Field impressions, trip to Chiang Mai, Thailand, Januari 2020

Wim van Binsbergen

OUR 2020 TRIP TO THAILAND

During our 2010 trip we were immensely impressed with Thailand and we visited the temples antiquities and museums of Bangkok, Ayuthayya, Sukhothai, with an excursion to the Islamic South to sample the beaches (still tsunami-devastated, alas, after the 2004 disaster) and the splendid snorkeling opportunities. We never made it to the northern part ofthe country, although it was generally highly praised as a region of textile handwork production and artistic handicraft. Ten years older, and fighting a daily battle against health problems, we decided to limit ourselves to one place, Chiang Mai, and from there explore the rich North. The city is situated, like many Thai cities, on the bank of a river (the Ping) flowing North-South to join, hundreds of kms to the South, the Chao Phraya River, the main water artery of Bangkok – which featured extensively in the book of poetry and photographs I published in Dutch as a result of the 2010 trip, *Met een nieuw lichaam van verlichting.* In Chiang Mai, our truly excellent Riverside Hotel was on the west bank of the Ping River, some 5 kms Northeast of the city centre, and largely beyond the noise and pollution that, we realised from extensive experience, tends to plague Asian cities today. With the aid of premanent Internet from the AIS company, and efficient, secure and affordable taxi services at our fingertips by means of the Grab app, within a few days we moved freely about inside and outside the city as if we were locals. There were only few disadvantages to our situation. Used to renting apartments abroad so that we have a choice of preparing our own meals, staying at a hotel room has for us the disadvantage of dependence on the restaurant for three meals a day – tasty and healthy food, as we found out, but very limited for a stay of three solid weeks. There were hardly any alternative restaurants within walking distance, and walking along the Patan Road that runs parallel to the Ping river means total absence of sidewalks and being at the merci of fairly disciplined but often, in bends and between trees and shrubs, invisible motor traffic. Insisting on walking 10,000 steps a day was our routine for keeping fit and healthy, and this could be kept up in the inner city, and during excursions to museums, shopping malls, the forest temple of Wat Amung, and the mountains – but scarcely in the immediate vicinity of our hotel.

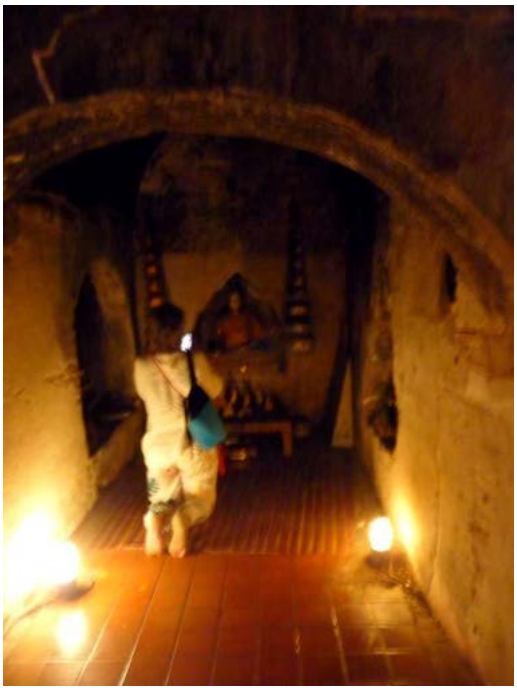
An ancient photograph of inhabitants of Chiang Mai contributing to an alms collection of Buddhist monks ; photograph on display in a dependance of the Hariphunchai Museum, Lamphun, 2020

Central Chiang Mai, although teeming with foreign tourists, has retained some of the characteristics of an ancient city:

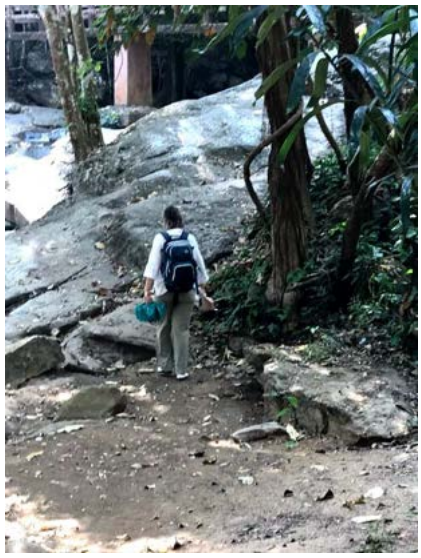
When we left Western Europe for Thailand, early Januari 2020, the Wuhan corona virus threat had already been signalled its country of origin but was covered up. Only towards the end of our stay did the fear of a pandemic go viral. The East Asian New Year was imminent and many regional tourists flocked to Thailand, and to our hotel. Protecting ourselves with mouth masks we reached Europe safely, and two weeks later were still symptom-free, which effectively seems to mean that we escaped with our health.



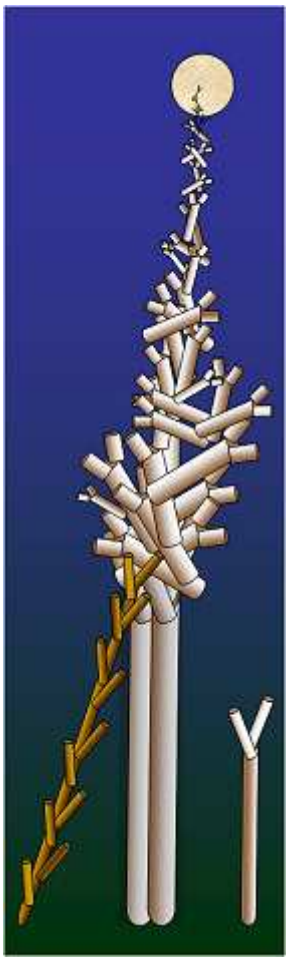



Arid plants



A LESSON FROM THE LANNA FOLKLIFE MUSEUM AT CENTRAL CHIANG MAI: FORKED POLES AS A BUDDHIST CONCEPT



The central royal myth of the Nkoya people of Western Zambia, and as such discussed repeatedly in my work across the decades, involves the construction of a (cf. Babel / Nimrod…; *Genesis 12*) tower into heaven by a royal personage of unspecified gender Kapesh Kamununga Mpanda – 'the Kapesh; who joins forked poles' (see artist's impression to the left). I have so far tried to interpret Kapesh by reference to a royal personage Kashyapa featuring in the life of the Buddha; another one similarly named and associated witn the towering mountain fortress of Sigiriya at central Sri Lanka; the IndoAryan root **gabhasti-*, 'carriage pole, forked pole' (de Vries 1958); or a Hebrew root *KPŠ* conveying the capering ('forked'?) movement of a fleeing deer. While all these associations may apply at particular narrative levels, my visit to Chiang May has opened my eyes, at long last, to the most obvious interpretation of forked poles in Buddhism: forked poles are widely used, at least in Theravada Buddhism, as additional supports of the widely extending hence sagging branches of the *boddhi* tree – which is exemplary for the sacred tree in the Ganges valley, North India, under which the Buddha is considered to have reached enlightenment in the middle of the last millennium BCE – as the pivotal event in the foundation of Buddhism, and as the initial moment of the Buddhist time reckoning still observed in Thailand. Having elsewhere argued at length the case for extensive Buddhist influence upon the Nkoya and upon South Central and Southern Africa as a whole, this new finding is of considerable interest and relevance.

