

Chapter IV

Village Organisation and the Sociology of Production and Consumption

Kinship in Palokhi, as we have seen, is inextricably linked to systems of naming, sex categories, and customary rules on residence at marriage as well as ritual. It is a central part of social organisation in Palokhi and, as I have shown, it also possesses symbolic and ideological elements. In this chapter, I turn to a consideration of yet another important aspect of the community life of the Palokhi Karen, namely, the socio-economic relations in subsistence production and consumption which, for all practical purposes, may well be regarded as constituting the other major substantive aspect of social organisation in the community.

In broad, general terms, all subsistence production and consumption in Palokhi is organised at the level of house-holds or domestic groups. This is a general characteristic of economic organisation which the Palokhi Karen share with other Karen communities (Hinton [1975:54ff.]; Mischung [1980:21-4]; Madha [1980:58]; Hamilton [1976:119]). Domestic groups, however, do not exist in isolation of one another, nor do they remain constant in composition over time. They exist with other domestic groups with which they are related through kinship links of one kind or another, although the significance attached to these links varies, as I noted in Chapter II. They also change in composition in their developmental cycles. Yet, at any point in time, they retain a certain "corporateness" and identity of their own which, as I emphasised in the last chapter, is also a primary feature of the symbolic and ideological aspects of kinship in Palokhi. These considerations are directly relevant to the sociology of subsistence production and consumption in Palokhi.

First, the fact of household formation and fission implies that the organisation of production and consumption must necessarily undergo some re-arrangement as domestic group composition changes over time and as different sets of kinship relationships come into play.

Second, at a more general level, certain agricultural tasks demand some form of co-operative organisation of labour. For example, planting in swiddens requires large labour inputs within a relatively short period of time to ensure that swiddens are ready before the onset of the rains. Similarly, harvesting needs to be completed without undue delay lest the crop suffers from unseasonal rains, the predations of pests and theft. Most Palokhi households, however, have high dependency ratios and therefore cannot supply all the labour required for such

intensive tasks. The variable emphasis placed on different kinds of kin relations between households is thus an important consideration in the organisation of co-operative labour. As I have pointed out before, this is best seen in terms of the interplay between genealogical relations and non-genealogical factors.

Finally, there are the symbolic and ritual aspects of kinship which express, and through which are constituted (or reconstituted), the ideological importance of the domestic group in Palokhi Karen culture. Allowing for changes in domestic organisation over time and the interdependence of households which are demanded by the recurrent necessities of certain agricultural tasks, in what sense then is the ideological significance of the domestic group maintained? This concerns the relationship between social organisation in the broader context of the economics of subsistence, the way in which this is symbolically represented, and the place it occupies in the cultural ideology of the Palokhi Karen. It is a question which requires some consideration because it is relevant to the major concerns of this study.

In this chapter, I propose to examine these issues by focussing on several case studies, paying close attention to the pragmatics of domestic economic organisation, and the symbolic aspects of eating and familial commensalism in Palokhi. My purpose is two-fold: first, to describe the various sociological arrangements which make up the organisation of economic activities in Palokhi, within and outside the context of kinship; second, to show how domestic and community organisation is symbolically represented and maintained in the cultural ideology of the Palokhi Karen.

The Domestic Organisation of Production and Consumption: Some Case Studies¹

Taking a general perspective, it is useful to view the array of socio-economic arrangements in the domestic economy of Palokhi in terms of degrees of relative household autonomy and areas of sharing within and between households in production and consumption. The nature of the economic functions of households and the variations in their associated sociological arrangements, which are not only features of domestic economics in Palokhi but of village economic organisation in general, requires this descriptive and analytical approach. As White, for example, observes in his introduction to a collection of papers in the volume

Rural Household Studies in Asia:

... there is no clear-cut distinction between 'sharing' and 'not-sharing', but rather a **range** of possible domestic arrangements in any society in which there are different **areas** of sharing ... It is in fact their degree of **autonomy** of internal economic organization relative to one another

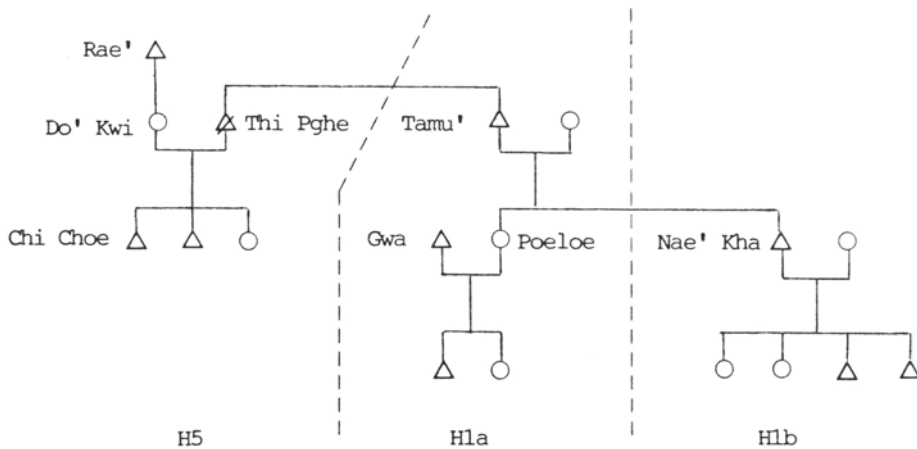
rather than any particular uniformity in that organization which marks off 'household' units from each other. (1980:14-6).

These observations are equally applicable to Palokhi.

Case 1: H1a, H1b

H1a consists of the headman, Tamu', his wife, their daughter, her husband Gwa and their two children. H1b consists of Tamu's son, Nae' Kha, his wife and their four children. The economically active people in these two households were Tamu', his daughter Poeloe, Gwa and Nae' Kha. Tamu's wife was too infirm for the more arduous tasks in agricultural work while Nae' Kha's wife was for much of 1981 house-bound as she was nursing a new-born son.

Figure 4.1 The Genealogical Relations between H1a and H1b



Nae' Kha married his wife in 1975 and went to live with her in her parents' house at Huai Dua, following the customary rule on uxori-local residence. In Huai Dua, he worked his father-in-law's wet-rice field but, at the same time, opened up a plot of wet-rice terraces by himself. After three years, however, he returned to Palokhi with his wife and, at that time, their two children. The wet-rice field that he opened was left for his father-in-law to use. There were two reasons why he returned to Palokhi. The principal reason was the expectation that he would eventually succeed his father as headman. For this, residence in Palokhi was mandatory. He also needed to familiarise himself with the various ritual performances and prayers required of a headman, although in the years when he was resident in Huai Dua he returned to participate in the Head Rite described in Chapter II. The second reason was that he found much of the burden of agricultural work fell upon him at Huai Dua because his father-in-law, an opium addict, left most of it to him.

Upon his return to Palokhi, he built a house next to Tamu's and a number of arrangements between the two households came into being which, in 1981–82, were still in the process of working themselves out. Prior to Nae' Kha's return, H1a cultivated swiddens and a wet-rice field owned by Tamu'.² When Nae' Kha returned to Palokhi, Tamu' and Gwa assumed responsibility for cultivating the swiddens of their household, whilst Tamu' and Nae' Kha were, on the other hand, responsible for cultivating Tamu's wet-rice field. However, in early 1981 Nae' Kha also rented a plot of wet-rice terraces from Chwi' (one of the former co-founders of Palokhi with Tamu') who had moved to Huai Dua in 1977 after divorcing his wife. The field was rented on a share-cropping basis. When Chwi' died later in the year, Nae' Kha exchanged his field in Huai Dua for Chwi's field in Palokhi with Chwi's second wife at Huai Dua. In addition, a small sum of money was paid over to her because Chwi's field was a little larger than Nae' Kha's. At the same time, he also began to open up his own plot of terraces near Tamu's wet-rice field. This marked the establishment of a certain independence in subsistence farming for Nae' Kha and his family. Although they were not under any undue pressure to do so, there was nevertheless a general expectation that they would eventually cultivate fields of their own whether they were swiddens or wet-rice terraces.

It may be noted here that the separation of responsibilities in working Tamu's swiddens and wet-rice fields between the two brothers-in-law was essentially dictated by ritual considerations (see Chapter VI).³ As far as the sharing of labour in Tamu's swiddens and wet-rice field were concerned, there was in fact no real division of labour, at least in theory. In practice, however, Nae' Kha was unable to contribute substantially to the cultivation of Tamu's swiddens because he was committed to working his rented field and opening the plot of terraces for his family's use. Gwa, however, assisted Nae' Kha in cultivating the latter's rented field and, occasionally, in the work on the new terraces.

Certain distinctions, however, were made in the sharing of the rice from the fields of H1a and H1b. While the crops from Tamu's swidden and wet-rice field were shared between the two households, the harvest from Nae' Kha's rented field was retained by him for his family's use in 1982.

