

**Report on the 1998 Field Season:  
Northern Thailand**

Submitted to Dr. Brian Hayden

By Michael Clarke

December 15, 1998

**DO NOT CITE WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION.**

This paper is a report on the prestige item use of the Hilltribes of Northern Thailand, specifically those items that are centred around the practice of feasting. It has long been known that feasting plays an important role in the sociopolitical world of the Hilltribes (Leach 1956; Kirsch 1972), but a detailed examination of the use of items of wealth and distinction has until this time been neglected. In this paper we will present data concerning the expenditures made on various types of feasts that are common to all six Hilltribes and information regarding the specific kinds of artifacts and activities that Hilltribe people imbue with prestige. The central question that we have addressed is why there seems to be such a dearth of prestige items, specifically serving vessels, in feasting contexts within a society that places such great social significance upon feasting. The conclusion that we make is that the Hilltribes lack excessive prestigious feasting paraphernalia because there are no permanent class divisions within their society. The low level of status rank competition does not often merit the investment in expensive status symbols. Furthermore, the tradition of egalitarianism puts many social restraints on selfaggrandizing.

When we refer to the Hilltribes, we are actually talking about six distinct cultures: These are the Akha, Hmong, Lahu, Lisu, Karen and the Yao. These groups inhabit the mountainous regions of mainland Southeast Asia and share many common cultural and economic characteristics.

## **The Six Hilltribes**

In the course of our research we visited twenty-six villages. We interviewed elder or administrative persons in each of the villages and we asked them about, among other things, the cost of marriage, funeral, and New Year's feasts. We were interested in both the average amount and highest amount of money invested in these events. Below (see table 1) is a table that ranks the Hilltribes according to which groups tend to spend the most, at the top, to those which tend to spend the least, at the bottom. Although feasting is very common among all of the six Hilltribes we can see from the table below that every group concentrates a different amount of its resources on different kinds of feasting events. Some groups are willing to devote a larger share of their economic surplus towards feasting. However, expense can be a relative thing. Some groups receive large sums of money from feast guests that defrays the cost of the event, while other groups receive little or no help. Furthermore, some groups tend to be wealthier overall, particularly the Yao and Hmong, then the other groups, and thus can afford to spend more money on feasts while actually investing a smaller percentage of their economic surplus. We will address the specifics of these issues below.

There are several key common socioeconomic circumstances that each of the tribes must confront, these are based around the precariousness of their mountain-slope horticulture resource base. This type of farming is very unreliable and as a consequence the Hilltribe people must constantly maintain a support group network to fall back on in times of economic crisis (Clarke 1998). Furthermore, the volatility of the economy combined with the lack of permanent land ownership does not seem to allow for the emergence of institutionalized multigenerational class divisions. Their horticultural economy seems to be a great social equalizer. These socioeconomic circumstances, in turn, effect both the nature of the feasting complex and the nature of prestige item production and use.

Feasting is an important means by which extended household groups in the Hilltribes create and maintain a life-crisis support network and a means by which individuals of status can maintain and increase that status. However, as is shown in the table below, each group tends to invest varying degrees of wealth in their feasting events. As previously stated, one reason for this is that each tribe has a different level of overall wealth and also because each tribe has a different set of social structures that

**Table 1 -- Feast Expenditure Ranking**

<b><u>Tribe</u></b>	<b><u>Funerals</u></b>	<b><u>Weddings</u></b>	<b><u>New Years</u></b>
<b>Yao</b>	Av. 17,000 Big 40,000	Av. 45,000 Big 100,000 B.P 30-100,000	Av. 1500
<b>Lisu</b>	Av. 30,000 Big 100,000	Av. 17,500 Big 50,000 B.P. 3000-10,000	Av. 5000 Headman 50,000
<b>Hmong</b>	Av. 15,000 Big 80,000	Av. 15,000 Big 30,000 B.P. 10-20,000	Av. 2250
<b>Akha</b>	Av. 15,000 Big 100,000	Av. 8,000 Big 20,000 No Bride Price	Av. 2000
<b>Lahu</b>	Av. 5000 Big 55,000	Av. 11,000 Big. 30,000 B.P 4000-5000	Av. 5000
<b>Karen</b>	None	Av. 6000 Big 20,000 No Bride Price	Only Liquor

\*Note: Av. stands for Average, Big is considered the uppermost limit, and B.P. stands for Bride Price.

\*\*Note: at the time of research, due to the Southeast Asian currency crisis, the exchange rate was 35 Thai Baht to the Canadian dollar. For most of the feast expenses in the recent past, the exchange rate was 20 Thai Baht to the Canadian dollar.

feasting must articulate with. In the following section we will examine some of the main differences between the six Hilltribes.

*The Yao:* The Yao are generally one of the richer tribal groups. They are often described by other locals (Thai and Tribal) as better business people and as more mercantile. They are a literate people, using Chinese characters, and they also use the Chinese language for their religious rituals. Yao villages seem less cohesive than some of the other tribal villages and there is a greater degree of lineage independence. It could possibly be for this reason that the Yao seem to have the closest thing resembling a social status hierarchy. This would also explain the great emphasis that they put on marriage events and bride prices (which have to do with power brokering between extended family groups), and the little emphasis that they put on community solidarity feasting events. There seems to be no upper limit for the bride price, some of them are quite exorbitant (we recorded one instance of a bride price being 100,000 Bht.), and it could be for this reason that Yao families are so interested in creating a name for themselves. Their prestigious reputation may be able to ensure a higher bride price for their daughters. However, the high cost of Yao weddings often seems to be off-set by the donations of guests and relatives. Most of our informants felt that it was common for a family to receive 50% of the cost of the wedding back in donations (this probably does not factor in the bride price). For a wedding, the bride will don a large ornamental hat and excessive amounts of silver jewelry. Another important prestige item at these events is the intricately embroidered leggings that the women wear, each one taking over a year to make and reputedly worth 45,000 Baht.

