Chapter VI

Agricultural Rituals: The Ceremonial Cycle in Palokhi

We have seen in the last chapter that the Palokhi Karen are dependent on swiddening, wet-rice cultivation, and a cash economy for their subsistence needs. Indeed, for several households in Palokhi, the cash sector is crucial in enabling them to meet their subsistence needs. Notwithstanding the extent to which the Palokhi Karen are dependent on an external economy, swidden agriculture is regarded as the dominant form of subsistence production within the community. This particular perception of swiddening is based on two factors: first, an understanding that swidden agriculture predates wet-rice agriculture and is seen as a “Karen” system of cultivation; second, the continuing cultivation of swiddens which has ensured the persistence of a religious and ritual life that remains organised around the swidden cycle.

In this chapter, I present a description of several rites which form part of the cycle of ritual activities in Palokhi in order to show its crucial importance in the community and in relation to swidden agriculture, despite the fact that the Palokhi Karen possess a mixed subsistence system. As these swidden rites form the basis of rites performed in wet-rice fields, I shall not therefore deal with wet-rice agricultural rituals in Palokhi.¹

The Ceremonial Cycle: An Overview

The ceremonial cycle in Palokhi consists of a large number of major and minor rites which are performed in swiddens and in the village, in the homes of households which cultivate swiddens. They are held at various times of the year according to various stages in the cycle of swidden cultivation beginning with the selection of swidden sites and culminating with the harvest celebration which marks the transition from one agricultural season to the next. These rites form a major part of a religious system which may well be regarded as a “totalizing” system, to borrow the use of the term from Levi-Strauss (1966:250–62), in which the larger significance of the Head Rite (talykho), certain features of kinship and ‘au’ ma xae, for example, cannot be fully apprehended without reference to agricultural rituals and vice versa.
Figure 6.1 shows when these rites are held according to the cycle of swidden cultivation in Palokhi.
For convenience, these rites may be grouped as follows:

Table 6.1. The Rites of Swidden Cultivation in Palokhi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Rites in the Ceremonial Cycle</th>
<th>Where Performed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Rites of Clearing and Planting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swidden divination (<em>ka lau hy</em>)</td>
<td>Swidden and village</td>
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<tr>
<td>The rite of clearing swiddens (no specific name)</td>
<td>Swidden</td>
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<tr>
<td>The rite of planting swiddens (<em>ly tho hy</em>)</td>
<td>Swidden</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planting the ritual basket of the yam (<em>chae’ lau nwaes tasae’</em>)</td>
<td>Swidden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking the liquor of the rice seed (<em>‘au si’ by chae’ khli</em>)</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rite of Protection</td>
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<tr>
<td>The rite protecting swiddens (<em>bghau hy</em>)</td>
<td>Swidden</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Rites of Harvesting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wrist-tying at the reaping of rice (<em>ki cy’ ku lau by</em>)</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrist-tying at the threshing of rice (<em>ki cy’ phau’ lau by</em>)</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating of the “Head Rice” (<em>‘au’ by kho</em>)</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calling up the bird (<em>kau’ thau tho</em>)</td>
<td>Swidden or village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking the less of the threshing mat (<em>‘au si’ khlaumyda’</em>)</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rites of the New Year (The Descent of the Land, The Rising of the New Year)</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The annual ‘<em>au’ ma xae</em> (no specific name)</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calling back of souls (<em>phau’ koela</em>)</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrist-tying at the descent of the land, the rising of the new year (<em>ki cy’ kau lau wae, thau ni sau</em>)</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the annual ‘*au’ ma xae* is not an agricultural ritual, nevertheless, it is an integral part of the yearly cycle of ritual activities and its performance needs to be viewed accordingly. That is, it is an essential element in the overall organisation of ritual activities, which are intimately linked with swidden agriculture, within the community.

The chief concern of these rites, with the exception of the annual ‘*au’ ma xae*, readily apparent from their performances and accompanying ritual texts, is the successful growth of the rice crop. This is effected primarily through the propitiation of various spirits, the most important of which is the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land. There are, however, other features embedded within these rites, and the overall structure of the ceremonial cycle, which are important. They are specifically: cultural definitions of a certain order which opposes settlement and forest, represented by relations with the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land, within the domain; the complementary roles of male and female in reproduction symbolically applied to agricultural production; the importance of a “cool state” for the successful growth of rice; the identification of rice with humans; and a general aoristic and proleptic orientation which emphasises continuity through renewal.

As it will not be possible to examine here all the rites which make up the annual ceremonial cycle in Palokhi, I shall therefore consider only what is sufficient to illustrate these features. The rites which I focus on are those which make up the rites of planting, the rite of protection, “wrist tying at the reaping
of rice” and “eating the ‘head rice’ ” in the larger body of rites of harvesting, and the rites of the New Year.

In examining these agrarian rites in Palokhi, I take the view implicit in my earlier discussions of rituals that religion consists of a system of ideas and concepts, and an expressive or performative aspect, namely, ritual behaviour. As a general proposition, I think it would not be untenable to say that whatever else religion and ritual behaviour may involve, nevertheless, there is at least one level where they entail conceptual relations which represent some underlying schemata of cognition or cognitive models. As such, these conceptual relations are integrated, that is, coherent or patterned, and meaningful.

Ritual: Performance and Language

The conjunction of non-verbal and verbal performances in ritual is a phenomenon now well acknowledged in the anthropological literature. The prevalent view of these two aspects of ritual, it seems clear, is that they are both modes of symbolic expression analysable as communicative activity. In the 1968 Malinowski Memorial Lecture on “The Magical Power of Words”, for instance, Tambiah has argued that the important feature of this conjunction of word and deed is the manipulation of metaphor and metonym, following Jakobson’s discussion (1956) of these two linguistic forms. Specifically, he says that (Trobriand) ritual “actively exploits the expressive properties of language, the sensory qualities of objects, and the instrumental properties of action simultaneously in a number of ways” based on the principles of similarity and contiguity which underlie the construction of metaphors and metonyms (1968:189–90).

The idea of ritual as a performative, in Austin’s sense (1962), is further developed by Tambiah in his 1979 Radcliffe-Brown Lecture. Here, Tambiah distinguishes two aspects of ritual as performative: the “constitutive” and the “regulative”. The former “achieves the realization of the performative effect” while the latter “orientate(s) and regulate(s) a practical or technical activity” (1979:127–30). There are various implications of this view of ritual (which Tambiah explores) but we may note here that a key feature identified by Tambiah is the redundant social communication of meaning involving “interpersonal orchestration … social integration and continuity” (1979:133).

Fox (whose work Tambiah refers to amongst others) expresses a somewhat similar view. In a description of the ceremonial system of Savu in Eastern Indonesia, Fox (1979), drawing on a later study of Jakobson’s (1970) on auditory and visual signs as semiotic systems distinguished respectively by time and space as structuring principles, has suggested that both (“oration” and “ostension”) may be considered as different modalities in ritual. He then goes on to show that both modalities (at least in the case of the ritual systems of the
Savunese and Rotinese which he compares) exhibit the features of complementarity, markedness and parallelism more commonly associated with the analysis of linguistic phenomena.

Though concerned with the verbal and non-verbal aspects of ritual behaviour, Tambiah and Fox approach the subject from different but essentially complementary perspectives. Whilst Tambiah examines specific Trobriand rituals, Fox examines the entire ceremonial system of the Savunese. Yet, it is apparent in their analyses that the significance of specific rituals cannot be grasped without taking into account the totality of the symbolic systems of the societies they look at, and vice versa. In the literary analogy that Fox refers to (1979:171), we might say that in order to understand rituals, they need to be “read” as part of a single “text”. The analogy is, in many respects, an apt one for the analyses that Tambiah and Fox advocate (despite differences in emphasis) both draw attention to the need to examine the ways in which meanings primarily associated with linguistic categories and forms may be expressed, similarly, in non-verbal performances which include the nature of the interaction of participants in ritual situations, the possibility that symbolic meaning may attach to the very participants themselves, and the manipulation of material objects in such contexts. They also establish the necessity to determine the range of contexts within which such symbolic expressions may take place and, thereby, guide the interpretation and analysis of the general and particular significance of these expressions.

These two discussions of the relation between act and language in ritual are instructive and provide a convenient starting point for this examination of Palokhi agrarian rites and, for that matter, the other rituals I have singled out for mention in earlier chapters. As we shall see, it will be necessary to re-examine the Head Rite and ‘au’ ma xae in the context of the ceremonial cycle in Palokhi.

Although there are certain features specific to Palokhi agrarian rites, they nevertheless share two essential generic characteristics which also distinguish the Head Rite and ‘au’ ma xae, namely, the recitation of formulaic prayers, and that most quotidian of activities — eating and drinking — as the focus of most non-verbal ritual performances. As with these two rituals, the prayers in agrarian rites are not impressive, public performances (though they are uttered in generally public situations), nor are the ritual acts highly colourful and dramatic events. They are best seen as falling in-between Fox’s two modalities of ritual, “oration” and “ostension”.

There is, however, one important difference between agrarian rites and the Head Rite and ‘au’ ma xae: agrarian rites are sequentially integrated following the cycle of swidden cultivation and they thus make up a cycle of ritual activities which are repeated annually. They are, therefore, not simply agricultural rituals but also calendrical rites articulated with certain key phases or stages in the
agricultural calendar. Furthermore, these agricultural rituals taken as a whole, that is, as an annual complex, are performed individually by households at certain times and as a community with the headman and elders acting as ritual mediators between the community and the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land. In other words, the ceremonial cycle in Palokhi brings together the two different themes of the Head Rite and ‘au’ ma xae rituals — the interdependence of households as a ritual community in the former, and the separate identity and autonomy of domestic groups in the latter — within the overall structure of what is, substantially, a single corpus of annual ritual performances.

The Ritual Ownership of Swiddens

Palokhi agricultural rituals are, in the main, performed by individual households qua domestic groups wholly responsible for their own subsistence needs and a crucial aspect of this is the ritual ownership of swiddens as distinguished from general ownership in which all members of the household are regarded as owners of their swidden. Every household with a swidden has a ritual owner who may be any member of the family, and an officiant who is always the eldest male in the household, that is a father, a son or son-in-law. The two, therefore, are not necessarily the same person although in Palokhi it has generally been the case that the ritual owner has also been the ritual officiant. The fact that the ritual officiant is always a male (with the exception of one ritual which I discuss later) has to do, of course, with the domination of ritual life by men and their primary association with the cultivation of land. The ritual ownership of swiddens, however, is related to certain conceptions in the religion of the Palokhi Karen where the successful growth of the rice crop is identified with the health and well-being of the ritual owner who, in effect, represents the entire household.

The Palokhi Karen have a term which is a compound of two elements which make up a dyadic set that is most often found in healing (soul calling) prayers. The first element is tachu which means “strength” and the second element is takhle which means “speed” or “fleetness of foot”. Compounded, these two terms — tachu takhle — give us something like “good health” or “vitality”. The Palokhi Karen say that if the ritual owner of a swidden is constantly plagued by sickness and ill-health, then his “vitality descends” (lau tachu takhle) and that as a consequence of this, the crops in the swidden will likewise suffer. On the other hand, although there may be no overt indication of ill-health on the part of the ritual owner, but if the harvests from swiddens are consistently poor, this too is taken as a sign that the “vitality” of the ritual owner has waned. Thus, the state of harvests are symptomatic of the condition of the ritual owner. The rationale for the practice of having a ritual owner, therefore, is that the “vitality” of the ritual owner is supposed to ensure a good harvest.
Ritual owners are usually also ritual officiants, but when it is deemed that the “vitality” of the officiant and owner has waned, then it becomes necessary to nominate a new ritual owner in order to ensure that subsequent harvests will be plentiful. It sometimes happens, however, that old men who are still in good health but are nevertheless unable to perform all the tasks required in agricultural pursuits may then decide to nominate a new ritual owner as a precaution against poor harvests which might result from the slow decline in their powers and abilities. The nomination of a new owner is usually decided at the discretion of the oldest male in the household and his wife. Not infrequently, however, this decision or choice of a new ritual owner may be arrived at through divination with the help of one of the two ritual specialists in Palokhi, or a Northern Thai ritual expert (called a mau duu in Northern Thai) in the nearby Northern Thai village of Ban Thung Choa. The new owner may be anyone in the household, male or female, but in general not children who have yet to reach an age when they can regularly perform a full day’s work.

If the new owner is a son or son-in-law, he will be taught how to conduct all the different rituals and their accompanying prayers as and when they become necessary to perform, that is on an ad hoc basis. This, it may be noted, is essentially how ritual knowledge is transmitted in Palokhi. Instruction in these matters is not carried out in any formal manner. It is thus not unusual to find a son or son-in-law forgetting parts of the prayers that he has been taught when he conducts agricultural rites in the swidden. Very often, he will perform the ritual acts and recite whatever he may remember of the prayers while his father or father-in-law stands by prompting him, or even reciting the entire text of the prayer himself.

If the ritual owner is a woman, however, the procedures are somewhat different. If a wife or daughter is the new owner, she performs only the ritual acts in two rites: those entailed in collecting soil samples for divination in order to decide on the final choice of a swidden site, and the harvesting of the rice grown solely for ritual purposes called the “Old Mother Rice” (By Mo Pgha). She may also be required to plant the Old Mother Rice. This, and the harvest of ritual rice are not structured performances nor do they involve the recitation of prayers unlike the collection of the soil samples which is conducted under the supervision or guidance of the father or husband. It is only in these circumstances that a woman actually performs rites in the swidden. She does not say the prayers which accompany the collection of soil samples; these are recited by the male ritual officiant of the household. From this, it is clear that despite the fact that women may sometimes participate in swidden rituals, this occurs in narrowly circumscribed contexts, and it is men who run the ritual life of domestic groups especially in relation to agriculture.
There are two aspects of the ritual ownership of swiddens worth noting which are relevant to an understanding of the symbolic meanings contained in the rites which make up the ceremonial cycle in Palokhi.

