Five Villages:
Culture and Resources Among Lao Iu Mien [1]

Jonathan Habarad

Introduction

It is common today to assume that refugees, because they are pushed out of their homelands involuntarily, are uncommitted and unprepared for success in the new land and respond conservatively. This contributes to the further assumption that involuntary relocation inherently involves incompetence to cope with change and an initial, often fundamental dependency upon outside agencies. These notions stem from widespread acceptance of push/pull typologies that predict the outcomes of relocation on the basis of motivation for leaving (e.g., Fairchild 1925:13ff, Petersen 1958, and Kunz 1973). However, in failing to account for the interactive processes that lead people to respond differently given the same motivations, the application of push/pull models in explaining transitional behavior has resulted in endless typological contortions and misplaced theoretical emphasis (e.g., Kunz 1981).

To understand the dynamics of responses to change, we require theories that consider the dynamic interplay of motivations, contexts, and the social relationships underlying action and organization. Writing from their long studies of relocation, Thayer Scudder and Elizabeth Colson argue the need to study organization as "dynamic sets of interrelationships that are highly responsive to the contexts in which they occur" and cite "the frequency with which people experiment, test the gains and losses and decide whether it is worth pursuing a new course" (1979:241).

In this essay I look at social dynamics among refugee Lao Iu Mien in four settings or "villages" in northern Thailand and one in the U.S. to illuminate processes that affect responses to dramatic change. The four settlements in Thailand are 1) Houei Chiang Laat, an autonomous agricultural settlement with a relatively "open-ended" resource base, but where access to resources depended almost entirely on performance, 2) Houei Dii Mii, an autonomous agricultural settlement experiencing extreme resource scarcity, 3) Mae Bong, with exceedingly limited agricultural resources, its inhabitants living on remittances from U.S. kin and connections to handicrafts outlets, and 4) Suun Chiang Kham, a "humane deterrence" camp for highland Lao refugees, tightly controlled and managed under extreme resource scarcities. The U.S. Iu Mien refugee population is represented by those settled in Oakland, California, where, with comprehensive assistance programs, they faced little effective limitation of economic resources. Iu Mien in all the settlements were familiar with those living elsewhere and most could recount some kinship link to various men and women I mentioned in the course of conversations. Though all considered themselves to be very much members of the same population, those in different settlements differed markedly in the kind of activities they had adopted in the years since flight.

The ethnographies are of interest primarily for the comparative light they throw on the range of responses generated by a single people thrust as refugees into different environments. They show first that responses in involuntary relocation are contingent upon conditions encountered in the new setting—during the adjustment process—rather than intrinsically predetermined by the reasons for or experiences of flight. Secondly, they show that perception of resources plays an extremely important role in determining the emphasis or direction of social responses to new conditions. In the final section I attempt to show how refugee resettlement within current frameworks of assistance has created a patterning of opportunities and constraints that contribute to an increasingly uniform pattern of apparent incompetence.

Contexts and Settlements in Northern Thailand

A highland Southeast Asian people, Iu Mien have long lived by shifting cultivation in the hills of southern China and Southeast Asia. Their flight from Laos is a direct consequence of their active alignment with Royal Lao Government and U.S. forces in action against the Pathet Lao (1959-1975). Approximately 13,000 fled in 1975 across the Mekong River into northern Thailand. Thousands followed them in subsequent years although the exact numbers are unknown. Many were placed by Thai authorities in refugee camps established for Highland Lao. By 1980, after five years in the camps, large numbers began to be accepted for resettlement in the United States. By 1981 approximately 5000 were in the U.S.; by 1984 their numbers had reached nearly 8000.

Others who fled at the same time sought to avoid the ordeal and uncertainty of the camps. These moved into remote areas in the north central highlands of Thailand where they tried to reconstruct a life based on shifting cultivation. Conditions in Thailand however, were strikingly different from what they had known in the less regulated Laotian highlands. When I visited their settlements in northern Thailand in 1984, it was after four years of ethnographic research among their U.S.-settled kin, and roughly ten years from the time of their initial flight.

Community organization in all the settings had been fragmented through the course of the Iu Mien's uprooting yet they managed to reconstruct working relationships using a familiar framework: they substituted available persons for the old incumbents of roles that had been left unfilled by the disruptions of relocation. Most settled in extended family clusters whose households were linked through bonds of patrifiliation or by having lived in the same districts, though not always in the same settlements, in Laos during the last generation.

Iu Mien attempting to settle the hills of northern Thailand faced grave resource scarcities. Soils unclaimed by the men and women of existing settlements were few, with forestry regulation prohibiting new clearing, and were further constrained by large numbers of other peoples moving in at the same time. As refugees, what the Iu Mien had been able to bring with them was limited to what family members could carry through the forest on the border and across the Mekong River under cover of darkness. For most this amounted to some silver, religious texts and records, some clothing, and tools. Apart from the limited assistance given by previously arrived kin already under stress, most were thrown immediately upon their own resources.

Houei Chiang Laat

In 1984 the 200 settlers of Houei Chiang Laat, settled at the edge of the lowlands, evinced an aggressive entrepreneurial dynamism, focused in innovative and expansive household economic strategies.

Their households were composed of extended families organized under the control of patriarchs who exercised strict control over their wives, unmarried daughters, sons, sons' wives, and their children, forming both the primary ritual unit and the unit of production. Patriarchs, generally aged forty and upwards were also responsible for the supernatural well-being of their sublineage households, and were able, indirectly but effectively, to control the activities of sons' wives and children through a close relation to their sons and through their role as mediators with the ancestors.

The burden of agricultural work fell on daughters, sons, and sons' wives. Marriages involved a large payment of bridewealth and effectively cut sons' wives off from the possibility of returning to their natal family. The in-marrying women also became dependent upon the patriarch for their ritual well-being. As a result his abilities to sanction demands for work were comprehensive.

Patriarchs in Houei Chiang Laat controlled the disposition of resources and imposed strict conditions of scarcity upon their dependents. With surpluses skimmed from subsistence they had begun to rent and purchase lowland fields. Though household members knew this they did not question the necessity for saving and investment. Since lowland fields gave higher yields over a long period, unlike the upland fields on which they currently depended, the shift to lowland agriculture was a means by which they could secure their positions in northern Thailand. Surpluses with which to rent or purchase fresh fields had to be extracted from the marginal lands available to them. This could only be done by intensifying the labor inputs from household members.

