

Review:

"George Condominas, *From Lawa to Mon, from Saa' to Thai*", Review article in *Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter*, Australian National University, Number Thirteen, June 1991, pp. 3-9.¹

The subject indicated by the title, and a major theme of the essay translated here, is change of ethnic identity, in particular how Thai ethnicity spread over areas occupied by other peoples. The historical and ethnographical evidence suggests two possibilities, movement of Thai peoples, and the adoption of Thai language by non-Thai in the absence of significant movement of original Thai speakers. This is perhaps the greatest unsolved problem of the early history of Thailand. How was it that Thai became the language of areas occupied by Khmer and Mon whose societies were at a higher level of cultural and material development, and in the case of the Khmer politically more powerful? Was it conquest of decaying civilizations by bold warriors, or peaceful acceptance of a new language? If the latter why? This is an area in which historical ethnography may have a field to itself. Straight historians of Thailand have stuck to Ayutthaya-centric king-and-battle treatments, and have either ignored the problem, or put forward *ad hoc*, even contradictory, explanations for particular cases. Either way something is implied about the area occupied earlier by the speakers of the language which seems to have spread.

With respect to the Thai/Tai, the current consensus, based on linguistic comparison, but also supported in general by the traditions of the Thai peoples in whom Condominas is most interested, is that the oldest identifiable location of Thai-speaking peoples was in what is now northern Vietnam and adjacent areas of southern China, Kwangtung and Kwangsi. Linguistic comparison suggests that their dispersal, or the spread of their languages, from that area westward, southwestward, and northwestward into Yunnan, began about 2000 years ago. Those languages, or their linguistic descendants, may have reached what is now central and northern Thailand around 1000 A.D.

This consensus is quite recent. Until the late 1960s the standard opinion among western scholars, and official history in Thailand, held that the Thai had originated in central, perhaps even northern, China, had constituted the important kingdom of Nan Chao in Yunnan, and that their spread into Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, the Shan States, etc., was a rapid, mass migration of original Thai

¹ Condominas's publication reviewed here was *From Lawa to Mon, from Saa' to Thai: Historical and anthropological aspects of Southeast Asian Social Spaces*, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1990. This was a translation from an original French text.

speakers after Nan Chao was conquered by the Mongols in the 1250s. This view was not based on any Thai traditions, but was devised by European amateur historians and based on misinterpretation of Chinese sources. A modification of this view by G. Coedès was that the Thai migration and conquest of other peoples had not been by a massed population, but by small bands of warriors.

Condominas recognizes evidence for both types of language spread, but his treatment is inconsistent, maintaining elements belonging to the Nan Chao theory, although he recognizes the validity of the arguments against it.

On page 29 he refers to "the rapidity with which the Thai-speaking peoples have achieved expansion from Southeast China up to and including Assam on the one hand, and to the Malaysian peninsular area on the other", which is not after all so rapid if the 2000 years estimated by the linguists is in mind (think of the ethno-linguistic changes in Europe over the last 2000 years). It would have been rapid, if, as in the older Nan Chao-theory, it had all taken place between mid-13th and the 17th century, by which time central and peninsular Thailand were certainly mainly Thai.

In his discussions of the two versions of the older expansion theory, a flood of people favored by Louis Finot, and assumption of power by a small Thai ruling class suggested by George Coedès (30-31), who considered that the Thai had begun infiltrating the valleys south of Yunnan from long before the Mongol conquest, Condominas interjects one of his surprising historical judgements, that "The Tai established themselves everywhere in small autonomous principalities, except in Siam where they formed a large state" (p. 31, n. 1), forgetting that until the 16th century Ayutthaya was no larger nor politically more important than Chiang Mai, that until the 15th, perhaps 16th century, it may not have been predominantly Thai in language, and that until those relatively late dates the indubitably Thai states of 'Siam'--Sukhothai, Kamphaeng Phet, Phitsanulok--were small autonomous principalities just like those farther to the north and northeast.

