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Transcultural Communication and Social Order

Comparisons in Upland Southeast Asia

In mainland Southeast Asia, the center-periphery relation structures both upland and lowland socialities and provides a background on which current ideas of indigeneity unfold. This relation is articulated in rituals, in the structure of settlements, and in myths and other cultural representations. However, there has been little attempt to compare types of center and periphery relations between ethnicities. This article proposes such a comparison between the Rmeet of Laos and the Yao/Iu Mien, an ethnicity that has migrated from southern China across Laos to Thailand. It proposes that at least two types of center-periphery relation can be found among these groups, one characterized by continuity and replication, the other by contrast and boundary maintenance. It also proposes that besides the dominant method of articulating center and periphery in each society, subordinate models exist. This comparison is enabled by a synthetic series of theoretical models that structure analytical terms.

keywords: Rmeet—Yao—transculturality—identity—Zomia

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Modern forms of indigeneity arguably result from local histories as much as, if not more than, globalized processes. This seems to be sometimes forgotten when articulations of ethnicity, like indigeneity, are considered only as the effect of the current strategies of modern nation-states. For most upland societies in Southeast Asia, the arrival of the modern nation-state must have initially appeared as a new form of an old foil: the empires and domains of their neighboring lowlanders. The identities that we observe today present a transformation of those that had formed during the period before the arrival of European-style territorial states. I wish to argue here that earlier center-periphery relations are still present in upland societies, and that they not only shape their rituals, cosmologies, and dealings with foreigners, but also provide ways to process the presence of the nation-state.

This does not mean that upland societies have emerged as mere mirror images of states, as Scott (2009) argues. Let us rather think in terms of system-environment relations. The biologist Jacob von Uexküll argued that spider webs are "fly-shaped"—they are entirely different from flies, but their strength and their width are exact matches to the features of flies (1940). This line of reasoning was applied to social systems by Luhmann, who argued that the environment of each system emerges from a differentiation based on the kind of information that the system is able to process (1984, 249–53). It is only in this sense that upland social systems are "state-shaped"— they produce unique communities (villages and kin groups), but they do so in a process of differentiation from their neighbors and the state. It also implies that the effect of states on upland communities can hardly be predicted, as their social systems process the information provided by states and neighbors (influences, intrusion, adoptions, and so on) in specific ways. It is this processing that ultimately alters the system (Luhmann 1984, 103–104). I want to explore some differences and similarities in the ways certain upland societies relate to the lowlands in terms of center-periphery relations. Like their ritual and kinship systems, the external relations of these groups are specific and quite different from each other. States shaped only some of the features of this set of relations that are devices of transcultural communication but nevertheless culturally specific.

Relations between the center and periphery provide a major means for the comparison of societies—or socialities, to use a word more suggestive of process than unit—in mainland Southeast Asia. Yet the questions of how terms, contexts, cen-

ters, and peripheries are defined still remains. What are the values and ideas that designate a place, a person, or a social practice as "central" or "peripheral"? What are the relationships that link centers and peripheries? What kind of centrality and periphery is being conceived? Analyzing types of such relationships, I have developed a comparative model for such socialities by relating three simple models of contrastive relations with one another. Models, in this sense, consist of a set of systematic relations between more or less abstract terms, and mediate between theoretical abstractions and the analysis of data. They are thus more or less close to the specificities of ethnography.

This analysis involves a comparison of the representations of center-periphery relations found among two different ethnicities of Southeast Asia: the Rmeet (Lamet), a Mon-Khmer-speaking group of upland Laos, and the Yao, a Miao-Yao-speaking ethnicity spread out in various subgroups across Southern China, Laos, and Thailand.[1] My use of ethnonyms here does not imply that my analysis presupposes these ethnicities as closed, coherent units. It only locates the data that I am using among the differences pertinent in the region. For the Rmeet, the most prominent political power centers historically were the *mueang* domains of Laos and northern Thailand, Luang Prabang, and Chiang Mai, which were also characterized as "galactic polities." These consist of centers and a shifting circle of sub-centers with their own sub-sub-centers, down to the village level, often in loose alliances maintained through kinship, ritual, and economic ties (Heine-Geldern 1963; Tambiah 1985; Turton 2000). The Yao, on the other hand, have preserved many features that were shaped by their relationship to the Chinese empire, even as they migrated out of China.

First of all, the center-periphery model is not the only model of identity-alterity relations in this region, although the analysis of premodern states has rendered it highly visible in scholarship of the region (for modes of such variance, see also Baumann 2004; Luhmann 1998). Second, the center-periphery relation is a value relation that cannot be reduced to relations of power and force. We tend to think of "centers" as being naturalized by power, cultural splendor, or military force, and there has been a recent trend in the literature to reduce centers to states (Jonsson 2005; Scott 2009; but also see Jonsson 2012). Thus, the historical states of the Chinese empire and the various *mueang* polities appear as natural candidates to be assigned the value of "center." However, we need to consider that center is a relational term, and that it is also a value specific to a cultural ideology. This particularly holds true for the complex ways state-centers have construed themselves as centers in cultural, political, and cosmological terms. We cannot expect a peripheral ethnicity process such complexity in its entirety, not because uplanders have less complex societies, but because no social system can be fully translated into another one (Luhmann 1984, 47–48; 291). Thus, even where uplanders or peripheral societies process the centrality of kingdoms and empires, they will do so selectively and according to their own semantics of reproduction. I will first present three simple analytical models and then later demonstrate how they are articulated and interlock in the given ethnographic cases.

