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## **Migration in Thailand: a social, eco-psychological approach**

### **1. Summary of basic theoretical concepts**

There are number of known impetus for urban migration, however, no single influence – be it economic, demographic, social or psychological – can adequately account for the motive(s) leading to a migration decision. In this study, we have endeavored to demonstrate that in order to gain insight into the reasons and processes underlying rural-urban migration, a number of factors should be considered. The theoretical approach guiding our research and analysis was an Action Theory developed by Boesch (1978, 1980). The prospective urban migrant is seen as an actor who weighs the perceived advantages and disadvantages of village versus urban living. So as to better understand the potential migrant's situation, motivations and his perception of them, we believe it is of value to question and to observe him acting within his actual life situation, his home village.

Action Theory assumes the existence of two somewhat similar, somewhat contrasting environments. The actual field-of-action of the potential migrant is his village. It includes a number of action goals, current as well as anticipated. The village offers possibilities for both satisfaction and frustration past and presently experienced and anticipated. The city, conversely, represents a potential action field, which also incorporates a number of action goals. Satisfactions and frustrations arising out of the urban situation, though, are predominantly anticipated. Both action fields and action goals are characterized by spatial, physical, social, economic and cultural features of an objective nature, but these are perceived, evaluated and upheld by the individual as a subjective reality. The city as a potential action field, however, is significantly less differentiated by the prospective migrant than his actual action field, the village.

A migration tendency originates when the individual becomes dissatisfied with his current life situation, is aware of alternatives, perceives opportunities to improve upon and expand his action possibilities and believes that he is capable of meeting the challenges which urban migration would entail. Pressures from the environment against migration must not be too prohibitive. The potential migrant evaluatively interpretes the costs and benefits, the advantages and drawbacks of remaining in the village over migrating to the city before he opts for one situation and devises a corresponding plan of action in order to facilitate the realization of his action goals.

## **2. Research location and methodology**

Two villages within Amphur<sup>1</sup> Baan Udom, Nakorn Nayok Province, Thailand were selected as our research sites. Several criteria determined the choice of the research location. One criterion was the size and the structure of population. Amphur Baan Udom with a comparatively small population, 24 424 inhabitants (1978 figures), was nevertheless sufficiently stratified to fit our needs. A second factor was the distance from Bangkok. We wanted to study a Central Plain district situated beyond commuting range, but still within an accessible distance to the capital so that the impact of modernization could be felt and observed. Thirdly, we wanted to study an area not presently demonstrating a well defined pattern of outward migration toward the country's capital. Amphur Baan Udom appeared to fulfill all of these three conditions.

During the initial phase of the field research, inquiries concerning the community's historical development, social and economic structures, cultural, political, ethnic, religious, educational, health and family organizations, beliefs, values, norms and so on were conducted by interviewing and interacting with several "key-informants". These informations were also substantiated by the use of semi-structured family surveys to determine the actual socio-economic living conditions of the villagers as well as many other aspects of village life which might not have been covered during in-depth interviews with our "target informants", the potential migrants. One hundred and thirty-one households were surveyed, equivalent to approximately 65 percent of the total households in the research areas.

A migration sample, a specific migration-willing age group 17 through 40 years old was selected with the assistance of the various key-informants. In-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with this group of informants. Participant observations of their daily activities and associations in the village also were made. Informal conversations with their relatives, friends and neighbors also were pursued.

A total of 35 village informants were interviewed as potential migrants. Another 10 informants from the district, who had already migrated to Bangkok, were interviewed, too. Actual migrators were encouraged to report, in retrospect, the various factors which they considered relevant in their migration decisions prior, during and after their departure from the village. Among others, these factors included their evaluation of their situation – social, familial, material – in the village, the satisfactions and frustrations they experienced there and anticipated in the city, their city-related information sources, their migration supportive and discouraging

1 "Amphur" in Thai means district.

social partners, their reasons and the possible precipitants motivating them to opt for the city and their city-related goals and expectations as well.

### 3. The psycho-social structure of the village

The village situation is characterized, first, by what we termed as “functional transparency”<sup>2</sup>. Functional transparency implies the common knowledge and understanding shared by the residents of a given community. It includes a type of shared internalization of the eco-social-cosmological structure of the community with its social-economic-political activities and more complex rules guiding secular as well as religious action and interaction. What is transparent for community members may be less so for “outsiders” or even residents from other Thai villages who have internalized other structures and do not appreciate fully the implications of the action and interaction processes occurring still within another community. Some of the most important functions of the “transparency” concept concern identification, group cohesion and loyalty, task cooperation, social harmony and conflict reduction etc. Thus, an intimate knowledge of one’s own action arena provides one with a *sense of security and familiarity*. While at the same time coordinated knowledge and action lead to harmony, support and cooperation within the community. Obviously, these are some of the most significant conditions prompting the villagers to remain in their rural communities. There they know more or less what to expect and, even in the case of the unexpected, know how to deal with it. On the other hand, security and harmony derive from *order* – moral, social, ecological and material – which are integral parts of village life, too. Objects or phenomena which are “outside” of, “foreign” to the villagers’ order and world view may be considered threatening. Means must be found to reestablish the threatened or lost balance. There are many regulative mechanisms – traditional as well as modern – within the community to help preserve order. Therefore, *adaptability* is considered to be another important quality of this social unit.