It seems that Yao funerals can also be aggrandizing events. Unlike most of the other tribes, the Yao pay the people involved in the proceedings. Pallbearers receive 50 Bht. each; the grave diggers 80 Bht.; and there are two ritual specialists who receive 1000 Bht. and 2000 Bht.

respectively. In some cases, rich families chose to purchase an elaborate coffin, and these can cost up to 20,000 Bht.

The Yao are also the only tribe in which we found an example of the use of prestige serving vessels. These vessels are small white and blue Chinese style ceramic whiskey cups. They are quite common throughout the region and are usually used in religious rituals. Although they are not excessively expensive, they are considered a little finer than ordinary glasses. In one instance we were told by an informant that a traditional method of soliciting money from guests at a wedding (which is still in use) is by way of presenting groups of eight guests (presumably male) with a tea tray. On the tray are eight cigarettes, eight glasses of tea, and eight blue ceramic whiskey cups. The assembled guests take their offerings and place their monetary donations on the tray. This can take many hundreds of vessels, and our informant said that these vessels are collectively owned by the villagers.

Law Sip is a Yao village located in Chaing Rai province. The village is 66 years old, and currently has 26 households with a population of approximately 200 people. All households engage in farming, and their main crops are rice, corn, and ginger, along with domestic livestock. We had the opportunity to interview the village headman. His grandfather was the first headman and the position has been passed down through his family.

The headman told us that New Years is a relatively small feasting event in Law Sip. Every family kills a pig and a chicken and eats at home while receiving visitors. Weddings however, are taken quite seriously. The groom's family pays for the entire event, this includes the food, whiskey, and bride price. Bride prices are usually 30,000 Bht., and if the groom cannot afford the requested amount then he can work in his father-in-law's fields to pay for the debt (the rate is set at 3000 Bht for one year's labour). If the groom works for his father-in-law for twelve years, then the father-in-law will build the young couple a house of their own. In general, one or two large pigs are eaten at a wedding feast, usually chickens are not eaten, and larger animals such as cows and buffalo are never eaten. A large full grown pig can cost between 2000 Bht. - 3000 Bht. On average, families in Law Sip can expect to receive back at least 50% of the cost of

the feasts in donations from guests. The minimal donation is considered 100 Bht., and people tend to judge how much is appropriate to give by the quality of the paper on which the wedding invitations are printed.

The largest wedding that the Headman has ever witnessed was that of his brother's in 1983. The bride price was 100,000 Bht. and the feast cost 40,000 Bht - 50,000 Bht. They killed six pigs weighing 80 kg each, and this was still not enough to feed the 400 people who attended. The feasting lasted for three days. They had to borrow many tables, chairs, and cooking utensils from neighbouring schools and temples.

Funerals are generally smaller events in Law Sip village, but compared to some of the other Hilltribes, Yao funeralls are still relatively large. On average, the funeral will cost 15,000 Bht - 16,000 Bht. Everyone in the village will pay 5 Bht, and guests will sometimes make donations. If the family is rich, they will keep the body in the house for a longer period of time so that they are able to feast for longer. Rich families will also pay 15,000 Bht. - 20,000 Bht. for an elaborate coffin. Three or four days is considered the maximum amount of time. The most expensive funeral that the headman of Law Sip has ever attended cost 40,000 Bht. and the feast consisted of five or six pigs. The headman claims that families really do not want to spend so much money on weddings and funerals, but they feel that they must in order to save face: They don't want other people "Talking behind their backs".

At a different Yao village, Huay Keo, we also had the opportunity to interview the headman. Huay Keo village is approximately 35 years old, and is comprised of 50 households with a population of 370 people. The villagers grow rice, ginger, lychees, tea, and coffee.

At Huay Keo we learned about a type of Yao feast called *Bautd* which seems to be a kind of coming-of-age feast for young men. These types of 'growth-stage' feasts seem to be more common in other, more stratified, cultures, and the only group which seems to have something similar is the Hmong. The Headman decribed the *Bautd* as an "ordination" for young men, and it can be sponsored at any time once a man is over the age of twenty. If a man should die befor this feast/ceremony is performed, then the family will often choose to perform it for him post

mortem. The feast usually consists of three pigs and 3-4 chickens, and costs approximately 25,000 Bht.

Weddings in Huay Keo were described as being the same as in Law Sip. One of the largest weddings that the Huay Keo Headman has attended was that of his niece. The bride price was 30,000 Bht. and the feast cost between 40,000 Bht and 50,000 Bht. There were nine pigs eaten, and approximately 200-300 guests in attendance. There were no invitation cards sent out, instead they relied on word of mouth, and consequently there was no 'official' money envelope into which to put donations. Consequently, the family choose to use the traditional method, as described above, of presenting groups of eight guests with a tea tray containing blue whiskey cups onto which they could place donations.

*The Lisu:* The Lisu seem to occupy a middle ground in regards to general social characteristics among the Hilltribes. They have a sense of clan autonomy, yet they also place great emphasis on community solidarity events, particularly New Year's celebrations. Their villages often have a communal ritual area, a fenced or walled in altar/shrine, which is used once a year for offerings to the ancestors. Although the village owns this site collectively, one man, the Shaman or Priest, is responsible for it, and has some authority over its use. Only men are allowed to participate in this ceremony, and a small amount of chicken or pork is cooked and eaten in this area. Consequently, one may find charcoal hearth beds within these ritual areas, and bones and feathers scattered about inside and outside of the walls.

