The World and Nong Khon: Continuity and Change

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Fifteen years ago, Nong Khon, a small village sixteen kilometres from the provincial capital, Ubon, was relatively isolated from the world outside its borders. While there was an almost continuous flow of movement in and out of the village, the villagers' emotional, psychological and intellectual commitments and concerns remained stationary, tied to their village. The economic focus was squarely within the confines of the village and, through barter, to neighboring villages as a cash economy had yet to insinuate itself into village life. Today, cash is very much a part of Nong Khon's life and while there have been significant changes in the traditional economic and social setting over the past decade and a half, threads of continuity have preserved, to a surprising extent, the web of traditional village life.

As one reflects on how Nong Khon has come to terms with the world outside its borders over the past years, the inexorable shift from a barter to a cash economy is especially relevant. The traditional barter trade in Nong Khon conjures up a familiar tableau: village women with swaying gait, two baskets on a bamboo slat balanced on the shoulder. They were taking rice to exchange for salt; fermented fish to exchange for rice; lime to exchange for fermented fish. There were well defined tables of exchange for these and other products such as fruits and vegetables. Certain villages became identified with specific products such as lime made from shells, salt from saltlicks etc. Such specialization was principally a function of climatic, soil and geographical location conditions. The surplus of commodities bartered was not viewed
as sufficient for export and without defined and pressing cash needs, barter within the village and between neighboring villages was the economic order of the day.

There appeared to be an economic gentlemen's agreement concerning such specialization as existed. Nong Khon was well known for its lime making expertise, and other villages, although close to the river and the necessary shells, deferred to Nong Khon. Another village only a few kilometres away was famous for its sugar cane. Such products as rice, fermented fish, fruits and vegetables were, of course, produced in all villages and the ability to barter depended on the surplus available.

Specialization was not reserved for food items alone. A neighboring village was famous for the cow, ankle and temple bells it produced. Other nearby villages specialized in the weaving of silk sarongs for both men and women. Such items were sold for cash rather than bartered.

Such trading as did occur between neighboring villages was on a rather haphazard basis. There were no village markets either on an ad hoc basis or at regular intervals. The village women having a product available to barter and some free time, would, without prior notice, try to organize an expedition with some of their friends. Gossip and eating at a friend's house in the village where the bartering was undertaken were integral parts of the trip. A market in the villagers' eyes connoted a cash economy. If an item was needed that could not be easily bartered, it could be procured for cash in the two village stores or in Ubon, the provincial capital. Such items as medicines, cloth, mirrors, cosmetics, pens, papers, tools, kerosene, fish sauce and condensed milk could be purchased in the village stores.

Today, the economy of Nong Khon is increasingly based on cash. Instead of bartering goods, one now goes to Ubon market to sell village products and buy necess-
ary commodities. Villagers from Nong Khon now take their lime as well as surplus vegetables to market and with the cash obtained buy such basic necessities as rice or fermented fish or salt. With the cash available from the sale of such cash crops as jute and from the salaries of the village youth, such food items as pork, beef and platu, previously eaten only at times of festivals, are now purchased in the market in small quantities at fairly regular intervals. Villagers say it is less tiring, less time consuming to go to market. While it is true that the road to town is paved and the bus service more frequent and cheaper, it is also true that the habit of using cash has become increasingly entrenched in village society.

By far the principal source of cash flow into the village has been the youth. In procuring such cash income, the youth necessarily left the village to seek work in the capital. More recently cash income as day laborers in the provincial capital, Ubon, has become a more attractive alternative. The mobility of the youth, while bringing the village into more immediate contact with the world outside, has upset and dislocated traditional social patterns to some degree. Fifteen years ago, only a handful of the youth had ever left the village for any extended periods of time. Certain families desirous of obtaining ready cash gave permission for their sons and/or daughters to go to Bangkok for work. Once the gates of the village had been opened to such travel, it became increasingly difficult to stem the tide as the children began to pressure their parents to be allowed to work in Bangkok. Within a relatively short period, the parents became unable to control their children’s travel. Parental authority became compromised. The family ties, however, remained strong and the youth would return most of the salary earned to their parents. They would also return to the village periodically to assist in planting and harvest tasks and such family and merit ceremo-
nies that were socially and/or psychologically obligatory. In Nong Khon, it was largely the young girls who traveled to Bangkok for jobs mainly as servants. However, they could also be found working in hairdressing salons or dressmaking shops. Other villages nearby tended to send their young men to the capital where they found work as samlor drivers, gardeners, waiters, and factory workers. Today, there is little differentiation in the sex ratio of those seeking work outside the village. Initially, the children would send back most of their income to their parents. With each passing year, the percentage of such income sent to the parents in the village decreased and the number of trips back to the village during the year also declined. The pendulum has swung back to some extent as today the young men, at least, have found satisfying remunerative work in the provincial capital and are able to sleep in their village homes. Cash contributions to the family coffers are regular and the food purchases made benefit the entire family.