To the individual villager, adaptability means a working comprehension of the (existing) system essential for successful “every-day” transactions and transformations. Adaptability implies both flexibility of the system as well as the ability of the individual to utilize the available community mechanisms to achieve his goals. In a sense, “functional transparency” is necessary for coordinated action and interaction while “adaptability” is essential for both

2 The concept was first introduced by Boesch in his Action Theory (refer to Boesch, 1978, 1980, 1981). It has been further expanded upon by Sripraphai, P. & Sripraphai, K. (1981, 1982) as a result of their field research in Thailand.



internal and external integration of new ideas, objects and behaviors. Societies in which norms are “compelling” or offer few opportunities, few goals or “difficult” access to appropriate means for achieving goals, alternative solutions/situations may be sought and migration appears to be one of the options.<sup>3</sup>

Another significant component which should be taken into consideration when examining the village situation is the *sentimental-symbolic* dimension. On the one hand, the sentimental-symbolic dimension encompasses the extent of the villager’s *attachment and commitment* to his community. On the other, it incorporates a *system of meanings* which may shape his personal belief-value system and action goals and tendencies. It appears that both of these functions may become components in the villager’s identity. While the concepts of transparency and adaptability may serve more or less instrumental functions for the individual and the community in the realization of goals, sentimental-symbolic qualities allow the villager to identify himself, to find and make his place within his world. Unfortunately, this latter condition is ignored frequently in many migration analyses despite the fact that it may be one of the most critical elements considered by the prospective migrant in his migration decision. Deliberating about leaving the home village elicits anxiety because this process entails not only considering a possible physical and emotional separation from the security of one’s home, but a calling into question much of what constitutes one’s identity – a spiritual and moral separation/alienation. On the other hand, a decision to migrate often is precipitated by some dissatisfaction within one’s current action situation. In other words, the individual feels that his needs can not be adequately met, his individual feels that his needs can not be adequately met, his specific goals may not be fulfilled by remaining in the village; simultaneously, he speculates that his action opportunities may be more favorable somewhere else. The desire to leave home, however, also may create interpersonal tensions. In a sense, the aspiring migrant appears to be communicating to the stayers, especially to his family, that there is something “lacking”, at the very least, in their community and with their lifestyle. Their values and way of living, in effect, have been called into question.

Better than anyone else, the villagers are well aware of this type of dilemma which, actually, constitutes part of their continuous development. To reduce potential conflicts and frustrations caused by the migratory tendencies of its members, the community has devised many *conciliatory mechanisms*. Apparently, each community has its own specific methods of

3 One example is the influx of economic and informational exchanges between the village and town. These can lead to conflicts and frustration and consequently to the need to cope with the apparently unbalanced situation. Migration, in its various forms, serves a regulative function. This issue is discussed in greater detail in Section 5.

handling this problem. In the area which we conducted our research, a special method has been cleverly incorporated into the worship of a guardian spirit called *puu taa*.

#### **4. The guardian spirit cult of *puu taa* and its implications for urban migration**

*Puu taa* is the traditional village guardian spirit worshipped by many of the villagers in Baan Udom. According to tradition, after the original leaders of the settlers to this region died (between 1824–1851), they came to be worshipped as the guardian spirits<sup>4</sup> of the villages which they had home-steaded.

Practically every village in the area has erected a shrine to *puu taa*, a large wooden spirit house, frequently located on the village periphery. *Puu taa* is regarded as a benevolent grandfather whose primary function is to safeguard the village. In addition, *puu taa* is ascribed the power of granting personal requests, of ensuring agricultural prosperity and acting as an intermediary between the villagers and other spirits. Through the village mediums, *puu taa* communicates his messages to the villagers and exercises control over their lives.

The behavioral patterns which we observed the villagers follow in their transactions with *puu taa*, seemed similar to those which we discerned were employed in their everyday dealings with each other – contemporaries, subordinates and superiors. This pattern can be best described as a reciprocal social contract. A party attempts to build up a ledger of gift/service debits and credits vis-à-vis other parties, especially the “appropriate” parties, including the supernatural. In this manner, past favors are reciprocated and new ones can be requested. As a consequence of the acceptance of this mode of relating to the spirits, this pattern acquires supernatural sanction on the mundane level.