To ensure longer-term economic security, and to compensate for the declining yield of their upland fields, patriarchs commonly sold or traded everything produced beyond what was absolutely necessary for living, converting it to cash, which they then reinvested in land. As the number of *rai* (0.4 acres) increased, hands available to work it remained more or less constant. This kept the consumption of crops by the household at a minimum while the land holdings to be worked expanded, creating an appearance of a scarcity of resources but a real scarcity of labor.

Patriarchs in Houei Chaing Laat therefore were overseeing an expansive system in which every additional rai of land involved an increased labor commitment from household members, while resources devoted to consumption remained at a more or less constant minimum. By artificially imposing conditions of scarcity, patriarchs created an economic dynamism enabling households ultimately to carve out a more secure position. Combined with the patriarch's constant exhortations and assertions that new fields were a question of survival, the seemingly endless work and meager standard of consumption contributed to the impression that the household was able to hold its own only through constant extreme efforts. Though the strategy involved a shift to an unfamiliar form of agriculture and increasing integration in lowland society, the people of Houei Chiang Laat's households, committed to their position, were convinced they had no alternative but to succeed.

Houei Dii Mii

Houei Dii Mii, with roughly 300 persons, was a highly charged, strongly involuted and rapidly disintegrating settlement rent with suspicions which found expression in conflicts over land, political dissension, and accusations of witchcraft and sorcery.[2]

Here men, women, and children worked exceedingly hard, though their distance from the nearest road transport and the difficulty of terrain prohibited the cultivation of crops for market. They found themselves in a "traditional" environment, but one in which government regulations made it impossible for them to shift their fields as customary. Their settlement was surrounded by protected forest in which official surveillance prohibited new clearing. After ten years of continuous cultivation they faced severe soil infertility and smaller harvests. Imperata grasses had encroached upon their steeply sloped fields, choking out the carefully planted maize and upland rice on which they depended. Nor could they move in large numbers because of the dangers of drawing attention to their illegal presence in Thailand. However industrious their efforts, their upland fields produced increasingly lower yields.

Initially, over the first five years when they were favored with large harvests, they felt they had established themselves in a good place. Though they knew that productivity declines with time, they had never before attempted to cultivate the same fields for so many years in succession. The extent of crop failures they faced in 1984 was entirely new to them. They assumed that declining yields could be offset by more intensive labor and tried to explain the general failure of crops by drought, an explanation not borne out by rainfall records provided by the Tribal Research Institute. They claimed to have worked harder than ever in cultivation to rid the fields of grasses and competing weeds. The demand for increased labor must have placed additional stresses upon household members, and their efforts to improve yields failed.

At the time of my stay the people of Houei Dii Mii had experienced a four-year decline in the standard of living. The maize crop, which had just come in, had been poor and roughly two months remained before the rice harvest, which looked as if it too would be meager. A large part of each household's maize harvest had to be saved for seed. They ate less well, supplementing their limited harvests with less desirable foods collected from the forest. These had to be discovered and gathered, involving a considerable cost in time. This added yet another element of uncertainty to their situation. Because of the increased time they spent in securing bare subsistence, men and women had less time to give to the upkeep of tools, houses, granaries, animal pens, and the bamboo conduits supplying the settlement with fresh water, resulting in frequent breakdowns and other difficulties.

Most households in August 1984 had insufficient means to meet obligations to the ancestors which they saw as making them vulnerable to supernatural attacks. They said illnesses were now striking them more frequently.

Tensions within the settlement had increased, building on existing conflicts to the point where personal losses were seen as due to enemies within the community who were trying to undermine others through witchcraft and sorcery. In response to the growing shortages and hunger, the settlers' strivings had intensified and turned inward. Response to scarcity, which initially had focused on the struggle to increase crop yields, had shifted to a constant struggle against enemies within the household and settlement, making life there increasingly untenable.

At the time of my visit the extreme social tensions generated by poor harvests, illnesses, accidents and other ill fortune, such as the recent ambush and murder of four residents by Thai forest poachers, were leading rapidly to disintegration of the settlement. Kin links were being severed and established households were breaking up and scattering through migration to other sites. Some had moved to join kin in nearby Houei Chiang

Laat where there was hope and a need for extra hands, while others were determined to make the more dangerous journey south.

Mae Bong

Most men among the 800 Lao Iu Mien in Mae Bong evinced a pattern of despairing passivity, of helplessness and abandoned hope. They sought simply to hold on to the gains they had made. They did little but wait in despondency, while women demonstrated a dynamic productivity.

Lao Iu Mien formed a spatially and socially separate settlement located on a dry season road adjacent to the Thai Mien village Mae Bong, but had exceedingly limited access to fields. What land was available to them on a rental basis was badly overcropped and yielded little. Fields within walking distance were the property of Thai Mien whose involvement in cash cropping required all cultivable local soils. Thus fields available to Lao Iu Mien were so limited or expensive as to have been almost nonexistent.

Paradoxically, even without fields they were economically well-off in comparison to residents of other Lao Mien settlements. They had living standards approaching those of long-settled Thai Mien who had productive hill and lowland fields. Instead of expending efforts on the limited fields, they cultivated better-situated kin. Their efforts focused on the maintenance of close lines of communication with brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces, nephews, aunts and uncles settled in the United States, who regularly sent remittances and who were providing reliable means for marketing women's handicrafts. To prevent kin from forgetting them, men and women regularly sent cassette tapes with narratives of their hardships and other family news, photographs, and pleas for assistance, as well as shipments of handicrafts to be sold in U.S. markets.

With money from remittances and the sales of crafts, families were able to purchase rice, and had more than sufficient cash to meet anticipated short-term needs. They bought maize for feeding the pigs which they raised in large numbers to use in frequent ritual offerings, and they invested in clothing, bicycles, motorcycles, radio-cassette players, wristwatches, cameras, flashlights, pressure lamps, and other useful but expensive items.