Some villages do seem to be fairly wealthy, while others are not quite so rich. The women wear a variety of brightly coloured clothing, which all must be made anew for the New Year's festival, and they wear a small amount of silver jewelry. They have no prestige items which seem particular to their group, though there is reference in the literature to individuals owning ponies as a status symbol (Dessant 1972: 80). Like the Yao and the Hmong, our informants told us that a Lisu family often received 50% of the cost of major feasts back in donations. Lisu bride prices can be fairly high; we have references of up to 30,000 Bht. being

paid. At the wedding ceremony, according to one informant, both bride and groom have a group of friends as helpers. The girlfriends of the bride are expected to wear 8000 Bht. worth of money on their clothing. We do not believe that this is a common practice, however, it is illustrative of the emic concept of a wedding as an opportunity to display wealth.

The Lisu headman seems to have an inordinate amount of power. At one village that we visited, the headman had heavily armed guards stationed at various points throughout the village. He had been receiving death threats apparently involving his role in the drug trade. Consequently, Lisu headmen are expected to be very generous in terms of village feasting, particularly at New Year's. He is obligated to host whoever comes to his home, and many people make it a point to visit the Lisu for New Year's. They are known for their boisterous celebrations and dancing. There appears to be some competition between villages as to which can draw the most visitors. This year, we encountered one village which had decided to postpone New Year's for one month. They did this because they wanted to be able to visit other villages for New Year's and because they wanted to maximize the number of guests which would attend their own New Year's celebration. This type of intervillage visit exchange can be very important to a mobile society like the Lisu, especially in terms of making migration choices.

Alain Yvon Dessant (1972) claims that:

[The] primary source of information concerning current conditions in other Lisu villages or other likely areas of settlement was travelers. Migration occurred only to areas that had participated in this exchange of visits. Normally, the household head or a representative for a group of households visited the destination before moving (Dessant 1972: 38).

An important consideration for the potential Lisu migrant is his affiliation with kin and others whom he can depend upon for cooperation in agricultural and ritual activities as well as support in disputes (Dessant 1972:44).

We had the opportunity to visit and conduct interviews in three different Lisu villages. We first visited the village of Hay Go and talked to their elderly village 'shaman/priest'. Hay Go



is a relatively large and developed Lisu village in the Northeast of Thailand, and is consequently frequented by groups of tourists.

Our informant claimed that a very large wedding in his village would cost between 30,000 Bht. - 40,000 Bht and have over 100 guests. A wedding feast of this size would be comprised of about four pigs and fifty bottles of whiskey. However, most wedding feasts consist of only one or two pigs. The typical bride price is 4,000 Bht. if the girl is from the boy's home village, and 8,000 Bht - 10,000 Bht. if she is from a different village. The wedding lasts for only one day, and two separate ceremonies are performed, one in the groom's house and one in the bride's. Both the bride and groom have friends who act as their assistants, and occasionally, as mentioned above, the 'bride's maids' will wear money pinned to their clothing. A family can expect to receive back 50% of the cost of the wedding in donations.

Funerals in Hay Go can be as large, or larger, than weddings. If the deceased had a son the funeral will generally be two days long, if they had no son, then one day is considered sufficient. People who die with no sons are cremated. Most funeral feasts will have three or four pigs, usually one for the first day and two for the second day when most of the guests arrive. It is tradition that the pork dishes can only contain meat, no vegetables can be mixed in. It is necessary to have a shaman perform funerary rites, but they do not get paid for this service. A very large funeral, lasting three days, will cost 40,000 Bht. - 50,000 Bht.

New Years in Hay Go, like in all Lisu villages, is an anticipated event. Preparation of the food and clothing begins as much as one month before the actual celebrations. On the day before New Years, the Shaman will kill two pigs and begin feasting early. On New Years day his family cannot kill anymore animals or spend any money. This tradition probably enables the Shaman to network with a greater number of people than the average person. Only the wealthy and important families in the village will kill pigs, and the other junior household members will roam from house to house feasting and dancing. The Headman is expected to kill four or five pigs because he hosts the most people, especially those visiting from other villages. The total

cost of a two pig feast is approximately 20, 000 Bht. while the headman's feast will cost 40,000 Bht - 50,000 Bht.

Pang Sa, a second Lisu village that we visited, is a fairly large settlement of 90 households with a population of approximately 500 people. Many of the families have officially converted to Buddhism, but it appears that they still follow most of their traditional religious practices. Our principle interviewee, the headman, also calls himself a shaman, and appeared quite well versed in Lisu custom and ritual.

In Pang Sa we were told that for New Years richer families will kill one pig, while poorer families will share one pig amongst themselves. Our informant, because of his role as shaman, must not kill any pigs on New Years day. This year he began killing pigs eleven days before New Years. The pigs were killed so early because it was considered a propitious day for the family. They smoked or salted the meat to preserve it for the festivities.

Some of the largest weddings in Pang Sa consisted of 200 or more people eating three large pigs, as well as chickens and fish. A large wedding like this can sometimes entail a bride price of up to 30, 000 Bht, and the feast itself would cost between 50, 000 Bht. - 60, 0000 Bht.

