

Traditional Marriage and Transaction of the Black Thai in Central Thailand

Nitaya ONOZAWA

Abstract

This paper presents findings on the marriage system and its transaction practiced among the Black Thai in Petchburi, central Thailand. The concepts and practices of brideservice, *kuay-kwaan*, and temporal uxorilocal residence, *kuay-asaa*, are found in this community. This finding can lead to a new theory of the residential patterns of Thai ethnic groups. Among the actual changes in marriage practices, the customary marital law with its strong ties to ancestral spirits, remains firmly unchanged. The marriage is not recognized until the last marriage ritual, *taeng kao phii*, is performed. In the marriage transaction, some symbolic items submitted to ancestral spirits remain unchanged, including the traditional bridewealth. Even though the practice of brideservice is disappearing and traditional bridewealth has lost its market value, they have been replaced by the *sinsod-thongmun*, a brideprice in the Thai Noi tradition.

keywords: Black Thai, marriage transaction, uxorilocal, bridewealth, brideservice

Introduction

Traditions and beliefs practiced in the Black Thai (so-called *Lao Song* in Thai) communities in Thailand have been studied by many scholars (Dararat & Somsak : 1986, Mayuree : 1978, Sumitr, Banthorn & Poonsuk : 1978, Vasana : 1987, Pedersen : 1968, 1982, Sams : 1987 and others) and are well known for their cultural differences from those of other Thai ethnic groups. Their different customs are fundamentally discussed on the following issues:

1. The social stratification in the Black Thai communities in Thailand is not complicated. People are traditionally divided into two strata by the status of their clans. Specification of rituals, ceremonies and other practices are determined in according to the clan's status.
2. They are a patrilineal descent group, holding a clan's name (*sing*), while other Thai groups

- (e.g. Thai Noi¹ in central Thailand) have bilateral kin-relations and never hold any clan's name.
3. Ancestor spirit worship is strictly practiced. All sons are obliged to continue venerating the ancestral spirits (*sueb phi* or *rub phi*). Their wives leave their own spirit descent groups to join their husbands. Some other Thai groups pursue ancestor spirit worship but daughters are obliged to carry on the household spirits (e.g. Thai Yuan in northern Thailand) while husbands leave their own spirit descent groups to join their wives (Turton : 1972).
 4. A virilocal residential settlement is practiced but only after the husband completes a period of *kuey-asaa* (voluntary son-in-law), the time during which the newly-wed husband moves to live with his wife and work for her paternal family. This practice is well documented for the fact that it is different from other Thai groups in which uxorilocal residence is a tradition.

Among these four distinctive characteristics of the Black Thai community in Thailand, the discussion on virilocal residence seems to gain less attention considering the amount of research on this matter. The initial finding of the practice of *kuey-asaa* (voluntary son-in-law) was made in the 1970's in the Kaoyoi district by a Thai sociologist whose original aim was to conduct research on community development, not on marital residential patterns. (Mayuree:1978) However, thereafter, this distinct concept and practice have never been further investigated or analyzed in relation to the kinship system or as a brideservice in the marriage system of the Black Thai, in spite of the fact that it has been frequently mentioned as a symbolic practice in the wedding ritual. One simple reason might be that in the 1980's and 1990's, Thai society has moved into a phase of high economic growth which brings along rapid change in various modes of social mechanism. In responding to the changes, most research studies, among the few, on the Black Thai communities in Thailand are directed to studying mainly modernization in the community, the impacts of socioeconomic changes to lifestyles, incomes, occupations, land owning, labor organization, out-migration and so on. Especially, after the Vietnam government opened its country and started welcoming foreign researchers to study its minority groups, scholars and researchers on Thai ethnic groups have shifted their areas of study to the northern Vietnam around Dien Bien Phu, Lai Chau and Son La which are believed to be the homeland of the Thais: Black Thai, White Thai, Red Thai, Tho, etc. However, doing anthropological research in these areas in Vietnam, so far, has not been an easy task. Strong support and sincere cooperation from the domestic officers are essential as well as the nature of the research of which its methodology requires not only well trained field researchers but a considerable amount of time to establish rapport, intimacy, and trust with the tribespeople in order to obtain correct and objective information on family members and their relationship.

Nevertheless, in view of the fact that the Black Thai have settled in central Thailand for two centuries, the marriage and kinship systems practiced among them have not yet been fully understood and clarified by academics. Thus, there is an urgent need to proceed with investigation as soon as the opportunity arises. The finding from the Black Thai groups in Thailand can help to construct a principal hypothesis which afterwards will facilitate research on the same subject elsewhere.

