AN EXCHANGE–NETWORK APPROACH TO THAI SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

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Social–organization studies in anthropology have encountered very serious problems in recent years. Social–organization studies of Thailand encountered very similar problems years earlier for many of the same reasons. In fact, cases like that of Thailand brought social anthropology to a near crisis. Accordingly, successes in the study of Thai society are potentially of great importance to anthropology. I would like to address these issues rather generally, suggesting a strategy for solving one important set of problems.

The Nature and Source of the Problems

After World War II, a series of fundamental problems were recognized in anthropology. Ethnographers were turning away from the studies of tribal societies which had occupied their attention for the first half of the century. This occurred partly by choice. In fact, it represented in many ways a return to the broader definition of interests which characterized nineteenth–century anthropology. The change occurred partly by necessity, however, as primitive societies were rapidly disappearing. As anthropologists turned their attention to more complex societies, the methods and theories that had served them well in the study of primitive societies seemed less effective and provided little guidance for researchers. For instance, in peasant societies a great deal of the most interesting and important behavior had little to do with kinship—the ultimate social–anthropological disaster. As if that were not enough, anthropologists’ intensive methods of field research became increasingly limiting, as studies of complex societies required more extensive research. This was necessary to encompass the diversity which characterized complex societies.
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But it was not just the reorientation to complex societies that provoked intellectual dislocations. It also became increasingly clear that the functional/structural studies of primitive societies posed many more difficulties than had previously been imagined. Basically, theories did not fit the data as well as had been thought, and there was a great deal more internal cultural variation than had previously been recognized. Dissatisfaction grew over the inability of the structural/functional theories to take account of change and process. At a more nuts-and-bolts level, increasing numbers of studies were done in societies without unilineal kinship, and structural/functional anthropology had never been very successful dealing with such systems.

The upshot of all of this was an intellectual revolution of sorts in social anthropology after World War II in which Raymond Firth, Ward Goodenough, Edmund Leach, and others undertook a far-reaching theoretical critique which called into question the most basic assumptions of structural/functional anthropology.\(^1\) Out of this turmoil came a number of the most influential currents in social anthropology in the last two decades, including transactional analysis, componental analysis, cognitive anthropology, and network analysis.

The place of Thailand in all of this is that Thai society posed in exaggerated form all of the problems which came to plague traditional ethnographic analysis. First, Thai kinship is bilateral, and to make matters worse it seems to be of little significance for many important facets of life. Second, investigators not only failed to find kinship groups, which were a crucial ingredient in the most successful kinship studies, but they failed to find any other kinds of groups as well. In the central region, even settlement patterns failed to produce clear groupings, since dwellings tended to be either scattered in the fields or strung out along rivers or canals.

In 1950, John Embree\(^2\) concluded that there simply was not much regularity in Thai society, which he described as "loosely structured," a real triumph in putting a good face on a bad situation. His formulation is especially remarkable for attributing to Thai society the origins of all the difficulties which Firth, Goodenough, and others encountered elsewhere but had attributed to faulty method and theory. Thus, rather than arguing that faulty theory and method kept him from dealing adequately with individual variation in Thai behavior, Embree concluded that Thai behavior was especially variable. Embree's characterization of Thai society has colored
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research there for thirty years now, although I think its influence has been overemphasized sometimes (for example, in J. Potter's recent book).³ What does seem clear is that there is a general malaise in Thai social organization studies. Since 1950, most (but not all) of the best research in Thailand has concerned religion, economics, and other topics, and social organization has become a relatively neglected area of study.

In view of the similarities in the substance of the difficulties faced by anthropologists working in Thailand and those working elsewhere, it is not surprising to find that many of the methods devised to deal with these problems in Thailand parallel broader developments in social anthropology. Among the most important contributions to social organization, for example, is the social analysis included in Phillips's work on Thai peasant personality,⁴ which focuses on interaction patterns in a way similar to a good deal of other recent anthropology. Similarly, Lucian Hanks's ideas on patronage and the entourage⁵ have close parallels in the general anthropological studies of peasantry, in which a large literature developed on peasant coalitions, patrons, brokers, intermediaries, and so forth. Jack Potter's comparative analysis in the last chapter of his book⁶ takes an essentially statistical view of social organization in which he informally identifies a number of dimensions of Thai social organization. I find this of particular interest, as it abandons the prevailing discrete-model approach (that is, Lévi-Strauss's mechanical models)⁷ so characteristic of most anthropological, social-organization literature. Finally, probably the most significant recent contribution to social-organization studies of Thailand is the Sharp and Hanks volume,⁸ which takes a historical look at Bang Chan, the most studied village in Thailand.

Nor is it surprising to find that general anthropological failures are paralleled in Thailand along with the successes. One major problem solved neither by students of Thai society nor by other anthropologists is that no method was developed which combined the anthropological mode of discrete structural analysis with current interests in individual decisions, exchange theory, and related topics. In general anthropology, the most important attempt to combine these objectives was the kind of network analysis developed by such people as J. A. Barnes, J. Clyde Mitchell, and Jeremy Boissevain.⁹ The basic idea behind this kind of analysis was to examine how individual behavior was carried out within the constraints imposed on the actors by their social networks.
Although nothing taking precisely this network-analysis form was done in Thailand, Hanks's entourage ideas converge closely, as do other patronage approaches (for example, that of Van Roy). Moreover, more recent extensions of network research, such as those pursued by Bruce Kapferer, focus on the transactional nature of the network ties, converging in many ways with work done much earlier in Thailand, such as that of Herbert Phillips.

My own view of the anthropological network-approach is that it achieved a great deal but failed to solve a number of important problems, which were handled somewhat better by the older structural methods in cases where the kinship systems and other conditions allowed their successful application. The most important shortcoming of the social-network methods is, perhaps, that they produced no really satisfactory way of characterizing global properties of social networks and no general way of comparing "mechanical models" of network structure. To do this, a powerful and flexible formalism is needed, since the complexity of realistic social systems is far too great to be captured by verbal descriptions. Kinship analysis had provided a crude but effective way of doing this—for example, by characterizing a system as "unilinear," as having "matrilateral cross-cousin marriage," or as having a "segmentary lineage system." (Anyone who has tried to draw a diagram to show the kinship relations among all individuals in a village can testify that this procedure entails its own practical difficulties, however.) Sociometric diagrams have often been used in a similar way to capture patterns visually in social systems made of relations among individuals; for many purposes they are adequate, but they ultimately fail more seriously than the kinship procedures, since they provide no formal logical principles by which the patterns can be generally described, generated, compared, or transformed.

This is partly a technical problem on which a number of sociologists and anthropologists have worked in recent years. In one such effort, over the past five years or so, Stephen Seidman and I have worked out a mathematical, computer-aided method for social-network analysis which in a very straightforward way is a formalization and generalization of the kinship methods used in the classic structural/functional analyses. These network methods potentially solve at least some of the technical problems which arise in Thai social-organization studies, but it is doubtful that the methodological magic alone would have produced satisfying results in the difficult Thai case. I do not wish to discuss the details of our