First model: center and periphery as reversible value relations

If "center" and "periphery" can be seen as general concepts structuring the reproduction of non-state societies like the Rmeet or the Yao, we can also describe them as values that motivate action and occupy a particular position (a function) in a value system or ideology. This implies that their relationship is hierarchical in any given context of their use, values being by definition both relational and hierarchical. However, this does not imply that this hierarchy of center and periphery is permanently fixed, or rather, that these values are always applied to social categories, groups, or places in the same way. In the context of power and force, states might be seen as superior centers, but as value hierarchies can be reversed (Dumont 1980), their peripheries may claim higher value, even the status of center, in particular contexts.

In any given local ideology, there are two possibilities for attributing the values of center and periphery to social entities. These attributions, made by non-state societies, are separated by context. The first one considers socio-cosmic states like the Chinese empire or the larger *mueang* polities to be centers, and the non-centralized, peripheral, often upland societies their periphery. In these models, the center is acknowledged as the source and embodiment of civilization as well as of social and cosmic order, while the periphery is incomplete in those respects, associated with the forest and the wilderness. This model goes back to premodern times but is transformed and fortified by modern nation-states and development ideologies. Importantly, non-state societies often share such conceptions with states in a hegemonic way.

However, given the reversibility of value hierarchies in different contexts, there is the potential for constructing the relationship in opposite terms. Thus, in some contexts, small-scale upland societies might consider themselves as the center of sociality, while the differences between external states, other ethnic groups, animals and spirits become somewhat blurry, allowing them all to be placed in the periphery. Thus, we arrive at this pattern:

	Non-state/uplands (self) / State (other)
Context 1	Periphery (self) < Center (other)
Context 2	Center (self) > Periphery (other)

Model 1. Reversible value relations.

These two types of relationships are also related to each other, as the contexts in which they appear form part of an overall system of structured action, framed by the particular ideology that attributes values to events and ideas. This analytical model does not preclude the fact that multiple centers with diverse, more specific value-ideas attached to them and different functions within the value system might exist. The center-periphery relation itself appears in different structural types, according to the concepts employed by each group. These

are shaped by the way actual historical relations are processed by their respective cultural semantics. This leads to the second model, which is more specific to the socialities I wish to compare.

Second model: contrast or continuity

The dominant type of center-periphery relation of the Rmeet and the Yao, as articulated in their ritual and other social practices, can be described as one of contrast, complementarity, and boundary maintenance for the Rmeet and one of continuity, replication, and mimesis for the Yao. For the latter, I use data collected among the Iu Mien subgroup in Laos and Thailand. In my model, these terms appear as a kind of heuristic binary opposition, although there is no reason why they should exhaust the range of possibilities. The second model, therefore, is this:

Rmeet	Yao
Center-periphery as contrast and boundary maintenance	Center-periphery as continuity and replication

MODEL 2. Contrast or continuity.

As mentioned previously, the center-periphery relation is only one form of the semantics of identity/alterity in the region. Like other types of relations, it gains its specific meaning and way of operation through other types of relationships within a given sociality and between socialities. Therefore, there are not only other types of center-periphery relations among other ethnicities, but such alternatives can also be found among the representations of the two societies in question, yet in a subordinate position.

Third model: dominant and subordinate forms

The third model follows the first in its logic of possible reversal. While a dominant form of center-periphery relation (such as contrast and boundary maintenance) structures the majority of actual center-periphery relations or the most highly valorized relationships in a given sociality, there might also be subordinate forms. Subordination does not imply that these alternatives are irrelevant in all contexts. Rather, the subordinated forms are of a lower value and might even be encompassed by the dominant ones. Thus, a "contrast" type of the relationship of center and periphery might occur in a context whose very existence is defined by a relationship of "replication." The model, in its general form, looks like this:

Sociality a	Sociality b
Dominant type of relation a	Dominant type of relation b
Subordinate type of relation x	Subordinate type of relation y

MODEL 3. General version: Dominant and subordinate form.

In the present analysis, and given my heuristic use of the continuity/contrast distinction as an opposition, this results in the following model:

	Rmeet	Yao
Dominant type of relation	Contrast/boundary maintenance	Continuity/Replication
Subordinate type of relation	Continuity/replication	Contrast/Boundary maintenance

model 4. Specified version.

