

The Tai *lak*: ritual and socio-political function

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The subject of this paper is the lak, which is a central cultural element in Tai societies. Fulfilling social, religious and political functions and consisting of several elements the lak can be specified as a socio-political institution, which is of special importance in the Tai baan-müang systems.

Introduction

There is quite a lot of evidence of the cultural element called *lak*¹ with Tai peoples in literature, but the material is fragmentary and information comes from personal observations, from narratives or rewritten history and seldom from original primary sources. The works of Notton (1926)² and Terwiel (1978) for example, are based on primary sources, but these are exceptional cases. The reason for the extreme difficulty in gaining access to primary sources concerning the ritual and its cosmogonic background might be that it is tabooed to pass on “secret knowledge” to non-entitled or non-predestined persons. However, the historian and the anthropologist are directly confronted with the term *lak* in historical literary sources or in secondary works on history and they cannot neglect this important Tai cultural element.

Many literary sources are dealing with the Tai word *lak müang*. Generally, the term is translated as “city pillar,” but in my opinion this translation is inadequate.³ The *lak müang* is only one sort of *lak*, the other type within this category is the *lak baan* (which belongs to the village). Several authors have given descriptions and definitions of the institution of the *lak müang*.

According to Terwiel, the *lak müang* “was erected in the name of the highest political authority, and up to the present day the religious practices connected with

¹Objectives for transcription used in this paper had been proposed in TAI CULTURE Vol. II no. 1 (1997):6-15.

²Notton has been cited again and again. However, Notton's primary source is not exactly given in the original wording.

³See “The Monument” section of this paper.

the guardian spirit of the *làng myan* (*cáawpháo làng myan*)⁴ are reminiscent of attitudes towards a seat of political power.”⁵

The political importance of the *lak müang* is also mentioned by Taillard.

“Ce système politique, à l’échelle de la seigneurie, repose sur un modèle spatial en nébuleuse organisé autour d’un centre symbolique unique représenté par l’autel du génie tutélaire de la seigneurie (*fi muang*) et par le poteau de la lignée (*lak muang*), génie du sol lié à la famille du seigneur qui exerce le pouvoir.”⁶

Davis states, that the cult of *phii müang* remains primarily agricultural in orientation. He supposes, that the *lak müang*

“perhaps evolved from the trees that once embodied the fertility on the ancient chief’s *muang*.⁷ The village of the chief of the *muang* is the site not only of the tree of the *phii muang* but also of the *lak muang* or *lak suea*, a wooden post which is associated with the incumbent chief and is uprooted and replaced at the installation of a new chief. This post embodies an earth spirit whose domain is identical to that of the *phii muang*, but whose rites are the personal concern of the chief.”⁸

Another aspect - that of the unifying character - is taken into consideration by Udom:

“Like the Village Pillar, the City Pillar is one of the city’s unifying symbols. Together with the Lord of the City or ‘Chao Luang’ (now known by the title of ‘Governor’), the City Pillar is a strong symbol of civic administration.”⁹

Similar information is given by Zhu, when he defines the *zaixin* (*zai* = *tjai* - heart) “as the soul of the community..., the heart of society.”¹⁰

The given descriptions include several aspects of social and political life, and one more interesting fact is mentioned by Naichanth, when speaking of the *Phra Lak Muang* as the defender of laws, “ensuring that the juridical process is carried out justly.”¹¹

⁴The cited author uses the Haas transcription system.

⁵Terwiel 1978:159; see also Mulder 1992:17-18.

⁶Taillard 1992:317.

⁷Davis uses his own transcription system.

⁸Davis 1984:273-274.

⁹Udom 1997:26.

¹⁰Liangwen 1992:16.

¹¹Naichanth 1982, English summary.

From these introductory statements one can deduce that the *lak* is a social institution of special importance, having its own ritual and fulfilling an important socio-political function.

Considering the *lak* in detail one must recognise that it consists of different elements, which reach far behind its visible shape. There is the *lak* as a physical phenomenon, circumscribed by “monument” in this paper; and there is the *lak* as a “performance,” executed by several celebrants and with the participation of the community.¹² Another noticeable element is the ceremonial text, which is recited mainly by the celebrants (“performers”), but partly also by the community (“audience”). Invisible elements organising and structuring the institution are the “genius,” which is believed to inhabit the *lak*, and the “code,” the totality of regulations and norms connected with the genius.

The “Monument”

Before introducing shape and symbolism of the monument known as *lak*, the linguistic background of the notion and its synonyms should be made clear.

