distinguished the Mons from Thais in the early period; this will give us a reference point for discussing what is left of Mon culture today.

5) For example, see Simon de La Loubere, *A New Historical Relation to the Kingdom of Siam* (London: 1693), p. 107.

The Mons had been wet rice farmers in Burma, and as noted above, most followed the same occupation in Thailand. There is evidence that the pottery trade was brought from Mon country,<sup>6</sup> but it is not known whether they had practiced their other specialties in Burma or not. Whatever the case, they have apparently carried out at least some of their specialties for many years; some old, retired boatmen, for instance, told me that their ancestors had been boatmen for as far back as they knew.

The farmers were essentially subsistence farmers, planting rice primarily for their own use; in addition they caught their own fish, built their own houses of local materials, wove their own cloth, and in short had little economic contact outside their villages.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, population was sparse and transportation time-consuming or non-existent, and the actual physical isolation of the villages was considerable. The boatmen's situation was similar in many respects; while they were not physically and economically isolated, they were as much socially isolated as the farmers. Their contacts with Thais were frequent, but they were fleeting market encounters, and non-repetitive ones at that. Small groups of Mon boats travelled together, and sustained intimate contact was almost entirely with other Mons.

Very little is known of the early village society, although a few things can be inferred. We know that the villages had their own headmen<sup>8</sup>; these headmen, as we shall see later, often were under Mon district and provincial officers,<sup>9</sup> and one would expect that under these circumstances they would have been free to establish intra-village organization in any way they desired. If that is true, one would expect that under these circumstances, village organization would be similar to that in Burma.

The village was a more compact spatial unit than Thai villages, as are those in major Mon areas of Burma<sup>10</sup>; even today one seldom if ever

6) James Low, "History of Tenasserim," *JRAS*, III (1836), p. 50.

7) Robert Halliday, *The Talaings* (Rangoon: Government Printing Office, 1917), p. 35.

8) W. A. Graham, *Siam* (London: Alexander Moring, Ltd., 1924), p. 129.

9) See page 208 below and Footnote 20. Also see Prince Damrong Rachanuphap, *Phra Wichan nai Lamdap Sakun Gajaseni lae Borankhadi Mon* (Comment in *Genealogy of the Gajaseni Family and Mon Antiquities*), pp. 1-33.

10) O. H. K. Spate, "The Burmese Village," *The Geographical Review*, XXXV (Oct. 1945), 523-43.

finds Mon farming villages spread over the fields as are Thai villages in some areas. Apparently it was common (and still is in Burma) for houses to be clustered in large villages, while fields were very far away.<sup>11</sup> In such cases, the husband and working age sons went for long periods to live in small, temporary houses in the fields, while the wives and old people stayed at the house in the village.<sup>12</sup> A similar pattern is still found in Prapradaeng.

It is common to find wooden or even concrete walkways in Mon villages, which were built by villagers, and which greatly facilitate intra-village interaction; again, such things are seldom found in Thai villages. The contrast was particularly strong in one village where I worked in Sam Khok, which is 80% Mon with a cluster of Thai houses at one end. The Mon section has a well-maintained concrete sidewalk and wooden bridges its entire length; but when one enters the Thai section, the sidewalk abruptly ends, and only a poor dirt path remains; each of two small canals is bridged only by a single log; and the section is all but impassable in the wet season.

Mon kinship terminology is a generational system with distinctions made (1) between lineal and collateral relatives in the first ascending and first descending generations; (2) between older and younger siblings, parents' older and younger siblings, and grandparents' older and younger siblings. In ego's and in ascending generations sex is distinguished. Wife's siblings are equated with own siblings' spouses, terms for which are partly the same as for own siblings. Mother's side and father's side are symmetrical. As would be expected, inheritance is and apparently for a long time has been bilateral, equal shares going to all children.<sup>13</sup>

Somewhat surprising, however, is the presence of a system of totemic-like house spirits which were inherited in the male line. Occasionally large ceremonies called "spirit dances" were given for the spirit, and there was a name for the group of people of the same spirit who took part in the ceremony—which was, in fact, a shallow patri-

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11) Halliday, *Talaings*, pp. 35-36.