Covert Nan-Chaoism appears where Condominas acknowledges that "most of the population [of Nan Chao] spoke Tibeto-Burmese languages", although insisting that there had been "temporary predominance of a Thai-speaking chieftaincy originating from the valley floors of southern China" (39), and that a "Thai group had, moreover, already dominated a state system, Nan-chao, where it is true the Tibeto-Burmese soon regained the control of the confederation" (78). At what time this is supposed to have occurred is unclear. Condominas mentions it again in reference to "numerous populations [who] rid themselves of their [Thai] conquerors, as was soon the case for the Nan-chao, and a large area of Burma" (45), undefined, and which surprises, given the large area of Burma which is still Thai (Shan). It was apparently, in Condominas's view, these Thai chiefs in Yunnan whose conquests "enabled them to constitute a vast area of Thai principalities,

extending from the southern confines of Nan-Chao and covering the northern area of continental Southeast Asia in its wider sense from Hainan and Upper Tonkin to Assam" (p.40). Clear rejection, or at least neglect, of the new linguistic consensus, is in the reference to the "Thai groups...their migration to the west Vietnam region [implicitly from Yunnan] in the ninth and tenth centuries" (47).

Condominas, thus, still holds that the Thai moved out of Yunnan in all directions, even if Nan Chao was only a temporary conquest, not a genuine Thai state.

A real relic from the Nan-Chao theory is the remark, following Coedès, that elements of early Sukhothai military organization were derived from the Mongols (52, n.41). This explanation was proposed by Coedès when he believed Nan-Chao to have been a real Thai state (*Les états hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*, 1948, pp. 55, 318), and he neglected to remove it from the 1964 edition when he already realized that Nan-Chao was Tibeto-Burman; and rejecting the Nan Chao connection removes any reason to connect early Thai organization with the Mongols. Condominas does not go as far as another student of Tai political systems, Jacques Lemoine ("Tai Lue Historical Relation, etc.", Proceedings of the International Conference on Thai Studies, July 1987, Vol 3, Part One, p. 131), who found in Thai *nāy* 'master' a derivation from Mongol *noyan*, while Condominas thinks *nāy* is from Sanskrit *nāyaka* (107). This is equally suspect, for *nāyaka* is found in Thai independently of *nāy*, and the differing speculative etymologies offered by Lemoine and Condominas illustrate the need for intra-Tai comparative work rather than *ad hoc* suggestions of linguistic diffusion.

Subconscious Nan Chao-ism may have influenced the explanation which Condominas, quoting Haudricourt, offered for the semantic field of *mōan*, which "designates...both the main town and the principality, but...also defines the communes of different sizes...for on the vocabulary level there is no distinction", and it is thus an example of "semantic structural impoverishment", for which "the only possible cause...seems...to be the change in language, a learned language and therefore not as rich as an inherited language" (36 and n. 11). This is an explanation based on assumption of the rapid Thai language expansion over a large area implicit in the Nan Chao theory. Its inaptness is shown by the precisely identical semantic field of Khmer *sruk*, and apparently also Mon *ḍūn* (H.L. Shorto, *A Dictionary of the Mon Inscriptions from the Sixth to the Sixteenth Century*, p. 135) in areas where there is no evidence of rapid population or linguistic expansion.

Although it is not explicit, one has the impression, indeed from the very title, and from the remark, "...the study of present-day Thai domains and principalities

[apparently those of Vietnam]² seems indispensable to an understanding of the process of formation of these states [i.e., 'the kingdoms of Lan Na, Lan Sang, Ayutthaya, or their present-day heirs, Laos and Thailand...strongly influenced by the Mon kingdoms and the Khmer Empire']" (31-2), that Condominas considered the Tai societies of northern Vietnam to represent an original, or at least ancient, Tai political system, less adulterated by other cultures than those of Ayutthaya, Sukhothai, or even Chiang Mai, and more peculiarly Thai, fundamentally different from Khmer, Mon, or Vietnamese. Not only is that concept as a basis for cultural research outmoded, but Black, White, and Red Tai societies have been for so long under Vietnamese influence and administration, and possibly subject even earlier to Khmer and Cham influence, that a mixed administrative terminology and political structure are inevitable. They have been as much influenced and changed by the assimilation of foreign models as the Thai of Ayutthaya-Bangkok.