*Puu taa*, in addition to his role as *law-giver*, assumes the role of *law-enforcer* constraining compliance with village norms. Societal pressure is another effective means of securing conformity. Nonconformance results in the withdrawal not only of supernatural succor, but of community support as well. Thus, the norms facilitate group solidarity and cooperation. A party is permitted to seek its advantage over other parties only within an ordained framework. The resources of the community are limited; non-regulated competition for them would undermine group viability and cohesion.

4 The relation of the guardian spirit cult to Theravada Buddhism, Thailand's dominant religion, is an intricate one, characterized by both contradictions and complements. These are separate domains of tradition, beliefs, values and ritual behavior.

In the two Baan Udom villages which we studied, it is imperative that new arrivals and soon-to-be departees ritually inform *puu taa* of their intention to transfer community residence and allegiance. Without *puu taa*'s permission and promise of protection, the mover or the intended mover would be reluctant to initiate and the villagers hesitant to accept this change. Furthermore, when a resident is contemplating distant or long-term migration from the village, *puu taa* is asked to predict the outcome of this plan. *Puu taa*'s forecast of success or failure in connection with the planned undertaking is considered seriously by the potential migrant along with the other factors which he believes are relevant in his weighing of the advantages and disadvantages of leaving or remaining in the village. It is apparent that these predictions may help an individual to structure situations as well as to formulate goals and strategies to achieve them more effectively. A favorable prognosis may encourage a hesitant prospective migrant; a negative one may dishearten an once determined potential migrant.

During the time when the would-be migrant is contemplating moving to Bangkok, he often tries to establish or reestablish, as the case may be, contacts with former villagers, usually relatives or friends, modeling these relationships upon the accustomed pattern in the village. These likely benefactors are believed to share or at least be aware of village customs and values and the prospective migrant feels then more at ease in soliciting their assistance in return for his assumed promise of future favors.

Moreover, by proceeding in this manner to leave the village, the potential migrant gains community support. Following the prescribed procedures for departure helps avoid conflicts and ill-will, is indicative of one's respect for the village traditions and of the community and fulfills one's minimal obligations to the parties involved.

Although on the one hand, the injunctions of *puu taa* may indeed circumscribe the individual's scope of behavioral possibilities, particularly within the village setting, which could lead to frustration in some case, on the other, they help the individual to define himself and allow him the behavioral latitude to set his own goals and to test them with supernatural and community approval and support.

## **5. Social change within rural villages: The influx of information and innovations**

In Thailand, as in most developing countries, the capital functions as an adoption and adaptation center for new ideas, objects and practices. These innovations are then conveyed further via various media to the outlying towns and villages. In this village study, considerable effort was made to

investigate innovative processes and action. The motivations and modelling, the anticipated rewards and difficulties, the hopes and anxieties constituted central elements in understanding innovating behavior. Urban migration as a specific problem area was selected because a migration decision implies a readiness to opt for change ideally if not in practice. What are, then, the attractions and the threats which the city represents to rural villagers? What does urban migration as an option to village living actually mean to prospective migrants? What do villagers hope for and actually expect to achieve through urban migration? In order to answer these and related questions, we concentrated upon *information flows* from the capital to the two researched villages. An attempt was made to evaluate generally how the villagers “act upon” these items of information. Also, since information flows are of various types, we have chosen to classify them into three categories: 1) the impersonal, 2) the personal and 3) the informant’s own experiences with the city.

### 5.1 *The Impersonal*

#### 5.1.1 The Mass Media

With the introduction of newspapers, radio and television to rural communities, the villagers are exposed more now than previously to modern/urban ideas, influences and affairs. Practically, every rural food shop and grocery store carry at least one daily Thai language journal for their customers. The central government, too, is trying to encourage the villagers to read more by setting up reading centers – *suun aan nangsüü* – in each district. In the district seat village of Tha Muang, practically every weekday morning, the local government officials broadcast official announcements, upcoming community events and national and local news over the village public-address system.

We discovered, though, through surveys we conducted, that very few villagers admit to reading newspapers or other materials with any regularity. Only 7 % of the 131 surveyed households claimed that at least one member did so. Listening to the radio appeared to be more popular with over 60 % of the respondents reporting that either they or members of their household regularly tuned into radio broadcasts.<sup>5</sup>

We can not, however, adequately capture the reality of flows of city information to the village relying upon such statistics alone. Although it appears that a low percentage of the villagers actually use such *formal channels*, it does not mean that the messages relayed via them fail to reach

5 For additional statistical data on urban information flows, refer to Sripraphai, P. & Sripraphai, K., (1981).

the majority of residents. This is just not the case. We found that the messages often were first selected, discussed and analyzed by community *opinion leaders* who eventually relayed them and their interpretation through their network of social connections. Where communication networks in the village are fundamentally informal and shaped by customs, prescribed interaction modes, status and supernatural sanctions, the flow of information requires the auxiliary support and “booster” of local channels.

