

THAILAND'S NORTHEAST: SOME INTRODUCTORY ARTICLES

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Supplement: "Tales of the
Northeast"

PEOPLES

[Page 2/29] The people of Northeast Thailand, or Phak Isaan as it is sometimes called, are commonly referred to as Lao. This term can be a source of great pride for the people themselves, who, while they retain a great loyalty to the Thai ruling family and hence to Thailand, think of themselves as distinct from the central Thais. Although most Northerners are Lao -- that is, they belong to the Lao branch of the family of Thai people who inhabit Southern China, Laos, Thailand and parts of Burma -- there are also many Northerners from other ethnic groups, both Thai and non-Thai. Many of these other groups also have members in the country of Laos where about 50 percent of the people are not Lao but are members of various hill tribes.

The population of Northeast Thailand was 11 million in 1968. Of this 11 million, approximately 9 million people were of the Lao ethnic group. This group can be divided into two smaller groups -- the Lao Wiang and the Lao Khaaw, both of which are spread throughout the Northeastern area.

Another large "Thai" group is the Phuthai. Phuthai culture and language differ from that of the surrounding Lao peoples of the Northeast although they are quickly being assimilated in the dominant Isaan patterns. They are said to be hard-working and independent and have apparently done more to influence their physical environment than some of the other groups in the area. They have, for example, already started to diversify crops. Their weaving, dancing, and music are all quite distinctive and very beautiful. It is estimated that there are 70,000 - 100,000 Phuthai in Northeast Thailand at the present time. Most of them are settled in Kalasin, Sakol Nakorn, and Nakorn Phanom provinces.

Korat Province is the home of the descendants of Siamese soldiers and Khmer women. In the 14th century, King Ramathibodi gained control of what is now Korat Province from the Cambodians who ruled the southern northeastern provinces at that time. Some of his soldiers stayed behind after the victory and married Khmer women. Their descendants are known as Thai Korat (or Korat Thai). They speak the Thai language, but with some peculiarities. There may be as many as 400,000 Khmer people in Thailand.

Another ethnic group in the southern provinces, especially Surin, Srisaket, Ubol and Roi-et, is the Soai or Kui. Other members of this group reside in Cambodia. The Kui are known for being elephant handlers and every year in November they stage the famous Surin Elephant Round-Up.

The So or Kha people, known to the Lao as Kha Tang Luang and to the Thais as Phi Tong Luang (the spirits of the yellow leaves), have settled in Sakol Nakorn, Kalasin and Nakorn Phanom provinces. They are a very small group and not too much is known about them because they live high up in the hills and are not friendly to outsiders. They prefer to live off the land and move when they have depleted an area. Their religion is very animistic. The Kha are, perhaps, the most primitive group to be found in the Northeast.

[Page_3/29] Other small ethnic groups that live in the Northeast include the Yaw (in Nakorn Phanom, Sakol Nakorn and Kalasin), the Yao (in Sakol Nakorn), the Saek (in Nakorn Phanom), the Khao Brao (Ubol), the Chao Bon or Niakuol (in Western Korat and Chaiyaphum), and the Meo (in Loey).

Although most of the ethnic groups which are found in the Northeast of Thailand have become well-assimilated and less distinctive with each passing year, they still have group loyalties and conceive of themselves in terms of their relationship to the other members of their ethnic group. Most of them do, however, have a definite loyalty to the Thai nation. It is a loyalty that is, in many cases, based more on a worship of the King than on a concept of the Thai state and government, but the loyalty does exist.

One ethnic group living in Thailand which has perhaps less loyalty to the present regime is the Vietnamese. There are more than 40,000 Vietnamese refugees in Thailand now and

most of them are settled in the Northeast. Sakol Nakorn, Nakorn Phanom and Nongkhai have the largest settlements, but the Vietnamese have spread out throughout the region. Some families have been in Thailand for two generations; others have come as refugees from the warfare that has torn Vietnam asunder for the last 20 years. Almost all the Vietnamese who have come to Thailand came from North Vietnam and thus they are subject to a great deal of suspicion and distrust, especially in view of the "Communist problem" in the Northeast. The government has them constantly under surveillance and occasionally arrests those who it suspects are "subversive". Many of the Vietnamese refugees do carry on their own "education" programs and refuse to send their children to a school where they will become "Thai-ized". It has been said that a great deal of financial support for North Vietnamese aims and projects comes from certain refugee groups, particularly in Nongkhai. The Thai government has been negotiating for sometime with the Vietnamese government to repatriate some, if not all, of the Vietnamese presently in the Northeast. Large groups of them are still looking forward to repatriation and refuse to consider Thailand as their home, although many have accepted Thailand and "Thai-ization". Some Vietnamese were repatriated in 1959, but since then the Thai government has had little luck with this program. The Vietnamese are generally hard working and clever. Many are employed as merchants, mechanics, radio and television repairmen, tailors or vegetable farmers.

The history of Northeast Thailand until recently is the history of the various states that ascended to power at various times in present-day Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Probably the first empire to leave a lasting influence on the Northeast was the Khmer. Expanding to the North and West from Angkor as early as the 9th or 10th century, the Khmer established themselves along the Muun River and its tributaries. The present provinces of Surin, Srisaket, Buriram, Ubol, and Korat were the first to be settled, but during the next four centuries the Khmer empire continued to expand northward. At the apex of its power, Angkor controlled all of present day Northeast Thailand (and some historians contend that its influence may have reached as far as Luang Prabang in Laos).

One theory holds that the Thai peoples had begun their migration out of Southern China during the period of early Khmer consolidation and expansion. Known Thai sates were already in existence in the 7th century in what is now the Northern Shan states of Burma. It is thought that the Thai continued to migrate southward and by the 11th century there were a number of them in the upper Chao Phya valley, as well as in the upper Mekong valley. Here they began to form small states under chieftains. Some of these states acquired a degree of power and in 1238 two Thai chiefs attacked and defeated the Khmer commander at Sukhothai (the capital of the Northwestern part of the Angkor empire) and established a kingdom that became a strong state under King Ram

Kamkaeng from 1275 to 1317. During Ram Kamkaeng's reign, Sukhothai controlled land as far east as Vientiane, but most of the kingdom's efforts were directed towards the south. After King Ram Kamkaeng's death, Sukhothai declined in importance, and soon a new Thai kingdom, Aythuya, rose to power farther south in the Chao Phya valley. Assuming power around 1350, this kingdom immediately began to look eastward at the Khmer held land of the Korat Plateau. For the next 80 years there were almost continuous wars between Angkor and Aythuya. Several times Aythuya occupied Angkor only to be driven out. In 1431 Aythuya again captured the city, took everything that they could carry away, as well as thousands of prisoners. The Khmers soon took back control of Angkor and remained a country of some power for many years. But its control over Northeast Thailand had been broken and soon the capital itself was moved to Phnom Penh, a more easily defended position.

During the next several centuries, Thai culture became dominant in most of the Northeast except in parts of Buriram, Srisaket, and Surin. After the wars many of the Thai soldiers took Khmer wives and settled in the Korat area.

Not too much is known of the historical development of the area to the north of the Korat region. It is known that Luang Prabang was established in 1353 shortly after Aythuya rose to power. For some years this essentially Thai state was a vassal to one or another strong state, but eventually it began to expand southward toward present day

Northeast Thailand and down the Laos panhandle. In 1707, after many years of power and unity, this kingdom was divided into two separate states with capitals in Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Beginning in the middle of the 18th century, people began to migrate into present day Sakol Nakorn, Udorn, Kalasin, Mahasarakham, and Roi-et. Added to these people were those Lao who were deported by the Thai armies after victories against the Lao armies during the course of the 18th century. Thus, by the early 19th century much of Northeast Thailand was inhabited by people shifted out of what is now recognized as Laos and thus of ethnic background.

[Page_5/29] During the latter part of the 18th century and into the 19th, the capital at Vientiane (as well as at Luang Prabang) was under the control of the Siamese government, which had moved to Bangkok in 1792. In 1828, Chao-Anori, the king of Vientiane, decided to attempt to free his kingdom from Siamese control and led his army toward Bangkok. He was assisted by armies from Ubol and Roi-et (regions also in his kingdom), but after threatening Bangkok, the Lao forces were completely routed. The Ubol army was crushed first and then the Siamese army continued on to Vientiane. The city was sacked and thousands of Laos were driven into Northeast Thailand to people the region. This was the end of the Vientiane kingdom and from 1828 on the Thai government had effective control over the entire area. In fact, until the end of the 19th century, Siam also controlled much of present day Laos on the east bank of the Mekong River.

