

A Preliminary Report and Analysis of Cultural Ecological Investigations Among the  
Ta Oi of Quang Tri Province, Vietnam, in 1966

by

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Introduction

From 24 January to 2 February 1996, Professors Tran Quoc Vuong and Brian Hayden visited several Ta Oi speaking villages in the vicinity of Ta Rut in Quang Tri Province. Mr. Yen Tho, the Vice-Director of the Provincial Museum accompanied us throughout the trip and took notes on all interviews as well. The purpose of our trip was twofold: first, to determine what practical reasons might exist for the occurrence of long houses in the Ta Rut region; and second, to determine the practical benefits that might underlie traditional Ta Oi feasting. This was not meant to be a full detailed study, but simply a preliminary reconnaissance trip to assess the suitability of the area for more indepth study. We chose the Ta Rut region because it was one of the few places anywhere in Vietnam, or Southeast Asia for that matter, where longhouses were reported to be still in use. Thus, we were all extremely disappointed to learn that only 6 months

prior to our arrival, the District office had decided that multiple family dwellings were a hindrance to regional economic development and they had ordered the dismantling of all longhouses in the district and the splitting up of the member households into independent nuclear family households. While the process had not been completed by the time we arrived, probably the longest remaining longhouse in Vietnam (over 70 m. long with 17 resident nuclear families) had been completely destroyed, and only structures with 8-9 living apartments were left, and even these were largely vacated except for 1-3 remaining families. We will comment later on this staggering loss of Vietnamese heritage and culture. For the present, we will turn our attention to some of the cultural ecological issues surrounding longhouses. Upon our arrival in Dong Ha, we met with the Director of the Cultural Office and the Provincial Museum of Quang Tri, Mr. Son Duc. We then traveled to Khe Sanh to meet with the District President and Vice-President for Culture.

We then proceeded to Ta Rut where we met with Mr. Hat, the Culture and Security Officer of Ta Rut who kindly introduced us to numerous elders and accompanied us in our visits. We also met with the local border military officials since Ta Rut is only 10 or so km from the Laos border.

### CULTURAL ECOLOGY AND LONGHOUSES

In our 1995 report (Hayden and Tran 1995) we discussed the theoretical issues concerning longhouses at some length. Here, we will simply summarize some of the main points of that discussion. First, living in large, multi-family dwellings like longhouses is relatively unusual in the world. Documenting and explaining this type of communal living has been an important issue in Marxist-related scholarship from the outset (Morgan 1982). There are a number of reasons why people should want to live in separate dwellings, however, probably the most important reason is to minimize interpersonal, intergenerational, interfamilial, and sibling conflicts (see Hayden and Cannon 1982). The more people that live together, the more likely conflicts will occur and the more severe they are likely to be. Conflicts in points of view, in

values, in lifestyles, and in self-interest are generally responsible for young adults wanting to move out of their parents' home, even today. If large numbers of families live together in one dwelling, there must be strong forces counteracting the natural desires to move out. These factors may be external threats (e.g., warfare, subsistence insecurity), or they may be internally created attractions (sharing in wealth) or internally created pressures (inability to marry without financial aid from corporate groups). Our goal is to try to determine what the factors were that originally made people want to live in longhouses. In order to deal with these factors, we employ a cultural ecology approach since it enables us to assess the importance of each factor mentioned above.

In order to determine what risks were present for nuclear families in the subsistence realm, we need to know about soil productivity, diseases affecting livestock, crop failures, and population densities. These same factors are also important in understanding the accumulation of wealth, but in order to understand why some families are rich and others are poor, we need to know what the constraints are on producing food and raising animals. We need to know how some families produce more food than others and whether control over the best resources is important or control over the best labour. We also need to know how wealth is used to attract and bind other families into multi-family residential corporate groups. We suspect that in many longhouse communities control over bride prices is an important mechanism. We also want to know why some people would want to bind other families to their own, and here considerations of power or security in old age must be addressed, as well as the advantages of alternate types of organization such as loose-knit lineages versus the congregation of families in common house organizations. Finally, we need to know what role external threats such as warfare played and, if possible, why warfare existed at given levels.

Let us examine some of these parameters among the Ta Oi.

### The Ta Oi

Although the longhouse villages in the Ta Rut region, including Ta Rut itself, are usually referred to as belonging to the "Pa Kau" ethnic group, in reality this is only a term that means

“mountain slope” and was applied to them as the result of a misunderstanding in 1963. The people in this region refer to themselves as “Ta Oi.” Similarly, groups often referred to as “Ban Keo” really refer to themselves as “Brou.” Ban Keo is simply a geographical district name without any ethnic meaning for the indigenous groups of the region. Both Ta Oi and Brou are Mon-Khmer languages. The Brou do not live in longhouses, whereas the Ta Oi of some localities do, including some Ta Oi living in Laos where there are reportedly some longhouses with 20 member families.

In the Ta Oi oral history, it is said that their ancestors used to live on the coastal deltas. However, they were pushed into the mountains by “Chinese” invaders where they ate banana tree pith. Even when they lived in the deltas, they lived in longhouses according to the oral histories. Today, the longhouse dwelling Ta Oi inhabit a number of small basins and broad valleys along the upper tributaries of the Dak Krong River (Fig. 1). This area is separated from others by precipitous mountains and the deep gorges of the middle stretches of the river. Ta Oi territory formed part of the Ho Chi Minh trail network during the last war, and as a result, the Ta Oi of the Ta Rut region were all relocated during the war. The area was heavily bombed and all villages essentially destroyed. Prior to this time, the village of Ta Rut was called Hang Din. People returned to their village locations in 1973 at the end of the war and a dirt road was built through the area in 1975. Houses were rebuilt in the traditional longhouse fashion and village locations seem to have changed very little. Villages are typically located in valley bottoms, along main trails, and near rivers. The introduction of roads and the connections that they brought to market economies, government programs, and various kinds of assistance, seem to have destabilized the former ecological relationships in the region. Although Ta Rut has existed for 200 years, there was still abundant jungle in the region up until 1977, and before the last war, there were about 1,500 buffalo in the village (10-20 buffalo per nuclear family) according to the estimates of elders and officials. Today there are only about 300 cows and buffalo combined and deforestation has stripped most mountainsides of tree cover. Similarly, at A Lieng, there are only 20 buffalo now, whereas before the American war the village chief alone had over 100 head. We

suspect that a rapidly increasing population (made possible by cash crops, bulk transport of crops or food staples, and wage labour) is primarily responsible for these changes although the war has probably also had some affect. Today, the population of the Ta Rut village cluster is 2,017 (with about 900-1,000 people, or 134 nuclear families living in the main village), which given a land area of 5,961 ha., is about 33 people per square km., a figure probably many times what a sustainable, self-sufficient subsistence economy could support. Unfortunately, we do not have population figures for before the last war, but if there were 10-20 buffalo per nuclear family at that time (with 1,500 buffalo in total), this would mean a village population of 75-150 families, and this probably errs on the high side since some families probably had less.

The Ta Rut area is not very good for growing either rice or maize and yields are poor. Although people vastly prefer rice, the principal crop is, and has been for living memory, manioc which grows well and abundantly on the hill slopes. There is no wet rice cultivation and many people sell manioc in order to buy rice. The region is good for taro production and taro, too is used for exchange. Tobacco and pineapples are also grown for exchange, and large areas are now planted in bananas. Some families began to plant coffee as a cash crop about 7 years ago, and the trees are only now beginning to produce. Opium is not a cash crop in the area and there do not appear to be any opium addicts. Distilled liquor has only been used since 1945, and prior to that time rice wine was only used in feasting contexts. Fishing and hunting still appear to make considerable contributions to diets, although with rising populations and deforestation, these resources must be diminishing rapidly. The streams and rivers in the Ta Rut region appear to be intensively exploited since weirs and basket traps for fish occur systematically at regular intervals. We suggest that the Neolithic and Dong Sonian occupants of the Quang Tri mountains and valleys must have had economies substantially different from the present ones since manioc was not then available and rice yields are unpredictable and poor. It may be that the principal staple in these prehistoric diets was fish, with some rice and taro added as a labour-intensive prestige food. Certainly, the bronze Dong Son fishhook that we observed in Mr. A. Dung's house (1-3 km. downstream from the Karong Bridge on the Thoch Han (?) River) was for catching very

large fish since the diameter of the hook part was 2.5-3.0 cm. across. Comparable fish that would be caught by such a hook are not known today in the rivers. The fish resources of the prehistoric periods were therefore probably much more substantial than those of today. Perhaps the neolithic adzes found in the Ta Rut area were used more for making weirs than for clearing forests to plant crops. Buffalo may have also been a major product of the mountains at least by Dong Son times, since mountain communities would have needed items of great value to acquire the bronze weapons, tools, and prestige items that they used. Buffalo seem to be the only item of great enough value from the mountain region to fill this role, especially since even in recent times buffalo were highly desired on the coast but difficult to raise there, resulting in a very significant coast-mountain trade network. Given the lack of similar trade goods in the mountain neolithic, it is less certain that trade with the coast, or the raising of buffalo was of any significance during the Neolithic. Thus, the nature of the Neolithic economy in the mountains is still poorly understood.

This brief overview provides a basic point of departure for discussing the cultural ecological aspects of Ta Oi longhouses. We should note however, that much of the following discussion is a reconstruction of the situation as we believe it was in the recent past since as we have already noted, the ecology and demography have been substantially altered and longhouses are no longer real functioning socioeconomic units. We suspect, in fact, that even before the government decision to destroy longhouses and their corporate groups, there were major social and economic pressures eroding away the *raison d'être* of these corporate groups. The greater independence and even wealth that cash crop markets and wage labor made possible for nuclear families must have motivated many people to leave their corporate residential homes on their own volition. Those that lingered on undoubtedly did so where the amassed corporate wealth still provided benefits (as in marriages) or because people did not have the means to amass or use equivalent wealth on their own. In any event, the outcome of all these factors is that we are, in effect, dealing with a memory culture and ecology, rather than currently functioning ones. The memory culture and ecology, however were functioning in rather traditional fashion prior to the

American war, that is, about 30 years ago. Due to the comparatively recent date of the functioning traditional culture, we expect that a great deal of useful information can still be gleaned from the memory culture, and our initial ethnographic reconnaissance bears this out.

