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MEO HANDBOOK

69 - 006

OCT 8 2 1969

ศูนย์วิจัยและพัฒนาการทหาร

ระหว่าง ไทย – สหรัฐ

JOINT THAI - U.S.

MILITARY RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CENTER

ประเทศไทย

BANGKOK, THAILAND

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คู่มือว่าด้วยชาวเขาเผ่าแม้ว

MEO HANDBOOK

69-006

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ระหว่าง ไทย - สหรัฐฯ

Joint Thai - U.S.
Military Research and Development Center

ประเทศไทย

Bangkok, Thailand

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FOREWORD

In the Fall of 1967, the outbreak of overt insurgency among the hill-tribes of Northern Thailand created a sudden demand for reliable and practical data on the tribal structures, social customs, inter-relationships and value systems of the mountain people. It also revealed that such data was not locally available in a concise and useful form.

Data on the Meo tribe, so far the most deeply involved in the insurgency, was particularly sketchy and was to be found only piecemeal in numerous monographs, interim research reports and separate studies. These were not of a uniformly high level of scholarship, nor did any one of them provide a summary of all available information.

By the Spring of 1969 my staff had assembled a considerable file of papers relating to the Meo. Much of the material was contradictory, and there were important gaps in the information we held. The Intelligence and Research Division, Department of State, generously made its holdings available to us and also obtained for us valuable papers from the Library of Congress. Australian Ambassador McNicol kindly made certain information available to us. We were also assisted by Battelle Memorial Institute Documents Repository, which surveyed and catalogued its Meo material and provided us with extracts of pertinent data.

In April 1969 I requested ARPA to undertake a thorough review of all the data we held jointly, and to assemble from it a concise "handbook" on the Meo which we felt would be useful both to U.S. and Thai officials concerned with the insurgency in North Thailand. Mr. Suthep Soonthornpasuch, Senior Research Specialist, ARPA, undertook the rather considerable task of compiling and reconciling the data and producing a cohesive draft text. Mr. Morton Stone of ARPA edited the final draft and handled certain details of publication. Throughout the work, from conception to publication, Mr. Lamar M. Prosser of my staff made valuable contributions by collecting previously unpublished data and photographic material and editing sections of the text to produce a version more practical for laymen. USIS generously provided a photographer to obtain material not available from other sources. This volume is the product of that effort.

Most of the research sources were in English, and consequently the English edition of the handbook is being published first, but a Thai version will soon follow. It clearly cannot be considered a definitive work on the Meo, but we hope it will be a useful orientation tool and handy reference book for those who work on tribal problems in Thailand.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all those who contributed to the compilation of this book, and to encourage readers who have additional data which might be incorporated into later revisions to contribute it to the Battelle Memorial Institute Documents Repository, or to SA/CI in the American Embassy, Bangkok.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of authors who write about the Meo are in general agreement about their personality characteristics. The Meo are characterized as highly industrious, relatively intelligent, frank and honest, highly aggressive under certain circumstances, and, above all, independent. The tribal independence, and to some extent the individual independence, derives partly from their past conflict with the Chinese, which can be traced back over 4000 years. While the Meo are independent, they are, at the same time, well disciplined both as individuals and in groups. The Meo independence can be thought of as being mainly defensive, as it comes into play only to ensure their freedom from domination.[29*]

The Meo temperament is reported to represent a blending of passivity and aggressiveness. Under normal conditions, especially in dealings with outsiders, the Meo appear to be reserved, quiet, and sometimes even elusive. Nevertheless, if they feel that their freedom is threatened or that their property is endangered by outsiders, they are extremely aggressive. In time of war the Meo are reported to be courageous and stubborn fighters; in fact, they are reported to be cruel and extremely belligerent under these circumstances. Meo political and military organizations are extremely strong.

In settling disputes within their own clan, village or tribe, the Meo resort to litigation instead of force. No matter how bitter and deep the disputes may be, they are usually successfully settled with grace, good manners and minimum loss of face. The Meo are jealous of their property rights, but dueling or other forms of personal combat are unknown within the group. Disputes over women, if there are any, never end in open, personal fights.

In general, the Meo are considered to be industrious people, and the lazy Meo can be counted as an exception. Meo industriousness can be synonymous with haste, improvisation, and maximum efficiency under given conditions. Most of their time and effort are devoted to

---

* See list of referenced works

agriculture, and the conditions under which they operate demand a great deal of industry to make the effort productive. They have a great deal of stamina and do not tire easily. Finally, it can be said that the Meo are materialists, for they usually seek to accumulate personal wealth whenever possible.

The Meo believe strongly in authority, particularly that of the family, ancestors and social and political figures. While women, children and lone men may be somewhat subordinate in Meo society, they are all treated with consideration. Along with a strong sense of responsibility towards society, the Meo senses also the stigma of social disapproval. There are occasional suicides, largely as the result of unhappy marriages. Social responsibility toward one's own family and the prospect of public censure are very strong factors, and for this reason crimes are rare.

There is a great deal of respect for formal learning among the Meo so long as it is not contradictory to traditional values. The attitude toward education, however, depends on the age and social position of the individual and the degree of his exposure to educational systems. According to Meo tradition, sons are expected to follow in their fathers' footsteps and daughters in their mothers'. The knowledge of other languages is valued highly among the Meo, particularly the knowledge of Chinese. On the whole, the Meo are fairly quick minded and learn rapidly. They are adaptable and display a readiness to accept innovation, and in that sense are most responsive to education.

Any treatise on the Meo, however brief, must deal to some extent with their history and background prior to their movement into Thailand and prior to their involvement in today's insurgency. However, the reader is expected to be more interested in the Meo as they exist and interact today in the context of a growing Thai nation and under the shadow of a growing insurgency in the North. This volume should answer some basic questions: who are the Meo; what are they; where and how do they live; what are their economic, social, political and religious characteristics and activities; and how do they fit into the insurgency/counterinsurgency situation in Northern Thailand?

Chapter 2
TRIBAL BACKGROUND AND DIVISIONS

MEO TRIBES AND TRIBAL NAMES

A great deal has been written about the meaning and derivation of the name "Meo". It is believed in some quarters that the name was derived from the Chinese term meaning "cats", an explanation arising from the fact that the word "Meo" is the Sino-Annamese expression for a writing character which means "cat."[2,3] Speculation as to the reason for the application of the word "cat" to the Meo includes the view that the Meo dialect sounded to the Chinese like the meowing of cats, or that the Meo people were, "as supple as, and moved like cats."[4,5] This cat-like and gliding manner of the Meo in climbing mountains or scaling cliffs has been pointed out by a number of observers of the tribe.[6] Additionally, an old Chinese historical work, Mong-Tse, compares the speech of the Meo to the howling or crying of hyenas.

Apart from the association of the name with cats, its origin has also been explained in other terms. Some investigators have translated the Chinese word "Meo" as "tender blades of grass or sprouts," and have translated the written symbol for Meo as "plant" and "field". In Chinese, the term "Meo," or "Meo-Tse," sometimes means foreigners, and thus non-Chinese; it also implies cultivators or farmers. Therefore, the word "Meo-Tse" means the people of the fields, the the peasants, who do not belong to the Chinese nation. Finally, one writer suggests that the word really means rice planter, a meaning which, after all, has more likelihood for the Meo than the connotation of cat.[5,8,9,10]

There are three fairly distinct groups of Meo tribesmen in Thailand: The Blue Meo; the White Meo; and the "Gua M'Ba" Meo, sometimes known as the Arm-Band Meo. The Blue Meo comprise three subgroups: The Meo Dawk (Flowery Meo); the Meo Lai (Striped Meo), and the Meo Dam (Black Meo).

All of the Blue Meo in Thailand generally call themselves "H'Moong Njua". The White Meo, or Meo Khao, call themselves "H'Moong Deaw". The Gua M'Ba Meo, or Arm-band Meo, call themselves "H'Moong Gua M'Ba".[1] "H'Moong" (sometimes H'Mung or H'Mu) is

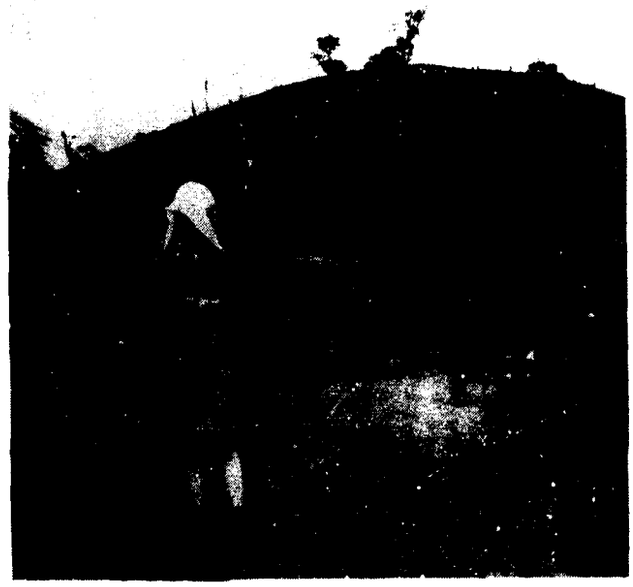

Fig. 1 Women in Dress Typical of Striped Meo.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

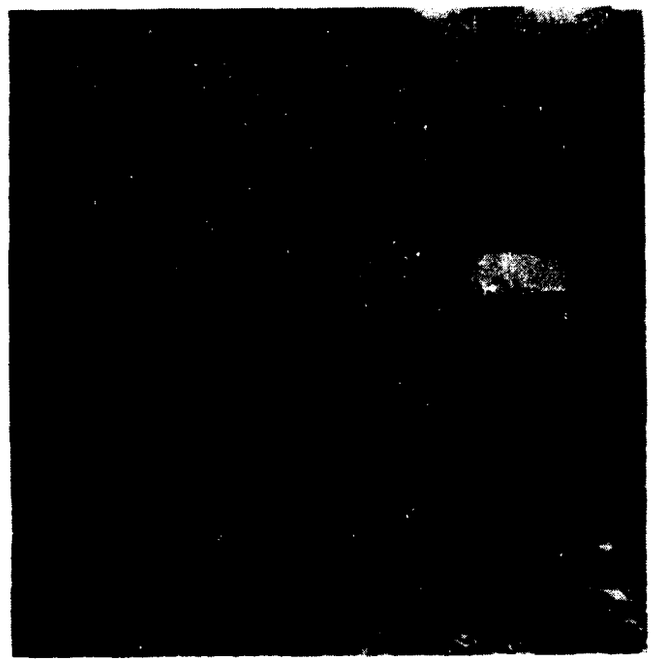

Fig. 2 White Meo Family - Men Wearing Black Hats.
Photo: Binney

the name that the Meo in Thailand call themselves* despite the various names given them by people with whom they have come into contact throughout their history in several countries.

According to the Chinese, there is a great variety of Meo people in China and Southeast Asia distinguished by differences in dialect and some variations in dress, hair style and occupation. The Chinese designate these varieties as the Ta Hua (Great Flowery) Meo, Hua (Flowery) Meo, He or Hei (Black) Meo, Pe or Pei (White) Meo, Hung (Red) Meo, and Ch'ing (Blue) Meo.[11] In addition to these major varieties, there are some sub-varieties worth mentioning, such as the Western Meo, the Pointed Meo, the Upside-Down Meo, the Shrimp Meo, the Steep Slope Meo, the Magpie Meo, and the Cowrie Shell Meo. It should be noted that although some of the designations used by the Chinese may be similar to those used for the Meo in Thailand, they may not necessarily be the same tribal groups.

LOCATION

The Meo-speaking people are dispersed over large areas of southern China and northern Southeast Asia. In south China the Meo are found mainly in Kweichow Province and in some adjacent areas of Hunan, Szechwan, Kwangsi, and Yunnan. The Red Meo are concentrated along the border area of western Hunan in eastern Kweichow, particularly in the districts of Feng Hung, Kang Ch'eng and Yung Sui, an area of some 40 by 100 miles. This area has been declared an autonomous region by the Chinese People's Republic. The Black Meo occupy southeastern Kweichow, Chienho and Lushan districts in particular, but they have also been migrating into northern Kwangsi and some parts of southeastern Kweichow.

The Chinese Blue Meo are located mainly in central Kweichow, particularly in the area around Kweiwang city. The White Meo, or Ch'uan Meo, are found chiefly in central and southern Kweichow, as well as in southern Szechwan. The Flowery Meo, although having the area of western Kweichow as their home base, can also be found widely dispersed over all eastern and southern Yunnan. In China only the Red Meo of western Hunan demonstrate a real degree of concentration. The rest of the Meo are dispersed and mixed, so that the Flowery Meo villages may adjoin those of the White Meo or of the Han Chinese.[11]

* In direct contacts with the Meo, they should be called "H'Moong."

