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A Note on the Ancient Towns and Cities of Northeastern Thailand

by

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In a recent article published in *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu*, Professors Thiva Supajanya and Srisakra Vallibhotama have put forth a well-argued plea that the antiquities of the northeastern region of Thailand be given attention beyond that which they have attracted from art historians (Thiva Supajanya and Srisakra Vallibhotama, 1972). Recent researches by prehistorians have established a sequence of independent developments in the region which includes a ceramic tradition dating from ca. 5,000 B.C., domesticated rice from ca. 4,000 B.C., full-scale agriculture associated with bronze-working by ca. 2,500 B.C., and the beginnings of iron technology from ca. 900 B.C. (Bayard, 1971; Chin Yūdi, 1972; Solheim, 1972). Given that this developmental sequence is unbroken, it would seem a logical step to expect and to look for the emergence of urban life in the region in the next phase of development. That such urban (or, at least, town) life did follow is strongly suggested by the existence of about 300 sites in the region which are characterized by earthen ramparts and moats. It is these sites to which Professors Thiva and Srisakra draw our attention.

While these remains of ancient towns in the northeastern region of Thailand have attracted some attention from time to time, they have been almost totally eclipsed by the much greater attention given to the antiquities of the region which are associated with the Angkorean empire. While the importance and interest of these Angkorean monuments, most of which seem to date from the 11th and 12th centuries, cannot be gainsaid, the plea made by Professors Thiva and Srisakra strongly deserves to be heeded. The Khorat Plateau may well hold some of the most important clues regarding the emergence of civilization in mainland Southeast Asia.

In this note, I wish to call attention to some evidence in the indigenous literature of the people of the Khorat Plateau which might throw some additional light on the ancient towns and cities known archaeologically. While I do consider some specific evidence from two legends from the region, I do so only to indicate what information might be derived from legendary sources rather than to present the distillation of a long period of research. I should like to conclude this note with a few suggestions,

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in keeping with those offered by Professors Thiva and Srisakra, regarding the possible interpretation of the evidence on the ancient sites of northeastern Thailand.

I Names of Ancient Towns and Principalities in Legends of Northeastern Thailand

The Thai-Lao people of northeastern Thailand¹⁾ have a well-developed tradition of 'legends' (*nithān*) which has been perpetuated in past through the media of folk opera which locally is known as *m̄ lam m̄*. While some of these legends can be traced to Indian sources and others belong to traditions found in neighboring areas, no small number record events which happened "long ago" on the Khorat Plateau itself. While such 'legends' are not historical accounts, they are not totally lacking in historical value. A number of the northeastern legends make reference to places which can be identified as being the sites of the ancient towns of which Professors Thiva and Srisakra have spoken.

Here, I wish to discuss only very briefly two legends which concern these ancient towns in order to suggest what might possibly be gleaned from legendary sources about this important period in the region's history. As with the archaeological study of the ancient towns of northeastern Thailand, the literature of the region has yet to be fully inventoried, much less analyzed.²⁾

II The Legend of "Phādāeng Nāng Ai"

The Legend of "Phādāeng Nāng Ai" is one of the most well-known legends in the region since it tells the story of how the first 'rocket' festival (*bun bōng fai*) occurred.³⁾ The characteristics of this ceremony are relevant to our interests since

1) I use the term "Thai-Lao" to refer to the majority of the population of northeastern Thailand who are ethnically Lao and who are Thai citizens. The population of Northeastern Thailand also includes a sizeable Khmer-speaking minority, a number of other Mon-Khmer speaking groups, and representatives of several other Tai-speaking groups such as the Yō and Phū Thai.

2) Much of the literature of northeastern Thailand still exists only on palm leaf manuscripts. However, a sizeable corpus has been published by Khlang Nānā Witthayā, a supplier of religious goods in the town of Khōnkaēn. Unfortunately, most of these publications have had little circulation outside of the folk opera troupes for which they were intended. Moreover, few titles have been reprinted once the original supply was exhausted and few new titles have been added in the last two or three years. The author has made two partial collections of this body of northeastern literature, one of which has been placed in the library of Cornell University. Recently, Phra Ariyānuwat Khēmacāri, the abbot of Wat Mahā Chai in the town of Mahāsārahām has established a center for the conservation of northeastern literature and culture. At this center he has collected both manuscripts and artefacts from sites mainly in the Chī River Valley of central northeastern Thailand. He has also himself been responsible for the editing, transliterating into modern Thai script, and publishing of a number of northeastern texts, including several legends. Again, unfortunately, these books have yet to receive the wide attention they deserve. Given the limited support for his work, these publications of Phra Ariyānuwat Khēmacāri have tended to be somewhat ephemeral.