### LONGHOUSE CHARACTERISTICS

The Ta Oi longhouses (*Dung*) are built on pilings with bamboo slat flooring, mat or plank sides, and thatch roofs. The entrance can be either in the center of the house or at one of the ends, although we suspect that traditionally the main entrance was in the center since this is where the reception of guests and feasting took place (Fig. 2). *Ideally*, the house “chief” (*Arié Dung*) occupies the apartment immediately to the right of this ritual and feasting part of the house (the *mong*), while his young brothers and sons occupy successive apartments further to the right and uncles, cousins, and nephews from junior branches of the lineage occupy the apartments to the left (Fig. 3). Despite some government administrative claims that the Ta Oi had no surnames, all members of each longhouse carried the same lineage name and these differed frequently from one house to another. While the highest ranking families almost certainly did occupy the most central apartments, we are sceptical that the relationships of all the residents fit so nicely into the emically prescribed kinship roles—a topic discussed later in this report. For example, rich or influential men could have up to 4 or 5 wives, each of which had her own apartment. In this fashion, houses soon grew to 35 or 36 apartment dwellings that “looked like trains.” One such house still existed in a hamlet near Ku Tay in 1993. We were told that such houses took much labour and 5-6 years to “build,” although what was probably meant was that it took 5-6 years to assemble the necessary materials and wealth to build a new house rather than the actual construction time. It was the responsibility of the longhouse residents to acquire and prepare all the construction materials while many people in the village assisted in the actual construction, perhaps in a fashion similar to traditional American “barn raisings.” Once finished, the residents of the new house gave a “new house feast” (see below).

Initially, it appears that villages were composed of a single, founding, extended family that all resided in a single house. As the family grew, however, the house could eventually divide, besides which other families might eventually establish themselves in or near the same location. The founding lineage and its heads might therefore be expected to have prior claims on village resources and political decisions. This was substantiated by the Ta Oi elders. Within a given longhouse, rich and poor families both occurred, and there could be significant differences between longhouses in their overall wealth. However, informants denied that the longest houses were always the richest, for this depended on the number of children born and the time elapsed since the founding of the house. Moreover, as among other Southeast Asian transegalitarian groups, success, wealth, and power was probably unstable at best and must have varied over time. In contrast, corporate wealth was built up over the span of several generations and probably developed into a kind of economic inertia—an economic, social, and political juggernaut—that kept on reflecting the successes of the past in hereditary metaphors after current economic situations could have changed for the worse. This situation could have also affected the relationship that one might expect between household size and wealth.

What did such wealth consist of? For the Ta Oi, wealth consisted of buffaloes, cows, goats, gongs, bronze cauldrons, ceremonial drums, large ceramic jars for drinking rice wine at feasts, fine hardwood bed-dressers, high quality houses, and many wives and children. It was the quality of the house that reflected wealth more than the size. In all cases, the house interiors were very sparsely furnished, although we never examined the contents of the voluminous bed-dressers of the house chiefs. Nevertheless the Ta Oi house interiors were striking in their simplicity and in the few furnishings or items of material culture that they contained, even in the ritual *mong* areas and the house chief's apartment where most of the corporate wealth was contained. Some idea of the magnitude of this wealth can be gleaned from Table 1, which, although not completely based on systematic inventories, does provide a general notion of what wealth was visible in the house interiors of the most important existing longhouses in the Ta Rut region. These inventories may have been depleted in some cases by the general destruction



during the American war, however, it is unlikely that all corporate inventories were destroyed, given the propensity of people to cache wealth during times of civil turbulence.

Within Ta Oi longhouses, there seems to have been considerable economic autonomy (in contrast to corporate Rhadé families). Each nuclear family cultivated their own swidden plot, stored their produce in separate field granaries, and prepared their own meals at their own hearths. There is a taboo on keeping unhusked rice inside living structures so that only a 2-3 days supply of food is brought to the house at a time. Presumably each family also owned its own livestock. Constituent families of given longhouses or lineages do not appear to have necessarily cleared swidden land as a group either, although the village as a whole was supposed to clear a single block of swidden.

The major corporate functions of the *dung* longhouse were the holding of feasts, the payment of bride prices or reciprocal wealth exchanges for its leading members, the underwriting of funeral expenses, the worshipping of lineage ancestors, curing illnesses, the protection of member interests in disputes, acting as intermediaries with all other *dung*, defense, and assuring adequate subsistence for all members. Each lineage had its own cemetery where members were buried. Most of these functions were organized or carried out either by the household administrative head (the *Arié Dung*) or a “wise” household official elected specifically to take care of the affairs of the longhouse, especially its relationships with other longhouses or other communities. Thus, while the role of *Arié Dung* was considered to be strictly hereditary, going to the eldest son of the senior branch of the lineage, this may have been more of a figurehead position for symbolical show rather than anything else. The real power seems frequently to have resided with the second in command who was elected on the basis of competency (probably as demonstrated in part by his economic and political success). Unfortunately, we did not record the Ta Oi title for this role. In more recent years, there may have been a shift to the merging of the two roles since several people mentioned that the *Arié Dung* is no longer necessarily the eldest brother, but the most capable brother or a household individual that was wealthy. Talent and wealth were stated as prerequisites for competently functioning as a contemporary *Arié Dung*.

The eldest brother always organized the ancestral sacrifice and performed the ancestral worship as well as some curing ceremonies. He was in charge of the basket containing the ancestral souls (the *Ling*). The “wise” administrative official probably organized all corporate feasting, and settled disputes within the longhouse. Sacrifices of large animals such as buffalo were performed in the central village plaza (Fig. 4) and the sacrificial pole was turned toward the house sponsoring the feast. A cord was also attached from the pole to the sponsoring longhouse.

Which of the previously mentioned corporate functions are most likely to be causal in the evolution of corporate longhouses from the more typical lineages with independent households? And which functions simply serve adjunct roles in preventing corporate household disintegration? And which functions are simply auxiliary functions that help keep the corporate residence functioning smoothly but are not absolutely essential? Although we lack sufficient data to make any definitive arguments, we can provide the following impressions for future consideration.

#### MINOR FUNCTIONS

First, it seems unlikely that feasting, the worshipping of ancestors, funeral ceremonies, or curing would be any more effective in practical terms when conducted on a corporate basis as opposed to a dispersed lineage basis. These, therefore, are most likely to be auxiliary or adjunct functions that do not add significant practical benefits to member families, or at least not enough to induce them to forego their status as independent households.

#### SUBSISTENCE INSURANCE

Last year, we explored the possibility that environmental fluctuations in marginal agricultural zones created strong pressures to pool resources and surpluses converted into wealth into corporate groups, somewhat like an administered insurance arrangement. At the time, it seemed puzzling that significant variations in crop production would occur between families if all families in a village made their swiddens contiguously in one large block clearing. This year

we found even less support for the “subsistence insurance” model of longhouse formation since the Ta Oi deny that there has ever been any serious starvation. They claim that there is always enough secondary and tertiary food in the form of manioc and forest foods. Such claims of adequate subsistence also seem to accord with our previous observations that longhouses appear to occur in environments with moderate levels of surplus production, not in environments with the most limited production (see also a similar observation concerning lineage strength in Mesoamerica by Collier 1975:77). It is clear that longhouse corporations do function to store surpluses (as wealth) that can be used in times of need for member families, and that families within the longhouse certainly assist each other when one family’s yields are abnormally low; however the severity of shortages does not seem great enough to have compelled families to seek corporate living unless we are being misled by the success of the system. The Akha of northern Thailand seem to be similar in this respect: they, too, have no traditions of serious starvation, even in areas that seem poorer agriculturally than the Ta Oi of Ta Rut. Yet, they get by very well living as lineages of dispersed member households in which members also provide mutual help, and they manage to produce limited surpluses.

### POLITICAL CONTROL

Thus, this year, we turn our attention away from external environmental threats, to more internal factors, particularly political power and the control over marriage made possible by bride prices. The political system of the Ta Oi conforms to what we can refer to as the general Southeast Asian transegalitarian (tribal) pattern—a pattern that may even typify transegalitarian cultures everywhere in terms of its more general features (Fig. 5). This consists of:

- 1) A village headman (or, less accurately, “chief”) who typically has hereditary rights to hold office, but who also must be judged competent to hold office and be ratified by a council of elders.

- 2) The headman is generally accompanied by one or more assistants, typically including an administrative assistant and a priest/recitor/shaman figure. Other roles vary slightly. These people form the “administrative core” of the political system.
- 3) The full decision-making body, however includes the elders from all lineages. It is they that elect the headman and other officials, and it is they who make all important decisions for the community, whether concerning feasting, disputes, criminal behavior, or combats.
- 4) The lineage elders and the officials together constitute the village council, where theoretically (emically) every member is supposed to have an equal voice and equal weight in decisions. However, careful reading of ethnographies and careful questioning of informants almost always reveals that the headman and the elders of some lineages are much more influential than others as our informants told us (see also Leach 1954:129). Thus, the headman and the lineage elders occupy key positions of power that can decide a family’s fate in any number of contexts.
- 5) In return, lineage elders represent the interests of lineage members.
- 6) Another key characteristic is a marked tendency toward inequality and competition despite egalitarian proclamations and ideals (Leach 1954:87, 171, 194; Alting von Geusau 1983).

This is the general pattern that we have observed among the Ta Oi, the Rhadé, the Akha, and which Leach (1954) documents for the Katchin. It occurs irrespective of whether societies are organized into matrilineages or patrilineages, residential corporate lineages (longhouses) or as lineages of dispersed households.

Some of the Ta Oi characteristic variations on this pattern are the concurrent office holding of 2 or even 3 village headmen (*Arié Vel*). When an active *Arié Vel* becomes too old to adequately function, he is given largely ceremonial and ritual functions while a younger *Arié Vel* is chosen to carry out the more active political and feasting functions.

The *Arié Vel* were also elected by household heads from the entire village and in consultation with *Arié Vel* from allied villages according to various elders. The *Arié Vel* had to

come from the founding lineage, but did not necessarily have to be the head (*Arié Dung*) of the lineage; ability was much more important. Wealth was not necessarily critical, and the *Arié Vel* made decisions in conjunction with the *Arié Dung* (the heads of corporate families) in the village, rather than with all the elders. Otherwise, the basic functions were the same as elsewhere in Southeast Asia: to take care of inter-village relationships, to oversee the settlement of disputes and make judgements on some issues, to see that people adhered to traditional customs and morals, to decide who would build houses and where they could be built, and to worship the village deities and to organize feasts in their honor or for village celebrations including the periodic worship of ancestors. In the last century, when wars between villages were common, the maintenance of other villages as allies would have been particularly important. Today, it is still felt that it is important to have other villages as allies, for disputes still occur between villages concerning the loss of livestock or elephants and concerning land boundaries. Thus, even today, Ta Rut has 3-4 allied villages, A Lieng has 9 allied villages, and KuTay has 2. If the lineage heads thought that the village headman had made a serious error in his decisions, they would go to his house to ask him and the lineage that supported him to apologize and to give a buffalo feast.