The biggest funeral in Pang Sa that our informant could remember lasted for five days and cost 40,000 Bht. They eat almost continually, in shifts, for the duration of the funeral, and during the funeral people are prohibited from working. The biggest Lisu funeral that our informant had ever seen took place in another village, and he estimates that it cost 100,000 Bht. (This is a vast sum when one remembers that hired farm labourers typically earn 60 Bht - 80 Bht per day).

The final Lisu village that we visited is called Huay Mae Kham, it is located on a very high ridge directly on the Burmese border in Northwestern Thailand. We interviewed the sons of the resident shaman who happened to be away that day.

New Years in Huay Mae Kham lasts for six to seven days. A majority of the families will kill one pig for the celebrations, but some of the more prosperous households will kill two pigs and several chickens. The larger pigs cost (or are worth) between 3000 Bht. - 4000 Bht.,

and a wealthy household will spend approximately 10,000 Bht. for the entire celebration. This also includes the new clothes that it is necessary for everyone to make for New Years. Because, as previously mentioned, Lisu New Years celebrations are renowned in the North of Thailand, they receive many guests from other villages.

Weddings in Huay Mae Kham can be fairly large, but there is a wide range of expenditure. Poorer families will kill only one small pig for the feast, and the groom will pay a bride price of 3000 Bht. - 4000 Bht. Large weddings, in wealthy families, can cost 40,000 Bht. - 50,000 Bht., and entail bride prices as high as 20,000 Bht - 30,000 Bht. Feasts at these events consist of several pigs, the people of this village do not feel that it is appropriate to sacrifice large animals, such as buffalo or cattle, at weddings. The cost of these weddings can be defrayed by contributions from the guests, and on average the host will receive back 50% of the cost of the feast. Apparently, they make more of an effort to invite wealthy individuals because these people tend to donate more money.

The larger funeral feasts in Huay Mae Kham can also be quite expensive. Funerals for wealthy and/or important individuals can last for three or four days, and the family has an obligation to sacrifice at least one pig for every day of the event. A funeral of this size can cost in excess of 50,000 Bht. - 60,000 Bht.

***The Hmong:*** This group is often characterized as being highly independent (Lewis and Lewis 1984). In our experience they are also one of the wealthier tribes. Traditionally, they were heavily involved in the opium trade, both as producers and traders. Much of this opium wealth is still evident in villages today (in the form of good homes and educated children), and considering this, the Hmong do not spend an excessive amount of their surplus wealth on feasting, although in absolute terms they tend to spend more than the other tribes. Like the Yao, the Hmong are very much oriented around lineage independence. Traditionally, many villages were made up of only one clan (i.e. a group of related lineages), and even today, the larger permanent villages in which they must live in are divided up into discrete monoclan areas.

Unlike the Yao, the Hmong do not have excessive bride prices, and some villages follow the practice of having bride prices fixed at a rate of 10,000 Baht. Possibly because Hmong feasts tend to be attended only by fellow clan members, the guests seem to be quite generous in their donations. It was not uncommon to find that the host could recoup 50% or more of the cost of a feast, and in one instance we were told that some families have actually made a profit through donations. Possibly indicating that they are slightly more community minded than the Yao, is the Hmong practice of collecting donations from the village-at-large to cover the cost of a funeral. One informant told us that for the death of an elder, the villagers will donate anywhere from 20 to 1000 Baht per household.

The Hmong have few overtly prestigious items other than formal wear consisting of embroidered clothing for both men and woman. They tend to invest their money in more tangible or utilitarian items such as farm equipment, trucks, homes, and televisions. Whether these items can be considered as prestigious is a matter of debate. There are few institutionalized positions of power, such as priest or ritual blacksmith, instead each family worships at home and tries to maintain its own autonomy. They do have village headmen, but this is a requirement of Thai law, and they also have very many Shamans which can turn out to be influential people within the villages.

Huay Mae Pow is a Black Hmong village in Eastern Chiang Rai province. It is a very large village of 150 houses and 1400 people. Most of the residents grow corn, ginger, and rice. They have no cattle in the village, but they do raise buffalo, pigs, and chickens. We interviewed the village headman.

News years is a seven day long festival for the Hmong. For reasons of worship, every household is obliged to kill at least a chicken. Some of the more wealthier households will also kill pigs and host larger feasts. Our informant estimated that the average cost for a New Years feast that consisted of pork would be 3000 Bht.

Weddings for the people of Huay Mae Pow are usually one day and one night long. Three pigs and eight chickens eaten by fifty people is considered the average size (In this case

the pigs must be fairly small). The biggest wedding that our informant witnessed in his village, as far as he can remember, consisted of "Two or three cows and some pigs". He guessed that this wedding would have cost 30,000 Bht (Although this seems like a low estimate to us). Sometimes the groom pays for all of the expenses, and sometimes the bride's family will help. Guests are not obliged to make contributions, but they often do, sometimes as much as 1000 Bht, and apparently there have been cases where people have actually made a profit from their weddings (Though this must be extremely rare). Bride prices in Huay Mae Pow, and in other Hmong villages that we visited in the past, were set at a fixed rate of 10,000 Bht.

Funerals seem to be the largest feasting events for the Hmong. A funeral for a child lasts for only two days, but the funeral of a respected elder can last for a week or more. The average sacrifice at a funeral is two pigs for younger people, and three pigs for respected elders. They have a feast every day until the body is buried. The day before the burial is the most important, this is when most of the guests arrive. Everyone in the village makes a standard donation of 3 Bht. for a funeral, but for the funeral of an elder they will contribute extra: ranging anywhere from 50 Bht. - 1000 Bht. The biggest funeral that our informant witnessed was for that of an elder male which lasted for nine days. For every day of the funeral they killed one pig (probably not very large), and on the last day each married son of the elder sacrificed a cow. Some of the left-over meat from this funeral was salted for later consumption, and some of it was given away to guests to take home. This funeral was estimated to cost 40,000 Bht. - 50,000 Bht.