3) A published version of this legend in Thai script exists in the collection printed by Khlang Nānā Witthayā. Tambiah(1970 : 294-298) give two versions of the myth from the oral tradition of villagers in Udōn province. In my interpretation of the myth, I have followed Phra Ariyānuwat's commentary in *Tamnān Mūang Fā Dāet Song Yāng* (Phra Ariyānuwat Khēmacāri, 1971:100-101).

the ceremony, regardless of present-day interpretation and associated practices, is not a Buddhist ceremony. Rather, it is supremely a 'fertility' ceremony whose supernatural audience are benevolent local spirits and deities.

While in parts of Laos the *bun bōng fai* is held in association with the major Buddhist holiday, Visakha-pūja, on the day of the full moon of the 6th lunar month, in other parts of Laos and in northeastern Thailand it has been reported to be held variously throughout the period from the day of the full moon of the 5th lunar month to the day of the full moon of the 8th lunar month.⁴⁾ In other words, the ceremony is held at the end of the dry season or at the beginning of the rainy season. According to my informants in the province of Mahāsārakhām in northeastern region of Thailand, the purpose of the ceremony was to request rain and fertility of the crops from the deities (*thēwadā*; Skt., *devāta*). This is, in essence, the same purpose ascribed to the ceremony by Pierre Nginn who says that the Lord of Heaven, Phragna Then (Phrayā Thāēn), is involved in order to obtain "the fecundity of the rice and the abundance of the monsoonal rains" (Nginn, 1961:9). The symbolism of the ceremony is highly sexual, the *bōng fai* themselves representing phalluses.

The concern with fertility in this ceremony, together with the attention to deities and some relatively benevolent spirits (*phī*),⁵⁾ point to a type of religious system which antedated Buddhism. That Buddhist elements in the ceremony are so obviously grafted supports this thesis. And the myth of "Phādāēng Nāng Ai", which tells of

4) Faure (1959 : 272) has reported the association of the *bun bōng fai* and Visakha-pūja at Wat Kang in Vientiane. The *bun bōng fai* with which I am most familiar from my own field researches—namely one held at an old Khmer temple in Tambon Khwao, Amphōē Mūang Mahāsārakhām, is held annually on the day of the full moon of the 5th lunar month. While traditionally this day was also the main day of the New Year's celebration, it no longer is since the Thai government has fixed the days of the New Year's ceremony as 13, 14, and 15 April. Tambiah, who carried field work in the village of Bān Phrān Muan, Tambon Bān Khao, Amphōē Mūang, Udōn, reports that in that area the rocket festival "is held at any time between the 6th and 8th lunar months, in theory on the 15th day of the waxing of the moon, but in act on any convenient day in the waxing period" (Tambiah, 1970 : 288). Condominas (1968 : 126) reports that for villages on the Vientiane Plain in Laos, the ceremony can take place on various dates over a month and half period in May and June.

5) The supernatural beings for whom the ceremony is intended appears to vary according to the social entity performing the ceremony. When that entity is a village, as in the case of the ceremony described by Tambiah (1970 : 285f), the supernatural beings in question are local tutelary spirits. Condominas reports the same situation for villages on the Vientiane Plain (Condominas 1968 : 126). When the entity is larger, as with the congeries of villages which gather at the Khmer shrine in Mahāsārakhām, the deities are higher, in this case being *thēwadā*. Finally, when the whole of a Mūang is involved, as in Vientiane, the deity in question is the Lord of Heaven himself. The fact that indigenous 'spirits' (*phī*) as well as Indian-derived 'deities' (*thēwadā*) are involved in this ceremony should not be allowed to disguise the fact that the ritual is quite different from those associated with warding off or counteracting the malfesance of most other types of 'spirits'.

the first *bun bōng fai*, at least for the Thai-Lao of northeastern Thailand,⁶⁾ strongly connects the ceremony with the protohistoric past of northeastern Thailand.