The somewhat fluid arrangements in the sharing of labour and rice between the two households undoubtedly reflected the fact that the situation was a transitional one for H1b. There are, however, two important points to note about these arrangements. First, the expectation that Nae' Kha would eventually farm his own fields (which he was determined to do); second, the "non-accountable" nature of labour between the two households where it was provided freely (instead of being on strict reciprocal terms) subject to the exigencies faced by the two households. The farming of independently owned fields is significant because it reflects a general attitude that households should have their own

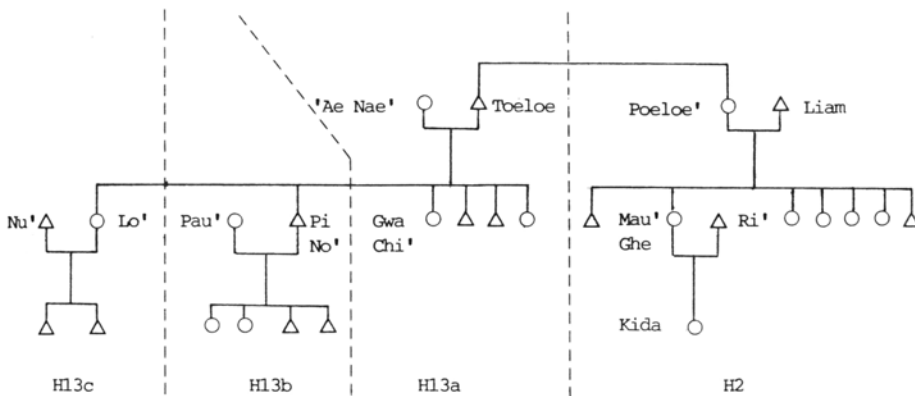
fields. The generally free exchange of labour, on the other hand, reflected the inability of both households to provide all the labour necessary for the cultivation of their own fields. It also shows the importance of primary kin ties and male affinal ties in such “non-accountable” labour exchanges.

In non-agricultural spheres, however, the separation of economic functions and the management of domestic budgets between the two households were decidedly marked. For example, the earnings of the two households from the sale of tea leaves collected in Tamu’s garden were managed independently. Thus, although both households had free access to the garden, the incomes from the sale of leaves were earned according to the labour that each expended instead of being pooled for common use. The use of money incomes were similarly decided upon separately. In other words, as far as cash incomes and expenditures were concerned, the two households operated quite independently. The only exception to this were rice purchases when rice stocks were near depletion in late 1981. Both households contributed to the purchase of rice but there was no strict accounting of their contributions. They also made additional purchases on their own from time to time according to their respective immediate needs.

Case 2: H2, H13a, H13b, H13c

The households which are of immediate interest here are H13a and H13b, but I have included H2 and H13c to illustrate other related features of domestic economic organisation which are not fully apparent from H13a and H13b.

Figure 4.2 The Genealogical Relations between H2, H13a, H13b, and H13c



H13a consists of Toeloe, his wife, four children and a grandchild. The grandchild is the daughter of Toeloe’s eldest daughter, Gwa Chi’, who was not married. There were only three members of the household who were economically active, namely, Toeloe, his wife and Gwa Chi’. Cha Pghe, the eldest after Gwa Chi’, was fifteen years old (in 1981) and did a considerable amount of agricultural

work but according to technical definitions may not be properly regarded as being part of the labour force.

The household cultivated only swiddens and did not own any wet-rice fields in 1981. A variable cash income was also earned by Toeloe who was Palokhi's blacksmith and gunsmith. The main source of this income came from gunsmithing for which Toeloe had a considerable reputation even beyond Palokhi and, indeed, a great many of his customers were Northern Thai from surrounding settlements. Toeloe, however, was an opium addict and much of this income was spent on opium. Because of his addiction and smithing work, Toeloe was rarely involved in swidden cultivation, his participation being confined more often than not to agrarian rites. Most of the agricultural work was done by his wife, Gwa Chi' and Cha Pghe. At various times, prior to 1981, Toeloe's eldest sons (Nu' and Pi No') who had moved away when they married came to assist in the more labour intensive tasks of swiddening, namely, planting and harvesting.

Early in 1981, however, Pi No' returned to Palokhi with his wife and children from the Flower Plantation of the Royal Forestry Department's Watershed Development Unit 1, where he had been working for about three years.⁴ Their intention was to settle permanently in Palokhi. Throughout 1981, they lived in Toeloe's house (their sleeping quarters being the outer verandah) and during this time Pi No' assisted the household in cultivating their swidden. This assistance, however, was only partial because he devoted a considerable amount of time to wage work in the Northern Thai settlement of Ban Mae Lao, the picking and sale of *miang* and tea leaves as well as other forest products. He also used Toeloe's smithy for work of his own of a similar nature such as making and repairing muzzle-loading caplock guns, bush knives, and so on.

For the most part of 1981, Toeloe's family and that of his son formed, for all practical purposes, a single household. This was particularly evident where the consumption of rice was concerned. The two families shared the rice from the previous agricultural season. The harvest from 1980, however, was small (as it was in 1981 as well) because the family had insufficient domestic supplies of labour to farm larger swiddens which would have been more appropriate to their needs. Thus, for most of 1981, they had to rely on rice purchased with money earned in the cash sector. Both families contributed to the purchase of rice which was pooled for common consumption.

Notwithstanding these arrangements in the sharing of rice, certain distinctions were nonetheless made in the management of the domestic budgets of the two families. The incomes earned by them in the cash sector were used to purchase items other than rice on the basis of quite independent decisions. Although these expenditures (on consumer durables, clothing, footwear, and so on) were small, they were distinctly separate reflecting the separate needs of the two families.

Despite the fact that H13a and H13b functioned more or less as a single household, it was clear in the latter part of 1981 that Pi No' had every intention of setting up his own household. He began to open up a plot of wet-rice terraces for his family's use in 1982. It is interesting to note that in doing so, he entered into a specific short-term labour exchange arrangement with Nae' Kha who was also opening a plot of terraces nearby. One reason why he did not seek any assistance from H13a was that the parental household was constrained by limited supplies of domestic labour. An equally important reason was the fact that he and Nae' Kha were in essentially the same situation. Both were able-bodied men who were the only full-time workers in their families; the arrangement, therefore, was to their mutual advantage. It is important point to note, however, that despite their on-going association with their parental households, both were acting to establish an independent subsistence base for themselves.

H13c consists of Nu' and Lo' (whose marriage was regarded as a "crooked" union as discussed in Chapter III) and their two children. In September 1981, they returned to Palokhi from the sub-unit of the Royal Forestry Department where they had eloped, with the intention of settling permanently in the village. Between September 1981 and February 1982 (when Nu' built a house for the family), the couple stayed with Toeloe with Lo' assisting H13a in various agricultural tasks. Nu', on the other hand, occasionally assisted H12, his parental household (see Case 4), but contributed little to the subsistence activities of H13a. Nu', who was an opium addict, spent most of his time picking and selling **miang** in order to earn money for buying opium. Some of his income was spent on the purchase of rice, but the rice was given to his mother in H12 where he took most of his meals. The reason why Nu' and Lo' took their meals in their respective parental homes was simply that H13a had insufficient rice to meet the needs of everyone. After Nu' and his family moved into their new house in 1982, Nu''s declared intention was to cultivate a swidden to meet, if not all, then part of his family's needs for the following year.

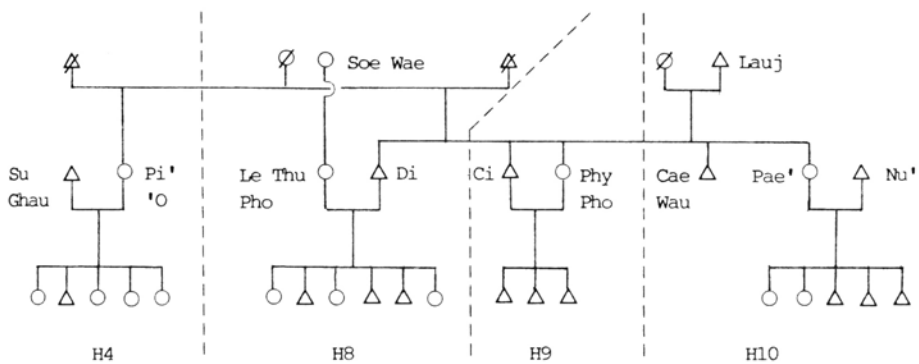
The case of H13c is, again, a transitional one but it shows that considerable flexibility is possible within the framework of domestic economic arrangements in Palokhi. The relative poverty of all the three households undoubtedly demanded various accommodations if they were to meet their very minimal consumption requirements in the transitional periods that they were going through. What is important, however, is that such accommodations are possible in the context of Palokhi kinship, familial sociology and their concomitant economic arrangements.