The museum text explaining the supporting poles reads:

> In the L:anna dialect, the Pho tree under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment is called sari. The Pho of course is famous for its longevity as well as its multiple trunks and many aerial roots. Since the wood is pliable, the branches tend to droop, and following Lanna tradition are propped with long poles, known as the *mai kham sari*. Propping the Pho's brancjes is associated in the

minds of the Lanna Buddhists with supporting their religion, and they believe that those who do so will be blessed with peace, happiness and longevity.

The mai kham sari, coming from a hardwood, is a small and tender support with a fork at the upper end, and should be of a length equal to that of the branch it supports. It tends to be ornately carved, and to have coloured paper attached, and the small 'cushion' between the support and the branch will contain the dedicators' names and such supplicatory notes they may care to include.

Remarkably, the museum text presents the supports as a particular Lanna custom. If this can be confirmed, we may have narrowed down the specific origin of the Kapesh myth among the Nkoya to one specific region in South East Asia, the Lanna kingdom.

the above picture (a) derives from the Lanna Folklife Museum in the centre of Chiang Mai, the other from the nearby Wat Chiang Man temple.

Also this intriguing relief from the Lanna Folklife Museum in Central Chiang Mai reminds us of the Central Javanese reliefs at Borobudur and Prambanang, which we extesnively visited in 2007.

The displays in that museum explain aspects of local Buddhist iconography. In a Buddhist shrines tends to be located a sacred representation of a ceremonial royal bed (asana), and associated with the asana are 'crown jewels' or regalia, notably :

1. a walking stick
2. a royal fan
3. a royal umbrella
4. a whip, and
5. a hat.

The are usually made of carved wood decorated with Thai lacquer-work, placed on a ceremonial tray beside the royal asana.

I was reminded at this point of the various regalia which were issued to me in the Western Grassfields, Cameroon, Africa, September 2006, by the Bamileke 'Notable de Neuf' Mr Touoyem, as tokens of my ceremonial incorporation in his family, being the PhD supervisor of his son Pascal.

The Bamileke items included:

1. a life specimen of the 'Arbre de la Paix', a plant symbolising peace
2. a carved walking stick
3. a notable's ceremonial bag
4. a carved cow's or buffalo's horn

These regalia were somewhat reminiscent but certainly not identical to those listed above for the Chiang Mai folklore museum.

THE CASE OF UNCOVERED WOMEN'S BREASTS

It is usually not realised that the standard of wearing underwear, and especially, for women, of wearing a bra, is a result of globalisation, and only conquered the world at large in the first half of the 20th c. – leass than a century ago. Under topday's global media culture, women's bare breasts are conspicuous even in the public space, but only in a number of preset situations, including advertising and commercial sexuality including its coverage in entertainment media. Nursing one's child in public has become almost scandalous in the North Atlantic region – and thus has become an act of defiance on the part of women who construct their identity as mothers and women more consciously than most. Non-specialist perception of global culture tends to associate women's bare breasts with sub-Saharan Africa. Of course there are numerous examples to challenge this perception, e.g. women's topless attire in the Isle of Bali (frequently depicted, and standard right through the 1930s) and elsewhere in Indonesia; and in depictions from the Middle Bronze Age from the Isle of Crete, in the Aegean Sea, Greece. Also in the Chiang Mai mural paintings from Buddhist

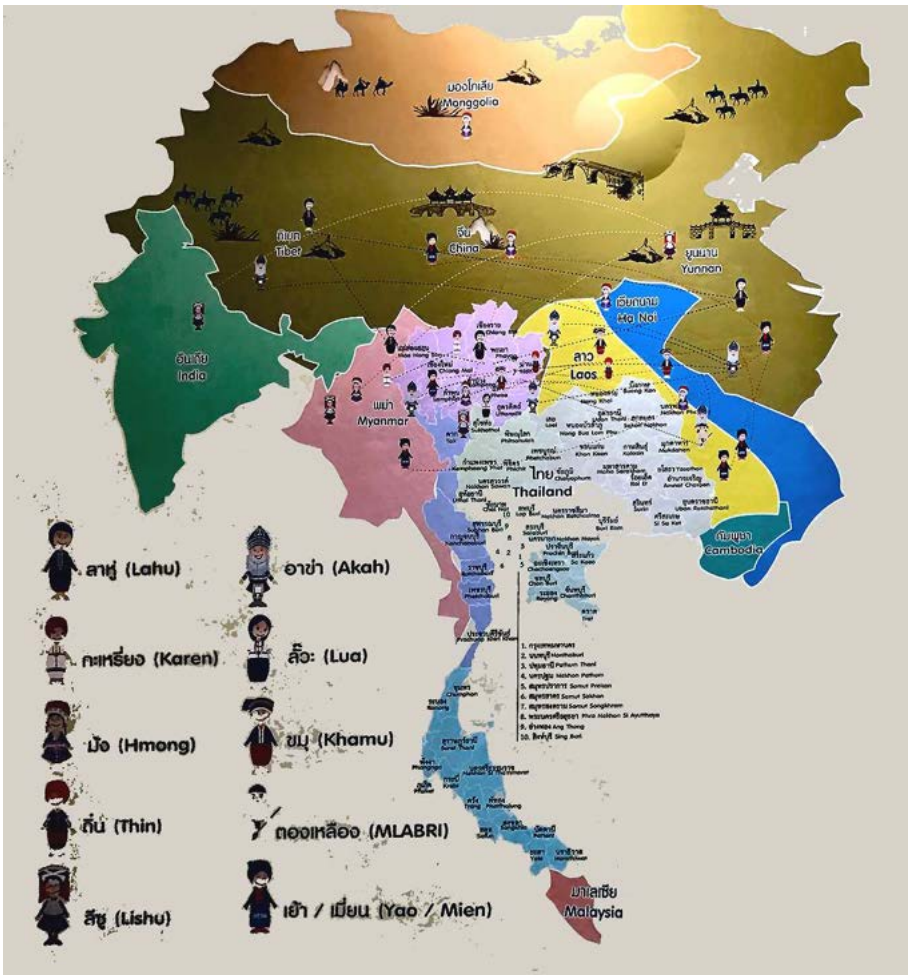
temples, bare breasts are frequently depicted. This stands in some contrast with the very prudish dress codes which is enforced especially in the temples that are frequently visited by tourists; there strapless topcs, deep decolletés, hotpants and men's short trousers are practically prohibited.

