Matrilineal Spirits, Descent and Territorial Power in Northern Thailand

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This paper examines matrilineal spirits (*phii puu nyaa*) in northern Thailand based on field research recently undertaken in a village in Chiang Mai province. The paper suggests that the *puu nyaa* spirits remain locally significant—despite previous statements about their demise—and that matrilineal linkages are ideologically and practically important in the constitution of the groups. Nevertheless, there are alternative points of reference—to fathers, spouses and localities—that can attenuate attachments to matrilineal kin and introduce alternative sources of spiritual power. It becomes clear that *phii puu nyaa* spirit beliefs and practices are malleable and provide a basis for various orientations to spiritual power. The intermingling of different types of spiritual power is well illustrated by the presence of protective spirits locally referred to as *aahak*. In local perception, there is a very close relationship between *phii puu nyaa* and *aahak*, but the two entities appear to reflect quite different orientations: in simple terms the *aahak* represent a masculine, territorial and outward looking form of power which is contrasted with the female-focused and lineage-derived potency of the *puu nyaa* spirits. The paper argues that the outward orientation of the *aahak* provides some valuable insights into local perceptions of power, demonstrating how the supposedly peripheral and parochial draws regional power into more intimate domains.

In Thailand, as in many other parts of the world, there is considerable academic and policy interest in the relationship between local communities and 'higher' levels of authority. Initiatives as varied as administrative decentralisation, electoral reform and participatory land-use planning have focused attention on the ways in which local institutions articulate with—and are affected by—the national bureaucracy in its various manifestations. In a series of articles (Walker 2001, 2004a, 2004b), I have suggested that much of the anthropological discussion on such issues—particularly in relation to the management of natural resources—has been constrained by a framework that over emphasises the tension between local practices and the external forces of state and market. I have proposed that many academic and non-government organisation portrayals of local village institutions tend to be overly parochial and too readily assert that 'incorporation' is a primary source of livelihood insecurity and cultural decline. In this paper, my intention is to approach this issue from a rather different perspective.

THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY, 2006, 17:2, 196-215