H2 is included, in this case, as an example of how households of siblings tend to assume a high degree of independence in economic functions especially when they are in the later stages of their domestic life cycle. That the the households of the two siblings, Toeloe and Poeloe', were well advanced in their

developmental cycle is, of course, evident from the fact that they had married daughters and sons. H2 cultivated swiddens and owned two plots of wet-rice fields and, in 1981, had the largest surpluses from agricultural production. Although Toeloe “borrowed” rice from Poeloe’ (which was never repayed) on one occasion in 1981, the two households were for all practical purposes quite independent of each other in subsistence production and other economic activities. H2 was, perhaps, the wealthiest household in Palokhi but there was no feeling of obligation, nor was there any expectation, that the household should assist H13a with rice or labour although Toeloe and Poeloe’ were brother and sister.

Case 3: H4, H5, H8, H9, H10

Figure 4.3 The Genealogical Relations between H4, H8, H9, and H10



Case 3 illustrates a variety of domestic arrangements which may come into existence over a long period of time. Some of these arrangements are described in the two cases above, but this particular case shows the further directions that they may take as domestic groups proceed further along their developmental cycle. It also illustrates how choice is a factor in whether or not kin links are activated in domestic economic functions as the network of kin becomes extended.

As the genealogical relations between households in the figure above show, Di and Ci, both full brothers, have a half-sister Pi' 'O by the same mother. When their mother and the father of the two brothers died, the three of them went to live with 'Ae', the sister of their mother (see Case 4) at Huai Khon Kha. When Su Ghau married Pi' 'O, in 1955, he moved into 'Ae''s house for a short period of time, after which he, Pi' 'O and Ci moved to Pang Ung where they lived as a single household cultivating only swiddens.

Di later married Le Thu Pho and went to live with her family at Mae Lak. For twelve years, apart from occasional visits, Di had little to do with his brother and half-sister's family. In 1969, Su Ghau, Pi' 'O, their children and Ci settled

in Palokhi, followed later by Di and his family. Di's decision to do so was guided by the availability of the wet-rice fields in Palokhi (news of which he had learnt from 'Ae' and Su Ghau), as it was in the case of Su Ghau. By the time Di arrived in Palokhi, both his family and that of Pi' 'O were fully independent and functioned quite autonomously of each other. Although they assisted each other in agricultural tasks, this did not entail cultivating the same fields or the sharing of rice.

Ci married Phy Pho in 1970 and moved into her parents' house, her father (Lauj) being the former headman of Palokhi. When Ci married Phy Pho, her elder sister Pae' was already married to Nu'. Pae' and Nu', therefore, had to move out of Lauj's house into a house of their own, following the custom on the succession of married daughters being co-resident with their parental families.

In the time that Nu' was living in Lauj's house, he assisted Lauj in the cultivation of Lauj's wet-rice field together with Cae Wau, Lauj's son. When he and his family lived on their own, however, he commenced swiddening on his own, although the rice from the two households was occasionally shared in times of need. Lauj, as I noted in Chapter I, was an opium addict and as he became older, eventually lost interest in farming leaving the work to Cae Wau and Ci. The two brothers-in-law, who began smoking opium with Lauj, became addicted in turn, so that the burden of cultivating Lauj's wet-rice field finally fell upon Nu', despite the fact that he was no longer a part of Lauj's household.

When Lauj's wife died in 1979, the family house was destroyed according to custom. Lauj and Cae Wau built a hut for themselves, while Ci (who preferred to disengage himself entirely from farming) built another house for his family. From then on, Ci committed himself to wage work in Northern Thai settlements and at sub-units of the Royal Forestry Department. Lauj and Cae Wau cooked and ate together, drawing upon rice from Lauj's wet-rice field which was stored in Nu''s house.

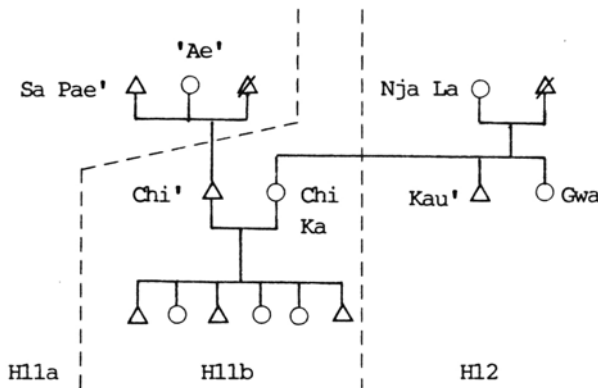
In early 1981, however, when Nu' built a new house, Lauj and Cae Wau moved into that house and, for all practical purposes lived as dependents of Nu' and his wife. Ci's household was virtually independent although his wife, Phy Pho, often obtained rice from Pae' of which no account was kept.

It will be recalled, from Chapter II, that Thi Pghe of H5 died in 1978 thus leaving behind his aged father-in-law, wife and three young children. As a result of Thi Pghe's death, the family encountered difficulties in cultivating their wet-rice fields primarily because of a shortage of labour and they rented out the field.⁵ The mainstay of their subsistence activities was tea and **miang** picking for a Northern Thai from Ban Mae Lao from which they derived a cash as well as rice income to meet their needs. Although they received some assistance within Palokhi, it is interesting to note, however, that this came from Su Ghau (H4) rather than Tamu' (H1a) who was Thi Pghe's brother. The assistance from

Su Ghau consisted of a work arrangement between him and Chi Choe (Thi Pghe's son) in which Chi Choe assisted Su Ghau in working his swidden; in return for this, Chi Choe was allowed to share in part of the harvest from the swidden. While the arrangement was mutually advantageous (though it perhaps worked out rather more in Su Ghau's favour than Chi Choe's), what is significant here is that Tamu' and his family felt no obligation to assist H5. It might be added, on the other hand, that no one in H5 expected H1 to assist them either.

This very clearly illustrates that collateral kin links are, by no means, **necessarily** important in guiding the sociological arrangements in the subsistence activities of related households. Indeed, if anything, it serves to show that very pragmatic — if not calculated — considerations of mutual advantage inform the decisions on the basis of which such arrangements come into being. More generally, it also shows that as households of siblings (or, in this case, siblings and step-siblings) assume a greater autonomy as they get older, this may be matched by other forms of organising subsistence activities which are not predicated on kin links. The possibility of this happening is related, of course, to the growth of the village and hence the availability of a wider range of related and unrelated households for co-operation in which choice then becomes a significant factor.

Figure 4.4 The Genealogical Relations between H11a, H11b, and H12



Case 4: H11a, H11b, H12

H11a consists of only two people, a sixty-three year old woman, 'Ae', and her fourth husband, Sa Pae', a Yunnanese Chinese deserter from a Kuomintang garrison in Chiengrai. 'Ae' first settled in Palokhi in 1955 with her second husband. When they came to Palokhi, they bought a wet-rice field which became 'Ae's when her second husband died. 'Ae' subsequently married Chwi' but they were divorced in 1976, the grounds allegedly being adultery between 'Ae' and Sa Pae'. Sa Pae', who came to Palokhi in 1974, had been taken in by the

couple as part of the household which meant, in effect, that they provided him with board and lodging in exchange for help in their fields.

H11b consists of Chi' ('Ae's only son), his wife Chi Ka and their seven children. H12 (see Case 2) consists of an eighty year old widow Nja La (Chi Ka's mother) and her two unmarried children, Kau' and Gwa.

The association of these households over a period of approximately nineteen years is interesting because it illustrates how the patterns in domestic economic arrangements may change through time, and how general statements about Karen kinship and residential patterns can often disguise the variety, complexity and fluidity in such arrangements among related households.

Chi' married Chi Ka in 1953, when his mother 'Ae' was still living in Huai Sai Luang. He went to live with Chi Ka and her family (at Huai Khon Kha) and, thereafter, had little to do with his mother apart from occasional visits. When Chi Ka's younger sister married, he and Chi Ka set up house of their own and continued to remain in Huai Khon Kha for a number of years after which they moved to various other places. After 'Ae' settled in Palokhi, however, he also moved to Palokhi in 1959 with the intention of opening up wet-rice fields for cultivation.⁶ This he failed to do; instead, he cultivated swiddens and assisted 'Ae' and her husbands in working the wet-rice field which was originally acquired by 'Ae' and her second husband, but which became her's on his death.⁷ Three years after Chi' moved to Palokhi (that is, in 1962), Nja La, her husband and their four children also settled in Palokhi. This, however, did not affect the arrangements which existed between H11a and H11b which consisted, essentially, of sharing in the cultivation and crops of Chi's swiddens and 'Ae's wet-rice field. H12 functioned virtually independently cultivating only swiddens.