Ethnically and geographically, Northeast Thailand has changed little in the last 125 years. There are three major subcultures: Cambodian, located primarily in the three provinces bordering Cambodia, the Korat Thai, located primarily in Korat, and the Lao, located throughout the Northeast and by far the dominant group. There have been only minor migrations into the Northeast in the last century, the most important being the Phuthai from the Laos mountains. To bring the history of the area up to the present, then, one must discuss the relationship between the Northeast and the Bangkok government. This not easily done, however, because of the lack of reliable research. Also, the "pronouncements and plans" of the Thai government as regards the Northeast have tended to be quite different from the actions or inactions of government in the not too distant past.

From the fall of Vientiane in 1828 to the beginning of the 20th century, the Northeast, like the outlying districts in the other directions, was treated as a vassal state. Money and power were concentrated in the central region and whatever development there was took place there. The first attempt to communicate with the Northeast came in 1892 when King Chulalongkorn began a railway from Bangkok to Korat. The project was completed in 1900 and greatly benefited the Korat area. Another line from Korat to Ubol was begun in 1921, but the area north of Korat remained effectively isolated for many more years. It was not until sometime after the coup of 1932 that the line was extended towards Nongkhai.

Before the railroad, travel from the Northeast to Bangkok was limited to the "cart trail" roads which were completely impassible during the wet season. Unlike the North, the Northeast does not have a water system that runs toward the central plains. Thus waterways could not act as a connecting system in the wet season.

The absence of a good physical connection between these two areas for so many years, however, does not alone explain the separateness between Bangkok and the Northeast which still exists today. Not more than a 1000 years ago, the Laos and the central Thais were essentially the same people. Sometime around the 11th or 12th century, one group migrated south into the Chao Phya valley. Another group migrated east and settled into the Luang Prabang area. In the 18th and 19th centuries, some of this group continued south and eventually became the Northeast Thai-Lao, when they were relocated by victorious Thai armies from Aythuya and Bangkok. Along the way the physical environments that these two groups experienced were different enough to cause very noticeable variance between them in language, culture and attitudes.

[Page 6/29] In choosing the southern route, the group that became the central Thai took the way most conducive to the development in the sense of nationhood. The Chao Phya valley proved to be quite fertile with sufficient water throughout most of the year, and very importantly, it offered a good transportation system to most of what became the central kingdom. Further, it was favorably located so

that these people came into frequent contact with other civilizations, both Asian and European.

The group that migrated eastward encountered quite different conditions. The land was not so fertile, and due to the mountainous terrain, these people found it difficult to bind the territory into a tight and manageable kingdom. The riches that were acquired by the kingdom of Siam were never attained by the Laos kingdoms. In short, over the period of several centuries the central Thai kingdom at Aythuya amassed riches, which in turn enabled it to foster the development of its arts which we, today, consider to be classical Thai. The architectural heights reached in Aythuya, Sukhothai, and other central plains towns were never remotely challenged by Laos. In assessing Lao art, one must look in different places. The temples were small, but much detail was achieved in wood carving. In dance, it was not the royal court but rather the villages that developed the uniquely Laotian style. In Siam classical dance was developed for and enjoyed by the elite, while in Laos the dance was for the folk, developed, enjoyed, and participated in by everyone. These styles have carried on down to the present. Today, when one mentions the Thai dance, he means the classical style, which only a few people are really able to perform. However, when one talks about Lao and Isaan dance, he means the folk style. What it lacks in gold-colored beauty and eloquence is soon forgotten in the vibrance, exuberance, and simple beauty of the performers (which can be almost anyone in the villages).

The concept of government also varied between the two regions. Over a period of time the Aythuya kings developed a very centralized government with a rather complex administrative structure. The kingdom was also helped by a large number of strong kings, who extended Siamese power into wider areas. Generally, the armies were strong and except for the Burmese, the Aythuya government would have been paramount in Southeast Asia by the 16th century. Much was demanded by the king from his subjects, such as military service which if necessary could amount to half of each year from the age of 20 to the age of 60 years. Also, all land belonged to the king who "loaned" it in relation to one's position in the established hierarchy. But along with more land came more responsibility to the king. Thus, all power really rested in the king.

In Laos, however, this strong centralization was never accomplished. For a time into the 17th century, the Laos kings held the country together fairly well; but it then slowly broke apart, due to the difficulty of communication, strong neighboring states, and a lack of strong kings who could pull the people together.

Thus, by the time the Bangkok government won a final and decisive victory over Vientiane in 1828, the people in the Northeast, though Thai in origin, were qualitatively different from the central Thais. During the remainder of the 19th century, the Siamese government treated the Northeasterners much like defeated prisoners, which in a sense

they were. Virtually all power and authority derived from Bangkok; local officials were almost always chosen with the approval of the central government but were virtually autonomous as long as they sent enough taxes each year. After the boundary treaty [Page 7./29] between Siam and France in the early 1890's, the present Northeast was a defined region and a definite part of the Siam state. With hindsight we can say that had the Bangkok government proceeded to incorporate this region into the integral governmental and developmental plans of the nation at that time, meaningful integration would be far easier today.

Along with reforms in many other areas, King Chulalongkorn began the reorganization of the provincial governments in 1892. Many of the previous abuses, such as forced labor, were outlawed. The provinces were redrawn and smaller units of authority were also created. The provincial officers became more directly answerable to the Ministry of Interior. However, this did not result in any significant change in the relationship of the Northeast to the rest of the country -- it remained relatively isolated. Until very recently, Bangkok did little to change this isolation. Additionally, a condescending attitude toward their "linguisticly inferior, culturally deprived," poor country cousins alienated many Northerners. Thus over a period of years the Isaaner has come to see himself as basically different from the central Thai, something that he had not previously considered or thought about.

After the revolution of 1932, and when there has been a parliament, the Isaaners were able to get a certain amount of representation in the central government. By the 1940's the Northeast had begun to produce first-rate legislators, many of whom were Isaaners who had managed to get a good education. These people were generally very interest in the development of their region and supported or proposed liberal programs. But the Northeast-oriented programs did not usually fare so well in a parliament, dominated by central representatives or with a cabinet, more oriented toward the development of the central region.

In prime ministers, the Northeast has found leadership sympathetic to its problems. The first was Pridii, who had varying degrees of power from 1932 when he was one of the chief engineers of the coup to the end of the 1940's when he was finally driven into exile (now reportedly in China) for purportedly being implicated in the death of Rama VIII. The second man was Sarit, who rose to power in 1958 after the last military coup. Though considered corrupt, he was sincerely interested in the Northeast and channeled much money into the area for the construction of roads and village improvements. He controlled the military with an iron fist, and in spite of dissent he was able to maintain control of his government. He died in 1963; soon after Thanom Kitakhakorn became Prime Minister and has continued and expanded Northeast development.

There is indeed a Communist movement in the Northeast (as well as in some border

provinces in the North and South): thus a short evaluation of its causes and seriousness is necessary in bringing the history of Isaan up to the moment. The truth of Communist activity perhaps lies somewhere between the naive theory that the present assassinations are only the work of bandits and personal vendettas and that all incidents in the Northeast are Communist inspired.

No discernible Communist movement was evident until sometime after World War II, and in its early stages was almost positively foreign inspired and led. It gained little backing for several reasons. Thailand had never been under colonial rule, thus there was no real "devil" to unite against. Secondly, though very poor, the Isaan villager has always had enough rice to [Page_8/29] eat. And third, there seems to be a basic Thai-Lao trait that does not make them too susceptible to overt protest. Thus, during the 1950's the Communist movement found the going rather rough. Eventually, however, the leaders found a suitable "devil" to rally at least some of the Northerners: the Thai government itself. As the conditions in Isaan improve, villagers have become more aware of just how much better off the central plains farmers are.

To counteract its negative image, the central government has undertaken a development plan for the Northeast. With the assistance of various U.S. and other foreign agencies and some private companies, extensive development has been started. USOM has contributed advisors and material for the greatly expanded road building and water projects. The U.S.

military has also built many roads, greatly assisting the opening of more villages to economic development. Also, the U.S. military has been assisting in the training of the Thai military; USOM, in training the police in counter-insurgency operations.

The Communists have been able to make inroads in the Northeast because of the now very extensive presence of the U.S. military in the area. Major bases are located in Ubol, Korat, Udorn and Nakorn Phanom, and there are at least two more bases in Sakol Nakorn and Khonkaen. The communists have taken advantage of the obvious American presence in the Northeast and its influence on the Thai military. The propaganda has highly distorted the facts and contends that the U.S. government has occupied Thailand and is using the country as its base for imperialistic advances. Some villagers, because of their lack of education, their deep distrust of the government, and the promises massed by the communists, have joined the terrorist movement. As false as the charges are against the U.S., they cannot be easily disproved in the eyes of the villagers. Until the presence of the American military is reduced or hidden (which is difficult), this will be a strong propaganda weapon of the communists.