12) *Ibid.*

13) None of the published sources speak of inheritance; the old people all say it has been bilateral as long as they remember.

lineage.<sup>14</sup> Heads of lineages were the oldest sons, who were holders of the ritual paraphernalia of the spirit which was used in the rituals. The lineages were quite shallow apparently, due to frequent fissioning. Women had dual membership; they went through a special ceremony at marriage to incorporate them in their husbands' lineages, but they also retained rights in that of their father and brothers.<sup>15</sup> Halliday said, and my older informants confirm, that the lineages were exogamous,<sup>16</sup> though it should perhaps be noted that the more general bilateral incest rule included most of the relations between people in these shallow lineages.

One old man told me that his father had told him one could not marry the descendents of his ancestors three generations back on both his mother's and his father's side. Another thought seven generations back. Some said grandchildren could marry grandchildren, which only goes back two generations; some said first cousins could marry, which comes to the same thing. Most people simply said one can't marry relatives, which seems to be what Halliday found—though he noted that cousins did sometimes elope and no serious consequences followed.<sup>17</sup> My informants told me that in the old days parents arranged the marriages, though Halliday seemed to think that normally the young couple first came to agreement themselves before the parents became involved.<sup>18</sup> The boys and girls were very strictly separated socially—much more than Thais, I am told. Halliday indicated that in his time marriage with Thais was not uncommon; he especially referred to Mon women marrying Thai men, who then came to live in the Mon village; these intermarriages apparently caused no difficulties.<sup>19</sup> Halliday described post-marital residence as being of the matrilocal variety—i.e., living for a short time (up to three years) with the wife's parents, then moving to live with parents of the husband.<sup>20</sup>

14) H. L. Shorto, "The *Dewatau Sotapau*: A Mon Prototype of the 37 Nats," BSOAS, XXX (1967), p. 133; Halliday, *Talaings*, p. 98; Halliday, "The Kalok Dance of the Talaings," JBR, IV (1914), p. 93.

15) Halliday, "The Kalok Dance . . .," p. 94, 98.

16) Halliday, "Kalok Dance . . .," p. 94; Halliday, *Talaings*, p. 100.

17) My informants all said marriages were traditionally arranged; Halliday says bride and groom arranged the marriages themselves; see *Talaings*, pp. 58-61.

18) Halliday, *Talaings*, p. 99.

19) *Ibid.*, p. 58.

20) Halliday, *Talaings*, pp. 85-86; also see "Latthi Thamnam Mon," in *Lamdap Sakun Gajasenī lāe Borankhadi Mon* (Religious and Other Customs" in *Genealogy of the Gajasenī Family and Mon Antiquities*), pp. 134-38.

As is the case in contemporary Thai villages, the wat was the focus of much of the village social life.<sup>21</sup> And many important occasions for large gatherings occurred in religious festivals at the wat or in personal ones like funerals and ordinations, which also, at least in part, took place at the wat. In areas where there were significant numbers of both Thais and Mons, both Thai and Mon wats were built; with few exceptions, the Mons went to their own wats and the Thais to theirs. In some cases one finds a Thai wat and a Mon wat actually touching one another, and it is not uncommon to find a Thai wat within a five minute or even shorter walk from a Mon one. Until recently government schools were run in the wat compound; and before that, the schools were run by the monks.

Supra-village society in the past is even harder to evaluate. It seems that older people often married Mons from rather distant areas. In Pakret, for instance, I know a number of old people who married Mons from Maha Chai and Prapradaeng. The exact amount of contact between such distant groups in the past is probably impossible to ascertain.

People often married into nearby Mon villages; and contacts between adjacent villages were frequent at funerals, ordinations, and in economic exchanges. On a more official level, there was cooperation between wats on some occasions such as ordinations. And in some places, yearly religious festivals such as the beginning and end of Buddhist lent were held jointly by several wats, thus bringing together very large multi-village gatherings. Such occasions only included wats very close to each other, however.<sup>22</sup>

The government touched the people's lives in the early period only to a very limited extent, and when it did so, it was generally through local officers selected from among important men of the local Mon society. Recruitment of local officers from local society occurred up to rather

21) "Latthi Thamniam . . ."

22) Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam from 1892 to 1915* (Oxford University, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, 1968), pp. 44-46; Michael Vickery, "Thai Regional Elites and the Reforms of King Chulalongkorn," *JAS*, XXIX (1970), 863-81; *Songkran Paklat lae Thanthap Muang Nakhon Khuan Khan* (*Songkran Paklat and the Fort at Nakhorn Khuan Khan*), pp. 12-14; Prince Damrong, *Phra Wicham*, pp. 1-33.

high levels and until surprisingly recently<sup>23</sup>; the first two district officers in Pakret, covering about fifty years from the inception of the Amphoe in about 1890, for example, were father and son, and were Mons from Pakret. Even in the military service, surely the most important way that the government impinged on the people's lives, the Mons were separated into Mon units until rather recently, thus again isolating them from the Thais.<sup>24</sup> With the major exception of military service, for which they had special obligations, the government did not treat the Mons differently from the Thais and they were regarded as genuine Thai citizens from the beginning. Wales quotes a mid-seventeenth century law that makes this quite clear: it forbids all subjects of the king, "Thai or Mon", from giving their daughters to foreigners as wives.<sup>25</sup>

At the cultural level, we have more information. Language was no doubt the most important feature distinguishing Mons from Thais. There were several Mon dialects in the different areas, but all were mutually intelligible; in fact, Thai Mons can still speak with Burmese Mons with little difficulty.<sup>26</sup> In the old days, most of the men were literate in Mon, either in addition to or instead of Thai, since Mon was taught in the wat schools. Mon books were used in the wats and some people owned their own copies, a few of which can still be found in old people's homes. A Mon press operated in Paklat until about thirty years ago.<sup>27</sup>

The Mons brought their own form of Buddhism with them from Burma. It was known as being very strict in monastic discipline, and in fact, the Thammayut reforms were inspired by the discipline of the Mon monks.<sup>28</sup> From the early Bangkok period until recently, the Mon wats constituted a separate category in the Buddhist hierarchy; the Mon

23) *Ibid.*

24) H. Quaritch Wales, *Ancient Siamese Government and Administration* (London: Bernard Quaritch, Ltd., 1934), pp. 64-65 and 144-49.

25) *Ibid.*, p. 66.

26) Robert Halliday, "The Mons in Siam," *JBR*, XXII (1922), pp. 78; Halliday, "Immigration. . .," p. 74.

27) Halliday, *Talaings*, pp. 129-30.

28) Prince Dhani, "A History of Buddhism in Siam," (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1965), pp. 30-32.

clergy was headed by a Mon abbot.<sup>29</sup> In the Mon wats, the monks chanted in the Mon style and preached in the Mon language, so that it was difficult for Thais to participate even if the occasion arose.<sup>30</sup> Still, the substance of Mon Buddhism differed little from that of the Thais.<sup>31</sup> As Theravada Buddhists, then, the Mons had large sectors of social activities which were similar to that of the Thais, and they had a large body of ideology, attitudes, and values in common with the Thais; but even in religion, there were factors that helped to isolate Mons in the early years at least.

Other than language, the most distinctive cultural characteristic of the Mons was the spirit cult. Halliday said that one of the distinguishing marks of a Mon, without which one could not be a Mon, was interest in house spirits.<sup>32</sup> These spirits are quite characteristic; the Thais have nothing even remotely similar to the best of my knowledge. They are totemic-like spirits that are inherited in the male line, as indicated above. I have called them "totemic-like", because it appears that the inherited house spirits are associated with avoidances and rituals with regard to certain animals and plants. I have heard of four kinds of spirit in Thailand, plus several others in Burma; those in Thailand are turtle, chicken, snake, and sticky rice. Each kind of spirit was associated with some specific avoidances and duties, which were followed by people of that particular affiliation. Turtle people, for instance, could not catch a turtle. If they saw one, they had to say "It smells bad," and let it go. If a person did catch one or accidentally killed one, he then had to take it home, offer the head and liver (and some say the feet) to the house spirit at the northeast corner of the house. Alternatively the turtle could be taken home, bathed, and the name of the local wat inscribed on its underside, and then released at the wat. Some people who are not affiliated with the turtle spirit observe these practices; I am not sure what the significance of that is.