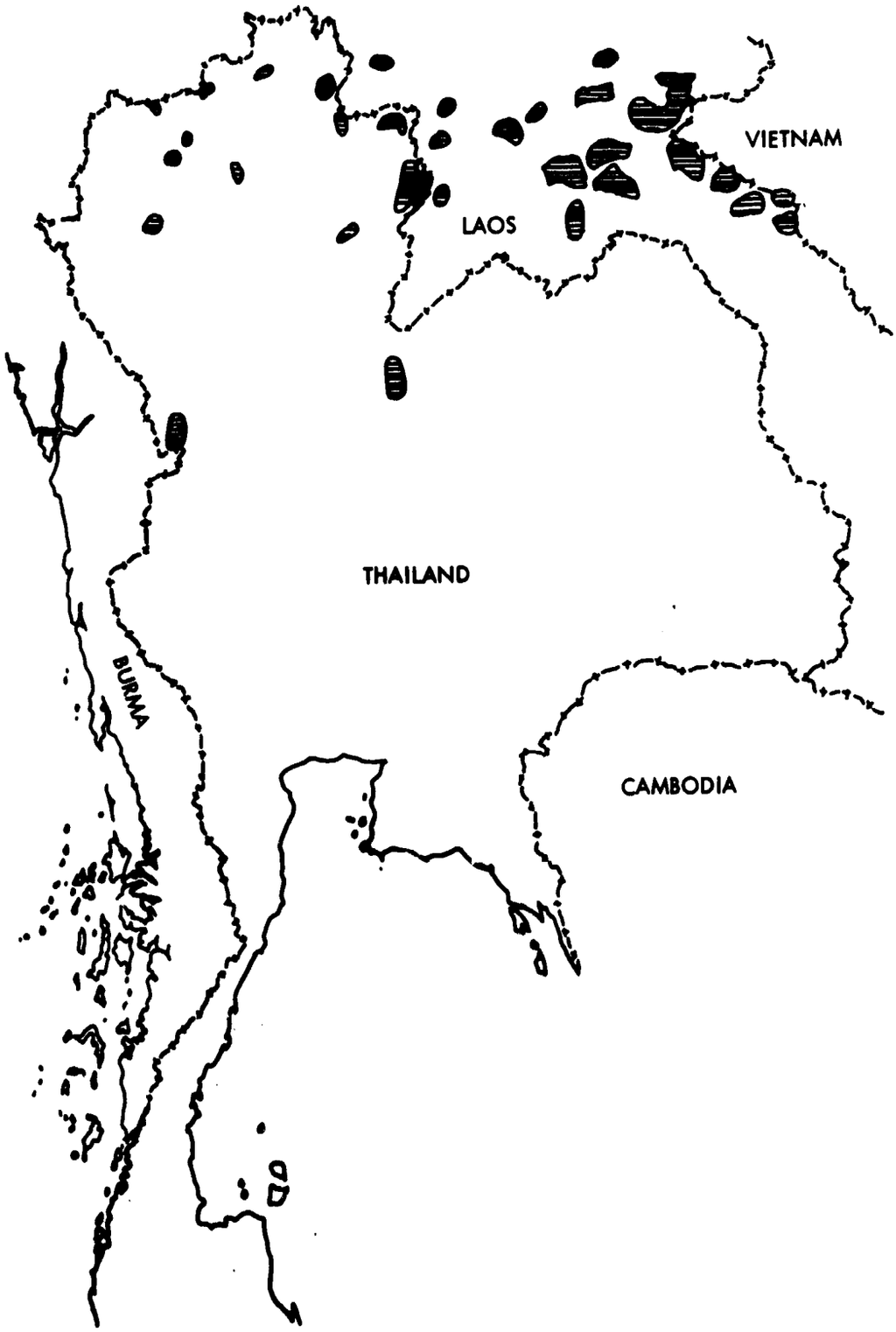

Fig. 3 Locations of Meo in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand[11]

In northern Vietnam the Meo are concentrated mostly along the Chinese frontier between Dong Van and Quan Ba, between Pa Kha and Muong Khuong, and along the right bank of the Red River between Nghia Lo, Van Bu, and Tu Le. The Meo on the Black River are found north of Van Yen. Those in the regions of Dong Van and Muong constitute the majority of the Meo population in northern Vietnam.

The Meo in Laos are concentrated mostly in Xieng Khouang Province.[12] Remember that in discussing the locations of the Meo in China, Vietnam and Laos the names such as Blue and Flowery Meo are not necessarily indicative of tribes by the name in Thailand.

The Meo in Thailand are widely dispersed in Nan, Chiengrai and Chiengmai Provinces of northern Thailand. There are some scattered villages as far south as 16 degrees 30 minutes north around Petchaboon and Pitsanuloke Provinces. The Blue Meo are concentrated mostly along the border areas of Nan and Chiengrai Provinces, in southern Tak, in Prae, in northern Petchaboon and Pitsanuloke, with a few villages in Chiengmai and Loey Provinces. Most of the White Meo are found in Nan and Chiengmai Provinces, together with some other clans in Tak and Prae. The rarely found Gua M'Ba Meo are located only in northern Nan Province. The Blue Meo in Chiengmai, who have immigrated from Burma, have remained within the province in area between Amphur Fang along the mountain ranges to areas in the southern parts of Doi Inthanon.[1]

POPULATION

The total number of Meo-speaking people in the world has been estimated to be in the neighborhood of 2,700,000.[11] The vast majority of Meo are, of course, in China, and according to a Chinese People's Republic census in 1953 the number in China is approximately 2,500,000. Of this number, Kweichow has 425,000; Hunan 378,000; Yunnan 360,000; Kwangsi 204,000, and Szechwan 84,000. In Kweichow, heartland of the Meo, over 70 percent reside in the southern and southeastern part of the province, where the Chinese People's Republic has created two autonomous regions.[11]

In Indo-China, particularly in Laos and Vietnam, the total number of Meo were estimated in 1930 at 200,000, although some authorities on

the subject consider the figure to be much too high.[10] The Meo population in Vietnam was reported at 40,000 in 1924; this estimate was raised to 60,000 in 1952.[14,15] In 1943 it was reported that the Meo in all Indo-China numbered 100,000,[16] with 40,000 in Vietnam and 60,000 in Laos. Barney, the governor of Xieng Khouang Province in Laos, estimated the Meo population of that area at 45,000.[12] An estimate in 1961 agrees with the 1931 census, which lists the Meo in Laos at 60,000.[17] The Minority People's Study Group of the Committee of Minority Peoples in Vietnam reports the Meo in Vietnam to be 182,747.[11]

In Thailand the Meo population has been given "conservatively" as 45,000.[1] A more recent (1965-6)survey by the Royal Thai Government, however, gave the total number of Meo in Thailand as 53,031.[18]

The Blue Meo in Thailand are said to number about 26,400 and the White Meo approximately 19,200. The Arm-Band Meo, who are found only in northern Nan Province and who are steadily being absorbed by the Blue Meo, number only about 200 persons.[1] These figures were given in 1961 and do not reflect the total of 53,031 reported by the Royal Thai Government survey in 1966. It will become more obvious to the reader in later chapters that an accurate census of the Meo people is difficult to attain because of the locations in which they are found and because of their frequent movements either in large groups or as single families.

LANGUAGE

Although the Meo language is a prime classifier of people as belonging to the Meo tribes, there is a good deal of disagreement on the derivation of the language and its dialects. It has been classified by various investigators as Mon-Khmer (Austroasiatic), Tai, Sinitic "independent", and so on. Some consider Meo and Yao together as a separate branch of the Sino-Tibetan language.[11,19]

The Meo language is tonal and monosyllabic; it contains 53 consonant phonemes, 13 vowel phonemes (9 simple vowels and 4 vowel clusters), and 7 tone phonemes, and it differs somewhat from Chinese in word order and phonetics. Many words are borrowed from the Chinese, Thai, Lao and other people with whom the Meo have associated. The major dialects (e.g., Red, White, Black, etc.) are said to be mutually

unintelligible, so that Chinese or Thai or Lao serves as a lingua franca (common language). However, within the major dialect groups (such as the Flowery Meo and its various subgroups), the language is presumably mutually intelligible.[8]

The Meo of Xieng Khouang in Laos are of two major dialect groups: The Mon Tleu, or White Meo, and the Mon Len, or Striped Meo.[20] Lao is the lingua franca in Laos.[12] In northern Vietnam the Meo use "kwan hoa", a common Chinese dialect, as their lingua franca in dealing with their neighbors.[12]

The Meo in Thailand speak dialects related to those of the Meo in South China. The dialects of various Meo subgroups in Thailand are in some instances mutually intelligible, although rather wide differences do exist.[1] Thai-Lao and Yunnanese are reported to be the lingua franca of the Meo in Thailand; among the Meo in Chiengmai Province, Shan is also an important second language.

The Meo themselves have no writing system, but recently the language has been written in a missionary-devised phonetic script. In 1955 three Latinized alphabets were devised by the Chinese People's Republic representing the western Hunan and southeastern Kweichow Meo.[11]

MYTH AND HISTORY

Myth

The myth encompassing the historical development of the Meo is difficult to pinpoint. Their origin, as told briefly by the Meo,[10] is that "The first living area of the Meo was at the other end of the earth. It was a land with long winters and long nights..... nights of six months. People and trees were small, The water was frozen and the earth covered with snow. Everyone wore furs."[10, 5]

Similarly, the Meo in Thailand recall of their original homeland that, "The first land that the Meo inhabited lay many years' journey from their present homeland areas. Half of the time was day, half of it night. During the night the water hardened and composed bug (sic), flat rock block (ice?) and fine white sand (snow?). Men, animals and plants do not have to suffer in heat as do the Meo today in the valleys.

All were much smaller than today. Because of the cold they had to cover their bodies with animal skins."[5]

Of the rise of the Meo language, a description derived from the Meo in China relates, "When the people became numerous on the earth, they tried to climb a ladder to heaven. But the lord of heaven destroyed all who were climbing with a bolt of lightning. Earlier, all men spoke the same language, but since that day each family spoke another language. The people did not understand each other and wandered away from each other."[5]

There is a myth of the origin of the first Meo king. "The first king of the Meo was a child who remained in his mother's womb for three years. He lived in a palace of pure gold. One day discord arose between the Meo and their neighbors over lands. The king ordered both parties to travel away at nightfall and to return before sunrise. Each would become the owner of the lands he had traversed during the night. He who was not back at the correct time was to remain at the place where the rising sun surprised him. At daybreak the Meo found themselves on a high mountain. Since then the Meo have lived on mountains."[5] (See also Historical Development in Chapter 5.)

There is yet another myth, said to be told by the Meo, which tells of the historical development of the tribes.[6] "The Chinese emperor Ti Ku (ca. 500 B.C.) is said to have promised the hand of his third daughter on condition that the suitor would free him of his most dangerous enemy, kill the latter and bring in his head. A yellow dog by the name of Pan Hu heard this, carried out the feat and married the princess, who bore him six sons and six daughters. From these are descended the various human races. There came about a division of the land in which the Chinese got the valleys, and the Meo the mountains."[6]

History

Regarding the factual history of the origin and development of the Meo, one writer[6] describes the tribal conglomeration of the present-day Meo as having originated essentially in the steppe area where Tibet, Mongolia and Old China meet. The unrest of the steppe peoples of Mongolia, and the pressure of the Sinic peasantry of North China caused this particular group to move southward into the only uninhabited and environmentally acceptable area at their disposal. This southward move or flow pushed down over the mountain chains of West China, South China

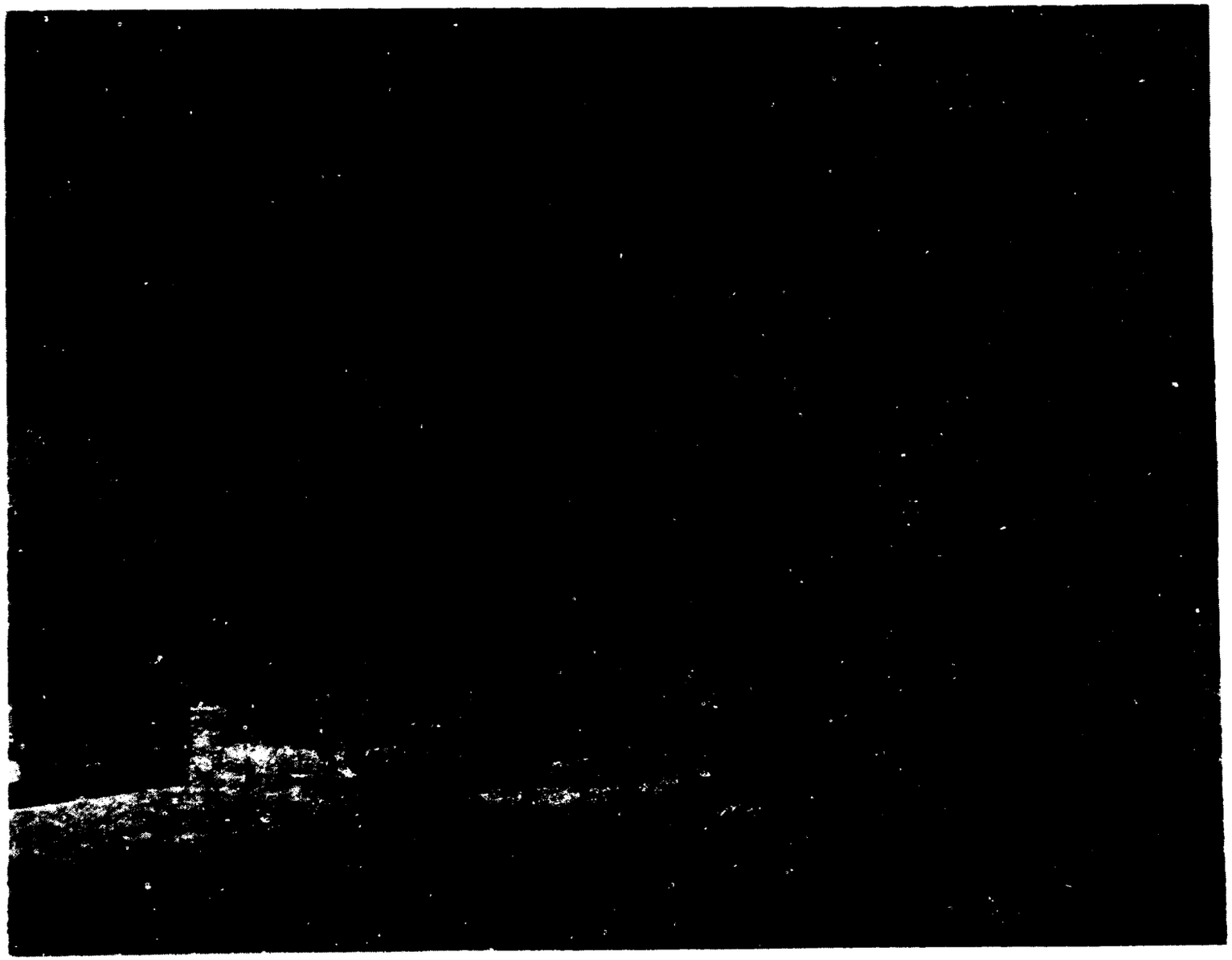

Fig. 4 ..."since then the Meo have lived on the mountains". Photo: Suthep

and finally Southeast Asia. The Meo are thought to have moved southward along the plateau-like heights of the Tibetan mountains.[5]

In old Chinese classics the people now generally known as the Meo are frequently referred to by the names Meo Min, Yu-Meo or San-Meo. When the Meo were first mentioned in these classics, they occupied the country south of the territory of the lengendary Emperor Shun (2255-2198 B.C.) in the central part of Yangtse plain, the region which embraces the provinces of Hupeh, Hunan, and Kiangsi. It is related in the Classics of History that this group of Meo was banished by Yii the Great (2205-2198 B.C.) to San-Wei, an area which subsequent commentators have identified as San-wei-san, a locality in the vicinity of Tung-hsian in northwestern Kansu.[21]

Later Chinese literature frequently failed to distinguish the Meo from other indigenous people. They were included under the name "Man" (barbarian) or "Nan-Man" (southern barbarians) applied collectively to all tribal groups of the vast area. It was in the Sung dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) that the name of the Meo reappears. Yeh Ch'ien, a scholar of the twelfth century, distinguished five ethnic groups among the Wu-Chi-Man or "barbarians of the five streams" on the upper Yuan River in western Hunan; they were the Meo, the Yao, the Lao, the Chuang or Tai, and the Keh-Lao.[21] Subsequently the names "Meo" or "Meo-Man" are frequently employed as general terms for the tribes of this region. Nevertheless, from the Ming dynasty (1368-1643) to the present, the Meo have been referred to as Hmo, Hmu, Hmong or Hmung, the names the Meo used to call themselves.[21]

The Meo descriptions of their history from the time of the Huang-ti until the present are in general accord with the Chinese reports. From the 40th-30th centuries B.C., it is reported[10] that they were not harassed by the Chinese,[5] but this harmonious living with the Chinese ended around the 27th century B.C. when the Meo, worrying about the speedy development of the Chinese, attacked them. At first the Meo were successful, but later they were defeated by the Chinese under Huan Yuan. Despite their defeat, the Meo refused to recognize either Huan Yuan or his successor as emperor. They fought the Chinese continually during the first centuries of Chinese history within the area of the Yellow River basin as well as that of the Hoai.[5]

In the Chinese reports, the Meo are invariably presented as the aggressors and worthless barbarians, so that the Chinese "had to punish them". Chun, one of the Chinese emperors who vigorously fought the Meo and later divided them into various tribes, decided that, "Since the Meo

prince has no virtuous principles, his people remain deep in barbariousness, and quite far from allowing them to become civilized, he renders it illogical. He thought only about rebellion and knew no loyalty, no truth and frankness either in words or in actions, and sought only to delude fatefully. Prisons were insufficient to hold the prisoners. The streets were red with the blood of the executed; the majority asserted their innocence before the throne of heaven and bitterly bewailed the injustice. But Chang-ti (God), from whom nothing is hidden, saw among them no trace of virtue. He saw only sin and robbery."