Today, probably the most important practical function of the village headman is in resolving disputes and ensuring that traditions and customary law are followed. Causes for disputes include adultery, the stealing of wives (especially by older brothers), stealing fish from weirs or game from snares, or even stealing domestic animals, the damage that animals cause to fields, crops or other animals. Before 1945, we were told that there were many disputes concerning wealth, and today disputes between brothers over inheritance are still common. Today, punishments seem to follow a relatively egalitarian ideal often simply involving restitution (returning the bride price of a women that was “stolen,” or simply apologizing for damages) and there is a denial on the part of some people that physical punishment was ever used. While it may be true that there were no slaves or indentured servants traditionally, there are a number of accounts that indicate quite punitive punishments were given out, including paying

back double the amount stolen, plus the giving of an atonement feast by the party found guilty. There are also accounts of hands being cut off for robbery and killing offenders after repeated offenses. Sorcerers could be killed. Animals that damaged crops could also be killed as retribution for crop loss. Although the entire corporate *dung* was held responsible for the infractions of each of its members, it appears that the corporate group could refuse such responsibility in serious cases since we were told that a longhouse might refuse to protect members guilty of serious crimes against retributions. Although moral transgressions and disputes appear to be infrequent today (only 2 cases were brought before the *Arié Vel* of Ta Rut in the last 2 years, and both involved adultery or wife stealing; only one case of rice stealing is known over the last 35 years in the village of Hat, although rice stealing is an especially odious crime that no one in their right mind would commit), they seem to have been considerably more frequent prior to 1945 according to elders. In all these domains, the headman and the lineage heads would have wielded considerable power and influence. Thus, they would have had great practical importance for all the households of a community.

As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, it was generally held that the *Arié Vel* obtained no practical benefits from his position other than being served first at feasts, and obviously being in a position of power in community politics. But he received no tribute or special services as a matter of routine. We suspect, all people in positions of power received gifts and favors “on the side” in order to curry their favor and influence for a wide variety of situations in which their decisions were of importance. Moreover, as leaders of the founding family that technically settled the area first and in a sense had first rights to the land, it appears that village headmen were generally in the best positions to claim rights to non-agricultural sources of wealth from the village territory, such as tribute from transiting traders or control over mineral sources (e.g. Leach 1954:28, 188, 224, 226, 237). We also suspect that the To Oi headmen may have received help with the construction of their houses since most political meetings were held in their houses, and the headmen’s houses seem to have served in many respects like a “communal” house for a number of political and feasting functions. However, we did not obtain information on this

specific issue. The headman certainly displayed the prestige symbols in his house from community feasts that he organized, as is also common throughout Southeast Asia. Among the Ta Oi and many other groups, these are primarily buffalo horns from major sacrifices.

This concludes our discussion of political considerations as possible causes for the formation of residential corporate groups. It is clear that the power of favorable versus unfavorable decisions in many important matters rested with the lineage heads and village heads, even the power of life and death where there were accusations of sorcery or serious crimes. Ordinary nuclear families had to depend on their elder lineage heads to defend them in such circumstances. Lineage heads could therefore use such dependence to bind individual nuclear families to their own household and extract contributions from them for various corporate and self-serving undertakings, such as arranging marriages, purchasing “corporate” wealth, and sponsoring feasts of many kinds, including those to create allies. With a large and capable labor force, aggrandizive lineage heads could become major power brokers not only within a village but throughout entire regions. However, in other regions, such as northwestern Thailand, and even among the Katu and Brou ethnic groups of Vietnam, these same political functions and roles are carried out by lineage heads or elders without creating large residential corporate groups with amassed corporate wealth and power. Thus, the political power of lineage heads does not *seem* to be of great enough importance by itself to account for the formation of corporate longhouse residences.

### Marriage Prices

What additional factors, then, may create conditions favorable for the exercise of power, or the luring of independent nuclear families into corporate residences? We suggest that the above basic political structure involving lineage elders in the most powerful positions and junior families being dependent upon them to defend their interests is an almost universal social structure in Southeast Asia among transegalitarian communities. What may tip the balance toward greater acquisition of power by lineage heads is a middle range of surplus production that

makes it possible for some men to use wealth to obtain brides by paying substantial surpluses for them, and precludes most men (or women) from obtaining brides (or husbands) because they cannot produce enough surpluses by themselves to obtain spouses, but must seek loans or support from other families. In this respect, people seeking spouses become like the men Katchin chiefs buy wives for and who then become indebted to their sponsors like their slaves (Leach 1954:161). We will therefore explore this factor as a possible cause of the formation of residential corporate groups. Such factors have been strongly advocated by Meillassoux (1981) for the formation of corporate groups in Africa, and by Feil (1987) for certain groups in New Guinea, characterized by moderate levels of surplus production.

This has also been one of the strongest characteristics of longhouse social and economic organization that we have observed in Vietnam: that is, unusually high wealth exchanges are involved in most marriages (at least to desirable spouses). These marriage costs are generally so high that they require large scale resource pooling such as is represented by longhouse corporate groups. Without such support, one risks either having no spouse at all or only obtaining a spouse of the least desirable type, perhaps who does not want to work or who is infertile. Interestingly, where bride prices are low as among the Akha of Thailand, children set up new households with ease when they marry and there are no corporate residences.

Among the Ta Oi, although it was stated that people generally married according to their own choice, or for “love,” this may be another version of the emic egalitarian ethic which did not traditionally translate into actual behavior very readily. It is true that there were anecdotal accounts of a poor girl that once married a rich boy, however, elders recognized that the rich usually married the rich and the poor married the poor. Even in the post-marriage feast that we witnessed between a relatively poor orphaned girl and a wealthier boy from Laos, it was necessary for her relatives to put on a lavish feast, and if *his* relatives did not feel that it was lavish enough, the marriage could be or would be annulled. We suspect that parents or corporate administrators probably played very influential roles in arranging for the main (first) marriage of dependents, and that subsequent (second or third) marriage partners might be taken for love or



romantic reasons. This is a very common pattern in cultures throughout the world that have arranged marriages (Jankowiak 1995:11). In addition, there are always a few individuals that contravene established principles no matter what the consequences, so that anecdotal accounts of marriages for love do not necessarily mean that most principal marriages were not arranged.

Marriages were occasions for the largest wealth exchanges in Ta Oi society, although previously the payment of war allies may have been of comparable importance (we lack data in this regard). The house chief obtained contributions from all member households within the longhouse and presumably contributed some of the longhouse wealth as well (which would subsequently be replenished by soliciting additional contributions from members or by other marriage exchanges or similar wealth exchanges). Marriage payments therefore could be presented to corporate members as clearly essential for all households and as an unassailable mandate to extract surpluses from member families. It is interesting to speculate that matrilineal residence and matrilineality may be common among corporate longhouse organizations throughout the world because by placing males in corporate groups to which large amounts of bride wealth had been given, administrators of the groom's group would better be able to ensure that their payments would be returned and that their investment interests would be secured and managed properly. As controller and organizer of marriage payments, the household administrator was clearly in a position to manipulate these payments and profit from them whenever possible. Thus, it would be in the household administrator's own self-interest to increase marriage prices to levels as high as possible. In this manner, he could push people to produce as much surplus as they were capable of producing, and he could appropriate those surpluses, or large proportions of them, control their use, and potentially profit from them. If conditions were such that it was extremely difficult to produce significant surpluses on a regular basis, that is, if the risk of going hungry was great because surpluses from good years had been given away rather than stored, it is doubtful that most people would go along with such a system. Similarly, if it was possible to produce more than enough surpluses so that a nuclear family could pay for its own marriage prices, those interested in maximizing their power and self-benefits

would have a harder time binding other families together in a single residential and economic unit over which they could exert control. That is, under prosperous economic circumstances, because people could be more independent economically, they chose to live in separate residences and exert more control over their own livelihoods. The recent increase in income levels of Rhadé families that have taken up cash cropping coffee, thus makes sense as a key factor in the dissolution of Rhadé corporate longhouses. This model also accords with the neighboring Brou communities that live in independent nuclear households and are reported to be richer than the Ta Oi and to have richer weddings as well. Like many Rhadé, they rely substantially on cash cropping and a monetary economy. Thus, we imagine that the extreme degree of control that lineage heads could exert over junior members in the form of longhouse organization is only typical of environments where moderate levels of surplus are regularly produced. The key element is the ratio of surplus that can be produced to the bride price.

What is the magnitude of marriage payments in traditional Ta Oi society? We have several statements concerning what was traditionally deemed the *minimum* payment for a wife.

Case 1: (from a 60 year old man):

1 ingot of silver (worth 17 silver coins, each coin worth about U\$ 8)

(for more expensive marriages, the following items were added: 1 buffalo, 1 bronze cauldron (80 cm. in diameter worth 1 buffalo, gongs, and antique agate beads).

Case 2: (from a 67 year old man speaking for his generation):

2 pigs (10-80 kg. in weight)

10 woven bed mats

60-70 bowls, cups, and glasses

2 small gongs

In return at the “post-marriage feast,” the bride’s family gave the groom’s family 10 chickens, 50 kg of rice, 60-70 bottles of alcohol, and 5 sarong dresses.

Case 3: (from one of the *Arié Vel* of Ku Tay village) a “normal marriage” price included:

6 silver bracelets & 4 pairs of earrings

6 buffalo (12 if the girl is pregnant) & 6 cows

8 silver ingots

20-30 gongs

More luxurious marriages would include the same number of buffalo and cows, but more gongs would be given including:

3 gongs worth 3 buffalo and 3 gongs worth 1 buffalo (c. 35 cm in diameter)

3 bronze cauldrons of size #10, 7, 5, and 3 (each)

100 porcelain bowls and 3 large porcelain bowls

2 coffins (worth 1 buffalo each) for the bride's mother and father.

At the post-marriage feast, the bride's family had to give back: 10 baskets of rice (18 kg in each), 100 liters of alcohol, 5 jars of traditional rice wine, 20 sarong skirts, the necks of sacrificed animals, and fish. At this same post-marriage feast, the spouse's family had to give 1 gong, 20 women mats, 1 pig, 1 cow, and 100 bowls. It is interesting to compare these tallies with those of the Rhadé (Hayden and Tran 1995) which seem slightly more modest in comparison).

When asked what a rich marriage price involved, one elder simply indicated that the amounts were too high to even discuss. Another elder emphasized that the marriage price was not simply a matter of "selling" a daughter and gaining profit, but it was also an agreement of cooperation between corporate longhouse families. These relationships were reaffirmed by the mandatory giving of a buffalo and a cow to the wife's family at the first *Ario Pin* feast after the marriage and by the giving of a pig at every subsequent *Ario Pin* feast. We expect that leading administrative officials of intermarrying longhouses were also invited to a wide array of other feasts given by each of the intermarrying longhouses. These are discussed in the second part of this report. Such statements and arrangements indicate that marriages were carefully arranged and orchestrated by the administrative heads of the corporate longhouses so as to benefit themselves and the corporate longhouse as a whole. In this respect, traditional marriage does not

appear to be primarily for “love,” but more for gaining political and economic advantages and creating alliances—perhaps in some cases between poor and rich families if the poor families had strong warriors or workers that would be a value as allies or as members of the longhouse. Another elder stated that rich families asked for more wealth for bride prices, which is as one might expect if marriage was being used as a strategy to obtain political and economic power.