Briefly, the myth concerns Nāng Ai, the beautiful daughter of Phayā Khōm, the ruler of Mụang Nōng Hān (or Mụang Nōng Hān Nōi), and her lover Prince Phādāēng. Phayā Khōm also had two sons by his wife, Nāng Pathumāthēwī (Skt., Padumā devi), each of whom ruled their own *mụang* (principalities): Chiang Hian (or Chiang Hian Bān Iat) and Mụang Si Kāēo Phak Wāēn. In addition, two grandsons (*lān*) ruled two more *mụang*: Mụang Hong-Mụang Thōng and Mụang Pheng.

Phayā Khōm decided to sponsor a rocket competition (that is, the first *bun bōng fai*). Both he and Prince Phādāēng entered rockets, but their rockets failed. The rocket of the ruler of Chiang Hian won. The son of the Nāga ruler, who had been married to Nāng Ai in a former existence, had been attracted to the competition. There he saw Nāng Ai and fell in love with her. To be close to her, he transformed himself into a squirrel. Nāng Ai saw the squirrel and had a hunter shoot it. The meat of the squirrel fed thousands, but the price was very high. The capital of Phayā Khōm sank into a swamp and much of the surrounding area was turned into mud. Phādāēng and Nāng Ai tried to escape by horse, taking with them the royal drum, the royal gong, and the royal ring. These proved to be too heavy in their efforts to get through the mud and so Nāng Ai cast them away, one by one. These three things, at least according to one version of the myth (Tambiah, 1970: 296, 297-8) provided the names for places in Udōn province. Some versions say that Nāng Ai herself died in the attempt to escape and only Phādāēng survived.

While this myth can be analyzed structurally (see Tambiah 1970: 298-304), our interest here is in what the myth tells us historically. First, there are several toponyms mentioned in the story: Mụang Nōng Hān (Nōi), Chiang Hian, Mụang Si Kāēo Phak Wāēn, Mụang Hong-Mụang Thōng, and Mụang Pheng. (In this paper, I will ignore the more localized place names given in the Udōn version of the myth.) Secondly, the myth makes use of the term, *Khōm*, in the title for the ruler of Nōng Hān, which has apparent ethnic connotations. Thirdly, the name of the wife of the ruler of Nōng Hān is clearly of Indian origin. We shall reserve our interpretation of these data until we have examined our second indigenous legend.

III The “Accounts of Fā Dāēt-Song Yāng”

The “Tamnān Fā Dāēt Song Yāng” is far less well-known than is “Phādāēng Nāng Ai”. Indeed, Phra Ariyānuwat who recently published this legend has said that the manuscript copy on which he based his text is the only extant version he knows of. The “Tamnān Fā Dāēt Song Yāng” is associated with no ceremony, but its story

6) Faure (1959: 281) provides a brief passage from a myth linked with *bun bōng fai* in Vientiane which appears to be quite different from that of “Phadaeng Nāng Ai”.

links it in time with the story of "Phādāṅg Ai".

Long, long ago, the people known as the Māṅ Fā or Thāṅ Fā moved to the banks of the Mahā Nathī (Skt., Mahā Nadi) River which was then a great lake. Two countries were created in the north and south respectively of the lake. On the north, was the country of Mṅ Chiang Sōm and on the south was the country of Fā Dāṅt/Song Yāṅ (as we shall see in a moment, these two are separate, but closely related places). Mṅ Chiang Sōm was ruled by Phayā Cantharāt (Skt., Candarāja) and his younger brother, Tham (Skt., Dharma), was the Upparāt or Viceroy. The vassal states of Chiang Sōm included Chiang Song, Chiang Sā, Chiang Khṅ, Chiang Chōi (or Thā Ngām Nām Dōk Mai) and Sābut (or Sābut Kutkōk). Also connected with Chiang Sōm, but apparently as an ally and not as a vassal, was Chiang Yṅ.