A few used funds to rent hill fields belonging to Thai Mien, more than two hours distant, to which a number of the young men with their wives and children had moved to cultivate, but this was very much a limited effort. Men took little or no initiative in working to improve the household welfare. They saw no opportunity to do so. Instead they sought to anticipate unknown contingencies that might yet befall them. Apart from the cultivation of small kitchen gardens and the raising of pigs and chickens for their own use men did little but wait, filling their time with talk, tending the children while the women worked. Most viewed themselves as helpless, and the use of opium was more common here than in other settlements.

Those not involved with opium sponsored frequent ritual placations of the ancestors and the celestial spirits when misfortune struck or when they encountered risk. This now was seen as their chief contribution to the household well-being. In some cases patriarchs sponsored rituals seeking to win the favor of ancestors and the celestial masters, hoping to induce them to improve their conditions.

Women, on the other hand, took considerable initiative. They worked industriously at garments to be sold in the U.S. and in Chiang Mai. They gathered nearby forest plants to add variety to the diet. They bore children, maintained the house, washed, and took a firm role in maintaining discipline in their households. They argued with their husbands and sons, asserting themselves more than women in any of the other settlements. A few had purchased sewing machines to increase production and most competed with one

another to produce more and better goods.

In contrast, as if empty of energy most men of Lao Mien Mae Bong had surrendered, accepting their present marginality as given, looking with fear on any change which they viewed as being out of their control. They knew that such changes would ultimately come and force them to make a major decision: to move, to return to Laos to fight, or accept life under Pathet Lao. Perhaps they would enter a refugee camp, in the hope of a policy change that would allow them to join kin in the U.S. Their lives were completely shrouded in uncertainty, and they were loth to make any commitment until a path without risk opened to them or necessity forced it. Whereas Iu Mien in Houei Dii Mii strove against one another, and those in Houei Chiang Laat strove against their environments, in their inactivity the men of Mae Bong strove with their spirits.[3]

Suun Chiang Kham

In late 1981 the Thai government instituted a program to stem the tide of land refugees from Laos. Asylum seekers were held in "austere camps and denied the chance to seek resettlement in third countries," demonstrating to would-be refugees the futility of crossing the Thai border (USCR 1986:6). Under the policy of "humane deterrence" these camps were officially closed to outside visitors. Suun Chiang Kham was such a camp and the main one housing Iu Mien in 1984. I include this settlement because its people, as much as any in the other settlements considered here, were involved in an ongoing collective life. Many had been there since the mid-seventies and at the time of my visit had no prospect of leaving.

By good fortune I was able to gain access to the camp for a full day, accompanied by a Lao Mien assistant with relatives inside. Though this is a very short time, the visit was contextualized by many hours of conversations with relatives outside about conditions there, and confirmed by observation, taped interviews, and accounts by those detained inside.[4] I saw enough to allow the observations needed for this comparison.

At the time of my visit, Suun Chiang Kham was reported to hold approximately 4,000 Lao Iu Mien and an additional 3,000 Lao Hmong, occupying separate areas of the camp. Paradoxically, although this was a refugee camp, Lao Mien men, women, children and elders were wholly engaged in work. They saw themselves at constant economic risk and were continually engaged in the production of handicrafts and manufacture of goods to sell or at tasks from which to gain resources to augment the meager rations allotted them. Thin and fired with hunger, they worked desperately and quickly.

As a "humane deterrence" camp, living conditions inside were calculated to support barest survival, and it was formally impossible to leave except through repatriation to Laos. Health services and rations were kept at a minimum, though they could be augmented through private arrangement and payment. Although there was formerly cultivated land outside the camp waiting further use, garden plots were not now permitted. Despite very limited space, residents kept to the same fragmented extended-family household organization, comparable to those in the other settlements, as the unit of production and consumption, sharing the same hearth and rice. They received a minimal weekly ration of rice for each person which they combined in meals. Meat, fish, and eggs were rarely distributed. Chickens, eggs, and portions of meat could be purchased in small quantities from small, refugee-run private butcheries but they were prohibitively expensive. Instead, women most often supplemented the rice ration with greens sold by outsiders who visited the camp on other business.

Resources were exceedingly limited. The highly inflated prices for available goods rapidly consumed remittances sent by kin in the United States. Though camp resources were generally shared, money sent by kin was carefully husbanded by those who received it. Remittances were absolutely critical despite the high inflation rate they encouraged. Without them, inmates claimed, they would have died. Even as it was the people of Suun Chiang Kham were hungry.

It cannot be argued that the camp environment, especially under such conditions, was a familiar setting to Lao Iu Mien, nor can it be suggested that they entered these circumstances willingly, yet given the scarcities they faced they responded dynamically and innovatively to provide for themselves. Nearly everyone found some means to bring in needed resources. Some used remittances to buy small stocks of goods, dyes, silver, cloth, tobacco, etc. that they sold in times of shortage when prices rose. Some ran small shops from their rooms, selling cassette tapes, film, envelopes and stamps, soaps, and other needed commodities. Some dealt in contraband and in providing health services.

Tin sheds filled with men rang with the sounds of hammers beating silver into jewelry, while women sat long hours in the sun to catch sufficient light to sew hand-crafted garments. Grandmothers and children dyed and strung to dry the cloth and threads their mothers and sisters would craft into garments to be sold in the tourist markets of Chiang Mai. Those with skills for smithing, carving and wood construction, and needlework and clothes making, bought small stocks of supplies which they worked into finished products and sold to the purchasing agents for tourist concessions in Chiang Mai and abroad. In crafts enterprises even children could and did play useful roles. Furthermore, a few men became employers, putting up the capital for smithing tools and materials and hiring others to work on commission.

Such opportunities were central topics of discussion and interest, for it meant augmenting the meager rations. Though people had no idea of how long they would be held in the camp, such work gave them hope of holding on. Though they depended to a great extent upon camp rations and remittances sent by relatives, their concern with production and maximizing resources was intense. They worked driven by a sense of desperation, seeming almost oblivious to other cares.

Iu Mien in the United States: Oakland, California

In contrast to the stark economic struggles of kin in Suun Chiang Kham, the resources available to the roughly 1500 Iu Mien in Oakland through refugee and public assistance programs easily met existing standards for economic well-being. As a result, those settled in Oakland lived without the complexities, striving, and risks required to gain resources independently. The greatest stress they faced was instead a sense of separateness and alienation. In rough terms, the resources in limited supply were social connections and information. Certainly this is where men and women placed their emphases in daily life and it led to the creation of a self-conscious and close-knit community in which the most absorbing concern was a struggling for one's place in the new order.