Besides the inconsistencies concerning who and where the Thai were before the beginnings of Thai expansion, which would not necessarily detract from a study of the political structure of the Thai societies of northern Vietnam, there are problems with the descriptive part.

First is the question of language and transcription, for the descriptions involve constant citation of Thai terms. Condominas's citations of Black and White Tai include two different systems of transcription, a European one and another in Vietnamese *Quốc Ngu'*, and occasionally, for comparison, transcriptions of standard Central Thai according to conventions used there, as well as an apparently *ad hoc* phonetic rendering of administrative names in Vietnam where *Quốc Ngu'* would have been appropriate. This can be very confusing, and I should think misleading, for students of anthropology or history trying to use Condominas's "Essay". Thus, the name for one group of commoners, 'house people' is given both as *côn ho'n* (47) (and also, p. 48, *côn hu'ò'n*, *Quốc Ngu'* spellings), and as *kon hiiön* (64) or *kon hön* (105). There are even a few instances in which Condominas seems not to have realized that a term used in a Thai title was Vietnamese, not Thai, and thus evidence of assimilation of Thai society to Vietnamese. Such is *ong* (also *ông*), in *ong sen* (52), the title *nha úy* (62), and *quan* in a "Thái saying" (57), which is moreover reproduced entirely in *Quốc Ngu'*, giving a false impression to anyone who does not know the conventions of that system, whereas the saying itself can be understood in terms of fairly straightforward Thai, or at least Lao. I suspect also that the tax termed '*nguôt*' (47) is Vietnamese.

2. Because these are the ones actually studied in this article, and because in the French original (264) Condominas wrote "...des seigneuries et principautés actuelles...", which terms can hardly mean any Thai states except those of Vietnam, the Lue, or the Shan.

Further confusion of terminology is inherent in the nature of description and analysis of the Thai political systems. This is because Condominas has relied on others, both early French colonial explorers and modern Vietnamese scholars, who have tried conjecturally to explain the structures observable today in terms of development from an ideal or hypothetical structure in the distant past.

The confusion is clearest in treatment of the classes of commoners. In one description of the 'house people' (*côn/kon hó'n/hüön*), who seem at present to be among the lowest class of Thai, more or less domestic servants, their status is rationalized by making the category originate in captured non-Thai war prisoners, who were later freed and given their own villages because that encouraged greater production. Then they were mixed with freed hill tribe slaves, and eventually with any persons who could not pay their debts. The historical rationalization differs somewhat from one source to another, and students should understand it for just that--speculative history. It might be pointed out that the term 'house people' corresponds literally to the Ayutthaya-Bangkok Thai *bala röan* (/phonlaröan/), which now means 'civilian', and in which the Sanskrit *bala*, probably in this context borrowed from Angkorean Khmer, has replaced the native Thai *kon/khon* (Black and White Tai *hüön/hön* is the same term as standard Thai *röan*). There is indeed an opportunity here for useful comparative historical hypothesis, but in a different manner.

Within the discussions of commoners and their evolution there is another expression which exhibits total confusion. It also indicates a category of people, and is written "pua or pái" (48), or "pua' pai" (51). Condominas states that the first term derives from Cantonese *puk*, 'servant' (111), and that the entire expression means "those who live close by" (48), or "'helper' or 'auxiliary', here to be translated as 'serfs'" (*pua'*) plus "/paai/-with a long a -it is an auxiliary word, not to be confused with *pay* meaning 'commoner'" (53), or "serfs of non-Tay origin" (64, see also 67). The 'commoner' *pay*, on the contrary, were "'free peasants'...reputed to be descendants of the fellow warriors of the *tao* [princes]" (60). Note the differing transcriptions of *pay/pāy*.