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29) *Ibid.*, p. 28.

30) Halliday, *Talaings*, p. 71.

31) Halliday, "Mons in Siam," p. 77.

32) *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Chicken people are allowed to touch chickens and catch them, but if one is eaten, the head and liver must be offered to the house spirit. People of the sticky rice spirit cannot give sticky rice to someone else; if another is to take it, he must take it like a thief. And so on. A different kind of rule was common to all four kinds of spirits. Pregnant women and people of another house spirit were subject to rules about whether they could spend the night in a Mon house or not.

In times of stress—especially when one of the spirit group was sick—a spirit dance was held.<sup>33</sup> All persons who were affiliated with the particular spirit group had to participate; it was directed by a hired specialist and lasted all day. Married women assumed the spirit of their husbands, but they could participate in dances of the spirit they were born to also, if they took a small offering of bananas and betel to the person running the dance. The group that gathered at a specific dance was called “one spirit” or “people of one spirit”; as noted above, it was forbidden to marry within this group. When the group became too large, or when one branch moved a long distance away, it could fission and these new lineages could then intermarry.

Perhaps the best known of the Mon customs are associated with the Songkran festival—though interestingly Halliday makes no mention of it at all.<sup>34</sup> Songkran was characterized by religious ceremonies, water splashing, freeing birds and fish, and colorful parades, among other things. Perhaps the best known activity was *sabaa*, a game for which the young women dressed in their best clothes and were, as one man put it, freed this once a year to flirt with the boys. Songkran, with the possible exception of the end of the Buddhist lent, is the most important ceremony of the year for the Mons.

Unfortunately it is not possible to give more detailed accounts of these practices in this essay, nor to describe more features of the old Mon culture. These are, however, in approximately this order, the features that the Mons themselves name as most important in distinguishing them from the Thais. They will serve as a gauge for judging the extent to which the Mons of today have retained their Mon-ness.

33) Halliday. *Talaings*, pp 95-101; also appendix.

34) *Songkran Paklat*; “Latthi Thamniam . . . .”

### III. THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

Looking at this early period as a whole, it seems that the Mons did have qualities that made them potentially more assimilable than most other minorities. Culturally and socially they were strikingly similar to Thais. But on balance, in the early years, the conditions separating them from Thais outweighed those favoring assimilation. The relative physical isolation, the separate wats, the economic self-sufficiency, and the nature of government relations combined to keep pressures for assimilation from having much effect for a surprisingly long time.

There is little direct evidence of the amount of assimilation that occurred in the early years. Change was apparently pretty slow. One of the few fragments of evidence that I have seen appears in a *nirat* of Sunthorn Phu, which deplores the loss of Mon cultural characteristics in Pakret; this would probably have been before 1850. It specifically refers to women's hair style, which does not seem like a very profound change<sup>35</sup> We know from Halliday and Graham that by the early twentieth century most Mons were bilingual in Thai and Mon<sup>36</sup>; we also know from Halliday that by the early twentieth century they built their houses like the Thais,<sup>37</sup> and that their language had experienced strong lexical influence from the Thai language.<sup>38</sup> But really rapid change, by which people began to lose the language and to lose virtually all their Mon identity, probably did not begin until World War II. It was the people born at this time who, in some places, began to grow up in the Mon villages to be more Thai than Mon. As we shall see, the rates of change varied greatly from place to place, depending on local circumstances.

Some of the factors behind the change are quite predictable. As population grew, lands began to fill up; Thai and Mon villages that used to be separated by woods or grassland now came into contact, thus

35) This passage was pointed out by David Chandler; it appears in *Nirat Phu Khaw Thong*.