"Indignant over the bad example set by these peoples, the emperor decided to destroy them and to annihilate their princes because Chang-ti, vexed upon observing no just conduct among the San-Meo, used Chun to destroy the Meo princes and his people."[22]

About 1110 B.C. it is reported that the Emperor Chun removed the Meo to east China, but part of the people remained and settled the mountains in the south, where they and their descendants maintained their independence. The Chinese fought the Meo until the year 826 B.C. but did not succeed in establishing a lasting peace. Now and then the Meo from mountain areas in Kweichow and Szechwan launched armed uprisings, but they were always defeated. These conditions held until about 1775, when the Chinese began to capture all major Meo strongpoints in the mountains. Finally, only under the promise of their personal safety, Somen, the king of the Meo, and his son surrendered. The Chinese did not keep their word, and both the king and his son were later executed.[5]

In about 1650, then between 1775 and 1779, and finally from 1855 to 1881 the Meo tried to win complete political independence in bloody uprisings, but they were "suppressed with truly barbaric cruelty". Nevertheless, by this time we learn [14] that the Meo residing in Tonkin continued to spread out along the north and northeast frontiers up to the Annamese mountain chains. At first this movement was slow, but their pressure accelerated at the beginning of 19th century and about 1860 in the Dong-Van region, where, according to one writer, several thousand Meo went toward southern Yunnan to the Annamese border at Dong-Van and forcibly expelled the Thai and Man who had settled there.[14]

On the Meo history in the 20th century, there was a Meo uprising in Dong-Van in 1911 under a chieftain named Sioung; this uprising was quickly suppressed. There was another uprising of Meo in upper Laos

during World War I. This uprising was said to have been instigated by agents of the warring powers.[5] Savina reports that this uprising is said to have lasted until March 1921, causing considerable difficulties to the French government in Laos.[10]

In 1894 the Meo settled the heights on the right bank of the Mekong River, and it is reported that in 1902 the Meo had not yet spread to the left bank.[24] In the course of the last half century, "they marched into the high area of northern Siam".[2] The Meo were found in 1929, "south of the Moulmein Road-Raheng, under 16 degrees, 35 minutes north latitude",[2] and within the last forty years the Meo have spread out their area southward about 380 kilometers.[2] They were also found in the mountain chains situated between the Chao Phya River and Pasak River, on the heights of Pu Lomlo, on the Uttradit road to Lomsak in 1927. Meo studied in 1936 and 1937 claimed that they came from Yunnan.[5]

In summarizing the Meo history, Bernatzik[5] has put it precisely as follows.

"It can be said with Von Eickstedt that the Meo originated in the high mountain steppes where Tibet, Mongolia and Old China come together, perhaps even from Siberia. The main body of the Meo still lives in two large, closed, separate groups in Kweichow, but important groups also settled in Kwangsi, Kwangtung, Szechwan and particularly in Yunnan provinces. Important tribal groups have, in addition, settled in the Annamese mountains, and other pressed on into Thailand, where they reached the central mountain chains below 16 degrees, 15 minutes north parallel. Advance groups of these people have penetrated during the last few decades into Burma. On the other hand, it is not entirely certain that the mountain people on the island of Hainan are really Meo. If they are, however, it would not be because of natural immigration movements, but because they had been resettled there forcibly by the Chinese. The migratory movement corresponds to the geographical and tribal political circumstances always directly from north to south, and which even today has not been concluded."

SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

Most Meo villages in Thailand will be found in the mountains at altitudes between 1,600 meters (5300 feet) and 1,000 meters (3,300 feet), with a

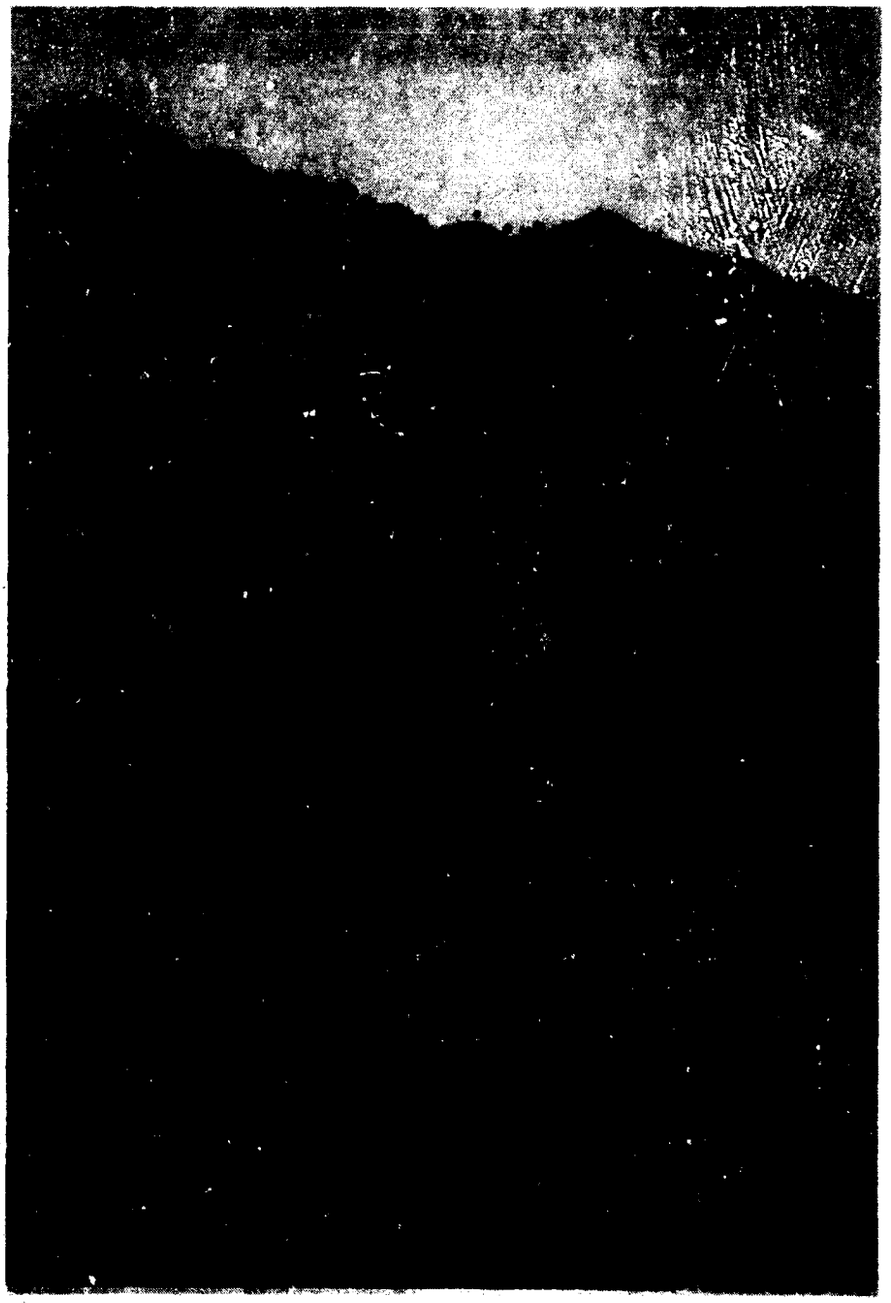

Fig. 5 Typical Meo Village Location on High Mountain Ridge.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

median height of about 1,200 meters (4000 feet).[18] Since opium is the major cash crop among the Meo, and since an ideal altitude for opium cultivation is at 2,500 feet and above, their village locations are strongly influenced by the need for fields appropriate for the cultivation of this crop.

According to one researcher,[26] the Meo village sites are selected by clan head on the following bases:

1. The site must be located at a point on a ridge between three or four mountains so that it will not be far from mountain springs and streams;

2. The mountains must protect the village from strong winds;

3. The Meo forest spirit, 'Tu Seng Tu Chi', lives on mountain peaks, so if a village is surrounded by peaks it will be protected on all sides by the forest spirits;

4. The village must be in a location where no village has existed before, because if the location was a good one the old village would not have moved away;

5. There must be sufficient level land nearby so that everyone in the village can have a field;

6. If the head of the village finds a good location for a new village in an area where there are other villages, he must determine why the others who came before did not select this spot.

When all above-mentioned criteria are met, the local clan head sacrifices a cock to the Heaven Spirit, "Da Shon Du"; the cock is then boiled and the legs of the animal are examined. If no small holes or punctures are found in the legs, the location of the new village is considered favorable.

The Meo move their villages on the average of once every ten to fifteen years. Usually the moves are due to exhaustion or depletion of the soil in old areas, epidemics, high taxes, or the urging of the village shaman.[11] While some earlier reporters indicate that the Meo never move a distance greater than one day's walk if they can help it,[5] moves may

actually be made over long distances and take many days.[1] It is true, however, that the Meo, as well as other tribes, hesitate to move very far from their old village sites for fear that the lands left behind will be taken up by other tribal groups, thus eliminating the possibility of a later return to the old land. This feeling grows as the tribal population in Thailand increases and with it the growing need for land for cultivation. There is some indication of a tendency among the Meo to remain sedentary by shifting from slash-and-burn agriculture to fruit tree and wet rice cultivation.[1]

The size of Meo villages in Thailand in terms of population and numbers of houses varies considerably. For example, the number of houses in Meo villages in the region near the Lao border ranges from three to ten.[5] One student of the Meo reports that their villages average 35 houses with an average population of 280 people. A recent survey indicates that in the Chiengmai area the villages have a density of 17 houses with an average of 130 villagers.[26] However, a large village in the Nan area is reported as having 53 houses and a population of 564 people.[27] Village size depends to a great extent upon the amount of available arable land in the vicinity. It has been fairly well demonstrated that in order to maintain their economic level, the Meo family must have available to it sufficient land upon which to grow its primary crop, opium. The lower limits of population per village are said to be determined, at least in part, by the social characteristics of the Meo people which demand that they feel themselves part of a village so that they may take part in their traditional festivals and have the support of friends in the crises of life and death. On the whole, the larger the village the happier they are.[28] Usually, however, the overriding consideration in determining whether or not a move will be made is the availability of sufficient land that will provide good crops.

The houses in Meo villages are clustered somewhat irregularly; the house of the headman is usually located in the center. There are no fences or stockades around the villages. The houses themselves are single-story, rectangular, and built directly on the ground. The house is usually surrounded by shallow drainage ditches. Roofs are made of grass thatching; while the walls may be of wood in the case of a well-established family, they are usually of bamboo. The size of the family will determine the partitioning within the house. In a small family the parents have their own closed-off sleeping quarters, while their male children occupy a section separated from the female children. In a large family the married son and his wife will also have separate sleeping quarters.[5]

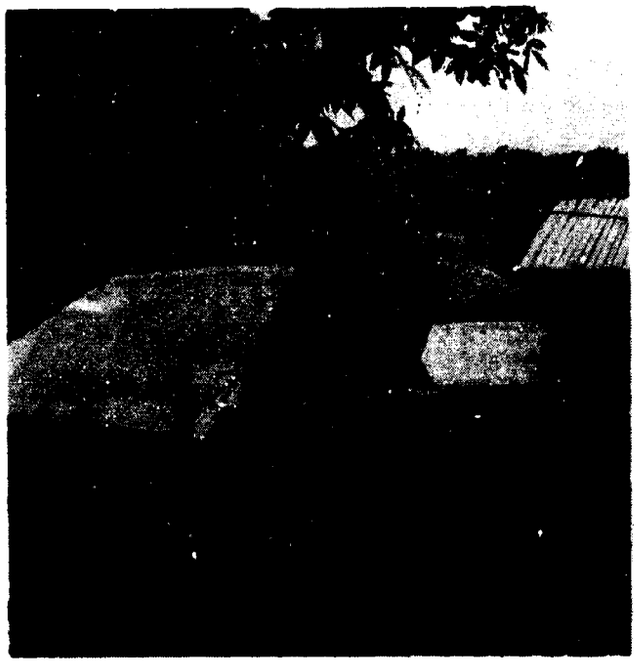

Fig. 6 Meo House with Thatched Roof. Storage Bin Roof is Split Bamboo. Photo: USIS