In fact, there can be no doubt that *pua/pua'*, written in the glossary in Black Tai script with a final *k*, is the Khmer term /puak/, written *buok* (Old Khmer *vnok/vnuok*), meaning 'group', found in standard Thai as /phuak/, also written *buok*, and indicating external influence on Black and White Tai, though whether directly from Khmer or via another Thai language is uncertain.

As for *pay/pai*, Condominas sees two distinct terms, one equivalent to standard Thai *phrai*, the registered commoners of premodern Ayutthaya and early Bangkok, and another term which is an auxiliary accompanying the term *pua'*. In one context (53) he says the latter contains a long /a/ [aa, or *ā*], and in the glossary (108) both are written in Black Tai script. The same *ai* vowel symbol is used for

both, but what is more intriguing is that the term which Condominas calls an 'auxiliary' accompanying *pua* is written with the initial labial consonant corresponding to standard Thai *pho* [ph] *phān*, indicating that it is the term cognate with standard Thai *phrai*, 'registered commoner'. Moreover, *Điêu Chính Nhìm* and Jean Donaldson, in their *Tai-Vietnamese-English Vocabulary* [White Tai], volume 2, p. 280 give "pāy [with a long a]...the people, citizens (as opposed to nobility...)". Condominas's other term *pay*, which he says (108) means ordinary commoners, and which is written in his glossary with the initial corresponding to standard Thai *po* [p] *pl?*, is not found in *Điêu* and Donaldson, nor in Diguët's dictionary of Black Tai, although it must be known to some native speakers for Condominas to have obtained it in written form. A version of the Black Tai traditional chronicle in Black Tai script which I possess (courtesy of James Chamberlain) writes the word for 'common people' with the letter corresponding to *pho phān*. I suspect that because in Black and White Tai initial aspiration has been lost, so that the initials corresponding to standard Thai /p/ and /ph/ are now pronounced the same (as unaspirated /p/), there has been confusion in spelling among even some native speakers, which has resulted in invention of a second terminological category, because of course some 'commoners' were genuinely free and of relatively high status, while others were indeed serfs. Another possibility is that the term /paay/ which Condominas says is an auxiliary with *pua*, meaning 'slave', is the old common Southwestern Thai *baai (/phaai/, /paai/) 'to be conquered, defeated', also, however, to be written, if etymologically correct, with the symbol corresponding to *pho phān* (See Fang Kuei Li, *A Handbook of Comparative Tai*, p. 66). If this were the case, *pua' pai* should be interpreted as 'group of the defeated'. [but in Black and White Tai *baai > fai]

One more terminological problem in the discussion of commoners in the Black and White Tai societies is Condominas's treatment of the terms *cuông nhôc/kuong ñok*, respectively *Quốc Ngu'* and western transcriptions. Condominas introduces the first term as a type of 'duty' paid to lords by peasants (47), presumably from earliest times. Then when captured slaves were freed (see above) they were settled in villages and paid *cuông*, their settlements became *cuông* hamlets, and their fields were *ná cuông*. With a later development some types of *cuông* people and hamlets came to be called *nhôc/ñok*. "Cuông and nhôc mean basically the same thing [but]...nhôc are the new cuông" (48). In another context Condominas says "kuong ñok (the two words can be used separately), 'slaves' or 'serfs' of Tay origin...(subjugated peasants)" (63); and in the glossary (105), *kuong* is "slave of Tay ethnicity", but "a Laha informant translated it as 'interior'...".