Through the mass media, the villagers are constantly being exposed to differing lifestyles and new ideas, objects and practices. Commercials as well have been especially effective in *shaping new material and social consumption needs*. One of the most interesting responses to urban informational inputs which we observed in our researched villages, was to a song entitled “*saaw roongngaan*” – The Factory Girl. This song relates the story of a young man who falls in love with a factory worker named *Chantana*. Chantana became a model for many of the young Baan Udom villagers. The young men hoped to meet such a “dream girl”, while the young ladies strove to be like Chantana. Unlike most of heroines and heroes of Thai love stories, who customarily come from the ranks of the nobility or higher social classes, Chantana and her beau portrayed rural farmers *successful in their attempt to migrate* to the capital and to find an appropriate spouse. Not only were they more realistic targets for identification, they reflected the *current concerns, problems and hopes* of the younger generation of villagers.

### 5.1.2 Material Inputs

Material objects also can serve informational functions: they constitute an integral part of the impersonal sources of information in the village. Nowadays villagers are exposed to a variety of town objects “packaged” in various forms. Aspirations for “modern” goods and services have increased dramatically in recent times perhaps due to both aggressive advertisement campaigns and the almost explosive increase in the availability of these goods and services. Regardless of the intent of the advertisers, advertisements transmitted through the mass media and “personal” channels have made an impression upon the moneyed sectors, who at the village level frequently serve as *behavioral models* for their neighbors.

Local advertisement and acquisition patterns usually follow the community’s established patterns and networks of communication. Often it is the elites who are in part responsible for creating local interest and demand. However, introduction does not always follow the vertical trickling down process; horizontal introduction also plays an important role. Relatives, friends or neighbors returning from the city are expected to bring along useful or interesting modern objects.



Commercials, availability and easier accessibility have had an impact upon the structuring of villagers' perceived needs. Whereas previously, resources not needed for survival most likely would have been put aside for purchasing farmland, improving upon farming and housing conditions or for educating the children, currently these former priorities in the farmers' needs hierarchy have been devalued. Long term savings plans have been interrupted by the purchase of more attractive, more readily ego-gratifying objects. In other words, object acquisition nowadays competes along with land ownership as a goal and investment.

Material objects serve as important indicators of the type and degree of integration which the individual is striving to achieve with his family, friends and community. There appears to be some social pressures upon members of rural communities to keep pace with certain locally-valued *consumption trends*. For example, when one rural household acquires a television set, a radio-recorder or an electric rice-cooker, the others feel obliged, for whatever reasons, to follow suit despite the hardship acquisition may entail. This often leads to the necessity of finding cash-paying town jobs. This is especially true for the younger generation of villagers who are exposed to very strong peer pressures. If a young villager repeatedly fails to "keep up", he will soon find himself a peripheral member of his group. Such conflicts and pressures can make village life trying (refer also to section 6.1).

Nearly all villagers have been confronted by the challenges brought about by social change, but the extent to which they are motivated and able to respond varies from individual to individual as well as to specific action areas. For instance, farmers are encouraged to adopt "rational" agricultural techniques and to purchase farm equipment, homemakers to acquire modern household appliances, carpenters to obtain electric tools and so forth. Even the monkhood, one of the most respected traditional Thai institutions and pillar of rural cultural heritage, has not been exempted from the impacts of social change. New or revised religious conceptions, methods and practices have been introduced and integrated into the more traditional body of Buddhist rites, rituals and beliefs. However, a note of caution seems to be appropriate here. In examining the adoption of "modern" objects or practices, one should consider how these actually have been appropriated and utilized by the villagers. The adoption of so-called technologically advanced or Western originating objects or behaviors, for example, is no guarantee, per se, that these carry similar meanings or are employed in similar fashions within another quite diverse cultural context. In other words, the "modernity" or whatever characteristic the object or act is ascribed, does not lie principally in the *object or action itself*, but in the actor's and his reference groups' perceptions of it and of their relationship to it. To the villager, "being modern" usually means *having acquired the ability (or the right) to properly manage the situations, the objects and the symbols of modernity*. And,



definitions of appropriate management tend to be *socio-culturally specific*. In some cases, outside observers may not attribute any modern significance to objects or actions to which the villagers themselves do.

## 5.2 Personal Sources of Urban Information – Behavioral Models

Behavioral models are individuals who by reason of their position, power, ability or resources are able to influence and shape the behavior of others, irrespective of their intentions and their “consciousness” in this regard. In the village, there appears to be what we considered as “competing models”. *Urban-oriented* models, either directly or indirectly, encourage and support adoption of “modern” behaviors and objects; *village-oriented* models act as a pro-village counter-force to the first group.