Of the villagers who do join the terrorists, many eventually surrender to government forces because they see that the Communists cannot give them what it promised. Sniping at and then running from government forces and living in fear in the forest with insufficient food and little friendship is very

alien to the Thai-Lao farmer. He much prefers the security of the village where there is always at least enough to eat. In spite of this there are some ideological Communists in the hills who come from two main sources. First, there are the foreign elements. Of these one group has come to Thailand for the expressed purpose of creating discontent. The other group is made up of Vietnamese (who mostly support Ho Chi Minh) who fled to Thailand during the French-Indochina war. Settling primarily in Nongkhai, Sakol Nakorn, and Nakorn Phanom, most of these people planned to return after hostilities ceased. At first the Thai government did assist them in returning, but eventually South Vietnam refused entry to any more because most of them support Ho Chi Minh, and North Vietnam refused their repatriation because they had enough trouble caring for their population already. Most of these "Thai" Vietnamese have not taken Thai citizenship because they still hope that one day they will be able to return, and because of the second-class status the Thai government has forced on them.

The second source of Communist ideologists is those Northeast Thais who are sent "abroad" to North Vietnam or China for intensive propaganda and insurgency training. A possible third source might include exiled Northeast politicians who left Thailand in the early 1950's after the fall of Pridii.

[Page_9/29] The state of the Northeast at present, then, seems to be somewhat confused, but not necessarily unpredictable or pessimistic. Given a few favorable

developments, the Northeast may very well reach virtual equality with the mainstream of Thai society. Three things seem to be of paramount importance if this is going to come about. First, the central Thai people must tone down their "country cousin" attitudes toward Northerners. The Thai government has already made efforts in this direction. Officials are encouraged to learn the local dialect and customs; some have and this has greatly improved the rapport between official and villager, but there is still a long way to go. Another encouraging sign is that the Northerners now have a feeling of regional identity and people from other regions are becoming more aware that the Isaan does in fact have an old and rich culture that is worth studying and maybe even worth saving.

The second thing is that the Thai government must continue and accelerate development plans when possible. Up to now the Thai military government has instituted development somewhat grudgingly. It is basically a problem of whether or not the richer regions will be willing to pour a larger portion of funds into the poorer regions. The new constitutional government is not far in the future, and it is possible that a parliament should be one-third Isaan, will be more concerned with the poor areas. A new government could go a long way in easing some of the old and painful friction between the Northerners and the government.

The third element of change necessary will be a concerted effort by the U.S. or any other government to assist in the development

of the region. At present, the U.S. has been forced to cut back many of its programs, but if the Vietnam crisis can be settled, much money would be freed, enabling the expansion of new projects in the Northeast. One of the critical necessities is for the increase and expansion of the educational system. Regardless of the amount of economic development that takes place, little will benefit poor villager until he is taught of the advantages of irrigation, second cropping, and fertilizer. And little long-range improvement will occur until he sees the advantage of education for his children.

All three elements have been begun, but they must be greatly expanded. Every effort should be made to bring the Isaaner into the mainstream of the Thai economic structure. At the same time, however, the people should be encouraged to maintain their cultural identity. There is nothing inherent in their culture that would inhibit them from being Thai. They have an amazingly resilient culture that has withstood years of subservience to other governments; they are proud, independent, and have a strong ability to produce leaders both in the village and in national politics.

The Isaaner, in fact, considers himself a Laos person, but a Thai citizen. He has a strong loyalty to the Thai King and to his area.

[Page_10/29] ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

By all tokens, Northeast Thailand, with its area of 66,000 square miles (one third

of the nation's total area) and 34 percent of the population, should be an important force in the economic, political, cultural, and social life of Thailand, yet it has yet to find its place in the national life. Economically speaking, the Northeast has always lagged far behind the rest of the nation. Although figures are hard to find and often do not agree, it is estimated that in 1953, the Northeast average income was around 44 percent of the national average. By 1968 this had improved to only 50 percent of the national average or over one-fourth of the per capita income in the central plains region. Since this per capita income reflects the improvements made by townspeople, who have approximately the same income as town dwellers in other parts of the country, and large farmers, it does not really reflect the economic position of the Isaan villager. Less than 600 baht (US\$30.00) of the average per capita income is in cash -- this means that the Northeast villagers receive far less cash income than the national average. It is estimated that 78 percent of the villagers in the Northeast receive about \$15.00 cash income a year and consume another \$15.00 or so in kind.

As the equality of income in kind to cash income for the majority of villagers shows, the Northeast villager is not yet involved in the cash economy of the "modern" world. He begins to adjust to the workings of the cash economy as he adjusts to the wide world outside his village (thanks chiefly to the improved transportation and communication of the past few years), but until the past

decade or so money was a thing of little meaning to the rural Northeasterner. The Northeast farmer has traditionally been self-sufficient; he has produced only for his own needs and has been dependent on the outside world only for such necessities as metal tools which he could not easily produce. This self-sufficient, subsistence level production attitude is one of the big problems facing those who wish to increase farm production in the region. There seems to be little concept of maximizing output -- farmers with larger holdings often cultivate a smaller percentage of their fields. Government officials often find their efforts to increase production by introducing innovations such as fertilizer, second crops, etc. frustrated because of this self-sufficient attitude. Other outside observers have commented on the reluctance of the Isaan farmer to make himself dependent on outside institutions such as the world market, which he doesn't understand, or trust. The low educational level in the Northeast explains a lot of this reluctance. Recently, a government official said it would be difficult to persuade farmers to accept the government's offer to clear trees and stumps from their fields; they couldn't read the agreement and would be afraid to sign it because they feared they might be signing away their property rights. Traditionally, outside institutions are not to be trusted -- and that goes for the competitive market place as well as the government. Some farmers who experienced the terrific decline in the price of kenaf after being assured that it was indeed a good cash crop found this out only too well.

Attitudes of farmers are not, of course, the only deterrent to economic progress in the Northeast. In most of Thailand, farmers must only be taught to do better what they are already doing, e.g., to use better strains of rice, to use fertilizer, etc., to improve their economic position. In the Northeast, however, the land is so poor and the water supply so limited that simple education of [the] farmer will not solve the problem. The land of the Korat Plateau is, for the most part, high, dry land. Much of it is hilly, some is termed [Page 11/29] "marginal upland" and is not suitable for rice; other land which is used for rice is, in actuality, marginal for this crop. Compare rice production per hectare in the Northeast with that of the rest of the country: In 1960, the Northeast produced 1.03 metric tons/hectare while the rest of the country produced 1.66 metric tons/hectare. The agricultural product value/rai in the same year was 149 Baht/rai for the Northeast compared with an average of 260 Baht/rai for the nation as a whole. Not only is the percentage of land which is cultivated low (18 percent), but the production rate on what is cultivated is appalling, especially in years with bad weather. Changes of crops, and completely new methods of farming are necessary to improve production.

Rice is the main crop for the area, occupying approximately 68 percent of total farmland. Most of the rice grown is of the glutinous or "sticky" variety, which has a shorter growing season than the non-glutinous varieties: it is also favored by Northerners. It is not, however, suited to

the national market as it is not in much demand in other regions or for export. Attempts to introduce other varieties of rice, such as the new high-yield Philippine variety, have met with little success. The farmers don't like the taste of the new varieties and so long as their main interest is in production for their own needs, they will not want to change from their old, familiar khaaw niaw [sticky rice]. Experiments are being done to find a new variety which will be both higher-yield and acceptable to the villagers.

Other crops currently grown in the Northeast include corn, sugar cane, watermelon, cotton, and kenaf. Kenaf is the largest cash crop grown. Its production increased by 1500 percent from 1957 to 1961 as a result of a government drive to introduce it as a second crop. It might be a good second crop for the Northeast as it can be grown on newly cleared forest land or other upland area not suited for paddy. Its production, thus, does not interfere with the main crop - rice. The initial optimism about kenaf as a cash crop has, however, been desiccated by a dramatic price decline following an overabundance of such fibers on the international market. The low price now paid for Northeast kenaf is also due in part to the low quality of kenaf produced. Northeast kenaf is of low quality because there is insufficient water to "ret" (process) it. Kenaf processing requires soaking the reeds in water for a long while and then beating them to break up the fibers. It is a process which requires as a great deal of water, which over much of the Northeast is just not available.