The close co-operation between H11a and H11b in agricultural cultivation existed for two main reasons. First, H11a comprised only two people and was therefore unable to provide all the labour in wet-rice cultivation which made assistance necessary. That this was provided by Chi', his wife and two children of working age was, undoubtedly, because of the primary relationship between the two families. Second, the cultivation of fields in Palokhi, whether swiddens or wet-rice terraces, entails a series of ritual performances throughout the agricultural calendar and the role of men in these performances is of primary importance. As Sa Pae' was unfamiliar with these rituals, the responsibility for them devolved on Chi'.⁸

The domestic budgets of H11a and H11b, on the other hand, were managed separately following the pattern common in Palokhi. The separation of the budgets was very clear because the harvests from their fields were more than sufficient to meet their consumption needs.⁹ Thus, unlike some of the other households discussed before, H11a and H11b were under no pressure to purchase

rice which could be pooled for common consumption following the arrangements in agricultural cultivation.

In terms of the residential patterns associated with marriage and the family sociology of the Palokhi Karen, what is interesting in this case is that customary practice does not preclude an out-married son (and his family) from reestablishing links in subsistence activities with his parental household after being an integral part of his wife's parental household in accordance with the rule on uxorilocal residence at marriage. It is significant because it is not a special case — namely, succession to headmanship — in which there are **institutional** factors at work which require a son and his family to return creating conditions under which co-operation with the parental family might then become a necessity, albeit for an interim period. This is also significant because it once again demonstrates the importance of choice or preference (and their attendant advantages) in how kin links may be activated or ignored in the sharing of economic functions between related households.

Some General Patterns

The case studies discussed above show a great deal of variation in the way in which individual households manage domestic production. Nevertheless, some general patterns may be discerned.

First, an important factor in the variability of domestic economic arrangements is the life cycle of domestic groups and its associated processes of household formation and fission. I have shown in the preceding chapter that the features of household formation and fission in Palokhi are related to the custom of uxorilocal residence at marriage, the belief that a house should not contain more than two married couples (and their offspring), and the succession of married daughters, their spouses and children who are co-resident with their parental families as they get married. In general, the various arrangements in subsistence and other activities between households related by primary kin ties reflect adjustments which are made in response to changes which occur in their composition and residential patterns over time. Accordingly, households as production and consumption units are not organisationally fixed over time; however, at any point in time, they may consist of either stem families or nuclear families.

Second, the rule on uxorilocal residence at marriage by no means precludes the return of sons who have married out. They may, and indeed do, return to set up households of their own. In such circumstances, there exists a certain amount of sharing in agricultural tasks and crops. However, in contrast to married daughters and their families who are co-resident with their parental families, the degree of sharing is more restricted reflecting the primary importance of the household as an integral unit of production and consumption. Furthermore,

there is a general expectation that sons (and indeed daughters) and their families who establish separate households should assume responsibility (at least in theory) for their own production and consumption. This is, in fact, an ideal which rarely manifests itself in practice because of the exigencies (for example, limited domestic supplies of labour) often faced by such households. The ideal is also rarely translated into practice because of attachments between such related households. Thus, the economic association between parental households and the separate households of married children is never broken off entirely. When the parents of married siblings are dead, however, there is a greater autonomy in the management of agricultural production among married siblings especially if they have enough children of working age. Nevertheless, it is also possible for brothers-in-law to establish close working relationships especially if their households are marked by limited supplies of labour.

Third, at any given stage of the developmental cycle of domestic groups (whether they consist of stem or nuclear families), the likelihood of related households working together and sharing the returns to work (on a “non-accountable” basis) is greater in agricultural production than non-agricultural production. Indeed, where the management of domestic incomes and expenditures is concerned, such sharing is very limited even within stem family households reflecting the different or specific needs of their constituent units rather than the larger domestic group. In this area of economic activity, the separation is clear with conjugal or nuclear families being the operative socio-economic unit. Exceptions, however, occur. When domestic groups suffer a shortage of rice and need to buy it, their constituent units (that is, nuclear or conjugal families) usually do not maintain strictly separate budgets.

Finally, the kinds of arrangements between related (and unrelated) domestic groups may also be guided by wholly pragmatic considerations which, as we have seen, are by no means unimportant in informing the decisions made by a household to work with a particular household rather than another. In other words, beyond primary kin links (between households), kinship is not necessarily a factor of over-riding importance in determining the way in which households co-operate in subsistence production, nor is it necessarily a significant factor in distribution.

Contractual and Non-contractual Arrangements in the Organisation of Agricultural Production

Apart from the various ways in which domestic production and consumption is organised as described above, the Palokhi Karen recognise a number of arrangements which form a part of the organisation of agricultural production. In general, these arrangements may be distinguished according to whether they are contractual or non-contractual, loosely defined—that is, binding agreements which recognise certain terms or conditions as against informal non-binding

agreements, between two or more people. There are, essentially, four kinds of arrangements which may be regarded as contractual: they are “partnerships” and various forms of share-cropping or rent contracts. The only important non-contractual arrangement is co-operative labour exchange.

Partnerships

Partnerships, the most general type of contractual agreement between two or more people, are termed **ma ‘au’ soekau’**. It literally means “to work-eat in association”. **Ma** means “to work” and **‘au’** “to eat”. **Soekau’** can refer to a companion, an associate or a partner, that is, someone who is rather less than a friend (**ghomau’**). Friends and kin, however, can of course be **soekau’**. In essence, the term **ma ‘au’ soekau’** describes any binding agreement between two or more people to work together and to share the proceeds of their effort, on the basis of some criterion or principle of equity. More often than not, it relates to agricultural work though it can also be used with respect to non-agricultural income earning activity in which case the term is used rather more loosely.

In 1980–81, there was only one instance of a **ma ‘au’ soekau’** arrangement in Palokhi. This was the arrangement between Su Ghau (H4) and Chi Choe (H5) described earlier.

Share-cropping

There are three kinds of share-cropping arrangements which the Palokhi Karen distinguish and they are similar to Northern Thai share-cropping arrangements. Indeed, given that these arrangements pertain to the cultivation of wetrice and not swidden farming, it is altogether likely that the arrangements recognised by the Palokhi Karen are derived from Northern Thai practices.

The first kind of share-cropping arrangement is called **ma ‘au’ pha’ phau** which means “to work-eat divided in half”. It is similar to the Northern Thai **baeng koeng** or **baeng koeng kan** which means “dividing in half”. The contracting parties in such an arrangement would be a cultivator and an owner of a field. As the term implies, payment is made in the form of an equal share in the rice crop. In some cases, there may be additional payments if, for example, the use of a buffalo for ploughing is also made available by the owner of the field. Alternatively, the cultivator may rent the use of a buffalo from someone else, in which case the payment (in rice or cash) would then constitute a separate contractual agreement. In 1980, there was only one case of such a **ma ‘au’ pha’ phau** agreement; it was entered into between Duang (H3) and Chwi’ (one of the co-founders of Palokhi along with Tamu’) who owned a field in Palokhi and left to settle in Huai Dua in 1974, as discussed in Chapter II. In 1981, Nae’ Kha took over the cultivation of the field under a similar arrangement with Chwi’. This

particular contract and the consequences of Chwi's death are discussed in more detail, in the next chapter, in the context of the ownership of land in Palokhi.

The second type of share-cropping arrangement is called 'au' kho pghe which means "eating the price of the head". It is similar to, and indeed is the literal equivalent of, the Northern Thai *kin kha hua* ("eating the cost of the head"). As with *ma 'au' pha' phau*, rent payments are made in the form of rice. However, the payments are much less with the cultivator retaining more than half of the crop. In 1980 and 1981, there were no 'au' kho pghe contracts in Palokhi.

The third contractual arrangement is termed 'au' chi' 'a' khloe xi. The term means "to eat the back of the wetrice field". It is a wholly Karen term but it refers to a practice which is also found among the Northern Thai who call it *syy* or "buying" (Wijeyewardene [1966:48]). The arrangement consists essentially of the sale of use rights to a field for a particular period of time. As the Palokhi Karen conceive it, it is the owner of the field who "eats the back of the field". In Palokhi, there was one 'au' chi' 'a' khloe xi contract which lasted from 1979 to 1981. In this case, the use rights to a plot of wet-rice terraces (of 0.51 ha) were sold by H5 to a Northern Thai in Ban Mae Lao for a fee of Bht 1,200. Further details of the circumstances surrounding this agreement are discussed in the following chapter in relation to land use, ownership and inheritance in Palokhi.

The various contractual arrangements described above are not commonly practised by the Palokhi Karen. The norm in swidden and wet-rice cultivation is owner-cultivation of fields. One reason for this is that there is no excess capacity in the form of wet-rice land which may, therefore, be rented out to individuals or households which require land. A more important reason, however, is that in general there are sufficient tracts of land in the Huai Thung Choa valley which can be brought under both swidden and wet-rice cultivation thus eliminating the need to rent land. The existence of these contractual arrangements is nevertheless important. It shows that they constitute mechanisms which may be resorted to in the short term, according to the exigencies of the circumstances of households, as a means of meeting their subsistence requirements until a more permanent solution—in the form of ownership of wet-rice land—is found.

