Appendix C. A Note on Work and Wage Work in Palokhi

By the very nature of their subsistence system where the fields and forests, on which the Palokhi Karen depend so much for food, are situated outside the village but within the stream valley or domain, whilst the loci of the cash economy are formed primarily by Northern Thai settlements such as Ban Mae Lao and Ban Pa Pae, it is not surprising therefore that “work” and “wage work” should be seen in terms of distinctions in spatial relationships with the village as a focal referent. These distinctions are reflected in the verbal categories for “work” and “wage work” and their usages.

In Palokhi, there is a generic term for “work” as an activity, mata, which is formed from the verb ma (“to do”, “to make”) and ta (“thing” or “things”). Tama, on the other hand, means “work” in the sense of something that is done but it is rarely used except when something specific is being referred to, whereas mata is always heard, especially in conjunction with the word lae, “to go”. Mata covers a whole range of activities — from the various agricultural tasks in swiddens and wet-rice fields to the making of tools, baskets, guns and the building of houses. It is also a common reply (lae mata, “going to work”) to the question “where are you going?” (na lae su lau) which functions as a standard greeting, after which a more specific response may follow such as “going to weed” (lae khlau nau), “going to pick tea” (lae dae’ naumy), and so on.

There are two terms which are the complementary opposites of mata. These are ‘o’ doe’ and lae ha’, and they refer to what people in Palokhi regard as essentially non-work activities. ‘O’ doe’ means “to be at home” (literally, “to be in the house” or “to remain in the house”) but, in fact, even when they are “in the house”, the Palokhi Karen are busy performing a myriad number of tasks, for example, collecting firewood, drawing water, mending garden fences, feeding their chickens and pigs, and so forth. Lae ha’, which always connotes leisure and enjoyment, however, means “to go visiting” (literally, “to go walking”) which may be anywhere outside one’s home or Palokhi. By the very nature of their subsistence system where the fields and forests, on which the Palokhi Karen depend so much for food, are situated away from the village, it is not surprising that mata is always coupled with lae, but it is nonetheless significant that activities outside the village (with the exception of lae ha’) should be regarded as work whereas activities within the village are not.

Against all these categories for work and non-work activities, stands the term for “wage work” or “wage labour” (which is also coupled with the word “to go”), ha’ ca, a loan word now fully assimilated into the lexicon of the Palokhi Karen from the Northern Thai hap caang, “to hire a worker” or “to engage for wage work”. 1 The use of this term as a loan word is by no means peculiar to
Palokhi or the Karen communities in the Mae Muang Luang-Huai Thung Choa area. Hamilton (1976:131) has also noted its use in the Pwo Karen community of Ban Hong in Hod, and this suggests that there is no indigenous term for this sort of work, or that if there is it does not enjoy any currency. In Palokhi, ha’ ca or lae ha’ ca is always used even when the Karen refer to wage work among themselves. Ha’ ca may, however, be glossed in Karen by a short-hand general term which provides an interesting insight into how wage work is conceived of in Karen thought. The term is ma laeta (or lae ma laeta) which, roughly translated, means “to work-exchange things” (where lae, “exchange” [possibly from the Northern Thai laek with the same meaning], is tonally different from lae, “to go”). Wage labour, therefore, is seen in terms of an exchange of something for one’s labour (rather than, say, the sale of one’s labour which would be impossible to express in Palokhi Karen). The significance of this gloss for ha’ ca is, perhaps, better appreciated if we contrast it with the Karen term for co-operative labour exchange in agricultural activities which is ma dau’ lau (poe’) sa’. The literal translation of this expression is “to work with (our) hearts falling together”, but a more idiomatic translation would be “to work mutually”. Indeed, this is the essential sense of the term as indicated by lau sa’, a phrase that invariably denotes mutual, reciprocal action or common activity. The important point here is that the provision of labour on a reciprocal basis (that is, what we might call “labour exchange”) is not seen to be “exchanged”; only objects or goods are “exchanged”. Ha’ ca, on the other hand, is seen as kind of exchange transaction. Ma laeta itself may be elaborated upon in order to make a distinction between the kinds of payments made for wage work, that is, money or cash payments, and rice wages. The former is called ma ne ce’, “to work and obtain money”, while the latter is called ma lae ‘au’ by, “to work-exchange eating unhusked rice”. While the first expression is straightforward enough, the second is unusual that ‘au’ by is not the conventional way of describing the eating of rice which is ‘au’ me, meaning “to eat cooked rice”. Nor does it reflect the nature of rice wages which are invariably made in the form of husked or milled rice which the Palokhi Karen call hy sa’ (or by hy sa’). What underlies this formulation for work paid in rice wages is a very fundamental idea about the relationship between work and rice: rice that is obtained by work is rice from one’s field and it is based, of course, on the agricultural experience of the Karen.