***The Akha:*** Often considered the most traditional of the six Hilltribes, the Akha give feasts for a wide range of social occasions. For the most part, these feasts tend to be relatively inexpensive (as compared to the Yao or Hmong), but the Akha still invest a large proportion of their surplus resources in feasting. And although the Akha may spend less overall than some of the other tribes, they also tend to be poorer, so in actuality, they are investing an equal or greater part of their surplus wealth into feasts. This is especially true for the funeral feasts of important elders, both male and female. These can be incredibly expensive, and have many hundreds or even

thousands of people in attendance. Although the Akha have a well developed sense of lineage solidarity, they are also very community minded. They hold three major yearly community festivals, and they have a traditional 'Village-founder-leader' (Kammerer's 1986 label), which is seen as the nexus of community cohesion. The single most obvious prestige item in the Akha culture are the ornamental headdresses worn by the women. These can have up to 2.5 kg of silver ornaments and bangles.

The Akha do not have a custom of bride prices. Young people have a great freedom in their choice of marriage partners. It could be for this reason that Akha households do not seem overly concerned about making a name for themselves within their communities. The Akha do collect donations from guests at weddings, funerals, and new house feasts. However, the amount received can vary greatly and often times there are no collections made at all.

We had the opportunity to visit several Akha villages and to conduct research in one particular village over a three and a half month period. Our main study village is called Mae Salep, and it is located in North Central Chiang Rai Province.

New Years for the Akha is a relatively important festival. In general, they put great emphasis on community solidarity events. New Years lasts for seven days and it is a time of household visiting and boisterous activity. A popular tradition is the making and spinning of wooden tops by the young boys. Many families will kill a pig in order to give a feast to visitors, but it is also common for groups of families to buy shares of a waterbuffalo which is slaughtered for the event. The amount spent on a share of buffalo meat can vary from 100 Bht - 1000 Bht. A lot of money seems to be spent upon rice whiskey, but we are not sure exactly how much, in part, because the people do not like to discuss the price of the whiskey that they buy from illegal (i.e. non-state run) distillers.

Weddings for the Akha of Mae Salep are not especially large. Middle income households will have a wedding with one large pig (approximately 3000 Bht.) and occasionally chickens. The two weddings that we witnessed both had approximately 70 people in attendance over a three day period. At these events there was some use of prestige items. Specifically,

people would be wearing their most formal clothes, concerning the women, this means all of their silver and baubles on their headresses. The bride also wears a white skirt, an item of clothing usually reserved for an older female ritual expert. The Akha do not have a tradition of bride prices. The guests do make monetary donations at the wedding, and some people bring food.

The size of funerals for the Akha vary greatly, but in general people will try to have the largest feast that they can (and sometimes cannot) afford. A poor person's funeral feast will consist of only tea and chickens to be fed to the people who help with the coffin making and burial. A funeral for a wealthy and respected elder, however, can have over a thousand people in attendance and consist of the sacrifice of numerous pigs and several buffalo. The largest funeral in recent memory at Mae Salep was for the elderly wife of the Village Founder-Leader (Kammerer's 1986 label), and at it the family sacrificed three waterbuffalo. The largest funeral that the resident ritual expert had witnessed was in a different village and consisted of seven waterbuffalo. In cases like this, it seems fairly self evident that the sacrifice of waterbuffalo is a means to display wealth and the ownership of prestigious animals.

***The Lahu:*** Strongly related to the Akha, both linguistically and historically, are the Lahu. Because of a traditional messiah myth, they were converted to Christianity to a far greater degree than any of the other Hilltribes. Our impression is that the Lahu, like the Akha and Karen, are at the lower end of the wealth spectrum, and this is reflected in the relative inexpensive feasts which they hold and in their lack of overt wealth items such as excessive jewelry. They are also very community minded; put a high degree of value on the New Years celebration; and perform various other community wide events. Some subgroups of the Lahu have permanent May-pole-like fixtures in their villages around which they dance during New Years. The Lahu are unique in that (at least in the villages that we visited) they never make donations towards other peoples feasts. One Lahu informant was quoted as saying, "The Lahu are stingy, they only come to eat."

We had the opportunity to visit three Lahu villages, the last two being in very close proximity to each another. At the first village, Mae Kham Buhn, a yellow Lahu village, we able to interview the elderly mother of one of the resident 'shamans'. She told us that in her village New Years celebrations last for five days. Not every family is obligated to sacrifice an animal, but many families kill a pig one day before the festivities begin. Some of the richer households will kill a cow and allow other, poorer, families to buy a share of the meat. The families slaughter pigs from their own herds (as do most of the Hilltribes), so there is not necessarily alot of 'out of pocket expense', and the pigs can be worth anywhere from 500 Bht - 3000 Bht. She estimates that the average family will spend only 200 Bht - 300 Bht on whiskey for New Years.

Weddings in Mae Kham Buhn usually consist of only one 'big' pig. Occasionally, richer families will kill a cow, and conversely, poorer families will have only chickens (In some groups, the Akha for example, it is impossible to hold a proper wedding without a pig sacrifice). The standard bride price is 4000 Bht - 5000 Bht., but if it happens to be the woman's second marriage the bride price is much lower or nothing at all. Attendance is generally very small, usually consisting of mainly elders from the groom's family. The guests do not donate any money. A "very big" wedding for Mae Kham Bunh village costs 30,000 Bht. - 40,000 Bht. The groom's family pays for the entire event, but the feast is held in the girl's family's house. Occasionally, a second feast is held in the groom's family's house.