Here people knew no hunger. Food stamps and a cash allowance paid for rent, clothes, cars, and other necessities or luxuries. Public assistance payments were made to each nuclear family unit and were seen to belong exclusively to those whose names appeared as "payee" on the checks. Though households were organized in the same extended family pattern as in settlements in Thailand, patriarchs in no way controlled household resources as they did there. Household expenses were shared in relation to the number of people in each nuclear family unit, e.g., total bills were divided into "shares" by the number of persons in the household and delegated to nuclear families according to

the number of persons they had. Since each nuclear family unit received grants adjusted to the cost of maintaining an independent household, by sharing expenses, households could easily meet economic needs, which further reduced economic stresses. Iu Mien settled in Oakland gave priority to being near kin and acquiring a patron with the skills and connections to deal with Americans who could aid them in the event of problems. They cultivated broad networks to stay informed of events and enhance their connections to others.

With no economic mission, much of the patriarchs' role had become redundant. This led to their general retirement from the regulation of household matters, spending their time instead in musing, tending their kitchen gardens, and in frequent ritual sociation with other elders. Many initially sought to assure their well-being through settling known obligations to the ancestors, and to do this it was important for them to locate in areas of dense Iu Mien settlement, near a ritual expert who could conduct offerings for them. Ritual as a vehicle for sociation drowned the sense of marginality and became a major focus of social activity and medium of competitions for prestige. Nearly all had sufficient surplus income to pay for frequent religious rituals to meet ancestral obligations and to earn merit. Hosting large numbers of men and linking households from throughout the community, these rituals increased dramatically in frequency after the first year (Habarad 1981, 1986).

A few men were able to find roles as important secular mediators because government and private programs for the promotion of social and economic well-being operated on the assumption of a "community," "tribal," or ethnic framework. Such programs to provide training, educational opportunities, and possible funding for Mutual Assistance Associations created new niches for Iu Mien elites as activist brokers in a new arena of power. In addition to ritual activities, therefore, some came to be absorbed with struggles for power in the new and growing arena of "community" affairs, as competitors for community support.

Younger men, outside their language or training classes, had few pressing tasks to accomplish. Many fought against feelings of redundancy and uselessness and a sense of incompetence by concerning themselves increasingly with sponsorship of rituals allowing them too an important household role as *givers* or mediators of household well-being and a place in the community arena. Apart from this, men became interested in cars, both in driving and in learning to repair them, or took to useful recreations such as fishing and hunting, where, if successful, they contributed something to the household and its network won through their own skills. Gambling, also became a common pastime for men which was exciting, often rewarding, and with liquor, sociable. Women coped with the demands for support made upon them by their men and with the needs of a rapidly increasing number of infants and attended part-time classes to learn English. When not occupied with these activities, they sat at needlework, improving their ritual finery alone or in gatherings with other neighborhood women.

The difficulties the Iu Mien faced in becoming familiar with their new setting and the troubles that seemed to beset them in everyday life made questions of voluntarily taking on the added difficulties of earning a living remote. They lived in decayed urban areas within a social milieu where unemployment was expected and where aid programs provided most families with a more or less uniform income. Immersion in the community milieu insulated them from raising their expectations for a standard of living beyond what they had already achieved. Work would have isolated them from the familiar social currents in which they sought to immerse themselves. Precedence over a search for jobs was given to meeting with kin or friends to sort out pressing business such as the purchase of a car or insurance, the arrangement of a marriage, preparations for other rites, or more

routine obligations such as taking wives to clinics, finding new sources for pigs and chickens, and language or training classes.

In 1984 fewer than fifteen Oakland men had jobs. Few with wives and children actively sought work, though those who did so seriously often succeeded. Their situation discouraged them from trying. Resources were simply available, as a condition of the new environment, and in consequence earning a living did not concern them. When men or women reached the end of eligibility for an aid program on which they depended, however, the problem of establishing new access to resources became a focus of obsessive concern. At such times anxieties related to resources led to extreme tensions within the household and throughout its network, mobilizing far-reaching efforts to find a solution. When such crises were resolved, attention again shifted to other concerns.

Living in an alien environment with a near uniform abundance of economic means, they invested their efforts instead in ritual and political competitions through which they sought power, importance, and a sense of social connectedness on their own familiar terms. Men and women alike, when questioned, claimed that while they wanted very much to work and become self-sufficient, this was impossible because of the unsuitability of their language and work skills. Most believed without question that their command of English and the untried skills gained in training classes were inadequate for jobs that would support wives and children. In this they viewed themselves as powerless.

Resources and Responses to Change

In contexts of change, Iu Mien men and women responded in large part to their perceptions of resources. Despite their shared culture, institutions, and experiences of flight, their reactions to diverse environments involved very different patterns of behavior. These ranged from the economic dynamisms of Houei Chiang Laat and Suun Chiang Kham to related disintegrative dynamics in Houei Dii Mii, and the relative productive inactivity and "cultural" involution (Scudder and Colson 1982) of Iu Mien in Mae Bong and Oakland. Based on the above brief descriptions, in what follows I examine social linkages between perception of resources in the various settings and the distinctive patterning in their responses.

In the economically stressed settlements, men and women found key economic resources inadequate to support expected standards of well-being and saw this as closely linked to the actions of other members of the household and settlement. When threatened by scarcities or when they recognized opportunities to improve their positions they exerted pressures on others to mobilize in a common effort, encouraging productive activities through interactional prestations and sanctions that focused on increasing resources.

In Houei Chiang Laat the economic dynamism of households was largely driven by the sanctioning power of the patriarch and the perception of scarcity he generated. Work left undone was seen to jeopardize not only one's own place vis-a-vis his powers, but also to affect the well-being of other household members who would be forced to take up the burden. This led to a concern on the part of each that other members did as much as they were able in setting up an economically oriented milieu. Intimate social, psychological and even threat of supernatural pressures bore on the household members to induce them to conform to expectations, operating as an essentially coercive system under an overall patriarchal authority.