First, notwithstanding the fact that men are preeminent in managing the ritual activities of domestic groups, household members regardless of sex may become ritual owners of swiddens. The substitutability of household members as candidates for the role of ritual owner points to the “homogenous” or solidary nature of domestic groups since one member is as good as another regardless of generation or sex which are criteria that are otherwise important in the organisation, formation and fissioning of domestic groups and ‘au’ ma xae. The practice of having a ritual owner itself indicates the close association between households, represented by the ritual owner, and the rice crop that they cultivate.

Second, although ritual owners may be seen to symbolise households or domestic groups in this particular sense, the relationship between ritual owners and the rice cultivated by their households is not merely a simple identification of person and crop; it is a metonymical relationship based on an implicit similarity and contiguity between what is best described as “life processes” in humans and rice evident in the perception that the successful growth of rice depends on the “vitality” of the ritual owner. Indeed, rice is in fact likened to humans in the number of souls that it is thought to possess, as held in common belief and explicitly expressed in certain agricultural ritual texts. It is not, however, attributed with “vitality” perhaps because it is not “animate” in the sense that humans (and animals) are. Nonetheless, its growth is spoken of as a “rising” (thau or thau ghe, “rising beautifully”) similar to the way in which men and women are thought to “rise” into adulthood, maturity and procreativity as in the expression for “marriage”, thau pgha. The verb thau, thus, expresses what are conceived of as processes of development in these two contexts, namely, the human and the agricultural, indicating a parallelism between the two.

The Rites of Clearing and Planting

Swidden Divination

The very first rite that is performed in association with swidden cultivation is the rite called ka lau hy’, or the “divining of swiddens”. This is the simplest of all the rites performed in the agricultural cycle and it is held after the head of the household has decided on a number of potential swidden locations (as described in Chapter V, pp. 266–7). Divination is meant to establish the most favourable and, hence, the final choice of a swidden site. To do this, the ritual owner of the swidden-to-be has to go to each potential swidden location and, there, collect a handful of soil which is then wrapped up in banana leaf, the ubiquitous wrapping material of the Palokhi Karen. The samples of soil are then
taken back to the house where a pair of chicken humeri (from chickens which have been eaten on previous occasions) are tied to each bundle of soil.

When all the households which intend to swidden in the year have collected all their samples of soil, the headman Tamu’ then decides on a day most convenient for all when the divination of these chicken bones may be carried out. The divination is performed by Tamu’, often with the assistance of the elders in the village.

On the day decided by Tamu’, the various households present their bundles of soil with their accompanying chicken bones to him in the open space before his house. As with most if not all occasions of this nature, divination by the headman is an informal affair. He receives the bundles of soil and both he and the head of the household, or the ritual owner, unwrap the bundles placing the chicken bones on the samples of soil. Tamu’ then picks up a pair of bones and scrapes away the dust, soot, grime and any left over flesh from them. Next, he cuts four fine slivers of bamboo about the length of toothpicks. Taking these one at a time, he searches out tiny holes in the humeri near their extremeties. These holes are the points of insertion of tendons in the bone and blood vessels leading to the marrow. The slivers of bamboo are inserted into these holes and examined for their orientation relative to the horizontal and vertical axes of the bones when they are held upright perpendicular to the ground. The principal criterion for a favourable outcome in this method of divination is symmetry in the orientation of the bamboo slivers along both axes. If the outcome of this augury is favourable, this means that the site from which the sample of soil was collected may be swiddened without danger or mishap to the members because it is believed that the localised spirits which inhabit the area can be persuaded to leave. There is also a general belief that the swidden will be farmed successfully. Even if divination of the first bundle of soil results in positive prognostications, Tamu’ will nonetheless proceed to divine the other bones presented along with the other soil samples. If more than one location is suitable for swiddening, then the household can make a free choice as to which site it wishes to cultivate. On the other hand, if divination shows that not one of the sites is suitable for cultivation, then the household must proceed to seek out further alternative sites and repeat the procedure of divination on a future date with the headman all over again.

Once a household has a site determined as suitable for swiddening purposes, the ritual owner must then go to the site to claim it for the purposes of cultivation. This is done in the following way. The bundle of soil and the chicken bones, along with the slivers of bamboo, are taken to the place where the soil was obtained and the bundle is then placed in the fork of a branch of any tree in the area. The bundle may not be placed on the ground or returned to the earth. The Palokhi Karen do not have a ready explanation for this practice but its symbolism
is clear. The act of not returning the soil to the earth or ground represents symbolically the appropriation of the land for agricultural purposes. The prayer that is said when the bundle of soil and bones is thus deposited in the tree suggests that this is indeed the significance of this practice (see below), pointing to a concordance in the expressive meanings of the verbal and non-verbal aspects of this ritual. There is, as I argue later, also another aspect, namely, a high-low opposition implicit in this performance the significance of which is the imposition of a certain order along with the appropriation of land for cultivation. The soil samples and chicken bones with unfavourable portents, however, are thrown in the bush around the village. Although the soil samples are not returned to their original locations, there is nevertheless a certain symmetry in the symbolism of the disposal of these samples. The bush is not part of the settlement; it is a place where the Palokhi Karen defecate and where the detritus of their domestic lives are disposed including, as we have seen, the cooking vessels and utensils of divorced spouses.

The prayer which is said when the soil samples and bones are deposited in the tree is addressed to the spirits which are believed to inhabit the locality. The following is an example of the prayers said when the site is claimed for cultivation.
Coe’ koe’ phae’ chghi, phae hy’ I will clear the fallow swidden, clear a swidden
Koe’zae tamy, koe’zae taxa Spirit Lords
Koe’zae tatoe’ghe, tatoe’gwa Lords of that which is not good, that which is not pure (literally, “white”)
Ha’ su thi soe’ noe, Kau Su Ce’ Go to where the waters bend, (in) the Land of Black Silver
Coe’ koe’ ma chghi phi’ ’i I will work the fallow swidden here
Coe’ koe’ ma hy’ phi’ ’i I will work a swidden here
Coe’ koe’ ma my phi’ ’i I will make the sun here
Coe’ koe’ ma wae phi’ ’i I will do that here
Ma he loe’ ‘a’ ghe Doing all that is good
Ma he loe’ ‘a’ gwa Doing all that is pure
Coe’ mae’ toe’ thi choe ba My eyes (literally, “face”) have not noticed (you) with favour (literally, “sweetly”)
Coe’ na toe’ thi choe ba My ears have not noticed (you) with favour
He lau loe’ tho xi’ ‘ylau, chau xi’ ‘ylau Placing down all the auspicious bird bones, the auspicious chicken bones
Coe’ koe’ ma tatoethae’, tatoekwau ‘i I will make a clearing, a circular space here
Coe’ koe’ ma me’u lau, phacha lau I will bring fire down, ashes down
Koe’zae tamy, koe’zae taxa Spirit Lords
Ha’ su thi soe’ noe, Kau Su Ce’ Go to where the waters bend, (in) the Land of Black Silver
‘o’ phi’ ’i toe’ ghe To remain here is not good
Cho phi’ ’i toe’ ghe To stay here is not good

The theme of this prayer (as with other similar prayers) is dispossession and appropriation. The spirits that inhabit the locality are told to leave and the ritual owner claims the land for agricultural purposes.

The expropriation of land from the spirits may be seen in the simple declarative sentences of intentionality which form part of the prayer. It is also expressed in certain tropological features of the prayer which also reveal other associated ideas. The contrast between “fallow swidden” (chghi) and “clearing” (tatoethea’), for example, is not merely one between regenerated forest and clearing; as their dyadic complements show, the contrast is also one between forest and a clearing that is a circular space. The underlying images of these contrasting metaphors are the disorder of naturally growing vegetation and a clearing marked by a regular, geometric shape which, in the order of things, is the product of human agency.
This contrast itself draws upon a more general distinction between forest and settlement akin to that made by the Northern Thai (Davis [1984:81–3]). It is also found in the Palokhi Karen belief that calamity would befall the village if wild animals (such as barking deer), which enter the village, are killed within the boundaries of the settlement. The killing of such animals is described by the term *tahaghau*, that is, “destructive”. The term, as we have seen, is used to explain the prohibition on “crooked” unions. The consequences of such “destructive” acts in both cases are that the land becomes “hot” and crops will be “destroyed”. Although the Palokhi Karen themselves translate *tahaghau* by the Northern Thai term *khoet* or “taboo”, it is clear that these consequences represent the infertility of land.

The forest and settlement, therefore, are important categories in Palokhi Karen thought. They establish a certain cognitive order in the lived-in world of the Palokhi Karen. The domains they represent also imply certain forms of appropriate behaviour and conduct; any inappropriate behaviour or action which transgresses the boundaries of these categorial domains results in “hot” land and the destruction of crops — the ultimate sanction that the community and its members can face.

Dispossession is also to be seen in that part of the prayer where the local spirits are told to “Go where the waters bend” in the “Land of Black Silver”. These expressions reveal further conceptual associations which cohere with the distinction between forest and settlement. The meaning of these cryptic references rests on certain cosmological beliefs. According to one informant, the Land of Black Silver is a reference to the after-world inhabited by spirits (as against souls) of the dead. It is a world that is an inverted version of the here-and-now world of the living. The Land of Black Silver, thus, contains an implicit contrast with the world of the living where silver is not black, that is, un tarnished. In the larger context of the ritual, however, this elliptical cosmological reference cannot be restricted merely to drawing out this implicit dichotomy or else it would be meaningless. Its significance, therefore, must lie in the only possible (but unarticulated) distinction suggested by other features of the prayer, namely, the contrast between forest and settlement, wild and domesticated, and the non-living and the living contained in the implied dichotomy: that is, human activity in “non-human” (spirit) areas within the kau. In other words, the cultivation of the forest is conceived of in terms of a process produced by human agency in an environment which is not regarded as an area of human activity.

The meaning of “where the waters bend” is more obscure and I was unable to elicit any exegesis for this phrase other than that this is where spirits may be found. I would venture the suggestion, nonetheless, that it contains an implicit contrast paralleling that between “crooked” (*ke’*) and “straight” (*lo*) which have...
much the same metaphorical connotations in Palokhi Karen as do the English terms. It would be consistent with the other distinctions made in the prayer.

The appropriation of land, on the other hand, is unequivocally stated in the prayer in which the ritual owner explicitly says that he intends to cultivate the area. It is significant that cultivating a swidden is said to be doing all that is “good” and “pure” while the spirits themselves are declared to be “lords of that which is not good, that which is not pure”. The dyadic pair formed by the terms “good” and “pure” stands for “auspicious” conditions which, elsewhere as we have seen in the Head Rite, are obtained from the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land. There are, thus, two senses in which “auspicious” conditions prevail with the appropriation of land from the local spirits. First, the departure of the spirits presents such conditions since the spirits are themselves “inauspicious”. Second, the clearing and cultivation of forest represent conditions of an order which are one and the same as those obtained from the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land. The creation of these conditions in the latter sense is reiterated consistently in agricultural ritual texts. Its recurrence in the next rite (the rite of clearing of swiddens) indicates, however, that there is yet another significant aspect to these conditions.

The Rite of Clearing Swiddens

The rite of clearing swiddens consists of a short prayer that is said by the head of the household as he first slashes the vegetation of the swidden site. It is performed on the first day of clearing by the household with the assistance of other villagers but it is an individualised performance. The outstanding feature of the rite, however, is that the ritual act is in fact a technical act accompanied by a prayer. The prayer is addressed to the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land.

Sa, delau Thi Koe’ca, Kau Koe’ca
Coe’ koe’ phae’ chghi phi’ ‘i
Coe’ koe’ phae’ hy’ phi’ ‘i
Coe’ koe’ ma by phi’ ‘i
Coe’ koe’ ma ‘a’ phi’ ‘i
Ma he loe’ ‘a’ ghe, ‘a’ gwa
Ma he coe’ by to’ kho, to’ xau
Ghe chae’ pha’,
Ghe poe’ khry’
Ghe nju’ pu,
Ghe chghae’ bo

O, descend Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land
I will clear the fallow swidden here
I will clear a swidden here
I will grow rice here
I will do much here
Bestow all that is good, that is pure
Bestow upon my rice at the head, at the bottom
Beautiful are the offerings
Beautiful are our tributes
Beautiful within (the swidden)
Beautiful every stem
It is unmistakably clear that the rite is constituted by a perfect concordance of “performatives”, namely, the technical (“ostension”) and the verbal (“oration”) where the technical becomes ritual by virtue of the recitation of the prayer. But, there is also a dialectical relation between the two. In the prayer previously described, the clearing of the forest is seen to result is auspicious conditions. In the context of this rite, however, the creation of these conditions is dependent on the actual clearing of the forest; the technical act is thus, also the operative analogue of the verbal performance.

It will be noticed that in this rite, these conditions are derived from the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land which is called “down” (that is, from “above”) to “bestow all that is good, that is pure” whereas in the previous prayer it is the clearing of the forest that is said to produce them. The phrase which expresses these meanings (Ma he loe’ ‘a’ ghe, ‘a’ gwa) is the same in both prayers. Although an Agent is not specified in the phrase (which is a characteristic feature of such simple declarative sentences), the Agents in both cases are identifiable by context and confirmed by native exegesis. The occurrence of the phrase in both prayers and its recitation immediately after the head of the household states that he will clear the “fallow swidden” and “swidden” in the second prayer is, however, significant: it indicates a contiguity between the process of clearing the forest and the descent of the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land according to which auspicious conditions are effected. This contiguity reveals a deeper meaning to the clearing of forest and the presence of the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land, namely, that the tutelary spirit is part of the process by which order is established in natural disorder through the creation of boundaries. It also suggests that the state of auspiciousness is representative of this order. Thus, although the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land is an overlord of a naturally defined domain (kau) in which may be found human settlements and areas occupied by non-human entities or spirits, it is nevertheless identified with a human and cultural order, an integral part of which is the cultivation of land.