Dominant forms of center and periphery i: the rmeet

The first example of center and periphery relationships I want to present is derived from the Rmeet of Laos, where I have been doing fieldwork since 2000. About twenty thousand people in Laos are currently identified as Rmeet; they are also known as Lamet in Izikowitz's classical monograph (Izikowitz 1979; see also 1985; 2004). Their language belongs to the Mon-Khmer family, and they make a living mostly from dry-rice swidden farming. They are not Buddhists, nor did they develop a form of organization beyond the village level. Today, Rmeet conceive of themselves as a minority in a modern nation-state that is dominated by Buddhist, wet-rice growing Lao but promotes an ideology of ethnic equality. However, an earlier model of sociality as structured by center-periphery relations persists in many concepts and ideas about the nature of society and the world. In these ideas about spirits, the dead, and the ritual reproduction of society, the earlier model has retained some validity. In this model, the Rmeet are situated on the peripheries to the *mueang* polities of the Lao (Luang Prabang), the Yuan (Chiang Mai, Thailand), and the Lue (from Sipsong Panna in Yunnan), as well as the colonial French state (Indochine). These polities were sources of important constituents of Rmeet social reproduction, like exchange items, money, or a system of ranks, in which the Rmeet partook without actually creating them (Sprenger 2007; 2010). At the same time, their livelihood in the mountains and the absence of Buddhism, kings, and a written language sharply distinguishes them from the lowlands, or at least from the lowlands' normative self-description. This has hardly changed since the days of the *mueang*, whose transformation into modern institutions started at the end of the nineteenth century. The present concepts of identity and sociality are thus shaped by layers of historical experiences that have been stabilized as forms of social reproduction.

Among the representations resulting from historical interaction is a story about how the Rmeet became the ancestors of the Lao kings. This notion is commonly shared by most of my informants, although there are significant variations. In some versions, a Rmeet king is killed by his subjects; in others, the Lao occupied the throne. The following story exists in a number of variations and elucidates how the Rmeet became the kings of the Lao.

In this tale, two Rmeet orphan boys dig a channel by a river for catching fish, but every time they come to check, the fish that were caught are gone. Thus they

ambush the person who takes them and catch an old water dragon lady (*phryoong*). She asks them to let her keep the fish, and they concede them to her. In response, she gives them an egg that she had laid herself. The orphans put the egg into a jar at home and then leave for their fields. When they come back, they find that water has been fetched and the house has been cleaned. The next day they hide to see who their helper is. Soon, a beautiful girl emerges from the jar and starts cleaning the house. They catch her, and as she is naked, they give her clothes. So she stays with them as their wife. One of the boys makes a drawing of her to look at when he is working in the fields. A gush of wind blows the picture away and carries it to the local lord (*chao*). When the lord sees the image of the girl, he desires her and orders a search. His officials finally find her in a rather out-of-the-way place. First, the lord tries to exchange her for buffaloes and cows, but the orphans refuse to give her away. Thus, he makes them drunk, and using tricks and force, he manages to abduct the woman. The orphans are woken up by their dog, who tracks the girl down for them. When they arrive at the Mekong, they jump on his back to cross the river, but when they reach the other shore, the dog dies of exhaustion. A fly emerging from his nose shows them the way to the palace of the lord.

After arriving there they contact their wife, and she proposes a plan: the brothers shall hunt animals of the forest and bring her their hides, while she asks the lord to keep seven dogs—as she is Rmeet, she explains, she likes dogs. The lord consents and keeps the dogs at his palace. When the brothers bring the hides and feathers of their prey to their wife, she tailors a dress from them. Then she challenges both the brothers and the lord to don the dress. After the lord does so, he is killed by his dogs, who mistake him for a wild animal. The brothers move into the palace and thus become the ancestors of the kings of the Lao.[2]

There are two important hierarchical relations involved here: the relation between humans (in particular Rmeet) and the forest, where water dragons and spirits dwell, and the relationship between a lord and common folk. The story starts with orphans who establish a positive exchange relationship with the forces of the forest. Orphans in Rmeet mythology are often blessed with such relations as they are marginal to the kinship system that would otherwise condition their exchange relationships (Sprenger 2004, 2006). For the gift of food, they receive a woman, who they transform into a social being by giving her clothes and marrying her. This relationship is hierarchical, first because of the cosmological power represented by the water dragons, and second, because the forest powers become wife-givers, who are superior to wife-takers in Rmeet social morphology.

The second relationship is more ambiguous. At first, the lord tries to negotiate with the brothers over their wife but then turns to a ruse and force. This indicates a relationship between potential equals, not so much one between an established ruler and subjects that owe him unconditional respect. In this scenario, a remote power intrudes into a place where it is not automatically respected and needs to be established by force—very much the relationship that, according to Scott (2009), characterizes peripheral peoples who evade state forces.

The remainder of the tale relates these two types of relationships—humans to spirits and ruler to periphery—in a hierarchical manner. It does so by a double reversal of the ruler/periphery relation. The lord is removed from his position as the center of "civilization" and turned into a representation of the wilderness, when he is mistaken for game by the dogs. After that, the peripheral people take his place and move to the center. These reversals are effected due to the machinations of the water dragon wife; thus, the relation with forest powers subordinates the ruler/periphery relation by reversing it.

As far as I know, the idea of the Rmeet ancestry of the Lao king is not shared by the Lao. From the Lao perspective, the Rmeet, like the Khmu, belong to the now abandoned category of Kha, the mountain dwellers and literal "serfs" on the periphery of their domains. The primordiality of the Kha, as first owners of the land, used to be recognized in the Royal New Year's Ritual (Aijmer 1979; Trankell 1999), but there was no notion of Kha kings being replaced by Lao.[3] In this respect, the Rmeet story is not affirmative but stresses difference—formally by not being shared with the Lao, and topically by reversing the power relationship.