Interestingly, marriage seems to have been village exogamous. This may have been desirable in order to maximize bride wealth payments, to establish alliances between communities, or for other practical reasons. But it seems to be relatively common among communities organized into residential corporate groups.

### WARFARE

The final factor that seems plausible as a practical causal agent for the formation of corporate longhouses is warfare. According to a number of elders, the last occurrence of warfare in the Ta Rut region was about 100 years ago, the same period when intercommunity warfare also was suppressed in the Rhadé region. Prior to this time, intervillage warfare seems to have been extremely common. We were told that when considering military action, the village headman would call together the entire village (or at least the male household heads, we suspect) to discuss the matter. The headman would then make a decision probably based on the extent and strength of support that he perceived in the community, and probably on considerations such as which allied communities could be counted on for support and how much such support would cost in terms of feasts and compensation payments for any individuals that were killed.

The emic causes of warfare were described in a variety of terms, including adultery, the lack of reciprocity in feast invitations, accusations of theft of livestock or elephants, and for trivial causes such as bets between men on the contents of a bird’s nest. Land and marriage debts were not causes for wars according to elders, especially since children from marriages were viewed as valuable assets that had to be “loved” and with whom contacts had to be maintained.

All of these characteristics fit well with the general model of strategies used by despots and reciprocators in order to gain and maintain power as described by Hayden (1995) for Highland New Guinea and other transegalitarian societies. Characteristically, ambitious men use and manipulate conflicts in order to further their own control over fellow corporate or community members. Ambitious men stir up enmity over the most trivial matters, or even bribe individuals to stir up trouble when they see it as being to their advantage. They also promote the use of compensation payments and the essential courting of allies as means of forcing people to produce and surrender surplus food or wealth which the aggrandizers can then control. Thus, warfare, becomes frequent in situations which paradoxically seem to be producing surpluses and where there is no significant pressure on land or other critical resources. This warfare strategy seems most effective in the lower and moderate levels of surplus production.

While there can be little doubt that manipulating conflict and warfare contributed to the maintenance of families as members of corporate longhouses, warfare, like the reduction of famine risk, seems to have been a supplemental (although fairly powerful and effective) technique used to keep the longhouse together. Two observations lead to this conclusion. First, in New Guinea, warfare was often extremely intensive, but does not seem to be related to the development of residential corporate groups (this should be investigated in greater detail). Second, even after the suppression of warfare in the Rhadé and Ta Oi regions, longhouses continued to exist in very developed forms. This may have been partly due to the momentum, or inertia, from the many generations of accumulated wealth that made membership in longhouses especially desirable. However, even after much of this wealth was lost during the American war, corporate longhouses rebounded into existence. Thus, warfare seems to be a contributing, reinforcing factor that strengthens corporate longhouse formation, and which generally seems to characterize longhouse societies, but warfare does not seem to be the primary motivating factor that impels families to seek residential and economic affiliation with longhouse corporate groups.

#### Overview of the Causes of Corporate Group Formation

We are still exploring the many possible practical reasons that might make membership in a longhouse corporate group advantageous for large numbers of families. At this point in our investigations, the minimization of famine risks (or the risk of experiencing resource shortages) does not now seem a compelling factor. Nor does defense seem an adequate explanation, nor does the defense of political interests. All of these concerns typically can equally well be met by alternate socioeconomic arrangements, typically involving agreements and relationships between related lineage households living as separate nuclear or minimally extended families. These dispersed independent households certainly incur costs for maintaining defense, political, and subsistence support from other families especially in terms of reciprocal feasts. However, it is unlikely that these expenses are as high as the contributions demanded of member families in corporate longhouses. Moreover, being a member of a corporate longhouse probably involves the surrender of much more of one's own autonomy. Thus, the critical question is what practical factors could be strong enough to override the disadvantages of corporate longhouse membership, if defense, political defense, and subsistence security are not enough by themselves to achieve this outcome?

At this point, we feel it is worth considering the control of marriage as the key factor. If this is, indeed, the case, it seems clear that corporate longhouses are really the creation of ambitious men who have increased and manipulated bride prices so that they can control access to brides by their control of access to the necessary wealth to obtain brides. The average person obtains no clear benefits from the requirement of having to pay exorbitant prices to obtain a bride (as compared to societies such as the Akha of Thailand where little or no bride prices are paid). It is really only the wealthy and those in power that benefit. The wealthy can obtain the most productive, the most desirable, and the most numerous wives. By providing the very large amounts of wealth necessary for marriage, ambitious aggrandizers can bind their married offspring and other marriageable corporate members to themselves, almost as indentured servants who must work for the rest of their lives to pay back their benefactors or the longhouse for the price that was paid for their spouses. This, in essence, is the situation in much of Africa

(Meillasoux 1981). While not all hereditary lineage heads might adhere to such a Machiavellian strategy, many hereditary lineage heads were probably only figureheads with the real power being wielded by the more ambitious and “rich” administrators. Even without such individuals, once this kind of a system is created, it tends to endure by itself where surplus production is adequate. It is capable of being maintained by even a few ambitious administrators in only a few corporate households in a region. Thus, the creation and manipulation of high bride prices in areas of limited surplus production may be a sufficient condition, all by itself, for the emergence of residential corporate groups.

If this is a generally accurate model of how and why corporate residential groups emerge in Southeast Asia, there are two issues of importance that warrant some further discussion: residence and wealth. Residence is important because it can determine the number and quality of member families that an ambitious individual can incorporate under his political control, that is, into his corporate longhouse. Thus, such individuals should be expected to promote residential flexibility under some conditions (e.g., when they are trying to attract members) and favor residential rigidity under other conditions (e.g., when they are trying to retain members or prevent them from moving elsewhere). Typically, transegalitarian societies maintain a staunch emic ethic of residential rigidity based firmly on narrow kinship relationships. Such rules could undoubtedly be invoked when administrators found it to be in their own best interests, and ignored under other circumstances. And, indeed, Ta Oi elders recounted very rigid emic rules. A person was born into a longhouse and such members could not leave it except when an entire junior branch of the lineage split off to form another longhouse. In this case, all the accumulated longhouse wealth would be left with the senior lineage remaining in the original house although the wealth that individual families had acquired would go with them to the new house. Thus, to become a viable new longhouse, the junior lineage would have to be relatively wealthy before they split off, or they would have to have good potential for accumulating wealth. Moreover, the head of the new house, its *Arié Dung*, would have less influence than the head of the senior branch. Such house divisions could take place after 3 generations had resided in the senior house.

Theoretically, such divisions took place along lineage branch lines, however, we suspect that considerable negotiating and flexibility must have occurred in practice. For, in all societies that we know of with absolute emic residence rules, reality has shown that people's behavior bears little resemblance to the emic version of affairs. This was true among the Rhadé that we described in our last report, where actual documentation of the residential relationships of longhouse families was available for early years. Unfortunately, similar documentation of actual residential practices was not available for the Ta Oi. Thus, we suspect that despite claims to the effect that neither lazy disputatious individuals nor inveterate thieves could be expelled from longhouse membership, there were probably a number of ways that longhouse administrators could divest themselves of families that became clear liabilities for the affairs of the longhouse and for the self-interest of the administrators. It is important to remember that the longhouse was held responsible for all the actions of each of its members. Similarly, there must have been ways of attracting particularly talented and productive families to membership in particular longhouses even if the kin relationship was distant. However, our information on these matters is sparse, and more information is definitely needed.

Wealth is also an important consideration in this model of longhouse development since it is needed for marriage, for attracting allies, for security, and for many other practical matters. From an ecological perspective, there are many advantages to being rich and there is also a strong link between wealth and power, although other factors also play roles in transegalitarian societies, as we previously mentioned. Nevertheless, if an individual is ambitious, he can usually attain influence and power by acquiring wealth and using it in prescribed ways. Ambitious longhouse administrators and headmen therefore should be concerned to maximize not only their own wealth but also the wealth of their corporate longhouse, and in a regional setting they should also try to maximize the wealth of their community. By controlling the corporate wealth and thus influencing the marriage negotiations of corporate members, longhouse ambitious longhouse administrators would be in very good positions to ensure that members married individuals that were most advantageous for the economic and political self-interest of the longhouse and its



administrators. Administrators could easily manipulate the system so as to maximize the economic and political position of the longhouse. And as we have noted, the rich tended to marry the rich, and the poor tended to marry the poor, although good productive or promising talent must always have been welcomed no matter what the wealth of the parents.

This brings us to an important point: what made some families rich and others poor? If an individual was ambitious and wanted to become rich, what constraints would create limitations? There are several important factors to take into consideration. First, traditionally, land does not seem to have been a constraint since population density was low and there was considerable unused forest that could be cleared. This also seems to have been typical of other Southeast Asian highlands (Leach 1954:3, 26; see also our 1995 report for Dak Lak). This observation presents a seeming contradiction since the region has been occupied for many thousands of years and it is not clear why population levels would not have risen to the point where the available land was being used to its maximum potential. To explain why population levels remained so low, it is necessary to postulate other constraints on population. For instance, protein, rather than land, may have been a critical limiting factor, and thus population levels may have been limited by the available fish and game, which also might explain the very strong emphasis on riverine settlement locations. Warfare may also have limited populations and served to space village locations far from each other. Finally, it is possible that we have misjudged the dynamics of traditional agricultural production and that much of the land either was not suitable for traditional agriculture or that fallow periods required much longer periods to regenerate than is generally assumed (e.g., Leach 1954:26 states that Burmese hill slopes gave very poor returns for cereal crops but were worth cultivating for some cash crops). In this latter case, the mountain populations would have actually been at their maximum agricultural carrying capacity. With our current state of knowledge, it is impossible to resolve which factors actually were limiting the Ta Oi traditional population levels, but this is a critical area to investigate further in order to understand the entire traditional feasting and cultural system. What is clear, is that since the end of the American war when access to and from the region was improved, population levels have

increased dramatically as well as deforestation accompanying increasing use of land for agriculture. Whether this is due to the new possibility of obtaining more protein, obtaining fertilizers to increase yields, the introduction of new cash crops that could be grown on hill soils, obtaining cash and industrial goods in exchange for crops, or whether it is more distantly related to the cessation of inter-tribal warfare is difficult to determine (although warfare was eliminated over 100 years ago and it seems less likely that this factor was constraining population levels). Without benefit of a detailed study of the agricultural production of the land in the Ta Oi region, we tend to think that much of the land was so marginal for traditional agriculture (providing minimal and unreliable returns for great amounts of effort) that it was simply unused, while people in the area concentrated their efforts on cultivating the best and more productive alluvium of the valley bottoms with only secondary use of some hillside locations. Thus, although there may have been a great deal of unused land, most of this land was probably of little use for subsistence agriculture. It seems likely that all the more productive land was being used. Founding families of villages would presumably clear and use the most productive land in their locality, thus establishing usufruct rights over the most productive lands, while subsequent immigrating families (and perhaps the most distant descendant branches of the founding lineage) would only have access to successively less productive land of a locality, or would have to travel greater distances to use high quality land. In this regard, it is significant that informants stated that there were usually only 1 or 2 “wealthy” nuclear families in a village, and that the founding families always were viewed as playing the most important political roles in the villages (e.g., village headmen always being from those families). Thus, we suspect that control of land quality and the distance traveled to fields may have played a significant role in determining wealth levels of families within villages, however, emically, the acknowledged rule is that there are no restrictions on use of land and that all families have equal access. The entire issue of land allocation, both in the hills and in the valley bottoms, is a feature of traditional society that is in the greatest need of further investigation.