In Suun Chiang Kham, on the other hand, the situation was more desperate. Here, a fear of immediate consequences to the collectivity through illness or failure on the part of any household member constantly imposed a sense of personal responsibility. Expectations that individuals would contribute in the struggle for resources permeated interactions

within the household. A responsive market made it possible for them to add to the household's resources. Their successes and awareness of responsibilities for the welfare of their parents, siblings, spouses, and children encouraged men and women to work with little rest.

The women of Mae Bong were also much involved in productive efforts. Largely because opportunities were available to them and remittances alone were seen as insufficient, they were expected to work, under pressures from husbands, fathers, and children who depended upon them. In contrast to the helplessness that gripped their husbands, Mae Bong women were dynamically oriented toward economic production and asserted an unusually powerful authoritative voice in household affairs.

In cases therefore, where key material means were perceived as scarce, interaction generated tensions that channeled awareness and behavior toward a more dynamic economic performance. Where economic resources were perceived as either unattainable or already sufficient to meet existing standards, men and women reacted by stressing social and supernatural problems.

In Houei Dii Mii, where ecological breakdown thwarted productive efforts, social pressures emphasized increased economic activity but gained no concomitant return. This added to existing stresses and contributed to the perception of a closed system of economic good. Men and women turned outward to explain and locate responsibility for their losses, and the increased anxieties and pressures erupted at points of social tension and conflict in accusations of witchcraft and sorcery. These arose in the schisms and suspicions between competing households, and within households, between young women and their fathers-in-law. Caught up in immediate events, few envisioned their links to U.S. kin as providing solutions to their problems. Most saw themselves as farmers and focused their attentions on coping with social conflicts they saw as the causes of hardship. As ecological and social stresses increased, the intensity of accusations and hostilities drove disputing men and women and their households apart, leading to their migration and scattering to seek out new and more workable areas.

In Mae Bong, mens' unbalanced dependency on resources from close kin and their women led to an incomprehensible but consuming loss of self-esteem. This, plus their inactivity and the uncertainty of their positions, contributed to a sense of helplessness in which they projected responsibility for their fates onto others. Constant discussion within networks of men sharing the same problems led many to see their individual conditions as the result of larger supernatural forces they could not fathom. Unable to clearly grasp the problems that beset them, some tried to escape through opium. Most, however, while continuing their demands upon women and kin, struggled against their distresses through frequent appeals to the ancestors, applying for celestial intervention.

In Oakland, on the other hand, in the context of their shared social marginality and unfamiliarity, the assumption of outside responsibility and the gift of economic security permitted the senses of uselessness and social alienation to become paramount. These the Iu Mien sought to remedy through efforts to enhance their power and social centrality in familiar ritual and political activities. This led to the creation of a dynamic but closed system which further insulated Iu Mien from coming to terms with their environment and legitimated their ongoing dependency on outside agencies by sustaining their sense of incompetence to cope.

An Interactional Framework for Responses to Change

Anthropological studies of community life show that men and women premise their responses to change on existing cultural understandings. Through these understandings people organize knowledge by symbolically identifying key values and emphasizing past connections between cause and effect. We have long understood that direct and indirect relationships between behavior and resources are not programmed cultural conventions as Malinowski sought to show (1939). Instead, the patterning of behavior is a highly responsive process that results from an interplay between environment, cultural ideas, and organization. Cultures are open-ended systems of explanation that are responsive to changing conditions and allow for change through innovation, experimentation, and adoption of new strategies that prove to give satisfactory results. Such changes do not occur randomly, but develop through dynamic interactions in response to perceived constraints and opportunities (Cohen 1969, Mayer 1971, Scudder and Colson 1980).[5]

Interactive linkages between resources and behavior are intrinsic in the transactions that constitute social organization. For example, Leach has argued that kin groups exist by reason of involvement with the same resources (1961:300-305); whether they are constructed around material or moral resources, this can equally be said of other collectivities such as households, clans, communities, congregations, classes, or corporations. As analysts we confront such linkages hidden within bodies of explanatory ideas and "rules" men and women create to order access to resources and to project rights, obligations, and responsibilities in respect of these. We find such linkages embodied in the operation of institutions and in the transactional relations which are the media for information and resources. For lack of a clearer term I incorporate other usages and refer to such complexes of interactional channeling simply as "interaction processes." Such connections may help explain the dynamics whereby peoples in change combine a "great flexibility of action with the maintenance of conceptual frames that appear remarkably stable" (Scudder and Colson 1979:241). At the same time they may also provide a key for tracing the interconnections in ongoing systems (cf. Anderson 1973, Goldschmidt 1976, Harris 1980).[6]

In personalized organizations such as the household or local kin group the sense of linkage and responsibility is powerful, involving moral and interactional pressures that stimulate and largely channel the responses of individuals within them. They talk together, express feelings, fears, hopes and disappointments. They admonish, praise, request, argue, demand, issue ultimata, threaten, tempt, cajole, and make claims upon one another in direct and indirect social exchanges. Their linkage by bonds of common identification often imposes an expressive sense of common responsibility, and in many cases continuing membership and the sense of self rest on the responses of others to conformance or nonconformance, giving such prestations and information moral efficacy (Colson 1974:35-51 and passim, Douglas 1986:15-19, 127-128).

Individual motivations respond largely to pressures and ideas generated in the social frameworks which in turn are based upon perceptions of the availability of culturally valued resources. Behavior therefore shifts in relation to changes in resource availability and is susceptible to channeling in patterned directions by perceptions and concerns emphasized within the collectivity. In this, they may also employ symbolically associated ideas and actions with related but unintended consequences, a notion which abounds in functionalist studies in anthropology (Douglas 1986:31-43).[7]

"Interaction processes" occur in any social field where men and women are linked by a relation to the same resources, but are more markedly observable in situations of dramatic change such as relocation, which interrupt familiar channels of access. While played out in terms of existing cultural explanations, such processes show regularities that may predict the direction and patterning of responses to change. Put simply, when

members of such groups perceive scarcities of key resources to jeopardize well-being, they emphasize ideas and exert sanctions that promote awareness and behavior within the group focused on improvement of individual access to those resources. A few patterns are generalizable from the above cases.