At the same time, this relation of center and periphery is reversed in a different context. In this, each Rmeet village appears as a cosmological center, composed of human families ("houses") and protective spirits, set against a periphery of forests and capricious, even malicious spirit forces. These places are also sources of important items of village life, particularly food. The shifting rice fields are the result of successful negotiations with spirit forces, just as hunting is. In this scheme, the centers of the Lao or Yuan appear as part of the periphery, and occasionally states, markets, and other ethnic groups are categorized with the spirit realms. The markets are sites where the spirits of the dead might roam, and persons who observe ritual prohibitions after a member of their house has died should avoid them for three years in order not to meet the dead person there. Spirits might appear as soldiers in dreams, and a large town in a dream—a *mueang*, literally—is the place of the spirits.

Rmeet villages in the uplands are clearly defined entities with boundaries and ritual gates that are particularly important during the annual rituals for the village spirit. Restrictions on entering and leaving regulate contact during these periods of time. At the same time, outside realms are sources of food and important exchange items, so that Rmeet village society is constantly processing outside elements for internal use. This means, for example, that money earned in towns can be used for bridewealth and other ritual exchanges where it is attributed a specific value different from the one it has in the context of markets and labor (Sprenger 2005; 2007). The center-periphery relation articulated here is thus one of relating external items and actors to a reproductive core of sociality. The form that this relationship takes is one that stresses contrast (lord/orphans), exclusion (village gates), and complementarity (shifts of the values attached to external exchange items).

Dominant modes of center and periphery 2: the Yao

A different relationship of centrality is found among the Yao from Southern China who have migrated into Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand since the early nineteenth century. Numbering about 2 million in China, 27,500 in Laos (Iu Mien), and 42,000 in Thailand (Iu Mien), they speak a Miao-Yao language and also mostly live off swidden farming, at least in Laos. Again, no distinctive form of supravillage organization is known, although there have been singular leaders who extended their influence to a large number of villages. However, these spheres of influence have hardly survived those who established them (Cushman 1970, 121; Jonsson 2001). In older Chinese sources, the Yao are classified as part of the Southern Man and by themselves are differentiated into a number of related subgroups. Certain cultural representations provide a shared frame of reference, and this includes their relationship with China. The Chinese court is a major reference point for Yao identity.

This is due to another origin story featuring kings and dogs. Known as the dog ancestor myth—a theme widespread in certain regions of Asia (White 1991) and particularly applying to the "Man" category from the perspective of the Chinese empire—the story concerns a dog that helped the (mythical) Chinese emperor Gao Xin to fight a rival, general Wu (the names vary among different versions). This "dragon dog" killed the rival and brought his severed head to the emperor. Having made merit for the empire, he was given elaborate clothing and allowed to marry a princess. Their six daughters and six sons became the ancestors of the twelve Yao clans. Furthermore, all the descendants of the dog were awarded with the rights laid down in King Ping's Charter, a document written in Chinese characters and possessed by many Yao leaders (Cushman 1970, appendix 13–29; Huang 1991; Quennec 1904).

This story clearly situates the Yao on the periphery of the Chinese sphere, making them the result of a double integration of outside elements into the state. Both of these integrations took the form of hierarchical subordination in Dumont's (1980) sense. The dog, a domesticated animal on the border of human sociality but not entirely outside of it, is associated with nonhumanity, but also with human ventures into the nonhuman realm. Words like "to hunt" are written with a dog radical, for example (Alberts 2006, 27). At first, the dog ventured outside of the empire, conquering a rival who questioned imperial law and power. By this act, the dog proved he belonged to the sphere of human social order and thus qualified for further human social relations. The domesticated animal that had turned into a military ally was thus transformed into a son-in-law. In the process, the dog was turned into a human being by being dressed in sophisticated clothes (Alberts 2006, 134; 160, footnote 173). The myth thus situates the Yao at the periphery of the Chinese empire but at the same time brings them ideologically into its fold. As ter Haar writes, it stresses their Chineseness, but not Han-ness (1998, 5). There is a clearly articulated value relationship here: the dog and his descendants appear as an extension of the imperial center that is at the same time a constitutive difference—a relationship articulated in terms of military alliance, civilizing as a process,

and affinal kinship. In this relationship, the Yao are thus subordinated but not entirely excluded. Their identity is expressed in terms of ideas shared with China. The Chinese empire as hierarchically superior encompasses its opposite.

The myth thus worked as a relay point for the two related parties, and it is indeed shared by the Chinese side—Chinese officials recorded it as the foundation myth of the Southern Man at least since Fan Ye's *Houshanshu*, written in the first half of the fifth century CE. The version contained in this account is surprisingly close to the version known among Yao/Iu Mien (Alberts 2006, 52–54; 158, footnote 138; see also Mair 1998).