The second factor that needs to be taken into account in understanding why some families were wealthy is the apparent fact that the main source of wealth was buffaloes, and there is no obvious constraint on their production. According to emic accounts, buffaloes require very little labor to raise, they forage for themselves, and the forage is unrestricted within the community, although conscientious owners will choose a field for the buffalo to feed in and build a shelter or stable for them and bring them back every night. However, most of the time the buffalo return by themselves to the stable because it is secure from attacks by tigers. It was stated that buffalo are never fed, even for fattening before sacrifices, although I observed at least some food scraps left for cows in Ta Rut. In addition, success in raising buffaloes was attributed to choosing good breeding stock. Given these features, it is difficult to understand on economic grounds why some families have many buffaloes and others have none.

The third factor that needs to be considered in order to account for relative family wealth within villages are personal qualities such as intelligence and industriousness or motivation. These are qualities viewed as critical determinants by informants in other areas (e.g., among the Akha of Thailand, and the Rhadé of Dak Lak—Hayden and Maneeprasert 1996) as well as by ethnographers in Quang Tri such as Mr. Yen Tho. Perhaps the choosing of the best land for agriculture by founding families is included in the parameter of “intelligence,” or finding other patches of good land not too distant from the community, however, intelligence seems to be necessary for all facets of social and economic life, whether choosing the most productive land, deciding when to plant, choosing good breeding stock, obtaining the most advantageous outcomes in exchanges, brokering good marriage ties or alliances, and arranging reciprocal feasting obligations. Every village probably has a few family heads that are known for their poor judgement and the ease with which they can be taken advantage of. In our experience, these are generally not very rich families. Thus, intelligence is undoubtedly important, but not sufficient for becoming wealthy. Everywhere in the Southeast Asian highlands, the willingness to work and to bring up children so that they too are willing to work hard and will show good judgement, appear to be the most critical emically recognized elements in creating wealth. Without these

elements, eventual poverty was assured. In low productivity environments, this seems axiomatic. If most families are not wealthy, it appears that they are not wealthy because they do not view the ephemeral rewards worth all the effort necessary to acquire them. In every society, there is always a certain percentage of people who strive to minimize the amount of work that they must do, even if this means marginalization. As the effort required to acquire wealth increases, we might expect this percentage to increase commensurately, especially where a strong egalitarian background is part of the cultural tradition, and especially if the advantages of wealth are only manifested episodically rather than in terms of a clear improvement in daily standard of living. Typically, the daily standard of living of wealthy and poor is almost the same in the hill tribes of Southeast Asia (Leach 1954:72).

When asked how a poor person could become rich, we were told that there were several ways. If a family had many sons and daughters that were productive, they could become rich—sons due to their labor, and daughters from their work and from the brideprice that they would bring to the family. Sons clear and plant fields, daughters and wives weed and harvest. Sons can also be sent on trading expeditions after the planting is finished. This constitutes another way of becoming wealthy: men can go to the Coastal deltas to buy gongs, bronze pots and silver in order to sell them at a profit in their home village; or men can go to Laos (where livestock cost only half the price of that in Ta Rut), and buy buffaloes, cows, or goats in order to sell them or raise them in their own region. Such trips take 2-3 months. If a man does not have the necessary capital for such a venture, he usually borrows silver coins from his brothers or his wife's family or the family of his sister's husband at 20-100% interest for the trip. Another traditional way of accumulating capital for such ventures is to grow tobacco to sell in the coast, but this demands considerable hard labor. Conversely, rich families generally run the risk of becoming poor from sickness, from alcoholism or opium addition, or from having many children who are not properly brought up (i.e., who are unproductive).

What then are the factors leading to the accumulation of buffaloes, cows, goats, gongs, large bronze pots, and wives that were the hallmarks of rich families? Taking all of these

considerations into account, we arrive at the following impressions: while there may be some restriction of access to the best, most productive lands in the Ta Oi region that excludes some families from becoming wealthy (an issue requiring more documentation), even within the group of those with access to productive land, many families choose not to make the efforts involved in acquiring wealth simply because it is too much effort. They appear content to opt for lower levels of work and thus make smaller contributions to the residential corporate groups in order to take advantage of the corporate wealth displays and elaborate feasts without having to acquire all the necessary paraphernalia, wealth, and food themselves. Those who are motivated and capable (“intelligent”), not only can acquire much wealth themselves, but also can usually maneuver themselves into positions of control and power within the residential corporate groups. As aggrandizers, they try to develop compelling pretexts such as military threats and alliances, costly marriage prices, and ancestral feasts to pressure constituent families to produce as much as possible and to contribute as much as possible to the corporate events which the aggrandizers largely control and benefit from. These are essentially the characteristics of Despot and Reciprocator societies in other parts of the world (Hayden 1995).

Since intelligence and motivation are highly individual characteristics that vary widely even between siblings or parents and children, the above scenario accords well with the Ta Oi and other observations (Leach 1954:162) that nuclear families within the elite or highest ranked lineages are not necessarily wealthy families, and that families that are not elites or part of highly ranked lineages can become very wealthy.

Before turning to the discussion of specific feasts, we would like to point out that there is really a continuum of different degrees of “corporate pooling” of resources in order to acquire the benefits of wealth displays, alliance feasting, and marriages. At one extreme, no surpluses are available to be used for these purposes. As small amounts of surpluses become available, we suggest that these are often pooled (at the urging of aggrandizers) at a community-wide level. Under these conditions, very rudimentary communal houses, men’s houses, or similar structures are built to house these events. At slightly higher levels of surplus production, it is possible for

groups of 5-30 households to cooperate together in residential corporate groups, or longhouses, in order to amass wealth and exert power for their own benefit. Under conditions where it is possible to create very large wealth and power advantages (as among the Katchin chiefs who controlled mining and trade—Leach 1954:28, 188, 224, 226, 237, or the Thai large houses in the forests of Thanh Hoa and Nghệ An Province report by Professor Lai Si Zao, personal communication), the houses of very wealthy and powerful groups may become very large while the houses of normal families remain single family residences. As the possibility of producing surpluses increases still more, we suggest that individual families begin to leave the constraints of corporate living and to establish themselves as economically independent families in their own residences. At this point, ambitious aggrandizers operating as village officials may again attempt to mobilize surpluses from each family in order to construct relatively elaborate common houses, to hold village feasts for tutelary deities or for inter-village alliances or for other compelling projects requiring the surrender of surpluses. State organizations are simply much more elaborate versions of this end of the continuum. However, as class societies come into existence, elite families may also form residential corporate groups (like the Katchin chiefs) depending on the nature of their economic and power base. In fact, even in transegalitarian societies, the ownership of a limited number of highly productive and geographically constrained resources such as fishing rocks, weirs, large boats, highly productive land patches, mines, or trade routes should have a very strong influence on the development of longhouses or residential corporate groups, perhaps irrespective of the relative levels of surplus (Hayden 1995). Where such factors are lacking, the formation of corporate groups based on the control of bride prices *under moderately abundant surpluses* appears to be the main reason for the formation of corporate residences. However, in the case of bride price corporate formation, longhouses may simply be one organizational option, with the alternative of dispersed households united only periodically for common house functions being equally viable and possibly determined by local historical traditions. Even if both corporate residences and dispersed residences are viable alternatives under this narrow range of surplus conditions, we feel that we are contributing to the better

understanding of environmental and practical conditions under which corporate residences are ecologically adaptive solutions.

## FEASTS

Having sketched some of the basic elements of the economic, social, and political organization of the Ta Oi, we now proceed to describe the main elements of feasting organization and to show how it relates to the other aspects of Ta Oi culture. To begin, several general observations on the analysis of feasting can be made. In order to fully understand the purpose and role of feasting in transegalitarian societies, it is necessary to understand the power structure in communities, in corporate groups, and in families as it concerns resources, labor, and disputes. It is also necessary to understand the most significant risk factors (illness, crop failures, warfare, &c) and how families create a social safety net to deal with these risks. The magnitude of surpluses families are capable of producing is another critical factor in understanding feasting as is how such surpluses are manipulated by aggrandizers and used in some cases to create corporate groups. We have attempted to document these aspects of Ta Oi culture in the preceding pages. Analysis of feasting also requires indepth descriptions of feasts, including who participates, who is invited, what items are given as gifts, whether there is a reciprocal obligation, and the other feasting dimensions discussed in our previous report. While our brief exploratory study in the Ta Oi region was not long enough to obtain many of these details, we were able to obtain the following preliminary impressions of the overall feasting structure of the Ta Oi.

We use the apparent function of the feasts in conjunction with the size of the social unit sponsoring the feast to classify the Ta Oi feasts (Fig. 6). As in our previous study, the major functions that feasts seem to serve include:

- 1/ the promotion of social solidarity or cooperation within a group;
- 2/ the creation of alliances between social groups;

- 3/ the promotion of a group by displaying success;
- 4/ feasts given to pay workers;
- 5/ recompense or penalty feasts.

At the largest of the Ta Oi feasts, officials publicly worship by praying in front of sacrificed animals, or their horns or severed heads. Buffaloes are sacrificed for the most important feasts, although it is generally only animals that are not suitable for sale in markets that are sacrificed (non-defective animals between 5-10 years old are generally chosen for sale). Administrative organizers assemble participating household heads well in advance (usually 1-3 months) of the largest feasts in order to discuss how large the feast should be and what contributions should be sought from each nuclear family or corporate group. We were told that each family contributed the same amount except in cases of hardship. We now provide brief descriptions of the Ta Oi feasts on which we were able to obtain information.

