CHAPTER VI

COMPARISON AND CONCLUSIONS

The migratory and settlement pattern of the hill tribes of Thailand has, in recent years generated significant interest among the scholars of ethnography, primitive cultures and folklore. Even though clear consensus has not emerged about many hill tribes, the journeys of the Yao and Lisaw hill tribes have been fairly well charted. It is now largely accepted that the Yao, originally from the Yangtse Kiang area of Central China, began their travels around a thousand years ago, and passing through Vietnam and northern Laos, finally entered Thailand. Very little information is available about the original home of the Lisaw, but scholarly opinion, by and large, places them in the Yunnan province of the south-west China, from where they began moving southwards into the Salween Valley, and Burma till they finally arrived in Thailand.

Since both tribes trace their antiquity to China, one of the most dominant and clearly etched motifs to emerge out of this brief survey of clothing, ornaments and musical instruments of the Yao and the Lisaw, is the integral relationship that both of them have with China. The legendary accounts that are available about the genesis of the Yao clearly trace their ancestry to the Chinese. In every aspect of life: their beliefs, the ceremonies attendant upon birth and death, arguably the most direct signifier of the ethic of the tribal people, the Chinese influence appears to have touched the Yao and the Lisaw seminally. Their deep-rooted belief in the pervasiveness of spirits, a strong animism and, in the case of the Lisaw at least, an equally strong belief in ancestor worship, are all of the Chinese derivation. Both like the ethnic Chinese remain strong believers in the efficacy of the extra terrestrial spirits and have elaborate rituals to
appease them. The fact that in the houses that they build a prominent space remains consecrated to the spirit altars, like in those of the Chinese, is a strong evidence of this. The Yao spoken language has strong Chinese impact and one of their languages uses a script derived from Chinese characters. A number of words in the Lisaw language are of the Chinese derivation and most of the Lisaw people, even till today can speak the Yunnanese dialect even as some can even converse in Mandarin Chinese.

The traditional costume of both the Yao and Lisaw has also been strongly influenced by the form and style of the Chinese apparel and there is enough evidence in myth and legend to provide a theoretical acceptability to this derivation. The Yao legend about the genesis of the turban has a Chinese Emperor and a noble man of his court as the main protagonists. Their loose trousers are also fashioned after the Chinese, as is the jacket particularly of the Lisaw (Figure 2.31, p. 115). The shape and decoration of coats and jackets are remarkably similar to that of the formal court costume originally associated with the officials of the erstwhile Imperial Chinese court and diffused through the Chinese populace. The Lisaw jackets with their high collars and distinctive cross over fastenings are nothing else but simplified versions of the elaborate embroidered coats worn by the Chinese officials. The five traditional embroidery patterns of the Yao (Figures 2.3 to 2.7, p. 85-87), have been added to by the Chinese influence, even as additional patterns like flowers, birds, grass and even Chinese characters have now become part of their repertoire.

The same impact can be seen in their ornaments as well, for the open silver necking worn by all Yao women and some men (Figure 3.12, p. 142) is essentially of the same type as is worn by many ethnic groups in China, to take only one example. But the size, details of design, engraving, and the number of rings completing the final ornaments are
determined by the requirements of the different sub-groups. The Yao legend of the birth of the music, once again has the Chinese Emperor in it and in a commanding position. Their musical ensemble is quite like the ethnic Chinese music ensemble (Figure 4.2, p. 158). The Yao and Lisaw musical instruments are individually also markedly influenced by the Chinese. The similarity in form and materials is also striking so that quite a few of the instruments like the Yao shawm may seem to have been derived from China itself even though its original form may be Central Asian. The Lisaw lute type Sewbew (Figure 4.17, p. 173) has a clear Chinese origin as does the mouth organ called Fulow (Figures 4.28 to 4.29, p. 180) which is a free adaptation of the reed Chinese mouth organ called Sheng (Figure 4.31, p. 181).

The fact of such apparent Chinese influence is intriguing in that as has been generally accepted, the migration of both Yao and Lisaw commenced from China in remote past, and yet in every sphere of life, both tangible and intangible, the Chinese referals remain etched in the subliminal layers of their subconscious. In this connection perhaps it is worthwhile to mention that even as both the Yao and Lisaw have been significantly impacted by the Chinese, according to the legend and mythical accounts the Lisaw seem to have taken a more confrontational position vis-a-vis them than the Yao whose legends always accept the Chinese as the law givers.