The group of urban-oriented models exercising the most influence upon the villagers tended to be the *visiting migrants and migration returnees* who reflect, both through their possessions and behavior, the benefits of their urban stay. Upon their return, these models convey information about the capital as well as about consumer goods and urban behavioral modes. By these actions, consciously or not, they promulgate the advantages of urban living functioning as “migration tempters” for their village contemporaries. Their gains in social prestige, stylish appearance, conspicuous urban mannerisms, greater action possibilities, and improved purchasing power are indicative of the benefits of urban migration.

A number of these migrants and returnees assume the role of “recruiter” either by directing or helping *to pave the way* for their friends’ migration. According to our informants, this type of assistance is a requisite incentive for generating the village-city transition. Such assistance is *founded upon community reciprocity*, the more or less obligatory sharing of social, material and personal resources.<sup>6</sup>

There are other types of urban “recruiters”, too. These include the townspeople who visit the village for various purposes, i.e. tourism, labor recruiting, village guardian spirit consultation,<sup>7</sup> product promotion, development assistance, etc. These visitors also expose the villagers to new social behaviors and items. Although their reasons for coming into contact with the

6 The code of conduct associated with *duty and merit* seems to permeate most areas of activity and achievement, even the secular. Status and success entail responsibility; a villager is not regarded as truly successful unless he shares his resources with significant others. Even if the material resources are thereby depleted, it is believed, that he has gained other benefits and that his good deeds will be reciprocated.

7 Baan Tha Muang’s *puu taa* is known for his ability to correctly predict lottery results and personal fortunes. A number of affluent urban clients regularly solicit the services of the mediums arriving in the village in the latest most expensive fashions and their luxury autos.

villagers may carry no conscious intention of influencing the latter, they, nevertheless, serve as urban models for their rural counterparts.

The village-oriented models while not inherently opposed to modernization do act, to some degree, as a counter force to it, supporting and stressing traditional community values, beliefs and norms. As a group they tend to evaluate innovations in terms of their impact not upon individuals, but upon the community as a whole. They endorse and support innovations when they believe that either these may enhance or at least will not undermine existing community values.

The village-oriented models as models perform many of the same functions as their urban-oriented counterparts, however, differ in that they underscore the advantages of community rural living. They tend to come from the ranks of the local elite i.e. village heads, temple committee members, monks, local teachers, village elders and other prominent community residents. Through example they demonstrate the value of village life.

The distinction we make here between the urban- and village-oriented models is not meant to imply necessarily a polarization. We are well aware of the complex influences a single behavioral model can exert upon his interaction partners. In certain action areas, a behavioral model can indeed be considered a promoter of modernity, in others, however, a staunch supporter of traditional values. Modernity/traditionalism are not absolutes, but rather "sliding measures" attuned to varying conditions and situations as well as to short- and long-term personal goals.

Most informants did not find it difficult to acknowledge the importance of "explicit" or commonly recognized models upon their ideas, attitudes or behavior. It was more difficult to identify "implicit" models, who by and large, tended to be the *actual interaction partners* of the potential migrants – close friends, peer group members, family members, relatives and neighbors. We repeatedly saw the significance of these models upon the formation of individual goals and action plans. Such models can influence a migration decision pro or con. Frequently, they function as "sounding boards" to whom the potential migrant confides his plans, seeks their advice and tries to gain their approval and support prior to approaching other significant persons. Their response is important. If favorable, it will become a plank in the potential migrant's campaign for migration; if not, the potential migrant may revise his plans, reassess his model and his relationship to him or reinterpret the model's message to correspond to his needs, among other possibilities.

Implicit models can be non-personal, too, for instance, *village-evolved ideals-images of what being a "successful" villager entails*. For some individuals, long term goals may include achieving village specified standards of the desirable, in the village or in the city. Certain components appear to be essential to this village picture of the "good life", but flexibility in other areas

is granted. Village standards of the desirable appear to differ somewhat from community to community and generational differences exist as well.

### 5.3 City Experience

Villagers learn about the capital through a variety of sources. But their knowledge of and familiarity with the city is more often than not less differentiated and less precise in comparison to that of their home community. What they lack in information is oftentimes completed by imagination. Hence, the image that villagers have of the city is a complex but incomplete *mental collage* shaped in part, also, by their hopes and fears, expectations and aspirations. Their image of the city is both *selective* and *projective*. The impressions and information which a villager holds of the city may serve an orienting and integrative function upon his arrival, but they do not prepare him adequately for the difficulties of urban living. The villager learns, often “the hard way”, that village ways can not be transferred intact and unadapted to the urban situation. The city is not simply a spatially larger village, but the material, social and technical features of the urban environment differ immensely from those of the rural migrant’s home community. The city may then be evaluated, after a time, as a complicated, disorderly and disappointing milieu instead of the wonderland the migrant had earlier envisioned. However, in some cases, *perceptual defense mechanisms* do not allow negative, contradictory or threatening perceptions to filter through to consciousness. Some urban migrants are not able to see the city in terms of their actual experiences.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, others’ criteria of consistency are flexible enough to accept seemingly broad discrepancies from their initial anticipations without seriously threatening the appropriateness of their action decision or other core beliefs and values; their zones of tolerance are wider.