It is this which underlies the dichotomous attributes of the tutelary spirit of the domain and the “inauspicious spirit lords”. It also explains the particular symbolism of placing the soil samples and the “auspicious bird bones” and “auspicious chicken bones” in a tree above the ground (rather than returning them to the, as yet, unclaimed land) while the bones are nonetheless said to be “placed down” in the previous prayer.

The Rite of Planting Swiddens (Ly Tho Hy’)

The planting of rice in swiddens is accompanied by the first major agricultural ritual performances of the season for swidden-cultivating households consisting of three related, but separate rites. The first is the rite of planting swiddens (ly tho hy’) which is held on the first day of planting in swiddens. It is followed by the rite called “planting the (ritual) basket of the yam” (chae’ lau nwae
tasae’) which is also performed on the same day. The third is held several days later, in the house, and it is called “drinking the liquor of the rice seed” (‘au si’ by chae’ khli). Unlike the rites entailed in divination and the clearing of swiddens, these three rites are not individualised performances. They are held in the presence of the labour gangs which are formed to assist the household and they involve the participation of village elders and the headman should he be present when a swidden is planted.

Planting begins early in the morning without any ritual performance. During this time, however, the head of the household or the ritual owner of the swidden plants the Old Mother Rice (By Mo Pgha). This is rice that is grown only for ritual purposes and it is never consumed. Its value is entirely symbolic and it is, in fact, rice that symbolises itself. When a household first swiddens on its own, it has to acquire rice seed. This may be obtained from a parental household or purchased from some other household. A small quantity of the seed is set aside to be the Old Mother Rice or, alternatively, some seed may be obtained from the Old Mother Rice of the parental household. The seed is planted in a small plot near the field hut in the swidden and it is harvested each year along with the principal rice crop. Thereafter, the Old Mother Rice is stored above the rice harvest in the household granary suspended from the rafters of the roof of the granary or of the house if the granary is built on the inner verandah of the house. It serves several symbolic functions but the most important is the representation of the continuity of the rice crop or the annual succession of rice from its own seed cultivated in swiddens.

The planting ritual takes place at about mid-day when the work party stops planting for the meal provided by the owners of the swidden. Food offerings consisting of rice, chicken or pork stew and chilli relishes are wrapped in banana leaves by the head of the household or his wife who then give the bundles of food to the headman and elders. The offerings are taken to any of the tree stumps that dot the swidden and the ritual officiants squat down before the tree stumps. Here, they hold up the offerings and pray to the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land and other tutelary spirits of domains in an invocation similar, or identical, to the invocation which characterises the prayers of the Head Rite. The prayers said by the elders and headman are generally similar but variations in some details are not uncommon.

An example of the prayers said at this time is presented below. This particular prayer was recited by the head of the household (Chi’ of Hllb) who was also the ritual owner of the swidden.

Sa, delau Thi Koe’ca, Kau Koe’ca  O, descend Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land
Lords of the mountain tops, Lords of the mountain ridges

Lord of the headwaters of Pang Luang, Pang Luang stream

Mountain peaks, mountain ridges

Lord of Chiang Dao

Lord of the Shining Cliff

Lord of Mau Ngau

Lord of Mau Hau Ke

Eat your fill of the first rice, the first water
(literally, “head rice, head water”)

Here raised up; look down

Look after, watch over

(In) the morning of this day

(We) dibble the fallow swidden, tattoo the swidden

Make my rice beautiful

To the top of the swidden, the bottom of the swidden, (literally, “head of the swidden, steps of the swidden)

Eat till you are full

Eat till you are replete

The supplicant then makes a series of requests which are punctuated by invitations to the tutelary spirits to eat the food offerings. The requests are varied:

(Let me) be the lord of swidden rice the lord of rice granaries

Eating fully into the future

Look after, watch over each (domesticated) animal, each person

Bring back that which is good

Bring back that which is proper

Bring back the lordship of wealth

Bring back the lordship of things of power

(Ancient Lords, (?)Old Lords

(?)Ancient Lords, (?)Old Lords

(Let me) be again the lord of horses, the lord of elephants

Seeking, (let me) obtain that which is proper, (let me) obtain that which is right

204

Remaining Karen
Pghe, ba’ ta’a’ba’  Buying, (let me) receive that which is cheap
Cha, ba’ ta’a’xi’  Selling, (let me) receive that which is valuable

The prayer then ends with the standard formula for closing prayers addressed to the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land and the other tutelary spirits.

Cy’noe (toe)chi ba thau Na  (My) ten fingers are raised up in prayer to You (literally, “praying up to You)
Ba thau Na  Raised up in prayer to You
Sa.  “Amen”.

When the prayers end, the food offerings are then placed on the tree stumps and the ritual officiants return to the field hut where the work party commences on the mid-day meal.

In this particular prayer, there are only a few direct references to the rice that is being planted in the swidden and the plea for a bountiful harvest is condensed in the lines in which the supplicant asks to be “the lord of swidden rice, the lord of rice granaries”. In other versions of the prayer, some of the supplicatory requests directed at the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land and the other domain spirits are more elaborate in their references to the rice crop. There are, for instance, requests to the tutelary spirits to prevent felled trees from sliding down the slopes of swiddens and destroying the rice crop, or that a month’s work will bring rice for a year, and so on. The tutelary spirits may also be asked for a bountiful harvest in hyperbolic terms where the supplicant or ritual officiant requests that each stalk of rice be made as big as the trees of the Dipterocarp species. Requests for a successful harvest may also be expressed in terms of an invitation (or, more correctly, a declaration) where the spirits are said to “sit in the swidden” and “rise up in the granary”.

Aside from these differences in details, perhaps the most significant common feature in all prayers is the plea that the supplicants be owners (“lords”) of wealth which is described either directly (as in the prayer above) or in terms of “exchangeables”, “silver” (which is now also the term for the currency of Thailand), “bronze frog drums” and “horses and elephants” as stated in the foregoing prayer. Yet another characteristic feature of these prayers is the way in which these pleas for the “lordship” of swidden rice, granaries of rice and wealth in these various forms are framed in terms of a state, or condition, that comes into existence “again” (ke, literally, “return”). The state or condition therefore is expressed in an idiom of repetition or renewal.

For the Palokhi Karen and, indeed, most if not all Karen, the nineteenth century British Indian Empire silver rupees, silver ornaments made from these coins, elephants and bronze drums are wealth par excellence. They are also
symbols of wealth. However, while several households possess silver rupees, bracelets and earrings, none possesses elephants or bronze drums. Furthermore, as I have shown in the last chapter, only a few households achieve surpluses in rice cultivation and these surpluses are generally not traded or sold as a means of accumulating wealth. Thus, self-sufficiency or surplus production in agriculture does not generate wealth in any direct sense in Palokhi. Nor is rice seen as wealth per se. These references to wealth in its various forms, therefore, are of an entirely metaphorical order. What, then, underlies the pervasive occurrence of these metaphors for wealth?

The parallel juxtaposition of these metaphors following the references to “swidden rice” and “rice granaries” indicate that there is a relationship of metonymy between these metaphors and rice in swiddens and granaries. The metaphors in this relationship are, thus, expressions for increase and a bountiful harvest. But, if these condensed metaphors and metonyms represent a rich harvest and increase, they do not imply an absolute, progressive increase through time measured in terms of the agricultural calendar. The consistent use of the aoristic term ke in the constructions containing these metaphors points to a conceptualisation of the process of increase as an on-going, continuing one that repeats and renews itself.

I suggest, however, that there is also a sociological reality reflected in these metaphors which is masked by the ritual textual form that they take. The examples of household budgets in the last chapter demonstrate that it is the households which are self-sufficient in rice and which have rice surpluses that are also able to enjoy a better material standard of living. Their incomes and expenditures are much greater than that of other households. Furthermore, their varied expenditures are on non-subsistence commodities rather than rice. Most of them are also owners of buffaloes and cattle (see Appendix G). While it is true that these households do not indulge themselves in “conspicuous consumption”, the myriad little unintended indicators of their better-off position and the size of their harvests are, on the other hand, not lost on others. This self-sufficiency in rice and the greater ability to purchase non-subsistence commodities are directly influenced by the larger domestic supplies of labour of these households. This is an economic and sociological relationship which the Palokhi Karen are by no means entirely unaware of. The easy equation, however, is that households with bountiful harvests are also those which have a greater access to non-subsistence commodities and are, therefore, “wealthy”. It is this equation, I suggest, which lends these metaphors to the particular metonymical usage in the prayer. But, it also results in a certain misrepresentation, for the Palokhi Karen are unable to exegesise the meanings of these metaphors even in relation to “swidden rice” and “rice granaries” apart from saying that they are “similar” (laugha').
They also say that these expressions are integral to “old prayers” (thuphata loeploe) which they undoubtedly are (but see below). These metaphors as with those in other ritual texts are not deliberately, or consciously, constructed. They are used because they are traditional formulae and because they are culturally appropriate. Their employment in the prayer, therefore, must also be regarded as the product — in part or in whole — of a certain “miscognition”, in Bourdieu’s sense ([1977]; see also Acciaioli [1981]), of sociological reality. Nevertheless, it is possible that for some individuals there is a muted awareness of at least one aspect of this reality in the prayers they use. For, as the last dyadic set in the series of metaphors suggests, the generation of wealth is expressed in terms of “buying cheap and selling dear”. This is not typical of other similar prayers and it is, in fact, Chi’’s own formulation.

**Planting the Ritual Basket of the Yam (Chae’ Lau Nwae Tasae’)**

The rite called chae’ lau nwae tasae’ (literally, “tattooing down the ritual basket of the yam”) is performed at the end of the day when the work party has completed its task. It is a brief performance and the Palokhi Karen have virtually no explanation for the rite other than to say that it “makes the rice rise up” (ma thau by).

Nevertheless, this rite and the rite protecting swiddens (bghau hy’) when interpreted together (for reasons which I discuss later) are crucial for an understanding of how the agricultural process is conceived of in Palokhi Karen thought. They suggest that the symbolism of these two rites are expressions of the subliminal ideas and conceptual associations which make up what I called, in Chapter III, the procreative model of society in Palokhi, namely, the procreative roles of male and female, ritual heat and cooling, and the fecundation of land for cultivation.

The ritual owner first plants a yam tuber or a portion of it (of the species Dioscorea) in the ground next to a tree stump near the plot where the Old Mother Rice has been planted. A bamboo water vessel (thi toe) is next placed on the ground where the tuber was planted, and a long slim bamboo pole, split at its upper end, called a kra’ lau (“descending pole” or “descending stick”) is then placed in the water vessel with its upper end resting against a tree stump or on a forked stick. The bamboo pole is set in such way that it is oriented in the direction of the constellation Ursus Major (the Great Bear or Big Dipper) which is known to the Palokhi Karen as the “Elephant Stars” (Cha Koe’cau). When these preparations are completed, the ritual owner or head of the household pours water into the thi toe from another water vessel, saying as he does so:
O, rice, (I) do this for you so that (literally, "until") you become great, each of you becomes great.

O, rice, beautiful on each stalk, beautiful in each village.

Beautiful to the top of the swidden.

Beautiful to the bottom of the swidden.

As the water overflows from the thi toe, spilling on the ground, the members of the work party who have assembled around to watch the performance start shouting and hooting. As they do so, the ritual owner or head of the household splashes the water remaining in the water vessel that he is carrying over everyone. Usually, there are also men and women standing around with water vessels in hand waiting for this moment when they too then splash water over all those who are present.

The paucity of indigenous explanations for the performance of the ritual, the absence of myths which might suggest reasons for the role of yam in the ritual and the orientation of the kra’ lau in the direction of the Great Bear, as well as the brevity of the prayer which makes no mention of the yam all make it difficult to interpret the symbolic meanings of the performance when taken merely within the specific context of the rite itself. When, however, the rite is viewed in terms of the features and “idioms” of ritual performances recurrent in other rites, the meanings embedded in the rite become clear.

The purpose or function of the rite is by no means obscure. The prayer, for example, is clearly addressed to rice itself and it unambiguously expresses what is considered to be the desired outcome of the rite. This and the proximity of the material appurtenances of the ritual to the plot where the Old Mother Rice is planted indicate that the Palokhi Karen are, at one level at any rate, indeed correct in saying that the ritual is designed to facilitate the growth of rice or to “make the rice rise up”. In this respect, the ritual is consistent with the one performed at mid-day. The only difference is that in the mid-day ritual the conditions necessary for the successful growth of rice are obtained from the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land, whereas in this ritual rice is directly ministered to. The expressions in the prayer are, thus, “performatives”: but, they are not the most significant feature of the ritual.
Watering the Thi Toe and Kra’ Lau in the Rite of Planting the Ritual Basket of the Yam.
The distinctive feature of the ritual is the production of a cool state that is brought about by the use of water — quite apart from its obvious function in agriculture — as a cooling medium for the successful cultivation of rice. Although this is not mentioned in the prayer, the ritual sequel that protects swiddens is wholly unambiguous on the necessity for this cool state. The use of water in this context, thus, possesses the same order of symbolic meaning as the showering of water on people and the application of lustral water on newly-married couples during marriage rites, as well as the lustrations to the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land in the Head Rite. In all these cases, cooling is related to the creation of auspicious conditions. However, as I argued in Chapter III, cooling is none other than the management of “ritual heat” associated with the union of procreative males and females. In what sense, then, is “ritual heat” present in this rite?

The answer lies in the symbolism of the kra' lau and thi toe. Although there are no means of ascertaining the significance of the Elephant Stars (for the Palokhi Karen have no explanation or myth which would account for their role), the name of the kra’ lau itself — descending pole or stick — is an important indication of the primary symbolism in the rite. It suggests that the kra’ lau is oriented from the Elephant Stars towards or, more precisely, into the thi toe. When viewed in these terms, the imagery of the kra’ lau and thi toe becomes transparent. They are an iconic representation of the quintessential conjunction of male and female in procreative mode, that is, sexual intercourse. And the heat that is implicitly managed in this rite is, thus, derived from this symbolic conjunction. Accordingly, the use of water takes on an added significance: it is as much a medium of cooling as it is a medium by which the fecundating properties of this iconic union are transferred to land. The rite therefore may well be regarded as a “fertility” or, more aptly, a fertilising rite. This, moreover, would explain why the rite is conducted when it is — after the rice has been planted in the swidden at which time the growth potential of rice may then be activated.