36) Halliday, *Talaings*, p. 119; Graham, *Siam*, p. 130.

37) Halliday, *Talaings*, 22-29; Halliday, "Mons in Siam," p. 76.

38) Halliday, "Mons in Siam," p. 78.

facilitating labor exchange and other forms of social and economic interaction. Transportation improved, with results so obvious as not to need comment. The economy gradually assumed a stronger market-orientation. The government began building its own school system, which replaced the wat schools.

A second set of important changes began in this century and virtually exploded after the war; these are the changes we call modernization, which did not so much promote assimilation, but which were to affect Thais and Mons in parallel ways, and to transform them both into something entirely new. Thus, for example, as the old subsistence economy broke down, both Thais and Mons found themselves in a new kind of relationship with the market, in which they depended upon it for a large portion of the necessities of life, which they now lacked the skills to produce for themselves. As land began to be in short supply, both Thais and Mons began sending increasing numbers of children to the city, where they all merged into a new metropolitan society. Both Thais and Mons learned new loyalties to the Thai state in the new Thai schools. In both groups traditional entertainments lost ground to movies, radios, and other new forms.

The causes of differences in the rates of assimilation and modernization in different villages are very complex. With one major exception, nearness to Bangkok and to good transportation summarizes the cause of variation pretty well. The more specific determinants seem to have been local economy and the social relations that resulted from it. For example, the deterioration of the pottery industry at Pakret forced people to find employment elsewhere; the nearness to Bangkok made alternative employment opportunities plentiful, and Pakret was gradually drawn into the periphery of the big Thai urban center. Other places, such as the thatch village in Ayuthia, lacking local alternative opportunities, sank into poverty but retained their ethnic identity. The major exception to the rule that nearness to Bangkok determined the degree of change occurs with certain economically specialized groups (especially merchants) who tend to retain their Mon identity longer than farmers.

#### IV. MON ETHNIC IDENTITY TODAY

Whatever the causes of the change, the most striking feature of most Mon villages today is their similarity to Thai villages, both socially and culturally. Regarding the society: many formal aspects of village society are rigidly dictated from outside. Moreover, all of the major Mon areas are in the part of Thailand where government is most efficient and effective. In every village where I have worked, for instance, the police play a very real role in intra-village affairs, and I know of cases where police were called in to settle even minor matters involving local children. This would have been unheard of a few years ago, and still today would probably be met much less frequently in areas a little more remote. This is important, I think, since the problem of order and many matters requiring collective efforts have simply been taken over by the central government; and it is precisely these matters that are generally among the most basic pillars of social organization at any level. The fact that these matters are now externally based has far reaching consequences for village social organization.

Turning to local society: inheritance rules have changed with the local situation to cope with new conditions. For example, in Pakret, where the pottery industry is contracting, there seems to be a tendency for property not to be split evenly among all children, though the fiction of equal shares is generally maintained. Those children who cannot get a share of the family property are given higher education and training for getting established in another occupation; the family business is likely to be given undivided to one child. Often it is formally shared by all children, but the one who actually takes it over buys the others' shares for a nominal price, or just runs everything without paying rent or other compensation to the others.

Residence and household composition are similar to Thai practices and show the matrilineal bias that has been noted by many writers for Thai villages—or at least that is the case for the potters and farmers.<sup>39</sup> In the boat villages, though, there are no households at all

39) For example, see Jeremy H. Kemp, "Initial Marriage Residence in Rural Thailand," in *In Memoriam: Phya Anuman Rajadon*, ed. Tej Bunnag and Michael Smithies (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1970), pp. 71-85.

in a sense; the people live on their boats, only returning to the village at Songkran for three or four weeks and for perhaps three or four other short visits during the year. They often travel in groups of two or three boats, but the composition of these groups changes frequently. Many people actually stay in their boats while visiting in the village, even though they may own houses. School-age children are usually separated from their parents during the school year, when they are likely to stay with grandparents.