Accumulated information and experience as a result of extended stays in or repeated visits to the city may be more realistically assessed but, again, not necessarily. Accounts of urban experience tend to be highly selective, especially if internal motivations and/or external norms are strongly oriented toward enhancing social prestige within the village. Hence, descriptions of frustrations, disappointments and failures are minimal and usually recounted to serve specific purposes. It appears that the villagers have created and maintain a social bind in the form of a *migration-related social desirability set*. For the most part, potential migrants are surrounded by the evidence that

8 Despite their difficulties in the city, a number of our informants choose to relate to significant others only the positive aspects of their urban experience. One informant, for example, recounted only her “fairy tale-like” childhood memories of her first Bangkok visit. Her adult experiences with the city were taboo conversational topics. The “real” Bangkok, in her opinion, was that of her childhood memories and dreams, not that disappointing milieu which she had recently experienced.

opportunities for personal enhancement, cash, goods, etc. are available to those willing to risk moving to the city heartening them to opt for migration. Actual migrants, upon their return to the village, despite the range of their experiences, positive and negative, and their potential to better prepare future migrants, feel compelled to follow this already established pattern of gift-giving and story telling to substantiate personal success. They fear that giving a more “realistic” description of urban-related action constraints and threats could be misconstrued as a personal lack of competence. Acceptance of personal failure in connection with urban migration was found to be rare among our informants.<sup>9</sup>

## 6. Towards a migration decision

The assumption underlying our research is that a decision to migrate originates when an individual perceives opportunities to improve and/or expand his action possibilities and considers the transformation itself and the accompanying changes as desirable as well as feasible. This means that the prospective urban migrant in his oft unconscious anticipatory structuring and evaluating of his action possibilities within two somewhat differing environments appraises the external positive valences<sup>10</sup> perceived to be offered by the less differentiated action field, city, to be greater than those currently experienced or expected in the familiar action field, village, and/or the external negative valences perceived to be represented by city to be less than those presently experienced or anticipated in the village, as well as assesses his internal action potential as sufficient in terms of meeting the challenges change would entail. In analyzing our informants’ village- and city-related anticipations, we often observed a continual vacillation between two decision-influencing parameters – 1) *the flight parameter*, which is predominantly urban-oriented and 2) *the maintenance parameter* which is mainly village-oriented. Action anticipations hence served a regulatory function in the choice of and shaping of present and planned action, all of which initially are influenced by the prospective migrants’ hierarchy of action goals. This hierarchy encompasses highly ego relevant to less ego relevant individual action goals, as well as diverse but, nonetheless, intercommunicative action goal complexes. The vicissitudes of daily life, to some extent, also may influence a migration decision. Conflicts, action constraints may strengthen

9 Failed or less than successful migration returnees often gave as reasons for their return familial obligations or difficulties in employer-employee relations.

10 Valence can be defined as ‘the qualitative attractiveness or repulsion of a goal’ (refer to Boesch, 1976, p. 21).



the flight tendency, while accord, development and expansion of action opportunities may reinforce the maintenance tendency.

Our research revealed two general areas which were referred to most often as impetuses for the potential migrants' reevaluation-reestimation of their situations and of their actionable opportunities village/city. They are as follows:

### *6.1 Family-Kin and Peer Group Networks – Support and Control*

In the communities which we investigated, family-kin and peer group networks formed a significant basis for support and control of the individual villager. Major endeavors customarily require kin approval and support, generally regulated by familial-community social control mechanisms. However, support and control give rise to two contrasting consequences for migration tendencies. On the one hand, tensions and conflicts could be generated among family members which could lead to alienation and eventually, perhaps, to migration. On the other, they can serve an important instrumental function for the potential migrant in setting up the necessary contacts for successful migration.

In connection with the first condition, we discovered that many interpersonal tensions appeared to be rooted in familial and communal normative behavioral expectations. By normative expectations we mean the culturally-given and -patterned behavioral guidelines which prescribe both suitable goals and the range of role- and status-appropriate action for achieving goals. Tensions arise when one interaction partner believes that his expectations with regard to his action and anticipation conflict, compete or can not be reconciled with those held by others. Perceived great divergences between the ideal, the desired and the actual can be a source of discontent as well.