In many respects, this story reverses the relationship with a royal center as expressed in the Rmeet myth. Both use the imagery of marriage, dogs, and kings. In both, dogs are identity markers for peripheral groups, very explicitly so in the Yao story and more implicitly in the Rmeet one (in fact, not all versions I recorded identify the Rmeet as liking dogs). Yet, there are plenty of reversals. While in both stories dogs kill a leader, in the Yao myth this leads to the reinforcement of the emperor's power, while it leads to the demise of the lord in the Rmeet tale. The Yao dog becomes more human through the gift of clothes by the emperor, while the Rmeet orphans turn the lord into prey for dogs by clothing him in hides. In the Yao story, the marriage of human and nonhuman is legitimated by the emperor, while in the Rmeet story, the dogs protect the human-nonhuman marriage against the illegitimate intrusion of the lord. While the Chinese imperial wife-giver creates the sociality of the Yao through marriage, the *mueang* wife-abductor endangers the marriage of the Rmeet orphans with a spirit.

Thus, the relation between power centers and peripheries takes different forms here. The Yao origin tale justifies special rights of autonomy within the fold of the empire, while the Rmeet myth ends with the replacement of the head of the domain. Thus, in the Yao story, the Chinese empire defines a world and a cosmology that very much reproduces the self-description of the empire itself, and the question for the Yao is which place to occupy within this world. The Rmeet story emphasizes much more the difference between the domain and its periphery, and a possible reversal of the relationship. In these instances, Yao construct their sociality in relation to the Chinese center in terms of continuity. It is a relationship that adopts the conditions that the center demands for the recognition of sociality in the first place. Yao are thus subordinated to the Chinese empire not in terms of power, but in terms of hegemony.

This is mirrored in a number of other expressions of this relationship. Yao identity hinges upon its recognition by the Chinese imperial court. The aforementioned King Ping's Charter specifies the rights of the Yao in relation to the court in form of a document written in Chinese and allegedly issued by a Chinese emperor—although Chinese chronicles and archives did not yield corresponding documents. The text, copied often and distributed widely among Yao, ascribes them the right to live in the mountains free of taxes and corvée, to practice swiddening, and to hunt. They are also exempted from greeting foreigners and bowing to officials (Huang 1991, 102–106). While its authenticity as an imperial decree is question-

able, it did have a function in relating the Yao to the Chinese administration, as Jonsson (2005, 29–31) and ter Haar (1998) have pointed out. In some formal respects, it resembles a Chinese document, being written in localized Chinese characters and bearing other features of imperial documents, like stamps (Alberts 2006, 140). Thus the combination of its content and its formal features allowed Yao to communicate both identity with each other and a recognizable relationship with the Chinese, as represented by officials, settlers, or military personnel in the Chinese borderlands. This potential to relate was not restricted to Chinese territory. One Yao informant told Alberts how the document was used after migrating into Southeast Asia to convince Laotian and Thai officials that the Yao were authorized by the emperor to settle in the mountains (Alberts 2006, 183, footnote 453). Interestingly, the indexes of officialdom, in particular the official-looking stamps, increased during the period of migration into Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century (Alberts 2006, 140).

There are more cultural domains of the Yao that have been strongly influenced by the Chinese. The Yao ritual system is generally acknowledged to be a localized version of a branch of Chinese Daoism, the Way of the Celestial Masters (Alberts 2006, 118; Zhang 1991, 319–20; see also Lemoine 1982, 31). This branch, often considered the origin of religious Daoism (as opposed to philosophical Daoism), structured its geographical domains, its symbols of legitimacy, and the order of its officials and priests according to late Han Dynasty administration (this is, of the first two centuries CE; see Alberts 2006, 101–103).

While these rituals have been localized, they also work as transcultural communication devices, in the sense of their double legibility (Welsch 1999; see also Sprenger 2011). Even though these practices have become part of Yao society, they depend partially on knowledge of Chinese. The tradition can only be perpetuated by reproducing the ritual texts written in Chinese characters. As Yao, especially those in Southeast Asia, often do not master the script, Chinese have to be found and employed as copyists. The same goes for the set of paintings that belong to the high-ranking *dongba* priests (Lemoine 1982, 34). Indeed, at least some identify Laozi as the founder of their tradition (Alberts 2006, 171, footnote 300). Again, the Chinese center appears as the source of sociality, including its boundaries.

Data on Yao who have migrated to Laos and Thailand even more clearly demonstrate how certain features of Chinese sociality were adapted to the new circumstances. These data show how constitutive relationships with centers were for Yao sociality. For Yao in China, it is unsurprising that they would somehow integrate the relation with the Chinese state into their socio-cosmology. As Mueggler has pointed out, the state forms the base of sociality in China even for the non-Han groups at its periphery (2001, 5). What is interesting then is how many of these representations the Yao took with them when they left the immediate sphere of influence of the Chinese state. The maintenance of relations that became increasingly remote and less lived out in everyday experience indicates their constitutive nature.

Certain identity markers and practices related directly to China, like King Ping's Charter or Yao Daoism, helped to maintain these relationships. Another form of

maintaining these relations was a replication of their structure in new surroundings. Yao villages are defined by their relation to a founder who separates village and forest and by their relation to the spirit of the local ruler, who becomes the village guardian. The latter implies actual relations with local kings and lords (Jonsson 2001, 632). Thus, the basic idea is that the unity of a settlement in a particular place is valorized by its relationship with a ruler. This relationship has both a cosmological aspect and a political one—the ruler appears as both a spirit and an institution that might be visited and given gifts. This unity of politics and cosmology also characterizes Chinese emperorship even though the forms of exchange and veneration might vary greatly between the Chinese context and the Yao settlements in Thailand or Laos. In stark contrast to Rmeet sociality, a relationship with some institution classified as center or ruler is a necessary condition for Yao settlements.

