

Historical Connections: The Kinship Systems of the Mulao in China and the Laotian in Laos

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Introduction

In August 1999, a scholar from the Institute for Culture Research of the Ministry of Information and Culture of P.D.R. Lao visited my institute in Nanning, China. He had told me that the Laotian in Laos and the Mulao in China may probably be of the same ethnic group, because they share the same term "Lao." I became interested in this question and tried to find an explanation for it. This paper will try to compare the kinship systems of the Mulao and the Laotian to explore their historical relationship.

The Mulao ethnic group is one of the 55 minorities in China. The census of the Mulao is 160,000 in 2000. The Mulao ethnic could be found only in the Guangxi province of China. The Laotian is the majority in Laos and could be found all over Laotian territory. The author studied the Mulao ethnic at the Da village of Luocheng district of Guangxi province in China and the Laotian at the Don village of Pakxe district of Champassac province in Laos. This paper is based on the data from these two field sites.

Research methodology

Kinship study is a domain of anthropology. Anthropologists who have studied kinship are more concerned with the different kin terms and types of kinship systems all over the world (Melford 1974). G.P.Murdoc used a different data of kinship to construct the World Culture Samples. He also discovered similarities in kin terms and types between some culture samples. These similarities are the reason why they are classified as one kind of culture sample.

In this paper, the author mainly concentrates on the similar kin terms of the Mulao ethnic and the Laotian ethnic, and considers their similarities as a cultural connection between the two groups.

The Field Sites

The Mulao kinship system

The Mulao ethnic had been recorded in the Chinese chronicles of the 16th century. “Guangxi Tongzhi” (History of Guangxi) published in 1531 noted that the Mulao are living at the eastern Tianhe District. This is the earliest source on the Mulao. Before that, the history of the Mulao ethnic is not clear.

The Mulao ethnic could be found in several districts of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China, mainly at the Luocheng Mulao Autonomous District. The language of the Mulao ethnic belongs to the Tai-kadai group of the Chinese-Tibet family.

Long ago, the Mulao converted wastelands into paddy fields to cultivate rice. Cultivating rice is their most important activity. They also cultivate vegetables and raise pigs and chicken for their food supply.

The Mulao ethnic directly build their houses on the ground. The wall of their house is made of clay or bricks. The roof is covered with clay tiles.

The Mulao are monogamous. The residential set-up of the Mulao is patrilineal. The newly married couple must live with the groom’s family. If a man wants to live with his wife’s family, he must use his wife’s family’s name. Otherwise, he is not accepted by his wife’s parents as a son-in-law. In this case, the wife’s family must pay some money to the man’s family as compensation. This situation only happens to a family that has no son to continue their blood lineage.

The Mulao trace their ancestry through male ancestors. Every lineage has genealogical books to record the names and dates of birth and death of the ancestors. The unilineal descent groups of the Mulao are patrilineages.

The kin terms of the Mulao which have been recorded are based on the three genealogies of 25 families. [See Table 1 and Table 2]

The Laotian’s kinship system

The word “Laotian” sometime refers to all citizens who are living in the territory of Laos. However, in this research, this word refers to the people who speak the Laotian language and share the Laotian culture.

According to the government of the P.D.R. Lao, the Laotian is the majority in the country. The census puts the number of Laotians at 2,403,891 in 1995. All the 18 provinces of Laos have Laotians living in their territory. Some researchers believe that the Laotians originated from the Ai Lao, an ethnic group recorded in Chinese chronicles in 16th century B.C.

In this paper, the author's data is based on his field work at a Laotian village in Paxe district, Champassac province of southern Laos.

According to the elder of the village, the history of the village is not so ancient. It is possible that in 1818, their ancestors, led by a monk, moved to the village where they are living now, Ban Donkok of the Phin district, Khammon province. At that time, they belonged to the Phu Tai ethnic group. After they arrived at the Mekong river bank, they discovered that there is a big island in the river. They decided to live on the island and called their village Ban Donkok. Don means 'island' in the Lao language. Kok is the name of the island. Ban Donkok means 'the village on the island of Kok.' Three years later, in 1821, the monk decided to build a pagoda on the right bank of the Mekong River. Some of the villagers followed him. They moved from the island to build houses beside the pagoda. Thus, the village has been divided into two parts: one part is still on the island and the other part is on the right bank of the Mekong River. But the name of their village was retained.

The Don village is a big village now. It has 340 houses and 2,124 residents. The people do not consider themselves as Phu Tai. Now, they identify themselves as Laotians.

Marriages in the village are monogamous. After the wedding, most grooms move with the bride's family. If the bride needs to live with the groom's family, the groom has to live first with the bride's family for three days before the new couple can move to the groom's family.