It will be noticed that the contracts entered into by the Palokhi Karen happen to involve non-kin. It is worth noting, however, that the Palokhi Karen say that these kinds of contractual arrangements may be entered into by kin and non-kin. In other words, such contractual agreements do not necessarily apply to non-kin only. One area where such contractual agreements between kin are potentially important in Palokhi is the inheritance of wet-rice fields. As I discuss the inheritance of land in the next chapter, it will be sufficient to point out here that the Palokhi Karen say that some of these agreements may be entered into by siblings who inherit wet-rice fields. The reason why inheritance and such

agreements are not yet an issue of major importance in Palokhi lies in the fact that only two of the male heads of households who opened up wet-rice fields have died.

Co-operative Labour Exchange

As with most if not all agrarian societies, there is in Palokhi an informal, non-contractual system for organising agricultural work on the basis of co-operative labour exchange. The underlying principle in this system is reciprocity in the provision of labour. In Palokhi, such work arrangements are called **ma dau' lau (poe') sa'** which may be taken to mean "working together" or "working mutually". The literal translation of this expression is "to work with (our) hearts falling together" where the essential sense of the term is conveyed by **lau sa'**, a phrase that functions as a simulfactive denoting mutual, reciprocal action or common activity.

Co-operative labour exchanges are most commonly found in clearing, planting, weeding, and harvesting in swidden cultivation. In wet-rice farming, it is found in the preparation of fields (ploughing, harrowing and levelling), planting, and harvesting. The main reason why labour exchange usually takes place in these tasks is that they either require large inputs of labour over a short period of time, or because they are tedious, time consuming tasks in which the presence of others helps to reduce the drudgery of the work as in weeding.

An examination of labour expended by Palokhi households on agricultural work and co-operative labour exchange (see Appendix B) reveals some interesting patterns which bear out some of the conclusions from the case studies.

First, the data show very clearly that despite the general principle of reciprocity which guides the exchange of labour there is, nevertheless, an imbalance in the labour supplied and received by all households in both swidden and wet-rice cultivation (see especially Tables B.2 and B.3). Much of the variation in the lack of full reciprocity in labour exchanges may be explained by the operation of contingent factors. These include differentials in the size of swiddens or wet-rice fields which affect the amount of labour required for the performance of related tasks, the size of domestic supplies of labour and domestic dependency ratios, competing demands on labour faced by households in non-agricultural activities, and so on. Other very human considerations also affect the amount of labour which may be contributed by households in co-operative labour exchanges. These include the degree of amity between members of different households, the expectation that good food will be provided for the labour gangs, the presence of marriageable young women who invariably attract a larger number of young men, and so forth.

Second, following some of the patterns discernible in the case studies, households related by collateral kin links by no means consistently work

together. Indeed, in some cases, the level of exchange labour is greater between non-related households than that between related households.

The Sociology of Production and Consumption in Palokhi

In examining the social organisation of production and consumption in Palokhi—through the examples of various households as well as general arrangements, both contractual and non-contractual—I wish to establish the importance of four considerations.

First, the operative socio-economic units in Palokhi are households. As we have seen in the last chapter, this follows from the fact that households are constituted according to the operation of the kinship system and, specifically, marriage and customs on residence.

Second, given that the household is the fundamental unit of production and consumption in Palokhi, there are nevertheless a variety of possible socio-economic arrangements within and between households. The significance of this is that kinship does not necessarily provide all the guiding principles in social organisation especially in the area of subsistence production in Palokhi.

Third, the variety of possible socio-economic arrangements show that there is considerable flexibility, in terms of available options, in the organisation of subsistence production in Palokhi. Indeed, adaptability might better describe this essential feature of production and consumption in the community. It is this flexibility or adaptability which allows the Palokhi Karen to maintain a certain level of subsistence production, in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors of their economy, by which they attempt to meet either part or all of their basic needs.¹⁰

Fourth, it will be noticed that despite the variety and flexibility in socio-economic arrangements none of these includes an institutionalised system of redistribution. Apart from the contractual arrangements described earlier, most if not all socio-economic arrangements have an *ad hoc* character and they do not, strictly speaking, constitute redistributive mechanisms. This has a direct bearing on the central theme of this study. Domestic groups or households which do not produce enough for their subsistence needs cannot make up these deficits by relying on the “internal” economy of Palokhi. They must seek recourse in an “external” cash or market economy which, for all practical purposes, firmly anchors Palokhi within a network of economic links in the Pa Pae hills which, in turn, is linked to the lowland economy of Chiang Mai. And they do so as independent households.

In sum, therefore, kinship provides the basic organising framework for social organisation. Within this framework, various possibilities are provided for on the basis of kinship relations in some cases, and non-kin relations in others, which enable the Palokhi Karen to organise themselves in subsistence production

and consumption. We might say, then, that while kinship structures social organisation in certain ways, it also does not preclude the interplay of other factors through which households seek to meet their basic needs. In Palokhi therefore, social organisation in general, and the organisation of production and consumption in particular, are constituted through the operation of the kinship system and **practical** social relations among households.

In terms of the cultural ideology of the Palokhi Karen, however, there is a specific set of behaviour which links—in the sense of a “relation between relations”—the operation of the kinship system, the household as the fundamental socio-economic unit in the community and the practical relations associated with it, as well as the larger organisation of the community. The behaviour in question is the actual consumption of food, eating, which functions as an operative, symbolic activity that establishes these links through the symbolic meanings it expresses in the contexts of day-to-day household routines and community rituals.

Eating: The Consumption of Food as Practical Symbol and Symbolic Practice

The consumption of food for sustenance forms the most fundamental goal of productive activity in Palokhi. Besides this, or indeed perhaps because of this, eating as an activity and idiom in verbal expressions appears to be a pervasive means of expressing and communicating ideas, concepts and cultural meanings about social relations. Some of these we have already seen.

In Chapter II, for example, I described the Head Rite and its sequel, and showed how the ritual commensalism among the co-founders of Palokhi and the rest of the community may be interpreted as a symbolic expression of certain social and ritual relationships which also involve the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land. Other examples of the symbolic significance of eating were also described in Chapter III, namely, the joint consumption of a meal by the bride and groom in public view on the final day of marriage ceremonies, followed by the drinking of liquor from a common cup. In the ‘au’ ma xae ritual, which is a quintessentially domestic ritual, as discussed in Appendix A, commensalism is the principal ritual activity; along with other considerations, it establishes the cultural meanings of various social relationships. And, in this chapter, we have seen how a number of contractual arrangements are described through the idiom of eating.

These examples are by no means the only ones to be found in Palokhi. There are many others which attest to the pervasiveness and power of eating as a polyvalent idiom in the symbolic representation of a host of cultural meanings in the social life of the Palokhi Karen, ranging from the seemingly trivial to the highly complex and significant.

Not unlike the Northern Thai, the Palokhi Karen often point to the number of times a day that people eat to make distinctions between ethnic groups. Indeed, because they eat three meals a day — as do the Northern Thai — this is taken as an indication of some similarity as against the Lisu, for example, who are said to eat five times a day. Again, similar to the Northern Thai, and a great many other Southeast Asian societies, a commonplace greeting in Palokhi has, as its subject matter, eating. The greeting, which is shared by the Pwo Karen (Hinton [1975:76]), is simply “Have you eaten yet?” (**na ‘au’ me wi li**). And, if the answer is in the affirmative, the next question could then be “What did you eat with rice?” (**na ‘au’ me dau’ ca’ lau**). The response is almost invariably “(I) had rice with pounded chillies” (**‘au’ me dau’ mysa tho**).¹¹

In ritual and non-ritual meals where chicken or pork is prepared, children (especially if they are very young) are not permitted to eat parts of the head. The reason given by parents is that the children will go hither and thither, heedless of parental instruction. Or, as we might say it in English, they would become “headstrong”. There is, perhaps, another unarticulated reason, namely, that the eating of the head is only appropriate to those who are mature or “old” because they are less vulnerable to the effects of what is consumed. In quite another context, healing rituals in cases of “soul loss” and “spirit invasion” entail the eating of a meal not only by the patient, but by all members of the household as well. The patient, however, is also given lustral water which has been chanted over with prayers or, more properly, spells, thus consuming the restorative power of the spells through the medium of water.

Furthermore, in all important rites which feature commensalism in one form or another, the accompanying ritual texts contain the words “eat” (**‘au’**) and “drink” (**‘au’**) as a key dyadic set stating explicitly the fact of commensalism which takes place. And, not unlike many societies in which eating is associated with sex (see, for example, Goody [1982: 11]), the Palokhi Karen have a formula for verbal abuse which makes a similar association. It translates as “eat your mother’s vagina” (**‘au’ noe’ mo ‘a’ li**).