While fifteen years ago there was only one radio in the entire village located in the Wat, today, thanks to the cash income of the young and their penchant for the transistor radio status symbol, almost every village house possesses one. Bicycles and motorcycles were, a decade ago, identified with teachers and government officials. Today, most of the young men possess either one or the other depending on their income and savings. Two sewing machines have appeared in the village during the past few years and both of their young owners, trained in Bangkok, have a thriving cash business as village dressmakers. The flow of cash into the village and the increasing dependence on a cash economy have produced changes other than the appearance of radios, motorbikes, sewing machines and the ubiquitous gold necklaces, jewelry and wristwatches which adorn the village youth. Large and, in village terms, ornate
houses have been built within the past few years. Fifteen years ago, one's wealth could not be measured by the grandeur of one's home as it was thought to be distasteful to show one's wealth in such a conspicuous fashion. However, it is significant that the largest and most elegant house recently built in the village belongs to the village spirit doctor cum herbal medicine specialist. His services now are paid for in cash and his wealth indicates that traditional village beliefs have not basically shifted despite the outward surface appearances of change associated with a cash economy.

A similar symbol of continuity in the midst of the changes brought about by the increasing reliance on cash, is the village Wat. Cash contributions to the Wat have markedly increased. Merit is now more easily made by cash gifts than by time consuming contributions of labor. While the meritorious cash offerings have largely been instrumental in the construction of both a new Sala and a new chapel building, hired labor for certain carpentry tasks was used. Previously, such work would have been done by village labor. Funds for the Wat are raised not only with the village but from those villagers who are either temporarily or permanently resident in Bangkok. No matter what cash demands there may be, on a family or individual, it is always possible to obtain a merit contribution. The villagers' emotional and psychological commitments to the Wat have not changed. However, it should be noted that while the great majority of village youth continue to enter the monkhood, their period of religious service has significantly decreased. The periodic religious or “merit making” ceremonies will often find villagers from the neighboring area attending in large numbers as well as several members of the village community who temporarily or permanently reside in Bangkok. Exchange of news, courtship and traditional entertainment forms are an integral part of these religious ceremonies.
The *mawlam* or bard singer accompanied on the *Khaen*, the bamboo Pan pipes of northeastern Thailand and Laos, is still a major attraction of any religious festival. The content of the *mawlam* songs has changed over the past generation. Previously, religious and local historical themes rivaled the ubiquitous courting repartee with its Rabelaisian ribaldry. While the *mawlam* is still the most sought after entertainment form, the villagers, in recent years, have shown an increasing preference for the *mawlam mu* (*group mawlam* rather than the *mawlam kho*, man and woman couple). The group *mawlam* enacts plays with the singers dressed in the ornate costumes associated with the *likay* plays of central Thailand. The themes of the group *mawlam* are often drawn from Thai literature and the lives of the Buddha. The *mawlam* couple performers, in traditional village dress, continue their challenge and response repartee that has been the hallmark of their bard singing for ages. They weave knowledge of current events, government policies, insurgency into their singing in addition to traditional themes. Intimate knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and philosophy and local history is less important in these bards’ repertory than formerly.