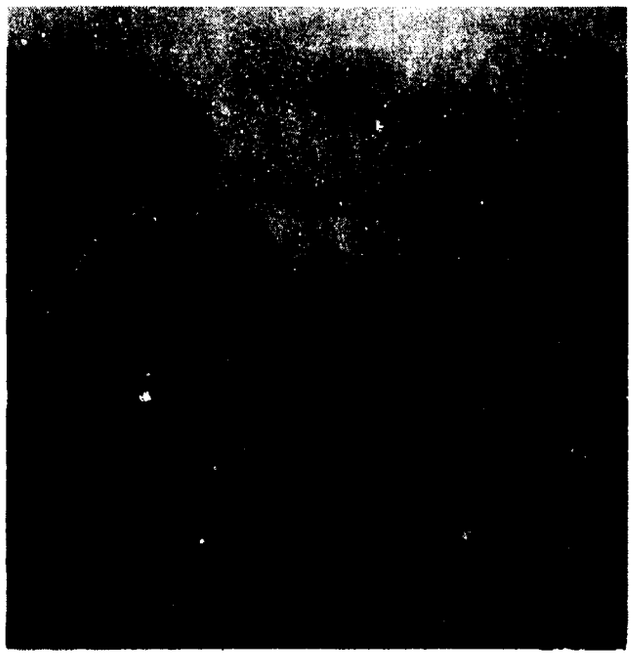

Fig. 7 Temporary Hut in Field. Photo: USIS

Furnishings in the home consist mainly of wooden beds and tables. A fireplace is usually sunk into the floor of the main room near the main entrance, and there is usually a Chinese-style earthen stove at the rear of the interior for cooking meals and for preparing food for the animals. Rice storage bins are built separately on piles near the houses. The Meo also erect temporary huts in the fields where they may be working.[5]

Fig. 8 Meo House Interior - Cooking Stove.
Photo: USIS

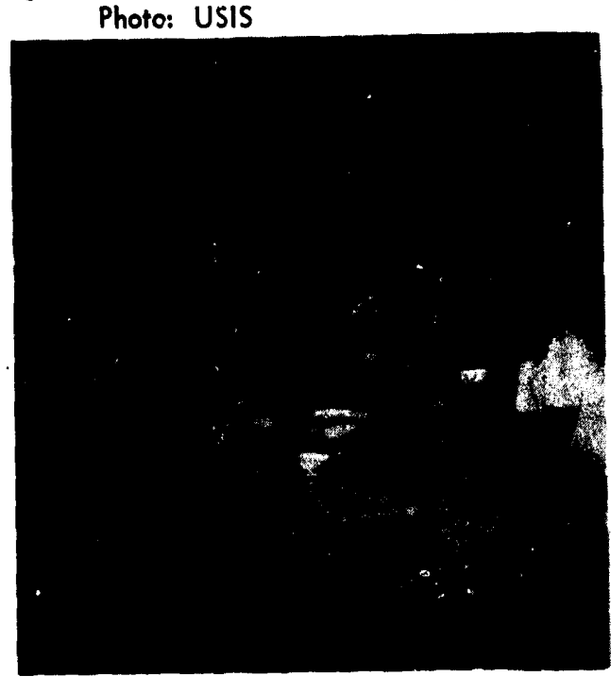

Fig. 9 Meo Entertaining Visiting Thai. Photo: USIS

Chapter 3
ECONOMY

TYPE OF ECONOMY

The economy of the Meo in Thailand is based almost entirely upon agriculture, and the methods of agriculture almost exclusively practiced among the Meo in Thailand are known as swidden, shifting, or slash-and-burn agriculture. These agricultural methods exist partially because of the type of crop grown by the Meo, the continuing availability of mountain land on which they may raise these crops, and certainly in some measure on the traditional shifting pattern established by the people of these tribes over the last several hundred years.

The Royal Thai Government is currently considering the introduction of new agricultural methods, particularly terracing and irrigation, to the Meo people, but these considerations are still under investigation and in the long-range planning stage. There is little available terrain in Thailand suitable for terracing, but even with such terrain available the introduction of such practices to the Meo might be lengthy and difficult, as it would require an almost complete re-orientation of the Meo's long established economic and agricultural patterns. However, some groups of the Meo in Nan Province have been reported recently to have developed wet rice agriculture and fruit tree orchards.[1]

The major cash crop of the Meo is opium, and this single factor probably has more influence over the social and economic patterns of the Meo people than any other. The main subsistence crop of the Meo is dry or hill rice, both glutinous and non-glutinous. Other field crops include maize, buckwheat, sugar cane, yams, cucumbers, beans, tobacco, onions, hemp and some cotton.[11]

Some indigenous fruits are grown by the Meo, among them the litchi, the mango and the jack fruit. Several varieties of peach and cherry also may be grown.[18] Tea planting has recently been introduced to the Meo in the Chiangmai area, and this may represent a promising crop for future consideration.

The Meo plant their crops in such a way that they will mature at various times throughout the year. In this way, the people always have some food available.[1, 5] Seeds are planted by hand in holes made with a

Fig. 10 Typical Swiddens in Meo Slash-and-Burn Agriculture.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

digging stick. Rice is usually cut and partly husked in the field and then stored in bins near the house. Due to the importance of field crops in the Meo subsistence economy, and because of their relatively primitive agricultural techniques, a considerable land area is required to produce these subsistence crops.[2, 11]

The selection of field sites is almost always carried out by the household head, except when he is incapacitated and must delegate the task to his wife or to his eldest son. The head of the household, however, has the final say on the land selected, even if he is incapacitated. After the site has been selected, clearing of the land begins almost immediately to avoid any doubt as to the family's claim on the land. The head of the household then usually informs the village headman of the site selection, so that if the field has been claimed earlier by someone else, the headman may make it known.[26]

The criteria used in selecting field sites vary from one household to another, but taste and texture of the soil at the site are considered of primary importance. The soil should have an oily texture and taste either salty or sweet. Soils which taste sour are considered to be very poor, in which case, despite other favorable indications, the site will be abandoned and a new one selected. The second criterion for the selection of a site is the availability of adequate water resources, and the majority of Meo fields are located near springs or streams.

There are some other criteria used in the selection of the new swidden fields. Sites should be surrounded by mountains, except that the view should be unobstructed on one side. A considerable emphasis is placed on the swidden being exposed to the sun. The "Place Spirit" is not involved in the selection of the field sites, for according to the Meo there is no way to tell if the spirit is good until the site has been cleared and cultivated. However, if there is a serious accident during the clearing or burning, or if the villagers or animals become ill because of crops eaten from the field, the site has to be abandoned.[26]

Although far less labor would be required to clear and cut secondary forest, the Meo prefer to cut primary forest for new swiddens. They explain that the increased yields from a crop grown in a cleared primary forest more than compensate for the extra work involved.[26]

Fig. 11 Family Harvesting in Dry Rice Swidden.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

Fig. 12 Aerial View of Meo Fields under Cultivation.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

The Meo permit their swiddens to lie fallow for various periods depending upon the crop being grown in the swidden. For example, in the rice swidden the land is permitted to lie fallow for three or four years after the first crop. Corn swiddens are permitted to lie fallow for four years after two years of cultivation, and after seven to eight years of opium cultivation the fields should be allowed to lie fallow for five to six years.[26] The growing and fallow periods for opium are again indicative of one of the primary reasons for the tendency of the Meo to shift their sites periodically. Opium demands first use of the land.[28] When consecutive plantings of opium have depleted the land to the degree that it must be allowed to lie fallow, it becomes economically infeasible, opium being the Meo's major cash crop, to remain on the land until the fields may be used again for opium. Therefore, the family or the village moves to a new location.

Although the Meo in Thailand thoroughly enjoy hunting, game, except in more remote mountain areas, has little significance in terms of food supply. Small game is hunted with traps and snares, but flintlock muskets and crossbows with poisoned arrows are used for larger game.[5] The Meo do some fishing, but since fishing grounds may be relatively rare and distant, fish accounts for only a small portion of the Meo diet. Hooks, hand nets, and weirs are used in fishing, but it is said that the favorite method of taking fish is by poisoning.[5]

The Meo are said to excell among the hill tribes in animal husbandry. They raise cattle, ponies, pigs, dogs and chickens. In some areas buffaloes are raised for sale to the lowland Lao and Thai. Pigs are raised frequently, and sometimes become a small cash crop. This is apparently true in those cases where maize crops are rotated with the opium crops. The bulk of the maize is said to be used as food for the pigs.[26]

The staples of the Meo diet are rice, vegetables and beans. Most of their food is commonly spiced with peppers, chillies or sour (pickled) vegetables. Meat is smoked, salted, or dried in the sun, and it is usually fried in animal fat. Wild plants, roots, insect larvae and honey are consumed as well, especially in times of poor harvest.[11] Native tobacco is smoked in pipes by both men and women, and opium is used as a medicine as well as for its narcotic effect.

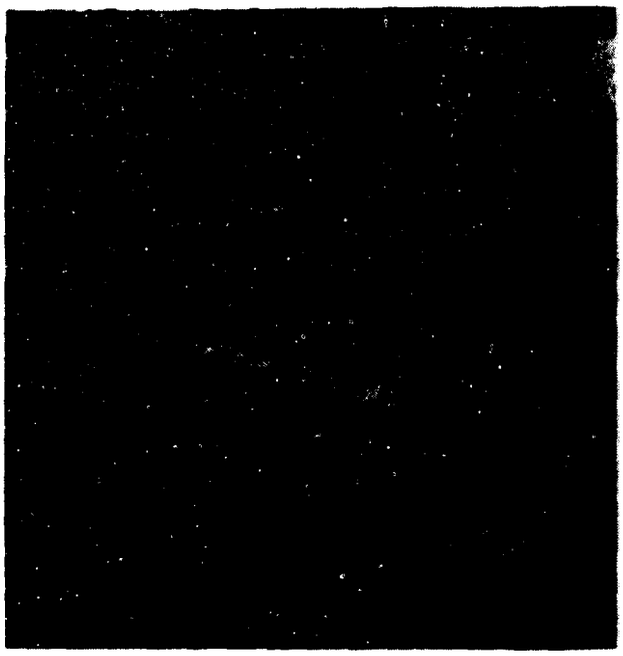

Fig. 13 Pigs are Sometimes Raised as a Cash Crop. Photo: USIS

Fig. 14 Meo Cattle. Bamboo Pipe in Foreground is Part of Water Conduit System. Photo: USIS

LAND TENURE SYSTEM

The Meo concept of land rights is fairly simple and straight forward and is related to the clan and family structure. In the event that a clan is split and a new village is formed, all available good land near the new village will be cleared by the members of all households. The primary or long-abandoned secondary forest is usually claimed by placing cut branches in the form of an arrow on the trees surrounding the claimed land. If the land selected had been claimed earlier, or should a dispute arise, the clan head in the new village will have the final word in the dispute. However, since arable lands are so abundant, and since there is less population pressure in such a village, land disputes seldom occur.

Although there is a saying among the Meo that, "when a man clears a field, he believes in his heart that this land is his", they know in fact that the land belongs to the Royal Thai Government.[28] In order to acquire actual rights to land, the tribesmen must go to the Amphur authorities and register ownership, or pay a tax. The Meo believe that only those who work on the land should own it. Nevertheless, although they are uneasy about the fact that the government owns the land they have cleared and cultivated, there are some Meo who understand and recognize the government ownership of the lands. They find it difficult to understand, however, why they should pay taxes for swiddens while they lie fallow.

Within the tribe it is recognized that lands within the village territory belong to the village headman. In practice, the land belongs to the family whose members have worked on it, and therefore they have the sole right to allocate and redistribute plots.[5]

Theoretically, when a man dies, his fields pass on equally to his sons. In practice, however, only the son or sons who remain in the father's house may inherit the deceased father's property. The rights of those sons who have married and live in other villages automatically revert to the remaining heirs. The exception to this rule is the opium field. In the case of this property, the co-resident heirs work together in the field and share the profits equally. Meo women cannot own land or crops.

Remunerative leases of land are not practiced by the Meo. If a man wants to use a piece of land which has lain fallow for five years or less, he may do so with the permission of the owner without any form of payment. Usually the Meo will not lend a fallowed field unless they are incapable of tending it themselves or unless it is located very far from

their village.

EXCHANGE SYSTEM AND TRADE

There appears to be little economic specialization among the Meo except for the part-time trades such as blacksmithing and gunsmithing.[11] Observers report little trade in the village community, although one reports some minor internal commerce.[1, 11] The part-time specialists usually confine their services to the needs of their own clans.[5] Trading outside the villages include occasional visits to the town markets in the valleys and some exchange with the Chinese or Thai. The Meo are reported to be good businessmen in dealing with other groups. A pattern of borrowing and lending money is also reported, and it is characterized by use of witnesses, fixed interest rates and legal procedures in case of forfeiture.[5]

MEO ARTS AND CRAFTS

There appear to be many skilled craftsmen among the Meo. They work in wood and bamboo and do a great deal of basket work. Villages have their own blacksmiths, who work with piston bellows on iron bars bought from Chinese traders. Silversmiths make women's jewelry from old silver coins. Cloth for clothing is made of hemp or cotton grown locally or bought from the town market. The spinning, weaving and dyeing are all done in the village. The batik (wax) dye technique is also practiced among the Meo. The women are particularly skilled in embroidery and applique work as evidenced by the designs on their clothing and other cloth products.[5]

The Meo are music lovers and great singers of improvised poetry and love songs. Their musical instruments consist of a reed organ made of some eight bamboo pipes and a vibrating metal or wood reed, the jew's harp, skinhead drums, and small brass gongs.[5]

DIVISION OF LABOR

Generally the division of labor among the Meo can be described as follows: Meo men hunt, make poisoned arrows, distill alcohol, do carpentry and metal work of various kinds; Meo women are responsible for collecting firewood and water, cooking, sewing, spinning, and weeding of the swiddens. During the planting and harvesting season, men, women and children may work together in the fields. Entire

Fig. 15 Meo Jewelry and Embroidery. Silver Neck Rings are Used for Decoration, Brideprice or Savings. Photo: Tribal Research Center

families also join in fishing trips and in trips to collect forest products. Pigs and chickens are usually taken care of jointly by men and women. Weaving cloth and load carrying may be performed by either men or women.[5]

OPIUM PRODUCTION AND MEO ECONOMY

The primary attention given to opium production in the Meo culture affects the entire agricultural, migratory and social pattern of these tribesmen. As we have already indicated, their villages and fields are established at altitudes of between 3000 and 5000 feet. In order to acquire the soil and condition necessary for opium culture, they clear jungle land on the crests of hills and on the slopes of the highest valleys. Almost half of the land that they cultivate is used for poppy. They farm this land for 5 to 10 years in succession until the soil is exhausted, and then they move, often great distances, to settle in new areas. Opium poppy cultivation, therefore, encourages their migratory pattern of living.[18]

The emphasis on opium has the effect of limiting the amount of production which can be achieved with other crops raised by the Meo. It also favors a particular set of crops. A Meo family devoting much of its attention to poppy cultivation may be unable to grow enough rice for its annual consumption. Since poppy cultivation demands the greater portion of their labor, there is not sufficient labor available for clearing land for rice and for planting and harvesting it. Opium fields must be hoed when the plants are thinned, and it must be weeded periodically. Two months after the first thinning, the plants must be thinned again and the ground hoed. After the poppy has reached maturity, the seed capsules are tapped for the juice containing the opium. This operation demands the labor of most of the family for two months between December and February. If rice is to be grown, the land must be cleared and made ready by late February in order to catch the rice growing season beginning in April. Concentration of labor resources on opium production through February, therefore, limits the amount of land which can be cleared for rice. The only way the Meo can grow poppy and at the same time as much rice as they need is to employ the Karen or other tribesmen as laborers.