The kin terms of the villagers which have been recorded are based on a genealogy of twenty families that are related to each other. [See Table 1, Table 2]

The unilineal groups of the Laotian are patrilineages. They trace their ancestry exclusively through the males beginning with a founding male ancestor. They can only trace their male ancestors up to three generations. They do not use a genealogical book to record their ancestors like the Mulao do.

A comparison of the kinship system of the two ethnics

Similar kin terms of the two ethnics

There are only two kin terms of the two ethnic groups which are similar in pronunciation, tone and the position of their kinship relation. The two kin terms are $\lambda\upsilon N2$ and $\pi\alpha3$.

In the kinship system of the Mulao, $\lambda\upsilon N2$ refers to Father's elder Sister's Husband (FeSH), Mother's elder Sister's Husband (MeZH) and Mother's elder Brother (MeB). In the kinship system of the Laotian, FeSH, MeZH, MeB are also called $\lambda\upsilon N2$. Father's elder Brother (FeB) is also be called $\lambda\upsilon N2$, but the Mulao call FeB $\pi\alpha5$.

Mulao: FeSH= MeZH= MeB= $\lambda\upsilon N2$
Laotian: FeSH= MeZH= MeB= FeB = $\lambda\upsilon N2$

The second similar kin terms of the two ethnics is $\pi\alpha3$. In the kinship system of the Mulao, $\pi\alpha3$ refers to Father's elder Sister (FeZ), Mother's elder Sister (MeZ) and Mother's elder Brother's Wife (MeBW). In the kinship system of the Laotian, $\pi\alpha3$ refers to the same persons as the Mulao.

Mulao: FeZ=MeZ=MeBW= $\pi\alpha3$
Laotian: FeZ=MeZ=MeBW= $\pi\alpha3$

These two similar kin terms suggest that the two ethnic groups not only have linguistic similarities in the lexical meaning, but also have the same cultural symbol.

There are also other closely similar kin terms. For example, Child in Mulao is $\lambda\alpha\alpha\kappa11$; in Laotian, it is $\lambda\upsilon\upsilon\kappa135$. Father in Mulao is $\pi\upsilon53$; in Laotian it is $\pi\alpha22$.

The kinship type of the two ethnics

G.P. Murdock has classified six kinship types in the world culture. They are Sudanese, Hawaiian, Eskimo, Iroquois, Omaha, and Crow. After analyzing the Mulao kin terms and the Laotian kin terms, the author discovered that the two ethnic groups' kin terms do not belong to the six types mentioned above. [See Diagram2, Diagram3]

Diagram 1 contains the kin terms of the Laotians. It shows that one's father's elder brother is similar to one's mother's elder brother. One's father's elder sister is similar to one's mother's elder sister. But the father's young brother is distinguished from the mother's young

brother, and the father's young sister is distinguished from the mother's young sister.

Diagram 2 shows us the characteristic of the Mulao kin terms. One addresses the father's sibling and the mother's sibling with different terms. This is not similar to the Laotian's kin terms.

The similarity of the two ethnic groups' kin terms is that one's father and mother all address their sibling's children as their children's children kin terms. The Mulao and the Laotian kin terms are different from any type previously known.

The different kin terms and kinship rules practiced in the two ethnic groups

Knowing how the people of the two ethnic groups address their kin is the first important step in understanding their kinship systems (Robin 1967). Because the Mulao ethnic group has long been influenced by Chinese culture, some of the kin terms of the Mulao were borrowed from the Chinese. For example, the Mulao call Father's Father (FF) $\kappa\text{O}N1$, the Chinese address FF as $\kappa\text{O}N5$. The Mulao term is just different in tone compared to the Chinese term. Other similarities include Father's young Brother (FyB= $\sigma\text{o}5$), Father's young Brother's Wife (FyBw= $\sigma\text{]}\mu3$), Father's young Sister (FyZ= $\kappa\upsilon1$), Mother's young Sister's Husband (MyZH= $\square\text{16}\phi\upsilon1$). In fact, the Mulao villages are located next to the Chinese villages. Some Mulao can speak Chinese very well. But only these 5 kin terms were borrowed from the Chinese. Most of the Mulao kin terms are original Mulao terms. The borrowed Chinese kin terms are actually different from the kin terms of the Laotian.

Besides the Chinese borrowed kin terms and the kin terms which are similar to the Laotian, the remaining kin terms of the Mulao are the predominant kin terms of this ethnic group. It is one important characteristic of the Mulao culture.