Skinner’s idea, that the Sanskrit term Shiva-linga and *lak* should be of the same origin,¹³ is not very convincing, not may be linguistically nor anthropologically.¹⁴ For instance, there is no positive evidence that the term *lak* is of Tai origin.¹⁵ Although it is often translated with “post, pillar” and (at least partially) really does mean this in the Tai languages (especially of the south-western groups), it is exactly understandable and commonly used only in combination with other words¹⁶, such as *lak baan*, *lak müang*, *lak see* (post of the monastery), *lak khaa* (penal post), and *lak mong* (one of the house-pillars) etc. Besides this, the term is often used in word-combinations with philosophic quality such as *lak suut* (summary, syllabus, curriculum), *lak thaan* (basis, foundation, evidence), *lak kaan* (principle), *lak keen* (rules) etc. - expressions which are accepted to be of Sanskrit origin. Udom (1990) gives 18 examples of possible combinations of the term *lak*, which can be reduced to two central meanings: 1) post or pillar describing a

¹²A detailed description overview is given by Sommai Premchit in “The history of Inthakhin Post,” Wat Chedi Luang Chiang Mai, Chiang Mai 1995.

¹³Skinner 1957:130.

¹⁴See also Terwiel 1978:166.

¹⁵According to Sapir (in: Sapir, P.: The Collected Works of Edward Sapir 1994:100-102), the word-stem is a reliable criteria to stamp a word of foreign origin. If a stem has no clear or an ambiguous meaning, it is quite sure that it was borrowed from a foreign language, even if that word stem can no longer be found in the possible original language.

¹⁶Asking native speakers about the meaning of *lak*, one will promptly be re-asked to concretise, what kind of *lak* one wishes to hear about or, in the other case, the term *lak* will be translated into *sao*, which is the unambiguous Tai term for “post” or “pillar.”

material phenomenon and 2) basis or foundation as a word of philosophic quality. It cannot be said which meaning of these is the original one. However, to be understood clearly in an actual context, the word must be combined with other words.

Dealing with *lak müang* or *lak baan*, one should have a clear understanding of *müang* and *baan*. It is not correct to simply translate *müang* as "city." The English terms "village" and "city" are traditional Western concepts, but are not fully applicable to the Tai concepts of *baan* and *müang*. Especially the term *müang*, which must be understood within the context of its Tai background; it means much more than only a city. *Müang* is firstly a consolidation of several *baan*, which might be situated in different locations, some distance from each other.¹⁷ Each *baan* owns (common and/or private) land, which as a whole makes the area of the *müang*. According to Srisak the reasons for founding *müang* are agricultural ones; wet rice cultivation using well developed flood and irrigation techniques in a large area (mostly a valley) requires co-operation and administrative co-ordination between several *baan*.¹⁸ The basic character of *müang* traditionally is not urbanity, although the administrative centre, which is the seat of the *chao müang* (the governor of the *müang*) is called *tjai müang* (the heart of the *müang*) or *müang*¹⁹ for short, can become an economic, religious and urban centre too. However, urbanity is not a precondition for a major *baan* to become the administrative centre of the whole *müang*.²⁰ Taillard calls *müang* "seigneuries" and gives the following description of the interrelationships between several *baan* in a *müang*:

Le pouvoir central opère des prélèvements sur les communautés locales - marques de leur dépendance -, en échange de services rendus - signes de la relation de réciprocité -, et d'une liberté accordée dans la gestion de leurs affaires - témoin de l'autonomie dont elles bénéficient à l'échelon local... Il s'agit de la forme la plus archaïque des systèmes politiques thai, celle de populations non bouddhistes parlant des dialectes tay, et installées dans les vallées et petits bassins du Nord de la péninsule. Ces seigneuries qui n'ont pas atteint la dimension d'un royaume se sont maintenues au Vietnam²¹ jusqu'en 1945 où elles ont

¹⁷Srisak 1996:61.

¹⁸ibid.:62-63.

¹⁹The ambigeousity of the term *müang* has caused great confusion in research into the history of the Tai peoples. The term *müang* designates at the same time the whole space and area of a *müang* (as a consolidation of several *baan*, which might be better translated with "country") as well as the administrative centre of that area.

²⁰Müang Baan Soong (a quarter of today's Vang Viang in Central Laos) for example, was and still is, a small village and would not be called a town or city (in the Western context), but it is the major *baan* (or (*tjai*) *müang*) and was the seat of the *chau* of Müang Soong, which occupies a large area along the Soong river. The same applies to a number of Müang in Northern/Northeastern Laos and Vietnam.

²¹The author refers to the Tai *müang* in Northern Vietnam, it has nothing to do with the ethnic Viet people.