*Ario pin* (lit: feast cemetery), or *Loc ku mul*. This is the largest, most impressive feast in Ta Oi culture. It is held every 10 years and each village has its own feast cycle. The last such feast given in Ta Rut was 8 years ago. It is organized by the village *Arié Vel* in conjunction with the *Arié Dung* of each longhouse. Above all, this is a village promotional and alliance feast with many other secondary functions including village solidarity and longhouse promotion. All allied villages are invited to attend and their officials are expected to bring pigs, rice, or alcohol to the feast. If allied villages or officials were to refuse to attend, or were not given invitations to attend, this would be an open sign of enmity and would have had serious consequences in the past. Thus, this is an obligatory reciprocal feast between allied villages clearly meant to renew and maintain alliances. These aspects of the feast as well as its 10 year cycle (probably necessary to accumulate adequate resources to hold the feast) make it similar to many of the “potlatch” feasts of the Northwest Coast of North America. It is even conceivable that under past very productive conditions, these feasts could have escalated into competitive feasts between villages.



The ostensible purpose for holding these feasts was to move the burial locations of the ancestors and renew their graves, presumably to make them happy so that they would favor descendants with success. Each longhouse had its own cemetery area near the road, and this was moved every 10 years, sometimes only a few meters, sometimes up to a kilometer. After several of these moves, the bones of a given ancestor would be reduced to a very small pile of remains and would eventually be completely lost to decay. Initial burials were in massive carved boat-shaped log coffins worth a buffalo. These coffins were entombed within a small tumulus and accompanied by small wood structures with carved corner posts and various grave offerings (Fig. 7). These events were clearly used by longhouse corporate groups to display the success that their ancestral spirits had brought to the *dung*. This success was undoubtedly important in turn in retaining families within the group (preventing fissioning), in recruiting desirable mates or even new member families, and in acquiring or maintaining allied *dung*. Ancestors were a natural focus for such displays since they were the founding principle upon which the existence of the corporate group was based and served as a warrant for its existence. Moreover, ancestral worship reinforced the authority of the administrative officials of the corporate group and was probably used to validate their requests for contributions from member families for feasts, bride price payments, purchasing corporate wealth items, and other affairs. It is probably a common or universal feature of communities with corporate residences that each corporate group would have a spatially separate cemetery.

The *Ario pin* feasting reportedly took place along the road, but we were also shown a place in two villages where temporary structures (about 5 x 3 m) were erected in the village plaza for the public blessing of meat before dividing it between families and where the worshipping of sacrificed animals by village officials took place. These temporary structures have left no visible surface remains, and were located only a few meters from the two sacrificial posts of the plaza. “Sacred (unspecified) objects” were also placed in the house, but were discarded afterwards.

*Funerals.* The initial funeral appears to have functions that vary with the socioeconomic status of the surviving social unit. The funerals of village headmen seem to have functions very

similar to the *Ario pin*, that is, allied village headmen are invited and help in the choosing of a successor to the deceased headman. In fact, no funeral can be held until the successor is chosen, and then it is his responsibility to organize the funeral.

Our information for deaths within corporate groups is sparse, but we suspect that this was generally a corporate responsibility, with the elaborateness of the funeral calibrated according to the rank of the individual within the *dung* and according to the wealth of the nuclear family. For important individuals, it appears that officials from some allied villages attended or sent gifts such as 8 kg of rice. Funerals for the fathers of rich or important families included the killing of a buffalo or a cow. Coffins for important individuals consisted of massive, boat-shaped carved wood wealth items that were often demanded by parents as part of bride prices. Funerals appear to have been open to everyone in the village, but those attending were expected to bring a gift. These relationships may have been reciprocal.

In the case of funerals for poor people, the village headman helped to organize the burial and to obtain some contributions, although there was no feast open to everyone. We suspect that the feasts for poor funerals probably were more like work feasts, as among the Akha of Thailand. But for the most part, funeral feasts seem to have been events used by corporate groups to display their success, to validate their ancestors, and to renew ties within the village and between kin or allies in other villages. They would have also promoted group solidarity providing that administrators did not create internal stresses by demanding too much from member families for feast contributions.

*Marriage, Post-marriage (Asar akay)* As noted earlier, marriage is probably the most important wealth exchange event in Ta Oi society. It is also a major alliance-forming or maintaining event that is followed by subsequent wealth exchanges and other forms of mutual support or aid. It is also a corporate event and we suspect that in most cases, corporate members tried to ensure that the alliance being formed would be a beneficial one. In many respects, the reciprocal exchange of wealth of approximately equal value does not make economic sense, just as the mutual exchange of Christmas gifts in the Occident does not make economic sense from

the individual point of view. All of these exchanges therefore must be viewed as beneficial from the perspective of establishing social relationships or alliances that wealth exchanges create or perpetrate, or from the view of the organizing aggrandizers who benefit from pressuring their members to generate surpluses which they can then exert control over and use for their own benefit. These have become the commercialization pressures associated with holidays and feasts in the Occident. We have already described these aspects of the marriage feasts in some detail, and of the subsequent post-marriage feast given by the bride's corporate group and kin to the husband's.

Marriages were also used as occasions to renew ties of mutual support and alliance with kin groups in other villages that might be important parts of a family's social safety net as well as sources of safe lodging during travel. Thus, closely related families were generally invited to marriages (and undoubtedly the same was true of funerals). Invitations to these families were probably formal, and monitored closely by both hosts and guests. However, according to emic principles, marriages and post-marriage feasts were open to anyone in the village without invitation. Actual attendance seems to have depended upon the wealth of the host, with only the wealthiest families really being able to accommodate any significant proportion of their entire village. Most sponsors of marriages and post-marriage celebrations tried to have at least one buffalo for the feasts. The relatively "poor" post-marriage feast that we observed almost filled one of the remaining longhouses and lasted two days. Pigs were the most important animals killed, and all food was prepared outside at the edge of the toft zone, just beyond the cleared zone around the house. Large bronze cauldrons were used for most of this cooking.

For the most important marriages, those of the *Arié dung*, alliance ties between intermarrying corporate families are further reinforced by an annual feast that the wife's family gives to the entire husband's corporate family. The husband's family brings prestige gifts (silver or money), although the wife's family only reciprocates with food. While we did not obtain a name for this feast, it clearly highlights the importance of inter-*dung* alliances, undoubtedly of greater importance in the past for defense, trading, and other forms of mutual support.

The marriage and post-marriage feasts are primarily feasts of alliance creation between corporate groups, but were also used secondarily to display success, and to promote corporate solidarity (again, as long as organizers did not put too much pressure on member families to contribute to these events), and to reinforce alliances with kin-related social groups. They generated wealth to the extent that they forced member families of the respective corporate groups to produce and surrender surpluses.

*Tuc azaa* (lit: *worship head of new rice*). This “new year” feast is primarily a corporate solidarity feast. It occurs once a year in November after the rice harvest. It centers on the worship of the *dung* ancestors and involves only the member families of the corporate residence, although one informant indicated that it was also associated with considerable inter-*dung* visiting (perhaps after the main feast, as is also typical of Occidental Christmas feasts). For the main feast, all members of a longhouse gathered together in the *Arié dung*’s apartment and contributed a chicken to the feast. The lack of high value prestige animals such as buffaloes and the equal contributions and sharing of food are important characteristics that indicate this is a solidarity feast. One of the central events besides the worshipping of corporate ancestors, is the display of a rat and its subsequent frying in a bamboo tube. Parts of the rat are then eaten by those present, perhaps symbolizing the destruction of an enemy that can damage stored grain. Goat and pig are often consumed at this feast as well, with the meat being prepared outside and the rice being cooked inside.

*New house feasts: Sar dung, Yung la moi, and Patché dung.* The other main feasts that center around corporate residences appear to occur at the time of building new houses. In the simplest form, such a feast is simply a work feast held for all those people that helped to build the new house. As we understand it, this is the *Patché dung*.

If a corporate group wishes to promote its status and success, the remaining two feasts probably provide ample opportunity to do so. The *Sar dung* is to “put away” the bad spirits that might still be residing in the wood used to construct the house. The *Yung la moi* is to promote happiness (and by implication success and wealth) in the house. We have few details about these

feasts but we expect that they would be open to the entire community, as most promotional feasts are, and that formal invitations would be issued to the main allies and support groups of the longhouse. We also expect that these events would be as lavish as longhouse economics permit. Generally, these three feasts formed a complex of new house feasts that occurred within a short time-frame.

*Tuc ario*: This is another village-wide feast that is held only infrequently, every 10-15 years, perhaps whenever adequate surpluses had built up. Our scant information indicates that it is above all a village solidarity feast between the village longhouses, and therefore perhaps also involves some competitive promotional display of success between the village *dung*. The feast is traditionally held in July and each longhouse is supposed to sacrifice a buffalo or other prestige animal. Worshipping and feasting take place inside the longhouse, and men (but not women) from the other *dung* are invited to participate. At A Lieng, we were told that the sacrificial pole in the plaza was turned to face the house offering the sacrifice and that a cord was connected from the sacrificial pole to the longhouse sponsoring the sacrifice. The pole is the spiritual link between the sky and the buffalo and was supposed to be aligned to the rising position of the sun in July. Therefore, we suspect that these descriptions pertain primarily to the *Tuc ario* feasts, for each longhouse took a turn in sacrificing an animal and inviting the men of other *dung* to feast. This went on for about 2 days. Thus, provisionally, we view the *Tuc ario* as a village solidarity feast with each longhouse contributing what it can and all participating in turn, but with substantial overtones of corporate promotion. The more successful longhouses probably provide more lavish feasts and sacrificed the highest prestige animals.

*Ario xu kanea (Worship of the mountains and land)*: This also seems to be primarily a village solidarity feast, organized by the village headman, although it may also have elements of reciprocal alliance feasting since relatives from other villages are also invited. It takes place about every 5 years and involves the sacrifice of a black and a white buffalo. Temporary structures are built for worshipping, but it is not clear if these are in the village's sacred forest or in the village itself. We need more information on this type of feast.

*Patchem Vel (Village founding)*: Major feasts are also held when new villages are founded or when they are moved. We recorded one such feast that was held when the village of La Hot was moved in 1994 from one side of a river to the other. Accumulated buffalo horns that had been used to display past village and longhouse feasts were left at the old village site in the house remains of the headman. We assume that the village founding feasts were large and primarily solidarity oriented, although it would not be surprising if officials from allied villages were also invited in order to reaffirm alliance commitments. Unfortunately, we lack specific details.