The rates of village endogamy and exogamy are greatly affected by economy. The boat village, surprisingly, showed by far the highest rate of endogamy—over 70%; the marriages outside tended to be far away and with Thais or Chinese—Suphanburi is a favorite, for some reason, as is Ratburi. Even more strange, there is no known case of a marriage between Mon boatmen and the Mon potters at Pakret, though the boatmen spend more time in Pakret than in their home village. The potters show high rates of endogamy, but non-potters from the same village marry outside extremely frequently; like boatmen, when they marry out, it is usually not in a nearby village and is often with a Thai. The farmers marry mostly within their village or adjacent villages; non-farmers in the same village tend to marry outside and to marry Thai.

A further revealing aspect of marriage is that the Mons and Thais do not seem to think of each other as of significantly different ethnic groups for purposes of marriage. Many times people have told me that they wouldn't have their children marry into a different ethnic group (*khon tang chaat*) (e.g., Thai-Islam, Cambodian, or Chinese), but that Thai would be all right. And I have heard corresponding reactions from Thais regarding Mons, assuming that the person knew what a Mon is. For marriage, Mons seem to be classed with Lao or Northern Thai; they are different, but not very different. Interestingly, I have met Thais who married Mon-speaking Mons, who say they did not know that their spouses were Mon until after the marriage.

The social importance of the wat has dramatically decreased, though this varies widely from one village to another. The number of permanent monks has decreased greatly in all areas; and the length of time young men enter the monkhood is also decreasing, though a high

percentage still are ordained for at least a short time. The average age of the permanent monks is rising, and it appears that there will be a crisis in leadership in a few years. One village where I worked has been without an abbot for about two years now, and prospects for finding one in the near future seem unpromising.

As a center of social interaction, the wat is declining too, though it remains important. Now, on days of big ceremonies, many young people would rather go to the movies than take part in traditional activities at the wat. The most striking example is Songkran; the several days of activities have been nearly abandoned in most areas. Young people neither like *likay*, *lamdat*, or the other traditional entertainments. *Ram wong* (Thai-style social dancing) is popular, at least among the boys, though generally nice girls do not take part.

Inter-village social relations between Mon villages do not exist today except accidental meetings and the individuals' relations across boundaries of adjacent villages. The schools bring young people of different villages together, but they are not necessarily all Mon, and the higher level schools especially constitute a powerful force toward social integration by bringing Thais and Mons together. A further medium of inter-village interaction is the recently formed Thai-Mon Association, which is intended to preserve Mon culture and to bring people from different areas together. Its impact is hard to assess, but it seems certain that at least up to now, it has had limited success in regard to slowing the assimilation, since it meets only rarely and its projects generally are restricted to a couple of large merit-making ceremonies a year. These do, however, draw several hundred people from over a rather wide area.

It is important to emphasize that, while these observations have general validity, the changes have occurred at different rates in different villages—that, in general, a community that is farther from Bangkok will have changed less than one that is nearby. All of the changes I have indicated, for instance, while evident at Ban Pong, are less evident than at Pakret. There is still a multi-wat ceremony at the end and beginning of the Buddhist Lent in Ban Pong, for instance, but I heard complaints last year that there were fewer monks than in previous years.

Not surprisingly, these social changes have brought about much cultural assimilation, and the variations in rates of social change have parallels in rates of cultural change. Language is probably the best gauge and is most important. For the villagers, the difference between being really Mon and not Mon depends on language. And in Pakret and Pathumthani, the language has virtually disappeared in many areas; where it still is used, only the old people can speak, with few exceptions—again not counting the boatmen's villages. At Ban Pong and Maha Chai nearly everyone can speak Mon fluently; and in fact children are native speakers of Mon, often not fluent in Thai when they start school. The written language is scarcely taught now at all, and in the very few wats where it is taught, it seems to be a token effort to learn the alphabet. Old people still can read and write; but as a written language Mon is virtually dead in Thailand. This probably has some effect on the spoken language, since the people often seem to think of a language that is not written as a second class language.