été étudiées par G. Condominas auquel est emprunté l'essentiel de l'information. Elles reproduisent dans sa forme la plus élémentaire la dialectique autonomie-dépendance par les relations qui existent entre les seigneur *tao*, et les villages des paysans libres *pay*. En sont exclus les esclaves d'ethnie tay qui, en se placant sous la dépendance des seigneurs et des notables, appartiennent à leurs maisonnées et de ce fait ont perdu tous leurs droits; comme les esclaves appartenant aux ethnies non tay, éduites au servage lors de la conquête et constituant des villages serviles.²²

Besides its primary meaning, the term *müang* is also used to express the Tai *Weltanschauung*. Heaven is called *müang faa*, the underworld is called *müang phüün din*. The term *müang* is also used as a synonym for "state"²³ (Thai: *pratheed*, Lao: *patheed*), *müang lao*, for example, means the Lao state; Thailand is named *müang thai* or Vietnam is referred as *müang yuan* etc. To better differentiate at least these two meanings of the term *müang*, in the following I will use *müang* (small initial letter and in italics) for the consolidation of several *baan* or even state; and *Müang* (capital letter) for the administrative centre of a *müang*. Having the different meanings of both *lak* and *müang* in mind, the term *lak müang* can no longer be translated as "city pillar." This is why the Tai word should be maintained having in mind that it expresses a fundamental principle of the cosmogony of *müang*, which is a complex system of interrelationships between several *baan* with a religious background. The *lak müang* functions as a founding element in the making and strengthening of the collective identity of several *baans*' populations.

Synonyms with the word *lak* are *sao* (the original Tai term for "post"), *süa* (coat)²⁴, *büü* (navel)²⁵, and *tjai* (heart), which can be combined with both the terms *müang* and *baan*. Sometimes, the *chao müang* himself is called *lak müang*.²⁶ The different terms of course express one and the same idea: the spiritual axis of *baan* or *müang*.

The "monument" mostly has the shape of a wooden post, or a pillar of stone or brick. Wooden posts are carved with one end in a rounded or pointed tip, which

²²Taillard 1992:315-316.

²³The foundation of Tai states by the consolidation of several *müang* had been investigated by Cam Trong (1978), Taillard 1992 and Lemoine (1997).

²⁴The term *süa baan* or *süa müang* originates from the pre-buddhist Tai burial rite to erect a pole with one or two coats of the deceased on the grave. The shirt symbolises the presence of the deceased's spiritual essences. Usually there is an umbrella on the top of the pole. The rite is observed up till today throughout Northern Vietnam (Tai Dam), but the term *süa* is used also by the Lao and Thai.

²⁵The hole, in which the *lak* is placed, is called *büü*. It can be interpreted as an existential aspect of Tai community life. See also Srisuro 1996:78-89.

²⁶Own observation in several places in Northern Laos.

might suggest the lotus symbol or the tip of the blossom of a banana tree.²⁷ Sometimes the *lak* is completely gilded or painted bright red. Occasionally the monument is wrapped with coloured cloths and garlands of flowers.²⁸

The shape of the monument convinces some researchers that it has a possible phallic nature, which they trace back to an Indian origin. Terwiel doubts this interpretation and mentions different indices to establish that the *lak* cannot be a phallic symbol.²⁹ The fact that a number of *lak* represent a female genius - for example the *lak müang viang tjan* (Vientiane) representing Vientiane's female guardian spirit *Sii Müang*,³⁰ contradicts the phallus interpretation. Besides this, original Lao or Thai sources do not make reference to a phallic origin at all. Although the *lak* often has the shape of a post or pillar, this is not the principle shape of the monument. Representing a guardian spirit, the *lak* can be a tree,³¹ a simple stone,³² or a rock.³³ It can be questioned if the *lak* generally has a material existence, since sometimes the *lak* of a *baan* or a *müang* cannot be located exactly by the inhabitants, although people have a clear imagination of the existence of "their" *lak*.³⁴

The location of a *lak* is, therefore, not homogeneously determined. According to Udom the possible locations of the *lak* are determined by a number of factors as: a) a good omen; b) a dream; c) outstanding characteristics of natural phenomena; or d) the immaculateness of an area.³⁵ The monument's location may be a central place, a place near the house of the *chao müang*, or a place at the entrance of a *baan* or of the *Müang*. In Thailand, Laos, and with Tai peoples in Southern China, a *wat* (Buddhist monastery) is often built around or near the *lak* of a *baan* or a *müang*. Occasionally, the monumental *thaat* or *chedi* (stupa) of that monastery, then called *thaat luang* or *chedi luang*, throws the *lak* itself into shade. Sometimes the *lak* is hidden behind the *thaat* or at the edge of the monastery, or