*Pu Bo: (Forest agricultural feast)*: This appears to be an unusual type of village feast in Southeast Asia since it crosscuts most of the usual social groups. It is essentially a feast of cooperation and solidarity between families that work adjacent swidden plots. Therefore, the participating families are frequently from different longhouses, different lineages, and represent only a portion of the community. The families involved do not necessarily exchange labor between themselves (work exchanges generally occur between member families of the same longhouse), but there are undoubtedly other types of cooperation that are important between cultivators of adjacent swiddens, such as defense from wild animals and human enemies while working in the fields, and mutual protection of fields against depredations by wild or domestic animals. The feast is held once in May or June, before or after the cutting of slash in the preparation of the swidden plots. The village headman worships at these feasts, and marriageable adolescent girls dance and gongs are played, but pregnant and menstruating women are excluded. It is unclear whether this feast takes place in the mountains or in the village. or what foods are involved. It seems to be fundamentally a solidarity feast for task groups working in specific geographical localities; or alternatively, one could also view it as an alliance feast between independent families of agricultural task groups.

*Tuc dac (Curing feasts)*: To a very large extent, it appears that curing feasts are widely used throughout Southeast Asian hill tribes not only as a means to re-establish health, but also as a means to display and promote nuclear or corporate family success. This is certainly true among

the Katchin (Leach 1954:172, 191-3), and it also appears to be true among the Akha (Hayden and Maneeprasert 1996), and the Ta Oi. It is important for families to promote their success in order for them to be viewed as desirable alliance partners, longhouse members, trading partners, marital partners, and members of reciprocal social safety nets. Thus, although the cause of illness is determined by diviners and the organization of the curing feast is often undertaken by the village headman, it is the family that initiates the request for the feast and which is the central focus. The sacrifices range from a chicken to a buffalo (in the past), and the feasts range from small nuclear family feasts to propitiate family demons, to large, village wide feasts to propitiate mountain demons. We suspect that the costs of these feasts is largely adapted to the wealth of the family or sponsoring social unit as is the case among the Katchin (Leach 1954:172, 192), and that many of these feasts are for conditions not involving physical illness, but often simply the feeling that spirits associated with an individual need strengthening, as among the Akha. Thus, these feasts can be excellent means for advertising family success as well as for reaffirming alliances between families or corporate social units by extending formal invitations to them to participate. We therefore view curing feasts as being primarily promotional and alliance feasts.

*Political administrative feasts:* We were told that every time the village headman called a meeting of the heads of the corporate longhouses to discuss village political issues, this was always accompanied by a meal together. Such feasting for village administrative officials is extremely common among transegalitarian societies, and seems directed primarily at ensuring cooperative and friendly relations among all involved, i.e., solidarity. It is also another pretext for aggrandizers to justify obtaining surplus contributions from village members. Typically, these political solidarity feasts are hosted by the village headman in his home.

Similarly, when the village headman receives headmen from other villages, either as individuals or as a group of headmen from allied villages, the hosting headman provides a feast. In this case, the feast would probably most accurately be viewed as a reciprocal feast given in order to maintain alliances between headmen of equal status. We did not obtain any special names for these kinds of feasts.

*Cha buoy: individual hospitality (alliance) feasts:* When friends are invited to share food, it is generally referred to as *cha buoy*. Such hospitality is clearly meant to maintain the personal relationship between two individuals. The term can also be extended to situations where more than one person is invited to share a meal, but the underlying logic and purpose remains the same. These feasts seem to be somewhat similar to urban “dinner parties.” It is our impression that the term “*cha buoy*” may even be extended to the small meals of political administrators described in the preceding section. We were told that *cha buoy* is always a part of meeting between officials. Not to partake of the food offered in *cha buoy* is said to risk the loss of one’s soul. Depending on the people involved, this term may therefore apply to individual alliance feasting, solidarity feasting within political groups, or alliance feasting between village headmen.

*Arvai (Worship of soul): compensation feasts:* In Vietnamese, these are known as “*cung hon*.” Compensation feasts are given by someone who owes another individual or a group a debt of gratitude or compensation for damages for a specific act. This may be in recognition for help in work situations where the host was ill, or it may be compensation for damages to crops caused by a family’s domestic animals, or it may be for social transgressions such as adultery or wife stealing, as described in the earlier parts of this report.

## SUMMARY

In sum, our analysis of feasting among the Ta Oi shows clearly the major socioeconomic and political forces at work within their communities both at present and in the recent past. The most important of these revolve around the control of surpluses by aggrandizive administrators of residential corporate groups and of the entire communities. Aggrandizers promote the production of surpluses so that these can be conscripted for purposes that are presented as being essential for the wellbeing of the corporate group and its members. In many respects, these become self-fulfilling prophecies; but in the escalation of bride prices, it is also possible to detect the unidirectional self-interest of aggrandizers at work. The analysis of feasting also discloses other major forces such as the importance of establishing a diverse and widespread social safety



net for individual nuclear families, and the importance of swidden task groups. Materially, socially, politically, and in the domain of feasting, however, it is the longhouse corporate groups that stand out as the dominant organizational principle of Ta Oi society. The traditional means of creating social safety nets via feasts and the acquisition of power through feasts absorbed all of the surpluses that traditional families could produce. Indeed, these were the reasons for producing surpluses, and there were few other reasons to produce surpluses or ways to use them. Surpluses were constantly being invested in these systems, creating a complex web of credits and debts, both in socioeconomic and political terms. This is why few Ta Oi families could ever amass sufficient capital to open stores, as one informant mentioned to us. That is, there were always people to whom one owed surplus wealth, or to whom one was expected to give such wealth in order to promote alliances and support.

From the perspective of Marxist theory, from the perspective of national and world heritage, from the perspective of humanitarian respect for indigenous people, it is a travesty that current government policies are trying to destroy the few remaining longhouses and their socioeconomic organization in the name of economic progress. Traditional longhouse social, political, and economic organization has persisted over the centuries despite warfare and economic changes. The accumulated wealth of many generations in the longhouses has provided a communal economic fund that has attracted and kept member families involved in traditional longhouses. However, recent economic changes and the integration into national economies have undermined these traditional structures so that any formal dissolution of corporate longhouses by governmental decree will now probably have the irreversible effect of destroying longhouses forever. Corporate longhouses have become like fragile eggs; once they are broken, they will probably be impossible to put back together, except perhaps as hollow glued-together shells. It is a sad commentary on the state of the current administrations that valuable national ethnic heritage and basic ethnic self-determination is being destroyed in order to provide a few marketplace dong for governmental coffers. It is clear that the current policies reflect government envy at not being able to control the surplus production of the Ta Oi that has

traditionally been used for feasting and marriages. The numbers of people affected by the government decrees are not great, and the diversion of surpluses from traditional feasting to more “economically productive” enterprises is not significant in the overall national or provincial economies. Such changes will undoubtedly come in time of their own accord, but forcing people to make these changes by decree before they are ready to is a serious error. Many people will view the current government policies as simply another instance of Kinh nationalists taking away both heritage and resources from the tribal ethnic groups of Vietnam. If more than lip service is to be paid to preserving the cultural heritage of the Vietnamese ethnic groups, especially those that fought heroically in the last war, it will be necessary to stop the ethnic genocide that is taking place and to give back to the ethnic groups their autonomy to govern their own affairs, to have their own social and political organizations, to own their own lands, and to have some degree of jurisdiction within their own communities. Instead of the punitive decrees of governments seeking to abolish corporate longhouses, it seems that more innovative policies could be adopted by the government that favor or reward corporate longhouses for developing corporate, profit-producing corporate ventures, such as the opening of stores, the production of cash crops for sale in markets, or other similar ventures. The corporate structure and labor force is already in place and has a traditional foundation. It should be a simple matter of supplying guidance and incentives to launch corporate enterprises that would benefit ambitious local aggrandizers, corporate members, and governments at all levels. In this fashion, much of the traditional structure of Ta Oi society could be preserved including much of its traditional feasting, while adapting traditional culture to modern concerns. We sincerely hope for more enlightened policies in the future.

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Figure Captions

- Fig. 1. Map of Quang Tri Province showing the location of Ta Rut.
- Fig. 2. Schematic layout of a normal Ta Oi longhouse.
- Fig. 3. An idealized version of residential locations of member families of a lineage in a Ta Oi longhouse.
- Fig. 4. Schematic plan of the center of a Ta Oi village.
- Fig. 5. A schematic diagram of typical Southeast Asian tribal political and social organization.
- Fig. 6. A schematic diagram of the various types of Ta Oi feasts arranged horizontally according to function and vertically according to the size of the participating group.
- Fig. 7. Some offerings and small funeral structures associated with Ta Oi burials.

**Table 1: Visible Wealth Items in Ta Oi Houses**

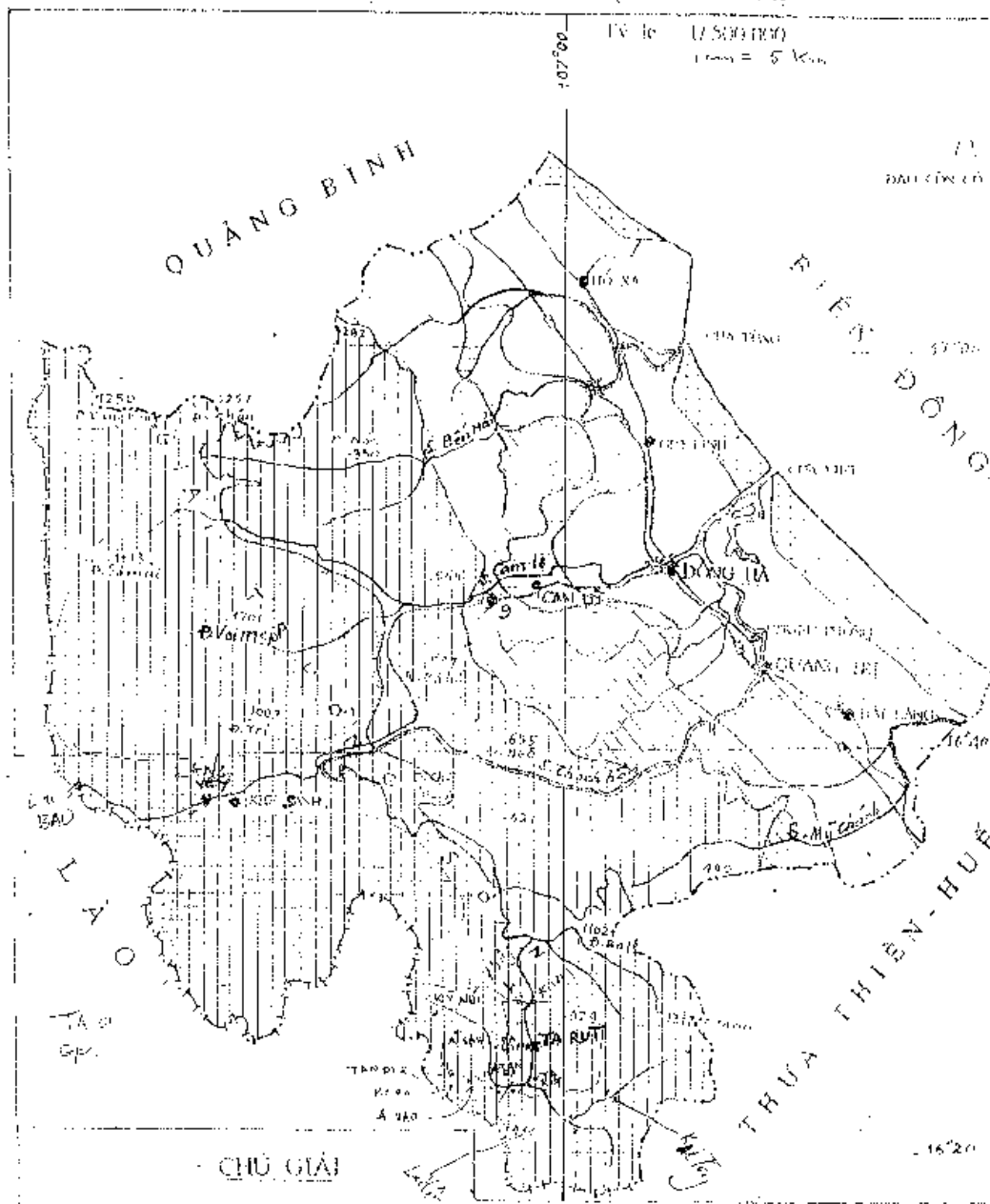
	Villages: Households:	Ta Rut 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	A Lieng & A. Vel	KuTay A. Vel	A. Vel	Total
Cuong Tarale:	Items: Gongs: Medium	1 1 4 3 6 6 7	9	7	4	29 19
Pung:	Bronze Cauldron Large	3 1 1	1	4		8 2
Yang:	Rice Wine Jars Large Medium Small	1 1 1 2 1 1 1 1	1			2 1 5 2
	Cabinet Bed-Dresser Cupboard	1 2 1	1	2	1	1 5 2
	Bos horns Porcelain Ware Tea Service Hanging Bowls Large Drum	11 11 1 1 1 2 1 4 1 1	18 15 1	1	1	2 41 2 22 3
Kaang:	Ancestral Baskets	1 2	1			2
Hing:	Village Altar		1			2
	Ceramic Water Jars	2				2