In the socio-cultural context of the Thai village, behavioral expectations within the family vary according to such characteristics as age, sex, sibling order, level of education, experience, status, occupation, etc. and usually are prescribed with regard to individual position vis-à-vis the positions of other family members i.e. husband – wife, oldest sibling – younger siblings, student – farmer and so on. The rights, privileges and obligations of such “*set*” family contracts are more or less *implicitly defined* within the family, flexible, reciprocal, and allegedly assumed without constraints. Ideally, such a system helps to maintain the family and insure familial harmony while also taking into account the needs of individual members. This works well as long as each partner appears to fulfill his responsibilities and family-defined rights and obligations are in general accordance with broader normative patterns. However, as a consequence of the spread of information, innovations and new behaviors, these traditional practices and values have been called into question. Tensions arise when the family is unable to integrate successfully

emerging values with older ones. Redress may be sought, but if the outcome proves unsatisfactory, tension will heighten. As the number of action areas affected increases or highly ego relevant action areas are threatened, so also increases the tendency that dissatisfied family members will leave home.

The rules regulating peer group associations are quite similar to those directing familial or community relationships. Formation of the various Baan Udom peer groups are based upon the concepts of common ancestry and heritage, territorial propinquity and age/sex/occupational and educational proximities. Roles, right, privileges and duties ascribed to the individual members lead to status distinction and thus status hierarchy which, in turn, are communicated and responded to by the larger community. Leading members, gradually gain power and prestige and thereby are in the position to set up behavioral standards for the remaining group members. Outstanding group members often inspire and encourage *identification*.

In the village situation, many of the individual's action possibilities depend directly upon group support. This means that certain behaviors and opportunities would be beyond one's personal action scope were it not for the group i.e. a young single woman usually is not allowed to go unaccompanied by girl friends or relatives to various social activities, it can be dangerous for a village youth to travel alone through "territories" belonging to rival groups, activities such as "partying", playing or listening to modern music can not be enjoyed without friends in attendance and so on. This "dependency" is especially noticeable during periods of limited association (i.e. during the busy planting season and summer time when many of the young people have gone off on trips, to summer jobs or to school). Under such circumstances the village may be viewed as a narrow, boring, unsatisfying sphere.

Significant also is the fact that some of the village groups, particularly the youth groups, tend to be competitive in their attempts toward modernization. Group members with *Bangkok experience* as well as those owning "modern" objects belong to an elite inner circle within their groups. As a result, advocacy of what is understood to be modern/urban increases among the general group membership hence intensifying social pressures toward adopting "modern" consumption and behavioral practices and acquiring Bangkok experience.

Similar to the conflicts generated within the family, stresses among peer group members also may arise as a consequence of perceived divergences in action and/or goal expectations. At times, a group member would prefer to follow his peers' expectations, which could lead to familial and community contention.<sup>11</sup> There are occasions, however, when the individual feels disin-

11 We witnessed several confrontations between the larger community and the youths over the issue of the latter's unignorable misconduct, such as drug-taking, carousing and brawling.



clined or unable to abide by group norms, which can be anxiety-arousing, too. The individual places himself in the very precarious situation of losing vital peer support.

Turning now to the concept of support, we found that a significant number of migrants successfully made their urban transition owing to the assistance of relatives and friends. This transition has been made less burdensome, psychologically at least, as a consequence of the so-called “city-extension” network whereby the more urban-experienced offer guidance and resources to the city-bound migrant. The pattern generally includes three basic components, which we have termed *initiation*, *escort* and *reference*. If urban migration does ensue, these components translate into the initial phases of city adjustment. Initiation refers to an anticipatory action phase of intense and deliberate urban-related information gathering during which the potential migrant tries to determine his action possibilities in the city. During this period, the individual attempts to enlist the assistance of a reliable city-experienced and -connected *escort(s)* who is willing to help him gain access to the city. The next step involves the escort’s introducing the migrant to further urban references; these include among others, contacts for education or employment as well as the Bangkok circles of temporarily and permanently migrated Baan Udom villagers.

Another significant determinant to successful migration lies in community acceptance; this is forthcoming, as we have observed, if the credibility and ability of the contact people in the afore-mentioned categories are recognized by the community. They help to bridge the village-city gap thereby reducing personal as well as communal anxieties. On the individual level, the potential migrant would not be left entirely to his own resources; he could count on some support. On the community level, the migrant is not perceived so much then as abandoning the home village, but in the process of becoming integrated into an extended village-city social network. In other words, the village is not losing a villager, but gaining an urban migrant.

This practice, in part, also can account for *sudden unexpected cases of urban migration*. Close friends of potential migrants become “sounding boards” and advisors helping to weigh the pros and cons of urban migration. Although they may have no professed interest in migrating, if their friend is able to set up the appropriate contacts, they may decide to take advantage of the opportunity. This pattern, similarly, may explain the urban visit turned migration. The host has assumed the function of escort opening up the doors of opportunity for his guest.

## 6.2 Opportunity Structures and Goal Formation

First, we will examine here more concretely the various opportunities the village is perceived to offer and how these can fulfill the aspirations of

villagers, especially those of the younger generation who demonstrate a greater readiness to migrate.