²⁷I tend to agree with the last suggestion, because the banana tree is often used as a ritual tree in non-buddhist spirit-calling and healing ceremonies, whereas the lotus flower cannot be found in such ceremonies. Golden and silver trees are significant in Buddhist ceremonies as well as tributary offerings in policy. Besides this, the tree has a very special meaning in the Tai *Weltanschauung*, as it is seen to be a connecting line between heaven, earth and underworld. The umbrella, an important symbol, is said to symbolize the "sacred tree." See also Simatrang 1993 and Rajadhon 1988:332-338.

²⁸See also Terwiel 1978:160

²⁹*ibid.*:168-170.

³⁰The legend tells about a pregnant woman, who sacrificed herself to become the guardian spirit of Vientiane. Up to today, besides the stone pillar at Wat Sii Müang in Vientiane the statue of Naang Sii Müang is worshipped.

³¹Terwiel 1978:167, referring to Maspero.

³²Liangwen 1992:16.

³³The *lak* of Müang Luang Phabang, for example, is a rock on the top of Mount Phousi.

³⁴Own observation and interviews.

³⁵Udom 1997:26.

exists only in the remembrance of the people, who now worship that *thaat* as their *lak*. Srisuro explains that Thai people do not make a clear distinction between *lak*, *sao*, *büü* or *thaat*. All the monuments, be it the *thaat* of a deceased or *phra thaat*³⁶, *lak see* or *büü baan*, are worshipped as places of a concentration of spiritual essence and power.³⁷

The *lak* of a significant *müang* may consist of several monuments, one main *lak* and four other *lak* or four to six *khumphan* (giant figures) representing the guardian spirits of the main *lak*.³⁸ Sometimes it is mentioned, that the *lak* is related to two³⁹ or four⁴⁰ gates of a *baan* or a *Müang*.

The “Genius”

Viewing the monuments of *lak baan* and *lak müang* we have seen that the *lak* is a material object representing spiritual powers, which we call “genius” or “genii.”⁴¹ This probably originates from the Tai pre-Buddhist belief that the spiritual powers of deceased persons continue to exist and preferably live in trees, stones or posts and poles. The custom to erect a pole with at least one coat of the deceased and a cotton umbrella is to give the spiritual powers of the dead person a certain “domestication.”⁴²

There is no general imagination about the appearance of the spiritual powers, but mostly they are believed to be guardian spirits. Names of the genii are very variable, those protecting the family and the individual are called *puu yaa taa yai*, guardian spirits of the community are generally referred as *chao phoo* or *chao mää*⁴³. Thai and Lao sources tell about the *ming khwan* (soul, spiritual or life essence) of *baan* or *müang*, which resides in the *lak*.⁴⁴ According to Rajadhon⁴⁵ the Tai word *ming* is identical with the Chinese term *ming*, which means life or fate (in a positive sense), but he does not mention that the term should be of Chinese origin, since it is a fundamental and clearly defined philosophic term in all Tai languages. This standpoint is supported by Cam Trong, too.⁴⁶

³⁶Housing the spiritual essence of Buddhism in form of relics of the Buddha or of monks.

³⁷Srisuro 1996.

³⁸Sommai 1995:45-47 and Le That Luang de Vientiane 1995:32.

³⁹*hua* - *haang* (head and tale).

⁴⁰the four quarters.

⁴¹The same it is with the *lak see* (lak of a buddhist monastery).

⁴²Information collected with Tai Dam people in Son La and Dien Bien Phu Provinces (Northern Vietnam).

⁴³See also Rajadhon 1988:100 and Terwiel 1978:162.

⁴⁴Naichanth 1982:2 and Buasiseangbaseuth 1995:40.

⁴⁵Rajadhon 1988:232.

⁴⁶Stated in an interview in February 1995.

For the Dai, Zhu reports that every *baan* has its *diulaman* (*chao baan*) and a larger grouping of a number of *baan* (known as *meng* or *müang*) has its “patron saints” called *diulameng* (*chao müang*).⁴⁷

Davis provides us with information about *phii baan* and *phii müang* known among the Khon Müang of Northern Thailand.⁴⁸ But he admits that the term *phii* is not commonly used. For Müang Nan Davis found out, that the *phii müang* is called *chao luang* or *chao luang tin taa*, which might be the spirit of a similarly named prince who ruled Nan in the 18th century.⁴⁹

The fact that genii have names and their own personal identity can be found in a number of sources.