Another example derives from the staircase of the Lamphun Ice restaurant adjacent to the central temple of the town of Lamphun. It is an old photograph (presumably from the 1940s) and depicts local women carrying ceramic food containers using bamboo yokes – perhaps on their way to the market, or in a ceremonial procession. The lady in front, not manifestly poorer than the others (none wear shoes, all traditional handwoven wrappers) is the only one topless; she has draped her top over the end of her yoke. In traditional settings in South Central Africa until only a few decades ago it was improper for a woman to approach the sacred with her breasts covered; perhaps something similar is the case on this photograph, although only one shows obeisance to this postulated ancient custom.

An ostracon found among the same debris confirms the topless iconography spotted elsewhere in the Chiang Mai ancient context. The similarity is striking with drawing styles on ostraca from the Ancient Mediterranean ni the Bronze and Iron Ages. As a result of Hellenism / Alexander's conquests Hellenic cultures spawned the Gandara early style of Indian sculpture, but if this further has an impact on Thailand is beyond my expertise.

THE HILL TRIBES (A) THE HIGHLAND PEOPLE DISCOVERY MUSEUM IN WEST CHIANG MAI

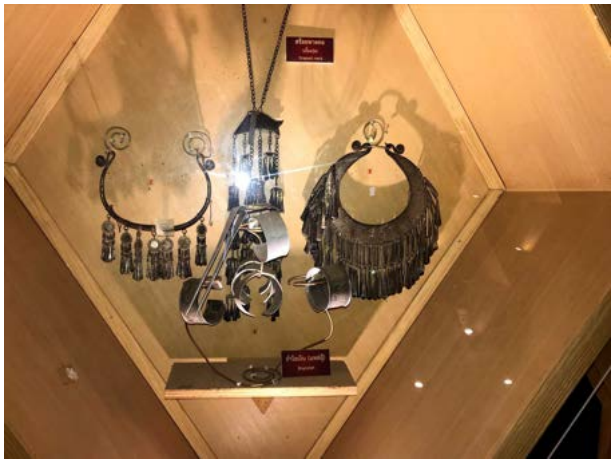
The word 'tribe' has effectively been banned from anthropological discourse since the 1960s, but it survives (like so many colonial stereotypes) in North Atlantic popular culture and media. The so-called 'Hill Tribes' have played an important role in the national perception of ethnicity in Thailand, and a fortiori in the tourist industry. Numerous, typically short, trips are offered to bring the tourists in short and superficial contact with exponents of these groups. In Chiang Mai, one beautiful, and beautifully situated, museum in the North Western outskirts of the city is devoted to the culture of these groups. It particularly highlights, in the top floor, the efforts by the royal family, to recognise and document these groups, incorporate them in the national community, and involve them in economic development.



The classification and regional origin of hill tribes in Suth East Asia, adapted from a map at the Hill Tribes museum, Chiang Mai

The following map from the Highland People Discovery Museum shows the distribution of Hill Tribe Development Centres in the country (numbered circles)

The top floor of the Hill Tribes Museum, Chiang Mai, packed with antiquated photographic and audio equipment testifying to the royal interest in these groups.



specimens of jewellery from the Lisa Hill Tribe. We managed to purchase similar pieces of silver jewellery during our trips in Chiang Mai and surroundings.

Strikingly, in this museum I spotted a ornate walking stick which was almost indistinguishable from one which was given to me in 2006 by a Bamileke notable ('Elder of Nine') on the occasion of my incorporation in a Bamileke family, Western Grassfields, Cameroon. Almost a decade later I undertook some short exploratory fieldwork in that region to ascertain if any conspicuous traces of Sunda influence could be found there. My results were contradictory and not very conclusive, but the walking stick is something of a belated confirmation. I suggest that both sticks represent the rainbow snake, a very ancient symbol that – according to my reconstructions – has been prominent in comparative mythology since the Middle Palaeolithic, when it appears to have informed the iconography of the Blombos ochre block, 70 ka BP (cf. van Binsbergen 2011c). Against this background, direct contact between Thailand and Cameroon in (protoohistoric times is not the only possible explanation of the coincidence, but striking it remains. It could be argued that crosshatching and concentric rings – as the dominant ornamental features of both walking sticks – are extremely wide spread and are partly dictated by the nature of the arboreal material use.

However, this could not be said for the head crowning the stick, and for the protrusion (crown? feathers?) on top of that head.

(a) the Chiang Mai museum piece (b) the 2006 Bamileke specimen (author's collection)

Particularly interesting for transcontinental comparisons is the display, in this museum, of a village gate from the Akha hill tribe. The caption at the museum reads as follows:

'Lok-kah protective gate, placed at the entrance to every Akha village. By passing through the gate you leave the dangerous world of forest spirits and enter the human realm of the village.

Wooden birds placed on the crossbar send messages to gods in the sky, while the star-shaped taboo signs prevent the spirits from entering the village. Similar protective function has a wooden word [sic] placed under the gate.

The simplied [sic] figures of men and women have some associations with human fertility, but their main function is to indicate that beyond the gate lies the realm of human beings.

Each year in April every Akha community constructs new gates and figures. The work is supervised by a village priest and special ceremonies and sacrifices take place.

Do Note: The gate and the figures are sacred. When visiting Akha villages, you should not touch them. If you do, the community has to perform special rituals to purify the gate.'

Sticks placed vertically in the ground and possibly adorned with faces and horizontal incisions are widespread in the Old World, as a symbols of the sacred and especially of ancestors. They are conspicuous in West and Central Africa [add refs] , but also in Siberia. Some African villages do have a special village gate, especially if the village is fenced, but many have not and can be approached and entered from all sides. The situation as described for the Akha of Northern Thailand is reminiscent of traditional Maori villages, such as one we visited on the Northern Island of New Zealand, near Rotawuwa / the Taupo Volcanic Zone, in 2013. In South Central Africa, like among the Akha, space is similarly conceptualised by the distinction between the humanised space of the village and the undomesticated forest; the village is where humans may feel safe from the aggressive forces of nature (predators) and the supernatural (the creator High God whose main epiphany is formed by the forest; and the mysterious unilateral being Mwendanjangula, who is many resppects is an epiphany of the creator god in its own right). Music is often conceived as the homage which the humanised world pays to the pre-human undomesticated world outside. I can very well understand what is meant by ' a wooden word [sic] placed under the gate'. However, the braided structure of cross-hatching vegetal stalks, repeated in various shapes and accompanied by garlands made of vegetal stalks closed into circles, is reminiscent of similar zigzag shapes often encountred as decorative or ceremonial arrangements in the context of South and South East Asian Hinduism and Buddhism, and may well constitute an apotropaic (evil-repelling) device.