That translation should have been given more attention, for *cuông/kuong* (Black Tai, White Tai *công*) is in fact the usual word for 'in' in most of the Thai languages of northern Vietnam, rather than *nai* of standard Thai. The etymological

origin of the name of the people termed *kuong* was thus 'interior people', and from this point of view *nhôc/nôk* looks suspiciously like a misapprehension of *nok*, 'out, outer'. Jacques Lemoine has written that among the Lue the "Kun Hoen" (*kon hiiön*) were "divided into 'inner' (or 'domestic') and 'outer' (or 'more distant') categories of dependents" (Lemoine, p. 127). He did not provide the Lue terminology, but it can hardly be other than '*kuong*' or '*nai*' and '*nok*'.

A problem, however, is that *Điêu* and Donaldson, Vol 2, p. 263, list *nhôc* as "a person at the disposal of an official as his public service", which is distinct from the term for 'outside', transcribed by them as *no*. And James Chamberlain has informed me that among Black Tai living near Vientiane several years ago, "/kuang/ which means 'in, inside' were household servants for officials..., [a]nd the /nôk/ were servants at the same level who worked in the fields".³ They were thus in fact 'outer' people, although the term *nôk* is certainly distinct from *nok*.

At least neither of the inferences that "*nôk* was the usual Black Tay word" equivalent to *kuong*, or that *nôk* is "the White Tay term corresponding to Black Tay *kuong*" is adequate (105, 107).

At the other end of the sociopolitical scale Condominas has misunderstood the title '*ho luang*', the literal meaning of which he says is 'The Great Yunnanese', and an example of Mongol influence of the Thai via Yunnan (103, 52, n. 41). Not only does this quite arbitrarily displace the modern colloquial ethnonym 'Ho' back to the 13th century, but it is not the best conjectural explanation for '*ho*' in this context.

There are two other genuine Tai terms which could conceivably be at issue, and which would be transcribed as '*ho*' by a non-linguist eliciting oral information. One is the term written *ห๑* in standard Thai, and meaning a building. In the expression '*ho luang*' it should be construed as 'palace', 'governor's residence', or perhaps as the title of an official attached to such places. Examples of this use of '*ho*' abound in the anthropological literature on 'Thai political systems'. In Chiang Mai the "Ho Na" ('the front *ho*'), a literal calque of the Ayutthaya-Bangkok *van hnā* ('Palace [in] Front'), was "the equivalent of 'vice king'", as was *van hnā*.⁴ In Luang Prabang Charles Archaimbault has recorded the "Hô Devatā Luong", the shrine or alter (*ho*) of the great (*luong*) *devatā*, and other such *ho* denoting man-made edifices; and among the Kachin chiefs' houses were known by various names, including the term 'Hkaw', which "is simply the Shan word haw--a

3. James Chamberlain, letter 18 March 1989.

4. Ronald D. Renard, "The Integration of Karens in Northern Thai Political Life During the Nineteenth Century", in *Anuson Walter Vella*, ed. by Ronald D. Renard, Honolulu, University of Hawaii, 1986, p. 233.

palace...[and] Royal persons such as Kings and Emperors are referred to as hkaw-hkam (palace of gold) or hkaw-seng (palace of precious stone...".⁵ The written Black Tai form of 'ho' supplied by Condominas (103) is this term.

Condominas has recognized this in writing of the “*ho phi ban*, the altar of the tutelary spirit of a village”.

A second possibility is the White Tai and Lue word for 'head', corresponding to standard Thai *hua* (หัว). Examples of this are found in Lemoine, op. cit., *ho sip* 'head of ten' (128), *ho khwaen* 'head of a khwaen' (129), *ho ha:sip* 'head of fifty', *ho hau:i* 'head of a hundred' *ho phan* 'head of a thousand', *ho muen* 'head of ten thousand' (131). This is less likely as an explanation for Condominas's 'ho luang', for 'head of *luang*' seems meaningless.