The genius of the *phra lak müang* in Bangkok, for example, is known as *chao phään din sayaam*,⁵⁰ but the genius itself has (or consists of) altogether twelve guardian spirits, between them *phra süa müang* and *theparak lak müang*.⁵¹ It is not seldom that there is a group of guardian spirits for one *baan* or *müang*. Sribasang reports about three *chao phoo* - *chao phoo khammun*, *chao phoo maakam* and *chaofaahaam* - of a Yong village in Northern Thailand. The three men died without leaving descendants or successors, then they “became” the guardian spirits of the *baan*.⁵² Terwiel informs of a legend concerning the *lak müang* of Trat. According to that legend, two persons “were taken to become the spirits of the town pillars.”⁵³ In Ratchaburi there were four persons who were said to have been sacrificed to become the *chao phoo lak müang*.⁵⁴

In Chiang Mai it is *phra in* (Indra) who is represented in the *lak müang*, which is called *inthakhin* (pali: *Indakhila* - Indra’s post). The legend tells about Phra In’s instructions about ritual, law and order to guarantee protection of Chiang Mai.⁵⁵

The guardian spirit of Vientiane is known as Naang Sii Müang, a pregnant woman who was said to have been sacrificed or sacrificed herself during the reign of Setthathirat (1563) to become the genius of Vientiane.⁵⁶

⁴⁷Liangwen 1992:15.

⁴⁸Davis 1984:266-275.

⁴⁹ibid.:268.

⁵⁰Krasaesin 1982:3.

⁵¹ibid.:18.

⁵²Sribasang 1997:44.

⁵³According to an undated pamphlet printed in Trat Province, entitled *Tamnaan saan theebphaarag caawphoo lagmyantraad*. Cited in: Terwiel 1978:160.

⁵⁴ibid.

⁵⁵Sommai 1996:43-50.

⁵⁶Abhay in: *Présence du Royaume Lao* 1956:963.

The *lak müang* of Luang Phrabang is situated at Mount Phousi. It is a rock, which in 1804 had been covered with bricks forming the *phathaad choomsii*.⁵⁷ Near the rock a bright red painted entrance to a cavern can be found. The mostly known legend concerning the foundation of Luang Phrabang is that of a glittering Giant Snake (*nguu lüam*) named Naak that lived in the abovementioned cavern and took a Water Snake (*naang ngüak*) as his wife. Their descendants, as the legend tells, were of human race and became the ancestors of *müang* Luang Phrabang.⁵⁸

To summarise the preceding examples, it must be noted that the guardian spirits, which are represented in the *lak*, are believed to influence everyday personal and community life. The genii can be imagined as non-personal powers as well as single guardian spirits or groups of guardian spirits and can have personal names and identities, which might be of human-like, deity-like or animal-like nature. The genii represented in the *lak* must not be mistaken with *phraphuum/chao thii* (guardian spirits of earth and places, houses or institutions). There might be elements of ancestor worship within the cult of guardian spirits of the *lak*. Often the *chao baan* or *chao müang* is regarded as being related or even akin to the genius of the *lak baan/müang*.⁵⁹

In every case the *chao baan*, *chao müang*, or in Bangkok His Royal Majesty, the King himself is responsible for the right carrying on of the cult of the genius (of *lak baan*, *lak müang*, *lak müang thai*). In this way, the *chao* demonstrates that he is subject to the code (law and order) of the genius just like every commoner.

The “Code”

The genii of the *lak* are not only believed to influence the lives of people and communities - they are also said to be defenders of law and order, too. The laws of *baan* and *müang* are comprised in the so called *hiit khoong* code. *Hiit khoong* is a codex of laws and regulations which dictate the manners of all relations between people and social institutions of different status. The codex is based upon the fundamental supposition about the hierarchical structure of society,⁶⁰ which implicates the necessity of regulating laws and behaviour codes. Another basic supposition is the embeddedness of human society in the laws of nature. In this context, a large number of laws deal with natural phenomena and manners.

⁵⁷Buasisaengpaseuth 1995:39.

⁵⁸*ibid.*:27.

⁵⁹Information collected in Northern Laos and Northern Vietnam.

⁶⁰The *hiit khoong*, up to today widely neglected by Western researchers, actually is contradictory to Embree's loose-structure-hypothesis. But, to make a certain statement, the contents and social relevance of *hiit khoong* should be studied exactly.

Hiit khoong is a dualistic code; *khoong* is the theoretical foundation of *hiit* with a universal validity. Abstractly, it could be described as “order” or “lawgiving institution.”⁶¹ *Hiit* is a practical component including the concrete rules and regulations, which make the theoretical *khoong* become a “social fact” or social reality.