Where material resources are perceived as inadequate to support expectations for well-being, as in Houei Chiang Laat and Suun Chiang Kham, interaction processes emphasize activities related to economy, creating tensions and pressures focused on acquisition of resources necessary to meet expectations. Where opportunities are seen to exist such pressures may channel behavior toward extraordinary productive dynamism. In such conditions interactional pressures may encourage men and women to make sacrifices, to struggle for alternatives, and to take risks in problem solving through innovation or adoption of new strategies (cf. Geertz 1963, Epstein 1971). Over time they may also give rise to explanations that legitimate shifts in strategy and subsequent organizational changes (e.g., Polanyi 1944, Weber 1958) as men and women attempt to reason through their new relationships.

Where expectations for material well-being continue to be unmet, as in Houei Dii Mii, explanations for failure turn outward to focus pressures within the social framework. If conditions render individual efforts ineffective, interaction processes focus attention on limiting damage by overcoming or removing assumed sources of hardship. Efforts at economic improvement may be less centrally emphasized and even negatively sanctioned as they are seen to occur at the expense of others (Foster 1965). This may lead to a continuing privation, and over time result in social polarization and disintegration, or in long-standing conditions of destructive involution (cf. Scudder 1983, 1984, Wisner 1983, Wolf 1959).[8]

In cases such as Mae Bong and Oakland, where economic resources are perceived as sufficient, other values assumed increased importance. Although control of material resources frequently offers a base of power in social, political, and supernatural spheres, it may be emphasized less as interaction processes direct attention to intensified efforts in responding to threats and opportunities in the social and cultural arena. Moral values are also sources of concern that men and women may treat as resources in organizing their activities. Indeed, when the sense of well-being in these other spheres is undermined, people may again operate as if within a closed system. Where power is expressed through social, political and supernatural resources, interaction processes may channel awareness and behavior in efforts to obtain these (e.g., Mitchell 1956, Barth 1966, Colson 1967, Bailey 1977, Scott 1982, Shokeid 1971, Hagen 1971, Worsley 1968).

Variation Within Settlements

The patterns I have described are generalizations made through discounting variation among residents within each settlement. Those who had achieved more had also been among the better off prior to relocation. This could be because they had been able to bring more capital with them and so had been able to obtain more or better fields, but I do not think so. Instead I would argue that they struggled harder to achieve in relocation because they measured their conditions by a higher social and economic standard than did others. They were used to a higher standard (measuring themselves against the achievements of co-villagers) and did not rest until they had regained a higher level of well-being and economic superiority over their fellows, attempting to regain a position confounded by the scrambling effect of the move. This was clearly seen in the cases of the leading patrons in Houei Chiang Laat, and in cases in the U.S. where formerly wealthy men struggled for social preeminence as brokers of power through the enhanced media of political

and ritual excellence. Elites in the old land became elites in the new. In contrast, those who had been poor or average in social and economic standing in the old land were those who, in Houei Chiang Laat, showed less drive to take lowland fields, who were more marginal economically, and who attached themselves as clients to elite patrons. Similarly in the U.S., those who became clients and who took less initiative to sponsor larger rituals, or political efforts, had also been among the non-elite in Laos.

Those who distinguished themselves did so because they were striving to regain a relative standard of social and economic well-being, judged 1) by material concerns, and when this was assured, 2) in political and expressive social terms, relative to the resources, esteem, and accomplishments of other Iu Mien in their personal social frameworks, with whom they identified and contrasted themselves to measure achievement.

In a larger context, these processes may explain some of the differences in performance between relocating ethnic groups, and between members of the same relocating groups as they respond to their new environments. Not only do men and women in different categories and groups experience different levels and means of access to resources, but they are often seeking to satisfy very different standards of well-being, not at all in relation to standards of the host society by which they are usually judged.[9]

Conclusion

Elizabeth Colson has recently characterized the present time as an age in which men, women, and communities are increasingly uprooted by force and thrown into new and unfamiliar circumstances (1987:1). Indeed, without considering internal shifts in population, refugees and other migrants are now estimated to exceed 30 million worldwide (Ford 1983:6). It is therefore more important than ever that we come to grips with conditions that affect responses to change.

Such connections as I have outlined in this essay have rarely been considered in studies of resettlement; Colson's work on Gwembe Tonga (1971) and Leighton's (1945) study of Japanese war relocation being important exceptions. In addition to the obvious applications in explicating the direction of responses among peoples acting in conditions of change, the relationships outlined above as "interaction processes"—the means by which people orient themselves, evaluate their opportunities and constraints and then organize their activities—throw considerable light on the much misunderstood behavior of refugees in U.S. resettlement.

A major, recently completed survey study of the difficulties of Indochinese refugee adjustment argues for example, that "refugees lack the motivation to migrate, and since their movement is not voluntary, they experience a sense of powerlessness which hampers their assimilation into a new society" (Strand and Jones 1985:3, see also Kibreab 1985:5). With other proponents of push/pull models, they assume the problems of dependency in contemporary refugee resettlement to result from the experience of powerlessness and trauma inherent in involuntary relocation (e.g., Howell 1982:122). As a result, they argue as policy recommendations, that "the federal government should assume more complete responsibility for the resettlement of refugees" including "financial as well as placement responsibility" and outline a comprehensive program of assistance.

The above comparisons show, in contrast, that external support encouraged the senses of powerlessness and despondency by removing responsibility to cope autonomously. Interventions have created patterned systems of relationships and opportunities encouraging refugees to respond in patterned ways as dependents. Since most studies of refugee resettlement are conducted in the context of external involvements, a general uniformity in their responses may then be taken as proof of the *a priori* assumption of

helplessness. Certainly other migrants today, often fleeing conditions as grave as any faced by refugees but with neither legal documents nor aid, show an economic dynamism that is lacking in the responses of refugees resettled in frameworks of external assistance.[10] We can ask today, as did Marcel Mauss (1967:73) in 1925, whether Western patronship differs from chiefly redistributions in the Trobriand Islands; if wealth for us is not also "first and foremost a means of controlling others," linking survival to a center of power.