Even where another word 'Ho', now written (ห๑) in standard Thai, is found in traditional Thai literature, as in the modern language, as the name of an ethnic group, it is not always Yunnanese. The Lanna chronicle *Singhanavatikumār*, at a fictitious date attributed to a time before the beginning of the Buddhist era, treats the 'Ho' as Thai living in Rājagṛha, although the location could be interpreted as Yunnan.⁶

An instance in which comparative linguistic work reveals a relationship not seen by Condominas is one of the titles of nobility, *phia/fia* (Quôc Ngu'/western), a "Black Tay title for noble heading a fiefdom", and which "may also be called *fia tao*", where the second term also means "noble, man belonging to the aristocratic class", and which Condominas realizes is the term also found in Lao and standard Thai, "in former times...a royal title" (102,113). *Fia* is the Black Tai reflex of Mon *bañā*, pronounced /phañaā, or phayaa/ in standard Thai, glossed by Condominas as "royal title preceding the proper name of a monarch" (109), which is no longer true, although it was in Sukhothai times. Condominas's failure to see the connection *bañā-fia*, is shown by the separate glossary entries, and in the remark "the residence of a *fia* who bore the title of *añā* (cf. *phaña*)" (52), in which there is still another error. The identity, however is proven by the constant appearance of *dāv b(r)añā* in the Sukhothai inscriptions for the same relative status as occupied by *fia tao* in Black Tai society. This suggests either very early assimilation of Mon

⁵. Condominas, *L'espace social a propos de l'Asie du Sud-Est*, Flamarion, 1980, p. 62; Charles Archaimbault, "Le Liang du Hô Devatā Luong à Luong P'rabang", *Bulletin de la société des études indochinoises*, nouvelle série, Tome XLVI, No. 2, pp. 215-285; E.R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, Boston, Beacon Paperback (1965), p. 112.

⁶. See Michael Vickery, "The Lion Prince and Related Remarks on Northern History", *JSS* 64/1 (January 1976), p. 328.

influence to the 'Tai political systems' of northern Vietnam, or possibly later influence from Sukhothai and Ayutthaya which had borrowed the title *b(r)añā* from the Mon. As for *añā/ánnha*, which Condominas suggested might be a form of *phañā*, it shows another, probably ancient, borrowing. It is the Sanskrit *ājñā* (/aajnhaa/), common in Old Khmer, but not at Sukhothai. What is suggested is that this term in Black Tai may be due to very ancient contact between them and the Khmer, or Cham, in Indochina.

The inconsistent evolutionary explanations offered by Condominas's informants and the intrusion of non-Tai terms at all levels indicate that far from representing an early stage of 'Tai political systems', the White, Black, and Red Tai today, like the Lue, Khon Müöng, and Ayutthaya-Bangkok Thai, show multiple strands of assimilation of foreign elements.

It is not clear where Condominas stands on the question of Thai expansion--by conquest, or through peaceful assimilation. He offers examples of both processes, and perhaps considers, quite reasonably, that both occurred. The only example of original ethnography in his "Thai political systems" is a description of some Laha villages in northern Vietnam which in the 1960s when Condominas visited them had become so assimilated to the language and culture of their Black Tai overlords that they were indistinguishable in dress and their children no longer spoke Laha at all.⁷ But as it stands it is no more than an example, without explanatory value, of one ethnic group dominating another within a restricted area, such as occurs constantly in the hills of northern Thailand, not only between Thai and non-Thai, but among Lisu and Akha, Hmong and Karen, Karen and Lawa. There is nothing in this story which helps understand what happened in the Sukhothai area in the 12th-13th centuries; nor is it even legitimate to conclude just from the ethnography that "the Laha and the Khang (Austroasiatics...) were the first occupants of this northwest Vietnamese region which the Tay came across during their migrations" (50), which also implies that Condominas considers migrations to be the important phenomenon, before peaceful linguistic assimilation can occur.⁸

With this we return to the major characteristic of "Thai political structures", as viewed by Condominas, the 'systems of boxes', or 'emboxment', an "all-encompassing and hierarchical society", (35) in which the religious and political structures of each level mirror those of the next higher level, as is reflected in the

7. The date of Condominas's research has been inferred from the context. It is not supplied in the publication.

8. Although some linguists, on comparative linguistic evidence, would agree that speakers of Kadai languages, which include Laha, were in the area before Austroasiatics, including the Vietnamese, and the Tai.

use of the single term 'müöng' for all. This structure seems to have influenced the "vast Thai expansion" (37), though how is not explained, and evidence for vast rapid expansion is the semantic field of 'müöng' itself (see above).