Hiit and *khoong* vary from region to region or possibly from *müang* to *müang*. The traditional code has partly been influenced by Buddhist laws, or the Buddhist law code has replaced the *hiit khoong* code fully. In some cases, Buddhist laws may have been added to the *hiit khoong*, or the title of the code had been changed. In Laos, for example, the code is also known as *hiit khoong papheonii* or *papheonii buraan*. In Northern Thailand the code is known as *khüd* or *khoo haam*. Besides this, there are great differences in the numbers of *hiit* and *khoong*. However, it can be assumed that all *baan* of one *müang* accept and follow the same code.

Siriwat shortly introduces the *hiit sipsoong khoong sipsii* code of North-eastern Thailand.⁶² Here, the 12 *hiit* are a small (but important) part of the *khoong*, which are divided into the following 14 groups:

1. *hiit chau khoong khun*
(regulates the interrelationship between *chau* (chiefs) of *baan* and *chau* of *müang* or *chau* of smaller *müang* and *chau* of superior *müang*)
2. *hiit thaao khoong phanjaa*
(regulates the interrelationship between noblemen)
3. *hiit phai khoong naai*
(regulates the interrelationship between commoners and governors)
4. *hiit baan khoong müang*
(regulates the interrelationship between *baan* and *Müang*)
5. *hiit buu khoong jaa*
(regulates the interrelationship between the paternal grandparents)
6. *hiit taa khoong jaai*
(regulates the interrelationship between the maternal grandparents)
7. *hiit phoo khoong mää*
(regulates the interrelationship between husband and wife)
8. *hiit phay khoong khöj*
(regulates the interrelationship between relatives-in-law)
9. *hiit paa khoong lung*
(regulates the interrelationship between relatives of the fathers side)

⁶¹But it should not be changed with the Western concept of “law.” *Khoong* should better be understood as customary law, which originally had not been written down and which could be changed and adapted to (naturally) given circumstances.

⁶²Siriwat 1978:77-83.

10. *hiit luuk khoong laan*

(regulates the interrelationship between descendants of a family)

11. *hiit thao khoong kää*

(regulates the interrelationship between people of different age)

12. *hiit pii khoong düan* – also called *hiit sip soong* (12 *hiit*)

(regulates the annual rites and ceremonies which are determined by the lunar cycle)

13. *hiit hai khoong naa*

(regulates agrarian works)

14. *hiit wat khoong song*

(regulates the interrelationship between Buddhist monasteries and the Sangha)⁶³

The *hiit 12 khoong 14* code is also commonly known in Laos, but the contents of the *khoong 14* are partially changed on behalf of Buddhist laws. Besides this, there is a difference between the *khoong* code for commoners and that for nobles.⁶⁴ Cam Trong mentions a *hiit 12 khoong 24* code which shall be valid with the Tai Dam in Northern Vietnam.⁶⁵

The Northern Thai (or Lanna) *khüd* code has only ten sections, which (partially) have the same contents as the above mentioned *khoong 14*.⁶⁶ Both the Lao and Northern Thai codes had been written down on palm leaves and were partially added to the Buddhist law codes (*khamphii phathammasaat* and *kodmaai buuraan*). However, contrary to the Buddhist laws the *hiit khoong* code, which might have been changed many times and which is orally transmitted from generation to generation, is merely “habitus” or custom than law. The most significant mark of the *hiit khoong* code is the lack of sanctions.⁶⁷ Lacking sanctions, it must be asked, how the code could function and come into reality. Firstly, the code must have been accepted by the majority of the population; non-acceptable parts of the code have been lost. This explains the differences and changes within the *hiit khoong* code in different regions or *müang* or among different Tai groups. Secondly, although there are no concrete sanctions prescribed in the code, the regulations often include threads of “natural” or “supernatural” sanctions.⁶⁸

⁶³see *ibid.*:82-83.

⁶⁴see Phuangsapha 1992:7-31.

⁶⁵Stated in an interview in february 1995.

⁶⁶See Khüd: *khoo haam nai laan naa*. 1997

⁶⁷The lack of sanctions is opposite to the universal conception of “law.” Orders and rules lacking sanctions are to be called habitus or customs. See also Reckwitz 1997:121-127.

⁶⁸This means sanctions which are inflicted by nature or supernatural powers without human assistance, as for example the thread of illness, madness or epidemics, fire, inundation, drought etc.