Fig. 10. Silent prayer before the *slamatan*

Zigzag braided constructions as part of the offerings local adept bring to a syncretistic Buddhist-Hindu-Muslim shrine at Nagara Padang, Ciwidey, West Java, Indonesia, 2010; cf. van Binsbergen 2010 / 2017.

THE ROYAL CULT

Although the royal cult of Thailand seems to have somewhat subsided as compared to our experiences ten years ago in the central parts of the country (Bangkok, Ayuthayya, Sukhothai), it is still of great importance. Thus the Royal Air Force built two impressive royal shrines on top of Thailand's highest peak, the Doi Inthanon – in celebration of the King's and Queen's respective sixtieth birthdays, two decades ago.

Remarkably, despite the considerable elevation (2565 m above sea level) the top of Doi Inthanon scarcely makes an alpine impression. A beautiful ornamental garden mainly of roses has been laid out here, and was is left of the original vegetation is a forest (with special high-altitude deciduous trees) one would scarcely expect at this height, where e.g. in the European Alps we are already nearly half a kilometre above the tree line.

The right-hand photograph above shows the ornate grave of one of the last princes of the Lanna kingdom before it was effectively incorporated in Thailand around 1900 CE; clearly it is the object of a cult similar to the sacred trees.

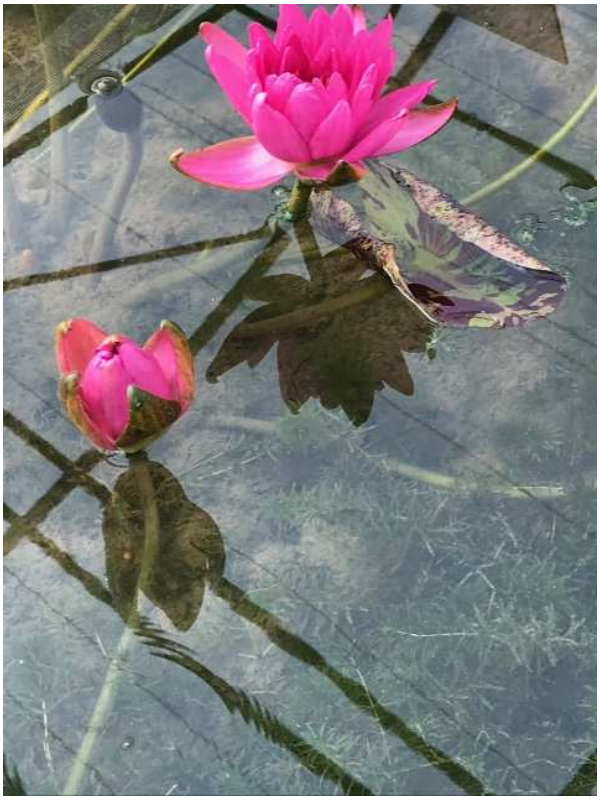
The central square of Chiang Mai is adorned with this modern statue of three Lanna kings as symbols of regional identity

Like ten years ago, the royal cult is very manifest in such an unexpected detail as the handling of paper money. A widespread poster reminds the public of the many way in which such handling may be disrespectful towards the king, whose image appears on every bill. In fact, cases have been known where the unheedful foreigner, using his feet in trying to stop a paper bill from being blown away by the wind, has been imprisoned on a charge of *lèse majesté*.

On the northern slopes of a lower mountain overlooking Chiang Mai, the Doi Suthep, the most enjoyable site consists of the Queen Sirikit Botanical Gardens – very extensive and extremely well kept, of an importance that exceeds national limits. Our visit lead to one of the few moments of downright rapture during our recent Thailand trip, the other moment being witnessing the Sunday temple cult at the Lamphung central temple.

QUEEN SIRIKIT BOTANICAL GARDENS IN THE NORTHERN FOOTHILLS OF DOI SUTHEP

I am tempted to display my photographs of this site rather lavishly because we were deeply moved by its beauty and by the dedication to nature it brought out.

Apparently a favourite spot for bridal photography, we happened upon a newly-wed Thai Ophelia, whose bridal dress the photographers have spread out among the flowers, her beau draped half upon her like a stranded boat.

Beyond the Botanical Gardens, the mountainous region of Samoeng unfolds in all its impressive beauty

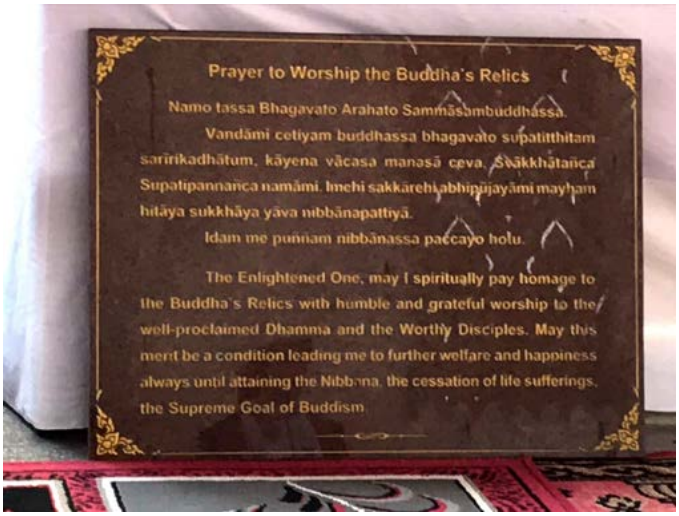
THE ANCIENT TOWN OF LAMPHUN AND ITS CENTRAL TEMPLE, THE WAT PHRA THAT HARIPHUNCHAI (A)

Given the royal cult, one must not be surprised to find, in the splendid Wat Phra That Hariphunchai (which houses an important Buddha relic, a hair) at the ancient town of Lamphun (20 km south of Chiang Mai) portraits and momorabilia the same Queen on display next to the most sacred Buddha images.

(note the pale red oval which marked the connection between the preceding two photographs)

In the same temple an ancient type of bronze drum is on display – well known from nearby Viet Nam, and of apparent influence on royal drums in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, e.g. among the Nkoya of Western Zambia.

Visiting this temple during the early afternoon of a Sunday, we were fortunate to find the common people's worship in full swing. Not only the considerable number of worshippers surprised us but also the fact that many of them were young people in their teens and twenties. Many performed the circumlambulatory moment of three times going around the temple's central hall, sounding every temple bell that one encountered on the way. Others engaged in silent personal prayer. Still others took the oppotunity of buying (at the temple entrance) pre-packaged set of temple offerings (contained a small bag of rice, some tea, a roll of toilet paper, and other mundane items) and joining the queue of worshippers in the inner temple, waiting for their turn to have a monk bless and accept these offerings, thus adding to the merit the worshiper was accumulating in life.