Center and periphery in reverse

Similar observations can be made for the reverse version of the center-periphery relation (illustrated by my first model). As in the form of center and periphery that identifies the center with an alter, the same type of relationship with the Chinese appears in a form in which Yao identity is the center. Like the Chinese empire, Yao sociality can be politically expansive and ethnically integrative. At least one Yao leader became exceptionally influential in early twentieth century Laos, expanding his power over presumably a hundred villages of various ethnicities (Jonsson 2001; Izikowitz 2004, 76). In contrast to Rmeet and other upland groups, at least some of the most prominent Yao leaders copied the manners of the lords of centralized polities by refraining from farming and living off tribute (Jonsson 2001, 635). What is more, the Yao were able to introduce persons of various ethnic origins into their communities by buying and adopting them, making them full members in the process. While the importance and extent of this practice varied widely (Jonsson 2001; Kandre 1967, 594; Miles 1972), it firmly belonged to the semantic resources that provided means for the establishment of actual social relations—adopting foreigners, especially as children, was a generally accepted way of creating kinship.

Both types of expansion are reminiscent of the Chinese techniques of expansion, of creating centers for multiethnic assimilation (for example, Herman 1997). In that sense, Yao sociality is able to replicate Chinese models on a smaller scale, in a context in which they themselves appear as centers. Thus, when I am arguing that Yao centrality replicates Chinese centrality, I intend to say that beyond the question of the continuity of motifs or of historical borrowings, these two types of centrality belong to the same class and share a similar structure.

These commonalities with China might at first seem flimsy, but they strengthen when Yao centrality is compared to that of the Rmeet. I am not aware of Rmeet headmen past or present whose rulership spread over several villages, certainly not over non-Rmeet ones. Integration of foreigners was and is possible, but hardly through the transethnic adoption of children. Rather, foreigners are integrated as immigrants or in-marrying wives. What is more, I know of only a few cases when

this was done for anyone who was not Khmu, a culturally related ethnicity that is already considered a kind of "brother." Thus, Rmeet centrality assumed a different form. While Yao centrality seems to have been based on leadership, the attraction of numerous people, and the subordination of foreign newcomers—often as children—Rmeet centrality is more village-based and focuses on boundary maintenance. While the Rmeet system is also integrative (SPRENGER 2010), the form of integration is one of negotiating complementary values situated on both sides of a boundary. The paradigmatic form of this is the village boundary that separates the sociality of humans and benevolent spirits from the world of the forest and dangerous spirits. It is true that the *mueang* polities were ethnically assimilatory as well, like the Chinese empire (TURTON 2000). However, this modality was not copied by the Rmeet, and virtually all of their cultural representations define *mueang* centrality either in terms subordinate to non-centralized Rmeet notions or opposed to Rmeet identity.

Seen from the perspective of ritual, myths, kinship, and concepts of personhood, the guiding difference of Rmeet sociality, the dichotomy that underlies the production of communication within the system (LUHMANN 1984), is that between kin and spirits. Outsiders, including those of a different ethnicity, can be turned into situational "brothers" by a blessing ritual, and a similar ritual is performed upon immigration. In other contexts, external socialities like those of cities are occasionally associated with the spirit world. As mentioned above, spirits of the dead visit markets that are conflated with the actual markets that Rmeet visit. The dead are sometimes said to go to the "capital city" (*meuang loong*) to sell their coffins, and again, there is no distinction between this place in the spirit world and a real city in the lowlands. Thus, while the replication of and continuity with the center seem to be the dominant form of this relation in Yao sociality, complementarity, boundary maintenance, and contrast constitute the dominant form for the Rmeet. This is true for both dimensions of center and periphery (with the center either being identified as other or as self).

SUBORDINATE MODELS OF CENTER AND PERIPHERY

Interestingly, there is another origin story in King Ping's Charter that states that the Yao were the first people and the Chinese the second. This is the story of a flood, similar to the one told by many Rmeet and other ethnicities as their story of origin (DANG 1993; LINDELL et al. 1976; PROSCHAN 2001; SPRENGER 2006, 264–67). A sibling couple survives a flood that kills the rest of mankind. After forces of the forest and wilderness induce them to marry (in the Rmeet version, a bird, in the Yao, a tree), the girl gives birth to an inhuman object: a lump of flesh (or a gourd in the Rmeet version). The couple cuts the lump of flesh into pieces, which they spread over the mountains and the plains. Each piece then turns into a different people, those in the mountain being Yao, those in the plains, Chinese. Yet, the Yao are explicitly said to be first. While this contradicts the birth of the Yao from the princess and the dog, the story still shows significant differences from the Khmu or Rmeet versions. While in Rmeet stories the Lao are not identified with the monarchy but appear as just

another ethnicity, the Chinese in the Yao flood tale are identified as the royal court ruling over everyone in the world (Huang 1991, 94–95).