The genius of the *lak* now is believed to take control over the right following the code. Tambiah provides us with excellent information concerning the imagined powers of two village genii in North-eastern Thailand to punish those, who did not follow the order.⁶⁹ The powers of the guardian spirits of the *lak* are of special significance, because these are seen as forces which can protect the whole community from negative influences, but also can punish the whole community, even if only one single member of the community broke the order.

The “Ritual”

The ritual of the genius of the *lak* consists of several ceremonies. The accomplishment of these ceremonies is the responsibility of both the governor(s) of a community and the community, too. The governors (*chau*, *naai*,⁷⁰ *phaam*⁷¹ or *moo*, often also a *tjam*⁷² and a *tiam*⁷³) are the leading persons in the ritual and take over the position of “celebrants.” The community sponsors the ceremony by giving the offerings. But the commoners also take part in the ceremony and in processions, occasionally co-reciting parts of ritual texts. From the viewpoint of performance theory they are in the position of the “audience.”

The most important ceremonies are the founding ceremony and the annual sacrifice or offering ceremonies.

There is less evidence in literature about founding ceremonies, whereas annual offering ceremonies have often been reported in detail.⁷⁴ The annual offering ceremonies are carried out regularly: in Chiang Mai, for example, it is carried out in May, in Vientiane it is in November, in Bangkok, Luang Phrabang and in the Dehong region of South China is celebrated in April. Shortly summarised, an annual offering ceremony consists of at least four main steps: a procession to bring the offerings to the *lak*; the recitation of ritual texts and/or direct communication to the genius of the *lak* with help of a medium; the offering ritual and a common festive meal and common amusements (games, theatre). Of course, there are variations from region to region, and differences are noticeable between *baan* and *müang*, especially concerning the expense and splendour of the ceremonies. The greatest and most glamorous ceremonies are held in Bangkok,

⁶⁹Tambiah 1970:266-269.

⁷⁰Synonym of “chau” (chief, headman).

⁷¹Tai version of Brahmin, means a white dressed (holy) man, who recites the ritual texts in non-buddhist ceremonies. The term is used synonymously for the Tai word “moo.” See also Tambiah 1970:256-258.

⁷²Spirit intermediary, see also Tambiah 1970:277.

⁷³Medium, *ibid.* and Lévy 1956: 851. Whereas the other celebrants generally are men, the function of *tiam* can be taken over by women, then called *naang tiam*. *Ibid.*:853.

⁷⁴Naichanth 1982, Lévy 1956, Sommai 1996, Tambiah 1970, Terwiel 1978, Zago 1993

Chiang Mai, Vientiane and Luang Phrabang. This is explainable from the fact, that the Kings of Thailand and the former Kings of Lanna and Lan Sang are/were involved in the rituals of the *lak müang* in Bangkok, the *lak müang* of Chiang Mai, the *lak müang* of Luang Phrabang and the *lak müang* of Vientiane.

Especially in Müang, which are known to be centres of Buddhism, the direct communication to the genius is left out or superseded by a chanting ceremony of Buddhist monks and a *tak baat* ceremony.⁷⁵ But normally, Buddhist monks are not involved in the ritual. Often, recitations of ritual texts and direct communication to the genius are started and finished with a *suu khwan*⁷⁶ ceremony in order to strengthen the spiritual powers of the celebrants.

The offerings consist of sliced dried areca nuts, rice whiskey, white and red cloth, flowers, flower garlands and incense sticks, candles, fruits (bananas and coconuts), a rope, a hook,⁷⁷ *phasaat phüng*,⁷⁸ *ton kalaphük*.⁷⁹ But also buffalo,⁸⁰ chicken and pigs can be sacrificed and offered together with glutinous rice.⁸¹ Also tea may be offered.⁸²

Human sacrifices are mentioned only in legends on the foundation of *lak*. Naang Sri Müang of Vientiane I have already mentioned. Terwiel provides us with information concerning legends of human sacrifices at Trat, Ratchaburi, and Ayutthaya.⁸³ Also Deydier reports of a legend about the self-sacrifice of a young woman at *baan* Wat Wisun of Luang Phrabang.⁸⁴ It is often told that pregnant women were preferred to be sacrificed and to become guardian spirits of *müang*.

Concerning human sacrifices, Terwiel points out that actually there is no firm evidence of such practices (neither from anthropology nor from archaeology).⁸⁵ However, to estimate the truthfulness of such legends, some other aspects must be taken into consideration.

⁷⁵Buddhist offering ceremony.

⁷⁶See also Heinze 1982.

⁷⁷All reported by Premchit 1996:56; the hook is also reported by Cam Trong in an interview in 1995.