The Chinese impact, though dominant is not the only constituent of the artefacts of the Yao and Lisaw. Even though more often then not it is not possible to clearly disentangle the various strains, as the forms have often mutated beyond recognition during the course of generations of movement, some pointers can be sensed. The W-shaped turban bound with silver bands that the Yao of Thailand still wear is clearly a Laotian importation (Figure 2.15, p. 94). Tentative suggestions can also be
advanced for the locale of some of the Yao symbols on their jewellery like the gourd and the double gourd, the multipointed stars, fishes, birds, dragons and umbrella etc. The gourd and the double gourd are almost certainly Yao indigenous symbols as they occur again and again in many legends surrounding the birth of the tribe. Similarly the fish may bespeak the reference in the same legends to the crossing of the great rivers. The dragon is obviously a Chinese motif and the umbrella a ubiquitous artefact of this entire region while the multipointed star may attest to their belief in the potency of spirits. Some kind of Indian connection can also be sensed. An intriguing custom that is followed by the Lisaw on the occasion of the naming ceremony of a baby is the throwing of an Indian coin in a pond of water. While enquiries of various Lisaws did not yield any specific answer, as perhaps for them the raison d'etre of a hallowed practice was of no moment only its execution was, the practice seems to have been a vestigial survival of certain customs which must have been followed since the times that the entire area was under a pervasive Indian influence, and which over a period of time acquired a totemic significance. That some kind of an Indian referal, though vague and indeterminate is certainly at play here is also borne out by the fact that a major Lisaw silver ornament (Figure 3.15, p. 146) is actually named Pooja. Some local Thai influences can be seen as well. Since Thailand is known for its fine work in metals, particularly silver and gold, the tribals have acquired more expertise in the honing of metal. To their original tools they have added various cleaning, polishing and soldering agents as well.

The relationship between the Yao and the Lisaw is also quite intricate. Even though both of them share a more or less similar weltanschaunung or world view, in certain important areas they differ from one another. In this context it is important to remember that more information is available about the Yao than about the Lisaw. A major
reason for this lacuna in our knowledge is that as compared to the Yao, the Lisaw are much fewer in number and even more important, the "process of sophistication" has been much more rapid with them than with the Yao. Ceremonies attendant upon birth and death have been accepted by the tribelorists as clear markers of the individuality of the tribe. And in both the birth and death ceremonials the Yao and the Lisaw are quite different from one another, often being in complete opposition to each other. The way in which the Yao cremate their dead and the Lisaw intern them is a case in point. Even as the Lisaw conceive of their dead only as journeying to a world of spirits, it becomes for them a celebratory occasion. While both the tribes have a deeply ingrained belief in the efficacy of spirits, once again their different approaches come to the fore. It can be seen that the Lisaw spirits are more wrathful while the Yao ones are generally benign and easier to please. On the other hand the Lisaw pantheon of spirits is more organized with seven of them (For a discussion see p. 63-64) representing the natural phenomena like earth, rain and so on, being assigned a higher position than the others which are considered merely as the guardians of the villages. The Lisaw lay far greater stress on the appeasement of spirits at the time of the birth of a baby. It is also interesting to see the role that each of the tribes assigns to their priests. For the Yao, the shaman is not only an appeaser of these spirits but also has a role as a prophesier, after a reading of natural portents and phenomenon. He acts not only as a go between amongst the spirits and the people but also as a counsellor and a judge and arbiter in village disputes while a Lisaw sorcerer has a more limited function of exorcising demons by making charms and amulets etc.