As an idiom and activity, eating very clearly has the capacity to express a wide variety of meanings in Palokhi. One of these, of particular relevance to the present discussion, is the “corporateness” of the household and the relations between households which generally make up the community life and organisation of the Palokhi Karen. This is to be found in two contrasting modes of eating behaviour. The first is routine eating behaviour; the second is a generalised commensalism which takes place in one of the most important community rituals in the village, that is, the rites of the New Year (**lyta thau ni sau**).

In analysing the significance of these two modes of behaviour it is necessary to consider commensalism as a form of behaviour which can take place in a

variety of contexts (as indeed it does in Palokhi) in which the symbolic meaning of the activity may vary, but which nonetheless possesses some common symbolic property, feature or value. The analysis, in other words, must take into account the fact that eating does indeed occur in different contexts, that there is at least some common meaning attributable to the fact that the activity is the same in different contexts, and that there may also be **other** meanings present which are derived from the particular circumstances of the different situations in which the activity takes place. Thus, although I am specifically interested in interpreting two contrasting modes of eating behaviour in Palokhi — routine domestic commensalism and feasting in the rites of the New Year — the interpretation should nevertheless be generally applicable to other instances of commensalism, some of which have already been described and some of which will be discussed later (see Chapter VI).

The analysis which I present below draws on Kapferer's essay (1979) on ritual as a transformative process which is primarily concerned with the form and organisation of rituals as performances (rather than their content), and how transformations in meaning and action may be effected. In essence, the meaning of a ritual is the product of its context which is composed of its constituent elements (such as objects, actions, symbols and identities) and their particular configuration. Thus any change in the relation between these elements, for example, leads to a change in meaning. Following Grathoff (1970) and Handelman (1979) on the concept of "symbolic types", Kapferer argues that:

... specific symbolic elements or forms have properties, often culturally encoded within them, which effect transformations in other symbolic elements and in the organization of the context which they enter. (1979:10)

Such elements or symbolic types, then, have their own internal consistency which may transform the contexts in which they appear, thus, effecting transformations in meaning. Symbolic types also have the property of "summarising" symbols (Ortner [1973]; Kapferer [1979:12]). That is, they can contain aspects of meaning which they carry with them from one context to another.

In terms of the organisation of rituals, symbolic types, furthermore, can be of two kinds. They can themselves be altered as a consequence of the transformations they bring about; or they can remain unaltered despite the changes in meaning that they effect. The former kind are best exemplified in rites of transition, the latter in "affirmatory" rites.

Although Kapferer is essentially concerned with ritual in its "religious" or "sacred" sense as conventionally understood, it is clear that the definitions of "symbolic type" and "context" permit their wider application.¹² Indeed, they

must. Symbolic entities and, by implication and extension, the contexts in which they appear are not symbols and not necessarily “ritual” *sui generis*. They are appropriated from the context of everyday life and are, as it were, constructed symbols and situations. Accordingly, a consideration of an entity or element that is symbolic in ritual contexts must require at least some consideration of its relation to what it is when it is not symbolic or when it exists in a non-ritual context. Or as Firth has pointed out in an essay specifically concerned with food symbolism (1973:245–6), it is the conceptualisation of the object in a given relationship that is significant and that where food is concerned, the symbolic and non-symbolic relationships are in fact intertwined.

In more general terms, the critical issue here is whether or not a clear-cut distinction can be established between what is ritual and what is not. As Leach has suggested (1964:12–3), this is not always so easy to determine and a far more useful approach lies in taking the view that human actions may be placed on a continuum ranging from the purely technical to the highly sacred. What is symbolically meaningful and not symbolically meaningful, ritual and non-ritual, can therefore only be determined by a consideration of the objects, elements or entities **and** their contexts simultaneously. It is here that the nature and composition of what constitutes a “symbolic type” become important.

I suggest that as a practical activity, commensalism, may be regarded as a “symbolic type”, the typical property of which is the “constitutive” in the sense that social relations are symbolically constituted by it. This is a view of commensalism which is by no means new in anthropology. Commensal behaviour, as it is well-acknowledged in the anthropological literature, symbolically expresses a solidarity, commonality (or, indeed, communality) and shared identity of those who participate in it. Furthermore, I suggest that it is this property of commensalism as a symbolic type which effects transformations in meaning and, at the same time, allows it to remain unaltered despite these changes which it may bring about. In terms of the transformative aspect of ritual, therefore, we may consider commensalism as a symbolic type that transforms the context in which it appears through its “constitutive” property such that the essential meaning of the context lies in the process of the constitution of social relations or identities. The kinds of social relations or identities that are constituted, however, are defined by other elements in the context in which commensalism features. At the same time, the symbolic value of commensalism, in each context, remains the same notwithstanding the transformation in meaning that it brings about. Commensalism, in other words, is essentially “affirmatory” symbolic activity.

Domestic Commensalism in Palokhi

The Palokhi Karen eat three meals a day, and of these meals the early morning and evening meals are consumed in their homes while the mid-day meal is usually

consumed in their fields. There is not a great deal of symbolic meaning attaching to the kinds of food that they eat, but there are certainly symbolic aspects to how food is domestically prepared and the utensils which are used for this purpose. Cooking utensils, for example, are used in ways which establish very broad distinctions between food that is cultivated or domesticated and food that is not. The cooking of rice, for example, is done in a pot that is reserved specifically for this function. Similarly, stews consisting of the flesh of domestically reared animals and cultivated crops are cooked in a separate pot. For each kind of pot, there is also a spoon or ladle which can only be used together with it. On the other hand, game must be cooked in a different vessel. The pots and spoons, therefore, are not interchangeable insofar as their uses are concerned. I have also noted in the previous chapter, for example, that the cooking utensils of a married couple are thrown away when spouses are divorced and when families convert to Christianity. Much of the general symbolic significance of food in Palokhi occurs, therefore, in domestic contexts.

It is, however, mundane social behaviour associated with the eating of food at domestic levels that throws into relief the importance of domestic commensalism as a practical symbol through which social relations are expressed. Such behaviour might be dismissed as trivial were it not for the fact that it occurs consistently and is always predictable. It is behaviour of a kind that is so much a part of everyday social life, to which little thought is given, that it eludes explicit exegesis or formulation of its motivation or rationale except within its own frame of reference. For this very reason, however, it is I believe a good example of the kinds of “taken for granted” social interaction or behaviour which constitutes much of the praxis of what we choose to call, by way of abstraction, social organisation — in the same way that we might describe social organisation through an observation of the activities of production and consumption. It is, in other words, yet another aspect of social interaction in which social organisation is, as we might say, “immanent” as praxis.

When the Palokhi Karen eat at home, they almost invariably shut the doors of their houses. In some houses, the meal is eaten from a large, circular wooden tray (made from a cross-section of a tree trunk) which is placed on the floor near the fire-place. Rice is spooned from the cooking pot all around the tray. A dish or two of food accompaniments and chilli relish is placed amidst the rice in the centre of the tray. In other houses, large enamel dishes (purchased from shops) are used instead of the wooden trays. The meal is eaten by members of the household as they squat, or sit, around the tray. They use their fingers to pick up the rice and other food. Soup or gravy is eaten with common spoons shared by all. There is no particular order which dictates the eating of the meal. Where households are small, all members of the family eat together while in the case of large families, household members may be broken up into two groups which eat consecutively because they cannot all sit around the tray.

Domestic commensalism in Palokhi is, by its very nature, clearly “inclusive” and “exclusive” at the same time, for it includes only household members and excludes non-household members. This is, of course, symbolically established by shutting the door of the house, but it is also to be seen in the behaviour of non-household members during meal times. In general, doors are shut only during the night when the household sleeps and during meals. Shut doors, thus, can only have two meanings in Palokhi; outside of sleeping hours, they indicate that a meal is in progress. At such times, it is understood that visits should not be made.

On the other hand, if the Palokhi Karen visit one another, and they then notice that a meal is being prepared or is about to be served, they invariably leave the house and return later when the meal is over. As a matter of courtesy, they are usually asked to stay and eat, but such invitations are always declined (see also Hinton [1975:183]). The implicit rule, therefore, is that the members of a household do not generally eat in other households.

Feasting in the Rites of the New Year

There are a number of important features in the rites of the New Year in Palokhi. Some of these I consider in Chapter VI where I discuss the annual ritual cycle in the community. Here, therefore, I shall consider only the commensalism that takes place in what is the most important ritual in the community.

The New Year celebrations are held over two consecutive days, the first of which is given to final preparations for the feasting that takes place on the second day, and an evening meal eaten only by members of the domestic group. Before this meal is eaten, the oldest married woman in the household performs a “soul calling” (**kau’ koela**) ritual in which the souls of all household members are called back to the home. The meal is eaten in much the same way as ordinary meals, the only difference being that a richer repast is prepared in the form of chicken or pork. What marks the eating of this meal from other meals and the annual **‘au’ ma xae**, however, is the fact that it occurs in the context of the New Year celebrations thus distinguishing it as an activity of special significance to the Palokhi Karen as a community.