Funerals seem to be very small events. A rich family's funeral will last three or four days, while a poorer family's funeral will last for only one day. The average funeral feast consists of one, or sometimes two, pigs. A large scale funeral will consist of one cow and two pigs, and it is estimated that this kind of funeral would cost approximately 10, 000 Bht. Our informant claims that they never kill buffalo at funerals (Buffalo sacrifice in most other Hilltribes is considered the ideal for a funeral). In terms of attendance, most of the guests will be residents of the home village.

The second Lahu village that we visited, Ya Fuu, was very small and very traditional. There are 170 residents, no roads lead to the village, and there is no electricitly available. The



people grow white rice and corn for consumption, and black rice for sale. The villagers are Red Lahu. We conducted an interview with a middle aged shaman/diviner.

New Years in Ya Fuu lasts for twelve days, and most houses kill one pig and one chicken. Some of the poorer residents will buy pork from other families. Large animals (i.e., cattle or buffalo) are never sacrificed for New Years. They generally receive some visitors from other villages, approximately twenty per New Years. The average expense is estimated at 4000 Bht.

Weddings are generally small events in Ya Fuu, costing approximately 7000 Bht. for a one pig and three chicken feast. Most of the villagers will attend and there are usually guests from outside the village. The ceremony and subsequent feast take place at the home of the bride. The average bride price is 5000 Bht.

Funerals in Ya Fuu are also generally small events. A three day funeral is considered extravagant, and would consist of three or four pigs being killed. There is no problem for poorer families to only kill chickens and serve tea at their relative's funerals. No guests donate money to the hosts, they do, however, help with the work involved with making the coffin and burying the body. The largest Lahu funeral that our informant has ever seen took place in a distant village and was for a Headman. It lasted for seven days and cost 50,000 Bht. - 60,000 Bht.

The final Lahu village that we visited is called Ja Leh. Again we interviewed the local shaman/ritual specialist. Ja Leh village is very much like Ya Fuu village, in size and development, and they are actually located very nearby each other. One significant difference, however, is that the residents of Ja Leh village tend cattle which they sell for profit and buffalo which they use to work the fields.

New Years celebrations in Ja Leh also lasts for twelve days. They never kill buffalo or cattle, and only some of the larger, more prosperous households, will kill pigs. The Headman, assistant Headman, and the shaman are all obligated to sacrifice at least one pig. Our informant estimates that close to 100 people visit the village over the 12 day period. The first six days of New Year are dedicated to the women, and they perform dances around a pig's head which is

mounted on a platform atop a pole. The last six days are dedicated to the men of the village, and during this time the men will dance around the pole. One large household will spend roughly 5000 Bht. on their New Years feast, but this does not include the cost of making the requisite new clothing.

Weddings in Ja Leh seem to hover around an average size which our informant summed up as "three chickens, one pig, one day". The bride price is not fixed, but is usually 5000 Bht. Our informant believed that the average cost of a wedding feast is 11, 000 Bht., and in fact, claims that he has never seen one in excess of that amount. Guests do not make contributions, however the brother or sister of one of the newly weds might give them a small piece of silver as a "momento or lucky charm". Normally, after the wedding, the couple lives with the bride's family for a year, and then with the groom's family for a year, after which they build their own house.

Funerals seem to be about the same size as weddings in Ja Leh village. The funerals of poor people last for only one day, and the only animals eaten at the feasts are chickens. The funerals of rich people, however, can last for two or three days and the feasts can consist of one or two pigs and occasionally a cow. If the deceased is extremely poor, then the Headman will collect 10 Bht. from every household and buy chickens for the funeral. A very expensive funeral would cost somewhere in the range of 10,000 Bht. - 11,000 Bht. Our informant gave one of the biggest funeral feasts in the village in recent history. It was for his deceased mother, and it cost him 10, 000 Bht. Although his mother had requested a cow to be sacrificed at her funeral, he didn't have one available at the time of her death so he sacrificed one large pig instead. He plans to hold a feast consisting of a cow sacrifice at her grave site on the one year anniversary of her death. Furthermore, he also plans to hold a pork feast at her grave site on the second year anniversary of her death.

***The Karen:*** There are many subgroups in the Karen tribe. In general they seem to be one of the more impoverished tribes. They practice wet paddy agriculture when they are able, but because

they live in the mountains, they have a difficult time finding enough suitable land. Their social organization appears to be quite loose, and there is not much centralization of power.

Furthermore, there seems to be little or no status divisions in the villages (though this probably varies widely by sub-group and region of residence). Village wide events do not play a large role in their feasting activity, and in general they hold very few feasts. Correspondingly, they have very few prestige items.

Weddings are relatively small affairs for the Karen, usually consisting of the sacrifice of one or two pigs. They do not have a bride price, and they do not have special clothing for the people who are to be wed. The bride and groom wear new versions of their everyday clothing. Similarly, funerals are small events. Everyone in the lineage of the deceased is expected to lend support to the funeral. There is no centralized feast, and people who come from other villages for the ceremony will eat in the homes of their hosts.

We had opportunity to conduct interviews in three Karen villages. The first is called Mae Jun. It is a small village, twenty-eight households, and it is located in Chiang Mai province. We interviewed an elderly male household head, focusing on the topic of weddings. We were told that the people in this village do not celebrate any large annual festivals, and that even New Years was a sedate occasion involving only the consumption of alcohol.