Their social customs and behavioural modes are also quite different from one another, for instance while the Lisaw condemn a child born out of wedlock, the Yao quite welcome it as they perceive it as a future
working asset. Their celebratory ceremonies are also quite different. The Yao have ordination rites like Kwa tang for a boy under the age of 20 that entitles him to enter the realm of his ancestors as also other ceremonies which are held in honour of the guardian spirits (for a discussion see p. 49-50). As against these solemn ceremonies the Lisaw ceremonies are more festive as apparent from their enthusiastic and elaborate heralding of the New Year. For these ceremonies large scale preparations are made involving a lot of feasting, merry making, preparation of new dresses and so on. One night almost say that the Yao ceremonies are more individualcentric while the Lisaw ones are more corporate in nature. Behind all these differences however stands the essential tribesmen: essentially gentle children of the hills with their clear apprehension of the unity of life between all manifestations of nature, the anthropomorphic, the bestial and the vegetal and their own symbiotic relationship with them.

This unity and understanding of the natural elements is reflected quite clearly more materially in their clothing, ornaments and musical instruments. It is a characteristic of the folk artist to lavish care and decoration upon objects that are inherently useful. Thus, more often than not, they can be taken as matrices to evaluate the points of similarity or dissimilarity, between different groups. The material used for clothing by both the Yao and the Lisaw was not only environment friendly but also something that could be grown locally. Both Yao and Lisaw grew their own cotton on the hillsides and spun it into thread either with hand-spindles or spinning wheels. Both the Yao and the Lisaw also grew their own indigo which is used extensively in the dyeing of their clothing. Designs, like in embroidery and ornaments are not only derived from a variety of symbols determined by their environment and belief systems but also represent and often interpret them. As a matter of fact the designs
favoured by the Yao are almost like a stylished picture book, and make compact creative statements close to the tribal heart. Both the Yao and the Lisaw clothes are so designed as would make them totally adapted to their harsh mountainous living, not only as protection from the inclemencies of weather but also as material tools that would help them in their productive activities. All the articles of clothing support this contention, even the lowly waistband which apart from acting as a tying agent for jackets which are without any buttons or other fastenings, also serve as receptacles for money bags and small arms and so on. The leggings, loose-fitting and comfortable, would once again provide protection from the burrs and undergrowth and yet would allow total freedom of movement over rough terrain, while climbing hills, walking across streams or even while stopping or squatting while working in the fields. Even though after the wise selection of material, proper cutting, and not the least its stitching and final decoration have turned them into objects of beauty, their primary function remains to adapt to nature as also to fight against it if it ever becomes unfriendly. Once again the musical instruments as also the ornaments transcend their aseribed function to become culture and ethnical symbols, and use the indigenous materials as their starting materials. However adornment remains naturally the main function of the Yao and Lisaw jewellery, even as the Yao show a clear preference for individual pieces worn over their dresses, and the Lisaw prefer them as an integral part of their apparel (for a discussion see p. 144). Whatever it be, however the ornaments are of essentially a simple configuration composed of geometrical forms like cubes, cylinders and spheres or their sections etc.

That such ineluctable relationship with their natural habitat is a part of a tribal’s being is borne out by all the studies of tribals and the cognate groups. This model holds true when applied to the third group of hill
people that has been the subject of a brief study in this dissertation. Once again there clothes, made of locally available wool and originally undyed, reflect their environment as strongly as does that of the Yao and Lisaw tribes. But here perhaps the close resemblance ceases between the Yao and the Lisaw on the one hand and the Ladakhis on the other, for by and large the former still follow their tribal norms, whereas the Ladakhis because of a rapid urbanization and consequent economic prosperity, and even more, the modern and organized forms of governance, religion and education that they are subject to, are in the process of developing more systematic norms. Ladakh forms a perfect exemplar of the way in which the modern sophisticating apparatus intrudes and changes the primary structures. In order to examine and analyse these changes once again the clothing, ornaments and musical instruments have been taken as points of reference in this survey. Both the Ladakhi clothing and the ornaments are far more opulent than those sported by the Yao and Lisaw. A number of materials are added on to the basic wool substructure to make the garment appear rich and elegant. The ornaments are thick and massive and use many materials like silver, gold, brass, all studded with precious and semi precious stones in contrast to those of the Yao and Lisaw which remain essentially simple. However it is the music of the Ladakhis which immediately makes visible the impact of an organized system of religion: Buddhism, followed by the majority of the people. Since there is no clear distinction between the Yao and Lisaw way of life and rituals, their system of music is uncluttered and no distinction is drawn between the music ordained for different occasions. The music is not imbued with any hallowed function and like the people who make it, remains primal and yet evocative. In contrast for the Ladakhis their musical instruments and music transcend their initial function to become cultural and ethnic symbols. Their music is clearly categorised into religions and secular
genres. It is occasion specific and thus they have a music for the gods, for exorcising evil spirits, for heralding spring, sowing of seeds, for harvesting etc., felicitating lamas, for according ceremonial reception to the dignitaries. Not only is the type of music different for each occasion but even certain instruments are assigned clearly defined function. Instruments like Ragtum and Kangling (Figures 5.28 to 5.30, p. 209-210) are used only for religious purposes while the Damyan (Figure 5.31, p. 212) and Dab (Figure 5.40, p. 218) are reserved for making secular music. Despite this clear demarcation of functions however the music, in Ladakh as in other tribal societies, remains an essentially collective activity rather than an individual one.