If so it is surely control gone awry. Efforts have shifted from patronship to paternalism through the involvement of an aid community, socially distant and operating with their own culture and interests (Colson 1982). These have sought to aid in the difficulties of development and change, screening out and discouraging local-level initiatives by denying their adequacy or desirability (ibid.:10-16). The availability of outside resources in the context of their poverty may encourage peoples to make prestations of helplessness, and their culture and interests have made members of the aid community receptive to such claims. Poverty and hardship are taken as evidence of peoples' incompetence to cope on their own, which legitimates the aid community's demand for increased budget and organization. The oppressed, dislocated, despairing and hungry have become themselves resources, around whom a dynamic community and a culture have developed (cf. ibid.:1-5).

The failure of peoples to become self-sufficient when subject to involuntary relocation or major development interventions cannot therefore be wholly attributed to problems inherent in adjustment to dramatic change. Instead, the incompetencies to cope with change may result in large part from benevolent assistances which, by imposing implicit controls, shift responsibilities for coping to outside agencies, disrupting and refocusing interactive processes that would have otherwise encouraged autonomous efforts. In view of the connections described above, what needs to be studied now are means to assist in conditions of change without creating conditions for dependency. Uncertainty is inherent in change; powerlessness is not.

Notes

1. Research in northern Thailand was carried out in 1984 as a pilot study for dissertation research, as a Wallis Research Fellow and with assistance from a Lowie Research grant from the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. A great debt is owed to the work of Elizabeth Colson, to whom I also owe thanks for having read and criticized various drafts of this paper. I am also indebted to James N. Anderson and Nelson Graburn for many useful discussions. Seminars on migration and resettlement led by Elizabeth Colson, George De Vos, and James Anderson in 1983 and 1984 at Berkeley, as well as the MARS-organized sessions of the Kroeber Anthropological Society presented stimulating material that contributed to the ideas worked out through cases presented here. Despite all this, responsibility for the positions taken remains my own.

2. Since men and women in Houei Dii Mii were frequently reluctant to provide their explanations for conditions there, I obtained much of the descriptive history from the narratives and questioning of men and women who had recently left, and from one of Houei Chiang Laat's ritual experts frequently called upon to divine the sources of misfortune there.

3. Two instances belie the pattern but demonstrate its generality. One, a young man who had mastered the skill of writing and reading names and addresses in English prepared and posted packages to the United States for a fee. Having purchased a motorcycle and set up a post-office box as a mailing address for his clients, he made regular trips to distant Chiang Rai to post packages and to collect payments and remittances from U.S. kin. Another case is the operation of two Lao Iu Mien "shops" supplying kerosene, oils, spirits, soaps, medicines and a limited selection of sweets, canned meats, cigarettes, alcohol, salt, etc.

4. Made for my own use and for reporting to kin in the United States. A pattern of economic indus-triousness within the camp environment is also reported for the Cambodian camps Nong Chan, Nong Samet and Mak Mun (Mason and Brown 1983, esp. pp. 38-47).

5. See also, for example, Barth 1969, Goody 1976, Cohen 1981, Ogbu 1974, Schapera 1970, Moer-man 1968; compare with Joachim 1981:28-31, Moran 1982:99.

6. Such problems of continuity and change in relation to environment have been among the foremost of problems in anthropological studies of cultural ecology, generally with a view to functional rela-tionships (e.g., Goldschmidt 1976:342-357, Goldschmidt et al. 1965:400-442, among many others). Cultural materialism (Harris 1980:55-62) asserts social dynamisms and a linkage to resources but does not yet grasp the processes by which they occur. In this connection Raymond Kelly's work on Nuer expansion is of great interest (1985).

7. Such as the framing of a community level of interactions involving a further channeling effect, with consequences unintended at the individual and household levels, as in, e.g., the interactions in Houei Dii Mii leading, unintentionally, to disintegration and migration to new areas, or, interactions in Oakland leading, again unintentionally, to the creation of a close-knit community perpetuating the conditions for dependency as a mode of access to resources. These are little different from the "latent" functions of, for example, the Kula (Malinowski 1922), or, the unintended but resource-related Hausa or Creole religious involvements reported by Cohen (1969, 1981).

8. The cases discussed by Scudder and Wisner, while not concerning refugees, exemplify such processes, which abound in the literature e.g., Freeman 1977, Barkun 1974, Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974, Kelly 1980:30-31). Extremes of destructive involution over time without change, combined with physiological stresses, may indeed lead to apathy and the sense of powerlessness (e.g., Frankel 1962). This was not the case in either of the settlements experiencing an apathetic economic pattern: instead, settlements evincing the pattern of powerlessness and despondency were those that enjoyed the highest levels of material well-being based on inputs from outside sources. Neither experienced either the physiological stresses evinced in dynamically responding Houei Dii Mii, which had the outlet of further migration, or Suun Chiang Kham.

9. It is at a later point, when they have assimilated host-society values and begin to feel themselves full members of the new society, that they begin to measure well-being according to host society standards. Suarez-Orozco (1987) points to a generational lag in the assimilation of standards. Other data indicate this may occur more rapidly where members of a related but earlier arriving ethnic community transmit their explanations to newcomers (Hirabayashi 1981).

10. Such as Central American refugees, currently denied the status of "political refugee," yet who in the same localities as Oakland's Iu Mien show high motivation and economic dynamism. (Suarez-Orozco, personal communications; also Suarez-Orozco 1987).