On the next day, the household has its early morning meal which is immediately followed by a wrist-tying ceremony for all members of the domestic group. Their wrists are tied by the head of the household and his wife with lengths of cotton yarn. The purpose of the ceremony is to bind the souls of household members to their bodies. Thereafter, members of the household (usually children) go to other houses in the village, beginning with the headman’s and that of the elders, inviting the occupants to “come and eat, come and eat”. As every household does this, the scene in the village eventually becomes one of people bustling to and fro, either issuing invitations to eat or entering houses

for a meal and emerging only to be faced with another barrage of invitations. And so it goes on through the day.

The headman and elders are usually invited together as a group. The reason for this is that when they have finished eating the meal, they are asked to make offerings of rice liquor to the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land as well as to pray for blessings on the household. They are, in other words, invited as ritual officiants inasmuch as they are members of the community like all others who are invited.

As visitors arrive at each house, food is placed before them in the eating tray for them to eat. They are usually joined by a member of the host family who, under the circumstances, eats as a token gesture. Needless to say, as visitors make their rounds, they too are only able to eat in token fashion. After the meal is eaten, rice liquor is served along with tobacco and fermented tea (**miang**). Feasting in the New Year celebrations of the Palokhi Karen is, to use a more familiar idiom, an “open house” affair.

The Constitutive and Transformative Aspects of Commensalism

It will be apparent from the accounts above where the essential area of contrast lies between routine domestic commensalism and the generalised commensalism of the rites of the New Year. Domestic commensalism is very much confined to members of the household with a corresponding exclusion of non-household members. The commensalism in the rites of the New Year, on the other hand, reverses this norm where the Palokhi Karen eat in every house contrary to everyday practice.

Although everyday household commensalism may not be regarded as a “ritual” activity, its primary significance lies in — to use Firth’s phrase — its “conceptualization in a given relationship”, that is, as an activity that is associated with, and identifies, those who live, work, and consume the products of their labour together. It is in this relational sense that domestic commensalism may be regarded as “constitutive”. But if commensalism is so, at the level of the mundane or quotidian, it is undoubtedly elevated to the symbolic in the meals taken by the domestic group on the evening of the first day and morning of the second day in the New Year celebrations. At this time, the conceptual and relational aspects of domestic commensalism are, quite unambiguously, symbolically “constitutive” of the “corporateness” or solidarity and identity of the domestic group or household.

However, the second day of the celebrations is also given to commensalism as the principal activity of the community as a whole. It is during this generalised commensalism that the activity of eating becomes “transformative” and “constitutive” at the same time. The rites of the New Year effect a transformation

in terms of what is being constituted through commensalism in a different context, a context that is now defined by the general participation of all members of the community as opposed to participation in commensalism at the strictly domestic level. Here, it is the “corporateness” of the community in its entirety that is affirmed through commensalism, following that of the domestic group. In other words, the process of transformation lies in the change from the affirmation of domestic group identity to community identity.

This is important for what it reveals of the ideological status of the household or domestic group, both individually and collectively. In strictly practical terms, the household is as we have seen the fundamental operative social and economic unit in Palokhi while general social organisation and the organisation of subsistence production and consumption consist of a variety of arrangements which make up the relations among households. It is, however, the representation of this fact through routine domestic commensalism **and** the generalised commensalism in the rites of the New Year, as symbolic or ritualised activity, which is indicative of the place which the household and general social organisation, effectively, occupy in the cultural ideology of the Palokhi Karen. At a general level, this is consonant with the family sociology of the Palokhi Karen as well as features of the ideology of the kinship system, marriage and residence discussed in the previous chapter. It is also totally consistent with the way in which households function as ritual units in the cultivation of crops (see Chapter VI). Although ideologies, at their most general, do not necessarily consistently reflect practical social arrangements, in Palokhi this is indeed the case. It implies a degree of internal consistency in the cultural ideology of the Palokhi Karen which is relevant to an understanding of the maintenance of a social and cultural order that is distinctively their own. It is this very internal consistency, along with other considerations discussed in the concluding chapter, which ensures a certain continuity in the cultural ideology of the Palokhi Karen if only because there are fewer areas of tension or contradiction which would, ultimately, require resolution thus rendering it open to restructuring or change.

In this chapter, I have attempted to describe the general social organisation of Palokhi in microsociological terms by examining a variety of practical social arrangements in subsistence production which form, in large part, the substantive aspects of this social organisation. I have also attempted to show that the cultural ideology of the Palokhi Karen reflects this organisation in ways which are consistent with other aspects of social organisation, namely, kinship, marriage and residence and that this is effected through commensalism, as practical and symbolic activity, which “summarises” (or abstracts from social reality) the social relations within and among households in which much of social organisation in Palokhi exists as praxis. These considerations are directly relevant to an understanding of the subsistence economy of the Palokhi Karen which I discuss in detail in the next chapter.

ENDNOTES

¹ I have chosen to approach Palokhi social organisation and the organisation of production and consumption through an examination of case studies for a number of reasons. First, it is only through an assessment of the **details** of how the Palokhi Karen actually work out the arrangements in subsistence production that we may then usefully draw conclusions about social organisation in general and about the organisation of production and consumption in particular. Second, I wish to further substantiate as fully as I can, through this micro-sociological approach, my views on kinship expressed in Chapter II: namely, that kinship principles (as they might conventionally be understood) do not necessarily operate independently in determining the particular configurations that characterise various forms of social organisation in Palokhi, beyond domestic group formation and fission. Third, in so doing, it is also my intention to present an alternative interpretation of Karen kinship and social organisation, especially in the domain of economic activities, to that contained in some contemporary anthropological writings on the Karen. A number of these interpretations are, I believe, over-formalised and as such misleading in many respects. Of the Pwo Karen, Hinton says, for example, that

... a network of cognatic ties linked all households in the village. It is further useful to regard a community as being composed of three levels of personnel: firstly, a large nucleus of close cognates; secondly, a category of people whose links with the first group were of greater genealogical distance, and third, men and women who had married people from the first or second categories, but who had no cognatic ties with one another, nor with any other village member. (1975:44).

As an attempt to depict social organisation in terms of kinship, there is nothing particularly problematic in this. However, it is in relation to specific sociological arrangements that difficulties arise. Immediately following this account, Hinton says it is noticeable that “the greater an individual’s genealogical distance from the cognatic nucleus, the greater his social disadvantage”. This, apparently, manifests itself in heavier fines, the inability to influence the opinions of others, and in “obtaining cooperation in the economic sphere”. In a more modest description of cooperative labour exchange however, Hinton has this to say:

No kinship or other principle applied to the recruitment of cooperative work groups. Members of a village community helped one another on an arbitrary basis. Except at planting time, little effort was made to formally coordinate work. As the number of people involved was relatively small, *ad hoc* arrangements sufficed. (1975:153).

As far as this goes, it is true for the Palokhi Karen as it is for the Dong Luang Karen studied by Hinton. While I have no wish to quibble over the facts that Hinton adduces, I would nevertheless claim that Hinton’s depiction of Dong Luang social organisation in terms of kinship is clearly inadequate in terms of the different and, indeed, apparently contradictory kinds of behaviour that may take place. The difficulty arises because of an implicit assumption which attributes too much explanatory power to kinship and some notion that the strength of affective sentiments, influence, etc. is inversely proportional to genealogical distance — for that is what Hinton’s depiction amounts to. He is not alone in this. Madha asserts that among the Sgaw Karen he studied, “As the degree of kinship-distance increases, loans take on a more business-like aspect” (1980:157). Yet he also tells us in his discussion of sibling ties (which are central to his analysis of social organisation and kinship) that there is considerable variation in the nature of economic arrangements between siblings in the two villages he studied (1980:181–92). Hamilton’s discussion of Pwo Karen social organisation represents perhaps the most earnest attempt at a formalised account but it is, in my view, highly unsatisfactory because it raises more questions than it attempts to answer. In his account of kinship, he says:

An obvious and major function of the kinship network is that of linkage. Through the network individuals are able to interact in predetermined, predictable ways, and the kinship system is extended to Karen who are nonkin in order to allow interaction.

The network of bilateral kin terms is focused through the recognition of the relationship between a man, a woman, and their children, as well as the surrounding set of relatives of the husband and wife. The bilateral kinship network ... leads ... to a system of filiation, consisting of set statuses with correlative behaviour patterns for structuring relationships ... (1976:97).

