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# Migrants of the Mountains: The Cultural Ecology of the Blue Miao (Hmong Njua) of Thailand [Book Review]

Joel Halpern

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party structure. Traditional values long operative in the Chinese community were utilized to rally communal support; Chinese education and recognition of Chinese as one of the official languages were top priorities. But Lee in his discussion of the Chinese position maintains a well balanced view. The myth of the Sabah Chinese as a "community" is exposed. Factionalism emerges along a number of expectable lines: dialect group rivalry, the issue of support for the Kuomintang, personal contention for status posts, and conflict over economic interests. The dream of a unified party is predictably ephemeral.

Clearly, Lee's book is directed to Southeast Asian specialists with at least a minimal knowledge of Malaysia and its genesis, and, as such, it offers a wealth of detailed information, well organized and dramatically narrated.

**Migrants of the Mountains: The Cultural Ecology of the Blue Miao (Hmong Njua) of Thailand.** William Robert Geddes. London: Oxford University Press, 1976. xviii + 274 pp. \$21.25 (cloth).

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Any watcher of the evening news on T.V. during the years of the Indochina War was aware that the Miao (Meo in Laos) were characterized as hill tribesmen fighting a guerrilla action against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese or as CIA-led mercenaries. More recently, newcasts have shown impoverished refugees living in camps along the Thai side of the Mekong. A smaller, less publicized group have become refugees in Australia and North America.

The so-called Thailand controversy of our more restricted AAA professional past was no less confused, involving as it did potential uses that had been or might have been made of research data by the American or Thai military, as in planned or reported bombing of Miao villages in Thailand. The opium trade, an economic mainstay of the Miao, is another instance of widespread publicity.

The author of *Migrants from the Mountains*, from the University of Sydney, defines his study: "We suspect that it is their devotion to the opium poppy which makes the Miao shifting cultivators in the complete sense of the term—not only the cultivations but the people

themselves shift. The main purpose of this book is to show why this is so" (p. 33). This extensive ethnographic monograph is based on the intensive study of two village communities in 1958-59 and 1964-66. During the second period, Geddes was associated with the Tribal Research Centre at the University of Chiangmai. His book provides an introduction to the historical background of the Miao in China and follows their subsequent migration into Indochina and Thailand. Focus is on the social structure of the village, the agricultural economy, and particularly the role of opium production. The relation between the cycle of land use and the need for future migration is discussed.

Geddes' study is valuable because it is the only comprehensive, ecologically sophisticated treatment of swidden agriculturalists in this area since the work of K. G. Izikowitz in Laos (*Lamet: Hill Peasants in French Indochina*, Ethnografiska Museet, Gothenburg, 1951). The most pertinent earlier study, to which Geddes makes frequent reference, is also based on prewar fieldwork (Hugo A. Bernatzik, *Akha and Miao: Problems of Applied Ethnography in Farther India*, Human Relations Area Files, 1970).

Unlike the Izikowitz monograph, Geddes' study provides detailed quantitative data on such items as demographic variables, household structure, padi and opium production, and cash income. Lineage and clan ties are seen as crucial in achieving and maintaining status over generations within a village structure that lacks long-term stability. The father-son link, which has strong religious sanctions, provides the basis for the structure of the household and clan system. In the villages Geddes studied, subsistence agriculture was subordinate to the cultivation of the opium poppy. The second crop was corn, used as pig fodder, resulting in what Geddes calls the opium-maize-pigs complex. The cash realized from opium provides an income level several times higher than that of other hill or valley agriculturalists.

A concluding section on opium cultivation in Thailand draws on the author's experience as a member of two United Nations study missions in 1967 and 1970. The task of the latter was the drawing up of a pilot plan for the partial replacement of opium.

Geddes' account seems likely to become, like that of Izikowitz, a basic documentary source and a model study for depicting the clear articulations between ecological adaptations, social structure, and recurrent patterns of migration. Geddes concludes that the future viability

of the Miao system depends on open possibilities for migration, but this is becoming increasingly problematic due to mounting population pressure: "A condition for successful stability must indeed be the granting to them of some form of secured land tenure" (p. 265). Whether that will in fact happen is an open question. If Thailand remains a capitalist country, there should be the possibility of interesting comparisons with its socialist neighbors in Laos, Vietnam, and China with respect to government policies toward the Miao and to ways in which the question of opium cultivation may be resolved.

**Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries: Umeda Society, Language and Ritual.** *Alfred Gell.* London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, 51. London: Athlone; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1975. 366 pp. \$22.50 (cloth).

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This sympathetic account of a most interesting and exotic society is a notable contribution to the literature on ritual and to the ethnography of Melanesia.

Umeda is a village of some 220 in the lowland interior of Papua New Guinea's West Sepik Province. *Metamorphosis* opens with a hundred pages on the social structure of Umeda and its co-village of Punda, with which it shares a dialect. Dualism prevails: in the generalized affinal alliance of Umeda and Punda, in the ritual moieties to which the component hamlets of each village are allocated, and in the hamlet divisions between core patrilineal clans and later accretions. Sago is the staple, but women are the scarce resource. Marriage is ideally, and in a high proportion of actual cases, by sister exchange and is followed by three generations of symmetrical alliance between the clans concerned, during which period no further marriages are permitted. However, enticement of widows into second marriages that disrupt the symmetry of alliance is common practice.

Thus, one structural stress is between the mature married men who control sago and women and the dependent bachelors and young men with unconsummated marriages to immature girls, whose role is hunting. Another is between potentially allied clans, mainly in opposed villages, which have not intermarried within three generations and are thus in a po-

sition to entice each other's women, including widows, as well as to contract legitimate and desirable new marital alliances. This section of the book alone could form the subject of an extended and appreciative review, for it raises many points of interest for kinship and alliance theory.

Then follows an excursion into the symbolism of language and of plants arguing, *à la* Edmund Leach, the attractive but contentious proposition that words with shared morphological features can be shown to carry a common semantic load, regardless of evidence for etymological or folk-etymological connection. It is worth noting that Gell's account of the plants whose names he uses to illustrate some of his points is in its own right a real contribution to Melanesian ethnobotany.

The final and longest section of the book is the account of *ida*, a public dance drama combining fertility ritual and *rite de passage* that deserves to become as memorable in the literature of anthropology as Bateson's presentation of *naven*. Except in years when important men have died or things otherwise gone badly, the men of Umeda dance *ida* annually, for two days and two nights, in order, they say, that the sago "comes up quickly." It is performed by a cast of over twenty, identified by name as cassowaries, sago flour, dead timber, various kinds of fishes, termites, megapodes (chicken-sized birds that lay huge eggs in mounds of rotting vegetation), sundry ogres, and bowmen (or bird-hunters). Dancers appear, reappear and finally disappear in a set sequence and for prescribed periods, and perform in distinctive styles or with distinctive degrees of exuberance or restraint. At some stages sections of the audience join in. The participation, for brief periods, of youths who at the onset of the ceremonies have donned penis-gourds for the first time and thus entered manhood, is of significance.

The first two dancers to appear are "male cassowaries," with black body-painting (corresponding to the black plumage of the adult cassowary) and wearing huge masks of vegetation, including sago fronds. They perform an exuberantly phallic dance for the whole of the first night. Accompanying them, but dancing in a totally contrasting sedate manner, are two red-painted figures in small trim masks, referred to as "fishes of the daughters."

At dawn the cassowaries are succeeded by the sago flour dancers, who don the same masks and indeed say they are also cassowaries. In their brief dance they leap over fires in which stones to boil sago flour are being heated.