References Cited

Anderson, J. N.
    1973   Ecological Anthropology and Anthropological Ecology. *In* Handbook of Social and Cul-
        tural Anthropology. J. Honigman, ed. Pp. 179-240. Chicago: Rand McNally.
Bailey, F.
    1977   Morality and Expediency. London: Basil Blackwell.
Barkun, M.
    1974   Disaster and the Millenium. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Barth, F.
    1966   Models of Social Organization. Glasgow: Royal Anthropological Institute Occasional Pa-
        per No. 23.
    1969   Introduction. *In* Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. F. Barth, ed. Pp. 9-38. Boston: Little,
        Brown and Co.
Boyer, P. and S. Nissenbaum
    1974   Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Cohen, A.
1969   Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns. Berkeley: University of California Press.
1981   The Politics of Elite Culture. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Colson, E.
1967   Assimilation of an American Indian Group. *In* Beyond the Frontier: Social Process and Cultural Change. Paul Bohannan and Fred Plog, eds. Pp. 209-226. Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press.
1971   The Social Consequences of Resettlement. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
1974   Tradition and Contract: The Problem of Order. Chicago: Aldine.
1982   Planned Change: The Creation of a New Community. Berkeley: Institute of International Studies.
1987   Introduction. *In* People in Upheaval. S. Morgan and E. Colson, eds. Pp. 1-16. Staten Island, New York: Center for Migration Studies.
Douglas, M.
1986   How Institutions Think. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press.
Epstein, S.
1971   Economic Development and Social Change in South India. *In* Economic Development and Social Change. G. Dalton, ed. Pp. 460-491. New York: Natural History Press.
Fairchild, H.P.
1925   Immigrant Backgrounds. New York: Wiley.
Ford Foundation
1983   Refugees and Migrants: Problems and Program Responses. New York: A Working Paper from the Ford Foundation.
Foster, G.
1965   Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good. American Anthropologist 67(2):293-315.
Frankl, V.
1962   Man's Search for Meaning: From Death Camp to Existentialism. New York: Simon and Schuster.
Freeman, J.
1977   Scarcity and Opportunity in an Indian Village. Menlo Park, CA: Cummings.
Geertz, C.
1963   Agricultural Involution. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Goldschmidt, W.
1976   Culture and Behavior of the Sebei. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Goldschmidt, W. et al.
1965   Variation and the Adaptability of Culture: A Symposium. American Anthropologist 67(2):400-442.
Goody, J.
1976   Production and Reproduction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Habarad, J.
1981   Insiders Looking Out: Lao Iu Mien in U.S. Resettlement. Unpublished Senior Honors Thesis. Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.
1987   Refugees and the Structure of Opportunity. *In* People in Upheaval. S. Morgan and E. Colson, eds. Pp. 66-87. Staten Island, New York: Center for Migration Studies.
Hagen, E.
1971   Colonialism and Economic Growth. *In* Economic Development and Social Change. G. Dalton, ed. Pp. 257-282. New York: Natural History Press.
Harris, Marvin
1979   Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture. New York: Random House.
Hirabayashi, L.
1981   Migration, Mutual Aid and Adaptation. Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.

Howell, D.
    1982   Refugee Resettlement and Public Policy: A Role for Anthropology. Anthropological
        Quarterly 55(3):119-125.
Joachim, M.
    1981   Strategies for Survival. New York: Academic Press.
Kelly, R.
    1980   Etoro Social Structure. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
    1985   The Nuer Conquest: The Structure and Development of an Expansionist System. Ann Ar-
        bor: University of Michigan Press.
Kibreab, G.
    1985   African Refugees. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.
Kunz, E.
    1973   The Refugee in Flight: Kinetic Models and Forms of Displacement. International Migra-
        tion Review 7(2):125-146.
    1981   Exile and Resettlement: Refugee Theory. International Migration Review 15(1-2):42-51.
Leach, E.
    1961   Pul Eliya. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Leighton, A.
    1945   The Governing of Men. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
Malinowski, B.
    1922   Argonauts of the Western Pacific. New York: Dutton.
    1939   The Group and the Individual in Functional Analysis. American Journal of Sociology
        44:938-964
Mason, L. and R. Brown
    1983   Rice, Rivalry and Politics: Managing Cambodian Relief. Notre Dame: University of Notre
        Dame Press.
Mauss, M.
    1967   The Gift. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.
Mayer, P.
    1971   Townsmen or Tribesmen. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
Mitchell, J. C.
    1956   The Kalela Dance: Aspects of Social Relationships Among Urban Africans in Northern
        Rhodesia. Rhodes-Livingstone Papers no. 27. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Moerman, M.
    1968   Agricultural Change and Peasant Choice in a Thai Village. Berkeley: University of Cali-
        fornia Press.
Moran, E.
    1982   Human Adaptability. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.
Ogbu, J.
    1974   The Next Generation: An Ethnography of Education in an Urban Neighborhood. New
        York: Academic Press.
Petersen, W.
    1958   A General Typology of Migration. American Sociological Review 23:256-266.
Polanyi, K.
    1944   The Great Transformation. Boston: Beacon.
Schapera, I.
    1970   Tribal Innovators: Tswana Chiefs and Social Change 1795-1940. London: Athlone.
Scott, G.
    1982   The Hmong Refugee Community in San Diego. Anthropological Quarterly 55(3):146-160.
Scudder, T.
    1983   Social Breakdown Among the Gwembe Tonga. Culture and Agriculture 18:16-19.
    1984   Economic Downturn and Community Unraveling Revisited. Culture and Agriculture 23:7-
        10.

Scudder, T. and E. Colson
    1979   Long-term Research in Gwembe Valley, Zambia. *In* Long-term Field Research in Social
    Anthropology. G. Foster, T. Scudder, E. Colson and R. Van Kemper, eds. Pp. 227-254. New
    York: Academic Press.
    1980   Secondary Education and the Formation of an Elite. New York: Academic Press.
    1982   From Welfare to Development: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of Dislocated
    People. *In* Involuntary Migration and Resettlement. A. Hansen and A. Oliver-Smith, eds. Pp.
    267-287. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.
Shokeid, M.
    1971   The Dual Heritage: Immigrants from the Atlas Mountains in an Israeli Village. Manches-
    ter: Manchester University Press.
Strand, P., and W. Jones Jr.
    1985   Indochinese Refugees in America. Durham, N.C.: Duke Press Policy Studies, Duke
    University Press.
Suarez-Orozco, M.
    1987   Transformation in Perception of Self and Social Environment in Mexican Immigrants. *In*
    People in Upheaval. S. Morgan and E. Colson, eds. Pp. 129-143. Staten Island, New York:
    Center for Migration Studies.
U.S.C.R.
    1986   Refugees from Laos: In Harm's Way. U.S. Committee for Refugees Issue Paper. Ameri-
    can Council for Nationalities Service. July.
Weber, M.
    1958   The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
Wisner, B.
    1983   Economic Downturn and Community Unraveling. Culture and Agriculture 20:11-12.
Wolf, E.
    1959   Sons of the Shaking Earth. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Worsley, P.
    1968   The Trumpet Shall Sound. New York: Schocken.