As is obvious the mores and patterns of the tribal societies across the world are in a process of transformation as the development in technology and means of transport and communication are inexorably bringing even remote areas into contact with the modern urban world. The accessibility of these remote areas has rendered the preservation of their rich and unique heritage vulnerable as these developments are contributing towards the tribal people drifting away from their traditional moorings. The most immediate and obvious change can be seen in the clothing and ornaments worn by these peoples.

In response to the generally changing socio-economic scenario in Thailand, the life style of the hill tribe people is also rapidly modifying itself even as they are being assimilated into the mainstream of the Thai society. With the coming of the tourists, and consequently the establishment of hotels, guesthouses, the economic status of these people is changing. The articles of their traditional clothing and ornaments etc. are now being occasionally made as tourist souvenirs. Some festivals like the New Year celebrations of the Lisaw which were earlier considered sacrosanct to only this tribe have now been thrown open to
tourists. Because of the introduction of television in certain areas the traditional music that they once cherished is being replaced by recorded western or even disco music. The materials are changing from natural fabrics to synthetic ones, and from the traditional ornamental patterns to the inclusion of contemporary motifs. The tribespeople have also taken to using synthetic materials for their clothing instead of the indigenously produced cotton or wool as in the case of Ladakhis (Figure 5.11, p. 196). That the process of change is not only rapid but inexorable can be seen from the fact that while originally, and not till too far back, the Yao could not even conceive of buying their silver ornaments from anyone except their own silversmiths, because of the decline in their traditional smithery, they have taken to buying them from other sources. More contemporary objects are also gradually intruding themselves in the repertory of the jewellers. To the Yanlim, a silver turban ornament (Figure 3.8, p. 138) which had as its pendulous attachments bells and silver leaves and so on, recently the tribespeople have started attaching an ornament that looks suspiciously like an aeroplane. Thus are the traditions created and sometimes degenerated. The dimensions of the ornaments are also changing due to the expense involved, for instance the Nomyoon (Figure 3.11, p. 140) a bent arrow shaped earring is now only 2-3 cm in size instead of the original 5 to 6 cm in diameter. Essentially thus it can be seen that with economic prosperity and growing awareness of their changing social context these people are fast losing their uniqueness, and even more disturbing, their store of legends and folk lore that has given them their specific identity.

It is interesting to see that even though a large number were interviewed during the course of field work, it was only the older people who were either at all interested in going over their traditional lore or even making an effort to find an answer to the specific query. The
younger people, by and large, were not interested in this interaction, and it appeared as if they were no longer even prepared to carry what they perceived as the burden of their tradition. In this context, it must however be pointed out that in the Yao and Lisaw tribes' major transformation has still not taken place, as they still follow, to an extent, their traditional norms. But in Ladakh the process of changeover can be seen as being more marked. Because of rapid urbanization, and a less itinerant lifestyle the Ladakhis have responded more materially and obviously to the processes of modernization.

It can be seen thus that this ingression of urbanization and introduction of sophisticating mechanism has worked in the tribal areas in two ways: both interlinked with one another (1) the tradition begins to transform and mutate itself even as it allows the process of innovation to set in and (2) engendering consequently, the danger of its diffusion and loss. The Yao and Lisaw have their marked individuality and these traditions are in an imminent danger of being irretrivably lost unless corrective and cuative steps are not taken expeditiously.