It is, however, more difficult to determine the significance of the yam in the rite. In the absence of Palokhi Karen explanations, myths and other ritual uses of yam which might inform an analysis of the role of the tuber in the rite, I therefore propose a deductive, rather than an inductive, interpretation.

In the context of the performance of the ritual, only two kinds of crops are planted which are directly relevant to the performance: rice and yam. Rice, as the term for the crop grown for ritual purposes (“Old Mother Rice”) indicates, is “female”. Given the primary symbolism of the rite in which male and female are conjoined, I would suggest that the yam is “male”, representing the complementary, botanic “sex” (or “gender”) category of rice.
It is important to note that the symbolism of the ritual is based on a logic of human sexual difference. It will also be recalled that when the Palokhi Karen wish to make their fruit trees (for example, papaya) bear fruit, they tie the skirts of married women to these trees. These are applications of conceptual associations derived from the human domain to the botanic domain. Although the Palokhi Karen may be aware of the fact of sexual dimorphism in certain plants (of which papaya is one), I have no reason to believe that this fact occupies an important place in their schemata of cognition beyond the attribution of female gender to rice which is, in any case, an extrapolation from the human domain. It is, on the contrary, human sexual difference that is important in the schemata of cognition of the Palokhi Karen. The point to note is that this difference and related processes in the human domain provide a model for processes in cultivated crops. The validity of this model in Palokhi — the procreative model of society extended to the cultivation of crops — is based, as we have seen in various other contexts, on a similarity and contiguity between the human and the botanic which is established through relationships of equivalence such as homology and analogy. In general belief and in the particular context of the rite of planting the ritual basket of the yam, “female” rice is such a relationship of equivalence. Given the primary symbolism of the rite and the logic of equivalences which guides the botanic extensions of the model of human society and processes, “male” yam therefore must be the other relationship of equivalence.

**Drinking the Liquor of the Rice Seed (‘Au’ Si’ By Chae’ Khli)**

The rite known as “drinking the liquor of the rice seed” is performed in the village but it is not a village-wide ritual. It is performed on a household basis with the headman and elders as officiants. The ritual consists of making offerings of rice liquor which, in theory, is made from the seed left over from planting. The left-over seed is often insufficient for making the liquor that is required (which is usually about three 750 ml beer bottles) and so it has to be supplemented with rice from the granary. In some cases, there may in fact be no left-over rice seed and the liquor is therefore made entirely from rice drawn from the granary. Depending on when and how long it takes to make the liquor, the rite may be held any time between two to three weeks from planting. When the liquor is ready, a day is set for the ritual which is held after the household has had its evening meal. It is usual for the household to invite other household members to attend.

The structure of the ritual is the same as that part of the Head Rite which is held in the headman’s house. The symbolic meaning of the rite is essentially similar, namely, the expression of the communality of the village. There is, however, one important difference: the rite also expresses at the same time the autonomy of the household as a domestic unit of production because it is
primarily a household ritual performed for the benefit of the household and its crop of rice. This is a concern that is fully expressed in the prayers that are said in the rite.

The use of left-over rice seed to make the liquor is also worth noting. It is a feature which appears in another ritual held later in the year called “drinking the lees of the threshing mat”. The seed is rice which was put aside for planting and hence reserved for a specific purpose other than domestic consumption. What remains of the seed after planting (in actual practice or theory) is not returned for general consumption. Instead, it is consumed as Liquor in a performance which is part of a set of planting rituals. The seed, therefore, serves of a symbolic function appropriate only to a particular phase in the agricultural cycle. The ritual consumption of the left-over rice seed, thus, represents its total utilisation and marks the end of the planting season.

I present below an example of the kinds of prayers offered on behalf of households by the headman and elders. The prayer was recited by Su Ghau (H4) in his brother-in-law’s house.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Karen Text</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sa, koecoe ‘a’ Koe’ca, koelo ‘a’ Koe’ca</td>
<td>O, Lords of the mountain tops, Lords of the mountain ridges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phinja’i ‘a’ Koe’ca, Phinjapho ‘a’ Koe’ca</td>
<td>Lady Phinja’i, Lady Phinjapho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tewabu’, Tewada’ ‘a’ Koe’ca</td>
<td>Celestial Lords and Ladies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land of Palokhi and other tutelary spirits are not explicitly invoked in these opening lines, it is understood that they are being called upon in the first line of the prayer. The spirits or deities addressed in the following lines occur frequently in Palokhi Karen ritual texts but the Palokhi Karen are vague about the nature of these spirits or deities. While most of them are agreed on the fact that Phinja’i-Phinjapho is female and that she resides in the sky watching over the rice crop, some however say that Phinja’i and Phinjapho are two entities. The Palokhi Karen are equally vague about Tewabu’-Tewada’, but they are clearly devata borrowed from the pantheon of Northern Thai Buddhism and, indeed, some Palokhi Karen admit as much. After invoking these various spirits or deities, the officiant continues with a series of requests on behalf of the household prefaced by a specific reference to his brother-in-law.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Karen Text</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘I, pyde, ‘au by chae’ kho, by chae’ khli</td>
<td>This, my wife’s younger brother drinks the head of the rice seed, (the liquor of) the rice seed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My cha ‘i, my ghe, la twae</td>
<td>This day, the sun is beautiful, the moon is bright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line</td>
<td>Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He lau ‘au by chae’ kho, by chae’ khli</td>
<td>(We) place down for drinking the head of the rice seed, (the liquor of) the rice seed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tho lau hy’, pghe lau hy’</td>
<td>(We have) planted the swidden, (We have) filled the swidden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pghe lau by, pghe lau me</td>
<td>Filled with rice, filled with cooked rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma he lau ‘a’ ‘au’ ba’, ‘au ba’</td>
<td>Bestow fullness in eating, fullness in drinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Au’ ku’, ‘au’ pghe</td>
<td>Eating replete, eating full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Au’choe, mae’ pghe</td>
<td>Eating sweetly, full of face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kau’ dy, kau’ ghe</td>
<td>Each animal, each person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poe’ ‘au’ me kho pha’ thau</td>
<td>We eat the first rice that is raised up (to you)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poe’ ‘au thi kho khwae’ lau</td>
<td>We drink the first water that is libated down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma he loe’ ‘a’ ghe</td>
<td>Bestow all that is good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma he loe’ ‘a’ gwa</td>
<td>Bestow all that is pure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma he loe’ ‘a’ ‘au’ ba’, ‘au ba’</td>
<td>Bestow fullness in eating, fullness in drinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The prayer then continues with direct requests for blessings on the rice crop, some of which are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ghe ‘a’ si’so, ‘a’ la ‘ae’</td>
<td>Beautiful be the (rice) sap, the spreading leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghe ‘a’ nju’ pu</td>
<td>Beautiful within (the swidden)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghe chghae’ bo, ghe kau’ bo</td>
<td>Beautiful be every stem, Beautiful be each stem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghe kau’ zi</td>
<td>Beautiful in each village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghe ty kho, ghe ty xau</td>
<td>Beautiful to the top, Beautiful to the bottom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghe</td>
<td>Beautiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Si toe’ lau xau, si toe lau xoe</td>
<td>So that (the rice) does not dwindle (literally, “descend the steps”), So that (the rice) does not diminish (literally, “descend to the bottom”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma he ‘a’ su ba’, ‘a’ sa ba’</td>
<td>Make sure the livers, make sure the grains(^{13})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘A’ thu ghe, ‘a’ dau’ ghe</td>
<td>(Make sure) the shoots are beautiful, (Make sure all) together are beautiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chghae’ tatoe’ghe, Chghae’ tatoe’gwa</td>
<td>Disperse that which is not good, Disperse that which is not pure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chghae’ toe, chghae’ plau</td>
<td>Disperse the ants, disperse (?) pests</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Disperse the ant grubs, disperse blights (literally, “afflictions”)

Disperse the nightmares, disperse that which brings down light hearts

The Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land and the other spirits and deities are also asked to “watch over well, watch over purely” so that “our hands are not struck by knives, our feet are not tripped” and so on.

In the concluding section of the prayer, the ritual officiant re-iterates some of the requests contained in the prayers recited during planting.

(Let us) be lords of swidden rice
(Let us) be lords of rice granaries
(Let us) be lords of wealth (literally, “exchangeables”)
(Let us) be lords of riches

**The Rite of Protection**

**The Protection of Swiddens (Bghau Hy’)**

After the rites of planting, there are no further ritual activities until August when the rice crop has reached a height of approximately one metre and when rice grains begin to appear. When this happens, it is time to perform the rite that protects swiddens. This is individually held by households and does not require the presence of the headman or elders in Palokhi. It is performed by the head of the household.

The ritual has three purposes: first, to make an offering to pests and crop diseases in order to send them away; second, to induce a cool state in the swidden crop and household members; third, to make an offering to the rice itself so as to encourage its growth and maturation. In analytical terms, however, the overriding significance of the rite is the symbolism which it shares with the rite of planting the ritual basket of the yam and which it elaborates upon. The elaboration of this symbolism is based on logical extensions of the underlying processes reflected in the conceptual associations common to both rites. It is for these reasons that the analysis and interpretation of the meanings of the planting of the ritual basket of the yam and the protection of swiddens require the two to be taken together.

The description and discussion of the bghau hy’ rite that follows is based on a performance in the swidden of the headman, Tamu’. It was conducted by Tamu’ and his son-in-law, Gwa, who was the ritual owner of the swidden. Gwa prepared the various objects required for the ritual and made the chicken sacrifices integral to it while Tamu’ confined himself to saying the accompanying
prayers because Gwa was not, as yet, proficient in them. The ritual is performed at mid-day after the preparation of the objects.

The first of these objects or items is an “altar” or “shrine” called tatoemau’ (see also Marshall 1922:78–9). This is sometimes described as the “house of the Old Mother Rice” (By Mo Pgha ’a’ doe’) but the term tatoemau’ itself means, literally, “thing of the one bowl”. It is a very simple bamboo structure consisting of a small platform raised on four posts with a ladder leading up to the platform from the ground. Like all Palokhi houses (and, indeed, Northern Thai rural houses), the ladder has an odd number of rungs, usually five or seven. The ladder is for the rice souls (by koela) to ascend to the platform to partake of the offerings that will be made to the rice. The house of the Old Mother rice is erected in the small plot in the swidden where the Old Mother Rice is planted.

The second item which is also made for the first stage of the rite is the ritual basket (tasae’) to replace the weather-worn one which was made earlier in the year for the planting ritual.

The third item consists of three articles which are collectively known as the toemau’ (“one bowl”) from which the “altar” or “shrine” derives its name. This consists of a small bamboo cup (tapolo’), a small stick “stirrer” placed inside the cup (mau’ bo, “stick of the bowl”) and a stylised plant made from bamboo (nade’ chu, literally, “nostril hairs”) which is also placed in the cup. The cup is filled with rice liquor if this is available; otherwise, some rice chaff (which is used to make the yeast necessary for the production of liquor) is used instead.
Figure 6.2 The Toemau'

Overall height approximately 11 cm.
The Toemau’ on the Platform of the Tatoemau or “House of the ‘Old Mother Rice’”. The “house” is being prepared by Gwa. N the nade’ chu (“nostril hairs”) in the tapolo’ or bamboo cup. mau’bo or “stick stirrer” has not yet been placed in the cup.
The ritual commences with an offering of a chicken (male or female) to the various elements which are believed to be a danger to the rice crop. The offering is made at the *tasae’*, the ritual basket into which these elements are collected and appeased. The prayer which accompanies the killing of the chicken begins with a line that, in fact, is addressed to rice.

By ‘oe, ma na ba’ takoe’e’, takoetau O rice, (I) do this so that you will receive that which is for you, that which protects you

This is followed by two lines which describe in dense metaphors all the ill-omens which portend disaster or calamity.

Li chi lau, cau’gwa hau poe “y’ The squirrel’s urine falls, the crow cries in pain
Tho soepghau ni, taho kau’ The ill-omened bird ([?]ruddy ring dove) laughs, the barking deer calls out

This is a list of what the Palokhi Karen believe are illomens that foretell disaster. They will not, for example, embark on a hunt if any of these signs are encountered. In this prayer, however, these portents serve to describe metaphorically the critical period in the growth of rice when the rice is thought to be vulnerable to the predations of pests, crop diseases and the elements.

The next part of the prayer elaborates on the preceding lines by describing what is being done to protect the rice, that is, the collection of the various dangers to the rice crop into the ritual basket.

*Sae’ xy’ tatoe’ghe*  The basket seeks that which is not good
*Sae’ xy’ tatoe’gwa*  The basket seeks that which is not pure
*Sae’ xy’ tho soepghau ni, taho kau’*  The basket seeks the ill-omened bird that laughs, the barking deer that calls out
*Sae’ xy’ ta’a’ble*  The basket seeks that which is slippery
*Ta’a’ple’, ta’a’chgha*  That which is pointed, that which tramples
*Sae’ xy’ pgha ku’, pghakoe’njau ’a’*  The basket seeks the people who cough, the human beings who are slippery

At this point, the throat of the chicken is slit and rubbed all over the ritual basket in order to smear it with the blood of the fowl. The prayer continues as this is done.

Li chi lau, the soepghau ni The squirrel’s urine falls, the ill-omened bird laughs
At the end of the prayer, feathers are torn from the chicken and stuck on the blood smears on the ritual basket.