It is strange that an ethnologist did not go beyond this, and even remarked that he chose the designation *systemes à emboîtement* "for want of anything better" (35), for what he has treated as a unique feature of Thai systems is precisely what other anthropologists have described as segmentary societies, in which a single term covers political entities at all levels, 'cieng' among the Nuer, and 'tar' among the Tiv. Those segmentary African societies also showed particular propensities for expansion under certain circumstances, and this might support the view of the spread of Thai languages via physical migrations and conquest, if it were certain that the same kind of segmentary structures pertained in Thai societies 1000 years ago.⁹

Condominas has assumed that such was true, and that Thai expansion was carried out by small bands under aristocratic chiefs who married the daughters or sisters of the non-Thai chiefs whom they conquered. The evidence to which Condominas alludes is the corpus of Thai legends about their past, which Condominas has accepted as literal factual history, something which detailed analysis of such tales has so far always shown untenable. There are examples in "Essay" (37, 43), and it is the main theme of "Notes on Lawa History" in which his visit to a peculiar earthwork in northern Thailand starts a train of thought leading to imaginative reconstruction of a great Lawa state ruling in northern Thailand before the Mon, Khmer, and Thai became dominant.

The circular earthwork, measuring altogether 23.5-24.5 metres in diameter, would be too small for a settlement, and "could only constitute a small fort". For Condominas this "would imply a political organization resting not on a sprinkling of autonomous villages but on a broad social space of the kingdom type" (8). The logic of this conclusion escapes me, but that can be left for the moment.

What I felt as I read Condominas's description of the 'Lawa tomb', was a definite aura of *déjà vu*. In July 1985 I visited Umpang in Tak Province, and sought out some of the people who had been involved in the excavations of buried ceramics which suddenly appeared in the 1980s and produced a sensation in Bangkok art circles and among specialists in Southeast Asian ceramics throughout

⁹. See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1940; M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *African Political Systems*, Oxford Paperbacks, 1975; Laura Bohannan, "Political Aspects of Tiv Social Organization", in *Tribes Without Rulers*, Ed. by John Middleton and David Tait, Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1962; Marshall D. Sahlins, "The Segmentary Lineage: An Organization of Predatory Expansion", *American Anthropologist* 63 (1961), pp. 322-345.

the world. According to a group of Hmong diggers, the ceramic burials were in circular sites about 10-20, sometimes 30-40 metres in diameter, sometimes slightly raised above ground level, sometimes with 2-3 terraces. They were thus precisely like Condominas's Lawa tomb, and indeed the diggers believed them to be 'Lawa'.

Most of the ceramics were easily identifiable as Thai products of the 14th-16th centuries, and it would not be amiss to guess that the sites were indeed graves, and not remains of edifices which could "constitute a small fort".

Whatever the ethnicity of those responsible, and it is a basic principle of archaeology that ethnicity and language cannot be deduced from material remains, they do not legitimate flights of fancy about ancient Lawa chieftains, least of all "a political organization resting...on a broad social space of the kingdom type" (8). Among all the shifting ethnonyms of mainland Southeast Asia 'Lawa' may be the most unstable in its attributions, and anything old and mysterious in northern Thailand may be called 'Lawa' by local people. To affirm that Cāmadevī must have been Lawa rather than Mon, or that she even existed, goes far beyond the limits of existing evidence. She is one of the characters of northern legend whose very historical existence should be considered most in doubt.