Mṅ Fā Dāṅt, whose ruler was known as Phayā Fā Dāṅt or the Sanskritic equivalent, Āditayarāja, was linked with Mṅ Song Yāṅ whose ruler was the younger brother of Phayā Fā Dāṅt. The ruler of Song Yāṅ also had a Sanskritic name, Isūraya. In this area south of the Mahā Nathī, there were a number of other *mṅ*: Chiang Hian or Chiang Hian Bān Iat, Mṅ Si Kāṅ Phak Wāṅ, Mṅ Hong-Mṅ Thōṅ, and Mṅ Pheng. While Chiang Hian and Fā Dāṅt appear to have been allies, none of these southern *mṅ* were vassals of Mṅ Fā Dāṅt. Also in the picture, but rather aloof from the events, was Mṅ Nōṅ Hān.

Phayā Fā Dāṅt had a beautiful daughter, called Nāṅ Fā Yāt. Phayā Cantharāt, the ruler of Mṅ Chiang Sōm, fell in love with the daughter and was able to become her lover, although at the price of abusing the hospitality of Phayā Fā Dāṅt. For this reason, Phayā Fā Dāṅt declared war on Phayā Cantharāt. Cantharāt was killed in battle and when the news of his death reached Nāṅ Fā Yāt, she fell into a faint from which she never recovered. Phayā Fā Dāṅt was heartbroken at the outcome of this war and ordered that two cetiya, one to hold the remains of Phayā Cantharāt and the other the remains of Nāṅ Fā Yāt, be constructed at Chiang Sōm and Fā Dāṅt respectively. Having lost the war, Chiang Sōm was forced to send annual tribute to Fā Dāṅt. However, Phayā Tham, who had succeeded his brother as ruler of Chiang Sōm, did not like this state of affairs and started a new war. This time Chiang Sōm was victorious, and Mṅ Fā Dāṅt became the dependency of Chiang Sōm.

From this legend, we are provided another list of place names, a number of which are the same as those in the legend of "Phādāṅg Nāṅ Ai". Those which are different include the Mahā Nathī River or Lake and the Mṅ of Chiang Sōm, Chiang Song, Chiang Sā, Chiang Khṅ, Chiang Chōi or Mṅ Thā Ngām Nām Dōk Mai, Mṅ Sābut (Skt., Sāputra) or Sarabut (Skt., Saraputra) Kutkōk, Chiang Yṅ, and Mṅ Fā Dāṅt Song Yāṅ. The use of terms which appear to have an ethnic connotation—i.e., Māṅ Fā or Thāṅ Fā, also occur in this legend. Finally, there is

considerable use of names of Indian origin (Mahā Nadi River, Mṅg Sāputra or Saraputra, Phayā Cantharāja, Phayā Dharma, Phayā Āditiyarāja, Phayā Isūraya).

IV Legends and the Old Towns of N. E. Thailand

While we cannot push the data from these legends too far, it does seem permissible to use them to suggest something about the ancient towns and cities which existed on the northeastern plateau. The basis of this claim lies in the fact that some of the toponyms mentioned in the two legends can be tied to the archaeological sites discussed by Professors Thiva and Srisakra; none of these, however, can be connected to either Khmer sites or to more recent centers established after Tai-speaking people came to dominate the region politically.

Of the places mentioned in the two legends, the following can be definitely connected with existing places on the Khorat Plateau:

Mṅg Nṅg Hān or Mṅg Nṅg Hān Nṅi	In Amphōē Nṅg Hān, Udṅn Province
Mṅg Fā Dāēt Song Yāng (or Sūng Yāng)	Bān Sēmā in Amphōē Komalasai, Kālasin Province
Chiang Hian (Chiang Hian Bān Iat)	Bān Chiang Hian and Bān Iat, Amphōē Mṅg, Mahāsārahām Province
Mṅg Si Kāēo Phak Wāēn	In Amphōē Mṅg, Rṅi Et Province
Mṅg Hong Mṅg Thṅg	In Amphōē Caturaphakphimān, Rṅi Et Province
Mṅg Pheng	In Amphōē Chiang Yṅn, Mahāsārahām Province
Chiang Yṅn	In Amphōē Chiang Yṅn, Mahāsārahām Province ⁷⁾

Of these, Mṅg Fā Dāēt is by far the best known of the ancient sites of northeastern Thailand, having been the first site recognized as being 'Dvāravatī'.⁸⁾