This prayer, like most Palokhi Karen prayers, consists of metaphors built around a simple theme which, in this case, is the containment of all that may endanger the rice crop. The most noteworthy feature of the prayer, however, is the recurrent references to “things that are slippery” (ta’a’ble). These references are based primarily on the idea that women who have just given birth, and new-born babies, are in a “slippery” condition. Slipperiness, however, is not merely descriptive of the physical condition of women and new-born babies; it also describes a general state that is believed to affect the whole community at childbirth. The Palokhi Karen have, for example, a prohibition on work outside the village on the day when a birth occurs. The reason for this prohibition, they say, is that if they do so, untoward consequences would result either for the mother and infant or for those who work outside the village. The belief and prohibition, quite evidently demonstrate that childbirth is a matter of concern to the community as a whole. In principle, it is similar to the belief that “crooked unions” would result in calamity and the destruction of rice crops for the whole community: the underlying logic of the two beliefs are similar in that the consequences of breaches of these prohibitions are transitive.

What is significant about the two beliefs and their associated prohibitions, it must be emphasised, is that both link cultural definitions of reproductive processes to the cultivation of crops, as well as the relations between individuals involved in such processes and the entire community. In the context of the rite of protection, the association between childbirth and the state of the rice crop...
at this stage of the swidden cycle possesses, as I shall show, a very specific significance.

However, it may be noted here that apart from the illomens which are mentioned, the image of the dangers that threaten the rice growing in swiddens is also evoked through the primary meanings attaching to the idea of a slippery state that comes about at childbirth. These meanings are further extended to fructivorous animals such as rats, squirrels, birds and so on, and also to people. There is no special significance to the term “coughing people” which is, here, an extension in the imagery of “slippery people” who are thought to be people who may steal the rice crop as well as those who through their “slippery” condition may bring about untoward consequences to the crop. The significance of the other referents in the prayer are less obscure and have to do with actual conditions which represent a destroyed crop, for example the trampling of the rice by feral pigs, deer, and so forth, and the crushing of the crop by the slipping of the charred remains of felled trees, and so on. The containment of “not eating to fullness, not drinking to fullness” is, of course, an alternative expression of the wish or desire that the year’s harvest will be sufficient for the needs of the household.

The next stage of the ritual consists of two parts. The first part is the induction of a cool state in the swidden crops and members of the household. This is yet another expression of the belief — central to the Head Rite, marriage, “crooked unions” and the rite of planting — that a cool state is essential for the successful growth of rice and other swidden crops. The second part of the ritual follows from the first and consists of encouraging the growth of rice. In this stage of the ritual, a hen is offered to the Old Mother Rice. The choice of a hen clearly indicates the essential feminine nature of rice through a concordance of sex categories. It is a further example of how in certain ritual performances (of which the ‘au’ ma xae ritual is one), the Palokhi Karen maintain distinctions in gender through the sex of chickens that are used in these performances.

The first part of this stage of the ritual entails a prayer that is addressed to fire which is propitiated in order to achieve the cool state that is necessary. As only one chicken is offered (that is to say, the chicken for the Old Mother Rice), it may be asked why the Palokhi Karen do not also make an offering to fire. The reason is that they do not necessarily conceive of fire as an entity in the same category as the Old Mother Rice and other tutelary spirits. The reference to fire is, in point of fact, part of the ritual language which is for all practical purposes a verbal ritual, as a performative, designed to induce the cool state that is regarded as being so crucial for the growth of rice and swidden crops. The prayer goes as follows:
O fire, I use and feed you, I send and feed you
Charring has eaten the knife cuts (that is, in the wood), the axe cuts (in the wood)
Propitiating you (so that) you go back
The glowing eats you till you are cool
Propitiating you till you are cool, propitiating (and) affecting you
Cooling together the rice, cooling together the unhusked rice
Cooling together that which is planted, cooling together that which is hoed
Cooling together the chillies, cooling together the brinjals
Cooling everything, cooling all
Cooling together myself, cooling together (?)thus
Cooling together my woman, wife
Daughter, son
Son-in-law, daughter-in-law
Grandchildren
Cooling everyone, cooling all
So that none are affected by heat, so that none are affected by redness

The prayer continues in this vein in a highly repetitive manner. The single, dominant theme here is very clearly the creation of a cool state. It is extremely significant, however, that the induction of this state that is so necessary for the successful growth of crops also entails cooling all the members of the household who are carefully identified in the prayer. The identification of the household, or domestic group, with the crops that it cultivates which underlies the practice of the ritual ownership of swiddens is, thus, expressed here in a different form. At the same time, the identification of household members individually recalls the manner in which they are similarly referred to in 'au ma xae prayers where they are also associated with subsistence activities. The almost litanical form of these references in prayers from quite different ritual contexts is a clear confirmation of the strength and pervasiveness of the associations that they express and establish simultaneously.

At the end of the prayer, the next part of the ritual begins with a prayer addressed to rice. The opening lines of this prayer are:
By ‘oe, toemau’ ghe na, toemau’ gwa  O rice, the toemau’ beautifies you, the
toemau’ purifies you
Toemau’ siso, toemau’ la ‘ae ‘au’  The sap of the toemau’, the spreading
ghe na  leaves of the toemau’ eat well for you

These lines are difficult to translate but they are crucial to an understanding of
the significance of the toemau’ in the ritual. The use of ghe (“good”, “beautiful”)
and gwa (“white”, “pure”) is, of course, a common feature of Palokhi ritual
language. As we have seen from the Head Rite, they stand together for a state
that is auspicious and harmonious. What is interesting in the first line, however,
is its syntax in which the adjectives ghe and gwa are used as verbs in order to
represent the transference of attributes from the toemau’ onto rice. Adjectival
verbs are not uncommon in Sgaw Karen and, for that matter, in other Karen
dialects. Here, however, they are used with particular effect. While the English
terms “beautify” and “purify” may seem adequate enough, nevertheless, they
do not quite convey the sense of the Karen. The construction of the Karen
suggests rather more. The verbalisation of the adjectives ghe and gwa in this
context carries with it a sense of “becoming” and “being for” or “being unto”,
so that the overall meaning of the line also contains the suggestion of a
transference of the attributes denoted by the adjectives.

The symbolic function of the toemau’, suggested by these adjectival verbs,
becomes more apparent in the next line. The reference to the “spreading leaves”
of the toemau’ has to do, in fact, with the exaggerated, stylised leaves of the
bamboo plant (na’de chu) placed within the cup (tapolo’). The “sap” of the
toemau’, on the other hand, refers to the rice liquor, or the substitute rice chaff,
which is also placed within the cup. At the heart of this reference to the “sap”
of the toemau’ are images and metaphors which are derived from the process
of making rice liquor. The yeast which is made from rice chaff and flour that is
necessary for the production of rice liquor, if it is well made, and the successful
fermentation of the liquor, for example, are both invariably described as having
“risen well” (thau ghe). It is an expression which is also used to describe the
successful growth of the rice crop. It may be noted also that in this second line
the transference of the properties of the toemau’ onto rice are expressed in an
idiom of consumption, that is, eating. It is yet again a further indication of the
importance of the idiom in representing structural relations in symbolic form
which, as we have seen, occurs elsewhere in ‘au’ ma xae, the Head Rite, and
day-to-day patterns of commensalism.

The rest of the prayer enlarges on the theme established in these first two
lines.

Ma noe’ chu than, ma noe’ sa thau  Making your leaves (literally, “hairs”) rise,
making your panicles (literally, “fruit”) rise
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Text</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toemau’ ghe na, toemau’ gwa na</td>
<td>The toemau’ beautifies you, the toemau’ purifies you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha’ ke, chae’ pha’, ha’ ke ‘au’ loe’ ghe</td>
<td>Return, (and be) stored, return and eat well of everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma noe’ su ghe, ma noe’ sa ghe</td>
<td>Making your livers beautiful, making your panicles beautiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma noe’ chu thau, ma noe’ sa thau</td>
<td>Making your leaves rise, making your panicles rise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma noe’ chu cha’, noe’ sa cha’</td>
<td>Making your leaves full, making your panicles full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toemau’ siso, toemau’ la ‘ae’ ‘au’ loe’ ghe na</td>
<td>The sap of the toemau’, the spreading leaves of the toemau’ eats well of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>everything for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siso ‘au’ ghe, la ‘ae’ ‘au’ ghe</td>
<td>The sap eats well, the spreading leaves eat well</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the end of the prayer, the throat of the chicken is slit and its blood is smeared on the ladder, posts and platform of the “house of the Old Mother Rice”, after which feathers are stuck onto the blood smears.

The two chickens are then cleaned, dressed and cooked in the field hut. Next, small pieces are taken from the extremities of the chickens, namely, the wing tips, the claws and tails which stand for the whole chickens, and these are wrapped up with some rice in banana leaves. These food offerings are placed on the platform of the shrine. A brief prayer, similar to the one above, is recited as this is done. Thereafter, the ritual officiants and other members of the household may proceed to eat.

The last stage of the ritual is relatively simple and involves the making and setting of three apotropaic devices within the plot where the Old Mother Rice is planted and another at the beginning of the path leading from the boundary of the swidden to the field hut.

The symbolism of these devices is, at a certain level, readily apparent. With one exception, they represent weapons of one kind or another. The three instruments set in the plot of the Old Mother Rice are the “elephant spears” (*bau koe’cau*), the “throat squeezers” or “throat chokers” (*tathi’khau’*) and the “anus eater” (*ta’au’khi*). The “elephant spears” are three long, sharpened bamboo sticks placed in the ground equidistant from one another and bound roughly two-thirds of their lengths from the ends implanted in the ground. The “throat squeezers” are two bamboo poles which are split in two at their upper ends. They are stuck in the ground facing each other and the split ends are brought together around a short bamboo staff which is set into the soil mid-way between the bases of the “throat squeezers”. The “anus eater” is a single bamboo pole split four ways almost to the base which is pushed into the ground. The four
quarters of the upper portion are then bent over backwards and forced into the earth.

In Palokhi, there are two interpretations of the meaning of the “anus eater” which is the only device that does not resemble a weapon. The first view is that it represents a gaping mouth, much like the mouth of a trap, and if it encounters intruders (in a metaphorical sense), then the four arms of the “anus eater” spring back trapping the intruders. The other view is that the “anus eater” symbolises the fate that would befall intruders, that is, their anuses would be split four ways.

I suggest, however, that there is a deeper symbolism running through the assemblage of apotropaic devices than that which is ostensibly portrayed by the apparent shapes of these devices. While the “elephant spears” do, indeed, suggest the symbolic impalement of intruders, pests, and so on, the “throat squeezers” and “anus eater” symbolise perhaps rather more which, quite conceivably, is related to the idioms of consumption that are a consistent and recurrent feature of Palokhi rituals. Both devices have, as their foci, the extremities of the alimentary canal and their “manifest” symbolic functions are to effect a dysfunctioning of these extremities in a general sense. Accordingly, the protection offered by these apotropaic devices would therefore be no other than that which is founded upon a latent image of non-functioning or “closed” alimentary canals in predators. It is an image which would be wholly consistent with a perception of such predators as competitors in the consumption of rice. In the rite called “wrist-tying at the reaping of rice” (which I discuss later [pp. 408–13]), for example, the rice souls are called upon to return from “within the throats of rats”.

The Symbolism of the Toemau’ Reconsidered

The significance of the toemau’ is worth a reconsideration at this stage. It is clear that the ritual and the use of the toemau’ conform closely to the patterns in ritual described by Tambiah. There is undoubtedly an exploitation of the expressive properties of language, the sensory qualities of objects and the instrumental properties of action simultaneously, based on the principles of similarity and contiguity.

The purpose of the ritual is, at one level, obvious as the contents of the prayer indicate and it is none other than what the Palokhi Karen profess it to be: the nurturing and successful growth of the rice crop through the containment of various dangers and the creation of a cool state. What is not entirely obvious, however, is the totality of the symbolism of the toemau’ in the context of the ritual and its structural position as a sequel to the rites of planting, within the larger context of swidden rites. There is only one indication of this and it concerns the “spreading leaves” and “sap” of the toemau’. These are clearly
references to the stylised plant and liquor or chaff placed within the bamboo cup. Yet, it is the toemau’ that is referred to rather than the stylised plant which is the key symbol that designates the physical state desired in the rice crop. This suggests that the symbolic plant is insufficient for the expressive aspects of the prayer. Or, to put it another way, the state of growth in the rice crop is not merely symbolised by the bamboo plant but by the totality of objects which make up the toemau’ of which the plant is a constituent part.

If we consider the appearance of the toemau’ carefully, it becomes apparent that apart from the stylised plant, the essential imagery of the cup and stirrer (the tapolo’ and mau’ bo) is identical to that of the water container and descending pole (thi toe and kra’ lau) in the rite of planting the ritual basket of the yam. They are analogues of the same symbolic identity — produced by the image of a stick-in-a-container — the only difference being one of scale. The correspondence in imagery, its occurrence in the same general context of swidden rites, and its appearance in consecutively performed rituals argue against any arbitrary coincidence. I therefore suggest that the primary symbolism of the toemau’ is none other than that in the case of the thi toe and kra’ lau, that is, the conjunction of male and female in procreative mode.

Other than the difference in scale, which by no means reduces the significance of this primary symbolism, there is nonetheless one important difference — the inclusion of the stylised plant in the toemau’. If the symbolism is identical in both cases, then the inclusion of the stylised bamboo plant must represent an extension of the imagery or symbolism that lies at the core of both sets of ritual objects. Given the primary symbolism of both, the elaboration on the toemau’ becomes wholly apparent and, indeed, it is almost literal. For it is none other than the emergence and growth of rice “arising” from the conjunction of male and female in procreative mode symbolised by the stick that lies within the container. The toemau’, therefore, represents a logical development of the symbolism contained in the thi toe and kra’ lau central to the rites of planting.