Our research area was a wet-rice growing region with a slightly higher than national average yield per *rai* of paddy. The area possesses considerable agricultural resources and has a good potential to be developed further with proper planning and some land reform. Presently, due to continual exploitation i.e. through unfair prices, manipulation of marketing mechanisms, land accumulation by a few powerful businessmen, to mention but a few of the most prevalent causes, the area farmers increasingly are losing ownership and control of their farmland. According to the results of a survey which we made, 52 % of the researched households were landless, while another 28 % owned less than 20 *rais*<sup>12</sup> of farmland – the minimum amount for an average agricultural household to live decently. Hence, most of the farming households rented-in additional farmland sacrificing at least 33 % of the yield in rental fees. Fortunately, unlike other regions of Thailand where climatic irregularities often have ruinous effects, the Baan Udom farmers rarely have experienced either severe drought or flooding. Still, our informants' projections regarding their personal agricultural prospectives in comparison with other emerging occupational opportunities were not very promising.

In addition to farm-related activities, an increasing number of area villagers were beginning to recognize and act upon regional opportunities and consequently have set up a small industry or business. There are two factories producing costume jewelry for sale in the capital, a garage for general maintenance and rebuilding used cars, a small home furniture industry, a few well-known restaurants, mushroom growing and broom-making, to give just a few examples. We also observed entrepreneurial thinking, skills and initiative in many of the local residents. For years, farmers and high school youths have been able to create their own jobs and/or take advantage of local opportunities to earn cash during the dry season i.e. through vending, carpentry, providing taxi services and so on<sup>13</sup>. In a few cases, these "summer jobs" have developed into year-round occupations.

Consequently, the corresponding valences which the village holds for these residents to a great extent is dependent upon the perceived outcome of their action. It appears that in the case of "successful" villagers, the tendency to try to realize their action goals by depending upon opportunities outside the region has been reduced, while village-related opportunities and satisfactions increase, which, in turn, enhances the overall attractiveness of the village for these individuals.

On the other hand, actual opportunities are rather limited; they can hardly satisfy the emerging needs-aspirations of the younger villagers. Undoubtedly, village and urban inequalities in income, resources and power distribu-

12 One *rai* is equivalent to 1600 square meters.

tions play an important role in the villagers' propensities towards urban migration. Of equal importance, however, are the psychological components; these encompass how the villagers perceive and evaluate themselves, their situation and their opportunities in "modern day" Thailand and how they can best satisfy their aspirations.

Our impression was that many of the younger villagers were not satisfied "just" to be farmers any longer. There has been a tremendous change in the perceived status of farmers – from that of an honored way of life in harmony with the material and social environment to that of an inferior, powerless, low status life-style offering but the meagerest chances for economic survival. At the same time, the world beyond the village appears to be more promising and inviting. Bangkok has become a flick of a switch, a walk to the store, a bus ride away. All around – from the government officials, local elites, school authorities, migration returnees, family members and friends, the mass media personalities, modern objects, practices and ideas – the villagers are picking up the message that the way to be in today's world is to be modern, is to be urbanite. Moreover, the ways and means to achieve these goals often are demonstrated by successful village-originating urban migrants. While success is heralded, failure and difficulties generally are repressed and, if necessary, attributed to fate – *chata/karma*, misfortune or circumstances believed to be beyond the individual's personal action realm. Besides, admitting failure is quite ego-threatening. There were, nevertheless, cases of failure considered so serious by the village standards that the concerned parties found it difficult to return to the village.

Despite the proclivity of the younger generation of villagers to ascribe the city with more favorable action opportunities than their home village, their initial intention in opting for urban migration is not entirely to "abandon" the village, but to improve their socio-economic position there. Village living is still regarded as a desirable goal; the younger generation wants to improve upon and extend their action opportunities within the village. Migration tendencies, then, can be indicative of innovation readiness. However, after the transition to the city has been made, it is likely that initial action goals and action plans may be transformed. The process of adjusting to a new situation fosters new ways of acting and new social forms. The longer the migrant remains in the city, the greater will be his commitment "to make a go of it" there. But most migrants, according to our analyses, do not want to sever their connections to the village. Their contacts – occasional visits back and forth, cash, goods and service remittances – directly or indirectly serve as incentives/models kindling (migration) aspirations among a future wave of potential urban migrants.

## **Summary**

Recognition of the need to understand the processes and consequences of social change in rural communities of the developing countries has been increasing. The psychological impact of social change, especially in terms of the “attraction” or “repulsion” the city exerts on rural villagers have been presented in this summary of our research findings, for it is often the capitals of developing countries which serve as transmission and transformation centres for new ideas, products and practices introduced to a country. Within the context of rural-urban migration, we attempted to gain insight into the villager’s action goals and aspirations as well as to understand his assessment of the action potential of his village and of Bangkok as a prospective action field. Various material, social and cultural influences on an individual’s willingness to change, particularly the influences of behavioral models and objects were examined.

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