Again, the problem comes down to water. Statistically speaking, there should be enough water, for Northeast total rainfall equals and, in some regions, exceeds the total annual rainfall of the north and central regions of Thailand. The short, concentrated rainy season, the high hilly land, and the sandy, coarse-textured soil combine, however, to render the Northeast arid for most of the year. Farmers in the area raise one crop a year, during the rainy season, but the other 6-8 months of the year the land in the Northeast is as dry as the proverbial bone. In fact, even during the rainy season a large portion of the land is dry because drainage takes place so fast. One who has visited the region will never forget the thick reddish-brown dust; this dust typifies the Northeast's major problem - lack of water, or, rather, lack of adequate water control, for there are times when the farmers suffer from too much water (rainy season floods can destroy a farmer's crops as easily as a lack of water). When asked about the needs of their people, village leaders are quick to respond that water control and storage are number one on their list; it is easy to understand why.

[Page 12/29] Various projects have been started to provide the much needed water control and irrigation facilities. Smallest among these are village-level projects started by ambitious village leaders and, perhaps, encouraged by the local monks as merit-making activities. (The role of progressive monks in the development process is an interesting factor.) These projects may be financed on the local level or

they may receive some aid from the central government. The government was exceedingly slow in recognizing the problems and needs of the Northeast (see the section on History), but since the 1950's, it has responded by realizing the necessity of government assistance in the region. Central government aid has produced impressive results. The government's first six-year plan of 1961-1966 began work on infrastructural projects such as roads, dams, etc., and included some work at the village level. The second plan, scheduled for 1967-71 continues work on the larger projects and includes village level projects for social change and economic development.

Large dams have been build at Nam Pong in Khonkaen Province, Lam Pao in Kalasin, Lam Tom Noi in Ubol, and Nam Pung in Sakol Nakorn, and many others are scheduled for construction. Irrigation systems to distribute the water from these reservoirs are also presently under construction. However, less than one-third of all cultivated land in the area is irrigated.

Ubolratana Dam at Nam Pong in Khonkaen is part of the Lower Mekong River Basin Project of the United Nations which will provide water, electricity, flood control, and eventually a whole new economic climate for the Northeast Thai farmers. The project, which will develop the Mekong sand its tributaries for use by the four nations on the banks of the Mekong is also carrying on research to help with the modernization of farming in the area when adequate water is available. The Pilot and Demonstration Farm for Irrigated Agriculture in Kalasin, a joint Food and Agricultural

Organization and Thai government project, just one example among many projects, is carrying out experiments to develop new crops and methods of cultivation for the Northeast. Experiments are being done there (as at other Thai government farms) with crops which can be grown during the dry season with help of irrigation. Experiments are being done to determine appropriate crops, varieties, fertilizers, methods of irrigation, etc. Among the crops being experimented with are corn, cotton, soy beans, mung beans, and peanuts. It is hoped that these can be introduced to the farmers who will receive irrigation water. Presently, farmers on the experimental farm in Kalasin receive free seeds, fertilizers, water, and agricultural advice. There is some success, but of course it is slow in coming because of the traditional attitudes of the farmers. A core of farmers favorable to new ideas will have to be developed if real agricultural progress is going to be made in the Northeast. Agricultural education and education for change in the schools, particularly at the lower pratom level which is as far as many village children go in school, will be important in developing this core of receptive farm leaders. Such education must be stressed by the government to reinforce its other projects.

Aside from irrigation and outside of the crop-producing realm, the government is carrying on other projects to aid the economy of the Northeast. Among these are promotion of silk raising, livestock, and fish. The Fisheries Department is aiding farmers with the construction of fish ponds and is providing

fingerlings. Planting of fish on a larger scale is presently being done at Ubolratana, Lam Pao, and Nam Pung reservoirs; such plantings will probably [Page_13/29] increase as more money becomes available for the project. The annual production of fish from Ubolratana now is valued at 5 million baht. It is estimated that this will rise to 20 million baht when the project is completed. The fish will be available to Northerners for their own consumption, thus providing a much needed increase in protein intake and will also be processed for distribution to large population centers in other areas of the country. If continuing government support is forthcoming, fishing may become a substantial industry in the "arid" Northeast.

Important both to the fishing industry and the development of all cash crops is an adequate transportation system. It has been estimated that roughly 50 percent of Northeast Thai villages are more than 10 kilometers away from roads usable by cars in the rainy season. The government's accelerated Rural Development (ARD) program, the major development program in the Northeast which was started in January 1966, as a direct response to the Communist threat, has as one of its major goals the connection of villages to the outside by means of feeder roads. It is hoped that eventually no village will be farther than 3 kilometers from a feeder road. ARD is doing a good job of bringing the outside world to the villagers, or vice versa, and this alone will give impetus to economic development. People who see what the outside world has to offer probably will have more incentive to become cash-producers.

In addition to road building, ARD operates to encourage development through encouragement of agribusiness (the production of cash crops), through its youth worker program, where trained young people try to bring communities together into workable units, by giving medical need and in many other ways. Progress in all of these areas is necessary. One of the most important in the long run may be the promotion of agribusiness because Thai farmers need lots of counsel and assistance in becoming businessmen/farmers. Credit and marketing cooperatives, loans from banks, simple business education -- all these are desperately needed by the Northeast Thai villagers.

The ARD program, locally under the control of the provincial governors, to provide a sense of participation, is part of the overall economic plan for the Northeast. Developed last year as a long-term and comprehensive regional development plan, the NEED (Northeast Economic Development) Plan is an attempt of the Thai government to greatly influence growth of the region in the next five years. It was initiated by the Committee for the Development of the Northeast and project proposals will be drawn up from suggestions submitted by village, tambol, and province leaders. It is expected that as a result of this plan, farmer per capita income will be doubled at the end of five years. This is a big task, but one that may be accomplished if the right steps are taken. Such development is certainly necessary if the Northeast is going to take its place as an important part of the Thai nation.

The language of the Northeast differs a great deal from the language of central Thailand and other parts of the country. A newly-arrived Volunteer, anxious to test his listening and speaking ability, may well be dismayed at the language situation in the area. Central Thai is simply not spoken by most village Northeasterners. People in towns and cities can speak the Bangkok dialect, but do so only when talking to superiors, such as officials from Bangkok or to foreigners who have learned only Bangkok Thai. This is supposedly the official language for education as well as other government activities, but use of it in schools varies from none to most of the time depending on the local situation. The local dialect, or "phasaa phynn muang" is, however, the dominant language in all parts of the Northeast.

The local dialects vary from the Cambodian dialect of Buriram, Surin, and parts of Srisaket to the Korat Thai of Nakornrajasrma to the language of the small ethnic groups such as Phuthai. (See the section on Peoples.) The most common dialects are all, however, [are] variants of Thai-Lao, a Thai language close to the "true" Lao of Laos. It is estimated that there are approximately 37 Lao dialects. The differences among these dialects are generally slight, having to do with tone changes and vowel differences. There is, however, a noticeable change as one goes closer to Laos. Going from Mahasarakham to

Kalasin to Sakol Nakorn to Nakorn Phanom, one notices a drop in the clarity of speech, an increase in nasalization, and other evidence of increasing "Laoization."

In recent years, thanks chiefly to radio and in a smaller degree to television, there has evolved a "standard" Isaan language. This is the educated Northerners' language and it is the language of the radio and TV. Most Northerners can probably understand this language. This language is now being taught to at least some of the officials coming from other regions to the Northeast. In the past, these officials were completely lost when they arrived in the Northeast and caused a great deal of resentment in their inability to speak the local language and their reluctance to learn it. Some progress has been made in this area, but certainly the problem of language is one which in the past has added to the antagonism between the Northeast and the rest of the country.

Speakers of non-Lao dialects (Khmer, Phuthai, etc.) generally also speak the local variation of Thai-Lao. This means that for some Northerners central Thai is their third language. For virtually every resident of the area, Thai is the second language and this presents one of the largest barriers to the success of the educational system in the Northeast. Beginning elementary students in the Northeast must learn to speak and understand Thai, not only read and write it, and until they master central Thai very little learning can take place in their other subjects. Add English as a third or fourth

language at the Pratom 5 level and you really have a problem.

Volunteers in the Northeast who work mainly in towns and with reasonably educated people, e.g., TEFL teachers, can get along without a knowledge of phasaa Isaan, but it is always useful to understand as much as possible or much of the world of Northeast Thailand may pass you by. Those Volunteers who spend a great deal of time in the field will find that mastery of phasaa *phyyn maang* (local dialect) is more important than mastery of central Thai.

[Page_15/29] Language materials are available from the Peace Corps Regional Office in Khonkaen and these provide a sound introduction to the complex problem of of Northeastern language. Some differences between Central Thai and Thai-Lao involve out and out vocabulary differences -- others are simply consonant, vowel, or tone changes and follow some fairly regular rules for each area dialect.