As we have said, poppy cultivation also influences the selection of other crops. One crop that may be coordinated with the poppy is maize. Land for poppies is cleared in April, but the poppy cannot be planted until August. If the ground intended for poppy were left unplanted until August, it would become covered with weeds, and clearing it would be a problem. Therefore, maize is planted in the clearings and is harvested in August.

Fig. 16 Meo Woman Husking Rice in Field During Harvest.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

The poppy is then sown immediately on ground that needs no further clearing. Even if the maize is not quite ready to be harvested, the poppy may be planted on the same ground, the maize functioning as protection for the young poppy against the heavy rain which often occurs in August. Maize, then, reduces the need for clearing land for poppy planting and provides a crop with which the Meo then feed their domestic animals--mainly their chickens and pigs. The production of opium, therefore, is an integral part of the production complex of the Meo economic system embracing opium itself, maize and livestock.[18] The elimination of opium production cannot be accomplished without affecting the entire Meo economic complex.

OPIUM AS A SOURCE OF CASH INCOME

The Meo grow poppy primarily as a source of cash income. Only a very small proportion of opium produced is consumed by the producers themselves, and it is reported that the number of opium smokers among the Meo is small.[18]

Since most Meo use almost half of their swidden areas for growing poppies, the average family produces only about half its annual rice needs. Therefore, a portion of the cash income, mainly derived from opium production, is needed to buy rice. Some of the remaining cash income is used to buy necessary goods, such as clothing, and semi-luxuries, such as flashlights, radios, wristwatches, etc.

Any remaining cash is usually converted into large silver rings worth about 400 baht ($20) each. These rings are worn by both men and women as ornaments, and they are also used by men as payment for a bride. In order to obtain a wife, a Meo man must pay the girl's parents a certain quantity of silver, usually in the form of silver necklaces. According to Meo clan rules, wives must be obtained from other clans, the members of which are often strangers. In such circumstances it is almost impossible for the Meo to avoid making the payment.

Opium production, therefore, is highly important as a means by which cash, silver and wives may be obtained, and the elimination of opium production among the Meo would certainly demand a considerable economic and social adjustment among the people.

Another non-decorative function of the silver rings is that they are a form of savings among the Meo. In times of poor harvest they may be

Fig. 17 Family Working in Poppy Field.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

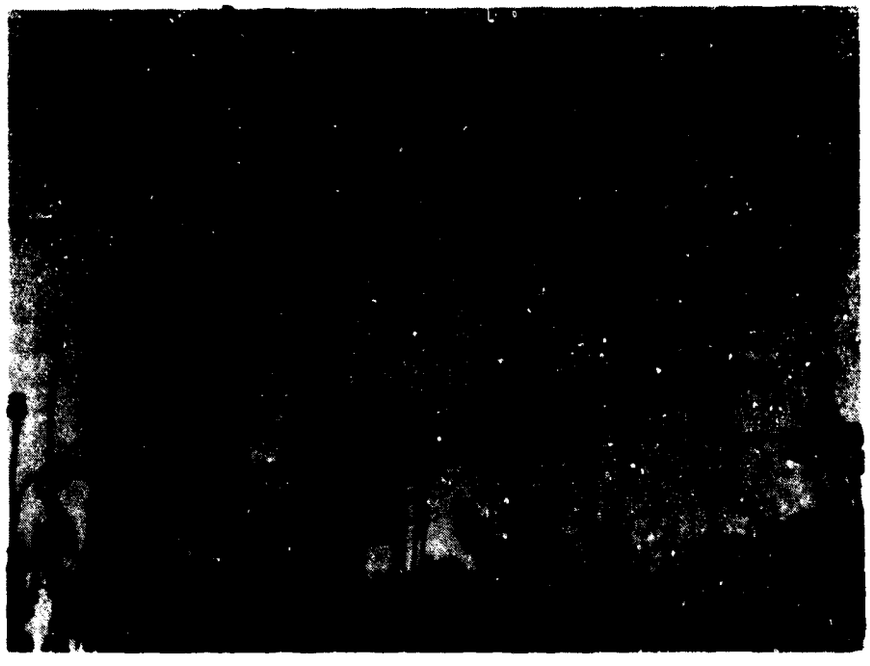

Fig. 18 Poppy Seed Pods Ready for Tapping.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

sold to the traders or silversmiths in town for cash to buy necessities. A portion of the opium itself can also be traded directly for goods, but generally the Meo prefer to sell their opium for cash. Most of the opium traders are Chinese of Yunnanese extraction, although they may also be Thai or members of other tribes.[18]

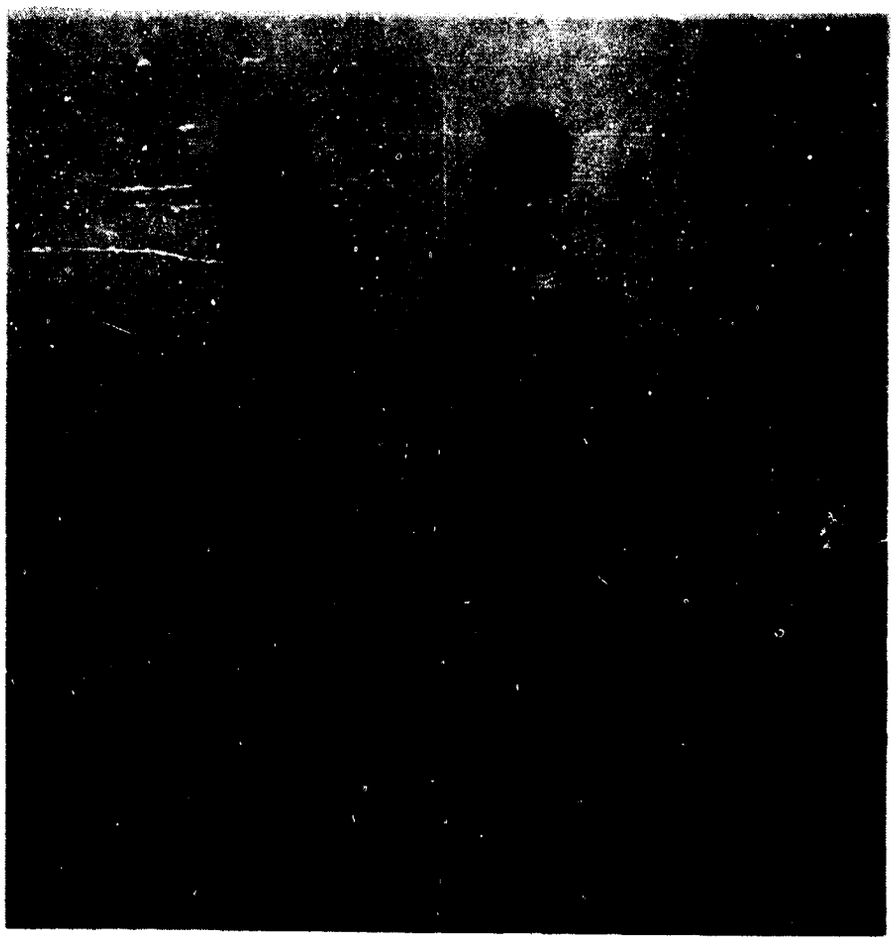

Fig. 19 Striped Meo Woman Wearing Silver Rings.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

Chapter 4
SOCIAL STRUCTURE

FAMILY AND KINSHIP STRUCTURE

The Clan

The clan system dominates the Meo social organization, and it functions as a primary focus for Meo culture by tying together the social, political, economic and religious aspects of Meo behavior. There are said to be eleven major clans in Thailand--the Yang, Li, Song, Wang, Mua (Ma), Thao, Huh, Wuh, Lo (Lao), Kin and Yang.[29]

Meo clans are patrilinear in structure; that is, sons belong to the clans of their fathers, and daughters belong to the clans of their fathers until they marry, at which time they become members of the clans of their husbands. The clans are exogamous; that is, a clan member may not marry or have sex relations with a member of his own clan under any circumstances.[28]

Meo clans in Thailand are dispersed. Members live in different parts of the country and are usually associated in villages with segments of other clans. Rarely, if ever, is an entire clan located in single place. This dispersion seem to be equivalent to the dispersion of surname groups among the Chinese.[28] The clan name is derived from a mythical ancestor, and all members of the clan carry the name in addition to their given names.

Each segment of a clan has its own religious practices, which may differ in some degree from the practices of other segments of the clan. When meeting members of a clan from distant places, clan members will inquire as to the religious practices of the strangers. In this way they determine whether or not they are members of the same segment of the clan. In practice, groups within the same clan segment may, over time and because of long separations, develop differences in ritual practice which may finally serve to distinguish them as different segments. It may be said, however, that while a clan segment in a particular locality tends to have an integrity of its own which separates it, usually in terms of differences in religious practices, from other segments of the clan, they are all within the genealogical unity of the clan.[28]

Meo of any clan are generally friendly to Meo of any other clan. The ties between dispersed segments of a single clan are even closer, and a definite general obligation of hospitality exists between such segments. For example, a group of Tung clansmen seeking land in 1964 visited the Tung people in Umlong in the Hod district. The visitors were given a section of the fields (in fact, the poorest section) in spite of the fact that the visitors were considered to be only distant relations ("of a different spirit") because they had different ritual practices.[28]

Clan members living together in a village or village-complex tend to plant in a common neighborhood and exchange labor when required. This is true in spite of the generality that Meo do not normally have large working groups, and that labor for farms is usually limited to the household. In addition to this type of economic cooperation, local members of a clan will gather for ceremonies once or twice a year and for marriages and funerals. Individuals or small groups may visit other sections of the clan in distant villages at the time of the New Year Festival. Closely related segments in different villages visit mutually on an individual or small group basis and may maintain ceremonial links. However, this sort of relationship declines after ten or fifteen years unless the groups come together again to live in a common village.

While clan membership is usually determined through the patrilinear principle--descent through male lines--there are some other bases for membership in the clan. Clan members may be recruited from among the "unfree" persons--usually surviving members of a disappearing clan or those who for some reason do not have a clan of their own. The acceptance of such "unfree" persons into the clan does not necessarily mean that they will enjoy the same status and privileges as do regular clan members.

Another method of acquiring clan membership is through the ritual of blood-brotherhood. During such a ritual a chicken is slaughtered and its blood mixed with rice brandy. This potion is then drunk by the two individuals involved to bind the relationship. While blood-brotherhood provides no real privileges, it carries with it the mutual obligation of aid, assistance and support. Blood brothers do not become co-heirs to estates, nor do they have any rights to each others' wives

The Village

The clan is the largest corporate group in the village, and, as we have said, clan members cooperate on economic, social and religious levels. Traditionally the clan owns the village, but in fact the actual control of houses and land rests in the hands of the household head.[26] While a village may have in it members of only one clan, this is rare, and would usually occur in densely populated areas where other villages with different clans would be close by. The primary motivation for this condition rests with the needs for sexual relationships and wives within the context of Meo traditions of exogamy. The Meo must have other clans nearby to provide them with women eligible for marriage.

In pioneering areas the village always comprises members of several different clans. The sexual adventures of the young usually lead to a number of inter-clan marriages within the village, and in these cases the ties of matrilineal relationships tend to modify clan separateness and lead to cooperation on a family basis which cuts across clan lines. The whole village will combine for big festivals--especially the New Year Festival--and indeed the ball game at the New Year Festival, being essentially a courting game, requires the participation of persons of different clans.[28]

The Household

The basic unit of the Meo social structure is the household, which includes not only those living under one roof, but also all those under the authority of the household head. In composition the household may range from a simple nuclear family (parents and unmarried children) to a patrilinealy extended family (parents, unmarried sons and daughters, married sons and their wives and children, and possibly a few other dependent relatives). In numbers the household may range from two to thirty.[28]

Members of such households may have food stocks in common and may work paddy fields jointly. Opium fields may be held separately by the component simple nuclear families, but if this is so there is usually much interchange of labor between them. The fact that the Meo are polygynous (men may have more than one wife) extends the family size in many cases.

In the case of the extended family in which the people are not included in a single household, the component households recognize a common link. They will frequently plant neighboring fields and render mutual help when needed. The death of a member nearly always brings these people together for feasting and funeral rites extending over several days. If the members of the group live in different villages, they will seek occasions to visit one another, even if they live in different provinces.[28]

All members of the household carry the same clan name as the household head, the name being derived from a mythical ancestor. Household members whose ancestors can be traced to a common known person are considered to be of the same lineage, and address each other by a common term meaning "my olders and my youngers".[12]

MARRIAGE SYSTEMS

Meo marriages are usually monogamous, but marriage to a second wife is permitted and exists to a certain extent. Second wives may not be sisters of the first wife. Co-wives usually live together in the same house. The practice of a man marrying the widow of his brother exists, but it is optional rather than compulsory. A secondary marriage with a father's widow, however, is forbidden. Marriage is also prohibited between members of families bearing the same surname.[21]

Marriage with any primary or secondary blood relative, or with any parallel cousin is taboo. Cross-cousin marriage, however, is favored (particularly a marriage to the daughter of one's father's sister). This type of marriage is not, however, obligatory, and cross-cousin marriage on the mother's side (that is, to the daughter of one's mother's brother) is also favorable. A brief examination of this pattern indicates that the females selected for marriage are always of another clan. Sex relations between unmarried cross cousins are freely permitted and are, in fact, taken as a matter of course.[21]

After marriage a man usually brings his wife to live with his father. In the event that daughters, but no sons, are born of a marriage, one daughter remains at home, and when she marries her husband comes to live with her father, rather than the usual procedure of the wife living with the husband's father. In this manner, the paternal line is continued for one generation through a female.[21]

Despite the patrilineal characteristics of the Meo clan, the Meo social system reveals unmistakable elements of a bilateral structure--that is, a close relationship with relatives on the mother's side as well as the father's. Individuals maintain close associations with near kinsmen regardless of whether their genealogical connections are on their father's side or on their mother's side, and a Meo expects from members of both sides of the family the kinds of services and relationships which he cannot demand of non-relatives or of more remote kinsmen. This relationship usually extends to both maternal and paternal aunts and uncles.