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to examine the marriage transaction of goods, wealth and service between the bride's and groom's families in the Black Thai communities. It needs to be examined together with the process of marriage which will be another focal point of this paper. The meanings and interpretation of the marriage transaction will not be discussed here in detail.

Research Area

The oldest community of the Black Thai at Kaoyoi District (Petchburi Province in central Thailand) is selected for this study, for the reason that it was the first site of settlement by the Black Thai in the eighteenth century. Historical evidence shows that the Black Thai population were evacuated from the areas in the present northwestern Vietnam to the Thai kingdom a total of six times, in 1776, 1779, 1792, 1835, 1836, and 1887 (Bang-on: 1988). Each time they were allocated to Petchburi, a historical strategic town since the Ayuthaya period (1350-1767). Even though their legal and social status was more that of a *phrai* (commoners) than that of a war prisoner or slave (*thaat*), it was not until the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910) that these evacuees were permitted to move out of the province and resettle at their own will. Thus it can be said that their communities found in the western and central parts of Thailand mostly originated from the Petchburi area². Only a few communities in other parts of the country have different origins³.

Traditional Marriage and Transaction

The marriage of the Black Thai is a time consuming continual process with plural rituals. The process may last for many years before the wife is recognized as a legitimate member of her husband's lineage. Therefore the transfer of goods and services appears in different times depending on each ritual. In this study, it is found that the process of traditional marriage of the Black Thai can be divided into six stages and periods, including the informal stage of courting, as follows :

1. **Courting (*Oh*)**. It is a period during which men go around to get to know women in other villages. In practice, in the evening when women are free from their chores, they gather at someone's house, working on their weaving machine, waiting for the young men from other villages to approach. After a few meetings in which they become acquainted with each other, they can talk in private at the women's houses but in an open space under the house. Since lineage endogamy is a taboo, men have to search for their wives in faraway areas. Men of older generations who married thirty and forty years ago generally went around to other districts within the province of Petchburi. A noticeable number of them married their maternal cross-cousins. Younger men go as far as Nakorn Prathom and Rajaburi provinces and sometimes

marry girls of the same clan's names.

2. **Negotiating** (*Lom*). After the man decides whom to marry, his representative (*laam*) is sent to propose to the woman's parents. This stage takes three to four trips at each of which, certain mannerisms and courtesies are performed. However, the main job of the representative is to negotiate the conditions of conducting the brideservice for the groom, which is called *kuey-kwaan*. The *kuey-kwaan* brideservice is a period of time when the man stays and works for the woman's parents **before marriage**. It should be noted that at this negotiating stage, **the amount of bridewealth is not an issue of negotiation** as usually done among the Thai Noi and many of other Thai groups. After the duration of *kuey-kwaan* has been agreed upon, the parties concerned proceed to the next stage.

3. **Probation or testing** (*Long*), is the period during which the man who is an applicant or a prospective son-in-law has to **live with and work for** the woman's family, usually for two or three years. Then the woman and her parents can observe and decide whether the man is competent and suitable. The status of the man is called *kuey-kwaan*. The word *kuey* means young man or son-in-law, the word *kwaan* means the unroofed space in the back of the house. The terminology simply indicates that the man is living in the *kwaan* area. Besides working for no payment, he brings his own materials and utensils for living and work. During the *kuey-kwaan* years, he is not allowed to enter the house, not even to walk through the sheltered area between the front and the back. Undoubtedly, the man is **absolutely** prohibited to have a sexual relationship with his prospective bride. Besides, by principle the woman reserves her right to have a date (*oh*) with other men. The live-in *kuey-kwaan* has no right to protest or disapprove. However, it is an unwritten agreement that both the woman's parents and the man reserve their rights to quit or terminate the promised period of *kuey-kwaan* anytime. In some cases, the parents think the man is lazy, or the man loses his desire to marry the woman. Since this period must be conducted without exception, it is a brideservice in the real sense.

4. **Engagement** (*Song*). After the man has fulfilled his obligation of being *kuey-kwaan*, he is ready to get engaged. At the engagement ceremony, three items must be presented to the woman's side. These are :
 - (1) *kan-maak*, a bowl filled with betel nuts and its ingredients,
 - (2) *kaleb*, small containers filled with symbolic foods,
 - (3) *haab-kow*, big containers filled with sweets for the woman's family to distribute to relatives when the engagement is announced⁴.

All three items must be offered to the ancestors' spirits in the *kalo-hong*, the small room at the house's corner where ancestral spirits live.