As I have indicated earlier, the exceptions to the loss of language in Pathumthani are the boatmen. In the boat villages, virtually everyone speaks the language fluently, both adults and children. Thais and Chinese who marry into the village often learn to speak it too. It appears that this may have been the case, though less so, at Pakret before the deterioration of the pottery industry. It also appears that boatmen and other specialists in Samut Sakhorn have kept the language more than farmers in the same area, though here the farmers too have retained the language and other customs well due to the relative isolation.

There is no longer an official distinction between Mon and Thai wats, and, in fact, in most cases there is no practical distinction either. Mons still usually go to Mon wats and Thais to Thai wats, but it is only a matter of convenience and habit in most cases, and the number of exceptions is increasing rapidly. In many wats, chanting is no longer done in the Mon manner; the change to Thai chanting usually occurs when the old abbot dies and is replaced by a younger one. Preaching is seldom done in Mon anywhere. I witnessed an incident which indicates how little the Mon wats are now distinctive. I was in a wat which is perhaps among the most Mon wats in Thailand, when an old Thai monk,

came to get a Buddha which the wat was distributing. Only after he had been there quite some time and I had told him what I was doing there, did he even suspect that it was a Mon wat. I might add that Thai is spoken there only when Thais are present, and all the monks are Mon speakers.

The state of the house spirit cult has deteriorated much more than the language. In the Pakret and Pathumthani area there has not been a spirit dance in the last thirty years, and most people never heard of such a thing. In Samut Sakhorn, Ban Pong, and perhaps Lopburi, they still are regularly held, but less frequently than in the past. The specialists who lead the dances are few and generally quite old now, and they probably will not be replaced.

In Pathumthani and Pakret, many people have a vague awareness of rules about turtles, chickens, and other things; and some still keep the ritual items of the spirit. But often there is quite a bit of confusion over the rules. Some people make an offering to the house spirit whenever they eat any fowl at all; most people do not know their spirit affiliation; some were confused about whether the ritual items should pass to the oldest or the youngest son, and so on. As with the language, the boat people seem to be better informed in these matters than others in Pathumthani and Pakret, but they do not have spirit dances.

As far as I can find out, the old style Songkran has virtually disappeared everywhere except Prapradaeng, where it is paid for partly by the Amphoe, at least in part as a tourist attraction. In Pakret the young people do not even know how to play *sabaa*. I am told that *sabaa* has not been played at Ban Pong for several years. In Sam Khok at the boatmen's village, Songkran has special significance, since it is the only time all the people return home at once during the year. But there was little activity other than religious ceremonies in the morning, which few young people attended; the only other important activity was a day of *ram wong* a few days after Songkran proper.

It would scarcely be an exaggeration, then, to say that Mon society and culture have disappeared in many areas and are highly attenuated in most others. Yet there are people who identify as Mon living in these non-Mon surroundings, and we have to look finally at the characteristics of these individuals and at their image of Mon-ness and of themselves.

If we ask what the common denominator is of all people who would in some circumstances identify as Mon, the answer would have to be, "Not much." A knowledge of some Mon ancestry would be nearly certain. Even then, the Mon ancestry would only be relevant, and would only come to light, in a few situations for the majority of today's Mons. Such situations would be discussions specifically about one's ancestry, about Mons, or in situations where one would look for criteria to set oneself off from the group around one for political or economic reasons.

Aside from recognition of Mon ancestry, there are several characteristics that most people would have if they identified as Mon. One would be some superficial awareness of the Mon historical tradition. This knowledge may not be much more than the fact that there once was a great Mon state in what is now Burma called Hongsawadi; but most would know in addition that the Mon kingdom was defeated by the Burmese in a war and that subsequently many people came to Siam. They may know of the migration of Phya Cheng and even the date of that migration. And at a level of greater sophistication—most monks know this, for instance—they may be aware of the influence of Mon Buddhism on King Mongkut and its part in the Thammayut reforms. Many people's acquaintance goes far beyond this in fact, in fancy, or in both. One old man I spoke to was aware of the relationship between Mon and Khmer, and he knew of the ancient state of Dvaravati. When I mentioned that my wife was German, he spoke up that Germans were once Mon too. Such fanciful history is not at all uncommon—and interestingly Germans have a way of getting into the scene rather often.