The extended meaning of the toemau’ is borne out by a key feature of the prayer in the rite, namely, the references to “slipperiness” which are based on conditions associated with childbirth. They are not, then, merely metaphors for the dangers that threaten the rice crop; they are integral to the symbolic representation of the transition made by rice expressed by the transformation in meaning of the two sets of ritual objects, that is, from the thi toe and kra’ lau to the toemau’. In other words, the allusions to “slipperiness” reveal, at the same time, that after the rice seed has been planted, the rice plants have been “born” and have entered a stage of growth in which their protection becomes essential to ensure that they are brought to a state of fruition which is the overt concern of the rite of protection. These references are, thus, integral to the totality of symbolic representations contained in the rite which, in short, are
derived from a procreative model of society extended to the cultivation of rice in Palokhi.

The Rites of Harvesting

The rites of harvesting consist of a number of rites performed at different times as the season proceeds. It is not possible to deal with all the rites that are performed at this time and I shall, therefore, discuss only three. These are: “wrist-tying at the reaping of rice” (ky cy’ ku lau by); the “eating of the head rice” (’au’ by kho); and the final harvest celebration called the “descent of the land” (kau lau we) or the “rising of the New Year” (thau ni sau).

Wrist-Tying at the Reaping of Rice (Ki Cy’ Ku’ Lau By)

The wrist-tying ceremony is performed in the early morning of the first day of reaping, before the members of the household set out to work in their swidden. The ritual is very much a domestic one and its purpose is to call back the souls of all the members of the household back into their bodies and, as the term suggests, to bind the souls within the bodies of their respective owners.

The significance of the wrist-tying ceremony, which is performed again in the harvest season (on the first day of threshing and the second day of the New Year celebrations), cannot be fully appreciated without reference to the more important features of wrist-tying rituals in general. Ordinarily, wrist-tying rituals are only performed when a person is thought to be suffering from “soul loss” (ba’ kau’ koela)\(^{17}\). In such circumstances, a ritual specialist (soera) is called in to perform the ritual which requires the preparation of food to entice the wandering soul (or souls) back into the body of the person concerned. Divination is employed to determine whether or not the soul or souls, have returned. If the souls are deemed to have returned, the wrists of the patient are bound, followed by those of other members of the household. Thereafter, all the members of the household proceed to eat. It is clear that these rituals have as their purpose the re-establishment of the “integrity” or “corporateness” of body and souls. Here, we may note that the ritual is held when a person undergoes what is regarded to be a critical period, and that an important aspect of the symbolism in the ritual is commensalism which establishes the interrelatedness or “corporateness”, as it were, of all household members.

Both these features are integral to the rite of wrist-tying at the reaping of rice. There is, however, one important difference: the souls of rice are included in the ritual reflecting the close association between households and the rice that they cultivate, as well as a certain conception which likens rice to humans evident in the ritual ministrations that both receive. This may be seen in the prayer that is said in the ritual by the head of the household.

Koela ‘oe, O Souls
These opening lines are significant for they show that in the ceremony, at this stage of the agricultural season, the restoration of the “integrity” or “corporateness” of souls, bodies and rice, has a territorial aspect. That is, it is conceived of in the context of the land, or domain, which the community inhabits, and which identifies the community. The prayer continues with invitations to the souls of the members of the household to partake of the food which has been prepared for the ritual:

Ke kwa, ke poe’ chghi, poe’ hy’ Return and look, return to our fallow swidden, our swidden
Ha’ ke, ‘au’ me loe’ ‘a’ gwa, ‘au thi loe’ chghi Return, eat the all-white rice, drink the all-clear water
Tho nja loe’ ‘a’ so, chau nja loe’ ‘a’ so The fat meat of the bird, the fat meat of the chicken
Ha’ pgha thi toe’ ghe, pgha kau toe’ ghe To go the waters of (other) people is not good, the domains of (other) people is not good
By loe’ chi’ pu, by loe’ na pu The rice in the wet-rice fields, the rice in the padi fields
By ‘a’ lau chwi, by ‘a’ lau Zwa The rice crouches down (literally, “goes down like a dog”), the rice bows down (literally, “goes down before “Zwa”, the cosmogonic deity)

At the end of this call to the souls of family members, the head of the household next calls upon the souls of rice to return to the swidden. In this call, the rice is described as “rice of the thirty-three mothers”. Although the Palokhi Karen cultivate several varieties of rice in their swiddens, they certainly do not recognise thirty-three varieties in their ethno-botanical classificatory system. This particular reference is based on the belief that rice and humans are similar in the number of souls that they possess. As I noted in Chapter III (p. 105, n. 24), the number of souls attributed to humans does, in fact, vary from informant to informant. Thus, the actual number of souls credited to humans and rice is not nearly so important as the fact that rice is likened to humans in the ideology of religion and agriculture in Palokhi. It is this which gives the ritual of wrist-tying at the reaping of rice its particular significance.
Glutinous (rice) of the thirty-three mothers,

Return dense and compact, return within

Return full as a comb, returning and

filling the granary

The last line above deserves comment because of the wealth of the metaphors employed and its polysemous nature. Si phau literally means “comb” and it is used here to convey the image not merely of the number of rice souls that are being called upon to return, but also of the plenitude of rice in the swidden. Phau, in this context, means “granary”, but it is also the homophone of “flower” (the difference being a mid-tone and a low-falling tone). “Comb” and “flower” (si phau), however, many also mean “flowers in blossom” and, metaphorically, also “mistress” or “lover” in Sgaw Karen. What we find here, therefore, is a super-imposition of various metaphors producing highly evocative images simultaneously. The overall impression conveyed in this line is a combination of a call to the thirty-three rice souls which return in a seried rank like the teeth of a comb, and a plea to a mistress or lover, as well as a declaration of the fullness of rice in the swidden that will abundantly stock the household granary.

Having called upon the souls of household members and rice, the head of the household goes on to say:

Returning full in the fallow swidden,

This morning, I tie (your wrists at) your return, I call (for) your return

Return and remain dense and compact, return; return and remain (in) the fence, return

Souls of the thirty-three mothers

(Of) the three persons, the four persons

In the last two lines above, the head of the household refers simultaneously to the souls of rice and the four members of his family. Following from this, he next instructs the souls of the family members to collect the rice souls from wherever they have wandered or were taken by predators of the rice crop which, in the text that follows, are represented by rats.

Pull back dense and compact, pull back within the fence

The rice (from) within the throats of rats

Go and seek, return and eat
Return, return this morning
(remaining) all (of you) (remaining)
everyone (of you)

The prayer is highly repetitive. At the end of the prayer, the parents then take up the lengths of yarn which were earlier placed on the tray of food and proceed to bind the wrists of their children. No particular attention is given to birth order in the tying of wrists. When the wrists of all the children have been tied, the two parents then tie each others’ wrists. With the wrist-tying completed, all the members of the household proceed to eat the meal from the tray after which they then go to their swidden to commence reaping.

The Eating of the Head Rice (‘Au’ By Kho)

In Palokhi, the rice that is first reaped is early ripening rice. The Old Mother Rice is not, usually, early ripening rice so that the reaping of swiddens does not always commence with the reaping of the entire crop of the Old Mother rice. Nevertheless, a sheaf of the Old Mother Rice is usually harvested and stored in the rafters of the field hut until the entire harvest is brought back to the village at the end of the harvest season, at which time the Old Mother Rice is brought back and stored above the rice in the granary. For many Palokhi households, the rice that is reaped in the early stages of the harvest season is brought back for immediate consumption because by this time their stocks of rice from the previous year have been exhausted. For other more fortunate households, the rice that has been reaped is left, bound in sheaves, on the stubble for to stooking prior to threshing at a later stage. For all households, however, the rice that has been reaped for immediate consumption is treated as the “head rice” (by kho) or “first rice”.

The eating of the head rice takes place in the evening of a day that is deemed convenient for all members of the household, for it is important that all should be present for the rite. The ritual officiant is, significantly, the oldest married, or widowed, woman in the family. There are many levels at which the ritual may be interpreted. It is concerned, for example, with the process of converting rice into its edible form through the use of fire. This is apparent from the inclusion of the hearth and hearth-stones in the ritual which includes their propitiation. It is also concerned with the propitiation of rice itself for being eaten. At yet another level, it is also concerned with ensuring that rice is not lost in the process of preparing it for consumption. However, what is most important sociologically is the essentially female nature of the rite which marks it as a domestic rite through the idiom of processing and cooking rice, quite regardless of the minimal sexual division of labour in Palokhi. It is the only agricultural rite of significance that demands a female officiant and it expresses the ideological categorisation of men and women and their complementarity, in
agricultural production, through the mediation of a general opposition between the domestic and non-domestic domains.

On the evening of the ritual, a small portion of the “first rice” is set aside, unhusked, in a small bowl while the rest, sufficient for a meal for the household, is cooked in a pot. When the rice is cooked, the pot is placed near the hearth where the family normally takes its meals. Other accompaniments are also prepared and placed alongside the pot of rice. The ritual officiant then proceeds to make the preparations that are necessary for the ceremony. Three bananas are split lengthwise along their skins which are opened up to form a sort of container for the fruit inside. The bananas are then placed on the three hearth-stones in the fireplace as an offering to fire. There is no particular significance in the use of bananas because pieces of yam, tapioca or sweet potato may also be used. A fresh water crab is then cast onto the embers in the fire-place.

The ritual officiant then unravels a bunch of vines (called ki’ko), collected earlier in the day from the forest, and proceeds to garland the hearth posts with them. As she does so, she picks up a few grains of the unhusked “first rice”, a small handful of the cooked rice in the pot and plucks a leaf from the vines and chews on them. She also picks up small pieces of banana from the hearth-stones and breaks of a claw from the crab and chews on these as well. As she does this, she says the following prayer:

By loe’ hy’ Rice of the swidden
‘Au’ nau, ‘au’ ti na (I) eat you shared (with other things), (I) eat you mixed (with other things)
‘Au’ nau na dau’ by be’ hysa’ (I) eat you shared together with unhusked rice
‘Au’ nau na, ‘au’ ti na dau’ soedau’ (I) eat you shared, (I) eat you mixed with prawns
Si toe’ ‘y, si toe’ xau’ So that you do not rot, so that you do not (?) spoil
Si toe’ phi’, si toe’ pau’ So that you do not take offence, so that you do not (?)
Si toe’ wi, si toe’ wau So that you are not finished, so that you are not (?) exhausted

The prayer continues in this vein at considerable length. As she chews and recites the prayer, the ritual officiant also spits out some of the contents of her mouth onto the hearth and around the fireplace.

There are some variations to the otherwise repetitive, indeed redundant, nature of the verses. For example, the rice is told that “people do so (that is, the ritual) for the future, people eat thus for the future” to bring about a “rising” of the “eating to fullness, the drinking to fullness”. It is, significantly, also told
that “You are the father, you are the mother”. In the light of the distinction between procreativity and non-procreativity established by the systems of sex, gender and kin terms in Palokhi discussed in Chapter III, the conjunction of “father” and “mother” in this reference is clear: in the cognitive scheme that orders cultural categories, rice is treated as a reproductive entity alongside humans.

The ritual officiant continues to refill her mouth with more unhusked rice, cooked rice and so on, and next addresses the hearth directly.

Loechau soe’ phloe’
Me’u ‘i, pgha moe ‘au’ ‘au’ na, pgha soe’ ‘au’ na
Si toe’ phi, si toe’ pau’
Pgha ‘au’ ti na dau’ li’lu, noxae

(You) three hearth-stones
This fire, people use and feed you, people send and feed you
So that you do not take offence, so that you do not (?)
People eat you mixed with squirrels, flying squirrels

What is being expressed in the second and last line above are difficult to translate because of the polysemous nature of the term for “eat” in Palokhi, and as it is employed in these lines. The expression pgha moe ‘au’ na, for example, also means “people use you to eat” (that is, to prepare food). There is also the idea that fire — as it is used to prepare food or to burn off the fur of animals prior to cooking them — “eats” the food or animals. “Burning”, to give another example, is spoken of in terms of “fire eating” (me’u ‘au’) something. All of these ideas and associations present in these lines express the propitiation of fire and hearth, and the fact that they are regarded as co-eaters of human food. This is, thus, yet another example of the importance and power of idioms of eating, and their applications, in Palokhi.

Beyond the purpose of the ritual, in these two stages, obvious from the declarative sentences of intentionality in the prayer, it is possible to propose a further interpretation on the performance. They key feature is the mastication of food together with unhusked and husked rice. The food and rice, however, are not swallowed by the officiant. Instead, they are spat out around the hearth when it is propitiated, and again around the room later. A major theme in the prayer, however, is the shared eating of food with rice itself, fire, the hearth and “the doing of the steps, the doing of the xae” (see below), that is, the household and ‘au’ ma xae respectively. Accordingly, I suggest that the mastication by the ritual officiant is in fact the symbolic acting out of the consumption of food by rice, fire, the hearth and the domestic group at one and the same time.

After propitiating rice, fire and the hearth, the officiant chews some more rice and food and circumambulates the room. As she does so, she repeats the
prayer but this time, however, she spits out the contents of her mouth on the walls and corners of the room. There is a variation in the prayer which reveals still another aspect to the ritual.

Toe chau ‘o’, si pi’ ‘a’ lau    One mortarful (of unhusked rice) present, so a pip descends
Toe pi’ ‘o’, pi’ ‘a’ lau     One pip present, a pip descends

When she returns to the hearth, the officiant then proceeds to tie a ki’ko vine around the pot of rice, saying as she does so:

Ki nau noe’ khau, ki tau noe’ khau Tying your neck shared, tying your neck (slowly)
‘Au’ na dau’ de’ by, njari Eating you with padi field frogs, njari fish ([? mantis shrimp])
Dau’ mauli’, dau’ taswau With gibbons, with langurs
Dau’ tamaxau’, tamaxae — khaeloe’ With the household (literally, “the doing of the steps”), the doing of the xae (that is, performing the ‘au’ ma xae ritual) — everything
Si toe’ wi, si toe’ wau So that you are not finished, so that you are not (?)exhausted
Si toe’ phi, si toe’ pau’ So that you do not take offence, so that you do not (?)