5. **Wedding ceremony** (*Taeng kuey-asaa* = to wed a voluntary son-in-law). This wedding ceremony is, in fact, the beginning of the period of being *kuey-asaa* (voluntary son-in-law). The

wedding ceremony takes place at the bride's house. The ancestral spirits of both sides are definitely informed. On the wedding day the groom brings symbolic foods and goods as gifts for the bride's parents and ancestral spirits. There is no money for the parents or special monetary gifts for the bride. This ceremony emphasizes the acceptance of the groom and his new status as an in-law. The **ritual of delivery of the groom** (*song*) is performed as an important part of the wedding ceremony, together with the **ritual of volunteering to work** (*saa*) for the bride's parents. He has to promise verbally that he will work for the family for a certain number of years, usually two or three.

After the wedding ceremony, the bride and the groom are **socially** and **practically** husband and wife. They normally have children during this *kuey-asaa* period. It is an ideal that the husband stays until three children are born so that he has a stable family before moving them out to live with his parents. Thus this period might last about five to seven years. Sometimes, the man spends many more years with his parents-in-law because they are not ready to let him and his family leave. Also, the man can prolong his stay if he wants to. The *kuey-asaa* period should be considered a **perpetuation** of the brideservice period. It can be called **wifeservice** since the man has been serving his wife, in order afterwards to receive his wife to his own lineage and village.

However, this uxorilocal period can be omitted for many reasons. The bride's family may have many sons already, so that the parents do not want any service from the son-in-law. They can afford losing their daughter's labor. The groom sometimes cannot leave his parents because he is the only son or the only child who is the main manpower of his family. For another reason, it is found in this study that in the hypergamy marriage, the man rarely becomes *kuey-asaa*⁵. In these cases the man has to *asaa-nok*, which means volunteering to work outside (his wife's house). He still lives with his parents and works in his own or his parents' rice field but delivers a quantity of rice he has produced in a year to his wife's parents. Usually the agreement is set at the negotiating stage. During the *asaa-nok* period the husband eats at his parents' and comes to visit his wife only at night. This conduct is traditionally perceived as usual for the son-in-law who does *asaa-nok*. Children born in this period stay with their mother until she is ritually married.

6. **Marriage ritual** (*Taeng-kao-phi* = to wed into lineage). This is the last and the most important stage of marriage for the Black Thai. Without this ritual, marriage is not customarily legalized. After the period of *kuey-asaa* is finished, the husband has to take his wife and children to his parents' home⁶. He has to move his wife ritually out of her spirits' descent group (*taeng-ork jaak phi-phuying*), to ritually get into his own (*taeng-kao phi-phuchaay*). At the ritual of *taeng-ork* (moving out), the bridewealth called *ngern-tam-mae-ko* (original mother money) must be presented to the wife's parents and her ancestors' spirits. The amount of *ngern-tam-mae-ko* must be the same as the amount the wife's mother received at her own marriage. This means the mother and daughter are equivalent in value, as are other maternal female ancestors of the wife. This is the identification for tracing back to the original clan's status of the woman's female ancestors (Onozawa :1997).

The basic concept of the bridewealth, *ngern-tam-mae-ko* (original mother money) is not the same as *sinsod*, the brideprice as practiced in other Thai groups and among the young generation of the Black Thai. The *ngern-tam-mae-ko* is the money for welcoming the baby (and its mother) as referred to in Black Thai as *Ao ngern pai phuk sai uu*, which literally means 'take the money to tie the cradle'. However the amount of this money is more than just a token of gratitude. If for any reason, the man does not move his immediate family out of his parents-in-law's house, he does not have to hand-in the *ngern-tam-mae-ko* (bridewealth).

In this community, another pattern of a residential uxorilocal settlement is found. The volunteer son-in-law (*kuey asaa*) stays with his wife permanently instead of for only a certain period of time. This practice is called *asaa-kaad* which means to absolutely volunteer. Surprisingly, a substantial number of *asaa-kaad* are found in the older generation and in the history of many families. It should be noted that uxorilocal residence has been analyzed as a typical settlement of the Thai groups without realizing the existence of the concept and practice of *kuey-asaa* and *asaa-kaad*.

However, the marriage is completed **only** when the wife changes her membership affiliation from her ancestral descent group to her husband's. In a life time, no matter where the couple establishes their family, in either virilocal, uxorilocal or neolocal patterns, the husband must perform the rituals of moving-out (*taeng-ork*) and moving-in (*taeng-kao*) his wife. It is a **must-do** ritual for every married couple. Otherwise, after death the wife cannot be venerated as a major spirit in her household⁷. Also, as long as the woman is not registered in her husband's lineage, her children are illegal under traditional kinship law. The ideology is that the couple's spirits must stay together and be fed and venerated in their children's houses. At the same time, their spirits can control, protect and take care of their descendants.