7) Except for the first of these identifications, all are taken from Phra Ariyānuwat's listing in the "Tamnān Fā Dāēt Song Yāng" (Phra Ariyānuwat Khēmacāri 1971 : 101-2). While Nṅg Hān is also the name for old Sakon Nakhṅn, geographical considerations suggest that the identification given here is more appropriate. Sakon Nakhṅn is separated by mountains from the Chī River Basin, while Nṅg Hān in Udṅn Province is not. Regarding the last identification, Phra Ariyānuwat suggests that the site was not that of present day Chiang Yṅn but was at Ban Cān in the same district. He says that the ancient name for Chiang Yṅn may have been Pattanagara or Sāyapatra, but provides no source for this supposition.

8) Mṅg Fā Dāēt was one of the ancient sites noted first by Williams-Hunt (1950) on the basis of aerial photographs of northeastern Thailand. It then became the subject of a site visit by Major Seidenfaden (1954) who, for some strange reason, called the ancient town, 'Kanok Nakhon'. Seidenfaden was followed shortly thereafter by reports of site visits by Prince Subhadradis Diskul (1956) and Quaritch Wales (1957). Wales was the main person responsible for connecting the site with 'Dvāravatī' civilization (see Wales, 1969 : 98-113). Recently, the Fine Arts Department has undertaken some excavations at the site, although only a few details have as yet been reported from the research (Prayūn Phabūnsuwan, 1972 : 25-7).

For the moment, at least, the other toponyms must remain unidentified. The key would seem to lie in identifying the Mahā Nathī River Lake. Perhaps it was the Māēkhōng, perhaps it was Nōng Hān, the largest body of water on the Khorat Plateau, or perhaps it was some lesser body or stream which is given more significance in the legend than its geographical characteristics would actually permit. My own suspicion is that both Bān Chiang, in Udōn province, which is now famous for its prehistoric remains, and Kantharawichai (a relatively modern name for an ancient site) which is the seat of a district in Mahāsārakhām province should probably be connected with one or the other of the unidentified names in the set derived from the two legends.

There is an interesting feature of some of these names which is worthy of note—namely that they refer to two places which are paired: Fā Dāēt–Song Yāng (or Sūng Yāng), Chiang Hian–Bān Iat, Si Kāeo–Phak Wāen, Mụang Hong–Mụang Thōng. It appears that the first of these names referred to the main capital of a *mụang* while the second referred to the seat of the viceroy-cum-successor (a person who is sometimes identified as the younger brother of the ruler). In this pairing of names we would, thus, seem to have some evidence regarding the political system of these ancient towns and principalities.

We can say something further about the political system as well. Chiang Sōm and Nōng Hān were obviously major centers with associated vassal states, Fā Dāēt Song Yāng appears to have been a middling place with allies from time to time but with no vassals and the rest appear to be small principalities which were semi-independent or vassals of the major entities. In any event, it would be hardly correct to speak of there being a single kingdom or single dominant political entity on the Khorat Plateau in this early period.

It is tempting to interpret the terms *khōm* and *māen fā/thāen fā* as indicating the ethnic identity of the people who ruled these early cities. However, the term *khōm*, which might perhaps be said to designate Mon-Khmer speaking people, is used in two quite different ways among northeasterners. On the one hand, it is used to indicate the aboriginal, non-civilized, peoples of the region as in the term *khā khōm* (see Phra Ariyānuwat Khēmacāri, 1971:119). Secondly, it is used to indicate the people who dominated the region at the time of the Angkorean empire. For example, ancient Khmer ruins in the area are described by the people as having been built by the *khōm*. *Māen fā/thāen fā*, on the other hand, means simply 'heavenly divinities', although some connection with Mụang Thāen (Dien Bien Phu), the putative homeland of the Tai-speaking peoples who moved into Laos, may also be suggested by the term.

The use of names of Indian derivation clearly suggests that these early towns were conceived of by those who composed the legends if not by peoples living in those early times as having adopted at least some elements of Indian civilization. The reference to *thēwadā* in the *bun bōng fai* further supports the inference that

early civilization associated with towns in the area had an Indian flavoring.

I have not attempted to derive all of the possible implications of these two northeastern legends, to say nothing of many other legends, for a study of early urban life on the Khorat Plateau. However, I do feel that what information has been here presented does strongly indicate that considerable profit could be gained by linking archaeological and literary studies in researching this early period of history.