In the temple, a standard Buddhist prayer is on display both in transliterated Pali and in English (but not in Thai) :

'The Enlightened One, may I spiritually pay homage to the Buddha's Relics with humble and grateful worship to the well-proclaimed Dhamma and the Worthy Disciples. May this ment [sic] be a condition leading me to further welfare and happiness always until attaining the Nibbana [Nirvana] , the cessation of life sufferings the Supreme Goals of Buddhism.'

As befits an ancient town which (unlike the originally very smilar Chiang Mai) was bypassed by the modern globalising developments, Lamphun is rich in impressive traditional houses and still boasts a remarkably intact sections of the ancient city fortifications

HARIPHUNCHAI ART

Terracotta Buddhist votice tablets are also on display in the Lamphun Hariphunchai Museum, not far from the Wat Phra That Hariphunchai. This museum reflects the local attempts to restore the Hariphunchai name and identity for the Northern region in memory of an ancient, pre-Thai kingdom of that name from the late 1st mill. CE. Unmistakably the Hariphunchai art has a signature of its own, with frowned facial expressions, bulging eyes and massive lips – quite distinct from the art traditions of Central Thailand.

(a) Hariphunchai Buddha images; (b) Terracotta Buddhist votive tablets from Lamphun province as examples of Hariphunchai art at the museum devoted to Hariphunchai culture, Lamphun

This is also the main type of antiques which is generally offered for sale in the vicinity of the temples, both in Lamphung and in Chiang Mai. Salesmen claim considerable rarity and antiquity for these objects, and may demand very stiff sums for them – but clearly they constitute a domain of connoisseurship which the newcomer, like myself, had better avoid lest he be seriously overcharged. Of course I allowed myself to be overcharged for the two items that I did buy in Lamphun.

Some of the Buddha statuettes on display in the Lamphun temple were of striking beauty and emotional profundity, e.g. :

By and large, the treasures heaped up in the lesser temple buildings testify to a nonchalant abundance perhaps suggestive of the riches of nature and of life's blessing – riches whose presence and greatness we felt here more than in any other temple in the region s, especially during Sunday worship hours.

GANESHA STATUETTES AND ELEPHANTS

As is generally known, Buddhism maintained considerable continuity with the Hindu pantheon from which it sprng in the mid-ıst mill. BCE. Hence depictions of the primordial elephant-shaped god Ganesha may be found in nearly every Buddhist temple in Northern Thailand.

(a)

(b)

Here is (a) one from the Wat Lam Chang temple in Central Chiang Mai; and another one (b) from the Wat Muang temple at the Patan Road, near our hotel

And one from the Wat Chiang Man temple in the ancient centre of Chiang May.

Elephants and their parts play a prominent part in the iconography of Thailand. The Wat Chiang Man in the ancient city area of Chiang Mai boasts an ancient stupa whose base is shaped as a procession of elephants. The ancient photograph, from around 1900 CE, shows the prominence of elephants in ancient life of Norther nThailand.

Like in the religious iconography of Theravada Buddhist in Sri Lanka (from which the Thai variant is supposed to derive anyway), a standard way of displaying sacred objects is behind two upright and facing elephant tusks. A conspicuous Lankan example is to be found in the Temple of the Sacred Tooth, at Kandy. The arrangement is unmistakably reminiscent of royal symbolism in South Central Africa – for which I have extensively argued the Buddhist and South East Asian element elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2012, 2017, 2019 etc.).

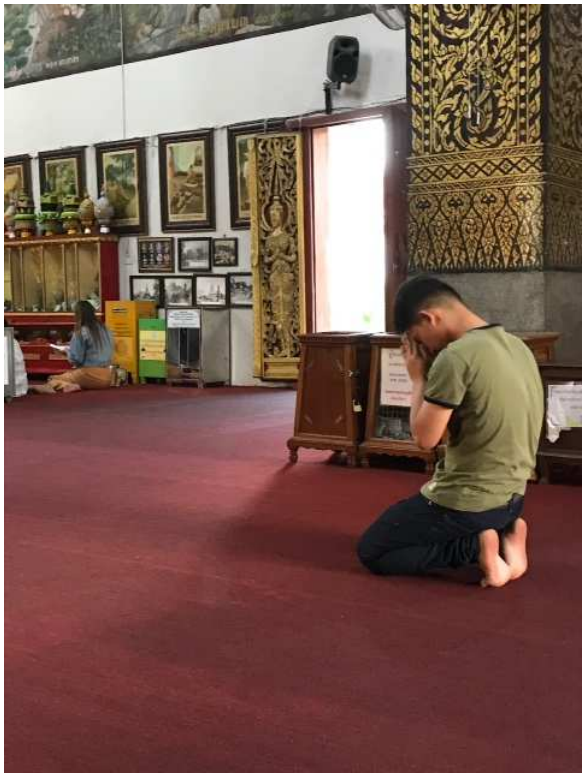
However, the sacred objects are not merely on display but are also supposed to be venerated by the pilgrims, through monetary offerings in the bowls placed before the statuettes.

WAT PRAH THAT HARIPHUNCHAI (B) CONTINUED

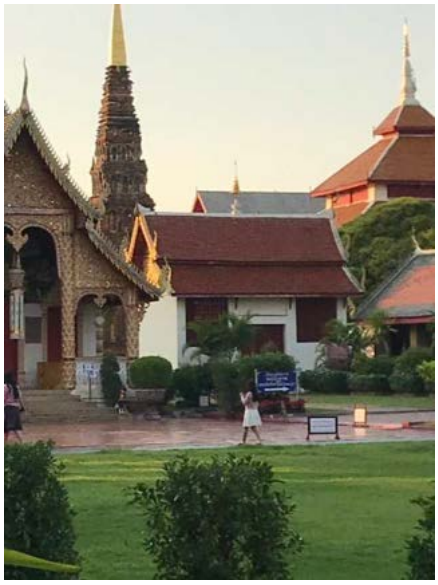
Although strict asceticism is clearly not the rule among Thai monks (most of those that can be spotted in the public space are overweight) yet the temple's founder is depicted as little more than a corpse :


FOR LADY


แม่สา เพชรรัตน์








TREE CULT AND TEMPLE

The tree is among the oldest and most widespread mythical motifs that comparative mythology has brought out. On a global scale, tree veneration is therefore widespread and important. Throughout South and South East Asia I have encountered, over the years, the conjunction of the tree cult with the temple cult. I have often written on this association. Also in Thailand during our earlier trip (2010) this connection was conspicuous, e.g. in the Wat Pho temple at Bangkok and at the Sukhothai sacred

precinct. At the central Lamphun temple the connection is very emphatic: two large and very ancient trees dominate the entrance to the temple, and they have been adorned with multicoloured textile bands (usually in the colours red / yellow / green, and with small sacred objects as sign of an active cult. In fact, one of the most amazing aspects of the tree cult is how the tree becomes the focus of a heterogeneous, gaudy, and often clownesque or bizarre collection of small statuettes – no doubt pious gifts from worshippers who – even at the temple premises – prefer the ancient and popular tree cult, to the forms and routines of high Buddhism.