The marriage ritual may not be pursued promptly at the time of moving in because it has to be done at the *sen ruen* ritual (household spirit veneration), when all ancestral spirits are called upon to the feast. The *sen ruen* ritual is held once in a few years or once in many years. Besides, the marriage ritual can also be delayed for other reasons. For instance, the parents of either one of the couples have not been married ritually, then that couple is not eligible to marry. In some cases, the marriage is a taboo: it is a paternal parallel cousin marriage or a lineage endogamy. While both are alive they are not allowed to ritually marry; when they die, any of their sons is eligible to perform the marriage ritual (*taeng phii*) on behalf of his father's spirit by marrying in his mother's spirit to his father's lineage.

It should be noted that the word *taeng* used in this context does not exactly mean to wed or to marry (*taeng-ngarn*). As explained by the informants, in Black Thai (as well as in *Thai Noi* language) the word means to beautify or to tidy things up (*tok-taeng* or *tam hai rieb-roi*).

Marriage Transaction

From the above mentioned marriage process, the traditional transaction can be divided into

three categories, as shown in the following table:

1. Symbolic gifts, the *kan-maak*, *kaleb*, *haab-kow*, foods and other items, are offered to ancestral spirits and parents.
2. The brideservice, the *kuey-kwaan's* and *kuey-asaa's* labor and work, are contributed to the parents.
3. The bridewealth, *ngern-tam-mae-ko* (original mother money), is submitted to parents and ancestral spirits.

Table 1. Receivers of Gifts, Brideservice and Bridewealth

<i>Items of Transaction to the Bride's</i>	Receivers of Transaction		
	<i>Ancestral Spirits</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Bride</i>
1. Symbolic gifts	directly	indirectly	none -
2. Brideservice: <i>kuey-kwaan</i> , <i>kuey-asaa</i>	indirectly	directly	indirectly
3. Bridewealth: <i>ngern-tam-mae-ko</i>	directly	indirectly	none -

As shown in the above table, traditionally, the gifts, service, and wealth go almost as much to the brides' parents as to the ancestral spirits. The bride receives almost nothing for herself.

Changes of Traditions

At present very few traditional marriages are accomplished. Couples in their thirties and younger prefer Thai Noi style marriages (*taeng thai*) to the Black Thai style (*taeng lao*). The traditional process of marriage at present has been shortened and changed as follows :

1. The period of *kuey-kwaan* (brideservice) has not been practiced for a long time so that some people in their sixties has never heard of the terminology. On the other hand, the term *kuey-asaa* (voluntary son-in-law) is well understood in younger generations but is not popularly practiced. These concepts and practices can be said to be disappearing.
2. The wedding ceremony is frequently performed together with the engagement ceremony. The rituals of *saung* (engagement), *song* (delivery of the groom), and *saa* (the groom

verbally volunteers to work) are nominally performed on the same day as a symbolic recognition, not for real practice. Sometimes, Buddhist monks are invited for merit making and blessing⁸ as in the Thai Noi tradition. Frequently, the brides leave their houses within that day to stay at the groom's house.⁹ The reasons they avoid the Black Thai tradition are because it is too costly and too difficult to perform the ritual correctly¹⁰.

Not only has the process of marriage been shortened, the feature of the gifts and transaction from the groom have also changed as described below:

1. Some symbolic items, the *kan-maak* and *kaleb* have not changed much in terms of materials. The betel nuts and ingredients are still major symbolic gifts. The *haab-kow* is not a requirement any more.
2. The bridewealth, *ngern-tam-mae-ko* (original mother money) still retains its original amount and significant role towards the ancestral spirits. The depreciation of the money's value over hundred years has made the original amount too tiny to compensate for the loss of the family's labor, the bride¹¹.
3. The practice of brideservice (*kuey-kwaan, kuey-asaa*) is disappearing from the community even though the concept continues to exist. The diversity of occupations and changes of life style greatly affect the discontinuity of the brideservice practice.
4. The disappearance of brideservice and the depreciation in value of the bridewealth (*ngern-tam-mae-ko*), have been substituted by a new category of marriage transaction called *sinsod-thongmun*, which is a custom of the Thai Noi in central Thailand.