There is a report that the Meo in China still maintain what was said to be an old tradition characteristically associated with bilateral rather than patrilineal descent systems. For this reason it has been tentatively concluded that the Meo may once have been characterized by bilateral descent, and that their present patrilineal and patrilocal (the taking up of residence with the husband's family) social structure developed under the influence of the Han Chinese.[21]

The survivor of a Meo marriage is free to remarry. If a wife dies, the husband simply takes a new wife as if he had never been married before. When a man dies, the eldest of the deceased's younger brothers usually takes the widow or widows as wife or wives.[5]

DIVORCE

A man is said to need no right to divorce, since he can always marry another girl. Meo women can get a divorce, although it is difficult. The most acceptable ground for divorce is unfaithfulness on the part of the woman and her flight with her lover. If the unfaithful wife refuses to return to her husband, her lover must pay the bride price to the injured husband. All children born before full payment of the bride price belong to the former husband. In the past, a husband had the right to kill an adulterous wife.

Bad treatment on either side, a wife's laziness, the inability of a man to care for his wife, or childlessness may be good grounds for divorce. The bride price is not returned in any of these cases. A divorce however, is possible only with the consent of the wife. If the wife refuses to consent to a divorce, the marriage must continue. Separations between husband and wife are seldom feasible, since the wife would not

be permitted to return to her parents' home immediately, and would therefore have to support herself.

ADOPTION

Childlessness does not always result in divorce or secondary marriage among the Meo. A married couple having no children of their own may adopt one. Children of either sex below the age of ten may be adopted. The adopted child is sought out from a mother who has many children, and, if possible, the child should come from the clan of the childless couple. Consent of the family heads on both sides must be obtained.

If there are no children of the same clan available, a child may be sought from among other Meo clans. However, adoption is rather difficult in this case, particularly in the event that the child's parents are still living, since children are rarely bought from a parent in Meo society. Nevertheless, if the child is an orphan, and if the eldest of his orphaned brothers or sisters is not in a position to support the child, then the child may be put up for sale and adoption. Chinese traders are reported to act as middle men in handling the affair. The price varies according to the age and health of the child. If the child is of the adopting parents' own clan, the price tends to be somewhat lower. A sacrifice is offered to the ancestors and the divinity to justify the adoption.

Married couples can adopt children in suitable numbers. The adopted child bears the surname of his adopted parents and has exactly the same rights of inheritance as would a natural child. There is no difference between the position or treatment of adopted children and natural children. Adopted children are not treated as servants, but in the same manner as a new-born child of their own clan taken into the family community. After adoption, the former family has no more rights over the child, nor can the adopting family attempt to make the former family responsible to any extent.[5]

OWNERSHIP AND INHERITANCE

In early Meo history, all land on which the people lived belonged to the king. After the dissolution of the Meo kingdom, the ownership was transferred into the hands of the great chief. Today such ownership

Fig. 20 Meo Children Spinning Tops. Photo: Binney

lies nominally in the hands of the village headman.[5]

In theory, therefore, the village headman is owner of all land within the village domain. In practice, however, the head of the extended family has de facto ownership of the land on which buildings have been built and crops cultivated. The family head allocates the lands among his family members and determines the crops to be planted. Members of the family cultivate the land commonly and share its production in proportion to the number of people in the family unit and the amount of labor given.

The head of the family owns his own house and most of the things attached to it. Personal belongings, on the other hand, belong to individual family members. These personal belongings include clothing, jewelry, weapons and tools. Meo women, for example, own their personal jewelry, clothing, embroidery and other items brought into the household at marriage. This includes the dowry. Jewelry and ornaments given as gifts to a daughter long before the question of inheritance arises belong to the daughter concerned. The Meo have no special mark to indicate personal or family ownership. However, certain embroidery patterns on clothing among the Meo are reported to serve as means of recognition as well as decoration.

According to Meo inheritance tradition, personal and family property are sharply distinguished. When the head of the family dies, all family property such as fields, animals, agricultural tools and the main house are automatically transferred to the new family head. The position of family head is generally given to the most senior married son who is living in the house and who is still under age 30. (Married sons of 30 normally leave the parents' household to establish their own family residence.) If the oldest son in the family cannot assume the position of family head because of physical or mental incapabilities, then the next eldest son will be chosen for the position. Should any dispute arise as to who should be the family head, the village head usually decides the matter.

The Meo family estate is not necessarily dissolved at the death of a family head. Such a dissolution of family property occurs only with the death of the last of the household heads' wives. Normally, after the death of a family head the senior widow, unless she is very old or suffering from illness, will marry her deceased husband's younger brother. He then assumes the household leadership. The remaining

widows of the deceased household head may do the same. While these women are still alive, they are co-heirs to a portion of their husband's property. Only upon the death of the last of these heirs is the family property divided.

In principle, all Meo children, including adopted sons, have equal rights to personal as well as family property. However, in practice, if a son has moved out of the house, particularly to another village, his share will be divided equally among the remaining heirs. Although Meo women are excluded from family property rights, surviving widows do have some control over the family property at the death of the family head.

Personal property is usually distributed among the heirs on the death of the owner. The first property divided is the cash and silver. The division of cash and silver begins with the eldest male still living in the household and moves downward through the younger sons, each in turn receiving one peice of silver. If any remains, it is distributed to the grandchildren, beginning with the eldest, each receiving one piece of silver. Should there be still more, then the process is repeated until the last silver or money has been distributed.

Ornaments and other movable goods are divided next, but grandchildren are excluded from receiving this kind or property. The remaining goods, such as harvested grain and livestock, are divided among the heirs according to age. Fields are worked jointly by the heirs until harvest, and then a division of the harvest is made. The opium fields, however, are not divided, but remain jointly owned by the heirs. Profits derived from these fields are divided equally among the workers.

We can see, therefore, that among the Meo the family goods pass on in a continuous line within the family, while personal goods pass from one individual to another within the household.[29]

SOCIAL CLASS AND STATUS

There does not appear to be any formal, recognized, or institutionalized class structure among the Meo. The only special position in Meo society is reported to be that of the Meo who are alone, whose followers have died out, and who now have no means of supporting themselves as individuals.[5] However, an informal class system does

exist, and is largely based on age, sex, and social, economic or religious position.

Age represents social status among the Meo; older men and women have a higher social position and greater familial authority than do younger people. Political position, economic wealth, and special and religious positions are sources of some privileges, such as the possession of a larger house, inter-village authority, and increased social status.

Sex and kinship relationships within the household are the prime considerations in social standings. The eldest male, who assumes the position of household head, has virtually unlimited authority. All other members of the household are responsible to him and are subject to him as the chief decision-maker for the family's general welfare. He is also responsible for the settling of all disputes between members of the family.

Distinctions between male and female are sharply drawn among the Meo in terms of duties and division of labor. All heavy and risky labor, such as clearing the fields and construction work, are performed by men. The lighter and less risky tasks at home are performed by women. Certain tasks, such as hunting, working in the stable, and manufacturing weapons for hunting and warfare are undertaken by men only.

A woman's position in Meo society is largely determined by her age and by the number of children she has produced. Therefore, the status and position of a new wife is relatively very low, since she is a newcomer to the husband's family and a new member of his clan. She is responsible to her husband, his parents, and sometimes the wives her husband has married earlier. Later, however, when she becomes older and has her own children, and particularly when her husband moves from his parents' house to establish a separate residence, she achieves the position of a "na tho", or chief wife. She then has status and authority over her sons' wives and any wives that her husband may marry afterward.

Outside the household, however, the status of women is generally lower than that of men. Moreover, while the labor in which women are involved may not be as strenuous, their responsibilities are greater, and there is much more work for them to do than is the case with the men.

The position of children in Meo society also depends largely upon age. Children are considered as economic assets, and a Meo therefore tries to have as large a family as possible. A marked preference is shown for male children, since they perpetuate both the family name and the clan, and they generally remain in the extended family. Female children, on the other hand, are almost always lost to the family once they are married. Nevertheless, regardless of this preference, both sexes are treated well in the Meo family.

Fig. 21 Meo Children Watching Marksmanship Demonstration.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

Chapter 5
POLITICAL STRUCTURE

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

It is fairly well agreed that while a full scope of traditional political institution, such as kingship, paramount or grand chief, field marshal, etc., existed in areas where the Meo were numerous and relatively better integrated (as they were in China), such political systems have never been present among the Meo in Thailand.[5, 11, 29] In fact, most authors report that Meo political integration in Thailand seldom goes beyond the village level. Before discussing the village community as a political unit, it might be well to touch briefly on the early development of Meo political institutions.

There are said to have been Meo kings and a Meo kingdom during the times when the Meo were fighting against the Chinese. The last of the Meo kings is believed to have been killed in battle, and his descendants were said to have continued to fight, but there is no indication as to how the remaining Meo princes died. Nevertheless, the Meo believe that a king will someday rise and lead them in a fight to establish an autonomous Meo state.[5, 30] Present-day insurgent recruiters have induced some Meo to go to Laos for training by promising to take them to see the "King of the Meo". (See also "Myth", Chapter 2.)

The Meo in Thailand are said to remember a "great chieftain", who had 20 or more villages under his control. His administration of this territory was, however, primarily for purposes of warfare. The chieftain was elected by the vote of all men who bore arms in his jurisdiction. They permitted him to act as the supreme judicial authority and military leader. The chieftain, in turn, appointed all village chiefs within his political domain; they assisted him in such administrative duties as the collection of fines and taxes.

At that time there were two types of popular assembly. At the village level, an assembly of all armed men of the village was called by the village chief for the purpose of handling matters pertaining to the village welfare, such as the planting of rice fields, the selection of village sites, general hunts, etc. The majority ruled in decision making. It was possible also for the people of the village to bypass the will of the chief by having the village elders convene a popular assembly.[5]

The other type of popular assembly was that in which all arms-bearing men of the administrative area of the great chief took part. This assembly, of course, possessed much greater authority, and it was only called to make decisions of extreme importance, such as a decision on peace and war, the measures to be taken for the New Year's feast, and for the harvest festival. Decisions made by this assembly were advisory in nature. The assembly was also a court of appeal against decisions of the great chief, and the assembly's decision was irrevocable.[5]

THE VILLAGE AS A POLITICAL COMMUNITY

The dominant figure in the Meo village is the village chief, or headman. Since patrilinear clan is the largest corporate kin group in the village, the senior member of the clan in a one-clan village would normally be the village headman. He is often succeded as headman by his eldest son.

In the event that there are two or more clans in a village, there may be more than one headman, or the clan leader of the major clan may be elected headman by the village elders. However, there have been cases of minor clans in a village uniting to elect the village headman from among the minority clans.[27]

There tends to be one dominant clan in terms of numbers in most villages. As persons are attracted to an area by good farming prospects, they frequently have to obtain land from fellow clansmen who have already laid a general claim to a large area. Domination in numbers generally means greater wealth belonging to that clan. A person of a different clan may have gained leadership in the early stages of a village when the population was small (perhaps because he was the first migrant to the area, or the most capable of a small group), but over time he may be displaced by a member of the numerically and economically dominant clan. In no other sense do there appear to be elite clans in Thailand. For example, the Tang clan may be dominant over Wang and Jang in one area; in another area Wang may be dominant over Jang and Tang, and so on. Any widespread leadership - and there is little of it among the Meo at present in Thailand - would be the result of individual qualities rather than clan origins.[28]

The Meo household reflects in miniature the larger socio-political organization of the village. Respect for elders is a basic principle in both organizations. The head of the household, usually the eldest male,

enjoys the deference and respect of the family members and is unquestionably regarded and respected as the leader of the village.

Just as the head of the Meo family has many duties and responsibilities, so does the village headman. When, as in Thailand, village relationships with the central government are indirect and the village has considerable autonomy, the headman acts in settling intra-village disputes, sees that trails are maintained, oversees the evacuation of the village in time of war, and does many other things that might otherwise be wholly or in part the responsibility of the central government. He usually plays a major role in decisions to migrate in search of new fields.

The authority of the village chief, however, is not absolute, and he must consult with village elders in arriving at his decisions. He may or may not be recognized by the district authority of the central government. Clans in the village usually function as interest groups and compete with one another as cases may arise. The cohesiveness of the village as a social and political unit is related to shared clan membership.

The sphere of a headman's influence may extend beyond his village boundary. In Nan Province, where there are great numbers of Meo, one village headman is reported to have a great deal of influence over a large number of villages in the area.[31] If the village headman's clan is the dominant one in the area, and if he is the most senior or respected among the clansmen, he may wield a great deal of power and influence.

Little is known about the working of inter-clan relations outside the village community, but since all clans have some forms of relationship and contact with each other, clan relationships probably were the major bases for the Meo's social, economic and political systems. The manner in which the Meo clansmen identified themselves with the tribe and with other higher political levels of integration is also unknown and needs further investigation. This is also true of the Meo conception of "nation", or "kingdom".

LEGAL SYSTEMS

The Meo possess a rather highly developed legal system. Disputes within the household are settled by the household head, and his decision is almost always final. Minor disputes affecting the interest of the community are often adjudicated by a village elder; the more important cases are handled by the village headman. Should either the defendant or the

plaintiff in a case disagree with the ruling of the headman, the case may then be taken to a Thai civil court or, where there is a great chief, such as in Nan Province, the case may be appealed to him.

The Meo do not have a codified criminal law, and all crimes and offenses are viewed virtually as civil matters. They consider such acts as theft, murder, lying, assault, bodily injury and kidnapping to be crimes. Treason was formerly considered to be a major crime. Verbal abuse, however, is not considered to be illegal. Cases of theft are rare among the Meo, while other crimes are more numerous. Most of the Meo litigation involves personal disputes concerning land usage or money and simple cases of assault.

Punishment is almost always in the form of fines or the restitution of destroyed property. Perjury is a serious crime, and the punishment is severe, since all Meo are expected to tell the truth. If a case is lost as a result of perjured testimony, and the perjury is discovered later, the offender is usually expelled from the clan and the village. There are no reports of the death penalty being imposed for a crime among the Meo.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

There has been an effort on the part of the Royal Thai Government to improve the life of the hill tribes. Partly as a result of this effort, and because of the Meo's wide distribution throughout North Thailand, many Meo groups have relatively close and frequent contact with Thai government officials. They are normally in contact with the headmen of the nearest Thai village, and there are some limited uses of Thai courts. Contact with the central government includes attendance at schools opened by the Border Patrol Police in some areas. In some cases Meo children attend regular local Thai schools.

The subversive elements among the Meo in northern Thailand have damaged the relationships between the Meo and the government. Attempts by the Royal Thai Government to suppress the growing of opium and to limit slash-and-burn agriculture generates some antagonism among the Meo toward Thai authorities. The concepts and laws governing land use and taxation are also unclear to the Meo. The Royal Thai Government is assisting the Meo with programs of economic improvement and the promotion of substitute cash crops for opium, but government

progress in this area is understandably slow.