In general, Northeast dialects have fewer sounds than Bangkok Thai -- and more tones. Among the easily learned changes are from the initial consonant "chaw" in central Thai to the consonant "saw" in Northeast dialects (e.g., "chuamong" becomes "suamong", "chyy" becomes "syy", etc.). and from initial consonant clusters to single consonants in Northeast (e.g., "klya" becomes "kya", "khuat " becomes "kuat", "kwua" becomes "kua", "plaa" becomes "paa", etc.). One consonant sound which does exist in the Northeast dialect but not in central Thai is the initial "nj" sound.

This consonant was in old Thai but the evolution of the language has caused it to disappear from the central region. This sound, which is much like the "n" in "crayon" or the "gn" in "cognac", takes the place of some "jaws" in central Thai (e.g., "jeek" becomes "njeek", "jang" becomes "njang", etc.)
[Quotation marks added by CHP.]

Vowels change also but these changes are not consistent throughout the Northeast. Neither are tone changes. Lao dialects have from 5-7 tones with 7 being quite common. These tones often change from one area to another. For more information and comparison of Thai-Lao and central Thai, see "An Introduction to Phasaa Phaak Isaan" by Jimmy G. Harris, available from the Peace Corps.

[Page 16/29] RELIGION

Northeast Thais are like most other Thais, nominally Buddhists. This means that most of their organized religious practices are conducted through the medium of the Buddhist religion and take place at the local temple. It is fair to say, however, that Northeastern religious practice differs more than a little from the norm prescribed by the Department of Religious Education in Bangkok. It is necessary for a monk to conform to many of the directives if he wishes to advance in the hierarchy -- that is, he must "Thai-ize" himself just as a Northerner who wants to advance in the governmental hierarchy must Thai-ize himself by renouncing many "Lao" or "Isaan" ways of acting, thinking, and speaking.

The average Isaan monk (or resident) is not, however, very much concerned with advancement in this world and so he will generally adhere to the Northeast beliefs and practices, even to including spirit worship in temple ceremonies and acting as a "spirit doctor" on occasion.

Most village Northeasterners are not too preoccupied with advancing themselves in this world; their main concern is ensuring a better life the next time they come back to earth. Thus their main religious objectives center around merit making (tham buun) by feeding monks, building new temples, presenting gifts to the monks and doing other things which have been designated as "merit-producing" activities. (With the help of clever community development workers and a cooperative local abbot this desire to make merit has proved to be an effective tool of development. Some villages have dug wells, built toilets, constructed roads, etc., under the guise of merit-making activities. It would be nice if all local abbots were as progressive as those who thought up these schemes.)

Buddhism is, thus a matter of doing things, not of meditation and study and this differs radically from the teachings of the Lord Buddha. But this last is true in all parts of the country. Religion is, however, a vital force in the life of Northeasterners. Statistics show that more Northeast men have spent time in the novicehood or priesthood than in other regions of the country. Such service is, of course, a way to achieve respect. One who has served in a monastery always retains a title of respect and he commands a great deal

of admiration.

Aside from Buddhism, or maybe more accurately, in conjunction with Buddhism, the relation of Northerners involves spirit worship. This religion, or should we say cult, is usually classified as animism. It involves a worship of, and respect for, the spirits which are believed to be present everywhere. Most Northeastern ceremonies, such as housewarmings, weddings, funerals, going-away and home-coming ceremonies, and birth rites, involve propitiation of the spirits. The spirits of one's ancestors are especially well cared for as Northerners don't want unhappy spirits hanging around.

There are many spirits, however, and they can cause accidents, make people do what they don't want to do, cause illness, disturb people by making loud noises and generally cause trouble. Each village has a maw phii or spirit doctor to treat illness and advise about the treatment of the spirits. **[Page_17./29]** Whether one believes in these spirits or not, they are very real to a majority of Northerners and practices related to propitiating them and thereby avoiding their wrath are as important in the villages as Buddhism itself. Most often, of course, the two are tied together so closely that it is hard to separate them. Thais who have studied Buddhism carefully say that the Northeast religion is not Buddhism, but rather animism. However classified, religion means a great deal to Northerners and is a living force in their lives. Temple ceremonies, merit-making activities, and spirit propitiating are all

important in the lives of the Northeast villagers.

[Page 18/29] FOOD

As might be expected, food in the Northeast differs quite a bit from food in the other regions of Thailand. Always available, of course, are the various kutiaw and baamii dishes, the fried vegetables and meat dishes, and khaaw phat. Various other Chinese and Thai foods are also available, but residents of the Northeast also have a chance to eat many dishes which are peculiar to the Lao areas of Thailand.

In general, Lao food tends to be quite spicy. Northerners do not use coconut as much as the other Thais and their foods are not as rich. The Northeast diet is considerably less nutritious than that of other parts of Thailand, partially because there is not the variety of fruits and vegetables here that is found in the rest of the country. Another explanation is, of course, that the people are much poorer than their brothers in the other regions of Thailand and cannot afford the more nutritious foods such as meat. A great many Lao dishes are uncooked. This is partly due to the fact that the whole family is obliged to work in the Northeast and no one has time to cook food. Northerners also prefer their food uncooked. They are not concerned about the parasites that are often transmitted through the raw food. For your information, many of the dishes eaten raw can be cooked and are just as good that way though many Northerners will deny the latter statement.

Here are brief descriptions of some of the foods you may run into. There are, of course, many other dishes which are peculiar to one region of the Northeast or another. This is just for a start, you will discover many other delicacies.

khaaw niaw (sticky rice) -- This is the staple food of the Northeast, as opposed to khaaw caaw (regular rice), the kind of rice you are used to. Your friends in other regions of the country will claim that they too eat khaaw niaw, but outside of the North and the Northeast, khaaw niaw is used only in khanoms (deserts). Here it may be an entire meal and it is usually eaten three times a day by country residents. Most Volunteers in the Northeast love it. This is incomprehensible to those from other regions, but then Volunteers too are victims of regionalism. Sticky rice is eaten with the fingers.

plaa laa (fish sauce) -- The official name of this is pal raa, but Northerners having no r's and few "pl's" in their dialects usually call it plaa laa, or paa laa, or call it by its Lao name, paa daek. It is the most common kap khaaw (things eaten with rice) in the Northeast. Plaa laa is a fermented fish sauce or paste which is aged about three months before it is eaten. It's eaten plain with sticky rice and is also put into other dishes such as som tam (see below). It has a strong taste and smell. Plaa laa is made from raw fish and sometimes contains liver fluke, a not-so-nice parasite. It can be cooked.

som tam (unripe papaya salad) -- Som tam is another common kap khaaw in the Northeast. It's made with shredded green papaya, chillies, garlic, tomatoes, nam plaa (fish soy), or plaa laa, and sometime other things. It is kind of like a salad and is eaten with the fingers as most Northeast dishes. Its flavor can range from maj phet leej to phet phet. Don't give up if it is too spice the first time -- it's delicious. It is sometimes referred to to as tam som or by its Lao name tam bak huung.

[Page 19/29] laap (spicy chopped meat) -- Laap is ground meat (beef, pork, fish, chicken, duck, goose or frog) mixed with lime, chillies, and other spices. It tends to be very spicy. Sometimes laap is eaten raw and sometimes it is cooked. It ranges from very good (saap ilii in Lao) to awful. It's interesting to note that the first farang to eat laap was Marco Polo who was served a similar dish when he visited the Orient.

kaj yang (roasted chicken) -- Although other parts of Thailand have kaj yang, barbecued chicken, the Northeast is probably best known for it. It's sold by the piece or by the whole chicken and is usually eaten with sticky rice.

sajkrook (sausages) -- There are many kinds of sausages in the Northeast. Look for them. Roi-et is especially known for its sausages. Naem is one popular kind of sausage. It is eaten with beer or with Mekhong. It is made from raw pork and is not cooked before serving. Another variant from Kalasin is especially

famous, mum (chopped aged beef).

kop (frogs) -- Frogs are eaten by many people in the Northeast. They can be made into a curry or barbecued or fixed in other ways.

insects -- Assorted beetles, ants, and other insects are eaten by Northeasterners. They are fried or eaten alive. Red ant eggs are very popular -- it is said that they add a sour taste to food.

lyat (blood) -- Northeasterners use blood in many ways in their cooking. It provides a nutritious supplement to their meager diet. Blood can be eaten (drunk?) raw or it can be cooked. One way of cooking it is to steam it and make little cakes. Another way is to make laap with it.