The last photographs shows a sacred tree in the ancient centre of Chiang Mai. The following picture is from the Wat Prachat Haripunchai in Lamphun, where two giant sacred trees guard the entrance area to the temple's main sacred precinct. :

Another sacred tree (among several) may be found at the centre of Chiang Mai in the immediate vicinity of the restored Tha Phae city gate.

WIND-BLOWN BANNERS AS EPIPHANIES OF THE SACRED

Throughout the Old World, from the villages of North Africa to the shores of the Pacific Ocean, flags (or simple rags of textile) blown in the wind are considered epiphanies of the sacred. Throughout that huge area, the rag tree[1] is a more or less common phenomenon. Already the Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic representation of 'god', 𓇋, was a flag on a pole. Long, narrow banners with auspicious signs or texts abound in North Thailand, and are generally on sale.

Attached from the temple awnings is a fringe of abanners at Wat Prah That Hariphunchai, in the town of Lamphun.

In the picture (a) below, taken at the site of the Wat Chedi Luang in the ancient centre of Chiang Mai, a tall (ca. 7 m) wickerwork construction has been hung with numerous such banners – all in a way epiphanies of the sacred. In the same premises the sight (b) may be seen: a small golden Buddha statue under an overwhelming canopy of sacred banners.

(a)

(b)

[1] I cite a footnote (n. 100) from van Binsbergen, in press (a): 103: 'Such rag trees may be found all over the Old World. Lucas 2006; Anonymous, Myth and more; Lane Fox 1869: 63 f.; Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe 2007; Anonymous, Dochara Ireland from the Inside; Lymer 2004; author's fieldnotes, Eastern Atlas (North Africa), Tunisia, Central Thailand, and Western Java, Indonesia. I take the textile offering to a tree to be a Pelasgian trait, i.e. belonging to a Neolithic culture complex that emerged in West Asia, spread and transmuted in the Bronze Age Mediterranean, and from there spread in all four directions across the Old World, and in part also to Oceania and the New World; cf. van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; .van Binsbergen 2011.

SNAKES AND DRAGONS AS GUARDIANS OVERSEEING ACCESS TO THE SACRED

One of the oldest themes in comparative mythology is that of the cosmic snake. it is one of the dominant motifs in Chinese ideonography and mythology. In nearby Nothern Thailand the snake / dragon appears in numerous temple situations, but apparently not so much an an object of veneration in its own right, but as access to or guardian of the sacred. The following picture (a) is from the Wat Chedi Luang in central Chiang Mai; (b) shows a red snake statuette from the debris field of Wat umaong.

THE TEMPLE GONG AT THE WAT PRATHAT HARIPHUNCHAI

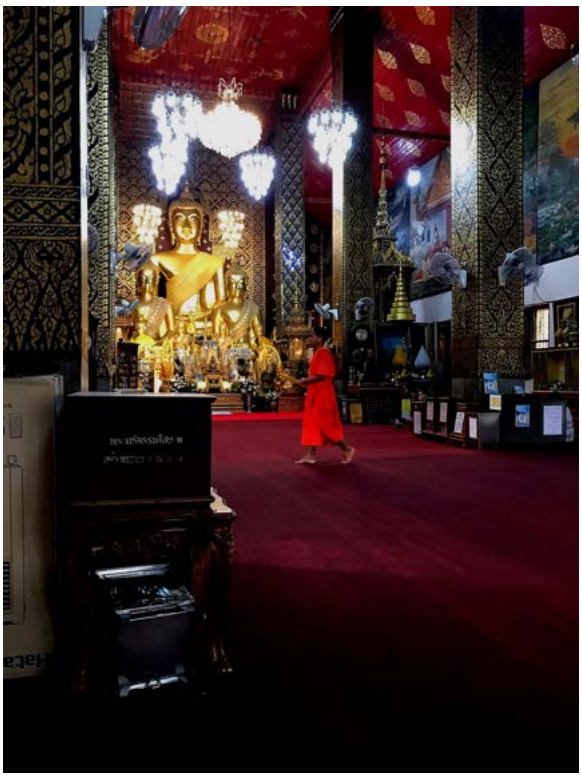
Inside the temple precinct, an dominant place is occupied by a structure containing a giant gong, which worshippers are free to operate when they have brought an offering.

Remarkably, the surface of the gong is partially covered with squares of gold foil – just like a particularly venerated Buddha statuette in the Wat Pho temple at Bangkok

The gong's sacrality is also clear from its elaborate inscription in Thai.

WAT PRATHAT HARIPHUNCHAI CONTINUED (C)

The main temple's great hall emanates a serenity which is not in the least diminished by the puzzling multiplicity of golden Buddha statues



THE FOREST TEMPLE COMPEX OF WAT UMONG, IN THE WESTERN OUTSKIRTS OF CHIANG MAI

Wat Umong is an ancient forest temple, which still is a centre of quiet monastic life and study.

The relatively recent excavation of the Wat Umong area yielded thousands of fragments of sacred representations, most of which were not stored in museums but clutter the sacred precinct.

An important feature of this temple is the underground passages, where sporadically religious representations are installed.

Near the entrance to the area a copy has been installed of the famous Asoka pillars. which the great Buddhist king Asoka)c. 300 BCE) had erected all over India.

At Wat Umong an abundance of ancient stone reliefs may be admired, but to the untutored comparative eye the workmanship is not very impressive as compared to, for instance, the reliefs at Borobudur, Central Java,Indonesia.

WIth the ascendence of the smart phone and of digital communication in general, books seem to be no longer a major and popular focus of intellectual and religious life in Northern Thailand. However, collections of ancient manuscripts are conspicuous in many of the local temples. Moreo ver, there is a fairly well stocked religious bookshop in the grounds of the Wat Umong temple in the forested western outskirts of Chiang Mai. The same temple grounds also contains an elaborate Buddhist library.