The Karen in this region are both matrilocal and matrilineal, and people generally marry into families which live in other villages. The fact that the groom goes to live with his in-laws may explain why there is no, or very minimal, bride price requirement for the Karen. On the first day of the wedding, a bottle of liquor is brought to the family of the bride by representatives of the groom as a way of begging permission for their man to marry into the family. If permission is granted (as it usually is because the visit has been expected), then the bride's family will give a pork feast to the groom's representatives. On the second day, the pig's head from the previous night's feast is hung in the house of the bride's family, and when the groom's representatives return to their home village, they feast once again at the house of the groom. The amount of animals killed at Mae Jue weddings can vary, but not to a large degree. The largest

wedding feast that our informant had witnessed consisted of five medium sized pigs (30 cm - 50 cm); his daughter's wedding feast consisted of four pigs 30 cm long; and his own wedding, to his second wife, had no pigs killed at all, only eight chickens.

The second Karen village that we visited is located in Chiang Rai province and is called Khun Wong. We interviewed their middle-aged Headman, and concentrated our questions on weddings in his village. Once again, we were told that there is no special attire made for the bride or groom. For a typical marriage, if it involves a couple from the same village, only one pig is sacrificed for the feast. If the bride should happen to come from a different village than the groom, then at least two pigs (one for each village) are necessary to perform the marriage. Weddings seldomly exceed this general size. Guests do not make monetary donations, though they sometimes give food or whiskey, and there is no form of bride-price or dowry exchanged.

The final Karen village that we visited is called Huay Pha Kan. It is a fairly sizable village of 60 households. We talked to an elderly man about weddings and New Years celebrations in his village.

New Years in Huay Pha Kan, like in the other Karen villages we visited, is a socially important event, but is not actually a large festival. The celebrations last for only a few days, and they entail one male representative from each household visiting each and every other household in the village for a drink of whiskey. This is clearly a village-wide solidarity enhancing event.

Weddings in Huay Pha Kan are generally fairly small events, though they can be a bit larger than at some of the other Karen villages that we visited. Our informant's wedding feast, 33 years ago, consisted of only two chickens and one pig. Both his family and his wife's family shared the expense. His son's wedding feast, four years ago, consisted of six pigs and ten chickens. Again, the expense of the wedding was shared by the two families. Every household that had members in attendance at the feast donated one bottle of whiskey. The largest wedding that our informant could remember consisted of two pigs and one cow, and this he considers the very maximum size of a wedding feast.

## Prestige Item Analysis

For our purposes, we shall define a prestige item as something which imbues social prestige upon its owner. Some prestige items are pragmatic and functional. For instance, it is considered prestigious in all of the six Hilltribes for a man to have many children, multiple wives, and many livestock. These are all symbols of 'production potential', and in a farming community these three things advertise success and future security. Then there are prestige items which are defined by their monetary value, and these are often times non utilitarian. For example, silver jewelry and expensive serving vessels. These are the types of prestige items which we as archaeologists are most usually interested in. By the very nature of their non utility and their expense we can speculate that they are objects by which surplus wealth is converted into a symbol which can create social status. This point is especially important to the study of the evolution of stratified societies.

We should first ask ourselves, what are prestige items used for? How do they function? It is here that a distinction in use must be made. It is our contention that they can either be used to 'compete' for social distinction (via wealth display, success display) and/or they can be used to 'reaffirmate' social distinction (via the material symbolization of a social reality). The first condition applies to transegalitarian societies who must constantly seek to find a place in a fluid and ill defined ranking system, while the second applies more often to stratified societies with individuals who can claim status through birth or other fixed means.

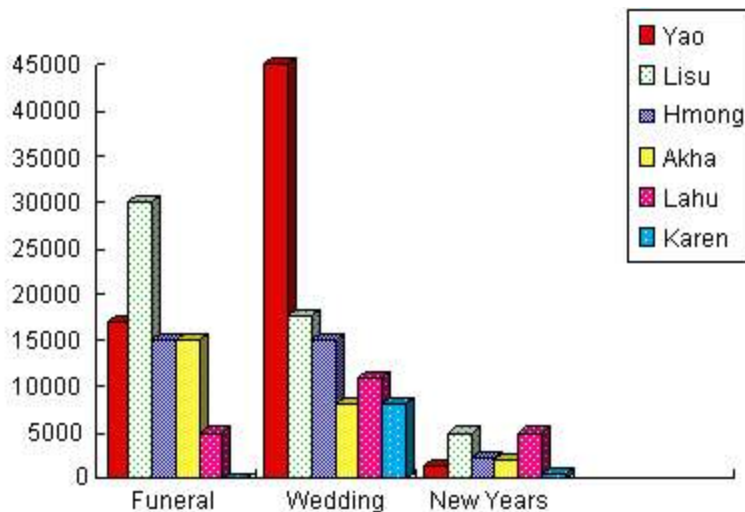
In the Hilltribe case, apparently because of the nature of the resource base (see Clarke 1998), there are no permanent class divisions. Individuals must vie for social position during their own lifetimes. In this case, items which display an immediate 'production potential', i.e. wives, children, and animals, and a 'give away potential', i.e. the number of animals that can be given to the community, can expect to receive respect and deference. This respect and deference can be further reaffirmed by expensive jewelry and clothes.