At the end of this prayer, the ritual officiant or a married daughter takes a length of the ki’ko vine outside the house and binds the mortar in which rice is pounded to remove the husk. This is accompanied by a perfunctory prayer which acknowledges the use of the mortar and asks that one pip of husked rice be obtained from one pip of unhusked rice.

When this is done, rice from the pot containing the cooked “first rice” is spooned out onto two eating trays after which the women and girls of the family eat from one tray while the men and boys eat from the other.

That this is a pre-eminently domestic ritual is clear; but, where it differs from other domestic rituals marked by commensalism is the way in which it is almost entirely focused on the process of transforming unhusked rice into husked rice, cooking (indicated by the role of fire and the hearth), and the commensalism with food itself. Given the structural position of the rite in the cycle of agrarian rites and the cultivation of swiddens, that is, when the first of the harvest is brought back for consumption, the rite is undoubtedly concerned with marking the passage of swidden rice from its cultivated state to a state in which it may be domestically consumed.
Another important difference lies in the organisation of the familial commensalism that takes place at the end of the ritual, namely, the segregation of males and females during the eating of the “first rice” which is not present in other forms of commensalism, ritual or otherwise. The undoubtedly female nature of the ritual and its focus on the transformation of rice establishes all too clearly that the two are associated through a play on the process of preparing rice and cooking.

Cooking, as Davis observes (1984:176) in discussing the symbolic representations of the opposition between male and female among the Northern Thai, is perhaps the one proto-typical cultural activity almost universally associated with females. In Palokhi, however, there is only a minimal sexual division of labour and men actually do cook and, occasionally, pound rice. The rite of eating the first rice, therefore, does not assert or reflect the reality of social relations in this particular sense. What it expresses is the opposition and complementarity of the roles of female and male, as general cultural categories, through a ritual sexual division of labour resting on an implicit opposition between women and men, the domestic and non-domestic, and settlement and forest. It is a complementary opposition that is mediated by the symbolic transition of rice from its cultivated state to a domestically consumable one.

The Rites of the New Year (Lyta Thau Ni Sau)

The rites of the New Year, or the “rising of the New Year” (thau ni sau) as it is called in Palokhi, may be regarded in some senses as a harvest celebration but they are, in fact, rites which mark the passage from one agricultural cycle into the next and which are wholly oriented towards the new season. The New Year itself is also described by a complementary term: the “descent of the land” (kau lau wae). Both these expressions, as I showed in my discussion of the agricultural calendar in Palokhi, describe the succession of agricultural seasons and their constituent features according to natural or “organic” rhythms.

The rites of the “rising of the New Year”, or “descent of the land” consist of the following: “Soul calling at the descent of the land” (phau’ koela kau lau wae); “libations at the descent of the land” (khwae’ ta kau lau wae); and “wrist-tying at the descent of the land” (ki cy’ kau lau wae). All these rites may equally be described in terms of the “rising of the New Year” instead of the “descent of the land”.

An important condition on holding the rites of the New Year, however, is that all the households in the village must have performed their annual ‘au’ ma xae first. Many of the agrarian rites that are conducted in Palokhi are, as we have seen, the responsibility of individual households. This is what we might expect given the nature of domestic social organisation and the sociology of agricultural production in Palokhi. ‘Au’ ma xae, however, is a quintessentially
domestic ritual intimately related to the ideology of kinship and the sociology of domestic group formation and fission. Nevertheless, the position of ‘au’ ma xae in the annual cycle of ritual activities — that is, as a mandatory ritual precondition for the New Year rites — marks it, at least in this particular regard, as a proper calendrical ritual and, therefore, as an integral part of the cycle of agrarian rites in Palokhi. This is significant because it is one more example of how not only ritual performances but also their structural positions in the sequence of annual rites periodically affirm the identification of households with the process of agricultural production.

When all the households in Palokhi have conducted their ‘au’ ma xae rituals, and have made the rice liquor and other preparations necessary for the New Year rites, the headman decides upon two consecutive days when they are to be held. The soul calling and libations are held on the evening of the first day while the wrist-tying is held on the following morning.

In the evening of the first day, the oldest married or widowed woman of each household performs the soul calling ritual. Although men may perform the soul calling, it is usually women who do so in Palokhi. Each woman carries a sling bag, into which a live chicken is placed, and goes to all the tracks which begin at the boundaries of the village with a “beating stick” (nau phau’ kra’). The stick is an implement which is, characteristically, used in soul calling rituals. It is a slim bamboo stick, just under a metre in length. It is split four ways half way down its length and has three notches mid-way on the remaining half. Bits of food are placed in the notches to entice the souls of people to return. The stick is beaten on the ground such that it rattles because of the free split ends. It is this that gives the ritual its name of phau’ koela (literally, “soul beating”). The prayer that is said in the ritual and the beating of the nau phau’ kra’ are accompanied by graphic gestures of collecting the souls and placing them into the bag. Unlike the soul calling prayers said during harvest rites in which the souls of rice are called back as well, the prayer is directed only to the souls of household members.

The prayer below, recited by the wife of the headman, is an example of the kinds of soul calling prayers which feature in the rites of the New Year. It begins onomatopoeically with a call which is invariably used in soul calling prayers in general. It is also the call to chickens when they are fed.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Prr, phomy koela, ke} & \quad \text{Prr, souls of (my) daughter return} \\
\text{Phokhwa koela, ke} & \quad \text{Souls of (my) son(-in-law) return} \\
\text{Coe li koela, ke} & \quad \text{Souls of my grandchildren return} \\
\text{Coe li phau’my, coe li phau’khwa} & \quad \text{(Of) my granddaughter, (of) my grandson} \\
\text{Ke ‘o’ loe’ doe’, ‘o’ loe’ lau} & \quad \text{Return and remain in the house, remain at the sleeping mat}
\end{align*}
\]
‘O’ ply ‘a’ sau’ toe’ghe  To stay with the spirits of the dead is not good
‘O’ chghe ‘a’ sau’ toe’ghe  To stay with the ghosts of the dead is not good
Ke ‘o’ loe’ zi, ke ‘o’ loe’ xau  Return and remain in the village, return and remain at the house steps
Khoelau’ koewi, koela  Touching one another, all souls
Dau’ mo, dau’ pa  With mother, with father
Dau’ py, dau’ wae  With younger sister, with elder brother
Dau’ pho, dau’ li  With children, with grandchildren

The prayer continues in this fashion at considerable length. At the end of the prayer, the woman goes on to the next track and repeats the prayer until the ritual has been conducted at all the tracks beginning at the boundaries of the village. She then returns to the house where all the household members assemble and have their evening meal.

Although this ritual is designed to recall the souls of household members, similar to the wrist-tying rites at harvest time, there is one difference. In this case wrist-tying is not performed. It is a general recall of the souls in preparation for the wrist-tying ceremony which is performed on the next day after the family has eaten its first meal in the morning. It is worth noting also that the prayer is wholly unambiguous on the communality of household members which it expresses through the conjunctive dau’ which relates all the members of the household together, and through the description of the proximity, indeed contiguity, of souls. To put it another way, the ritual brings together the individual members of the household in all their totality and, thus, “consolidates” them for the transition into the new agricultural season.

When all the households have had their meal, the festivities begin with various people beating gongs, clashing cymbals and singing in the open near the headman’s house. This goes on until the headman calls in the Palokhi villagers for the “libations at the descent of the land” (khwae’ta kau lau wae) made to the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land and other tutelary spirits. The size of Palokhi houses makes it impossible for any house to accommodate all the people in the village and this is equally true for the headman’s house. For the “libations at the descent of the land”, what usually happens is that all the male heads of households congregate in the headman’s house while women and children stay outside. However, as with the Head Rite (the key features of which also distinguish this ritual), this is also a reflection of the fact that men dominate the ritual life of the community.

In the two New Year rites which I witnessed in 1981 (22–23 January) and 1982 (6–7 February), the serving of liquor during the “libations at the descent
of the land” were done by Nae’ Kha, the headman’s son. The customary practice in Palokhi is that it is the male head of the household, his son-in-law or, occasionally, an unmarried son who serves the liquor on ritual and social occasions. The deviation from this practice in the headman’s house, however, should be understood in the light of the prospective succession of Nae’ Kha to the headmanship of Palokhi. Headmanship and the Head Rite, as we have seen, require the maintenance of a certain continuity of relationship with the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land to ensure harmonious conditions for the on-going existence of the community. Nae’ Kha’s role in the “libations at the descent of the land” is, therefore, another aspect of the constitution of this continuity of ritual relationships integral to headmanship in Palokhi.

The organisation and structure of the “libations at the descent of the land” are identical to that of the Head Rite. Although the prayers are essentially similar in that they propitiate the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land and request his protection, they differ somewhat in their temporal orientations. Whereas the prayers of the Head Rite are concerned with maintaining the status quo with the spirit of the domain in the agricultural year that is in progress, the prayer in the New Year rite is markedly proleptic; it is emphatic about the approaching year and, indeed, a general future.

The following is a prayer made by Tamu’ the headman.

Sa, delau Thi Koe’ca, Kau Koe’ca
Palaukhi ‘a’ Koe’ca, Palauklo ‘a’ Koe’ca
Tado’, tapgha ‘a’ Koe’ca
Koe’ca, loe’ my, Koe’ca loe’ hau
Mycha ‘i, my ghe, la ghe
Sa’ lau ne loe’ my ghe, la ghe, ‘a’ sau ‘i
Ma sunja, ‘au’ sunja
Ma klae, ‘au’ ba do’
Ma sunja, ‘au’ ba do’
Ma ‘au’ chi’, ma ‘au’
Ma ‘au’ chghi, ma ‘au’ hy'
Ma sunja, ‘au’ sunja
Ma klae, ‘au’ ba do’

O descend Lord of the Water Lord of the Land
Lord of the headwaters of Pang Luang, Lord of Pang Luang
Lord of that which is great, Lord of that which is old
Lord in the mid-heavens, Lord of the earth
Today, the sun is beautiful, the moon is beautiful
(We) desire the sun to be beautiful, the moon to be beautiful, anew here
Working for the future, eating in the future
Working little, eating greatly
Working for the future, eating in the future
Cultivating (literally, “working to eat”) padi-fields, cultivating wet-rice fields
Cultivating fallow swiddens, cultivating swiddens
Working for the future, eating in the future
Working little, eating greatly
Ma ci’ (kae), ne ba’ ‘a’ Doing little, obtaining much
Sunja khaupa (In) the future continuously
Kae’ ba’ ke by koe’ca hy koe’ca (Let us) be again lords of rice, lords of
unhusked rice
Kae’ poe’na ‘a’ koe’ca (Let us) be lords of buffaloes
Kae’ tatau’ ‘a’ koe’ca (Let us) be lords of cattle
Kae’ thau’ ‘a’ koe’ca (Let us) be lords of pigs
Kae’ chau ‘a’ koe’ca (Let us) be lords of chickens
Cy’noe chi ba thau Na (Our) ten fingers are raised up in prayer to
you
Ghe loe’ Koe’ca ‘i, Koe’ca kwa It is beautiful here Lord, Lord look
Koe’ca kwa khaeloe’ kwa khaeche Lord watch over all, watch over everything
Kwa myna ty loe’ myche Watch over in the night till the dawn
Kwa mycha ty loe’ hamy watch over in the morning till the dusk
Ma he loe’ ‘a’ ‘au’, ba, ‘a’ ‘au ba Bestow fullness in eating, fullness in
drinking
Ma he loe’ ‘a’ ‘au’ ba dau’ zi, dau’ xau Bestow fullness in eating together (in all)
the villages, together at all the house-steps
Kwa khaeloe’ Watch over all
Kwa khaeloe’, kwa khaeche Watch over all, watch over everything
Kwa phodi’, kwa phosa Watch over those still young, watch over
the children
Kwa phau’my, kwa phau’khwa Watch over the women, watch over the
men

Later in the prayer, the tutelary spirit of the domain is specifically asked to
protect the village and house-holders from all that may endanger them. The
form in which this request is expressed makes it clear that the community and
its well-being are conceived of in terms of a solidarity and corporateness which
are defined by the physical boundaries of houses, the village, and the domain.

Kwa tacu’, kwa tacha Watch over the aches, watch over the pains
Kwa tatoe’ghe, kwa tatoe’gwa Watch over that which is not good, watch
over that which is not pure
Si’ toe’ thau loe’ doe’ So that they do not ascend to the houses
Si’ toe’ thau loe’ lau So that they do not ascend to the sleeping
mats
Toe’ ghe It is not good
Si’ toe’ hae thau zi So that they do not ascend to the village
Toe’ ghe It is not good
Si’ toe’ hae thau xau         So that they do not ascend to the
Toe’ ghe                   house-steps
Plae ke                     It is not good
Plae ke su my do’, kau lae   Divert them back
Divert them back to the great domain, the
large country
Su thi zi, su kau coe       To faraway waters, To distant domains
He loe’ ‘a’ chghae doe’, chghae lau
Bestow their dispersal from houses, their
dispersal from sleeping mats
He loe’ ‘a’ chghae zi, chghae xau
Bestow their dispersal from the village,
their dispersal from house-steps
‘O’ loe’, Koe’ca, ‘i        Remain, Lord, here
Koe’ca kwa khaeloe’, kwa khaechae Lord watch over all, watch over everything

The prayer continues in this manner and then ends with the standard formula
which closes all prayers to the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land and other
tutelary spirits.

Once the libations and prayers have been made in the headman’s house, the
headman and elders then proceed to the other houses to perform the ritual. This
may be done on the same night or on the following day depending on how much
time is left.

The “wrist-tying at the descent of the land” is performed on the following
morning. In contrast to the libations in the headman’s house of the previous
night, it is a domestic rite performed, in conjunction with the eating of the early
morning meal, by parents. It is similar to the wrist-tying rituals that I have
already described and its purpose is also the same. After the ceremony, other
people in the village are then invited to eat. As I noted in Chapter IV, this goes
on throughout the day with the Palokhi Karen moving from house to house to
eat and to drink the rice liquor which is also offered at the same time.