The implication here is that interaction is not possible without the kinship system which “predetermines” behaviour and makes it “predictable”. This must surely be an overstatement. For one thing, it raises the question as to what exactly is the difference in behaviour between kin and non-kin? Second, the

only possible kinds of behaviour which could be spoken of in these terms are, in fact, avoidance and joking relationships (at least in the context of cognatic systems) such as those found in certain societies in Peninsular Malaya (Benjamin [1980]) where certain types of behaviour are deemed appropriate, indeed obligatory, between **specified** kin. Hamilton also sets out what he calls the “social structural organisation of economic activities” in terms of the “subsistence economy”, which he says may be called the “kinship economy”, and the “market economy”. His observations on the former are that

The kinship economy is based upon cooperation, reciprocity, mutual aid, and sharing within and between Karen social units. Individuals cooperate in fishing endeavours; they help each other in preparing, planting, caring for, and harvesting crops; they go hunting together, and they cooperate in other ways as well. People may or may not share crops equally, but if one family is in need, it may borrow from another family, and return the favour at some later time; in some cases, however, there may be no return at all. This subsistence economy has behaviour patterns based on kin, lineage, friendship, and village relations. There is a discernible structure, with rules, in these economic inter-relations. (1976:195).

It is difficult to see how this can be a “kinship economy” if it has “behaviour patterns” which run the gamut that Hamilton mentions. I might add that his argument that “lineages” exist among the Ban Hong Pwo Karen is far from convincing. They are, if anything, rather like Northern Thai matrilineal descent groups (see Cohen and Wijeyewardene [1984]) constituted solely for ritual purposes. There hangs an intriguing anthropological tale but it is best left for discussion elsewhere. Furthermore, it is not at all evident that there is a “discernible structure” nor what the “rules” are. While it is true that Hamilton presents this “kinship economy” as an ideal type of sorts, contrasting with the “market economy”, he also claims that actual economic organisation consists of “mixtures of relations and rules between the extremes”. But as he does not indicate what this “mixture” specifically involves, the heuristic value of the “kinship economy” is, to say the least, highly doubtful. Hamilton’s general sociological observations in fact tell us very little. The central issue in these accounts of Karen social organisation, kinship, and economic activities is whether or not cognatic kinship systems can be talked about in terms of statuses, roles, or indeed some notion of “morality” or an “axiom of amity” (Fortes 1969:231–2) beyond primary kin relationships. The issue is by no means confined to the Karen ethnography but as it concerns questions which lie outside the scope of the present discussion, I shall not, therefore, go into them here. However, I should at least point out that there are a number of papers (most of which are unfortunately as yet unpublished), of considerable importance, which challenge (with, in my opinion, good reason) the kinds of assumptions often found in discussions of Southeast Asian cognatic societies of which those in the Karen case are examples. The first is **Kinship: An Essay in its Logic and Antecedents** by Wijeyewardene (1974), which is very much concerned with theory and addresses a wide range of issues. One of these issues concerns assumptions of the kind mentioned above which Wijeyewardene argues constitute a “sociological fallacy” because, along with other considerations, kin behaviour in cognatic societies cannot be regarded as role behaviour in any formulable sense. Nor can such behaviour necessarily be spoken of in terms of rights and obligations beyond primary kin relations. There are also a series of papers on the prehistory and comparative ethnography and ethnology of Aslian societies in Peninsular Malaya by Benjamin (1980, 1985a, 1985b). One of Benjamin’s major arguments is that in these societies (all of which are cognatic), kinship may actually be manipulated, that is employed to establish certain kinds of organisational differences, as part of a process of selective adaptation to, and the creation of, ecological niches. This concerns a particular set of issues which are, quite possibly, related to those which Wijeyewardene deals with briefly in his discussion of the different terminological systems employed by the Eskimo in different contexts (1974:174). As a last comment, it goes without saying that there are different kinds of cognatic systems in so far as their terminologies are concerned. Accordingly, the broad generalisations which have, in some ways, grown uncritically since contemporary rethinking of these systems by Murdock (1960) and Freeman (1958, 1960, 1961) among others, are often of limited value. The point I wish to make in all of this is that there is much that cannot be taken for granted in the analysis of Southeast Asian cognatic systems generally, and Karen kinship specifically. For these reasons, and also because I am of course concerned with somewhat different issues in this thesis, I have chosen to approach the analysis of Palokhi social organisation as I have done here.

² The ownership of fields in Palokhi is an interesting and, indeed, important aspect of the cultivation system involving kinship, gender considerations, inheritance as well as certain ritual concepts which are relevant to an understanding of the cultural ideology of the Palokhi Karen where it concerns the use of land. This is discussed in the next chapter.

³ The ritual considerations concern the ritual ownership of fields as opposed to non-ritual ownership. I discuss the ritual ownership of fields at some length in Chapter VI.

⁴ The marriage between Pi No' and his wife, it will be recalled, was a "crooked" union as discussed in Chapter III. As the wife, Pau', was living in the Flower Plantation where her father was a wage-worker, Pi No' thus went to live with her according to the custom on uxorilocal residence at marriage once the appropriate rituals had been conducted. After fulfilling the requirement on residence dictated by custom, and after saving up some money, Pi No' decided to return to Palokhi to take up farming because he found the work at the Flower Plantation "not enjoyable" (*toe' my'*).

⁵ I discuss this rent arrangement as well as some others later in this chapter in the section on contractual and non-contractual arrangements. Further details concerning land transactions in Palokhi may be found in the next chapter.

⁶ As discussed in Chapter II, a major reason for the migration of households to the Huai Thung Choa valley was the prospect of reclaiming the abandoned Hmong wet-rice fields. Chi's decision not to cultivate wet-rice fields eventually was partly due to the fact that it was possible for his family to share in the cultivation and the crops of 'Ae's field. It was also partly because the reclamation of fields required labour inputs which his family could not supply as his children were still young. In short, it was a decision based on several considerations. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Chi' from **claiming** ownership to a number of plots of land although he had no intention to open them up for cultivation. As I discuss in the following chapter, this appears to have been nothing but a scheme to profit from the sale of these plots to subsequent migrants to Palokhi. One reason for this was that Chi' was an opium addict and needed money to buy the drug. The other was that he was, quite simply, an opportunist and a rogue though a likeable one, a fact which the Palokhi Karen recognised and which perhaps explains why he did not earn much opprobrium, at least overtly.

⁷ The ownership of fields by women is very unusual indeed in Palokhi and this was, in fact, the only case. I discuss the reasons for this in Chapter V.

⁸ Some of these rituals and the central role of men in their performance are dealt with in Chapter VI where I describe and discuss the cycle of agrarian rites in Palokhi.

⁹ I might point out here that the harvests from 'Ae's wet-rice field were far in excess of what was required by her and Sa Pae'. This was not the case with the harvests from Chi's swidden as his family was large. The fact that there were surpluses from both fields, however, indicates that the deficits in Chi's household were being made up by rice from 'Ae's field.

¹⁰ That is, where households cannot produce enough for their consumption requirements, they have to obtain rice by other means in the non-agricultural or cash sector. As I show later and in Chapter V, this is done by households on an individual basis. The flexibility or adaptability, in other words, lies in the variety of arrangements which households can enter into either together or on their own in both sectors. It is this which enables them to meet their subsistence requirements.

¹¹ There is, in fact, more to these greetings and they deserve to be examined in their own right. Very briefly, they appear to encode certain ideas about — for lack of a better term — the "offensiveness" of repletion, and suggest a reluctance to establish or assert (however perfunctorily) differences in well-being. I have on a number of occasions heard Palokhi parents check their children who, with little care for social niceties and with obvious relish, informed their friends of some dish of meat which they enjoyed at home in response to precisely these kinds of alimentary greetings. It is true that the Palokhi Karen almost invariably have a chilli-based relish with their rice. However, while it is the commonest fare, it is also the most basic. "Pounded chillies", however, is a generic term which covers a wide variety of preparations which, I might add, by no means compare unfavourably with many equivalent relishes in Northern Thai cuisine. I suspect that an important reason why "pounded chillies" is a standard response is that the Palokhi Karen experience a certain degree of embarrassment in indicating that they have eaten well when they know that others may not have done so. While this makes sense in terms of social interaction, what makes this kind of verbal behaviour culturally significant is that it is yet another manifestation of an ethos of egalitarian social relations. Though there are disparities in wealth among Palokhi households, wealth is generally never ostentatiously displayed. The avoidance of assertions of socio-economic differences is, thus, effected through the use of metaphors of shared poverty — in this case "pounded chillies" — in order to assert that all are equal in what people are compelled to eat in lean times. However, I might add that Palokhi Karen cuisine is not as impoverished as is often believed by the Northern Thai many of whom in fact are convinced that all that the Karen eat is rice and "pounded chillies".

¹² Though Kapferer does not deal with this, it is clear from his review of the papers to which his essay is an introduction, that he accepts that the most fundamental definition of a symbol lies in the relationship between a signifier and what is signified and that symbols are not symbolic objects, elements or identities

in themselves. In the same way, rituals are not *ipso facto* rituals but are constructed situations with symbolic meaning.