In the past the government's education programs for the Meo have aided the establishment of amicable Thai-Meo relations, as has the political education provided by the government for some Meo village chiefs. The results of the government's recently instituted programs of resettlement are not yet certain, though relatively few Meo have voluntarily entered resettlement centers. The Thai government's daily radio broadcasts in the Meo language are attracting listeners among the Meo as evidenced by the 50-60 monthly visits by tribesmen to the radio station.

Fig. 22 Traditional Spirit Gate near Meo Village.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

Chapter 6
RELIGION

PRINCIPAL DEITIES

In general, the Meo religion is said to be based primarily on the belief in ancestors and spirits. Most of the Meo in Thailand are reported to be animists, and there are only about 100 Christian Meo in the country.[1]

The Meo believe in a variety of spirits. Some of these spirits are said to inhabit trees, mountains and fields. There are patron spirits of various activities, such as blacksmithing, and there are spirits which are said to teach medicine men and shamans. A guardian dog spirit protects the Meo house and its inhabitants from evil spirits, and it is reported that among the White Meo two dog paws are hung over the front door of the Meo house to ward off these evil spirits.[15] The most dangerous spirit is said to be that of the water, and women, especially pregnant women, have to guard themselves carefully against this spirit. Since the Meo are materialistic in their beliefs, even the spirit must have form.

Guardian spirits inhabit various parts of the Meo household. The main spirit of the house is said to be at the central house post. There are also spirits that protect the front door of the house, the kitchen, the main room, the earthen stove, the bed of the household head, and the storeroom. Once a year the shaman must make a sacrifice to each of these individual spirits. Villages are protected by a gate which is said to exclude certain evil spirits.

The Meo believe that the further they go from their homes the more danger they are exposed to in terms of evil spirits. Therefore, their household becomes their spiritual security. The Meo believes that when he goes into the woods, away from the protection of his guardian household spirits, the spirits of the mountains, rivers and trees may cause him illness. The Meo is said to be able to chase and capture evil spirits, but may never kill them.

According to Meo belief, each man has three souls, called "pli". A child is born without a soul, and the shaman has to make three sacrifices of pigs and chickens to call three souls into the body of the child. After the child receives these three souls, he is given a name. The

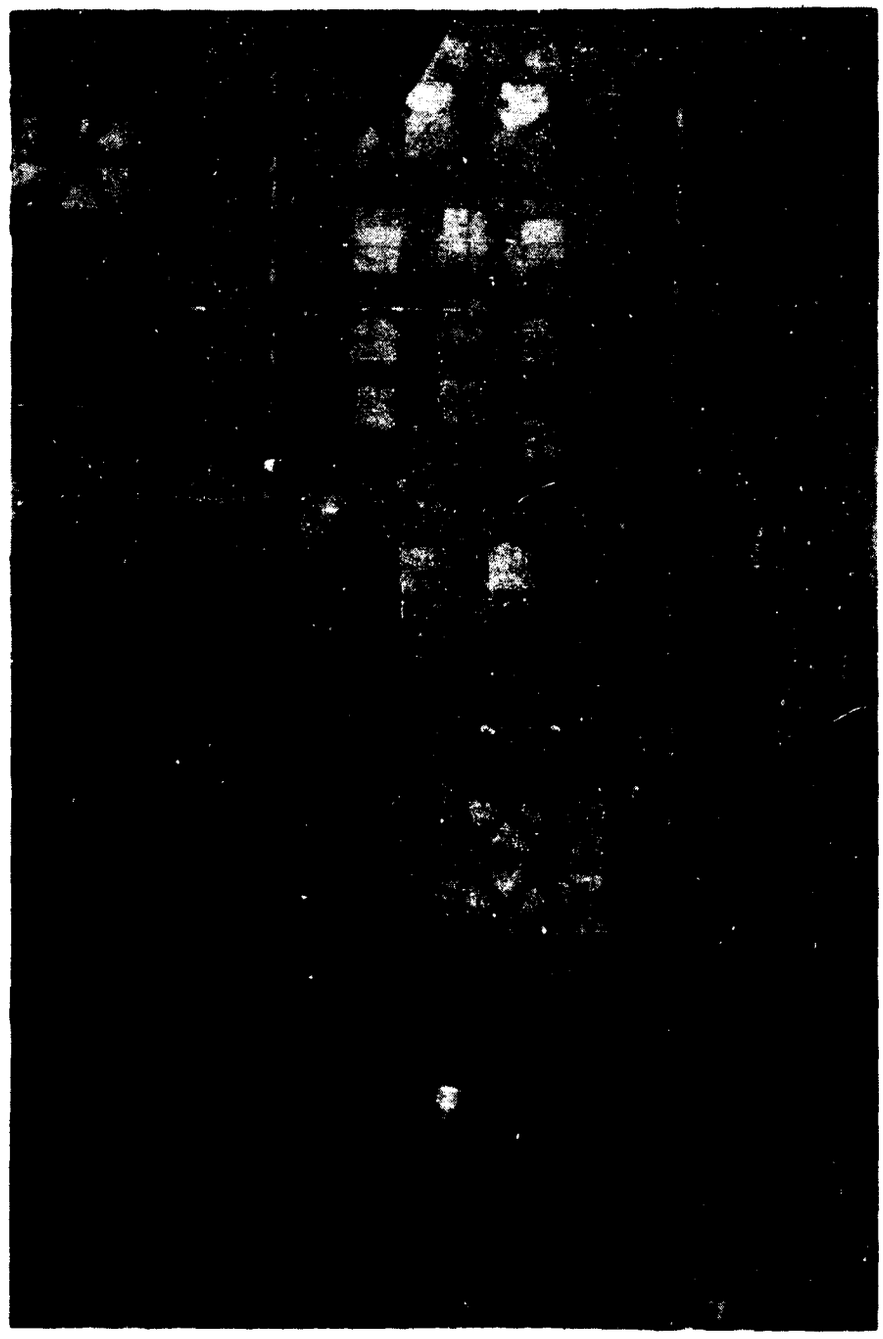

Fig. 23 Spirit Platform in Meo House. Photo: Binney

souls of children are said to be weaker than the souls of adults.

At least one soul must always stay in the Meo's body; the other two souls may leave the body while a man is sleeping. If all three souls left the body, the man would die. The belief is that a soul, while wandering about outside the body, may be delayed or hindered by evil spirits. If the soul does not return to the body, the man becomes ill. It is then necessary for the shaman to perform a sacrifice in order to bring the soul back; if the shaman fails, the man will die.

Upon the death of a Meo, it is believed that one soul stays at the burial place, one soul goes to heaven, and the last goes to hell. Whether the soul goes to heaven or hell does not appear to be dependent upon the Meo's behavior before death, but rather upon the numbers of buffalo sacrificed at the burial.

The Meo do not fear death, since they believe they will be reborn. The soul is said to be reincarnated in the bodies of pregnant women, and the dead are said to be reborn as children of the opposite sex. Animals are said to have one soul and one spirit, and animals may only be reborn as animals. While exemplary behavior of a Meo in his lifetime does not determine whether his souls will go to heaven or to hell, it does determine the form in which he will be reborn. A man who has committed a crime will be reborn as a buffalo or as a horse, depending on the degree of the crime committed. While the soul is said to have the same feelings as humans in the sense that it can be pleased, can hate, can love, and enjoys wealth, it cannot seek revenge and can do no harm. For example, the soul of a deceased Meo who has been murdered can do no harm to the murderer.

The White Meo are said to have a word for heaven, but no word for hell except for an equivalent word meaning "under the earth". The Meo are reported to have supreme deities, and (especially the White Meo) have the notion of gods.[15]

RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND PRACTITIONERS

The Meo believe that there are some people who have supernatural powers permitting close association with the spirits in a manner that is not usually allowed with ordinary people. Such individuals are known as "shamans" or "ao nin".

The shaman is said to derive his supernatural power from of a spirit which enters his body. He is said to be able to see spirits while he is awake and to move about with them. He usually possesses skills and knowledge normally lacking among ordinary people.

Among the Meo a shaman can be either a male or female. It is believed that, although his powers may be inherited from his father, the shaman is usually chosen by the spirits. There may be more than one shaman in a village, but there is no competition among them. However, they are not considered to be equal in power. Villagers often turn to the most powerful shaman; if he refuses the villager's problem, the villager will then go to the second shaman of the village.[5] Among the White Meo particularly, the degree to which the shaman earns respect from his village followers depends largely on the intelligence of his conversation and the efficacy of his advice.[15] According to one writer, the Meo shaman can be distinguished by the small cloth across sewn on the back of the male shaman's jacket.[5]

The shaman is said to be able to communicate with ancestors while he is in a trance. While in the trance, the shaman stamps his feet, shakes his body, rolls on the ground, and may become unconscious. He manipulates swords, rattles, sacrificial animal blood and spirit money while chanting and reciting incantations.[11]

In addition to his main duty, which is that of performing the sacrifices to the spirits, the shaman has a number of other duties. He is asked to cure illnesses by driving out the evil spirits which cause them; he reads the future to foretell the probable success of a work effort; he reads omens and interprets dreams; and he makes amulets and sacral signs.

The shaman may he paid in silver or in coins for such vital services as curing serious illness. He is also paid for presaging good or bad fortune and for explaining signs, but instead of being paid in money, the shaman may receives food, opium, cloth, etc.[5]

When not engaged in religious matters, the shaman functions as an ordinary member of society. His political roles are not clearly reported, but a village chief may at the same time be a recognized shaman with a wide reputation for divination and exorcism. In such circumstances, the chief's political influence may extend over a large area, particularly in times of crisis.[11] In matters such as selection

Fig. 24 Shaman Performing Burial Ceremony. White Cross Denotes Male Shaman. Photo: Tribal Research Center

of village sites or the time and place for village movements, which are political in nature, the shaman can be said to have much influence.

The shaman does not engage in black magic or sorcery, but apart from the shaman, there are a few individuals among the Meo who are "half priests and half sorcerers", without religious service or ordination. They are said to possess supernatural powers. They close the eyes of the dead and save their souls, and they are believed to be able to move beneath the earth with the spirits. These priests are identifiable by the white veils they wear over their faces. There ceremonies, which usually end with a large festive meal, include singing and dancing.

RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES AND RITUALS

The Meos' most important ceremony of the year is the New Year's Festival, which usually begins after the harvest in December. On the first day of the ceremony, animals are sacrificed to the souls of the ancestors and to other household spirits. The festival may continue for a week or more, and after the first day is characterized by drinking, games, visits to relatives in different villages, and courting. The animal sacrifices, which constitute the major part of the Meo ritual, are performed by the household heads and by the shamans on a variety of occasions.[11]

Other less important rituals and ceremonies through the year are performed by individuals and household heads on altars set up in the homes, in the fields, and along paths outside the village. Pigs or chickens are the animals usually selected for sacrifice; cattle, horses or buffalo are usually not sacrificed for these purposes. Divination is practiced with the help of chicken bones or other cracked bones, or with cracked bamboo sticks.[5] Shamans carry out rituals designed to exorcise evil spirits that are said to cause illnesses, the guilty spirits supposedly having been discovered earlier by divination.

When a man dies, the corpse is washed, dressed in new clothes, and laid out in the home for a few days while immediate relatives keep vigil. The body, in a wooden coffin, is then borne to a grave in the woods. All of the members of the deceased's clan attend the funeral procession. Much care is taken to "show the right road" to the departing soul. The priest and shaman exorcise evil spirits during the

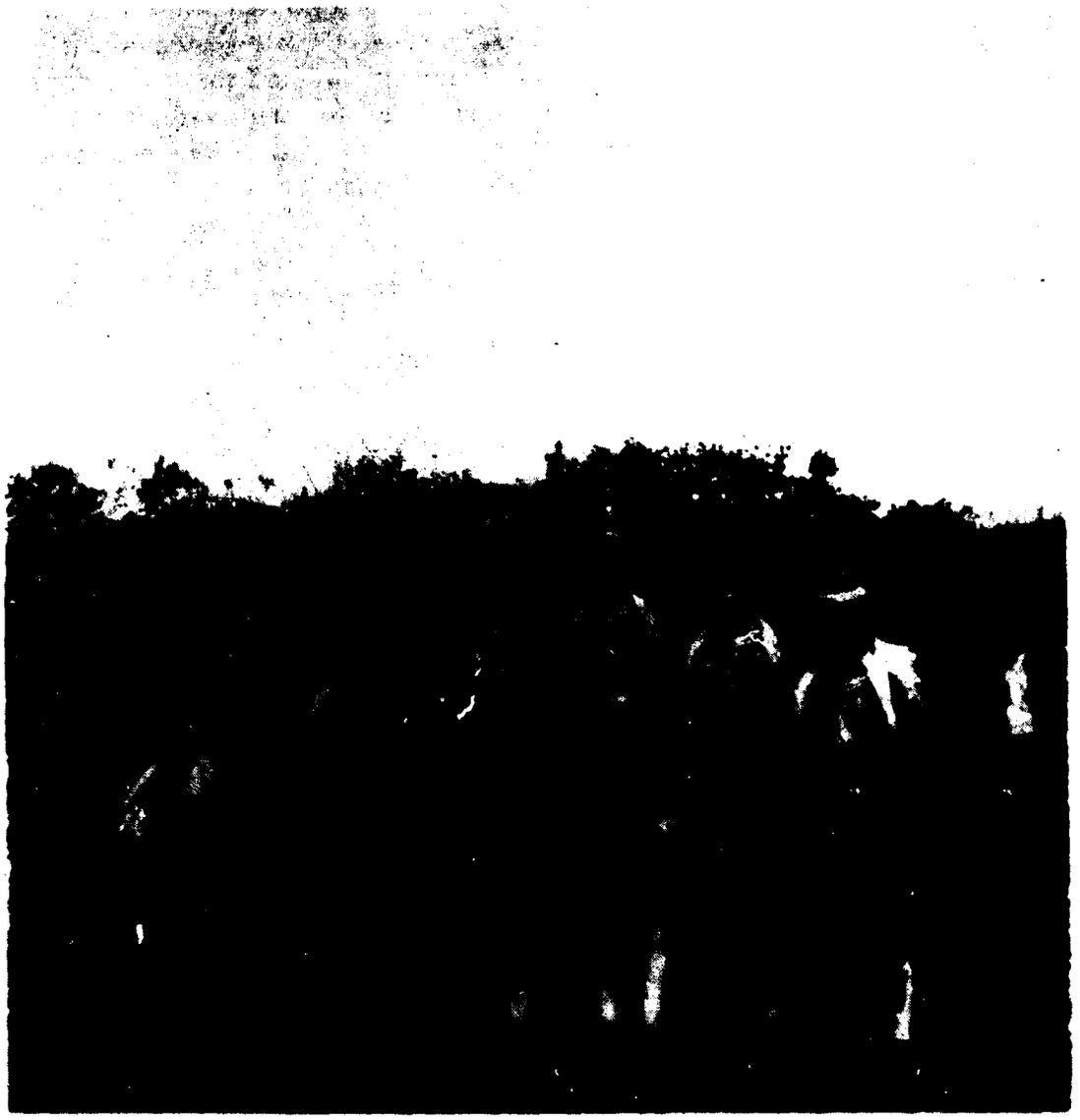

Fig. 25 Striped Meo Dressed for New Year Festival.
Photo: Tribal Research Center

period between death and burial, and when the burial is completed, an animal sacrifice is made and some food is offered to the deceased's soul. Burial sacrifices and ceremonies are performed for three days afterwards, and an annual festival is performed for the dead.[1,5,11]