One notable feature of the festivities on the second day of the New Year rites
is the custom of displaying new married women’s skirts. This is done individually
by house-holds, usually after the wrist-tying ceremony. The skirts are taken
out and hung on bamboo poles which are the equivalent of clothes lines in
Palokhi. Alternatively, they may be hung on the railings of verandahs. The
overall effect is highly colourful, contributing to the festive air which
characterises the rites of the New Year.

The Palokhi Karen explain the custom by saying that it makes the village
look “beautiful” (ghe). This is undoubtedly true but, as we have seen, married
women’s skirts possess a very particular symbolic value in Palokhi. While their
red colour signifies a state of “procreativity”, a symbolic value which they share
with men’s shirts, their special application to fruit trees on the other hand singles
them out as a more powerful symbol of this state. Given the dominant symbolism of married women’s skirts, their use is entirely appropriate in the context of the New Year rites. Indeed, it is consistent with the general theme of the rites, that is, the consolidation of the community and renewal: the custom invokes the generative powers that are symbolised by married women’s skirts for the new agricultural year.

In this chapter, I have described several rituals within the corpus of annual agricultural rites in Palokhi, in order to illustrate their principal features and the particular forms in which language and symbolic activity are employed, to demonstrate their major importance in the religious life of the community, and to show more generally their significance in terms of the cultural ideology of the Palokhi Karen. These rituals are organised around ideas, concepts and categories which are key elements in the way that the Palokhi Karen conceive of agricultural production, especially swidden cultivation, and of their viability as a community. In the religious life of the Palokhi Karen, it is evident that both agricultural production and the existence of the community are treated as interrelated, on-going processes. At the heart of this ideological relationship lies what may best be regarded as a procreative model of society extended to agriculture.

ENDNOTES

1 In Palokhi, the cycle of wet-rice agricultural rituals is modelled on that of swiddens, but not in its entirety. It is based on a number of key rites such as the rites of planting, the rite of protection and some harvest rites which I discuss in this chapter. There are, in addition, some minor ritual practices which are borrowed from the Northern Thai but these do not provide the key symbolic motifs of the wet-rice ritual cycle. There are, however, two rites which are partly of Northern Thai provenance and they are important. These are, specifically, the rite of “propitiating the spirit of the dam” (known by the macaronic ly faaj) and the “wrist-tying of buffaloes” (ki’ cy’ poe’ na). Both are fitted in within the religious system of the Palokhi Karen in that the supreme spirit which is appeased, and appealed to, is the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land. Indeed, the cycle of wet-rice agricultural rituals is in fact articulated within the cycle of swidden rites. For example, although the rites of planting and protection must be performed in swiddens and wet-rice fields by households which have both, it is not unusual to find such households performing only harvest rites in swiddens because they deem it sufficient for both fields.

2 As I explain later, an important feature in ritual ownership is the health or “vitality” of the ritual owner. In Palokhi, most of the male heads of households have not reached an age, or are in a condition, where they might be regarded as having declined in health or “vitality”. Hence the fact that the ritual officiant and ritual owner are one and the same person.

3 Among the Sgaw Karen in Mae Sariang, however, this does not appear to be the case. Kunstadter reports that the ceremonial owner of the field is, often, a young child (male or female) who is selected by the family to be the owner of the field for a year. The rationale for this, according to Kunstadter, is that:

The Karen like to select a young field owner because of the probability that a young person has not been exposed to, nor has had a chance to offend the spirits as much as an older person. If the field is bountiful, its young ritual owner will continue in this role as long as his (or her) luck holds, or until he has children of his own to take the responsibility; but if he is unlucky, he may never again assume ritual responsibility for fear that his unsuccessful relationship with the spirits will be repeated. (1978:86).

4 In Palokhi, people were divided in opinion as to whether or not a former ritual owner could become one again. In practice, however, there was no instance of a person assuming the role again.
Remaining Karen

5 Divination with chicken bones has been widely reported for the Karen. However, the methods and criteria for ascertaining favourable or unfavourable prognostications vary. An alternative method of divination with chicken bones, among the Karen, is excellently described by (Marshall [1922:280–4]).

6 The term my, here, literally means “sun” and its use is based, of course, on the idea that clearing the forest canopy lets the sun in. However, perhaps because of this association, my may in fact be used as a metaphor for swiddens which is indeed the case in some other ritual texts. This sense of the term is also present in this line.

7 This distinction is also to be found in one of the very few general food taboos that the Palokhi Karen have. Despite their very eclectic diet, they have a dietary prohibition on rats which live in or around the village (see also Hinton [1975:127]). As this prohibition cannot be related to any other aspect of Palokhi Karen culture, the explanation for it must lie in the anomalous habits of these rats which are neither domesticated nor wild but forage in both domains. The prohibition, therefore, would be of the same order as that on the pangolin amongst the Lele which Douglas discusses (1957) or on the cat amongst the Northern Thai (Davis [1984:171]). This separation of domains among the Karen has also been noted by Madha (1980: 59–60) and Mischung (1980:26–7).

8 The Palokhi Karen do not have an elaborate cosmology. At any rate, they are unable to describe in any detail what might be regarded as a cosmological system. The only references to a cosmology occur in prayers such as this one, and in mortuary prayers in which the souls of deceased persons are instructed to go to the after-world (see also Mischung [1980:73–81]). The after-world is described symbolically in these prayers through the medium of a tree drawn out on the back of a winnowing tray with rice flour. A coin (a baht or sataang), which represents the souls of the dead person, is moved in various directions along the tree but the orientational references in the prayer are totally inverted. The base of the tree, for example, is spoken of as that of the top of the tree and vice versa. It is only from these references that we may infer something of the cosmology of the Palokhi Karen because the few myths that they possess offer no indication of a cosmology.

9 An indication of the pejorative associations attaching to the words for “crooked” and “crossed” is, of course, to be found in the way that the Palokhi Karen describe prohibited unions. It may also be seen in the way stubborn, obdurate adults and children are described: they are said to have “crooked ears” (na kɛ’).

10 Ha’sa is a Northern Thai term (haksaa) that has been used to form the dyadic complement of the Sgaw Karen koetau. The use of Northern Thai terms in Palokhi Karen ritual language is not uncommon as we have seen elsewhere. In this, Palokhi Karen ritual language displays a feature, amongst others, which is by no means uncommon. It is a characteristic of ritual languages distinguished by semantic parallelism, in multi-lingual or multi-dialectal contexts, as Fox (1971:234) has shown.

11 Pgho refers essentially to what is probably best regarded as “ritual power”. It may be applied to objects or to people and some animals such as elephants. Old or ancient objects, for example, may sometimes be said to have pgho especially if they possess ritual significance. Wild animals such as barking deer or wild boar which “cannot be killed” (ma si toe’ se), that is, which constantly elude hunters, may also sometimes be said to have pgho. Similarly, elephants of advanced age with a reputation for intelligence may also be spoken of as having pgho. However, the word is more appropriately used with respect to people especially ritual specialists (soera). Ritual specialists who are repeatedly successful in healing rituals, for example, are said to be “men of pgho”. Such men might well be described as possessing “charisma” in the Weberian sense of the term. In Palokhi, and indeed in the Mae Muang Luang-Huai Tung Choa area there was no person, animal or object that was recognised as such. A brief but interesting summary of the concept may be found in (Keyes [1977b:54]).

12 Quite apart from being symbols of wealth, elephants are wealth for the Karen (see, for example, Hinton [1975:134–5] and Kunstadter [1978:103–5]). Few Palokhi Karen have ever seen bronze frog drums but they are regarded, as in many if not all other Karen communities, as being quintessentially Karen (see also Cooler [1979]). They are, also, typically, objects which may be attributed with pgho. The identification with bronze drums is so strong that it forms the central motif of the coat-of-arms of the Karen National Union and Karen National Liberation Army, the separatist movement in Burma. In Palokhi, however, part of the value that is placed on such drums and rupees lies in the fact that they are seen to be old. This association is not overtly expressed but it may seen in the near-reverent way that the Palokhi Karen handle or admire such old objects. While it true to some extent that the value that is placed on these objects derives from their rarity, this does not explain the quasi-veneration accorded to them nor the belief that if they are sold or traded off, the result will be the destitution of the household. Some Palokhi households possess objects of no mean antiquity. The small assortment of objects include a bullet coin, a Bols genever clay bottle possibly dating back to late Ayuthian times, a
crude celadon covered jar of undoubtedly old provenance (Donald Gibson, pers. comm.) resembling primitive Northern Thai celadons, and a glass bead necklace similar to the Venetian glass beads extensively traded in parts of Southeast and East Asia via the Indian sub-continent.

13 In this line, the use of the term “livers” should be understood in the context of the term sa’, “fruit”, “grains” or “panicles”. Sa has the homophone sa’ which means “heart”. In ordinary speech, sa’ coupled with transitive verbs denotes reflexive action or action that involves oneself. So, here the desire for fullness in rice itself is conveyed by the partially explicit and partially implicit organic analogy that is being drawn.

14 Taka’ means “riches” or “wealth” in Sgaw Karen. Talae’, however, comes from the Northern Thai laek which means “to exchange”.

15 In describing a similar ritual in Burma, Marshall quotes part of a ritual text which goes as follows: “When the eagle flies, the crow is afraid. When the laughing bird laughs and the barking deer barks, let us not fear their bad omens” (1922:79). Despite the obvious differences, the similarities in this formula are striking. They do not merely suggest a common oral tradition among the Karen but a certain continuity through time and space as well. In Palokhi, the formula may sometimes be rendered as “the squirrel sits” (li chinâu). Marshall identifies the “laughing bird” as a species of the genus Lanius.


17 The expression literally means “having to call souls” or “being required to call souls”. “Soul calling” is also performed in cases of what is probably best described as “spirit invasion” or ba’ soeta which may be translated as “being required to do a sending”. This represents a more complex situation as intruding spirits must first be “sent” before the souls of the afflicted person may be “called” to return. In either case, the most important feature is the restoration of souls to bodies. More generally, it reflects conceptions of “self” or “person” in which the joint integrity of souls and bodies is an important feature.

18 Na, here, comes from the Northern Thai naa which means, of course, “padi-field” or “wet-rice field”.

19 This is one of the very few references in any context, in Palokhi, to the cosmogonic deity Zwa or Ywa which has been widely reported in the early literature on the Karen (see, for example, Cross [1853–54:300]; Mason [1861:97]; Marshall [1922:211–218]). While the Palokhi Karen appear to believe, very generally, in the existence of Zwa as a sort of high god there is no evidence in their day-to-day religious and ritual life to suggest that this belief occupies an important place in their religious system. Neither do they have myths about Zwa which the early Christian missionaries in Burma were so fond of recounting. For the Palokhi Karen, the most important figure in their religious system is the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land. It is interesting to note that the Zwa tradition of the Karen does not feature prominently in contemporary studies of the Karen, suggesting that its importance to the Karen may have been overplayed by Christian missionaries. As Keyes also points out in his analysis of the Zwa tradition (1977b:52), missionary accounts have tended to colour all subsequent interpretations of the tradition. The difference between “Ywa” and “Zwa” is a simple linguistic transformation of the initial consonants which occurs fairly consistently among Sgaw Karen speakers as one moves east from Burma to Thailand.

20 I must acknowledge here my indebtedness to Thra Pu Tamoo for explaining the intricacies of this portion of the prayer which would otherwise have remained obscure to me. Not all Palokhi ritual texts contain such a wealth of images. Unlike, say, the ritual texts of the Rotinese of Eastern Indonesia which are presented as public oratorical performances (Fox [1971, 1975, 1983]), Palokhi Karen ritual language is used in prayers which are for all practical purposes individualised performances. There is no audience as such even when there are a large number of villagers present. Under these conditions, and given the way that knowledge of ritual language is transmitted (as I have described before), there is very little cross-referral and discussion of the forms in ritual language. In these circumstances, it is not possible to talk of a proper canon in Palokhi ritual texts which, otherwise, would be established through public performances as is the case with the Rotinese (see, for example, Fox [1983]). Nevertheless, it is clear that there is a common stock of lexical items and semantic elements which make up dyadic sets that are structured in “formulaic phrases” as Fox calls it (1971:215). Contrary to the Rotinese, the very nature of the way in which ritual language is employed in Palokhi allows for individual improvisation and this particular line, I think, is an exceptionally good (if rare) example of such an improvisation.

21 This brief reference bears a remarkable similarity with a Northern Thai prayer, also said during the harvest which Davis discusses (1984:25–6). In the part of the prayer which Davis examines, in the ritual that “recalls rice souls” (suukhwaan khao), the rice is asked to “flow” from the mouths of a host of animals, including the bamboo rat.
I have not been able to identify the ki’ko plant. Marshall also reports its use, but in a different context. He says that the leaves are used to wrap the chicken bones used in swidden divination (1922:76). He does not, however, identify the vine.

Wi means “to be finished”, “to be completed”, and so forth. Wau, however, has no intrinsic meaning so far as I have been able to ascertain. In transcribing and translating this text with the assistance of several men in Palokhi, I was unable to obtain any elucidation of the meaning of the word despite many queries. Some suggested that Soe Wae, the old lady who performed the ritual, had perhaps made up a word to complete the dyadic set. Soe Wae, however, claimed that wau meant the same thing as wi. In the absence of any other referent by which the term may be glossed, I have used here an English equivalent which may, perhaps, be regarded as permissible given the form of the oral tradition of the Palokhi Karen. Nevertheless, I must stress that the translation offered here is provisional for the reasons above.

The pip referred to here is one of the standard measures of rice used in Palokhi which they have adopted from the Northern Thai. As I noted in Chapter V, it is equivalent to 22 litres.

Koewi, according to the Palokhi Karen, is an alternative term for koela or “souls”. It is not used in ordinary speech and is, therefore, specific to ritual language. I have used only the term “souls” in this translation for lack of an alternative term in English.

The term my is derived from the Northern Thai myang which means “land”, “country” or “domain”, that is, a political unit, as well as “capital city”.

Remaining Karen

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242