These terms and expressions are important in showing how the Palokhi Karen view wage work according to culturally held notions about the nature of work. The ideas encapsulated in these descriptions are implicit in their use of the term ha’ ca. The retention and use of the Northern Thai term, however, is itself significant. We have already seen that a distinction is made between work and non-work, where work is viewed in terms of activities performed outside the village. This is also true of wage work which is undertaken not merely outside
the village but of the environment which the Palokhi Karen utilise for subsistence purposes — usually in Northern Thai villages and sometimes in Lisu villages and units of the Royal Forestry Department in the watershed. While wage work is performed “outside”, it is also work which is different from ma ta and the difference is indicated by the use of the term ha’ ca. But, I suggest that ha’ ca as a borrowed Northern Thai linguistic category also marks this sort of work in another significant sense: it is work that falls within a different domain — not necessarily Northern Thai, although it is very often the case, but one that is essentially non-Karen. This is associated with a certain attitude, in Palokhi, that agricultural work is intrinsically satisfying — or, at least, meaningful in the sense that its product is directly consumable for sustenance — while wage work to support oneself entirely is not.

Despite the arduous nature of agricultural work, the Palokhi Karen regard wage work for a living as being harder and more demanding than agricultural work. This is not peculiar only to Palokhi. Marshall, a keen observer of the Karen, put this rather more strongly in describing the employment of Karen in the forestry industry in Burma some sixty years ago; he notes that “the Karen has a distaste for steady work under supervision, especially if the immediate overseer is a Burman” (1922:87). This is really more a reflection of attitudes towards a way of life rather than the nature of wage work itself. They do not, of course, describe it in quite this way; what they say is that wage work is “not enjoyable” (toe’ my’). A good instance of this feeling towards wage work and agricultural work may be seen in the return to farming by the households which worked for several years in units of the Royal Forestry Department in the Mae Muang Luang-Huai Thung Choa area. It is also to be seen in the sentiments that the Palokhi Karen evince with regard to households that are virtually wholly dependent on wage work for a living and households that fail to make the most of agricultural production; these households are considered unfortunate or, to put it another way, as somehow “second-class” members of the community.

I think it would not be far wrong to say that the ultimate aspiration of the Palokhi Karen in general is to cultivate fields and to be entirely self-sufficient in agricultural production. But, this would not be just a desire generated by the inadequacies of their agricultural system; it represents a sort of ideal which has intrinsic value as a way of life and it is reflected in their verbal categories for agricultural work and wage work.

ENDNOTES
1 McFarland (1944:704) gives, as the meaning of rap caang (the Central Thai equivalent of hap caang), “to engage as an hireling”.
2 The Karen expressions for ma laeta and its elaborations that I discuss here are less commonly used compared to the Northern Thai term. They might, perhaps, be better described as explanations in Karen for the Northern Thai term. However they are regarded, it is clear that they indicate a particular view of wage work in terms of the semantics of words available in Karen. It is this that I wish to stress: the
Palokhi Karen can only express the meaning of the Northern Thai term in ways that are significant to them but that this is done by employing words which have particular meanings in a Karen context of experience. The Karen must, of course, be able to explain somehow the Northern Thai term but when they do, it is not done arbitrarily. Nevertheless, it would seem that the Karen expressions do not satisfy or else we might expect them to be used instead of the Northern Thai term. I suggest, later, a reason why this might be so.

I am not implying by this that the Karen in Palokhi therefore regard their labour, or the work that they do, as some sort of object or that they are necessarily “alienated” (in the Marxist sense of the term) from the work that they do and the products of their labour in wage work situations.