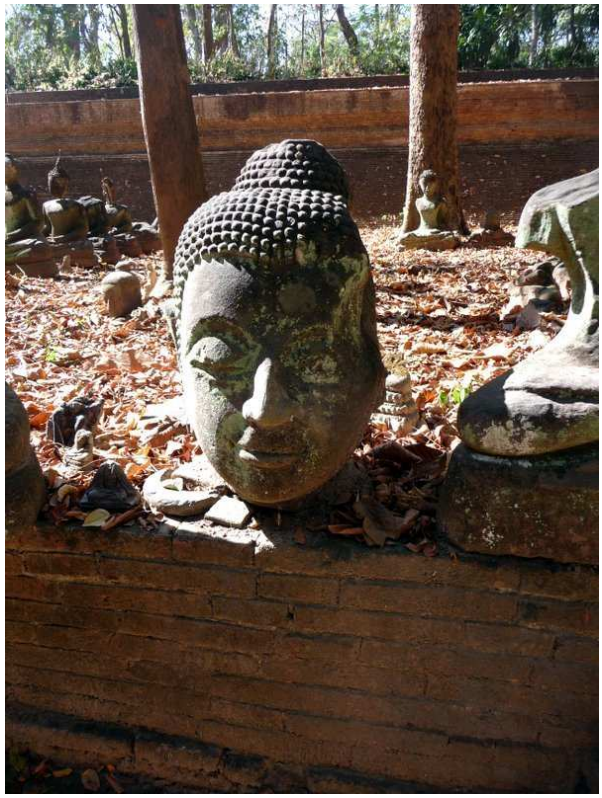
In the bookshop also a few scholarly texts in English may be purchased

Originally this was a forest monastery but the westward expansion of the city of Chiang Mai caused it to be incorporated in the outskirts. The extensive area is still largely covered with trees, and dotted with small shrines and with small huts that house monks. Pious placards remind the passer-by of basic elements in Buddhist doctrine:

The Thai text on thE poster to the left, feautring dogs with human clothes and engaged in human acts, also appears in English translation as:

'As the wind overthrows a weak tree, SO [sic] does "Mara" overpower him, ho lives attached so sense pleasure, who lives with his sense – uncontrolled, who doesn't know moderation in his food, and who is indolent and inactive.'


Asoke Pillar
This pillar is a replica and a remembrance of those set up by king Asoke the Great of India around 327 BC. He was one of the greatest upholders of the Buddhist faith that the world has ever known,spreading the Lord Buddha's word wide. This replica is an important reminder of the far reaching influence of King Asoke's peaceful interpretation of Buddhism. This pillar is symbolic of the true faith of Buddhism.



A more compelling (even if unintended) evocation of the Buddhist theme of the futility and decay of the flesh is scarcely imaginable.

SCENES FROM THE DOI SUTHEP MOUNTAIN TEMPLE

Spectacularly situated in the Southern foothills of the Doi Suthep Mountain, and overlooking the large Chiang Mai city area, the Doi Suthep mountain temple is one of

the main touristic attractions of Northern Thailand, and tourist from all over South East and East Asia flock here daily in numerous buses and other forms of transport.

In an inconspicuous corner of th eDoi Suthep mountain temple precinct, the evocation of an ancient warrior, adorned with textile patterns reminiscent of the tiger and the leopard – s symbolism that has played such a prominent part in my work of the last few decades *(*van Binsbergen 2004, 2009a, in press (b)

TEMPLES AND GRAVES

Remarkable is that in some temples, but (relatively) very sporadically, graves could be found, duly marked with the deceased's name and often photograph. It is not clear why dome peoplewere so honoured, and most others not.

In the Doi Suthep temple the graves were inside the sacred precinct, immediately adjacent to the main ancient, ornate tree in that area

Ornate, illustrates graves from Wat Doi Suthep

Another occasional ornate grave we found at the Wat Lam Chang in central Chiang Mai:

WAT LAM CHANG

An interesting temple is the Wat Lam Chang temple in central Chiang Mai. It is a functioning meditation centre with mediation huts on the premises, and moreover features a number of interesting detail comparating favourable with other temples: an ornate ste of temple bells, snake / dragon iconography, a most interesting very old chedi (relic tower), a conspicuous major kettle drum (again with probable parallels in South Central Africa), and a sweet statue of a boy strikingly reminiscent (als in the gesture of raised index finger) of our grandson.




and especially a very elaborately appointed sacred tree, with several spirit houses at its bottom, and obviously (to judge by the flowser garlands) the object of a living cult


IN THE EASTERN PART OF CENTRAL; CHIANG MAI, ON THE BANK OF THE RIVER PING, THE WAT CHAI MONG KHON IS SITUATED

It boasts another remarkable, richly appointed sacred tree




Especially on Sundays, which is also happened to be the day of our visit, a lively practice of worship is going on. It attracts many pilgrim whop come in their own motor transport. The monks are supervising the traffic and sweep the parking lot.

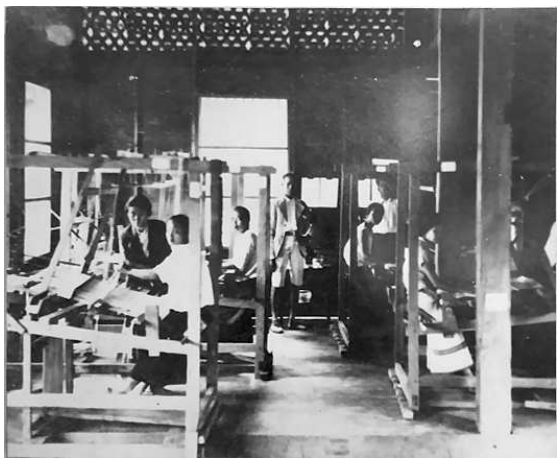
At the river bank, in the far end of the temple premises, we see an interesting sight : a middle-aged lady with ther adult daughter and the latter's small child, have installed themselves at the water with two large buckets covered with a lid. One contains huge live frogs, the other live fishes of a respectable size. One by one the creatures are released from their captivity and launched into the Ping River. It is an offering intended to yield the worshiper special merit, and from the conversation we had with the ladies (they even allowed my wife and me to to part of the launching, and to dedicate it to the wellbring of our eldest daughter, whose 49th birthday it is) I suspect that the purpose of the sacrifice was to gain special blessing in connection with an ailment from which the child is suffering.

Inside the temple's main hall worshipers, carrying the prepackaged offfering bought at the entrance, are patiently lining up to have their offerings and themselves blesses by the monk on duty, after which another monk whisks the offerings away to make room for the next in line.

In the temple hall we also encounter standardised forked poles, whose purpose in Lanna Buddhism has now been revealed to us.

THE CHIANG MAI REGION BOASTS AN IMPORTANT TEXTILE / WEAVING INDUSTRY, SPECIMENS OF WHICH ARE FOR SALE AT EVERY LOCAL MARKET

The Chiang Mai silk industry is world famous, and its intricate products (again strongly reminiscent of weaving we have seen in West Africa, *e.g.* among the Manjacos of Guinea Bissau) are beautiful but extremely expensive. As compared with the far cheaper Chinese silk, the Thai silk has a coarseness to the touch which, while authentic and winning, is not generally appreciated.