At this time, the cash income available does not, for the most part, find its way into “economically productive” channels. Only a very minimal amount of cash is used for the purchase of fertilizers and new and improved seed varieties. No heavy farm equipment has been purchased. However, small village “rice mills” using machinery have come into existence and the villagers have their rice husked by machine rather than by wooden pounder. The owner of the machine either keeps the husks and sells them for pig fodder or takes cash if the villager wishes to keep the husks. However, new lands have been bought from less affluent village neighbors. Such lands are mostly “gardens” rather than rice lands. Vegetables and fruit trees
are grown in the newly purchased gardens and houses built for members of the family. The extended family unit is thus breaking down to some degree as younger members of the family and newly married couples have their own homes, albeit within the village confines. So-called community development programs have not been able to draw, to any significant degree, on these cash funds. For example, water seal latrines have yet to be introduced in more than a handful of houses though a continuous campaign on part of government authorities has been waged over the past fifteen years. Unplanned change in eating patterns has occurred as availability of cash and the eating habits of the youth developed during their labors outside the village have combined to bring about a wider variety in the average village diet. The choice of additional food items is not, however, guided by nutritional requirements.

As noted above, labor has become more of a purchasable commodity. Whether it is a new house that is to be built, a new chapel to be constructed in the Wat or the harvesting of a large rice or jute crop, the traditional co-operative voluntary labor force is slowly giving way to hired labor. The customary forms are preserved on the surface as village friends and relatives will, for example, join together in helping to raise the main pillar of a village house. However, a hired carpenter does the detailed work in the following days, weeks, months. No longer is a house constructed in a two or three day period.

It should be noted that despite the cash income the youth have, and their increased awareness of the world of technological change beyond the village borders, their influence in both family and village decisions remains minimal.

One marked difference in contact with the world outside the village that may ultimately have more significant impact on change in traditional village commit-
ment, concerns and attitudes is the increased educational opportunities that are being sought outside the village. The crucial question is whether those who receive higher education particularly at the secondary and university level will return to their village and/or attempt to influence decision making and take the initiative in effecting change on their periodic visits. At this point in time, the very few villagers who have matriculated beyond the primary level in either the Sangha or lay school system have sought a new life in the world beyond the village. While they may return to participate in a cremation ceremony, in a village festival as Bun Bang Fai or in one of the periodic religious celebrations, the interests and commitments of these educated youth lie elsewhere. Fifteen years ago, only one boy in the village had gone to the provincial capital for further schooling beyond the primary level. Today, it is not uncommon for young boys not only to study in Ubon town but also to continue their studies in Bangkok. The Nong Khon village school will add an additional grade next year and the village children will now study through primary grade five. For several years now a school in a neighboring village three kilometres distant from Nong Khon has offered classes through primary grade seven. Many of the Nong Khon village children have furthered their studies at this school. Children now travel to the provincial town on the bus and return to the village after the afternoon session. Village parents are increasingly conscious of the value of education if one is to achieve power and wealth. While they do not seek these “values” for themselves, they want at least one or two of their sons and, to a much lesser extent, their daughters to travel the educational path to achieve these goals. Previously, parents were most reluctant to have their children seek further education beyond that available in the vicinity of the village. The children now want these opportunities and cash is now available in the family to support such studies.
Of those village students who come to Bangkok to further their studies, many of them will take up residence in a Wat and will be put in the care of a monk known to the students' parents. Often the monk himself who has come to Bangkok for further religious training will be from the boys' village or a neighboring one. Northeastern religious enclaves have developed and certain temples are almost exclusively composed of northeastern monks and dek Wat, the school children in residence who serve the monks and the temple in their spare time. It is of interest to note that the majority of the monk students matriculating at the two Buddhist Universities in Bangkok are from the northeast and in some years have represented as much as 70% of the total student body. While it is too early to predict with any certainty, it would appear highly unlikely that those villagers who receive higher secondary and university education will return to the village and/or attempt to exercise any influence in bringing programmed change to it.

News from outside the village often came in the past via itinerant salesmen who traveled throughout northeast Thailand for many weeks each year. These wandering salesmen sold waterpots, weaving racks, sleeping mats, farm implements and cloth. Gold and silversmiths also visited the village and each year an itinerant dentist and a variety of quacks came peddling cure—all medicines and giving injections. The dentist and quacks would not stay more than a few hours as they were subject to arrest for practising without a license. The products and services of these salesmen and self-proclaimed specialists were welcomed. Almost as welcome was the news and gossip they brought from distant villages and provinces. Such salesmen and specialists only very rarely visit Nong Khon today as goods and services offered can now be cheaply and easily obtained in Ubon and at the various village health centers and clinics in Ubon.
Nong Khon boasted a rather unique specialist of its own in its village hairdresser. The permanent wave had made its mark on the village beauty scale and young maidens from Nong Khon and neighboring villages would come to have their hair set especially just prior to village festivals, religious ceremonies and after the harvest. The rather primitive artistry used involving hot iron clip curlers, tin foil and hair oil seemed to satisfy the customers. Much inter village gossip swirled around the open air salon of the village hairdresser. Today, one of the two young dressmakers in the village does permanent waves using slightly more up-to-date techniques and the latest oils and lotions.