Most people claiming to be Mon will also know a few words of Mon—to eat, to smoke, hello, where are you going, and such things. As I have noted above, ethnicity is fundamentally a linguistic phenomenon to them. They often make the distinction between real Mons and people with just Mon ancestry on the basis of language. It is therefore important to be able to validate one's status as Mon with at least a few words of the Mon language.

Beyond this common denominator, the meaning of an individual's being Mon varies greatly from place to place. In Ban Pong it means quite a lot; and in fact, it means much of what it meant fifty years ago: language, customs, religion are still recognizably Mon. In Pathumthani, to the boatmen it often means language and occupation. In Prapradaeng it means Songkran. In Pathumthani and Pakret farming areas it often means not much more than the minimum common denominator, plus perhaps language and some memories for the old people.

For old people it means much more than for children. Older people often evidence an interest in Burma, or *Muang Mon*, as they call it. I have been struck by the frequency with which older people tell me that I can easily identify Mon wats by just looking for the *saw hong*—a large pole with a swan on top which was the symbol of Mon wats in the past.<sup>40</sup> In fact, of the dozens of Mon wats I have visited, not over ten still have a *saw hong*; but they remain reality for the old people.

Even in the most Mon areas, giving the children a Mon identification is increasingly difficult. Nothing so clearly shows this as difficulties in getting them to speak Mon. Many times, and in a number of villages, I have been told an identical story by parents who wanted their children to speak Mon. They only spoke Mon with the children at home when they were small and in fact the children spoke fluent Mon. But from the time they entered school they refused to speak Mon any more. They did not forget Mon or even pretend to forget it; but if the parents spoke to them in Mon, they simply answered in Thai. This happens in villages where Mon is the common medium of everyday speech among the adults, and it undoubtedly reflects an extremely broad front of forces favoring assimilation.

#### V. A NOTE ON SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

I do not have space to examine the sociological implications of the Mon case; but in conclusion, I would like to just mention a few things that I think to be most important. First, to look at the Mon people in Thailand as a group—as some kind of entity—seems rather fruitless.

40) In fact, it is not a symbol of Mon wats; Michael Vickery tells me the same thing is found in Cambodian wats.

They are homogeneous neither socially, culturally, nor in their own or other's view of them. Nor is there any conceivable way to envision a Mon social organization. Mon is a category and nothing more. One implication of this is that it would not be fruitful to speak of ethnic boundaries, as is often done in regard to ethnicity.

But this does not mean that Mon ethnicity is of no sociological importance. It still can be and is seized upon as a means of demarcating social and perhaps political differences within the broader society. The case of the boatmen in Pathumthani and other commercial specialists is a striking example. As I have pointed out, in nearly every aspect of ethnicity, these specialists have retained their Mon-ness more than nearby farmers. It is especially striking in the case of the boatmen, who spend most of their time among Thais. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that Mon boatmen have adopted Mon ethnicity as a way of separating themselves socially from the broader society for business reasons. The difference in ethnicity sets them off from the people they deal with and frees them from the traditional social constraints that would strangle a business enterprise—e.g., difficulties in bargaining with friends, difficulties in collecting debts, and the need to give good measure. It perhaps should be noted that in this regard minorities have always played an important part in Thai non-farming economy—the Chinese notably, but also Muslims, Indians, Vietnamese, and others. And it might be added too that such correspondence of ethnicity and economy is common throughout the world. In these cases, it is the difference that is important, and not the content of the difference.

In any event, to explain the present state of Mon ethnicity, it is necessary to remember the injunction about not viewing the Mons as a unit; one has to look at local conditions, and their effects on local society, differences in the efficiency with which the government impinges on the local society, distance to urban centers, and other factors. Of course actual content of the ethnic difference is a historical matter.

The possibilities for the further retention of Mon ethnicity are not favorable. Thai society is rapidly closing in on the villages which have remained Mon simply through isolation, and the number of children born now whose primary ethnic identity will be Mon will be small indeed.

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