Conclusions

In their article, Professor Thiva and Srisakra indicated that our understanding of early urban life in northeastern Thailand has been very limited since the ancient sites have been considered almost exclusively from the vantage of art history. This is most clearly seen in the work of Quaritch Wales. On the basis of similarity of artistic styles, Wales has spoken of a 'Dvāravatī' civilization in the region which was 'Buddhist' in character and which was politically part of a kingdom centered on the lower Chao Phrayā River Valley. Moreover, since the Dvāravatī art of central Thailand is associated with some inscriptions in old Mon, the sites on the Khorat Plateau have become 'Mon' sites.⁹⁾ On the basis of the preliminary archaeological work presented by Professors Thiva and Srisakra together with the preliminary inquiry into legendary material discussed here, I would argue that the terms 'Dvāravatī', 'Buddhist', and 'Mon', are misleading and inappropriate when applied to the society associated with the early towns of the Khorat Plateau.

Beginning with the term 'Mon', there is nothing in either the legendary sources or in the archaeological evidence which would justify our identifying the people of the region in early protohistoric times as being ethnically 'Mon'. While some of the early inhabitants of the region most probably spoke Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer) languages, the distinction between 'Mon' and 'Khmer' in cultural and political terms is really not justified before the 8th century and probably not until about the 10th century. Moreover, evidence from the Campāsak region suggests that some of the early inhabitants of the region may have been speakers of Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian) languages (Coedés, 1954). And, I for one at least, would not be willing to rule out the possibility of there having been Tai-speaking people living on the Khorat Plateau earlier than the 13th-14th centuries when Sukhōthai, Lān Chāng, and Ayutthayā began extending their control over parts of the region.

Both the legendary and archaeological evidence clearly indicates that in the early protohistoric period the Khorat Plateau contained a large number of principalities (Mưang) whose capitals were enclosed by earthen ramparts and moats (thus the use

9) Wales argument is developed in his recent book, entitled *Dvāravatī* (Wales 1969). I would add that many of the caveats which I raise regarding Wales' interpretation of early history in northeastern Thailand could equally well be applied to his interpretation of the early history of northern Thailand as well.

of the term *chiang*). The legends tell us further that these *muang* were often independent of each other, some consisting of a capital and surrounding villages, others including a capital and subsidiary town together with their villages, and others having dependent vassals. Even in the case of those which were vassals, the title of the ruler, Phayā, was no different than that of their overlord. Politically, then, we appear to be dealing with a type of 'city-state' rather than with components of an 'empire' or a 'kingdom'. I would suggest that the society associated with these early towns represented something of a transitional type between tribal chiefdoms (perhaps not dissimilar to those of the Tai of northern Laos and northern Vietnam) and the fully-developed state system of Angkor.

There is certainly no question but that Buddhist religious motifs are found in association with these early sites. However, the *sēmā* stones, which in orthodox usage are used in sets of four or eight to mark off a sacred area within which ordinations and other Sangha activities take place, are often huge in size and are far more numerous than would be required even if there had been very sizeable monastic communities. These *sēmā* stones strongly suggest a kinship with 'megalithic' cultures associated with tribal peoples. Moreover, in addition to the Buddhist motifs found on the *sēmā*, non-Buddhist themes are also found. And, if it is permissible to extrapolate from the symbols found in the ritual of *bun bōng fai* and the myth of "Phādāēng Nāng Ai", it would appear that the religion of these towns also included a major concern with 'fertility' which drew on beliefs in both local spirits and Hindu deities. Even if this last piece of evidence be discounted, it is still clear that the religion of the people of early protohistoric northeastern Thailand was not 'Buddhist' in the sense that it became after the 13th century in Thailand.

In brief, the term Dvāravatī which has been applied to the ancient sites of the Khorat Plateau has disguised both the political fragmentation which existed and the character of the religion. To obtain a fuller and more correct picture of the society and culture of the early urban life on the Khorat Plateau, we must, as Professors Thiva and Srisakra have argued, undertake considerably more archaeological research than has been done thus far. And, I would add, we can further increase our understanding of these societies through systematic research on a number of the indigenous legends of the Thai-Lao people of northeastern Thailand.

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