⁷⁸“Honey palace” – A bamboo-mounting, which has the shape of a small stupa (of about 1m height), decorated with flowers and honey cakes. See Le That Luang de Vientiane 1995:32-33.

⁷⁹Small banana trees decorated with flowers and banknotes. See *ibid.*:33.

⁸⁰Reported by Lévy 1956:851-858. The buffalo sacrifice is a general part of Tai Dam burial ceremonies. (Own observation in müang Nambaak, Northern Laos.)

⁸¹Reported by Davis 1984:269-273.

⁸²Archaimbault 1991:28.

⁸³Terwiel 1978:160-162.

⁸⁴Deydier 1954:212.

⁸⁵Terwiel 1978:161.

1) The legends have great differences in contents. In Thailand collected legends are telling about the forced sacrifice of human beings, and in Laos narrated legends are referring mainly to self-sacrifice. With the Tai of Northern Vietnam no legends concerning human sacrifices were found.

2) During my field research in Central Laos in 1994, I learned that the hole, in which the *lak* is placed, is to be filled with non-organic offerings only. I was told, that it is forbidden to place things of organic consistence, as flowers or animals, in the hole. Only peoples hair would be allowed to be placed under the *lak*. It is believed, that by giving hair the positive essences or moral powers (*bun*) of a person are transferred to the spirit of the *lak*.⁸⁶ This information seems to be very serious, but might be influenced by Buddhist ethics.

3) Animals, which are sacrificed as offerings to the genius of the *lak*, are never placed under the *lak*. Sacrificed animals are symbolically presented to the guardian spirits and after the ceremony are consumed by the whole community during a festive meal. It is believed that the spirits would take the non-material “positive essences” (*bun*) of the offerings only, and the visible “remains” are left to the community.⁸⁷

Conclusions

The community's duty is not only to carry out the annual offering ceremonies, but every commoner must render an account to the guardian spirit if planning or doing actions which reach into community affairs.

Communal assemblies nowadays mostly take place in the *saalaa* of the Buddhist monastery, where the *lak* is (or was) situated.⁸⁸

The cult of guardian spirits of the *lak* has village as well as regional significance. One main function of the ritual connected with the *lak*, which has to be carried out by a whole community (whether it be at the level of *baan* or of *müang*), is the unification of communities and to build a common sense of identity. Personal identities are predetermined by family ancestry as well as by membership of *baan* **and** *müang*. Common identity surely is strengthened by declaring guardian spirits as being communities ancestors.

⁸⁶The annual offering ceremony to the *lak* in Laos is also called “hed bun baan” or “hed bun müang” (to give *bun* to *baan/müang*).

⁸⁷Davis 1984:273.

⁸⁸Own observation in Northern Thailand and Laos.

Due to the strong identity-building function of the institution of *lak* and referring to its complex background (monument, genius, code, ritual) it was possible to administer successfully relatively big communities of a number of *baan*, which were situated throughout relatively large areas. Communities such as *baan* and *müang* and their customary law codes are legitimised by the genii of *lak baan* and *lak müang*. The foundation of *lak müang* must be seen as one main step in the historical development of *müang* with great inner stability, well defined borders and a functioning administration system. It would be worthwhile doing further research on the administration and law of *müang* as well as intra- and inter-*müang* relations, since the *baan-müang* socio-political systems seems to be a special case of small state formation and is possibly of greater importance than credit is given for in historical (archaeology-centred) research up to today.

Glossary

<i>baan</i>	village (in the broadest sense)
<i>bun</i>	moral merit (pali: <i>punna</i>)
<i>chao müang</i>	chief or lord of a <i>müang</i>
<i>chao phään din</i>	lord of an area
<i>chao phoo</i>	senior, lord
<i>lak</i>	1. post, pillar; 2. foundation, basis
<i>khwan</i>	life essence, spiritual essence
<i>ming khwan</i>	see <i>khwan</i>
<i>müang</i>	consolidation of a number of <i>baan</i>
Müang	administrative centre of a <i>müang</i> (the initial capital letter is used in this paper for a better distinction of <i>müang</i> and Müang)
<i>phii baan</i>	genius; ancestor or guardian spirit of a <i>baan</i>
<i>phii müang</i>	genius; ancestor or guardian spirit of a <i>müang</i>
<i>puu yaa taa yai</i>	ancestors; grandfathers and grandmothers of a fathers' and a mothers' lineage
<i>sayaam</i>	Siam
<i>suu khwan</i>	"to call the <i>khwan</i> "; name of a ritual
<i>thaat luang/chedi luang</i>	principal stupa

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