These are just a few of the dishes peculiar to the Northeastern people (and their Lao cousins in Northern Thailand). Many of these dishes are village food and a Volunteer who spends his time exclusively in town may not encounter some of the more exotic ones. All of you will discover many more interesting things. Happy Eating!

[PAGE_20/29] CELEBRATIONS AND ENTERTAINMENT

The number of Thai national holidays seems at times to include four days of the week. Many of these celebrations are connected to the Buddhist religion, as they are not distinctive to Isaan alone. The relative importance of these ceremonies varies only

slightly in most cases among the Central Thai, Isaan, and Lao cultures. There are, however, notable exceptions, such as Makhabuacha and Witsakhabucha which are celebrated in the central villages and Isaan cities, but not in the Isaan villages, conversely, Bun Phawat, a ceremony (but not a national holiday) commemorating the "Great Life" incarnate of Buddha, is celebrated only in Isaan.

The remaining national holidays in Thailand are either secular or royal. The royal ceremonies, such as the ploughing ceremony, are generally observed only in the Bangkok area, and the secular festivals are usually not celebrated in the Isaan village, except that the schools are closed. The Isaan villagers, then, celebrate most of the national religious holidays, but only some of the secular holidays. On the other hand, these people have developed a number of ceremonies which they share to a large extent with their Lao neighbors. These are primarily related to phii (spirit) worship. Included in this category are the bun chaawci, a thanksgiving festival held at the end of the rice harvest; the "liang baan" or "liang phii pu ta" at which time the people feed the village spirits; and "bun padapdin" and "bun khaaw sak" in which the ancestral sprits are given special food and attention.

There is another important annual celebration in the Isaan village, which may be of Khmer origin. This is the "bun baang fai", held just before the rainy season is supposed to begin in May. This may be one of the most exciting, colorful, and ribald festivals of the

Isaan villages, and is usually held on a Sunday in May, although customs and dates differ throughout Isaan. The people make huge rockets generally from bamboo and gunpowder and launch them from trees in the paddy fields. A well-constructed rocket may go up several hundred meters before crashing back into the fields. The villagers dress up and play their native instruments, i.e., khaan (a bamboo reed instrument), chiing (cymbals), klang jaw (long drum), and sao (a two-string violin). At the same time the men get progressively more drunk and a young man will be persuaded to dress up like a woman. He will be followed by a small band with which he carries on an orally and physically risqué dialogue. If successful, the bun baang fai brings the rainy season and the rice planting begins.

The bun baang fai, however, does not always bring the rain at the appropriate time; so, if necessary, other ceremonies are performed in an attempt to bring on the rain gods. The most widely used ceremony is the cat ceremony which possibly originated in Changwat Chaiyaphum. A group of young men (drunk and singing, of course), carry a cat tied to a pole around the village. They carry the cat around the outside of a house and wait until the occupants come out, pour a cup of water on the cat, and give the men some money, they the parade proceeds to each of the other houses. The pouring of water on the cat is supposed to bring rain, while the money is used for another celebration by the young men.

A second related ritual stems from the belief among villagers that the king cobra

causes droughts. The snake hatches its eggs only in the dry weather, thus those who believe this myth try to find and destroy the eggs of the king cobra. This is done by building a large fire with a pot of water in [Page 21/29] the middle. Then one man, on a horse, searches in the field until he finds an egg. He takes the egg and rides back to the fire, where he throws the egg into the now boiling water. Theory has it that the snake pursues the egg, "jumps" into the pot, is killed, and the rains come.

Many other informal ceremonies are invoked in order to take care of the various occasions or emergencies which the Isaan person faces in his life. Sickness is a very common problem due to the Isaan villagers' lack of knowledge about health and medicine and the very limited number of doctors available, even in emergencies. In the Isaan cities, where there are doctors and hospitals, most people frequent these services for almost any real or imagined sickness. The standard solution to the problems is a shot and possibly several different colored pills. (Most Thais honestly believe that the doctor is slighting them unless they are given a shot whether or not one is needed.) In the villages, where there are no doctors, the inhabitants nevertheless have "outstanding" medical care in the form of curers and mystic monks which rival the successes of city doctors. The most interesting "expert" in medicine is probably a monk who has mystical powers to drive out the bad spirits which everyone "knows" causes sickness in the first place. The well supplied medical mystic kit might contain candles, holy

water, special symbolic replicas, and assorted prayers. The monk will come to the house, and perform his exorcisms (reminiscent of medieval Christian exorcisms). The patient then either recovers because the spirit has fled due to the great powers of the monk, or dies because the spirits wanted the body and could not have been displaced under any conditions. In either case, the monk can't lose, and if the person dies, there is a whole new ceremony to be performed.

Death is cause for one of the largest ceremonies in the life cycle of the Thai person, and very special procedures must be followed. In the cities of the Northeast fairly standard religious ceremonies are followed. If the person dies a natural death, he is usually cremated within three days. The body lies in state at his home until it is taken to the wat for cremation. The final journey begins at the house and is led by a small brass band of drums, cymbals, baritone horn, and sometimes a clarinet. (The tempo and even the melodic structure of the music is strikingly similar to the old New Orleans funeral bands.) Next comes a monk in a saamlaw, the people who pull the casket-laden ox cart, and last, all the other people in the ceremony. When the procession reaches them, some prayers are offered by the monks, the people pay their last respects, and then leave, or wait until the body is cremated. The days preceding the final rites are consumed by numerous dinners or gatherings at the deceased's home by neighbors. This is done to keep the deceased's family from getting depressed. After the body has been cremated,

people assume an attitude of joy, and comments which might seem very impolite or cutting to the Western mind are heard incessantly. (It is possible that this flippant attitude toward death is an external cover, hiding a real feeling of loss among the people.)

In the case of death by unnatural means, i.e., murder, car accidents, childbirth, cholera, and other incomprehensible reasons, the body is buried in the temple grounds. Some Thais say that after a number of years the remains will be brought up and burned, while others say the body is never cremated. In any case, it seems likely that the body is buried in order that the phii will have time to leave the body and find its way to "heaven". This belief that the phii lives in the body is very prevalent in the Northeast, especially in the villages, but also in the cities. Thus, the ceremonies preceding the final rites have certain aspects which are intended to placate the phii. In **[Page_22/29]** the village, the degree of animism in the religious ceremony is much greater than in the city. Tradition is different in each village, but it might be helpful to mention a few from Baan Yang Terng in Ubol Province. When the person dies, a satang is placed in his mouth so that the phii will be able to find its way to the spirit house in the sky. Strings are put around the wrists of a dead man to remind him of his wife, around the neck to remind him of his children, and around his ankles to remind him of his earthly treasures. In selecting the cremation site, an egg is thrown; if it breaks, it is because the spirits like the spot; if it doesn't break, then the egg must be thrown

again in a different place until it breaks. Repeated and different signs are continually being made to inform the spirit that the man has died and to leave the body. Finally, it is very important the spirits be offered food every day so as to appease them. A full death ceremony which might consume parts of three or four days would probably be one of the most interesting events to see, though also very mysterious unless one has a well-informed interpreter.

Another ceremony that one will very possibly experience is the "good luck" or good health ceremony. This may be invoked when one is about to leave on a journey or has just returned, or possibly to invoke luck for some endeavor. The event will probably be held at the house of the person who is sponsoring the ceremony. Monks are invited to the home, where they pray for good fortune. Then they are fed and return to the wat. Then the friends are invited for dinner and a small ceremony is conducted by the sponsor. The friends tie strings around the wrists of the person for whom the party is held. The strings are supposed to bring good luck.

One last ceremony that is very common is the blessing of a house. This is performed when a person builds a new house, or when a new family moves into a house. The procedure is much the same as the "good luck" ceremony, except that strings are not tied to anyone's wrist. The ceremony ends with a large dinner and small talk.

This a short and by no means complete

list of Isaan holidays and ceremonies. Many festivals, etc., are only celebrated in the villages, thus it will be very difficult for most Volunteers to learn about them. If this is the case, you should ask one of your Thai friends who comes from a village to take you to them when they occur. (For a list of official and semi-official celebrations in Isaan, refer to the table on the following page.)

[Page_23/29] FESTIVALS INDIGENOUS TO THE
NORTHEAST

Lunar Month	Date	Name of Ceremony
III	1st half	<u>Bun khaoci</u> (Harvest ceremony in which special types of rice dishes are prepared.)
	No set date	<u>Sukhuankhao</u> (Harvest ceremony to give offering to the soul of the rice; in Central Plains, <u>thamkhwanyung?</u>)
III-IV	Full moon	<u>Bun phawet</u> (Festival devoted to the Vessantara or "Gre at Life" Jataka.)
IV	In March	Teachers Day
V	Full moon	T'ai New

Years (traditional reckoning.)