The *sinsod* and *thongmun* are regularly referred to together to mean either the brideprice or bridewealth. In fact they are different items and different in social contexts. I would consider *sinsod* (literally meaning an inserted money) a **brideprice** since it is an amount of money submitted to the bride's parents as a token of appreciation for the up-bringing and education they provide for their daughter. Frequently it is called *ka-nam-nom* or 'milk-money' to indicate the repayment for milk and nursing. Therefore, the amount of 'milk-money' differs according to the cost that parents have invested in their daughters. The *sinsod* is naturally more expensive for marrying a daughter of the rich than for a daughter of the poor.

The *thongmun* (literally meaning engagement gold), which can be considered a **bridewealth**, usually comes in the form of gold ornaments and jewelry.¹² They are presented directly to the bride at the engagement or wedding ceremony. The *thongmun* becomes the bride's personal possession that she keeps and manages at her own will. It should be noted that in most cases the bride brings all these items with her to her new family. In that sense, these items of **bridewealth** become a **dowry** in which her husband later shares.

Compared to the traditional Black Thai transaction, the present practice of marriage transaction is observed in the following table.

Table 2. The Present Practice of Marriage Transaction in the Black Thai Community

<i>Categories of Transaction</i>	<i>Receivers of Transaction</i>		
	<i>Ancestral Spirits</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Bride</i>
1. Symbolic gifts: <i>kanmaak, kaleb</i>	directly	indirectly	none -
2.1. Brideservice: <i>kuey-kwaan,</i> <i>kuey-asaa</i>	no practice	no practice	no practice
2.2. Bideservice: <i>sinsod</i>	none -	directly	none -
3.1. Brideprice: <i>ngern-tam-</i> <i>mae-ko</i>	directly	indirectly	none -
3.2. Bideservice: <i>thong-mun</i>	none -	none -	directly

In this research most of the *thong-mun* are gold ornaments and gold accessories. The average value of the *sinsod-thongmun* is equivalent to the amount of the *ngern-tam-mae-ko* sixty years ago.

Conclusions

The examination of the marriage process and transaction in the Black Thai community in this study has revealed some facts. The Black Thai cosmology and tradition have significantly changed over time. Some of the systems have disappeared but some still firmly remain. The marriage system is obviously affected by the monetary economic system and the Thai Noi's culture. However, the main concept of marriage as a change of the spirit descent group affiliation still survives strongly. The transactions related to ancestral spirits, symbolic items and the original mother's money, still preserve their traditional concepts and meanings.

More observations are as follows:

1. The practice of *kuey-kwaan* is a new finding leading us to the investigation of the practice of **hypogamy**. To a certain degree the traditional marriage rules of the Black Thai are similar to those of the Kachin's studied by Edmund Leach and others.
2. The flexibility of the period of *kuey asaa*, between a few years to a life-long stay (*asaa-kaad*), shows not only the sequence of uxori-local to viri-local residence but also the possibility that the uxori-local residence has been prolonged, and gradually taking over the period of viri-local residence, and finally becoming a dominant pattern of residence.

3. The practices of marriage process and transaction found in this Black Thai community exhibit an important stage of cultural assimilation: actual changes in practice taking place over tradition, while the cosmology remains firmly unchanged.

Notes

- 1 **Thai Noi** referred in this paper means the **Siamese Thai** or the majority group of the Thai in central part of Thailand.
- 2 The community at Kaoyoi district is often referred by members of other Black Thai communities as 'Baan Kao' or 'original home'.
- 3 For instance, the rather young, one century old community at Baan Napanaad in the northeast is a group evacuated from Laos heading to Petchburi but failed to make it through, and ended up settling down on the way in Luey province. (Dararat & Somsak : 1991).
- 4 haab is a big container, kow is bauk klow in Thai Noi language, means to tell or announce.
- 5 In one case, it was quoted frankly that 'He did not come because he was higher'. (kao maima prau khao pen phuu tao.)
- 6 His father-in-law may build a new house for him in repay for working so many years.
- 7 The life after death for the Black Thai is as important as the present life. Spirits without sons are left at the bottom of the line for being fed. (Onozawa : 1997)
- 8 In Black Thai tradition, none of the rituals includes Buddhist elements.
- 9 Traditionally, in the case of neolocal or whatsoever, the bride never leaves the house on the day she weds because it resembles the rite for the dead in which the body (khorn) is carried away from home on the day the death occurs.
- 10 Many said that incorrect performance is worse than negligence because it can disturb the ancestral spirits and endanger themselves.
- 11 For instance, an amount of four bahts before the second world war could purchase sixty-two kilograms of pork, but it cannot buy even one can of drink nowadays.
- 12 For the central Thai Noi, the sinsod and thongmun are merged into one category. It can be money or any valuable materials like diamond ring, a lot of land, a house, a car, a bank account, and so on.

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