It is also our contention that the use of prestige items increases with the degree of social ranking and not necessarily with the amount of surplus available. This could be why the Yao, for example, invest so heavily in prestige items: they are the most ranked of all the Hilltribes. Furthermore, as is shown in the data presented here, the use of prestige items increases when there is a corresponding increase in the amount of money spent on the feast. The Yao and the Lisu spend the greatest amount on their feasts, and consequently they make the greatest use of prestige items (see figure 1 below). In the Akha case, only the most expensive funeral feasts will utilize prestige items. It would seem that once feasts reach a certain expense level, they become aggrandizing events, and as such, the people choose to use expensive prestige items to further the impressiveness of the event.

Concerning feasting related prestige items, we must first ask ourselves what is the purpose behind the feast? For most people it is the creation and maintenance of a life-crisis support network. For a few it is competitive aggrandizing. For a feast, a family has a choice of where to invest its capital: into more food and drink, or into wealth items. If they are trying to reaffirmate a position of status (e.g., an Akha village priest, a Lisu headman), then they will probably invest in wealth items: for instance, at the funeral of high status Akha individuals, the presiding ritual expert is paid in the form of silver spoons and jewelry. If, however, they are trying to ensure the maintenance of a cooperative support/work network, then they will probably invest in extra food and drink.

If a family decides to invest in expensive prestige items, then they have a choice of what kinds. Some forms are easily liquefied back into capital for use in emergencies (e.g., jewelry and animals), while some cannot be resold, or only resold at a loss (e.g. houses, clothes, carved wooden objects). Because of the volatile nature of the Hilltribe economy it is unwise to tie up all of one's capital in items which cannot be resold in times of economic crisis.

Prestige serving vessels fall into the second category. Surprisingly, there is an unexpected dearth of prestige serving vessels in Hilltribe societies. We suspect that the

**Figure 1: Average Feast Expenditures by Tribe**

reason for this is that the use of prestige serving vessels has more to do with reaffirming an already extant ranking system, which the Hilltribes do not have, rather than for competing for status. Unlike the Western European tradition, prestige serving vessels in Asia seem to give distinction to the guests who use them, not to the family who owns them. By serving some individuals at a feast, but not others, with special vessels, a host is demonstrating the status of the guest. The host probably hopes that guest will at a later date give him a place of honour at a feast, or is rationalizing that by supporting the system of status ranking he will solidify his own position in it, whatever that might be.

Lastly, the nature of the Hilltribe's mobile lifestyle affects their use of prestige items. First of all, in general, villages do not often move in whole groups. Either single families move to the already existing villages of distant kin, or groups of families splinter off and start very small new communities. This does not allow for the emergence of a permanent village wide class division, nor does it allow individuals to take the status that they gained in one village to the next. Furthermore, migration often takes a lot of available capital. A family must have enough money to hold them over for one year until the new harvest comes in.

Secondly, a migratory lifestyle does not allow for the erection of prestigious structures by any one family group. If a family tried to impress their fellow villagers with an especially fine house, or a monolith on the grave of an ancestor, for example, they would soon find that all of those people who were initially impressed had since moved away. Furthermore, once that family had to move on itself, they would realize that they could not take the monolith with them, and probably would not want to move an excessively large home. Currently in Thailand, the Hilltribes have been settled into permanent villages, and we now occasionally see the construction of prestigious homes. We also see the emergence of a more permanent class division within certain villages.

Thirdly, the mobile lifestyle of the Hilltribes is not conducive to the accumulation of heavy and breakable objects. For instance, traditionally the people would use bamboo cylinders for drinking cups. These were disposable and could eventually be used as fire wood. When they moved on to a new location they were not obligated to bring these cups along, but rather, would just make new ones once they reached their new location.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

We have seen from the data presented above that each of the various Hilltribes spends different amounts of money on different types feasts. One of the reasons for this is that each tribe has a different level of over-all wealth. Another reason is that some tribes have a higher degree of social ranking, and feasting is a method that they use to establish themselves in a position of high rank. Prestige items, for the most part, seem to be more prevalent in those groups that have the highest degree of social stratification. Those groups which are the least wealthy also tend to be the least stratified. It would seem that when income is barely above subsistence levels, people feel that it is in their best interest to cultivate a support group network, and counterproductive to produce rivalries based on status competition.



In regards to future research among the Hilltribes, it would be illuminating to be able to do an in-depth study of the economics of feasting in one of the wealthier and more stratified groups such as the Yao. It would also be interesting to examine how the traditional role of feasting within Hilltribe culture has adapted to modernization. Specifically, how the governmental policy of permanent settlement and long term land ownership has effected the rationale behind the sponsoring of feasts. Because of the extremely rapid rate of modernization in Northern Thailand in the past few decades, the Hilltribes represent a case of forced and accelerated social evolution. To see how the practice of feasting and the use of status symbols is changing to meet the demands of the modern world may give us some insight into how the practice of feasting evolved in the past and what role it plays today

## References.

- Clarke, Michael J. 1998. *Feasting among the Akha: An ethnoarchaeological case study*. M.A. thesis; Simon Fraser University, Burnaby B.C.
- Dessant, Alai Yvon. 1972. *Economic Organization of the Lisu of the Thai Highlands*. Ph.D. thesis; University of Hawaii.
- Kammerer, Cornelia. 1986. *Gateway to the Akha world: Kinship, ritual, and community among highlanders of Thailand*. Ph.D. thesis Anthropology Department, University of Chicago: Chicago.
- Kirsch, A. T.. 1973. *Feasting and Social Oscillation: A Working Paper on Religion and Society in Upland Southeast Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell University, Dept. of Asian Studies, Southeast Asian Data Paper No. 92.
- Leach, Edmund. 1956. *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. Beacon Press: Boston.
- Lewis, Paul and Elaine Lewis. 1984. *Peoples of the Golden Triangle*. Thames and Hudson: London.