April 13-16 Songkran
(T'ai New YEARS according to fixed dates)

VI 1st day of
Liangban/liangphiputa (feeding of village
spirits)

waning moon

Later half Bun
bongfai (Firerocket ceremony to tell the Devas
to send
the rains).

VIII Full moon
Khaophansa (Beginning of Buddhist Lent)

IX Last day Bun
padapdin (Ceremony for feeding ancestors;
coupled
with bun khaosak).

X Full moon Bun
khaosak (Another ceremony for feeding
ancestors;
coupled
with bun padapdin).

XI Full moon
Aukphansa (Leaving of Buddhist Lent).

XI-XII Full moon Thot
Kathin (Ceremony for presenting robes and other
gifts to
Buddhist monks).

[Page_24/29] Entertainment, like the celebrations, in the Northeast is quite different from that of the central Thai culture. On certain occasions one can see classical Thai dancing or music in the cities, but the most common, and by far the most popular, forms of entertainment of the Isaan populus are the mawlaam and the medicine show.

A common sight available on practically any passenger bus ride to nearly anywhere in the Northeast is a troupe of rather gaudily dressed men and women carrying with them a huge dilapidated vaudevillian trunk, an electrical generator, and two or four loudspeakers. The women, dressed in loud phasins and heavily made-up, travel with professional boredom, while the men, usually wearing stovepipe trousers and long-pointed and raised-heel shoes, patronizingly accept the curious stares of the surrounding populace. This aloof little group is doubtless on its way to a temple fair or similar type of celebration to perform, at a rather exorbitant fee, a very special and popular kind of entertainment known as the "maw lam". Literally translated as the "doctor dance", an adequate English appellation would be difficult to concoct. The players half-sing, half-dance and half-chant their way through a kind of folk operetta in a way so thoroughly alien to any Western equivalent so as to elude verbal description. Because of its own peculiar qualities, especially those of vocal gymnastics, rhythm, and body movement, the maw lam is one of the most interesting aesthetic experiences to be had in the Northeast.

On the morning or afternoon before the performance, the company prepares its scenery and sound equipment upon a small, hastily constructed wooden stage. There are side-wings of painted canvas hung upon wood frames and a large scene-depicting canvas backdrop. Above there are six or seven canvases, rolled in curtain-shade fashion, in reserve to be dropped at scene changes during the play. At the bottom and top are more narrow strips of painted canvas to surround the stage in a frame effect. A microphone hangs center-stage and at the front a row of variously colored footlights wait to add light and fantasy to the show.

In the evening, after the fair is underway, the first activity upon the mawlam stage is usually a program of songs and dances, interspaced with some often rather ribald humor. The humor is again reminiscent of vaudeville, commanded by a fast-talking, wise-cracking comedian, and including straight-man/funny-man dialogues, and mock slap-stick fist (and foot) fights. Also quite prevalent is play upon sexual identity as a source of comedy, since for example the M.C. may happen to be wearing long hair, exceedingly heavy make-up, and a phasin.

This little pre-show variety program serves as a bally to signal the impending beginning of the dance. Most of the firm mawram disciples have, naturally, firmly situated themselves one or two hours previously. Families come equipped with straw mats and snacks, while many of the men come equipped only to squat endlessly enchanted by the dance.

As the drama begins, the first sound is that of the Northeastern organ-like reed instrument known as the "khaan" which plays a single suspended note while a major character, usually the hero, enters. The hero is dressed in costume according to the era of the epic, but always to the dandiest, **[Page_25/29]** flashiest extreme, and his face is caked with white, nearly caricature make-up. Since many of the stories originated in Laos, the costumes are also Lao, of either royal, upper-class, or peasant variety. The hero "wajs" and proceeds to introduce himself in the singular nasal whine of the mawram, holding forth with rapid-fire sentences and phrases, interrupted at unpredictable intervals by a long voice slide from high to low, undoubtedly creating every size and type of sound wave in existence. The language is some form of the Northeastern tongue, depending upon the origin of the mawram troupe. Most are from Khonkaen, Udorn, Korat, or Ubol. But whatever the variance from the native language of the listeners, it seems that they can understand all or most of the words.

After the hero has introduced himself and give the background for the oncoming story, the rhythm of the accompanying "khaan" picks up, and then suddenly, even joyously, a drum begins sounding loudly and vibrantly, and the speaker bursts into a song and dance, moving his body rhythmically and gracefully using his hands to emphasize and illustrate his song. The song finished, the music continues and the speaker-turned-singer emerges from his position behind the microphone and dances up, down, and across the stage in the movements which will

throughout the drama establish his character, as has the particular melody of his song. After the hero's initial appearance, the other characters emerge for a two or three minute performance, each unfolding a section of the plot. The plot is always fairy-tale simple, but often extended by incredibly long complications. The other characters include a heroine, a villain, and a comedian, as well as minor heroes, heroines, etc. Interchanges often occur with three or four characters on stage, exchanging speeches, songs, and ending simultaneously in extended dance.

The length of the show ranges from long (3-4 hours) to very long (6-8 hours) and often the audience will squat unblinking all night long completely captivated. The most avid fans are older townspeople, villagers, and children, while many of the young, sophisticated, educated population seem to disdain this form of entertainment as crude and old-fashioned. Many villages, where residents cannot afford shoes and clothes, can somehow come up with the two or three thousand baht necessary to engage in a mawram for one night. Each company has two or three stories in its repertoire, some of which are well known throughout the Northeast. The sounds of the larger and better companies are available by radio, and by films which circulate around the various provinces.

The mawram is known of throughout Thailand although its performance route is limited to the Northeast and its language is strictly the Northeastern dialect. It is difficult for a foreigner to understand

completely, even if he is well acquainted with the particular dialect, because of the rapidity of speech and the large scale injection of idioms and slang. Conversely, much of the story, character expression and humor is comprehensible simply through body movement. It is, at any rate, one of the most well preserved traditional art forms of Thailand, and one which is widely popular and widely available.

The second distinctive entertainment is the medicine show, which can be compared with those in the United States less than a hundred years ago, except that today the Thai medicine vendor enters town in a make-shirt motorized **[Page_26/29]** vehicle that almost defies description. It is possibly the offspring of a VW bus and a WWII tank, but it fits the purpose very well. The sides are covered with gaudy advertisements extolling the merits of the medicine and on the top are mounted several fog-horn-sized megaphone speakers, connected to a 5,000-watt amplification system (or so it seems when the system is put into operation). During the day the medicine man may drive through the town announcing his presence, but by the late afternoon he has parked his vehicle in a wat compound, the salaklang, or just a plain field where the people can gather for the evening show. He puts up the movie screen, readies his projector, and waits for the evening procession of men, women, and children with rolled mats under their arms to gather around the screen. If on the first time you go to this show you reach the action before the movie begins, you may well think that one-half of the people are

out of their minds, for in fact they are literally sitting around the screen (on both sides as it were). However, as soon as darkness comes the movie begins and you realize that the screen is rather transparent and the show can be seen from both sides. The range of pictures is quite astounding; you may see a second-rate American cowboy movie (in English yet) which the people appear to understand, and you can't quite comprehend how this could be until you then see the second feature which is a second-rate Thai movie (in Thai) which you actually understand even though the words are completely incoherent. If you are a TEFL teacher, you suddenly realize that language is indeed movement as much as sound. If you are lucky, you may even witness a Charlie Chaplin classic.

Though the people may have come for entertainment, the medicine man has his own ideas, and sooner or later the movies are stopped and the hard sell begins. Some people are immune but a good many can be seen returning home late in the evening with several bottles of the cure-all medicine, medicine that cures headaches, sore stomachs, dysentery, fever, malaria, dengue, cholera, and every other malady that may exist. America hasn't had medicine of this unrivaled stature since the passage of the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1907.

There are other forms of entertainment, such as the town movies, the wat fairs, and the traveling Chinese opera, or "nyiw", but these can be seen anywhere in Thailand. Actually almost any reason can be an

excuse for a party. Sending a person off to a new city, receiving a person from another city, and the annual Thai university reunions are only a few of the occasions for entertainment. You will find, we believe, that the Isaan person is much less inhibited than the central Thai. He is more earthy and shows his emotions much more readily; thus although he may not be the example of "caj jen jen"-ness, which the Thai is supposedly supposed to be, his cajrawn-ness allows him to release his tensions rather than harboring them like the central Thai person. All in all you will probably get the feeling that the celebrations, etc., help to relieve the otherwise hard life of most Isaan people. Maybe their gatherings are a bit raucous or a bit petty, but seldom are they stuffed-shirt.