There is an important rule among the Laotians of the Don village. It is that no matter how young they are, the elder brother's children and the elder sister's children are considered the elder Brothers or Sisters of the Children of the younger brothers and younger sisters. The rule of using age to distinguish elder brother and elder sister from younger brother and younger sister is only used in the nuclear family. This rule can be visualized in diagram 1. In diagram 1, A3 is the younger brother of A1 and A2, so A3's children B5 and B6 should address A1's and A2's children as elder brother ($\alpha\alpha\text{1}53$) and elder sister ($\{\text{1}53$). [See Diagram 1, Table 2]

Clearly, the Laotian rule is very different from that of the Mulao. The rule of the Mulao is based on the age of the person to distinguish the Elder Brother from Younger Brother, Elder Sister from Younger Sister. Age is the criteria.

The second rule of the Laotian is that after getting married, all Laotians follow the position of their children to address their kinsmen. For example, their elder brothers should be called $\alpha\alpha\iota53$ before marriage. But after getting married, the elder brother should be called as their children are called, $\lambda\upsilon N121$. This rule of the Laotian is also different from the rule of the Mulaos. The Mulaos address their kinsmen in the same way even after getting married.

The third rule of the Laotian's kinship system is that they address their parallel cousins and cross cousins by the same kin terms as their brother ($\alpha\alpha\iota53, \{\iota53, \upsilon N53\}$).

Conclusion

The distance between the Mulaos village and the Don village of the Laotian is thousands of miles away. However, they use several similar kinship terms. Their similar kinship terms are $\lambda\upsilon N2(+1, FeSH, MeZH, MeB,)$, $\pi\alpha3(+1, FeZ, MeZ, MeBW)$, $\lambda\alpha\alpha\kappa11(-1, \lambda\upsilon\upsilon\kappa135, Child)$, $\pi\upsilon53(+1, \pi\omicron22, F)$. The structure of their kinship terms has one important characteristic: One's father and mother all address their sibling's children as their children's children.

It is easy to appreciate that different ethnic groups use different kin terms. But it is hard to understand why different ethnic groups use similar kin terms. Is it just a coincidence that the Mulaos and the Laotians use similar kinship terms?

Some anthropologists say that kinship study is an imaginative process. Maybe, long ago, the Mulaos and the Laotians were living in the same territory before the Laotians emigrated from China. They were using the same kin terms to address their kinsmen. After the Laotians immigrated to Laos, they retained the kin terms which they used before. Thus, we can see the historical connection between the Mulaos and the Laotians.

References

Melford, E. Spiro. 1974. *Kinship and Marriage in Burma: A Cultural and Psychodynamic Analysis*. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press Berkeley.

Robin, Fox. 1967. *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropoloical Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Diagram 1