This brings us to the problem of subordinate modes of center-periphery relations. The flood story belongs to the dominant mode of contrasting and complementing in the Rmeet context. In the story, the Rmeet, the Lao, the Khmu, the Americans, and the other groups emerge one by one from a hole in a gourd. The sequence in the older versions determines seniority, and the various attributes that the groups obtain after leaving the gourd are differentially valued: the uplanders have dark skin, while the skin of the lowlanders is beautifully white, and so on. However, none of this establishes overlordship of one group over the other, and the attributes distinguishing the groups vary considerably between versions. Ethnicities in this scheme are thus not hierarchically ordered but separated by flexible but contrastive codes of difference.

A similar story, though, belongs to a subordinate mode in the Yao context. As it assigns the value of primordiality to the Yao and stresses the difference with the Chinese, it both centers the Yao and contrasts them with the Chinese. However, this appears in a context that by itself is framed by the mode of replication: the story is contained in a charter that is modeled upon imperial documents. What is more, it still bears the traces of the dominant mode by acknowledging the universal overlordship of the Chinese court. Thus, the dominant mode of continuity encompasses the subordinate mode of contrast without erasing it. In terms of transculturality, with the flood tale the Yao possess a communication device by which they can establish commonalities with other upland groups who tell similar stories.[4]

The principle of subordination becomes even clearer when looking at the rights bestowed upon the Yao by the charter. These establish the Yao as contrasting with the Chinese by differentiating them according to farming, taxes, and behavior towards officials. Yet, the same arguments hold: the contrasting form of the center-periphery relation is encompassed by the replicating form, embodied by the imperial decree. The Yao are anarchists by the grace of the state.

Similarly, the replication of the state center as a form of center and periphery relationships is found among Rmeet, although in subordinate positions. One major form of centering Rmeet village society is the ritual for the village spirit, in which the spirit appears as a kind of virtual founding ancestor and the houses of the village are seen as periphery. Thus, the galactic form of the *mueang* state is replicated on the village level (Sprenger 2008; see Tooker 1996 for a similar analysis of the Akha). However, these states were decidedly Buddhist, and their Rmeet replication is framed by the veneration of spirits, which is a major and explicit point of contrasting differentiation from lowland Buddhism. The Lao do recognize non-Buddhist village spirits that are the addressees of annual rituals, but their cult is quite different from those of uplanders, and it occupies a position explicitly subordinate to Buddhism (Holt 2009; Platenkamp 2010). The Rmeet themselves articulate this point when they compare the ritual house (*cuong läh*) of the Rmeet village spirit with the Buddhist temple of the Lao—and not the shrine of the Lao village spirit.

Furthermore, the Rmeet village spirit is called *phi mueang*, a Lao loanword meaning "spirit of the domain/realm," thus clearly referring to lowland models of the cosmological dimensions of centralized polities. Yet, this expression is only used for the aspect of the spirit that relates to the village boundary, while the centralized aspect—located in the ritual house—is called *phi yiing*, an expression combining the Lao word for spirit with the Rmeet word for village. What is more, the *phi mueang* is not literally one, as for the Lao, a *mueang* by definition encompasses more than one village (*ban*), while for the Rmeet the spirit only refers to a single village (CONDOMINAS 1975, 255–56). One aspect of the spirit is thus facing the outside and named after the largest unit in lowland socialities, and another one organizing the inside named after the largest Rmeet entity—but the spirit itself is specific to just a single village.

Another example is the adoption of administrative titles from the lowlands like *saen* and *phya*. These seem to have been bought from the Lue, another *mueang*-building ethnicity, but other polities like that of the Lao used similar titles (IZIKOWITZ 2004, 188). Just like the lowland contexts in which they emerged, the titles express a formalized top-down hierarchy that is quite uncharacteristic of Rmeet social organization, but is being acknowledged and used by them anyway. However, while the titles confer prestige on their bearers, they are subordinated to the wife-giver/wife-taker hierarchy, which is locally distinctive to Rmeet sociality. Titles are not bestowed by persons with higher-ranking titles, but by wife-givers (SPRENGER 2010). Thus, the replication of the *mueang* models of hierarchy is subordinated to models of complementary difference. In this way, the dominant mode of center-periphery differentiation constrains and encompasses the subordinate mode. The synthetic model derived from the three elaborated above can be summarized as:

	CHINA (YAO)	*MUEANG* (RMEET)
Center as other	Daoism (model: Han administrative structure), King Ping's Charter, dog myth	Lowlands as source for models of power (kings, titles), wealth, education etc.
Center as self	Rulership over ethnically different villages, integration by adoption	People as (classificatory) Rmeet kin, lowlands as spirit realms
Dominant form	Continuity and replication (for both self and other forms)	Contrast and boundary maintenance (for both self and other forms)
Subordinate form	Contrast (exemption from taxes, etiquette, permanent fields, and so on)—subordinate because ostentatively valorized by center	Replication (village spirit in its boundary-focused form; subordination of top-down titles under affinal hierarchy)

MODEL 5. Synthetic model.

As mentioned before, the treatment of replication and contrast as a binary opposition is merely heuristic. There are certainly more types of center-periphery relations that only comparison with additional ethnicities may uncover. However, I presume that only dominant forms can be used for comparison, as subordinate forms may be multitudinous and vary greatly. Thus, further comparison might show that there is more than one subordinate form among Yao or Rmeet cultural representations, or reveal forms not recognized in the present analysis.