[Page 27/29] ARCHEOLOGY AND THIAWING

Sometime after receiving your assignment (while in Bangkok), you will probably be asked by an all-knowing Bangkok Thai where you will be sent. When you reply "an amphur in the Northeast", you could be met by one of two replies. Either he will confess that he has never heard of the place or he will offer his sympathy sincerely fearing that you will never return from that region. These remarks may lead you to question the Peace Corps staff for its obviously irresponsible behavior by placing you in a dangerous and desolate region. But after you have settled into your new home and have had a chance to meet the people and look around, you will realize that staff was not irresponsible, but

that most Bangkok Thais are not very interested in things more than 100 kms from their city.

The differences in culture and entertainment are discussed in other sections, but a brief sketch of the archeology and "thiaw" sites might also be helpful. If you are really interested in archeology or related fields, then the Northern or Central regions would be more to your liking (at least up to now). Nothing yet excavated in the Northeast can match the ruins of Sukhothai or Aythuya, or the still functioning, exquisite temples of Chiangmai or Bangkok. We say "yet" because the Northeast is just now coming into its own as a field of serious research. According to some anthropologists and archeologists, the Northeast will prove to be the most valuable archeological site in Thailand and possibly in Southeast Asia.

On the surface the Northeast temples and cities of today look much like the central culture, only smaller and poorer. But underneath the ground, buried by 600 to 3,000 thousand years of dirt, are the remains of at least several civilizations or migratory groups. Looking back beyond the present Northeast culture, which in most cases has not been here for more than 200 years, one finds the remains of the Khmer or Cambodian cultures. Still strong today in the provinces of Srisaket, Buriram, and Surin, the culture once extended as far north s Chaiyaphum. Except for a few exceptions, this civilization in the form of temples and cities is difficult to find, but with increased interest and money and need to dig before the Mekong River Project inundates

the land, much is being unearthed now. Phimai (50 kms north of Korat on the Friendship Highway and 10 kms east from the highway junction) is the best example in Thailand today of the Khmer's architecture. The ruins, located in the center of the city, are being reconstructed by the Department of Fine Arts. Though most of the outer buildings and walls will not be repaired, the inner temple has been assembled very well. It, along with the carved lintels, is well worth the trip.

Phanom Wan Temple (7 kms north of Korat, just east of the Friendship Highway) is easily reached and dates, like Phimai, from the 11th Century. There are hundreds of remains of the Khmer Empire (aerial photography has located more than 200), but only a few have been excavated. Many of these are quite inaccessible, but a few of varying degrees of worth can be reached. About 4 kms from Amphur Kamalasai, Changwat Kalasin, an ancient Khmer city is being reconstructed by archeologists near Muang Phao Daat. The town of Sung Moen (just off Friendship Highway, south of Korat) is near two sites. The first is Nong Ku, as part of the ancient city of Khorakapura, which dates from the 10th Century. About 2 kms away at Muang Sama are the remains of an older city that flourished during the Dvaravati period when the Mon ruled at Lopburi from the 4th to the 6th Centuries. (Other cities, however, particularly in Buriram, Srisaket, and Surin, are difficult to reach and private vehicles are required to reach them.) In Changwat Roi-et there are the remains of two ancient towns, one in Amphur Suwannaphum, the other in Amphur Phanom Phrai.

[Page_28/29] Preceding the Khmer civilization, not much is known about the people who inhabited the Northeast. For years it has been thought that most present Thais are descendants of migrating Southern Chinese who began to appear only 800 years ago. Now, however, due to one of the most spectacular finds in Southeast Asia, anthropologists are going to have to change their theories of Chinese migration, at least into the Northeast. Recently, the remains of a town dating from about 3000 BC have been uncovered near Baan Naa Dii, Changwat Khonkaen. At this site the earliest bronze instruments in Asia have been found and they are contemporaneous to the earliest ones found anywhere in the world.

Not all places worth seeing in the Northeast are connected with the distant past. There are many temples in the Northeast that while old are still in use. Again, Korat probably has the most impressive display. There are many old impressive temples in the city itself that date from the Aythuya period. While in Korat you can visit the old town wall and the statue of Taw Suraanurii, the famous heroine of the 19th Century war with Laos. In Ubol 6 hours by east of Korat by train, there are also many fine old temples. If you are really interested in architecture, here you can see the most unusual temple in Thailand. Located only a few blocks from the center of town on the bank of the Moon River is a 19th Century temple which was designed by a German architect. Almost a joke because of its massive pillars which remind one of the old European cathedrals, it is nevertheless a very

handsome building.

A 5-hour bus ride from North and West of Ubol will bring you to Changwat Mahasarakham. In Amphur Kantharawicha, Phuthai Mongkhon Temple is located which has a famous legend connected with it. In addition to two large statues, one in front of the temple and the other nearby in the woods, there is a legendary third one somewhere made of solid gold, which, if seen by anyone, will cause death within one day. Just to the north of Changwat Kalasin in Tambol Nongpan, Amphur Kamalasai, there is an old monastery with carving, possibly dating from the Aythuya period. To the northeast, along the Lao border is Changwat Nakorn Phanom which (along with Sakol Nakorn and Kalasin) has some very interesting ethnic groups. The most famous are the Phuthai. Renu Village in Nakorn Phanom can be easily reached and is famous for its weaving. In Amphur Tat Phanom, the most important temple in Northeast Thailand is located. Phra Tat Phanom Temple is the center of Buddhist learning and has a beautiful, tall cedi. Every year (around February) there is an enormous temple fair, which people from all over the Northeast and Laos attend.

To the north Changwat Loey is located. In Amphur Chiangkhan there are some old temples. And here one will find some of the most beautiful mountains in Thailand (legends have it that snow has on occasion fallen in these mountains). Unfortunately the road to Loei is marginal in good weather and it takes a hardy soul to brave the bus ride, which starts in at Khonkaen. Nongkhai is the other province along

the northern border. It has some old temples and ruins, but is best known as the crossing point to Vientiane, Laos.

Two more things are well worth mentioning as places to see. First, is Ubolratanat Dam, north of Khonkaen, and then west from the Friendship Highway. It is an impressive structure, providing irrigation and fish for a large number of Northeasterners. The second is the Surin Elephant Round-Up which comes every November. A one or two-day affair, one can ride an elephant for a very reasonable price and enjoy the festival atmosphere.

[Page_29/29] No doubt many places have been overlooked, but the above-mentioned places do offer a change of pace from your work site, and contrary to what most people will tell you, you will not have to flee the Northeast to thiaiw.

(Notes by CHP)

My insertions in the text are in bold and italics, with the page numbers underlined in addition. I have tried to avoid editing, but I have changed what I felt to be obvious misspellings. As the authors had to use typewriters, correcting misspellings and typos would have been difficult for them. Had they had access to computers as we do today they would have changed typos and misspellings in the original, so I've decided to do the same. I have also used the booklet's spelling of Thai words, even though some of them varied throughout. At times my original was so faded

that I had to guess at the text.

Cover page:

ROBERT R. CHARLES -- Peace Corps/Thailand,
Northeast Regional Director and later Country Director

GEORGE VINAL SMITH -- Thai XVIII, Boys
Secondary School, Kalasin

CHRYSTAL STILLINGS SMITH -- Thai XVIII, Girls
Secondary School, Kalasin

JEAN BERNARD -- Thai XIX, Chiang Karn School,
Loey

Chesley H. Prince -- Thai 27, Sakol Nakorn
Teacher Training School and later College

Page 8:

USOM -- Probably U.S. Overseas Mission.

The U.S. military presence in Sakol Nakorn was substantial. A Special Forces camp was located in the Phupan Mountains south of the provincial capital. For a time the Green Berets ran a bar with slot machines in town. It was called "The Green Beret." The U.S. 808th Combat Engineer Battalion, which was improving and paving the road from Sakol Nakorn to Nakorn Phanom, had its main base southeast of the provincial capital and a smaller, temporary base on the road to Nakorn Phanom. A small JUSMAG (Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group) contingent was stationed at the Thai Army base west of the capital on the road to Udorn and near the Sakol Nakorn Teacher Training College.

The U.S. Information Service set up a radio station (AM 909) on the road to Nakorn Phanom, also near the Thai Army base and the college. The PCV's were told that it was the place where Thai Communists would go to surrender. The CIA also had an agent in town. Everybody seemed to know who and what he was and that his code name "Lion".

The base near Khonkaen was probably a listening post monitoring radio traffic in China.

Page 10: 1 acre = 2.5 rai
1 hectare = 6.25 rai

Page 12: pratom = elementary school

Page 18: Mekhong = Thai whiskey