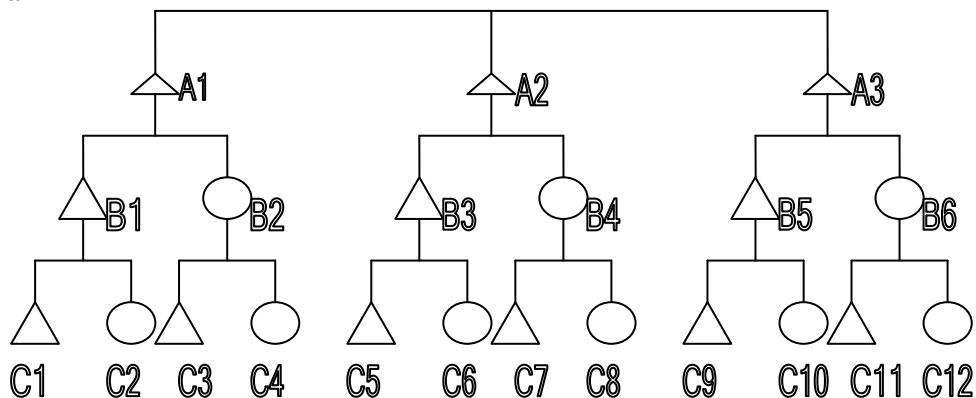


Diagram 2

Laotian kin terms

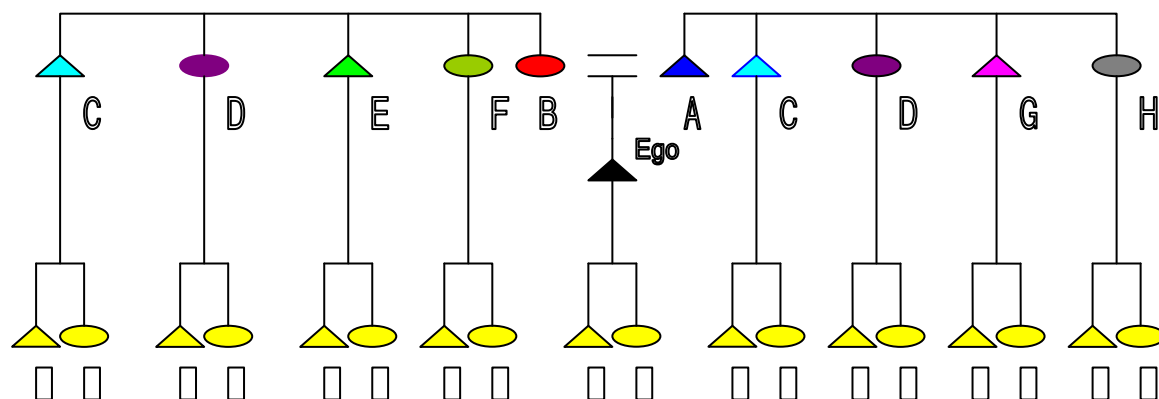


Diagram 3

Mulao's kin terms

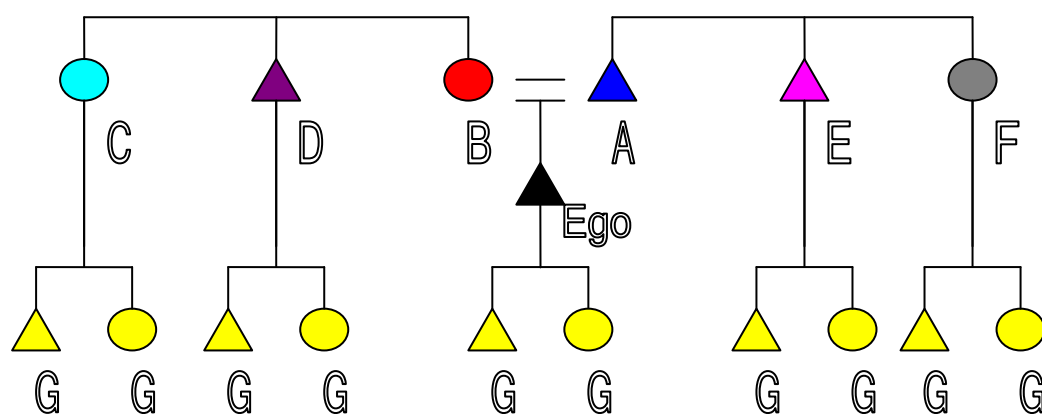


Table 1 Element Kin Terms of the Matrilineal Kinship

Sybls Terms	MFF	MFM	MF	MM	MeB	MeBW	MyB	MyBW
Mulao	ωαι11κON42μαα N11	ωαι11πωα121μαα N11	ωαι11κON42	ωαι11πωα121	λυσN121	πα53	σ{υ21	ηαυ53φαια124σ] υ21
Laotian	πο22του121□εψ22	μο22του121□εψ22	πο222του121	με222του121	λυσN121	πα53	να21παιο 22	να21σαο53
Sybls Terms	MyBS	MyZS	MeBS	MeZS	MeZH	MeZ	MyZ	MyZH
Mulao	λαακ11κηαν42	λαακ11κηαν42	λαακ11κηαν 42	λαακ11κηαν 42	λυσN121	πα53	φαι121	□ι21φυ42
Laotian	λααν135	λααν135	λααν135	λααν135	λυσN121	πα53	να21σαο 53	να21παιο22

Table 2 Element Kin Terms of the Patrilial Relationship

Sybls Terms	FFF	FFM	FF	FM	F	M	S	D	FeB	FeBW
Mulao	μααN11	μααN11πωα2	κοN1	πωα2	πυ24	νι24	λαακ11μαν21	λαακ11φεκ24	πα22	μυ24
Laotian	π□ο22πυ24□εψ22	με33□α22□εψ22	πυ24	□α22	π□ο22	με33	λυσκ53σαι53	λυσκ53σαο53	λυσN121	πα53
Sybls Terms	SSS	SSD	FyB	FyBW	FyZ	FyZH	SS	SD	FeZH	FeZ
Mulao	λαακ11κηαν42λυσ53	λαακ11κιααν42λυσ53	σο22	σ{μ53	κυ1	σο5κυ1	λαακ11κηαν42	λαακ11κηαν42	λυσN121	πα53
Laotian	λιυ11	λυσον135	αυ53	αα121	αα121	αυ53	λααν135σαι53	λααν135σαο53	λυσN121	πα53
Sybls	eB	eZ	yB	yZ	eBW	yBW	eZH			

Terms										
Mulao	φαι42	τσε121	υN24	υN24	ηψαυ53	υN24	φαι42τσε121			
Laotian	αι53(λυN121)	{ι53(πα53)	υN53	υN53	πα53	πα53	λυN121			