According to a village saying “news travels with the wind” and in times past the rice harp played the melody of news and gossip brought in and out of the village by word of mouth. While verbal jottings are still a major source of news, information and knowledge of the world outside the village; the radio, newspaper and magazine serve today as additional sources of news. Fifteen years ago, the only newspaper in the village could be found in the headmaster's house. Now many of the village youth may be seen reading a Bangkok newspaper with their transistor radio blaring the latest tunes from the capital. Movie and love story magazines have also appeared in the village as the youth have become addicted to these on their visits to the capital. However, one should be careful not to automatically assume that the radio and newspapers mean the villagers' knowledge of the outside world has greatly expanded in any meaningful way and that information of government activities and policies effectively reach and influence the villagers through these media. The newspapers and magazines are read very selectively for “sex, crime and ghost” stories. The radio is turned to music, either the popular tunes of the capital or the mawlam chants of the northeast. International and certain domestic news when heard often does not register as there is little intellectual and emotional frame of reference and a
basic lack of interest in events, activities and programs which the villagers do not believe relate to or affect them.

Over the past fifteen years, the pace of visits to and involvement in the village on the part of government officialdom has gradually increased. In addition to the monthly meetings of headmen and headmasters at the District headquarters and tambon council meetings which district officials come to attend, government officials visit the village at more regular intervals in connection with community development projects. The emphasis is principally on the school which serves as a conduit for much of the programmed change initiated by government officialdom.

In discussing relations between the village and the world outside, it is of interest to denote the stereotyped images that are formed. These stereotypes apply not only to the city dwellers but to neighboring villages as well. Each village has a well defined personality and reputation. There are traditional animosities and friendships between villages and even sections of a village. Although not articulated in such terms "sister" villagers exist. These are often contiguous. Sometimes, however, this relationship exists between villages in different tambons. Several factors contribute to such special relationships: proximity; a history of migration (often of a respected teacher or religious leader) and/or trade; pattern of intermarriage etc. Villages are often referred to in personal terms with obvious negative or positive connotations: "that village acts like little children"; "this village speaks well and cleverly"; "their village is supercilious, improper, drunken"; another is "a village of thieves" or "schooled in black magic and charms". Nong khon was "proper and religious".

Obviously, it would be wise to obtain a personality and reputation "clearance" before a village was chosen as a model or pilot in experimental community development programming.
I have traced very briefly some aspects of continuity and change in a small northeastern village as it slowly and very gradually reaches out to the world beyond its borders. Such a village still retains, for the most part, its distinctive personality and preserves its traditional emphasis on merit making. While new cash crops have appeared on the agricultural scene, farming techniques have hardly changed at all. A cash focus has displaced, to a large degree, the barter economy that was so much a part of village economic and social life. This cash economy has resulted in greater mability particularly of the village youth and far less reliance on voluntary labor in such formerly co-operative activities on a reciprocal basis as house building and planting and harvesting of the rice crop. Petty thefts, within the village, almost unknown fifteen years ago, are now a frequent occurrence. Everywhere is evidence of conspicuous consumption in the radios, motorbikes, wristwatches and jewelry of the village youth. However, traditional entertainment forms such as the mawlam still have the strongest attraction. While traditional village leaders have shown marked staying power with the voice of the youth yet unheard, parental authority has been compromised. Although the relationships between the villagers and government officials have not markedly changed, frequency of contact has increased as well as knowledge of government policy and activities, especially as they may relate directly or indirectly to the village. The pressure for seeking advanced education at the higher primary, secondary and university level is building up steadily. The brightest village youth are reaching beyond the village borders, and it is questionable whether they will return. Village boys who previously became bhikkhus for several years now remain in the roles only for three months Rains Retreat or at the most for a year or two. One hesitates to speculate as to the shape the village will take in the next fifteen years. Continuity has so far held its own against the forces of change. The balance may well shift in the coming years.