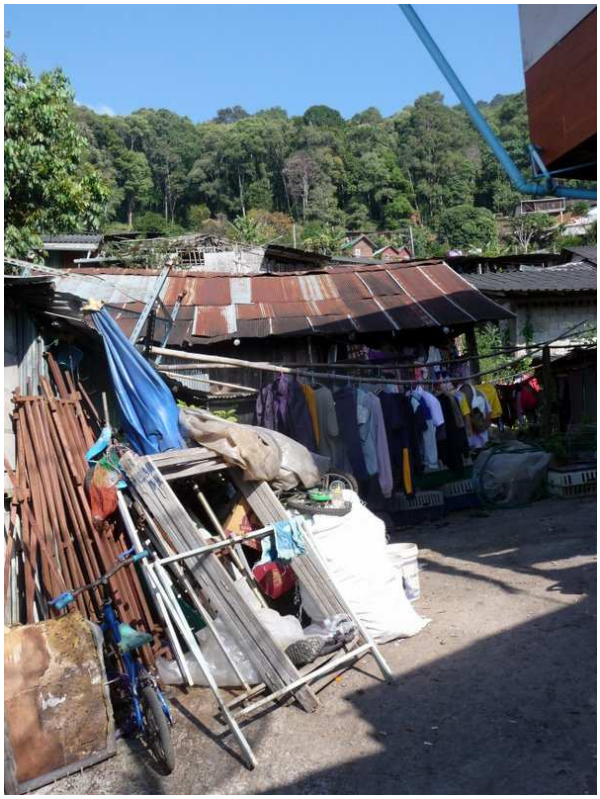

The common combination of tourism, ignorance, lack of general education, and reliance on search machines generally available (also in Thailand today) through personal smart phones results in the kind of gems like the above '1954 painting of by a young Dutch artist' (Vincent van Gogh died in 1890).

THE 'HILL TRIBES' (B) VISITS TO TWO 'HILL TRIBE' VILLAGES

As an anthropologists and an Africanist who for the past twenty years has specialised in Africa's transcontinental cultural continuities, and has made a special study of Edmund Leach's 1954 masterpiece *Political Systems of Highland Birma* (highland Myanmar, which has much in common with adjacent Northern Thailand), I was particularly interested to catch glimpses of the hill tribes, since these, comparatively aloof of major processes of language politics, state formation and world religions, were likely to reflect socio-cultural patterns that may have played a role in Asian – African continuities. Initially this desire was thwarted by the extreme commoditification of the hill tribe situation in the context of the tourist industry. Whole armies of young backpackers were shepherded up the mountains around Chiang Mai so as to gather unique experiences, of which long moountain walks, evening conversations by the camp fire under the stars, and snap short encounters with exponents of the hill tribes were standard ingredients. Not only the commoditification of the commercialised, stereotypified sham encounters were appalling to us – also we lacked the physical condition to earn our encounter with hill tribes by long mountain walks, and we found the prospect appalling of gazing at the so-called long-necked Karen women whose necks in the course of years of childhood tortue has been spectacularly elongated with the aid of neckrings.

In the end, we found partial solutions to these dilemmas, and managed to visit two hill tribe villages. The first was a Hmong village situated high on Doi Suthep, the big mountain directly overlooking Chiang Mai – nearer to the city the Doi Suthep mountain temple (attracting thousands of pilgrims, especially from China; and appointed with a large automated elevator to accommodate the elderly pilgrims), and a royal palace, are major attractions.

The Hmong village turned out to be arranged around an large and bristling market, where alleged mountain tribe products were offered at competitive prices. The commercial nature of the place appeared to obliterate whatever cultural specificity and identity the Hmong village might still possess. It was my impression that the village was ethnically quite heterogeneous. The rambling, ramshackle, essentially poor housing afforded picturesque views, and some of the silverwork on sale was sufficiently costly to be authentic.



Affluence is not absent from the Hmong village ; here the child of the Hmong lady running the jeweler's shop amuses himself with an ipad – a most expensive toy.

The Hmong villlage stood in charp contrast with the one Karen village we visited, not far from the top of Doi Inthanon (Thailands highest peak, 90 km Wesst of Chiang Mai, and 2650 m above sea level). The village was reputed to have made a transition from opium production to coffee, under the special patronage of the King and Queen of Thailand (whose special interest in the Hill Tribes has been well known, and has been widely bropadcast e.g. atthe Hill Tribes museum in Chiang Mai). Whether as a result of coffee growing, or of incorporation in the tourist industry (like in the mountains of Northeastern Bali, tour operators would bring their customers to drink and buy coffee here – of exceptional quality, I must confess – and the village also participated in touristic homestay scheme), the village gave a decidedly affluent impression, dotted as it was with local cars and car porches, despite continued adherence to Karen architectural principles (a proper house stands high above the ground, on poles). Most houses were rambling one-storey structures, but some were far more elaborate and boasted several floors. In the Hill Tribes museum I had already spotted an intricately decorated walking stick that was practically indistinguishable from one that was given to me by a Bamileke notable, Western Grassfield, Cameroon, in 2006; and on of the results of my later research into the Bamileke and their possible South East Asian connections was that three key concepts in their world view were downright Chinese and seems to derive from the Taoist conceptual toolkit (van Binsbergen in press (c)). In the outskirts of the Karen village I had my next *déjà-vu* experience: the layout of the gardens (a) was somewhat similar to what I found (b) during my 2015 fieldwork in the Western Grassfields, Cameroon, among the Bamileke.

(a)

(b)






This male inhabitant of the Karen village does not conform with any touristic stereotype; however, the pigs in the rough soil under the stilted housing do confirm any stereotype the visitor may have brought to the scene





Not surprisingly, the walls of the coffee-serving shed were adorned with photographs of the development work associated with the royal couple.

CONCLUSION

We have reached the end of my provisional account of three weeks in Northern Thailand. I have been highly selective, and have only reflected on such points as have my continued interest, not as a student of Thailand, but as one of comparative religion, comparative mythology, and in general transcontinental cultural continuities since the Upper Palaeolithic. The information must still be checked in great detail, since with the

abundance of temple sites and their very similar names confusion is always around the corner. My aim in writing this piece has been multiple:

- to open up my very extensive photo collection from this trip for further use in my scholarly and poetical work;
- to share the beauty and excitement of what we have seen, with others especially family, friends, and colleagues;
- and to begin to ponder on the possible relevance of what we have seen, for my ongoing research into transcontinental continuities.

It has been my experience, after so many short trips into Africa and Asia in the last few decades (not counting the much longer trips, the many years of intensive participant-observational fieldwork), that field impressions, however ephemeral, superficial, contextless, are far more likely to reveal their underlying relevance if written out in detail, and shared with others. Manwhile mine is a hurried, inconclusive account, and should be read and treated as such. The order of the sections is rambling and arbitrary, and reflects the crude initial processes of writing. Methodologically the entire approach should be faulted since the etic observational material (the photographs) is seldom complemented by emic statements from the local participants themselves. As a result the suggestions of interpretation and transcontinental relevance must be treated with the greatest caution: although I provide a systematic and empirical context by selective references to my extensive work in this field over the decades, they are made off the cuff, and must at this stage still be taken with a fair pinch of salt.

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