**Figure 6: Ta Oi Feasting Types**

Social Unit	Solidarity / Cooperation	Display / Promotion	Alliance	Competitive	Repayment / Recompense	Work
Inter-village	Patchen Vel		Chief's Feast			
Village	Tuc Ario Ario Yu Konea	Ario Pin	Ario Pin			
Swidden Group	Pu Bo					
Political Group	Cha Buoy			Tuc Ario	Penalty Feast	
Corporate House	Tuc Azaa Sar Dung/- Yang La Moi	Ario Pin Marriage Tuc Ario Sar Dung/- Yung La Moi Tuc Dac?	Marriage Post Parriage (Asar Akay)			Patché Dung
Family	Tuc Dac	Tuc Dac				
Individual	Cha Buoy		Chief's Feast		Arvai	

Figure 1.

## SƠ ĐỒ ĐỊA HÌNH TỈNH QUẢNG TRỊ



Diện tích: 4592 km<sup>2</sup>

Dân số: 510.992 người

6 đơn vị hành chính cấp huyện

2 đơn vị hành chính cấp Thị xã

Figure 2.

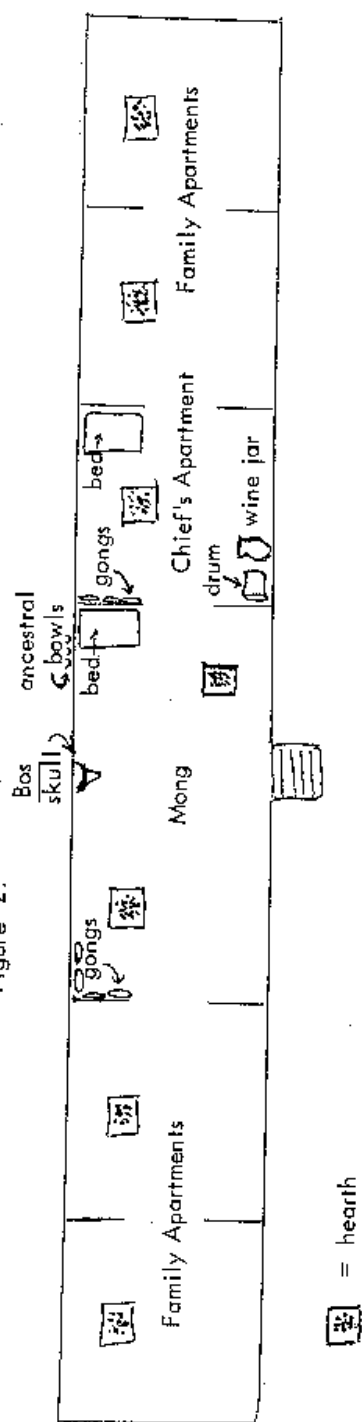


Figure 3.

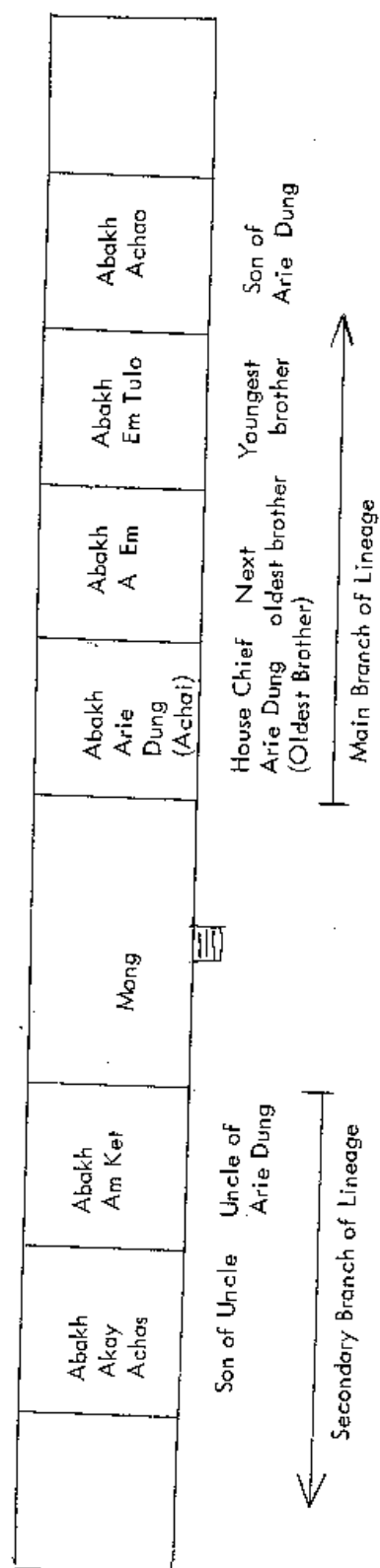




Figure 4

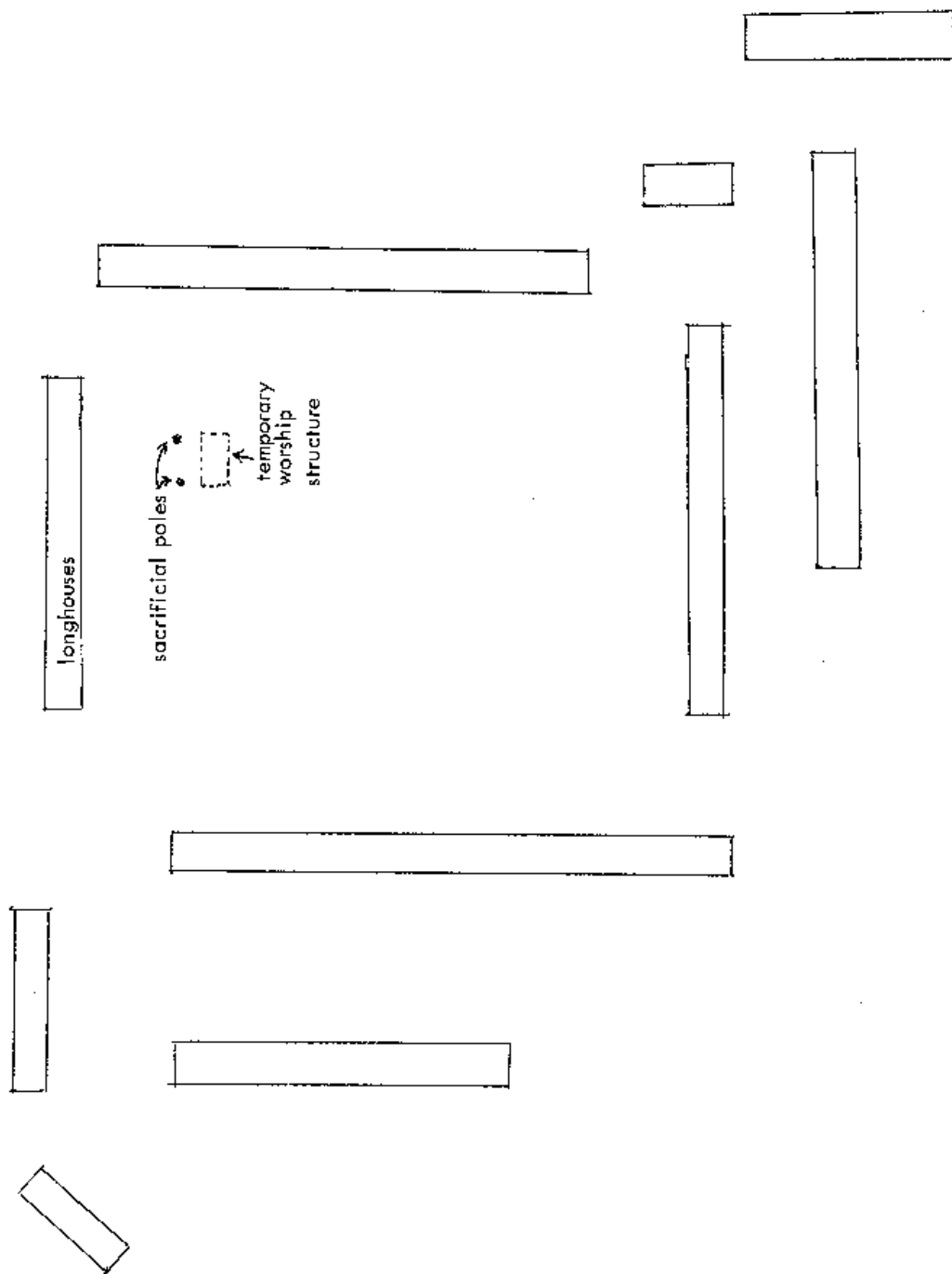


Figure 5. General Southeast Asian Structure of Political Organization