Chapter 7
MILITARY ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATION FOR DEFENSE

Traditionally, the Meo have been known as people who would resist any kind of oppression, even at the risk of their lives, and history has proved them to be brave and excellent soldiers. Their love of independence and their high regard for property rights have usually been the basis for their military activities, particularly against the Chinese. Despite their relatively quiet (and sometimes even timid) nature, the Meo can be vicious and cruel in wartime, and they have been known to utilize a variety of torture on captured enemies. They are excellent guerilla fighters and can function as light infantry or even light cavalry in mountainous or jungle areas.[29]

The Meo military system is based on a civilian militia composed of all able-bodied males over the age of 16. There is no formal military training, but from early childhood every Meo is familiarized with weapons. Every male capable of bearing arms is obligated to perform military services. Children and women are exempt from active military service, although Meo history has recorded many examples of women who became famous in wartime.[5]

In the past the Meo militia was ordered to war after a meeting of the people's assembly usually called by the grand chief. Once the decision to go to war had been reached, the grand chief appointed a field marshal and a general commander, and lower ranking officers as well. Messengers and signal guns were used to coordinate and control the army.[5]

In Thailand today, the decision to go to war is largely a matter to be decided within the individual village. However, this is especially true of a village which has a leader whose position and influence is similar to that of the traditional grand chief. When such influential headmen call for a war, all able-bodied males from the various villages within the chief's political domain will don their white turbans (a Meo symbol of war), take up arms and assemble at a predesignated spot. Traditionally, wars were preceded by a formal declaration, which was delivered to the enemy before combat was actually undertaken. However, this practice may have been given up in recent years.[29]

The usual Meo military tactic in wartime is to move in a loose order or march and attempt to gain control of the mountain passes ahead of the enemy. In battle the Meo try to launch surprise attacks and ambushes, preferably at night. Their military doctrine calls for small units to engage the enemy while the larger reserve is held in readiness. After a battle, the Meo decapitate their killed, wounded and captured enemies and send the bodies to their grand chief, who redeems them in money. Women and children of the enemy are not harmed, the women sometimes being married by the soldiers and the children adopted. Enemy property is not destroyed, but is sent to the grand chief, who in turn distributes this property among the soldiers of his district.[5]

The battles are not as bloody as might be assumed from this description, as a fleeing enemy is soon able to escape from pursuers in dense jungle, and women and children usually desert their villages in wartime, taking their belongings with them.[5]

Traditionally the only known reason for the Meo to go to war was to secure their living space. Within the last few decades, the Meo have been on the defensive against strong neighbors. Meo will usually only wage war against people outside their tribe, and a 1947 study indicated that no war between Meo tribes had ever been reported.[5] This does not apply, however, to the current situation in northwestern Laos and northern Thailand in which there have been incidents of Meo fighting on both sides and against each other.

MEO WEAPONS

Early history speaks of the Meo weapons as including swords, spears, bows, crossbows, armor and iron shields. Today in Thailand, however, spears and armor are rare. The modern Meo arsenal includes a wide range of weapons, consisting of rifles, crossbows, forestry axes, rice sickles, knives, machetes and double-edged swords. The rifle, of course, is the most important weapon of the Meo, and those manufactured by the Meo are of the flintlock type of varying degrees of power and accuracy. They are manufactured in different sizes to suit the user. Gunpowder is traditionally made locally of charcoal, sulphur and niter, the niter being obtained from bat droppings. The crossbow is second only in importance to the rifle. The Meo crossbow is custom made for the user, is highly accurate, and has high penetration power at short distances, making it an excellent jungle fighting weapon. Meo arrows are almost always poisoned, and the poison is quick-acting.[29]

Chapter 8
CONSIDERATIONS IN ESTABLISHING RAPPORT WITH THE MEO

The material in the preceding chapters suggests that representatives of the Royal Thai Government should exercise a great deal of care in their contacts with tribal people, particularly the Meo, to avoid creating misunderstandings or hostility. In order to work successfully with the Meo and to enlist their assistance in government-sponsored projects, it is essential to understand and respect the social, political, economic, and religious characteristics of the tribesmen and to use this knowledge to create a relationship of mutual trust and confidence.

The Meo live in areas of strategic importance to the RTG. Most have some knowledge of the location, strength and activities of communist terrorists who are attempting to carry out subversion in their vicinity. Such information is of importance to the government and can be obtained if the tribesmen trust the particular representatives of the government with whom they have personal contact. The tribesmen's impressions of the RTG are likely to be based on brief encounters with individual policemen, soldiers or merchants.

The Meo are generally reported to be quite democratic. Leadership is by persuasion, and the acceptability of a leader, or chief persuader, depends upon general concensus. A leader generally should not be too young, but he should be of a still active generation. He should pay great attention to the counsel of older men, for a major emphasis in Meo society is respect for the aged. Men are usually the most influential among the aged, but old women may also be highly regarded, especially if they are widowed progenitors of the group concerned.[28]

The nature of the society generally is such that it will not willingly accept aggressive leaders. Therefore, any attempt by outsiders to influence the village people should have the village headman as its first contact, and should include consideration of the elders and the leading shamans. An outsider should be wary of giving overt influence to a younger man in disagreement with attitudes of elders, because this could quickly split the village into factions and destroy the chances for success in the venture.[28]

In any projected activities, religious approval should be sought from the shaman. Not only are shamanistic skills extremely important in

the single village, but a single shaman may practice for different clans. He may vary his performance in accordance with the ritual requirements of the particular clan, maintaining his own personal spirits to call upon, and he may thus acquire prestige over a fairly wide area.[28] The shaman is consequently a very important person whose support should always be sought.

Signs and omens, good or evil, mentioned by the tribesmen should be respected, whether they seem "sensible" or not. Usually there is some acceptable tribal way to placate evil spirits or change the omens from good to bad. The advice of the tribesmen should be asked for and, if possible, followed in such matters. It is generally wiser to accept tribal practices in this regard than to ignore them and risk losing local support.

Spirit gates at the entrance to villages and other religious structures or materials should never be disturbed.

Among the Meo, ideas for change will receive the most favorable response if they are presented as forms of local community betterment. Proposals for civic action should emphasize village life improvement rather than ethnic or cultural pride, nationalism or political ideology. Innovations should be explained at length to prevent resentment against what might be considered interference in their traditional norms.

The villagers should also be psychologically prepared before any attempts are made to introduce proposed changes into a village. Such preparation requires detailed consultation with village leaders, careful assurance of expected results, and a relatively slow pace in implementing programs. A full discussion usually must take place first, and a decision must be taken by the village chief before work commences.

There is usually a strong sense of group responsibility in a Meo village. The acts of individual members of the village are thought by the Meo to reflect credit or blame on the village as a whole. Thus, though only a few villagers may be personally involved in certain activities that are disapproved of by the other villagers, it is usually very difficult to collect information that might put the village as a whole in a bad light.

As we have already learned, however, the Meo political domain is not wholly confined to the village level. Family, friendships and interclan relationships extend the Meo political network over considerable

distances. A Meo in Chiengrai, for instance, may visit and be well received by members of the same clan many miles away in Nan or in Tak. Clan exogamous rules may make the young Meo roam over a large area to look for a bride. A Meo stranger, therefore, if he behaves himself properly, should be well received in any Meo village both within and without Thailand. This widely extended relationship system has made the Meo vulnerable to subversive penetration. It can also, of course, assure a friendly Meo the same acceptance in Meo villages a great distance from his own.

Leadership that extends beyond the village exists among the Meo. Some shamans, the elders of the clans, and some particularly respected village chiefs exercise influence outside their villages, but such inter-village leadership is not easy to secure on a voluntary basis in Thailand because the Meo villages are autonomous units. Among those Meo who have aquired some inter-village influence, personal characteristics and respect for Meo customs seem to be more important factors than membership in a particular clan.

Individual Meo travel freely across the Thai-Lao border to visit fellow clansmen, particularly after the rice and opium harvests. Some Meo villages are situated near the border, and the villagers have fields in both countries. Border recognition among the Meo is not very strong. The Meo seem to identify more strongly with the concept of the mountain country as "home" regardless of the country in which the mountain is located. Thailand as a country is vaguely and variously identified by different Meo sub-groups. Primarily, the Meo can be said to have loyalties toward their family, clan and tribe. However, because there is much travel between villages, news of fortune or misfortune travels with surprising swiftness, and villagers are likely to know a great deal about conditions and events in areas far distant from their own. Tribal information programs should take this into consideration.

A striking feature of the Meo in Thailand is the manner in which they and many different tribes have coexisted without fighting, even when they have become intermixed in an area, and each of them has experienced pressure upon his land resources from the other. They recognize each other's basic land rights; they are tenacious of their own, but they are not by nature aggressive, and they recognize and tolerate different cultures.

The environment of the high mountains is difficult, and the search for

good living is the primary concern of most Meo groups. They are quite adjustable, as they have had to be, and they have a very high pride of origin - a stronger sense of ethnic identity - than many other tribes in Thailand. Whereas Chinese traders in Meo villages have wives of other tribes, few can be found with Meo wives. There may be some cases of tribal intermarriage, but there is certainly a general resistance to it, and also to the adoption of Meo children by members of other groups.

There are legends which show that among the tribesmen the Meo were regarded as the elite, the intellectuals, or the warriors. The Meo cultural connection with the Chinese and, in some cases, knowledge of the Chinese language are also the sources of much pride. The subversion carried out by agents infiltrated into Thailand relies heavily on appeals to Meo legends and ethnic pride. This includes, as we have noted, the promise that one day the Meo king will rise and lead the Meo to victory (See Chapter 7).

It is hard to say whether the Meo feel superior to other tribes. They do not feel inferior. The most important factor is that they feel different. They recognize that other tribes have other customs, and they have no wish to interfere with them. They generally do not wish to dominate them, but if they see a chance to gain land from them which they themselves can use, then they will use any methods short of force which they think are likely to succeed.[28] It is important, incidentally, in all cases when dealing directly with the Thailand Meo, to refer to them as H'Moong", which is the term they use in referring to themselves. (See Chapter 1).

The isolation of the Meo, the relative inaccessability of the areas in which they live, and the consequently infrequent RTG presence among them have been factors favorable to the development of the insurgency in the North. The insurgents have distorted this lack of visible government presence, cite it as evidence of government neglect, and have made this a major theme in their propaganda to the tribesmen.

Though the Meo have had infrequent contact with the Thai government, much of the contact has been negative and abrasive to the tribesmen, since it involves taxation, the suppression of opium growing, and the limitation of slash-and-burn agriculture. (Some authorities believe that shifting agriculture is not generally harmful to the country. See UN Report - Opium Growing in Thailand.) These quite reasonable

government programs seem to the Meo to threaten their way of life and their already precarious economy. Still, the Meo are interested in self-improvement, and programs that offer medical assistance, opportunities for education, agricultural improvement and markets for his handicrafts have been successful among the Meo.

Apart from their infrequent but often unpleasant contacts with agents of the government, the Meo consider themselves to have been exploited by the valley Thai in the market place. Measures to assure fair treatment of the Meo by merchants and shopkeepers might do much to improve relations in general.

A friendly Meo population in the mountainous border regions would be a great advantage and strength to the RTG. The establishment of friendly relations is still possible, but it will require some effort by the RTG to educate both Meo and valley Thai in the North to the fact that cooperation is to their mutual long-range benefit.

Following are summary guidelines which may be useful for planning and implementation of projects or programs among the Meo.

1. Projects should originate at the village level rather than be imposed by the central government or by outsiders.

2. Projects should be challenging in nature, but should not be so large in scale or strange that they intimidate villagers.

3. Projects should be capable of completion within a short time, and they should proceed in phases that provide opportunities for evaluation of their progress and effectiveness.

4. The project results should be observable, measureable and tangible, as much as possible.

5. Ideally, the projects should lend themselves to emulation by other villages or groups.

The civic action possibilities for personnel working with the Meo encompass different aspects of village life. Examples of possible projects are as follows.

1. Agricultural and Animal Husbandry

Improvement of livestock and poultry through the introduction of better breeds.

Instruction in elementary veterinary techniques to improve health of animals.

Introduction of improved seeds and new vegetables.

Introduction of techniques to improve quality and yields of farmland.

Insect and rodent control.

Introduction of cash crop substitute for opium.

2. Transportation and Communication

Road-building and clearing of trails.

Installation, operation and maintenance of simple electric-power generators and village electric-light systems.

3. Health and Sanitation

Improvement of village sanitation.

Provision of safe water-supply systems.

Eradication of disease-carrying insects.

Provision of dispensary facilities for outpatient treatment.

Teaching of sanitation, personal hygiene and first aid.

4. Education

Provision for basic literacy training.

Provision of rudimentary vocational training.

Provision of basic citizenship training.

5. Miscellaneous

Assistance in marketing surplus agricultural products at fair market prices.

Trading posts where small, frequently used articles (plastic sheets for rain-coats, batteries for flashlights and radios, needles, thread, salt, etc.) can be sold or bartered at reasonable prices.

Simple guest house at District and Province Headquarters where tribesmen can stay overnight when they walk in to market or to do business with the government.

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13. ABSTRACT

This document is a compilation and presentation of data on the Meo hill tribe of Northern Thailand. It is designed to furnish information useful to individuals or organizations dealing with the Meo tribes or with problems concerning the Meo. The purpose is to provide a better understanding of the background, economy, social structure, religion, political structure and military organization of the tribe, in order that its people may be approached more effectively, and assisted in such a way as to be of mutual benefit both to the tribespeople and the Royal Thai Government.

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