Conclusion

The difference between the two modes of replication and contrast might be related to what Scott (2009, 23) has identified as the difference between long-standing hill-dwellers and those whose identity has emerged due to ambivalent and often conflicting relations with centers—those who have, according to Hanks, a "heritage of defeat" (Hanks 1984, quoted in Fiskesjö 2000, 55). The Yao/Iu Mien model is dominated by replication, continuity, and mimesis, the Rmeet one by boundary maintenance and contrasting terms which are often also complementary. Both models contain aspects of the respective other. While the Yao developed their sociality in relation to a socio-cosmic state that hardly ascribed a positive value to the Other (Cushman 1970, 153–54; Gladney 1994), the Rmeet lived in the periphery of polities in which at least a contextual acknowledgment of the value of the Other belongs to the constitutive relations of sociality, for example, as the original inhabitants of the land (Platenkamp 2004).

It seems unnecessary to mention that the above model, like all models, severely reduces the complexity of the available data. The question is rather, what does this reduction elucidate? For once, the comparative schemata resulting from this kind of analysis should not be considered as taxonomies of phenomena which are what they are and have essential features they either share or do not share. I also do not suggest that the groups involved are bounded entities that localize neighboring concepts by reversing them, as in Lévi-Strauss's classical analysis (Lévi-Strauss 1979). Rather, I suggest an analytical framework that highlights differences in a manner that helps to systematize them. As the dominant and subordinate forms show, such forms are not restricted to singular ethnicities and thus are not features of "unique cultures." Rather, they appear as transcultural communication devices that help shape the relationships between various social entities—only some of whom can be called "ethnicities"—as well as their very processes of social reproduction. The coexistence in Yao mythology of the dog ancestor story that is shared with the Chinese and the flood story shared with other uplanders, or the two-faced character of Rmeet village spirits bear testimony to the relational nature of such representations. What would appear to be contradictions for an approach focusing on unified, fully integrated cultures become comprehensible when used as tools to conceive relationships between rather different social systems, which are defined by these relationships in the first place.

This brings us back to indigeneity. Indigeneity can be understood as a specific modern form by which social entities like ethnicities are conceptually related to each other. It stresses the relationship between autochthonous groups and later immigrants—a value configuration that corresponds well with the Rmeet idea of being the first inhabitants of the land, but contrasts with the value placed by Yao on their origin from the north, closer to the center of Chineseness (TER HAAR 1998, 12). Thus, the various forms of the center-periphery relation offer different points of connectivity for the modern notion of indigeneity and the options for practice that it suggests. Their definition of relationships that create the shape of ethnicities by the new value-idea of indigeneity has to build on these older forms. It is no coincidence that one of the major representations articulating Iu Mien identity in a set of transcultural relations, King Ping's Charter, now becomes exhibited in newly invented cultural festivals, in which the Iu Mien of Thailand celebrate their uniqueness (JONSSON 2005, 121).

It is therefore doubtful if a boundary can be drawn between a current age of globalization and the nation-state and an earlier period of premodern relationships. As we have known for half a century at least, this difference cannot be maintained by contrasting premodern isolation with modern interconnectedness (LEACH 2001; LEHMAN 1967). The question is therefore not about globalization or localization, but is rather this: in which way do social entities connect to others, and how do these connections shape their form and content? This implies two considerations: first, the multiplicity of identity forms—like myths, rituals, festivals, but also political and territorial claims—corresponds with the variety of external relations by which social entities define themselves. This explains why there are seemingly contradictory forms of relating to the outside or making up ethnicities. Second, insofar as external relationships belong to social reproduction, the forms established to conceptualize them may be quite tenacious. This indicates why representations shaped by contact with the Chinese empire or the *mueang* polities are still extant. These representations provide material that can be reread in terms of modern indigeneity as a form of identity emerging from a relationship with the nation-state and a global public.

NOTES

1. Data on the Rmeet have been drawn mostly from more than two years of fieldwork conducted since 2000. Data on Yao have been drawn from the literature, mostly on the Iu Mien subgroup in Laos and Thailand. An earlier version of this article was presented at the International Conference "Centrality viewed from the Borders: Comparisons in the 'Asia Massif,' from the Himalaya to Mainland Southeast Asia," at the Maison française d'Oxford, 12–13 November 2009. I am grateful to Yves Goudineau, Charles Ramble, and the other participants for their helpful comments. I would also like to thank Joseba Estevez.

2. Polyandry is otherwise unheard of among Rmeet. The only other version of the story I found, from the Man (Yao) of Tonkin, has only a single hero and does not venture to explain how the ethnicity of the storyteller became the forebears of current kings (BONIFACY 1902, 273–77). However, the orphan heroes of Rmeet stories often appear as pairs of brothers, and this story follows this rule.

3. The Nang Oua myths about a Lao princess refusing to marry a non-Buddhist Kha lord, while testifying to the hierarchical relationship, do not bear direct testimony to such a replacement in Lao representations (Archaimbault 1973).

4. The Chinese also possess myths about an incestuous primal couple and a flood, but these do not seem to stress the emergence of the various ethnicities (Lewis 2006, 123–24).

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